Title: Ordinary Perpetrators and the Banality of Evil

Name: Christian Adriaanse

Student Number: 4518519

Supervisor: Prof. Dr. Jean-Pierre Wils

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Radboud University Nijmegen

I hereby declare and assure that I, Christian Adriaanse, have drafted this thesis independently, that no other sources and/or means other than those mentioned have been used and that the passages of which the text content or meaning originates in other words – including electronic media- have been identified and the sources clearly stated. Place: Tilburg date: 15-06-2017

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Abstract

Arendt's idea of the banality of evil is commonly interpreted as highlighting the ordinariness of perpetrators like Adolf Eichmann. In recent decades, the 'ordinary perpetrator' has become a prominent topic of historical and psychological research. This article discusses Arendt's work on the banality of evil in light of this research and asks: to what extent are the banality of evil and the ordinary perpetrator synonymous? I argue that it is short-sighted to equate the two. While Arendt emphasises the ordinariness of perpetrators like Eichmann, her critique of moral philosophy is the most thought-provoking element in her analysis. Arendt focuses not on ordinariness but on the thoughtlessness and inability to judge which allowed ordinary perpetrators to do extraordinary evil.

Introduction

In recent decades, the 'ordinary perpetrator' of atrocities has become a prominent topic in psychological and historical research. Hannah Arendt is often understood as the first to describe this phenomenon when she speaks about 'the banality of evil.' The central question of this article is: to what extent are Arendt's idea of 'the banality of evil' and the phenomenon of 'ordinary perpetrators' in historical and psychological research synonymous? I will answer this question by confronting Arendt's work with contemporary research on ordinary perpetrators. I will argue that while these two ideas share many characteristics, it is wrong to equate them. Arendt's analysis of the banality of evil not only reveals the ordinary perpetrator, but also a critique of moral philosophy. Arendt is not simply arguing that perpetrators like Adolf Eichmann were ordinary. Rather, she focuses on the thoughtlessness that allowed ordinary people to do extraordinary evil. Her analysis ultimately questions how we can think of morality and responsibility when ordinary people can thoughtlessly do evil without malicious intentions.

I will first give an impression of the ordinary perpetrator in psychological and historical research. In distinct ways, these researchers identify the elements that constitute the ordinariness of perpetrators. In part two, I will discuss Arendt's analysis of the banality of evil in *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, as well as the continuing debate surrounding this book. Arendt's analysis of Eichmann is often regarded as the first analysis of the ordinary perpetrator. However, some authors also question the historical accuracy of Arendt's analysis. Others criticise Arendt for supposedly making the perpetrators less guilty of their crimes. In part three, I will confront Arendt's analysis with both the research on ordinary perpetrators and her critics. Based Arendt's text 'Some Questions of Moral Philosophy' I will argue that Arendt's concern is not primarily the ordinary perpetrator and that this view is based on misunderstanding Arendt's work. While she acknowledges the ordinariness of perpetrators like Eichmann, Arendt is more interested in the ideas of thoughtlessness and the inability to think independently and judge from the standpoint of others. Arendt is concerned with the moral significance of thinking and judging. She bases this on her own idiosyncratic interpretation of Socratic thinking and Kantian aesthetic judgments. However, this part of Arendt's analysis is often ignored in favour of a more simplistic view of the banality of evil.

By reflecting upon Arendt's idea of the banality of evil in the perspective of research on ordinary perpetrators, this article will show the relevance of Arendt's work in contemporary thinking about evil and evildoers. It will also clarify the existing misunderstandings surrounding Arendt's idea of the banality of evil. The importance of Arendt's work lies not in the idea that evildoers are ordinary, but in her discussion of the fundamental moral questions that arise from the banality of evil.

1. Ordinary Perpetrators in Historical and Psychological Research

The first part of this article is about the phenomenon of 'ordinary perpetrators' in contemporary historical and psychological research. What makes an ordinary perpetrator ordinary? I will discuss two approaches: psychological and historical.

I will first discuss the psychological approaches of Zimbardo and Welzer & Neitzel. Zimbardo's reflections on the Stanford Prison Experiment show how context and power structures can heavily influence an individual's behaviour. Welzer and Neitzel base their analysis based on transcripts of conversations between German POWs in World War Two. While their research is both historical and psychological, it is mostly focused on the 'frames of reference' which influence the soldier's behaviour. I will then move on to the historical approaches. The three authors whom I discuss respond to one another in some way. Christopher Browning and Daniel Goldhagen both research the same case but their conclusions differ vastly. Browning talks about 'ordinary men,' while Goldhagen speaks about 'ordinary Germans.'[1] Mary Fulbrook relates her own case study to the work of Goldhagen and Browning by using the label 'ordinary Nazi's.'

1.1 The Psychology of Ordinary Perpetrators

Zimbardo argues against dispositional theories of evil, which explain evil actions by the inner nature, dispositions, personality traits and character of individuals. Instead, Zimbardo emphasises the influence of collectives on individual actions and more generally the situational circumstances which influence and modify behaviour (Zimbardo 2007, vii). Zimbardo reflects upon a famous experiment he conducted in 1971, the Stanford Prison Experiment. The participating students were put into a makeshift prison and divided up into two groups: guards and prisoners. The experiment became famous, or rather infamous, because things escalated rapidly. The guards abused their power over the prisoners and the prisoners revolted. Reflecting on this experiment Zimbardo identifies a set of dynamic psychological processes that can lead good people to do evil: deindividuation, obedience to authority, passivity in the face of threats, self-justification, and rationalization. Most of all, Zimbardo identifies the process of

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[1] Browning and Goldhagen discuss the case of Reserve Police Battalion 101. With the label 'ordinary Germans' Goldhagen responds and distances his thesis from that of Browning's. Browning's book is titled *Ordinary Men*, Goldhagen uses the phrase 'ordinary Germans' in the subtitle of *Hitler's Willing Executioners*.

dehumanization, negating the humanity of the victim, as the key factor that can transform ordinary people into perpetrators of evil (Zimbardo 2007, xii).

The social context, circumstances and systems of power thus heavily influence the behaviour of individuals, to such an extent that ordinary people can do extraordinary evil. Zimbardo contends that systems create hierarchies of dominance that can blur the line between good and evil (Zimbardo 2007, 8-11). Neither the guards nor the prisoners had any increased tendency to behave badly. What made these ordinary people act badly was the context in which they were placed (Zimbardo 2007, 197). Their ordinariness thus existed in the absence of a specific disposition toward doing evil like mental illnesses, character flaws, pathologies or personality traits. Zimbardo's analysis shows how situational forces and systems of power can create an 'ecology of dehumanization.' Atrocities can become part of everyday life when power and ideology go unquestioned and when the basic need to belong is transformed into conformity to emerging harmful norms (Zimbardo 2007, 258-259). Zimbardo argues that his analysis, like Arendt's analysis of the banality of evil, shows that often perpetrators are not exceptions but completely ordinary human beings (Zimbardo 2007, 483-486)[2].

The analysis of Welzer and Neitzel is similar to Zimbardo's. They also focus on the context and circumstances in which the 'ordinary perpetrators' act, their frame of reference. Welzer & Neitzel emphasise the psychological normalcy of these perpetrators. However, aside from the immediate frame of reference, they also discuss the influence of the frame of reference on a historical and societal level. They explain that collective violence tends to develop not from unexplainable outbursts but from social operations with a start, middle and end point (Welzer 2005, 14). Nazi Germany in 1933 was vastly different from Nazi Germany in 1943. Through the process of the transformation of society, what would have been unacceptable at first became increasingly normal. This can happen because both people's individual dispositions and their frame of reference change over time.

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[2] In part three, I will explain why Zimbardo's interpretation of Arendt is mistaken.

This frame of reference decides the context in which we act, and the options we have in acting. Not only the objective situation plays a role, but also how an actor views that situation (Welzer 2005, 15-17).

Welzer identifies the need for 'social belonging' as the key factor which can be manipulated in order to change everything. This manipulation exists in radically redefining who belongs to 'us', which can be seen not only in the anti-Jewish race theory of the Nazi's, but also in ex-Yugoslavia and Rwanda (Welzer 2005, 248). The Nazi's not only made a political argument when they claimed that people are inherently unequal, they also tried to justify it morally and scientifically. For the in-group the racist policies were attractive because it made their situation better. Not only did it promise to make their situation better, at every step their situation became comparatively and subjectively better (Welzer 2005, 249). This explains to a certain extent why Germans in majority were positive about the treatment of Jews. Welzer thinks we should focus on the way this worldview was implemented in the everyday life of citizens rather than focus too much on elements like propaganda (Welzer 2005, 250). In many ways life in the Third Reich was in many ways just normal everyday life. While all of these dimensions of everyday life may have become increasingly tinged with ideology and racism over the twelve years of the Reich, they remained habits and routines (Welzer & Neitzel 2012, 26-27). The Nazi regime did not brainwash everyone into thinking the exact same way. Yet, because the Nazi atrocities became routinized, people who were not necessarily even Nazi's could maintain their different beliefs while still executing Nazi policies (Welzer & Neitzel 2012, 29-30).

In *Soldaten* Welzer and Neitzel show how the behaviour of German soldiers during WW2 was influenced by their frame of reference. Their observations are based on transcripts of German POW's in the Second World War, whose conversations were monitored (Welzer & Neitzel 2012, ix). The conversations show the soldier's world, which is vastly different from ours. The soldier's world is war, a world in which atrocities are part of daily life. Hence, the soldiers speak about these atrocities as matters of fact. From a contemporary perspective, the

conversations between the soldiers provoke astonishment and moral outrage. However, Welzer & Neitzel think we should refrain from such outrage if we wish to understand the frame of reference, the shared world, of these soldiers (Welzer & Neitzel 2012, 4-5). Merely analysing mentalities or objective circumstances do no explain why someone did something. The question always remains how world views and ideologies that are interpreted by the individual influence the individual's behaviour (Welzer & Neitzel 2012, 9).

Welzer and Neitzel find that the soldiers were not necessarily predisposed to commit extreme acts of violence. Yet, they were extremely prone to violence right from the start of World War Two (Welzer & Neitzel 2012, 44-45). Killing for a soldier in war is part of everyday life; it becomes routine. This is why they don't talk about it much in the transcripts (Welzer & Neitzel 2012, 54-55). Furthermore, Welzer and Neitzel find that ideology was not prominent among the things that occupied the soldiers' mind. An astonishing number of soldiers were against using violence to solve the 'Jewish Question.' However, for all of them the existence of the question was a given, regardless of whether they as individuals thought the Nazis' anti-Jewish policies were good or bad, right or wrong (Welzer & Neitzel 2012, 228). The frame of reference of the soldiers was mostly formed by the military value system and their immediate social environment. As a result, differences of ideology, background, education, age, rank, and branch of service mattered little (Welzer & Neitzel 2012, 317). As a rule German soldiers were not "ideological warriors." Most of them were fully apolitical (Welzer & Neitzel 2012, 317-318). Like Zimbardo, Welzer and Neitzel conclude that we should be sceptical of intentionalist explanations of Nazi crimes. War creates a context for events and actions in which people do things they never would have otherwise. Within this context, soldiers could murder Jews without being anti-Semites and fight fanatically for Germany without being committed Nazi's. Ideology may provide reasons for war, but it does not explain why soldiers kill or commit war crimes (Welzer & Neitzel 2012, 319-320).

Welzer and Neitzel show us ordinary German soldiers. Their ordinariness existed in their being average men in German society, without any special predisposition toward violent acts, without being especially fanatic Nazi's or anti-Semites. The two analyses which I discussed in this section emphasise the major influence of group dynamics on individual behaviour. The group seems to have more influence over individual soldiers' behaviour than ideological convictions, political views, and personal motivations. (Welzer & Neitzel 2012, 338-339). In the next section, I will turn to the historical research on ordinary perpetrators, which is mostly in line with the analyses of Zimbardo and Welzer & Neitzel.

1.2 Ordinary Men, Germans and Nazi's: Historians on 'Ordinary Perpetrators'

Several historians have researched phenomenon of ordinary perpetrator in recent decades. I will first discuss Christopher Browning's and Daniel Goldhagen's analyses of Reserve Battalion 101. They study the same case but have vastly different conclusions. I will then discuss Mary Fulbrook, who more recently did a similar case study. In different ways the authors all emphasise the ordinariness of the perpetrators. They speak about ordinary men, ordinary Germans and ordinary Nazi's.

Ordinary Men and Ordinary Germans

Browning and Goldhagen base their case study of Reserve Police Battalion 101 on the testimonies of the members of this battalion after WW2. This battalion was tasked with mass-murder in Poland. It was sent with the express purpose to kill Jews. Browning concludes that for Reserve Police Battalion 101 mass murder and routine had become one (Browning 1998, xvii). Only a small minority refused to take part in the killings. In explaining why the majority did become killers, Browning argues that many factors play a role to varying degrees: wartime brutalization, racism, segmentation and routinization of the task, careerism, conformity, ideological indoctrination, obedience to orders and deference to authority. However, none of these applied without qualification (Browning 1998,

159). While atrocities occur in war, as Welzer and Neitzel showed, these men carried out 'atrocity by policy.' They are different than soldiers that Welzer and Neitzel analyse. The men of Reserve Police Battalion 101 were specifically tasked with committing atrocities. They acted not out of frenzy, bitterness, and frustration but with calculation (Browning 1998, 160-161).

Reserve Police Battalion 101 was not sent to Lublin to murder Jews because it was composed of men specially selected or deemed particularly suited for the task (Browning 1998, 165). These middle-aged, working-class Hamburg men were in many ways representative for the German population and did not possess any particular special qualifications to do this sort of work. Browning even argues they were quite ill-suited for this particular task (Browning 1998, 164). Most of all, Browning argues one comes away from the story of Reserve Police Battalion 101 with great unease. While they were responsible for their actions, the collective behaviour of the battalion has deeply disturbing implications. Society conditions people to respect authority. Everywhere people seek career advancement. The bureaucratization of our society diffuses the sense of personal responsibility. Groups exert tremendous pressure on behaviour and set moral norms (Browning 1998, 188-189). In the wrong circumstances this can lead ordinary people to do extraordinary evil.

Goldhagen disagrees with Browning's explanation of the actions of these 'ordinary men.' He argues that these men were rather 'ordinary Germans.' Goldhagen thinks that what Browning and other researchers miss in their analysis is the most important factor that made the Holocaust possible: anti-Semitism. He states that the holocaust defines not only the history of Jews during the middle of the twentieth century but also the history of the Germans (Goldhagen 1996, 8). He argues that economic hardship, the coercion of a totalitarian state and social psychological influences are insufficient to explain what the Nazi's did (Goldhagen 1996, 9). Goldhagen asserts that the perpetrators, 'ordinary Germans' were animated by 'eliminationist anti-Semitism,' by a particular type of anti-Semitism present in German society that led them to conclude that the Jews ought

to die (Goldhagen 1996, 13-14). Goldhagen's thesis garnered much controversy because it went against the trend that sought non-ideological explanations for the atrocities committed by ordinary German men.[3] Many commenters rejected Goldhagen's thesis for being one-dimensional; he reduced a complex problem to a sole cause. Browning agrees with this; the actions of most perpetrators cannot simply be explained by anti-Semitism. He argues that Goldhagen opts for an explanation that is too simplistic for such a complex problem (Browning 1998, 192-220).

Ordinary Nazi's

Where Browning speaks of 'ordinary men' and Goldhagen of 'ordinary Germans,' Fulbrook speaks of 'ordinary Nazi's.' Fulbrook positions herself between Browning and Goldhagen. Her case study focuses on Udo Klausa, the principal civilian administrator of the county Bedzin, an area in Poland which was annexed by the Germans in 1939. Fulbrook argues that Klausa was neither a committed perpetrator nor someone engaged in resistance. Fulbrook's intent is to better understand those went along with the Nazi regime for so long while still thinking themselves to be decent people (Fulbrook 2012, vii). She describes the actions of Klausa and the experiences of the tens of thousands of Jews in this county, a mere 25 miles from Auschwitz (Fulbrook 2012, v). Within less than four years after the German invasion, virtually half the population of the town of Bedzin -the Jewish half- was dead (Fulbrook 2012, 1-2).

Fulbrook focuses on the role Hitler's civilian functionaries, facilitators and beneficiaries played in the atrocities of the Nazi regime. These people were unlike the soldiers, who while fighting the war committed atrocities. Nor were they like the reserve policemen of Battalion 101, who were specifically tasked with committing mass murder. Yet, they facilitated these crimes even when they had quite different intentions and were perhaps horrified at the outcomes of policies they had supported and executed. Fulbrook argues that many of these

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[3] The most important contributions to the 'Goldhagen debate' can be found in *Unwilling Germans? The Goldhagen Debate* (Shandley 1998).

functionaries, like Udo Klausa, were 'ordinary Nazis.' She means that not all Nazis were similar. Some were radical, fanatic, and energetic; others played the game for reasons of opportunism, careerism, ambition, fear. Some took initiatives; others simply went along with their role in the system. Some were explicitly driven by ideological motives while others were not (Fulbrook 2012, 7-8). While functionaries like Klausa were not the initiators of policy, in executing these policies they often turned a blind eye to the consequences of racist policies (Fulbrook 2012, 337-338). Thus for Fulbrook, it is not about the individual motives of people like Klausa but rather the fact that he was so easily mobilized by the system to act in certain ways, even as he grew increasingly aware of the murderous consequences (Fulbrook 2012, 342-343). Fulbrook's analysis is positioned somewhere between Browning and Goldhagen. Udo Klausa was a Nazi; he was ideologically aligned with the ideas of Nazism. However, Fulbrook also emphasises that Nazi's were not a monolith; they existed among of a spectrum of attitudes and viewpoints. Thus, while acknowledging the role of ideology, Fulbrook also emphasises the complexity of explaining why ordinary people do evil.

2. Eichmann: an ordinary perpetrator?

So far I have given an overview of some of the historical and psychological research on ordinary perpetrators. In this part, I will transition to Arendt's discussion of Eichmann. I will show some of the important parallels between Arendt's analysis and the analyses discussed in part one. I will also go into the controversy surrounding this work, which continues to this day. My intention in this part is to argue to what extent Arendt saw Eichmann as an ordinary perpetrator when she speaks of the banality of evil but also to show some of the arguments both the critics and supporters of Arendt make in the continuing debate on *Eichmann in Jerusalem*. This will provide a basis for part three, in which I will argue that most interpretations of Arendt's analysis of Eichmann as an ordinary perpetrators rest on some fundamental misunderstandings of her work.

2.1 Arendt and Eichmann

The subtitle of *Eichmann in Jerusalem* is 'a report on the banality of evil.' This is somewhat peculiar because the term banality of evil only appears at the very end of the book. Furthermore, the idea of the banality of evil is not addressed extensively. Moreover, Arendt states several times that the banality of evil is not a theory of evil, but merely a factual observation about Eichmann.[4] However, the fact that evil, thinking and judging are recurring themes in Arendt's work after *Eichmann in Jerusalem* shows that these remarks are misleading. Arendt disagrees with the common perception that Eichmann was the incarnation of demonic evil. Arendt positions herself against the traditional stance on evil and the traditional jurisprudence. While Eichmann acted with purpose when he deported millions of Jews toward their deaths, Arendt argues that he did not act out of base motives; he did not think he was a bad person nor did he have a bad conscience (Arendt 1963, 25). No one believed that an average, normal person could be unable to distinguish right from wrong. However, Arendt observes that the longer one listened to him, the more obvious it became that he was unable to think from the standpoint of anyone else. It was impossible to communicate with him, not because he lied but because Eichmann was talking only from his own viewpoint, without taking the other into account (Arendt 1963, 49).

Arendt concludes that the trouble with Eichmann was that so many were like him; people who were 'terribly and terrifyingly normal'. This idea is more frightening than the traditional view of evil because it implies that criminals can commit crime under circumstances in which telling right from wrong is almost impossible (Arendt 1963, 276). Fulbrook expresses this idea when she speaks of the 'ordinary Nazi.' Functionaries like Eichmann may not have been extraordinarily fanatic Nazi's, but often turned a blind eye to the consequences of their actions. Arendt calls into question one of our most central moral and legal convictions: that

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[4] In the postscript of *Eichmann in Jerusalem* Arendt states that when she speaks of the banality of evil, she does so only on the strictly factual level, referring only to Eichmann (Arendt 1963, 287). In the introduction of *The Life of the Mind* Arendt remarks that "behind that phrase, I held no thesis or doctrine, although I was dimly aware of the fact that it went counter to our tradition of thought … about the phenomenon of evil" (Arendt 1971, 3).

people who do evil deeds must have evil intentions and motives. As Neiman aptly states: "at every level, the Nazis produced more evil, with less malice, than civilization had previously known" (Neiman 2002, 270-271). To a large extent, what Arendt argues here expresses the same idea as that of the ordinary perpetrator. However, while Arendt states clearly that Eichmann was terrifyingly and terribly normal, her fundamental argument is not focused on his normalcy but on Eichmann's sheer thoughtlessness that enabled him to do what he did. Because he was unable to think for himself and judge from the standpoint of others, he never fully realized what he was doing (Arendt 1963, 287). Ultimately, Arendt is asking about the moral significance of the thoughtlessness and inability to judge of these ordinary people. In part three, I will elaborate on this.

2.2 The *Eichmann in Jerusalem* controversy

Eichmann in Jerusalem was controversial even before the book was published. Originally published as a series of articles in The New Yorker, many had already expressed their criticism and disapproval[5]. After the publication of the English translation of Bettina Stangneth's *Eichmann Before Jerusalem* in 2014 the debate was revitalized, primarily in an exchange between Richard Wolin and Seyla Benhabib in The New York Times and the Jewish Review of Books.

Stangneth regrets that the debate about Eichmann and his trial in Jerusalem has stopped being about Eichmann and has become a debate about Arendt and her ideas on evil. Stangneth's intention is to return the debate to Eichmann himself by providing a comprehensive study of Eichmann's life after World War Two and before his trial in Jerusalem. While Stangneth appreciates Arendt's detailed analysis of the trial reports, she contends that Arendt ultimately misunderstood who Eichmann really was. Eichmann was an ideological warrior and remained so long after the war. His words in Argentina show he had a consistent system of thought and speech. In these texts one finds not an inability to speak or think, but

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[5] Maier-Katkin gives an account of the discussion surrounding *Eichmann in Jerusalem* in the United States between 1963 and 2011. What becomes apparent is that to this day the controversy and debate surrounding this work continues (Maier-Katkin 2011).

a dogmatic belief in a totalitarian ideology. Thus, Stangneth argues that Arendt was mistaken in labelling Eichmann as thoughtless and unable to speak (Stangneth 2014, 302).

Ironically the debate that ensued after the publication of Stangneth's book was centred not around Eichmann but around Arendt's thoughts on Eichmann. The exchange between Wolin and Benhabib shows how the two sides in the debate around *Eichmann in Jerusalem* talk past one another. Wolin views Stangneth's analysis as the final confirmation that Arendt was wrong both about Eichmann himself but also about the existence of the banality of evil. Benhabib, on the other hand, emphasises the importance of reading *Eichmann in Jerusalem* in its philosophical context. Wolin accuses Arendt of downplaying the criminal liability of Eichmann by labelling him banal. He thinks this makes the evildoer so unworthy of our attention that he disappears. He concludes that after Stangneth's book the viability of Arendt's thesis about Eichmann has become untenable. He thinks that Arendt's supporters deflect this issue by shifting the terrain of the debate to a general discussion of the intricacies and merits of Arendt's political philosophy, which he calls a distraction and largely beside the point (Wolin 2014a, 2014b, 2014c).

Benhabib disagrees with both Stangneth and Wolin. Against both she argues that Arendt's work should be seen in its philosophical context. While it may be interesting to look at the historical accuracy of her analysis of Eichmann, Wolin and Stangneth do not delve deeper into Arendt's ideas on thinking and judging, and thereby do not really seriously examine Eichmann's inability to think. If they had done that, they would have seen that Eichmann being banal *and* a convinced Nazi are not mutually exclusive if one understands Arendt correctly (Benhabib 2014a). Benhabib contends that Arendt's thesis of the banality of evil does not understate the guilt and responsibility of perpetrators, but does the opposite. Arendt shows us that people who do evil are not simply sadistic monsters who are determined by systems of power and ideology Arendt points out that Eichmann had a choice but never even began to think about his actions. If anything, Arendt

challenges us to be more vigilant toward the moral, political, and cognitive inability to take the standpoint of others (Benhabib 2014b).

3. Ordinary Perpetrators and the Banality of Evil

In part one I explored the phenomenon of the ordinary perpetrator. I gave an overview of the psychological and historical research that is focused on the ordinary perpetrator. Zimbardo and Welzer & Neitzel both show the influence of situational forces, power structures and the frame of reference on individual behaviour. Browning shows how ordinary men became mass murderers. Goldhagen calls these same men ordinary Germans, and provides a different explanation to explain their actions, anti-Semitism. Finally, Fulbrook shows ordinary Nazi's who without necessarily evil intentions facilitated the atrocities of the Holocaust. As I mentioned in the introduction, this phenomenon of the ordinary perpetrator is commonly taken to be synonymous with Arendt's idea of the banality of evil. In part two, I discussed how critics of Arendt doubt the historical accuracy of Arendt's portrayal of Eichmann but also the criticism that she understates the guilt and responsibility of perpetrators such as Eichmann.

Despite Arendt's somewhat confusing statements in this regard, I agree with Benhabib that *Eichmann in Jerusalem* should be read in its philosophical context. It then becomes clear why equating the banality of evil with the phenomenon of the ordinary perpetrator is wrong. While the banality of evil and the ordinary perpetrator are similar and have many overlapping qualities, what Arendt wanted to say with the banality of evil was not that Eichmann was an ordinary perpetrator. Rather, she wanted to focus on his sheer thoughtlessness, his inability to think and judge for himself while taking into account the position of others. In this part I will show why the banality of evil contains more than the idea of the ordinary perpetrator.

3.1 Thoughtlessness and the Banality of Evil

The central aspect of Arendt's analysis of the banality of evil is thoughtlessness. The most common misunderstanding in this context is that Arendt implies that

Eichmann was a 'cog in the machine[6].' Berkowitz suggests that this mistake is the result of a conflation of Arendt's analysis with Milgram's study on people's tendency to obey authority (Berkowitz 2014, 193-195). Arendt explicitly argued against this 'cog in the machine' theory and went to great lengths to explain what she exactly meant with thoughtlessness. Group-pressures and the idea of simply obeying orders may form mitigating circumstances, but they can never excuse someone. While Arendt does argue that circumstances play a role in the actions of individuals, she maintains that one is always responsible for one's actions (Arendt 2003, 30-32). Arendt points out that in Nazi Germany the moral standards which were seemingly self-evident, collapsed overnight. This revealed morality as it was in the original meaning of the word *mores*, a set of customs and manners which could be exchanged for another set without much trouble (Arendt 2003, 50). For Arendt the moral issue with the Nazi's lies not just in the atrocities committed under their rule. Equally important was the matter-of-course collaboration from all layers of German society. The Nazi's announced a new set of values that was implemented in a new legal system. No one had to be a convinced Nazi to conform to these values and this legal system, and to forget overnight the moral convictions which once went with it (Arendt 2003, 53-54). On the other hand, the non-participants in the Nazi crimes asked themselves whether they could still live in peace with themselves after having committed certain deeds. They decided it would be better to do nothing. They refused to murder not because they held to the imperative to not kill, but because they were unwilling to live together with themselves as a murderer (Arendt 2003, 44).

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[6] A few examples: Browning argues that Arendt thought Eichmann was a mindless bureaucrat who became a mass murderer (Browning 1998, 250). Goldhagen disagrees with the 'conventional explanation' of perpetrators as unthinking, obedient executioners of state orders (Goldhagen 1996, 379). Stangneth argues that Eichmann's writings in Argentina show a consistent system of thought and speech; not an inability to speak or think but a dogmatic belief in a totalitarian ideology (Stangneth 2014, 302).

Arendt devotes a significant portion of her later work to the ideas of thinking and judging.[7] Arendt contends that all moral philosophy takes the self and the intercourse of the individual with himself as the main standard, which goes against the common sense idea that morality is about our conduct toward others (Arendt 2003, 76). Arendt continues that those in Nazi Germany who remained free of all guilt did not undergo a great moral conflict or crisis of conscience. They were not great moralists with a deep knowledge of moral philosophy, pondering the various issues of country loyalty or the lesser of two evils. They may have thought about the consequences of their actions but what never remained in doubt was that crimes remain crimes even if they are legalized by a government. Arendt argues that they did not act out of obligation but according to something that was self-evident to them even though it was no longer self-evident to those around them. Their conscience said 'this I cannot do' rather than 'this I ought not to do' (Arendt 2003, 77-78). They merely followed the Socratic precepts: 'it is better to suffer than to do wrong' and 'that it is better to be at odds with everyone else than, being one, to be at odds with myself.'

For Arendt, thinking is constituted by the inner dialogue with oneself. The inspiration for this idea of thinking is Socrates. I am a person because I can be in dialogue with myself. I can be in my own company. This requires that I am in agreement with myself; it requires that I do not contradict myself. Hence, Arendt argues that the criterion of right and wrong depends not on habits or customs, which I share with those around me, nor on a command of either divine or human origin, but on what I decide with regard to myself. The question is: Can I live with myself if I do x? Every thought process is an activity in which I speak with myself about whatever concerns me (Arendt 2003, 97-99). Thinking means moving in the dimension of depth, it strikes roots which stabilize us, so that we are not swept away by whatever may occur. The greatest evil, Arendt argues, is not radical; it has no roots. Therefore it has no limitations; it can go to unthinkable extremes.

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[7] She does so most prominently in *The Life of the Mind* and *Lectures on Kant's Political Philosophy.* Here I will focus on another text, originally a series of lectures, titled 'Some Questions of Moral Philosophy.'

Arendt argues that from this standpoint, my conduct toward others will depend on my conduct toward myself. It involves no specific content, no special duties or obligations. It involves only the capacity to think and remember, or in contradicting myself losing that capacity (Arendt 2003, 95-97). A thinking person can still give into vices. He can be stupid or intelligent, friendly or unkind. However, he knows he has to live with himself and is afraid of losing oneself, of not being able to talk with oneself. Thus, there will be limits to what he can permit himself to do. These limits he will impose on himself. On the other hand, Arendt argues that limitless, extreme evil is possible only for those people where these self-grown roots are entirely absent, who permit themselves to be carried away with whatever happens. The greatest evildoers are those who do not remember because they have never given thought to the matter (Arendt 2003, 100-101).

The interpretations of Eichmann as a cog in the machine often miss what Arendt means with thoughtlessness. When Arendt calls Eichmann thoughtless and unable to speak, she does not mean that he was stupid. She does not imply that he did not have the intellectual capacity to think or that he was incapable of completing full sentences. The question is not whether perpetrators like Eichmann had the cognitive capability to think consistently. Rather, it is about the absence of the dialogue with oneself; the absence of thinking independently.

3.2 Banality and Ordinariness

In the previous section I elaborated on Arendt's idea of thinking and its counterpart thoughtlessness. Thinking sets self-imposed boundaries. It prevents the limitless thoughtless evil that someone like Eichmann was capable of. However, the disadvantage of this is that it remains entirely negative. Arendt argues that politically speaking, this Socratic morality is irresponsible; it centres on the self, not the world in which we live with others (Arendt 2003, 79). This is why we also need judgment. I will elaborate on this in the context of Zimbardo's mistaken interpretation of Arendt.

Zimbardo's analysis comes quite close to Arendt's idea of the banality of evil and of the role of judgment. Zimbardo argues that the Stanford Prison Experiment shows that situational power is most salient in those novel settings in which people cannot call on previous guidelines for their new behavioural options. The usual utilitarian reward structures are different in these situations; expectations are not a reliable tool. This is similar to Arendt's idea that those who were free of guilt in Nazi Germany were able to judge without any general rules or norms guiding them (Zimbardo 2007, 258-259). However, Zimbardo's actual interpretation of Arendt is mistaken. He argues that for Arendt the banality of evil means that individuals such as Eichmann should not be viewed as exceptions, as monsters, but that they should be exposed in their very ordinariness. Realizing this means being aware that such people are a pervasive, hidden danger in all societies. He thus takes the central aspect of the banality of evil to be the fact that these perpetrators are completely ordinary human beings. Zimbardo argues that the reverse can also be argued: perpetrators of heroic deeds are just as ordinary. He calls this the 'banality of heroism.' Neither the banality of evil nor the banality of heroism is the direct consequence of unique dispositional tendencies. Rather, they involve the decisions one makes in moments when it matters (Zimbardo 2007, 483-486).

This view about Arendt and the banality of evil is mistaken. As I demonstrated in the previous section, what makes the banality of evil banal is 'sheer thoughtlessness,' the inability to be in dialogue with oneself in a consistent manner. For Arendt evil is banal because it has no depth; there is no inner reflection. Just like we want to be in the company of others, we want to be in our own company by being in agreement with ourselves; not contradicting ourselves. The 'heroism' Zimbardo talks about cannot be banal if one takes Arendt seriously. For Arendt, the ability to resist bad situational forces requires depth. It requires independent thinking. 'Heroes' can be ordinary but not banal. However, one of the difficulties in Arendt's work is that her conception of thinking only sets limitations; it does not lead to specific mores, to specific rules and precepts of

behaviour, or even laws. Thinking does not prescribe anything but only sets boundaries. It is politically relevant only in times of crisis (Arendt 2003, 104-105).

Arendt argues that there exists an inherent tension between thinking and acting. The main distinction between thought and action lies in that I am alone with myself, whereas I am in the company of the many the moment I start to act. The dialogue with myself is also a plurality, but it is a plurality within myself. But insofar as being with others is concerned, this is a marginal phenomenon (Arendt 2003, 105-106). The trouble with the Nazi criminals was precisely that they renounced voluntarily all personal qualities, as if nobody were left to be either punished or forgiven. This is why Eichmann protested that he was merely following orders. Arendt contends that the greatest evil perpetrated is the evil committed by nobodies, by human beings who refuse to be persons. They are the ones who do not have the roots of remembering and the company of oneself in thinking (Arendt 2003, 111-112).

Thus, while 'heroes' are not banal, the tension between action and thought presents a problem: What can guide ordinary thoughtful persons to do the right thing? Arendt asks whether there is a mental activity like thinking that can help us decide what we should do. Arendt thinks this mental activity is judging; judging can mediate between thinking and action. Although she never completely developed this idea, she derives her idea of judgment from Kant's *Critique of Judgment*. In 'Some Questions of Moral Philosophy' Arendt sees Kantian judgment as a potential link between thinking and acting[8]. Kant, in Arendt's interpretation, defined judgment as the faculty which comes into play when we are confronted with particulars; judgment decides about the relation between a particular instance and the general. In the case of knowledge and reason, judgment subsumes the particular under its appropriate general rule. However, the matter is more complicated when there are judgments where no general rules and standards

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[8] Later, in *Lectures on Kant's Political Philosophy* Arendt expands further on Kant's notion of reflective judgment.

are applicable. Kant argues that this is the case in matters of taste. When judging something to be beautiful, I cannot do this based on a general sense of beauty. Arendt wants to use this Kantian notion of judgments about particulars that cannot be subsumed under a general rule in a moral and political context (Arendt 2003, 138-139).

It must be noted that Arendt has a very idiosyncratic interpretation of Kant. For Kant, reflective judgments have no moral significance. Unlike aesthetic judgments, where the particular cannot be applied to a general rule, for Kant moral judgments do rely on a general rule, the categorical imperative. Kant's idea of morality is still tied up with the will to act according to those maxims that can be universal laws. Arendt displaces morality from the faculty of the will and the general rule of the categorical imperative. Her point is rather that, given the moral collapse in Nazi Germany, general rules and norms can no longer guide us in morally and politically relevant situations. Those who were able to resist this moral collapse were not the guided by general norms but had been convinced of the non-validity of existing moral standards. They were able to judge the particular cases independently from whatever general rules people generally applied. This is why, rather than turning to Kant's practical philosophy and the will, Arendt turns to Kant's theory of judgment.

Kant argues that this form of judgment relies on *sensus communis*, which Arendt translates as common sense. This does not mean a sense common to all of us, but a sense which fits us into a community with others; which makes us members of it and enables us to communicate. This it does with the help of the faculty of imagination and representation. Through imagination and representation, I can have those present who actually are absent. If one can think in the place of everybody else, one can take them into account when judging and hence hope that their judgment will carry a certain general, though perhaps not universal validity. This validity will reach as far as the community of which my common sense makes me a member. Kant calls this the enlarged mentality. Judgment of a particular instance does not merely depend upon my own perception but upon the

community of judging subjects. The validity of common sense grows out of the interaction and dialogue with people- just as thought grows out of the dialogue with myself (Arendt 2003, 137-141). In Arendt's interpretation, it is not the categorical imperative but the Kantian impartial judge who has moral significance. If morality is more than its negative aspect of refraining from doing wrong, then we have to consider judgments which make us part of the plurality of human beings. Our decisions about right and wrong will depend on our choice of company; with whom do we want to be together? People or events that are absent can guide us in our judgments by being examples. Arendt argues that these examples can be from ancient history, or they might even be fictional. Arendt argues that the horror and the banality of evil arise from the unwillingness or inability to choose these examples, and in the inability to relate to others (Arendt 2003, 142-146).

In this section, I have specifically zoomed in on Zimbardo's interpretation of the banality of evil as the ordinariness of the perpetrator. His well-intentioned but mistaken idea of the 'banality of heroism' is based upon the misunderstanding that for Arendt banality is synonymous with ordinary. Thoughtfulness and the ability to judge taking into account the position of others is anything but banal, it requires depth. In thinking we constitute ourselves, and in judging we are placed in a community by taking into account the judgments and examples of others. In judging one asks: 'with whom do I want to share the world I live in?' Hence, thinking and judging make us not only rooted in ourselves, but also in the world we share with others. This requires thoughtfulness and imagination.

Conclusion

In the previous part, I have clarified some of the major misunderstandings surrounding Arendt's work on the banality of evil. I have showed how even well-intentioned authors like Zimbardo misunderstand what Arendt means when she argues that the evil of perpetrators like Eichmann was banal. There is a clear difference between the approaches of the historians and psychologists which were

discussed in previous parts and Arendt's analysis of the banality of evil. They mostly focus on the ordinariness of the perpetrators. In line with Benhabib's reasoning, I have argued that Arendt is focusing on the moral issue concerning ordinary individuals who unthinkingly do evil with banal intentions.

Benhabib is right when she argues that Arendt's analysis must be seen in its philosophical context. This is not to say that the research on ordinary perpetrators is without merit. They identify the social-psychological and historical circumstances in which ordinary people can become instruments of evil. Arendt's analysis is different. Despite the confusing statements she made on this, Arendt's analysis is not just about Eichmann being an ordinary perpetrator. Arendt's analysis is concerned with the overnight collapse of morality into a mere set of mores in ordinary people. The moral issue with the crimes of the Nazi's was not the behaviour of the convinced Nazi's or the ordinary criminals but the fact that ordinary people committed crimes with more or less enthusiasm, simply because they followed the new set of norms that emerged (Arendt 2003, 59). These deeds were not committed by outlaws, monsters, or raving sadists, but by the most respected members of respectable society (Arendt 2003, 42). Perpetrators like Eichmann were not stupid, merely obedient, or a cog in the machine. They may have been convinced Nazi's, but most of all they relinquished their independence, their capacity to think for themselves and to judge from the standpoint of others. They lost both the ability to speak with themselves and with others (Berkowitz 2014, 205). This part of Arendt's analysis of the banality of evil is the most compelling and thought provoking. Unfortunately it is this part that is most commonly misunderstood or glossed over.

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Research Proposal

The Contemporary Relevance of Arendt's ideas on evil

Summary

Hannah Arendt's work on evil is the most influential attempt at understanding evil in the twentieth century. She observes a criminal who could unthinkingly do evil with banal intentions under totalitarian rule. She challenges the idea that evil actions are necessarily the result of evil intentions and argues that general moral norms proved unable to guide people's actions in times of crisis. The vocabulary we use to understand evil is largely shaped by events. Arendt's thoughts on evil arise from a response to totalitarianism. Since 9/11 the term evil has gained new significance in the moral vocabularies of public figures. The actions committed by Islamic suicide terrorists appear as a new manifestation of evil. This research will examine to what extent Arendt's thoughts on evil can be used to understand contemporary evil. Evil bewilders us and confronts us with a sense of intellectual helplessness. At first glance, contemporary evil is quite different than the banality of evil. Not only do the perpetrators act out of malice and forethought but they also act without any regard for their own lives. Hence, the question is whether Arendt's ideas on evil can still be used to understand the evil we face today.

Description of Proposed Research

Background

The central question of this research is: to what extent can Arendt's ideas on evil be used to understand contemporary evil? Evil is an elusive term. It denotes something that goes beyond actions that are morally wrong. Evil bewilders us and confronts us with a feeling of helplessness; an inability to understand what has happened. Hannah Arendt's work is arguably the most influential attempt at understanding evil in the twentieth century. In *Eichmann in Jerusalem* she observes a criminal who could unthinkingly do evil with banal intentions under totalitarian rule. Arendt challenges the idea, prevalent in modern moral

philosophy, that evil actions must be the result of evil intentions (Arendt 1963, 25-26). Furthermore, she argues that morality based on universal or general norms has proven to be incapable of guiding people to do the right thing in times of crisis (Arendt 2003, 138). Instead, Arendt identifies thinking and judging as activities which can prevent us from doing wrong and guide our actions. Arendt's ideas on evil have dominated the discourse on evil since the publication of *Eichmann in Jerusalem*.

The vocabulary we use to understand evil is largely shaped by events. Neiman describes how the Lisbon earthquake of 1755 and the holocaust were the pivotal events which shaped our thought on evil (Neiman 2002). Since 9/11 Islamic suicide terrorism has preoccupied public discourse. 9/11 may prove to be another pivotal event which shapes our perception of evil. Bernstein (2005) and Neiman (2002) note that since 9/11 the term evil has gained new significance in the moral vocabularies of many public figures. Both authors express their disapproval at how this term is often used to resort to a simplistic dichotomy between good and evil, us versus them. This ignores the complexity of evil and shuts down debate and critical thought. Both Bernstein and Neiman take Arendt's work as inspiration for their analysis of evil today. Simultaneously, one cannot ignore the fact that Arendt is speaking from a different context; she reacts to the evil committed by ordinary people within the context of totalitarianism. The evil that bewilders us today appears to be quite different. Dictators and authoritarian leaders still commit many cruelties but Islamic suicide terrorism has more firmly grasped our attention in recent decades as a new manifestation of evil. At first sight this evil appears to be so intentional that one could hardly call the perpetrators banal. These attacks of 9/11 were completely intentional; they were planned for years with the goal to produce death and fear. They combined the classic components of evil intention, malice and forethought (Neiman 2002, 283). Neiman argues that while many are prepared to play small roles in systems that lead to evils they do not want to foresee, only very few people are prepared to give up their own lives in an attempt to destroy others (Neiman 2002 285-287). The completely intentional act of

killing others indiscriminately and the enthusiastic willingness to give up one's own life in the process are challenges to our understanding of morality. Perhaps Neiman is right when she argues that so many cases in the twentieth century could be explained by the banality of evil that it made us unprepared for a case of such thoughtful evil (Neiman 2002, 283-287). Hence, the question is whether Arendt's ideas on evil can still be used to understand the evil we face today, or whether we need to rethink our understanding of evil.

Research questions

Question 1: How does contemporary evil manifest itself compared to 20th century evil?

In the first part of this research, I will compare Arendt's analysis of evil to the manner in which evil manifests itself today. Arendt responds to the moral collapse of Germany under Nazi rule in particular. For Arendt the moral issue lies not just in the atrocities that were committed but that people from all layers of German society went along with the new set of values that was implemented in a new legal system. No one had to be a convinced Nazi to conform to this new situation, and to forget the moral convictions which they once held as self-evident (Arendt 2003, 53-54). However, the non-participants in the Nazi crimes asked themselves whether they could still live in peace with themselves if they went along with the crimes of the regime. They refused to participate not because of a deeply held universal moral imperative but because they were unwilling to live together with themselves as a criminal (Arendt 2003, 44). Arendt argues that limitless, extreme evil is possible only for those people who permit themselves to be carried away with whatever happens, for those who have never given thought to the matter (Arendt 2003, 100-101).

The question is to what extent this applies to contemporary evil. This requires an investigation into how contemporary evil manifests. Invoking the term 'evil' suggests that the actions of Islamic terrorists go beyond the boundaries of morality. When faced with evil it is simple to resort to primitive conceptions of

good and evil which only serve to demonize the enemy, portraying them as someone who does evil for evil's sake. This is illustrated by Singer's analysis of speeches by President George W. Bush (Singer 2004). In parts two and three, I specifically discuss the perpetrators and the victims. In this part, it is my goal to investigate how contemporary evil manifests itself. Neiman observes that banal evil arises from the structures of everyday life, but 9/11 and other terrorist attacks are designed to rip through everyday life (Neiman 2002, 283). On the one hand, the terrorist's actions are executed with malice and forethought. On the other hand, these attacks seem random and unpredictable. One could argue that 9/11 had some symbolic value; it struck at the heart of capitalism and Western imperialism. However, most recent terrorist attacks have no particularly significant target location. Furthermore, it matters little to the terrorist who the victims are. Anyone anywhere can become the victim of these attacks. The attacks rip through everyday life; they disrupt the sense of safety and predictability that goes along with it. They are thoughtfully malicious and unpredictable at the same time. The attacks negate all distinctions. It does not really matter who and where the attack takes place, so long as the goal of inflicting suffering and spreading fear is accomplished. In part one, I will conduct a deeper investigation into these aspects of contemporary evil.

Question 2: To what extent are the 'ordinary perpetrators' of banal evil comparable to the contemporary perpetrator of evil (i.e. the suicide terrorist)?

Arendt analyses a particular type of perpetrator in *Eichmann in Jerusalem.* Adolf Eichmann was a bureaucrat involved in the crimes of a totalitarian regime. Similarly, Historians like Browning and Fulbrook and psychologists like Welzer and Zimbardo research ordinary people who perpetrate crimes they thought they could never commit. The banality of evil manifests itself in the thoughtlessness of these ordinary perpetrators. Arendt's analysis is so often linked to these studies of ordinary perpetrators because they describe a similar kind of person who becomes involved in atrocious deeds. The second question is focused on comparing her

analysis with an analysis of the perpetrators of contemporary evil. I will examine the literature on perpetrators of terrorism since 9/11. I will examine their motives, the psychology of the perpetrators and the social dynamics and circumstances in which these people become perpetrators.

The most distinctive aspect about the perpetrators of Islamic terrorism is that they commit their deeds with the intention to die themselves. As Sofsky argues, self-preservation is an inherent component of violence. Violence implies the willingness to defend oneself against violence (Sofsky 1996, 139-141). On the other hand, the martyr, which the suicide terrorist considers himself to be, breaks through this. Earthly powers have no power over him. He attempts to give his own pain and death meaning. This liberates the perpetrator to do the unthinkable, willingly destroying his own life along with others (Sofsky 1996, 68-70). An important question in this regard is what the psychological motivations of suicide terrorists are. Perry and Hasisi suggest that suicide terrorism is not a case of 'altruistic suicide,' sacrificing oneself for a cause. Rather, they argue that their actions are mostly the result of the cost/benefit analysis they make. In other words, their expected rewards motivate them to choose to commit these acts of terror (Perry & Hasisi 2013, 53-54; 72-80).

Other research focuses on the ideological motivations for terrorism. There are many varying explanations. For instance, Lewis attempts to understand how Islamic fundamentalism could arise from within Muslim civilization in our time (Lewis 2003, 100). Harris (2005) and Atran (2006) argue that one cannot ignore the religious motivations of these terrorists. On the other hand, Chomsky (2001) and Pape (2005) suggest that Islamic terrorists are primarily motivated by political reasons, i.e. the meddling of Western countries (in particular the United States) in Muslim countries. Lelyveld shows that the motivations for suicide bombings are different across different groups and perpetrators. While Hamas suicide bombers in Gaza are likely also politically motivated, this did not apply to the 9/11 hijackers (Lelyveld 2001). Walzer does not think we can explain Islamic suicide terrorism only with religious or political motivations, but that we need a combined

cultural-religious-political explanation which focuses on the how an enemy is created by the Jihadist ideology (Walzer 2004, 131-133).

Finally, some research focuses specifically on the perpetrators themselves. For instance, Lawrence Wright studies Osama Bin Laden and the 9/11 hijackers in his book *The Looming Tower.* Case studies like this on terrorism provide a deeper insight into the perpetrators themselves, their personal motivations and the social situations in which they become perpetrators. One can examine the contemporary perpetrators of evil from a variety of academic disciplines and approaches. Both the general analyses of Islamic suicide terrorism as well as some of the case studies that have been done can provide a clear understanding of the type of perpetrator that is the suicide terrorist. This will allow for a comparison with the perpetrator of banal evil which Arendt analyses.

Question 3: To what extent can the victims of contemporary evil be understood in terms of Arendt's idea of radical evil?

Aside from examining the perpetrators of evil and their actions, it is important not to ignore the people who actually suffer evil. While all victims ultimately share the same fate, not every victim is a victim in the same manner. In the *Origins of Totalitarianism* Arendt examines the fate of the victims of totalitarian regimes, the victims of a perpetrator like Eichmann which she would later analyse. Arendt argues that "The real horror of the concentration and extermination camps lies in the fact that the inmates, even if they happen to keep alive, are more effectively cut· off from the world of the living than if they had died" (Arendt 1973, 443). She argues that in the concentration camp a radical evil appears which makes human beings superfluous. Hence, she argues that the goal of totalitarianism is not to control people, but a system in which people are superfluous (Arendt 1973, 457).

I will examine to what extent the same thing can be said of the victims of 9/11 and other terrorist attacks since. The circumstances of victims of contemporary evil are quite different than that of the prisoner of the concentration camp. As I

pointed out in question one, who becomes a victim is not of much concern to the terrorist, it is often a matter of being in the wrong place at the wrong time. Of course, as Ruddick suggests, to the perpetrators they are infidels. Moreover, they appear to be mere accessories to their plan; they are superfluous. However, when one looks at the perspective of the victims in their final moments, one sees something different. Ruddick observes stories about victims who helped others get to safety while endangering their own lives or who spoke final messages to their loved ones. She argues that the terrorists want to destroy a sense of home, a safe place where people can trust one another. The stories of the victims show that they could not destroy that (Ruddick 2003, 218). Ruddick suggests that from the perspective of the perpetrators one can still make sense of Arendt's idea of superfluousness. However, when one looks at the victims, one sees anything but the fact that they are superfluous in their final moments. This may indicate a difference between the evil of the Nazi's and that of terrorists.

Research Methods

- Literature research. Since Arendt's work is at the core of this research, Arendt's work on evil will be examined, both her earlier works like *The Origins of Totalitarianism* and her works on the banality of evil like *Eichmann in Jerusalem*. Furthermore, secondary literature on Arendt will be examined, particularly literature that discusses Arendt in a contemporary context. Finally, literature from social sciences will be used to examine the contemporary context within which evil manifests itself and the perpetrators who commit this evil.

- Conceptual analysis. Arendt's ideas on evil and morality will be examined in light of present-day research on these topics. This will provide an understanding of the similarities and difference in the vocabularies used to understand evil.

- Insights from social sciences. While many philosophers have touched on the issue of terrorism and evil after 9/11, a full understanding of present-

day evil requires a broader scope. Hence insights from social sciences on terrorism will be included in this research.

Scientific and Social Relevance

This research will shed more clarity on Arendt's work and the relevance of her work today. Moreover, it will contribute to our understanding of contemporary evil. Evil is an important term when thinking about morality. Its existence is arguably the reason we think about morality at all. The existence of evil makes us think about how the world could be better, through our individual actions as well as our society's institutions. Arendt's work shows the complexity of understanding evil while also providing a critique of modern moral philosophy. She shifts morality away from speaking about intentions and general norms. The discourse on evil after 9/11 has struggled to grapple with the phenomenon of Jihadist suicide terrorism. Given the continued influence of Arendt on the contemporary discourse on evil, it is important to ask whether her ideas on evil can still function to speak about evil today, or whether we need to reconsider evil in the 21st century. Ultimately, the way we see good and evil shapes our behaviour, our society's norms, values and governmental policies. Understanding evil is an important first step in combating it.

Key words

Banality, evil, Arendt, terrorism, contemporary evil

Timetable

Year	Research Work	Output
Year 1	Focus on research question 1: - Investigating how contemporary evil manifests itself by examining both the reactions in public discourse to events as well as analyses in academic discourse.	- Draft version of the first chapter, dealing with question 1

	- Comparing this to Arendt's thoughts on how 20th century evil manifested itself	
Year 2	Focus on research question 2: - Examining research on Islamic suicide terrorism, both general analyses and case studies. - Comparing the findings on perpetrators of contemporary evil to the 'ordinary perpetrators' of banal evil	- Draft version of chapter 2, dealing with question 2 - Article dealing with the applicability of the banality of evil to contemporary manifestations of evil
Year 3	Focus on research question 3: - Examining Arendt's idea of radical evil as making human beings superfluous - Reflecting upon the position of the victims of contemporary evil	- Draft version of chapter 3, dealing with question 3 - Article on the applicability of Arendt's idea of radical evil to the position of the victim of contemporary evil
Year 4	Conducting a final analysis, combining the first three parts	- Final concluding chapter, which takes the findings of the first three parts in order to answer the overall question - Completion of dissertation

Summary for non-specialists

Evil is an elusive term. It denotes something which goes beyond actions which are morally wrong. Evil bewilders us and makes us feel helpless. Evil confronts us with an inability to understand what has happened. The way we attempt to understand evil and the words we use to describe evil are largely shaped by events. Events can change the way we think about evil. After 9/11 the term evil has gained new significance in public discourse. Many public figures use the term evil to describe 9/11 and the wave of Islamic terrorism that has manifested itself

in the twenty-first century. Bernstein (2005) and Neiman (2002). have both expressed their disapproval at how the term evil is used in public discourse. Instead of appealing to the complexity of evil, it is rather used to create a simplistic 'us versus them' dichotomy.

This research places Arendt's thoughts on evil within this contemporary context. The central question is to what extent Arendt's ideas on evil can still be used to understand the evil we face today. Arendt is arguably the most influential twentieth century thinker on evil. In *Eichmann in Jerusalem* she observes what she calls the banality of evil. She argues that under totalitarian rule, ordinary people can become criminals implicit in the crimes of the regime unthinkingly and with banal intentions. In other words, in totalitarian regimes ordinary people can do extraordinary evil without any evil intentions. Thus, Arendt criticises the traditional idea of evil, in which evil actions are the result of evil intentions Arendt 1963, 25-26). She also questions the effectiveness of general moral norms in guiding people's actions in times of crisis. She observes that in German society in the 1930's and 1940's people could exchange their moral values for that of the Nazi's overnight with little difficulty (Arendt 2003, 138). The seemingly ironclad moral principles which people held proved to have little power in preventing people from being implicit in the crimes of the Nazi regime.

However, the evil we are faced with today appears at first sight to be quite different. It is quite difficult to think that the actions of Islamic suicide terrorists are the result of thoughtlessness and banal intentions. As Neiman argues, these perpetrators with malice and forethought, the classical elements of evil intention (Neiman 2002, 283). Furthermore, the most bewildering aspect about the actions of Islamic terrorists is that they commit their deeds with an enthusiastic willingness to give up one's own life in the process. Hence, the question is whether Arendt's ideas on evil can still be used to understand the evil we face today, or whether we need to rethink our understanding of evil. Understanding evil is an important first step in combating it. It is worthwhile asking whether the

most influential thinker on evil in the twentieth century can still provide us with the intellectual tools to understand evil today.

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Curriculum Vitae

Personal Information:

Name: Christian Adriaanse

Address: Talent Square 75

                5038LX Tilburg

Country: The Netherlands

Telephone: +31623121695

E-mail: christian.adriaanse@gmail.com

Date of Birth: 24 December 1991

Education

1996-2004   Elementary school R.K Basisschool Lodijke in Bergen op Zoom

2004-2010   VWO at Gymnasium Juvenaat in Bergen op Zoom.

                Courses: Dutch, English, French, German, Ancient Greek, Mathematics A, Economics, Management & Organisation, history

2010-2015   Bachelor International Business Administration at Tilburg University

2011-2014   Bachelor Philosophy at Tilburg University

                Judicium: With Distinction

2014-now   Research Master Philosophy at Radboud University Nijmegen

Work Experience and Extracurricular Activities

2013-2014 Board member of study association Sapientia Ludenda in Tilburg. Sapientia Ludenda is the study association for philosophy students in Tilburg. Activities involve organising readings, study trip, excursions, and informal activities.

2014, 2016 Volunteer at 'Dag van de Filosofie' in Tilburg. The 'Dag van de Filosofie' is an annual day-long event filled with philosophical lectures and workshops in Tilburg in April.

Personal skills and competencies

Languages:

Native tongue: Dutch

Other languages:

English, fluent in speaking, writing, understanding.

German, fair knowledge in understanding, speaking and writing

French, basic knowledge in understanding, speaking and writing.

Certificates:

2012: Workshop 'Intercultural Communication' at Tilburg University.