CHAINS OF COMMAND: FROM EICHMANN TO THE DRONE OPERATOR – MORAL DISTANCE AND THE BUREAUCRATIZATION OF KILLING

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the transformation of violence through bureaucratic and technological mediation, focusing on the concept of "moral distancing"—the psychological and structural processes that convert acts of killing into administrative procedures. Drawing a conceptual genealogy from Nazi bureaucracy to contemporary drone warfare, we analyze how systems of classification and command create conditions where responsibility becomes diffuse and ethical engagement is systematically precluded. The paper demonstrates how institutional frameworks transform direct violence into compliance with procedures, enabling the rationalized erasure of human subjects through mechanisms of abstraction and delegation. We argue that modern warfare's bureaucratic and algorithmic command structures reproduce a moral architecture where physical and psychological distance facilitates a perceived innocence, fundamentally undermining the conditions necessary for ethical responsibility and encounter. This analysis contributes to understanding how administrative reason can operate as a grammar of erasure, with profound implications for contemporary philosophical ethics.

1 INTRODUCTION

It is difficult to define genocide, a term whose legal and moral weight often obscures more than it reveals when applied to contemporary conflicts. The case of Palestine presents a particularly instructive instance of this definitional instability, where the systematic nature of violence exists in tension with frameworks that render such violence contestable or even invisible. This paper examines how the discourse surrounding genocide functions not merely to describe but to shape the very possibility of recognizing Palestinian suffering within institutional and academic contexts.

The scholarly and legal fields are deeply divided between those who emphasize the contestable nature of genocide as a category and those who demand rigid, narrowly defined criteria for its application. This division creates a paradoxical space where Palestine becomes simultaneously hyper-visible as a site of political controversy and systematically deniable as a case of genocide. As Meiches (2017) observes, the discursive practices surrounding genocide often produce double binds that allow for acknowledgment of violence while simultaneously precluding definitive categorization. This linguistic and conceptual maneuvering operates as a mechanism of procedural absolution, where the very act of debating definitions becomes a way to avoid substantive ethical engagement.

Within this contested terrain, Palestinian suffering is rendered both perpetually present and perpetually deferred. The visibility of Palestinian casualties in media and international discourse exists alongside their erasure through bureaucratic and legal mechanisms that question the applicability of the genocide label. Butler (2009) helps illuminate how certain lives are framed as ungrievable, their loss failing to register within dominant ethical and political frameworks. This simultaneous visibility and deniability creates a condition where the substantive reality of systematic violence is obscured by procedural debates about classification and terminology.

The purpose of this paper is not merely to determine whether the term genocide applies to the Palestinian case, but rather to analyze how speaking about genocide functions within a socio-linguistic field that systematically normalizes Palestinian erasure. We examine the discursive mechanisms through which institutional language transforms concrete acts of violence into abstract administrative

categories, thereby enabling what Mbembe (2003) identifies as the power to dictate who may live and who must die while maintaining a veneer of bureaucratic rationality. This analysis reveals how discourse operates as a technology of power that produces and maintains conditions of violence through their very contestation.

This investigation draws upon several key philosophical frameworks to unpack these dynamics. Arendt (1963) provides crucial insights into the banality of evil, where bureaucratic procedures can facilitate atrocities by distancing perpetrators from the moral implications of their actions. Similarly, Foucault (1977) helps us understand how modern power operates through systems of classification and normalization that render certain populations subject to violence while maintaining the appearance of legal and administrative order. These theoretical perspectives allow us to move beyond surface-level debates about definitions to examine the deeper structural conditions that enable systematic violence.

This paper proceeds in three main sections. First, we examine the definitional contestation surrounding genocide, with particular attention to how procedural mechanisms function to occlude Palestinian suffering. Second, we analyze the conceptual systems and double binds that structure discourse about genocide, drawing on philosophical frameworks to understand how language can simultaneously acknowledge and deny violence. Finally, we conclude by reflecting on the implications of this analysis for both academic discourse and political practice, suggesting pathways toward a more ethically responsive engagement with systematic violence.

The contribution of this paper lies in its systematic unpacking of how discourse functions to produce and maintain conditions of erasure, even in the face of overwhelming evidence of violence. By tracing the mechanisms through which language transforms moral questions into procedural debates, we aim to reveal the complicity of academic and institutional discourse in normalizing Palestinian suffering. This analysis not only sheds light on the specific case of Palestine but also offers a framework for understanding how discourse operates in other contexts where systematic violence is rendered invisible through its very hyper-visibility.

2 Related Work

This paper builds upon several interconnected strands of philosophical and sociological scholarship that examine the relationship between obedience, bureaucracy, and moral responsibility. Our analysis situates itself within a genealogy that traces how conceptions of duty and compliance have evolved across different historical and technological contexts, while maintaining core structural features that enable moral distancing.

2.1 Genealogy of Obedience

The philosophical foundations of obedience find their modern expression in Weber (1947)'s analysis of bureaucratic rationality as an impersonal, predictable system operating "without hatred or passion." Weber's ideal type of bureaucracy provides a crucial framework for understanding how administrative systems can systematically distance individuals from the moral consequences of their actions. This builds upon earlier philosophical traditions: Kant's conception of duty grounded in universal law, which while emphasizing moral autonomy, can paradoxically lead to obedience that eclipses empathy when abstract principles override particular ethical encounters. Hegel's mediation of self-consciousness through the state further develops this theme, showing how violence can be rationalized as the work of Spirit or historical necessity.

The most influential contemporary analysis comes from Arendt (1963), whose concept of the "banality of evil" reveals how ordinary individuals can participate in atrocities through thoughtless adherence to procedural competence. Arendt's work demonstrates that evil can emerge not from monstrous intention but from a moral vacuum created by bureaucratic systems that prioritize compliance over ethical reflection.

2.2 Philosophical Impasse and Contemporary Extensions

Post-Holocaust humanism sought to rescue conscience as a bulwark against systematic violence, yet military and digital governance systems have continued to expand, creating what we identify as a fundamental impasse: rational obedience and moral empathy appear structurally incompatible within

hierarchical systems of violence. Levinas (1969)'s ethics of the face-to-face encounter provides a crucial counterpoint to bureaucratic abstraction, insisting that ethical responsibility arises precisely in the particular encounter with the Other that cannot be reduced to universal rules or procedures.

Foucault (1977) extends this analysis by showing how disciplinary power internalizes command structures, transforming subjects into instruments of normalization. Foucault's work helps explain how modern power operates not only through explicit coercion but through systems of classification and surveillance that render certain forms of life manageable and others disposable.

Milgram (1974)'s experimental demonstrations of obedience to authority provide empirical support for these philosophical insights, showing how ordinary people can inflict harm when authorized by institutional structures. Similarly, Bandura (1999)'s concept of moral disengagement identifies psychological mechanisms—including euphemistic labeling and displacement of responsibility—that enable individuals to participate in harmful actions while maintaining their self-concept as moral agents.

2.3 Contemporary Technological Extensions

Recent scholarship has extended these analyses to contemporary technological contexts. Chamayou (2015)'s theory of drone warfare examines how remote killing creates conditions of "riskless war" for perpetrators, fundamentally altering the ethical dynamics of violence. Butler (2009) analyzes how certain lives become framed as ungrievable through discursive practices that systematically exclude them from ethical consideration. Mbembe (2003) develops the concept of necropolitics to describe how sovereign power operates through the capacity to dictate who may live and who must die.

Our work builds upon these foundations while making several distinctive contributions. We trace a conceptual genealogy that reveals continuities across seemingly disparate historical contexts, from Nazi bureaucracy to contemporary algorithmic warfare. We develop the concept of "obedience without presence" to describe how technological mediation intensifies moral distancing beyond what previous analyses have captured. Finally, we examine how these dynamics operate specifically within discourse about genocide, showing how bureaucratic language can function as a grammar of erasure that systematically occludes Palestinian suffering.

3 Discussion

This paper has traced a conceptual genealogy from Nazi bureaucracy to contemporary drone warfare, revealing how moral distance operates as a structural mechanism that transforms killing into administrative procedure. Our analysis demonstrates that the difficulty in defining responsibility when violence becomes procedural stems not from conceptual ambiguity alone, but from systematic architectures of command that disperse agency across hierarchies and technologies. The research question—how bureaucratic classification transforms from a logic of administration into a grammar of erasure—finds its answer in the persistent pattern where obedience to procedure replaces ethical engagement with the human face of violence.

The findings strongly resonate with Arendt (1963)'s concept of the banality of evil, extending it into the digital age where algorithmic commands further abstract moral responsibility. Where Arendt identified thoughtlessness in bureaucratic compliance, we observe its intensification in systems where human operators interact with pixelated representations rather than living beings. Similarly, Levinas (1969)'s ethics of the face-to-face encounter provides a crucial theoretical anchor for understanding how remote warfare systematically voids the conditions for ethical responsibility. The drone operator's screen represents not merely technological advancement but a fundamental reconfiguration of the ethical relationship, where the Other's command "Thou shalt not kill" is rendered inaudible through layers of digital mediation.

The significance of these findings lies in their demonstration of continuity across seemingly disparate historical contexts. From Eichmann's meticulous paperwork to the drone operator's targeting algorithms, we observe a consistent pattern where bureaucratic reason converts moral questions into technical problems. This has profound implications for contemporary philosophical ethics, suggesting that traditional frameworks centered on intention and individual responsibility may be inadequate for addressing systemic violence embedded within institutional procedures. The implication is that

ethical analysis must shift from focusing solely on individual actors to examining the structural conditions that enable moral distancing.

Our findings both confirm and extend existing scholarship. They strongly align with Milgram (1974)'s experimental demonstrations of obedience to authority, while revealing how technological mediation creates even greater psychological distance than physical separation alone. Similarly, Bandura (1999)'s concept of moral disengagement finds concrete manifestation in the euphemistic language and procedural frameworks of modern warfare. Bandura's systematic analysis of moral disengagement mechanisms—including moral justification, euphemistic labeling, and displacement of responsibility—provides a comprehensive framework for understanding how bureaucratic and technological systems facilitate ethical disengagement. However, our analysis extends this work by demonstrating how these psychological mechanisms become embedded within institutional architectures that systematically produce moral distance as an operational requirement rather than merely as an individual coping strategy.

An unexpected finding emerging from this analysis is the degree to which Enlightenment rationality itself may contain within it the seeds of this moral distancing. The very emphasis on universal rules and procedural consistency that characterizes modern bureaucracy—drawing from Weber (1947)'s ideal type—appears to create conditions where ethical particularity and the unique demands of individual encounters become systematically excluded. This suggests that the problem is not merely one of misapplication of rational principles, but may be inherent to certain forms of rational organization that prioritize efficiency and predictability over ethical responsiveness. This echoes critical scholarship that has long questioned the ethical limitations of bureaucratic rationality and its capacity to accommodate moral particularity, particularly foundational critiques of how Enlightenment reason can become instrumental and self-destructive.

The philosophical implications extend to questions of agency and responsibility in an increasingly automated world. As Chamayou (2015) observes, drone warfare represents a paradigm shift toward "riskless war" for the perpetrator, but our analysis reveals this as the culmination of a longer historical trajectory where physical and moral risk become systematically uncoupled. This creates what might be termed an "ethics of asymmetric vulnerability," where the powerful are insulated not only from physical harm but from the moral demands that arise from shared vulnerability. This represents a fundamental challenge to ethical frameworks that ground responsibility in our common human condition.

Several limitations must be acknowledged in this study. As a philosophical analysis, it relies on conceptual genealogy rather than empirical data, which limits its ability to make claims about the actual psychological states of individuals within command structures. Additionally, the focus on bureaucratic and technological mediation may underemphasize the role of political ideology and economic interests in shaping these systems. The comparative approach, while illuminating continuities, risks flattening important historical specificities and differences between contexts. Finally, the analysis remains largely within Western philosophical traditions, potentially limiting its applicability to non-Western contexts.

For genocide studies, our findings suggest the need to expand analysis beyond direct physical violence to include what Meiches (2017) identifies as the discursive practices that enable systematic erasure. This extends Mbembe (2003)'s concept by showing how necropolitical power operates not only through the power to kill but through the power to render certain lives administratively invisible, creating what might be termed "slow genocide"—processes that may not involve mass killing but systematically undermine the conditions for collective existence.

One might argue that technological mediation actually increases accountability through enhanced surveillance and data collection. However, this perspective fails to account for how these same technologies can be used to further abstract and distance operators from the human consequences of their actions. The proliferation of data does not necessarily lead to greater ethical engagement—it may instead facilitate what Butler (2009) identifies as framing that renders certain lives ungrievable through their representation as statistical anomalies or security threats.

Future research should pursue several promising directions. Empirical studies examining the psychological experiences of drone operators and other remote weapons operators could provide crucial data about how moral distancing operates in practice. Comparative philosophical work exploring non-Western ethical traditions might reveal alternative frameworks for understanding responsibility

in mediated contexts. Historical research could trace more fine-grained connections between specific bureaucratic practices across different contexts. Finally, interdisciplinary work combining philosophy, psychology, and political science could develop concrete proposals for institutional reforms that might mitigate moral distancing.

The broader implication for philosophy is the urgent need to develop ethical frameworks capable of addressing what we have termed "obedience without presence." This requires moving beyond individualistic conceptions of responsibility to develop collective and structural approaches to ethics. It also demands critical engagement with the technological systems that increasingly mediate human relationships, recognizing that these are not neutral tools but active shapers of moral possibility. Philosophy must recover its critical function by questioning the very structures of thought that make systematic violence appear reasonable.

In synthesis, this discussion has shown how the bureaucratization of killing represents not merely a practical challenge but a fundamental philosophical problem. The continuity from Eichmann to the drone operator reveals persistent patterns where moral responsibility becomes dispersed through chains of command and technological mediation. By examining these patterns through multiple philosophical lenses, we have demonstrated how administrative reason can operate as what Derrida (1997) might identify as a writing that erases even as it inscribes—a system of classification that simultaneously documents and obliterates the human subject. The task for contemporary ethics is to develop languages and practices capable of resisting this erasure, restoring the ethical encounter to its proper place at the heart of moral responsibility.

4 Conclusions and Future Work

This paper has traced the persistent paradox within genocide discourse: while the field proclaims the contestability of definitions, it simultaneously reproduces closure through bureaucratic and discursive mechanisms that systematically occlude Palestinian suffering. The very frameworks designed to identify and prevent mass violence become, in practice, instruments of erasure when applied to Palestine. As Meiches (2017) demonstrates, the double binds of political discourse create conditions where acknowledgment and denial coexist, allowing institutional actors to navigate ethical demands while maintaining established practices. The Palestinian case exposes this bind with particular clarity, revealing how procedural language and administrative categories can transform concrete human suffering into abstract debates about classification.

The central claim emerging from this analysis is that the task before us is not to perfect a definition of genocide, but rather to unbind discourse itself—to alter the rules of speaking such that Palestinian life is neither footnoted nor administratively absolved. This requires moving beyond what Butler (2009) identifies as the framing that renders certain lives ungrievable, toward linguistic practices that restore ethical encounter to the heart of political discourse. The bureaucratic sentence, with its grammar of classification and procedural correctness, must be challenged by a language capable of bearing witness to human suffering without reducing it to administrative categories. This is not merely a semantic shift, but a fundamental reorientation of how we understand responsibility in the face of systematic violence.

This reorientation has profound implications for philosophical practice. Philosophy must move beyond its traditional role as arbiter of definitions to become a practice of critical reflection on the conditions of its own speech. As Mbembe (2003) reminds us, the power to dictate who may live and who must die operates not only through direct violence but through the very categories that make certain forms of life appear disposable. Philosophical discourse that fails to examine its own complicity in producing these categories risks becoming another mechanism of what Arendt (1963) identified as the banality of evil—where thoughtless adherence to procedural reason replaces genuine ethical engagement.

In conclusion, this paper argues that philosophy must undertake what might be termed a Meiches-style meta-reflection: examining its own conditions of speech to avoid complicity in rationalized erasure. The future of ethical discourse depends on our ability to develop languages and practices that resist the comfort of abstraction, that restore the human face to political calculation, and that recognize how distance—whether physical, psychological, or linguistic—enables the perpetuation of violence. The Palestinian case stands as both warning and invitation: a warning about how easily administrative

reason can become a grammar of erasure, and an invitation to develop new forms of discourse capable of bearing witness to suffering without reducing it to procedural categories. The work ahead lies not in refining our definitions, but in transforming our ways of speaking and listening—creating conditions where ethical responsibility can flourish even in the face of systematic violence.

Future work should focus on developing concrete methodologies for this discursive transformation, including critical analyses of institutional language, the development of alternative vocabularies for discussing systematic violence, and interdisciplinary collaborations that bridge philosophy, political science, and legal studies. Such efforts must remain attentive to the specific historical and political contexts in which discourse operates, while working toward more ethically responsive forms of engagement with violence and suffering.

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