Hannah Arendt and Moral Evil: Connecting the Radical and the Banal

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To my mother, who, out of all the goodness in her heart, taught
me about the dark side of humanity.

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Introduction

Evil has been present throughout the entire history of humanity: be it a war in the Roman empire or the war against terrorism. Philosophy naturally always has been investigating evil and morality. How can we understand the role of evil in the world, and even come to accept its existence? In this thesis, I will zoom in on one specific topic in the spectrum of the investigations into evil: Hannah Arendt's theory of evil.

     The fascinating aspect of Arendt's theory of evil is that it is clearly divided into two conceptions. Up until the famous trial of Nazi leader Adolf Eichmann, Arendt defended a theory of radical evil, with the Holocaust as a horribly accurate example. After the trial, however, she proposed the banality of evil, a concept that (at first) seems to contrast the concept of radical evil. This seemingly contrasting shift of thought caught the interest of the academic world: some argue that Arendt indeed made a radical turn, while others think that the difference is only superficial, not fundamental. This discussion is still relevant today, as Arendt is one of the leading philosophers in the contemporary debate about secular theories of evil. The ongoing discussion has led me to the main question of this thesis: how should we understand Hannah Arendt's two conceptions of evil, and how do they relate to each other?

Before anything else, I want to limit the kind of evil I will be discussing. I will exclusively be talking about *moral* evil, the kind of evil that is caused by human beings. This thus does not include *natural* evil such as natural disasters or diseases.

Although Arendt proposed her conceptions of evil in the context of World War II, they are still relevant today. Current evil might differ in form from the evil Arendt described; current phenomena like the war on terror *still* constitute evil on a large scale. A thorough conception of how Arendt's evil would help us understand these phenomena is beyond the scope of this thesis, but they still are the contemporary issues that make research into Arendt's conceptions of evil important. Any such analysis, however, will need clarity about how Arendt's conception of radical evil and banality relate. Therefore, this thesis aims to provide the preparation for such an investigation. I will return to the contemporary relevance briefly in my conclusions.

I will start the thesis by discussing the concept of radical evil in chapter 1. After showing that radical evil essentially revolves around dehumanization of human beings, I will turn to the subject of the banality of evil in chapter 2. I will argue that banality in this context should be understood as a new level on which we should comprehend moral evil, after which I will address the controversy that arose regarding the term 'banality of evil'. In the last chapter, I will compare both Arendt's notions of evil, and argue that we should understand these concepts in a different way: with this interpretation, radical evil and the banality of evil can be compatible. I will then briefly discuss the possible applications of this compatibility, focusing on the question whether both conceptions of evil are applicable outside of a totalitarian context. This will lead to the conclusion of the thesis, where I will answer the main question and briefly get back to its value for understanding contemporary evil.

Chapter 1: Radical Evil

The first clear conception of evil to be found in Hannah Arendt's work, is that of radical evil. She proposed the term in her 1951 book *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (hereafter: *Origins*), explaining it in the context of totalitarianism in Nazi Germany and Stalinist Russia. In the first editions of the *Origins* she sometimes refers to it as 'absolute evil', something that disappears in her later works. It follows from studying the *Origins* that the two terms seem to be commutable, which is acknowledged by the main secondary literature.[1]

I will interpret Arendt's conception of radical evil by mainly following the last chapters of the *Origins* and some of her correspondence with Karl Jaspers. I will first situate Arendt's conception of evil in a historical context. Then I will address the nature of radical evil, and follow Arendt's analysis of the three-step-process that radical evil entails. Hereafter I will question the relation between radical evil and totalitarianism, and close the chapter with a short discussion of the evil-doers involved.

1.1 Situating Hannah Arendt's conception of evil

Conceptions of moral evil can be roughly divided into two categories: religious conceptions and secular conceptions. Up until now, the former category has had a much bigger role in history. Moral evil was explained by claiming that evil is the existence of a devilish counterpart to God, or by claiming that evil is a privation of the good. The latter claim was popular among religious nations and philosophers, because it is compatible with the claim that God creates no evil, which is obviously of fundamental importance in traditional religion. However, neither of the claims have been completely satisfactory: why would God allow a privation of good to exist in the world, and how are we supposed to understand concepts like pain in this context? This, and the rising secularity of society, eventually led to purely secular theories of evil.[2]

Conventionally, we say that completely secular theories of evil are relatively new: Immanuel Kant was the first to propose such a theory in 1793.[3] This was still a rather broad theory about both evil on a larger scale, the kind Arendt discusses, as well as merely bad-doing.

In short, Kant argues that evil-doing is choosing self-love over the moral law.[4] This moral law is the categorical imperative: actions are morally correct only if the actor in all fairness can want the maxim under which he performed the action to be raised as a universal law. Kant claimed that human beings always act according to their individual fundamental maxim, which is either morally right (according to the moral law) or morally wrong. Although human beings are free to choose this fundamental law, and therefore are not

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[1] See for example Richard J. Bernstein, "Did Hannah Arendt Change Her Mind?", in *Hannah Arendt: Twenty Years Later*, ed. Larry May and Jerome Kohn (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 1996), 127-146.
[2] Todd Calder, "The Concept of Evil," in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Fall 2015 edition), ed. Edward N. Zalta, http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2015/entries/concept-evil/ (retrieved June 8, 2016), 2.1.
[3] Ibid., 2.2.
[4] Immanuel Kant, "Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone," in *Religion and Rational Theology*, ed. and trans. Allen Wood and George di Giovanni (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 39-216.

innately good or evil, Kant claims that evil is rooted in *mankind*, and therefore radical.[5] Evil thus is a necessary aspect of mankind as a whole, not of individual human beings.

Although heavily influenced by Kant, Arendt was among the first to propose a theory exclusively on "narrow evil, [...] the most morally despicable sorts of actions, characters, events, etc."[6] Arendt borrows the term 'radical evil' from Kant, but fundamentally changes it. Whereas she follows Kant in reasoning the human condition is somehow poisoned with evil, she does not follow the Kantian view that radical evil is somehow *rooted* in human nature. This led her to develop a theory opposed to the historical religious conceptions of evil and focused on the narrow conception of evil.

1.2 Defining radical evil

Arendt argues that radical evil is the kind of evil that is beyond any moral evil that we have ever experienced in the history of human nature. Whereas the evil that we have experienced up until the Holocaust involved sadistic monsters, revengeful motives or a hunger for power, radical evil goes beyond these familiar causes.

Radical evil has two important aspects. In a letter to Karl Jaspers, Arendt writes that "we know that the greatest evils or radical evil has nothing to do anymore with such humanly understandable, sinful motives."[7] This reveals the first important aspect of radical evil: it goes beyond human comprehension, and "could no longer be understood and explained by the evil motives of self-interest."[8] It is in that sense "absolute because it can no longer be deduced from humanly comprehensible motives,"[9] being the aforementioned motives like power or revenge.

Arendt argues that we have long been mistaken in our conception of evil: the classic image of some malicious red devil who tortures people is an image that has expired.[10,11] The newest, most dangerous kind of evil in the first half of the twentieth century (and in the years after), is this radical evil, which not only has a different way to express itself in a three-step-process which I will discuss below, but a significantly different essence. This is the second important aspect of radical evil: "individual human beings did not kill other individual human beings for human reasons, but [...] an organized attempt was made to *eradicate the concept of the human being*."[12]

It is only possible to give an *interpretation* of the concept of radical evil, as Arendt has never been explicitly clear on the definition. In the same letter to Jaspers, she writes: "What radical evil really is *I don't know*, but it seems to me it somehow has to do with the following

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[5] Kant, "Religion," 6:33.
[6] Calder, "The Concept of Evil," introduction.
[7] L. Kohler and H. Saner, ed., *Hannah Arendt-Karl Jaspers Correspondence 1926-1969* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1992), 166.
[8] Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, renewed edition (New York: Harcourt Inc., 1973), 459.
[9] Ibid., ix.
[10] Kohler and Saner, *Hannah Arendt-Karl Jaspers*, 54/62/69.
[11] Susan Neiman, "Banality Reconsidered," in *Politics in Dark Times: Encounters with Hannah Arendt*, ed. Seyla Benhabib (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 305-315, 306-308.
[12] Kohler and Saner, *Hannah Arendt-Karl Jaspers*, 69, my emphasis.

phenomenon: making human beings as human beings superfluous."[13] This 'superfluousness' she mentions, has later become *the* definition of Arendt's radical evil. It seems that it does not only have "something to do" with making human beings superfluous, but that this is its essence: secondary literature tends to make these concepts almost interchangeable.[14] Radical evil tries to get rid of the *human being qua human being,* that is, leaving nothing but living corpses – beings who are "at once human and non-human."[15]

Arendt notes that this evil showed itself most clearly in the extermination camps that were present during the Holocaust. In these camps, human beings (although dehumanized in a psychological sense) were not only superfluous but also completely arbitrary. After the process of dehumanization, it did not matter anymore if the victims had ever existed at all. In the camps, the world stood "outside of life and death."[16] The dehumanization erased the individual human being as well as the universal or overall importance of men. It not only did not matter anymore if a human being was alive or dead, it did not matter if he *ever was*.

1.3 Three steps to dehumanization

In the *Origins*, Arendt explains that this process of dehumanization (and thus the process of radical evil) involves three steps, which can be found in the systematic extermination of the Jewish society during the Holocaust. It is important to note that with 'total domination' in this context, she means the total domination needed to make human beings superfluous.

Regarding the three steps, Arendt writes: "The first essential step on the road to total domination is to kill the juridical person in man."[17] What does she mean when she says this? To do such a thing, one has to make sure that the victim lives in an environment where there is no system of law to be found. Protection and punishment hereby become arbitrary. Arendt underlines in this context the necessity of "the element of the innocent" in the concentration camps: the camps were filled with criminals (murderers or opponents of the regime) as well as with people who did not do anything wrong their entire life.[18] This broke the causal relationship between behaviour and punishment: it did not matter if you chose to cooperate or disobey. This "arbitrary arrest which chooses among innocent people destroys the validity of free consent, just as torture […] destroys the possibility of opposition."[19] The victim's juridical person must be eliminated by taking away the state-like environment in terms of laws and justice qua punishment. Behaviour will thus have no causal relationship with protection and punishment anymore - justice will become some complete arbitrary and empty concept.

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[13] Kohler and Saner, *Hannah Arendt-Karl Jaspers*, 69, my emphasis.
[14] See for example Richard J. Bernstein, Kees van Hattem, etc.
[15] Richard J. Bernstein, "Are Arendt's Reflections on Evil Still Relevant?", in *Politics in Dark Times: Encounters with Hannah Arendt*, ed. Seyla Behabib (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 293-304, 297.
[16] Arendt, *Origins*, 444.
[17] Ibid., 447.
[18] Ibid., 433-435/448-449.
[19] Ibid., 451.

The second step is "the murder of the moral person in man."[20] By this, Arendt means the total eradication of the possibility to make a (moral) difference as an individual. Apart from the fact that, as explained in the first step, it did not matter for your fate if you cooperated or disobeyed, any protesting against the regime was of complete usefulness; it would never reach other members of the society. Individuals were being anonymized: "the concentration camps, by making death itself anonymous (making it impossible to find out whether a prisoner is dead or alive) robbed death of its meaning as the end of a fulfilled life."[21] A victim could protest and disagree as much as he would like, it did not make any difference. There was no way of his protest ever reaching the outside world. Another way of achieving the eradication of the moral person, is to force him to commit some evil act, with no way out: "when even suicide would mean the immediate murder of his own family-how is he to decide? The alternative is no longer between good and evil, but between murder and murder."[22]

The final step is to eliminate "the one thing that still prevents men from being made into living corpses […] the differentiation of the individual, his unique identity."[23] This began with the anonymizing of the victims by making their exteriors look exactly the same, and was completed with the most essential step of dehumanization: the eradication of the spontaneity of the human being. Once its freedom, its juridical and moral judgement is erased, a human being is no longer spontaneous. Its behaviour is of that moment completely predictable, thereby erasing a core concept of the human being, namely its individuality. The only thing that is left is a living corpse, nothing but a small cog in a dehumanized system.

Even though World War II motivated Arendt to theorize this concept of radical evil, it is not entirely clear if the radical evil emerged out of the totalitarianism, or was uncovered by it. Although Arendt claims it to be the greatest evil in the history of humanity, it does not follow that this kind of evil was *conceived* by totalitarianism: it could also be the case that the twentieth century totalitarianism was the first occasion for the radical evil to exist in its pure form. In the preface of the *Origins*, Arendt argues that "if it is true that in the final stages of totalitarianism an absolute evil appears […] it is also true that without it we might never have known the truly radical nature of Evil."[24] This implies the latter: moral evil has always had a potential deep and radical layer, but had yet never showed itself earlier in history.

Until now, I have only spoken of the undergoing of the radical evil, but not yet of the executers of radical evil. It is important to understand the complete concept of radical evil, not only the process and the results, but also the evildoers: in the end, they are the ones that start the actual process of making human beings superfluous. I will interpret some of the passages in Arendt's work that reflect on this subject, and discuss how we should understand this.

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[20] Arendt, *Origins*, 451.
[21] Ibid., 452.
[22] Ibid.
[23] Ibid., 453.
[24] Ibid., ix.

Arendt rejects the concept of devil-like monsters - Margaret Canovan states she even "never had thought in terms of 'monsters and demons'."[25] In the context of radical evil, Arendt rejects men who do evil because they have some sort of bad will, because, as said, radical evil goes *beyond* evil motives like selfishness or corrupted will – "what meaning has the concept of murder when we are confronted with the mass production of corpses?"[26] The men who execute such an evil must therefore also be on some sort of level of 'inhumanity'. In her 1963 book *Eichmann in Jerusalem,* Arendt briefly mentions the executioners in the camps: "the murderers were not sadists or killers by nature; on the contrary, a systematic effort was made to weed out all those who derived physical pleasure from what they did."[27] Previously, in the *Origins,* she had already made a similar comment: "The manipulators of this system believe in their own superfluousness as much as in that of all others, and the totalitarian murderers are all the more dangerous because they do not care if they themselves are alive or dead, if they ever lived or never were born."[28] This implies that the evil-doers, the executioners in the camps, are also somehow influenced by the radical evil – they do not have understandable evil motives like hunger for power, they are some level of inhuman and superfluous themselves. This shows that the system of radical evil affects all people involved, and thus has an even larger victim-count than one might intuitively think.[29]

This is an aspect of Arendt's theory where she distinguishes herself from common evil theories. The suggestion of evil without evil motives "also indicates an object that has no intention whatsoever. This, we saw, was Arendt's greatest break with modern philosophical tradition."[30] The evil-doer is no longer portrayed as a satanic monster, or as someone with a flawed moral will. Evil is no longer elevated, and evil-doers are no longer fundamentally different from morally just people.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the best way to define Hannah Arendt's concept of radical evil, is in my opinion to understand it as an evil that goes beyond humanly understandable motives like revenge or power and human imagination. The main phenomenon occurring within radical evil is at the same time its goal: to dehumanize human beings, thereby making them superfluous and completely arbitrary.

       This is a first step towards answering the main question: how do the concepts of radical evil and the banality of evil relate to each other? The next step will be the analysis of the banality of evil. The main aspects of radical evil to take with us to the next chapter are the fact that its motives go beyond human understanding, and that its ultimate goal is to make

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[25] Margaret Canovan, *Hannah Arendt: A Reinterpretation of Her Political Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 24, n. 30.

[26] Arendt, *Origins*, 441.

[27] Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, 5th edition (New York: Penguin Books, 1963), 105.

[28] Arendt, *Origins*, 459.

[29] However, it seems that in these passages Arendt only speaks about the actual *murderers* in the camp, and not about the leading figures like Adolf Hitler was in the Holocaust. There is still an open question on how we should understand his position in the system of incomprehensible evil.

[30] Susan Neiman, *Evil in Modern Thought: An Alternative History of Philosophy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002), 301.

human beings superfluous. What then, are goals and motives in the context of the banality of evil? This question is, among others, the subject of chapter 2.

Chapter 2: The Banality of Evil

The second and last clear concept regarding moral evil Hannah Arendt brings to the table, is the concept of 'the banality of evil'. She first mentioned this term in her book *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, which is a report on the trial against Adolf Eichmann in Jerusalem. Although she only mentioned the term once in the entire book, it generated a lot of controversy. After an interpretation of what Arendt meant with 'the banality of evil', I will briefly address how this led to a controversy and close this chapter with some concluding remarks on what are the most important aspects of the banality of evil that we need to take from *Eichmann in Jerusalem*.

2.1 'The Banality of Evil'
First off, it is important to realize that Hannah Arendt never meant the banality of evil as a *theory* of evil: in the last part of *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, she writes that "This book, then, does not deal with […] nor is it, finally and least of all, a theoretical treatise on the nature of evil."[31] In her later book *The Life of the Mind*, she states this even more explicitly: "In my report of it [the Eichmann trial] I spoke of 'the banality of evil.' Behind that phrase, I held no thesis or doctrine."[32]

This absence of a (systematic) theory or thesis makes it hard to grasp a clear understanding of what she meant by the term. Although she did not write a lot about it, there are some important passages in *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, as well as in *The Life of the Mind* and in some of her correspondence that enables us to put together an interpretation of the meaning of the banality of evil.

The most important observation Arendt made in regard to the Eichmann trial, was that Adolf Eichmann was not the satanic monster she expected him to be. Although he was responsible for the deportation of hundreds of thousands of Jews, he struck her as fairly normal. In the introduction to her book *The Life of the Mind*, she writes:

> "I was struck by a manifest shallowness in the doer that made it impossible to trace the uncontestable evil of his deeds to any deeper level of roots or motives. The deeds were monstrous, but the doer - at least the very effective one now on trial - was quite ordinary, commonplace, and neither demonic nor monstrous. There was no sign in him of firm ideological convictions or of specific evil motives, and the only notable characteristic one could detect in his past behavior as well as in his behavior during the trial and throughout the pre-trial police examination was something entirely negative: it was not stupidity but *thoughtlessness*."[33]

Eichmann merely claimed over and over again that he did not think he was in the wrong: he just executed the orders that were given to him. He not only stressed that he never actually

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[31] Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, 285.
[32] Hannah Arendt, *The Life of the Mind, Volume 1: Thinking* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1981), 3.
[33] Ibid., 4.

killed a human being, he stated that "he was incapable of killing."[34] Arendt described Eichmann as someone who was making a fool of himself, "a clown,"[35] having a bad memory and mainly talking in clichés. He was in any case not a great monstrous person with satanic motives: "except for an extraordinary diligence in looking out for his personal advancement, he had no motives at all."[36] Arendt notes that "what was terrifying about Eichmann was his normality rather than his monstrosity."[37]

As said, Arendt never really theorized 'the banality of evil', resulting in having to put together an interpretation out of the pieces she offered in multiple works and correspondence. My interpretation of the banality of evil comes down to the idea that evil manifests itself as banal and superficial, not as heroic or elevated.[38] This manifestation was the main cause for Arendt to call what she saw at the trial 'banal': in *The Life of Mind*, she writes that "it was this absence of thinking […] that awakened my interest."[39] In a letter to Gershom Scholem, Arendt provided a useful metaphor for the superficiality of the banality of evil: "it can overgrow and lay waste the whole world precisely because it spreads like a fungus over the surface."[40]

It is important to grasp the meaning of 'banal' in this context: Arendt explicitly does not mean that it is *commonplace* to execute such evil acts, that it has no importance. Karen Fry explains this clearly when she says that "for Arendt, evil is not banal because it is unimportant or commonplace, but because it is committed by persons through the uncritical acceptance of clichés and propaganda."[41] Arendt only argues that the trial led her to observe that *everyone could do great evil*, there was no need for great motives or a satanic character – evil had become banal.

With the introduction of the banality of evil, Arendt let go of a Kantian perception of evil. Kant claimed that evil is something that has *depth* and *roots* in human nature. Arendt's view of the banality of evil contrasts this, by stating that evil is something that spreads on the surface and, just like fungus, has got no deeper evil causes or motives.[42] This is a whole new way to look at it. Arguing that evil cannot be humanly understandable, is "to seek something less than a full theoretical explanation of it."[43] This is not common for a philosophical conception of evil: it is important to realise that Arendt in this respect offers something different from the existing theories.

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[34] Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, 92.
[35] Ibid., 54.
[36] Ibid., 287.
[37] Ibid., 253.
[38] Kees van Hattem, *Overbodige mensen: Een beschouwing over Hannah Arendt en het kwaad* (Zoetermeer: Uitgeverij Boekencentrum Zoetermeer, 2003), 71.
[39] Arendt, *The Life of the Mind*, 4.
[40] Hannah Arendt, *The Jewish Writings*, ed. Jerome Kohn and Ron H. Feldman (New York: Schocken Books, 2007), 471.
[41] Karen Fry, "Banality of Evil," in *The Wiley Blackwell Encyclopedia of Race, Ethnicity and Nationalism*, ed. John Stone et al. (New Jersey: John Wiley & Sons, 2015), 1-2, http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1002/9781118663202.wberen493/pdf (retrieved June 5, 2016), 1.
[42] Neiman, *Evil in Modern Thought*, 301.
[43] Ibid., 301.

2.2 Controversy

'The banality of evil' led to a lot of controversy among fellow philosophers and members of the post-war society.[44] I will address three examples of the criticism, arguing that this controversy in my opinion mostly relies on misinterpretation of Arendt's writings.

The main criticism was that Arendt treated the Holocaust as if it was 'commonplace', even though it was the greatest horror of the century.[45] The fact that Arendt had called Eichmann "not a monster" was misinterpreted by many (I, however, think Arendt meant that, as said, she thought she would meet a satanic monster, but instead saw a seemingly normal, almost boring person).[46]

Nathan Rotenstreich, on the other hand, criticises Arendt for claiming that such a banality of evil could exist at all. Rotenstreich argues that she did not choose the right word and ignores the fact that what Eichmann did involved a lot of planning and therefore cannot be considered banal.[47]

Although Arendt was of the opinion that Eichmann's death sentence was more than appropriate,[48,49] many felt she let him off the hook by denying him responsibility. These criticisms apparently understood her description of Eichmann as someone who did not have any demonic notions, as her implying that Eichmann did not have a horrible part in the deportation of the Jews and he was not to blame for it. Justice Musmanno argued this when stating that "she says that Eichmann was misjudged, misrepresented, misunderstood, that he was victim of 'hard luck.' Is that not sympathizing?"[50]

However, Arendt never once stated that Eichmann was innocent or that he did not have full responsibility. In the later postscript to *Eichmann in Jerusalem* as well as in the famous letter she wrote to Scholem (as a result of him accusing Arendt of "making a 'mockery'"),[51] she tends to answer to the controversy. She stresses that she has been faithful to her role as Jewish woman,[52] and once again poses her conviction that Eichmann's death sentence was "politically and juridically"[53] correct (although she did not explicitly write 'morally', I do think after reading *Eichmann in Jerusalem* that she was fully convinced of the moral rightness of hanging Eichmann).[18,19] In the last paragraphs of this letter, she actually offers valuable pieces of the still somewhat lean material of writings where Arendt offers

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[44] For a thorough and detailed overview of the controversy, see for example Michael Ezra, "The Eichmann Polemics: Hannah Arendt and Her Critics," *Democratiya* 9 (2007), 141-165, https://www.dissentmagazine.org/wp-content/files_mf/1390334198d9Ezra.pdf (retrieved June 12, 2016).

[45] Another fundamental part of the criticism was that Arendt was 'arrogant' and questioned the integrity and braveness of the Jews; however, this is not of relevance in this discussion of the notion of evil.

[46] Ezra, "The Eichmann Polemics," 145.

[47] Ibid., 81.

[48] Judith Butler, "Hannah Arendt's Death Sentences," *Comparative Literature Studies* 48-3 (2011), 280-295, http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.5325/complitstudies.48.3.0280?seq=1 (retrieved June 12, 2016), 208.

[49] Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, 277-279.

[50] Ezra, "The Eichmann Polemics," 144.

[51] Arendt, *The Jewish Writings*, 465/469.

[52] There is a lot to say on the position of Arendt as a Jewish woman in the context of *Eichmann in Jerusalem*. However, this too is not of relevance in this thesis – this is the reason why I decided not to include this in the discussion of the controversy.

[53] Arendt, *The Jewish Writings,* 470.

explicit explanations on the banality of evil. As far as this controversy has had an upside to it, it is Arendt explicitly explaining what she had meant.

Conclusion
The most important thing to grasp from this discussion is the fact that the banality of evil should not be interpreted as a theory, whereas radical evil should. I therefore want to conclude that radical evil and the banality of evil are essentially two different types of concepts. Although Arendt wrote that she was not sure what radical evil means, she was sure that it existed in the world: she presented a coherent theory around the concept.

This is different for the banality of evil. She never intended to present a theory or deep analysis of evil, it was merely "a phenomenon which stared one in the face at the trial." That, and the discussion of the banality of evil in this chapter, leads me to conclude that the phrase 'the banality of evil' was a mere *observation*, one that ultimately surprised her and fascinated her for the rest of her life.[54]

This is why I do not wish to use the term 'banal evil,' as I do not believe there is such a thing in Arendt's body of thought. The banality is a mere *aspect* of the evil, but the evil itself as a whole is not banal.

This leads me to the next chapter of the thesis, where I will compare the notions of radical evil and the banality of evil, and discuss the possible contradiction or compatibility that will arise.

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[54] Bernstein, "Did Hannah Arendt Change Her Mind?", 127.

Chapter 3: The Fusion of the Radical and the Banal

Are Hannah Arendt's different notions regarding moral evil compatible, or are they mutually exclusive? In this chapter I will argue for the former by comparing the two notions, in specific the way we should understand each of them. I will close the chapter discussing the width of Arendt's conceptions of evil.

I want to stress the point that because of the in chapter 2 mentioned conceptual difference between the two, it is hard (if not impossible) to compare them. However, respecting this aspect of the discussion, I will try to find some parallels and contradictions between the two. This will lead to my final proposition, namely that they are in fact compatible, and that it is valuable for the discussion of secular evil to acknowledge this compatibility.

3.1 Radical alongside banal

When studying radical evil and the banality of evil, there is one important difference to be found: there is an essential shift of focus when discussing radical evil and banality. Whereas the former has a focus on the process of making human beings superfluous, the latter concerns the motives and behaviour of the evil-doer, in this specific case Eichmann. As Richard Bernstein notes, "'the banality of evil' is not an expression that refers to Eichmann's deeds; there was nothing banal about these. Rather, 'the banality of evil' refers to his motives and intentions."[55]

In her theory of radical evil, though, Arendt never mentioned a characteristic example. She merely described the process of making human beings superfluous, that the core act was to eradicate the spontaneity to make human beings completely predictable. Potential intentions were of secondary importance, whereas the banality of evil relies on intentions. One could say that radical evil is about the *internal* process leading towards the goal of making human beings superfluous, while the banality of evil is a judgement or *external* observation of the process.

This misconception of the focus of banality of evil could also be one of the reasons *Eichmann in Jerusalem* resulted in controversy. I will highlight this using an example of a criticism that supervenes on the misconception of the term 'banal'.

Stephen Miller claims that "evil acts, it seems clear, are neither banal nor not banal. The term banality does not apply to evil, just as it does not apply to goodness."[56] This whole criticism relies on a fundamental misconception of the banality of evil. Arendt never explicitly applied the term banality to evil acts! Whatever Miller's conception of 'evil' and 'goodness' may be; he wrongly takes the term 'banality' to concern the mere evil acts. Miller also argues that "it makes sense to use the term banal when talking about ideas, but are the ideas that motivated

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[55] Bernstein, "Arendt's Reflections," 301.
[56] Stephen H. Miller, "A Note on the Banality of Evil," *Wilson Quarterly* 22-4 (1998), 54-59, http://archive.wilsonquarterly.com/sites/default/files/articles/WQ_VOL22_A_1998_Article_02.pdf (retrieved June 6, 2016), 56.

the leading Nazis banal?"[57] Obviously, she did not use the term 'banal' in the way that Miller understood it – she did not talk about ideas when using the term, let alone the ideas that motivated the Nazis. The important insight here is that banality does not concern the *whole* concept of evil.

This difference is one of the main reasons that the two concepts are fairly compatible and could complement each other. When postulating this, I am following Richard Bernstein's line of thought rather than Arendt's. Bernstein is convinced that both radical evil and the banality of evil exist in the world, and do not contradict each other at all.[58] Arendt however, has stated that after *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, she did not believe in the existence of radical evil anymore, let alone its compatibility with the banality of evil. In her letter to Scholem, Arendt writes the following:

> "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 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." Only the good has depth and can be radical."[59]

This excerpt of the letter eradicates the idea that radical evil and the banality of evil can co-exist. In a letter to her friend Mary McCarthy, she confirms this when she writes: "The very phrase, 'the banality of evil,' stands in contrast to the phrase I used in the totalitarianism book, 'radical evil.'"[60] This was also the opinion of Scholem, who wrote to Arendt in his first letter concerning *Eichmann in Jerusalem* that these ideas contradict each other.[61]

However, I think there is a possible interpretation of both that results in them co-existing and complementing each other. As said, I am following Bernstein's line of thought, who also argued against Scholem: "Does the concept of radical evil that Arendt analyses in The Origins of Totalitarianism "contradict" (as Scholem claims) Arendt's notion of the banality of evil? No!"[62] I now want to present two arguments that underline this thought.

The first argument I want to propose is the following. *Because* of the essentially different types of concepts radical evil and the banality of evil are, there is no contradiction, but a compatibility. This is not to say the two *necessarily* have to co-exist: radical evil *can* go without banality. Making human beings superfluous in the concentration camps is *an sich* not banal, but when considering the hundreds of thousands of men that together made this evil possible, without them all being satanic monsters, it has a definite sense of banality to it!

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[57] Miller, "A Note," 56.
[58] Bernstein, "Did Hannah Arendt Change Her Mind?", 142.
[59] Arendt, *The Jewish Writings,* 471.
[60] Carol Brightman, ed., *Between Friends: The Correspondence of Hannah Arendt and Mary McCarthy 1949-1975* (Eugene: Harvest Books, 1996), 54.
[61] Hannah Arendt, *The Jew as Pariah*, ed. R.H. Feldman (New York: Grove Press, 1978), 245.
[62] Bernstein, "Did Hannah Arendt Change Her Mind?", 142.

An example from John Kekes, mentioned in the works of Todd Calder, illustrates the difference between radical evil and banality by distinguishing between two types of evil characters: [63] "Evil characters who cause evil autonomously such as Hitler and Bundy he calls moral monsters, while evil characters who cause evil nonautonomously such as Eichmann and well-meaning yet heartlessly stern parents he calls moral idiots."[64] A character such as Hitler has no aspect of banality, as there is no thoughtlessness to be found in his ideas and leadership, but when Eichmann gets involved in the story, banality comes around.

As for a second argument, I want to argue that in some way, the banality can be seen as an *addition* to the radical evil. As Margaret Canovan puts it, "'banality' was really a more accurate way of *describing* the self-abandonment to inhuman forces and the diminution of human beings to an animal species that she had all along placed at the centre of totalitarianism."[65] This addresses the descriptive *aspect* of the banality of evil, rather than 'banalizing' the evil as a whole.

In conclusion, when interpreting both radical evil and the banality of evil as I have done in the previous chapters, compatibility of the two is a much more inviting option than contradiction.

3.2 The width of evil
One aspect of evil in general I will address now, affects both the conceptions of evil. Both seem to need some process on a very large scale in order to exist as such. Do Arendt's conceptions of evil have value outside of the context of totalitarianism and its total domination?

One reason to believe that she might underline this thesis, is that she has more or less argued that radical evil has emerged out of totalitarianism. In the *Origins*, Arendt writes that "we actually have nothing to fall back on in order to understand a phenomenon that [...] breaks down all the standards we know."[66] One way to read this, is that (as argued in chapter 1) radical evil is in some way a *new* kind of evil, that tops already existing kinds – i.e., the "standards" she is talking about. However, she does not explicitly state that totalitarianism is the only phenomenon that could break down these standards. There could possibly be other phenomena that could give rise to radical evil.

Somewhat further, she writes that "we may say that radical evil has *emerged* in connection with a system in which all men have become equally superfluous."[67] One interpretation of this sentence is that this new kind of evil, the radical kind, arises from some kind of system in which men become superfluous: again, this does not necessarily have to be totalitarianism. However, a large-scaled system that involves making men superfluous and

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[63] Todd Calder, "The Apparent Banality of Evil: The Relationship between Evil Acts and Evil Character," *Journal of Social Philosophy* 34-3 (2003), 264-376, http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/1467-9833.00187/epdf (retrieved June 5, 2016), 370.
[64] Ibid., 370.
[65] Canovan, *Hannah Arendt*, 24, n. 3, my emphasis.
[66] Arendt, *Origins*, 459.
[67] Ibid., my emphasis.

thus involving the three necessary steps to reach that result (as discussed in chapter 1), would almost always be some form of totalitarianism.

I would now like to progress to discussing an implication that Arendt made when stating that there were some human "standards" of evil that radical evil apparently has broken down. The existence of these standards would mean that before radical evil, there have obviously been *other* kinds of evil, implying that radical evil (and the banality of evil, if we accept the radical-alongside-banal hypothesis) is only one of multiple evils.

However, there is at least one piece of evidence in Arendt's work that suggests otherwise. In her letter to Scholem, she writes that "evil is never 'radical,' that it is only extreme,"[68] implying that there is only one kind of evil: it is *only* extreme. Later that year (1963), Karl Jaspers writes to Arendt that he thinks she should make clear that with the banality, she was referring to this specific Eichmann-case: "The point is that *this* evil, not evil per se, is banal."[69] This suggests that Arendt may have been so caught up in the Eichmann-trial, that she did not have the urge to explicitly mention in the Scholem-letter that she was talking about evil merely in the totalitarian context.

Some secondary literature suggests a solution in this matter, namely that there is a fundamental distinction between 'merely bad' and 'evil'. Leo Zaibert writes the following:

> "I have now come to think that the best way of understanding Arendt's views is to realize that her whole evaluation of the Eichmann trial is premised, precisely, on the existence of a distinction between the merely bad and the evil. I would like to argue that it was because Arendt thought that what Eichmann did was evil (and not merely bad), that she found his "banality" so "word-and-thought-defying." Had Eichmann committed merely bad deeds, then she would not have been shocked about his alleged banality."[70]

On this view, the whole concept of banality is limited to the 'actual evil', which I would want to translate with 'radical evil.' Zaibert continues by stating that "Arendt thus believed that there is a qualitative difference between the sort of things the Nazis did (evil), and other more mundane crimes (the merely bad)."[71] Arendt may have only spoken of the radical kind of evil, because the so-called merely bad was not 'word-and-thought-defying' enough for thorough investigation – it was simply too 'mundane.'

I aim to conclude that there is in fact much more to evil than the conceptions of Arendt contain. Within the limits of totalitarianism and other alike large domination structures,

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[68] Arendt, *The Jewish Writings,* 471.
[69] Kohler and Saner, *Hannah Arendt-Karl Jaspers,* 542.
[70] Leo Zaibert, "Beyond Bad: Punishment Theory Meets the Problem of Evil," *Midwest Studies in Philosophy* 36 (2012), 93-111, onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/j.1475-4975.2012.00236.x/abstract (retrieved June 5, 2016), 99.
[71] Ibid., 100.

however, I do think Arendt's radical evil and the banality of evil together enclose the whole spectrum.

Conclusion

In this thesis, I investigated Hannah Arendt's two different conceptions of moral evil. I did this by first defining radical evil (making human beings superfluous), and then by defining the banality of evil, which is more of an observation than a theory: evil has no depth or satanic motives, but spreads on the surface through thoughtlessness of seemingly morally just people. After this, I discussed the relationship between the radical and the banal, which leads me to my answer to the main question: how should we understand Hannah Arendt's conceptions of evil, and how do they relate to each other?

   The most important point to grasp is that we should understand both of the conceptions in a different way. Whereas radical evil actually conveys a theory, the banality of evil is an external observation or aspect of evil. Assuming these interpretations are correct, the two conceptions do not contrast each other, but are fairly compatible. I therefore want to argue that radical evil can exist in the world, in some sort of system of total domination, and at the same time have a banal aspect.

   There also is an important similarity between the two, namely the motives and character of the evildoer. This is of course only to be said on some level, as Arendt has not explicitly wrote on the bigger figures that caused the radical evil, people like Adolf Hitler. However, it seems that in most cases, the evildoer is not an elevated, satanic monster. In the case of Eichmann, Arendt made this very clear by calling him a clown; in the case of the executioners, Arendt argued that they had no sadistic motives and were in some way superfluous themselves. This leads to a similarity in the aspect of the motives: at both radical evil and the banality of evil, these motives are not knowable. At the former, they are simply not humanly understandable; at the latter, they are often simply not there.

Having related the conceptions to each other, I want to briefly discuss their value for the contemporary understanding of evil. Bernstein argues that we should take Arendt's theory of radical evil as a "warning about what can happen when masses of people are suddenly rendered superfluous."[72] He argues that totalitarian solutions may always be tempting in the context of stateless groups of people, which is something we should now recognize and stop before history repeats itself. As long as there are systematic attempts to dehumanize human beings, the concept of radical evil is unfortunately still very much alive.

   The banality of evil has contemporary value for another process we should be cautious about. I think that in this context, there are two important lessons to learn from Arendt. The first one is that even the most despicable of evils does not always need despicable, evil characters. Thoughtlessly cooperating could convey just the same consequences, just as performing evil acts without explicit evil motives (e.g., one of Eichmann's main motivations was that he wanted to obey the law of the Third Reich). Even people without a motive *at all* could perform evil acts out of sheer thoughtlessness. When public servants today perform their jobs to their best abilities, some tend to thoughtlessly follow the government they work for at that time. When the leading parties in the government

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[72] Bernstein, "Arendt's Reflections," 299.

change, the public servant *thoughtlessly* changes with them. This is of course usually not dangerous, but it is definitely something to realise: after all, Eichmann was not much more than a thoughtless public servant as well.

The second lesson to carry out of Arendt's works, is that small, seemingly harmless actions can lead to enormous evils. Susan Neiman argues this when she says that "contemporary dangers begin with trivial and insidious steps. Once these are taken, they lead to consequences so vast they could hardly have been foreseen. The claim that evil is banal is a claim not about magnitude but about proportion."[73]

I think there is still a lot to learn about how we should understand evil, both in philosophical and human sense. The role of individual evildoers, for example someone like Adolf Hitler, is an aspect of evil that is still relatively underexposed in the works of Hannah Arendt. When evil is of such a kind that we cannot understand its motives, how can we ever accept, understand and prevent it? If we understand the concept of evil and its systematic process, it is not to say that we understand what causes it and why it happens. This is an underexposed theme throughout Arendt's complete body of work, and something that is worth investigating: moral evil would not even exist without the existence and actions of human beings.

To conclude this thesis, I want to relativize the great amount of danger that Arendt seems to predict, by mentioning another important thought of Neiman. She ends her observation on a promising positive note that in the end might be the most important lesson of the banality of evil: "if crimes that great can result from causes that small, there may be hope for overcoming them."[74]

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[73] Neiman, *Evil in Modern Thought*, 301.
[74] Ibid., 301-302.

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