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INTRODUCTION

When a bomb exploded in Oslo’s government district on the afternoon of 22 July 2011, followed by mass killings on Utøya, Norway found itself at the centre of an act of evil that no one in the country could have imagined. And carried out by one of us, a fellow Norwegian.

Although as a philosopher I have spent my whole professional career working on the phenomenon of evil, I cannot say that I was better prepared than anyone else for something like this would happen. It is typical that the first experts to comment immediately after the explosion at the high-rise building in the government district pointed to Islamist terrorists as the most likely culprits. That the culprit would turn out to be a young Norwegian man, brought up in Oslo’s west side, was as much of a shock for terrorism researchers as it was for the Norwegian Police Security Service and the political authorities.

For me, however, it was not the political ideological specifics of the terrorist’s stated positionas a counter-jihadist as opposed to a jihadist that was most unexpected and academically challenging. It was rather the fact that Anders Behring Breivik was alone in his actions. My work on the phenomenon of evil has almost exclusively concentrated on cases of groups of perpetrators, rather than individuals acting on their own. Given that it is often a group that carries out mass killings, and since systematic abuse of a certain group of victims often occurs on the basis of ideology, we have extensive knowledge of what characterises such an ideology and on the mechanisms of group mentalitythat play a part in individuals being able to bring themselves toinflict immense suffering on selected victims. In short, whether we are social scientists or philosophers, we know a lot about what I call *collective evil*.

In the case of Breivik’s terrorism acts, we are confronted with *individual evil*. The very fact that he was alone – completely alone – in deciding what he wanted to do, how to do it and against whom, means that the interpretive framework I have been accustomed to using falls short. Psychological assessments and psychiatric evaluations become far more important here than in cases analysing group behaviour. Specifically, does the fact that the perpetrator was alone in his crime indicate that he lived alone in his own world and did not realise the extent of what he had done? Do the striking nature his actions – that they deviate from the normal caseinthat his actions were instructed from a higher authority and consequently put the individual actorunder (greater or lesser) coercion– reveal that we are dealing with a deviant psychiatric mind, a case of pathology, of psychosis? Or can we imagine, no matter how much we may not like it andhow unseemlyit may be in light of a well-establishedtheoretical explanatory model, that a person of sound mind with an understanding of the consequences of his actions can decide to carry out such acts? If the answer is yes, what kind of light does this shed on our society, that it could produce that kind of mass murderer, that kind of desperation, that kind of hostile image that the perpetrator acted on and which, in terms of ideology, we know he is not alone in?

The first text in this book is entitled ‘Narratives of justice’, and is my attempt to provide an analysis of Breivik and the terrorist attack he carried out. Readers should know that thistext is an adapted and expanded version of a lecture I gave at the Norwegian Academy of Science and Letters in Oslo and at the University of Oxford in January 2012. I wrote the lecture between November and December 2011, at the same time as the first forensic psychiatry report, written by Torgeir Husby and Synne Sørheim, was released. It had been four months since the terror attack, and just overfour months untilthe case in Oslo District Court would begin and the second expert report would be made.

The reason that I state precisely when the text came about is to highlight that 22 July felt like it had not been digested or processed yet, that there was still something inexplicable about it. The fact that it was all still very recent was not the only issue. Public debate was still bearing traces of shock and experts from a range of disciplines fumbled for plausible answers or were contradicted as soon as they thought they had the answer. A few commemorative memory books(keywords: rose march and speeches) and the first accounts from survivors had come out, but the books that we today associate with attempts at a broader knowledge-based analysis of the questions ‘how?’ and ‘why?’ – namely Aage Storm Borchgrevink’s *A Norwegian Tragedy* (2012) and Åsne Seierstad’s *One of Us* (2013), the two of the most widely read – would not come out until much later. Consequently, I had to base my analysis largely on Breivik’s so-called ‘Manifesto’, on journalistic sources and on individual contributions from various academic sources.

Now, three years later, I am familiar with almost all of the books that have come out in Norway about 22 July, over forty in total, in different genres and varying highly in quality. And I am now faced with the question of whether the text I wrote in late 2011 should be revised to incorporate what I might find to be significant new pieces of information, approaches and interpretations in the new extensive literature. I have decided to leave it be,with the exception of a few small notes that have been specified in the text as it is presented here.It would be false to say that I have not learned anything new from reading what has been published since I made my analysis. Nonetheless, I have not seen any reason to change my overarching interpretation or replace my approach with another. My thesis and my conclusions remain the same.

Although what happened by the high-rise and on Utøya on 22 July is regarded as an act of individual evil, I use space in my essay on Breivik to show that he found motivation and justification in so-called ‘narratives of justice’that we recognise from historical cases of collective evil, wherein one group seeks to destroy another. Because although Breivik was alone in his actions, he viewed them as justified – politically necessary and morally right – in the same way that those who in a group committing mass murder or genocide view their actions as justified. In both cases, the killings are interpreted in the light of a broader narrativeon the antagonistic relationship that historically has developed between the two groups. The attacker has morality on his side in his wish to defend his own group (racial, national, ethnic, religious – enter as appropriate) against the danger of total annihilation which according tothe narrative is posed by the designated enemy group. It is about what has to be done, and someone has to do it,on behalf of the endangered group so that they do not disappear. It is essentially about survival in a situationwhere compromises are out of the question and the usual rules of politics – the rules of democracy and debate – must be put to one side. In this narrative, there is no time to lose and all means must therefore be allowed. At this point I wish to highlight the common features between the ideology that Breivik professes, which is a collective (shared) variable and not something he has come up with on his own (as we know, ‘Manifesto’ is largely a collage of quotations from a number of examples), and the structure found in other historical examples of narratives that legitimise violence. While the identity of the group or groups in question will vary from case to case, the structural elements are generally the same: the threat from ‘the impure others’, the imperative of a self-sacrificing defence of one’s group, for the purpose of survival.

Despite the similarity in the justification for the use of violence between Breivik’s ‘Manifesto’ and the genocidal ideologies of German Nazism or Serbian ethnonationalism, there are aspects ofBreivik’s personality and behavioural pattern towards the terrorist acts that point to something distinctive, evenaberrantor pathological. Many questions arise around this. In specific cases such as Breivik’s, how should we understand the relationship – the meeting points – between biography in terms of Breivik’s personal experiences and ideology in terms of an overarching macro-historical narrative on the group’s relation to others? Is it a question of a relationship that can be perceived as intimate, as mutually supplementary and meaningful?

Rather than examining the Breivik case along the well-trodden paths of forensic psychiatry, I employ insights from Hegel’s philosophy of right to clarify whether on 22 July we were dealing with a sane or a deranged perpetrator? Without expanding on my conclusion too much here, it goes along the lines of dealing with a combination of alternatives that usually appear to be mutually exclusive, like an either-or situation. The question of what consequences Breivik’s subsequent and near total isolation had on his self-understanding, on his relations to others and to a shared social and moral reality, can be focused with the help ofHegel’s thoughts on the meeting points between evil and madness.

The second text ‘How do you live with psychologicalpain?’ also deals with the Breivik case. My approach here is psychoanalytically oriented and linked to insights from Svein Haugsgjerd and Melanie Klein. The question deals with how to tackle difficult and negative experiences, or rather more fundamentally our human exposure to pain in the broadest sense and in many forms; not only that we go through life exposed to falling ill or getting injured, but also that we get hurt through the violation and humiliation of our self-esteem and self-respect. I demonstrate that what appears to be an individual-centred issue – what do I do about *my* pain, with *my* frustrations and loss? – is framed by culturally and historically variable factors; the culture we belong to and the society we are socialised in give us different kinds of tools to deal with our exposure to pain. The culture of my contemporariesconveys directly and indirectly a particular view on basic human conditions such as dependence, vulnerability and death, and on how they should be dealt with, thought about and expressed, or on the other hand denied and struggled with, in so far as they are made to seem negative and undesirable and are therefore associated with shame, which I argue is the case in today’s society. The difference between a symbolic-abstract way and a physical-concrete way of processing the most difficult things in life is central. A lack of culturally-arranged opportunity to process symbolically can lead to attempts to get rid of what is painful by forcing it on others as the only way to dealing with difficult experiences and emotions. By transferring my pain to others so that it becomes their pain, I can be relieved; by making others feel bad or inferior, I change into someone who is free and in control. This is a move that today’s autonomy-ideal knows to value but, as we will see, at a high price. Finally, I employ this perspective to understand the significance of Breivik’s use of violent video games prior to committing acts of terrorism.

In the third text ‘Perpetrators – an outcome of repressing or releasing emotions?’, the theme is the role of emotions in the execution of acts of violence. The scientific literature here is divided along two conflicting lines. Broken down into question formula: Is it the case that the perpetrator, if we generalise, almost freely vents his otherwise internal aggression, hatred and anger when he rapes, maims and kills? So that violent attacks are fuelled by negative emotions run wild? Or should we understand it conversely, that the misguided application of pain on other human beings if pain is seen and heard is only possible when the perpetrator completely shuts off his emotional life and goes into a state of numbness? Who is more dangerous: the emotionally uncontrolled or the emotionally controlled perpetrator? Based on the knowledge we have about atrocities throughout history such as the so-called ‘rape’ of Nanjing in 1937, the My Lai massacre in 1968 and various genocides of our time, these two alternatives are discussed against each other. In the analysis of the role of emotions, I attach great importance to the fact that nearly all perpetratorsin these events are men. In the second part of the text I discuss the very different answers that philosophers Thomas Hobbes and Emmanuel Levinas give to the question of how violence is humanly possible, particularly in relation to the significance of whether the victim appears to be weak or strong, defenceless or formidable.

The fourth text ‘Perpetrators, self-understanding and evil’ is a critical study of the contribution from German social psychologist Harald Welzer to more recent research on perpetrators who have taken part in mass murder. Taking the behaviour of German soldiers before, during and after immense abuse of civilians (especially Jews) as a primary example, Welzer has over the course of a few years and on account of a few very important books reached worldwide recognition and been translated into a number of languages, among them Norwegian. With Welzer, we can safely say we have returned to a discussion about collective evil carried out by the group; a discussion in which Breivik constitutes a striking deviation. Welzer takes the explanatory model that first became popular through Stanley Milgram (who experimented with it at Yale in the early 1960s) and which was later extended by Philip Zimbardo (‘The Stanford Prison Experiment’ in 1971) one step further. Welzer makes the individual perpetrator’s preoccupation with continued group belonging the key to explaining ‘how normal human beings can do terrible things, as it is referred to in this literature. This gives me the opportunity to deepen my previous implied critique of this kind of ‘totalised’ group perspective. The keywords used in my specific critique are the three factors of ideology, autonomy and sadism, which I argue Welzer misunderstands in part and partly explains away the significance of. In my opinion, Welzer risks providing an explanation of how perpetrators are able to do what they do that has been taken over by a perpetrator perspective, with a focus on the perpetrator’s self-understanding. The risk of committing such as a takeover in perspective in academic works is not only found in Welzer’s writing but in much of social science research on the phenomenon of evil. It also raises crucial questions about the role of researchers in a broad moral sense, linked to the researcher’s far greater fascination with the perpetrator’s experiences and interpretations over the victim’s.

The fifth text ‘Is it right to hold resentment?’ directs the perspective away from the analyses of perpetrators and their standpoints, and instead asks how those who are victims of direct abuse, such astorture, should bring themselvesto be part of reconciliation, so that society can move forward and leave the pain in the past. One of the most well-known – though they are few – defenders of why it might be right to *continue* to hold resentment against perpetrators, and thus refuse to play a part in reaching reconciliation, is Jean Amery. Amery, an Austrian Jew, was tortured while in prison during the Second World War, and later wrote a book in which he insists on his – the victim’s – right to hold onto an anger and resentment towards the perpetrators, despite the fact the crimes took place long ago, that they are fading in the collective memory and that the wider society strives for a reconciliation in which all parties are expected to contribute so that the future can be more important than the past, harmony more important than confrontation, magnanimity more important than resentment. I discuss Amery’s uncompromising defence of the victim’s right to anger and resentment in comparison with another Holocaust survivor, the Italian Jew Primo Levi, and I side with Amery in the discussion between them.

The sixth and final text follows on from the previous text and asks ‘Can it be morally wrong to forgive?’. Similarly, the primary issue here is not how a perpetrator views himself or what he has inflicted on others, but instead how the victims, and in some cases those who survive them, should react to a perpetrator’s wish to be forgiven, if such a wish is expressed. The meaning of signs of guilt and remorse, which are other forms of self-understanding compared to the self-righteousness that most perpetrators have when they commitabuses, is of great importance. In this discussion, I use in part real-life individuals such as Traudl Junge, one of Hitler’s secretaries during the war, and in part fictional characters such as the dying German soldier ‘Karl’ who in Simon Wiesenthal’s famous book *The Sunflower* pleads with a surviving Jew – representing the victims –to be forgiven for his crimes while there is still time. The discussion on forgiveness gives me the opportunity to expand on what has been the perspective in the previous texts, in the form of an exchange between the points of view of the perpetrator, victim and third party, respectively. My point of view – with which I know many will disagree – is that society’s eagerness to reach reconciliation between perpetrators and victims (or their next of kin, surviving family members, descendants) so as to move on from the pain that has been inflicted, often leads to pressure to forgive which from a moral perspective is deeply problematic. I end by answering yes, albeit conditionally, to the question of whether it can be morally wrong to forgive.

As the reader may have noticed, the texts compiled in this book shift between examining the phenomenon of evil as perceived from the perpetrator side and from the victim side. As I see it, the shift between the different affected parties and their – often incompatible – interpretations of what has happened is essential in the philosophical analysis of evil. If we give philosophical precedence to one point of view, we risk losing a complete picture as well as the complexity of what evil, understood in terms of concrete actions, actually is.

However, my view is that it is not enough to alternate between the points of view of the person who has inflicted suffering and the person who has been inflicted. We must to beyond the points of view to those who are directly involved, of those in the roles of perpetrator and victim, in order to graspevil – or more to the point, in order to be able to intervene for the purpose of stopping it. The words of philosopher Edmund Burke have not lost their relevance: “All that is necessary for the triumph of evil is for good men to do nothing.”

In other words, unaffectedness and indifference among so-called third parties or ‘bystanders’ can be just as criticalfor whether evil actions occur as a perpetrator’s self-proclaimed right to commit them. Of course it will vary as to how much – or how little – these outsiders can do, depending on a number of factors such as power, resources, knowledge and will. The political and moral responsibility of third parties is a broad topic in itself, which I have dealt with in detail elsewhere (Vetlesen 2003, 2005). It also raises burning questions about impartiality and intervention, about the risks of relativizing and making morally ‘equal’ all parties, questions that are beyond the scope of the discussion here. In this book, the two latter texts – on the question of whether resentment can be justified and whether victims can be expected, rather than required, by wider society to forgive their perpetrators – highlightin particularthe issue of how the greater ‘we’, made up of neither perpetrators nor victims, should respond to the evil that has taken place. Because evil is not a phenomenon that is ‘owned’ by the two parties directly involved, in the sense that it is those two alone who have a part to play in processing the wrongs that have been committed. The evil that has taken place should also be understood as the evil that was not prevented or foreseen in time by the society that the direct parties, and especially future perpetrators, belong, and thus the society that will also have to carry with it the long-term effects of what happened. Although this point can be most clearly illustrated by looking at cases of collective evil as examples – the Holocaust, Bosnia and Rwanda are the three cases I have worked with, but the list is much longer and in no way exhaustive – it is not only in these instances, where there are many perpetrators, that the question of the community’s responsibility is relevant. The responsibility to see the signs that something is wrong, that some have fallen out of society, and that they – whoever they may be, whether a lone wolf or coming from tight sub-cultures – are at risk of turning against the community (or a selected group) in a violent way.

Which takes us back to beginning to 22 July. Is it meaningful to say that the society in which Anders Behring Breivik grew up but subsequently withdrew from could have done anything differently in order to prevent this young Norwegian man from Oslo’s affluent west-side becoming, as it turned out, a political terrorist with the desire to strike his own society – the social democratic, increasingly wealthier, neo-liberal, multi-ethnic Norway?

The question of responsibility to see the signs in time, to make contact with those at risk of falling outside the community, to safeguard and ‘contain’, as psychoanalysts put it, those who have what I previously referred to as psychological pain connected to violation, frustrations and loss, with experiences of failing, and with a growing tendency for aggressive turns towards, or revenge against, this society in the form of selected representatives of society, may seem academic because ‘society’ and ‘community’ seem like abstract sub-cultures, as concepts in a theory rather than lived reality for concrete people. But the move betweentheory to practice is simply not that far, but in fact close. The society I am talking about consists of us: those of us who are relatives, who go to the same school or have children there, who share a workplace or are neighbours. The roles and relations, good or bad, these constitute are not abstract but in fact very concrete; they frame our lives, they *are* our lives.

The question of whether we – made concrete in the roles I listed above – could have done anything different loses its academic airandgets itsting, its aversion, when the person whose place in community we are dealing is that of Anders Behring Breivik, and not a nameless mass rapist in Bosnia, a machete-wielding murderer in Rwanda or a prison guard in Auschwitz. The sting consists in, as Åsne Seierstad indicates in the title of her book, the fact that he was – is – one of us, a fellow Norwegian.

We, meaning those who make up the concrete ‘we’ around Breivik, did not intercepthim. Some tried, again and again, but they were dismissed. I am not saying that it would have been easy. And as is presented in this essay, I am not saying that anyone other than Breivik himself bears the main responsibility for what he did; although there were many people who contributed to him becoming the person he became and from whom he got the ideas he had, that he became someone capable of making himself, *wanting* to do what he did. But even now, when the damage is done and with all that evil and pain behind us, questions now pile up before us – the contemporaries of Breivikthat we are and continue to be. Should Breivik be forgiven? Can he be forgiven? Does anyone have the right, without talking about duty, to forgive him – and if so, who? Should he be interviewed? Should he be allowed to write feature articles in newspapers, publish a book? Should he one day be allowed out and become someone we see in the street, one of us, completely atoned? Can he move onfrom what he did? Can we? Should we?

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When a bomb exploded in Oslo’s government district on 22 July 2011, followed by mass killings on Utøya, Norway found itself at the centre of an act of evil that no one in the country could have imagined. Carried out by a fellow Norwegian.

Arne Johan Vetlesen has worked on the phenomenon of evil for several decades. In this book, he studies a number of historical examples of atrocities in order to answer difficult and important questions: What is the motivation behind acts of evil? Are perpetrators venting their inner aggressions when perpetrators rape, main or kill? Or is the opposite the case? That the emotional life must be shut off in order to carry out evil?

What about the victims of evil and their families? Should they be required to be part of reconciliation? Should we forgive cruel perpetrators rather than hold resentment against them? Is there such a thing as an unforgivable act?

The goal of this book is to make us better prepared to explain and counteract evil.

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