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Violence

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Shortly after Miramax released *Reservoir Dogs*, the modern-day gangster film debut by Quentin Tarantino, film critic Stanley Kauffmann published a self-reflective review describing the movie as being "cramped with murders." More interesting, however, was the acclaimed film critic's nomination on the use and prevalence of violence in movies today. The movie clearly made Kauffmann stop a moment and think about the effects of violent content on audiences. But his moment was fleeting, and his review remained stuck on relatively derivative questions of aesthetics—at one point, Kauffmann wondered whether Tarantino, Hollywood's latest star director, didn't simply make the film just because he could—whether *Reservoir Dogs* was produced "just for the sake of its making, the application of style to sheer slaughter."

"Adjustment to changing values is the prime law of the twentieth century," Kauffmann wrote, "but once in a while a film comes along that makes me imagine that everyone has a mental compass on the subject of violence and that I must tap mine to make sure it's not stuck" (1992, p. 31). It is both unsurprising and unfortunate that Kauffmann typed "mental compass" instead of "moral compass." Far be it from a prominent film critic to question or challenge the effects of such gratuitous bloodletting on moral grounds. Even his "tapping" seems to be understood as an exercise in righteous futility: Kauffmann never hints at what the compass actually tells him. The implication is that, in our violence-soaked media culture, only the gesture of conscience matters. Our considered response as moral agents, as long as we continue to watch, does not.

Many behavioral researchers and media ethicists, however, beg to differ. More than three decades of rigorous research has compellingly documented the negative effects of violent media content on certain populations and how exposure to such content appears to contribute to aggressive and antisocial behavior. And while free-speech and commercially driven interests tend to override others considerations in the public discourse, the field of ethics provides numerous ways not only to tap our moral compasses when it comes to violent media content, but to understand the resulting compass readings so that we can talk more compellingly about our obligations as moral beings in the media world. Clear ethical thinking about the nature of respect, duty, harm and accountability, as applied to both media consumers and producers, can help turn moral claims that strike many as unrealistic and ineffective into a more useful framework with which to critique violent media content. This chapter will provide a brief survey of the research documenting the effects of violent media content on audiences, discuss the nature of the potential "harm" posed by such content, and suggest ways to more effectively incorporate ethical theory into our responses to violence in the media.

PATTERNS OF VIOLENT CONTENT

Policymakers, researchers, and politicians began expressing concern over the effects of violent television content in the 1950s. In the early 1970s, researchers estimated that by age of 14, the average child witnessed more than 11,000 murders on television (Bartholow, Dill, Anderson & Lindsay, 2003, p. 4). But a 1995 study showed that the average American child now witnesses more than 10,000 violent crimes *each year* on television (Signorelli, Gebner & Morgan, 1995). This trend of ever-prevalent violent content continues despite pledges by industry groups to actively monitor and limit violent content. The Network Television Association vowed to do so in 1992. In 1993, the National Cable Television Association condemned the "gratuitous use of violence depicted as an easy and convenient solution to human problems" and vowed to "strive to reduce the frequency of such exploitative uses of violence" (Bartholow et al., 2003, p. 4). Regardless, levels of violent content have remained high. For prime-time programming, television audiences witness on average five violent acts per hour, and 20 times per hour on so-called children's programming (Strasburger & Wilson, 2002).

VIOLENCE IN TELEVISION AND MOVIE ENTERTAINMENT

Violence is a staple of television and movie fare. But several studies of television violence have shown frequencies and levels of violent TV content to be quite stable over the last few decades—and in some cases even decreasing (Gebner et al., 1994, as cited in Comstock & Scharrer, 1999, p. 66). But those frequencies—and several compelling contextual factors—are sobering. Overall, 57 percent of television programming features violent content. Of that, 73 percent contain scenes in which the violence is unpunished, 58 percent feature violence without showing any signs of pain, and 39 percent contain violent scenes that include humor (National Television Violence Study, 1996). Regarding what's on the local movie theater screen, violence dominates in a similar way. The percentage of PG-rated films that have come out of Hollywood has steadily declined. There is more violence in G-rated films than ever before (Yokota & Thompson, 2000).

VIOLENCE IN VIDEO GAMES

The overwhelming majority of children play video games daily or weekly. About 15 percent of young men entering college play at least one hour of video games per day in an average week (Cooperative Institutional Research Program, 1999). In the early 1990s, one study found that 85 percent of the most popular video games were dominated by violent themes or content. Researchers also have found that such overwhelmingly violent games were the favorites of young children; in 1996, researchers reported that by far, large majorities of fourth-grade girls and boys said their favorite games were violent ones (Buchanan & Funk, 1996).

VIOLENCE IN NEWS

Crime is a staple of television news. According to Graber (1996), nearly half of all the news items covered in tabloid news magazine shows such as "Inside Edition" dealt with crime-related stories. On "Dateline NBC," "60 Minutes," and other similar network news shows, one of every

four items is crime-related. Studies on television crime news over the last two decades have all shown the same pattern: Focus is consistently on crimes such as burglary and homicide instead of white-collar offenses, on crimes against people and less on those involving property; and most coverage is focused on initial stages of accusation and investigation and not on the later stages of prosecution and sentencing (Comstock & Scharrer, 1999, p. 126).

EFFECTS OF VIOLENT CONTENT

Decades of experimental and survey research has painted a compelling picture of the negative effects of violent media content. In 1969, the National Commission on the Causes and Prevention of Violence concluded that "violence in television programs can and does have adverse effects upon audiences (cited in Bartholow et al., p. 4). In 1972, the report by the Surgeon General's Scientific Advisory Committee on Television and Social Behavior concluded that "there is a causative relationship between televised violence and subsequent antisocial behavior." Several credible organizations have gone on record over the last two decades in stating that media violence is one of the causes of aggression in society. These include the American Medical Association, the American Academy of Pediatrics, The American Psychological Association, the National Institute of Mental Health, the National Institutes of Health, and the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry. In their survey of the research on effects of media violence, Sparks and Sparks (2002) concluded that "numerous reviews by researchers, professional associations and organizations all agree that exposure to media violence is causally related to aggressive behavior" (p. 273). Since 1977, at least eight "meta-analyses"—sophisticated statistical assessments that cluster different studies on the same topic to estimate the overall magnitude of relationships among variables—have been conducted with research projects that have examined questions of effects of violent media content. All of them

make it irrefutably clear that children and teenagers who view greater amounts of violent television and movie portrayals are more likely to behave in an aggressive and antisocial manner.... This is an outcome that holds for all ages, both genders...and occurs across both experimental designs, where causation can be inferred, and nonexperimental survey designs, which produce data describing everyday occurrences. (Comstock & Scharrer, 2003, p. 207, 222)

In one notable study, researchers following the viewing patterns of children in the United States and four other countries established a strong relationship between children's level of viewing and their aggressive behavior (Huesmann & Eron, 1986). About 60 percent of the children were tracked down 15 years later. The result? According to Huesmann (2005):

[T]he children's exposure to media violence between ages 6 and 9 correlates significantly with a composite of 11 different kinds of measures of their aggression taken 15 years later when they were 21 to 25 years old.... [T]hese results certainly add credence to the conclusion that childhood exposure to violence in the media has lasting effects on behavior through a high-level process of initiation in which cognitions that control aggressive behavior are acquired. (p. 262, 264)

Critics of media-effects research and apologists for the television industry often cite the apparently low "effect size" produced by these studies—the correlational statistic that reports what percentage of an overall effect (i.e., aggressive behavior) can be attributed with confidence to a certain stimulus (i.e., exposure to media violence). The effect size of the best studies and

meta-analyses, however, are *higher* than that of other public-health research programs that have resulted in proactive policy decisions to protect certain populations from identified threats. These include exposure to lead and IQ scores among children, nicotine patch adoption and smoking cessation, calcium intake and bone mass, homework and academic achievement, and women's self-examination and extent of breast cancer (Comstock & Scharrer, 2003, p. 217; Bushman & Anderson, 2001, p. 481). A 2001 meta-analysis of research exploring the effects of violent video games also concluded that there is a correlation between video-game play and examples of aggressive behavior, but that the effect size is smaller than that found with television violence (Sherry, 2001).

Defenders of the television and movie industries also have long argued that violent content, instead of stimulating imitative acts and aggressive tendencies, actually provides a cathartic outlet. In one characteristic comment, legendary film director Alfred Hitchcock said, "One of television's greatest contributions is that it brought murder back into the home where it belongs." (Myers, 1999, p. 412). Extensive research, however, suggests that catharsis simply doesn't occur; there are dissenting views (Signorelli, 1990; Gunter, 1994), but the evidence "overwhelmingly shows that media violence has quite the opposite effect than that which is predicted by catharsis" (Strasburger & Wilson, 2003, p. 78).

Researchers have found that very different cognitive and behavior modeling processes help explain both short-term and long-term effects of violent content in increasing the likelihood of aggressive behavior.

SHORT-TERM EFFECTS

Priming occurs when an observed stimulus serves to activate other neural activity that is associated with aggressive thoughts or behaviors. The excited "nodes" then may become more likely to influence behavior (Berkowitz, 1993). *Excitation transfer* refers to when, after a violent stimulus, a subsequent provocation may be perceived as more pronounced than it is because of the emotional response to the previous observed violence (Zillmann, 1983). *Imitation* refers to the natural tendency of children and young primates to imitate whomsoever they observe. The observation of specific aggressive behaviors around them increases the likelihood of children behaving in the same way (Bandura, 1977). Research by Berkowitz (1993) also suggests that children who have viewed a violent movie "are slower...to intervene" when they witness a fight erupting among other children (pp. 223–224).

LONG-TERM EFFECTS

Children and young adults engage regularly in *observational learning* that can establish schemas about a hostile world, "scripts" for problem-solving that rely on aggression and general beliefs about the acceptability of aggression (Bushman & Huesmann, 2001). *Desensitization* occurs over repeated exposure to violence so that innate negative responses to observing violence are tempered through habituation, and proactive aggression can become more likely. The theory of *cultivation* argues that people who are heavy television viewers will "cultivate" a view of the world that is much more crime-ridden and violent than it actually is (Gerbner & Gross, 1976). Gerbner and his colleagues have referred to the resulting effect as the "mean world syndrome."

APPLICATION OF ETHICS THEORY TO VIOLENT CONTENT

Violence is a serious ethical issue, Clifford Christians said, because "it violates the persons-as-ends principle" that constitutes the core of our moral obligations, according to Kant and other theorists (2004, p. 28). When we are clear about the legitimate reasons why types of violent content are so ubiquitous—whether as attention-getting techniques for largely commercial purposes or as valuable artistic depictions or honest efforts to reflect its occurrence in society—then we can minimize muddled thinking and self-validating ideological exchanges, and instead more effectively exercise our moral compass and bring to bear the full power of ethics.

VIOLENCE: ARTISTIC CLAIMS

Violent content is defended and justified on artistic grounds when such depictions serve to help carry out an aesthetic vision of our world. Art helps us make meaning of our variegated existence. Violence is part of the natural and human realm. To reflexively denounce violent depictions as never justifiable stunts the aesthetic needs of all of us, threatens to sanitize reality, and reduces art to either an exercise in cheap sentimentalism or to a propagandistic tool. The fullness of the Aristotelian enterprise of the virtuous life is denied. From this perspective, one could say that the function of the artistic impulse, and the maintenance of its integrity, requires access to the brutal as much as it does to the divine. Our diverse moral sensibilities and prioritization of values, of course, mean that the boundary between artistic integrity and gratuitous gore is continually contested—hence the moralistic claims and the "moral compass" moments of Kaufmann and the rest of us over *Reservoir Dogs* and other provocations. If we keep in mind the deliberative essence of ethics, we see that it is in this debate that our Aristotelian selves live and breathe.

While a life of virtue implies an openness to life's rich pageant as we search for our zones of moderation and manifest our moral agency in social action, artistic integrity requires a Kantian imperative of freedom. Even in the context of the effects research surveyed above, a censor's impulse to limit or "cleanse" film and video depictions of violence can threaten to undermine the capacity for reason and the exercise of free will that all humans require. Our moral obligation to respect and cultivate both is central to Kant's system of moral agency.

VIOLENCE: JOURNALISTIC CLAIMS

"If it bleeds, it leads." The cynical adage signals a key element of news, particularly for broadcast media. Stories featuring crime, suffering, tragic loss and shattered lives exploit our primal human impulses of surveillance and dramatic narrative. Stories involving violence rarely get old for journalists because they promise compelling verbal and visual images that never fail to draw and hold audiences, which translate into high ratings. Moreover, they are obligatory if journalism is to carry out one of its core functions of public service by representing the march of human events in all its dimensions. To sanitize reality by minimizing or marginalizing the presence and intensity of violence would be both hypocritical and paternalistic. Iyengar (1997) and other theorists argue that modern forms of ethnic conflict, such as in Bosnia and Rwanda, demand that journalists become moral witnesses who must insist that such atrocities be given special attention. Yet most journalists are keenly aware of the fine distinction between unflinching reportage and rubber-necking voyeurism. How much violence and how much graphic gore is too much are questions that constantly dominate reporter and editor listserve and journalistic Websites. Characteristic

was the debate among journalists around the world struggling to decide just how much to show of the brutal attacks on American security contractors in Fallujah, Iraq, in March 2004. Many news organizations relied on narrative descriptions of the charred bodies being dragged through the streets and strung up on bridges; video clips showing them never made it on the air at most broadcast outlets, and were relegated to websites that featured advisory warnings.

Readers and viewers also are served daily buffers of crime-related stories and stories focusing on violent aftermath because they so easily fit the twin journalistic imperatives of newsworthiness and expediency. In an environment of constant deadlines, journalists are often simply in a reactive mode, focusing and reporting on the latest consequences of decisions, acts and policies on various individuals or groups. Violent events are often the result of something—of a regional or ethnic conflict, of psychological and social disorders, of failed diplomatic efforts. Investigating the causes of violent outcomes is more difficult and often requires much more time and resources. Additionally, media sociologists also have shown that the news decisions of television news producers are often driven by "good visuals" (Abbott & Brassfield, 1989). Stories that come with compelling visuals and footage will get airtime; more difficult stories, which often do not lend themselves to visual storytelling (i.e., the Enron scandal) will either receive late or marginal attention or none at all. Crime news also is extremely cheap to produce; all that is required is a police scanner, a TV truck, and a camera. This insistence that all news be visual, as well as the fixation on consequences rather than on causes, constitutes two of the four distorting forces of television as a news medium, Iyengar argues. The other two are television's "artificial constraints" of the 30-minute format—"The time disciplines of the news genre militate against the minimum moral requirement of engagement with another person's suffering" (1997, p. 29)—and television's tendency to commodify human tragedy.

A dissonance is done when the flow of television news reduces all the world's horror to identical commodities. In a culture overwhelmed by the volume of promiscuous representation, there must be some practice by which the real—the instant when a real body is struck, abused or violated—is given a place of special attention, a demarcation that insists that it be seen. (p. 30)

VIOLENCE: ECONOMIC CLAIMS

As we have seen, values of artistic integrity and journalistic autonomy are given significant weight in our deliberation over the ethics of violent media content. But the game changes when the justifications for violent content leave either of these arenas and the *motive* for using violence can be described another way. When the rationale becomes based on economic or marketing claims, the thinness of any ethical justification for its use is thrown into stark relief. The commonly used justifications for the use of violence may present compelling economic, financial or marketing arguments, but these cannot be mistaken for *ethical* arguments when they fail to take into account how the use of media violence does or does not serve our moral obligations. Indeed, one might argue that, from an epistemological perspective, ethics theory and its focus on negotiating among competing, *legitimate* moral claims would suggest that there is little to discuss in this realm. While we may claim that gratuitous and commercially-motivated use of violent content represents a moral failure, it doesn't actually provide much of an ethical dilemma at all. "Gratuitous cheapening of life to expand ratings, in terms of Aristotle's teleological model, is a reprehensible misuse of human beings as means to base ends," Christians suggested (2004, p. 28). In his 1994 book, *Selling Our America's Children*, Walsh discusses how television programming and advertising, two key influences in American culture today, work together to shape our values. The top

priority for media executives is to draw audiences that they can reliably deliver to advertisers promoting their products. We see pervasive messages that include sex, violence and humor because those topics, or frames, reliably capture audience attention. So it is no surprise that researchers and policymakers have concluded that media executives are consequently creating programming that depends largely on images and contexts that trade on violence, sex and the enshrinement of consumerism. "In this respect, media executives are profiting from a product that is unhealthy for those who consume it, particularly children" (Walsh, 1994, p. 10).

Violence is a consistently reliable and effective marketing tool because it attracts the attention of male adolescents, which is a demographic segment that is intensely sought after by advertisers. Violent content presents a more universal language compared with "complex, dialogue-based stories" and is easier to produce (Groebel, 2001, p. 235). Gerbner, Morgan and Signorelli (1994) argued that violent content is prominent in global or exported media because it requires very little verbal translation, whereas humor, despite its value as an attention-getting tool, often is culture-bound and difficult to translate.

Some studies suggest, however, that violent entertainment content, while effective in drawing eyeballs, actually may undermine the friendly, receptive "environment" that companies want media outlets to provide for their advertising. From a media economics perspective, in other words, addition to violent fare as an attention-getting tool may become self-defeating. Gerbner concluded that "the most highly rated programs are seldom violent" (cited in Hamilton, 1998, p. 32). Hamilton (1998) reported that when theatrically produced movies are shown on television along with warnings about content (for violence, nudity or language), "broadcasters run more network promotions and fewer general ads, consistent with the theory that warnings cause advertiser pullouts that lower prices" (p. 165). Other more compelling recent research has suggested that strong viewer emotional response to violent content—specifically, anger—actually interferes with viewer ability to recall advertising embedded in the content (Bushman & Phillips, 2001).

The very prevalence of media violence can serve to discourage and trivialize any exploration of the issue's ethical dimension. If research was able to document a "positive" cathartic effect, how might that allow us to argue that violent depictions intended to provide a relatively innocuous method of "venting" one's stress or aggression is justified in terms of ethical use of media? We might say such a utilitarian description of violent content spares society actual (read: greater) harm that may otherwise occur without such a social release valve. We might say that the harm inherent in the actual media content is outweighed by the existence of a positive public effect. But even if a cathartic effect of media violence were demonstrated to exist, we would not so easily be able to justify such content on the grounds of expediency if in fact it offered a cinematic repudiation of our duty of non-injury. We are well-aware that the means we use to accomplish our goals say as much about us as the ends themselves. The use of the theory of utility itself here raises other problems, which will be discussed later, regarding how we articulate public good and how the theory invites a reliance on gross generalizations rather than a serious consideration of how we might weigh competing values.

MEDIA VIOLENCE AND OUR MORAL AGENCY

It is useful to consider how ethics theory helps us clarify the stakes involved in violent content and its effects that we have outlined here. Ethics helps us "delineate responsibility" among various stakeholders, as Christians said; it enables us to press the question of "whether producers of violent entertainment can dismiss their responsibility by claiming to give the public what it wants" (2004, p. 28). Developing a credible *normative* ethics theory remains difficult due to the

demands of media practitioners' daily problems and routines and the predominance of rather simplistic utilitarian conventions and guidelines. But the preceding survey of the research documenting the effects of violent media content provides evidence that a deontological, duty-based approach is more effective in our efforts to develop an ethical framework with which to judge violent content, rather than a consequentialist approach.

DIMENSIONS OF HARM POSED BY VIOLENT CONTENT

Even as using a duty-based moral framework provides a more effective way to judge the ethics of using violence in media content, it is still valuable to have a firm grasp of the nature of the potential harm that can result. As we have seen, the question of whether violent media content has an effect is no longer a serious one. And the existence of such effects does not necessarily raise a question of ethics. To be considered a compelling ethics question we must determine the relative *harmfulness* of those effects. Some dimensions, or forms, of this harm may be readily apparent: the priming potential of some violent cues to foster endorsement of antisocial behavior in children, for example, could clearly be said to pose a legitimate harm. Research also has suggested that men who watch pornographic material are likely to express "desensitized" attitudes toward women (Harris, 1994; Traut, 2005). Theorists also have long argued that advertising that sexualizes, marginalizes and generally devalues women as objects is harmful because it undermines girls' self-esteem by promoting impossible and restrictive norms of beauty and femininity (Silverstein, Perdue, Peterson & Kelly, 1986; Myers & Blocc, 1992). In these and other cases, the claims of harm are much more concrete and significant than mere claims of being offended by violent or sexual content. It can be argued that, in these areas, research strongly suggests that actual "harm" has indeed occurred. Others may be less concrete or verifiable. How much violence against women can be directly attributed to the objectification and hypersexualization of young women in advertising?

Several theorists have been concerned about building a universal framework for moral responsibility for the assessment of harm and justifying standards about the "blameworthiness" of anyone who chooses not to prevent harm. Harris (1973), for example, claimed that to discover that a person is morally responsible for external harm is to discover that she is both causally responsible for it and morally to blame. Consequently, we must use a definition of harm that is more specific than the way many armchair media critics may understand it. The National Television Violence Study, among the most comprehensive studies to track the content of televised programming, offered the following definition of violence:

Any overt depiction of a credible threat of physical force or the actual beings. Violence also includes certain depictions of physically harmful use of such force intended to physically harm an animate being or group of consequences against an animate being or group that occurs as a result of unseen violent means. Thus there are three primary types of violent depictions: credible threats, behavioral acts, and harmful consequences. (1998, p. 41)

Potter (1999) explored what he called the "profound" difference between what the public considers violent and how researchers conceptualize violence. The public often express outrage and concern when audience members are "shocked" or "offended" by what they see—what registers most viscerally with many viewers is the *graphicness* of the media violence. This is why many parents do not seem to be concerned with violence in children's cartoons, even though research has documented that such cartoons feature some of the highest rates of violence found in the

media. While the public is concerned with being shocked by what they watch, scientists are concerned whether certain audiences will be harmed by what they watch, regardless of whether it can be called shocking or not (Bartholow et al., 2003, p. 4). Indeed, using terms such as "shocking" or "graphic" as measures of violent content denies the long-term cultivation and desensitization processes that researchers have recorded.

HARM AND THE INADEQUACY OF UTILITARIAN THEORY

Though the conventions of media practice may have a "natural affinity" with utilitarian approaches, as Christians said, the theory elaborated on by John Stuart Mill and which has become the basis for much of our majoritarian democratic policy making is actually ill-suited for guiding ethical deliberations of media practitioners. Critics have argued that the limitations of Mill's approach point up a general failure of utilitarianism to account for fundamental injustices or address how unequal distribution of goods and wealth raise questions about moral agency. Utilitarianism goes wrong, Arneson argues, "in regarding only aggregate totals or averages of welfare while ignoring altogether the value of equal distribution of welfare among persons.... [I]t is polemically slanted insofar as it highlights harmonious, rosy possibilities and ignores equally likely but more troublesome cases which pose acute conflicts of distribution" (Arneson, 1997, pp. 87, 92). This objection also reflects a more general problem with Mill's overall argument for his theory of utility in guiding decision making. Having as our object the achievement of the greatest benefit for the largest number of people is clearly a noble thing. And Mill, in his efforts to build a usable framework to help ensure a harmonious social life, never lets us understate or dismiss the centrality of individual freedom as a driving value. But the devil, for most utilitarian theorists, has always been in the details—in the practical application of Mill's abstract claims. Who determines the nature of the potential harm involved? How are we defining "benefit," and is our focus on the short term or on the long term? Noting the work of Charles Taylor, Christians said utilitarianism certainly is very appealing in part because of its promise to provide a single principle to help us adjudicate conflicts. But the abstractness of the theory of utility leaves practitioners grappling—often unproductively—with fundamental questions about the nature of a supposed benefit, the exact membership of groups that may benefit or suffer from a decision, and whether immediate or long-term impacts are considered. In the end, the theory of utility offers an exactness that is not exact at all, representing only a "semblance of validity" as policymakers and potential stakeholders dismiss or marginalize whatever factors that cannot be quantified. Christians (2004) outlines several other deficiencies of utility:

[Utilitarianism] depends on making accurate measurements of the consequences, when in everyday affairs, the results of our choices are often blurred, at least in the long term. In addition, utilitarians view society as a collection of individuals, each with his or her own desires and goals. Thus, institutions and structures are not analyzed in a sophisticated manner, and an atomistic, procedural view of democracy is presumed. Moreover, the principle of the greatest public benefit applies only to societies in which certain nonutilitarian standards of decency prevail. (p. 21)

The theory spelled out in Mill's famous *On Liberty* and other essays is understandably a landmark in social and political theory and undergirds much of our majoritarian democratic ideals. And rightly so. But Mill is much less useful in the realm of ethics because he invites blanket assumptions and gross generalizations on the kinds of key questions just mentioned. By maintain-

ing such a high level of abstraction, Mill also discourages serious explorations into the various types and dimensions of harm. Indeed, his abstraction results in some significant contradictions, particularly when we try to apply his utilitarian framework to media behavior.

REFINING OUR CONCEPTION OF HARM

In his landmark work, *Harm to Others*, social philosopher Joel Feinberg builds a largely legalistic framework for properly understanding the notion of harm and how it should be handled by the law and the courts. He discusses various dimensions of "injuring" or "wronging" others and how different kinds of harm should be punished. According to Feinberg, a harm is an act or state that "sets back" the interest of someone else, such as her reasonable interest in her career, health, reputation, or privacy. This "setting back" of someone's interest has to be concrete—it has to be something that explicitly makes the person's state of affairs, or his or her ability to attain reasonable goals, worse off than if the act had not been done. And it must be something that "sets back" important desires, like raising a family or accomplishing a long-term project, and not more trivial interests such as seeing a movie or walking a dog. "Not everything that we dislike or resent, and wish to avoid, is harmful to us," Feinberg writes (1984, p. 45). "[I]t is critical that we distinguish] between the harmful conditions and all the various unhappy and unwanted physical and mental states that are not states of harm in themselves" (p. 47).

Behavioral research also suggests that largely negative effects of violent media content may pose an altogether different sort of harm because of the often unconscious way aggressive modeling can be initiated. As noted earlier, initiation is among the cognitive processes that researchers have pointed to as a likely cause of short-term effects of violent content on aggressive behavior. Hayes (2001, 2002), Meltzoff and Decety (2003; Meltzoff, 2004) and other researchers have established how imitative learning processes, far from being the mindless, childlike repetition of actions scientists once thought, are elaborate methods of goal emulation with diverse "ends/means" structures. They are more complex than scientists once believed, yet they also are largely automatic. We don't think about them. Susan Hurley (2004) suggested the ethical implications of our exposure to violent media content is enormous. "Ironically, imitative tendencies that bypass autonomous deliberative processes may well be symptomatic of the way our distinctively human and rational minds are built," she suggested (p. 177). If this "deliberative bypass" occurs with regularity over a range of behaviors, there is no reason that imitative learning regarding the violence we see in the media should be exempt from it—whether we acknowledge this process or not. And that, Hurley argued, raises troubling questions about our autonomous agency as audience members.

If it is true, as recent cognitive-processing research has suggested, that we have little or no control over the negative effects of violent media content due to unconscious imitative-learning processes, does that provide compelling ethical grounds for limiting or restricting such violent content to ensure our autonomy? A Kantian approach might argue that the answer is yes: Actions that violate the persons-as-ends principle include those that undermine or subvert the exercise of our autonomous agency, or free will. Exposure to violent media content that triggers unconscious imitative behaviors could represent a failure of our primary duty to respect every individual's free will and capacity for reason. Hurley, however, also adopts a utilitarian approach that draws on Mill's harm principle to promote similar moral claims. The results of research on imitative learning and its implication of audiences being involuntarily affected by violent content pose significant challenges to our assumptions about liberal political theory and human autonomy.

simplistic understanding of the term. Compelling models of *accountability* are needed that harness the concept's "dynamic of interaction" between the claims of autonomous agents and their values (Plaisance, 2000).

Potter (2003) outlined several areas where more focused media-effects research is urgently needed: to try to further document types of effects other than "disinhibition" processes and fear responses; to produce more definitive assessment of long-term effects through longitudinal and panel studies; to explore positive, "prosocial" effects, which may in fact be stronger than the negative effects that have preoccupied researchers for three decades; to delineate types and degrees of effects from violence in print, video and audio-based media. All of these areas include significant ethical dimensions that cannot be ignored if we are to take seriously ideas such as moral obligation, autonomous agency, non-injury and accountability.

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