

Bernard J. Bergen. *The Banality of Evil: Hannah Arendt and "The Final Solution"*. Lanham, Md: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 1998. xvii + 169 pp. \$22.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8476-9210-1.



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Published on H-Holocaust (August, 1999)

Hannah Arendt and The Shoah: Banality of Evil? Radical Evil? Or Both?

Hannah Arendt and The Shoah: Banality of Evil? Radical Evil? Or Both?

This well written, insightful, and interdisciplinary book explores some of the political and philosophical consequences of Hannah Arendt's thesis of "the banality of evil."

Bergen shows familiarity and creative application of the work of modern philosophers, contemporary academics, and literary critics. Bergen perceptively describes Arendt's redefinition of ideas such as freedom, society, identity, truth, reason, and so on. Bergen demonstrates not only familiarity with the editions of Arendt's book *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil*, but the whole corpus of Arendt's published oeuvres.

Structurally, Bergen's book is organized in the following sections titled 1) "The Problem of 'The Final Solution,'" 2) "The Problem of Thinking," 3) "The Problem of the Political," and 4) "The Problem of Terror."

Some scholars may find Bergen's choice not to engage Arendt in dialogue with important Jewish philosophers such as Emil Fackenheim, Richard Rubenstein,

Eliezer Berkovits, Arthur Cohen, George Steiner, and others who have commented on or raised questions about Arendt's thesis of "the banality of evil" problematic. Arendt's thesis of "the banality of evil" raised storms of protest from philosophers such as Emil Fackenheim, creative writers such as Saul Bellow, scholars such as Amos Elon, and historians such as Jacob Robinson. More recently historians such as Goetz-Aly in his book *Endlösung* and Safrian in his book *Die Eichmann Maenner* have challenged Arendt's thesis, arguing that Eichmann and others like him took initiative to kill Jews as "an eager beaver" who was passionately dedicated to murdering Jews at his own discretion well beyond his call of "duty".

Bergen ignores Fackenheim's argument that Arendt "has only half the coin." Fackenheim asserts that when Eichmann remarked "I will jump into my grave laughing, because the fact that I have the death of five million Jews on my conscience gives me extraordinary satisfaction," Eichmann's banality crossed into the demonic. Fackenheim contradicts Arendt by asserting that it was radical evil when children were thrown into the ovens alive to save money on Zyklon-B gas, whereby the screams could

be heard echoing through the camps.

Bergen does defend Arendt against Scholem's critique of her thesis. Scholem argued Arendt employs 1) a flippant inappropriate tone, 2) blurs the distinction between Jewish victims and Nazi torturers/persecutors, 3) employs a demagogic will to overstatement, 4) misreads Eichmann as a convert to Zionism "which could only come from someone who had a profound dislike of Zionism," and 5) lacks the quality of manifesting Ahavat Yisrael. Bergen defends Arendt against Scholem's attack. Arendt in her letter dated July 24, 1963 in response to Scholem's letter comments, "It is indeed my opinion now that evil is never radical, that it is only extreme, and that it possesses neither depth nor any demonic dimension. It can overgrow and lay waste the whole world precisely because it spreads like a fungus on the surface. It is 'thought-defying,' as I said, because thought tries to reach some depth, to go to the roots, and the moment it concerns itself with evil, it is frustrated because there is nothing. That is its banality. Only the Good has depth and can be radical." (*Encounter*, Jan. 1964, vol. xxii, No. 1, p. 56.) Arendt insightfully raises the question of the relationship between Good and Evil, and she suggests that the question of evil cannot be raised without also having an adequate understanding of the good. In Richard Bernstein's thoughtful book *Hannah Arendt and the Jewish Question*, the complexity of Arendt's love for fellow Jews and love of the world (*Amor Mundi*) is suggested when we read, "Scholem was right in ways which even he did not recognize. In her love of the world ... in her half-religious Jewish passion for justice and tangible public freedom, in the pride she takes in the accomplishments of her people, as well as in her passionate critiques of their failures, in her hope (and disappointment) that the Jews might set an example and bring some illumination to other peoples in these 'dark times,' in keeping alive the tradition of independent thinking and the conscious Jewish pariah, Hannah Arendt was truly a 'daughter of our people.'" Bernstein in a book titled *Hannah Arendt: Twenty Years Later* further insightfully defends Arendt against her attackers in a brilliant essay that considers whether she changed her mind with regards to the banality versus radicality thesis.

Bergen's book successfully amplifies Arendt's identification of Eichmann the bureaucrat who manifested "the banality of evil" on the following five levels: 1) banal bureaucratic professional careerism, 2) moral indifference and ambivalence, 3) use of banal language or clichés, 4) renunciation of moral autonomy substituted for blind obedience to carry out governmental duty, and 5) forget-

fulness of conscience.

Bergen amplifies Arendt's critique of modern bureaucracy. The fact that detailed bureaucratic records were sometimes kept of a conceptualized process in which the manufacture of corpses in gas chambers became an industry shows how the banal bureaucrat, Germany's "desk murderers," set in motion radically evil actions. The meticulously monitored processes (i.e. the efficient tracking down and commanding of families to train stations to be transported in cattle cars, the assembly line tattooing of all inmates, the extraction of gold fillings to be melted down and channelled into bank accounts, the purchase and administration of Zyklon-B gas to be pumped by Volkswagen engines into showers, etc.) required bureaucratic management. Arendt's thesis of the banality of evil is in part a damning critique of the thoughtlessness of modern bureaucratic man who follows rules blindly and mechanistically. Alain Finkielkraut in "The Imaginary Jew" insightfully notes, "But the true executors of the Holocaust, making it possible despite its enormity, were the farthest thing from perverts: they were model functionaries. Think of Eichmann or Rudolph Hess, Commandant of Auschwitz...these bureaucrats dispatched their victims with a ferocity that was neutral, administrative, dispassionate and routine. Evil, they knew from still recent experience, was a spectacular and sporadic kind of disorder. It was the banalization of the crime that was inconceivable: the dull, methodical and continuous terror that the Nazis were about to make them endure" (p. 48).

Some scholars may argue that Bergen might have further strengthened Arendt's critique of modern bureaucracy by tracing the influence of Max Weber. It can be argued that Arendt's critique of bureaucracy has parallels with Weber's demonstration that "the key evils" of the modern world is the increasing power of the Leviathan (Hobbes) state bureaucracies. Weber exposes the banality of "crass careerism" when he remarks, "It is horrible to think, that the world could one day be filled with nothing but those little cogs, little men clinging to their jobs and striving towards bigger ones." The case of Otto Ohlendorf who asserted that he "volunteered" for mass murder, for no other reason than concern that refusal might jeopardize his career, exposes just one dimension of "the banality of evil."

Bergen also amplifies Arendt's condemnation of the modern bureaucrat Eichmann's moral indifference. Bergen tactfully cites this kind of "banality of evil" apparent in Himmler's Posen speech. Bergen insightfully

cites Himmler telling his generals that they have demonstrated “an invisible quality of character” by the murder they have “accomplished” which “is a glorious unwritten page of our history... And we have not sustained any damage to our inner self, our soul and our character.” Himmler effectively executes the linguistic reversal of the evil of moral vice into a virtue.

Bergen shows that Eichmann’s renunciation of moral autonomy is unconscionable. Eichmann in his testimony before the court repeatedly argued that he was just following his “duty” and had no moral freedom to act otherwise (Levinas). Andre Mineau in his essay “Himmler on Moral Duty” identifies, condemns, and alerts us to the dangers of the modern bureaucratic mind-set that renounces moral freedom. To be a moral agent implies that one recognizes that he or she has freedom to do good or evil as a consequence of his or her actions and to distinguish and know the difference between right and wrong. When Eichmann renounced all “moral freedom” by offering the defense that he was just following orders that had been “reported to him” from higher ups, the danger of a state of affairs where causality had shrunk to a bureaucratic reporting challenged forth by hateful ideology aimed to exterminate the Jewish people, modern unthinking bureaucratic man entered into the domain of moral non-accountability at the furtherance of professional careerism whereby evil in some aspect truly became banal.

The fact that Eichmann in Jerusalem banally cited the first part of Kant’s categorical imperative that states, “it is morally necessary to do duty for duty’s sake” in defense of his actions represents the banal vulgarization into which Kant’s philosophy was distorted. The third proposition of Kant’s imperative that “it is morally necessary to treat humanity never as a means, only always as a kingdom of ends” was operative for Eichmann only after he relegated the Jews to be outside of humanity, the equivalent of vermin or parasites. The banal vocabulary of sterilized bureaucratic euphemism such as *Loesungsmoeglichkeit* (possibility of solution), *Sonderbehandlung* (special treatment), *Evakuierung* (deportation) sets up distance between the bureaucrat and the victims, thereby renouncing moral responsibility. Bergen perceptively describes the Nazi relegation of the Jew as being defilers of the social body, a kind of “racial tuberculosis among the nations.” As Saul Friedlander has pointed out, Nazi ideology did not allow the least zone of infestation by Jews to form or to become established. Such a relegation of the Jews to be outside of humanity was done by the Nazis by equating the Jews with blood suckers on

host bodies.

Bergen correctly reveals Arendt’s affirmation of the redemptive capability of the life of the mind “which if there is anything in thinking that can prevent men from doing evil, it must be some property inherent in the goodness of the activity of thought itself.” According to Bergen, for Arendt, thinking has the power to “oppose the banality of evil” (p. 59). Bergen suggests that Eichmann’s lack of moral conscience is emblematic and linked to his interpretative and cognitive failure in the realm of understanding and judgement. According to Bergen, Arendt is warning us that the possibility of planet Auschwitz rises on the horizon when modern unthinking banal bureaucratic functionaries renounce moral autonomy and ethical responsibility. According to Bergen, Arendt saw clearly throughout her work that we will never understand the Final Solution to the Jewish Question if we fail to understand what it is to think, will, and judge. Failure in thinking, willing, and judging leads modern man towards an existence where terror becomes a normal feature of the world. According to Bergen the evil that was the Final Solution signifies “how easy it is for human beings to fail to use their ability to think” (p. 34). Bergen argues that Arendt saw that the German people’s delirium of loyalty to the Fuehrer represents the failure to think. Bergen writes, “By seeing the man sitting in that famous glass box (Eichmann) as the failure to think, Arendt had found the terms in which to make the final solution significant for us.” Modern man’s thoughtlessness endangers this world in part because it prevents man from distinguishing between evil and good. Such a failure can lead to mass destruction, murder, torture, etc. in the delusion of omnipotence rather than man’s humble place within the cosmos as an agent for moral action, kindness, and *Tikkun* (repair).

Bergen asserts “The ultimate horror of the Final Solution was how peripheral it was, indeed even inconsequential to ordinary people to justify their participation in murder with judgements about the victims—even for those ordinary people who actually pulled triggers or released gas pellets or kept the engines running in the execution vans. What was more important, as it was to Eichmann, was for the murderer to judge his own loyalty to the command not to judge...Murder without judging the victim carries the possibility of assembling and putting into motion the ruthless machinery of mass murder that represented the unprecedented national policy of Nazi totalitarianism” (p. 114). Bergen alerts us to the importance of Arendt’s continual interest in Kant’s understanding of thinking, willing, and judging, not merely

as an academic problem, but rather “to reach the meaning of the final solution” requiring “treating judgement as the critical constituent of the experience of being an individual” (p. 119).

This insightful, well written, interdisciplinary book

has much light to shed on Hannah Arendt’s thesis of “the banality of evil” and is recommended for scholars of Arendt’s work and the Shoah. While it is not the final word on Arendt’s work, it represents an important contribution in furthering our understanding of Hannah Arendt’s thought.

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Citation: David B. Levy. Review of Bergen, Bernard J., *The Banality of Evil: Hannah Arendt and “The Final Solution”*. H-Holocaust, H-Net Reviews. August, 1999.

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