



Zygmunt Bauman

A Natural History of Evil

Abstract

In the 36,525 days of the twentieth century, between 100 and 160 million civilians lost their lives at hand of mass-murder, slaughter and massacres – that is an average of more than 3,000 innocent deaths per day. The pace has not slackened in the new millennium: statistically speaking, September 11 was an ordinary day.

In his lecture, Zygmunt Bauman outlines and analyses the efforts made to solve the mystery that more perhaps than any other keeps ethical philosophers awake at night: the mystery of *unde malum* (Whence the Evil?) and, more specifically and yet more urgently, of “How do good people turn evil?” The latter is, succinctly put, the secret of the mysterious transmogrification of caring family people and friendly and benevolent neighbours into monsters.

This article is the revised version of a chapter published in *Collateral Damages. Social inequalities in a global age*, Polity Press, Cambridge 2011.

It is highly unlikely that 21st Century readers of Anatole France’s novel *Les Dieux ont soif* originally published in 1912¹ won’t be, simultaneously, bewildered and enraptured. In all likelihood, they will be overwhelmed, as I have been, with admiration for an author who not only, as Milan Kundera would say, managed to “tear through the curtain of preinterpretations”, the “curtain hanging in front of the world”, in order to free “the great human conflicts from naïve interpretation as a struggle between good and evil, understanding them in the light of tragedy”,² which in Kundera’s opinion is the calling of the novelists and the vocation of all novel-writing – but in addition to design and test, for the benefit of his yet unborn readers, the tools with which to cut and tear the curtains not yet woven, but certain to start being eagerly woven and hanged “in front of the world” well after his novel was finished, and particularly eagerly well after his death ...

At the moment Anatole France put aside his pen and took one last look of the finished novel, no words like ‘bolshevism’, ‘fascism’, or indeed ‘totalitarianism’ were listed in dictionaries, French or any other; and no names like Stalin or Hitler appeared in any of the history books. Anatole France’s sight focused on Evarist Gamelin, a juvenile beginner in the world of fine arts, a youngster of great talent and promise, but yet greater disgust of Watteau, Boucher, Fragonard and other dictators of popular taste – whose “bad taste, bad drawings, bad designs”, “complete absence of clear style and clear line”, “a complete unawareness of nature and truth”, fondness of “masks, dolls, fripperies, childish nonsense” he explained by their readiness to “work for tyrants and slaves”. Gamelin was sure that “a hundred years hence all Watteau’s paintings will have rotted away in attics”, and predicted that “by 1893 art students

1 Here quoted after Frederick Davies’s English translation, published under the title *The Gods will have blood*, London 1979.

2 Comp. Milan Kundera, *The Curtain. An Essay in Seven Parts*, trans. by Linda Asher, London 2007, pp. 92, 123, 110.



will be covering the canvases of Boucher with their own rough sketches". The French Republic, still a tender, unsound and frail child of the Revolution, will grow to cut off, one after another, the many heads of the hydra of tyranny and slavery, including this one. There is no mercy for the conspirators against the Republic, as there is no liberty for the enemies of liberty, nor tolerance for the enemies of tolerance. To the doubts voiced by his incredulous mother, Gamelin would respond without hesitation: "We must put our trust in Robespierre; he is incorruptible. Above all, we must trust in Marat. He is the one who really loves the people, who realizes their true interests and serves them. He was always the first to unmask the traitors and frustrate plots." In one of his few and far between authorial interventions, France explains the thoughts and deeds of his hero and his hero's likes as "serene fanaticism" of "little men, who had demolished the throne itself and turned upside down the old order of things". On his own way from the youth of a Romanian fascist to the adulthood of French philosopher, Emile Cioran³ summed up the lot of youngsters of the era of Robespierre and Marat, and Stalin and Hitler alike: "Bad luck is their lot. It is they who voice the doctrine of intolerance and it is they who put that doctrine into practice. It is they who are thirsty – for blood, tumult, barbarity." Well, all the youngsters? And only the youngsters? And in eras of Robespierre or Stalin only?

For Kant, respect and goodwill for others is an imperative of reason; which means that if a human being, a creature endowed by God or Nature with reason, ponders on Kant's reasoning, she or he will surely recognize and accept the categorical character of that imperative and will adopt it as a precept of her or his conduct. In its essence, the categorical imperative in question boils down to the commandment of treating others as you would wish to be treated by them; in other words, to another version of the biblical injunction to love your neighbour as yourself – only in the Kantian case grounded on an elaborate and refined series of logical arguments, and thus invoking the authority of human reason able to judge what needs and cannot but be, instead to the will of God deciding what be ought.

In such a translation from the sacred to secular language something of the commandment's persuasive powers has been however lost. The will of God, that unashamed 'decisionist', can bestow apodictic, unquestionable power on the presumption of the essential, preordained and inescapable symmetry of inter-human relations, a presumption indispensable for both the sacred and the secular version; whereas reason would have a lot of trouble with demonstrating that presumption's veracity. The assertion of the symmetry of inter-human relations belongs, after all, in the universe of beliefs, taken-for-granted and stipulations (and may be therefore accepted on the ground of 'if would be better, if ...', or of 'we owe obedience to God's will'); but it has no room in the universe of empirically testable knowledge – that domain, or rather the natural habitat, of reason. Whether the advocates of the legislative powers of reason refer to the reason's infallibility in its search for truth (for 'how things indeed are and cannot but be'), or to the reason's utilitarian merits (that is, its ability to separate realistic, feasible and plausible intentions from mere daydreaming), they will find it difficult to argue convincingly the reality of symmetry, and yet more difficult to prove the usefulness of practising it.

The problem is the paucity, to say the least, of experiential evidence supporting the debated presumption, whereas reason rests its claim to the last word in contention on its resolution to ground its judgements precisely in that kind of evidence, while dismissing validity of all other grounds. Another, yet closely related problem, is the

³ Comp. Emile Cioran, *Précis de decomposition*, Gallimard 1949, 3.



profusion of contrary evidence: namely, that when promoting the effectiveness of human undertakings and humans' dexterity in reaching their objectives, reason focuses on liberating its carriers from constraints imposed on their choices by symmetry, mutuality, reversibility of actions and obligations; in other words, on creating situations in which the carriers of reason may quietly strike off the list of factors relevant to their choices the apprehension that the course of action they take may rebound on them – or, to put it brutally yet more to the point, that evil may boomerang on the evildoers. Contrary to Kant's hope, common reason seems to be deploying most of its time and energy in the service of disarming and incapacitating the demands and pressures of the allegedly categorical imperative. According to the precepts of reason, the most reasonable, worthy of attention and commendable principles of action are those of pre-empting or abolishing the symmetry between the actors and the objects of their actions; or at least such stratagems that once deployed reduce to minimum the chances of reciprocation. Whatever 'stands to reason', all too often flatly refuses to 'stand to demands of morality'. At any rate, it loses none of its reasonability when failing a moral test.

Reason is a service station of power. It is, first and foremost, a factory of might (*Macht, pouvoir*), defined as the subject's capacity of reaching objectives despite the resistance – whether of the inert matter or of the subjects pursuing different aims. 'To be mighty' means, in other words, the ability to overcome the inertia of recalcitrant object of action or to ignore the ambitions of other *dramatis personae* (to wit, to enjoy the sole subjectivity and the sole effective intentionality in the multi-actor drama, and so to reduce the other subjects to the status of the objects of action or its neutral backdrop). By its very nature, might and power are a-symmetrical (one is tempted to say: in the same way in which nature stands no void, power stands no symmetry). Power does not unify and does not level up (or down) the differences; power divides and opposes. Power is sworn enemy and suppressor of symmetry, reciprocity and mutuality. Power's might consists in its potency to manipulate probabilities, differentiate possibilities as well as potentialities and chances: all that through sealing-up the resulting divisions and immunizing inequalities of distribution against dissent and appellations of those at the receiving end of the operation.

In the nutshell: power and the might to act, the production and the servicing of which are calling of reason, equals an explicit rejection or ignoring in practice of the presumption which renders Kant's imperative categorical. As vividly and poignantly expressed by Friedrich Nietzsche: *What is good?* All that enhances the feeling of power ... *What is bad?* All that proceeds from weakness ... The weak and the botched shall perish: first principle of our humanity. And they ought even be helped to perish. *What is more harmful than any vice?* – Practical sympathy with all the botched and weak ...⁴

"I know joy in destruction" – Nietzsche admitted – proudly. "I am therewith destroyer par excellence."⁵ Several generations of other 'destroyers par excellence', armed with the weapons adequate to making the words flesh (and more to the point, to make the words kill the flesh), who worked hard to make Nietzsche's vision reality, could draw inspiration – and many among them did. They would find the absolution for their intention in Nietzsche's exhortation to help the weak and the botched to perish. As Zarathustra, Nietzsche's authorized spokesman and plenipotentiary, puts it: "My greatest danger always lay in indulgence and sufferance; and all humankind

4 The Antichrist, trans. by Anthony M. Ludovici, London 2000, 4.

5 Ecce Homo, trans. by R. J. Hollingdale, London 1979, 97.



wants to be indulged and suffered.⁶ Verdicts of Nature can be tinkered with only at the tinkers' peril and ruin. To avoid ruin, humans must be freed: the high and mighty from pity, compassion, (unjustly) guilty conscience and (uncalled for) scruples – and the vulgar and lowly from hope.

The efforts to crack one mystery that more perhaps than any other keeps ethical philosophers awake at night, namely the mystery of unde malum (whence the evil?), and more specifically and yet more urgently of “how good people turn evil”⁷ (or, more to the point, the secret of the mysterious transmutation of caring family people, and friendly and benevolent neighbours, into monsters) – were triggered and given the first powerful push by the rising tide of the 20th century totalitarianism, set in feverish motion by the Holocaust revelations, and accelerated yet further by the growing evidence of the ever more evident likeness between the post-Holocaust world's and a mine-field, of which one knows that an explosion must sooner or later occur, yet no one knows when and where. Just how shocking that evidence is and how urgent are measures needed to be undertaken in response, show for instance the calculations made by the psychologist Robert J. Sternberg: in the 36,525 days of the twentieth century, 100 million to 160 millions civilians lost their lives in massacres – that is an average of more than 3,000 innocent deaths per day, and the pace has not slackened in the new millennium. “Statistically speaking”, Sternberg concludes, “September 11 was an ordinary day” ... It takes a lot of evildoers to murder 3,000 civilians in a day. How much it takes to murder 100–160 millions?

From their start, the efforts to crack the aforementioned mystery followed three different tracks; in all probability, they will continue to follow all three of them for a long time to come, as none of the three trajectories seem to possess a final station at which the explorers could rest satisfied that the intended destination of their journey has been reached. The purpose of their exploration is after all the catching in the net of reason the kind of phenomena which Günther Anders described as ‘over-liminal’ (*überschwellige*): phenomena that cannot be grasped and intellectually assimilated because they outgrow the size of any of the sensual/conceptual nets, sharing thereby the fate of their apparent opposite, ‘subliminal’ (*unterschwellige*) phenomena – tiny enough and fast moving enough to escape even the most dense of nets, and to vanish before they could be caught and sent over to reason for intelligent recycling.

The first track (through which Jonathan Littell⁸ seemed most recently to proceed, with but few, and less than principal, qualifications) leads to the sounding and fathoming of psychical peculiarities (or psychical sediments of biographical peculiarities), discovered or hypothesized among the individuals known to have committed cruel acts or caught in the act red-handed, and assumed therefore to surpass the average individuals in their inclination and eagerness to commit atrocities when tempted or commanded. That track was laid yet before the monstrous human deeds of the post-Holocaust era revealed the full awesomeness of the problem's potential

6 Friedrich Nietzsche, Thus spoke Zarathustra, trans. by R. J. Hollingdale, London 2003, 204.

7 The subtitle of Philip Zimbardo's *The Lucifer Effect*, London 2009.

8 Jonathan Littell, *Les Bienveillantes*, Paris 2006; the edition referred to here now and thereafter is Charlotte Mandel's English translation *The Kindly Ones*, London 2009. The original French title, similarly to the title given to the German translation (*Die Wohlgesinnten*), seems to convey the intended interpretation better than its English translation. A title like *The Well-wishers*, or better still *The Benevolent*, would be much more faithful to the original intention.



scale. It was started by Theodore Adorno's highly influential and memorable *Authoritarian Personality* study, promoting the idea of, so to speak, the self-selection of the evildoers – and suggesting that the self-selection in question was determined by natural rather than nurtured predispositions of individual character.

Another, perhaps the widest and most massively trodden track was laid along the line of behavioural conditioning: it led to the investigation of the types of social placement, or the situations, that prompted individuals – 'normal' under 'ordinary' or most common circumstances – to join in the perpetration of evil deeds; or, to express the same in another fashion, conditions that awoke evil predispositions which under different conditions would remain fast asleep. For scholars who followed this track, it was the society of a certain type, not the certain types of individual features, that ought to be put on the defendant bench. For instance, Siegfried Kracauer or Hans Speier sought in the unstoppably multiplying ranks of the *Angestellte* the source of the foul moral atmosphere favouring recruitment to the army of evil. That malodorous, indeed morally poisonous atmosphere was to be shortly afterwards ascribed by Hannah Arendt to the 'proto-totalitarian' predispositions of the bourgeois, or to philistinism and vulgarity of classes forcibly re-forged into masses (and following the principle of *Erst kommt das Fressen, dann kommt die Moral*, as Bertolt Brecht succinctly put it).

Hannah Arendt, arguably the most prominent spokesperson for this way of thinking sharply and uncompromisingly opposing the reduction of social phenomena to individual psyche, observed that the true genius among the Nazi seducers was Himmler, who – neither descending from the *bohème* as Goebbels did, nor being a sexual pervert as Streicher, adventurer as Goering, fanatic as Hitler or madman as Rosenberg – “organized the masses into a system of total domination” – thanks to his (correct!) assumption that in their decisive majority men are not vampires or sadists, but job holders and family providers.⁹ Where to that observation ultimately led her, we could learn from the *Eichmann in Jerusalem* book. The most widely quoted among Arendt's conclusions was the succinct verdict of the banality of evil. What Arendt meant when pronouncing that verdict, was that monstrosities do not need monsters, outrages do not need outrageous characters, and that the trouble with Eichmann lied precisely in the fact that according to the assessments of supreme luminaries of psychology and psychiatry he (alongside so many of his companions in crime) was not a monster nor a sadist, but outrageously, terribly, frighteningly 'normal'. Littel would at least partly follow that Arendt's conclusion in his insistence that Eichmann was anything but a “faceless, soulless robot”. Among the most recent studies following that line, *The Lucifer Effect* of Philip Zimbardo, published in 2007, is a blood-curdling and nerve-racking study of a bunch of good, ordinary, likeable and popular American lads and lasses who turned into monsters once they had been transported to a sort of a 'nowhere place', to the faraway country of Iraq, and put in charge of prisoners charged with ill intentions and suspected to belong to an inferior brand of humans, or being possibly somewhat less than human.

How safe and comfortable, cosy and friendly the world would feel if it were monsters and monsters alone who perpetrated monstrous deeds. Against monsters we are fairly well protected, and so we may rest assured that we are insured against the evil deeds that monsters are capable of and threaten to perpetrate. We have psychologists to spot psychopaths and sociopaths, we have sociologists to tell us where they are likely to propagate and congregate, we have judges to condemn them to confine-

⁹ See Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, London 1986, 338.



ment and isolation, and police or psychiatrists to make sure they stay there. Alas, the good, ordinary, likeable American lads and lasses were neither monsters nor perverts. Were they not assigned to lord over the inmates of *Abu Ghraib*, we would never know (surmise, guess, imagine, fantasize) the horrifying things they were capable of contriving. It wouldn't occur to any of us that the smiling girl at the counter might, once on overseas assignment, excel at devising ever more clever and fanciful, as well as wicked and perverse tricks – to harass, molest, torture and humiliate her wards. In her and her companions' hometowns, their neighbours refuse to believe to this very day that those charming lads and lasses they have known since their childhood are the same folks as the monsters in the snapshots of the *Abu Ghraib* torture chambers. But they are.

In the conclusion of his psychological study of Chip Frederick, the suspected leader and guide of the torturers' pack, Philip Zimbardo had to say that there is absolutely nothing in his record that I was able to uncover that would predict that Chip Frederick would engage in any form of abusive, sadistic behaviour. On the contrary, there is much in his record to suggest that had he not been forced to work and live in such an abnormal situation, he might have been the military's All-American poster soldier on its recruitment ads.

Indeed, Chip Frederick would have passed with flying colours any imaginable psychological test, as well as the most thorough scrutiny of behavioural record routinely applied in selecting candidates for the most responsible and morally sensitive services, like those of the official, uniformed guardians of law and order. In the case of Chip Frederick and his closest and most notorious companion, Lyndie England, you might still insist (even if counterfactually) that they had acted on command and had been forced to engage in atrocities they detested and abhorred – meek sheep rather than predatory wolves. The sole charge against them you might then approve would be that of cowardice or exaggerated respect for their superiors; at the utmost, the charge of having too easily, without as much as a murmur of protest, abandoned the moral principles which guided them in their 'ordinary' life at home. But what about those at the top of bureaucratic ladder? Those who gave commands, forced obedience and punished the disobedient? Those people, surely, must have been monsters?

The inquiry into the *Abu Ghraib* outrage never reached the top echelons of the American military command; for the top, command-issuing people to be brought to trial and tried for war crimes, they would first need to find themselves on the defeated side in the war they waged – which they did not ... But Adolf Eichmann, presiding over the tools and procedures of the 'final solution' of the 'Jewish problem' and giving orders to their operators, was on the side of the defeated, had been captured by victors and brought to their courts. There was an occasion, therefore, to submit the 'monster hypothesis' to a most careful, indeed meticulous scrutiny – and by the most distinguished members of the psychological and psychiatric professions. The final conclusion drawn from that most thorough and reliable research was anything but ambiguous. Here it is, as conveyed by Hannah Arendt: Half a dozen psychiatrists had certified him as 'normal' – "More normal, at any rate, than I am after examining him", one of them was said to have exclaimed, while another had found that his whole psychological outlook, his attitude towards wife and children, mother and father, brothers, sisters and friends was 'not only normal but most desirable'. The trouble with Eichmann was precisely that so many were like him, and that the many were neither perverted nor sadistic, that they were, and still are, terribly and terrifyingly normal. From the viewpoint of our legal institutions and our moral standards



of judgement, this normality was much more terrifying than all the atrocities put together.

It must indeed have been most terrifying of findings: if not ogres, but normal people (I am tempted to add: ‘guys like you and me’), commit atrocities and are capable of acting in a perverted and sadistic way, then all the sieves we have invented and put in place to strain out the carriers of inhumanity from the rest of human species are either botched in execution or misconceived from the start – and most certainly ineffective. And so we are, to cut a long story short, un-protected (one is tempted to add: ‘defenceless against our shared morbid capacity’). Employing their ingenuity to the utmost and trying as hard as they could to ‘civilise’ human manners and the patterns of human togetherness, our ancestors, and also those of us who’ve followed their line of thought and action, are so to speak barking up a wrong tree ...

Reading *The Kindly Ones* attentively, one can unpack a covert critique of the common, and endorsed by Arendt’s herself, interpretation of *The Banality of Evil* thesis: namely, that supposition that the evildoer Eichmann was an “un-thinking man”. From Littel’s portraiture, Eichmann emerges as anything but an un-thinking follower of orders or a slave to his own base passions. “He was certainly not an enemy of mankind described in Nuremberg”, “nor was he an incarnation of banal evil”, he was on the contrary “a very talented bureaucrat, extremely competent at his functions, with a certain stature and a considerable sense of personal initiative”.¹⁰ As a manager, Eichmann would be most certainly a pride of any reputable European firm (one could add: including the companies with Jewish owners or top executives). Littel’s narrator, Dr. Aue, insists that in many personal encounters he had with Eichmann he never noticed any trace of a personal prejudice, let alone a passionate hatred of the Jews whom he saw as no more though not less either than the objects which his office demanded to be duly processed. Whether at home or in his job, Eichmann was consistently the same person. The kind of person he was, for instance, when together with his SS mates he performed two of Brahms’ quartets: “Eichmann played calmly, methodically, his eyes riveted to the score; he didn’t make any mistakes.”¹¹

If Eichmann was ‘normal’, then no one is a priori exempt from suspicion. None of our dazzlingly normal friends and acquaintances; and neither are we. Chip Fredericks and Adolf Eichmanns walk in our streets in full view, queue like us at the same shops’ checkouts, fill cinemas and football grandstands, travel on trains and city buses or stick next to us in the traffic jams. They might live next door, or even sit at our dining table. All of them, given propitious circumstances, might do what Chip Frederick or Adolf Eichmann did. And what about me?! Since so many people can potentially commit acts of humanity, I might easily by chance, by a mere caprice of fate, become one of their victims. They can do it – this is what I already know. But is not it so that equally easily it may be I myself who become one of ,them’: just another ‘ordinary human’ who can do to other humans what they have done ...

John M. Steiner¹² used metaphorically the notion of a ‘sleeper’, drawn from the terminology of spy networks, to denote as yet undisclosed personal inclination to commit acts of violence, or person’s vulnerability to a temptation to join in such acts – some odious potential that may be hypothetically present in particular individuals while remaining for a long time invisible; an inclination that can (is bound to?) surface, or vulnerability that may be revealed, only under some particularly propitious

¹⁰ *The Kindly Ones*, 569-70.

¹¹ *The Kindly Ones*, p. 565.

¹² John Steiner, *The SS Yesterday and Today: A Sociopsychological View*, in: *Survivors, Victims and Perpetrators*, ed. Joel E. Dinsdale, Washington 1980, 431.



conditions: presumably once the forces that hitherto repressed it and kept under cover are abruptly weakened or removed. Ervin Staub moved one (gigantic) step further, deleting both references to ‘particularity’ in Steiner’s proposition and hypothesizing the presence of malevolent ‘sleepers’ in most, perhaps all humans: “Evil ... committed by ordinary people is the norm, not an exception.” Is he right? We don’t know and will never know, at least never know for sure, as there is no way to prove or disprove that guess empirically. Possibilities are not unlike chicken: they can be reliably, definitely counted only after they have been hatched.

What do we know for sure? The ease (as Zimbardo himself found in his earlier experiments conducted at Stanford University with students randomly selected to play the role of ‘prison guards’ towards fellow students, also randomly cast in the role of prisoners) “with which sadistic behaviour could be elicited in individuals who were not ‘sadistic types’”.¹³ Or, as Stanley Milgram found in his Yale experiments with again randomly chosen people who were asked to inflict on other humans a series of what they were made to believe were painful electrical shocks of escalating magnitude: that ‘obedience to authority’, any authority, regardless of the nature of the commands that authority may give, is a “deeply ingrained behaviour tendency” even if the subjects find the actions they are told to perform repugnant and revolting.¹⁴ If you add to that factor such well-nigh universal sediments of socialization as the attributes of loyalty, sense of duty and discipline, “men are led to kill with little difficulty”. It is easy, in other words, to prod/push/seduce/entice non-evil people to commit evil things.

Christopher R. Browning investigated the twisted yet invariably gory itinerary of men belonging to the German Reserve Police Battalion 101, assigned to the police from among conscripts unfit for front-line duty, and eventually delegated to participate in the mass murder of Jews in Poland.¹⁵ Those people, who had never been known to commit violent, let alone murderous acts before, and gave no ground to suspicion of being capable of committing them, were ready (not a hundred per cent of them, but a considerable majority) to comply with the command to murder: to shoot point blank men and women, old people and children unarmed and obviously innocent since not charged with any crime, and none of whom nestling the slightest intention to harm them or their comrades-in-arms. What Browning found, however (and published under the telling-it-all title of *Ordinary Men*), was that just about ten to twenty per cent of the conscripted policemen proved to be ‘refusers and evaders’, who asked to be excused from carrying out the orders, that there was also a ‘nucleus of increasingly enthusiastic killers who volunteered for the firing squads and ‘Jew hunts’’, but that a by far the largest group of conscript policemen performed placidly the role of murderers and ghetto clearers when assigned to it, though not seeking opportunities to kill on their own initiative. The most striking aspect of that finding was in my view the amazing similarity of Browning’s statistical distribution of zealots, abstainers and impassioned ‘neither-nors’, to that of the reactions to the authoritatively endorsed commands by the subjects of Zimbardo’s and Milgram’s experiments. In all three cases, some people ordered to commit cruelty were only too eager to jump to the occasion and give vent to their evil drives; some – roughly of the same number – refused to do evil whatever the circumstances and whatever the conse-

¹³ See Craig Haney/Curtis Banks/Philip Zimbardo, Interpersonal Dynamics in a Simulated Prison, in: *International Journal of Criminology and Penology*, 1973, 69-97.

¹⁴ For full discussion, see Zygmunt Bauman, *Modernity and the Holocaust*, London 1989, chap. 6.

¹⁵ See Christopher R. Browning, *Ordinary Men: Reserve Police Battalion 101 and the Final Solution in Poland*, London 2001.



quences of their abstention; whereas an extensive ‘middle ground’ was filled by people who were indifferent, lukewarm and not particularly engaged or strongly committed to one or another side of the attitudinal spectrum, avoiding taking any stand, whether for morality or against it – and preferring instead to follow the line of least resistance and do whatever prudence dictated them, whereas unconcern allowed, to do.

In other words, in all three cases (as well as in innumerable other specimens of the extensive set of studies of which these three investigations have been acclaimed as the most spectacular and illuminating examples), the distribution of the probabilities that the command to do evil will be obeyed or resisted has followed the standard known in statistics as the Gaussian curve (sometimes called the Gaussian bell, Gaussian distribution, or Gaussian function) – believed to be the graph of the most common and prototypical, to wit ‘normal’, distribution of probabilities. We read in Wikipedia that what the notion of the Gaussian curve refers to is the tendency of results to ‘cluster around a mean or average’. ‘The graph of the associated probability density function is bell-shaped, with a peak at the mean.’ We also read that ‘by the central limit theorem, any variable that is the sum of a large number of independent factors is likely to be normally distributed.’

As the probabilities of various behavioural responses by people exposed to the pressure to do evil show a clear tendency to take the form of a Gaussian curve, we can risk the supposition that, in their case as well, the results were compounded by the mutual interference of a large number of independent factors: commands descending from on high, instinctual or deeply entrenched respect for or fear of authority, loyalty reinforced by the consideration of duty and by drilled discipline were some of them – but not necessarily the only ones.

The possible silver lining under this uniformly dark cloud is that it seems plausible (just plausible ...) that under conditions of liquid modernity, marked by the loosening or dissipation of bureaucratic hierarchies of authority as well as by the multiplication of sites from which competitive recommendations are voiced (the two factors responsible for rising illegibility and diminishing audibility of those voices), other – more individual, idiosyncratic and personal factors, for instance personal characters, may play an increasingly important role on the choice of responses. Humanity of humans may gain if they did.

And yet, our shared experience thus far offers few if any reasons to be optimistic. As Winfried George Sebald (in his 1999 *Luftkrieg und Literatur*, published in the English translation by Anthea Bell under the title *On the Natural History of Destruction*) suggests, “we are unable to learn from the misfortunes we bring on ourselves” and “we are incorrigible and will continue along the beaten tracks that bear some slight relation to the old road network”. Bent as we all are, by nature or training, on seeking and finding the shortest way to the aims we pursue and believe to be worth pursuing, ‘misfortunes’ (and particularly misfortunes suffered by others) do not seem an excessively high price to pay for shortening the way, cutting the costs and magnifying the effects.

Sebald quotes, after Alexander Kluge’s *Unheimlichkeit der Zeit*, an interview conducted by a German journalist Kunzert with the U.S. Eight Army Air Force Brigadier Frederick L. Anderson. Pressed by Kunzert to explain whether there was a way to prevent/avoid the destruction of Halberstadt, his home town, by American carpet bombing, Anderson responded that the bomb were, after all, “expensive items”. “In practice, they couldn’t have been dropped over mountains or open country after so much labour had gone into making them at home” (Sebald, p. 65). Anderson, un-



commonly frank, hit the nail on its head; it was not the need to do something about Halberstadt that decided the use of the bombs, but the need to do something with the bombs that decided the fate of Halberstadt. Halberstadt was but a “collateral casualty” (to update the language of the military) of the bomb factories’ success. As Sebald explains, “once the *matériel* was manufactured, simply letting the aircraft and their valuable freight stand idle on the airfields of eastern England ran counter to any healthy economic instinct” (p. 18). That “economic instinct” could perhaps have had the first, but most certainly had the last word in the debate about the propriety and usefulness of Sir Arthur ‘Bomber’ Harris strategy; the destruction of German cities went into its full and unstoppable swing well after the spring of 1944, when it had already dawned on the policy makers and the military order-givers that contrary to the officially proclaimed objective of the air campaign and its protracted, determined, lavish, zealous, pull-no-punches execution, “the morale of the German population was obviously unbroken, while industrial production was impaired only marginally at best, and the end of the war had not come a day closer”. By the time that discovery and disclosure was made, the *matériel* in question had been already manufactured and filled the warehouses to capacity; letting it lie idle would indeed “counter any healthy economic instinct”, or, to put it simply, would make no “economic sense” (by A.J.P. Taylor’s estimate, as quoted by Max Hastings in his 1979 study Bomber Command, 349, the servicing of the bombing campaign engaged and “swallowed up” after all one-third of the total British war-servicing production).

We have sketched so far and compared two tracks along which the search for an answer to the *unde malum* has in recent times proceeded. There is, however, a third track as well, which due to the universality and extemporality of the factors it invokes and deploys in the pursuit of understanding deserves to be called anthropological; a factor that with the passage of time seems to rise in stature and promise, just as the other two sketched above near the exhaustion of their cognitive potential. We could intuit the direction of that third track in Sebald’s study; it has been however laid out already before, in Günther Anders’ seminal yet for a few decades overlooked or neglected study of the *Nagasaki Syndrome* phenomenon,¹⁶ charged by Anders with a fully and truly apocalyptic potential of ‘globocide’. *Nagasaki Syndrome*, as Anders suggested, means that “what has been done once, can be repeated over again, with ever weaker reservations”; with each successive case, more and more “matter-offactly, casually, with little deliberation or motive”. “Repetition of outrage is not just possible, but probable – as the chance to win the battle for its prevention gets smaller, while that of losing it rises.”

The decision to despatch atomic bombs on Hiroshima on 6 August 1945 and three days later on Nagasaki was officially explained, *ex post facto*, by the need to bring forward the capitulation of Japan in order to save uncounted numbers of American lives which most certainly would be lost were the American army to invade the Japanese archipelago. The jury of history is still in sitting, but the official version of the motive, justifying the meanness and villainy of the means by reference to the grandiosity and nobility of the goals, has been recently cast in doubt by American historians examining the newly de-classified information about the circum-

¹⁶ See Günther Anders, *Wir Eichmannsöhne* (1964, 1988), here quoted after French translation *Nous, fils d’Eichmann*, Paris 2003, 47.



stances in which the decision was considered, taken and implemented, which allows to question the official version also on factual, and not only moral grounds. As the critics of the official version aver, rulers of Japan were ready to capitulate a month or so before the first atom bomb was dropped – and just two steps would cause them to lay down arms: Truman’s consent to the Soviet Army joining the war with Japan, and the commitments of the allies to keep Mikado on his throne after Japan’s surrender. Truman, however, procrastinated. He waited for the results of the test set to be conducted in Alamogordo in New Mexico, where final touches were about to be put on the performance of first atomic bombs. The news of the results did arrive, to Potsdam, on 17 July: the test was not just successful: the impact of explosion eclipsed the boldest of expectations ... Resenting the idea of consigning an exorbitantly expensive technology to waste, Truman started playing for time. The genuine stake of his procrastination could be easily deduced from the triumphant presidential address published in the New York Times on the day following the destruction of a hundred thousand lives in Hiroshima: “We made the most audacious scientific bet in history, a bet of two billion dollars – and won.” One just couldn’t waste two billion dollars, could one? If the original objective has been reached before the product had a chance of being used, one had to promptly find another aim that would preserve or restore to the expenditure its “economic sense” ...

On 16 March 1945, when Nazi Germany was already on its knees and the speedy end of war was no longer in doubt, Arthur ‘Bomber’ Harris sent 225 Lancaster bombers and eleven Mosquito fighter planes ordered to discharge 289 ton of explosives and 573 ton of incendiary substances on Würzburg, a middle-size town of 107 thousands residents, rich in history and art treasures while poor in industry. Between 9:20 and 9:37 p.m. about five thousand inhabitants (of whom 66 per cent were women and 14 per cent children) were killed, whereas 21 thousand living houses were set on fire: only six thousand residents found roof over their heads once the planes left. Hermann Knell,¹⁷ who calculated above figures following a scrupulous scrutiny of archives, asks why a town devoid of all and any strategic significance (that opinion being confirmed, even if in a round-about way, by omitting all and any mention of that town’s name in the official History of RAF, meticulously listing all, even the most minute, strategic accomplishments of air forces) had been selected for destruction. Having examined and disqualified one by one all conceivable alternative causes, Knell was left with the sole sensible answer to his question: that Arthur Harris and Carl Spaatz (the commander of the US Air Force in Great Britain and Italy) found themselves at the beginning of 1945 short of targets.

The bombing progressed as planned without consideration of the changed military situation. The destruction of German cities continued until the end of April. Seemingly once the military machine was moving it could not be stopped. It had a life of its own. There was now all the equipment and soldiers on hand. It must have been that aspect that made Harris decide to have Würzburg attacked ...

But why Würzburg of all places? Purely for reasons of convenience. As previous reconnaissance sorties have shown, “the city could be easily located with the electronic aids available at the time”. And the city was sufficiently distanced from the advancing allied troops to reduce the threat of another case of ‘friendly fire’ (i.e., dropping the bombs on own troops). In other words, the town was “an easy and riskless target”. This was Würzburg’s inadvertent and unwitting fault, a kind of fault

¹⁷ See Hermann Knell, *To Destroy a City: Strategic Bombing and Its Human Consequences in World War II*, London 2003 – particularly pp. 25 and 330-331.



for which no ‘target’ would ever be pardoned once “the military machine was moving” ...

In *La violence nazie: une généalogie européenne*¹⁸ Enzo Traverso puts forward a concept of the “barbaric potential” of modern civilization. In that study dedicated to Nazi violence he comes to the conclusion that the atrocities Nazi-style were unique solely in the sense of synthesizing large number of the means of enslavement and annihilation already tested, though separately, in the history of the Western civilization. The bombs thrown on Hiroshima and Nagasaki prove, that the anti-Enlightenment sentiments are not the necessary conditions of technological massacre. The two atomic bombs as much as the Nazi camps were elements of the “civilizing process”, manifestations of one of its potentials, one of its faces and one of its possible ramifications. Traverso finishes his exploration with a warning: there are no grounds whatsoever for excluding the possibility of other syntheses in the future – no less murderous than the Nazi. The liberal, civilized Europe of the 20th century proved to be, after all, a laboratory of violence. Myself, I would add that there are no signs of that laboratory having been shut and ceased operation with the dawn of the 21st century.

Günther Anders¹⁹ asks: are we, in this age of machines, the last relics of the past, who did not manage as yet to clean off the toxic sediments of past atrocities? And he answers: the outrages under discussion were committed *then* not because they were still feasible (or failed yet to be eradicated), but on the contrary – they were perpetrated *already* then, because *already* then they became feasible and plausible ...

Let me sum up: there must have been the ‘first moment’ in which the technologically assisted atrocities, until then inconceivable, had become feasible; those atrocities must have had their moment of beginning, their starting point – but it does not follow, that they must have an end as well. It does not follow, that they entered human cohabitation on a brief visit only, and even less that they brought or set in motion some mechanisms bound to cause sooner or later their departure. It is rather the other way round: once the contraption allowing to separate technological capacity from moral imagination is put in place, it becomes self-propelling, self-reinforcing and self-reinvigorating. Human capacity of adjustment, habituation, becoming accustomed, starting today from the point to which one has been brought the evening before, and all in all recycling the inconceivability of yesterday into today’s fact-of-the-matter will see to that.

Atrocities, in other words, do not self-condemn and self-destruct. They, on the contrary, self-reproduce: what was once an unexpectedly horrifying turn of fate and a shock (an awesome discovery, gruesome revelation), degenerates into a routine conditioned reflex. Hiroshima was a shock with deafeningly loud and seemingly non-extinguishable echoes. Three days later, Nagasaki was hardly a shock, evoking few if any echoes. Joseph Roth²⁰ pointed to one of the mechanisms of that de-sensitising habituation:

When a catastrophe occurs, people at hand are shocked into helpfulness. Certainly, acute catastrophes have that effect. It seems that people expect catastrophes to be brief. But chronic catastrophes are so unpalatable to neighbours that they gradually become indifferent to them and their victims, if not downright impatient ... Once the emergency becomes protracted, helping hands return to pockets, the fires of compassion cool down.

¹⁸ Enzo Traverso, *La violence nazie: une généalogie européenne*. Paris 2003.

¹⁹ Nous, fils d’Eichmann, 108.

²⁰ See: *Juden auf Wanderschaft*, here quoted from Michael Hoffmann English translation *The Wandering Jews*, London 2001, 125.



In other words: a protracted catastrophe blazes the trail of its own continuation by consigning the initial shock and outrage to oblivion and thus emaciating and enfeebling human solidarity with its victims – and so sapping the possibility of joining forces for the sake of staving off future victimage ...

But how and why the said atrocities came to be in the first place? For the explorers of the sources of evil, it is Anders, it seems, who sketches a yet another, best called metaphysical, approach. One could spy out its antecedents in Heidegger's concept of *technē* (Τέχνη), though curiously that acclaimed metaphysician of being-in-time set the *technē* beyond historical time, in the metaphysics of Sein – being – as such, presenting thereby *technē* as a history-immune, intractable and unchangeable attribute of all and any being. Anders, on the other hand, is intensely aware of the intimate interdependence of *technē* and history and the sensitivity of *technē* to the historical transmutations of forms of life. Anders, as it can be seen, focused on metaphysics of evil made to the measure of our times, a specific evil, endemic uniquely to our own, present and still continuing, form of human cohabitation: form defined and set apart from other forms by the *technē* (a product, in the last account, of human power of imagination) dashing far beyond human imagining powers and in its turn overpowering, enslaving and disabling that human capacity which brought it to be. A prototype of such convoluted, meandering story of Andersian *technē* needs to be sought perhaps in the ancient saga of sorcerer's wayward apprentice, Hegel's and Marx's physiology of alienation, and closer to our times in Georg Simmel's idea of the *Tragödie der Kultur* – of the products of human spirit rising to a volume transcending and leaving far behind human power of absorption, comprehension, assimilation and mastery.

According to Anders, human power to produce (*herstellen*: having things done, plans implemented), has been in recent decades emancipated from the constraints imposed by the much less expandable power of humans to imagine, re-present and render intelligible (*vorstellen*). It is in that relatively new phenomenon, the hiatus (*Diskrepanz*) separating human creative and imagining powers, that contemporary variety of evil set its roots. The moral calamity of our time “does not grow from our sensuality or perfidy, dishonesty or licentiousness, not even from exploitation – but from the deficit of imagination”; whereas imagination, as Anders untiringly insists, grasps more of the “truth” (*nimmt mehr 'wahr'*), then our machine-driven empirical perception (*Wahrnehmung*) is capable of.²¹ I would add: imagination grasps also infinitely more of the moral truth, in encounter with which our empirical perception is especially blindfolded.

The reality which the perception orphaned by imagination grasps, and beyond which it is unable to reach, is always-already-made, technologically prefabricated and operated; in it, there is no room for those thousands or millions cast at its receiving end and sentenced to atomic, napalm, or poisonous-gas destruction. That reality consists of keyboards and pushbuttons. And as Anders points out, “one wouldn't gnash teeth when pressing a button ... A key is a key.”²² Whether the pressing of the key starts a kitchen ice-cream-making contraption, feeds current into an electricity network, or lets loose the Horsemen of Apocalypse, makes no difference. “The gesture that will initiate the Apocalypse would not differ from any of the other gestures – and it will be performed, as all other identical gestures, by a similarly routine guid-

21 See Wenn ich verzweifelt bin, was geht's mich an? (1977), here quoted after French translation Et si je suis désespéré, que voulez-vous que j'y fasse?, Paris 2007, 65-66.

22 See Günther Anders, Der Mann auf der Brücke, München 1959, 144.



ed and routine-bored operator.” “If something symbolizes the satanic nature of our situation, it is precisely that innocence of the gesture”;²³ the negligibility of the effort and thought needed to set off a cataclysm – any cataclysm, including the globocide. We are technologically all-powerful because of, and thanks to, powerlessness of our imagination.

Powerless as we are, we are omnipotent, since capable of bringing into being the forces able in their turn to cause effects which we will not be able to produce with our ‘natural equipment’ – our own hands and muscles. But having become all-powerful in that way, watching and admiring the might and the efficiency and the shattering effects of entities we have ourselves designed and conjured-up, we discover our own powerlessness ... That discovery comes together with another: that of the pride of inventing and setting in motion magnificent machines able to perform Herculean deeds of which we would be incapable otherwise of performing. By the same token, we feel however *challenged* by the standards of perfection we have set for the machines brought by us into being, but which we ourselves can’t match. And so, finally, we discover shame: the ignominy of our own inferiority, and thus the humiliation which overwhelms us when facing up to our own impotence.

Those three discoveries combine, as Anders suggests, into the *Promethean Complex*. Anders has names for the objects of each discovery: Promethean pride, Promethean challenge, and Promethean shame.²⁴ The latter is the sense of one’s own inborn inferiority and imperfection – both blatant if juxtaposed with the perfection, nay omnipotence, of made-up things; the outcome of indignity brought upon us in the last account by our failure to self-reify – to become like the machines: indomitable, irresistible, unstoppable, un-submissive, and indeed ungovernable as are the machines ‘at their best’. To mitigate that infamy, we need to demonstrate our own ability to accomplish, by our own natural means and bodily effort and without help of machines, things which the machines so easily, matter-of-factly perform: by turning themselves, in other words, into means for the means, tools for the tools ... Having watched from their low-flying war machines, avidly and at close quarters, the ravages perpetrated by the tools of murder and devastation sprinkled over the village of My Lai, lieutenant Calley’s soldiers could not resist the challenge/temptation to perform personally, with their bare hands, what their weapons achieved mechanically: the temptation to catch up with the tools of destruction and to overtake them in the chase after perfection – if only for a moment and only here and now, in this village.²⁵ The sight of inanimate objects harnessed to the gory job widened the soldiers’ horizons, uncovered un-thought-of possibilities, stimulated imagination – but these were already horizons drawn by machines, possibilities opened up by mechanical conduct, and imagination industrially prefabricated.

In his second open letter to Klaus Eichmann²⁶ Anders writes of the relation between criminal Nazi state and the post-Nazi, our contemporary, world regime: “The affinity between the technical-totalitarian empire which threatens us and the monstrous Nazi empire is evident.” But he hastens to explain right away that he intended the above statement as a provocation, aimed against the widespread (because comforting) opinion that the Third Reich was a unique phenomenon, an aberration un-

23 See Günther Anders, *Le temps de la fin*, Paris 2007 (originally 1960), 52-53.

24 See Günther Anders, *Die Antiquiertheit des Menschen: Über die Seele im Zeitalter der zweiten industriellen Revolution*, München 1956. Here quoted after the French translation, *L’Obsolescence de l’Homme: Sur l’âme à l’époque de la deuxième révolution industrielle*, Paris 2002, 37-40.

25 See *Et si je suis désespéré*, 67-68.

26 See *Et si je suis désespéré*, 100.



typical of our times and particularly in our Western world; an opinion which owes its popularity to its treacherous potency of exonerating and legitimising turning one's eyes away from one's own gruesome, terrifying potential. Personally, I deeply regret that I was not aware of these Anders' conclusions, when working on my *Modernity and the Holocaust*. In response to a journalist's suggestion, that he belongs in the ranks of "panic mongers", Anders replied, that he considers the "panic monger" title to be a distinction and wears it with pride – adding that "in our days, the most important moral task is to make people aware that they need to be alarmed – and that the fears that haunt them have valid reasons."²⁷

Zygmunt Bauman is a Polish-born sociologist. After having left Poland in the aftermath of the anti-Semitic campaign of 1968, he became professor of sociology at the *University of Leeds*, England and has since held professorships at numerous other universities, among them *Berkeley*, *Yale*, *St. John's* and *Copenhagen*. Bauman has become best known for his analyses of the links between modernity and the Holocaust, the ambivalence of modernity, postmodernity and consumerism.

27 Ibid., 92

Quotation: Zygmunt Bauman, A Natural History of Evil, in: S:I.M.O.N. - Shoah: Intervention. Methods, Documentation. The E-Journal of the Vienna Wiesenthal Institute for Holocaust Studies (VWI), 22 March 2012

<http://simon.vwi.ac.at/index.php/swl-reader/21-a-natural-history-of-evil>

S:I.M.O.N.– Shoah: Intervention. Methods. DocumentatiON.
ISSN 2408-9192

SWL-Reader – Reader of the Simon Wiesenthal Lectures

Editors: Éva Kovács / Béla Rásky / Philipp Rohrbach
Copy Editor: Jana Starek
Graphic Design: Hans Ljung

S:I.M.O.N. is the occasional bilingual e-journal of the
Vienna Wiesenthal Institute for Holocaust Studies (VWI)

© by the Vienna Wiesenthal Institute for Holocaust Studies (VWI), S:I.M.O.N., the authors, and translators, all rights reserved. This work may be copied and redistributed for non-commercial, educational purposes, if permission is granted by the author(s) and usage right holders.

For permission please contact simon@vwi.ac.at