Richard Rechtman. *Living in Death: Genocide and its Functionaries*. Translated by Lindsay Turner. Fordham University Press 2021. 192 pp. $90.00 USD (Hardcover ISBN 9780823297856); $24.95 USD (Paperback ISBN 9780823297863).

Content Warning: This review discusses sexual and physical violence carried out during genocide

Prior to reading this book's conclusion, I remained ambivalent upon, if I may use a crude word, the value of this book's investigation into the perpetrators of evil. Richard Rechtman, a respected anthropologist and psychiatrist at EHESS in Paris, stated he was not interested here trying to decipher or locate a perpetrator's ultimate responsibility or the main causes of what made particular people participate in genocidal acts, but rather 'to understand and analyse how these men and women live a quotidian [life] that is suffused with the death of others' (26). The word I added to the sentence—'life'—is essential: Rechtman wants to examine how these killers went about their daily lives in the midst of hacking, butchering, beheading, raping, and gassing innocent people. Contra some standard claims, he doesn't see the majority of these perpetrators as moral monsters or rabid zealots of any ideology, but as individuals for whom such murderous acts become something they simply do, or have to do (sometimes the distinction is thin). It becomes a job (7), and like almost any other job, one that has 'perks' ('a non-consenting woman' according to one 'docile executioner' of the Khmer Rouge) (166), but also many inconveniences—the constant smell of death and decay; tired limbs and hands from repeated acts of slashing or chopping; the messiness of splattered brains on one's clothes and boots (158). The majority thus seemed to have little remorse, shame, or guilt, sometimes even none (166). There was no major moral crisis on whether or not to participate in such killings, but often little reflection before, during, or after—claims supported by letters written by perpetrators of various genocides, casually mentioning the weather or a hot meal in the context of the decimation and burning of a village. Rechtman also cites his various interviews with perpetrators, especially of the Cambodian genocide, who seemed generally unbothered by their past actions, though preferring not to do something like that again (169).

While discussion of the trauma experienced by some perpetrators would have been a helpful addition, Rechtman's focus is interesting and provocative. Nevertheless, his initial claims of not examining ultimate responsibility or grappling with any meaning or nature of humanity, whether graced by some telos rooted in what is good or holy; or enmeshed in evil and suffering; or simply a blank slate or string of chemicals or synoptic transmissions seemed a glaring absence. Was it really the case that the majority of perpetrators (which could number in the millions) were simply indifferent and 'available' to do such work (176)? And regarding questions of how someone could murder a former neighbor, lover, or even child because such were now vermin, cockroaches, or the new people, how could this not be morally fraught? As Rechtman contends: 'It was not as neighbors the Tutsi were assassinated, but as enemies or as cockroaches' (151). When there had been a previous relationship, such accrued knowledge 'became nothing other than a strategic element for more effective killing' (151).

Here the Catholic theologian in me wants to assert the universal dignity of the human person,

made in the image and likeness of God, and so intended and meant to echo and incarnate this goodness. I want to linger with fellow theologians like Didier Pollefeyt who examine the Shoah and other mass atrocities but stress that human beings who participate in such heinous acts are usually coerced, propagandized, and extremely vulnerable and so rarely free in their actions. The perpetrators of atrocities are broken by a system, which proves that exterior conditions and context must be created and reinforced to make most people participants in such horrors (for the opposite view, see Rechtman, 9). I also want to speak of a human conscience, that unless perverted by a pernicious ideological doctrine through a malformed society, rails against such crimes. Is this really relevant, though?

Rechtman writes: 'Ultimately neither an excess of cruelty nor bad conscience on the part of killers put an end to the most violent practices. Instead, it was accomplished by weariness and exhaustion' (159). Before responding, here I again remind the reader about Rechtman's conclusion which I will examine shortly, and why grand discussions of the ontology of humanity or even of the extent an individual perpetrator was ultimately responsible (a key political, legal and moral question) may not be the most important questions here. In fact, and to my shame, an inordinate focus on such theoretical questions left me blind to another moral quandary I may otherwise have not connected, but which, thanks to Rechtman, I will from now on.

Before doing so, let me highlight a few other important reflections or connections in the book: namely his discussion of the ordinary, living in death, and Wittgenstein's notion of 'forms of life.' Evil and the ordinary or banal is connected to Hannah Arendt's *Eichmann in Jerusalem* which stressed the mediocrity or even weakness of Eichmann as a 'banal and ordinary man' (64) who nevertheless committed monstrous evils and so can be tried under law. For Rechtman, there is no 'predictive value' about whether an ordinary person or (looking to Freud) so-called monster ends up committing atrocious deeds, and so he writes: 'the banality of evil or mediocrity proves to be empirically unfounded, ultimately insufficient for taking account of the millions of men and women in the programmatic killings of dozens of millions of people on every continent across the globe' (65). Where notions of the ordinary become prevalent is in examining everything else that preoccupies the killers, not the act of killing per se, 'but everything needed for the killing of hundreds or even thousands of individuals, the planning of the division of tasks and the discussion this involves, or disputes between colleagues, or of course fatigue and the risk of accidents. In short: the ordinary' (127-128). For Rechtman, for most genocidal perpetrators there is no moral tussling of what is right or wrong, but what must be done.

The daily, constant presence of killing and death are the 'forms of life,' really 'forms of death' that nurture, describe, and dominate the perpetrators' worldview, both individually and communally. Building upon philosopher Stanley Cavell, sociologist Albert Ogien and then anthropologist Veena Das' employment of Wittgenstein's *form of life*, Rechtman notes: 'To speak of forms of life consists first and foremost of describing a linguistic universe, a neighborhood, practices, and representations' (146). Applying these notion and terms to the worlds of the perpetrators of genocide forms a picture of the ordinary, the 'quotidian existence of an entire neigborhood' (148), even if such quotidian is built and fashioned around killing.

Prior to reading the conclusion, I would have suffused the review with challenges to what seemed an overly pessimistic brushstroke. After reading the entire book, I'm chastened and humbled. Following a discussion of the mostly forgotten horrors committed against the Yazidi (178), Rechtman sharpens his conclusion on the reality of refugees and migrants who flee their homelands, not simply for safety (like the Yazidi) but because they refuse to become killers. He cites a number of his interviews and treatment of refugees, especially Muslims from the Middle East. Ironically, the EU and UK want little to do with these 'migrants' and so partner with countries like Libya, Rwanda or Turkey to take in, keep out, or send 'them back.' Rechtman shows, however, that many of the men, despite losing their families, dignity, and way of life, maintain that leaving their homeland was the right thing to do so that they would not become killers—what the regime or government or gang in their village or city tried to force on them. Rechtman shows that despite the large numbers of available men to take up the killing, the majority resist—despite it being easier and more beneficial for them to kill. As Rechtman writes of one representative 'migrant,' Ahmad from Afghanistan, 'He was proud of being Muslim and did not want to become a killer. He was less afraid of death than the dishonour of having to kill his neighbors. He believed that France would give him the right to live with dignity and to send for his family' (184-185). His claim for refugee status, though, was denied by the French authorities. And so, to the armchair question many of us pose on whether we would become killers under certain conditions, Rechtman points to the 'millions of men and women who have already responded. They left. They did not want to kill to preserve the comfort of their lives' (191). And yet we have abandoned, marginalized, silenced, or deported them. In a book focused upon the perpetrators of genocide, perhaps mostly through availability and indifference, it ends with a potent and invaluable call to be aware of the many victims in our midst and our ongoing complicity and indifference to their plight.

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