

## **Moral Disengagements on Iconography of Superhero Films: *Black Adam*, *Captain America: The First Avenger*, and *Man of Steel***

**Rommel Utungga Pasopati<sup>1\*</sup>, Riska Dewi Ramadhani<sup>2</sup>, Frefies Lavigni Putri Lutvia<sup>3</sup>, Devito Andharu<sup>4</sup>, Muhammad Reza Ishadi Fadillah<sup>5</sup>**

<sup>12345</sup>Universitas Dr. Soetomo Surabaya

\*E-mail: [rommelpasopati@yahoo.com](mailto:rommelpasopati@yahoo.com)

### **ABSTRACT**

This paper exposes collateral damage as representation of moral disengagement in the three superhero films of *Black Adam*, *Captain America: The First Avenger*, and *Man of Steel*. Iconography in superhero film represents ambivalent moral justifications. The superheroes must do everything to ‘save’ the world though it is done by embracing evil, destroying surroundings, or using cunning strategies. Any collateral damage in moral disengagement is considered necessary in order to destroy the source of the problem. The superheroes must do everything to save the day though he/she has to kill, to abuse his/her power, and even be ignorant only to focus on bigger things by sacrificing petty things. As the analysis, the moral disengagement theorized by Albert Bandura is shown through recurring iconography of superheroes who kill other people and destroy the surrounding. The three superhero films indicate that the actions of the superheroes are only focusing on their own moral values. Collateral damage is considered not only as side effect of superheroes’ action, but also as reflection of their moral disengagement. In conclusion, the values that superheroes hold is universal, but actually, those destroy particular matters. Their moral doings are not totally true, but those are justified as one.

**KEY WORDS:** Black Adam, Captain America, collateral damage, Man of Steel, moral disengagement

### **ABSTRAK**

*Tulisan ini memaparkan kehancuran sampingan sebagai representasi penyangkalan moral dalam tiga film pahlawan super Black Adam, Captain America: The First Avenger, dan Man of Steel. Ikonografi dalam film pahlawan super mewakili pembenaran moral yang bersifat ambivalen. Para pahlawan super harus melakukan apa saja untuk ‘menyelamatkan’ dunia meski dilakukan dengan cara membenarkan kejahatan, menghancurkan lingkungan sekitar, atau menggunakan strategi licik. Segala kerusakan sampingan dalam penyangkalan*

*moral dianggap perlu untuk menghancurkan sumber masalahnya. Para pahlawan super harus melakukan segala hal untuk menyelamatkan dunia meski harus membunuh, menyalahgunakan kekuasaan, bahkan keras kepala untuk fokus pada hal yang lebih besar dengan mengorbankan hal-hal kecil. Sebagai analisis, penyangkalan moral seperti diteorikan oleh Albert Bandura ditampilkan melalui ikonografi pahlawan super yang berulang kali membunuh orang lain dan merusak lingkungan sekitar. Ketiga film pahlawan super tersebut menunjukkan bahwa tindakan para pahlawan super hanya berfokus pada nilai moral mereka sendiri. Kerusakan sampingan dianggap tidak hanya sebagai efek samping dari tindakan pahlawan super, namun juga sebagai cerminan penyangkalan moral mereka. Kesimpulannya, nilai-nilai yang dianut para pahlawan super bersifat universal, namun justru merusak hal-hal tertentu. Perbuatan moral mereka tidak sepenuhnya benar, namun justru dibenarkan sebagai satu kesatuan.*

**Kata kunci:** *Black Adam, Captain America, kerusakan sampingan, Man of Steel, penyangkalan moral*

## A. INTRODUCTION

Superhero films are used to accentuate the superhero and to undermine the enemies and the surroundings. The iconography is that superhero is the main center of the film then everything he/she does is morally justified. The superhero must do everything to 'save' the world though it is done by embracing evil, destroying surroundings, or using cunning strategies. This ultimate doing is the universal value of being a superhero. This condition is interesting to be analyzed, as focusing merely on one core character will automatically consider other characters as the irony of the periphery (Grant, 2015; Millenia et al., 2023). Moreover, it will always bring in steep dualism, as one aspect is hierarchically more valuable than the others are. In this case, the actions of the superhero are much more needed than anything to suppress and even to eliminate the evil. Furthermore, emphasizing merely on superhero aspect will undermine the victims, the villains, and even the anonymity of surroundings (Beggan, 2020; Wijaya et al., 2023). Surrounding damage is inevitable in superhero movies though its condition violates moral values.

Then, this paper would like to investigate how the iconography of the superhero genre of the film represents moral disengagement in films of *Black Adam*, *Captain America: The First Avenger*, and *Man of Steel*. By analyzing those three films, iconography in those films are proofs that trigger emotional experience of the audience. It happens because of moral considerations brought in by the superheroes are different from common human ethical values. Those are so unilateral that shape such further moral justifications. It may not be right at all, but their actions are normalized and justified since they are superheroes.

The thesis statement of this article is that iconography in superhero films represents ambivalent moral justification. The superhero must apply his/her power to 'save' the world. Any collateral damage in moral disengagement is considered

necessary in order to destroy the source of the problem. The superhero must do everything to save the day though he/she has to kill, to abuse his/her power, and even be ignorant only to focus on bigger things by sacrificing petty things. Superheroes are not the ones that need to engage moral values since their ethical perspectives are beyond this world.

The main idea of this paper is to explore collateral damage as representation of moral disengagement in the three superhero films. Iconography in superhero films tend to explore the super strength narratively and visually, but the impacts of it is rarely discussed. The moral disengagement is also shown through recurring war, but how superheroes are involved in killing and destroying the surroundings is less analyzed. Collateral damage is also considered usual in wars, but its side effects and reflection through moral disengagements are researched inadequately. The tensions between justifications in being universal and particular is quite common in philosophy and literary studies, but it is not widely indicated through the critical analysis of superheroes. This paper then finds its novelty by filling the gaps shown in those former indications.

## **B. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

This paper uses theories and concepts of Iconography and Genre of film, Moral Disengagement, and Collateral Damage. A genre's iconography consists of recurring symbolic images that carry meaning from film to film (Bordwell, 2015). A genre is identified through consistent symbolic key images in mise-en-scene. The idea is to focus on the descriptions of visual rather than narrative aspects of a film (Cateridge, 2015; Yuliastuti & Pasopati, 2021). Through the images, actions and conditions are related to intended meanings of a film. The meanings are shown in three types of symbol; individual as own values regarded by the main character, social as other characters' values beside the main character, and cultural as surrounding aspects including wider environment, circumstances, and conditions (Cateridge, 2015; Grant, 2015). Those three meanings intertwine by giving several perspectives to the audience. One perspective is about the moral justification done by the main character. Somehow, the values of the main characters could be so unilateral that may only bring utilitarian perspective on his/her doings. What is considered as true by the main character could be totally wrong if being seen from surrounding matters. Therefore, a film may contain ambivalent moral perspectives that is related to moral disengagement as well.

Moral disengagement is the process by which an individual convinces him/herself that ethical standards do not apply to him/herself within a particular situation or context (Bandura, 1999; Rengifo & Laham, 2022). The concept indicates that any action that he/she does is totally rationalized and justified by their own values. Consequently, any action is considered out of any responsibility as long as the main problem is solved. There are four categories of moral disengagement (Bandura, 1999). First is Moral Justification done by embracing immoral conduct to serve the greater good. The instance of the justification is a character who

cooperates with enemies to fight other bigger enemies. Second is Diffusing Responsibility by deflecting responsibility to those who do the wrongdoing. The example is that what he/she does is right since it is derived from his/her moral superiority. Third is Mis-presenting Injuries Consequences seen through misinterpretation of unruly behavior. The example is sacrificing small things to destroy bigger enemies. Fourth is Dehumanizing the Victims as any victim is punished since he/she brings the harm on themselves. The example is someone needs to be killed since he/she brings condemnation to him or herself. He/she is not considered as important so that he/she does not deserve to be treated as human being. The four categories above indicate that there is a main character that could do everything while the others must accept, agree, and even be sacrificed both as victims and collateral damage (Bandura, 1999; Bussey et al., 2020). Collateral damage then is an inevitable consequence of a doing that in many cases, including films, are considered as normal. However, collateral damage is not normal at all since it brings harm to the wrongdoers, those who know nothing about it, and even the cultural surroundings.

In terms of moral disengagement, social cognitive theory adopts a cognitive interactionist perspective to moral phenomena. Within this conceptual framework, personal factors in the form of moral thought and affective self-reactions, moral conduct, and environmental factors all operate as interacting determinants that influence each other (Bandura, 1991; Pasopati, 2018). Such theory of morality requires a broader conception provided by rationalistic approaches. Moral conduct is motivated and regulated mainly by the ongoing exercise of self-reactive influence. Self-regulatory mechanisms, therefore, form an integral part in the conception of moral agency in social cognitive theory. Self-reactive influences do not operate unless they are activated, and those include various psychosocial processes by which self-sanctions can be selectively activated and disengaged from transgressive conduct (Bandura, 1991; Sarmi et al., 2023). Mechanisms of moral disengagement also play a central role in the social cognitive theory of morality.

Many forms of behavior are personally advantageous but are detrimental to others' rights. Without moral codes, people would disregard each other's rights and welfare whenever their desires come into social conflict (Bandura, 1991; Michelle et al., 2023). Societal codes and sanctions articulate collective moral imperatives as well as influence social conduct. However, external sanctions are relatively weak deterrents because most transgressive acts can go undetected. However, people continuously preside over their own conduct in countless situations presenting little or no external threat. Therefore, the exercise of self-sanction must play a central role in the regulation of moral conduct. It is considerably easier to examine how people reason about hypothetical moral dilemmas than to study their actual moral conduct (Bandura, 1991; Djanarko & Pasopati, 2017). People suffer from the wrongs done to them, yet perpetrators might justify their inhumane actions. The mechanisms governing the self-regulation of moral conduct involve much more than moral thought.

Collateral damage is any damage perceived as incidental result of a conflict (Lefkowitz, 2008). The harm is not morally permitted but somehow inevitable in many wars. The collateral damage is realized based on two aspects; total unilateral doing that shapes unintended victim and usage of bigger power that annihilate wider area (Barker, 2012; Lefkowitz, 2008). The damage, though it may not be intentional, is the effect of continuation of unilateral doing alongside with utilitarian purpose. If a moral value is true, it must be applied at any cost. Then, if it is good to be applied to realize such better life, it must be done either (Bussey et al., 2020; Falla et al., 2022). Indeed, those aspects undermine others including humans and the surroundings. The damage then also justifies the doer since it must be done by all means. This result to ignorant mind of the doer since what he/she does is always correct in all aspects, including if the action may come up with intended victims.

There are four previous studies that have been written regarding moral considerations and superheroes. The first one is written by J. R. Loftis in 2022 entitled Means, ends, and the critique of pure superheroes (Loftis, 2022). The paper explains how the ideas of pure superheroes are always problematic within philosophical senses. Loftis' paper employs the idea of superhero that indicates such similarity to this paper, yet the difference is located in the perspective of moral consideration used in this particular paper. The second writing is composed by D. D. Saptanto and M. K. Dewi in 2020 entitled Gundala and Gatotkaca in the concept of modern Indonesian superheroes: Comparative analysis of the Indonesian and American superheroes (Saptanto & Dewi, 2020). This paper critically compares narrative and cultural factors between Indonesian and American superheroes. Saptanto and Dewi's paper employs ideas of superheroes similar to this article, while the dissimilarity is related to moral aspects of the superheroes being discussed. The third paper is written by C. Besaw, K. Ritter, and G. M. Tezcür in 2023 entitled Beyond Collateral Damage: The Politics of Civilian Victimization in a Civil War (Besaw, et al., 2023). This particular paper speaks the consequences of civil war locally, regionally, and globally. While Besaw's paper has similarity about the theme of war compared to this study, the difference lies on the matters of superheroes being indicated. The fourth paper is done by S. Jangbar in 2023 entitled Collateral Damage: The Politics and Ethics of Drone Strikes (Jangbar, 2023). This paper explores matter of Artificial Intelligence in its ethical aspects of wars. Jangbar's paper has similarity in questioning moral considerations compared to this article, while the difference is seen in the emphasis of superheroes stated in this current article. Four previous studies above indicate that this paper points out its novelty through combining the explorative issues between moral considerations, collateral damage, ideas of superheroes, alongside the film and literary studies reflected in the three films mentioned beforehand.

### C. METHODOLOGY

This study employs qualitative method to explore iconography and its complexities in the three films. The data is obtained from literature studies.

Qualitative research begins with data collection then continues with analysis. The theoretical foundation serves as a framework to ensure that the research emphasis aligns with the realities observed in the particular field. The data of this research is the superhero films of Black Adam published in 2022, Captain America: The First Avenger released in 2011, and Man of Steel publicized in 2013. The data collection technique is done by note-taking technique. This technique collects the notes consist of various patterns of data regarding iconography and moral disengagement in those three films. Data analysis techniques include watching the films, marking data of collateral damage and moral disengagement in the films, reading the theories and concepts carefully, comparing research data with theory, writing down the data, theories, and analysis, and the last is concluding the main ideas from the overall results.

#### **D. RESULT AND DISCUSSION**

The analysis of this study is derived from the actions of Black Adam, Captain America, and Superman in the films related to moral disengagement. There are recurring iconographies repeatedly shown in the films. There are three main cultural symbols indicated in superhero film; situated in a modern city, full of crowded people, and invasion of enemies. The modern city is indicated as Kahndaq in Black Adam, New York in Captain America, and Metropolis in Superman. Three of the cities are crowded with people and invaded by enemies especially the oppressor in Black Adam, Red Skull in Captain America, and General Zod in Superman movies. Other iconographies are related to actions of the superheroes that are considered unilateral yet utilitarian. Later, the actions also result to collateral damage of their doings.

Through iconography of the mise-en-scene, subjective experience in watching films arises (Fadiyah et al., 2023; Grant, 2015). It is interpreted from direct understanding while looking at the film. Other than the main cultural symbols, the superhero films also contain some crucial aspects. Superheroes used to wear such costumes that differentiate them from other common people. The villains are in similar concepts too since both superheroes and villains are nemesis to each other. The primary reason for this conflicting phenomenon is to highlight the main characters. The spotlight is not only the good one but also he/she remains different from the others. In moral aspects, by being seen as different, they are out of normal values, considered as higher, and even must be praised by all human beings. Moreover, the main idea of superheroes film are the superior actions of the main characters (Annasai et al., 2023; Beggan, 2020). The actions are the main implementations of the thoughts and values of them. They are not thinkers at all since what they think are how they act based on their values at the same time. The actions are indicated on the weapon as their main powers. Those also differentiate them from other human beings. In further cases, their powers are abused that shape violence toward others (Falla et al., 2022; Lefkowitz, 2008). They do not make mistakes since the nemesis is the one that does wrong doing. If someone must blame

the superheroes, he/she must firstly blame the enemies who firstly bring wrath to the world.

The first analysis is the abuse of power that result to violence. Black Adam uses his power as his moral justification and rational ignorance to protect the city at all costs (Collet-Serra, 2022; Listyaningsih et al., 2023). His power is unlimited and he realizes that he is superior to the others and could do what he wants. Though his power is used to save others, markets, schools, even hospitals are destroyed. He says that the oppressor must be eliminated since they are not accepted in Kahndaq. In destroying Red Skull, Captain America is also morally justified by abusing his power. He uses his shield to protect American citizen from invasion of Nazi and Hydra organization (Johnston, 2011). By doing this, any violence is permitted as long as the threat is eliminated. He saves America by killing and destroying those with different ideology. Superman also does anything to keep general Zod away from earth. Though he is hesitant to kill Zod at the end, he still does it, as he is considered as the main public enemy (P. Smith & Riley, 2009; Snyder, 2013). He does not care whether his power may destroy other building. His main intention is eliminating Zod and preventing bigger casualties. However, his action indeed has already brought casualties since his abusive power brings consequences to the using of violence.

In the case of superheroes, powers are their main authentic weapons that bring in further moral effects to the others (Djanarko & Pasopati, 2019; Sarmi et al., 2023). Since they are beyond any human beings, they are dependable and reliable especially for obstacles that common people could not solve. However, what makes it as abuse of power is that not all power of superheroes suitable for the problems. Therefore, there are many superheroes with different powers since the problems of human beings may vary too (Beggan, 2020; Erzi, 2020). In superhero films, the writers and the directors will fit which power is necessary to use for the theme of the film. Then, they exaggerate the condition that the superheroes may match inside that situation. Indeed, the surplus of the values and powers of superheroes are intended in those films. The abuse of power is not accidental, but intentional (Erzi, 2020; Rengifo & Laham, 2022). The audience also enjoys that violence since superheroes could go beyond normal moral values. The filmmakers smartly exploit the need of audience of such moral values that could solve problems and violence is a way to emphasize that desire.

The second is the ignorant mind of superhero. Being ignorant means focusing on own justified values and undermining others. Black Adam only values his own perspective in protecting Kahndaq and deteriorating values of Justice Society and the human value of the oppressors (Collet-Serra, 2022). He does what he wants by killing those who stand on his way. Justice Society reminds him by not killing people including the evil ones, but Black Adam refuses. He keeps hunting the enemies by killing them. Since his power is unlimited, lives of people are undermined since the victims come both from enemies, other citizens, and places of the city. Captain America is also ignorant since he finds his perspective of liberty

is the ultimate and the Nazi and Hydra are the number two (Johnston, 2011). He is able to destroy the Hydra to its roots since he believes that liberty must be applied everywhere on earth. Later, he uses not only his shield, but also his guns to shoot people and destroy public facilities. Though there are many scientists that know nothing about ideology, they are still punished since Captain America thinks that they cooperate with the evils. Superman also acts like a God who has ultimate power and justified by the people. He hits Zod many times to the buildings full of people. Many people falls of high buildings but Superman only focuses on Zod as the main problem (Snyder, 2013). He keeps on doing what he thinks is right. He also thinks that Zod and his armies are not welcomed in earth and must be exiled or even killed.

The ignorant part of superheroes is not selfish but full of altruism. This iconography is recurring to show that superheroes exist not for themselves, but for other human beings. In a way, it is good to give knowledge to take care of others. People could learn from superheroes' values that propose external matters to its peak. However, being ignorant in matter of superheroes intend to indicate that the main problems must be solved at any cost (Djanarko & Pasopati, 2017; Robinson, 2020). Any superhero is the main bearer of ultimate values while the adversaries are the lower ones. This condition also reflects another side effect. People are told that to solve a problem and main enemy must be punished though it is done by ignoring other things. In many cases, people could not do many things since they are bounded by limitation of themselves and restrictions of other values. Superheroes are otherwise since they are not limited and restricted at all (Adams et al., 2020; Robinson, 2020). They are internally and externally free in their own values. The iconography of superhero films then is also ethical as it engages with the world, but by disengaging from any common conscientious moral value of the world (Akbar et al., 2023; Ibrahim et al., 2023).

The third is killing as the ultimate solution that will solve the problem. The idea is shown in images of the three films. In *Black Adam*, he thinks that by killing the armies then the oppression of Kahndaq will end. He totally thinks that the oppressors must be eliminated since they are worth to be punished by their own wrongdoings (Collet-Serra, 2022; Erzi, 2020). Even he will also fight the Justice Society to the death if they want to stop him. Captain America is doing the same since the enemies also use guns to attack him. He sometimes deflects the bullets by his shield but the projectiles are returned to the enemies. In the film, Captain America must kill the lower enemies to go to the next stage to fight Red Skull (Johnston, 2011). It works like a game that must go through some levels to go forward. Superman does the same by his abundant physical power including laser beam from his eyes. He easily shoots people with his laser gaze and kills them instantly (Snyder, 2013).

People could not easily kill others, as the law and other norms prohibit it. However, superheroes could do it. Simply, it is because they surpass any human being and they are not bounded by the law. There are some scenes in superheroes films that superheroes are required to give testimonies in a court of their ignorant

doings. Some scenes in Marvel films also show Sokovia Accord to limit the application of superheroes' powers. However, they could not be accused since they are not humans and even they are not from this world. If they are restricted, the rules must come from themselves (Pasopati, 2018; Robinson, 2020). Iconography of superhero film would like to propose that superheroes are the ones that could do what they want since their moral considerations are already at the ultimate peak. Even Superman and Black Adam are told as God that will give peace to the world. Even so, superheroes could not be mentioned as totally beyond of this world. Their identities must be logical in being closely intact with human beings (Adams et al., 2020; Oktafiani et al., 2023). This is interesting since their presence is here but their values are out of this world as seen in Captain America who is told as Super Soldier. Therefore, killing people will only relate to any fictional character in fictional world either (Ibrahim et al., 2023; M. F. Smith et al., 2023). Though the name could be real one as in real world, but the cities are not the similar since the places must be ready to accept any consequence from the actions of the superheroes.

Fourth is focusing on bigger things by sacrificing petty things. This one is the clearest proof of collateral damage. Black Adam does not care if any building destroyed because of his action. He thinks that he is true by all means (Collet-Serra, 2022). The side effect is only little consequences borne to get a more peaceful condition. Captain America is also totally okay if he has to blow up many facilities in order to stop the spreading ideology of Nazi and Hydra. If there are people inside, he considers them as the enemies. He generalizes all of them as bad people and ignores any little goodness in them (Djanarko & Pasopati, 2017; Johnston, 2011). Superman is doing the same since Zod is his responsibility as both of them come from the same planet, Krypton. He forgets his responsibility to the people of Metropolis for a while to eliminate the big threats facing him. He keeps throwing big objects, makes building into rubbles, and ignore those who needs help only to eliminate the existence of Zod (Snyder, 2013).

The language in iconography of those three superhero films is to see the bigger pictures while considering others as the undermined ones. Superheroes are seen as people that do not have situational ethical values. For them, the ethics are totally Kantian in imperative categories. If someone is wrong, he must be punished (Ibrahim et al., 2023; Lefkowitz, 2008). If others follow the wrong leaders, they are wrong too and must be punished. Superheroes do not care if individuals may have little sense of goodness. They are also careless that someone is part of family though superheroes are often related to dramatized familial or love relations (Pasopati, 2016; Robinson, 2020). The iconography of superhero films is clear, they are the main characters and others are complementary to them. Destroying things are what they must do to the main enemies. They are morally justified since they are the ones that people could only rely on.

From the four analyses above, the focus of the three superhero films is on their actions to prioritize saving the world but undermining and marginalizing others. The superheroes ignore the lives of the enemies and other surroundings

(Posada, 2019; P. Smith & Riley, 2009). Their main doings are to attack and by these actions then their intention to protect is justified and rationalized. They prevent the spreading enemies by doing preemptive strike. Then, while it is done, it creates further collateral damage since the battle is situated in a city full of people and public facilities. They could not be morally sanctioned since their values are ultimate and necessary to promote peaceful life (Posada, 2019; Yuliastuti et al., 2022). However, their superiorities are always intact with many inferior conditions. Their abundant power has made other to be powerless. Their high moral values undermine others as lower creatures. Their general views on enemies also is spreading to be applied to common people (Lefkowitz, 2008). In other words, any action done by superhero will never only result to intentional damage, but will also create further collateral damage.

Moreover, collateral damage is never talked in main superhero films. Some of them are talked but in periphery series as the side effects of the main war. However, the series do not erode the importance of the actions of the superheroes. Collateral damage will be forgiven as long as the main problem is solved (Djanarko & Pasopati, 2019; Lefkowitz, 2008). They later will help people to re-build again. This idea has made such permissive moral ethics to the superheroes. It is so much different from what common people must bear from the wars that superheroes bring in. Even common people could not criticize superheroes since they do not have the same power, moral values, and even capitals (Adams et al., 2020; Barker, 2012). Iconography of superhero films reflect normalized collateral damage brought by the main characters. Somehow, many audiences even would like to see blasts and fire in the films. Director like Christopher Nolan is someone who focuses on the superheroes by accentuating collateral damage. The damage then is not bad side effect, but it is considered necessary as bringing joy to the audience. Advancement of visual effect may flourish since the more complicated the collateral damage, the more income producers and directors could get from a superhero film.

## E. CONCLUSION

The iconographies of the films of *Black Adam*, *Captain America: The First Avenger*, and *Man of Steel* indicate matter of moral disengagement that is related to collateral damage. The disengagement is constantly identified through consistent symbolic visual images in mise-en-scene in the three films. Superheroes embrace moral disengagement as consequences of their moral and physical superiorities. While in many real wars collateral damage must be avoided at all costs, superhero films obscenely show collateral damage that must exist. The obscenity is shown through matters of Moral Justification in saving lives by destroying things, Diffusing Responsibility by deflecting the fault to the enemies, Mis-presenting Injuries Consequences by showing collateral damage as unruly but just behavior, and Dehumanizing the Victims by indicating any harm is done as consequences of their own wrongdoing. Though collateral damage is done to support the matter of superheroes' actions, it is still wrong in any moral level including the fallacy of collateral damage in its unilateral justice.

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