

ASSIGNMENT 2: ESSAY

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Assignment 2: *Describe and critically assess Arendt's idea of the banality of evil.*

Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil is a work originally published in 1963 by Hannah Arendt.¹ Originally, it appeared as a series of articles in the New Yorker and has inspired much debate since its first publication; consistently being called controversial by a variety of readers and theorists alike.² The word banality encompasses a variety of qualities including unoriginality, boringness, and ordinariness.³ In his introduction to the book, Amos Elon notes that the term is only used at the end of Arendt's work but is implied throughout.⁴ Throughout his trial, Eichmann presented himself as something of a bland and bureaucratic cog in a machine who was simply doing his job and following the orders of the law. For many people, Eichmann came to symbolise the Nazi Party and was seen as the chief architect of the Holocaust.⁵ Several people have criticised Arendt because she sometimes uses inflammatory language, she has obvious biases which sometimes deflect from her central theory,⁶ and finally, that she also only appeared at the early stages of the trial and did not attend the entire proceedings.⁷ Using the word banal as a way of describing Eichmann was controversial in and of itself, however, psychologists examined Eichmann before his trial to assess his mental state and they found him to be sane. Given the breadth of the work, it is impossible to cover all points and aspects of the debate, therefore, some focus will be necessary; this essay will therefore consider whether we can commit acts of evil without being inherently evil.

Amoralism or the lack of recognition of the importance of moral force is distinct from Immoralism or the recognition of moral force but the refusal to act in compliance with it.⁸ Arendt's work is important because it challenges us to consider our preconceived notions of evil. For many; before and after the publication of the *Banality of Evil*, an act such as the Holocaust could only have been committed by someone who was amoral or immoral.

¹ Hannah Arendt and Amos Elon, *Eichmann In Jerusalem* (London: Penguin Books, 2006). p.vii-xxiii

² Hannah Arendt and Amos Elon, *Eichmann In Jerusalem* (London: Penguin Books, 2006). p.vii-xxiii

³ "BANAL | Meaning In The Cambridge English Dictionary", *Dictionary.Cambridge.Org*, 2020
<<https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/banal>> [Accessed 11 October 2020].

⁴ Hannah Arendt and Amos Elon, *Eichmann In Jerusalem* (London: Penguin Books, 2006). p.vii-xxiii

⁵ Martin Gilbert, *The Holocaust: The Jewish Tragedy* (London: Collins, 1986). p.219

⁶ Hannah Arendt and Amos Elon, *Eichmann In Jerusalem* (London: Penguin Books, 2006). p.vii-xxiii

⁷ David Cesarini, *Eichmann: His Life And Crimes* (Vintage: London, 2005). p.238

⁸ Bernard Williams, 'The Amoralist', *Morality: An Introduction to Ethics*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993) p.3

Regarding Amoralism and Immoralism, we think of such figures as the sadist, the psychopath, and the even mentally impaired - beings who are likened to monsters and demons in the popular imagination. Amorality and Immorality raise many questions, but chief among them is the question: Can we convince people to be moral? The various issues surrounding morality have led to the various Dirty Hand Dilemma's. These work to show that morality places many demands upon us by presenting us with an uncomfortable situation in which we are forced to make a moral choice.⁹ Was this something that Eichmann was confronted with? In her work, Arendt believes that due to him being, to use Arendt's word, banal, that he was not confronted with any moral choice as he could not even conceive of the notion of morality. A typical Dirty Hand Dilemma would be the modern debate surrounding Euthanasia. For the Moral Philosopher James Rachels there is no distinction between in what he terms as passive killing and active killing because he is focused on the result, not the action it takes to achieve it¹⁰ and yet, in our legal system, such a distinction is made. To add to this dilemma, what do we do when these moral dilemmas meet someone who is amoral or immoral? Can we provide a rational argument to convince people to be moral? For William Bernard, Philosophy is limited by the limitation of reasoning; if someone is unwilling or unable to accept a clear moral boundary or distinction, then the result will be an inability to gain a foothold in which it is possible to convince them to act morally.¹¹ To add to the complexity of the entire question of morality, we must also take into account the role of Cultural Relativism, which is the force that culture plays upon our morality, which often happens on a subconscious level. For Eichmann, and those living in Nazi Germany, this led to the acceptance of the degradation of the Jewish community. All of these various competing views and opinions have a part to play in our assessment of Arendt's work.

During his trial, Eichmann's principal argument was based on the philosophical theories of Immanuel Kant, a German Philosopher who formulated the concept of the Categorical Imperative.¹² His philosophical system is deontological and non-consequentialist.¹³ Eichmann claimed he was doing his duty and tried to use Kantian Ethics as a justification for

⁹ C.A.J Coady, "The Problem Of Dirty Hands (Stanford Encyclopedia Of Philosophy)", *Plato.Stanford.Edu*, 2018 <<https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/dirty-hands/>> [Accessed 11 October 2020].

¹⁰ Steven M Cahn, *Exploring Philosophy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000). p.288

¹¹ Bernard Arthur Owen Williams, *Ethics And The Limits Of Philosophy* (London: Routledge, 2011). p.141

¹² Immanuel Kant and Thomas Kingsmill Abbott, *Fundamental Principles of The Metaphysic of Morals* (London: Merchant Books, 2009). p.lv

¹³ Robert Johnson and Adam Cureton, "Kant's Moral Philosophy (Stanford Encyclopedia Of Philosophy)", *Plato.Stanford.Edu*, 2019 <<https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/kant-moral/>> [Accessed 11 October 2020].

his actions,¹⁴ which was a mis-understanding on the part of Eichmann. Kantian Ethics works in such a way that the role of compassion is debased in favour of duty.¹⁵ For Kant, the moral worth of an action was dependant upon the reason the action was being performed, not only should this action conform to duty, but it should also be done for duty's sake, this minimised the possibility of compassion fatigue. For Kant, duty works when other things fail. Also part of Kantian Ethics is the key component of clear reasoning.¹⁶ Kant's school of thought is such that, if it is acceptable to kill Jewish people, then it is acceptable to kill anyone, at any time.¹⁷ In Kantian Ethics to consider an action as moral it must, inherently, possess a universal application (applying to all people, at all times).¹⁸ Whilst Kantian Ethics do place a duty to adhere to the law, what Eichmann seems to have neglected is that for Kant, it is the moral law that holds most importance and that is where our duty lies.

Banality permeates the entire book. The point Arendt was trying to make by using this word was that Eichmann lacked a moral compass. He had no ideology, no fixed views, no depth of emotion. In some sense he was like a robot, completing tasks as he was told to do them without attaching or putting any great depth of thought or emotion into his work. In judging Eichmann, two important issues need to be examined, that of moral luck and the Milgram Experiment. The Milgram Experiment was conducted by the psychologist Stanley Milgram in the 1960s during which a series of clinically sane volunteers were coerced to inflict pain on a group of actors because they were told to do so by someone they thought was in authority, despite the fact they knew it was morally wrong or had moral doubts about their actions.¹⁹ The results found that only one quarter of the participants were willing to question the authority figure and the morality of what was being asked of them, as opposed to the majority who did not.²⁰ To correlate the outcomes of the Milgram Experiment with the trial of Eichmann, the results seem to lend some credence to the idea of banality as expressed

¹⁴ Carsten Bagge Laustsen and Rasmus Ugilt, "Eichmann's Kant", *The Journal of Speculative Philosophy*, 21.3 (2007), 166-180 <<https://doi.org/10.1353/jsp.0.0001>>.

¹⁵ Carsten Bagge Laustsen and Rasmus Ugilt, "Eichmann's Kant", *The Journal of Speculative Philosophy*, 21.3 (2007), 166-180 <<https://doi.org/10.1353/jsp.0.0001>>.

¹⁶ Michael Rohlf, "Immanuel Kant (Stanford Encyclopedia Of Philosophy)", *Plato.Stanford.Edu*, 2020 <<https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/kant/>> [Accessed 11 October 2020].

¹⁷ Michael Rohlf, "Immanuel Kant (Stanford Encyclopedia Of Philosophy)", *Plato.Stanford.Edu*, 2020 <<https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/kant/>> [Accessed 11 October 2020].

¹⁸ Michael Rohlf, "Immanuel Kant (Stanford Encyclopedia Of Philosophy)", *Plato.Stanford.Edu*, 2020 <<https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/kant/>> [Accessed 11 October 2020].

¹⁹ Stanley Milgram and Thomas Blass, *The Individual In A Social World* (London: Pinter & Martin, 2010), p.256

²⁰ Stanley Milgram and Thomas Blass, *The Individual In A Social World* (London: Pinter & Martin, 2010), p.241

through Arendt's work. It is possible to see that the Holocaust could be conducted by perpetrators who were normal, ordinary and everyday people. Germany was advanced technologically, economically and culturally, if it could happen in Germany, that ordinary people would do what they were told by someone in a position of authority, then it is possible that same could be said of those in Britain and America. Arendt and Milgram both argued that people like Eichmann and the participants are not dissimilar from us and if put in the same situation, we cannot be certain that we would act any differently. Milgram actually began his experiments the year after Eichmann's trial in order to answer the question of whether he was just being obedient and following orders.

J. O. Urmson, in his paper; Saints and Heroes, distinguishes between moral actions we have a duty to perform, actions which are morally permissible, actions which are wrong and should not be performed and acts that go beyond the call of duty, which includes saintly and heroic acts.²¹ The categorisation of Saints and Heroes are that Heroes put themselves into danger that cannot be reasonably expected of them. An example would be someone sacrificing their own place in a lifeboat on a sinking ship for someone else. Whereas a Saint goes beyond what is reasonably expected of someone, such as a carer giving an inordinate amount of time looking after someone at the expense of their own wants and needs.²² From this perspective, it would be difficult to judge Eichmann as anything other than ordinary or, to use Arendt's terminology, banal. This also brings us back to the force of cultural relativism. Eichmann was living in a society which had become saturated in antisemitic rhetoric and propaganda, and to have acted any way out of the new societal norms which were in place would have certainly resulted in death. However, many people would also believe it a fair assumption that what was being asked of him was so brutal and evil that it was fundamentally a wrong action that should not have been performed. On balance, after much time struggling with the issues of morality that we are forced to confront in Arendt's work, we have to reconcile ourselves to the paradox of wanting the strength and the courage to act contrary to what we are being told, whilst us having some level of sympathy for those who cannot.

²¹ Elizabeth M. Pybus, "Saints and Heroes", *Philosophy*, 57.220 (1982), 193-199
<<https://doi.org/10.1017/s0031819100050762>>.

²² Elizabeth M. Pybus, "Saints and Heroes", *Philosophy*, 57.220 (1982), 193-199
<<https://doi.org/10.1017/s0031819100050762>>.

David Cesarani was a critic of Hannah Arendt, and he points to several issues he felt Arendt overlooked. He believed Arendt was far too simplistic in her account of Eichmann, and that Arendt made a misjudgement by not believing that Eichmann was ideologically driven.²³ For Cesarani, Eichmann exhibited far more in common with the amoralists. In response to this, Arendt did not deny that Eichmann had said antisemitic things, merely that he was just parroting back what had been instilled in him by figures in authority. She maintained that Eichmann was a pitiful character who accepted things far too readily because of a shallowness on his own part.²⁴ Part of what makes Arendt's work on *The Banality of Evil* so controversial is that it forces us to ask ourselves deep questions about our own morality, and shines a light on dark areas which are not normally examined or confronted. Before Arendt, it was easy to characterise criminals as sadists, amoral or psychopathic. In some ways, these fantasies are reassuring; if placed in such a position, we have a certainty that we would act differently. After Arendt, the same could not be said, rather, the question becomes, at what point will we be complicit in evil? And, by extension, if faced with the same choices presented to Eichmann, how would we act? Reading Arendt's work has elicited a paradox.

After weighing up the various arguments and counter-arguments and various competing claims and studies, the conclusion that I have drawn is that I cannot fully accept the conclusions of Arendt in relation to Eichmann. The evidence seems to point to the contrary, that Eichmann was in fact ideologically driven and this banality that Arendt witnessed was nothing more than a pretence. However, that is not to say that I disagree with the theory that Arendt proposes; that ordinary people can be capable of acts of evil. It seems to me that the evidence in support of the central argument of the text is overwhelming. This work will always be relevant because of the debate it has created and continues to create. Due to the increasingly sectarian society in which we live, Arendt's work is as relevant as ever.

²³ David Cesarini, *Eichmann: His Life and Crimes* (Vintage: London, 2005). p.239

²⁴ David Cesarini, *Eichmann: His Life and Crimes* (Vintage: London, 2005). P.240

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