

## **On the Prevention of Genocide: The Gap between Research and Education\***

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### **Abstract**

When recommending ways to prevent genocide, most historians, social scientists, and other scholars engaged in empirical research tend to identify structural factors such as new or improved international institutions, early warning systems, rapid response teams, and peace keeping forces, or they emphasize the need to develop liberal democratic institutions and culture wherever possible. In sharp contrast, most genocide educators ignore the topic of prevention entirely. Moreover, the few genocide courses that address prevention take a highly individualistic and apolitical approach

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which can be called the Moral Exemplars Perspective (MEP). According to proponents of MEP, the best way to prevent genocide is to find ways to make individual people more altruistic and responsible, for example, through socialization, moral training, and education. MEP is shown to be highly implausible because it rests on faulty historical analysis, it ignores relevant evidence from political science and psychology, and its apolitical conception of good moral character is ethically questionable.

Where the prevention of genocide is concerned, there is a conspicuous, yet little remarked upon, gap between the results of genocide research and the content of most genocide education. This gap can be seen very clearly in the strikingly different answers that would be given to the question, What do the Holocaust and other genocides teach us about how best to prevent genocide like the one that appears to be emerging in Zimbabwe? Researchers and scholars who specialize in the study of genocide from an historical or social science perspective would tend to focus on the fact that in nearly all cases genocide is intentional state-sponsored persecution and mass killing aimed at the extermination of a targeted group; as such, it requires extensive planning, complex organization, and considerable resources (Alvarez, 2001; Fein, 1994; Heidenrich, 2001;

Riemer, 2000; Smith, 1999). As a consequence, genocide researchers tend to agree that what is most urgently needed for effective prevention are new or improved international political institutions, as well as non-governmental organizations, that can check or counter the power of genocidal regimes by the use of early warning systems, rapid response teams, humanitarian intervention, peace keeping, or even full-scale invasion and military occupation. Moreover, they tend to argue that since genocide is a crime under international law, principal perpetrators should be held accountable in either domestic or international courts, and punished, not only for justice, but also for deterrence of political leaders tempted to engage in genocide. Most genocide scholars also stress the great need to establish or strengthen liberal political institutions, democratic culture, and pluralism wherever possible to act as a brake on the use of state power to commit genocide. The more democratic a society is, the less likely its government is to embark on a genocidal project.

The gap between the results of research on the prevention of genocide and the content of most genocide education in the United States is strikingly illustrated by two facts. The first fact is that many (perhaps most) programs of genocide education completely ignore the topic of prevention. For example, the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum publishes a resource booklet, *Teaching About the Holocaust* (1995). In its sixteen-page "Guidelines for Teaching About the Holocaust" there is no mention of the topic of genocide prevention, and in the thirty-nine page "Annotated Bibliography," containing over one hundred and fifty titles,

there is no book on genocide prevention. The neglect of the topic of prevention holds for most educational programs of Holocaust and genocide museums and memorials. Margaret Crouch (1999) found a similar neglect in her study of undergraduate courses on the Holocaust at seventy Mid-Atlantic colleges and universities. Only two percent of the course syllabi in her sample included prevention as a topic covered. In an anthology on teaching methodology for Holocaust courses (Garber, 1988), the topic of prevention is virtually ignored, rating neither an article nor a listing in the index.

The second fact that illustrates the gap between genocide research and education is that even when an education program or course does include prevention as a topic, it will in most instances adopt a highly individualistic perspective that differs dramatically from the structural, historical, social science perspective of genocide researchers. Instead of focusing on means of prevention involving collective action through international institutions or the development of domestic democratic political institutions and culture, genocide educators tend to recommend highly individualistic means of prevention. For example, one of the most popular genocide education textbooks, *Facing History and Ourselves* (1994), is focused primarily on developing students' moral character and civic awareness. It uses the Turkish genocide of the Armenians and the Holocaust primarily as object lessons to teach students about the roles of racism, stereotyping, propaganda, and discrimination in helping to bring about genocide. It also emphasizes the need for citizens in a democracy to have mutual tolerance for conflicting opinions

and attitudes, as well as a willingness to engage in honest dialogue. The primary educational goal of the text is not to investigate direct means of preventing on-going or imminent genocide, but to further the development of these individual virtues in students so that they can become better citizens. While there are some genocide courses, including a few at the graduate level, that both take the topic of prevention seriously and focus attention on structural means to achieve it, most of these courses are taught by genocide researchers and scholars. (Apsel & Fein, 2002).

*Explaining the gap: The Moral Exemplars Perspective*

There are several reasons that can partly explain the gap between research and education on the subject of prevention. A great deal of genocide education is directed at juveniles in middle school and high school who must first gain an adequate historical and factual understanding of how genocide occurs before they can address the question of how to prevent it. In addition, it is probably desirable that young people be incrementally exposed to the evil, horror, and magnitude of genocide. Indeed, some students may be too immature, emotionally unprepared, and unsophisticated to understand the need for international institutions, military intervention, and criminal prosecution. One reason why so much genocide education of young students begins with sympathetic and hopeful accounts of rescue, resistance, and survival is that this allows them to appreciate the role played

by ordinary individuals like themselves in response to genocide. It is sometimes argued that young students are likely to be shocked by the seemingly overwhelming evil of genocide and become pessimistic (Oliner & Oliner, 1988, pp. xviii-xix). Although this explanation is probably true for many educational programs directed at young students, it does not apply to all of them. For example, the program *Facing History and Ourselves* explicitly rejects this paternalistic rationale for its own individualistic approach and it deals explicitly and honestly with much of the evil, horror, and complexity of genocide (*Facing History and Ourselves*, 1994, pp. 1-17). Moreover, a large percentage of genocide education courses are designed for older adolescents or young adults in late high school or college, not to mention individuals pursuing graduate or professional education. The anthology on teaching methodology (Garber, 1988) already cited is aimed at professors who teach mature students at colleges and universities. However, the fact that most of the contributors to this anthology teach Jewish studies or literature provides another reason for the neglect of the topic of prevention, namely, that many courses are focused on cultural, aesthetic, literary, and ethical aspects of genocide, not on explanation or prevention.

This last observation suggests that a more satisfactory explanation for the gap is to be found in some widely shared attitudes, values, and beliefs that predispose many writers and teachers (who are mostly in the humanities and religious studies) toward the apolitical and individualistic perspective that underlies so much genocide literature and

education. There are also some social scientists who agree with this perspective (for example, the Oliners, whose views are discussed at length later). It is because so many scholars and educators share this perspective that they tend to give essentially the same answer to the question how best to prevent genocide: We must find ways to inculcate certain individual traits of good character, that is, moral virtues, such as altruistic care and concern for others, through appropriate parenting, socialization, moral training, and education, that will make more people have a greater sense of responsibility for the welfare of others and willingness to resist governmental oppression and tyranny. The specific traits recommended vary from writer to writer, but the general idea is the same: the principal failure that allows genocide to occur is the widespread weakness and flaws of individual moral character, especially the lack of altruism, sympathy, and compassion. Correspondingly, the best way to prevent genocide is to ensure that there are enough people who are individually of strong moral character in these respects. Hence, this may fairly be called the Moral Exemplars Perspective on genocide prevention (hereafter MEP). Three paradigmatic examples will be used for both the exposition and critical assessment of MEP.

Many adherents of MEP focus on rescuers of Jewish victims during the Holocaust to construct their conception of moral exemplariness. For example, in the Preface of their book, *The Altruistic Personality*, Samuel and Pearl Oliner state, "If we are to live in a world free from the threat of Holocausts, we will need to create it. If we can understand

some of the attributes that distinguish rescuers from others, perhaps we can deliberately cultivate them" (1988, p. xviii). The implication is clear: if we could cultivate the attributes of rescuers in enough individuals, the world would be free from the threat of genocide. The Oliners claim that their research into altruistic personality enables them to identify the attributes that distinguish rescuers from others: a capacity for "extensive relationships -- their stronger sense of attachment to others and their feeling of responsibility for the welfare of others, including those outside their immediate familial and communal circles" (p. 249). At the end of their book, the Oliners turn to the task of finding the most effective ways of inculcating the traits of extensive personality. One of their recommendations is that "[s]chools need to become caring institutions ....in which students, teachers, bus drivers, principals, and all others receive positive affirmation for kindness, empathy, and concern" (pp. 258-60). In a later book, *Toward a Caring Society* (Oliner & Oliner, 1995), they present a number of detailed recommendations for ways to develop caring and responsible individuals.

The strategy for preventing genocide endorsed by the Oliners is fairly typical of recommendations made by adherents of MEP. In addition to being highly individualistic and apolitical, these strategies tend to be incremental and indirect. Political and legal institutions (whether domestic or international) play, at best, a secondary role, or no role at all; the anticipated preventive effects of these strategies will be realized at some indefinite time in the future; and, even then,



they will be realized only indirectly through the improved behavior of the growing number of individuals who possess the exemplary character and individual traits being sought. Moreover, these exemplary individuals will be capable of acting in ways that are presently viewed as heroic, self-sacrificing, and even supererogatory. Adherents of MEP maintain their confident optimism in the face of the historical evidence that only a small number of individuals became altruistic rescuers or resisters in the face of the power and brutality of the Nazi regime. Cynthia Ozick (Block & Drucker, 1992) observes that the category of rescuers was "so miniscule that statistically it vanishes" (p. xiv); the Oliners themselves cite a range of estimates, the highest of which still sets the total number of rescuers throughout Nazi-occupied Europe at less than one-half-of-one-percent of the population (1988, p. 2).

Other defenders of MEP reach a conclusion similar to that of the Oliners, but they reach it by a different route. Instead of focusing on the exemplary behavior of rescuers, they study the much more numerous category of bystanders. For example, Victoria J. Barnett (1999, p. xvi) declares: "If we decide that a Holocaust should never happen again, we must think about the behavior of those who were present, but did nothing to stop the evil or help the victims." Similar to the approach of the Oliners, Barnett contrasts the bystanders with exemplary rescuers, specifically the French Huguenots of Le Chambon-sur-Lignon who created "an ethical community that mirrored their 'inward government' - i.e., that reflected their character" (p. 159). Barnett's overall

conclusion on prevention is clearly a version of MEP, although she is rather vague about the means of achieving it. "[T]he conscience of each individual has the power to reach far beyond the private realm, and create a fabric of a progressively greater whole: of family, society, nation, history, and humanity itself " (p. 175).

Yet a third way of defending MEP is to focus on an exemplary group of resisters such as the Jehovah's Witnesses. John K. Roth (2001) argues that the unyielding but peaceful resistance of the Witnesses represented a distinctive kind of threat to the Nazi regime because it stemmed from a deep faith in God's sovereignty over the world that was incompatible with allegiance to the state. Roth's commitment to MEP is clear: "If more people practiced versions of what the Jehovah's Witnesses preach and practice, the Holocaust could have been prevented and genocide would scourge the world no more" (p. 236). Roth is fully aware that genocide happens primarily because there is no effective constraint on the power of the state, yet his own recommendations about what we should do to curb it either ignore institutional and political methods of prevention altogether, or (at best) make vague references to those possibilities.

...[E]thics after Auschwitz will need to draw on every resource it can find: appeals to human rights, calls for "a return to God," respect and honor for people who save lives and resist tyranny, and attention to the Holocaust's warnings, to name only a few. Those efforts

will need to be accompanied by efforts that build those concerns into our educational, religious, business, and political institutions. (p. 251)

*How proponents of MEP get off to a false start*

Prevention and explanation go hand in hand. Gaining an adequate understanding of how to prevent genocide depends in large part on having a correct explanation of how, and under what conditions, genocide is most likely to occur. This, in turn, requires careful comparative study of different genocides, paying close attention to historical details of each particular case, as well as identifying commonalities that can be found. Indeed, there is a growing consensus among genocide researchers on the importance of comparative studies (Alvarez, 2001; Charny, 1999, pp. 9-11; Melsen, 1992). By contrast, the great majority of proponents of MEP, like the scholars noted in the previous section, are concerned exclusively with the Holocaust, and their models for moral exemplars tend to be drawn from that single historical example.

In addition to this methodological weakness, the way in which these scholars approach the Holocaust is itself flawed, because they focus on the behavior of people *after* the Nazis came to power in 1933. Indeed, most of the examples of exemplary behavior they use occurred after the Holocaust was well underway. This is not a very promising

strategy if one is looking for clues about how the Holocaust might have been prevented, since it ignores the earlier period during which events leading up to the Holocaust took place. Moreover, some recent research makes a very powerful case for the hypothesis that in the long run, the most potent factor for the prevention of genocide may well be the existence of liberal political institutions, together with a robust democratic political culture. For example, R. J. Rummel argues that by far the greatest number of deaths by "democide" (his term for all types of non-military killing of civilians by governments, including genocide) in the twentieth century was caused by totalitarian, authoritarian, and communist regimes (1994). If Rummel is correct, adherents of MEP should look very closely at the period of the 1920s and early 1930s *before* the Nazis were in power to identify missed opportunities to take political actions that might have saved the Weimar Republic and kept the Nazis out of power. Had this happened, it would in all likelihood have prevented the Holocaust. However, proponents of MEP are not interested in a line of inquiry that shifts the focus away from the role of individuals and toward the role of social and political institutions and processes.

In addition to ignoring potentially important historical evidence, the proponents of MEP often fasten on evidence that seems irrelevant to the question of prevention. This seems to be the case with the Oliners' research into the personality of rescuers of Jews during the Holocaust, the results of which they use to justify their strong claim that a general increase in the individual trait of extensivity might

be sufficient to prevent genocide altogether ("a world free of Holocausts"). However, the fact that a relatively small number of rescuers were able to save approximately 300,000 Jewish victims (Block & Drucker, 1992) from being killed during the on-going Holocaust does not justify the conclusion that had the trait of extensivity been more prevalent in Germany and German-occupied Europe, the Holocaust would have been prevented altogether. For one thing, piecemeal rescue of individuals during an on-going genocide that claimed between five and six million victims does not constitute prevention. For another, truly effective and meaningful prevention of genocide requires timely action directed at the causes before the genocidal project can be implemented. In any case, the Oliners need to provide additional evidence or arguments to establish that an increase in individual virtue alone could provide such effective prevention. Unfortunately, the Oliners do not provide any additional support for their strong claim; instead, it appears to rest entirely on their prior commitment to MEP (1988, p. 2).

*Proponents of MEP systematically ignore the potentially positive role of liberal political institutions and democratic culture in preventing genocide*

Like the Oliners, both Barnett (1999) and Roth (2001) ignore the possibility that liberal political institutions and democratic culture might be effective means of preventing genocide. For the purpose of critically evaluating their

views, the following stipulative definitions will be used: (1) *liberal political institutions* refers to the familiar features of contemporary constitutional democracies that are designed to limit the power of the state: the rule of law; constitutional separation of powers, including an independent judiciary; equality of citizenship; protection of individual civil liberties such as freedom of religion, speech and the press, and association; and electoral accountability of the government to the people; (2) *democratic political culture* refers to a set of guiding values, principles, and ideals that are shared by most members of a democratic society, such as equal respect for all persons, the high value placed on individual liberties and equal opportunity, toleration of ethnic and religious pluralism, and the renunciation of violence as a means of achieving political goals; and (3) a democratic political culture is *robust* when individual citizens generally possess a sufficient degree of *civic virtues* such as respect for the rule of law, loyalty to liberal political institutions and processes, a willingness to actively participate in them, and mutual respect and tolerance toward each other as fellow citizens (Jones, 1999, pp. 239-242; Putnam, 1992, chapters 5 and 6). Ideally, a democracy should fully exhibit the three dimensions of social and political life corresponding to these definitions; however, actual democracies often fall short in different ways and in varying degrees.

To her credit, Barnett (1999) shows that she is aware that it was in large part the moribund liberal institutions of the Weimar Republic, together with the lack of a robust democratic culture and civic virtues, that allowed the Nazi

regime to quickly consolidate its hold on power through a process of *Gleichschaltung* (coordination). Commenting on the way in which German institutions largely fell in line with Nazi policies and regulations, Barnett states, "The underlying crisis is that there was apparently no mechanism or set of values within those institutions to *prevent* what happened.... Had the churches preached differently, the courts operated differently, and the schools taught tolerance, not prejudice -- history might have taken a different course" (1999, p. 44). Although Barnett does not say so explicitly, it seems reasonable to infer that she has in mind some of the features of liberal democratic institutions, culture, and civic virtue that foster diversity of opinion, freedom of expression, and an expectation that the courts will give equal protection to all citizens under the rule of law. Yet, near the end of her book, when Barnett discusses possible ways by which society might prevent the feeling of powerlessness that she thinks underlies the bystander phenomenon, she writes as though the thought that liberal democratic culture could provide a remedy had never crossed her mind. "The solution is to discover a new way of connecting ethically, of changing both individual and societal ways of thinking about our ethical responsibilities" (1999, p. 174). Thus, despite her recognition that a major part of the explanation how the Nazis came to power (thus putting in place an essential condition for the Holocaust to occur) was the failure of the Weimar Republic's liberal institutions, Barnett fails to see the implication regarding the preventive role those institutions and culture might have played had they been more robust. It

seems likely that her predisposition toward MEP gets in the way of her being able to see a possible connection between explanation and prevention.

Unlike Barnett, who shows some awareness of the role played by the lack of liberal democratic political institutions and culture in the explanation of genocide, Roth largely ignores it, especially in the work under discussion (2001). Instead, when Roth discusses the enormous danger posed by the unconstrained power of the state, and how its misuse is to blame for most genocide, he tends to make sweeping generalizations about "the modern state," making no distinction between regimes that are democratic and those that are authoritarian, totalitarian, or communist. "The Final Solution was symptomatic of the modern state's perennial temptation to destroy people who are regarded as undesirable, superfluous, or unwanted because of religion, race, politics, ethnicity, or economic redundancy" (p. 226).

Roth uses a lengthy quotation from R.J. Rummel's book, *Death by Government*, to drive home his own indictment of all modern governments:

In total, during the first eighty-eight years of this [twentieth] century, almost 170 million men, women, and children have been shot, beaten, tortured, knifed, burned, starved, frozen, and crushed or worked to death; burned alive, drowned, hung, bombed, or killed in any other of the myriad ways governments have inflicted death on unarmed,



helpless citizens and foreigners. (2001, pp. 250-251)

The tendentious manner in which Roth uses Rummel's book is especially clear when he quotes selectively from Rummel's summary of his principal finding as follows: "Power kills, absolute power kills absolutely" (p. 250). However, the complete text of Rummel's passage has a quite different sense: "The less freedom people have, the greater the violence: the more freedom, the less violence. I offer this proposition here as the Principle of Power: power kills, absolute power kills absolutely" (1994, p. 23). Moreover, Roth ignores what Rummel has to say about the crucial role played by democratic culture:

When Power is checked and accountable, when cross-pressures limit the operation of Power, a particular democratic culture develops. This culture involves debate, demonstrations, and protests, as well as negotiations, compromise, and tolerance. It involves the art of conflict resolution and acceptance of democratic procedures at all levels of society. The ballot replaces the bullet, and people and groups come to accept a loss on this or that interest as only the unfortunate outcome of the way the legitimate game is played. "Lose today, win tomorrow." (1994, p. 23)

One possible explanation why proponents of MEP systematically avoid the potentially positive role that liberal democratic institutions, culture, and civic virtues can play in preventing genocide is that they have forgotten the adage: Do not make the perfect the enemy of the good. Perhaps proponents of MEP use an unrealistic standard of perfection to judge all governments, with the inevitable result that they have become cynical and pessimistic about the ways in which power is misused by liberal democracies.

It is all too true, of course, that liberal democracies are far from perfect. As Roger W. Smith (1997) has noted in a review of another Rummel book (1997), liberal democracies often resort to war, kill innocent civilians, and sometimes fail to live up to their own political ideals by persecuting their own citizens. Smith also states, "Even if it is true that democracies have not committed genocide in the twentieth century (and some would dispute that), they have supported regimes engaged in genocide.... Further, when not actually supporting genocidal regimes, democracies have often acted as bystanders, allowing mass slaughter to proceed" (p. 439). While one must acknowledge the very serious wrongs committed by liberal democracies, these wrongs pale by comparison with the extraordinarily greater extent to which non-democratic regimes routinely slaughter their own citizens as well as their neighbors, a point that Smith accepts (p. 440). For example, Rummel (1994, p. 14) estimates that of the approximately 170 million civilians killed between 1900 and 1987, about two million (one-and-a-half percent) were killed by democracies. A cynicism that would persist in the

face of figures like these would be a cynicism that is both morally blinkered and self-defeating in the search for ways to prevent genocide.

*Proponents of MEP ignore or fail to understand the relevance of social psychological research on the influence of situational factors on human behavior*

The Oliners and Roth hold MEP in a strong form. They reason that since there are identifiable traits of character that actually enabled individuals to withstand the power and brutality of the Nazis, inculcating these traits in greater numbers of people would free the world from genocide. Arguing this way presupposes that having these exemplary traits enables individuals to routinely override the influence of situational factors to produce ethically correct, even heroic, behavior like that exhibited by rescuers (for the Oliners) or Jehovah's Witnesses (for Roth). In short, genuine good character almost unfailingly produces exemplary behavior regardless of circumstances.

The confidence that the Oliners and Roth have in the power of individuals' moral character is problematic because it flies in the face of a large body of experimental research in social psychology that clearly demonstrates the great extent to which human behavior is influenced by the situation in which it takes place. A wide variety of carefully controlled experiments have shown that our common sense preconceptions about the decisive role of individual character, personality, and autonomy in determining behavior are

frequently mistaken. Stanley Milgram's obedience studies (1975) and Philip Zimbardo's Stanford prison experiment (2000) are two well-known examples of such social psychological research. It is worthwhile taking a closer look at a few of the things that Milgram and Zimbardo discovered about the power of situations to affect individual behavior, since their findings seem to seriously undermine the scientific credibility of MEP.

In a series of eighteen carefully designed experiments, Milgram showed that the presence of a person in authority can induce large majorities of experimental subjects to violate their own moral beliefs by administering what they think are powerful electric shocks to another subject, ostensibly a "learner" (but in fact Milgram's confederate) taking part in an experiment to discover the effects of punishment on learning. In actuality, the experiment was designed to find out whether the naive individuals in the role of teacher would obey orders to administer what they believe are increasingly painful shocks, even up to a level that appears to be life-threatening. Milgram classified subjects as fully obedient if they continued administering shocks as ordered up to the highest possible level of voltage. Subjects were considered disobedient if at any level they broke off the experiment by refusing to administer further shocks. Milgram's findings were truly startling. In the most familiar variant of the experiment, 65% of the subjects were fully obedient up to the highest level of 450 volts, and none of the disobedient subjects stopped before reaching 300 volts (1975, p. 35). Moreover, Milgram was able to elicit full obe-

dience from nearly 93% of subjects in another variation simply by having a peer administer the shock, relieving the teacher of direct responsibility for the harm (p. 119).

There are several features of Milgram's experiments that have significant implications for a critical assessment of MEP. Given these features, a proponent of MEP should predict very high levels of *disobedience*, in line with the optimistic predictions that Milgram obtained in his own surveys of both lay and professional opinions about the likely behavior of subjects (chap. 3). The first feature is the relatively benign nature of the experimental situations in which a majority of Milgram's subjects committed their surprising acts of obedience. Not only were his subjects not coerced or threatened with punishment in any way, they were participating as paid volunteers responding to a newspaper advertisement; they were free to leave the experimental situation at any time. Second, the subjects had no reason to devalue the learner, since they had been assigned the role of teacher by a seemingly random (but actually rigged) drawing before the experiment started, and (so far as they knew) they might just as easily have been in the learner's place. Nor were subjects given any ideological justification for mistreating the learner (for example, that he was inferior or culpable in some way) that would persuade them that it was morally permissible to inflict harm.

A third feature of Milgram's experiments is that a majority of the subjects, including those who were fully obedient, exhibited varying degrees of stress and conflict, including severe anxiety and emotion in some cases, about

inflicting severe pain as they were being instructed to do. Some explicitly said they thought it was wrong and asked for the experiment to stop. Thus, most subjects, whether obedient or disobedient, showed care and concern for the welfare of the learner who was being shocked (pp. 155-157). Finally, the learners for whose welfare the subjects showed genuine concern were anonymous strangers who fell "outside their familial and communal circles," thus satisfying the Oliners' definition of having an extensive (that is, strongly altruistic) personality. Despite all these features that, according to MEP and common preconceptions, should have led to high levels of disobedience, large percentages of Milgram's subject were fully obedient in several variations. Other investigators have replicated Milgram's findings with subjects drawn from different populations (e.g. German students, young children, and workers in a hospital), sometimes with even higher levels of obedience (Miller, 1986, chap. 4). Thus, there seems to be no way to avoid the conclusion reached by Milgram: the presence of an authority figure can be an extremely powerful situational factor that for a large majority of individuals overrides their genuine (often strong) altruistic concern, sympathy, and feelings of obligation not to harm the learner/victim.

If there was anything that Milgram's fully obedient subjects lacked it was definitely not moral virtues such as altruism or conscientious feelings of obligation not to harm others, as proponents of MEP might contend. The virtues they lacked are quite distinct from the virtues of altruism. Three of these warrant some mention. *Practical wisdom* is

(among other things) the ability to weigh distinct moral claims when they are in conflict with each other (in Milgram's experiment, the authority's ostensible right to be obeyed conflicted with the learner's right not to be harmed), to reach a sound judgment concerning which claim has priority in the situation, and to act accordingly, before one is morally compromised by unthinking compliance (Jones, 1999, pp. 53-57). *Autonomy* consists primarily of a strong disposition to make up one's own mind about what is the right or best thing to do and to act accordingly, even if this involves disobeying an authority figure (p. 55). *Civic virtues* include traits such as mutual respect for fellow citizens and a willingness to question, and even disobey, the use of institutional authority when it appears to disregard the worth and dignity of other persons, or treat them unfairly. Proponents of MEP tend to ignore these important non-altruistic virtues which are necessary for citizens to participate responsibly in a liberal democracy.

Looking primarily to an increase in the number of individuals who are altruistic and sympathetic as a sufficient means to prevent mindless obedience to institutional authority in relatively benign situations like those created in Milgram's experiments would be misguided at best. However, to defend it as the best way to prevent mass killing by a genocidal regime like that of the Nazis which was willing to use extreme coercion and brute force, as the proponents of MEP do, appears to be little more than wishful thinking.

Another consequence of the lack of practical wisdom, autonomy, and civic virtues can be seen in the limited nature of the disobedience shown by Milgram's subjects. Christina Maslach (2000) asks her reader to suppose that Milgram's cover story was in fact the truth, and that he or she was the first of a thousand subjects (approximately the number Milgram used) who participated in an actual use of high-voltage shocks to study learning:

If you disobeyed, refused to continue, got paid, and left silently, your heroic action would not prevent the next 999 participants from experiencing the same distress. It would be an isolated event without social impact unless it included going the next step of challenging the structure and assumptions of the research. (p. 220)

None of Milgram's disobedient subjects challenged the authority beyond a refusal to continue administering shocks. Satisfied with minimal passive resistance, they made no inquiry into the legitimacy of the experiment as a whole, nor did they threaten to take any action to prevent injury to other subjects. They just wanted out. Thus, their disobedience, which was strikingly individualistic and apolitical, far from providing an exemplary model of active resistance that might help prevent genocide, further confirms the suspicion that altruism alone is insufficient for that task.



It must be admitted that Milgram's findings do not prove that situations are all-powerful and that individual dispositions count for nothing. Indeed, Milgram explicitly qualifies his claims about the power of situations to determine behavior, saying that "often" it is the situation that determines how a person will act (1974, p. 205). Just as the Oliners studied individuals who were rescuers in order to identify any traits they share that would explain why they acted as they did, proponents of MEP might point to the 35% of subjects who were disobedient in the one variation already noted, and argue that there must be something special about the character traits that these individuals share that explains their disobedience. Milgram addressed this problem of individual differences, but his findings were inconclusive. For example, although obedient subjects had higher scores on the F-scale (used to measure fascistic tendencies) than disobedient ones, this difference was too weakly correlated to observed behavior to be significant. Milgram reached the same conclusion with respect to several other correlations, and concluded by cautioning his readers that "it would be a mistake to believe that any single temperamental quality is associated with disobedience, or to make the simple-minded statement that kindly and good persons disobey while those who are cruel do not" (p. 205).

Zimbardo's prison experiment (2000) involved creating a simulation of the kind of total situation found in prisons. Two dozen male subjects, who had been assessed as normal, average, and healthy by a battery of psychological tests, were randomly assigned to one of two roles, guard or

prisoner. This would make it very likely that any difference in the effects of the experiment on the two groups would be the result of the respective roles they occupied, rather than the individual psychological traits they brought to the situation. The prisoners wore uniforms and nylon stocking caps to simulate having their hair cut off, and they were required to refer to themselves and to each other only by their prison number, and to address the guards as "Mr. Corrections Officer." The guards were instructed to maintain order and discipline, but to use their billy clubs only as symbols of their authority, and not to let prisoners escape. Beyond that, neither group was given any instructions how to behave; the guards were then free to set the rules governing prisoners.

Zimbardo's experiment was scheduled to last two weeks, but it had to be stopped after only six days because several of the guards became increasingly abusive, hostile, punitive, and even physically violent toward the prisoners (e.g., one guard hit a prisoner on the chin with his billy club). The prisoners, for their part, quickly showed signs of severe stress, becoming increasingly deferential, obedient, and depressed. Thus, the guards and prisoners rapidly exhibited dramatically different patterns of behavior and emotion in their respective roles. The effects on the prisoners in this experimental simulation were eerily similar to those observed by Primo Levi (1993, chap. 2) during his first few days in Auschwitz when newly arrived slave laborers were dehumanized. Correspondingly, the abusive behavior that

emerged among some of the guards in the simulation was reminiscent of the behavior of the SS and kapos.

There are some features of the Zimbardo experiment that have particular relevance for a critical assessment of MEP. First, the guards differed from each other in the degree to which they engaged in authoritarian behavior, abuse, and violence toward the prisoners, falling into three groupings: those who were tough but fair; the "good guys" who felt sorry for the prisoners, did little favors for them, and never punished them; and those who were, in Zimbardo's words, "extremely hostile, arbitrary, inventive in their forms of degradation and humiliation, and [who] appeared to thoroughly enjoy the power they wielded" (Sabini & Silver, 1982, p. 82). Noting that neither the good guards nor the tough but fair guards tried to interfere with the cruelty of the hostile guards, Sabini & Silver have suggested that a process of "moral drift" had taken place. The hostility and cruelty of the abusive guards persisted and became the norm because of the acquiescence of the other guards. This, too, mirrors the behavior of the guards in Nazi slave labor camps (pp. 83-84).

Zimbardo's prison experiment dramatically confirms the general thesis that institutional situations can have a wide range of powerful effects on individuals, depending on the particular roles they happen to occupy. The prison simulation involves an especially potent kind of institutional situation, with its social isolation, hierarchical organization, concentration of power, and wide discretion in how it may be used, that in conjunction with ordinary peer pressure, makes moral drift almost inevitable (Kelman & Hamilton,

1989, pp. 310-315). Moreover, this is precisely the kind of institutional design that is prevalent in a non-democratic regime using the police, the military, civilian bureaucracies, and concentration camps to implement a genocidal project. The regime will make every effort to ensure that officials, managers, and administrators in institutional leadership positions are in full agreement with the goals of the state's project; these leaders in turn will try to see to it that the implementation of the project is carried out by loyal cadres (Alvarez, 2001, chap. 4). Despite the best efforts of such a regime, however, there are always people with moral scruples about engaging in extermination, but such doubters and would-be dissenters are usually deterred from acting on their scruples by fear of punishment or damage to their careers, and by peer pressure.

Neither the Oliners nor Roth explicitly acknowledge these unwelcome facts about human psychology and the explanation of genocide, and instead fasten their attention on examples of successful rescuers or resisters. Although Barnett (1999: 24-27) explicitly discusses the negative implications of the Milgram and Zimbardo experiments, she concludes by reaffirming her faith in MEP, citing the example of rescuers and the inherent "ambiguity and complexity of human behavior" (p. 31). An examination of another recent example of an MEP-inspired search for an impeccable model of moral exemplariness will prove instructive.

*The reasons why Jehovah's Witnesses are not well-suited to serve as models of moral exemplariness for the prevention of genocide*

John K. Roth has been calling attention to admirable rescuers and resisters for a number of years, arguing that they provide proof that the extent of the evil of genocide can be mitigated by individuals acting responsibly to help victims (Garber, 1988, p. 116, for example). In a recent book, however, Roth (2001) makes a much stronger claim (already noted): "If more people practiced versions of what the Jehovah's Witnesses preach and practice, the Holocaust could have been prevented and genocide would scourge the world no more" (p. 236). One might be tempted to dismiss this claim as the empty hypothetical truism that it appears to be. Compare: "If more people acted in the ways that truly honest business men and women act, the Enron collapse could have been avoided and corporate scandal would scourge the world no more." Who could disagree? However, looking more closely at the Witnesses as a model for moral exemplariness will enable us to see more clearly why Roth's choice is so implausible.

Roth's admiration for Witnesses stems from the exemplary way they steadfastly resisted the relentless and brutal persecution of the Nazi regime. Consequently, it is necessary at the outset to point out the difference between two distinct questions: (1) Was the resistance of the Witnesses to the Nazi regime admirable and praiseworthy?, and (2) If the Witnesses are admirable for their resistance to the Nazi

regime, does this automatically mean they are especially well-suited to serve as models of moral exemplariness for the prevention of genocide, as Roth contends? A careful review of the relevant evidence strongly supports an affirmative answer to (1), but at the same time makes it very difficult to avoid a negative answer to (2).

The Nazi regime recognized the Witnesses as an enemy very early, enacting a ban on them July 24, 1933 (Reynaud & Graffard, 2001, p. xxii). It continued to persecute them until the end of the war in 1945, primarily because Witnesses, like communists, represented a rival ideology and way of life. Witnesses engaged in open and direct refusal to take part in the myriad activities required of them as citizens of the Third Reich, such as using the Hitler salute as a greeting, swearing an oath of loyalty to Hitler or the Reich, serving in the military, and enrolling their children in the Nazi youth organizations. They also made repeated efforts to explain and justify their principled religious reasons for refusing to have anything to do with the Nazi state. For example, they published open letters to the authorities, thousands of copies of which were distributed throughout Germany. In October, 1934, the Witnesses sent a statement of principles to the German government in which they declared, "We have no interest in political affairs, but are wholly devoted to God's kingdom under Christ his King" (*Jehovah's Witnesses*, 1993, p. 694).

The reaction of the Nazi regime was swift and fierce. Witnesses lost their jobs and pensions, and their children were taken away to be re-educated in state reformatories for

juvenile delinquents. There were between twenty and thirty thousand Witnesses living in Germany in 1933; of these, between one-third and one-half were arrested and sent to prison or concentration camps, where as many as 5,000 died from the brutal treatment they received between 1933 and 1945 (Johnson, 1999, pp. 239-240). Yet virtually all Witnesses persevered in their faith and in their solidarity with each other, even in the concentration camps. Incredibly, Witness prisoners could free themselves from a concentration camp at any time by a seemingly simple act: signing an official declaration renouncing their faith and swearing allegiance to the Reich. Yet, only a small number took advantage of this offer.

Taking all of these facts into consideration, there is no question that Roth and other admirers of the Witnesses (Chu, 2002) are right to judge their resistance to the Nazi regime as admirable and praiseworthy. Their actions were not only right and good, but often they were exemplary, going above and beyond duty. In this respect, Witnesses stand in marked contrast with the great majority of Germans who were perpetrators, accomplices, or bystanders during the Nazi regime. However, the fact that the Witnesses resisted Nazi persecution in a very praiseworthy way does not automatically mean that they are also well-suited to serve as models of moral exemplariness for the prevention of genocide. Indeed, a strong case can be made that Witnesses are actually ill-suited to fill that role.

There is, first of all, the strictly apolitical world view of the Witnesses which requires not just that they refrain

from participating as citizens in a totalitarian regime like the Third Reich, it requires them to abstain from *any* kind of political activity or involvement in worldly affairs, regardless of the kind of state they live under. Even if they live in a liberal democracy, Witnesses believe it would be a violation of God's law to "take sides," because he has set them apart from the world and they are "under obligation to shun the spirit of the world - its aims, ambitions, and hopes, as well as its selfish ways" (*Jehovah's Witnesses*, p. 188). Witnesses believe, further, that all human governments are part of the "present wicked system of things" which will be completely destroyed before the Kingdom of God is established, bringing a lasting peace (pp. 144-145). Witnesses adhere to these beliefs in practice, not just when they live in a dictatorship like the Third Reich, but also in a democracy like the United States, refusing to fulfill a wide variety of civic duties, such as serving on a jury, voting, and accepting induction into the military. And, of course, they will not hold any public office (p. 673). Finally, Witnesses are strict pacifists; they believe it is always wrong to kill or use violence against others (pp. 194, 198, 662). Roth (2001, p. 238) notes approvingly that Witnesses who were imprisoned in concentration camps did not attempt to escape or engage in violent resistance of any kind. Even when they were beaten or tortured by the SS, they endured the torment without attempting to strike back (King, 1990, p. 191).

A second, and even more compelling, reason why Witnesses are ill-suited as models of moral exemplariness for the prevention of genocide is that they played no part,



one way or the other, in the tumultuous events surrounding the rise of Hitler and the Nazi party and the destruction of German democracy. Throughout the 1920s and early 1930s when the Weimar Republic was under attack from almost all sides, German Witnesses remained true to their theologically-based stance of political neutrality. Their public activity consisted entirely of "witnessing," that is, distributing their own religious tracts, an apolitical activity which nevertheless drew the attention of some hostile local governments (*Jehovah's Witnesses*, pp, 441-442). Watching passively as parliamentary democracy was incrementally enfeebled and subverted, Witnesses were indistinguishable from the great majority of Germans who, tired of trying to make democracy work, favored a return to some form of authoritarian regime.

To be blunt, Witnesses did nothing to stop the slide into Nazi dictatorship. Unlike the exemplary (albeit passive) resistance they exhibited *after* the Nazis came to power, there was nothing exemplary about their public behavior in the years *prior* to the Nazi takeover. What is worse, it was precisely the years before the Nazis had the power of the German state at their disposal that provided the best opportunity to prevent the Holocaust, not after. In any case, the kind of passive, non-violent resistance practiced by the Witnesses in the face of Nazi persecution, even if it had been practiced by large numbers of Germans, would in all likelihood not have been sufficient to deflect that regime from its ideologically defined course.

*Civic conscientiousness: An alternative model of moral exemplariness for the prevention of genocide*

Roth, who probably recognizes that not everyone would find the religious and apolitical world view of the Witnesses attractive, explicitly rejects the notion that being a practicing Jehovah's Witness is a necessary part of his version of MEP. Instead, he emphasizes what he takes to be the humanistic and ethical content of what Witnesses believe, namely "principles of justice, peace, love, and understanding" (2001, p. 242). This means that Roth's version of MEP, like the versions of the Oliners and Barnett, is focused primarily on apolitical altruistic virtues such as benevolence, sympathy, and compassion. And this leaves it open to the objection, discussed earlier, that it ignores important non-altruistic virtues such as practical wisdom and autonomy, as well as civic virtues generally. Moreover, Roth also ignores the results of social psychological experiments like those of Milgram and Zimbardo. Finally, we have already seen that he shares the tendency of virtually all proponents of MEP to ignore the potential importance of liberal democratic political institutions, culture, and civic virtues as means of preventing genocide.

It seems fair to conclude that the altruistic and apolitical conceptions of moral exemplariness characteristic of MEP do not provide plausible models of good character in an age of genocide. Fortunately, the critical discussion in this essay provides ample materials for an alternative conception of moral exemplariness, which can be called civic conscien-

tiousness. While this conception includes the ordinary altruistic virtues such as the capacity to feel love, affection and disinterested benevolence for others, it denies that these are sufficient to provide the kind of civic and political motivation needed in citizens. In order for persons to be moral exemplars on this conception, they must also have the virtues that MEP tends to neglect: practical wisdom, autonomy, and civic virtue generally. In addition, and most importantly, the civic virtues are assumed to emerge from, and to be largely dependent upon, participation in liberal institutions and democratic culture (Cnudde & Neubauer, 1969, chap. 14; Barber, 1984, chap. 9). Unlike the individualistic apolitical conceptions of moral exemplariness in MEP, civic virtues are defined in terms of citizenship, thus, they are inherently social, institutional, political, and communal.

Another contrast with MEP is that civic conscientiousness does not imply that the existence of enough exemplary individuals alone would be sufficient to prevent genocide; the power of civic virtue can only be realized in the context of complementary liberal democratic institutions and culture. It is the combination of institutions, culture, and individual virtues which is held to be sufficient for prevention (Jones, 1999, pp. 236-243). Yet a third contrast with MEP is that individuals can exemplify civic conscientiousness without necessarily engaging in heroic or supererogatory actions. Indeed, as its name implies, civic conscientiousness will most often be realized in ordinary, non-heroic fulfillment of an individual's civic duties and obligations (obeying the law, paying taxes, serving on juries or in public office,

and the like), or in optional voluntary acts of civic service and participation that need not be onerous, dangerous, or self-sacrificing in any strong sense. In occasional times of great crisis, citizens may be called on to perform actions that are heroic and dangerous, but even then this may not be necessary. After all, it is often possible to engage in non-violent civil disobedience or public demonstrations without great risk. However, when the political life of a liberal democratic community is going well (or not too badly), when the power of the state is being kept more or less within its constitutional bounds, acts of ordinary civic conscientiousness will usually suffice.

Despite the radical differences between them, both the MEP and civic conscientiousness models for moral exemplariness are conceived as means to a shared long-term goal: making *individual societies* less likely to engage in genocide. Consequently, neither of these approaches is an adequate remedy for the most pressing and immediate problems of international law and order: detecting and preventing imminent genocides, intervening in on-going genocides, and bringing perpetrators of past genocides to justice. The historical record of the international community, including the United States, in responding to genocide and other mass killings is truly abysmal (Power, 2002). There are hopeful signs that this dismal picture may change, but there is yet no cause for optimism. However, such a realistic appraisal of how bad the current situation is should not obscure the very real and important differences between the recommendations for prevention made by advocates of MEP

and those made by researchers who adopt a structural approach based on historical and psychological evidence. It is not too strong to say that MEP often leads to illusion and wishful thinking. By contrast, we can have at least some empirically based confidence that the recommendations of genocide researchers might actually have some preventive effects, if they are ever in fact implemented.

*Some modest proposals regarding ways to help close the gap between genocide research and education*

There are some things that individual genocide researchers, as well as their professional organizations, could do to reach more teachers and students in genocide education that might help close the gap between research and education. One principal goal should be to break down the "two cultures" split between scholars in the humanities and those in history, psychology, and the social sciences. (1) They should try to publish more critical articles and books explicitly addressed to the need for more in-depth discussion of prevention in genocide courses, and at museums and memorials. Wherever possible, critical articles should be submitted to journals, symposia, and other media likely to be read or seen by adherents of MEP as well as genocide researchers. (2) Efforts should be made to organize national or regional conferences on teaching about genocide with a focus on prevention. Calls for papers should be sent to a wide range of scholars, including those who are strongly inclined toward MEP and those who are drawn to a more

structural and institutional approach to genocide prevention. (3) Professional organizations of genocide researchers should sponsor teacher workshops; this effort should be coupled with aggressive recruitment of young new scholars interested in teaching genocide courses, much like the summer seminars now offered by the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, except that teaching about prevention from a comparative and social science perspective would be given priority.

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