

# Evaluating the banality of evil thesis



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The word ‘evil’ exists in many cultures universally around the world. The word evil was previously, on the whole, limited to religious and secular beliefs. However, although the word exists around the world, the meaning of ‘evil’ is not collective. James Waller (2002: 12) argues that part of the reason for this is because the word has been overused. Waller explains that people replace ‘wrong’ or ‘shocking’ with the term ‘evil’. Waller notes two types of evil: human evil and natural evil. Natural evil occurs due to natural processes of changes and is not due to human involvement. An example is an earthquake resulting in loss of lives. Human evil occurs as a result of conscious intentions and decisions made by humans.

#### Introduction to Arendt and the book

The origin of the term the “banality of evil” is the caption from the American philosopher, Hannah Arendt’s book published in 1963 called ‘Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil’. In 1961, Arendt was present at the Adolf Eichmann trial in Jerusalem whilst working as a reporter for ‘The New Yorker’ newspaper. She held an interest in the trial as she wished to understand what led an ordinary person to become involved in the mass murder of Jewish citizens during the Holocaust. Arendt examines the actual trial and other issues related to the trial such as; the personality of Eichmann, nature of evil and she also wrote a considerable amount regarding the flaws of the trial. Arendt stated the trial is “show trial” where the trial was just a formality as Eichmann was already convicted. Arendt mentions throughout the book that Eichmann was not appropriately defended nor was he allowed adequate access to his lawyer. Eichmann was

hanged on May 31, 1962 after being found guilty by the Israeli courts on fifteen counts of crime against the Jewish people and humanity.

#### About BON

Evil takes place due to excessive thoughtlessness by those who are not evil as a nature. Eichmann did not possess the ability to think independently therefore he did not question the moral activities of the state (Arendt, 1961). Eichmann's weakness was that he was extremely shallow and therefore he was unable to think from another individual's viewpoint. Due to this, he was unable to understand that by following Nazi orders, he became involved in the bloodbath which ultimately led to his death sentence.

Eichmann strived for a work promotion and therefore, Arendt summarised that there were 'no motives at all'.

Clarke suggests that Arendt planned to contrast with Kant's notion of 'radical evil' and to suggest Eichmann's as a 'thoughtless' individual with no 'satanic' or other shockingly evil aims. Arendt's study of the Eichmann trial assured her that Eichmann was ordinary and that his banality was apparent in his thoughtlessness.

The phrase the "banality of evil" is mentioned once in the book and this is during the last chapter of the book. Arendt did not elaborate on what she meant by the phrase but readers can understand what she meant due to hints throughout the book. The "banality of evil" thesis is the notion that ordinary people commit barbaric acts without realisation of what they are doing.

## About (thoughtlessness)

However, it is clear from Arendt's report of Eichmann that he had knowledge, and that he was able to rationalise and showed willpower. Eichmann would face difficulties in common social situations if he did not possess these senses. Due to no known difficulties in using his judgement to will and reason, Eichmann had success in the Third Reich.

There is theoretical implication in the claim that Eichmann did not think. This is indeed a fundamental element of her analysis of the threats of modern civilisation. Arendt believed that Eichmann was an extreme illustration of the risks of thoughtlessness. Arendt argued that thoughtlessness was a common feature of this time period and she therefore proposes, that 'it is important to think what we are doing' (Arendt, 1958: 5).

Arendt deemed the psychology of thinking, willing and judging as independent components and supports Hume with the view that reasoning alone cannot influence the willing (Arendt, 1978: 70).

Arendt commonly treated thought and action as separate components which were a key to understanding her political beliefs. Arendt explained that judging is simply reflecting on thoughts and viewing situations to create judgements but this does not tell you how to act. (Arendt, 1978: 58).

According to Arendt, although action is always social and collective, it is the will which is the most unique of all the human capabilities. The will is what presents the foundation for characterisation of the person. This characterisation caused by the will then creates problems for the concept of

freedom. According to Arendt, freedom without any barriers is frightening (Arendt, 1978: 195-6).

### Support for BON

Historian Dick de Mildt's review supported the banality of evil thesis. De Mildt studied individuals on trial for alleged involvement with the Nazi's. He explained that the individuals he studied were not killers by conviction but somewhat killers by circumstances.

Eichmann was unable to view the consequences of his decisions. It appeared that he could only understand that he was doing his job. During the trial Eichmann asserted that he simply sat in his office and completed his work, 'Ich sass am Schreibtisch und machte meine Sachen' (Papadatos, 1964: 29).

Carnahan and McFarland (2007) note that there is a general understanding, that evil only prevails because normal and honest human beings become fiends when they are in egregious situations; particularly, when their judgment is sabotaged by compliance to a more authoritative mass. This view is epitomised in the notion of the " banality of evil" thesis.

Lozowick (2002) notes the " banality of evil" thesis has become a lasting aspect of understanding in the West, and is therefore a gist of what occurs in the present society.

At the same time that Eichmann was appearing in court for his crimes, Stanley Milgram (1963, 1974) was carrying out his studies on obedience. In his study, normal and psychologically stable men participated in a false memory test, as the role of teachers. These men were willing to administer

electric jolts of increasing level to another person, who acted as learner, whenever the latter answered incorrectly. Every single participant was ready to deliver powerful tremors of 300 volts. Sixty-five per cent complied with all the experimenter's requirements, distributing shocks of the highest voltage at 450 volts. Milgram's conclusion therefore supports Arendt's argument that ordinary individuals can be responsible for harmful acts, but also, his reasoning reflected hers too. Milgram explained that when people are faced by authoritative individuals, they surrender responsibility for their actions to those in charge. Critics state that the explanations from Arendt and Milgram are merely coincidental but further evidence suggests otherwise. Blass (2004) noted that Milgram worked without any influence from previous theories during his 1963 study.

Further support comes from the field of psychology in the form of the 'Stanford Prison Experiment'. This experiment was conducted by Philip Zimbardo in 1973. In this study, participants were randomly allocated to the role of a prisoner or a prison guard. The aim was to monitor the group interactions which developed over a two weeks period.

The study had many intricate details, but the main point that is of relevance for this essay is that the guards embraced their positions with violence and therefore the study was discontinued after six days. There were increased fears about the safety of the prisoners, who were restricted by the guards to a continuous cycle of mockery, deprivation, and ill-treatment.

As with Milgram's work, the influence of Zimbardo's ideas has also been strengthened by their correlation with supports from other academic fields.

An example is, Browning's (1992) review of the actions of Reserve Police Battalion (RPB) 101 between 1942 and 1943. Members of the RPB would travel around Poland and gather the groups of people targeted by the Final Solution- predominantly Jews. The battalion was responsible for the murder of at least 38, 000 Jews (Browning, 1992).

Browning emphasises that the members were not extremist nor anti-Semite who were aware that their action was not obligatory. Browning agrees with Milgram that these 'ordinary' men's moral judgement suspended after entering an agentic state.

Browning agrees with Zimbardo that this happened without leadership. Browning uses the Stanford Prison Experiment to suggest that the situation in Poland in the 1940s was adequate to turn ordinary people into mass murderers (Browning, 1992: 168).

### Against BON

Psychologists and medical analysts who examined Eichmann had formerly maintained that he was "a man obsessed with a dangerous and insatiable urge to kill" who had "a dangerous and perverted personality" (Arendt, 1963: 21)

According to Arendt, Eichmann was merely ignorant of his own evilness. He believed he had neither murdered anyone himself, nor had he instructed anyone to be murdered. Arendt also believed that Eichmann seemed alarmingly normal. Arendt explained that Eichmann was not a serial killer whose intentions were evil but that he was determined to stringently follow

rules and obey orders. According to the Israeli investigators who interviewed him, Eichmann showed no dislike for the Jewish people. Although he ordered the death of many, Eichmann did not feel emotionally involved in the incident. Arendt (1963) notes that Eichmann killed people instinctively and obediently. Arendt noted the fact that Eichmann had lost his ability to make moral decisions. Due to a passion with perfecting the practical aspects of the holocaust (e. g. organising vehicles to carry the Jews), Eichmann and his colleagues had no understanding that what they were doing was immoral.

Michael Selzer (1977) is an American researcher who sent images drawn by Eichmann to six psychologists. Their job was to analyse the images using personality tests, such as the Bender-Gestalt and the House-Person-Tree Tests. The psychologists were made aware of the age, sex and the importance of the person who drew the pictures. The majority of the psychologists concluded that the subject had a violent and a neurotic personality. Once the psychologists were presented with the name of the person who drew the images, Selzer concluded that the psychologists were ‘not surprised to learn that his name was Adolf Eichmann’. Thomas Litwack (1977), however, criticised the study as the researchers may have been aware who they were evaluated. Litwack explained that as Michael Selzer, a renowned psychologist was in charge of the tests, the psychologists who were examining the images may have guessed that the subject may be a figure who is well-known. Furthermore, as a psychometric test was required, the subject may be mentally unstable or may have committed something inhumane. These hints may have led the psychologists to guess that the subject is Adolf Eichmann. Stephen Whitfield (1981) notes that the results



would have been more plausible if the psychologists chose Eichmann's drawing from a selection of other subjects, who may also have also committed atrocities or be alleged to be psychologically unstable.

Nevertheless the psychological tests did not create a relationship between his destructiveness and the intolerance towards Jewish people, which the prosecutor ascribed to him (Whitfield., 1981).

To challenge the notion that Eichmann was not banal, Cesarani (2004) observes that Arendt only attended the first few days of Eichmann's trial in 1963, in which he gave a statement. Cesarani argues that Eichmann used this opportunity to weaken the claims made by the prosecution team that Eichmann was an evil extremist, thus he purposely appeared ordinary and dull. Due to an early departure from the trial, Arendt did not witness the evidence from victims who indicated that Eichmann was anything but a banal member of the government.

Vetlesen (2005: 5) claims that by suggesting that Eichmann was thoughtless, Arendt only believed his portrayal of himself in court.

A thorough inspection of evidence from the past also approves the negative image of Eichmann.

Haslam (2007: 618) points out that Eichmann's views changed after becoming more involved with the Nazi movement. Above all, his views on how to deal with the Jewish people changed from one of leaving the country voluntarily to one of implementing and organising transportation to the death camps. Haslam argues that Eichmann had more involvement in the deaths of many, instead of merely 'following orders'; that is, Eichmann

developed new ways to carry out deportations, to such an extent that he was appraised and acknowledged by his superiors. Haslam provides evidence that on an occasion, Eichmann was involved in a conflict with his superior (by the name of Himmler) due to Himmler adopting a more pacific strategy to the one recommended by Eichmann. Haslam concludes that Eichmann was aware of his actions and in court displayed no repentance not remorse as he was not banal.

Rees (1997) notes that the orders issue by superiors in the Nazi movement were vague, in terms of what was expected. Therefore, Eichmann had to use his imagination to impress the Führer. This explanation is supported by Vetlesen (2005) who reviewed evidence showing that Nazi members were consciously aware of what they were doing, believed in the cause and once the orders were followed, celebrations were held. Vetlesen provides an example in

Schutzstaffeln (SS) officers ensuring every member was involved in the ethnic-cleansing at least once; therefore administrators working in offices were also involved in the crimes.

In this way, previous views of Eichmann, the banality of evil and the holocaust are challenged with evidence suggesting that these incidents are not normal and do not occur due to thoughtlessness. Rather Haslam points out that sheer determination and planning is needed. Further support discrediting the banality of evil is from Lozowick, (2002: 279) who states that, Eichamnn and his fellow bureaucrats worked hard and thought hard, over a lengthy period of time, over how they would carry out their crimes.

Goldhagen (1996) questions Browning's (1992) attempts to make the Reserve Police Battalion (RPB) 101 appear banal. Goldhagen (1996: 168) categorises battalion members into three groups: 'enthusiastic killers', 'shooters and ghetto clearers' and 'refusers and evaders'. Goldhagen notes that the 'enthusiastic killers' were actively looking for ways to receive more involvement in their tasks.

Although their acts are not entirely due to the civilisation and group contexts in which they took place, neither Hitler's agents, members of the battalion, Milgram's participants, nor Zimbardo's guards became insensitive machines. Therefore, the true shock is not that those involved in the holocaust were unaware of the nature of what they were doing. It is actually that they genuinely believe what they are doing is right. Rees (1977) argues that their actions occurred not due to a mechanical compliance but due to ingenious and fanatical reasons.

By arguing that Nazi criminals were not banal, means that there are attempts to disregard Milgram's research on obedience. It is unclear whether the participants in Milgram's obedience and Zimbardo's prison study entered in an agentic state due to the presence of an authority. This explanation does not explain why the participants in Milgram study experienced chronic doubts and showed conflicts in their moral judgement as a result of their role as a teacher.

Self-categorization theory states that what people learn about particular groups, before deciding to join them, leads them to understand more about themselves. Turner & Oakes (1986) use this theory to explain that groups

play a role in transforming its members by changing the personality of their members and the way they express particular moods. Therefore when members behave according to group norms, they are less likely to speak out and express their true beliefs. Therefore Eichmann held authoritarian views before being involved with the Nazi's but as involvement increased, his views became extreme and to a different depth.

However, it is not enough for effective tyrants to be more violent, they need to hold a certain degree of social influence so that individuals holding similar but less radical views do not attempt to interfere or oppose them.

As social circumstance change, individuals who were insignificant previously, begin to be seen as symbolising group values. This leads them to take a position where they order other group members on what is right and what (Turner, 1987).

From this, they become leaders who achieve the authority to manipulate activities through their control over others (Turner, 2005). Moreover, leaders do not just take advantage of the transformed social context; they actively try to change the social context in order to suit their needs (Reicher et al., 2005).

This demonstrates the expansion and the success of the Nazi's. Nazi members in the early days made various attempts to weaken the Weimar Republic and to create a civil unrest. Later, they were also able to claim power by providing a solution to a problem created by them. The Nazi regime offered authoritarian solutions promising that such solutions would bring back traditional german values. As Nazism was accepted as the way

forward, the political system and the legislative system changed according to the Nazism requirements.

Ardent initially attempted to explain the banality of evil through the concept of radical evil; this was the highest form of evil. She believed that radical evil was the reason for concentration camps; the victims were treated as valueless not as human beings.

### Criticism of Zimbardo

The key feature from Zimbardo's study was that, the acts of aggression by the guards occurred, as a consequence of constantly dressing in the attire of a guard and delivering the authority which is intrinsic to this job. (Haney et al., 1973: 62) note that people do not essentially need the pressure of strong leaders (as Milgram previously stated) in order to stop using their sense of moral judgement and commit atrocities. Alessandra Stanley (2006) agreed with Haney et al. because the participants in the Stanford Prison Experiment were instructed to play the role of a guard not to be abusive. Therefore by being abusive, the participants conformed to their own ideas of how a prison guard should behave and of how to hold authority.

Similar criticisms have been made of Zimbardo's study. It was found that Zimbardo instructed the guards that the prisoners must sense fear and must be under constant surveillance. By doing so, Zimbardo gave ideas to his guards on how he would like them to torment the prisoners. This does not show Zimbardo as a neutral experimenter (Haslam, 2007: 620).

Carnahan and McFarland's (2007) conducted a study to understand which types of people are attracted to tyrannical groups. They studied the 'Stanford Prison Experiment' and noted that those participants who volunteered to participate in this study were not necessarily ordinary individuals. These individuals tended to be aggressive and egotistical by nature, than the individuals who volunteered for controlled and safer experiments.

This explanation fits in with Vetlesen's (2005) understanding that the individuals who were drawn to the Nazism or similar extremist groups do so as they feel a connection with the group's principles and believe this will give them an identity. Vetlesen also highlights the importance of tactical issues and career enhancement when analysing individuals who were linked with the Nazi's. This explains why doctors and engineers were amongst the Nazi members as they believed it gave them unlimited opportunities to follow their aspirations. Hence he argues that for organised evil to work there needs to be a mergence between individual and institutional factors to work towards a similar goal.

### Radical Evil

Arendt argues that radical evil is perpetrated through a three step process. Firstly, all of the individual's legal right are taken away. Concentrations camps fulfilled these criteria as the inmates held there were not recognised as individuals who hold legal rights. The ability to make moral judgements is the second criteria, which is also taken away. As the person lacks a moral self, he is unable to choose good over bad. The final step to the

radicalisation process is spontaneity. According to Arendt the concentration camps depicts how human spontaneity can be destabilised by the occurrence of dictatorship.

#### Conclusion:

Arendt suggests that evil is not limited to callous individuals.

Cesarani (2004) notes that although on one hand there was nothing from Eichmann's life before the Nazi, which could suggest his reasons for committing crimes, but he was nevertheless 'different'. It was his personal background which attracted him to Nazism; the more involved he became, the more callous his actions were. According to Cesarani this meant he had more role in the Nazi's than Arendt understands; he was involved on a creative dictatorial level which demands deeper level of thinking.

Looking at tyranny and group dynamics it can be argued that evil can appear banal in these situations. However, the developments of the groups and their motives are a complex process. Therefore, Haslam argues that the 'normalisation of evil' is not banal.

The phrase "banality of evil" is left to interpretation due to a lack of clarity by Arendt. This has rendered the phrase open to interpretation and attacks by critic. This theory has instilled the view that every human is capable of committing evil. This means that those who commit evil acts are not different from 'normal' human beings. From Arendt's work, it is possible to understand that ordinary individuals can commit evil acts depending on the correct circumstances. From this insight it is learnt that the ability to commit

evil lies in everyone. However, it does not explain how so people commit evil.

Browning (1992) thus assumes that as the members of Reserve Police Battalion 101 were capable to commit mass murders; all other men are also capable to do this under the right circumstances. This theory has powerful and convincing support from multiple disciples (eg., Haney et al., 1973; Zimbardo et al., 1973; Milgram, 1963).

To understand the Banality of evil thesis, it's important to acknowledge that when humans are banal it does not mean that they are simple. As previous examples (e. g. Milgram; Zimbardo) have demonstrated, humans do not act decidedly and mechanically. For those who do act in an evil way, they are consciously aware and are involved in a moral conflict.