

THE UNHOLY ALLIANCE BETWEEN STRAIGHTLINING AND SINGLEMINDEDNESS

Sin is anything extended far enough in a straight line, and straightlining is the shortest distance between sin and hell. The first time this geometry analogy popped into my mind and out of my mouth in public, it was impressed on my memory because of the group's laughter and eagerness to talk about. Maybe they all had geometry in high school, and that's what I connected with....This thinksheet meditates on the dark underside of the convergence of straightline thinking and single-minded action.

1. First, a joke from Saturday (it's now Friday, 26Apr85, Loree's 60th birthday): Norbert Wiener, inventor-coiner of "cybernetics" and "cyborg" and a world-class model of the alliance this thinksheet is worried about, met, in an MIT corridor, and old student of his, who introduced NW to his companion (in whose NY home Loree and I spent last weekend and acquired the story). After a brief conversation notably desultory on NW's part, he broke off with "Which way was I going when you interrupted me?" BH (our friend): "That way." NW: "Oh, then I've had lunch." Innocuous old German till you remember that his people gave us and history the Holocaust: people capable of tunnel vision (Romans, Germans, Japanese, Russians, Americans) become high achievers, usually in the service of both heaven and hell. For *tunnel vision is in the startup costs of "planning your work and working your plan" --intellectual straightlining, concentrating singlemindedly of the proximate activity logically "indicated" for the ultimate goal (the "objectives" toward "goals" in managerial thinking, of which the First and Second Worlds have an oversupply and the Third World an undersupply).*

2. I heard Hannah Ahrendt face-to-face use her famous phrase (about Eichmann) "the banality of evil." "I was only doing my job," said death-camps czar Eichmann. So how can the Holocaust, being banal, be "unique," as so many of those who rightly call on us to remember it insist that it is? It was, indeed, an outside banality, an enormity, an obscenity. But is not calling it unique removing it from all contexts in which it would be reasonably discussed--indeed, as it was for Eichmann, for whom Hitler's will was "unique," of ultimate (undiscussable) sanctional force. (no sanctions of consequence applying)? Part of the evil fallout of Holocaust is the irrationality of many who defend it as "unique" and attack those who (like me) call for rational control through our God-given power to multi-context our problems by use of all our powers.

3. I find it ominous when anybody becomes singleminded, because singlemindedness is amoral and easily passes over into unconscious immorality (as Robt. Oppenheimer and his "bomb" pals, who worked on their infernal machine with "daily joy"--as doubtless did also, at the same time, the German *Waffen* scientists--hilariously parodied in the film "Dr. Stranglove"). Just try to have a rational, cool discussion of, e.g., abortion in USA 1985!

4. All the major ancient Near Eastern peoples stormed trough Damascus' Straight St. --the military always favoring straight roads (mil. action being essentially straightline and singleminded). Supreme in history, here, were the Romans, whose Pax Romana Britannica was maintained for 4 cs. along perfectly straight roads (regardless of swamps, steeps, or rivers)--the same efficient transportation-communication system that made the Pax Romana possible in the Mediterranean world. Ambiguity: so much good out of so much violent evil!

5. One important context for seeing Holocaust is antimontheism. Instances: The Jews banned from Rome, AD/CE 40; the AD/CE 8th c. genocide of Christians in China; the Roman Empire's sporadic persecution of Christians (parallel with efforts to bring polytheism back into vitality--esp. Julian the Apostate); Alfred Rosenberg's Nazi philosophy, with its hatred of the Jewish-and-Christian god and its love of the ancient Teutonic deities; Lenin's insistence (against my old friend E.E.Carr) that "God" would have to yield place to "history."

*Should Reagan place a wreath there? Whatever your opinion on this, you're right.

OVER

Well then, how can the world protect itself against straight-line, singleminded evil without quashing the creative human spirit that works, often straight-line and singlemindedly, for good? My question is more important than any of these stream-of-consciousness responses to it:

1. We can teach logic to children and remedial logic to adults, both in the context of reason. The Holocaust was logical in eliminating (1) cripples of all kinds and (2) monotheists, natural enemies of the gods/goddesses sitting around Valhalla-- but was it rational? Logic is only one of reason's tools. As I type this in my office and look up, I see my electronic cross, made for me as a gift by a NY artist who in 1962 dismantled the earliest commercial computer and turned the whole of it into Jesus crosses as a form of action prayer that the third industrial revolution, viz., electronics, would not overwhelm and control the human spirit (on the mindless assumption that "What can be done should be done."). Ralph Holdeman's action was highly rational, though the electronic crosses are highly illogical in that the computer parts in the "electronic" crosses are in jumbled chaos! His action parallels Emerson's 1835 words: "Things are in the saddle and riding men."
2. This one is tougher: We can contain the self-and-other destructive tendencies in earth's peoples. I can hear my Alsatian greatgrandmother's voice; her parents hid her under attic floorboards when German-speaking central Europe was endangered by the swelling of people-rivers east and west; and her daughter my grandmother often said in my ears, "Die böse Franzosa! Die böse Russa!" The Russias have calmed down their expansiveness somewhat, and the French have given up on it since Vietnam (Dienbienphu) and Algeria. As for the Germans: sitting next to Kurt Scharff (Bishop of Berlin-Brandenburg, of both West and East Germany) at lunch one day, I asked him "How many Germanies should there be?" Said he: "Never fewer than two." Were he still alive, he'd be fighting against the present unionist sentiment in both Germanies. When at the Charlottensburg Palace, I thought "Here Frederick the Great, King of Prussia, played music with Bach; and from here Bismarck in 1875 unified Germany, which I think--in light of WWI & WWII--to have been mainly a bad idea. I'm against keeping the Germans down (which Versailles tried unsuccessfully to do), but I'm for keeping them apart! Would you like to hear my programs for containing Buddhists (who're now expanding Westward) and Jews and Americans and Christians? I thought not. My principle, however, stands: Peoples are most dangerous where strongest, which in this sense is also where they're weakest. Because it is a pan-human characteristic of human beings singly and in groups, hybris is everybody's problem--singly, relationally, collectively. Strength-power expands to fill voids, and the snake (Gn.3) knew it. (Freedom is not a void; it's the gift the God of the Garden gave uniquely to the first humans. But the snake convinced the first humans that freedom consists in "doing your thing" as though God were absent, a Void.)
3. Yesterday at MIT the world saw the first mini-demo of a vacuum train that may travel NY to LA in 21 minutes! The Roman road-builders are back, with as always no terrain-problems that can't be overcome (rather, undercome; it's a tunnel). No moral change: arithmetic-geometric--logarithmic progress only increases the size of good and evil. I can't agree that "genocide" should be used exclusively of the Holocaust. "Uniqueness" as a term applied to history is rhetorical, and should not occlude reason (as rhetoric always does when it claims to be rational). Part of the overage, the excessive cost of the Holocaust, is this tendency to claim that here "uniquely" reason and rhetoric are synonyms. In all of human history, Jews (including the earliest Christians) have been the most successful in theological containment of tragedy, in cutting losses, in damage control: as long as rhetorical inflation of the Holocaust continues, Jews and the rest of us will be unable to bring the Holocaust under theological control both active (as somehow making sense) and passive (as within "tragedy" and the mystery of good and evil).
4. So should Reagan put a wreath on a German cemetery that has 47 SS graves? Of course not! Some fool on his staff, undersensitive to the Holocaust, erred; and yet the local Am. general has done it every year, beginning 1959. So why not?