

Copenhagen: The Weight of a Life – Exploring the Ethical Dilemma of Killing

Laura Young

Is there a difference in guilt when one chooses one method of killing over another? Consider the fire-bombing of Dresden: thousands of planes dropping napalm, creating an inferno on Earth. Imagine the terror as the people of Dresden tried to flee and found that they couldn't – that because of the differential created between the hot air from the fire and the cool air sweeping in along the ground, they were literally sucked back into the burning city. Or consider those who died of asphyxiation because the fire leeched all of the oxygen from the air. Is this any better than being annihilated as in nuclear holocaust, becoming a whiff of dust upon the air?

Needless to say, this is a romanticized notion of the ease of death under such circumstances. A less romantic version speaks of a mother and daughter who lived in Nagasaki. As on any other day, the mother sent the daughter out for water. And then came the mysterious thing, this weapon that no one could have foreseen. The tale outlines the mother's agonized search for her daughter, whom she finally finds, flesh seared from her bones from radiation exposure and dying a painfully slow death. Is one of these ways of death worse than the other? Is the measure of responsibility for a death directly correlated to the suffering of the victim?

Nuclear warfare and conventional warfare differ in magnitude and the

numbers of deaths caused, certainly; but in terms of the terror inspired and the pain caused, how can we judge which is worse? Who holds more blood on their hands: the participants of the Manhattan Project, or the man who invented the chemical napalm used in the firebombings of Dresden and Tokyo? Copenhagen encourages us to question the weight of human suffering in considering responsibility for death or continued life in unutterable pain. Was death in the hell of Dresden or Tokyo worse and more fear inspiring than death in the cities of Nagasaki and Hiroshima? Was life with the after-effects of these two events worse in one case than in another? In Dresden and Tokyo, there was time to see death coming. Does this make the Dresden/Tokyo firebombings more or less morally reprehensible than the nuclear bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki? This conundrum lies at the heart of the nuclear question.

Ethically, there are several things to consider. First: What is the value placed on human life? Is one human life equal to one human life no matter what? In Copenhagen, Margrethe highlights this question, stating that "one single soul [is] the emperor of the universe, no less than each of us." Meanwhile, Bohr, in the depths of guilt over his contributions to the Manhattan Project, compares the blood on his hands to the blood on those of his partner, Heisenberg. "You, my dear

Heisenberg,” he says, “never managed to contribute to the death of one single solitary person in all your life.” As it turns out, Heisenberg had killed one man, long before the war. “All right then, one,” Bohr concedes, “One single soul on his conscience, to set against all the others.” Clearly Bohr believes that quantity does matter; in this sense it is far worse to have killed many than to have killed one, whether conventionally or through the science of nuclear fission. If “one single soul [is] the emperor of the universe, no less than each of us,” then what are the moral implications of choosing one method of killing over another?

Does it matter whether death is meted out through the push of a button or the thrust of a sabre or the pulling of a trigger at close range? Do guilt and grief in any way atone for the act of killing another ‘emperor of the universe’? Is there more guilt and grief associated with ‘intimate’ killing than with nuclear bombs – or fire bombing, for that matter? In this sense, then, is nuclear bombing the less morally reprehensible of the two? Or is it the more so, simply because we ought to feel guilt for killing our fellows, especially in such vast numbers, and perhaps do not given the distance technology places between the act of killing and the consequences thereof?

It is the consideration of consequences that makes these questions difficult to answer. Consequences are both short term and long term; in this case, they stem from the primary decision (to kill) and the secondary question (the means with which to execute – no pun intended – the plan to kill). Thus, whether or not fire-bombing is morally equivalent to dropping a nuclear bomb also requires an examination of the long term effects: personal, environmental, and political.

Recall the story of the young girl found by her mother; remember that nuclear bombs leave in their wake environmental contamination that lasts for an unknown number of years. They also cause an increased risk of cancer in future generations, and hideous pain and suffering to those who ‘escape’ death and are forced to live with radiation burns and other heinous illnesses caused by radiation exposure. Finally, consider the blow to national pride incurred by either method of warfare. When the weights of these consequences are measured, how do they balance? Does the moral scale tip towards one means of killing over another? Are these reasons enough to consider nuclear bombs less ethical than conventional warfare?

Of course, this all points to one conclusion: killing is terrible in any circumstance. But wars occur, and we have always touted this war in particular – the Second World War – as a ‘just’ war; a necessary evil, just as all ideological battles are. It is easy to say that war should not exist; I am sure that we all subscribe to that inner ideal of peace on Earth. Unfortunately, all that we can do in the face of war’s continued presence is struggle with the ethics of war: with questions such as those I have tried to outline. If we must fight, then we should at least be aware on all levels of the ramifications of the means by which we choose to fight our battles.