

Yes, this is a hill worth dying on

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[Epistemic Status: Postrational metaethics.]

[Content warning: Politics, Nazis, Social Justice, genocides, none of these ideas are original, but they are important.]

I.

Nazis kill people, killing people is bad, therefore Nazis are bad.

It's a simple yet powerful sort of folk logic that holds up well under scrutiny. Nazis are *clearly bad*. It doesn't take a philosopher to derive that badness, it's obvious. They killed millions of people in concentration camps, they started a globe-spanning war that killed millions more, they're so obviously awful that they've become a cultural caricature of stereotypical badness unto themselves.

The results of letting Nazis have their way were: war, murder, genocide, images of jackbooted soldiers marching amidst rows of tanks. Violence on a scale the world has not seen since was fought out all across the green hills and forests of Europe for everyone to see.

And there are no words.

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Humanity as a whole has rejected Nazism on its merits, we saw first hand what their ideology meant, and we said *fuck that*. We said fuck that so hard that they became one of the generic images of villainy within our pop culture.

And that's the problem because it's meant we've stopped seeing them as *people*.

But they are people, and remembering that they're people is *important*. It's just as important as remembering the horrible things they did. We don't have words to express how bad the Nazis were while still humanizing them. But if we reject their humanity, if we don't see them as people, then we lose sight of something important.

The Nazis ate dinner every night, worried about the future, cared about their children, and through all of the murder and mayhem they committed, *most of them thought they were doing the right thing*.

They weren't that different than us, and we can't pretend we're incapable of their sort of evil. Their sort of evil was a distinctly human sort, driven by a powerful and overriding desire to do what was best, what *needed to be done* at all costs. They were making a better world, and sometimes you had to get rid of the bad people in order to facilitate

that better world. Some people just couldn't be saved, they were intrinsically awful and had to be purged for the good of humanity. That was the sort of evil that led to the Nazis systematically killing 1.5 million children.

You can strip away all the specifics of the Nazi ideology and get at the root of the evil: The Nazis believed that doing bad things for good reasons was good.

If we want to avoid the possibility of becoming Nazis ourselves, we have to completely reject that notion. Maybe our ideals are important, maybe they're cherished, maybe they're even worth dying for on a hill. But that doesn't make them worth *killing for*.

If we want to avoid the possibility of committing evils of a similar horror and scope to the Nazis, then we have to believe that doing bad things for good reasons are *still bad*.

II.

Ozyandias proposes a thought experiment at Thing of Things, called the enemy control raygun.

Imagine that a mad scientist has invented a device called the Enemy Control Ray. The Enemy Control Ray is a mind-control device: whatever rule you say into it, your enemy must follow.

However, because of limitations of the technology, any rule you put in is *translated into your enemy's belief system*.

So, let's say you're a trans rights activist, and you're targeting transphobes. If you think trans women are women, you can't say "call trans women by their correct pronouns", because you believe that trans women are women and transphobes don't, so it will be translated into "misgender trans women." If you are a disability rights advocate targeting Peter Singer, you can't say "don't advocate for the infanticide of disabled babies", because it will translate as "don't advocate for the death of beings that have a right to life", because you think babies have a right to life and Singer doesn't. And, for that matter, you can't say "no eugenics" to Mr. Singer, because it will translate as "bring into existence people whom I think deserve to exist."

Ozy then goes on to suggest a few commands you *could* put into the enemy control raygun that would actually generate some good outcomes:

- Do not do violence to anyone unless they did violence to someone else first or they're consenting.
- Do not fire people from jobs for reasons unrelated to their ability to perform the job.
- If your children are minors, you must support them, even if they make choices you disapprove of.
- Do not bother people who are really weird but not hurting anyone, and I mean *direct hurt* not indirect harm to the social fabric; you can argue with them politely or ignore them but don't insult them or harass them.
- Try to listen to people about their own experiences and don't assume that everyone works the same way you do.

These are *niceness heuristics* and they're the best defense we have against the sort of human evils that lead to Nazism.

Here's a few of our own:

- Don't apply negative attributes to individuals or groups. People can take harmful actions, they don't have harmful traits.
- Almost No one is evil, almost everything is broken.
- Do not do to others what you would not want them to do to you.
- Be soft. Do not let the world make you hard, do not let the bitterness steal your sweetness. Take pride that even though the rest of the world may disagree, you still believe it to be a beautiful place
- Do not put things or ideas above people.

You might notice that most of the things on these lists are advice for what *not* to do. That's important, and representative of the notion that your own ideas might be wrong.

In the sermon on the mount, Jesus says:

καὶ καθὼς θέλετε ἵνα ποιῶσιν ὑμῖν οἱ ἄνθρωποι, ποιεῖτε αὐτοῖς ὁμοίως.

Which is widely interpreted to mean:

"Do to others what you want them to do to you."

But there's an issue with this, that being the typical mind fallacy. We're operating from within our own minds, based on our own preferences. And there might be places where our preferences hurt other people. It's generally a pretty good rule, "I want to not die, therefore I should expect other people want to not die," isn't exactly flawed, it just ignores the possibility of people having different preferences to you. The partial inversion from a command to action to a command to inaction is harder to game by a person working from a different set of preferences.

III.

Niceness heuristics are incredibly powerful, and fortunately for us as humans, we mostly come pre-packaged with them. Our 200,000 years spent living in tribes in the ancestral environments have given us a tremendous stockpile of evolutionarily adaptive

prosocial traits. Those traits are clearly not quite good enough and fail spectacularly at the scales that humans exist at in modern times, but they're a good starting point.

Niceness acts like a schelling fence for our ethics, and it might be our *only* ethical schelling point. Given all that, it rather deeply disturbs us when we see things like this:



Sarcastic response: We hate people who hate cis people and can't wait for the people who hate cis people revolution where we kill all of them.

See the problem with abandoning niceness? Heuristics like “kill bad people who do bad things” is *really* easy to have turned on you if someone is operating from a different moral base.



Freedom of speech is a critical niceness heuristic. “Don’t tell people what they can and can’t say” is a lot better than “Don’t say things I don’t like” since you might not always be the one making the decision.

But what if our enemies reject the niceness heuristic themselves, what if they hate us and want to kill us all? Do we still have to be nice to them?

Yes.

For one, whenever anyone makes the claim “our enemies have rejected the niceness heuristic” it should be viewed with extreme skepticism. It’s super useful to your own side to claim the other side is being mean and bad and unfair, and it’s often difficult to pick out the signal from the noise.

But if even if you can prove your enemies have rejected niceness heuristics, that should *never* be justification to reject them ourselves. That’s *literally what the Nazis did*. They saw the jews as bad, they thought the jews were hurting them and manipulating them and had abandoned their own niceness heuristics, which they then used as justification to gleefully leap past the moral event horizon themselves.

Whether or not your enemies are respecting the niceness heuristic has *absolutely no bearing* on whether to use it yourself. Once you abandon that commitment to niceness and decency, there are no asymmetric weapons left, there’s no schelling point to coordinate around. It becomes a zero sum game and you settle into a shitty nash equilibrium where it becomes a race to see who can escalate the most.

They kill us. So we kill them. So they kill more of us. So we kill more of them. So they kill more of us. So we kill more of them. There’s no place where it ends until one side has completely obliterated the other.

IV.

So what do we do then? Do we just take it? Let them kill us?

No, of course not. We’re not so pacifistic that we think violence is *never* justified. Sometimes you need to raise an army and stop Hitler from conquering the world, fine. Trolley problems exist in the real world, and there aren’t always easy answers.

But when you stop seeing your enemies as people and start seeing them as generic video game baddies to be riddled with bullets, “raise an army and stop Hitler from conquering the world” goes from the last resort to the first option.

Everyone knows the story of how during WWI, there was a cease-fire on Christmas in 1914 on the Western front, and the soldiers on both sides ended up singing and celebrating together. But less well known, is that that was actually part of a much larger phenomenon. All during the war, peace kept breaking out on the front.

There’s a meme going around in leftist circles that trying to debate with Nazis and talk them out of their Nazism is a waste of time and effort, the best example of it is this Wolfenstein mod that asks you moral questions before letting you shoot the pixel nazi villians in the game who have been programmed with no other commands then “shoot at the player”

It’s a powerful statement, and it’s also totally wrong. Real Nazis in real life are real people, they aren’t cartoon villains, they aren’t monsters, they’re people. People can be reasoned with, people can be talked to, and people can *change their minds*.

We're not saying it's going to be easy. People don't change their minds in a day, it takes weeks of debate and discussion to shift people's views on things. Were *your* views easily shifted to the place they are now? Or did it take years of discussion and debate with people to come to the positions you now hold?

If someone has been racist for the last twenty years, they're not going to suddenly wake up after a five-minute conversation, realize they're being awful, and stop. It takes years to tear those ideas out of the cultural narrative. But they'll never change if you don't talk to them. If you just write them off as inherently awful then there's no possibility of anything ever changing. Someone has to take the first step and extend an olive branch. Maybe they'll get their hand shot off for the trouble, or maybe, it'll turn out that the other side aren't actually monsters, and that they also want to extend their own olive branch, but have been too afraid of your side to do it.

It seems like a weird hill to die on, especially given that it's one currently being assaulted from all sides, but unless you have a better schelling point then niceness to coordinate around, it's what we have to work with.

So yes, we might not agree with you, but we *will* defend unto death your right to exist with that opinion. Niceness is important, it's one of the most important things about us as humans. So yes, this is a hill worth dying on.