

## **Panel 4**

### **Interdisciplinary Approaches: the Social Sciences - Philosophy - Representation**

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“Holocaust Studies and Philosophy”

#### **No Why?**

Yehuda Bauer writes of recent historical work:

Who, if anyone, gave the order to murder the Jews, and when?...But, when all is said and done, what is the essential importance of this quest? If we, at some future date, know the exact way the murder was implemented, what will that knowledge give us? We will know who, what, and when, but we will not have asked the really important question: Why?<sup>1</sup>

This is not a new question. The need for an answer was felt by non-Germans immediately after the war: the journalist Gitta Sereny, later to produce two in-depth studies of major perpetrators, writes that, during her time as welfare office in Displaced Person camps in Germany, she

felt more and more that we needed to find someone capable of explaining to us how presumably normal human beings had been brought to do what had been done. It was essential... to penetrate the personality of at least one of the people who had been intimately associated with this total evil.<sup>2</sup>

Yet one of the oddities of the historiography of the Holocaust is that this central question continues to evade academic work. This paper, then, is about the not about the perpetrators but about the attempts to answer the question ‘why’.

#### **Historians**

Of course, this question is at the basis of historical studies of the Holocaust. Soon after the war, a number of broad sweeping explanations took hold – that the perpetrators were “outsiders” or “misfits”, for example: these were too broad and sweeping. More philosophical attempts to explain the events, too, seemed too broad: Adorno’s thought – that the Holocaust was interwoven with the nature of capitalism and rational modernity itself is illuminating, but – in its total condemnation of western modernity and the Enlightenment - oddly exculpatory: if everyone was to blame, then, in a way, no one was.

It is these sorts of wide-ranging conceptions that Hannah Arendt’s more theoretical and Raul Hilberg’s more empirical accounts challenged by implicating the structure of German society in the Reich as a whole. While these histories offered more nuanced views of the perpetrators – Hilberg’s “Zealots, Vulgarians and Bearers of Burdens”, Arendt’s “men of brilliant and

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<sup>1</sup> Bauer, Yehuda, *Rethinking the Holocaust* (London: Yale University Press, 2002), p. xiv.

<sup>2</sup> Gitta Sereny, *Into that Darkness* (London: Pimlico, 1974), p. 9.

facile conceptions” and “men of brutal deeds and active bestiality” between which there is an “abyss... no intellectual explanation is able to bridge” – the sense of a ‘why’ still seemed to escape.<sup>3</sup> Emil Fackenheim recalls a conversation with Raul Hilberg:

Why did they do it? I once asked Raul Hilberg.... He heaved a sigh and said: “They did it because they wanted to do it”. Of course, Hilberg know very well that this is no answer, because the next question is, Why did they want to do it? And not only that; one doesn’t do everything one wants to do.<sup>4</sup>

Similarly, as I will argue later, Arendt was unable to offer a satisfactory account of ‘why’ too.

Despite the historical detail and insight of Christopher Browning’s work, the sense of a ‘why’ here is missing. Indeed, his reliance on the flawed science - but inspired ‘science-theater’ -- of the psychologist Stanley Milgram seems almost to evade the question. In his book *Ordinary Men*, Browning asks, with a strikingly odd temporal inversion: ‘[W]as the massacre at Józefów a kind of radical Milgram experiment that took place in a Polish forest with real killers and victims rather than in a social psychology laboratory with naive subject and actor/victims?’ (OM 174). The implication of this is that once the lower level perpetrators (in any genocide) had entered what Milgram called the ‘agentic state’ –simply following what they had been told – then they become “something different” from their former selves “with new properties not easily traced to [their] usual personality”. In the Holocaust, Browning argues that ‘agentic state’ was created by the brutalisation of the war, the division of duties, the isolation of the unit in occupied Poland and indoctrination. This explains *how* the perpetrators crossed a ‘moral Rubicon’, and became killers feeling devoid of personal responsibility, but not *why*. In (high profile) contrast, Daniel Goldhagen’s explanation of a pervasive ‘eliminationist anti-Semitism’ offers another very broad ‘why’, in many ways a return to earlier understandings of the problem, but less in the sense of how, and with less of a sense of variation.

More recent work in perpetrator research (täterforschung) has, as Jürgen Matthäus analyses in his history of perpetrator historiography, focussed on the “personality” of perpetrators and their “participation in criminal actions”.<sup>5</sup> This is clearly essential. However, a crucial difference between genocide and, say, simply murder, is that genocide is a crime committed by a part – a large part – of a society, and, while individual motivations (peer pressure, fear, personal commitment to an ideology) clearly play a part in this, the ‘social’ aspect asks for a wider ‘social’ explanation.

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<sup>3</sup> Raul Hilberg *Perpetrators, Victims Bystanders* (London: HarperPerennial, 1992), p. 51: Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (London: Harcourt Brace, 1973), p. 183.

<sup>4</sup> Emil Fackenheim and Raphael Jospe eds, *Jewish Philosophy and the Academy* (London: Associated University Presses, 1996)pp. 195-6

<sup>5</sup> Jürgen Matthäus, ‘Historiography and the Perpetrators of the Holocaust’ in *The Historiography of the Holocaust* Dan Stone (ed) (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2004), p. 210.

So, while the work of historians offers more and more of an explanation of how the perpetrators came to commit genocide, the answer of 'why' – above and beyond simply 'personal' considerations - still seems elusive.

### Testimonies...

In such cases, one might well turn to more personal accounts for a sense of 'why'. There are, of course, accounts by perpetrators of their actions: court cases, memoirs, biographies, and a selection of odd genres. Of course, many of these are characterised by filled with "forgetfulness, repression, distortion, evasion and mendacity". However, some – perhaps the most celebrated – are something like 'second person' memoirs: written not by the perpetrator but about and with the perpetrator, willingly (Sereny on Speer and Stangl) or unknowingly (Moscarski on Stroop). The apparent promise of these works – especially the more famous – is that they might be able to 'penetrate' into the 'why' of the Holocaust. However, it is clear that they do not.

These texts are about, or are in themselves, acts of punishment. Forced confessions, like the formal recantation of views by heretics, are not simply stating facts: they are themselves part of the form of punishment. Just as, at Nuremberg, the trial was more a show trial to educate the world and the former Reich about Nazism, so too concurrent trials (Hoess in Poland) and later ones (Eichmann, the Hamburg trials) were about education and wider political issues rather than simply the judicial process. In strange symmetry to the idea that the crimes were considered 'beyond punishment', or as crimes against humanity, for which no court can stand (as no one court stands for all humanity), these confessions are a form of extra-judicial punishment. Events witnessed and testimonies written, then, act not simply as a chronicle of events but as a wider, literary calling to account. Mozcarski attacks Stroop over the death of his brother, which lends the testimony the air of psychodrama. *Into that Darkness* ends, with Gitta Sereny making Stangl confess, past his courtroom "My conscience is clear about what I did, myself" through to "I never intentionally hurt anyone" through to "in reality I share the guilt...my guilt...only now in these talks...my guilt is that I am still here".<sup>6</sup>

Nineteen hours after this, he is dead. "I think he died" Sereny writes because he had finally, however, briefly, faced himself and told the truth; it was a monumental effort to reach that fleeting moment when he became the man he should have been".<sup>7</sup>

There is more than a hint here – not least from the form itself, the location of this comment in the narrative flow of the text - that Sereny, or Sereny's actions have in fact killed him. (Sereny revisits this in the final pages of her Speer book: here she finds his refusal to die, though "he needed and longed to die" of central interest).<sup>8</sup> This desire to hear a confession, or to force a confession – above any mendacity by the perpetrator – silences or shapes an answer to 'why'.

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<sup>6</sup> Gitta Sereny, *Into that Darkness* (London: Pimlico 1995), p. 364.

<sup>7</sup> Serent, *Into that Darkness*, p. 366.

<sup>8</sup> Gitta Sereny, *Albert Speer: his battle with truth* (London: Picador, 1995) p. 704.

These texts also beg questions about 'factual' truth and mendacity. Indeed, while the genre itself seems to ask the reader to willingly suspend our belief, the content of the texts keeps returning to these questions. Again, this is the core of Sereny's book on Speer. The whole of Sereny's book hinges on Speer's presence or absence at Himmler's speech at Posen 6<sup>th</sup> October 1943 and so about whether he actually (officially, as it were) knew about the Holocaust: it was "absolutely central to an understanding of him", a "landmark date".<sup>9</sup> Joachim Fest's account of Speer, too, argues this is a "crucial" date.<sup>10</sup> This concentration itself is odd, as the book draws so much on the 'total texture' of his life and his battle with truth: this moment of presence or absence becomes a narrative touchstone, a moment where the non-provable non-empirical tapestry of a life can be pinned down, held for a moment to account. Like a good detective story, the Sereny builds up the suspense. First, she stresses how important it is for him not to have heard the speech. In 1971, Speer hears about an article by Erich Goldhagen which alleged he had been present: it sends Speer into cold sweats and makes him sleepless. Sereny shows this article to be faulty (the allegation is the result of an unedited proof). Then Speer lists all the reasons he couldn't have been there: no night landings were possible back in Germany, Hitler's appointment book showed his return and so on. Then, piece by piece Sereny takes these away:

the fact is that the more Speer tries to explain away awkward facts, the clearer it is that he is desperately trying to avoid facing the truth. There is simply no way that Speer can have failed to know about Himmler's speech, whether or not he sat through it.<sup>11</sup>

This date becomes an epiphanic moment, a concrete historical fact that can be proved or disproved. In fact, the text itself, in the final pages (the chapter called 'the great lie') allows that Speer himself "sensed dreadful things were happening with the Jews" and then in a cited letter to the South African Board of Deputies, that he considers "my main guilt to be my tacit acceptance of the persecution and murder of million of Jews".<sup>12</sup> Sereny pauses over the translation of 'tacit acceptance': *billigung*. Speer himself glosses it as also 'looking away, not by knowledge of an order or its executioner'.<sup>13</sup> Thus, Speer (and so Sereny) admits a general sense of knowledge, to which one incident (official though it may be) is not crucial, nor landmark. I think that Sereny's text focuses on this moment, however, precisely because it can be codified, discussed: it is not the secret – the answer to 'why?'-- but the encryption of the secret, the hiding and the denial of it that is the issue. The answer as to 'why' escapes.

### Why no answer?

If, then, the work by generations of historians has provided a much more complex and nuanced 'how' and yet no satisfactory 'why', and work by perpetrators and more importantly on perpetrators in detail has failed in this

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<sup>9</sup> Sereny, *Speer* pp. 397, 399.

<sup>10</sup> Joachim Fest *Speer: the final verdict* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 2001), p. 185. account of Hess, too, argues this is a "crucial" date

<sup>11</sup> Sereny, *Speer* p. 401

<sup>12</sup> Sereny, *Speer* pp. 706, 707.

<sup>13</sup> Sereny, *Speer* p. 708; See also Fest, *Speer* p. 333.

too, it seems fair to ask about why this question is so hard to answer. I want to outline three possible approaches to why to this.

The first turns on the nature of language itself, and especially on both memoir and more importantly, history as a genre. Hayden White defines the historical work as “a verbal structure in the form of a narrative prose discourse that purports to be a model, or icon, of past structures and processes in the interest of explaining what they were by representing them”.<sup>14</sup> The issue I want to focus on here is not to do with the epistemology of the past, but to do with the ‘explanation’ these texts offer. Paul de Man, who we may take as knowing something about telling and not telling, writes that

rhetoric functions as a key to the discovery of the self, and it functions with such ease that one may well begin to wonder whether the lock indeed shapes the key or whether it is not be the other way round, that a lock (and a secret room on box behind it) had to be invented to give a function to that key.<sup>15</sup>

That is, the very form of historical writing, especially when focussed on the actions of people from the past, itself creates an expectation that there will be an answer. (This is the shared root of fictional and historical prose in the Enlightenment: both began as explanatory narratives). The question and the elaborate, careful and well-developed methodologies of history expect an answer. But there may be none, or none that can fit this methodology, and to explain ‘how’ is to explain as much of the ‘why’ as is possible.

A second explanation of the difficulty of explanation in this case lies in the relationship between language and ethics. There a number of different ways to explore this, but one very clear account is offered by Hilary Putnam in his book *Reason, Truth and History*. Here, he argues for what he calls an ‘internalist’ perspective on truth: ‘because it is characteristic of this view to hold that *what objects does the world consist of?* is a question that makes sense to ask only *within* a theory or description’.<sup>16</sup> He goes on

“Truth” in an internalist view, is some sort of (idealized) rational acceptability - some sort of ideal coherence of our beliefs with each other and with our experiences *as those experiences are themselves represented in our belief system*<sup>17</sup>

Truth, he argues ‘itself gets its life from our criteria of rational acceptability’.<sup>18</sup> Putnam suggests that the standards of rational acceptability take in a range of areas of human life including our ethical standards. What people would expect, what they can and cannot defend, and so on, also fall under the standards of rational acceptability for Putnam: they can be investigated, discussed, explored, justified and so on in an open-ended way. He suggests, over the course of the book, three ways in which a putative Nazi might

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<sup>14</sup> White, Hayden *Metahistory* (London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1973), p. 2.

<sup>15</sup> Paul de Man, *Allegories of Reading* (London: Yale University Press, 1979) p. 173.

<sup>16</sup> Hilary Putnam, *Reason, Truth and History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), p. 49.

<sup>17</sup> Putnam, *Reason* pp. 49-50.

<sup>18</sup> Pytnam, *Reason* p. 132.

engage with this. First, the Nazi might claim that his beliefs are right and good: this, Putnam says is ‘rubbish’ as his arguments are self-contradictory and weak and the ‘notion of a ‘good argument’, he writes, is ‘internal to ordinary moral discourse’.<sup>19</sup> Second, the Nazi may simply claim that he has chosen these positions because that is how he feels, without offering an explanation: then Putnam suggests, then we are right to blame them for unjustified actions. Third, and with perhaps most historical weight, Putnam argues that if the Nazi argues that he repudiates moral norms, then his culture

would lose the ability to describe ordinary interpersonal relations, social events and political events adequately and perspicuously *by our present lights* (original italics)... if the different ideology and moral outlook are... warped and monstrous, then the result will simply be an inadequate, unperspicuous, repulsive representation of interpersonal and social facts.<sup>20</sup>

Even if the Nazi still maintains a moral vocabulary of sorts (as, say, Stropf claimed he did) then even these terms will no longer work in the same way that normal moral notions work. The Nazi will be morally incomprehensible: there will be no shared world, or very basic rational acceptability. Each of these three alternatives really describe the ways in which the Nazi is simply not amenable to debate or rational discourse, which in turn means that their post-war accounts of themselves or histories that aim to explain ‘why’ simply won’t make sense: there will be no ‘real’ to which to penetrate, there are no shared standards by which to justify – or even explain -- their behaviour. It may be that there is no way that we can understand the Nazi: this form of behaviour simply does not belong to our moral world. That is, they were no longer ‘normal human beings’ if, by normal one might mean (*pace* Putnam) sharing the lowest level of a communal rationality.

A third approach comes from one of the earliest, and most insightful, attempts undertake an account of a perpetrator, Hannah Arendt’s *Eichmann in Jerusalem*. Of course, this book generated controversy in its time, and still does.<sup>21</sup> Its central claims are often misunderstood. Raul Hilberg didn’t like the book, even though it draws considerably and with correct scholarly deference on his own magisterial work and shares many of his conclusions and insights. At the core of the idea of the “fearsome, word-and-thought-defying banality of evil” is the idea that there simply is no ‘radical evil’ in the Kantian sense, no ‘satanic evil’, but that ‘evil’ – while horrific – is the result of a much simpler process.<sup>22</sup> Arendt argues that Eichmann “was genuinely incapable of uttering a single sentence that was not a cliché.”<sup>23</sup> This in turn was because

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<sup>19</sup> Putnam, *Reason* p. 212

<sup>20</sup> Putnam, *Reason*, p. 212.

<sup>21</sup> See, for recent coverage, David Cesarani *Eichmann: his life and crimes* (London: Heinemann, 2004).

<sup>22</sup> Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann In Jerusalem* (London: Penguin, 1997), p. 252. Space makes a consideration of this impossible here: this concept is widely discussed. Interestingly, Browning thinks it a useful concept but misapplied to Eichmann Christopher Browning *Collected Memory: Holocaust History and Postwar Testimony* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2003) pp 3-4. A good account is given in Selya Benhabib ‘Arendt’s *Eichmann in Jerusalem*’ in Dana Villa (ed) *The Cambridge Companion to Hannah Arendt* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000) and in various in Steven Aschheim (ed), *Hannah Arendt in Jerusalem* (London: University of California Press, 2001).

<sup>23</sup> Arendt, *Eichmann...* p. 48.

closely connected with an inability to *think*, namely, to think from the standpoint of somebody else. No communication was possible with him, not because he lied but because he was surrounded by the most reliable of safeguards against the words and the presence of others, and hence against reality as such.<sup>24</sup>

Evil is not 'deep' or 'statacic' or even 'interesting', either in the mundane sense or in the original sense of 'inter-esse', between beings. There is just nothing there: it is an absence. This is not to argue, with Paul Roth, that 'there is no why' but that evil, in this understanding, is not amiable to a foundational answer.<sup>25</sup> Writing to Scholem, Arendt puts it like this:

It is indeed my opinion now that evil is never "radical," that it is only extreme, and that it possesses neither depth nor any demonic dimension. It can overgrow and lay waste the whole world precisely because it spreads like a fungus on the surface. It is "thought-defying," as I said, because thought tries to reach some depth, to go to the roots, and the moment it concerns itself with evil, it is frustrated because there is nothing. That is its "banality."<sup>26</sup>

If this is correct, then it means that the attempt to 'penetrate', to understand the evil is doomed to failure, because, simply, there is nothing to understand. It explains why some of these histories are only descriptive accounts (they offer a historical account of the evil acts) and some are quasi-juridical (they judge the evil) but can get no closer to the evil, as evil, here, has no depth. This is absolutely not to say that this evil is not evil, nor only to say it is for desk killers, but it is to analyse the form of that evil.

## Conclusion

This is not to say that the Holocaust – or any genocide – is a 'transcendental event', inexplicable and beyond knowledge. It is to say, however, that it questions what we might think of as the standards of explication. The question, then, of 'why?' perpetrators did what they did – like nearly all questions regarding the Holocaust - turns out to ask meta-questions. In this case, the question is: what counts as an explanation? How might we know when we have got to the end of an investigation? What answer satisfies us? These are, of course, very hard to answer both in the abstract and in this context. In part, the inability of knowing 'when to stop' is perhaps a response to the horror. What explanation of guilt could be enough? This sort of idea underlies the fictional/theoretical opening of Sean Burke's *The Ethics of Writing* (2008) in which Nietzsche is called to account for the Holocaust because only the murder of God – analysed, poeticised, proclaimed by Nietzsche – could be enough of a cause. In part, it is because the very question of guilt is too 'interdisciplinary', because each discipline that approaches this issue provides different discoveries or paths of analysis (sociologists find sociological pressure, historians find historical circumstances, philosophers locate moral evil and personal weakness): the

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<sup>24</sup> Arendt, *Eichmann...* p. 49.

<sup>25</sup> Paul A. Roth, 'Hearts of Darkness: "Perpetrator History" and why there is no why' *History of the Human Sciences* 17: 2/3, pp. 211-251.

<sup>26</sup> Hannah Arendt *The Jewish Writings* ed. by Jerome Kohn and Ron H. Feldman (New York: Schocken Books, 2007). I owe this to Simon Swift.

sheer competition of explanations makes one impossible. This is not the 'inexplicability' of the Holocaust, but an over-explicability. And finally, in part, because the Nazi world is at one and the same time both utterly familiar and utterly unfamiliar in a self-contradictory way. A character in David Grossman's *See Under: Love* discusses the 'White Room': she

explained that for forty years people had been writing about the Holocaust and would continue to do so, only they were doomed to failure... There is nothing in the White Room. It's empty. But everything that exists beyond its membranous walls, everything that flows out of the corridors of Yad Vashem is projected into it.<sup>27</sup>

The 'White Room' is a symbol of both the fact that in any analysis of the Holocaust the analyzer brings his or her own world with them, and of the continuing complexity and paradoxical nature of explaining, and of satisfying the need for explanation of the events. The question of 'why?' is perhaps the most central – and so the most unanswerable - of all these questions.

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<sup>27</sup> Grossman, David *See Under: Love*, trans. Betsy Rosenberg (New York: The Noonday Press Farrar Strauss Girouz, 1989) p. 124-5.