PART THREE

THE PERPETRATORS
Chapter Six

Human Nature and Social-Psychological Insights

1. Introduction

Confronted with so many atrocities in the history of mankind one might easily be inclined to say that man is intrinsically evil or that atrocities are bound to happen given the basic nature of mankind. Another possible reaction is to distance oneself from the perpetrators and point ones finger to them and say that they are sadists or mentally disturbed criminals. Immediately after the Second World War when the horrors of the Holocaust were fully revealed, scholars tried to prove the “Mad-Nazi” theory. In other words, they tried to prove that the Nazi perpetrators were different from us, ordinary people.\(^1\) It would be too disquieting, too disturbing, to do otherwise. To accept that the perpetrators were just ordinary people and that everyone could possibly commit such atrocities is a horrifying thought and something we prefer not to acknowledge. Within academic literature, however, it became an (almost) undisputed observation – after many years of research – that most perpetrators of international crimes are ordinary people operating in extra-ordinary circumstances.\(^2\) Even many survivors have noted this, although not with ease (Cf. Todorov 1999).\(^3\)

The focus of this chapter will be on social-psychology rather than on psychology or psychiatry. Social-psychology studies the interaction between the individual and his or her environment rather than possible individual defects. Human beings are strongly influenced by their environment (Cf. Aronson 2004). This is not to say that people are completely passive products of the environment but rather that they are shaped by interacting with their

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\(^1\) Kogon (1946) for example concluded that the SS were a bunch of sadists and criminals, Adorno et al. (1969) tried to show that the perpetrators had authoritarian personalities. See for an overview Waller 2007, 59 ff.

\(^2\) See a.o. Arendt 1964; Hilberg 1985; Browning 1992; Waller 2007 and Welzer 2007. There are a few exceptions such as Hitler’s willing executioners by Goldhagen (1996).

\(^3\) One of the most difficult things for the author Primo Levi, survivor of the Holocaust was to acknowledge that men created Auschwitz and that he too was a man. Primo Levi committed suicide in 1987.