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The Elementary Forms of Denial

One common thread runs through the many different stories of denial: people, organizations, governments or whole societies are presented with information that is too disturbing, threatening or anomalous to be fully absorbed or openly acknowledged. The information is therefore somehow repressed, disavowed, pushed aside or reinterpreted. Or else the information 'registers' well enough, but its implications – cognitive, emotional or moral – are evaded, neutralized or rationalized away.

Consider these common expressions and phrases:

Turning a blind eye
Burying your head in the sand
She saw what she wanted to see
He only heard what he wanted to hear
Ignorance is bliss
Living a lie
Conspiracy of silence
Economical with the truth
It's got nothing to do with me
Don't make waves
They were typical passive bystanders
There's nothing I can do about it
Being like an ostrich
I can't believe that this is happening
I don't want to know/hear/see any more
The whole society was in deep denial
It can't happen to people like us
The plan called for maximum deniability
Averting your gaze
Wearing blinkers

He couldn't take in the news
Wilful ignorance
She looked the other way
He didn't admit it, even to himself
Don't wash your dirty linen in public
It didn't happen on my watch
I must have known all along

Now consider the following items:

- The TV screen is full of images of human suffering, faces contorted in agony and desperation. Lost refugees, starving children, corpses in rivers. Sometimes we take a quite conscious decision to avoid such information. Often we are not aware of how much we either take in or block out. Sometimes we absorb all the information, but feel passive, powerless and helpless: 'there's nothing I can do about it.' Or we may feel angry and resentful: this is another demand, another nagging, guilt-inducing reproach – as with this United Nations Association's message: 'There are over 18 million refugees in the world today, fleeing from persecution, rape, torture and war, in Africa and Asia, South America and now here in Europe. You can close your eyes, close your ears, close your minds, close your doors, close your frontiers. Or you can open your heart.'
- Between 1915 and 1917, nearly one and a quarter million Armenians were massacred by the Turkish army or died during forced expulsions. The event was thoroughly documented in official records, survivors' accounts, witness testimonies and historical research. The main details were accepted without dispute soon afterwards by outside observers. But for eighty years, successive Turkish governments have consistently denied responsibility for genocidal massacres or any deliberate killings. Most other countries, particularly the USA and Turkey's other NATO allies, have colluded in this obliteration of the past.
- Villagers who lived around Mauthausen, a concentration camp in Austria from 1942 to 1945, were interviewed forty years later by an American historian, Gordon Horwitz. Many claimed that although they saw the smoke from the furnaces and heard rumours about the purpose of the camp, they did not really know what was going on. They did not ask too many questions at the time, and could not 'put together' what information they did have. Horwitz writes about the villagers' reactions: 'They never sought to inform themselves of what had happened. One encounters not a flat denial of the existence of the camps, only an indifference to their presence so

long ago. In some instances one may not talk of forgetfulness, for one cannot forget what one has never attempted to know.'[1]

- One night in New York in 1964, a woman named Kitty Genovese was savagely assaulted in the street just before reaching home. Her assailant attacked her over a period of forty minutes, during which she struggled, battered and bleeding, to reach her apartment. Her screams and calls for help were heard by at least thirty-eight neighbours who saw her or heard the struggle. But no one offered any assistance, either by directly intervening or by phoning the police. After thirty-five years, the event is still debated.[2] Social psychologists have studied intensely the 'passive bystander effect', publishing 600 pieces of research in academic journals. Every conceivable variable has been manipulated – both in real-life situations and simulated laboratory conditions – to discover how the bystander effect works and may be counteracted.
- A full-page newspaper advertisement from British Amnesty shows a photo of a Muslim woman, screaming with grief. The image is surrounded by a collage of words: *decapitated, massacres, mutilated, burned alive, babies thrown off balconies, pregnant women disembowelled*. The text starts: 'No words – there are no words – to express what this Algerian woman is feeling': her baby dashed to its death, her small daughter disembowelled, her mother's head rolling in the dust. *Words lose power*: 'Shocking headlines no longer touch us. We are not moved, we resent being manipulated. Experience says that you will read this page, turn over and forget it, because this is how you, like the rest of us, have learnt to cope with clamouring ads.'

These are some of the many states covered by my code word 'denial'. This is neither a fixed psychological 'mechanism' nor a universal social process. This chapter simply classifies the ways in which the concept of denial is used. At the risk of repetition, I also preview the themes of the whole book, but in an elementary way – without too many of the endnotes, sidetracks, theories and academic references that appear in later chapters.

Psychological status: conscious or unconscious?

Statements of denial are assertions that something did not happen, does not exist, is not true or is not known about. There are three possibilities about the truth-value of these assertions. The first and simplest is that these assertions are indeed true, justified and correct.

There are obviously many occasions on which individuals, organizations or governments are perfectly justified in claiming that an event did not happen at all, or not as it was alleged to have happened, or that it might have happened, but without their knowledge. These denials are simple statements of fact, made in good faith. Evidence and counter-evidence can be produced, claims checked, lies exposed, reasonable standards of proof presented.

Even without today's post-modernist scepticism about objective knowledge, these games of truth are highly volatile. It can be genuinely difficult to find out the truth about atrocities within the intricate circuit of claims and counter-claims made by governments, their human rights critics and opposition forces. Did the demonstrators use violence first, or did the police? Is this really torture, or 'intense' but legitimate interrogation? It is even more difficult to produce legal evidence, and often virtually impossible to establish causal responsibility. None the less, assertions of denial can be made in perfectly good faith. This is true for both governments ('there was no massacre') and individuals ('I didn't see anything').

A second possibility is also logically simple, though more difficult to identify. This is the deliberate, intentional and conscious statement which is meant to deceive – that is, lying. The truth is clearly known, but for many reasons – personal or political, justifiable or unjustifiable – it is concealed. The denial is deliberate and intentional. At the individual level, a few common words (lying, concealment, deception) will do. At the organized level (perhaps indicating the pervasiveness of lying in public life) more terms are in currency: propaganda, disinformation, whitewash, manipulation, spin, misinformation, fraud, cover-up. These are standard responses to allegations about atrocities, corruption or public wrongdoing. In the absence of evidence that the government must be telling the truth while everyone else is biased, unreliable and lying, most of us assume that most such official denials are indeed lies. A different form of conscious denial is the deliberate choice not to expose ourselves to certain unpalatable information. We cannot live in a state of continuous awareness of the fact that thousands of children are starving to death each day or dying of easily preventable diseases. So we make a conscious decision to switch off the sources of such information. This is like taking a different route to avoid seeing homeless beggars on the street.

Sometimes, though, we are not entirely aware of switching off or blocking out. This is the third and most intriguing set of possibilities. Denial may be neither a matter of telling the truth nor intentionally telling a lie. The statement is not wholly deliberate, and the status of 'knowledge' about the truth is not wholly clear. There seem to be states

of mind, or even whole cultures, in which we know and don't know at the same time. Perhaps this was the case with those villagers living around the concentration camp? Or with the mother who doesn't know what her husband is doing to their daughter?

The complex psychology of denial is the subject of my next chapter. The best-known psychological theory – well known enough to have entered into everyday language, though in a sense the most extreme – derives from psychoanalysis. Denial is understood as an unconscious defence mechanism for coping with guilt, anxiety and other disturbing emotions aroused by reality. The psyche blocks off information that is literally unthinkable or unbearable. The unconscious sets up a barrier which prevents the thought from reaching conscious knowledge. Information and memories slip into an inaccessible region of the mind.

Can this really happen without any conscious awareness – in the uncharted territory between deliberate choice and unconscious defence? Is this the normal suppression of background noise – allowing attention to be paid to more important matters – or a defence against a personally threatening perception? And is denial malignant (as with high HIV-risk groups denying their vulnerability) or benign (like the false hopes that allow terminally ill patients to continue living)?

The psychology of 'turning a blind eye' or 'looking the other way' is a tricky matter. These phrases imply that we have access to reality, but choose to ignore it because it is convenient to do so. This might be a simple fraud: the information is available and registered, but leads to a conclusion which is knowingly evaded. 'Knowing', though, can be far more ambiguous. We are vaguely aware of choosing not to look at the facts, but not quite conscious of just what it is we are evading. We know, but at the same time we don't know.

The political echoes of these states of mind may be found in the mass denial so characteristic of repressive, racist and colonial states. Dominant groups seem uncannily able to shut out or ignore the injustice and suffering around them. In more democratic societies, people shut out the results not because of coercion but out of cultural habit – turning a blind eye to the visible reminders of homelessness, deprivation, poverty and urban decay. Knowledge about atrocities in distant places is more easily rendered invisible: 'I just switch off the TV news when they show those corpses in Rwanda.'

Denial is also studied in terms of cognitive psychology and decision making. This approach emphasizes the normality of the process, and plays down its emotional component. Denial is a high-speed cognitive mechanism for processing information, like the computer command to 'delete' rather than 'save'. But this assumes the *denial paradox*. In order

to use the term 'denial' to describe a person's statement 'I didn't know', one has to assume that she knew or knows about what it is that she claims not to know – otherwise the term 'denial' is inappropriate. Strictly speaking, this is the *only* legitimate use of the term 'denial'.

Cognitive psychologists use the language of information processing, monitoring, selective perception, filtering and attention span to understand how we notice and simultaneously don't notice. Some even offer the neurological phenomenon of 'blindsight' as a model: one part of the mind can know just what it is doing, while the part that supposedly knows, remains oblivious of this. More obviously, information is selected to fit existing perceptual frames and information which is too threatening is shut out altogether. The mind somehow grasps what is going on – but rushes a protective filter into place. Information slips into a kind of 'black hole of the mind' – a blind zone of blocked attention and self-deception. Attention is thus diverted from facts or their meaning – hence the 'vital lies' sustained by family members about violence, incest, sexual abuse, adultery and unhappiness. Lies remain unrevealed, covered up by family silence, alibis and conspiracies.[3]

Not only families. Government bureaucracies, political parties, professional associations, religions, armies and police all have their own forms of cover-up and lying. Such collective denial results from professional ethics, traditions of loyalty and secrecy, mutual reciprocity or codes of silence. Myths are maintained that prevent outsiders knowing about discreditable information; there are unspoken arrangements for concerted or strategic ignorance. It may be convenient not to know exactly what your superiors or subordinates are doing.

This sounds close to the philosophical interest in self-knowledge and self-deception, especially the famous notion of 'bad faith'. For Sartre, contrary to psychoanalytical theory, denial is indeed conscious. Self-deception refers to keeping secret from ourselves the truth we cannot face. Sartre ridicules the theory that this happens through an unconscious mechanism that maintains the duality between deceiver and deceived. His alternative, 'bad faith', is a form of denial that the mind *knowingly* directs towards itself. But how do you lie to yourself? How do you know and not know the same thing at the same time?

These are the concerns of chapter 2. Political denial – the normal disinformation, lying and cover-up by public authorities – seldom calls for these subtle psychological questions. Denial is cynical, calculated and transparent. The grey areas between consciousness and unconsciousness are far more significant in explaining ordinary public responses to knowledge about atrocities and suffering, This is the zone of open secrets, turning a blind eye, burying one's head in the sand and not wanting to know.

Content: literal, interpretive or implicatory?

There are three possibilities as regards *what* exactly is being 'denied': literal, interpretive and implicatory.

Literal denial

This is the type of denial that fits the dictionary definition: the assertion that something did not happen or is not true. In *literal, factual* or *blatant* denial, the fact or knowledge of the fact is denied. In the private realm of family suffering: my husband could not have done that to our daughter, she is making it up, the social worker doesn't understand. In the public realm of atrocities: nothing happened here, there was no massacre, they are all lying, we don't believe you, we didn't notice anything, they didn't tell us anything, it couldn't have happened without us knowing (or it could have happened without us knowing). These assertions refuse to acknowledge the facts – for whatever reason, in good or bad faith, and whether these claims are true (genuine ignorance), blatantly untrue (deliberate lies) or unconscious defence mechanisms.

Interpretive denial

At other times, the raw facts (something happened) are not being denied. Rather, they are given a different meaning from what seems apparent to others.

In the personal realm: I am a social drinker, not an alcoholic; what happened was not really 'rape'. President Clinton smoked marijuana while he was a student, but never inhaled; so this was not really using drugs. As for later allegations about his sexual relations with Monica Lewinsky, he followed his literal denial (nothing like this happened at all) by some original interpretive denial: oral sex was 'inappropriate behaviour' but not really a 'sex act' or 'sexual relations', and therefore there was no adultery or marital infidelity or screwing around. Indeed, there was no sex. So the president was not lying when he said that his relationship with Ms Lewinsky was not sexual.

In the public realm: this was population exchange, not ethnic cleansing; the arms deal was not illegal and was not really an arms deal. Officials do not claim that 'nothing happened', but what happened is not what you think it is, not what it looks like, not what you call it. This

was 'collateral damage', not killing of civilians; 'transfer of populations', not forced expulsion; 'moderate physical pressure', not torture. By changing words, by euphemism, by technical jargon, the observer disputes the cognitive meaning given to an event and re-allocates it to another class of event.

Implicatory denial

At yet other times, there is no attempt to deny either the facts or their conventional interpretation. What are denied or minimized are the psychological, political or moral implications that conventionally follow. The facts of children starving to death in Somalia, mass rape of women in Bosnia, a massacre in East Timor, homeless people in our streets are recognized, but are not seen as psychologically disturbing or as carrying a moral imperative to act. As a witness to a mugging in the underground, you see exactly what is happening, but you deny any responsibility as a citizen to intervene. Such denials are often called 'rationalizations': 'It's got nothing to do with me', 'Why should I take a risk of being victimized myself?', 'What can an ordinary person do?', 'It's worse elsewhere', 'Someone else will deal with it.'

As with literal denial, such assertions may be perfectly justified, both morally and factually. There is nothing you can do about death squads in Colombia; it might be quite stupid to try to stop a mugging. Rationalization is another matter when you do know what can and should be done, you have the means to do this, and there is no risk. This is not a refusal to acknowledge reality, but a denial of its significance or implications. My clumsy neologism 'implicatory denial' covers the multitude of vocabularies – justifications, rationalizations, evasions – that we use to deal with our awareness of so many images of unmitigated suffering.

At one extreme this vocabulary is wholly bland and unapologetic. We are either unable or unwilling to decode these messages. The folk idioms of detachment, unconcern and self-centredness are casually invoked: 'I don't care a shit', 'It doesn't bother me', 'Not my problem', 'I've got better things to think about', 'What's the big fuss about?', 'So what?' When these denials seem grotesquely inappropriate, we reach out for explanations: 'He obviously doesn't grasp what's going on' (he needs more information); 'she can't really mean that' (she is being disingenuous . . . deep down she really cares). Or, depending on the favoured discourse: he must be a psychopath, a moral idiot, a product of late capitalist Thatcherite individualism or an ironic postmodernist.

At the other extreme is the rich, convoluted and ever-increasing vocabulary for bridging the moral and psychic gap between what you know and what you do, between the sense of who you are and how your action (or inaction) looks. These techniques of evasion, avoidance, deflection and rationalization should draw on good – that is, believable – stories. These stories are difficult to decipher. Passivity and silence may *look* the same as obliviousness, apathy and indifference, but may not be the same at all. We can feel and care intensely, yet remain silent. The term 'implicatory denial' stretches words to cover all such states. Unlike literal or interpretive denial, knowledge itself is not at issue, but doing the 'right' thing with this knowledge. These are matters of mobilization, commitment and involvement. There is a strong sense, though, in which inaction is associated with denial – whether it comes from not-knowing or knowing but not caring. Hence the apocryphal reply by a British civil servant to a question about whether his government's policy in the Middle East derived from ignorance or indifference: 'I don't know and I don't care.'

Each mode of denial has its own psychological status. *Literal denial* may be a genuine and non-culpable ignorance; a deliberate aversion of your gaze from a truth too unbearable to acknowledge; a twilight state of self-deception where some of the truth is hidden from yourself; a cultural not-noticing because the reality is part of your taken-for-granted view of the world; or one of a variety of calculated forms of lying, deception or disinformation. *Interpretive denial* ranges from a genuine inability to grasp what the facts mean to others, to deeply cynical renamings to avoid moral censure or legal accountability. *Implicatory denials* come from some rather banal folk techniques for avoiding moral or psychological demands, but are invoked with mystifying degrees of sincerity.

Denial, then, includes *cognition* (not acknowledging the facts); *emotion* (not feeling, not being disturbed); *morality* (not recognizing wrongness or responsibility) and *action* (not taking active steps in response to knowledge). In the public arena of knowing about the suffering of others – mass media, politics, charity appeals – action is the issue. Oxfam and Amnesty want their information not to allow you to bracket off, ignore, forget and just go on with your life.

Organization: personal, cultural or official?

Denial can be individual, personal, psychological and private – or shared, social, collective and organized.

Personal denial

At times, denial appears to be wholly individual, or at least comprehensible in psychological terms: patients who forget being given a diagnosis of terminal cancer; spouses who put aside suspicions about their partner's infidelities ('I just don't want to know whether he is having an affair'); refusal to believe that our family and friends – our 'own people' – could act so cruelly. There is no public access to how these processes take place in a person's mind. In the Freudian model, they even remain unconscious and inaccessible to the self unless exposed with professional help.

Official denial

At the other extreme are forms of denial which are public, collective and highly organized. In particular, there are denials that are initiated, structured and sustained by the massive resources of the modern state: the cover-up of famines and political massacres, or deceptive violations of international arms boycotts. The entire rhetoric of government responses to allegations about atrocities consists of denials.

In totalitarian societies, especially of the classic Stalinist variety, official denial goes beyond particular incidents (the massacre that didn't happen) to an entire rewriting of history and a blocking-out of the present. The state makes it impossible or dangerous to acknowledge the existence of past and present realities. In more democratic societies, official denial is more subtle – putting a gloss on the truth, setting the public agenda, spin-doctoring, tendentious leaks to the media, selective concern about suitable victims, interpretive denials regarding foreign policy. Denial is thus not a personal matter, but is built into the ideological façade of the state. The social conditions that give rise to atrocities merge into the official techniques for denying these realities – not just to observers, but even to the perpetrators themselves.

Cultural denial

Cultural denials are neither wholly private nor officially organized by the state. Whole societies may slip into collective modes of denial not dependent on a fully-fledged Stalinist or Orwellian form of thought control. Without being told what to think about (or what not to think about) and without being punished for 'knowing' the wrong

things, societies arrive at unwritten agreements about what can be publicly remembered and acknowledged. People pretend to believe information that they know is false or fake their allegiance to meaningless slogans and kitsch ceremonies. This happens even in more democratic societies. Besides collective denials of the past (such as brutalities against indigenous peoples), people may be encouraged to act as if they don't know about the present. Whole societies are based on forms of cruelty, discrimination, repression or exclusion which are 'known' about but never openly acknowledged. These denials may be initiated by the state, but then acquire lives of their own. They may refer to other, distant societies: 'places like that'. Some are public and organized, but not 'official' in the sense of being sponsored by the state. A notorious example is the Holocaust denial movement.

The mutual dependency between official and cultural denial is most visible in the mass media coverage of atrocities and social suffering. The media image of the Gulf War was a masterpiece of collusive denial between the producers and reproducers of reality. Nor did the public really want to know more. The combination of official lying and cultural evasion is also clear in the language of the nuclear arms race: the use of war games analogies and other linguistic tricks to neutralize catastrophe. An entire language of denial has been constructed in order to evade thinking about the unthinkable.[4]

The point of 'consciousness raising' (feminist, political, human rights) is to combat the numbing effects of this type of denial. Assertions such as 'I didn't really know what happened to the Kurds in Iraq' call for radical changes in the media and political culture rather than tinkering with private, psychological mechanisms. We must make it difficult for people to say that they 'don't know'. Amnesty once prefaced a report with these words by Arthur Miller: 'Amnesty, with its stream of documented reports from all over the world, is a daily, weekly, monthly assault on denial.'[5]

There are also micro-cultures of denial within particular institutions. The 'vital lies' sustained by families and the cover-ups within government bureaucracies, the police or the army are again neither personal nor the result of official instruction. The group censors itself, learns to keep silent about matters whose open discussion would threaten its self-image. States maintain elaborate myths (such as the Israeli army's 'purity of arms', which asserts that force is used only when morally justified for self-defence); organizations depend on forms of concerted ignorance, different levels of the system keeping themselves uninformed about what is happening elsewhere. Telling the truth is taboo: it is snitching, whistle blowing, giving comfort to the enemy.

Time: historical or contemporary?

Are we talking about something that happened a long time ago and is now a matter of memory and history – or is it happening now? 'A long time ago' is a vague notion, but is a common-sense point between historical and contemporary denial.

Historical denial

At the personal, biographical level, historical denial is a matter of memory, forgetting and repression. It is commonplace to talk about remembering only what we want to remember. A more controversial claim is that memories of traumatic life experiences, notably childhood sexual abuse, can be totally blocked for decades but then be 'recovered'. Here we will be more interested in the denial of public and historically recognized suffering. Memories are lost or regained about what has happened to you (as victim), what you have done (as perpetrator) or know about (as observer). The Nazi period contributed two folk clichés to the lexicon of bystander denial: the 'good Germans' and 'we didn't know'. Such denials belong to the wider cultural pool of collective forgetting ('social amnesia'), such as the grossly selective memories of victimization and aggression invoked to justify today's ethnic nationalist hatreds. Sometimes, this amnesia is officially organized by the state, covering up a record of genocide or other past atrocities.

The Armenian and Holocaust cases combine both literal and interpretive denial (it didn't happen; it happened too long ago to prove; the facts are open to different interpretations; what happened was not genocide). More often, historical denial is less the result of a planned campaign than a gradual seepage of knowledge down some collective black hole. There is no need to invoke conspiracy or manipulation to understand how whole societies collude in covering up discreditable historical truths, as in the French myth of resistance that masked the record of collaboration with the Nazi occupation. Historical memories about suffering in distant places are even more prone to speedy and thorough deletion through the 'politics of ethnic amnesia'. Atrocities were denied at the time by the perpetrator government; the information flow is limited; there are either no geopolitical interests, or they are too strong to be sacrificed; victims are unimportant, isolated peoples in remote parts of the world. Some people make more suitable and memorable victims than others.

'Coming to terms with the past' becomes an urgent, fateful question when regimes change after periods of state terror and repression. How does the new government confront past atrocities? Democratic transitions in South Africa, Latin America and post-Communist societies have raised complex questions about whether and how the past is to be uncovered, recovered and represented: Are some wounds too fresh to open? Does 'living in the past' interfere with social reconstruction and national reconciliation? Should previously covered-up and denied information always be brought to light?

In the Soviet bloc, history was officially rewritten to help people forget what the state preferred them not to know. But most people knew the past all too well. Their private memories were intact, and no one believed the official lies. Private knowledge, though, has to be officially confirmed and enter into the public discourse, if it is to be acknowledged. Truth Commissions provide an arena for the symbolic recognition of what is already known but was officially denied. I will return frequently to the distinction between *knowledge* and *acknowledgement*.

Contemporary denial

At any moment, we can justifiably claim (that is, we are not lying) that we cannot and do not notice everything that is happening around us. Cognitive psychology confirms that people are bombarded with far too many stimuli for the mind to process. The media present us with so much information ('information overload') that we have to be highly selective. A perceptual filter is placed over reality, and some knowledge is shut out: 'literal denial of the present'. Nor can we feel emotionally moved or compelled to act in response to all that we do absorb. Even if there is no literal denial of the daily bulletin of social suffering, there is no choice but to deny most of its implications. Each item cannot carry the same overwhelming demand. According to the 'compassion fatigue' thesis, the potential for response is gradually blunted ('I just can't take any more photos of starving children'), and filtering becomes even more selective. In our message-dense environment there is no need to wait for historical denial; the information slips away the instant it is presented. The problem is not to explain how anyone 'denies', but how anyone's attention is ever held.

There are some intriguing links between historical and contemporary denial. The rhetoric of historical denial is prefigured in the accounts used by perpetrators at the time to hide from themselves and others the implications of their actions. Deceptive planning and

implementation – by deliberate use of euphemism, commands that have an encoded double meaning, destruction of incriminating orders – live on long after the event.

Agent: victim, perpetrator or observer?

There is an atrocity triangle: in the one corner, *victims*, to whom things are done; in the second, *perpetrators*, who do these things; in the third, *observers*, those who see and know what is happening. These roles are not fixed: observers may become either perpetrators or victims; and perpetrators and observers may belong to the same culture of denial.

Victims

Victims suffer from something terrible that 'happens' to them or is deliberately done to them. Victims from all causes – whether hurricanes, wrongful arrest or sexual abuse – say to themselves, 'This can't be happening to me.' Sometimes this is just a superficial and automatic cliché. Sometimes it expresses a more profound sense of denial: an almost bodily dissociation, a sense that what in fact is happening to oneself is happening to somebody else. It is commonly said by women who are raped, people told that they are HIV-positive, parents informed that their child has been hurt in a road accident, political activists who are tortured. Chapters 2 and 3 explore the psychic manoeuvres that we use to keep troublesome knowledge from ourselves.

This also happens at the cultural level. Whole groups of potential or even designated victims may deny their approaching fate. Even when the warning signs were clear, Jewish communities in Germany and the rest of Europe refused to believe what was about to happen to them – or was already happening to their fellow Jews. Explicit warnings were ignored; each incremental increase in persecution was seen as the last one; initial reports were disbelieved; the unbearable knowledge was suppressed that you and your loved ones were going to be killed and that nothing could save you; the belief was sustained against all odds that innocent people will not suffer. Observer governments refused to believe clear reports about the annihilation programme. There was moral indifference, but perhaps also a zone of denial shared with the victims: the refusal to acknowledge a truth which seemed too impossible to be true.

While such refusal is patently maladaptive for victims, who then fail to protect themselves against impending danger, in many other situations denial is healthy and adaptive. The inhabitants of Beirut, Bogotá or Belfast cannot live in a permanent state of heightened awareness that a car bomb may go off any minute. Some switching off is necessary to get through the round of everyday life.

Perpetrators

A recurrent question about perpetrators of political atrocities and serious crimes is this: how can ordinary people do terrible things, yet, during or after the event, find ways to deny the meaning of what they are doing? These denials play a causal role in allowing atrocities to be committed initially and allowing offenders to continue with the rest of their lives as if nothing unusual was happening. The same denials – whether contrived lies or sincere beliefs – appear in official discourse and government appeals to persuade their citizens to do terrible things or keep quiet about knowing them. And they reappear in the rhetoric later used to deflect any criticism. These continuities are reviewed in chapter 4.

Bystanders

This is my main interest: the responses of onlookers, audiences, witnesses, observers, spectators and bystanders: those who come to know, see or hear, either at the time or later. There are three types of audience: (i) *immediate, literal, physical* or *internal* (those who are actual witnesses to atrocities and suffering or hear about them at the time from first-hand sources); (ii) *external* or *metaphorical* (those who receive information from secondary sources, primarily the mass media or humanitarian organizations); and (iii) *bystander states* (other governments or international organizations).

Immediate bystanders

Much human suffering takes place in private, invisible to any outside observer. We never know the secret agonies of those closest to us. Domestic violence may remain hidden indefinitely, belonging only to victim and perpetrator. But even some secret atrocities may become known to others. Torture goes beyond detainee and interrogator: police or soldiers escort prisoners to be interrogated; doctors check them before, during or after; judges and lawyers hear their testimony.

Mass refugee displacements, ethnic cleansing and famines cannot be hidden. Observers are present at the scene or hear first-hand evidence: the villagers living next to a concentration camp, the passers-by watching someone being mugged, people seeing their neighbours being abducted and 'disappeared'.

The iconography of the classic 'passive bystander effect' – the indifference of urban strangers to visible public suffering, their reluctance to help a victim – derives from one of my opening vignettes, the Kitty Genovese case. Research (chapters 3 and 6) suggests that intervention is less likely when *responsibility is diffused* ('So many others are watching', 'Why should I be the one to intervene?', 'Besides, it's none of my business'); when people are *unable to identify with the victim* (even if I see someone as a victim, I won't act if I can't empathize with their suffering; we help our family, friends, community, 'people like us', not those excluded from our moral universe, who may even be blamed for their predicament – a common experience of women victims of sexual violence); and when they are *unable to conceive of effective intervention* – even if you do not erect barriers of denial, even if you feel genuine moral or psychological unease ('I just can't get those pictures from Somalia out of my mind'), this will not necessarily result in intervention. Observers will not act if they do not know what to do, feel powerless and helpless themselves, don't see any reward, or fear punishment if they help.

These explanations of bystander passivity have been applied to routine urban sights like street crime, homelessness and accidents. Social psychologists have used experiments and simulations to discover how passivity is caused and may be counteracted. How do we encourage altruistic responses – whether to banal troubles or mass suffering? Bystanders may be too similar to perpetrators: belonging to the same ethnic group, exposed to the same ideology and stereotypes, prone to beliefs such as 'just world thinking' and victim blaming (wanting to believe that they themselves won't become victims of random circumstance, they see victims as deserving their fate). Bystanders, like perpetrators, are gradually drawn into accepting as normal actions which are initially repugnant. They deny the significance of what they see by avoiding or minimizing information about victims' suffering.

Research on bystanders to the Holocaust finds a 'history of inaction, indifference and insensitivity'.[6] Observers stand by even when their neighbours are abused, walk past victims as if they were not there, and take the jobs and possessions that victims leave behind. Chapter 10 searches for the reverse: observers who acknowledge and help, even at great personal risk.

External bystanders

We are all external or metaphorical bystanders, sitting in our living rooms facing texts and images of suffering. Switching newspapers, cruising to another channel, even going on holiday – these tactics buy only a little time. The children especially won't leave us alone – killed in the streets of Rio, suffering from AIDS in Romanian orphanages, sold as slave labour in Bangladesh, the twelve-year-old 'clean' girls in Thai brothels, the Sierra Leone child soldiers with their limbs sliced off. Then, as if to reinforce the unease induced by the media, the organizations keep up their pitch: donate money, sponsor a child, sign a petition, attend a demonstration, become a member, *do something*.

There are few theories and even less data about how we respond to such appeals. Some of us do something; most of us scan our rationalization list or just feel helpless or (metaphorically and actually) switch off. Televised images of distant misery don't seem to belong to the same world as our familiar daily round. But the distant and the immediate bystander raise common questions: Is this really my problem? Can I identify with these victims? What can I do about it anyway?

Bystander states

Whole governments and 'the international community' are also external bystanders. The term 'bystander nations' was originally used to describe the lack of response by Allied governments to early knowledge about the unfolding destruction of European Jews: the reluctance to believe allegations of genocide and the refusal to adopt policies such as bombing concentration camps. The repeated mantras calling on Western governments to 'do something' about Rwanda, Kosovo and Chechnya are part of a long history of selective refusal to intervene in certain national and international conflicts.

There is now an intensified debate about peace-keeping and international humanitarian intervention: conceptions of national self-interest; disputes about whether nation states are moral agents with moral obligations; doctrines of non-interference and national sovereignty; beliefs in moral relativism. Without stretching concepts such as 'denial' and 'bystander' too far, they at least suggest some analogies. Literal denial occurs when observer governments have to react to the depredations of their client states or arms-dealing partners. Cynically, and with full intention to deceive, they deny knowledge about what their partners are doing. The State Department's Annual Human

Rights Review reinterprets its own embassy's *evidence* as 'allegations'. Information is assigned a different cognitive frame ('ethnic conflict', 'restoring order', 'security needs', 'furthering the peace process'), or its political implications are denied. These reactions are virtually institutionalized in international bodies such as the United Nations. Kuper remarks on 'the technology of denial developed by member states of the United Nations as they shield offending governments'.[7]

Bosnia was the most explicit case in which the Holocaust experience was invoked. Early reports – about atrocities, mass rapes, detention camps, ethnic cleansing – were initially disbelieved by official sources. Eventually, no bystander nation denied these realities, but rationalized non-intervention: using the familiar mixture of high-sounding principles, pragmatic doubts, political expediency and self-interest. The Rwanda case, though far more similar to the Holocaust, was deemed too unimportant and distant for principled arguments.

Space and place: your own or elsewhere?

The difference between knowing about the sufferings of our family and loved ones, compared with strangers and distant others, is too primeval to need to be spelt out. These ties of love, care and obligation cannot be reproduced or simulated anywhere else. But the boundaries of the moral universe vary from person to person; they also stretch and contract historically – from family and intimate friends to neighbourhood, community, ethnic group, religion, country, right up to 'the children of the world'. These are not just psychological questions, but draw on a wider discourse about responsiveness to 'the needs of strangers'.[8]

In your own society, you know about social suffering (past or present) from personal observation and experience. But information about other countries, often strange and remote places, comes primarily from the mass media or international humanitarian organizations. Leaving aside extreme cases of insulation because of near-total state control over information, local people normally have more and better-quality information than outsiders – from first-hand experience, memory, personal contacts, national media, rumour, linguistic nuances and shared public culture. This information is rich, personal, multi-dimensional and historically layered. You can smell the tear gas; you know of somebody who has been tortured; you have a cousin in the army; you have participated in recent political history; you have a deep sense (prejudiced or not) regarding the evils of the enemy (the 'victim'?) and

a fear of what might happen if you make any concessions. This dense picture is quite unlike the flat, one-dimensional information (headlines, sound-bites, and fifty-second TV clips) we receive about foreign places.

Past atrocities may be genuinely unknown: the clandestine torture cells and unmarked mass graves. But within these societies, people usually know most such things – and the government knows that they know. The culture of state terror is neither secret nor openly acknowledged. Information circulates – neighbours witness disappearances or kidnappings, torture victims return to their families, newspaper readers know exactly what was censored – but is simultaneously denied. Fear inside depends on knowledge *and* uncertainty: who will be picked up next? State legitimacy outside depends on permanent official denial.

If the perpetrator is your own government, this must touch your own identity and political role. You are not responsible for the atrocities – you may be an opponent of the government or even a potential victim. But this is your country. As a citizen, however distant or critical, you are bound by collective ties of culture, history and loyalty. These are not horrors in some remote place about which you have no feelings. There are few similar competing pulls of guilt, shame and loyalty when it comes to other countries.

Interests and risks are at stake in your own country: material interests and personal safety. Any outcome of the conflict will directly affect your life. Israeli citizens' interest in what is happening in their country is not the same 'interest' as that of Canadian citizens reading about Israel. And doing something about your own country asks more of you, that you pay especially the price of standing up against the consensus: ostracism, isolation and stigmatization as a 'traitor'. You may even risk becoming a victim yourself.

International observers, by contrast, do not have to understand much in order to take a stand. And they are asked to do very little – write a cheque, sign a petition, send a postcard to a prisoner, join an organization – and with almost no risk to themselves. A Swedish citizen signing an Amnesty petition against the death penalty in Singapore is not doing very much. The distant bystander should be far more easily mobilized to take a simple stand: 'Sure, I'm against the occupation of East Timor'; 'Sure, I support Kurdish rights'. In your own country, even the most undemanding action may put you outside the consensus. Moral indignation about a remote place is safe, cheap and uncomplicated.

Other reasons, though, make active involvement less likely in the international arena. I know why I should be interested in (and not

'deny') crime, unemployment, child abuse, homelessness, racism or environmental pollution in my own country. But why should I take any interest, let alone 'do something', about the fact that a hundred people were massacred in Algeria or a poet was gaoled in Malawi? The powerful moral meta-rule is to look after your own people first: 'Charity begins at home.' Pressing domestic social problems should take priority over the perennial demands of far-off places. This meta-rule was graphically expressed by the former British Defence Minister, Alan Clark, in a 1994 television documentary about East Timor.[9] Asked whether he knew that British arms exported to Indonesia were being used to carry out massacres in Timor, Clark replied: 'I don't really fill my mind much with what one set of foreigners is doing to another.'

International organizations have to ask their audiences to make an effort even to think about what is happening in a foreign place, let alone acknowledge the implications of this information. It is not natural to step out of the rhythms of private life in your own society to engage with these distant issues. And the channels through which this information is conveyed – whether the mass media, a direct mailing or a public appeal – are so structured that they can easily be segmented from the rest of life. We turn off the television, throw away the begging letter, and go back to daily life.

But a deeper form of denial is more universal: the inability or refusal to be continually 'facing' or 'living with' unpleasant truths. Domestic and foreign problems, for example, may be avoided by the same sentiment that 'worse things are happening elsewhere'. In your own society, this allows you the evasive reassurance that what is happening is not so bad. And for a remote society, this locates information on a relativistic atlas of other terrible places: why should you concern yourself about this one place if even worse things are happening elsewhere?

As Auden's Old Masters knew, suffering is always happening elsewhere.