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The Legacy of Hannah Arendt's *Banality of Evil*

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Abstract:

Contemporary thinkers such as Philip Zimbardo, Alexander Hinton and Elizabeth Minnich recently coined the terms *Banality of Heroism*, *Banality of Everyday Thought,* and *Banality of Goodness* respectively (without these concepts being the linchpins of their theses). These terms can be retraced to one thinker in particular who is constantly referred to by them: Hannah Arendt. Arendt's *Banality of Evil*, a key concept in her work, was devised to discuss the trial of Adolf Eichmann in 1961. This paper seeks to critically analyze these "banalities," and ascertain whether they have contributed meaningfully to the existing literature on the problem of evil.

Key Words: Adolf Eichmann, Banality of Evil, Hannah Arendt, Mass Atrocities, Radical Evil.

I. Banality of Evil

The *Banality of Evil*, over time, has been interpreted by academicians as either a complement or a substitute to Immanuel Kant's concept of *Radical Evil*.[1] Arendt, who was then familiar with the latter term, and knew it was associated with all génocidaires, could not bring herself to associate it with Adolf Eichmann, a Nazi mid-level perpetrator: he did not possess the typical intelligence, and hence the scheming mind one would expect of evildoers such as Adolf Hitler and Stalin. Instead, the Eichmann she bore witness to in the trial in Jerusalem nearly two decades after the Second World War, was mediocre in several ways: he seemed self-absorbed, he regurgitated the clichéd jargon used under the rule of the Third Reich, and lost focus of the bigger questions being posed during the trial. Even his captor, Peter Malkin derided him when recounting actions and reactions that denoted stupidity.[2] Yet, in spite of all the

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evidence, the prosecution went on to portray Eichmann as a man who was comparable to Adolf Hitler.[3]

In other words, the overall effect then apparent to Arendt was the horror of Eichmann's evil deeds that stood in contrast to how ordinary he appeared to be in the dock during the trial. This was the same man who had organized the transportation of millions of Jews from across Europe to the infamous death factories. As she said: "The deeds were monstrous, but the doer—at least the very effective now on trial—was quite ordinary, commonplace, and neither demonic nor monstrous."[4] In other words, the evil perpetrated was extraordinary, but the evildoer ordinary. All this while, the universal understanding of evil was that the evildoer was by all means as extraordinary as the evil he had perpetrated.[5]

Arendt realized the necessity of closing the gap in the literature by explaining this peculiarity or incongruence before her, and came up with the term *Banality of evil*. One of Arendt's observations was that the powerful bureaucratic mechanism that can normalize everything,[6] including great acts of evil, by creating the distance and detachment necessary for tortures and killings to become routinized, could only be successfully operated by reliable and hard-working, although mediocre and expendable characters like Eichmann.[7] Elsewhere, Arendt said that a bureaucratic system is concerned with the task of shifting responsibilities on a daily basis; therefore a "(B)ureaucracy unhappily is the rule of nobody and for this very reason perhaps the least human and most cruel form of rulership."[8] These pronouncements legitimized the existence of Eichmann, and other Eichmann-type of perpetrators, who were ordinary and mediocre, and yet necessary for the mechanism of mass perpetration to be effective. Suddenly, through Arendt's thesis, the ordinary man had a clear identity and role in the genocidal scene. And the most daunting thought was that this ordinary evildoer could be just about anyone, including you and me. Her argument unleashed a series of experiments and studies that followed, on how "ordinary" men and women could be led into perpetrating violence.[9]

From the time it was first coined, the *Banality of Evil* has often been misunderstood. Arendt's contribution was initially interpreted as an attempt to excuse the devil that everyone saw, or wished to see in Eichmann. In fact, accounts of negative reception by the Jewish community, its initial dissidents are rampant, and it is said that Arendt suffered repercussions long afterward.[10] The misunderstanding surrounding the term *Banality of Evil* was also recently highlighted by Elizabeth Minnich: she recounted how John F. Burn, a reporter at the trial of Saddam Hussein, misused it by referring to Saddam's arrogance and stubborn refusal to

acknowledge the torture his victims had suffered, which to him (i.e., Burn) were contrary to the pity and sympathy that Eichmann evoked during the trial.

Burn inferred that the monstrosity of Saddam Hussein was without parallel, thereby contributing to the romanticization of evildoers and their evil deeds that Arendt, Minnich and Hinton speak vehemently against in their theses. For Minnich, Eichmann was not pitiable—he was "good at what he did, and ambitious, not reluctant."[11]

THE BANALITY OF THE *BANALITY OF EVIL*

It should not be surprising that Arendt's Banality of evil has been widely misunderstood. Her report is strewn with references to Eichmann's apparent intellectual mediocrity, so that many readers have easily, although erroneously concluded that the mediocrity of the perpetrator should be included in understanding what Banality of Evil means. This inference makes sense since Arendt goes on to speak about how evil is connected to an "absence of thinking"[12] on the part of the perpetrator. The idea of a stupid, hence unthinking person, who therefore commits evil, is in conformity with not only an age-old prejudice, but also appeals to widely-shared utilitarian instincts. (Since it is assumed that a person who does evil fails to see the bigger picture of things).

This inference or conclusion could have been satisfactory—on one hand, secondary or mid-level perpetrators like Eichmann, mediocre in intelligence, are associated with the Banality of evil in order to explain how even mere puppets or "cogs in the wheel" are guilty of evil; on the other hand, Kant's Radical Evil, evil at its roots, where the doer acts on instinct, is for primary perpetrators such as Hitler, Stalin, Idi Amin and Pol Pot who have the required *mens rea* for mass murder. This would establish the logic and harmony necessary for the two concepts to co-exist. But the concept of Banality of evil was befuddled by Arendt's later statement in *The Life of the Mind*: not only are the stupid and mediocre guilty of thoughtlessness, she said, but so too are highly intelligent people.[13] This implies that Arendt's "absence of thinking," does not mean an *inability to think*, so much as a conscious or subconscious decision *not to think*.

Thus interpreted, the term Banality of evil would have nothing more to do with the nature of the doer (as he could be anyone—stupid or intelligent) than with the nature of the deed (the "evil") itself. Hence evil is banal in the sense that it is inexplicable, unfathomable, because evil can happen unjustifiably, arbitrarily. If this is a better interpretation of the meaning of "banality of evil", then it reinforces what Arendt is known to have said elsewhere—

that the term was not meant to be a theory, but merely the expression of a fact that she had observed.[14]

It is as if Bernhard Schlink understood the confusion surrounding Arendt's Banality of evil and wished to clear it up through his 1995 novel *The Reader.* Schlink put together the story of an even more ordinary person than Eichmann, called Hanna Schmitz, who is guilty of the evil of inaction when she abandoned Holocaust prisoners to burn in a church that caught fire. While Eichmann devised the plan to send victims of the Second World War to their deaths in concentration camps in Auschwitz, Belzec, Chelmo, Majdanek, Sobibor, and Treblinka, the fictitious Schmitz manned one of the trains that followed those routes. During her trial, when she is unjustly accused of certain crimes she did not commit, and is asked to recognize a signature supposedly by her, her insecurities lead her to admit to them; her only fear being that her illiteracy should be made public.[15] One can't escape feeling empathy for Schmitz, despite her heinous deeds, especially in becoming familiar with the details and intimacies of her ordinary life—therein lies one more example of an ordinary evildoer performing extraordinary deeds of evil. The novel can be interpreted as an attempt to highlight the banality of evil by showing us how perplexed Schmitz was on learning the extent of her crime; that all the while, she had been carried away by the routine of earning a living and doing what was necessary to secure that. Again, it wasn't because of her *inability to think* (her interest in books and reading, among others, betray a vivid intellect), but somewhere of a subconscious decision *not to think*. Through this story, by portraying Schmitz as an ordinary human being and not a monster, Schlink also asserted the need not to romanticize evil.[16]

The overall conclusion on why evil is perpetrated is as follows: Evil occurs out of *thoughtlessness*; from a mind that has consciously or subconsciously shut down thinking. And it could apply to all types of perpetrators, whether primary or secondary (i.e, mid-level and lower level). The inference is that *thinking,* its opposite, would prevent the perpetration of evil—this will be explored further below in section V. I will first begin by analyzing the variety of "banalities" that Hannah Arendt's successors have come up in the recent years (II, III, IV) in order to explore what thinking means to them, assessing how effective this solution is to the problem of evil (V). Section VI is an attempt at understanding the rationale of Arendt's reaction when faced with Eichmann, and finally, section VII provides details about how the "banalities" cohere and don't cohere.

II. Banality of Heroism

Philip Zimbardo headed the Stanford Prison Experiment in 1971 where twenty-four young men who had responded to a newspaper

advertisement, were randomly assigned the positions of guards and prisoners in a simulated jail setting in Stanford University. What was intended to be an experiment lasting two weeks was however cut short to six days because it took up disturbingly real dimensions, as the experimenters as well as the mock prisoners and guards, became too engrossed in the act. This experiment, together with the Milgram Obedience experiment conducted at Yale University in 1963, served to establish that we could all be monsters, given the right situational factors. This finding went counter to the long-held beliefs imposed by religion and law which rely on individual traits (or dispositional factors) in punishing crime.[17] (Hannah Arendt shares this belief when she says that the legal system lays too much faith in personal responsibility and guilt, and "on a belief in the functioning of conscience."[18]) It is noteworthy that the reason many academics today reject situational forces as explaining human behavior is because this poses problems with respect to agency and responsibility: blaming the evil of action or inaction on situational forces leaves no one to punish, and provides an easy getaway for perpetrators.[19]

In *The Lucifer Effect*, Zimbardo extends his research to find out how goodness could outdo evil. He introduces the concept of *Banality of Heroism*, averring that just as we are capable of committing crime or of being evil, so too are we capable of being heroes. He proposes a thought experiment which he calls Reverse-Milgram—"a setting in which people will comply with demands that intensify over time *to do good."*[20] In this thought experiment, he requires us to replace the factors that account for the slow descent into evil, into a slow ascent into doing good. Thus he reflects on the truth that getting people to do good would not necessarily mean that the goodness would become part of them, and that they would understand and appreciate the need for it. He goes on to draw a parallel with another situation: "Talmudic scholars are supposed to have preached not to require that people believe before they pray, only to do what is needed to get them to begin to pray; then they will come to believe in what and to whom they are praying."[21] This is Zimbardo's solution to spreading goodness in the world—first do it, and then you can be free to believe in it later. This slow ascent into goodness is also known by social psychologists as the "foot-in-the-door" tactic (FITD). Applying the wisdom of the Talmudic scholars, Zimbardo also encourages the use of "identity labels"—By telling people they are kind and generous even if they are not, he feels it would encourage them to behave according to the identity label.[22]

It is clear that Zimbardo seeks to influence those who are similar in nature, and in the manner they can be influenced. They are the ones who according to Arendt were the first to change their minds

and align themselves with the values of the Third Reich. But by focusing on how to influence the numbers in doing good, Zimbardo has omitted to consider the thinking, independent-minded lot; those who are skeptics both in being urged to do evil and to do good. In the face of evil, they may, through casuistry, find ways to justify their actions, twist them to sound noble and necessary,[23] and in being urged to do good, they may resist measures such as the use of identity labels, or the FITD approach—just because they would not want to submit to the condescending authority of such experiments or ploys. Of course, there are those among this category of thinking, independent-minded lot, who would not mind being knowingly fooled in doing good, since they would assure themselves that it would be for the Greater Good of society—but they are only a minority within a minority, and don't provide a definite solution to the problem of evil. The main observation here being that those who go against the grain of things, that margin of society, the exceptions, will in either case remain uninfluenced, be it in the commission of good or evil. What this implies will be discussed further below.

For Zimbardo, the *banality of heroism* is the opposite of the *banality of evil.* In the latter case, Arendt pointed out how terrifyingly normal Eichmann was, despite his evil deeds; in the case of the banality of heroism, Zimbardo wants to highlight how terrifyingly normal so-called heroes actually are; he wants us to look upon such people as ordinary folks who "do what they (have) to do" when they have to be called to do a good deed, and in fact goes on to say that they did "what anyone would do in that situation", and even "what everyone ought to do."[24]

Zimbardo also believes that we could all be potential heroes and villains waiting for the right situational moment to do good and evil respectively. He blames the superstition that prevails in our thinking, that goodness in us is unchanging, so that only some of us have the power to resist total situations. He believes that we keep changing, depending on the situation. He says: "We simplify the complexity of human experience by erecting a seemingly impermeable boundary between Good and Evil."[25] Thus he says, in doing so, "we set ourselves up for a fall by not being sufficiently vigilant to situational forces."[26] Dispositional traits, according to Zimbardo should only be analyzed after situational ones have been dismissed as the likely possibility for the behavior of people. The book ends with a request to rethink the romanticized idea of the hero as an exceptional person. Some heroes, according to Zimbardo are ordinary people who have done exceptional things—hence the Banality of Heroism.

III. Banality of Everyday Thought

Alexander Hinton's variation of Arendt's Banality of evil is as follows: The Banality of evil he says, is about a failure to think in exceptional circumstances such as genocides and mass atrocities, but the failure to think is in truth, an everyday habit—hence the *Banality of Everyday Thought*. In particular, he refers to the manner in which we "simplify and categorize the world in order to navigate complexity—particular renderings of us and them, self and other—[which] directly parallels a key dynamic in the genocidal process."[27] He suggests what he calls "reflexive articulation" or critical thinking, and urges us to pay more attention to what is effaced or redacted when we use "frames and articulations that mediate our everyday lives."[28] His principal argument is that in forming opinions on people and events, we often omit vital information from our assessment, in an act of *framing*—which implies that the framer is consciously selecting specific information to convey his own ideologies and/or biases.

In *Man or Monster? The Trial of a Khmer Rouge Torturer*, Hinton lays out a detailed portrait of Duch (also known as Kaing Guek Eav), former Head of the Security Prison—S-21 (or "Tuol Sleng")—during the Khmer Rouge era. He shows how Duch was depicted as a monster by victims, their families, the prosecution during the trial, and generally people who came to know about the horrible acts of torture, inhuman and degrading treatment meted out on prisoners at Tuol Sleng. He brings particular attention to a graffiti painted on the walls of Tuol Sleng, where Duch is given devil-like horns, and glowing eyes with the help of a white marker, while the word "Evil" is written across the collar of his white shirt. This is Duch, the monster, who took the lives of thousands of innocent people under the aegis of his henchmen. Then there is Duch, the man: To give a more all-rounding idea of who Duch is, Hinton quotes him speaking about his ambition to go back to teaching after the Khmer Rouge revolution, or mentions the ambiguity of Duch as both man and monster, that François Bizot and Rithy Panh[29]—two of his victims—could not seem to come to terms with. He concludes by commenting on the ease with which we depict people in romanticized ways, adding that just as Duch was graffitied as a devil on the walls of S-21 while omitting the complexity of who he is, "all of us, in a sense, are 'graffiti-artists'". In other words, we tend to simplify who human beings are by indulging in moral economies, in fitting them or "framing them" into boxes and types that suit us or the mainstream ideology of the moment.[30] In the process, we erase or redact vital information about the person we are judging—therein lies the beginning of prejudice, and another face-to-face encounter with the operation of casuistry.

It is noteworthy that Hinton's employment of framing theory, or the idea that our perspectives are constructed "politically", each presenting only one (or a one-sided) view of a person or event, can be retraced to one of Friedrich Nietzsche's ideas. In *The Genealogy of Morals and Ecce Homo,* Nietzsche opines that pinning down the definition of a concept is quasi impossible, since it is likely to have a history of its own, with interpretations differing according to complex effects of time and space. What we can expect however, is to get as close as possible to its meaning, and to do so, we ought to expose ourselves to a variety of "perspectives" of it. Expecting any less, or advocating a purist approach so that a perspective at any point would be divorced from all possible political analyses and interpretations, is idealistic—it would be asking for what he calls, a "castration of the intellect".[31]

The *Banality of Everyday Thought* consists precisely in the act of desisting thinking, and choosing the easy way out by laying the least claim on our thinking attention and falling back on clichés and stockphrases in order to understand our environment and the people who make it up. It can be effortlessly paralleled with Elizabeth Minnich's idea about *The Evil of Banality*, where the real challenge, or the real evil we face in life, is banality—when ideas, concepts, good actions and bad actions lose their meaning, or become banal because we think of them or do them thoughtlessly.

IV. Banality of Goodness

It is in Man's nature to adopt short-cuts to thinking: Arendt articulates this reality by saying:

> Clichés, stock phrases, adherence to conventional, standardized codes of expression and conduct have the socially recognized function of protecting us against reality, that is, against the claim on our thinking attention that all events and facts make by virtue of their existence. If we were responsive to this claim all the time, we would soon be exhausted…[32]

The point is to know when to adopt these short-cuts. For Elizabeth Minnich, this warning by Arendt is a call to us to "remain open to experience."[33] Clichés according to Minnich, do not activate our minds; they stop it.[34] Her book *The Evil of Banality* goes a step further: Instead of restricting herself to the discussion of evil, she avers that *both* good and evil actions can become banal, ordinary or meaningless when they are done with inattention—or thoughtlessness.

For her, qualifying something as evil is the necessary result of incomprehensible or unspeakable horror—or what Hinton calls the "uncanny."[35] But calling something evil has the effect of paralyzing thinking: "Evil is an epithet that simultaneously disables and takes

over the usual role of explanation."[36] If thinking is capped, then no one does anything to try to fathom what caused the evil, and ascertain how to prevent its manifestation. Evil, she says, is often unduly romanticized, when in truth for mass harms to happen, it does not require the help of extraordinary people and extraordinary actions: there is great dependence on the work of dependable hard-workers to do their jobs properly.[37]

Minnich proposes a distinction between intensive evil and extensive evil. The former refers to short and intense episodes of harm involving people who can be clearly identifiable as perpetrators, victims and bystanders. Intensive evils are carried out surreptitiously by individuals or small groups affecting a limited number of victims.[38] They are "horrific, episodic rather than sustained acts…"[39] Examples comprise the suicide pact of Charles Manson and recent shootings in American schools. In cases of extensive evil, the demarcations between perpetrators, victims, and bystanders cannot be sustained, evil is insidious, "*massive, monstrous harms carried out by many, many people for significant periods of times—months, years, decades, and more."*[40] Examples comprise war, genocide, and other forms of mass atrocities.

Minnich goes on to propose the corresponding equivalent of intensive evil and extensive evil in the context of good actions: intensive good and extensive good. Scenarios of intensive good would include acts of heroism,[41] or the supererogatory, and in her opinion the beneficiaries as in the case of intensive evil, are a limited group of people. Such acts would include fundraising activities, or helping someone in distress. Doers of intensive good are more likely to gain the status of saints, heroes and angels, which to her carry similar romanticized overtones as the doers of intensive evil who are referred to as satans and demons. The outlook on both types of people who are in truth ordinary, are veiled by such romanticized descriptions. For her, extensive good implies "a genuinely lived goodness that becomes a bedrock of lives, and for many lives, over time—takes account of realities in our changing, contradictory, complicated, plural world."[42] Its roots go very deep, and it has longer lasting effects on society.

In her opinion, romanticized insinuations made about the heroic deeds of people and evildoers are misleading as they prevent us from thinking about ourselves as ordinary and human, equally capable of both good and evil. By maintaining the distance between us and them, or by *Othering* demons, evildoers, saints and heroes, we deny ourselves the two-fold opportunity of understanding and overcoming evil, as well as showing our responsibility, commitment and goodness towards other people in our environment.

Towards the end of her work, Minnich dedicates a chapter with the title *Banality of Goodness?* where in keeping with the spirit of her message, she avers that not only evil, but goodness too is in danger of becoming banal through thoughtlessness. Thus the question of whether an act, if done thoughtlessly would help or hurt would inevitably fall in the hands of luck.[43] The inherent evil of banality is stated as follows:

> The mystery…is how so many of us so often, without even thinking about it, no more do good than we do wrong, or evil, but simply behave ourselves, or absent ourselves, or try to do well whatever the terms of the game. *We do not even choose*[44]; we simply reach into our grab-bag of conventions, of processed concepts, and follow the one that seems most familiar…[45]

How does one ensure that people prone to doing good, who are merely acting out their potential, are born in society? In the afterword to the book, titled *Teaching Thinking*, Minnich proposes that education (at an earlier point she refers specifically to the Humanities), could circumvent the problems posed by a lack of thinking.[46] It goes without saying that this aspirational Rousseauean solution may not appeal to a more practical Hobbesian community of thinkers. To evaluate how tenable this solution is, one may turn once again to what Arendt has to say about the inculcation of values:

> Might the problem of good and evil, our faculty for telling right from wrong, be connected with our faculty of thought? To be sure, not in the sense that thinking would ever be able to produce the good deed as its result, as though 'virtue could be taught' and learned—only habits and customs can be taught, and we know only too well the alarming speed with which they are unlearned and forgotten when new circumstances demand a change in manners and patterns of behaviour.[47]

If the practice of good and evil is primarily concerned with how well habits and customs were previously taught, then one can only teach by way of example. One cannot go on to expect *all* students to be independent and mature enough to use their faculty of judgment to come up with solutions—let alone *humanitarian* solutions—in dealing with novel scenarios.

Still, Minnich does not stop there—she acknowledges the difficulties in relying heavily on education to reform thinking. She comments on the current approach of the education system which is geared towards training students to be technocrats, rather than individuals who are capable of thinking for themselves. According to her, we can't stop intensive evil, but we can prevent extensive evil, her logic being that: "Unlike brief if monstrous harm-doing, extensive evils cannot take over or sustain themselves if many of us do not reliably do their work."[48]

On the face of it, while it may seem that the Banality of Heroism and the Banality of Goodness are similar, there is certainly an important difference. Where the former asks us to de-romanticize the hero, and accept the fact that doing good is within everyone's reach, the latter concept lays emphasis on how much is lost when we unthinkingly do good in our environment.

V. The Fallacies in the Suggestion to Think

The blanket effect of the "banalities" proposed by Arendt, Zimbardo, Hinton and Minnich is primarily to encourage us to "stop and think", or to show more empathy to the people around us, and in the situations in which we find ourselves. This, Arendt does through her statement about "clichés and stockphrases",[49] Zimbardo in his suggestion of "energizing the conscience", Hinton through the concept of "afacement" (see below), Minnich in her advice to "remain open to experience".[50] Unthinking minds, minds that constantly require "bannisters" to operate, are vulnerable to exterior influences, to the loss of personal autonomy, and in the context of rule by a totalitarian government, are open to being misled into perpetrating evil.

But the point is that if *thoughtlessness* is the precondition for the perpetration of evil, is *thinking* the remedy? Would thoughtfulness necessarily lead to the avoidance of evil? To answer this, let us explore what thinking means in the context of the four theses.

Hannah Arendt does not broach this topic in her *Eichmann in Jerusalem - A report on the Banality of Evil*—it is included in *Responsibility and Judgment* as an essay she wrote later in time. Her conclusion is that we should take an active step to think, and not just yield to the sovereignty of clichés and dogmas. According to her, we do evil when we act indifferently, in refusing to exercise judgment. But this pronouncement is barely a guide: it describes a reality about our lot: that some of us are more capable of making an informed choice than others, and to demand that everyone should be equally capable in doing so is idealistic. Nevertheless, she provides the most thorough account of what thinking means, and traces how Socrates and Kant sought to resolve the problem of evil.

According to Arendt, the happenings during the Holocaust put into jeopardy the common belief that there were certain basic standards of morality that would be adhered to in any given situation. "How strange and how frightening it suddenly appeared that the very terms we use to designate these things—'morality,' with its Latin origin, and 'ethics,' with its Greek origin—should never have meant more than usages and habits."[51] She comments on how these usages and habits were easily traded off for others under the rule of the Third Reich. Before the Holocaust, Arendt says that she

believed that "every sane man…carried within himself a voice that tells him what is right and what is wrong, and this regardless of the law of the land and regardless of the voices of his fellowmen."[52] In the aftermath of the war, she realizes how wrong this belief was, as she observes that Man would not know virtue from vice if he had "spent his life among rascals".[53] The human mind is after all guided by examples (by usages and habits); not by a thorough understanding of what virtues and vices are, and why if at all the former should be put into practice over the latter. We may even go on to argue that in practice, the usages and habits one is exposed to, are never uniformly transferable; there is no guarantee what the thinking individual will take from them, even after being exposed to a high dose of a commendable portion of usages and habits.

The type of evil that one perpetrates in following one's inclinations, is what Kant calls "radical evil."[54] For Kant this only happens as an exception, as the doer is conscious and aware of the virtue he is transgressing. He believes that because Man is always with his *self*, that is, the other person in him who keeps questioning his actions, in order to be free of evil, such a person would have to move and live in a city of law-abiding citizens. That way, he would learn through usages and habits, right from wrong, and if he was tempted to do evil, the *fear of self-contempt* would work in controlling his behaviour.[55] (Socrates believes that the *fear of self-contradiction* will stop a person from doing evil.) But Kant also acknowledges that the fear of self-contempt would not always work—because Man can lie to himself, meaning that he can justify or rationalize his own actions. That is why Kant deems the faculty of lying to be the "sore or foul spot" in human nature.[56] Perhaps it is necessary to mention at this juncture that it is not just Man's habit of lying, but also the common practice of forgiving oneself (which probably stems from the belief that God is forgiving) that explains the indulgence in vice. It is also casuistry, or a form of rationalization. Examples would be those of primary perpetrators such a Stalin, Hitler and Pol Pot who believed that they should be judged by the "laws of history to which the revolutionary has to submit to and sacrifice himself if need be."[57] To overcome the problem of mendacity or of lying to oneself, Kant suggests self-respect—which is higher than concern with the other (the neighbor), or love for oneself.[58] But one could only be guided by this consideration (that is, self-respect) through the dictate of reason, and Arendt admits that the will cannot be forced to accept the dictate of reason.[59] Sadism for instance, can push reason out of the way. She points out the influence of sadism as a driving force of evil, and goes on to say that of all the sins associated with evil, sadism has been curiously left out—and limited for a long time to "pornographic literature and painting of the

perverse."[60] It is perhaps this argument on sadism, together with the findings by Milgram and Zimbardo's experiments, that have incited thinkers to believe that there is an Eichmann in all of us, an inherent sadistic self waiting for the right situation to manifest itself.

But whether it is out of fear of self-contempt (per Kant) or self-contradiction (per Socrates) that we do not perpetrate evil, the truth is that such theories are merely theories, in that they have no practical application. Thus Arendt notes that none of the perpetrators in question who perpetrated evil during the Holocaust, analyzed the matter thoroughly, evaluating pros and cons, experiencing crises of conscience and moral conflicts.[61] In other words, they suspended thinking and judging, just as Eichmann had done.

Arendt extends Kant's discussion on the presence of the self and how it regulates behavior, by adding her own input: she avers that there is a constant "fear of losing oneself" and this happens when the self stops remembering—it stops remembering, or effaces its own memory, when it is guilty of doing evil.[62] For Arendt, this concept of "living-with-myself" is "more than consciousness, more than the self-awareness that accompanies me in whatever I do and in whichever state I am."[63] Living with oneself becomes harder especially in moments of isolation, where the presence of the other self is more obvious. If one does evil, one would have to stop remembering and stop thinking in order to stifle the voice of the self, and for Arendt, this is how human beings refuse to be persons.[64]

Kant relies on common sense to overcome the problem of evil—the faculty of judging through imagination by basing oneself on examples and precedents to decide how to behave in future. Arendt says that Kant did not mean a "sense common to all."[65] Common sense is a general agreement on dos and don'ts and Kant feels that this understanding is what makes one be part of the civilized lot. Without this "enlarged mentality", "man is not fit for civilized discourse."[66] In this, there is heavy reliance on a consensus of norms and values, and the very fact of expecting unanimity and uniformity may sound unrealistic to many. Arendt says that for Kant, the validity of such judgments "would be neither objective and universal or nor subjective, depending on personal whim, but intersubjective or representative." For this, certain sacrifices are required, and Kant speaks about renouncing "ourselves for the sake of others"—another superhuman expectation. Finally Arendt feels that our decisions to choose right from wrong will depend on the company we choose, and the examples or precedents that affect us through them. Then she goes on to speak about the apathetic, the indifferent, who pose a danger—although a lesser one than those who choose the wrong

company and have set wrong examples and precedents for themselves.[67] This would be Eichmann. Eichmann's apathy and indifference, which to Arendt means his refusal to judge at all, and his inability to relate to others through judgment, accounts for the horror and hence, the banality of evil.

Philip Zimbardo speaks about "energizing the conscience" as a step towards being more responsible in our surroundings. He gives the example of how a "good-hearted" guard failed to influence the "bad" guard in stopping the abuse on the prisoners: had he energized his conscience, avers Zimbardo, things would certainly be different.[68] In order to reduce the impact of undesirable social influences, and in promoting personal resilience and civic virtue, Zimbardo lays out a ten-step program which can be summarized as the development of self-awareness, situational sensitivity and street-smarts. He also makes a valid point when he speaks about the number of heroic acts out there which we may not be aware of, as they are not recorded, and there are no means of doing so. It is only evil and its consequences that always come to our attention, leading us to believe erroneously that the extent of evil outdoes the extent of goodness on the earth. Since Zimbardo lays more responsibility on situational factors rather than dispositional ones, to countervail evil, he proposes approaches to help "limit, constrain, and prevent the situational and systemic forces that propel some of us toward social pathology." He also pushes for the inculcation of a "heroic imagination" so that the doing of good can counterbalance the doing of evil.[69]

For Elizabeth Minnich, thoughtfulness could imply "an impulse to pity" where one is more open to understanding the other, so that it becomes "a call to stop and think." This in turn compels us "to think in someone else's place," as Kant put it. Minnich avers that thinking and feeling are both important, and that Arendt addressed the former, not the latter, in her evaluation of Eichmann. It was a "radical failure in thinking," which implies a renunciation in exercising freedom, that led Eichmann to escape his responsibility.[70] Minnich then goes on to compare the behavior of Eichmann and Saddam Hussein during their trials: the one was more worried that he had not been promoted while working with the Nazi, and the other went on claiming he deserved the respect of a leader, both willfully seeming selfish, and "radically out of touch with the realities of (their) victims as well as (their) prosecutors."[71] Then Minnich explains how Peter Malkin, Eichmann's captor, felt perturbed by Eichmann's indifference and lack of remorse, quoting him at length saying:

> What was I hoping to hear? Even I didn't know. Maybe a trace of real sorrow, a sense that he felt something about it beyond regret

> at being caught…But never, not once, did the man convey anything but the feeling that everything he had done was absolutely appropriate.[72]

In other words, Minnich supports her argument on the importance of thinking, by speaking of Malkin's own shock and discomfort at witnessing Eichmann's indifference (read "absence of thinking"). These may sound like unrealistic expectations from both of them, considering that Eichmann would have by then rationalized his actions to himself. Elsewhere, Minnich expresses her idea of thinking as such:

> To be attentive is to be able to be startled back into thought, to become again able to be in touch with the originality of all that is around us, and so also to be aware of what we are actually doing, here and now.[73]

For her, thinking implies choosing, and the evil of banality lies in the fact that people do not make choices when decisions have to be made.

Alexander Hinton suggests "afacement" which he believes would deal not only with the problem of evil, but the problem of prejudice, or of limiting one's understanding to what is depicted through a particular frame. Afacement involves the "willingness to think critically", "to remain open to differences and the real-world complexities" that we tend to simplify, by framing, erasing, redacting. He adopts a Khmer proverb, often used by Duch to explain what he means: "If you break open the crab you'll show the shit."[74] This is relevant especially when thick frames of power are in operation, and through power and numbers, exert an influence on how others think.

What Arendt, Zimbardo, Hinton and Minnich suggest is for the thinking man to discard clichés and stockphrases from his vocabulary, and prejudices and dogmas from his thinking, opting for a perpetual reassessment of who he is, and what he is supposed to do. But the problems with this reasoning are two-fold. First, to impose this responsibility on all human beings, considering how varied our intellectual capacities are, is untenable. Second, this moral responsibility presupposes that if we were to stop and think, we would be governed by the same values and considerations in deciding how to act in a given scenario—again, this omits considerations of our plurality by wrongly assuming that *we always think in the most humane ways of other people*. In doing so, a considerable dose of romanticism or idealism is being reintroduced in these attempts to tackle the problem of evil.

VI. What really happened during the trial of Eichmann: An encounter with the *Rootlessness of Evil*

In commenting on the meaning of the Banality of evil, Minnich says: "It holds before us *the lack of congruence between monstrous acts and the petty people who do them, between the horrors of plague and its cause, a mere bacillus*."[75] The extent of Arendt's shock in encountering a mediocre character like Eichmann who had committed such evil deeds, can be justified through this statement:

> [O]urs is the first generation since the rise of Christianity in the West in which the masses, and not only a small elite, no longer believe in 'future states' (as the Founding Fathers still put it) and who therefore are committed (it would seem) to think of conscience as an organ that will react without hope for rewards and without fear of punishment.[76]

While it is understandable that the audience in the trial as well as the public at large, in the turbulent aftermath of the Second World War, may not have been ready to see the doer of so much evil being after all only mediocre in intelligence, as Arendt mentioned above, it was her duty as an honest and feeling reporter to point it out, and open the public's mind to the fact that evildoers are *not* necessarily self-aware, highly intelligent, possessing great skills in designing detailed plans to torture and kill. It was also a start to distinguishing political crimes from individual crimes; noting the existence of criminals of all types, some more slavish than others, subjected to different degrees of manipulation, some more mediocre in intelligence than others, some moved more by ideologies than role-models in justifying acts of extermination to themselves. What was anomalous about that 1961 trial, was trying *political criminals* in a traditional setting such as the court system whose founding premise was free will and individual responsibility, and therefore a setting that took it for granted that a criminal should be entirely conscious of his deeds. What was incongruous about that 1961 trial was that Eichmann did not seem as self-aware as Arendt would have imagined a primary perpetrator such as Stalin and Hitler to be. Should we infer that Arendt had come face-to-face with the reality that there was no way of rationalizing evil; that it was maybe the first time in her life that she could not fall back on the age-old solace that behind the doing of evil, there is always an intelligent and a meticulous evildoer, sharing the characteristics of the romanticized figure of Satan? After all, the injustice in the manifestation of evil is not the evil by itself, but the truth that it happens for no reason at all; evil is baseless and rootless, having nothing to do with a Divine Plan that only "God knows best" about. She poses the question: "Is evildoing, not just sins of omission but the sins of commission, possible in the absence of not merely 'base motives' (as the law calls it) but of any motives at all, any particular prompting of interest or volition?"[77] Arendt then goes on to associate an absence of motives in evildoing with the possibility of

conditioning. This would not be different to Michel Foucault's take in *Abnormal,* a compilation of his lectures, where he implies that sometimes criminal evildoing has no head or tail, is not tied down by a law of origin, or a relationship of cause and effect.[78] What Arendt may have alluded to through her Banality of evil, was merely the *rootlessness of evil* which qualifies the nature of the evil, rather than the doer in question. What Arendt experienced was tantamount to the shock experienced by a former believer who has renounced the existence of God, and is suddenly faced with the realization that evil is cruel because it is arbitrary—in the sense that there is no logic as to why it chooses one victim over another. In other words, it is perhaps evil's inherent arbitrariness that came as a shock to Arendt, that may have in turn prompted her to come up with the term "Banality of evil".

VII. Final remarks – Tackling the Problem of Evil

All the concepts discussed above, that is "energizing the conscience", "afacement", and "remaining open to experience", among others, can be subsumed under Kant's concept of advocating an "enlarged mentality", as a solution to circumventing evil. But this could make sense only in a utopian world. Teaching people not to waste food by telling them to think with an "enlarged mentality" of the poor and the needy could only show limited good results. Human behavior is grounded in acts of casuistry or sophistry, governed by self-interests whether in the doing of good or evil deeds. It has maybe been difficult for many to admit to being moved by self-interests, again because of the age-old prejudice about its immorality.

The problem is that we do not all have the same potential to think coherently, systematically, even less so, to *feel uniformly*: to make matters worse, there are often lapses when even the most lucid among us have thoughts that are not always clear and logical. To expect us to be more aware or pay more attention to details, with the broader aim of subverting evil, as Arendt, Hinton and Minnich suggest, is firstly, tantamount to laying "too much claim on our thinking attention,"[79] which can be thoroughly exhausting, and is secondly, indisputably, an unrealistic expectation.

Minnich's solution may also sound idealistic in its hope of converting an entire group of non-thinkers into thinkers, especially through today's *en masse* education system. It will be worth exploring what she has to propose in her next book, where she hopes to detail "an education that can free us…from the deadening hold of banality."[80] Zimbardo's approach is slightly more plausible: he suggests practical means to allow the balance of good to outdo evil: for example, through the use of identity labels and the FITD method. Recently, to further these ideas, he has also been closely involved in

setting up the Heroic Imagination Project, among others. An analysis of the effectiveness of these attempts however, is beyond the scope of this paper.

It is noteworthy that Zimbardo's strategic or Machiavellian techniques of encouraging goodness (eg., through the FITD approach, the use of identity labels, etc) follow the logic of Kant and Arendt's discussion that human behavior is not molded by anything that is deeply rooted or well thought out, but is merely the result of people following "usages and practices" that are the order of the day. Following Zimbardo's analysis on the problem of evil however, we are now faced with a new conundrum that turns Minnich and Arendt's principal argument on the importance of thinking on its head. Promoting goodness à la Zimbardo, would spare us of the problem of having to worry about non-thinking persons, the passive automats, because they would be more inclined to imitate what they have been taught, or mould their behavior according to role models, or "exemplers". But it would bring to the fore the issue of dealing with those who think, and exercise their freedom. Zimbardo contradicts his own belief about the need for positive reinforcement as the only recourse to promoting goodness, as detailed above, by wrongly presupposing that "the thinking ones" would naturally frown upon evildoing and resist it, as if doing good would come naturally or instinctively to them. The truth is that it is often the ones who think and who are sufficiently autonomous, who resist the (Machiavellian) use of say identity labels to spread goodness; the reason being that they may be deterred by the patronizing effects of such an approach. Ironically, they are the ones who are more likely to turn into primary perpetrators, having the ability to gather a group of passive automats in order to add one more record to the history of mass harm.

In summary, Minnich's Evil of Banality can be mirrored onto Hinton's Banality of Everyday Thought. Both have expanded the reach of what Arendt originally meant by the banality of evil; the danger of thoughtlessness they say, affects us not only in exceptional circumstances in the commission of evil, but in our daily lives, and even while we do good. Ultimately the advice meted out by the four academicians discussed above, shares an obvious parallel: they are all unanimous in encouraging *empathy.* The manner of achieving it however continues to remain contentious: Minnich proposes education, although with some measure of reserve; Zimbardo urges us to have institutions to teach heroism, to imbibe in us the culture of engaging in heroic actions;[81] Hinton and Arendt ask for a raising of awareness of the differences among us in the way we think.

Right now, where we stand, we do not seem to have much influence on "enlarging the minds" of everyone, especially since this implies implementing some form of uniform change in the way we think. Too many numbers are involved, and teaching empathy, especially ensuring a monolithic grasp of the notion, is quasi impossible. The four theses (or banalities) explored in this paper may have merely *reasserted* the universally acknowledged thought that an attempt on our part to try to understand other people is a must if we want to live more meaningfully.

Notes:

1. For a debate on whether Arendt's Banality of Evil can co-exist with Radical Evil, or merely substitutes it, see Paul Formosa, "Is Radical Evil Banal? Is Banal Evil Radical?," *Philosophy & Social Criticism* 33, no. 6 (2007).
2. Elizabeth Minnich, *The Evil of Banality* (London: Rowman & Littlefield, 2017), 38. Cf. For a discussion about how Arendt misinterpreted Eichmann's nature, see Delpla. and Lipstadt.
3. Hannah Arendt, *Responsibility and Judgment* (New York: Schocken Books, 2003), 30.
4. *The Life of the Mind* (New York Harcourt Brace & Co, 1978), 4.
5. See Ron Rosenbaum, *Explaining Hitler - the Search for the Origins of His Evil* (USA: Da Capo Press, 2014). for a study of all the complex theories devised by academics and others to portray Hitler in a way that matched the extraordinariness of the evil he had perpetrated.
6. See Zygmunt Bauman, *Modernity and the Holocaust* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1989)., for more information on this.
7. For a discussion on how the bureaucratic mechanism facilitates the perpetration of evil, see Christopher L. Atkinson, "Reflections on Administrative Evil, Belief, and Justification in Khmer Rouge Cambodia," *SAGE Open* (2013). It is interesting to note that Duch (mentioned later in the paper), a mid-level perpetrator during the Khmer Rouge era was given a position of authority because of his characteristics of trustworthiness, obedience, hard work and diligence. See Alexander Laban Hinton, *Man or Monster? The Trial of a Khmer Rouge Torturer* (USA: Duke University Press, 2016), 199-200.
8. Hannah Arendt, *The Promise of Politics* (USA: Schocken Books, 2005), 31.
9. See Stanley Milgram, *Obedience to Authority* (An Experimental View-Tavistock Publications 1974).; Philip Zimbardo, *The Lucifer Effect* (USA: Random House, 2007).; Christopher R. Browning, *Ordinary Men - Reserve Police Battalion 101 and the Final Solution in Poland* (1993). Cf. Daniel Jonah Goldhagen, *Hitler's Willing Executioners_ Ordinary Germans and the Holocaust* (Alfred A. Knopf, 1996).
10. Minnich, 31.
11. Ibid., 33-34. "The Evil of Banality: Arendt Revisited," *Arts and Humanities in Higher Education* 13 (2014).
12. Arendt, *The Life of the Mind*, 13.
13. Ibid.
14. *Responsibility and Judgment* 17-18.

15. Bernhard Schlink, *The Reader* (USA: Vintage Books, 1995), 128.
16. For similar accounts of the need to de-romanticize evil, see Zimbardo., Alexander Laban Hinton, *Man or Monster? - the Trial of a Khmer Rouge Torturer* (USA: Duke University Press, 2016).
17. For a detailed discussion of how trials are limited to cases of individual misconduct and not to politically based, collectively organized crimes, see ibid.
18. Arendt, *Responsibility and Judgment* 57.
19. See Erich Fromm, *The Anatomy of Human Destructiveness* (Holt, Rinehart and Winston 1973).; Luke Russell, "Dispositional Accounts of Evil Personhood," *Philosophical Studies: An International Journal for Philosophy in the Analytic Tradition* 149, no. 2 (June 2010).
20. Zimbardo, 448.
21. Ibid., 449.
22. Sikkink refers to this as 'norm entrepreneurship'. See Kathryn Sikkink, *The Justice Cascade - How Human Rights Prosecutions Are Changing World Politics* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2011).
23. Arendt, *Responsibility and Judgment* 45.
24. Zeno Franco and Philip Zimbardo, "The Lucifer Effect by Philip Zimbardo," http://www.lucifereffect.com/heroism.htm.
25. Zimbardo, 211.
26. Ibid.
27. Hinton, 70.
28. Ibid., 78.
29. Ibid., 562-63.
30. Ibid., 69.
31. Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Genealogy of Morals and Ecce Homo*, trans. Walter A. Kaufmann and RJ Hollingdale, Vintage Books Edition ed. (New York: Vintage Books, 1989), 382-83.
32. Arendt, *The Life of the Mind*, 4. For an acknowledgment of this by Minnich, see Minnich, *The Evil of Banality*, 152.
33. *The Evil of Banality*, 152.
34. Ibid., 51.
35. See Sigmund Freud, *The Uncanny*, trans. Alix Strachey (New York: Penguin, 2003).
36. Minnich, *The Evil of Banality*, 76.
37. Ibid., 88.
38. Ibid., 92.
39. Ibid. (Her emphasis)
40. Ibid., 88.
41. Ibid., 151.
42. Ibid., 152.
43. Ibid., 151.
44. (my emphasis)
45. Minnich, *The Evil of Banality*, 151.
46. "The Evil of Banality: Arendt Revisited," 158.
47. Arendt, *The Life of the Mind*, 5.
48. Minnich, *The Evil of Banality*, 215.
49. Arendt, *The Life of the Mind*, 4.
50. Minnich, *The Evil of Banality*, 152.

51. Arendt, *Responsibility and Judgment* 50.
52. Ibid., 61.
53. Ibid.
54. Ibid., 62.
55. Ibid., 63.
56. Ibid.
57. Ibid., 53.
58. Ibid., 61.
59. Ibid., 72.
60. Ibid., 73.
61. Ibid., 78.
62. Ibid., 96.
63. Ibid., 97.
64. Ibid., 111.
65. Ibid., 139.
66. Ibid., 140.
67. Ibid., 146.
68. Zimbardo, 208.
69. Ibid., 486.
70. Minnich, *The Evil of Banality*, 34-35.
71. Ibid., 35.
72. Ibid.
73. Ibid., 75.
74. Hinton, 581.
75.(Her emphasis). Minnich, *The Evil of Banality*, 45.
76. Arendt, *Responsibility and Judgment* 89.
77. Ibid., 16.
78. Michel Foucault, *Abnormal* (New York: Picador, 2003).
79. Arendt, *The Life of the Mind*, 4.
80. Minnich, *The Evil of Banality*, 217.
81. Franco and Zimbardo.

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