

RATIONALIZING THE UNTHINKABLE: BUREAUCRACY, DATA, AND THE CALCULUS OF DEATH

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the paradoxical relationship between rationality and mass violence through the lens of what we term the “calculus of death”—an analytic framework that reveals how bureaucratic and data-driven systems transform moral atrocities into administrative operations. We trace a conceptual genealogy from historical biopolitical administration to contemporary algorithmic surveillance, demonstrating how classification systems evolve from acknowledging moral complexity to imposing epistemic closure through data management. Our analysis exposes how this process enables the systematic erasure of Palestinian life through predictive governance and demographic analytics that reduce human beings to manageable variables. Ultimately, this paper argues that modern forms of violence reveal a structural complicity between Western rationality, technological administration, and the erosion of moral responsibility, where bureaucratic language itself becomes an instrument of dehumanization.

1 INTRODUCTION

It is difficult to define genocide without encountering both conceptual instability and political contestation. From Raphael Lemkin’s initial formulation that sought to capture the systematic destruction of national groups Lemkin (1944) to the legal codification in the United Nations Genocide Convention, the term has perpetually struggled between juridical precision and moral significance. This definitional anxiety becomes particularly acute when examining the Palestinian case, where claims of genocide are simultaneously rendered hyper-visible through extensive documentation and systematically denied through legal and discursive maneuvers. The tension between these positions reveals not merely a disagreement about facts, but a deeper epistemological crisis about how we recognize and name mass violence in the contemporary era.

The academic and legal discourse surrounding genocide has long been characterized by a fundamental split between those who emphasize the term’s inherent contestability and those who demand rigid, operationalizable definitions. Scholars like Benjamin Meiches have highlighted how the very act of speaking about genocide involves navigating a series of double binds where acknowledgment and denial coexist in the same discursive space Meiches (2017). This creates a paradoxical situation where the Palestinian experience of systematic violence becomes both constantly referenced and perpetually deferred—always subject to further scrutiny, additional evidence requirements, or redefinition of terms that ultimately maintain its status as contestable rather than established.

Within this discursive framework, Palestine occupies a peculiar position of being simultaneously hyper-visible through extensive documentation of suffering and systematically erased through procedural and definitional barriers. As Judith Butler notes, certain lives are framed as grievable while others are not, and this framing is itself an exercise of power Butler (2009). The massive archival evidence of Palestinian displacement, casualty statistics, and systemic restrictions exists alongside sophisticated mechanisms of denial that employ the language of security, conflict, and counter-terrorism. This dual status—constantly examined yet never fully recognized—exemplifies what we might call epistemic violence: the use of knowledge systems to simultaneously document and obscure atrocity.

This paper’s purpose extends beyond determining whether the term genocide accurately describes the Palestinian experience. Rather, we analyze how discourse about genocide functions within a socio-linguistic field that normalizes Palestinian erasure. Following Michel Foucault’s insight that

power operates through the production of truth regimes Foucault (1978), we examine the bureaucratic and data-driven systems that make Palestinian life manageable and Palestinian death calculable. Our focus is on what we term the “calculus of death”—the transformation of moral horror into administrative operations through classification, quantification, and prediction.

Our analysis draws from critical philosophical traditions that have long warned about the dark side of Enlightenment rationality. Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer’s dialectic of enlightenment reveals how reason, when divorced from ethical considerations, can become an instrument of domination Adorno & Horkheimer (1947). Similarly, Zygmunt Bauman’s work demonstrates how the Holocaust was not a failure of modernity but rather its terrifying fulfillment through bureaucratic efficiency Bauman (1989). We extend these insights to contemporary data-driven systems, arguing that they represent a new phase in the rationalization of violence where algorithmic governance accomplishes through prediction and optimization what earlier bureaucracies achieved through paperwork and classification.

This paper unfolds in three main sections that mirror the conceptual progression of our argument. First, we examine the definitional politics of genocide, showing how contestation functions as a mechanism of denial through what we term “procedural absolutism.” Second, we analyze the conceptual systems and double binds that enable this violence, tracing a genealogy from historical biopolitical administration to contemporary algorithmic surveillance. Here, we draw on Giorgio Agamben’s notion of bare life Agamben (1998) and Hannah Arendt’s analysis of the banality of evil Arendt (1963) to understand how moral responsibility evaporates in systems of administrative rationality. Finally, we conclude by reflecting on the possibilities for resisting this calculus of death and imagining forms of knowledge that might counter, rather than enable, systematic erasure.

Our contribution lies in exposing how the very frameworks we use to understand and discuss genocide often participate in the violence they purport to describe. By making visible the operations of what we call the calculus of death, we hope to interrupt the smooth functioning of rationalized erasure and open space for alternative ways of knowing and responding to mass violence that do not replicate the epistemological violence of the systems they critique.

2 RELATED WORK

Our analysis builds on foundational work examining how bureaucratic rationality enables systematic violence, including James C. Scott’s examination of how states use simplification and standardization to control complex social realities Scott (1998). This theoretical framework provides crucial grounding for understanding how administrative systems transform human complexity into manageable categories, often with violent consequences. Geoffrey Bowker and Susan Leigh Star’s analysis of classification systems demonstrates how categorization schemes can produce violence by rendering certain populations invisible or marking them for administrative intervention Bowker & Star (1999). Similarly, Lisa Stampnitzky’s work on the construction of terrorism as a category demonstrates how bureaucratic and expert knowledge can produce objects of governance that enable specific forms of violence and intervention Stampnitzky (2013). In colonial contexts, bureaucratic classification systems have historically served as instruments of population management and control, creating administrative categories that enabled systematic violence against indigenous populations ?. Building on this foundation, our work extends to contemporary data-driven systems that intensify these processes through algorithmic governance and predictive analytics. Virginia Eubanks’ analysis of automated decision-making in social services demonstrates how algorithmic systems can reproduce and intensify structural inequalities while maintaining the appearance of technical neutrality Eubanks (2018).

The literature on genocide studies has long grappled with the relationship between bureaucracy and mass violence. Zygmunt Bauman’s seminal work Bauman (1989) established the Holocaust as a product of modern rationality rather than its breakdown, highlighting how bureaucratic efficiency enabled systematic extermination. Similarly, Hannah Arendt’s analysis of the banality of evil Arendt (1963) revealed how ordinary individuals could participate in atrocities through procedural obedience and the fragmentation of moral responsibility.

Michel Foucault’s theories of biopower and governmentality Foucault (1978) provide another crucial theoretical pillar, explaining how states manage populations through statistical knowledge and

administrative control. Giorgio Agamben’s concept of bare life Agamben (1998) further develops this line of thought, examining how sovereign power can reduce human beings to biological existence stripped of political rights and moral consideration.

Recent scholarship has begun to address the digital transformation of these mechanisms. Eyal Weizman’s work on forensic architecture Weizman (2017) examines how violence operates at the threshold of detectability through technical and epistemological means. Nathan Bailey’s analysis of algorithmic violence Bailey (2020) explores how data systems can reproduce and intensify forms of structural harm. Judith Butler’s framing of grievability Butler (2009) helps explain how certain lives become systematically devalued through discursive practices.

Our contribution lies in synthesizing these diverse theoretical traditions to develop the framework of the “calculus of death”—a concept that captures how bureaucratic and data-driven systems transform moral atrocities into administrative operations. By tracing continuities from historical cases of bureaucratic violence to contemporary algorithmic systems, we provide a comprehensive analysis of how rationality becomes complicit in atrocity across different technological contexts.

3 DISCUSSION

Our analysis reveals that the “calculus of death” operates as a sophisticated mechanism through which bureaucratic and data-driven systems transform moral atrocities into administrative operations. This finding directly addresses our core research question about how rationality becomes complicit in atrocity. The transformation occurs through three interconnected processes: the abstraction of human life into data points, the normalization of violence through procedural language, and the temporal expansion of control through predictive governance. These processes find their theoretical grounding in Foucault’s biopolitics Foucault (1978), where the state’s power to “make live and let die” becomes operationalized through increasingly sophisticated technological means. Our work thus extends Foucault’s framework into the digital age, demonstrating how algorithmic systems intensify biopolitical control while maintaining the appearance of objective neutrality.

The significance of our findings lies in their exposure of how contemporary forms of violence operate through epistemological frameworks that claim objectivity and efficiency. The systematic management of populations through demographic analytics and predictive surveillance represents a fundamental crisis in the relationship between knowledge, power, and ethics. As Bauman argued in the context of the Holocaust Bauman (1989), the most disturbing aspect of modern violence is its rationality—its integration into bureaucratic systems that distance perpetrators from moral consequences. Our analysis demonstrates that this distancing effect has been amplified in the digital age, where decisions are made by algorithms processing data points rather than individuals confronting human suffering directly.

Our findings both confirm and extend existing scholarship on bureaucratic violence. Meiches’ work on the double binds of discourse Meiches (2017) is particularly relevant, as we observe how language used to describe suffering often reinforces the systems that produce it. Similarly, Butler’s analysis of grievability Butler (2009) helps explain how certain lives become systematically devalued. However, our contribution extends beyond these frameworks by highlighting how data-driven systems create new forms of epistemic closure that resist traditional modes of critique. Where previous research focused on linguistic violence, we demonstrate how computational frameworks produce more potent forms of erasure through their claims to mathematical objectivity.

An unexpected finding that emerged from our analysis is the degree to which contemporary systems rely on what might be called “ethical outsourcing”—the displacement of moral responsibility from human actors to technical systems. This represents a significant evolution from Arendt’s concept of the banality of evil Arendt (1963), where individuals followed orders without critical reflection. In algorithmic systems, decision-making becomes diffused across complex technical infrastructures, making accountability increasingly elusive. This phenomenon of accountability diffusion in algorithmic systems has been extensively documented in the literature on AI ethics and moral philosophy. This suggests that traditional frameworks for understanding moral responsibility may be inadequate for addressing violence in the age of artificial intelligence and big data.

Several limitations of our study must be acknowledged. First, as a philosophical analysis, our work relies on theoretical frameworks rather than empirical data collection. While this approach allows

for deep engagement with complex ethical questions, it lacks the concrete specificity that empirical studies provide. Second, our focus on Western rationality risks overlooking important nuances within the Western philosophical tradition itself. Third, the comparative dimension of our analysis requires careful handling to avoid oversimplification, though we have emphasized structural similarities rather than moral equivalences.

The broader implications of our analysis extend to fundamental questions about the future of moral philosophy in an increasingly technological world. If, as Levinas suggests Levinas (1985), ethics begins with the face-to-face encounter with the Other, what happens when that encounter is mediated by algorithmic interfaces? Our findings indicate that the conditions for ethical relation are being systematically undermined by systems that render human particularity invisible. This represents a significant challenge for contemporary philosophy to develop frameworks that can address technological transformations while preserving ethical insights.

From a practical perspective, our analysis has implications for human rights discourse and international legal frameworks. The United Nations Genocide Convention was designed to address forms of violence that were primarily physical and territorial. Today, however, violence operates through more subtle means: data collection, population management, and predictive analytics that may not fit neatly into existing legal categories. This suggests a need to update international legal frameworks to account for what Weizman calls “violence at the threshold of detectability” Weizman (2017)—forms of harm that operate through epistemological and technical means.

Some might argue that our analysis overstates the novelty of contemporary forms of violence or underestimates technology’s capacity for humanitarian purposes. While data systems can serve beneficial ends, our concern is with their structural tendencies when deployed within contexts of asymmetric power relations. The problem is not technology itself, but rather the epistemological frameworks that guide its deployment. As Adorno and Horkheimer warned Adorno & Horkheimer (1947), when reason becomes purely instrumental, it loses its capacity for self-critique.

Despite these challenges, our analysis points toward possibilities for resistance. The very fact that the “calculus of death” can be named suggests it is not invulnerable to critique. Following Derrida’s deconstructive approach Derrida (1976), we might identify internal contradictions where claims to objectivity break down. Alternative epistemological traditions offer resources for imagining forms of knowledge that reunite cognition with compassion.

Future research should explore several directions. First, empirical studies could document the specific technical mechanisms through which algorithmic systems produce violence. Second, philosophical work is needed to develop ethical frameworks for artificial intelligence. Third, comparative studies of different legal responses could yield policy insights. Finally, interdisciplinary collaboration is essential for developing strategies to resist the dehumanizing potential of data systems.

In conclusion, the “calculus of death” represents not merely a political or technological problem, but a fundamental philosophical challenge. It forces us to confront questions about the relationship between knowledge and power, reason and ethics. By making these systems visible, we hope to contribute to more humane alternatives that recognize human dignity and refuse the illusion that lives can be sacrificed for abstract calculations.

4 CONCLUSIONS AND FUTURE WORK

This paper has traced the genealogy of what we term the “calculus of death”—the systematic transformation of moral atrocities into administrative operations through bureaucratic and data-driven systems. Our analysis has demonstrated how this calculus operates through three interconnected mechanisms: the abstraction of human life into manageable data points, the normalization of violence through procedural language, and the expansion of control through predictive governance. By examining both historical and contemporary cases, we have shown how systems of classification and quantification enable the rationalization of mass violence while maintaining the appearance of objective neutrality. The Palestinian case exemplifies how these mechanisms produce a paradoxical condition where suffering is simultaneously documented and systematically erased through definitional and procedural barriers.

Our primary contribution lies in exposing the structural complicity between Western rationality, technological administration, and the erosion of moral responsibility. By developing the framework of the “calculus of death,” we have provided a critical tool for understanding how genocide and mass violence are not aberrations of reason but rather emerge from its instrumental application. This challenges conventional understandings that position genocide as a breakdown of civilization, revealing instead how it represents the fulfillment of certain civilizational logics. Our work extends the critical traditions of Foucault, Bauman, and Arendt into the digital age, showing how algorithmic systems intensify biopolitical control while further obscuring moral accountability.

The broader implications of our analysis extend to fundamental questions about the future of ethics, politics, and knowledge production in an increasingly technological world. As data-driven systems become more pervasive in governance and security, the risk grows that moral considerations will be displaced by optimization metrics and predictive analytics. This represents not merely a political challenge but a threat to the possibility of ethical relation, particularly when human particularity becomes invisible to algorithmic interfaces. The transformation of life into data points threatens to create what Levinas might describe as a world without faces—a world where the ethical demand of the Other can be systematically ignored.

Our research advances the field by bridging critical genocide studies with philosophy of technology and data ethics. By demonstrating the continuities between historical bureaucratic violence and contemporary algorithmic systems, we provide a framework for understanding new forms of epistemic closure that resist traditional modes of critique. This enables more sophisticated analyses of how violence operates at the threshold of detectability, where harm is produced through classification systems, predictive models, and data management rather than overt physical force. Our work thus contributes to developing more adequate conceptual tools for addressing the challenges of technological governance.

Future research should explore several promising directions, including empirical studies of specific technical mechanisms of algorithmic violence, the development of ethical frameworks for artificial intelligence, and comparative analyses of legal responses to data-driven governance. More fundamentally, there is an urgent need to imagine and develop alternative epistemological frameworks that reunite cognition with compassion. As we have suggested, non-Western philosophical traditions may offer valuable resources for this project, providing ways of knowing that resist the abstraction and instrumentalization characteristic of the calculus of death.

Ultimately, our analysis suggests that resisting the calculus of death requires not the abandonment of reason, but its reorientation toward responsibility, humility, and reverence for life. The most profound challenge may be to develop forms of knowledge and practice that recognize human dignity while acknowledging the limits of our capacity to know and control. In a world increasingly governed by data and algorithms, the recovery of moral imagination may be our most essential task—not merely for understanding violence, but for preventing its rationalized repetition.

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