

## **EXPLORING HOW THE ACTIVITY OF THINKING CONDITIONS MEN AGAINST EVIL DOINGS THROUGH THE IDEA OF BANALITY OF EVIL**

**Yinuo Krystina Guo**

Adelaide University

**AUSTRALIA**

**Email:** guomean@yahoo.com

### **ABSTRACT**

Drawing on Hannah Arendt's concept of Banality of Evil, this paper explores ways in which the activity of thinking conditions men against evil doings. It argues that the activity of thinking is an important condition in preventing men from evil doings and discusses that human behaviours are not necessarily mirror images of their preferred actions unless the behaviours are shaped by the activity of thinking without the consideration of social norms. In a belief that no man who had engaged in thinking could participate in the commission of genocide, Arendt claimed that a nation could succumb to a change of its moral standards if its citizens do not think and judge what had taken place. Arendt's insights into the activity of thinking provide a lens to emphasize influences on and consequences of thinking. These insights are intended to provoke an aware that thinking enables individuals to reflect on themselves and the world, arriving at rational actions by the personal application of reason and self-consciousness.

**Keywords:** Banality of Evil, Activity of Thinking, Evil Doings.

### **INTRODUCTION: WHAT DID ARENDT MEAN BY THE TERM: THE BANALITY OF EVIL?**

Arendt coined the term the banality of evil after she had witnessed the Eichmann trial in Israel. She had concluded that Eichmann was "ordinary, commonplace, and neither demonic nor monstrous" (Arendt, 1994, p.81). Eichmann insisted that he was only following orders and that the crimes he committed against humanity were done in blind obedience and in a daily and systematic way.<sup>1</sup> Arendt's astonishment at how a common man who displayed no signs of intentional wickedness could be responsible for the murders of millions of Jews helped her develop the concept, the Banality of Evil. Originally, Arendt had stated in the *Origins of Totalitarianism* that totalitarianism was the result of radical or absolute evil (Arendt, 1973). This meant the perpetrator must have a corrupt moral orientation or evil disposition. Arendt, a woman of Jewish descent had experienced eighteen years of statelessness, witnessed the Concentration Camps and lost her rights under Hitler's rule. These experiences all contributed to Arendt's initial belief that only an evil person was capable of conducting the types of atrocities she had faced. Arendt's judgment on the concept of evil shifted for two main reasons; her correspondence with Karl Jaspers and her primary witness of Eichmann's trial. She credited evil as not always being radical or extreme but instead does not possess depth or demonic dimension (Arendt, 1981). Bernstein (1996) argues that there is a continuity between the theory of superfluity and thoughtlessness developed in Arendt's works. Arendt did not simply change her mind as a result of a sudden realization. She spent years justifying and perfecting the idea of the banality of evil. Eichmann in Jerusalem had touched upon the idea of the banality of evil but it was Arendt's later work

such as the *Life of the Mind* that really expressed her thoughtful and strong views on the importance of the faculty of thinking.

## **THE FACULTY OF THINKING AND EVIL-DOINGS**

Arendt differentiated between a thoughtless person who commits evil and a wicked person. A wicked person overcomes his own conscience and acts with the intention to commit a crime but a thoughtless person acts without intention to commit a crime (Berstein, 1996). In *Thinking and Moral Consideration*, Arendt (1981) argued that thinking is able to dissolve our previous opinions about what is good and right and to cleanse us of unexamined prejudices we gain through standards and habits. Thinking is not just limited to the intelligent or privileged as all ordinary people have the capability to do it. Thinking creates meaning and reasoning to our judgment, experiences and prejudice. It is the ceaseless activity of questioning and reflecting on the events that we encounter. We must question again and again the meanings that are given to our experiences, actions and circumstances (Rosenbaum, 1999). It was Eichmann's failure to do this that characterized the 'banality' of the crimes he was trialled for. The faculty for thinking is not influenced by the world around us but led by self-conscience. Arendt argued that we cannot determine the conditions we are brought up in or the experiences we face but the "faculty of reasoning can only happen to be the same in everybody (Arendt, 1998, p.257) .If people were to raise their own self-awareness, they can overcome social pressure and influence. Arendt believed that thinking goes beyond knowledge and into the unknown, searching for truth that cannot be found through knowledge. Socrates offered a related idea, stating thinking should be a dialogue between oneself.

In the case of Eichmann, he had always acted according to established laws. The issue Eichmann faced was that he could not engage in an internal dialogue with himself about the meaning of the moral, social and legal standards he was told to adhere to. It is not that Eichmann could not think that he committed evil actions. Eichmann certainly could engage in the activity of thinking. For example, he thought about what he would eat that day and when he would get married or join the S.S. Eichmann's crime was that he failed to ask himself whether he could live with himself if he had committed the crimes.

A thoughtful person engages in good judgment about what he needs to think about and what he does not. Eichmann's evil was banal because he did not think about something of such an immense moral importance such as his crimes. Eichmann was thoughtless because he did not give thought to others. Eichmann did not have a personal hatred towards the Jews and his trial revealed no motivation for revenge or power and his words at trial conveyed no joy from inflicting pain. In 'Eichmann in Jerusalem' (Arendt, 1994, p.87), Eichmann had testified that he could not look at the Jews shrieking as they entered the gas chambers and mobile gas vans. He said that this was the "most horrible thing he had ever seen in this life". All of Eichmann's reactions suggested that he was able to think about his own feelings but he was unable to think about the sufferings of those around him. This showed that intrinsically Eichmann felt what he was doing was wrong but he was not able to engage with the meaning behind how he felt. Eichmann had never formed an understanding of the circumstances. Instead of saying "what horrible things I did to people," he was able to say: "my duty allows me to watch some horrible things" (Arendt, 1994, p.106). Eichmann's conscience lasted four weeks before he began to justify the actions which previously made him uncomfortable with a lack of personal responsibility. He was able to detach his mind from the reality of the situation. The danger for people like Eichmann was that they could act responsively to orders

regarding instructions such as how to transport people to concentration camps but could not be thoughtful about the consequences of his actions on the lives of other people. Hence a thoughtful person is a person who can gauge the significance and meaning of their actions.

### **Eichmann's Banal Evil**

The insignificance (banality) of the persons committing the crime and the scale of the crime itself in Eichmann's case could not measure up. According to Eichmann, he was only able to organize the commission of the killings because he had witnessed the higher authorities in the hierarchy encouraging the mass genocide. Eichmann frequently described himself as a law abider who was willing to go to any lengths to carry out the orders. Eichmann's mind was detached from the reality of his actions. His blind trust in authority contributed to his inability to raise self-conscience and question the situation he was placed in. Stanley Milgram wanted to find out whether given the conditions such as having to take an order by a legal authority, Arendt's banality of evil theory was a normal response of the greater public. The Milgram experiment tested one of the conditions that may trigger this outcome. His experiment proved that in the situation where people were ordered to act by an authority they trusted, they were willing to act in ways that might defy their own conscience (Milgram, 2009).

In the Milgram experiment, the participants (the teachers) were told to administer shocks to a student for answering an incorrect answer. With every mistake, the shock intensified. Even if the teachers wanted to stop, they were given orders to continue and they did. Some of the teachers objected to the shocks but still continued when told to do so (Milgram, 2009). Milgram argued that enslavement of American Indians, the internment of Japanese Americans, the use of napalm in Vietnam were all policies that were made 'in the authority of a democratic nation' and were met by obedience. The vast majority of people act on the directions given by a legitimate authority figure even if they do not agree with what they have been told. Eichmann argued throughout his trial that he was only following orders and could not be held personally liable for the crimes. The Milgram experiment prove that Eichmann is not alone in his obedience and that humans are innately built to do as they are told by an authority they trust. Philip Zimbardo's experiment also dwell into the idea of how a seemingly moral person can engage in acts which tend to be perpetrated only by people who are 'evil. (Zimbarbo, 2008). In his experiment, students role-played guards and prisoners. The experiment was cancelled after four days because the guards were discovered to be abusing the prisoners. The findings of this experiment was that if the majority of people are committing an act, it was likely that other people will follow. Zimbardo found that often human brutality are not due to the sadistic nature of the perpetrators but are a consequence of the conditions they are placed in. The results from the Milgram experiment and Philip Zimbardo's experiment both support Arendt's theory idea that we must make our own judgments and engage in critical thinking because we cannot control the influences and conditions we are placed in.

### **How Being Thoughtful Can Condition Humans against Doing Evil**

As Milgram's experiment had shown, humans are innately conditioned to follow the instructions of an authority figure whether they personally believe it is the right thing to do or not. This means that moral and ethical behaviour can be changed by customs and rules. In 'Personal Responsibility Under Dictatorship', Arendt had stated that only a few people could rise above the moral collapse set by social standards and act in a way that serves their conscience. Oskar Schindler was a member of the Nazi Party. He had witnessed the cruelties

that the Jewish people had to endure and decided that instead of following procedural orders, he would transfer several thousand Jews to safety (Crowe, 2004). Schindler was able to break out of the trap of thoughtlessness that Eichmann fell victim to. His internal questioning of the events led him to make his own judgments. Schindler demonstrates that it is only when we have an internal conversation with ourselves, uninfluenced by societal pressures about what we are doing that we can actualize our conscience and decide for ourselves what is right and wrong. Arendt's proposal is that if people practise tapping into their internal dialogue in their day to day lives, they are better equipped to resisting the deformity of conscience in times of terror and genocide. Socrates was Arendt's model thinker who encouraged Arendt's belief that pure thinking consists of an internal dialogue with oneself. Socrates believed that thinking must be done in a way of being inherent in the act and not in its objectives (Philips, 2005).

The Chicago School of Law has a specialized first year Socratic Method programme based on Socratic questioning. This method involves the teachers asking students questions about a certain pre-conceived idea or notion and the students asking questions back. Eventually, this helps the students come to a conclusion about an already formed ideology while viewing all sides of the argument for and against it (Seeskin, 1987). The Banality of Evil demonstrated the superficiality of evil. Evil can spread among masses of people who do not reflect, ask for significance or critically engage in what they are doing. In Arendt's words (2005, p.90), when a man is properly thinking "I am my own witness when I am acting. I know the agent and am condemned to live together with him." The Socratic Method demands students to take responsibility for their own opinions, judgments and actions.

### **Is Thinking Enough?**

Arendt begins her writing in *The Life of the Mind* by explaining that thinking is "among the conditions that make men abstain from evil-doing" (Arendt, 1981, p.3). Obviously, thinking can help people overcome social pressure and influence and can enable them to make conscious and responsible judgments. However, is thinking the only factor that can stop crimes from being committed? There are apparently two main factors which may refrain people from thinking or from using thinking to help with actions.

Firstly, when people are not in a proper physical and mental state, they cannot think or cannot generate meaningful inner dialogues. For example, if a person is placed in a situation where their basic needs such as food, water, shelter are not met, it is unlikely the person can think beyond what they need the most. Maslow's hierarchy of needs suggest that in order for all animals to survive, food, water and clean air must be available (McLeod, 2013). If these basic needs are not met, the human body cannot function properly. Under such circumstances, their priority is to live. This is not an appropriate condition for responsible thinking to take place.

In the case of *Regina v Dudley and Stephens*, Dudley, Stephens, Brooke and Parker faced shipwreck and were stranded at sea. Due to extreme hunger, lack of water and no sense of rescue in sight, Dudley and Stephens decided to kill Parker and survive on consuming parts of his body. When they were rescued four days later, Dudley and Stephens were charged and found guilty of Parker's murder. Stephens and Dudley argued that killing Parker was the only way for them to survive. This case did not support Stephens or Dudley's actions but it did present a situation where ordinary people without the intention to commit an evil deed were forced to do so in the circumstances. Stephens and Dudley had engaged in thinking prior to killing Parker. They thought about the meaning behind their actions and their ultimate

outcome was that they could save three lives by sacrificing one. They had to formulate their own meaning of their conduct according to the situation. It is arguable that in a circumstances where survival were not threatened, and the defendants had engaged in the act of thinking, they most likely would have not committed the murder. Therefore Arendt is correct to state that a normal person in a normal living state who engages with his thoughts is unlikely to commit an unaccountable crime.

Secondly, if the power of authorities is too overbearing, people cannot act in their own way, although they can think. Thinking thus can become meaningless. Ordinary people can find themselves in situations where they must take into consideration factors that threaten their survival or the survival of those they care about. If they choose to neglect certain external factors and engage purely in an internal dialogue and refuse to follow the orders of authority, they may risk losing their lives. Their survivorship is what dictates the meaning behind what they decide to do. The events in Cambodia during the years where the Communist Party was in power and the country was known as Democratic Kampuchea showed how difficult it was for ordinary civilians to 'think' about the meaning behind the societal standards when their basic needs were threatened and how violence and isolation conditioned ordinary people to be unable to engage in or express their own thinking. Communist Khmer Rouge Party leader Pol Pot of Cambodia tried to nationalize the peasant farming society to the Chinese Communist Agricultural model. The country was prevented from communicating with the outside world and became a controlled community (Sperfeldt, 2012). Reporters were prevented from going in and out of the country. Thinking could have provided these people with their own ideas of what a community should look like and this might have prevented them from following the orders of the Khmer Rouge Government.

The problem with this was, the main method used to prevent civilians from expressing their own thinking was violence. The Khmer Rouge Soldiers were described as killing machines. Prince Sihanouk, the monarch of Cambodia had set out a list of rules people must abide by. If the orders were not obeyed and the government found out, you would be taken away and shot. Paranoia and fear was created to prevent people from thinking and fighting back. State-organized terror, hunger, violence were all implemented. Children were separated from their families and educated in a way to clean of the old orders and became army comrades. It became a cycle that prevented people from coming out and retaliating. Civilians knew if they challenged the government, they would risk more than their lives. When basic human survival and quintessential needs could be taken away for non-compliance with authority, very few Cambodians dared to opening express their own thinking. People chose to go ahead with the Communist ideologies and supported or participated in the mass violence. They could simply not neglect the circumstances they were placed in and act according to their own judgment. If they did this, they would risk their own lives and the lives of their families. Unlike the Milgram experiment where the participants had the choice to not act on instructions, citizens in Cambodia were forced into complying with orders even if they involved brutality and violence. SothyEng (2015) remembers how his parents did not agree with the Communist Government but they dared not challenge it. The reason was that they could at the very least walk away with their lives.

It is possible to infer based on the above example that to be able to engage in thinking and act within one's conscious is possible inside a classroom where freedom of speech is allowed and critical thinking is encouraged but not in situations where people are under consistent paranoia and fear that disobedience to standards could cause them more harm than good.

The extent of hope Arendt places on the faculty of thinking to prevent evil has offered a similar idea to the above arguments. It is possible to claim again here that thinking is important to help us make good judgments. Thinking can prevent banal evil but it itself is enough to prevent evil things from happening in our society as ordinary people are not always in the position to act or change what happens to them. Thinking works when we are free and when we are mentally and physically able to think. Eichmann had a choice but he chose to engage in obedience to authority. This emphasises how thoughtless Eichmann truly was. So maybe in those circumstances thinking might condition humans against evil. But in other situations, thinking itself may not be enough. Thinking may apply to Eichmann but not to everyone.

## CONCLUSION

According to Hannah Arendt, ordinary people who showed no sense of wickedness would not engage in incomprehensible crimes if they sat down and thought about what they were doing. Arendt referred to thinking as playing a huge role in conditioning men against evil doings especially for those who are not intentionally evil, because thinking allowed people to tap into their conscience thus helping them make rational and responsible judgements and decisions. Arendt's contribution is based on her involvement in the trial of Otto Adolf Eichmann, a German Nazi, who was accused of crimes against Jewish during the Second World War. Drawing on the case of Eichmann who did not comprehend his evil doings, Arendt developed the concept of Banality of Evil and argued that thinking was crucial in human actions and behaviours. From this perspective, this paper attempted to consider human actions, particularly evil actions, not in terms of the result of conscious decisions, but in terms of the absence of an activity of thinking or the result of a condition when they could not think properly. The closer individuals come to thinking the closer they come to themselves, to their conscience and true nature.

Evil actions of human beings are often seen as the result of wicked intentions of people but according to the concept of Banality of Evil, people do not conduct evil actions if they are able to engage in critical and responsible thinking about their actions. The notion of Eichmann committing his banality of evil was embedded in Arendt's argument, an idea in which the absence of an ability to think was seen as being responsible for Eichmann's crimes. Although giving importance to thinking as influencing one's actions, the paper also argued that thinking was only possible when people were given the condition to freely act in a way they wished to. 'Evil' or 'kind' behaviours can only be perceived in a context where people are able to think about what they do and they can do what they want to do. The activity to think and a condition of thinking are not mutually exclusive and only when they come together, people can generate meaningful inner dialogues and make rational and responsible decisions.

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