

“You kill or you die, or you die and you kill”: Meaning and Violence in AMC’s *The Walking Dead*

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ONE OF THE HALLMARKS OF AMC’S *THE WALKING DEAD* IS ITS unflinching portrayal of grisly violence. While graphic violence may attract some viewers, its role in the series transcends mere sensationalism, serving much the same purpose as violence in Flannery O’Connor’s work—namely, as “the extreme situation that best reveals what we are essentially” (O’Connor 113). In *The Walking Dead*, violence is an artistic tool that not only reveals character but also poses questions about mortality, meaning, and power(lessness) that viewers, in turn, use as a means of personal exploration. By involving viewers vicariously in intense crises and ethical dilemmas, the series engages its audience psychologically and philosophically, opening a debate about the fundamental meaning of human activity. This debate captivates viewers because it is not located exclusively in an imaginary postapocalyptic landscape, but also in their own world, which is haunted by many of the anxieties that the characters experience. Viewers’ participation in this debate indicates that the drama of *The Walking Dead* is deeply resonant for them and that they often discover themselves in this fictional wasteland.

Violence is an important source of the special relevance of *The Walking Dead* and other zombie narratives to today’s audiences. Kyle Bishop connects the zombie’s appeal with the disturbing similarity between fictional scenes of devastation wrought by a zombie

apocalypse—“deserted metropolitan streets, abandoned human corpses, and gangs of lawless vigilantes”—and news coverage of horrifying real-world events (11). Although it runs on the small screen rather than the big screen, *The Walking Dead* exploits the power of the same sort of visual connection that has placed zombie cinema “among the most culturally revealing and resonant fictions of the recent decade of unrest” (Bishop 10). While the use of violence in the series seems especially meaningful in the current cultural climate, it also has a place within what Richard Slotkin describes as a long tradition of mythmaking that identifies violence as a core feature of American history and progress, a tradition that represents “the redemption of American spirit. . . through a scenario of separation, temporary regression to a more primitive or ‘natural’ state, and *regeneration through violence*” (12). Indeed, Slotkin argues that what makes this myth “distinctively ‘American’ is. . . the mythic significance we have assigned to the kinds of violence we have actually experienced” (13). *The Walking Dead* builds on this myth, suggesting that violence may again play a central role in Americans’ response to the challenges of an uncertain future.

Dramatizing the struggle to redefine values in a potentially violent future is the business of *The Walking Dead*. Gregory Waller has argued that stories about the conflict between the living and the undead “explore the nature and the function of violence” while providing “a dramatic rendering of what violence has come to mean” (23). Waller’s description of these narratives as dramas of finding meaning in violence is especially suitable for *The Walking Dead*. According to Waller, “we can see the fate of individual heroism, religious faith, communal action, romantic love, the nuclear family, and private property, and we can measure the fitness of man during the night of the living dead” (281); all of these concerns are central in *The Walking Dead*, which, like many zombie narratives, focuses heavily on human responses to extreme danger and on violence committed *by* the living *against* the living. By constructing a fictional world in which the pervasive threat of violent death forces characters to re-evaluate what they are willing to do in order to survive and what constitutes meaningful existence, the series challenges cherished cultural structures and addresses existential anxiety. Contextual reassessment of violence requires ongoing renegotiation of meaning, and many viewers participate in this process by imagining their own

responses to the situations faced by the characters. This engagement invites identification with victims, perpetrators, or witnesses as viewers contemplate their own vulnerability to violence, the potential for violence within themselves, and the beliefs that imbue life and death with meaning.

As viewers “inhabit” the narrative terrain, they share emotional and psychological space with the characters. This activity can be understood through the lenses of two psychological theories: Terror Management Theory, which emphasizes the human struggle to cope with death anxiety, and Moral Foundations Theory, which describes moral choices as products of fundamental values that may at times compete with each other. In conjunction, these theories provide a means of placing the narrative within its broader psychosocial context. Their applicability to both character actions and viewer responses suggests that one source of the success of the series is that viewers connect easily with the psychologically credible responses of its very human characters as they struggle with decisions that define, for better or for worse, who they are.

Zombies and Terror Management

In his integrated model of horror, Glenn Walters argues that horror offers viewers a way to ameliorate existential fear. This view is consistent with a prominent theory of human behavior known as Terror Management Theory (Pyszczynski, Greenberg, and Solomon). Terror Management Theory posits that humans have developed elaborate psychological defenses to mitigate the potentially overwhelming anxiety engendered by the terrifying awareness of personal mortality. Attempts to suppress thoughts of death and to extend longevity are insufficient, but cultural worldviews provide comfort by offering the perception of an orderly, meaningful world and by defining the means through which individuals can literally or symbolically extend identity and existence. Terror Management Theory seems particularly applicable to the behavior of the characters in *The Walking Dead*, who live with the relentless threat of impending death. The theory also seems well suited for analyzing viewers’ reactions to the series, given their emotional attachment to and identification with its characters. Kim Paffenroth argues that zombies are often “a symbol of our own

mad urges to destroy ourselves, and a terrifying portent that we might succeed" (3), while Bishop notes that in the wake of the attacks of September 11, 2001, popular cultural productions have reflected "the grim realization that people are not as safe and secure as they might have once thought" (9). Thus, Terror Management Theory is also a useful critical lens for studying the cultural role of zombie fiction. The zombies in *The Walking Dead* provide a vehicle for confronting concerns about the threat posed by foreign Others, the potential collapse of government, and the vulnerability of the entire human project to extinction. Confronting these concerns allows viewers to grapple with the existential condition in which life is finite and meaning is a symbolic social construction.

Research in Terror Management Theory reveals that existential threat can lead to aggressive behavior. Subtle manipulations that force people to contemplate personal death have been shown, for example, to increase support among conservative American university students for pre-emptive attacks against countries that do not currently but might someday threaten the United States, and for the use of nuclear and biological weapons in the war on terror, even if it would mean thousands of civilian casualties (Pyszczynski, Greenberg, and Solomon 532-33). Numerous situations in *The Walking Dead* indicate that its characters similarly justify violence against threats to self-interest. For example, Shane kills Otis to save himself, and Rick nearly gives up Michonne in exchange for the Governor's assurance that he will not harm the prison community ("Save the Last One"; "This Sorrowful Life"). Viewer responses to these incidents suggest ambivalence. For example, fifty-eight percent of respondents to a viewer poll condemned Shane for killing Otis, while most other respondents felt that Shane had no choice ("How Do You Feel?"). In another fan poll, although ninety-five percent of respondents indicated that they would not turn Michonne over to the Governor, many cited pragmatic reasons—including Michonne's importance as a skilled warrior with proven loyalty—rather than ethical qualms; those who did favor giving up Michonne consistently identified the mortal threats to self and community as a justification ("Would You?"). It seems, then, that in entering the narrative, viewers often apply a logic that is contextually adapted and not unlike that applied by the characters themselves.

Confrontations with existential anxiety can also lead to prosocial behavior if death terror is managed through enhancement of self-worth based on cultural standards of meaningful behavior. In cultures that value helping others, threat can lead to altruism. For example, research on Terror Management Theory describes a “Scrooge Effect” in which reminders of death increase people’s willingness to help others (Jonas et al. 1349). *The Walking Dead* also illustrates the idea that when faced with life-threatening danger, some people prioritize serving others. For example, the “Vatos” episode, in which Rick and his team encounter a group that is caring for elderly residents in an abandoned nursing home, suggests that “[a]pocalypse can bring out the best in us” (Greeley 173). A similar effect is seen when Daryl, despite his brother Merle’s objections, risks his life to save a family of strangers from a zombie horde. Many viewers praise Daryl’s response while condemning Merle’s: “Merle was racist, rude, happy to let them die and was more than happy to take their belongings. Daryl on the other hand saw them as fellow humans” (Ceepeebee).¹ Such responses recognize the dichotomy described by Terror Management Theory—the divergence between prosocial and self-interested responses. Moreover, by defying the brother who was once a hero to him, Daryl makes a choice that gives meaning to the episode’s title: “Home.” Daryl’s earlier unwillingness to abandon Merle, who was unwelcome at the prison, reverses once they are alone together; Daryl seems to reach a new understanding of the notions of both home and family. This incident emphasizes the importance of the social group: Daryl discovers that his personal investment in the culture of Rick’s group supersedes his blood bond to and identification with his brother. His new culture has reshaped his values, or perhaps validated values that were underappreciated in his former life, and honoring these values is now an important source of his personal worth.

People can become so invested in defenses against existential anxiety that they will sacrifice their lives to benefit a group, nation, or cause that gives their existence meaning and offers symbolic immortality. Clay Routledge and Jamie Arndt found that inducing thoughts of personal death made people more willing to sacrifice their lives for their country, but allowing them to consider other ways to achieve symbolic immortality negated this effect (531). Consequently, self-sacrifice is a last resort when other means of symbolic immortality are unavailable. In *The Walking Dead*, this process

is illustrated when Merle, after agreeing to deliver Michonne to the Governor, instead releases her and attacks the Governor (“This Sorrowful Life”). Undertaking a dangerous mission to eliminate a major threat to the prison group suggests hope for redemption, but Merle’s choice also may be driven by his loss of the hope that he will ever reconcile fully with members of Rick’s group after his earlier attacks on them. With no prospect of becoming a valued and trusted member of the group, he risks his life to support its cause. He surely realizes that survival is unlikely but hopes that death will render his existence meaningful.

Many viewers agree that Merle is redeemed in death, and many sense that his decision was indeed a last resort. As some viewers suggest, Merle “doesn’t like the man that he has become”; this recognition, others propose, leads to Merle’s attempt “to atone for his wrongdoings” (ohhhsnap; WarriorPrincess). Such responses reflect a perception that Merle lacked external sources of validation; his failure to gain acceptance from Rick’s group, coupled with Daryl’s decision to return to the prison instead of staying with him, leaves Merle alone with a guilty conscience. Viewers seem to view Merle’s decision to release Michonne and undertake a suicide mission as an all-out effort to transform, at any cost, the image of himself that he sees reflected in the eyes of others. These views of Merle’s concern for his legacy articulate motivations that are consistent with Terror Management Theory: in the absence of other viable means of establishing social significance, people will sacrifice their lives to achieve symbolic immortality.

Zombies and Moral Foundations

The (undead) heart of *The Walking Dead* is its presentation of dilemmas that force characters to make ethical choices that define them and their visions of life, humanity, and meaning. Their lives are fraught with existential anxiety, as they now “have nothing but their freedom and their existence” and—without government, law enforcement, or social institutions to rely on—“have no alternative other than to choose their own moral code” (Kempner 144-46). Kevin Boon’s division of the three historic phases of zombie mythology sheds further light on the world of *The Walking Dead*. After eras

in which zombies are first explained through religion and then science, the third phase that Boon identifies is the era of the postnuclear zombie, when the individual, unable to rely on either religion or science, loses all external anchors for faith: "Because self was all that remained after the bomb, the loss of self became the greatest fear. If self is lost, all that remains is an abyss of nothingness—precisely what the post-nuclear zombie came to signify" (54-55). The characters of *The Walking Dead* are mired in the "abyss of nothingness" that Boon describes. All that formerly constituted their definitions of self has been lost, they are more alienated from their tenuous humanity every day, and their survival-driven existence has become disturbingly similar to that of the undead. Their desperate efforts to cling to shreds of their humanity give meaning and power to their ongoing confrontations with a nothingness that threatens to engulf and consume them, eventually changing each of them into the feared and detested Other.

The necessity of violent survival behaviors and the disintegration of moral authority yield ethical struggles in *The Walking Dead* as its characters resist the seemingly inevitable process of losing self and humanity and becoming Other. One useful framework for analyzing these issues is Moral Foundations Theory (Graham et al.). According to Moral Foundations Theory, moral judgments are based on five foundational receptors to which dimensional labels are given, with the favorable pole listed before the unfavorable pole:

- Care/harm: addresses whether one inflicts pain on others or attempts to relieve their distress.
- Fairness/cheating: addresses the rule of cooperation and reciprocity in social exchange.
- Loyalty/betrayal: addresses the preferential treatment of ingroup members.
- Authority/subversion: deals with respecting and obeying authority figures, social institutions, and traditions.
- Sanctity/degradation: protects the individual or political body from perceived physical or spiritual contamination.

Since these theoretical foundations can also be used to describe the moral views of the audience, Moral Foundations Theory is a useful framework for scrutinizing viewer reactions to situations that validate

or violate their own morality. Thus, applying Moral Foundations Theory can yield insight not only about the fictional realm, but also about fans' real-world responses to it.

Application of Moral Foundations Theory to the moral dilemmas presented in *The Walking Dead* suggests that confusion arises when actions consistent with one moral foundation are inconsistent with other foundations. When characters disagree about what constitutes right action, they may be assessing the issue through the lenses of different moral foundations or weighting those foundations differently. Similarly, apparent variations in a character's ethical judgment may actually reflect prioritization of different moral foundations in different circumstances. Further, viewer condemnation of a character may depend on which moral foundation is most relevant, either because of its generally greater weight for the viewer or because of its situational salience. Consequently, Moral Foundations Theory can offer insight about why different characters judge the same action in different ways, why a character's behavior may appear ethically inconsistent, and why viewers disagree about the ethicality of a particular action.

These issues are clearly illustrated in the debate about the fate of the prisoner Randall in the episode "Judge, Jury, Executioner." Randall says that he belongs to a group of roughly thirty people and that the men of this group frequently go on raids with heavy ammunition. Rick's group fears that if Randall is allowed to leave, he will reconnect with his group and return to take the farm by force. Rick decides that the only safe option is to execute Randall. He does not reach this decision lightly; indeed, he has shown much compassion by rescuing Randall and bringing him back to Hershel's farm. Rick's original decision was based on the care/harm foundation, but now, sensitive to the duty of protecting his group, he sees the increased importance of the loyalty/betrayal foundation. He tells Lori, "I brought him back here. Maybe I shouldn't have. I gotta keep these people safe. That is what I'm gonna do."

Dale vehemently opposes Randall's execution and tries to convince the group that it would be immoral. When the group gathers to discuss Randall's fate, Dale argues passionately against the prevailing attitude, emphasizing the immorality of taking a life (an appeal to the care foundation), especially the life of someone who has done nothing wrong (an appeal to fairness). His argument concludes with a final plea: "Please, let's just do what's right." For Dale, there is no

ambiguity; killing Randall is clearly wrong. His moral certainty stems from the specific moral foundations that he privileges; through the lenses of the care and fairness foundations, killing Randall is immoral, but other group members, like Rick, give greater weight to loyalty/betrayal. Dale cannot persuade the group because others are prioritizing a different moral foundation.

Several characters refuse to take a stand on the dilemma and simply defer to Rick's judgment. Although this behavior may imply evasion of moral responsibility, it also can be interpreted as a form of morality that prioritizes the authority/subversion foundation. Rick, the group's established leader, has stated that he thinks that Randall must be killed, and challenging his decision is a potentially subversive act. Hershel, for example, responds deferentially when Dale asks him to support his cause: "I'm told they're deciding his fate. I'll leave it with Rick." Lori shows similar deference; when Rick asks if she supports his decision, she simply replies, "If you think it's best." Lori's response is driven by the authority foundation on two levels: it indicates her acceptance both of Rick's group leadership and of her traditional role of a supportive wife. Other group members express misgivings about the decision based on the care foundation—such as Patricia's inquiry about how Randall would be killed and whether he would suffer—but such reservations become subordinate to concerns rooted in the loyalty/betrayal foundation. Glenn clearly articulates this in his justification of the decision to execute Randall: "He's not one of us. . . we've lost too many people already. . . we should not put our own people at risk."

Responses to this debate suggest that many viewers also prioritize the loyalty/betrayal foundation. An informal online poll posted by a fan of the series asked viewers whether they thought that Shane's covert murder of Randall was justified even though Rick had decided against execution. Most poll respondents thought that Randall should have been either left to die in the first place or executed by Rick's group (Bailey 2260). In a popular online forum for viewer discussion of the series, numerous viewer comments cite the threat that Randall, an unknown entity with professed ties to a rival group, poses to Rick's group; many also sense Randall's untrustworthiness: "Shane did them a favor. Randall would have betrayed them sooner rather than later after he got away" (Damrod). In the same discussion of whether the killing of Randall was justified, many fans who

disapprove of the decision still emphasize group safety, offering “safe” alternatives, such as driving Randall five hundred miles away and abandoning him or marooning him on an island off the coast. Such responses arguably ignore the likely outcome of the proposed measures, which only technically avoid issuing a death sentence for Randall, but perhaps the wish to honor two deeply valued foundations—here, care and loyalty—can cause respondents to propose untenable alternatives. Within the same online discussion cited above, a minority of viewers express strong opposition to Randall’s execution; most of these seem to prioritize the care/harm and fairness/cheating foundations, just as Dale does, arguing that Randall “had not proven to be a real threat to the group” and characterizing his killing as “senseless murder” (HisMrs).

Although violence and death are facts of everyday life in the world of *The Walking Dead*, the series articulates death as a personal and individual event. While each death raises its own set of questions, some cases provoke stronger viewer reactions. Among these are equivocal situations in which a character’s decision to kill is not a clear-cut case of self-defense in response to an immediate threat. This occurs, for example, when Carl executes a boy, Jody, who may be in the process of surrendering (“Welcome to the Tombs”). Jody, a member of the Governor’s attack force, hesitates when instructed to put down his weapon, and in that moment, we may speculate that Carl is weighing the question of Jody’s immediate intentions (is he preparing to put down his gun or trying to find a way to use it?) and his longer-term potential to do harm (even if he is about to surrender, is he just laying a trap for Rick’s group?). When Rick confronts Carl about the incident, Carl expresses no remorse and justifies his action in contrast to decisions made by Rick that have brought harm to members of the group. Carl’s response suggests that he is being reshaped by the hard realities of his world, dismissing any residual morality from his earlier upbringing and any current morality that does not promote group safety. Carl has redefined old ideas of right action, mercy, and other values that are being tested anew each day.

In this instance, Moral Foundations Theory offers insight about the disparity between Carl’s perception of the killing and the perception of Hershel, who witnessed the event. Carl thinks he acted commendably, bragging to Rick, “I did my job out there just like all of you—took out one of the Governor’s soldiers.” Hershel, however,

views Carl's act as cold-blooded murder. He tells Rick, "That kid was scared. He was handing over his gun. . . I'm telling you [Carl] gunned that kid down." The difference of opinion is perhaps based on which moral foundation is applied. Killing clearly violates the care/harm foundation, but responding with lethal force in self-defense is generally considered acceptable. If, however, Jody really was handing over his gun, then Carl's violent response to Jody's expression of trust would violate the fairness/cheating foundation. However, when pressed on the issue, Carl justifies his decision by appealing neither to care/harm nor fairness/cheating, but instead to loyalty/betrayal. When Rick asks if Jody was surrendering his weapon, Carl argues, "I couldn't take the chance. I didn't kill the walker that killed Dale, and look what happened." While it is possible that Carl may, momentarily, consider accepting Jody's (hypothetical) surrender, he quickly decides that this course of action is unsafe because it might allow Jody to harm the group in the future, in much the same way that the zombie that Carl failed to destroy later killed Dale. Carl embraces the loyalty/betrayal foundation, which privileges group members' needs over those of outsiders: killing any of the Governor's associates, even in an ignoble way, is morally appropriate because it protects the group. This view is consistent with research about the dynamics of tribal society, in which swift situational assessment is a key survival skill. When two armed strangers meet, each must quickly infer the other's intentions. However, because underinferring malicious intent can be lethal, each party will tend to overinfer, assuming the other's malicious intent even if both parties actually would prefer to go their ways peacefully. Steven Pinker has argued that these dynamics of tribal living made the ancestral past much more violent than the present. The apocalyptic setting of *The Walking Dead* depicts a return to a kind of tribalism that promotes violence against outsiders.

Carl's behavior in this incident has generated much fan discussion of both the apparent rashness of the shooting and his lack of remorse for it. An AMC poll asking, "Did Carl go too far when he killed the boy?" indicates that viewer sentiment is split almost exactly down the middle ("Talking Dead Poll"). Online discussion is also divided but seems to endorse Carl's actions more consistently. Viewers tend to support Carl because Jody didn't comply promptly and completely—"When someone tells you to drop your weapon, you don't crouch

your way to the person holding a gun. You drop it and kick it towards them” (Shambo)—though some believe that Carl was too hasty: “Carl was wrong. . . Jody was a scared kid and not a trained soldier” (Luv2readt). What troubles many viewers, even those who feel that Carl made the right choice, is the apparent ease with which he kills: “I don’t think I can blame Carl for his choice. What’s condemnable is his lack of remorse for having to do it” (At Risk). The discomfort caused by Carl’s clear conscience is amplified, for many, because of his youth: “At 12 or 13, your conscience is not fully developed. I doubt Carl, if he continues down this path will ever form one” (theglassinthequivseye).

Such comments suggest that viewers want conscience to remain in lockstep with the old world, even when they argue that action should take shape in response to the new world. In effect, they appear to connect morality with a view of humanity that they, like Dale, are reluctant to relinquish, expressing aversion to the recalibration of conscience in response to environmental change. They seem to resist the notion that what is called “humanity” is a set of acquired behaviors that were not always customary in the history of our species, behaviors that might not be suitable in a plague-ravaged, survival-oriented world. Indeed, from the perspective of Moral Foundations Theory, the prioritization of the care/harm and fairness/cheating foundations is a fairly recent development in industrialized, democratic Western nations; more traditional communal societies have valued loyalty, authority, and sanctity as much as or more than fairness and care. We can discern, however, that viewers are deeply troubled by the prospect of a world of moral ambiguity in which their ideal of clear-cut Western morality does not apply. Indeed, what troubles them may well be that the series forces them to consider whether such clear-cut morality exists even now.

Undead Ethics: Integrating Terror Management Theory and Moral Foundations Theory

In his integrated model of horror, Walters applies the principle of dispositional alignment to suggest that viewers’ reactions to a character’s fate depend on how well their own views align with those of the character. According to this view, audiences tend to respond more favorably to the death of a morally transgressive character than to that

of a perceived innocent. The appeal of narratives that punish moral transgressors stems from a need to believe in a just world—a belief that may mitigate the death anxiety that Terror Management Theory cites as a primary focus of human thought and behavior. If the universe operates according to human notions of morality so that bad things happen only to bad people, then those who adhere to culturally prescribed morality can feel safe; however, the prosperity of the wicked or suffering of the innocent causes distress because it suggests the possibility that morality is merely a human artifact. If, as Terror Management Theory asserts, death anxiety motivates belief in a just world, we would expect viewers of *The Walking Dead* to respond positively to the death of a character who is viewed as transgressive and negatively to the death of a character who is perceived as innocent or virtuous. When opinions about a specific death are divided, Moral Foundations Theory can suggest reasons for the division. Such differences can often be attributed to the relative weights ascribed to the five moral foundations employed in determining the character's overall moral stature.

Combining Terror Management Theory and Moral Foundations Theory with reference to specific cases illustrates how the two theories together provide more insight about viewer responses than either on its own. Dale's death is a useful example because of the wide variety of responses it has elicited. A zombie attacks Dale when he is out walking alone at night after the group has decided to execute Randall, and he storms off, asserting, "I won't be a party to this" ("Judge, Jury, Executioner"). An AMC poll quickly ranked Dale's death as the saddest in the series by a wide margin (forty-eight percent, with the next closest choice, "other"—identified by numerous respondents as Sophia, Carol's young daughter who disappears early in season two and whose fate is revealed when she emerges, in reanimated form, from a barn full of zombies on Hershel's farm—at twenty-six percent), and many viewers expressed a feeling of personal loss ("Saddest Death?"). Many viewer responses to Dale's death focus on the apparent senselessness of his behavior and the implications of his loss in terms of his perceived status as the group's moral compass. Viewers' incredulity at and condemnation of Dale's fatal decision to wander off on his own are neatly (and emphatically) summarized in the following comment: "Who goes outside, alone, in the woods, at night, with no one around you, you're 60 years old, AND ITS A ZOMBIE

APOCALYPSE!!!” (UserName). In Terror Management Theory terms, such responses are rooted in the need to believe in a just world; blaming the victim for his death allows viewers to affirm the belief that good people can avoid such a fate through prudence and vigilance. Many of the viewers who mourned Dale’s death thought that it made sense due to the incompatibility of his worldview with the actual world: “Dale is humane, ethical, and passionate, but once Randall showed up on the scene there was no room for that type of personality anymore” (KPandoraStar). By not only citing Dale’s virtues but also recognizing factors inimical to them in the zombie apocalypse, this comment not only suggests the viewer’s identification with Dale’s character but also appreciates how the series problematizes his morality. Diametrically opposed to this view is the position of fans who dislike Dale for his attempts to sway the group’s decisions toward more humane courses of action. Comments of fans in this camp sometimes show extreme hostility: “I hated Dale, he was too moral and I was enthralled to see that walker rip open his body cavity” (Sword of Salvation). This viewer’s graphic appreciation of Dale’s death suggests a high level of disagreement with his morality, leading to a negative disposition toward his character. While some grieve and others rejoice at the passing of a character whom they viewed as the group’s last bastion of humanity, both sides seem to agree that Dale’s passing may spell the death of morality. This observation is consistent with a broader pattern of deaths in the show that suggests that a cherished value may be symbolically damaged or lost when a character dies. The death of Sophia, for example, figures the death of innocence; the full thrust of this loss can be seen through the corresponding changes undergone by Carl, the group’s only other child-survivor, as he becomes increasingly a product of the new world rather than of the old.

A second case study can be made of season four’s “The Grove,” a particularly powerful and controversial episode in which Carol executes eleven-year-old Lizzie, who believes that zombies are just “different” people and who kills her sister Mika to prove to Carol and Tyrese that a reanimated Mika will still be her sister. Carol, who has tried to correct Lizzie’s zombie-friendly views, concludes that no one—and especially baby Judith, whom Lizzie says she was about to kill when Carol and Tyrese returned—is safe around Lizzie. In the current state of the world, there is no mechanism for treatment or

rehabilitation of those who suffer from potentially dangerous mental illnesses. Accordingly, Carol takes Lizzie out into a field and shoots her.

Carol's actions are strongly rooted in the principles of both Terror Management Theory and Moral Foundations Theory. For some time before her exile from the prison, Carol had been giving the resident children lessons in weapon use. This effort constitutes a sort of "immortality project" that extends her influence (and hence her symbolic existence) into the next generation. Her quasi adoption of Lizzie, Mika, and Judith after the prison stronghold's collapse and the dispersion of the group reflects a similar impulse: having lost her chance for the symbolic immortality afforded by parenthood with the death of her biological child, Sophia, Carol seizes this new opportunity to transcend the boundaries of her physical lifespan. Once Lizzie becomes a threat to that project, however, her former role as an integral piece of it is negated, and Carol does what she deems necessary to preserve the project in the form of the one remaining piece over which she still has some degree of control: baby Judith.

The question of Lizzie's fate also suggests conflicts between the care/harm foundation and several other foundations. Carol's need to protect her social unit even if doing so means taking the life of one individual within it creates a conflict between the loyalty/betrayal and care/harm foundations; Carol clearly harms Lizzie, formerly a beneficiary of Carol's caregiver role, but does so in order to secure the safety of Judith, Tyreese, and any other prospective future members of the group. Moreover, Carol has a related conflict between the authority/subversion and care/harm foundations. At this time, she is effectively serving as the leader of a small group, and despite numerous verbal warnings about the true nature of the risen dead and practical demonstrations of the perils that they pose, Lizzie has been disobedient and shown disrespect for authority. Carol honors her role in the current hierarchy by serving some notion of justice and morality to preserve order, even if she must violate care/harm by overriding her duty to protect Lizzie. Her dilemma is a timely one, echoing the contemporary real-world controversy surrounding the question of whether minors should be tried and sentenced as adults when they commit capital offenses. Her predicament also reflects a conflict between the care/harm and sanctity/degradation foundations. Lizzie's

behavior (even if it is a product of mental illness) violates fundamental social taboos regarding purity on at least two levels: the rules that dictate how we approach the contamination of death/the human corpse, and the perception that killing a blood relation is a particularly abhorrent crime. In this context, Lizzie's conduct can be considered impure or even unnatural: she is drawn to the unclean dead and tries to interact with them, and she takes the life of not only an innocent child, but her own sister. These are forms of desecration that elicit shock and revulsion. In such dire and complex circumstances, the morality of Carol's choice emerges only through the application of multiple foundations.

Viewers largely agree on the dramatic impact of this episode. In one poll, the scene in which Lizzie is discovered next to Mika's bloody corpse and the moment before Carol's execution of Lizzie were voted, by an overwhelming majority, the most gripping of ten key moments in 2014 prior to the season finale ("Most Gripping Moment"). Moreover, most viewers seem to approve of Carol's choice. According to one fan poll, eighty percent of viewers agree with her decision to kill Lizzie ("Did Carol Go too Far?"). Many viewers who support Carol's decision cite Lizzie's instability and unredeemable nature as justifications, but some feel that it was, despite Lizzie's actions, incumbent on the adults to educate and rehabilitate her. Some of the most interesting viewer debate moves beyond the fictional realm to address the morality of the episode, with some strong objections to the depiction of a child's execution. One viewer, for example, compares it to sympathetic depictions of Nazis, arguing that a television episode that conveys the message that Carol "shot a child and she really didn't have any choice" is equivalent to one that suggests that "it's bad to exterminate jews, gays, and union organizers but in so-and-so's situation he really doesn't have any choice," ultimately concluding that "it would be better if [such a] TV show didn't exist" (highway234). One response to this objection neatly articulates the value of the series's willingness to address taboos and other controversial social issues: "It is important to see the humanity in a person who does unthinkable things, because it reminds us that we have the same potential for doing that which we cannot fathom doing" (SweetD213).

Conclusion

The artistic vision of the creators and writers of AMC's *The Walking Dead* is probably not informed by explicit awareness of Terror Management Theory and Moral Foundations Theory, nor is it likely that participants in online discussions of the series are deliberately considering these theories in formulating their responses. Instead, it seems that these theories apply so well to the violent situations at hand that they allow us to discover underlying psychological mechanisms. That those mechanisms fit the behaviors both of fictional characters in the series and of real people who respond to it is a testimony to the achievement of the series. It has set a high standard of character credibility by portraying fictional individuals who respond to the violence in their world in ways that we would expect real people to behave. Viewer responses verify this to the extent that they are similarly consistent with the theories applied here.

Together, Terror Management Theory and Moral Foundations Theory also help explain the popularity of the series. The ways in which viewers respond to, identify with, and take issue with the dilemmas and decisions of the characters suggest that the fictional world of *The Walking Dead* has a powerful reality to its fans because of its ability to present scenarios that trigger multiple moral foundations, often in competing ways. While there are many reasons for the popularity of this series in particular and of zombie narratives in general, Terror Management Theory suggests that one prominent reason is the pervasive fear of imminent societal collapse. From the Internet attention garnered by sinister stories of "FEMA coffins" in Georgia, domestic concentration camps, and the US importation of thousands of guillotines, we can deduce that many harbor fears of widespread catastrophe. The popularity of television shows with related themes, such as *Doomsday Preppers*, tells a similar story. Whatever actually lies in store, *The Walking Dead* voices the concerns of a nation living in fear of its demise and a generation engaged in a daily struggle to manage the terror caused both by constant reminders of mortality and by anticipation of a possible world that, bereft of institutionalized authority, forces individuals to confront the terrifying reality of moral uncertainty.

Note

1. Web content written by viewers is reproduced in its original form. Because viewer content often disregards the standards of written English, we have not marked errors and trust that readers will tolerate the many scribal, grammatical, and other irregularities that are endemic to online postings. Because most postings also lack titles, our list of works cited shows the discussion topic to which the posting responds, followed by the page number and the posting number (in the form X.X), if shown on the site; when page and posting numbers are absent, we include informal headings, abbreviated first lines, or other distinguishing markers to help readers locate the relevant content.

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