

# Mass murder and moral code: some thoughts on an easily misunderstood subject

HARALD WELZER

## ABSTRACT

Research on perpetrators of genocidal processes and especially of the Holocaust is still puzzled by the fact that most of the atrocities and killings have been executed by 'ordinary men', i.e. by persons with a self-concept which would not have indicated that they could become killers. The guiding question of research on genocidal perpetrators is therefore how given moral inhibitions and moral values could have been overcome, or, to put it simply, how good people could have been turned into bad ones. The following article proposes the opposite question: Is it possible that particular moral commitments and principles gave the perpetrators a sense of continuing moral integrity that enabled them to carry out the killings? This socio-psychological proposal is first elaborated theoretically and then illustrated with a case study on Franz Stangl, the commander of the extermination camp of Treblinka.

*Key words* Holocaust, mass murder, morality of perpetrators, rationality, role distance

At any rate, in my opinion I always remained objective, for that was our duty. (Adolf Eichmann)

### SELF-INTERPRETATIONS OF SERIOUS ANTI-SEMITES

'The silent transition', writes Primo Levi, 'from the lie to self-deception is advantageous: the person who lies "with his hand on his heart" lies better, plays his role better, is more easily believed by a judge, by a reader, by his wife and children.' This interpretation is always adopted, when the classic question at issue is what kind of moral code those possessed who were involved, whether as clerks, SS henchmen, *Wehrmacht* soldiers, concentration camp guards or auxiliary police, in the mass murder of Jews, gypsies, the handicapped and other 'national pests'. It is implicitly assumed that these perpetrators had to lie to themselves in some way, in order to be able to incorporate their murdering into the framework of their other behaviour and self-image.<sup>1</sup> This assumption, examined carefully, not only attributes a prior moral capacity to the murderers, but one that is astonishingly similar to the kind we like to credit ourselves with.

By posing the question 'But how *could* you?', the perpetrators of National Socialist crimes are, in a curious duality, conceived of as people who violated a previous, better moral capacity. It is no coincidence that this duality, applied collectively, corresponds to that adopted with regard to the 'nation of poets and thinkers', which temporarily deviated from the path of virtue. But what if the perpetrators did not violate their moral code, but rather, within the framework of their *Weltanschauung*, acted according to the highest moral standards? What if the awareness that one was a person who acted according to a moral code even in the act of killing, had in the end actually provided the psychological endowment to kill without repugnance and with a clean conscience?

The question of the relationship between mass murder and moral code is seldom explicitly posed. It is implicit, however, in most academic treatments of perpetrator psychology involving a search for specific personal dispositions and situative factors, which enabled the perpetrators to kill other people. The implicit hypothesis, that prior morally motivated inhibitions had to be overcome before murder could be not only conceived, but carried out, is still often misleading research on Holocaust perpetrators.

I wish to show in what follows, against the background of some very simple considerations and empirical examples, that the perpetrators not only knew what they were doing, but that they only brought their scruples to bear on what they did in exceptional cases – indeed, that they were able to kill precisely because they were able to perceive themselves as persons possessing

an intact moral code. The following extract from a letter from a euthanasia doctor to his wife may serve initially to provide an intimation, on an impressionistic level, of what I mean: 'So, Mummy, now Dad has yet again knocked together an appraisal, with which he himself is happy. The man will probably be condemned to death' (Friedrich Mennecke, quoted by Chroust, 1987: 79).

Let me start with a topical example. The reaction in Germany to Goldhagen's book *Hitler's Willing Executioners* (1996), has revealed that the author, despite his thesis's lack of refinement in dealing with moral questions, has struck a nerve in the Germans' view of their history. On closer examination it also becomes clear that the sensitive issue underlying the discussion was prudently avoided. I am referring here to Goldhagen's idea, that during the National Socialist era the Germans were not endowed with the same basic ethical and moral convictions, which we lay claim to for ourselves. 'Above all', writes Goldhagen, 'one may no longer assume that the Germans at that time corresponded to our ideal conceptions of ourselves' (1996: 66).

This idea sounds simple, yet it represents a provocation within the context of the research done on perpetrators so far. This is because in proceeding from this assumption Goldhagen does not look at the social, social-psychological and psychological circumstances which made the essentially good Germans into cruel and pitiless or indifferent and unfeeling perpetrators and collaborators. Instead, he adopts the straightforward premise that when they murdered they simply did not behave as good people. But acknowledging a state of affairs like this, which is as simple as it is terrible, brings a different problem into play than if one assumes that the readiness to commit murder first had to be manufactured, that existing moral barriers and ethical scruples first had to be overcome. The latter assumption is based on the conviction (which has no empirical base whatsoever) that by the 20th century civilization had established a fundamental aversion to killing. Goldhagen's statement of the problem casts doubt on the validity of this conviction by insisting that mass murder was prepared and carried out by people, who apparently had no particular difficulty in reconciling their actions with their self-image.

In my opinion this was the truly contentious aspect of his book, which was obscured by the crudity of his arguments. The deprecation of his central propositions provides a clear indication of what one would rather not discuss in the homeland of the perpetrators: that during the National Socialist era a large proportion of the Germans were committed to a moral code, which instead of condemning, actually demanded the degradation and persecution of other people, and which among other things prescribed that it was necessary and good to kill. Goldhagen speaks in this regard of a 'cognitive model', that is, of an interpretative scheme, that enjoyed general currency in Germany. The essence of this model was the supposition that every misfortune was linked to the Jews and consequently every step to improvement

depended on their elimination. In historical terms this is doubtless unsustainable, but Goldhagen's picture of a 'cognitive model' can certainly be used to examine what normative guidelines prevailed in the Germany of the first half of the previous century and how these put their stamp on education as well as the pictures held of people. If one is going to conduct an academic investigation into the consciousness of 'ordinary murderers', it does not of course suffice to say that they were all anti-Semites. In the first place, in an annihilation process that possessed a high degree of specialization and a partly industrial character, one could become a murderer without being in any way ideologically committed. Secondly, prejudices do not lead directly to murder and finally, anti-Semitism was by no means more widespread in Germany than elsewhere in Europe.

In other words, seeing Jews as the cause of all social ills cannot be the key to a cognitive model that made people prepared to murder. Its components were rather pre-conceptions regarding the absolute inequality of people, the attribution of principles of superiority and inferiority, guidelines on questions of honour, blood, nation and race: in short, the ideals of the Wilhelminian society, complemented by a scientific racism and dreams of the complete malleability of the world. In his *Studien über die Deutschen* (1989), Norbert Elias attempted to examine Germany's social fabric prior to 1933 as far as its ethical and moral guidelines were concerned, with the aim – unique in his work – of answering the question 'How was Hitler possible?' In answering this question 'the insight did indeed seem compelling, that such a proliferation of socially-sanctioned models of violence and social inequality formed part of the pre-conditions of his rise' (1989: 27).

Elias assumes that from the second half of the 19th century onwards a metamorphosis had occurred within the German bourgeoisie. As a result, questions of honour and its defence, human inequality, the nation and race acquired greater significance than the humanitarian ideals and questions of morality, which had been of importance for large parts of the bourgeoisie since the Enlightenment. According to Elias, this gradually forming 'canon of honour' was based 'on a strict hierarchical ranking of human relationships, a clear arrangement of order and obedience, while the ... middle-class canon explicitly seemed to lay claim to applying to all people and so implicitly to proclaim the postulate of the equality of all people' (1989: 130).

Elias attributes this metamorphosis to, among other things, the fact that the unification of the German people did not result from a middle-class revolution, but rather from the military victory of 1871, which was won under the leadership of the traditional elites. In Elias's view this led to a retreat from the moral canon of the bourgeois Enlightenment and to an orientation towards the honour canon of the elite. Particularly in its Prussian form this honour canon evaluated

cultural achievements and everything which the German bourgeoisie of the latter half of the eighteenth century had held in high esteem, as of lesser value. ... The artistic interests of the courtly aristocratic society were slight and the same was true of imperial Germany's standard-setting officer class. That it was the traditions of the warlike honour canon and not those of the bourgeois cultural and moral canon which were perpetuated in these circles is self-evident. It is equally self-evident too, that they were tied to a tradition of the hierarchical inequality of people, to unconditional exaltation and subordination. ... Questions of honour ranked high, those of morality low. Questions of humanity and of identifying with others as people vanished from view and on the whole such earlier ideals were evaluated negatively as weaknesses of socially-inferior classes. (1989: 152)

Taking the duelling fraternities ('*schlagende Verbindungen*') as an example, Elias demonstrates, at first with reference to a specific social group, that the establishment of the military-aristocratic honour canon also regulated the social practice of relationships between people and promoted particular personality structures as well as the formation of particular norms: 'Education led people to accept a society with pronounced hierarchical inequalities, where whoever stood higher behaved ostentatiously as a superior and better person and explicitly let all those below him realize that they were lower, weaker and worse than he' (1989: 136).

Traces to one extent or another of such a 'tradition of behaviour and feeling' can certainly be identified in Germany even today. In the first quarter of the 20th century it must have been, at least in bourgeois and aristocratic circles, the dominant factor in the formation of those normative and political tendencies, which finally resulted in the genocidal process. When one reads Ulrich Herbert's study on Werner Best, the *völkische* student leader and later deputy of Richard Heydrich, the perhaps overly abstract picture sketched by Elias begins to come to life. Herbert does not just elaborate with great care the socio-historical situation of the post-1918 period, with its development of racist and national ideals. Rather, taking the young lawyer Best as an example, he shows that an ethic of 'objectivity' crystallized within the rising academic elite of the 1920s against the background of elitist, racial-biological and *völkische* theories, which in a contemporary description was described as follows: the outstanding characteristics of this so-called 'political generation' were

... the love of truth and plainness, 'seriousness, laconic taciturnity and reserve, indeed occasionally abrupt coldness'. What was most important however, was 'objectivity': putting the business in hand above personal inclinations, the rejection of the 'public display of feelings' ... for where we feel a genuine empathy we guard against expressing it in

the old-fashioned kitsch manner and would rather be suspected of 'callousness'. (Herbert, 1996: 44)

Consequently Best's political writings from this period also propagate fighting political and racial enemies 'in terms of carrying out the laws of nature and in pursuit of the interests of one's own nation, so that struggle can be conducted as "work in an objective way" and no longer with emotions and passion' (quoted by Herbert, 1996: 95). With this conception of a 'serious anti-Semitism', which argues precisely on the basis of rejecting personal motives and spontaneous feelings, and develops various courses of action, Best shared the view of large sections of the academic youth, who only a decade later would form the leadership elite of the 'Third Reich' (cf. Wild, 2002; Heinemann, 2001).

As Herbert demonstrates, the argumentative foundation of 'serious anti-Semitism' was provided on the one hand by the teachings of '*Rassenbiologie*' and on the other by '*völkische*' theory. These accorded a privileged position to the welfare and 'health' of the nation as a 'transcendent overall being' (Himmler) *vis-à-vis* the fate of the individual. From this was deduced the right, in the superior interests of the race, to subordinate the interests of individuals to those of the race, just as those of '*Sklavenvölker*' were to be subjected to the interests of the '*Herrenvölker*'. In the domestic political theory of the lawyer Best, in the meantime promoted to become head of the Main Section of the Gestapo, the programme which derived out of all this ran:

National Socialism's political totality principle, which corresponds to the *weltanschauliche* principle of the organic and indivisible racial unit, cannot tolerate any formation of political will in its area. Every attempt to assert or even just to maintain an alternative political view shall be eliminated without regard to the subjective intentions of its bearers, as a pathological symptom, which threatens the overall unity of the indivisible racial organism. (Best, 1936, quoted by Herbert, 1996: 164)

The foreign policy variation of such a programme consisted in the view, derived from the '*völkische Weltanschauung*', that it was in accord with the 'eternal laws of life' when nations, defined according to racial criteria, faced each other as enemies and fought to the death. The special role of the Jews as a danger for the survival of other nations derived within the framework of this theory from the fact that the former threatened such nations' racial identity by living among them and mixing with their members. The central enemy of the German body politic lived as a 'parasite' within it and had to be eliminated with just as much consistency as other bearers of 'harmful racial qualities' – at any rate with more consistency than external enemies in the form of other peoples.

## TOWARDS A NATIONAL SOCIALIST MORAL CODE

For members of the leadership elite of Best's ilk such 'serious anti-Semitism' in no way provided an occasion for developing personal grudges against individual members of the Jewish population, let alone to endorse the excesses of 'ordinary anti-Semites', including those within the ranks of the Nazi party or its machine. Seen in this light the Jews were simply ... by reason of their origin part of a nation hostile to the German, which, in terms ... of the notions of the '*völkische Lebensgesetze* (laws of life)' it was unavoidably necessary, quite irrespective of individual feelings, to combat, drive out, under certain circumstances also to destroy, and which had no direct relationship at all to one's own behaviour towards individual Jews. (Herbert, 1996: 314)

The presence of such orientations within the circles of the political, administrative, medical, scientific and technical elites, of course, tells us nothing about what the actual relationships with members of the victim group were like. But in a more abstract sense views like the ones cited of Werner Best can certainly be described as 'moral' within a moral code, which concerns itself with super-individual and super-situational values – even if the contents of this 'moral code' diverge from that which we currently favour? In terms of the most prominent theory of moral development (that of Kohlberg), one could not even say with certainty whether Best was expressing a conventional or post-conventional moral code. The fourth stage of moral development, which according to Kohlberg is the conception of morality most widely encountered among adults, is characterized by the fact that the subject 'distinguishes between society's standpoint and the interpersonal agreement or motives directed towards particular individuals; assumes the standpoint of the system, which lays down roles and rules; regards individual relationships as ones between system-components' (Colby and Kohlberg, 1984: 357). The conventional moral individual derives reasons 'for doing the right thing' in part from the desire to appear as a 'good guy', to 'guarantee the functioning of the institution, or to satisfy his conscience, which admonishes him to come up to the self-assumed commitments' (ibid.).

On the conventional level of moral development dictatorial societies may seem directly evident? However, it is perhaps somewhat more difficult to concede that people like Werner Best might possibly be located on the post-conventional level, in which Kohlberg regards the rational individual as being embodied. For the 'social perspective' of this level consists in the 'perspective of a rational individual, who is conscious of the existence of values and rights which take precedence over social ties and contracts; integrates

different perspectives through the formal mechanisms of agreement, contract, impartiality and the appropriate alteration; takes moral as well as legal considerations into account; recognizes that they sometimes contradict each other and is able to integrate them' (Colby and Kohlberg, 1984: 357). Without wishing to interpret Kohlberg's work at arriving at definitions of post-onesidedly – he predicates, after all, with regard to other dimensions of post-conventional morality, among other things, the recognition of a plurality of opinions – it is quite clear that at least such descriptive models of moral development suffice in themselves to locate the moral code of National Socialist perpetrators on the conventional, as well as the post-conventional, level.

In short, if one wishes to explain the behaviour of perpetrators under National Socialism, one cannot make any progress by insisting on transcendental and universally valid moral principles. It appears to be more helpful to apply a social-psychological axiom, formulated in the first third of this century by William I. Thomas: 'If people define situations as real, they are real in their consequences.' Despite its simplicity this dictum, which has become known as the 'Thomas-theorem', says first that people's behaviour is dependent on how they perceive and define situations. Secondly, the consequences of actions which arise on the basis of such definitions are not components of fantasy worlds, but of reality. Hence, if 'the Jew', from the point of view of 'rassenbiologische' and 'völkische' theories, appeared to be the ultimate enemy of the Germans, one may characterize it – particularly from today's perspective – as irrational or pseudo-scientific. For contemporaries, however, this perception provided the foundation for propagating and carrying out particular actions. The consequences of these actions were the very real deaths of millions of people.

Hannah Arendt has described this very plainly:

The Nazis acted as if the world were dominated by the Jews and needed a counter-conspiracy to be saved. The racial doctrines were no longer a theory of highly-dubious scientific value, but were realized on a daily basis within a functioning world, within whose parameters it would have been highly 'unrealistic' to doubt their real worth. (Arendt, 1986: 573)

The straightforward evidence of the Thomas-theorem may be helpful in realizing that people do not act at all times and in all parts of the world in accord with identical perceptions and moral judgements, but that on the contrary, it is the variability of the given framework which permits sometimes one and at other times another action to appear to be right. In addition, it explains how it is possible for someone to perceive himself or herself to be a person of perfect integrity, though seen from another perspective his or her amorality assumes almost extra-terrestrial dimensions.

Against this background, the presumption mentioned at the beginning, that pre-existing moral scruples first had to be put out of action or overcome before the readiness to kill could be created, reveals itself as wishful thinking. On the contrary, it is possible for one to make a far greater contribution to explaining perpetrators' actions, if one assumes that indirect perpetrators ('*Schreibtischtäter*') felt themselves to be acting as morally inspired people precisely when they were occupied with working out their murder programmes, and that the actual perpetrators derived a sense of their moral integrity – in Kohlberg's terms, the feeling they were 'good guys' – precisely from an awareness that in everything they did, they remained 'decent', i.e. they acted in terms of super-personal and super-situative norms. 'Most of you will know what it means, when 100 corpses are lying side-by-side, when 500 or 1000 are lying there. To have stood this and at the same time – apart from exceptions of human weakness – remained decent, that has made us hard' (Himmler, quoted by Broszat, 1963: 16). In this frequently quoted passage from Himmler's notorious speech to the SS top leadership in October 1943, the unproblematic coupling of killing and moral code emerges without any profound interpretations. It is this coupling, born of the insight into the necessity of unpleasant actions and the feeling that one had carried out these unpleasant actions despite one's own sense of humanity, which provides the basis for perceiving oneself as 'decent' – as someone, who, to quote Rudolf Höß, 'had a heart', who 'was not bad' (Höß, 1963: 41).

In *Eichmann in Jerusalem* Hannah Arendt notes how Himmler used a 'trick' to overcome feelings of 'animal pity by which all normal men are affected in the presence of physical suffering': 'it consisted in turning these instincts around, as it were, in directing them toward the self. So that instead of saying: 'What horrible things I did to people!, murderers would be able to say: 'What horrible things I had to watch in the pursuance of my duties, how heavily the task weighted upon my shoulders!' (Arendt, 1994: 106). This interpretation applies perfectly to the self-interpretation of perpetrators who left us autobiographical material like Rudolf Höß, who contemplates several times about his duty to appear 'hard and cold' while in truth feeling very touched inside.

Such an ethics of decency needs to be examined more closely. I would first like to give a brief outline of this question, using the example of the commander of Treblinka, Franz Stangl, and then in closing indicate a few general conclusions.

#### A CASE STUDY

Stangl, who was born in 1908 in Austria, was chief of police of the euthanasia clinic Schloß Hartheim from 1940 to 1942, from March 1942 to September

1942 commander of the concentration camp of Sobibor and then commander of the extermination camp of Treblinka from September 1942 until August 1943. In 1971 he gave the journalist Gitta Sereny comprehensive interviews about his past, which provides the material for the following discussion. Sereny's own central interest is in the question of the perpetrator's recognition and processing of guilt. She too implicitly assumes that her interviewee secretly experienced a deep sense of guilt, which in turn presupposes that he violated his own moral standards. According to Sereny Stangl speaks only once of guilt – in connection with an interrogation in which a victim was subjected to extreme humiliation (cf. Sereny, 1995: 41). Sereny interprets Stangl's confession of guilt in this relatively harmless case as a displacement for the guilt, relating to around a million people whom he had on his conscience, of which he could not speak. Here too Sereny assumes that Stangl felt guilty that such an unimaginable number of people had been killed under his command in Sobibor and Treblinka. She also has a psychological explanation why confessions of guilt are almost impossible in such a situation. 'Only a monster could himself have participated in such deeds, admitted his guilt and then . . . been able to go on living' (ibid.).

In making this assessment the author ignores that in relation to the above interrogation Stangl only perceived his guilt in not realizing what 'the Germans had dragged [him] into'. Consequently in this connection she disregards not only that he externalized any potential sense of guilt, but also that her 'monster' thesis is substantiated by nothing more than confusing her own normative self-image with that of another person.

Stangl himself only showed moral distress regarding his victims when they were already dead and something had not gone according to plan with their disposal. 'They had laid too many corpses [in a pit] and the decomposition had proceeded so far that at the bottom everything had turned liquid. The corpses had swollen over, out of the pit and had rolled down the hill. I saw some – my God, it was horrible' (Stangl, quoted by Sereny, 1995: 129). Stangl solved the problem of these horrifying scenes – in a quite similar way to the Auschwitz commander Rudolf Höß (cf. Welzer, 1993) – through distancing himself from what took place. He either looked the other way or avoided the places where the killing occurred in general ('In Sobibor one could almost completely avoid seeing it' [Stangl, quoted by Sereny, 1995: 131]) or plunged himself into manic activities (ibid.: 235), which by means of overwork hindered him from perceiving what results his work had.

What is more interesting than such strategies for avoiding a direct confrontation with the disgusting aspects of his duties, however, are the assessments Stangl makes of the moral aspects of his actions – for example, when he tries to assess, on the basis of what he had learnt at the police school, whether he was involved in criminal actions:

In the police school they taught us – I remember exactly, it was Captain Leitner who always said it – that a crime must fulfil four criteria: the motive, the object, the criminal action, and free will. If one of these four principles was absent, then it was not a matter of a punishable action. . . . You see if the 'motive' was the Nazi government, the 'object' the Jews, and the criminal action the exterminations, then I could say to myself for me personally the fourth element, the 'free will', was missing. (1995: 189)

Sereny considers this theory of Stangl to be an exculpatory device, which serves to veil his own feeling of guilt. Various other interview extracts reveal, however, that in other connections, which were linked within the framework of his area of responsibilities to what he described as his 'free will', Stangl put a great deal of value on an exact characterization of his actions. Moreover, in so doing, repudiating any suspicion that he personally had had anything against the Jews played a central role, as well as the shameful idea that as commander he had allowed any improprieties to occur. For instance, he describes the complaint of a newly arrived Jew in Treblinka ('a decent looking fellow'), who complained about a Lithuanian supervisor who had promised him water, if he gave him his watch in return.

But the Lithuanian had then taken his watch, but not given him any water. Well, that wasn't right, was it? At any rate, there was no pinching under my command. I immediately asked the Lithuanians who had taken the watch. But nobody responded. Franz . . . whispered to me that it could involve one of the Lithuanian officers – the Lithuanians had so-called officers – and that I could hardly humiliate an officer in public. I told him: 'I couldn't care less what kind of uniform a man wears. I'm only interested in what's inside him.' This was also passed on to Warsaw straightaway. But that didn't bother me at all. What's right, has to go on being right, hasn't it? (1995: 197)

What is striking here are the ethics of super-personal correctitude, which includes the Jew as a bearer of complaints just as much as the possibility of incorrect behaviour on the part of allied officers. Stangl's working maxim, 'what's right, has to go on being right', is completely unrelated to the context in which the whole situation takes place, as well as being quite independent of the circumstance that the plaintiff had probably been murdered in the gas-chamber before the conclusion of Stangl's investigations. At any rate, Stangl replied laconically to Sereny's question as to what had happened to the man, 'I don't know.' For Stangl, the context of mass extermination remains completely external. For him what is important – as for Rudolf Höß within the framework of analogous stories – is highlighting his correct code of conduct, which rigorously avoided personal favours or discriminations.

This is the source of the moral integrity that Stangl attributes to himself and since at least from his point of view it can be described and corroborated without any doubt at the level of concrete actions, the fulfilment of his duties in other respects, to the extent they were not subject to his free will, is not capable of arousing any personal uneasiness.

Another story is suited to accomplishing this, one which brings Stangl perilously close to being represented as acting out of personal motives, indeed as a sadistic character – and accordingly it is this story too, which in his conversations with Sereny reveals him in the greatest discomfort and excitement. It concerns the witness Stan Szmajzner, who came to Sobibor as a 14-year-old boy and was able to escape extermination in the camp because he demonstrated qualities as a goldsmith and was apparently able to arouse a kind of sympathy on the part of Stangl. Stangl had him make several objects of jewellery and occasionally, as Szmajzner recounts, sometimes came by just to chat to him. The fact that Stangl brought him sausages every Friday evening with the words: 'Here are some sausages for you to celebrate the Sabbath', played an important role in his court statement. In his conversations with Sereny, Stangl returned several times to the implied infamy of having attempted to seduce the Jewish boy to eat pork on the Sabbath itself. In fact, it was precisely this story which disturbed and angered him most among all the witness-statements at his trial:

This story with the sausages was deliberately interpreted wrongly. . . . It's true I brought him things to eat and there were probably also sausages among them. But not to tempt him with pork or to taunt him: I brought him other things too. I think it was because we got our own rations on Friday and the storehouse was usually full of food and we had food to spare. I liked that boy. (1995: 149)

For our purposes it is of no importance, whether Stangl in bestowing his gifts was inspired by a particular malice or was well-meaning and simply thoughtless. What is noteworthy is that it was not that he bore responsibility for mass murder or was commander of two extermination camps that caused him problems, but rather that his moral integrity in his personal dealings with a particular individual had been publicly questioned. Sereny herself sees this quite correctly – what caused him the most problems were those things which he specifically had done, and not what he was' (1995: 150). In this, however, she sees another proof of Stangl's 'moral corruption' and the refusal 'to come to terms with the total alteration of his person' (ibid.).

The concepts Sereny employs here again reveal the underlying theory: the essentially upright Stangl had allowed himself to be corrupted by the genocidal process and had lost his moral integrity. The reverse interpretation would make far more sense: Stangl had scarcely any or no problems at all with his 'work', which in his view he was obliged to carry out, and this was

particularly the case when he could regard himself personally as a 'good guy', just, objective, free of partiality, and sometimes helpful and friendly above and beyond the call of duty. It will have been the maintenance of this self-image of the extermination camp commander which ensured that Stangl, despite his actual function, which consisted in leading masses of people to their deaths, was nevertheless not tortured by any moral qualms. On the one hand, a task which fits into a universe of causes to be justified one way or the other; on the other, an individual, from case to case distanced from his role, who is ready at all times to fulfil his duties as required, but who at the same time also wants 'to remain a human being'.

It is the doubt regarding this last quality too, rather than the actually unparalleled crimes, which oppresses him. It is precisely here, in his conversations with Sereny, that he is concerned to put his behaviour in a good light. Moreover, that he did not first become corrupt in the camps, but rather – if one wishes to operate with such categories – had been so from the beginning, emerges, among other things, from the fact that Stangl was brazen enough to attend the unloading of just-arrived deportees wearing a white riding-suit. He justified this on three grounds: in the first place he had preferred riding as a means of locomotion in view of the badness of the paths; secondly, it had been hot; and thirdly, it had been coincidence that the tailor in the neighbouring village had only had a white linen material available at the time Stangl decided, because of the worn state of his uniform, to have a suit made. According to Stangl this extraordinary wear and tear was due to the repeated disinfection of his clothing on account of sand-fly infestation. When Stangl told this story, Sereny interjected and asked:

'These sand-flies must have been a terrible problem for the prisoners.' To this Stangl replied tersely: 'Not everyone reacted so strongly to them as I did. . . . They just happened to like me.' (1995: 137)

Even if one can here speak of a complete absence of empathy and a quite schizoid thoughtlessness, this episode does not in any way indicate a process of moral corruption. Rather, it reveals a pre-existing and quite unquestioned feeling of superiority and omnipotence, which even 25 years after the events did not occasion Stangl any discomfort, in complete contrast to the doubts regarding his moral integrity. What did discomfort him was that it was precisely this suit that in the midst of the chaos of the arriving transports made him identifiable for surviving witnesses as someone who had shot into the crowd. This in turn incensed him deeply and gave rise to assurances that he had never shot into the crowd (1995: 143). Complementary to this indignation at the shattering of his integrity by such testimony are stories which Stangl told precisely in order to demonstrate his integrity, such as that of the prisoner Blau, whom he, apparently out of fondness, had made a cook:

He knew, reported Stangl, that I would help him, whenever I could. One day he knocked at my office door early in the morning, stood to attention and asked for permission to speak to me. He looked very worried. I said: 'Of course, Blau, come in. What's on your mind?' He replied that it was on account of his 80-year-old father. He had arrived with the morning transport. Couldn't I do something? I replied: 'No, really, Blau, that's impossible, you must understand: an 80-year-old... He quickly responded that he of course understood that. But could he ask my permission to be allowed to bring his father into the 'hospital' (instead of the gas-chamber)? And could he first give his father something to eat in the kitchen? I gave him the answer: 'Go and do what you think best, Blau. Officially, I don't know anything. But unofficially you can tell the Kapo from me that it's okay.' When I came back to the office in the afternoon, Blau was already waiting for me. He had tears in his eyes, stood to attention and said:

*'Hauptsturmführer, I would like to thank you. I gave my father something to eat and brought him into the "hospital". It's all over. Thank you very much.' I answered: 'Yes, Blau, there's no need for thank yous, but if you want to thank me, of course you may do so.'* (1995: 244)

The impression of unbelievable cynicism, which strikes one today when one hears this story, quite misses Stangl's candid intention in relating the episode. It is by no means evidence of a moral deterioration, but rather that within the framework of contemporary moral guidelines it was possible for someone to regard himself as a good person, if by an act of omission he slightly eased another person's dying. The fact that Stangl was capable of telling such stories as examples of his 'humane' attitude reveals the gulf between the normative orientations of narrator and listener. At the same time it also shows that perpetrators like Stangl acted within a different normative framework from that which we retrospectively apply to their perceptions, interpretations and actions. In addition, it is apparent that they needed to behave – in however macabre a way – as 'good people', in order to uphold their self-image as people of integrity. Seen in this light a moral code becomes a psychological accessory, which is not at all suited to inhibiting, but on the contrary, far rather to securing the readiness to murder.

There seems to be a pretty fundamental human reluctance to count as 'bad', and experience teaches that even the most unscrupulous criminal places a high value on being perceived in some facet of his or her personality as 'humane'. This everyday observation can hardly irritate within a social-psychological perspective, which assumes that outside of participation in sociality human life simply does not exist. To this extent one can certainly agree with Sereny, that it would indeed have been expecting too

much from Stangl for him to recognize himself as the monster, which from our point of view he was.

But was he really a monster? This question can perhaps easily be decided politically as well as morally, but not scientifically. Viewed in social-psychological terms, and one balks at writing this in view of the monstrousness of his deeds, he did nothing else, on the one hand, than behave within the framework of contemporary normative paradigms, academic teachings, military conceptions of duty and canonized definitions of honour, and on the other, assure himself with contemporary definitions of 'decency'. As indicated, it was this ethic of decency, too, which even decades after his deeds merely led him to doubt whether he might not have erred in specific interpersonal relationships.

This doubt regarding the maintenance of decency always recurs, when one looks into the biographies of significant perpetrators, where the latter are concerned with the personal dimensions of their actions; at the places, in short, where Stangl, for example, is confronted with the accusation of personal malevolence; or Höß muses over actions he himself had committed, 'which would wring the heart of anyone with any humanity' (Höß, 1963: 120); or where one of the members of a police battalion investigated by Christopher Browning made the following statement:

I tried, and this was possible for me, only to shoot children. It happened like this, the mothers led the children by the hand. My neighbour then shot the mother and I her child, because I told myself for particular reasons, that the child would in any case not be able to live without the mother. Delivering such children, who could not live without their mother, was meant to be a salve for my conscience. (Browning, 1996: 107)

Psychology has a whole arsenal of categories at its disposal for such enormities – rationalization, dissonance reduction, defence, splitting and so on. Reference is far too seldom made, however, to the rather trivial psychological necessity that actions must be capable of being endowed with meaning for the person who carries them out and in some way of being incorporated into a self-concept, which does not seriously undermine the subject's personal feeling of moral integrity. In view of this, one can be grateful for the few cases where perpetrators have despaired and have reacted with nervous breakdowns, alcohol, drugs or desertion to the subjective impossibility of doing what in their perception was demanded of them. The fact that by far the majority of perpetrators quite obviously did not break in doing their duties, perhaps says something about what role self-assurance regarding their moral capacity played in those actions, which consisted in preparing or carrying out mass murder.



## ROLE, DISTANCE AND MORAL CODE

Seen from this perspective, the relationship between mass murder and moral code needs to be discussed in a manner which reverses that normally adopted. The question is not how the erosion or overcoming of moral inhibitions can explain perpetrator behaviour; it is rather how particular moral commitments and principles gave the perpetrators a sense of moral integrity which enabled them to carry out the deeds they performed. I have described this horrifying finding elsewhere within the framework of the concept of role-distance (Welzer, 1993), a central condition of professional action, which – according to Erving Goffman – characterizes the distance between the individual and the role, ‘between doing and being’. ‘In fact’, says Goffman, ‘the individual does not deny the role, but rather the possible self, which the role implies for all role-holders, who do not defend themselves against this’ (Goffman, 1973: 265).

Seen against the background of such a concept, which describes a mechanism for mastering professional demands, the behaviour of perpetrators shrinks to normal dimensions. But these still contain more horrors than any idea that they were sadistic, schizoid, brutalized, corrupt or whatever. One must now add, that within the framework of this concept the moral capacity merely assumes the function of securing the distance from the particular role in the process of mass murder. Seen in this light the relationship between mass murder and moral code is not contradictory, but rather one of reciprocal conditionality. Mass murder could not have been carried out with amoral perpetrators.

## NOTES

- 1 For a critical overview see Paul, 2002, especially the chapter by Gerhard Paul and the chapter by Klaus-Michael Mallmann, who develops a different perspective.
- 2 I am disregarding here that from a philosophical point of view moral behaviour presupposes freedom and can be defined only categorially and not in social scientific terms. My concern here is with something in the way of a practical conception of morality, whose subject in accord with current interpretation, is committed to super-individual and where possible, super-temporal behaviour.
- 3 According to Kohlberg the conventionally moral individual defines ‘what is right’ in the following manner: ‘Fulfilling the duties one had assumed. Laws are to be obeyed, except in those extreme cases where they are in conflict with other socially-established commitments. The law also serves society, groups, institutions’ (Colby and Kohlberg, 1984: 357).

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Arendt, H. (1986) *Elemente und Ursprünge totaler Herrschaft*. Munich: Piper.
- Arendt, H. (1994) *Eichmann in Jerusalem*. London: Penguin.
- Bauman, Z. (1992) *Dialektik der Ordnung: Die Moderne und der Holocaust*. Hamburg: Eva.
- Broszat, M., ed. (1963) *Kommandant in Auschwitz. Autobiographische Aufzeichnungen des Rudolf Höss*. Munich: dtv.
- Browning, C. R. (1996) *Ganz normale Männer. Das Reserve-Polizeibataillon 101 und die ‘Endlösung’ in Polen*. Reinbek: Rowohlt.
- Chroust, P. (1987) ‘Friedrich Mennecke. Innenansichten eines medizinischen Täters im Nationalsozialismus’, in G. Aly et al., *Biederermann und Schreibtischtäter. Materialien zur deutschen Täter-Biographie*. Berlin: Rotbuch, pp. 67–122.
- Colby, A. and Kohlberg, L. (1984) ‘Das moralische Urteil: Der kognitionszentrierte entwicklungspsychologische Ansatz’, in G. Steiner (ed.) *Entwicklungspsychologie*, Vol. 1, *Kindlers Psychologie des 20. Jahrhunderts*. Weinheim u. Basel: Beltz, pp. 348–66.
- Elias, N. (1989) *Studien über die Deutschen*. Frankfurt: Suhrkamp.
- Goffman, E. (1973) ‘Rollendistanz’, in Heinz Steinert (ed.) *Symbolische Interaktion*. Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta, pp. 260–79.
- Goldhagen, D. J. (1996) *Hitler’s Willing Executioners*. New York: Vintage.
- Heinemann, I. (2001) ‘Another Type of Perpetrator: The SS Racial Experts and Forced Population Movements in the Occupied Regions’, *Holocaust and Genocide Studies* 15(3): 387–411.
- Herbert, U. (1996) *Best: biographische Studien über Radikalismus, Weltanschauung und Vernunft; 1903–1989*. Bonn: Dietz.
- Höß, R. (1963) ‘Meine Psyche: Werden, Leben und Erleben’, in M. Broszat (ed.) *Kommandant in Auschwitz: Autobiographische Aufzeichnungen des Rudolf Höß*. Munich: dtv, pp. 23–156.
- Paul, G., ed. (2002) *Die Täter der Shoah: Fanatische Nationalsozialisten oder ganz normale Deutsche?* Göttingen: Wallstein.
- Sereny, G. (1995) *Am Abgrund: Gespräche mit dem Henker. Franz Stangl und die Morde von Treblinka*. Munich: Piper.
- Welzer, H. (1993) ‘Härte und Rollendistanz. Zur Sozialpsychologie des Verwaltungsmassenmordes’, *Leviathan* 21(3): 358–73.
- Welzer, H. (1997) *Verweilen beim Grauen: Essays zum wissenschaftlichen Umgang mit dem Holocaust*. Tübingen: Diskord.
- Wild, M. (2002) *Generation des Unbedingten*. Hamburg: Hamburger Edition.

## BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

HARALD WELZER is Research Professor of Social Psychology at the University of Witten/Herdecke and director of the Center of Interdisciplinary Research at Essen. He has conducted several research projects on the transmission of historical consciousness, the development of autobiographical memory and

allied matters. His recent work includes 'Opa war kein Nazi!' *Nationalsozialismus und Holocaust im Familiengedächtnis* ['Grandpa was no Nazi! National Socialism and the Holocaust in Family Memory] (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 2002), with Sabine Moller and Karoline Tschuggnall; *Das Kommunikative Gedächtnis. Eine Theorie der Erinnerung* (Munich, Beck, 2002); and *Täter. Eine Sozialpsychologie des Massenmords* [Perpetrators: A Social Psychology of Mass Murder], to appear in 2005.

Address: Kulturwissenschaftliches Institut, Goethestrasse 31, D-45128 Essen. [email: harald.welzer@kwi-nrw.de]

## Personal relations and moral residue

ELEONORE STUMP

### ABSTRACT

To what extent can one be saddled with responsibility or guilt as a result of actions committed not by oneself but by others with whom one has a familial or national connection or some other communal association? The issue of communal guilt has been extensively discussed, and there has been no shortage of writers willing to apply the notion of communal responsibility and guilt to Germany after the Holocaust. The whole notion of communal guilt is deeply puzzling. How can the actions of one generation cast a shadow over the future in this way to generate obligations or guilt on the part of those who did not in any way participate in those actions? In this article, I will focus on a question that is a smaller-scale analogue of the question of communal guilt, one which raises similar perplexities but in a more tractable way. I will concentrate on the restoration of relations with perpetrators of great evil in cases in which their whole-hearted repentance is not in doubt. Most of us feel a strong antipathy to the restoration of relations with such a perpetrator. We explain and support that emotive reaction is the subject of this article and its conclusions are suggestive of promising approaches to the question of communal guilt.

*Key words* Aquinas, communal guilt, forgiveness, Holocaust repentance