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Where is Evil?

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To appreciate what is at issue here consider what I take to be the increasingly common notion that the truly intriguing question to investigate is not “how was it to be made to suffer?” but instead “how was it to be the one causing the suffering?” There is presently no end to the number of books on the market that in some way or other revolves around the theme “how ordinary people become mass murderers”. Perhaps it is a question of supply meeting demand. We do not want to enter the heads and hearts of those victimized by the violence, those who suffer it, more or less passively, impotently. Instead, we are – ambivalently, apprehensively – curious about the mindset of the doers, wondering whether we, under similar circumstances, would turn out like them and – God forbid – do the same.

As Hannah Arendt pointed out long ago – it now appears longer ago than it is – the fascination with the question “what about me, what would I have done?” easily leads to the apparently prudent and “tolerant” conclusion that “I simply cannot know.” A contemporary case in point, very influential at that, is the social psychologist Philip Zimbardo. Setting out to replace “dispositionalism” with “situationalism” in the study of how ordinary people come to commit cruel acts, Zimbardo asserts that “any deed, good or evil, that any human being has ever one, you and I could also do – given the same situational forces.” And since I cannot be sure that I would have acted otherwise than did, say, Eichmann, I must withhold moral judgment. Arendt’s point was that this is the opposite, indeed the death, of moral reasoning: it is a non sequitur to infer that since I do not know what I would have done, I have no right to pass moral judgment. The more traction such an inference gains, the better for perpetrators everywhere; those who stand to lose are not only the direct victims of the violence in question, but the entire community from which the passing of moral judgment on the actions of others would be suspended. Indeed, on Arendt’s view creating a situation where the aggressor’s description of violence is regarded as capturing the truth, as being the only description worth giving, is part and parcel of the totalitarian mentality.

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