A broad and strong consensus prevails in the human sciences about the personality traits that distinguish genocidal perpetrators from other human beings: there are none. A small percentage of the killers, roughly the same as in society at large, say five percent, may indeed show psychopathologies that make them impervious to the suffering of others and even cause them to enjoy it. The vast majority, however, displays the same variety of traits and in roughly the same frequencies as the population at large. There is near unanimity among scholars, a rare exception in the human sciences, that nothing in their personality predisposes the perpetrators to commit their deeds more than anyone else. In the very titles of their books, the adherents of this view announce their conclusion: the killers are ‘ordinary men.’ What must be explained is ‘how ordinary people commit extraordinary evil’.

The argument follows a fixed itinerary. It begins with the psychological tests that were administered to the Nazi defendants at the Nuremberg trials by US psychologists and psychiatrists. The chiefs of the Nazi regime were rather remarkable personalities, each in his own way. The fact that psychological tests did not reflect any anomaly, to my knowledge, was never seen as a shortcoming of the tests, but rather as evidence for the mental health of the persons tested. They were, however, found to share high scores on certain traits that were not per se pathological: above average intelligence, high ambition, overconfidence and an ‘ambient’ style of problem-solving.

Eichmann in Jerusalem: The banalization of evil

If anything focused global attention on the Nazi crimes, it was the spectacular abduction of Adolf Eichmann from his hideout in Argentina and his subsequent trial, in the spring of 1961, before an Israeli court in Jerusalem. In most war-crime trials, the defendants had presented themselves as average citizens, not especial-
ly motivated for their task, lukewarm at most in their ideological convictions, career-minded, maybe, but not wildly ambitious, not much given to racial or ethnic hatred, nor driven by passionate loyalties to the Leader or the Party. Strong motivations after all, might betray a personal commitment to their murderous task and bring their individual responsibility to the fore.

This camouflage strategy was brought to perfection by Eichmann’s defender, Servatius, who may not have fooled the prosecution or the judge, but certainly influenced some of those who attended the trial, most notoriously Hannah Arendt (or the Dutch writer Harry Mulisch, for that matter). Even at the time, it was well-known that Adolf Eichmann had been a fanatic Jew hunter, who knew full well what fate lay in store for his prey. In interviews with Willem Sassen, his SS acquaintance in Argentina, which were published in part in Time Weekly before the trial, Eichmann had said that he regretted only one thing: ‘that he had not caught them all.’ Arendt mentions that Eichmann during and after the war had repeatedly boasted: ‘I will jump into my grave laughing, because the fact that I have the death of five million Jews on my conscience gives me extraordinary satisfaction.’ Arendt dismisses this rather unusual confession as rodomontade (a boast) and adds: ‘Bragging was the vice that was Eichmann’s undoing’. But, as a matter of fact, Eichmann was not bragging; he was more or less accurate, and it was certainly not this vice that got him in trouble, but the fact that indeed he had been instrumental in the extermination of many millions of Jews.

Arendt and many others who reported on the trial were enthralled by the fashionable notion of the time that the Nazi (and the Soviet) state were mighty machines, manned by countless, nameless, faceless bureaucrats and soldiers who were no more than cogs in the apparatus, obediently and unthinkingly doing whatever they were told, without much conviction of their own, except for loyalty to the system. But, certainly in Eichmann’s case, this was an expedient masquerade, set up by the defense, and it went together very well with the spirit of the times: ‘Befehl ist befehl’ (Orders are orders) had become the ironic mot d’ordre of the 1960s, implying the opposite: that people should never again hide behind their superiors’ commands and that they should learn to judge for themselves and heed their individual conscience.

Arendt depicts Eichmann as a pompous idiot, ‘genuinely incapable of uttering a single sentence that was not a cliché’. Poking fun at his malapropisms, she observed with dead precision: ‘[H]is inability to speak was closely connected with an inability to think, namely, to think from the standpoint of somebody else’.

Eichmann whose efforts to expel, deport and exterminate millions exceeded even the orders he received, who continued to the very last moment when even Himmler had changed course, who said he despised colleagues who just followed orders, was the least apt example of an average bureaucrat, of just another number
in the huge equation of the Nazi state.\textsuperscript{11} Eichmann was totally devoted to Hitler and national socialism, fanatically ambitious and without any trace of conscience or empathy regarding his victims even when he was directly confronted with their fate.

Were the perpetrators banal? Arendt’s thesis on the ‘banality of evil’ does not stand critical scrutiny, certainly not as applied to Adolf Eichmann or other Nazi leaders, nor for that matter, to the rank-and-file killers. Her model might, however, fit the countless minor middlemen of the Holocaust: the administrators in the civil registry who supplied the names of the prospective victims, the local police who rounded them up, the railroad employees who transported them in cattle trains, the local contractors who built the gas chambers and supplied the extermination camps. Most of them were in some sense banal.

It was Hannah Arendt’s great, albeit not unique, accomplishment that she took the \textit{idées reçues} of her epoch, combined them with widespread though unrealistic notions about Adolf Eichmann, and presented these musings as profoundly innovative insights all her own.\textsuperscript{12} Her readers, being told with the seal of Arendt’s authorial and philosophical rank, that what they had been thinking all along was novel and profound, piously gobbled it all up.

\textit{Milgram’s punishing experiment and its ambiguous outcomes}

In the meantime, and no doubt inspired by the Eichmann trial, a series of spectacular psychological experiments received rapt attention in the US and across the world. Stanley Milgram had invited volunteers to participate in what he presented to them as an educational experiment. They were told that they would be randomly assigned to the role of either teacher or student. In fact all of them were made teachers and the student was played by an actor, a ‘plant’. The teachers were expected to present him with a series of random words and administer an electrical shock each time he made an error in reproducing the sequence from memory. The setup was presented as an experiment about the effects of punishment by different ‘teachers’ on memorizing by the ‘student’. As the shocks increased in strength, the actor playing the ‘student’ would simulate growing discomfort, and then signal more and more intense pain, until he fell silent. The electric shocks went from hardly perceptible to ‘dangerous’ at 300 and beyond, up to 450 volts. Or so the subjects were led to believe.

Against all expectations, also the experimenter’s, a two-thirds majority of the subjects went all the way and administered the highest and seemingly quite dangerous jolts. They did so under the adamant insistence of the researcher that they continue the experiment to the very end. Most subjects protested, visibly and audibly torn between compassion and compliance. Nevertheless they went on to
obey the experimenter and shock the hapless ‘student’. However, a considerable proportion did not obey: from one-third to four-fifths, depending on the mise-en-scène of the experiment. Thus, there always remained a considerable share of naysayers.

Apparently, the general expectation at the time had been that people would not obey if it went against their individual conscience. When it turned out that many or even most did, this finding became the overriding message from the experiment. But to people who would have thought from the outset that most people will do what they are told, Milgram finally proved that among a very sizeable and varying proportion of the test population, disobedience prevailed.

It is quite customary to conclude from Milgram’s results that a majority of people would collaborate with a real genocidal regime. But no one has drawn the same conclusion in the opposite direction and decided on exactly the same grounds that a very sizeable minority or even a majority under a genocidal regime would resist. Probably, the most sensible conclusion is that the outcomes of laboratory experiments must not be directly applied to real-life situations, either way.

More pertinent for the present argument is Milgram’s finding that he could not find any significant difference between the compliers and the resisters. But, as we shall see, absence of evidence is not evidence of absence.

The proportions of the two categories varied considerably with the variations that Milgram introduced in the setup of the experiment: the proportion of refusers increased when the element of authority was reduced (no lab coat; an ordinary room in a plain building; no experimenter present, just ‘other subjects’; the presence of other – planted – ‘teachers’ who would refuse to go along with the experiment or on the contrary would comply ostentatiously); or if the element of empathy was intensified (a visible ‘student’; the opportunity to hold his hand). This strongly suggests that the subject’s reactions in the experiment are determined by the balance between the opposing tendencies of compliance and empathy.

Milgram’s own filmed account of the original experiments begins with a subject who abruptly stops sending electric shocks as he hears the ‘student’ scream. He turns around to face the experimenter, his arms folded over his chest. When the experimenter asserts, ‘You have no choice’, he responds: ‘What do you mean, I have no choice? Of course I have a choice’.

Paradoxically, after having demonstrated that obedience to authority figures was much more common than many would have expected, Milgram’s followers concluded that personal psychology was irrelevant in explaining compliance to authority. Supposedly, it depended on the characteristics of the situation alone. But this leaves unexplained the fact that even within one and the same experimental context, a sizeable proportion of subjects did go the other way.
This was and still is a most revealing experiment. But what exactly it reveals is not all that clear. Did Milgram’s subjects believe in the ‘reality’ of the punishment that they inflicted on the student? That is in itself hard to believe. Nobody in his right mind would ever accept the idea that someone, anyone, would be electrocuted deliberately and with forethought in the presence of certified researchers in the psychology lab, on the campus of Yale University (New Haven, Connecticut).

Unquestionably, there is a gamelike aspect to the situation. The experiment must have been experienced by the ‘teacher’ subjects as a very serious game. Apparently, the subjects were suspending their disbelief, like the participants in a serious game tend to do.

There were, moreover, some most significant ambiguities in the presentation of the experiment to the subjects: During the session, the experimenter would insist that ‘no lasting damage’ would result from the shocks. But the subjects sat in front of a machine with labels under the rightmost buttons, which explicitly mentioned just that: ‘danger, severe shock’.

Does the experiment show that the majority of people in real life are ready to electrocute someone, if a person of authority tells them to? No. Does the experiment show that people can get carried away in an experimental situation and will do almost anything not to antagonize a person of authority, even act as if they were electrocuting a third person? Yes.

In other words, experiments are a kind of serious game. That somehow the setup of the experiment was not entirely real may not have eluded most participants.

Thomas Blass reviewed the many replications of the Milgram experiment. He found that some major changes in the situational setup of the experiment did not much affect the outcome. On the other hand, some personality traits did make a difference in the participants’ behavior: ‘authoritarianism’ by one measure or another did make a difference, as did (lack of) ‘empathy’ and ‘trust’ in the experimenter. Blass proposes an ‘interactionist’ approach to the problem of obedience to authority, which takes into account both situational and dispositional aspects. But against his expectations, twenty years later this sensible position has by no means become predominant in the field.

Milgram himself remained rather reserved in his interpretations. But his experiment became an icon of modern self-consciousness: ‘If the situation demands it, everyone is a murderer’. Fifty years later, what stands out most is the authority that laboratory experiments hold, most of all for scholars in the human sciences.
Ordinary men or ordinary Germans

The third phase in the discussion on genocidal perpetrators, after Arendt on Eichmann, and Milgram on obedience to authority came when students of mass violence began to explore the judicial documents on Nazi génocidaires. The pioneering and meticulous research by Christopher Browning produced the classic in this field: Ordinary Men. That title is followed by a subtitle: Reserve Police Battalion 101 and the Final Solution in Poland. The book’s message is contained in this juxtaposition: the mass executions of millions of Jews in Eastern Europe were in fact the work of ‘ordinary people’. Browning makes his case most convincingly. Most of his findings have been confirmed and some vehemently criticized by Daniel Jonah Goldhagen in a study of the same Battalion 101, Hitler’s Willing Executioners: Ordinary Germans and the Holocaust.

Both authors agree that the recruits for Police Battalion 101 were quite representative of the German (male) population in its entirety. The men expected to be recruited for police duty and had no idea beforehand that they would be employed to round up Jewish men, women, and children, march them toward a killing site nearby, force them to undress, line them up on the edge of a trench that the male captives had been forced to dig, and mow them down with machine guns so that they would fall into the pit on top of the other bodies, dead or still alive. And yet, almost without exception, these ordinary German men complied and carried out their murderous duty, day after day, for months at a stretch.

Browning and Goldhagen mainly disagree whether the men of Battalion 101 were ‘ordinary ‘men’, as in Browning’s title, or ordinary ‘Germans’, as in Goldhagen’s subtitle.

Under police interrogation in the 1960s, long after the war, most men of Battalion 101 denied any particular animosity against Jews or a special commitment to Nazi ideals. They may well have wanted to conceal the motivations that they brought to their killing assignment. Browning, and even more so Goldhagen, have produced ample evidence of incidents of obscene and barbaric cruelty. Many men of Battalion 101 did not just follow the orders to kill by the thousands, according to schedule, but exceeded them on their own initiative. Even if later they denied strong anti-Semitic feelings, at the time these atrocities were committed with fanatic hatred and contempt of Jews. In this respect, the draftees of Battalion 101 may have not been entirely ‘ordinary men’.

In these respects, they certainly were not unique. The German nation did produce genocidal perpetrators en masse, but it was not the only nation to do so in the course of the twentieth century.
History, biography, and immediate context

‘Situation’ and ‘disposition’ are not opposites. Dispositions are shaped by situations over time, in social processes that is. Social situations, in turn, are the outcome of human interactions in the course of time, sometimes on a very large scale, prompted in part by their dispositions.

An authoritarian and a militaristic tradition, defeat in war, political violence and economic crisis, coupled with an endemic anti-Semitism that became state ideology, did affect the Germans of those days and may have rendered many among them more amenable to the massive killing of human beings whom they had been taught to consider ‘nonhuman.’ Yet, the difference with other nations is one of degree, and of statistical averages in a varied and changing population.

In retrospect, the controversy between Browning and Goldhagen boils down to a difference of opinion about the weight to be assigned to one of these historically shaped, cultural characteristics: German anti-Semitism.

Judicial evidence tends to reinforce the impression of depersonalization in the perpetrators. Their personalities pale in the process. In front of their judges, they minimize their initiatives, convictions, emotions, ambitions and desires. They come to look more and more like Hannah Arendt’s version of Eichmann and for the same reasons he chose to present himself in that manner. What is often lost in this trial documentation is the individual variety in dealing with the genocidal situation. There was indeed a continuum of cooperation with the imposed project of extermination. Some men were ‘willing executioners’, volunteering for the Jew hunt, eager to join the roundups and the shootings and given to haphazard meanness (and sometimes kindness too, since unpredictable favors on a whim would even better display their supreme power over their victims). Other men limited their participation to the tasks that were explicitly demanded from them, without much enthusiasm, but without objection either. And, finally, there were men who tried to exploit what little room for maneuver they perceived in order to stay away from the roundups, forced marches and firing squads.

It is in these variations of comportment that differences in individual personalities and dispositions are revealed. But even in the rare cases that individual behavior within the genocidal context has been documented, it is hard to infer from this evidence what the individual’s dispositions were, let alone to trace these personality characteristics back to prior life experiences, in early childhood or adolescence. So far, this sort of research has not even been tried, not in the case of the perpetrators of the Holocaust, nor of later instances of genocide.15

A remarkable consensus across the fields of history, political science, sociology and social psychology holds that genocidal perpetrators as a group are
not distinct in disposition from the population at large. It is the immediate situation that turns people of diverse background and inclination into mass killers.

This apparently factual conclusion has had an enormous impact on moral thinking about ‘contemporary men and modern society’. The vulgarization of the Arendt-Milgram-Browning tradition has led to the grand cliché of our times: potentially, all people are genocidal perpetrators, we just never were in a situation where that would show.

First of all, the fateful phrase: ‘If you and I had been in the same circumstances...’ is a counterfactual and can not be shown to be either true or false, since you and I were not in the same circumstances and they are extremely unlikely to recur. It is also counterintuitive, since people find it very hard to imagine themselves as mass executioners. Yet, the idea that in a certain social context, in a given situation, people will commit acts that they would not dream of otherwise, is quite plausible. Some people are more likely to do so than others, some will resist, even at considerable risk to themselves. Others may be willing and even eager to do what they are told to. That does not only depend on the situation of the moment, but also on their prior experience and personal history, in one word, a term that with so many words has been declared out of bounds: on their personal disposition. And in other words: on their particular personality.

‘Under the same conditions, you or I might have done the same thing...’ I very much doubt if I, or most of my readers for that matter, upon being brought into the killing site would have started clubbing, knifing, shooting, gassing people to death by the thousands, for weeks and months at a stretch. It would have taken more than that, it would require deadly threats and ineluctable force to turn us into executioners.

But to make me or you into mass killers without extreme duress would require more preparation. If, for example, we had been brought up by authoritarian and unfeeling parents, as church-going anti-Semitic German Lutherans or Catholics, had survived the trenches and the mustard gas of WWI, had lived through the hyperinflation and the political chaos of the Weimar Republic, if we had lost our jobs or our business as a result of the Great Crisis, had had to adapt to the Nazi tyranny under a constant bombardment of the vilest racist propaganda, if we found ourselves in the utterly destructive battles at the Eastern Front, if this had been the course of our lives, then, yes, maybe then, some of us might have become genocidal killers. But then, you and I, we would have been someone else.
Notes


2 Charny agrees that ‘the potential for being genociders and accomplices is in all of us’, but he argues that we should revise our concept of normalcy and decide that ‘wanton destruction of life is an act of madness’. He proposes to include disorders of pseudocompetence, invulnerability and doing harm to other people and the extent to which people abandon their individual identity and self to any collective process (Israel W. Charny, ‘Genocide and Mass Destruction: A Missing Dimension in Psychopathology’, in Israel W. Charny (ed.), *Towards the Understanding and Prevention of Genocide: Proceedings of the International Conference on the Holocaust and Genocide* [Boulder and London: Westview Press, 1984], 154-174, 155).


4 Cf. Christopher Browning, ‘Introduction’ in L.S. Newman and R. Erber (eds.), *Understanding Genocide: The Social Psychology of the Holocaust* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 4: ‘Most historians would now agree, I think, that Arendt had uncritically accepted Eichmann’s misrepresentation of himself, and that he was in fact a Nazi activist, motivated by both his ideological identification with the regime and his unquenchable ambition’. Yet, Browning continues, ‘Arendt had arrived at a powerful insight that the ability of a state to organize mass murder owes much to the accommodation and compliance of petty and dutiful civil servants, even if she misunderstood her star example’.

5 Mulisch concludes at the end of his account of the Eichmann trial: ‘He is the machine that is suitable for everything. He is the right man in every place. He is the ideal of psychotechnics. He walks the earth by the millions’ (Harry Mulisch, *Criminal Case 40/61, the Trial of Adolf Eichmann: An Eyewitness Account* [Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2005]). Other writers who attended the trial, with fewer axes to grind and pet theories to launch, avoided these errors, e.g., the always perceptive Abel Herzberg, *Eichmann in Jeruzalem* (The Hague: Bert Bakker/Daamen, 1962), who mentions numerous instances of initiatives by Eichmann, above and beyond the call of duty.


In fact, in German war crime trials, until late in the 1960s, in order to get the accused convicted, the prosecutor had to prove that a particular defendant committed criminal acts above and beyond what he was ordered to do. In later jurisprudence, the plea of obedience to superior orders was no longer accepted and the defendants could be sentenced for committing criminal acts even if they had been ordered to do so. Moreover, if the evidence left room for doubt, initially the German courts decided in favor of the defendant (*in dubio pro reo*). Cf. Dick de Mildt, *In the Name of the People: Perpetrators of Genocide in the Reflection of Their Postwar Prosecution in West Germany: The 'Euthanasia' and 'Aktion Reinhardt' Trial Cases* (The Hague, London, Boston: Martinus Nijhoff, 1996), 302-325.


*Ibid.*, 57 Compare: ‘...Ich war kein normaler Befehlsempfänger, dann wäre ich ein Trottel gewesen, sondern ich habe mitgedacht, ich war ein Idealist gewesen.’ (cf. Wikipedia.de, lemma ‘Eichmann’): ‘I was not an ordinary follower of orders, that would have made me a sucker, but I thought along, I was an idealist’ [trans. AdS].

‘However, in Eichmann’s case her analysis seems strangely out of touch with the reality of his historical record’ (Deborah E. Lipstadt, *The Eichmann Trial* [New York: Nextbook/Shocken, 2011], 169).


The set phrase was: ‘Although the shocks may be painful, there is no permanent tissue damage. So please go on.’ The film that was made of the experiments under Milgram’s own supervision in 1965 is instructive in every respect.

Milgram mentions the outcome of test research by his assistant, A.C. Elms, who found ‘that the subjects who had obeyed showed a greater degree of authoritarianism (a higher F score) than those who refused to obey’, Stanley Milgram, *Obedience to Authority* (New York: Harper and Collins, 2004 [orig. 1974]), 204. The relationship, however, was not very strong, and Milgram adds (in 1974): ‘It is hard to relate performance to personality because we really do not know very much about how to measure personality’ (*ibid.*, 205).

Stanley Milgram, and no doubt others who replicated his experiments, regularly came across subjects who ‘went all the way’ without showing reluctance or even uneasiness. Afterwards one of them explained that ‘I had to follow orders. That’s how I figured it’. This compliant participant argued that the victim brought punishment upon himself for being ‘a more or less stubborn person’. And, yes he could have stopped shocking the learner, if only the experimenter would have told him to (Milgram, *Obedience to Authority*, 46-47).
What the experimenters had stumbled upon was the Rosetta Stone of genocide studies: an innocent genocidaire. Someone with the mind of a mass murderer but without any guilt, who could have answered any question without shame of the past or fear for punishment. However, after the presentation of a series of most enlightening thumbnail case descriptions, Milgram does not pursue this path further.