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BANALITY OF EVIL AND ITS POWER

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1. Introduction

In literature, it could be said one of the characters' biggest driving forces is guilt. Similarly, in the real world, one of the most powerful human emotions is also guilt, or the opposite of the feeling of innocence. We can see that pattern throughout many genres, cultures and historical periods, from Shakespeare to current young adult novels and from the bible to poems posted on social media. Whether it be guilt from losing contact with a loved one, dealing with hurting someone, deeply regretting an action, causing suffering (accidental or not), all, or most, humans have felt some range of that emotion. But to be declared guilty, one needs to have deemed their action as wrong, and that is completely associated with the values present in the moment someone decides they are not innocent. In Hannah Arendt's, a Jewish philosopher who wrote extensively about the holocaust, excerpt she talks about the separation between collective, individual and political responsibilities', which are directly linked to guilt, since the feeling of guilt can come from feeling as though you did not act responsibly. In this essay, I will argue how the banality of evil, one of Arendt's main concepts, can directly influence the feelings of political, individual and collective guilt (or its lack, innocence) and its judgement.

2. Definitions

In order to explain the thesis, first I need to define two concepts. The first one I would like to clarify is the concept of the banality of evil. This concept was created by Hannah Arendt in reference to the holocaust in the context of Eichmann's judgment, one of the Nazis responsible for the massacre. In simple terms, this phenomenon is based on the concept of banality, which occurs when something happens so often that it can start to feel normal. In this case, the banality of evil happens when cruel things happen so often that they are no longer seen as something odd and they simply become a part of the routine. In sum, it can no longer be deemed some that brings guilt or that can deem you guilty.

Finally, it is also essential to differentiate the feeling of guilt from being guilty from a legal point of view. While the feelings of guilt come from believing you did not act well in a certain situation, legal guilt is when you go against a law and are deemed guilty by the government. Both types of guilt can influence each other and can be influenced by collective notions of guilt such as a constitution or a group of unwritten social rules.

3. The holocaust as an example of guilt and innocence

The holocaust was a genocide that happened during the Second World War (1939 to 1945) and ended up assassinating more than six million Jews and other minorities. In Judaism, there is great importance in seeing these victims as more than a number in a big collective, but as a universe of dreams and individually that was brutally removed from the world. This is important not only to see their humanity, but also as a way to prevent future genocides and other social atrocities from happening.

In addition, genocides do not happen overnight. Slowly, society starts to normalize certain actions and prejudices until they are so common that there is no way to see its brutality and this is what the concept banality of evil refers to. For example, in the holocaust, laws were slowly implemented in a way that it might have been harder to be critical of the reality since the changes were so gradual. In this case, can we say that all of those who were directly or indirectly involved in it are collectively guilty? And if that is the case, does that remove individual responsibility and guilt?

According to Hannah Arendt, the lack of collective guilt (or innocence) makes it possible for individual people to be deemed guilty (or innocent). In that sense, if all of Germany was to be deemed guilty for the holocaust, the specific Nazis that were politically responsible for the decisions that led to the death of six million people would not be able to be guilty since they would be seen as a part of a collective and not as an individual.

Furthermore, it is important to analyze the roles individuality, politics and collectivity play in guilt and innocence. First, collective guilt can determine individual guilt. Let's look at a hypothetical scenario to better understand this. Let's say that in a specific fictional society there is a law that stealing broccoli is prohibited (political), but that society believes that broccoli is great for you and should be free to eat it whenever you would like. But since broccoli has been extremely expensive, stealing it becomes so common that people no longer find it wrong. Because it has become such a common practice, its prior judgement is no longer existent. Now, after stealing the expensive vegetable, individuals are no longer deemed guilty, since it has been normalized or like Hannah Arendt says, a banalization occurred.

Well, but then how does political responsibility play into this? According to the philosopher Arendt, it is separated from the actions that the individual has done, which means that, in this case, moral judgement would not be adequate. In sum, this means that individual and political guilt are not the same.

4. Collective guilt does not cancel out individual guilt

While collective guilt can influence individual guilt, it does not excuse it. In Pam Muñoz's fiction book *Ecós*, which is based on true events, the main characters' sister thinks she is doing what is best to her brother by taking action to chemically castrate him, a procedure which could cause his death, because he has a physical disability. To her, who is in the Nazi youth group, she is doing a favor for the country and is not harming her brother since that action would be for the best of the nation. In this case, I would argue that she is not exclusively individually guilty, since she has been completely brainwashed in order to think that able-bodied people are superior and those who do not fit into the narrow ideals of the perfect human should not be able to reproduce. Although she is not individually guilty, I would argue that saying she is innocent would also be faulty and would have the danger of excusing her behavior. There is a fine line between understanding where a behavior comes from and deeming that person innocent because of it. While humans are manipulated with great ease that does not erase the individual responsibility and hurt individual people can cause. In addition, it does not make them innocent.

For example, a movie that demonstrated the banality of evil and the susceptibility to manipulation of individuals is *The Wave*. In this movie, we see a teacher slowly create a sort of cult in his classroom. Little by little, more rules, ideals and hierarchies were implemented in such a way that was hard to be critical. After a while, even the teacher was completely immersed in it and openly discriminating against people was normalized and by then, which became hard to criticize since it was the new norm. While this demonstrates human fragility and our susceptibility to be manipulated, it does not excuse the collective or individual behavior, it only exposes how such brutal actions can be normalized.

Additionally, what Hannah Arendt helps us understand is that those terrible Nazis, the people who ordered millions of people to go to gas chambers to be brutally assassinated, could be us. It could be you, your mom, your teachers, your sibling or even the cashier at the supermarket and yes, even a philosopher. At first this might seem hard to accept, but when you are completely immersed in a context that teaches you one thing as the absolute and utter truth, you might think killing certain people is not that bad, or is even necessary in some cases. This is how collective ideals play into individual guilt: if an ideal is widely accepted in a collective setting, individual people might not be deemed socially guilty if they play into that. Finally, the normalization of such acts is NEVER an excuse to cause any suffering.

5. Political responsibility and guilt

By analyzing the philosopher's beliefs, the question of whether legal guilt, disobeying legal documents, and emotional guilt, disobeying social rules or your own beliefs, coincide and how that plays into political responsibility. Let's look at a biblical story to better understand it. In the Old Testament, there is the story of how there was a law that some children should be killed after they were born. Because of this and in order to preserve his life, Moses's mother put him in a basket and set it by the river in hopes someone would find him and he wouldn't have to die. While that was happening, many babies were being separated from their mothers to be killed. Since it was legal to kill babies, does that make the people who had the job to kill politically guilty? While I would argue that they were not guilty from a legal standpoint, since they were following their political responsibility, I would say they were morally wrong, and therefore individually guilty. At the same time, if such practice was normal, and therefore

harder to criticize, perhaps people would not be collectively guilty and that would influence on one's individual guilt, whether it be political or social. In sum, while political, individual and collective responsibilities are separate concepts, they cannot exist without the other and have the power to shape what each one means.

6. Political and individual guilt as equals

While I have argued that political and individual responsibilities' are not the same, one could argue that since they refer to actions made by the same person, they cannot be differentiated. Even though that could be said, it would not be a true statement, since political and individual responsibilities are not interchangeable because different aspects determine guilt or innocence: legal documents and society. Furthermore, the individual member of the group does not have their actions equated to their political responsibility, which is impossible to deny exists.

7. Conclusion and final thoughts

In conclusion, the normalization of actions can change the meaning of individual, collective and political guilt and responsibility, which are all separate, but related concepts. Similarly, the banality of evil has the capacity to shape how actions are interpreted and criticized. Additionally, by using these concepts, Hannah Arendt teaches us how in order to keep the world a safer and more comfortable space, we have to be critical of the world even when our actions seem completely normal and are inserted into our routines. Finally, let's make the world a better place by being responsible and critical of our roles and actions and always remembering those who died unjustly because of such normalization and human cruelty.