

MORAL
PHILOSOPHY
AND THE
HOLOCAUST

EDITED BY
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AND
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How far can we ever hope to understand the Holocaust? What can we reasonably say about right and wrong, moral responsibility, praise and blame, in a world where ordinary reasons seem to be excluded? In the century of Nazism, ethical writing in English had much more to say about the meaning of the word 'good' than about the material reality of evil. This book seeks to redress the balance at the start of a new century.

Despite intense interest in the Holocaust, there has been relatively little exploration of it by philosophers in the analytic tradition. Although ethical writers often refer to Nazism as a touchstone example of evil, and use it as a case by which moral theorising can be tested, they rarely analyse what evil amounts to, or address the substantive moral questions raised by the Holocaust itself.

This book draws together new work by leading moral philosophers to present a wide range of perspectives on the Holocaust. Contributors focus on particular themes of central importance, including: moral responsibility for genocide; the moral uniqueness of the Holocaust; responding to extreme evil; the role of ideology; the moral psychology of perpetrators and victims of genocide; forgiveness and the Holocaust; and the impact of the 'Final Solution' on subsequent culture. Topics are treated with the precision and rigour characteristic of analytic philosophy. Scholars, teachers and students with an interest in moral theory, applied ethics, genocide and Holocaust studies will find this book of particular value, as will all those seeking greater insight into ethical issues surrounding Nazism, race-hatred and intolerance.

Moral Philosophy and the Holocaust

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ASHGATE

Chapter 15

The Holocaust in American Life as a Moral Text

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Whitwell, Tennessee, is a small town, almost entirely white, Christian and fundamentalist, with no Jews. In the late 1990s, in response to a new curriculum on the Holocaust, a class of eighth graders (thirteen-year-olds) decided to collect six million paper clips, representing the Jews killed in the Holocaust, and make them into a sculpture.¹ The Whitwell 'paper clip project,' as it came to be known, exemplifies the sort of penetration of the Holocaust into American consciousness which Peter Novick attempts to account for – and about which he expresses a good deal of dismay – in his important book, *The Holocaust in American Life*.²

The Nazis' partially successful attempt to exterminate the Jews of Europe – an event widely referred to as 'the Holocaust' – has come to serve as a symbol of absolute moral evil and horror. Virtually every American can identify the Holocaust, at least in its main outline, while ignorance of salient facts about American history is widespread.³ Many Americans, especially Jews, regard this as unremarkable; the Holocaust is worthy of any attention it is given, so its salience is no cause for wonder or explanation.

Novick attempts to dislodge this sense of inevitability about 'Holocaust-consciousness' in the contemporary United States. He traces American awareness of the Holocaust from the 1940s to the late 1990s. Through meticulous scholarship and plausible, if sometimes somewhat speculative, historical supposition, Novick paints a picture of social, cultural and political factors that account for the new visibility and previous invisibility of the Holocaust.

Novick argues that it was not until the 1960s that 'the Holocaust' emerged into consciousness as a distinctive event, separate in historical and moral character from other Nazi atrocities. In the period following the war, Novick argues, Jews were not generally singled out for specific attention as Nazi victims.⁴ During the war, fears of anti-Semitism (which was quite pronounced in the prewar and war years) plus pessimism that anything could be done short of winning the war as quickly as possible inhibited Jewish organizations from calling attention to the specifically Jewish dimensions of Nazi atrocities.⁵ Furthermore, the onset of the cold war severely dampened American receptivity to German crimes. The new enemy was the Soviet Union; the Germans were allies. Even the war itself came to be reframed as part of a struggle against 'totalitarianism,' a concept that embraced Nazism and Soviet communism equally. Refugees from communism became the favored

victims, and Jews' fears of being associated with communism – especially intensified by the Rosenberg spy trials in 1953 – made it difficult for American Jews to depart publicly from the cold war consensus and call attention to German crimes against Jews during the war.⁶ The bombing of Hiroshima was an atrocity of more ongoing concern, both because Americans perpetrated it and because of the fear of nuclear attack against the US.

The idea of the Holocaust as an event of transcendent significance was not in evidence:

In the first postwar years, the Holocaust was viewed, by Jews as well as Americans in general, as part of history. It was an event that had taken place there and not here; it was an aspect of a period – the era of fascism – that was now ended; it had been the result of a particular constellation of forces.⁷

Although Novick fully recognizes the distinctiveness of Jewish victimization by the Nazis, he decries a Jewish overpossessiveness about the Holocaust in recent decades, and clearly thinks there is a salutary lesson in remembering an era in which Nazi crimes were viewed in a less particularistic, more universalist manner.

In a different vein, the 'upbeat' mood of the postwar years encouraged a focus on optimistic hopes for the future, not appalling memories of the past. Anti-Semitism had discouraged Jews from calling attention to themselves, but, ironically, the growing acceptance of Jews as Americans through the 1950s encouraged an assimilationist consciousness among Jews that had the same result.

All this changed in the 1960s.⁸ The 1961 trial (in Israel) of Adolf Eichmann, charged with administering 'The Final Solution,' brought the details of the Holocaust forcefully to public awareness. Then the 1967 Israeli-Arab War, and even more so the 1973 Yom Kippur War, seemed to emphasize Israeli vulnerability, and intensified a tendency to link the Holocaust to the plight of Israel, a link increasingly pressed by the Israeli government and pro-Israel lobbyists in the US.

Novick mentions later events and cultural factors that encouraged and solidified the salience of Holocaust-awareness in American, and especially American Jewish, consciousness – the TV mini-series *Holocaust* in 1978; a rising cachet, connected to multiculturalism, attached to 'victim identity' (when, in contrast to racial minority groups, Jews had little in their current circumstances to support this sense of victimhood); a desire for the clarity of good versus evil provided by the Holocaust, when other moral reference points were becoming uncertain; the weakening of traditional forces securing Jewish communal identity (anti-Semitism, religious belief and ritual observance), allowing the Holocaust to fill that breach; the opening in 1993 of the Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, which has become the best-attended museum in US history.

At one level, Novick's book is purely historical. But his argument is infused with moral import, both explicit and implicit. Three moral strands in Novick's book bear mentioning. Novick is particularly concerned to counter a 'moralized' account of the history of American Holocaust-consciousness, according to which its initial near-absence was caused by American (including American Jewish) guilt for having failed to take steps to stop the Holocaust (such as bombing railway lines to death camps) or to help Jewish refugees, and by survivors' repression of their traumatic

experience. The eventual breaking through to consciousness, on this account, was due to getting past such barriers, and coming to recognize the genuine moral and historic importance of the Holocaust. Novick's counter-narrative involving more mundane, contingent, social and opportunistic factors is meant to undercut this moralized and psychological account. In addition, he attempts to demonstrate that there was little that the US, and American Jews, could have done to halt the Holocaust; so there was little reason for them to feel guilty.

A second moral strand is Novick's approval of some of the developments he details and disapproval of others. He is quite explicit about this, expressing in his Introduction skepticism 'that the prominent role the Holocaust has come to play both for American Jewry and American discourse is as desirable a development as most people seem to think it is.'⁹ He disapproves of the centrality of Holocaust-consciousness to Jewish identity, seeing in that consciousness an intimate connection with an inward and politically rightward turn among Jews, an engagement in a morally revolting contest of sufferings, and a withdrawal of concern from the plight of more deprived groups. In Israel and the US, Holocaust-consciousness has provided a rationalization for supporting what Novick regards as deplorable and oppressive Israeli policies toward the Palestinians.¹⁰ Independent of these effects, Novick also finds regrettable a Jewish communal self-definition in terms of suffering. (Interestingly, Novick provides no *alternative* basis for what he, or someone, might regard as a healthy form of Jewish identity.¹¹)

With regard to the more general salience of the Holocaust in American consciousness, Novick suggests that it has diverted public attention and concern from morally serious issues close to home, such as the plight of African Americans.¹² He avers that it enables a costless moral regret that does no one any good, yet yields the illusion of some sort of moral accomplishment.

The decrying of the salience of Holocaust-consciousness is tied in with the third, and most prominent, moral thread in Novick's book, one on which I will focus the remainder of this paper. That is his rejection of what he regards as the widespread idea that the Holocaust has vital moral lessons to teach with respect to the world we currently inhabit. Novick devotes an entire chapter – which he sardonically entitles, 'Never Again the Slaughter of the Albigensians' – to criticizing 'the lessons of the Holocaust,' and arguments to that end are peppered throughout the book.

The attack on Holocaust lessons is no mere moral add-on to Novick's historical argument. Novick states in his Introduction that the public rationale for confronting the Holocaust is 'that the Holocaust is the bearer of important lessons that we all ignore at our peril.'¹³ That is, Novick sees the acceptance of Holocaust lessons as both a *rationale* for sustaining attention to the Holocaust, and also as perhaps a major prop in what *actually does* sustain it. If he can show that Americans have wildly overblown the lessons to be learned, this removes an important normative, and possibly empirical, prop of Holocaust-consciousness.

Novick's criticisms of 'Holocaust lessons' are quite distinct in spirit from those that imply a kind of sacralizing of the Holocaust, or seeing it as a kind of trans-historical event. For example, Berel Lang, criticizing his own title for a piece on 'lessons,' says that the title is offensive because it implies that the enormity of the Holocaust

should be viewed as a school for study, as if together with the horror of that event, we ought also ... to observe it with a detached and calculating eye that looks ahead to future contingencies and opportunities in our own lives and in those of others.¹⁴

By contrast, for Novick one should be able to contemplate the Holocaust from a distance and with a historian's detachment.

In response both to Lang's remarks and to Novick, I would suggest that one should not contemplate any horror with a view *simply* to what it can teach us about how to deal with our current dilemmas. However, this is as true of the murder of a single innocent as of genocides such as the Holocaust, the Rwandan, the Armenian, and so on. Each atrocity should be appreciated in its distinctiveness and particularity, and accorded the moral attention and moral response it deserves; but, contrary to Novick, I also see distinct value in attempting to mine these atrocities for moral lessons for our own times. (Lang agrees, answering his own criticism.)

However, Novick thinks there is not much, or much of use, to be learned from the Holocaust. I find in Novick at least ten distinct criticisms of the 'lessons of the Holocaust,' and will discuss all but the last two:

1. People take from the Holocaust moral stances that they already hold, rather than actually learning those lessons from an encounter with the Holocaust.
2. For various reasons, the Holocaust has little to teach us that is applicable to our current situation; we can best learn the lessons we need from other sources.
3. Much more urgent moral tasks (racial injustice, world hunger) face American society than taking up a morally appropriate stance toward the Holocaust.
4. Some prominent alleged lessons about the Holocaust itself (for example the culpability of 'bystanders,' the culpability of the US government for not taking action during the war to bomb rail lines to death camps) are not well founded.
5. The American public and government have failed to apply obvious lessons of the Holocaust to comparable atrocities (Bosnia, Rwanda, Cambodia) since that time.
6. The Americanization of the Holocaust has led to strained or banal views about the significance of the Holocaust for Americans (for example, that the US stands for values that are the precise opposite of those of Nazism, or that American commemoration of the Holocaust is particularly appropriate because of American failure to do more to stop the Holocaust or to rescue Jews).
7. Advocates of the importance of a confrontation with the Holocaust often swing inconsistently between claiming that the Holocaust is unique – a claim that is politically reprehensible, as well as counterproductive to any use of the Holocaust for the purposes of moral education – and that it is the repository of universal lessons.
8. The Holocaust is invoked in moral contexts (sometimes, as in 7 above, by claiming that the Holocaust is unique) in such a way as to render any other atrocity virtually trivial by comparison.
9. At the same time, the constant invocation of the Holocaust in relation to other allegedly morally objectionable phenomena has served to trivialize the Holocaust itself.
10. Looking to historical events for moral lessons tends to distort our understanding of history, encouraging oversimplification.

The Uniqueness Controversy

I begin with the related criticisms 7 and 8, which raise issues familiar in philosophical writing on the Holocaust. Novick is right to note the tension between claiming that the Holocaust is unique, and that there are lessons to be learned from it. Lessons require points of comparison. If we are to learn that the bureaucracy of a modern state can be put in service to mass murder, in order to prevent such a thing happening again, we must believe that it is at least possible for modern states other than Germany to do so as well, whether or not any have actually done so. If we are to learn from the Holocaust the horrors to which blind obedience to authority can lead, such blind obedience must exist, or be possible, outside the Nazi context. If the Holocaust were 'unique,' in the sense that nothing could properly be compared with it, these comparisons could not be drawn. This seems an elementary point, but Novick is correct to claim that both views are frequently expressed in American discourse about the Holocaust without a sense of their inherent tension if not outright contradiction.

In addition to this point, Novick is particularly disturbed by the claim of uniqueness, or, more precisely, by the way that claim has been parlayed in discourse about the Holocaust and other atrocities. In one sense, Novick notes, claiming the uniqueness of any historical event is vacuous; no two historical events are exactly alike. On the other hand, every historical event shares some features with other events while being distinctive in other ways. In this sense *no* historical event, including the Holocaust, is unique. One can, however, set up a particular criterion as one's definition of uniqueness, and show that the Holocaust is unique by that criterion – say, a combination of the use of modern technology and an avowed intention on the part of the state to murder every individual of a particular ethnic group. But the choice of that criterion of uniqueness, if not entirely arbitrary, can hardly be vindicated as the only plausible candidate.

So the claim of uniqueness is somewhat arbitrary, but Novick is particularly concerned with its practical effect. 'The assertion that the Holocaust is unique ... is, in practice, deeply offensive. What else can it possibly mean except "your catastrophe, unlike ours, is ordinary."' ¹⁵ This claim is what Novick means by criticism 8, that the Holocaust is invoked in such a way as to imply that other atrocities are almost trivial by comparison.

Proponents of the 'uniqueness thesis' are often sensitive to the concern Novick raises. For example, Alan Rosenbaum, in his preface to the collection *Is the Holocaust Unique? Perspectives on Comparative Genocide*, cautions that any warranted claim to uniqueness must not 'diminish or still the certain moral authority that must be accorded to other groups whose members have also been forced to endure unspeakable atrocities during their history.' ¹⁶ And Steven Katz, perhaps the most prominent uniqueness theorist, says 'In arguing for the uniqueness of the Holocaust, I am *not* making a moral claim' – not saying that it was more evil than other atrocities (slavery, devastation of Native American communities, murder of Armenians by Turks). ¹⁷

Novick regards such disavowals as disingenuous, or at best naive, because these claims take place in a context in which invidious comparisons are being made.

Katz's further argument would seem to exemplify Novick's point. Katz says that by uniqueness he is referring to the fact that never before has a state set out, as a matter of intentional principle, to 'annihilate physically every man, woman, and child belonging to a specific people.'¹⁸ Katz can hardly deny that he has chosen a morally infused criterion of uniqueness; the intention to wipe out an entire people is surely a particularly evil one. It is not as if Katz picked a criterion of uniqueness that could be regarded as historically interesting, but of uncertain moral import – such as the use of modern technology in the service of genocidal policies.¹⁹ Katz thus seems disingenuous, or at least confused, when he says that his uniqueness assertion is not meant as a 'moral claim.'

Rosenbaum's (qualified) sympathy with the uniqueness hypothesis reveals different concerns. He says,

Is it inevitable as many people today fear, that the attenuating hold [the Holocaust] has on our generation will gradually yield to a more generalized noting that the Holocaust was merely only one of many significant horrors that occurred in this century's most horrific conflict?²⁰

That is, Rosenbaum appears to think that the assertion of uniqueness is the only alternative to minimizing some of the distinctive, and morally pertinent, features of the Holocaust among other Nazi crimes (and, perhaps he means to imply, among other twentieth-century atrocities as well). But the Holocaust has some historical and moral features that distinguish it from other Nazi crimes (and from other atrocities as well) – although this is also true of each particular atrocity. (This is the trivial meaning of 'uniqueness'.) To recognize the Holocaust's distinctiveness, and to accord it the moral attention it warrants, it is not necessary to see the Holocaust as, in some total way, 'unique.' Moreover, as Berel Lang notes, the moral horror of the Holocaust would not in the least be diminished if events exemplifying the features thought by Katz or Rosenbaum to constitute that uniqueness were to be repeated in the future.²¹

Although his claim that invoking the Holocaust has the effect of demoting moral concern about other atrocities seems intuitively plausible, Novick actually provides little empirical support for it. Indeed, it is equally plausible to think that, in public contexts (in contrast to scholarly contexts, as above, in which detailed comparisons are drawn), invoking the Holocaust has the effect of calling attention to atrocities that many will regard as somewhat comparable. In fact Novick provides instances of this latter effect, as we will discuss in the next section. It is probably safe to say that instances of both the demoting and the calling attention can be found.

Criteria for Moral Analogies to the Holocaust

Regarding criticism 1, Novick cites several contexts in which the lessons of the Holocaust have been invoked to support a moral stance whose sources clearly lie elsewhere – opposition to 'big government,' environmentalism, animal rights, gun control, and (the most enthusiastic constituency of lessons of the Holocaust) opposition to abortion (spoken of as 'the American Holocaust').²² Yet Novick

recognizes, albeit hesitantly and ambivalently, that this fact does not invalidate a claim that something is a valid or authentic lesson of the Holocaust.²³ We are still left with the question of what makes something an authentic moral lesson of the Holocaust. However, Novick is extremely reluctant to concede that one can produce criteria for the validity or invalidity of moral lessons. The analogy between the Holocaust and whatever it is being analogized to (abortion, harm to the environment) must, he says, simply 'click.' If it does, one cannot persuade that individual to abandon the analogy; if it does not, one cannot get him or her to see it.²⁴ At the end of the chapter on lessons, Novick doubts, as if in conclusion, that useful, much less redemptive, lessons can be learned from the Holocaust.²⁵

However, the view that there are no general, non-subjective, criteria for validity of moral analogies is at odds with the implications of Novick's criticism 5 – that there are, indeed, lessons to be learned from the Holocaust, important ones too, but that relevant parties (such as Western governments) continually fail to heed them. Novick devotes much attention to the Serbian attack on Bosnian Muslims following the break-up of the former Yugoslavia, with the use of concentration camps, the language and motivation of 'ethnic cleansing,' and other features strongly analogous to the Nazi treatment of the Jews.²⁶ He also cites the 1994 Rwandan genocide as meeting 'just about every imaginable criterion' for being a holocaust.²⁷ Novick notes that prominent Jewish organizations called for action to halt the atrocities in Bosnia, citing the Holocaust as a source of their moral concern.²⁸ Moreover, the opening of the Washington Holocaust Museum coincided with the debate concerning Bosnia, and Novick cites several prominent Jews who opined that failure to act in Bosnia would render the ceremonies opening the Museum an empty gesture.²⁹

Novick clearly regards opposition to the Serbian ethnic cleansing of Bosnian Muslims as a plausible and legitimate lesson of the Holocaust. His historically reasonable observation that the American failure to act on it – he acerbically remarks, "the lessons of Vietnam" easily trumped "the lessons of the Holocaust"³⁰ – serves only to reinforce this plausibility.

If Bosnia contains a legitimate lesson from the Holocaust, there must be some moral guideline that renders it so. Before examining what such guidelines might be, let me clarify what Novick is talking about when he speaks of lessons of the Holocaust. He has primarily two categories in mind. One is a particular event in the present (or, in any case, subsequent to the Holocaust), a stance toward which is implied by analogy to the Holocaust – attempting to stop ethnic cleansing in Bosnia, for example. A second is a standing public issue with a moral dimension – abortion, the environment, execution by gas – an appropriate moral stand on which the Holocaust is alleged to provide guidance.

Novick is interested in these two categories because he is concerned with the public functions of the Holocaust in the United States – how the Holocaust has been used to influence policy on moral issues facing American society. He is therefore less interested in a third category of item often discussed in terms of 'lessons of the Holocaust' – general morally significant historical truths to be gleaned from the Holocaust but not directly applicable to distinct events and public issues. Berel Lang provides a thoughtful discussion of such lessons in 'Afterword: Lessons to Learn, or What Future for the Holocaust?'³¹ Some of his examples of lessons are that

the intention to commit genocide might develop incrementally rather than being fully formed at the outset; that since the Holocaust happened once, something like it can happen again; that with respect to genocide there are no legitimate bystanders.

Novick does, in passing, remark on some lessons of this sort – a reminder of the presence of evil in the world, or that science and technology are not necessarily benevolent, or disabusing us of Enlightenment illusions about the ‘perfectability of man.’³² Novick is, however, skeptical of the *value* of such lessons: either they are empty, or we already know them and do not need to learn them from the Holocaust (criticism 2). ‘Most Americans are bombarded with crime in the streets, terrorist bombings, and so know there is evil.’

This is a weak argument. For one thing, the sort of evil involved in ordinary, even violent, crime is not of the magnitude or character of the wholesale intentional slaughter of an ethnic group. More significantly, these deeper truths about bystanders, evil and so on, can be understood at a more or a less profound level, and the Holocaust can be a source of the former. Indeed, somewhat inconsistently, later in the chapter Novick acknowledges a useful Holocaust lesson of this sort that he does regard as salutary – that barbarous deeds can be perpetrated by ‘advanced’ peoples, not only those seen in the West as more primitive and less ‘cultured.’³³

So Novick finds himself occasionally, grudgingly and inconsistently, conceding the legitimacy of some lessons to be learned from the Holocaust. He does not want to explore how one might go about discerning the significant truths to be so garnered, because it seems to him that to do so would provide a reason why one might think it important for the Holocaust to be a significant moral reference point for Americans. His ‘take no prisoners’ approach to the latter issue ill suits his nuanced historical account. He could have argued that Americans have misused the Holocaust, have accorded it too much importance, and even have failed to make use of the lessons there to be gotten, without having to take the extreme and implausible position that (inconsistently) guides his discussion – that there are no important lessons to be gleaned from the Holocaust.

Guidelines for Holocaust Analogies

To answer Novick’s claim that we have no basis for assessing proposed analogies to the Holocaust, I would like to propose some such guidelines. Even if in only a provisional and tentative way, I hope they will suggest the feasibility of an enterprise that Novick rejects, even if he implicitly relies on it in some of his examples. The general idea is that awareness of the Holocaust will sensitize to and elicit appropriate moral concern toward that which is (validly) analogized to it.

Two somewhat distinct directions suggest themselves. One is to require that the analogized phenomenon be, in some overall sense, comparable to the Holocaust. The second is a much more minimal standard, that requires only that the analogized phenomenon share some important morally significant feature with the Holocaust taken in its historical specificity.

The Holocaust-based curriculum provided by the organization Facing History and Ourselves (‘Facing History’) is a good illustration of the latter approach. In use

since the late 1970s, Facing History teachers have taught hundreds of thousands of secondary school children important lessons about prejudice, hatred, the need to stand up against injustice and persecution, the costs of violence, and the need for civic participation. Moving back and forth in time between the Nazi era and contemporary society, Facing History continually encourages students to draw on morally pertinent dimensions of the Holocaust to make connections to their own lives and societies. To give one concrete example, students in a junior high class (12–13-year-olds) studied the Holocaust and focused on ‘bystanders,’ emphasizing the moral cost of inaction. At the time that they were engaged in this unit of study, some youngsters from a nearby school gay-baited and then assaulted a female classmate who was holding hands with another girl. During a discussion of this incident, which was widely reported in the local papers, the Facing History students decided they should respond to this hate-based outrage. They planned and executed an elaborate protest on the Underground, where the assault had taken place. It is clear that their study of bystanders in the Holocaust, and of the costs of hatred, had helped these students to focus their moral attention in a productive and impressive way.³⁴

In one respect, Novick would presumably approve of Facing History’s approach. He worries about a moral tunnel vision that can be promoted by a too Jewish-centered take on the crimes of Nazism. He would approve of a form of Holocaust-awareness that was less parochial, and that linked to other non-Jewish social injustices.

On the other hand, a central part of Novick’s criticism 2 is that the Holocaust is so extreme an example of a moral horror that the sorts of moral dimensions taken up by Facing History in application to contemporary American life – bystanders, prejudice, conformity and so on – are not well learned about from a study of the Holocaust. As Novick says,

I have, in this chapter, expressed doubts about the usefulness of the Holocaust as a bearer of lessons. In large part these doubts are based on the Holocaust’s extremity, which on the one hand makes its practical lessons of little applicability to everyday life.³⁵

Novick is right that, for example, incidents such as the gay-baiting just mentioned do not, in the contemporary US, carry ‘seeds of a Holocaust,’ and forms of racial prejudice, suppression of political dissent, and public indifference to injustice in the contemporary US are not wrong and morally troubling because left unchecked they threaten to lead to a holocaust.³⁶ They are simply wrong in their own right, and Facing History does not imply otherwise. But Novick’s reservations on this matter here implicitly point to an important cautionary guideline regarding the ‘shared morally significant feature’ approach practiced by Facing History – moral ills shared between the Holocaust and other entirely disanalogous situations must be given their appropriate moral due in their particular social and historical context, which are likely to be entirely different from Nazi Germany. In the contemporary United States, incidents embodying such features – an anti-Semitic defacing of a Jewish synagogue, for example – are extremely unlikely to have anything like a ‘holocaustal’ significance. But such incidents are still quite morally troubling in their own right.

Thus, the 'morally significant feature' approach allows for a fairly wide range of moral lessons of the Holocaust, but limits the place of the Holocaust in teaching about them. The Holocaust supplies the source of these lessons; but the lessons themselves cannot legitimately draw on the distinctive moral horror of the Holocaust itself.

The second approach to analogies to the Holocaust is quite different. It requires that the event or circumstance analogized be of sufficient moral gravity, in some overall sense, to say that the Holocaust is analogous to it; the Holocaust then becomes an appropriate source of moral recognition of the event in question. For example, several years ago, in Texas, a black man, James Byrd, was brutally murdered in an appalling instance of racial hatred, by being tied to the back of a truck and dragged through town. Revulsion at this racist murder was widespread in the United States. Racial hatred is a morally significant dimension of the Holocaust, and this incident could profitably be studied under the 'shared moral feature' approach. However, it does not, I suggest, rise to the level of moral gravity – it is simply on too small a scale – to be analogized to the Holocaust in an overall way.

The 'sufficient moral gravity' condition is met, I suggest, by a range of large-scale human atrocities committed by states. I would include, for example (though I do not rest my case on the inclusion of any particular one of these), the Bosnian, Armenian and Rwandan genocides, slavery in the United States, the American bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the starvation and killing of a million and a half Cambodians by the Khmer Rouge, Stalin's starving of many millions of peasants in the early 1930s, the decimation of Native Americans in the United States, the Indonesian treatment of the East Timorese. The intuition operating here is that these atrocities are of sufficient scale and dreadfulness that the moral horror of the Holocaust should be permitted to direct appropriate moral attention to them; and, in addition, that comparisons of the two atrocities can be profitably undertaken in a spirit of dispassionate enquiry that will illuminate both the moral and historical character of each in its particularity.³⁷

This 'sufficient moral gravity' criterion is admittedly quite ill defined; I would be loath to define how 'massive' the scale needed to be to meet the criterion. It does *not*, however, require rough moral *equivalence* to the Holocaust. In part, as mentioned in our 'uniqueness' discussion, this is because the meaningfulness of asserting such equivalence is in question. And in part it is because the attempt to establish such equivalences is fraught with moral perils. But the idea is that some atrocities are so appalling that they cross into something like a distinct moral terrain, occupied by the Holocaust, and that establishing their further equivalence to the Holocaust is unnecessary (as well as problematic). Take the Rwandan genocide of 1994, for example, which Novick is correct to say bears, among genocides, perhaps the closest resemblance to the Holocaust. This atrocity involved the mass slaughter of an ethnically identified people (the Tutsis, as well as many politically moderate Hutus) on the part of a state, with an intention to destroy every member of that group within the borders of the state. Is this genocide morally equivalent to the Holocaust? In about one hundred days, between five hundred and eight hundred thousand people were murdered (at a rate that surpassed the mass killing in the Holocaust), while six million were murdered in the Holocaust.³⁸ Although there is

no uniform agreement that 'numbers matter' when it comes to morality, it is at least *plausible* to regard this numerical difference as involving some moral significance. If so, it will be impossible to gain agreement that the Rwandan genocide and the Holocaust are roughly morally equivalent.

I am guided by the overall standard that every atrocity deserves its appropriate form of moral attention; that attention should not be demoted or curtailed by the thought, 'Atrocity X is not as bad as atrocity Y.' Yet when the Holocaust is utilized to generate that appropriate attention to other atrocities, that is all to the good.

Remember that the proposed criterion is not of 'rough moral equivalence.' I am skeptical that such a concept could meaningfully be applied; and I agree with Novick that it is generally morally distasteful and unproductive to do so. Nor am I taking a stand on the vexing and contested issue of how, and in what ways, similar and different each of the 'candidate atrocities' is to the Holocaust. I have selected atrocities which have in fact been compared to the Holocaust. Some of these comparisons are made in the spirit criticized earlier (pp. 261–2) that, intended or not, has the effect of demoting the non-Holocaust atrocities. But in other cases – and here I may be in disagreement with Novick – the particular character of a given atrocity may well be helpfully brought out and highlighted by comparisons with the Holocaust.

Perhaps a consideration of the category of 'genocide' will help clarify my proposal here. In 1948, the United Nations declared genocide a crime under international law (in the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide), and the concept has subsequently garnered a good deal of political and scholarly attention. Leaving aside problems about the range of groups legitimately considered as targets under the concept of 'genocide' (for example whether to include politically defined groups, as the UN definition does not), all agree that the concept of genocide is meant to mark out a particularly atrocious and abominable form of crime, deserving of the severest condemnation by the international community, and, at least in theory, licensing activity across national boundaries to punish perpetrators of it. (In practice the United Nations has done little in this regard, although the trials in the past few years of alleged perpetrators in the Bosnian and Rwandan genocides are a sign of hope.)

At the same time, no one denies that atrocities short of genocide – such as the Chinese government's massacring approximately five thousand students in the protest in Tiananmen square in 1989, or 'ethnocide' (the destruction of a group's culture without the physical destruction of members of the group themselves) – deserve severe opprobrium and censure from the international community. But it is rightly felt that the concept of 'genocide' picks out a particularly horrific sort of mass atrocity deserving of a distinct form of opprobrium. Moreover, to count as a genocide, not all such atrocities need be thought of as equivalent in moral horror and reprehensibility (depending, for example, on the degree of premeditation, number of people killed, devotion to barring of escape, and so on³⁹).

Similarly, I am suggesting that certain large-scale human atrocities are of 'sufficient moral gravity' to be candidates for analogy to the Holocaust, just as some atrocities deserve to be designated as 'genocides,' while others do not. But this does not mean that every sufficiently morally grave atrocity is *equal* in gravity to the

Holocaust, just as not every genocide is equally grave. Nor, obviously, does failure to meet the 'sufficient moral gravity' standard exclude a crime (such as the murder of James Byrd) from being horrific.⁴⁰

So I have suggested two, not mutually exclusive, guidelines – the 'shared moral feature' and the 'sufficient moral gravity' approaches – for using the Holocaust as a source of 'moral lessons.' In this regard, I disagree with Novick's claim that this cannot, or should not, be done, and in doing so, I draw on some of Novick's own examples related to his different criticism 5 that Americans have failed to learn certain lessons of the Holocaust.

My defense of 'lessons of the Holocaust' so far still leaves in place part of Novick's criticism 2 – that the sort of lessons taught, say, by Facing History about prejudice, injustice and civic participation in the United States could be more profitably gleaned from other sources. To some degree, Facing History itself recognizes this. In its early years, its curriculum gave attention to the Turkish genocide of Armenians in 1915–23, in which (it is estimated) a million and a half Armenians were murdered. And in recent years, the organization has developed curricula focusing directly on African American issues, in recognition that such issues have special pertinence to American school children. The horrors of Cambodia, Rwanda and Bosnia surely deserve comparable attention in the study of mass atrocity, and issues of complicity, indifference, state-sponsored murder, resistance to authority, heroism in the face of appalling inhumanity, the involvement of official religious organizations, and other matters central to the Holocaust, could equally well be learned in these other contexts. In part (though only in part) because these atrocities are much more recent, there is nothing like the same level of documentation, personal testimony, and ethical and religious reflection on these events as there is with regard to the Holocaust.

In addition, however, one suspects another somewhat disturbing factor at play, that Novick mentions briefly, citing Phillip Lopate. Lopate has noted mass slaughters of Cambodians, Bengalis, Ibos (in Nigeria), Indonesian 'communists,' and others, and speculates,

It is hard to escape the conclusion that, to us in North America, those piles of other victims are not as significant as Jewish corpses. Is it simply because they are Third World people – black, brown, and yellow-skinned?⁴¹

I fear that there is some truth to this, if we confine the point to the present and recent past. Although anti-Semitism has been 'the longest hatred,' in contemporary America, even in isolated Christian enclaves such as Whitwell, Tennessee, Jews are still, that is, have become, *white*; they are no longer the paradigm 'other,' as they were in Europe for centuries. I cannot help but look forward to the development of curricula and forms of public attention and recognition of these non-white victims of genocide and other mass atrocities, that would press white Americans to extend their empathy and understanding across America's long-intractable racial divide.

Problems with the Americanizing of the Holocaust

This brings us to two other of Novick's criticisms, 3 (more urgent tasks for Americans than Holocaust remembrance) and 6 (Americanization has led to strained links to Holocaust) (and 2 as well [sources other than the Holocaust provide the moral lessons contemporary Americans require]), relating to the American uses of the Holocaust. The salience of the Holocaust in American consciousness has had the effect of making it seem as if remembering the Holocaust, that is, remembering it in the morally appropriate way, is a vital task for Americans. The placement of the Holocaust Memorial Museum on the Washington Mall symbolizes this view. Imagine if, instead, a museum devoted to American slavery and segregation, or to the mistreatment of Native Americans by the US government and its people, were comparably prominent memorials in the nation's capital. How much more appropriate specifically to Americans would be such a public expression of the importance of coming to terms with the nation's historical mistreatment of African Americans and Native Americans.⁴² (Perhaps the teachers in Whitwell, Tennessee, might go on to create a unit of study that encouraged their students to set out to collect paper clips for every African who died in the Middle Passage en route to slavery in the Americas.)

Admittedly, it is extremely unlikely that museums dedicated to slavery or the mistreatment of the American Indian would ever come to fruition with the widespread public and official support comparable to the Holocaust Museum, even if no Holocaust Museum had been built. Too many public figures, and many ordinary Americans, simply do not want to face these historical deprivations with their continuing legacy of misfortune and injustice visited upon African Americans and Native Americans.⁴³ Indeed, in part because of that continuing legacy, African Americans and Native Americans are themselves ambivalent about memorials to their own past victimization.⁴⁴ To say this, however, is to vindicate Novick's very point. The reluctance to deal with America's own historical injustices is intimately tied to the very urgency of doing so. A main reason Americans have been willing to embrace the Holocaust Museum is precisely that, by contrast, the Holocaust is an atrocity for which Americans bear minimal responsibility.

In light of the relative remoteness of the Holocaust to specifically American history, national leaders have understandably felt compelled to link America to the Holocaust in explanation of American memorializing of the Holocaust in 'remembrance' days and the Museum. This explanation has gone in two quite different directions – one emphasizing American culpability in not doing more about the Holocaust at the time, the other emphasizing the 'un-American-ness' of the Holocaust. Novick is critical of both. He devotes a chapter to rebutting critics of American failure to bomb Auschwitz or rail lines to other death camps, of claims that anti-Semitism (rather than restrictionist sentiment more generally) lay behind not allowing more Jewish refugees to flee to the US, and other alleged failures to do more to rescue Jews (criticism 4).⁴⁵ I am insufficiently knowledgeable to assess these arguments, but it is striking that at the end of the chapter Novick concedes that

A much more energetic program of rescue on all fronts might have reduced the overall toll

by perhaps 1 percent, conceivably 2 percent. Given the absolute numbers involved, this would have been a worthwhile achievement indeed.⁴⁶

Novick is on stronger ground regarding criticism 6 – the strained or banal views about the Holocaust's importance for Americans. Even if Americans *could* have done somewhat more than they did to slow Hitler's genocide, their responsibility for this atrocity is still so much more minimal than their responsibility for their own history of mistreatment of African Americans and Native Americans.

The second public rationale for the prominence of American commemoration of the Holocaust – that America represents the mirror opposite of what Nazism stood for – is even more problematic. This rationale feeds an American triumphalism that acts as if the United States has already achieved the ideals of liberty, justice and equality that its national story valorizes. Witness the following official statement from the council charged with planning the Holocaust Memorial Museum:

This Museum belongs at the center of American life because as a democratic civilization America is the enemy of racism and its ultimate expression, genocide. An event of universal significance, the Holocaust has special importance for Americans: in act and word the Nazis denied the deepest tenets of the American people.⁴⁷

The idea that the United States has uniformly and unequivocally rejected racism is almost laughable, in light of the aforementioned legacy of racial slavery, segregation, and the racist mistreatment of Native Americans. Novick is right to worry that this particular dimension of the Americanization of the Holocaust feeds a lack of concern with urgent American injustices (criticism 3), implying that we have already transcended them.

Despite his irreverent and often sardonic tone, Novick occasionally acknowledges that he too contemplates the Holocaust with horror, awe, and a never-diminished sense that this is an event that can do no less than boggle the mind. Nor does Novick deny that Jews held a distinctive role in the outlook and genocidal policies of the Nazi state. Still, he is right, I believe, to decry common uses of the Holocaust that make it a sort of exclusive Jewish preserve, and that serve to divert attention from more urgent moral ills of our time, or past appalling sufferings of other peoples. In this light, I suggest a general guideline – that every atrocity be given its due, its appropriate form of moral attention and response, be that attempting to prevent mass slaughters that threaten or are in the process of being carried out, bringing perpetrators to justice, honoring the memory of the dead and the loss to the peoples involved, and teaching young people about these crimes. This standard can be used to assess whether, in whatever context, the Holocaust is being used to encourage, or to discourage, that appropriate attention; it can do both.

Novick is also on firm ground in pointing to some absurd, trivial and offensive uses of the Holocaust, as well as to some unfortunate aspects of the excessive Americanizing to which it has been subject. But I cannot follow him in his general attack on the idea that important lessons can be learned by studying the Holocaust – a position driven in part by his desire to undercut the legitimacy of the intensely

American appropriation of the Holocaust. Novick provides little support for this extreme position, and, indeed, takes stands inconsistent with it. As he rightly says, we should have learned from the Holocaust that a genocide was in the making in Bosnia and Rwanda; and that the risk of some American (and European) lives would have been justified in mitigating the horrors that took place in these nations. More generally, as Facing History and other Holocaust-based curricula suggest, it is possible to utilize the Holocaust for meaningful and important moral education on a range of issues. Peter Novick has provided us with a remarkable and essential disquisition on the post-Holocaust history of the Holocaust, one that is enriched by its moral concerns. It should spur us to deeper reflections on some of the most profound and intractable moral concerns of our time.

Notes

1. Dita Smith, 'A Measure of Hope: The Whitwell, Tenn., Holocaust Project Has Spread Far Beyond the Classroom,' *Washington Post*, 7 April 2001, p. C01.
2. Peter Novick (1999), *The Holocaust in American Life*, Boston: Houghton Mifflin.
3. Novick reports a summary of a series of polls taken in the early and mid 1990s, that 97 percent of those surveyed 'knew what the Holocaust was,' many more than knew what Pearl Harbor was, and even more than knew that the Soviet Union fought with the Allies in World War II. *Ibid.*, p. 232.
4. Novick points out that the majority of prisoners liberated from Nazi concentration camps by American (as contrasted with Soviet) troops were not Jews. 'The best estimates are that Jews accounted for about one fifth of those liberated from concentrations camps in Germany by American troops.' *Ibid.*, p. 65.
5. *Ibid.*, pp. 41–4.
6. During this period, the Jews most visibly calling attention to the Holocaust were Jewish leftists, who emphasized the anti-fascist dimension of the struggle against Nazism. *Ibid.*, p. 93. For a more detailed discussion of continuing struggles within the Jewish community over whether Holocaust-consciousness was to be given an anti-fascist and anti-racist direction, or (as Novick emphasizes) a more particularistic and politically conservative direction, see Michael E. Staub (1999), "'Negroes are not Jews': Race, Holocaust Consciousness, and the Rise of Jewish Neoconservatism,' *Radical History Review* 75 (Fall 1999), pp. 3–27.
7. Novick, *Holocaust in American Life*, pp. 177–8.
8. *The Diary of Anne Frank*, published in the US in 1952, made into a popular and prize-winning Broadway play in 1955, and a Hollywood film in 1959, is an only apparent counter-example to Novick's chronological account. *Diary* is not really about the Holocaust itself; the narrative takes place entirely in Amsterdam, omitting Anne's subsequent death in Bergen-Belsen. Moreover, especially the stage and screen versions downplayed the (in any case quite minor) Jewish elements in the diary and in Anne's self-identity, in favor of a more universal message (one very much supported and promoted by Otto Frank, the surviving member of the Frank family, who brought the diary to public attention), including the absurdly hopeful line from the diary, that closes both the play and the film: 'In spite of everything, I still believe that people are really good at heart.' Novick, pp. 117–20. On this issue, a fuller, quite helpful discussion is Hilene Flanzbaum (1999), 'Introduction' to her edited collection, *The Americanization of the Holocaust*, London: Johns Hopkins University Press, pp. 1–4.
9. Novick, *Holocaust in American Life*, p. 1.

10. Because Novick's primary focus is the United States, he gives much less attention to the uses of Holocaust-consciousness in Israel where, arguably, it has done a good deal more direct damage than in the US.
11. It is worth noting that Novick provides very little empirical substantiation for the factual claims on which many of these moral judgments are made. For example, he does not show, or really even attempt to show, that a focus on the Holocaust has served to render Jews more conservative; that conservative trend has affected all ethnic groups, and Novick provides no evidence that Jews as a group have moved further in a conservative direction than have any other ethnic group. Jews remain the only ethnic group besides African Americans that has consistently voted Democratic in national elections.
12. Novick, *Holocaust in American Life*, p. 14.
13. *Ibid.*, p. 12.
14. Berel Lang (1999), 'Afterword: Lessons to Learn, or What Future for the Holocaust?', in his *The Future of the Holocaust: Between History and Memory*, Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, p. 174. Despite this cautionary note, Lang does in fact go on to derive some lessons from the Holocaust. See below, pp. 263–4.
15. Novick, p. 9.
16. Alan S. Rosenbaum (ed.) (2001), *Is the Holocaust Unique? Perspectives on Comparative Genocide*, 2nd edn, Oxford: Westview Press (from Introduction to the first edition), p. 3.
17. Steven T. Katz, 'The Uniqueness of the Holocaust: the Historical Dimension,' in *ibid.*, p. 49.
18. *Ibid.* Novick cites this definition of Katz's on p. 196.
19. My own argument here implies, and I accept this implication, that the Holocaust can be spoken of as worse than other atrocities *in particular respects*, for example in involving a genocidal intention on the part of a state. This is not the same as saying that it is worse *all things considered*, a judgment that one should be less confident about making. But if I understand Novick correctly, he is not really denying that judgments of comparative moral horror can legitimately be made across atrocities, but that the public use of the 'uniqueness hypothesis' in our current circumstances is offensive.
20. Rosenbaum, *Is the Holocaust Unique?*, p. 2.
21. 'Nothing in the enormity of the Nazi genocide would change if that series of acts turned out to be the second, or fifth, instance of its kind.' Cited in Novick, p. 197.
22. Novick, pp. 242–3.
23. Novick says, 'Does the fact that these lessons didn't originate with the Holocaust mean that they aren't really lessons of the Holocaust, or at least not authentic ones? I don't think we should be in a hurry to say that.' *Ibid.*, p. 242.
24. Novick, p. 243. Cf. 'I don't know of any criterion for the aptness of an analogy except the pragmatic one: does it or doesn't it click?' *Ibid.*
25. *Ibid.*, p. 263.
26. Novick speaks of photographs of 'emaciated Bosnians peering out from behind barbed wire, pictures that might have been captioned "Buchenwald, 1945.'" *Ibid.*, p. 251.
27. *Ibid.*, p. 250.
28. "'Stop the Death Camps," was the headline of an advertisement placed in the *New York Times* by three important American Jewish organizations.' *Ibid.*, p. 251.
29. *Ibid.*, p. 252.
30. *Ibid.*, p. 253.
31. Lang, 'Afterword: Lessons to Learn,' pp. 175–93.
32. Novick, pp. 239–40.
33. *Ibid.*, p. 262.
34. See account of this incident, 'Facing History Students Decide to "Stop Talking and Start Doing"', in *Facing History and Ourselves News*, spring 2000, p. 7.

35. Novick goes on to reiterate a different point, that I discussed earlier: 'on the other hand [it] makes anything to which it is compared look "not so bad".'
36. Novick is particularly derisive toward the version of this when anti-Semitism is involved: 'first stop, an anti-Semitic joke; last stop, Treblinka' (p. 178).
37. The comparisons are made, for example, in the collection George J. Andreopoulos (ed.) (1994), *Genocide: Conceptual and Historical Dimensions*, Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press; Rosenbaum, *Is the Holocaust Unique?*; and Laurence Mordekhai Thomas (1993), *Vessels of Evil: American Slavery and the Holocaust*, Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press. We saw above, in the uniqueness discussion, that such comparisons are sometimes, even in the scholarly literature, made in a way that runs afoul of Novick's concern that the Holocaust not be used to demote in significance the atrocities compared to it. However, this is by no means always the case.
38. Account of Rwanda from Jeffrey Sharlet, 'Fierce Debate Divides Scholars of the 1994 Rwandan Genocide,' *Chronicle of Higher Education*, 3 August 2001, pp. A16–A19, and Philip Gourevitch (1997), *We Wish to Inform You That Tomorrow We Will be Killed with Our Families: Stories From Rwanda*, New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux. The use of 'the six million' in reference to the Holocaust brings to the fore an assumption I have been making in referring to 'the Holocaust' – that that term refers specifically to the murder of Jews by the Nazis. Novick's book contains an excellent discussion (pp. 214–26) of the arbitrariness of this use of the term 'Holocaust.' He cites the other oft-employed figure of eleven million, itself a somewhat arbitrary figure, but one meant to encompass the range of non-Jewish victims of Nazism. I make no brief for my use of 'Holocaust' but mean only to be following what has become common usage, a usage that supplies the context for Novick's criticisms.
39. On possible criteria for degrees of moral culpability within genocides, see Israel Charny (1994), 'Toward a Generic Definition of Genocide,' in Andreopoulos, *Genocide*, p. 85.
40. The 'shared moral gravity' criterion is meant to be broader in its reach than 'genocide.' For example, it would include the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and the treatment of Native Americans in the United States, neither of which seems to me usefully called 'genocide.' It is worth noting that the concept of 'genocide' has come to have such power as a term of shared condemnation that all sorts of crimes and (alleged) outrages have come to be called genocides (for example closing of synagogues in the Soviet Union; encouraging birth control and abortion among 'third world' peoples). This debasing of the term 'genocide' is parallel to the process Novick decries, although he does not exactly put it this way, of alleging a too broad range of alleged lessons to be drawn from the Holocaust (criticism 1).
41. Novick, p. 235. Fuller account in Phillip Lopate (1989), 'Resistance to the Holocaust,' *Tikkun* 4 (3), p. 58. Lopate goes on to suspect that both class and race factors are in play here. If Lopate is right about this, his point would probably not, however, have applied to the way the 'piles of corpses' were viewed in the first postwar photographs and accounts, when these Jewish bodies were not generally regarded as 'like us' by most Americans.
42. Between 1984 and 1994, several black organizations and individuals were instrumental in attempting to secure Congressional support for such a museum of African American life. Fath Davis Ruffins, 'Culture Wars Won and Lost, Part II: The National African-American Museum Project,' *Radical History Review* 70 (winter 1998), pp. 78–101.
43. The creation in the early 1980s of a national holiday commemorating Martin Luther King's birthday constituted a significant public recognition of African Americans. However, the public understanding of this national holiday has come to focus on King as a great national leader upholding American ideals of equality and justice, rather than on the actual (and continuing) racial injustices King's life was dedicated to eradicating. See Ruffins, 'Culture Wars', pp. 96–9.

44. Ibid.
45. Novick, 'The Abandonment of the Jews' (ch. 3), *Holocaust in American Life*, pp. 47–59.
46. Ibid., p. 58.
47. Quoted in: James E. Young, 'America's Holocaust: Memory and the Politics of Identity', in Helen Flanzbaum (ed.) (1999) *The Americanization of the Holocaust*, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, p. 73.