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# IS THERE BANALITY IN EVIL? RE-READING HANNAH ARENDT'S *EICHMANN IN JERUSALEM* IN VIEW OF YARIV MOZER'S FILM "THE DEVIL'S CONFESSION ON THE LOST EICHMANN TAPES"

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## Abstract

In 1957, some years before Eichmann's Willem Sassen a Dutch Nazi journalist, conducted a series of interviews with Eichmann in Buenos Aires. The resulting tape recordings were recently made public for the first time in the documentary "The Devil's Confession : The Lost Eichmann Tapes" (2022). This is the occasion for a rereading of Arendt's *Eichmann in Jerusalem*. Arendt, reporting Eichmann's trial in Jerusalem for the *New Yorker*, argued that rather than a bloodthirsty murderer motivated by anti-Semitic ideology, Eichmann showed himself to be a mediocre but ambitious civil servant whose evil can be described as "banal". I look at a hitherto neglected aspect in the discussion of her book: the psychology of attribution of evil. The Sassen interviews bear out that Eichmann, no less than Himmler, was a radical anti-Semite. Eichmann relates how he himself took the initiative to kill as many Jews as possible and felt sorry for not having managed more. Arendt was misled by Eichmann's cliché riddled testimony during his trial. Referring to a new theory of moral judgment (Govrin, 2014) this lecture shows how the local public outrage against Arendt's analysis is related to the fact that it broke each of the four criteria of the perception of evil. She questioned the asymmetry between victim and perpetrator; accepted at face value the perpetrator's denial of his hatred of the victim; entered the perpetrator's mind and presumed he showed a degree of guilt. This undermined the public perception of the evil of the Nazis which was largely based in identification with the victims and profound shock with their actions. That said, Arendt's analysis was a contribution to our understanding of evil by pointing at a structural gap between the observer's perception of the perpetrator and that of the perpetrator himself. Recognizing this will allow us to take due note of aspects of evil whose origins are in banality.

***Keywords:*** *Evil, moral psychology, Arendt Hannah, victimhood, antisemitism.*

## 1. Introduction

In 1957, some years before Eichmann's Willem Sassen a Dutch Nazi journalist conducted a series of interviews with Eichmann in Buenos Aires. The resulting tape recordings were recently made public for the first time in the documentary "The Devil's Confession : The Lost Eichmann Tapes" (2022). This is the occasion for a rereading of Arendt's *Eichmann in Jerusalem*. Arendt, reporting Eichmann's trial in Jerusalem for the *New Yorker*, argued that rather than a bloodthirsty murderer motivated by anti-Semitic ideology, Eichmann showed himself to be a mediocre but ambitious civil servant whose evil can be described as "banal". I look at a hitherto neglected aspect in the discussion of her book: the psychology of attribution of evil. The Sassen interviews bear out that Eichmann, no less than Himmler, was a radical anti-Semite. Eichmann relates how he himself took the initiative to kill as many Jews as possible and felt sorry for not having managed more. Arendt was misled by Eichmann's cliché riddled testimony during his trial. Referring to a new theory of moral judgment (Govrin, 2014) this lecture shows how the local public outrage against Arendt's analysis is related to the fact that it broke each of the four criteria of the perception of evil. She questioned the asymmetry between victim and perpetrator, accepted at face value the perpetrator's denial of his hatred of the victim; entered the perpetrator's mind and presumed he showed a degree of guilt. This undermined the public perception of the evil of the Nazis which was largely based in identification with the victims and profound shock by their actions. That said, Arendt's analysis was a contribution to our understanding of evil by pointing at a structural gap between the observer's perception of the perpetrator and that of the perpetrator himself. Recognizing this will allow us to take due note of aspects of evil whose origins are in banality.

## 2. Arendt's perception of Eichmann

Arendt saw Eichmann as a mediocre but ambitious civil servent who sought his superiors' approval and to gain power. He neither had a special hatred of Jews nor was he driven by Nazi ideology. Unable to think autonomously, he was only capable of producing banal clichés. But the tapes leave no room for doubt: there was nothing banal about Eichmann's evil. He was a high ranking Nazi officer whose hatred of Jews was no less intense than Himmler's, Heydrich's or Hitler's. Eichmann told Sassen, for instance, that he violated Himmler's order to stop the transports of Jews to extermination camps when the end of the war was in sight, in order to make sure more Jews would be killed. The clichés which became Eichmann's trademark afte/r the Jerusalem trial turn out to have been no more than a clever ruse he used in his defense.

It is not immediately obvious why Arendt's report so deeply antagonized her critics. All she did was describe Eichmann as a bureaucrat who was eager to please his superiors and to advance along a road in which the obedient carrying out of an order was considered more important that any other moral imperative. As said, she did not perceive ideological-antisemitic motives in Eichmann's career. Is banal evil somehow less grave than its ideologically motivated, and hate-filled counterpart? In Arendt's opinion the former type of evil was actually worse than the latter: "" (23).

These questions require a psychological discussion about something that has so far been absent from the debate: The psychology of the observer who attributes evil and grave moral failure. If we don't understand the psychic-experiential response triggered by the word "evil", and the serious emotional charge of the term "self-hating Jews" it is hard to understand the outrage and controversy Arendt's book brought about. A new theoretical model of "evil" which I presented in previous publication (2016, 2017, 2018) will cast a light on this and will re-direct the discussion, away from Arendt's book itself, focusing instead on that book's effect on us, the readers. My theory holds that the word evil refers to a cluster of cognitions an emotions unique to some especially horrific moral failures, which only emerge under certain circumstances. Rather than a particular act, what horrifies is determined by an entire relational texture between perpetrator and victim.

## 3. Four criterions for the perception of evil

In my research on evil and moral judgment I have shown that for an observer to make this judgment, four conditions must simultaneously obtain. What the Nazis inflicted on the Jews is commonly seen as the ultimate evil because it fully meets these four criteria. But the criteria of evil can also be observed in other crimes like rape, pedophilia, or other forms of brutal violence.

What Arendt's book does by presenting Eichmann and his victims in an unusual way is that these four criteria come into question, creating intolerable tension in readers' minds.

### 3.1. Extreme asymetry of force

In the conventional attribution of evil, observers first need to identify a radically asymmetric power relation between perpetrator and victim, as for instance in the relations between rapist-victim, pedophile-child, a blind person and the person who intentionally trips them up. This criterion was conspicuously in place in the Nazis-Jews constellation. The power relations between the Nazis with their huge military machine and the vulnerable, defenseless Jews were extremely unequal.

While painstakingly describing all this, and not sparing her readers any of his crimes, Arendt's narrative frequently punctures the perception of the perpetrator's unlimited power by pointing out some of his vulnerable personality traits. She describes Eichmann for instance as "a leaf in the whirlwind of time" (32) and as having suffered from a "mild case of aphasia" from childhood, as having had a somewhat hard time in school; moreover "His own mother had died when he was ten" (15). In Argentina, she wrote, he had been "leading the unhappy existence of a refugee" (16) while in Jerusalem " (25). On the whole she presents him as less formidable than Hausner tried to make him out: He wasn't Hitler, after all, nor was he nearly as important as Heydrich or Himmler (67). She was amused by the protocols of his police interrogations: "The horrible can be not only ludicrous but outright funny" (66).

But the most glaring rupture in the expected victim-perpetrator relations Arendt produced where she discussed the role of the Jewish Councils, for whom she reserved her most scathing words: "Wherever Jews lived, there were recognized Jewish leaders, and this leadership, almost without exception, cooperated in one way or another, for one reason or another, with the Nazis" (34). She believed that without this collaboration "The total number of victims would hardly have been between four and a half and six million people"(83). This view about the role of the Jewish Councils was shared by many Israelis and others, especially in the first years after the war. While the perpetrator has parts that speak to victimhood, the victims show murderous elements. Arendt tried to defend herself when she was

blamed of suggesting the Jews had been their own murderers, by calling it a "monstrously implausible lie" (67).

Arendt drew an extremely limited picture of the role of the Jewish Councils who were forced to make moral decisions under extreme duress. She did not mention many influential Jews' refusal to lend a hand to the Nazis, on the one hand, as well the severe threats and punishments to which those who refused to collaborate were exposed. The *Holocaust Encyclopedia* of the US Holocaust Museum in Washington provides the relevant information, and another valuable source is Isaiah Trunk's excellent *Judenrat* (1996).

### 3.2. The perpetrator's perceived attitude toward the victim

Arendt also flew in the face of the second condition of the common perception of evil, namely that the observer attributes a certain attitude to the victim's dependency or vulnerability on the part of the perpetrator. The observer determines that even though the perpetrator understands that they are facing an innocent person or group (or maybe exactly because of it), the former decides to injure the latter without feeling either pity or compassion. This proves perpetrators' monstrosity. Perpetrators harm their victim because they are weak and vulnerable. When evil is attributed, observers perceive the pleasure victims' suffering give to perpetrators. Research shows that when someone expresses deriving pleasure from the other's suffering, this will lead research participants to judge that person evil, even if the latter wasn't directly involved in causing this suffering.

Arendt (like Eichmann himself) makes a special effort to show that his motivation was not of this kind: “" His [behavior] was obviously also no case of insane hatred of Jews, of fanatical anti-Semitism or indoctrination of any kind" (33). She even accepts his lie that he actually tried to save Jews (26). She is willing to believe his ridiculous claim that he felt relieved when, later in the process of extermination, Jews were put into gaschambers rather than being shot, since for him:

the unforgivable sin was not to kill people but to cause unnecessary pain.

Rather grotesquely, Arendt thus finds signs of compassion and pity for the victim's suffering within evil.

### 3.3. The inaccessible mind of the perpetrator

The third condition for attributions of evil is that the observer feels unable to enter the perpetrator's perspective: observers can simply not make sense of perpetrators or imagine themselves in their place. To observers, perpetrators seem to have lost their mind. No longer guided by the usual codes – for instance, to avoid injuring the weak and helpless – perpetrators become inhuman. Observers thus disconnect from perpetrators' humanity. Maybe they can form some intellectual understanding of perpetrators' motives, but they absolutely cannot take perpetrators' perspective, because that would require a degree of empathy and recognition.

Arendt punctures this third condition on almost each and every page of her book. She offers readers an exhaustive and "intimate" description of Eichmann's motives, desires and needs, thus associating him with regular human ways and weaknesses. It turns out that there is a very broad common ground with Eichmann: Who doesn't want to excel at their job? Climb the professional ladder? Prove themselves? All these are normal human drives, and quite remote from cruelty. "(…) we have a common humanity with those whom we accuse and judge and condemn", she concludes (53).

### 3.4. The perpetrator's lack of remorse

A fourth condition in our perception of evil is related to the Latin expression *mea culpa* – the admission of guilt. The observer looks hard at the perpetrator, keenly awaiting their response. When perpetrators are sincerely willing to accept responsibility and express shock at their own actions, observers’ emotional response can to some extent cohere with that of the perpetrators. Sometimes, when observers are in the position to feel that perpetrators’ regret is sincere and true, they may feel a certain alleviation, as if social order was restored. When perpetrators avoid taking responsibility, when they voice excuses, explanations or even justifications, then observers’ feel shocked all over again, sometimes even worse than before. Eichmann does not make any gesture of *mea culpa* (such a gesture, it seems, would have clashed with the defense argument he adopted).

Arendt mentions and seems to believe Eichmann’s claim that he fully cooperated with his Israeli abductors because he felt guilty. He also proposed he would publicly hang himself. Though Arendt calls this “empty talk” (27), she immediately adds: “There was some truth behind the empty talk” (33).

## 4. Conclusions

It is therefore clear what aroused Arendt's critics ire and it bears a direct relation to the uncompromising nature of the psychology of obervers' perception of evil: it is her lack of empathy and compassion for the victims, along with her attempt to understand what moved Eichmann. In addition she reduced the importance of Eichmann's role in the extermination project and denied that Eichmann acted from hatred of his victims. All these factors together ruptured the necessary conditions for perceptions of evil and altered the proportions of the polarity between Nazi and Jew into something less horrific and monstrous.

But even though Arendt bitterly failed to understand Eichmannand the survivor's reading of her acount her analysis can still be considered a contribution to our understanding of evil. As long as the above mentioned criteria generally obtain in our perception of evil, we are bound to ignore other forms of evil with different motivational trajectories.

In addition, observers' disinclination to see evil and banality in the same brackets suggests the gap between observers and perpetrators in these situations and the former's inability and/or unwillingness to take the latter's point of view. In my research I have shown that attributions of evil to perpetrators originate in observers' perceptual error. Observers and perpetrators have in mind extremely different objects. While observers tend to think of the victim as vulnerable and unprotected, perpetrators' perception will be of the victim's threat and violence, so that to themselves their actions feel like self-defense. Behind the perpetrator, there is always a story of human weakness, threatened existence or a strong sense of persecution.

Without the gap between observers and perpetrators we would not be outraged by atrocities, we would not call them evil, and without it we would not put murderers, rapists, pedophiles and Nazi criminals to trial.

We hear, in the documentary, how Eichmann tells Sassen he would have felt he'd completed his job only if he knew he had managed to exterminate ten million Jews. That we feel shocked by this is what makes us human.

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