THE QUESTION THAT WE SHOULD BE ASKING

BY Allison Hornstein [NEWSWEEK STAFF](http://www.newsweek.com/authors/newsweek-staff)  12/16/01 http://www.newsweek.com/question-we-should-be-asking-148547

On the morning of September 11, my entire college campus huddled around television sets, our eyes riveted in horror to images of the burning, then falling, Twin Towers. By evening there were candlelight vigils where people sought to comfort and be comforted. But by Sept. 12, as our shock began to fade, so did our sense of being wronged. Student reactions expressed in the daily newspaper and in class pointed to the differences between our life circumstances and those of the perpetrators, suggesting that these differences had caused the previous day's events. Noticeably absent was a general outcry of indignation at what had been the most successful terrorist attack of our lifetimes. These reactions and similar ones on other campuses have made it apparent that my generation is uncomfortable assessing, or even asking, whether a moral wrong has taken place.

I spent 14 years at a public school in Manhattan with students who came from a variety of ethnic and socioeconomic backgrounds. I benefited immensely from the open-minded curriculum. In second grade we learned about the Inuit (who don't like to be called Eskimos, our teacher taught us), and how, though they sometimes ate caribou hoofs and other foods that we generally did not find on our own dinner tables, they were essentially like us.

When my third-grade class read a story about one boy kicking another at a school-bus stop, our teacher talked about why the boy might have done what he did--maybe he was having a bad day or had had a fight with his mother that morning. The teacher stressed that the little boy had feelings that sometimes led him to do mean things. That these feelings did not necessarily justify his actions got lost in the discussion. Later, in high school, my classmates and I learned about how women in some countries are circumcised and how, even though this seemed abhorrent to us, it was part of their culture. We discussed the pros and cons of imposing our standards on other cultures. And, overwhelmingly, we decided we should not. We gained an important degree of emotional and psychological sophistication from looking at these issues. But being taught to think within a framework of moral and cultural relativity, without learning its boundaries, has seemingly created a deficiency in my generation's ability to make moral judgments.

In a college seminar on Sept. 12 a professor said he did not see much difference between Hamas suicide bombers (who, he pointed out, saw themselves as "martyrs") and American soldiers who died fighting in World War II. When I saw one or two students nodding in agreement, I raised my hand. I wanted to say that although both groups may have believed that they were fighting for their ways of life in declared "wars," there is a considerable distinction. American soldiers, in uniform, did not have a policy of specifically targeting civilians; suicide bombers, who wear plainclothes, do. The professor didn't call on me. The people who did get a chance to speak cited various provocations for terrorism; not one of them questioned its morality. I had to drop the class.

The explanations students and professors give for the September 11 attacks--extreme poverty in the Middle East, America's foreign policy in that region and religious motivation--are insightful, but they cannot provide absolution for wrongdoing. Even if a woman wears a very short, tight skirt, she should not be raped. Even if the rapist was abused as a child. Even if his wife just cheated on him. Even if the woman looked really, really good in that skirt. The rapist is still accountable. And he still did wrong.

Just as we should pass absolute moral judgment in the case of rape, we should recognize that some actions are objectively bad, despite differences in cultural standards and values. To me, hijacking planes and killing thousands of civilians falls into this category. Others may disagree. It is less important to me where people choose to draw the line than it is that they are willing to draw it at all. Continuing to neglect the place of moral evaluations in discussing current events is not only philosophically problematic; it is also potentially suicidal. There comes a point where the refusal to take a stand on what is wrong results in its victory.

I am so glad that I learned early on not to judge people who eat things that might make me gag, like caribou hoofs or cow brains (which I traumatically encountered years later in France). I am a little less enthusiastic about the conclusions my high-school class drew over the issue of female circumcision. I do know that much of the discussion on this campus since September 11 has failed to address the question of whether an absolute wrong has been committed.

I think it should.

**GENOCIDE CLASS NAME: DATE:**

1. Summarize Yale student Allison Hornstein’s main argument, using three specific examples from the reading.

2. Explain your opinion of Hornstein’s argument.