



EICHMANN IS IN THE PANOPTICON: COMMENTS ON HANNAH ARENDT’S “BANALITY OF EVIL”

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Abstract

Hannah Arendt’s book “Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil” has led to a hot-debated argument among readers for years, in particular, the Jews. She has been criticized for describing the former Nazi officer, Adolf Eichmann, with the terms “thoughtless”, “clown”, and “banal”. However, through a close reading of the expression “banality of evil,” this paper presents the rational side of what Arendt has written about the offender, who has been responsible for murdering millions of people in the extermination camps. Many see him as guilty and extremely sinful. While others consider him as a heedless follower of fascism. This study aims to explore the invisible parts of this case – through the Jewish gazes on Eichmann during his trial which show the power relation that is depicted in Foucault’s “panopticism”, the influence of nationalism (Immanuel Kant), Ideology (Gramsci and Althusser), and obedience (Milgram’s experiment). This analysis demonstrates that Arendt has turned to philosophy and depicted Eichmann in his state of nature rather than being a German or a Nazi officer.

Subject Area Literature

Keywords: Arendt, Eichmann, banality of evil, panopticon

1 Introduction

In this paper, I unravel the significations and explore the hidden meanings of the written work by the German-Jewish modern political theorist, Hannah Arendt (1906–1975). She emerges as a revolutionist in many readers’ thoughts through her book *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil*, which was first published as an article in the *New Yorker* in 1963. Later, the book was published in 1964. Arendt’s text recounts the incidents inside the courtroom wherein the former Nazi officer, Adolf Eichmann, was sitting in a glass cage, and for the first time, he was controlled by the power of the Jews’ gazes rather than his Führer’s¹. Arendt launches her comments on Eichmann’s trail with a detailed description, as she states:

“Beth Hamishpath”-the House of Justice: these words shouted by the court usher at the top of his voice make us jump to our feet as they announce the arrival of the three judges, who, bare-headed, in black robes, walk into the courtroom from a side entrance to take their seats on the highest tier of the raised platform. Their long table, soon to be covered with innumerable books and more than fifteen hundred documents, is flanked at each end by the court stenographers (Arendt, 2006, p.26).

¹ The German Führer means “leader”, this terms was used by Adolf Hitler during his time (1933-1945).

These words are typed by Arendt after she attended the trial. The peculiarities in her statement show the close look of how she offered her gaze not only on the offender, but also on the judges in the court, and the language.

1.1 Eichmann during and after the Holocaust:

Karl Adolf Eichmann (born 1906 Germany- died 1962 Israel) was hanged for his role in the holocaust during World War II. Biographically, Eichmann had a difficult childhood and during his adulthood, his life was not easier; he couldn't make any success in his jobs. Then, he worked in an oil company, but eventually, he lost his job once again. However, he could join the Nazi party in 1932 after a certain period of time, Eichmann became a member of Heinrich Himmler's (SS). Thereafter in 1934, he joined the SS group in Dachau then he became a member of the "security service" – The main office in Berlin – Eichmann started to work on the cases related to the Jewish issues, and eventually, he was sent to Vienna and Austria in 1938. Later, on the same mission, he went to Prague to settle the issues related to the Jews. Finally, in 1942 the evil actions started to be real in which the Nazis began to attack the Jews and they called it the "final solution to the Jewish question". Eichmann was the organizer of this race extermination (Berenbaum, 2020).

The operation was processed by deporting and transporting the Jews to the extermination camps – those camps were built in different areas such as Auschwitz and others in Poland. Progressively, the Germans began occupying other European countries during World War II. And they attacked the Jews by sending them to the camps, wherein the victims were murdered in various ways; either by gassing them, shooting them, or dying out of hunger and disease. All other forms of psychological and emotional abuses were other ways that the Nazis have practiced against the Jews. They humiliated them and deprived them of their least rights. After the war, Eichmann escaped to Italy and later to Argentina, he changed his name and chose a poor neighborhood to settle there with his family under a false identification, but in 1960 he was caught and kidnapped by the Jewish citizens and brought back to Israel to have a trial and to be sentenced.

In the trial, where the Jewish Judges were sitting, a huge number of the audience attended. At long last, it was a victory that they had the villain sitting there in a cage that was covered by glass to protect him from the victims – the Jews – who have spent many years with the pain and misery. Strikingly, Eichmann declared that he was not an anti-Semite and he would never hate the Jews. In other words, he didn't have any intentions of harming them.

Another court claim Eichmann made was that he was interested in the victims more than Arabs – and read about their works and their books. However, the reason behind murdering the Jews was the result of obeying the commands of the authority, and he had always taken pride in his obedience to the leader – Hitler – and this dutifulness made him thoughtless; Eichmann also stated that he didn't realize why all that crimes were happening: "I was only dealing with train timetables and technical aspects of evacuation transports". In reference to the "gas chambers," he claimed that he would never know what was happening inside – all he could hear was the screams.

Eichmann's trial lasted for fourteen weeks and in the end, he was "sentenced to death by hanging" on June 1, 1962. His body was burned into ashes and scattered in the water near Israel. The trial was a historical turning point in Jerusalem. For all that, the highlighted part of this case was Hannah Arendt's report on Eichmann.

2 Literature Review

Critics have been investigating this case, for instance, Steinberger (1990) sheds light on Arendt's expressions saying that she has referred to philosophy – to 'truth' and 'reason'. In other words, her comments on both Eichmann and the Jewish judges in the courtroom show the impact of the social conventions that have extracted humans from their state of nature (p. 804). Like Steinberger, Dresser (2018) claims that Arendt's report on Eichmann proves that he is the offender

in the state of nature as Arendt has noted: “Eichmann was neither perverted nor sadistic. In other words, his reactions showed his normal state of being.

Dresser argues that Arendt has explained that sometimes evil deeds or actions can be done without intentions, hence she described Eichmann as heedless. In other words, Eichmann was an officer in the Nazi Party and he was clueless or brainless for murdering people. Later in her work *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, Arendt began commenting on the political and historical issues that were related to what the German Nazis have done to the Jewish people; she insisted that the Nazis' crimes were a “radical evil”, not “banal”. Because what they have done is something neither forgivable nor forgettable. While Butler (2011) states after Arendt attended the trial in Jerusalem, she didn't defend him or any other Nazi officers because what they have done was something evil, and she has claimed that what they have done was never ordinary, and the punishment required a legal and international court.

Butler continues saying that Arendt's report is a challenge that she made towards the judges; she criticized them because they viewed the offender as a real monster. Arendt emphasized the question; whether Eichmann had real evil intentions or he was banal. Arendt didn't want to tackle the issue of the massive destruction, but also to focus on “thinking”, “intentions” and the crimes against “humanity”.

Gottlieb (2011) compares Arendt's report to literature and culture – it appears as a reaction to a tragedy. In other words, the topic is focused on the concept of tragedy. There is a link between “modernity” and “tragedy”. What Arendt has shown in “The Origins of Totalitarianism” and in “The Declaration of the Rights of Man”, the absolute truth of human rights. That is to say, it cannot be justified that Eichmann was a tragic hero. Hence, Arendt could solve this puzzle with “Supreme Justification”.

Dossa (1984) focuses on Arendt's descriptions of Eichmann which depicted him more like a victim rather than a guilty. Dossa states that Arendt's writing has presented a sense of self-concern or self-centeredness which has presented a philosophical issue; in her theory, Arendt has distracted the Nazi offender from the social, religious, and also political values because in her thought the concept of evil results from these factors. “for Hannah, Eichmann's guilt is beyond doubt and dispute” (p. 166). Adolf Eichmann was not a good person, and by the “good”, it is meant not to be encouraged by other humans to do all those crimes.

According to Dossa Arendt has stressed the idea “a good man is not one of those who have recognized the evil of Auschwitz”. In other words, every good man should avoid and stop the vicious elements, in that way she declares that Eichmann was not a real monster or evil, he was not breaking morals in the trial, he didn't hate the Jews, and he didn't intend to do all those “unspeakable horrors”. Strikingly, Eichmann was called a “monster” by the court attendees except for Arendt who called him the “clown”. In western political philosophy, the denial of human rights is not plain since Aristotle has also assumed the lawfulness of self-interest in its theoretical rules, but, until the modern period, it couldn't bring its rights in terms of “philosophical defense and justification” as it can be found in Thomas Hobbes, the way he depicts human being tries to offer attention for the sake of self-interest. According to Hobbes; human is always in fear of their life and also of jealousy (pp. 169-170). However, this study goes deeper and shows the philosophical aspects of what others have stated about Arendt and Eichmann case. In my analysis, I show that Foucault's “panopticon”, Immanuel Kant's influence of nationalism, Gramsci and Althusser's Ideology, and Milgram's experiment on obedience are related to all the social conventions that rule Eichmann's identity.

3 Methodology

Through qualitative research and a semiotic reading, this study examines Arendt's phrase “banality of evil”. The term ‘semiotics’ means the study of signs and symbols. First, it was coined by the Swiss linguist, Ferdinand de Saussure, whose study indicates that language is a sign system

that consists of words, images, sounds/signifiers, and their meanings signified which is related to real objects. Similarly, semiotic analysis studies the meanings of the words rather than the historical and biographical references. Therefore, Arendt’s “banality of evil” is reviewed through its meaning and the context is related to theoretical frameworks of Foucault’s “panopticon,” and both Gramsci and Althusser’s “ideology”.

4 Discussion and Results

Arendt’s phrase “banality of evil” has been critiqued by Jewish readers. However, her expressions suggest a close reading of what she had recorded about the trial. Her gaze was not only on the courtroom, but also on Eichmann; his claims, his facial expressions, and his responses to the eyewitnesses. She was attacked by the Jews for her expressions: “thoughtless” and “clown”, the general public began questioning about “banality of evil” – what did she mean by that? Is it possible that Arendt defended Eichmann? These doubts made the scholars and critics wonder about her interpretations of the trial (Grafton, 2020). However, Arendt replied to those attacking comments by saying:

For when I speak of the banality of evil, I do so only on the strictly factual level, pointing to a phenomenon which stared one in the face at the trial. Eichmann was not Iago and not Macbeth, and nothing would have been farther from his mind than to determine with Richard III “to prove a villain.” Except for an extraordinary diligence in looking out for his personal advancement, he had no motives at all (Arendt, 2006, p.263).

The theoretical side of her text seems to be investigated deeply to discover the layer of meanings; the term “banality” signifies the meaning of something that lacks originality. The later “evil” indicates someone or something morally bad or cruel. Through a semiotic reading, this phrase offers a deeper explanation. Barthes' *Elements of Semiology* (1967) shows that the meanings of words do not provide fixed meanings – that is to say, besides the literal meanings, these terms signify other connotations – as Barthes presents language as a “system of significations, in which the elements are the expression (E), the meanings are the content (C), and there is an arbitrary relation (R) between them. Thus each time, a new sign is added to the system another signification is produced (1967, p. 91). From this perspective, the meaning of the term “banal” does not simply mean that Eichmann is innocent, but actually “evil” is added to show that Eichmann is not an original evil, but these metaphors are utilized to show the power of social conventions:

Banal – E1	= signification of the system1
Not original -C1	
The banality of Evil – E2	= signification of the system 2
The villain that is not intrinsic – C2	

In these terms, a critical issue may appear; the originality for being evil is Eichmann himself as a human, or for being a German, Christian, or for being one of the followers of Adolf-Hitler? These questions seem to be rooted in the “banality of evil” in which Arendt as a modern theorist wished the population to seek, she wanted them to leave the dark thoughts behind and have the critical one instead. Because social conventions that rule the traditional intellectuals are the primary references that govern the society. That is to say, she sees the offender – Eichmann – as a man without a certain doctrine – banal – yet those rules and principles made him German, Christian, Nazi, and anti-Semitic – evil. Hence, Arendt’s report appears to lead the critics to question those

beliefs and principles. This issue appears clearly if the scholars read through Althusser's "ideological state apparatus". He asserts that educational and religious institutions instruct children on certain ideologies that control their beliefs (2001, p. 1495). Thus, Eichmann was the criminal – "evil" but also a "banal" because his beliefs motivated him to commit massive crimes during the holocaust. Arendt also clarifies her use of the term "thoughtless":

It was sheer thoughtlessness—something by no means identical with stupidity—that predisposed him to become one of the greatest criminals of that period. And if this is "banal" and even funny, if with the best will in the world one cannot extract any diabolical or demonic profundity from Eichmann, that is still far from calling it commonplace (Arendt, 2006, p. 263).

To Arendt, Eichmann is "thoughtless". Apparently, the literal meaning of the term is that he has murdered the Jews carelessly or he did that without realization. However, the word connotes another level of metaphor that is much deeper than the shallow and obvious signification; Eichmann is thoughtless because psychologically, culturally, and religiously has been under that impact of what he has been taught and ruled from the educational institutions – the hatred that German had towards the Jews was not intrinsic, but actually, it has been propagandized through the environmental factors. For this reason, she remarkably has neglected all the national, religious, and social aspects and merely concentrated on Eichmann as a human being. Arendt goes further as she writes:

Despite all the efforts of the prosecution, everybody could see that this man was not a "monster," but it was difficult indeed not to suspect that he was a clown (Arendt, 2006, p.68).

The term "clown" has been the focus of many critics. Remarkably, in this context, it suggests neither a humorous sense nor a sympathetic emotion, but actually, the power relation that shows the cultural hegemony. Eichmann had horrified the Jews with his German gaze, but now they stare at him with their revolt eyes. Unlike the other Jews in the room, Arendt watched him very closely to have a critical view apart from all the "social conventions". The phrase "cultural hegemony" is rooted deeply in this case; as Gramsci states that ideology plays a key role rather than economic forces, violence, or coercion. The cultural hegemony operates in the educational and religious institutions that begin from family and schools. These ideologies operate to teach the generations what beliefs they should follow (Hobsbawm, 2000, pp. 234-235).

This dialectical power shifts from the traditional intellectual – Eichmann – to the organic intellectual – the Jewish judges. Foucault's gaze reinforces this hegemonic power through the 'look'. That is to say, Eichmann's position from being the organizer and scheduling the trains and pulling people to the gas chambers has shifted to the glass cage, likewise, the Jewish victims are the ones who decide about Eichmann's destiny. He is not sitting in the actual panopticon, but the location, the gazes, and the power are the metaphors for what Foucault explains in his "panopticism". The term "panopticon" is coined by the English philosopher Jeremy Bentham (1748-1832), explaining the panopticon is a prison in a circular building wherein a tower is centered; offenders are imprisoned around the tower, in which they cannot see inside the tower, thus they must have constantly been watchful.

Foucault explains: the panopticon is not necessarily limited to a prison, a school, or a hospital, but in fact, it can be in the entire society, which controls people by reinforcing certain ideologies that have been constructed by social conventions (Foucault, 1977, pp. 195-206). Eichmann's trial seems to be in accordance with Foucault's panopticon; the offender is being watched by the judges and the attended Jews in the courtroom and their gaze implies and reinforces their power on him. Hence, their ideology imposes and embodies their thoughts towards Eichmann – who is been seen as a Nazi.

Historians trace antisemitism back to centuries, this prejudice towards Jews. And this race discrimination grew within the Germans deeper, particularly, during the German Reich. Many

philosophers relate this phenomenon of nationalism and racism to the philosophical theories of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries – Enlightenment – in the same way, their pride for obedience to their leader became stronger.

Theories of the enlightenment philosopher, Immanuel Kant, have risen the patriotism within the Germans and also the ideology of obedience for their leader. In these terms, Eichmann seems to be a victim of the ideology that is called “obedience”. Smith (2016) states that critics doubt whether Kant’s philosophy is the factor for those incidents that happened because of the impact of his theory and what became the dogma that led the Germans to be emotionless and irrational. Kant’s “epistemology and metaphysics” that according to Kant is to practice everything we as human beings know or think we know about the external objects is subjective in origin or our mind. In other words, the actions are the consequences of what a man thinks. However, it appears that the Nazis misused his theories.

For instance, Kant’s statement about truth and lie – it is always wrong to lie, and despite everything, the truth is must be the priority. Nazis have been biased in following this statement. To put it another way, even if there is a good intention behind lying there must be repercussions, for example, if the German citizens would hide the Jews for protection, then they would have the same punishments as the victims for keeping them and being dishonest with the authority. This shows the fact that the Nazis have misinterpreted Kant’s words (Varden, 2010).

Another study that has been conducted on the relation between Kant’s theory of *Obedience* and the Nazis being evil is the “can evil be both radical and banal?” Since Arendt used both terms “evil” for murdering millions of people and torturing them in the extermination camps cannot be a simple crime and also “banal” for being thoughtless. According to Kant, evil actions are considered evil when they are radical. Put it another way, when they commit a crime consciously, then they destroy the moral laws. In these terms, Arendt considers Eichmann for being “banal evil” because he appears to have done all those ugly and horrible deeds unconsciously or better to say without intentions. Arendt then shifts her perceptions to the concept of forgetting and punishment in which “men are unable to forgive what they cannot punish and they are unable to punish what has turned out to be unforgivable” (Ophir, 1996, p.91).

Halberstam (1988) in his work *From Kant to Auschwitz* asks the questions: how they could do it? What was the reason behind killing and burning innocent children? How they could do it without their conscience? Was not painful for them to hear all the screams coming from those gas chambers? Despite following Kantian school, he cannot be responsible for the gas chamber, he would never say burn the innocent babies into ashes, and he would never write in his theories to take a million families to the extermination camps. Kant was not responsible for the Nazi evil actions in Auschwitz and other camps. Criminals like Eichmann, who was responsible for the crimes and the terrible deeds from “final solution” were just under the statement and the ideology or the doctrine of “only following orders” (pp. 45-49).

In his theory, Kant has distracted the emotions from the law and replaced them with reason. For Kant, the moral laws, a human must be aware of being emotional, because it does not work with love or passion. And then the duty of reason is not only for happiness, but a guide for common good. He also stated that there are no feelings or love in the commands, hence this can be related to Eichmann in which he did all the evil deeds without love or passion because that was what he had learned from the theories.

Eichmann is the icon of the horror of the Holocaust in which it has engaged the writers and the thinkers to investigate the case through various lenses – psychological and historical ways. Feinberg (1986) states that “Eichmann is the archetype of the Nazi law officer” and he also became the “protagonist” of the drama after he was kidnapped and brought to Israel to have the trial. The global media started to broadcast the events from the courtroom and millions of people watched them. In the trial of Adolf Eichmann (Feinberg, 1986).

Adolf Eichmann claimed in the court during the trial that he had followed and behaved based on Kant's principles of "obedience". He was in charge of deporting nearly 1.5 million Jewish people to the extermination camps in eastern Europe, and it was not only about sending them to the camps, but also locking them in the gas chamber, and insulting them in various ways. Hence different opinions can be found on the devil actions made by Nazis such as Eichmann (Jackson, 2018).

After world war II, the public began to question the factors and reasons – in particular – the hatred and the brutal side within the Nazi offers. For this reason, Milgram could contribute to the idea of "banality of evil" and show that Nazis among them – Eichmann – were *thoughtlessly* exterminating the Jews.

Milgram's experiment began to investigate the case of the holocaust in terms of "authority and obedience". Moreover, it sought to discover the reason behind this obedience of the German soldiers. Hence, Milgram started with his "obedience research" at Yale University in 1960-1962. The results from his work made people astonished, the experiment went this way: two persons came to have the test – one as a teacher (commander) and the other as a learner(victim) and the experimenter would sit there as an (authority). Both the teacher and the learner took part in the "memory experiment". The learner went to another room to answer the questions that are asked by the teacher in the other room wherein the experimenter sits, and the answers are based on the memory of the learner.

With every wrong answer, the learner would be punished with an electric shock started from 45 volts. And as the questions were asked and the more wrong answered were given the shocks would be risen to 270 or even to 300 volts. The learners would scream or shout and ask to quit, and the teachers (the ones who were tested) were uncomfortable to apply the electric shocks to the victims and they often asked the experimenter to stop the test because they did not want to do any harm for the learners, but the experimenter insisted to keep on, and the teachers followed their orders without any desire or satisfaction. They didn't know that the learners were actors and there weren't real shocks or harms. This shows that the majority of the Nazi officers were under the threat of orders from the authority (Eckman, 1977).

Though most of the studies and the scholars or the researchers state through Milgram's experiment that the German officers did the evil actions because they were following the rules, Fenigstein (2015) shows the opposite in his study – Milgram's experiment couldn't give a sharp and exact result of the fact, because from the truth that has been told through history and the researchers or even from the victims (the survivors) that those officers enjoyed abusing and torturing the Jews, actually they found it fun, and they had their faith and pride for what they were doing.

The result showed that about 65% of the teachers punished the learners with the electric shocks out of following the orders from the authority. The learners or the subjects usually were college students in psychological departments who wanted to participate and develop their knowledge in the field. Later the experiment was applied to the murderers from the Nazis to testify to them and their intentions about the 'final solution' in killing the Jews.

And Milgram's test could be applicable for those killers who would murder the victim immediately or after a while, but in the case of the Nazis and the Jews, the situation is different because they have spent days and months abusing and humiliating them in different ways without mercy. The various details that happened in the camps would be out of order but out of the brutality of the officers.

5 Conclusion

Arendt's popularized "banality of evil" has been attacked by the Jewish population and also has been defended by many critics. This paper shows the sensible aspect of the terms. Through the meanings and the logical-modern theoretical frameworks, Arendt's words are opened up and all the

traditional views are ignored. Because Arendt's intentions have been re-presented for being a Jew. Hence, social conventions are authorized in readers' thoughts and eyes. Eichmann has been viewed as a 'monster' by the Jews for murdering the victims during the holocaust. However, I argued in my discussion that if we neglect all the cultural, religious, and political issues then we would conclude that both Eichmann and Arendt have been attacked. Because the ideologies entitle human beings. In other words, Eichmann has been viewed as a "monster" because he was a Nazi and participated in the massive murder. Similarly, Arendt has been criticized for her rational notes on him. Hence, in the trial, the national, cultural, religious, and political doctrines have authorized the Jews to look at Eichmann through their 'eyes' as a beast rather than a human being. However, at one time, Eichmann had watched them as inferiors and could terrify them with his Nazi's look. Therefore, the basic fact relies on the "cultural hegemony".

6 References

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