

Case 13: Selfieness

While emergency workers offered aid to a woman critically injured by a train at a station in northern Italy, a young man in white shorts stepped up to the platform, held his fingers in a “V for victory” sign, and snapped a selfie.

Voted Word of the Year by *Oxford Dictionary* in 2013, “selfie” denotes a picture one takes of oneself. Self-portraits are not new, of course. Humans have created pictures of themselves since cave drawing. The only change over centuries has been the medium and publication format.

Today smartphone owners around the globe snap digital self-portraits on a daily basis with seemingly little consideration for whether doing so may be morally inappropriate. When tourists take selfies at sites associated with evil, like the monuments to the Trail of Tears in the southeastern United States or the village of My Lai in Vietnam, it is questionable whether the ethics of doing so is even a fleeting concern. In 2017, a firestorm of criticism erupted around a figure of Hitler in a wax museum in Indonesia, in part because so many people wanted selfies with the figure.

Although police caught the selfie-taker and forced him to delete his picture, the journalist’s photograph of his act ignited a news and social media controversy across Italy and throughout Europe. Journalists, radio hosts, and social media postings characterized selfies as a “cancer that corrodes the Internet” and the selfie-taker as “an automaton of the Internet” and feared the human race was “galloping toward extinction.”

According to Giorgio Lambri, the journalist who photographed the selfie-taker at the train station accident, “We have completely lost a sense of ethics.” Lambri himself wrote about the experience in the Italian newspaper, *Liberta*, under the headline, “The barbarism you don’t expect: the ‘self’ in front of a tragedy,” and later posted on his Facebook page about the young man’s apparent lack of moral compass.

Moral philosopher Jonathan Pugh argues that selfies can remove us from our own experiences and quotes Sartre’s novel, *Nausea*: “Man is always a teller of tales, he lives surrounded by his stories and the stories of others, he sees everything that happens to him through them; and he tries to live his life as if he were recounting it. But you have to choose: to live or to recount.”

Case from the 2019 National Intercollegiate Ethics Bowl



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