

Topicnumber: 2

The unconscious evilness of mankind

The great philosopher Hannah Arendt spent a lot of time trying to understand the mysteries of evil. Especially after the war, she spent time studying conspicuous Nazis, who had committed horrifying crimes during the Second World War. Her studies led her to the conclusion that “The sad truth is that most evil is done by people who never make up their minds to be good or evil.” Is Hannah Arendt on a completely wrong track, or is her conclusion more or less right and reliable?

Firstly it's important to have an idea of what evil is. What does Hannah Arendt mean when she uses the word “evil”? The topic has been discussed for centuries, but no one has ever made a good and clear definition, which everyone can be satisfied with. The Christian philosopher Augustin was one of the first philosophers to discuss evilness. He claimed that evil is an *absence of God*. If something evil happens, than God is not present. There are also lots of other views on how evil is created. Some might say that evilness is a consequence of some kind of evil force, which (obviously) forces us to do evil things, to make evil actions. Other philosophers have suggested that mankind itself is evil. Another perspective on the topic is that mankind itself, or maybe more precise: *the human mind*, is not in itself *evil* – evilness is something we choose ourselves. But these views may not be relevant to this specific topic, and I will explain why in the next section.

It's important to understand that there are to different perspectives on Hannah Arendt quote:

1. What she claims is that the humankind doesn't have free will – that the mind of human beings is not free. Every thought, every idea and every action made by human beings are predetermined, and there is nothing we can do to make our mind free, there is nothing we can do to achieve *real* free will.
2. She doesn't care whether we have free will or not. All she is trying to do is to show us that most people who are being considered evil have not taken a decision to become evil. It's not something they want.

Further in this text I will stick to perspective number 2. My impression is that Hannah Arendt tried to understand evil as it shows itself in our everyday-life, not to achieve “useless” knowledge about the pure theoretical side of the topic. If my assumption is correct, than it's

irrelevant what the underlying “force” of evil is. For example: Imagine that you are now the famous Christian philosopher Augustin. You have just “seen the light”, and you are convinced that evil is caused by the absence of the almighty God himself. However, in this ecstatic situation you realize that there is one big problem about your theory: you can not use it to get rid of evilness. To use Augustins theory to get rid of evil you would have to make God himself present, which seems like a very hard task, putting it mildly. Of course, there are certain religious people who would claim that prayers can have the power to make God present. Nevertheless, I can’t imagine that there are many people who would claim that you can stop or prevent evil just by praying.

If my assumption (number 2) in the previous section is right, than Hannah Arendt has understood this problem. She has understood that theories about evil have to be useful in terms of stopping, preventing and getting rid of evilness. The question is, how do we do this?

To stop evil we somehow will have to understand it, maybe not as Augustin tried to understand it, but maybe in a more practical way. In the rest of this text I will assume that humankind has free will (if we don’t have, than the debate about, and understanding off evil will be completely different). This is something I will do because I think the debate about evil is divided into to different parts: one theoretical (which involves free will) and one practical. Of course these two parts of the debate are connected, but also separated in some important areas. There are two main reasons why I will focus one the more practical side of evil:

1. I find the practical side of the issue more interesting, more important and (arguably) more *philosophical*.
2. I think Hannah Arendt wanted to accentuate the practical side of the topic.

Like I’ve said before: even though we want to prevent evil and even though we want to understand the practical side of the issue, we somehow have to *understand* evil. We have to understand why people make evil actions. Some might that this kind of knowledge is *theoretical* knowledge, not practical knowledge. But I would prefer to call it “theoretical-practical” knowledge, because the main goal by this knowledge, or theories, that I’m about to introduce is to prevent and stop evil, even though the theories may *seem* more theoretical than practical.

One philosopher who could help us gain such knowledge is the Norwegian philosopher named Lars Fr. H. Svendsen. In his book about evil (I’m unfortunately not sure of the english

title) "Ondskapens Filosofi" he presents some really interesting theories about evil. The most interesting part of the book is, after my opinion, the part where he divides evil into 4 different sorts of evil, which all can help us answering one big question: "Why does human beings choose to commit evil actions?" Those four categories are:

1. Pure evil or diabolical evil.
2. Idealistic evil.
3. Instrumental evil.
4. Banal or unconscious evil.ⁱ

These four categories can help us understand why people commit evil acts, and I will explain all of the categories, to show that not *all* of the evil is done by people who never make up their mind to be good or evil. It's not possible to disprove Arendts theory, only to weaken it, which is what I will try to do by showing you that there are people who have reflected really long and really hard about their evil acts.

Pure evil or diabolical evil is a kind of evil which some philosophers (both myself and Svendsen included) don't think is actually existing. This sort of evil can be defined as evil actions made in the interest of evil itself. So a person who commits an evil crime will be considered diabolical evil only if his action(s) had no other purpose than to *be evil*. But it's very hard to find example for such kind of evil. Someone would perhaps mention masochism as such an example. Masochists are people who love to see or cause other peoples suffering, and many people would say that if a person loves to watch other human beings being tortured (or to actually do the torture themselves), than this person is purely evil. But I would disagree. Like I said before: If a person is to be considered a diabolical evil person his or her evil action can have no other purpose than to *be evil*. But does people who love to watch or/and cause pain for another human being fall under this category? I don't think so. When this person is watching/causing pain, this act has one purpose which can not be considered purely evil: The watching/causing of pain gives this masochist (the person who watches or tortures another human) *great pleasure*. The evil act is therefore not something he does only because he wants to be evil, but because he wants to experience the great feeling of enjoyment which the watching/torturing gives him. Ivan the Terrible didn't eat his dinner while watching people in great pains slowly being executed only because he knew it was evil. He did it because he (probably) *enjoyed being evil*. So such evil has mainly two purposes:

1. Being evil.
2. Creating enjoyment for the evil person.

And when the *enjoyment*, and not only the evil itself, becomes a target, this person can not be considered diabolical evil. That's why it's hard to prove the existence of such evilness, and that is why I believe that such evilness do not exist.

The idealistic evil is easier to explain. Idealistic evil is what led Adolf Hitler to a wish about eliminate all Jews from the earth, and idealistic evil is what led the Norwegian terrorist Anders Behring Breivik to kill nearly 80 people in July 2011. Idealistic evil can be described as evil actions committed by a group or a person to achieve something they look upon as a benefit for the community. Adolf Hitler believed that the world would be a better place without Jews, and Anders Behring Breivik believed that Norway would be a better place without Muslims. They both showed us how the idealistic evil works, by fighting for something they looked upon as good for the whole community, even though other people look upon it as evil. They both knew that many people would say that their actions were evil, but they didn't care as long as there was a chance to achieve what they saw/see as a benefit for us all.

Instrumental evil is somehow connected to all kinds of evil, and is therefore maybe not a kind of evil itself. Instrumental evil can be defined as evil actions used *only* as an instrument to achieve something. What they want to achieve doesn't need to be closer specified, because that is irrelevant to the topic of instrumental evil. The only relevant thing is that the person who makes an evil act wants to achieve *something*. That he wants to achieve something other than evil itself.

And now for the most interesting sorts of evil, taken Hannah Arendt quote into consideration: the banal evil. This kind of evil is very tricky to explain, but one possible definition could be this one: Banal evil is a kind of evil which is unconscious, a kind of evil that the "evil person" hasn't reflected over. It's a kind of evil that is not considered evil by the person who acts, in the moment of the evil act. The reason why the person doesn't consider the act as an evil act is mainly one out of two:

1. Ignorance
2. Inconsiderateness

What Hannah Arendt observed when she studied the Nazis after the war was that many of them had done evil things, but they did these evil actions in a state of "unconsciousness". Many of them got orders from their supervisors to accomplish an evil act, and considered it therefore their duty to do just as their supervisors had commanded them to do. Many of them did not even *reflect* on whether their actions were evil or not. Those Nazi soldiers acted like some kind of robots without any moral. They acted like robots who hadn't considered if their actions were evil and that hadn't considered what the purpose of their

actions were. We can see the same tendency in studies from our own period of history. Here's one example: Once there was a study made to find out if people would take orders from a supervisor no matter how horrifying the orders were. These people were asked by a man in uniform to give another human a continuously higher amount of electrical power through their body. Most of the people in the study didn't stop until the amount of power was becoming lethal. Of course the other person didn't die because it was no *real* person who experienced this amount of electrical power.

Another study showed that students would keep their fellow students as prisoners if they were told that it was an experiment. But not only did they keep their fellow students as prisoners, they did it in a most brutal and horrifying way. These studies show us something important that Hannah Arendt understood. It showed us that human beings can act more or less like robots in certain situations. When we get over the first shock of making an evil act, for instance when the Nazi soldiers had killed their first victim/prisoner, it was no problem to kill the next one. This tells us that evil sometimes can become a habit, something everyday-like, something we do just because we are told to do it, not even taking in to consideration if our acts are evil or not. It shows us that humankind might not be evil, but that most people have the ability to be evil. This banal evil is, if we were to believe Hannah Arendt, the most common form of evil. This may well be, as far as much of evil seems to be unconscious, banal, unreflected evil and not diabolical, idealistic or instrumental evil. But if she is right that *most* evil is done by people who never make up their mind to be evil, that is hard to prove. One argument for her theory is however that there were a lot more Nazi soldiers than there were Adolf Hitler's.

No back to a much more practical side of the issue. I believe that Hannah Arendt really wanted to *achieve* something with her philosophy. I think she really wanted to *prevent* evil from happening, and I believe that she wanted us to think about the consequences of our actions before we actually go through with them. I therefore think the main essence of Hannah Arendt's philosophy is this: *Reflect before you act.*

ⁱ The name of this last category of evil might not be exactly like Svendsen presented it in his book, but I don't see this as a big problem because the name is more or less irrelevant as long as the understanding of the category (which I will present later) is the same.