

Topic number: 2

“The sad truth is that most evil is done by people who never make up their minds to be good or evil.”

- Hannah Arendt, *The Life of the Mind* (1978)

One day, their neighbor had left. The house next door was empty all of a sudden and it did not take a long time until they saw it being offered at an auction in the city. They told their children that the neighbors were only taking a longer vacation, that the neighbor kids were probably doing alright; this was Germany after all. But this talk could not hide their feeling from themselves that their neighbors had, in fact, become victims of the “final solution” to the “Jewish question.” Sometimes they were a little sad about the loss, since the neighbors had always been nice people. Most of the time, it was accepted as a sad necessity, which, unfortunately, had to be a part of the Fuehrer’s plan. Finally, there were others, often young and thirsty for a meaningful life, who decided to participate actively – to kill their neighbors in the name of “the people.”

The Christian opposition against the Nazi regime met in secret and was in despair about the “Evil” unfolding around them. They believed in “the Evil” as a thing existing independent of human actions, with its own being, and to some, Adolf Hitler was an incarnation of “the Devil.” After the war, the Holocaust was interpreted along these lines by many believing Christians, often neglecting to pay attention, at least in retro-perspective, to their own guilt of pious inaction. Others went further in their interpretation of the events, which left the “civilized” world shocked about the potential of industrialized and perfected mass-murder, i.e. the backside of its own potential to technological “progress.” In the tradition of Marquis de Sade, some saw the Holocaust as an expression of the fact that the ultimate basis of existence is not a set of eternally “good” ideas but instead the sheer metaphysical “Evil,” which breaks through into the tangible world when human beings start to act. Jean Améry, himself a survivor of the Holocaust, argued that National Socialist murderers took part in the Holocaust because of their secret and hidden desire to “nullify the world” as such.

The German-American political theorist Hannah Arendt rejected these approaches drastically. In the 1960s, she was sent to Jerusalem to report on the process against Adolf Eichmann, one of the executing heads of the genocide against the Jews. The essay Arendt published about Eichmann had the title “The Banality of Evil,” which summarizes her view that “Evil” is nothing we should be “afraid” of, since it does not exist prior or outside of human existence or moral evaluations, which makes it banal at last. Instead of presenting other metaphysical interpretations of an “Evil” breaking through, Arendt wrote about Eichmann’s “outrageous stupidity.” This point of view is further elaborated on in the quote taken from her 1978 work *The Life of the Mind* in which she states “that most evil is done by people who never make up their minds to be good or evil.” The problem for Arendt is, therefore, not a metaphysical “Evil” which enters our lives in some way or another but rather a “mere” lack of reflection on the morality of an action.

Arendt’s rational approach, of course, takes away some of the theology-inspired, mystical fear of the perpetrators that is included in viewing them as “evil” or even “devils.” This explains some of the angry reactions to Arendt’s analysis (many from Holocaust survivors), which accused Arendt of relativizing the Nazi crimes as “regular” actions. It is obvious that such a simplistic view, which, as emotionally understandable it may be, reduces murderers to non-human “monsters,” takes away any basis for a public debate on the morality of the perpetrator’s actions, therefore making it impossible

to know how to “act in a way so that Auschwitz will never happen again” (Adorno). Fundamentally evil beings, “devils,” cannot be blamed for immoral actions since they do not have a free will that would prevent them from acting the way they do. There is no reasoning about the morality of an animal’s behavior. Thus, Arendt is correct in asserting the necessity to learn from the past crimes by treating the murderers of the Holocaust as what they were – “normal” people doing “evil” things out of a lack of ethical scrutiny.

Firstly, Arendt’s quote implies that “Evil” as an abstract concept does not have an individual being because “evil” actions do not derive from it but from ignorance, from not making up one’s mind. Secondly, however, she still uses the words “good” and “evil” to characterize the moral value of an action. This shows that even though she does not believe in the existence of an abstract “Evil,” she still implicitly proclaims the truth of a universal moral law, according to which one could judge whether an action is moral or immoral, i.e. “good” or “evil.” Immanuel Kant, in contrast to Arendt’s use of “good” vs. “evil” in the quote, refrains from choosing the term “evil” out of the same concern Hannah Arendt expressed in the debate about the “Banality of Evil,” i.e. excusing immoral actions through the replacement of freedom with the existence of a metaphysical “Evil.” With this in mind, Arendt’s precise use of words at the end of the sentence becomes less relevant in comparison to the central thesis it includes, which is that a lack of reflection is the basis of immoral actions – a point of view very similar to Kantian ethics.

This similarity can be seen when looking at a simple example. Would it be right to steal just in order to buy a product one wishes to possess, e.g. a new car? Kant (along other ethical theorists, who would come to the same conclusion for this basic moral question) would argue that it would be immoral, which we could realize when using the Categorical Imperative: We could not reasonably want the maxim of the action, i.e. “When you wish to possess a product, you should take away somebody’s property/money in order to buy it.”, to be universalized as a law. But if one still decides to steal for the purpose of one’s own enrichment, Kant would argue that it was not an evil intention that is responsible for the immoral act but rather the failure to use a formal ethic, the Categorical Imperative, to realize that the action is wrong. Therefore, Hannah Arendt expresses a very similar thought to Kant’s view: If one uses reason within the frame of a formal ethical system in order to judge the morality of an action, one will come to the morally right conclusion. If one behaves in an immoral way, it must be because one’s feelings, e.g. the anticipated joy one would get from driving a new car, the anticipated prestige etc., have prevented reason from doing its job of scrutinizing the action and coming to the proper conclusion. An immoral action will, thus, always be done by people who did not “make up their minds to be good or evil,” since making up one’s mind would presuppose the use of reason against the pressure one feels from one’s own feelings.

Nonetheless, there is another central aspect to Arendt’s quote. Not only does she implicitly demand the use of a reason-based moral but she also warns society about the danger of manipulative ideologies. “Most evil is done by people who never make up *their* minds” – maybe because other people have made up their minds instead, projecting their ideas onto society and forming it in a way according to their ideology. When Eichmann was accused for crimes against humanity, he pleaded “innocent” because he had only received and executed orders, so he argued. These orders were imbedded into an entire world view, which negated individual freedom, the basis of judging the morality of an action in the first place, because the collective was said to be everything, the individual nothing. If such an ideology is consequentially put into action, the individual is turned into a mere

cogwheel and loses the necessity of thinking morally. One's conscience, normally the root of moral reasoning, is no longer concerned with one's own morality but that of "the system." In some cases, the allegiance to "the cause" will be so drastic that one is willing to sacrifice one's life fighting for one's ideology, e.g. for the "survival of the race," or, in the case of Marxism, for the liberation of the "proletariat." In such situations, Arendt's quote does not seem applicable at first, since this kind of actions would not represent the "banal" side of evil. It is not the lack of reflection that is the basis of it but its opposite: excessive thought, which is not one's own after all. If one takes Arendt's sentence out of its immediate context, however, and stresses the fact that she talked about people doing evil because *they* have not made up their minds individually, it becomes clear that what she called the "mechanization of history" (*Vita activa*) can be the horribly "civilized" root of a different type of ignorance, which is the cause of a sophisticated, not "banal" evil.

The subordination of the individual's freedom to act morally, which also includes the freedom to judge the morality of one's action individually, to the proclaimed existence of a certain collectivist, metaphysical telos, is at the root of "most evil." Max Horkheimer criticized a certain type of Marxist who would look right past his own mother for the victory of the proletariat; a person who is not willing to help in concrete real-life situations because he fears he would prevent the revolution and somehow stand in the way of history. Oscar Wilde wrote in "The Soul of Man under Socialism," that the "worst slave-holders were those that were good to their slaves," since trying to help on an individual basis would perpetuate the unjust system as a whole. Horkheimer accused this position of being a "rationalization of one's own inhumanity." This phrasing would characterize many modes of thought under totalitarian ideologies, e.g. Eichmann's own, who argued that he only fulfilled his duty towards the authorities or "the people" as a collective.

"The sad truth is that most evil is done by people who never make up *their* minds to be good or evil." –Ideologies often replace the individual's freedom to act with the urge to produce society along the lines of someone else's thought. The confusion of acting and producing in the political realm is, as Arendt shows in *Vita activa*, typical for mechanical approaches to society (such as Hegelian philosophy of history), which have fundamentally undermined the notion of existential human freedom and, therefore, also the concept of ethical reasoning. Cogwheels do not have to make up their minds in order to function properly. Therefore, it can be said that just as much as Kant is correct in arguing that our feelings can prevent us from using a reason-based ethical framework, modern political philosophies or ideologies have taken away the burden of trying to overcome these feelings through reason in the first place. "The system" is proclaimed as morally right, so the individual does not need to bother about his or her action's moral basis, as long as it serves the ideology's end.

The problem with this dual interpretation of Arendt's quote is the fact that one would have to argue that a reason-based moral, which Hannah Arendt advocates, is an expression of a certain metaphysical concept for itself, which does not directly derive from "making up my mind." Almost as much as in the case of a universalized law of history, which political ideologies often claim to have discovered, certain abstract concepts, such as "humanity" or "maxim," are imposed on my own mind in the case of Kant's ethics, limiting my freedom of thought. But how can people truly "make up *their* minds," if their conscience is not supposed to express a moral sentiment anymore but instead only use a very limited form of cold and pure reason? Is the Categorical Imperative to become the "secret police" of my own mind, as Max Stirner had it?

The experience of the totalitarian regimes of the 20th century shows that it is not only the lack of (moral) reflection, as Arendt argues expressively, that led to horrible crimes, but also ignorance in the disguise of (partially) highly sophisticated political philosophies, which relieved individuals from “making up their” own “minds.” Therefore, philosophers should be careful to answer an excessive use of metaphysics in the realm of social relations, which has produced much suffering, with a metaphysical antidote. Henry David Thoreau argued that we can only have “true knowledge,” if we “forget everything we have learned.” Even though many people would claim that the rejection of a universalized reason-based moral would lead to increased suffering of human beings, Hannah Arendt’s quote, when read according to the second interpretation as described above, already implies that making up one’s *own* mind, leaving apart the eagerness to cover all of existence with one’s thought, just trying to discover one’s limited perspective to the fullest extent as possible, will lead to a way of acting that reduces suffering (what Arendt would probably also call “good”). Metaphysical excuses of any kind will make room for an existential notion of human liberty and, thus, for a true change of actions out of our own will.

The rejection of an ethic based on metaphysics might seem paradox if one still believes in the goal of reducing the amount of suffering (another “abstraction,” critics would argue), since this in itself seems to imply a sort of moral law for it to be regarded as a goal. This objection, however, is only valid if one accepts the notion of one universal reason that could tell what suffering is. Suffering, however, cannot be understood in terms of pure reason – it must be felt (or empathized with) and since feelings cannot claim any ability to be universalized, one can only advocate for a Schopenhauerian ethic of empathy “as if.” It is, therefore, necessary for us to leave apart our previously held, inherited conceptions, which have limited our ability to actually “make up our minds” to act in that way or another, in order to become Stirner’s “un-man.” Only if we try to un-think, i.e. abandon, as many of the meanings we have been accustomed to and aim at a reconstruction of our own thought in the freest way as possible, can we reach a relationship to existence that is authentic.

Such a process of the “unthinking” of given conceptions, including Kantian ethics, would make it possible to realize what Martin Buber had in mind for a change of human relationships. If one agrees on a metaphysical basis for the organization of society or the judgment of the morality of one’s actions, one always degrades the relationship between two (or more) human beings to the state of an “I-It-relationship.” Instead of treating the other as an equally free human being, one sees him e.g. as an expression of an “illness” of one’s “people” (as it was the case in the Nationalist Socialist, racist perception of Jews), or simply as a machine one can use to advance the goal of one’s ideology (e.g. in German working camps or Russian Gulags). Each time, the other is reduced to an inanimate thing or the representation of an abstraction. A similar degrading mode of thought is sustained in one phrasing of Kant’s Categorical Imperative, which says that we should “Act in such a way, that the maxim of your action always respects another human being also as an expression of humanity as a whole.” We should not simply empathize with the other human being but we should, Kant demands from us, treat it as the manifestation of a metaphysical abstraction called “humanity,” thereby paving the way for an inhumane “I-It-relationship” with the other. In contrast to this, Buber advocated the advancement of authentic “I-Thou-relationships,” which directly connect human beings without the detour over metaphysical abstractions.

Finally, one has to agree with Hannah Arendt's quote to the extent that "many people" do not "make up their minds," which, in fact, leads to a lot of suffering. It is, however, questionable, if "making up one's mind" must necessarily mean coming to a reason-based decision of acting morally right or wrong or if such a discussion would even lead to a situation that would be of a higher ethical value (morally speaking), or would empirically reduce suffering. Hannah Arendt seems to oversee the unfree and ultimately inhumane mode of thought that Kant's ethic still includes and which it shares with the much less reasonable metaphysics of totalitarian ideologies. But in order to prevent the repetition of crimes committed in the name of such ideologies, it is the responsibility of philosophy, and, in fact, of all members of society, to check their own conceptions regarding the question if those might only represent projections of other people's metaphysical thinking. It is necessary for us to "make up" our own "minds," which cannot mean to get back to a preexisting system of ethics based on abstractions that do not derive from my own life's point of view. Only if I reclaim my life as the only perspective that holds "truth" that might be accessible to me, even on moral questions, can I truly "make up my mind" and open my eyes for my co-existence with other people to which I can directly connect through empathy. This argument does not suffice for a full system of morality but it can be a basis to reconcile the existential experience of freedom with the wish to reduce suffering in the world.