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Incubation of Evil: Evil as the Problem of Human Thinking and Praxis

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Abstract

This paper discusses phenomena of evil through the works of Hannah Arendt and the crimes of the Nazi regime by identifying in our contemporary world a series of problems with evil which author analyses and defines as a contribution to a future inquiry into the problem of evil as a problem of human praxis. When Arendt writes on evil, she is encountered with a trial to one of the biggest Nazi criminals, Adolph Eichmann in Jerusalem; a trial which substantially influenced the theories of evil to this day. What it brings into the discourse is for the first time fully described evil as a problem of human consciousness, the inner dialogue as a contemplative nature of our being in the world. In the context in which Arendt encounters evil, it is described as banal, as evil that is done by men without any call to consciousness, and also as a deprivation of thought that aims only at mere execution of tasks where evil is global, but the sole act is individual. In other words, it is radical evil that happens with full assimilation of an individual into the system of production, bureaucratization, and industrialization, where mine self (the “I”) is subjected to the will of the process that itself remains unknown. In the contemporary situation, on which we will reflect and compare the theories of Arendt and her commentators, evil does not happen as assimilation but rather as a displacement from our everyday life. In that context, evil is incubated in the areas of worldly conflicts, and it witnesses itself through media representations. They create the topographies of evil, and with this creation they deprive us of the duty to think our own actions or to think them inside the framework of evil and good because our everyday life is deprived of the operators with which we could execute such thought process without falling into a discourse of conservative tones of some other form of selective tradition that do not fit the socio-political being of the world we live in, the world of technosphere. Evil has its solid foundations in metaphysics, and it surely governs the discussion of justice (social mystification of good), punishment (justified evil) and others, but that does not mean that evil, begins and ends in its categorical immovability out of the world of movable, the physical world. Evil is a fluctuating point of distress inside the freedom which we produced so we could get rid of it. In the moment in which we deal with our immediate past, it is necessary to “modernize” the thought of evil as a phenomenon that is the inevitable subject of every praxis that hopes to overcome the concrete injustice of our globally and historically taken situation of the spirit.

Keywords

evil, Hannah Arendt, thinking, praxis, incubation, displacement

1. INTRODUCTION

More than half a century ago – confronted with the aftermath of the second World War – Hannah Arendt reinterpreted the connection between evil and thought. With her original inquiry into the

“banality of evil”, Arendt marked all the contemporary interpretations of evil, crime and punishment, culminating with the book *Eichmann in Jerusalem*. The trial of Adolf Eichmann – a high-ranking officer of the Reich responsible for the logistic organization of mass deportations of the Jewish into ghettos and concentration camps, and one of the persons held responsible for the genocide known under the name of the Holocaust – was in the centre of numerous philosophical discussions of that time. How could a man, framed by one concrete historical moment, develop an ability for the kind of evil that retarded the Western civilization on such a comprehensive level with consequences that are felt even today? With clarity and a sense of distinction, Arendt – even without the much-needed historical lag – managed to give an essential insight into the philosophical and spiritual nature of evil. On the trail of Arendt’s inquiry this paper will expose the context of the Eichmann trial in order for us to be able to take the main thesis of her work as points of dispute, discussion or motivation for further elaborations. This paper will – with this introduction in mind – give an account of evil as a phenomenon as well as the actions and factors it implies, and how can it be banalized, radicalized, latent, or even intelligent, as some commentators speculate.

At the centre of the paper we will highlight the ability and the measure of a human being in disclosing with ones thought. We will pose a question about what is the concrete stake of the “merely not thinking” in the act of understanding one’s own evil acts (Arendt 2006:292) while keeping in mind the tradition of ancient Greek philosophy as crucial reference point for Arendt and focus on the matter of inner dialogue of thought, our intellectual surplus that we encounter in the moment when we are left with our own selves – the *consciousness*. Is the criminal mind capable of reflecting its own undoing? If it is, how does he cope with that reflection while seeing himself in it? To think of evil as one’s own is a specific quality of human spirit, as well as it is the ability to disqualify it from our mind, or to say, our ability of self-deception, of that “dark stain on the human race” (Kant 1998:61) that represents our defences against the heavy burden of consciousness that always bares a wish to keep us out of the nexus of our own complex nature. The role of our inner dialogue is composed of calling to responsibility for our acts in the world and as such defines a human being as a person. To give a living being the status of a person means that it can meet the demands that are required with such a status. It is a being of feelings, being that has certain physical characteristics, being that makes things, but first and foremost it is a being that thinks, that has consciousness which carries a crucial role in human behaviour. The ability to think, comprehend, and reflect its thoughts and actions allows a human being to recognize the other as the Other. Giving someone the status of a person is a (bio)political act because only then a human being is invited to communicate with the Other. In that moment it is adopted into an organized society that has its rights as well as its laws, thus it is an act of commitment, and carries with itself the nature of ethical and aesthetic act – one of matter, and of form. If we consider a person that is not capable of reflecting its acts, or a person instrumentalized to the extent where it no longer thinks through his actions, we have to ask about stripping that person of it rights, about its privileged status among the living beings, and about the act of trial as the specific political disposition. That disposition opens the door to two new views that do not have the ability of encompassing the concrete political judgement of one’s acts. Living being – in a sense broader than the realm of human persons – can be two things: a “lower” being, a sort of animal, or a “higher” being, transcendental entity, god or *Übermensch*. On the one hand, lower being are the subjects of biology as well as bioethics – they consider our moral thought on the subject – while on the other hand, the higher beings are subjects of theology or metaphysics. Thus, the first struggle is about what kind of a trial should a person that does not – historically or ontologically speaking – qualify to be considered a person undergo. It is our political and contemporary liberal philosophy that permits this trivial paradox. The popular social media question outlined it as a conundrum by asking about whether is it okay to “punch a Nazi”. Nonetheless, above mentioned mediums of contemplation are not capable of grasping the whole, or event to think politically on their subjects. However, to establish or to broaden the scope

of political power and other culturally inherited (human) right to non-persons would pose a new problem because the normalisation of “non-person” entities would generate a new organized community that would again have to – for differentiation purposes – define new non-persons, or to say, entities without a political status (by re-evaluation producing an *übermensch* that would then be a simulacrum). Evil nature outside the political essence of the “evil subject” is taken into consideration by certain cultural and spiritual movements, such as organized religion, that make their own ground for judgement on right and wrong, good and evil, for the sake of internal cohesion of the movement in question. For that reason, we are required to refrain from the thesis about dehumanizing the defendant. In that sense, that which is posed as a problem of thought has its consequences in the practice of an individual, and the society as a whole, that is, has its consequences in the human praxis.

This paper will deduce general remarks on evil as the problem of theory, but also as the problem of praxis. If the posed dichotomy will not provide us with the consequent understanding of an evil act – act that brings pain and obstructs the other human being – as evil in itself, we will be in the need of posing a new thesis, and suggest the new way of thinking about evil. *Displaced* evil is utilized inside the apparatus that shapes the discourse on evil itself. By using the tools of phenomenological analysis and deconstruction we will offer a set of premises for the consequent “contemporary” understanding of evil, and we will determine in which way our understanding of evil as a theoretical or practical problem aids the debate on injustice, inequality, punishment, and other phenomena connected with some of the significations of evil. Within the discussion we will keep in mind the political consequences of evil acts, but also the politics of evil in the context of ethical dimension.

2. THE PROBLEM OF EVIL AS A PROBLEM OF THEORY

2.1. Arendt, Eichmann and conscience

Adolf Eichmann was abducted in 1962 in Argentina by Mossad, and was brought to trial in Jerusalem for the crimes from the time of the Second World War. Putting the virtual spectacle aside, the role of the trial was to finally resolve the harsh past of the Jewish people, and return verdict on the Nazi crimes. The trial went smoothly, accompanied by numerous press materials, at some point going as far as providing live feed. Hundreds of journalists were reporting in full detail the spectacle of confessed sufferings staged to amplify the horror of the man standing in front of the people he tried to eradicate.

However, theoretical consequences of this trial, consequences for our contemporary understanding of the problem of evil, are of the utmost importance.

This paper does not rely on the contemporary commentators of Eichmann before Eichmann, Eichmann trial or Eichmann after Eichmann, it concentrates on the original contribution to the above mentioned phenomenon that S would consequently come close to a form of Eichmann behind Eichmann.

We should still keep in mind three essential moments of this introduction as three points that we are now opening a dialogue with: 1) the virtualisation of the trial that acts as a precedent insofar as it posed a cathartic gesture of the trial as an event that is synonymous with the judgement and punishment; 2) spectacle of the trial in the sense of “a social relationship between individuals, mediated by images (...) that is a view of the world that objectified itself” (Debord 1999:36) role of the trial in the closure of historic moment, a situation of closing the story where the same story was unleashed into the unstable media exposition.

The Eichmann trial showed us how the law (or the will of the law) cannot be rhetorically played over, even though the trial showed its utmost weakness exactly in that point. It was predestined for a structural distress with the testimony of the accused as being an innocent bystander. That gave way to a thought that this is actually more or less an innocent man tangled in the web of criminal

organization of totalitarian regime of power. Structural weakness in this phenomenon was increased with the mediatisation of the trial, and more or less known outcome of the case in question that was certainly interesting, essential, and frightening, but defined and resolved by its context. From the intellectual aspect, the trial represents a phenomenon that executed the initial exposition of extensive theory on evil which is, with the constant reference to Nazi crime, in development ever since. Evil reveals the paradox at its foundation; that it is not possible to subject it to theorization.

Rather, it is the intrinsic signifier of a failed institution. To thematise evil as something more than an ontological segment of the opposition of good–evil means to set it within the world as a justification for, in some cases perhaps inconceivable, consequences of an action. “And so it can be said that ‘we’, people, are sooner the results of our coincidences than our intentions” (Svendsen 2006:185), or rather, as Odo Marquard claims, it is the matter of the style of “life that maintains equilibrium through the ability to compensate for evil with beliefs” (Marquard 1989:42). Evil as a problem banal or radical, as being affected by the appearance of the automatized bureaucratization of mechanisms of repression, execution and destruction, couldn’t have been properly subsumed in Jerusalem because this type of mass evil can’t be properly subsumed politically or juridically (Arendt 2006:292). In that sense, evil should be observed peripherally, as *relocated*, and it should be placed into the more complex compound of meaning composed of today’s political, or rather biopolitical, relationships.

As opposed to deeper psychological and psychoanalytic attempts to clarify the massive *abyss boulders* that we feel while thinking about Eichmann and Nazi crimes on the level of our own comprehension of the phenomenon, cultural theory and history can serve as fertile ground for contemplation, although it could represent yet another blow struck to ethics and the philosophy of moral sentiments in its consequence. Moreover, with the paradigm of modern aesthetics and with Hegel’s historical progression (Hegel 2001) at mind, in which every form of expression isn’t possible in every historical era, can we understand the creation of un-thought, the change of conscience into empty conscience? Is it possible that the work of the cruellest transgression over humanity was banalized to such an extent that in a time reckless behaviour, which today is considered immoral, was truly trivial, mechanized, and devoid of ethical questions, or rather that morals, at best, represented a contingent point of activity in the execution of the task assigned to those people? That S wouldn’t imply that those people were devoid of virtue and feeling, that in their insignificance they became radical to the point at which they were reduced to conductive material for the *Führer’s* will. It would mean that they were devoid of any ideology and indoctrination and that their “regularity” reacted to the external as it would to a job, a work habit of simple collection, registration and dissemination – a routine. What if indoctrination avoided the officials of the *Reich*, and acted only externally, affecting the initial system of the legitimization of power – the elections at which Hitler was elected? It set the path of progressive normalization which, in the given historical moment, managed to successfully bypass the “path of ideology” in order for the Nazi program to find itself at the very core of a new way of life. There is nothing religious or heroic in them, there is no instinct of honour, lust or hate. Officials of high bureaucratic institutions of the *Reich* are but small segments of a machine, a comprehensive system in which they appear as a subject-less point of the point at which crime transforms into act. That is why Eichmann, the official, “only” did his job, but that is also why he was a criminal, although neither of the two ascertainties is directly defensible through what was then thought to be the conduction of justice. Every trial against an individual’s Nazi behaviour is a trial against Nazi crime in general, and, as a result, the verdict has to be general, and verging on abstract.

It is also a call for opinion on the cruel nature of our everyday life, and the banality which shouldn’t be merely accepted, but recognized through one’s own thought process. To conclude, ideology and indoctrination assumed an aesthetic form – it formed a specific sensory regime – which preceded

political legitimacy and propaganda that historically determined things. Aesthetics as a meta-political framework in the creation of society acts substantially unhistorically (Badiou, Ranciere). It is in this sense that a series of adapted or endorsed dispositions on the valorisation of reality based on the identification of the referent appear. Quite often, evil is identified as an enemy force, and the humane (as opposed to the dehumanized) is understood as moral. Human beings act morally, and evil is (one of) the political orientations. Is it not that such positions accentuate the dehumanized state of critics? Svendsen's review of Hannah Arendt's attitude (Svendsen, 2006:149) on Eichmann's understanding of personal responsibility and the evil nature of his actions appropriately brings doubt into whether Eichmann was truly aware of all the evils and injustices that he brought upon Jews but has, in giving his moral subject in to the heteronomy of will, decided to part with this responsibility. The aforementioned has consequences in what Hans Jonas will thematize in his *Principle of Responsibility* (Jonas 1990:20 and further), consequently also Höhle in *The Philosophy of the Ecological Crisis* (Höhle 1996:73). They claim that one of the possible solutions to the incredible ease of the elimination of another life is in the widened state of our *consciousness of happening*. The culprit in the era of *long-distance wars* no longer has an immediate encounter with his victim and no longer feels the consequences of his actions directly – if at all. The state of responsibility has been disqualified by the mediatisation and technicisation of war. Evil no longer happens in the place of performance and in this medial contingency, it is incubated in order to be actualized without any mediation of thought. Devoid of any emotional or moral framework, the criminal actions and the criminals of Reich, and of any totalitarian order in general, especially of those that are initially realized by general public consensus, hold within them elements of *incubation*, preparation and finally exposition.