The Moral Significance of Shock

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...the disintegration of the aura in the experience of shock. —Walter Benjamin

1.

My topic is a kind of moral failure: a failure to be shocked. The idea that there can be such a moral failure might initially seem dubious. Shock is not voluntary, it seems to involve a certain failure of agency and cognition, it is unpleasant and at times profoundly wounding. Initially, such a state might not seem morally desirable. And yet the absence of shock sometimes strikes us as a moral failing. To explain this we might be tempted to invoke the *instrumental* value shock can have. But in what follows I am interested in the possibility that the absence of shock can be a moral failing independently of any morally desirable consequence of shock.

Consider the title of an op-ed recently published in *The Washington Post*: "After three years of Trump, we've lost our ability to be shocked" (Klaas 2020). The author writes that "because the barrier for what shocks us has soared so high, Trump is able to get away with increasingly bad behavior" (ibidem). The reason the failure to be shocked is significant, according to the author, is that it leads to a lack of accountability. This is an example of an instrumental account of the moral significance of shock.

But is it true that the failure to resist Trump is a *result* of the failure to be shocked? The opposite might be the case. Those who were initially shocked by Trump's behavior might no longer be moved by it because they've come to feel there is nothing they can do about it. But if the dissipation of shock *results* from moral impotence rather than *leads* to it, then what is its moral

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significance? What could be morally lamentable about the gradual dissolution of shock when the presence of shock would not have any morally desirable consequences?

Indeed, it might seem that the absence of shock in such circumstances is a moral improvement. The occurrence of shock is burdensome and hurtful; if being shocked would not lead to any good—say, by motivating effective moral action, or leading to a diminishment in suffering—its absence seems welcome. Now, one might insist with the author of the op-ed that continuing to be shocked by Trump's behavior would have good consequences after all. Perhaps. But I shall discuss cases that suggest that shock can be morally significant independently of its consequences. These cases raise the question of the moral significance of shock.

I shall arrive at an answer to this question in a roundabout way, so I want to state the answer in advance to make clear where I am heading. I shall propose that shock can be morally significanct independently of its consequences but only as part of an ongoing commitment to certain norms, in particular norms that constitute recognizing another as a person. When we witness others in agony, or being severely wronged, or when we ourselves severely wrong or mistreat others, our shock can reflect our recognition of them as persons, a recognition constituted by our commitment to certain moral norms. However, if we do not in fact respond to the suffering or wrong in accordance with these norms—if, for example, we do not act to relieve their suffering or to properly address the wrong done, and do not avoid or prevent its recurrence—then our commitment to the relevant norms is undermined. When we consistently violate the norms whose violation initially shocked us, our lingering shock upon repeated violations gradually loses its significance and becomes a mere impulse—a fossil of a past commitment, so to speak—before it disappears completely. The failure to be shocked in such instances marks the failure of our moral commitments, which is the failure to recognize others as persons.

2.

My interest in the moral significance of shock originates from a specific, real example from my own past, which had a significant influence on my life and which I've never fully understood. I served as an Israeli soldier in the Occupied Territories. During my first ever eight-hour shift in the West Bank, I saw a soldier stop a van with ten Palestinian women on their way to work. It was very early in the morning. He ordered everyone out, yelled at them and gave them tasks, such as singing and dancing for him. I remember distinctively my sense of shock as I watched them obey his orders, trying to satisfy his whims. But of course I wasn't a mere witness: I stood there as his escort, holding my gun, providing him cover. The same shock recurred several times in each of my first few shifts, as I became more actively involved in terrorizing and humiliating people. These incidents weren't deviations from our mission; they were its manifestation. Our job as enforcers of military rule was to control people through sheer force and intimidation. Soon—very soon— my shock subsided. I can't say exactly how long it took—maybe less than a week and certainly less than a month—before I felt nothing at all in response to the same things that at first left me speechless.

It is not, however, as if my judgment had changed. I still *thought* what we were doing was horrible and morally shocking, but I just couldn't feel it. I thought we shouldn't be doing this, but I didn't know what else to do: there was no other way to *be* a soldier at a checkpoint. With time I also came up with reasons to keep doing it. If I refuse to serve here, I thought, someone else, more cruel and ruthless, would take my place and then no one will be made better off, certainly not the Palestinians who cross this checkpoint every day. So I came to think that defection—that is, ceasing to terrorize people—would be an act of moral narcissism. I decided I should stay and keep doing this morally shocking job, but, I insisted, I should also continue to be shocked by it. The

dissolution of my initial shock seemed like an additional moral failure. But after a while it occurred to me that feeling bad about not being shocked is ludicrous. What does it matter whether I am shocked by what I am doing if I continue to do it anyway? My guilt about growing accustomed to terrorizing people seemed as self-indulgent as the desire to run away. In both cases, I was more concerned about my moral righteousness than I was about the reality that tarnished it. And so I let myself fall into moral numbness. It was as if my mind collapsed upon itself.

3.

A strikingly similar reaction to shock is described by John Berger, in his essay "Photographs of Agony." Writing in 1972 about photographs from the Vietnam war that appeared in the newspapers of the time, Berger says such photographs are "arresting": "we are seized by them" (Berger 1972: 42). It is often assumed that such photographs raise awareness and arouse empathy for the suffering of others, thereby increasing the chances we'll do something to end the suffering they depict. This would explain the instrumental moral significance of the shock they inspire. But Berger argues the photographs in fact paralyze us. As we are confronted by photographs of agony, we cannot help but be struck by the failure of our response to them. Even the circumstances in which they appear to us—say, as we are drinking our morning coffee—seem inadequate. Moments of agony are discontinuous with all other moments, Berger says, "they exist by themselves."

> The reader who has been arrested by the photograph may tend to feel this discontinuity as his own personal moral inadequacy. *And as soon as this happens even his sense of shock is dispersed:* his own moral inadequacy may now shock him as much as the crimes being committed in the war. Either he shrugs off this sense of inadequacy as being only too familiar, or else he thinks of performing a kind of penance — of which the purest example would be to make a contribution to OXFAM or UNICEF. In both cases, the issue of the war which has caused that moment is effectively depoliticized. The picture becomes evidence of the general human condition. It accuses nobody and everybody. (*idem*, 43, italics in original)

The force of what we see in the photograph immediately turns our gaze upon ourselves and thereby shifts the focus of our shock to our own inadequacy. The shock of another's suffering turns into the shock of our moral failing.

It is helpful here to distinguish between *the moral significance of shock* and *the significance of moral shock*. Moral shock is a shock that is about some violation of a moral norm, such as a shocking lie, or a shocking mistreatment of another person. But a shock can be morally significant without being a moral shock. I can be shocked by the ruin brought about by a hurricane, which is not itself a violation of a moral norm. My shock in this case would be morally significant because it is part of a response to the suffering of others that is itself subject to moral norms.[1] So shock need not be about morality in order to be morally significant.

Confronted with photographs of agony in the newspaper, one is inclined to be shocked by the agony rather than by the wrongs that underlie it. This initially non-moral shock is then replaced by a moral one when one is shocked by one's failure to adequately respond to the agony of the people in the photograph. So the non-moral shock leads to a moral shock, but it distracts us from the morally shocking wrongs—such as the unjust war—that led to the suffering in the photograph.

There are many differences between the checkpoint soldier and the consumer of news. In particular, the soldier is shocked by a wronging in which he is directly complicit while the consumer of news is shocked by agony depicted in a photo. And yet the checkpoint soldier and the consumer of news share a similar reaction to what each sees as a moral failure he or she cannot avoid: a failure to properly respond to the person they (directly or indirectly) encounter. Berger urges his readers to recall the political backdrop of the moment depicted by the photograph and which the photograph obfuscates. Oddly enough, something similar might be said of my

predicament in the West Bank checkpoints: for me, the shock of terrorizing civilians overshadowed the political conditions that required (and were perpetuated by) terrorizing civilians.

But the discontinuity of the moment of agony with other moments remains: what shocks us in the war photographs is primarily the agony of the particular people in front of us and our failure to respond to *it*, not the political conditions that caused their suffering. Even if the right response to their suffering is addressing the political conditions that cause it, such response would not address their *present* plea, which is the immediate object of our shock. Our moral impotence with regard to what shocks us is real: we cannot help or do right by the people depicted in the photograph. This is precisely why it is such an effective distraction from political action.

Susan Sontag had similar concerns about the de-politization of suffering. In *Regarding the Pain of Others*, Sontag recounts the words of a woman she met in Sarajevo during the Bosnian War. The woman told her:

> In October 1991 I was here in my nice apartment in peaceful Sarajevo when the Serbs invaded Croatia, and I remember when the evening news showed footage of the destruction of Vukovar, just a couple of hundred miles away, I thought to myself, 'Oh, how horrible,' and switched the channel. So how can I be indignant if someone in France or Italy or Germany sees the killing taking place here day after day on their evening news and says, 'Oh, how horrible,' and looks for another program. It's normal. It's human. (Sontag 2003: 99-100)

Sontag claims that it is because war doesn't seem as if it can be stopped that people become less responsive to its horrors. "Compassion is an unstable emotion," she says, "it needs to be translated into action, or it withers" (*idem*, 101). On its own, Sontag says, our sympathy is not called for. "So far as we feel sympathy, we feel we are not accomplices to what caused the suffering. Our sympathy proclaims our innocence as well as our impotence. To that extent, it can be (for all our good intentions) an impertinent—if not an inappropriate—response" (*idem*, 102).

Instead, she says, we need to reflect on how our privileges might be linked to the suffering we see. Sontag thus brings the consumer of news closer to the checkpoint soldier: both want to feel bad for the suffering they witness in order not to feel responsible for it.

But why can't we both feel sympathy for suffering and recognize our complicity in causing it? Or, put another way, if we do recognize our complicity in causing the suffering we now witness, why not also feel sympathy? Indeed, would it not be a failure to recognize our wrongdoing and yet remain emotionally indifferent to the plight of the people we have wronged? What I want to better understand is whether, and why, the experience of shock (and the sympathy that might accompany it) can be morally important even when it cannot lead to action that resolves the reason for it—that is, even when we cannot act with regard to what the shock is about.

4.

To begin, it is worth noting that it is no coincidence that the examples of shock I've considered so far are associated with the experience of war. Writing about the meanings of "surprise" in eighteenth century English literature, Christopher Miller says that "the word contains a history of violence" (Miller 2015: 3). The English word "surprise" first denoted military assault, seizure, rape, or disturbance. Only in the late Middle Ages the word acquired a mental and cognitive sense. The modern term, 'surprise attack', marks the shift in meaning: when understood according to the original meaning of 'surprise', the term is redundant (*idem*, 225).

By the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, the word has lost most of its violent associations. Indeed, people often *enjoy* surprises. Miller notes that "the modern bourgeois birthday is celebrated with a surprise party, not a shock party, which would connote an entirely different kind of spectacle" (*idem*, 227). He suggests that the term 'shock', more closely associated

with modernity, "takes up the sense of violence and stupefaction contained in the older sense of 'surprise'" (*idem*, 226). "Shock", Miller says, suggests "a direct assault on the sensorium that bypasses higher rationality, it draws on the clinical frisson of trauma, and it often connotes an attack on standards of morality or propriety" (*idem*, 227).

War, violence, and shock, are also brought together in Sigmund Freud's *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*. Freud wrote the essay in the wake of the Great War, and in it he aimed to offer an explanation of 'traumatic neurosis', and of 'war neuroses', or shell-shock, in particular. On Freud's model, consciousness is a defense against external stimuli. Shock, or 'traumatic neurosis', results from ruptures in this defensive mechanism. "We describe as 'traumatic'," Freud writes, "any excitations from outside which are powerful enough to break though the protective shield" (Freud 1961: 23).

Freud sought to understand the effects of such shocks on the mind. According to him, these shocks occur when consciousness is unprepared for the external stimulus, and its unpreparedness consists in the absence of anxiety—that is, a lack of expectation of the danger. A person who suffers from traumatic neurosis might try not to think of the traumatic event from her past during her waking hours, but the catastrophe will recur in her dreams. According to Freud, dreams of this kind "endeavor to master the stimulus retroactively, by developing the anxiety whose omission was the cause of the traumatic neurosis" (*idem*, 26). In other words, the dreams of trauma patients go back in time so they can prepare for what *had happened*. We *recover from* the shocking event by *recovering it*, by making sense of it and weaving it into our consciousness.

In what follows I do not mean to endorse Freud's analysis of shock but to take from it the idea that shock involves both a cognitive success and a cognitive failure. In the experience of shock a person successfully cognizes a real event, occurrence, or fact, but she fails to make sense of it or

to understand what she saw or experienced in light of her other practical and epistemic commitments. Shock is a cognitive crisis precisely because it involves a conflict in our cognitive capacities: we see but cannot comprehend; witness but cannot understand. Furthermore, shock caused by extreme violence is an extreme kind of shock, but there might be more moderate kinds of shock that share the same essential features without having the same lasting or debilitating impact. Consider, in comparison, the shock of city life.

5.

In his account of the modern city, Walter Benjamin drew on Freud's account of shock and trauma. In "On Some Motifs in Baudelaire", Benjamin argues that shock, and particularly the experience of shock that is distinctive of the modern metropolis, is at the center of Baudelaire's artistic work. The modern city constitutes a new condition of existence, according to Benjamin, and a new way of relating to other people. Benjamin cites Paul Valéry's observation:

> The inhabitant of the great urban center (…) reverts to a state of savagery—that is, of isolation. The feeling of being dependent on others, which used to be kept alive by need, is gradually blunted in the smooth functioning of the social mechanism. Any improvement of this mechanism eliminates certain modes of behavior and emotions. (Benjamin 1969: 174)

And Benjamin adds: "Comfort isolates; on the other hand, it brings those enjoying it closer to mechanization" (*ibidem*).

Benjamin describes this process of mechanization, from the invention of the match, around the middle of the nineteenth century, to that of the telephone, and, of course, the camera. Through the creation of these and other machines, new experiences emerged, and all these machines and experiences came together in the modern city.

> Haptic experiences of this kind were joined by optic ones, such as are supplied by the advertising pages of a newspaper or the traffic of a big city. Moving through this traffic involves the individual in a series of shocks and collisions. At dangerous intersections, nervous impulses flow through him in rapid succession, like the energy from a battery. Baudelaire speaks of a man who plunges into the crowd as into a reservoir of electric energy. (*idem*, 175)

Benjamin is interested in what happens when shocking, external stimuli repeat themselves regularly. He argues that the perception and conduct of the city dweller—like that of the factory worker, that of the film viewer, and that of the gambler—are regulated by sequences of shocks. "Technology has subjected the human sensorium to a complex kind of training", he says (*ibidem*). In these different environments, people act as if they "adapted themselves to the machines and could express themselves only automatically" (*idem*, 176).

According to the Freudian model, consciousness adjusts itself in response to shock in order to subsume the past event and prevent shocks by similar events in the future. What Benjamin noticed is that this Freudian mechanism (or some mechanism like it) can be manipulated. Shock can be used to shape and direct an individual's consciousness. The camera—like the conveyor belt to which the factory worker is bound or the game of chance in which the gambler is enthralled—was a new technology for the reshaping of the mind. A technology founded on a simple principle:

> The greater the share of the shock factor in particular impressions, the more constantly consciousness has to be alert as a screen against stimuli; the more efficiently it does so, the less do these impressions enter experience (*Efahrung*), tending to remain in the sphere of a certain hour in one's life (*Erlebnis*) (*idem*, 163).

The distinction between "experience" and "a certain hour in one's life" is crucial for understanding the phenomenon Benjamin is describing. Unlike a singular incident of shock, which can, in principle, be made sense of retroactively, repeated shocks undermine the mind's ability to weave external stimuli into meaningful experiences that make up a coherent whole. A shock

inducing system forces the mind to create a protective shield but one that is unable to incorporate the shocking stimuli as memory into consciousness. The system thereby numbs the mind to any particular instance of shock-inducing stimulus. The modern man, "capable only of a reflex reaction" (*idem*, 178), is "cheated out of his experience" (*idem*, 180).

The Freudian model construes shock as a form of injury to the mind, but the sinister aspect of the systematic manipulation of shock that Benjamin describes calls our attention to the fact that unlike other injuries, shock has a cognitive element: it purports to *register* something in the world, it is *about* something. In the cases of trauma Freud considered, the mind recovers by coming to understand the shocking occurrence, but Benjamin suggests that in the modern city this process is stymied. In the city, the injury of shock diminishes with the diminishment in a person's ability to understand or even to notice its cause. Shock is thus blunted without regard to its content, and the injury heals at the expense of cognition. We anticipate the shock but cannot cognize it, neither in the moment of its occurrence nor in retrospect. Our mind effectively blinds us to the shocking events that occur to us.

6.

A friend told me a story that might illustrate the difference between these two kinds of shock reactions—the singular shock of a particular event and the systematic shock of Benjamin's modern man. My friend, call him S, served as an officer in the Israeli army. On one occasion, he was leading his team into a Palestinian village in the West Bank to carry out an arrest. The mission went sideways, as they say in the movies, and S led his soldiers in pursuit of the wanted persons through the streets and alleyways of the village. In the midst of all the confusion, one of S's soldiers fired several shots and two uninvolved civilians were badly injured. S did his best to give them initial medical assistance, but it was clear from the injuries that even if they survive they would

never fully recover. This event shook S to the core and, eventually, led to his discharge from the military.

A year or so after his discharge, S went on a first date with a woman he met, call her K. They decided to go to the movies to watch *A History of Violence*, a film directed by David Cronenberg. Cronenberg is one of the main originators of a genre known as "body horror", and his movies often include extreme, and extremely gory violence. As the film went on, S became worried that K is deeply distressed by the violence shown on screen and kept suggesting they leave the theatre. K, however, insisted that they stay through till the end. When the film finally ended and they walked out, S was a nervous wreck but K seemed perfectly calm. She liked the film and wasn't bothered by the violence. S realized that for K, the images of broken bones and gushing blood did not seem real. But he, who witnessed similar violence first hand, found the images unbearably real. "This is *exactly* what it looks like when someone's leg is shot off!", he told me. They never went on a second date.

What made the images of violence less real for K is not that they failed to faithfully depict the injuries they purported to show, nor that she mistakenly thought they were unrealistic. What made them unreal was that she experienced them in a context in which shocking images are to be expected and enjoyed. Like most trained movie-goers, she could not experience a film *as* reality. To be sure, she might have been shocked by the violence and gore in the movie, but if so it was only *in the way one is shocked by a film*. S, by contrast, could not detach these images from the images he had seen in (the context of) reality and which he has since struggled to make sense of. His trauma bypassed his movie-goer reflexes.

In thinking back of the gradual numbing of my shock at the West Bank checkpoints, it occurs to me that I was transitioning from the kind of shock S experienced to the kind of subdued

shock K experienced in watching the film. Of course, K was right that the violence in the movie wasn't real. But I, in the checkpoints, wasn't watching a film. For me, real people became less real. Maybe in trying to hold on to the initial shock of terrorizing people, I was trying to resist a "training" of my impulses that threatened to blind me to the reality of my actions and the people they impacted.

7.

It is possible to understand philosophy as the systematic avoidance of realities we cannot bear: philosophy as a defense against shock. For instance, Bernard Williams describes the history of moral philosophy as the history of attempts to justify, redeem, deny, or forget suffering (Williams 1996/2006). There is, he writes, Leibniz's theodicy, according to which this world is the best of all possible worlds; or Hegel's teleological view of history, according to which the horrors are rendered worthwhile by the achievements they make possible; and even Schopenhauer, who rejected Hegel's triumphalist teleology, held that life, with all its suffering, is redeemed by art.

Modern forms of moral philosophy, Williams argues, tend to avoid the problem by looking away, so to speak. Modern moral theories—whether of Kantian or consequentialist stripe—focus on the rational agent and on moral restrictions on her intentions to change the world. With this focus, moral theories overlook "the very plain fact that everything that an agent most cares about typically comes from, and can be ruined by, uncontrollable necessity and chance" (*idem*, 54).

Consider the suffering caused by the current global pandemic. To moralize this global event is to deny its arbitrariness and inexplicability and present it as somehow justified or worthwhile. But modern moral theory doesn't exactly moralize such suffering, according to Williams, it mostly has nothing to say about it (or, more precisely, it has nothing to say about the

part of the suffering we could not have prevented and cannot change.) Indeed, Williams claims moral theory successfully sidesteps the prospect of being shocked by arbitrary and inevitable suffering by ignoring it altogether. Therefore, both past and modern moral philosophy is an attempt to numb the mind to shocking realities we cannot avoid, undo, or change. Insofar as philosophy *successfully* defends the mind from such shock, it trades in truthfulness and is oblivious to a real and important human concern. In this respect, moral philosophy according to Williams is analogous to city life according to Benjamin.

An exception to moral philosophy's tradition of bad faith, says Williams, is provided by Nietzsche. Nietzsche rejected redemptive stories about suffering. He sought a way to be truthful about the horrors without "being crushed by them" (*idem*, 53). The only truthful response, Nietzsche thought, is a fully conscious refusal to be crushed and a conclusive affirmation of one's life. The possibility and difficulty of such a response are captured by the thought experiment of eternal recurrence, in which one must be prepared to will everything, with every horror and every hideous triviality, to happen endlessly over again.

Williams is doubtful of the prospects of Nietzsche's solution and calls our attention, instead, to the capacity of certain forms of fiction to allow us to truthfully confront the horrors. In fact, this, too, is a theme of Nietzsche's, namely, that works of art can allow us to contemplate certain things in honesty without being crushed by them. Williams writes: "When (…) he [i.e., Nietzsche] said that we have art so that we do not perish from the truth he did not mean that we use art in order to escape from the truth: he meant that we have art so that we can both grasp the truth and not perish from it" (*idem*, 58). Williams is suggesting that fictional horrors can help us understand real ones without offering relief, justification, or redemption, on the one hand, and without traumatizing us, on the other. Fictional horrors are not shocking (at least not in the

debilitating way that real horrors are), they do not crush us, and we can therefore bear them without diverting our eyes or invoking stories of redemption.

Consider an example: Gerhard Richter made a series of paintings of members of the Baader-Meinhof group, a radical left group that had become notorious in Germany for executing kidnappings and terror attacks in the late 1960s. The group was finally caught and imprisoned, and the series' title, *October 18, 1977*, marks the day the bodies of the leaders of the group were found in their prison cells. Richter made his paintings on the basis of photographs of members of the group, including photographs of their dead bodies. He later commented on these works: "the photograph provokes horror, and the painting — with the same motif — something more like grief. That comes very close to what I intended" (Richter 2009: 229).

I take Richter to mean that the painting of the corpse creates a distance that is necessary for the pensiveness of grief, whereas the photograph is too close to what it depicts and therefore elicits shock and lends itself to the excitement of voyeurism and pornography. Coming too close can be distorting. What affords us a clear view of the dead body of Ulrike Meinhof is precisely the distance created by the painting (see below). As Williams suggests, fiction, and art more generally, has an important ethical role: it enables us to grasp the truth without being crushed by it.

Newspaper photograph of the body of Ulrike Meinhof.

(Richter 1988)

8.

In line with the idea that we might better understand reality if we look at it through the lens of fiction, I propose to reflect on our current state of shock in this time of a global pandemic, and on the nature of shock itself, through a short story by Edgar Allan Poe, "The Man of the Crowd" (Poe 2015). Benjamin, too, opens his discussion of the shock of city life with this story, which Baudelaire translated and—Benjamin claims—was influenced by.

The epigraph of the story, taken from La Bruyère, already seems pertinent to our times of social distancing and zoom-socializing: "the misery of being unable to be alone" ("Ce grand malheur, de ne pouvoir être seul") (*idem*, 163). The story begins, enigmatically, with statements about a certain German book that "does not permit itself to be read", about a conscience "so heavy in horror" that it cannot divulge its secrets, and about "the essence of all crime" that remains buried (*ibidem*). Immediately thereafter begins a tale that initially seems entirely unrelated to the dark, cryptic messages of the opening paragraph.

The story is set in London and the narrator is a man who, after a long illness, goes out again for the first time to the busy streets, with "a calm but inquisitive interest in every thing". In the evening of an autumn day, he sits by the window of a big coffee house, smokes a cigar, reads a paper, and looks over the other guests. But his interest is drawn to the throng of people passing by his window in the street.

> This latter is one of the principal thoroughfares of the city, and had been very much crowded during the whole day. But, as the darkness came on, the throng momently increased; and, by the time the lamps were well lighted, two dense and continuous tides of population were rushing past the door. At this particular period of the evening I had never before been in a similar situation, and the tumultuous sea of human heads filled me, therefore, with a delicious novelty of emotion. I gave up, at length, all care of things within the hotel, and became absorbed in contemplation of the scene without. (*idem*, 167)

The narrator proceeds to describe different types of characters as they are passing by—their looks, conduct, and gestures.

> By far the greater number of those who went by had a satisfied business-like demeanor, and seemed to be thinking only of making their way through the press. Their brows were knit, and their eyes rolled quickly; when pushed against by fellow-wayfarers they evinced no symptom of impatience, but adjusted their clothes and hurried on. Others, still a numerous class, were restless in their movements, had flushed faces, and talked and gesticulated to themselves, as if feeling in solitude on account of the very denseness of the company around. When impeded in their progress, these people suddenly ceased muttering, but re-doubled their gesticulations, and awaited, with an absent and overdone smile upon the lips, the course of the persons impeding them. If jostled, they bowed profusely to the jostlers, and appeared overwhelmed with confusion (…) They were undoubtedly noblemen, merchants, attorneys, tradesmen, stock-jobbers.. (*ibidem*)

Benjamin notes that Poe attributes to the high ranking employees the same restless dejection he attributes to the riffraff. Poe "deals with people, pure and simple," Benjamin writes, "for him there was something menacing in the spectacle they presented" (Benjamin 1969: 172). And yet the spectacle is engrossing. The narrator, somehow both drawn and repulsed by the sight of the masses, seems to manage to discipline them, so to speak, by analyzing them and producing a taxonomy of city dwellers. But then—and this is where the plot, if it can be called that, begins—the narrator notices a man he cannot decipher.

> With my brow to the glass, I was thus occupied in scrutinizing the mob, when suddenly there came into view a countenance (that of a decrepid old man, some sixty-five or seventy years of age,) --a countenance which at once arrested and absorbed my whole attention, on account of the absolute idiosyncrasy of its expression. Any thing even remotely resembling that expression I had never seen before (…) As I endeavored, during the brief minute of my original survey, to form some analysis of the meaning conveyed, there arose confusedly and paradoxically within my mind, the ideas of vast mental power, of caution, of penuriousness, of avarice, of coolness, of malice, of blood-thirstiness, of triumph, of merriment, of excessive terror, of

intense --of supreme despair. I felt singularly aroused, startled, fascinated. "How wild a history," I said to myself, "is written within that bosom!" Then came a craving desire to keep the man in view --to know more of him. Hurriedly putting on an overcoat, and seizing my hat and cane, I made my way into the street, and pushed through the crowd in the direction which I had seen him take; for he had already disappeared. With some little difficulty I at length came within sight of him, approached, and followed him closely, yet cautiously, so as not to attract his attention. (Poe 2015: 168-169)

The narrator follows the "decrepid old man" all night and all day through the foggy, rainy, streets of London. Whenever the old man reaches a less crowded street, he walks more slowly, losses his sense of purpose and becomes hesitant. Whenever the old man finds a large, dense crowd again, he speeds up and walks intently, pushing through the crowd, until he finally turns, retraces his steps, and makes his way through once again. When the crowd dwindles, the old man hurries elsewhere. As the night progresses and the streets empty, the old man becomes more desperate. When finally a crowd of people came out of a theater after a show, the narrator saw "the old man gasp as if for breath while he threw himself amid the crowd; but I thought that the intense agony of his countenance had, in some measure, abated" (*idem*, 171). The race continues as the night grows desolate and the old man walks through the poorest parts of the city, surrounded by "the most abandoned of a London populace … reeling to and fro" (*ibidem*). The man descends into "something even more intense than despair" but never relents. With the new day, people swarm the streets again and the man continues to pursue the crowds till dusk. Finally, the anticipated confrontation occurs:

as the shades of the second evening came on, I grew wearied unto death, and, stopping fully in front of the wanderer, gazed at him steadfastly in the face. He noticed me not, but resumed his solemn walk, while I, ceasing to follow, remained absorbed in contemplation. "This old man," I said at length, "is the type and the genius of deep crime. He refuses to be alone. He is the man of the crowd. It will be in vain to follow; for I shall learn no more of him, nor of his deeds. The worst heart of the world is a grosser book than the 'Hortulus

Animæ,' and perhaps it is but one of the great mercies of God that 'er lässt sich nicht lesen.' [it does not permit itself to be read]." (*idem*, 174)

9.

There are two cravings in Poe's story: the narrator's craving to know and understand the old man and his secrets, and the old man's craving to be among the crowds. The story describes the fierce competition between these urges, and the outcome of the competition turns out to have moral and metaphysical implications. But why should these two longings be in competition with each other to begin with? That is, why does the narrator, upon coming to terms with the old man's refusal to be alone, conclude that the old man cannot be understood and his secrets cannot be known?

The implicit assumption in the narrator's inference is that only a person who can bear to be alone is a person who can be known to others. The crowd is the old man's hiding place. His determination to be surrounded by people is also his determination to avoid his guilty conscience. His horror of being alone is his horror of his own past. By avoiding himself he keeps the truth about himself beyond the reach of others. His truth cannot be known because he cannot bear to know it.

But what is it about the crowd that provides the ultimate shield from knowing oneself and being known to others? The key to answering this question is noticing that the city crowd is anything but a community. In the crowd, the old man is surrounded with the presence of people without facing the prospect of their recognition. This is why Valéry speaks of city life as 'isolating': it creates a new relation to others; a proximity without mutual recognition.

The lack of recognition is, in fact, the trigger of the narrator's insight in the final paragraph of the story. The narrator looks directly at the old man, but the man doesn't notice. He doesn't

notice the narrator noticing him. The old man forgets himself in the crowd, to the point that he is no longer conscious of his own existence and of the possibility that he might be the object of another's gaze. It is this realization that leads the narrator to the conclusion that the old man is unknowable.

Benjamin describes the disintegration of relationships of mutual recognition as "the decline of the aura" (Benjamin 1969: 187). He says: "Looking at someone carries the implicit expectation that our look will be returned by the object of our gaze. Where this expectation is met … there is an experience of the aura to the fullest extent" (*idem*, 188). When the camera first appeared, says Benjamin, it was felt to be "inhuman" and "deadly" due to the prolonged looking into the camera, since "the camera records our likeness without returning our gaze" (*ibidem*). Similarly, he writes: "Baudelaire describes eyes of which one is inclined to say that they have lost their ability to look" (*idem*, 189). In the city we become accustomed to experiencing the presence of others without the possibility of a relationship of any kind, and, like the man of the crowd, if to a lesser extent, this allows us to forget ourselves, to avoid ourselves, to be as absent to ourselves as we are to others.

There's a delight in this experience of being weightless. Benjamin says of Baudelaire: "He has lost himself to the spell of eyes which do not return his glance and submits to their sway without illusions" (*idem*, 190). This might as well be said of the old man of the crowd, and once the narrator gives up the hope of recognition, it might be said of him, too. Or maybe the narrator, like the man of the crowd, never sought recognition to begin with. Maybe, after a long while alone due to his illness, the narrator was simply delighted—indeed, desperate—to step outside into the crowd, and get lost.

10.

City life, according to Benjamin, is arranged so as to undermine the possibility of mutual recognition over time; it achieves this by the systematic employment of shock. I do not mean to endorse the proposal wholesale—it seems to capture something true and important but it strikes me as too sweeping. I am also not sure the phenomenon first emerged with the modern city, nor do I mean to equate the shock of war with the shock of the boulevards of nineteenth-century Paris.[2] However, the idea that a systematic change in one's relation to oneself and to others can change the significance of shock is illuminating when applied to the West Bank checkpoints.

The initial shock of witnessing people being humiliated is itself an expression of their "aura", in Benjamin's sense. As we have seen, shock is an indication of a cognitive crisis: given one's commitments, one cannot comprehend how a *person*, who has the capacity to return one's gaze, can be treated in this way. A relation to another that is based on sheer force is a relation that excludes the possibility of mutual recognition; such a relation is shocking only when the possibility of mutual recognition is *presupposed*.[3] I take the possibility of mutual recognition to be the mark of a moral relation to another. Thus, shock, in this context, is the manifestation of crisis in one's moral relationship to another. The norms that define and constitute the moral relationship have been violated. However, the crisis in the relationship is a sign of one's commitment to it. And there is, in principle, the possibility of moral repair.[4]

But once a relationship of sheer force becomes systematic and therefore predictable, one can no longer assume the possibility of mutual recognition and therefore struggles to recognize what has been lost. The ongoing violation of norms amounts to the gradual dissolution of one's commitment to them. The eyes of the helpless gradually cease to carry in them the capacity to return one's gaze. At the extreme, 'humiliation' ceases to be the right word: from the point of view

of the new, morally corrupt relationship, there's no one *to humiliate*; 'management' seems more appropriate. The shock dissipates because it is the last stronghold of a moral relationship that has ceased to exist; the absence of the relationship is itself a moral failing. Yet the soldier's need for recognition remains, especially as there is now no one who can recognize him as superior. The camera, with its blank, black lens, promises to satisfy this need. The eye of the camera tells him: "someone will see you."

Picture courtesy of Breaking the Silence

The soldier in the photograph above collected photographs of himself with the Palestinians he detained at his checkpoint—a collection of his "trophies". He contributed these pictures to an exhibit organized in 2004 by Breaking the Silence, a group of Israeli veterans who collect

testimonies of soldiers about the moral reality of Israel's military occupation in the West Bank and Gaza Strip. The fact the detainees are blindfolded suggests that, while their capacity to return the soldiers' gaze did not completely vanish, steps were taken to stifle it. In fact, blindfolding detainees was a common practice when I served at the checkpoints. The possibility of recognition was actively denied.

The photograph can only shock a person who is neither a subject nor an enforcer of military occupation. To be shocked by it is to express one's commitment to the possibility of mutual recognition with regard to the individuals in the photograph.[5] But that possibility depends on the nature of one's relationship to these individuals over time. Those who live in this reality of brute force cannot reasonably expect mutual recognition, though perhaps they might keep faith that one day it will be possible.

Shock is morally significant not merely because or in so far as it might lead to action; it is morally significant because it is an essential feature of the kind of relationship we take ourselves to bear to the people whose treatment shocks us. It is an expression of our commitment to the moral norms that define and constitute this relationship. But when we no longer bear the relevant relationship to these people because we are not in fact committed to its norms, then our shock, if it persists at all, is at best an expression of our moral pretensions and at worst a mere condemnation of impropriety or bad taste.

When, in the checkpoints, I tried to hold on to my sense of shock, I failed to understand that, over time, one cannot recognize a person as a person without *treating* her so. When all that is left of a moral relationship is the shock of its destruction, the shock itself is but a mere impulse, which stands for nothing and soon dies out.

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[1] In the literature about the problem of evil it is common to distinguish *natural evils* from *moral evils*. Natural evils are bad states of affairs which do not result from the intentions or negligence of moral agents (e.g., hurricanes and

toothaches), whereas moral evils are bad states of affairs that result from the intentions or negligence of moral agents (e.g., murder and lying). The same distinction can be drawn not in terms of states of affairs but of suffering that either involves or does not involve the violation of moral norms. I'm suggesting that moral shock is about moral evils, though shock about natural evils (as well as about other things) can be morally significant. For the distinction, see for example Calder 2018.

[2] For a critique of the idea that 'the shock of the city' is comparable to trauma, see Samuels 2010.

[3] I do not pretend to have offered an account of mutual recognition here, nor of a relationship based on the possibility of mutual recognition. How to understand these ideas is a difficult matter (for an influential account, see Honneth 1992). The only thing I want to insist on here is that we can have a sense of what mutual recognition (and the possibility of it) *is*, even if we don't have a satisfactory analysis of it. Similarly, I do not offer an account of the distinction between a relationship of sheer force and a relationship based on the possibility of mutual recognition. But we admit such a distinction when we contrast *coercion* or *exploitation* with relations of *basic equality* and *dignity*. Of course, there are rival accounts of these ideas as well. All I need for the purposes of the present essay is to be granted the distinction. My use of the distinction is not meant to be partial to any one analysis, though what I say about it, if plausible, might be seen as an adequacy-constraint on a plausible analysis.

[4] My suggestion—i.e., that a relationship of mutual recognition is a moral relationship that is constituted by certain norms and that shock is a response to the violation of these norms while *at the same time* an expression of one's commitment to them—is similar to Agnes Callard's view of anger. Callard argues that anger is how we value a relationship whose constitutive norms have been violated:

> My violation of a norm constitutive of our relationship is a failure to care about what we can only care about together. When I defect, I reduce you to anger. Anger is the form that your co-valuation of our relationship takes in response to the action by which I (seem to you to) withdraw from co-valuing with you. Because you cannot care (value) together with me, you care about (are angered by) it. (Callard 2017: 130)

[5] Here the "possibility of mutual recognition" cannot be understood too literally, since any actual encounter between the viewer and the individuals in the photo might in fact be impossible due to distance in time and place. This is precisely why I avoid offering a full account of what "the possibility of recognition" amounts to. Perhaps a counterfactual account of this possibility is needed, but I cannot examine this question within the limits of this paper. Still, I insist, we can have a sense of there being such a possibility even if we struggle to spell out what it amounts to.