

The Shoah as a Manifestation of Radical and Banal Evil: The Holocaust in the Thought of Hannah Arendt and Emil Fackenheim and the Kantian Legacy

Introduction

Arendt and Fackenheim have placed at the center of philosophic inquiry into the Holocaust the question whether the evil of the Shoah should be conceptualized as radical or banal. Although they disagree whether the nature of the evil of the Shoah was banal or radical, they share a common Kantian philosophic horizon. My thesis is that the Holocaust was both a manifestation of radical and banal evil. The views of Arendt and Fackenheim, who both draw on Kant to elaborate their positions, can be taken as complementary rather than contradictory in assessing the philosophic significance of the evil of the Shoah.

Arendt and Fackenheim ground their formulations of the question of evil within the philosophic framework articulated by Kant in *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason Alone*. To understand the ways in which Arendt and Fackenheim describe and evaluate the Shoah, it is necessary to turn first to Kant's understanding of the nature of evil. It is Kant who first coined the phrase "radical evil."

I will argue in this dissertation that the Shoah was a manifestation of both radical evil, as viewed by Fackenheim, and banal evil, as Arendt argued; as a result the Kierkegardian polarized category of 'either/or' inadequately contains the subtle shades of gray in which the evil of the Holocaust was manifested. This investigation into the evil of the Shoah holds significance for understanding past, current, and future moral behavior of individuals and nations, with implications in the legal, political, religious, and philosophic realms.

Given the work of Arendt and Fackenheim, no understanding of moral phenomena and the moral failing that resulted in the Shoah is adequate without an understanding of the question of evil for Kant. Six key elements of Kant's thinking about moral phenomena need to be applied to the Shoah. These concepts play key roles in

moral phenomena and include his concepts of radical evil, moral autonomy, human will, duty, freedom, and the human being as a kingdom of ends, never to be used as a means to an end. The way in which evil becomes a question of radical evil for Kant finds its principal elaboration in his writings on religion (*RWLRA*). It is necessary then to come to a determination whether or not the concept of radical evil depends upon a theology of the Christian notion of original sin, and thereby derives its authority from revelation, or whether it belongs to a philosophically reasoned account of the nature of matter, existence, and the place of humanity in that cosmology.

I. Kant's Formulation of Evil

Kant's understanding of evil (*kakon, malum, Uebel*) is informed by several long and internally complex philosophical and religious traditions -- Biblical, Christian, and Greek philosophic -- outside of which many of his critical distinctions and emphases cannot adequately be understood. At one stage in his thought, Kant found evil's origin not in God, but in an inner principle of self-determination proper to human beings, a radically evil principle inherent to the human will. Kant proposes that human evil is a negative evil of defect (*malum defectus*), not of reason but of the will, and therefore not a positive evil of privation (*malum privationis*).

Although Kant's understanding of evil varied at different stages of his life, his concern with the connection between evil and the human will remained constant. He regards human freedom to distinguish between right and wrong as leading to the *malum defectus* of radical evil. His notion of radical evil is an example of a *malum defectus* and not a *malum privationis*. Kant's concept of morality allowed him to maintain the possibility of a progressive human history in which the culturing of the will leads steadily to the good of an ever-approaching kingdom of "goodwill towards men."

Kant's introduction of the concept of "radical evil" needs to be situated through demarcating the historical context and motives for his turn to such an apparently "Christian theological category." His discoursing on "radical evil" is motivated by

strictly philosophical reasons, by the need to give an adequate justification of the grounding of moral freedom. For Kant moral freedom assumes the freedom to choose between good and evil.

In *Religion Within the Limits of Reason Alone*, Kant formulates a concept of “radical evil.” He viewed his work on religion as “a corollary of the substance of his ethics.” For Kant the substance of religion is morality and not ceremony. He attempts to locate radical evil in the adoption of evil maxims that invert the moral order. Moral freedom is essential to his ethical vision based on moral accountability and responsibility. The concept of radical evil makes freedom in this sense intelligible. The morally free choice is made independent of external authority.

As Kant argues in *Religion Within the Limits of Reason Alone*, a human being is evil if he has incorporated into his maxims deviation from the moral law. Radical evil involves choosing evil maxims when one is conscious that they are contradictory to the moral law.

Kant’s ethics on radical evil seeks to establish the absolute freedom of man to act ethically. Freedom is key to Kant’s treatment of radical evil. He does not equate “radical evil” with “original sin,” and indeed considers “original sin” as both a moral and metaphysical impossibility. He argues that each person from birth has an innate predisposition toward having a morally good character, consisting of the capacity to distinguish between right and wrong, that can be cultivated into respect for the moral law.

Kant’s conceptualization of “radical evil” has been analyzed by such Kantian scholars as Allison, Anderson-Gold, Munzel, Paton, Schulte, Rotenstreich, Sullivan, and Wood. It is important to decide what Kant means by his statement regarding the “propensity to evil in human nature,” which human experience suggests. The analysis explores the three stages in which the propensity to evil, as defined by Kant, is manifested, including weakness, frailty, and impurity.

An analysis of the Kantian moral imperative as an incentive to action shows that the root of evil lies not in sensuality, but in the freedom of choice to self-determination by the elective will. The work of Munzel, Teale, Rotenstreich, and Wood explains how “radical evil” for Kant is a problem of moral character. Relevant also are Kantian conceptions of “radical evil” as indifference, disrespect for the moral law, a function of self-love, and as an impediment to the social condition of man out of a non-ethical state of nature. Following the reasoning in an article by Ophir, “Between Eichmann and Kant: Thinking on Evil after Arendt,” I shall argue that radical evil involves consciousness of the moral law, but choosing deliberately to violate it.

Kant’s legacy for the Holocaust thought of Arendt and Fackenheim draws on the scholarship of Hewitt, Ophir, and, of course, Fackenheim and Arendt themselves. Kant’s treatment of radical evil gains in significance with Eichmann’s assertion that he had no freedom, and that his absence of freedom should be understood positively as the doing of Kantian duty. Eichmann and other bureaucrats argued that they had no freedom but to dutifully obey orders reported from higher ups. Arendt and Fackenheim demonstrate that Kant’s philosophy holds the completely opposite understanding of duty and freedom that Eichmann assumed, for Eichmann’s appeal to the Kantian categorical imperative was fatally flawed. This is important also with regards to the example of Himmler’s Posen speech, which conforms to a Kantian definition of radical evil as the inversion and reversal of ethical maxims from the moral order. Underlying this analysis is the persistent question, “Is Kant’s notion of radical evil insufficient for comprehending the unique manifestation of evil that was the Shoah?” Kant sets up the problem of evil in a way that was to have repercussions when Arendt and Fackenheim sought to confront the Holocaust as an instance of evil, whether they defined it as radical or banal.

II. Arendt’s Formulation of the Evil of the Shoah

Arendt’s conception of the Holocaust as a manifestation of the banality of evil evolved in the writings that are contained in the following five sources: (1) *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, (2) *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil*, (3) *An*

Exchange of Letters between Gershom Scholem and Hannah Arendt, (4) *Hannah Arendt, Karl Jaspers Briefwechsel*, and (5) *Between Friends: The Correspondence of Hannah Arendt and Mary McCarthy*. My discussion systematically isolates those passages where Arendt alludes or refers to or directly cites Kant. It also takes up Kantian themes such as moral autonomy, freedom, human will, duty, and law, as they relate to radical evil. Then I analyze the question of evil as it applies to the Holocaust as Arendt raises it within the Kantian subtext.

In *The Origins of Totalitarianism* Arendt conceives of the Shoah as a manifestation of radical evil that makes human beings superfluous, but in *Eichmann in Jerusalem* she defines the Holocaust to be a manifestation of the banality of evil, understood as modern bureaucratic man's thoughtlessness. Arendt likens the concentration camps to Hell, as do others, such as Steiner, Primo Levi, and Zwulka. Arendt defines radical evil as the realm where everything is possible because there are no limits. Evil can be institutionalized in modern bureaucracy. She identifies evil in the terror generated by totalitarian regimes and their techniques of total domination to reduce human beings to superfluity. Arendt's remedy to radical evil is thoughtfulness. The correspondence between her and Jaspers that documents the importance of Kant to Arendt's understanding of evil exposes her conceptualization of the Shoah as both radical and banal evil. Arendt and Jaspers emphasize the lack of "satanic greatness" in Eichmann who spoke in clichés, gave little evidence of fanatical hatred of Jews, and was proud of being a "law abiding citizen" of the Nazi bureaucratic state. Arendt did not mean that the *Judeocide* Eichmann helped to perpetrate was banal. Rather the phrase "banality of evil" was meant to refer to a specific bureaucratic thoughtlessness and ordinariness in Eichmann himself, but neither to the enormity of the deeds nor the principles behind those deeds.

While Arendt resisted mythologizing Nazi crimes through aesthetically understanding models of literary evil villains, she did draw on the myth of Cain and Abel, the character of Shakespeare's Iago, and Melville's *Billy Budd* as foils by which to attempt to better understand the evil of the Holocaust. She ultimately rejects literature as

an inadequate means to understand the evil of the Holocaust and turns to the analytic tools of philosophy. While Arendt affirmed that the deeds of Eichmann were monstrous, the bureaucratic administrators responsible for orchestrating these monstrous deeds were quite banal and not examples of satanic greatness. Arendt asserts that the rise of totalitarianism made possible the existence of a new kind of evil -- absolute evil, which she says could no longer be understood and explained by Plato's conception of evil arising out of strong passions of lust, self-interest, greed, covetousness, resentment, thirst for power, and cowardice. Her thinking extends an Enlightenment tradition that rejects classical Platonic assertions that evil deeds are the product of strong passions.

Although there are limitations to Arendt's Enlightenment assumptions, she adequately demonstrates to be false the notion that evil requires sinister intentions, that the greater the crime the more vicious the criminal, and that moral insanity implies clinical insanity. Arendt demonstrates that the horror behind the Nazi horror is that quite unextraordinary, average, common people living what many people view as ordinary "respectable lives," can, do, and have set monstrous crimes in motion. She offers this as the basis for a critical evaluation of modern bureaucracy, modern technology, and modern professional careerism threatening to lead modern unthinking man down a very dark and dangerous path.

Arendt's critique of the banality of evil concentrates on the rise of modern bureaucracy and the bureaucratic type. Future studies might explore further the relationship between Max Weber and Arendt, both of whom are critical of the rise of modern bureaucratic man. Arendt explained that Eichmann represented "the banality of evil" and, in his one-dimensionality, exercised what Marcuse was to call instrumental reason. She understands the banality of evil as manifested not only by Eichmann's professional goals, routines, and general comportment, but by the way he employs cliché-ridden language. Upon examination her critique of Eichmann proves central to her argument.

The dissertation will argue that Arendt wishes to expose in her portrait of Eichmann the unthinking bureaucrat's uncritical use of thoughtless language, reflecting the bureaucrat's inner moral emptiness. Eichmann, incapable of uttering anything but clichés, murdered millions of Jews through shuffling and signing bureaucratic paperwork that sent victims to horrible deaths. I will question whether Arendt is right that modern bureaucrats who unthinkingly go about their daily business and routine are always potential Eichmanns. In order to clarify what exactly Arendt understands by the "banality of evil," I will further examine whether Arendt is right in her suggestion that the key evil of the modern world is the increasing power of governmental bureaucracies.

The Kantian subtext of Arendt's attempt to raise the question of the banality of evil with the Holocaust stands out most clearly in Eichmann's vulgarization of Kant's philosophy. He alludes to Kant in invoking the categorical imperative as the model for his actions. Arendt intends to make her readers realize and understand how and why Eichmann failed to grasp Kant's thought and that he vulgarized it. Since Kant's moral philosophy is so closely bound up with man's faculty of judgment, it rules out the blind obedience of which Eichmann was proud. To distinguish Eichmann's vulgar misunderstanding of Kant from Kant's true understanding of duty, freedom, moral autonomy, and will, Arendt clarifies these concepts. As a result, Kant assumes his rightful place at the center of philosophic reflections and discourses on the Holocaust.

The *Grounding for the Metaphysics of Morals* presents a form of the categorical imperative that recovers Kant's true understanding of moral phenomena. Kant's true understanding of morality and its relation to radical evil is necessary if we are to understand Arendt's concept of the banality of evil. Kant's true moral theory, in which every human being deserves to be treated as a kingdom of ends rather than a means, implicates modernity, Machiavellian privileging of "the end justify the means," and modernity's privileging of "will" itself in the Nazi genocide.

Arendt exposes Eichmann's distortion of the categorical imperative. Eichmann claimed to act as if the principle of his actions were the same as that of the legislator or

the law of the land. In Hans Frank's formulation, which Eichmann might have known, "Act in such a way that the Fuhrer, if he knew your action, would approve it." Arendt shows that Kant had never intended to say anything of the sort. On the contrary, to him every man was a legislator the moment he started to act: by using his "practical reason" man found the principles that could and should be the principle of law. Kant demands that man do more than obey the law and go beyond the mere call of obedience to identify his will with the principle and spirit (*Geist*) behind the law-- the source from which the law ethically sprang.

Arendt is not only exposing the danger of a demagogue setting himself up as a god to be obeyed blindly. She asks us, as does Kant, "What is law? What is the nature of law? What is its purpose? When must evil laws be disobeyed, as in Nazi Europe? What truly are the duties of an ethical being? When must one free themselves from obeying laws blindly? How must one resist when secular laws become the embodiment of evil?" These questions impel us to seek an understanding of the implications of the danger of accepting Eichmann's argument that, in following orders, he did his duty and obeyed the law. Nazi bureaucratic legal culture was highly ordered and "lawful"-- lawful to do evil.

III. Fackenheim's Formulation of the Evil of the Shoah

Arendt's thesis that Eichmann illustrated the banality of evil provoked objections from many academics, philosophers, and theologians. The most sustained and theologically complex critique of her thesis is Emil Fackenheim's, which is articulated by Fackenheim's own reading of Kant. Fackenheim's reaction to Arendt's "thesis" as "one side of the coin" is found in the following works: (1) "Kant and Radical Evil," (2) "Kant's Concept of History," (3) "Kant and Judaism," (4) "Immanuel Kant," (5) "The Holocaust and Philosophy," (6) "The Revealed Morality of Judaism and Modern Thought: A Confrontation with Kant," (7) Abraham and the Kantians, and (8) *To Mend the World* (pages 156-157, 267-276).

In *To Mend the World* and throughout his works Fackenheim rejects Arendt's thesis concerning the "banality of evil." He uses the phrase "evil for evil's sake" to encapsulate the radical evil of the Holocaust. Fackenheim himself gives examples of radical evil throughout his writings. He describes evil as the attempt to eradicate the divine image in the human being and the attempt to eradicate the possibility of the choice of martyrdom. He views revisionism and Holocaust denial as forms of radical evil subsequent to the event of radical evil that of the Shoah. He argues that the Shoah was a radically unique evil. There is an essential relationship between the Shoah as radical evil and Fackenheim's insistence on its uniqueness. He argues that the Shoah surpasses the theological conceptions of evil, and he seeks to demonstrate that the anti-Semitic Nazis used in a radically evil way traditional Christian anti-Judaism and demonization of the Jews. He calls the Jews to resist evil in his formulation of the 614th commandment encouraging Jews to affirm Jewish life and deny posthumous victories to the Nazis. He sees the Holocaust as constituting a radically evil rupture of history that demands to be mended. The debate on the significance of the Holocaust is indebted to Fackenheim's dialogue with Kant. Although the essay "Kant and Radical Evil" does not mention the Holocaust specifically because it was not until 1967 that Fackenheim deliberately turned towards addressing the Holocaust as an instance of radical evil, we can locate in Fackenheim's later thought a confrontation with the Holocaust informed by Kant's conception of evil. His view is that German philosophy reached a zenith in Kant's thought and descended to touch bottom in Nazi *Weltanschauung*.

Fackenheim's critique of Arendt's thesis of "the banality of evil" is the obverse side of his assertion of the uniqueness of the Holocaust. In his view, if Arendt is right that evil is banal, then the uniqueness of the Holocaust is invalidated. Fackenheim argues for the uniqueness, incommensurability, and privileged separateness of the genocide of European Jewry, as compared to other atrocities. Fackenheim considers penultimate the question of the relationship between the Holocaust as a manifestation of radical evil and philosophy. Fackenheim faults Arendt for failing to see Eichmann's demonic hatred, which impels radical evil. The portrait painted by Arendt of Eichmann as "a cog in a

machine, a little man with a respect for the law of his master, who performs his job with meticulous care and without any hate of Jews,” is indefensible according to Fackenheim.

In my conversation with Dr. Fackenheim [at his home in Jerusalem] he made it clear that Arendt’s theory of the banality of evil is a consequence of her “misunderstanding” of the Kantian text. Fackenheim believes that, at best, Arendt only described “half of the coin.” She is partially accurate in her analysis of the “banality of evil.” Fackenheim sees “the other side” of the coin and is indeed haunted by its implications. He sees the sadism, maliciousness, and radical evil of the whole Nazi regime as more than a kind of “perversion.” He characterizes the Fuehrer’s grasping and seizing of power as an animalistic devouring of the public realm under the throttle of not just a “totalitarian” political regime, but as the demonic itself. When the Nazis exploited Jews in the most humiliating and torturous ways, the Holocaust crossed the threshold of the banal to the other side of radical evil. For Fackenheim, countless examples of demonic cruelty invalidate the adequacy of Arendt’s intellectual description of the banality of evil. Fackenheim repudiates Arendt’s conception of Eichmann’s banality by holding the Nazi bureaucrat responsible for his demonic remark, “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.” Fackenheim asserts that this remark glorifies in the very opposite of the banal, but rather is a demonic groundless exaltation of death and destruction which is radical evil. Fackenheim agrees with Arendt that Eichmann’s bureaucratic mentality manifested in statements such as, “I am ready for business; goods for blood, blood for goods” (*Ware fuer Blut; blut fuer Ware*) represents a kind of banality of evil, but he argues that Arendt does not see that radical evil is a permanent dimension of Eichmann’s character. Fackenheim rejects Arendt’s picture of Eichmann as a “robot” who lacked autonomy by following orders no matter what. Fackenheim asserts that Eichmann followed the Fuehrer freely, and rejects Arendt’s portrait of Eichmann as a robot who did not think. Fackenheim contradicts Arendt’s conception of the “banality of evil” when he comments that it was “radical evil” when children were thrown alive into the ovens to save money on zyklon b gas, or when

Eichmann diverted trains and resources away from the German military effort in order to liquidate the Jews of Hungary.

IV. Summary

My central thesis is that to assess the moral significance of the Holocaust, Arendt, and Fackenheim ask us to question the limits of what can be known about evil, as Kant defined it for moderns. Arendt and Fackenheim draw on Kant's thought on evil to place into philosophical, theological and social context the evil that manifested itself during the Shoah. The Nazi annihilation of European Jewry was the most actual manifestation of what Kant called radical evil. While Arendt and Fackenheim strongly disagree as to whether the nature of the evil manifested during the Shoah was banal or radical, both thinkers force us to confront the moral failures that gave rise to the catastrophic annihilation of European Jewry. The dissertation will argue that the Holocaust was a manifestation of both radical and banal evil, and that Fackenheim and Arendt's positions are both valid. My central contention is that the most thorough understanding of the evil of the Shoah can be gained through viewing the positions of Arendt and Fackenheim as complementary, rather than as mutually exclusive. Viewed together, the banality of evil in everyday life offers opportunities for radical evil. This risk constitutes an essential moral lesson for modern man.