

Understanding Evil Acts

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Abstract. Evil acts strike us, by their very nature, as not only horrifying and reprehensible, but also as deeply puzzling. No doubt for reasons like this, evil has often been seen as mysterious, demonic and beyond our human powers of understanding. The question I examine in this paper is whether or not we can (or would want to) overcome this puzzlement in the face of evil acts. I shall argue that we ought want to (in all cases) and can (in at least most cases) come to understand why people perpetrate evil acts. This is an appealing conclusion as it allows us to take practical steps to both minimise future occurrences of evil and come to terms with its past abominations.

Keywords: Arendt, Eichmann, empathy, evil, explanation, Hitler, identification, simulation, theory, understanding.

1. Introduction

Evil acts strike us, by their very nature, as not only horrifying and reprehensible, but also as deeply puzzling. No doubt for reasons like this, evil has often been seen as mysterious, demonic and beyond our human powers of understanding. But, as Susan Nieman argues, “to insist that evil is demonic is not only to insist that it is fundamentally mysterious, but thereby to relegate it to religion, rather than to politics” (2001: 86-7). If we *could* understand why people performed evil acts then it should be possible to also address evil at a political rather than just a theological level. This would be a good thing, or so I shall argue. However, it first needs to be shown that we *can* understand why people do evil. This position has often been denied. Joel Feinberg, for example, thinks evil cannot be understood because of the “unintelligibility of the actor’s reasons or motives” for evil-doing (see Corlett, 2004: 82).¹ On this view evil is *necessarily* puzzling as, by its very nature, it eludes our powers of understanding. This view might seem intuitively appealing, for what intelligible reason can there ever be to do evil? The question I examine here is whether or not we can (or would want to) overcome this puzzlement in the face of evil

acts. I shall argue that we ought want to (in all cases) and can (in at least most cases) come to understand why people perpetrate evil acts.

2. What is evil?

The term ‘evil’ can be used in either an *axiological* sense, to refer to things or states that lack value or have disvalue (e.g. “everything adverse in human lives,” from “wars and massacres” to “drought and plague”), (Garrard, 2002: 320) or in a *moral* sense, to refer to acts which are not merely wrong, but evil. I shall henceforth be using the term ‘evil’ only in its moral sense. Moral evil is thus conceptually a subset of moral wrong and refers to those acts, such as sadistically torturing and killing children, which are beyond the pale of ‘normal’ wrongdoing. A clear example is the Holocaust - such an event was wrong, but it was more than *just* wrong, it was evil. In contrast, a subway rider who does not pay their fare does wrong, but not evil. Evil is therefore a ‘wrong-intensifier’. But this, according to Hillel Steiner, can mean two things (2002: 184). First, that there is a *quantitative* threshold that needs to be met, so that an evil act is just a very, very wrong act. Second, that there is a *qualitative* difference, so that an evil act is a wrong one intensified by the presence of some additional property or properties. Daniel Haybron, (2002) Eve Garrard (2002) and Steiner, (2002) for example, all take this qualitative difference position as sacrosanct, although the point is, arguably, debatable.

In any case, there are just three possible general approaches to conceptualising evil. This claim utilises the familiar Rawlsian distinction between a *conceptualisation* and a *concept*. The concept defines the problem, the conceptualisation gives the solution (Korsgaard, 1996: 113). Thus a conceptualisation of evil is a solution to the problem of which acts are so morally abhorrent that they go significantly (qualitatively or quantitatively) beyond the pale of mere moral wrongness. The three approaches to conceptualising evil are: *victim* approaches, which focus on the amount of harm done to victims; *perpetrator* approaches, which focus on some combination of the cause (e.g. motive), affect and response (e.g. remorse, joy) of the perpetrator; and *combination* approaches, which incorporate both victim and perpetrator approaches. For example, on Claudia Card’s (2002: 3) victim approach, “evils...have two basic components: (intolerable) harm and (culpable) wrong doing”. That is, for Card, it is the intolerable harm inflicted on victims of evil that sets such acts apart as qualitatively different from wrongs.

It is not my intention here, however, to support or defend any particular conceptualisation of evil (for some recent attempts to do so see Cushman, 2001; Garrard, 1998; Midgley 1984; Morton, 2004; Vetlesen, 2005). Thus I shall leave the question of which (if any) is the correct conceptualisation of evil very much open here, for the following reasons. First, the question of understanding *why* someone performs an evil act is one that can be answered independently of *what* one's particular conceptualisation of evil is, provided that there is broad agreement (and there is) about the concept of evil and about certain paradigm cases of evil (e.g. everyone agrees that Hitler's acts count as evil). That is, I am not concerned here with what makes an evil act *evil*, but with *why* people do evil. Second, the methodology for approaching the question of understanding evil acts, which I set out below, is compatible with many different conceptualisations of evil. That being said, the attempt to understand evil-doers may have implications for our conceptualisation of evil. In particular, if my account is successful in illustrating the motivational diversity of perpetrators of evil, then those conceptualisations of evil that focus solely on the perpetrator possessing certain 'diabolical' motives, are made to look implausible, as they tend to see evil-doers as a motivationally homogenous rather than heterogenous set.²

3. What is understanding?

The question of what it means to 'understand' human actions is taken up across a remarkably large and disparate literature.³ However, there has been relatively little work done in the field of ethics concerning the understanding of evil acts. This is because ethics traditionally focuses on good and/or right acts, which are the sorts of acts for which problems of understanding do not in general arise. There is nothing mysterious or puzzling about morally good and right behaviour. We have, by and large, no problem understanding why people might perform morally right acts and we can often imagine ourselves as able to act similarly. Heroic or supererogatory acts, though we might sometimes doubt ourselves capable of them, evoke feelings of moral admiration, not disgust and puzzlement. In contrast, evil acts seem to be the paradigm case of acts that we find difficult or impossible to understand.

In trying to understand evil acts we are concerned with asking 'why' questions, namely, 'why did the evil-doer perform the evil act?' In general, when asked why you have performed a certain act, it is usual to give an answer that states a

(or the) reason you had for acting (Gordon, 2000: 74). For example, the reason I opened the fridge was because I was hungry. This is a reason explanation. It explains why the act was done in terms of a (or the) reason the agent themselves actually had for acting.⁴ But sometimes we give other types of explanations, such as ‘I did it because I was angry’, ‘I did it because I was forced into it against my will’, or ‘I did it because I was intoxicated at the time’, etc. That is, we either give an explanation in terms of a reason we had for acting, or give an explanation of why we acted without really needing any particular reason, namely, because we were in a certain state, or we were forced into acting in a certain way, or because we acted from emotional rather than deliberative grounds. Sometimes we don’t even know ourselves why we act as we do and other times we are mistaken, confused, or deceived about the real reasons for which we act. The point I wish to make here is simply that we understand human behaviour by seeing what moved the agent to act as they did, and what moved them is often a reason (but sometimes an emotion, a whim, etc) that spoke in favour of doing that act.

It is important to note that having a reason to act is very different from having a *justified* reason to act. I have a reason to perform a particular act when there is something that speaks in favour of performing that act, even if it ought not to speak in favour of performing that act, or ought not to override other morally salient reasons for not acting (or acting differently). For example, my reason for stealing from you is to get rich, but wanting to get rich is no reason to steal. Thus we can see a reason to act can just mean the *actual* reason a person has for acting, or it can mean a *justifiable* or *reasonable* reason for performing that act. While there is never a justifiable reason to do evil, nonetheless, people may have actual reasons to do evil (e.g. for gain, for pleasure, in order to do their job etc). It is these actual reasons that we need to understand here.

There are two general views about how we arrive at, or see the point of, reason explanations of the actions of other persons. On the one hand, there is the view that we arrive at our understanding of others through theory (theory theory, TT), and on the other hand, that we do so through simulation (simulation theory, ST) (Davies & Stone, 1995: 1-44). In the literature the so-called ‘false belief’ task is often used to distinguish these positions. In this experiment a puppet character, Maxi, is shown to a group of children, who subsequently observe Maxi putting a piece of chocolate in the kitchen before departing. However, while Maxi is away and without his knowledge,

the chocolate is moved to another location. The children are then asked where Maxi will look for the chocolate. Only children over four seem consistently able to answer correctly, while the under fours generally predict Maxi will look where the chocolate is in fact, not where Maxi believes he left it. The under fours fail to understand why Maxi acts as he does, and it is claimed that this is because they cannot handle cases of false beliefs.

The question that is debated in the literature concerns how we are to explain the difference between the under fours and the over fours. Namely, do the children gain a folk theoretical *knowledge* of the concept of belief (and so also the concept of a false belief), or do they gain an *ability* to simulate others (and so are able to see things from Maxi's perspective rather than their own)? Any cognitively 'normal' adult has no problems *intuitively* understanding why Maxi acts as he does. But understanding is not *innate* as the false-belief experiment shows. The question then remains whether our ability to understand others is *grounded* in simulation or theory (or both).

However, whatever the answer to this question is, it need not concern us here, for it is quite clear that in the above case we can (as is often pointed out) use *either* method to understand Maxi's actions. Indeed, as a matter of fact, we just do, in everyday practical cases of understanding, use *both* methods. For example, to understand why an intoxicated person kicks over a bin, I can simulate how I might act if intoxicated or I can draw upon theoretical knowledge about how intoxicated people generally behave (especially if I have never been intoxicated myself). Indeed, as Henderson and Horgan argue, "we do well epistemically to employ simulation and theoretical models as complementary processes – and to employ hybrid processes" (2000: 133-6). Further, they rightly point out that: "We believe that such a joint application is reflected in the ways we manage to understand others, and we conclude that this is central to our epistemic competence in understanding others" (2000: 139). A similar point is made by Morton (2004: 96). Thus, in trying to understand evil acts we shall do well to employ theoretical, simulative and hybrid methods.

However, understanding is not an all or nothing affair - it comes in degrees. A reason explanation may remove only *some* but not *all* of our puzzlement. We have achieved what I shall call a *basic* understanding of an act when: 1) we can give a reason explanation and 2) we can see how that reason could lead the agent to act as they do. To illustrate this point, consider the following example, taken from Schatzki (2003: 3):

What, for example, are the Azande doing in killing those fowl and examining their entrails? They are consulting an oracle. Why, moreover, are they doing it? In order to determine whether witchcraft played a part in some recent misfortune. A person understands the Azande, more specifically, this particular practice, when he grasps these matters.

Even after having worked out what the act is (oracle consulting), the reason for which the Azande are acting as such (to find out whether witchcraft played a part in some recent misfortune) and why that reason leads them to act as they do (they believe examining fowl entrails is the way to ascertain this information), we still feel that we do not *fully* understand the Azande's behaviour.

Schatzki (2003: 3) rightly points out that "one can grasp what people are doing and why, and at the same time feel that one still doesn't get it. The people's behaviour remains opaque or baffling". While we have what I am calling a basic understanding of the Azande's actions, there is still much that puzzles us about their behaviour. Schatzki (2003: 4) explains this as follows:

One might grasp, not just what people are doing and why, but also the point of it all, and *still* feel a distance from, a lack of feeling for, some practice. This gap can be described...as not being able to relate to the practice...One simply cannot imagine acting as the Azande do...If one really understood them, one could imagine carrying them out...In this sense, one understands a practice when one can participate in it.

We have only fully understood a practice, according to Schatzki, when we can meaningfully and competently engage in it.

The above discussion shows us that we understand an act more deeply if we can (at least) imagine ourselves as *actually* able to do that same act. We have achieved what I shall call a *full* understanding of an act only when we can meaningfully carry out that same act ourselves and relate to others who act similarly. This occurs only when we can fully reconcile ourselves to how and why others perform such acts because we can imagine ourselves as able to actually perform that very same act.

The role of imagination here needs to be demarcated from its role in simulation. In a simulation we are not imagining ourselves as *actually* being able to do the act under question. Rather, we are using off-line simulation to see how, with a set of explicitly *pretend* beliefs and desires, we can formulate a *pretend* reason for doing an act (Davis and Stone, 1995: 20). In this sense of imagining we need neither *identify*⁵ nor *empathise*⁶ with the agent we are simulating. This is because we may not

at all be able to either identify or empathise with the explicitly *pretend* beliefs and desires we are simulating. For example, I may be able to imaginatively simulate off-line that, *if* I held vicious anti-Semitic beliefs then that may give me a reason to perform or support certain vicious anti-Semitic acts. But this does not mean that I can *actually* imagine *myself* having that belief, or that I can imagine *myself* doing those acts.

In contrast when we draw on the role of imagination for arriving at a *full* rather than a *basic* understanding, we imagine ourselves *actually* being able to perform that very same act. This involves (in general) both identifying and empathising with the agent who performed that act. It involves identifying because I am able to imagine myself as actually able to perform the very same act in similar situations and so I can identify with the agent by seeing that I too would act similarly. It involves empathising if I can also imagine how the agent is feeling when they act as they do in a certain situation. Therefore, in order to fully understand the anti-Semite I would have to be able to imagine *myself* as both *actually* holding anti-Semitic beliefs (not just explicitly pretending to) and *actually* capable of carrying out vicious anti-Semitic acts. In short, only by being able to engage in similar acts myself can I fully understand an act, and if I can fully understand an act, then I can (generally) identify and empathise with the agent of that act.⁷

So how does this relate to evil? I shall argue that we ought to try to, and can (in at least most cases), reach a *basic* (rather than *full*) understanding of evil acts. It certainly seems wrong to claim that others ought to try and either identify or empathise with perpetrators of evil.⁸ Nor, by and large, can most of us do so, although it is probably true that at least some people can. In any case, or so I shall argue, a basic understanding of evil acts is all that is needed to develop practical strategies to prevent or minimise future occurrences of evil and to help us, at least somewhat, come to terms with past evils.

4. How to understand evil acts

Evil acts, while puzzling, are not the *only* types of acts that are puzzling. For example, the actions of a schizophrenic can seem puzzling to those who are unfamiliar with the nature of the illness. The behaviour of people acting under vastly different social and cultural conditions, such as the Azande case outlined earlier, can seem puzzling to those unfamiliar with such conditions. The actions of a compulsive and addicted

gambler can seem puzzling to those who have never been addicted to gambling, or anything else for that matter. These acts confuse us and we find ourselves asking ‘how’ and ‘why’ people can bring themselves to act like that. Clearly, then, evil acts are not alone in being puzzling.

The above example suggests that what makes an act puzzling is that it is performed by an agent who is in either an unfamiliar *state* (e.g. a schizophrenic), or *situation* (e.g. the Azande), or who holds fundamentally different *beliefs, desires, values* or *preferences* from our own. Other factors that may also be relevant here are our unfamiliarity with the agent’s *biography* (e.g. whether they were abused as a child), *character* (e.g. whether they have a vicious disposition) and any general *psychological facts* about human agents (e.g. people fitting this profile, or having these characteristics or neural structures, often perform acts of a certain type).⁹ It is my claim that we find acts to be puzzling, in general, in just those cases where we lack information about these properties. Further, in order to remove our puzzlement, we need to, as well as improve and hone our simulative abilities, correct this lack of information. I take this to be a plausible and not overly controversial suggestion. What is controversial is to claim that evil acts are puzzling for just these very same reasons (i.e. because we lack information about the above mentioned properties). Therefore, what makes evil acts puzzling, or so I shall argue, is not the ‘mysterious’ nature of evil, but our unwillingness to try to understand why perpetrators do what they do with all the relevant information at our disposal.

Consider the case of a compulsive gambler called John. My claim is that our puzzlement about John’s gambling behaviour is caused by paying insufficient attention to the relevant details. These are, from the above list: state (John may be lonely), situation (John lives in a society where gambling is not socially frowned upon), beliefs (John believes that he will ‘win it big’ next time), biography (John has become isolated from friends and family) and relevant psychological facts about, in this case, gambling addiction (on the issue of addiction see Elster, 1999). These details, if explored in appropriate depths, should provide us with a basic understanding of John’s compulsive gambling behaviour. This is because in the light of such information we can now see *why* John acts as he does (John thinks he will ‘win it big’ next time, gambling fills an important emotional hole in his life, etc), and *how* John can bring himself to act like that (John is addicted, gambling is not socially frowned upon, etc). This basic understanding removes much of our puzzlement about

the actions of compulsive gamblers like John. My claim is that a similar method applied to evil acts will likewise remove at least some of our puzzlement about such acts.

However, it might be objected that evil acts are not puzzling in just the same way as other non-evil acts are puzzling. For while I may not be sure about exactly how I would act in very foreign situations, it seems that no matter what the situation, I would never go around inflicting evil. But unfortunately, we have learnt that many 'normal' humans, in bad situations, are indeed capable of great evil. This does not imply that each and every one of us would do evil in certain situations, but it does mean that people who lead law-abiding lives in some situations might not live them under other (less lucky) situations. Put to the test, for example, many of us would have become complicit in Nazis crimes if we had been in the same situation as the German people in the 1940s.

For reasons like these, John Doris (2002) thinks that situation is a more important indicator of future behaviour than character. We need not accept this thesis to note that it is surely true that situation will play a large part in influencing the sorts of acts people will choose to do and the reasons for which they will choose to do them. Contemporary psychology calls our common mistake of underestimating how much each person's behaviour varies from one situation to another 'the fundamental attribution error'. Morton (2004: 6) explains this error as follows:

We explain why sometimes we meet one kind of behavior – lying, truth telling [etc.]...and sometimes another by thinking that some people lie, or tell the truth...most of the time and others do not. But in fact each person's actions vary more from occasion to occasion than we normally suppose, so that the variation in the acts we observe is due more to each person's variability and less to the variety of people around us.

It is obvious how this mistake applies to evil acts. We see a certain type of behaviour, evil, and assume that only a different variety of people could perform such acts, whereas in fact much evil may be due to the variability of individual persons acting in different contexts.¹⁰

In support of his view Doris (2002: 39-51, 134) cites numerous psychological experiments and, of particular interest here, are the well-known Milgram 'obedience' experiments. From 1960 to 1963 Stanley Milgram ran various permutations of his experiment with around one thousand subjects who responded to newspaper advertisements seeking paid participants for the study of memory and learning. On

arrival the subject was designated the “teacher” by a lab-coated “experimenter” and introduced to the “learner”, who, unknown to the teacher, was a confederate in the experiment. The teacher was then instructed to inflict a series of electric shocks on the learner (who was in another room and was not actually shocked) each time that they got an answer wrong in a word-association test, incrementally increasing the intensity of the shocks with each wrong answer.

Shock levels ranged from 15 to 450 in increments of 15. If throughout the process the teacher expressed concern, the experimenter responded with a series of four verbal prods, the strongest being, “You have no choice, you *must* continue”, delivered in a firm but not impolite tone of voice. If the teacher refused to continue after the four verbal prods, the experiment ended and the subject was counted as “disobedient”. The subject was counted as “obedient” if they continued to the end. At shock level 75 a cry of “Ugh!” was heard by the teacher, at 150 “Get me out of here. I told you I had heart trouble”, at 195 “Let me out of here. Let me out of here. My heart’s bothering me”, at 270 an “agonized scream”, at 330 an “intense and prolonged agonized scream” and “You have no right to hold me here. Let me out! Let me out!”. After 330 and until 450 the learner was unresponsive. Has he had a heart attack? Is he dead? What is the teacher to do? According to the experimenter the teacher is to treat no answer as a wrong answer and continue administering shocks. Amazingly two-thirds of participants in the experiment went on until the bitter-end and obediently reached 450. However, participants did not, in general, display blind obedience. Subjects were observed to sweat, tremble, bite their lips, groan and yet continue to obey until the very end.

Not surprisingly, when surveyed beforehand no potential subjects said they would be fully obedient and the typical prediction for the behaviour of others was that only 1 or 2 percent would be fully obedient. Yet the fact remains that about two-thirds of participants were fully obedient. This is an enormously shocking and disturbing result. What is clear is that Milgram didn’t happen to stumble across a weird cohort of sadists hanging out in New Haven. Large proportions of psychologically (and presumably morally) normal people performed acts which we might not think normal people are capable of. While most of us might not be able to imagine how we could possibly act like those participants in the Milgram experiments, nonetheless many of us would have in fact acted similarly. Put in the wrong situation even ‘normal’ people can act in unimaginably reprehensible ways.

In order for an agent to perpetrate an evil act, actual (but unjustifiable) reasons for doing that act need to be acted upon, even though they ought not to be. How is this possible? The Milgram experiments show us one way this can come about. The reason the teachers had for acting as they did was simply because they were told to do so as part of a job that they had agreed to accept payment for. But what we really want to know is *how* they could act on that reason when doing so ostensibly involved inflicting potentially lethal harm on unwilling learners. Clearly, the answer to this question, in the case of the Milgram experiments, can only be because of the situation the ‘teachers’ found themselves in.

Part of seeing how people can bring themselves to perpetrate evil acts is to understand that certain situations are what I shall call *evil-encouraging*. While it is individuals, not situations, that bring about evil, it is essential to understand that individuals always act within a particular situation that, in many cases, allows or even encourages their evil behaviour. A situation is evil-encouraging if being in that situation increases the likelihood that one might perform an evil act.¹¹ A situation is evil-discouraging if the opposite is the case. Of course, this is a matter of degree. There is a continuous scale from situations that strongly encourage evil, to ones that are fairly neutral, to others that strongly discourage evil. For example, having a fair distribution of resources which is sufficient to satisfy the basic needs of a community, equal access to employment and education opportunities, as well as uncorrupted and effective political leaders and institutions, all provide for, in general, an evil-discouraging situation. In contrast, the opposites of these conditions all provide for, in general, an evil-encouraging situation. War zones and Milgram-type situations are highly evil-encouraging. Lack of opportunities and poverty encourages evil, whereas peace and prosperity discourages it.¹² Beliefs, not just situations, can also be evil-encouraging or discouraging.¹³ Racist beliefs, for example, are in general evil-encouraging. A belief that everyone, irrespective of race or gender, deserves certain levels of respect, is likely to be evil-discouraging. However, unlike situations, most beliefs are relatively neutral – for example, the belief that it is raining outside seems to neither encourage nor discourage evil.

Some perpetrators of evil are able to perpetrate that evil only because they have been subject to a process of conditioning. A person may start out with just one small step down the road toward evil, but once they start, each further step becomes easier and easier, until they are able to do something that they would not have been

capable of initially. Such a process of conditioning was clearly at play in the incremental nature of the Milgram experiments. Similarly in Nazi Germany, for example, humiliation and discrimination of the Jewish people began relatively mildly, with Jews initially being excluded only from government jobs and the military. Later they were made to wear yellow stars and were eventually forced out of their businesses and homes. Finally they were moved to ghettos and then to death camps. Bureaucrats began by administering only minor humiliations and discriminations against Jews and then incrementally increased the severity of their harm-doing until they were organising genocide. Minor evil-encouraging situations can all too often snowball into even greater evil-encouraging situations.

Evil-encouraging situations can also lead directly to the increased pervasiveness of evil-encouraging beliefs, as in such situations there is often a lack of security combined with dysfunctional or rapidly changing economic, social and cultural conditions. There is a tendency in such conditions for people to strongly identify with their ‘own group’, such as a religious, national, racial, or other ‘identity’ group, in order “to strengthen individual identity and to gain support and security” (Staub, 2003: 419). This can lead to group conflict and violence, and to a tendency to hold evil-encouraging beliefs that devalue the worth of those in opposing identity groups, in order to increase the perceived value of one’s own group. Holding beliefs that devalue or demonise other individuals or groups makes it easier to harm those individuals or groups and thus makes it easier to do evil.

It should be clear that evil-encouraging situations and beliefs are neither necessary for evil – a sociopath can easily perform evil in any situation – nor sufficient – some of us would not do evil in any situation. My point is only that evil is more likely to *flourish*, especially on a large scale, in cases where many people are subject to evil-encouraging situations and/or where evil-encouraging beliefs are widely held, particularly by those in authority positions. Understanding how certain situations and beliefs can encourage evil is an important part of coming to see *how* an individual can bring themselves to perform an evil act.

Given that the conceptual tools required for understanding evil acts are now in place, I shall seek to apply these tools to a number of prominent examples. I shall begin by examining the case of the Nazi bureaucrat Adolf Eichmann, who knowingly organised for the ‘transportation’ of countless Jewish people to their inevitable deaths. Eichmann had a similar reason for ‘obeying’ his evil orders as did the teachers in the

Milgram experiments – it was part of doing his job (Arendt, 1965).¹⁴ It is not hard to see how such banal reasons lead Eichmann to the very non-banal evil acts he knowingly performed, as doing his job meant doing evil. That was why *those* reasons led to *that* act. But what we really want to know, and what puzzles us, is *how* Eichmann could bring himself to do such a job.

In order to reach a basic understanding of Eichmann's acts we need to appreciate the evil-encouraging nature of the situation he acted in, the beliefs he held, and the lack of character he possessed. The bureaucratic situation Eichmann operated in was one where it was 'easier' to just follow orders. Someone 'above' always made the hard decisions. However, unlike the obedient teachers in the Milgram experiment, Eichmann did not seem deeply conflicted. His duties did not seem to weigh too heavily upon him. Part of the reason for this was that, unlike those in the Milgram experiment, Eichmann was not directly fed back the results of his handiwork. He heard no screams of pain. The evil consequences of his actions were belated and distant. Further, he worked within a competitive bureaucratic system where his deeds were officially approved and rewarded. This system encouraged efficiency and a detached and compartmentalising approach to work.¹⁵ Not only that, but Eichmann held beliefs under which he could see his acts as justified ones, done in the pursuit of what he was told was his duty. He also lacked character, making him the sort of petty and selfish person who thoughtlessly did what he was told (Formosa, 2006: 514). All of these things were deeply evil-encouraging. In short, in that situation, with those beliefs and with that lack of character, it does not seem overly surprising or puzzling that Eichmann should come to perpetrate evil acts.

This analysis, though simplistic by necessity, is enough to illustrate how we can achieve a basic understanding of why Eichmann acted as he did. Of course, this analysis remains but a sketch. Thankfully, in this case I can point towards a work that provides a more complete basic understanding – namely, Hannah Arendt's *Eichmann in Jerusalem* (1965). The greatness of this work lies, at least in part, in the way it is able to walk the very fine line between allowing us to reach a basic understanding of how and why Eichmann perpetrated evil, without ever eliciting our sympathy, or forcing us to either empathise or identify with Eichmann. Commentators who have differed dramatically in their appraisal of Arendt's book have often found agreement in being highly critical of the *tone* of the work (Arendt, 1994: 16).¹⁶ Arendt often seems to lack the level of solemnity or seriousness that the gravity of the events

would seem to require. She mocks Eichmann and makes him look like a fool. At times the book is even openly funny,¹⁷ and to many, this is scandalous.

But, as is often the case, style and content are deeply interwoven. Indeed part of the reason why Arendt's book continues to be read is precisely because of the tone that is employed. It is this tone that brings Eichmann down to earth, so to speak, and allows us to see him not as a profound monster, but as a deficient and shallow human being. We may feel sympathy for Shakespeare's Macbeth, despite his evil acts, but never for Arendt's Eichmann. There is no tragic greatness to Eichmann or his evil. Not only that, it is this tone that allows us to understand Eichmann, to partly see things from his perspective (but never exclusively), without ever allowing us to identify or empathise with him. By mocking him Arendt never allows the reader to get too close to Eichmann. We can understand Eichmann, but always from a distance, and this is precisely what a basic understanding should aim to achieve.

I shall now consider the example of Franz Stangl, commandant of the Treblinka death camp. Stangl described his actions in a series of interviews with Gitta Sereny, (1974) and the results are summarised by Roth (2000: 238) as follows:

There was no plan; there was no intention to become overseer of the most efficient death camp in history. Options were offered, decisions made, posts accepted – one damn thing after another...Stangl explains his actions in terms of what he needed to do to provide for his family, advance his career, or avoid working under difficult superiors...his 'narrative' is one of frustrated ambition.

There appears here to be an enormous gap between the evil acts Stangl performed and the reasons for which he performed them. As Roth (2000: 239) points out: "there is a sharp discordance between what wants explaining – the willingness to aid and abet the murder of over a million people whom he had no particular reason to murder – and the self-ascribed actions of the individual".¹⁸ But it should not be surprising that 'simply' acting in the way required to do your job well, in a situation where your job is to facilitate the efficient implementation of genocide, is likely to lead to evil acts. Stangl's reasons for acting were not at all profound, deep or mysterious. What is puzzling is *how* he was able to act on those banal reasons, when acting on them involved perpetrating an immense evil. It is here the gap lies, and to see how it can be bridged we need to focus on the evil-encouraging nature of Stangl's situation and beliefs.

Stangl, in response to the question, “so you didn’t feel they were human beings?”, replied:

cargo...they were cargo...I remember Wirth standing there, next to pits full of blue-black corpses. It had nothing to do with humanity – it couldn’t have; it was a mass - a mass of rotting flesh. Wirth said, ‘what shall we do with this garbage?’...I rarely saw them as individuals. It was always a huge mass...but – how can I explain it – they were naked, packed together, running, driven with whips (Sereny, 1974: 201).

Sereny (1974: 203) explains this as follows:

It became clear that as soon as the people were in the undressing barracks – that is, as soon as they were naked – they were no longer human beings for him [Stangl]. What he was ‘avoiding at any price’ was witnessing the transition.

Stangl failed to let himself see those in the camp as human beings at all. Richard Glazer, a survivor of Treblinka, points out that the importance for those in the camp of being clean, having tidy clothes, being able to shave, etc, lay in the fact that anything at all that made you merely *look* more like the SS themselves made you look more ‘human’ and so “created a *kind* of respect in them” that increased one’s chances of survival. This explains, no doubt, what Glazer calls “the deep fundamental indifference they [the SS] felt towards us” (Sereny, 1974: 178, 198). This indifference was the result of seeing those in the camps as ‘cargo’, as a single homogenous ‘mass’, and not as distinct persons worthy of respect. To Stangl, what he dealt with was a dirty, naked, unshaven and chaotic mass. No doubt he saw himself as on par with the manager of a meat slaughterhouse.

The way we see ourselves is often very different from the way others see us. This is important to note, for we go astray if we assume that perpetrators of evil *necessarily* see themselves or their acts as evil (or, similarly, that they never do). While an evil act may be of immense significance in the lives of its victims, it is sometimes, perhaps often, of little importance to the perpetrator.¹⁹ The decision to do evil is rarely deep and profound, although its consequences are deeply and profoundly felt. Stangl did not set out to perpetrate genocide. He implemented policies, ran things efficiently, and refused to allow himself to take in the full significance of what he was doing. Stangl never had to bring himself to be an evil monster (as we might see him) for he never saw himself as one (at least at the time). With this in mind, it starts to seem not overly surprising that someone like Stangl might be able to perform evil in a situation like that.

But can we get a basic understanding of even the most evil of evil, someone like Hitler? Hitler, unlike Eichmann, was anything but banal (Formosa, 2006: 512). He did not just happen to find himself in an evil situation, but instead actively instigated the creation of such a situation. But why? It is important to at least *try* to understand Hitler, even if we ultimately fail. We should seek to neither glorify Hitler, by setting him up as an in-principle unfathomable enigma, nor to explain him away all too easily. The most obvious place to start is to note that whatever actually drove Hitler, we can be sure that anti-Semitism played a central role both in giving him a reason to act and facilitating his ability to act on that reason.²⁰ If one sees a group of humans, not as persons, but as ‘vermin’ or ‘viruses’ who deserve nothing better than to be exterminated, as Hitler saw the Jews, (Lang, 2003: 16) then it should not surprise us that such a person may actually bring themselves to act on that evil-encouraging belief. A similar point was made about Stangl, although for Stangl this devaluing of personhood was based more on the physical nakedness of the chaotic masses he dealt with, whereas for Hitler it seems to have been based on more ideological grounds.

But, while it is important to understand the dangerous nature of the anti-Semitic beliefs Hitler seems to have held, this alone does not help us very much to get at Hitler himself. That is, how did Hitler become *Hitler*? We need more than a story about anti-Semitism to explain this, for a great many people have held anti-Semitic beliefs without actually instigating genocide. There are many theories that attempt to explain the cause of Hitler’s evil, with the common list of culprits including: his father, his missing testicle, some sort of sexual perversion, the Jewish Doctor who treated his dying mother, some Jewish prostitute, syphilis, or even just going to school with Wittgenstein (Rosenbaum, 1998). All of these theories seek to locate a defining moment that brought about the psychological changes that led to the metamorphosis of a normal human child into some sort of evil monster. While I am far from sure what combination of events, if any, actually caused Hitler to develop the evil character he certainly came to possess, in any case, we can go a long way to understanding Hitler’s evil acts, and even Hitler himself, if we examine the nature of that character.

There have been, of course, many attempts to do just this, and I make no claim here to be giving an overly novel or definitive account. Nonetheless, I shall explore the vicious character disposition of malevolence in order to see how it can help us

move towards an understanding of, if not Hitler, at least some other perpetrators of evil. John Kekes (1990: 79) describes malevolence as follows:

Malevolence...is a disposition to act contrary to what is good. Its emotional source is ill will, a desire for things not to go well. Malevolence may be general, directed towards humanity as a whole, or particular, focusing on selected individuals. Hate, resentment, envy, jealousy, rage, vindictiveness, cruelty...are some of its forms.

We act malevolently when we act in order to make things go badly for others. But malevolent behaviour is not only destructive but often highly *self*-destructive. Indeed when malevolence succeeds it usually only makes things worse for everybody, the perpetrator included.

But if malevolence is rarely prudential, why might people develop such a vicious disposition? Kekes (1990: 80) offers a familiar answer:

Malevolence is the natural reaction elicited by understandable grievances against a society that treats them with contempt. The agents I have in mind are the lifelong losers in a competitive setting...Such people may see their lives as hopeless...Their lives are informed by futility, indignity and meaninglessness...Malevolence...involves stating no to life – to their own [and others]...It is...a hate-filled, resentful, enraged no. It involves actively wishing ill to their society...[and can be manifested in] casual vandalism, senseless crime, random violence, desecration of symbols, indifference to consequences due to contempt for self-interest, and delight in cruelty.

Malevolence need not be, though it sometimes is, a reaction to *real* social problems and injustices. Merely perceived, but not actual, injustices or affronts can equally well do the job. Sometimes even the simple fact that others are better than us is enough to stir up malevolence. The desire to diminish others in order to better one's self by comparison, which both Kant (1996a: 577) and Hume (1969: 425) saw as the root of all malice, is one way to affirm the self and overcome poor self-esteem. Malevolence can, for example, help us to understand the often senseless and self-destructive acts of disaffected youths who feel, rightly or wrongly, that society can offer them nothing. It might also help us to understand the roots of Hitler's self-destructive hatred of those he saw as 'racially inferior'. It should not seem overly surprising that a poor and resentful postcard painter on the streets of Vienna, who, like Hitler, felt himself to be a neglected war-hero, might come to develop malevolent character traits.

But when we add a hate-filled ideology to a malevolent character, we can (arguably) begin to see what drove Hitler to the evil destruction of so many, himself included. Hitler, not unlike suicide terrorists, (Pape, 2005: 23) came to subordinate prudence and even self-preservation to what he took to be a 'higher' goal - in his case,

Aryan racial purity. Self-deception plays an important role here, as it has done in the above examples. While we as outsider observers might be focused on the harmful consequences of an agent motivated by a malevolent character disposition, foremost in the mind of the malevolent perpetrator themselves might be “the humiliation to which their conduct is a reaction”, or “hatred...[turned] into righteous indignation” through a hate-filled ideology (Kekes, 1990: 82). Hitler’s anti-Semitism no doubt encouraged him to give play and direction to a malevolent disposition he probably already possessed. His ideology would have also helped justify in his own mind (if justification he needed) the actions he undertook. This process of self-justification would no doubt have been aided significantly by the relative inaction of bystanders in the face of the Nazi humiliation, persecution and then genocide of Jewish and other ‘undesirable’ persons.²¹

Alternatively, one might argue that my account in terms of malevolence and an evil ideology misses the mark. Perhaps, rather, Hitler was a genuine moral monster, someone who diabolically set out to be evil for evil’s sake. Berel Lang (2003), for one, thinks that this is the correct way to understand what motivated Hitler and other Nazis. Kant (1996b: 82-4), in contrast, thinks that no human being can ever possibly be diabolically motivated to do evil for evil’s sake. Without deciding here who is right, I shall at least consider what implications this might have for understanding Hitler’s evil if Lang is right. While understanding diabolical perpetrators is surely beyond our simulative abilities (I cannot even pretend to imagine how an act being evil is alone a motivating factor for choosing to do that act), there is no reason why we cannot understand such perpetrators through purely theoretical methods. It might just be a psychological fact that, for example, people fitting a certain profile tend to perform evil acts for diabolical motives. This might be the only type of understanding we can reach of serial killers (Morton, 2004: 70-4) and, perhaps, it is the only type of understanding we can reach of diabolical perpetrators of evil. This sort of knowledge should be enough to help us reach a basic understanding of even diabolical acts.

I have, however, left very much open here the question of what is ultimately the correct way to understand Hitler’s evil acts. All I take myself to have shown is that we can at least start to make substantial inroads towards reaching a basic understanding of the evil of even someone like Hitler. I have sought to defend this position by examining a number of ways that we might try to understand Hitler (e.g.

as an anti-Semite, as a malevolent character, as diabolically evil) in order to show that such a task is one that we can at least commence with the hope of success. Much more work is surely needed, although in Hitler's case, it is unclear whether we have access to enough information to completely piece the puzzle together (we lack a lot of psychological evidence for one), though I wish to affirm that, in-principle, the puzzle can surely be pieced together.²²

I have thus far given a number of examples of how we might try to understand the evil acts of the likes of Eichmann, Stangl and Hitler. This list is very far from exhaustive, though it is sufficient to give a reasonable illustration of the general method I have proposed for reaching a basic understanding of evil acts. These examples also provide provisional support for my thesis that we can, in fact, reach a basic understanding of *many* evil acts. Indeed, such examples may even suggest the plausibility of the stronger thesis that, in-principle and with all the relevant facts, combined with well-honed simulative abilities, we can reach a basic understanding of *all* evil acts.²³ In any case, even if a basic understanding can be reached of only a majority of evil acts, this alone should be sufficient to remove any intrinsic mysteriousness from evil acts. This is a move that we should find appealing, for to see evil as fundamentally mysterious and intrinsically incomprehensible is to verge on the adulation and glorification of it.²⁴ This we should not, and need not, do.

5. Why one should try to understand evil

The most important reason we have for trying to understand evil is that a necessary requirement for optimising the limitation of evil is to understand under what conditions it does and does not *flourish*. In short, evil will flourish where evil-encouraging situations or beliefs are at play, especially on a large-scale. Understanding why people perform evil acts can aid us in creating social, cultural and political institutions that can better prevent or minimise evil, through creating conditions that are not conducive to the flourishing of evil. However, a basic, rather than a full, understanding is all that is needed to help meet this laudable goal. This is because we need to neither identify nor empathise with perpetrators of evil in order to understand their acts *enough* to help in the prevention of future evils. For example, our basic understanding of how the bureaucratic structures within which Eichmann worked were able to encourage his ability to perform evil is enough of an understanding to provide a basis from which to formulate strategies that might

minimise the likelihood of future occurrences of such bureaucratic evil. Such strategies might include, for example, fostering an independent and critical culture in which bureaucrats explicitly consider the consequences their decisions can have on the lives of distant others and the taking of personal responsibility for those decisions.

Another reason why trying to understand evil acts is important is that it can help *us* to avoid perpetrating evil ourselves. It seems likely that had individual Nazis, for example, ever bothered to genuinely imagine the world from the point of view of a Jewish person, then such an exercise might have made at least some of them think twice about their actions. But such Nazis had, what they falsely took to be, a good reason for not doing this – namely, they thought Jews were racially inferior, different in kind to themselves, and so not in possession of a point of view even worth considering.²⁵ We should not make the same mistake. To see the world from even the eyes of a perpetrator of evil might be, in itself, an evil-discouraging activity, as it can remind us to avoid the mistake of demonising other religious, cultural or ethnic groups.

However, a number of counter reasons can be raised as to why we should *not* try to understand evil. Firstly, it might be thought that to understand evil is to justify it. But this is not so, because to look for answers as to why evil acts are perpetrated does not commit one to the position that such acts are justifiable. Indeed, many of the reasons for which people often act are far from reasonable. Thus to say that a perpetrator of evil took themselves to have a reason to perpetrate evil is not the same as saying that such a reason is a justifiable one for carrying out that act. Achieving a basic understanding of how and why Eichmann, for example, perpetrated his evil acts, in no way justifies those acts, but does rather the opposite – it shows us just how unjustifiable they were. There is absolutely no inconsistency between seeing the acts of perpetrators of evil as culpably wrong and, at the same time, being able to understand how and why such agents acted otherwise than as they ought. Hence understanding and condemnation are perfectly compatible.

Similarly, it might be claimed that understanding evil undermines our hatred of perpetrators of evil and, as perpetrators of evil do not deserve anything better than our hatred, we should not try to understand their acts. However, the major premise of this argument is false. For example, I may understand that it was greed that drove a man to commit evil, but this in no way lessens my hatred of him. Indeed, it may actually increase it if, for example, I find out that he was already very wealthy and

was simply greedily seeking even more money. However, it is important to note that, in other cases, coming to understand why someone perpetrated evil *may* actually decrease or remove our hatred of them. The manner in which understanding will affect our emotional responses, including hatred, towards perpetrators of evil, is something that will vary on a case by case basis.

The task of understanding evil can play an important role, not just in preventing future evils, but also in helping us to come to terms with past evils. Understanding can do this by helping us to progress beyond past evils. But progress is not made by forgetting what happened. Rather we might think of progress, as Adorno (2003: 145) does, not as the achievement of a state of utopia, but rather as the achievement of an ever-present vigilance to ensure that we do not relapse into evil. While coming to terms with past evils is surely a complex endeavour operating on both an emotional and intellectual level, it involves, at least in part, understanding and remembering why the evil occurred, not so that one can reconcile one's self to its necessity, but so that one can ensure it does not happen again. Understanding, in empowering us in our ability to do something to prevent evil repeating itself, can also help us come to terms with past evils in a constructive and beneficial way.

While punishment, blame and demands for justice are important and valid responses to evil, these responses alone may not prove sufficient for dealing with large-scale evils. Society as a whole, as well as individual victims of evil, may find that responses of forgiveness, at a personal level, and reconciliation, at a political level, may sometimes be more appropriate alternatives, or at least additions, to these more basic responses. Understanding why someone has perpetrated evil can only aid, and often greatly aid, in developing the foundations from which the responses of forgiveness and reconciliation can be successfully approached.²⁶ While it is not controversial to claim that we should be forgiving and reconciling towards others *in general*, it is highly controversial (and I think wrong) to claim that we ought to forgive and reconcile with everyone for everything without condition. But if we should in general be forgiving and reconciling, it seems that we should in general cultivate the sorts of environments, post-evil, where these responses can best flourish. Understanding can play a central role in promoting such an environment.

However, it is important to note that understanding does not *necessitate* forgiveness, which should always remain a moral *gift*, never a demand (Thomas, 2003). The act of forgiving can be an activity that victims of evil can find enormously

helpful, as it can improve their sense of well-being and relieve them of the burden of anger and the desire for revenge (Staub, 2003: 433). Understanding why someone acted as they did can help make this gift easier to give. Similarly, reconciliation can be equally important as a way of avoiding ongoing cycles of violence, especially at a group level. Understanding why other groups acted as they did can greatly help in developing the level of trust needed to move towards a reconciled and peaceful future.

6. Conclusion

We should not hold perpetrators of evil to be, in-principle, mysterious and unfathomable enigmas. This only glorifies evil. Rather, we should, and by and large can, try to gain a basic (but not full) understanding of how and for what actual reasons perpetrators perform evil acts. I outlined a method for doing just this, one that paid attention to the evil-encouraging nature of certain situations and beliefs, as well as to information about the state, biography and character of the perpetrator. This method can help us to remove some of our puzzlement about why people perform evil acts. It also allows us to identify the types of environments in which evil can flourish and, by understanding this, help us to take practical steps to both minimise future occurrences of evil and come to terms with its past abominations. Thus we can do something to fight evil. This conclusion is both liberating and empowering. But with empowerment comes responsibility, a responsibility to act to bring about progress and a never sleeping vigilance against evil. And perhaps also a responsibility to attempt to cultivate a world worth living in, a world worth being reconciled to. In short, a world with less evil in it.

Notes

¹ Feinberg, however, makes this claim only in relation to what he calls ‘pure’ evil, rather than evil per se (Corlett, 2004: 82).

² David Pockock’s (1985: 51) claim, for example, that evil acts are “not explicable by reference to ‘normal’ motives such as greed or lust,” begins to look implausible as a general claim, even if it is true in at least some cases.

³ The philosophical issues as to what ‘understanding’ is arises in debates in: the philosophy of mind between theory theory (TT) and simulation theory (ST); in the literature concerning interpreting

language in both the analytic and continental philosophical traditions (Quine, Davidson, Gadamer etc); in the philosophical literature on the human (or social) sciences and its methodological differences from the natural sciences (the *Erklären* (explanation) versus *Verstehen* (understanding) debate, Collingwood's 'historical re-enactment', etc); and in anthropological literature regarding issues of understanding other cultures (especially Peter Winch's influential Wittgensteinian approach). For an overview of this literature see Kogler and Stueber (2000: 1-61).

⁴ Of course there is a difference between having a reason to act and acting for that reason. This is especially problematic where a person has multiple reasons for acting (as we often do) - see Gordon (2000: 65).

⁵ By 'identification' I mean, in Wollheim's (1973: 75) words: "the person who identifies himself with another may be assumed to imagine himself doing those things the other would be expected to do, or would naturally do".

⁶ By empathy I mean knowing what the other person is *feeling* (as opposed to *thinking*). In empathy, as opposed to sympathy, we feel *with* (i.e. we feel terror if they feel terror) rather than *for* (or *against*) a person (i.e. we feel pity (or joy) if they are in a terrifying situation). It is clear that it is empathy, not sympathy, that is important for understanding others, for we want to know what it feels like for *them*, not what it feels like for *us* to see something happen to them.

⁷ I do not wish, however, to endorse any thesis that ties identification and empathy too closely together. This is because I may be able to empathise with someone I cannot identify with and vice versa. For example, when someone I cannot at all identify with is in a difficult situation similar to one I have been in, I may be able to empathise with them, at least on this particular occasion. Similarly, when someone I can identify with deeply is in a very foreign situation, I may not be able to empathise with them at all, at least on this particular occasion.

⁸ Morton gestures in a similar direction though, arguably, less successfully, as he fails to draw on the concept of identification. He writes (2004: 107-8): "this business of standing in imagination in someone else's shoes is very varied. It doesn't always require that we feel all of the other person's emotions and sensations...if we want understanding to be compatible with condemnation, we shall need to consider kinds of understanding that preserve the distance between people". This 'distance' is what a basic understanding achieves – it explicitly avoids identifying or empathising with the subject.

⁹ I do not claim that this list is exhaustive, but it is illustrative. Note the mixed and hybrid nature of this list in terms of the theory vs. simulation debate. Psychological facts, for example, are purely theoretical, whereas an understanding of a situation might be achieved via simulation or a hybrid method.

¹⁰ Which is not to say issues of character are irrelevant, but only that they may not be as important as we sometimes think they are. In any case, I suggest looking at *both* character and situation as part of an overall attempt to understand evil acts.

¹¹ This definition, it might be argued, is dependent on a particular conceptualisation of evil. But this is not so, as any plausible conceptualisation of evil must be able to handle certain paradigm cases. Thus acts like genocide, or the sadistic torturing and killing of children etc, will count as evil on *any* (plausible) conceptualisation of evil. Situations that encourage such acts are evil-encouraging ones.

¹² Many psychologists and social scientists have shown that violence and conflict are far more likely in situations where sections of a community, or a community as a whole, fail to satisfy basic needs for things like security, identity, recognition, dignity, justice, material well-being and self-determination. There is also much evidence on the link between poverty, unemployment and violence. For a summary, see Ervin Staub (2003: 53-5, 215-7).

¹³ Although not *only* situations and beliefs, but also preferences, values, desires, character dispositions, biography etc, all make it more or less likely that evil will come about. I focus here only on situations and beliefs, as the evidence seems to suggest that these are particularly influential.

¹⁴ Arendt locates the root of Eichmann's evil in a failure of thinking (to think about what he was doing) and imagination (to imagine the world from another person's point of view). For a detailed discussion of Arendt's views see Formosa (forthcoming, 2007).

¹⁵ As Staub (2003: 329) notes: "Compartmentalisation enables people to focus and act on goals that conflict with important values...they may concentrate on the immediate task, ignoring ethics and long-term consequences".

¹⁶ Karl Jaspers is an important exception. He writes: "She [Arendt] wants to understand; she disregards completely what other people imagine in their need for the legendary, the mythical, the grand...Eichmann comes out of the gutter...I like this tone of Hannah Arendt's very much" (Jaspers, 1994: 517, 521).

¹⁷ For example, consider Arendt's (1965: 252) account of Eichmann's execution, which is full of irony, mockery and even humour: "Adolf Eichmann went to the gallows with great dignity. He had asked for a bottle of red wine and had drunk half of it. He refused the help of the Protestant minister...he had only two more hours to live, and therefore had no 'time to waste'...[in] the grotesque silliness of his last words...he had found the cliché used in funeral oratory. Under the gallows, his memory played him the last trick; he was 'elated' and he forgot that this was his own funeral."

¹⁸ Nieman (2002: 273) argues that it is a defining feature of what she calls 'modern evil' that the intention does not correspond to the magnitude of the evil that is inflicted.

¹⁹ Card (2002: 9) calls this the 'magnitude gap' between how victims and perpetrators of evil see the same act.

²⁰ There is, however, some debate as to whether Hitler was a 'sincere' anti-Semite, or whether he just manipulatively used anti-Semitism to gain and maintain power (Rosenbaum, 1998). In either case, anti-Semitism (whether or not it was sincerely believed in) certainly played an important role in Hitler's decision making.

²¹ Staub (2003: 292, 331-2) argues that bystanders, by remaining passive in the face of evil, allow "perpetrators to see their destructive actions as acceptable and even right".

²² A similar point is made by Yehuda Bauer, (in Rosenbaum, 1998: xv) who claims: "Hitler is explicable in principle, but that does not mean that he *has* been explained".

²³ Though I am not claiming that we can understand anything as complex as, for example, the Holocaust, *as a whole*. No doubt grasping the *totality* of such an enormously complex event is beyond our powers of understanding.

²⁴ Giorgio Agamben (1999: 32) points out that to "glorify and adore" God is to say His nature is incomprehensible, unsayable and unspeakable. But "to say that Auschwitz is 'unsayable' or 'incomprehensible' is equivalent to *euphemein*, to adoring in silence, as one does with a God. Regardless of one's intention, this contributes to its glory".

²⁵ While Slavic people were thought by the Nazis to be *inferior* humans (different in degree), Jews were specifically held to be *sub-human* (different in kind) (Lang 2003: 21).

²⁶ This is a weak version of a stronger claim, which I shall not defend here, that understanding why an evil act was done not only *aids* (as I claim above), but is a *necessary* pre-condition for, the ability to forgive or seek reconciliation with the perpetrator of that act.

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