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0521856949 - Evil and Human Agency: Understanding Collective Evildoing

Arne Johan Vetlesen

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## Evil and Human Agency

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Evil is a poorly understood phenomenon. In this provocative and original approach to evil, Professor Vetlesen argues that to do evil is to inflict pain intentionally on another human being, against his or her will, and causing serious and foreseeable harm. Vetlesen investigates why and in what sort of circumstances such a desire arises, and how it is channelled, or exploited, into collective evil-doing. He argues that such evil-doing, pitting whole groups against each other, springs from a combination of character, situation, and social structure. By combining a philosophical approach inspired by Hannah Arendt, a psychological approach inspired by C. Fred Alford, and a sociological approach inspired by Zygmunt Bauman, and bringing these to bear on the Holocaust and ethnic cleansing in the former Yugoslavia, Vetlesen shows how closely perpetrators, victims, and bystanders interact, and how aspects of human agency are recognized, denied, and projected by different agents.

ARNE JOHAN VETLESEN is Professor of Philosophy at the Department of Philosophy, University of Oslo, Norway. He is the author of over thirteen books, including *Perception, Empathy, and Judgment: An Inquiry into the Preconditions of Moral Performance* (1994) and *Closeness: An Ethics* (with H. Jodalen, 1997).

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To my children: Anahita, Daniel, and Petter Nicolai

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## *Preface*

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My obsession with this book's subject goes way back in time. I remember my shock when coming across, at the age of fifteen, the autobiography of one of the handful of Jews from Norway who survived Auschwitz, Herman Sachnowitz. His book is titled *It Concerns You Too*.

Now a professor of philosophy specializing in ethics, my early interest in how organized evil comes about and what it does to all affected is, if anything, more intense than ever. Being a contemporary to the occurrence of genocide in the 1990s – in Bosnia and in Rwanda – made the topic even more urgent. Sixty years after the liberation of Auschwitz, we know only too well that the promise, nay imperative, 'Never again!' has been betrayed again and again.

During the years spent working on this book, I have benefited from exchange with a large number of friends and colleagues. For contributions big and small, I wish to thank Per Nortvedt, Jan-Olav Henriksen, Lars Svendsen, Henrik Syse, Carsten Bagge Laustsen, Tone Bringa, Odd Bjørn Fure, and Bernt Hagtvet. Alastair Hannay once again offered his unfailing moral support. Zygmunt Bauman once again demonstrated that genuine friendship can endure heated disagreement. Thomas Cushman showed his belief in the book at a decisive moment. To all of them, and to the students who have made my seminars on evil into a workshop of ideas from which my argument in this book slowly ripened, I wish to express my deep gratitude. This also goes for my editor, Sarah Caro.

Chapter 2 partly uses material originally published in my 2001 article 'Hannah Arendt on Conscience and Evil' (*Philosophy and Social Criticism* 27, 5). I am grateful to Sage Publications Ltd for permission to reuse this material.

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## *A note on the cover image*

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On 26 November 1942, at four o'clock in the morning, about 100 black taxis driven by Norwegian plain-clothes policemen were used to round up 532 Jews from their homes in the Oslo area. The group, which included children as well as elderly men and women, had to stand in line to wait to be given the order to embark on the German ship *Donau*, which would take them to Germany. The group would then be transported by freight trains to the infamous death camp Auschwitz in Poland. Of the 532 individuals deported that day, only 9 would survive Auschwitz and return to Norway after the camp was liberated by the Soviet Red Army on 27 January 1945. With very few exceptions, the group was 'selected' for extermination by gas immediately upon arriving at Auschwitz in the early days of December 1942. This event, which went largely unnoticed at the time and was without dramatic incident (the arrests occurred without noteworthy resistance), has – somewhat misleadingly – come to be known in postwar Norway as the 'Norwegian *Kristallnacht*', alluding to the pogroms orchestrated by the Nazi Party in Germany on 9 November 1938, when German Jews were killed or beaten up, synagogues throughout Germany set on fire and thousands of books burned amid anti-Semitic speeches and shouting of Nazi slogans.

The photo was taken by a young Norwegian man, Georg W. Fossum, who used to take photos for the underground resistance, sending them by courier to Sweden. Because of a series of arrests, the film of which the 'Donau-photo' is part was in fact not exposed until after the war. Only in 1994 did the photo become known to the wider public, having been part of Fossum's private collection until then.