

Evil Is More Than Banal: Situationism and the Concept of Evil

Leonard Berkowitz

Department of Psychology
University of Wisconsin–Madison

Social psychology as a discipline has given relatively little attention to the problem of evil in society, and those discussions in this field that do exist typically regard evil actions as only varieties of aggression without any characteristics that distinguish them from other forms of intentional mistreatment of others. Because of the field's situationistic perspective emphasizing the individual's susceptibility to the power of the immediate situation, social psychologists generally view the fairly high levels of obedience to authority displayed in Milgram's (1963, 1974) classic experiment as the paradigmatic example of evil behavior. For them, much evil is, in Arendt's (1963) well-known phrase, only "banal," and Milgram's findings are often viewed as illustrating the "central dynamic" involved in the slaughter of millions of Jews and other "undesirables" in the Holocaust. This article holds that Milgram's (1974) obedience research does not represent significant features of the Holocaust, especially the sadism that occurred not infrequently, and disregards the vital difference between those who initiated the murderous policy and the others who followed their orders. Building on Darley's (1992) earlier conjectures about the features that ordinary people might consider in judging whether any given action is evil, I suggest that many persons have a prototypic conception of evil and speculate about the dimensions that could be involved in this prototype.

The deliberate slaughter of millions of people in this century solely because of their group membership has prompted considerable discussion of the nature and causes of evil. Discussants have come from a variety of scholarly fields, including philosophy, history, political science, sociology, and psychology. However valuable their contributions, none has the complete answer to the question of why the killings arose. Furthermore, virtually all of them have given little attention to the problem of just what constitutes evil. Although there is a clear need for a comprehensive and detailed review of the various perspectives on evil, this article is relatively narrowly focused. I cite some analyses advanced by writers with nonpsychological backgrounds; nevertheless, I concentrate on social psychological conceptions. More than this, the article is concerned primarily with how

social psychologists think of evil rather than with their understanding of its manifold causes.

Just What Is Evil?: Ambiguity of the Concept

Remarkably few discussions of evil, in social psychology or in the other areas of human study, offer a specific definition of this term. *Evil* is usually seen as the intentional, planned, and morally unjustified injury of others. However, there is no such consensus as to whether the word should be applied only to especially egregious wrongdoing and/or to acts that do very great harm (e.g., Darley, 1992, and Levine, 1997). Everyday language is frequently even less precise. At times, when ordinary people employ this concept, it seems to have certain highly significant features, discussed subsequently. However, as Alford (1997) noted, very often the word evil also has "connotations that are not exhausted by terms like 'bad,' 'aggressive,' 'destructive,' and so forth" (p. 1). Documenting this observation, when Alford asked a heterogeneous sample of U.S. adults about their conception of evil, he found that the term did not always have a moralistic meaning. Many of his infor-

In preparing this article, I benefitted from discussions with several colleagues at the University of Wisconsin–Madison, especially (but not only) Professors Alfred Kadushin, Marcus Singer, and Claudia Card, and also members of my Monday lunch group. However, they should not be faulted for whatever shortcomings the reader might find in my article.

Requests for reprints should be sent to Leonard Berkowitz, Department of Psychology, University of Wisconsin–Madison, 5818 Anorage Avenue, Madison, WI 53705. E-mail: lberkowi@facstaff.wisc.edu.

mants linked the word to a terrifying experience of impending doom. Anthropological investigations have revealed even greater variation in the meaning of evil across (and within) human societies. According to Parkin's (1985) review of the anthropological literature, "talk about evil ... ranges over the terrible and serious as well as the playful and creative" (p. 1) and can refer to imperfection and incompleteness or great "ambivalent power" over others as well as violations of moral codes. Philosophical analyses do not necessarily guide us out of this linguistic ambiguity. Perhaps surprisingly, we cannot find much direct discussion of the concept of evil in the literature of philosophical ethics; when philosophers in this field take up the idea of evil, they typically are concerned chiefly with the question of how evil can occur if the Creator is omnipotent and perfectly good (C. F. Card, personal communication, September 1998).

However diffuse and wide-ranging are the notions of evil in the various human societies, a comprehensive analysis of evil requires adopting what might be called a modified essentialist position and specifying certain features that differentiate between matters that are evil and those that are merely very bad or very wrong. Such a distinction would be, at the very least, a step toward increased precision in discussions of morality and ethics. The words *bad* and *wrong* are used all too broadly and do not necessarily convey the sense of moral repugnance that we usually have in mind when we speak of evil. Achieving this more specific conception requires the identification of those qualities that evil behaviors possess to a greater or lesser extent—the conceptual dimensions, we might say, along which actions vary. Unfortunately, the most important social psychological discussions of evil, with one possible exception, provide us with little guidance as to what these characteristics (or dimensions) might be.

Social psychologists typically have a relatively restricted conception of evil that focuses on socially unjustified violence, but in my view, that conception is not sufficiently specific. In the two most recent and best-known social psychological works on this topic, the meaning given is very general and broad-ranging, even somewhat fuzzy. Staub's (1989) analysis of genocide, titled *The Roots of Evil: The origins of genocide and other group violence*, thought of evil as "the destruction of human beings" involving not only the deliberate killing of others but also "the creation of conditions that materially or psychologically destroy or diminish people's dignity, happiness, and capacity to fulfill basic material needs" (p. 25). Baumeister (1997), seeking a general understanding of "human violence and cruelty" in his book *Evil: Inside human violence and cruelty*, had an even more diffuse conception. He regarded evil as "intentional

interpersonal harm" (p. 8) and used the word to encompass not only "great crimes and horrendous acts" but also "petty cruelties and minor transgressions of everyday life" (p. 8). For Baumeister, restricting the term to excessive, horrendous acts is to succumb to the "myth of pure evil" (p. 18), a stereotyped conception of evil as essentially different from less extreme unjustified aggression. Another view, espoused by Darley (1992), was somewhat more mixed in nature. On one hand, Darley spelled out what he believed are the major aspects of ordinary persons' conceptions of evil. His discussion, a step toward identifying the defining characteristics of the concept, is intriguing, and I build on it in a later section of this article. However, Darley also dismissed the importance of these fairly specific features: "Our everyday understandings of evil ... are frequently incorrect or perhaps, more accurately, irrelevant to most acts of evil and therefore deeply misleading" (p. 199). He concluded that it is not "possible to definitely, unequivocally categorize certain acts as evil, and others as merely 'bad'" (p. 201). In my view, the "everyday understandings" that Darley listed are not "irrelevant" for a truly adequate analysis of evil.

The Situationist Perspective on Evil

Social psychologists, by and large, do not think of evil actions as the product of evil personalities. Emphasizing the immediate situation's great influence on thoughts, feelings, and behavior, they tend to minimize the role of individual dispositions (see, e.g., Ross & Nisbett, 1991). Baumeister (1997) and Darley (1992) explicitly held this situationist perspective and faulted the common explanation of evil as "springing from the depraved minds of evil persons" (Darley, 1992, p. 202). As Darley put it, offering an analysis undoubtedly shared by most of his disciplinary colleagues, "when one probes behind evil actions, one normally finds not an evil individual viciously forwarding diabolical schemes but instead ordinary individuals who have done acts of evil because they were caught up in complex social forces" (p. 204)

The Obedience Experiments

Social psychologists typically point to a number of investigations as graphic illustrations of how ordinarily well-behaved people can be led by situational influences to torment others, most notably in Zimbardo's (Zimbardo, Haney, Banks, & Jaffe, 1973) prison simulation and Milgram's (1963, 1974) series of experiments on obedience to authority. Milgram's ambitious research program is especially

pertinent to my argument, and I concentrate on this research.

As is well known, in Milgram's (1963) basic procedure, each of the male volunteer participants were recruited from the surrounding community by newspaper ads and other solicitations so that the sample was commendably heterogeneous, varying greatly in age and socioeconomic background. When the participant arrived at the university laboratory, he was informed that his job was to teach certain pairs of words to another person in the next room. Supposedly, because he was taking part in a study of the effects of punishment on learning, he also was told to punish the other person in the session, the learner, with an electric shock whenever the learner made a mistake and to increase the shock's intensity with each error. The scientist-experimenter said the shocks could be very painful but would not cause any permanent tissue damage. If the naive participant seemed reluctant to deliver a punishment at any time after the learning trials got under way, the watching experimenter prodded him to follow the rules and administer the shock. Sixty-five percent of the participants obeyed fully, going up the punishment intensity scale with each "mistake" to the supposedly highly painful maximum level of 450 V.¹ By contrast, in another experiment, when a peer (termed by Milgram [1974] a "common man") gave the orders to the participants, only 20% complied fully and delivered the highest intensity shocks. Here, then, is the central finding: The majority of the ordinary people serving in the baseline study apparently believed they were so obligated to comply with the commands of a legitimate authority that they were even willing to hurt another person severely at the authority's behest. Other investigators have replicated these basic results, sometimes in a close duplication of Milgram's (1963) procedure, but at other times, using variations in the setting, the actions called for, and the nature of the authority, and in other nations as well as in the United States (see Blass, 1992; A. G. Miller, 1986).

Some Questions About the Experiments

This is not the place to discuss all of the intricacies in the controversy that has swirled around Milgram's

¹With this startling degree of obedience as the baseline, Milgram (1974) then carried out 17 other studies to explore the situational conditions that could lessen the extent of compliance to the authority's orders. Other writers have at times exaggerated the amount of compliance to the experimenter's orders. Baumeister (1997), as one example, told his readers that the *vast majority* [italics added] of Milgram's participants had shocked the learner up to the maximum level of intensity (p. 191). As A. G. Miller's (1986) survey of the Milgram series shows, by no means were the vast majority of the participants as completely submissive as Baumeister indicated.

(1974) research (for thoughtful reviews and discussions of the arguments, see Blass, 1992; A. G. Miller, 1986). Instead, I take up only two questions: whether the immediate situation was so powerful that personality characteristics had only a very insignificant role and how well the experiment represented the key features of the Nazi death camps. This discussion then serves as the basis of my proposed conception of evil actions.

The Role of Individual Differences

As indicated previously, most reports of the obedience experiments in social psychology have played down the importance of individual differences in the results. They generally agree with Milgram's (1974) contention that "the disposition a person brings to the experiment is probably less important a cause of his behavior than most readers assume" (p. 205). Nevertheless, it is the case that a substantial fraction of the participants in Milgram's experiments and the other replications (although a minority) defied the authority at some point and refused to deliver the highest intensity punishment. Did they possess particular personality traits that led (or enabled) them to resist the situational pressures? Elms and Milgram (as cited in A. G. Miller, 1986) sought to answer this question by interviewing a subsample of the participants who had taken part in the first four Milgram experiments. Although these investigators found that the fully obedient persons tended to score higher on a measure of authoritarianism and lower on a social responsibility scale than did the "defiants," they were more impressed by the variability in personality scores from one individual to another. Explicitly taking the situationist stance held by most of their disciplinary colleagues, they concluded that their results "do not reveal a single personality pattern which is inevitably expressed in one behavior or the other" (as cited in A. G. Miller, 1986, p. 239).

Blass (1991) gave somewhat more weight to the part played by personality traits, although he acknowledged that the evidence is not as unequivocal as one would want. In his survey of the research seeking to distinguish between those who obeyed fully and those who defied the authority at some point, he noted some interesting suggestive differences, particularly in regard to the participants' beliefs as to how their lives were controlled: Several studies found that the people who refused to comply completely with a high-status authority's orders were more apt to view themselves, rather than external circumstances, as largely responsible for the significant events in their lives (i.e., in the latter case, they scored high on an internal control scale). Even more

suggestive are the results of other, “real-life” investigations that inquired into the personal qualities of non-Jews who protected or rescued Jews from the Nazis. The largest such study compared 406 rescuers with 126 other non-Jews who had lived through the Nazi occupation, but who had not helped Jews escape from the Nazis (Oliner & Oliner, 1988, as cited in Blass, 1993, pp. 40–41). Apparently in accord with some of the findings cited in Blass’s (1992) survey of the experimental research, the researchers reported that the rescuers scored significantly higher on measures of social responsibility inclinations and internal control than did the nonrescuers (Blass, 1993, p. 41). However generalizable these particular observations are, the fact that there were these rescuers indicates quite clearly that some people were able to resist very substantial situational pressures.

Of course, as Blass (1991, 1993) and others have emphasized, it is not the “defiant” people’s personalities alone but their traits in interaction with the situation confronting them that probably led to their resistance to authority. Blass (1991) revealed to us that relatively few studies have investigated these interactions (p. 406), in part because Milgram-type laboratory experiments have not been conducted in the United States since the late 1970s (although they continue to be carried out in other countries; Blass, 1991, p. 408). However, research provides some indications. For example, I noted previously that a strong sense of internal control appears to promote resistance to seemingly arbitrary orders primarily when the commanding authority has a high status (Miller, 1975, as cited in Blass, 1991, p. 404). The desire to be a “master of one’s own fate” evidently has to be activated if it is to produce defiance of commands. In this case, the greater the experimenter’s status, the more the participant presumably perceived a challenge to his personal freedom, thus producing a stronger desire to control his own behavior and greater resistance to the influence (Blass, 1991, p. 404).

Limitations to the Generalizability of the Findings

Besides emphasizing the power of the immediate situation, many social psychologists believe Milgram’s (1974) results help us understand the Holocaust—or at least the behavior of ordinary Germans involved in the extermination process. Milgram did not attempt to establish a miniature version of a death camp in his laboratory, but he did believe his procedure captured a central aspect of the Holocaust. In both the laboratory and in the concentration camp, a person was ordered by a legitimate authority to act against other people (Milgram, 1974, p. 177; A. G.

Miller, 1986, p. 181). Indeed, Milgram and others (e.g., Darley, 1992; Kelman & Hamilton, 1989; see also A. G. Miller, 1986) also have generalized the findings to other “crimes of obedience” (to use the title of the Kelman and Hamilton, 1989, book), such as the actions of the American soldiers at My Lai in Vietnam. Writers other than professional psychologists also have expressed this strong situationist view. Psychiatrists such as Dicks (1972) and Lifton (1986), both of whom interviewed Nazis directly involved in the Holocaust, emphasized the extent to which the killers were relatively “normal” rather than pathological and had carried out their actions in obedience to higher authorities. Dicks explicitly believed the Milgram (1974) research helped explain the behavior of the SS men he had studied.

Probably the best known statement of the thesis that ordinary people had engaged in the horrific killings is Arendt’s (1963) report of the trial of Adolph Eichmann in Jerusalem. Although Eichmann had a major part in organizing the planned extermination of the European Jews, Arendt portrayed Eichmann as an uninspired bureaucrat who had only carried out his instructions. In her famous phrase, Eichmann illustrated the “banality of evil”.² For Milgram (1974), and for many of the social psychological discussants of his research (see A. G. Miller, 1986), Arendt’s characterization applied to his obedient participants:

After witnessing hundreds of ordinary people submit to the authority in our own experiments, I must conclude that Arendt’s conception of the *banality of evil* comes closer to the truth than one might dare imagine. The ordinary person who shocked his victim did so out of a sense of obligation—and not from any peculiarly aggressive tendencies. (Milgram, 1974, p. 6)

At this point, I voice my misgivings. I wonder if those who stress the generalizability of Milgram’s (1974) experiments to the Holocaust and talk about the banality of evil have not unduly neglected the sadism in some of the killings. Blass (1993) noted that, after the publication of her banality of evil report,

²Arendt (1963) went so far as to hold that Eichmann was so much the bureaucrat that, she believed, he did not fully realize what he was doing. Although Arendt’s analysis of both Eichmann and evil has been severely criticized, it also has met with considerable approval (see S. Miller, 1998). Contrary to Arendt’s thesis, it certainly can be argued that Eichmann’s behavior was far from “banal.” He played an important part in the infamous 1942 Wannsee conference at which the final solution was planned. As he later testified, the discussions that took place were “in very blunt terms ... of killing, elimination, and annihilation” (as cited in Bullock, 1993, p. 757). He was not a passive, low-level clerk in the killing process. In this regard, Blass (1993) quoted an observer who pointed out that “the bureaucracy that destroyed the European Jews” (p. 37), and its middle-level Nazi officials (such as Eichmann), often produced major recommendations and set policies as to how the extermination program should operate.

Arendt herself was struck by the sadistic nature of some of those who participated in the murder of the Jews. In Arendt's introduction to Naumann's 1966 book about the trial of 22 SS men in Frankfurt, she commented about the charges that the defendants had committed horrific acts of torture and murder:

No one had issued orders that infants should be thrown into the air as shooting targets, or hurled into the fire alive, or have their heads smashed against walls. . . . Innumerable individual crimes, one more horrible than the next, surrounded and created the atmosphere of the gigantic crime of extermination. (Arendt, as cited in Blass, 1993, p. 36)

The evil acts to which Arendt referred were not banal, and the shocks the participants delivered in the Milgram (1974) experiments were not commensurate with the behaviors she described. This is not to say that the Milgram research does not reflect some aspects of the Holocaust. The compliance the participants exhibited might have some conceptual resemblance to the actions of a good number of people in the killing process—such as many of the German soldiers in the *Einsatzgruppen* (special “strike squads”) or the concentration camps, the Nazi doctors interviewed by Lifton (1986), or even those Jews who became ghetto police charged with rounding up other Jews for deportation—but it does not fully represent all of the terrible crimes that were committed in the Holocaust.

Reflecting on these egregious actions, and also on the fact that officials such as Eichmann often had a very active part in the extermination program, Blass (1993) questioned whether Milgram's (1974) research adequately represents the Holocaust:

Both the laboratory evidence and the historical details of the destruction of European Jewry raise doubts about the fit between Milgram's conceptual model of obedience to authority and the actualities of the Holocaust. Clearly, there was more to the genocidal Nazi program than the dispassionate obedience of the average citizen who participated in the murder of his fellow citizens . . . out of a sense of duty and not malice. (p. 37)

As I see it (and Blass, 1993, shares this view), social psychology's general belief in the overriding power of the immediate situation has contributed greatly to the widespread contention that Milgram's observations capture the “central dynamic” of the Holocaust.

Toward the Establishment of a More Specific Concept

Social psychology's relative inattention to the great atrocities committed during the extermination

program reflects the field's failure to establish a conception of evil that differentiates among categories of wrongdoing. In so doing, there is a danger of trivializing terrible actions. In not distinguishing conceptually between truly egregious injustices, such as the Nazis' Final Solution (the campaign to exterminate the Jews), and somewhat lesser misdeeds—such as, say, a husband hitting his wife in a rare outburst of temper—as Darley (1992) and Baumeister (1997) implicitly did, we basically place all of these behaviors in the same psychological category and thus run the risk of regarding all of them as equally bad.

In this connection, the absence of a special conception of evil somehow also seems to have resulted in a failure to recognize degrees of evil. Social psychology manifests this particular failure in its concentration on the relatively low- or intermediate-status persons who complied with their superiors' policies rather than on the higher-ups who initiated these policies. The evil of Adolph Eichmann's actions surely did not match those of Adolph Hitler or even those of Reinhardt Heydrich, described by Arendt (1963) as “the real engineer of the Final Solution” (p. 36).

Possible Features of a Common Prototype of Evil

It is helpful to employ Hitler as our reference in specifying the qualities distinguishing evil from other instances of wrongdoing. It is true that quite a few historians are reluctant to call Hitler evil, apparently because they prefer to interpret historical events and personages in terms of fairly abstract cultural, economic, historical, and social influences, and believe a characterization of Hitler as evil is a relic of the disapproved Great Man theory of history (Rosenbaum, 1998). Yet, other scholars are willing to apply the term to him. When the English historian Alan Bullock talked to journalist Ron Rosenbaum about Hitler, Bullock asked, rhetorically, “If he isn't evil, who is?” (Rosenbaum, 1998, p. xxi). Indeed, for many scholars and lay people alike, Hitler is the embodiment of evil. Nevertheless, I am not concerned here with the question of just why it is appropriate to so regard him (see Rosenbaum, 1998, for discussions of this issue). I am not attempting to say what is evil, objectively speaking. My interest is somewhat different, more psychological. I offer some speculation as to why so many persons do believe that Hitler and other high Nazi officials were evil. What aspects do outside observers, rather than the perpetrators, consider when they judge whether some action is evil, and if so, how evil they think it is.

Psychological research into the categorization process is relevant here because I am saying that evil is a

category within the broader class of social norm violations. Like other categories, this concept is *fuzzy* (to use the psychologists' term), in that it does not possess necessary and sufficient features. If we extrapolate from studies of the categorization process (see Fiske & Taylor, 1991), it could be that, when people say something is evil, a variety of associated ideas come to mind. For some, these may be the ideas identified in anthropological and other naturalistic investigations (e.g., Alford, 1997; Parkin, 1985), such as "ambivalent power" or "impending doom." Equally important, there is a good chance they also will think of some instances of what they had previously regarded as evil. These will range from events closest to, or most typical of, their general notion (or prototype) of evil to those that have only a slight similarity to this conception. My guess is that, for many people, the actions and policies we usually associate with Hitler have a close resemblance to their prototype of evil. We should keep in mind, though, that wrongful events vary in how close they are to this prototype: Some acts are more evil than others. Thus, we might consider the brutal killing of a young child to be evil because our conception of this event resembles our prototype of evil but not think of a husband's beating his wife as very evil because our understanding of this battering is far removed from the prototype.

The remainder of this article spells out what I think are the elements of a very widely shared prototype of evil, building on Darley's (1992) conjectures but, for our purposes, organized around the actions and policies of the Nazi leaders, especially Hitler. These characteristics should not be seen in absolute, yes-or-no terms but as continua varying in degree. My listing of these matters also demonstrates how inadequately the obedience experiments represent truly horrendous instances of evil.

To start, for most persons in technologically advanced societies, an evil action obviously is behavior they regard as morally wrong, a clear intentional violation of their moral norms. It is quite possible that they base their judgment on their assessment of both the action and its assumed goal. Think of the common reaction to a battered wife's killing of her seriously abusive husband. A good part of the public apparently considers the wife's inferred motive—self-defense, they might believe—as well as the impropriety of the killing itself.

(I digress here for a side observation. Although I am concerned with the factors influencing an onlooker's judgments rather than with the appraisals made by the victims or the actors, it is interesting that the highest Nazi authorities themselves apparently believed their program to exterminate the Jews and other "undesirable" minorities violated traditional moral standards. One indication of this is Himmler's admonition to SS

officials in 1943 not to speak openly of the Nazis' drive to kill the Jews. He even required the members of the SS teams "selected for 'special duties' ... to swear personally an oath of silence" [Bullock, 1993, p. 803]. The Nazi leadership believed it was necessary to "cleanse" the world of Jews, but they also realized that the deliberate slaughter was contrary to their people's beliefs and would horrify or at least shock them.)

The evil act is, of course, a sharp, even (to use Darley's, 1992, phrase) egregiously excessive, departure from the onlookers' norms. One of these qualities leading observers to judge that some occurrence greatly violates their moral standards has to do with the victims' helplessness. We think baby killers are depraved in part because the children are unable to protect themselves from their attackers. The top Nazis had no compunction about destroying children as well as adults. In a 1943 talk to party leaders, Himmler told them he would not

be justified in getting rid of the men—in having them put to death—only to allow their children to grow up. We have to make up our minds, hard though it may be, that this race must be wiped off the face of the earth. (Bullock, 1993, p. 805)

In addition, of course, the adult victims were also generally helpless in the face of the Nazi's brutal force.

Another factor influencing people's judgments of evil has to do with the perceived responsibility for the action. This particular consideration has been surprisingly neglected by those who talk of the banality of evil as if it did not at all matter who initiated, or was primarily responsible for, the behavior being assessed. We can easily see the relevance of this perceived responsibility in Milgram's (1974) research. His analysis of the situation confronting the participants in his experiments holds that the fully obedient individuals did not feel guilty about what they had done because they thought of themselves as only the scientist-authority's agent, who had little responsibility for the harsh punishment they delivered.³ In the Eichmann case, I suggested previously that Eichmann had voluntarily shaped more of the extermination program than is usually supposed by those who regard him as only one of many "faceless bureaucrats" in the Nazi administration. Still, naive onlookers presumably would not view him as highly evil if they believed he had little actual responsibility for the mass killings. Extending this reasoning, would those onlookers not also think that Hitler, in initiating the Holocaust, was much more

³Although Milgram (1974) provided only mixed evidence for this supposition, Blass (1996) found that naive onlookers who watched a filmed depiction of an obedient participant were likely to believe that the obedient participant would shift responsibility for his actions to the experimenter.

responsible than Eichmann? Does anyone doubt that Hitler would be judged as more evil than Eichmann?

Yet another quality affecting everyday judgments of evil involves the imbalance between the amount of injury done to the victims and the magnitude of the relatively immediate and fairly objective gains achieved by the wrongdoer. Baumeister (1997) referred to this discrepancy as the "magnitude gap," whereas Darley (1992) observed that for the ordinary person "an evil action occurs when an individual inflicts a highly negative state on another, without this negative state being balanced in any way in the perpetrator" (p. 201). Both, however, give this important matter only slight attention. I suggest that the great majority of Americans thought much more about the relation between victim suffering and actor gain when they asked themselves whether Truman's 1945 decision to drop atomic bombs on Japan was evil. In their minds, the devastation visited on Hiroshima and Nagasaki was well balanced by the lives of the hundreds of thousands of U.S. soldiers and marines who otherwise would have been killed or wounded in the planned invasion of Japan.

One might ask how this consideration applies to Hitler and the Nazis. Some, taking the perpetrators' perspective, might argue that Hitler's extermination program was dreadfully wrong but not truly evil: He had devised this policy "in the deluded but sincere belief that he was taking heroic measures to save the human race from the deadly plague he believed the Jews to be" (Rosenbaum, 1998, p. xxii). They would say, then, that from Hitler's point of view, the gain to be achieved was great indeed, and therefore, the Nazi dictator's policy should not be judged as evil (see Rosenbaum, 1998, p. xxii).

Two points can be made in reply. One has to do with the aim's impropriety. Most outsiders probably would regard this particular goal accomplishment as immoral, and as such, whatever success the Nazis had in reaching their objective would actually enhance the onlookers' condemnation of the extermination program as evil. Setting this aside, there is also a question of the perceived magnitude of the gain. Although we really cannot say what external judges would estimate to be the amount of benefit that Hitler would have achieved in his own mind if he had reached his objective, my guess is that, in considering this subjective gain, onlookers would give the greatest weight to gains that are both relatively concrete rather than abstract and that are obtained relatively soon rather than in the indefinite future. Most outside observers undoubtedly would scorn Hitler's desire for racial purity as well his belief that Jews were racial contaminants. However, in addition, if I am right, they are also likely to think that the gain (the pleasure Hitler would feel at reaching his goal regarding the Jews) was both too vague and too

distant to count for much in their estimation of the suffering-gain discrepancy.

Conclusions

My discussion in this article has concentrated on Hitler and the other Nazi leaders and their attempts to destroy the European Jews. This focus certainly does not mean that I believe the Nazis' killing of Gypsies, homosexuals, and seriously handicapped persons was necessarily less evil than the Holocaust, or that Stalin or Pol Pot (or any others one might nominate) were not evil. I chose to deal only with the Final Solution because it seemed to me that I could most clearly highlight the issues I believe to be important by confining my discussion to this particular matter.

Then, too, it is obvious that there is little good evidence to support my characterization of the supposedly common prototype of evil. Research clearly is required to determine just what are the dimensions that people consider when they judge whether a socially wrong behavior is evil and along which dimensions highly and less evil actions vary. I am especially intrigued by the notion of the magnitude gap. Do people, indeed, consider the discrepancy between the magnitude of the damage done by the perpetrators and the amount of fairly concrete benefits they receive from their action? If so, in thinking about the actors' benefits, do they give much less weight to the pleasure the perpetrators would feel, especially in the future, than to any concrete gains they might obtain fairly soon? It is also important, of course, to investigate what kinds of individuals possess this conjectured prototype (or any other specific conception of evil) and how it might change with socialization. Society long has aspired to have a criminal code whose prescribed punishments "fit the crime," morally speaking. People seem to be relatively satisfied with those punishments given to criminals that they believe are commensurate with the judged evil of the criminal actions. We conceivably might be better at predicting this public reaction if we knew how most people in our culture define evil and what are the qualities that enter into their judgments of degrees of evil.

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