The Crime of Genocide: The Moral Imperative to Remember, Acknowledge and Repair

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“By leaving history to the historians, we can together look to the future. I still believe this is possible. A segment of the Armenian Diaspora does not share this vision, and therefore it is a significant hurdle. I am not convinced that this particular segment of the diaspora is doing Armenia any favors this way.” Spoken by Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan during an interview for the newspaper *Jamanank* on November 9, 2010.\(^1\)

I begin by with these words of Turkish Prime Minister because it is precisely claims such as these that I will refute in my presentation. By leaving history to the historians we condemn ourselves to repeating the horrors of the past. As the philosopher George Santayana wrote in 1905, “Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it.”\(^2\) Given the subtitle of my talk, one might rightly ask what role can moral argument play for reparative justice in the case of the Armenian Genocide. I am not naïve in thinking that a moral argument will persuade someone who is actively engaged in wrongdoing to cease such behavior. At the same time, I don’t fully rule out such a possibility. Such arguments may reanimate a moral sentiment that has long lay dormant. Ultra-nationalist Turks and their denialist supporters are not my intended audience. My argument is directed to those potentially thoughtful and morally sensitive people who are skeptical of the need of restorative justice and the moral repair
that it may entail. These are individuals who see no need in remembering the past and when questioned will argue that their community’s past has little or nothing to do with their present life, let alone their moral character or responsibilities. Pressed further, such individuals often give a series of responses that are all too familiar:

- If a genocide or some injustice took place 95 years ago what does that have to do with me, a citizen of the Republic of Turkey in the year 2010.
- If harm was done, the perpetrators have long been dead. They were the responsible parties, I am not.
- I am only responsible for my own actions and omissions or at most, the actions and omissions of my dependent children. I am not responsible for the actions of members of my community, ethnic group, or nation-state, especially a nation-state, Ottoman Turkey, that is not my nation-state, the Republic of Turkey.

Given these responses, how does one establish the claim that members of a particular community, or in our case the citizens of the nation-state of Turkey, have a moral obligation to take responsibility for a historic injustice committed by their ancestors. One approach would be to attack the factually false claim that there is a radical break or discontinuity between the Ottoman government under the Committee of Union and Progress (CUP) and that of the Republic of Turkey under Attaturk. Historical research, greatly enhanced by the pioneering work of Taner Akçam, has come a long way in establishing the falsity of this claim. Further, the genocidal forces that were set into play in the spring of 1915 did not abate with the end of the CUP government but continued well into the early years of the rise of Kemalism. Such historical arguments
are not ones appropriate for a philosophically oriented panel such as this. I also suspect that they do not get to the heart of the hurdle I am trying to overcome.

Another approach would be through the avenue of political action or legal sanction. I’m not in a position to judge the efficacy of such approaches. Others are better qualified to make such judgments. Whether or not such approaches will bear fruit, they do highlight a distinction I would like to make. This is the distinction between accepting responsibility and taking responsibility. The unlikely event of some future Turkish government accepting responsibility for the Armenian Genocide should be distinguished from acts by which individual Turkish citizens take responsibility for the Genocide. I liken the former scenario to that of a criminal defendant reluctantly accepting a plea bargain under heavy pressure from both the prosecutors and his defense team in order to avoid a stiffer penalty. I do not believe that there is much moral work going on here. Political expediency is not equivalent to moral rectitude. Accepting responsibility by issuing a government statement acknowledging the 1915 Great Crime or Calamity (Medz Yeghern), followed by token gestures of reconciliation is not morally equivalent to the stronger and more difficult act of taking responsibility for the wrongdoing of genocide. The difference between accepting responsibility and taking responsibility may only sound like a verbal difference but the passive and active connotations of these words do highlight a significant moral difference. Accepting responsibility in order to get back to business as usual is a far cry from the hard moral work of actively engaging in repairing the multi-dimensional harms that the genocide has caused. When a community takes collective responsibility for an event in its past that it professes to repudiate, the expectation is that various sorts of reparative actions,
both real and symbolic, will follow. I will briefly return to this notion of taking responsibility at the end of my talk.

Let us return to the objections of the moral skeptics that I enumerated earlier. They all have an underlying common assumption: They reduce the sphere of morality to individuals and their actions or omissions. While this may seem to make some intuitive sense, a cursory reflection upon how human beings actually live their lives in communities proves this false. The false assumption that only individuals can be morally culpable leads to two questionable inferences: 1) that moral responsibility ends with the death of the perpetrator; 2) that collective or group moral culpability is a fiction. This latter inference sometimes takes the form of the denial of collective guilt. There is a large body of literature dating back to Karl Jaspers’ 1946 book, *The Question of German Guilt*, that attempts to sort through this issue of collective guilt and shame but I can’t deal with it here. What I will argue for is the claim that there is a strong case to be made for intergenerational collective moral responsibility. By the simple fact that we live in communities – no matter how diverse – we inherit a group identity and character. These identities have a history. We align ourselves to these identities to varying degrees. Social institutions sustain these identities across generations and their moral trustworthiness becomes our responsibility.

I argue for my position and against the moral skeptic by drawing an analogy to the arguments put forward by those who oppose reparations for slavery in the United States. The moral skeptic in the Armenian Genocide case and the U.S. slavery case hold similar positions. I quote the philosopher Bernard Boxill who summarizes this position: “Since present day U.S. citizens were not complicit in the crime of slavery [the]
claim that the U. S. government owes reparations to present-day African Americans] can only be based on the morally repugnant idea that individuals can be burdened with the duties that other people incurred.” The assumption here is that the only way one can be burdened with moral responsibilities is by one’s own actions or the actions that one has directly authorized (i.e., the actions of one’s present government). Since we are not citizens of the antebellum South and our present government is not the same collective that existed prior to the Emancipation Proclamation, we therefore have no moral obligation to pay reparations to our African American citizens. We did not authorize our founding fathers to institutionalize slavery in our society. By extension, the post–World War II government of Germany is not the Third Reich, and the current government of the Republic of Turkey is not the Ottoman Young Turk government of World War I. Only highly organized hierarchical organizations such as business corporations can act as moral agents and thus engender moral obligations, obligations that only extend to individuals in their corporate management. The founding of the Federal Republic of Germany or the Republic of Turkey is the equivalent of the establishment of a new corporation, albeit one in which the assets of the bankrupt old regimes were assumed. These assets come with no moral baggage, so this argument claims.

I argue, to the contrary, that this argument presents a very weak analogy and reflects a very naïve view of history. The historical evidence for the claims in support of the argument, especially those with regard to slavery and the Armenian Genocide are not very strong, but as I’ve already stated, such an historical critique is not my purpose here. On a conceptual level, what the above line of reasoning fails to acknowledge is
the fact that collectivities have identities across time. A person’s ethnic identity is one such identity. In more ethnically diverse societies, there are political or institutional forms of identity. The two sometimes merge. Ethnic communities are collectivities, collectivities that frequently transcend national borders. The philosopher Karen Kovach has argued that mere biological membership in one’s ethnic community is not sufficient to confer collective moral obligations. But if one chooses, whether explicitly or implicitly, to identify oneself with one’s ethnic community, then one assumes certain moral obligations with that choice. One’s shared ancestry opens up a space in which one acts in concert, whether intentionally or not, with the “idea of the group.” One acts and responds “emotionally as a member of the group,” and thus one’s actions have moral implications. The particularities of this alignment can vary greatly, from the relatively trivial to the profound—from one’s tastes in cuisine to one’s deeply felt religious beliefs. Through such an alignment one shares in the collective agency of the ethnic group and in so doing shares its history of moral achievements as well as its moral failures. Again this is not simply a matter of assuming some moral obligation because of an event in the distant past but is part of being who you are today, be it a German, a Turk, or an American.

Moral failures and their associated obligations may be inherited, but, as is the case with a defective gene, what counts are the consequences of this inheritance. While it is not true for all genetically inherited disorders, one can think of the analogy of an individual who has inherited the gene for alcoholism but whose behavior is not that of an alcoholic. Blissful ignorance of one’s inheritance is not what I have in mind here; rather, it is the constant struggle to accept one’s inheritance while at the same time remodeling...
oneself as a sober, that is, a moral self. The philosopher Marina A. L. Oshana, calls this sense of responsibility “authenticity with respect to one’s self-conception.” “Authenticity consists in truthfulness toward oneself and about oneself in word and in deed. One who is authentic “meets head on his or her faults, or those of one’s fellow community members, and regards oneself as at least partially responsible for them … Inauthenticity marks a kind of dishonesty with respect to one’s self-conception.”

My own concern here is with those aspects of this “idea of the group” that fueled aggression and genocidal violence in the past and that continue to be actively present in the ethnic identities of today. We have seen much evidence of this in many of the ethnic conflicts that have culminated in genocides in the past hundred years, one recent example of which was the wars in the former Yugoslavia. A necessary condition for genuine reconciliation between the descendants of the perpetrators and the descendants of the victims is sincere moral assessment, on both sides, of the alignment of oneself with one’s ethnic identity group. This self-assessment, often aided by others, is crucial to moral authenticity. [Truth commissions can play a role here as Margaret Walker will argue shortly. Though with the initial victims and perpetrators gone, such commissions would take on a different form for the Armenian Genocide.]

My second argument against those who would reject intergenerational collective moral responsibility takes a slightly different focus. This argument is based on the following premise: The political, social, cultural, religious and educational institutions that mark all large collectivities such as nations provide a degree of moral reliability that is necessary for individuals to carry out their legitimate interests. We count on such institutions to exemplify the values that allow individuals to flourish in their life activities.
In the words of the philosopher Janna Thompson, such collective institutions ought to value “the long-term and lifetime-transcending interests and projects” of individuals. Thompson puts it this way:

People care about how they will fare in old age, the outcome of their lifetime projects, the future well-being of their children, the fate of their community or culture, the disposal of their property, and their posthumous reputations. Their present activities, their ability to live a meaningful life, are often predicated on their ability to make plans for the more distant future, including the future beyond their lifetime, and on the presumption that institutions and practices of certain kinds will continue to exist. . . . [They] make moral demands of citizens young and not yet born.⁹

If these interests are morally legitimate, then it follows that we ought to develop and maintain institutions that enable these interests to be met. There are limits to what kinds of institutions or practices I am discussing here. My claim is restricted to what I call “morally legitimate interests.” Some of these interests are fairly obvious. An important human interest is the institutional confidence that one’s personal property, both movable and immovable, be protected. The conveyance of such property to one’s descendants, while not unlimited, is a legitimate intergenerational interest. Institutions that promote the flourishing of important life activities are by their very nature intergenerational. They do not abruptly end with a change in government, whether or not that change is constitutionally legitimate. Our current government has inherited the moral obligation to provide the effective maintenance that these institutions demand. As individual citizens who are part of a collective, we have also inherited obligations under these institutions.
If these institutions were corrupted in the past, either by the U.S. Constitution’s legitimation of slavery or by the Nuremberg Laws of 1935, we have moral obligations to remedy such abuses. Repairing the past failures of these institutions can only serve to strengthen them in the future. Our present relationship with these institutions is what obligates us, not our complicity in some historic event in the past, be it slavery or genocide. When genocidal crimes were committed in the name of one’s nation, be it Germany, Turkey, Serbia, or the United States, moral responsibility needs to be acknowledged and repair instituted. This was the path chosen in the post–World War II years by the government of Conrad Adenauer in the Federal Republic of Germany. Reparations played a significant role in re-legitimating the institutions of the new Germany. No such re-legitimating has taken place in the Turkish Republic. The precarious status of property ownership, especially for minorities, continues to this day. Evidence the current case of Sevan Nisanyan in regard to the properties he has restored in Shirince. I needn’t mention the expropriation of properties of Greeks, Jews, and Armenians as a result of the 1942 wealth or capital tax (Varlık Vergisi) during World War II.

By way of conclusion I would like to return to the point I made earlier about the active sense of taking responsibility for historical injustices of one’s community. Simply put: Taking responsibility for something does not presuppose being causally responsible for it, in the sense of being open to blameworthiness (or praiseworthiness) for it. On my understanding of taking responsibility, there is no conceptual bar to taking responsibility for something for which one is not causally responsible. Often it is the case that moral praise is given to individuals who take responsibility for something for which another
person should be responsible. They do so in order to prevent a greater harm. Most humanitarian interventions are of this nature. Under normal circumstances, that is, baring any ignorance, one ought to take responsibility for all acts and omissions for which one is responsible. Often there is a considerable overlap between the active taking of responsibility and the state of being responsible. But the latter, taking responsibility, should not be limited by the former, being responsible. The two arguments I have presented here for intergenerational collective moral responsibility, that is, the argument from moral obligations that are entailed in ethnic group identity, and the moral long-term trustworthiness or reliability of social institutions, highlight the fact that there can be moral obligations that extend well beyond those acts for which one is directly responsible. In essence I am saying to the moral skeptic: Yes, you are not responsible for what happened in your nation’s past. Now go and take responsibility for the current injustices in your nation, especially for those injustices whose origins lie in its past. You now have ample reasons for doing so.

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I am indebted to the work of Jeffrey Blustein for the distinction between the concepts of “accepting responsibility” and “taking responsibility.” See especially, *The Moral Demands of Memory*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008).


