1 On Understanding
Behavior Control

"What, precisely, is behavior control?" ask the editors of a recent series of books on the subject. They answer as follows:

It is simply the manipulation of the environmental conditions to which an organism is exposed so as to bring about a definite behavioral result: to produce new behavior, to maintain or change the organism's tendency to engage in current behavior, or to eliminate past behavior.[1]

I have written this book because the control of human behavior is one of the most important issues in every society and because I believe that this contemporary definition is dangerously misleading. It is at best an uninformative generalization to say that the behavior of organisms can be controlled by the manipulation of environmental conditions, and at worst a way of making behavior control appear scientific and beneficent. What makes such a definition dangerous is its failure to take account of the fact that certain human beings are invariably in control of the manipulations in question, that the manipulations always take place in a social context, and that the aim of the manipulations is often to regulate the conduct of other human beings. It is precisely because the effort to control human behavior necessarily takes place in a social context that it is necessary to regard it as more than "simply" a technical matter of manipulating certain material conditions in order "to bring about a definite behavioral result."

The position taken here is that behavior control needs to be understood as part of the broader field of psychotechnology, which encompasses both the effort to define (or measure) human nature and the effort to control human behavior. Because the form and content of this field vary with different societies and historical circumstances, it is impossible properly to characterize it (let alone to understand it) without taking its contextual relationships into account. Accordingly, I have undertaken in this book to describe psychotechnology in a way that pays particular attention to the social and political goals of its deployment in various contexts and to the moral and ethical values underlying its development in particular directions. The book does not purport to provide an internal account of psychotechnology but focuses, instead, on the relationship between its internal theoretical and practical aspects and the external world of social existence of which it is necessarily a part. The approach that I have taken has been guided throughout by my own desire to understand why efforts to develop and deploy psychotechnological solutions to pressing social problems (such as violence, juvenile delinquency, drug addiction, and crime) have tended to precipitate such vehement (and sometimes violent) partisan disputes.

In the prolonged process of putting my ideas together, I feel that I have learned a great deal and have begun to develop what is for me a new way of thinking about the nature of social problems. Although still far from perfect or complete, the perspective embodied in this book seems to

me to provide a simple yet intellectually satisfying way of understanding what makes contemporary psychotechnology so often and so deeply controversial. At its heart is the idea that many superficially dissimilar controversies over psychotechnology are variations on a single fundamental theme. In other words, my thesis is that despite wide variations from time to time and place to place in the form and content of psychotechnology, and despite many obvious differences in the issues around which controversies have swirled, they share a certain common denominator, which has been obscured by the tendency (prevalent in many current discussions) to treat each controversy as if it were an isolated or independent phenomenon.

What are those constancies? My answer is that they comprise a relationship (or rather a network of relationships) between two distinct, but closely interconnected domains of human social existence.

The first domain, which I shall refer to as the domain of meaning, encompasses an almost bewildering array of different conceptual "systems" (including theological, artistic, philosophical and scientific ones) whose most obvious common denominator is their effort to define the world in terms of human existence and purpose. This includes, of course, an interest in describing as precisely as possible, what it means to be a specifically *human* being. It is the conjunction (or, as it has often been, the collision) of such disparate conceptual systems over the meaning of human nature with which this book is mainly concerned.

The second domain, no less important for my thesis than the first, is the domain of power; the domain in which—at any given time or place— there exists a socially organized effort to manage the course of human affairs. Suffice it for the moment to say that this domain encompasses the political behavior of human beings at all levels of social complexity, and that political behavior frequently entails a degree of conflict among contending social forces. Such conflicts commonly turn out to be disputes about the propriety or justifiability of certain kinds of behavior, and efforts to resolve them are frequently marked by struggles among the contending forces to influence the behavior of their adversaries, "to produce new behavior, to maintain or change the . . . tendency to engage in current behavior, or to eliminate past behavior." In other words, my contention is that the exercise of political power often turns out to be intelligible as an exercise in behavior control, and vice versa.

Whether or not such exercises are successful, and irrespective of whether success is measured in terms of mutual compromise or in terms of the ability of one group to bring the behavior of another group under control, all controversies over the propriety or justifiability of behavior, and all socially organized attempts to regulate human conduct, take place at the interface between the domains of meaning and power. Like the "domains"

that it joins, this interface is an abstraction, but that does not make it any less real. Indeed, it is my intention to argue that the interplay between meaning and power across this interface not only defines the nature and content of what passes for psychotechnology in any given time, place, or circumstance but also reflects (and helps to reinforce) the broader system of social arrangement of which it is a part. In a society where social policy is ostensibly guided by conventional principles of reason, logic, and justice (which is to say, wherever leadership professes to operate rationally), it might reasonably be expected that systematic efforts to regulate the conduct of individuals or groups will generally correspond to what the leadership conceives to be the essential characteristics of those individuals or groups. In other words, ideas about human nature will influence judgments about the reasonableness of particular social policy objectives and the necessity of specific behavior control programs. But to say that ideas about human nature are likely to have social policy consequences and behavior control implications is only to make an obvious point: what people believe about the essential nature of human beings has a powerful influence upon social expectations. Such beliefs tend to shape the ways in which people in a given social context are treated, and these in turn, significantly influence how they behave.

If ideas about human nature can actually shape social reality, then they obviously deserve to be regarded as powerful instruments of behavior control in their own right. Indeed, it is precisely because of the demonstrably self-fulfilling character of social expectations that I have insisted upon treating definitions of human nature and measurements of human diversity (in addition to the material tools and techniques of behavior control) as a part of psychotechnology.

What determines whether or not a given idea about human nature forms the basis for rationalizing a particular social policy objective or justifies a specific form of behavior control? It is one purpose of my analysis to answer this question by showing that specific relationships between ideas about human nature and programs of behavior control exist in any society. By substantiating the proposition that psychotechnological theories and procedures tend to reflect and reinforce the interests and objectives of dominant social groups, I will show why it is both false and misleading to answer the question with which I began (the definition of behavior control) merely in terms of the available tools and techniques of manipulation. The effort to depict psychotechnology as "simply" a matter of techniques serves to obscure the fact that all socially organized efforts to control human behavior are really efforts by some people to control the behavior of other people. It is also my contention that even the most sophisticated contemporary discussions of behavior control are based upon false and misleading ideas about human nature, versions of which

have been fostered since antiquity for the sole purpose of justifying the power of some people to control the behavior of others.

In undertaking to describe a more or less universal process by which ideas about human nature and techniques of behavior control are related to each other and to the organizational interests of powerful social groups, I do not necessarily cast doubt on the moral and ethical legitimacy of this process. I do not mean to suggest, in other words, that behavior control in itself is a bad thing or that there is something inherently sinister or con-spiratorial in the existence of a conjunction between efforts to regulate human conduct, to manage public affairs, and to describe human nature. On the contrary, my contention is that such a conjunction is a defining political characteristic of *all* social systems and that it is possible to learn something about the way in which a specific social system functions by analyzing the structure of a few of its distinctive subsystems and by identi-fying the pattern of their reciprocal relationships. Thus I intend to seek out the general principles governing the interplay between meaning and power as they manifest themselves in varying social contexts.

Let me insist before going further that this is not intended to be a mere academic exercise. In extreme instances questions about behavior control in human society can be (and have been) literally questions of life and death. Imagine, for example, that you are a senior staff member at a large psychiatric hospital located on the outskirts of a major city. The institu-tion is a major teaching center with a long and honorable medical tradition where high-quality clinical training has always been given to students and where patients have generally received the best possible treatments at the hands of skillful and humane experts in neurology and psychiatry.

Imagine, further, that in the company of other people like yourself—staff physicians, research scientists, administrators—a visiting dignitary is being conducted on a tour of inspection. The visitor, who has come from the nation's capital, is a recognized expert in the diagnosis, classification, and treatment of nervous and mental disorders and the author of numer-ous influential articles on such diverse topics as alcoholism, stress, epi-lepsy, head injury, and brain inflammation. His administrative credentials are similarly impressive: he is professor of psychiatry at one of the country's principal medical schools and directs a world-renowned clinic. Recently he has been organizing a massive psychotechnology program. A review by panels of experts of the past records and current behavioral status of every mental hospital patient in the country has led to the selec-tion of a large number of patients for inclusion in a special treatment group. This screening process followed a meeting, held about a year earlier, at which a group of top-level psychiatric experts and mental health offi-cials decided that special treatment centers should be built and put into operation at several hospitals throughout the country. Since the one

at "your" institution is among the first such installations to have been completed, the visitor has come to observe how the treatment phase of the project is being carried out.

The official tour of inspection has now very nearly reached its conclusion. You and your associates together with the distinguished visitor, observe through a small window as several hospital orderlies escort twenty mental patients into the clean and brightly illuminated treatment area. The patients stand about quietly as the orderlies leave, closing the door behind them. At a signal from one of your colleagues, a member of the hospital staff manipulates a control device. At first the patients seem unaffected; they continue to stand about quietly. Then, quite suddenly, they begin to gasp, grow agitated, stagger, cry out, and totter. Finally, each one drops to the floor. The treatment is over. Environmental manipulation has brought about a definite behavioral result: all twenty of the mental patients are dead.

Although I have presented it in the form of a hypothetical example, this episode actually occurred, as part of a project deliberately aimed at the administrative mass killing of mental patients which was conceived, organized, and carried out in Germany during the past half century. It bore the official designation, "The destruction of lives devoid of value," and was planned in detail at a conference of leading academic psychiatrists and public·officials in Berlin during the month of July 1939. One of those present was Dr. Max de Crinis, professor of psychiatry at Berlin University, head of the neuropsychiatric department as the Charité Hospital and a recognized expert on diverse neuropsychiatric subjects. As a member of the board of supervising physicians who were responsible for the project from its inception, Dr. de Crinis paid an official visit early in 1940 to the state mental hospital at Sonnenstein, near Dresden, where, under the circumstances already recounted, he witnessed the killing of at least twenty male mental patients by acute carbon monoxide asphyxiation. Although cited in the proceedings of the Nuremberg War Crimes Tribunal for his participation in the project, Dr. de Crinis never came to trial. During the Soviet encirclement of Berlin in 1945, he committed suicide with a government-supplied capsule of cyanide.

Is it possible to understand what transpired on that day at Sonnenstein? It is at first tempting to say that the episode hardly requires any explanation beyond the fact that it took place in Germany during the era of the Nazi Reich, and was one among many of the bizarre and inexplicable atrocities that took place in Europe during the Nazi period. Such a response defeats understanding rather than enhancing it. Indeed, what continues to demand an explanation is the very fact that the episode at Sonnenstein was not an isolated event. By mid-1940, scenes just like it had

become commonplace in mental hospitals all over Germany and, within a few short years, the project that Dr. de Crinis and his professional colleagues had created claimed the lives of an estimated 275,000 psychiatric patients, prisoners, and mentally retarded persons. "The destruction of unworthy life," which was the official overall designation of the Nazi project aimed at the mass extermination of millions of Jews, Slavs, and diverse other groups, followed in time, technique, and justification the precedent set by what purported to be a scientifically objective and morally and ethically neutral exercise in psychotechnology. It is one purpose of this book to trace a connection between the administrative mass killing of mental patients and the subsequent emergence of genocide as an official instrument of Nazi public policy. In effect, my analysis is intended to explain not only what took place at Sonnenstein but also how that episode was connected, on the one hand, to antecedents having nothing explicitly to do with the Nazi movement and, on the other hand, to consequences that not only encompass, but actually go beyond the specific manifestations of Nazi genocide.

At first, the barriers to such an analysis seem overwhelming. The very word "holocaust" seems to invite a retreat from explanation, as from some natural disaster. When confronted with a phenomenon of such monstrous proportions, it is tempting to fall back upon the idea that there are certain historical happenings that the human mind is inherently too weak and too limited ever to comprehend. As Walter Lippmann expressed it many years ago,

... the human mind must take a partial and simplified view of existence. The ocean of experience cannot be poured into the little bottles of our intelligence. The mind is an instrument evolved through the struggle for existence, and the strain of concentrating upon a chain of reasoning is like standing rigidly straight, a very fatiguing posture, which must soon give way to the primordial disposition to crouch or sit down.[2]

This book was written, I confess, from a crouch. But from where I have been sitting and reasoning, I have come to a conclusion quite the opposite of Mr. Lippmann's, namely, that the most formidable barrier to understanding Nazi genocide (and all forms of behavior control, whether or not they are matters of life and death) is not the primordial weakness of the human mind but rather the prevailing strength of certain social preconceptions. Reason, however it has evolved, seeks understanding through the methods of careful observation, analysis, and other forms of intelligent behavior, but even those who set out faithfully to follow reason are likely to be driven or enticed into accepting conclusions about the world they might otherwise reject as irrational. The struggle after meaning by a long line of theorists attests that existence is altogether safer and professional life more secure when one takes the "partial and simplified view of existence" upon

which the orderly functioning of certain powerful social institutions depends, institutions that sometimes resort to violence as a means of enforcing their particular view of existence. At such times, thinkers following reason in search of new views occasionally collide with bureaucrats following orders in defense of existing institutions. Collisions between those seeking to construct new meanings and the bureaucratic defenders of power may even be fatal, but even when neither fatal nor violent, their indirect effects may often reasonably be called matters of life and death.

When it comes to understanding a phenomenon such as Nazi genocide, it is easiest to take a "partial and simplified view;" to rest content with having "the little bottles of our intelligence" filled with a jumble of opaque assertions that serve to obscure the part of human existence they are supposed to explain. As a psychologist, I am personally most familiar with the "explanations" of Nazi genocide that take a psychological form. According to such explanations, the "holocaust" occurred because the personalities of the German people as a whole, and particularly of those who participated in, condoned, or had knowledge of Nazi genocide (and perhaps of the victims as well), were deeply and fatally flawed. In other words, the staggering sequence of events in which millions of men, women, and children were systematically persecuted, segregated, incarcerated, manipulated, and killed is supposedly comprehensible in terms of the peculiarly "authoritarian" mass psychology of the German people or as a reflection of the "sadistic" or "masochistic" character structure of their leaders. As I intend to show, however, the effort to explain events of such historic moment in terms of individual dementias or collective derangements is both facile and dangerous. Consider, for example, the explanations based on the allegedly demented or deranged minds of the political leaders who organized and commanded the overall enterprise. Despite its seductive appeal, psychological speculation explains very little, and the effort to invoke Hitler's "unconscious motives" ("his mother was unsuccessfully treated for breast cancer by a Jewish physician when he was a boy") or the psychological instability of his henchmen ("Goering was a drug addict; Goebbels a certifiable paranoid") as a key to understanding mass violence is tantamount to an exercise in political apologetics.

This is not to say that Nazi genocide was devoid of psychological dimensions, but only that attempts to explain genocide in psychological terms are devoid of real explanatory power. Hitler and his henchmen were not a group of psychotic demons who set blind social forces into motion. Furthermore, to the extent that psychohistorical description creates the misleading impression that events in the political and social domains can be "explained" in the narrowly private language of inner psychological determinants, psychohistory itself is an instrument of deception rather than a means of explanation.

A proper understanding of contemporary behavior control cannot be reached without tracing the path that it has followed in the process of becoming what it is today. By the same token, it is necessary to reach an understanding of Nazi genocide before modern exercises in behavior control can be properly understood. But if an understanding of Nazi genocide is a prerequisite for understanding other kinds of behavior control, and if the necessary understanding cannot be found by an analysis of the thoughts and actions of individual participants, what is to be done? My answer is that one must begin with the social context and the antecedent conditions from which genocide emerged as the ultimate instrument of behavior control. It is necessary to follow the sequence of events that led professional psychotechnologists to play a decisive guiding role in fashioning and implementing genocide as the "final solution" to many of Germany's pressing internal problems.

Many lines of converging evidence point to the importance of a few key concepts that took on special significance in the atmosphere of the emerging National Socialist movement. Of particular interest is a family of sociobiological ideas about human inequality and a specific class of political inferences drawn from Darwinism and summed up by such earlier catch phrases as "the struggle for existence" and "the survival of the fittest." Under the force of specific material circumstances—military, political, and economic—these phrases and others like them came to be interpreted at all levels of German society as having the force of universal laws of nature whose implications for public policy were logically obvious, scientifically justifiable, and morally compelling. I will show that the form and content of interpretations of human nature presented by English and American (as well as German) scholars of the time simultaneously reflected and helped to create the monstrous reality of Nazi genocide. Which is to say that Nazi genocide was not an aberrant symptom of national psychosis but a coldly calculated exercise in behavior control that clearly reflected the interplay of meaning and power in a particular place and time.

Considered in these terms, it becomes possible to understand how influential social forces were able to use the symbolic power of allegedly objective sociobiological science to foster, promote, defend, and justify the radical extermination of "biologically inferior" elements of the population; how the systematic preservation of "biologically superior" elements came to be regarded as a vital national necessity; and how the political leaders of a modern industrial society, although deeply divided by political disputes and chronically afflicted with economic troubles, continued to bolster the myths of Aryan supremacy and manifest destiny with biological arguments conducive to the belief that Germany was "naturally" fated to be the world's leading political, military, and economic power. The path was direct, from an allegedly objective brand of scientific discourse about

human inequality to a purportedly rational form of moral argument about "lives devoid of value" and thence to the final solution: "the release and destruction of lives devoid of value."

In order to understand this interplay of specific intellectual and material forces, it is necessary to analyze certain ideas about human nature and human diversity and to show how they became powerful instruments of behavior control in German society. The process, seen in historical perspective, not only belies the myth that Nazi genocide arose almost overnight in a society that was largely unprepared to receive it; it also reveals that, on the contrary, the basic sociobiological seeds of genocide were deeply planted in the fertile soil of German political consciousness long before Hitler and his Nazi movement existed.

But my analysis will do more than show that sociobiological ideas like "the struggle for existence" and "lives devoid of value" had been nurtured for some time before they were put to use by the Nazis on behalf of their psychotechnological objectives. Although the links with Nazi genocide are not difficult to trace, sociobiological ideas also have connections with other (and more contemporary) kinds of political partisanship and are thus linked to other kinds of behavior control. That is why it becomes pertinent to identify the source of modern behavior control technology in all its diverse forms, which is a particular set of ideas about human nature (in general) and human inequality (in particular).

The chain of ideas uncovered in the tracing leads deep into the past as well as to the present. In fact, the conceptual roots of modern behavior control (and of the controversies that surround it) lie buried in ancient legends about the creation of the world and myths about the genesis of humanity. Such myths, unchanged in their essence, are still used to define the basic nature of the human beings whose behavior is the subject of control and controversy today. Thus, the terms "genesis" and "genocide," in my title, were not frivolously chosen to provide a superficial play on words. On the contrary, they denote the two basic poles of my inquiry. On the surface, the most obvious thing about these two terms is their disparity. When the distance that separates them has been crossed, it will be clear, I hope, that many superficially dissimilar controversies about behavior control are deeply related to each other and that each one represents—in its own time and place—a particular transformation of a single fundamental and recurrent political paradigm; a paradigm in which conflicts between contending social forces express themselves as a ceaseless and kaleidoscopic interplay between the meaning of human nature and the power of behavior control.