

**AFFECT, AGENCY AND RESPONSIBILITY:
THE ACT OF KILLING IN THE AGE OF CYBORGS**

Roger Pippin, Dept of Communication Studies, University of South Florida

John Protevi, Dept of French Studies, Louisiana State University¹

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ABSTRACT

While close-range killing is sometimes performed in "cold blood" (with full conscious awareness of a subject), it is more often performed in a de-subjectified state, as in reflexes, rages, and panics. We explore two military modifications of de-subjectified killing: (1) Vietnam-era training for "free fire zones" and (2) current digital and video simulator training for urban warfare of the "shoot / no shoot" type. We focus on how dehumanization of the enemy temporarily allows for activation of a "hunting agent," but often cannot stop an "empathy agent" from kicking in afterwards, producing a sense of retrospective guilt, even though the practical agent and the moral agent did not coincide at the time of the act of killing.

INTRODUCTION TO THE ACT OF KILLING

In one of the most famous passages of the Western tradition, Socrates tells Simmias and Cebes in the *Phaedo* that philosophy is preparation for death. In his case, Socrates demonstrates his

¹ Alphabetical listing of authors. We each contributed equally to this article.

philosophical preparation for the brave or even cheerful facing of one's own death in the joking story about the payment of the cock due Asclepius. Since then, the proper attitude toward one's own death, or the death of the other, whether that death hits close to home or occurs far away, has been a constant philosophical concern. However, other than the analysis of the body of the guardian in the *Republic*, there has been to our knowledge precious little philosophical analysis of the killer, the one who deals death to others. By contrast, the psychology or even physiology of killing has been a deep and abiding theme in Western literature, from the *Iliad* onward, from the war epic through crime fiction. It is time to redress this imbalance and consider the act of killing from a philosophical perspective.

One of the most striking things we see in beginning our reflection on the act of killing is that killing in combat is less easy than it might seem to those outside the military, for whom the logic of "kill or be killed" would predict high rates of deadly interaction. While close-range killing can be done by a very small percentage of soldiers in "cold blood" (with full conscious awareness of a subject), Grossman 1996 argues for a deep-seated inhibition against one-on-one, face-to-face, cold-blooded killing on the part of some 98% of soldiers, a figure which correlates well with the estimated 2% of the population who count as low-affect or "stimulus-hungry" sociopaths (Niehoff 1999: 129, 166, 181). While distance, teamwork, and mechanical intermediaries increase the ability to engage in deadly combat, nonetheless so deep is this inhibition on killing that traditional military drill (target shooting at bull's-eyes) produced only a 15-20% *firing* rate among American infantry troops in WWII, excluding machine-gunners (Grossman 1996: 3-4, citing Marshall 1978). Now a firing rate doesn't indicate willingness to kill, as Grossman explains. The usual "fight or flight" dichotomy is falsely drawn from *inter*-species conflicts; *intra*-species conflicts are also marked by display and submission, which,

along with flight, are much more likely to occur before fight (especially fight to the death).

While it is true that in some territorial species, such as lions, a newly victorious alpha male will kill the offspring of his defeated adversary, the intra-species inhibition we invoke concerns animals of the same generation in one-on-one combat; chimpanzee wars and murders always involve ambushes in which at least two but often seven or eight chimpanzees attack a single, isolated victim (de Waal 1997: 38). Given these factors, Grossman concludes that much of the World War II firing rate was display rather than fight (Grossman 1996: 5-6).

We propose three factors to account for the wide distribution of this inhibition on killing, each of which depends on an empathic identification. We need not decide here on the mechanism of that empathy, for which there are two major explanations in the current literature. First, we find simulation theories relying on mirror neurons (Gallese 2001) in which empathy is grounded in a “shared manifold”: a neurological firing pattern provoked in the observer by the sight of the intentional actions of a co-specific. Secondly, we find phenomenological accounts. Some supplement the mirror neuron findings with an account of an embodied intentionality, as in Thompson 2001; others, however, will find the mirror neuron approach still too representational and appeal to a field of directly felt corporeal expressivity grounding our “pragmatic interaction” with others (Gallagher 2005: 223).

Whatever the mechanism, these empathetic abilities underlie three factors we propose as underlying the wide-spread inhibition on cold-blooded close range killing: (1) Sensing what the intensity of the fight to the kill would be like: an attack beyond the threshold mutually recognized as that indicating display might provoke a deep panicked self-defense on the part of the opponent rather than the desired submission. Niehoff 1999 offers support here. See page 75 on “protective aggression,” citing Archer 1988; page 127 on the release of norepinephrine in

attack situations; and page 130 for a summary of Gray 1977, which postulates a behavioral inhibition system tied to physiological arousal. (2) The need to avoid the intensity of revulsion afterward: living with having been a killer would be too much; the “memories of the future” (Casey 2000: 62-63) are in this case intolerable for the subjective present (see also Damasio 1994 and 1999 for accounts of the role of “somatic markers” in entertaining “as if” scenarios of future action). (3) The recognition of the humanity of the opponent through face-recognition, one of the earliest infant capacities (Hendriks-Jansen 1996: 252-277; see also Stern 1985 and Gallagher 2005): many battlefield accounts show how the face of the enemy has profound inhibitory effects; the blindfold on the victim of a firing squad enables the shooters by breaking eye contact between victim and executioners (Grossman 1996: 225).

RAGE, REFLEXES AND THE ACT OF KILLING

As we have seen, the vast majority of soldiers cannot kill in cold blood and need to kill in a de-subjectified state, e.g., in reflexes, rages and panics. The biggest problem of military training is how to overcome the inhibition on killing without the loss of control that comes with rage and panic; thus activating and controlling reflex killing is often the goal. But who does the killing when reflexes are activated?

Zahavi (2005) and Gallagher (2005) have recently distinguished agency and ownership of bodily actions. Ownership is the sense that my body is doing the action, while agency is the sense that I am in control of the action, that the action is willed. Both are aspects of subjectivity, though the first might be a matter of pre-reflective self-awareness rather than full-fledged objectifying self-consciousness. But alongside subjectivity we need also to notice emergent

assemblages that skip subjectivity and directly conjoin larger groups and the somatic. To follow this line of thought, let us accept that, in addition to non-subjective body control by reflexes, we can treat basic emotions as modular “affect programs” (Griffiths 1997) that run the body’s hardware in the absence of conscious control. (Here we use computer metaphors about which we have to be very careful not to let them imply any stance on cognition as computation of discrete symbols.) In this way we see two elements we need to take into account besides the notion of subjective agency: (1) that there is another sense of “agent” as non-subjective controller of bodily action, either reflex or basic emotion, and (2) that in some cases the military unit and non-subjective reflexes and basic emotions are intertwined in such a way as to bypass (or at least attenuate) subjectivity. In these cases the practical agent of the act of killing is not the individual person or subject, but the emergent assemblage of military unit and non-subjective reflex or equally non-subjective “affect program.”

A little more detail on the notion of a “rage agent” might be helpful at this point. We hold that extreme cases of rage produce a modular agent or “affect program” that replaces the subject. Affect programs are emotional responses that are “complex, coordinated, and automated ... unfold[ing] in this coordinated fashion without the need for conscious direction” (Griffiths 1997: 77). They are more than reflexes, but they are triggered well before any cortical processing can take place (though later cortical appraisals can dampen or accelerate the affect program). Griffiths makes the case that affect programs should be seen in light of Fodor’s notion of modularity, which calls for a module to be “mandatory ... opaque [we are aware of outputs but not the processes producing them] ... and informationally encapsulated [the information in a module cannot access that in other modules]” (93; my comments in brackets). Perhaps second only to the question of adaptationism for the amount of controversy it has evoked, the use of the

concept of modularity in evolutionary psychology is bitterly contested. We feel relatively safe proposing a very-widely distributed rage module or rage agent, since its adaptive value is widely attested to by its presence in other mammals, and since Panksepp 1998 is able to cite studies of direct electrical stimulation of the brain (ESB) and neurochemical manipulation as identifying homologous rage circuits in humans and other mammalian species (190). (Homologies are organs in different species united by common descent. Analogies are organs in different species united by similar function. See Panksepp 1998: 17 for a brief discussion of this important distinction). Panksepp proposes as adaptive reasons for rage agents their utility in predator-prey relations, further sharpening the difference between rage and predator aggression. While a hunting attack is by definition an instance of predatory aggression, rage reactions are a prey phenomenon, a vigorous reaction when pinned down by a predator. Initially a reflex, Panksepp claims, it developed into a full-fledged neural phenomenon with its own circuits (190). The evolutionary inheritance of rage patterns is confirmed by the well-attested fact that infants can become enraged by having their arms pinned to their sides (189).

With this in the background, we will concentrate on the occurrence of rage in military contexts. Without the enablers of distance, machinics, teamwork, command, and dehumanization, most soldiers must leave the state of “cold blood” in order to kill one-on-one at close range – they have to dump their subjectivity. They burst through the threshold of inhibition by super-charging their bodily intensity. Thus the tried and true method for killing in close combat is the berserker rage, the frenzy of killing anything that enters the “death zone” immediately in front of the berserker. In the berserker rage, the subject is overwhelmed by a chemical flood that triggers an evolutionarily primitive module which functions as an agent which runs the body’s hardware in its place. The Greeks called it “possession by Ares” (Shay

1994; Harris 2001). It's important to understand that such rage is itself traumatic: it sets endorphin release thresholds so high that only more combat will provide relief, initiating a cycle of rage trapping many of those who enter it in the berserker state and greatly increasing the chance of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder or PTSD (van der Kolk and Greenberg 1987; Shay 1994).

Two common triggers of the berserker rage are panic over engulfment (Theweleit 1987-89) and the death of a comrade (Shay 1994). About the latter, we can speculate that such rage is triggered by what Damasio would call the flashing somatic marker of future pain (separation from and mourning for the comrade) coupled with the memory of pleasure tagged to the person of the comrade. See LeDoux 1996: 200-203 for a brief overview of emotional memory; although LeDoux focuses on fearful memories, dopamine would seem to be a key player in the production of pleasant memories, as summarized at Niehoff 1999: 131. The wrenching shift between the pleasant memories and the painful future triggers rage, a notion that dovetails with Panksepp 1998, where frustration, as the curtailment to the free use of "seeking" and "play" systems, triggers rage. A third trigger, at which we have already hinted, is direct and immediate threat to life, the panicked self-defense reaction that display and submission seeks to avoid. There are of course many other rage triggers in other walks of life we can't discuss here, among them abandonment, as when domestic violence escalates from beating to killing, as often happens only after separation. The military problem of the berserker rage is how to turn it on and off on command (and only on command): this is the problem of the conversion of the warrior (whose triggers include insults to honor) into the soldier who kills only on command.

The military problem is that rage or panic agents have no "emergency brakes." For example, the ancient Norse berserkers were very effective killers, but could not stop killing at

will; their beserker state was only turned off once all members of the opposition were dead (Speidel 2002). We can note that modern soldiers are not *trained* to utilize rage states; the goal of modern military training is not to replicate the beserkers of ancient times. As we will shortly see, for most modern soldiers, the attack direction is articulated to neither the panic nor the rage agent, but in free fire zones to the conditioned response of the sight of a human silhouette or in urban warfare situations to the appropriate context. Occasionally, however, rage and panic agents can supersede the hunter agent if the situation involves the death of a comrade (Shay 1994).

Even when a sense of agency is absent during the reflex-controlled act of killing, however, a sense of moral responsibility can be produced by a retrospective identification of action and ownership, a retrospective production of the moral sense of agency, even when the practical agent at the time of action was a non-subjective rage or reflex: “Oh my God, look what I’ve done!” In support of this claim, let us turn to Lifton 1973, who has produced a noteworthy study of Vietnam veterans in which the My Lai massacre plays a central role in the psychological trauma of such guilt-producing retrospective identification. After discussing the ways in which many aspects of the American war in Vietnam set up an “atrocious-producing situation” (41), he provides a brief description of the “psychology of slaughter” in which rage and racialized dehumanization of the enemy plays a major role (42-43). Of particular interest to us is his description of individual soldiers’ experience of guilt after the rage-fueled group performed the slaughter at My Lai (56-57; on the toxic combination of killer and survivor guilt, see 107). Even though we could argue that the practical agent of the massacre was the assemblage of unit and the distributed non-subjective “rage agents,” these soldiers assumed moral responsibility, that is, they identified themselves as individual moral agents with the distributed and emergent practical agent of the massacre. In what follows we discuss two contemporary modes of military training

in relation to the phenomenon of retrospective identification of ownership and agency resulting in guilt.

TWO MODES OF CONTEMPORARY MILITARY TRAINING

REFLEX TRAINING

Contemporary military training cuts subjectivity out of the loop so that most soldiers' bodies are able to *temporarily* withstand the stress of the act of killing. The first aspect is affective: soldiers are acculturated to dehumanize the enemy by a series of racial slurs. This acculturation is especially powerful when accomplished through rhythmic chanting while running, for such entrainment weakens personal identity to produce a group subject (McNeill 1995; Burke 2004; Rockwell 2007). At the same time as the group subject is constituted, the act of killing is rhetorically sterilized by euphemisms.

Most soldiers do not "kill," instead the enemy was knocked over, wasted, greased, taken out, and mopped up. The enemy is hosed, zapped, probed, and fired on. The enemy's humanity is denied, and he becomes a strange beast called a Kraut, Jap, Reb, Yank, dink, slant, or slope. (Grossman 1996: 93)

Desensitization is merely an enabling factor for the role of classical and operant conditioning in modern training. Such training enables most soldiers to kill reflexively. In doing so, they bypass the wide-spread inhibition on killing we have noted above.

The major problem of modern military training that re-configures reflex action lies in going beyond what the restored subjectivity of many soldiers can withstand. The "shoot on

sight” or “free fire zone” protocol begins in Vietnam with the application of human silhouettes rather than concentric targets in basic training; this new training produced a significant rise in kill-to-fire ratios (Grossman 1996: 181). In effect, such pattern recognition training increases the distribution of a “hunter agent” in the population of soldiers, so that the sight of human-shaped targets triggers a shoot reflex. The problem, here, however, is that the increased distribution of hunting agents is incompatible with other traits in the same population of soldiers, a predisposition to not kill members of the species – what we can call an “empathy agent,” which we posit as present in all but the small percentage of the population of soldiers we can classify as “cold-blooded” or low-affect sociopaths. Unless these empathy agents are sufficiently desensitized, these two factors working together traumatize many soldiers, because in the aftereffects of battle they see the enemy’s corpse – produced by their implanted hunting agents – as human, as someone “that could have been me” – via their empathy agents (Lifton 1973; Grossman 1996).

CYBORG TRAINING

Vietnam-era reflex training is good only for free fire zones. With urban warfare, more sophisticated cognition is necessary: the “shoot / no shoot” instant decision. With the advent of digital and video simulator training for urban warfare, we see true cyborg killing.

Military training has very often involved simulated combat conditions – training dummies – to develop motor skills. While it succeeds in this, the transfer to real combat often falters because of affective limitations. Traditional simulation training puts soldiers in an everyday world of three-dimensional objects; however, the difference between the dummy and a real

person is clear, so that “killing” the dummy does not desensitize their empathy agents. Digital and video simulation also develops individual motor skills, but increases the desensitization effect of training. Because images are so life-like, they activate the empathy agents present in most soldiers to produce an identification with the enemy as human. Repetition of the training attempts to produce the desired desensitization. In other words, simulation-trained contemporary soldiers have already *virtually* experienced killing before *actually* having to kill (Macedonia 2002; McCarter 2005). But they haven’t experienced the transition from the simulated environment to real life: we speculate that even though simulations can desensitize to some extent, they cannot override or completely extinguish the empathy agents in a good number of soldiers.

In addition to the affective aspect of heightened desensitization, simulation training constitutes a new cognitive group subject. Cutting-edge simulation technology now allows soldiers to network together in real time so that they enable a supra-individual organizational cognition or “top-sight” to emerge (Arquilla and Rondfeldt 2000: 22). In other words, contemporary team-building applications through real-time networking are a cybernetic application of video games that goes above the level of the subject (Fletcher 1999). In both affective entrainment and cognitive “top-sight” the soldiers produced by rhythmic chanting and intensive simulation training are functional nodes within a cybernetic organism, the fighting group, which maintains its structural integrity and tactical effectiveness by harnessing the efficacy of de-subjectified agents that are trained by digital and video simulation and linked together in actual combat by communication technology. It’s the emergent group / distributed reflex assemblage that is the cyborg here, bypassing the individual subjectivities of the soldiers.

CONCLUSION: TAKING RESPONSIBILITY FOR THE ACT OF KILLING

At the end of our treatment, we find ourselves asking what happens to these soldiers once they return home and are no longer part of the larger cybernetic organism that was constituted by their very bodies? What happens to soldiers when they are separated from the group subject, the true practical agent of the act of cyborg killing? While the group is the practical agent in the act of killing, the individual often assumes moral agency, and thus bears the brunt of retrospective guilt and in some cases PTSD, which reaches significant levels among Iraq veterans (Hoge et al 2004).

Here we must leave off our account, but we should remark upon the tenacity of retrospective guilt produced through the “My God, what have I done?” effect. Thus even when the practical agent of the act of killing is the assemblage of emergent military unit and distributed non-subjective reflexes or rage agents, we can see a “centrifugal power” to subject constitution, drawing to itself responsibility for acts it never committed in isolation. Thus it seems many military people paradoxically just can’t help taking responsibility. In other words, to heighten the paradox, they are irresponsible in taking responsibility, in taking upon themselves moral agency, when practical agency lies elsewhere. Our questions for future research concern the genealogy of this powerful motivation for subject construction and the assumption of moral responsibility.

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