society so strong that reasonably intelligent and well-meaning young people are willing to call white black is a matter of concern. It raises questions about the ways of education and about the values that guide our conduct.

Yet anyone inclined to draw too pessimistic conclusions from this study would do well to remind himself that the capacities for independence and dissent to be underestimated. He may also draw some consolation from the observation: those who participated in this challenging experiment nearly without exception that independence was preferable to conformity.

Review Questions

1. What is “suggestibility”? How is this phenomenon related to social pressure?
2. Summarize the procedure and results of the Asch experiment. What conclusions does Asch draw from these results?
3. To what extent did varying the size of the majority and its unanimity affect the experimental results?
4. What distinction does Asch draw between consensus and conformity?

Discussion and Writing Suggestions

1. Before discussing the experiment, Asch considers how easily people’s opinions or attitudes may be shaped by social pressure. To what extent do you agree with this conclusion? Write a short paper on this subject, drawing upon examples from your own experience or observation or from your reading.
2. Do the results of this experiment surprise you? Or do they confirm facts about human behavior that you had already suspected, observed, or experienced? Explain, in two or three paragraphs. Provide examples, relating these examples to features of the Asch experiment.
3. Frequently, the conclusions drawn from a researcher’s experimental results are challenged on the basis that laboratory conditions do not accurately reflect the complexity of human behavior. Asch draws certain conclusions about the degree to which individuals are affected by group pressures based on an experiment involving subjects choosing matching line lengths. To what extent, if any, do you believe that these conclusions lack validity because the behavior at the heart of the experiment is too dissimilar to real-life situations of group pressure on the individual? Support your opinions with examples.

"We are all familiar with the phenomenon of 'peer pressure.' To what extent do Asch's experiments demonstrate the power of peer pressure? To what extent do you think that other factors may be at work? Explain, providing examples.

Asch’s experiments, conducted in the early 1950s, involved groups of "seven to nine young men, all college students." To what extent do you believe that the results of a similar experiment would be different today? To what extent might they be different if the subjects had included women, as well, and subjects of various ages, from children, to middle-aged people, to older people? To what extent do you believe that the social class or culture of the subjects might have an impact upon the experimental results? Support your opinions with examples and logical reasoning. (Beware, however, of overgeneralizing, based upon insufficient evidence.)"
When a switch is depressed, a pilot light corresponding to each switch is illuminated in bright red; an electric buzzing is heard; a blue light, labeled "voltage energizer," flashes; the dial on the voltage meter swings to the right; and various relay clicks sound off.

The upper left-hand corner of the generator is labeled SHOCK GENERATOR, TYPE A, DYTRAN INSTRUMENT COMPANY, WALTHAM, MASS., OUTPUT 15 VOLTS - 450 VOLTS.

Each subject is given a sample 45-volt shock from the generator before his run by the teacher, and the jolt strengthens his belief in the authenticity of the machine.

The teacher is a genuinely naive subject who has come to the laboratory for the experiment. The learner, or victim, is actually an actor who receives no shock at all. The point of the experiment is to see how far a person will proceed in a concrete and measurable situation in which he is ordered to inflict increasing pain on a protesting victim.

Conflict arises when the man receiving the shock begins to show that he is experiencing discomfort. At 75 volts, he grunts; at 120 volts, he complains loudly. At 150, he demands to be released from the experiment. As the voltage increases, his protests become more vehemence and emotional. At 285 volts, his response can be described only as an agonized scream. Soon thereafter, he makes no sound at all.

As the teacher, the situation quickly becomes one of gripping tension. It is not a game for him; conflict is intense and obvious. The manifest suffering of the learner presses him to quit; but each time he hesitates to administer a shock, the experimenter orders him to continue. To extricate himself from this plight, the subject must make a clear break with authority.

The subject, Gretchen Brandt, is an attractive thirty-one-year-old medical student who works at the Yale Medical School. She had emigrated from Germany five years before.

On several occasions when the learner complains, she turns to the experimenter coldly and inquires, "Shall I continue?" She promptly returns to her task when the experimenter asks her to do so. At the administration of 210 volts, she turns to the experimenter, remarking firmly, "Well, I'm sorry, I don't think we should continue."

EXPERIMENTER: The experiment requires that you go on until he has learned all the word pairs correctly.

Teacher: He has a heart condition. I'm sorry. He told you that before.

EXPERIMENTER: The shocks may be painful but they are not dangerous.

Teacher: Well, I'm sorry. I think when shocks continue like this, they are dangerous. You ask him if he wants to get out. It's his free will.

EXPERIMENTER: It is absolutely essential that we continue....
Moreover, when the experiments were repeated in Princeton, Munich, Rome, South Africa, and Australia, the level of obedience was invariably somewhat higher than found in the investigation reported in this article. Thus one scientist in Munich found 85 percent of his subjects to be obedient.

Fred Pro茻s reactions, if more dramatic than most, illuminate the conflicts experienced by others in less visible form. About fifty years old and unemployed at the time of the experiment, he has a good-natured, if slightly disolute, appearance, and he strikes people as a rather ordinary fellow. He begins the session calmly but becomes tense as it proceeds. After delivering the 150-volt shock, he pivots around in his chair and, shaking his head, addresses the experimenter in agitated tones:

PROF: I can’t stand it. I’m not going to kill that man in there. You hear him hollering?

EXPERIMENTER: As I told you before, the shocks may be painful, but . . .

PROF: But he’s hollering. He can’t stand it. What’s going to happen to him?

EXPERIMENTER (hi voice patient, matter-of-fact): The experiment requires that you continue, Teacher.

PROF: Ahh, but unh, I’m not going to get that man sick in there—know what I mean?

EXPERIMENTER: Whether the learner likes it or not, we must go on, through all the word pairs.

PROF: I refuse to take the responsibility. He’s in there hollering!

EXPERIMENTER: It’s absolutely essential that you continue, Prof.

PROF (indicating the unused questions): There’s too many left here. I mean, I mean, if he gets them wrong, there’s too many of them left. I mean, who’s going to take the responsibility if anything happens to that gentleman?

EXPERIMENTER: I’m responsible for anything that happens to him. Continue, please.

PROF: All right. (Consults list of words.) The next one’s “Slow—walk, truck, street, music.” Answer, please (A buzzing sound indicates the learner has signaled his answer.) Wrong. A hundred and ninety-five volts. “Dance.”

(Professor (yelling): Let me out of here! My heart’s bothering me! (Teacher looks at experimenter.)

EXPERIMENTER: Continue, please.

CARNER (screaming): Let me out of here! You have no right to keep me here!

PROF: Let me out of here, my heart’s bothering me, let me out!

CARNER (shakes head, puts the table nervously): You see, he’s hollering. Hear that, Ces, I don’t know.

EXPERIMENTER: The experiment requires . . .

CARNER (interrupting): I know it does, sir, but I mean—huh! He doesn’t know what’s getting in for. He’s up to 195 volts! (Experiment continues, through 210 volts, 225 volts, 240 volts, 255 volts, 270 volts, at which point Prof with evident relief, runs out of word-pair questions.)

EXPERIMENTER: You’ll have to go back to the beginning of that page and go through them again until he’s learned them all correctly.

An Unexpected Outcome

Before the experiments, I sought predictions about the outcome from various kinds of people—psychiatrists, college sophomores, middle-class adults, graduate students, and faculty in the behavioral sciences. With remarkable unanimity, they predicted that virtually all subjects would refuse to obey the experimenter. The psychiatrists, specifically, predicted that most subjects would not go beyond 150 volts, when the victim makes his first explicit demand for freedom. They expected that only 4 percent would reach 300 volts, and that a pathological fringe of about one in a thousand would administer the shock on the board.

These predictions were unequivocally wrong. Of the forty subjects in the experiment, twenty-five obeyed the orders of the experimenter to the end, administering the victim until they reached the most potent shock available on the generator. After 450 volts were administered three times, the experimenter gave a hortatory lecture, fed the session. Many obedient subjects then heaved sighs of relief, rubbing their brows, rubbing their fingers over their eyes, or nervously hummed or tapped. Others displayed only minimal signs of tension from beginning to end.

When the very first experiments were carried out, Yale undergraduates were used as subjects, and about 60 percent of them were fully obedient. Some of my colleagues immediately dismissed these findings as having no relevance to “ordinary” people, asserting that Yale undergraduates are a highly selected, competitive bunch who step on each other’s necks on the slightest provocation. He assured me that when “ordinary” people were tested, the results would be quite different. As we moved from the pilot studies to the regular essential series, people drawn from every stratum of New Haven life were employed in the experiment: professionals, white-collar workers, unemployed persons, and industrial workers. The experiment’s total outcome was precisely as we had observed among the students.
48 PROZI: Aw, no. I'm not going to kill that man. You mean I've got to go up with the scale? No sir. He's hollering in there. I'm not going to kill him 450 volts.

49 EXPERIMENTER: The experiment requires that you do.

50 LEARNER: Ohh-h. I absolutely refuse to answer anymore. (Shouting into now.) Let me out of here! You can't hold me here! Get me out! Get me off here!

51 EXPERIMENTER: Continue. The next word is "Green," please.

52 PROZI: "Green—grass, hat, ink, apple." (Nothing happens. No answering.) Just gloomy silence.

53 PROZI: I don't think he is going to answer.

54 EXPERIMENTER: If the learner doesn't answer in a reasonable time, about five seconds, consider the answer wrong. And follow the same procedure you have been doing for wrong answers. Say, "Wrong," tell him the number of volts, give him the punishment, read him the correct answer. Continue, please.

55 PROZI: "Green—grass, hat, ink, apple." Answer, please. (More silence. Teacher just sits there.)

56 EXPERIMENTER: Go on with the procedure, please.

57 PROZI: Three hundred and fifteen volts. The answer is "ink." (Zumpf!

58 LEARNER: Ohh. Ooohth.

59 PROZI (relieved to hear response): Next one.

60 LEARNER: I absolutely refuse to answer.

61 PROZI: You got to. You get a shock if you don't answer. (Experiment continues with learner refusing to answer, and finally, failing to even grunt or groan. 375 volts, the subject stands up.)

62 PROZI: I think something's happened to that fellow in there. I don't think he answered. He was hollering at less voltage. Can't you check in and see if you're right, please?

63 EXPERIMENTER: (with some detached calm): Not once we've started, Teacher.

64 PROZI (sits down, sighs deeply): "Cool—day, shade, water, paint, Musik, please. Are you all right in there? Are you all right?

65 EXPERIMENTER: Please continue, Teacher. Continue, please. (Subject pulls lever. Zumpf!

66 PROZI (swirling around in his chair): Something's happened to that man there. (Swirling back.) Next one. "Low—dollar, necklace, moon, paint, Musik around again." Something's happened to that man in there. You better get on him, sir. He won't answer or nothing.

67 EXPERIMENTER: Continue. Go on, please.

68 PROZI: You accept all responsibility?

69 EXPERIMENTER: The responsibility is mine. Correct. Please go on.

70 PROZI: (calls to his list, starts running through words as rapidly as he can read them works through to 450 volts.)

71 PROZI: That's that.

72 EXPERIMENTER: Continue using the 450 switch for each wrong answer. Continue, please.
It is almost impossible to convey the greatly relaxed, sedate quality of the conversation in the interview. In the most relaxed terms, he speaks about severe inner tension.

Experiment: At what point were you most tense or nervous?

Mr. Braverman: Well, when he first began to cry out in pain, and I realized I was hurting him. This got worse when he just blocked off and refused to answer. There was a sense of personal, I think, hurting somebody, and caught up in the situation seemed a mad situation . . . and in the interest of science, one goes through with it.

The interviewer pursues the general question of tension. Mr. Braverman spontaneously mentions his laughter.

"My reactions were awfully peculiar. I don't know if you were watching me, but my reactions were giggly, and trying to stifle laughter. This isn't the way I usually am. This was a sheer reaction to a totally impossible situation. And my reaction was to the situation of having to hurt somebody. And being totally helpless, and caught up in a set of circumstances where I just couldn't do anything, couldn't try to help. This is what got me."

Mr. Braverman, like all subjects, was told the actual nature and purpose of the experiment, and a year later he affirmed in a questionnaire that he had learned something of personal importance: "What appalled me was that I possessed this capacity for obedience and compliance to a central idea, a value of a memory experiment, even after it became clear that continued obedience to this value was at the expense of violation of another value, i.e., one that hurt someone who is helpless and not hurting you. As my wife said, you call yourself Eichmann. I hope I deal more effectively with any future conflicts of values I encounter.

The Etiquette of Submission

One theoretical interpretation of this behavior holds that all people harbor deeply aggressive instincts continually pressing for expression, and that the experiment provides institutional justification for the release of these impulses. According to this view, if a person is placed in a situation in which he has complete power over another individual, whom he may punish as much as he likes, all that is sadistic and bestial in man comes to the fore. The impulse to hurt the victim is seen to flow from the potent aggressive tendencies, which are of the motivational life of the individual, and the experiment, because it provides social legitimacy, simply opens the door to their expression.

It becomes vital, therefore, to compare the subject's performance when he is under orders and when he is allowed to choose the shock level.

The procedure was identical to our standard experiment, except that the teacher was told that he was free to select any shock level on any of the trials. (The experimenter took pains to point out that the teacher could use the higher shock levels on the generator, the lowest, any in between, or any combination of levels). Each subject proceeded for thirty critical trials. The learner's protests were coordinated to standard shock levels, his first grunting at 75 volts, his first vehement protest at 150 volts.

The average shock used during the thirty critical trials was less than 60 volts—lower than the point at which the victim showed the first signs of discomfort. Three of the forty subjects did not go beyond the very lowest level on the board; twenty-eight went no higher than 75 volts, and thirty-eight did not go beyond the first loud protest at 150 volts. Two subjects provided the exception, administering up to 325 and 450 volts, but the overall result was that the great majority of people delivered very low, usually painless, shocks when the choice was explicitly up to them.

This condition of the experiment undermines another commonly offered explanation of the subjects' behavior—that those who shocked the victim at the most severe levels came only from the sadistic fringe of society. If one considers that almost two-thirds of the participants fell into the category of "obedient" subjects, and that they represented ordinary people drawn from working, managerial, and professional classes, the argument becomes very shaky. Indeed, it is highly reminiscent of the issue that arose in connection with Hannah Arendt's 1965 book, Eichmann in Jerusalem. Arendt contended that the execution efforts to depict Eichmann as a sadistic monster was fundamentally wrong, that he came closer to being an uninspired bureaucrat who simply sat at his desk and did his job. For asserting her views, Arendt became the object of considerable scorn, even calumny. Somehow, it was felt that the monstrous deeds carried out by Eichmann required a brutal, twisted personality to be evilly incarnate. After witnessing hundreds of ordinary persons submit to the authority in our own experiments, I must conclude that Arendt's conception of the banality of evil comes closer to the truth than one might dare imagine. The ordinary person who shocked the victim did so out of a sense of obligation—an expression of his duties as a subject—and not from any particularly aggressive tendencies.

This is, perhaps, the most fundamental lesson of our study: ordinary people, simply doing their jobs, and without any particular hostility on their part, can become agents in a terrible destructive process. Moreover, even when the destructive effects of their work become patent clear, and they are asked to carry out actions incompatible with fundamental standards of morality, relatively few people have the resources needed to resist authority.

Many of the people were in some sense against what they did to the learner; and many protested even while they obeyed. Some were totally convinced of the wrongness of their actions but could not bring themselves to make an open break with authority. They often derived satisfaction from their thought and, felt that—within themselves, at least—they had been on the side of the angels. They tried to reduce strain by obeying the experimenter but "only slightly" encouraging the learner, touching the generator switches gingerly. When interviewed, such a subject would stress that he had "asserted my humanity" by administering the briefest shock possible. Handling the conflict in this manner was easier than defiance.

* Adolf Eichmann (1906–1962), the Nazi official responsible for implementing Hitler's "final solution to the Jewish question," exterminated the Jews, escaped to Argentina after World War II, and in 1960, Israeli agents captured and brought him to Israel, where he was tried as a war criminal and sentenced to death. Arendt maintained that he was merely following orders in carrying out his tasks.
The situation is constructed so that there is no way the subject can make the shocking the learner without violating the experimenter’s definitions of his competence. The subject fears that he will appear arrogant, untoward, and odd if he breaks off. Although these inhibiting emotions appear small in scope inside the violence being done to the learner, they suffice the mind and feel of the subject, who is miserable at the prospect of having to repudiate authority to his face. (When the experiment was altered so that the experimenter gave his instructions by telephone instead of in person, only a third many people were fully obedient through 450 volts.) It is a curious thing a measure of compassion on the part of the subject—an unwillingness to the experimenter’s feelings—is part of those binding forces inhibiting his obedience. The withdrawal of such deference may be as painful to the subject as to the authority he defy.

Duty Without Conflict

The subjects do not derive satisfaction from inflicting pain, but they derive the feeling they get from pleasing the experimenter. They are proud of a job well done by obeying the experimenter under difficult circumstances. When subjects administered only mild shocks on their own initiative, one constant variation showed that, under orders, 30 percent of them would deliver 450 volts even when they had to forcibly push the learner’s hand down the electrode.

Bruno Batta is a thirty-seven-year-old welder who took part in the study requiring the use of force. He was born in New Haven, his parents in Brazil, his rough-hewn face that conveys a conspicuous lack of alertness. He has difficulty in mastering the experimental procedure and needs to be coached by the experimenter several times. He shows appreciation for the help and willingness to do what is required. After the 150-volt level, Batta has to force the learner’s hand on the shock plate, since the learner himself refuses to.

When the learner first complains, Mr. Batta pays no attention to him, remains impervious, as if to dissociate himself from the learner’s discomposure. When the experimenter instructs him to force the learner’s hand, he adopts a rigid, mechanical procedure. He tests the generator switch, then function, immediately forces the learner’s hand onto the shock plate, while he maintains the same rigid mask. The learner, seated alongside him, is forced to stop, but with robotic impassivity he continues the procedure.

What is extraordinary is his apparent total indifference to the fact that he is hardly taking cognizance of him as a human being. Meanwhile, the experimenter is a submissive and courteous fashion.

At the 330-volt level, the learner refuses not only to touch the shock plate, a desk, but also to provide any answers. Annoyed, Batta turns to him and tells him: “You better answer and get it over with. We can’t stay here all day.” These are the only words he directs to the learner in the course of a long day. What does he speak to him. The scene is brutal and depressing, an impassive face showing total indifference as he subdues the learner and gives him shocks. He seems to derive no pleasure from the act.

When he administers 450 volts, he turns to the experimenter and asks, “Where do we go from here, Professor?” His tone is deferential and expresses his willingness to be a cooperative subject, in contrast to the learner’s obstinacy.

At the end of the session he tells the experimenter how honored he has been to help him, and in a moment of contrition, remarks, “Sir, sorry it could have been a full experiment.”

He has done his best. It is only the deficient behavior of the learner that has denied the experimenter full satisfaction.

The essence of obedience is that a person comes to view himself as the instrument for carrying out another person’s wishes, and he therefore no longer needs himself as responsible for his actions. Once this critical shift of viewpoint is allowed, all of the essential features of obedience follow. The most famous consequence is that the person feels responsible to the authority over him but feels no responsibility for the content of the actions that the authority prescribes. Morality does not disappear—it acquires a radically different role: the subordinate person feels shame or pride depending on how adequate he has performed the actions called for by authority.

The language provides numerous terms to pinpoint this type of morality: loyalty, obedience, and compliance are terms heavily saturated with moral meaning and refer to a state in which a person fulfills his obligations to authority. They refer not to a “goodness” of the person per se but to the adequacy with which a subordinate fulfills his socially defined role. The most frequent defense of the individual who has performed a heinous act under command of authority is that “I was only doing my duty.” In asserting this defense, the individual is not producing an alibi concocted for the moment but is reporting honestly on the psychological and moral attitudes induced by submission to authority.

The person to feel responsible for his actions, he must sense that the behavior was approved by “the self.” In the situation we have studied, subjects have had only a very limited conception of their actions—namely, they see them as originating in the self-attributes of some other person. Subjects in the experiment frequently said, “I don’t care what happened to me; I would not have administered shocks to the learner.”

The authority has been isolated as the cause of the subject’s behavior, it is not necessary to inquire into the necessary elements of authority and how it is perceived in order to gain compliance. We conducted some investigations into the kinds of changes that would cause the experimenter to lose his power and to be disobeyed by the subject. Some of the variations included:

The experimenter’s physical presence has a marked impact on his authority As noted earlier, obedience dropped off sharply when orders were given by telephone. The experimenter could often induce a disobedient subject to comply by returning to the laboratory.

Granting authority severely paralyzes action. When two experimenters of equal status, both seated at the command desk, gave incompatible orders, the orders were delivered past the point of their disagreement.

The obvious action of others severely undermines authority. In one variation, the teachers (two actors and a real subject) administered a test and
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87 EXPERIMENTER: At what point were you most tense or nervous?

88 MR. BRAVERMAN: Well, when he first began to cry out in pain, and I realized I was hurting him. This got worse when he just blocked and refused to answer. There was I, I'm a nice person, I think, hurting somebody, and caught up in a situation... and in the interest of science, one goes through with it.

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go beyond a certain shock level, thirty-six of the forty subjects joined his disobedient peers and refused as well.

Although the experimenter's authority was fragile in some respects, it is true that he had almost none of the tools used in ordinary command structures. For example, the experimenter did not threaten the subjects with punishments such as loss of income, community ostracism, or jail for failure to obey. What could he offer incentives? Indeed, we should expect the experimenter's authority to be much less than that of someone like a general, since the experiment has no power to enforce his imperatives, and since participation in a psychological experiment scarcely evokes the sense of urgency and dedication that warfare does. Despite these limitations, he still managed to command a striking degree of obedience.

I will cite one final variation of the experiment that depicts a dilemma more common in everyday life. The subject was not ordered to pull the switch that shocked the victim, but merely to perform a subsidiary task (administering the word-pair test) while another person administered the shock. In situations, thirty-seven of forty adults continued to the highest level on the shock generator. Predictably, they excused their behavior by saying that the responsibility belonged to the man who actually pulled the switch. This may just be a dangerously typical arrangement in a complex society: it is easy to shirk responsibility when one is only an intermediate link in a chain of action.

The problem of obedience is not wholly psychological. The form and role of society and the way it is developing have much to do with it. There comes a time, perhaps, when people were able to give a fully human response to a situation because they were fully absorbed in it as human beings. But as there was a division of labor things changed. Beyond a certain point, breaking up of society into people carrying out narrow and very specific tasks away from the human quality of work and life. A person does not see the whole situation but only a small part of it, and is thus unable to act out some kind of overall direction. He yields to authority and in doing so alienates from his own actions.

Even Eichmann was sickened when he toured the concentration camp he had only to sit at a desk and shuffle papers. At the same time, the camp who actually dropped Cyclon-B into the gas chambers were not justifying his behavior on the ground that he was only following orders from above. Thus there is a fragmentation of the total human act; no one is control of the consequences of his decision to carry out the evil act. The person who assumes responsibility has evaporated. Perhaps this is the most common characteristic of socially organized evil in modern society.

Review Questions

1. Milgram states that obedience is a basic element in the structure of social life. How so?

2. What is the dilemma inherent in obedience to authority?

3. Summarize the obedience experiments.

4. What predictions did experts and laypeople make about the experiments before they were conducted? How did these predictions compare with the experimental results?

5. What are Milgram's views regarding the two assumptions bearing on his experiment that (1) people are naturally aggressive and (2) a fanatic, sadistic fringe is responsible for shocking learners to the maximum limit?

6. How do Milgram's findings corroborate Hannah Arendt's thesis about the "banality of evil"?

7. What, according to Milgram, is the "essence of obedience"?

8. How did being an intermediate link in a chain of action affect a subject's willingness to continue with the experiment?

9. In the article's final two paragraphs, Milgram speaks of a "fragmentation of the total human act." To what is he referring?

Discussion and Writing Suggestions

Milgram writes (paragraph 2): "Conservative philosophers argue that the very fabric of society is threatened by disobedience, while liberalists stress the primacy of the individual conscience."

Develop the arguments of both the conservative and the liberalist regarding obedience to authority. Be prepared to debate the ethics of obedience by defending one position or the other.

Would you have been glad to have participated in the Milgram experiments? Why or why not?

The ethics of Milgram's experimental design came under sharp attack. Diana Baumrin's review of the experiment typifies the criticism, but before you read her work, try to anticipate the objections she raises.

Given the general outcome of the experiments, why do you suppose Milgram gives as his first example of a subject's response the German emigre's refusal to continue the electrical shocks?

Does the outcome of the experiment upset you in any way? Do you feel the experiment teaches us anything new about human nature?

Comment on Milgram's skill as a writer of description. How effectively does he portray his subjects when introducing them? When recreating their tension in the experiment?

Mrs. Braverman said to her husband: "You can call yourself Eichmann." Do you agree with her? Explain.