

# **A Social Ontology of Vengeance**

Micah Tillman

Sept. 23, 2012

Recently a number of Americans were killed in retaliation for an offensive film that I can only assume the Americans had not seen, did not make and had not materially supported. When such atrocities occur I'm sorely tempted to call them, "senseless." Sadly, however, there was a chain of reasoning that led from the movie to the murders. And that chain is one to which most people spend their whole lives clinging. It is a chain with three links. The first link is as follows.

When one person strikes another with his hand, it is not the hand that has acted; rather the person has acted through the hand. It is the person, not the hand, who bears ultimate responsibility. This is because a person is a single unity, a whole, and his hand is only part of this whole. When a part of a whole acts, it is, in fact, more accurate to say that the whole is acting through the part. Similarly, when you act on a part of a whole, you act upon the whole as a whole. If you strike a person in the face, you have struck the person himself. Therefore, when a part acts, it is actually the whole that acts, and when a part is acted upon, it is actually the whole that is acted upon.

Now, for the second link in the chain. "Groups are wholes," says this link, "in the same way that our bodies are wholes, and therefore members of groups are parts of groups in the same way that our bodily members are parts of our bodies." In other words, the second link consists of two claims. First, there is the claim that a group is a single, unitary thing, a whole of the same type as a living body. Second, there is the claim that group members are parts of their groups like hands and feet are parts of bodies.

The third link in the chain of reasoning, then, simply articulates the logical result of the first two. It says, "If groups are wholes, and members are parts, then the action of a group member is actually the action of the whole group. The group acts through its members, and thus it is the group as a whole who is ultimately responsible for the actions of its individual parts. After all, this is how bodies work, and a group is a whole like a body." On this reasoning, if one member of a group attacks you, you have been attacked by the group as a whole. Likewise, if you are to have vengeance, you will have to respond to the group as a whole. But, again, on this reasoning, you may do this by attacking any member of the group, not only the member who attacked you.

And now I believe we see the reasoning that led from the movie to the murders. Some Americans purportedly made a film. If Americans are members of the group we call "America," and to be a group is to be a whole, then Americans are parts of that whole. Therefore, if a certain part makes a movie, it is actually America as a whole who makes the movie through that part. And, on this reasoning, if a completely different set of Americans are killed as vengeance for the making of the movie, it is America itself, as a whole, which is being punished.

But this is no isolated incident. We see people following this chain of reasoning all over our own country. Members of governments punish Planned Parenthood, because some of its employees perform abortions. Likewise, since 9/11, certain members and employees of the federal government seem to have been trying to punish entire groups of people because of something only a few individuals did. And why should all Hispanic persons in Arizona, in effect, be made to suffer because some people have entered the state from Mexico illegally? In each of these cases, it is

because members or employees of government see groups as wholes, and persons as parts, that they punish the group for the actions of a few.

And the faulty reasoning is not a problem limited to government. It extends to business as well. Take corporations, for instance, and notice the etymological connection of “corporation” to “corpus” or “body.” The notion of a corporation derives from the belief that groups are wholes, and persons are parts. Without that belief, the legal fiction of the corporation would disappear, depriving owners and managers of the shield which allows them to abuse workers, pollute the environment and cheat customers with impunity. And with the corporation would go capitalism as we know it.

Furthermore, it is the belief that groups are wholes, and persons are parts, which stands in the way of legal equality for homosexual persons. If groups are wholes, and any act of a part is actually an act of the whole, then for any part to accept homosexuals is for the whole to do so. If, then, the government were to legitimize homosexuality, people on the Right would feel forced to say, “America — that is, *we* — now accept homosexuality.” And many cannot bring themselves to do this. Furthermore, there is a belief among religious conservatives that God will visit vengeance upon the Nation for accepting homosexuality, and there’s no telling through which part God will choose to punish the whole. Therefore, because they see groups as wholes, and persons as parts, many believe it is a matter of their own physical safety that no one—most especially the government—be allowed to accept homosexuality.

But consider as well the leftwing belief that the government’s failure to enforce a “living wage” is an injustice for which the nation as a whole is responsible. An activist writes that “*we* are being unjust to our employees, and this must be stopped!” even

though he does not own a business, and thus has no employees. Similarly, a pacifist talks about when “we invaded Iraq,” though *she’s* never left the great state of Kansas. Such claims only make sense if you believe that groups are wholes, and persons are parts. And because Americans on both the Right and Left share this belief, they spend their lives trying get government to impose their opposed moralities on everyone else.

But, of course, this type of thinking is not limited to the U.S. It led to the French retaliation against the Germans after WWI, and the German quest for vengeance against the French in WWII, and it fuels the Palestinian–Israeli conflict to this day. It leads to gang wars in the U.S. and blood feuds between families and tribes all over the globe and throughout history. This is the world you get, when people think of groups as wholes and of persons as parts. I, however, am hoping for a change.

No matter how closely the members of a group cooperate with each other, they never achieve the unity that would be necessary for the group to become a single thing, a whole. Persons can work together, think together, feel together and believe together, but they just don’t fit together in the way that parts fit together within wholes. When they come together, they do not do so in the way that would transform them into a new, superhuman entity that can itself be treated as a single thing. Persons can function as members of groups, but they can never truly unite as parts within a whole.

And, as anyone who has ever gotten to know a group can tell you, the internal differences and tensions between the members of a group often stand out much more strongly than any cohesion. The lectionary readings for today include a passage in which James scolds a church for their internal “wars and fightings” (James 4:1, WEB). And these divisions go back to the Apostles themselves. The Gospel reading we heard,

recounts Jesus reprimanding his Disciples for being divided over who was greatest. The one thing most groups do not suffer from is an abundance of unity.

So, even if in the ideal, the members of groups achieve a kind of harmonious cooperation of feeling, thinking and acting that would make them in some vague sense like a body, most groups fall far, far short of that ideal. But is this kind of single-minded systematicity, or lack of divergent diversity, really even an ideal? And what would happen to our own desires for vengeance if we understood group unity as an ideal, and a questionable one at that? Wouldn't this lead us to expect most groups to have never achieved such wholeness? And wouldn't that make us ask whether we really understood the group against whom we desired vengeance, based only on what we knew of a few of their members? Wouldn't the rejection of the idea that groups are wholes force us to believe that there may be people within the group by whom we feel injured, who feel as strongly as we do that what was done was wrong?

But you're good, non-violent Mennonites, so you never desired vengeance against anyone. Right? The racist, sexist, heterosexist, imperialist, industrial capitalism that you believe to be destroying our world, causing global warming and every manner of evil, has never made you in the least bit angry. You didn't sing, stomp or clap with gusto last week for the "fires of [God's] justice [to] burn." And you've never thought, "Well, they're getting what's coming to them" or "Their chickens are just coming home to roost," when you hear about some leader of the industrial-capitalist complex suffering some ill or other.

Or perhaps you are so caught up in the stereotype of groups as wholes that you even think the ills you suffer are legitimate retribution for *your* belonging to a racist,

sexist, heterosexist, imperialist, industrial-capitalist nation. Perhaps you think the heat, crazy storms and power outages this summer were just the punishment you deserved for relying on air conditioning and fossil fuels. And perhaps you think being hated by the world is just what you deserve for not shopping exclusively at the fair-trade, earth-conscious co-ops that the Invisible Hand has created to serve white, college-educated, middle-class population centers like yours. And in unguarded moments, perhaps you even speak in the first person plural about the evil done by other members of your family or country or species. Perhaps you, in effect, have become a caricature of Jesus, taking responsibility for the sins of the world.

With the Psalmist, then, you cry out for God to “repay” your “enemies,” so you can “triumph over them”; it’s just you have “met the enemy, and he is you.” But what does Jesus teach us in the Gospel reading for today? When he says he will be betrayed and murdered, he doesn’t respond like the Psalmist. He just says, matter-of-factly, that after he dies, he will return to life. His response on the cross will be to call not for vengeance from God, but for forgiveness. And as we saw, when Jesus discovers conflict amongst his group of followers, he tells them the solution is service.

It is “love” — not self-flagellation over being a part of a capitalist, carbon-producing whole — that “covers a multitude of sins” (1 Peter 4:8, WEB). And with Jesus we pray for our sins to be forgiven, and for help in forgiving the sins of others, not for the strength to take those sins on ourselves. We also pray for God’s kingdom to come. That is, we pray for the strength and motivation to follow God’s rule, as lived out by Jesus, in such a way that we inspire others to do the same. We hope to inspire people the world over to live together the lives that God designed us to live.

That is the ideal we are aiming for. We may never reach it, but it gives us a direction in which to head, a goal toward which to work. And on our way there may we remind ourselves of two things. First, our “enemies,” whether at home or abroad, are not a monolithic body, single-mindedly united in evil and intent on the destruction of all we love. Some of them may well be. But there is probably more to them, and probably more good to them, than first makes the news, no matter who is reporting the news (right, left, or whatever). And second, we are not even a monolithic body united in racist, sexist, heterosexist, industrial, capitalist evil. Some of us may well be. But there is probably more to us, and probably more good to us, than the example of some of our fellow citizens might lead you to believe.