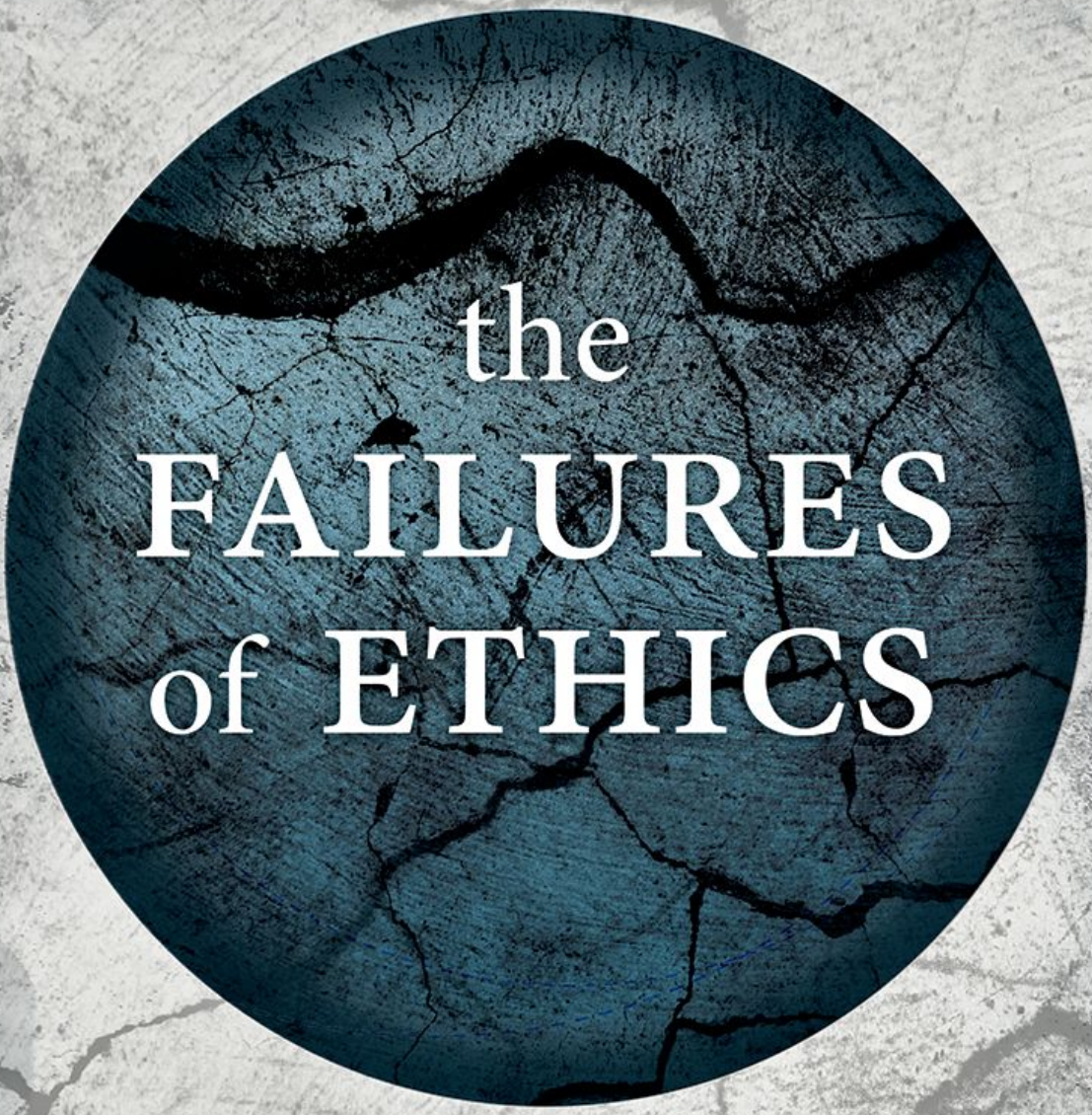
OXFORD



the FAILURES of ETHICS

Confronting the Holocaust, Genocide, & Other Mass Atrocities

JOHN K. ROTH

THE FAILURES OF ETHICS

The Failures of Ethics

Confronting the Holocaust, Genocide, and Other Mass Atrocities

JOHN K. ROTH

OXFORD
UNIVERSITY PRESS

OXFORD
UNIVERSITY PRESS

Great Clarendon Street, Oxford, OX2 6DP,
United Kingdom

Oxford University Press is a department of the University of Oxford.
It furthers the University's objective of excellence in research, scholarship,
and education by publishing worldwide. Oxford is a registered trade mark of
Oxford University Press in the UK and in certain other countries

© John K. Roth 2015

The moral rights of the author have been asserted

First Edition published in 2015

Impression: 1

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in
a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, without the
prior permission in writing of Oxford University Press, or as expressly permitted
by law, by licence or under terms agreed with the appropriate reprographics
rights organization. Enquiries concerning reproduction outside the scope of the
above should be sent to the Rights Department, Oxford University Press, at the
address above

You must not circulate this work in any other form
and you must impose this same condition on any acquirer

Published in the United States of America by Oxford University Press
198 Madison Avenue, New York, NY 10016, United States of America

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

Data available

Library of Congress Control Number: 2014956629

ISBN 978–0–19–872533–6

Printed and bound by
CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon, CR0 4YY

Links to third party websites are provided by Oxford in good faith and
for information only. Oxford disclaims any responsibility for the materials
contained in any third party website referenced in this work.

To

Lyn
Andy and Liz
Sarah, Erik, and Keeley

Love never ends.
—1 Corinthians 13:8

Contents

Prologue: The Thread 1

I. PROTESTING FAILURES

1. The Failures of Ethics 11
2. Rape as Torture and the Responsibility to Protect 29
3. Philosophy and the "Logic" of Racism 46
4. "You Shall Not Murder" 65
5. God's Failures 87

II. RESISTING FAILURES

6. The Holocaust's Impact on Christian-Jewish Relations 107
7. The Effects of Genocide 131
8. What Has Been Learned? 153
9. The Politics of Testimony 173
10. Death and Meaning 188

Epilogue: The Right Side of History? 205

Acknowledgments 211
Notes 215
Bibliography 251
Index 267

There you stand in the field
one with all the others
frail tottering headless at a loss

though still with work to be done
to clear away or turn under
mow rake and burn off this failure
if there is to be another crop

—Paul Hunter, “This Failure”

Prologue

The Thread

> People wonder about what you are pursuing.
>
> —William Stafford, "The Way It Is"

A few weeks before dying in 1993, the American poet William Stafford recollected a life's work in "The Way It Is," a poem that tracks "a thread you follow." People may "wonder about what you are pursuing," and so, Stafford said, explanation about the thread is important. It is also imperative, he insisted, not to abandon the thread, especially when catastrophes strike and lives are maimed and lost.[1]

Confronting the Holocaust, genocide, and other mass atrocities for more than forty years, I gradually discerned that I have been following a thread that weaves its way through failure. Inescapable and pervasive, failure riddles existence. Following that thread particularly compels me to contend with the failures of ethics. Exposing fault lines in nature and flaws in reality itself, those failures abound in the multiple shortfalls and shortcomings of thought, character, decision, and action that tempt us human beings to betray what is good, right, virtuous, and just, and incite us to inflict incalculable harm.[2] The chapters that follow do not rationalize, let alone justify, such failure. Instead, they support the resistance expressed in the book's governing epigraph: "There you stand in the field / one with all the others / frail tottering headless at a loss / though still with work to be done / to clear away or turn under / mow rake and burn off this failure / if there is to be another crop."[3]

The outlook in Paul Hunter's poem "This Failure" is amplified in "For the Miracle," whose tone voices other moods that thread through

these pages.[4] This time Hunter envisions not a barren field but a cluttered workshop. The partners of its grease-stained bench and well-worn but ever-ready vice jaws are old coffee cans filled with assorted nails and screws, mixed bolts and nuts, waiting to be of use. On the floor are broken, shopworn things, odd parts of this and that, stuff in the way that got consigned to this place by someone, sometime, for who knows what. Hunter sees these elements—maybe trash, good for nothing, to some—as basic elements waiting for the caring, imaginative, creative, and even joyful touch that could beneficially salvage and reconfigure them.

My reading of Hunter emphasizes that what is fragmented, what has been ripped apart, let go, broken, heaved, tossed aside, disrespected, and dumped may sometimes have new life and be of use again. But this repairer-of-brokenness should not be misunderstood. Not everything can be fixed and made whole again. Hunter evokes "the muck of history," the sadness, melancholy, and grief that swirl through it.[5] Nevertheless, he advocates doing the best one can to defy the odds that would wear the world out. More than that, he encourages what I call an in-spite-of joy, the deep-down sense of significance and meaning—happiness even—found when what we do protects, preserves, and enhances precious human life. Such action requires protest and resistance; it embraces the contradiction of holding together persistent melancholy and tenacious hope—the latter understood as what the Israeli writer David Grossman calls "the hope of nevertheless," which "does not disregard the many dangers and obstacles, but refuses to see only them and nothing else."[6] Asserted and reasserted in what follows, those qualities are necessities for combating the failures of ethics. They have authoritative standing because the British philosopher G. J. Warnock was right when he said: "That it is a bad thing to be tortured or starved, humiliated or hurt, is not an opinion; it is a fact. That it is better for people to be loved and attended to, rather than hated or neglected, is again a plain fact, not a matter of opinion."[7] No one, Warnock added, should be permitted to bully that truth away. In our lethal world, however, such bullying and worse abound.

Honest ethical efforts to protest and resist those conditions take place on the scarred planks of life's workbenches, and a premium belongs on candid appraisal of the human predicament. That appraisal, which cannot be sound unless it tackles the failures of ethics, must not be general or abstract but needs to bear down with

lucidity on historical particularities. Recognizing that life often puts people in dilemmas that involve competing goods, unnerving ambiguities, radical evils, and impossible but inescapable choices, this book explores how ethics in its brokenness may be mended and, at least to that extent, renewed and celebrated.

William Stafford's thread especially connects with mine because he explored decision points where often no option is very good, but where we have to take a stand. In "Traveling through the Dark," arguably his best-known poem, Stafford drew on an episode in his own experience to probe that dilemma and the responsibilities it confers. As he made his way home one night in Oregon, Stafford came across a deer struck to death by a preceding car on the narrow Wilson River road. Realizing the danger that other drivers might encounter, Stafford stopped and dragged the deer to the side, seeing as he did so that her fawn, still alive, was waiting to be born. Stafford hesitated, "thought hard" and then pushed the pregnant doe into the river.[8] Stafford does not say what went through his mind while he hesitated and "thought hard," but it seems unlikely that his thinking turned to salvation for the fawn. He was too realistic for that. More likely, Stafford felt things should not be as they were, but this time—too much of the time—that is how they unfolded. The decision that Stafford made, steeped in regret, sadness, and irony, continued to haunt him, for the poem—it came to him some time after the actual episode—was for the sake of life-saving.

Stafford said that the signals we give should be clear because "the darkness around us is deep."[9] In explorations that concentrate on the Holocaust, genocide, and crimes against humanity that so devastatingly deepen the darkness, the following argument threads its way through this book: Defined by the intention to encourage human action that fits sound understanding about what is *right* and *wrong*, *just* and *unjust*, *good* and *evil*, *virtuous* and *corrupt*, ethics arguably is civilization's keystone.[10] Absent the overriding of moral sensibilities, if not the collapse or collaboration of ethical traditions, the Holocaust, genocide, and other mass atrocities could not take place. Although these catastrophes do not pronounce the death of ethics, they show that ethics is vulnerable, subject to misuse and perversion, and that no simple reaffirmation of ethics, as if nothing disastrous had happened, will do.

Senses of moral and religious authority have been fragmented and weakened by the accumulated ruins of history and the depersonalized

advances of civilization that have taken us from a bloody twentieth century into an immensely problematic twenty-first. What, nevertheless, remain essential are spirited commitment and political will that embody the courage not to let go of the ethical but to persist for it *in spite of* humankind's self-inflicted destructiveness. Salvaging the fragmented condition of ethics requires bold summoning of the question, "Are we doing the best we can?" and gutsy backing for every resource that can be found, including: appeals to human rights, calls for renewed religious sensitivity, deepened attention to the dead and to death itself, and especially respect and honor for people who save lives and resist atrocity. *The Failures of Ethics* is grounded in questions raised to keep us awake, tempered by spirits of resistance against despair, and steeped in commitments to mend and repair so that what is broken can yet be of good use. Human existence may turn out to be little more than a fleeting episode in the cosmic scheme of things, but meaning, purpose, and joy remain to be found in combating the failures of ethics. Do we know that efforts in this direction will work? Of course not, but it is vital to try. The thread this book follows never lets go of that conviction.

My writing neared completion during the summer of 2014, a century after World War I began. During that time, my evening reading included John Keegan's history of the Great War. A colossal failure of ethics, that so-called war to end all wars left staggering military losses in its wake: 8.5 million dead, 21 million wounded, 7.7 million "missing"—many of them blown to bits beyond identification by unrelenting artillery fire—or in prisoner of war status. "All that was worst in the century which the First World War had opened," adds Keegan, "had its origins in the chaos it left behind."[11] Pondering that truth, I also recalled the disillusioning observation made by Sigmund Freud in 1915, while the Great War raged but had yet to worsen its dismal losses. "In reality," he said, "our fellow-citizens have not sunk so low as we feared, because they had never risen so high as we believed."[12]

I thought of Freud and studied Keegan by headlamp because near my home in the small town of Winthrop, Washington, lightning strikes on July 14, 2014, ignited wildfire that grew into the largest in the state's recorded history. Its perimeter 200 miles around, the firestorm scorched 390 square miles in the beautiful Methow Valley, left hundreds homeless, and charred 300 miles' worth of transmission lines. Thousands had no electricity for days. The fire was too close for

comfort, but my wife and I did not have to evacuate, and our home was not harmed. Many others were less fortunate.

The magnitude of what happened in the Methow Valley pales in comparison with what took place in Europe a century ago. But I mention the Carlton Complex Fire, as the gigantic convergence of multiple wildfires came to be called, because it confirmed that human beings can rise higher and be better than we are when the failures of ethics define us. The firestorm brought salvaging help from near and far. Local people shared food, lodging, money, and resources of all kinds with their neighbors. More than three thousand strong in all, firefighters from across the United States—Alaska to Maine and California—joined those from Washington to battle the flames. Lives and homes were saved because people acted ethically in the deepest and most caring ways. The successes as well as the failures of ethics are real. Those achievements can and must grow; they show that the failures of ethics can be curbed, even if not eliminated. Intensified in the fire's darkness, that conviction enlightens what follows.

Part I

Protesting Failures

If ethics is to be a safeguard against its own failures, then people who try to be ethical have to acknowledge the failures, own them when they should, and protest against them. We have to be accountable and take responsibility for the shortcomings that are ours. Among the most discouraging and disheartening failures of ethics are those that have conspired to unleash the Holocaust, genocide, and other mass atrocities. Those failures are widespread because they exist in indifference, silence, bystanding, and complicity as well as in willful perpetration of such carnage.

Acknowledging the failures of ethics as genuine failures and owning our fair share of those failures is a first and necessary step for protesting them, because that accountability reminds and alerts us to the fact that *what is* and *what ought to be* are not identical and very often are profoundly at odds. Protest against the failures of ethics emerges in varied ways, but importantly it grows from within the failures themselves. As the chapters in Part I indicate, the Holocaust, genocide, and other mass atrocities signify immense ethical failure of cosmic proportions, but study of those catastrophes also shows that the Holocaust did not have to happen, nor did any other genocide or mass atrocity crime. Racism, sexual violence, torture, and mass murder continue to ruin human flourishing, but they can spur—often through the voices of their targets, the living and the dead—renewed opposition to such crimes against humanity. Mass atrocities often implicate religion, and certainly they do little to bolster faith, but within the shards of that brokenness are fragments that can be salvaged in ways that provoke needed responses to the failures of ethics.

Lore about the legendary Jewish philosopher Sidney Morgenbesser, who taught for half a century at Columbia University before he died in 2004, includes his pithy distinction between Jewish ethics and the Christian ethics of the German philosopher Immanuel Kant. For Kant, said Morgenbesser, *ought* implies *can*, but in Jewish ethics, *can* implies *don't*.[1] Morgenbesser knew his distinction was oversimplified, but its crisp humor made a necessary point. Good responses to the failures of ethics require both of those outlooks. What ought to be can be enacted, at least to a greater extent that has often been the case. But Morgenbesser saw something equally telling when he underscored that very often human beings should not, must not, do what we can do. We can be indifferent, we can stand by or be complicit while human harm wreaks havoc. We can even perpetrate mass atrocities. But in such cases, *can* must imply *don't*. The chapters ahead argue that saying so and acting that way are key aspects of protesting the failures of ethics.

In 1966, I completed my doctoral dissertation in philosophy at Yale University. It focused on the American philosopher William James. His lifelong conviction held that "philosophical study means the habit of always seeing an alternative, of not taking the usual for granted, of making conventionalities fluid again, of imagining foreign states of mind."[1] *I share that outlook; it informs this book.*

My dissertation explored James's moral philosophy. Ever since, my work has explored ethical questions: How should I understand ideas such as right *and* wrong, justice *and* injustice, good *and* evil*? Why do we human beings—so often, so gravely—intend and unleash harm? What most needs to change, and how could such transformation take place, for individuals and institutions to waste life less and respect each other more? Are we doing the best we can?*

In the mid-1960s, although the concept of genocide *was relatively new to me, I knew that the Holocaust had happened and that the world had long been full of mass atrocities. My attention, however, did not yet center on those realities. Likewise, although I saw that a huge gap yawned between the way things are and the way they ought to be, my probing had not fully zeroed in on the failures of ethics.*

During the 2007–8 academic year, I was the Robert and Carolyn Frederick Distinguished Visiting Professor of Ethics at DePauw University in Greencastle, Indiana. During that year, DePauw opened The Prindle Institute for Ethics. For two years before its opening, I consulted with the University about the development of this institute, which is housed in a magnificent facility generously endowed by alumna Janet Prindle and dedicated to inquiry and discourse about critical issues of our time. To advance that mission, the Institute convened its first annual Undergraduate Ethics Symposium, which brings competitively chosen students to DePauw for intensive work on ethical problems. On April 3, 2008, I delivered the keynote address for that first symposium. The topic I chose and publicly tackled for the first time was "The Failures of Ethics." Now explicit after long weaving its way through my teaching and writing, that thread governs my awareness and takes me where it leads.

1

The Failures of Ethics

> Why does this history continue to haunt us . . . ?
>
> —Wendy Lower, *Hitler's Furies*

> No obstruction stopped the German machine of destruction. No moral problem proved insurmountable. . . . The old moral order did not break through anywhere along the line. This is a phenomenon of the greatest magnitude.
>
> —Raul Hilberg, *The Destruction of the European Jews*

During the summer of 1992, the historian Wendy Lower traveled to Ukraine to do archival research. Some of the documents she studied contained "the names of young German women who were active in the region as Hitler's empire-builders."[2] That discovery put Lower on the twenty-year path that led to her deservedly praised *Hitler's Furies: German Women in the Nazi Killing Fields*, which appeared in 2013. During that same summer of 1992, I tried to find a publisher for a book that I was completing with Carol Rittner. Failures seemed to prevail as rejections accumulated—not because of the book's quality, the various editors kept saying, but because they doubted there would be a market for its topic: "women and the Holocaust." Rittner and I eventually found a publisher, and the book helped to break taboos about the subject.[3]

Decades later, it is hard to imagine the indifferent and at times hostile responses that once were commonplace about gender-focused research on the Holocaust. Lower and *Hitler's Furies* ensure that confrontations with the Holocaust, genocide, and other mass atrocities *must* have a focus of that kind. That focus, however, raises difficulties, as Lower acknowledges toward the end of her book when she wonders why the history of the Holocaust and, in particular, the history of German women in the Nazi killing fields "continue

to haunt us," as they surely do.[4] My contention is that a key reason why those histories haunt us—indeed why they *must*—has much to do with the failures of ethics.

THE PROCESS OF BYSTANDING

A three-term taxonomy—perpetrator, victim, bystander—has long dominated studies of the Holocaust, genocide, and other mass atrocities. In such contexts, those terms are not separable, static, or purely descriptive. The intentions and actions of perpetrators entail victims, and victims do not exist without perpetrators. The power of perpetrators and the vulnerability of victims also depend on bystanders. Importantly, a person is not by nature—born or preordained—to be one or the other. A person *becomes* a perpetrator, a victim, or a bystander. Both social circumstances and individual decisions are parts of that process. In addition, the tone of this three-term taxonomy is ethical. No person ought to be a perpetrator, a victim, or a bystander when the intentions and actions of perpetrators victimize others. In short, it is not good to be a perpetrator, victim, or bystander.

Lower's perpetrator-oriented research shows that while genocide is committed primarily by men, "genocide is also women's business."[5] If the German women who became killers in the East numbered "only" a few thousand, the evidence, says Lower, shows that "at least half a million women witnessed and contributed to the operations and terror of a genocidal war in the eastern territories."[6] Driven by motivations that included ambition and opportunism, patriotism and a sense of duty, most of these women were not fully fledged perpetrators of mass murder, but their complicity and partnership seem to exceed what the bystander category can contain. Of the three terms—perpetrator, victim, bystander—the last one is the least helpful, partly because it has to cover such a multitude of people and because it suggests passivity.[7] It is not, however, a category to be dismissed, at least not completely, for there were women and men in the Third Reich and even in the Nazi killing fields who can be placed in what Victoria Barnett calls the far-reaching and complex *process of bystanding*.[8] That process includes the reality that at key moments, as Raul Hilberg said, "every individual makes decisions, and . . . every decision is individual."[9]

A photograph in the extensive collection at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum illustrates such points by providing a glimpse of what happened in Graz, Austria, on the night of November 9–10, 1938, which is euphemistically known as *Kristallnacht*.[10] Authorized and incited by Nazi leaders when a minor German official died after an assassination attempt by a young Jew named Herschel Grynszpan, the antisemitic riots of *Kristallnacht* (crystal night) targeted Jewish communities throughout Germany and Austria. Sometimes these November pogroms are referred to as the "Night of Broken Glass" because the wreckage included so many smashed windows that the replacement value reached more than $2 million in the cash equivalent at the time. The onslaught, however, was far more devastating than that. A great many Germans, their religious heritage and identity overwhelmingly Christian, were involved and implicated in the widespread carnage. While their friends and neighbors watched, the perpetrators looted and wrecked Jewish homes and businesses, torched hundreds of synagogues while intentionally inactive fire brigades stood by, desecrated cemeteries, killed scores of Jews, and terrorized virtually every Jew in the Third Reich. In the aftermath, some thirty thousand Jewish men were arrested and sent to concentration camps at Dachau, Buchenwald, and Sachsenhausen. The November pogroms of 1938 showed that no Jew could ever expect to live a normal life in Nazi Germany.

Taken during *Kristallnacht*, the Graz photograph depicts local residents watching the burning of the ceremonial hall at the Jewish cemetery in that city. Their backs to the camera, onlookers (men and women; some younger, some older, and probably most of them at least nominally Christian) gazed at the consuming fire. The photographer also saw what happened, but more actively as his or her camera captured the moment and made it motionless. The Graz photo contains no evidence of firefighting or firefighters. Apparently, the ceremonial hall in that Jewish cemetery in Graz was allowed to burn. Nor does the picture identify the onlookers; it tells nothing about what they were doing before they arrived at the scene or what they did after they left it. Although active at the site, the photographer also remains anonymous; the picture says nothing about other photographs he or she went on to take. Nevertheless, despite its anonymity, this photo is part of what Karl Schleunes aptly called "the twisted road to Auschwitz."[11] It has counterparts in the many other genocidal situations that have scarred the earth before, during, and after

Kristallnacht and the Holocaust. Those related photos vary in their focus and detail but all of them would likely capture aspects of what Alexis Herr calls silent witnessing, acquiescent following, and compensated complicity.[12]

The devil, of course, is in the details. As both the Graz photograph and Wendy Lower's book suggest, categories such as *perpetrator*, *victim*, and *bystander* have to be disaggregated and particularized to avoid abstraction. Reflecting on the *bystander* category in regard to the Holocaust, the historian Omer Bartov outlines the magnitude of that problem:

> The majority of the estimated 300 million people under German rule during the Holocaust were neither victims of the camps nor perpetrators. They were bystanders of various degrees and types. Some belonged to Greater Germany, and their kin were either fighting for Hitler or running his camps. Others belonged to Germany's allies, and more likely than not were more supportive of the partnership with the Third Reich in the early phases of the war than toward the end. Others still belonged to the occupied nations, and stood a good chance of becoming victims themselves, especially if they resisted Nazi policies or tried to protect those slated for extermination. But by and large, those who did not carry out genocide and related atrocities, and those who were not subjected to these policies, namely, the vast majority of German-occupied Europe's population, mostly watched in silence or did their best not to see at all.[13]

Paragraphs akin to Bartov's could be written about the Armenian genocide and post-Holocaust genocides in Cambodia, the former Yugoslavia, Rwanda, and Darfur, to mention only a few examples. Bartov's summary, however, does a better job of sketching the magnitude of the bystander phenomenon than it does of describing bystander behavior, at least in the shorthand his paragraph employs. Following Victoria Barnett's lead, one should question whether it is accurate, let alone sufficient, to say that bystanders to the Holocaust and other genocides have "mostly watched in silence or did their best not to see at all." Nor do I think that Bartov gets it entirely right when he says that "genocide cannot take place without a majority of passive bystanders."[14] True, genocide cannot take place without a majority who do not interfere with the hardliners who gain power and use it to target their perceived opposition, but what that "going along" entails is not so much passivity as action that trends in some directions rather than others. For the most part, we human beings are agents

and actors; we are *protagonists*. Our decisions may make us stand by; our actions may keep us quiet, out of sight, and averse to difficulty, but action is involved nonetheless. Sometimes we feel the tug of moral responsibility—I should do *this* or I must do *that*—but *I can't* is the response.[15] *Can't*, however, is scarcely passive. Absent the action it entails, *can't* could never have its often decisive significance. As protagonists, we may not be leaders, but even getting along by going along still requires activity, not passivity, at least not primarily.

As used in reflection about the Holocaust, genocide, and other mass atrocities, the bystander category is infused with ethical content. In addition, it embraces a heterogeneous mix, for it can include nations and institutions as well as individuals and groups of people. Importantly, moreover, bystanding is not a static condition but a changeable one that leads *here* or *there* in a spectrum that ranges from becoming a perpetrator to becoming a victim. No single size fits all bystanders, but conditions for inclusion in that category involve knowledge and agency.[16] In particular, the knowing encompasses awareness—sometimes specific, sometimes more general—that people are inflicting or suffering harm, that their lives are threatening or threatened, that they are killing or being killed. The agency entailed by bystanding involves ability to act and intervene in ways, small or large, that could curb the harm and relieve the suffering, contest the threats, or resist the taking of life. Some bystanders seize the benevolent opportunities that their knowledge and agency create, but most do not, and the result is that wrongs multiply and rights diminish. Those who obscure, avoid, or deny the helping and resisting opportunities that their knowledge and agency create only seem, however, to be passive or inactive. For reasons that range from timidity or opportunism, caution or fear, to neutrality, indifference, and resignation—"this problem is not mine and, besides, nothing I can do will make any difference"—bystanders still make decisions and act in particular ways. Unfortunately, their decisions and actions usually do more harm than good, often aiding and abetting the perpetrators of genocide and other mass atrocities.

Not only during the Holocaust but also in other cases of genocide and mass atrocity, the process of bystanding is social and political as well as fluid. Sometimes it turns onlookers into resisters and rescuers, but more often it leads to indirect participation in atrocity through compliance and everyday silence or to direct involvement and culpability as partners, collaborators, accomplices, and perpetrators in a

process of destruction. The motivations that take the process of bystanding in those directions typically include job and family responsibilities, professional duties, power aspirations, career objectives, patriotic convictions, peer pressure, greed, jealousy, and revenge.

Keeping attention focused for now on persons rather than on nations or institutions, the women studied by Lower were not destined to be accomplices in crimes against humanity, let alone hardliners who harbored and enacted genocidal intentions. They are more accurately described as participants in a process that led them—not by coercion but willingly—to increasingly active roles in the Nazi killing fields. Onlookers before they made choices that led to complicity and collaboration in the Holocaust, they experienced their Holocaust-related circumstances and opportunities in various ways, at different times, and in diverse contexts. Those perspectives informed their decisions and actions, which were individual, as Hilberg emphasizes, but also influenced by friends and families, acquaintances and neighbors, teachers and lovers, co-workers and superiors, political and religious leaders, and by social factors that ranged from economic prospects and national interests to patriotic impulses and partisan ideologies, the latter steeped in antisemitism and racism. Such developments shed light on ethics.

SHEDDING LIGHT ON ETHICS

At its best, ethics emphasizes careful deliberation about the difference between right and wrong, encouragement not to be indifferent toward that difference, cultivation of virtuous character, and action that defends what is right and resists what is wrong. Noting that context and content, observe that Lower's book describes Johanna Altvater as coming from a working-class background and volunteering to serve the German occupation in Ukraine, where she participated in the murder of Jews, including children. Vera Wohlauf, a socialite from Hamburg, married an SS captain, accompanied him to Poland, inflicted cruelties on Jews, and witnessed massacres unleashed against them. Also the spouse of an SS officer, Erna Petri helped to manage an agricultural estate in occupied Ukraine, entertained German perpetrators of genocide, and, on one occasion, contributed to the Holocaust by murdering six starving Jewish children.

What needed to be different to keep women such as Altvater, Wohlauf, and Petri from sustaining the Nazi killing fields?

An adequate answer to that question is as elusive as it is complex, but part of it would have to include not only reflection about bystanding and onlooking and the complicity and collaboration they encourage but also thoughtfulness about the failures of ethics. So, what can be done about those shortfalls and shortcomings? It is too late for Altvater, Wohlauf, and Petri, but what about us? How can we do better at being "upstanders," to use Samantha Power's term? How can we better use our ability to respond in a world besieged by mass atrocities?[17] No one, at least not single-handedly, can stop genocide in its tracks. We may have scant success in preventing mass atrocity crimes. But most of us have some influence, power, and leverage. How might the leverage we possess best be brought to bear on the scourge and aftereffects of crimes against humanity?

When I say *we* or *us* in this book, as in the questions above, I am mindful that life-span variations such as age, health, education, job, and domestic and economic circumstance as well as social, cultural, and political factors—ethnicity, gender, and nationality, for example—affect people's inclinations and abilities to protest and resist crimes against humanity. As far as *we* and *us* are concerned, one size does not fit all when it comes to moral responsibilities and capacities for ethical action. But in confronting the threats and realities of mass atrocities, those relativities and qualifications do not excuse us, at least not completely. The philosopher Albert Camus was right when he held that human beings are not entirely to blame because we did not start history. But, he emphasized, human beings are by no means innocent, because we continue history.[18] No longer can we plead ignorance—"I didn't know what was happening"—as a justification for inaction. Media reports about mass atrocities are too frequent, widespread, and detailed for that rationalization to be credible. As we continue history, whose terrain is drenched in the bloodshed of mass atrocity crimes, we still need to do—within the limitations and possibilities that are ours—what we can to protest and resist crimes against humanity. Indeed, we need to do as much as we can for as long as we can.

Ethics is supposed to guide and inspire us to respond well to such challenges. Considerations of that kind led to observations made by the scholar-journalist Gitta Sereny in her 1974 classic about the Holocaust called *Into that Darkness: An Examination of Conscience*. In 1971, Sereny had the opportunity to interview not a bystander but

one of the key perpetrators of the Holocaust, Franz Stangl, who had the dubious distinction of being the commandant of Sobibor and Treblinka, two of the Holocaust's most grisly killing centers. He had been tried and sentenced to life imprisonment by a West German court. In the preface to her book, which is based on the seventy hours of interviews she conducted with Stangl, Sereny took stock of what she had discovered, hoping that her encounters with him might reveal, as she put it, "some new truth which would contribute to the understanding of things that had never yet been understood."[19]

As Sereny probed her findings, she drew the following conclusions, which pertain not only to perpetrators of mass atrocity crimes but also to bystanders and onlookers and to the failures of ethics. Individuals, Sereny emphasized, remain responsible for their action and its consequences, but persons are, and must be, responsible for each other too. What we do as individuals, she underscored, reflects what she called "the fatal interdependence of all human actions."[20] Sereny ended her book as follows:

> Social morality is contingent upon the individual's capacity to make responsible decisions, to make the fundamental choice between right and wrong; this capacity derives from this mysterious core—the very essence of the human person.
>
> This essence, however, cannot come into being or exist in a vacuum. It is deeply vulnerable and profoundly dependent on a climate of life; on freedom in the deepest sense: not license, but freedom to grow: within family, within community, within nations, and within human society as a whole. The fact of its existence therefore—the very fact of our existence as valid individuals—is evidence of our interdependence and of our responsibility for each other.[21]

Our responsibility for each other: ethics succeeds or fails, lives or dies in that neighborhood. So, keeping in mind Sereny's points about "the fatal interdependence of all human actions" and "our responsibility for each other," consider that ethics has had good days and bad.

GOOD DAYS AND BAD

After World War II and the Holocaust, good days for ethics occurred on December 9 and 10, 1948, when the General Assembly of the United Nations adopted the Convention on the Prevention and