



BOOK REVIEWS

Guy B. Adams and Danny L. Balfour, *Unmasking Administrative Evil*, 4th edition. Armonk, NY; London, England: M.E. Sharpe, Inc. (also Routledge), 2015. Pp. xx+222. ISBN 978-0765642912. \$44.95.

In a few words, the thesis of the book is that the end result of the use of technical rationality in organized living is often an evil of which we are unaware until after the fact. This is a newly realized problem of evil that can be translated into terms parallel to the traditional question of theodicy how can good, but fallible and not too powerful people do evil when they are doing their best to perform their jobs in apparently ordinary institutions? The authors' answer is that ordinary people *choose* to employ the commonly accepted standards of technical rationality, focusing exclusively on the narrow picture of their organization's policies and goals rather than looking at the broader picture of universal humane and ethical goals. The root of "masked evil," then, is technical rationality. The attitude of "just doing my job" permits one to avoid asking broad questions of ethics and allows one to narrow one's focus to issues of technique.

Two common questions about evil from a humanist point of view are 1) how much evil is due to good intentions

and 2) how much evil is due to the unintended consequences or side effects of social and technological changes? Situations that illustrate the first question are the great loss of life that occurred when trying to implement utopian plans such as happened during the terror of the French Revolution and the loss of life in the famines that resulted from Stalin's attempt to collectivize agriculture. The second situation is even more widespread, occurring during technological revolutions where ways of social life and entire cultures are lost. However, as Adams and Balfour point out in their emotionally wrenching book, the Holocaust produced a new question about evil that requires addressing: in our mundane organizations, how much evil is done of which we are unaware?

The authors of *Unmasking Administrative Evil* argue that the evil unwittingly depicted by Eichmann in his trial, "the banality of evil" discussed by Hannah Arendt, was a hitherto unknown unspeakable evil committed during the Nazi tyranny. The "banality of evil" was the unaware product of the apparently mundane actions of ordinary people in all spheres of organized life and institutions such as the civil service, the courts,

and not to be overlooked, institutions of “higher learning” and “research.” The authors suggest that today “the banality of evil” is committed in an unwitting manner in our supposedly humane institutions and that this evil is “masked” by the ordinary actions of ordinary people seeking to achieve excellence in their careers. The best practices of “technical rationality” or “instrumental rationality” that are employed in the guise of efficient and effective management and organizational practice today were studied by Max Weber in the bureaucracies of his day and those practices were used in the civil organizations of Nazi Germany.

Unfortunately, in juxtaposing the *masked* evil done *unwittingly* by organizations in liberal democracies with the *blatant* evil of the Holocaust done *wittingly but as a matter of course* by organizations in Nazi Germany and other tyrannies, the authors appear themselves to mask some important ethical distinctions. It appears the authors are saying that, because both evils were done by ordinary people in organizations using modern techniques of management and rational planning, both forms of society—Nazism and modern liberal democracies—are identical in the evil they do. The authors give the false appearance of wanting to blind us to the fact that there is a huge disparity between evils done wittingly as part of the mission of a fascist society dedicated to genocide and war, versus the wrongs done unwittingly in societies dedicated to achieving some form of good for all of their citizens. Indeed, to couple the term

“administrative” with “evil” is misleading because “evil” requires an intention and awareness to commit inhumane acts, an intention that is lacking in administrative policies in liberal democracies. But I think a reading of the book as having a subliminal message that fosters and reinforces a false equation of the wrongs done in liberal democracies with the wrongs done in totalitarian and genocidal nations is unjust.

To put the thesis of the book in Polanyian terms, the new problem of evil is that when evil occurs as a result of modern organizational life, it is often masked because the form of reason employed, technical rationality, has become part of the *tacit knowledge* of modern organizational life. Technical rationality in our time, called by the authors “praetorian times,” is said to manifest a sense of social decay and social disorder. “The Praetorian Guard was an elite military force that was originally created to protect the Roman emperors (perhaps analogous in some respects to the Waffen SS in Nazi Germany and more recently, Iraq’s Republican Guard). Over several hundred years of Roman history, the Guard gradually became a symbol of pervasive corruption and venality, and this is the sense in which the term is evoked here” (160). The sensitive reader may well consider this description of American social fabric to be exaggerated.

Our world should not be equated with the Nazi Reich; rather the unpremeditated evils of our world are often the result of ordinary persons trapped

in a social fabric not of their own weaving. Therefore, the authors ask us to look critically at the overall social structure of modern liberal democracies in “praetorian capitalism” (163 ff.) to see how ordinary people commit administrative evils under the pressure of governments expecting public institutions to perform according to the demands of market economics. The outsourcing of entire sectors of public institutions to private institutions results in public employees cutting important corners that lead to disasters with the loss of life, in the worst case, and with the loss of humanity and basic humane treatment in other horrendous cases. One needs to grit one’s teeth to read the following chapters for examples and analyses of such cases: Chapter 5 for the space shuttle disasters, Chapter 6 for the internment of many Japanese American citizens during WWII, and Chapter 7 for the treatment of prisoners in Abu Ghraib.

Two important concepts are introduced by the authors to explain how ordinary people, once they realize that the treatment of people by their organizations is awfully wrong, blinker their recognition of themselves doing anything immoral and deny their involvement in wrong. The first concept is regarding groups as “surplus populations”—treating a population and their very existence as a “problem” that needs a “solution.” They are regarded as analogous to pests or invasive species and diseases, epidemics, pandemics and plagues. The second concept is “moral inversion”—evaluating immoral actions taken to “solve the

problem” as morally just. How the ordinary public servant and the ordinary corporate worker adopt these methods for hiding the wrong they do from their own sight is through a process the authors discuss in chapters 1 and 2 about the psychological dynamics of “splitting,” a casting off of one’s moral conscience from self-awareness and also no longer identifying those regarded as problematic as part of our group or even part of true humanity. The two psycho-social strategies of identifying suspect populations as “surplus” and of the “inversion” of common morality further entrench technical rationality in a self-reinforcing loop. For instance, by thinking of the poor as a problem, rather than implementing social measures to help people who are poor, administrators sometimes eliminate the problem by simply removing the poor from visibility.

The authors do suggest some connection between the evils of Nazism and American decision making. The United States imported from Germany some of the administrators, engineers, and scientists who worked on the development of the missiles for bombing Britain. Moreover, the authors tell of how even some of the former slave laborers used to manufacture the missiles were also brought to the United States, but were subjected to more scrutiny by U.S. Immigration services than were the Nazi officials and Nazi technical staff who were brought into the United States to manage and design the Space Program.

Chapter 8 provides some small sliver of hope for avoiding administrative evil and its masking. They discuss the “liberalism of fear,” where we expect the worst from humanity and our ordinary selves, and “deliberative democracy,” where we open the discussion of policy to a broad spectrum of populations. But the ultimate question that confronts us in a situation where evils are unmasked is this: once evil is done, how can we “expiate” the evil? The “Afterword,” Chapter 9, discusses expiation through reparation of the victims and forgiveness by the victims. Where forgiveness by the victims is in reality impossible, the chapter discusses the question of the reconciliation of evil-doers with their victims.

I will leave it to the reader to make a judgment about whether the authors exaggerate the wrongs done in America and whether America is in a state “of corruption and decay.” The clear and explicit message of the book is that the avoidance of a masked evil requires constant self-vigilance and the ability to go beyond technical rationality and look at ourselves from the outside of our organizational and cultural frames of reference. Though the authors do not explicitly say so, to paraphrase the famous saying, constant vigilance is the price of avoiding administrative evil.

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Esther Lightcap Meek, *A Little Manual for Knowing*. Eugene, OR: Cascade Books (Wipf & Stock), 2014. Pp. 108. ISBN 978-1610977845. \$14.00 pb.

Esther Lightcap Meek, a philosophy professor at Geneva College in western Pennsylvania, has added a third volume to her works inspired by philosopher Michael Polanyi. First she authored *Longing to Know: The Philosophy of Knowledge for Ordinary People* (2003). In this creative effort, Professor Meek compared “knowing God” to “knowing your auto mechanic.” The effort was a brilliant explanation of how humans know what they know: knowing how we know things, knowing how we know people, and knowing how we know God.

A second and more complex book, *Loving to Know: Covenant Epistemology* appeared in 2011. In this volume, the mention of “covenant,” a biblical term, signals that knowing is less about information and more about transformation. Relying again on Polanyi but following other guides as well, Meek claims that all knowing takes the shape of an interpersonal, covenantal relationship. Rather than knowing in order to love, we love in order to know. Meek contends that all knowing is best understood as transformative encounter. In this regard, Meek reflects the influence of theologian James Loder (*The Transforming Moment*, 1989).

At 108 pages, *A Little Manual for Knowing* is much briefer than the other tomes. It covers much of the same material and advances the ideas detailed in the longer work, *Loving to Know*. Meek seems to have written this guide with

college students particularly in mind. She refers throughout the book to “knowing ventures” and often refers to the college experience. Still, the *Manual* is general enough to guide anyone wanting to reflect on a life’s journey of discovering, learning, gaining insights and building relationships. The book is titled “a manual” because it is constructed with a set of exercises or study questions that conclude each chapter and challenge the reader to go further.

In her introduction, Meek tells the reader of the dangers of a view of knowing called “the knowledge-as-information vision [that] is actually defective and damaging. It distorts reality and humanness, and it gets in the way of good knowing” (2). Congruent with this emphasis on knowledge-as-information, Meek asserts that we tend to be “epistemological dualists” (2-3). She echoes Michael Polanyi’s critique of western Enlightenment sensibilities that theologian Lesslie Newbigin repeated in his books—namely, that “we distinguish knowledge from belief, facts from values, reason from faith, theory from application, thought from emotion, mind from body, objective from subjective, science from art” (2).

Campaigning against the modernist inclination to overly-distinguish between the subjective and the objective, and between the scientific and the imaginative, Esther Meek builds upon Polanyi’s understanding of personal knowing. Meek invokes additional insights from James

Loder, Parker Palmer, John Macmurray, Colin Gunton, Martin Buber and others.

Professor Meek says in the opening paragraphs, “my life and work have been shaped in the Christian tradition. It stands to reason that if you believe in the God of the Judeo-Christian Scriptures, you would think it important to develop an epistemology that accommodates knowing God” (6). The phrase, covenant epistemology, certainly signals the importance of relationships (the knower and the known), the primacy of love and personal transformation through encountering God (4-5). Nonetheless, she contends that her manual is intended for all persons and not simply for religious persons.

The book has two parts and eight chapters. Part One is titled “Pilgrimage” and moves from “Love” to “Pledge” to “Invitation” to “Indwelling” (the titles of the first four chapters). Pilgrimage suggests a journey or a process and the chapters represent steps along the way. Meek contends that this process is born of love and involves a responsibility to seek what we do not know. Polanyi’s understanding of discovery aligns with this pilgrimage theme. The second part of the *Little Manual* is called “Gift” and suggests that knowing includes coming to discover insights or epiphanies—these insights should be registered as gifts. Under this heading of “Gift”, Meek includes chapters as additional steps entitled “Encounter,” “Transformation,” “Dance,” and “Shalom.”

Chapter Four, “Indwelling,” stands at the midpoint of Meek’s *Little Manual*.

It is the chapter that most emphatically expounds Polanyian ideas. Perhaps because I share the author's admiration of Polanyi, I found it the most satisfying part of the book. Since the passing of Richard Gelwick, Meek has become perhaps our best translator of Polanyi's epistemological insights for persons not accustomed to reading or studying philosophy. Her ability to present complex ideas like "subject-focal integration" (SFI) and "indeterminate future manifestations" (IFM) bodes well for new Polanyi readers to begin their knowing pilgrimages. Here is a sample of her explanatory prose:

Every time we notice something, picking out an object or pattern, we are focusing on that thing and relying subsidiarily on an array of other things. We rely subsidiarily on background and surroundings. We rely subsidiarily on our felt body sense. We rely on authoritative guides in the form of mothers, coaches, traditions, theoretical frameworks. That means that the simplest perception involves SFI: this cup beside me, that flower vase over there. But so does the most theoretical claim: Chemical elements conform to the Periodic Table... Subsidiaries can't simultaneously be focal. We can't attend from them and to them at the same time... They are tacit rather than explicit. (50)

Although Dr. Meek cogently presents Polanyian ideas and other insights from other "authoritative guides," the *Little Manual* still reads like a philosophy argument. No doubt, epistemology is hard to translate, though Meek certainly succeeded in her first book, *Longing to Know*. Her use of abbreviations like SFI and IFMs does not necessarily elucidate. How many readers will digest these ideas and remember the relevant phrases? Like Christian discipleship, some adventures require "forming" and "transforming."

To go on pilgrimage with Esther Meek as a wise guide, however, is a journey worth taking. Polanyi himself inspired his readers to make common cause with scientists who comprise a society of explorers intent to discover what lies beyond our reach. Meek invites us to do likewise. "To move, in love and pledge, through invitation and indwelling, to undergo encounter and transformation, cultivating dance and communion to the end of shalom, is not exactly to arrive with exhaustive finality at what we sought, and not exactly to be finished with the adventure"(98).

No, the journey goes on. There is more to discover. And there are more subsidiary clues to be focused and integrated into meaningful patterns as we submit to reality. I salute Esther Meek who calls us to go beyond the world of information into knowing ventures and perhaps, even into the place of wisdom.

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