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On Locating Disaster

Brad J. Kallenberg

Imagine a man, unknown to you, standing in your backyard calmly clasping and unclasping his hands three times each hour. If we ask "What is he doing?" we would not likely be satisfied with these words: "He's clasping his hands three times per hour." There is something unnerving about the whole scene, not only because we cannot comprehend the point of clasping one's hands three times per hour, we want to know "What's he doing in *my* back yard?"¹

There is a similarly unnerving quality about the description of the *Columbia* disaster as posed by the case study. By it we are tempted to equate the task of moral reasoning with the assignment of blame. Rodney Rocha, the engineer who chairs the Debris Assessment Team, strongly objected to the decision by Linda Ham (chair of the Mission Management Team) to withdraw pleas made to the Department of Defense for assistance by satellite and ground facilities in order to obtain higher resolution images of the shuttle while in flight. Ham, whose call it was to make, reasoned that further imaging was too expensive and frankly, too late to be of any use. Rocha insisted Ham's decision was "wrong" and "bordering on irresponsible" because both the stakes and the

¹ Philippa Foot, "Moral Beliefs," in *Virtues and Vices* (Oxford, UK: Basil Blackwell, 1978).

probability of failure were high enough to trump all consideration of costs and practicality. Thus one engineer is pitted against another. We in turn wrestle to assign blame so that we can breathe a sigh of relief.

However, if we are honest with ourselves, affixing blame would not entirely remove our sense of unease. Like the description of the stranger (factual as far as it goes)—"he's clasping his hands three times per hour"—we suspect that there is something missing from the description, and consequently something anemic about our moral reasoning about this tragedy.

Sometimes a fresh insight can be generated by the most surprising of conversation partners. All but forgotten, 12th-century mystical theologian Hugh of St. Victor, once wrote that all of creation labors against an inevitable corruption attributable to "sin." Regardless of sin's origins, the reality of the human condition is twofold. In the first place, this physical world is not Eden. In modern parlance, entropy increases, things fall apart, and only by expending great energy can disaster be averted, and then only sometimes. In Hugh's mind, figuring out how best to do this was the provenance of the engineer; *mechanical arts* have to do with fortifying the body against hunger and harm and contriving "remedies" for alleviating physical weaknesses resulting from the corruption of creation by sin.² Hugh seems to make a good point: there is a sense in which the question, "Who is right between Ham and Rocha?" reduces to "Whose mechanical reasoning is sharper?" In the end, moral reasoning comes down to "engineering judgment." Unfortunately, those of us who are under-trained in engineering are thus constrained to be spectators to their debate.

² Hugh of St. Victor, *Didascalicon*, trans. Jerome Taylor from the Latin with an Introduction and Notes (New York & London: Columbia University Press, 1961), I.8. Apparently Hugh took Genesis 1-3 as realistic, if not historical.

In the second place, Hugh also maintained that human beings are depraved. In other words, humans can never be fully trusted. They are not only capable of enormous intentional evil (Hitler), but also of lesser sins of omission due to illness, physical fatigue, inadequate training as well as darker reasons such as laziness, inattention, selfishness and the will-to-power. Again Hugh makes a useful point. We ought to consider whether engineering judgment can be skewed when one has an ax to grind is bucking for promotion.

But there is more going on in this case than the Rocha-Ham rivalry. If we expand the horizon of description slightly, we learn that "this mission was a yawn—a low-priority 'science' flight forced onto NASA by Congress and postponed for two years because of a more pressing schedule of construction deliveries to the International Space Station."³ Forced? If Langewiesche's report is taken at face value, we see that the context of the *Columbia* disaster not only involved a conflict between two engineers but also a power struggle between two institutions jockeying for control over a big ticket item; a single shuttle flight costs \$300 million.⁴ NASA was intent on utilizing this flight to deliver materials for building the International Space Station. But at the end of the day, Congress controls the purse strings with the result that this flight was launched "as much to clear the books as to add to human knowledge."⁵ Once the broader picture begins to emerge we get the sinking feeling that something has gone awry, that science is infected by power politics.

³ William Langewiesche, *Columbia's Last Flight* (Atlantic Monthly, Nov 2003 [cited 11 May 2004]); available from <http://www.theatlantic.com/cgi-bin/send.cgi?page=http%3A//www.theatlantic.com/issues/2003/11/langewiesche.htm>.

⁴ *Nasa's Assumed Baseline Space Shuttle Launch Costs through 2020 Applicable to the Nasa Space Transportation Architecture Study* ([cited 12 May 2004]); available from <http://www.hq.nasa.gov/office/codea/codeae/documentc.html>.

⁵ Langewiesche, *Columbia's Last Flight* ([cited]).

The tainting of science by issues of power would not surprise Hugh. What would surprise him is our seeming unawareness of what science and engineering is for. Activities such as growing food more efficiently, protecting the body from harm, and alleviating physical weakness are penultimate goal. The ultimate goal is reunion with God and love of neighbor. What is easily overlooked in the *Columbia* disaster is not only the struggle between NASA and Congress, but the apparent disconnect of the space program from greater human goods.

Langeweische summarizes the significance of the *Columbia* flight this way,

it had gone nowhere except into low Earth orbit, around the globe every ninety minutes for sixteen days, carrying the first Israeli astronaut, and performing a string of experiments, many of which, like the shuttle program itself, seemed to suffer from something of a make-work character—the examination of dust in the Middle East (by the Israeli, of course); the ever popular ozone study; experiments designed by schoolchildren in six countries to observe the effect of weightlessness on spiders, silkworms, and other creatures; an exercise in "astroculture" involving the extraction of essential oils from rose and rice flowers, which was said to hold promise for new perfumes; and so forth.⁶

Perhaps not exactly a "wasted" mission. But how are we to think about the costs of the space program in light of global needs? With an average of eight flights per year, the space shuttle program cost \$2.4 billion each year. But that is pittance in light of the estimated cost projected for the International Space Station: \$100 billion over the course of its lifetime.⁷ *One hundred billion dollars.* That is enough money to retire the national debts of Sudan, Cote D'Ivoire, Angola, Myanmar, Yemen, Republic of Congo, Honduras, Ethiopia, Tanzania, Bolivia, Somalia, Lao PDR, Mozambique, Ghana, Mali, Senegal, Liberia, Cameroon, Uganda, Malawi, Togo, Guinea, Burundi, Madagascar,

⁶ Ibid.([cited]).

⁷ Tony Freemantle and Mike Tolson, *Space Station Had Political Ties in Tow* (Houston Chronicle, 2003 [cited 12 May 2004]); available from <http://www.chron.com/cs/CDA/ssistory.mpl/space/iss/2004947>.

Benin, Central African Republic, Zambia, Chad, Nicaragua, Mauritania, Burkina Faso, Niger, Guyana, Rwanda, Gambia, and Sierra Leone *combined*. In fact, \$100 billion is fourteen times more than the total spent by all of these governments health and education for their people.⁸ Where is real the real disaster?

⁸ Most recent figures are from 1998 and 1999. See http://www.jubilee2000uk.org/hipc/progress_report/countrynominal.htm and <http://www.jubilee2000uk.org/databank/debttables/debtdata98.htm>.