CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
0521856949 - Evil and Human Agency: Understanding Collective Evildoing
Arne Johan Vetlesen
Excerpt
More information

Introduction

Some fifteen years ago, just after the end of the cold war, Leonard Cohen contended, 'I have seen the future. It is murder.'

He has been proved right. Not that human evildoing is something new; far from it. If anything, what is new is the readiness of society to denounce large-scale atrocities whenever they occur and to indict those responsible, as demonstrated by the UN Conventions inspired by the 'Never again!' unanimously voiced in the aftermath of the Holocaust.

Now take a look at what happened during the last decade of the twentieth century – the century that will go down in history as the century of (increasingly universal) human rights *and* as a century stained by genocide. The facts are as plain as they are deeply disturbing: the 1990s saw the slaughter of more than 800,000 people within three months in Rwanda, as well as the murder of nearly 200,000 people in the former Yugoslavia. In the former case, the victims were massacred with machetes, axes, and kitchen tools; in the latter, with guns, knives, and broken bottles. The principal victims were civilians, of both sexes and all ages. The atrocities were not carried out in secrecy; on the contrary, they were reported live on television for months on end. Despite the knowledge – or perversely, partly because of it, as I shall argue – not much was done to stop the genocides.

The point is made: to embark upon a study of evil these days is to confront an abundance of empirical material. Being heterogeneous and pulling in all sorts of different directions, the material at hand dramatically explodes the framework of the conventional 'scholarly study', raising more questions than any academic can answer.

So what to do? For a start, I have chosen to concentrate, on the empirical side, on what I referred to as large-scale atrocities; and on the theoretical side, I have sought to avail myself of a rich variety of

© Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
0521856949 - Evil and Human Agency: Understanding Collective Evildoing
Arne Johan Vetlesen
Excerpt
More information

approaches, ranging from Socrates to Zizek, though referring extensively to modern classics in the field such as Hannah Arendt and Zygmunt Bauman. The two historical cases to receive particular attention are the Holocaust and 'ethnic cleansing' in the former Yugoslavia. But why this choice, considering the many other instances of well-documented evil on a large scale in recent history?

First, selecting the Holocaust means engaging with what counts – in popular understanding as well as in scholarly works – as the seminal case of the worst that humans can do to each other. While agreeing on the evil nature of the Holocaust, scholars differ sharply with regard to such crucial questions as why it happened, what it reveals about human nature or the workings of modern society, and the extent to which it forces us to discard received assumptions about what spurs man-made evil. As for the second case to be discussed in depth, that of so-called 'ethnic cleansing', a reason for its inclusion is that it allows for thought-provoking contrast with the Holocaust – think only of the industrialized way in which the Nazis' murder of millions of Jews was carried out, as opposed to the eminent proximity (personal, emotional, physical) accompanying the killings in Bosnia. On a more theoretical level, conclusions about human nature, modern society, and the causes of man-made evil *generalized* from the Holocaust, are in principle open to question as soon as another historical case comes along in which the same issues force themselves upon us. Can there be such a thing as a *theory* about evil when the fact is that its manifestations in the world differ so widely?

This brings me to my understanding of what evil is. I shall take as my point of departure a definition of evil that I intend to be both common-sensical and minimalist: to do evil, I propose, is to *intentionally inflict pain and suffering on another human being, against her will, and causing serious and foreseeable harm to her*. It is tempting to add that the pain and suffering inflicted needs to be 'excessive' – as suggests, for example, Thomas Cushman (2001: 81) – but I do not wish to make this element a part of the definition of evil, since I believe it burdens the theoretician with the task of explaining what precisely is to qualify as 'excessive' in each concrete case. Part of human agency, then, is an agent's desire to *do evil* in the sense given. I investigate why and in what sorts of social circumstances this desire arises at an individual level, and how it is channelled – amplified, exploited – into what I call collective evildoing. I argue that such evildoing, in which whole groups are pitted against each other, springs from a combination of character, situation, and structure; factors too often set apart and viewed in isolation in the literature. To analyse the dynamics of collective evildoing in general, and the

© Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
0521856949 - Evil and Human Agency: Understanding Collective Evildoing
Arne Johan Vetlesen
Excerpt
More information

mechanisms by which individual and group fuse, so that 'your group becomes your destiny', a philosophical approach is combined with a psychological and sociological one. My theoretical aim is to seek a kind of synthesis between functionalist and intentionalist approaches to collective evil. Finally, my definition of evil is meant to differentiate evil from what is broadly understood as 'immorality': whereas acts such as lying and stealing are considered immoral as a matter of principle, they are not by the same token to be regarded as evil. Whereas all evil acts are immoral, not every immoral act is to be counted evil. Thus defined, evil is a subcategory of immorality – wrongdoing at its absolute worst.

My hunch is that we, simply as human beings with some experience with others (and with ourselves), know what evil is; we know, that is, what it means to intentionally inflict pain and suffering on someone else. This knowledge is experiential; it is practical not theoretical. Hence in taking it as our chosen point of departure we do not need to commit ourselves to any particular theoretical outlook or school of thought. Jürgen Habermas (1994: 185) captures this approach when he says that 'what moral and, especially, immoral action means is something we experience and learn *prior to* all philosophy; it confronts us no less compellingly in compassion for the hurt integrity of others than in suffering over one's own afflicted identity or in anxiety at its being endangered'.

For all the talk about evil these days, it is a poorly understood phenomenon. Either evil is made out to be more enigmatic than it really is, or it is trivialized and robbed of its sting. Evil, no doubt, is a highly *suggestive* phenomenon. It contains the intellectually irresistible promise of allowing for a privileged access to 'deep', yet probably uncomfortable truths about us, about who we are, and what we are capable of doing to each other. However, putting it like this strikes many a present-day reader as betraying assumptions long out of fashion. Perhaps it was psychologist Stanley Milgram who, shocked by his famous experiment findings in the early 1960s, inaugurated the influential academic shift away from traditional (metaphysically or religiously flavoured) notions of what evil is and what it tells us about ourselves and our place in the world. *Post*-Milgram, evil – I suggest – turned into a secondary or derivative phenomenon. Deprived of its once widely held status as elementary, as a *given* disposition of human nature, evil came to be seen predominantly in a perspective of irreducibly *social* (environmental, circumstantial) constraints and influences on the individual agent.

The shift I have in mind should not be associated solely with the extraordinary impact of Milgram's experiment. It can also be linked to

© Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
0521856949 - Evil and Human Agency: Understanding Collective Evildoing
Arne Johan Vetlesen
Excerpt
More information

the theoretical shift from the most influential psychologist of the first half of the twentieth century to the most influential one of the last four or so decades: that is, from Freud to Kohut. Heinz Kohut, founding father of 'self psychology', rejects the 'equal rank' thesis of Freud's according to which *eros* and the death instinct (i.e. what 'produces' humanity's destructiveness) are equiprimordial, biologically given instincts. In Kohut's view, the 'essence of sadism and masochism . . . is not the expression of a primary destructive or self-destructive tendency' (1977: 128). He argues that destructiveness is a secondary phenomenon, something that is not biologically rooted or constitutionally pregiven but is instead, in all its manifestations, to be traced back to a failure on the part of the person's primary self-object(s) – most basically, a failure of empathy. To Kohut, then, 'man's destructiveness . . . arises originally as the result of the failure of the self-object environment to meet the child's need for optimal – not maximal, it should be stressed – empathic response. Aggression, as a psychological phenomenon, is not elemental' (1977: 116).

Concomitantly, in social discourse evil became more an instance of 'causing bad or immoral consequences' than of an agent's desire or deliberate will to *do evil*, to purposefully inflict suffering on others. Evildoing ceased being predominantly a moral category, at least as far as psychology and sociology are concerned; if at all claiming the interest of the scholar, it would do so as a piece of behaviour deviating from the norm, from what is the socially expected (and approved) conduct, and thus as a socially conspicuous instance of a 'falling away from the good'. So, instead of springing from some more or less enigmatic or deep anthropological truth about human motivation and behaviour, evildoing was seen as somehow shallow, as marginal to human agency rather than as forming a core element of it. Moreover, those who pursued it, or who were persuaded by others to commit it, came to do what they did because of 'ego weakness' or some other factor rendering them particularly vulnerable to social pressure, especially of the kind emanating from some established authority. This development, it should be noted, is perfectly in line with David Riesman's finding in another twentieth-century academic bestseller, *The Lonely Crowd*, that post-World War II American society is characterized by a shift from the 'inner-directed' to the 'outer-directed' social type; that is to say, a shift from acting from firm beliefs and inner convictions, forming a distinct and persistent personality core, to increasingly using one's well-tuned 'radar' to register and adjust to the expectations of others, especially peers (Riesman et al. 1950).

© Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
0521856949 - Evil and Human Agency: Understanding Collective Evildoing
Arne Johan Vetlesen
Excerpt
More information

The evildoer emerging from Milgram's experiments is a person eager to please the powers that be, as distinct from someone acting selfishly and in pursuit of his own interests only, without caring for the well-being of others. In effect, if not by theoretical intention, Milgram's studies boiled down to the message that, in the circumstances of contemporary society, *evil is an – often unintended – by-product of obedience to authority*. To allude to Zygmunt Bauman's influential reformulation of Milgram's claim, evil in modern society has more to do with patterns of social interaction than with the character and motivation of the acting individual. Evil refers to the unfortunate consequences produced – by and large unintentionally, and often also unknowingly – by individuals who, upon entering large and complex social institutions, get caught up in a so-called 'agentic state', in which they – in alarming numbers, and with alarming consequences for society – are willing to abandon their sense of responsibility for what they do. Social conformity, in fateful collaboration with 'systemic' features such as increasing specialization of tasks amid growing overall complexity, is the cause of more evil than is the once-assumed malicious – that is, evil-*intending* – will of human individuals.

At least superficially there is significant common ground between Milgram, thus read, and Hannah Arendt's famous notion of the 'banality' of evil, coined in response to the figure cut by Adolf Eichmann, the infamous Nazi 'desk-murderer'. Look to the ordinary, to thoughtlessness, to what is devoid of depth, and you shall be able to understand what has become of evil in the age of large-scale atrocities administrated by the institutions of the State. For reasons that I examine in depth in Chapter 2, Arendt ends up with an anti-psychological answer to why someone like Eichmann participated in collective evil. Wary of the pitfalls of 'psychologizing' Eichmann, Arendt presents a portrait of him as a paradigmatic evildoer in our era that I find naive: in suggesting that he was 'merely thoughtless', she in fact adopts the very self-presentation he cultivated. Departing from Arendt, I explore the constant make-believe instrumental in seeking to make come true the ideological notion that some humans are not human, and 'therefore' ought to perish. I show that this is a blindness in Arendt caused by her privileging the role of intellectual capacities over – morally crucial – emotional ones. Arguing for the precarious yet indispensable role of empathy in moral perception, my claim is that Eichmann was *insensitive* rather than thoughtless.

To sum up, I am critical of the shift of emphasis inaugurated by Milgram and consolidated – though in different ways – in the widely read works of Bauman and Arendt. It is not that its advocates have got

© Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
0521856949 - Evil and Human Agency: Understanding Collective Evildoing
Arne Johan Vetlesen
Excerpt
More information

things completely wrong; there *are* trends pointing in the direction they look to, making evildoing in our modern, complex, and bureaucratic society into a matter – a consequence – of 'patterns of interaction' such as obedience to authority. But by looking, rather unanimously, in one particular direction to comprehend what has presently become of evil, other dimensions, forms, and features of evildoing remain in the dark. And when they – unexpectedly – resurface on the social arena, we are caught off guard, practically no less than intellectually: witness Bosnia – the event and the response (or lack of such) to it.

In challenging the understanding of evil I identify as the common ground between such influential authors as Milgram, Arendt, and Bauman, I shall not opt for, say, Daniel Goldhagen's view, in which the Holocaust is traced back to a strong desire to commit murder on the part of each and every perpetrator. Goldhagen's ultimately dogmatic and monocausal privileging of intention over social structure, and of the particularities of German mentality over general characteristics of collective behaviour, means that he throws the baby out with the bathwater. Rather than relying on Goldhagen, I shall draw upon a study by the American philosopher C. Fred Alford, *What Evil Means to Us*, to build my case for an understanding of evil that in major respects goes against the grain of much of today's received wisdom. After devoting a chapter to the contributions of Zygmunt Bauman and Hannah Arendt, respectively, I shall discuss the alternative approach advocated by Alford.

Alford comes up with a tentative theory of evil that goes out of its way to provoke the paradigm inaugurated by Milgram. In my view, Alford is good at offering a framework for analysing what I term 'individual' evil, in which sadism, understood as pleasure in hurting and lack of remorse, plays a large part. Such individual evil is often subtle, often clever, inconspicuous to outsiders yet profoundly damaging to those targeted by it by way of humiliation, spite, neglect, and ridicule – the list is easily prolonged, yet the hurt is effected in each case, leaving the individual victim damaged in his or her sense of self-worth. This is the type of interpersonal evil to whose agency- and life-destructive consequences a considerable portion of psychiatric and psychotherapeutic work is devoted. This everyday arena of 'micro' instances of evil as caused and suffered by individuals on a person-to-person, face-to-face basis is too often overlooked in academic inquiries into evil. In this respect, Alford is a welcome exception. Alford is less helpful, however, when it comes to understanding what I call collective evil: evildoing as planned and performed by groups against other groups, of which *genocide* stands out as

© Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
0521856949 - Evil and Human Agency: Understanding Collective Evildoing
Arne Johan Vetlesen
Excerpt
More information

the particularly salient variant and to which I devote a large portion of the book. To put it briefly, it is not obvious that what helps illuminate and explain individual evil is apt to help us understand collective evil. It is indeed my thesis that the two types of man-made evil need to be studied as much for how they differ as for what they have in common. To restrict myself to just one observation, the scapegoating of others engaged in by an individual who, in inflicting suffering on some particular other person, acts on his own behalf and for reasons all his own, is different in kind from the scapegoating of entire categories of others (Jews, Muslims, immigrants) engaged in by individuals who act in their capacity as members of a certain group, perceiving themselves as acting on behalf of and for the sake of their group and the values it represents. The phenomenon alluded to – that of *allocating guilt* – is a vast topic in its own right, one carrying great significance for my suggested distinction between individual and collective forms of evildoing. Allocation of guilt in a group perspective is a process closely linked with memory, a sense of shared history and fate and thus identity, and the (often very fanciful) inscription of events old and new into a master narrative – the narrative of the group's historical interaction with its adversary. As we shall see in great detail, in some such cases the group's sense of identity is inextricably fused with its (increasingly mythologized) victimhood, thus rendering the individual's fate inseparable from that of the group. Whereas in instances of individual evil the agent committing it will normally perceive himself as a distinct individual, the logic underpinning most instances of collectively undertaken evil is such that the distinction between individual and collective is downplayed or outright denied in theory and virtually obliterated in practice. Collective evil as I theorize it appears to make self-fulfilling the idea that 'your group is your destiny', coupling this idea in disastrous ways with the sense of self-righteousness that stems from the 'once a victim, always a victim' logic alluded to above. In fact – or so I shall argue – *human agency as such* is collectivized, including its crucial elements, responsibility, guilt, and shame.

My choice of theoretical approaches to evil is intended to make the present work a truly interdisciplinary one: Bauman offers a sociological approach, Arendt a philosophical one, and Alford a psychological one. Having completed my presentation and critique of these three approaches, I shift emphasis from the theoretical to the empirical. In Chapters 4 and 5, I turn to recent historical instances of collective evil, in particular 'ethnic cleansing'. My aims are several. To begin with, I find deeply intriguing the huge differences that appear to exist between the form of evildoing exhibited in the Holocaust (analysed by Arendt and

© Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
0521856949 - Evil and Human Agency: Understanding Collective Evildoing
Arne Johan Vetlesen
Excerpt
More information

Bauman) and the form of evildoing displayed in 'ethnic cleansing' – even though in my vocabulary they are both instances of large-scale and collective evil, organized top-down and carried out with the support of the state apparatus. As indicated above, a salient difference between the two historical cases consists in the contrast between evildoing precipitated by mechanisms of *distantiation* and evildoing thriving on *proximity*. Sociologically put, the contrast is that between *Gesellschaft* and *Gemeinschaft* types of collective evil. Accordingly, the social logic underpinning the two cases in question can be described as a *systemic* one in the case of the Holocaust, pursuing the achievement of anonymity in the relationship between perpetrators and victims, and as a *communal* one in the case of 'ethnic cleansing', maintaining a personalized, face-to-face relationship between perpetrator and victim, and doing so *in the very act* of carrying out evil (as I shall discuss in particular with regard to the practice – a deliberate policy – of rape). This contrast invites a whole series of questions. Is the pivotal role attributed to dehumanization of the victim in the case of the Holocaust conspicuous by its absence in 'ethnic cleansing'? If so, does this repudiate the widespread view that dehumanization is a necessary condition of (as well as consequence of) evildoing? Can there be such a thing as an evildoer's *upholding* the fellow humanity of his chosen victim? And what about the viewpoint of the victim? Do we find differences here that somehow correspond to those mentioned between systemic and communal forms of evil? *What does it matter* – in experiential terms, in moral terms, and with regard to questions of guilt and shame, to the prospects of repentance, reconciliation, and forgiveness? Focusing on organized rape in particular, I show how producing shame in the victims relieves the rapists of feelings of guilt. There is a struggle both to rid oneself of agency (responsibility, accountability) and to (re)claim it, trying to remain fully human even when subject to extreme humiliation and suffering.

The issues of guilt, shame, and repentance arise in the course of my account of the ideology and practice of 'ethnic cleansing', and they take centre stage in Chapter 5, dealing with *responses* to collective evil. In developing a theoretical approach suited to addressing the many issues – and aspects – of human agency that force themselves upon us when studying the genocide that was carried out in the former Yugoslavia, I move back and forth between three distinct perspectives: that of perpetrators, that of directly affected victims, and that of bystanders and third parties (who come in many sorts). Neglecting one or the other would only be to the detriment of the task as I see it: to give a comprehensive account of the many ways in which the perspectives and actions of all 'parties'

© Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
0521856949 - Evil and Human Agency: Understanding Collective Evildoing
Arne Johan Vetlesen
Excerpt
More information

(I word I dislike but cannot do without in this context) *interact* so as to help produce the final outcome.

It has been suggested by many authors preoccupied with the issues raised here that during the last one or two decades there has been a shift from a 'modern' to a 'postmodern' understanding of suffering. This invites the question whether the Holocaust symbolizes, and perhaps also exhausts, what can be called the modern understanding, whereas 'ethnic cleansing' might be said to exemplify, on an empirical level, the postmodern understanding. The moral stance of judgment and condemnation taken toward brutal instances of man-made evil in the modern paradigm is today said to have been replaced by a postmodern fascination with *transgression*, with what appears subversive, with deviation from the norm, thus marking a strong reluctance to judge and to condemn acts of so-called evil, and so indulging instead in an attitude of playfulness, of looking for 'all sides' to any given phenomenon, of not 'preaching morality' to anyone but instead affirming the free play of differences, of language games all possessing intrinsic value. Hence evil – along with everything else – is deconstructed, and relativism abounds.

My position is that, while doubtless suggestive, the indicated one-to-one relationship between, first, Holocaust and the distinctly 'modern' understanding of evil, and second, 'ethnic cleansing' and the so-called 'postmodern' understanding, fails to be very instructive. Otherwise put, even if I grant, with vital reservations, Bauman's portrait of the Holocaust as a 'window' through which we can catch a rare glimpse of what modernity is like, I am not prepared to grant an equivalent function to 'ethnic cleansing' vis-à-vis postmodernity. I am not even sure that we have made the alleged shift – in mentality, in type of society – from modernity to postmodernity. More to the point, it *is* true that the overall cultural climate of relativism played a part in shaping the response of leading Western countries to what unfolded before their eyes in the Balkans, and on a more massive scale in Rwanda – the response being that of hesitation, indecisiveness, and inaction, to which the perpetrators responded by proceeding with their killings. But there is nothing novel about this sort of response. Moreover, shifting focus from bystanders to the event itself, 'ethnic cleansing' in my understanding of it offers no clear-cut case of 'postmodern evildoing'. Though certainly deviating from the industrial design associated with the Holocaust, the methods applied in carrying out genocide in central Europe in the alleged heyday of cultural postmodernism represent a strange mixture of premodern, modern, and postmodern elements: there is no or little hi-tech involved (knives being the preferred weapon), the staunchest supporters of the

© Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
0521856949 - Evil and Human Agency: Understanding Collective Evildoing
Arne Johan Vetlesen
Excerpt
More information

'cleansing' ideology are poorly educated peasants; simultaneously, there is a large faction of intellectuals involved (the brains behind it), most of them fairly up-to-date with Western intellectual discourse (suffice it to mention here the nationalist ideologues Mihailo Markovic, a prominent philosophy professor and long-time editor of the internationally acclaimed humanist Marxist journal *Praxis*, and Radovan Karadzic, who, besides being a Sarajevo-based psychiatrist specializing in paranoid states, went to New York to take a postgraduate course in 'creative writing' at Columbia University in the early 1980s). And so on. All I want to say is that, for me, and for my purposes in this book, the modern/postmodern divide is of little help when trying to identify the differences between earlier and more recent eruptions of collective evil.

My own approach to evil places it in an unmistakably *existential* and *experiential* context. Evil in my view touches on certain given, irremovable, and hence non-optional conditions of human being-in-the-world – namely, dependency, vulnerability, mortality, the frailty of interpersonal relationships, and existential loneliness (Vetlesen and Stänicke 1999: 304ff.). Common to these five conditions – I refer to them as basic conditions – of our existence as it is ineluctably given to us is that they point, each in separate ways, to *boundaries* and *limits*. Evil has much to do with this dimension of human existence – be it as the attempt to transcend, negate, or deny boundaries and limits, be it as a symptom of individuals' intolerance of existential givens as such – as in evildoing that is carried out in the form of a *protest against such givens*; recognizing their realness for others – in the form of the 'weakness'-inducing vulnerability of one's victims – but denying their realness for oneself. In this perspective, evildoing is about *hurting others in order to get relief from one's own vulnerability*, to gain a sense of mastery over it. Again, this is a vast subject in its own right. In the present work, the existential dimensions to evil will be treated most fully in the chapter dealing with Alford, and with the crucial part played in his theory of evil by psychoanalyst Melanie Klein. My Alford-inspired thesis is that our vulnerability and dependence qua human beings play an equally fundamental part in our *wishing to do evil to others* and in our own *susceptibility to suffering it* as victims.

I pointed out that our primary access to the phenomenon of evil is through experience – be it that of doing evil or that of suffering it. Philosophically, my position has much in common with that of Emmanuel Levinas. 'All evil', asserts Levinas (1988: 157, 158), 'refers to suffering'; and suffering is the experience of 'extreme passivity, impotence, abandonment and solitude'. I am not convinced, however, that Levinas' understanding of evil – positing an absolute identity between

© Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org