Research Article

Veronica Cibotaru*

Banal Evil – Radical Goodness. Reflection on the 60th Anniversary of "Eichmann in Jerusalem"

https://doi.org/10.1515/opphil-2022-0259
received April 30, 2023; accepted August 10, 2023

Abstract: The starting point of this article lies in the idea, defended by Hannah Arendt, according to which only goodness can be radical, while evil is merely banal. The idea of a banality of evil is present in Arendt's work *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, although it is explicitly not presented as a general theory on evil as such – it is more particularly in her correspondence with Gershom Scholem that one can find this specific distinction between evil and goodness mentioned. How is this distinction to be understood? This article proposes the idea that such a distinction has to be construed on an ontological level: evil is ontologically deficient, since it does not take hold in a specific capacity of human beings, which would be what Hannah Arendt calls the demonic evil, but in the absence of thinking, i.e. in the absence of a specific human faculty. Conversely, only goodness expresses a creative human faculty, which is precisely thinking, and which, following Hannah Arendt, can be fully realized only through a political, collective dimension.

Keywords: Hannah Arendt, evil, goodness, banality of evil, ontology, phenomenology, Kant, Levinas

1 Introduction

The starting point of this article lies in the idea, defended by Hannah Arendt, according to which only goodness can be radical, while evil is merely banal. The idea of a banality of evil is present in Arendt's work *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, although it is explicitly not presented as a general theory on evil as such – it is more particularly in her correspondence with Gershom Scholem that one can find this specific distinction between evil and goodness mentioned. How is this distinction to be understood? This article proposes the idea that such a distinction has to be construed on an ontological level: evil is ontologically deficient, since it does not take hold in a specific capacity of human beings, which would be what Hannah Arendt calls the demonic evil, but in the absence of thinking, i.e. in the absence of a specific human faculty. Conversely, only goodness expresses a creative human faculty, which is precisely thinking, and which, following Hannah Arendt, can be fully realized only through a political, collective dimension.

Such an ontological distinction between evil and goodness seems to bear similarities with Kant's theory of human evil and with Levinas' phenomenological descriptions of the primacy of goodness in human relationships. Indeed, in the *Religion within the boundaries of mere reason*, Kant makes the crucial distinction between radical and absolute evil. Human evil is radical, because it is grounded in human nature itself and its self-love, but is not absolute, since it can be countered by another essential human faculty, namely moral reason. Nevertheless, although Kant, just as Arendt, does not consider that human evil is absolute, i.e. demonic, contrary to Hannah Arendt he attributes to it a form of ontological consistency, since he links it with a specific

* **Corresponding author: Veronica Cibotaru,** Institute of Philosophy, KU Leuven, Leuven, Belgium,
e-mail: cibotaruveronica@gmail.com

reality, namely self-love. The same reserve could be enounced for the apparent similarity between Arendt's and Levinas' understanding of goodness: both for Arendt and for Levinas, there is a primacy of goodness over evil in human relationships – however, Levinas states explicitly, starting from *Totality and Infinity*, that goodness, and more generally ethics, cannot be understood, at least in an unambiguous way, by means of ontological categories.

As a result of the analyses of this article, it will appear that Arendt's conception of evil lies closer to Augustine's and Aquinas' understanding of evil as privation. At the same time, it stresses that evil has a specific agentive force, according to Arendt, and although it lacks ontological consistency, it can lead paradoxically to disastrous effects.

Eventually, the article brings to light and meditates on an important consequence of Arendt's ontological distinction between evil and goodness that concerns the question of the modality of resisting evil: one cannot resist evil as such, because one cannot resist what does not have any consistency. One can only fill the ontological void of evil by enhancing the presence and fullness of goodness.

2 The Ontological Distinction between Evil and Goodness

2.1 Evil as Thoughtlessness

"He was not stupid. It was sheer thoughtlessness – something by no means identical with stupidity – that predisposed him to become one of the greatest criminals of that period".[1] Such is the description that Hannah Arendt gives of Eichmann. Thoughtlessness is identified in this case as one motivating factor that results in criminal acts. This situation is characterized as banal and "even funny," because despite the gravity of Eichmann's acts, one cannot find any "diabolical or demonical profundity" in Eichmann.[2] Eichmann is described as an ordinary person that could have been perhaps even a respectable person if he would have been in different circumstances. Surprisingly, Eichmann is reported even to acknowledge that the Shoah was "one of the greatest crimes in the history of Humanity"[3], thus acknowledging that the results of his acts were evil, without at the same time taking responsibility for them. Following the logic of his words, criminal nature would characterize the result of his acts, but not his acts as such. Eichmann's justification is well known: he has simply obeyed orders. Moreover, this obedience is morally justified through reference to Kant's definition of duty that explains as follows: "I meant by my remark about Kant that the principle of my will must always be such that it can become the principle of general laws,"[4] which is approximately a correct definition of Kant's categorical imperative and shows that Eichmann clearly had at least some rudimentary knowledge of Kant's philosophy. On the other hand, Eichmann also claimed that he stopped living by Kantian moral precepts starting from the moment when he has been charged with the Final Solution, which inaugurated, following his own words "a period of crimes legalized by the state."[5]

Eichmann's words are self-contradictory and raise for this reason the question if they are even worth to be analysed and reflected on. Nevertheless, Arendt takes these words very seriously and dismisses with indignation their reference to Kant, putting forward the fact that human capacity for judgement and practical, i.e. moral reason are at the core of Kant's practical philosophy. She even reproaches Eichmann for distorting

1 Arendt, "Eichmann in Jerusalem," 287–8.

2 Ibid., 288.

3 Ibid., 22.

4 The exact formulation of one possible formulation of Kant's categorical imperative to which Eichmann refers is the following: "So act that the maxim of your will could always hold at the same time as a principle in a giving of universal law" (Kant, "*Critique of Practical Reason*," 164). Eichmann declared during his trial in Jerusalem that he read the *Critique of Practical Reason*. Arendt, "Eichmann in Jerusalem," 136.

5 Arendt, "Eichmann in Jerusalem".

Kant's categorical imperative so that the ultimate principle of obedience lies not anymore in the autonomy of the self-legislating practical reason, as for Kant, but in the arbitrary will of one single person, namely the Führer: "Act as if the principle of your actions were the same as that of the legislator or of the law of the land – or, in Hans Frank's formulation of 'the categorical imperative in the Third Reich,' which Eichmann might have known: 'Act in such a way that the Führer, if he knew your action, would approve it'".[6]

As a matter of fact, the precept of obedience to heteronomous authority is not alien to Kant's if not moral at least political thinking. Thus, in his opuscule *An Answer to the Question: What is Enlightenment?*, Kant clearly states that in some particular circumstances, "it is, certainly, impermissible to argue; instead, one must obey".[7] Indeed, a certain "mechanism" would be necessary for the "interest of a commonwealth"[8]: it would be "ruinous" for an officer not to obey while on duty, for a citizen not to pay taxes, for a clergyman not to deliver his catechism class according to the creed of his church.[9] Hence, from this perspective, Eichmann could have argued that he obeyed orders just as an officer would obey orders from his hierarchy. On the other hand, Kant states also that the same officer, citizen or clergyman insofar as he is a member of the "society of citizens of the world"[10] should have the freedom to argue against orders by making public use of his reason, and this is precisely what Eichmann did not. Moreover, Kant also contends that if the official teaching of a church goes against the inner religion of a clergyman, the latter should resign from it, for "he could not in conscience hold his office."[11] Again, this is precisely what Eichmann did not, although he acknowledged during his trial the criminal nature of the results of his acts.

Hence, if we deepen Eichmann's reference to Kant's philosophy as a means of justification of his acts, we come to a conclusion that partly converges with Arendt's verdict of thoughtlessness and that at the same time nuances it: indeed, Eichmann did not make use of his reason but he did not make use of it in a particular sense, namely in a public sense. In a private sense,[12] Eichmann did make use of an instrumental form of reason in the strict limit of his functions, which allowed him to achieve specific goals required by his functions. In a broader perspective, it is also by virtue of this instrumental dimension that Eichmann could realize his personal ambitions, in accordance with his vanity, on which Hannah Arendt insists. However, he did not make use of his reason *as* a citizen of the world, endowed with a moral conscience, whose thoughts and actions have potential effects on the commonwealth as a whole. He identified his whole being with his figure and the role of a functionary. Hence, "he acted not as a man but as a mere functionary whose functions could just as easily have been carried out by an one else".[13] By renouncing to make use of his reason in a public sense, Eichmann made himself a replaceable and one could say superfluous entity that is at odds with his radical uniqueness, which is rooted in the freedom of his personality.[14]

Arendt's account of Eichmann's thoughtlessness implies at least two possible dimensions of interpretation of the phenomenon of thoughtlessness, which indicates towards (1) the question of judgement and of (2) the capacity to think from the standpoint of others. The first dimension can be read in this fragment:

> There remains, however, one fundamental problem, which was implicitly present in all these postwar trials and which must be mentioned here because it touches upon one of the central moral questions of all time, namely upon the nature and function of human judgment. What we have demanded in these trials, where the defendants had committed "legal" crimes, is that human beings be capable of telling right from wrong even when all they have to guide them is their own judgment, which,

6 Ibid.
7 Kant, "An Answer to the Question: What is Enlightenment?", 18.
8 Ibid.
9 Ibid., 18–9.
10 Ibid., 18.
11 Ibid., 19.
12 Ibid., 18
13 Arendt, "Eichmann in Jerusalem," 289.
14 "Through his inability to think, [Eichmann] refuses to be a somebody, which makes his responsibility for the crimes he enabled appear as diffuse" (Robaszkiewicz and Weinman, *Hannah Arendt and Politics*, 46). As a consequence, "no common world could emerge" "without the presence of someone who can be held responsible for an act (good or evil)" (Ibid.).

> moreover, happens to be completely at odds with what they must, regard as the unanimous opinion of all those around them. And this question is all the more serious as we know that the few who were "arrogant" enough to trust only their own judgment were by no means identical with those persons who continued to abide by old values, or who were guided by a religious belief. Since the whole of respectable society had in one way or another succumbed to Hitler, the moral maxims which determine social behavior and the religious commandments - "Thou shalt not kill!" - which guide conscience had virtually vanished. Those few who were still able to tell right from wrong went really only by their own judgments, and they did so freely; there were no rules to be abided by, under which the particular cases with which they were confronted could be subsumed. They had to decide each instance as it arose, because no rules existed for the unprecedented.[15]

Thoughtlessness is reinterpreted implicitly in this passage as a lack of judgement, which is defined as the capacity to discern what is morally right and wrong. The faculty of judgement is conceived of as that which appeals to human freedom in its most radical form, namely as the capacity to resist the common *doxa* and generally accepted social behaviour and values. "The few who were 'arrogant' enough to trust only their own judgement were by no means identical with those persons who continued to abide by old values, or who were guided by a religious belief," since those who trust their own judgement do not do this by virtue of a specific *doxa*, be it a minority *doxa*, such as specific old values of religious beliefs that were dismissed by the Nazi regime. The faculty of judgement thus entails the capacity to resist even to "the whole of respectable society" facing the risk of complete solitude and appeals to the most radical form of uniqueness and irreplaceability of a human person, which is left with its "own judgement" as sole guide.

In a text dated 1956–1957, "Introduction *into* Politics" Arendt distinguishes between two types of judgement. The first type organizes and subsumes "the individual and particular under the general and universal".[16] It presupposes "a prejudgement, a prejudice [*Vorurteil*]" that has been applied to the "standard itself," i.e. to the general rule following which current judgements are effectuated,[17] but that is not interrogated as such. Hence, the prejudice has to be understood in this context in a double meaning, i.e. in its etymological meaning, as that which precedes and makes possible the judgement, but also in its common meaning, namely as an unreflected *doxa.*[18] There is, however, also an authentic, original type of judgement, which manifests itself in situations when "there are no standards at our disposal",[19] and hence, that does not subsume following a general rule, simply because it does not dispose of such an overarching rule. It is precisely this second type of judgement that is highlighted in the above passage from *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, and which Arendt defines as the "ability to make distinctions," and more precisely the distinction between right and wrong[20]. Contrary to the first type of judgement, the second type of judgement does not dispose of any pregiven rule that it could apply to a particular case, but has to decide for a particular instance in an unprecedented and new way. Hence, this second type of judgement is intimately rooted in the phenomenon of natality that Hannah Arendt conceives as a new beginning and the introduction of novelty in the world. In *The Human Condition* Arendt relates the capacity of action of human beings to natality: "It is in the nature of beginning that something new is started which cannot be expected from whatever may have happened before. This character of startling unexpectedness is inherent in all beginnings .... The fact that man is capable of action means that the unexpected can be expected from him, that he is able to perform what is infinitely improbable. And this again is possible only because each man is unique, so that with each birth something uniquely new comes into the world".[21] Nevertheless, it is possible to apply this same description to the human capacity for this original

15 Arendt, "Eichmann in Jerusalem," 294–5.

16 Arendt, "Introduction into Politics", 102.

17 Ibid.

18 Prejudice thus defined can be described from the perspective of Husserl's generative and genetic phenomenology as a sedimented unity of sense that is operative but whose origin is not necessarily reactivated through a questioning back (*Rückfrage*) (Husserl, *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology*).

19 Arendt, "Introduction *into* Politics", 102.

20 Ibid.

21 Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 177–8.

form of judgement, which is at stake in *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, since it entails the capacity to decide on the rightness or wrongness of a particular case in a new way, undetermined by precedent rules.[22]

With this distinction between two types of judgement, Hannah Arendt recuperates the Kantian conceptual distinction between the determining and the reflecting judgement, which appears in the *Critique of the Power of Judgment*: "The power of judgment can be regarded either as a mere faculty for reflecting on a given representation, in accordance with a certain principle, for the sake of a concept that is thereby made possible, or as a faculty for determining an underlying concept through a given empirical representation" (Kant 2000, 15). Contrary to Arendt, Kant does not so much stress the idea of rule as the idea of concept in order to set up this distinction: by opposition with the determining judgement, the reflecting judgement does not dispose of any previous, "underlying" concept that it can apply to a representation, but creates a new concept for a particular representation.[23] Nevertheless, Kant converges with Arendt's idea of the originality of the second type of judgement, which is, in Kantian terminology, the reflecting judgement, when he states, "the reflecting power of judgment is that which is also called the faculty of judging (*facultas diiudicandi*)" (Kant 2000, 15). In other words, the reflective power of judgement is the power of judgement as such, in its most original form.

Although in *Eichmann in Jerusalem* Hannah Arendt does not distinguish thinking from judging and seems on the contrary to identify thoughtlessness with the absence of judgement, she clearly distinguishes these two human faculties in the first volume of her work *The Life of the Mind*. This distinction appears also in the tripartition of this work whose part are devoted to thinking, willing and judging. One essential distinctive feature between judging and thinking lies in the fact that judgement is focused on the particular, while thinking strives towards generalization.[24] In *Eichmann in Jerusalem* such a distinction is not explicitly present, and the absence of judgement understood in its original sense, i.e. as faculty of making distinctions in a particular case, appears on the contrary as a way of understanding the phenomenon of thoughtlessness, incarnated by Eichmann's figure.

Apart from the lack of judgement a second essential feature of thoughtlessness according to Arendt is the lack of the capacity to think from the standpoint of others. Thus, she writes in *Eichmann in Jerusalem*: "The longer one listened to him, the more obvious it became that this inability to speak was closely connected with an inability to think, namely to think from the standpoint of somebody else".[25]

These two characteristics of thoughtlessness are correlated, since the faculty of judgement in its original sense, i.e. as the capacity for reflective judgement in the Kantian sense, necessarily entails following Hannah Arendt the capacity to think from the perspective of others and even of everybody else:

> In the *Critique of Judgment* … Kant insisted upon a … way of thinking … for which it would not be enough to be in agreement with one's own self, but which consisted of being able to "think in the place of everybody else" and which he therefore called an "enlarged mentality" (*eine erweiterte Denkungsart*). … And this enlarged way of thinking, which as judgment knows how to transcend its own individual limitations, on the other hand, cannot function in strict isolation or solitude; it needs the presence of others "in whose place" it must think, whose perspectives it must take into consideration, and without whom it never has the opportunity to operate at all. As logic, to be sound, depends on the presence of the self, so judgment, to be valid, depends on the presence of others. Hence judgment is endowed with a certain specific validity but is never universally valid.[26]

Although Hannah Arendt does not mention in this fragment explicitly the notion of reflective judgement, it is obvious that it is precisely this particular form of judgement that is here at stake, since the determining judgement is precisely universally valid, contrary to the reflecting judgement that is not universally valid as

22 This specific understanding of judgment in its original form is confirmed by this quote from Arendt's *Denktagebuch*: "Power of judgment: 'the ability to discover the particular'" (Arendt, *Denktagebuch*, 603).

23 The judgement of taste, which is a particular form of reflecting judgment, namely an aesthetic judgement, is an exception to this definition, since its object, namely the beautiful, is represented without concepts (Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment. The Cambridge Edition of the Works of Immanuel Kant*, 96).

24 Arendt, The Life of the Mind, 213.

25 Arendt, "Eichmann in Jerusalem," 49.

26 Arendt, "The Crisis in Culture: Its Social and Its Political Significance", 220–1.

such, but can only woo a universal adherence. More particularly, Arendt bears here in mind the judgement of taste, whose object, namely the beautiful is defined as "that which, without concepts, is represented as the object of a *universal* satisfaction."[27] The beautiful is only *represented* as an object of universal satisfaction; i.e. it pretends to such a form of universality, it is however not the object of a universal judgement, because it does not ground on concepts. In Arendtian words: the judgement of taste has a specific validity, but is never universally valid. Its validity is always particular since it is always related to particular cases and instances.

On the other hand, a judgement that is truly universal, and that can be only a determining judgement, does not need, paradoxically, "the presence of others," but only logic, and the mere "presence of the self" that it entails. Hence, in order to acknowledge that the proposition "2 + 2 = 4" is universally valid I do not need to take into consideration the presence of others.[28] I can even consider that this proposition would be true even if no human being or any other form of mind, not even my mind, would exist. When I recognize a bird as being beautiful, I cannot do this without taking into account the possibility that any other human being would find this bird necessarily beautiful.

Hence, one can find in Arendt's thinking a "*political* appropriation of Kant's conception of *aesthetic* judgment."[29] It is a political appropriation since Arendt interprets the wooing of a universal consent that is implied in the judgement of taste as a typical "political form of people talking with one another," since it corresponds to the "convincing and persuading speech" that corresponds to "what the Greeks called *peithein*."[30] Persuasion founds the life of citizens in the polis because it excludes physical violence, but also because the political realm is conceived by Hannah Arendt as a realm of collective thinking and action. It "resembles a … stage … and … rises directly out of acting together, the 'sharing of words and deeds.'"[31] Hence judgement in its original form has necessarily a political dimension, and if this form of judgement is an original form of thinking, then one can conclude that we cannot genuinely think without the presence of others and the horizon of a political community.

This political form of thinking is fundamentally grounded on the capacity of empathy, since it presupposes the capacity to think from the standpoint of somebody else, or, in the place of somebody else. Contrary to what Arendt's words may suggest, what is at stake here is not to represent others through our singular and particular thinking, in the same way as a delegate would represent a community – such a way of thinking would amount in a mere abstract presence of others – but to attempt to think *from* the standpoint of others *as if* I would be in their place, in Husserl's words, as if I would be "there."[32] Husserl's phenomenology of empathy (*Einfühlung*), particularly as it unfolds in the Fifth Cartesian Meditation, allows us to describe precisely this empathic structure, highlighted by Arendt, according to which one can project itself in the perspective of the other. This structure is marked, as Husserl shows, by an unbridgeable dichotomy between the "here" of my own original perspective and the "there" of the other's perspective.[33] The "there" of the other will never become my "here" – however, I can perceive this "there," through a process of analogy with my own "here," *as if* it would be a "here," i.e., as if, precisely as Hannah Arendt puts it, I would be from the standpoint of the other.

As it appears from this analysis, the phenomenon of thoughtlessness is described in *Eichmann in Jerusalem* as bearing two essential features: (1) the absence of judgement in its original form, i.e. as faculty of distinguishing good from evil in particular cases, independently from a general law or from any "clichés"[34,35]; (2) the

27 Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, 96

28 The same holds for philosophical truths, since they are subordinated to laws of logic (Robaszkiewicz and Weinman, *Hannah Arendt and Politics*, 38).

29 Blumenthal-Barby, *Arendt, Kant and the Enigma of Judgment*, 10.

30 Arendt, "The Crisis in Culture: Its Social and Its Political Significance", 222–3.

31 Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 198.

32 Husserl, *Cartesian Meditations. An Introduction to Phenomenology*, 119.

33 Ibid., 116–7.

34 Arendt depicts the portrait of Eichmann as of someone who talks in clichés even in his last instants before death: "It surely cannot be so common that a man facing death, and, moreover, standing beneath the gallows, should be able to think of nothing but what he has heard at funerals all his life, and these 'lofty words' should completely becloud the reality – of his own death" (Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, 288).

35 Formosa, "Is Radical Evil Banal? Is Banal Evil Radical?".

absence of consideration of the standpoint of others through empathy acts that allow us to project ourselves in the place of others. The first feature remains ambiguous in Arendt's account, since it is not clear if it should be understood as the absence of the faculty of judgement as such or merely of the exercise of this faculty, an exercise that would necessarily entail the question of the will. In regard to this second reading, the phenomenon of thoughtlessness should be specified not merely as the absence of thinking, but as the absence of the *will* to think. Hence, evil would not mean mere thoughtlessness but a *lack of will* to think.[36]

2.2 Evil as Ontological Deficiency – Goodness as Ontological Fullness

Despite the emblematic nature of the notion of banality of evil that Hannah Arendt uses in *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, surprisingly this notion is very rarely used in this work, nor does it lead to any systematic elaboration or any theory on evil. It appears rather that "Arendt's primary concern is not to elaborate a normative moral philosophy[37] but to capture evil in political-phenomenological terms,"[38] i.e. to capture evil in its most prominent manifestation, as it destroys political thinking and political life. From this standpoint, Eichmann appears as a prominent and paradigmatic case of evil, which incarnates the banality of evil. On the one hand, Arendt states that "when [she] speaks of the banality of the evil, [she] does so only on the strictly factual level, pointing to a phenomenon which stared one in the face at the trial,"[39] and while she distinguishes Eichmann from Iago and Macbeth, suggesting thus that other forms of evil would be possible;[40] on the other hand she also contends that "such thoughtlessness [that characterizes the banality of evil] can wreak more havoc than all the evil instincts taken together which, perhaps, are inherent in man."[41] This particular banal form of evil is paradigmatic not so much because it is the most common form of evil,[42] but because paradoxically, it bears, despite its banality, the most disastrous and extremely harmful effects. This does not entail that evil is defined by Hannah Arendt merely through its degree of harmfulness[43] and hence also through a victim approach to evil. Arendt's account of evil in *Eichmann in Jerusalem* reunites the victim but also the perpetrator approach,[44] since it defines evil through the mental representations and characteristics of the evil

36 As a key point from these analyses, it appears that thoughtlessness that is equated to evil does not designate mere obedience to authority, but the incapacity of thinking through judgement and empathy. This point allows us to give an answer to an often formulated critique towards Arendt's description of Eichmann as a mere obedient functionary who actually was deeply convinced of the necessity of the Final Solution (for instance, Améry, *Jenseits von Schuld und Sühne*, who, grounding on this type of critique, based on his personal experience of the concentration camps and of the zeal of his torturers, recuses Arendt's concept of banality of evil): even if we accept that this is true, this would not entail that Eichmann's conviction was the manifestation of a genuine form of thinking.

37 As Arendt puts it "[*Eichmann in Jerusalem*] is least of all a theoretical treatise on the nature of evil" (Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, 285). Its object is rather "the person of the defendant, a man of flesh and blood with an individual history, with an always unique set of qualities, peculiarities, behavior patterns, and circumstances" (Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, 285).

38 Robaszkiewicz, Weinman, *Hannah Arendt and Politics*, 47.

39 Arendt, "Eichmann in Jerusalem," 287. This particular phenomenon, which Arendt experienced and one could say discovered at Eichmann's trial, radically modified Arendt's understanding of the evil that is incarnated by totalitarianism, imperialism, the use of the atomic bomb and the Holocaust, which she defends in *The Origins of Totalitarianism*. In this book Arendt claims that this form of evil, previously unknown to humanity, is "absolute" and "radical" (Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, VIII–IX, 443, 459).

40 Arendt, "Eichmann in Jerusalem," 287.

41 Ibid.

42 Such an idea has been contested in the scholarly literature: "There are plenty of examples of serial killers, terrorists, and war criminals who think very clearly about the extreme harms that they are intentionally inflicting on innocent victims, and the absence of thoughtlessness does not render their actions anything less than evil. Ted Bundy had many failings, but thoughtless obedience was not one of them" (Russell, *Being Evil*, 109).

43 Card, *The Atrocity Paradigm: A Theory of Evil*, 3.

44 Formosa, "A Conception of Evil".

perpetrators, namely their absence of thinking, while at the same time, it construes this form of evil as a paradigmatic case of evil because of the extreme magnitude of its harmfulness.

It is however in Arendt's correspondence, more precisely in a letter from July 1963 addressed to Gershom Scholem, that one can find if not a proper theory at least a general statement on the nature of evil:

> you are quite right: I changed my mind and do no longer speak of "radical evil."[45] ... it is indeed my opinion now that evil is never "radical", that it is only extreme, and that it possesses neither depth nor demonic dimensions. It can overgrow and lay waste the whole world precisely because it spreads like a fungus on the surface ... the moment [thought] concerns itself with evil, it is frustrated because there is nothing. That is its "banality". Only the good has depth and can be radical.[46]

This short but very dense passage features two striking points: (1) a distinction between evil and goodness that is ontologically based; (2) an ontologically framed definition of the banality of evil. Evil cannot be radical because it is nothing, in other words, it does not have any ontological consistency. Conversely, only its opposite, goodness, "has depth and can be radical." Hence, only goodness is "something," has ontological consistency and fullness.

These distinctions lead to a reconsideration of what is the banality of evil, which is at odds with every possible attempt to minimize the scope of evil: evil is banal because it is nothing, and precisely because it is nothing is it extremely devastating and can "lay waste the whole world." At the same time, we find here again this paradoxical relationship of consequence between extremely harmful effects and something that is merely banal, highlighted already in *Eichmann in Jerusalem*.

In what sense, however, is evil devoid of ontological consistency? Following our previous analyses, it appears that the ontological deficiency of evil has to be construed as the lack of a human faculty (as such, or in its exercise, this point remains ambiguous as we have seen), namely the faculty of thinking, understood as the capacity for judging and of empathy. Conversely, the ontological fullness of goodness would imply the *presence* of this human faculty.[47]

3 Arendt's Conception of Evil and Goodness: A Mere Repetition of the History of Philosophy?

In the second edition of 1958 of *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, Hannah Arendt writes:

> It is inherent in our entire philosophical tradition that we cannot conceive of a "radical evil", and this is true both for Christian theology, which conceded even to the Devil himself a celestial origin, as well as for Kant, the only philosopher who, in the word he coined for it, at least must have suspected the existence of the evil even though he immediately rationalized it in the concept of a "perverted ill will" that could be explained by comprehensible motives. Therefore, we actually have nothing to fall back on in order to understand a phenomenon that nevertheless confronts us with its overpowering reality and breaks down all standards we know.[48]

In this work, Arendt implicitly argues for the necessity of renovating the traditional conceptions of evil as they have been transmitted through the history of philosophy because these conceptions are not apt to think of a new form of evil, manifested by the emergence of totalitarianism and the happening of the impossible, namely the Holocaust. This new phenomenon features, as she explicitly argues, a radical form of evil, which the philosophical tradition is unable to think of. Nevertheless, as we have seen, in 1964, Arendt contends that evil cannot be radical and that this constitutes its banality, which is at stake in *Eichmann in Jerusalem*. Did Arendt's

45 Arendt defended this idea in her book from 1951 *The Origins of Totalitarianism*. See footnote above.

46 Arendt, "An Exchange of Letters between Gershom Scholem and Hannah Arendt," 251.

47 Here again it remains to be clarified if goodness entails the presence of the faculty of thinking as such, or the *exercise* of this faculty.

48 Arendt, "The Origins of Totalitarianism".

position evolve into a conservative posture that situates itself in continuity with the history of philosophy?[49] What would be renovating in her understanding of evil and correlatively of goodness? Does this understanding match the urgency to think about the possibility of these extreme forms of evil, which has been largely passed over in the philosophical thinking after Auschwitz?[50]

Arendt's idea of banal evil, which cannot be radical, seems to lie in continuity with the philosophies of at least four thinkers, namely Kant, Levinas, Augustine and Aquinas. Indeed, in the *Religion within the boundaries of mere reason* Kant distinguishes radical evil, which is rooted in human nature, and "hinders the germ of the good from developing as it otherwise would,"[51] from absolute evil that would be incarnated by an "absolutely evil will" and would be congenial to a diabolical being.[52] This latter form of evil would be characterized by an "evil reason" that would be "exonerated from the moral law."[53] And it is precisely because human reason necessarily acknowledges moral law, that it cannot be absolutely evil and that it can subordinate the evil gems of its nature, rooted in the incentives (*Triebfeder*) caused by its self-love, to moral law. Consequently, Kant's conclusion is categorical: human being cannot be fundamentally and absolutely evil, who "despite a corrupted heart yet always possesses a good will" – "there still remains hope of a return to the good from which he has strayed."[54]

Kant's denial of an absolute, diabolic nature of evil, at least in so far as it applies to human beings, is very much to remind Arendt's denial of a diabolical and deep dimension of evil. However one essential difference remains: contrary to Arendt, Kant concedes a radical dimension to evil, which is rooted in a specific human reality, namely self-love. Arendt's idea of an ontological deficiency of evil is hence foreign to Kantian thinking.

Arendt's conception of evil and goodness bears however another striking resemblance with Levinas' thinking, as it unfolds starting from the publication in 1961 of *Totality and Infinity*. Although the concept of evil does hardly appear in this work,[55] just as in future Levinas' works, the question of goodness (*bonté*) plays on the contrary a prominent role, since the encounter and relationship with the Other is grounded in its most original form on goodness. Thus, Levinas writes that "our efforts consists in the maintaining … the society of the I with the Other – language and goodness."[56] Language and goodness are not however two equal conditions of the relationship of the I to the Other, but goodness is a more fundamental condition, since goodness is the essence of language,[57] which means that language is "friendship and hospitality."[58] The encounter with the

49 Bernstein convincingly argues that Arendt's previous idea of a radical evil is compatible with her later idea of banal evil, since they both imply a rejection of the idea of a demonic evil, and both presuppose the necessity to think a new form of evil that could not be grasped through evil motives (Bernstein, *Hannah Arendt and the Jewish Question*, 152). Rather than being contradictory, they express a shift in the key concepts that allow Arendt to conceive of evil: if the idea of radical evil is mainly based on the concept of superfluousness of human beings, the concept of banal evil presupposes thoughtlessness as a key concept (ibid.), or, following our analysis, the concept of banal evil implies an ontological dimension, since it is conceived as absence of thinking. On the other hand, as we have seen, Arendt explicitly states in her letter from July 1963 to Gershom Scholem that she "changed [her] mind and no longer speak[s] of 'radical evil'" (Arendt, "An Exchange of Letters between Gershom Scholem and Hannah Arendt," 251). Hence, Arendt insists on a form of discontinuity between these two ideas of evil, which cannot be reduced to mere conceptual nuances. As it appears from the rest of her letter, the concept of banal evil allows Arendt to insist on the ontological deficiency of evil ("the moment [thought] concerns itself with evil, it is frustrated because there is nothing. That is its 'banality'" (ibid.)), which does not follow clearly from the concept of radical evil – much on the contrary, the concept of radical evil can be misleading, since it can suggest an ontological positivity of evil – but also to contrapose the ontological deficiency of evil to the ontological positivity of goodness ("only the good … can be radical" (ibid.)).

50 Neiman, *Evil in Modern Thought. An Alternative History of Philosophy*, 2.

51 Kant, *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason and Other Writings*, 61.

52 Ibid., 58.

53 Ibid.

54 Ibid., 65.

55 Only the Cartesian question of the evil genius is thematized in this work (Levinas, *Totality and Infinity, An Essay on Exteriority*, 91).

56 Levinas, *Totality and Infinity, An Essay on Exteriority*, 47.

57 Ibid., 305.

58 Ibid.

Other "arous[es] my goodness"[59] and is, in its most original form, of an ethical nature. Hence, Levinas argues for an ethical primacy of human relationships, a primacy which is clearly expressed in the idea that "war presupposes peace, the antecedent … presence of the Other; it does not represent the first event of the encounter."[60] If we consider that war is a form of evil and that peace necessarily presupposes according to Levinas goodness,[61] one must conclude a form of the primacy of goodness over evil in Levinas' thinking.

This primacy of goodness over evil in human relationships echoes Arendt's distinction between radical goodness and banal evil. Nevertheless, Arendt's distinction entails an ontological background that is less obvious in *Totality and Infinity* and certainly in the future works of Levinas. The question of whether goodness has to be understood on an ontological level remains ambiguous in *Totality and Infinity*. Thus, on the one hand, Levinas writes about being as goodness in the closing chapter of this work – on the other hand, he introduces in French another concept than being (*être*), namely *étant* (existent), in order to characterize the Other, and states explicitly that the ethical relationship with the Other is metaphysical and not ontological.[62] Much more, metaphysics precedes ontology, since "ontology presupposes metaphysics."[63] Hence, it is also the idea of goodness as a mode of accomplishment of the ethical relationship with the Other that falls under this ambiguity in *Totality and Infinity*. In his later works, particularly in *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence* published in 1974, Levinas radicalizes and disambiguates this movement of dissociation of the ethical relationship to the Other from ontology.[64]

Arendt's ontological distinction between evil and goodness, and particularly her understanding of evil as ontological deficiency, seems to bear the most affinities with Augustine's and Aquinas' understanding of evil as privation, of substance for Augustine,[65] or of something that should be there for Aquinas.[66] Augustine's and Aquinas' conceptions of evil bear a theological background, which open the way towards a Christian theodicy: God does not bear responsibility for the presence of evil in the Creation since evil does not have any substance or reality. Thus, evil can be reduced to human finitude but also human responsibility. Such a theological background is certainly not proper to Arendt's thinking. Nevertheless, could we not argue that her idea of evil as ontological deficiency also allows for a certain form of theodicy, which would not be theological, but rather existential, by maintaining hope of the goodness of the world? Thus, Susan Neiman states that "to call evil banal is to offer not a definition of it but a theodicy. For it implies that the sources of evil are not mysterious or profound but fully within our grasp. If so, they do not infect the world at a depth that could make us despair of the world itself."[67]

59 Ibid., 200.

60 Ibid., 199.

61 "Peace must be my peace, in a relation that starts from an I and goes to the other, in desire and goodness, where the I both maintains itself and exists without egoism" (Levinas, *Totality and Infinity, An Essay on Exteriority*, 306).

62 Levinas, *Totality and Infinity, An Essay on Exteriority*, 48.

63 Ibid.

64 Levinas, *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence*.

65 Augustine, Augustine of Hippo, *Confessions*. Jean Bethke Elshtain even argues that Arendt's conception of evil was inspired by Augustine's understanding of evil (Elshtain, *Augustine and the Limits of Politics*, 76–7), which she so beautifully defines as "unbearable lightness of nonbeing" (ibid., 81). Charles Mathewes makes a similar point, by contending that Arendt's ontological interpretation of evil as privation entails fundamentally an Augustinian framework (Mathewes, *Evil and the Augustinian Tradition*, 195). Moreover, Mathewes claims that both Augustine and Arendt share one common concern: just as Augustine aims at undermining Manichaeistic ideas about the positive reality of evil, Arendt's endeavours to deconstruct any vision of evil as something that would be "heroic-demonic" (ibid.) and that would have a positive content.

66 Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles*.

67 See also Neiman, "Banality Reconsidered," 307: "*Eichmann in Jerusalem* can function as a modernist theodicy." The aim of such a theodicy is, following Neiman, to show that evil exists, but is not a "necessary part of the world" nor of the "human condition" (ibid.). According to Neiman, it is precisely this endeavour of a theodicy that explains the harsh criticism that *Eichmann in Jerusalem* brought fourth, both because theodicy is "out of style" in the contemporary world, and appears to be "out of taste" after Auschwitz (ibid., 306). Neiman, *Evil in Modern Thought. An Alternative History of Philosophy*, 303.

Particular formulations from *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, such as this fragment, may indeed suggest the idea of a tentative theodicy:

> Politically speaking, it is that under conditions of terror most people will comply but some people will not, just as the lesson of the countries to which the Final Solution was proposed is that "it could happen" in most places but it did not happen everywhere. Humanly speaking, no more is required, and no more can reasonably be asked, for this planet to remain a place fit for human habitation.[68]

This passage seems to entail the claim of trust in the world as fit for human habitation and hence also of trust in the fundamental goodness of the world despite the presence of evil in the world. If evil "threatens our sense of the world,"[69] then goodness, conversely, preserves and restores our sense of the world as a common and shared world.

On the other hand, as it follows from our analyses Arendt insists also on the extremely harmful effects of evil, despite its banality. Despite its ontological deficiency, evil has a specific agentive force, which indicates that Arendt's conception of evil, contrary to Augustine's and Aquinas' conceptions, is not grounded on the idea of mere privation, nor that it opens towards a form of theodicy, but that it acknowledges the destructive force of evil that arises precisely from evil's nothingness.[70]

In conclusion, it seems to me that we can draw one important consequence from Arendt's ontological understanding of evil and goodness, namely that one cannot resist evil, or fight evil as such, because one cannot fight against what is nothing. Fighting against evil would rather make sense from a gnostic or Manichean perspective, which is at odds with Hannah Arendt's thinking. Since only goodness has ontological fullness, making the world more fit for human habitation would be possible only by filling the ontological void of evil through goodness.

Acknowledgments: I would like to thank the anonymous reviewers for their useful comments on the first version of this paper.

Conflict of interest: Author states no conflict of interest.

References

Améry, Jean. *Jenseits von Schuld und Sühne: Bewältigungsversuche eines Überwältigten*. Munich: Szczesny, 1966.
Aquinas, Thomas. *Summa Contra Gentiles*, translated by Anton C. Pegis. Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1975.
Arendt, Hannah. "An Exchange of Letters between Gershom Scholem and Hannah Arendt." In *The Jew as Pariah: Jewish Identity and the Politics in the Modern Age*, edited by Ron H. Feldman. New York: Grove Press, 1978.
Arendt, Hannah. *Denktagebuch*, vol. 1. Munich: Piper, 2002.
Arendt, Hannah. "Introduction *into* Politics." In *The Promise of Politics*, edited by Jerome Kohn, 93–200. New York: Schocken Books, 2005.
Arendt, Hannah. *Eichmann in Jerusalem. A Report on the Banality of Evil*. New York: Penguin Books, 2006.
Arendt, Hannah. "The Crisis in Culture: Its Social and Its Political Significance." In *Between Past and Future: Eight Exercises in Political Thought*, 197–226. New York: Penguin Books, 1968.
Arendt, Hannah. *The Human Condition*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958.
Arendt, Hannah. *The Life of the Mind*, vol. 1. New York: Harcourt, 1978.
Arendt, Hannah. *The Origins of Totalitarianism*. San Diego/New York/London: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1973.
Augustine of Hippo. *Confessions*, translated by Vernon J. Bourke. Washington D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1966.
Bernstein, Richard J. *Hannah Arendt and the Jewish Question*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 1996.

68 Arendt, "Eichmann in Jerusalem," 287–8.

69 Neiman, *Evil in Modern Thought. An Alternative History of Philosophy*, 2.

70 Evil's nothingness can also be called a form of emptiness, following Neiman's indirect characterization of banal evil as being empty (Neiman, "Banality Reconsidered," 308). Emptiness should not be understood in this context as a black hole, because it can be grasped, namely as lack of thinking, and is hence not impenetrable (Neiman, "Banality Reconsidered," 308). It lacks for this reason of every form of "aura of the sacred and the erotic" (Neiman, "Banality Reconsidered," 307).

Blumenthal-Barby, Martin. *Arendt, Kant and the Enigma of Judgment*. Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2023.
Card, Claudia. *The Atrocity Paradigm: A Theory of Evil*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002.
Elshtain, Jean Bethke. *Augustine and the Limits of Politics*. Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1995.
Formosa, Paul. "A Conception of Evil," *Journal of Value Inquiry* 42, no. 2 (2008), 217–39.
Formosa, Paul. "Is Radical Evil Banal? Is Banal Evil Radical?," *Philosophy & Social Criticism* 33, no. 6 (2007), 717–35.
Husserl, Edmund. *Cartesian Meditations. An Introduction to Phenomenology*, translated by Dorion Cairns. Dordrecht/Boston/London: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1999.
Husserl, Edmund. *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology*, translated by David Carr. Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1970.
Kant, Immanuel. "An Answer to the Question: What is Enlightenment?" In *Practical Philosophy*, *The Cambridge Edition of the Works of Immanuel Kant*, translated by Mary J. Gregor, 133–276. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996b.
Kant, Immanuel. "Critique of Practical Reason." In *Practical Philosophy*, *The Cambridge Edition of the Works of Immanuel Kant*, translated by Mary J. Gregor, 133–276. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996a.
Kant, Immanuel. *Critique of the Power of Judgment. The Cambridge Edition of the Works of Immanuel Kant*, translated by Paul Guyer and Eric Matthews. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000.
Kant, Immanuel. *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason and Other Writings*, translated by Allen Wood. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998.
Levinas, Emmanuel. *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence*, translated by Alphonso Lingis. Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1998.
Levinas, Emmanuel. *Totality and Infinity, An Essay on Exteriority*, translated by Alphonso Lingis. Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1969.
Mathewes, Charles T. *Evil and the Augustinian Tradition*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001.
Neiman, Susan. *Evil in Modern Thought. An Alternative History of Philosophy*. Princeton/Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2002.
Neiman, Susan. "Banality Reconsidered." In *Politics in Dark Times. Encounters with Hannah Arendt*, edited by Seyla Benhabib, 305–15. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010.
Robaszkiewicz, Maria and Michael D. Weinman. *Hannah Arendt and Politics*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh Unversity Press, 2023.
Russell, Luke. *Being Evil: A Philosophical Perspective*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020.