

# The Agent of Killing in Contemporary Warfare

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Brownbag discussion: 1 Oct 2010

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# REDRESSING AN IMBALANCE

- Literature, from Homer to crime fiction, investigates the act of killing very closely
- It's time to redress that imbalance and address the act of killing from a philosophical perspective

# Outline of the talk

- Introduction: Inhibition and empathy
- De-subjectified killing
  - The beserker rage
- 2 modes of contemporary military training
  - Affective
  - Cognitive
    - Reflex training: “free fire zones”
    - Time-pressured decisions: “shoot/no shoot”
- Cyborg killing

# Introduction to the act of killing

- SLA Marshall, *Men Against Fire* (1947)
  - 15-20% firing rate among US infantry in WWII
- Dave Grossman, *On Killing* (1996)
  - 98%: inhibited on close-range killing
  - 2%: low-affect sociopaths
  - Fight or flight / display and submission
- Factors increasing ability to kill:
  - Distance, teamwork, command
  - Mechanical intermediaries, dehumanization

# Low affect sociopaths



# Firing squad: teamwork, mechanics, command



And disruption of empathy:  
note the blindfold on the victim



# A new science of human nature?

- Contra EP / genetic reductionist views
- DST: multiple levels of selection, including social patterns of development of affect
- Evolution:
  - Social brain hypothesis
- Development:
  - Neonate face-recognition / imitation
  - Social triggers of brain development



# Proto-empathic identification

## two possible mechanisms

- Simulation theories: 1<sup>st</sup> / 3<sup>rd</sup> person modeling
  - Gallese et al (2004): “A unifying view of the basis of social cognition,” *Trends in Cognitive Science*.
  - Singer et al (2004): “Empathy for pain involves the affective but not sensory components of pain,” *Science*.
- Phenomenological theories: 2<sup>nd</sup> person relation
  - Thompson (2001): “Empathy and Consciousness,” *Journal of Consciousness Studies*.
  - Gallagher (2005): *How the Body Shapes the Mind* (Oxford)
  - Ratcliffe (2007): *Rethinking Commonsense Psychology* (Palgrave Macmillam)

# Theory Theory

- Seems not up to the task in this domain
- Here we see intense behavioral effects on the part of the soldier: nausea, vomiting
- Are these the result of our having attributed the state of agony to the mind of the victim?
- Do we infer a mental state in the victim on the basis of their clutching at spilled guts?
- Perhaps it's best to restrict Theory Theory to sophisticated social settings

# A fundamental link of affect, body image and bodily integrity

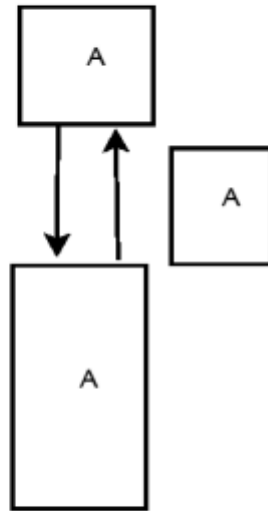
- Gallese and Singer: focus on “viscero-motor” centers in their simulation theories
- Damasio and Panksepp: primary awareness is engaged with proprioception of bodily condition
- Soldiers’ anecdotes: overwhelming negative feelings of seeing the other’s guts
- Agony of the other is powerfully felt:
  - “as if” simulation (Damasio)
  - corporeal intersubjectivity (Gallagher)
- Experienced as guilt (“My God, what have I done?”)

# Speculation: 2 inhibitory factors

- Anticipation of the intensity of a fight to the death (a panic reaction rather than desired submission)
- Anticipation of revulsion at having been a killer: the “memories of the future” as in Damasio’s somatic markers of “as if” scenarios

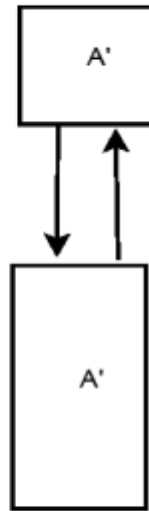
# Somatic Marker Hypothesis

Somatic Marker Hypothesis



# “As If” Somatic Marker

“As If” Somatic Marker



# Desubjectified killing

- Only a few can kill at close-range in cold blood
- Most must find a way to dump subjectivity
- Ownership vs agency
- Assemblages: above and below the subject
  - Group agent (bracket “group mind” issue for now)
  - Supersonal “affect programs”
    - Griffiths (1997), *What Emotions Really Are*

# Rage agents

- “Agent” as subpersonal affect program
  - Fodorian modularity
    - Mandatory
    - Opaque
    - Informationally encapsulated
- Panksepp (1998): *Affective Neuroscience*
  - Electrical stimulation and neurochemical experiments show homologous rage circuits
  - Rage as prey reaction



# Beserker Rage

- Dumping subject to enable close-range killing
- Ancient military tactic: “possession by Ares”
- Beserking is traumatic:
  - Endorphin release thresholds are set very high
  - Only more combat brings analgesia
  - High correlation with PTSD
- Triggers of beserker rage
  - Death of comrade
  - Direct threat to life

- Berserkers have no “emergency brakes”
- Command problems
  - Berserkers don’t take orders
  - Low affect sociopaths are “stimulus hungry” and are prone to seize command in a crisis
- The warrior vs the soldier
  - Homer as “political physiologist”
  - Achilles, Hector, Odysseus

# Viking berserker sculpture



Boy's Lit image of Berserker



# Two modes of contemporary military training

- Affective
  - Physical entrainment
    - Group drills: marching, running
    - Chants: semantic content plus physical entrainment
  - Dehumanization of the enemy
    - Chants, slang, euphemisms
- “Cognitive”
  - Reflexes (aimed at bypassing subject)
  - Time-pressured decisions (threshold of subject)

# Infantry marching drill



# Group bonding via running together



# Reflex training

- After Marshall's report
  - Substitution of human-shaped figures for bullseye
  - Increased firing rates in Vietnam
  - Pattern recognition training: reflexive killing
  - Predatory “hunting agent” rather than rage agent
  - Assemblage of group and subpersonal reflexive hunting agent
  - Retrospective agency:
    - reflexive killing, but reflective guilt



# Live fire training



# Time-pressured decisions: “shoot / no shoot”

- Simulation training
  - Digital
  - Live action video w/ CGI background
- Recognition of key elements in a Gestalt
  - At the edge of conscious awareness
  - Correll et al (2006), “Event-related potentials and the decision to shoot: The role of threat perception and cognitive control,” *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*.

# Shoot / no shoot training



US ARMY PEO-STRI: PROGRAM EXECUTIVE OFFICE for SIMULATION, TRAINING, & INSTRUMENTATION



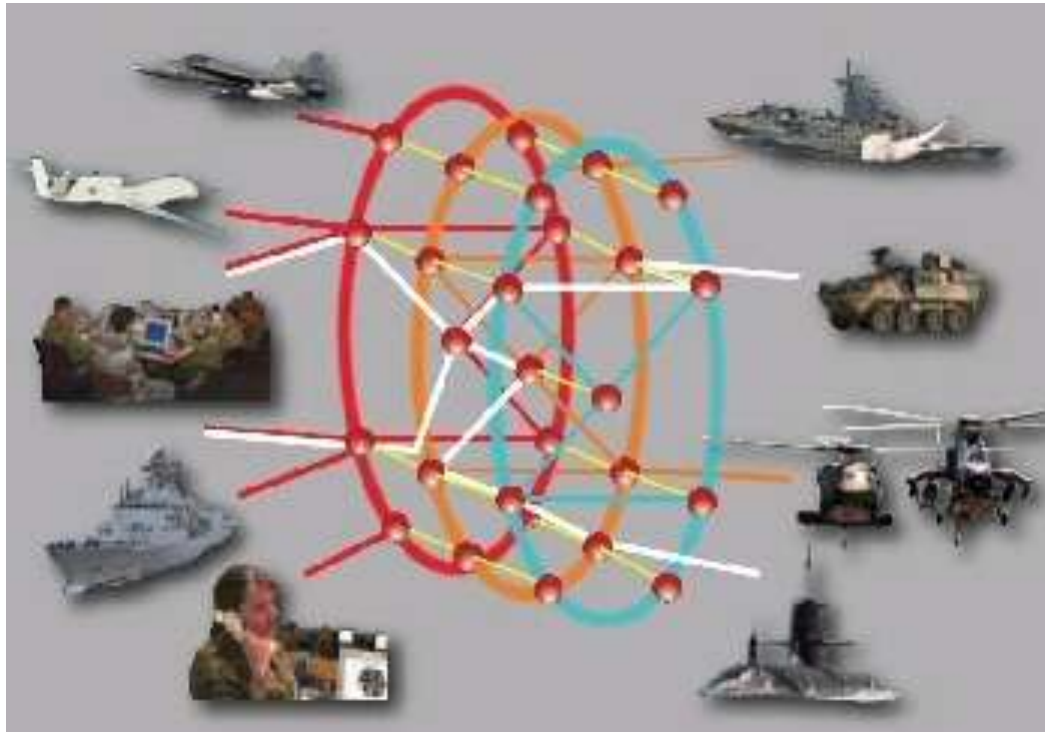
PEO-STRI Motto: "All but war is simulation"



# Cyborg killing

- Real-time communication technology
- NCW or “network-centric warfare”
- Commander doesn’t “command” (i.e., micromanage) but guides, observes (“topside”), and intervenes

# Network-Centric Warfare (NCW)



## Australian Cyborg





# Retrospective Agency, or the “My God, What Have I Done” effect

- Even when practical agent is group with de-subjectified / borderline conscious agents
- Many soldiers take moral responsibility even in this situation of distributed agency
- Against “bad faith”: many cling to guilt: they “could have done something”
- The “centripetal” subject: irresponsible in taking upon itself this responsibility?