Virtuous Violence
Moral Motivations for Mayhem

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Description, not prescription

This lecture does not aim to be moral philosophy, it aims to be scientific explanation.

I will not be prescribing how people should act,

I shall attempt to describe and illuminate how people do act.

This lecture is not an exercise in ethics, it is an analysis of human psychology & society – a theory of human motivation.
So when I use the term “moral,” I mean to describe what most people generally feel and think to be moral: their moral motives, their perception of their obligations and commitments.

These intuitive folk moralities very often differ from my own moral judgments and sentiments, and probably yours.
Do people universally perceive violence as immoral?
Piaget 1932; Turiel 1983; Haidt & Joseph 2004; Haidt 2012; Hauser 2006; Mikhail 2007; Gray, Waytz, & Young 2012; and others claim that people *universally* perceive intentional harm as morally wrong, *period*; and indeed they all claim that this is the (or a) core foundation of the moral sense.
According to these dominant theories, everyone should judge all harm as immoral.

True??
If so, what is the explanation for violence?
Why and when are people violent?

Does most violence result from
- frustration?
- loss of individual self-control?
- the breakdown of norms: anomie?
- rational calculations of costs or benefits?
- moral disengagement?
- dehumanization and infrahumanization?

Or does violence have another source?
Our Theory of ‘Virtuous’ Violence posits that much (most?) violence is morally motivated:

People harm others (or themselves) because they genuinely feel that it’s right.

**Violence is intentional moral action.**

Perpetrators know they are harming human agents like themselves, and that’s precisely what they mean to do.
What is ‘moral’?

Action to constitute social relationships.

“Constitute” =

- create;
- sustain, enhance, modulate, test;
- regulate, redress, enforce, sanction;
- terminate.

Morality = Regulation of social relationships.  
In all cultures across history most violence is morally motivated.

People committing violence generally feel and judge that what they are doing is *legitimate*, and they *should*, *ought*, are *obligated* or *entitled* to do it. They are doing what feels *right*. At least at the moment they do it.

Typically, their reference groups condone the violence: the morality of the violence is culturally recognized.
This does not mean that people enjoy violence, or do it easily.

Most of the time, most people don’t.
Psychopaths and a few sadists aside, *most* people do *not* enjoy maiming, torturing, or killing.

Usually it is difficult, horrifying, repugnant, and stressful to seriously harm or kill someone.

Doing violence often has long-term and highly traumatic effects on the perpetrator, often resulting in perpetration-induced stress disorder (PISD).

However, many people can be trained to be violent, and under certain conditions may become habituated to it.
Like many other kinds of moral action, people do violence *despite* their aversion to it.

When a person jumps into icy waves to save someone, they do it *despite* their fear and pain.

Indeed, we consider their act all the more virtuous because it was difficult to do -- because the person overcame their self-oriented motives and did the right thing.

Violence is difficult, but most perpetrators judge that they are doing what they must do.
People often have conflicting moral motives, emotions and judgments.

The perpetrator may have both violent and anti-violent motives, such as compassion.

The balance of motives and judgments may vary over time, so that a person later wishes they had been violent, or regrets being violent.

A person may be morally motivated to commit violence, but later regret it.

A person may fail to fulfill recognized moral obligations to be violent, and later be ashamed of that failure.

(cf. George Ainslie 1992, *Picoecomics*, on temporal variation in all kinds of preferences.)
How does violence constitute social relationships?

• What are the relational functions of violence?

• Let’s look at relationships dynamically, as processes.
1. **Defense**: Self-protection and protection of relationship partners; moral entitlement to be safe and sound.

2. **Constitution**: Seeking to create new relationships.

3. **Conduct** and **Modulation**: Enacting, testing, enforcing, reinforcing, enhancing, or attenuating relationships.

4. **Preemption**: Prophylactic action to prevent others’ transgression.

5. **Repair**: Redress, rectification, making amends, punishment, (and self-punishments) for the person’s own transgressions that threaten relationships.

6. **Termination**: Ending an intolerable relationship by eliminating the partner.

7. **Mourning**: Response to the loss of an important relationship due to the other’s departure, defection or death.
Defense, constitution, conduct and modulation, preemption, repair, termination, mourning, may be oriented toward 1\textsuperscript{st}, 2\textsuperscript{nd}, or 3\textsuperscript{rd} parties. For example, you can defend yourself, defend your child, defend someone your child is beating up. You can punish yourself, punish someone for something they did to you, or punish someone for what they did to your child.
If A is friend or kin to B, and V is enemy to B, That may motivate A and V to be violent toward each other.

Fritz Heider’s balance theory applied to three social relationships.
Using the virtuous violence framework, we can analyze

- Suicide and martyrdom
- Homicide
- Assault
- Rape
- Domestic violence
- Police violence
- Lynching
- War
- Feuding
- Chivalry, warrior cultures, honor, and street gangs
- Dueling
- Martial and contact sports
- Initiation and hazing
- Male & female genital surgery
- Body scarification and modification
- Extreme religious asceticism, self-flagellation, and vision quests
- Human sacrifice
- Judicial torture
- Legal and self-help punishment, incarceration, and execution
- Etc.
Some violent practices are obviously motivated to enhance social relationships.
Interviews by Margaux Quebedeaux with high school & college football players.

Q: How do you view or feel when tackling an opponent?
A: I feel really good. It’s an adrenaline, dominance thing. You completely trying to dominate someone else’s will by hurting them and crushing their spirit.

Q: What are your intentions when hitting an opponent?
A: Trying to get the ball. . . injure him, take him out of the game. Demolish him. Make him fumble . . . make a big play.

Another football player:
Q: How do you view or feel when tackling/hitting/etc. an opponent?
A: Want to punish them, make sure they’re down. Don’t want to hurt them, but make sure they’re down. Linebackers are just trying to “kill” all the time.

Q: What are your intentions when hitting an opponent?
A: Not trying to kill them, but make sure they felt it. Don’t want to see them again
Q: for the rest of the game?
A: Yeah. It’s about respectability.

Q: How would you explain a “good hit” to someone who may only know the basics of the sport?
A: Loud, someone hit the ground, one person in pain. It’s motivational for the team. Like scoring a touchdown for defense.
Sports columnist and writer Buzz Bissinger (2011) wrote that if football rules are changed to reduce violence, “It will no longer be football.”

**Football is violence.**
So are ice hockey, rugby, boxing and other martial arts.

The play of the game consists of organized, condoned violence. Heroes in these sports are those who are the best at it.
Contests of violence, where the most violent wins and is honored for victory, gaining status:

– knights in the age of chivalry, Viking warriors,
– East African and Greek cattle raiders,
– early modern dueling and Western gun fighting,
– pre-20th century European and US boys’ fighting,
– reciprocal pain games.
Contests of violence constitute **authority ranking** status hierarchies.

Among persons,
Among teams & their associated fans
and communities.

Contests of violence *create*
these AR relationships.
Contests of violence create these AR relationships.
The victor gains honor, while the one defeated or killed loses honor.
Repair: Punishment
Repair: Punishment

Spanking, whipping, beating;
Deprivation of food, water, warmth;
Isolation, exile, enslavement;
Mutilation, amputation, castration;
Judicial torture, trial by combat;
Execution – fast or excruciating.
Punishment constitutes all kinds of social relationships, but violent punishment is especially important in constituting authority ranking.
Violence *redresses* the transgressed relationship.
Welch (1993) showed that justice was a significant factor motivating:

- The Crimean War,
- World War I,
- World War II (to a lesser but important extent),
- The Falklands/Maldives War.
Margaret Thatcher on the Falklands/Maldives War:

“What we were fighting for eight thousand miles away in the South Atlantic was not only the territory and the people of the Falklands, important though they were. We were defending our honour as a nation, and principles of fundamental importance to the whole world — above all, that aggressors should never succeed and that international law should prevail over the use of force.”

(cited in Dolan 2010:22–23)
Motives for all 94 wars that involved a dominant, great, or rising power since 1648:

- standing – 58%,
- revenge – 10%,
- security – 18%,
- interest – 7%,
- other – 7%.

(Lebow 2010)

McCauley (2000) analysis indicates that competition for resources or over status translates into intergroup conflict only when the in-group perceives the out-group as guilty of a moral transgression.
This is not a modern phenomenon.

Morally laudatory warfare was common, and bloody, in early civilizations:

Shang China,
ancient Mesopotamia,
Old and Middle Kingdom Egypt,
pre-colonial Yoruba and Benin,
classic Maya,
pre-conquest Aztec and Inka,
classical Greece,
and most other early civilizations.
Religious Self-mortification

• Self-flagellation/scourging
  – Muslim,
  – Christian.

• Ascetic deprivation of food & sleep
  – Many religions,
  – Jain self-starvation to death.
Shia muharram
American Indian vision quest:

Cheyenne:
“He is tied to the pole by means of wooden pins driven through the flesh. All day long, after he is left alone again, he must walk back and forth on the sunward side of the pole, praying constantly, and fixing his eyes on the sun, trying to tear the pins loose from the torn flesh.”  Benedict 1922

Crow:
“Medicine Crow fasted and prayed for four days. He cut off a finger joint and offered it to the Sun. 'Sun, look at me. I am poor. I wish to own horses. Make me wealthy. That is why I give you my little finger.’”  Lowie 1919
Religious mortification constitutes authority ranking between mortifier and gods, and communal sharing among congregants.

It sustains and enhances these relationships, and to some degree preempts defection.
Body modification and pain-testing

- Genital surgery
- Identity-creating piercing, tattooing, scarification, tooth excision or filing.
- Brutal initiations in warrior cultures.
- Gang “beating in”.
Mai Mai militias in the Eastern Congo were scarified to mark their membership, and then beaten in.

Q: If someone wishes to join you, what can he do?
R: That civilian must be spilt in the dust, be beaten black and blue so that he might leave his civilian thoughts.
Q: Beat him first? How is this helpful?
R: The civilian will come out of him. You must spill him in the mud, to beat him black and blue before he is taken care of and given his uniform as well as a gun.
Q: Will he not be trained?
R: He will be trained after receiving a uniform and a gun. You will be shown the field and explained things as they are. Since you have already dropped civilian thoughts because of the flogging, you will start saying, “Ahhhh! So it is like this!” Then you will be practicing what you have learned.

Another soldier described his first beating, saying new recruits were taken to the river, stripped naked, and flogged. After the beating they were “anointed” with the river mud.

The soldier described himself as being “molded in the mud” and went on to say, “All those sticks that you were beaten with put into you another ideology.” (Kelly 2010)
Body modification and pain-testing constitute communal sharing. They create new relationships.
Homicide
Analyses of Western homicides in the second half of the 20th century show that 50% - 90% are actions to redress social relationships, typically “arguments over gambling debts, girlfriends, rip-offs in drug transactions, and verbal insults about one’s masculinity, race and family background” (Miethe & Regoecri 2004).

In small-scale and traditional societies, the proportion of homicides that redress social relationships seems to be even higher.
“Well my homeboy had bought some coke, and he said it wasn’t good. So I told him I would go and fix it. I met the dude in my neighborhood, and it all went to shit. I told him, “Hey, if you’re going to buy drugs to sell, you need to get good shit. You don’t fuck around with this shit.” He then pulled out a small gun, I think it was a 38. But I had the advantage because I think he was all fucked up on coke. I told him, “vato (man), what you did, I’m just coming over to fix it.” That’s when I slapped the gun, and I already had mine on him and boom.” (Valdez et al 2009:299)
The offender, victim, and two neighbors were sitting in the living room drinking wine. The victim started calling the offender, his wife, abusive names. The offender told him to ‘shut up.’ Nevertheless, he continued. Finally, she shouted, ‘I said shut up. If you don't shut up and stop it, I'm going to kill you and I mean it.’” Whereupon he didn’t and she did  (Luckenbill 1977).
Homicide constitutes **authority ranking**, **equality matching**, and sometimes **communal sharing** relationships.
It defends, terminates, redresses, and preempts violations of these relationships.
Rape
“Rape was a feeling of total dominance. Before the rapes, I would always get a feeling of power and anger. I would degrade women so I could feel there was a person of less worth than me.”

A black rapist said that raping a white woman conferred “high status among my friends. It gave me a feeling of status, power, macho.”

Gang rapists were excited by the “male camaraderie engendered by participating collectively in a dangerous activity” (Scully & Marolla 1985).
Man who raped and murdered five strangers:

“I wanted to take my anger and frustration out on a stranger, to be in control, to do what I wanted to do. I wanted to use and abuse someone as I felt used and abused. I was killing my girlfriend. During the rapes and murders, I would think about my girlfriend. I hated the victims because they probably messed men over. I hated women because they were deceitful and I was getting revenge for what happened to me.”

(Scully & Marolla 1985:257)
Rape constitutes **authority ranking**.

It *redresses* perceived transgressions of authority ranking.
Precipitators of suicide

- “Relational conflicts;”
- divorce, relationship breakup, desertion;
- job stress and/or financial stress;
- school stress & failures (especially in East Asia);
- fighting with a parent;
- guilt & shame over failure or transgression;
- military, political, criminal, or sexual dishonor.
Suicide constitutes communal sharing and authority ranking relationships. It terminates, repairs, and sometimes preempts violations of these relationships.
Virtuous violence theory posits that most violence is morally motivated to constitute social relationships.
This afternoon I’ve only discussed a few kinds of violence, and only very cursorily, but we find the same moral motivations when we look more deeply at these and most other kinds of violence.

- Punishment
- Suicide and martyrdom
- Homicide
- Assault
- Rape
- Domestic violence
- Police violence
- Lynching
- War
- Feuding
- Chivalry, warrior cultures, honor, and street gangs
- Dueling
- Martial and contact sports
- Initiation and hazing
- Male & female genital surgery
- Body scarification and modification
- Extreme religious asceticism, self-flagellation, and vision quests
- Human sacrifice
- Judicial torture
- Legal and self-help punishment, incarceration, and execution
- Etc.
But why violence?

Why not language material means, or other forms of influence?
When do people constitute relationships with violence, per se?
Violence ups the ante: it increases the stakes in the relationship, like placing a big bet or making a big raise. Can be analyzed as a hawk-dove or chicken game, or as a deterrence strategy, with the added factor of interdependence:

If an essential relationship is going badly, violence may be an adaptive strategy to transform the relationship so as to make it more beneficial for the perpetrator.

Chicken: Rapoport & Chammah 1966
Violence may be afforded or restricted by metarelational models

Metarelational models (MeRMs) are meaningful configurations of social relationships, in which the existence or state of each relationship has moral implications for the other relationships in the configuration.

Violence isn’t always about the isolated relationship between the perpetrator and victim; it’s often motivated by concerns or goals regarding other social relationships linked to the relationship between perpetrator and victim.

Violence depends on configurations of connected relationships

The motives for violence are not confined to the dyad or group in which the violence occurs.

Motives to constitute one relationship may evoke violence in another relationship.

Intolerable combinations of relationship may evoke violence,

as when a person kills a partner’s lover.
Multiplex relationships, composed of many different affiliative strands, attenuate violence arising out of any one strand of the relationship: violence is diminished in a dyad that coordinates their interaction in multiple, diverse domains of sociality.
A MeRM in which A’s relationship with B is enhanced by A’s violence against V.

Strong relationships and multiple MeRMs that magnify A’s propensity to violence against V.

Previously, some of this MeRM effect might have been analyzed as ‘signaling’ or ‘reputation effects.’ But there is more to this than information: people are motivated, have strong emotions, and make crucial moral judgments about MeRMs.
A MeRM in which A’s bond with B together with B’s enmity to V prescribes that A be violent to V.

A MeRM in which A’s bond with B together with B’s bond with V prohibits A’s violence to V.

Bottom graphs: The effects are enhanced when there are multiple MeRMs with multiple third parties.
Violence-regulating MeRMs involving four to six relationships among four persons.

In the classical functionalist social anthropology literature, this violence-reduction mechanism was called “cross-cutting ties” (Evans-Pritchard 1939, Colson 1953; Gluckman 1954, 1963; LeVine 1961; see also Simmel & Wolf 1908).
Violence-regulating MeRMs involving four to six relationships among four persons.

![Diagram with nodes A, B, C, V connected by red arrows]
Bottom line:

Some MeRM-s foster violence.

Other MeRM-s constrain violence.

Comparatively isolated relationships lack MeRM constraints on violence, and lack MeRM-fostered violence.

The more MeRM-s in which a relationship is embedded, the greater their impact on the likelihood of violence, assuming they don’t cancel each other out.

In general, embedding in multiple diverse MeRM-s inhibits violence.
Implications for Strategies to Reduce Violence

• Recognize that perpetrators are morally motivated,
  • so they may not respond to economic, material, or practical incentives,
  • they may not be disposed to negotiate or compromise,
  • they may be determined to find a legitimately moral resolution.

• Help potential perpetrators find non-violent means to regulate their relationships.

• Show potential perpetrators the harmful metarelational implications of violence – the damage it will do to other relationships. I.e., make violence-inhibiting MeRMs more salient.

• Foster strong, valued relationships between potential perpetrators and third parties who will sanction violence against second parties. I.e., develop, sustain, and strengthen violence-inhibiting MeRMs.

• Foster public declarations of non-violence by these third parties, expressed to potential perpetrators.
• Foster the development of multiplex dyadic and group relationships
  • so that dispositions to violence in any one relational framework are counteracted by affiliative dispositions in other relational frameworks.

• Integrate potential perpetrators into configurations of relationships
  • consisting of affiliative bonds that are inconsistent with violence in any of the component relationships.
Implications for Understanding Violence

Violence is generally not the result of a lack of sociality, or the lack of moral feeling.

People committing violence are often ‘doing’ social relationships.

The moral motives of social relationships generate most/much violence.
Implications for Understanding Moral Psychology

Moral psychology centers on relational motives; moral psychology is about relationship regulation; relationship regulation consists of:

- defense,
- creation,
- conduct and modulation,
- preemption,
- repair,
- termination,
- mourning.
Implications for Methodology in Social and Cognitive Psychology

Sometimes Western philosophy – in this case, Western moral philosophy – is a poor guide to psychology, Western or human.

Sometimes arm-chair reasoning & experimentation in the lab do not lead to valid psychological theory.

Sometimes ethnographic fieldwork, along with broad ethnological comparisons across history and cultures, lead to valuable insights into psychology.
There is far less violence than there was
• 50 years ago,
• 300 years ago,
• 1000 years ago,
and less than in hunting & gathering societies.