Perpetrators of Genocide: An Explanatory Model of Extraordinary Human Evil

James Waller[*]

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I. INTRODUCTION

According to Jewish-Christian tradition, the first time that death appeared in the world, it was murder. Cain slew Abel. "Two men," says Elie Wiesel, and "one of them became a killer."[1] Throughout human history, social conflict is ubiquitous. Wars erupt naturally everywhere humans are present. Since the Napoleonic Wars, we have fought an average of six international wars and six civil wars per *decade*. The four decades after the end of World War II saw 150 wars and only 26 days of world peace—and that does not even include the innumerable internal wars and police actions. Buried in the midst of all of our progress in the twentieth century are well over a hundred million persons who met a violent death at the hands of their fellow human beings. That is over five times the number from the nineteenth century and more than ten times the number from the eighteenth century.[2]

Anthropologist Michael Ghiglieri even contends that war vies with sex for the distinction of being the most significant process in human evolution. "Not only have wars shaped geopolitical boundaries and spread national

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    1.   Lance Morrow, *Evil*, TIME 52 (June 10, 1991).
    2.   See A. Westing, *War as a Human Endeavour*, Journal of Peace Research 3 (1982). The data on war-related deaths is drawn from William Eckhardt's "War-Related Deaths Since 3000 B.C.," Bulletin of Peace Proposals, December 1991.

ideologies," he writes, "but they also have carved the distributions of humanity's religions, cultures, diseases, technologies, and even genetic populations."[3]

There is no sign that we are on an ascendant trajectory out of the shadow of our work of de-creation. At the close of the twentieth century, a third of the world's 193 nations were embroiled in conflict—nearly twice the Cold War level. The bipolar Cold War system has disintegrated into a system of "Warm Wars," with randomized conflicts popping up in all corners of an interdependent world. Retired Army Major Andy Messing Jr., executive director of the conservative-oriented National Defense Council Foundation, warns that the growing proliferation of weapons of mass destruction and an increasing world population only add to the danger. In his words, "It's going to be a very tough next 20 years."[4] Even more liberal-leaning voices recognize that present-day population growth, land resources, energy consumption and per capita consumption cannot be sustained without leading to even more catastrophic human conflict.

The persistence of inhumanity in human affairs is incontrovertible. The greatest catastrophes occur when the distinctions between war and crime fade; when there is dissolution of the boundary between military and criminal conduct, between civility and barbarity; when political and social groups embrace mass killing and genocide as warfare. I am not speaking here of isolated executions, but of wholesale slaughters. As collectives, we engage in acts of extraordinary evil, with apparent moral calm and intensity of supposed purpose, which could only be described as insane were they committed by an individual.

The twentieth century, aptly dubbed the "Age of Genocide,"[5] saw a massive scale of systematic and intentional mass murder coupled with an unprecedented efficiency of the mechanisms and techniques of mass destruction. In the past century alone, it is estimated that 60 million men, women and children have been victims of mass killing and genocide.[6] The "Age of Genocide" moved from the near-complete annihilation of the Hereros by the Germans in South-West Africa in 1904; to the brutal assault of the Armenian population by the Turks between 1915 and 1923; to the implementation of a Soviet man-made famine in the Ukraine in 1932-1933 that left several million peasants starving to death; to the Soviet deportation of

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3.   Michael P. Ghiglieri, *The Dark Side of Man: Tracing the Origins of Male Violence* (Reading, MA: Perseus Books, 1999), p. 162.

4.   "Third of Nations Mired in Conflict," Associated Press Report, December 30, 1999.

5.   Roger W. Smith, "Human Destructiveness and Politics: The Twentieth Century as an Age of Genocide," p. 21, in Isidor Wallimann & Michael N. Dobkowski, *Genocide and the Modern Age: Etiology and Case Studies of Mass Death* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2000).

6.   *Id.*

entire nations; to the extermination of two-thirds of Europe's Jews during the Holocaust of 1939-1945; to the massacre of approximately half a million people in Indonesia during 1965-1966; to mass killings and genocide in Bangladesh (1971), Burundi (1972), Cambodia (1975-1979), East Timor (1975-1979) and Rwanda (1994); and, finally, to the perpetual human crisis that continues to rage in the former Yugoslavia.

There is one unassailable fact behind this ignoble litany of human conflict and suffering. Political or social groups wanting to commit mass murder do. Though there may be other obstacles, they are never hindered by a lack of willing executioners. That is the one constant upon which they can count. They can always find individual human beings who will kill other human beings in large numbers and over an extended period of time. In short, people are the weapons by which genocide occurs. How do we explain the extraordinary evil that we perpetrate on each other in the name of our country, race, ethnicity, political party or god?

Unlike much of the research in perpetrator behavior, I am not interested in the higher echelons of leadership who structured the ideology, policy and initiatives behind a particular genocide or mass killing. Nor am I interested in the middle-echelon perpetrators, the faceless bureaucrats who made implementation of those initiatives possible. Rather, I am interested in the rank-and-file killers. The ordinary men and women at the bottom of the hierarchy who personally carried out the millions of executions. The people that were so ordinary that, with few exceptions, they were readily absorbed into civil society after the killings and peacefully lived out their unremarkable lives. To understand the fundamental reality of mass murder requires shifting the focus from impersonal institutions and abstract structures directly onto the actors —the men and women who actually carried out the atrocities.

Rather than another descriptive catalogue of the atrocities we perpetrate on each other, we stand much more in need of explanation and understanding. How do people come to commit extraordinary evil? *The goal of this paper is to offer a psychological explanation of how people come to commit extraordinary evil.* The paper is divided into three parts. First, I will briefly review the work of those who argue for the extraordinary origins of extraordinary evil. Second, I will counter these positions with the argument that it is ordinary individuals, like you and me, who commit extraordinary evil. Third, I will then outline an explanation of extraordinary human evil that considers the wide range of evolutionary, individual, social and situational factors involved in the process of ordinary people coming to commit extraordinary evil. This four-pronged explanatory model, drawing on extensive case studies of perpetrator behavior from a wide range of genocides and mass killings in the twentieth century, is not an invocation of a single broad-brush psychological state to explain extraordinary human evil. Rather, it is a detailed analysis of the factors that help shape our responses to

authority and unleash our destructive capacities.

II. EXTRAORDINARY ORIGINS OF EXTRAORDINARY
HUMAN EVIL

What are the origins of extraordinary human evil? Some scholars contend that the origins of extraordinary human evil are best found in correspondingly extraordinary sources. One such source is the *extraordinary nature of the collective*. Intuitively, many of us recognize that we are vulnerable to losing ourselves in a group. There seems to be something about the *nature of the collective*—a small band of marauders, an army battalion, a mob, a social or political organization, an office staff, a nation—that brings out our worst tendencies.

A long line of scholarly work has argued that the inherent nature of a group is to be immature, selfish, uncaring, and even brutal. In 1895, for example, French sociologist and journalist Gustave Le Bon wrote *La Psychologie des Foules*, which was published in English the following year under the title, *The Crowd: A Study of the Popular Mind*.[7] The work became a bestseller, was available in nineteen languages a year after publication and become enormously influential.

Le Bon was an anguished French middle-class academic who lived in fear that the mob at any moment could seize society (Le Bon also, incidentally, claimed to have thought of relativity before Einstein). Le Bon "the founder of crowd psychology" theorized that, in a crowd, the individual's psychology is subordinated to a collective mentality that radically transforms the individual's behavior. In other words, his fundamental ideal is that individuals undergo a radical transformation in a crowd. "By the mere fact that he forms part of an organized crowd," Le Bon wrote, "a man descends several rungs in the ladder of civilization. Isolated, he may be a cultivated individual: in a crowd, he is a barbarian—that is, a creature acting by instinct" (1896, p. 32).

For Le Bon, the collective is an unreasoning, primitive, fickle, dictatorial, intolerant and stupid aggregate: "Whoever be the individuals that compose it, however like or unlike be their mode of life, their occupations, their character, or their intelligence, the fact that they have been transformed into a crowd puts them in possession of a sort of collective mind which makes them feel, think, and act in a manner quite different from that in which each individual of them would feel, think, and act were he in a state of isolation" (p. 27). In short, the basic characteristic of crowds—and any groups—is the fusion of individuals into a common spirit and feeling that blurs individual differences

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7.   Gustave Le Bon, *The Crowd: A Study of the Popular Mind* (Dunwoody, GA: N.S. Berg, 1968; originally published, 1896).

and lowers intellectual capacities.

Sigmund Freud endorsed Le Bon's controversial view that there is a regression inherent in group behavior and dynamics. As a matter of fact, Freud was so impressed with Le Bon's description of the irrationality of crowds that he devoted a sixth of his classic *Group Psychology and Analysis of the Ego* (1921) to quotations from the Frenchman's work.[8] Freud accepted Le Bon's characterization of the group as credulous, lacking in self-criticism, impulsive, excitable and suggestive. In a crowd, Freud agreed, individuals lose their own opinions and intellectual faculties, can no longer control their feelings and instincts and begin to act in a way that surprises both themselves and those who know them.

Reinhold Niebuhr, who taught for many years at Union Theological Seminary in New York City, was another vocal proponent of individual regression in groups. In his provocatively titled *Moral Man and Immoral Society*, first published in 1932, Niebuhr argued that there is a "basic difference between the morality of individuals and the morality of collectives, whether races, classes or nations."[9] What is this basic difference? In short, although individuals are capable of goodness and morality, groups are *inherently* selfish and uncaring. There is, Niebuhr argued, a clear distinction between the character of people acting in large social groups as opposed to their character as individual people. "The proportion of reason to impulse becomes increasingly negative," he writes, "when we proceed from the life of individuals to that of social groups, among whom a common mind and purpose is always more or less inchoate and transitory and who depend therefore upon a common impulse to bind them together."[10]

The voluminous psychological literature on group dynamics certainly affirms that groups can develop characteristics that create a potential for extraordinary evil. Moral constraints are less powerful in groups than in individuals. There is a diffusion of responsibility within groups that can make evildoing a relatively simple matter. In addition, groups have a power to repress dissent and, thus, encourage the abandonment of the individual self. As Israel Charny writes: "It is a human being who operates through the mechanisms of group behavior to do what he does to fellow human beings, but it is the mechanism of group experience that potentiates, legitimates,

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8.   Sigmund Freud, *Group Psychology and Analysis of the Ego* (see the *Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, ed. by James Strachey et al., London, UK: The Hogart Press and the Institute of Psycho-Analysis, 1974; originally published, 1921).

9.   Reinhold Niebuhr, *Moral Man and Immoral Society* (New York, NY: Touchstone, 1932), p. ix.

10.   *Id.*

operationalizes, and narcotizes the emergence of man's various and often unsavory selves."[11]

On the other hand, groups also can develop values, institutions and practices that promote caring and connection. Groups are not inherently selfish and uncaring; they do not always behave at a level that is more primitive and immature than the individuals that comprise the group. At times, groups can even provide the security to *oppose* potentially destructive ideas and practices. In short, all collectives are not all bad all of the time. Group processes, like individual processes, are dynamic, not static; changing, not changeless.

It seems most true to state that being in a group *reveals* who individuals are just as much, if not more, than being in a group alters who they are. In this way, groups can reflect some of the baser characteristics of the individuals within them as well as some of the more noble characteristics. To divorce evildoing groups from the reality of the nature of the individuals within them is to misplace the blame for the commission of extraordinary evil. It is not the nature of the collective that limits our possibility for cooperative, caring, nonviolent relations. It is the nature of the individuals that make up the collective.

Others contend that the lethal soil of specific extraordinary cultures, nurtured by *the influence of an extraordinary ideology*, is the origin of extraordinary human evil. Most relevant here, and a perfect case study for the general argument, is the work of Daniel Jonah Goldhagen.[12] In response to the enduring question of how the German people could do the things they did to Jews in the Holocaust, Goldhagen gave a simple and straightforward answer. Because they wanted to. Why did they want to? Because they grew up in an extraordinary culture where an unusually virulent form of antisemitism was commonplace. They were heirs to a set of shared beliefs that included a deep-rooted, pathological antisemitism that simply awaited the ascendancy of Hitler and the opportunity of war for its lethal expression.

Following this logic, Goldhagen maintains that ordinary Germans were not forced into performing executions. Rather, they were willing participants in the whole process. These Germans did not view their actions as criminal nor did they shrink from opportunities to inflict suffering, humiliation and death— openly, knowingly and zealously—upon their victims. Moreover, many of them were not part of an elite group like the SS. Most were ordinary Germans, Goldhagen posits a minimum figure of one hundred thousand and says "it would not be surprising if the number turned out to be five hundred

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11.   Israel Charny, *How Can We Commit the Unthinkable?: Genocide, The Human Cancer* (Boulder, Co: Westview Press, 1982), p. 160.

12.   Daniel Jonah Goldhagen, *Hitler's Willing Executioners: Ordinary Germans and the Holocaust* (New York, NY: Alfred A. Knopf, 1996).

thousand or more," who willingly took part in the Final Solution. They were, in his opinion, killers of conviction.

Ultimately, as several critics have pointed out, Goldhagen's argument is untenable.[13] There is little evidence that the antisemitism of Germans was "eliminationist" aside from the outcome. Germans were not so fundamentally different that it is plausible to attribute to them a single cognitive outlook in stark contrast to the diversity found in the rest of the contemporaneous human community. We will not benefit from an approach that emphasizes uniformity among one particular culture and a sharp difference between "them" and other peoples. We need not invoke a "demonological" hatred of others to explain the commission of extraordinary evil. The existence of widespread negative racial stereotyping in a society—in no way unique to Nazi Germany—can provide fanatical regimes not only the freedom of action to pursue genocide but also an ample supply of executioners.

It is too easy to say that *only* an extraordinary culture, like Germany, and *only* an extraordinary ideology, like eliminationist antisemitism, could produce thousands of willing executioners. We want to assume that mass killing and genocide are simply inherited from cultures and ideologies that preceded a regime's rise to power because then we can believe that extraordinary human evil is curable. Simply change the culture or ideology and you can change the mindset that leads to something like the Holocaust. Admitting that culture or ideology may simply be the pretext by which we rationalize a more general wish to dominate and destroy is much more discomforting.

Moreover, by ascribing the crimes and their perpetrators to a particular culture or ideology, *their* behavior becomes "unfathomable" and outside of "our" world. Only the Germans could have behaved the way they did; nobody else. As a consequence, it cannot be repeated by someone else. Unfortunately, it has been, is being, and will be repeated by many other people. As a result, we must recognize that we are dealing not with "ordinary Germans" but rather with "ordinary people." As Christopher Browning writes, "if ordinary Serbs, Croats, Hutus, Turks, Cambodians and Chinese can be the perpetrators of mass murder and genocide, implemented with terrible cruelty, then we do indeed need to look at those universal aspects of human nature that transcend the cognition and culture of ordinary Germans."[14]

A third argument for the extraordinary origins of extraordinary human evil focuses on the idea that extraordinary human evil stems from *psychopathic persons*. Clearly there are some perpetrators involved in

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13.   See, for instance, Robert R. Shandley's *Unwilling Germans?: The Goldhagen Debate* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1998).

14.   From a presentation given at the United States Holocaust Research Institute at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, Washington, DC, April 8, 1996.

atrocities who are deranged psychopaths or otherwise psychologically disturbed. Are there enough, though, to responsibly consider psychopathology as a predominant cause of participation in extraordinary evil?

In the most recent and comprehensive reanalysis of the Rorschachs administered to the Nazi defendants at Nuremberg, psychologist Eric Zillmer and colleagues concluded that the leaders of Nazi Germany were anything but "Mad Nazis." They were, for the most part, extremely able, intelligent, high-functioning people. They were average German citizens—products of a rigid, paternalistic, male-dominated society. There was no evidence of thought disorder or psychiatric conditions in most of these men. In the authors' concluding words, "'high-ranking Nazi war criminals' participated in atrocities without having diagnosable impairments that would account for their actions. In this sense, the origins of Nazi Germany should be sought for primarily in the context of social, cultural, political and personality, rather than clinical psychological factors."[15]

But were the Nuremberg defendants representative of any larger group than themselves? In other words, how far can we generalize the conclusions drawn from the Nazi elite? Can they be extended to the psychological functioning of the broader population of Nazis? If the "Mad Nazi" thesis did not hold true for the Nazi elite at Nuremberg, does that necessarily mean that it also would not hold true for the rank-and-file killers?

To answer these questions, Zillmer et al. examined another large bank of nearly 200 Rorschach records of rank-and-file Nazis. These records came from tests administered at the war crimes trials in Copenhagen in 1946. The Rorschach records were those of Danish citizens convicted of collaborating with the Nazi occupation and German military personnel who were sentenced for war crimes committed in Denmark. Their conclusions suggest that these rank-and-file Nazis showed some unusual thought patterns (for example, rigid and pessimistic thinking), but not enough to indicate grossly disturbed thinking. Neither did the perpetrators' responses demonstrate any particular inclination toward violence. Consistent with the Nuremberg Rorschachs, there was a lack of evidence for obvious and severe psychopathology in the Copenhagen Rorschachs. The "Mad Nazi" thesis seems to apply no better to the rank-and-file than it did to the Nazi elite.

In short, where they existed, perpetrators characterized by extraordinary psychopathology were far too few to account for the litany of atrocities that occurred in the name of the Third Reich. As much as we may wish it to be true, the Nazis cannot so easily be explained away as disturbed, highly

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15.   Eric A. Zillmer, Molly Harrower, Barry A. Ritzler, and Robert P. Archer, *The Quest for the Nazi Personality: A Psychological Investigation of Nazi War Criminals* (Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1995), p. 194.

abnormal individuals. Indeed, few psychologists today would argue for the existence of a psychopathic personality in understanding the origins of extraordinary human evil.

This brings us to the fourth, and final, extraordinary source of extraordinary evil—the idea that the origins of extraordinary human evil lie in *specific personality types*. Even if perpetrators are not similar in psychopathology, this argument contends, then certainly they must have a similar personality structure that explains their participation in evildoing.

Shortly after the Nuremberg trials, Theodor Adorno headed a team of researchers intent on explaining German acquiescence to Hitler's brutal plans. The resulting book, *The Authoritarian Personality*, suggested the presence of a fascist personality structure that included, among other characteristics, an exploitative power orientation, rigid thinking and a preoccupation with toughness.[16] In the midst of jarring theoretical and methodological critiques, the theory was quickly discredited. Today, the search for a specific, homogeneous personality type that is predisposed to participation in extraordinary evil remains elusive. While there may be certain broad personality differences that relate to the commission of extraordinary evil, there is not a single personality pattern that is inevitably expressed among all, or most, perpetrators.

As affirmed by the historical analyses of Christopher Browning and George Browder, to bluntly suggest that all Nazis had a common, homogenous extraordinary personality that predisposed them to the commission of extraordinary evil is an obvious oversimplification.[17] Just because they shared, to some degree, a common pattern of behavior does not mean that they also shared a common underlying personality organization. We cannot justifiably speak of a psychological coherence or homogeneity among perpetrators as a group. In short, they were not a homogenous group of individuals who had more in common with each other than with any other group of people. Similarly, our search for a homogeneous personality that characterizes perpetrators of genocide in Armenia, Germany, East Timor, Cambodia, Guatemala, Rwanda, the former Yugoslavia and Sierra Leone has revealed more variability than consistency; more heterogeneity than homogeneity. Perpetrators are, quite simply, a representative cross-section of the normal distribution of humans.

Even where there is a glimpse of homogeneity of personality characteristics, we are still faced with another, equally important, question.

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16.   Theodor W. Adorno, E. Frankel-Brunswick, D.J. Levinson, & R.N. Sanford, *The Authoritarian Personality* (New York, NY: Harper, 1950).

17.   Christopher R. Browning, *Ordinary Men: Reserve Police Battalion 101 and the Final Solution in Poland* (New York: HarperCollins, 1992); George C. Browder, *Hitler's Enforcers: The Gestapo and the SS Security Service in the Nazi Revolution* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1996).

Are these commonalties in psychological functioning *unique* to the perpetrators as a group or do we also find these characteristics in non-perpetrator groups (for example, high-level, successful business executives and bureaucrats, non-killing military personnel, lawyers, teachers, psychiatrists, etc.)? In other words, do these characteristics discriminate, or differentiate, perpetrators of extraordinary evil from groups of non-perpetrators? Clearly, the answer is "no." The few personality structures that describe the psychological organization of a majority of the perpetrators (for example, problem-solving style) are also common to millions of other individuals who may have done nothing more criminal in their lives than commit a parking meter violation.

If the violent, aggressive and antisocial behaviors displayed by perpetrators of extraordinary evil are not exclusively attributable to the nature of the collective, the influence of an extraordinary ideology, gross psychopathology, or a homogeneous personality syndrome, then to what other influences or factors can such behaviors be attributed?

III. ORDINARY ORIGINS OF EXTRAORDINARY HUMAN EVIL

Emphasizing the extraordinary origins—groups or individuals—of extraordinary human evil is comforting because it helps distance *us* from *them*. We would rather maintain that extraordinary individuals, very much *unlike* you and me, commit extraordinary evil. We can then rest in the reassurance that extraordinary evil cannot be duplicated in "ordinary" groups or cultures or in individuals with seemingly "normal" human capacities.

Increasingly, though, scholars are questioning if perpetrators of evil are that fundamentally different from you and me. They are recognizing that evil transcends groups, ideology, psychopathology and personality. These scholars are coming to see the dead end of demonization. They are realizing, with more than a little discomfort, the authenticity of Hannah Arendt's concept of the banality of evil.[18] In short, perpetrators of extraordinary evil are not that fundamentally different from you and me.

In reality, a purely evil person is just as much an artificial construct as a person who is purely good. Perpetrators of extraordinary evil are extraordinary only by what they have done, not by who they are. Most were not mentally impaired. Nor were they identified as sadists at home or in their social environment. Nor were they victims of an abusive background. They defy easy demographic categorization. Among them, we find educated and

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18.   See Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (New York: Viking Press, 1963); Bernard J. Bergen, *The Banality of Evil: Hannah Arendt and the Final Solution* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1999).

well-to-do people, as well as simple and impoverished people. We find church-affiliated people as well as agnostics and atheists. We find people who were loving parents as well as people who had difficulty initiating and sustaining satisfying personal relationships. We find young people and old people. We find people who were not actively involved in the political or social groups responsible for institutionalizing the process of destruction as well as those who were. We find people, like you and me, who went to school, fought with siblings, celebrated birthdays, listened to music and played with friends. In short, the majority of perpetrators of extraordinary evil are not distinguished by background, personality, or previous political affiliation or behavior as having been men or women unusually likely or fit to be genocidal executioners.

This reality is difficult to admit, to understand, to absorb. We would rather know Extraordinary Evil as an extra-human capitalization. This reality is unsettling because it counters our general mental tendency to relate extraordinary acts to correspondingly extraordinary people. We cannot evade, however, its truth. We are forced to confront the ordinariness of most perpetrators of mass killing and genocide. Recognizing their ordinariness does not diminish the horror of their actions. It increases it.

Understanding that ordinary people commit extraordinary evil still begs an explanation. *How*, exactly, do ordinary people come to commit extraordinary evil? This question remains a matter of debate. I now review the work of theorists who argue that extraordinary evil is done by ordinary individuals who have created or activated a second self to commit that evil. I call these "divided self" theories of extraordinary human evil.

Most relevant here is the famous series of studies on obedience to authority conducted in the early 1960s by Stanley Milgram.[19] Milgram's research demonstrated that, in response to the demands of an experimenter, many people were willing to administer what they believed to be life-threatening electrical shocks to another person. Milgram postulated a discontinuous, altered state— the "agentic" state—as responsible for these results. The agentic state, activated by one's integration into a hierarchy, occurs when one ". . . sees himself as an agent for carrying out another person's wishes."[20] In the agentic state one is in a state of openness to regulation by an authority; it is the opposite of the state of autonomy. It is a change in one's self-perception, a cognitive reorientation induced when a person occupies a subordinate position in a hierarchical system.

In the agentic state, inner conflict is reduced through the abrogation of personal responsibility. Unable to defy the authority of the experimenter in

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19.   Stanley Milgram, *Obedience to Authority: An Experimental View* (New York, NY: Harper & Row, 1974).
20.   *Id.* at p. 133.

Milgram's study, subjects attributed all responsibility to him. In Milgram's words: "The most far-reaching consequence of the agentic shift is that a man feels responsible *to* the authority directing him but feels no responsibility *for* the content of the actions that the authority prescribes" (italics in original).[21] In the agentic state, Milgram argued, we are not governed by the operations of our own conscience; instead, our conscience has been momentarily switched off or given over to the "substitute" conscience of the authority.

Overtly adopting a divided self approach, Milgram argues: "Moved into the agentic state, the person becomes something different from his former self, with new properties not easily traced to his usual personality."[22] It is a dichotomous and all-or-nothing proposition—we are either in one state or another at any given time. Milgram's notion of an "on-off" switch reflects the acutely abrupt nature of the agentic shift—a necessary conceptualization given that Milgram's subjects began and completed their task of administering what they regarded as life-threatening shocks to an innocent victim within the window of one laboratory hour.

Although logically compelling, the empirical evidence supporting the agentic shift is, in fact, weak or contradictory. Mantell and Panzarella, for instance, found that there was *no* relationship between the degree of obedience exhibited by subjects and the subjects' assignment of responsibility. In their words: "Although the majority of subjects in a command situation like the baseline condition administer all of the shocks, they have not surrendered personal responsibility in becoming agents of the experimenter. Some have. But others continue to hold themselves responsible. A monolithic view of the obedient person as a purely passive agent who invariable relinquishes personal responsibility is a false view."[23]

Despite the lack of empirical evidence for "something different" from a former self in explaining Milgram's results, both scholars and laypeople have continued to hold on to the notion that there is a mystical shift from one self to another that enables a person to commit extraordinary evil. There is something emotionally compelling about the idea that extraordinary evil is committed by a "double" of some sorts; ourselves become not ourselves. We see this most clearly in the oft-cited work of Robert Jay Lifton who advances "doubling" as the principal defense mechanism utilized by the Nazi doctors in their adaptation to evildoing.[24] Doubling maintains that the doctors created a second dissociated self to do evil; related to but more or less autonomous from the primary self.

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21. *Id.* at pp. 145-146.
22. *Id.* at p. 143.
23. David Mark Mantell & R. Panzarella (1976), "Obedience and Responsibility," *British Journal of Social and Clinical Psychology, 15*, p. 242.
24. Robert Jay Lifton, *The Nazi Doctors: Medical Killing and the Psychology of Genocide* (New York, NY: Basic Books, 1986).

I counter that these divided self explanations are unnecessarily complicated. I argue—more simply—that the primary, and only, self is fundamentally altered as a result of the power of potent social forces generated by the situation or organization. At the heart of my argument is the belief that we are troubled by inconsistencies between our external behaviors and internal psychological constellations (that is, our beliefs and values). We are motivated to reduce these inconsistencies to preserve the integrity of the primary self. When social forces do not allow us to modify our external behaviors, we alter our internal psychological constellations to be consistent with those behaviors.[25]

Each of the arguments for the extraordinary origins of extraordinary human evil, as well as the more ordinary origins of the divided self, contain a grain of truth that helps advance our understanding of perpetrators of mass killing and genocide. In other words, it is not that any of them is completely *wrong*; rather, each of them is completely *incomplete*. It is in looking at their incompleteness that we most clearly see the need for a new understanding of how ordinary individuals come to commit extraordinary human evil.

IV. EXPLANATORY MODEL OF EXTRAORDINARY HUMAN EVIL

To answer the question of how ordinary people come to commit extraordinary evil, I offer an original explanation that considers the wide range of evolutionary, individual, social and situational factors inherent in the process of ordinary people coming to commit extraordinary evil. Framed in the context of a four-pronged model, this explanation examines the forces, both internal and external, that help shape our responses to authority (see Figure 1).

The first prong of the model focuses on the **distal forces of human nature** that are particularly relevant in shaping our responses to authority. The subfield of psychology that was most responsible for bringing us back to rethinking the issue of human nature is evolutionary psychology (EP). EP is a multidisciplinary approach within the Darwinian paradigm that seeks to apply theories of evolutionary biology in order to understand human psychology. EP is psychology informed by the fact that the inherited architecture of the human mind is the product of the evolutionary process. Its central premise is that there *is* a universal human nature and that this nature is adapted to the way of life of Pleistocene hunter-gatherers, and not necessarily to our modern circumstances. It has reminded us that we are part of the natural world and, like other animals, we have our own particular psychological tendencies or

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25.   For a more detailed critique of the divided self theories, see James Waller's (1996) "Perpetrators of the Holocaust: Divided and Unitary Self Conceptions of Evildoing," *Holocaust and Genocide Studies, 10* (1), 11-33.

instincts.[26]

I focus on three such tendencies of human nature that are particularly relevant in shaping our responses to authority. Studies worldwide show not only that these tendencies are universal in people, but also that they start in infancy.

> *Ethnocentrism*, the tendency to focus on one's own group as the "right" one.

> *Xenophobia*, the tendency to fear outsiders or strangers. In some important ways, xenophobia complements ethnocentrism. There is no "us" without a corresponding "them" to oppose.

> The tendency for *aggression and violence* that arises out of an innate desire for power—particularly power over death. It is through unleashing our aggressive and violent tendencies that we claim the illusion of invulnerability and, even, immortality.

These tendencies represent evolved social capacities that are at the core of human nature. They are the underlying, distant biological capacities that, in concert with other immediate and proximal influences, help us understand our capacity for our extraordinary evil to one another. This is not to say that we only respond to iron instinct. As famed evolutionary biologist Stephen Jay Gould reminds us, "We can only speak of capacities, not requirements or even determining propensities. Therefore, our biology does not make us do it."[27] We remain, however, compelled to examine the impact of *what* we are upon *who* we are.

The second prong acknowledges that a thorough understanding of extraordinary evil must include a focus on the forces that mold the **identities of the perpetrators** who carry out the atrocities. Social psychologists, by and large, do not think of evil actions as the product of evil personalities. Generally, we tend to emphasize the immediate situation's influence on thoughts, feelings and behaviors while, at the same time, minimizing the role of individual dispositions or personalities. It is important to recognize, however, that a contest between situational and personal explanations is not ultimately productive. Rather, what we should be concerned with is the *relative* importance of both situational *and* personal factors in explaining extraordinary human evil.

In that vein, this prong of the model explores the impact of three specific factors that shape the identities of the perpetrators.

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26. For an accessible introduction to evolutionary psychology, see Henry Plotkin's *Evolution in Mind* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998).

27. Stephen Jay Gould (1996), "The Diet of Worms and the Defenestration of Prague," *Natural History, 105* (9), p.18.

Cultural influences, particularly those stemming from belief systems that have been shaped and distorted by ideological indoctrination and propaganda.

Moral exclusion and norm distortion that leads to a legitimization of the "other" as the enemy and, thus, deserving of their victimization—even to the point of becoming a moral imperative. The targeted group is devalued to such an extent that they are excluded from the moral universe of human obligation, even from the community of the human family itself.

Ego investment in an organization that predisposes one person to participation in evildoing and another to entirely different behavior. Relevant here are the individual differences in professional ambitions and careerism that are mediated, in part, by differences in linkages between one's ego and the organization to which one belongs. Also relevant is the recognition that our susceptibility to "ego threats"—that is, the way in which we typically react when our favorable view of ourselves is disputed or undermined by someone else—is a reliable predictor of violent behavior. People who are most prone to encounter ego threats are the most likely to respond violently.

The third prong of the model recognizes that who the victims are, or, at least, who they have been made out to be, is an important piece of understanding how we respond to authority. In this prong, I explore the following three features of **defining the victims as the "other."**

A classification of several *faces of hatred* that

differentially influence the perpetrators' perception of the victims and differentially impact their relationships with the victims. The three primary faces of hatred are: (a) the negation of intimacy, or the seeking of distance from the targeted group, (b) passion, which expresses itself motivationally as intense anger or fear in response to threats posed by the targeted group and (c) beliefs of devaluation and diminution toward the targeted group. These three faces of hatred generate, in various combinations, seven diverse types of hatred.[28]

The role of *social categorization* in defining in-groups (the groups with which we identify and feel we are a member) and out-groups (the groups with which we do not identify). Building on the universal human tendencies of ethnocentrism and xenophobia, social categorization leads us to make several assumptions about the social world that influence our perception of the

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28.   See Robert J. Sternberg, "A Duplex Theory of Hate and its Development and its Application to Massacres and Genocide," unpublished manuscript, Yale University (New Haven, CT.).

victims. Most notably, we tend to see in-group members as very similar to us and out-group members as all alike and very different from us. Without much prompting, we then extend these assumptions to a belief that our group is better than the out-group.

The various processes involved in the *dehumanization of the victims*. For example, the distance between the linguistic dehumanization of a people and their actual suppression and extermination is not great. The Nazis, for instance, redefined Jews as "bacilli," "parasites," "vermin," "demons" and a "plague." Similarly, the euphemistic labels and bureaucratic jargon (for example, "special treatment") used about the Jews' suffering further led to their devaluation and the removal of normal constraints against aggression and, ultimately, genocide.

Finally, the fourth prong returns to the classic social psychological approach of emphasizing **the power of the situation** to influence our thoughts, feelings and behaviors. Specifically, I explore the following three social psychological concepts.

The escalating *process of brutalization* in which perpetrators learn to kill. This process includes a gradual desensitization or habituation to atrocities in which initial, relatively inconsequential, evil actions make later evildoing easier. During the early 1970s, for instance, the process of learning by doing was used by the military junta then in power in Greece to train torturers. In a systematic and deliberate program, trainees were first assigned to guard prisoners, then to participate in arresting squads, then ordered to hit prisoners, then to observe torture and, finally, to practice torture. Each step is so small as to be essentially continuous with previous ones. After each step, the individual is positioned to take the next one. The individual's morality follows, rather than leads, their behavior.[29]

The *binding factors of the group* that shape our responses to authority. Here, I am referring to the various influences of group dynamics that bind one to the group and its activities. These include peer pressure and conformity, male ritual and camaraderie, diffusion of responsibility and a distinctive culture of cruelty that rewards individuals for acts of extraordinary evil.

The *power differentials* that exist between perpetrators and victims that make the actual perpetration of extraordinary evil possible. There is a volatile paradox of dependency and power that generally exists between perpetrators and victims in genocides and mass killings. This power differential explains, in part, why hatreds do not result in systematic violence unless they are organized by governments. Conversely, it explains, in part, why genocides and mass killings are relatively uncommon in stable democracies where such extreme power differentials are kept in check.

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29.   Mika Haritos-Fatouros (1988), "The Official Torturer: A Learning Model for Obedience to the Authority of Violence," *Journal of Applied Social Psychology, 18*, 1107-1120.

The model is based on a wide range of testimony and documentation regarding perpetrator behavior in several genocides and mass killings from the twentieth-century. As an opening explanatory model, however, its broad applicability remains open to testing and critique (for example, its applicability to female perpetrators).

V. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, we must acknowledge the possibility that to explain the behaviors of perpetrators of extraordinary evil is to justify those behaviors. In other words, does explanation inevitably lead to condoning, pardoning, and forgiving or—at the very least—a shift in the direction of a more favorable attitude toward the perpetrator? A recent intriguing social psychological experiment by Miller and colleagues contends that there *is* ample reason to fear that understanding can promote forgiving. In three experiments designed to explore the exonerating effects of explanations, Miller et al. found "that there are a variety of cognitive and affective processes that, in fact, may produce a relatively condoning attitude toward perpetrators as a result of explaining their actions."[30] Even after a brief exposure to explanations, participants evidenced a significant judgmental shift in the direction of a less harsh or punitive orientation toward a perpetrator. Miller et al.'s studies found that social psychological explanations, in particular, run the risk of reducing the perceived intentionality and responsibility attributed to perpetrators.

Why do we fall prey to the notion that explanation equals justification, forgiveness or exoneration? In part, because we see explanation only in purely deterministic terms. That is, when we explain a behavior, it is as if the person had no choice but to engage in that particular behavior and, thus, the behavior is justifiable. In reality, though, psychological explanations are more probabilistic than deterministic. In other words, they tell us what we are *most likely* to do rather than what we *must* do.

To offer a psychological explanation for the atrocities committed by perpetrators is not to forgive, justify or condone their behaviors. There are no such things as "perpetratorless" mass killings or genocides. Perpetrators are not just the hapless victims of fate. At each step of the explanatory model, there are many opportunities for choice and what they decide to do makes a great difference in what they eventually do. At some times, the choosing may take place without awareness or conscious deliberation. At other times, it is a matter of very focused and deliberate decision-making. Regardless, the perpetrators, in willfully failing to exercise their moral judgment, retain full

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30.   Arthur G. Miller, Anne K. Gordon, & Amy M. Buddie (1999), "Accounting for Evil and Cruelty: Is to Explain to Condone?," *Personality and Social Psychology Review, 3* (3), p. 265.

moral accountability for the atrocities they committed. To understand all is not to forgive all. "Explaining is not excusing; understanding is not forgiving," writes Browning. "Not trying to understand the perpetrators in human terms," he continues "would make impossible not only this [his] study but any history of Holocaust perpetrators that sought to go beyond one-dimensional caricature."[31]

No one would deny that we have learned a tremendous amount about who we are, and of what the human spirit can endure, by exploring the multidimensional complexity of the victims of extraordinary human evil. It is equally appropriate to believe that there may be just as much to learn by ripping off the masks that disguise perpetrators of extraordinary evil as monsters. In understanding how these ordinary people come to commit extraordinary evil, we get a discomforting glimpse of the depths to which the human spirit can fall. We must then, however, have the courage to resume the moral condemnation of those terrible acts. As social psychologist Roy Baumeister writes, "It is a mistake to let moral condemnation interfere with trying to understand—but it would be a bigger mistake to let that understanding, once it has been attained, interfere with moral condemnation."[32]

Finally, when we understand the ordinariness of extraordinary evil, we will be less surprised by evil, less likely to be unwitting contributors to evil and better equipped to forestall evil. It does not mean that evil will no longer happen. It means, only, that we will have a clearer understanding of how human evil is produced and, thus, be better positioned to cut off the acting out of that evil. Ultimately, being aware of our own capacity for evil—and the evolutionary, individual, social and situational constraints that foster it—is the best safeguard we can have against future genocide.

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31.   Browning (1992), p. xx.
32.   Roy F. Baumeister, *Evil: Inside Human Violence and Cruelty* (New York, NY: W.H. Freeman and Company, 1999), p. 387.