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Zero vision and a Western salvation narrative

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ABSTRACT

This paper sets the zero accident vision in the historical–cultural context of a Western salvation narrative, which suggests that a world without suffering is desirable and achievable. Tracing the development of what is an archetype in our thinking, it shows how a Western ethic typically ascribes moral responsibility for suffering (and its avoidance) to individuals' choices. If taken literally into a ZAV then this can paradoxically produce new kinds of suffering—for example, the sanctioning of workers involved in incidents. It can also create an illusory world without suffering by making suffering disappear from view (e.g., hiding incidents/injuries). Alternative readings of ZAV might suggest that suffering is inevitable and universal, and that human moral choice should focus on efforts to relieve its effects, rather than pretend that it can eradicate its causes.

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> *"You want if possible—and there is no madder 'if possible'—to abolish suffering...?"*
>
> Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil* (par. 225, emphasis in original).

1. Introduction

In this journal recently, Zwetsloot et al. (2013) argued for a 'serious consideration' of the zero accident vision (ZAV) and the safety commitment practices it produces. As they demonstrated, our knowledge of what ZAV is, where it comes from and how it might or might not work has many gaps. In a sense, ZAV is still a 'black box.' Little is known about the exact activities and mechanisms that lie beneath the reductions in harm that committed companies have witnessed (Donaldson, 2013). Effectiveness of implementing the vision is not uniform. Negative consequences have been noted in this journal and elsewhere, such as excessive quantification and bureaucratization of safety (Dekker, 2014a; Hale et al., 2013), the manipulation of a dependent variable and concomitant suppression of incident and injury data, and investigations and improvement initiatives that may not have substantial effect (Dekker, 2014b).

The Zero Accident Vision does not necessarily mean a commitment to zero accidents at *all* levels of severity (Zwetsloot et al., 2013). Rather, it might cover severe accidents and implies that near-misses and minor accidents are not only inevitable, but important for learning from the everyday workings and failings of complex socio-technical systems. ZAV has this in common with most accident theories such as normal accident theory (Clarke and Perrow, 1996), man-made disaster theory (Pidgeon and O'Leary, 2000) and drift theories (Dekker, 2011a; Snook, 2000; Vaughan, 2005) which do not believe that a total zero vision—a world without accidents—is actually achievable. This goes for high-reliability theory as well (Dekker and Woods, 2009).

This paper is one response to Zwetsloot et al.'s call for a 'serious consideration' of ZAV, exploring some of the cultural–historical basis of what amounts to an 'archetype' in Western thinking. It locates the commitment to a zero vision inside what is known as the salvation narrative—the notion that a world without suffering is not only desirable but achievable, and that efforts expended toward that goal are morally right and inherently laudable.[1] The paper sketches, in broad and brief strokes, a line from Weber back

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[1] The Western salvation narrative, as considered in this paper, is a product of Judeo-Christian thinking—the tradition that gave the West (even if largely secularized today) much of its ethical code. This paper categorically does not wish to impugn the truth or validity that people might read into this tradition, nor the faith which impels them to act morally. It attempts a weak and distant form of exegesis, the time-honored critical explanation and interpretation of texts that stem from that, and alternative, traditions.

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through Calvin and Augustine, to the Judeo-Christian origins of Western thinking about suffering and salvation. Of course, ZAV owes its origins in the West from more than just Judeo-Christian thinking. It is possible, for instance, to seek its roots in ancient Greek ideas about guilt, cause and effect, and harmony. Thus, this paper illuminates just one of the pathways by which ZAV might have become enabled and reified. It contributes to the discussion one example of ZAV as historically and culturally contingent—the product of social constructions that have established it as a culturally and managerially legitimate reading of suffering and salvation today. Other readings are possible too, of course, some of which carry different, and possibly more humane, implications for organizational or managerial commitments.

2. Rational choice and blaming the worker

Rational choice theory—the premise that people who face a decision choose among fully reasoned alternatives—remains dominant in safety work (Dekker, 2011a; Orasanu and Connolly, 1993), keeping the focus on the actions or omissions of frontline operators. As could be found in the pages of this journal not long ago:

> It is now generally acknowledged that individual human frailties ... lie behind the majority of the remaining accidents. Although many of these have been anticipated in safety rules, prescriptive procedures and management treatises, people don't always do what they are supposed to do. Some employees have negative attitudes to safety which adversely affect their behaviours. This undermines the system of multiple defences that an organisation constructs and maintains to guard against injury to its workers and damage to its property (Lee and Harrison, 2000, pp. 61–62)

In a review of the patient safety literature, as another example, 98 of the 360 articles reviewed addressed the individual, focusing for example on human error (Waterson, 2009). Between 1999 and 2006, 96% of US aviation accidents were attributed in large part to the flight crew. In 81%, people were the *sole* reported cause (Holden, 2009). Accident probes often conduct analyses of people's decision making as if it were driven by rational, fully informed choices, concluding that they either must have been amoral calculators who prioritized production or personal goals over safety (Vaughan, 1999) or made shortcuts that are popularly called "violations" (Reason, 1990). "Unsafe acts," a term originally coined by Heinrich in the 1930s, remains a central concept in the Swiss Cheese Model widely used today, reifying the belief that things ultimately don't go wrong (however the odds are stacked up) until and unless a frontline worker "adds the final garnish" (ibid, p. 173).

This has managerial and policy implications for zealously implemented "zero" programs. Consider the example of a food warehouse, where 150 workers load and unload trucks, lift boxes, drive fork trucks, and move pallets. Each month that no one reports an injury, all workers receive prizes, such as $50 gift certificates. If someone reports an injury, no prizes are given that month. Management then added a new element to this "safety incentive" program: if a worker reported an injury, not only would co-workers forgo monthly prizes but the injured worker had to wear a fluorescent orange vest for a week. The vest identified the worker as a safety problem, and alerted co-workers: he/she lost you your prizes (Frederick and Lessin, 2000). It is an example of what has been noted, in some countries, as a neo-liberal trend toward worker "responsibilization." A recent Canadian study shows how workers themselves are increasingly blamed (sanctioned, ticketed) for safety violations, with over two thirds of all citations handed out by workplace safety inspectors directed at them rather than the organization (Gray, 2009). Workers are "instructed to become prudent subjects who must 'practice legal responsibility'" (p. 327). And if they don't, "the failure to practise individual responsibility in the face of workplace dangers is often used to explain why workers who perform unsafe jobs become injured" (p. 330). The premise of full rationality and workers who have their own choices to blame when things go wrong juxtaposes with safety science research. This generally stresses the influence of context on human action, as well as the role of others in creating the conditions for success and failure in complex systems (Dekker et al., 2011). That attempts at implementing ZAV keep gravitating toward frontline worker rational choice assumptions (they "don't always do what they are supposed to do") says something about the vocabulary and methods of safety science itself, of course (Dekker, 2011b). But these in turn derive from a cultural–historical heritage that goes much further than that.

3. Augustine and Calvin

The notion that suffering results from human moral choices has a long historical shadow in the West. Of course, most cultures have evolved allegories about the sources of suffering, which often coincide or are linked with those of their own birth. Many start with human beings living in close intimacy with the divine. In a blissful initial state, there is no ontological divide, but instead complete harmony with nature and each other—and no suffering. Storytellers may have invoked these images to reassure people that life was not meant to be so painful, so separated. Then, typically, follows a separation. The allegory of Adam and Eve who inhabit the Garden of Eden (placed second among more than twenty creation stories that can be found in the Judeo-Christian bible alone, but likely the oldest one, from around 1000–900 BCE) follows this script. But it does so with a major distinction from similar contemporary accounts (e.g. the Babylonian Epic of Gilgamesh). The Judeo-Christian account places moral responsibility for that separation (and humanity's subsequent introduction to suffering) on the human; on human responsibility for violating a trusting relationship with the divine (Armstrong, 1996; Visotzky, 1996). Such, in any case, is the reading by Augustine of Hippo (354–430 CE). His "theodicy" (or justification of a divine existence despite the presence of evil and suffering in the world) answers the question of why we suffer by explaining that evil is the result of human free will, and that sin corrupts essentially good humans. Writing in the early fifth century BCE, Augustine argued that:

> ...when an evil choice happens in any being, then what happens is dependent on the will of that being; the failure is voluntary, not necessary, and the punishment that follows is just (Yu, 2006, p. 129).

Suffering, in this reading, is caused by bad human choices; it is the just retribution that follows on such choices. Suffering is not inevitable, it hinges on rational human choice. Calvin (1509–1564), instrumental in shaping much of the recent West's interpretation of Judeo-Christian history and ethics, relied heavily on Augustinian theodicy. In *The Bondage and Liberation of the Will* (1543), a publication that mainly addresses the freedom of human will and human choice, Calvin includes many citations from Augustine—significantly more than from any other patristic authors (e.g. Tertullian, Pelagius), agreeing on the essential links between human choice, sin and evil.

4. Weber

Sociologist Max Weber (1864–1920) identified the problem of suffering as the 'driving force of all religious evolution' (Weber et al., 1950). When a culture reached the aporia of the 'brute fact that suffering exists,' it tended to produce forms of metaphysical rationality and meaning-making that could accommodate that fact,

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