

# Hearts of darkness: 'perpetrator history' and why there is no why

PAUL A. ROTH

## ABSTRACT

Three theories contend as explanations of perpetrator behavior in the Holocaust as well as other cases of genocide: structural, intentional, and situational. Structural explanations emphasize the sense in which no single individual or choice accounts for the course of events. In opposition, intentional/cultural accounts insist upon the genocides as intended outcomes, for how can one explain situations in which people 'step up' and repeatedly kill defenseless others in large numbers over sustained periods of time as anything other than a choice? Situational explanations offer a type of behavioral account; this is how people act in certain environments. Critical to the situational account as I discuss it is the 'Asch paradigm', i.e. experimentally attested conditions for eliciting *conformity* of behavior regardless of available evidence of prior beliefs. In what follows, I defend what I term above a version of situational explanations of perpetrator behavior. Moreover, I maintain that the factors that explain provide an understanding as well. While not committed to the complete irrelevance or exclusion of cultural or structural factors, nonetheless situational analyses can account both for what happened and why. *A cardinal virtue of this version of situational explanations consists in showing how shallow the problem of understanding turns out to be for such cases.*

*Key words* conformity, genocide, Holocaust, perpetrator history, situational explanations

During the few minutes it took Kovner to tell of the help that had come from a German sergeant, a hush settled over the courtroom; it was as though the crowd had spontaneously decided to observe the usual two minutes of silence in honor of the man named Anton Schmidt. And in those two minutes, which were like a sudden burst of light in the midst of impenetrable, unfathomable darkness, a single thought stood out clearly, irrefutably, beyond question – how utterly different everything would be today in this courtroom, in Israel, in Germany, in all of Europe, and perhaps in all countries of the world, if only more such stories could have been told.

...

For the lesson of such stories is simple and within everybody's grasp. Politically speaking, it is that under conditions of terror most people will comply but some people will not, just as the lesson of the countries to which the Final Solution was proposed is that 'it could happen' in most places but *it did not happen everywhere*. Humanly speaking, no more is required, and no more can reasonably be asked, of this planet to remain a place fit for human habitation. (Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem*)

Old dualisms never die. They simply become passé. Consider, in this regard, the venerable divide between understanding and explanation. This alleged contrast concerned, on the one hand, a notion of understanding based upon contextually determined reasons for action. Since the intelligibility of reasons was taken to be contingent on historical circumstances, such context dependence required an account 'thick' with details specific to the intentions, time and place, and consequently non-generalizable. On the other hand, explanation remains tied to causal accounts. Philosophical tradition held that causal explanations must be cashed out in terms captured by laws or law-like generalizations, and so descriptively 'thin'.

But these old theoretical dichotomies did not neatly fit with evolving disciplinary practices. The chief concern motivating a supposed explanation/understanding dualism – the rift between the required thickness of reasons-based accounts and the thinness of causal ones – no longer stands as a difference that makes a difference. Moreover, absent some consensus regarding what makes a science a science, no requirement exists binding explanation to some particular logical form. Benefits result. For abandoning the old divide has led, first, to increasing cross-fertilization among the sciences (both social and natural) and, second, to a renewed focus on naturalism as providing a general characterization of empirical inquiry.<sup>1</sup>

But apparent hard cases remain, i.e. events that seemingly defy efforts to treat explanation and understanding as part of a unified frame of inquiry. The historiography of the destruction of the European Jews at the hands of the

Nazis – the Holocaust – some suggest provides a case in point. Here an opposition between understanding and explanation appears to reassert itself.

Saul Friedländer voices a form of my general worry that accounts of genocides reopen a divide between explanation and understanding. The relentless, unprecedented and very effective pursuit by the Nazis of their program of racialized mass murder raises questions regarding these policies. But, Friedländer worries, a concern for understanding not only fails to contribute to a general explanation, but also proves antithetical to it.<sup>2</sup>

Friedländer elaborates on the conflict he envisions as follows:

Thomas Laqueur wrote a critique of what he called the ‘business as usual’ historiography of the Holocaust, namely, the historiography that fails to confront both the particular moral breakdown these events imply and the subjective terror that they inspired. For Laqueur, as for myself, only the integration of the fate of the individual victim into the historical narration could eventually enable the historian to overcome the dichotomy between the unfathomable abstraction of the millions of dead and the tragedy of the individual life and death in the time of extermination.<sup>3</sup>

Friedländer imagines that explanation must account for a gross failure of common moral behavior – a pervasive, society-wide change of disposition – and further assumes that situational factors, the account of how things happened, cannot illuminate such ‘why’ questions. Emphasis on *how* Nazis succeeded as well as they did with regard to mass murder leaves us with only an ‘unfathomable abstraction’, unable to connect the enormity of the moral collapse and the multitude of individual tragedies with any part of the explanation of how this happened. This abstraction in explanation must be filled, he insists, by an ‘understanding’ of the moral and personal factors. Thus, inquiry appears doomed to providing either just explanations devoid of understanding – ever more detailed knowledge of the mechanics of mass destruction without insight into just why and how mass murder became accepted policy – or understanding which, because of the particularity of the biographies, cannot be integrated into a uniform explanation.<sup>4</sup>

An area strongly manifesting the tension Friedländer notes involves work on what has come to be called ‘perpetrator history’. Studies of perpetrators shift historical focus away from those who formulated policies – Nazi elites and the institutions of the Third Reich – and onto instead those who performed the actual killings of targeted civilians and non-combatants, e.g. the Order Police and the *Einsatzgruppen*. For while the gas chamber may remain forever as the symbol of the mass murders of this period, in fact about half of those who died were victims of mass shooting or other conventional forms of murder. These required specific acts by individuals and so differed

in that respect at least from the more industrialized and depersonalized killing systems.

In the context of 'perpetrator history', problems flow from attendant concerns with explaining perpetrator participation. Since the killing processes differ so widely, explanations of participation vary from stress on highly impersonal factors – e.g. the peculiarly distancing nature due to the bureaucratization of the murder process and so the attendant banality of administrative evil – to culturally situated and intentional ones – e.g. the peculiarly homicidal anti-Semitism bred into the German bone and so the Holocaust as Teutonic deep play. Explanation favors impersonal (characteristically structural) factors. Yet these, while providing a wealth of detail on how things happened, seem to leave unanswered and unanswerable questions of why things happened. Understanding pulls in the direction of the personal, i.e. examining the motivations of perpetrators or the trauma of victims. But this offers only splintered accounts; no unifying perspective emerges here.

Insofar as demands for understanding seemingly preclude more integrated and unified accounts, such cases threaten to revivify the old divide. That is, one root of the explanation–understanding distinction lay in an alleged contrast between causal processes as timeless and reasons as time specific, a product unique to their historical moment. Different methods, consequently, were called for with regard to ascertaining each – the scientific method to ascertain causes, a hermeneutic method to recover meanings. Each special method plumbed its own distinct reality – one material, the other cognitive or cultural. Different realities required distinct methods, distinct methods involved means of verification unique to each. For committed naturalists, such dichotomizing hardly encourages an attitude of *vive la différence*.<sup>5</sup>

Moreover, all explanations in this area face two related hurdles. One I term the 'choice problem' – why did people choose to acquiesce to or participate in the murder of innocents? The presumed break in the normal or usual standards of behavior sets the problem here.<sup>6</sup> Complicating any answer to the choice problem in perpetrator history is a second issue, which I have elsewhere called the 'smile problem'.<sup>7</sup> For many who killed did so uncoerced, indeed did so with enthusiasm and relish. A solution to the 'smile problem' requires showing why perpetrators did more than merely acquiesce to demands made on them, that is, why they took to their roles in the way they did.

Three theories contend as explanations of perpetrator behavior: structural, situational, and intentional. Structural explanations emphasize the sense in which no single individual or choice accounts for the course of events that resulted in the destruction of the European Jews. The defining feature of what I here call structural explanations involves how bureaucracies rationalize outcomes.<sup>8</sup> Regarding perpetrator behavior, structural explanations emphasize how bureaucracies morally anesthetize their denizens. In opposition,

intentional/cultural accounts insist upon the genocides as intended outcomes, for how can one explain situations in which people do ‘step up’ and repeatedly kill defenseless others in large numbers over sustained periods of time as anything other than a choice? With respect to perpetrators, explanation must reconstruct their mind-set. The intentional explanations characteristically emphasize factors unique to time, place, and individuals.

Situational explanations offer a type of behavioral account; this is how people act in certain environments. Situational analyses do not appeal to states of mind such as moral numbing or cultural blinders. Unlike structural ones, situational analyses do not focus on a particular context, e.g. bureaucracies, and do not emphasize a particular form or method for rationalizing action. Rather, critical to the situational account as I discuss it is the ‘Asch paradigm’, i.e. experimentally attested conditions for eliciting *conformity* of behavior regardless of available evidence or prior beliefs. The three approaches cannot obviously be combined. For each points to completely different factors for purposes of accounting for why what happened happened. The truth of any one makes the others irrelevant for purposes of explanation.

In what follows, I argue against the assumption that perpetrator behavior in fact presents any special problem with regard to unifying explanation and understanding. I maintain that the factors explanatory of such behavior have long been compellingly established through basic work in social psychology. That is, I defend what I term above a version of a situational explanation of perpetrator behavior. Moreover, the factors that explain provide, I maintain, an understanding as well. Any apparent obstacle to accepting the explanatory factors as allowing for understanding as well turns, I suggest, on requiring more for understanding than the account requires. While not committed to the complete irrelevance or exclusion of cultural or structural factors, nonetheless situational analyses can account both for what happened and why. *A cardinal virtue of the version of situational explanations consists in showing how shallow the problem of understanding turns out to be for such cases.*

Part I reviews some of the classic experimental literature from social psychology which emphasizes the importance of situational factors in the determination of behavior. Explanation of human action, at least in social psychology, bears the marks of an ongoing intellectual tug-of-war between dispositional and situational factors. The former (dispositional) factors characteristically emphasize the motivational primacy of endogenous factors such as beliefs (however they differ on the status of these beliefs – conscious or unconscious – or their mode of acquisition). The latter (situational) factors emphasize the motivational primacy of exogenous factors, e.g. peer group pressures. I defend the situationalist approach *even in the absence of any general analytic account of the notion of a situation.*

By way of reinforcing the case for the explanatory power of situational analyses for the genocidal cases, I turn to examine in Parts II and III two alternative explanations, both of which discount the situational analysis I favor. The first – Zygmunt Bauman’s *Modernity and the Holocaust* – attempts to locate the causal factors more in purely structural than in situational factors. On this account the most relevant factor turns out to be precisely the depersonalization of any relationship between actions and outcomes. In the case of Bauman’s work, he attempts to recruit social psychology as empirical support for this structuralist claim. Nonetheless, *contra* social psychologists, Bauman maintains that the core problem is not that people mould themselves chameleon-like to situations in which they find themselves, but rather that bureaucracies anesthetize individuals against the gruesome consequences of their actions. But Bauman’s efforts to enlist these results so as to provide an empirical basis for his divorce of structure and agency fail completely, for he consistently misreads the content and the import of the research he cites.

The second – Daniel Jonah Goldhagen’s *Hitler’s Willing Executioners* (1997) – attempts to locate the chief causal factor not in the (relatively) transitory situations in which individuals found themselves, but rather in inculcated beliefs which rationalized and justified otherwise horrific and proscribed acts. The situational analysis fails, from this perspective, because it cannot rationalize why Jews were killed in the way they were. However, the particular dispositional factors invoked by Goldhagen prove deeply problematic and unable to bear the explanatory burden he places on them. Moreover, I maintain, Goldhagen’s way of posing the problem causes him vastly to underestimate the actual contribution of situational factors to an understanding of what happens, i.e. to appreciating why people behaved in the way they did.<sup>9</sup> Both Bauman and Goldhagen, I show, seriously misconstrue the import and insights of social psychology. Most importantly, since Bauman and Goldhagen aim respectively to account for different modes of mass murder, my analysis points to how situationalist elements allow for a theory that not only unifies accounts of participation in the different types of killing projects but also brings together the elements necessary to explain and understand perpetrator participation in mass murder.

Part IV briefly considers and rejects the suggestion that situational analyses such as I defend pose any challenge to or stand in tension with claims regarding human autonomy. Appeals to understanding might seem autonomy-friendly while explanations imply autonomy-hostile views, inasmuch as reasons are not taken to necessitate behaviors but causes do. The situational account I offer forces no decision regarding the autonomy of the behavior examined. Actions, I argue, may be predictable yet not necessitated.

## I

Although social psychologists acknowledge that precise definitions of what counts as 'situational' probably cannot be formulated, I suggest that this lack does not prove crucial. Important instead is the fact that experimental situations can in fact be created which allow for tests on individuals of factors deriving from the more or less immediate context – peer group pressure (implicit or explicit), the pronouncements or presence of an authority, etc. The cases can involve beliefs that one has good reason to hold against a group (as in the Asch experiments described in n. 12), or cases where situational factors encourage a person to behave in ways that, one might reasonably suppose, actually go against prior expectations about someone's beliefs (Milgram and Zimbardo cases). Experimenters, that is, effectively construct decision scenarios in which subjects behave in ways in which either the available evidence counts against the choice a context encourages an individual to make, or there exists no reason to believe the subjects possess any prior propensity to so behave.<sup>10</sup> Political operatives, in this regard, may be viewed as de facto social psychologists, ones with a strong interest in learning how to construct just such psychologically coercive contexts. Thus, even absent some rigorous analytic specification of the notion of a 'situation', the fact remains that such contexts, with sufficient ingenuity and a bit of trial and error, can be constructed.

The robust experimental results in this area which concern me include classic experiments by Asch, Milgram and Zimbardo. The results build upon and supplement each other in interesting and important ways. A great deal of work in social psychology continues to be, in one way or another, extensions of issues and insights originally gleaned from these results. Ross and Nisbett (1991) provide a particularly cogent narrative regarding how social psychological research in this area developed over the last five decades with regard to what they term 'the Asch paradigm'.<sup>11</sup> *Asch's work proves paradigmatic by providing a concrete, replicable (and extendable) demonstration of the powerful tendency of people to conform to the behavior of groups in which they find themselves.*<sup>12</sup> Importantly, as in the other cases, the experimental results proved contrary to the prior expectations of the experimenters. No one, that is, anticipated that the circumstances would elicit the types or extent of conformity found in them.

In Asch's experiments, pressure to conform presumably arises merely from the *implied* challenge of contravening those who have already announced their decision. An important development in the exploration of the power of this experimental paradigm comes with Stanley Milgram's justly celebrated work. Would conformity to a real or imagined norm be found as well in situations which involved, for example, pain or possible harm to others? Milgram interestingly distinguishes the notions of conformity and obedience

in a way relevant to later discussion. For the notions figure very differently with regard to how people rationalize their actions. 'Subjects *deny* conformity and *embrace* obedience as the explanation of their actions.'<sup>13</sup> Milgram suggests that the reason for this involves the fact that in one case – Asch's – the norm (agreement) is only implicit while in the other – Milgram's own obedience experiments – it is explicit. Thus, although the notions of conformity and obedience can be distinguished in particular ways, they nonetheless link crucially to one key aspect of human response: 'Obedience and conformity both refer to the abdication of initiative to an external source.'<sup>14</sup> Reference to norms here represents only speculation, however. For what these experiments indicate is that a vast majority of people will, in fact, 'abdicate' initiative or responsibility. But the experiments, in and of themselves, determine no answer as to why.

The details of Milgram's experiments require, I shall assume, minimal rehearsal. In its essentials, someone is told he is involved in a learning experiment as a 'teacher', a role requiring this person to administer shocks – graded in the experiment from 15 volts to 450 volts – to a 'learner' whenever this learner makes an error in the learning task at hand. 'The point of the experiment', Milgram notes, 'is to see how far a person will proceed in a concrete and measurable situation in which he is ordered to inflict increasing pain on a protesting victim. At what point will the subject refuse to obey the experimenter?'<sup>15</sup> By way of referencing the 'learner's' protests, at '120 volts he complains verbally, at 150 he demands to be released from the experiment. His protests continue as the shocks escalate, growing increasingly vehement and emotional. At 285 volts his response can only be described as an agonized scream.'<sup>16</sup> Under these conditions, Milgram found that about two-thirds of the 'teachers' proved obedient, i.e. continued shocking through 450 volts. The experiment and its results, repeated in many variations and in different countries, have proved to be remarkably robust.<sup>17</sup>

The final set of experiments to note here involves celebrated work by Philip Zimbardo. Although he is best known for the Stanford Prison experiment (see Haney *et al.*, 1973), I also draw upon work done somewhat earlier by Zimbardo (see Zimbardo, 1970). Remarkable if only for the fact that it includes material ranging from the latest experimental work in social psychology to reflections from Nietzsche and Heidegger to allusions to novels by Bataille and Réage, Zimbardo (1970) focuses on what he terms 'deindividuation'. This he defines as 'a complex, hypothesized process in which a series of antecedent social conditions lead to changes in perception of self and others, and thereby to a lowered threshold of normally restrained behavior'.<sup>18</sup> An example of deindividuated behavior would be a person participating in some form of mob behavior. Zimbardo suggests, in this regard, that dehumanization represents just 'a different face' of deindividuation.<sup>19</sup> The conditions for dehumanizing others can be readily achieved, Zimbardo suggests.

The Stanford Prison Experiment (SPE) provides powerful evidence of how arbitrarily assigned social roles determine behavior. Twenty-one male undergraduates, extensively pre-screened for 'normalcy', were recruited for participation. Ten were randomly assigned the role of prisoner and went through an arrest procedure with the help of the local police department. Prisoners were prisoners 24 hours a day; the designated guards worked 8-hour shifts. The effects of the arbitrarily assigned (and deliberately under-specified) roles were immediate and dramatic.

The conferring of differential power on the status of 'guard' and 'prisoner' constituted, in effect, the institutional validation of those roles. But further, many of the subjects ceased distinguishing between prison role and their prior self-identities. When this occurred, within what was a surprisingly short period of time, we witnessed a sample of normal, healthy American college students fractionate into a group of prison guards who seemed to derive pleasure from insulting, threatening, humiliating, and dehumanising their peers – those who by chance selection had been assigned to the 'prisoner' role. The typical prisoner syndrome was one of passivity, dependency, depression, helplessness, and self-depreciation. Prisoner participation in the social reality which the guards had constructed for them lent increasing validity to it and . . . many acted in ways to justify their fate at the hands of the guards. . . . Most dramatic and distressing to us was the observation of the ease with which sadistic behavior could be elicited in individuals who were not 'sadistic types' and the frequency with which acute emotional breakdowns could occur in men selected precisely for their emotional stability.<sup>20</sup>

Nothing special in terms of instructions, time, or ideology had to be supplied to each group in order to have them play their roles. Transformations were virtually immediate, the emotional and behavioral changes palpable, and none of it could have been predicted from a study of the prior behaviors (or post-experiment behaviors) of those involved.

Both historians and social psychologists have insisted on the relevance of this research to explaining perpetrator behavior such as that exhibited by the Nazis and their allies. Perhaps by now the best known, and certainly the most compelling account, has been given by Christopher Browning in his admirable and remarkable book.<sup>21</sup> Speaking of Zimbardo's SPE and his own study of German reservists who became mass murderers, shooting to death thousands of Polish civilians, men and women, young and old, healthy and sick, Browning observes:

Zimbardo's spectrum of guard behavior bears an uncanny resemblance to the groups that emerged within Reserve Police Battalion 101: a

nucleus of increasingly enthusiastic killers who volunteered for the firing squads and 'Jew hunts'; a larger group of policemen who performed as shooters and ghetto clearers when assigned but who did not seek opportunities to kill . . . and a small group (less than 20 percent) of refusers and evaders.<sup>22</sup>

The congruence between what was observed in the SPE and the natural experiment provided by the Order Police in Browning's study also bears on the larger question of why mistreatment of Jews was widely tolerated. For wider social indifference to the fate of the Jews poses a puzzle as well. For example, in his recent overview of Holocaust historiography, Yehuda Bauer emphasizes the importance he attaches to the formation of a broad social consensus among Germans of that time as a key enabling condition which provided 'a justification for ordinary folks to participate in the genocidal program'.<sup>23</sup> Specifically, Bauer argues, a sea change occurs in Germany between 1933 and 1941, from one where there was no consensus regarding persecution of the Jews to a situation where their murder was tolerated. But, Bauer maintains, 'The steps leading to these quick changes in perception by large numbers of people have not been properly researched'.<sup>24</sup> But Bauer just is wrong about this. The issue has been 'properly researched'. The distressing facts that emerge point to the conclusion that such consensus formation involves a great deal *less* than one might hope or imagine.

I accept, in fact, the suggestion that, in all essentials, the situational analyses outlined above account for why the supposedly incomprehensible brutality and cruelty that one finds all too manifest in the treatment by the Nazis and their cohorts of all those who fell within their grasp took place. In retrospect, Nazi behavior would have been predictable had it been known then what we know now about conformity, obedience, and roles.<sup>25</sup>

## II

Raul Hilberg prefigures Arendt's stress on the significance of the interpretations stressing links between the extermination of all '*lebensunwerten Lebens*' and the technocrats of modern bureaucracy. In a single paragraph, he sets what has since become the canonical problem and points as well to what Arendt later develops as its fundamental explanation.

The German annihilation of the European Jews was the world's first completed destruction process. For the first time in the history of Western civilization the perpetrators had overcome all administrative and moral obstacles to a killing operation. For the first time, also, the Jewish victims, caught in the straitjacket of their history, plunged themselves physically and psychologically into catastrophe. The destruction

of the Jews was thus no accident. When in the early days of 1933 the first civil servant wrote the first definition of 'non-Aryan' into a civil service ordinance, the fate of European Jewry was sealed.<sup>26</sup>

Past history gave no hint to the Jews of Central and Eastern Europe of what lay in store for them.<sup>27</sup> Even had it done so, it remains unclear what actions were open to them. In any case, the first two sentences set the *explanandum* – what needs to be explained. Why did the Germans achieve the 'first completed destruction process'? How did they succeed in overcoming 'all administrative and moral obstacles' to this process? The second question I take to be an expansion of the first. The last sentence of the quoted paragraph gestures to Hilberg's suggested answer, one famously elaborated first by Hannah Arendt and later by Zygmunt Bauman. Hilberg intimates that the success of Nazi genocidal projects resulted from their ability to mobilize the full resources of the modern state for purposes of this undertaking – incorporating the destruction process as an integral piece of standard state machinery. By doing this, the claim goes, the Germans simultaneously solved *both* the moral and the administrative problems. Indeed, turning genocide into an administrative problem allegedly proved key to effectively neutralizing moral concerns.

Explanations emphasizing bureaucratic imperatives in the creation of the systems of mass murder that the Nazis put in place – genocide as a result of bureaucratic processes – appear plausible only by focusing on one aspect of the larger system of persecution, namely the death camps. Explanation by appeal to 'banality of evil' requires, that is, an emphasis on the distance or disconnection between those who ran the death mills and those who were its grist. In an article on perpetrators, Sabini and Silver review diary entries from a well-educated SS functionary at Auschwitz in which he notes in successive entries what he had for dinner, the acquisition of some amenities, and his participation in mass executions. They comment, 'How could a *Sonderaktion* [an execution of prisoners] and soap flakes possibly be mentioned in the same breath? . . . What needs explanation is not so much how the sadist could murder but how murder could come to occupy the same level of importance as soap flakes.'<sup>28</sup> Here they can only echo Arendt's wonderment with regard to Eichmann from two decades earlier: 'It was sheer thoughtlessness – something by no means identical with stupidity – that predisposed him to become one of the greatest criminals of that period.'<sup>29</sup> Ironically, while some emphasize the importance of the process of dehumanization of the *victims* of the death mills, Arendt and those influenced by her emphasize the dehumanization of the *perpetrators* as the chief 'enabling' condition for the workings of the machinery of death. 'Of course it is important to the political and social sciences that the essence of totalitarian government, and perhaps the nature of every bureaucracy, is to make functionaries and mere cogs in

the administrative machinery out of men, and to dehumanize them.<sup>30</sup> Dehumanization of the *perpetrators* breeds the 'thoughtlessness' which she bewails, supposedly cognitively anesthetizing individuals against thinking about what they do.

The reason alleged for why the administrative solution proves effectively to blunt moral inhibitions can be simply stated: killing no longer links clearly to any individual decision. The embedding of the killings within a bureaucratic process of implementation meant that those involved were called upon to exercise only their technical competence – their expertise as middle managers – and not their moral sensibility. No hard choices had to be made. By splitting technical competence off from questions of autonomy or responsibility for action, bureaucracy ensures '*the irrelevance of moral standards for the technical success of the bureaucratic operation*'.<sup>31</sup> Form trumps content; substantive moral concerns cannot find an outlet, on this account, within routinized procedures. In this regard, '[b]ureaucracy is intrinsically *capable* of genocidal action'.<sup>32</sup> Bauman's construal of Arendt's 'dehumanization of the perpetrator' scenario emphasizes how he imagines bureaucracy to distance perpetrator from act.<sup>33</sup> The distancing afforded by the administrative apparatus functions, Bauman then claims, as a 'moral sleeping pill'.<sup>34</sup>

Oddly, when it comes to citing actual empirical evidence that bureaucratic structures have this effect, the best that Bauman can do is to analogize the Nazi administrative processes to those required to launch long-range missiles or drop bombs from high altitude. While these latter cases exemplify, no doubt, *impersonal* forms of killing, they do not establish or entail the efficacy in moral sanitizing attributed to bureaucratized killing. But Bauman's claim simply equates one with the other.

While for Arendt, claims about dehumanization rest on a conceptual analysis, Bauman suggests that the connection can be demonstrated empirically. He attempts to indicate the empirical basis of this link by asserting that the 'invisibility of victims was, arguably, an important factor also in Milgram's experiments'.<sup>35</sup> But this is just not correct. Milgram's experiments, in most variations, have the 'victim' in both visual and auditory range of the 'teacher'. Indeed, it is a defining feature of the experiments that this be the case; otherwise, nothing weighs against an authority's request to continue meting out shocks.

Milgram varies, *inter alia*, the physical proximity of the putative teacher and learner, and some interesting results emerge. But there exists no obvious connection between Milgram's experimental set-up and anything *unique* to bureaucracies. The experiments look to test obedience to an authority figure, and the authority in these experiments generally wears the mantle not of a bureaucrat, but of a scientist. No administrative structure separates authority figure and 'teacher', even in cases that vary perceptual proximity between

'teacher' and 'subject' in these experiments. Milgram's experiments provide not a shred of empirical support for the claims Bauman makes.

Bauman's misguided formulations have the virtue of making plain a basic lacuna of Arendt's analysis, namely providing an empirically justified connection between the assertion that it is specifically the bureaucratic structure that morally and cognitively numbs (i.e. makes its denizens 'thoughtless' in Arendt's sense) and the behavior of those who ran the Nazi death machine.

Use of violence is most efficient and cost-effective when the means are subjected to solely instrumental-rational criteria, and thus dissociated from moral evaluation of the ends. . . . The dissociation is by and large and [*sic*] outcome of two parallel processes, which are both central to the bureaucratic model of action. . . . [*T*]he second is the substitution of a technical for a moral responsibility.<sup>36</sup>

How supposedly does this work?

The culprit here turns out to be rationality in the sense of (economic) efficiency. Bureaucracies institutionalize this form of rationality for corporations and modern states. Previously, one might have imagined with Hobbes that what is to be feared is people acting only on unbridled self-interest. Bauman reads Milgram as teaching us about the fearsome side of economic rationality, i.e. a rationality supposedly in the service of social order.

We used to believe that the unthinkable may only happen when people stop thinking: when the lid of rationality is taken off the cauldron of pre-social and uncivilized human passions. Milgram's findings also turn upside-down that much older image of the world, according to which humanity was fully on the side of the rational order, while inhumanity was fully confined to its occasional breakdowns.

In a nutshell, Milgram suggested and proved that inhumanity is a matter of social relationships. *As the latter are rationalized and technically perfected, so is the capacity and the efficiency of the social production of inhumanity.*<sup>37</sup>

But this just (re)asserts what in fact Bauman needs to prove, namely bureaucracy's special role in or capacity for morally short-circuiting social relationships.

Indeed, in the context of summarizing some of the variations Milgram performed to see how physical proximity impacted cooperation with authority, Bauman presents the following statement from Milgram as if it were his (Milgram's) general conclusion: 'Any force or event that is placed between the subject and the consequences of shocking the victim, will lead to a reduction of strain on the participant and thus lessen disobedience. In a modern society others often stand between us and the final destructive act to which we contribute.'<sup>38</sup> Bauman, in remarks following this quote,

characterizes its import as follows: 'The meaning of Milgram's discovery is that, immanently and irretrievably, the process of rationalization facilitates behaviour that is inhuman and cruel in its consequences. . . . The more rational is the organization of action, the easier it is to cause suffering – and remain at peace with oneself.'<sup>39</sup> But what Bauman says here provides a mistaken and misleading characterization of Milgram's work. To begin, the quote from Milgram represents no general summary on Milgram's part, but only a remark on a variation on his general set-up. This misrepresentation, though striking, still is not the worst of Bauman's stumbles. For as Milgram himself constantly stresses, the experiments are about obedience to *authority*, and what factors impact, negatively or positively, this obedience. What the experiments show unequivocally concerns how the perception of authority overrides any prior conceptions an individual might profess regarding the moral permissibility of actions. The variations, including the one Bauman misrepresents as supporting his interpretation, only go to show that distancing of an individual from the actual harmful action further enhances the likelihood of obedience. Nothing in what Milgram says or in the design of the experiments themselves bears on issues of rationalization in the sense that Bauman needs to make his account plausible. Bauman's efforts to use Milgram's work to empirically underwrite the alleged connection between *bureaucratization* and willingness to harm prove fatuous.<sup>40</sup>

Bauman also misstates the experimental implications for resisting authority. For, he insists, the Milgram experiments 'teach' that the failures to exercise any putative autonomy must lie in the absence of dissent. 'A most remarkable conclusion flowing from the full set of Milgram experiments is that *pluralism is the best preventive medicine against morally normally people engaging in morally abnormal actions.*'<sup>41</sup> Rather, what Milgram's experiments show, as Milgram himself quite properly emphasizes, is exactly what the Asch paradigm leads experimenters in this area to expect: when *peers* fail to follow, so will the subject. 'Indeed, of the score of experimental variations completed in this study, none was so effective in undercutting the experimenter's authority as the manipulation reported here.'<sup>42</sup> When two peers 'rebel' against the authority in the Milgram set-up, 90% of the subjects defy the experimenter as well at that point. Milgram's conclusion is just the opposite of that on which Bauman insists. Bauman imagines that the absence of pressure to conform makes defiance of authority likely. What Milgram shows is that the cases where people are most likely to defy authority are just those when others with them do so as well (or, better, others lead the way).

But the primary point to emphasize concerns what I shall term the 'causal disconnect' feature of Bauman's account. What supposedly serves to empirically justify the claimed connection between the antecedent conditions and the consequent behavior simply does not do so. It fails to do so because what Bauman cites as evidence for a causal connection simply proves not to

support his position *at all*. The insistence upon conceptual connection lacks any empirical content.

### III

Bauman's account represents an extreme, although oddly influential, explanation of the cultural dope variety, in which actors become morally numbed by structural factors. At the other extreme, situated seemingly at the opposite end of the functional/intentional explanatory spectrum, sits Daniel Jonah Goldhagen's *Hitler's Willing Executioners*, a widely discussed exemplar of a type of volitional or intentional account of the motivations of perpetrators. As might be expected, Goldhagen dismisses the type of situational factors discussed by social psychologists as explanatory. I shall argue that Goldhagen's account falls as well to the causal disconnect problem. In the end, he cannot establish the empirical connection he needs between his antecedent conditions and the outcome to be explained. However, by reviewing Goldhagen's much more sophisticated effort to forge such a connection, and his concomitant efforts to reject as inadequate to the explanatory challenge the experimental results canvassed in Section I, a fuller appreciation of the explanatory power of these results can in fact be achieved.

Goldhagen's doubts regarding the explanatory efficacy of the social psychological data emerge first in his critique of Christopher Browning's book, *Ordinary Men* (1992). Browning's use there of social psychology to explain the actions of perpetrators receives pointed and extended challenge from Goldhagen, a then unknown academic just completing his PhD but who reviewed Browning's book in *The New Republic*.<sup>43</sup> Although Goldhagen generally praises the book, the very title of his review – 'The Evil of Banality' – suggests Goldhagen remains opposed to what he views as Browning's concessions to cultural dope-ism, i.e. to the perpetrators as just responding to the situations in which they find themselves. 'Browning does discuss the voluntarism – which was in fact so frequently exhibited in the battalion – but fails to give it adequate attention.'<sup>44</sup> Indeed, Goldhagen quickly interjects the moralistic rhetoric which later become a trademark feature of his own book.

At one point Browning does reflect on the striking absence from the testimony of principled or ethical reasons for the putative opposition to the killing. Yet he explains this absence away: 'Given the educational level of these reserve policemen, one should not expect a sophisticated articulation of abstract principle'. Abstract principles? One does not have to be a Kantian philosopher to recognize and then to say that the wholesale slaughter of unarmed, unresisting men, women, and children is wrong.<sup>45</sup>

Cultural dope explanations have their limits, and Goldhagen insists that this is one. For one cannot plausibly assume that perpetrators were somehow blind or impervious to the moral consequences of their acts, and so explanations that might apply to assembly-line workers or paper-pushers cannot apply here.

The problem is not just that Browning makes the perpetrators into judgemental dopes of a particularly stunning sort. There is an additional aggravating factor which for Goldhagen, and I think for all who follow him, becomes the test for adequacy of explanation. To the choice problem, Goldhagen adds the 'smile problem'.<sup>46</sup> A condition on the adequacy of explaining perpetrator behavior becomes explaining the enthusiasm many killers brought to their task.<sup>47</sup>

Goldhagen's argument can be put as a disjunctive syllogism: (1) acts are either coerced (including here 'situational' factors such as those Browning favors) or chosen; (2) but not coerced (even in Browning's weak sense, citing evidence of voluntarism); (3) therefore, chosen (voluntaristic, willed – acts for which one bears responsibility). Final step: why chosen? Answer: a culturally pervasive and shared belief in 'eliminationist anti-Semitism'. As Goldhagen emphasizes yet again in a 1998 response to Browning, the problem is that 'Browning generally understates two matters: the degree of brutality of these men . . . and their general voluntarism in killing'.<sup>48</sup> The brutality, it is absolutely crucial to note, is the reason for insisting on the voluntarism of the action. 'A schematization of the dominant beliefs in Germany . . . illustrates two things: the tight connection between Germans' prior belief and their actions – in other words, that belief governed action – and the comparative explanatory power of the specific content of German anti-Semitism for the Germans' treatment of Jews.'<sup>49</sup> The voluntarism is what needs explaining; eliminationist anti-Semitism is what explains.

What Goldhagen repeatedly strives to show, and what drives much of the undeniably heated tone of his book, is that the behaviors involved far exceed anything that can be plausibly ascribed to a Browningsque situational account. Brutality and pleasure that transcend any purpose (and, in the case of the death marches, transcend direct orders from Himmler to desist) speak to agency – Germans chose to act this way. 'Germans could say "no" to mass murder. They chose to say "yes".'<sup>50</sup> Indeed, the behavior of the killers cannot be accounted for by any other explanatory model currently on the table. The *differential* treatment of Jews must be explained, and Goldhagen claims that only his model explains it.<sup>51</sup>

Goldhagen does point to data that is not only left unexplained by others, but that, on the face of it, constitutes powerful evidence for saying that the actions represent clear choices, especially in light of the evidence for non-coercion. In this context, i.e. as an answer to the 'smile problem', Goldhagen

maintains that eliminationist anti-Semitism is the 'motivational source' which explains German behavior.<sup>52</sup>

My suggestion is to revisit the structure of the argument by which Goldhagen leads one to his final step. For he rejects acquiescence – conformity to the situation – as an inadequate answer to the smile problem. But is it?

Although Clifford Geertz's name does not appear in the index of *Hitler's Willing Executioners*, and despite Goldhagen's constant fuss regarding the methodological apparatus of his study, his fundamental and basic move introduces an 'anthropological moment'.<sup>53</sup> For his argument asserts a 'tight connection' between beliefs and actions, a connection that can be made evident only through a 'thick description' of German culture in the Second World War years. Moreover, use of thick description abets seeing people as agents, as acting in accord with preferences whose rationality was sanctified by the society in which they lived.

The fundamental mistake of historians prior to Goldhagen has been to treat the pre-1945 Germans as familiars. Goldhagen aims to show just how much these Germans are the Other, people whose motivational springs can only be obscured until Goldhagen provides the needed hermeneutical illumination. 'The unearthing of the perpetrators' lives, the presentation of a "thick", rather than the customary paper-thin, description of their actions, as important and necessary as it is for its own sake, lays the foundation for the main task of this book's consideration of them, namely to explain their actions.'<sup>54</sup> It is in this anthropological moment that Goldhagen ties together the history of German anti-Semitism and the willing executioners of the Nazi era.<sup>55</sup> At the core of Goldhagen's argument thus lies a shared belief in eliminationist anti-Semitism as a necessary condition for explaining perpetrator behavior.

Germans could be brutal or not. They were brutal. Therefore, the behavior expresses a preference.<sup>56</sup> His 'thick description' of German attitudes at this time establishes the asserted 'tight connection' between beliefs and actions.<sup>57</sup> 'This study of the Holocaust and its perpetrators assigns to their beliefs paramount importance. It reverses the Marxian dictum, in holding that consciousness determined being.'<sup>58</sup> In any case, the point to emphasize here is that, on Goldhagen's account, the beliefs were the '*necessary enabling condition*';<sup>59</sup> the situation does not cause the actions, but the prior disposition of people to act in a particular way does.

In his careful and detailed analysis of Goldhagen's methodology, A. D. Moses insightfully links Goldhagen's ethnographic ambitions to a particularistic or ideographic 'deep structure', one that claims to do justice to the peculiarities of the cognitive model of Germans of that time. As Moses observes, Goldhagen the anthropologist 'is able to link the individual to the collective by grounding individual preferences in the national culture that condition the individual'.<sup>60</sup> In particular, Moses provides good hints of the conceptual structure underlying Goldhagen's thesis, i.e. just how the tight fit

on which Goldhagen insists between beliefs and actions becomes established in Goldhagen's ethnographic practice.

By emphasizing the cruelty of Germans towards Jews, Goldhagen answers two important psychological questions regarding the 'phenomenology' of the murders. The first is, of course, just the straightforward motivational question. But the second links to the all-important smile problem, which Goldhagen attacks by forcing his readers to consider the dissonance murderers presumably had to overcome between their presumed 'perception' that their victims included those who posed no threat to the German war effort whatsoever, e.g. young children and the elderly. Precisely here, his emphasis on the 'cognitive model' supposedly does work nothing else could do, namely to explain how *all* Jews came to be assimilated to an abstract category which the concrete individuals simply should not 'appear' to fit.

Browning is undoubtedly right that social psychological pressures eased the Germans' transformation into mass murderers. And he is right that such pressures are powerful. But such pressures cannot begin to account for the Germans' behavior in all its facets. . . . This suggests that, their hesitations and initial disgust notwithstanding, they were believers in the justice of the murder of the Jews.

. . . The men of Reserve Police Battalion 101 were not ordinary 'men', but ordinary members of an extraordinary political culture, the culture of Nazi Germany, which was possessed of a hallucinatory, lethal view of the Jews. The view was the mainspring of what was, in essence, voluntary barbarism.<sup>61</sup>

The appeal to preferences embedded in the cognitive model solves both the motivational and the dissonance problems – why Germans chose to kill, and why they did so with enthusiasm whatever the actual physical situation of their victims happened to be.

But are Goldhagen's Germans agents, i.e. is the observed behavior the product of choices in some relevant sense of the term? For thick description is not identical to demonstrating agency. Indeed, such accounts may subvert agency by showing inconceivability of alternatives.<sup>62</sup> A truism of philosophical ethics found in Kant notes that animals act according to preferences. But this hardly means they make choices. A preference, in the form of an instinct, may overpower all efforts at control.<sup>63</sup> More generally, a preference may be such as to obscure options.<sup>64</sup>

What Goldhagen does not notice, it would seem, is that this 'tight connection' limits in the most radical way the choices that Germans could conceivably make. Goldhagen disparages Browning and others who would ascribe primacy to situational variables with the remark that one does not have to be a Kantian philosopher to see that the murder of innocents is wrong. Yet Kant assumes, on behalf of 'common-sense' morality, that

individuals do, in fact, possess the capacity to see what is really right. It is open to anyone, in principle, to use reason to learn what one's duty actually is in a given situation. Yet Goldhagen's own remarks on 'cognitive models' absolutely preclude just this sort of Kantian insight being available to the Germans he considers. They could not – if his remarks on cognitive models are in fact correct – even possibly perceive or comprehend the perspective from which their acts could be considered morally wrong.

This shows, in turn, where the flaw lies in the disjunctive syllogism on which Goldhagen relies. The 'coercion or choice' model lacks exactly that option on which social psychologists in the Asch paradigm rely, what I will call 'release conditions'. The term means to capture what Zimbardo demonstrates in his experiments of the late 1960s, which ranged from exploring the relation between conditions such as deindividuation and harm and, e.g. vandalism or Mardi Gras. That is, Goldhagen intends the notion of willing to connote choice. But his own account makes that reading unlikely. Yet 'willing' can also suggest 'compliant', even an enthusiastic compliance just because the opportunity arises. A person may indulge, in this respect, in sexual desires, overeating, or even rioting without having any prior thoughts or intentions of doing so. In one respect, such actions can be termed 'choices', but such choices are conditioned by the Asch paradigm. That is, one can predict the likelihood of such actions occurring in the situations suitably specified without viewing the actions as coerced or without pleasure.

Bauer offers a strangely contradictory 'defense' of Goldhagen's views that at least has the merit of making apparent the very lack of 'tight connection' upon which Goldhagen insists. On the one hand, Bauer applauds Goldhagen for emphasizing as he does the role of anti-Semitism in the popular ideology promulgated by the Nazis.<sup>65</sup> Indeed, Bauer goes on to say, if as Goldhagen insists the norm of eliminationist anti-Semitism pervaded German culture, then this would fully explain why the Holocaust happened and when and where it did.

Critics have argued that Goldhagen does not explain how an anti-Semitic norm translated itself into the actual murder. Here again I have to come to the defense of Goldhagen: surely if there is a norm in society that requires the elimination of a group of people, then if the structure of society provides a rationale for the killing, it will be done. The addition of a structural factor . . . to a basic motivation does provide a sufficient answer.<sup>66</sup>

But having confirmed the conditional on which Goldhagen insists, Bauer then argues forcefully for the unequivocal falsity of the antecedent condition. 'The question that one has to ask of Goldhagen is to what extent there indeed existed an exterminationist anti-Semitic norm in German society from the

mid-nineteenth century, if not from earlier, as he asserts. Here Goldhagen stumbles badly.<sup>67</sup> So, Bauer in fact adds his voice to the chorus of those claiming that Goldhagen mistakes both the substance of the cognitive model and its pervasiveness.

But one can raise the question as well whether Goldhagen's motivational hypothesis is necessary to account for how ordinary Germans presumably had to overcome the dissonance between percept and concept when it comes to killing Jews.<sup>68</sup> For the counterfactual assertion on which Goldhagen relies emphasizes just this point, i.e. that appearances to the contrary, no Jew was to be included within the realm of those one need care about.

Not only was German anti-Semitism in this historical instance a sufficient cause, but it was also a necessary cause for such broad German participation in the persecution and mass slaughter of Jews, *and* for Germans to have treated Jews in all the heartless, harsh, and cruel ways that they did. Had ordinary Germans not shared their leadership's eliminationist ideals, then they would have reacted to the ever-intensifying assault on their Jewish countrymen and brethren with at least as much opposition and non-cooperation as they did to their government's attacks on Christianity and to the so-called Euthanasia program. . . . Had the Nazis been faced with a German populace who saw Jews as ordinary human beings, and German Jews as their brothers and sisters, then it is hard to imagine that the Nazis would have proceeded, or would have been able to proceed, with the extermination of the Jews.<sup>69</sup>

Logically, arguing that p is necessary for q – if q then p – requires that, in the absence of p, q does not obtain. The antecedent assertion here concerns the persecution of the Jews, the consequent (the alleged necessary condition for q) asserts the pervasive presence of eliminationist anti-Semitism in the German cognitive model. The second sentence of the above quote asserts p as necessary: if Jews had been viewed as objects of moral concern, their persecution would have been halted or never allowed to be carried to such an extreme, just as the outcry resulting from public revelations of Hitler's euthanasia program resulted in the suspension of it.

But even Goldhagen has his doubts that his appeal to the cognitive model, however 'thick', does the explanatory work which he needs it to do. For, on the one hand, he desperately needs the beliefs to bridge his hypothesized dissonance between concept, percepts, and acts, i.e. to link the otherwise seemingly inexplicable tensions between the eliminationist stereotypes, the 'perceived reality' presented by the helpless and hapless victims, and the bestial cruelty of the acts visited on them. 'Although the Germans' brutality remains somewhat unfathomable, German antisemitism helps explain their immense cruelty towards Jews that was almost always voluntaristic.'<sup>70</sup> In a

footnote, Goldhagen proceeds to elaborate on his sense of ‘somewhat unfathomable’:

As much as the Germans’ antisemitism was the basis of their profound hatred of the Jews and the psychological impulse to make them suffer, it obviously does not explain people’s capacity for cruelty in the first place or the gratification many derive from it. The Germans’ cruelty towards the Jews was so immense that it remains hard to fathom.<sup>71</sup>

But in the context of Goldhagen’s argument, this stunning admission effectively undercuts his fundamental claim, namely the necessity for purposes of explanation to posit his favored account of the prevailing cognitive model. For, he concedes in the footnote, these beliefs do *not* explain precisely what they were posited for purposes of explaining – how individual perpetrators overcome the presumed dissonance between perceived concrete individuals and ideologically or culturally inculcated stereotyping.

On the other hand, so caught is Goldhagen in a logical net of his own construction – having created the smile or dissonance problem and rejected all other efforts to solve it – that a scant two pages (and five footnotes) later, his doubts disappear. He once again insists that his necessary condition does survive empirical test.

These killing institutions were chosen for study precisely because they, in different ways, should have put to the severest test the notion that racial eliminationist antisemitism motivated the perpetrators to kill Jews and that this antisemitism was powerful enough to override other considerations that should have tempered the exterminationist drive.<sup>72</sup>

I will return to the question of what sorts of considerations ‘should have tempered’ the slaughter. For now, given that Goldhagen cannot be asserting ‘necessary’ as a conceptual connection, the charitable reading is to take him as asserting, in effect, something like a psychological law, or a statement that has law-like properties. Only on such a reading does it make sense to term one state of affairs as necessary for another as well as attempting to marshal empirical evidence. No law – no universal generalization – can be proven to be a law empirically. I take Goldhagen to be using ‘severest test’ in a Popperian/falsificationist spirit. He looks to different institutions of killing to try to find a counter-example to his claim. Finding no counter-example in the cases where a counter-example most likely might be found, and finding no other explanation available to account for how to resolve the dissonance, he declares his account logically vindicated.

Or is it? For my purposes, the question which Bauer takes as constituting the real unsolved mystery – conformity or consensus – is precisely the one for which social psychologists provide an answer.<sup>73</sup> If we insist on posing the question as motivational, then there appears to be only a forced choice

between seeing the tyranny of culture or the tyranny of circumstance as swaying people to act. But suppose we assume that dissonance exists only from the perspective of selected *observers*. That is, any need to provide a motivational explanation simply *assumes* the existence of that which the motivation then purports to account for, namely the special need to link the treatment individuals receive and some prior set of beliefs on the part of perpetrators. *But it is precisely this assumption that the social psychological experiments discussed earlier call into question.* One need not posit any reason to explain the compliance behavior of perpetrators. Rather, it suffices to say that this is just what people do when placed in certain sorts of circumstances.

Following the Asch paradigm, people simply comply. They comply when the physical reality bears no resemblance to judgements they are asked to give, indeed, when the perceptual evidence strongly invalidates judgements of acquiescing peers. People comply when asked to inflict gratuitous harm on others; they comply when arbitrarily assigned roles that lead others to misery and unhappiness. One may well wonder why, but that is a separate question.

Goldhagen systematically misunderstands or misrepresents what follows from Milgram's work and those social psychological results related to it. In particular, he takes it that Milgram's work cannot explain the smile problem.<sup>74</sup> For, Goldhagen claims,

Milgram's own experiments undermine the notion that his findings are relevant to an explanation of the perpetrators' action – though Milgram does not draw this conclusion. By varying the conditions of his experiment, he discovered that the more the people who administered the shocks confronted the apparent pain of the person being shocked, the more frequently they were willing to defy the authority of the . . . experimenter, so that fully 70 percent refused to administer shocks when they themselves had to place the victim's hand on the shock plate.<sup>75</sup>

That is, Goldhagen reads the experimental results here as indicating that people disobey authority when asked to administer pain in a 'hands on' way.

Keep in mind that Milgram's 'victim' throughout most variations of this experiment is *not* a Zimbardoian deindividuated cipher but a 47-year-old accountant, 'trained for the role; he was of Irish-American descent and most observers found him mild-mannered and likable'.<sup>76</sup> More importantly, for the variation Milgram discusses on the pages Goldhagen cites, even when the 'teacher' had to force the victim's hand onto a supposed shock plate, 30% complied fully. This means they kept the victim's hand on the plate through the full range of charges – to 450 volts. Tracing Milgram's reported numbers back to the 285-volt level (level 19 of 30 shock levels) – a point at which, on the experiment's construction, the victim's 'response can only be described as

an agonized scream<sup>77</sup> – one finds a 42.5% compliance level. There exists a 50% compliance up to the 210-volt level (level 14), well past the point when the victim cries out for release. (Milgram's script has the victim demanding to be released at the 150-volt level [level 10].) Thus while Goldhagen takes this experimental variation to show the *irrelevance* of Milgram's result, I fail to see how this 'undermines' the bearing of Milgram's work to explanations of perpetrator behavior at all.

Let me hedge the foregoing charge of 'misrepresentation' against Goldhagen as follows. Goldhagen's use of the notions of necessary and sufficient conditions indicates that he takes himself to be formulating, as I discussed above, a law-like relation between beliefs and acts. That is, he needs a connection with virtually the force of a law of nature in order to overcome the presumed dissonance and so establish the beliefs as necessary to explaining behavior. In consequence, Goldhagen would scorn any apparent 'explanation' of the brutality which fails by this standard, i.e. fails to be appropriately law-like. Given an opt-out rate of 70% at the 450-volt level for the experimental variation in question, no 'Milgram law' appears to exist which does the job Goldhagen insists needs doing. But if one, in the spirit of Browning, merely asks what percentage of people simply (for whatever reason) choose to go along in specific situations, the Asch paradigm looms into view as a perfectly adequate and appropriate explanation. Given that one could expect 30–40% of people to fully comply (for all intents and purposes) *for no particular reason*, this would give one all the perpetrators one needs to carry out exterminationist policies. It is precisely because Goldhagen presumes to characterize all Germans in a particular way that he needs the law-like connection. But given a fair measure of human indifference and a healthy percentage of mindless compliance even to situations calling for despicable behavior, one has as much of a solution as is needed to the choice problem.

But what then of the smile problem? Here Zimbardo's work comes to the fore. One might ask why, as Milgram reports, his 'teachers' experience tension, etc., whereas Zimbardo's 'jailers' quickly come to relish and embellish their arbitrarily assigned role. Zimbardo, unlike Milgram, creates a 'total institution'.<sup>78</sup> The wartime conditions in which groups – Order Police, *Einsatzgruppen* – find themselves, the isolation of the death camps, the institutions from which the camps draw their personnel, and arguably perhaps even Germany's wartime society fit well enough the model of a total institution. Under these circumstances, Zimbardo provides the requisite experimental demonstration. People engage in their roles in such a way that the gratuitous violence inflicted upon those over whom they have power becomes predictable.

Goldhagen complains that a special problem attends with regards to 'ordinary Germans' precisely because people of other nationalities acted

differently. The logical point he makes with these examples is that if circumstance were the primary or chief explanatory factor of the observed behavior, then other people would have acted as the Germans did in those circumstances. But others did not, so some differentiating factor must be involved. '[T]he crucial analytical issue is not to explain why some others acted as Germans did, but to explain why there is variance in people's actions, namely why different groups acted differently toward the same victims. This establishes that the killer's conception and the deed matters, that their willingness to kill matters.'<sup>79</sup> Hence, his appeal to the special cognitive model at work.

But Goldhagen simply assumes what in fact he needs to prove, namely that the variance must be motivational and not situational. That is, explaining why the Italians or the Danes or the Bulgarians did not buckle under German pressure is never explored in terms of possible variations of the situations that existed, e.g. in how the leadership behaved, etc. Given a particularly rigid reading of the Milgram experiments and his concomitant search for a law-like relation between beliefs and acts, Goldhagen just assumes that if others are not obedient, this can only be explained by appeal to a variation in cognitive models.

Thus, what is more *analytically significant* than finding some other group of ordinary people . . . who helped the Germans deport and kill Jews, is to find those who did not or even would not have. The refusal or unwillingness of others to do so demonstrates that the Germans were not ordinary *men*, but that there was something particular about them, which is what must be investigated and specified.<sup>80</sup>

But the logical point just is that this variation in national behaviors does not have the analytical cachet for purposes of argument which Goldhagen consistently and insistently imputes to it. For unless he makes the rather untenable assumption that, in all other *relevant* respects, the situations in each place where persecution fails to occur are like those in which people choose to acquiesce to or participate in various forms of persecution, he has not discredited the situationalist hypothesis.

Obviously, the counter-claim to Goldhagen need not be that anti-Semitism had *nothing* to do with exterminationist policies. The point, rather, is that no explanatory mileage is to be had by appeal to shared cognitive models. Others have shown why Goldhagen cannot make the case for sharing. My claim here is that Goldhagen cannot sustain his claim that adversion to a cognitive model is necessary for purposes of explanation. This argument rests on an assumption that some special motivation must be invoked, some special set of overriding preferences and beliefs, to compensate for the perceived reality of the old, the helpless, the women and children who constituted many of the victims of exterminationist policies. This, in turn, presumes that situationalist hypotheses cannot account for the brutality and that appeals to situations

deny voluntarism. But both assumptions are false. People, free will or no, just as a matter of fact allow themselves to be defined by roles and situations in which they by happenstance or choice find themselves. Situationalism is, in this regard, in no way morally exculpatory. Situationalism in no way shows that people could not have done otherwise. But experiments do show the hefty percentages of those whose behavior becomes defined by situations.

It is in this spirit that one might read testimony reported by Browning:

A few policemen made the attempt to confront the question of choice but failed to find the words. It was a different time and place, as if they had been on another political planet, and the political values and vocabulary of the 1960s were useless in explaining the situation in which they had found themselves in 1942. Quite atypical in describing his state of mind that morning of July 13 was a policeman who admitted to killing as many as twenty Jews before quitting. 'I thought I could master the situation and that without me the Jews were not going to escape their fate anyway. . . . Truthfully I must say that at the time we didn't reflect about it at all. Only years later did any of us become truly conscious of what had happened then. . . . Only later did it first occur to me that had not been right.'<sup>81</sup>

Goldhagen takes such remarks as 'proof' of an unexpressed but nonetheless overwhelmingly powerful force of an imputed eliminationist cognitive model. I suggest taking the policeman's testimony at face value. He just did not think that much about what he was doing, and only much later when challenged to 'justify' his actions does some felt dissonance result.

Goldhagen assumes something like a stable, indeed a relatively well-defined notion of a cognitive model. It must make sense, on his account, to talk of people having the 'same' cognitive model, of the model having if not identity over time, then at least enough resemblances that one can reasonably speak of people who have similar or related cognitive models.<sup>82</sup> If this does not make sense, then Goldhagen's project cannot get off the ground, i.e. nothing of the needed 'cognitive' kinds exists that individuals instantiate, and if this model cannot be instantiated and replicated in and across individuals, the cognitive factors cannot possibly do the explanatory work for the purpose of which Goldhagen hypothesizes and invokes them. In short, what sense can one make of appeals to a 'shared' cognitive model?<sup>83</sup>

In his fascinating article which experimentally explores factors making for individuation and deindividuation, Zimbardo raises the following question: 'What keeps you from becoming someone else, or someone else from becoming you?'<sup>84</sup> He made this remark prior to conducting his now famous prison experiments. The prison experiments provide one answer to the first question Zimbardo raises – what keeps each person from becoming someone else? The answer at first shocks, for it turns out that the primary source of

personal stability is not one's history, or one's professed values, but rather the stability of circumstances in which one finds oneself. Vary the circumstances, the individual's behavior will change.

Situation power is most salient in novel settings in which the participants call on previous guidelines for their new behavior and have no historical references to rely on and in which their habitual ways of behaving and coping are not reinforced. Under such circumstances, personality variables have little predictive utility because they depend on estimations of future actions based on characteristic past reactions in certain situations – but rarely in the kind of situation currently being encountered. . . .

. . . Private attitudes, values, and beliefs are likely to be modified to bring them in line with the role enactment, as shown by many experiments in dissonance theory.<sup>85</sup>

Goldhagen questions whether situations can elicit the types of behavior Nazis exhibited. Yet, as Zimbardo's review of many results indicates, assaultive and abusive behavior turns out to be the norm for such experimentally contrived situations, with the relevant behaviors manifesting themselves within a day of people assuming their arbitrarily assigned roles. Zimbardo alludes favorably, in this regard, to early work by Lifton on brainwashing and personality change. In that context, Lifton notes, 'Over decades of observation, I have come to see that the older version of personal identity, at least insofar as it suggests inner stability and sameness, was derived from a vision of a traditional culture in which relationships to symbols and institutions are still relatively intact – hardly the case in the last years of the twentieth century.'<sup>86</sup> People do not lend stability to situations, but situations to people. In this regard, both stability and change flow from situations for most people.

#### IV

The conclusion from the experimental data cannot be avoided. Extraordinary brutality does not require some special explanation.

A myopic focus on the proposed psychopathology of perpetrators, or on their alleged extraordinary personalities, tells us more about our own personal dreams of how we wish the world to work than it does about the reality of perpetrator behavior. In that role, such explanations satisfy an important emotional demand of distancing us from them. The truth seems to be, though, that the most outstanding common characteristic of perpetrators of extraordinary evil is their normality, not their abnormality.<sup>87</sup>

The issues that Bauer raises regarding the quick formation of a consensus regarding the brutalization and mistreatment of the Jews, the extreme and gratuitous cruelty to which Goldhagen points, the enjoyment of the killing activities that Goldhagen and Browning both note as one of the most troubling features of perpetrator behavior, *all* of these factors find consistent manifestation and validation as consequences of situations in the experimental work that flows from the Lewin/Asch paradigm.<sup>88</sup>

On my view, naturalism in epistemology can sometimes help us the better to understand limits encountered in empirical inquiry. The apparent tension between explanation and understanding in accounting for perpetrator behavior, between, that is, describing structural factors surrounding the evolution of the systems of mass murder and ascribing motivations to the killers, proves to be only apparent. Ironically, seemingly radical breaks in 'ordinary' behavior yield to 'shallow' or 'thin' explanations. No need exists for positing 'deeper' reasons. The irony has particular bearing for the case at hand, since it is those engaged in the process of trying to account for perpetrator behavior such as Goldhagen who betray an unwholesome dependence on abstractions and concepts.<sup>89</sup>

One final reason for favoring a divide between explanation and understanding, one I alluded to at the outset of this article and one that Goldhagen insistently invokes, appeals to what I termed the autonomy-friendly aspects of understanding. That is, insofar as explanations make actions predictable, this suggests determinant causes; a person could not have done otherwise. Configured as choices, however, actions have alternatives open to an individual.

Does the Asch paradigm, and so my use of it, actually challenge the place of autonomy in the moral evaluation of action? I approach an answer to this question, and so the final reason I consider for recognizing a principled divide between explanation and understanding, by examining the notion of moral luck. In ways that create difficulties for ordinary notions of moral evaluation, the notion of moral luck looks at how causal/explanatory factors exist in tension with moral/evaluative ones.<sup>90</sup> Moral luck involves considerations which at first blush ought to be irrelevant to moral evaluation but which do influence or determine the evaluation of acts. For example, you know the car's brakes need work, but they're serviceable, you're busy, and you defer repairs. But a child jumps out from behind a parked car as you drive by. Your worn brakes cannot stop the car quickly enough. As a result, the child dies.<sup>91</sup> Under a different scenario – the 'no child' one – nothing bad happens, no such event for ever morally clouds and complicates your life. A factor over which you had no control determines the moral evaluation of you. Such is moral luck.

One aspect of the problem posed by the notion of moral luck Thomas Nagel puts as follows. 'What we do is also limited by the opportunities and

choices with which we are faced, and these are largely determined by factors beyond our control. Someone who was an officer in a concentration camp might have led a quiet and harmless life if the Nazis had never come to power in Germany.<sup>92</sup> Nagel goes on to speculate that perhaps the citizens of Nazi Germany did no more than fail a test of civic courage most peoples would fail. Indeed, Nagel surely is right in thinking this.<sup>93</sup> But most of us, fortunately, do not find ourselves in such situations.

Yet, Nagel goes on to worry, considerations of luck work against notions of responsibility and agency. 'Once we see an aspect of what we or someone else does as something that happens, we lose our grip on the idea that it has been done and that we can judge the doer and not just the happening.'<sup>94</sup> But this relies upon a distinction between doings and happenings in which what 'happens' must be in some morally relevant sense sharply distinguishable from what one does – just, so to speak, a matter of 'luck'. But only by advertising to a social dope-ism induced by structural or cognitive factors does Nagel's problem regarding moral luck appear pervasive or a threat to ordinary notions of accountability. Put another way, Nagel's example does not seem to acknowledge the modal difference between predictability and determination. The latter notion carries the suggestion of necessity; the former involves no such assumption. In this regard, the experimental work points to a way to prise apart conditions inducing conformity and the causal determination of behavior. While it may be the case that people conform under certain conditions, this does not entail that they lack autonomy – the ability to do otherwise even in those situations. Negligence, indifference and conformity may be explanatory without thereby being either exculpatory or determinative.

Seen aright, studies of one of the darkest episodes of how humans treat their own – the Nazi programs of mass murder directed against selected populations under their control – provide insight into how to avoid repetition of such events. But, again somewhat ironically, evidence suggests that probably any highly effective means of preventing morally abhorrent acts will involve not relying on appeals to moral autonomy.<sup>95</sup> Our salvation as well might lie in our manipulability.

## NOTES

I would like to thank Nigel Pleasants, Piers Rawling, Stephen Turner, Eleonore Stump, and Eric Wiland for helping me clarify and improve the topics discussed in this essay. Credit all confusion that remains just to me.

- 1 The issues briefly noted here receive more detailed elaboration in essays in Turner and Roth, 2003.
- 2 'Yet it [the Nazi extermination of the Jews] seems impossible to situate in its

historical place. What, for instance, is the significance for the writer of history of Chelmno, Belzec, Sobibór, and Treblinka, sites whose sole function was the immediate extermination of the Jews sent there? . . . How can such events be integrated into the interpretation of our epoch when they influenced neither the course of the war nor any major trend in postwar history? . . . Historical inquiry into the mechanisms of the “Final Solution” is the very basis of our knowledge and undoubtedly remains a primary task. But, ultimately, the “why” overshadows all other concerns’ (S. Friedländer, 2001: 278). See also S. Friedländer, 1994: 259–60. Remarks in a similarly apocalyptic vein can be found in the opening paragraph of Rüsen, 2001: 252. I find special poignancy in Henry Friedlander’s conclusion to his review of the Nazi T4 euthanasia program which killed by various means an estimated 70,000 Aryans deemed unfit to live. ‘When all is said and done, I am still unable to fathom why seemingly normal men and women were able to commit such extraordinary crimes. Neither ideology nor self-interest is a satisfactory explanation for such behavior. Attempts to replicate their actions in the laboratory must fail. . . . The T4 killers confronted real human beings as victims and saw their agony, the blood and gore of the killing process. . . . [T]he Nazi killers, even if they lacked all imagination, could not avoid knowing what they were doing. They understood the consequences of their deeds’ (H. Friedlander, 1998: 249). See Bauer, 2001, especially ch. 2, ‘Is the Holocaust Explicable?’ for a review of ‘inexplicability’ views of the Holocaust.

- 3 S. Friedländer, 2001: 280.
- 4 This tension is markedly present in de Mildt’s work. De Mildt can do little more than enumerate and discuss individual cases. No overall explanation or account emerges from his otherwise interesting work.
- 5 As Alford perceptively remarks, ‘Social scientists generally assume that large-scale events have many causes operating at many levels, that no single cause is likely to constitute an adequate explanation. . . . This principle exerts little influence on Holocaust studies. In no other field is there more isolation of paradigms, more insistence that explanations are not additive but exclusionary. Goldhagen is extreme in this regard, but not unusual’ (Alford, 1997: 722).
- 6 One answer to the choice problem finds expression in, for example, Arendt’s famous ‘banality of evil’ remark – the Holocaust happened although no one chose it. See Braun, 1994. ‘The “banality of evil” does not answer our question about the substance of the human soul but shows us the potential of “thoughtless” acts. It shows what humans are *capable of*, not what humans are *like*’ (ibid.: 185). I shall be arguing that, unfortunately, the social psychology that grew up around Arendt’s provocations shows us that this is just what we are like. A being whose essence is to have no essence, as Sartre remarks, proves to be a less than edifying one.
- 7 See Roth (2003a), ‘Beyond Understanding’. For a good review of ‘choice’ hypotheses which historians typically consider (and largely reject) see, for example, Henry Friedlander, 1998: 245–6. See also Goldhagen’s helpful list (1997: 11–16). In taking, as I do below, Bauman and Goldhagen as extreme points on the scale of accounts of the Holocaust, as personifying the explanation–understanding divide, I am not alone. See Alford, 1997: 724.
- 8 Bauman puts it this way. ‘The most shattering of lessons deriving from the analysis

of the “twisted road to Auschwitz” is that . . . *the choice of physical extermination as the right means to the task of Entfernung was a product of routine bureaucratic procedures: means-end calculus, budget balancing, universal rule application. . . . The “Final Solution” did not clash at any stage with the rational pursuit of efficient, optimal goal-implementation. On the contrary, it arose out of a genuinely rational concern, and it was generated by bureaucracy true to its form and purpose. . . . The Holocaust, however, was clearly unthinkable without such bureaucracy. . . . It was a legitimate resident in the house of modernity; indeed, one who would not be at home in any other house’* (Bauman, 1989: 17; emphases all in the original).

- 9 To anticipate somewhat, I ultimately challenge the utility of trying to distinguish sharply between situational and dispositional factors. The important point, I contend, involves knowing how to manipulate situations in a way that leads to a desired behavioral outcome.
- 10 Related to material I discuss below is the classic work on cognitive dissonance, especially as it relates to prior categorizations of behavior. See, for example, Rosenhan (1973).
- 11 Although they themselves coin the term ‘the Asch paradigm’, prior discussion by Ross and Nisbett suggests that this could more justifiably be termed the ‘Lewinian paradigm’. See especially their discussion pp. 8–11.
- 12 The classic Asch experiment goes as follows. A group of ‘subjects’ was asked to match test lines – which varied in half-inch intervals from 0.5 inch to 2 inches – with a standard line – which was in fact 1.5 inches long. The last person in the group of those asked to judge was the ‘naïve’ subject; the rest were all complicit in the experimental situation. All the other judges selected the 0.5-inch line as the match for the standard 1.5-inch line. The naïve subject, the last in line, then had to pick. The problem here involves conflicting pressures, ‘either to conform, and thereby deny the evidence of their sense, or else remain independent in the face of a unanimous, seemingly confident majority’ (Ross and Nisbett, 1991: 31). Although the numbers varied on different occasions when the experiment was performed, ‘anywhere from 50 percent to 80 percent of the subjects . . . yielded to the erroneous majority at least once, and overall, conformity occurred on over a third of all critical trials’ (ibid.: 31). Nobody believes that the naïve subjects suddenly saw an 0.5-inch line as equal to a line 1.5 inches long (especially when another 1.5-inch line was ‘passed over’ in favor of the shorter line). As Ross and Nisbett remark, ‘all [psychologists] are agreed that Asch’s research represents one of the most stunning demonstrations we have of the remarkable power of situations to elicit behavior that most of us are sure we ourselves would never resort to – public conformity to the views expressed by others even when we privately hold utterly different views’ (ibid.: 34–5). See ibid.: 30–5 regarding ‘the Asch paradigm’.
- 13 Milgram, 1974: 115.
- 14 ibid.: 114.
- 15 ibid.: 4.
- 16 ibid.
- 17 See Blass, 2000 for a review of post-Milgram national and international results.
- 18 Zimbardo, 1970: 251.

- 19 *ibid.*: 296. See Zimbardo's own summary of the results in Zimbardo, 1995: 127–8. Kelman and Hamilton, 1989 also note the significance of deindividuation for the psychological processes that they suggest play a significant role in allowing for mass murders. See, for example, 16–17.
- 20 Haney *et al.*, 1973: 89.
- 21 Browning, 1992, especially ch. 18.
- 22 *ibid.*: 168. Writing a reply to his critics a few years later, Browning remains committed to the situational analysis he offered in his 1992 work: 'the immediate situational factors to which I gave considerable attention in the conclusion of my book must be given even greater weight. The preponderance of evidence suggests that in trying to understand the vast majority of the perpetrators, we are dealing with . . . "ordinary men"' (Browning, 1998a: 263). See also Browning, 1998b: 216–20.
- 23 Bauer, 2001: 105.
- 24 *ibid.* See generally his discussion in ch. 5.
- 25 See McBroom, 2001 for a defense of this view as well.
- 26 Hilberg, 1985: 1044. As discussed below, Bauman develops a flat-footed and empirically untenable version of the Hilberg/Arendt thesis, one that I do not find in Hilberg or Arendt. I will not in this paper concern myself, however, with the exegetical question of how to unpack Arendt's now famous remark on the 'banality of evil'.
- 27 Hilberg and Arendt strike me as simply reporting on the impossible situation of most Eastern European Jews trapped by Nazi conquests. I do not see either Hilberg or Arendt as judging or implicating those unfortunates as agents of their own destruction. Both Hilberg and Arendt, rather, are at pains to indicate the geographically and politically hopeless circumstances in which these Jews found themselves.
- 28 Sabini and Silver, 1980: 331. For many additional comments in this vein, see Klee *et al.*, 1988.
- 29 Arendt, 1963: 287–8. See also 276.
- 30 *ibid.*: 289.
- 31 *ibid.*: 101; original emphasis.
- 32 Bauman, 1989: 106.
- 33 *ibid.*: 25.
- 34 *ibid.*: 26.
- 35 *ibid.* The link here for Arendt exists, I suggest, at the purely theoretical level. Roughly, given a Heideggerian-influenced view of consciousness and thought, making people part of a system which emphasizes bureaucratic form above any particular content results in just the type of 'thoughtless' individual she perceives Eichmann to be.
- 36 *ibid.*: 98. For a more balanced and nuanced view of the role played by the German bureaucracy, see Mommsen, 1998. I do not read Hilberg (or Arendt) as endorsing or legitimizing Bauman's empirically untenable and conceptually implausible reading of his (Hilberg's) remarks. Hilberg's own more complex view finds expression in, for example, Hilberg, 1993, especially essay 5, 'Zealots, Vulgarians, and Bearers of Burdens'. Eichmann and others knew full well, by virtue of their visits to sites, what the physical processes of destruction involved. See, for example, Rhodes, 2002: 246f. for Eichmann's description of a massacre he

- witnessed of Jews of the Minsk ghetto in 1942. In general, Bauman's imputation of a distinctive causal role to bureaucratization in the process of moral anesthetization misidentifies a site of certain symptoms – bureaucratic obedience or conformity – as their unique cause.
- 37 Bauman, 1989: 154.
- 38 *ibid.*: 155, quoting Milgram.
- 39 *ibid.*
- 40 Bauman's citation of Sabini and Silver (Bauman, 1989: 157–8) as supporting his analysis also turns out to be another empirically empty gesture. For Sabini and Silver at least have the wit to realize that Milgram's experiment leaves *unexplained* just why individuals defer to authority to the extent that they do. 'As for the behavior of Milgram's subjects, while it is correct to point out that they continued to obey because they *felt* that they were not responsible even though they were responsible, we now are obligated to explain how they could feel not responsible when they in fact were' (Sabini and Silver, 1980: 335). Moreover, and conveniently for Bauman, they answer this explanatory puzzle by simply insisting that Milgram's subjects 'confused' issues of technical and moral responsibility. 'Obedient subjects in the Milgram experiment who felt reassured by the experimenter's acceptance of responsibility apparently succumbed to a confusion between these two sorts of responsibility' (*ibid.*: 336). But this simply represents an assumption on their part, and they claim only conceptual and not empirical support for the imputed 'confusion'.
- 41 Bauman, 1989: 165. Bauman repeats, with italics, this point a page later, as if the repetition and added emphasis helps make the statement true. '*The voice of individual moral conscience is best heard in the tumult of political and social discord*' (*ibid.*: 166).
- 42 Milgram, 1974: 118. As he later notes, 'When an individual wishes to stand in opposition to authority, he does best to find support for his position from others in his group. The mutual support provided by men for each other is the strongest bulwark we have against the excesses of authority.' *ibid.*: 121.
- 43 Goldhagen, 1992.
- 44 *ibid.*: 51.
- 45 *ibid.*
- 46 'Even if Germans had not killed millions of Jews, the amount of sustained, inventive, wanton, voluntary cruelty and degradation that they inflicted upon Jews would be seen as one of the great crimes in history and would itself demand an explanation. Yet no historian has thought it necessary to put this phenomenon at the center of study' (Goldhagen, 1996: 39).
- 47 '... it seems hard to maintain that they were reluctant killers, that their behavior was primarily situationally conditioned' (*ibid.*). No one can doubt that Goldhagen has refocused debates within perpetrator history on this issue of the smile problem. Bauer devotes some 20 pages to discussing Goldhagen's book (Bauer, 2001: 93–113). His reason: 'Aly, Bauman, Mommsen, even Raul Hilberg, cannot explain *why* the murder happened' (*ibid.*: 96). Goldhagen does. Even those who reject his explanation recognize the need to explain how perpetrators became so engaged in their grisly and gruesome task. See, for example, Browning, 1998b: 202 for a characteristically candid admission on this point.

- 48 Goldhagen, 1998: 301.
- 49 Goldhagen, 1997: 410. 'This cruelty, moreover, was almost always voluntaristic, which means that all those who inflicted it took initiative in the brutalizing of Jews. Finally, the killing operations were characterized by widespread German dedication and zeal, without which the genocide would never have proceeded so smoothly' (ibid.: 378, see also 379). Goldhagen continues to insist on this point, rightly appreciating that this imputed 'tight connection' lies at the heart of his case. 'Brutality, in [Browning's] view, is a utilitarian response of sorts to objective difficulties. It is functional and pragmatic. . . . But pragmatism cannot be seen as having been the major cause of brutality and cruelty' (Goldhagen, 1998: 303). Or, again, 'I simply do not believe that the evidence supports a universalistic reading of the perpetration of the Holocaust according to which "ordinary" man, that transhistorical, acultural being, would be willing to kill as these men did, simply for the asking' (ibid.: 306).
- 50 Goldhagen, 1997: 381.
- 51 'And if some deem my explanation simplistic, then they must demonstrate that a better one exists. But my critics say that my explanation is wrong without providing any coherent alternative. . . . Critics charge me with being dismissive of the work and explanations of others. What the critics do not say is that, far from being dismissive of them, I demonstrate that the conventional explanations cannot account for the actions of the perpetrators and the other central features of the Holocaust to which they pertain' (Goldhagen, 1996: 39). The 'one explanation adequate' to the smile problem is his (Goldhagen, 1997: 392-3). As Browning perceptively notes, Goldhagen's claim for having initiated a 'Copernican turn' in Holocaust studies resides in the claim to being the only one to explain the smile problem, and to connecting this explanation to a thick description (my characterization) of the ordinary German mind-set of the time. 'Like a latter-day Copernicus, he sees himself sweeping away the out-moded equants and epicycles of a superseded Ptolemaic system and replacing it with an explanation that is seductively attractive because of its simplicity' (Browning, 1996: 102).
- 52 'During the Nazi period, eliminationist anti-Semitism provided the motivational source for the German leadership and for rank-and-file Germans to kill the Jews. It also was the motivational source of the other non-killing actions of the perpetrators that were integral to the Holocaust' (Goldhagen, 1997: 419). Regarding Goldhagen's claims to have preserved agency, see my critique in Roth, 2003a.
- 53 I owe this phrase to Nigel Pleasants. For another view emphasizing Goldhagen as anthropologist, see Pleasants's essay in this volume. Christopher Browning complains, in this regard, of Goldhagen's criticism of him for not being ethnographic enough, namely that Browning 'naively studied these events through my [Browning's] non-German cognitive lens rather than – like the anthropologist – discovering the very different cognitive world of the Germans that was so saturated with anti-Semitism as to make it part of the "common sense" of the day' (Browning, 1996: 89). See especially references that Browning cites to *Hitler's Willing Executioners* on 1996: 105, n. 13.
- 54 Goldhagen, 1997: 7.
- 55 'This revision calls for us to acknowledge what has for so long been generally denied or obscured by academic and non-academic interpreters alike: Germans'

- anti-Semitic beliefs about Jews were the central causal agent of the Holocaust' (ibid.: 9).
- 56 As A. D. Moses notes, Goldhagen wants to explain behavior as an expression of preference, and the only shared preference Goldhagen can identify is that of anti-Semitism. 'Behavior is explained preferentially, and preferences are explained culturally' (Moses, 1998: 211). See generally 209 ff. See also, for example, Goldhagen, 1996: 39. Moses also notes Goldhagen's use of Geertzian cultural anthropology (Moses, 1998: 210, fn. 67), but oddly states that Goldhagen 'acknowledges his reliance on Clifford Geertz's method of "thick description"' (ibid.). But the sole references to Geertz consist of two brief footnotes in Goldhagen's 'Introduction' to *Hitler's Willing Executioners* (ones that the book's index fails to note), and neither Geertz nor 'thick description', nor ethnography, receives any discussion or even mention in Goldhagen's methodological appendix. Thus, although Moses (rightly, in my view) refers to Goldhagen as doing a type of cultural anthropology, it hardly seems appropriate to speak of Goldhagen signaling his 'reliance' on this method. It is there to see for those who take the hint.
- 57 For Goldhagen's specific claim that the special German anti-Semitism is necessary as well as sufficient, see 1997: 418 and 1996: 43.
- 58 Goldhagen, 1997: 455. Goldhagen repeatedly stresses that all Hitler provided was an opening for the realization of long-standing preferences. *Contra* the social psychologists, the situation did not create or cause the behavior; it merely provided an opportunity to do what people long wanted to do: 'what Hitler and the Nazis did was to unshackle and thereby activate Germans' pre-existing, pent-up anti-Semitism' (ibid.: 443, 447). 'Genocide was immanent in the conversation of Germany [*sic*] society. It was immanent in its language and emotion. It was immanent in the structure of cognition. And it was immanent in the society's proto-genocidal practice of the 1930s. Under the proper circumstances, eliminationist anti-Semitism metastasized into its most virulent exterminationist form, and ordinary Germans became willing genocidal killers' (ibid.: 449); he also speaks on this page of the 'autonomous power' of these beliefs.
- 59 Goldhagen, 1997: 448; original emphasis. See generally 448–9.
- 60 Moses, 1998: 210. Moses speaks in several places of Goldhagen's 'behavioralism' as a type of methodological supplement to Goldhagen's erstwhile cultural anthropology. But Moses nowhere specifies just what this doctrine is, and I cannot distinguish what Moses calls 'behaviorialism' from a general anthropological approach. As an example of an otherwise astute investigator who entirely misses how Goldhagen's account works, and the explanatory role played by emphasizing German brutality towards the Jews and the implied dissonance, consider the following remark by Omer Bartov. 'What distinguishes this [Goldhagen's] book, however, is that the author's empathy is given exclusively to the victim rather than the perpetrators. In demonizing the perpetrators, Goldhagen makes no attempt to understand them; his focus is on portraying them as sadistic murderers who enjoy their "work" of torturing and killing Jews' (Bartov, 2000: 55). Ironically, Bartov's own account receives criticism just on the point of Bartov's failure to link ideology and actual killing. 'Yet, while his [Bartov's] provocative ideas further our understanding of the persistent historical maligning of the Jews, the link between

- creating an enemy and killing him is one for which there are not even sketchy, general explanations' (Miller, 1998: 1181).
- 61 Goldhagen, 1992: 52. Although I am not aware of anyone who explicitly characterizes the problem of how to explain (or explain away) as one of *dissonance* between the flesh-and-blood helpless victims and abstract cultural or ideological rationales, one finds this suggestion in those who take seriously Goldhagen's remarks on investigating the phenomenology of the killers. 'And yet it is clear that he [Goldhagen] intends this method to reveal the motivational essence of the actions he examines . . . Goldhagen asks his readers to stand back from the historical data and generalizations and ask themselves to imagine the thoughts and feelings of a middle-aged German policeman on duty in Poland as he puts a bullet in the head of a twelve-year-old child or a German-Jewish war veteran begging for his life' (Kamber, 2000: 170). Alford hints at an appreciation of how the dissonance issue and the anthropological approach work together. 'For Goldhagen, the Holocaust possesses a strange rationality that others have failed to discern. Germans hated and feared Jews, and wanted to kill them. . . . To be sure, Goldhagen grasps the irrational quality of Germans' hatred of Jews. To see Jews as demons is, at least from the perspective of the modern world, tantamount to believing in witchcraft and magic. Goldhagen sees himself as an anthropologist, one who studies German demonological anti-Semitism as an anthropologist would study a pre-literature culture' (Alford, 1997: 721).
- 62 Goldhagen is sometimes less than clear with regard to what makes description 'thick'. In the classic Geertzian sense, description thickens insofar as one must supply cultural context in order for the rationality of the actions to be comprehensible. 'Thin' descriptions of rationality assume a discernible means-end relationship between preferences and actions in terms of efficiency. German 'inefficiencies' in this regard – choosing to be brutal, killing Jews instead of using them for slave labor, diverting resources from the war effort for the purposes of killing, etc. – indicate the need, Goldhagen insists, for a thick rather than thin account of the preferences at work. However, Goldhagen sometimes uses the term simply to mean 'descriptively rich', in ways unconnected with questions regarding the rationality of agents. See, for example, Goldhagen, 1997: 266–7. As Dominick LaCapra once remarked to me, someone possessed by the past may be incapable of ethically responsible behavior.
- 63 Goldhagen, surprisingly, acknowledges just this point. 'When beliefs and images are uncontested or are even just dominant within a given society, individuals typically come to accept them as self-evident truths. Just as people today accept that the earth revolves around the sun . . . so too have many people accepted culturally ubiquitous images of Jews. The capacity of an individual to diverge from prevailing cognitive models is still smaller because cognitive models are among the individual's building blocks of understanding, and are incorporated into the structures of his mind as naturally as the grammar of his language' (Goldhagen, 1997: 46).
- 64 Goldhagen offers the following remark in support of his contention concerning the shared 'cognitive model' of Hitler's fellow Germans and so as a key step in his claim regarding the tight fit between beliefs and actions – in this case, between German anti-Semitism and Germans as willing perpetrators. 'During the Nazi

period and even long before, most Germans could no more emerge with cognitive models foreign to their society – with a certain aboriginal people’s model of the mind, for example – than they could speak fluent Romanian without ever having been exposed to it’ (ibid.: 34).

65 Bauer, 2001: 96.

66 ibid.: 97.

67 ibid.: 98. ‘The real question, then, is this: if, in 1933, the Nazis and their radically but not murderously anti-Semitic allies were supported by some 43 percent of the electorate, non-Nazi parties by 57 percent, including outspoken opponents of Nazis who were either anti-anti-Semitic or only moderately anti-Jewish (that is, they opposed even the relatively moderate step of disenfranchising the Jews), how did it happen that by 1940–1 the overwhelming majority of Germans became a reservoir of willing murderers of Jews? *That* is the problem. Goldhagen’s discussion about norms that did not exist is useless’ (ibid.: 103). In his discussion from 98–103, Bauer goes on simply to dismantle any suggestion that there might be a plausible historical basis for Goldhagen’s ‘thick description’ claims regarding shared eliminationist beliefs.

68 Note that what Bauer above concedes just is the sufficiency of Goldhagen’s condition. The methodologically and substantively controversial claim concerns the role of anti-Semitism as a necessary condition. For nothing else, Goldhagen insists, can explain how Jews could fail to be included within the circle of moral concern. Once a leadership has control of the reins of government which shares this view of the exclusion of Jews from moral consideration, the beliefs about Jews become sufficient as well to ensure a genocide.

69 Goldhagen, 1997: 418.

70 ibid.: 399.

71 ibid.: 596, fn. 62.

72 ibid.: 596–7, fn. 67.

73 As Bauer goes on to remark (p. 105), ‘The concept of a consensus is absolutely central to this line of explanation’. What needs explanation, that is, are the steps leading to this consensus formation. For additional citations on this point, see Moses, 1998: 195, fn. 6 and 215, fn. 77.

74 I would not take Milgram’s work to bear most directly on this issue, though Zimbardo (not discussed by Goldhagen) clearly and powerfully does.

75 Goldhagen, 1997: 592, fn. 19.

76 Milgram, 1974: 16. See also the picture of the ‘victim’ on p. 17. In this context, I find irrelevant Bartov’s catalog of ethnic stereotypes he finds in Milgram (Bartov, 2000: 81ff.). Likewise, Bartov’s absolutely remarkable assertion that ‘Unlike Goldhagen, Milgram does not believe in choice’ betrays only how completely Bartov assumes exactly what needs to be regarded as problematic, namely that the situations must be couched in motivational terms, and so choices and preferences are at issue (Bartov, 2000: 80). Between coercion and choice lies an immense range of behaviors which are certainly not coerced but which do not therefore reflect some determinate preference or decision. People do ‘act mindlessly’.

77 Milgram, 1974: 4. Milgram numbers appear on his Table 2. ibid.: 34.

78 The *locus classicus* of such work is, of course, Erving Goffman’s *Asylums*.

79 Goldhagen, 1996: 43.

- 80 Goldhagen, 1998: 305.
- 81 Browning, 1992: 72.
- 82 Goldhagen makes it clear that cognitive models, like language, consist of what members of a society or culture *share*; the sharing makes communication possible. While the specifics of these conceptual models may operate behind people's backs – they may be unaware of the details of what is shared – the sharing structures the thought of all those who are part of this culture (Goldhagen, 1997: 33). Goldhagen confidently enumerates various elements of this shared cognitive model at various points; for example: 319–23. The shared stuff, it must be emphasized, consists of 'conceptual objects and their relations to each other' (ibid.: 33). (Goldhagen here quotes approvingly from an essay by Roy D'Andrade on so-called 'folk models' of the mind.) ibid.: 495, fn. 10.
- 83 Goldhagen insists that his presumption of assuming a cognitive model is a *sine qua non* of his whole approach. Goldhagen, 1997: 496, fn. 18. For elaborations of skepticism about the cogency of such appeals, see Roth, 2003a and 2003b and especially Turner, 1994.
- 84 Zimbardo, 1970: 305, fn. 10.
- 85 Zimbardo, 2000: 205 In both this article and in Zimbardo, 1995, Zimbardo cites with approval Browning's use of his results. If anything, Browning under-utilizes Zimbardo's work. As Zimbardo also emphasizes (Zimbardo, 1995: 132–3), the experimental work in no way 'coerces' or somehow excuses the behavior. Rather, it simply demonstrates, as an experimental fact, how most people will behave in situations where certain restraints or norms have been weakened or rendered inoperative.
- 86 Lifton, 1993: 4–5.
- 87 Waller, 2002: 87. See also McBroom, 2001, especially 171ff. Rhodes, 2002, although he does not follow Goldhagen, wants to insist that perpetrators are of a psychological type, a type constituted by having undergone personal exposure to brutalization according to the theory of criminologist Lonnie Athens. See, for example, Rhodes, 2002: 218. Indeed, lack of prior brutalization explains as well, on this account, why Eastern European Jews failed to resist. ibid.: 251–2. Despite his compelling account of *Einsatzgruppen* activity, however, Rhodes's hypothesis cannot be credited. See de Mildt, 1996, especially 310ff.
- 88 A number of the essays in Newman and Erber, 2002 discuss these issues. Interested readers can quickly discern which. For my purposes, I simply wish to emphasize the wide convergence of views here, all noting how Goldhagen either vastly ignores or wrongly discounts how situations account for precisely those factors which, he claims, only his 'cognitive models' can explain. The methodological point here is that one might well concede, following Bauer, that such models, if one could show that they exist, would prove sufficient. But there exists no reason – historically, methodologically, or psychologically – to believe that they do. Goldhagen needed to show such models to be necessary, not merely sufficient. In this he fails completely.
- 89 My objection to Goldhagen may strike some as pre-empting, in fact, the proper role of empirical inquiry. How can one rule out, as I have insisted, the use of cognitive models? I have addressed what I take to be the most serious drawbacks of any appeal to cognitive models in Goldhagen's sense in Roth, 2003c.

- 90 See Nagel, 1979.
- 91 Assume, for the sake of argument, no other complicating factors – one is not speeding, the road does not need repairs, etc.
- 92 *ibid.*: 442. As perhaps Nagel knows, this proved true of many participants in the Nazi killing process. They led ‘quiet and harmless’ lives after the war, and in many cases before the war as well. See de Mildt on this point. Rhodes suggests that many of the *Einsatzgruppen* members did, in fact, have criminal histories or records of brutalization that uniquely prepared them for their roles. Although any discussion of why goes beyond the scope of this paper, I note in passing that I find Rhodes unconvincing on this point.
- 93 An appreciation of how basic and pervasive this failure was can be found by reading Klemperer’s diaries (Klemperer, 1998 and 1999).
- 94 Nagel, 1979: 451.
- 95 The genuine question with which we are confronted, however, concerns not why people conform, but why or how they resist conforming (for the minority that does). Zimbardo explicitly broaches this questions and notes that researchers, fixated as they are on the power of conformity, thereby ignore the opportunity to understand better the ‘heroic’ resistance that some demonstrate in these experimental situations. Zimbardo, 2000: 196. Until we understand that, what distinguishes those who kill and those who do not will unfortunately continue to appear as just a matter of moral luck.

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#### BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

PAUL A. ROTH is Professor and Chair of the Department of Philosophy at the University of California-Santa Cruz. He has written extensively on issues of explanation in history and social theory. He coedited (with Stephen Turner) *The Blackwell Guide to the Philosophy of the Social Sciences* (Blackwell Publishing, 2003).

*Address:* Department of Philosophy, University of California-Santa Cruz, Santa Cruz, CA 95064, USA. [email: paroth@ucsc.edu]