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The Absurdity of Terror

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Over the past year while teaching in Singapore and the United States, I have conducted lengthy interviews on the topic of absurdity. The purpose of these interviews was to investigate how participants contended with what they perceived to be absurd experiences and events. Participants were asked what "it means to say that something is absurd, to picture someone doing something very absurd, to tell about a time when you felt absurd," to describe "the opposite of absurdity, to tell about a time when you felt not at all absurd," to assess whether absurdity is controllable, changeable, good, bad, and whether "life is absurd, to tell about a time when life seemed absurd," and to describe how talking about absurd things "makes you feel." Perhaps not surprisingly, acts of terrorism, such as the attacks of 9/11, were seen as manifestly absurd. My sample was comprised of 26 individuals (9 males and 17 females) between the ages of 18 and 44 (with a median age of 22.3 years). Nine participants were from the U.S. and 17 from Singapore (the numerical similarities are coincidental). This essay describes how participants articulated the absurd quality of terror and how that quality influenced their moral outlooks.

Because the similarities between American and Singaporean participants' responses were more remarkable than their differences, this essay does not distinguish between the two citizenship groups. While all were affiliated in some way with a university or college, the participant group as a whole represented highly diverse cultural, ethnic, economic, educational, and religious backgrounds and experiences. The relative consistency of participants' responses, then, suggests that their comments may carry considerable relevance for young people in both countries, perhaps even in others.

When prompted to give "an example of something absurd," over two-thirds of the people I spoke with discussed terror or violence. They spoke about 9/11, the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, the student murders at Columbine High School in Colorado, the Burmese government's rejection of foreign aid for typhoon victims in 2008, the Indonesian riots of 1998, and the Nazi Holocaust. More abstract examples of absurdity included "killing a person without a reason, firing a shotgun into a crowd, public raping, committing suicide without feeling unhappy," economic inequality, racism, and self-mutilation. Memorable images were of strewn body parts, "ashes and bones," the swastika, armed robberies, being thrown from a tall building, "running down the street naked," and the Edvard Munch painting, *The Scream*.

With few exceptions, participants designated acts of terror and violence as "absurd" when they were highly public and seemingly unmotivated. Thus, it was not the act of murder that participants found absurd, but the act of "firing a shotgun into a crowd"; not the act of rape, but "a public raping"; not acts of physical violence, but the spectacle of prolonged, televised warfare. Similarly, it was not suicide that was absurd, but "committing suicide without feeling unhappy." It was not killing that was absurd, but killing without reason.

Although participants implied that they were repulsed by these horrific events and images, their narratives about absurdity evinced even greater distress about the perpetrators' flagrant violations of social norms. That is, participants considered public transgressions of law and conventional morality to be absurd not primarily because of the undeserved suffering of victims, nor because of the implication that they, too, might be victimized, but because such acts were "abnormal." While I assumed that victims' suffering was part of participants' consternation over acts of terror, very few said so. More typical were explanations which emphasized only that "normal people don't do it," that "it's not supposed to happen," or that "I can't understand the reason." To my surprise, no one offered an ethical or philosophical definition of absurdity. Rather, over 75 percent claimed that "absurd" meant simply "out of the ordinary, out of the norm," or "unusual to me or my community."

Ambivalence was remarkable in most participants' accounts of absurdity. Many associated absurdity with violence and terror, only then to express a desire to be more "open" to absurdities, which could be accomplished by reducing the power and scope of one's "self-monitor." A number of participants described not only violent, but sexually evocative acts when prompted to picture "someone doing something very absurd." Some described absurdities that appeared to contain hidden wishes, such as a young woman who had been engaged in a painful combat with her strict family over the expectations they associated with her gender. To her, absurd acts were "parents and children arguing in public, disclosing family secrets (including the sexual habits of the parents) to everybody, child prostitution," and "a gay family." All may be interpreted as highly subversive possibilities in the context of her family.

In the end, over 95 percent of participants, including those who described terror and violence as absurd, said that

absurdity was "not bad," but was "good" and/or "natural." They found it to be "good" because without absurd events life was imagined to be intolerably boring; "natural" because absurdity was seen as an essential part of human existence. Needless to say, these definitions and attributions contrasted sharply with the horrific events described moments earlier in the interview.

I doubt that participants' ambivalence and their emphasis on perpetrators' moral rebellion signified a lack of concern for victims. Rather, it seemed to be indicative of participants' experience of a world in which terror is supposedly unthinkable, yet is constantly thought about, discussed, and displayed. The young people I spoke with did not seem to view terror as evidence of the "primitive hostility of the world," nor even "the fact of man's own inhumanity" (Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus and Other Essays*, 1955, pp. 14-15). Terrorists were somewhat more understandable than that. Indeed, participants' descriptions of terror and violence as merely "unconventional" implied that terror was thinkable, and that thinkable terror may produce greater moral anxiety than unthinkable terror.

Many young people also seemed to live with subtle terrors of their own, as their economic "survival" seemed to require the mastery of conventional skills and roles, while their personal "survival" depended on "being themselves," being authentic, and being free. Since many participants imagined terrorists and other criminals to be released from both sets of demands, what may have been troubling about absurd behavior was that it signified the potential for nonrational, destructive, and transgressive acts to reconcile contradictory impulses, perhaps offering freedom from the pressures of ordinary life—an ordinary life which participants regularly denigrated as "just chasing money, a dog's life," or the time to "just dive into the crowd and follow the robots."

Some participants suggested a surprising strategy to contend with the disturbing emotions they associated with witnessing or remembering an absurd act. A significant percentage took it upon themselves to normalize and justify absurd events. When asked to imagine something absurd, one young woman said, "Nothing. I can rationalize almost anything that people do… Absurdity is from your own perception. If you have no quarrel with anything, then there is nothing absurd for you." Others echoed this view: "Even if absurd things happen to me, I will convince myself that they are not absurd." This nearly stoic outlook framed absurdity as a quality of perception and not a political or social reality, rationalizing absurd acts perhaps in order to sustain beliefs in the justice and reliability of conventional social arrangements (Melvin Lerner, *Belief in a Just World: A Fundamental Delusion*, 1980).

A somewhat different response to absurdity was expressed in the slightly smaller number of participants who spoke of joining forces with absurdity, as it were, to claim its power. One young man described his physical assault of a military officer and his habit of driving at intentionally reckless speeds as evidence that he had integrated absurdity (and a bit of terror) into his way of life. More than one participant said that committing crimes would not be absurd if one were paid or compensated for them because, then, the crime would have a purpose. Such calculations even led one young man to reflect that while terrorism may be "abnormal" to him, terrorists must have their reasons, so perhaps terrorism is reasonable.

These interview accounts of the absurdity of terror suggest that rather than remarking on the absurdity of needless suffering or loss, most young people were troubled by witnessing or recalling a highly publicized transgressive act. Participants implied that those who rationalize or commit absurdities suffer none, freeing them from ambivalent feel-

ings about secure yet confining social roles. Participants' greater interest in resolving doubts about the motives of perpetrators likely reflect doubts about the fairness of conventional moral and social expectations as well as the ever-widening distance at which the victims of 9/11 and other acts of terror are remembered. Their responses suggest that it is important to understand witnesses' reactions to the absurdity of terror as something distinct from victims' reactions to traumatic events, for while very few interview participants appeared to be traumatized by the terror they had seen or read about, many seemed deeply conflicted about how to integrate the possibility of committing absurd violence into their moral outlooks.

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Consequences

Playing the Trauma Card after 9/11?

Dan Dervin—University of Mary Washington

The sight of a large aircraft flying low over Manhattan's skyline drove thousands of New Yorkers out onto the streets, their faces registering terror and panic. But no, this morning in the spring of 2009 was not a replay of 9/11; only a bureaucratic snafu out of Washington. But if nothing else, it demonstrated the lasting power of mass trauma and the underlying fear of repetition.