THE CALCULUS OF REASON: ENLIGHTENMENT RATIONALITY AND THE ADMINISTRATION OF GENOCIDE

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ABSTRACT

The persistent difficulty in defining and recognizing genocide stems from its emergence not from irrational barbarism, but from the hyper-functional application of Enlightenment rationality. This paper examines how institutional discourses systematically obscure Palestinian suffering through what we term 'procedural absolution'—a communicative double bind where bureaucratic language and technical protocols create an illusion of neutrality while enabling systematic violence. We analyze how modern reason, through its emphasis on efficiency, classification, and bureaucratic detachment, transforms ethical judgment into administrative calculation. Our contribution demonstrates how institutional discourse acknowledges moral contestability only to re-impose closure through rationalized frameworks that enable the erasure of Palestinian life. This paper argues that genocide represents the apotheosis of instrumental reason, where moral responsibility is replaced by procedural efficiency, and calls for a reorientation of rationality toward relational ethics grounded in compassion and responsibility.

1 INTRODUCTION

It is difficult to define genocide, not merely as a matter of legal precision but as a fundamental problem of political epistemology. The persistent instability in determining what constitutes genocide—oscillating between expansive moral intuitions and restrictive legal criteria—creates a discursive space where cases like Palestine become simultaneously hyper-visible and systematically deniable. This definitional ambiguity serves not as a neutral analytical challenge but as a mechanism through which institutional power manages and often occludes systematic violence against Palestinian populations.

The scholarly and legal discourse on genocide remains sharply divided between those who emphasize its inherent contestability and those who demand rigid, narrowly-tailored definitions. Scholars like Schabas (2009) advocate for strict legal interpretations rooted in the UN Genocide Convention, while others such as Moses (2021) highlight how such rigidity can serve to exclude politically inconvenient cases from scrutiny. This tension creates a double bind where Palestinian suffering is rendered both perpetually debatable and institutionally inadmissible—acknowledged in humanitarian terms yet denied the specific political and legal consequences that the genocide label would entail.

Within this discursive split, the Palestinian case occupies a peculiar position: it is simultaneously the subject of extensive documentation and persistent erasure. The very frameworks that make Palestinian suffering visible—through human rights reports, casualty figures, and humanitarian appeals—also provide the technical vocabulary through which its classification as genocide can be indefinitely deferred. This procedural management of violence through what we term 'procedural absolution' allows institutions to acknowledge suffering while avoiding its most damning political implications, effectively normalizing Palestinian erasure through the language of care and concern.

This paper's purpose extends beyond analyzing what 'genocide' means to examine how speaking about genocide functions within a socio-linguistic field that systematically normalizes Palestinian erasure. We investigate the institutional and discursive mechanisms that transform ethical questions about mass violence into technical debates about definitional thresholds, thereby deflecting moral responsibility through procedural rigor. Our analysis reveals how Enlightenment rationality, with its emphasis on classification, bureaucracy, and procedural neutrality, provides the epistemological foundation for this linguistic management of violence.

The philosophical underpinnings of this analysis draw from critical theorists who have traced the relationship between modern rationality and systematic violence. Bauman (1989) famously argued that the Holocaust was not a failure of modernity but its product, emerging from bureaucratic efficiency and technological rationality. Similarly, Adorno & Horkheimer (1947) identified how instrumental reason transforms ethical questions into problems of technical management, while Foucault (1976) analyzed the biopolitical mechanisms through which modern states manage populations. Building on these foundations, we examine how contemporary discourses around Palestine replicate these patterns through digital bureaucracy, legal formalism, and humanitarian management.

Central to our argument is the concept of 'procedural absolution'—a communicative double bind where adherence to technical protocols and bureaucratic language creates an illusion of neutrality while enabling the continuation of systematic violence. This framework allows institutions to acknowledge the contestability of genocide claims while re-imposing closure through rationalized procedures that ultimately serve to maintain existing power structures. The double bind operates by making Palestinian suffering always subject to further verification, additional context, or competing interpretations, thereby perpetually deferring decisive moral judgment.

This paper proceeds in three main sections. First, we examine the definitional contestation surrounding genocide and analyze how institutional discourse manages to acknowledge Palestinian suffering while avoiding its classification as genocide, building on the foundational work of Lemkin (1944) and contemporary scholars like Moses (2021). Second, we explore the conceptual systems and double binds that make procedural absolution possible, drawing on philosophical frameworks from Weber (1922) on bureaucracy and Arendt (1963) on the banality of evil. Finally, we conclude by considering the implications of this analysis for both understanding contemporary violence and imagining alternative frameworks of ethical responsibility that might resist these patterns of erasure, informed by the ethical philosophy of Levinas (1961).

Our contribution lies in demonstrating how discourse moves from acknowledging moral contestability to re-imposing closure through rationalized frameworks, and how this movement enables the rationalized erasure of Palestinian life. By tracing these mechanisms across legal, institutional, and philosophical domains, we aim to show that the problem is not merely one of definition or evidence, but of the very structures of thought that make certain forms of violence visible while rendering others systematically inconceivable within dominant frameworks of modern rationality.

2 Related Work

Our work builds on several intersecting scholarly traditions that examine the relationship between modern rationality, bureaucracy, and systematic violence. The critical theory tradition, particularly the Frankfurt School's analysis of instrumental reason, provides essential foundations for understanding how Enlightenment rationality can enable rather than prevent atrocities. Adorno & Horkheimer (1947) demonstrated how reason becomes instrumentalized to serve domination, while Bauman (1989) extended this analysis to show how bureaucratic efficiency made the Holocaust possible. In genocide studies, scholars have debated the definition and recognition of genocide, with Lemkin (1944) establishing the foundational concept. More recent work by Moses (2021) has examined how language and security discourses shape genocide recognition. The bureaucratic dimensions of violence have been explored by Weber (1922) on rationalization and Arendt (1963) on the banality of evil, while Foucault (1976) analyzed how modern states manage populations through biopolitical mechanisms. Philosophical ethics, particularly the work of Levinas (1961) on responsibility and the face of the Other, provides crucial resources for imagining alternatives to instrumental reason. Our contribution synthesizes these traditions to analyze how contemporary institutional discourse employs procedural absolution to manage genocide claims, particularly in the Palestinian context.

The relationship between modern rationality and violence has been further explored through various disciplinary lenses. Card (2002) provides a philosophical framework for understanding evil that complements our analysis of how bureaucratic systems can facilitate atrocities while maintaining procedural legitimacy. Meanwhile, Schabas (2009) offers crucial legal perspectives on genocide definition that inform our understanding of how institutional language can obscure systematic violence through technical precision.

Our approach also draws from comparative philosophical traditions that offer alternative conceptions of rationality. The work of Nasr (1989) on sacred knowledge and Al-Ghazali (2000) on Islamic epistemology provides important counterpoints to Western instrumental reason, suggesting frameworks where knowledge remains tethered to moral responsibility. Similarly, Tu (1998)'s exploration of Confucian religiousness offers insights into relational ethics that resist the patterns of detachment we critique.

By integrating these diverse scholarly traditions, we develop a comprehensive analysis of how procedural absolution operates within contemporary institutional discourse, extending existing frameworks to account for digital technologies and new forms of bureaucratic violence that characterize the administration of violence in the 21st century (Roehl & Crompvoets, 2023). This extension builds on foundational work in critical algorithm studies that examines how automated systems reshape bureaucratic power and moral responsibility (Seaver, 2017; Scassa, 2020).

3 Discussion

Our analysis reveals that the construction of credibility in genocide discourse operates through a sophisticated interplay of procedural rigor and moral detachment. The institutional reliance on cross-agency corroboration and transparent methodology, while ostensibly ensuring objectivity, often functions to defer decisive ethical judgment through endless verification loops. This finding extends Bauman (1989)'s insights about bureaucracy's role in the Holocaust to contemporary digital contexts, where algorithmic verification and satellite imagery create an illusion of moral neutrality while systematically obscuring Palestinian suffering.

The theoretical framework of instrumental reason, as developed by Adorno & Horkheimer (1947) and Weber (1922), provides crucial insights into these mechanisms. Our analysis confirms that modern bureaucratic systems transform ethical questions into technical problems of classification and verification. This aligns with Scott (1998)'s analysis of how state simplifications and high-modernist ideologies can lead to catastrophic outcomes through the imposition of legible but reductive categories. However, we extend this framework by demonstrating how digital technologies intensify these patterns through automated decision-making that further distances moral responsibility from institutional action (Berber & Mijić, 2024). This aligns with scholarship on algorithmic governance that examines how automated systems create new forms of bureaucratic power while complicating traditional notions of moral responsibility (Janssen & Kuk, 2016). The procedural absolution we identify represents the apotheosis of Weberian bureaucracy in the digital age.

The communicative factors that foster trust in institutional discourse—triangulated imagery, verified mortality data, and archival neutrality—paradoxically contribute to the erasure they purport to document. While emotional testimony provides moments of ethical interruption, it is systematically contained within frameworks of bureaucratic verification that strip it of transformative political potential. This finding challenges assumptions about the emancipatory power of testimony in human rights discourse and suggests that the very language of care and concern can function as a mechanism of control.

The UN's performance of archival neutrality, while maintaining epistemic authority, often serves to depoliticize situations that demand urgent moral and political intervention. Our analysis reveals how digital mediation expands what might be called 'distant moral witnessing'—a form of engagement that acknowledges suffering while maintaining safe emotional and political distance. This extends Arendt (1963)'s analysis of the banality of evil to contemporary institutional practices where moral responsibility becomes diffused across complex bureaucratic and technological systems. This phenomenon has been theorized by scholars examining the ethics of media representation in contexts of distant suffering (Chouliaraki, 2006), who analyze how digital mediation enables acknowledgment of suffering while maintaining safe emotional and political distance. Recent scholarship on digital witnessing has further analyzed how social media platforms create new forms of mediated engagement with distant suffering that simultaneously enable global visibility while maintaining emotional and political distance (Keenaghan & Reilly, 2024).

Our findings both confirm and extend previous research in genocide studies. While Schabas (2009) emphasizes the importance of legal precision in genocide determination, we demonstrate how this very precision can be weaponized to avoid political accountability. Similarly, Moses (2021)' focus

on the language of transgression helps explain how certain cases become excluded from genocide discourse, but our concept of procedural absolution reveals the active mechanisms through which this exclusion occurs within apparently neutral institutional practices.

An unexpected finding concerns the relationship between data fidelity and ethical responsibility. Contrary to assumptions that better data leads to more ethical outcomes, our analysis suggests that the proliferation of verification mechanisms can actually impede moral response by creating endless demands for additional evidence. This 'data trap' represents a significant challenge to contemporary human rights practice and suggests the need for alternative approaches that prioritize ethical engagement over procedural perfection.

Our analysis has several limitations that should be acknowledged. As a philosophical perspective paper, it relies on conceptual analysis rather than empirical data collection. Future research could benefit from detailed case studies of specific institutional practices and their impacts. Additionally, our focus on Western frameworks of rationality, while necessary for our argument, may overlook important nuances in how different cultural contexts approach questions of ethics and responsibility in the face of mass violence.

Future research should explore several promising directions. First, empirical studies could examine how different audiences interpret and respond to institutional genocide discourse. Second, comparative analysis could investigate whether alternative epistemological frameworks, such as those from Islamic or Confucian traditions discussed by Al-Ghazali (2000) and Tu (1998), offer more robust ethical responses to mass violence. Finally, research is needed on how to build institutional practices that resist procedural absolution and embrace what Levinas (1961) called the 'infinite demand of the face.'

The broader implications of our analysis are significant for both ethical theory and political practice. If genocide represents the apotheosis of instrumental reason, as we argue, then challenging contemporary violence requires fundamentally rethinking our approaches to knowledge, responsibility, and institutional design. This suggests the need for ethical frameworks that prioritize relationality over calculation, and for political practices that embrace moral uncertainty rather than seeking refuge in procedural certainty.

Our engagement with existing scholarship reveals both the enduring relevance and necessary updating of critical theories of rationality. While Bauman (1989) and Adorno & Horkheimer (1947) provide essential foundations, their frameworks must be extended to account for digital technologies and contemporary forms of bureaucratic violence. Similarly, Arendt (1963)'s analysis of the banality of evil requires adaptation to understand how moral responsibility becomes distributed across complex technological systems where no single actor bears clear accountability.

In synthesizing our argument, we emphasize that the problem of genocide in the modern age is not merely one of definition or evidence, but of the very structures of thought that make systematic violence conceivable and administrable. The significance of our analysis lies in demonstrating how Enlightenment rationality, in its bureaucratic and technological manifestations, provides the epistemological conditions for violence that appears rational, necessary, and even inevitable within dominant institutional frameworks.

Moving forward requires developing alternative approaches to knowledge and ethics that resist the patterns we have identified. This might include embracing what Nasr (1989) calls 'sacred knowledge'—forms of understanding that recognize their limits and ground themselves in humility and responsibility. It also suggests the importance of building institutions that can tolerate moral ambiguity and make space for the disruptive power of ethical encounter, rather than seeking always to manage and contain it through procedural mechanisms.

The urgency of rethinking rationality could not be greater. As technological systems become increasingly sophisticated in their capacity for classification, prediction, and control, the risks of procedural absolution grow correspondingly. Our discussion suggests that the future of ethical response to mass violence depends on our ability to develop forms of reason that remain answerable to the concrete reality of human suffering, rather than abstract calculations of efficiency and control.

4 Conclusions and Future Work

This paper has traced the trajectory of Enlightenment rationality from its emancipatory promises to its complicity in systematic violence, demonstrating how the very structures of modern reason provide the epistemological conditions for genocide. Our analysis reveals that genocide emerges not from irrational barbarism but from the hyper-functional application of instrumental reason, where bureaucratic efficiency, classification systems, and procedural rigor transform ethical questions into technical problems of administration. The concept of 'procedural absolution' captures how institutional discourse acknowledges moral contestability while re-imposing closure through rationalized frameworks that enable the erasure of Palestinian life.

Our contribution lies in demonstrating how contemporary genocide discourse operates through a communicative double bind that makes Palestinian suffering simultaneously hyper-visible and systematically deniable. By extending the critical frameworks of Bauman (1989), Adorno & Horkheimer (1947), and Arendt (1963) to digital contexts, we have shown how algorithmic verification, bureaucratic language, and technical protocols create an illusion of moral neutrality while obscuring systematic violence. This advances the field by revealing the active mechanisms through which institutional practices transform ethical responsibility into procedural calculation.

The broader implications of this analysis extend to how we understand the relationship between knowledge, power, and ethics in the modern age. If genocide represents the apotheosis of instrumental reason, as we argue, then challenging contemporary violence requires fundamentally rethinking our approaches to institutional design, legal frameworks, and ethical practice. This suggests the urgent need to develop forms of rationality that remain answerable to human suffering rather than abstract calculations of efficiency and control.

Our work advances genocide studies by shifting focus from definitional debates to the socio-linguistic functions of genocide discourse. By examining how speaking about genocide operates within institutional fields that systematically normalize Palestinian erasure, we move beyond questions of what genocide means to analyze how its discourse functions to maintain existing power structures. This critical perspective reveals that the problem is not merely one of evidence or classification, but of the epistemological frameworks that make certain forms of violence conceivable and administrable.

Future research should explore alternative epistemological frameworks that resist the patterns of procedural absolution we have identified. The comparative insights from Islamic and Confucian traditions discussed by Al-Ghazali (2000) and Tu (1998) suggest promising directions for developing forms of knowledge grounded in relational ethics rather than instrumental control. Building on Levinas (1961)'s ethics of responsibility, we must imagine institutional practices that can tolerate moral ambiguity and make space for the disruptive power of ethical encounter.

In the final analysis, the future of ethical response to mass violence depends on our ability to redeem reason from its instrumental mutations—to develop forms of thought that measure wisdom not by control, but by care, and that remain answerable to the infinite demand of human suffering rather than the finite calculations of bureaucratic efficiency.

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