Ethics and Extermination: Reflections on Nazi Genocide


This is a marvellous book that can be read with profit by anyone interested in the Nazi period and the ethical and philosophical issues it throws up. It builds on work done in the author's book Death and Deliverance: 'Euthanasia' in Germany c 1900-1945. The first confidence-inspiring feature is the evident firm foundation of detailed historical research of the highest quality. Yet the style is direct, gripping and unevasive in its conclusions.

The book accomplishes various tasks broadly reflecting its three parts. The first paints the intellectual and social background of a Germany that could give rise to the Nazi genocide in the camps, psychiatric hospitals and in occupied lands especially in the East, showing how the Nazis found fertile soil for their views and aims, especially amongst those professionals and members of the academic establishment who might have been expected to subject Nazism to rational scrutiny: doctors, psychiatrists, clerics, historians and economists. Repeatedly the depth of their complicity emerges all too clearly. They not only stamped up rationales for decisions or actions after the event but also, frequently, had already, prior to their implementation, formulated spurious justifications from which the Nazis could pick and choose - and which they could use - at will.

The final part of the book concerns the way in which the history of the Holocaust has been handled. It contains some tart comments on the way in which some fellow historians have lost sight of the fundamental horror of the events in methodological infighting, while others seem determined to establish the unique nature of the events in a way that distorts their significance and clouds rational discussion at the same time as neglecting other examples of heinous brutality. In fact the Nazi analogy gets applied to things it should not (for example the philosopher Peter Singer's work on ethics), and is not applied to things it should be applied to (eugenic engineering in communist China). Not everyone is subject to such criticism and it should be emphasised that Burleigh is quick to give credit for work that retains perspective and basic good sense, credit that is given weight by the breadth and care of his reading.

The second part of the book is perhaps the one most immediately relevant to the concerns of the readers of this journal. The central question it asks is whether the Nazi genocide has anything special to teach us about what our attitude should be to the ethics and practicalities of euthanasia. Burleigh's conclusion is that it does not. On the contrary such an association is not only largely irrelevant, its emotive nature makes clear thought more difficult. We do not need to refer to the Nazi genocide to know that "human beings are capable of behaving murderously" (page 143). The association of the Nazi exterminations of those considered mentally and physically defective ("life unworthy of life") on spurious racial and expedient economic grounds with modern discussions of voluntary euthanasia which is motivated by a belief in personal autonomy and the relief of suffering, has next to nothing to teach us. Indeed to call what the Nazis did "euthanasia" is simply to acquire it in their euphemism for what was in fact murder. There is no slippery slope here from a benign desire to respect the rights of individuals and relieve suffering, from euthanasia to unacceptable killing; rather it was simply a move from murder to mass murder. The fact is that the Nazis found it easy to implement the elimination of undesirables on a large scale because such practices were already in operation and acceptable to many. The brutal contrast between the Nazis' motivations and those of modern proponents of euthanasia is movingly brought out by considering the case of Anthony Bland, whose life-support system was turned off following legal deliberations initiated by the love of his parents for their son.

Personally I found one of the most gripping essays was chapter three, See you in Siberia: the German-Soviet war and other tragedies. This chapter exemplifies the strengths of the book. Burleigh never loses sight of the particular by burying it under a dubi- ous gloss of "historical explanation". The chapter is no mere description of military manoeuvring. It starkly portrays the rigours of the life of soldiers on the Eastern Front and the way the subject people were used mercilessly and treated as mere things in a vast, utilitarian accounting game. It also documents the true underlying aims of Nazi expansion eastward; partly this amounted to the bogus "reclaiming" of lands lost to the German people, partly to the use of the Eastern lands as a huge subtracted wasteland for the production of raw materials to supply the post-war manufacturing industry in Germany.

While I acknowledge that there is much written on these matters, I feel bound to encourage people at least as much as this book.

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