

The Clown Behind the Monster is a Monster

Written by Bob Alexander

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Once upon a time there was a thoroughly mediocre man. He was incapable of finishing secondary or vocational school. By age 22, he found some small success as a salesman. He lived with his parents when not on the road making sales calls. Eventually he lost interest in the job, his performance dropped, and he was fired.

On the advice of his father's friend he joined a political party. He didn't join out of any sense of conviction. He didn't even know the party's platform. He just wanted the sense of being part of something - of belonging. When the party came into power he saw it as his best chance at some sort of success.

By his own admission he did best when he was told what to do. Projects he initiated failed. He did not have the capacity to think about what he was doing with any depth. His inability to speak coherently reflected his inability *to think*. He would obviously string together contradictory ideas within a single statement. He was literally a *thoughtless* man.

But he could carry out the tasks he was given as long as he operated within an established framework. He did not excel at his job in the same way a cog in a machine does not excel at being a cog. It simply performs as a cog should. He eventually rose to a low level management position and there he would stay for the rest of his career.

He worked primarily in transportation planning. In time he became adept at moving people from one place to another in the most efficient manner. To him the destination was irrelevant. Initially he was working on the forced emigration of Jews out of Germany. But within a few years, on orders from his superiors, the process was adjusted to transport Jews to death camps. And that is how Adolf Eichmann became The Man In the Glass Booth on trial for his life in Jerusalem in April 1961.

Political theorist Hannah Arendt traveled to Israel and covered the trial in a series of articles for *The New Yorker* magazine which evolved into her book *Eichmann in Jerusalem* published in 1963.

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Eichmann was portrayed in the press - and perceived by most people - as an evil, sadistic, Nazi mastermind finally brought to justice. Arendt saw someone ultimately more horrifying than that.

She originated the phrase "the banality of evil" to describe the phenomenon of Eichmann. She raised the idea that evil is a function of *thoughtlessness*, a tendency of ordinary people to conform to mass opinion and obey authority without thinking about the consequences of their actions. The world wanted a monster. And she gave them one. But not the monster they wanted. And for that she and her book have been vilified for over 50 years. The monster Arendt saw on trial in the glass booth was not a rare species of human. The horror of what Arendt discovered was that the world might be

filled

with Eichmanns. And social psychology experiments conducted by Yale University psychologist Stanley Milgram in 1961 proved it was the

non

-Eichmanns of this world who are in the minority.

The Milgram experiment on obedience to authority figures measured the willingness of subjects to obey instructions to perform acts that conflicted with their personal conscience. The 40 men who participated in the Milgram experiment were from 20 to 50 years old, with differing educational and professional backgrounds.

The experimenter outlined the procedure. The participant was the "teacher" who delivered an electric shock to the "learner" who was in a different room, each time an incorrect answer was given.

Before starting the experiment, the "learner" informed the experimenter and the "teacher" he had a heart condition. The experimenter assured the "learner" the shocks might be painful but were not dangerous. The participant believed that he was delivering real shocks to the "learner" but the "learner" was actually a confederate in the experiment and pretended to be shocked.

Milgram's "shock generator" started at 30 volts and increased in 15-volt increments up to 450 volts. The switches were labeled "Slight Shock," "Moderate Shock" and "Danger: Severe Shock." The final two switches were ominously labeled "XXX."

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As the experiment progressed, the participant would hear the learner pleading to stop, complaining about his heart. At the 300-volt level the “learner” banged on the wall and begged to be released. Beyond this point, the “learner” became completely silent and didn’t answer further questions. The experimenter instructed the participant to treat this silence as an incorrect response and deliver another shock.

If the “teacher” balked, the experimenter issued these statements:

Please continue.

The experiment requires that you continue.

It is absolutely essential that you continue.

You have no other choice, you must go on.

Before the experiment, Milgram polled forty psychiatrists who predicted that when the “learner” demanded to be released, most subjects would stop the experiment. They predicted that by the 300-volt shock, when the victim became silent, only 3.73 percent of the subjects would continue, and they believed that only *one-tenth of one percent* of the subjects would administer the highest shocks on the board.

In reality, 65% of the participants in Milgram’s study delivered the maximum shocks. *All* the participants continued to 300 volts. The conclusion is undeniable: ordinary people will likely follow orders given by an authority figure, even to the extent of killing an innocent human being.

In Milgram’s experiment, the authority figure was a man in a lab coat. That was the only condition required to make a regular guy off the street torture and kill a stranger in the next

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room.

In Eichmann's time the authority figures were the people who ruled German society. The cops, lawyers, judges, politicians, and Nazi officials compelled a *nation* to take part in genocide. This is not to excuse or exonerate Adolf Eichmann. This is to

explain

Adolf Eichmann. And to explain - us.

The bitter controversy that erupted with the publication of *Eichmann in Jerusalem* rages to this day. And the damning conclusions derived from the Milgram experiment have been glossed over by attacking the ethics behind the experiment itself. The inconvenient truth is that Eichmann was not an anomaly. He was a typical unthinking human being. And Milgram proved most people, the

majority

of people, can easily become an Eichmann. The consensus is that it's best not to think about that at all. Better to imagine the singular monster on trial in the glass booth than to realize his numbers are legion.

I wrote all this because the drones are still flying. The bombs are still falling. The United States of America is still waging war in Iraq and wherever else the rulers of America have casually determined there are enemies to The American Way of Life.

We *know* the names of the corporations, the CEO's, the politicians, and the presidents who were - and are - the cogs spinning within the American Death Machine. Adolf Eichmann was correct in describing himself as only one cog in the machine. But as Arendt wrote, "*... all the cogs in the machinery, no matter how insignificant, are in court forthwith transformed back into perpetrators, that is to say, into human beings.*"

The day may come when the cogs of the American Death Machine are brought into a courtroom and transformed back into human beings. It is imperative for this to happen. Because if it does not come to pass ... we shall continue to be ruled by - and ourselves become - monsters. It doesn't end well.

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Hannah Arendt closes Eichmann in Jerusalem addressing him directly, "*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. This is the reason, and the only reason, you must hang.*"

Happy Halloween,