

Hannah Arendt's Thesis on Different Modes of Evil

Jari Kauppinen

University of Helsinki

In my report of it [The Eichmann trial in Jerusalem] I spoke of "the banality of evil." Behind that phrase, I held no thesis or doctrine, although I was dimly aware of the fact it went counter to our tradition of thought – literary, theological, or philosophic – about the phenomenon of evil.

Hannah Arendt, *The Life of the Mind*

The Thesis of Evil

Hannah Arendt's "thesis" of evil is well known. It starts with a famous claim: "The problem of evil will be the fundamental question of postwar intellectual life in Europe."¹ The Arendtian thesis or "doctrine" of evil consists of several different claims. The first and the most important one is the claim that evil is historical. Evil has different historical modes. In *The Origins of Totalitarianism* Arendt notes that without the Second World War "we might never have known the truly radical nature of Evil."² Thus, the problem concerns the temporality of evil: how can we distinguish the new evil from the old one? Terminologically, as often noticed, Arendt is inconsistent. She speaks about absolute evil, about "radical evil" in quotation marks, and once about radical evil without quotation marks.³ Usually commentators identify absolute evil with radical evil. It denotes the worst evil, although it is not clear that we cannot face something that would be worse than the historical situation to which Arendt refers. Hence, Arendt's radical evil should not be confused with the Kantian radical

1 Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem*. Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1989(1958), 134.

2 Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*. New York: Harcourt, 1976(1951), ix.

3 Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, 459. I owe this remark to Susanna Snell.

evil, which refers to corruption of the human heart, neither to absolute evil nor the worst possible evil.

The second question concerns the distinction between “radical evil” and the “banality of evil,” the non-demonic evil. Richard Bernstein claims that these forms of evil coincide,⁴ whereas Dana Villa, for instance, finds certain dissimilarities between them.⁵ Perhaps the Arendtian final *Setzung* is that “the evil is extreme,” which has also been pointed out by many commentators.

The third question relates to the ontology of evil. In this respect, Arendt seems to be very Augustinian, and her thought can be situated in the Augustinian tradition as suggested by Charles T. Mathewes. Augustinian position is an amalgam of both Aristotelian (evil is the privation of good) and Platonic (God, Idea, or the Supreme Creator is good) assumptions. It implies that the intramundane world is corrupted and it is a matter of human will to use one’s freedom against wickedness. In this sense, the Augustinian evil is objective: evil exists in the world. Conceived in this way, Arendt thus seems to believe in the objectivity of evil. The obvious difficulty with this position is that if the privation of good is understood as something existing (*existentia*), why should it be objective; but the good as *essentia* supposes the stability of the Creator. That the nature of evil can change necessarily implies that it ceases to be objective, unless the notion of constituted objectivity (as well as subjectivity) is transient as a historical phenomenon. Arendt’s controversial thesis on evil seems to be that the objectivity of evil can change inasmuch as the condition of being in the world changes. With the modern subjectivity, the evil becomes banal (fallenness).

The usual position since Kant has been that the human being is evil, meaning subjective evil, which implies that evil is something intrinsic or intentional. Therefore Arendt’s functionalistic position in the Eichmann book seems deeply problematic and contrary to the intentional explanations of evil. Subjective or intentional explanations involve either psychological or psychopathological motives. Arendt’s functionalistic position can also be contrasted to the projection theory of Theodor Adorno. In Adorno’s theory inner hate and inner evil are projected outwards: onto nature, woman, or the Jew. In other words, self-hate and resentment are exteriorized. In stressing that wickedness is not a necessary condition for doing evil, Arendt can at least be thought to have a counter-argument to subjective evil.⁶ Arendt emphasizes that our faculty of thought is connected to telling good from evil

4 See Richard J. Bernstein, *Radical Evil: A Philosophical Interrogation*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 2002.

5 See Dana R. Villa, *Politics, Philosophy, Terror: Essays on the Thought of Hannah Arendt*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999.

6 Hannah Arendt, *The Life of the Mind*. New York: Harcourt, 1981, vol. I, 5.

and right from wrong, in which case the “activity of thinking” could sublimate innate wickedness, thus providing a condition against evil-doing.

Arendt can also be placed in the context of those Heideggerian philosophers trying to work out the Heideggerian ethics that seem to be lacking at least in *Being and Time*. Arendt could then be related to thinkers such as Hans Jonas and Emmanuel Levinas. It is obvious that in *Being and Time* there is no place for ethics, since the *privatio boni* takes place on the ontical (present-at-hand) and not on the ontological level. Thus Arendt, influenced by Augustine, appears to subscribe to the *privatio boni* argument which states that we cannot accept the Heideggerian ontology as such, with its modes of Being-in-the-World like anguish and guilt. She repeats this objection when developing her notions of judgment and freedom in her famous critique of Heidegger in *The Life of the Mind*.

In this article, I study Arendt more in the context of the question concerning the history of evil, namely, in the context of Western metaphysics based on the phenomenological and the theological oppositions of light (*fairsthai*) and darkness, good and evil. Elisabeth Young-Bruehl confirms the legitimacy of this perspective in her new book *Why Arendt Matters* by asserting that in Arendtian terms we are living now in darker times which invite the type of men who bring the light.⁷ Indeed, Young-Bruehl shows that the Eichmann case is central to Arendt’s thought.⁸ Quite recently, Susan Neiman has argued in her *Evil in Modern Thought* that we have a different or, as she calls it, “alternative history of philosophy” if we read philosophy through the problem of evil.⁹

Augustinian Evil

In his book *Evil in the Augustinian Tradition*, Charles T. Mathewes considers Hannah Arendt and the theology of Ronald Niebuhr as the two representatives of the Augustinian tradition. On a theological basis, Mathewes rejects the subjective interpretation of evil. This interpretation is attributed to Nietzsche and Freud, but insofar as the issue concerns the interior evil we can find the idea in several thinkers from Kant to Adorno. Mathewes contrasts it to the exterior, or the Augustinian evil. Mathewes’ description of Augustinian evil is worth citing for the understanding of several of Arendt’s positions, even if we do not believe them to be as consistent as Mathewes thinks.

7 Elisabeth Young-Bruehl, *Why Arendt Matters*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2006, 1–7.

8 Elisabeth Young-Bruehl, *Hannah Arendt: For the Love of the World*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004(1982).

9 Susan Neiman, *Evil in Modern Thought: An Alternative History of Philosophy*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002(2001), 1–13.

[T]he Augustinian tradition interprets evil's challenge in two distinct conceptual mechanisms, one ontological and the other anthropological. Ontologically, in terms of the status of evil in the universe, it understands evil as nothing more than the *privation* of being and goodness – “evil” is not an existing thing at all, but rather the absence of existence, an ontological shortcoming. Anthropologically, in terms of the effect of evil on a human being, it depicts human wickedness as rooted in the sinful *perversion* of the human's good nature – created in the *imago Dei* – into a distorted, misoriented and, and false imitation of what the human should be. *Privation* and *perversion* [...].¹⁰

This summarizes neatly the traditional concept of evil. This concept has a double structure and it works mechanically. The origin is pure but what is derived from it is contaminated. The mimetic order involves a doubling of evil which is mechanic and therefore, increasingly less perfect than the origin. Thus, evil always necessarily bifurcates itself as moral and diabolic, as this pattern is always already the imperfect double of the good, a shortcoming and distortion. Mathewes describes the Arendtian evil as objective and ontological; the evil exists in the world, and it concerns the relationship between the Creator and the created. This description fits in the Augustinian concept of beginning, birth, or natality as *initium*.¹¹ Beginning or creation also comprehends the Arendtian/Augustinian *amor mundi*, the love of the world through the theme of anthropological perversion and corruption. The original fallenness of man could easily explain the problem of judgment in later Arendt. In the background of the traditional idea of evil there are both the Platonic theory of imitation and perfection as well as the Aristotelian theory of *steresis* (*Cat.* 10, *Met.* V, 22) and man's lack of judgment or weakness of character (*Eth. Nic.* VII, 6). It should also be pointed out that Arendt notices the filiations of privation from Aristotle through Augustine to Kant in *The Life of the Mind*, although she claims that privation is most central in the system of St. Thomas Aquinas, i.e. in Thomism.¹²

Before Kant the problem of evil was discussed on three levels; *Malum physicum* (natural evil), *Malum morale* (moral evil), and *Malum metaphysicum* (metaphysical evil). The natural evil denotes natural disasters; the moral evil is the usual evil of human (nature); and the metaphysical evil concerns Theodicy. Let us examine what Arendt says about the notion of evil in *Love and Saint Augustine*. Arendt formulates the Augustinian position of *privatio boni* as follows:

Since no part in this universe, no human life and no part of this life, can possess its own autonomous significance, there can be no “evil” (*malum*). There are only “goods” (*bona*)

10 Charles Mathewes, *Evil in Augustinian Tradition*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001, 6–7.

11 Mathewes mentions that the idea can actually be found in chapter 21 of *De Civitate Dei* XII, and not in chapter 20 as Arendt usually claims: *Initium ergo ut esset, creatus est homo, ante quem nullus fuit*, “that there would be a beginning, man was created, before whom no beginning existed.” Mathewes, *Evil in Augustinian Tradition*, 151 n. 1. For a definition of natality see Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1989, 177–178.

12 Arendt, *The Life of the Mind*, vol. II, 118.

in their proper order, which may merely *seem* evil from the transient perspective of the individual (*singulum*).¹³

This is by no means Arendt's position, but we can ask how much she accepts from it, especially in relation to Heideggerian temporality and ontology. One could easily find the theory of perversion and wickedness which works through imitation in Arendt: "[e]ven wickedness could not exist without being related to the Supreme Being and imitating it."¹⁴ Indeed, we can find the operation of imitation going both ways; also perfection or *caritas* refers to imitation of the Sovereign Good. This becomes clearer when Arendt takes up the relation of the Creator and the created. Here we find the evil in the form of *concupiscentia*, covetousness, or *cupiditas*. It is defined as misguided love for the human-made things of the world, and also as habituality.¹⁵ In *Love and Saint Augustine* evil means bad conscience and living in habituality. Ultimately it is God that calls man in his conscience. The call of conscience is the faculty that tends to the Creator. Thus it is God that judges good and evil; and it is the conscience that brings man into the presence of God, *coram Deo*.¹⁶

These Arendtian descriptions of Augustine will help us later, especially in the context of her famous discussion on thoughtlessness, or inability to think, or living in an absorbed situation in which an authentic call of conscience is no longer able to function. This is what happens in a totalitarian society.

Kantian Radical Evil

In *The Origins of Totalitarianism* there are two famous *topoi* where radical evil is discussed. First, there is the 1950 preface to the first edition, where Arendt first states her famous thesis of absolute evil and then formulates it as radical evil:

And if it is true that in the final stages of totalitarianism an absolute evil appears (absolute because it can no longer be deduced from humanly comprehensive motives), it is also true that without it we might never have known the truly radical nature of Evil.¹⁷

Absolute evil is both unintentional and incomprehensible. This raises of course several questions: are absolute evil and radical evil the same? Does anything exist that would be worse than totalitarianism, say "let the dead bury the dead?" If it is clear for Arendt that evil is historically contingent, how could it turn out to be

13 Hannah Arendt, *Love and Saint Augustine*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996, 60.

14 Arendt, *Love and Saint Augustine*, 53.

15 Arendt, *Love and Saint Augustine*, 77–83.

16 Arendt, *Love and Saint Augustine*, 84.

17 Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, viii.

absolute? We may also ask: how is it possible to distinguish new forms of evil from the old ones? Is it possible that an old evil resurfaces in a new form, i.e. that the old evil appears in a seemingly new form, for instance in the disguise of technology? Or is it even possible that a new and unpredictable evil appears in the form of the old, even as *malum naturale*? (Is this not the most urgent question nowadays?) There is no “coming of the worst,” the worst of the worst to-come in Arendt, after we have faced “radical evil.”

The second passage on radical evil is from the section on concentration camps. First, Arendt says that the issue is not about suffering, or *malum physicum*, but about the change in human nature at the camps, the change which leads to absolute evil that cannot be explained by referring to the motives of *malum morale*, that is, by covetousness, greed, resentment, or self-interest. Second, Arendt claims that our entire tradition has been unable to conceive absolute evil, even if Kant, who coined the word, must have foreseen this kind of incomprehensible evil. Arendt also claims that Kant rationalizes this evil by defining it as “perverted ill will.” (Perhaps Kant was afraid of the diabolic evil which posits evil as its maxim or where the supreme good and the radical evil are connected.¹⁸) Lastly, we can find in this passage Arendt’s theory of the superfluousness of evil: “We may say that radical evil has emerged in a connection where all men have become equally superfluous.”¹⁹ In what follows, I read closely Richard Bernstein, who understands this superfluousness in relation to human freedom or natality; to him it signifies elimination of spontaneity and unpredictability.²⁰ The elimination of spontaneity is an argument about negative freedom in totalitarian society, and the superfluousness of men could also be explained in terms of omnipotence: man as having taken the place of the Creator.

In Arendt, there is no extensive discussion of the radicality of evil. However, I would like to examine the concept of radical evil more closely, especially because this concept seems to be gaining more philosophical interest. Kant discusses the inextricable nature of evil in the famous essay called “Radical Evil” in his *Religion in the Limits of Reason Alone*. Radical evil is defined in a much quoted passage as follows:

This evil is *radical*, because it corrupts the ground of all maxims; it is, moreover, a natural propensity, *inextirpable* by human powers, since this extirpation could not occur only through good maxims, and cannot take place when the ultimate subjective ground of all

18 I refer here to the so-called Slovenian school, namely Slavoj Žižek, Alenka Zupančič and Joan Copjec.

19 Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, 459.

20 Richard J. Bernstein, *Radical Evil*, 208–213.

maxims is postulated as corrupt yet at the same time it must be possible to *overcome* it, since it is found in man, a being whose actions are free.²¹

There are some technicalities in the terminology of propensity (*Hang*) in relation to the freedom of choice (*Willkür*). There is, for Kant, the weakness of the human heart; and towards the end of the chapter he speaks about the wickedness of the human heart, the propensity that adopts evil maxims.²² This is Arendt's context, but I do not want to go into details of this issue.²³ There already exist several studies on Arendt concerning radical evil.²⁴

One problem worth mentioning here is Jacques Derrida's critique of the status of lie and lying in Arendt. Arendt continues the Kantian line of reasoning.²⁵ For Kant, lying is radically evil and he holds that it is not worth living in the world based on lies. In her later articles on lying, Arendt repeats her argument about how totalitarianism depends both on lying to others and lying to oneself, appearing as a *habitus*, or as a mode of being in the world.²⁶ Derrida sees the problematic of lying secondary because it presupposes that the truth wins, or that the truth is never sacrificed. This is, in turn, related to the thesis of human corruption and to the theory of imitation:

[I]t is not a matter here of opposing to this risk of the Judeo-Christian-Kantian hypothesis of the lie as a radical evil and sign of the originary corruption of human existence, but of noting if there is no *possibility* at least of this radical perversion and its infinite survival, and, notably if one does not take into account *technical* mutations in the history and the structure of the *simulacrum*, or the iconic substitute, one will always fail to think the lie itself [...].²⁷

21 Immanuel Kant, *Der Religion Innerhalb der Grenz der blossen Vernunft*. In *Werke*, vol. 5. Cologne: Koenemann, 1995(1794), 32, 39. Cited in Bernstein, *Radical Evil*, 31–32.

22 See Bernstein, *Radical Evil*, 38.

23 See for example Jacques Derrida, "Faith and Knowledge." In *Acts of Religion*, London and New York: Routledge, 2002; Hent de Vries, *Religion and Violence. Philosophical Perspectives from Kant to Derrida*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001; see also Jari Kauppinen, "Arche-evil." In Ari Hirvonen & Janne Porttikivi (eds.), *Law and Evil: Philosophy, Politics, Psychoanalysis*. Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2009, 73–93.

24 On radical evil and the banality of evil, see, Gary Smith (ed.), *Hannah Arendt Revisited: "Eichmann in Jerusalem" und die Folgen*. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2000; Pia Maria Lara (ed.), *Rethinking Evil: Contemporary Perspectives*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001; Enrico Donaggio & Domenico Scalzo, *Sur Male a partire di Hannah Arendt*. Roma: Meltemi, 2003.

25 See Hannah Arendt, *Lectures on Kant's Political Philosophy*. Brighton: The Harvest Press, 1986, 16. In *On Revolution* Arendt even states: "Only crime and criminal, it is true, confront us with the perplexity of radical evil; but only hypocrite is rotten to the core." Hannah Arendt, *On Revolution*. London: Penguin Books, 1990, 103.

26 I am referring to Arendt's articles "Truth and Politics" in W. G. Laslett and P. Runciman (eds.), *Philosophy, Politics and Society*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1967, and "Lying in Politics" in *The Crises of the Republic*. New York: Harcourt, 1972.

27 Jacques Derrida, "History of Lie: Prolegomena." *Graduate Faculty Philosophical Journal*, vol. 19, no. 2 / vol. 20, no. 1, 1997, 129–161.

In *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, there are several examples of lying. Stalin and Hitler are the main examples, and the concern is not only in lying but in its effects as well. This is in concordance with Arendt's thesis that lying has always been favored in politics, but the circumstances have changed. According to Arendt, the modern lies are so big that they must be swallowed because the opposite would be more miraculous:

Not Stalin's and Hitler's skills in the art of lying but the fact they were able to organize the masses into a collective unit to back up their lies with impressive magnificence, exerted the fascination.²⁸

We can, of course, make a distinction between the totalitarian propaganda which Arendt characterizes as "monstrous lies" and Hitler's more private lies (*Tischgespräche*) to his generals about winning the war.²⁹ Besides, the latter seems to be a restricted situation as well, since we know the isolation of the Führer's bunker where Hitler could, at least for the time being, persuade his audience.³⁰

Eichmann and the Banality

In *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A report on the Banality of Evil*, Arendt's most important contribution to the discussion on evil is contained in the two pages of postscript where she tries to say what she meant in the book. She starts by referring to the great Shakespearean villains, Iago, Macbeth, and Richard III, and noting that Eichmann could not be compared to any of them.³¹ Eichmann had, according to Arendt, no motives at all, and she claims that "*he merely never realized what he was doing*."³² This is where the unfortunate term "thoughtlessness" appears. Arendt identifies it with an inability to think, contrasting it with stupidity; Eichmann was certainly not stupid. Arendt then moves on to explain the banality in relation to Eichmann: "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."³³

Eichmann is here neither intentionally nor diabolically evil. This is also what Arendt calls administrative evil, and it is often noted that Arendt lays emphasis on

28 Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, 333.

29 Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, 342.

30 I refer to the testimony of Traudl Junge, in Melissa Müller (ed.), *Until the Final Hour. Hitler's last secretary*. New York: Arcade, 2004.

31 One can also think of the great villains, such as Vautrin from Balzac's *Human Comedy*, that also served as a model, for example to Marx.

32 Hannah Arendt, *Essays on Understanding*. New York: Harcourt, 1994, 287.

33 Arendt, *Essays on Understanding*, 288.

the fact that the real horror started with SS and not with the *ressentiment* of SA.³⁴ Arendt develops a kind of logic of offering, referring to the fact that totalitarianism needed Jews as victims, as a remainder. There is always a chain of substitutions at work in an offering: after the Jews, the Germans suffering from lung or cardiac disease would be exterminated next. This logic of sacrifice is different from the fact that the totalitarian system also needed slave workers to support the economy, even if the final goal from the point of view of the victim was the same.

One point against Arendt is the point of view of the witness. Edith Wyschogrod notes that Arendt's thesis on the banality of evil, or the bureaucratic evil, is insufficient from the point of view of Jean Améry, who said in direct opposition to Arendt: "Evil exceeds and overlays banality [...] I saw it in their serious, tense faces, which were not swelling let us say, with sexual sadistic delight but concentrated in murderous self-realization."³⁵ However, even if we accept that Arendt saw Eichmann only in a glass cage, it does not refute the fact that the Holocaust was an administrative murder, a function of the bureaucracy. Arendt continuously uses the term "administrative massacres" to describe this. In "Auschwitz on Trial," for instance, she defines Holocaust as executions that were designed by desk murderers with the strictest plans and rules. She says that the extermination of millions was planned to function like a machine, although the main characteristic of murdering was complete arbitrariness.³⁶

About the structure of the destruction of the European Jews we have, like Arendt, learned from Raul Hilberg's study *The Destruction of European Jews*.³⁷ It must be mentioned that Arendt's *Report* was based on Hilberg's monumental history, which was published because of the Eichmann trial. And, for example, Claude Lanzmann's nine-hour long "documentary" film *Shoah* was based on Hilberg's book. But unlike Arendt and as a complement to Hilberg, the film also included the victim's point of view. Hilberg argues that it was mostly the same men of the *Einsatzgruppen* that functioned in RSHA, which Eichmann also belonged to (IV-B-4), that were involved in the destruction, and thus there is a pattern of administrative murders. I call this here the opposition between the so called Hilbergian and Arendtian "functionalist" position that studies only what the Germans did and the intentionalist position of

34 Bernstein, *Radical Evil*, 216. The reference is to the article "Concentration Camps." *Partisan Review*, Vol. 15, No. 7, July 1948.

35 Jean Améry, *At the Mind's Limits*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press 1980, 25–26, 35–36. Cited in Edith Wyschogrod, *Spirit in Ashes: Hegel, Heidegger and Man-Made Mass Death*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985, 75.

36 Hannah Arendt, *Responsibility and Judgement*. New York: Schocken Books, 2003, 250–251.

37 Raul Hilberg, *The Destruction of European Jews*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003(1961).

Améry and Lanzmann that also underscores witness accounts.³⁸ Arendt derives from Hilberg the much criticized thesis about *Judenräte* that where the Jews resisted the Germans, they were saved at least to some extent. Nevertheless, I believe that one reason for the criticism against Arendt was also the question of her style: her tone is described as being too ironic, prevailing, and too “black and white.”³⁹

Neiman tries to combine the distinction between the intentional and functional positions with subjective and objective evil. Even if Eichmann was not subjectively a great evil doer, on the objective level his deeds were so horrible that in fact he is a great evil doer. What made accusing Arendt so easy is the supposition that there could be no evil without evil intentions. According to Neiman, Arendt did not distinguish between metaphysical evil and political evil – since Kant we have had no natural evil and the moral evil refers the deeds and metaphysical one to the intentions. In his view, Arendt would be philosophically more rigorous if she had kept that distinction.⁴⁰ Nevertheless, it is not yet clear to me what the political means here. For example Fred Poché reads Arendt’s concept of political evil as a philosophy of engagement that has finally put into practice the transcendental dimension of the philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas.⁴¹

Is the radical evil for Arendt the same as the banality of evil? According to Bernstein they are nearly identical and he claims that “the phenomenon that she identified as the banality of evil *presupposes* this understanding of radical evil,” which entails the elimination of human spontaneity and freedom as superfluous.⁴² One could express the idea by saying that if radical evil is a theory then the banality of evil is the practice. Dana R. Villa has taken the contrary view, insisting that in the Eichmann book Arendt had to change her position on evil. Radical evil and banality of evil are different things, or as Villa says, they may even be contradictory but at the very least they are in tension. Villa also points to the particularity of Eichmann and his context; the banality of evil does not mean that we all have a little Eichmann inside us.⁴³ Furthermore, she states that the specificity of Eichmann enabled Arendt

38 I will not go deeper into the representational problematic in Lanzmann. It could well be argued that the documentary character is also fictive and manipulated, as is done in *Shoah*. See *Au sujet du Shoah. Le film de Claude Lanzmann*. Paris: Belin, 1990.

39 On this subject, see Tuija Parvikko, *Arendt, Eichmann, and the Politics of the Past*. Helsinki: The Finnish Political Science Association, 2008.

40 Neiman, *Evil in Modern Thought*, 267–277.

41 Fred Poché, *Penser avec Arendt et Levinas: Du man politique au respect de l'autre*. Lyon: Chronique Sociale, 2003.

42 Bernstein, *Radical Evil*, 210.

43 Villa, *Politics, Philosophy, Terror*, 53–58.

to elaborate a more widespread concept of evil as human wickedness⁴⁴ that also stressed the particularity of Eichmann which was his extraordinary shallowness.⁴⁵

After the controversy of the banality of evil the commentators have usually referred to Arendt's response to Gershom Scholem where she says that "it is indeed my opinion now that evil is never 'radical,' that it is only extreme, and it possesses neither depth nor any demonic dimension."⁴⁶ According to Bernstein Arendt did change her mind but only regarding the motivation of evil and not the theory itself.⁴⁷

Nevertheless, an interesting interpretation of Arendt is that of Jacob Rogozinski, who in his recent lecture *Hannah Arendt, Hitler, and the Banality of Evil* claims that in her thesis of the banality of evil Arendt underestimates the unconscious and the fantasmatic power (hatred, envy) of the projection of evil.⁴⁸ In Rogozinski's reading, evil is projected onto the empty place of the other, because radical evil means transcendental evil and freedom is understood as transcendental freedom.

It may be true that Arendt did not pay sufficient attention to the meaning of "banality" (as etymologically related to banishment and abandonment) as well as that she did not bother to delve into the philosophical meaning of the absolute, in the expression "absolute evil."⁴⁹ But usually it is said that Arendt – like any philosopher – defined new meanings for old concepts in her genealogies, and that instead of assuming the role of a professional philosopher she rather decidedly remained inconsistent in her conceptual schematics. The content of a concept was more important to Arendt, but the cost of this method was what she had to pay in the numerous "Arendt controversies."

In the end, the problem of evil and ontology would have to be measured against Schelling's *Treatise on Human Freedom* and Heidegger's interpretation of it, in the debate of evil as a *Grund*. In the Schellingian sense evil would be situated

44 Villa, *Politics, Philosophy, Terror*, 105.

45 Villa, *Politics, Philosophy, Terror*, 40–41.

46 Cited in Villa, *Politics, Philosophy, Terror*, 55–56.

47 Bernstein, *Radical Evil*, 218.

48 Rogozinski emphasizes the remainder, superfluosity, or *reste* in relation to abandoning in its etymological relation to banality. He observes that the meaning of banality is in fact 'banished from society' as the condition of modern men. I am referring here to a lecture he delivered as a guest of the *Law and Evil* project at the University of Helsinki on October 21, 2006. Published in Ari Hirvonen & Janne Porttikivi (eds.), *Law and Evil: Philosophy, Politics, Psychoanalysis*. Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2009, 97–116.

49 I stress that these Arendtian concepts are now understood more poorly than ever. For instance, the common journalistic image of "demonic evil" is that it has become banal (as in the case of Saddam Hussein). And the cultural elitist version interprets banality in the sense of consumerism as everydayness. These positions imply a projection theory that is contrary to Arendt.

ontologically at a deeper level than in the Augustinian and Kantian metaphysics of privation, in the Ground of God's being. In a Schellingian interpretation Eichmann could be seen as a part of the state's mechanical punishment machine which Kant supposes to stand against evil.⁵⁰

The Different Modes of Ontology: Arendt and Heidegger on Evil

In the famous essay "Thinking and Moral Considerations" Arendt changes the term 'thoughtlessness' to 'inability to think' when she underlines the factuality of Eichmann's doings. She puts it bluntly: "This total absence of thinking attracted my interest."⁵¹ She begins to develop a theory of thinking that is still against *bios theoretikos*, or professional thinking.⁵² In the case of evil, most of Arendt's commentators highlight Arendt's *Life of the Mind* and especially the last missing part on judging, but in my view we can well focus on the second part, *Willing*, since for Arendt willing is the faculty that is connected with freedom and thus with evil. At least willing is directed to the future whereas judging – or as Arendt specifies, reflective judging as opposed to deductive political judging – is directed to the past. I am not sure if in Arendt's "metapsychology" of the threefold hierarchy of thinking, willing, and judging the autonomous judging really has the last word.⁵³

There exists the opinion, for example in the new preface to Young-Bruehl's biography, that Heidegger was not a moral character and that he was not interested in judging.⁵⁴ But this has to do with Heidegger's famous deconstruction of ontology in *Being and Time*, and we have some evidence, although Arendt had a kind of existentialist or phenomenological tendency to turn to the experience of Lifeworld, that there is a crucial difference between Arendt and Heidegger in this respect. Of course, in Heidegger's ontology there is nothing to prevent evil. One could say that the everydayness of totalitarianism is an equiprimordial possibility for *Dasein* in its

50 On this aspect see Joseph Lawrence, "Schelling's Metaphysics of Evil." In Judith Norman and Alistair Welchman (eds.), *The New Schelling*. London and New York: Continuum, 2004, 172–173. One question remains open here: Heidegger seems to say in his later works that evil exists in the world in the ontological or spatial sense of being, whereas in the *Being and Time* he had posited it only in the temporal sense. See Berndt Irlenborn, *Das Ingrim des Auffurs: Heidegger and das Problem des Bösen*. Vienna: Passagen Verlag, 2000 for further discussion on the topic.

51 Arendt, *Responsibility and Judgement*, 160.

52 Jacques Taminiaux, *La fille de Thrace et le penseur professionnel*. Paris: Payot, 1992.

53 Although this Arendtian threefold structure is analogical to Kant's three *Critiques* and the labour, work, and action structure of *The Human Condition*, the triad as a structure of the mind also bears a resemblance to the famous Super-ego, ego, and id structure, where the Super-ego has the judging role.

54 Young-Bruehl, *Hannah Arendt*, xxx-xxxi.

resoluteness. My aim, however, is to show why the question of evil could not be posed in Heidegger's fundamental ontology as Arendt does.

In *Being and Time* evil is on the ontic level (*Vorhanden*) for Heidegger and not on the ontological level; on the level of being there is no morality. This is understood best by Emmanuel Levinas, who insists on the transcendence of evil in relation to Heidegger's procedure that "moves to nothingness out of lived anxiety, a modality of psyche leading further than negation."⁵⁵ This finally leads Levinas to assert that there is a more fundamental anxiety than death, namely evil, which is more fundamental than the Heideggerian Being or the ontological difference.

Heidegger performs his procedure in section 58 of *Being and Time* called *Understanding the appeal, guilt* that concentrates on the call of conscience (*Gewissen*) and authenticity in relation to one's own possibilities, meaning temporality and death. He starts with the distinction between nullity and notness. He states: "is it so obvious that every 'not' (*Nichts*) signifies something negative in the sense of a lack?"⁵⁶ Heidegger speaks about the nullity as one of *Dasein*'s possibilities. He begins from the ontological source of notness and claims that privation and lack are incapable of explaining the ontological phenomenon of guilt (*Schuldigsein*) that instigates the whole system of guilt, care, and gift. Heidegger speaks about evil only once in *Being and Time*:

Least of all can we come any closer to the existential phenomenon of guilt by taking our orientation from the idea of evil, the *malum* as *privatio boni*. Just as *bonum* and its *privatio* have the same ontological origin in the ontology of the *present-at-hand*, this ontology also applies to the idea of 'value', which has been 'abstracted' from these.⁵⁷

This makes it very clear why in the Heideggerian ontology the traditional notion of privation has little value, as does the traditional conception of morality. He continues by claiming that the essential being guilty is the existential condition of possibility of the morally good and morally bad – clearly a Nietzschean idea but stated as an equiprimordial condition for morality in general and its possible factual forms. Heidegger could not be clearer when he says: "The primordial 'Being-guilty' cannot be defined by morality, since morality already presupposes it for itself."⁵⁸ We have here a difference in the concepts of evil, due to the concepts of ontology: in the Arendtian ontology evil is in the world and this is defined in *Being and Time* as the

55 Emmanuel Levinas, "Transcendence and Evil." In Anna-Teresa Tymieniecka (ed.), *Analecta Husserliana XIV: The Phenomenology of Man and of the Human Condition*. Dordrecht: Reidel, 1983, 155.

56 Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*. London: Blackwell, 1987, 331–332; Martin Heidegger, *Sein und Zeit*. Tübingen: Niemeyer, 1986(1927), 286.

57 Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 322; Heidegger, *Sein und Zeit*, 286.

58 Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 322; Heidegger, *Sein und Zeit*, 286.

ontic sense of morality. This ontology is evident in Arendt's famous fungus metaphor which is taken from her response to Scholem. She claims: "Evil possesses neither depth nor demonic dimensions. It can overgrow and lay waste the whole world because it spreads like a fungus."⁵⁹ I am not so much interested in the metaphor of fungus but in her opinion that evil has the possibility of overgrowing – as a global growth – the whole world. The evil belongs to the world as the Augustinian objective evil, or as she says "we are of the world and not merely in it,"⁶⁰ and there is a growing eschatological evil. In Mathewes argument, the evil, for example the banality of evil in the Arendtian "political ontology," is based on the Augustinian ontology, where there are no demonic or superhuman agents but agonism, as in *Vita Activa*, and on being in the world as *amor mundi* and *initium* as human will.⁶¹

Now, one can look closer at Arendt's most famous critique of Heidegger in *The Life of the Mind*. This critique concentrates especially on Heidegger's call of conscience in the meaning of being guilty. Arendt has several formulations of "guilty" in her critique. She says, for example, that when Heidegger makes the call of conscience universal, it means that if everyone is guilty then no-one is:

It apparently never occurred to Heidegger that by making all men who listen to the "call of conscience" equally guilty, he was actually proclaiming universal innocence: where everybody is guilty, nobody is.⁶²

This is fine but one wonders why Arendt first says "all men who listen to the call of conscience" and then, in the next sentence, she universalizes the referent: the listening to the call of conscience is equivalent to "universal innocence." Hence, the structure of Arendt's argument is reminiscent of the critique of collective guilt of the Germans. When everyone is guilty then no-one is guilty – but this is far from saying that no-one is innocent.

Arendt does not accept the notion of guilt in Heidegger, although she explores the three-part structure of being guilty as follows:

On the contrary, the Self in *Being and Time* becomes manifest in the "voice of conscience" which calls man back from his everyday entanglement in the "*man*" (German for "one" or "they") and what conscience, in its call, discloses as human "guilt," a word (*Schuld*) that in German means both being guilty of (responsible for) some deed and having debts in the sense of owing somebody something. The main point in Heidegger's "idea of guilt" is that human existence is guilty to the extent that it "factually exists" [...].⁶³

59 Cited in Neiman, *Evil in Modern Thought*, 301.

60 Arendt, *The Life of the Mind*, vol. I, 22.

61 Mathewes, *Evil in Augustinian Tradition*, 150–151.

62 Arendt, *The Life of the Mind*, vol. II, 184.

63 Arendt, *The Life of the Mind*, vol. II, 184.

In another sense, it is possible to interpret *Schuld* as debt referring to the beginning (what is the first gift?), but since Arendt does not conceive any structure of giving in this context, it is not interesting to develop this line of interpretation here. Nevertheless, Arendt formulates her critique most succinctly when she describes Heidegger's philosophy after the so-called turning (*Kehre*) or turnings; she refers negatively to what the later Heidegger no longer is in *The Anaximandros Fragment*:

To be sure, there is no longer the "call of conscience" summoning man back to his authentic self, to the insight that, no matter what he has done or omitted to do, he was already *schuldig* ("guilty"), since his existence was a debt he "owed" after having been thrown into the world.⁶⁴

This neatly summarizes Arendt's critique of guilt, and it also fits Dana Villa's scheme that Heidegger was in a sense like Eichmann, because Heidegger was more interested in thinking than judging. This means that judging is for Arendt more important than thinking and therefore, thinking too much instead of judging resembles lack of thinking connected to lack of judgment. According to Villa, Heidegger and Eichmann are linked together: "pure thought and thoughtlessness are the two sides of the same phenomenon, incapability of judgment."⁶⁵ This may be so, but in the Heideggerian ontology this guiltiness and thinking and call of conscience are not on the same ontological level; Eichmann and Arendt worked on the ontical level, since politics as well as morals also seemed to be on the ontical level for Heidegger.

My argument does not imply that Arendt would show herself to be naïve, on the contrary. I am suspicious of the use Arendt's thought is put to today. Not that Arendt was simply objectivistic; surely she was familiar with the critique of the subject-object relation in which something present is presented to a subject, but my worry is that Arendt is taken too easily nowadays as someone who is referring to reality i.e. to the world without the phenomenological attitude. In a further move, she is then posited as a guarantee against some Heideggerian anti-subjectivist, who sees the situation of the judging or deciding subject as more complicated than just "personal responsibility under dictatorship." Or, to put this otherwise, after what Nietzsche said about the true world having become a fable we have only aesthetics and no more politics in post-modern society, and Arendt is believed to be arguing against this position.

According to Neiman Arendt is offering a modern Theodicy in the fungus metaphor and she reductively compares Arendt to Rousseau, who saw our

64 Arendt, *The Life of the Mind*, vol. II, 193.

65 Villa, *Philosophy, Politics, Terror*, 85.

faculties as corrupted but not inherently corrupt.⁶⁶ Yet, although Rousseau was the first to say (in the first *Discourse*) that human nature changes in the course of history, and surely not for the better, in Arendt there is hope and optimism. Here we encounter again the question of natality and the relation between the Creator and the created. Indeed, Bernstein notes this when he quotes Karl Jaspers' question "Hasn't Jahve gone out of sight?" and Arendt replies with the distinction between God's and man's omnipotence, where the latter stands for evil that "has provided more radical than expected." In a way this brings to mind Hans Jonas' Gnostic position (from the Lurianic *Kabbalah*) where the Creator is helpless and we the created must help him with redemption. Perhaps Arendt's notion of love could also be understood in this way.

In the end, Arendt seems to embrace the Platonic position of privation, or corruption and perversion of truth (*Protagoras* 345e) as she says in *Thinking and Moral Considerations*:

The most conspicuous and most dangerous fallacy in the proposition, as old as Plato, "Nobody does evil voluntarily," is the implied conclusion, "Everybody wants to do good." The sad truth of the matter is that most evil is done by people who never made up their mind to be either bad or good.⁶⁷

It is this thoughtlessness and not stupidity that seems to be the most characteristic mode of being in the world for Arendt. Thus, whatever modes of evil (radical, absolute, banal, extreme) there are, they are in the world and they could not be explained away as Arendt states against the tendency of the tradition. Moreover, for Arendt, evil is in the history, temporally it has already happened, its tense is the past. Evil is not futural, it does not have the modus of not yet, becoming without any presence. Neither does Arendt construct, as a third possibility, another temporality of the past i.e. an impossible past without historical actuality or presence. Of course, Arendt conceives evil to be actual, but it springs from the past since temporality is conceived on an Augustinian basis, as a beginning, and not as a becoming or thrownness, a Heideggerian danger that can save us like technology.

Yet, in the Arendtian parlance evil could also be overcome by the act of thinking. This position is the same which can be found in "The two-in-One" chapter of *The Life of the Mind*, at the end of "What makes us Think?" after the example of Socrates the thinker: "If there is anything in thinking that can prevent men from doing evil, it must be some property inherent to the activity itself, regardless its objects."⁶⁸ The action and activity point of course to natality. But there is in thinking a more

66 Neiman, *Evil in Modern Thought*, 301.

67 Arendt, *Thinking and Moral Consideration*, 180.

68 Arendt, *The Life of the Mind*, vol. I, 180.

important question than the property of thinking, namely the topos of thinking. Arendt poses in the last part of *Thinking* perhaps the most important question, the ontological *où*: “where are we when we think?” Arendt’s answer, surely, was different from Aristotle’s classical definition of *bios theoretikos* as *bios xenikos*, the life of the stranger.⁶⁹

69 I propose a set of atopolities in Jari Kauppinen, *Atopolities of Derrida. Philosophy, Law and Literature*. Reports from Department of Philosophy. Helsinki: University of Helsinki, 2000.

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