Understanding the holocaust

The uniqueness debate

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Many people are so struck by the distinctive enormity of what the Nazis, their supporters and their collaborators did to the Jews that they describe the Holocaust as unique: the systematic attempt to eradicate Jewry and its culture, there, then, was not just qualitatively different from other genocides but is also the limiting case of human understanding. Others insist that, however ghastly, the Holocaust was not historically unique as an instance of genocide, nor necessarily aimed with greater ferocity or ideological purpose at the Jews than at the Roma, gays, and others: their concern is to draw comparisons between and among all these precisely in order better to understand the Holocaust. So, on the side of uniqueness: the Holocaust was not (just) another historical event: it is beyond anything intelligible as human history. To deny this, the argument goes, is to deny either or both the distinctiveness of the Jewish experience and its destruction of the certainties – rational, moral, theological – on which their opponents' inadequate understanding is based.[1] In reply: the insistence on the uniqueness of the Holocaust is a counsel of despair, not least about the nature of human beings and our capacity to make the world a better place. The Holocaust is indelibly part of human history: it consisted in human actions, and so is open to understanding, however limited, complex and difficult.

Even such a cursory characterization of the debate shows why it has a significance beyond simply historical study of the Holocaust, important though that is: the Holocaust marks something definitive about the twentieth century, even if quite what that consists in remains contested. More immediately, the uniqueness debate raises the political issue of what is to be done in a Europe which is witnessing a resurgence of fascism, increasing persecution of the Roma, ethno-religious 'cleansing' and, relatedly of course, denials of the Holocaust itself.[2] Already we see something – if only embryonically – of a set of alignments: optimism about human beings versus a degree of pessimism; reason versus 'our reason'; understanding versus hubris; profane versus sacred; the Enlightenment versus postmodernism. The scenario is politically and culturally familiar. So, as I shall argue, is the appropriate response to the mystifications permitted or encouraged by a flight from reason: attention to, and analysis and interpretation of, what was done. Hence my later focus on the Nazis' intentions.

First, though, I need to discuss something of the terms and implications of 'the uniqueness debate' in order to show how it obscures the historical, political and moral issues the Holocaust raises, while yet signalling genuine concerns: in short, the problems of imputing uniqueness to the Holocaust and the position-staking to which it has led is not only mystificatory but also actively deflects consideration of the extent to which what the Nazis did was in fact unprecedented. My treatment of these issues, especially that of the nature of the Nazis' intentions, will inevitably be briefer than they merit: but within the confines of a single article, that is unavoidable if I am to show something of the nature of their *connection* and its political lessons.

One final introductory point: my use of the term 'Holocaust' is not to be taken to imply any particular view of the debate; nor to exclude by fiat either the terms 'Shoah' or 'Porrajmos'.[3] The question of the interrelationship or otherwise of these three terms is itself an aspect of the larger debate about the alleged uniqueness of what I would still rather call the 'Holocaust', despite that term's implications of (voluntary) sacrifice. For, grossly inapposite though that implica-

tion is, 'Holocaust' remains the term most widely used; and, moreover, one that does not of itself describe the actions concerned as necessarily pertaining in any exclusive manner to any particular group.[4]

Uniqueness and understanding

Sometimes the claim of uniqueness is made on broadly empirical grounds: the numbers killed; the technology of the death camps and their support structures; or the fact that all this was directed by an entire state apparatus. More commonly, and more interestingly, it is made on conceptual grounds: the nature of the perpetrators – 'civilized Europeans'; their 'uniquely evil' intentions; or the Holocaust's theological, metaphysical or spiritual character.[5] The latter sorts of ground often subsume elements of the former: but then the relevance of empirical considerations becomes a matter of their significance and not simply of their content.

The empirical case for uniqueness is weak, not least in terms of historical accuracy. It is clear that other groups of people have suffered even greater numerical losses in other genocides, whether absolutely or proportionately, than did European Jewry or Roma during the Holocaust, *even though* 'by the time the war was over, almost two out of every three Jews in Europe (and one out of three worldwide) had died in the concentration and death camps, in the ghettoes, or at the hands of mobile killing squads, the *Einsatzgruppen*'[6] and 'somewhere between 20 and 50 percent of the entire population of European Gypsies was killed by the Nazis'.[7] Examples include the losses of northern and western Africans during the long years of the slave trade;[8] Ottoman Armenians at the hands of the Turkish state earlier this century;[9] and native Americans at the hands of first European and then American colonists.[10] In terms of technology, the Nazis' comparative sophistication and routinized efficiency – gruesome though it was – is nevertheless matched both absolutely and comparatively:

> between April and July 1994, as many as 850,000 Tutsi people were slaughtered in Rwanda, primarily with handguns and machetes. This is a rate of about 10,000 per day, a figure equal to the maximum ever achieved during a single 24-hour period at Auschwitz … [and] if speed is to be a criterion, no one has come close to matching the achievements of the United States in killing at least 100,000 people in a matter of hours with the firebombing of Tokyo and the subsequent vaporizing, in virtually a single nuclear instant, of more than 200,000 innocent Japanese civilians in Hiroshima and Nagasaki.[11]

At least the former arguably constitutes routinization (within technological constraints) while the latter is clearly technologically sophisticated killing; and examples unhappily abound of the two combined (the Khmer Rouge in Cambodia, for example).

The conceptual case, however, is altogether more compelling. The Holocaust, it is variously claimed, is a phenomenon which remains 'beyond history', and thus beyond human understanding; a variety of horror quite radically different even from other genocides, overturning those very human faculties by means of which we understand and learn. After Auschwitz there is no God; after Mauthausen there is no morality; after Treblinka there is no sense. It is not just that the Holocaust is beyond our collective imagination, but that it remains beyond our collective understanding. As with the God of Judaism, Christianity and Islam, we know only that (it happened), and not what (it was).

This is a powerful argument. For in order to understand something we have to compare it with something else that we already understand. But in the case of the Holocaust, surely, every comparison appears to fail on account of the sheer depths of evil in which it consisted: whether because the Nazis acted so utterly irrationally, pursuing the genocide of the Jews even against their own war aims; or because the 'purely instrumental' rationality they employed in pursuit of their ends exposed the pretensions of our Enlightenment faith in reason; or because the perpetrators' evil is beyond human thought and language. Thus it is claimed that, whatever the extent to which we might come to understand *how* the Nazis and their allies did what they did (the historical, economic, political, religious antecedents and the details of the mechanisms brought to bear to achieve their ends), the real question remains unanswered – *how could* they have done what they did? The question resists all attempts to dissolve or circumvent it: the Holocaust, in its uniqueness, must remain beyond our understanding.

On the other side, however, the argument seems no less convincing. For if the Holocaust were indeed unique, so that we could not understand it, two things follow. First, we could not learn from it and try thereby to prevent anything like it recurring; and it takes a remarkable optimism to be sure that nothing like it can ever happen again, an optimism curiously at odds with the pessimism about the nature of human beings associated with the uniqueness thesis. Second, we cannot do justice to the past, to the people who suffered those horrors: for it is a prerequisite of doing someone justice that one understand what they did and what was done and what happened to them.

The question of uniqueness, then, is central to thinking about what it might be to understand the Holocaust: no wonder that it should provoke so much heat. Heat, certainly; but little light. Both parties, it seems to me, are saying *something* important, even if, mutually, they do not always acknowledge the fact. If the Holocaust is not unique, then with what shall we compare it and how shall we avoid diminishing its radical horror? But if it is unique, then how can we understand and respond to it? I shall try to get clearer about what is involved here by examining the uniqueness claim in more detail.

What is 'unique'?

In an obvious sense, to describe a historical phenomenon as unique is trivial: *every* individual thing in the world is unique – an individual thing which was not unique would not be *individual*. In this sense it is a truism that every historical action, event or phenomenon is unique, and that 'each configuration of historical, political, military, societal, and psychological processes that define a given genocidal process is inherently unique':[12] but of course that truism is not at all what those who insist on the uniqueness of the Holocaust mean to assert. They either deny that there is *a class of thing* – even genocide – to which the Holocaust may be said to belong, or insist that the Holocaust is alone of its kind (even if these two claims are generally not distinguished).[13] Here is a typical statement:

> [Y]et the peculiar circumstances of the Holocaust do make it unique. Never has the extermination of an entire people, coupled with the technology of industrialisation … been attempted so systematically as an end in itself.… Never has the annihilation of a race been so central to an ideology.[14]

Let me present the strength of this case by discussing a powerful repudiation – if not a refutation – of it. In a long and effective passage where he substitutes 'Jews' for 'native peoples' to draw attention to the similarities between what was done to each, David Stannard writes that 'all of this was justified by the common and often expressed belief of the murderers – including the wisest and holiest men in the Spanish realm – that the Jews were semi-human beasts created by God to be the slaves of Christians; that it was the divine right of Christians to hunt Jews down as animals of the forest for no other purpose than to feed their carcasses to dogs',[15] pointing out that, furthermore, 'the dehumanizing language used by the Nazis to describe their victims … [was] … *derivative* of expressed Euro-American attitudes toward Native Americans'.[16] But it is not to diminish from either the suffering of Native Americans or the murderous actions of their killers to point out that, while the Nazis and their collaborators and sympathizers did treat Jews – and others – like this and did use such language as 'justificatory' propaganda, that is not *all* they did or said. Their treatment of Jews and Roma, and in some cases of Slavs, was predicated not just on their view of these peoples as vermin, weeds, and so on, but also on their view of their being *that* particular vermin, *those* specific weeds. While the historical record appears to indicate that ridding *the world* of Jews and Roma was at least arguably part of the Nazi agenda, that was not the case in respect of the American settlers' agenda with regard to Native Peoples or the Turkish genocide against the Armenians of the Ottoman.[17] A difference remains in respect of the standard examples encountered in the literature: even if not, of course, in respect of other, less systematic, instances of being accused of living, and therefore murdered on account of *who you are*, and being murdered on account of *what you or your community does, believes or says.*

But this difference (for which I shall argue below) is nonetheless not best marked by the term 'unique'.[18] First, questions of the uniqueness or otherwise of something are a species of inquiry about what category, if any, it comes into. Even if by denial, uniqueness is a comparative notion: if something is unique, then it cannot properly be compared with anything else, and thus cannot be categorized or classified, along with others, as an example of anything (more general, more abstract). Second, the question of the category to which something belongs concerns the subject as a whole: to what sort of whole do its various attributes add up, and how does that whole compare with other wholes? Third, classification is always for some purpose: it is never disinterestedly descriptive. So, for example, to categorize whales as mammals is not to describe individual whales (other than by implication) but to make a claim about how to *do* something – in this case, how to fit whales into our systematic conception of the animal world.

The point is that how to classify anything depends on the purpose in question: what is picked out as constituting the whole depends on what it is picked out for. Whales are mammals; they are also, and no less, big animals. In the case of whales, however, the purpose of classification is agreed. The debate about the Holocaust's alleged uniqueness, however, concerns precisely the *purposes* of classifying it thus

or otherwise; and it is about those purposes that the disagreements arise. Those who insist that the Holocaust is unique do so because they want to insist that it was significantly *unlike anything that had gone before*: it entered into human history, not as yet another historical phenomenon, but as an unknown visitor, so to speak. That is why it is quite unlike anything else (note the similarity with divine intervention), not even any other genocide.

Furthermore, the argument must run, so much a singular phenomenon was it that nothing like it can happen again – otherwise it would be simply *so far unique* and thus not actually unique at all. (A 'unique' event were it replicated would turn out not to have been unique after all.) Some commentators do not shy away from this conclusion, pointing, variously, to Israel, the radically different nature of post-Holocaust European Jewry or the changes that either or both have engendered in the very nature of Jewishness. Others simply miss the logical point.

The vantage points from which the parties to the dispute look are different ones. Their disagreement is not about what they see, what they pick out, but in what they are doing it for. What is powerful on both sides of the debate arises out of the importance of the different purposes concerned: broadly, to pay proper respect and to do justice to those to whom things were done; and to understand what was done so as to guard against repetition. That is of course a very crude contrast; but it is perhaps a start. Nor can either purpose be pursued without attending to elements of what is required by pursuit of the other.

The concern of the proponents of the uniqueness thesis is with the Jewish experience: indeed, it often serves as a statement of the *essentially* Jewish nature of the Holocaust and of its significance. But *of course* the Jewish experience of the Holocaust is unique, just as is everyone's experience – whether individually or as culture – of what happens to them. And *of course* that fact – the uniqueness of the Jewish experience of the Holocaust – is critically important. But it is not uniquely so. The unique experience of the Roma, gays, Slavs and others in respect of the Holocaust, and of others in respect of other genocides, is no less critically important – even if, of course and understandably, it might be less important to Jews than are their own experiences, just as those of the Jews might, no less understandably, be less important to other groups and cultures than their own. None of this detracts in the slightest from the importance of *any* of these experiences. The ascription of importance here is a universal and not a local matter – as indeed is recognized by those, like myself, who would insist that what was done to the Jews is of universal importance and significance, as is what was done to the Roma and to others in that and other genocides. Thus David Stannard, for example, a fierce opponent of the uniqueness thesis, easily acknowledges that the Jewish experience of the Holocaust was unique – no less than was that of the Armenians in the Armenian genocide.

But this is a trivial response and diverts our attention from the specificities concerned.

What I propose, then, is that we understand the Holocaust as *unprecedented*. For trying to understand the Holocaust and doing justice to its victims are not identical undertakings, however closely they may be connected: we need not abandon the former to accomplish the latter. Uniqueness is ill-suited to the purposes of those who claim, variously, that the numbers involved, the technology employed and the intentions of the Nazis were such as to render the Holocaust quantitatively and/or qualitatively different from other *partly* comparable genocides – but not utterly incomprehensible. For those who do not think understanding impossible, the term 'unprecedented' – as Berel Lang among others has suggested – is more appropriate, since to say of an action or event that it is unprecedented is simply to say that nothing like it has been done or has happened before. So a particular famine might be unprecedented, not because there has never been anything like it, but because there has been no famine on such a scale, or caused in that particular way: and therefore this is a famine the like of which has not been seen – although something like it has been. The contrast with 'unique' is clear: 'unprecedented' allows us to focus on material evidence rather than getting sidetracked by (quasi-) metaphysical issues. To say the Holocaust was unprecedented preserves everything that proponents of the uniqueness thesis ought to wish to insist upon, with (in some cases) that one exception: that it *cannot* happen again. But the exception is welcome. Our task is to ensure that the Holocaust – unprecedented as it was – does not itself come to serve as precedent for other atrocities: 'events happen,' as Yehuda Bauer once put it, 'because they are possible. If they were possible once, they are possible again. In that sense the Holocaust is not unique, but a warning for the future.'[19]

Unprecedented intentions

What was visited upon the Jews and the Roma of Europe, I suggest, was unprecedented *in terms of the nature of the Nazis' intentions*: no attempts had previously been made to eradicate Jews and Roma across a continent; no other group of human beings – not even the Armenians of the Ottoman Empire, the indigenous people of North America, the Slavs and the gays of Nazi-occupied Europe – faced extermination simply on account of being *who* (rather than *what*) they were. The Holocaust was not unprecedented in terms of the comparative efficiency, industrialization and so on of the onslaught of the Nazis and their collaborators and sympathizers: banal or radical, the evil done has its parallels in Turkey, the Congo, Cambodia, Bosnia and elsewhere in the twentieth century, let alone earlier. It has its parallels in the individual Turkish doctor who officiates at a session of torture; the British soldier out to 'kill the Fenian bastards'; the American pornographer who mutilates and tortures for profit … and so on.

But were the Nazis' intentions in fact unprecedented? Bauer claims that the Nazis' intention was to wipe out every single Jew on earth, something so radical that 'to date this has happened once, to the Jews under Nazism'.[20] Similarly, Steven Katz argues that 'the Nazi racial imperative [was] that *all* Jews must die, and that they must die here and now'.[21] Certainly, this would appear to differentiate the Nazis' intentions from those of the Turks with regard to the Armenians, as the latter 'were motivated by a variant of nationalist ideology … and the methods of destruction included massacre, forced deportation, and starvation', while 'the perpetrators of the Holocaust were motivated by racism and antisemitism and ideologies of global scope … and the death camp was the characteristic method of destruction'.[22] Nor were the perpetrators of the slave trade driven by the same motive as the Nazis;[23] nor was Stalin in the Ukraine. On the other hand, it is clear from David Stannard's work that 'the historical record [also] reveals many pre-twentieth-century examples of unambiguous official calls by European or white American political leaders for the total annihilation of any number of individual Native American peoples'.[24] And yet: there still seems to me to be a difference here, and one that Stannard does not recognize. It is this: that the calls 'to Destroy *all* these Northern Indians',[25] or to wage war 'until the Indian race becomes extinct',[26] although of course similar in form to what the Nazis said and wrote regarding Jews and Roma, were not motivated in quite the same way. To put it bluntly: calls to wipe out Jews and Roma were made on account of the Jews being Jews and the Roma being Roma,[27] while those to wipe out the North American Indians, or the Cambodian intelligentsia, were made on account of their specific positions (economic, political) vis-à-vis the perpetrators. Katz and Melson are both surely right to differentiate nationalist from racist policies, and attacks on the Armenian community in a particular region from attacks on Jewry as such, even if the conclusions that Katz (but not Melson) draws are mistaken.[28]

Furthermore, it seems to me far more plausible to suppose that the Nazis' accusations of Bolshevism, sexual degeneration and threat, and so on, against the

Jews were made largely on account of their being Jews, rather than occasioning the Nazis' hatred of them; accusations they did not bother to make regarding the Roma or others. The Nazis' hatred of the Jews as being Bolsheviks, capitalists, 'racially' degenerate and so on arose out of traditional (central) European anti-Semitism, being the culmination of accusations which have changed with changing cultural and political concerns: from the murder of Christ to the blood-sacrifice of gentile babies to Bolshevism. An account which understands Jews as first and foremost place-holders in the Nazis' anathema for internationalists, Bolsheviks, and so on, underestimates the anti-Semitic traditions of Christendom. The evidence (for instance) of Hitler's *Mein Kampf*, moreover, is that the Nazis' nationalism grew out of the racism imbibed from a long line of anti-Semitism from Luther to Gobineau and Chamberlain.[29]

David Stannard argues that the Nazis' intentions were not to exterminate all Jews (he confines his argument to the Jewish Holocaust). His starting-point is Katz's counter-claim, epitomizing the uniqueness thesis, 'that never before has a state set out, as a matter of intentional principle and actualized policy, to annihilate physically every man, woman, and child belonging to a specific people'.[30] Agreeing with Christopher Browning's contention that, because there are few written records and those that there are are indecisive, 'the decision-making process at the centre must be reconstructed by the historian',[31] Stannard points out that the minutes of the infamous Wannsee Protocol of 20 January 1942 record that those Jews who do not die of 'natural' causes 'have to be treated accordingly',[32] so that 'careful historians … have begun by analyzing the phrase in its larger context'.[33] So far, so good. Let us consider his central arguments in more detail, however.

(1) The Protocol

> clearly suggests that *if* those countries ['in the German influence of Europe'[34] (to quote an earlier letter, which had been drafted by Eichmann and signed by Hermann Göring, authorizing the development of plans for a Final Solution)] were to fall under German domination Heydrich wished to include those Jews as well in the Final Solution. However, it is an enormous and unjustified leap to take the *potential* inclusion of other *European* Jews in Heydrich's report to the furthest extreme possible and claim, as Yehuda Bauer has, that *therefore* the Nazis regarded 'the so-called "Jewish Problem" [as] not a German, or ultimately even European issue, but a global, universal, even cosmic problem of the greatest magnitude'.[35]

And that is because, (2)

> there is no documentary evidence to suggest that any plan to kill even most of the Jews in Nazi-controlled Europe existed prior to the year 1941.… Rather, the decision to exterminate the Jews of Europe emerged in the midst of the war because of specific mundane and intra-European historical circumstances.[36]

And, (3)

> this is demonstrable by a large and disparate body of evidence, but one particularly compelling series of incidents irrefutably makes the point. It has long been known that representatives from the highest level of Nazi leadership … offered in 1944 – that is, two years following the initial implementation of the Final Solution and a year before the war ended – to *release* from Nazi captivity 1 million Jews.… This was but one of several attempts … to receive ransom in exchange for the freedom of incarcerated Jews.[37]

Furthermore, (4)

> in November 1944, without any major ransom agreements worked out and six months prior to the end of the war in Europe, the *Reichsführer* called a halt to the Jewish exterminations … since 'for practical purposes the Jewish question had been solved' – although at least one-third of Europe's Jews, and two-thirds of the world's Jewish population, remained alive.[38]

Thus (5) Bauer's contention that this does not constitute contradictory behaviour for a group bent on the utter destruction of world Jewry because the Nazis expected to win the war and thus finally 'solve' the 'Jewish question' is 'a very imaginative attempt on Bauer's part to wriggle free from an otherwise unsolvable factual and logical dilemma'.[39] On the basis of (1) to (5), Stannard concludes that

> in short, the supposed Nazi pseudo-religious mania for pursuing and murdering every Jew on earth, thus distinguishing Jews as the victims to end all victims who had ever lived, melted rapidly away (to the largely imaginary extent that it ever truly existed) once defeat was apparent and the possibility occurred to Nazi leaders that living Jews might be more valuable to them than dead ones.[40]

Let me make a few comments on each of (1) to (5). First, why is Bauer's and others' conclusion *in the context of other evidence*, such as the text of *Mein Kampf* and Nazi policies towards the Jews from 1933 onwards, 'an enormous and unjustified leap'? After all, the Protocol itself needs to be taken in its ideological context: the fact that it concerned directly

only Europe (since even in 1942, world dictatorship was practically infeasible) does not *prove* that the Nazis' intentions were not what Bauer takes them to be. Intentions, as Stannard himself notes, are not the sort of thing that can simply be read off from official documents. Second, that such an intention emerged from a specific set of political and ideological goals 'in the midst of war because of specific … circumstances' is hardly surprising: Bauer does not need to claim otherwise. Of course 'the Holocaust was an emergent rather than a firmly shaped and prefixed undertaking'; of course 'it evolved' – but that is not to show that it 'became a by-product of the dynamics of war and its consequences', as Dadrian, for example, argues.[41] Nor, to take Stannard's third and fourth points, do attempted ransom deals *obviously* show that it was not the Nazis' intentions to exterminate Jewry. Temporary expedients, and/or a worry on the part of some about the consequences of what they had done should they be defeated in the war, might quite easily explain such attempts without diminishing the Nazis' intentions. Again, intentions are not the kind of thing that can be read off in this way. Finally, while it may be the case that Bauer's response to (3) and (4) is misconceived – it being perhaps more likely that most Nazis no longer expected in 1944 to win the war – the point is that he does not need to resort to such convolutions in the first place. The problem here is that Bauer appears to take far too simplistic a view of intentions, no less than does Stannard. The heat and dust of the debate obscure what is really at issue, so that proponents become caught up in disputes which miss the point, with the result that convolutions and *non sequiturs* abound on both sides, culminating in Stannard's apparent but entirely unwarranted assumption that even if it were the case that 'the possibility occurred to Nazi leaders that living Jews might be more valuable to them than dead ones' that does not in the least imply, let alone show, that it had not been their intention to annihilate them. The Nazis' intentions towards the Jews and the Roma, so far as we can reasonably draw conclusions about them, were unprecedented.

Stannard would deny that claim, I think, but in so doing he would continue to miss something, just as he does in his analysis of the uniqueness thesis itself. On the other hand, his opponents also miss something important about his thesis. And, to revisit my objections to 'uniqueness', this may well be on account of the misleading nature of the term. I have argued that Stannard is right to say that the uniqueness thesis is one which is brought to the details of the evidence rather than following from it (although he puts it somewhat more forcefully).[42] He is also right that 'denial of *other* historical genocides … *is inextricably interwoven with the very claim of uniqueness*' – but for the wrong reason. 'Uniqueness' cannot but imply the denial. 'Unprecedentedness', by contrast, carries no such logical implication, so that no such denial *need* be made at all, whatever the politics of particular commentators. Nor does it follow that because the thesis – in either 'unique' or in 'unprecedented' version – can be used to serve all sorts of political ends, not least the oppression of the Palestinian people by the Israeli state, it must be false.[43] On the other hand, neither should the Jews' determination to redefine their identity as protagonists and not victims – either of others or, indeed, of their own Jewishness – be allowed to justify, however much it may explain, recourse to the uniqueness claim. For what is, necessarily, unique about what the experience of the Holocaust has done to Jewish self-perception is quite another thing than what is unprecedented about the Holocaust itself. Perhaps it is because 'unique' and its implications are more easily misunderstood than 'unprecedented' that it has tended to set the terms of the debate, a debate more about the present and the future than about the past, about recognition and acknowledgement than about the historical details. But that is precisely why both sides would do well to stick to 'unprecedented'.[44]

The specificity of the Jewish Holocaust

What is immediately stunning about the Holocaust is the nature of the murderous intentions of the Nazis and their rigorously systematic pursuit of them: and the more so when one considers an element so far not mentioned, namely a specific feature of the nature of the Nazis' intentions. It is there that its crucial difference from other genocides lies. What is unprecedented about the Holocaust is the nature of the link between victim and perpetrator, and the Nazis' intentions regarding it.

I shall finish by offering a modest suggestion about that link. Some people, as we have seen, become victims of genocide on account of being in someone's way; others because of who they are, namely the specific way in which they are seen as not fully persons at all. Indeed, in some cases effort has to be expended on making such people appear not to be people, to deny their humanity prior to their murder; Primo Levi describes this element of Auschwitz particularly well. Now, sometimes, unhappily, such effort is either quite unnecessary or minimal: I have in mind the indigenous peoples of North America, as Stannard describes what was done to them. Sometimes, no less

unhappily, the effort required is considerable, and that is what the Nazis' policies and practices regarding Jews grimly exemplify. The point is that the Jews – unlike the Roma, the Armenians, the Native Americans, the Tutsi, the Aché and doubtless many others we don't even know about at all – were part of the very culture which was intent on their destruction. In short, what makes the Jewish Holocaust unprecedented is the extent to which it represents a culture's turning on and against itself.[45] The Jews were targeted because of who they were and in particular because of their foundational, constitutive and continuing role vis-à-vis European civilization. And that – to recall the role of anti-Semitism I adumbrated earlier – is not the same as the attempted genocide of a culture either not recognized as a culture at all or regarded as a *wholly* foreign one. The Nazis targeted Jewry because, while in many and constitutive ways *of* European culture, the Jews were also, largely as a result of their historical role as the perceived 'Other' against which Europe, and in particular Christianity, had identified itself, a presence foreign to the 'culture' they were attempting to establish as its 'true' instantiation.[46] Stannard is right that the general refusal to recognize the genocide of the Native Americans arises out of 'the deeply embedded Euro-American ideology of white supremacy', and the

> plainly racist 'all-of-them-look-alike' bias in the Euro-American tendency to lump the native peoples of North and South America into one or a handful of large and nondistinctive categories of 'Indians' (as often is done as well with Africans and Asians), while insisting on fine points of differentiation among European religious, cultural, ethnic, and national groups.[47]

But the Nazis' genocidal intentions regarding the Jews were against *acknowledgedly problematic* 'others', people who had to a large extent – but not of course entirely – to be *made* other, as their various efforts, from the propaganda films of the 1930s to the infamous Poznan speech, testify.[48] In this they differed not only from, say, those of the Turks regarding the Armenians, but also from their intentions regarding the Roma.[49] It was in many ways precisely on account of the Jewish role in European culture, and in particular in the foundation of the Christianity which has defined itself as against Judaism, that those intentions were formed, a point to which Rubinstein's and others' 'religious' analyses in part testify. Indeed, the Nazis' own contradictions about Christianity exemplify the point: on the one hand, in 'defenders of the faith' mode, they mouthed the traditional Christian accusation that the Jews had killed Christ; on the other, in quasi-Nietzschean anti-Christian mode, they blamed the Jews for bringing Christianity into being. However that may be, the perpetrators' intentions and actions were in that sense culturally auto-destructive: that is what is unprecedented about the Holocaust. The question: 'which is worse, "internal" or "external" genocide?' is of course another matter.

Understanding the Holocaust

The Holocaust remains unprecedented. And the *political* determination that the Holocaust be *rendered* unique, rather than that it be *kept* unique, remains crucial, however badly served it might be by the description of it as *phenomenologically* 'unique'. That does not, and must not, imply the slightest denigration of others' suffering or other perpetrators' responsibility for their genocidal actions. The entire debate is one about meaning and significance, all too often masquerading as one simply about the historical facts. If its proponents understood that more clearly we might the better concentrate our energies on that political determination, rather than wasting it entering quasi-empirical arguments that are quite needless. For if we can know only *how* the Holocaust occurred, and not *what* it was, then it will inevitably be consigned to some theoretical or (quasi-) mystical world which has no necessary purchase on the world we actually inhabit. If the Holocaust really cannot be compared with anything else at all, as the uniqueness thesis implies, in whichever of the two forms adumbrated earlier, then not only must it remain incomprehensible – a philosophical conundrum itself comparable only with the 'God' of the monotheistic religions – but, politically and more importantly, it cannot but continue both to circumscribe and even determine Jewish identity, whether as victim or as Zionist, and to exclude the rest of humanity from concerning itself with it and thus, in part, understanding it and its victims as integral to the story that is humanity. Ironically, that is just what some critics of the Enlightenment – however mistakenly – berate its universalism for having at least permitted to be done to European Jewry.

What is more, the question, 'How could they have done what they did?', however important, becomes a mystification if it leads only to a shrug of the shoulders, however awestruck: for it serves then to reify 'human nature' into a form which regards 'The Fall' not as inspired rationalization but as some sort of 'fact' of human nature. It mystifies what requires to be understood and dealt with: namely that, in given sets of material and ideological conditions, ordinary

people do these things, as countless examples testify. To insist that the Holocaust must be beyond our understanding, incapable of historical, political and moral analysis – the motivation of a significant proportion of the proponents of 'the uniqueness thesis' – is both to prevent ourselves from understanding the conditions that allowed the perpetrators to do what they did and to allow others to behave in similar ways and to avoid necessary moral decisions concerning blame and exculpation. But religion, in whatever form, serves as the opium of the people, leaving to others – such as God – what we need to understand and to do ourselves.[50]

Two objections might be raised here: the hubris evident in claiming to understand others' experience on their behalf; and the view, such as Primo Levi's, that 'to understand is almost to justify'.[51] Let me say a little about each in turn.

Of course we cannot know what it was like, we who were not there; nor, perhaps, even those who were there, for they were in some particular part of it, not in the Holocaust as such – the term designates, retrospectively, the whole of all those experiences and actions, not any one or one set of them. But even though we cannot know what it was like, is that to say that we cannot know what it was? For if it were indeed unique, in either sense, we could *do* nothing about the Holocaust, but merely respond to it. Is it really beyond us in that 'ultimate' sense? Notice that if it is outside history then so are those who were responsible for it, the perpetrators: and that puts them outside the orbit of moral and political responsibility as secularly understood. This is precisely the claim of those who argue that Nazism is at best a matter for God or that it represents so radical an evil that our moral and political vocabularies are wholly inadequate in its face. Notice, also, that it puts the victims of the Holocaust outside history too.

When Primo Levi says that ' "understanding" a proposal or human behaviour means to "contain" it, contain its author, put oneself in his place, identify with him'[52] – which is his reason for suggesting that perhaps we ought not to seek to understand – he is offering, and indeed assuming, an empathetic and not an intellectual conception of understanding. That is fine in its place. Of course 'no normal human being will ever be able to identify with Hitler, Himmler, Goebbels, Eichmann, and endless others.'[53] But empathy is irrelevant here. For the Nazis' 'words and deeds' are *not* 'non-human', even while they are 'really counter-human'. 'Human' is here being used ambiguously: at once evaluatively ('counter-human') and descriptively ('non-human'). Such ambiguity is dangerous: it all too easily leads to what is itself an understandable, but profoundly mistaken, position, namely that, as Levi urges, 'Nazi hatred … is a hate that is not in us; it is outside man, it is a poison fruit sprung from the deadly trunk of Fascism, but it is outside and beyond Fascism itself. We cannot understand it, but we can and must understand from where it springs, and we

must be on our guard.'[54] On the contrary: 'in us', in humankind, is exactly where it is. But to understand that or any of its instances is not to justify anyone's actions. This would only be the case if ascriptions of responsibility depended on ignorance, as the invested (quasi-) religious mystifications of some behaviourists and sociobiologists in fact suppose. Both suggest a view of what we are which, among other things, implausibly seeks to avoid having actively to decide which and whose 'understandable' actions are on those grounds excusable and which not.

Consider in this context Rosenbaum's discussion of normalization: '[N]ormalizing the Holocaust in this manner (so that it may be accurately integrated into the mainstream of recorded history) recognizes both its continuities and discontinuities with the past', he writes, clearly with approval. Only three pages later, however, he also says that 'when Holocaust denials are considered in tandem with another set of recent tendencies to "normalize," historicize, relativize, marginalize, and trivialize the reality of the Holocaust, the debate seriously intensifies'.[55] But that is the point: normalization is an extraordinarily ambiguous process, as for example post-1968 (or post-1989?) Czecho/Slovakia or today's South Africa attest. And the attribution of uniqueness to the Holocaust is precisely parallel: on the one hand it may (as is of course intended) mark it out as special; on the other, it is likely, on analysis of the term, to trivialize it. The Holocaust needs neither to be normalized nor not to be, but rather to be remembered for exactly what it was (normalized?) and continually acted upon (not normalized?). We Europeans and our North American descendants in particular have to remember what one element of our tradition and our civilization did to an integral part of itself. That, as I have already said, is not to make an invidious comparison with what we have done to other peoples: rather, it is simply to take note of the specific depths to which we so easily sank. For it will not do simply to blame the Nazis and say no more. As in many other cases, we already knew in the 1930s: we could have intervened; we didn't – anyone who doubts this should read Robert Brady's 1937 *The Spirit and Structure of German Fascism*.[56] Finally, as Richard Rorty eloquently puts it, 'it does not diminish the memory of the Holocaust to say that our response to it should not be a claim to have gained a new understanding of human nature or of human history, but rather a willingness to pick ourselves up and try again.'[57]

Notes

An early version of this paper was read to an annual Conference on the Holocaust, Jerusalem, January 1998, from discussion at which I benefited considerably. I am grateful to the British Council, Israel, for making it possible for me to do so. Versions were read also at a Graduate-Staff Seminar of the Department of Political Science at the Hebrew University, Jerusalem, members of which robustly rejected any exclusive 'ownership' of the Holocaust; at Philosophy Society meetings at the Universities of Brighton and Kent; at a meeting of the Manchester Holocaust Seminar; and more recently at a public discussion of 'Political Philosophy and the Holocaust' organized by the University of St Andrews' centre for Philosophy and Public Affairs, and at Dundee University. I thank everyone who took part and organized these occasions, as well as others who have commented on earlier drafts. Special thanks go to my colleague Tom Hickey, both for his insistence on the term 'unprecedented' and for his encouragement; to Norman Geras for his profound disagreements; and to Mark Neocleous, my editor at *Radical Philosophy*, and its anonymous readers, for their helpful comments and suggestions.

1. These claims do not have to be made jointly, of course; nonetheless, it is a denial of the former that many proponents of the uniqueness thesis regard as leading to the latter.
2. An excellent source is Deborah Lipstadt, *Denying the Holocaust*, Free Press, New York, 1993.
3. The preferred terms, respectively, of those who wish to stress the Jewish experience and of those who direct attention to that of the Romani.
4. Thus although I agree with Ian Hancock when he says that '[T]he word "Holocaust," I feel, is used too casually to have the meaning intended for it,' and that he 'would like to see the individual "uniquenesses," if you like, emphasized by a greater use of the ethnic terminology: *Shoah* or *Khurbn* for the Jewish Holocaust, *Porrajmos* for the Romani', nonetheless a word is needed to refer to whatever may be common to those holocausts, as Hancock himself implies. Ian Hancock, 'Responses to the Porrajmos: The Romani Holocaust', in Alan Rosenbaum, ed., *Is the Holocaust Unique?*, Westview Press, Boulder CO, 1996, p. 58. I was persuaded of this by participants in the Political Science department seminar at the Hebrew University.
5. See, for example, Rosenbaum's introduction to *Is the Holocaust Unique?*, *passim*: the papers in that volume all deal with aspects of these considerations.
6. David Stannard, 'The Politics of Genocide Scholarship', in Rosenbaum, ed., *Is the Holocaust Unique?*, p. 170.
7. Michael Berenbaum, *The World Must Know: The History of the Holocaust as Told in the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum*, Little, Brown, Boston MA, 1993, p. 129. See also Hancock, 'Responses to the Porrajmos', pp. 39–41 and 49.
8. 'During three and a half centuries, from the early 1500s to the 1860s, up to 12 million Africans were loaded and transported in dreadful conditions to the tropical and subtropical zones of the Americas. In the process, probably twice as many were seized in the African interior … The human cost of sustaining the combined slave systems to the west, north, and east of sub-Saharan Africa between 1500 and 1900 was an estimated "four

million people who lost their lives as a direct result of enslavement," plus others who died prematurely. Of the nearly 12 million in the Atlantic slave trade, around 15 percent, or up to 2 million more, died on the Atlantic voyage – the dreaded "Middle Passage" – and the first year of "seasoning."' Seymour Drescher, 'The Atlantic Slave Trade and the Holocaust: a Comparative Analysis', in Rosenbaum, ed., *Is the Holocaust Unique?*, pp. 66–7, quoting Paul E. Lovejoy, 'The Impact of the Atlantic Slave Trade on Africa: A Review of the Literature', *Journal of African History* 30, 1989, p. 387.

9. '[B]etween 1915 and the armistice in 1918, some 1 million people – out of a population of 2 million – were killed. Later, a half-million more Armenians perished as Turkey sought to free itself of foreign occupation and to expel minorities. Thus, between 1915 and 1923 approximately one-half to three-quarters of the Armenian population was destroyed in the Ottoman empire.' Robert Melson, 'The Armenian Genocide as Precursor and Prototype of Twentieth-Century Genocide', in Rosenbaum, ed., *Is the Holocaust Unique?*, p. 89. Katz's figures, while lower absolutely, are only somewhat lower proportionately: Steven Katz, 'The Uniqueness of the Holocaust: the Historical Dimension', in ibid., p. 36.
10. '[N]ot only were *proportionate* losses routinely much higher among indigenous peoples (up to 100 percent in many cases – that is, total extermination – and between 90 and 95 percent generally), but the *gross number* of people destroyed by what I have called the "American Holocaust" exceeded by many times over the number of Jews who died under the Nazis and, indeed, was even greater than the number of people of all nations killed worldwide during the entire duration of the Second World War.' Stannard, 'The Politics of Genocide Scholarship', p. 170.
11. Ibid., p. 172.
12. Israel W. Charney, 'Foreword' to Rosenbaum, ed., *Is the Holocaust Unique?*, p. xi.
13. As a referee has pointed out, these are two different senses of 'unique'. Anything unique in the first sense must be, straightforwardly, unintelligible. Something unique in the second sense, however, *can* in principle be intelligible: but only, or so I would argue, if its being alone of its kind is contingent, not necessary, since otherwise this second sense effectively collapses into the first. But that of course raises large issues of modal logic, as treatments of the ontological argument for the existence of God over the past thirty or so years have shown. But this is not the place to pursue them; nor are discussions of the Holocaust.
14. *The Economist*, 28 January 1995, p. 18.
15. Stannard, 'The Politics of Genocide Scholarship', p. 174.
16. Ibid., p. 182, where he makes good his claim by reference to examples of 'parasitic terminology' used in the United States 'as justification for killing' Native Americans.
17. Certainly neither Robert Melson nor Vahakn Dadrian, both pre-eminent scholars in the field, think so: '[T]he perpetrators of the Armenian genocide were motivated by a variant of nationalist ideology, the victims were a territorial ethnic group that had sought autonomy'; 'the Ittihadists … were convinced that they would again have a more or less free hand in bringing in to play their anti-Armenian scheme, which this time involved the introduction of a "final solution" with regard to the Armenian population of the Ottoman empire.' 'The Armenian Genocide', p. 91; and 'The Comparative Aspects of the Armenian and Jewish Cases of Genocide: A Sociohistorical Perspective', in Rosenbaum, ed., *Is the Holocaust Unique?*, p. 117, respectively. Nor does Stannard deny this: he argues, however, that the Nazis did not intend to eradicate all Jews.
18. Compare Avishai Margalit and Gabriel Motzkin, 'The Uniqueness of the Holocaust', *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 25, 1996: '[W]hat is unique about the Holocaust is its particular form of collective humiliation and mass destruction.… For ideological reasons, the Nazis sought both the humiliation and the death of the race enemy' (p. 66); and '[O]ver time, Nazi ideology moved from … the racism of inferior varieties[,] to … the racism of exclusion from the human race' (p. 71). Margalit and Motzkin's verdict that 'the Holocaust is not unique [a term they prefer, mistakenly in my view – see p. 66] because it happened to the Jews, but because it was the expression of a unique world-view, that of the Nazis' (p. 81) parallels my own, if on account of rather different features.
19. Yehuda Bauer, 'Against Mysticism: The Holocaust as a Historical Phenomenon', in Y. Bauer, ed., *The Holocaust in Historical Perspective* (Seattle, 1978), quoted by Rosenbaum in a frontispiece to his 'Introduction', *Is the Holocaust Unique?*, no page given. Cf. Bauer, ibid., p. 47: the Holocaust 'was not the product of an inexplicable fate or of supernatural intervention, but one logical possible outcome of European history'.
20. Bauer, ibid., p. 38. (He does not here argue, however, for uniqueness: see note 19.)
21. S. Katz, *The Holocaust in Historical Context*, vol. 1, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1994, p. 580.
22. Melson, 'The Armenian Genocide', p. 91; cf. p. 97.
23. See Drescher, 'The Atlantic Slave Trade', pp. 68–70.
24. 'Such examples might begin (although in fact there were precedents) with the plan of William Berkeley, Virginia's colonial governor during the mid-seventeenth century … "to Destroy *all* these Northern Indians".' Stannard, 'The Politics of Genocide Scholarship', p. 184; see ibid., p. 205 n. 51, for a range of sources of further examples.
25. See note above.
26. Albert L. Hurtado, *Indian Survival on the California Frontier*, Yale University Press, New Haven CT, 1988, p. 135, cited by Stannard, 'The Politics of Genocide Scholarship', p. 205 n. 51.
27. Those antipathetic to 'including' the Roma in the Holocaust often point out that the Nazis were wont to distinguish between categories of Roma – but forget that their definition of who counted as a Jew broadened from the passing of the Nuremberg Laws onwards.
28. Katz, *The Holocaust in Historical Context*, pp. 32–4; Melson, 'The Armenian Genocide', pp. 91–2, 97.
29. Thanks to Mark Neocleous for suggesting the importance of this issue, however much we may differ on it.
30. Katz, *The Holocaust in Historical Context*, p. 19.
31. Christopher Browning, *Fateful Months: Essays on the Emergence of the Final Solution*, Holmes & Meyer, New York, 1985, pp. 13–14, quoted by Stannard, 'The Politics of Genocide Scholarship', p. 186.
32. Stannard, 'The Politics of Genocide Scholarship', p. 186, citing John Mendelsohn and Donald S. Detwiler, eds, *The Holocaust: Selected Documents in Eighteen Volumes*, Garland, New York, 1982, pp. 22–5 ('a reproduction and translation of the only known extant copy of the Wansee Protocol', Stannard, ibid., p. 206 n. 57).
33. Stannard, 'The Politics of Genocide Scholarship', p.

186.
34. Raul Hilberg, *The Destruction of the European Jews*, vol. 2, W.H. Allen, London, 1961, p. 401.
35. Stannard, 'The Politics of Genocide Scholarship', pp. 186–7, citing Bauer, 'Is the Holocaust Explicable?', in Bauer et al., eds, *Remembering for the Future*, Pergamon Press, Oxford, 1988, p. 1970.
36. Ibid., p. 187.
37. Ibid.
38. Ibid., p. 188, citing Hilberg, *The Destruction of the European Jew*s, vol. 3, pp. 980–81.
39. Ibid., citing Bauer, *Jews for Sale? Nazi-Jewish Negotiations, 1933–1945*, Yale University Press, New Haven CT, 1994, p. 252.
40. Ibid., p. 189.
41. Dadrian, 'The Comparative Aspects of the Armenian and Jewish Cases of Genocide', p. 108. Nor is the argument about the Nazis' intentions as compared with those of the Turks regarding the Armenians one which turns on numbers allowed to 'emigrate', exemptions, and so on, as Dadrian would have it (ibid., pp. 109–11).
42. Stannard, 'The Politics of Genocide Scholarship', p. 190.
43. Ibid., pp. 192–5.
44. Not, of course, that the question of whether or not the Nazis intended to eliminate all Jews depends on whether one describes their intentions as 'unique' or as 'unprecedented': rather, sticking with the latter helps avoid some of the misunderstandings which arise in that debate.
45. The *contradictions* of Nazi ideology insightfully examined, although not characterized as such, by Margalit and Motzkin ('The Uniqueness of the Holocaust', pp. 71–4) support such a view.
46. The parallel with the experience of the Roma in today's Slovakia, Czech Republic, Romania and elsewhere, and that of all those, especially Muslims, perceived as a threat to 'fortress Europe' is all too clear.
47. 'The Politics of Genocide Scholarship', pp. 167, 181.
48. Lucy Davidowicz, *A Holocaust Reader*, Behrman House, New York, 1976, p. 133.
49. Cf. Margalit and Motzkin ('The Uniqueness of the Holocaust', p. 69), who claim, albeit controversially, that while Jews were both murdered and humiliated in the process, neither the Roma nor the 'mentally retarded' were *systematically* humiliated, whereas gays were not systematically exterminated.
50. With thanks to Tom Hickey, who pressed this point.
51. Primo Levi, 'Afterword' to *If This Is A Man* and *The Truce*, Sphere, London, 1987, p. 395.
52. Ibid.
53. Ibid.
54. Ibid., p. 396.
55. Rosenbaum, 'Introduction' to *Is the Holocaust Unique?*, pp. 1 and 4.
56. Victor Gollancz, for the Left Book Club, London, 1937.
57. Richard Rorty, 'Human Rights, Rationality, and Sentimentality', in Stephen Shute and Susan Hurley, *On Human Rights: The Oxford Amnesty Lectures 1993*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1993, p. 246 n.7.