

What is a delicate balance?

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RUNNING HEAD: Delicate balance

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In the books entitled Forgiveness and revenge (2002a) and A delicate balance (2002b), prominent philosopher Trudy Govier analyzed philosophical issues relating to revenge and forgiveness. The latter was written especially as a response to September 11. On one hand, her insightful analysis urges us to avoid simplistic and emotional responses. On the other hand, some of her notions seem to be ungrounded due to the lack of logical and empirical support. The questionable notions are summarized in the following:

1. We are all victims and offenders in different contexts, although we might not be directly involved in physical conflicts. Affiliations and relationships are complex in various ways. Any individual may be a member of a group that has been both victim and oppressor.
2. Physical force would not lead to long term security; instead, it would lead to a vicious cycle of violence. History demonstrates successful examples of “the power of the powerless” and non-violent revolution.

We are both victims and oppressors

The intention of promoting the notion that we are victims and offenders at the same time is to encourage forgiveness. However, this blanket “moral equivalence” may cause resentment. Govier (2002b) cites several examples to support this notion: Jews are victims of the Holocaust but oppressors of Palestinians. A black American soldier may be a victim of racism in America, but also a willing participant in the deaths, due to destruction and infrastructure in the Gulf War of 1991, of hundreds of thousands of Iraqi children.

Besides that the dual identity of victim/oppressor could help us to be more forgiving to the wrongs done by others, Govier asserts that we should also face the shared responsibilities for the wrongs done by our own group. As mentioned before, although this notion is noble, blurring the line between victims and offenders could lead to resentment. Consider the examples cited by Govier. It does not seem to be appropriate to tell an Israeli commander who chased after a Palestinian sniper that he is also an oppressor, or to tell a Black American soldier who volunteered to liberate Kuwait and protect Kurds that he is a perpetrator, too. “Shared responsibility” is inevitably controversial. The young Israeli commander might have nothing to do the rejection of the 1947 UN Resolution by Arabs and the subsequent political conflicts in Middle East. The Black American soldier also could not affect Saddam Hussein’s decision of continued occupation of Kuwait in 1991 that led to the suffering of his people. To some certain extent everything in the world is somehow related to something else. Association does not necessarily imply accountability. For example, if I fire a lazy employee and a family breakdown, say divorce, results from his or her unemployment, it is not fair for me to accept moral responsibility for this.

The hidden assumption that a group membership is automatically tied to victimization and wrongs is problematic. In the past the Chinese government implemented many coercive policies in Tibet and thus forced Dali Lama to seek asylum in India. However, do all Chinese people share the moral responsibility for the Tibet problem? As a matter of fact, many Chinese dissidents are opposed to the Chinese policies in Tibet.

The power of the powerless

Govier (2002a, 2002b) is opposed to use of physical force that leads to a vicious cycle of violence. In her view, physical force employed by states and terrorist acts committed by non-

state agents are both morally unjustifiable. To her, distinguishing bombing Afghanistan after September 11 from terrorist acts is based on a double standard.

To promote an alternative to violence, Govier (2002b) cites philosopher Hobbes to maintain that power is not a physical thing. Further, she examines the case of India and asserts that the non-cooperation, a form of non-physical power, used by Gandhi and his followers eventually forced the British to give up India. In addition, she embraces the notion of “the power of the powerless” introduced by Havel. The notion of “the power of the powerless” is noble; nonetheless, Govier supports the preceding notion by citing quotations and interpreting history selectively. As a matter of fact, Hobbes claims that the state of nature is a total war in which each one fights against each other and thus coercion is necessary to maintain society; Havel supports using physical forces to fight evils such as NATO’s intervention on the Balkan crisis and the US’s military action against Iraq.

Govier cites the fall of Communism in Romania as an example of the power of the powerless:

“In early December 1989, the Romanian dictator Nicolae Ceausescu appeared to be securely in charge of his country. Despite a few occasions of unruly rebellion, he had long ruled by bizarre decree and was expected to do so indefinitely. Ceausescu gave a lengthy speech to a vast room full of party supporters who applauded with stolid enthusiasm. Secure with this support, he gave another speech a week later, this time in front of a huge crowd in downtown Bucharest. At first the response was expected, with people yelling ‘Ceausescu si popural.’ Then a single voice called out, ‘Ceausescu dictatorul.’ The entire crowd began to yell against the repressive leader, and the mood changed in a single moment. Ceausescu’s face crumbled and his demeanor of confidence

gave way to an image of craven fear. In a televised instant he had become a small vulnerable man facing thousands of furious people. The consent for his authority disappeared; his power had gone. It was the beginning of the end for this dictator, who was executed a week later. Gandhi's ideas--and Hobbes'--were apparently confirmed." (p.55)

However, Govier omits several facts from this anecdote. First, the fact that the army supported the uprising is crucial to the fall of the Communist regime in Romania (Hollis, 1999). During the crisis in 1989 there were various groups who devoted their support to Ceausescu. They posed an immediate threat to the revolution and therefore the army declared the will to fight them. Indeed there was heavy fighting on the Place Square before the execution of Ceausescu. Further, Ceausescu was executed and his corpse was shown to the public because the new government wanted to prevent people who were loyal to Ceausescu from fighting. This is a typical example of violent revolution, rather than an example of the power of the powerless. Also, in contrast to what Govier's theory suggests, overthrowing the Communist government by force does not lead to endless violence. Indeed, opposition to the revolution stopped after the violent execution of the dictator. A vicious cycle of violence might have spread across Romania if Ceausescu were alive and his supporters had a hope of restoring Ceausescu's rule.

More importantly, Govier did not discuss a similar anti-Communist demonstration in China that happened in June 1989, just six months before the Romanian revolution. This is a typical example of non-violent revolution. From the beginning to the end of the movement, student demonstrators did not employ any physical means. However, the movement ended abruptly when the Chinese government cracked down on the students on June 4, 1989, by sending troops to Tiananmen Square. Apparently, Gandhi's strategy failed to transfer to China.

The successful example of Gandhi has been evaluated by many authors such as Indian researcher D'Souza (2002), who contends that Gandhi could expel the British colonists because his opponent was not Nazi Germany. Even Chinese Communist leaders agreed that Gandhi's strategy was only effective with sentimental people like the British (Kissinger, 1995).

In other cases Govier's interpretation of history also seems to be questionable. She asserts that NATO's bombing of Serbia in 1999 did not result in long-lasting peace. Serbians intensified their oppression of Muslims after the bombing began. Even after the war, Serbians and Muslims still hate each other. Nation-rebuilding does not appear to be successful.

First, let's consider the fact that Serbians escalated their hostility against Albanians. It is a popular saying that violence provokes endless violence. However, this saying does not pass the counterfactual test. If no physical force is taken to react against the initial violence, would violence be stopped? If NATO had never bombed Serbia, would Serbia cease oppressing Bosnians and Kosovans? If no military actions were used against bin Laden's group and other terrorists, would terrorism be less frequent or stopped? History tells us otherwise. During the Clinton Administration, only limited armed force was used as a counter-measure against terrorism. Then came September 11.

Even if military actions provoke more counter-attacks from the opponent, it does not necessarily mean that the strategy is unjust or ineffective. Imagine that it was not NATO but Albanians bombing Serbia. Could we deny their right to self-defense even though Serbians fought back and killed more Albanians? Japan invaded China in 1937 and encountered strong resistance in Shanghai. When Japanese troops took over Nanking, they launched the "Nanking Massacre" that caused 400,000 deaths. It is hurtful to tell the Chinese that the massacre was caused by China's killing of Japanese in Shanghai and is a result of a vicious cycle of violence.

Most people do not have a problem calling the police when they are attacked by robbers or gangsters. When a police officer is killed by gangsters, no one says that revenge by the gangsters is an example of a vicious cycle of violence. Rather, the usual response is to call for stronger measures and harsher punishment. One of the major differences between the police and the military forces is that actions by the latter have a higher probability of hurting innocent civilians. But is it not also true that many innocent people also suffer under the law enforcement system due to mistaken identity and abuse of power? Denouncing military actions but supporting police measures is based upon a double standard.

Contrary to Govier's assertion, historian Stephen Ambrose (2002), who recently visited the Balkans, describes an optimistic picture of nation-building in that region. To Ambrose's observation, law and order have been restored and multiple ethnic groups are allowed to participate in the law enforcement process. It took several decades to see the fruits of nation-rebuilding and reconciliation in Japan and Germany. Today it is still premature to judge whether Kosovo is a sad case of endless violence or a successful case of nation-rebuilding and reconciliation.

Discussion

As a philosopher, Govier applied her logical and moral reasoning to challenge us to avoid simplistic and emotional reactions against terrorism. The major challenge, as the title of her book implies, is how we can achieve a delicate balance. On one hand, it is fair to admit that virtually every group has been victimized by others and also has oppressed others; on the other hand, group membership does not automatically put one into a position of sharing moral responsibilities. Moreover, it is questionable whether we should draw a moral equivalency across all parties who use physical force. It is true that violence is not the solution to all problems and

violence should not always be glorified, but it is equally problematic to romanticize “the power of the powerless.” History is full of examples and counter-examples.

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