

CHAPTER 10

SOCIAL
PSYCHOLOGY AND
GENOCIDE

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Hier ist kein Warum.

Primo Levi¹

[T]he International Military Tribunal (IMT) at Nuremberg introduced conspiracy and membership in a criminal organization as charges that transcended individual involvement by what could be seen as 'guilt by association.' In the minds of their American authors, one of the main purposes of these charges was to find a legal basis for... 'a ghoulish *embarras de richesse*': the large number of perpetrators—estimated at the time at hundreds of thousands—in numerous branches of the German executive, bureaucratic and economic apparatus.

Jürgen Matthäus²

Understanding perpetrator and perpetration is *the* essential element to understanding genocide. Other 'lessons' are ancillary.

Donald Bloxham³

¹ Primo Levi, *Survival in Auschwitz*.

² Jürgen Matthäus, 'Historiography and the Perpetrators of the Holocaust', in Dan Stone (ed.), *The Historiography of the Holocaust* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), 199.

³ Donald Bloxham, 'From Streicher to Sawoniuk: the Holocaust in the Courtroom', *ibid.* 414.

We will not have come to terms with the past until the causes of what happened then are no longer active. Only because these causes live on does the spell of the past remain, to this very day, unbroken.

Theodor W. Adorno⁴

THIS chapter examines what purports to be a core standing problem in the explanation of genocide, viz. how to account for the large number of people willing to participate in mass murders. Yet this core status notwithstanding, I contend that research in social psychology has already answered the question of 'perpetrator production'. Recruiting people to be perpetrators proves to be alarmingly easy. In addition, the application of social psychology to genocide has also become entangled in an ongoing moral debate, a debate that focuses on whether an emphasis on the extrinsic predictors of behaviour fits at all well or comfortably with a sense that people should be held morally (and legally) responsible for the choices they make.⁵ This chapter argues as well that social psychology neither casts a pall of inevitability over such events nor provides moral exculpation for those involved.

In what follows, I use the phrase 'situationist social psychology', 'situationism', and cognate terms to designate a research tradition that emphasizes how situational variables most often prove determinative of individual and group behaviour. 'Situational' contrasts with 'dispositional', i.e., an emphasis on factors specific to the psychology of an individual. The paradigm takes a person's immediate context—the 'situation' in which one finds oneself—as a highly reliable predictor of behaviour. The key factor in terms of 'defining the situation' concerns the group or social norms that implicitly or explicitly govern expected behaviour in the situation. *Experiments in this tradition place people in contexts where the usual norms have been changed or expectations must be challenged.* The emphasis on situation implies that social stability (the following of certain standards of behaviour) should be understood as a function of the 'normative stability' of the contexts in which a person happens to be. Changes in normative expectations change behaviour. More generally, the paradigm teaches how people have a powerful tendency to conform to stated or implied norms in social and institutional contexts.

⁴ Theodor W. Adorno, 'What Does Coming to Terms with the Past Mean?', in Geoffrey H. Hartman (ed.), *Bitburg in Moral and Political Perspective* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1986) 129. This essay was originally published in German in 1959.

⁵ For a somewhat equivocal view of the relation between the social psychology and moral theory, see John M. Doris and Dominic Murphy, 'From My Lai to Abu Ghraib: The Moral Psychology of Atrocity', *Midwestern Studies in Philosophy* 31 (2007), 25–55. See also the special issue of the journal *Metaphilosophy* devoted to the topic, 'Genocide's Aftermath: Responsibility and Repair', *Metaphilosophy* 37 (2006), 299–543.

Experimental work in situationist social psychology has taught troubling yet important lessons.⁶ Although the key research has been much discussed for close to four decades, its implications remain underappreciated. A reason for the lack of uptake of this research might be the unpleasantly shallow picture it suggests of what actually guides human behaviour, for the experiments suggest that people simply adapt to the norms present in the situation in which they find themselves and do not 'carry over' previous standards. But the lessons of situationism prove too valuable to let lie idle.⁷

The 'situationist' paradigm in social psychology pioneered by Kurt Lewin and developed experimentally by Solomon Asch, Stanley Milgram, and Philip Zimbardo can be shown to have broad and somewhat surprising application to historical cases of genocide.⁸ This serendipitous marriage of social science and historical research represents a type of model for how the details of historical research (often thought to resist extrapolation to other cases) fits well with the generalizing proclivities of social science. Yet the relevant social psychological parameters fit a wide range of historical cases. Surprise (or horror) arises insofar as the experimental data demonstrate how relatively easily a substantial number of people can be co-opted for the purpose of assisting in mass murder.

Definitional issues regarding what does or does not count as genocide will not be examined in this essay. By focusing instead on how people transform into perpetrators, the definitional or conceptual debates surrounding genocide assume no more than legalistic status. As a legal type, definition may matter for purposes of, e.g., mobilizing international support. But some suggestion that an event called into existence by definitional fiat can then serve as the basis for comparative analysis is a thin reed on which to rest any claim to science: 'Concepts determine case selection, which in turn shapes causal inference.'⁹ Yet for concepts such as that of genocide, definitions create the cases. And for cases so stipulatively created, no reason exists for assuming that they then fit into any causal order.¹⁰

⁶ For an excellent overview and characterization of work in this tradition, see Lee Ross and Richard E. Nisbett, *The Person and the Situation* (Boston: McGraw Hill, 1991). A recent updating of research in this area can be found in Philip Zimbardo, *The Lucifer Effect: Understanding How Good People Turn Evil* (New York: Random House, 2008).

⁷ Works such as, e.g., Ervin Staub, *The Roots of Evil* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989) overtheorize genocide and yet add nothing of predictive value.

⁸ Christopher R. Browning's work provides the compelling model. See his now classic book, *Ordinary Men: Reserve Police Battalion 101 and the Final Solution in Poland* (New York: HarperPerennial, 1993). For a defence of Browning's use of the social psychological research, see my 'Beyond Understanding: The Career of the Concept of Understanding in the Human Sciences', in Stephen P. Turner and Paul A. Roth, eds., *The Blackwell Guide to the Philosophy of the Social Sciences* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2003) and 'Hearts of Darkness', *History of the Human Sciences* 17 (2004), 211–51.

⁹ See Scott Straus, 'Contested Meanings and Conflicting Imperatives: A Conceptual Analysis of Genocide', *Journal of Genocide Research* 3 (2001), 359.

¹⁰ See my 'Historical Explanation', *Journal of the Philosophy of History* 2 (2008), 214–26.

The social psychological experiments suggest a focus instead on comprehending the construction of a corps of perpetrators. The victims may be almost randomly chosen once one understands how perpetrators can be readily recruited. What makes conditions conducive to mass-producing perpetrators of acts such as genocides?¹¹ Posing the problem this way helps highlight two distinct philosophical components inseparable from the social psychological task of explaining participation in mass murder. One concerns the motivational question—what could account for a choice to behave in the way that genocidal killers and mass murderers do? The second concerns the relation of any proposed explanation and that of responsibility. Since explanations typically speak to causes, and causes can readily be understood to mitigate agency—freedom of or responsibility for choice—it might appear that the more one explains, the less people can be held responsible. However, properly understood, situationist accounts explain and yet require no diminution of attribution of responsibility.

The first section sets a philosophical frame for discussions of explanations of genocide. The second section examines how certain results from social psychology nicely accord with and support this frame. The third and final section looks at Ian Hacking's accounts of 'making up people' as enriching and supporting the theoretical lessons informed by the empirical work.

GENOCIDE AND 'THOUGHTLESS' BEHAVIOUR

The social trauma of the Second World War and its political aftermath were never far from the minds of European philosophers of that time. What seem to be philosophical abstractions turn out to connect to grim political concerns. For example, take Jean-Paul Sartre's declaration that 'Existence precedes essence.' Essences constitute a thing's nature, what it must be. Existence without a prior essence permits a type of freedom. One's own choices can then determine who or what one will be. But if a lack of an essence makes existential freedom possible, it also makes people at core unreliable. For nothing need determine how one acts. 'Tomorrow . . . some may decide to set up Fascism, and the others may be cowardly

¹¹ Regarding how definitional concerns have had some interesting ramifications in moral, legal, and historical debates, see Ann Curthoys and John Docker, 'Defining Genocide', in Stone (ed.), *The Historiography of Genocide*, 9–41. As with so much else, Arendt anticipates these definitional concerns. Genocide, she argued, represents a new break in the moral order. 'Nothing is more pernicious to an understanding of these new crimes . . . than the common illusion that the crime of murder and the crime of genocide are essentially the same' (Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, rev and enl edn (New York: Penguin Books, 1977), 272).

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'The Human Sciences', in
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, 214–26.

and muddled enough to let them do it. Fascism would then be the human reality, and so much the worse for us.¹² War revealed the ambivalent legacy of postulating human freedom subject to no moral imperatives.

Writing about a decade and a half after Sartre, Adorno too ponders what the experience of the Second World War reveals with regard to a 'social weakening of personal autonomy'.¹³ Both worry in light of that experience about who will choose to resist oppression. Revelations surrounding perpetrator behaviour and the death camps in the intervening decade and a half sharpens this worry about whether or how people will in fact exercise autonomy. In this context, Adorno famously asks, 'What Does Coming to Terms with the Past Mean?' Do enduring but unaddressed social conditions continue to exist that incline people to political oppression and mass murder? Has post-war society comprehended the social conditions that caused or abetted the horrific acts? Insofar as these conditions persist, they leave in place the forces that ultimately produce, for example, genocides. Only by bringing these processes to collective self-awareness might their hold be broken. The proliferation of genocides through the second half of the twentieth century suggests that the social determinants remain in place.

Adorno's essay touches on two themes that remain relevant to any attempt to explain why genocide-like events recur. The first concerns his emphasis on 'objective conditions'—the social situations in which people find themselves—as having explanatory priority over individual 'subjective' factors. This suggested focus on objective situation (however cashed out) shall be termed the 'choice problem'—what determines how people act? The choice problem typically seeks answers regarding motivation—why people would choose to do what they did. The second concerns the affective character—a need to explain the enthusiasm often manifested by those inflicting the pain. This is the 'smile problem'.¹⁴ The very questions suggest how social psychology might inform a philosophical anthropology. Answers to these problems would presumably indicate whether conditions could be altered so as to make genocidal behaviour less likely and if so how.

The concerns of Sartre and Adorno connect to yet a third figure whose philosophical writings attempt to comprehend how people behaved under conditions of

¹² Jean-Paul Sartre, 'Existentialism is a Humanism', in George Sher (ed.), *Moral Philosophy* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1987), 480–1.

¹³ Adorno, 'What Does Coming to Terms with the Past Mean?', 117.

¹⁴ Adorno echoes both worries in the following remark. '[T]he past one wishes to evade is still so intensely alive. National Socialism lives on, and to this day we don't know whether it is only the ghost of what was so monstrous that it didn't even die off with its own death, or whether . . . the readiness for unspeakable actions survives in people, as in the social conditions that hem them in' (Adorno, 'What Does Coming to Terms with the Past Mean?', 115). Social conditions are one thing; people's 'readiness for unspeakable actions' quite another. See also Roth, 'Beyond Understanding', 322 and 'Hearts of Darkness', 226–36. Daniel Jonah Goldhagen takes the smile problem as key to explaining the Holocaust. See his *Hitler's Willing Executioners: Ordinary Germans and the Holocaust* (New York: Vintage, 1997).

occupation and oppression. Hannah Arendt too takes the choices made by perpetrators not as reflecting their individual quirks, but as revelations about us all. Schooled in the same philosophical tradition as were Sartre and Adorno, her oft-quoted and yet widely misunderstood remark about the 'banality of evil' with respect to Eichmann reflects a shared concern about the nature and conditions of choice.

How could Eichmann deny recognition to others of a common humanity, and so of moral worth? Her answer—recognizable to anyone in the Kantian tradition from which she comes—identifies Eichmann's failure as one of refusing responsibility for his choices by letting others determine the ends of action. Sartre and Adorno and Arendt all share with Kant the view that our ability to will—to choose—separates us from beasts in the field. Other animals cannot but behave as instinct dictates; only humans can will to act against instinct. Eichmann fails this essential test of one's humanity, for he uses reason only to follow rules others have made for him.

It was sheer thoughtlessness—something by no means identical with stupidity—that predisposed him [Eichmann] to become one of the greatest criminals of that period. And if this is 'banal' and even funny, if with the best will in the world one cannot extract any diabolical or demonic profundity from Eichmann, that is still far from calling it commonplace. . . . That such remoteness forms reality and such thoughtlessness can wreak more havoc than all the evil instincts taken together which, perhaps are inherent in man—that was, in fact, the lesson one could learn in Jerusalem. But it was a lesson, neither an explanation of the phenomenon nor a theory about it.¹⁵

A literal failure to 'think for himself' marks him as thoughtless, as behaving as if a being who could not recognize and follow the moral law. Human will allows us only this choice, i.e., to follow the dictates of reason over that of animal nature. If one holds their will in abeyance, behaviour cannot be original—something other than a product of instinct or animal nature. If not original, then banal. The consequences of any failure of will thus can provide a lesson, an example of the consequences of indifference to aligning action to our human nature. But nothing can compel humans to act against instinct, i.e., freely.

Evil becomes banal once the actions that produce it lack just this type of Kantian thoughtfulness, i.e., becomes a mere following of ends given by others and not by reason. Arendt specifically comments upon Eichmann as manifesting a 'strange interdependence of thoughtlessness and evil'. Indeed, when she speaks explicitly of Eichmann as personifying the 'banality of evil', it is in the context of 'forgetting' he was at his own death sentence, i.e., faced with his own mortality. This proves to be a defining moment. For in the philosophical tradition to which Arendt belongs, such a 'forgetting' comes significantly freighted. Recognizing oneself as human involves

¹⁵ Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, 288.

always being confronted with the fact of one's own mortality. Losing sight of this just is losing sight of what defines us as human—our common fate and our capacity to choose. *Eichmann's crime, Arendt contends, consists precisely in this special thoughtlessness.*¹⁶

The substitution of technical reasoning—bureaucratic, economic, technological—for considerations about the best conditions for humans characterizes contemporary thoughtlessness about the ends of action. Arendt worries these issues most thoroughly. For her, the disconnect that arises between thinking and willing signifies the area of most concern in contemporary life. By letting ends set by things and institutions go proxy for those freely chosen, banality ensues. Insofar as modern technology makes masses of people economically unnecessary and to the extent technology allows for the ready mobilization of killers, the world stage has been set for a 'new' crime to emerge.

So what begins as an extremely abstract pronouncement about humankind's lack of essence and the nature of free choice becomes, when filtered through the related musings of Adorno and Arendt, a question about the material conditions that engender 'thoughtless' action. Arendt, in particular, suggests that the Holocaust results from this type of thoughtless behaviour. In this regard, the oft-discussed connection between Arendt's invocation of the 'banality of evil' and work in social psychology must be seen in light of how experimental settings can readily induce just such 'thoughtless' behaviour.

INDUCING 'THOUGHTLESS BEHAVIOUR' AND CREATING PERPETRATORS

Can one experimentally create situations so as to induce such 'thoughtless' behaviour? Note that what calls for explanation concerns not only the production of perpetrators, but also their 'disappearance'. That is, characteristics of genocides in the twentieth century include the large number of perpetrators, their wantonness, and their later return to live undisturbed among the populace. If one considers the political furor accompanying, e.g., the residential locations of sex offenders, the re-assimilation of perpetrators appears strikingly anomalous.¹⁷

In emphasizing the importance of situational factors, the salient feature concerns how the experiments effectively construct scenarios that require people to challenge norms (decide against a group or an authority figure) or forge normative

¹⁶ Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, 252, 279.

¹⁷ This point struck Arendt as well. *Ibid.* 16–19.

limits (e.g., how to modulate or enact the authority one has over others).¹⁸ So, for example, people will identify a shorter line as the longest in a set if a majority of others in their group do or choose to inflict pain despite having no prior history of a willingness to do so.¹⁹ The core point demonstrated by these experiments concerns the power of the 'conformity effect'—the amazing willingness of people to simply assimilate the norms of the situations in which they find themselves. Experiments in the 'Asch paradigm' provides replicable demonstrations of how this powerful 'conformity effect' trumps other factors as a predictor of behaviour.²⁰

An interesting and important feature of the classic experiments in the Asch–Milgram–Zimbardo line is that in each case the outcomes proved contrary to the prior expectations of the experimenters.²¹ In Asch's experiments, pressure to conform presumably arises merely from the implied challenge of contravening those who have already announced a decision. Milgram's justly celebrated extension of this experimental paradigm explored whether this proclivity to conformity to a real or imagined norm would be manifest if the choice involved inflicting pain or possible harm on others.

In earlier writings, I emphasized how these experiments could be brought to bear on two key explanatory problems noted in the introduction—the 'choice problem' and the 'smile problem'. The choice problem can be characterized as follows: why do so many people with no prior history of brutalization or murder participate, at one level or another, in the killing operations involved in genocides and mass murders?²² The smile problem connects to the choice problem. For if the choice problem asks why people did these acts voluntarily, the smile problem

¹⁸ Material in this and the subsequent three paragraphs borrow from my discussion in 'Hearts of Darkness', 217–20.

¹⁹ For a detailed account of Asch's experiments in this vein and important related work, see Zimbardo, *The Lucifer Effect*, esp. Chapter 12. An extensive overview and summary presentation of the relevant research can also be found in Philip Zimbardo, 'Transforming Good People into Perpetrators of Evil: Can We Reverse the Process?', *Ricerche di psicologia* 28 (2005), 1–52.

²⁰ See the helpful and historically broad accounts of this research tradition and its influence on social psychology in Ross and Nisbett, *The Person and the Situation*.

²¹ In *The Lucifer Effect*, Zimbardo devotes over 200 pages to elaborating the details of the Stanford Prison Experiment (SPE). From his discussion one learns that there is a web site devoted just to the SPE, <http://www.prisonexp.org>, one devoted to Zimbardo's book featuring his extensive retrospective analysis of the material, <http://www.LuciferEffect.com> ('Lucifer Effect' t-shirts can be purchased from this site), and one devoted to Zimbardo himself, <http://www.zimbardo.com>. Given that the SPE (unlike, e.g., the Milgram experiment) was effectively a one-time occurrence that occurred 37 years ago, it yet remains a focus of much attention. Much more so than the Milgram experiment, the SPE poses ethical obstacles to its replication. But see S. H. Lovibond, X. Mithiran, and W. G. Adams, 'The Effects of Three Experimental Prison Environments on the Behaviour of Non-convict Volunteer Subjects', *Australian Psychologist* 14 (1979), 273–87. Their results strikingly confirm those of the SPE. 'It is clear that our Standard Custodial regime induced ordinary people with little knowledge and no experience of prisons, to behave in much the same way as prisoners and officers in real prisons' (283; see also 278). See discussions of the SPE and replications in Zimbardo, *The Lucifer Effect*, 250–5.

²² See my discussion in 'Beyond Understanding', 320.

points to the disconcerting fact that many do so with apparent enjoyment. Simply put, those inflicting harm appeared to enjoy it.²³

A close analysis of Milgram's work and Zimbardo's establishes that the situational analysis accounts in all essentials for the number of perpetrators and their otherwise incomprehensible brutality. The experiments compellingly demonstrate that a 'conformity effect' suffices to predict both the extent of participation (and thus obviate any apparent problem of choice) and the sadistic enthusiasm that individuals invest in roles to which accidents of experimental design (or of fate) have assigned them (and thus solve the smile problem).

Milgram's work bears primarily on questions of choice; Zimbardo's addresses issues related to the smile problem.²⁴ To briefly summarize, the 'Milgram experiment' (and its variants) involves subjects who believe that they are administering electric shocks to someone as part of a learning experiment. The core of this experiment concerns the extent to which subjects continue to inflict the electric shocks despite pleas, screams, cries, etc. from the supposed victim. In some variations, in excess of 60% of subjects regularly deliver up to maximum shocks (450 volts). *No coercion of the subject exists other than the norm requiring someone to 'obey' the experiment's protocols.*

Zimbardo was the chief architect of the Stanford Prison Experiment (SPE). This involved arbitrarily assigning college students (pre-screened for personality abnormalities) to roles as prisoners or as guards. The experiment had to be terminated after only a few days because of the brutality invested by guards in their roles and the debilitating psychological effects on those assigned to be prisoners. The chief theoretical point was to establish how structures, roles, or situations trump dispositional factors as determinants of behaviour. This the experiment did in compelling fashion. The famously unexpected result concerned the pleasure people took in exercising arbitrary power over others. For by experimental design in the SPE the roles were left underspecified just for the purpose of seeing how those assigned the role 'filled them in'. As Zimbardo states in that essay, 'The third feature

²³ Emphasis on the smile problem constitutes the core of Goldhagen's critique of Browning's use of social psychology to explain perpetrator behaviour. In the view of some social psychologists, it remains a standing objection to the explanatory reach of Milgram's work. See, e.g., Arthur G. Miller, 'What Can the Milgram Obedience Experiments Tell Us about the Holocaust?: Generalizing from the Social Psychology Laboratory', in *idem* (ed.), *The Social Psychology of Good and Evil* (New York: Guilford Press, 2004), 193–239, but esp. 212–16. Note how the chief criticisms of the explanatory power of Milgram emphasize what I term the smile problem. Quite inexplicably, although Zimbardo has an essay in the Miller anthology, his work receives no discussion in the other essays, and Miller himself does not connect or emphasize the joint importance of using Milgram and Zimbardo together for purposes of explanation. For my introduction and discussion of the smile problem, see 'Beyond Understanding', 322. See also 'Hearts of Darkness', 226–36.

²⁴ For an excellent summary of work done by Milgram and the many replications of his results, see Thomas Blass, 'The Milgram Paradigm after 35 Years: Some Things We Now Know about Obedience to Authority', in *idem* (ed.), *Obedience to Authority: Current Perspectives on the Milgram Paradigm* (Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2000), 35–59. See also Zimbardo, *The Lucifer Effect*.

of the study was the novelty of the prisoner and guard roles: Participants had no prior training in how to play the randomly assigned roles. Each subject's prior societal learning of the meaning of prisons and the behavioural scripts associated with the oppositional roles of prisoner and guard was the sole source of guidance.²⁵ Zimbardo's design strongly suggests that cruelty will simply emerge; it does not have to be planned for. The smile problem asks how people can take pleasure in inflicting pain, especially when accidents of circumstance account for their position to do so. The SPE and related research indicate that the mere ability to do this engenders pleasure for many in doing so.²⁶

Taken together, these experiments indicate that it requires little incentive to recruit people for unsavory purposes. What appear as explanatory puzzles arise only because such behaviour does not appear to be the norm. But confusion arises if one takes a *choice* of norms as explaining the stability of the situations, as opposed to seeing stability as a product of mere *conformity* to norms. When for whatever reason stability disappears, people will simply adapt to what they take to be expected of them. In short, the work of Milgram and Zimbardo retroactively account for general behaviour of people under the Nazis and make (or should have made) what happened at Abu Ghraib predictable.²⁷

A third puzzle also can be solved by the situationist account—the 'nasty neighbour problem'. The nasty neighbour puzzle arises insofar as one might assume that a general populace would not desire known mass murderers to continue to live undisturbed in their midst. But, as Arendt notes for the German case and has been seen in later cases of genocides, the general populace reabsorbs perpetrators with seeming complacency.²⁸ Indeed, I am unaware that this has been recognized as an explanatory *problem* by social psychologists or historians examining perpetrator behaviour.

In tracing different accounts of perpetrator behaviour that have marked the historical literature about the Holocaust, Mark Roseman notes that one model

²⁵ See Philip G. Zimbardo, 'A Situationist Perspective on the Psychology of Evil: Understanding How Good People Are Transformed into Perpetrators', in Miller (ed.), *The Social Psychology of Good and Evil*, 39.

²⁶ For a detailed analysis of just why this solves the choice problem, see Roth, 'Hearts of Darkness', 232–3. Regarding the smile problem, see 233–6. Important here is related work by Zimbardo on deindividuation. See account in *The Lucifer Effect*.

²⁷ The social psychology explains the events recounted in Victor Klemperer, *I Will Bear Witness*, 2 vols (New York: Random House, 1998).

²⁸ Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, 16. For a detailed study which brings particular empirical force to Arendt's observation, see Dick de Mildt, *In the Name of the People: Perpetrators of Genocide in the Reflection of Their Post-War Prosecution in West Germany* (Boston: Martinus Nijhoff, 1996). For a personal perspective, see Katharina von Kellenback, 'Vanishing Acts: Perpetrators in Postwar Germany', *Holocaust and Genocide Studies* 17 (2003), 305–29. Mark Roseman also raises this issue in 'Beyond Conviction? Perpetrators, Idea, and Action in the Holocaust in Historiographical Perspective', in Frank Biess, Mark Roseman, and Hanna Schissler (eds), *Conflict, Catastrophe and Continuity: Essays on Modern German History* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2007), 83–103.

emphasizes just a form of the nasty neighbour puzzle.²⁹ But while Roseman does not embrace this specific model, he acknowledges it as one of the standing explanatory challenges regarding perpetrator behaviour:

Yet Arendt and others had grasped an essential problem that continues to be posed to us by the Nazi regime, and which lies at the core of [historian Hans] Mommsen's analysis too—namely, how a body of men could operate with such comprehensiveness and relentlessness right up to the last minute, and then let go of the program, like that, as if it had never been theirs.³⁰

As with the choice and smile problems, situational analyses offers a resolution of the nasty neighbour puzzle. That is, the situation explains why people readily become killers, indeed even killers who relish their work. Altering it then also accounts for the otherwise counter-intuitive result that these very same people not only reintegrate peaceably in their respective societies, but also that they can be accepted as if they posed no threat.

Although the nasty neighbour puzzle has not figured prominently in debates regarding explanations of perpetrator behaviour, it should. For too often those committing the crimes simply melt back into the general populace. In this regard, recent work indicates that there appears nothing remarkable about the particular backgrounds from which the perpetrators of the Holocaust, for example, were drawn.³¹ Somewhat oddly, given that the number of perpetrators in the German case has been estimated at up to 250,000, the investigator focuses on about 1,500 cases, drawing only from those tried for a war crime. Not too surprisingly, he finds a disproportionate number of 'real Nazis'—committed party members with a long history of Nazi association—in this group. But what light does this shed on how the mass of perpetrators were co-opted?

More relevantly, Scott Straus attempts to find a way to accurately estimate the number of perpetrators in the Rwandan genocide.³² The numbers are large, both in absolute terms and in terms of the relative proportion of the population. This detailed effort at quantifying the number of perpetrators and bystanders appears consistent with numbers developed for the Holocaust case. I have elsewhere provided a detailed analysis of the Milgram experiments that show why the percentages of obedient subjects suffices to provide the needed number of perpetrators just by virtue of a tendency to obey authority. The question of choice ceases

²⁹ Roseman, 'Beyond Conviction?', 91.

³⁰ Ibid. 99. Roseman and I differ sharply on Arendt on banality.

³¹ Michael Mann, 'Were the Perpetrators of Genocide "Ordinary Men" or "Real Nazis"? Results from Fifteen Hundred Biographies', *Holocaust and Genocide Studies* 14 (2006), 334–5. For an account at variance both with Mann's and my own, see Donald Bloxham, 'Organized Mass Murder: Structure, Participation and Motivation in Comparative Perspective', *Holocaust and Genocide Studies* 22:2 (2008), 203–45.

³² Scott Straus, 'How Many Perpetrators Were there in the Rwandan Genocide? An Estimate', *Journal of Genocide Research* 6 (2004), 85–98.

to matter. By demonstrating what people will do simply sidesteps any question of whether they could have chosen otherwise.³³ Put another way, situations do not necessitate behaviours. But the tendency to conform makes this freedom to choose moot. A type of herd mentality effectively trumps any actual ability to behave otherwise.

There remains in the social psychological literature an unfortunate tendency to equate situationist explanations with 'judgmental dopes', as caricatures of people blindly shaping themselves to situations. For example, a recent article discusses straight-faced and with endorsement a reading of the Arendtian notion of banality and thoughtlessness as equivalent to asserting the 'Nazi killers were unwitting minions',³⁴ and that the experiments were meant to show that the people involved were 'amoral automatons'.³⁵ Thus does the situationist paradigm come to be labelled 'reductionist'.

Arendt, Milgram, and Zimbardo played a critical part in taking us beyond reductionist explanations of tyranny as a simple product of pathological individuals. But now, their reductionist explanations of tyranny as a simple product of pathological situations—the banality-of-evil hypothesis—seem equally untenable. Instead, . . . an interactionist understanding that sees the social psychology of individual tyrants and collective tyranny as interdependent and mutually reinforcing.³⁶

But the foregoing only reflects a fundamental misreading of these texts. *Nothing* in the Milgram experiments or in the SPE makes the situation inherently pathological. *The 'pathology' consists in the thoughtless investment people make in roles handed them by an accident of fate.* Arendt's Kantian-inflected notion of banality resonates deeply with what Milgram and Zimbardo demonstrate empirically.

In an effort to reject what he characterizes as 'strong situationism', Leonard Newman maintains that controversies featuring disputes between situational and dispositional variables are passé. Rather, 'It has long been recognized that people and their traits and the situations in which they find themselves *interact*.'³⁷ Yet the problem with distinguishing this model from the situationist also becomes immediately if unwittingly apparent. For while interactionists maintain that traits and situations mutually effect one another, Newman adds that 'Traits will express

³³ Roth, 'Hearts of Darkness', 232 ff; *idem*, 'Beyond Understanding', 319–26.

³⁴ S. Alexander Haslam and Stephen Reicher, 'Beyond the Banality of Evil: Three Dynamics of an Interactionist Social Psychology of Tyranny', *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* 33 (2007), 615–22, esp. 617–19.

³⁵ *Ibid.* 619. Donald Bloxham discusses some of these readings of Arendt in 'Organized Mass Murder'.

³⁶ Haslam and Reicher, 'Beyond the Banality of Evil', 621.

³⁷ Leonard S. Newman, 'Beyond Situationism: The Social Psychology of Genocide and Mass Killing', in Helgard Kramer (ed.), *NS-Täter aus interdisziplinärer Perspektive* (München: Martin Meidenbauer, 2006), 110.

themselves in some situations and not others.³⁸ Indeed, one does not even need to do any new experiments to prove this. The old experiments suffice for that purpose. 'In fact, if you look carefully at the results of those studies [Asch, Milgram, Zimbardo], the evidence is right there. Not everyone obeys, not everyone conforms, and not everyone gets swallowed up into a role.'³⁹ True enough. But what then could be Newman's point regarding how to distinguish between situationism and interactionism? The data from the classic situational experiments only made claims about how a certain percentage of people would respond. 'Interactionism' proves indistinguishable from what it proposes to replace.⁴⁰

Surprisingly, Newman appears to concede the point, for he drops the idea that specific traits interact in particular ways, and instead emphasizes that situations can later alter the traits that people initially have. He cites literature that indicates that even though individuals might be aware that they create a certain situation, e.g., a stench caused by unsanitary conditions that perpetrators established, people will nonetheless 'blame the victim.' He sums this up as follows: '*People are not only affected by situations; they also change those situations.* The process is bi-directional. In addition, people are not always aware of how they have changed situations, and when they are, they do not always take their influence into account.'⁴¹ Indeed, Christopher Browning's now classic *Ordinary Men* offers clear and graphic demonstrations of this bidirectional process of influence. But this simply shows the extent to which the situationist paradigm already incorporates the dynamic aspect on which interactionism insists. Likewise, Newman explicitly raises the smile problem as if it were a difficulty for situationism, whereas in fact the ability to deal also with this issue proves to be a situationist strength.⁴²

Mass murder has become a feature of the twentieth century. Arendt's concern that genocides represent a new break in the moral order implicates the newly evolved technologies. Insofar as certain technologies—e.g., those of mass communication—help to engineer changes in the perceived normative framework, technology abets thoughtlessness in the Kantian sense. Even in cases where the actual means of killing remain relatively primitive, e.g., Rwanda, the use of such technologies allows for the ready mobilization and manipulation of would-be perpetrators. Technology makes *practical* obstacles to mass murders for those in the

³⁸ Leonard S. Newman, 'Beyond Situationism: The Social Psychology of Genocide and Mass Killing', in Helgard Kramer (ed.), *NS-Täter aus interdisziplinärer Perspektive* (München: Martin Meidenbauer, 2006), 110.

³⁹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁰ Newman does appreciate how Arendt has been misread by social psychologists, See Leonard S. Newman, 'The Banality of Secondary Sources: Why Social Psychologists have Misinterpreted Arendt's Thesis' (2001, unpublished talk).

⁴¹ Newman, 'Beyond Situationism', 115.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 111–13; see Roth, 'Beyond Understanding', and 'Hearts of Darkness'.

changed situation disappear.⁴³ Research and history show that prior norms will not provide sufficient constraint.

‘THOUGHTLESSNESS’ IN (FURTHER) THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVE

The work in social psychology has profound implications, in turn, for philosophical anthropology—our understanding of the type of beings that we are. And, in fact, these empirical and theoretical considerations have been further extended through some of the important and innovative work done by Ian Hacking on ‘making up people.’⁴⁴ Hacking explores how categories of people or medical classifications of them come into being (e.g., suicides, the normal, child abuse, multiple personality disorder). By what processes, he asks, do human kinds become sorted into recognized types that bureaucrats and others then use as bases for how to treat people?

In raising these questions, he goes to the heart of how social science might be possible, for scientific generalizations typically utilize categories (kinds) of entities. The generalizations, that is, apply to like items, and the relevant likenesses mark out the properties by which to sort things into kinds. The stability of generalizations thus presumes a stability of the kinds. If one seeks generalizations about human behaviour, the question to be answered concerns what makes for stable human kinds.

Hacking develops examples from a fascinating range of areas—homosexuality considered both as a medical category and as a ‘life style’, multiple personality disorder, suicides. In each case, he examines the technological, social, and scientific factors surrounding the emergence of each of these ways of categorizing individuals. So, for example, he shows how innovations in classifying and counting made possible by the development of statistical analysis abets efforts to measure the ‘health’ of

⁴³ For related reflections, see A. Dirk Moses, ‘Genocide and Modernity’, in Stone, *The Historiography of Genocide* (ed.), 166–70.

⁴⁴ Key essays by Hacking in this regard include ‘Making Up People’, in Thomas Heller, Morton Sosna, and David Wellberry (eds), *Reconstructing Individualism* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1986), 222–36; ‘Multiple Personality Disorder and its Hosts’, *History of the Human Sciences* 2 (1992), 3–31; ‘World Making by Kind-Making: Child Abuse for Example’, in Mary Douglas and David Hull (eds), *How Classification Works* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1992), 180–238; ‘The Looping Effects of Human Kinds’, in Dan Sperber, David Premack, and Ann J. Premack (eds), *Causal Cognition* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), 251–83; *Rewriting the Soul: Multiple Personality and the Sciences of Memory* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995); ‘Between Michel Foucault and Erving Goffman: Between Discourse in the Abstract and Face-to-Face Interaction’, *Economy and Society* 33 (2004), 277–302.

societies, and so ultimately to classify and count suicides. The emergence and growth of multiple personality disorder as a diagnostic category likewise links with the evolution of the definition of child abuse from physical to primarily sexual abuse. Childhood sexual abuse becomes by definition a key part of the etiology of multiple personality disorder. So as one is found pervasive, so is the other. Likewise, the homosexual considered as a distinct medical and social type also proves to be of recent historical origin. In all cases, a drive to medicalize problems (and so make them into individual and not social problems) or create scientifically certified categories of social misfits (as with multiple personality disorder) suggests how individuals can be at the mercy of others for ways to think about themselves, and how bureaucratic or social imperatives trump what the available evidence actually establishes.

But the ways in which people become classified by existing institutional arrangements also manifest what Hacking calls 'looping effects'. These involve cases where people come to inhabit a classificatory category that has been created. *Hacking's looping effect, I suggest, should be seen as a manifestation of what has been discussed above as the conformity effect.* Hacking's work points to the presence of institutionally pervasive pressures to conform to the ways in which one is diagnosed or sorted as a type of person. The categories do not need a prior reality, so to speak. Once they have an institutional context, people will make them 'real' and populate the categories.

As a philosopher of science, Hacking has a keen awareness of the stakes here in exploring how human kinds come to be, change, and perhaps fade away. 'I could develop the argument that what I call human kinds are at the historical root of sociology—the science of normality and deviance.'⁴⁵ This looping effect becomes another way to theoretically account for how people come to 'make real' roles they never envisioned themselves as inhabiting. In this regard, the implicit concern involves whether one takes the designation of a certain type of behaviour—'perpetrator', for example—as the name of a kind. Taken as a kind, one assumes common properties, and looks for elements all the individuals share. But the distinction between the notions of looping and that of situations indicates that the common elements may be largely or wholly extrinsic to the individuals involved. People readily become perpetrators by falling prey to situational factors. Looping effects indicate that the behaviour in question involves more than the conformity effect, but also the self-definition of the actor. The conformity effect does not imply looping, while the looping effect indicates how categories can be taken up by those so categorized.⁴⁶

In short, looping effects point to a power of categorization that goes beyond what the conformity effect demonstrates. Categories matter existentially, so to speak. People come to inhabit and so perpetuate and make real the categories by which they are classified. But their ultimate significance as historical or social

⁴⁵ Hacking, 'Looping Effects', 360.

⁴⁶ Hacking readily acknowledges the immense influence that the work of Michel Foucault has had on his approach to these issues.

artefacts remains distinct from the power of the conformity effect. If perpetrators adopt and adapt a categorization of themselves as perpetrators, they will internalize kind-like attributes.

Thus one way in which some human kinds differ from some kinds of thing is that classifying people works on people, changes them, and can even change their past. The process does not stop there. The people of a kind themselves are changed. Hence 'we', the experts, are forced to rethink our classifications. Moreover, causal relationships between kinds are changed. . . . This is not because we have found out more about the natural disorder, but because people who see themselves as having this human disorder now find in themselves memories of trauma, often traumas of a kind that they could not even have conceptualized twenty years ago. . . . This in turn generates a looping effect, because people of the kind behave differently and so are different. That is to say the kind changes, and so there is new causal knowledge to be gained.⁴⁷

Otherwise, what makes them perpetrators is only conformity.

A dramatic illustration of Hacking's looping effect can be found in Zimbardo's description of the well-known case where a schoolteacher, Jane Elliott, discriminated among her students by an arbitrarily chosen characteristic, e.g., eye color. The students quickly realize that discrimination exists and determine the group to which they belong. They then behave as either those entitled to privilege or those who expect the worst. A key feature of this incident concerns how the children came to occupy categories of a kind of person who was being discriminated against. Though simple in structure, the case indicates the power of categorization and how adaptation to contextual norms induces a looping effect, i.e., creates and sustains certain patterns of behaviour.⁴⁸

As Hacking insists, his account of looping effects goes beyond what, e.g., labelling theory suggests insofar as the individual may shape the category in which placed, and in doing so alters both the kind and what there is to know about the kind in question. In labelling theory a certain normative tag (e.g., 'delinquent') comes to be applied to certain behaviours. In Hacking's case, however, the emphasis concerns how people 'fill out' institutionally specified but otherwise underdetermined social roles. In many interesting cases, behaviours become tagged as representing a category in advance of any determination that they reflect common properties or causes. But this calls into existence institutionally designated but vaguely articulated kinds. Actual individuals then come to adapt to and inhabit these categories, making them real after the fact, so to speak.

Hacking suggestively juxtaposes in a complementary fashion the philosophical approaches of Michel Foucault (concerned with structures of power as structures of knowledge) and sociologist Erving Goffman, who in his turn did classic studies of self-construction within institutional frameworks and in face-to-face interactions.⁴⁹

⁴⁷ Hacking, 'Looping Effects', 369.

⁴⁸ The case is described by Zimbardo in *The Lucifer Effect*, 283-4.

⁴⁹ Hacking, 'Between Michel Foucault and Erving Goffman'.

By combining Foucauldian macroanalyses of how power influences structures of everyday life and Goffman's microanalyses of the environment of 'closed institutions'—asylums, hospitals, boarding schools—Hacking provides a compelling picture of how certain types of social norms become institutionalized and sustained even in the absence of conscious decisions by people to accept these norms. The net effect sketches how the constraints of a physical space and the assigned but indeterminate roles that people must work out within them determine who people can be.⁵⁰

The emphasis on how people come to inhabit the roles offered them emphasizes the existential insight that constraints allow for the discovery of who we are. For in the process of filling out a role, one learns and defines in a literal sense who one is.

Does one feel different, has one a different experience of oneself, if one is led to see oneself as a certain type of person? Does the availability of a classification, a label, a word or phrase, open certain possibilities, or perhaps close off others? . . . It seemed to me that a new way of describing people does not only create new ways to be, but also new ways to choose—in the existentialist philosophy, new ways to choose who one is.⁵¹

Marx famously observed that 'Men make their own history, but they do not make it just as they please; they do not make it under circumstances chosen by themselves, but under circumstances directly encountered, given, and transmitted from the past.'⁵² Hacking looks to update just this view by supplementing Marx's broad sweep with the finer grained analyses of Foucault and Goffman.

I want instead to draw on both the archaeological and the sociological approach to better understand the ways in which the actual and possible lives of individuals are constituted. . . . This is not because how we are can be freely chosen, but because the choices that are open to us are made possible by the intersection of the immediate social settings . . . and the history of that present.⁵³

The unifying point linking the thinkers discussed concerns the importance of choices. People create themselves within institutional spaces and categories not of their making. In this regard, Hacking's work extends our understanding of how

⁵⁰ Erving Goffman, *Asylums: Essays on the Social Situation of Mental Patients and other Inmates* (Garden City, NY: Anchor Books, 1961). Hacking puts the point of comparison this way: 'Goffman analyzed, by a series of ideal types, the ways in which human roles are constituted in the face-to-face interactions within an institution setting, and how patterns of normality and deviance work on individual agents—and how the agents change those norms, by a sort of feedback effect. Foucault's archaeologies establish the preconditions for and the mutations between successive institutional forms. His later genealogies are closer to how the historical settings work on people to form their potentialities, but never indicate how this happens in daily life. Goffman does that in rich detail, but gives no hint of how the surrounding structures themselves were constituted' ('Between Michel Foucault and Erving Goffman', 288).

⁵¹ *Ibid.* 285.

⁵² Karl Marx, 'The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte', in Lewis S. Feuer (ed.), *Marx and Engels: Basic Writings on Politics and Philosophy* (New York: Anchor Books, 1959), 320.

⁵³ Hacking, 'Between Michel Foucault and Erving Goffman', 288.

the conformity effect ranges over medical categories and social institutions. It helps replicate the categories created by which to count, classify, and treat people.

Perpetrators may be unwittingly made by circumstance, but the same can be said for many other types of people. My argument has been to establish that the ability of the situationist approach to deal successfully with the choice problem and the smile problem implies that the affective dimensions of genocidal behaviours—the alarming enthusiasm people bring to these roles—needs (alas) no special, or especially deep, explanation. The nasty neighbour problem and its proposed solution, i.e., that people implicitly recognized that role-determined behaviour does not constitute a general threat once the general circumstances have changed, adds I suggest an additional measure of credence to the results. To the best of my knowledge, no other explanatory proposal put forward so neatly resolves all three of these problems. These activities, rather, reflect all too well the sort of elements involved in ‘making up people’.

That these problems all find explicit anticipation in Arendt's *Eichmann in Jerusalem* underscores the ways in which philosophy and social science remain curiously tied together, at least on this issue. For on the one hand, the social scientific resources exist for explaining why people would suddenly become murderers on a mass scale, pursue this with grisly abandon, and then return to ‘normal’ lives when circumstances change. On the other hand, the empirical work appears to generate a type of moral revulsion or psychological resistance to the idea that people can just be so malleable. But perhaps a key to lessening the likelihood of creating perpetrators resides precisely in coming to terms with acknowledging the fact that though people can choose against conformity effects, relatively few will.

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