

Doomsday

Смр̄и

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Death

DOOMSDAY
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Уредници
Марија Лојаница
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DEATH TACTICS

ТАКТИКЕ СМРТИ

Death can be imagined as an active, scheming agent. Death in this picture is a powerful perpetrator of something feared, harmful and often horrible: causing lives to end prematurely. Research shows that powerful perpetrators — in areas ranging from sexual harassment to genocide — regularly use five types of methods to reduce public outrage: covering up their actions; devaluing the target; reinterpreting events by lying, minimising, blaming and framing; using official channels to give an appearance of justice; and intimidating or rewarding people involved. This model of outrage management can be applied to Death imagined as a powerful perpetrator. Two case studies — medicine and war — show how this approach can highlight weaknesses in human responses to danger.

Key words: death, medicine, war, outrage, justice

Смрт се да замислити као активни, сплеткарски агенс. Овако виђена, Смрт је починилац дела застрашујућих, шкодљивих, и често ужасних: она је узрок превременог окончања живота. Истраживања показују да моћни починиоци дела – у распону од сексуалног узнемиравања до геноцида – по правилу посежу за пет типова метода како би умањили осуду јавности: заташкавање почињеног, обезвређивање мете напада; реинтерпретација догађаја путем лагања, умањивања или преусмеравања кривице и смештања; употреба званичних канала како би сачинили привид правде, те застрашивање или награђивање учесника. Овакав модел управљања јавном осудом може се применити и на механизме функционисања Смрти као моћног починиоца. Две студије случаја – медицина и рат – показују како овакав приступ може да осветли слабости када је у питању одговор човека на опасност.

Кључне речи: смрт, медицина, рат, осуда јавности, правда

Introduction

Depending on the circumstances, people have different attitudes and reactions to the possibility of death. Much of the time, people make strenuous efforts to stay alive, fighting illnesses or dangers. They will also make extraordinary efforts to keep others alive, especially those nearest and dearest. This makes sense in evolutionary terms: for survival of the human species, it is useful for most individuals to have an instinctive drive to avoid their own death and the deaths of others close to them.

On the other hand, sometimes a person welcomes death. To escape from extreme psychological suffering, suicide may seem like the only option. Some individuals willingly sacrifice their lives for others.

How can these different attitudes and reactions be understood? Perspectives are available from psychology, biology, theology, sociology and other disciplines and angles. Here, insight will be sought through imagining that Death is an active, scheming agent, using a variety of tactics to get its way. (The capitalised word Death is used to distinguish the imagined agent from the biological reality of the end of life.) Similarly, individuals and societies can use a variety of tactics to counter Death's tactics, or occasionally welcome them.

Death has been portrayed in various ways through the ages, for example as cruel, ruthless, benevolent or just doing a routine job (Vardal 2019). A well-known personification is the Grim Reaper, a fearsome presence carrying a scythe, but just as common are more benign representations. Death's images, from centuries of lore, have been brought into contemporary contexts through novels and films (Vardal 2019). Most commonly seen as male, Death is sometimes represented as female. Surveys show several typical images of Death, with a macabre Death associated with murder outside the home, Death the gentle comforter with peaceful death by old age at home, Death the attractive deceiver with heart attack and Death the automaton with death from cancer in a hospital (Kang 2019).

The powers attributed to different personifications of Death, in myths and fiction, vary considerably. In the spirit of this diversity of Death personifications, for the purposes of this analysis Death is conceived as having limited powers over the deaths of individuals, because they have to conform to natural laws. However, Death can encourage ways of thinking and behaving that contribute to premature individual deaths or to mass death. Death in this picture is like a disinformation specialist, leading humans to make decisions and adopt patterns of behaviour that lead to people's deaths sooner than they

would otherwise. For example, in relation to Covid-19, Death cannot create or spread the coronavirus but can encourage activities – wet markets, lab experimentation, take your pick – with the potential to lead to pandemics.

Here the focus will be less on how Death is personified and instead mostly on the tactics that Death can use to reduce outrage from its actions, and the counter-tactics that people and societies use against Death's tactics. In the next section, a framework of tactics for managing outrage from injustice is presented. Following this are two extended case studies: medicine and war. The conclusion sums up the value and limitations of looking at Death tactics.

As noted, thinking in terms of Death tactics is just one of many approaches to death. The question is not whether Death is *really* an active, scheming agent but whether thinking of death this way offers any useful insights. This is an empirical issue: we can only try it and see.

Tactics for managing outrage

When people see something that they think is unfair, disgusting or harmful, they may be concerned, upset or angry. For example, if people see a man beating a defenceless puppy, some of them will be distressed or angry, and some may intervene, including by trying to make the man pay a penalty. Therefore, perpetrators of such actions usually try to avoid repercussions.

Then there are powerful perpetrators, for example governments and corporations. They also can be held responsible for actions that people think are unfair, disgusting or harmful. Powerful perpetrators have a greater range of possible ways to reduce concern about their actions. Studies of a variety of areas show that powerful perpetrators of injustice regularly use five types of methods that reduce public outrage (Martin 2007). They:

- Cover up the action.
- Devalue the target.
- Reinterpret events by lying, minimising, blaming and framing.
- Use official channels to give an appearance of justice.
- Intimidate and/or reward people involved.

This framework has been applied to censorship (Jansen and Martin 2015), sexual harassment (McDonald et al. 2010), torture (Brooks 2016) and war (Riddick 2012), among other topics.

Consider, for example, genocide, something that most people think is horrible. The perpetrators of genocides can use all these methods to try to reduce outrage over their actions (Martin 2009).

First, they can try to cover up the activity, so most people do not know it is happening. In the case of the 1994 genocide in Rwanda, the leaders of the operation hid their own role by training militias away from the capital, cutting telephone lines during massacres and preventing survivors from leaving. Western governments also aided in cover-up by withdrawing their nationals and not publicising their knowledge of the killings.

Second, they can devalue the targets. Governments say that people claiming to have been tortured are terrorists, criminals or subversives. When the target is seen as having little value, as having low status or as being dangerous, then what is done to them doesn't seem so bad. In Rwanda, propaganda portrayed Tutsis, the main target group, as traitors, enemies and devils.

Third, powerful perpetrators can reinterpret their actions by lying, minimising, blaming and framing. These are ways of getting people to think differently about actions. The Rwandan government claimed that massacres were tribal violence and that Hutus were innocent victims (rather than perpetrators). They minimised the death toll. Meanwhile, Western governments avoided using the term "genocide."

Fourth, powerful perpetrators can refer claims to official channels – for example, grievance procedures, formal investigations, expert committees or courts – that give only an appearance of justice. Official channels encourage people to think justice is being done, so they wait for an outcome. Official channels are typically slow, procedural and rely on experts such as lawyers. By the time they reach a conclusion, public outrage often has died down. In the case of Rwanda, foreign governments and the UN Security Council deliberated but did nothing to stop the killing.

Fifth, powerful perpetrators may try to intimidate or reward people involved. In Rwanda, soldiers and police threatened anyone who refused to kill. Those who cooperated with the killing received rewards including food, marijuana, money and opportunities for looting.

In summary, powerful perpetrators of something thought to be bad can try to reduce public outrage through tactics of cover-up, devaluation, reinterpretation, official channels and intimidation. But this is not the end of the story: people can resist. The targets can resist and so can their supporters. More specifically, they can try to counter each of the five types of perpetrator tactics. They can:

- Expose the action.
- Validate the targets.
- Interpret the action as an injustice.
- Avoid official channels and instead mobilise support.
- Resist intimidation and rewards.

For much of the existence of the human species, Death played what might be called a routine role. Humans instinctively tried to live in an environment made challenging by the necessities of acquiring food, shelter and clothing. The struggle with Death became more complex and interesting with the introduction of agriculture, which made possible the accumulation of surpluses and the development of a division of labour, with specialised roles for artisans, priests and the like. Later, with the growth of cities, Death had new opportunities to wreak havoc via infectious diseases. Then, with the industrial revolution, increases in affluence and the development of science, humans started making inroads against early death. In affluent societies, infant mortality greatly declined, infectious diseases were tamed through better sanitation, hygiene, diet and antibiotics, and life expectancies began climbing. It seemed that humans were able to postpone their appointments with Death.

In this context, let us look at Death's tactics in contemporary societies, specifically at two areas: medicine and war. Medicine presents itself as a fierce opponent of death, so it is worth exploring what Death, as an active agent, can do to make its efforts more effective. War remains an important cause of death, so it is worth exploring the tactics Death uses to discourage humans from finding ways to abolish war.

Medicine

Imagine you are Death and want to bring more people into your orbit. You know that you face a major opponent, the medical profession, dedicated to keeping people alive. Your opponent uses a range of tactics to generate outrage over death: it exposes health problems, validates people with illnesses, interprets death as something to be opposed, mobilises massive social resources for health care, and resists death at all costs. The medical profession seems to be using all the tactics that you want to counter.

You have a very sneaky approach. You allow organised medicine to do as much as it wants to keep people alive, as long as it focuses on people with injuries and illnesses. Meanwhile, you use a range of methods to reduce outrage over the *causes* of injuries and illnesses. A lot of what you do is to allow curative medicine to flourish while taking advantage of preventive health measures being starved of attention.

Your first method is cover-up: you keep the focus on medical treatments for illnesses and obscure systemic causes of ill health such as lack of exercise (e.g., Roberts with Edwards 2010), unhealthy diet, toxic environmental chemicals, overly stressful lifestyles, and economic inequality (Wilkinson and Pickett 2009). There is plenty of documentation of the role of these factors in ill health, but you're able to keep attention to them limited. As well, you discourage attention to the adverse effects of medicine, for example the damaging effects of medical errors, even though they are responsible for a huge number of deaths (Gibson and Singh 2003). Although your impact is huge, your methods cleverly hide your role.

Your second method is to target people who are devalued, because there is less public concern about their deaths. Smokers are a prime example: supposedly, they bring their illnesses upon themselves. Likewise, poor people are devalued, so their deaths don't matter so much.

Your third method is reinterpretation. You aim to get people to think that medical interventions – rather than preventive health measures – are the road to health. People need to think that the more money spent on doctors and hospitals, the healthier they will be. In this way, deaths caused by systemic causes such as lack of exercise are not in the picture.

Your fourth method is to take advantage of official channels, in this case experts and authorities, which divert attention away from efforts to tackle the systemic causes of ill health. Whenever there are scientific reports or official pronouncements, they maintain the focus on medicine. When there are complaints about medical treatments, experts and authorities unite in saying that the solution is a redoubled effort to improve medical treatments, not to look at alternatives.

Your fifth and final method is intimidation and rewards, used to discourage people from dealing with the systemic causes of ill health and death. This is simple: you encourage setting up systems so that people can easily indulge themselves. Cars and labour-saving devices are tempting, thereby reducing physical activity. Sugary and fatty foods, with lots of

artificial additives for taste and colour, are very tempting indeed. Smoking and drinking alcohol are promoted by companies that try to make them seem glamorous. Intimidation is used against those who try to speak out against the causes of ill health. For example, whistleblowers within pharmaceutical companies are unwelcome and subject to all sorts of reprisals (Rost 2006).

As Death, you've done a very good job of maintaining a system that causes ill health through toxic environmental chemicals, lack of exercise, bad diet and unhealthy habits, while redirecting attention from these causes to the medical system that is designed to keep diseased bodies alive. You have had a difficult time because your previous blights, including starvation and infectious diseases, are no longer so deadly. As affluence has gradually increased around the globe, you've opened new pathways to illness and death. Good work!

War

Imagine you are Death and want to cause a great number of people to die – prematurely. To do this is not so easy. You cannot just strike anyone on your own whim, because the deaths you cause need to follow natural laws. Life on earth has its own driving forces, including a powerful urge to survive. So you need to be sneaky. One of your techniques is to convince humans to kill each other. When they do this in an organised fashion, it is called war.

Humans want to survive, and in many circumstances they help each other to survive. That is how humans have become the dominant species on earth. But there are weak points in human willingness to help others to survive. That's where you have a chance.

To reduce outrage from what you're planning and doing, your first technique is cover-up: you need to hide the possibility of death. This might seem to be a futile task, because everyone knows that war involves death and destruction. True, but the way you proceed is to encourage preparations for war. Preparations don't seem so bad, because death seems something separate. You encourage people to set up what is called the division of labour, so each worker concentrates on their own task and doesn't think of the overall purpose. This is especially important in arms manufacture: workers focus on the task of designing weapons, building manufacturing facilities, and producing and selling weapons. This massive industry is all geared to killing, but for most of the workers in the industry it's just a job. Then there are the cleaners, accountants, cooks, teachers, clothes designers and a host of other

civilian functions that are vital to maintaining military forces. They just need to do their jobs and not think about how they are supporting a system leading to death. However, cover-up via the division of labour can only work to a degree. You need other methods to reduce outrage.

Your second technique is devaluation of the target. The target in war is the enemy. As Death, you need to make the enemy seem so bad or worthless that killing is acceptable, even desirable. The technique of devaluation is extremely powerful (Keen 1986). It works best when the so-called enemies are not known personally: they are foreigners, speak a different language, look different. More importantly, they are evil: they do horrible things and believe in dangerous ideas. Most of all, they want to kill, so it becomes a matter of kill or be killed.

There's a risk that the enemy will seem like regular human beings. Therefore, to devalue them requires a major effort in shaping opinions. Beginning in the 1900s, this became more sophisticated with the application of psychological techniques to change the way people think, in what is called propaganda.

Devaluation is made easier by a human propensity to form in-groups. Those in the in-group, the group with which a person identifies, are seen as kin, as allies, as valuable, as deserving recognition and protection. Those not in the in-group, namely the out-group, are aliens or enemies, and seen as dangerous, as warranting defence or destruction. For contemporary war, the most common in-group is the nation, to which loyalty is pledged. The out-group is enemy nations, which are devalued.

Your third method for reducing outrage is reinterpretation. Through a range of techniques – lying, minimising, blaming and framing – you give reasons why killing and death are not so bad. Lying is straightforward: you encourage propaganda, for example saying that no civilians have died, or that the war is going well and victory is inevitable. Minimising the scale or seriousness of war-fighting is closely related to lying, for example saying that only a few civilians have died. Blaming the war on the enemy is one option; another is to blame problems on internal scapegoats, such as racial minorities, who can be arrested, imprisoned, even killed. Genocide is the extreme case: it can be thought of as a war against civilians (Shaw 2007). Finally, framing is the process of seeing the world from a particular viewpoint. To reduce outrage, you get people to avoid thinking of war as a horrible destructive waste and instead to think of it as a noble endeavour to defend the homeland and its highest values. Who can resist going to war to defend freedom and justice?

The framing of war preparations is ingenious: you encourage people to believe that war preparations are the most effective way to ensure peace. Everyone wants peace, so this rationalisation ensures that peaceful ways to promote peace are sidelined (Galtung, 1996).

Your fourth method for reducing outrage is official channels. In war, the most important official channel is the government, which authorises preparations, defences and interventions. When there is the possibility or reality of massive death and destruction, the government is there to say that this is necessary for the greater good. Also useful are experts of various sorts who can be relied upon to make pronouncements about the need for sacrifices and the importance of commitment.

Your fifth method for reducing outrage has two elements: intimidation and rewards. You ensure that war promoters use threats and penalties to coerce anyone who refuses go along with preparations and war fighting. This includes condemnation of those who refuse conscription. Intimidation includes spying and dirty tricks against peace activists. When a war is underway, it includes serious sanctions for pacifists: they are traitors. Though these means, most of those with reservations about war do not express them: outrage is silenced.

Rewards are at least as important. Anyone who supports war preparations is left alone. Quite a few have jobs, some of them lucrative. Members of the military are lauded by national leaders, given special benefits after service, as veterans, and become venerated if they lose their lives. Enthusiastic war boosters can rise in prestige. Some of them, such as politicians supporting a country's war effort, gain popularity.

In summary, as Death, war is a way to prematurely end the lives of millions of people. All you have to do is encourage the sorts of thinking and behaviour that supports creation of powerful military machines and that sees killing other humans as something necessary. In this way you overcome the noble sentiments against killing espoused by most religious doctrines.

Now let's step outside of your role as Death and look at these tactics in a social scientific manner. To think of war in terms of Death tactics is to categorise the many ways in which military systems and war are normalised in human societies. Peace activists have long opposed war preparations and war, and for them, most of these tactics are familiar. What this approach offers is a convenient way of thinking about the methods that make war, or preparation for war, unremarkable to so many people despite the principles of world

religions and the earnest efforts of generations of campaigners. Thinking in terms of Death tactics helps in appreciating the enormous challenge faced by those seeking a world without war.

Conclusion

For all humans, death is inevitable, but for many individuals and society as a whole, strenuous efforts are made to postpone it. In other words, most people would like to live a long life and to support others, especially children, close friends and others near and dear, to also have long lives. To understand the challenges in this quest, it can be useful to imagine that Death is a conscious, scheming agent, seeking to bring humans into its orbit. For Death to be effective in its task, it seeks to reduce concern about its efforts. With this way of envisaging Death, the next step is to examine a variety of methods that Death can use to reduce concern: cover-up, devaluation, reinterpretation, official channels, intimidation and rewards. Then, for each of Death's methods, it is valuable to examine counter-methods: exposing Death's actions, validating the targets, interpreting Death's actions as unfair, mobilising support and resisting intimidation and rewards.

Applying this approach to medicine leads to an agenda that meshes with the push for preventive health; applying the approach to violent conflict meshes with the agenda of the antiwar movement. How can the process of imagining that Death is an active agent lead to useful insights? One answer is that this process helps identify weaknesses in human responses to danger.

In the mathematical theory of games, the canonical model involves two players each with a set of choices. Depending on the choices that each player makes, there are different outcomes. The most famous configuration is prisoner's dilemma: two prisoners are interrogated separately and each one is told that if they confess, they will get a lighter sentence. They are better off if neither confesses, but each one has an advantage if their opponent confesses but they do not.

In game theory writing, there has been consideration of "games against nature." A human is one player and "nature," the natural world, is the other, assumed to be indifferent to what the human player does. For example, whether it rains does not depend on whether you carry an umbrella. However, there is another way to think about games against nature. One interpretation is that when humans make choices, the world is indifferent overall, but among the

outcomes are ones that are bad for humans. In playing against nature over and over, humans need to take into account the possibility of adverse outcomes.

The same sort of thinking applies to games against Death. In the case of nuclear war, there are short-term advantages to having nuclear weapons but, as in the prisoner's dilemma, it is very bad for multiple players to engage in nuclear war. In the case of causes of ill health such as pollution and lack of exercise, each individual is playing a game in which there are immediate payoffs for bad practices – cheaper products produced by polluting industries and a softer life without the stress of exercise – and the risk of a large negative payoff if one succumbs to disease. It is useful to imagine Death as a scheming agent because it highlights the consequences of taking the easy option today that creates the risk of bad outcomes later on.

One final thought: a devil's advocate is someone who argues against everyone else, raising warnings about a consensus decision. When everyone on a committee thinks an investment is a good idea, it can be wise to assign one member to be a devil's advocate and raise objections to the investment, objections that may be overlooked in the rush to judgement called groupthink. Appropriately, the devil is traditionally associated with death. To better understand human options, it can be helpful to think like the devil and like Death.

A good devil's advocate brings risk into the open so they can be countered. In a similar way, to be more effective in opposing Death, it can be useful to figure out how Death thinks and schemes – and be prepared.

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