

Todorov Tzvetan, Arthur Denner
Abigail Polak:

depersonalization

Facing the extreme: Moral Life
in the Concentration Camps

Henry Holt & Company Inc.
January 1996

THE DEHUMANIZATION OF THE VICTIMS

Totalitarian ideology sees the individual as an instrument, as a means by which to realize a political or even a cosmic project. Hitler spoke determinedly of “the nothingness and insignificance of the individual human being and of his continued existence in the visible immortality of the nation” (Rauschning 222–23), while Himmler demanded of each member of the SS “the total sacrifice of his personality to the accomplishment of his duty to the nation and to the fatherland” (Höss 95)—all the more reason, I suppose, for the SS to be willing to sacrifice the lives of others to the great cause. One can find equivalent statements in the writings of Lenin and Stalin, the word *Communism* replacing *nation*. Totalitarian doctrines can thus properly be called antihumanist. Humanistic philosophy, as I take that term to mean, considers the individual an ultimate end. This is the practical moral imperative of that other German, Immanuel Kant: “Act so that humanity, both in your own person and that of others, be used as an end in itself, and never as a mere means” (*Metaphysics* 42). The philosophy of humanism recognizes that at times individuals must inevitably be treated as a means; it insists, however, that they not be considered solely that.

Here is one of those rare points on which totalitarian practice conforms with the theory: the human being is in fact taken to be a means; he is therefore no longer a genuine “person” (who by definition, at

least in the Kantian sense, is an end in himself). Bettelheim maintains that “the goal of the system was depersonalization” (*Heart* 39). In fact, it was not. Depersonalization was more a means of transforming individuals into the components of a project that transcended them. What is true, however, is that depersonalization is ubiquitous under totalitarianism, and nowhere did it triumph more completely than in the camps. Far more than any sadistic or primitive instincts, it is depersonalization, of the other and of oneself, that is responsible for totalitarian evil.

In its normal operations, the totalitarian system reduces individuals to their functions, but at least these functions tend to be multiple. The camp, once again, is a mirror of the world around it, magnifying what it reflects. Only one function is recognized there, and that is work; moreover, because the camps have access to an endless supply of labor, it becomes unnecessary for those in charge to worry about the upkeep of this instrument and thus about the preservation of human lives. In the totalitarian world beyond the concentration camp walls, individuals, even if not valued as persons, are still treated as human beings, because it is when treated as such that they best fulfill their task. Inside the camp, however, they are no longer truly considered part of the human race. Even before she was sent to her camp, Eugenia Ginzburg was told by one of the examining magistrates, “Enemies are not people. We’re allowed to do what we like with them. People indeed!” (*Journey* 63). To be classified as an enemy is enough to be excluded from humanity. Once Ginzburg arrived at her Siberian destination, she found this attitude to be common currency. As she says in her description of the director of the penal *sovkhose* at Elgen, “He derived no satisfaction from our sufferings. He was simply oblivious to them because in the most sincere way imaginable, he did not regard us as human. Wastage among the convict work force was to him no more than a routine malfunction” (*Within* 71). Conversely, the way to get better treatment from the guards was to establish a personal relationship with one of them, in other words, to have oneself recognized as an individual. Knowing how to speak the same language as the guards proved indispensable for that reason: deprived of speech, the individual loses a large part of his or her humanity.

Turning people into nonpersons, into animate but not human be-

ings, is not always easy, whatever one's ideological principles. Faced with a concrete individual, guards can find it hard to overcome their own resistance to this process. And so various techniques of depersonalization are put into action, aimed at helping the guard forget the prisoner's humanity. Here are a few of these techniques.

There is, to begin with, the transformation imposed on the victims. Before being killed, they are stripped naked. Human beings tend not to congregate naked, they do not move about from place to place naked; to deprive them of their clothing is to make them like animals. Guards have testified that it became impossible for them to identify with their victims once those people became a mass of nude bodies: clothes are a mark of humanity. The same effect was achieved by forcing the camp inmates to live in their own filth or by subjecting them to a starvation diet that turned them into scavengers, ready to swallow just about anything they found. "They were no longer men," Höss said of the Russian prisoners of war. "They'd turned into beasts who thought only about eating" (160). Of course, Höss neglected to add that he was the person responsible for this change. All these means had the same end, which was not lost on the guards. "Why," Gitta Sereny asked Stangl, "if they were going to kill them anyway, what was the point of all the humiliation, why the cruelty?" Stangl replied, "To condition those who actually had to carry out the policies. To make it possible for them to do what they did" (Sereny 101). It was thus a two-stage operation: one first induced "animal-like" behavior; one could then, with a clear conscience, treat these people like animals or worse.

There are other techniques, less brutal but no less effective. Each inmate is stripped of his name, that cardinal sign of human individuality, and given a number. When speaking of their prisoners, the guards avoid using words like *people* or *individuals* or *men*, referring to them instead as "pieces" or "items" or employing other impersonal turns of phrase. More than thirty years after the fact, Sereny finds Stangl still using language of this sort: "They were well ahead with the work up there," he says, referring to a mass execution and the disposal of the corpses (170). Two grave diggers from Vilno recall that "the Germans even forbade us to use the words 'corpse' or 'victim.' The dead were blocks of wood, shit, with absolutely no importance" (Lanzmann 13).

A secret memorandum, dated June 5, 1942, concerning modifications to be made to the trucks that would serve as mobile gas chambers at Chelmno is particularly chilling. The human beings marked for death are always referred to as "the cargo" or "the items," or they are not called anything at all, as in "ninety-seven thousand have been dealt with" (Kogon et al. iii-iv).

Large numbers in themselves produce the same effect: killing two people is in a sense harder than killing two thousand. "I rarely saw them as individuals," Stangl declares. "It was always just a huge mass" (Sereny 201). All of us tend to react this way. When deaths are announced in the thousands, the sheer number depersonalizes the victims and as a result desensitizes us to their fate. One death is a cause for sorrow; a million deaths is a news item. And the incorporation of individuals into a more abstract category works the same way: it is easier to dispense inhumane treatment to "enemies of the people" or to "kulaks" than to Ivan or Masha; to Jews or Poles than to Mordechai or Tadeusz. Reducing the individual to a category is inevitable when one wants to study human beings; when one is interacting with them, however, the practice is dangerous. A category can never stand before me in the flesh; only a person can.

It was for just this reason that all possible measures were taken in the concentration camps to ensure that face-to-face encounters did not occur, to prevent the executioner from meeting his victims' gaze. Only an individual can look at us (and when I look at a stranger, I try to make sure he doesn't notice me doing so); by avoiding his gaze, we can all the more easily ignore him as a person. In recognizing the other, even the most hardened individual risks moments of weakness. "One day," Eichmann remembers, "Höss told me that Himmler had come and looked over everything very carefully . . . and that apparently he had lost his nerve" (117). Eichmann himself made much of his own inability to look death in the face, to see the figures and the graphs transformed into twisted human corpses. He visited Chelmno, where victims were gassed in trucks: "I didn't stay to watch the whole maneuver. I couldn't stand the screams; I was far too anxious. . . . I fled. I jumped into the car and for a long time I couldn't open my mouth" (111). He attended a mass execution in Minsk: "I saw a woman throw her arms out behind her," he says. "My knees turned to

water. . . . I had to leave" (115). He went to Auschwitz: "I preferred not to watch the way they asphyxiated people. . . . They burned the corpses on a gigantic iron grill. . . . I couldn't stand it; I was overcome with nausea" (152). And then to Treblinka: "I stood off to one side; I would have liked not to see anything at all" (153). He ordered a group of Hungarian Jews on a forced march to Vienna: "I didn't see them myself; on principle, I refused to watch these oppressive sights unless formally ordered to do so" (326).

The gas chamber was invented to avoid this kind of "human" reaction, to which even Himmler and Eichmann were not immune, and to keep the members of the *Einsatzkommandos*, who shot prisoners by the thousands, from losing their minds. Once the machine had replaced the man, the executioner could avoid all contact with the victim. This is the way Himmler justified the gas chambers to Höss; there were too many people to kill simply by shooting them, he said, and "if we take the women and children into account, this method would be too painful for the SS" (Höss 263). On the technical level, the same is true of all modern warfare: wherever actual contact is eliminated, efficiency (the rate of fatalities among the enemy) rises. Psychologically, it is easier to kill ten thousand people by dropping a bomb from a plane than to shoot a single child at point-blank range. Furthermore, we tend to criminalize the second more than the first. "The person who launches a bomb by pushing a button," Erich Kahler writes, "or the general or statesman who directs the slaughter from afar, faces only targets and numbers, and must, by necessity, lose the ability to value and distinguish human beings" (70). Robert Jay Lifton has found a significant correlation between altitude and attitude: during the Vietnam War, pilots who flew bombers at high altitudes had clear consciences, while those who fired from helicopters experienced remorse and anguish (494-95). The risk in getting to know an enemy soldier is that he may cease to be an enemy.

Yet the gaze of the other cannot always be avoided; therefore de-personalization ultimately depends on the torturer's having a schema that allows him to maintain an acceptable self-image in his interactions with his victims. This schema was transmitted through ideological indoctrination, which in Germany took the form of a "cult of toughness," the systematic denigration of all feelings of sympathy or

pity. This cult preceded Nazism; it is part of what Alice Miller calls "the black pedagogy" (a tradition that, among other things, expected fathers to beat their sons in order to make men of them). It found its way into Prussian military training as well, in the form of the *Drill*, which imposed exhausting exercises and forced marches with heavy packs, all in the name of a doctrine that held that each additional suffering improved the sufferer and was therefore reason for pride rather than complaint. Nazism appropriated these traditions and systematized them. The "tough" training received by the SS men guaranteed that no spontaneous feeling of pity would taint the treatment to which they would later subject their prisoners. A circular from Hitler's chancellery concerning deportations says, "It is the nature of things that these, in some respects, very difficult problems can be solved in the interests of the permanent security of our people only with *ruthless toughness—rücksichtsloser Härte*" (Arendt, *Eichmann* 161). Thus, the SS tended to recruit candidates who seemed the most hard-hearted, and those who aspired to the SS counted on a little of its ruthlessness to rub off on them; they felt that simply by belonging to the SS, they would be perceived as tougher and more virile. Those who belonged to the Cheka, the predecessor of the KGB, felt similarly. Needless to say, this kind of toughness did not imply physical endurance or personal courage (during wartime, prison camp guards were derided by "real" soldiers for being goldbrickers); it merely meant insensitivity to the suffering of others.

Hitler himself spoke contemptuously of pity, that onerous holdover of Christian ethics. "It's just bad luck that we don't have the right religion," Speer recalls him saying. "Why didn't we have the religion of the Japanese, who regard sacrifice for the Fatherland as the highest good? The Mohammedan religion too would have been much more compatible to us than Christianity. Why did it have to be Christianity, with its weakness and flabbiness?" (96). Other religions were preferable to Christianity precisely because they did not place as much value on compassion, on sympathy for the weak. Hitler, moreover, carefully avoided personal attachments; the only one Speer knew him to have was to his dog; indeed, before committing suicide, Hitler killed the dog, thus conferring on his pet the highest possible distinction. The fact that this cult of toughness is both a caricature of masculinity and

the antithesis of the ordinary virtues may explain the systematic deprecation of women in Nazi discourse. Thus, during the Nuremberg trials, Göring scorns the humanitarian values as “womanly” (Gilbert, *Nuremberg* 216) and holds heroism to be a strictly masculine affair; the role of women here, if any, is to admire the heroes and reward them with feminine favors for their great deeds (a role in keeping with tradition). Hitler himself was neither attracted to the world of ordinary everyday life nor particularly concerned with the valorization of feminine virtues. “A highly intelligent man should take a primitive and stupid woman. . . . I could never marry. Think of the problems if I had children!” (Speer 92).

Eicke, who was responsible for the actual setting up of the camps, was steadfast in his contempt for those who failed to live up to his harsh ideal: “To perform an act of charity toward an ‘enemy of the state’ would be a weakness that he would instantly turn to his advantage. Pity for these men would be unworthy of an SS man; in our ranks there is no room for ‘softies’; they are better off entering a monastery. We need men who are tough and committed.” (Eicke imagined monks to be as fanatical as Nazis but more prone to pity.) “An SS man,” he says on another occasion, “must be capable of annihilating even his closest family if they rebel against the state or the ideas of Adolf Hitler” (Höss 71, 100). In the Soviet Union, it is the Young Pioneer Pavlik Morozov who incarnated toughness. Having denounced his parents, he was killed in retaliation by “enemies of the state” and was accorded the status of martyr, a posthumous example for all Soviet children. The lesson is simple: if one’s parents do not agree with the ideas of the leader, they are to be denounced. And in yet another speech, Eicke recommends that the SS men rid themselves of “those old bourgeois notions that Hitler’s revolution has rendered obsolete. They are symptoms of a weakness and a sentimentality unworthy of an SS führer” (101–2). We know that most of the SS took that counsel to heart and allowed no unseemly pity to hinder the systematic depersonalization of the prisoners. After all, a regime cannot cultivate both pity and torture at the same time. If these men felt any pity at all, it was for themselves, for having to be so tough with the inmates. Sometimes, like Eichmann, they might become “anx-

ious,” although their “anxieties” never seemed to keep them from fulfilling their duty.

The cult of toughness—or of virility, as it is also sometimes called—is obviously not the exclusive province of the camp guards, although they did take the ideal to its extreme. We, too, know how to depersonalize those close to us. Our methods are infinitely less spectacular, however; sometimes an offhand word or a thoughtless glance suffices.

THE SUBMISSION OF THE GUARDS

The inmates were not the only ones to undergo the process of depersonalization. In the totalitarian system, and especially in the camps, the guards tended toward this same condition, although they reached it by a different route. The goal of the system was to transform everyone into a cog in a vast machine and thus to deprive them of their will. The guards attest to this transformation in claiming that they were only following orders, that it was their duty to obey. They fail to realize that submission of this sort implies their own depersonalization: they have ceased to see themselves as an end and have agreed to be merely a means.

When the system collapses, the former guards typically fall back on the principle of obedience as their excuse. “We were only following orders,” they exclaim, assuming that this formula is sufficient to lift the burden of responsibility from their shoulders. Their accusers, of course, try to prove that this defense is a sham, that the guards acted on their own initiative, in which case their fault would indeed be all the greater. Certain exceptions notwithstanding, it is clear that the demand for blind obedience, the need to have each person see himself as a mere cog in a machine, is highly characteristic of the totalitarian system. Even if the words “I was only following orders” do not always do justice to the actual facts, they correctly evoke the mind of the totalitarian subject. Rather than reject such statements, we must preserve them as a precious admission of a certain truth. The argument that the guards were only doing what they were told they must do may lessen their responsibility in the eyes of the law, but it also

reveals the enormity of their moral transformation. Someone who only follows orders is no longer a person. The originality of totalitarian crime resides precisely in this possibility.

Submission is presented first as an obligation. Eicke says of the true SS man that he “must consider every order sacred and execute it without hesitation, however painful it may appear to be” (Höss 95). Echoing the SS motto “Führer, Command and We Shall Obey,” Eicke’s letterhead bears the following inscription: “One thing counts: the order given” (100–101, 196). These were not mere words. Obedience, however, is not simply accepted; it is sought out and actively assumed. To submit to laws and commands is to fulfill one’s duty; one therefore has reason to be proud and can even feel especially virtuous. To comply with the demands of the state, that is, with the supreme demands, allows one a clear conscience. That is why Eichmann could claim that he acted according to moral principles, that he simply did his duty. As Hannah Arendt points out, however, that claim becomes possible only after one has supplanted Kant’s categorical imperative—that one must act as if the maxim from which one acts were to become through one’s will a universal law of nature—with Hans Frank’s reformulation. “Act in such a way,” says Frank, the Nazi governor-general of Poland, “that if the Führer knew of your action he would approve of it” (Frank 15–16). Here, the form (to do one’s duty) remains, but the content has changed. In place of universal maxims we have the will of a single individual. “*Führerworte haben Gesetzkraft*,” the leader’s words have the force of law; this is Eichmann’s principle and that of every other obedient citizen as well.

The principle of submission is not confined to behaviors; it concerns beliefs as well. This is to be expected in the camps, where the absence of any autonomy was a given. Elsewhere in the totalitarian state, however, subservience of mind comes as more of a surprise because it concerns the beliefs of an entire population. (Note, however, that outside the camps the distinction between guard and inmate is no longer as clear; each and everyone is both guard and inmate at the same time, if only to a small degree, submitting to the system and imposing it on others.) Surprising or not, in the 1930s, when accusations rained down upon the heads of ordinary Soviet citizens, neighbors discovered that people they thought had led irre-

proachable lives were in fact perfidious enemies. Did they really believe such things? “*Pravda* said so,” Eugenia Ginzburg recounts, “and it must therefore be true” (*Journey* 5). The fact of being arrested is proof of guilt; indeed, the accused is punished before it has been established that any crime has been committed. Better yet, the punishment obviates the need for the crime. In some cases, spouses stop trusting each other; when one is accused, the other believes the testimony of the accuser rather than the evidence of his or her own senses. Ginzburg tells the sad story of an elderly Communist who refused to defend her husband after he had been declared an enemy of the party and who, despite her own sufferings, wrote Stalin a letter “full of love and devotion” (19); later the woman committed suicide. Ginzburg’s own husband reacted in a similar way: he did not want the calamities that befell his wife to compromise his confidence in the party.

In the literature devoted to the Nazi camps, this blind submission to law and order is often held up as yet another “typically German” or “Prussian” characteristic. That it is also present in other totalitarian countries is enough to undercut such a notion, but habits of obedience are not confined to these countries, either. When Jorge Semprun, the son of Spanish refugees who settled in France, was liberated from Buchenwald, he immediately returned home. On his very first day back in France, he heard from the mouth of an administrator of a repatriation camp a phrase the Buchenwald guards had not bothered to say to him but certainly must have said to themselves many times: “If I had to have personal opinions, *monsieur*, there would be no end to it,” the man said. “I confine myself to carrying out the orders of the Administration” (Semprun 110). The chilling results of Stanley Milgram’s famous experiment on submission to authority are well known: a representative sample of free, educated, intelligent American citizens (and not “docile Germans”) agree to inflict torture on one of their own once they have been convinced that in doing so they are acceding to the demands of science and to their professors’ orders. Not a “typically German” phenomenon at all, submission turns out to be a general human response—given the right conditions.

Of all these conditions, one of the most powerful is the transformation of life in its totality into a state of war (an extension of the notion

of "the enemy"). In wartime, you are supposed to stop making decisions on your own and to carry out, blindly and promptly, your superiors' orders, even when they violate your peacetime principles. War is an occasion for legal, even moral, murder. Insofar as the Prussian mind was impregnated with the military ideal, the Nazis could indeed claim to be drawing on a national tradition (of course, they kept only those parts of it that suited their purposes). The army is traditionally the guardian of this wartime mentality in times of peace as well. "When you're in the army, you don't argue," Fritz Klein, an Auschwitz doctor who took part in the selections, offered in his own defense (Langbein 337). But one cannot equate a concentration camp with a battlefield or an "internal enemy" with an "external enemy"; the "war" that the Jews were alleged to have declared against the Nazi state was a convenient fiction invented by Hitler. In addition, even in wartime, all prior principles are not annulled. If they were, we would all run the risk of ceasing to be human.

Docile acquiescence and abdication of will and judgment can be found well beyond the confines of the camps and the totalitarian states; they are everyday behaviors. What extreme situations do is simply illustrate the most painful consequences of them. Once again, the truth of the individual and that of humanity find themselves on the same side, opposed to that of the collectivity; the laws of the country, the will of the leader, the orders of the state will always be contested by the thinking individual who is inspired by what has been called, at different times, natural law, universal morality, or human rights. The notion of "crimes against humanity" rests on these principles: actions that are entirely within the bounds of existing laws come to be considered crimes, not because they break those laws but because they violate the unwritten maxims underlying the very notions of right and of humanity. Seeking to justify his actions as commandant of Auschwitz, Höss claimed to have followed a principle still in force in democratic England: "My country, right or wrong!" (197). Far from justifying Höss, however, the principle was itself compromised by the revelation of the acts to which it can lead. Auschwitz becomes possible when national interest is held above that of humanity. Obedience to the law may be necessary in order for the state to function smoothly, but that does not make it a source of virtue. If the law is

iniquitous, it must be denounced and disobeyed. That it is more possible to do so under certain regimes than under others points to a practical way of distinguishing the better among them from the far less good.

THREE PORTRAITS

In our effort to understand the nature of evil, it is the Nazi variant of totalitarianism that offers the richest material; on the Communist side, we have nothing like the documents produced by certain officials of the National Socialist regime who were more or less forced to explain themselves. And so it is with particular interest that I turn to three of these documents—Höss's autobiography, the proceedings of Eichmann's pretrial questioning, and Speer's memoirs.

Let us begin with Rudolf Höss. He describes his childhood as an apprenticeship in obedience—less to the law itself than to the successive figures incarnating it, first his father, then his superiors, then his commanding officer. Höss confuses good with power, or with the person holding it: "In our eyes, the Führer was always right," he declares, "as was his first deputy, the Reichsführer [Himmler]" (197). Their orders are carried out with no reflection whatsoever; disobedience is inconceivable. "I don't think such an idea even came close to entering the mind of a single one of the thousands of SS officers," Höss says (196). The commandant of Auschwitz, then, works at his own depersonalization, becoming in his own eyes a cog in the Nazi machine. The day comes when he receives the order concerning the "final solution" to the Jewish question; without a moment's hesitation he sets about executing it. Höss acts out of duty, not for the pleasure of killing, as is illustrated by an episode that occurred during the final evacuation of the camps. Soldiers coming upon convoys of inmates amused themselves by firing on them at random. Every so often someone would hit his target. Catching one of his men in the act, Höss takes the soldier to task. "I shouted at him," he says. "I was furious. I asked him why he'd killed that poor creature when he wasn't even in his charge. He answered me with an insolent laugh and told me it was none of my business. I pulled out my revolver and shot

him" (237). This is the same Rudolf Höss who sent millions to their deaths, but then Höss had been officially charged with that responsibility, unlike the soldier, who acted on his own initiative. The story may not be true, but it is still a good illustration of how Höss saw himself and understood his actions.

Höss is as depersonalized as he is obedient. He never mentions a single friend; he says he loves his wife but never describes a single act that might confirm it. At Auschwitz he has a mistress, one of the inmates; when he wants to end the relationship, he isn't satisfied simply to leave her—he takes steps to have her killed. On his orders, the inmates are reduced to their pure function, that of work. Those too weak to produce a high enough yield are eliminated at once. "They were dying after a very short time, without having been the slightest use to the rearmament industry. . . . These men were a burden on the camps; good for absolutely nothing, they took space and food away from those who could work" (219). They were going to die soon anyway (from exhaustion), so why not send them directly to the gas chambers? Unproductive, a burden on the camps, these men are never considered an end; at best, they can serve as a means. And if they cannot do that, then they must die.

Höss's depersonalization of others, especially the victims, lets him strike a rather odd pose, that of a natural scientist. In his confession (which he makes after he already knows he has been sentenced to death) he coyly confides in his readers and shares with them his impartial observations on the behavior of the human species and the Jewish race. During his tour of duty at Sachsenhausen, he tells us, he accumulated many "varied and picturesque impressions" (129). Even more so at Auschwitz, that vast laboratory, where he "gathered indelible impressions and ample food for thought" (209). Why did members of the Jewish race go to their deaths so easily? A thorny question that Höss, the professor, will try to clarify for us: "From my observations, I can state categorically . . .," he says (175). "The life and death of the Jews posed, in fact, a fair number of problems that I was incapable of solving" (209).

(Each time I read Höss's book, I am deeply disturbed. It doesn't matter that it holds no surprises for me anymore. As soon as I start

reading or copying down passages like those above, a kind of nausea washes over me. None of the other books I've discussed triggers this strong a feeling. So why Höss? Doubtless because of several factors combined: the enormity of his crime, the absence of sincere regret on his part, and the many ways he elicits my identification with him and manages to make me share his way of seeing things. The first-person-singular point of view is also important, as is the absence of any other voice alongside his own, like Gitta Sereny's with Stangl's, Less's with Eichmann's, or even that of the older Speer juxtaposed with that of the young man. Finally, there is the complicity Höss creates by inviting his reader to take advantage of his singular experiences to observe human beings as if they were laboratory animals at a particularly interesting phase of their lives, the hours just before death. When I read Höss's book, I consent to share with him the role of the voyeur who looks on as others die, and it makes me feel unclean.)

For Höss, abstract categories become detached from the reality they are supposed to elucidate, and from then on, only the categories matter. Höss is thoroughly enchanted by the idea expressed in the motto *Arbeit macht frei* ("Work will make you free"), and the whole macabre experiment of Auschwitz taking place before his eyes, even though it is the antithesis of freedom, cannot dampen his enthusiasm. Höss can easily see the problem in general terms (and in other individuals) but never in himself, despite his being a prime example. How else to explain so astonishing a statement as this one: "I am convinced," he writes, "that the situation of many prisoners could have improved if the representatives of the administration had been more humane and less bureaucratic" (48).

Höss reached this degree of depersonalization by systematically cultivating his toughness and by suppressing any compassion or, as he calls it, "softness." He himself interprets this ability as part of his love of the soldier's occupation, for him a calling. His first kill at the front felt to him like a rite of passage: "My first death! I have crossed the threshold into the magic circle" (27). Until his dying day, Höss believed that war alone reveals the truth about life. Having endured harsh treatment himself—at home, in the army, in prison—and stirred by Eicke's speeches, Höss treats others with equal severity. At

the first executions and torture sessions he attends, he experiences an "inner emotion" but allows nothing to show. "I did not want to destroy my feelings of compassion for human suffering. I've always felt them, but usually I paid no attention because I was not allowed to be 'soft.' In order not to be accused of weakness, I wanted to have the reputation of being 'tough'" (92-93). In this value system, to be strong means to be hard, or pitiless. Here, the perfection of the totalitarian machine is unmistakable: the more Höss can console himself with that other self—the one still filled with sympathy—the more effective he is in his work. His confession ends with the words "I too had a heart. . . ." (257).

Having succeeded in depersonalizing his victims, Höss regards his work at Auschwitz as a technocrat might his own: all that interests Höss is how his factory is performing. He never wonders about the final product. Not that he has any doubts about Hitler's objectives; in fact, he is so committed to Nazi doctrine that, despite his best efforts, the book he writes can't help exuding anti-Semitism. Yet he continues to insist on certain distinctions. For example: "I want to emphasize the fact that I personally have never felt hatred toward the Jews" (174). As Arthur Seyss-Inquart points out, the "work of death" is particularly successful when it is done without hatred. Höss sees to it that his factory functions smoothly, that there are no hitches, that the various raw materials (poison, human beings, combustibles) arrive in synchrony. In this sense, he represents a prime example of instrumental thinking. It is not the only way of thinking Höss knows, but it is one at which he excels.

Adolf Eichmann, the person directly in charge of the "final solution," was the same type of man. He describes himself as "a pawn on a chessboard" (*Eichmann* 291), a tiny cog with no will or initiative of his own, in other words, a nonsubject. To hear him tell it, he never did anything more than obey, than carry out orders. "Throughout my entire life, I'd been used to obeying . . . from earliest infancy right up to May 8, 1945 . . . an obedience that had become unconditional" (422). In Jerusalem, in his final statement before the court, he observes, "My guilt lies in my obedience, in my respect for discipline, for my military obligations in wartime, for my oath of loyalty"—all

attributes we normally esteem. "During these times," Eichmann continues, "obedience was required of all subordinates, as it will be again in the future. Obedience belongs among the virtues." For him, to disobey was both inadmissible and impossible.

Eichmann thus prides himself on what is most troubling about him, his own depersonalization. Not only does he obey orders, but he never *wants* to do otherwise. Personal initiative frightens him; he always tries to make sure he is "covered." If there is one thing that truly shocks him, it is the idea, proposed to him by his interrogator, that he could have disobeyed orders. Never in his life, he says, has anything as low as this—a capacity for disobedience—been imputed to him. Given the magnitude of the crimes for which he was on trial, the comment is a telling one indeed. Eichmann's idea of duty and virtue is grounded in obedience, and yet he never completely stops seeing himself as a person, since he considers himself (though not his victims) to be deserving of pity. If, toward the end of the war, he expressed a desire to put a halt to his labors, it was only to stop "wearing myself out with all this deportation business" (314).

The depersonalization of others in Eichmann's mind is thus more radical than what we saw with Höss. Even during his questioning twenty years later, his language still echoes with it. Repeatedly the act of deportation and execution is referred to with an abstract euphemism, as is the object of that act, the Jews. As for its author, most of the time he is an implicit subject or else absent altogether. His statements deal not with the act itself but with the circumstances surrounding it, which seem to absorb his full attention. Here, for example, is his description of the Wannsee Conference of January 1942, at which it was decided in concrete terms just how the greatest mass murder in German history would be carried out. "Everything went well," Eichmann says. "Everybody was friendly, very polite, very kind, and very courteous. . . . The aides de camp served you cognac, and the business was concluded" (119). Whoever could have guessed what lay behind the vague word "business"? Here are minutes from another meeting, in August 1942, the purpose of which was to discuss ways to speed up the "evacuation": "Difficulties in loading the cars because of the longer October nights" (272). What is being loaded

into those cars is not even identified, nor is the destination of the train or the reason for the journey; all attention focuses on a “technical” problem, how to overcome the difficulties caused by darkness.

Another masterpiece of depersonalization reads: “In the context of the solution to the Jewish question in Europe, Hungary too should somehow be relieved” (56). The exact translation of this sentence is: “We also have to deport the Hungarian Jews to kill them.” The “we” has simply dropped out (but who is to do the “relieving”?); the Jews are now no more than the “Jewish question” (human beings are supplanted by an abstraction, one that, moreover, takes the form of a problem, and as instrumental thinking would have it, where there’s a problem, there’s a solution); and the actions themselves are designated by euphemisms of the most general sort (“relieve,” “solution”).

Eichmann himself sees his work as purely technical, and he never tires of saying so. Counting heads of cattle or Jews is the same thing, a matter of “doing one’s job.” The important thing is that it be done well. The expression “professional secret” corresponds in Eichmann’s parlance to the silence shrouding the mass exterminations; he seems never to understand, however, that his “profession” is precisely that of a mass murderer. At the time of these acts and during his trial as well, Eichmann focuses his attention exclusively on the methods of execution, never on what is at stake in the action itself. If someone brings up a deportation of ten thousand Jews a day (from Hungary), he reacts neither to the meaning nor to the scope of the action, only to the technical “problem.” No, he says, we didn’t have enough police for operations of that magnitude; there must be a mistake somewhere.

Basically Eichmann’s character traits—obedience, abstraction, instrumental thinking—are nothing out of the ordinary. In him, however, they are exceptionally well developed. His capacity for abstraction, for instance, leaves no room at all for human beings; in this regard, Höss was actually the more human of the two. And yet, in his final statement to the court, Eichmann can still declare, “I am not the monster people want me to be” (Wieviorka 187). He knows he is not quite your average man, that he deviated a bit from the norm, but he interprets this positively: I was an idealist, he says, and if I am suffering now, it is because of my idealism. By his definition the idealist is someone who prefers ideas to human beings; in this sense,

an idealist is indeed what he was. By contrast, an inmate like Eugenia Ginzburg became the exact opposite of an idealist as a result of her experiences in the camps, whose lessons she summarizes as follows: “How relative are all human systems and ideologies and how absolute the tortures which human beings inflict on one another” (*Journey* 113).

With Albert Speer, we seem to change registers: here we have not some boorish policeman like Höss or Eichmann but a talented architect, a man of education, refinement, and taste, and after his release from prison, a successful writer. Yet his personality, like theirs, reveals many of the familiar characteristics. He, too, wished to be a cog in the machine, to live the “professional life,” neglecting, for example, all semblance of family life, all self-reflection. He, too, internalized the notions of law and obedience and declined to exercise his own judgment as to the soundness of the orders he received. He was, by his own account, the type of individual who received an order and never questioned it. In 1947, he concludes that his self-depersonalization was actually part of a larger historical process: “The automatism of [technical] progress,” he argues, “will depersonalize man further and withdraw more and more of his responsibility” (524).

Speer’s most salient characteristic seems to be the central role he accords to instrumental thinking. He recalls how, even as a very young man, he enjoyed finding himself in challenging situations, the kind that presented a problem and demanded a solution. Indeed, he owes his early celebrity in Nazi circles to his efficiency: working under impossible deadlines, he managed nonetheless to bring to completion various construction projects. Much later in his career, in April 1944, Speer reads in a British newspaper a portrait of himself that pleases him at the time and pleases him still as he writes his memoirs. The article describes him as the very incarnation of the technocrat, “a type which is becoming increasingly important in all belligerent countries: the pure technician, the classless bright young man without background, with no other original aim than to make his way in the world and no other means than his technical and managerial ability. . . . This is their age; the Hitlers and Himmlers we may get rid of, but the Speers, whatever happens to this particular special man, will long be with us” (344–45).

Eichmann's "problem" was the deportation of the Jews; his "solution" was the organization of roundups, the loading of railroad cars, the coordination of train routes. Speer's "problem," from his first day as the Third Reich's minister of armaments, was to produce the most and highest-quality weapons possible. Eichmann never asked himself whether or not the Jews should be gassed; that was not his "problem." Speer never asked himself whether or not the war was just; his problem was "merely" the production of weaponry, not its use. To reach this goal, all means were good: the deportation of foreign workers to Germany, the use of prisoners of war or concentration camp inmates as forced labor. If Speer wanted the lives of certain inmates spared or their food rations increased, it was not out of concern for their well-being but to ensure the greatest possible output from his factories. In his conflicts with the SS, he writes, "apart from all humanitarian considerations, the rational arguments were on our side" (371); he thus reduces common sense to instrumental reasoning. Humanitarian considerations never entered the picture. "The desperate race with time," Speer writes, "my obsessional fixation on production and output statistics, blurred all considerations and feelings of humanity" (375). The "pragmatists," among whom Speer counted himself, were ultimately responsible for at least as many deaths as the "fanatics" were.

Although at the time he writes his memoirs, Speer has already decided to condemn this attitude, he can't help lapsing back into it as he complains about all the obstacles that incompetent bureaucrats, fanatical SS officers, and even waffling leaders (Hitler himself!) placed in his path, in the path of military production. If not for those obstacles, he could have raised productivity levels even higher and Germany could have fought better, might even have won the war. "All my good arguments were . . . blown to the winds," he writes (221). Or on another occasion: "Once again my efforts to organize an effective war economy had been ruined by Hitler's vacillation" (222). And yet if this war, as Speer himself says, was a crime, why the regrets for not having won it? Hitler's vacillation is very attractive, by comparison. In the camps, inmates who were conscientious workers, who staked their dignity on the job well done, could not stop themselves from working efficiently and thus from helping to strengthen the state

that had condemned them. Twenty years after the war and despite his overall assessment of it, Speer still cannot free himself from the habit of instrumental thinking; if there is a job to be done, one must do it as best one can, even if it furthers the reign of terror.

Obviously, under these conditions other human beings never constitute an end. If Speer gives any thought to others, it is only insofar as they might serve as a means. And when he adds to this the usual separation between private and public, the work of eliminating humanitarian considerations is complete. "I realize that the sight of suffering people influenced only my emotions, but not my conduct. On the plane of feelings only sentimentality emerged; in the realm of decisions, on the other hand, I continued to be ruled by the principles of utility" (375). At the very end of the war Speer begins to feel responsible, not for the loss of life suffered by the Germans or their enemies but for the destruction of German industrial capacity. He rebels against Hitler and for the first time disobeys his orders—to save machinery and buildings.

The conclusions Speer draws from his life have to do specifically with the power that instrumental thought exerts over mankind; they are about the forgetting of ends. I was, he says, "the top representative of a technocracy which had without compunction used all its know-how in an assault on humanity. . . . By my abilities and my energies I had prolonged that war by many months. . . . Although I never actually agreed with Hitler . . . I had nevertheless designed the buildings and produced the weapons which served his ends" (520, 523). Although Speer has a tendency to minimize his involvement with Nazism, on the whole his explanation seems accurate to me. It also sheds light on lives other than his own.

Speer, Eichmann, Höss: so many links in a single chain. Their personalities are different, as are their social milieux, but their moral behaviors are so many variations on the same basic theme. The accounts they offer of their actions are intended to exonerate and justify them, if only partially. They tend to embellish where they can, emphasizing what they deem least compromising in their pasts. For this very reason, however, these stories are particularly revealing: the authors tell the truth precisely when they believe they have successfully dissimulated it. By portraying themselves as more obedient and more

lacking in initiative and conviction than they must have been, they show us that even in their own eyes obedience and depersonalization were enough to transform them into effective means for attaining criminal ends. Höss is particularly hardened, Eichmann exceptionally "abstract," Speer more efficient than anyone else. All three, however, stopped thinking of themselves as subjects, as the authors of their actions, and they stopped thinking of others as their actions' rightful ends. All three were willing to let other human beings be reduced to slavery or be killed, as long as the objectives that they themselves had been assigned were served. Höss, Eichmann, and Speer practiced an "idealism" that was the direct opposite of a concern for others; for them, ideas came before people. The British journalist who painted the portrait of Speer was correct: no matter what their personal destinies, the type of man they personify still has a glorious future before him; instrumental thinking and the depersonalization that goes with it cast their shadow far beyond the concentration camp.

the enjoyment of power

POWER OVER OTHERS

Depersonalization cuts both ways, as we have seen. It can affect oneself as well as the other: by seeing the other person as simply an element in a project that transcends him, one forgets his humanity, and by submitting, oneself, to the requirements of the system, one becomes simply another part of the machine. Whether animal or piece of machinery, one ceases to be part of the human condition. There is a particular type of instrumentalism and depersonalization, however, that merits special consideration, the type in which I remain the end of my action while only the other becomes a means, not a means to accomplish some more or less abstract project—the victory of Communism, for example, or cleansing the earth of its inferior races—but a means to realize the satisfaction of a particular individual, me. This kind of satisfaction is fed by one thing only: my cognizance that the other has submitted to me. The power I enjoy over him is direct, unmediated by rationalizing concepts such as law, duty, or the word of the leader. The phenomenon I am describing is that of the *libido dominandi*.

The sense of power can assume a number of different forms. It does not always mean power over others. As a young child (and sometimes later as well), I find pleasure in the power I have over my own body. This satisfaction, though it lacks a moral dimension, nonetheless goes hand in glove with dignity since, like dignity, it arises from an