# Why Atrocities, a Hypothesis

**Edward H Tobe***

*Clinical Professor, Department of Psychiatry, Cooper Medical School of Rowan University, 1001 Lincoln Drive West Suite B, Marlton, New Jersey, United States*

**\*Corresponding Author:** Edward H Tobe, Clinical Professor, Department of Psychiatry, Cooper Medical School of Rowan University, 1001 Lincoln Drive West Suite B, Marlton, New Jersey, United States.

## Abstract

Human history is replete with atrocities, wars, massacres, and oppression. George Santayana wrote, "only the dead have seen the end of war" [1]. This propensity toward destruction and annihilation has dangerous consequences as the science of war advances. This paper explores ageless adaptations of our species to the challenges of existence in the context of individuals and groups. Critical factors are explored that embolden some groups to become instruments of gratuitous or organized destruction.

*Keywords: Group Hate; Dehumanize; Fear; Atrocity*

## Introduction

An inveterate river of hate arises from many tributaries. To provide weight to all possible contributions is a daunting process; instead selected variables are postulated. As a caveat, an accent on a map represents a part, but not the whole. Webster's Dictionary, 2nd Edition, Copyright 1956, defines hypothesis, "A tentative theory or supposition provisionally adopted to explain certain facts and to guide in the investigation of others." "Hypothesis implies insufficiency of presently attainable evidence and therefore a tentative explanation" [2].

A hypothesis may be limited by the author's bias. Respectfully recognizing the limitations of this paper both in unique or universal factors, this author offers a focus on a sorrowful but realistic part of human existence.

In 2014, there were at least 17 conflicts that killed > 1000 people each [3]. Unresolved conflicts in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Syria account for two-thirds of global conflict deaths in 2014 [3]. "An habitual emotional attitude in which distaste is coupled with sustained ill will" is hate [4].

Our species has faced the reality of natural and man-made dangers, along with inevitable morbidities and mortalities. This experience would judiciously create compassionate collaboration of abilities to improve a mutual struggle to survive. Plausibly throughout human history signs of life evoked hope. The germination of seed from earth or womb signaled survival. Compassion inspires efforts to alleviate misery. Bonds of beneficial interests increase the value of family, group or tribe; however, primitive individual or subgroup rivalry for supremacy may ascend to dominate and serve the wishes of the leaders. Although compassion provides hope, the yearning for power/ greed may potentially led to the exploitation of the most vulnerable. According to the World Health Organization, at least 250,000 child soldiers are currently used for war:

"The collapse of civil society resulting from protracted conflicts and the unchecked abuses of marauding militias expose children to a range of health risks from cholera to malnutrition; from deliberate mutilation to perhaps a lesser known consequence of their deployment in conflict – sexual abuse" [5].

## Susceptibility

Fear of real or imagined unknown sources of dominance is easily provoked. As an example, Sunday evening, October 30, 1938, Orson Welles broadcasted "War of the Worlds", an adaptation of H.G. Well's 1898 novel The War of the Worlds. The broadcast details a Martian invasion of Earth. Although intended to entertain, this broadcast caused nationwide panic. Individuals and groups can be intimidated by real or imagined danger arising from a perceived overwhelming source of power. As a group and as individuals, people have shown specific defenses upon encountering perceived overwhelming power. Some of the major defenses are noted below.

- **Denial** references not wanting to recognize an intrapsychic or external reality; denial may include ignoring an illness or consequences of inaction. The three monkeys of see no evil, hear no evil, and speak no evil represent avoidance and denial.

- **Flight** has been a universal method to manage fear in many species; before several tsunamis struck in locations from Asia to Africa, many land animals instinctively knew danger was about to happen and fled. Mass exodus can be realistic or ill advised.

- **'Identification with the aggressor'** means identifying with and becoming what is feared. As a charming example, a child returns home after unhappily receiving immunizations from the doctor. Upon arrival, the child identifies with the doctor and treats the teddy bear's 'injuries'. A more primitive example would be the expression 'do unto others what you imagine they would do unto you, but do it first.' The adaptation is to become what is feared.

- **Idealization** is projective identification with someone who represents all that the idealizer yearns to possess. This may be benign such as the idealization of an athlete or malignant such as the idealization of groups like ISIS. In recent years, some people travel long distances to join murderous groups commanded by people with vile amoral motives such as ISIS. Idealization of a source of fear is paying homage.

- **Scientific study** sounds prudent; however, science is vulnerable to cultural beliefs, research tools, and vested sociopolitical interests.

Awe is a common emotional reaction to real or imagined supra-human power. Awe is defined as, "1. Obs. Great fear; terror. 2. Archaic. Power to inspire dread or fear. 3. Profound and reverent dread inspired by deity. 4. Veneration; solemn wonder." In contrast, awless (or aweless) is defined as, "irreverent; fearless" [6]. Awe is an idealization and often glorification of perceived commanding power. Historically, powerful invaders or dangerous natural phenomena might be considered deities. The establishment of deities whose lives reflect human experience allows the illusion of connection and communication between humans and forces that 'control' the world. Skills in accessing transcendent knowledge to win the favor of the ultimate sources of power provided hope for protection from the dangers encountered in life and thereafter. Ancient Egyptian civilizations documented a struggle to cope with forces beyond comprehension.

A well-documented sophisticated Egyptian civilization created deities who mirrored the unconscious struggles of the people. Allow one brief example. Isis and Osiris had a son Horus. Osiris's brother, Seth, murdered Osiris to usurp his brother's powerful position. When grown, Horus retaliates and kills Seth. [Isis is the goddess of magic; Horus is the God of the Sky; Osiris among many attributions, is God of the Afterlife. Osiris's brother Seth is the God of desert storms, thunder, evil and other phenomena]. This history has similarities to Shakespeare's Hamlet. The creation of Gods allowed familiarity and a basis for negotiation to ameliorate fear.

The Ancient Egyptians were prolific writers and sculptors who documented their search for 'truth' and 'guidance' through sculptures, drawings on walls, holy tablets, scriptures, and oral laws passed from generation to generation purporting to provide 'truth.' Ancient

Egyptians believed that in the netherworld, people meet gods and goddesses who can make afterlife difficult; but if the gods are honored with statues in the tomb, the gods might work in the deceased person's favor [7].

## Group formation: benign or malignant

Groups are a significant part of the human experience. Wilfred Bion outlined the unconscious dynamics of the group. Bion recognized that a group needed the individuals to forfeit a part of their autonomy and the group needs an enemy [8]. Overtly or subtly, individuals identifying or merging with a group, at least partially forfeit personal autonomy, and more easily retreat from individual moral authority or responsibility. Most groups demonstrate no conscious desire to harm; rather, groups support important projects that increase the potential for improved health and safety. Group dynamics include a search for leadership; once a leader is found, there is often benign testy behavior toward the leader. On a family group level, the child wants parental love and support yet feels an ambition to self-assert and find her or his own destiny. The adolescent may perceive the parent as both an obstacle and an ideal. Intrapsychic conflict about ambitious wishes is expressed in fantasy. These families/groups tolerate emotional stressors without decompensation.

Without adequate distribution of authority, the leader can become dominant, feared, and idealized; he or she may exert unquestioned authority. Others in the group become subservient but may await the opportunity to kill the leader and assume dominance. A hierarchy develops within the group based upon pleasing the leader. In most human groups, females and children may become chattel and cannon fodder.

In some groups, malignant, aggressive, competitive urges develop among certain members. When ambitious leader(s) assert authority, members of the group are challenged to manage unconscious ambivalence toward the leader(s). The leader is glorified and feared. If members of the group criticize the ambitious idealized leader, the offenders might face punishment. If outsiders challenge the group's values or criticize its leaders, the group leaders encourage violence against the offender. By hating the enemy, the group is drawn together and internal ambivalence and animosities are now externalized. The leader(s) find or invent a reason to hate the 'enemy' to enhance loyalty and admiration of the leadership. The leadership of 'good, righteous countries' may encourage perceiving certain nations as an 'evil empire' to justify self-serving ambitions.

Successful leaders manipulate the populace to feel an allegiance to the goals of the leaders. This allegiance justifies the ambitions of the leaders. Intolerance to mockery or criticism has been particularly observed in rigid religious groups. Leader(s) claim transcendent knowledge of the wishes of the deity(s) or prophet(s) and cloak their exploitive ambitions behind serving a 'righteous' need to destroy.

Today radical Muslims are encouraged to show no tolerance when their leader is portrayed negatively in free speech, writing, or cartoons. Through savagery and televised murder of defenseless people, the leaders imagine that they will be seen as powerful and frightening. The atrocity demonstrates the pathetic weakness of the group. Arrogant 'powerful' monsters delight in the murder of caged, bonded helpless unarmed people, an intrapsychic representation of their lives of futility and victimization.

## The Methods of Hate

Groups that promote urges to dominate and oppress may achieve success by establishing the illusion of superiority. Historically effective strategies to oppress include:

- Disorganize captured groups to impair a feeling of community.
- Impair capacity for communication between the captured groups.
- Destroy current or potential future leaders of the captured group.
- Capriciously kill to demean the value of their life and instill terror.

- Wantonly violate families to dethrone family leaders.
- Destroy enemy symbols of belief.
- Use the women and children as chattel.
- The conquered represent orthologous inferiority.
- Treat the conquered as a subspecies animal.

The superior group idealizes itself and feels entitled to contemptuous behavior toward the dehumanized, and exculpation for harming the expendable subhuman. Evil by the venerated amoral leaders provides vicarious pleasure. Sadistic arrogance may be unleashed without boundaries. The most destructive transgenerational consequence of dehumanization occurs when the conquered people believe the arrogant illusions of those in power.

## Atrocities

The group becomes dangerous when its leaders enforce a psychopathic agenda including violent, antisocial thought and behavior without remorse or empathy. Destructive intent with claimed transcendent approval is a dangerous combination of righteous moral destruction. Dehumanization of the perceived enemy allows unregulated atrocity with incitement of savagery and absolution through righteous moral authority. The leaders dehumanize their 'moral soldiers' to serve as cannon fodder. Followers are encouraged to believe bizarre promises of glory, rewards in afterlife such as families sponsoring their children to carry bombs to murder and commit suicide. Denial of horrific atrocities, especially against children, mocks the victims and approves hate.

Groups dominated by dangerous psychopaths will remain an ongoing threat for civilization. There is a possibility of psychopathic leaders developing and/or obtaining weapons of mass destruction. If the psychopath has access to sophisticated current or new science, we may face massive destruction of our ways of life. Ongoing vigilance is required.

## Child soldiers and other young children who kill

Child soldiers are under age 18 and often under age 10. They are of both genders. Commonly, the children are from impoverished areas with poor educational opportunities. These children are used as shields or sexual objects for abuse. These children are forced into a life of horror.

In contrast, there are children prepared to plan and execute gruesome murders without observable remorse. In 1993, two 10 year olds abducted James Bulger, not quite 3 years of age, from a shopping area, forcefully took him two and a half miles away and sadistically, brutally murdered the child and left the body on the railroad tracks to make the death appear due to the freight train that later cut the body in half. This well publicized case shocked the British people. There was no rationale for the calculated murder. Unfortunately, brutal atrocity by young children against young children continues.

In years past, this author worked as a child psychiatrist evaluating, treating and collaborating with the courts for disposition of the most dangerous children in Delaware Valley, USA. Every child was unique and required individual attention without assumption. There were common features that were absent in these children. There were no neurotics. Neurosis is an intrapsychic struggle of love. The capacity for relatedness other than for manipulative purposes was severely impoverished. Many suffered depression with a mixture of labile moods such as rages, crying, withdrawal, and clinging behavior. Some children showed no qualms about violence either while on the psychiatric unit or by police documentation of long records of violence by, in many instances, age 12. These children were very alone inside; they did not value their own lives or the lives of biologically related people. They were empty of affection for themselves and anyone else. These children could not value others because they were internally dehumanized. Violence for these children was not against

humans; rather, violence occurred if someone obstructed their activity or violence created a feeling of momentary aliveness through the excitement of destructive activity.

## Solution

Compassion would support a search for what great speakers and writers have proposed, that all people, regardless of differences, need realistic hope for an opportunity to bring their lives to fruition. After thousands of years of atrocities, if there were a solution, there would be evidence of a learning curve. Humans are a species of contradictions. Approximately 400 years ago, Francis Bacon noted, "But it is not only the difficulty and labor, which men take in finding out of truth, nor again, that when it is found, it imposeth upon men's thoughts, that doth bring lies in favor; but a natural though corrupt love, of the lie itself" [9].

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