
Book Review

On Killing: The Psychological Cost of Learning to Kill in War and Society

By Lt. Col. Dave Grossman, Back Bay Books, 1995

Reviewed by Harley Ewing and Selena Ewing, March 2010

As bioethics increasingly turns its philosophical attention to the expanding territory of medical killing – euthanasia, assisted suicide, eugenics, abortion – it is helpful to consider the psychology of traditional killing in combat and society. Lieutenant Colonel Dave Grossman is a former army Ranger, paratrooper, psychology teacher and Military Science Professor in the United States, a combination that renders him eminently suitable to be an expert on what he has termed ‘killology’. His book *On Killing* was published in 1995, and for bioethicists and many others it still warrants attention even fifteen years later.

What this book is *not* about is the ethics of war and killing. Interestingly, he uses the word ‘murder’ throughout the book, implying that killing in combat is not a lesser kind of killing, even in self-defence. But he never condemns soldiers; “If ... the reader senses moral judgment or disapproval of the individuals involved, let me flatly and categorically deny it.” (Pg. xxxii)

On Killing explores in vivid detail the psychological cost on Western society of training soldiers to kill. This cost includes the trauma experienced by soldiers and their families, and the broader effect on society at large.

Soldiers, it turns out, don’t find it easy to kill. There is a great natural resistance against the killing of fellow human beings. This resistance is so strong, in fact, that recent military field studies have shown a stunning fact: less than ten percent of untrained soldiers fire their guns. (Pg. xxxiii)

Of these men, Grossman accepts his own mixed emotions. “As a soldier who may have stood beside them I cannot help but be dismayed at their failure to support their cause, their nation, and their fellows; but as a human being who has understood some

of the burden that they have borne, and the sacrifice that they have made, I cannot help but be proud of them and the noble characteristic that they represent in our species.” (Pg. xxxiii)

Modern militaries have invested much time and money to remedy this situation, bringing a trained soldier’s shooting rate close to one hundred percent at the time of writing. The important point here is that soldiers need to be trained to kill. Their natural inhibition needs to be destroyed so that they can be recreated as a killing machine.

There are many mechanisms that enable the modern soldier to kill more effectively. Grossman spends a lot of time showing these mechanisms which are only briefly mentioned in this review. Training methods to deconstruct the soldier and dehumanise the enemy are key; bayonette charges into bags filled with offal (even though bayonettes are rarely any longer used in combat), marching to aggressive chants, violent video simulators. The demands of authority in a military command structure effectively lower inhibition to kill, particularly in training when one has a sergeant screaming at you to “kill, kill, kill”! Grossman also discusses the predisposition of the killer (is he trained or a natural killer?), the attractiveness of the victim and what one stands to gain by killing the enemy. He explains the importance of operant conditioning based on B. F. Skinner’s research.

The role of changing combat and military technology is an important theme – but importantly, not the central one. Modern technique has allowed great distances to separate the killer from the victim and now most combat occurs from rifle distance or farther. The natural inhibition of killing a fellow human is shown to have a direct association with the distance from which one

has to kill. Our humanity, particularly in the image of our eyes and face, implores other humans to respond in love and the soldier must resist. This is why, for example, American soldiers are taught to remove their helmets if captured. It also explains why an attacker who turns and flees from his enemy is much more likely to be killed by being shot in the back.

Accordingly, ranged weapons were an evolution of warfare much favoured by soldiers, since they removed the soldier from the enemy. The quick uptake of both the bow and arrow and later, the rifle, are the immediate historical examples. With the greater use of bombs and rockets to destroy the enemy, even bombing civilian populations becomes possible. The distance factor enables a soldier, while he logically knows the end result of what he is doing, to deny the humanity of the enemy. The bombardiers in World War II did not have to hear the screams of civilian men, women, and children as they obliterated London, Dresden, Hamburg, Tokyo and Hiroshima. Artillerymen, bomber crews, and naval personnel have little difficulty with killing. They are able to internally deny what is actually happening.

The demands of authority and group absolution are concepts that make sense. When someone commands a group of men to commit the murder of another group of men they are able to mutually commit such deeds without personally feeling completely responsible. This group absolution does not suggest that the men feel no guilt. It is simply a coping mechanism to help absolve themselves of the large amounts of guilt they are in fact shown to feel. Rather than something "I" did, it is easier to cope with the guilt of murder committed by a group when conceptualised as something "we" did.

Readers of the Boomer generation may be especially challenged by Section VII which recounts and analyses the experience of soldiers involved in the Vietnam War. This particular chapter is gentle and objective, yet gripping, arousing confusion and grief regarding a situation that many readers will

never before have considered. The unique circumstances and politics of the Vietnam War resulted in up to 1.5 million Vietnam vets suffering from Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) in the USA.

Why? Among many factors, Grossman explains that the rationalisation of killing failed in that war. As just one example, he quotes a former Vietcong agent who said, "Children were trained to throw grenades, not only for the terror factor, but so the government or American soldiers would have to shoot them. Then the Americans feel very ashamed. And they blame themselves and call their soldiers war criminals." (Pg. 267). Grossman observes: "it worked." (Pg. 267)

Comparing the Vietnam War with World Wars I and II, Grossman offers a defense for the Vietnam Veterans of whom he writes that "never in American history, perhaps never in all the history of Western civilisation, has an army suffered such an agony of many blows from its own people." (Pg. 280) And silently a gauntlet is thrown down to all of us. Do we hate killing because we love humanity? If we love humanity, can we hate killers? Do humanists hate the military, or only the politicians who send the military? Perhaps they only hate war criminals? While most agree that killing is wrong, war is a vexed topic. How can we make sense of it? Grossman's own unconcealed discordant emotions give his book a unique authenticity.

The final section is entitled *Killing in America: What are we doing to our children?* This concerns every one of us by questioning the movies, role models and video games that have become ubiquitous in modern Western culture. Once used as techniques for desensitisation of soldiers, these are now routine forms of entertainment.

Grossman tries to answer the question of whether rising assault and murder rates are linked to rising levels of violence in television, films and computer/console games. In short, are we making a society of killers? Is society looking critically at media violence

and its effect on society, or being blindly complicit?

It has become clichéd to blame the media for violence but Grossman's case is persuasive. He suggests that younger generations have learned to associate scenes of violence with soft drink, junk food, pleasure, and intimate contact with one's date. He points out that the implicit social pressure *not* to avert one's eyes or look away during scenes of horror and cruelty is a mechanism similar to a head clamp *a la* A Clockwork Orange.

He advocates for the censoring of violence by various means, stopping short of censorship. Grossman strikes out at the creators and marketers of violent images: "They participate in a diffusion of responsibility by referring to themselves as 'the tobacco industry' or 'the entertainment industry,' and we permit it, but they are ultimately individuals making individual moral decisions to participate in the destruction of their fellow citizens." (Pg. 330) Pointing once again to man's natural inclination not to kill, he offers hope and strategy for social recovery.

Grossman wants society to learn how to put the psychological safety catch back on,

to restore our natural resistance to killing. Most healthy people find the subject of killing to be repulsive and offensive, yet Grossman insists that we must face it if we are to understand and control it. This book, a highly informed, balanced and human account of the psychology of killing, is priceless for those who honestly seek to understand killing and war without the politics and rhetoric.

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