

Guillotine Ethics: An Exploration of The Final Irony

“If Jesus was around today, we would kill him with lethal injection. I call that progress.”

Kurt Vonnegut, *Armageddon in Retrospect*

Introduction

For some morbid reason that I don't remember, I was on the Wikipedia page for famous last words the other day. What a concept that is, the inherent significance of the very last phrase crawling from a dead man's mouth, like the last reverberation of a church bell -- and a Wikipedia page for it nonetheless, a communal, peer-reviewed epitaph on a mass grave! What these sayings do is illuminate the tendencies of certain historically-recurring personalities: rockstars playing with revolvers at house parties: “What do you think I'm gonna do, blow my brains out?” and “I'll show you that it won't shoot,” the last assurances of Terry Keith and Johnny Ace. The words show us the peacemongers and warlords, Jesus' famous “It is finished” and George Harrison's “Love one another;” Edward Teller, whose last name is the first half of the hydrogen bomb's surrogate fathers and was known among nuclear-physicist friends as the fourth Hungarian Horseman of the Apocalypse, said through the breaths of a fatal stroke that he “should've been a concert pianist.” Hugo Chavez, the man personally responsible for my own expulsion from my country along with the biblical exodus of 7.7 million refugees from Venezuela (now a failed state on his account), said on his cancerous deathbed to a doctor in Cuba - he did not trust the nation over which he ruled with his own affliction- , “Yo no quiero morir, por favor no me dejen morir” (“I don't want to die, please don't let me die.”) The last words of democratically-elected Chilean President Salvador Allende in his final address: “¡Viva el pueblo! ¡Vivan los trabajadores!” (“Long live the people! Long live the workers!”) before he secluded himself in the presidential office, under bombing by the air force, and shot himself through the head with an AK-47 gifted to him by Fidel Castro, as to elude torture at the hands of the CIA-backed military coup of General Augusto Pinochet. Thirty-three years later, Pinochet died of a heart attack in 2006 with 300 remaining criminal charges from his twenty-three-year military dictatorship, from which there are records of at the very least 27,255 tortures and 2,279 executions. He called out to his wife with his final breath, “Lucy.”

Those last few are three 20th-century men: two dictators on pasteurized hospital beds calling for life and loved ones, versus a democratically-elected President rallying his people with the final touch of his breath - the next thing that came into contact with his mouth was the barrel of an assault rifle. There is a supreme irony in the nature of state violence and the deaths of its offenders: what happens when the

apparatus designed to protect you shoots you dead in the street? What happens when “for the people, by the people, of the people” descends into the hands of some of the most violent individuals on the planet? Any response can only prove one thing, that violence only multiplies – “*La haine attire la haine*,” (“Hatred breeds hatred”). In one particular, enigmatic, and grandiose case, the French public were both the perpetrators and the proprietors of such determined violence. The question is this: *What constitutes a just end to the men of unjust regimes?*

I have a friend who is incredibly sympathetic to the story of Marie Antoinette. She takes the mademoiselle to be a young, scared girl married off to a nation that never reciprocated in her the pride that she had in it. Antoinette’s last words: “*Pardonnez-moi, monsieur. Je ne l’ai pas fait exprès.*” (“I’m sorry, sir, I didn’t do that on purpose.”) She seemed more occupied with personal kindness than the instrument of mass murder in front of her; on a platform saturated with the blood of her friends and family, she had accidentally stepped on the foot of the man who pulled the guillotine’s lever. Within the same minute of her apology, her head was mechanically severed from her body and fell into its appropriate receptacle. This sort of execution was more than commonplace in revolutionary-era France at the marvelous hands of a machine with a newly-invigorated and exceedingly unambiguous purpose: the guillotine. It was decided by the bloodthirsty public of France (almost literally - the guillotine produced such an indulgence of gore that glass barriers were put in place around the base of the mechanism to prevent onlookers from being covered in blood) as the chief means of execution for the entirety of the revolutionary era on the basis of its *humaneness*. It was an improvement to the previous means of decapitation - a big man and a big sword - as it nearly eliminated the gruesome possibility of human error, as seen in the unfortunate execution of Mary, Queen of Scots, whose head required two grisly blows to be severed. The guillotine, in turn, could “deliver a humane, egalitarian punishment that did not cause unnecessary pain or torment, did not distinguish between noble and commoner, and could execute up to 20 people per hour” (NIH.gov). My question: what moral and ethical concerns arise with the widespread adoption of a more “painless” execution method?

I. Is the Procedure Itself More Civilized?

The mechanics of the guillotine are relatively simple. The device consists of a wooden structure 10 to 12 feet high that houses, guides, and provides (through the release of a lever-operated pulley system) the blow of a diagonal blade in a vertical line through the nape of the condemned's neck - that individual being restrained at the bottom of the instrument by use of a specially-designed pillory. Generally, there is a receptacle for which the head is to fall into, and in higher-profile, i.e. more attended cases, a splash guard is placed outside the head receptacle. An image of the guillotine provides the viewer with a very clear and macabre conception of the machine's purpose:

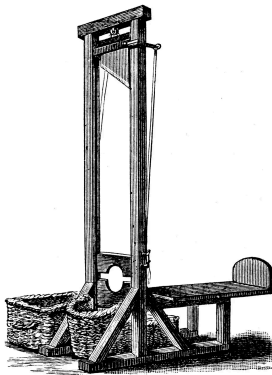


Fig. 1. Courtesy of Encyclopedia Britannica. Visible in this image are the aforementioned modified pillory that restrains the unfortunately condemned, the basket for the dead cranium, the diagonal blade and the pulley system.

The question is whether or not the guillotine is more humane than the alternative - humane in this case being defined by myself as “not causing excess or unrelated suffering to the actual death itself, suffering being both direct physical pain as well as emotional and psychological torment”.

To answer this question one must consider alternative means of execution of the era, of which there are essentially two modes: beheading and otherwise. The previous means of beheading involved a rather large man with an equally large sword (or ax) who would have the beneficiary lie over a piece of wood or stone to receive their court-mandated divorce of head from body. This method was subject to the error of the executioner - an indirect hit would result in a partially severed and sometimes still animated head, allowing the victim's eyes and mouth to apparently move and provide a generally unpleasant viewing experience for all those who had simply come to enjoy a family-friendly decapitation rather than such a display of torment and existential suffering. “Even the most skilled of executioners could botch a beheading [...] One executioner reminded the National Assembly [in support of the guillotine] of the Duc de Lally, whose beheading via sword was even more gruesome - he required so many blows that he

eventually had to be flipped onto his back to fully sever the head from the body” (NIH.gov). Since the mechanized guillotine basically eliminated the potential for human error, it was very much a more reliable and definitive beheading.

Non-beheading executions were essentially twofold: hanging and firing squad. While it was the chiefest non-beheading execution method since before even the dark ages, death by asphyxiation could take up to twenty minutes for each individual and was notoriously unreliable. A weak neck or a tight rope could result in a gruesome decapitation, and a thick neck or loose noose would allow the victim to survive with mild discomfort. An extended asphyxiation of course resulted in a lengthy and appalling process of suffering for the victim that was inherently inhumane, but the true cause of disadoption of this method was because the French did not have the time to sit around and watch one person choke for twenty minutes when they had the whole Ancien regime to publicly murder. While it was most definitely a crueler execution, the guillotine was chosen over hanging not for an ethical rationale but rather on the basis of efficiency.

In regards to the firing squad, the newly-invented rifled musket afforded new creativities in the capital punishment department, but the novelty of the weapon and its ammunition reserved this death for those sentenced to death by court-marshal, such as officers of the army and navy, likely because the army and navy were already doling out free death sentences by musket to any and all political enemies. A bullet to the head generally and reliably provides a quick death, but due to the unavailability of armed firing squads, it was never truly an option to replace hanging or manual beheading.

Without the common availability of the firing squad, and over the hanging and the previous beheading method, it's my opinion and professedly that as well of the French republic that the guillotine was in fact, the safest method of execution commonly accessible at the time - but I don't believe that this was the true cause for its adoption during the Revolution.

II. What Social Factors Led to the Adoption of the Guillotine?

There was not another time or place in history other than the French Revolution in which there was such a demand for such a high volume of political executions- historians have the numbers sitting somewhere between fifteen to seventeen *thousand* beheadings (The Conversation). Centuries of injustice, inequality, and exploitation under the monarchy and aristocracy previous to the Revolution fueled a frenzied powder keg set off by Enlightenment ideas of liberty, equality and fraternity - a rallying cry of

the revolutionaries - that were being actively repressed by the Ancien regime's absolute monarchy. Popular sovereignty demanded the complete carpet bombing of the French despotism, and what better method for dissolution than mass homicide?

That question is rhetorical. A more ethical means of reform would be a peaceful reform of the French government, instatement of republican populist politicians that could transition the French nation into a representative democracy by the most peaceful way possible - so the question is double: why did the French have to kill fifteen thousand people, and why did they pick the guillotine to do it?

The short answer is the French Revolution. The Enlightenment that sparked it was a philosophical, literary and artistic craze that literally shook the physical foundations of Western society by calling into question the role of the Church in the state, the Church itself and the state itself, methods of thought, methods of societal maintenance... imagine if every book you read or show/movie you watched and song you listened to for the next hundred years was about the same thing, and that thing was making the world a better place - for a long enough time that your great-great grandparents would have the same exact thoughts you would, five generations of egalitarian and brotherly bedtime stories in spite of the monarchistic regime... that's enough reason to want to kill a few thousand aristocrats. The French Revolution was such an invigorating and electric example of the ability that the people could have to save the world that was nearly perfectly symbolized in the guillotine; a newly-nationwide product of science at the disposal of all, "a material celebration of scientific Enlightenment codes... a rational instrument technology par excellence..." (NIH.gov), a stark image of retribution received by national tyrants and a physical example of the liberty, science, and truth that the Enlightenment stood for.

These same Enlightenment ideologies demanded reason and critical thinking, which seem to have taken a backseat to public outrage, a thirst for blood, cries for violence, and function as the second side of the French Revolution's non-metaphorical double-edged blade. Since first hand sources are not concerned much with the ethics surrounding the guillotine over its use, I'll offer my own opinion: the guillotine was an answer to a question with two parts, "what do we do" and "how do we justify it?" Since it seemed that it was an inevitability that the Revolution culminated into mass violence, the guillotine's professed humanity was a way to reconcile the Enlightenment's benevolence with the barbarity of the act that it committed.

III. What Ethical Implications Arise From the Common Use of the Guillotine

There seems to be a bottom line that the event of death that can most reliably cause the least amount of suffering to the victim is the most humane, and therefore the most morally defensible. If this is assumed, and considered to be the extent of the moral concern of capital punishment, then the guillotine presents an absolute ethicality - by facilitating the deaths of seventeen thousand people. How can a device that enables the murder the size of a small town be a device that represents morality, justice, and democracy? This is the ultimate irony constituting the guillotine.

Firstly, one must address the nature of capital punishment. State execution presents the role of the state over an individual's own existence, a national legislative body supersedes the very concept of life and death. The only other instance of such direct control over life that comes to mind is war - but, evidently, a patriotic mind cannot be occupied by the plight of the Beauvorian/Jungian Other. The murder of a nation's very own citizens is a sort of filicide - the killing of one's kin. As such, capital punishment in its natural state presents a bargain: the life of a criminal for the safety of the general public. But the French Revolution's enactment of capital punishment did not abide by a natural state: those executed were not given due process, impartial juries - many were not tried at all - and as such were not the result of unanimous decision of public protection but provided instead of safety, *entertainment* for the masses. All sources and histories basically point in the same direction: a great deal of death was absolutely inevitable, and is essentially required by any revolution worth its salt. The guillotine, in result, is a supreme morality by limiting the suffering associated with these deaths, no? My opinion is precisely the opposite.

Consider a Native American. The indigenous, the aboriginal, an unseen option in the "provide your ethnicity" box, a Pandora's duffel bag of shame woefully tucked in America's dark and skeleton-filled closet. I went on a tour of MIT recently, which is on land originally belonging to a large and powerful Native tribe (as was the entire country), a fact that the White presenter made sure to immediately bring to our attention. It was the first slide after the title card that read, "We want to acknowledge that this is Native American land that was taken from its rightful owners by colonial settlers..." she said, very businesslike, "so let's just take a minute to acknowledge that." So we all sat in silence for a second or two, shuffling our feet, until she felt that enough acknowledgement had been had and so we continued on with the tour. I thought about the nomenclatural debate going on, between "Native American" and "Indian," which one was more polite and courteous - by what means the American public could offer verbal respect to this race that they systematically disenfranchised and continue to chronically ignore the political and basic needs of. The debate itself, these symbolic

mechanisms to accommodate and be “inclusive” to these people that these professed samaritans are still actively oppressing, are nothing but empty platitudes, testaments to the ignorance that resulted in such suffering. In this case, a moral quota is filled by an empty kindness, and truly moral reformatory action is deemed unnecessary: this sort of *acknowledgement* affords *denial*.

The case of the guillotine is fundamentally the same: an *acknowledgement* of the necessary death for a revolution by the invention of a device that allegedly mitigates the associated suffering affords the *denial* of necessity to attempt to limit the amount of deaths. The *cherîe* on the sundae: whether or not the guillotine actually alleviates suffering is vitally unknowable. Locke comes to mind, on what happens after death: “Earthly judges, the state in particular, and human beings generally, cannot dependably evaluate the truth-claims of competing religious standpoints.” *We will never, ever know if the guillotine is a more humane death*. We know that it’s more consistent, more reliable, and more efficient, but we can only make these decisions based on our own perceptions: the disgust that we see at botched executions, the contempt we have for the ends of our lives... what that blade does and doesn’t do to the inner workings of the mind and the heart will forever be a mystery of the universe, and thus what it represents is not justice but its denial, the fact that perception will overrule reason at every turn, that the desire is the same in the hearts of tyrannical kings and bloodthirsty peasants, that life is at stake - always, and forever. The fatal flaw of aristocracy, and the ultimate irony of the French Revolution is that it was this: an injustice that could only be ended by injustice.

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These were all sources for the introduction and opening. The first one is the library of Brown University that holds a firsthand document, the second is UNHCR - probably the most respected refugee commission in the world - and the third, the list of last words; since the factuality of the introduction isn't necessarily relevant, I didn't source each individual phrase because of the vast conjecture surrounding each.

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All of these were really great info and sources all about the guillotine, its ethics, use, practicality etc. The “Question of Retained Consciousness” is really interesting, I recommended a read.