

from A Common Humanity

Genocide & the Holocaust

By the time of the Final Solution, it was evident that the attempt to annihilate the Jews served none of the ordinary political purposes for which crimes have been committed throughout history. Nor could it be explained by the way the human personality becomes deranged in times of war and great upheaval. Nor by elaboration of the theme that violence begets violence. The Jews were not murdered because they were enemies of the Reich, or because they were obstacles to its expansion, or because it served the Reich's purpose to scapegoat them or for any such familiar political reason. They were killed because they were judged unfit to inhabit the earth with the master race. The ruthless determination to hunt and to kill them in all the corners of the earth, if possible, distinguishes the Holocaust from other forms of genocide, as they are alleged to have occurred in colonial times. And it distinguishes the murder of the Jews from that of the gipsies and

homosexuals. More chilling even than that, however, is the fact that the attempt to exterminate of the Jews was not an aberration of war. It was integral to the civic ideals of the Thousand Year Reich.

Jews threatened no one, not even religiously. They had either assimilated successfully or lived in ghettos which caused no problems to the wider community. Yet to the Nazis and their supporters their mere existence was so offensive as to inspire the most virulent hatred. Nothing Jews could do, even in principle, could save themselves from annihilation. It is a bitter irony, therefore, that the Final Solution was not a measure taken to address what anyone could seriously call a social or political problem, not even if one added that the Jews could be a problem only for the wicked. When the mere existence of a people is supposed to constitute a problem independently of their characteristics and how they behave, then we are dealing with a degenerate application of the concept of a problem. Anti-Semitic stereotypes did, of course, cast Jews as a problem—as Bolsheviks, as capitalists, as threats to children, to culture and religion and so on. But those stereotypes did not express genuinely mistaken beliefs about the Jews which would explain the hatred of them. The stereotypes rationalised the hatred; they did not cause it.

It seems that the terribleness of the Holocaust dawned on the judges at Nuremberg only gradually. At first they were preoccupied with their determination to prosecute Germany for crimes against the peace and for war crimes. When the distinctive character of the Holocaust began to emerge for them, they were understandably overwhelmed by the horror of it and so were unable to conceptualise clearly what struck them as distinctive. Their sense that they were confronted with new crimes appeared to wax and wane—as it has done in the minds of many after them—yet it remained sufficiently strong for them to give a new name to them. They called them 'crimes against humanity'. In some ways the name is inspired but it also invites the misconception that the Holocaust was marked by its extreme *inhumaneness*, that it was the most hideous of

the pogroms, distinguished from others by its extent and terrible-ness, but not in its essence. It suggests that crimes against humanity were different from others only on account of their barbarity. The crimes of the Nazis *were* distinguished by their barbarity, but considered in that aspect they were different only in degree from their war crimes, and from other abominations throughout history. A tendency to understand the concept of a crime against humanity as marking a terrible degree of inhumaneness has been one reason why the distinctions drawn at Nuremberg have largely been forgotten, even amongst Jews.

That forgetfulness shows itself in a number of ways. Consider as a first example the debates in the late 1980s over whether the Australian government should pass legislation to try people, now living in Australia, who had committed crimes during World War II. Everyone knew that most of the accused would be from Eastern Europe and that they would be charged with crimes connected with the Holocaust. Few people expected that anyone would actually be convicted in the Australian trials. Those who wanted the trials did so because they hoped they would have 'educative value'. It is ironic, therefore, that the legislation they supported should have expressed the most common and fundamental misunderstanding about the Holocaust, namely that the crimes that define it were acts of war, no different in kind from those that were committed in the former Yugoslavia.

It was, of course, the Serbs' talk of ethnic cleansing that made people speak in the same breath of their crimes and those of the Nazis. The Serbs, however, indulged only their desire to rid their territory of Croats and Muslims. Their hatred was not inspired by the thought that Croats were vermin, but by a complex history of national hatred, past fighting and atrocities. The thought that one's enemies are vermin can mean different things and show itself in many ways. When it surfaced in the minds of the Serbs, it was more a consequence of the war than one of its causes. For the Nazis, ridding the earth of the Jews was a civic ideal, which,

though it developed and hardened during the war, was essentially unconnected with the war and the kinds of hatreds wars cause. The chilling bureaucratic finesse of the Final Solution was a terrible intimation of a postwar civilian world in which the death camps would continue. Had the Nazis won the war, the attempt to annihilate the Jews totally would have continued in peacetime, not in the spirit of finishing business that had started in wartime and whose nature was essentially shaped by wartime conditions, but as a political ideal of the New Reich.

Steven Spielberg's powerful and successful film, *Schindler's List*, and the controversy that followed its release, gives a second example. A small number of mostly Jewish critics who were disturbed by the film and by its reception raised the question whether, despite the declared intentions of its makers, the film undermined truthful perception of the Holocaust and, in so doing, the ground of our need to remember it. To my knowledge none of the critics denied the film's power. On the contrary, their acknowledgment of its power gave weight to their misgivings.

Many—perhaps most—Jews, including many survivors of the death camps, responded to the film with a euphoria that seemed to be the consequence of having many times suffered the nightmare that Primo Levi recounts—that he is freed from Auschwitz, that he tells of what he suffered and saw there, but no one believes him. More than anything, I suspect, that explains their intense irritation with the film's critics. They saw them as unable to see, and as spoiling, this unprecedented opportunity finally to stop that nightmare. They believed the world would see this film and weep over what they and the dead had suffered, and over the world's indifference to it.

Sadly, the euphoria expressed a loss of contact with reality. The degree of it showed in the fact that many people hoped that those who had been corrupted by Holocaust deniers to doubt that millions of Jews were murdered in the death camps would be persuaded to believe it by a film made by an internationally

influential Hollywood Jew. As though *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion* had taught us nothing about the nature of anti-Semitism! Younger people who felt the power of the film sometimes believed themselves to be obliged, in fidelity to that very power, to apply, with no conceptual unease, what they took to be its lessons to the former Yugoslavia, to the settlement of Australia and, of course, to the conduct of Israeli soldiers on the West Bank. Nothing in the film substantially contradicts them. Nothing of dramatic power in it shows, or even suggests, that the crimes depicted in it are different in kind from those that were committed in the name of ethnic cleansing. Nothing even seriously contradicts the revisionists. (The scenes in Auschwitz have almost universally been regarded as a failure.) Yet the illusion that *Schindler's List* would finally plant the lessons of the Holocaust in the hearts of millions of people seemed unassailable.

Less than a year later it was shattered by the honours awarded to Helen Darville's book, *The Hand That Signed the Paper*, and by the subsequent argument over it. This is my third example. Many Jews perceived the book to be anti-Semitic and to degrade memory of the Holocaust. In many cases their pain went deeper than indignation or anger. Robert Manne wrote poignantly of how the affair had 'destabilised him', profoundly affecting his sense of his place in Australia, the country he loved and to which he had given so much of himself. Others felt the same. Their pain does not prove their reading of the book to be the right one, but if its tone had been heard the discussion would have been different.

It wasn't heard for a number of reasons. For the purposes of this discussion, the most important was the widespread irritation with Jews and with the place they accord, and ask others to accord, to the Holocaust in humanity's self-understanding. To what degree that irritation was a cause, and to what degree an effect of a failure to understand the nature of the Holocaust, is hard to say. Amongst other ways, the failure showed itself in the repeated suggestion that we could get a perspective on the alleged

anti-Semitism of Darville's novel if we remember that many of the great writers of the past were anti-Semitic. As though anti-Semitic aspects in the novels of Dostoyevsky or of Dickens, for example, before the Holocaust could have the same significance as an anti-Semitic novel written after the Holocaust and whose anti-Semitism is directed at undermining the moral response to the Holocaust that had been common to Jews and non-Jews alike.

Darville vindicated Spielberg's critics, if not in their judgment of his film, then at least in their dismay at the impatient response to the important questions they had raised. The Darville affair was partly the result of the carelessness about the characterisation of the Holocaust that showed itself in that impatience—sometimes in the vehement hostility—directed at Spielberg's critics and at critics of the war crimes legislation. Sooner than anyone predicted, that impatience reaped what it had sown. Darville succeeded in convincing many people that the crimes of the Ukrainians involved in the Holocaust were no different in kind from those now committed by all the combatants in the former Yugoslavia. It is true that the Ukrainians were probably seldom motivated by considerations of the kind that define the Holocaust. They would, however, be charged with crimes against humanity rather than with war crimes by any court that distinguished them. Many of Darville's younger readers did not know there is such a distinction to be made, and many older readers did not think it important to tell them. For Jews who had placed their hopes in them, the trials and Spielberg's film could hardly have failed more completely to educate people about the meaning of the Holocaust.

Apart from the time of the Nuremberg trials, the most interesting and intense discussion of the distinctive character of the Nazi crimes occurred, in my judgment, during and immediately after the trial of Adolf Eichmann in 1961. Eichmann was charged with crimes against the Jewish people. In *Eichmann in Jerusalem* Hannah Arendt said that he should have been tried for crimes against humanity, perpetrated on the body of the Jewish people. Critical

though she was of aspects of the trial, she credited the judges in Jerusalem with a clearer and more constant grasp of what was at issue than was possessed by the judges in Nuremberg, who, she said, tended to think of crimes against humanity 'as inhuman acts...as though the Nazis had simply been lacking in human kindness'. Alluding to the rhetoric of the prosecution she praised the judges in Jerusalem for refusing 'to let the basic character of the crime be swallowed up by a flood of atrocities'. She writes:

It was the great advantage of a trial centred on the crime against the Jewish people that not only did the difference between war crimes, such as shooting of partisans and killing of hostages, and 'inhuman acts,' such as 'expulsion and annihilation' of native populations to permit colonization by an invader, emerge with sufficient clarity to become part of the future international penal code, but also that the difference between 'inhuman acts' (which were undertaken for some known, though criminal, purpose, such as expansion through colonization) and the 'crime against humanity,' whose intent and purpose were unprecedented, was clarified. At no point, however, either in the proceedings or in the judgment, did the Jerusalem trial ever mention even the possibility that extermination of whole ethnic groups—the Jews, or the Poles, or the Gypsies—might be more than a crime against the Jewish or the Polish or the Gypsy people, that the international order, and mankind in its entirety, might have been grievously hurt and endangered.

It is easy to be misled by Arendt's remark that 'mankind in its entirety might be grievously hurt and endangered'. One might, quite naturally, take her to mean that humankind was in danger of suffering what the Jews had suffered. It is true that other groups were marked for genocide, and it is true that in other works Arendt shows deep concern over the possibility that the Holocaust would be repeated, though not necessarily against Jews.

Such thoughts, however, are not the ones driving this passage. Arendt expresses herself better, I think, when she says that genocide should be seen as a crime against 'the order of mankind', just as the murder of an individual is an offence, a 'hurt', against a community even when it does not have the potential to encourage more crimes of the same kind. Arendt's praise of the French prosecutor at Nuremberg for calling crimes against humanity 'crimes against the human status' was motivated by the same thought. Elaborating on it, she suggests that we think of a crime against humanity as 'an attack upon human diversity as such, that is upon a characteristic of the "human status" without which the very words "mankind" or "humanity" would be devoid of meaning.'

Eichmann in Jerusalem provoked widespread anger and dismay. To many people it seemed too abstract, too cold. Arendt was often accused of heartlessness. Gershom Scholem wrote to her saying:

Why, then, should your book leave one with so strong a sensation of bitterness and shame—not for the compilation, but for the compiler?...Insofar as I have an answer, it is one which, precisely out of my deep respect for you, I dare not suppress...It is that heartless, frequently almost sneering and malicious tone with which these matters, touching the very quick of our life, are treated in your book to which I take exception.

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No one could sensibly have wanted the judgment of the Jerusalem court to have been distorted by a 'flood of atrocities', but often the atrocities recounted in the court appeared to be essential, not only to the evil of Eichmann's crimes, but also to an adequate understanding of their novelty. It seemed implausible that the death camps could be regarded merely as an aggravation upon a crime whose essence could be captured without reference to them. Yet to many that is how Arendt appeared to take them when she praised the judges in Jerusalem for refusing to let the basic character of the crime be swallowed up by a 'flood of atrocities' and

even more when she declared the essence of that claim to be its attack on 'human diversity'.

She was misunderstood. Talk of the 'flood of atrocities' inevitably brings the death camps to mind. The name 'death camps' invites us to think of them as killing centres. And of course they were that. Films and photographs we have seen will ensure that our imaginations are assailed by terrible images of corpses piled high. Considered only as killing centres, however, even as horrifically brutal ones, the existence of the camps provides no reason to seek a new name for a new crime. Nothing in the images that assail us could give us that reason. Attention to the bureaucratic efficiency that facilitated the mass murder will not do it either, I think. Considered as a means to mass murder, the bureaucratically efficient 'industrialisation of death' was (perhaps) a new means to the achievement of an old end, but that does not imply that the new means was different in kind from older ones.

To put the point brutally: piles of corpses will look the same and horrify us in the same way whether they were produced for the sake of the ancient political end of eradicating opposition or to eliminate from the earth a people believed to be pollutants of it. Only the latter counts as genocide. If one thinks of the camps as essentially killing centres, as the locus of nightmarish atrocities, perhaps the most terrible that human beings have ever committed against one another, then stories from the camps, told in a court of law, are more likely to obscure than to reveal the nature of the criminal purpose which the camps served.

The matter becomes even clearer if one thinks, as I do, that reflecting on the forcible sterilisation of a people should incline one to think that genocide may be committed though not one person was murdered to achieve it. Even when they are considered as existing in the service of a genocidal end, the death camps are, therefore, as Arendt implied, an aggravation on a crime whose nature need not involve killing at all. Seen from that point of view, Arendt's fear that the essence of the crime for which Eichmann

was charged would be obscured by 'a flood of atrocities' was not the expression of heartlessness.

Not heartlessness, but perhaps some degree of confusion. My defence of Arendt has so far assumed that the charge against Eichmann—that he was guilty of crimes against humanity—should be read as the charge of genocide. Many assumed, however, that the charge against him should distil the essence of the Holocaust, an assumption that was almost irresistible. Yet, on reflection, it is far from clear that genocide is the essence of the Holocaust, not if one keeps in mind the features of it that make people say it is unique, even that it is, and will forever be, mysterious. If there is reason to distinguish between genocide and the essence of the Holocaust, then there is reason to suspect we distort the significance of the death camps if we think of them merely as efficient killing centres serving a genocidal intent, even if we stress the terrible purity of the intent and the relentlessness of its execution.

Anyone who has read Primo Levi or Martin Gilbert will, I think, find it impossible to separate the death camps from whatever inclines them to say the Holocaust is unique, that it can never be explained, even when they separate the reasons why they say that from their understanding of genocide. The death camps made apparent something that was not evident even in the killings in the east. News of those killings, their massive and unrelenting scale, convinced many in the Polish ghettos that something different and more terrible in kind had begun than anything they had experienced in the ghettos. We naturally think the Holocaust includes the destruction of the ghettos, the killings in the east and the death camps. We are right to do so and it would be a mistake to think that the Holocaust proper began only with the institution of the death camps. But just as some of the Jews in the Warsaw ghetto sensed that they had glimpsed something terrifyingly different in kind from what they had suffered in the ghettos when they heard of the killings in the east, so, it seems to me, there is also a difference in kind between the killings in the east and the death camps.

Or perhaps the point can be put slightly differently this way. Some people realised what was really being done in the ghettos when they heard of the killings in the east. The death camps made others realise what was really being done in the east. In the east the Nazis' genocidal purpose became transparent. In the death camps it became clear that something even more terrible than genocide was being committed. The death camps are essential to our understanding of the Holocaust, not because they were horrifically efficient killing centres, but because there occurred in them an assault on the preciousness of individual human beings of a kind never seen before. That, I think, is the truth in Avishai Margalit's claim that the Holocaust was unique because it combined mass murder with demonic efforts to humiliate those who were destined to be murdered.

Distinctions such as I have drawn are not likely to show themselves at all clearly in a courtroom where survivors from the Warsaw ghetto, survivors of the *Einsatzgruppen* and survivors from the camps tell their terrible stories. Again, floods of atrocities would obscure them. But, unlike the way they obscure the nature of genocide, some of those atrocities—those that occurred in the death camps—can take us to the essence of the Holocaust. Arendt was right to say that a flood of atrocities would have obscured the essence of the crime with which Eichmann should be charged, if we assume that he should have been charged with genocide. But if I have been right to draw the distinction I have, then it is also true that 'a flood of atrocities'—that is to say, atrocity piled upon atrocity irrespective of whether they were committed in the ghettos, in the east or in the camps—would also have obscured the distinctive evil of the Holocaust, an evil different from and worse than genocide and which cannot be understood apart from the camps. The camps are the purest and worst examples of genocide and something worse still.

It is not surprising that the distinctive evil of the Holocaust and the purity of the genocide perpetrated in it should not have

been distinguished in Nuremberg or in Jerusalem. The relentless destruction of a people is the salient fact in both and both are probably unprecedented. If one tries to articulate the distinctive evil of the Holocaust by focusing on what is unprecedented in it, then one is almost bound to run together moral phenomena that should be kept distinct, and perhaps only one of which (genocide) is tractable to law. Only gradually has the difference emerged in the writings of survivors like Primo Levi. He does not articulate the difference, but one becomes aware when reading him that the camps represent an evil different from genocide in even its purest form. Like the concept of an atrocity, the concept of an unprecedented crime is unresponsive to the difference.

Marvellous though it is in its serious tone and sober judgment, Arendt's discussion is an example that reveals, in a fertile confusion, the tendency to conflate the distinctive evil of the Holocaust and the distinctive moral character of genocide. She assumed that the perpetrators of the Holocaust should be charged with a crime whose name would express its distinctive evil. That is why she ran together her reflections on the banality of evil, as these were informed by her sense of Eichmann's character, with her reflections on the nature of genocide. Her conclusions about that informed her discussion of the kind of crime he should be charged with. It is at least plausible that, when set against the terrible evil of his deeds, the banality of Eichmann's character would deepen our understanding of his crimes and so of the distinctive nature of the Holocaust. It is not plausible, however, that it would reveal the essence of genocide which can be committed by exactly the kind of monsters that Arendt, rightly or wrongly, denied Eichmann to be.

When the court in Jerusalem passed judgment on Eichmann and sentenced him to death, many were impressed by a sense of the unbridgeable distance between the evil he had done and what it was possible for the court to do. It seemed to many, in Jerusalem and on other occasions, that the crimes of the Holocaust mocked the instruments of justice which had never been fashioned, and

could never be modified, to deal with them. Before Jerusalem and after, people have persistently expressed a sense of the incommensurability of the evil of the crimes that define the Holocaust, and the conditions of legal practice. It is as though the terrible and unique evil of these crimes reveals that the law, which of course is no stranger to the varieties of brutality and sadism, is founded on assumptions about our common humanity, our intelligibility to one another, which these crimes undermine.

I do not say such a response is clear let alone right to the extent that it can be stated clearly. But it has been expressed so often that it should be respected. It does not entail that there should not have been trials, nor that Eichmann should not have been hanged, even though Martin Buber (who as Arendt observes should have known better) claimed that to hang him would be to declare that there existed a punishment that would be appropriate to his deeds. Arendt has some sober and justifiably scathing words about this. But just as a sense of incommensurability, between the crimes committed by Eichmann and the conditions of legal practice, does not entail Buber's conclusion, rejection of his conclusion does not entail rejection of that sense of incommensurability.

Arendt is not always concerned enough to avoid misinterpretation on this point. She seems sometimes to imply that the sense of incommensurability is sustained by a failure adequately to distinguish between law and morality. 'The wrongdoer,' she writes:

is brought to justice because his act has disturbed and gravely endangered the community as a whole, and not because, as in civil suits, damage has been done to individuals who are entitled to reparation... For just as a murderer is prosecuted because he has violated the law of the community, and not because he has deprived the Smith family of its husband, father, and breadwinner, so these modern, state-employed mass murderers must be prosecuted because they violated the order of mankind, and not because they killed millions of people.

True and important though Arendt's point is, one must be careful not to draw the wrong lesson from it. Despite the distinguished place, in some legal philosophies, of the view that law and morality are quite distinct, our practices often bring them together with a justified lack of anxiety. It is true that the moral wrong of, say, murder is an offence only against its victims, whereas the crime of murder is also an offence against the community. The difference shows itself in the fact that the law will insist on prosecuting attempted murderers even if their victims are ready to forgive them. Clearly, therefore, there exists an important difference between the criminality of murder and the moral wrong of it. That difference will not appear as radical as it otherwise might, if one remembers that the kind of community we are is partly constituted by our concerns for the *wrongs* suffered by its members when they are the victims of *crime*. The concept of a crime carries with it a richer concept of criminal and victim, and a richer concept of the community to which both belong, than anything that could be captured in a narrow legalism that radically separates law from morality. The legitimate desire to resist the reduction of a crime to moral categories should not lead us to obscure that.

The suspicion, therefore, that the crimes of the Holocaust cannot be captured in concepts sufficiently tractable to serve the purposes of law does not—certainly it need not—rest on the assumption that the law is concerned with the criminality of deeds rather than with their moral character. It is because of something peculiar to the Holocaust. The difficulty in understanding the nature of genocide is also a difficulty inseparable from understanding its distinctive moral nature—here morality and law are indivisible. But I doubt that the difficulties are of a kind that should make us fearful that genocide is beyond the conceptual reach of the law. That is partly because evil is not the concept that marks the inexpungeable moral dimension of the concept of genocide; it is not, I think, the concept that even partially explains why we have had such difficulty in trying to understand

the experiences that we bring under the concept of genocide. Considered as a 'crime against humanity', 'against the human status', 'against human plurality', genocide can be committed even in its purest form, and its essence can be understood, by people who have no understanding of 'goodness beyond virtue and evil beyond vice'.

The combination of the belief that we *must* deal with the crimes of the Holocaust with the strong sense that we *cannot* has parallels elsewhere. Sara Horowitz noted that some of the survivors of the death camps were driven by the bitter imperative that they must tell others, but that others could not understand. It is the reason for the tone of despair which is for the most part absent from the writings from the Lodz and Warsaw ghettos. Chronicles were written in both ghettos which meticulously record the daily life in them—from the killings to the supply of potato peelings—with a confidence that they would be understood by those who read them after the war. The chroniclers conceived the evil they suffered to be no more than a terrible interruption in the movement of civilisation, for which there had been many historical precedents. It is true that for a considerable time life in the ghettos had some of the trappings of normality, but that is not why the chroniclers wrote with such confidence. Later, when that confidence was shaken, when a note of despair crept into some of their writings, it is not because the brutality had increased (although it had) or because they feared they would all be killed (although they did). The despair came when they heard of the killings in the east and began to understand the relentless determination of the Germans to hunt down Jews and to kill them in their thousands wherever they could find them. It deepened and seemed to take on a different character in 1942 when almost three thousand Jews were sent to Treblinka.

The dawning of the terrible realisation of what the Holocaust meant conditioned the tone of the despair. Horowitz writes: 'The Ghetto writers anticipate the outrage of a future reader—outrage

based upon shared values and a common idea of civilisation. Generally they remain untroubled by the suspicions which plague survivor reflections that these values were killed by the Holocaust, or indeed brought it on.'

Survivors from the death camps tell us again and again that the essential dimension of their experience cannot be understood. Descriptions of subjective states, especially of traumatic ones, are of course inherently difficult, but that is not the reason why survivors cannot convey to us what they have experienced. The reason is that there is a critical element of their experience which is incomprehensible even to themselves.

To distinguish and characterise the many reasons why people have said that the Holocaust is unique has proved impossibly difficult. It is not unique in the sense of being unrepeatable. Indeed, often the very people who have insisted that the Holocaust is unique have expressed the fear that it will be repeated, if not against the Jews, then against others. More commonly, people will say that the Holocaust is historically unprecedented, and although that is true in more ways than one I do not believe that it captures what is most important in the impulse to say it is unique. Often those who were moved to speak of the Holocaust's uniqueness were not historians, and I suspect that those who were did not call it unique because they had an assured scholarly sense that there are no salient historical precedents. They spoke as they did because, when the facts of the Holocaust became known, they felt that the meaning of those facts could not be captured adequately by existing legal, moral or political categories.

Indeed some people thought that the facts subverted those categories. For them, as Horowitz brings out, the Holocaust did not merely crush the hopes of continuous human progress, the hopes of the enlightenment. It did so in ways that put in doubt our understanding of ourselves as moral and political beings. The fact that people responded that way to the Holocaust does not, of course, show that they were right to do so, that their responses

were true to the facts. But those common responses to the Holocaust differ markedly, I think, from responses to genocide, even in its pure form as it occurred in the Holocaust, to the extent that they can be separated. And that provides reason for believing that we should distinguish the distinctive evil of the Holocaust from that of genocide, as that term is applicable, for example, to the massacres in Armenia, perhaps in Rwanda, or in Tasmania. Difficult though it may be adequately to capture the nature of genocide, our bafflement over it has not appeared to us radically to threaten the categories with which we understand ourselves.

If I am right, then the idea of a crime against humanity should be reserved to articulate the nature of genocide rather than the deeds that define the Holocaust. Argument about the nature of the Holocaust will continue, probably intractably. But just as the evil of genocide is not necessarily greater than other evils, so the evil of the Holocaust need not be the greatest evil. Nothing I have said entails that it is greater than, say, the evils committed by Stalin. If someone were to ask me which of these is greater I would have no idea how to answer or even how to think towards achieving an answer. Our sense of the distinctiveness of the Holocaust as something different from and worse than genocide, and our sense (if we have it) of it as deeply mysterious, depend on our sense of the evil that it manifests. But even if these, singly or together, justify the claim that the Holocaust is uniquely evil, it is yet a further, and I believe unjustified, step to say that therefore the evil of the Holocaust is the greatest evil we know.

What, then, distinguishes genocide from other, less serious, crimes against human plurality—crimes such as the destruction of a culture? What I am about to say towards an answer should not be taken as even a rough definition of genocide. But it will, I hope, identify something that is fundamental to genocide and also show why the absorption programs described in *Bringing Them Home* were sometimes genocidal in a sense which rightly attracts the obloquy the term has acquired through association with more

terrible examples. A clue lies in the closing pages of Arendt's book when she outlines why she thinks Eichmann deserved the death penalty. In an imaginary address to Eichmann she says:

And just as you supported and carried out a policy of not wanting to share the earth with the Jewish people and the people of a number of other nations—as though you and your superiors had any right to determine who should and who should not inhabit the world—we find that no one, that is, no member of the human race, can be expected to want to share the earth with you.

Leave aside whether that justifies Eichmann's execution. These words capture something essential about genocide, especially when we read them against what we know to be the spirit in which the Nazis killed the Jews.

The desire not to share the earth with a people because they are perceived to be unfit to inhabit it, the desire to rid the earth of them because they are seen to be pollutants of it—these desires and the intentions and actions they inspire can mean different things in different contexts. The words that describe them do not give us a clear and simple standard with which to measure the genocidal elements in crimes. The Holocaust is our paradigm for one kind of terrible application of them. They are not uniquely adequate words to capture what makes it a paradigm. None could be.

Still less could there be uniquely adequate words to capture the distinctive evil of the Holocaust. Elie Wiesel says that only those who were its victims can really understand it. He seems to suggest that this is for reasons that are distinctive to the Holocaust rather than to an understanding of the traumatic experiences of others—those who suffered in the Gulag, or who have been tortured, for example. Sometimes he appears to suggest that the reasons why it is impossible for anyone who did not suffer directly in the Holocaust to understand it are reasons why there is no serious point in trying to do it. Even if it were desirable not to try

and to maintain pious silence, it is not possible. We are haunted by the Holocaust precisely because there is reason to say it is unique and we will continue to make what sense we can of it. The reason why we are obliged solemnly to remember it is the reason why we cannot stop trying to fathom it, and if we cannot fathom it to understand better why we can't.

The place occupied by the Holocaust in Western thought has sometimes justifiably been resented by other victims of terrible crimes and by others on their behalf. They have sometimes felt that their suffering has been denigrated by the pre-eminence accorded to the Holocaust in our concern with the atrocities of the twentieth century, and by the political exploitation of that concern. I take it for granted that the politically corrupt uses to which the Holocaust has been put—most often in the service of Israel or, perhaps more accurately, to the service of certain kinds of Zionist ideologists—need no labouring by me. And, as I have already argued, preoccupation with the mystery of the Holocaust, bound up as that is with its distinctive evil, does not entail, and should never lead to, the claim that all other evils are lesser than the evil of the Holocaust.

With less assurance I assume that the kind of 'Holocaust theology' that appears to find edification in the idea that the Holocaust has given a new dimension to the problem of evil—the problem, that is, of how, given the evil in the world, there could be a God who is omniscient, omnipotent and also good—is morally suspect. What kind of person would need the Holocaust to raise that problem for him? It would of course almost always be impertinent to question the religious or moral authenticity of those who actually did lose their faith in the camps and elsewhere. But there is something unsavoury in asking in a theoretical way whether the Holocaust should prove that God must lack at least one of the qualities generally attributed to him because the possession of all three looks to be inconsistent with the evil in the world. As though it requires the Holocaust to make the evil in the world sufficiently

terrible to test the faith of a Jew or a Christian. None of these and other corruptions should incline one to think preoccupation with the Holocaust in our understanding of ourselves, in the West in the second half of the twentieth century, demeans the suffering of others, including other victims of genocide and mass murder.

Nor should the occurrence of the Holocaust be a reason for political pessimism. It is true that a belief in the inevitability of progress is unlikely to survive serious reflection of the nature of the Holocaust and its causes, but one doesn't need the Holocaust to put paid to that superstition. That being said, the Holocaust gives one no serious ground for predicting one kind of future rather than another. Contingently, things may get better. Contingently, they may get worse.

Optimism and pessimism are, anyhow, relatively trivial dispositions of personality. One can be a pessimist in the sense that one is disposed to take a gloomy view of prospects in most situations, seeing in them more reason to predict ill than good, and one can combine this with a temperamental melancholia, yet respond joyously to life as a gift. Deeper than the question of whether the Holocaust undermines grounds for optimism is whether the Holocaust has justifiably blighted faith in the kind of goodness I attributed to the nun, whether one could believe in such goodness only if one did not understand what the Holocaust meant. Many people lost their religious faith in the camps and many survivors could no longer respond to life as a gift and to the kind of goodness that is its source. Who would dare be critical of them? But just as the loss of religious faith is no basis for a generalised theology of the Holocaust, so, I think, a survivor's loss of faith in goodness cannot be the basis for generalised denial of its existence.

Consider this story from Primo Levi:

The night held ugly surprises.

Lakmaker, in the bunk under mine, was a poor wreck of a man. He was (or had been) a Dutch Jew, seventeen years

old, tall, thin and gentle. He had been in bed for three months; I have no idea how he had managed to survive the selections. He had had typhus and scarlet fever successively; at the same time a serious cardiac illness had shown itself, while he was smothered with bedsores, so much so that by now he could only lie on his stomach. Despite all this, he had a ferocious appetite. He only spoke Dutch, and none of us could understand him.

Perhaps the cause of it all was the cabbage and turnip soup, of which Lakmaker had wanted two helpings. In the middle of the night he groaned and then threw himself from his bed. He tried to reach the latrine, but was too weak and fell to the ground, crying and shouting loudly.

Charles lit the lamp...and we were able to ascertain the gravity of the incident. The boy's bed and the floor were filthy. The smell in the small area was rapidly becoming insupportable. We had but a minimum supply of water and neither blankets nor straw mattresses to spare. And the poor wretch, suffering from typhus, formed a terrible source of infection, while he could certainly not be left all night to groan and shiver in the cold in the middle of the filth.

Charles climbed down from his bed and dressed in silence. While I held the lamp, he cut all the dirty patches from the straw mattress and the blankets with a knife. He lifted Lakmaker from the ground with the tenderness of a mother, cleaned him as best as possible with straw taken from the mattress and lifted him into the remade bed in the only position in which the unfortunate fellow could lie. He scraped the floor with a scrap of tinsplate, diluted a little chloramine and finally spread disinfectant over everything, including himself.

I judged his self-sacrifice by the tiredness which I would have had to overcome in myself to do what he had done.

As much as the nun's example, perhaps even more than her example, this is goodness to wonder at. No evil can diminish its

beauty. And Levi's writings, one of the great spiritual achievements of humankind, inspire a similar wonder. It is impossible to describe their spirit without appealing to the concepts of goodness and truth. He achieves what Emmanuel Ringelblum, the founder of *Oneg Shabbes* (enjoyment of the Sabbath), the chronicle of the Warsaw ghetto, demanded of his journalists:

We deliberately refrained from drawing professional journalists into our work, because we did not want it to be sensationalised. Our aim was that the sequence of events in each town, the experiences of each Jew—and during the current war each Jew is a world unto himself—should be conveyed as simply and as faithfully as possible. Every redundant word, every literary gilding or ornamentation grated upon our ears and provoked our anger. Jewish life in wartime is so full of tragedy that it is unnecessary to embellish it with one superfluous line.

Ringelblum was innocent of the kind of evil that came with the death camps, and to which Levi gave witness, when he wrote that passage. It shows in the fact that he spoke only of the tragedy of Jewish life in *wartime*.

Levi's reverence for each individual life whose fate he records directly or implicitly is expressed in the rigorous and unrelenting observance of an obligation to truthfulness and objectivity that informs his work. Iris Murdoch has observed that this kind of effort to see things as they are is an effort of love, justice and pity. There is despair in Levi's writings but it is never a form of numbness. It is a terrible mistake to believe that numbness could be an appropriate (as distinct from understandable) response to evil which could at the same time reveal to us its nature and reality. When he records the evil that he has seen and suffered, Levi reveals how it is a violation of the preciousness of each individual. A tradition, going back to Plato, has taught us that evil can be properly and clearly understood only in the light of the good. In

the death camps only that light could illuminate each individual soul and reveal him or her to be infinitely precious.

If the concept of evil as one that marks a distinctive moral phenomenon becomes lost to us, then, I think, people will no longer respond to the Holocaust as to something mysterious. Its distinctive dimensions will be seen as those which make it a paradigm of genocide and no more. If that happens, then distinctions I have drawn in this chapter will appear obscure and unimportant—especially the distinction between the death camps as efficient centres to service a genocidal intent, and as institutions which realised an evil beyond the intention of those who conceived them, who administered them and who worked in them.

Though not all the perpetrators were banal in the way Eichmann was, and though one could not say that the genocidal intention expressed in the Final Solution was banal, I do not believe that the Holocaust gives us evidence to settle ancient disputes about whether evil can have depth. Our sense of the distinctive evil of the Holocaust is, I have tried to suggest, based on the way the death camps were an unprecedented assault on the preciousness of individuals, an assault that was partly self-conscious of its nature. That self-consciousness is what makes us think that the assault was demonic. But that, of course, may be an illusion. From the perspective on evil adopted by the tradition in which Arendt found herself, the 'demonic', like the sadistic to which it is closely allied, looks to be based on a false perception of that which it appears self-consciously to violate—the unconditional preciousness of each individual, or, to put it religiously, the sanctity of each individual.

The Holocaust offers no privileged perspective on this. Arendt may, therefore, have been right to think that Eichmann was emblematic of the Holocaust, affording us insight into its distinctive evil. To take him as emblematic of the distinctive evil of the Holocaust is not thereby to take him as the basis for an empirical generalisation about the kinds of people who were its perpetrators.

It would be foolish to do so because those perpetrators were of many kinds, ranging from Eichmann through Ivan the Terrible to Dr Mengele. But the brutes and the sadists do not give us reason to distinguish the Holocaust from the many barbarities throughout history. Reflection on the banality of Eichmann may therefore deepen our understanding of an essential aspect, if not the essence, of the Holocaust. The more general thesis that evil is always banal, that it never has depth, does little to deepen our understanding of the Holocaust, and the Holocaust does nothing, I think, to deepen our understanding of it.

A television program about Primo Levi has a particularly disturbing film clip. We are shown a large shed which is filled two-thirds to the roof with something we cannot at first identify. It looks like wool, or some other form of material. A man is standing on top of it—an ordinary man, middle aged, in a double-breasted dark suit. He looks like a salesman and talks enthusiastically, obviously proud of what he is showing his audience. His enthusiasm is evident when the voice-over allows us to hear him. The voice-over sounds for all the world like the voices in old newsreels, celebrating a national achievement—a good harvest, perhaps. We then learn what he is standing on. It is human hair.

As an image, it is I think more truly emblematic of the Holocaust than any of the images from the camps, even though many of them are in obvious ways more horrible. The camps are, of course, evoked for anyone who knows about them, by the hair, and the hair, perhaps even more than images of corpses, evokes a sense of an unrelenting assault on the preciousness of each of the Nazis' victims. Like Homer's references to the loved ones who will grieve for the dead warrior, the hair (of women I imagine) conjures moments of tenderness—hair brushed by a mother, caressed by a lover.

I have found this the most disturbing image I have seen of the Holocaust. When I reflected on why it should be so, I kept returning in my mind to Arendt's remarks about the banality of evil. She did not, as I have already remarked, intend them to

diminish the evil of the Holocaust. On the contrary, her sense of the banality of evil frightened her more than her earlier sense of its radicalness had. Many people who were present at Eichmann's trial said that their imaginations were defeated by the effort to put together this man, so ordinary and unprepossessing behind the glass booth in the courtroom, with the crimes of which he was clearly guilty. But in the film clip I described, the grotesque sight of a man in civilian clothes standing on the 'harvest' and rejoicing in it, we have exactly what they could not put together: the banality and the evil, and the two together in a way that intensifies rather than diminishes our sense of the evil.