

# *A Thinker in the Dark Age——Research of Hannah Arendt's Theory on the Banality of Evil*

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**Abstract:** After Hannah Arendt participated in Eichmann's trial, she proposed the idea of the banality of evil. It means that evil necessarily has no extreme purpose, and that ordinary people can also commit extreme evil. In her view, it is in the totalitarian atmosphere that Eichmann was taught anything is possible and he is required to carry out his superior's orders unconditionally, and he lost his ability to think, judge. Arendt believes that the relationship between thinking and action links between individuals and public life. Only by balancing the two relationships can individuals better participate in the discussion of the public life.

## 1. Introduction

Hannah Arendt is considered as one of the most independent and original philosophers and political theorists in the 20th century. She studies under existentialist masters Martin Heidegger and Theodore Jaspers. After two world wars and a decade on the fugitive, she came to the United States and became a naturalized citizen. Arendt has a successful academic career, and publishes many original books such as *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, *The Human Condition*, *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, and *Between Past and Future*, as well as many papers and reviews. Scholars at home and abroad have done a lot of research on Hannah Arendt. Margaret Canofan, Osamu Kawasaki, Philip Hansen, Elizabeth Yang Brussels and other senior experts and scholars in the field of Studying Arendt. They provide us with rich theoretical historical materials and supplements from different perspectives, such as the life of the characters, the formation and development of thoughts, political philosophy.

In the 1980s, a large number of scholars conducted research on Arendt's thought, covering political thought, philosophy, phenomenology and other aspects. After comparing and analyzing Hannah Arendt's two important viewpoints of radical evil and the banality of evil, Elizabeth Yang, a disciple of Arendt, believes that the banality of evil is the lack of personality of the victim and the perpetrator under totalitarian system, and the decline of social morality.<sup>[1]</sup> Milgram experiment demonstrates the emergence of the banality of evil from the perspective of social psychology. The reason why ordinary people commit crimes is that they will suppress their own moral judgment and thinking ability when faced with powerful authority, and they have the social psychological structure of absolute obedience to authoritative orders. Criticism against Arendt is not a minority. Saul Bellow, in his book *Mr Semmler's Planet*, rebukes Arendt for using the historical tragedy of

the Holocaust to promote her philosophy. In an open letter published in the literary magazine *Confrontation*, Gersom Shorem makes it clear that Arendt's ideas are nonsense, and she was logically wrong and not worth studying.

Researches at home on Arendt roughly began in the 1990s, focusing on sociology, politics, psychology and other disciplines. Chen Lianying and Xie Rensheng believe that people's thoughtlessness leads to the banality of evil, in which people lose the ability to make moral judgments and choices to some extent, eventually become executors of massacre. Liu Ying explains that the two evils pointed out by Arendt reveal the loss of human nature under the totalitarian system of modern society from both social and individual aspects<sup>[2]</sup>. Mr. Sun Chuanzhao points that the lack of historical truth and the lack of evidence is the weakness of Arendt's academic work<sup>[3]</sup>. Wu Naide believes that Arendt is blinded by Eichmann's mediocre appearance at the very beginning, which led to cognitive biases in the process of his trial and ultimately resulted in one-sided subjective theories<sup>[4]</sup>.

## 2. Origin of the Banality of Evil

The argument of good and evil has a long history, which can be traced back to the origin of the world in the ancient Greek period which stands for the highest ruling order in that era. Good and evil have not been regarded as the original of the world, because in this period, the focus is still on the identity and order of the world, not on rationality and justice. Plato once said "Reason for rule, passion for escort, and desires should be engaged in the production of the rule. The harmony of the three is temperate, on the contrary, injustice and other every kind of evil is the basis of the three parts of conflict."<sup>[5]</sup> Because the human soul is tempted to fall into the real world, the good and evil in the moral sense tend to be good and evil in the natural sense, which is related to individuals and external substances. According to Plato, the human soul cannot automatically move toward evil. On the contrary, he believes that people can purify their minds and return to the Ideal world after death.

Augustine's doctrine of original sin also distinguishes between good and evil. In the case of stealing pears, Augustine explains that the purpose of stealing pears is not to eat, but it happens to be immoral and against justice, challenge the traditional moral behavior. This situation inspires the thinking of Augustine after baptism, he thinks the original sin is to break God's ban, follow creature rather than Creator<sup>[6]</sup>. But at the same time he also believes that people are born with disobedience and the ability of free will. In *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, published in 1951, Arendt proposes the idea of radical evil. In her view, radical evil goes hand in hand with a system in which everyone is as superfluous as everyone else.<sup>[7]</sup> Totalitarian system is just such a system, which people's plural sex and individuality are banished, and change them into a unified collective without difference. The radical evil under totalitarianism destroys the plurality and individuality of human beings, that is, the possibility of moral consciousness and value judgment is fundamentally lost. The qualification and significance of human beings disappear, making more people become redundant, resulting in the absence of thought and the banality of evil. However, the banality of evil is not rooted in the surrounding social environment, but in themselves. It is them who give up the choice of active thinking, choose to avoid the pain of thinking, and avoid their responsibility. The relationship between the radical evil and the banality of evil is like a cycle of whirlpool, once involved, no one can escape. Radical evil provides the social environment and atmosphere for the banality of evil, while the banality of evil is the executor and actor, which the two interact and influence each other.

## 3. Meaning of the Banality of Evil

The concept of the banality of evil first appears in Arendt's article *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A*

*Report on the Banality of Evil*. In the book, she writes that the perpetrator of the holocaust is just an ordinary man with no evil or extreme motives, and no abnormal psychology or mental illness<sup>[6]</sup>. The terrible thing about this evil is that when the Nazis take off their uniforms, they play the roles of fathers, sons, and husbands, just like ordinary people. They also have normal hobbies like singing, reading, and playing chess. But when they put on military uniform, soon they become the execrable executioner, a cold-blooded killing machine. In the concentration camps, they use whipping, starvation and other inhuman ways to torture and kill those men, women and children.

Eichmann was born in a middle class family in a small town of Germany Rhine. After he successfully joined the Nazi party in 1932, he works in the security services, and then participate in the camp program as a Jewish expert. Under the efficient work, he manages the camp every day, at least more than ten thousand people are taken to the gas chambers or put to death. Thanks to his “outstanding” performance, he gets the position of Lieutenant colonel. After Germany's defeat in World War II, Eichmann fled to Argentina. However, he finally was extradited by Israeli Intelligence Office to Jerusalem for the final trial. When Arendt got the news of the trial, she immediately applied to the editor of New York Newspaper as a special correspondent to cover the trial. But from the first moment she saw Eichmann, she had doubts, because the man behind the box in the courtroom had nothing special compared with normal people. “He was of medium height, rather thin build, in his forties or fifties, with a bald front head, bad teeth, near-sighted eyes, and a thin neck. Throughout the trial, he leaned his neck toward the bench (never toward the audience). The nervous twitches in his face distorted his mouth long before the trial began.” This “clown” figure made it difficult for Arendt to connect him with the executor of the holocaust. During the trial, Arendt observed Mr. Eichmann, and found that his explanation for what he had done was that “I did what my leader told me to do. I did not disobey orders. I took advantage of options.”<sup>[8]</sup> After the trial, Arendt published the article *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, in which she referred to the banality of evil committed by ordinary people like Eichmann, which can be featured as follows.

### 3.1 Thoughtlessness

As the name suggests, thoughtlessness means the inability to think. Arendt accepts Descartes’ concept of “I think, therefore I am”, and believes that we exist only when we think, and thinking is the form of everyone’s existence<sup>[9]</sup>. She explains the concept in *Human Condition*, “Thoughtlessness -- mindless recklessness, hopeless confusion, or the complacent recitation of trivialized and empty truths -- seems to me one of the defining features of our age.”<sup>[10]</sup> Arendt inherits the advantage of her teacher Heidegger’s love-- thinking. In her opinion, thinking does not lie in the results and answers, but in the questioning itself, and the process is more important than the results. “This kind of thinking activity is not for meditation, but for the pursuit of meaning... Preservation and judgment are not about justifying the past, but about making sense of it.”

When Eichmann met Heydrich in his Berlin office, he was told that “the Fuhrer ordered the physical extermination of the Jews.” There was an uncharacteristically long silence, and then he looked back and understood. He didn’t say anything, because he had nothing to say, and the idea of such a violent solution never seemed to cross his mind. He had been told only how to finish a particular job. When he was ordered to go to Lublin to see how to wipe out the Jews, he knew how cruel the Final Solution would be. Instead he did not linger too long in judgment, he obeyed. In the operation of Final Solution, all those with detailed knowledge of the Fuhrer’s orders are required to take an oath, and there is an original “language code” that wrapped all relevant persons and written materials. Behind these disguises, Eichmann was enforcing these “rules of language”. The language is not designed to make people ignore what they have done, but to prevent them from equating ordinary knowledge of murder with what is happening in front of them. Eichmann’s penchant for

slogans and formulaic speech make him the best practitioner of this language rules. When Miller sent him back to Lublin, he saw the exact opposite of the buildings and streets he had in mind. He saw lines of naked Jews walking into a hall waiting to be poisoned. He would never forget these scenes of horror. But he apparently forgot those unforgettable memories when it came to transport and send Jews to concentration camps. He said he did it “to save himself from imminent danger” and besides this, his only option was suicide.” Eichmann’s thoughtlessness promotes his disposition ranks, but it also made him the perfect accomplice to the Holocaust.

Modern moral norms require people to act in accordance with the general moral standards, ignores the reflection and questioning of daily life. And people forget to think whether such moral norms are reasonable over time. And when totalitarianism shows up with a new system of values, people don’t have time to think and judge carefully, they just accept. Whether it is the pre-war value system, the Nazi totalitarian value system, or the post-war value system, people have not made timely reflection and choice. This is a phenomenon that contemporary society needs to be vigilant.

### 3.2 Inaction

This is Arendt’s generalization of another characteristic of the banality of evil. Inaction is indifference and no action to the case. Arendt believes that Eichmann, as an official, dutifully fulfills the tasks assigned by his superiors in the workplace. But he is silent in the face of the brutal torture of unarmed Jews who were shot, poisoned and buried alive. In the last year of the Second World War, Eichmann seemed to have “reborn” a sense of conscience, not against the suffering Jews, but against Hitler. He knew that Himmler’s order was in absolute defiance of the instructions of the Fuhrer Hitler, and Himmler wanted to end the extermination at Auschwitz. “He expects the Hungarian government to take action against the Jews of Budapest without delay,” the fuhrer said in his final order to Horti. Himmler, on the other hand, ordered an end to the evacuation of Hungarian Jews, and Eichmann threatened Himmler with asking the Fuhrer to make a new decision. His conscience was awakened to carry out the Fuhrer’s orders, protect his work, gain the appreciation of the Fuhrer. Instead of acting in the position of the victim, he maximizes his own interests from the perspective of the perpetrator. The evidence suggests that Eichmann is intensely loyal to Hitler, and that he has a genuine and overwhelming admiration for a man from first class to imperial chancellor. But in the Third Reich, he explained, “the Fuhrer’s word has the force of law.”<sup>[8]</sup> That is to say, within this “legal” framework, any disobedience to the written orders of the Fuhrer Hitler is illegal and invalid. This explains why Eichmann strongly objected when Himmler ordered an end to the evacuation of Hungarian Jews.

Eichmann’s transient conscience has strange limits. Before receiving the Fuehrer order, he has been aware of the eastern special massacre action. He also knows that all the Top Soviet men, all the local Jews, were killed directly behind the front lines. In addition, before he was summoned by Heydricha few weeks ago, he got a memo from a member of the SS, “In the coming winter, the Jews will no longer have enough food supply, and pass some kind of the most effective way to kill Jews who don’t have the ability to work. Whenever it can be regarded as one of the most humane solution, at least, it’s better than people starving to death.” In the letters, the members were brainwashed into thinking that they have the power to decide the life and death of others, and can ease their suffering. One of the charges against Eichmann is that he tortured innocent Jews. Eichmann acknowledges that he has caused the Jews to suffer, but denies that he had caused them to suffer. In his view, euthanasia is the right and admirable way to minimize suffering. Under the mask of hypocrisy, he escorts Jews from different places to gas chambers and concentration camps again and again, firmly thinking that he was helping them to alleviate suffering and regain a new life. His accomplice was instrumental in the deaths of millions of Jews.

On the other hand, when Eichmann visited the Nazi persecution of Jews, he recalled the horror of the scene and claimed that he would never forget it. But when he sent these victims to the camps, he seemed to forget, his conscience suddenly disappeared. He stopped thinking about the cruelty and bloodshed of the action, and how unjust, anti-human this job was. He would just take orders, escort the criminals, finish his job, then take new orders, send new criminals, and do another round of jobs like a cog.

### 3.3 Slavishness

Because of the thoughtlessness, there is no action, and then blindly obey the command without inner moral judgment and self-thinking. Eichmann took the SS speech, “My honor is called loyalty,” as a personal familiar quote, and carried it responsibly in his later work. Brainwashing slogans such as “The execution of the mandate for the Final Solution of the Jewish Question is the most difficult step we have yet taken”,<sup>[8]</sup> “We need you to be ‘ruthless beyond human beings’”, which do a lot of psychological work for those special SS guys. Himmler changed the focus on the instinctive sympathy for physical torture on himself, not others. People give up thinking what terrible things they have done to these people! What they should do is to convince themselves how much pain they must endure to finish this terrible job! What a burden this job puts on them! Apparently, these efforts hypnotize the members believing that they are entrusted with the task of solving difficult problems for the benefit of the country and majorities.

Eichmann once said, “There are ‘different personal attitudes’ to death, and now there are bodies everywhere, a world in which people are indifferent to death, even their own, because it doesn’t matter whether we die today or tomorrow; when we find ourselves alive the next day, we often wonder why we haven’t died.” Therefore, when Eichmann and his colleagues were given the assignments of shooting, poisoning, and burying living people which were closely related to death, they obeyed without slackness or questioning like enslaved people. Eichmann’s conscience took a major turn in the Ten Thousand Lakes Conference in January 1942. The main discussion of this meeting is to coordinate the efforts of all parties to implement the Final Solution. At the meeting, those leaders had a heated public discussion about “the various possibilities of solving the problem,” that is, how to kill people. And eventually “happily reached a consensus and a concrete plan.” When Eichmann heard the violent solution to the problem, he was shocked. After the meeting, this feeling seemed to dissipate. Now he had seen and heard not only Hitler and Heydrich but also the SS and Nazis, and even the best officials competing for the honor of leading the “bloody” mission. “At that moment,” Eichmann recalled, “I felt Pilate because I no longer felt guilty.” No longer did he feel that he was the first and last man to be ruined by humility, no longer did he feel the cruelty of his task, no longer did he feel sympathy for the Jews who had been killed, no longer did he feel the horror of the means and instruments of their murder. He became more comfortable with the assembly-line operation of moving from country to country, registering Jews, forcing them to wear yellow stars for identification, assessing and selecting the Jews who arrived. So when he was accused of murdering more than five million people, he simply said he was following orders from his superiors and he was innocent.

### 4. Reflection and Perception

It has been more than half a century since Arendt put forward the idea of the banality of evil, which still enlighten and alert people to reflect on it in various aspects. In the book *Sometimes There is a Gap between Opinion and Truth*, Professor Liu Qing mentioned that “Evil needs two components to become a universal social reality. One part is ordinary and prosaic, which can come from the actions of ordinary people. But the other part is often closely related to a grand, demagogic

discourse, or to the distortion of ideas that are themselves of deep aesthetic and philosophical significance.”<sup>[11]</sup>It warns people to reflect on the massacre from the two directions of evil systems and how to avoid the recurrence of the phenomenon of the banality of evil. To refrain this evil, we should try to avoid being a philistine. We need to develop the ability of independent thinking and judgment, the ability to judge good and evil. Socrates once said, “An unreflected life is not worth living.” Everyone should take good part in public life and share own opinion for a better country and own life.

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