

## CHAPTER 1

### *Confronting Evil and Its Paradoxes*

He was “a very ordinary little man.” So said an amazed Bertrand Russell, one of the great philosophers of this century, in describing a man who sat in court shortly after the Second World War facing charges of committing horrendous crimes. Indeed, the man was not an impressive figure. If anything he was average looking, perhaps a bit overweight. His manner was mild. He had none of the master-race arrogance commonly associated with the Nazi ideologist. In Russell’s view, he gave no sign of great brilliance, cunning or malevolence. In the course of the court hearings the man was very forthcoming in his answers to questions, seemingly not hiding anything. He appeared eager to bring out all the facts.

The accused man was Rudolf Hoess, the chief of the Auschwitz concentration camp. Hoess had been in charge of setting up the camp, and he had been the major architect for planning its program. He had devised many of its specific methods of torture and murder. He remained in overall charge of the camp during most of its period of existence. He was its ongoing supervisor and enforcer of operations.

Hoess, who looked so ordinary, was perhaps the greatest executioner of human beings of all times. Over 2 million persons were put to death under his orders. The victims included the whole range of humankind. There were the young and old, the healthy and sick, the married and single, the religious and irreligious, the educated and uneducated. Hoess was the main functionary who saw to it that their voices were stilled forever. How could a seemingly ordinary man make such a contribution to extraordinary evil?

In contrast to Hoess, Bertrand Russell was not an ordinary man—he was one of this century’s intellectual giants. He made profound contributions to philosophy, and his innovations in mathematics underlie much of the computer revolution we are

now experiencing. But beyond that, he was one of the leading voices that advocated a modern Age of Reason.

Russell was fond of saying that the greatest mission of all was “extending the sphere of reason” to new realms of living.<sup>1</sup> He believed that reason, humankind’s marvelous capacity for understanding the world around us, could be used to tackle many problems that cause human misery. It could improve our lives if we but allow it to operate in areas where we traditionally rely upon superstition and fuzzy thinking. And the process of reasoning, itself, could be continually sharpened and used to help us understand more of the puzzles in the world around us.

Yet here, in the person of Hoess, was a puzzle that resisted reason: How could a seemingly limited little man make such a prodigious contribution to evil?

Hoess embodied a paradox: *When it comes to doing evil deeds, a very ordinary person may make very extraordinary contributions.*

And furthermore, the life of Hoess shows, as we shall see later on in Chapter 3 when Hoess’s life is examined more fully, that an ordinary person may not only do evil, but do evil innovatively and enthusiastically and on a grand scale. The book will explore the Hoess paradox by dwelling on the question, how does ordinary behavior contribute to extraordinary evil?

## ARENDRT’S VIEW OF EICHMANN

Hannah Arendt also pointed to the ordinariness of those who carried out the mass murders of the Nazi era. Her book on Adolf Eichmann’s trial is subtitled *A Report on the Banality of Evil*.<sup>2</sup>

Eichmann had been in charge of organizing the transportation of Jews to the concentration and extermination camps. In this capacity he was responsible for arranging that a steady flow of victims would be delivered to the camps. He thereby had a major role in the bureaucratic administration of the extermination program; and he played this role with unyielding persistence, considerable ingenuity, and great verve. About fifteen years after the Second World War Israeli agents captured Eichmann in his hiding place in Argentina and brought him to trial in Israel. Hannah Arendt’s book describes the trial.

In Arendt's view the Eichmann trial was a partial failure. Certainly it was a considerable accomplishment to bring to trial a person who was a central participant in the unprecedented mass murders, a person who contributed so greatly to the annihilation of so many innocent persons. The prosecution believed that now they might be able to use Eichmann to personify the horror, the evil, that had been perpetrated. But Eichmann turned out to be a very ordinary sort of bureaucrat. He might have been exceedingly and bizarrely confused about ideological and moral issues, but he had a strong sense of dignity, orderliness, commitment to what he saw as a grand cause. His conscience was warped—"he would have had a bad conscience only if he had not done what he had been ordered to do—to ship millions of men, women and children to their death with great zeal and meticulous care"<sup>3</sup>—but *he seemingly did have a conscience.*

This was hard to accept. Arendt wrote: "Half a dozen psychiatrists certified him as a 'normal'—'more normal, at any rate, than I am after having examined him' one of them was said to have exclaimed."<sup>4</sup>

The prosecution made desperate efforts to bring out the man's viciousness, the pure evil that they felt must surely reside in him. They did succeed in documenting the horrors committed by the Nazis. They went to excruciating lengths to enumerate the deeds that took place, and Eichmann certainly had a great part in these deeds. But *he*, as an individual, emerges as an incredibly ordinary, banal person. His mental horizon was not very large, but he did not appear to be a person who was driven by evil motives as such. He was a person strongly committed to getting his personal fulfillment through a bureaucratic career. He took his work awfully seriously. He took the Nazi cause, with its anti-Semitic ideology, awfully seriously.

In short, Eichmann came through his trial looking like a thoroughly ordinary bureaucrat. He was not mentally ill, as the psychiatrists had to admit. Arendt wrote: "The trouble with Eichmann was precisely that so many were like him, and that the many were neither perverted, nor sadistic, that they were, and still are, terribly and terrifyingly normal."<sup>5</sup>

The prosecutors at the trial, the survivors of Eichmann's efforts, and very many other people, Jews and non-Jews alike, found this very hard to accept. After all, the deeds in which Eich-

mann participated so enthusiastically and energetically speak for themselves. They are ghoulish in the extreme—in their scope, in their bestiality—and they defy comparison with most other inhumanities.

The trial ended with the death sentence for Eichmann. (This was not surprising, not even to Eichmann himself. During the trial he occasionally remarked, “Don’t you have enough to hang me already?”) The prosecution, given its herculean efforts to document the horrendous crimes, appeared satisfied. It remained for Arendt, in her role as an observer for *The New Yorker* magazine, to give public expression to the *banality* of Eichmann, to define his terrible ordinariness. This proved to be a very upsetting idea. It produced widespread shock and anger.<sup>6</sup>

The victims of Nazism felt there was nothing “ordinary” about their experiences. They believed the catalogue of Nazi horrors showed a program of genocide that was surely unique in the history of humankind; and they held that Eichmann, as a major organizer of the Nazi program, in all its horrendous ramifications, was surely not behaving as an ordinary person. How could one regard such deeds, and such a man, as banal or ordinary?

Of course these people were right. There was nothing ordinary in the scale and ferocity of the Nazi program of extermination of innocent human beings. It is an obscenity to trivialize it, as some have done, by equating it with other crimes, and various lesser social injustices. The Nazi Holocaust was evil at its most extreme, and Eichmann was an active, innovative and exuberant participant in that evil.

However, the voices of this very justified passion can lead one astray. Surviving victims and their kin are inflamed by the memory of those innocents whose lives were extinguished, those brothers and sisters, those fathers and mothers, those children. Eichmann’s *deeds* were monstrous, but Eichmann was also thoroughly ordinary. If we are not prepared to accept this fact, and to learn from it, then we are losing an opportunity to understand evil and, perhaps, to prevent it in future.<sup>7</sup>

The actions of Eichmann, for which he was tried and convicted, were extraordinary. There was nothing ordinary about the Nazi Holocaust as carried out by Eichmann and his cohorts. Yet, if we insist on concentrating on the extraordinary side of Eichmann, on the monstrosity of his deeds, we shall remain impotent against

evil. If we merely put a “monster” label on the man and his deeds, without understanding the very ordinary mechanisms of behavior he utilized, then we cannot understand how the monstrous actions could have taken place. We may continue to be outraged at the Eichmanns of this world, but we shall not forestall future extraordinary evils as long as our level of understanding remains inadequate. We shall remain intellectually crippled by our rage.

To confront evil we must put passion aside, concentrating instead on the real issue: How is the ordinary transformed into the extraordinary? In the case of Eichmann, how did he transform the ordinary into the extraordinary? How much of the ordinary was retained amid Eichmann’s world of extraordinary evil? In short, how could a man who was so profoundly ordinary accomplish deeds that were so extraordinary? I shall take up these issues via the case study of Rudolf Hoess, in Chapter 3. Hoess was in a way doing even greater evil than Eichmann. He, like Eichmann, made abundant use of ordinary behavior.

If we understand the ordinary more fully, and if we understand how the ordinary is transformed into the extraordinary, we shall stand a chance of understanding how it is that evil appears and prospers so often.

### IS DISPASSIONATE STUDY OF EVIL POSSIBLE?

The public responses to Hannah Arendt’s book on Eichmann were very spirited, some quite negative. These responses imply a second paradox: *Those persons most affected by horrendous deeds may unwittingly stand in the way of understanding the causes of the deeds.* The victims, in their passionate—and justified!—espousal of the uniqueness of the horrors that have befallen them, may hinder dispassionate analysis.

Hannah Arendt epitomized the cool, detached observer. Her emphasis was on an unemotional search for facts and dispassionate explanations, especially through comparison of the Holocaust with other forms of authoritarianism. At the heart of this approach is a search for generalizations, for concepts that show how a particular event is comparable to other events. The “uniqueness” of a particular event is regarded as more apparent than real. In Arendt’s work on Eichmann she applied detachment

to events that Holocaust survivors cannot help seeing in highly personal and utterly unique terms.

This approach applies the scientist's objectivity to the horrendous evil exemplified by the Holocaust. It operates from these assumptions:

- The large-scale brutalization and murder of innocent people in the Holocaust is a manifestation of colossal evil.
- There are many forms of colossal social evil.
- Each is terribly real.
- Each is entirely unique to its victims and their kin
- The Holocaust's importance is not diminished by comparing it to other forms of evil. Indeed, only by making such comparisons, and developing generalizations, can one develop the kind of knowledge that might enable one to prevent future Holocausts.

In contrast to this approach, survivors and descendants of victims of the Nazi Holocaust, like the descendants of the victims of the Turkish massacres of Armenians earlier in the century, to this day, have a living and active sense of immersion in these events. To them, the events are drenched in such personal horror that to them "detachment" amounts to absurdity, if not outright desecration of the memory of those who died. Arendt's scholarly, scientific detachment, with its notion that the Holocaust was a by-product of authoritarian systems that are not at all unique and that its individual perpetrators were ordinary persons, is appalling to many survivors of the Holocaust. They see scientific objectivity as a violation of the full uniqueness of the events that took place.

Survivors have emphasized that the Holocaust has no parallels, that it is incomparable. In practice, this meant that many survivors spent the first years after the Second World War in stunned silence. So great was the catastrophe, so overpowering was its effect, so profound the evil, that for many survivors the only possible response with personal meaning was silence. Silence alone appeared to even approach doing justice to the enormity of the unspeakable events that had taken place. Elie Wiesel, the winner of the 1986 Nobel Peace Prize was, and remains, the most elo-

quent spokesperson for this view of the enormity and of the fundamental incomprehensibility of the Holocaust. As a survivor of extermination camps and also as an artist and writer, Wiesel spent the first post-Holocaust years in silence. Since then he has increasingly spoken about what he regards as the unspeakable. He senses a compulsion to comprehend Holocaust experiences, but believes that these experiences can never be comprehended. From this viewpoint speaking about the Holocaust is, at best, a step in the direction of comprehension, where full comprehension is inherently impossible.

Following the years of stunned silence, some very different responses to the Holocaust emerged. These included efforts to reconcile the Holocaust with religious teachings. Where was God during the Nazi era? How could God permit such total disaster? Was God absent? Was God incapable of keeping humans from being so inhuman? And, more affirmatively, was God perhaps speaking to Jews and humankind *through* Auschwitz? Is there a religious message that comes from Auschwitz?<sup>8</sup>

In the 1960s a virtual turnabout in responses to the Holocaust began. No longer was silence valued so highly. Instead, there started much deliberate public speaking and writing about the Holocaust. The thinking was that the world must not be allowed to forget what happened. Information about the Holocaust not only must be stored in archives and libraries, it must be publicized. It must be taught in schools. It must be included in everyday discourse about politics, about community life, and about personal life. For many, drawing attention to the Holocaust has become a sacred duty.

Scholars operating in the Hannah Arendt tradition bring yet another interpretation to the Holocaust. They decry the “mystic vision of the Holocaust” that rejects comparing the Holocaust to other forms of mass murder and torture and that denies social scientists the opportunity to develop theories that encompass all kinds of genocide, not merely the Nazi variant. Irving Louis Horowitz (a sociologist, and holder of the Hannah Arendt Professorship at Rutgers University) says: “genocide must be reduced from mass culture...[and] be made part and parcel of a general theory of social systems and social structures, and if social science is to make its own serious contribution to the Holocaust studies it must move beyond the mystery of silence or the silence of mysteries.”<sup>9</sup>

It is harsh to say that those who were most directly involved in the Holocaust—its survivors and their kinsfolk—may actually stand in the way of attaining dispassionate and objective knowledge about it. But there is, indeed, a difference between the attitude of victims, trying to come to terms with the evil that has befallen them and the attitude of scientists, trying to discover concepts that explain the occurrence of evil in different times and places. Yet the two can be reconciled when we realize that each is valid, that each serves a distinctive and important purpose, and that neither negates the other.

When one concentrates on the uniqueness of a calamity, such as one's particular encounter with the Holocaust, one is trying to come to terms with the collapse of a significant portion of one's world. One's resulting grief contains a measure of highly personal reality that cannot possibly be generalized. From the survivors' standpoint, trying to generalize from the Holocaust amounts to interfering with one's personal mourning, the sanctity of one's personal memories, and one's personal outrage against the perpetrators. All of these are ways of mentally constructing a meaningful and livable reality for oneself in response to evil events that were, and still are, experienced personally. All of these are addressed by focus on the uniqueness of the evil events.

By contrast, scientists live with different mental constructions. One focuses on objective knowledge and the ability to generalize, rather than giving primacy to personal experience. To accomplish this, a full "experience" of a catastrophe is not necessary. To do research on cancer in the hope of discovering a cure for cancer, the scientist does not have to capture the full experience of the horror of having cancer. One does not deny the personal side of every catastrophe, but one chooses to concentrate on its features that appear in a variety of contexts. To accomplish this one does not attempt to capture the fullness and the essence of the catastrophe as a victim might experience it. Instead, one concentrates on those features that are knowable in an objective way. One's goal is to understand *some features* very well. One looks for generalizations, for laws of behavior that apply to the occurrence of these features in many situations. One's objective is to gain knowledge that will apply to future events and, thereby, prevent future catastrophes.

In actuality, the unique and the generalizing approaches have much in common. Those who emphasize the uniqueness of each



instance of horrendous evil also want to prevent similar events in the future. Those who scientifically compare the Holocaust to, say, other forms of authoritarian control also want to honor the memory of the victims of the Holocaust, and they do not deny the unique fate and needs of its surviving victims. But in their central objectives, they differ. And in their methods, they differ.

Now, to begin to look at those who commit horrors, here is another paradox: *Horrendous deeds may be performed by persons who are addressing themselves to innocuous immediate problems.* A person may do horrible things without paying attention to the horror of the deeds, instead focusing attention only on an aspect of the situation that is relatively benign.

A good illustration of this point is contained in Stanley Milgram's experiments I mentioned earlier.<sup>10</sup> For his experiments Milgram set up a laboratory situation in which the subjects thought they were teachers in a learning experiment. If a "learner" made a mistake, the subject (the "teacher") was to administer an electric shock to the learner. When the learner continued to make mistakes the subject was told to increase the severity of the shocks. Eventually the shocks would reach a high level of severity, involving much pain for the learner. In reality the shocks were simulated—there were no electric shocks at all—but the subjects did not know this. The striking finding of the experiments was that most of the subjects were willing to inflict severe pain on the "learners."

Milgram's instructions for the participants mapped out an *immediate context*. It contained two features: the claim that the participant was making an important contribution to science; and the claim that it was necessary to have unquestioning obedience to the instructions. These two features were presented as a complete set of prescriptions governing participation in that context. It left no room for other considerations, such as being worried about inflicting pain on innocent people. Milgram's work showed that the immediate context proved to be a remarkably effective device for getting people to do horrible things. The research participants paid attention chiefly to the instructions they received in that immediate context. The other features—the fact that they were inflicting pain on innocent people—were brushed aside by the administrator of the experiments, and most participants accepted this and did not withdraw from the experiment.

How can one explain such behavior? Why were the subjects willing to inflict pain? Milgram's own interpretation of his findings was that obedience to authority was the crucial factor in making people inflict pain on innocent people (plus their belief that they were making a contribution to science).

I believe that a more realistic interpretation is that people can be mentally locked into a particular context (as Milgram's subjects were; as American soldiers in Vietnam sometimes were; as SS guards in concentration camps often were), where "outside" values are excluded and locally generated values dominate. Here immediacy prevails, even when it does violence to some of one's fundamental values. The Milgram experiments laid the groundwork for understanding this process, as later sections of this book will show.

One might argue that the Milgram findings deal only with a laboratory situation, and that they are not based on real life. However, there are real life corroborations of Milgram's findings. One example is a massacre that occurred in the Vietnam war. It became known to the general public when William Calley, a lieutenant in the U.S. Army, was accused of murdering unarmed, innocent old men, women, and children in the rural Vietnamese hamlet of My Lai in March 1968. During Calley's court martial the defense lawyer argued that Calley was following orders from higher-ranking officers, and that he was under severe stress at the time. The lawyer for the prosecution argued that Calley acted very much under his own discretion when ordering the Vietnamese to be killed and when he himself fired into the defenseless people huddled together in groups within the village. A jury of six fellow officers, including five Vietnam veterans, found Calley guilty of ordering and participating in the murders.

Although the results of the court martial are important, it is even more important to understand what went on inside Calley's head during the massacre. Calley himself provides a convincing picture of what went on in his head, although neither the prosecution nor his own lawyer seemed to believe him. What he said sounded so utterly simplistic and "ordinary" that few took him seriously. According to Calley one issue dominated the immediate context in which he found himself: to move his troops through the village and do it rapidly. To us, who are far removed from that day in March 1968, the order to move rapidly—and Calley had

received a previous reprimand for not moving his men rapidly enough—may seem innocuous and trivial. To Calley it was very real and immediate. It was so real, in fact, that it dominated his actions to the extent of overruling any concern for the lives of Vietnamese citizens. Calley's perspective is illustrated in this exchange between Calley and the prosecuting attorney during the court martial:

Prosecuting Attorney: How long did you fire into the ditch [where the Vietnamese were huddled]?

Calley: I have no idea, Sir...

P.A.: What at in the ditch?

Calley: At the people in the ditch, Sir.

P.A.: How many people in the ditch?

Calley: I don't know, Sir...

P.A.: What were these people doing as they were being fired upon?

Calley: Nothing, Sir...

P.A.: Were they being hit?

Calley: I would imagine so, Sir.

P.A.: Do you know?

Calley: I don't know if they were being hit when I saw them, Sir.

P.A.: Do you know if you hit any of them?

Calley: No Sir, I don't.

P.A.: How far away were you from them when you fired?

Calley: The muzzle would have been five feet, Sir.

P.A.: You didn't see the bullets impact?

Calley: Not that I recall, no Sir.... My main thing was to go on, finish off these people as fast as possible and get my people out into position, Sir.

P.A.: Why?

Calley: Because that is what I was instructed to do, Sir, and I had been delayed long enough. I was trying to get out there before I got criticized again, Sir.<sup>11</sup>

In the immediate context Calley's foremost concern was to move his troops through the village very rapidly.

Calley was in charge of a platoon of soldiers, one of three such platoons engaged in sweeping through an area that was supposedly occupied by the enemy, the Viet Cong. Actually, there was no resistance whatever, because the enemy soldiers had previously withdrawn. Calley was under orders to proceed rapidly through the village, clearing it of all inhabitants. Apparently his platoon was slower than the others, and Calley had previously been reprimanded for slowness. In response to this reprimand Calley ordered that if the Vietnamese civilians could not be moved fast enough his men should kill them: He told a sergeant under him that if he could not "move" the people, he was to "waste" (i. e., kill) them. In short, Calley's horrendous deeds were carried out as he addressed himself to an innocuous (but, to him, very real) immediate problem—to avoid another reprimand for slowness.

In Calley's mind whatever interfered with moving his men rapidly was detrimental to this mission and had to be obliterated. In this case, the inhabitants could be seen as obstacles to getting through the village rapidly. He believed he did not have time to determine their potential to threaten his movement. He had to assume, he thought, that they were a hindrance. So, in his mind, it was necessary and justified to kill them. The low value he assigned to human life may strike us as appalling, but in Calley's scheme of thought the lives of Vietnamese civilians were a very minor aspect of his mission that day. Of course, addressing an immediate problem was not the only important factor in Calley's actions at My Lai. These other factors are described in Chapter 3.

### THE DESIRE TO IGNORE EVIL

I began this book by saying that I tried to ignore the evil of the Holocaust for many years. I tried to shield myself. In a similar vein many American people tried to shield themselves about Vietnam in the 1960s and 1970s. During that time the daily television news routinely carried pictures of the latest atrocities in Vietnam. After repeatedly seeing these reports of killings, many Western viewers became emotionally numbed. People continued eating

their evening meal while watching the latest pictures of atrocities on television. Similarly, responses to the Nazi Holocaust have reached the point of producing emotional exhaustion. Most of us have heard enough of the details to produce a lifetime's worth of emotional atrophy. This emotional exhaustion (or psychic numbing, as Robert Lifton calls it) is our defense against unbearable emotional assault. Our personal emotional system cannot stand being blinded by horrendous stimuli, so it puts up a curtain to cover our window to the world of evil.

However, extraordinary evil is real, and we cannot do away with it by putting up curtains to safeguard our senses. If we are to understand evil, and overcome it, we must pull aside the curtain. Yet we start with a handicap. Culturally produced sensibilities give us an aversion to exposing ourselves to extremes of evil. We do not want to see it or hear about it. Unfortunately, by closing our eyes and ears we are merely deceiving ourselves and giving evil the benefit of our ignorance. To overcome evil we must confront its realities. One of these realities is that people may engage in evil deliberately.

#### PEOPLE MAY DELIBERATELY ENGAGE IN EVIL ACTIVITIES

So far this book has painted a picture that makes evil seem accidental, a by-product of behavior that is not *intentionally* evil. Certainly, evil can happen accidentally, but there is also evil that is far from accidental; there is evil that is deliberate. There are occasions when persons do horrendous deeds *because* these deeds are horrendous. There are occasions when persons do evil *because* it is known to be evil.

For example, Dostoevski wrote about an incident of extraordinary evil that happened a hundred years ago, in another age, in another location; but it was real, and comparable activities take place in our own age.

In *The Brothers Karamazov*, Dostoevski wrote:

a Bulgarian I met lately in Moscow, Ivan went on...told me about the crimes committed by the Turks and Circassians in Bulgaria through fear of a general uprising of the Slavs. They burned villages, murdered, outraged women and children, they

nailed their prisoners by the ears to the fences, left them till morning, and in the morning they hanged them—all sorts of things you can't imagine. People talk sometimes of bestial cruelty, but that's a great injustice and insult to the beasts; a beast can never be so cruel as a man, so artistically cruel. The tiger only tears and gnaws, that's all he can do. He would never think of nailing people by the ears, even if he were able to do it. These Turks took pleasure in torturing children, too; cutting the unborn child from the mother's womb, and tossing babies up in the air and catching them on the points of their bayonets before their mother's eyes. Doing it before the mother's eyes was what gave zest to the amusement. Here is another scene that I thought very interesting. Imagine a trembling mother with her baby in her arms, a circle of invading Turks around her. They've planned a game; they pet the baby, laugh to make it laugh. They succeed, the baby laughs. At that moment a Turk points a pistol four inches from the baby's face. The baby laughs, holds out its little hands to the pistol, and the Turk pulls the trigger in the baby's face and blows out its brains.<sup>12</sup>

Dostoevski did not want his readers to think that such cruelty was a uniquely Turkish disease. All societies have some of it. Dostoevski said:

I have Russian examples that are even better than the Turks. You know we prefer beating—rods and scourges—that's our national institution. Nailing ears is unthinkable for us, for we are, after all, Europeans. But the rod and scourge we have always with us and they cannot be taken away from us. Abroad now, they scarcely do any beating. Manners are more humane, or laws have been passed, so that they don't dare to flog men now. But they make up for it in another way just as national as ours...<sup>13</sup>

This is not accidental evil. It is deliberate evil. It is evil flaunted. As Kenneth Seeskin, a philosopher, said:

The killing [in the preceding passage] is not swift and impersonal but amusing and innovative: a grotesque form of self-expression. Despite what one might think after an initial reading of the passage, the person who plays with a baby in order to enjoy the slaughtering of it even more cannot be without a conscience. These are the actions of someone who understands only too well what human dignity is and takes pleasure in

mocking it. In fact killing is symbolic. He has chosen to profane the tenderest and most sacred of living creatures and to do so in a manner designed to show the victim and everyone else that he is fully aware of the horror in what he is doing...<sup>14</sup>

If one could be sure that the flaunters of evil were sadists, suffering from psychopathology and so mentally unbalanced that they did not know right from wrong, one might almost be able to comprehend their evil. Even Hannah Arendt, in her effort to be objective about Eichmann, leaned in that direction. She claimed that Eichmann did not know right from wrong. But there was every indication that Eichmann was not mentally unbalanced. Arendt herself cited the psychiatric reports on Eichmann that said so. Similarly, psychiatrists found Lt. Calley to be quite sane. They affirmed that he could, indeed, distinguish right from wrong.

This points to yet another paradox: *Evil may be flaunted by people who know better.*

How can one explain the extraordinary level of evil that seemingly ordinary individuals may perpetrate? How can one explain the pursuit of evil when moral standards against such acts are known and are, to some extent at least, shared by those who carry out the evil? How can one explain the virtual courting of evil for its own sake? The answers seem to be contained in three phenomena I shall discuss in detail in Chapter 3, and describe briefly here.

Evil can be, and sometimes has been, *developed into a culture of cruelty*, a distinctive culture in its own right. As such it is systematically organized to reward individuals for their acts of cruelty: for being creative at inventing cruelties and for establishing a personal reputation for their particular version of cruelty. Here cruelty can be a macabre art form: one's creativity at inventing new forms of cruelty is socially recognized and rewarded. Here, too, cruelty can be a distinctive "economy," where one's credit rating depends on one's level of cruelty—the more cruel, the higher one's standing. By contrast, acts of kindness can lead to publicly declared bankruptcy, and in some situations the punishment for this bankruptcy is a death sentence.

Evil can be, and sometimes has been, *produced routinely, as an integral part of the operation of modern bureaucracy*. In some bureaucracies, such as Nazi extermination camps, the production of evil was the official mission of the bureaucracy. Here, merely

being a bureaucratic functionary engaged the bureaucrat in routinely doing evil. However, in addition, bureaucrats often add to evil on their own initiative. On both counts, their contribution to evil can be enormous.

Evil can be, and sometimes has been, *produced in separate social contexts*. Evil is produced in the confines of a package of a number of items of valued behavior, which is organized under an all-embracing theme. That theme integrates and gives focus to behavior; it becomes a rider to all activities within the package, coloring all activities within that package; and it facilitates the outlook that everything outside the package can be ignored.

Such a rider helped to produce a context for evil in Nazi Germany. Hitler offered the German people a package that consisted of plans for revitalizing the German economy, recapturing German political glory that had been severely tarnished by defeat in the First World War, and racially “purifying” Germany. Hitler offered these items as separate issues under a unifying theme: the revived grandeur of Germany.

Hitler claimed that he, personally, was uniquely qualified to help restore Germany’s grandeur. He was singularly attuned to Germany’s destiny, its historic call to greatness. He, like Caesar and Alexander the Great, was to be the instrument for a nation’s reaching its destiny. In this kind of myth great men, believed to be uniquely in touch with destiny, are held to be far above the level of ordinary humans. Hegel, a German philosopher who had helped establish this way of thinking, was sometimes quoted as saying that such superior persons “must trample down many an innocent flower, crush to pieces many objects in [their] path.”<sup>15</sup> Hitler, like the legendary German hero Sigfried, “came to reawaken Germany to greatness, [and was a man] for whom morality, suffering and ‘the litany of private virtues’ was irrelevant.”<sup>16</sup> Hitler was the implementor of the German people’s destiny of greatness, and “anyone opposing them was flying in the face of the laws of Nature and Fate.”<sup>17</sup>

This mythology meant that what was outside the Nazi package—namely, other German values, other concerns—had to be ignored. What Hitler offered the German people was a unifying theme, pursuit of national grandeur—with Hitler at the core, as its fundamental embodiment and leader—but with the German people sharing fully in the glory of it all while they participated in car-



rying out the Nazi package of programs. All economic, political, religious, and social life came to be pervaded by the rider of Hitler's grandiose theme. It fostered and permeated Nazi Germany.

The Nazi situation also illustrates the effects of a change of riders. Such a change may drastically alter an entire situation in which people live, even when much of their day-to-day behavior remains the same. In Germany many items of routine daily life remained the same between 1920 and 1933, yet life was thoroughly transformed by the emergence of the pursuit-of-grandeur rider, with a crucial turning point coming after Hitler's election as chancellor of Germany in 1933. As a result of the transformation, the German people took part in evil on a scale that would have been unthinkable to them before the emergence of the new rider. Yet much of the evil went unrecognized because so much of everyday life remained unchanged. In short, a new rider can entirely transform everyday living, while most ongoing activities remain unchanged.

This is the rider paradox: *Given a new rider to everyday living, little may change, but everything will be different.* In themselves, riders are neither good or bad. They are simply ways in which priorities from one sector of life intrude into, and dominate, other sectors of life—just as Hitler's personal grandiose heroics came to dominate much of the everyday life of the entire German people. Riders are linkage mechanisms, joining one sector of life to other sectors. And, finally, riders are organizing mechanisms: When a new rider prevails, a new set of priorities is imposed. Sometimes these new priorities create a context that legitimates extraordinary evil. To confront the evil it is necessary to recognize which riders are at work in that context and how they operate to facilitate evil.

The concepts outlined in this chapter form the basis for the understanding of how small, incremental steps, taken in our daily life, can have profound consequences; of how behavior is packaged and influenced by the riders that permeate it; and of how personal autonomy, one's ability to make independent decisions, can be used to contribute to horrendous evil. These ideas are examined next as they influence the actual practice of evil.