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Humankind: A Hopeful History

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Humankind

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Humankind

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A Hopeful
History

Author of the
New York Times
Bestseller
UTOPIA FOR
REALISTS

Rutger
Bregman

“In a sea of cynicism, this book is the sturdy, unsinkable lifeboat the world needs.”

—DANIEL H. PINK, author of the #1 bestseller *Drive*

Part Two

AFTER AUSCHWITZ

‘It’s a wonder I haven’t abandoned all my ideals, they seem so absurd and impractical. Yet I cling to them because I still believe, in spite of everything, that people are truly good at heart.’

Anne Frank (1929–45)

If it's true that human beings are kind-hearted by nature, then it's time to address the inevitable question. It's a question that made a number of German publishers less than enthusiastic about my book. And it's a question that continued to haunt me while I was writing it.

How do you explain Auschwitz?

How do you explain the raids and the pogroms, the genocide and concentration camps? Who were those willing executioners that signed on with Hitler? Or Stalin? With Mao? Or Pol Pot?

After the systematic murder of more than six million Jews, science and literature became obsessed with the question of how humans could be so cruel. It was tempting at first to see the Germans as a whole different animal, to chalk everything up to their twisted souls, sick minds, or barbaric culture. In any case, they were clearly nothing like us.

But there's a problem: the most heinous crime in human history wasn't committed in some primitive backwater. It happened in one of the richest, most advanced countries in the world – in the land of Kant and Goethe, of Beethoven and Bach.

Could it be that civil society was not a protective veneer after all? That Rousseau was right and civilisation an insidious rot? Around this time, a new scientific discipline rose to prominence and began to furnish disturbing proof that modern humans are indeed fundamentally flawed. That field was social psychology.

During the 1950s and 1960s, social psychologists began prying, probing and prodding to pin down what turns ordinary men and women into monsters. This new breed of scientist devised one experiment after another that showed humans are capable of appalling acts. A tweak in our situation is all it takes and – voila! – out comes the Nazi in each of us.

In the years that *Lord of the Flies* topped the bestseller lists, a young researcher named Stanley Milgram demonstrated how obediently people follow the orders even of dubious authority figures (Chapter 8), while the murder of a young woman in New York City laid the basis for hundreds of studies on apathy in the modern age (Chapter 9). And then there were the experiments by psychology professors Muzafer Sherif and Philip Zimbardo (Chapter 7), who demonstrated that good little boys can turn into camp tyrants at the drop of a hat.

What fascinates me is that all of these studies took place during a relatively short span of time. These were the wild west years of social psychology, when young hotshot researchers could soar to scientific stardom on the wings of shocking experiments.

Fifty years on, the young hotshots are dead and gone or travelling the globe as renowned professors. Their work is famous and continues to be taught to new generations of students. But now the archives of their post-war experiments have also been opened. For the first time, we can take a look behind the scenes.

In other words, if you push people hard enough, if you poke and prod, bait and manipulate, many of us are indeed capable of doing evil. The road to hell is paved with good intentions. But evil doesn't live just beneath the surface; it takes immense effort to draw it out. And most importantly, evil has to be disguised as doing good.

Ironically, good intentions also played a major role in the Stanford Prison Experiment, from Chapter 7. Student guard Dave Eshelman, who wondered if he would have taken things as far if he hadn't been explicitly instructed to do so, also described himself as a 'scientist at heart'.²⁵ Afterwards, he said he felt he had done something positive, 'because I had contributed in some way to the understanding of human nature'.²⁶

This was also true for David Jaffe, Zimbardo's assistant who came up with the original prison study concept. Jaffe encouraged the well-meaning guards to take a tougher line by pointing to the noble intentions behind the study. 'What we want to do,' he told a wavering guard, 'is be able to [...] go to the world with what we've done and say "Now look, this is what happens when you have Guards who behave this way." But in order to say that we have to have Guards who behave that way.'²⁷

Ultimately, David Jaffe and Philip Zimbardo wanted their work to galvanise a complete overhaul of the prison system. 'Hopefully what will come out of this study is some very serious recommendations for reform,' Jaffe assured the guard. 'This is our goal. We're not trying to do this just because we're all, um, sadists.'²⁸

4

That brings us back to Adolf Eichmann. On 11 April 1961, the Nazi officer's trial for war crimes began. Over the next

fourteen weeks, hundreds of witnesses took the stand. For fourteen weeks the prosecution did its best to show what a monster Eichmann was.

But this was more than a court case alone. It was also a massive history lesson, a media spectacle to which millions of people tuned in. Among them was Stanley Milgram, described by his wife as a 'news addict', who closely followed the progress of the trial.²⁹

Hannah Arendt, meanwhile, had a seat in the courtroom. 'The trouble with Eichmann,' she later wrote, '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.'³⁰ In the years that followed, Eichmann came to stand for the mindless 'desk murderer' – for the banality of evil in each of us.

Only recently have historians come to some very different conclusions. When the Israeli secret service captured Eichmann in 1960, he'd been hiding out in Argentina. There, he'd been interviewed by former Dutch SS officer Willem Sassen for several months. Sassen hoped to get Eichmann to admit that the Holocaust was all a lie fabricated to discredit the Nazi regime. He was disappointed.

'I have no regrets!' Eichmann assured him.³¹ Or as he'd already declared in 1945: 'I will leap into my grave laughing because the feeling that I have five million human beings on my conscience is for me a source of extraordinary satisfaction.'³²

Reading through the thirteen hundred pages of interviews, teeming with warped ideas and fantasies, it's patently obvious that Eichmann was no brainless bureaucrat. He was a fanatic. He acted not out of indifference, but out of conviction. Like Milgram's experimental subjects, he did evil because he believed he was doing good.

Although transcripts of the Sassen interviews were available at the time of the trial, Eichmann managed to cast doubt on their authenticity. And so he put the whole world on the wrong track. All that time, the interview tapes lay mouldering in the Bundesarchiv in Koblenz, where the philosopher Bettina Stangneth found them fifty years later. What she heard confirmed that everything in Sassen's transcripts was true.

'I never did anything, great or small, without obtaining in advance express instructions from Adolf Hitler or any of my superiors,' Eichmann testified during the trial. This was a brazen lie. And his lie would be parroted by countless Nazis who professed that they were 'just following orders'.

Orders handed down within the Third Reich's bureaucratic machine tended to be vague, historians have since come to realise. Official commands were rarely issued, so Hitler's adherents had to rely on their own creativity. Rather than simply obeying their leader, historian Ian Kershaw explains that they 'worked towards him', attempting to act in the spirit of the Führer.³³ This inspired a culture of one-upmanship in which increasingly radical Nazis devised increasingly radical measures to get in Hitler's good graces.

In other words, the Holocaust wasn't the work of humans suddenly turned robots, just as Milgram's volunteers didn't press switches without stopping to think. The perpetrators believed they were on the right side of history. Auschwitz was the culmination of a long and complex historical process in which the voltage was upped step by step and evil was more convincingly passed off as good. The Nazi propaganda mill – with its writers and poets, its philosophers and politicians – had had years to do its work, blunting and poisoning the minds of the German people. *Homo puppy* was deceived and indoctrinated, brainwashed and manipulated.

Only then could the inconceivable happen.

Had Hannah Arendt been misled when she wrote that Eichmann wasn't a monster? Had she been taken in by his act on the stand?

That is the opinion of many historians, who cite her book as a case of 'great idea, bad example'.³⁴ But some philosophers disagree, arguing that these historians have failed to understand Arendt's thinking. For Arendt did in fact study parts of Sassen's interviews with Eichmann during the trial, and nowhere did she write that Eichmann was simply obeying orders.

What's more, Arendt was openly critical of Milgram's obedience experiments. As much as the young psychologist admired the philosopher, the sentiment wasn't mutual. Arendt accused Milgram of a 'naïve belief that temptation and coercion are really the same thing'.³⁵ And, unlike Milgram, she didn't think a Nazi was hiding in each of us.

Why *did* Milgram and Arendt enter the history books together? Some Arendt experts believe it's because she was misinterpreted. She was one of those philosophers who spoke in aphorisms, using enigmatic phraseology that could easily be misunderstood. Take her statement that Eichmann 'did not think'. She didn't say he was a robotic desk killer, but, rather, as Arendt expert Roger Berkowitz points out, that Eichmann was unable to think from someone else's perspective.³⁶

In point of fact, Hannah Arendt was one of those rare philosophers who believe that most people, deep down, are decent.³⁷ She argued that our need for love and friendship is more human than any inclination towards hate and violence. And when we do choose the path of evil, we feel compelled to hide behind lies and clichés that give us a semblance of virtue.

Eichmann was a prime example. He'd convinced himself he'd done a great deed, something historic for which he'd be admired by future generations. That didn't make him a monster or a robot. It made him a joiner. Many years later, psychologists would reach the same conclusion about Milgram's research: the

shock experiments were not about obedience. They were about conformity.

It's astonishing how far ahead of her time Hannah Arendt was when she made precisely the same observation.

Sadly, Stanley Milgram's simplistic deductions (that humans submit to evil without thinking) made a more lasting impression than Hannah Arendt's layered philosophy (that humans are tempted by evil masquerading as good). This speaks to Milgram's directorial talent, to his eye for drama and his astute sense of what works on television.

But above all, I think what made Milgram famous was that he furnished evidence to support an age-old belief. 'The experiments seemed to offer strong support,' writes psychologist Don Mixon, 'for history's oldest, most momentous self-fulfilling prophecy – that we are born sinners. Most people, even atheists, believe that it is good for us to be reminded of our sinful nature.'³⁸

What makes us so eager to believe in our own corruption? Why does veneer theory keep returning in so many permutations? I suspect it has a lot to do with convenience. In a weird way, to believe in our own sinful nature is comforting. It provides a kind of absolution. Because if most people are bad, then engagement and resistance aren't worth the effort.

Belief in humankind's sinful nature also provides a tidy explanation for the existence of evil. When confronted with hatred or selfishness, you can tell yourself, 'Oh, well, that's just human nature.' But if you believe that people are essentially good, you have to question why evil exists at all. It implies that engagement and resistance are worthwhile, and it imposes an obligation to act.

In 2015, psychologist Matthew Hollander reviewed the taped recordings of 117 sessions at Milgram's shock machine.³⁹ After

extensive analysis, he discovered a pattern. The subjects who managed to halt the experiment used three tactics:

1. Talk to the victim.
2. Remind the man in the grey lab coat of his responsibility.
3. Repeatedly refuse to continue.

Communication and confrontation, compassion and resistance. Hollander discovered that virtually all participants used these tactics – virtually all wanted to stop, after all – but that those who succeeded used them much more. The good news is: these are trainable skills. Resistance just takes practice. 'What distinguishes Milgram's heroes,' Hollander observes, 'is largely a teachable competency at resisting questionable authority.'⁴⁰

If you think resistance is doomed to fail, then I have one last story for you on the subject. It takes place in Denmark during the Second World War. It's a story of ordinary people who demonstrated extraordinary courage. And it shows that resistance is always worthwhile, even when all seems lost.

5

The date is 28 September 1943.

In the headquarters of the Workers Assembly Building on 24 Rømersgade in Copenhagen, the Social Democratic Party leaders have all convened. A visitor in a Nazi uniform stands before them. They are staring at him in shock.

'The disaster is at hand,' the man is saying. 'Everything is planned in detail. Ships will anchor at the mooring off Copenhagen. Those of your poor Jewish countrymen who get

caught by the Gestapo will forcibly be brought on board the ships and transported to an unknown fate.'⁴¹

The speaker is trembling and pale. Georg Ferdinand Duckwitz is his name. He will go down in history as 'the converted Nazi', and his warning will work a miracle.

The raid was set to take place on Friday 1 October 1943, following detailed plans drawn up by the SS. At the stroke of 8 p.m., hundreds of German troops would begin knocking on doors up and down the country to round up all the Danish Jews. They would be taken to the harbour and boarded onto a ship equipped to hold six thousand prisoners.

To put it in terms of the shock experiments: Denmark didn't go from 15 volts to 30 and from 30 volts to 45. The Danes would be told to give the highest 450-volt shock at once. Up until this moment there had been no discriminatory laws, no mandatory yellow badges, no confiscation of Jewish property. Danish Jews would find themselves being deported to Polish concentration camps before they knew what had hit them.

That, at least, was the plan.

On the appointed night, tens of thousands of ordinary Danes – barbers and bartenders, builders and businessmen – refused to press that last switch on the shock machine. That night, the Germans discovered that the Jews had been forewarned of the raid and that most had already fled. In fact, thanks to that warning, almost 99 per cent of Denmark's Jews survived the war.

How can we explain the miracle of Denmark? What made this country a beacon of light in a sea of darkness?

After the war, historians suggested a number of answers. One important factor was that the Nazis had not fully seized power in Denmark, wishing to preserve the impression that their two governments were working together in harmony. As a

consequence, resistance against the Germans wasn't as risky in Denmark as in other countries, such as occupied Holland.

But ultimately one explanation stands out. 'The answer is undeniable,' writes historian Bo Lidegaard. 'The Danish Jews were protected by their compatriots' consistent engagement.'⁴²

When news of the raid spread, resistance sprang up from every quarter. From churches, universities and the business community, from the royal family, the Lawyers Council and the Danish Women's National Council – all voiced their objection. Almost immediately, a network of escape routes was organised, even with no centralised planning and no attempt to coordinate the hundreds of individual efforts. There simply wasn't time. Thousands of Danes, rich and poor, young and old, understood that now was the time to act, and that to look away would be a betrayal of their country.

'Even where the request came from the Jews themselves,' historian Leni Yahil noted, 'these were never refused.'⁴³ Schools and hospitals threw open their doors. Small fishing villages took in hundreds of refugees. The Danish police also assisted where they could and refused to cooperate with the Nazis. 'We Danes don't barter with our Constitution,' stormed *Dansk Maanedspost*, a resistance newspaper, 'and least of all in the matter of citizens' equality.'⁴⁴

Where mighty Germany was doped up on years of racist propaganda, modest Denmark was steeped in humanist spirit. Danish leaders had always insisted on the sanctity of the democratic rule of law. Anybody who sought to pit people against each other was not considered worthy to be called a Dane. There could be no such thing as a 'Jewish question'. There were only countrymen.

In a few short days, more than seven thousand Danish Jews were ferried in small fishing boats across the Sound separating Denmark from Sweden. Their rescue was a small but radiant point of light in a time of utter darkness. It was a triumph of

humanity and courage. 'The Danish exception shows that the mobilization of civil society's humanism [...] is not only a theoretical possibility,' writes Lidegaard. 'It can be done. We know because it happened.'⁴⁵

The Danish resistance turned out to be so contagious that even Hitler's most loyal followers in Denmark began to experience doubts. It became increasingly difficult for them to act as if they were backing a just cause. 'Even injustice needs a semblance of law,' Lidegaard observes. 'That is hard to find when the entire society denies the right of the stronger.'⁴⁶

Only in Bulgaria and Italy did the Nazis encounter comparable resistance, and there the Jewish death toll was analogously low. Historians emphasise that the scale of deportations in occupied regions hinged on the extent of each country's collaboration.⁴⁷ In Denmark, Adolf Eichmann would tell Willem Sassen years later, the Germans had more difficulties than elsewhere. 'The result was meager ... I also had to recall my transports — it was for me a mighty disgrace.'⁴⁸

To be clear, the Germans stationed in Denmark were no softies — as attested by the highest ranking Nazi there, Werner Best, better known as 'the Bloodhound of Paris'. Even Duckwitz, the converted Nazi in Copenhagen, had been a rabid anti-Semite throughout the 1930s. But as the years progressed, he became infected by the Danish spirit of humanity.

In her book *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, Hannah Arendt makes a fascinating observation about the rescue of the Danish Jews. 'It is the only case we know,' she wrote, 'in which the Nazis met with open native resistance, and the result seems to have been that those exposed to it changed their minds. They themselves apparently no longer looked upon the extermination of a whole people as a matter of course. They had met resistance based on principle, and their "toughness" had melted like butter in the sun ...'⁴⁹