

‘Teaching as Ethical Practice’

Talk for the 2018 Sheedy Excellence in Teaching Award

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Dear friends and colleagues,

It is an immense honor to be here today, to be recognized for teaching in the College of Arts and Letters. To be honest, I was surprised – frankly, shocked – to receive this award; as I look around the room, I see many faces of wonderful and inspirational teachers who are equally deserving, and I am keenly aware of the passion for teaching our students that we all share. It makes this recognition all the more humbling.

I have indeed learned a great deal from many of you. I must confess that in my early days at Notre Dame my teaching ‘style’ was perhaps a bit too ‘East Coast’: a tad too forceful and direct, which tended to shut down class discussion rather quickly. But I will not forget the practical advice on adjusting to my new environment that I received from a number of friends,

including George Lopez, Scott Appleby, Catherine Zuckert and Michael Zuckert, and of course the ever helpful Kevin Barry.

Over the years, I have taught courses on topics that I am passionate about - peace, reconciliation and political violence, interests that are a product of my own upbringing. My parents were political refugees from Cuba, and although I was born in the United States, I spent my formative years abroad, in Argentina and Venezuela, during a period when Latin America was in turmoil as it confronted legacies of violence, repression and inequality (as of course, it still does). Having immigrant parents and living in South America deeply shaped my own understandings of identity and belonging, and catalyzed a life-long interest in questions of political reconciliation, justice and peacebuilding.

I feel especially fortunate that I can teach about these topics for a living. But I also see it as a responsibility: for many of us, we make our biggest impact in the classroom, semester after semester, year after year, and thus we are enjoined to think carefully about how and what we teach.

Now, having said that, I must confess that I do not have a unique teaching method with particular guidelines or strategies that are solely mine, so I do not have much wisdom to impart on that front. My approach is broadly Socratic: Listen to students, take them seriously, but also ask

questions that challenge their own assumptions and presuppositions, all the while underscoring the importance of respectful disagreement. I have found this is most successful if one establishes a space for discussion and dialogue, so even those who are shy can feel like they have something to contribute.

Indeed, I see teaching as a way to encourage the development of moral reflection, to cultivate an awareness of the needs of others, and to engender a commitment to work to make the world a better place. In many ways, these are values at the center of democratic citizenship, for no political society can survive if its members care only about themselves and dismiss the needs of the most vulnerable among us.

I realize, of course, that a substantial number of students will take only one class in political science, or peace studies, and that their primary interests lie elsewhere. But I am fine with this – if I can kindle some concern for the issues that are passionate to me, and if I can get them to think about how to respond to some of the gravest problems we face – and that they and their children will continue to face – then I feel like I have made at least a small contribution to democratic citizenship, to promoting the idea that the privileges that come with being a member of a political community also come with responsibilities. And that these responsibilities do not end at our national borders. Moral decency and respect for the dignity of others,

whether founded on deep religious convictions or secular humanist principles, requires of us all to care for those among us in most need.

So, what might this all mean in practice? I've reflected on this quite a bit, and here I'll take the example of a course I have taught at the undergraduate and graduate levels for some time now, on contemporary genocide and mass violence, which is also at the center of my research and my practical interests in human rights advocacy. I was invited to think about this about a year ago for an edited book on teaching about mass violence (I'm sure it will be a bestseller), and I will take the opportunity here to elaborate further some of my thoughts.

So, let's begin with this question: What would it mean to teach successfully about genocide? There are some obvious criteria one can identify. For instance, one could focus on ensuring students learn the basic facts of particular cases: the historical origins of discrimination and dehumanization, the role of hate propaganda, the names and actions of perpetrator organizations, the institutionalization of political and everyday forms of violence over time, as well as examples of resistance and tender humanity. One can, and should, also teach a broad range of analytical

approaches, and show students the causal factors, prior conditions, tipping points and the like that inform contemporary research. And certainly, one may wish to introduce students to the variety of theories and practical strategies that have emerged to prevent future genocides.

All of this is valuable, no doubt, and any instructor who can communicate this in a sophisticated and clear way is certainly successful. I refer to this as generally *explanatory* work: it concerns explanations of what happened, where and when it happened, why it occurred, who were the main actors, and how it all occurred. Now, explanations are important, but they provide us with only one analytical perspective on genocide. Genocide can be *explained* to various degrees, using a host of social scientific, legal and policy methods. But *understanding* genocide is another matter, as it raises profound questions that are not easily resolved. In my experience as an instructor, addressing the latter involves posing questions and searching for answers collectively.¹

By understanding, I have in mind the ethical meaning, and also consequences, of genocide: how could this be? How could this have happened? Can one even make sense of this enormous catastrophe? Can our

¹ The distinction I propose here between explanation and understanding is not quite the same as Max Weber's influential formulation, developed in response to Wilhelm Dilthey, though there is certainly some overlap. See Weber, Max *Sociological Writings*, Wolf Heydebrand (ed.) (New York: Continuum, 1994).

explanations function as understanding, provide us with any deeper insight into what this means? One cannot evade these questions in class. One cannot bracket them indefinitely, because they continue to return, unwelcome guests who haunt one's conscience and demands answers. I raise these questions in class through various readings, and they provide some of the most challenging, but also thoughtful, discussions with my students.

Explanation and understanding are not wholly separate, of course, for without adequate empirical explanations of genocide we cannot grasp what is at stake in ethical terms, or even properly frame it. However, explanations do not exhaust the kinds of questions that my students continuously raise, a point well known to philosophers, theologians, artists and others who grapple with these issues. Here I lay out some of the epistemological and ontological challenges to understanding that frequently emerge during the semester.

The *epistemological* challenge posed by genocide asks whether any of our moral frameworks can make sense of the wholesale extermination of fellow human beings. In many natural law traditions, for instance, the cosmos is posited as morally intelligible – there is right and wrong, and

harmful actions are not only violations of the individual rights of others,² but against the proper moral order of things. There are many such formulations of natural law (monotheist, pantheist, naturalist, and so forth), but most point to some sense of the correct ordering and intelligibility of the way things are and ought to be.³ Genocide, however, challenges this in profound ways. The cognitive epistemic rupture engendered by genocide – what happened? – is also a moral epistemic rupture – how could this have happened? – that fractures our very frameworks of moral intelligibility. It is no surprise that the problem of theodicy, which concerns how an all good, all knowing, and all powerful God could allow evil, gained new relevance for Christians and Jews in the aftermath of the Holocaust, and of course drove many others away from religion. Indeed, some version of this problem, whether sacred or secularized, appears following any major catastrophe where our abilities of comprehension fail. Epistemologically, then, genocide leaves us morally unanchored, questioning whether we can make sense of these atrocities when our moral faculties and the foundations on which they rest seem inadequate. When Hannah Arendt wrote that in the twentieth century we

² Modern human rights discourse has its own complex genealogy and origin story, and faces a similar set of epistemological and ontological challenges to its justification. See Donnelly, Jack *Human Rights in Theory and Practice* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2013); Moyn, Samuel *The Last Utopia: Human Rights in History* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press).

³ Boyle, Joseph, “Natural Law and the Ethics of Traditions” in *Natural Law Theory: Contemporary Essays*, Robert P. George (ed.) (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992)

must “think without a banister,” she had this erosion of our moral certainties in mind.⁴ To be sure, the Holocaust, and genocide more generally, are not solely responsible for these crises of meaning,⁵ but the crises always arise in the shadow of genocide.⁶

These ruptures are also evident in many of the artistic works that directly take on genocide: consider the paintings of Anselm Kiefer or the poetry of Charlotte Delbo, to name only two artists, where the fundamental aporia between experience and presentation – that is, the rupture in *re-presentation* – stubbornly remains, resisting any attempt at full understanding, and thus at closure. Hence, Theodor Adorno’s famous observation that “to write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric.”⁷ These ruptures have been central to aesthetic encounters with the problem of

⁴ Arendt, Hannah, “Understanding and Politics,” in Kohn, Jerome (ed.) *Essays in Understanding: 1930-1954* (New York: Harcourt, 1994).

⁵ In the “West,” scholars often point to radical changes brought about by the collapse of empires, the two world wars, anti-colonial struggles, and shifts in political, cultural and ethical norms tied to the rise of modernity. I leave these complex and fascinating debates aside for the present. My point here is only that genocide consistently raises profound challenges to our epistemological frameworks, and thus to the certainties of moral intelligibility that we hold as given.

⁶ See, for instance, Alexander Hinton’s nuanced analysis of the Cambodian torturer Duch in *Man or Monster? The Trial of a Khmer Rouge Torturer* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016).

⁷ Adorno, Theodor “Culture Critique and Society” *Prisms* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press), 34. In a later work, Adorno seems to retract this claim, though only to state that a world that has experienced Auschwitz may not be a world worth living in. Adorno, Theodor, *Negative Dialectics* (London: Routledge), 362.

genocide, a point my students grasp when working through these challenging texts.

And yet, as we discuss in class, the emphasis on rupture may carry its own danger. If art about genocide can point to the limits of representation and comprehension – that is, to understanding –focusing on rupture can also risk aestheticizing genocide to the point where it is portrayed as abject horror that remains inscrutable, uninterpretable, and thus outside of history. We risk returning to interpretations of genocide as ‘madness,’ ‘irrationality,’ and the like, and we may lose any way to interrogate it, leading to the abandonment of ethical critique. It is only a short step from declaring something uninterpretable to casting it aside as an aberration that need not challenge our own beliefs, values or convenient self-understandings of historical progress.⁸

This raises a second, *ontological* challenge to understanding that we discuss in class. There is an enormous literature concerning what exactly *is* genocide, beyond the typical definitional debates among social scientists and lawyers. When we ask what genocide is, we are asking about its

⁸ Bauman, Zygmunt *Modernity and the Holocaust* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1986); LaCapra, Dominick *Representing the Holocaust: History, Theory, Trauma* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1994); Friedlander, Saul (ed.) *Probing the Limits of Representation: Nazism and the “Final Solution”* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992).

fundamental elements beyond the observable and measurable features of social scientific analysis. Genocide is more than the aggregate of many killings, the processes by which an extermination policy coalesces, or the end result of human destruction. It is, as my students consistently point out, evil – but the specific elements of this are debated (as is the very concept of evil – one need only consider the differences between Leibniz and Voltaire on this score).⁹ Is genocide evil because of its inherent cruelty – that is, the enormous and unjustifiable suffering it entails – or because it constitutes the rejection of coexistence and pluralism, a basic human norm? Is its evil rooted in “social death” and the obliteration of a meaningful, shared life?¹⁰ Or is there something else? There are, certainly, many more formulations about the evil of genocide (as banality, radical, excess, irrationality, and so forth.)¹¹ And yet, as my students observe, any ontological inquiry poses a new danger: that of hypostatizing genocide and treating the concept as more ‘real’ than its specific historical cases, separated from its context.

⁹ Leibniz, Gottfried W. F. *Theodicy*, Farrer, Austin (ed.) (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1952); Voltaire, *Candide* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006); Bernstein, Richard *Radical Evil: A Philosophical Interrogation* (London: Polity, 2002).

¹⁰ Card, Claudia “Social Death” *Hypatia* 18/1 (2003): 63-79; Short, Damien *Redefining Genocide: Settler Colonialism, Social Death, and Ecocide* (London: Zed Books, 2016); Lang, Berel *Genocide: The Act as Idea* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016), p 32.

¹¹ Neiman, Susan *Evil In Modern Thought: An Alternative History of Philosophy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2002); Arendt, Hannah *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (New York: Penguin Classics, 2006).

My point in class is less to adjudicate among these and other theoretical accounts, and instead underscore that any attempt to explore genocide's ontology will face, at some juncture, resistance to placing it neatly within the narrative of human affairs. Primo Levi tells the story of being denied by an Auschwitz guard an icicle to quench his thirst. When Levi asks the guard why, he is told, "Hier ist kein warum" - there is no why here.¹² Any examination of genocide must confront this "absence of why" at its center, even if many of its other features can be *explained* in the ways sketched earlier.

This gap between explanation and understanding is not, however, a cause for despair, but rather the catalyst for ethical practice: it encourages students to think about what it means to be responsible toward others; what it means to care for the most vulnerable and exposed among us; what it means to lend a voice and a hand to the work of justice; what it means to make the world a better place for our fellow human beings.

Indeed, throughout my courses, whether on genocide, or the foundations of human rights, or the politics of transitional justice and reconciliation, we examine the ethical and practical responses to the

¹² Levi, *Primo Survival In Auschwitz* (New York: Touchstone), 29.

profound challenges of modern day injustices. In all of these instances, the goal is to combine intellectual integrity with moral awareness, to explore the ways in which we all are rooted in a shared world of mutual obligation.

Teaching, in this sense, is a collective enterprise, one that combines sharp intellectual debate and critique with a knowledge of the ethical implications at stake.

I do have a sense that these discussions have an impact. I am especially moved when I receive a card or letter or email from a former student noting how something from class has stuck with her. I have had students write to me sometimes several years after they graduated. I recall one student who told me about how a class discussion on the politics of human rights shaped her own thinking working in a human rights organization, and another former student saying that what she learned about peacebuilding strategies has been directly relevant to her work building trust in communities torn by histories of conflict. And of course, there are the many other students one has taught over the years who have gone on to have their own professional successes in numerous fields, and have maintained, regardless of what they do for a living, a commitment to advancing justice and protecting rights. I have kept all of these notes and cards, for they

continue to inspire me in the classroom. They are reminders of the *importance of what we do*, and sometimes even leave us in awe of what these *young people go on to do*.

And so, as I stand here and reflect about the purpose of teaching, I settle on the comforting thought that we can have some impact in the long run, and, though the precise means by which this happens may seem intangible, through our students we can help contribute to a more humane, just and decent future.

Friends and colleagues, I am so grateful to be here today. I am very aware that I would not be here without your support and generosity.

Thank you.

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