

Fighting Indifference: Looking at World Response to the Holocaust with Elie Wiesel

ERIC BRESSMAN

“The opposite of love is not hate, it’s indifference.”
—Elie Wiesel

There exists a common misconception that the terms “World War II” and “The Holocaust” refer to the same period in history. Though historical analysis might reveal that the Second World War had its roots in what were the early stages of the Holocaust, that which made the war worthy of its worldly status did not truly begin until a number of years later. By the time the United States and its allies finally launched a full scale attack against the Fascist powers in 1944, most of the genocide that the Nazis ultimately committed had already taken place, and many of the death camps had long since closed down because there was simply no more killing to be done. What exactly was it, then, that took the world so long to respond? And if the international community was truly unaware of what was taking place (a theory which has long since been abandoned), why did the Europeans who were aware of but not subject to Nazi persecution sit back and watch?

In his speech “The Perils of Indifference,” Elie Wiesel addresses the question that underlies any discussion of the world’s response to the atrocities of the Holocaust: “What is indifference?” (2). Essentially, his question raises two separate but equally important issues: What motivates indifference, and what are its consequences? Martha C. Nussbaum and Bruce Robbins, in their respective essays “Compassion and Terror” and “The Sweatshop Sublime,” present the typical contemporary answers to these questions. It seems worthwhile, however, to take heed of the words of wisdom that Wiesel, a Holocaust survivor, might have to offer given his experience. Analyzing the prevailing approaches to these questions, from the perspective of two significantly different generations, ought to give deeper insight into the concept of indifference, how it might explain the global response to the Holocaust, and, perhaps more importantly, how it relates to the world today.

Nussbaum expresses, in part, the more modern view on the causes of indifference in her essay “Compassion and Terror.” Though she directly discusses the concept of compassion in the context of the events surrounding September 11th, her particular thoughts on the causes of this emotion are of equal relevance with regard to indifference. Commenting on why Americans did not respond emotionally to the plight of Rwandans with the same intensity as they did following September 11th, she writes, “suffering Rwandans could not be seen as part of the larger ‘us’ for whose fate we trembled” (17). Nussbaum is of the belief that, among other causal factors, a sense

of connectivity and commonality is required between the victim and the onlooker for compassion to be aroused within the onlooker. If this sense is lacking, the result will be a relative lack of compassion, which is one important element of indifference.

Bruce Robbins, author of the essay "The Sweatshop Sublime," would argue against Nussbaum's point that a degree of closeness is required for any feeling of compassion to develop. Compassion, Robbins claims, can be aroused regardless of differences between the victim and the onlooker; it is simply the ability of compassion to affect action that is affected by the degree of closeness. One might experience a "moment of consciousness," as Robbins describes it, in which one grasps the complexity of the division of labor and the inequality it engenders, but "this moment of consciousness will not be converted into action" (84). While compassion or pity can be felt for people no matter their nationality and social status, the crux of the issue is a different "tyranny of the close over the distant" (Robbins 86). The problem, ultimately, as Robbins explains, is "that global commitments can emerge more or less organically and continuously only from local, personal, familial commitments" (91). Though we may sympathize with the plight of others, our willingness to assist them will only be an outgrowth of more personal, tangible issues that we have committed ourselves to resolving. Thus, in Robbins's terms it would seem indifference is not a lack of compassion, but rather a lack of action.

Though these are two very distinct aspects of the definition of indifference, it is important to note that either of these elements could produce the same effect. A lack of compassion will never lead to action, and compassion without action is of no help to the sufferer. Despite their differences, Robbins and Nussbaum can at least agree on what causes indifference: a certain rift between the onlooker and the victim. A sense that the victim is different or distant ultimately leads to a lack of compassion (in Nussbaum's definition) or a lack of action (in Robbins' definition), both of which leave the victim helpless.

Wiesel, representing the approach to indifference of generations past that have learned from history and experience, could respond to this idea with several pieces of contradictory evidence. Most notably, how would the citizens of Poland and Germany who claimed to bear no hatred for the victims of Nazi persecution fit into this definition? Were these not their fellow citizens? Yet so many of them did not speak up or act and went on living their lives showing no signs of sympathy for the suffering of others in their midst. In the city of Lublin, Poland, people literally lived with a death camp in their backyard; if indifference can exist under such circumstances, then how can we define it as a product of distance? Of course Nussbaum might retort that perhaps these people did feel compassion, though they did not show it, and Robbins would say that the lack of action in this situation stemmed from a fear for their own lives. If this is true, then Wiesel would want to know what there is to say for the response of the United States, which presumably was not afraid of the Nazis. While the argument of distance and difference might apply, does it still hold in the case of the St. Louis, for instance? As Wiesel explains, the St. Louis was a ship that requested refuge in the U.S., among other countries, and "its human cargo—maybe 1,000 Jews—was turned back to Nazi Germany" (4). Given a blatant opportunity to prevent the suffering of one thousand people that were figuratively knocking at the country's

door, the U.S. government sent them back with full knowledge of where it was sending them. Distance was most definitely not an issue, and one might argue that difference is not a factor when one is in direct contact with the victim. Then, according to Robbins and Nussbaum, why was the U.S. government so obviously indifferent?

One might be inclined to say that this question is irrelevant to Robbins's and Nussbaum's definitions of indifference altogether. It seems they are explaining the causes of indifference on the individual level, while Wiesel seeks to understand its causes on the national level. Yet even Robbins and Nussbaum equate these two realms. Though they are both clearly analyzing personal responses to certain issues, they frame their analyses in the context of discussions that can only be understood on a national level. Nussbaum wants to know what factors caused the response, or lack thereof, of Americans to the genocide in Rwanda. This question, while relevant on the individual level, only bears significance in the context of the national; no one could realistically expect the individual to affect the situation in Rwanda, whereas the collection of every individual response into what becomes the national one may have an impact. The same holds true with regards to Robbins's discussion of sweatshop labor. While it may be necessary to examine the causes of indifference on the individual level in order to fully understand the logic behind it, such an analysis is only important in that it leads to an understanding of the concept on a larger scale. Thus, the question that Wiesel poses about the U.S. government's response to the pleas of the St. Louis passengers is unequivocally relevant to Robbins's and Nussbaum's understandings of indifference on the individual level as well.

Wiesel, in attempting to decipher the causes of indifference, asks, "Is it necessary at times to practice it simply to keep one's sanity, live normally, enjoy a fine meal and a glass of wine, as the world around us experiences harrowing upheavals?" (2). Robbins, explaining the aftermath of the moment of consciousness of the division of labor, answers this question as directly as possible: "You have a cup of tea or coffee. You get dressed. Just as suddenly, just as shockingly, you are returned to yourself in all your everyday smallness" (85). The reason, according to Robbins, that compassion will not necessarily lead to action is because to worry about the division of labor that produced your shirt or cup of coffee means you will not be able to fully enjoy those things. Nussbaum agrees with this idea as well, commenting on our relative lack of compassion for things that do not affect us: "There are so many things closer to home to distract us, and these things are likely to be so much more thoroughly woven into our scheme of goals" (16). Essentially, Nussbaum is of the opinion that the capacities for concern we have for our own happiness and the happiness of others are mutually exclusive, and ultimately we have to choose one over the other. The fact that our personal goals are a more immediate distraction and a more integral aspect of our daily lives prevents us from feeling concern for the suffering of others to the degree that we can or should. The consensus here seems to be that, if nothing else, indifference is the result of a very natural desire to maintain one's own happiness. This approach might help explain the response of the U.S. to the request of the St. Louis passengers: granting one group refuge might have inspired others to make a similar journey, thereby sparking an influx in immigration that would be easier

for the government not to have to worry about or deal with. Indifference is a product of values that prioritize personal happiness over the greater good.

Having established the root cause of indifference, it seems appropriate to analyze its effects. Implicit within both Nussbaum's and Robbins's essays, in that they only discuss the causes of compassion and action, or lack thereof, is the widespread idea that lack of compassion and lack of action effectively leave the situation static and unchanged. According to Nussbaum, if we are not concerned for the fate of suffering Rwandans, then they will simply continue to suffer; according to Robbins, if we do not respond to the plight of sweatshop laborers, then their plight will remain. Wiesel, however, emphatically disputes this notion that indifference is merely neutral. He argues, "Indifference is always the friend of the enemy, for it benefits the aggressor- never his victim, whose pain is magnified when he or she feels forgotten" (3). The effect of indifference, in Wiesel's view, is twofold: it aids the oppressor by giving him the necessary means and the confidence to continue what he is doing, and it worsens the victim's suffering by diminishing his hope. The former effect is highlighted by the St. Louis incident in that the U.S. literally sent the Nazis one thousand more people to persecute and murder as a direct result of their indifference. This sheds light upon a very relevant distinction between the notion of lack of compassion and the notion of indifference: lack of compassion seems to imply neutrality as Robbins and Nussbaum would like to have it; something is missing, therefore no effect will be produced. Indifference, however, is an emotion in its own right; it is an inactively active response with real consequences that are rarely positive.

This important distinction captures within it a true understanding of the problem of indifference. It is not, as Nussbaum and Robbins seem to imply, a simple lack of compassion or action to complement compassion, both of which lead to the same result; rather, it is a helping hand to the oppressor. It is a truly active response. This being the case, it seems all the more necessary to directly deal with the issue by stopping it at the source. The driving force behind indifference is the one idea that Wiesel, Nussbaum, and Robbins all seem to be able to agree on: the need to ignore the plight of others in order to maintain one's own happiness. But given the already proven results of indifference, is it feasible to say that the gain in happiness one receives from being indifferent outweighs the consequences? Is our ability to enjoy trivial pleasures to a slightly greater degree more important than the suffering and lives of so many? History has taught its lesson and offered its testimony; the only question that remains is whether we will take heed. ❖

WORKS CITED

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