

Generating the Ability of Independent Thinking

—From Radical Evil to Extreme Evil to the Banality of Evil

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Abstract

Nazi evil makes the people of Eichmann, this is the whole context of the banality of evil. The destruction of Nazi evil is so unprecedented that it forms a whole new evil- Radical evil. Radical evil is not the change in the degree of evil, but the lack of traditional cognition or conception that suits it. Compared with the traditional evil, Radical evil cancels the concept of man itself. The banality of evil does not oppose Radical evil is a new evil, does not deny its destruction, it criticizes the understanding of this evil as the devil. Replacing Radical evil with Extreme evil highlights the feature of no thinking of this evil. The banality of evil goes against words and thought, and it cannot be understood in the way of exploring the roots. The banality of evil is about thinking rather than knowing, aiming to seek meaning rather than knowledge. Thinking is a political activity, which does not directly bring knowledge and directly guide behavior, but generates independent judgment, thus helping to deal with evil.

Keywords

Radical Evil, Extreme Evil, The Banality of Evil, Independent Thinking

1. Introduction

In the contemporary world, where terrorism and other evil practices occur frequently, people are not only shocked and indignant, but also need to think about why evil occurs. For example, on the night of March 22, 2024, a terrorist attack on the Crocus City Hall, located in Moscow, Russia, has killed 143 people and injured 182 others. The youngest one among the suspects arrested, 21 years old, confessed only for money. Since World War II, Hannah Arendt has undoubtedly been a great thinker on the subject of evil. However, as Richard J. Bernstein said, there was a misleading approach to Arendt that she was proposing theories

which were intended to reveal the essence of evil. "It is indeed my opinion now that evil is never 'radical', that it is only extreme, and that it possesses neither depth nor any demonic dimension. It can overgrow and lay to waste the whole world precisely because it spreads like a fungus on the surface. It is 'thought-defying' as I said, 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, 2007: p. 471) From the above, one can draw the following conclusions: first, Arendt once advocated Radical evil; second, Radical evil is associated with the depth or the devil, and fails to get rid of thought; third, the characteristic of Extreme evil is the banality of evil, this characteristic is opposite to the depth or the devil, because here thought is no longer possible; fourth, Radical evil corresponds to Extreme evil rather than the banality of evil, the latter matters only when Radical evil means thought. Although people are no longer unfamiliar with the banality of evil and Radical evil, they are still affected by popular misconceptions. One misconception holds that Arendt's idea of evil is a theory or thought of evil, which reveals the essence of evil, and another is that Arendt later rejected the earlier analysis of Radical evil with the banality of evil (Bernstein, 2016: pp. 142-145). To overcome these popular misconceptions, people need to accurately understand the connotation of the banality of evil.

2. Radical Evil: A New Type of Evil

On August 17, 1946, Arendt wrote a letter to Jaspers expressing her views on Nazi policy in *The Question of German Guilt*, "Your definition of Nazi policy as a crime ('criminal guilt') strikes me as questionable. The Nazi crimes, it seems to me, explode the limits of law; and that is precisely what constitutes their monstrousness. For these crimes, no punishment is severe enough... We are simply not equipped to deal, on a human, political level, with a guilt that is beyond crime and an innocence that is beyond goodness or virtue." (Kohler & Saner, 1992: p. 54) Arendt here expressed two points: that it was wrong to interpret Nazi policy as crime, and that Nazi guilt went beyond people's cognitive habits of understanding of good and evil.

In response to Arendt's criticism, Jaspers said, "I'm not altogether comfortable with your view, because a guilt that goes beyond all criminal guilt inevitably takes on a streak of 'greatness'—of satanic greatness—which is, for me, as inappropriate for the Nazis as all the talk of the 'demonic' element in Hitler and so forth. It seems to me that we have to see these things in their total banality, in their prosaic triviality, because that's what truly characterizes them. Bacteria can cause epidemics that wipe out nations, but they remain merely bacteria. I regard any hint of myth and legend with horror." (Kohler & Saner, 1992: p. 62) Jaspers affirmed Arendt's view, but also pointed out the problems that it might pose. Specifically, on the one hand, Nazi guilt are unprecedented in human history; on the other hand, while it was understandable to condemn Nazi guilt, the condemnation would also bring new problems that the idea of the bacterial banality of evil as a Satanic devil would lead to new terror.

Arendt quickly expressed her admiration when she received the letter, “I found what you say about my thoughts on ‘beyond crime and innocence’ in what the Nazis did half convincing; that is, I realize completely that in the way I’ve expressed this up to now I come dangerously close to that ‘satanic greatness’ that I, like you, totally reject. But still, there is a difference between a man who sets out to murder his old aunt and people who without considering the economic usefulness of their actions at all (the deportations were very damaging to the war effort) built factories to produce corpses. One thing is certain: We have to combat all impulses to mythologize the horrible and to the extent that I can’t avoid such formulations, I haven’t understood what actually went on. Perhaps what is behind it all is only that individual human beings did not kill other individual human beings for human reasons, but an organized attempt was made to eradicate the concept of a human being.” (Kohler & Saner, 1992: p. 69) What Arendt wants to express here is that people should indeed pay attention to avoid understanding Nazi guilt in terms of Satanic grandeur, but at the same time, they should pay attention to the understanding that Nazi guilt is different from people’s cognitive habit of understanding of evil and innocence. Nazi guilt is intended to make an organized attempt to achieve eliminating the concept of man. It was this basic judgment of Nazi guilt that prompted Arendt further to explore Radical evil and Extreme evil.

Radical evil is the concept that Arendt proposes when working on the operational logic of total domination. “Total domination, which strives to organize the infinite plurality and differentiation of human beings as if all humanity were just one individual, is possible only if each and every person can be reduced to a never-changing identity of reactions, so that each of these bundles of reactions can be exchanged at random for any other... The camps are meant not only to exterminate people and degrade human beings, but to also serve the ghastly experiment of eliminating under scientifically controlled conditions, spontaneity itself as an expression of human behavior and of transforming the human personality into a mere thing, into something that even animals are not.” (Arendt, 1976: p. 438) The question now is, how is this total domination possible? Arendt divided its implementation into three steps. One is to deprive their legal rights of people, where the Nazis systematically and by every possible means make people, especially Jews, lose his (her) country. When people lose their countries, they also lose the protection of the law, and they lose any legal or civil rights. Second, it destroys the moral compositions of people. The camps are full of living corpses, which makes martyrdom impossible for the first time in human history. In the face of extreme cruel living environment, people’s fate is completely at the mercy of the environment (concentration camp), and even choose death is no longer possible. When individuals are unable to change the environment and have to survive, so is it possible to be alone here, or is it possible to preserve their conscience for themselves? The answer is no. When an individual faces the choice to kill friends or family, when a mother faces the choice of her

son or daughter death, how can people still have conscience? The choice faced here is no longer good and evil or good and bad, but just killing this one or that one. However, this is still not the most terrible place of total domination, its real realization lies in the third step, namely, to make people superfluous. “For to destroy individuality is to destroy spontaneity, man’s power to begin something new out of his own resources, something that cannot be explained on the basis of reactions to an environment and events.” (Arendt, 1976: p. 455) For Arendt, the most terrible thing is not to destroy the whole man, but to systematically make people inhuman, and to make their infinite diversities and differences become superfluous, which Arendt calls Radical evil.

“When the impossible was made possible it became unpunishable, unforgivable absolute evil which could no longer be understood and explained by evil motives... this newest species of criminals is beyond the pale even of solidarity in human sinfulness.” (Arendt, 1976: p. 459) Arendt thus led to the concept of Radical evil. First, “It is inherent in our entire philosophical tradition that we cannot conceive of a ‘radical evil,’ and this is true both for Christian theology, which conceded even the Devil himself a celestial origin, as well as for Kant, the only philosopher who, in the word he coined for it, at least must have suspected the existence of this evil even though he immediately rationalized it in the concept of a ‘perverted ill will’ that could be explained by comprehensible motives”; second, Radical evil overpowers reality “and breaks down all standards that we know. There is only one thing that seems discernible: we may say that radical evil has emerged in connection with a system in which all men have become superfluous”. (Arendt, 1976: p. 459) From the arguments of Radical evil proposed by Arendt, we can draw the following conclusions: first, Radical evil marks a new type of evil, which breaks all the standards that people know; second, Radical evil means that man becomes superfluous; third, the harm of Radical evil is unprecedented, and it overwhelms all the reality.

On the eve of Arente publishing *The Origin of totalitarianism*, she sent it to Jaspers as a birthday gift, who read it and wrote, “hasn’t Jahwe faded too far out of sight?” (Kohler & Saner, 1992: p. 165). Arendt thought for a long time about how to respond, but it did trigger Arendt to reflect on Radical evil. “Evil has proved to be more radical than expected... the Western Tradition is suffering from the preconception that the most evil things human beings can do arise from the vice of selfishness. Yet we know that the greatest evils or radical evil has nothing to do anymore with such humanly understandable, sinful motives. What radical evil really is I don’t know, but it seems to me it somehow has to do with the following phenomenon: making human beings as human beings superfluous (not using them as a 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. And all this in turn arises from—or better, goes along with—the delusion of the om-

nipotence (not simply 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 in the plural should exist at all—just as in monotheism it is only God’s omnipotence that makes him ONE. So, in this same way the omnipotence of an individual man would make men superfluous.” (Kohler & Saner, 1992: p. 166) In Arendt’s view, behind Radical evil is the divine of man, the omnipotent individual that makes the diversities of others superfluous. But as Jaspers pointed out, Jahwe has gone far, and the omnipotent individual is only an illusion. It was the understanding of the radical implication of Radical evil (the omnipotent individual is an illusion) that Arendt turned to the exploration of Extreme evil, aiming to further reveal the new evil connotation of Nazi guilt. Different from the latent devil understanding of Radical evil, Extreme evil emphasizes the banality of evil. The banality of evil is a reillustration of the destructive features of Radical evil, which criticizes its demon-understanding rather than opposes to the destructive fact itself. Therefore, compared with Radical evil, Extreme evil is that Arendt go one step forward in thinking about Nazi guilt, that is, Radical and Extreme evil are progressive relationship, rather than juxtaposition or opposition.

3. Extreme Evil: Thought-Defying Evil

Arendt retained the sensitivity to the word “radical” when using the expression of Radical evil. Arendt knew that the word “radical” came from its Latin root “radix”, which meant roots, so it was easy to think of some kind of reach to the root, which led Arendt to abandon the expression of Radical evil to avoid thinking that there may be some deep root (devilish understanding). “I meant that evil is not radical, going to the roots (radix), that it has no depth, and that for this very reason it is so terribly difficult to think about, since thinking, by definition, wants to reach the roots. Evil is a surface phenomenon, and instead of being radical, it is merely extreme. We resist evil by not being swept away by the surface of things, by stopping ourselves and beginning to think.” (Arendt, 1976: p. 479) When Arendt turned her attention to the possible problems of Radical evil, she stopped using the expression and converted it to Extreme evil. In contrast to Radical evil, Extreme evil emphasizes that evil is a surface phenomenon, which has no depth. This surface phenomenon without depth or root of evil is what Arendt called “the banality of evil”. The following specifies the actual use of the banality of evil as described in Arendt.

The banality of evil was the concept presented in Arendt’s *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, which appeared in the last sentence of the chapter preceding the conclusion of the book. Arendt described how Eichmann went to the execution ground, quoting Eichmann’s final words, “After a short while gentlemen, we shall all meet again. Such is the fate of all men. Long live Germany, long live Argentina, long live Austria. I shall not forget them.” (Arendt, 1965: p. 252) In response to Eichmann’s last words, Arendt commented, “In the face of death, he had found the cliché used in funeral oratory. Under the gallows, his memory

played him the last trick; he was 'elated' and he forgot that this was his own funeral. It was as though in those last minutes he was summing up the lesson that this long course of human wickedness had taught us—the lesson of the fearsome, word-and-thought-defying *banality of evil*." (Arendt, 1965: p. 252) So, what is the banality of evil meant to be? Arendt wrote in her note, "when I speak of the banality of evil, I do so only on the strictly factual level, pointing to a phenomenon which stared one in the face at the trial. Eichmann was not Iago and not Macbeth, and nothing would have been farther from his mind than to determine with Richard III 'to prove a villain.' Except for an extraordinary diligence in looking out for his personal advancement, he had no motives at all . . . He merely, to put the matter colloquially, *never realized what he was doing*. It was precisely this lack of imagination which enabled him to sit for months on end facing a German Jew who was conducting the police interrogation, pouring out his heart to the man and explaining again and again how it was that he reached only the rank of lieutenant colonel in the S.S. and that it had not been his fault that he was not promoted... He was not stupid. It was sheer thoughtlessness—something by no means identical with stupidity—that predisposed him to become *one of the greatest criminals of that period*." (Arendt, 1965: pp. 287-288) Arendt stated here that to understand the banality of evil, one must return to the fact that Eichmann was at trial, the banality of evil did not mean anything else otherwise. More specifically, Eichmann's performances during the interrogation suggested that he was not stupid but thoughtless. Arendt here apparently did not deny Eichmann's guilt for his thoughtlessness, on the contrary, first assuming that he was one of the greatest criminals of the period. Therefore, Arendt opposed the discrimination that he was only a part of the Nazi machine, that is, cog-theory.

"In every bureaucratic system the shifting responsibilities is a matter of daily routine, and if one wishes to define bureaucracy in terms of political science, that is, as a form of government—the rule of offices, as contrasted to the rule of men, of one man, or the few, or the many—bureaucracy unhappily is the rule of nobody and for this very reason perhaps the least human and most cruel form of rulership. But in the courtroom, these definitions are of no avail. For to the answer: 'Not I but the system did it in which I was a cog,' the court immediately raises the next question: 'And why, if you please, did you become a cog or continue to be a cog under such circumstances'... The Eichmann trial, like all such trials, would have been devoid of all interest if it had not transformed the cog or 'referent' of Section IV B4 in the Reich Security Head Office into a man. Only because this operation was achieved before the trial started could the question of personal responsibility, and hence legal guilt, arise at all." (Kohn, 2003: pp. 31-32) This cog-theory has two aspects: on the one hand, the selector is aware of his (her) choice that his (her) choice is independent, but voluntarily gives up his (her) autonomy, so as to attribute his (her) choice to the system or The times, so the selector is still responsible for his (her) own behavior; on the other hand, the

selector is not aware of his (her) choice, that is, his (her) choice is thoughtless, so naturally choose to make a cog, then he (she) will not realize that he (she) is a cog, so to be a cog as a confession is not valid. In a court, a man acts only as a man, and not as a cog. But there is still a question that when the court tries the person who naturally chooses to be cog (the Eichmann's people), the court can certainly be convicted of his (her) crime, but the Eichmann's people now is tantamount to an inhuman one. In other words, the court in fact ruled on an inhuman people, and Eichmann is indeed human. What really puzzles people here is not Eichmann's guilt, but the fact that human become inhuman. Eichmann's people greatly challenge our understanding of people as human, which is what Arendt's the banality of evil wants to express.

Thus, Arendt gave a further explanation of the banality of evil in his article "Thinking and Moral considerations". "Some years ago, reporting the trial of Eichmann in Jerusalem, I spoke of 'the banality of evil' and meant with this no theory or doctrine but something quite factual, the phenomenon of evil deeds, committed on a gigantic scale, which could not be traced to any particularity of wickedness, pathology or ideological conviction in the doer, whose only personal distinction was perhaps extraordinary shallowness. However monstrous the deeds, the doer was neither monstrous nor demonic, and the only specific characteristic one could detect in his past as well as in his behavior during the trial and the preceding police examination was something entirely negative: it was not stupidity but a curious, quite inability to think. He functioned in the role of a prominent war criminal as well as he had under the Nazi regime: he had not the slightest difficulty in accepting an entirely different set of rules. He knew that what he had once considered his duty was now called a crime, and he accepted this new code of judgment as though it were nothing but another language rule." (Arendt, 1971: p. 417) Arendt here further pointed out that the Eichmann's man was not a monster or a devil, and he (she) had no physical sickness, or even an advocate or practitioner of fanatical ideology, but just absolute obedience without any obstacle. Eichmann was not stupid, he can accept many sets of rules and practice them. But all of these are abnormal and strange, they are the performances of thoughtlessness. So the real question here is why people who are everything normal can't think. In other words, to understand the banality of evil requires a further examination of human thinking.

As in Richard J. Bernstein, Arendt's the banality of evil caused such a strong reaction (misunderstanding and opposition), because she makes a deeply rooted thinking about evil into doubt, this thinking has "psychologically appealing and that frequently becomes dominant in times of perceived crisis", it is the good and evil as strict binary mode of thinking (Bernstein, 2016: p. 150). In the binary thinking mode of good and evil, both good and evil seem to be clear facts. There are only two types of people involved in the crime, one is criminal and the other is innocent. If someone does something appalling, like Eichmann, then he(she) must be a monster or devil. Eichmann must be a sadistic, or morally corrupt

person, or anti-Semitic, with all sorts of pathological intentions and motives. The deep-rooted mindset of the binary between good and evil makes it difficult for people to accept the sad truth that evil is never determined to be good or bad. But after Auschwitz, people can no longer rely on the traditional way of thinking about evil, but must think about evil in new ways. One has to explain why, without any evil motives, a perfectly normal man can commit heinous crimes and still be held responsible. In the modern era of bureaucracy, unmanned management makes extreme evil not only can but also happens, and no one is responsible for it. Because of all of these, it is more urgent to explore human thinking, otherwise not only may self-deception, but also may become more degenerate.

4. Thinking: A Political Activity

The banality of evil is thought-defying, which is thoughtless. Thought, by definition, is to explore the depth or reach the roots, so it first presupposes that the object of inquiry has its root. Relying on this root, thought can fully grasp the object of inquiry. The inquiry of evil based on the way of thought is frustrated, because evil has nothing root and what evil has is its banality. Radical evil made Arendt realize that even with this new evil, there could still be a traditional way of thinking about evil, namely, the monstrous or demonic style of thinking of Radical evil. The banality of evil opposes the traditional way of thinking about evil, and understands the spread of Nazi crimes as sweeping like bacteria. The banality of evil advocates a new way of thinking about evil, and it opposes the once and for all thinking (thoughtlessness). Therefore, Arendt paid special attention to inquiry thinking, emphasizing that human thinking was a political activity.

The reason why thinking is interpreted as a political activity is first related to Arendt's understanding of human beings. In Arendt's view, man is pariah, and pariah is the human mode, which is of great importance to the evaluation of human beings today. Pariah means not only the social state of human, homeless, but also independence or freedom (Arendt, 1978a: p. 83). The understanding of human as pariah is related to the time of Arendt herself. On the one hand, Arendt herself was German Jewish; on the other hand, Arendt lived in Germany, a Nazi-ruled Germany. It was the identity of pariah that made Arendt realize the importance of being an independent thinker. This independent thinking is "a new kind of thinking that needs" no pillars and props, no standards and traditions to move freely without crutches over unfamiliar terrain" (Arendt, 1968: p. 10). Independent thinking has no ready available reference, and must be fought for. Just as Kafka was always living in the fight between the past and the future, independent thinking is always in the endless struggle between the past and the future. Therefore, independent thinking is not "such mental processes as deducing, inducing, and drawing conclusions whose logical rules of noncontradiction and inner consistency can be learned once and for all and then need only to be

applied” (Arendt, 1961: p. 14). The traditional way of thinking is closely related to the above spiritual processes, and the reason why Arendt distinguished it from independent thinking is to emphasize that independent thinking is “a creative activity which requires remembrance, story-telling, and imagination. It also requires the virtues of both courage and independence.” (Villa, 2000: p. 279) Further, thinking itself comes from the examples of life experience, and must be associated with them, using them as the only landmarks for their meaning. While Arendt also emphasized thinking at a distance from life experience and the need to be alone and quiet, the belief that thinking can be divorced from the world of everyday experience is the most dangerous illusion. In the history of philosophy, this represents a deep-rooted tendency to depreciate opinions and escape the contingency in the changing life experience. Arendt called someone who indulged in this tendency of philosophical history as a professional thinker, which was the main reason why she was reluctant to call herself a philosopher but an independent thinker.

Understanding human as pariah, and being an independent thinker rather than a professional thinker, is the subject of Arendt’s “philosophy and politics”. In this article, Arendt provided important explanations on the activity that thinking is political. In Arendt’s view, the mainstream tradition of political philosophy went back to Plato. When philosophers turn their attention to the scattered and confused political world, their goals are not to understand politics, but to impose the absolute standards in philosophy to politics, in which there are always competing pluralistic claims of opinions. The philosopher wants to avoid the mental disorder in politics, and wants to resort to the eternal and absolute standards of truth to manage politics, which is a tradition born from the despair of Plato that the execution of Socrates bears. But Arendt clearly distinguished between Plato and Socrates. Socrates was not hiding from the city-state, he walked in the market, into the middle of opinions, trying to help people come to what they thought, to find the truth in their opinions. This truth is realized through conversations, and the conversations which produce truth do not destroy opinions, but return to opinions in their own truth. “The role of the philosopher, then, is not to rule the city but to be its ‘gadfly’, not to tell philosophical truths but to make citizens more truthful. The difference with Plato is decisive: Socrates did not want to educate the citizens so much as he wanted to improve their *doxai*, which constituted the political life in which he too took part. To Socrates, maieutic was a political activity, a give and take, fundamentally on a basis of strict equality, the fruits of which could not be measured by the result of arriving at this or that general truth.” (Arendt, 1990: p. 81) What Socrates wanted to do was not to inform, educate and manage, but to make Athens citizens like him to think. All he wanted to do was the gadfly. For Socrates, learning to think is living a political life, or communicating with the opinions of other citizens, thus showing their opinions in their own truth. Socrates always focused on the truth of opinions rather than destroying opinions.

This kind of political activity of thinking (the conversations with different

opinions) is more concentrated and reflected in *The Life of the Mind*. Arendt's discussions of thinking here was based on four pairwise related propositions from Heidegger. Among the most important is that thinking does not bring knowledge like science. Arendt distinguished between thinking and knowing (science), with the former focusing on meaning, while the latter focusing on truth (knowledge). To illustrate the distinction between thinking and knowing, Arendt appealed to Kant's distinction between understanding and reason. Understanding is to explore knowledge, while reason tries to go beyond knowledge. Thinking, like reason, tries to ask questions that are impossible to answer, but it cannot stop itself from asking them. Therefore, thinking wants not (and cannot be) knowledge but meaning. Just like understanding and reason, thinking and knowing are not completely broken. Knowing that it is no longer possible without thinking, and thinking is on the premise of knowing. "By posing unanswerable questions of meaning, men establish themselves as question-asking beings. Behind all the cognitive questions for which men find answers, there lurk the unanswerable ones that seem entirely idle and have always been denounced as such. It is more than likely that men, if they were ever to lose the appetite for meaning we call thinking and cease to ask unanswerable questions would lose not only the ability to produce those thought-things that we call works of art but also capacity to ask answerable questions upon which every civilization is founded." (Arendt, 1978b: p. 62) Second, thinking does not answer the puzzles of the universe. The proposition is related to the first proposition, just as Kant criticized the fallacy of traditional metaphysics, which gave philosophy the intellectual task beyond scientific knowledge, namely, solving the puzzles of the universe. Get free thinking from knowing, and enhance curiosity from curiosity. But here with Arendt, Kant's work was not enough, preferring to combine thinking with art or poetry like Heidegger. In modern society, the forgetting of thinking or the performance of thoughtlessness is the kind of catastrophic inducement to equate thinking with infinite knowing of exploring truth.

Not only does thinking not directly bring knowledge, it also does not directly guide behavior. The relationship between thinking and behavior is the remaining two propositions of thinking. One is thinking does not produce usable practical wisdom, the other is thinking does not directly empower people to act. The emergence of Eichmann's evil makes the traditional moral and ethical disciplines no longer applicable. When Arendt witnessed Eichmann and Eichmann's thoughtlessness, she asked herself: whether the question of good and evil, whether people's ability to distinguish between right and wrong, may be related to their ability to think? Arendt pointed out, "to be sure, not in the sense that thinking would ever be able to produce the good deed as its result, as though 'virtue could be taught' and learned - only habits and customs can be taught, and we know only too well the alarming speed with which they are unlearned and forgotten when new circumstances demand a change in manners and patterns of behavior." (Arendt, 1978b: p. 5) Arendt could not forget the painful lessons of

the totalitarianism, and how the familiar habits and customs were easily changed one night. “Without much notice all this collapsed almost overnight and then it was as though morality suddenly stood revealed... as a set of mores, customs and manners which could be exchanged for another set with hardly more trouble than it would take to change the table manners of an individual or a people.” (Bernstein, 1996: p. 147) It was these personal experiences that made Arendt deeply suspicious of morality, habits and customs, which therefore guided her to focus on and emphasize the role of thinking. “Thinking deals with invisibles, with representations of things that are absent; judgment always concerns particulars and things close at hand. But the two are interrelated, as are consciousness and conscience. If thinking—the two-in-one of soundless dialogue—actualizes the difference within our identity as given in consciousness and thereby results in conscience as its by-product, then judging, the by-product of the liberating effect of thinking, realizes thinking, makes it manifest in the world of appearances, where I am never alone and always too busy to be able to think. The manifestation of the wind of thought is not knowledge; it is the ability to tell right from wrong, beauty from ugly. And this, at the rare moments when the stakes are on the table, may indeed prevent catastrophes, at least for the self.” (Arendt, 1978b: p. 193) Thinking is different from judging. Judging always deals with special things, so it is visible in reality, which is visible in the phenomenon world. In other words, judging can directly guide people’s behavior here. And thinking is also not usable practical wisdom (judgment), cannot directly give people the power of behavior, thinking deals with invisible things. Arendt here compared thinking to the wind in nature, although invisible, but actually affected things. On the other hand, judgment is the attached product of thinking, and it is the manifestation of the realization of thinking in the real world. In this way, in the very moment when evil comes, thinking may indeed prevent disaster, at least to the thinker himself (herself).

5. Conclusion

To sum up, the Eichmann’s people is the one thoughtlessness, he (she) cannot even say a sentence that is not a cliché, even his (her) final words, but it is such a person who commits heinous crimes. “The longer one listened to him, the more obvious it became that his inability to speak was closely connected with an inability to think, namely, to think from the standpoint of somebody else. No communication was possible with him, not because he lied but because he was surrounded by the most reliable of all safeguards against the words and the presence of others, and hence against reality as such.” (Arendt, 1965: p. 49) Eichmann could not communicate with others because he just repeated or obeyed the already rigid command sentences (platitudes), and he could not think in the shoes of others. Eichmann’s own manuscripts confirmed Arendt’s judgment, “From my childhood, obedience was something I could not get out of my system... Now that I look back, I realize that a life predicated on being obedient

is a very comfortable life indeed. Living in such a way reduces to a minimum one's own need to think." (Cohen, 1999: p. A1, A3) In Eichmann's view, thoughtlessness was not only obeying and executing orders but also very comfortable. He did not know that behind such thoughtlessness hid extreme evil. On the surface, Eichmann seems far away, but as with the horror listed at the beginning of this article, Eichmann's people are actually always with us. In order to prevent and avoid similar tragedies from happening again and again, everyone needs to rethink and take seriously the banality of evil revealed by Arendt. The banality of evil is Eichmann's incompetence of thinking, so it is urgent to emphasize the independent thinking that is a political activity.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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