

Master Thesis Applied Ethics



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Moral Responsibility and the Banality of Evil

*How ordinary people commit evil actions, and how
we should deal with this*

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Summary

In this report, I am elaborating on a phenomenon that is called banal evil. I will argue that banal evil is still a relevant concept today in the form of consumerism and that it should be judged differently than absolute evil. The main research question is: *how should we deal with banal evil?* To answer this question, I used a literature study on the concept of evil, consumerism and moral responsibility, and I used close reading on Hannah Arendt's book 'Eichmann in Jerusalem, a report on the banality of evil'.

I argue that consumerism can be considered evil, and that it conforms to the characteristics of banal evil. The phenomenon of banal evil entails that an evil act is committed thoughtlessly in circumstances which make it understandable that one did not think. This is a serious problem because consumerism is a great contributor to global warming, and, therefore, it is important to know how to deal with a large group of people, who fail to think about the evil consequences of their actions. Next to this, one should also know how morally responsible people are for their thoughtlessness, as this will make a difference in how one should prevent banal evil from happening. There appear to be two camps, one saying that one chooses to be thoughtless, implying that humans are rational. The other saying that thoughtlessness is completely understandable, as humans are highly influenced by their environment, also for their moral standards and thinking. Neither side is completely sufficient to answer the question of moral responsibility today, as neither side has any decisive evidence. I argue therefore that more research is necessary on the human psyche, and that people can be presumed partly morally responsible for their banal evil actions. In the meantime, I argue that on the basis of the characteristics of banal evil, there are a few things that we need to pay more attention to in concern to banal evil and consumerism. That is an education in independent thinking, more debate on systems we live in, and more transparency on product production and selling.

Table of contents

- Preface and method.....5

- Chapter 1: Consumerism as evil action.....7**
 - 1.1 Definition of consumerism.....7
 - 1.2 Why can consumerism be considered as an accumulation of evil acts.....9
 - 1.3 Concluding remarks.....12

- Chapter 2: An exploration of the concept of the banality of evil.....14**
 - 2.1 An exploration of Arendt’s concept of banal evil.....14
 - 2.2 Book ‘Eichmann in Jerusalem: a report on the banality of evil’14
 - 2.3 Thoughtlessness as most important characteristic.....15
 - 2.4 Circumstances in which banal evil was committed.....16
 - 2.5 Assessment of thoughtless crimes.....19
 - 2.6 Concluding remarks.....24

- Chapter 3: Dealing with consumerism as banal evil.....26**
 - 3.1 Why an act of consumerism can be described as thoughtless.....26
 - 3.2 Following orders.....27
 - 3.3 Distance between the act and its evil consequence.....28
 - 3.4 Consumerism is by law not criminal, it is even encouraged.....28
 - 3.5 Not an individual crime, but communal.....29
 - 3.6 Concluding remarks.....30
 - 3.7 How must we deal with banal evil in the form of consumerism.....30

- Conclusion.....33**

- Literature.....35

Introduction

Preface

Consumerism, or in other words, excessive shopping, is a fundamental aspect of modern societies in the twenty-first century. Consumerism entails the increasing want for products that are not needed for basic survival.¹ Consumerism has brought us economic growth and wealth, but it also has major consequences for the environment. Excessive consuming and producing leads to a lot of waste, pollution, depletion of natural resources and deforestation. It is one of the biggest causes of global warming. Already, it has far-reaching consequences for people in poorer countries, as they are already suffering from floods, drought and extreme weather. Future generations will be suffering even more. The consequences will be disastrous if we keep consuming on this level. Most of us don't know any different than this way of living. We buy stuff we think we need like the newest phone, our houses are full of stuff that was made in polluting factories, we own a car or two and buy gasoline to be able to drive them, we organize food festivals and buy food for which a lot of water and energy was needed, which cause a lot of methane emissions. But despite the devastating consequences of our actions, I don't think people have an evil intend to destroy our planet. When we buy yet another t-shirt, we don't have the intention to cause the ice on Antarctica to melt. I think it can even be said that most of us are persons who want to do good, who live in this time and place, wanting to make the best of it. But unfortunately, these ordinary actions, done by people who live ordinary lives, are the cause of global warming and its disastrous consequences. In this report, I argue that you can call these actions a form of evil. Specifically, banal evil.

In this report, I want to make a comparison between consumerism and its evil component, and the phenomenon of banal evil, that was brought to light by German philosopher Hannah Arendt. I will do so because actions that can be ascribed to consumerism, have a lot in common with the characteristics of banal evil. Banal evil, in short, means evil that is done by an ordinary person with no evil motive, an evil that is done thoughtlessly. Given the definition of banal evil and given the description of consumerism provided above, it can be concluded that consumerism is a form of banal evil. That said, I will also address the question of how we should deal with banal evil. This question I split into two sub questions. Firstly, how morally responsible is an individual for their thoughtless evil actions? And secondly, what can we currently do to prevent banal evil from happening?

This report consists of three chapters. In the first chapter, I will elaborate on what consumerism entails and why you can describe it as an accumulation of evil actions. I will distinguish

¹ Stearns, P, (2012), *Born to Shop: Consumerism as the Modern Panacea*, in *Satisfaction Not Guaranteed: Dilemmas of Progress in Modern Society*, New York; London: NYU Press, p. 213, from: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt9qzvf6>

two kinds of evil: banal evil and absolute evil. In the second chapter, I will go into the concept of banal evil as described by Hannah Arendt when she writes about SS officer Adolf Eichmann's case. I will go into the most important characteristic of banal evil, namely thoughtlessness, and I will elaborate the circumstances in which thoughtlessness manifests itself. After this, I will elaborate on individual moral responsibility when banal evil is committed. In the third chapter I will compare the characteristics of consumerism with banal evil and argue why you can describe consumerism as (a form of) banal evil. I will also discuss what this means for condemning actions that are part of consumerism and, most importantly, I will discuss how we should deal with this problem. The conclusion will be that people are partly morally responsible for their banal evil actions. More research to the human psyche should be done to give an accurate answer to this problem of moral responsibility and banal evil. But based on the characteristics of banal evil, I will argue, that there are a few things we can do to prevent banal evil from happening.

Method

This report is an ethical report which is focused on individual responsibility in relation to banal evil. It is an elaboration on the thoughtless mind. To answer the main question, I use a literature study. In the first chapter I use Joseph Heath and Judith Lichtenberg's different descriptions of consumerism and try to define the main aspects. Then to define what evil is, I use John Kekes description of an evil action and I will elaborate on how the definition of consumerism fits the properties of an evil action. In chapter two I use close reading on Hannah Arendt's book 'Eichmann in Jerusalem, a report on the banality of evil' which describes Eichmann's situation and his thoughtlessness. Next to this, I will refer to articles that are written in response to Arendt's concept of banal evil to elaborate on the responsibility for thoughtlessness. In chapter three, I compare the situation of Eichmann with the situation of consumerism. I do this on the basis of the characteristics of banal evil in Eichmann's case, as established in chapter two. In the conclusion, I use the characteristics of banal evil to suggest four recommendations.

1. CONSUMERISM AS EVIL ACTION

In this chapter, I will elaborate on the concept of consumerism and why it is evil. I will try to formulate a definition of consumerism according to a few characteristics, as they will later help to determine whether the characteristics of banal evil apply to consumerism. Two questions are important in this chapter. First, what are the aspects of consumerism? Second, what is evil, and why can consumerism be considered evil? Finally, I will discuss the distinction between absolute evil and banal evil.

1.1 Definition of consumerism

There are two ways to describe consumerism. One way to describe it is to say that it is a state of advanced industrial society which heavily revolves around many goods being bought and sold. Consumerism can also be thought of as the protection of consumers from harmful products or business methods.² In this report, I will focus on the first description.

Descriptions of consumerism are either negatively or positively loaded. What is clear is that we, people in wealthier countries, live in an economic system that thrives because of consumerism. Consumerism is the engine of our capitalist societies. The consumption of goods or services creates jobs which is good for business. For the countries and people lucky enough to benefit from consumerism, consumption brings tremendous wealth and improves the quality of life. For example, many people in economically advanced societies can consume a wide variety of goods that are available at affordable prices. Consumerism, which started in England during the enlightenment, is part of a vision of progress focused on increasing our access to material comforts.³ One could say that for consumerism to function effectively, people must consume excessively, and they must embrace the mandate to consume as an essential part of the system in which they live. Some say consumerism is a belief. To thrive in a capitalist society, one must believe in a consumerist system that sees buying as an intrinsic good that leads to economic growth. Therefore, the first significant aspect of consumerism is that it requires tremendous amounts of buying and producing. The second aspect is that it is a system—a consumerist system—that can only benefit the masses when many people contribute to it.

According to Joseph Heath, a professor of philosophy and the author of the bestseller *The Rebel Sell*, there are a few ways to describe consumerism negatively. These ways of understanding

²Cambridge Dictionary, (without date), *Consumerism*, from:

<https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/consumerism>

³ Stearns, P, (2012), *Born to Shop: Consumerism as the Modern Panacea*, in *Satisfaction Not Guaranteed: Dilemmas of Progress in Modern Society*, New York; London: NYU Press, p. 213, from:

<https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt9qzf6>

consumerism are the ideological way, the perfectionist way, and the liberal way. The ideological way suggests that “people often spend a lot of money purchasing goods that don’t actually produce lasting satisfaction or happiness” (Heath, 2001, p.3). People are considerably influenced by advertisers who “instill subconscious cravings for consumer goods in ordinary citizens – effectively circumventing any process of rational deliberation” (Heath, 2001, p. 3). Another negative approach to consumerism, is the perfectionist approach. In this approach, consumers actually do buy what they want. However, though their wants are not inflicted on them by advertisers, there is something wrong with what they want. Theoretically, this flawed version of consumerism can be remedied by correcting the imperfect system of wants and needs. Yet, if consumerism is “a problem of manufactured desire” (Heath, 2001, p. 5), one must ask whether something that can be called an objective want really exists. According to Heath, such a want does not exist. Since every desire we have is a product of our culture, one cannot distinguish between authentic and non-authentic desire.⁴ This argument is not entirely sound, as one can posit that food really is, at least to a certain extent, an objective want. But food is probably more a need than a want, unless it becomes a want for more food than is physically necessary. Still, the idea that many of our wants or needs for certain products are culturally determined does sound possible. Finally, the liberal approach to consumerism suggests that consumerism is a form of collectively self-defeating behavior that arises out of feelings of envy created by advertisers.⁵

Interestingly, Heath does not agree with any of the three ways of negatively describing consumerism. He does not think consumerism has anything to do with wanting to conform with a pursuit commonly known as “keeping up with the Joneses”. He thinks we all want our consumptions to reflect our individuality. We supposedly want to be cool and rebel against others, and we can do this by buying exclusive products.⁶ Heath’s view of consumerism is certainly different from those of other scholars. Judith Lichtenberg, for instance, says that consumption is relational. In other words, the main reason people buy a product is that others are also buying it. If this is true, collectively reducing consumption will be less painful than doing it alone because our happiness depends on how much we consume within the society to which we belong.⁷ For this report, it is not relevant to take sides in this theoretical debate. What is important is the commonly held proposition that people are greatly influenced by their fellow humans when it comes to wanting products that are not actually

⁴ Joseph Heath, (2001), The Structure of Hip Consumerism, in *Philosophy and Social Criticism*, Vol. 27, no. 6, p. 6, from: <http://homes.chass.utoronto.ca/~jheath/hip%20consumerism.pdf>.

⁵ Joseph Heath, (2001), The Structure of Hip Consumerism, in *Philosophy and Social Criticism*, P. 8-12.

⁶ Joseph Heath, (2001), The Structure of Hip Consumerism, in *Philosophy and Social Criticism*, P. 12-16.

⁷ Lichtenberg, J. (1996). Consuming Because Others Consume. In *Social Theory and Practice*, 22(3), p. 290, from www.jstor.org/stable/23559052.

needed. Whether one wants to be the same or different, wants can only be fulfilled by consumption, and this fact is a deeply important feature of consumerist societies.

Something that has not been discussed by Heath and Lichtenberg is that the governments of the consumerist societies we live in today have a significant influence on how we behave. A message that a lot of governments spread to their citizens is that buying is a good thing. In the Netherlands, there is a bureau (CPB) that measures the purchasing power of households.⁸ The idea here is that more purchasing power is a good thing. Purchasing power is something that stands in close relation to economic growth⁹, and the economic growth is something that society strives for and that supposedly improves our quality of life. Governments are reinforcing the system we live within, a system in which we are made to think that buying things, and being able to buy things, is a good thing. This philosophy makes our society a consumerist society.

It is important to know whether the things we buy are actually needed because it says something about the excessiveness of our patterns of consumption. If most of what we buy is not necessity, then it is possible that excessive purchasing can be stopped. However, when reading the literature on consumerism, it becomes clear that many people think that consumerism requires that people buy more than they actually need to live. Therefore, excessive needs must be created or manufactured by the culture or system we live in, and we must be conditioned to think it is normal to act as if more is better. We have been inflicted with the idea that we must live up to the standards of others as well as the idea that our identity is defined by the products we buy. In consideration to the aforementioned arguments, we can define the aspects of consumerism are as follows: people consume and produce more than is necessary, consumerist societies purposefully condition their members to need excessively, and consumption is a collective activity seen as something good.

1.2 Why can consumerism be considered as an accumulation of evil acts?

1.2.1. What does an evil action entail?

When can an action be defined as evil? To call something evil is a weighty accusation. When something is evil, one may assume that it is very cruel, as evil is considered the worst kind of bad. An evil act is not a little lie. It is something much bigger. The use of the term “evil” is reserved for horrific crimes or persons. For instance, calling Hitler an evil person sounds appropriate. On the other hand, calling a childhood bully evil seems overdone and inappropriate. According to Todd Calder, most

⁸ Centraal Planbureau, *Koopkracht*, from: <https://www.cpb.nl/koopkracht>.

⁹ Rik Wassens, (february 13th 2020) Nederlandse Economie groeit met 1,7 procent, from: <https://www.nrc.nl/nieuws/2020/02/13/nederlandse-economie-groeit-met-17-procent-a3990309>

people agree that an essential component of an evil action is its wrongfulness. Therefore, an evil act must cause or allow significant harm to befall at least one victim.¹⁰

When is something so wrong and harmful that it is evil? To answer this question, I will follow the arguments of John Kekes and say that wrongfulness implies serious and excessive harm. The purpose of such harm is achieving an unworthy goal, and such harm is inexcusable.¹¹ Obviously, this description of the characteristics of evil is just one way of describing evil. Nevertheless, for the purposes of this report, it shall suffice as it sets a minimum standard for what can be considered evil.

Now that the components of an evil action have been determined, it is time to ask a key question about evil that has been highly debated: does an evil action require an evil intent? Some say that evil actions require a certain kind of motivation or emotion. Hillel Steiner, for instance, says that to do an evil act we must feel a certain way or have certain emotions at the time of the evil action, such as the emotion of pleasure. Steiner says that something can only be called evil when it has two components: pleasure and wrongdoing.¹² But this emotion of feeling pleasure when doing evil is something, I think, can mainly be ascribed to psychopaths who don't feel empathy. The same goes for a total lack of motivation, which some also see as a component of an evil action.¹³ Others say that it is enough for an act to cause significant harm for an unworthy goal for it to be called evil.¹⁴ Both sides make good points. If you think about the truly evil people of history, it seems that some of them indeed desired to cause harm to others. Hitler is an excellent example of such a person. People like Hitler feel hatred towards their victims. Yet if one thinks further on the subject, it becomes clear that many evil deeds have been committed without being motivated by the desire to cause harm to others. For example, evil acts can arise from desires of a different kind, such as greed, sexual desire, and the hunger for power. These motivations can be considered evil because they can lead to unscrupulous violence or death.

It is not evident when or whether a motivation is evil or not. To say that a deed is only evil if it is motivated by a desire to harm others might be too narrow of a definition and one not easily determined. Indeed, the concept of evil should not be applied lightly. Therefore, I want to make a

¹⁰ Todd Calder, (2003), The apparent Banality of Evil: The Relationship between Evil Acts and Evil Character, in *Journal of Social Philosophy*, vol. 34, no. 3. P. 364-365, from: <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/abs/10.1111/1467-9833.00187>

¹¹ John Kekes, (2005), *The Roots of Evil*. Ithaca; London: Cornell University Press. From www.jstor.org/stable/10.7591/j.ctt5hh0xk.

¹² Hillel Steiner, (2002), Calibrating Evil, in *The Monist*, vol. 85, no. 2, p. 189. From: <https://academic.oup.com/monist/article-abstract/85/2/183/1129947>.

¹³ Todd Calder, (2003), The apparent Banality of Evil: The Relationship between Evil Acts and Evil Character, in *Journal of Social Philosophy*, vol. 34, no. 3. P. 365, from: <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/abs/10.1111/1467-9833.00187>

¹⁴ Todd Calder, (2003), The apparent Banality of Evil: The Relationship between Evil Acts and Evil Character, in *Journal of Social Philosophy*, vol. 34, no. 3. P. 373.

distinction between two different kinds of evil. I agree with Hannah Arendt that there is a kind of evil that can be called banal evil. This kind of evil is done by a non-monstrous person. It is done by a very ordinary person who banally performs evil actions.¹⁵ Whether Arendt would call such a person evil is not clear, but she does call their actions evil, even if they lack in an evil motivation. The other form of evil I will call absolute or pure evil, which is evil that was done by a person whose motivation was explicit to harm others. I call this absolute evil because it is an evil action that is motivated by evil intentions. So, there are no good intentions involved.

1.2.2 Why consumerism can be considered an evil

When I study consumerism and its implications, it is clear to me that consumerism is a form of evil. I will later, in chapter 3, argue that it is a form of banal evil. First, I will discuss why our way of consuming, especially in affluent countries, is evil in the first place. Climate change is one of the biggest challenges we, as a global society, are facing, and we should be rushing to resolve it.¹⁶ It is a problem that we humans have created for ourselves and it is our behavior that must change if we are to solve it. Recent research from scientists working for PNAS (Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America) concluded that every degree that the planet warms will cost a billion people their habitat. This is because certain places will become too hot to live in safely. If we do not take the necessary actions to reduce our emissions, we can look forward to facing such unfortunate scenarios. According to PNAS, global warming will have an impact on our ecosystems, human health, subsistence, food security, water supply, and economic growth.¹⁷ It is my educated assumption that climate change will harm people physically by causing famine, failed harvest, floods, and death. One of the biggest reasons why current and future generations will be harmed by climate change is because developed countries consume too much at this moment. According to a study published in the *Journal of Industrial Ecology*, household consumption is responsible for up to 60 percent of global greenhouse gas emissions and between 50 to 80 percent of land use, water use, and material use. The wealthier countries turn out to have the biggest footprint when it comes to consumption.¹⁸ For example, a third of global human protein consumption comes from animal products. Producing animal products requires a lot of land, water, and materials. Ruminants are very polluting. They are the largest source of anthropogenic methane emissions, and methane is 21 times

¹⁵ Hannah Arendt, (1971) *Thinking and Moral Considerations: A Lecture*, in *Social Research*, Vol. 38(3), p. 417.

¹⁶ Phillips, Laura, (2016) *Consumerism and Climate Change: How the Choices You Make Can Help Mitigate the Effects of Climate Change*, in *United Nations Academic Impact*.

¹⁷ Chi Xu, Kohler, A. Timothy, Lenton, M, Timothy, Svenning, Jeans-Christian, Scheffer, M. (2020) *Future of the human climate niche*, in PNAS, from: <https://www.pnas.org/content/early/2020/04/28/1910114117>

¹⁸ Ivanova, Diana & Stadler, Konstantin & Steen-Olsen, Kjartan & Wood, Richard & Vita, Gibran & Tukker, Arnold & Hertwich, Edgar, (2015), *Environmental Impact Assessment of Household Consumption*. *Journal of Industrial Ecology*, from: <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/abs/10.1111/jiec.12371>

worse for the atmosphere than carbon dioxide. If people could learn to consume less meat and eat more plants, our greenhouse gas footprint could be up to 48 times lower.¹⁹ At this moment, the average Dutch person consumes considerably more meat than he or she physically needs.²⁰ The excessive consumption of meat is one example of how we consume more than we need. It also is a powerful example of how consumption contributes to climate change.

As long as one keeps buying things, things will keep being produced, and this production unavoidably degrades the environment. Therefore, consumerism is evil; it contributes to climate change, and the consequences of climate change are very harmful to many people. Consumerism complies with what can be considered the most important component of an evil action: it must cause harm to another person.

In addition to the harm they cause, acts of consumerism are also excessive because they are not necessary. Consumerist actions are inexcusable because much of what we buy is not life essential. Speaking for myself, I think most of the things I own are not necessary for me to survive or even live comfortably. I might need two pairs of shoes, but I definitely don't need eight pairs of shoes. I need to eat food, but I am sure that I do not need all the different kinds of snacks and soda that I have stored in my kitchen. The excuse that I use to justify my consumerist actions is that they make me happy. However, pursuing my happiness does not excuse my contribution to climate change, and I know I can easily buy less and still live a good life.

1.3 Concluding remarks

This chapter discussed what consumerism is and why it can be considered evil. Consumerism is a phenomenon that entails buying and producing products in massive quantities. Consumers buy more than they need, and they do so within a consumerist society in which more is considered good. Furthermore, since consumption is a collective activity, people can engage in it without critically reflecting on their actions. For an action to be called evil, it must meet a number of conditions. Consumerism complies with these conditions. First, evil acts must inflict harm on people, and consumerism does just that by making contributions to climate change that will eventually cause great harm to people all over the world. Second, evil acts cause more harm than necessary for an unworthy goal, and consumerism meets this condition because it entails buying much more than a person needs to live sufficiently well. Finally, consumerism complies with the condition that there is no excuse for an evil act. Since people can easily consume less, their excessive consumption is

¹⁹ Phillips, Laura, (2016) Consumerism and Climate Change: How the Choices You Make Can Help Mitigate the Effects of Climate Change, in United Nations Academic Impact.

²⁰ Dossier Vleesconsumptie, Wageningen University and Research, from: <https://www.wur.nl/nl/Dossiers/dossier/Vleesconsumptie.htm>

unjustifiable. Based on the above arguments, it is clear that consumerism can be considered evil. I agree with Arendt that there is a difference between absolute evil and banal evil, and in Chapter 3 I will argue that consumerism is a form of banal evil.

2. AN EXPLORATION OF THE CONCEPT OF THE BANALITY OF EVIL

In this chapter, I define the concept of banal evil according to the arguments put forth by Arendt in her written work on banal evil. Afterwards, I discuss ways to deal with banal evil.

2.1 An exploration of Arendt's concept of banal evil

"The trouble with Eichmann was precisely that so many were like him, and that the many were neither perverted nor sadistic, that they were, and still are, terribly and terrifyingly normal" (Hannah Arendt, 2006).

There has been a lot of controversy on how to interpret Hannah Arendt's book 'Eichmann in Jerusalem: a report on the banality of evil'. Arendt's book is a sensitive one, especially at the time in which it was written, in 1963, when the Second World War was still fresh. People were dealing with the trials of war criminals during this time, and Arendt's book touched upon some sensitive subjects. The war's victims were not conformable with the notion that Arendt seemed to downplay the evil they had witnessed. Furthermore, many have doubted whether Eichmann was the "thoughtless man" Arendt made him out to be, and there is evidence that he was an enthusiastic follower of the Nazi ideology.

I am not going to discuss Eichmann's Nazism, for this is not relevant for this report. Arendt believed she witnessed banal evil in Eichmann, and I will not question that. What is relevant for this report, is trying to define the phenomenon of banal evil and discuss its implications.

2.2 Book 'Eichmann in Jerusalem: a report on the banality of evil'

In her book, Arendt writes about how Eichmann contributed to the extermination of the Jewish people by arranging their transport to the concentration camps. In relation to writing about Eichmann's role, she writes little about the banality of evil that she observed in Eichmann. Although Arendt does not explicitly state a theory about banal evil, she mentions a few essential characteristics of the concept and describes circumstances in which it can take place. I believe Arendt's description of banal evil can be divided into a number of characteristics of which thoughtlessness is the most essential and indispensable. She even devoted an article titled *Thinking and Moral Considerations* to the concept of thoughtlessness. Because thoughtlessness is the most important characteristic of banal evil, I will start with its analysis first. The other characteristics that must be considered are the circumstances in which banal evil manifests itself. Most of these circumstances must be present in order for banal evil to take place.

2.3 Thoughtlessness as the most important characteristic

Thoughtlessness is the most important characteristic of banal evil. According to Arendt, Eichmann was not stupid, but it was pure thoughtlessness, something different than stupidity, that positioned Eichmann to become one of the biggest war criminals of his time. According to Arendt, he never really thought about what he was doing.²¹ Thoughtlessness thus means that one is not thinking about the consequences of one's actions. One is not ethically deliberating on whether one's action is good or not in relation to others.

Something that stands in close relation to the characteristic of thoughtlessness is the absence of a motive. Arendt writes that, except for his unusual zeal for doing everything that he could to benefit his career, Eichmann did not have any motive to do what he did.²² Arendt describes Eichmann in the following terms: "Worse, his was obviously no case of insane hatred of Jewish people, of fanatical anti-Semitism or indoctrination of any kind. He 'personally' never had anything against Jews; on the contrary, he had plenty of 'private reason' for not being a Jew hater..." (Arendt, 2006, p. 26). And to be certain, Eichmann's thoughtlessness also did not have anything to do with his sanity. Half a dozen psychiatrist investigated Eichmann and concluded that he was utterly normal (Arendt, 2017, p. 84). The fact that Eichmann did not adhere to an ideology stands in close relation to the fact that he did not think. However, it seems strange for someone to spend so much time and effort achieving a goal in which one does not really believe. His real goal was to do a good job and climb the career ladder. Eichmann was not that motiveless then, in that sense. His actions were just not motivated by an ideology, and lack of ideology is an important aspect of banal evil, according to Arendt.

2.3.1 thinking

To explain the concept of thinking, Arendt wrote an article, titled *Thinking and Moral Considerations: A Lecture*, in which she explains the notion of thoughtlessness. In this article, Arendt describes banal evil in the following terms: "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" (Arendt, 1971, p. 417). She continues: "However monstrous the deeds were, the doer was neither monstrous nor demonic, (...) it was not stupidity but a curious, quite authentic inability to think" (Arendt, 1971, p. 417).

²¹ Hannah Arendt, translated by W.J.P Scholtz, (2017), *Eichmann in Jeruzalem: de banaliteit van het kwaad*, (ninth edition), Netherlands: Uitgeverij Atlas Contact, p. 36.

²² Hannah Arendt, (2017), *Eichmann in Jeruzalem: de banaliteit van het kwaad*, (ninth edition), Netherlands: Uitgeverij Atlas Contact, p. 36.

It is important to go deeper into the notion of thinking. Arendt suggests that thinking will hold us back from doing evil, and she has a specific idea about this. Joseph Beatty states that, according to Arendt, thinking has three main characteristics: it is uncertain, unverifiable, and self-destructive.²³ It has many negatives. It resembles the Socratic model because it entails searching for the truth but never finding it and never expecting to find it. You think whilst you are aware of the limits of thought.²⁴ To me, thinking, according to this description, sounds like quite a difficult activity. But, according to Arendt, man has an inclination and an urge to think beyond the limitations of knowledge. The distinction between thinking and knowing is crucial. It does not matter whether you are highly intelligent, or ignorant or erudite, inability to think is not stupidity.²⁵ Arendt pleads that “(...) one would need philosophy, the exercise of reason as the faculty of thought, to prevent evil. And this is demanding a great deal (...) for thinking’s chief characteristic is that it interrupts all doing, all ordinary activities no matter what they happen to be” (Arendt, 1971, p. 423). Doing and living prevent one from thinking.²⁶ One really has to stop one’s activities to think deeply. Unfortunately, what one thinks is a solid axiom today can turn out to be undone by the next morning.²⁷

Thinking certainly sounds quite demanding, but Arendt gives mixed statements about thinking’s fastidious qualities. Thinking is an unnatural, uncertain, unverifiable, and self-destructive activity that Arendt admits demands a great deal of someone.²⁸ In this sense, it is logical for a lot of people not to want to think too much. To have a few certainties in life does sound compelling. On the other hand, Arendt says that, regardless of our intelligence, we all have an urge to think.

The most important thing that thinking can afford a person is that it prevents one from doing evil. This is because when one thinks, one is searching for the good, and the good is never evil. Evil can’t be on one’s mind when one thinks, because thinking is searching for the truth and the good and evil presents the negative (Beatty, 1976).²⁹ However, this raises a key question: by thinking alone, is it possible to know a priori that something is good?

2.4 Circumstances in which banal evil was committed

Arendt says the following about the connection between circumstances and evil: “that is the new type of criminal, (...) commits his crimes under circumstances that make it well-nigh impossible for

²³ Joseph Beatty, (1976), Thinking and moral considerations: Socrates and Arendt's Eichmann, in *Journal of Value Inquiry* 10, p.268.

²⁴ Joseph Beatty, (1976), Thinking and moral considerations: Socrates and Arendt's Eichmann, p. 268.

²⁵ Hannah Arendt, (1971) Thinking and Moral Considerations: A Lecture, in *Social Research*, Vol. 38(3), p. 423.

²⁶ Hannah Arendt, (1971), Thinking and Moral Considerations, A lecture, p. 423.

²⁷ Hannah Arendt, (1971), Thinking and Moral Considerations, A lecture, p. 425.

²⁸ Hannah Arendt, (197), Thinking and Moral Considerations, A lecture, p. 423.

²⁹ Joseph Beatty, (1976), Thinking and moral considerations: Socrates and Arendt's Eichmann, p. 269.

him to know or to feel that he is doing wrong” (Arendt, 2006, p. 276). If this is correct, what are the circumstances under which banal evil can occur?

2.4.1 *Following orders*

An important argument brought up by Eichmann’s defense team in court was that he was simply following orders and that he was merely a minuscule part of a massive bureaucratic machine. The court responded to this defense by referring to the military criminal laws of civilized countries, that says that apparent “criminal” orders must not be followed. Arendt criticized the court for this because such an apparent criminal order should consist of a warning sign, which in Eichmann’s case there wasn’t. It should be clear that the act it requests is forbidden. For someone to recognize a wrongful order, such an order must be remarkably unusual, and it must clearly violate the canon of the thrusting legal system.³⁰ According to Eichmann, only one thing could have upset his conscience, that one thing would have been “if he had not done what he had been ordered to do” (Arendt, 2006, p.25). According to Eichmann, he had done his duty. Not only had he obeyed his orders, he had also obeyed the law.³¹

That people commit crimes because they are ordered to, is not an unfamiliar phenomenon. There are many examples of such situations. For example, also in the second world war, 500 men from Battalion 101 massacred 38,000 Jewish people by rifle and pistol fire. These middle-aged men came from all walks of life and had the choice not to participate in the killings. Only a small minority of the soldiers decided to walk away.³² But there are also more recent examples, like the Stanford Prison experiment that showed how readily people conform to social roles they are expected to play.³³ Or the Milgram experiment that showed that ordinary people are likely to follow orders, even if this means killing another person.³⁴

2.4.2 *Distance between the act and it’s evil consequence*

According to Arendt, Eichmann was accurately informed of the situation in Germany. For example, he knew of the unspeakable misery caused by the liquidation of the ghettos, but “none of this had anything to do with his job” (Arendt, 2006, p. 215). This is an interesting point. Eichmann, according to Arendt, was, to some extent, informed of the situation concerning the Jewish people, but their

³⁰ Hannah Arendt, (2017), *Eichmann in Jeruzalem: de banaliteit van het kwaad*, (ninth edition), Netherlands: Uitgeverij Atlas Contact, p. 43.

³¹ Hannah Arendt, (2017), *Eichmann in Jeruzalem: de banaliteit van het kwaad*, (ninth edition), Netherlands: Uitgeverij Atlas Contact, p. 82.

³² N. Pleasants, (2018), Ordinary Men: Genocide, Determinism, Agency, and Moral Culpability, in *Philosophy of the Social Sciences*, 48(1), 3–32.

³³ McLoad, S. (2020), The Stanford Prison Experiment, From: <https://www.simplypsychology.org/zimbardo.html>

³⁴McLoad, S. (2017), The Milgram Shock Experiment, from: <https://www.simplypsychology.org/milgram.html>

suffering was not part of his job. In some sense, this is true because Eichmann's job was arranging the transport of the Jewish people to the concentration camps, not killing or abusing them personally. He never killed anyone directly. Yet, by arranging their transport, he contributed to the extermination of the Jewish people. It is clear that he knew this to some extent. The fact that there was physical and perhaps even mental distance between Eichmann and the evil consequences of his actions, seems to be significant. This distance made it possible for him to be thoughtless because it prevented him from being confronted directly with the evil that his actions enabled.

Another thing that caused the distance between Eichmann's actions and their evil consequences is the objective language in which the SS spoke. The SS, according to Arendt, had a businesslike attitude. They talked about the activities going on in the concentration camps as if they were administrative matters or matters of economics. Eichmann continued to talk in this way during the trial as well.³⁵ Arendt concluded that this way of talking has "the socially recognized function of protecting us against reality, that is, against the claim on our thinking attention which all events and facts arouse by virtue of their existence" (Arendt, 1971, p. 418). According to Arendt, even the way that we talk about certain situations can keep us from thinking about them.

2.4.3 Evil action is by law not criminal

Another situation in which people become complacent with their thinking is when what they are doing is not forbidden by law. Arendt comments on Eichmann's relationship with the laws of Germany, stating that "What he had done was a crime only in retrospect, and he had always been a law-abiding citizen, because Hitler's orders, which he had certainly executed to the best of his ability, had possessed 'the force of law' in the Third Reich" (Arendt, 2006, p. 24). In other words, if something is not forbidden by law, then one could reason that it is not bad. This is not the strongest argument. The law is always relative to the time and place people live in. What is legal today, can be illegal tomorrow. It actually has a lot in common with Arendt's idea of thinking as explained in section 2.3.1. I assume that laws are like red flags, they make you see that something is wrong and stop you from doing it. It is not unthinkable that people sometimes don't see a red flag, when the action is not forbidden by law.

2.4.4 Not an individual crime, but a communal crime

Lastly, a very important circumstance in Eichmann's case is that Eichmann's thoughtless crimes were not exceptional. Many people in Germany participated in crimes against the Jewish people. It was

³⁵ Hannah Arendt, (2017), *Eichmann in Jeruzalem: de banaliteit van het kwaad*, (ninth edition), Netherlands: Uitgeverij Atlas Contact, p. 144.

not abnormal to follow the orders of the SS leaders. What Eichmann participated in was not an individual crime.³⁶ Instead, it was a crime done by many people together, which made it rather normal. When others are not critical of what one is doing because they are acting similarly, a situation develops in which the actions of others can have quite an influence on one's independent thinking.

2.5 Assessment of thoughtless crimes

I want to go deeper into how one must judge thoughtlessness when an evil act occurs. Thinking, according to Arendt's description, is a difficult enterprise. It takes a lot of effort to set aside one's beliefs, especially in circumstances where there are no red flags to indicate that something is wrong. On the other hand, this is not about thoughtlessly forgetting to pay your friends money back. It is about thoughtlessly committing evil actions. The question I want to elaborate on in this section is: to what extent can someone be blamed for their thoughtlessness, and, in circumstances in which thinking—as defined by Arendt—is very demanding, is thoughtlessness to some extent understandable?

2.5.1 Reflections on why one is responsible for his or her thoughtlessness

There are a few interesting theories that reflect on thoughtlessness and that denounce it. José Brunner says that thoughtlessness is motivated by a desire, and that evildoers like Eichmann refuse to think because the absence of thought provides them with more pleasure than its presence. Brunner states that thoughtless people want "(...) to disappear as an autonomous subject and turn into a cog in a purportedly all-powerful apparatus" (Brunner, 1996, p. 81). According to Brunner, when reading Arendt from a psychoanalytic angle, it shows that human nature is fundamentally and naturally narcissistic.³⁷ Brunner is referring here to other works of Arendt in which she says that people have an urge to self-display and to appear in front of others. Brunner says that it is clear that Arendt depicts totalitarian regimes redirecting people's natural narcissism into collective channels.³⁸ In a letter to Karl Jasper, Arendt writes the following: "I don't know what radical evil actually is, but it seems somehow related to (...) the making superfluous of men as men (...) Men in the plural are made superfluous when one abolishes all their unpredictability or spontaneity, and the attempt to do

³⁶ Hannah Arendt, (2017), *Eichmann in Jeruzalem: de banaliteit van het kwaad*, (ninth edition), Netherlands: Uitgeverij Atlas Contact, p. 429; 38.

³⁷ Jose Brunner, (1996), Eichmann, Arendt and Freud in Jerusalem: On the Evils of Narcissism and the Pleasures of Thoughtlessness. *History and Memory*, 8(2), p. 64.

³⁸ Jose Brunner, (1996), Eichmann, Arendt and Freud in Jerusalem: On the Evils of Narcissism and the Pleasures of Thoughtlessness. *History and Memory*, 8(2), p. 68.

so derives from, or is related to, a delusion of omnipotence” (Arendt, Jaspers, 1985). Brunner discusses a concept called institutional narcissism, a situation in which people leave behind their healthy individual narcissism or intrasubjective narcissism for the sake of a collective cause. Intrasubjective narcissism entails “the possibility of an inner split in which one becomes one’s own spectator, whose approval for one’s actions one has to seek” (Brunner, 1996, p. 78). According to Brunner, Eichmann was the perfect example of banal evil because he did not seek healthy or intrasubjective narcissism. He was “perfectly suited to be a grey, anonymous and loyal operator in the service of an institutionalized collective narcissistic pathology” (Brunner, 1996, p. 78). Brunner pleads that Eichmann’s evil was not a thoughtless commitment to duty and emphasizes that one should be suspicious of “apparently unmotivated mental states, lapses and absences and to regard them as hiding unconscious wishes and desires” (Brunner, 1996, p. 78). He says that “thoughtlessness cannot be taken as an ultimate cause (...) it has to be analyzed as a motivated and purposeful mental condition (...) what brought Eichmann to renounce thinking-and hence his autonomy-was the pleasurable feeling he derived from the symbolic destruction of his own self” (Brunner, 1996, p. 79). In short, Brunner says that Eichmann’s thoughtlessness was motivated by a desire and that the absence of thought provided him with more pleasure than its presence. This desire is a will to be part of a big apparatus in which one is part of something big. Eichmann’s desire was to be part of a big apparatus. Only by making one’s self superfluous, or insignificant, can one become capable of committing evil deeds without feeling guilty.³⁹

Arendt supposedly fails to attribute a motive to Eichmann. Brunner looks to Mary McCarthy’s rightful claim, that “One cannot help feeling that this mental oblivion is *chosen*, by the heart or the moral will – an active preference” (McCarthy, 1995, p. 296). In other words, Brunner is not convinced that Eichmann was actually thoughtless because Eichmann made a choice to become thoughtless.

Brunner also says that it is not clear how one can be held responsible as a person who is incapable of thought. However, when one’s actions arise from a pleasure-seeking motive, even an unconscious one, you can be fully responsible for your thoughtlessness. Brunner refers to psychoanalyst Heinz Kohut, who says that some people might be ready to commit collective suicide because sharing a spectacular fantasy of grandeur and omnipotence may be more important to them than their individual lives.⁴⁰ Being part of a big apparatus gave Eichmann the meaning that he needed in his life.⁴¹

³⁹ Jose Brunner, (1996), Eichmann, Arendt and Freud in Jerusalem: On the Evils of Narcissism and the Pleasures of Thoughtlessness. *History and Memory*, 8(2), p. 82.

⁴⁰ Heinz Kohut, (1985), *Self Psychology and the Humanities*, New York, p. 229.

⁴¹ Jose Brunner, (1996), Eichmann, Arendt and Freud in Jerusalem: On the Evils of Narcissism and the Pleasures of Thoughtlessness. *History and Memory*, 8(2), p. 81.

Brunner's arguments are supported by those of Michael S. Moore. Moore states that we are not less responsible when our action is prompted by unconscious mental states.⁴² Sigmund Freud agrees with this notion as well. Freud suggests that people's judgments are driven by unconscious motives and feelings. However, he also admits that these judgments are rationalized by reasons that are accepted by the public.⁴³

Brunner's theory about Eichmann is interesting. He says that Eichmann was not thoughtless at all because beneath the supposedly thoughtless mind lies a desire to do great (evil) things. However, Arendt never said Eichmann was without motive. According to Arendt, his motive was simply to do a good job. So perhaps thoughtlessness should not be described as not having a motive. Rather, thoughtlessness means that you don't have any thought for the evil consequences of your actions. In Eichmann's case, it seems that he indeed wanted to be an important man, but it was not his desire to kill Jewish people. Such discrepancies are what make cases of thoughtlessness so difficult. It is not possible to look inside Eichmann's mind and see whether he indeed wanted to be part of a big apparatus that committed great but horrific crimes. Following Arendt, it seems more likely that he was committed to the greatness of the apparatus but not to the evilness of it. Nevertheless, one could still say that Eichmann's thoughtlessness was a choice because it was easier to be thoughtless.

Benjamin Schupmann, a professor of political science, also raises the question of whether we can hold someone morally accountable for lacking in intentionality, or, in other words, for being a thoughtless cog. To show that Eichmann can still be held accountable without losing sight of the depth of the problem of thoughtlessness, Schupmann refers to Jean-Paul Sartre's concept of acting in bad faith. According to Sartre's notion of acting in bad faith, Eichmann's act of bad faith was deceiving himself about his agency. In other words, it was not Eichmann's agency that disappeared but his perception of agency. Eichmann apparently only ceased to think of himself as an agent and ceased to perceive the world as laden with value judgements. Eichmann's apparent lack of agency hinged on him perceiving himself as a being without agency, which means that he chose to believe in his objectified status as an obedient, predetermined being.⁴⁴ Eichmann stopped adopting self-reactive attitudes and retreated into a third-person perspective. According to Schupmann, he "fled from the demands of agency and decisions" (Schupmann, 2014, p. 138). He chose to objectify himself, which allowed him to see his acts as non-choices and freed him from the burden of his

⁴² M.S. Moore, (1979), Responsibility for unconsciously motivated action. *International Journal of Law and Psychiatry*, 2(3), 323-347.

⁴³ Jonathan Haidt, (2001) The Emotional Dog and it's Rational Tail: A Social Intuitionist Approach to Moral Approach, in *Psychological Review*, Vol. 108, No.4, p. 816.

⁴⁴ Benjamin A. Schupmann, (2014), Thoughtlessness and resentment: Determinism and moral responsibility in the case of Adolf Eichmann. *Philosophy & Social Criticism*, 40(2), p. 138.

existential decision-making.⁴⁵ Regarding Eichmann, Schupmann comes to the following conclusion:

“Eichmann can be held accountable not for the acts that he committed as an object but for his very ignorance and refusal to decide – an unreasonable and grossly negligent ignorance, carrying the correspondingly appropriate reactive attitudes – of having done the immoral acts that he did” (Schupmann, 2014, p. 140).

According to Schupmann, Eichmann willingly abandoned his sense of agency because it was the easier path for him. It is because of this choice that he is responsible for his crimes.

Paul Formosa agrees with Schupmann that Eichmann is responsible for being thoughtless. According to Formosa, even though Eichmann’s duty was not autonomously legislated but heteronomously absorbed, he himself is responsible for what he did because he could have, at any time, spontaneously started to act autonomously. It was Eichmann’s choice to heteronomously perform his job, and for this reason he is responsible. On the other hand, Formosa admits that even people who are very thoughtful can still thoughtlessly perpetrate evil, which can happen if the moral saliency of certain issues is deeply and pervasively ingrained in a person’s culture.⁴⁶

What these different theories about Eichmann’s thoughtlessness have in common is that they see Eichmann’s thoughtlessness as a choice. They conclude that Eichmann is responsible for being thoughtless because he made a choice to be thoughtless. But what does this mean? It is not clear whether this means that Eichmann should be punished the same as someone who commits crimes because they are longing for evil consequences. At least one thing is clear, and that is that these theories argue that since Eichmann was in control of his own actions, he could have acted in a totally autonomous and reasonable manner. This notion that humans are rational and can act rational, has up to now been quite popular. However, recently it has come increasingly under scrutiny.⁴⁷

2.5.2 Reasons why one is less responsible for one’s thoughtlessness

There are also reasons to argue that banal evil should be punished less than absolute evil, or maybe should not be punished at all. There is not much literature on this argument that takes Eichmann’s case into account. However, I do think that when you look at this issue in a broader sense, there are

⁴⁵ Benjamin A. Schupmann, (2014), Thoughtlessness and resentment: Determinism and moral responsibility in the case of Adolf Eichmann. *Philosophy & Social Criticism*, 40(2), p. 138-140.

⁴⁶ Formosa, P. (2006), Moral Responsibility for Banal Evil. In *Journal of Social Philosophy*, 37: 501-520. From: [10.1111/j.1467-9833.2006.00354.x](https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9833.2006.00354.x)

⁴⁷ Jonathan Haidt, (2001) The Emotional Dog and it’s Rational Tail: A Social Intuitionist Approach to Moral Approach, in *Psychological Review*, Vol. 108, No.4, p. 814-834. From: <https://pdfs.semanticscholar.org/4f61/5dbb532f3ce5ab7f2a24f53c5a2ccf53b9f0.pdf>

sensible reasons for saying that someone should be punished less (or not at all) when committing banal evil instead of absolute evil.

First, as discussed in chapter one, absolute evil is an evil act committed by a person who intends to commit evil acts and who has an evil motive. For example, if person A steals a car from a person from a minority group because person A hates minorities, then person A has committed what is known as a hate crime, which you can describe as an evil intention. Hate crimes are crimes committed by perpetrators who are biased against the race, color, religion, or national origin of their victims. On the other hand, person B steals a car because he wants to make a good impression on his friends. It seems more appropriate to say that the crime committed by person A is more evil than the crime committed by person B. One could say that the amount of evil committed by person A, whose actions can be considered absolute evil, outweighs the evil perpetrated by person B, who, despite committing the same crime, has committed an act without evil intention, as he only did it to impress he's friends. The presence of an evil intention makes the act eviler than an act that lacks an evil intention. This example can be better described as bad than evil, but it is just to show that the intention for doing a crime can have an influence on how bad the act was. Both acts are bad, but the intentions are different.

Second, the way humans live, namely in societies, makes it the case that fitting into one's social group is essential for survival. This means that one must adapt oneself to a certain extent to the group's customs and rules. According to Michael Tomasello, who is a developmental and comparative psychologist, this is the result of evolutionary steps in which humans became "more identified with their cultural group and its conventions, norms, and institutions. (...) relate to one another not just as social but as moral agents" (Tomasello, 2014, p. 192). Conforming to the group not only has an evolutionary background, it is also practical. Those who do not conform to the social norms of the group, are likely to suffer some sort of negative consequences.⁴⁸ One could say that thoughtlessly following the norms of social groups may be a human characteristic. Especially when it is done within circumstances in which banal evil easily manifests itself. This tendency of humans must be taken into consideration in Eichmann's case, but also in other cases of banal evil as, what I argue in this report, this is more common than is thought. This does not mean that every crime committed on the basis of cultural norms should be dismissed. Only when the circumstances are such that it is reasonable to say that it has become demanding for someone to think critically does this characteristic of humans need to be recognized. The question then arises, what are the circumstance in which a person should not be punished for their thoughtlessness? To answer this

⁴⁸ M. Tomasello, (2014), The ultra-social animal, in *European Journal of Social Psychology*, Vol. 44 Issue 3, P. 191, from: <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/epdf/10.1002/ejsp.2015>

question, one must turn to the field of psychology and science. Research should be done to determine how rational people are. People like Jonathan Haidt argue that human rationality is highly overrated.⁴⁹ This research is important, because it concerns the question between human rationality (and free will) and moral responsibility, as elaborated on by Matthew Talbert.⁵⁰ If it can be proven that a person is highly or completely influenced by their social environment (social groups norms for example) then one's individual moral responsibility is less or none.

Another reason to say that banal evil should be punished milder than absolute evil is because of Arendt's demanding definition of thinking. Arendt's activity of thinking is quite time consuming and seems to have some practical issues. Its vagueness also begs the question: how does one know if something is bad? You would have to know what the consequences are. A counterargument, however, would be that one has an intuition about what is bad and what is not, like Jonathan Haidt says.⁵¹ Yet, even intuition can be culturally determined. One can't be expected to think critically all the time and to think deeply about every action one takes. If one really wants to do so, one would also need a tremendous amount of knowledge. Arendt says there is a difference between knowledge and thinking, but I think that they often go hand in hand. When one buys a fur coat but doesn't have any knowledge about the abuse of the animals that went into making the coat, one is probably not going to know that buying such a coat may be a wrong and possibly evil act. To be able to think critically about all of one's actions, one must have knowledge about the consequences of one's actions. Gathering such knowledge can be quite demanding.

2.6 Concluding remarks

The purpose of this chapter was to describe the characteristics of banal evil as well as the circumstances in which banal evil takes place. Thoughtlessness, it turns out, is the essential characteristic of banal evil. Thoughtlessness, in this case, largely means that one commits evil acts without having an evil motivation. The most important circumstances that allow someone to commit an evil act thoughtlessly are; that one is following orders; the distance between the act and its evil consequences; the fact that the act is not forbidden by law; and the fact that the act is being done jointly by many people rather than individually. In this chapter, I also discussed to what degree a person is responsible for their thoughtlessness in circumstances in which thoughtlessness is

⁴⁹ Jonathan Haidt, (2001) The Emotional Dog and it's Rational Tail: A Social Intuitionist Approach to Moral Approach, in *Psychological Review*, Vol. 108, No.4, p. 814-834.

⁵⁰ Talbert, Matthew. (Winter, 2019). Moral Responsibility. In *the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. Edward N. Zalta (ed.). From: <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2019/entries/moral-responsibility/>.

⁵¹ Jonathan Haidt, (2001) The Emotional Dog and it's Rational Tail: A Social Intuitionist Approach to Moral Approach, in *Psychological Review*, Vol. 108, No.4, p. 814-834. From: <https://pdfs.semanticscholar.org/4f61/5dbb532f3ce5ab7f2a24f53c5a2ccf53b9f0.pdf>

understandable. There are two ways of thinking about such situations. On the one hand, there are theories that say that thoughtlessness is a choice. Therefore, one is responsible for one's choices as well as their consequences. On the other hand, there are reasons to say that one should be punished milder for a thoughtless crime. In such crimes, there is no evil motivation involved, as one did not think of any possible evil consequences on one's action. One just assumed that what one did, was not wrong. Even more importantly, people are highly influenced by their environment, and there is more and more skepticism about human's rationality. And rationality is an important factor for someone to be morally responsible for their actions.

3. DEALING WITH CONSUMERISM AS BANAL EVIL

In this last chapter, I will show the relevance of banal evil today, by showing how banal evil can be ascribed to actions of consumerism. I will start with explaining why I think acts of consumerism are thoughtless. Then I will go through the circumstances and show that these apply to consumerism. In the end I will elaborate on whether one should be punished less or not at all for committing consumerist acts thoughtlessly.

3.1 Why an act of consumerism can be described as thoughtless

The most important aspect of banal evil is that it is done thoughtlessly. I will use a slightly narrower description of thoughtlessness than Arendt, as described in chapter 2, namely that thoughtlessness means not thinking about the possible bad consequences of one's action and having no evil motivation.

I argue that that at least some actions of consumerism meet the characteristics of thoughtlessness. To take myself as an example, I buy a lot of stuff of which I don't think of how it was made and so I don't know what system I sustain by buying it. This is the case with much of my possessions, for example: my furniture, my clothes, shoes, books, phone, laptop, and so on. When I buy new things, the only thing on my mind is my own happiness, or in the case of gifts: their happiness. Possible bad consequences were mostly not on my mind. It is my assumption that a lot of people buy things while not thinking about the possible bad consequences, just like me. To substantiate this assumption, I look at current events. The clothing industry, for example, is still increasing their business – people spend 40 percent more than they did 20 years ago.⁵² Even though the clothing industry produces 10 percent of total human carbon emissions.⁵³ One could argue that we probably would not have a clothing industry that is as polluting as it currently is, if people would be aware of the damage caused. This argument is tricky, because there I assume that there are a lot of cases in which people know the bad consequences of their actions but still continue their bad practices. For example, it is now commonly known that the production of meat is very polluting, but most people still buy a lot of meat. Even if the effects are known – the pollution that meat production causes – people don't seem to think of these bad consequences while shopping. But then still you could say, that people apparently don't think of the bad consequences when buying meat.

⁵² Sjan, N. (2019). Environmental impact of the textile and clothing industry: What consumers need to know, in briefing European Parliament. From:

[https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2019/633143/EPRS_BRI\(2019\)633143_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2019/633143/EPRS_BRI(2019)633143_EN.pdf)

⁵³ McFall-Johnsen, M. (2019). The fashion industry emits more carbon than international flights and maritime shipping combined. Here are the biggest ways it impacts the planet. In *Business Insider*. From:

<https://www.businessinsider.nl/fast-fashion-environmental-impact-pollution-emissions-waste-water-2019-10?international=true&r=US>

Just like Eichmann continued to do his job, even though he was to some extent aware of the consequences.

The point is that people don't have the destruction of the earth in mind, when they buy a new piece of clothing or when they buy meat. It is my assumption that people buy things for their own happiness, whether it is for themselves or for the pleasure of others. They don't buy things with the intention to cause climate change and to harm a lot of people. There is no evil ideology. The closest thing resembling an ideology would be the idea that buying is a good thing.

3.2 Following orders

In consumerism there is no direct following of orders like in the case of Eichmann. Advertisements, however, cause a similar effect: consumers are somehow indirectly following orders from advertisers and other consumers. Because of advertisements, consumers are convinced they need new things.⁵⁴ It is similar to following orders: someone (or in this case companies) wants the consumer to buy their products and they find a way for the consumer to comply. This is what Heath mentioned in his article when talking about the ideology and perfectionist critique of consumerism, as mentioned in chapter one, which says that consumer wants are fabricated by advertisements or by culture.

Nobody is forced to comply with the orders that are given but somehow it is not easy to dismiss them. According to international law, Eichmann should have known that the orders that were given to him, were morally wrong. But to be recognized as wrong, according to Arendt, the order must seriously infringe the canon of the trusted legal system. In Eichmann's case they were not.⁵⁵ In his circumstances, to him the orders were not out of place. The same goes for the compulsion of advertisement: products are portrayed as something positive, as if they are the next thing needed to improve life. It takes a hefty amount of research to find out the bad consequences of enabling consumerism. Information about this is not always available or easily found, like in the clothing industry⁵⁶ or in the food industry⁵⁷.

⁵⁴ Haider, T. Shakib, S. (2017). A Study on The Influences of Advertisement On Consumer Buying Behavior. In *Business Studies Journal* Vol. 9 Issue 1. From: <https://www.abacademies.org/articles/a-study-on-the-influences-of-advertisement-on-consumer-buying-behavior-7177.html>

⁵⁵ Hannah Arendt, (2017), *Eichmann in Jeruzalem: de banaliteit van het kwaad*, (ninth edition), Netherlands: Uitgeverij Atlas Contact, p. 43.

⁵⁶ Buis, A. (2017). *Nog maar weinig merken zijn transparant over productie*. From: <https://fashionunited.nl/nieuws/mode/nog-weinig-merken-zijn-transparant-over-productie/2017042428612>.

⁵⁷ Consumentenbond. (2014). *Rapport Traceerbaarheid en transparantie in de voedselketen*. From: <https://www.google.nl/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&source=web&cd=&ved=2ahUKewjwwvn0oJPqAhWB2KQKHUfJDUUQFjAGegQICBAB&url=https%3A%2F%2Fzoek.officielebekendmakingen.nl%2Fblg-354186.pdf&usg=AOvVaw3F8wUIWj0V-pTa6AX-BEc0>

3.3 Distance between the act and its evil consequence

Another point to consider, as discussed in chapter two, is the distance between the act and its evil consequences. When one buys meat for the barbeque or gas at the gas station, one does not immediately see the drought or the air pollution that one's action causes. There are plenty of reasons for this, an important reason is that for wealthier countries, at least, the bad consequences have no immediate impact. For one because the bad consequences, for wealthier countries at least, will really be felt in a few decades. However, there are areas in the world in which people already suffer from climate change because of floods and drought, which leads to wildfires and water shortages. South-Africa, for example, has already become dryer the last few years, because of climate change.⁵⁸ But for most consumerist societies there is distance in time between the act and its evil consequences. And there is physical distance because one, for instance, does not see, smell, or feel air pollution in these countries. The consequences are not tangible, not yet. There are already cases of smog, however. The psychical and temporal distance ask of a person to invest more in research. Not seeing or feeling the consequences of one's action, makes it difficult to see anything wrong with it. Just like Eichmann had no immediate connection to the consequences of his actions. What happened with the Jewish people mostly happened out of his sight.

3.4 Consumerism is by law not criminal, it is even encouraged

In his time, Eichmann's actions were by law not forbidden. By law, Eichmann was an exemplary citizen and what he had done was a crime only in retrospect.⁵⁹ Laws are in place to keep people from doing wrong, but laws are relative to time and never definite and so what one thinks is wrong, can't only depend on what the law says. It is up to the government and the people to sometimes revise laws when they are not covering what is commonly seen as right and wrong. It is a process, and so one must always be critical. Unfortunately, people are not always critical of existing laws, and the extermination of the Jewish people is an example of this. The same can be said about actions of consumerism. Buying too much things in general, or buying products that are polluting, are not forbidden actions in this time and place, in 2020. However, it is not inconceivable that these actions will be prohibited in the future. For now, it seems that the Dutch government, for instance, is not going to limit actions of consumerism. Liberal states like the Netherlands are usually quite careful with prohibiting actions or products, as freedom to choose what is right or wrong is considered

⁵⁸ KNMI, (2018), *Zuid-Afrika droger door klimaatverandering*, from: <https://www.knmi.nl/over-het-knmi/nieuws/zuid-afrika-droger-door-klimaatverandering>

⁵⁹ Hannah Arendt, (2017), *Eichmann in Jeruzalem: de banaliteit van het kwaad*, (ninth edition), Netherlands: Uitgeverij Atlas Contact, p. 82.

important. However, the Dutch government is not completely neutral as we have already seen in chapter one. The Dutch government seems to encourage consumerism. A primary example of encouraged consumerism from within the government is the earlier mentioned institute (CBS) that measures people's welfare by economic standards such as purchasing power, and more power is seen as a good thing. The ideology provided in wealthier countries seems to be that we can only thrive when we stimulate the economy. Which is often translated as spending money on (luxury) goods. There are also other examples of the government, in which they encourage certain purchases, like the fact that the European Union is spending millions of euros every year to promote meat eating.⁶⁰ So, in the case of consumerism, buying products of which the production has been polluting, is not only not unlawful, but it is also to some extent encouraged. This makes it understandable that people don't think critically of their actions, when buying new things. On the other side, it seems naïve to think that when something is not illegal, it evidently is not wrong. There are many people who, apart from the law, decide that it is wrong to buy more than one needs and adapted a different lifestyle whereby they consume less and don't buy products that cause global warming.

3.5. Not an individual crime, but communal

The extermination of the Jewish people could not have been done by one person, it could only be done if a large group of people participated. And I assume that it only works when people are not too questionable about the goodness of their actions. According to Arendt, the problem is that there are so many people like Eichmann⁶¹, implying that an enterprise as the extermination of the Jewish people can only be done when many Eichmanns are involved.

Consumerism can also be described as a communal activity: it is done by many people together in a system that only works if a lot of people contribute. If there would be only one individual consumerist, then that person's actions would not have evil consequences like climate change. One of the main problems of consumerism is that it is integrated in our society, meaning that these banally evil actions are considered normal, not evil. The fact that one consumes together with many other people, makes their actions normal and ordinary. It is not unique like murdering someone. Murder is considered abnormal and is done only by a small percentage of individuals. But because consumerism is done on a large scale, it is understandable that one does not see any red flags. Thinking is not encouraged, if an activity, by a large group of people, is seen as something normal. Just like Eichmann was one of the many people, who were similarly not involved in the

⁶⁰ Daniel Boffey, (January, 2020), EU spends tens of millions of euros a year to promote meat eating', in *The Guardian*, From: <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2020/feb/14/eu-spending-tens-of-millions-of-euros-a-year-to-promote-meat-eating>

⁶¹ Hannah Arendt, (2017), *Eichmann in Jerusalem: de banaliteit van het kwaad*, (ninth edition), Netherlands: Uitgeverij Atlas Contact, p. 429.

actual execution of evil but were indirectly engaged in the continuation of evil. If everybody does it, it becomes normal.

3.6 Concluding remarks

I argue that the circumstances of consumerism and the circumstances in which Eichmann operated can be seen to have some resemblances. In both situations the evil act was done with no evil intention; it was done by blindly following orders; it was not prohibited by law and; it was done by the majority of the community which normalized these evil actions. It is a serious problem that people are capable of creating evil whilst doing it banally. Sometimes, it might be considered as more dangerous than absolute evil. Benjamin Schupmann says that thoughtless or sleepwalking people, represent a far more ubiquitous problem than they may appear at first.⁶² Schupmann continues to say that “Individuals who abandon their will to structures of dominion end up becoming powerful ‘tools’ in the service of aims that they are unable to dissociate themselves from” (Schupmann, 2014, p. 140). Whether people really abandoned their will or not, I will discuss in the next section. But that banal evil is dangerous, is an understatement.

3.7 How must we deal with banal evil in the form of consumerism?

In the first parts of this chapter I have argued that consumerism complies with the characteristics of banal evil. The next question that is important is what to do with this knowledge. In this section I will look at individual moral responsibility from two angles, as discussed in chapter two.

3.7.1 Consumerists choose to purchase thoughtlessly

The rationalist view says that one is responsible for one’s chosen thoughtlessness when buying (new) things. This view says that it was a choice not to think about the possible evil consequences of their actions and that with pure logic one could have known that what one did was wrong. The rationalist argues that one is always able to think and that there is always a possibility to stop one’s actions. In the case of consumerism this would be buying non-essential things. The freedom to act differently is one way of deeming someone responsible for their action.⁶³ This view must entail that one was not influenced by any of the circumstances named in the last section.

⁶² Benjamin A. Schupmann, (2014), Thoughtlessness and resentment: Determinism and moral responsibility in the case of Adolf Eichmann. *Philosophy & Social Criticism*, 40(2), 128.

⁶³ Talbert, Matthew. (Winter, 2019). Moral Responsibility. In *the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. Edward N. Zalta (ed.). From: <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2019/entries/moral-responsibility/>.

This rationalist view makes every individual that participates in the consumerist system morally responsible for the consequences, which in the case of consumerism means being responsible for climate change. This means, that if we would look back in thirty years or so, we can say that we are all fully accountable for contributing to climate change, through buying more than we needed. And because this is a case of evil, I argue that we should be punished for this behavior.

But as already discussed in chapter two, this view seems too severe. Firstly, it does not take into account human psychology, like discussed in chapter two. That humans are completely rational is not evident. There are more and more scholars and scientists who argue that humans are not that rational. Furthermore, specifically for the case of consumerism, it is at this point not possible or easy for consumers to know what the possible evil consequences of their actions are. According to Talbert, in some cases one can be excused from blame when one was ignorant of the evil consequences of one's action. But when one's ignorance is one's own fault, like when one fails to improve one's epistemic position, then one is still responsible.⁶⁴

3.7.2 *Consumerists are thoughtless by nature*

The psychological view says that people are highly or completely influenced by their environment, and therefore, one can't be held accountable for one's thoughtless evil actions. This answer relies heavily on knowledge from psychological research which is not completely sufficient at this point. But if it is the case that one is highly influenced by one's environment, then one can't be blamed for thoughtlessly doing what one's environment prescribes. That would mean that no human can be held accountable for climate change. However, this does not feel right either as some of us could have acted differently. We could have paid more attention.

3.7.3 *Concluding remarks*

Both sides are unfortunately unsatisfactory up to this point. Arendt's analysis also seems a bit confusing on this matter. Arendt agreed with Eichmann's punishment, which was the death penalty. She has also written a critique on society, saying that modern psychology and sociology, and mostly modern bureaucracy, are the cause of why we have become so ordinary, appealing to some determinism, smuggling away the responsibility of the perpetrator.⁶⁵ But on the other hand, she acknowledges Eichmann's non-evil character. Almost understanding how he came about to commit

⁶⁴ Talbert, Matthew. (Winter, 2019). Moral Responsibility. In *the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. Edward N. Zalta (ed.). From: <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2019/entries/moral-responsibility/>.

⁶⁵ Hannah Arendt, (2017), *Eichmann in Jerusalem: de banaliteit van het kwaad*, (ninth edition), Netherlands: Uitgeverij Atlas Contact, p. 39.

these actions that led to the mass extermination of Jewish people. But there is no doubt she found him guilty and that he got the punishment he deserved.

Both ways of reacting to this matter of banal evil have good points. I suggest that we take both sides into account and for the time being assume that people are partially responsible for their behavior, until research will give us more information on which view we should prefer. This will help us understand our thoughtlessness and how we can minimize it. Either way, we must look critically at our society for not letting people act autonomously enough or influencing their behavior too much the wrong way. We should make greater use of our autonomy that we value so much. At this point it seems as if we are using our autonomy, but instead we are buying what others buy, like Lichtenberg said, and we are blinded by this idea that more and cheaper is better. Or as Heath said, that we think we are cool when we have a lot of stuff and buy new exotic things. And all the while our government and laws are not stimulating us to think about what we do, as mentioned earlier in this chapter. There is no red flag waving to warn our conscience. Professor of philosophy, Peg Birmingham points to the phenomenon of our century, namely the fragile identity of the modern subject and the law. There is supposedly a modern phenomenon of superfluosity.⁶⁶ We all act as if we are insignificant, which encourages one's thoughtless behavior.

So, the question remains, should we be fully accountable for consumerist banal evil actions? Or not accountable? Or partially accountable? The preliminary answer, after this analysis, is that one should be partially accountable and that one thus isn't fully morally accountable when committing banal evil. This in contrast to absolute evil. With a note that more research should be done in the field of psychology and science, to investigate how impressionable humans are.

⁶⁶ Birmingham, P. (2003). Holes of Oblivion: The Banality of Radical Evil. *Hypatia*, 18(1), 80-103. Retrieved June 8, 2020, from www.jstor.org/stable/3811038

4. CONCLUSION

In this report I have shown that Hannah Arendt's phenomenon of banal evil is still relevant today. I have formulated a theory that represents the phenomenon of banal evil, by ascribing to it a few characteristics based on Arendt's book. Consumerism, it turned out, has these characteristics and can be called a case of banal evil.

It is important to raise the issue of banal evil as its consequences are disastrous. Banal evil is something that is done by a large group of people, who, on the face of it, don't think about their actions. Without particularly wanting to hurt anybody, they commit deeds that indirectly do a lot of damage. On the one hand, their thoughtlessness is understandable. Their circumstances are such that they do not trigger or encourage one to think. But on the other hand, if one had paid just a little more attention, one would have been able to stop consuming more than one needs.

The question of this report was how one must deal with banal evil. The main discussion point was to which extent an individual person is morally responsible for their consumerist actions. You can respond to this question in two ways. Either, one can say that humans are completely autonomous and thus fully responsible for not choosing to be autonomous. If this would be the case, then the conviction of consumerist actions should be tough. Or one can say that we don't have autonomy, as we are very much influenced by our environment and, therefore, we are not responsible. If this would be the case, we would have to look at our institutions to make the change that is necessary. However, as it turned out, neither side is completely satisfying up to now. Debate about whether people can make rational decisions is still going on and psychological and scientific research up till now is not sufficient enough to defend or dismiss either side completely. I suggest, therefore, that for now the middle way should be preferred, which is to say that people are partially responsible for their banal evil actions. And at least meaning that banal evil should be judged as less evil than absolute evil. This also means that scientific research should be a central aspect when elaborating on one's moral responsibility. Next to this conclusion, I have four recommendations, based on the characteristics of banal evil, on how to prevent banal evil from occurring and how to deal with it. First, as previously stated, I argue that there should be more research on the human psyche, so a clearer answer can be given to the question of moral responsibility and thoughtless crime. It is very important to figure out how morally responsible individual humans are for co-creating climate change, so policies can adapt to that. Second, people should be educated more on how to think critically and how to think independently. This is to prevent people from becoming thoughtless cogs in a big system that causes evil to emerge. As to learn how to think about wrong and right. Third, the systems that we live in, which is now a consumerist system, should always be up for discussion. It should always be known that the system can change and should be changed. The most important recommendation in relation to consumerism, is that there should be complete

transparency on the production of products that we buy. Information on this should be readable and accessible for everyone. This way evil consequences can be traced by the consumer.

In this report I have mainly focused on banal evil committed by consumers. But they are not the only group who commit banal evil in relation to climate change. Advertisers and companies (but also people who are influencers) may have even greater responsibility. More research on this, I suggest, is necessary. More research should be done to individual responsibility, on different levels, when circumstances make it so that an act is easily seen as normal.

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PLAGIARISM RULES AWARENESS STATEMENT

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Scientific integrity is the foundation of academic life. Utrecht University considers any form of scientific deception to be an extremely serious infraction. Utrecht University therefore expects every student to be aware of, and to abide by, the norms and values regarding scientific integrity.

The most important forms of deception that affect this integrity are fraud and plagiarism. Plagiarism is the copying of another person's work without proper acknowledgement, and it is a form of fraud. The following is a detailed explanation of what is considered to be fraud and plagiarism, with a few concrete examples. Please note that this is not a comprehensive list!

If fraud or plagiarism is detected, the study programme's Examination Committee may decide to impose sanctions. The most serious sanction that the committee can impose is to submit a request to the Executive Board of the University to expel the student from the study programme.

Plagiarism

Plagiarism is the copying of another person's documents, ideas or lines of thought and presenting it as one's own work. You must always accurately indicate from whom you obtained ideas and insights, and you must constantly be aware of the difference between citing, paraphrasing and plagiarising. Students and staff must be very careful in citing sources; this concerns not only printed sources, but also information obtained from the Internet.

The following issues will always be considered to be plagiarism:

- cutting and pasting text from digital sources, such as an encyclopaedia or digital periodicals, without quotation marks and footnotes;
- cutting and pasting text from the Internet without quotation marks and footnotes;
- copying printed materials, such as books, magazines or encyclopaedias, without quotation marks or footnotes;
- including a translation of one of the sources named above without quotation marks or footnotes;
- paraphrasing (parts of) the texts listed above without proper references: paraphrasing must be marked as such, by expressly mentioning the original author in the text or in a footnote, so that you do not give the impression that it is your own idea;
- copying sound, video or test materials from others without references, and presenting it as one's own work;
- submitting work done previously by the student without reference to the original paper, and presenting it as original work done in the context of the course, without the express permission of the course lecturer;
- copying the work of another student and presenting it as one's own work. If this is done with the consent of the other student, then he or she is also complicit in the plagiarism;
- when one of the authors of a group paper commits plagiarism, then the other co-authors are also complicit in plagiarism if they could or should have known that the person was committing plagiarism;
- submitting papers acquired from a commercial institution, such as an Internet site with summaries or papers, that were written by another person, whether or not that other person received payment for the work.

The rules for plagiarism also apply to rough drafts of papers or (parts of) theses sent to a lecturer for feedback, to the extent that submitting rough drafts for feedback is mentioned in the course handbook or the thesis regulations.

The Education and Examination Regulations (Article 5.15) describe the formal procedure in case of suspicion of fraud and/or plagiarism, and the sanctions that can be imposed.

Ignorance of these rules is not an excuse. Each individual is responsible for their own behaviour. Utrecht University assumes that each student or staff member knows what fraud and plagiarism



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