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***Narrativized Ethics and Hiroshima:
Harry S. Truman, Homer, and Aeschylus¹***

Michael Palencia-Roth

Introduction

Discussions of the atomic bomb and Hiroshima have to be deeply troubling for anyone. The natural inclination is to turn one's eyes away or to remain silent. Avoidance and silence, however, were not valid options immediately after the Second World War and are not valid options today. The decision – or decisions, for there were many – to drop the atomic bomb on Hiroshima and later Nagasaki raises issues of profound importance for the human community. It compels us to ask who we are as individuals and as members of a society engaged in actions with such devastating consequences. We must ask ourselves as well how otherwise ordinary people come to such decisions and how they justify them – consciously or unconsciously – before or after the fact.

Thousands of pages have been devoted to the topic of the atomic bomb and Hiroshima, but relatively little attention has been paid to the role that narrative played. Yet stories shape the actions of individuals and of cultures. “Narrativized ethics” – which is my own term – may help in understanding how the “Hiroshima narrative” informed the attitudes and decisions of many involved in the Manhattan Project.

Narrativized ethics is primarily of two kinds. First, there is the story that is deliberately constructed, at the conscious level, for explanatory and justificatory purposes. The most frequent use of this kind of narrativized ethics on a national stage occurs in politics, especially during an election or in the run-up to an initiative like going to war, which requires at least the implied, if not the formal, consent of the populace. Second, there is the story that operates at a more unconscious level. This story may sometimes not look like a conventional story, for it tends to be determined by hidden motivations, somewhat like the dreams that are motivated by unconscious desires in Freudian psychoanalysis. This is the story behind the story. In general, at whatever level of awareness, narrativized ethics provides justifications for the beliefs, thoughts, and actions of an individual, a nation, or a culture.

¹ Reprinted, with permission, from *Studies in Moralogy*, No. 74 (February 2015), the academic journal of the Research Center for Moral Science in the Institute of Moralogy in Kashiwa-City, Japan. Professor Palencia-Roth is a senior academic adviser for the Center.

Narrativized ethics can be a useful analytical tool in a number of areas in comparative history, especially when historical circumstances lead to and seem to require the threat of force and/or its application. Consider, for example, the drive toward the East by Alexander the Great, the Roman colonization of much of the known western world, the Muslim expansion which began in the 7th century, the Crusades, the Spanish conquest and colonization of the New World, the treatment of Indians by North Americans, the English colonization of India, the European push into Africa in the 19th century, Russian expansionism, the Japanese occupation of Taiwan, and the so-called War on Terror.

The appeal to justificatory arguments favoring aggression has a long history in the West, especially with the rise of nationalism. The rationale for “Just War Theory,” articulated by St. Thomas Aquinas, who took the term from St. Augustine (*The City of God*), even made its way into 19th-century American law. Chief Justice John Marshall, in an 1823 Supreme Court decision, basing his argument on the Just War Theory used by the Spanish in the New World, delivered a judgment that he named “The Doctrine of Discovery.”² The doctrine stated that Christian nations – in this case, the United States – had the right, by virtue of their “discovery” of non-Christian nations, to appropriate property from Native Americans. The Doctrine of Discovery became part of international law in the 19th century and into the 20th. All justificatory arguments are based on narratives of one kind or another.

The names which triangulate the subtitle of this essay would seem to have little in common. Yet the events leading up to and following August 6, 1945, acquire a profoundly ethical resonance when viewed through the prism of the cultural values underlying both Homer and Aeschylus as they were refracted through the classical and biblical frames of reference of President Truman and a few other central players in this drama. That prism is a kind of narrative lens through which we may better understand not only the past but also the challenges of the present moment. Of course, the manufacture and use of the Atomic Bomb were not a direct consequence of Homer and Aeschylus, or of the Judeo-Christian worldview.

² Francisco de Vitoria, in the 16th century in Spain, convincingly argued against the Just War Theory in the Spanish conquest of the New World, saying in effect that the Spanish Crown had no authority, moral, legal or natural, to appropriate land that, by natural right, belonged to the natives. Chief Justice Marshall ignored that argument. See Vitoria, *Relecciones sobre los indios y el derecho de guerra*, written in 1532.

But Hiroshima and Nagasaki became caught in the web of a grand narrative³ with a largely pre-determined plot⁴ made justifiable by an appeal, conscious or not, to the logic and consequences of the excluded middle, the dropped middle, and the classical form of the Aristotelian syllogism.

Narrativized Ethics I: Harry S. Truman

Although President Truman could have decided against using the atomic bomb, he decided in favor of it because, I believe, he was influenced by two kinds of narrative structures. The first was a plot in which he was a major actor with little freedom to improvise, and the second was a moral tale which provided ethical support for his decision. I do not wish to excuse that decision but to explain how I believe that it became justifiable to him.

President Roosevelt died on April 12, 1945. Thirteen days later President Truman, having previously been kept in the dark, on President Roosevelt's instructions, learned of the Manhattan Project for the first time. He was informed of it by Henry Stimson, the Secretary of War, and General Leslie R. Groves, the general who directed the project to develop the atomic bomb. We do not have a record of Truman's response at the time, but we do have the memorandum by Secretary Stimson which was the basis of the conversation. For my purposes, the most important points are the first, the fifth, the seventh, and the eighth:

1. Within four months we shall in all probability have completed the most terrible weapon ever known in human history, one bomb of which could destroy a whole city.

5. The world in its present state of moral advancement compared with its technical development would be eventually at the mercy of such a weapon. In other words, modern civilization might be completely destroyed.

³ The term "grand narrative" comes from Jean-François Lyotard in his book *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (1979). By grand narrative Lyotard means a narrative structure that is totalizing and is characterized by the appeal to a truth that is considered to be transcendent and universal. All grand narratives contain an ethical component.

⁴ George Steiner, in his influential book on cultural studies entitled *In Bluebeard's Castle: Some Notes toward the Redefinition of Culture* asks with reference to the Holocaust a question that is relevant to my concerns in this essay: "What had turned professional, essentially limited warfare into massacre?" (p. 31) His answer: the massacre was due to a "matter of automatism" in which there is an unstoppable momentum to a process which has been set in motion. In my view, the process which makes the Holocaust or Hiroshima possible comes from a deeper source, narrative itself and the predictive nature of plot. At its deepest level narrative offers perhaps the most fundamental explanation of the world. It is therefore no accident that the first cosmogonies were all narrative in structure.

7. In light of our present position with reference to this weapon, the question of sharing it with other nations and, if so shared, upon what terms, becomes a primary question of our foreign relations. Also our leadership in the war and in the development of this weapon has placed a certain moral responsibility upon us which we cannot shirk without very serious responsibility for any disaster to civilization which it would further.

8. On the other hand, if the problem of the proper use of this weapon can be solved, we would have the opportunity to bring the world into a pattern in which the peace of the world and our civilization can be saved.⁵

From this moment until the end of the war, Stimson and Groves – joined, late in the process, by Secretary of State James F. Byrnes – controlled Truman’s access to information concerning the Manhattan Project.

In White House discussions, arguments for the use of the bomb were emphasized, while arguments against its use were discounted or suppressed.⁶ For example, it is now commonly accepted that General Groves made certain that Truman would not see a petition of July 1945 signed by 69 scientists involved in the Manhattan Project based in Chicago; that petition urged that “purely on moral considerations” the bomb should not be used against the Japanese without explicit warning.⁷

We have nothing in Truman’s own hand which refers even indirectly to the Manhattan Project or the atomic bomb until June 17, 1945, after a boat ride on the Potomac River with some friends. He writes in his diary: “I have to decide Japanese strategy – shall we invade Japan proper or shall we bomb and blockade?”⁸ It is possible that the word “bomb” refers to the atomic bomb, but it could also refer to the more conventional yet also devastating bombing which was already taking place.

⁵ Henry L. Stimson, “The Decision to Use the Atomic Bomb,” *Harper’s Magazine*, vol. 194, no. 1161 (February 1947): 99-100. The original typescript, entitled “Memorandum Discussed with the President. April 25, 1945,” is in the Manuscript Division of the Library of Congress.

⁶ In his massive and detailed study, *The Decision to Use the Atomic Bomb and the Architecture of an American Myth*, Gar Alperovitz departs from two questions. First, to what degree was President Truman apprised by his staff of the probability that the Japanese would have surrendered “unconditionally” if they had known that they would be allowed to keep the emperor? Second, how well did President Truman’s staff help him to understand that Russia’s entry into the war would itself force the Japanese to surrender quickly? (pp. xiii-xiv)

⁷See Robert Jay Lifton and Greg Mitchell, *Hiroshima in America: A Half Century of Denial*, p. 67; Gar Alperovitz, *Op.Cit.*, p. 191.

⁸ Harry S. Truman, *Off the Record: The Private Papers of Harry S. Truman*, p. 47

What appears to have happened in the White House in the spring and summer of 1945 is that whenever moral issues concerning the atomic bomb were raised they were dropped from the discussion. Why this happened is itself a moral issue and central to my concerns. I suggest that narrativized ethics played a role.

In *Hiroshima in America*, Robert Jay Lifton and Greg Mitchell characterize the months before and after August 1945 as a time of “psychic numbing”. For instance, Secretary Stimson in his own diary referred to the bomb as “the gadget,” “the thing,” “the secret” or “the diabolical,” as if he were afraid to name it directly.⁹ A different kind of numbing occurred with President Truman. That is evident in his diary entries made during the Potsdam Conference, which took place between July 17th and August 2nd in a suburb of Berlin which had not been destroyed by the Allies. The day before the conference, Truman toured Berlin and saw the destruction caused by war. He wrote in his diary:

“I thought of Carthage, Baalbek, Jerusalem, Rome, Atlantis [sic], Peking, Babylon, Nineveh; Scipio, Rameses II, Titus, Herman, Sherman, Jenghis Khan, Alexander, Darius the Great. But Hitler only destroyed Stalingrad -- and Berlin. I hope for some sort of peace -- but I fear that machines are ahead of morals by some centuries and when morals catch up perhaps there'll be no reason for any of it.”¹⁰

Several points are of interest here.¹¹ First, Truman may have been an autodidact, but he was a devoted student of history:¹² he could name a number of cities -- east and west, classical and biblical -- destroyed by war. Second, he could name the perpetrators. Third, he identified Hitler as responsible for the destruction of his own city. Fourth, he expressed the fear that the instruments of war would outpace ethical considerations.

⁹ Lifton and Mitchell, *Op. Cit.*, 119. In his excellent study on the myth and psychology of war entitled *A Terrible Love of War*, James Hillman calls this rhetorical strategy a kind of magical thinking which transmutes the potential and actual horror of war into something more acceptable to the mind: thus the language of body counts, scenarios, collateral damage, smart bombs, and so on (p. 3ff).

¹⁰ Truman, *Off the Record*, p. 52. There is a curious slip of the pen here, as Truman appeared to have associated the destruction of Atlantis with the destruction of Atlanta by General Sherman in the American Civil War.

¹¹ In the final analysis, we cannot determine whether or not Truman intended his diaries to remain completely private forever. The question of Truman's intentions is an interesting one but does not alter the kind of rhetorical analysis I am pursuing. Either he was justifying and explaining things to himself or he was speaking to “history.” In either case, narrativized ethics influenced both the substance and form of what he thought and wrote.

¹² One of his favorite classical authors was Plutarch, whom he read frequently. As he wrote in the first volume of his memoirs, entitled *Year of Decisions* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1955), “[as a young man] I pored over Plutarch's *Lives* time and time again I read the standard histories of ancient Egypt, the Mesopotamian cultures, Greece and Rome, the exploits of Genghis Khan and the stories of oriental civilizations, the accounts of the developments of every modern country. . . . Reading history . . . was solid instruction and wise teaching” (p. 119). Truman continued to read Plutarch and to think about the lessons of history well into his presidency

See also Merle Miller, *Plain Speaking: An Oral Biography of Harry S. Truman*, pp. 69-70.

All this is fairly clear. Yet most revealing is the stance that Truman took toward the events described and what he did not say. He removed himself from the calculus of war and placed the responsibility for destruction elsewhere. He even removed himself from the moral debate about the machines of war. He did this even though he was at the center of it all.

On July 18th, after being told of the successful testing of the atomic bomb, Truman confidently wrote in his diary: “the Japs will fold up . . . when Manhattan appears over their homeland.”¹³ The term “Japs” is characteristic of the mentality of the 1930s and 1940s. There is no record in Truman’s diaries of him referring to the Italians as “Wops” or to the Germans as “Krauts” or “Fritzes”. The stereotyping of the Japanese in this manner became part of the psychic numbing which made the decision to deploy the atomic bomb easier.

On July 25th Truman made of the longest diary entry of this period of his presidency. It is worth quoting at some length:

I had a most important session with Lord Mountbatten and General Marshall before [meeting with Stalin and Churchill]. We have discovered the most terrible bomb in the history of the world. It may be the fire destruction prophesied in the Euphrates Valley Era, after Noah and his fabulous Ark.

This weapon is to be used against Japan between now and August 10th. I have told the Sec. of War, Mr. Stimson, to use it so that military objectives and soldiers and sailors are the target and not women and children. Even if the Japs are savages, ruthless, merciless and fanatic, we as the leader of the world for the common welfare cannot drop this terrible bomb on the old capital [Kyoto] or the new [Tokyo].

He [Mr. Stimson] and I are in accord. The target will be a purely military one and we will issue a warning statement asking the Japs to surrender and save lives. I’m sure they will not do that, but we will have given them the chance. It is certainly a good thing for the world that Hitler’s crowd or Stalin’s did not discover this atomic bomb. It seems to be the most terrible thing ever discovered, but it can be made the most useful.¹⁴

In this remarkable diary entry, Truman first placed Japan into a Judeo-Christian context by describing the bomb as somehow related to biblical prophecy which is then somehow also connected to Japan itself. In addition, Truman linked Japan to the sinful races around Noah after the Great Flood. Put another way: Truman has brought Japan within the moral orbit of the West in order to account for its destruction.

¹³ Truman, *Off the Record*, p. 53.

¹⁴ See Truman, *Off the Record*, pp. 55-56.

Second, he adopted the passive voice, saying that the bomb “is” to be used; this strategy distanced Truman from the decision itself; it also suggests that, psychologically, Truman was merely acquiescing to a decision which had been taken earlier. Third, the target is to be military only. This twice-repeated statement is either an outright lie or a self-protective delusion on Truman’s part, for he knew full well that a single atomic bomb could destroy an entire city and therefore that most of the casualties would be civilian. Fourth, Truman described the Japanese people, not just the military, as “savagely, ruthless, merciless and fanatic,” a description which merged the civilian with the soldier and made the entire Japanese nation, including women and young children, into an army. Fifth, Truman placed himself and the Allies on the high moral ground as “the leader of the world for the common welfare” and, because of that, decided to “save” Kyoto and Tokyo.¹⁵ Sixth, Truman said that the Allies will first warn the Japanese of the bomb. In fact, however, Truman had already agreed with the Select Committee’s recommendation not to warn the Japanese but to drop the bomb as a surprise in order to “shock” them into surrender.¹⁶ The word “shock” comes up in several documents of this time period. Seventh, Truman described the United States as the only nation moral enough to possess this “most terrible thing ever discovered.” Eighth, Truman considered that this most terrible thing “can be made the most useful,” a point to which I will return later.

We know from several first-hand accounts that Truman’s reaction after the bomb was dropped on Hiroshima was one of “extreme excitement and pleasure,” with no immediate thought of innocent victims.¹⁷ After both bombs were dropped, Truman received letters and telegrams of all sorts, the majority congratulatory but some critical. He replied in blistering language to a telegram critical of his decision from the Federal Council of the Churches of Christ in America.

¹⁵ I find it ironical that Kyoto was originally the first city on the intended target list and later, on August 10th and 11th, as Truman became impatient for Japan to surrender, Tokyo went to the head of the list as the next target of the Atomic Bomb. Yet after the war ended, one of the ways that Truman defended his decision to bomb Hiroshima and Nagasaki was to say that he had spared Kyoto and Tokyo.

¹⁶ I have sometimes wondered if the “Shock and Awe” campaign in the first Iraq war were not a reference by some in the Bush administration, their hubris intact, to the Hiroshima bomb and its effects, in the expectation of a sudden capitulation and then the glorious reconstruction of a devastated Iraq. If so, then the Manhattan Project and Hiroshima became a narrative influential in the run-up to that war.

¹⁷ The words are from Gar Alperovitz, *Op.Cit.*, p. 513. A United Press reporter wrote that Truman “had never been happier” (p. 513).

Truman wrote: “Nobody is more disturbed over the use of Atomic bombs than I am but I was greatly disturbed over the unwarranted attack by the Japanese on Pearl Harbor and their murder of our prisoners of war. The only language they seem to understand is the one we have been using to bombard them. When you have to deal with a beast you have to treat him as a beast.”¹⁸ Vengeance and payback are motives. Moreover, he considered the atomic bomb to be fully justified because, after all, the Japanese were “beasts.” The attitude behind Truman’s words is of great significance.

Narrativized Ethics II: Homer, Aeschylus, and Logic

How is all this related to Homer and to Aeschylus, to excluded and dropped middles, and to the syllogism? Let us focus on a single passage from Book 9 (ll. 105-115) of the *Odyssey*, both in Greek and in Robert Fitzgerald’s English translation. Since Homer’s language is relevant to my analysis, his terminology requires comment:

ἔνθεν δὲ προτέρω πλέομεν ἀκαχήμενοι ἦτορ. (105)
 Κυκλώπων δ’ ἐς γαῖαν ὑπερφιάλων ἀθεμίστων
 ἰκόμεθ’, οἳ ῥα θεοῖσι πεποιθότες ἀθανάτοισιν
 οὔτε φυτεύουσιν χερσὶν φυτὸν οὔτ’ ἀρόωσιν,
 ἀλλὰ τὰ γ’ ἄσπαρτα καὶ ἀνήροτα πάντα φύονται,
 πυροὶ καὶ κριθαὶ ἠδ’ ἄμπελοι, αἳ τε φέρουσιν (110)
 οἶνον ἐριστάφυλον, καὶ σφιν Διὸς ὄμβρος ἀέξει.
 τοῖσιν δ’ οὔτ’ ἀγοραὶ βουλευφόροι οὔτε θέμιστες,
 ἀλλ’ οἳ γ’ ὑψηλῶν ὀρέων ναίουσι κάρηνα
 ἐν σπέεσι γλαφυροῖσι, θεμιστεύει δὲ ἕκαστος
 παίδων ἠδ’ ἀλόχων, οὐδ’ ἀλλήλων ἀλέγουσιν. (115)

In the next land we found were *Kyklopes*,
 giants, louts, without a law to bless them.
 In ignorance leaving the fruitage of the earth in mystery
 to the immortal gods, they neither plow
 nor sow by hand, nor till the ground, though grain—
 wild wheat and barley—grow untended, and
 wine-grapes, in clusters, ripen in heaven’s rain.
Kyklopes have no muster and no meeting,
 no consultation or old tribal ways,
 but each one dwells in his own mountain cave
 dealing out rough justice to wife and child,
 indifferent to what the others do.

Odyssey, 9: 105-115

¹⁸ Harry S. Truman, *Dear Harry: Truman’s Mailroom, 1945-1953. The Truman Administration through Correspondence with “Everyday Americans,”* p. 295.

One may ask why Odysseus is telling King Alkinoös at this very moment about the Cyclops, this monstrous race he has encountered. It is a familiar story. Having arrived at King Alkinoös's kingdom, exhausted and near death, Odysseus has been revived by food and drink and by celebrations in his honor, though no one yet knows his name. After the celebrations, he hears a blind minstrel sing about the exploits of the great hero Odysseus. Overcome with emotion, he cries. Seeing his tears, King Alkinoös asks about them. Odysseus confesses that he is the person whom the minstrel has just praised. Then he begins to recount his adventures in such a way as to let King Alkinoös know that he, too, is civilized, and therefore worthy of the hospitality he has just received. This he accomplishes by telling the King of a race that is as different from the two of them as it is possible to be, a race that is non-civilized, barbarous, and even inhuman. His main narrative strategy depends on the logic of the excluded middle.

In western philosophy, the principle of the excluded middle is one of the logical principles at the foundation of precision in logic. A standard formulation of the excluded middle is to say "either A is B, or A is not B." That is, every individual in the universe is a member either of the class "A" or of "not-A" (B). There is no middle; it is excluded. In Latin, this is known as the principle of *tertium non datur*, there is no third term. There are only two terms ("A" and "not-A"): such binaries are absolute and exclusive.

In the cited passage, the first important word in Odysseus's binary conceptual universe is "Kyklopes" in the English or "Κυκλώπων" in the Greek which means Cyclops in modern English and refers to a race of beings characterized by a single round eye in the center of their foreheads and gigantic size. This appearance distinguishes them from every other race. Odysseus is here depending on certain traditions in Greek ethnography of both actual and fabulous races. Even today, the classification of peoples may be based in part on such characteristics as appearance, eating habits, and language. As far as we know, the Greeks originated this kind of thinking in the West, and in addition to being the origin of anthropology it is as well the origin of stereotyping as a mental process. Stereotyping generally depends on the exaggeration of a physical quality like skin color or noses, which results in the objectification of the person.¹⁹

This passage is built on a series of negations around the idea of the differences between civilized and non-civilized cultures. These "louts" are "without a law" to bless them. One of the terms for law in Greek is "θέμις." Therefore these louts are "ἄθεμιστων" or "lawless." "θέμιστες," the plural form of "θέμις," is a mostly untranslatable term which means "right custom" or "the proper procedure" or "the proper social order," and it was considered to be one of the main gifts of the gods to humankind.

¹⁹ For an excellent overview of the images of stereotyping, see Katérina Stenou, *Images de l'Autre: La différence: Du mythe au préjugé*.

As good as this English translation by Robert Fitzgerald is, it does not transmit to the reader how effectively the repetition of “θέμις” as a literary device builds toward a concluding condemnation of the Cyclops. Variants of the word are used three times in the passage: ἀθεμίστων (106), θέμιστες (112), θεμιστεύει (114) – as a genitive plural adjective in the negative, as a noun, and as a verb. To be “ἀθεμίστων” is to be unable to behave in society according to proper custom. To be non-civilized is to be ignorant of agriculture as well as the importance of assembly; it is to be indifferent to others; it is to live not in cities or communities but in isolated caves.

If non-civilized societies are characterized by these and other negatives (the neither nor structure, οὔτε . . . οὔτ’, is also used), then civilized societies are going to be the opposite. They are going to be lawful and law abiding; they will conduct themselves according to proper custom; they will know something of agriculture and viticulture; they will conduct their business in democratic meetings; they will live in communities and they will care about their citizens and their opinions. Upon hearing Odysseus speak in this manner, Alkinoös, being civilized, recognizes him as someone who is also civilized. Without actually saying so, Alkinoös accepts Odysseus’s characterization of the Cyclops, despite being the son of Poseidon, as irredeemably “other”.

It is a brilliantly successful strategy on the part of Odysseus. The complete otherness of the Cyclops will be considered as sufficient justification for aggression.²⁰ Odysseus blinds Polyphêmos, plunging a burning stake into that single eye-socket so that, in Homer’s words, the eyeball burned and, as the blood flowed out of the socket, its roots crackled and hissed around the stake.

One sometimes forgets, because of the terrible beauty of Homer’s language and the heroic sweep of the narrative, just what the cultural values are in Homer’s epics, and what kind of behavior is being advocated as a survival tactic and in the name of civilization. There is no middle position in this episode. The middle is excluded.

President Truman is not Odysseus and the Japanese are not a Cyclopean people, but the attitudinal structure of the relationship is linguistically similar. Truman arrogates to himself the high ground of civilization, of right conduct, of moral authority, of justice, of reasonableness. The Japanese are stereotyped as “Japs,” they are savage, ruthless and fanatic, their conduct of the war is unwarranted and murderous, they are beasts. For Truman – as for Odysseus and Alkinoös – the middle has been excluded. Neither dialogue nor compromise is even considered. Surrender must be unconditional. The only alternative to unconditional surrender is total destruction.

²⁰ There is enough blame to go around. Odysseus and his men have violated the guest-host relationship by entering the Cyclops’ cave uninvited, lighting a fire and helping themselves to some of the Cyclops’ cheese while the Cyclops is absent. Upon returning to his cave, the Cyclops also violates the guest-host relationship by killing and eating several of Odysseus’ men. Vengeance thus becomes an additional motive.

There is no third outcome. *Tertium non datur*. On August 7th, *The New York Times* published a front-page article announcing the bombing of Hiroshima. President Truman is quoted as saying that if the Japanese did not accept the American ultimatum of unconditional surrender, “they may expect a rain of ruin from the air the like of which has never been seen on this earth.” Biblical and apocalyptic language has been added to Greek categories of thought and of ethnographic distinctions.

Up to this point, my analysis still does not explain how Truman could have come to such a morally dark and difficult decision that he knew would kill perhaps 100,000 people in an instant. For that part of the story we turn to Aeschylus’s *Oresteia*, in particular to the end of that trilogy, *The Eumenides*.²¹

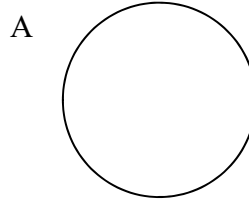
At this climactic point a trial is underway. Orestes has been accused of the murder of his mother. Apollo is his defense attorney. Knowing that Orestes really did kill his mother, Apollo shifts the grounds of his defense in order to prove that the killing of one’s mother is not a serious crime and that therefore Orestes must be declared innocent. “The mother is no parent of that which is called her child, but only nurse of the new-planted seed that grows. The parent is he who mounts” (ll. 658-660). This statement is so astonishing and on the surface so indefensible that Apollo knows that he must quickly win his argument or lose the trial. Dramatically, he states, “I will show you proof. . . . There she stands, the living witness, daughter of Olympian Zeus” (ll. 662-664). He points to the goddess Pallas Athene, who, along with the chorus, must decide Orestes’s guilt or innocence. She agrees with Apollo’s argument and, declaring that “there is no mother anywhere who gave me birth” (l. 736), casts the vote which results in the acquittal of Orestes.

Pallas Athene agrees to what she knows is a lie. She and the rest of the chorus know that Pallas Athene had a mother named Metis. When she was pregnant with Pallas Athene, Metis was swallowed by Zeus and kept in his stomach. Pallas Athene was then born through Zeus’s head rather than through the birth canal of her mother. In Apollo’s argument, the mother disappears, the middle term is dropped. Orestes, therefore, cannot have killed his mother because, in this argument, he had no mother.

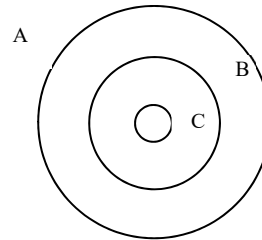
Let us not dismiss this argument as ludicrous. Let us acknowledge, rather, that it has a strangely seductive logical power. That power may perhaps best be visualized through applying Leonard Euler’s circles for the distribution of terms to this story. Euler was an 18th-century Swiss mathematician.

²¹ Since I am depending on plot and not on the use of language for my analysis here, I quote only from the English translation by Richard Lattimore, *Orestia, The Eumenides*, pp. 158-162, ll. 657-753.

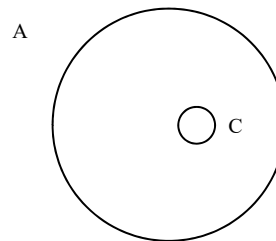
Using Euler's circles, we may say that if we take class A (or Zeus)



and then class B (or Metis) with the element C (or Athene) within it, then the most succinct way of describing the position of C (Athene) if B (Metis) is made a class within A (Zeus) is to draw the circles in the following manner:



Therefore, C is within A; C is within class A:



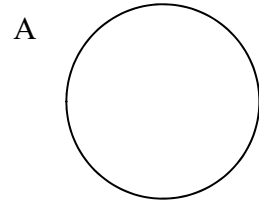
It is no longer necessary to cite B, the middle element, in order to describe the position of C. Therefore, the middle is dropped and B (or Metis, Athene's mother) "vanishes." In this line of argument, as strange as it may seem, there can be no matricide. Athene supports Apollo's argument further when she states that she is "always for the male with all [her] heart and strongly on [her] father's side" (ll. 737-738).

Perhaps another reason why Apollo's argument appears convincing is that, by analogy, it makes an appeal to syllogistic processes in which the middle also appears to be dropped. This is a classic form of the syllogism: If A, then B; and if B, then C; therefore, if A, then C. The middle term, B, is dropped in the concluding third movement of this process.

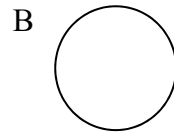
One should note, however, that even though the middle is dropped, this does not mean that it has actually ceased to exist. In fact, logicians could argue that it continues to exist because it is the carrier of the meaning, because it links A with C. But Apollo asks the jury to conclude that the middle *has vanished in fact*. And Athene accepts the story and the argument. Her decision is the result of narrativized ethics at work.

President's Truman's decision to obliterate Hiroshima in an instant – men, women, and children, civilians as well as soldiers – owes its justificatory logic to a distribution of terms resembling that of Euler's circles. Truman's thinking, like that of Aeschylus, may also be visualized with the aid of Euler's circles.

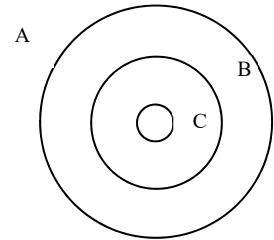
Let us take the city of Hiroshima as class A:



Let us take the people of Hiroshima as class B, within the city itself:



Let us take, further, the Japanese military as class C, which is stationed among the people of Hiroshima. The most succinct way of describing the position of C or the Japanese military, if it is made a class within B or the people of Hiroshima, and the people of Hiroshima are made a class within A or the city itself, is to say that class C is within class A.



Class B becomes superfluous as a logical class in order for the position of C to be described. Class B was dropped in Truman's thinking and Hiroshima re-defined as a purely military target; in effect, he willed the non-combatant population of Hiroshima out of existence in a theoretical sense. The dropping of the middle at this stage of the process resembles what happened in White House meetings in spring and summer of 1945 when sustained discussions of the morality of the atomic bomb were also dropped.

Recall that Truman stated emphatically in his diary entry of July 25, 1945, that "women and children" are *not* to be the target of the atomic bomb. Yet, inevitably, they were the target, along with the military, because they occupied an actual space, despite Truman's theoretical and abstract redefinitions of them. Reality will always trump theory and logic, but theory and logic, even twisted logic, may have an effect on reality. Narrativized ethics here becomes a kind of narrativized logic, subservient to ends which justify means.

Narrativized Ethics III: Consequences

The story that Truman told himself is either a gigantic lie or a gigantic self-deception. That he somehow felt this narrative to be a lie, despite relying on it at the time, is evidenced by the fact that in later years, while not admitting guilt for being responsible for the instant annihilation of some 200,000 people, most of them civilians, he attempted over and over to restore a moral component to his decision. Thus, he repeatedly drew attention not to the lives that were actually lost because of the atomic bomb but to all those other lives that might have been lost had the atomic bomb not been deployed. He said that he dropped the bomb in order to save American lives and in order to save those Japanese lives – all the women and children – that an invasion of Japan would have cost. In later years, the characterization of the Japanese people as beasts is dropped from his public and private ruminations. To me, that is a sign of a private expiation that is too horrible to be made conscious.²² The story protects the psyche.

President Truman was of course not the only important American to have relied on narrativized ethics for a justification of his actions and thoughts. As an interpretive method, narrativized ethics may be applied to several of the major figures involved in the Manhattan Project, from its generals to its scientists, even to its most famous journalist, William L. Laurence. The Greek and the biblical frames of reference were never very far from the thoughts of these men, as the following examples demonstrate.

Let us review the most famous version of the Aristotelian deductive syllogism. All men are mortal. Socrates is a man. Therefore Socrates is mortal. John Stuart Mill criticized deductive logic on the grounds that it could not lead to the discovery of new knowledge and that it merely could be used to confirm the truth of the major premise. For John Stuart Mill, in this case the major premise of “all men are mortal” already contains within it both the minor premise and the conclusion. J. Robert Oppenheimer, the scientific director of the Manhattan Project, recognized this truth about atomic bomb research when he admitted that the use of the bomb was implicit in its discovery and testing.²³ He was not the only one.

²² One can sense regret, as well as perhaps suppressed guilt, in notes that Truman made for a speech delivered on December 15, 1945. The decision, he wrote, was difficult because it meant “the wholesale slaughter of human beings . . . blotting out women, children, and noncombatants” (Cited by Alperovitz, *Op. Cit.*, pp. 566-567). This kind of language is nowhere to be found in the lead-up to Hiroshima and Nagasaki or in his immediate reactions afterwards.

²³ Lifton and Mitchell, *Op. Cit.*, p. 155.

The Interim Committee on the use of the bomb took that use for granted in its meeting of May 31, 1945, as did the Scientific Panel in its report of June 16, 1945.²⁴ In his memoir, *Year of Decision*, Truman himself said: “I regarded the bomb as a military weapon and never had any doubt that it should be used” (p. 419). In other words, once the Manhattan Project was conceived, once the atomic bomb became a reality, Hiroshima was logically inevitable. Narrativized ethics became part of the justification of that inevitability.

Let us return now to a statement from the end of Truman’s diary entry of July 25th. There Truman muses that “this most terrible thing ever discovered . . . can be made the most useful.” I think of this comment as a Promethean moment, a justification found in Aeschylus’s drama, *Prometheus Bound*. As is well known, Prometheus stole fire from the gods and gave it to humankind, thus making all sorts of technological advances possible. As dangerous as fire may be, it is also potentially useful and beneficial. Whether or not he was actually aware that he was doing so, Truman was echoing a view common within the scientific community that atomic bomb research was itself a Promethean enterprise. It was daring and dangerous, even perhaps “forbidden,” for the scientists all knew that they were probing the deepest secrets of the universe itself in order to create a weapon of unimaginable destructive power.

William L. Laurence, science correspondent for the *New York Times*, was hired in secret by General Groves to follow the Manhattan Project from start to finish so that, at the appropriate time, he could tell its story to the American people. He wrote two influential books on the subject. His frame of reference for both books is Greek and biblical. In this first of these books, *Dawn over Zero: the Story of the Atomic Bomb*, published in 1946, he entitles its three parts as “Genesis,” “Atomland-on-Mars,” and “Armageddon.”²⁵ “Genesis” narrates the first atomic test in the New Mexico desert on July 16, 1945. He reports his initial reaction: “One felt as though one were present at the moment of creation when God said: ‘Let there be light’” (p. 11). Another observer, Professor George Kistiakowsky of Harvard, thought that the scene was one of “doomsday” and he imagined that this is how “the last millisecond of the earth’s existence” would look (p. 11).

²⁴ Alperovitz, *Op. Cit.*, pp. 163-164, 188-189.

²⁵ William L. Laurence, *Dawn over Zero: The Story of the Atomic Bomb*.

Laurence later compares the search for the atomic bomb with the search for the legendary and impossible philosopher's stone that transmutes elements into gold (p. 254), and he ends his book with a hymn to Prometheus, calling him "the first scientist" (p. 273), the great "liberator," implying that his modern avatars have liberated the world from "bondage" (p. 273) and created the potential for "a new promised land of plenty" (p. 274). In a second book entitled *Men and Atoms: The Discovery, the Uses and the Future of Atomic Energy*, published in 1959, he entitles Part I (of five) "The Second Coming of Prometheus," mingling in that single phrase narratives from Greek and biblical cultures.²⁶

This rhetorical hubris exalting scientists and decision makers, using narrativized ethics, is in my view dangerous. Such a narrative divinizes the human intellect, divinizes human power, and exalts the United States above all other nations, arrogating to America the authority to determine the fate of other nations in an absolute manner. One wonders, finally, about the real meaning of J. Robert Oppenheimer's reaction to that first atomic test of July 16, 1945. He said that as he saw the atomic flash, two lines from the *Bhagavad Gita*, which he had studied in the original Sanskrit, flashed through his mind: "I am become death, the shatterer of worlds."²⁷ Was he thinking of the bomb itself? Was he thinking of himself and his fellow scientists? Was he thinking of the human race in general? Or was as he, in essence, pointing directly at us? We are, after all, the stories that we tell ourselves, and we use those stories, consciously or not, to justify our thoughts and actions.

²⁶ In this regard, let us note the title of a recent biography on the principal scientist on the Manhattan Project: *American Prometheus: the Triumph and Tragedy of J. Robert Oppenheimer* by Kai Bird and Martin J. Sherwin.

²⁷ *Time Magazine*, November 8, 1948, p. 77.

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