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# EVIL IN BOSNIA – IN THE EYES OF ARNE JOHAN VETLESEN

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## Introduction

Evil does not lie in one place and is not related to one actor, but it is fiercely realized at a particular place and by particular actors toward particular people. It is hard to find someone who will deny the existence of evil in the world, but there are many who want to deny that there are evil people.

Evil is, therefore, a term by which we describe not the agents as such, but specific actions owing to the suffering they cause. The term was originally applied to heterogeneous phenomena—for example, disease, natural disasters, death, war, genocide. All these evils are recognized as evil. In order to face the existence of evil, and in order to find the hope that the present situation will change for the better, we are obliged to engage with the various understandings of evil that are found in religions and political ideologies. However, looking at the history of the last century, we will see that it is impossible to find any real understanding of the countless tragedies. What fascinates people more than evil itself is its misunderstanding, the ways in which it is dressed up as something else, indeed as its opposite, good. At the same time, evil is both incomprehensibly attractive and disgusting, and the world of evil feels beyond the reach of thought.

Attempts to get at the phenomenon of evil very often feels like shooting blanks or shooting into a void. Philosophy reflects thought or experience that already exists. Philosophy takes its content and legitimacy from what is already understood.This is methodologically decisive, since philosophical reflections must maintain contact with the pre-philosophical if it is to maintain legitimacy. Evil, however, is something abstract and inaccessible on the one hand yet specific on the other. In four days of July 1995, over 8,000 people were killed (approximately 2,000 per day in the UN-declared“safe zone” Srebrenica)—this is as specific as it gets, I think.

In his comprehensive work on evil doing, Arne Johan Vetlesen explores a peculiar form of shame that is experienced by the victim. In this context, he focuses on the victims of genocide in Bosnia, particularly individuals who were subject to mass rape. Vetlesen argues that it is not the aggressors (perpetrators) who feel shame but their victims:

> In this case, being ashamed of, means being humiliated, embarrassed,

> stamped by others, as well as being ashamed in your own eyes. When the victim, and not the perpetrator, is ashamed, it seems that guilt and shame have changed places. The question then arises: Did something happen to the victim to the effect that he or she who first assumed the responsibility, and later came to blame him- or herself? If so, is this right or is it wrong? This is largely determined by the situation in society, in social circumstances, in the sense that it is society that decides to give value to victims in their role as victims. Or—alternatively—victims are deemed as worthless because they are victims, and victims are seen as losers, individuals who had it coming, in a society giving pride of place to those who are able to fight, to survive, to come out on top, to be winners (All translations of Vetlesen 2003 are the author's).

Vetlesen thinks that we live in a society reluctant to talk about evil, one symbolically and morally ill-equipped to do so in a meaningful way. We, therefore, find it difficult to recognize cases of evil as such, and to fight it. We either turn away from evil, or we call it something different, only not evil. A significant case in point, according to Vetlesen, is what took place—and was allowed by the outside world to take place—in Bosnia in the 1990s. "Murder, rape, torture, expulsions are not called evil! 'What were we doing when the first genocide on the European soil was executed since 1945?" Such questions were not raised by politicians or diplomatic representatives. Instead, they spoke year in, year out in Geneva about three "warring sides," with three "equal parts" in a so-called "civil war." But in fact, for planned, organized, ordered and executed crimes against humanity and international law, including crimes of genocide, everything is documented, first in mass media, and subsequently in the prosecutor's offices and courts" (Vetlesen 2003: 292).

**What is evil?**

Vetlesen defines evil "as the willful infliction of pain on others, severely so and against the victim's will"; the aim is to cause serious harm to his or her agency, meaning to reduce the victim's capacity to be a full-blown agent in the world (Vetlesen 2003: 294.) Because of this, he perceives evil as connected with sadism, though adding that not all forms of evil can be understood as an expression of sadism. Sadism, however, is crucial in showing what evil is.

Vetlesen proceeds by asking, "Is evil always an existential and desired project? What about the evil committed by a group, where the actions communicate between fellow perpetrators, as it were, rather than addressing the chosen victims?" (Vetlesen 2003: 295). The conclusion that Vetlesen arrives at is thatevildoing—contrary to a widespread view—does not presuppose that the perpetrator denies the victim a common humanity with him. The victim has to be a fellow human being in order to qualify as *suitable* as the chosen object for the perpetrator's need to control what appears to be intolerable; to transport onto the other what he cannot endure in himself, making the other into a being haunted by pain and suffering, thereby unburdening himself, hoping to evade their reality in his own case, in his own body and mind. Contrary to the theories that insist that for evildoing to occur, a distance must be created so as to help the perpetrator to dehumanize his victim, to not-relate

to the other, as it were, Vetlesen concentrates on the evil doing that takes place in proximity—deliberately seeking it out, at that, instead of shunning proximity by so many means, as dominant sociological explanations have it (e.g., Bauman 1989).

**Evil in Bosnia**

Of what kind was the evil doing carried out in Bosnia? Vetlesen gives the following account:

> In Bosnia, perpetrators would often know their victim as a school mate, a colleague from work, a neighbor, or even a member of the family, inter-ethnic marriages being common in Yugoslavia. So there was a dimension of emotional proximity based on personal acquaintance. Moreover, the killing, the rapes and the torture were carried out in physical proximity, face to face. The hands-on, person-to-person violence was eminently visible, in contrast to the bureaucratic fog that accompanied the Nazi execution of the "final solution." The Nazis concocted a bureaucratic language fraught with jargon like "special measures,""labor camps," etc. in order to conceal the truth from the victims and from others, but not from members of their units who used mainly oral orders and words that fit reality.In addition, during the execution of the Holocaust, it was important to ensure that the site of the mass murder be geographically far away from home and from the domestic population, i.e., in Poland instead of Germany.

Vetlesen continues:

> Bosnia is a different story: the atrocities occur within a context of proximity. In a face-to-face setting we normally expect the perpetrator's being able to experience first-hand – see, hear, touch; interact with – the victim, *his* individual victim, to arouse empathy. We expect, that is, that the dehumanizing impact of ideological stereotypes such as "the Jew" or "the Muslim"are undermined when the victim is allowed to appear as an individual not a category, as a concrete fellow human being not an anonymous member of a collectivity. This being so, we expect that empathy allies with morality, that itssides with morality in a positive sense, prompting feelings of sympathy and pity with the victim before one, evoking guilt and shame in the perpetrator and thereby making it difficult to inflict suffering and pain. In proximity-driven "ethnic cleansing," however, empathy and the described charged nature of the person-to-person, face-to-faceencounter are inverted, as it were, transformed into their opposites, siding with immorality and intensifying the evildoing that takes place (Vetlesen 2003: 314).

The conclusion Vetlesen draws from his analysis is that, when the violence is carried out in proximity, the prospect for forgiveness and reconciliation in the future is

severely undermined. Precisely because the perpetrator and his victim were eye to eye when the suffering was inflicted, they will not be able to look into each other's eyes afterward, or ever again. They have both witnessed close-up something that was not supposed to happen, something irreparable. It is this type of peculiar reciprocity—sharedness—vis-à-vis what came to pass between them that must be regarded as a crucial goal in the pursuit of evil in a psychological sense, the ultimate goal being to prevent any possibility of genuine co-existence between them in the future, both between the two individuals involved and between the groups (collectives) they belong to.

The closer the pre-violence relationship between the individuals in terms of friendship, neighborhood, family relations and so on, the greater will be the psychological and emotional impact on the relationship caused by the violence: it will never be the same. For these reasons, as a result of the dynamics of proximity being brought about and exploited for the purposes of evildoing, genocide in the form of "ethnic cleansing" is a particularly subtle and cruel form of evil (Vetlesen 2003: 314).

In Bosnia, the perpetrators made no effort to hide what was going on, quite the opposite. Vetlesen quotes Danish political scientist Carsten Bagge Laustsen, who gives the following description:

> Rape for a Muslim Bosnian woman means she is unclean. Partly because she is embarrassed, and partly because she is forced to give birth to a Serb. Many women were held in concentration camps where they were systematically raped until they got pregnant. Rape had a pregnancy for the goal. The raped women were released when they were heavily pregnant, when abortion was no longer possible. The child will be worn, and the Serb will be born. (Vetlesen, 2003: 15).

The "for all to see" as opposed to hidden modus operandi of the atrocities sought to draw in the men as well as the women directly targeted. Whenever possible, as part of the strategy, the men were forced to attend the rape of his wife, daughter, mother, sister, granddaughter alongside the rest of his family, the more relatives present, the better. Why? In addition to the reasons given above, a man is embarrassed because he is not able, as the head of his family, to prevent the rapes and so protect female family members. His position asa man (male) is defined in religious and cultural terms, characterized precisely by his ability to protect women, children, and the elderly. A strong sense of shame and impotence results from the destruction of the family structure, indeed the destruction of the soil from which the Bosnian identity is born and sustained, for both sexes. This example is one of many to show that for the extreme Serbs and for their warfare in Bosnia, it was not a matter of fighting a classical war, but of destroying longstanding identities (especially the one traditionally upheld among Bosnian Muslims, Bosniaks) and creating a new identity in their stead; erasing the past so as to bring about, per force as well as symbolically and psychologically, a wholly novel present and future, one completely oblivious to what went before it, to the point of denying it outright.

> It was an attempt to destroy family ties in a particularly lingering, harmful way: by forcing family members to kill each other, organizing rape in the presence of family members, using psychic terror and concentration camps where personal values and personal integrity were destroyed, were the humiliation by their tormentors was transferred onto the victims themselves so as to make them complicit in their own humiliation, by way of so many enforced acts of self-denigration. These were the main aspects of Serbian warfare (Vetlesen 2003: 305–306).

In the planning of genocide against Bosniaks in Bosnia, the so-called RAM plan plays a prominent role, drawn up in Belgrade in 1991 by a group of senior officers, including experts ofpsychological warfare. The plan and the experts involved in its developmentdemonstrate how knowledge about what mechanisms create hostile images, if systematically applied, isgood preparation for carrying out agenocide. It identified the target group's weaknesses, recommending systematic attacks on "women and adolescents" in the form of organized mass rape, which went on for months. Military and academic expertise were at the disposal of the Milosevic regime, using their knowledge of Islam – the religion and culture of the targeted Bosniaks – in order to most effectively destroy their way of life forever." (see Allen 1996; Sells 1996; Vranic 1996).

In Vetlesen's analysis, shame is at the center. Who causes shame? And who is ashamed? To answer the questions, Vetlesen builds on the understanding of guilt and shame propounded by the English sociologist Stephen Pattison:

> A guilty person is a person responsible for crimes and violations for which he or she may be forgiven after the sequence of admission, conviction, and punishment (sentencing) is completed. With time, then, the guilty person will be able to reenter society as someone with dignity and so entitled to the respect of others. He is in that sense free of his troubled past. By contrast, the person who is afflicted by shame and therefore disgraced stands in a polluted shadow exposed to stigma and without the possibility of recovery in the sense of retaining social recognition. Shame and stigma are not attributed on the basis of clear rules, ethical principles, or mechanisms of punishment and reconciliation. Shame sticks to the core of the person, not only to some particular action of his, marking his very identity as harmed and worthless. Such a person, contaminated with shame, with what is impure and won't go away, risks to spend the rest of his life alone, worthless both to himself and to others. People and groups exposed to shame are dirty in the sense of permanently toxic, they are "humanity out of place" in society (to allude to Mary Douglas). Governing the toxically dirty requires a strong hand, seeing to it that its possessors and bearers are ignored, removed, kept away. In a society more oriented toward shame than toward guilt, the importance of avoiding being the object of shame can be a question of life or death (Pattison quoted in Vetlesen 2003: 307).

Vetlesen asks himself:

> 'Who is the one who is afraid?' The answer is, 'It is the victims.' These were raped Muslim women who were raped especially because of their belonging to a particular religion, in this case Islam. These are their brothers, fathers, husbands, sons who failed to protect their values/honor, status and personal respect, and they were witnesses of those crimes. There is more violence still in concentration camps in full display in front of the audience gathered per force to see everything. Some testimonies are difficult to describe, such as a grandfather forced to rape his granddaughter and the son who had to bite off the testicles of his father, etc. (Vetlesen 2003: 307)

**Unbearable to be a victim, intolerable to think about the victim**

In Vetlesen's critical analysis of the international community and its relation to Srebrenica and events in Bosnia in general, it is not just a question of who was attacked. The question is also, what was the goal of the participants in the war. Vetlesen holds that "the goal of the Serbs was an absolute negation of the idea of the intrinsic value of human life. On this basis, the Serbs started the destruction of a group of civilians:Muslim believers, Muslims who werereligiously indifferent, and Muslim atheists, artificially treating them as ahomogeneous group: Muslims in Bosnia and Herzegovina. This was their basic war target. Genocide was from early on an integral part of the Serbian strategy" (Vetlesen 1997: 73, author's translation). Accordingly: "What happened in Bosnia from 1991 to 1995 was not a classical war. It was genocide. Planned ethnic, religious, and sexual genocide" (Vetlesen 1997: 75, author's translation).

Vetlesen thinks "that the leading Western countries (USA, Great Britain, Germany, France) largely and uncritically accepted the notion that the war in Bosnia was one with equally distributed guilt between the three 'affected parties.' To talk about the affected parties in a manner suggesting symmetry and balance is to conceal, if not outright deny, the fact that there was one main aggressor—ethnic-religious Serb nationalists led by Milosevic and Karadzic—and one major victim, civilian Bosnian Muslims" (Vetlesen 1997: 74, 97, author's translation).

If there is one thing the instances of genocide in history has taught us, Vetlesen maintains, it is that "evil has a certain goal: to destroy something that is inherently good and worthy of its own in order to protect something that is evil." Importantly, the architects of large-scale evildoing invariably insist that "the violence they launch not be considered as aggression but instead as justified self-defense. To take part in it means to fight and eliminate what is bad and destructive and so to be on the side of morality, defending what is good and worthy against those alleged to threaten it, be it the Jew or the Tutsi or the Muslim" (Vetlesen 1997: 84).

However, Vetlesen almost stands alone in this interpretation of evil in Bosnia. In Europe, most political scientists as well as military officers and diplomats are skeptical

about drawing clear-cut moral conclusions that identify one “side” as the aggressor and the other as the victim (see Thune and Hansen 1998: 95) There is no unambiguous answer to the question of guilt and responsibility for a military officer like the Swedish general Bo Pällnes:“Choosing between the good and the bad in political reality is difficult. Political leaders and civilian populations have to be separated. We sometimes have to make a choice that contains evil” (quoted in Thune andHansen 1998: 98).

Linking the notion of guilt and responsibility to history distorts the (im)moral nature of the action and helps legitimize the Serbian nationalists’ justification for their aggression. Talking about “parties in conflict” is deeply problematic when the asymmetry in weaponry, logistics, and military resources (including trained men under arms) is of such magnitude as that between the Bosnian Serbs (who disposed of the resources wielded by the JNA, the Yugoslavian National Army built by Tito since World War II) on the one hand, and the largely unarmed, untrained, and unorganized Bosniaks on the other. This was a matter of fact and a situation that was anything but “balanced” when the conflict-cum-genocide started in April 1992.

**Conclusion**

Shortly after World War II, Europe, even America, enjoyed a positive relationship with Bosnia. And then, on the eve of the twenty-first century, on European soil, genocide. Srebrenica, Prijedor, Foča, Bratunac, Vlasenica, Zvornik, Sanski Most, Ključ, Sarajevo, as well as all occupied towns and cities during the siege of the Republic of Bosnia and Herzegovina experienced what was pledged after World War II and the Holocaust never to happen again.

The more sociology became the haven of scientific concepts and rules, the more marginalized morality became in the social universe. In principle, this allowed immorality in general, outright evil doing in particular to be explained in a non-normative, quasi-neutral scientific way. The sociological approach to moral studies entails a reduction strategy whereby moral phenomena in their totality—the choice between rightand wrong—are sought explained by showing how individual agents adoptwhat psychologist Stanley Milgram called “the agentic state.”The result is what sociologist Zygmunt Bauman (in his modern classic *Modernity and the Holocaust*) described as “adiaphorization,” a process where distantiation ensures that the “other” affected by any one participant’s actions within the larger organizational complex becomes an “abstract,” anonymous, faceless other. Thus, actions lose their moral import and are instead described in purely technical terms related to professional competency, goal-efficiency, finding the optimal means to goals, etc. The goal itself is thus deprived of morality and thoroughly technified, beyond the reach and relevance of right and wrong. In this way, the treatment of the human beings at the receiving end of the whole operation loses moral significance.

Beyond his criticism of the long-dominant approach taken by Milgram and Bauman, Vetlesen provides an alternative thatgives hope: a focus on the victims. Vetlesen—surprisingly—only started coming to Bosnia in 2015, to see for himself and visit the sites of the atrocities and meet with survivors and witnesses. From a considerable distance, his understanding of what happened in Bosnia between 1992 to

1995 was remarkable; he saw that what took place so far away from Norway was indeed genocide, defying his colleagues and the prevailing public opinion at the time.

Vetlesen also publicly criticized the Norwegian politician and diplomat Thorvald Stoltenberg, who played a key role as the UN envoy in negotiations with Milosevic, Karadzic, and Mladic. Vetlesen articulated his criticisms in a humanly dignifying way. Thus, my second goal when writing this chapter (the first being to provide insight), is to show my gratitude to Vetlesen for infusing human dignity into the study of the Bosniak genocide.

In his work on genocide, Vetlesen focuses on the victim. He is particularly preoccupied with the perpetrator's intent to impose guilt on those targeted as victims and to produce shame (ever-lasting shame) among those who survived the rape, the torture, and the killings. When one reads Vetlesen's scientific explanation of such an intent, one can only be overwhelmed by the impression that it is part of a wider political project of his that is still going on. Evil doing on a large scale such as genocide is not destined to happen again in the same form and against the same group and by the same perpetrators. But it can happen if conditions for the prevention of genocide are not created. I see Vetlesen's work as a warning, a lingering wake-up call to ensure that prevention efforts must be continuous and ongoing.

In conclusion, some words about Vetlesen's analysis of forgiveness, a topic central to the prospects for reconciliation in a country like Bosnia, but also in Rwanda and South Africa, to mention a few examples.

Vetlesen is categorical when he claims that the perpetrators cannot be forgiven unless they admit everything they did and shows sincere regret for the pain they have caused. But even then, even in the case of remorse, the perpetrator is not entitled to forgiveness; to be forgiven can never be a right, neither legally nor morally. The victim is never obligated to forgive, not even as a "response" to the perpetrator's admission of guilt and display of regret. No one can be forced to forgive. Whether to forgive or not must remain up to the victim, based on his or her free choice. And when forgiveness is given, it is something supererogatory (beyond duty), a pure gift, something the perpetrator—as well as the wider community—may hope for but can never demand.

During his annual visits to Bosnia and Herzegovina,Vetlesen has been shocked to learn that almost nothing of what happened during 1992–1995 is taught in schools; it is not part of the curriculum:"This bodes ill for the future, because history shows us that denial and oblivion do not have the last word. In a culture where denial is commonplace, society leads to false morality and one moment will come out, and reactions can be very violent and can be dangerous to the future of that nation. One survivor of Auschwitz, who was asked about forgiveness, replied in the following way: When a man forgives, he may think of his forgiveness as one form of betrayal against those who were tortured and exterminated and by whom he ceased his loyalty." (Engelking 2001: 137).

Margaret Walker writes about the very essence of forgiveness being "that one cannot be asked to collect debt from another person, and that whoever is guilty must pay for

himself" (Walker 2006: 182). When faced with grave injustice, justice requires that the debt generated by the act that led to the destruction of life not be forgiven. People who are asked to forgive, must overcome their human tendency for pride, for putting the agent above the crime, point out their and realize that forgiveness, like all other social activities, is limited by our earthly laws: the boundary between life and death, between what has been done and what can never be erased.

The conclusion Vetlesen arrives at, then, is not that forgiveness should be considered morally wrong. "Wrong," he says, "is too strong a word. Rather, we may speak about cases where forgiveness is inappropriate. If the perpetrator's actions were absolutely devastating for the victims—or for those who must always live with the consequences—then those actions are simply not suitable for forgiveness, it goes beyond their reach." (Vetlesen, 214: 197). In such cases, morally speaking the gravest of them all, Vetlesen asserts that to withhold or deny forgiveness may be regarded as staying loyal to those who deserve it the most: the victims.

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