

Abram de Swaan, 'Auschwitz Never Again' Lecture 21 January 2015

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'Even mass murderers are persons, in many respects different persons, distinct like everyone else.' This is the final sentence of my book *The Killing Compartments: The Mentality of Mass Murder*, which was published a year ago. I would now like to take a closer look at that final sentence.

The Killing Compartments looks at episodes of mass murder in the 20th century and describes the processes of 'compartmentalisation' that can result in annihilation on such a massive scale. This growing separation between an established group and a targeted group of victims is played out at every level of society: at the level of the political regime and social institutions such as schools and hospitals, and at the level of everyday interaction, right down to our individual feelings and thoughts. But even though episodes of mass murder always occur in a context of compartmentalisation, they can manifest themselves in very different ways. I distinguish four of these: 'victors' frenzy', whereby triumphant armies, drunk with victory, go on a violent rampage against their disarmed opponents and the unarmed civilian population; 'rule by terror', used by established regimes to control their subjects through fear and intimidation; 'loser's triumph' – when a regime on the brink of military defeat makes a last desperate attempt to eradicate the defenceless group it has targeted; and the 'megapogroms' – a wave of local, murderous ethnic attacks, sparked off by a radical and far-reaching turn of events.

I believe that it is indeed possible to compare episodes of genocide with each other. Making comparisons always entails searching for both similarities and differences. To do this, we first have to divide episodes of mass murder into a number of different categories. Comparing things is therefore not at all the same as equating them.

In all those episodes of genocide, people were killed on a massive scale and in the most appalling ways, and, in each case, there were people who organized the killings and carried them out with weapons in hand or their fingers on the button.

One section of the book deals with these perpetrators. It may appear to be no longer necessary. After all, everything on the subject has already been said and the experts are agreed. Such comprehensive consensus is a rarity in the otherwise so argumentative world of the social sciences. There hardly is any room left for a contrary voice. It would be difficult to have missed a message that has been repeated so decidedly, so often and for such a long time. But if you are still unsure as to the prevailing expert opinion, I can bring you up to date with a single sentence about the present state of knowledge, if that should be necessary since you can hardly have missed the message repeated so often, for so long and with so much conviction.

'Perpetrators of genocide are ordinary people, people like you and me who have dived into acts of extraordinary evil under exceptional circumstances. And under the same conditions, you and I might have done the same thing.'

I must already have a collection of about thirty books and articles with the words 'ordinary men' and 'extraordinary evil' in the title alone. There must be hundreds, if not thousands, more that are based on the same precept.

'Mass murderers are ordinary people. Just like you and me. Under the same conditions, you and I would have done the same thing.'

Really?

Perhaps we would.

We shall never know, however, because you and I have never been in those exceptional circumstances. So it remains a hypothesis, a so-called '*counterfactual*', a statement that asserts something which is not actually the case. And the truth value of the inference drawn from such an untrue assertion cannot be determined in logic.

It is also a '*counterintuitive*' statement, going against most people's intuition. What is this 'same thing' that you or I would also be capable of? It is not plain manslaughter, committed in a fit of passion, with a club or a knife that happens to be at hand. That is something I might well be capable of, if the circumstances were very exceptional. And there are plenty of people here today that I would not care to vouch for in such a situation either. No, this is about the slaughter of defenceless people, children, the elderly, men, women, and not one or two, but tens, hundreds, thousands... And not just at one time, for an

hour or a day, not for a week or a month, but for months or even years on end. This is about cruelty too vicious and obscene to mention, and even when you think you have heard it all, you find that people have managed to commit new atrocities that were hitherto unimaginable.

Extraordinary evil is committed by ordinary people under exceptional conditions – that is the situationist view. This prompts the question, “What kind of ordinary people are these ordinary people?” And then it appears that all the situationists have to say on the subject is that, apart from a very few exceptions, mass murderers are ordinary because they are not psychopaths or perverts, or monsters or savage beasts. That is the great and original insight that during the last half century has elevated once and for all our thinking on evil to a higher plane. Before that, perpetrators of genocide had always been demonised and presented as inhuman or as advanced psychiatric cases at the very least.

In fact, I have yet to come across a serious author who has actually claimed that the perpetrators of genocide were psychopaths or monsters. On the contrary. The alleged demonisation of the perpetrators serves to make the idea that they are just ordinary people seem new and interesting. But it has effectively stifled all discussion on the perpetrators of genocide for the last half century.

Of course, it may be that my idea of examining the specific characteristics of perpetrators is a sign of a character flaw: ‘Such a commonsense assumption is also comforting. We look for flaws in others, not latent potentials in ourselves’.¹ One reviewer of my book for *De Groene* weekly called it ‘wishful thinking’.² The same authors who so adamantly reject a psychological interpretation of genocidal perpetrators lapse in the same habit whenever anyone threatens to contradict them. And that, as I said, happens very rarely indeed.

I think that the idea that the worst evildoers are just ordinary or ‘completely normal’ people is not new at all, but accords very well with Western Christian tradition.

After all, the unmistakable issue here is evil, or at least what a modern secular society understands by the word. But as a few people may remember, evil has been spoken of before. For the past few thousand years, in fact. And not just by anyone, but by people who were as wise to the ways of the world and of life’s vicissitudes as the best of us.

In the *International New York Times* (25 September 2014), I came across an article by Seyla Benhabib, a professor in political philosophy, in which she argues against a way of thinking about the evil of mass murder that she attributes to a tradition in Western thinking that perceives evil as ‘extreme depravity and wickedness’. She sets this against the doctrine of the ‘banality of evil’, which she derives from Hannah Arendt.

Now, there are numerous traditions in Western thought and I, for one, am unable to list them all, but I could not help feeling that for many, many centuries the dominant view has been that man is essentially weak, or even worse, ‘inclined to all evil (and utterly indisposed to all good)’. And that this feeble or corrupt man can be led into temptation and then fall into the worst kind of evil. That is why we still sometimes hear the prayer: ‘And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from all evil’. Is this not a more or less literal rendering of the situationist theory of ordinary people in extraordinary situations (temptation) who succumb to extraordinary criminal behaviour? Could it be that this revolutionary insight is no more than a religious or theological insight dressed up as an innovative and sophisticated piece of philosophy? That would mean that the main advocate for this groundbreaking insight into the ‘banality of evil’, Hannah Arendt, is actually just a well-meaning Christian damsel. And it was not from just anyone that she got the idea that the worst kind of evil derives not from fanaticism but from mindlessness: ‘For they know not what they do.’

This is in no way intended as criticism, because I actually agree with her. A lot more ‘ordinary people’ would be inclined to commit atrocities if circumstances dictated than you would think. Whatever

¹ Christopher Browning in his ‘Foreword’ to *Becoming Evil; How Ordinary People Commit Genocide and Mass Killing*, James Waller, Oxford etc.: Oxford U.P., 2002, p. vii.

² Let him remain anonymous. But not Alette Smeulers: ‘Arendt was one of the first who saw what many refused to see, namely that perpetrators of the Holocaust in Nazi Germany were very ordinary people [...] We so much want to believe that perpetrators of [...] mass violence are not like us but different somehow. We want to distance ourselves from them – not only from their actions but also from them as people. But is that possible? Are they really different or is everyone a potential perpetrator capable of torturing, raping or killing a fellow human being, or of being complicit in such an act?’ *In Opdracht van de Staat: Gezagsgetrouwe Criminelen en Internationale Misdrijven (Commissioned by the State: law-abiding criminals and international crimes)* Inaugural address, Tilburg University, 27 April 2012, p. 7).

we mean by 'ordinary people'. Christopher Browning was right: the mass murderers of police battalion 101 were in many respects 'ordinary Germans' reduced to the lowest of scum. But the question still remains, what kind of people were these who got themselves into this situation and then let themselves get so carried away.

However, it is not true that the opposite view - of the Nazi executioners as 'monsters', 'beasts' or 'psychopaths' - predominated before 1960. In fact, I have not found a single example of this in any serious text. Of course, I am not talking about propaganda or the tabloids. But I do remember reading something in the papers when I was about seven, most probably in the communist paper *De Waarheid* which dropped on the doormat every day.. It was something like 'Beastman Kotälla sentenced to death'. 'Beastman', that appealed to me. It conjured up all sorts of images. As it turned out, Kotälla was certainly not an 'ordinary person', but a psychiatric patient who, when he was not acting as executioner, was being treated in the psychiatry ward of the military wing at the Wilhelmina Hospital in Amsterdam. But psychopaths and perverts are rare among war criminals as they are too unpredictable to be deployed in an orderly programme of extermination.

As I said, I have not come across any serious author who maintains that all or even most perpetrators of genocide are severely disturbed people or even monsters. It is true that I have not read anywhere near all that has been written on the subject, and I would be grateful for any information as to where this *has* been stated. I was therefore very curious to hear from people who had had first-hand experience of the executioners, not as their commander or comrade nor as a spectator or eyewitness, but in the key role of victim and survivor. Such people are few and far between. The one thing we cannot say about those who committed genocide is that they did not do their work properly. There are few left to tell the tale. And of those few, there are even fewer who wanted to tell it to the world by publishing their diaries or memoirs.

Recently, I read a number of these testimonies. If you are looking for it, you notice that camp survivors do not often talk about the camp guards. They seem to have other things on their mind; foremost among them, to stay out of their way. But that would be too simple an explanation. It may be that they hardly mention the executioners for other reasons. But I don't know which ones.

Most of the publications I read appeared shortly after the war when the writers' experiences were still fresh in their minds. At no time during my limited exploration did I come across descriptions such as 'psychopath' or 'human monster' - the characterisations that the situationists are so opposed to, but which you would most expect to see mentioned by the people who had had to endure the worst.

Almost as soon as the war ended, Abel Hertzberg published a series of articles in *De Groene* weekly about his experiences in Bergen-Belsen.³ On the very first page he wrote, 'If knowledge of what took place contributes to providing insight into what man is capable of and to what he might be driven if one is not vigilant, much will have been gained.' Please note: not 'Germans' or 'Nazis', but 'man' in general.

But Herzberg does not spare them. On the contrary: 'The things they did, those Nazis, and for which they are now standing trial, they did with joy and with shameless sensuality.' His first article portrays the SS officers in the camp. For Hertzberg it is absolutely imperative that we should understand what kind of people the camp guards were, even if this is no more than 'a prerequisite for striking back effectively at an appropriate moment.'

'Scharführer X is... a nothing He is a void.' Without idealism, without opinions. And it is into that empty vessel that a false ideology is poured, 'So now he toots along with the big brass ...'. Further on, Hertzberg writes, 'There is yet another difficulty. Man is never quite so ordinary, so empty, and so doubly blank that he does not have a conscience.' And it is precisely because the perpetrator has to stifle the voice of his conscience that he is overcome by such rage towards his victim.

'Is this all exclusively German?' he wonders. It may well be the result of historical circumstances in Germany. But there are people without convictions everywhere, people who have an 'appetite for persecution and suffering.'

Although these passages contain clear echoes of Hertzberg's religious ideas, his view of the perpetrators of genocide already contains everything that would later be presented as the situationist point

³ Later published together as *Amor Fati; Zeven Opstellen over Bergen Belsen*. Amsterdam: Moussault, 1946. Now available as an e-book. Also available in English as *Attachment to Fate: Seven Essays on Bergen-Belsen*, transl. Jack Santcross, 2006 (all quotes here taken from this translation).

of view and the theory of evil as banality. Moreover, Hertzberg includes another aspect that does not fit so well with his own image of 'emptiness': the presence of a personal, stifled conscience that the perpetrator avenges through crime. In his later work, *Eichmann in Jerusalem*,⁴ Hertzberg continues to perceive the perpetrator as first and foremost a human being: 'Eichmann is a human being, and I fear, quite an ordinary human being at that. He lives among us everywhere. He is one of us. And it is our responsibility to save him from the disaster into which he can fall.' (p. 189). But unlike Arendt or Mulisch, who were also in Jerusalem, Hertzberg does not erase Eichmann's own character and accountability. He does not reduce him to an insignificant cog in the killing machine. He portrays him as the fanatical zealot and Jew hunter that he was.

As a tribute to Hertzberg, who followed the trial more closely than anyone else, here is another quote: 'It was not a matter of Eichmann, as a subordinate, obeying the orders of his superiors. Any recourse to that argument is inadmissible. It was a form of coercion resulting from the oppression of those times, through the influence of everyone on everyone, a coercion that Eichmann was passively subjected to, but that he also helped bring about, and that held him in its grip.'

Elie Aron Cohen, a survivor of Auschwitz, wrote a thesis on *Human Behaviour in the Concentration Camp* (Transl: M.H. Braaksma 1989) which was published in 1952, seven years after the Liberation. In his book Cohen devotes a chapter to 'The psychology of the SS'. Here too, there is no demonisation of the camp guards. On the contrary: 'I do not think that I could explain the atrocities by assuming that the SS guards in the camp were sadists.' (p. 239) Cohen used the psychoanalytic arsenal that prevailed at the time. He sees the SS guards as having a transformed superego, as people whose conscience had been reconstructed, as it were.

Most people through their upbringing will develop a 'religious-humane' superego, says Cohen, but in many German families this early education had already taken a strong authoritarian turn. In Nazi Germany, this individual conscience was transformed by schooling and propaganda into a 'tribal conscience' in which anything that could destroy, torture or kill the enemies of the German people and particularly the Jews, was not only permitted but even prescribed. The acting out of aggression against anyone who was not a member of the tribe was encouraged and rewarded rather than punished. This was why, according to Cohen, the SS lacked all sense of guilt. Cohen's psychology of the SS is thus a kind of social psychology or sociology of German conscience formation before and during the Nazi regime.

In his argument, Cohen draws on an earlier book by Alexander and Staub from which he quoted a sentence that I in turn want to cite.⁵ The authors distinguish between the 'chronic' criminal who is predisposed to fall into crime, and on the other hand 'normal people', "die unter gewissen spezifischen Bedingungen *akut kriminell* werden... Für diese Handlungen ist also nicht den eigenart des Menschen, sondern die Besonderheit der Situation charakterisch". As Germany did not win the war, I should perhaps translate this sentence: 'normal people who under certain specific conditions instantly become criminals. Their criminal activities are not determined by the nature of the individual concerned but by the extraordinary nature of the situation'. Of course, this book does not date from the 60s, or even from the years when Cohen was working on his thesis, but from a good twenty years before that; from 1929! That was more than thirty years before Hannah Arendt's notions about Eichmann and Stanley Milgram's experiments with the shock machine, and more than sixty years before Browning's annihilation squad of ordinary men.

Cohen (p. 201) follows the American psychologist Gilbert by quoting his statement, 'It was not hatred but the prevailing morality in Nazi Germany that made the extermination of "inferior" races possible.'⁶ But what Cohen does not do is describe the emotions of the SS guards, or rather, the striking lack of emotion. Nor does he look at the possibility of 'internal conflict' in the minds of the SS, or its striking absence.

Both Cohen and Hertzberg take a broader view but they already point to the importance of the genocidal situation, which would end up becoming not only the generally held opinion, but in the end the

⁴ Den Haag: Bert Bakker/Daamen, 1962.

⁵ Franz Gabriel Alexander & Hugo Staub, *Der Verbrecher und seine Richter: Ein psychoanalytischer Einblick in die Welt der Paragrafen*. Wenen: Internationaler Psychoanalytischer Verlag, 1929.

⁶ G.M.Gilbert, *The Psychology of Dictatorship*. New York: 1950, p. 314

only explanation that is still accepted: that the behavior of perpetrators of genocide is largely determined by their immediate circumstances. But even if Herzberg calls the typical SS guard 'empty', 'a void', 'an object', he still sees him as having a conscience that has to be stifled. And that is how Herzberg explains the murderousness: as deriving from the rage against the voice of conscience that cannot be silenced completely. Cohen stresses that most people are inculcated with 'religious-humane' values from birth, but he does not identify any conflict with the subsequent formation of a Nazi superego. Psychoanalysis at that time, however, paid little attention to emotions or emotional conflict.

There is something else that does not quite add up. Cohen and Hertzberg sound too wise to be true. There is evidence of the fears experienced, of the grief and loss suffered, but very little of the shame and practically nothing at all of the anger that must have gripped the survivors. Of course, the moral victory belongs to those who were once so defenceless against the SS, and who now calmly and objectively describe and analyse their executioners before a sympathetic public. In other words, reflection is used as the purest form of revenge against their erstwhile executioners. But this spiritual revenge only works if every thought of actual revenge has been eradicated by both author and public.

I would like to take a closer look at those feelings of revenge, as there are one or two references to them.

In *Eindstation...Auschwitz*.⁷ (*Last Stop...Auschwitz*), the physician and later psychiatrist Eddy de Wind described his memories of the camp. Here too, there is little mention of the SS guards and no attempt to explain their heinous conduct. But it is an account that in even the smallest details, strives to fulfill what Johan Goudsblom has called the 'truth imperative'. The survivor bears witness, also on behalf of his fellow inmates who perished. Nothing must be made up, nothing exaggerated. The witness must be completely honest, even about his own failings and bad thoughts.

On the second to last page (p. 168), De Wind describes a conversation from the day before the camp was liberated.

"How can we ever make them pay for this?" asked one of the others, after a long silence.

"We can't," said Hans (the name De Wind gives to himself). "The only thing we can do is exterminate the SS scum."

[I skip a bit here].

"Does that mean we have to gas the entire German population as a punishment?"

"Certainly not, sir, but everyone who belonged to the SS and the Gestapo and so on you must exterminate to stop them from ever again rearing their heads.. The rest of the German people will have to stay under our tutelage until a new generation has grown up.... Perhaps by then, a socialist German nation will be able to manage on its own."

I have not quoted this passage for its alluring socialist vision, but because of the frank consideration of retribution which I have rarely come across in camp literature. And because, even here, right away, limits are imposed upon this⁸

This almost compulsive honesty can also be found in Loden Vogel's *Diary of a Camp* (Bergen Belsen), first published in 1947 by the later Amsterdam psychoanalyst Louis Tas.⁹ As with the other diarists, Vogel focuses on his fellow prisoners and his own emotions, and hardly ever on the guards. In the camp, keeping a diary in the greatest secrecy was a way to maintain a personal space, to uphold one's own autonomy in the face of the totalitarian machinery aimed at destroying individual personality while the person was still alive. I would like to cite one entry here, which appears quite unexpectedly: 'Tuesday 24 (October 1944). Oberscharführer Theo has suffered a loss; his wife and/or children have been bombed to death. Nobody would have wished this on him. Lights out.' This refers to an SS officer, but apparently one who had not made himself hated. About his fellow guards: nothing. .

⁷ Vijftig jaar na Auschwitz' (*Fifty years after Auschwitz*) in: A. van Dantzig, *Is Alles Geoorloofd als God niet Bestaat?* (*If there is no God, is everything permitted?*) Amsterdam/Meppel: Boom, 1995, pp. 203-208.

⁸ [Even in the present-day Netherlands, feelings of revenge are conspicuous by their absence. As everyone knows, a plane carrying three hundred passengers, two-thirds of whom were Dutch, was recently shot down above Ukraine by Russian rebels (probably because it was mistaken for an enemy military plane). This was followed by repeated and widespread public mourning for the victims. But there was a noticeable lack of indignation, anger, feelings of revenge or attempts to obtain justice, either at the time or later. In the emotional culture of the Dutch, feelings of sympathy, loss and mourning apparently take precedence over feelings of anger and revenge. 'Those feelings will possess you, and hate can destroy a person.' Is that so? Is there any clinical evidence?

⁹ The edition quoted here is: *Dagboek uit een Kamp*. Amsterdam: Van Oorschot, 1965 2nd imp.

Simone Veil, an Auschwitz survivor who gave the 'Auschwitz Never Again' Lecture in 2006, said on that occasion, 'For my part, after the war, I had to fight my feelings of hatred and the desire for revenge, because I realised that no act of vengeance could ever equal the monstrous barbarity of the holocaust. Nothing could bring back my murdered parents and brother. I have always believed that the only way to bring murderous wars to an end is by reconciliation...'¹⁰ But even if no 'act of revenge' could ever be enough, why should she have to renounce feelings which were, in her case, more than justified? Could she not allow herself a few more thoughts of revenge, before devoting herself entirely to reconciliation between peoples? Anyone who reflects on her words understands why it is impossible to even think of a revenge experienced as so powerful and magical. .

In his speech for the fiftieth anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz, the psychiatrist Dries van Dantzig spoke before the Auschwitz Committee.¹¹ During his time in the concentration camp at Neuengamme, he had witnessed the 'Tragedy of the Putteners. The male population from the village of Putten had been rounded up in retaliation for an assault by the Dutch resistance and sent to this camp where they perished almost to the last man. Van Dantzig later described these events in a classic article .

In his commemoration speech, Van Dantzig spoke on the subject of anger, and the sensation of being completely overwhelmed by anger (p. 204), and says about the survivor: 'Someone can feel hatred and an urge to kill raging inside, and this will leave one who can not acknowledge him or herself as such with a sense of being evil, guilty..¹² I find this bitterly ironic: those who have been affected feel as guilty about their thoughts as the executioner should have felt about his deeds.'

But why would the survivor in Van Dantzig's words 'not want to know him or herself' as filled with hatred? I think it is because they never and in no way want to be like the perpetrators. But the survivors are not in the least bit similar to the perpetrators. The perpetrators felt nothing but did act, and if the survivors do feel it they still do not act.

Of course, there are exceptions. In his war memoirs, Yvo Pannekoek describes the final days of the concentration camp at Dachau. He is standing under the shower when the camp commandant arrives, strips off, and joins him under the shower, saying cheerfully, 'jetzt ist der Unterschied zwischen uns verschwunden und könnten Sie mir einen verhauen, was! [The difference between us has disappeared and now you can thump me]. Without thinking I said: 'Gladly' and gave him what was obviously a not too hefty clip on the ear – 'damit unser Verhältnis klar ist'. [So, our relationship is now clear.] And that settled the matter"¹³

In his memoirs, Pannekoek remains very self-confident, almost jaunty. In his case, he had been arrested not because of origins he could not do anything about, but for an act of resistance that he had chosen to commit. He describes how, after he is freed, he took what he needed from the Germans using the same tone that he says he picked up from the SS. 'But I feel like a conqueror...because I have liberated myself, thus proving that I am no rabbit, and I have hunted out SS officers and bumped one off with my own hands...' What interests me here is that Pannekoek permitted himself feelings of revenge which he sometimes acted on, or at least fantasized about.

This points to yet another misunderstanding: that forgiveness is beautiful and makes the forgiver a better person. That is certainly true if the forgiver would otherwise have the power to punish those who had wronged him. The forgiver can then show generosity and mercy by rejecting the avenging deed, just as our Queen Juliana and her Minister of Justice so often and so generously exercised their right of pardon. But if you are not in a position to avenge yourself on those who have wronged you, what is the value of forgiveness? You are not giving anything up, you are not making a gift of anything, you are just saving them from your anger. And that rage, impotent as it is, is about the only thing you can mobilize against them.

We have come here today for a commemoration ceremony, an occasion on which it is customary to express high values and lofty sentiments. And rightly so. But Auschwitz was a pit of destruction. It was the absolute nadir in a century in which there were many other episodes of mass murder. There has never

¹⁰ *Auschwitz Never Again Lecture*. Leiden: Pension and Benefit Board, 2006, p. 8.

¹¹ Amsterdam: Republiek der Letteren, 1946] by Eddy de Wind

¹² 'Nowadays the most pressing problem for ex-detainees is that they so often take their aggression out on their children...' E. de Wind, *Confrontatie met de Dood; Psychische Gevolgen van vervolging (Confrontation with death; the psychological effects of persecution)*, Utrecht: ICODO, 1993, p. 30.

¹³ *Memoires van Yvo Pannekoek*. Amsterdam: Van Oorschot, 1982, p. 108.

been another Auschwitz, what came after was different, and yet in many respects similar. One way of dealing with such tragedies, perhaps not the best, is to strive for a better understanding of the calamities people inflict on other people.

I have cited a number of survivors of the camps because each of them knew exactly what they were talking about and had done their uttermost to try to understand what it was that had happened to them, and very nearly destroyed them. It was not only about their view of the perpetrators, but also about their feelings of revenge against the perpetrators, because their feelings also shape their view and everyone else's.

I mentioned the authors so that they could be remembered here today. With love.

I did not find a single passage in their work in which the Nazi murderers were demonised. On the contrary, the authors were very mindful of the effect of the socio-cultural context and of the coercive nature of the situation on the behaviour of the genocidal perpetrators.. The insight proclaimed so resolutely in the sixties was not new. And it soon became a cliché that has hindered understanding rather than helping to further it. It is time to look afresh at the perpetrators as people who, in some respects and to a certain extent, differ from other people and who, as perpetrators, also differ significantly from one another.

In ninety-nine out of a hundred cases, mass murderers go unpunished. It is only in the exceptional situation that a regime is wholly defeated that a few of them appear before the courts. And then they present themselves quite differently from when they were carrying out their work. And it is impossible to study them in full action. The perpetrators are only a small fraction of the population, no more than a few per cent. The rest are usually not even considered. In my book, I have attempted to describe a few of the traits that may be stronger and more common in perpetrators than in those who do not end up in genocidal situations.

Can we know for certain who would or would not degenerate into a mass murderer under fatal circumstances? 'I couldn't vouch for myself', psychologist Nico Frijda once said in answer to the question. In physics, the science of nature, there is an uncertainty principle, and it seems the same applies to the science of human nature. But the odds are not the same for everyone.