



Ethical Blind Spots, Complacency & Nazism

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When I traveled to Auschwitz a few years ago, one question played over and over in my mind: *Did they know?* Did the German people know what was happening in this camp near their own border, in their own occupied territories? With the trains coming and going year after year, with the long lines of prisoners and the billowing smokestacks, did they just turn a blind eye to the atrocities? Had they become so desensitized that they could no longer see the carefully choreographed death operations nearby?

Some concentration camps, like the one in Dachau, were set in comfortable suburbs right inside Germany itself, and the townsfolk could stroll past them during their daily routine. The grass in those suburbs continued to grow as green as anywhere else, young people got married, babies were born, men went to work, and life went on.

Walking through Dachau or Auschwitz today, one wonders: could this ever happen again? Could such a scenario ever play out today in middle-class America? We instinctively reply, "no, never — this is a more enlightened time and culture." Yet a perceptive observer will discern troubling parallels. Our society, in fact, faces essentially the same temptation that Germany did: the temptation to normalize certain

well-scripted death operations in the midst of polite society. If we scrutinize our own culture and our own time, we can hardly avoid the conclusion that suction machines have replaced smokestacks, and that Fertility Clinics and Women's Health Centers have replaced the barbed wire and the barracks.

We need look no further than the Planned Parenthood clinics which sit comfortably in our cities and neighborhoods. Future generations are likely to be appalled by the statistics: nearly 2 million deaths per year. They are sure to wonder about a people that ended the lives of their own children at the rate of 1 every 23 seconds through elective abortion. They are sure to ask, "How could they?" and, "Did they know?"

Future generations are sure to be scandalized by what transpired, essentially without protest, in our fertility clinics: *in vitro* fertilization producing hundreds of thousands of embryonic humans, to be chilled in liquid nitrogen and turned into, in the words of one commentator, "kidsicles." Future generations are sure to deplore the denigration of human embryos as "medical waste," using them as experimental research

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subjects without their consent, and strip-mining them for their embryonic stem cells. Unborn humans and embryonic children are now dispatched with the same desensitized ease as camp inhabitants once were, and ne'er a word is mentioned in respectable society. We no longer even notice the pall of death that quietly permeates the air.

There is a certain banality about evil. It doesn't necessarily present itself in a monstrous or dramatic way. It can take the shape of simple conformity to what everyone else is doing, to what the leadership says is right, to what the neighbors are doing. The gradual encroachment of evil in our lives can be something we might not even notice because we are not paying attention; it can be something barely on the periphery of our consciousness.

During the Nazi years, there often were no momentous decisions to be made for or against evil. People were concerned with their daily affairs, and on that level, Nazism seemed good: it seemed to bring prosperity, it made things work, it allowed people to feel good about themselves and their country. The moral issues — the ones that we now see as having been central — were

carefully avoided.

When the full horror of Nazism was revealed at the end of the war, the German people responded, "We didn't know." When a local towns-person was asked whether he knew what was going on in the camp, he gave a more complete answer.

"Yes, we knew something was up, but we didn't talk about it, we didn't want to know too much."

Primo Levi, a writer and a survivor of Auschwitz, described the German ethical blind spot this way:

"In spite of the varied possibilities for information, most Germans didn't know because they didn't want to know. Because, indeed they wanted *not* to know. ...Those who knew did not talk; those who did not know did not ask questions; those who did ask questions received no answers. In this way the typical German citizen won and defended his ignorance, which seemed to him sufficient justification of his adherence to Nazism. Shutting his mouth, his eyes and his ears, he built for himself the illusion of

not knowing, hence not being an accomplice to the things taking place in front of his door."

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