

NOTES, INSIGHTS, AND FLASHES

Arendt and the “Banality” of Evil: A Note on Neiman

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In her book *Evil in Modern Thought*, Susan Neiman proposes that we may use the word “theodicy” in two senses. She writes: “Theodicy, in the narrow sense, allows the believer to maintain faith in God in the face of the world’s evils. Theodicy, in the broad sense, is any way of giving meaning to evil that helps us face despair” (Neiman 2002, 239). Neiman also writes that Hannah Arendt’s *Eichmann in Jerusalem* “is the best attempt at theodicy [that] postwar philosophy has produced” (Neiman 2002, 300). Here Neiman uses the word “theodicy” in its second, “broad sense.” She proposes, that is, that we see Arendt’s book as seeking to give meaning to evil and thus help us face despair.

This claim—that *Eichmann in Jerusalem* is a work of theodicy—would perhaps have surprised and even displeased Arendt, not only because of Neiman’s extension of the word’s meaning beyond its etymology, and also not only because of Arendt’s own apparent suspicion of theodicies in at least the traditional, etymological sense: Arendt characterizes theodicies as “those strange justifications of God or of Being which, ever since the seventeenth century, philosophers felt were needed to reconcile man’s mind to the world” (Arendt 1978, 21). Neiman’s claim that *Eichmann in Jerusalem* is a work of theodicy would perhaps have surprised and even displeased Arendt because, among the many things that Arendt claims her book is not, she lists, “finally and least of all, a theoretical treatise on the nature of evil” (Arendt 1964, 285). It is true that she does not say that her book is not a work of theodicy. Yet she insists that what she has written is no more and no less than a *report* on what she learned in observing Eichmann’s trial in Jerusalem—in her words, “the lesson of the fearsome, word-and-thought-defying *banality*

of evil," namely, that the "remoteness from reality and...thoughtlessness [exhibited and exemplified by Eichmann] can wreak more havoc than all the evil instincts" that may be in the human heart (Arendt 1964, 252, 285).

Neiman rejects Arendt's characterization of her book. According to Neiman, Arendt's claim that her book is a work of journalism "underestimated the depth and force of her own work"; Arendt was "disingenuous" in claiming that her book is "just a long piece of reporting" (Neiman 2002, 274, 299). Instead, Neiman finds there a theory of the nature of evil and, to reiterate, a theodicy. To quote:

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. Like a fungus, they may devastate reality by laying waste to its surface. Their roots, however, are shallow enough to pull up. (Neiman 2002, 303)

How, then, is Arendt's book a work of theodicy? On Neiman's reading, Arendt seeks to save us from despair that the "sources" or "roots" of evil exceed our grasp. Arendt does not seek to make evil appear meaningful by appeal to some vast cosmic plan; she seeks to orient us toward evil in a way that gives us hope. If we cannot simply rip evil out of ourselves and thus end its devastation, we can at least work, diligently and without reason to despair, to uproot it.

Neiman is surely correct that Arendt's book is of philosophical interest, but it is difficult to agree with Neiman, and against Arendt, that it is a treatise on evil. Arendt acknowledges that there is philosophy in her book or at least behind it in a letter to Gershom Scholem replying to his criticism that the phrase "the banality of evil" is a mere "catchword" in need of analysis (Arendt and Scholem 1964, 53). Her conception of evil may have shaped her controversial rendering of Eichmann's character.¹ Evil, Arendt writes to Scholem, "possesses neither depth nor any demonic dimension. It can overgrow and lay waste to the world precisely because it spreads like a fungus on the surface." Neiman quotes only these first two sentences in her book, but Arendt goes on: "It [evil] is 'thought-defying'...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’” (Arendt and Scholem 1964, 56; cited in Neiman 2002, 301).

Neiman draws from this letter in claiming that Arendt’s book is a work of theodicy. Yet this quote, if taken in full, works *against* Neiman’s interpretation. For Arendt says here, not that evil has shallow roots—in Neiman’s words, “shallow enough to pull up”—but that it has *no* roots. This is Arendt’s point in likening evil to a fungus. Having, like a fungus, no roots, evil defies thought. In Gertrude Stein’s now banal words, there is no there there: “nothing” for thought to comprehend. So, at least, Arendt claims, consistent with the Augustinian tradition she knew well.²

Neiman supports her interpretation of “Arendt’s project” by citing a letter from Arendt to Mary McCarthy about *Eichmann in Jerusalem*. In an article written in defense of Arendt’s book, McCarthy had compared reading it to listening to “the final chorus of *Figaro* or the *Messiah*” (McCarthy 1964, 91), “both of which are concerned with redemption” (Arendt and McCarthy 1995, 166). Arendt replied: “[Y]ou were the only reader to understand what otherwise I have never admitted—namely that I wrote this book in a curious state of euphoria.” She goes on to remark that, “ever since I did it, I feel—after twenty years [since the war]—light-hearted about the whole matter” (Arendt and McCarthy 1995, 168). Neiman considers this euphoria as reason to attribute to Arendt the belief that, in Neiman’s words, “[w]e may be at home in the world after all” (Neiman 2002, 304). Neiman seems to mean by this phrase that we do not need to have recourse to “supernatural forces, divine or demonic,” to account for the evil that we do; if we did need to have such recourse, the implication is that we would be alienated from the world. Instead, as Neiman reads Arendt, evil is “naturalized”: it is shown to be the product of no more than “thoughtlessness.” Arendt’s book then redeems the world by teaching that, “while natural processes are responsible for [evil], natural processes can be used to prevent it” (Neiman 2002, 303). We can thereby believe the world to be basically good.

For Neiman, Arendt’s euphoria can be accounted for only by reading *Eichmann in Jerusalem* as teaching that “the sources of evil are...fully within our grasp” because they are no more than “natural.” But this

explanation of Arendt’s euphoria has no more basis than that Neiman cannot think of any other explanation. It does not follow from the fact that Arendt wrote *Eichmann in Jerusalem* in “a curious state of euphoria” that Neiman’s interpretation of the lesson of this book is correct. Admittedly, it is difficult to know what to make of Arendt’s euphoria, a term that is used technically in psychology to refer to an exaggerated and by all appearances groundless feeling of well being. But it bears repeating that Neiman invokes Arendt’s euphoria to support a reading of Arendt’s book that is otherwise without support.

The passage by McCarthy that led Arendt to call her friend “the only reader to understand what otherwise I have never admitted” does not support, moreover, Neiman’s interpretation of Arendt’s book. McCarthy writes in her article defending Arendt:

To me, *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, despite all the horrors in it, was morally exhilarating. I freely confess that it gave me joy and that I too heard a paean in it...a paean of transcendence, heavenly music, like that of the final chorus of *Figaro* or the *Messiah*. As in these choruses, a pardon or redemption of some sort was taking place. The reader “rose above” the terrible material of the trial or was borne aloft to survey it with his intelligence. No person was pardoned, but the whole experience was bought back, redeemed, as in the harrowing of hell.

(McCarthy 1964, 91)

Like her article as a whole, this passage needs some clarification—McCarthy says here both that a pardon was taking place, and that no person was pardoned—but it does seem clear that she found the book “morally exhilarating” because Arendt was able in it to rise above rage and confusion and to seek to make sense of an experience that might have remained senseless. As McCarthy writes in the next sentence after those quoted, “intelligence, mastering the incoherence of violence and suffering, gives it sense, i.e., form....” McCarthy does *not* write, however, that what made the book redemptive for her was that (as Neiman claims) it showed evil to be “fully within our grasp” and “shallow enough to pull up.” Instead, McCarthy goes on to write that “the plot and lesson were almost a godsend” to her: she read *Eichmann in Jerusalem* as teaching between the lines “that it was *possible* to behave well even in extreme circumstances,” a lesson that she took from the

book's accounts of "the Jews who were saved" in Denmark, Bulgaria, and Italy (McCarthy 1964, 91). For McCarthy, in sum, what made the book redemptive was *not* that it presented a "theodicy," but that it attested to the resilience of the good.

In any event, if it is true that, according to Arendt, evil has no roots to be discovered, it is also true that her account of the banality of evil is not all that far from what Kant says about radical evil, which Neiman summarily dismisses as "extremely disappointing" (Neiman 2002, 269). For Kant, as Henry Allison has nicely remarked, "Radical evil does not refer...to a particularly great or deeply rooted demonic evil. It refers rather to the root of *all* moral evil, whatever its extent," namely, the propensity to subordinate the moral law to our self-love, to reverse the ethical order out of the perversity of the human heart (Allison 1996, 170). For Kant too, evil is then banal. According to Kant, "Man (even the most wicked) does not...repudiate the moral law in the manner of a rebel (renouncing obedience to it)." What he does instead is to "make the incentive of self-love and its inclinations the condition of obedience to the moral law," which is the *root* of evil, whether he goes on to do evil or not (Kant 2003, 44, 45; see also Kant 1960, 33, 34). And what could be more commonplace and less original—more banal—than putting self-love before what we ought to do?

Yet the comparison with Arendt can be pressed further. According to Kant, "the ultimate subjective ground" for whether or not we subordinate the moral law to our self-love is "inscrutable to us" (Kant 2003, 24; see also 1960, 17). For this choice lies in a free act of will, which it may be that only God can search out. Before a person makes it his "maxim" to subordinate the moral law to his self-love, he will not be moved—he cannot be moved—by the incentives of self-love. Before the person makes it his "maxim" to subordinate the moral law to his self-love, there is *nothing* to move him to subordinate the moral law—and so nothing can explain why a person chooses to give priority to the incentives of self-love. The incentives of self-love cannot explain it, for the incentives of self-love can operate on a person only *after* his choosing to give priority to these incentives. As Emil Fackenheim has put this point: "[I]f man chooses freely, either for or against the moral law, then there can be no higher determining principle. Then each decision

of each man is a metaphysical ultimate; and whichever choice is made, it is an ultimate irrationality" (Fackenheim 1954, 350).

To be sure, we can say, as Kant does, that moral evil comes from us and that we are responsible for it; but it seems that for Kant we cannot say why we fall into moral evil. When we look, we find nothing there. So again evil is "thought-defying." And if "[t]hat is its 'banality,'" as Arendt wrote to Scholem, then Arendt's banality and Kant's seem finally to be importantly similar.³ For Kant *and* Arendt, evil is inexplicable not because it is so deep; evil is inexplicable because it is so shallow.

Notes

1. Lionel Abel, for example, asks "why [Arendt] insists on regarding [Eichmann] as merely a mediocre and comical individual" (Abel 1963, 228–229).
2. See, for example, *De libero arbitrio*, Book 2, §20 (Augustine 1993, 69).
3. It should be noted that Arendt also writes to Scholem in her 1964 letter that "[i]t is indeed my opinion now that evil is never 'radical'..." But she explains at the end of this sentence, and as quoted already, that what she means is that evil "possesses neither depth nor any demonic dimension" (See Arendt and Scholem 1964, 56). Her conception of evil does not then seem opposed to Kant's concept of "radical evil." The contrast is rather with how she spoke of evil in the preface and "Concluding Remarks" of the original edition of *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (Arendt 1951, ix, 433). Arendt replaced the "Concluding Remarks" in subsequent editions and retained the preface only "in order to indicate the mood of those years" in which she first wrote the book (Arendt 1966, viii.) In the first edition, Arendt writes in the preface that "an absolute evil (absolute because it can no longer be deduced from humanly comprehensible motives)" appears in the final stages of totalitarianism, thus revealing "the truly radical nature of Evil." She writes in the "Concluding Remarks" that "[absolute evil] seems to be closely connected with the invention of a system in which all men are equally superfluous," including even the "manipulators of this system," who she believed "do not care if they themselves are alive or dead." Unfortunately, Arendt does not explain the reasons for her change of mind.

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