Theorizing Evil

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Abstract

While philosophy has long concerned itself with the question of evil, sociology has consciously distanced itself from it. This paper takes evil seriously and believes that it needs to be drawn into our explanatory schemas. For this to happen it must first be seen as a form of reflexive social action. Developing a sociology of evil is one way to bring ethical considerations in from the discipline’s margins and to help make a moral sociology possible. Drawing on Zygmunt Bauman and others I argue that a reliance on Durkheimian analyses of moral society has meant that questions of moral choice and agency have been under-discussed. Here I revisit Hannah Arendt’s *Eichmann in Jerusalem* as a way in to these very issues. Rather than believe that ‘the world is as it should be’ we know the world to be unjust. It is the acceptance of evil rather than ignorance of it that blinds us to seeing the seeds of extreme forms of cruelty.

Sociological gaps

Though genocide now finds itself on the sociological agenda there has been little theory developed to account for it as a social phenomenon. Helen Fein claims that when sociologists have recognized genocide they most often analyse it with pre-existing sociological categories. Genocide is most frequently posited as the result of: conflict; biosocial factors linked with a predisposition to aggression; ethnic victimization; economic and cultural conflict; crimes of the state; ideology; prejudice; dehumanisation; and the devaluation of individuals or groups (Fein 1990: 32-43). Though all of these may
be elements in particular instances of genocide they do not necessarily, or even usually, lead to it. While many of these studies have been useful in determining the social processes that may lead to genocide (Kuper, 1981, 1985; Harff 1986; Chalk and Johnassohn 1990) most do not explain predilections for state violence or why some, and not all, social elites and leaders elect to use genocide or terror. There is also little discussion on questions of the nature of human suffering, or any enthusiasm to address moral questions which genocide presents. John McCamant, in a discussion on the paucity of research on state violence, terror and gross human rights abuses, observes that ‘social science most often glosses over blood and victims in an antiseptic abstraction’ (in Fein 1990: 32).

As a social phenomenon, the Holocaust must cause us to question the way we understand social formations, social relationships and social structures. We could imagine that the long shadow it has cast would penetrate deep into our social consciousness, and would have been reflected in sociological analysis that sought to make sense of seemingly barbaric behaviour in a seemingly civilized world. Zygmunt Bauman urges, that this has not occurred. He sees the dearth of such studies as an indictment of sociology (Bauman 1989: 3) indicating an unwillingness to see how an examination of the Holocaust might illuminate many recesses in modern society. For him the Holocaust necessitates an exploration of the moral.

From the Durkheimian perspective the distinction between good and evil was created and sustained within society. Theoretically if there had been no rule-breaking or divergence from the collective moral code then there would be no legitimate ground for submitting a charge of immorality against accused individuals. Bauman suggests that if Germany had not been defeated then the issue might not have arisen. Given that defeat however, it was necessary to condemn as war criminals those who had obeyed their moral norms. This meant that legal practice and moral theory had to face the possibility ‘that morality may manifest itself in the insubordination towards socially upheld principles, and in an action openly defying social solidarity and consensus’ (Bauman 1989: 177).

Bauman makes us sensitive to moral acts that are suppressed by social mores, and to the way that immorality is socially produced. His work has consistently focused on ethical
regulation in social relationships. He argues that the modern way of dealing with moral issues has been two fold. On one hand it has been an attempt to wrest moral responsibility away from the individual by institutions such as the church and the state; and on the other it has comprised a process of ‘adiaphorization’ (in Beilharz 2001: 21). He uses the term adiaphorization to refer to a process that has led to the assertion that a number of important human actions are morally adiaphoric, that is, indifferent from the moral point of view (ibid). He argues that most activities regulated by organizations are subject to adiaphorization in that the individual is responsible for performing set duties and tasks but does not bear moral responsibility for them. For Bauman, both forms of moral regulation are now contested. We are now aware that we no longer have a moral code that is absolute and universal. This return to individual responsibility, and the need to confront moral problems on our own, necessitates a revision of the way sociological theories of morality see society as the author and the guardian of morality (Bauman in Beilharz 2001: 22). The Holocaust and other atrocities of the modern era can be the lens, stark and terrible, through which we may rethink the way that morality and immorality are produced, and question the status of moral concerns in sociological discourse.

**Sociology and Evil**

Thomas Cushman (2001:80), in discussing the war in Bosnia, signals his wish to turn the rhetorical question of ‘Why did it happen?’ into a sociological one: ‘What brought individual agents to do such things and how were their acts facilitated by their social and cultural environments?’ To do so, Cushman argues, it is necessary to draw on a sociology of evil which is yet to arrive. Evil as moral concept is bound to ‘the baggage of morality, metaphysics, emotions, essentialism, psychology – in short all the things that sociology has defined itself against’ (ibid). While philosophy has long concerned itself with the question of evil, early sociology consciously distanced itself from it. Evil failed to fit the embryonic discipline’s idea ‘of human nature and the positive telos of human evolution’ (ibid). As such evil is sociology’s doppelgänger, ‘haunting the discipline for enlightenment by calling to mind questions of metaphysics, agency, and the ‘dark side’ of human progress’ (ibid).
Most sociological narratives do not engage with moral issues. For Bauman this is largely a problem of language. Sociology, influenced by the scientific tradition, liberated itself from religious thought by creating and utilising an explanatory language that produced accounts without need of notions of purpose or will. The focus on individual behaviour is evaded with the inclination to seek explanation in collective institutions: ‘education, class, sex, culture, or whatever’ (Beilharz 2001:9). Abiding ‘by the rules of scientific discourse, morality and related phenomena sat uneasily in the social universe generated, theorized and researched by the dominant sociological narratives’ (Bauman 1989:170). Moral phenomena were written out of accounts or were explained in terms of non-moral institutions.

Reliance on Durkheimian analyses of moral society has meant that the issue of moral responsibility is largely missing in sociological analysis (Fine & Hirsh 2000:1). Durkheim’s identification of morality with conformity to social norms has resulted in questions of moral choice and agency being removed from the discussion. Durkheim privileges the need for social integration in an ordered society. A moral system is taken as essential - it ensures the continued existence of a society by supporting the structures of authority through socialization and punitive sanctions. Bauman (1989:172) argues that if ‘the only existential foundation of morality is the will of society, and its only function is to allow the society to survive, then the very issue of substantive evaluation of specific moral systems is effectively removed from the sociological agenda’ (Bauman 1989: 172). Durkheim’s position suggests that what matters is that society has a moral system rather than what substance these moral norms have or how they should be enforced. Following Durkheim’s lead we would propose that ‘every society has the morality it needs’ (ibid). Moral norms are reinforced as social products; for all intents and purposes moral systems are seen as equal if they serve as a force for order in a given society. Bauman sees Durkheim’s most forceful contribution to sociological understandings of morality to be his conception that not only is society a moralizing force but that ‘Man is a moral being only because he lives in society’ (ibid).

Just as Durkheim’s sociology sets the agenda in questioning morality it also does so in questioning the nature of evil. He saw evil as the absence of good rather than a presence unto itself. For Cushman (2001:81) this perception of deviance and evil as ‘fallings away
from the good – is deeply embedded in the history of sociological thought and has worked to disestablish the ontological reality of evil in social theory and … to elide the presence of evil in social life’. To first tackle evil we must that it is not an absence of good, but a presence – a social presence or a social manifestation – in itself and moreover is a chosen action within a social setting. Evil, as a form of social action, is the intentional infliction of pain and suffering on others within a social setting.

**Evil: Radical and Banal**

Hannah Arendt is one theorist who has endeavoured to recover the lost moral category of evil. She reframes evil within moral discourse, trying to better understand its character and the different responses to it. In *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1961) Arendt looked at ‘radical evil’. While the idea of radical evil is traced back to Kant, as an event it is most readily associated with the extermination of European Jews (Badiou, 2001). The massive numbers of prisoners in concentration camps in Nazi Germany and Stalinist Russia marked a sickening discontinuity in European history. Totalitarianism demonstrated new modes of power, dominated people as never before, and pushed entire populations beyond the bounds of humanity. Totalitarianism released radical evil through mass terror, murder, and revenge.

Her subsequent work, *Eichmann in Jerusalem* (1963), moved from radical evil to the banality of evil, taking Adolf Eichmann, the principal logistical military officer of the Nazi’s mass murder of the Jews during World War II, as its subject. Arendt meant the phrase to relate to the nature of evil as exhibited in Eichmann. The consequences of such evil were appalling, certainly not banal, but the perpetrator was. The horror of Eichmann’s trial came from the observation that the man responsible for such heinous actions ‘stood before the court a profoundly mediocre, indeed common, human being’ (Todorov 2000: 124). The prosecution’s desire to depict Eichmann as an ‘abnormal monster’ was not only doomed, given the man presented before them, but also wrong in that it perpetuated the belief that only extreme deviants would be capable of similar actions. Eichmann had only been following orders, and in the context of Nazi society was acting within the confines of the law.
At his trial the prosecution argued that Eichmann’s conscience must have alerted him to the knowledge that he was doing wrong, yet this reasoning ignores the fact that one’s conscience is influenced by societal norms. Often the inner voice is merely an echo of the outer voice. As Bauman (1989:178) notes the ‘authority and binding force of the distinction between good and evil cannot be legitimized by reference to social powers which sanction and enforce it’. Even if action is condemned by authorities or the community it may still be moral. Moreover, an action that is enthusiastically embraced by a community may be immoral. Bauman (ibid) attests that the societal grounds of moral authority are morally irrelevant: the socialization process does not produce moral capacity it merely manipulates it. This means that responsibility for moral choices does not lie with society but with the individual.

Herbert C. Kelman’s work looks at the way moral inhibitions about participating in violent atrocities is eroded. Inhibitions tend to weaken

once three conditions are met, singly or together; the violence is authorized (by official orders coming from the legally entitled quarters), actions are routinized (by rule-governed practices and exact specification of roles), and the victims of the violence are dehumanized (by ideological definitions and indoctrinations) (in Bauman 1989: 21).

These conditions were met in Eichmann’s case. His conscience instructed him to obey orders however distasteful. He prided himself on rule adherence and effective and efficient organization. Finally he thought little of the people he sent to their deaths. Though fully aware of what awaited them, he believed it was neither his concern nor his responsibility. Instead of finding an inhuman monster Arendt found the archetypical bureaucrat whose central fault, a lethal one of near unbelievable magnitude, was a total lack of sympathy or empathy coupled with a near pathological thoughtlessness.

**An Evil Shared: Complicity, Coercion and Despair**

A controversial aspect of Arendt’s work is her examination of the role of the Judenrate’s (Jewish Councils in the ghetto) complicity in carrying out Nazi dictates. Her assertion that ‘the role of the Jewish leaders in the destruction of their own people is undoubtedly the darkest chapter of the whole dark story’ (Arendt 1963:104) unleashed a debate that continues. Whereas Hilberg’s *Destruction of the European Jews* (1961) argued that the
Jews had been ‘trapped as the prisoners of their past history’ and ‘had unlearned the art of resistance’, Arendt argued that Jewish leaders made active choices which assisted the Nazis (Bennett 1999:186). She argued that without this assistance the Nazis would not have killed the number of people that they did. Doing nothing would have been better than responding to Nazi directives. Eichmann, for instance, testified that he never personally selected an individual for deportation. He relied on the Judenrate Councils’ selection lists. These lists, put together under S.S. directives, stipulated how many were to be deported, and of what age, sex and country of origin. Eichmann, while aware that the majority of deportees were condemned to death, still did not feel the weight of them bear down upon him. ‘I never killed a Jew or, for that matter, I never killed a non-Jew…I never gave an order to kill a Jew nor an order to kill a non-Jew’, he said at his trial (in Arendt 1963: 196). It is not easy to contemplate a mass killer who has never killed. Equally, critics of Arendt had trouble contemplating her argument as the Judenrate Councils had responsibility without any real power and the threat of swift and brutal retribution hovered over them should ever they waver. Here we need to consider the notion of evil (as social action that will cause suffering) under conditions of coercion and despair.

The central moral question confronting the Judenrate was the decision to determine who should live from who should die. In attempting to keep as many Jews alive as possible the Judenrate played off the military needs of the Wehrmacht and German industry for skilled labour against those of the Nazi hierarchy that preferred the immediate extermination of all Jews. This strategy made those that were not seen as productive – children, the aged, the infirm – a far greater risk of selection for extermination. Productive Jews were saved at the sacrifice of the ‘unproductive’ Jews who were used to meet the deportation quotas of the authorities. The question of who survives is a moral dilemma that tests the moral fibre of any social community. The value of individuals and sectors of society is always differentiated, though the consequences of differentiation are rarely as stark as those that confronted the ghetto dweller. The Judenrate determined who was of value and who should be saved, in effect legitimizing the sacrifice of others. Some were able to buy their way out, others were seen as valuable because of their particular intellectual or artistic ability, many more because they were connected to influential
Council members. Rudolf Kastner, the leader of the Hungarian Jewish community, agreed to sacrifice ‘ordinary’ Jews in order to save a few ‘prominent’ ones. Many, it turned out, owed their prominence to their wealth or their relationship to Kastner (Todorov 2000: 107). To live with the task of surrendering their own they spoke of sacrificing a few to save many more. As Arendt (1963:105) points out the truth was far grimmer. Kastner saved 1, 648 people with approximately 476,000 victims. It was a human loss that cannot be redeemed by mathematical equation.

Without a doubt the Judenrate faced decisions that seem humanly impossible to make. Their actions are a dark chapter in the history of the Holocaust – suffering built upon suffering – yet it is not a chapter that can be presented with any clarity or where one can readily name the base collaborators. The Judenrate falls into Primo Levi’s ‘grey zone’ a ‘region of ambiguity and perplexity’ (Bartov 2000:252). Levi argues that the ghetto, like the Lager, created conditions where conventional categories of norms and values no longer held, where there existed no restraints to curtail the power from above. Judenrate members were able to exercise a certain amount of power on their charges but had little power influencing policy decisions. Many worked to save those who they could, knowing the cost was borne by all who they were unable to help; many were compromised, some were totally corrupted.

Submission to Evil: Blameworthy Victims?

At the Eichmann trial the prosecutor asked witness after witness why they did not protest, refuse to board the train or attack their oppressors? For Arendt the heartrending reality was that no non-Jewish group had behaved differently. David Rousset explains this as a consequence of the process of dehumanization that occurred both within and outside of the camps,

The triumph of the S.S. demands that the tortured victim allow himself to be led to the noose without protesting, that he renounce and abandon himself to the point of ceasing to affirm his identity…. It is not gratuitously, out of sheer sadism, that the S.S. men desire his defeat. They know that the system which succeeds in destroying its victim before he mounts the scaffold … is incomparably the best for keeping a whole people in slavery. In submission. Nothing is more terrible than these processions of
human beings going like dummies to their deaths (in Arendt 1963: 9).

When we demand to know why the Jews did not revolt more vigorously, Todorov asks us to reflect on why the Soviet prisoners of war in Germany did not revolt? Or why peasants in 1930s Ukraine submitted to the starvation that Stalin ordered? We need to consider the nature of the regime that these people suffered under (Todorov 2000: 131). Countless examples of gross inequities suffered with varying forms of fatalistic acquiescence confront us in our own time. These are the consequences of total absence of power coupled with absolute depersonalization. For many survivors the horror of their experience was exacerbated by the need to defend their actions, or often more pointedly, their inaction. Elie Wiesel (1978:42) recalls the nature of the accusations that pervaded the media after the war, ‘Why the Judenrate? Why a Jewish police? Why Jewish kapos? Why did the victims march to the slaughterhouse like cattle? … The height of irony and cruelty: the dead victims needed to be defended, while the killers, dead and alive, were left alone’.

**Conclusion**

By the time Jews found themselves at the gas chamber’s doors they had experienced a process that had so totally exteriorized them that their ability to comprehend, let alone resist their situation, was all but lost. Resistance at the end may have been futile but may have been life-saving at the beginning. Todorov writes,

> Those who refused to acknowledge the danger of Nazism, who consoled themselves by maintaining that people were fundamentally good and the world fundamentally harmonious, unwittingly abetted the spread of evil. For Nazi persecution did not take its extreme forms at the very start; on the contrary, it progressed only insofar as it failed to meet with resistance (Todorov 2000: 215).

Aware that it is with hindsight he makes this observation he suggests that one lesson we need to learn from the Holocaust is the need to resist evil at its onset: to confront it before it transforms into an unstoppable juggernaut. When reading survivor accounts the dread is heightened by the knowledge that each time the victims try to appease their persecutors or comply with their demands they move inexorably toward disaster. This is neither to argue that the crematorium was their destiny or their fault but to signal the significance of
our actions in creating possible trajectories and the importance of recognizing evil. We live in a world where we see, and accept, inequities. Rather than believe that ‘the world is as it should be’ we know the world to be unjust. It is the acceptance of evil rather than ignorance of it that blinds us to seeing the seeds of extreme forms of cruelty. To better resist it we need to understand it. As Arendt notes:

Comprehension does not mean denying the outrageous, deducing the unprecedented from the precedents, or explaining phenomena by such analogies and generalities that the impact of reality and the shock of experience are no longer felt. It means, rather, examining and bearing consciously the burden which our century has placed on us – neither denying its existence nor submitting meekly to its weight. Comprehension, in short, means the unpremeditated, attentive facing up to, and resisting of, reality – whatever it may be. (Arendt 1961: xxx)

A sociology of evil would allow us to better understand how individual actions within certain societal structures and environments come together to produce collective and catastrophic social outcomes.

References


