
HUMANITY

*A Moral History
of the Twentieth Century.*

By Jonathan Glover.

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Glover's history is not original, of course, but his psychology is, dramatically so. The prevailing wisdom among many intellectuals has been that evil has nothing to do with human nature and must be attributed to political institutions. The anthropologist Ashley Montagu, at a time when the ashes of 35 million victims of World War II were still warm (or radioactive), urged Unesco to declare that "biological studies lend support to the ethic of universal brotherhood." In 1986, Unesco and several scholarly societies resolved that "it is scientifically incorrect to say that war or any other violent behavior is genetically programmed into our human nature." Scientists who have dissented from this saccharine view have been picketed, smeared and likened to Nazis.

Glover does not let our species off so lightly. He shows that distinctive patterns of cruelty and callousness pop up repeatedly in history, cutting across times, places and political systems. He insists that "we need to look hard and clearly at some monsters inside us," not to make us pessimists but as "part of the project of caging and taming them." For Glover argues that human nature encompasses not just destructive impulses but "moral resources": humane impulses that sometimes recoil from the intentions of the monsters. The course of history, and our hopes for the

future, are shaped by struggles among these impulses inside countless minds.

The great contribution of "Humanity" is a dissection of these motives. This is not, as some might fear, an attempt to reduce history to psychology. Glover makes it clear that the motives are responses to the larger community and manifest themselves in different ways in different social and political contexts.

HERE are some of the monsters. Pure, amoral self-interest. Sadism and the thrill of the battlefield. Tribalism, which elevates the group above the individual and turns personal enmity into feuding, war and genocide. Ideology, which can convince people that a struggle between groups — races for the Nazis, classes for the Marxists — is inevitable and necessary for progress. The "Hobbesian trap," in which a nation is tempted to attack a neighbor out of fear that it would otherwise attack first, like an armed homeowner who surprises an armed burglar, tempting each to shoot first to avoid being shot.

Glover sees two countervailing moral resources. Human responses — sympathy, empathy and respect — occasionally break through in people committing vicious acts. Sometimes they are triggered by the intellect. A British World War II navigator, safely home after a bombing raid, says to the pilot, "What about those poor sods under those fires?" Entrenched soldiers say, "We don't want to kill you, and you don't want to kill us, so why shoot?" At other times they are triggered by tangible signs of a target's humanity. A soldier sees a fleeing man holding up his trousers. The mundane detail turns him from "fascist" to "person," and the soldier loses the will to fire. An Afrikaner policeman chases a South African demonstrator, club in hand. She loses her shoe, and chivalry makes him hand

it back. Their eyes meet, and he finds it impossible to club her.

The other resource is moral identity, or self-respect — the answer to the question "Am I the kind of person who could do this?" People sometimes resist the pressure to harm others when it conflicts with how they want to see themselves. A moral identity can come from a religion, a culture, professional mores (like the Hippocratic oath), a cosmopolitan humanism or sometimes just an insistent voice inside us.

In Glover's analysis, the horrors of the century took place when the moral resources were deliberately or accidentally disabled. Again and again he finds that atrocities are accompanied by tactics of humiliation and dehumanization: pejorative nicknames, degrading conditions, humiliating dress. They flip a mental switch and reclassify another individual from "person" to "nonperson," making it as easy to torture or kill him as it is for us to boil a lobster alive. Some of the most indelible images in "Humanity" are of the "cold jokes" that brutes all over the world have used to strip their victims of dignity and make cruelty come easier. Those who poke fun at "politically correct" names for ethnic minorities will be reminded that they originally had a humane rationale.

Sympathy can be turned off by physical distance from the victims, as in aerial bombardment and remote-control warfare. It can also be suppressed by sheer willpower. It is frightening to think that our vaunted ability to subdue emotional urges through the force of intellect and conscience (allowing us to defer gratification and resist temptation) also allowed Nazi guards to overcome their visceral horror at what they were doing and to persevere with distasteful acts that they thought served a higher purpose.

Like sympathy, the moral resource of identity can be insidiously eroded. No

one is a saint, and most people calibrate their conscience against a level of minimum decency expected of people in their peer group or culture. When the level drifts downward, people can commit horrible crimes with the confidence that comes from knowing that "everyone does it." Euphemisms like "resettlement to work camps," phased decisions (in which bombing targets might shift from isolated factories to factories near neighborhoods to the neighborhoods themselves) and the diffusion of responsibility within a bureaucracy can lead conscientious people to cause appalling outcomes that no one would ever willingly choose on his own.

GLOVER draws hope from the recurring breakthroughs of moral resources and from the happy episodes in which they conspired to avert disaster. During the Cuban missile crisis, Nikita Khrushchev and John F. Kennedy were reminded of the human cost of the nuclear brink they were approaching, Khrushchev by memories of two world wars fought on his soil, Kennedy by a graphic briefing of the aftermath of an atomic bomb. And each understood they were in a Hobbesian trap. Kennedy had just read Barbara Tuchman's "Guns of August" and saw how the leaders of great nations could sleepwalk into a pointless and awful war. Khrushchev, thinking like a game theorist, wrote to Kennedy:

"You and I should not now pull on the ends of the rope in which you have tied a knot of war, because the harder you and I pull, the tighter this knot will become. And a time may come when this knot is tied so tight that the person who tied it is no longer capable of untying it, and then the knot will have to be cut."

By identifying the trap, they could set the shared goal of escaping it. In the teeth of opposition from many of their advisers, both made concessions that may have literally saved the world.