A Closer Look at "The Banality of Evil"

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The concept of the "banality of evil" was introduced in 1963 by Hannah Arendt, a German-American philosopher and political theorist, with her book *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil*. The concept originated from Arendt's observations of Adolf Eichmann's trial, in which she concluded that Eichmann, a major organizer of the Holocaust, was not monstrous but rather banal. The concept of the "banality of evil" was interpreted in different ways as the concept was further discussed. After the publishing of Arendt's book, scholars debated over the morality and accuracy of the concept. As the discussions progressed, the conversations became less about what the moral concept was, but more on how the concept could potentially explain the morality of society. Following the release of Hannah Arendt's book, scholars began debating whether the concept of the "banality of evil" correctly represented or diminished Eichmann's depravity.

Haslam and Reicher refute Arendt's concept of detachment from evil acts, arguing that perpetrators "act thoughtfully, creatively, and with conviction."[1] Haslam and Reicher refute the "banality of evil" to support their conclusions on the results of the Stanford Prison Experiment. The Stanford Prison Experiment was a psychological study in which it was shown that anyone is capable of doing evil when put into a position of power. As opposed to arguing against the moral reasoning enforcing Arendt's concept, Haslam and Reicher challenge the foundational example that Arendt uses, namely, Adolf Eichmann. The authors claim that Eichmann "was comfortable with Nazi anti-Semitism and found the general ideology of the party congenial."[2] The authors use old images of the Holocaust to illustrate how intensive and personal the acts of evil were

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[1] Haslam, S. Alexander, and Stephen Reicher. "Beyond the Banality of Evil: Three Dynamics of an Interactionist Social Psychology of Tyranny." *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* 33, no. 5 (May 2007)
[2] Haslam, S. Alexander, and Stephen Reicher. "Beyond the Banality of Evil: Three Dynamics of an Interactionist Social Psychology of Tyranny." *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* 33, no. 5 (May 2007)

during World War II. Haslam and Reicher say that as opposed to the photos demonstrating banality, the photos represent "the endpoint of a long and arduous journey of individual socialization and social transformation."[3] Overall, the argument refutes Hannah Arendt's idea that humans can commit acts of evil without evil intention.

Similar to Haslam and Reicher, Lederman critiques Arendt's idea of banality. This time, Lederman points to the specific psychological reasoning that could have prompted Arendt's conception of the banality of evil. Lederman contemplates the idea that Arendt used the concept of the "banality of evil" as a mechanism that "made the Holocaust more comprehensible to her."[4] A mechanism was needed for Arendt to process how humanity could commit such atrocious acts. Lederman claimed that in order for the Holocaust to be processible, the concept of the "banality of evil" was created as a "phenomenon one can understand in human terms despite its moral monstrosity."[5] Lederman believed Arendt used the idea of banality to come to the realization of needing to comprehend the "question of what form of government could resist the phenomenon of political conformity" and look towards a greater power influencing people, such as Eichmann.[6]

Bergen interpreted Arendt's concept of "the banality of evil" as a psychological tool to understand the human ability to commit evil acts. Bergen believed that Arendt knew what she was going to witness at Eichmann's trial, that "Eichmann as the icon of the SS, knowing that the

[3] Haslam, S. Alexander, and Stephen Reicher. "Beyond the Banality of Evil: Three Dynamics of an Interactionist Social Psychology of Tyranny." *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* 33, no. 5 (May 2007)

[4] Lederman, Shmuel. "The Radicalism of the Banality of EvilIdeology and Political Conformity in Arendt." *New German Critique* 46, no. 2 (137) (August 1, 2019): 197–220.

[5] Lederman, Shmuel. "The Radicalism of the Banality of EvilIdeology and Political Conformity in Arendt." *New German Critique* 46, no. 2 (137) (August 1, 2019): 197–220.

[6] Lederman, Shmuel. "The Radicalism of the Banality of EvilIdeology and Political Conformity in Arendt." *New German Critique* 46, no. 2 (137) (August 1, 2019): 197–220.

SS itself was an icon for the delirium of blind loyalty."[7] Therefore, according to Bergen, the concept of banality that Arendt created had the purpose of representing the fault of "blind loyalty" that existed in humankind. Arendt began contemplating that the "commonplace capacity of humans" was the reasoning behind Eichmann's participation in such heinous crimes.[8] Bergen described how this thought process of Arendt initiated the studying of other scholars of if the pre-existing fault "can lead us beyond the delirium of a blind loyalty into something we believe that is real about our experience of ourselves and our world."[9] According to Bergen, this is why Arendt did not believe Eichmann was monstrous but rather banal.

Building upon Bergen's opinion of the reason behind "the banality of evil," Formosa dives deeper into what exactly defines a "banal perpetrator."[10] According to Formosa, the difference between a banal perpetrator and a non-banal fanatic is "a banal perpetrator has only a thoughtless blind commitment to such an ideology, whereas a non-banal fanatic, such as a Hitler or Himmler, has a thoughtful, convinced commitment to their anti-Semitic 'cover story.'"[11] In relation to Arendt's claim that Eichmann was banal, Formosa's description defends Arendt's claim that Eichmann was simply following orders. In addition, Formosa furthered Arendt's claim of Eichmann's banality by introducing the factor of his lack of character. Formosa defines a person of character as "one who shows a willingness to buck the tide and think independently about what they are doing."[12] Therefore, Formosa writes that Eichmann did not possess an evil

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[7] Bergen, Bernard J. *The Banality of Evil: Hannah Arendt and "The Final Solution."* Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2000.

[8] Bergen, Bernard J. *The Banality of Evil: Hannah Arendt and "The Final Solution."* Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2000.

[9] Bergen, Bernard J. *The Banality of Evil: Hannah Arendt and "The Final Solution."* Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2000.

[10] Formosa, Paul. "Moral Responsibility for Banal Evil." *Journal of Social Philosophy* 37, no. 4 (2006): 501–520

[11] Formosa, Paul. "Moral Responsibility for Banal Evil." *Journal of Social Philosophy* 37, no. 4 (2006): 501–520

[12] Formosa, Paul. "Moral Responsibility for Banal Evil." *Journal of Social Philosophy* 37, no. 4 (2006): 501–520

character because of the fact that he did not possess character in the first place; "In this sense of character, Eichmann did not have an evil character but rather lacked character altogether."[13]

Hayden takes a different perspective of Arendt's concept of "the banality of evil" and discusses its relationship with political evil. Hayden writes that "the banality of evil" Arendt created is a resulting factor of the political evil that exists in the world; "banality of evil supersedes the notion of radical evil overlooks both the nature of political evil as she conceived it, and the enduring place of extreme evil in her thought."[14] Hayden's view on the idea is that "radical evil and evil as banal are distinct, though complementary, aspects of extreme evil as a whole," which is how an individual, like Eichmann, can partake in such atrocious activities as they do and feel little sympathy.[15] The influential power that political ideas and regimes have over a society creates the mindset that performing evil is valid and humane. Therefore, Eichmann was a banal character, in Arendt's eyes, because of the toxic political system that encouraged his participation.

Building off of Hayden, Minnich explored Arendt's idea of "the banality of evil" through the lens of political power. Arendt described the normalcy of Eichmann's image, and how he did not fit the image of a person who committed the crimes that he was accused of. As Arendt tried to rationalize Eichmann's mindset through his participation in the Holocaust, she concluded that Eichmann "was 'a quite extraordinary thoughtlessness,' which led him to have trouble thinking for himself rather than in clichés and platitudinous."[16] Minnich, along with Arendt, believes that

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[13] Formosa, Paul. "Moral Responsibility for Banal Evil." *Journal of Social Philosophy* 37, no. 4 (2006): 501–520
[14] Hayden, Patrick. "Political Evil in a Global Age," n.d., 30.
[15] Hayden, Patrick. "Political Evil in a Global Age," n.d., 30.
[16] Minnich, Elizabeth. "The Evil of Banality: Arendt Revisited." *Arts and Humanities in Higher Education: An International Journal of Theory, Research and Practice* 13, no. 1–2 (April 2014): 158–79.

individuals commit evil acts as a factor of obedience to authoritative figures or beliefs. Minnich states that certain, characterless individuals are "being reduced to 'obedience to authority' and variants are taken to account for our propensity to take on and fully play out whatever social role we are given, including harming other people when authority tells, or a system encourages, us to."[17]

Overall, the concept of "the banality of evil" is an idea that has led to much debate and speculation. Scholars have had trouble fully understanding why Hannah Arendt made the claim of Eichmann's banal character. However, after looking at the concept through various lenses, including political, philosophical, and psychological, scholars have become more aware to what defines a banal individual. The evolving interpretation of "the banality of evil" helps scholars better understand why Hannah Arendt created the concept in the context of Adolf Eichmann.

Personally, I believe the concept of "the banality of evil" is one that gives too much credit to those who commit horrific acts. Simply because a situation is easier for you or it is what you are being told to do does not mean it is correct. I understand Eichmann claiming he committed his acts because he was told to, and not for his own personal beliefs, but each individual has a set of morals to follow. No situation should alter an individual's personal morals because they should be a strong enough individual to recognize when an action goes against their beliefs. I feel as though, for example, Eichmann understood that what he was doing to the Jewish people, deep down, was wrong. However, he knew it would be easier to follow Hitler rather than fight him. Stating the concept of "the banality of evil" is the reasoning Eichmann would do horrific actions does not hold him accountable for having a weak sense of self and a cowardness personality.

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[17] Minnich, Elizabeth. "The Evil of Banality: Arendt Revisited." *Arts and Humanities in Higher Education: An International Journal of Theory, Research and Practice* 13, no. 1–2 (April 2014): 158–79.

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