

"Vengeance is mine," saith the victims

In the first edition of his 1976 book *The Sunflower*, famed Nazi-hunter Simon Wiesenthal spun a tale, putatively autobiographical but possibly embroidered for pedagogical purposes, of his encounter with a dying SS soldier. Wiesenthal was an inmate of a concentration camp who was assigned to a work detail at a hospital. Karl, 21 years old, covered virtually head to toe with bandages, and unable to see, wished to confess to a Jew that he had participated the previous year in the massacre of all the Jewish inhabitants of the Ukrainian village of Dnepropetrovsk. Wiesenthal was picked by a German nurse to be the designated confessor. He found it painful and angering to have to hear the story but was convinced of the sincerity of the dying man's remorse. One detail of Wiesenthal's experience stands out in the telling:

I forgot for a moment where I was and then I heard a buzzing sound. A bluebottle, probably attracted by the smell, flew round the head of the dying man, who could not see it nor could he see me wave it away. "Thanks," he nevertheless whispered. And for the first time I realized that I, a defenseless subhuman, had contrived to lighten the lot of an equally defenseless superman, without thinking, simply as a matter of course.

At the end of his confession, Karl makes this request:

"I know that what I have told you is terrible. In the long nights while I have been waiting for death, time and time again I have longed to talk about it to a Jew and beg forgiveness from him. Only I didn't know whether there were any Jews left . . .

"I know that what I am asking is almost too much for you, but without your answer I cannot die in peace." [Ellipsis in the original]

Wiesenthal feels himself "helpless and able to do nothing for him." He stands up and looks at the soldier. "At last I made up my mind and without a word I left the room."

The soldier dies during the night, and the next day Wiesenthal learns that Karl has left him his few possessions. Wiesenthal refuses to accept them and tells the nurse to mail them to Karl's mother.

Wiesenthal finds himself doubting whether he did the right thing. After the war, he visits Karl's mother and learns that she has continued to cherish memories of her son, an only child. Wiesenthal chooses to remain silent about her son's confession.

The last line of his account is this:

You, who have just read this sad and tragic episode in my life, can mentally change places with me and ask yourself the crucial question, "What would I have done?"

The remainder of the book consists of 46 responses to Wiesenthal's question, 32 newly supplied for the second edition edited by Harry James Cargas and Bonny V. Fetterman and published in 1997 by Schocken Books.

The value of the book certainly lies more in the responses than in the original story, which Wiesenthal may have altered precisely for the purpose of creating a pointed thought-experiment. His intention was to convene a kind of symposium centered on a puzzling and even excruciating crux of a spiritual nature, to which end he

clarifies points that may have been ambiguous to him at the time of the incident. He carefully stipulates answers to a number of questions that might otherwise obstruct the participant's engagement with the core issue. For the better understanding of the exact nature of the thought-experiment, these excerpts from Wiesenthal's account are especially pertinent:

I saw that he was torturing himself. He was determined to gloss over nothing.

. . . .

In his confession there was true repentance, even though he did not admit it in so many words. Nor was it necessary, for the way he spoke and the fact that he spoke to *me* was a proof of his repentance.
[Emphasis in the original]

When Wiesenthal tells the incident to his fellow inmates at the concentration camp, they applaud his refusal to speak any word of forgiveness. They immediately produce, some with citations of the relevant Talmudic teaching, the argument that he cannot forgive in the name of other people. But Wiesenthal never treats the matter from a theological point of view, and he finds himself trying to persuade his friends that he was wrong:

The fellow showed a deep and genuine repentance, he did not once try to excuse what he had done.

. . . .

The dying man looked on me as a representative, as a symbol of the other Jews whom he could no longer reach or talk to. And moreover he showed his repentance entirely of his own accord. Obviously he was not born a murderer nor did he want to be a murderer. It was the Nazis who made him kill defenseless people.

Wiesenthal's last comment is echoed in the text of *The Kindly Ones*, a novel by Jonathan Littell. The narrator is an unapologetic Nazi functionary:

Political philosophers have often pointed out that in wartime, the citizen, the male citizen at least, loses one of his most basic rights, his right to life; and this has been true ever since the French Revolution and the invention of conscription, now an almost universally accepted principle. But these same philosophers have rarely noted that the citizen in question simultaneously loses another right, one just as basic and perhaps even more vital for his conception of himself as a civilized human being: the right not to kill.

. . . .

If you were born in a country or at a time not only when nobody comes to kill your wife and your children, but also nobody comes to ask you to kill the wives and children of others, then render thanks to God and go in peace.

It is only fair to report, however, that many commentators on Littell's novel disdained this passage, because in their minds it allows too much for circumstances and fails to underline the distinction that they find in the world between the righteous, like themselves, and the evildoers.

Many difficult questions about the nature of evil do lie behind the issue that Wiesenthal raises. What is the culpability of the least cog in the machine, who nonetheless does the actual killing, in comparison with the architects of the genocide, who may never personally commit any act of violence against anybody? What weight should we give to expressions of remorse and demonstrations of repentance, especially as the seriousness of the crimes increases? How much does it alter the case that, in the specific instance, the slaughter was perpetrated on unarmed civilians

guilty of no offense other than their Jewishness? When is forgiveness appropriate?

Ordinary readers are likely to feel an immediate discomfort at the way the question is posed, and may wish to go outside the conditions of the experiment in order to mitigate it. The first thought, I believe, of almost all people who are not themselves Holocaust survivors, is that they would not wish to criticize Wiesenthal's behavior in any way – they have no basis for judging how it would have felt to be literally in his shoes, a Jewish prisoner who is expecting to die, sooner rather than later, at the hands of Nazi criminals. A second thought might be that Wiesenthal had no standing to forgive Karl in the name of the slaughtered Ukrainian villagers. As it happens, the Talmud explicitly supports this notion as a point of Jewish law.

Clearly, however, Wiesenthal is inviting the reader to formulate an ethic and to state it regardless of the difficulty posed by the two thoughts I have just referenced. He wishes to know if, upon hearing that he turned and left the room without speaking to Karl, the reader felt sad that he had missed an opportunity of a spiritual nature to comfort a dying man or triumphant that he had avoided a trap and had refused to succumb to a misplaced sentimentalism. If I accept the question and I choose to attempt to answer it, I must not then cite these obstacles to putting myself in his place – that I have never been imprisoned, have never lived through a genocide, am not Jewish, and cannot forgive in the name of others. By his description of the scene, and his admission that his conscience was troubled by his decision, Wiesenthal acknowledges that he believes that some sort of statement by him – call it consolatory rather than forgiving – was possible and that he chose not to make it. It thus becomes a condition of the thought-experiment that we adopt Wiesenthal's reading of the

situation. In the story *as it is presented to us*, Wiesenthal accepts Karl's confession as an act of painful penance and Karl's remorse as genuine. He believes he had the option of bestowing a kind of blessing upon the dying man as a recognition of his true contrition; at a minimum, he might have said something that is comforting – for instance, that he hoped Karl now felt more peaceful for having confessed. If a reader enters the Sunflower symposium, he or she should not argue that Karl is insincere or that he is asking the impossible. A reader can reject the conditions of the thought-experiment altogether, and refuse to participate; but it is a misunderstanding of the exercise to accept the conditions and then try to change them.

And yet, precisely this is what happens again and again in the answers that were provided by the respondents, especially among those contributors who approved of Wiesenthal's silence in the face of the request.

At the end of his story about Karl, Wiesenthal posed a very simple question, which I repeat here with emphases added:

You, who have just read this sad and tragic episode in my life, can *mentally change places with me* and ask yourself the crucial question, "*What would *I* have done?*"

Yet four paragraphs into a notably disorganized response, Roger Ikor, a resolutely atheistic French author of Jewish extraction, writes this:

It being impossible to tackle the problem as it was put, I tried looking at it from a different angle. I asked myself not whether I approved or disapproved of Wiesenthal, but what I would have done in his place.

But he was never asked whether he approved or disapproved of Wiesenthal. What he imagines to be the *different* angle from which he will be viewing the problem is in fact precisely the angle that Wiesenthal asked him to adopt.

In general, the Christian respondents are tortured by the question, fretting that they are not Jews and therefore have no standing to second-guess Wiesenthal in any way. They are wracked by the presumptuousness of putting themselves in Wiesenthal's place, in spite of Wiesenthal's explicit invitation to do so. Full of ecumenical spirit, they are loath to bruise the feelings of their fellow contributors who are Jewish. This is salutary in its way, but is so much wasted verbiage: it is overtly ingratiating and too obviously what any decent gentile must say; and it merely delays the moment of reckoning. For when, having apologized profusely for their effrontery, they reluctantly take the bull by the horns – had they absolutely refused to do so, they would not be appearing in the symposium – they are in a cleft stick: they cannot bear to say that Wiesenthal did wrong; but by the light of their religion, he cannot possibly be said to have done right. Clearly they feel hogtied by their religion's *pro forma* injunction to forgive. So the typical Christian writer, somewhere near the end of an anguished essay, will cough up a hairball of forgiveness for Karl, hedged round with many qualifications and demurrals.

The Jewish contributors almost without exception approve of Wiesenthal's silence, and often express this approval in fierce and unforgiving language. Some of them evince irritation with him for seeming to have regretted his action. They are made prolix, not by the question, which they think is easy to answer, but by the requirement that they put the justification in words. It is not so easy to formulate an argument in

support of denying a deathbed request for a few words of acknowledgment.

Eva Fleischner, for instance, blames the soldier for his self-absorption, although Wiesenthal does not. She then goes further and concocts a speculative narrative whereby Karl is even causing Wiesenthal to risk his life because the guards may find him missing and punish him. This introduces an element that cannot be found in Wiesenthal's account, in which it is implied that the nurse has authority over the guards and that he is running no such risk. Fleischner then hypothesizes that Karl, from his deathbed, should have appealed to the humanity of the guards to try to better the lot of the Jewish prisoners. Even if plausible, this suggestion takes us outside the question as Wiesenthal wishes to frame it. Thus Fleischner exhibits a determination to arrive by any means possible at her finding that Karl deserved no consolation.

It is perhaps unsurprising, upon reflection, that the longer essays are almost always those of writers who approve of Wiesenthal's decision to withhold any consolatory statement. We have generally, as a culture, extolled forgiveness, so that recommending it is the easier assignment. Finding grounds that it would be wrong to bestow forgiveness and right to withhold it is the harder task. We do not need to justify kindness and generosity; it is harder to justify a refusal to be kind and generous. It is the opponent of forgiveness who feels obligated to explain why this alleged virtue may be a moral mistake. A few contributors argue unapologetically against forgiveness and waste few words in saying so. But among the members of the larger group who wish to affirm Wiesenthal's silence but without setting themselves against forgiveness in general, I find evidence of psychological discomfort: these are the respondents who are repeatedly afflicted by the aforementioned fallacy of going outside the experiment.

Underlying many of their comments is a palpable fear of being duped by the soldier: What if his contrition is faked? But Wiesenthal has created the conditions for his dilemma, and he is convinced that the remorse is genuine and the wish to atone heartfelt. So the writers who raise this point are violating the terms of the experiment. But they are also making a spiritual mistake. What does it matter if I am duped? I lose nothing by it. And the soldier gains nothing by it. Either he is having one last sociopathic laugh at my expense, which in light of his impending death is hardly worth denying him if I do so at the cost of my humanity; or he has gained a benediction from me by false means, in which case, Much good may it do him! Presumably my forgiveness will be valueless to him, in this world and the next, if he knows he has obtained it by lying.

The contributors are too canny to present themselves as insecure individuals fearful of being taken in. They prefer to put the focus on Karl, and question his sincerity. Rabbi Joseph Telushkin puts it this way:

Had a doctor entered the room with a miracle drug that would have restored this young man to full vigor, would he have remained weighed down with guilt? And had the German Army then offered him whatever was the Nazi equivalent to a Purple Heart for bravery in battle would he have scorned the award?

The first question ignores the facts of the narrative – we are told that Karl's guilt and remorse began immediately upon the perpetration of the atrocity. These feelings did not arise only after he was mortally wounded. The second question is a *non-sequitur*. What has the acceptance or non-acceptance of a medal to do with the matter we are

discussing? Presumably Telushkin would want Karl to have certified the genuineness of his guilty conscience by refusing the medal, perhaps spitting on it during the ceremony and calling out his commanding officer for a crime against inhumanity. Several contributors suggest that nothing less than such an action on Karl's part would suffice to convince them of his sincerity. In holding Karl to this standard, they certainly imply that this is what *they* would have done. I can only remark on the great courage that is rhetorically manifested by persons who are not in any danger.

Another way of trying to evade Wiesenthal's set-up is to argue that atonement has to be tested over time, to make sure that it is not just a superficial deathbed confession – one that requires nothing of Karl but a few words of pretended regret. Again, there are two answers to this: first, that Wiesenthal does not himself make this argument, but instead believes that Karl is now changed from the former Nazi enthusiast into a person tormented by the memory of his participation in a terrible crime; second, that a person on a deathbed simply *cannot* be put to such a test because he has no time left to fulfill its requirements. I again risk making a spiritual mistake by withholding absolution from a dying man who *would if he could* perform an exacting penance – the more so if I am doing this because I am thinking of myself most of all and trying to make certain that I am not being gulled. The suspicion roused in me by the writers in *The Sunflower*, however, is that they are invoking a technicality so they can reach what is, to them, a morally satisfying conclusion. In doing so, they invalidate the premises of the experiment, which includes Wiesenthal's confidence that Karl is completely transformed and has long been atoning in his way by the suffering that he experiences when he remembers the terrible deed.

Deborah Lipstadt uses all the evasions that are available: forgiveness is not possible in the situation; the dying soldier may not be sincere and may not have done all that he needed to do by way of a convincing contrition; he may have repented but he has not yet atoned.

Who am I to offer forgiveness? I cannot speak on behalf of those who have been wronged – particularly those who have been killed.

Ultimately, we have no way of knowing if the soldier had actually performed complete *teshuvah* [*N.B.*, defined by Lipstadt as "Judaism's process of saying I'm sorry to those we have wronged"]. The SS soldier who lay on his deathbed did not have the ability to repeat his heinous crimes. Would he have felt so contrite if he had not been at death's door? It is also important to remember that the soldier's apparently genuine struggle with his past did not obviate his responsibility to bear the punishment for what he had done.

Finally, it is important to differentiate between *teshuvah*, repentance, and *kaparah*, atonement. Atonement only comes after one bears the consequences of one's acts.

Lipstadt's Old Testament framework is a reminder that more than one contributor worries over a split that shows up in the contributions and has been repeated in Holocaust classrooms: Jewish students tend to approve of Wiesenthal's refusal to forgive, Christian students do not. Those who address this uncomfortable schism conclude, too hastily I think, that this has *nothing to do* with Jews sharing the identity of the victims of the Holocaust and Christians belonging to the same religion as the vast majority of the perpetrators. The contributors exhibit a natural reluctance to resuscitate old anti-Semitic canards by attributing to Jews a sterile commitment to the Letter of the Law and to Christians a more expansive understanding of the Spirit. A religion whose holiest high holiday places an obligation upon every individual who has wronged

another to make amends does not need to be instructed in forgiveness by the religion that prosecuted the Crusades, the Inquisition, the burning of witches, the Thirty Years War, and laid the theological groundwork for the Holocaust.

Perhaps the most interesting interpretation of the split has to do with a reading of certain Talmudic passages that state that God can forgive my crime against Him but not even He can forgive my crime against another person: only the victim of my act can forgive me. Eva Fleischner quotes from the Mishnah:

For sins against God, the Day of Atonement brings forgiveness. For sins against one's neighbor, the Day of Atonement brings no forgiveness until one has become reconciled with one's neighbors.

Murder therefore becomes the one crime that cannot be expiated. The people to whom the soldier must apply are all dead. Fleischner is thus enabled to reach an impeccable conclusion that is repeated numerous times by Jewish contributors to *The Sunflower*:

Again, coming back to our story: Karl cannot atone for his crime, since the victims are dead. And Simon cannot forgive Karl in their name.

But the thought experiment proposed by Wiesenthal works around this objection. The soldier may say that he is asking for forgiveness – but Simon does not take those words so literally. Simon is not God or a rabbi or a Catholic priest. Karl wants Simon to say something that will acknowledge the genuineness of his remorse and his desire to repent; Simon clearly believes that he could have done so, but chose not to.

Contributors who argue that Simon has no right to forgive in the name of the victims, or that Karl has no right to ask forgiveness of Simon, are again changing the conditions of

the experiment in order to justify either their unwillingness to forgive Karl or their unwillingness to entertain Wiesenthal's question.

A strange contribution comes from Eugene J. Fisher, who begins in a spate of strong indignation over Christian insensitivity: "I believe it is the height of arrogance for Christians to ask Jews to forgive them. . . . This, in my reading, was the final sin of the dying Nazi." But as his screed continues, we find that the author is not Jewish but a Catholic functionary who wishes to tout what he credulously believes was the dramatic repentance undertaken by the Vatican late in the 20th century. He wants to applaud the Vatican's tweaking of the theology that had for centuries explicitly held "the Jews" responsible for the death of Christ; and he is especially moved that, on a single occasion, a Cardinal of the Holy See's Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews used the Hebrew biblical term *teshuvah* to characterize the proper Christian attitude toward the Holocaust. Fisher was writing before Pope John Paul II visited the Yad Vashem memorial in Jerusalem in 2000, where he not only made no mention of the enduring scandal over the active help given to Nazi war criminals by the post-war Vatican, but prayed that "there will be no more anti-Jewish feeling among Christians or anti-Christian feeling among Jews." This is like praying that there will be no more anti-black feeling among the Ku Klux Klan or anti-white feeling among black families whose sons were lynched. The Pope's remarks on the Holocaust were purely *pro forma*: he chalked it up to Nazi godlessness rather than to 19 centuries of Christian anti-Semitism. In any event, I find Fisher's judgment that Karl *sinned* on his deathbed to be in direct conflict with the injunction of Jesus found in the Sermon on the Mount to "Judge not, lest you be judged."

Roger Ikor's contribution is among the most agonized, and agonizing to read.

He torments himself with a variety of irrelevant considerations, many of them echoed by later contributors:

- Any discussion turns into hair-splitting. For example: to what extent was the young SS man sincere? . . . To what extent did the fear of divine punishment have a part in his repentance?

To route the discussion through these questions would not be hair-splitting – it would be speculation, quite fruitless in any case, but in this particular case specifically ruled out by Wiesenthal's premises.

- The SS man represented the entire SS, the entire Nazi system, the whole of Germany, the whole of man's evil forces. Wiesenthal for his part was not just Wiesenthal but the entire deportation, and beyond this, the bulk of the Nazi victims. Man to man, I think Wiesenthal would have forgiven in the face of so obviously sincere a repentance, one that was sanctioned, as it were, by the criminal's sufferings. He could not do so because of what he represented and what the person he was dealing with represented.

Having just questioned whether the young man's sincerity should be credited, Ikor changes direction and finds his repentance *obviously sincere*. Even so, forgiveness should be withheld because Karl must be viewed, not as he viewed himself or as Wiesenthal viewed him, as an individual, but as a "representative" of (1) the SS, (2) the Nazi system, (3) the whole of Germany, and (4) the whole of human evil on earth. Perhaps Ikor was going to add "all the evil in the universe" and thought better of it.

Tolstoy, in *The Kingdom of God Is Within You*, discourses at length on the evil that ensues when humans act, not as individuals confronting other individuals, but as

bureaucratized officials dealing with people who have been reduced to their statistical properties, and in so doing obliterate the individuality and humanity of those whom they act against. I hope the fallacy here is so obvious that I can summarize quickly by noting that cruelty flourishes and even genocide can ensue when we intellectualize and turn living persons into abstractions and symbolic figures, and judge them, not for who they are and what they actually do, but for what they "represent." The Nazis did this with the Jews; Ikor is doing it with Karl.

Still worrying the problem of how to "mentally change places" with Wiesenthal, Ikor takes the assignment too literally and tries to project himself back to the summer of 1942 as the person he was then, when he knew less about the genocidal nature of "the deportation" than he subsequently learned. He punctiliously allows that his historical ignorance might well have induced him to make a terrible error:

- It is possible that, being more sensitive to the atrocious suffering of this dying young man than to my extremely hazy awareness of the horrors of the deportation, I would, like a coward, have given in to pity. I say like a coward because I would have done this despite myself, despite the dictates of reason and reflection. My ensuing remorse at this cowardice of mine would have dogged me for the rest of my days.

So it is that we see this intelligent, thoughtful man with an active conscience, who is scrupulously alert to every nuance of the moral conundrum, ends by talking himself into equating kindness and compassion with cowardice, and harshness and vengeance with rationality. His argument is that had he, out of too limited an awareness of the extent of the Holocaust, pitied Karl, his mistake would have been so appalling as to have shadowed the rest of his life with remorse, because irrespective of what he knew about

the scale of the Nazi crime at that point in time, "the dictates of reason and reflection" should have sufficed to deflect any impulse to forgive the dying man. This conception of reason and reflection leaves me speechless. Ikor's mobilization of so much intellect in order to reach, at the end of a long and tortuous train of terribly chopped logic, so dire a conclusion, cannot but engender my own reflections on the malign power of language to bewitch us, and not in a good way. *The Sunflower* demonstrates how incoherently most people, even religious clerics, scholars, and writers, think about morality. We all believe that we possess a moral compass. But when asked which way the needle points, we are thrown into disarray and cannot put together consecutive sentences that do not contradict each other.

By comparison with Ikor's anguished divagations, I must say that the much briefer statement by the writer Constantine FitzGibbon, Irish Catholic by birth, is refreshingly forthright: presumably not intending his remark to be taken literally, but certainly as encapsulating his feelings in conducting the thought-experiment of putting himself in Wiesenthal's place in the room with Karl, he writes, "I think I would strangle him in his bed."

To acknowledge a kind of primitive virtue to FitzGibbon's "moral clarity" – to contrast its ostensibly healthy confidence to the sickly ratiocination of other contributors who arrive at the same destination after so many peregrinations – is not to endorse it, however. Ikor's decommissioning of empathy at least cost him some effort.

There is one more thing to remark about the *Sunflower* narrative and the vast majority of the responses. The commonest Nazi defense after the war was "I was just following orders." After the trials of Nazi war criminals, the Fourth Nuremberg Principle

dealt explicitly with this defense:

The fact that a person acted pursuant to order of his Government or of a superior does not relieve him from responsibility under international law, provided a moral choice was in fact possible to him.

Yet inevitably, moralists have tended to draw a distinction between the architects of a genocide and those who carried it out under conditions of varying compulsion. And the Nuremberg sentences that were handed down to the war criminals were adjusted to fit these varying levels of culpability.

Anyone who has ever been in the military knows that the Fourth Nuremberg Principle is simply not in play; no soldier believes he can disobey a direct order without being punished; no soldier can imagine challenging his commanding officer by citing international law. This tends to be true in all circumstances; it is apodictically true in the middle of a military action when the troops are in the field.

But Karl never offers this excuse. Throughout his confession, Karl speaks of himself as a murderer of defenseless Jews. This is the more noteworthy in that he was not an officer in his unit, and played no role whatsoever in the decision to round up the Jewish population of Dnepropetrovsk and massacre every man, woman, and child.

Curiously, however, almost no one who participated in the *Sunflower* symposium alluded to this distinction. Dith Pran, the Cambodian journalist who barely survived the Khmer Rouge genocide and became the subject of the movie *The Killing Fields*, is the only contributor to emphasize this point of the difference in moral culpability between the leaders and the followers:

I blame the dozen leaders, the brains behind a sadistic plot, who ordered the deaths of millions of people, including the disabled, children, religious people, the educated, and anyone who they thought was a threat to their ideas.

. . . .

When I talk about not forgiving the dozen leaders of the Khmer Rouge, I include Pol Pot, Khieu Samphan, Leng Sary, and their entourage. They are the ones who had the plan of ridding the Khmer population of unwanted elements like people who were unable to work, people with ideas, or anyone who would get in the way of transforming Cambodia into an agrarian society.

. . . .

Pulling away from the Khmer Rouge leadership, I can forgive the soldiers of the Khmer Rouge, those who actually did the killing, although I can never forget what they did. Placed in Simon Wiesenthal's position, I would have forgiven the soldier.

I surmise that many contributors, and perhaps all of those who wished to applaud Wiesenthal's withholding of consolation, were quietly relieved that Karl did not seek to exculpate himself by means of blaming his officers. It meant that they did not have to marshal their own arguments against the plain fact that, in all armies everywhere prior to the promulgation of the Nuremberg Principles, a soldier was required to follow orders or else face a firing squad. And had they used the Fourth Nuremberg Principle to retroactively condemn Karl, they would have had to further explain how that principle has been violated thousands and tens of thousands of times since it was announced. No modern army could exist if it were taken seriously. Every American soldier regards the principle as a deterrent that should discourage his *officers* from issuing an illegal order; but whether it does or not, no soldier plans to disobey any order that his officers issue. The only instance of an American soldier refusing to obey a direct order that has

come to my attention since the Nuremberg Principles were published involved an enlisted man named Michael New, who, when ordered in 1995 to wear a United Nations uniform while serving in Macedonia as a medic, refused to do so. Needless to say, the order was lawful and did not violate the Nuremberg Principles. New was court-martialed and given a dishonorable discharge, to subsequently become a hero to the paranoid wing of the Far Right.

No one can read Wiesenthal's account impartially and fail to see that Karl was a youthful victim of Nazi propaganda. At precisely the moment that he was ripe to begin the customary rebellion of a teenager against his parents – his father a Social Democrat who loathed Hitler, his mother an intensely religious Catholic – the Nazis transformed the country, revived the economy, and created the Hitler Youth, which combined patriotism with athletics and singing and, perhaps needless to say, appealed to a boy more than attending Mass.

Martin Luther, a revered figure even in Nazi Germany (his marked anti-Semitism standing him in good stead), in his commentary on the Fourth Commandment speaks passionately and at length about the lifelong duty to obey not only your parents but their surrogates. These surrogates comprise pretty much everyone who outranks you socially. Luther believed further that the commandments are given in the order of their importance and therefore "Disobedience is a greater sin than murder, unchastity, theft, and dishonesty." Too young to understand how the founder of German Lutheranism and the Leader of the German nation might be evil while those who appeared to be sacrilegious and unpatriotic might be moral heroes, Karl followed the path of social conformity that most humans follow without a second thought. It is fortunate for most of

us if this keeps our noses clean, for the unexamined life is what most of us live.

The remainder of my comments will remark the anger, indignation, and hostility among the most impassioned contributors over the idea of forgiving the Nazi soldier. On this charged topic, I must first enter a clear statement of my own standpoint.

I believe that most apologies are insincere. Those apologists who are maladroit at fakery cannot disguise their real meaning – "I am sorry you have taken things wrongly and gotten yourself in a snit. I am sorry you have misunderstood me."

Nonetheless, one out of a hundred times, an apology is appropriate. This is when the perpetrator of a misdeed sees clearly that he was wrong and has since become a person who regrets that deed and condemns it as strongly as if it had been done by someone else. Additionally, such a person earns the right to apologize if he has genuine empathy for the people he has wronged.

But in spite of his sincerity, this person never has the right to ask the victim to forgive him. He must make his apology and then leave without asking for anything in return. He must also make such amends as he can, accordant with the wishes of the person he has wronged. He must not act on any motive beyond a desire to take responsibility for his deed and to let the victim know that he does so.

He will naturally hope to be forgiven. It is a principle of Judaism that a victim who has received a sincere apology backed up by genuine repentance and an offer to make meaningful restitution is *obligated* to accept the apology and bury the hatchet:

It is forbidden to be obdurate and not allow yourself to be appeased. On the contrary, one should be easily pacified and find it difficult to become

angry. When asked by an offender for forgiveness, one should forgive with a sincere mind and a willing spirit . . . forgiveness is natural to the seed of Israel. (Mishneh Torah, Teshuvah 2:10)

The application of my ideas to this scenario is obvious. Karl should not have asked for forgiveness. At most, he should have asked whether Simon heard, understood, and accepted his apology.

However, it is a condition of the thought experiment that Karl did ask for forgiveness; and we are to answer how we would have responded, whether his asking was proper or not. Furthermore, Simon does not treat Karl's request for forgiveness as impertinent.

Simon would have been obligated as a good Jew to forgive any act wrongly done to *him* by the dying soldier for which the soldier sincerely apologized. But, as almost all contributors point out, it did not lay within Simon's powers to forgive actions done to others.

Again, however, it is a condition of the thought experiment that Simon believes he could have responded verbally in some way to Karl's request, as is implicit in his troubled conscience after he chose to simply walk away instead. At no time does he reference Jewish scripture or law to justify his silent exit.

With leisure to compose an answer, and with the humility appropriate to someone who is incapable of truly putting himself in Simon's shoes, I would like to think that I would have answered Karl this way: "It is not within my power to forgive you in the name of the people who were murdered on that day in the Ukraine. The deed cannot be undone. But I believe that your remorse is genuine and that you have done all that

someone who joined in that evil deed and has found himself subsequently brought to this point can do to repent and atone. It has been hard for me to hear this and hard for you to tell it, but I believe your confession has been good for both of us. I may be killed tomorrow by people who continue to believe what you believed yesterday, but I face my future and the future of humanity, whatever it may be, with greater hope knowing that people can learn from their mistakes and change for the better."

It may be that many readers will feel that this statement is too credulous and too kind to the dying soldier, and that even if it is acceptable as far as it goes, it should contain more harshness and condemnation as a balance to the consolation. But if the soldier's confession is genuine, he has spent months condemning himself, and his conscience has punished him far more than any words of mine could do. If I believe that he should not hear any word of mine unless it contains a last reminder of his evil – if, in short, I still harbor a doubt as to whether I am letting him off too easy because his contrition is not as complete as I would like it to be – I had better emulate Simon and say nothing at all. Some contributors note that Simon had the kindness to refrain from condemning the dying man.

My concentration on the harshest responses in *The Sunflower* comes not from a desire to place myself on a more elevated moral level than those who cannot forgive or console – many of them are Holocaust survivors or people who lost large numbers of relatives in the Shoah and need no justification for their feelings. But I am interested in exploring the implicit world-view of those who feel that forgiveness would be a kind of moral atrocity.

Jean Améry, a member of the Resistance and later a survivor of the concentration camps, understandably has no interest in soothing the conscience of any perpetrator, but he goes on to offer a theory about the proper way to proceed in the future.

I refuse any reconciliation with the criminals, and with those who only by accident did not happen to commit atrocities, and finally, all those who helped prepare the unspeakable acts with their words. Only if Nazi crimes like the genocide of European Jewry are not subject to a statute of limitations now or in the future, only if everyone who committed atrocities is hunted down and finally caught, will the potential murderers of tomorrow and the day after tomorrow be prevented from realizing their criminal potential.

Good luck with that. But I really have to ask what universe Améry has been inhabiting, because it is not the one I live in. First of all, we have been hunting down the perpetrators for all of recorded history. What exactly entitles Améry to believe that this will deter the potential murderers of tomorrow and the day after tomorrow? It never has before. Does he have a license to simply believe anything he wants to believe? Second, there is a lot of empirical evidence that a better way to go, as in South Africa and Rwanda, is the Truth and Reconciliation route. Third, how will his ethic serve us where we don't see any atrocity? This is the commonest outcome. Not one American interrogator has been charged with crimes of torture and murder committed since September 11, 2001, even though our own military medical records show that a number of prisoners were beaten to death during questioning.

But to answer my own question: Améry, if he were confronted with even ten or twenty pages from the historical record, could not possibly maintain his belief that a harshly punitive response to the *tens of millions* of perpetrators he identifies – all those

who did the killing, all those who might well have done the killing, and all those whose words supported the regime – could be effective. So it is impossible to believe that he is motivated solely by his hope of preventing crimes in the future: he cares most about revenge. And it is sacred to him.

Contributor André Stein is "dismayed about the eagerness of many to forgive child-killers, torturers, rapists by transferring the blame onto a murderous ideology and propaganda, and, in Karl's case, onto his youthful vulnerability." He sees only self-absorption in Karl's request, and blames Karl further for leaving his possessions to Simon. He sees a deterrent value in letting all malefactors know that there will be no mercy shown to them even on their deathbeds. In these views, Stein is not atypical, but he is the only contributor who faults *Wiesenthal* for deciding to spare Karl's mother the truth about her son.

Karl's parents are not guilt-free in his joining the SS. And by keeping the truth under cover, Simon enabled Karl's mother to live a nasty lie. As a child survivor of the Holocaust who lost sixty-two relatives to "nice boys who wouldn't hurt a fly," I feel indignant about this version of the conspiracy of silence.

In fact, Karl's father – a former member of the Social Democratic Party and staunch opponent of the regime – was lucky to escape Nazi retribution. Ironically, although he virtually stopped speaking to Karl after his son joined the Hitler Youth, he was spared only because he had a family member who served in the SS. (Karl's mother, while disturbed by her son's decision because it involved his falling away from the Catholic Church, chose not to sever the parent-child bond.) It is interesting, then, to observe

that Stein, under the impress of a strong vengeful feeling, distorts the plain factual record. Whether he is right or wrong about the stance he adopts, he bends the truth in the direction he needs it to go in order to be justified. And the fierceness of his condemnation of Wiesenthal for deciding not to lacerate the feelings of an old woman, for no valuable purpose that I can make out, is startling. No doubt a case could be made for his *general* argument that the "conspiracy of silence" – and he explicitly names Wiesenthal as one of the conspirators – must be challenged by relentless truth-telling. But his language suggests that this is a position that he has extemporized in order to put a pseudo-objective gloss on feelings of rage.

At the time of writing, Stein was a practicing psychotherapist.

Moshe Bejski, who survived the concentration camps, perhaps understandably devotes several paragraphs to reviewing the depths of Nazi depravity. He is typical in taking his interpretation outside the narrative provided by Wiesenthal and finding fault with the Nazi soldier. In doing so, he sets himself up as an infallible reader of Karl's mind:

Only the awareness of imminent and certain death induced Karl to think that his actions had been crimes against both humanity and God. Had he not been mortally wounded, he would almost certainly have continued to commit these crimes, along with his comrades, who had volunteered for these assignments of their own free will and in large numbers, never regretting their actions, but rather justifying them by claiming that they had only been carrying out orders.

Half way through the last sentence, Bejski switches from Karl to "his comrades," so that his indictment can encompass nearly the whole German people; but both halves of his statement are inaccurate. Wiesenthal's recounting of Karl's confession clearly

indicates that Karl was stricken in his conscience as soon as the atrocity was perpetrated, and tormented by his role in it *before* he was wounded. It may be true that, like other soldiers in the armies of every nation, he would have continued to commit war crimes under orders. But Karl never attempts to extenuate his crime by means of that argument. Furthermore, some of his comrades similarly regretted the action – the last words of a dying friend were "The people in that house, you know what I mean . . ." And most members of the SS "who had volunteered for these assignments of their own free will" believed they were joining an elite force similar to the Green Berets of the United States Army. Only after the invasion of the Soviet Union, when they were sent to the Eastern Front, did they discover what their specific task was to be. Bejski's mania to make all the perpetrators of the Nazi crime equal in complicity, and to identify Karl with the worst of them, causes him to alter Wiesenthal's account with such recklessness that it is surely correct to deduce that he has done so unconsciously, in the grip of a strong emotion.

Alan L. Berger, a scholar and founder of a Jewish Studies Program at Syracuse University, employs the full complement of techniques to evade the question that Wiesenthal wishes to pose:

Was Karl's repentance genuine? . . . Was Karl's repentance sincere?

. . . .

Am I entitled to forgive on behalf of the murdered? My response is, do not forgive someone for whom forgiveness is forbidden. . . . I may forgive one who has sinned against me. I may not forgive one who has taken the life of another.

Let us assume for a moment that Karl either was not wounded or did not die. Would he then have had pangs of conscience? After the war, would he be among the penitents? Or would he not have been among those Nazis who either gathered to reminisce about the "good old days" or simply resume his life: marrying, raising a family, prospering, and shaking his head over all the fuss Jews made over the Holocaust.

Here Berger touches upon a point of irritation among many of the respondents: that large numbers of Nazi criminals escaped justice; that many were unrepentant; and that the world was too quick to forgive them in light of their impenitence. But these are *non sequiturs*, changes of topic. Wiesenthal gives the reader no warrant for believing that Karl's remorse is opportunistic, or that, had he not been wounded, he would have remained an enthusiastic Nazi. Again, Wiesenthal considers himself empowered to say something rather than nothing to Karl's petition, and never offers as an excuse for his silence the Jewish law that forbids him to forgive in another's name.

Berger is relentless in revisiting Karl's criminality: "When it mattered, when he shot Jews jumping from a burning house, Karl displayed no moral courage." This is true, although some of us wonder whether we would have behaved differently and also what our display would have achieved had we done so. But *this is precisely what Karl wishes to atone* – his failure of moral courage when it mattered. If all of us displayed moral courage when it counted, evil would not exist and no one would ever have anything to atone. Berger also spreads wide the net of criminality and accordingly ramps up the note of moral superiority, even implying a superiority of the religion of Judaism to the religion of Catholicism:

If the teachings of the Catholic Church were so radically deficient as to be unable to hold Karl to moral accountability, then shame on the Church. Shame on the murderers. And shame on those who ask forgiveness thereby requiring from others the moral integrity which they themselves so sorely lack.

No religion can withstand a moral accounting based upon the derelictions of its most iniquitous devotees. No fair-minded critic would blame the teachings of Judaism for being so "radically deficient" that they failed to restrain Baruch Goldstein when he murdered 29 Muslims praying at a mosque and wounded 125 others on February 25, 1994. In fact, Wiesenthal's narrative expressly makes the point that Karl, to the consternation of his mother, completely abandoned the Catholic Church when he joined the Hitler Youth. Karl thereby implicitly recognized that Nazi ideology was at odds with the religious instruction that he had received. Goldstein, on the other hand, was a devout Orthodox Jew whose action was inspired by his conception of his religion. His grave became a pilgrimage site for extremists. A shrine was built in his memory; it was dismantled by the Israeli Army in 1999 after the Knesset passed special legislation outlawing monuments to terrorists. I say all this not to endorse Berger's implication and then fling it back in his face, but to deplore it.

Berger takes Karl's personal culpability, even on his deathbed, to unusual lengths:

Further, in asking for a Jew to hear his confession, Karl perpetuated the Nazi stereotype. Jews were not individuals with souls, feelings, aspirations, and emotions. Rather, they were perceived as an amorphous, undifferentiated mass. Bring me a Jew, was the dying Nazi's request. Any Jew will do. Karl has learned nothing. His desire is to "cleanse" his own soul at the expense of the Jew.

Language gets away from Berger here: we do not call the dehumanization of Jews preparatory to exterminating them a "stereotype." Karl shows several times that he perceives Simon as a feeling individual who must be undergoing strong and unpleasant emotions in having to hear the details of his confession. And while perhaps "any Jew will do," it is patent, in terms of Wiesenthal's narrative, that Karl sees acutely the meretriciousness of making his apology to anyone *other* than a Jew. Berger writes:

The entire issue of cheap grace, forgive and forget, is raised here. Presumably, Karl, achieving forgiveness, would go to heaven. Whereas Simon and other Jews, including and especially the victims of the slaughter in the Polish town [sic], would not.

Would Berger, outraged that a Jew was suborned to hear this confession, find Karl more admirable for making his confession to a priest of the Catholic Church? That priest, in spite of Karl's long lapse from church attendance, would certainly have granted him absolution. Berger runs off the rails picturing a Christian heaven that he no doubt considers a fairy tale; and again he departs from Wiesenthal's script. The dying soldier never seems to picture his confession in religious terms at all. His object is to show contrition to someone who is of the injured party.

Berger, although full of sidesteps to avoid the question as Wiesenthal frames it, is nonetheless forthright in concluding that even to entertain the question is reprehensible:

To have forgiven [Karl] would have been a desecration both of the memory of the Jewish victims and of the sanctity of forgiveness.

Granting the murderer forgiveness would have been the final victory of Nazism. Had he spoken to Karl, Simon would have sealed his own guilt.

This last sentence, the final sentence of Berger's essay, with "guilt" the last word, but aimed threateningly at Wiesenthal rather than Karl – a guilt that Berger believes Wiesenthal came close to incurring at the time of the incident and that now tempts the respondents to his thought-experiment – is, once again, difficult to understand on any premise other than the author's incapacity to rise above his mania for vengeance. That his indignation is touched off by a moral crime still rightly considered to be almost unparalleled in human history and well nigh unfathomable in its magnitude and thoroughness is certainly a mitigating circumstance. But what I am considering here, in relation to the problem of evil, is the philosophy that lies behind Berger's thoughts and feelings. It is clear that Berger either denies that a person can truly repent certain types of crimes or that, alternatively, even if he can, his repentance should be spurned by all moral actors and he should be treated as if he has done no penance at all. Such a penitent should be lumped with the unrepentant: he should be regarded forevermore not only as one who was once given over to evil, but as one who is evil still. He should be thus regarded even if we strongly believe in his sincerity.

This view is echoed by several other contributors. Rabbi Arthur Hertzberg is resolute in withholding any word of consolation. "The crimes in which this SS man had taken part are beyond forgiveness by man, and even by God, for God Himself is among the accused." That would seem to be definitive, but Hertzberg goes further and looks for elements of guilt in Karl beyond the atrocity to which he confesses. He places Karl

among the fanatics: "This personal history of the dying soldier made him more, and not less, guilty. This young man had not drifted into being a Nazi, for he was raised by a mother who was a pious Catholic and a father who never wavered in his opposition to Hitler and his followers." Like Berger, Hertzberg takes the very act that Karl is confessing and uses it to accuse him: "The dying member of the SS should have risked losing his own life rather than become a racist murderer or a careerist killer." Yes, of course: if, at every moral crossroads, we had all done what we should have done instead of what we did, we would already be inhabiting the kingdom of God. It seems a strange conversation to have with a man of the cloth: "I should not have done X, and I wish to atone for it." "Well, X is what you should not have done. There is no atonement for X." Apparently, an act of contrition is valid and acceptable only if performed by a person who has nothing to apologize for: atonement is for the blameless; expiation belongs to the innocent. In Hertzberg's moral universe, the only people deserving of forgiveness are those who have done nothing wrong.

Hertzberg mentions a minor fact of history that has been useful in discrediting the sometime plea of the perpetrators that they had no choice except to obey orders: "The Nazi regime did allow 'faint-hearted' soldiers to ask for other assignments." Close readers of the historical record know that "the Nazi regime" rarely had fixed policies that applied through all its competing departments. Some soldiers in the murderous *Einsatzgruppen* were indeed reassigned when their morale sagged under the weight of the continuous mass killings of men, women, and children; but doubtless there were differences from one unit to the next in how a commanding officer would have reacted to such signs of "faint-heartedness." However, Hertzberg, in common with so many

other commentators, alters the narrative in order to damn the dying soldier: it is clear that Karl did not join the SS with the idea of murdering Jews; and in fact the atrocity was sprung upon his unit without prior warning and was the first and only such action in which he participated. Certainly he could have refused to participate. He would likely have been executed; at the least, he would have been severely punished for refusing to obey an order in the midst of an ongoing military operation. But he could not have asked for another assignment *before* he knew the nature of this one, which he discovered only when he was commanded to take part in it.

I also find it interesting that Hertzberg fails to see the ethical opportunism involved in requesting a transfer to "cleaner" work. The Nazi regime was willing to accommodate the squeamishness of a handful of overly sensitive soldiers, but had the numbers increased to the point of threatening the mission, the customary harsh reprisals would have been employed. The SS was especially notorious for draconian punishments of minor infractions and for reprisals against family members. Karl would not have saved the life of a single Jew had he asked to be reassigned. He would only have lightened his own conscience while someone else's would have been the heavier for taking on the work he eschewed. But in all of this discussion, we move outside the narrative: Karl never makes the excuse that he had no choice except to participate, or that he was under orders and had to obey. Similarly, he never portrays himself as having been "taken in" by the Hitler Youth. He owns his youthful patriotism and he owns the deed he confesses.

Lawrence Langer, whose niche has been the publication of numerous unedited

testimonies provided by survivors of the Holocaust, is as emphatic as Hertzberg: "The mass murder of European Jewry is an unforgivable crime." As for the specific atrocity that Karl relates: "*Can* one repent such a monstrous deed? I do not see how." Yet Langer, like Berger and Hertzberg, does not rest in the absoluteness of this judgment, which makes further discussion superfluous by rendering it irrelevant whether Karl is sincere or not. He is worried that the dying man may get away with something:

"Although many have hailed the sincerity of the SS man's repentance, we have no way of verifying this. All we have is Wiesenthal's remembered account, a reproduced voice, not an authentic one." And Langer joins other commentators in blaming Karl for suborning a Jew to hear his confession:

Ironically, in asking forgiveness of a Jew, the SS man transfers the weight of moral decision from himself to one of his potential victims. . . . For me, the SS man's request betrays his utter failure to understand the nature of his crime: it seems a desperate last gesture to escape his guilt

Moreover, Langer finds Karl to be "deftly silent" about why he joined the Hitler Youth, and later the SS, against the will of his parents, and "most important of all, why he had to wait until he was dying to feel the time had come for repentance and forgiveness."

But Karl is not deftly silent about these matters – he relates them forthrightly. It is the reader who, with ordinary empathy, understands that Karl was young and susceptible, probably no more than 13 when he joined the Hitler Youth, and only 18 when he volunteered for the SS. As for the timing of the plea for forgiveness, it is a longstanding custom that deathbed confessions occur just before death, and from a bed. However, Karl is explicit that his feelings of guilt began immediately with the massacre.

Langer joins with Berger and Hertzberg in recapitulating the moment of guilt:

The real test of the SS man's spiritual integrity came at the moment he received the order to shoot. At that instant he was still a morally free man (assuming he had not taken part in earlier crimes). But agreeing to shoot instead of deferring to a higher authority and disobeying the order, he failed the test and permanently cut himself off from the possibility of forgiveness.

To generalize this statement: We are morally free and still have our spiritual integrity until the moment that we sin, at which time we fail the test and pass beyond forgiveness. Langer out-Calvins Calvin here. But blanching, perhaps, at the harshness of such a proposition, immediately he amends it: "This may not be true for other crimes – but the mass murder of European Jewry is not an ordinary crime."

It is not often that we are tempted to accuse a writer who is describing the Holocaust of overstatement, but Langer, along with other respondents, is driven to rhetorical excess by Wiesenthal's question. Genocide may not be an "ordinary" crime, but sadly it is not an unusual one. Langer's work with survivor testimony has led him to believe that such testimony alone is valid. He feels that the sufferings of the victims must remain central to our understanding of atrocity, and that any attention at all to the perpetrators threatens to occlude that understanding. He thus offers an intellectual's version of the hardline position of the man-in-the-street. The theory seems to be that our only hope of preventing future atrocities is to immerse ourselves in the wrong done to the victims and fill ourselves with such feelings of horror and repugnance that we could never become the doers of such deeds; concomitant with that is a determination to make it clear to all would-be perpetrators that they will be punished as criminals to

the maximum extent of the law and treated as pariahs for the rest of their lives. The would-be genocidalists must be made to foresee, at the moment of temptation, that they will be abandoning all hope; and Langer strangely pursues them even into Dante's Hell, which he no doubt considers a figment of the Christian imagination.

But it has been demonstrated repeatedly in the years since the Holocaust that historical memory does not suffice to shame the perpetrators of new genocides. When we read about the actions of the Khmer Rouge in Cambodia or the Hutu killing squads in Rwanda, it seems likelier that film footage of the extermination of the Jews may have inspired these new *genocidaires* to emulation rather than revulsion. It is the disturbing quality of genocide that those marked for extermination are seen as the real perpetrators, and therefore no feeling of empathy toward them is allowable. In other words, the feeling of a genocidal perpetrator toward his victims is exactly Langer's feeling toward Karl – that no particle of mercy toward the miscreant is permissible, and no compassion for him as a fellow human being, because he is now beyond the human pale.

The disgust with Karl makes his condemners not merely incurious about him but opposed in principle to trying to understand him at all. But we must try to comprehend the psychological forces that turn ordinary people into agents of extermination. Here another statement by Jonathan Littell, this time in an interview with the Israeli newspaper *Haaretz* (May 29, 2008), is illuminating:

In general I am much less interested in victims than I am in perpetrators. That's because they are the ones who are doing something and changing the reality. It's very easy to understand the victim: Something terrible happens to him and he reacts accordingly. But in terms of trying to

understand something, there is nothing to examine. The perpetrator is more complicated to understand, along with the apparatus that activates him. By means of the attempt to give a voice to the perpetrator, lessons can be learned that will affect the way we look at the world today.

Our reluctance to adopt the point of view of the perpetrator stands between us and any possibility of preventing genocide in the future.

Arthur Waskow is a rabbi who uses the mystical language of the Kabbalah to excoriate Karl and to sadistically picture his punishment, which is for him to be read out of the human race and ostracized to the last possible degree short of perpetual solitary confinement. In a vocabulary of religious mania, with capital letters repeatedly utilized to express the Immense Cosmic Perspective to which this author has ready access, Waskow indicts Karl for metaphysical crimes vastly beyond the ordinary imagination. Perhaps you thought that Karl only participated in a military atrocity, under orders. No: Karl "shattered the Ultimate Unity shattered the Four Worlds that are One World . . . the Worlds of Doing, Relating, Knowing, and Being. . . ."

What you ask of me is to join with you to restore this Unity in each of the Four Worlds. . . .

I cannot do it. This is why: There is no way for you to repair the physical damage to the Jews you yourself murdered, let alone those whose murder and torture you helped organize and celebrate. . . . And, in terms of Spirit, there is no way for you to repair our sense of God in hiding.

Here, and not for the first time in *The Sunflower*, a clergyman, of all people, rejects any possibility of remorse and atonement for a sin because the offender should not have committed the sin in the first place. Apparently, the only people who are entitled to

repent are those who are sinless.

I may be able to make these repairs for myself (at least the ones in Relationship and Spirit): we Jews may be able together to do these for ourselves; but not with you. You can take no part in these three repairs. So I cannot "forgive" you.

Karl is to be excluded from the human community. He is forbidden to help repair the damage he has done, although in many schemes of retribution he would be denominated as the very person to do the reparative work.

You are a teacher of what is now possible. . . . From you I learn that sadism can be technologized and mass-produced. . . .

Waskow must have only the most passing acquaintance with history if he believes that the Nazis were the first practitioners of technologized, mass-produced violence. (The word "sadism" is inserted, like dozens of Waskow's words, merely to heighten the rhetorical overkill.)

From you I learn the raw, raging Power – one aspect of God – that has come roaring into the world, into human hands.

Waskow is ruminating on a plane too high for me to reach as he passes directly from the raw, raging Power of Nazi atrocities to the raw, raging Power that is, he tells us (with the same confidence that he tells us *everything*), one of the aspects of God. Waskow next meditates upon the *tikkunim* (repairs) that *he* must undertake to clean up Karl's mess, including "the need to shape a deeper and broader sense of community among the peoples and species of the earth" (excluding Karl) and "the need to relocate

God not Up There on a kingly throne but In Here, among us, between us, within us"
(but not among or between us and even the most penitent Nazis).

Waskow has now explained his verdict and prepared the ground for the pronouncement of Karl's sentence:

I can learn from you the need to do these things, but I cannot do them with you. I can talk with you, but I cannot touch you, love you, or pray with you. So I thank you for being my teacher, and I leave you also in the three Worlds of Body, Heart, and Spirit – alone, cut off, an alien in the alien corner of the world you yourself have cut off from the Flow of Life.

We did not need a contemporary example to judge how filthy the religious imagination can be: we have had centuries of Christian fantasies, courtesy of all the great saints but especially Augustine and Aquinas, about the torments of Hell, which, in keeping with God's notion of proportioning the punishment to the crime, will be eternal – the first trillion years merely the beginning of the beginning. These "saints" went on to aver that the blessed in Heaven would be allowed to witness the tortures of the damned in Hell as one of the rewards for their godly lives. A great and terrible sickness must afflict us that we have conjured up these visions at all, much less robed them in vestments of cosmic justice. One hopes that Waskow felt better after penning this essay. One would like to think that *some* good could have come from it.

Cynthia Ozick's contribution is titled *Notes Toward a Meditation on "Forgiveness"* and is the longest in the book, in keeping with a general pattern that the more vengeful the essay, the more prolix it is. In Ozick's reading, "Vengeance, only vengeance, knows pity for the victims." On the other hand, "how stony to the slaughtered" is forgiveness.

Ozick retells Wiesenthal's moment of waving the fly away from the helplessly trussed-up soldier, making it clear that she would prefer that Simon had not done Karl this kindness. But rather than criticize him, she pushes a paradox that I find hard to follow: she says that Simon was able to pity Karl and brush away the fly only because he did *not* forgive him. Had he forgiven him and the fly had then buzzed about Karl's head . . .

He would not have noticed it at all. Whoever forgives the murderer blinds himself to the vastest letting of blood – how then should he see the smallest mite?

In her moral economy, forgiveness not only disrespects the dead, it also blinds its exponent to all suffering endured by victims everywhere; and thus a forgiving person will not even see the fly that is tormenting the dying man – he is that disabled by his reflexive kindness from having a decent ethical perspective.

After this fascinatingly mixed review of Wiesenthal's humane impulse, Ozick takes up the repentance of the dying soldier and finds it believably sincere – and therefore all the worse for that. It is a sign that he is even more culpable than the beastly Nazis who went on boasting to the end of their days about their murderous exploits. Karl had the benefit of a religious upbringing, she says: his very ability to belatedly see his wrongness, now that his conscience has awakened, means that once upon a time he chose to put his conscience to sleep. Therefore he lacks the excuse of the brutes who never had any conscience to begin with. Like several other contributors, Ozick turns Karl's contrition against him – if he knows *now* that it was wrong, why did he not know it *then*?

I have already noted those writers who speculate that Karl became remorseful

only on his deathbed: they choose to disbelieve his account that he could not sleep after the atrocity and began immediately to feel revulsion at his participation in it. I have said repeatedly that this suspicion, apart from indicating manifestly bad will toward Karl, violates the conditions of the experiment: the participants in the symposium are to put themselves in Simon's place, which means accepting his interpretation of Karl's genuineness. Ozick cuts right through this problem of when Karl's atonement began and how sincere it was: she does not care. It makes no difference to her if his remorse began immediately with a devastating jolt to his conscience or if it started two hours ago. Her judgment on him is precisely the same on either scenario, and it is ferocious and implacable. The conclusion to her essay:

Let the SS man die unshriven.
Let him go to hell.
Sooner the fly to God than he.

So articulate a hatred is, I am guessing, something that the author cherishes as an old and dear companion.

There is much that we cannot know about the psychology of good and evil. But in this instance, we know *some* things. We know that Karl's father despised Hitler and his mother brought him up in the Catholic Church and remembered him as the best of sons. We know that he came of age at a time when his youthful patriotism could be easily suborned into fealty to the Nazi regime, which came to power legally and governed the German nation throughout his adolescence. We should be able to understand that an idealistic German boy might have chosen to join the SS because he

viewed it as the aptest vehicle for his idealism – it was an elite corps, the best of the best. We know that he was pervasively lied to by the authorities whom he naturally trusted and respected – he was told that the Poles and the Russians had attacked Germany first, and that the Jews constituted an existential threat to the nation. We know the history of the invasion of the USSR – that the troops on the ground would not have had any inkling that their military duties would extend to massacres and exterminations of entire populations. Karl's account is believable in every detail – that in the middle of an action to secure a town taken in battle, he and the other members of his unit were suddenly ordered to burn down a house full of civilian men, women, and children and to shoot to death anyone who was seen trying to escape the inferno. We know that had he refused to obey that order or any other given by any member of his unit who outranked him, he might well have been executed – that in any case, such a refusal was unthinkable to infantrymen in any of the armies deployed in the war, including our own. We learn from him that he was conscience-stricken from the time that he participated in the atrocity until he was lying on his deathbed. The one witness who hears his confession vouches for his sincerity. We have every reason to acquit him of having entered upon this deed with any malice in his heart toward those who suffered from it; we understand that nothing he could have done would have saved the victims; we know that many decent people found themselves swept up by the Nazi war machine and realized its malignancy only when they were already participating in its crimes; we must have some awareness that we may have done no better than Karl under the circumstances.

Let us acknowledge powerful arguments on the side of those who view Karl with

unmitigated harshness. It is all too easy, in the case of a mass murder, to regard the victims *in the mass* – to emphasize instead the statistical enormity at the expense of cognizing each individual as a person who loved his or her life and was a repository of thoughts, plans, hopes, and affections. It is the more difficult to bring each individual to our minds separately, inasmuch as the victims are bound to be anonymous and undifferentiated. But we know that the victims had done nothing to deserve their fate. The murder of each was an atrocity; the murder of all was part of a larger war crime without a scintilla of palliation and of an almost incomprehensible horror. I believe that many of the contributors who are most determined to resist impulses of sympathy for Karl feel a sacred duty to those slaughtered innocents – in part, a duty to keep before their minds how senseless the cruelty and malevolence of their treatment was and how little can be said in extenuation of the deed. The blood of the slain calls out to us; and as we cannot raise the dead, we are left with only the imperative to honor them and to use our imaginations to remember and cherish, to the best of our ability, each lost life.

For one moment, however, consider this possibility: that among the persons in that house were some whose past conduct might not have withstood close moral scrutiny. They had lied and stolen, bullied and abused, and perhaps among them was even a killer or two. Did they deserve to die? Even to posit this thought experiment may strike the reader as repugnant. At least, it strikes me as repugnant. It was not for the German Army to blindly punish the handful of malefactors by eliminating the innocent along with the guilty. That way madness lies, obviously. All the people in the house were alive on that day, and all deserved to remain alive. Life is sacred; and each individual life is sacred.

How stands it, then, if we regard another mass of men – the German soldiers in Karl's unit – and reverse the proposition? Among all those perpetrators, surely a few were innocent. Had no one in that crowd of soldiers arrived at the fatal hour as himself a victim, having been subjected to myriad forms of coercion including mandatory military conscription? As we adjudge all the people in the house to be deserving of our compassion, knowing full well that some must have done wrong to the others, are we to adjudge all the soldiers in the unit to be utterly beyond our compassion, knowing full well that some must have been unwilling participants with no safe way to opt out?

There are several spiritual fallacies on display in the harsh responses to Karl's confession. Cynthia Ozick's is perhaps only the most overt and conspicuous in her belief that compassion for the victims of evil absolutely precludes compassion for the perpetrators. I would count on most readers to grasp immediately the manifest absurdity of such a stance. Several smaller fallacies, less easily spotted, are implicit in this one: that compassion is like a natural or financial resource, finite and therefore necessarily economized; that not only must it be spent carefully and wisely, but on some people it must not be spent at all; that if I *do* spend any of it on an undeserving person, I have so dishonored it that I can be said to lack it altogether. More specifically in this case, if I show any compassion for the Jewish victim in this dyad, I must show none to the German perpetrator; and, as already indicated by the overriding axiom, if I do make the mistake of spending compassion on both persons, this will be tantamount to withdrawing what I spent on the deserving person and bestowing the entire amount on the undeserving person. My compassion for the evildoer is evil in itself, and also re-victimizes the victim.

At a lesser level of pathology are those responses that are equally categorical about the monstrous error of compassion in this particular situation, and lack only Ozick's mad philosophy of implacable revenge and unabating hatred. I have mentioned the fear that seems to infect many contributors that they will be taken in by the soldier – that it is worth going to any extreme of harshness and mercilessness to avoid being "played," as if that would be the worst thing that could happen to us.

There also seems to be a terrible fear that we will not have condemned the Holocaust fully enough if we give any attention at all to what motivated the perpetrators. Yet I am unaware of the existence of anyone, other than an anti-Semite or Neo-Nazi, who downplays the monstrosity of the Shoah. It does not seem to me that we are in danger of minimizing the moral atrocity of the genocidal murder of those six million people who had done nothing to harm their neighbors. I am perhaps blissfully ignorant, but I have not often met the person who needed to be persuaded that Hitler was evil – he is, in fact, in today's world, accepted as having been iconically evil. (The main dissenters I have met with have not been Nazi sympathizers but ardent anti-communists, obsessed with making Stalin or Mao out to be the bigger villain.) Yet a number of contributors seem to feel that our response has not yet risen to the level of indignation that is appropriate to this moral crime. We are called upon to certify our own moral clarity by raising our voices even louder than before. Not to do so calls our own moral clarity into question. Are we really afraid of going too easy on Nazism? No, but apparently we are afraid that someone else will accuse us of this dereliction – someone else who is more purple-faced with rage than we are, and therefore ostensibly demonstrates greater warmth of feeling for the victims. Hearing of a

perpetrator who, on his deathbed, hoped to receive from a word of forgiveness, the possessors of the requisite clarity become enraged all over again and take great satisfaction in Wiesenthal's refusal to speak that word. This is understandable; but in a number of cases, these paragons of clarity go on to abuse, articulately and sometimes vociferously, anyone who merely disagrees with them as being little better than Karl himself. Even Wiesenthal comes in for criticism on two grounds: that he failed to acquaint Karl's mother with her son's crime in Ukraine and with Karl's final wickedness of despicably attempting to suborn a Jew into saying a kind word to him; and that he convened the symposium at all, which suggests that he had second thoughts about his own impeccable conduct and therefore himself lacks moral clarity. Here it seems that the lust for vengeance has metastasized prodigiously. In the minds of these avengers, the taint of evil seems to have spread well beyond even those tens of millions of Germans and their allies who directly or indirectly participated in the atrocity: it now attaches itself to anyone who thinks incorrectly about the matter.

We have an especially notable fallacy expressed by the view that, in the teeth of the aphorism that to understand all is to forgive all, it is a mistake even to *attempt* to understand – that understanding is tantamount to exculpation, and that the investigation into motives and causes is unforgivable. And once again, the most extreme exponents of this view go further and say that anyone who disagrees with them and *does* wish to investigate the phenomenon from the viewpoint of the perpetrators is himself evil.

This touches upon the greatest error of all – that the way to fight fire is with fire. To eradicate evil, we must emulate the evildoers themselves: we must stop at nothing.

Their first act was to identify *their* victims as evil, and next to give themselves a blank check to eradicate them. Very well; we must better the instruction, congratulating ourselves, perhaps, that we do not propose to liquidate Karl and others like him physically – only morally, by permanently ostracizing them from the human community. Ozick wants Karl, if left alive, to be treated like a insect – a fly perhaps – someone whom it would sully her to recognize as sharing any human attribute with her.

In contemplating the thought experiment of whether we should have said a kind word to Karl on his deathbed, we can pause over some other things that we know, or should know, since we have time for reflection and are under none of the constraints that operated on Wiesenthal when the incident occurred. We are at leisure to think about the lessons that history has taught us. We know that the greatest evil occurs when some people project evil onto other people – that Hitler projected his murderous hatred *of* the Jews *onto* the Jews and convinced himself that they were trying to destroy the German nation with malice aforethought. This evil is compounded when we think in abstractions and treat a whole population as a single entity, as Hitler did with his monolithic view of "International Jewry"; we then attribute to every individual member of the group a malignant characteristic that allegedly defines the group itself – as if millions of separate persons could constitute a single evil personality. We know too that in order to nourish in ourselves the requisite fear and loathing of the enemy, we must decommission our empathy and refuse to put ourselves in the shoes of those persons. This enables us to place them beyond the pale of humanity. We know that moral judgmentalism and self-righteousness rarely help to bring about justice and instead issue in the great purifying campaigns that end in ethnic cleansing. We know

that hatred is toxic and contagious. We know that an unforgiving attitude has long been deplored, in even our earliest scriptures – writings that otherwise may seem to represent primitive humanity in its moral infancy – whereas forgiveness, generosity of spirit, and ordinary kindness have been extolled time immemorial. At the end of the *Iliad*, after a prolonged bloodbath has culminated in Achilles' killing of Hector, the great Greek warrior evinces all these better angels of our nature in returning Hector's body to his father. As Micah said, we know what is good: to do justly, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with God.

We can see that Karl had an excuse for how, without being given over to evil, he came to participate in an evil act. What excuse can we have, if, out of the hardness of our hearts, we out-Karl Karl, who never projected upon the poor people in the house any evil that made them deserving of death, but we project upon him so much evil that it moves him completely out of the range of human compassion and off the grid of humanity, to the point where we withhold from him any consoling word and can even say, "Let him go to hell"? After such knowledge *of ourselves*, what forgiveness?

As an antidote to this poison, I opt for the Dalai Lama's contribution to *The Sunflower*. It opens with a simple declaration: "I believe one should forgive the person or persons who have committed atrocities against oneself and mankind." So blanket a statement, so general and encompassing, must express a principle that comes from a religious perspective, and the speaker may be pronouncing it automatically without much emotion. Those who prefer to withhold any word that might comfort the dying German soldier can wave it away as *pro forma* Buddhist teaching. But the Dalai Lama is aware

that it is a perspective that is not easily attained, and immediately he brings it down from its blandly general application as a religious precept to its very deep resonance for him personally – for he fled the Chinese invasion of Tibet in 1959 and barely escaped, and has since seen his country brutalized in a manner that all too horrifically resembles the Nazi depredations in Eastern Europe. He acknowledges the difficulty of applying this teaching to the oppressors of his nation, in light of the many Tibetans who "have lost their lives due to massacre, execution, starvation, and suicide." He admits that it is an ongoing struggle to "preserve our Buddhist culture of nonviolence and compassion." But he ends, as I will, with this paragraph:

Here I would like to relate a very interesting incident. A few years back, a Tibetan monk who had served about eighteen years in a Chinese prison in Tibet came to see me after his escape to India. I knew him from my days in Tibet and remember last seeing him in 1959. During the course of that meeting I had asked him what he felt was the biggest threat or danger while he was in prison. I was amazed by his answer. It was extraordinary and inspiring. I was expecting him to say something else; instead he said that what he most feared was losing his compassion for the Chinese.