

ARENDT IN JERUSALEM

A REPORT ON THE RELEVANCE OF RESPONSIBILITY

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Abstract

The paper analyzes Hannah Arendt's report of the trial in which Adolf Eichmann was condemned for his responsibility in the Shoah. From the observation of the phenomenon and the phenomenology of the "Eichmann case" two problems, above all, emerge requiring philosophical investigation of a specifically moral nature. These problems concern, on the one hand, the banality of evil and, on the other hand, the relevance of human responsibility. Finally, the paper develops the idea of responsibility even for what we are not directly responsible, and justifies the ethical character of this attitude.

Keywords: Arendt, Eichmann, evil, responsibility, Shoah.

Arendtova v Jeruzalemu. Poročilo o pomembnosti odgovornosti

Povzetek

Članek analizira poročilo Hannah Arendt o procesu, na katerem je bil Adolf Eichmann obsojen za svojo odgovornost pri holokavstu. Na podlagi obravnave fenomena in fenomenologije »primera Eichmann« se predvsem zastavljata dva problema, ki zahtevata filozofsko raziskavo specifično moralne narave. Zadevata, na eni strani, banalnost zla in, na drugi strani, pomembnost človeške odgovornosti. Nazadnje članek razvije idejo odgovornosti tudi za tisto, za kar nismo neposredno odgovorni, in skuša upravičiti etični značaj takšne države.

Ključne besede: Arendt, Eichmann, zlo, odgovornost, holokavst.

1. Arendt in Jerusalem

I will start with one of the most famous trials of the twentieth century: that of the Nazi SS officer, Adolf Eichmann. This trial was held in Jerusalem in 1961, following Eichmann's capture the previous year in Buenos Aires. As it is well known, the trial was covered by the philosopher Hannah Arendt, who went to Jerusalem as a correspondent for *The New Yorker*. The articles and the book that Arendt brought forth from this experience in 1963—*Eichmann in Jerusalem. A Report on the Banality of Evil* (Arendt 1977)—created a real stir, and gave rise to a great deal of debate, which remains unabated even to this day.

Why did Arendt's writings create such a stir? Why do the "Eichmann case" and the "banality of evil" continue to be debated? What do we stand to gain from these reflections today? My paper will attempt to answer these questions.

First of all, the stir was created by the fact that Arendt's report did not take the approach everyone expected. Arendt did not abide by Ben Gurion's instructions, for whom Eichmann's trial was to have been an exemplary case brought before the attention of the world. Unlike the public prosecutor, Arendt did not portray Eichmann as a monster, that is, as a person who deliberately and consciously set about creating evil; nor did she extol the virtues of the Israeli court judging Eichmann, but rather criticized its performance in several instances. In other words, on the political level, Arendt took a maverick approach and, on the philosophical one, she turned the Eichmann trial into an opportunity to explore two important themes: that of evil and that of responsibility. In order to do this, it was crucial to avoid transforming philosophy into an ideology.

Instead, Ben Gurion, Prime Minister of the State of Israel, had a different conception of the trial: "It is not an individual that is in the dock at this historic trial, and not the Nazi regime alone, but anti-Semitism throughout history." (Arendt 1977, 17) The purpose of the trial was to condemn anti-Semitism in general. To this end Eichmann would have to be transformed into a symbol: a symbol of anti-Semitism as the manifestation of evil. Only in this way could the trial bring about a strengthening of "Jewish Consciousness", and highlight the role that Jews could play on the world stage.

Once in Jerusalem, Arendt rebelled against this ideological reading of the "Eichmann case", above all for philosophical reasons. In fact, this reading

did not correspond to the facts as they presented themselves before her eyes, or to the phenomena that, as a reporter, she had to describe. “Zu die Sache selbst!” was the motto of Edmund Husserl’s phenomenology. “Zu die Sache selbst!” was what the young Martin Heidegger, although with a different idea of what constituted philosophy, had repeated during the 1920s and taught to his students. Among these students, as we know, was Hannah Arendt (Young-Bruehl 2004, 42–76).

But if one wants to get to “the things themselves”, if the phenomena are to be respected just as they present themselves, and within the limits in which they are presented, if—in other words—philosophy is to be approached as phenomenology, then there can be no place for ideology. It is sufficient to look, and look well. If one looks at the defendant, Otto Adolf Eichmann, it does not seem as if one is looking at a monster. Eichmann comes across as an ordinary man. He seems to be obtuse; he does not seem to realize what he has done. He declares himself to be “Not guilty in the sense of the indictment” (Arendt 1977, 19). It follows that if he is not guilty, then he cannot acknowledge his own responsibility for being on trial.

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This is certainly the way that Eichmann appears in Arendt’s eyes. Since then, however, further information, compared to what was presented about him at the time of the trial in Jerusalem, has reached us, above all concerning the period of his stay in Argentina after the war (Stangneth 2014). From these documents, it emerges that Eichmann may well have been a morally obtuse man, but he was nevertheless aware of having made certain choices and continued unhesitatingly to defend them. The person who emerges is convinced of his actions: a person aware that he might be called on to account for them.

In other words, from the observation of phenomena and the phenomenology of the “Eichmann case”, two problems above all emerge requiring philosophical investigation of a specifically moral nature. These problems concern, on the one hand, the banality of evil and, on the other, the relevance of human responsibility.

2. The banality of Evil

How can evil possibly be “banal”? Isn’t evil actually the opposite of this—something remarkable, out of the ordinary, unlike anything we experience or seek from day to day, namely a measure of peace and quiet? But first of all, what exactly does “banality” mean?

“Banal”, in the most usual sense of the word, refers to something ordinary, unremarkable and commonplace in our lives: something we have got used to. Whatever fails to stand out with respect to our habits is banal. It is generally accepted that the everyday is banal.

In the 1920s Martin Heidegger dedicated several university courses, as well as all of the first part of *Being and Time*, to an analysis of the everydayness in our lives (Heidegger 1979, 126–130). However, for Heidegger the everyday is not always the same and unchanging. Rather, is it characterized by a destructive dynamic that leads human beings to ruination and decay. Banality is therefore something negative. Philosophy’s task, as Heidegger was already demonstrating in his courses at the beginning of the 1920s, is that of confronting the decay of life and allowing *Dasein* to choose its own level of authenticity: whatever derives from the realization of one’s finiteness and the acceptance of one’s mortal condition. In other words, life is the terrain in which the battle takes place against the banality of daily decadence in favor of the exceptionality of opting for one’s deepest and truest self, which is marked by death.

But when Arendt speaks of the “banality of evil”, she means something different, something unlike the commonly accepted meaning, which Heidegger failed to perceive in his analysis. Arendt means above all one thing: that the cause of evil is an underlying stupidity, that there are, in other words, certain people—in this case Germans—who fail to grasp the meaning of situations, who cannot manage to put themselves in other people’s shoes, or even open up to them. In other words, whatever is different to me is a matter of indifference since only I have any value, only I am a real human being. And so, evil that derives from this indifference, which is truly evil for whoever falls victim to it, is not such—nor is it recognized as such—by those who carry it out. It is in fact

something quite banal.¹

Once again, Arendt asserts that, in the case of Eichmann and many other Nazis, good itself was a temptation to which they did not want to give in. Good—not evil. To take this even further, it means that evil can no longer be distinguished from good, that at this stage the confines between good and evil have been blurred. This has occurred because their radical difference has disappeared. The inter-changeability of good and evil in daily life; evil blending with good: this, basically, is the banality of evil; this is what happens in the age of nihilism.

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A hypothesis such as this could not fail to cause a scandal, in an era in which there was a need for a clear division between those who were good and those who were bad, as well as in a context in which the guilty—in this case Eichmann—had to be seen to be judged and condemned. It might have been dangerous to maintain that good and evil were inter-changeable, at the very moment, that is, when, on the rubble of the Second World War, a moral foundation needed to be rebuilt. Instead, as Ben Gurion wished, it had to be said that good had triumphed, and that it was now sitting in judgment on evil. It was necessary for everyone to accept his or her own responsibilities. If, in fact, evil is banal, if it is, in fact, inter-changeable with good, the risk is that Eichmann himself could be justified, or even partly excused from his part of responsibility. This is why there was such a backlash against Arendt's book.

From a philosophical point of view, however, this approach was too facile. It was necessary instead to get to the things in themselves, necessary to be faithful to the phenomenological method, in order to get to the bottom of the question. This is what Arendt does in her interpretation of the banality of evil, and she does it by confronting two aspects. The first is what we might call the experience of active indifference, which is capable of making all those affected by it obtuse, morally obtuse; the second is what transforms every action into a simple procedure.

The inter-changeability of good and evil, for the Germans, but not only for this people, during the Nazi era is a given. It was purely on account of this generalized

1 See what Arendt says very clearly in this regard in the radio interview with Joachim Fest on November 9, 1964, now in: Arendt and Fest 2011.

inter-changeability, for instance, that the officers in charge of surveillance in the concentration camps were able to return in the evenings to their houses situated close to the barbed wire perimeter fences, hug their wives and children—women and children who were in every way the same as those who had been sent to the gas chambers—, and unwind by listening to a Beethoven symphony conducted by Furtwängler on the radio. This blurring, however, was built up bit by bit. It is the result of a series of well-defined actions. It is an *active* indifference, as I have already said, the purpose of which is the elimination of the differences between certain categories of human beings with respect to animals and things. This is what the Nazis did towards the Jew when they reduced him to a being that was not quite human, or to what Primo Levi calls a “muslim”: someone who has been subjugated (Levi 2014). Therefore, if it is no longer necessary to acknowledge the Jews as fellow human beings, they can be eliminated. In a very banal way, without hatred—like animals led to the slaughterhouse.

All this may be connected to the second aspect, which Arendt investigates by describing Eichmann’s behavior. I have mentioned that Eichmann declared that he was “Not guilty in the sense of the indictment”. Why? The figure that comes closest to Eichmann is, in Arendt’s opinion, Pontius Pilate. But this is not so because Eichmann, like Pilate, washes his hands: that is, because he has no interest in the consequences of his actions. Eichmann does not actually want to be irresponsible. On the contrary: his choice is to want what his own people want. His choice is to adhere, like his people, like the German people, to the will of the *Führer*.²

In other words, Eichmann is not an irresponsible person because he does not want to act. Eichmann’s error lies precisely with the idea of responsibility he adopts. He believes he is acting correctly because he is obeying orders from above. And it is this very obedience that he believes exonerates him from anything he is charged with.

Here is what Arendt very clearly says about this: “So Eichmann’s opportunities for feeling like Pontius Pilate were many, and as the months and

² Even if, during the course of the trial, and a propos of nothing, Eichmann declares that he has always lived according to the dictates of Kantian morality. But he has confused subordination to an arbitrary order with the choice of acting in keeping with a universal principle.

the years went by, he lost the need to feel anything at all. This was the way things were, this was the new law of the land, based on the Führer's order; whatever he did he did, as far as he could see, as a law-abiding citizen. He did his *duty*, as he told the police and the court over and over again; he not only obeyed *orders*, he also obeyed the *law*." (Arendt 1977, 133) This is why Eichmann continued to maintain that he was "Not guilty in the sense of the indictment": that is, in the sense of the law.

But how can any of this be possible? This happens because a transformation takes place in the way actions are perceived. Here, there is no question of the indifferent kinds of action I have mentioned, in which good and evil are blurred. This indifference is also a consequence of the fact that actions involve the application of a procedure, they require rules to be observed and orders to be obeyed. It is *precisely this*, all this, that came to be considered moral. Instead, however, it is not moral in the slightest, since this way of interpreting action leaves no room for the exercise of free will. Or rather, it leaves the possibility at least of deciding whether to disobey or not.

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3. The Relevance of Responsibility

The question of responsibility, and above all the way in which we may be responsible within contexts in which collective actions are carried out, is, therefore, the nature of the ethical problem facing us. Indeed, it is the prerequisite for giving rise to ethics. Otherwise, as I have said, everything becomes inter-changeable, and evil blurs with good.

The problem, then, is that of recuperating a sense of responsibility. Or, at least, managing to avoid losing it. We have seen how Eichmann lost his: by transforming himself into a cog in a mechanism that was bigger than him, and choosing to voluntarily subject himself to another's will. And he paid precisely for this choice: that is, for not having come to terms with the necessity of facing up to his own responsibilities.

Others, many others, have acted and continue to act as he did. Still others, however, arrived and continue to arrive at a different decision. As a way of concluding my reflections, I would like to analyze the behavior of one of these people, in whom a sense of responsibility was alive and well. This person did not

say no to what he was ordered to do, unlike Bartleby, the scrivener, protagonist of the novel of the same name by Herman Melville (1835: see Melville 2014). Rather, he did live his whole life feeling guilty about what he had contributed to making. I refer to the American, Maj. Claude Eatherly, who participated in the dropping of the bomb on Hiroshima.

Eatherly played a limited part in the bombing of Hiroshima, involving aerial reconnaissance. Nevertheless, he felt guilty for all the deaths provoked by the atomic bomb. He faced up to his responsibilities for them, unlike, for example, Stiborik, the radar operator on *Enola Gay*, the plane that dropped the bomb; or Tibbets, who piloted the same plane; or Olivi, the co-pilot involved in the bombing of Nagasaki. In some interviews they gave, these men said they had no problems of conscience. They stated that they had only been obeying orders. Just like Eichmann.

Instead, as I have said, Eatherly felt guilty for what he had contributed to doing. He shouldered the responsibility for it, unlike his fellow pilots, and unlike Harry Truman, President of the United States, who decided to destroy Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and continued to defend this decision right to the end, saying that it had been taken in order to speed up the end of the war. On the contrary, Eatherly never managed to overcome his sense of remorse for having contributed not only to the death of millions of people, but above all for having set in motion a mechanism of destruction, whose consequences could not be controlled. This is why he had to be taken into a psychiatric hospital on several occasions. And it was there that a letter arrived for him from Günther Anders.

Günther Stern (aka Anders = different) was well known to Hannah Arendt. Like Arendt, he too was Jewish and a pupil of Husserl and Heidegger in the 1920s. But most importantly, Anders was Arendt's partner who in 1929 also became her husband. He fled with her to Paris when Nazism came to power, divorced from her in 1937, and moved to the United States.³

In the research he carried out in the United States, Anders concentrated on the human being's responsibility with regard to technology. More specifically, towards those types of technology that have become increasingly autonomous

3 About this matter we can read now in: Arendt and Anders 2016.

and self-sufficient, that act even without any input from human beings, and the consequences of which cannot be controlled by them. But this does not mean that human beings are simply enslaved by these technologies, nor can they hold themselves absolved of the consequences of what they do. This can be seen precisely in Eatherly's case.

The principal theme of the letters exchanged between Anders and Eatherly is in fact the pilot's responsibility, and the way in which he can come to terms with it (Anders 1995). In actual fact, for Anders, Eatherly is a "precursor": that is, he is an example of the type of destiny facing the whole of humanity: that of being "guiltlessly guilty" for the consequences of the use of these new technologies. In fact, Eatherly acted like a cog in a mechanism that did not depend on him, without being able to fully conceive of the effects that would derive from his actions: actions that were important in order for a result to be achieved, even if not to such an extent as to completely determine its outcome.

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Yet, Eatherly—despite having made only one of a number of contributions that brought about the result—still feels responsible. And rightly so. Above all because, as Anders states, it is by means of his behavior and this acceptance of responsibility that he can lay claim to his dignity as a human being. A human being may be considered such insofar as he is in a position to choose, and not insofar as he abdicates this opportunity to choose, resigning himself to being a part of a mechanism. In other words, facing up to one's responsibilities and embracing an ethical vocation is precisely what defines the human condition.

This, then, is what Eichmann was not capable of doing, or simply did not want to do. It is this fact that explains his "obtuseness", which is underlined by Arendt. By adhering to the Nazi mechanism and limiting himself to obeying the logic of the procedures, Eichmann thereby foregoes his humanity. Therefore, it was not just the victims who, through this mechanism, lost the characteristics denoting their humanity; they were lost also by their persecutors.

Eatherly shows that there is an alternative. But how can it be chosen? How can one be responsible when one does not have control over all the consequences of the actions one contributes to making? The answer is simple, despite the apparent paradox. In an era of mechanical procedures, in an era of the power of dictatorship, in an era of technological dominion, we can still lay claim to our humanity, first of all if we take *responsibility even for what we are*

not directly responsible. Just as Eatherly did. Because, in actual fact we cannot determine and control the consequences of what the procedures or orders of a dictator have established. But we can say no, insofar as it is in our power to do so, like Bartleby, the scrivener. In this way, in those areas over which we have a measure of control, we may manage to block the setting in motion of some deleterious process.

There may be other people to take our place; or there may not. There might, instead, be others who will follow our example. In any case, we will be able to say that whatever happened, it was “not in my name”. Otherwise, we will be fully guilty: whether we recognize it, like Eatherly, or not. And in that case we will come up against death, yet fail to grasp why. Just like Eichmann.

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