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978-0-521-42214-7 - The Roots of Evil: The Origins of Genocide and Other Group Violence

Ervin Staub

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For those who suffered.
In hope of a better world.

The roots of evil

ERVIN STAUB is Professor of Psychology at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst. He has conducted extensive research and published many articles on helping, altruism, values, aggression, and motivation. He is author of the two-volume work, *Positive Social Behavior and Morality*. In 1990, Professor Staub was awarded the Intercultural and International Relations Prize of the Society for the Psychological Study of Social Issues (a division of the American Psychological Association).

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Preface

Before I first thought of writing this book, I had for many years been conducting research and writing articles and books on the psychological origins of people helping others in need. Psychologists call this altruism, or “prosocial behavior.” In early 1979 I completed the second of my two-volume *Positive Social Behavior and Morality*, and that summer, during a sabbatical leave, I began to read seriously about the Holocaust.¹ I realized that a number of concepts that were useful for understanding why people did or did not help others in need were also useful for understanding the extreme destructiveness of the perpetrators of the Holocaust.

For example, a feeling of responsibility for other people’s welfare greatly increases the likelihood of helping during an accident or sudden illness. This is partly a matter of personality, but it also depends on circumstances. A person helps more when circumstances focus responsibility on him or her. People help less when circumstances diffuse responsibility among a number of those who are present or focus it elsewhere (e.g., on a doctor who is present). I reasoned that harming and killing members of a group become possible when a feeling of responsibility for their welfare has been lost as a result of profound devaluation by a society or by an ideology adopted by the society.

It was clear to me that devaluation and loss of responsibility alone will not directly lead to genocide. Instead, an evolution must occur. Limited mistreatment of the victims changes the perpetrators and prepares them for extreme destructiveness. This was first suggested to me when in my laboratory children whom we involved in prosocial acts became more willing to help others. Research indicates that adults are also changed by their own prior actions. People learn by doing. Extreme destructiveness, it seemed to me, is usually the last of many steps along a continuum of destruction.

I was also struck by the influence of bystanders who knew of or witnessed the persecution of Jews. In Denmark, in the French Huguenot

village of Le Chambon, and in a few other places where bystanders resisted Nazi persecution of Jews, the persecutors changed their behavior. Research strengthened my belief in the power of bystanders. What one bystander said during an emergency defined the meaning of the situation and influenced others' helping. What a bystander did affected others; passivity reduced and action increased helping.

I felt I had the beginnings of an understanding. I knew, however, that the Holocaust had been described as an incomprehensible evil. This view, it seemed to me, romanticized evil and gave it mythic proportions. It discouraged the realistic understanding that is necessary if we are to work effectively for a world without genocides and mass killings and torture.

During the next few years I read and taught courses, first about the Holocaust, then about other genocides and "lesser" cruelties such as mass killings and torture (for a discussion of definitions see Chapter 1). I began to write and lecture on how genocides and mass killings in general come about and to work on this book. This process also led to further exploration of the development of human caring and connection and to an attempt to specify an agenda for creating caring and connection within and between groups.

The reasons for undertaking this task were not disinterested. Their origins are in my personal experience. It took me many years to begin to pay attention to this; my resistance may have been a defense against feelings of loss and sorrow that I was not ready to deal with. I was fortified in this by the professional stance of the disinterested social scientist.

As a Jewish child in Budapest, I was six years old in the horrendous summer of 1944, when the Nazis took over four hundred thousand Hungarian Jews to Auschwitz, where most were murdered on arrival. My immediate family – my parents, my sister, and I – miraculously survived until the end of the war in one of the "protected" houses created by Raoul Wallenberg. Wallenberg, whose heroic deeds are by now well known, was a Swede who accepted a mission to come to Hungary and attempt to save Jewish lives.² His strategy was to create, in his capacity as a Swedish diplomat, "letters of protection" that guaranteed Hungarian Jews Swedish citizenship after the war. The Hungarian authorities allowed a few thousand such documents; many false ones were also created. Some other embassies – the Swiss, the Spanish – followed Wallenberg's example.

Wallenberg managed to buy houses into which people with letters of protection could move. Although there were constant raids on these houses by Hungarian Nazis (the Arrow Cross), many women and children survived. (My father was in a forced labor camp. He escaped when his group was on its way to Germany and was its sole survivor. He hid with us

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in the protected house and was undetected during several raids on the house.)

I was also powerfully influenced by a Christian woman who worked many years for my family. I love her and consider her my second mother. Maria Gógán took my sister and me into hiding at one point, when it seemed that all Jews would be collected for “deportation” (that is, taken to Auschwitz for extermination). She procured food for us and the others in the protected house. In the midst of cruelty and violence she risked her life for others, not only for our family, but even for strangers.

These early experiences are one source of my intense and lifelong concern with kindness and cruelty. But even after I had begun to integrate my past experiences with my scholarly interests, I remained reluctant to mention them in lectures or articles. I thought that the origins of my concerns should not matter, and I feared that audiences and readers might discount the validity of what I had to say. I hope that readers will see such experiences as motivating my study of the issues discussed in this book, but not as determining my conclusions.

I have several reasons for mentioning my childhood experiences here. In 1985 I published an article about the psychology of perpetrators and bystanders.³ Reviewers, who recommended publication, objected that I analyzed the Holocaust along with seemingly much lesser cruelties, for example, the disappearances in Argentina, where between nine and thirty thousand people were tortured and then killed. The Holocaust literature confirms my sense that some readers, given their own personal suffering and identification with victims, may feel that the tremendous tragedy of the Holocaust is diminished when it and other genocides and mass killings are studied together.

I deeply appreciate the horrors of the Holocaust: the Nazis’ obsession with eliminating the Jews as a people, the murder of six million in factories of death, and the great brutality with which victims, who in no way provoked the perpetrators, were treated. Still, extreme evil defies comparisons of magnitude. What is the degree of evil in the act of torturers who insert a tube into a man’s anus or a woman’s vagina and seal into it a rat, which then tries to get out by gnawing its way through the victim’s body? This method of torture was used in Argentina. I intend to make no comparisons of the magnitude of horrors; I do wish, however, to enhance our understanding of the commonalities (and differences) in the *psychological and cultural origins* of mass killings and genocides.

I also fear that some readers may see me as exculpating killers; I have no such intention. Understanding the motives of those who perpetrate genocide may seem to blunt outrage because the individual and group

changes that lead to increasingly vicious acts may become not only more comprehensible, but even seemingly natural. Although outrage is easier to feel in the face of uncomprehended evil, to understand is not necessarily to forgive. In fact, understanding can *increase* our awareness of the culpability of perpetrators of great evil because we can see them as human beings, not as beasts without moral capacity.

Perpetrators make many small and great decisions as they progress along the continuum of destruction. They choose leaders, adopt ideologies, create policies and plans, and engage in harmful and violent acts. Their circumstances and characteristics (which themselves evolve) move them in certain directions. But human experience is always multidimensional and other directions are possible. Other aspects of the self and of experience can be guides to contrary choices. Choice clearly implies responsibility. We must maintain a double vision that both searches for understanding and acknowledges human responsibility. (These issues are discussed at several points, especially in Chapters 2 and 10.)

In the immediate aftermath of the Holocaust, people wondered whether the special characteristics of Germans as a people led them to perpetrate the Holocaust. However, the many atrocities committed by many states since World War II have led to a view that “Germanness” is no explanation. Many now doubt that cultural characteristics determine such conduct. In this book I reassert the importance of culture – not the old notion of “national character,” but a certain pattern of characteristics that enhances the potential for group violence. The psychological processes leading to extreme destructiveness arise when this pattern combines with extreme difficulties of life.

Although this book includes a great deal of historical material, it is primarily a psychological work that attempts to draw on history in the service of psychological understanding of how genocides and mass killings come about.

I want to mention another bit of personal history. I was invited to give a lecture on the psychology of genocide at the University of Trier, in West Germany, in June 1987. At my request, my hosts very kindly arranged for me to talk with a group of students and with a group of people who lived under Hitler. A scheduled two hours with a group of twenty 60- to 75-year-old men and women turned into an intense four-hour discussion of their experiences in the Hitler era. We spoke in German, which I learned when I lived in Vienna between 1956 and 1959 and to my surprise remembered well. I am grateful for the willing participation of members of this group. I will refer in a few footnotes to this discussion and to a ninety-minute discussion with a larger group of students.

Acknowledgments

A book reflects many influences on the writer and the contributions and support of many people. At the University of Massachusetts, the continuing interest of Seymour Epstein, George Levinger, Susan Fiske and other colleagues in my attempts to understand the roots of human destructiveness has been more helpful than they might have imagined. The early intellectual influence of Walter Mischel, as well as Perry London, Eleanor Maccoby, and others at Stanford, during my graduate-school years (and subsequently) has also been important. The friendship and support of Lane Conn, a former colleague at Harvard, and Sarah Conn, a former student of mine there, have been of great value.

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The book was typed and retyped on the computer as I revised and edited it. The staff of the psychology department at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst provided essential help. Melanie Bellenoit was involved from the beginning to the end; her contribution was outstanding and invaluable. Joanne Daughdrill, Amanda Morgan, Stacie Melcher and Jean Glenowicz also made significant contributions. Lisa Sheehy did an excellent job in collecting some materials on Turkey and Argentina and translating some Spanish sources. People routinely thank their families for help and support. Mine certainly deserves thanks. Once more they lived with me through years of the obsession of writing a book – an obsession perhaps more intense with this book – and with books about mass killing, genocide, and torture lying around the house. I am grateful to Sylvia, Adrian and Daniel for their forbearance and love. I hope that my continuing interest in and work on some of the positive aspects of human

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behavior provided relief for them, as I hope that my concern throughout this book with the roots and evolution of caring, helping, altruism, cooperation, and nonaggression will do the same for the readers of this book.

Finally, I appreciated the hospitality of the Department of Psychology at the London School of Economics and Political Science, where I worked on this book in the spring of 1987.