DELIBERATIO
STUDIES IN CONTEMPORARY PHILOSOPHICAL CHALLENGES

2023, *3*, 63-73

https://deliberatio.uvt.ro/
ISSN 2810 – 5826 ISSN – L 2810 – 5532 Print
ISSN 2810 – 5532 ISSN – L 2810 – 5532 Online

# Hitler, The Wannsee Meeting, and the Epistemology of Power

Elliot D. Cohen*

**Abstract**

In everyday life, truth is ordinarily conceived as correspondence to fact. A belief is judged to be true when it corresponds to a fact. In contrast, individuals with Narcissistic Personality Disorder tend to turn the ordinary concept of truth on its head, holding instead that truth is correspondence to *their beliefs*. This paper argues that this narcissistic epistemology embraced and applied by Adolf Hitler operated insidiously at the root of a systematic and deadly distortion of reality that facilitated the Holocaust. It then provides an antidote to such systematic, lethal distortion of reality.

*Keywords*: NPD, narcissistic epistemology, Adolf Hitler, epistemology of power, systematized delirium.

On January 20, 1942, 15 senior officials of the Nazi regime sat down at a meeting in Wannsee, a suburb of Berlin, to discuss "The Final Solution" to the "Jewish problem." A few months later, concentration camps were set up and nearly two million Jews were put to death between 1942 and 1943. More

* *Ph.D., President, Logic-Based Therapy & Consultation Institute (USA); Editor, International Journal of Applied Philosophy; Email: elliotdcohen2@gmail.com. Website: www.elliotdcohen.com ORCID id: https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4575-5389.*

than three quarters of a century later, there is still scholarly debate about the central purpose of this meeting.

The main purpose of this paper, however, is not to add to this scholarly debate but rather to address the ethical question of how these distinguished gentlemen at Wannsee in 1942 could have dispassionately and in earnest participated in such a meeting in the first place. More generally, this is the question of how so many people during the Nazi regime could have accepted Hitler's plan.

My goal is not to survey well worn hypotheses about "brainwashing" through strategic Nazi propaganda and disinformation (Aurbach & Costronovo, 2013). Indeed, these are important parts of the explanation. However, I want to call attention to something even more insidious that appears to have operated synergistically, beneath the surface, to support if not give rise to the latter programs. I am referring to the way a narcissistic epistemology or theory of knowledge embraced and applied by Hitler appears to have operated at the root of a systematic and deadly distortion of reality that facilitated the Holocaust.

It is remarkable that the 15 attendees to the Wannsee meeting were not repulsed by the detailed plan they courted to commit the mass murder of millions. These individuals from different walks of German government and occupied territories were familiar with this goal before the meeting even began. None of them objected on moral grounds. In fact, none of them objected on any grounds. Instead, as the minutes of the meeting reflect (U. of Penn, n.d.), the attendees dispassionately discussed the plan in terms of the euphemism "evacuation" rather than "extermination" and spoke as if they would be disposing of damaged goods. The perception was that there was a "Jewish problem" and there needed to be a "Final Solution." Forced migration was off the table as it did not appear to be working; so there simply needed to be a more effective approach.

The chilling aspect was how well-educated pillars of German society could sit down in polite company to discuss in such starkly cold-blooded and calculating terms the encampment and subsequent annihilation of millions of human beings. So, what makes such systematic brutality possible? Why were the attendees dispassionately moved to comply?

## 1. The Role of Ideologies

From a Marxist perspective (Marx & Engels, 1998), those who were able to aid and abet commission of such atrocities could do so because they had internalized an ideology that enabled them to avoid feeling guilty. Not unlike the slave owner who told himself that the slaves were not fully human, those who blindly followed Hitler held an ideology about the moral depravity of Jewish people that made "exterminating" them somehow acceptable.

Such malignant ideologies are essentially reconstructions of reality that fly in the face of empirical facticity but make it easier to commit atrocities such as those committed by the Nazis. If Jews were by nature evil and a threat to human decency, then it was acceptable to defend oneself against this common bogyman or enemy, and if the only way to accomplish the latter was to "exterminate" them as though they were an infestation of roaches, then so be it. Thus, systematic annihilation of six million Jews (along with homosexuals, gypsies, and other humans conceived to be blights on humanity) could be carried out without the sense of having done anything morally wrong, and thus without a guilty conscience.

The role of language cannot be overstressed in recognizing the potency of such ideologies to shield perpetrators from moral responsibility. What helps to blunt the moral conscience is the use of damning language to devalue and cast blame on the targeted group, in the case of Hitler, the Jewish people (Cohen, 2021; 2012). Thus, adjectives such as "dirty" preceding "Jew" tends to evoke images, among the anti-Semitic, associated with viscerally negative feelings. During the Nazi regime Jews were referred to as "viruses," "subhuman," "bacteria," "leeches," "lice," among other terms aiming at the dehumanization of Jews. In so doing it became easier to "exterminate" them. No wonder the gas chambers in which Jews were slaughtered
were modeled after delousing chambers (Livingston, 2012).

Still, how is it that so many people during the Nazi regime were moved to accept such debasing and anti-empirical linguistic depictions of human beings in the first place without questioning them? After all, many of those who bought into the Nazi ideology were well educated and perceived themselves to be morally upright people.

## 1. An Epistemology of Power: Dictating Reality

This is a complex question and there are many contributing factors that have been rightly recognized by historians, including finding someone to blame for the hard economic times many Germans faced, and the prevalence already of anti-Semitism in Europe (Brustein & King, 2004). However, what I want to suggest is that at least part of the answer to this question also lies in the application of a narcissistic epistemology based on power rather than facticity (Cohen, 2017), which gave rise to and helped spawn acceptance of such malignant ideologies.

According to this conceptual framework, what counts as true or false, right or wrong, good or bad is determined by an authority who perceives himself to possess unlimited power to create reality, the latter reality of which is unquestioningly accepted by those under the authority's leadership. Such a delusional dictator does not want simply to control or manipulate the actions of others. He also demands that they believe as he does, and to have (unflinching) loyalty and faith in him and condemns those who fail to follow lockstep and subscribe to his (re)construction of reality. As such, this epistemology is anti-empirical, and based on fiat instead of evidence.

Importantly, such an epistemology, as understood here, implies steadfast devotion to the dictator of reality. The follower is not to question the decree of the Fuhrer. It is blind faith, not allegiance to facticity that undergirds this perverse theory of truth. In a post-fact culture such as that erected by Hitler, the only evidence that counts for the veracity of a belief is by fiat. Asking questions is therefore heresy.

Hence, as part of the Hitlerian culture, the respected gentlemen who attended the Wannsee meeting were expected, without question, to internalize the twisted vision of reality embraced by Adolf Hitler. As such, these men were able to dispassionately discuss mass murder as though they were doing what was good and right to do; without apparent apprehensiveness or unmitigated pangs of moral guilt, based on a concoction of reality that there was in the first place a "Jewish problem"; and cowardly evading the harsh reality by speaking of "evacuating to the east" rather than "sending to death camps" (U. of Penn., n.d.).

I do not submit that all who followed Hitler lockstep had internalized such an anti-empirical version of reality. Undoubtedly some simply feared for their own lives while others in positions of authority were themselves psychopathically invested in amassing power over others. However, I

maintain that an internalized epistemology of power rather than facticity was behind much of the lockstep conformity to what by any rational assessment would be considered insanity.

Long ago, Aristotle defined truth as correspondence to reality. According to this commonplace epistemology, a belief is true when it corresponds to fact (Aristotle, 2000, Pt. 7, Bk. 4). The theory of truth embraced by Hitler and other tyrants turns the correspondence theory on its head. According to the latter theoretical framework, something is a fact (or reality) when it corresponds to the tyrant's belief.

Psychologically, this theory of truth undergirds narcissistic personality disorder (NPD). Delusions of grandeur, which characterize this personality disorder, are effectively prescriptions of reality. The person who has NPD thereby operates on an aberrant epistemology. He is convinced of his delusions because he has decreed that they are true. The power that the person with NPD seeks is power over reality itself (Cohen, 2017); in Hitler's case, inventing superiority of the Aryan race; the decadence and immorality of the Jews; thus, the concoction of a "Jewish problem" calling for a "Final Solution."

## 2. Hitler's Portrayal of Jews

The reality Hitler created by fiat in "The Final Solution" to the "Jewish problem" had already been foreshadowed in 1925 with the publication of *Mein Kampf* (Hitler, 2002), in which he described the Jewish people as lacking morality, being egotists who come together like a pack of wolves for purposes of self-preservation and then drift apart when no threats to survival are present, thus lacking a true culture. They therefore "make a mockery of religion" (Hitler, 2002, Ch. 11). Their religion is counterfeit, existing for self-interested commercial purposes, not to further human decency.

In Mein Kampf, Hitler portrays Jews as exploiting morality for selfish interests. Referring to the invention of Marxism, he states,

> The Jew artfully enkindled that innate yearning for social justice which is a typical Aryan characteristic. Once that yearning became alive it was transformed into hatred against those in more fortunate circumstances of life. The next stage was to give a precise philosophical aspect to the struggle for the elimination of social wrongs. And thus the Marxist doctrine was invented. (Hitler, 2002, Ch. 11)

Absent in this vision of reality is an intrinsic regard for social justice by Jews, using the latter instead merely as an excuse to oppress others who are in "more fortunate circumstances." In contrast, the Aryan race is portrayed as having intrinsic regard for social justice, which is perverted at the hands of the Jewish people.

In Mein Kampf, Hitler also accuses the Jews of propagating mass murder of Russians, falsely claiming,

> the Jew killed or starved thirty million people, in a bout of savage fanaticism and partly by the employment of inhuman torture. And he did this so that a gang of Jewish literati and financial bandits should dominate over a great people. (Hitler, 2002, Ch. 11)

Hence it is not surprising that he should think "The Final Solution" was a moral response to "the Jewish problem." It is also not surprising that he accused the Jewish people of doing precisely what he ultimately did to them (Cikanavicius, 2019).

## 3. Hitler's "Systematized Delirium"

So, it appears that Hitler's "Final Solution" was not *simply* a conscious attempt by a skillful liar to manipulate others into accepting the mass genocide of the Jews; for such a liar does not believe what he says and therefore intentionally propagates falsehoods. In the case of Hitler's "Final Solution," there was something more pernicious, insidious, and pathological, namely a narcissistic epistemology that defined reality in terms of whatever Hitler himself believed. Hitler sought control over reality itself, and the Wannsee meeting occurred to decide how to navigate this prescribed reality.

On this twisted logic, there was no need for evidence that Jewish people were hateful, egoistical mass murderers as Hitler declared. All he needed to do was to stipulate that they were such, and *ipso facto*, the mere fiat made it true.

When truth is no longer seen as a function of factuality but rather the beliefs of a madman, there is no longer an anchor to distinguish what is acceptable from what is not. There is also a thin like between pathological lying and delusional thinking. According to Dike et al (2005, p. 344),

> Supporters of possible impaired reality testing observe that in the final evolution of the pathological lie, it cannot be differentiated from a delusion because, to the liar, it has the worth of a real experience. The lie ultimately wins power over the pathological liar, so that mastery of his or her own lies is lost. The new "I" supposedly overwhelms the normal "I" who now appears only at intervals, a condition that has been referred to as systematized delirium.

Such "systematized delirium" has the effect of producing a coherent set of fact claims that can be seductive, especially when combined with use of language to manipulate emotions. Such use of language to manipulate emotions appears to be emblematic of skilled liars (Berzack, 2011). It was also a major part of the Nazi propaganda machine aimed at enlisting fervent believers (Nichol, n.d.).

## 6. Domestic Violence and the Epistemology of Power

In cases of domestic abuse, the perpetrator may similarly harbor an epistemology based on power rather than reality. The perpetrator declares by fiat his superiority over his partner, punishes her for her failure to live up to his reality, while the victim begins to believe that she is inferior, and that the punishment was her own fault. Hence there is buying into the concocted reality by the victim. However, it is not fear alone that the perpetrator wants to impose. He demands that his partner believe in his twisted reality (Cohen, 2021).

The case is not unlike dictatorships ruled by strongmen such as Hitler. Those who fail to conform to the epistemic fiat are punished while those who walk lockstep are either rewarded or simply not punished. Reality is imposed by power, not by evidence, and those who live under this concocted reality internalize and behaviorally conform to it and thus live as though it were veridical. He demands that others believe as he does and condemns others who fail to reaffirm and walk lockstep with the reconstruction of reality. Like the domestic abuser, he wants to be idolized and exalted as a supreme being. Such is the twisted epistemic logic that appears to explain how meetings like that of Wannsee in which the "Jewish problem" and its "Final Solution" could be dispassionately discussed by 15 well educated men and subsequently executed.

## 7. God (or Hitler) as the Arbiter of Reality

In the history of philosophy, even idealists like George Berkeley who claimed that "esse est percipi" ("to be is to be perceived") did not think that the musings of any finite mind were true. Rather, true perceptions were the ones perceived by God. Thus, if I am intoxicated and see a pink elephant this is an hallucination because it is not part of the regular sequence of perceptions that are perceived by God. The narcissistic dictator fashions himself in the image of God, or more accurately, assumes the role served by God in the Berkelean system—to determine what is real and what is not (Berkely, 2009). In this sense, Hitler sought to replace God with himself. There was no room for God in Hitler's epistemology because he, not God, was the source of reality.

In contrast, theocratic despots who claim to derive their knowledge and power from God make room for a higher authority but set themselves up as the only human authority who can interpret the word of God. So, even here, there is fiat instead of fact grounding truth. Only such a despot has the power to decide what is true or false. So, the operative epistemology is again one based on power.

## 8. An Antidote to the Epistemology of Power

In a post fact culture such as Nazi Germany, missing was the freedom to base one's beliefs about the world on empirical evidence. Instead, German's were expected to believe lockstep what their Fuhrer believed. This accords with the model of domestic violence found in households led by persons with NPD, and there is indeed evidence that Hitler suffered from this disorder as have many other dictators noted in political history (Diamond, 2014; Norrholm & Hunley, n.d.).

It follows that a culture that strongly encourages its citizens to believe only on sufficient evidence is likely to be most resistant to the erection of a culture grounded in the epistemology of power. As W. K. Clifford (1877, p. 554) states in his classical work on the *Ethics of Belief*,

> if I let myself believe anything on insufficient evidence, there may be no great harm done by the mere belief … But I cannot help doing this great wrong towards Man, that I make myself credulous. The danger to society is not merely that it should believe wrong things, though that is great enough; but that it should become credulous, and lose the habit of testing things and inquiring into them;

> for then it must sink back into savagery…. If a man, holding a belief which he was taught in childhood or persuaded of afterwards, keeps down and pushes away any doubts which arise about it in his mind, purposely avoids the reading of books and the company of men that call in question or discuss it, and regards as impious those questions which cannot easily be asked without disturbing it—the life of that man is one long sin against mankind.

Had German society been enlisted in a "universal duty of questioning all that we believe," as Clifford (1877) admonished, Hitler's "systematized delirium" would probably not have had the capacity as it did to mesmerize the German people into supporting a Holocaust the madness of which is eternally emblazoned in the spilled blood of six million Jews, along with that of other innocent human lives. The historical lesson has often been crystalized in the phrase, "Never again" but the potential for history to repeat itself is not quelled by hashtags. Lessons tend to fade over time, and unless the prophylactic to this disease is taken regularly, the probabilities are great that other dictators who narcissistically subscribe to the epistemology of power will arise to successfully poison the headwaters of progress toward universal love to the beat of mass genocide.

We inhabit a world that is constantly technologically evolving, but this potential human asset is double-edged. On the hand, communication technologies such as the Internet have permitted the world to be kept informed about the malignant activities of deranged despots who threaten their own people and that of other nations.

On the other hand, emerging virtual realities may blur the lines between truth and falsehood, making it easier to lose track of the difference. Still, like actors on a stage, when the virtual reality curtain comes down, we will all remain mortal human beings with the capacity to suffer, subject to cruelty and oppression of other human beings unless we all take heed. No race, gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation, or religion is excluded from the risk of being targeted. "Never again" means routinely having the courage to ask for evidence instead of blindly placing faith in a leader; it means standing up to the bully in the schoolyard instead of counting oneself fortunate that one is not the one being bullied. It means realizing that we are all one global community of ends, and that an assault on any one of us is an assault on us all.

**References**

Aristotle (2000). *Metaphysics*. (Ross, W.D., Trans). http://classics.mit.edu/ Aristotle/ metaphysics.mb.txt

Aurbach, J. & Castronovo, R. (Eds.) (2013). *The Oxford handbook of propaganda studies*. Oxford University Press.

Berkeley, G. (2009). *A treatise concerning the principles of human knowledge*. https://www.gutenberg.org/files/4723/4723-h/4723-h.htm

Berzack, A. (2011). *Language use of successful liars*. Cornell University. Language Use Of Successful Liars (cornell.edu).

Brustein, W.I. & King, R. D. (2004). Anti-Semitism in Europe Before the Holocaust. *International Political Science Review*. *25*(1), 35–53.

Cikanavicius, D. (2019, August 11). How narcissists blame and accuse others for their own shortcomings. *PsychCentral*. https://psychcentral.com/blog/psychology-self/2019/08/narcissists-blame-projection#1

Clifford, W.K. (1877). The ethics of belief. In *Wikisource* https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/The_Ethics_of_Belief

Cohen, E. (2021). *Cognitive behavior interventions for self-defeating thoughts: Helping clients to overcome the tyranny of 'I can't'*. Routledge.

Cohen, E. (2017). The epistemology of narcissistic personality disorder. *Psychology Today*.

Cohen, E. (2012). Stop playing the blame game. *Psychology Today*. https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/what-would-aristotle-do/201207/stop-playing-the-blame-game

Diamond, S.A. (2014). How mad was Hitler? *Psychology Today*. https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/evil-deeds/201412/how-mad-was-hitler

Dike, C.C., Baranoski, M., & Grithith, E.E.H. (2005). Pathological Lying Revisited. *The Journal of the American Academy of Psychiatry and the Law*, *33*(3), 342-349. http://jaapl.org/content/33/3/342

Hitler, A. (2002). *Mein Kampf*. (Murphy, J, Trans.). https://gutenberg.net.au/ ebooks02/0200601.txt

Livingston, D. (2012). *Less than human: Why we demean, enslave, and exterminate others*. St. Martin's Press.

Marx, K. & Engels, F. (1998). *The German ideology*. Prometheus Books.

Nichol, M. (n.d.). Nazi propaganda and its unfortunate link with emotion. *History is Now*. http://www.historyisnowmagazine.com/blog/2018/6/17/nazi-propaganda-and-its-unfortunate-link-with-emotion#.YiuWGNXMKUk=

Norrholm, S.D. & Hunley, S. (n.d.). The Psychology of Dictators: Power, Fear, and Anxiety. *Anxiety.org*. https://www.anxiety.org/psychology-of-dictators-power-fear-anxiety

U. of Penn. (n.d.). *The Wansee protocol*. https://www.writing.upenn.edu/~afilreis/Holocaust/wansee-transcript.html