

The Humanness of Cruelty
Alfred Adler, Viktor Frankl and the Psychology of Genocide

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INTRODUCTION

Viktor Frankl and Alfred Adler were renowned theorists of the human condition. Both were protégés of Sigmund Freud and both proposed nuanced explanations of human behavior. Although their work is grounded in humanistic psychology (primarily focusing on human potential), Adler and Frankl also explain the human capability for cruelty. As a result, their theories should help qualify the behavior of Reserve Police Battalion 101, a Hamburg police unit of average citizens that slaughtered 38,000 human beings in Nazi occupied Poland. Although historian Christopher Browning's *Ordinary Men*¹ furthers the understanding of what led these men to kill, few scholars studying the psychology of cruelty have given explicit credence to Adler or Frankl.

Adler's "will to power" and the resulting social feeling are foundational to modern psychology. Although his work has been substantially modernized, particularly by behavioral and evolutionary psychology, the application of his ideas to Browning's case study demonstrates his foundational importance to perpetrator studies. Nevertheless, the existing interpretations of perpetrator behavior, which focus on the Adlerian premise of situational and psychobiological factors, are not exhaustive explanations for what turned ordinary men into mass murderers. Most importantly, the Adlerian lens does not account for individual responsibility. Thus, the study of RPB 101 — and indeed human behavior as a whole — benefits from a careful consideration of the interplay between Adler's Individual Psychology and Frankl's *logotherapy*.

An interpretation of RPB 101 that defines the men's behavior as a result of Freudian drives and Adlerian instincts deprives them of the fact that they were responsible for their actions. As Browning makes clear at the end of his work, in the end "human responsibility is

¹ Christopher R. Browning, *Ordinary Men: Reserve Police Battalion 101 and the Final Solution in Poland* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1992).

ultimately an individual matter.”² As Frankl makes clear, condemnation lies in the human dimension. Despite psychobiological and environmental influences, the men of RPB 101 had an ability to act humanely, not the least because they were given a choice of whether or not to shoot. For Frankl, there is always freedom to respond to life’s conditions. This is what it means to be a human being. In addition to Adler’s theory, a clear antecedent to social and behavioral psychology, Frankl’s *logotherapy* maintains the importance of individual responsibility. In short, Frankl’s “will to meaning” must be considered lest deterministic views of psychobiological and environmental factors overshadow the human capability and justification for mass murder.

Although Frankl and Adler’s theories are at times antiquated — Adler was born in 1870 and Frankl in 1905 — they are not only important predecessors to modern psychology but also retain striking insight into humanity’s capability for destruction. While cognitive scientists, evolutionary and behavioral psychologists have made great strides in the explanation of mass murder, as a strictly scientific discipline these fields often leave out a more human element. To this extent, Adler’s Individual Psychology and particularly Frankl’s *logotherapy* illumine those aspects of the human condition that have not yet been confirmed in a laboratory.

There are few better or more disturbing examples of human cruelty than the open-air shootings of almost two million human beings* during the Second World War. Unlike the industrialized killing methods used in the Nazi death camps, the open-air shootings were crude and highly personal — in most cases a point blank shot to the nape of the neck was the preferred method. In other words, this was an extremely active style of mass murder.

Psychological distancing was impossible. While some scholars have searched in vain for an

² Ibid, 188.

* Of course, the majority of these victims were Jewish. However, classifying “Jews” as separate from other victims creates a tendentious taxonomy. For this study, what is important is that we are discussing human beings.

essential German caricature to explain such crimes,^{*} the overwhelming conclusion concerning the mobile killing units (*Einsatzgruppen*) is that myriad factors — including (but not limited to) psychological causes, fanatical ideology, shame culture, obedience to authority and personal ambition — led to genocide. How these execution squads carried out their task has been well documented, but there remains much debate when it comes to the cause for their behavior.

Ordinary Men forces the reader to confront the reality that rational, educated, socially interested men engaged in the close-contact murder of some 38,000 human beings and the deportation of an additional 42,000. While supporting material is necessary, the emphasis on Browning's case study can be explained for a couple of reasons. First, while the officially sanctioned *Einsatzgruppen* were recruited from the SS and were readily prepared for the Nazis' "war of destruction," the men of RPB 101 had no such training. As Browning's book title suggests, by and large these men were average citizens. Second, myopic and reductionist explanations of German uniqueness only results in a prejudiced desire to distance *us* from *them*. Browning's work convincingly rejects the myth of evil, dismissing sweeping clichés and regressive notions of Nazi caricatures that serve more to justify our "goodness" than to understand their "evil."

Much of Browning's thesis relies on supporting evidence within behavioral psychology, most notably Stanley Milgram's *Obedience to Authority*³ and Philip Zimbardo's *Stanford Prison*⁴ experiments. While these studies are invaluable for understanding the psychology of cruelty, the data alone does not suffice. In order to avoid reducing RPB 101's behavior to psychobiological and environmental factors, a deeper theory about what lies at

^{*} Daniel Goldhagen's *Hitler's Willing Executioners* is better known for the resulting controversy than its historical importance or contribution to the field of Holocaust studies.

³ Stanley Milgram, *Obedience to Authority: An Experimental View* (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1974).

⁴ Craig Haney, Curtis Banks and Philip Zimbardo, "Interpersonal Dynamics in a Simulated Prison," *International Journal of Criminology and Penology* 1 (1973), 69-97.

the core of the human condition remains necessary. Not surprisingly, Adler and Frankl's theories reveal a nuanced explanation for how ordinary people can engage in genocide.

There is, however, a necessary proviso: to explain is not to excuse and to understand is not to forgive. As Browning makes clear, "not trying to understand the perpetrators in human terms would make impossible not only this study but any history of Holocaust perpetrators that sought to go beyond one-dimensional caricature."⁵ If we hope to better understand how and why human beings are capable of genocide, even the extreme example of RPB 101 must be seen as a representation of rather than a deviation from the human condition. As Adler states, "the hardest thing for human beings to do is to know themselves and to change themselves."⁶ Without knowing what we are capable of, it is exceedingly difficult to improve and understand what we are like.

Thus, the question "how did the men of RPB 101 become mass murderers?" becomes "What about the human condition allows for mass murder?" With a comprehensive understanding of Adler's focus on the inferiority complex and the social feeling, and Frankl's notion of the "freedom of will" and the "will to meaning," an informed study of Browning's research furthers the understanding of RPB 101's behavior and the human condition as a whole.

⁵ Browning, *Ordinary Men*, xx.

⁶ Alfred Adler, *Understanding Human Nature* (London: George Allen & Unwin LTD, 1962), 11.