



## Reflections on Social Psychology while reading Hannah Arendt

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### ABSTRACT

Two recent articles in the *American Psychologist* (Vol 74, no. 7, 2019) on the Stanford Prison Experiment induced me to re-read Hannah Arendt's *The Human Condition* (1958), *On Totalitarianism* (1973), and *Eichmann in Jerusalem* (Arendt and Kroh, 1964). This re-reading and reflection deepened my understanding of the value and role of social psychology and Arendt's deep understanding of human speech and action as it relates to the Human Sciences and understanding our role in the social and political world.

The review includes an experiment by Arthur Asch on "Opinion and social pressure" published in 1955 and then looks at Stanley Milgram's experiment on obedience published in 1963. The review of these articles provides a context for looking at Philip Zimbardo's Stanford Prison Experiment (1973) and a critique of that experiment which led to my re-reading Hannah Arendt. This article continues an exploration of my efforts (Morehouse, 2012; Morehouse, 2015; Morehouse et al, 2019) at integrating some elements of psychology and philosophy with the goal of deepening understanding of contemporary issues.

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## Introduction

Three classic studies in social psychology will be briefly looked at (1) a conformity to group opinion (Arthur Ash, 1955), (2) a study of obedience (Stanly Milgram, 1963) and (3) a study of the environmental impact of being a prison guard (Haney, Banks and Zimbardo, 1973). The first two of these studies will be looked at very briefly and the Zimbardo study in more detail with attention paid to recent critiques of the Zimbardo Stanford Prison Experiment (SPE) (Haslam, Reicher & Bavel, 2019). Hannah Arendt's reflections on radical and benign evil will provide an additional perspective on these three experiments.

## Social Psychology Research Experiments on Social Conformity and the Environment

Social Psychology research offers many studies that examine how the opinions and behaviors of others affect our belief, our judgment, and our action. These studies support the premise that what we see with our own eyes, and what we hear with our own ears, may be reinterpreted if it disagrees with what others report to be true.

Let's look at three of these studies in social psychology: one conducted by Solomon Asch (1955), another (perhaps the most widely known of the three) conducted by Stanley Milgram (1963), and a final study, also widely studied and included in many widely used general psychology courses, conducted by Philip Zimbardo and his colleagues (1973)<sup>1</sup>.

Social psychology researchers often focus on current issues relevant to the problems of the time. Solomon Asch published his study in the *Scientific American* entitled "Opinion and Social Pressure." Asch writes in the introduction that his research is important for the following reasons:

How, and to what extent, do social forces constrain people's opinions and attitudes? This question is especially pertinent in our day. The

same epoch that has witnessed the unprecedented technological extensions of communication has also brought into existence the deliberate manipulation of opinion and the "engineering of consent." There are many good reasons why, as citizens and social scientists, we should be concerned with the study of the ways in which human beings form their opinions and the role that social conditions play (In Readings About the Social Animal, 1996. p. 19).

Asch<sup>2</sup> conducted a simple straightforward experiment. He presents his subjects with a single vertical line. He then presents three vertical lines of varying lengths, one of which matches the line on the previous card. The subject is asked to identify the line closest to the original line. There are other people in the room, and they all state their choice before the subject states his choice. Unknown to the subject all the other persons in the room are accomplices of the experimenter. All the accomplices misidentify the line—all choosing the same wrong line. Thirty-one percent of the subjects agreed with the accomplices and stated that the matching line was in fact a line that did not match the original. An important difference was found when there was just one person who identified the line correctly or even misidentified an alternate line. If one of the accomplices gave a different answer from the majority of persons in the room, the rate of conformity to the wrong answer dropped by one-third.

Asch's research sheds some light on the current social media environment. However, it remains quite easy for us to see ourselves as members of the almost 70 percent who did not go along with the majority and against our better judgment. Stanley Milgram's 1963 study may give us pause to reevaluate our strength to resist pressure to conform. Milgram's experiment grew directly out of his efforts to understand the Holocaust. As he states:

<sup>1</sup> This study is often called the Zimbardo study or the Stanford Prison experiment (SPE). I follow the same practice in this article.

<sup>2</sup> As all of Asch's participant were male, the male pronoun was used.

It has been reliably established that from 1933 to 1945 millions of innocent persons were systematically slaughtered on command. Gas chambers were built, death camps were guarded, and daily quotas of corpses were produced with the same efficiency as the manufacturing of appliances. These inhumane policies may have originated in the mind of a single person, but they could not be carried out on a massive scale if a very large number of persons had not obeyed orders (Milgram in Aronson, 1996, p.32).

Briefly, Stanley Milgram, a Yale psychologist, invited people to participate in an experiment that he thought would examine the role of punishment in learning. Again, there is an accomplice. The accomplice in this experiment plays the role of the learner, and the subject is asked to perform the task of the teacher. To ensure that the subject does not catch on to the experimenter's real purpose (the study of obedience or compliance) the experimenter has each person draw slips of paper from a hat. He tells them that one slip of paper says teacher and the other learner. In fact, both say teacher, and the accomplice states that his slip of paper has the word learner on it. The accomplice sits behind a glass window and is hooked up to what looks like electrodes connected to a box that the subject is given. The gauge the subject has in front of him has four switches, each with an incremental setting of 15 volts. The switches are labeled Slight Shock, Moderate Shock, Extreme Intense Shock, and Danger: Severe Shock. Two levels after the Danger switch were simply marked XXX. The subject is informed that he is to shock the learner (accomplice) if the learner gets a wrong answer and to increase the shock with each successive wrong answer. If the "teacher" hesitated, the experimenter says one of four prompts: (1) Please continue, (2) The experiment requires that you continue, (3) It is absolutely essential that you continue, or (4) You have no choice, you must go on. The subjects were paid in advance and told that they could quit at any time.

Of the 40 subjects in the original experiment, no subject stopped below 300 volts. Five subjects refused to obey beyond 300 volts. Twenty-six subjects obeyed to the end of the experiment, despite the protests of the learner (accomplice). Milgram provided this observation from a subject who continues to the end:

I observed a mature and initially poised businessman enter the laboratory smiling and confident. Within minutes he was reduced to a twitching, stuttering wreck, who was rapidly approaching a point of nervous collapse. He constantly pulled on his earlobe and twisted his hands. At one point he pushed his fist into his forehead and muttered, Oh, my God, let's stop it." And yet he continued to respond to every word of the experimenter and obeyed to the end (p.34).

These quotes illustrate the near-complete loss of the individual conscience in the subjects of this experiment; they also remind us of the possibility that we, ourselves, are susceptible to losing our conscience if the public space for discussion and disagreement is severely limited.

The third experiment was conducted by Haney, Banks, and Zimbardo and published in 1973. The authors state the questions they wish to investigate as follows: "What happens when you put good people in an evil place? Does humanity win over evil, or does evil triumph?" (Haney et al, 1973, p. 1). Zimbardo sometime later, stated the goal somewhat differently, "To show that normal people could behave in pathological ways even without the external pressure of an experimenter-authority. My colleagues and I put college students in a simulated prison setting and observed the power of roles, rules, and expectations" (Zimbardo, 1983).

Here is a brief description of this study. Stanford undergraduates volunteered to be in a mock prison experiment. An ad was placed in a local paper and people were screened and only those who fit a stable personality profile were included in the study. They were paid to participate in the experiment. Half of the group was assigned at random to be guards of prisoners. Those

assigned to be prisoners were arrested by the local police and taken to the basement of a building at Stanford University and placed in a makeshift jail. The bottom line of the experiment was that it had to be stopped early. The people playing the role of guards, with no prompting from the experimenters, acted too cruelly to the "prisoners" for the experiment to continue. While the "guards" did not physically abuse the prisoners, they regularly humiliated and dehumanized the "prisoners" beyond ordinary bounds of civility. The characterizations of the results of the experiment are those paraphrased from Haney, Banks, and Zimbardo (1973).

### **A Critiques of the Zimbardo Stanford Prison Experiment**

S. Alexander Haslam, Stephen D. Reicher & Jay J. Van Bavel (2019) in their article "Rethinking the nature of cruelty: the role of identity leadership in the Stanford Prison Experiment" re-examine all the documents related to the SPE and come to very different conclusions than did Zimbardo and colleagues, both regarding how the experiment was conducted and what conclusion could be drawn from it. There two main criticisms are that (1) Identity leadership was a better explanation than environment as a cause for the behavior of the guards and (2) looking at the wider world, "it is also clear that identity leadership is common in episodes of toxicity and brutality" (P. 819).

Regarding leadership identity, Haslam et al make their case using the transcript of guard # 7 as an example. "[T]he warden (Zimbardo) encouraged the guard to discard his personal identity, to adopt a collective identity, and to embody stereotypic expectations associated with collective identity" (p. 816). Further, Haslam et al argue that a leader not only works to create a common identity but also makes an effort to instill the importance of cruelty to members of an outsider group as a way "to protect and advance the ingroup" (p. 819). Discussing the manner that the guards slipped into habits of cruelty, Haslam et al (2019) state "The totality of evidence indicates that, far from slipping into

assigned roles, some of Zimbardo's guards actively resisted. They were consequently subjected to intense interventions from the experimenters" (p. 820).

As to the real-world examples of identity leadership and cruelty, Haslam et al, while not making a direct comparison with the Milgram experiment or the Holocaust, none-the-less state:

What we believe is striking, though, is the consonance in these settings. Framing cruelty as essential for the achievement of noble collective goals thus appears to be a critical strategy for mobilizing people to hate and harm others in theaters of conflict both small and large.

It follows from all this that just as cruelty does not inhere simply in the nature of the perpetrator, neither does it inhere in the demands of the situation. An understanding of how it is produced additionally requires an analysis of leadership, of how leaders persuade, and of how they are able to portray toxic behavior as worthy of action in defense of a noble group cause. Central to this endeavor are leaders' efforts to construct a sense of shared identity that encompasses both the source and target of persuasion (820).

### **Hannah Arendt's reflection on the nature of evil takes this argument one step further**

Arendt asks how do we approach events that are inexplicably acts of evil? How could the holocaust occur in a country often thought to be at the pinnacle of civilized Europe? How did the philosophical ideas of Marx, a thinker solidly within the intellectual tradition of the West, end in the gulags of Stalinist Soviet Union? How can one explain the apparent civility and placid nature of Adolph Eichmann, a man who oversaw the murder of perhaps hundreds of thousands of people? In somewhat different language, these are the types of questions that captured the interest of some important social psychologists discussed here, namely Arthur Ash, Stanley Milgram, Philip Zimbardo, and Alexander Haslam.

Hannah Arendt's examination of the evils committed in Nazi Germany and Stalinist Russia provide a different, but not incompatible, look at the issues raised by these social scientists. Arendt examines the historical questions of evil as a German Jewish philosopher born before the First World War and died in 1975. As a philosopher and political theorist who studied with some of the greatest thinkers in 20th-century philosophy: Martin Heidegger, Edmund Husserl, and Karl Jaspers. Arendt makes a case for what she calls radical evil, and within the framework of radical evil writes about one of the perpetrators of that evil (Adolph Eichmann) whom she labels "banal." In Arendt's view, the ideas of radical evil and the banality of evil stand together. Arendt argues that the way to understand Adolph Eichmann's behavior is within the context of the radical evil of Nazi Germany. This essay will first explore the origins of evil in Germany and, to a lesser extent, the Soviet Union and then raise the question of what can be done to prevent radical evil in its earliest stages within democratic societies worldwide and thus work against individual acts of banal evil.

Arendt understands radical evil as coming from the total destruction of what she calls the human condition. Arendt's human condition is a non-essentialist human condition: one based on the twin principles of equality and distinction that she calls plurality. Because humans are equal, communication is possible. Because we are distinct, communication is necessary. How does human plurality connect with the death camps? Arendt argues that point of totalitarianism is the destruction not of individuals, or even a race of people, but rather totalitarian destruction is about the destruction of the human spirit—the destruction of human action, human spontaneity, and free will.

I will explore Arendt's view of radical evil in some detail. And within the context of the radical evil of totalitarianism, Arendt's understanding of Eichmann as an example of the "banality of evil".

This exploration will provide the background for a discussion of the current political environment.

Hannah Arendt wrote on evil in several books and articles over a long period. The two that deal most directly with evil are *The Origins of Totalitarianism* and *Eichmann in Jerusalem*. It is a difficult task to sort out and to get right her ideas on the topic. It is an almost impossible task to do so in a short article. But I will do my best to at least highlight some of her thoughts, with as little distortion as possible.

This phrase, the banality of evil, has become one of our everyday expressions of evil—without much thought on its meaning beyond its surface, common-sense meaning that evil can in some sense be ordinary. A deeper sense of banality of evil as developed by Arendt will be explored here. The question many people asked of Arendt at the time of the Eichmann trial was "How could anyone write about the banality of evil while looking in the face of a mass murderer?" Arendt was sitting in the courtroom and looking directly at that face, the face of Adolph Eichmann. So, what can banal evil mean in the context of the holocaust? One step toward understanding this type of evil is Arendt's citation of Eichmann's statements at the trial in Jerusalem. Eichmann states that he had worried about his role in killing Jews and others until he was confronted with a group of his betters at the Wannsee conference. This meeting was attended by leading figures in Germany including not only military men and members of the Nazi party but also important civil servants and others not directly connected to either the party or the military. Arendt writes:

Although he had been doing his best right along to help with the Final Solution, he had still harbored some doubts about "such a bloody solution through violence," and these doubts had been dispelled. "Here now, during this conference (the Wannsee Conference, January 1942), the most prominent people had spoken, the Popes of the Third Reich." Now he could see with his own eyes and hear with his own ears that not only Hitler, but also Heydrick ...not just the SS or the Party, but the elite of the good old

Civil Service were vying and fighting with each other to take the lead in these "bloody" matters." "At this moment, I sensed a kind of Pontius Pilate feeling, for I felt free of all guilt." Who was he to judge? Who was he "to have [his] own thoughts in this matter?" (Villa, 1999, p. 48, citing Arendt's Eichmann in Jerusalem).

What makes Eichmann's evil banal is that there is "no voice from the other side to arouse his conscience." Arendt sees Eichmann as a person who is thoughtless regarding his role in the killing of Jews. Eichmann was instead concerned about his social role; he was concerned about how he fits into the structure of the government of which he was a part. She further sees this thoughtlessness as related to his inability to see another position. He could not see that he might have a role in the German government or military that might, for moral reasons, go against the ruling establishment.

Arendt's questions (Who was he to judge? Who was he to have [his] own thoughts in this matter?) are questions that are relevant to us today as we examine our role in the world. The question for me (and I think, for Arendt) is: how do we keep our own thoughts on issues of good and evil if those around us all seem to agree that what we might think of as evil is seen as benign by the rest of those around us and in particular of those in power?

The three experiments in this paper were conducted in a democratic society that places a high value on individual responsibility and initiative. Eichmann's evil, however, was committed in Nazi Germany—a considerably less free society. To return to Arendt's "banality of evil," it is important to place Eichmann within the context of Nazi Germany and what Arendt calls "radical evil." One of the points that Arendt makes in *On Totalitarianism* is that Nazi Germany and Communist Russia were shaped by ideologies that limited and eventually eliminated the possibility for many people to reason about issues of good and evil. She argues that race and history (in Germany and Russia respectively) served as ends in

themselves. When individual lives are regarded as ends to the inevitable "purity of the race" or "the march of history" arguments about who should be saved became meaningless as the answer is already decided by the principle of race or history. The actions one might take against a person or a group of persons inevitably flow from the ideology and require no thought at all.

The reason no thought is required is that the Nazi regime and Stalinism have as their basic premise, not the control of people, but the creation of a single mind and single "man" to replace human plurality. Human plurality as mentioned above is central to Arendt's political philosophy. She sees humans as inserted into the "web of human history." As participants in this web of meaning, we are agents who engage in action, but we cannot control the eventual outcome of our action because action (in Arendt's framework) takes place in public. Arendt argues that Nazi Germany and Stalinist Soviet Union destroyed or at least attempted to destroy all public places—that is, those spaces where human discourse can occur between people who are both equal and distinct.

With the elimination of human action within public spaces where people meet as distinct equals, there is little chance for individuals to seek their own counsel, to think for themselves because paradoxically we often think for ourselves best when we think aloud in public. The same mechanistic worldview that destroyed public spaces also treated all members of the nations as potential executors or victims. In Stalinist Russia or Nazi Germany, one might be executor today and a victim tomorrow. And as Shirley Jackson points out so powerfully in "The Lottery," it is almost impossible to protest against evil if you do not know when you will be a victim or an executor.

Villa argues in *Political, Philosophical, Terror: Essays on the Thoughts of Hannah Arendt*, that: Unlike authoritarianism, tyrannical, or despotic regimes, totalitarianism relies fundamentally on terror—not only as a means but as a kind of end

in itself. It hoped to achieve what no form of government had ever dreamt of attempting—the complete elimination of the very space between individuals and (thus) their capacity for independent action. The goal, in other words, was not simply the monopolization of public power (as in tyranny or one-party dictatorships) but the mortal creation of "One Man of Gigantic Dimensions," of a world without plurality and the differences of perspective born of it (Villa, pp. 198-9, 1999).

The desire to create a non-human world, a world where human beings are things, comes from a new and profound type of hubris—the hubris of the perfectibility of the human species. Arendt, in response to a letter from Karl Jaspers<sup>3</sup> who queried about the distance of our society from God, responded that the evil found in the totalitarian regimes of Hitler and Stalin was not even thought of in the Ten Commandments. The Ten Commandments teach us about the evils relating to selfishness. The radical evil of the Camps and the Gulags was a new type of evil.

Yet we know that the greatest of evil, or radical evil, has nothing to do any more with such humanly understood motives [those motives arising out of the many forms of selfishness]. What the face of radical evil looks like I do not know but its goal is making human beings as human beings superfluous (not using them as means to an end, which leaves their essence as humans untouched and impinges only on their human dignity; rather making them superfluous as human beings). This happens as soon as all unpredictability—which, in human beings is the equivalent of spontaneity—is eliminated. All this, in turn, arises from—or better, goes along with—the delusion of the omnipotence (not simply with the lust for power) of an individual man. If an individual man qua man were omnipotent, then there is, in fact, no reason why men should exist as all (Hannah Arendt-Karl Jaspers

correspondence (1926-1969 as cited in Villa, 1999, pp. 32-33).

If that argument is correct, then it becomes paramount that the response to terrorism is one that maintains and enhances human plurality, not one that destroys it.

From this perspective on radical evil, we can now go back and look at the "banality of evil" as reported in the Eichmann trial (Arendt, 19). Adolph Eichmann sitting at trial in Jerusalem is by most accounts intelligent, educated, and knowledgeable. Arendt reports that he is able to correctly state and explain Kant's Categorical Imperative. This is not a typical picture of a person who would oversee mass murder. He is a person who appears to understand right from wrong. How can we reconcile this information? An even more challenging question is how can Eichmann's acts be considered banal?

One possible explanation for Eichmann's behavior is that he lost his ability to think for himself because he did not have anyone to talk with, any place to express his thoughts freely among equals<sup>4</sup>. With all of his "betters" speaking loudly with one voice, Eichmann found himself, like Ash's subjects, going along with the group, like Milgram's "teachers" following the orders of the authority figures, like Zimbardo's "prison guards," conforming to the vision of the prisoner as less than human. Eichmann's acts are banal because he did not think; he only followed orders. Quoting from Arendt's *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, Villa states: "As Eichmann told it, the most potent factor in the soothing of his own conscience was the simple fact that he could see no one, no one at all, who was actually against the Final Solution" (p. 114). Thus, it was that Eichmann could honestly claim, despite the incredulity of the prosecution (at his trial), that "there were no voices from the outside to arouse his conscience" once it had been set at ease by the unanimous agreement of his social betters.

<sup>3</sup> Jaspers wrote his letter as a comment on some issues Arendt raised in *On Totalitarianism*.

<sup>4</sup> It is important to note here that many historians have also argued that many Jews were hidden and/or aided in the effort

to leave Germany and other NAZI occupied areas. These historians have argued that for every Jew that was saved, it required the complicity, or at least silence, of about 100 non-Jews

Eichmann, according to Arendt, "did not close his ears to the voice of conscience, as the judgment has it, not because he had none, but because his conscience spoke with a 'respectable voice,' with the voice of respectable society around him." (Villa, p. 48),

While Arendt's point is not to lessen Eichmann's responsibility for his behavior, she is concerned with understanding the processes that allow an ordinary, intelligent person to become a mass murderer. I think the lesson is that an ordinary person can contribute to great evil when few opportunities are available to think aloud about moral issues. Would we be able to stand against the opinions of our "betters" even in the face of profound evil? When do we begin to take a stand?

While I have only provided a partial answer to those questions, Villa<sup>5</sup> (1999) warns

As the case of Eichmann amply demonstrates, where "a law is a law" - where, in other words, thoughtlessness reins - the faculties of judgment and moral imagination atrophy and then disappear (p. 52).

### **A final thought**

The value of reading Hannah Arendt along with reading social psychology research is that the reader potentially gains a perspective on the value of public spaces within a democracy. Arendt provides additional tools for understanding and action. What we can do for one another is to engage in discussions in public spaces so that we can bring our opinions, our "Doxa" as the Greeks called opinion, to the presence of others. Arendt argues that we are most often unaware of our opinions, of our perspective in our common world. Our opinions need to be worked out, need to be drawn out in the presence of others so that the consequences of those opinions can be examined more fully. As we deliver our opinion in public, we become aware of our unique perspectives and thus the

perspectives of others. Unless we claim our voices in public we risk, to paraphrase Arendt, the possibility of becoming an unthinking Everyman.

Perhaps the larger issue is not the lack of opportunity for us to have open discussions, but what we can do to encourage, support, and engage in spirited and open debate about issues of war and peace, of justice and safety, and private gain and the public good. We need to work to ensure that there are public forums, where people of differing political stripes, and different economic and racial backgrounds, can engage each other about ideas that matter. Our current discourse is restricted out of laziness and a lack of social infrastructure. These relatively benign limitations of open discourse may seem to be a long way from the Wanesse Conference, which for Eichmann sucked the air out of his ability to think for himself, but small steps taken in public can lead to revitalize and maintain public spaces to dialogue and thus a plausible, if not vital democracy, alternately, small steps in the opposite direction, can lead to the destruction of democracy itself.

This article continues an exploration of my efforts (Maykut and Morehouse, 1994; Morehouse, 2012; Morehouse, 2015; Morehouse et al, 2019) at integrating some elements of psychology and philosophy with the goal of deepening understanding of contemporary issues. Starting with *Beginning qualitative research: A philosophical and practical guide* (1994) which provided philosophical understanding necessary to conduct qualitative research, then in *Beginning Interpretative Inquiry* (Morehouse, 2012) providing a philosophical and psychological rationale for integrating quantitative and qualitative measures in one project. In *A case for Psychology* (2015) as a human science an effort was made to make a case for distinguishing between areas of psychology that focused on

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<sup>5</sup> Villa argues that the tools of social science" are not so useful in "grasping the peculiar evil of totalitarian regimes" but perhaps social science can make a small contribution to

understanding the way the restriction of public space for discussion and disagreement affect the individual.

interpretation of experience over proof or cause of behavior. "Juggling the many voices within: what it means to be an emerging adult" (Morehouse et al, 2019) using an interpretative approach to psychology to gain some understanding of the phenomena a emerging adulthood by blending elements of phenomenology with a theory of the dialogical self (Hermans, 2018). Perhaps, each of these works makes a small contribution to a thoughtful integration of psychological and philosophical understanding.

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