

## **Is Radical Evil Banal? Is Banal Evil Radical?**

### **1. Introduction**

There has been much recent debate concerning how Hannah Arendt's concepts of radical evil and the banality of evil 'fit together', if at all. There are two general positions in regard to this question. The first, forwarded most notably by Richard Bernstein,<sup>1</sup> sees the two concepts as broadly compatible. However, within this position, there are those who see some localised incompatibility with regard to the account of motivation (such as Bernstein and Henry Allison),<sup>2</sup> and those who see the two concepts as intimately related and not at all in contradiction with each other (such as Peg Birmingham).<sup>3</sup> Others, such as Wayne Allen, seem to fall somewhere in between.<sup>4</sup> The second, forwarded initially by Gershom Scholem (and arguably by Arendt herself) and recently updated by Dana Villa,<sup>5</sup> sees the two concepts as inherently incompatible. In this paper I shall argue for a position of the first type, by showing that the two concepts are broadly compatible. However, I shall also argue against the various other positions of this type, listed above, which all see the two concepts as fundamentally interdependent. Instead, I contend that radical evil and the banality of evil are *independent* but nonetheless highly *complementary* concepts.

### **2. Radical Evil**

For Arendt, as for many others, the Nazi regime and the Holocaust were seen as utterly unprecedented events which dictated the need to re-think the possible extremes of evil. Arendt initially attempted to do this through her concept of radical evil, which she also refers to as the 'greatest' or 'absolute' evil. What is so absolute about the new type of evil at Auschwitz is, for Arendt, that it is seemingly not done from any "humanly comprehensible motive[s]".<sup>6</sup> It is a type of evil that goes radically beyond the Kantian categorical imperative, which forbids us to treat persons solely as means rather than as ends-in-themselves. If a person is treated as a means, this at least implies that the person is considered to have some utility or value, namely that of achieving an end. But radical evil is absolute evil because it takes this to its absolute extreme; concentration camp inmates are treated not as

persons, nor even as things or means, worthy of achieving a particular end, but as intrinsically valueless, as completely useless and thus as totally superfluous.

Arendt argues that radical evil is perpetrated through a three step process. The first essential step in this process is the killing of the *juridical* person. This involves removing *all* of a person's legal rights as a citizen, that is, removing a person's 'right to have rights' before the law.<sup>7</sup> As far as the law is concerned such superfluous people simply do not exist. Concentration camps serve this end practically by creating an environment where any pretext to having rights is completely abolished. Thus it is essential that people are not incarcerated in the concentration camps for *any* legal reason, that is, they cannot be thought of as criminals, as this would imply that they had some legal standing.<sup>8</sup> This results in a system of arbitrary detention which forms an integral part of the totalising domination that a totalitarian system seeks to impose on its entire populace.

Secondly, the *moral* person is killed, and this is achieved by removing the very possibility of making moral choices. The moral person presupposes the freedom to choose between doing good or evil, but in a totalitarian regime this freedom is removed through the elimination of good as a possible choice. For example, when a person is "faced with the alternative of betraying and thus murdering his friends or of sending his wife and children...to their death; when even suicide would mean the immediate murder of his own family",<sup>9</sup> the very *possibility* of choosing good is removed. Further, the traditional outlet of martyrdom, by which the moral person could defy evil, is also removed by making death itself completely anonymous, thereby robbing it of all testimony, grief and remembrance.<sup>10</sup> As such, "martyrdom...[becomes] impossible".<sup>11</sup> Thus the one thing a person alone truly possesses, their own death, is stolen from them, thereby proving the totalitarian regime's assertion that nothing really belonged to them and that they belonged to no one. It is as if they had never really existed at all.

Finally, in order to complete the process of radical evil any remaining trace of uniqueness, individuality and *spontaneity* must be totally removed. Spontaneity is for Arendt the mere possibility of doing something that cannot be simply and completely explained on

the basis of reactions to the environment and preceding events. For Kant, spontaneity is a transcendental condition of our very humanity, for without it there can be no rationality and no freedom. However, for Arendt what the Nazi death camps expose is how human spontaneity can be undermined by the phenomenon of totalitarianism.<sup>12</sup> The case of the so-called *Muselmänner* in the Nazi death camps illustrate this point all too well.<sup>13</sup> A person's spontaneity has been removed when they have been reduced to a bundle of reactions, which "can be exchanged at random for any other",<sup>14</sup> as they are all identically valueless, and so perfectly replaceable. Hence, radical evil, by literally destroying spontaneity, also destroys the very essence of humanity, and thereby seeks to make humanity itself absolutely superfluous.

Thus far I have only described Arendt's definition of *what* radical evil is and explored an analysis of *how* it arises; we are now in the position to explore *why* it is perpetrated. This question is particularly difficult since it appears as if the concentration camps themselves had neither economic nor military utility. But, as Arendt explains: "the uselessness of the camps...is only apparent. In reality they are more essential to the preservation of the regime's power than any other of its institutions".<sup>15</sup> In other words, while the concentration camps seek to make the human essence absolutely superfluous, as an institution of radical evil, the concentration camps are themselves anything but superfluous to totalitarianism. Indeed, they are the very "laboratories in which the fundamental belief of totalitarianism, that everything is possible, is being verified".<sup>16</sup> As such, they are "essential to the preservation of the regime's power".<sup>17</sup> This is because totalitarianism, which seeks 'total power' and domination, can only achieve and safeguard its goal in a world organised in such a way so as to be void of spontaneity and plurality. In contrast, despotic regimes aim only to *limit* freedom, and thus their power is likewise limited. But totalitarianism aims to *abolish* freedom, by eliminating human spontaneity and plurality, and thus its power knows no limits – for the totalitarian state everything is possible, not just, as it is for the nihilist, permitted.

The motive, then, for the perpetrators of radical evil, is not simply a lust for power, but the delusion of maintaining an absolute, divine power. Arendt writes:

If an individual man qua man were omnipotent, then there is in fact no reason why men in the plural should exist at all – just as in monotheism it is only God’s omnipotence that makes him ONE. So, in this same way, the omnipotence of an individual man would make men superfluous.<sup>18</sup>

This implies that by making people superfluous, by eliminating plurality, the totalitarian regime is attempting to assert its own ‘omnipotence’. By identifying with the party and excluding as superfluous everything different to the party, the perpetrators of radical evil were motivated by a complex desire to transcend humanity and become literally superhuman, by becoming god-like – omnipotent and ONE.<sup>19</sup> That is, as Arendt makes clear, “what binds these men together is a firm and sincere belief in human omnipotence”.<sup>20</sup>

Arendt goes on to claim that SS men are “inanimate men, i.e. men who can no longer be psychologically understood”.<sup>21</sup> Their actions make us think of “some evil spirit gone mad...amusing himself”.<sup>22</sup> As Arendt explains:

it is inherent in our entire philosophical tradition that we cannot conceive of a “radical evil” and this is true both for Christian theology, which conceded even to the Devil himself a celestial origin, as well as for Kant, the only philosopher who, in the word he coined for it, at least must have suspected the existence of this evil even though he immediately rationalised it in the concept of a “perverted ill will” that could be explained by comprehensible motives.<sup>23</sup>

For Kant, the ‘perverted ill will’, or the diabolical will, is a type of will capable of choosing evil for evil’s sake. However, Kant argues that no human being can have a diabolical will; instead evil is for Kant to be explained in terms of self-love and other ‘comprehensible’ motives.<sup>24</sup> In the above passage Arendt seems to be implying that *why* certain Nazis perpetrated radical evil is due to some deep and radical innate human capacity (i.e. a capacity not of celestial or external origins) to perform evil for evil’s sake, to destroy the human essence for its own sake.<sup>25</sup> That is, the Nazi atrocities go absolutely beyond the humanly comprehensible

motives of sinfulness and so, in seeking to destroy the very essence of humanity itself, any explanation of their actions needs to go absolutely beyond *human* categories of motivation. Thus, Arendt's notion of the *why* of radical evil seems to be quite closely related to affirming (against Kant) the possibility of a diabolical will.<sup>26</sup> For Arendt, it is only by not 'rationalising' away such a disturbing motivational account that we can explain the truly radical dimensions of totalitarian evil.

### 3. The Banality of Evil

In 1961 Arendt went to Jerusalem to cover the Eichmann trial for *The New Yorker* magazine. In the course of her trial report Arendt was:

struck by a manifest shallowness in the doer [Eichmann] that made it impossible to trace the incontestable evil in his deeds to any deeper level of roots or motives. The deeds were monstrous, but the doer – at least the very effective one now on trial – was quite ordinary, commonplace, and neither demonic nor monstrous. There was no...firm ideological convictions or specific evil motives, and the only notable characteristic...was something entirely negative: it was not stupidity but *thoughtlessness*.<sup>27</sup>

Eichmann's decisive flaw was an almost total inability to look at anything from the point of view of another person, coupled with a lack of imagination and a certain remoteness from reality. Eichmann's evil was banal, not because it was 'commonplace', but because he was 'commonplace'. Thus Arendt, by emphasising Eichmann's thoughtlessness, challenges the traditional view that a perpetrator who habitually commits evil must necessarily have a diabolical character or pathological psychology.

In her *Eichmann* book Arendt claims that her account of the banality of evil works only at a "strictly factual level",<sup>28</sup> and is thus not to be read as a "theoretical treatise on the nature of evil".<sup>29</sup> However, if we accept that Arendt's banality thesis is just a factual claim, then many have argued that she got her facts wrong. For example, numerous historians,

such as Haas,<sup>30</sup> Goldhagen<sup>31</sup> and Lozowick,<sup>32</sup> all argue that Eichmann was *not* banal because ideology played some, or even an essential role, in explaining his motivations.

Such historical critiques of Arendt, while important, are somewhat inadequate, for the following two reasons. Firstly, even if they are correct in their criticisms, they have only argued against what Bernstein calls the “*historical* accuracy of Arendt’s account”, which would nonetheless leave “the far more important *conceptual* account” untouched.<sup>33</sup> The conceptual account in Arendt’s work is the idea that monstrous deeds do not necessarily require monstrous doers. Arendt’s account is historically accurate to the extent that Eichmann really fits such a conceptual model. However, even if it is shown that Eichmann was not really banal in Arendt’s sense of the term, it would not follow that the concept of the banality of evil itself has been shown to be false. Rather, it would only be shown that Eichmann did not fit the mould, not that the mould was broken. Secondly, such critiques are based on a misunderstanding of just what Arendt meant by the term ‘thoughtlessness’.

Eichmann was not thoughtless in the sense that he could not, or did not, think about the actions that he was performing. Rather, when Arendt employs the term ‘thought’ she employs it with an essentially Socratic methodology in mind. In *The Life of the Mind* Arendt writes that:

clichés, stock phrases, adherences to conventional, standardised codes of expression and conduct have the socially recognised function of protecting us against reality, that is, against the claim on our thinking attention which all events and facts arouse by virtue of their existence...the difference in Eichmann was only that he clearly knew of no such claim at all.<sup>34</sup>

Eichmann, who spoke only in clichés, was thoughtless in the sense that he unthinkingly accepted the mores and the laws that his society had given him; after all, as Eichmann put it, who was he to judge? According to Eichmann’s interpretation of the Nazi categorical imperative, to “act in such a way that the Führer, if he knew your action, would approve it”,<sup>35</sup> he had no wrong, but only his ‘duty’. Thus, Eichmann had a conscience, and indeed it

would (probably) have spoken up had Eichmann done other than his perceived duty.<sup>36</sup> The problem was that Eichmann's conscience answered not to thought or reason, but to the dictates of Hitler's will.

Thinking for Arendt is essentially "the 2-in-1 of the soundless dialogue", the self soundlessly talking to the self.<sup>37</sup> Thinking thus "actualises the difference within our identity as given in consciousness and thereby results in conscience as its by-product".<sup>38</sup> In other words, thoughtfulness is required for a genuine faculty of judgment to operate, as it is thinking that creates the (genuine) conscience that authentic moral judging requires.<sup>39</sup> For Arendt the faculty of judgment deals with particulars that cannot be subsumed under general laws that someone like Eichmann can thoughtlessly accept and follow. As such, it is a faculty that prevents us from accepting the given mores of society uncritically. Such a faculty becomes particularly important and essential in a state where the given mores are criminal and where one has nothing but their own conscience to rely upon in order to judge moral issues. Eichmann was able to commit great evil, not because he had a demonic depth to his character, but because he was thoughtlessly swept along by the criminality of the Nazi regime. He was not a great villain, but banally thoughtless and lacking in judgment.

#### **4. Banality: The Nature of Evil or of Eichmann?**

In a famous letter to Gershom Scholem Arendt writes:

you are quite right: I changed my mind and do no longer speak of "radical evil"...it is indeed my opinion now that evil is never "radical", that it is only extreme, and that it possesses neither depth nor any demonic dimensions. It can overgrow and lay waste the whole world precisely because it spreads like a fungus on the surface...the moment it [thought] concerns itself with evil, it is frustrated because there is nothing. That is its "banality". Only the good has depth and can be radical.<sup>40</sup>

This frequently quoted letter has perhaps done more than any other source to create confusion as to what is the correct philosophical interpretation of Arendt's thought on evil. In

this letter Arendt seems to be implying that the concept of banality is not, as she had previously explicitly claimed, a factual description of the phenomenon that was Eichmann in Jerusalem, but is instead to be read as a theory about the nature of evil itself. That is, as Dana Villa points out, in this letter Arendt is not simply explaining her position in the *Eichmann* book, but is explicitly *generalising* or *extending* it.<sup>41</sup>

Thus the question naturally arises: *can* and *ought* we generalise Arendt's banality thesis? I shall now argue that we should answer both of these questions in the negative. Firstly, it must be noted that in all her published work proper, including the later *The Life of the Mind*,<sup>42</sup> Arendt reiterates forcefully and clearly the claim she made in the *Eichmann* book itself; that is, she claims not to be theorising about the nature of evil itself, but merely describing what struck her about Eichmann's particular type of evil. Given that we ought give more textual weight to published work proper, as opposed to private letters (even if they were intended for possible publication), it follows that we ought to take what Arendt says seriously, and thus we ought not to read (without further evidence) her as offering a general theory of evil.

Secondly, regardless of how we *ought* to read Arendt, there still remains the question of whether or not we *can* read her as offering a general theory of evil. Allison, for example, reads Arendt in this way. He argues that Arendt:

instead of viewing them [Eichmann's actions] as stemming from inhuman, diabolical motives [as she did in the *Origins*], Arendt now sees Eichmann's crimes (and by extension, those of the Nazi regime as a whole) as essentially motiveless...Accordingly evil loses its depth and dimension and becomes simply banal.<sup>43</sup>

Thus Allison claims that Arendt sees the crimes of *all* Nazis (not just Eichmann's) as being essentially motiveless, that is, thoughtless. And he extends this even further, by claiming that for Arendt it is the very nature of all evil per se that it is banal and without roots, depth or dimension. While I think it is clear that Arendt herself does not explicitly make these

extensions in her text, the question remains whether they are feasible or possible extensions.

However, such a reading is simply untenable. Firstly, it must be noted that Eichmann's evil was said to have no roots *only* because he engaged in evil deeds *thoughtlessly*. By 'thoughtlessly' Arendt meant specifically the inability to judge, a distance from reality, a lack of imagination, and a blind acceptance of the mores of society. But clearly not *all* perpetrators of evil commit evil thoughtlessly. For example, there are instigators, like Hitler, who were not thoughtlessly following given conventions, but were *thoughtfully* creating them. Further, there were at least some Nazis who, unlike Eichmann, did indeed act from base motives, such as sadism, or from a firm and deeply rooted ideological anti-Semitism. Such perpetrators are simply not 'thoughtless' in Arendt's sense of the term. However, Todd Calder seems to challenge this view by claiming that Eichmann and Hitler differ morally only in degree and not in kind. This constitutes a challenge to my claim that Eichmann and Hitler are different types of perpetrators and thus that not all perpetrators of evil are banal.<sup>44</sup> I disagree with Calder's point because there is a genuine moral difference between what S.I. Benn refers to as Hitler's "conscientious wickedness" (i.e. thoughtfulness), and Eichmann's "heteronomous wickedness" (i.e. thoughtlessness).<sup>45</sup>

## **5. Is Radical Evil Banal? Is Banal Evil Radical?**

Scholem, in the above quoted exchange of letters with Arendt, specifically calls 'banality' and 'radical' *contradictory* theses on evil,<sup>46</sup> a claim that Arendt not only does not reject, but seems to implicitly endorse by stating that she has indeed changed her mind about evil. Against Scholem's reading, I shall now argue that we ought to hold radical evil and the banality of evil to be *compatible* concepts. By 'compatible' I mean that the two accounts are able to stand side by side in our intellectual repertoire for philosophically approaching evil.

In my earlier presentation of radical evil I clearly portrayed the *what/how* and the *why* components of Arendt's account as *distinct* elements. The former element only describes *what* happened, in terms of making the human essence absolutely superfluous,

and describes *how* this was perpetrated, through the murder of the juridical, moral and spontaneous persons. This distinct element only describes radical evil and does not assign any demonic depth to it. The second major element of Arendt's account is largely a theoretical attempt to describe *why* radical evil was perpetrated. The explanation of motive that this distinct element offers is one which posits that a certain diabolical depth and demonic profundity is possessed by the perpetrators of radical evil.

Eichmann perpetrated radical evil because he knowingly caused Jewish people to be made absolutely superfluous as human beings, by organising them to be transported to extermination camps.<sup>47</sup> However, *why* Eichmann committed radical evil is to be explained in terms of banal thoughtlessness and not in terms of any sort of diabolical profundity or depth. Given this, is there any incompatibility between Arendt's two concepts of evil? There is, I claim (contra Birmingham),<sup>48</sup> but it is a *localised* (rather than global) incompatibility, because it relates only to the *why* element of motive, and not to the distinct *what/how* element. It is only the distinct motivational element of radical evil, which allocates a demonic dimension to the motive, that is incompatible with Eichmann's banality and lack of demonic profundity. Further, this incompatibility only arises if the original motivational account is taken to be a *necessary* account for *all* perpetrators of radical evil.<sup>49</sup>

Villa, in contrast, argues in support of the claim that there is a global contradiction between the two concepts. Villa argues that if we remain "at the level of a philosophical reflection on the nature of evil" when thinking about the radicalness and banality of evil, then a contradiction or tension inevitably arises.<sup>50</sup> Villa argues:

Evil can be radical, can have a metaphysical depth and reality, only within a theological framework that...endowed totalitarian regimes with a Faustian grandeur...In *Eichmann in Jerusalem*...she showed herself ready to dispense with the Devil, ready to face the problem of evil in entirely secular terms.<sup>51</sup>

However, it is essential to note that in order for Villa's critique to be successful he has had to interpret radical evil in an overtly *ontological* sense. Villa reads radical evil as postulating a

metaphysical depth to evil, and he takes such a metaphysical depth to be defensible only within a theological, rather than secular, framework. If this is how we read the term radical evil, then it is indeed inevitable that an irreconcilable incompatibility will arise, as Arendt was undoubtedly aware. Arendt, in discussing Aquinas' theory of evil, writes:

[For Aquinas] Evil is not a principle, because it is sheer *absence*, and absence can be stated "in a private and in a negative sense"...Because of its privative character, absolute or radical evil cannot exist. No evil exists in which one can detect "the total absence of good".<sup>52</sup>

*If* we interpret both radical evil and the banality of evil in a strong ontological sense, then it is immediately clear that there is a direct and irreconcilable incompatibility. Ontologically interpreted (and generalised), the banality of evil might be thought to imply a privation theory of evil, such as the one Aquinas defends, where evil is a fungus or surface phenomenon that can parasitically only live on the good and has no depth or reality of its own. Thus, given this, it would follow that absolute or radical evil cannot possibly exist, because an evil that is the complete absence of good is the very ontological definition of non-Being.

However, Villa's point seems to be slightly different. He claims that banality implies a conception of evil in general that is secular, and radical evil implies a conception of evil in general that is theological – that is, when staying "at the level of a philosophical reflection on the nature of evil". Villa's critique is, however, based on a misunderstanding of what exactly it is that Arendt's accounts of evil do. Firstly, in contrast to Villa, it is incorrect to claim that Arendt *is* working "at the level of a philosophical reflection on the nature of evil". I have already argued that we ought to, and in fact can, only interpret the banality account to be a descriptive judgment about Eichmann. That is, it is not evil *per se* that is banal, but rather only Eichmann's particular evil, that is rootless and banal. Likewise radical evil is also not a reflection on the nature of evil itself, but a description of the *what/how* criteria for a certain *type* of evil. That is, as Robert Fine puts it, Arendt is merely describing the

"*appearance* of some radical evil", rather than the *ontological* reality of evil *per se*.<sup>53</sup> Villa is mistaken to think that Arendt was, in either account, working at the level of metaphysics and fundamental ontology.

Further, to say that the evil of *some* perpetrators of evil has roots and depth is only to say that it is not mere thoughtlessness, but evil motives, such as sadism or a desire to humiliate others or seek omnipotence, that motivates such perpetrators. This in no way implies, as Villa suggests, some sort of "theological framework". And even if there is a certain 'Faustian' grandeur to perpetrators of evil radical evil who, unlike Eichmann, sought omnipotence, this is neither indicative of a "theological framework" nor reason to reject the concept. It just is an unfortunate fact about humans that some persons, somewhat 'heroically' even, do very evil things for very evil reasons, and in the eyes of some, this sheds a certain grandeur and nobility upon them. Arendt did not wish to deny that such evildoers exist, but only that Eichmann was not one of them, and that the likes of Eichmann may prove to be more dangerous.

Radical evil is a *type of evil*. It is a large scale political phenomenon that works at the level of public institutions, and involves numerous perpetrators, undertaking numerous actions, which in combination have a certain cumulative effect which is radically evil. It refers to a specific historical phenomenon, totalitarianism, and its various incarnations, specifically in its forms in Nazi Germany and Stalinist Russia. In contrast, the banality of evil refers to a *type of perpetrator* who thoughtlessly perpetrates evil in certain circumstances, suffers from a remoteness from reality and does not possess a particularly pathological psychology. As such, it works largely at the level of the individual and concerns moral, rather than large scale political, phenomena. Hence, the moral problems raised by someone like Eichmann refer to a situation that is applicable, unlike radical evil, far beyond the realms of totalitarianism and modernity.

This position directly challenges the claims of Jennifer Geddes, Birmingham and Allen, who all see banality as a particularly new type of evil, as a "leitmotif for modernity".<sup>54</sup> While radical evil may be a new phenomenon, this is so only because it requires certain large scale

technical and organisational capabilities; thus it is indeed a phenomenon possible only in modernity and beyond. However, banality is a localised phenomenon that refers to a type of perpetrator, and such a perpetrator does not require the apparatus of modernity in order to banally commit evil. What is new is not banal perpetrators, but the extent of the evil (even radical evil) that can be thoughtlessly committed within the technical and organisational capabilities of modernity. That is, thoughtlessness is not a new phenomenon, though the extent of its implications may be.

Of course, not all instances of banal evil will result in radical evil, as someone can banally commit an evil that does not make human beings absolutely superfluous. Hence it follows that we can think of the concept of banality independently of radical evil. Further, not all perpetrators of radical evil are banal, such as a thoughtful instigator like Hitler. Hence it follows that we can think of the concept of radical evil independently of banality. Therefore, these two concepts are *independent*. They are independent because neither concept necessarily depends on the other for its sense. Given this, it should be clear that Bernstein is incorrect to argue that "rather than displacing the concept of radical evil, the banality of evil *presupposes* it".<sup>55</sup> Unfortunately, Bernstein does not at all clearly define just what he means here by 'presuppose'.<sup>56</sup> However, Bernstein's claim does seem to imply that the banality of evil is a concept that is necessarily *dependent* on radical evil - that is, we cannot have a concept of the banality of evil without a concept of radical evil. This I have shown to be false - as the concepts are independent, we can have a concept of the banality of evil without having a concept of radical evil, and vice versa.

However, not only are these two concepts compatible and independent, they are also highly and directly *complementary*. By 'complementary' I mean not only can both accounts stand side by side without contradiction, but that each shines a bit of light on the other, so that in combination the two accounts provide a fuller philosophical approach to evil than either is able to do in isolation.

An understanding of radical evil *complements* our understanding of the banality of evil, by helping us to understand how thoughtlessness can be encouraged on such large

scales. While banality may be a localised moral phenomenon, it nonetheless occurs only within political environments and will be more prevalent in some and less in others. Consider, for example, that if instead of dealing with Jews, Eichmann had been given orders to organise the shipping of all his family to a concentration camp. While it is not clear if in such a situation Eichmann would obey his orders or not, the fact is clear that he simply *could not* react thoughtlessly to the order. He would be literally compelled by the situation to consider the implications of his actions and to think about them from the perspective of his family members. But Eichmann did not face such situations, because he dealt only with what he, and his society, considered to be absolutely superfluous things (unlike his family members), nothing but (at least soon to be) bundles of valueless reactions to be dealt with expediently, efficiently and thoughtlessly.

Arendt also discusses in detail how ideological 'thinking' works with all the force of logical deduction to crush mental spontaneity, action and freedom.<sup>57</sup> The total domination of totalitarianism attempts to remove the 'inner freedom' to mentally begin something new, something beyond totalitarian logic. Such domination leads to a mass feeling of abandonment or helplessness, a feeling of being caught in the steel jaws of History or Nature, which in turn promotes mass thoughtlessness. Thus radical evil, by creating superfluous people and imposing crushing ideological logic on the populace, while not necessary to bring about thoughtless evil,<sup>58</sup> does create the types of environments where thoughtlessness can be encouraged on mass scales and, consequently, be organised on mass to achieve evil outcomes.

Likewise, the concept of the banality of evil *complements* our understanding of radical evil, as it helps us to understand the complexity of such an atrocity. The account of banality, in focusing on particular perpetrators and emphasising the complexities of motivation, complicates, and thus makes more feasible, an account of radical evil. Such an account cautions us against broad, sweeping statements that attempt to explain too simplistically such a highly complex event. Instead it encourages us to understand radical evil by examining the myriad different individual perpetrators, who must act in unison, in

order to cumulatively bring about such enormous atrocities. Likewise, a central theme of the concept of radical evil is the contrast between plurality and oneness. While we can understand this on a political scale as the contrast between public spaces where freedom and spontaneity are encouraged, on the one hand, and destroyed on the other, we can also understand this contrast on an individual scale. Arendt's analysis of Eichmann's thoughtlessness can help us to understand the important role that thinking and judging might play in ensuring plurality and thus challenging the oneness and total domination of the radical evil of totalitarian states.

## 6. Forgiveness and Punishment

Arendt repeatedly claims that the true hallmark of radical evil is that it cannot be punished and is unforgivable.<sup>59</sup> This is because such offences "transcend the realm of human affairs and the potentialities of human power, both of which they radically destroy wherever they make their appearance".<sup>60</sup> This claim, I shall now show, follows specifically from Arendt's account of radical evil and particularly from the problematic *why* component. Given that I have argued that this problematic component is the source of a localised incompatibility with the concept of the banality of evil, it follows that I must now assess whether Arendt's claims about forgiveness and punishment remain relevant post-Eichmann.

For Arendt forgiveness involves forgiving *what* a person has done for the sake of *who* they are. Arendt argues that Christianity "assumed that only love can forgive because it is only love [that] is fully receptive to *who* somebody is, to the point of being always willing to forgive him whatever he may have done".<sup>61</sup> However, Arendt sees love as being "the most powerful of all antipolitical forces" because it abolishes the "in-between" which separates us from others.<sup>62</sup> If forgiving were based *only* on love, Arendt claims, then forgiveness would remain outside the "larger domain of human affairs"; i.e. the public sphere. However, Arendt claims that respect "is [also] quite sufficient to prompt forgiving for what a person did, for the sake of the person".<sup>63</sup> Respect is not so much esteem for a person and their qualities, but is rather a respect for *what* they are (or could be), that is, an individual and unique

person in a plural public sphere.<sup>64</sup> However, Arendt is not claiming that because we ought to respect all persons, it follows that we ought to forgive all crimes. Rather, Arendt only claims that respect (as well as love) is a sufficient prompt for forgiving, not a necessary one. Thus, Arendt's understanding of forgiveness implies that all humans who we are capable of respecting (or loving), that is, all persons, we are also capable of forgiving whatever they have done (though we are not obliged to).<sup>65</sup>

Hence, if Arendt is to hold that the perpetrators of radical evil are unforgivable, given her discussion of forgiveness, it follows that she must think that we can neither love nor respect such perpetrators. Given Arendt's early radical evil account of motivation, we can see that the reason why Arendt claims that we can neither love nor respect the perpetrators of radical evil is because their actions are not human, but rather aim to destroy human plurality out of a diabolical desire for omnipotence, total power and Oneness.

But can we forgive Eichmann's banal evil? Arendt claims that Eichmann too is unforgivable. Arendt's argument for this claim relies on a distinction between *humans* (understood in a descriptive sense) and *persons* (understood in a normative sense). Arendt claims that it is the "process of thought in which I...explicitly constitute myself a person".<sup>66</sup> That is, it is the *activity* of *thoughtfulness* that constitutes personhood. Thus, Eichmann, who was constituted by *thoughtlessness*, is, for Arendt, merely a human and not a person proper. Given that for Arendt it is the person and not the crime that is forgiven, it follows that "in rootless evil there is no person left whom one could ever forgive".<sup>67</sup> Thus, Arendt claims that Eichmann, and banal perpetrators of evil like him, are unforgivable, because they are not persons, and thus there is nobody, no *person*, to forgive.

However, it is essential to note that there is an important shift that occurs in Arendt's thought on forgiveness. In both cases Arendt's position rests on the claim that perpetrators of radical evil are not persons. But in her earlier account the perpetrator is not a person because they *exceed* or *transcend* the "realm of human affairs and the potentialities of human power".<sup>68</sup> Such perpetrators are not persons capable of being respected because they are essentially *supra*-human. In contrast, Eichmann is too thoughtless to even be a

person. Eichmann cannot be respected because he is essentially *less than* or *sub-human*. Thus we see that Arendt fundamentally changes her justification, but not her position, on forgiveness in the light of her latter account of the banality of evil.<sup>69</sup>

Arendt also claims that the perpetrators of radical evil cannot be punished. She makes two distinct claims in relation to this inability. The first point is that the Nazi's crimes "explode the limits of the law", and the second point is that "for these crimes no punishment is severe enough".<sup>70</sup> But does Arendt's thought on punishment need to change as a result of her work on Eichmann? While it is true that at the time they were committed the Nazi's crimes did indeed seem to explode the 'limits of the law', with the introduction of the notion of a crime against humanity into our legal framework, this claim now seems less strong.<sup>71</sup> This is particularly so because, given Arendt's account of radical evil as an attempt to make the human essence itself absolutely superfluous, such a legal framework does seem like the appropriate framework through which to bring the perpetrators of radical evil to justice. In regards her second point, Arendt herself gives us some reasons to think that perhaps Eichmann *was* sufficiently punished (or even too severely punished). Arendt certainly points out many mitigating circumstances, in particular that Eichmann committed his crimes "under circumstances that make it well-nigh impossible for him to know or to feel that he [was] doing wrong".<sup>72</sup> While such mitigating circumstances certainly do not undermine the foundation for punishment, namely Eichmann's responsibility for his actions, they might be read as at least challenging the claim that hanging Eichmann was far *too lenient* a punishment. However, whatever the case, in combination these two points certainly give us some grounds to at least doubt Arendt's early claim that *all* perpetrators of radical evil cannot be (adequately) punished.

## 7. Conclusion

In this paper I have examined how Arendt's concepts of radical evil, which refers to a type of evil, and the banality of evil, which refers to a type of perpetrator, fit together. While the two concepts have a *localised* incompatibility, they can be made *compatible* if we remove

the motivational *why* account (or at least its claim to generality) from our understanding of radical evil. This involves an important shift from the claim that only diabolical perpetrators can commit radical evil, to the claim that at least some perpetrators of radical evil can be banal persons. Further, while the two concepts are *independent*, they are nonetheless highly *complementary*. Therefore, by understanding in combination *both* the concepts of radical and banal evil, we can possess a fuller (though not complete) framework through which to approach both the question of evil in general (including issues such as forgiveness and punishment), and totalitarian evil in particular.

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> See chapter 8 and the Conclusion of Richard J. Bernstein, *Radical Evil: A Philosophical Interrogation* (Cambridge: Blackwell Publishers, 2002). Bernstein argues for a similar position, but with a few important differences, in chapters 7 and 8 of Richard J. Bernstein, *Hannah Arendt and the Jewish Question* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1996).

<sup>2</sup> Henry E. Allison, "Reflections on the Banality of (Radical) Evil," in *Rethinking Evil: Contemporary Perspectives*, ed. Maria Pia Lara (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001).

<sup>3</sup> Peg Birmingham, "Holes of Oblivion: The Banality of Radical Evil," *Hypatia* 18, no. 1 (2003) 80-103.

<sup>4</sup> Wayne Allen, "Hannah Arendt's Foundation for a Metaphysics of Evil," *The Southern Journal of Philosophy* 38, no. 2 (2000) 183-206.

<sup>5</sup> See chapters 1 and 2 of Dana R. Villa, *Politics, Philosophy, Terror: Essays on the Thought of Hannah Arendt* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999).

<sup>6</sup> Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1961) xxx.

<sup>7</sup> See Bernstein, *Radical Evil: A Philosophical Interrogation* 207.

<sup>8</sup> For example, Primo Levi writes: "For us...the Lager is not a punishment; for us, no end is foreseen and the Lager is nothing but a manner of living assigned to us, without limits of time" - Primo Levi, *If This Is a Man*, trans. Stuart Woolf (London: Orion Press, 1959) 94.

<sup>9</sup> Hannah Arendt, "The Concentration Camps," *Partisan Review* XV, no. 7 (1948) 757.

<sup>10</sup> See Arendt, "The Concentration Camps" 756.

<sup>11</sup> Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* 451.

<sup>12</sup> See Bernstein, *Radical Evil: A Philosophical Interrogation* 206.

<sup>13</sup> Primo Levi's "drowned", the *Muselmänner* (Muslims), are, unlike the privileged "saved", good candidates for such destroyed beings. Levi writes: "the *Muselmänner*, the drowned, form the backbone of the camp, an anonymous mass, continually renewed and always identical, of non-men who march and labour in silence, the divine spark dead within them, already too empty to really suffer. One hesitates to call them living" - Levi, *If This Is a Man* 103.

<sup>14</sup> Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* 438.

<sup>15</sup> Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* 456.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid. 437.

<sup>17</sup> Arendt, "The Concentration Camps" 760.

<sup>18</sup> Arendt in a letter to Jaspers, from Hannah Arendt and Karl Jaspers, *Correspondence 1926-1969*, ed. Lotte Kohler and Hans Saner, trans. Robert Kimber and Rita Kimber (New York: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1992) 166.

<sup>19</sup> This analysis is similar to the one Orwell offers in his *1984* for the 'why' of totalitarianism: "God is power...The first thing you must realise is that power is collective. The individual only has power in so far as he ceases to be an individual...But if he can make complete, utter submission, if he can escape from his identity, if he can merge himself in the Party so that he is the Party, then he is all-powerful and immortal." - George Orwell, *1984* (Great Britain: Penguin Books, 1967) 212.

<sup>20</sup> Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* 387.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid. 441.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid. 445.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid. 459.

<sup>24</sup> See Immanuel Kant, "Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason," in *Religion and Rational Theology*, ed. Allen Wood and George Di Giovanni (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

<sup>25</sup> It is important to note that Arendt uses the term 'radical' in the sense of 'extreme', whereas Kant uses the term in the sense of 'rooted-in'. For Kant radical evil refers to the innate but freely chosen propensity to evil that is part of human nature. I discuss Kant's radical evil thesis in Paul Formosa, "Kant on the Radical Evil of Human Nature," *The Philosophical Forum* (2007): forthcoming.

<sup>26</sup> Allison also reads Arendt's account of radical evil as affirming some sort of diabolical will - see Allison, "Reflections on the Banality of (Radical) Evil".

<sup>27</sup> Hannah Arendt, *The Life of the Mind: Thinking*, ed. Mary McCarthy (London: Secker & Warburg, 1978) 3.

<sup>28</sup> Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (New York: Penguin Books, 1965) 287.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid. 285.

<sup>30</sup> "I do not find the actions of Eichmann...and others like him banal...The claim of banality in essence says that the perpetrators of the Holocaust acted out of no real conviction at all" - Peter J Haas, *Morality after Auschwitz: The Radical Challenge of the Nazi Ethic* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1988) 1.

<sup>31</sup> For the relationship between Daniel Goldhagen's influential *Hitler's Willing Executioners*, which emphasises the importance of ideology as a motive for perpetrators of Holocaust atrocities, and Arendt's *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, see Villa, *Politics, Philosophy, Terror: Essays on the Thought of Hannah Arendt* 39-60.

<sup>32</sup> "At each stage they ran into constraints, difficulties and obstacles, and always devoted their full energies to removing everything that stood in the way of achieving their goal...They were wholeheartedly in accord with their mission, and that in itself is enough to discredit the suggestion that there was something banal about them" - Yaacov Lozowick, *Hitler's Bureaucrats: The Nazi Security Police and the Banality of Evil*, trans. Haim Watzman (London: Continuum, 2000) 271.

<sup>33</sup> See Bernstein, *Hannah Arendt and the Jewish Question* 170.

<sup>34</sup> Arendt, *The Life of the Mind: Thinking* 160.

<sup>35</sup> Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* 136.

<sup>36</sup> Although Eichmann may have had a conscience, he arguably did not have a 'genuine' or Socratic one – see Arne Johan Vetlesen, "Hannah Arendt on conscience and evil," *Philosophy and Social Criticism* 27, no. 5 (2001) 27.

<sup>37</sup> See Arendt, *The Life of the Mind: Thinking* 189.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

<sup>39</sup> Thinking prepares the way for judging by undermining unfounded rules and standards, and by providing thought-objects and stories that portray the exemplars that allow one to judge without rules. Conscience, out of egoistic concern for the self, only puts obstacles in one's way, and leads one to place a higher value on avoiding sins of commission at the potential cost of performing sins of omission. Judging goes beyond conscience in that it can also judge what one ought to do, not just what one ought not to do. Thus conscience acts as a limiting condition on judging. There is an enormous literature on 'judgment' in Arendt's work, and I have treated it here in, at best, only a cursory manner, as this is not the focus of my paper. For a good discussion see, for example, Richard J Bernstein, "Judging - the Actor and the Spectator," in *The Realm of Humanitas: Responses to the Writings of Hannah Arendt* (New York: Lang, 1990).

<sup>40</sup> Hannah Arendt, "An Exchange of Letters between Gershom Scholem and Hannah Arendt," in *The Jew as Pariah: Jewish Identity and the Politics in the Modern Age*, ed. Ron H Feldman (New York: Grove Press, 1978) 250.

<sup>41</sup> Villa, *Politics, Philosophy, Terror: Essays on the Thought of Hannah Arendt* 56.

<sup>42</sup> See Arendt, *The Life of the Mind: Thinking* 3.

<sup>43</sup> Allison, "Reflections on the Banality of (Radical) Evil" 87.

<sup>44</sup> Calder argues that Eichmann (like Hitler) is not banal, although he does not deny that some perpetrators of evil may be banal. See Todd Calder, "The Apparent Banality of Evil: The Relationship between Evil Acts and Evil Character," *Journal of Social Philosophy* 34, no. 3 (2003) 364-376.

<sup>45</sup> See S. I. Benn, "Wickedness," *Ethics* 95, no. 4 (1985) 795-810.

<sup>46</sup> Gershom Scholem, "An Exchange of Letters between Gershom Scholem and Hannah Arendt" 245.

<sup>47</sup> I defend the claim that we can hold Eichmann morally responsible for his actions in Paul Formosa, "Kant on the Radical Evil of Human Nature," *The Philosophical Forum* 38(3) (2007): 221-245.

<sup>48</sup> Birmingham writes: "I propose that Arendt does not change her mind regarding the nature of evil. Already in *Origins*...her analysis of the superfluousness of the modern human being grasps the banality of radical evil. Her later report on the trial of Eichmann...further elucidates this banality, but does not in any way refute or alter what she has argued in the earlier work" - Birmingham, "Holes of Oblivion: The Banality of Radical Evil" 81. Against Birmingham's reading I have already argued that it is thoughtlessness not superfluousness that is the root concept of banality, and that Arendt's latter work does (in the account of motive) alter her earlier work.

<sup>49</sup> It is at least unclear whether Arendt's earlier radical evil account of motivation is meant to be an account of *all* perpetrators of radical evil - however, as it is the *only* motivational explanation she offers at the time, it is reasonable to assume so.

<sup>50</sup> Villa, *Politics, Philosophy, Terror: Essays on the Thought of Hannah Arendt* 56.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid. 57-8.

<sup>52</sup> Hannah Arendt, *The Life of the Mind: Willing*, ed. Mary McCarthy (London: Secker & Warburg, 1978) 118.

<sup>53</sup> See Robert Fine, "Understanding Evil: Arendt and the Final Solution," in *Rethinking Evil: Contemporary Perspectives*, ed. Maria Pia Lara (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001) 142-3.

<sup>54</sup> From Allen, "Hannah Arendt's Foundation for a Metaphysics of Evil" 187. Also see Jennifer L Geddes, "Banal Evil and Useless Knowledge: Hannah Arendt and Charlotte Delbo on Evil after the Holocaust," *Hypatia* 18, no. 1 (2003) 108.

<sup>55</sup> Bernstein, *Radical Evil: A Philosophical Interrogation* 232.

<sup>56</sup> Bernstein is not at all clear on this point. However, an alternative way to interpret Bernstein's claim, to the one I explore above, is that he simply means that in Arendt's mind her understanding of banality of evil presupposes radical evil. This would seem to fit in with Bernstein's focus on the question of whether or not Arendt changed her mind.

<sup>57</sup> For example, see Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* 473.

<sup>58</sup> Allen's paper discusses these issues in some depth, though he does appear to see ideological domination as necessary for bringing about banal thoughtlessness, whereas I have argued above that it is conducive but not necessary. See Allen, "Hannah Arendt's Foundation for a Metaphysics of Evil".

<sup>59</sup> Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* 459.

<sup>60</sup> Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1958) 241.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid. 242-3.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid. 242.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid. 243.

<sup>64</sup> See Ibid.

<sup>65</sup> That is, forgiving remains what Laurence Thomas calls a "moral gift" rather than a "moral obligation" – see Laurence Thomas, "Forgiving the Unforgivable?," in *Moral Philosophy and the Holocaust*, ed. Eve Garrard and Geoffrey Scarre (Aldershot, England: Ashgate, 2003).

<sup>66</sup> Hannah Arendt, "Some Questions of Moral Philosophy," in *Responsibility and Judgment*, ed. J. Kohn (New York: Schocken Books) 95. Also see page 111 of the same work where a similar point is made.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid.

<sup>68</sup> Arendt, *The Human Condition* 241.

<sup>69</sup> Of course, one could contest Arendt's claims. For example, Raimond Gaita claims that even perpetrators of evil ought to be respected as human beings (a claim Kant would, arguably, agree with) – see Chapter 1 on 'Unconditional Respect' in Raimond Gaita, *Good and Evil: An Absolute Conception* (London: Macmillan Press, 1991).

<sup>70</sup> See Arendt and Jaspers, *Correspondence 1926-1969* 54. Arendt makes a similar claim in Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* 439-41.

<sup>71</sup> The indictment of crimes against humanity was applied ex post facto at the Nuremberg trials, as such, at the time they were committed the Nazi's 'crimes' were not strictly speaking illegal (at least in the sense of being crimes against humanity), but only became so later. See Chapter 19 of Haas, *Morality after Auschwitz: The Radical Challenge of the Nazi Ethic*.

<sup>72</sup> Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* 276.