



# The Emptiness of Evil: A Dialogue between Arendt and Aquinas

Fisogni P\*

*La Provincia daily newspaper, Italy*

\*Corresponding author: Fisogni P, La Provincia daily newspaper, Italy; E-mail: [pfisogni@gmail.com](mailto:pfisogni@gmail.com)

## Abstract

The philosophical discourse about existential emptiness cannot ignore evil, which was recognized as a component of the human agency since the beginnings of civilization. Evil has been traditionally explored in terms of a loss of being, an absence of consistence or as a formal or a material defect: think of Augustine of Hippo, for example. In any case, this opaque concept is deeply linked to the notion of void, in opposition to the good as a fullness, a totality. In the contemporary philosophical debate, it was the German political scientist Hannah Arendt (1906-1975) to present evil as an insubstantial reality whose emptiness conflicts with the severe, highly concrete consequences of evildoing. This paper, through the discussion of the Arendt's change of perspective about the "banality" of evil, strives to dig into the contradiction posed by the idea of evil as a phenomenon of the existential void – in virtue of its lack of consistence - that, nevertheless, moves to action. Arendt's thought will be discussed in dialogue with the Aquinas' doctrine, and finally examined within the frame of General System Thinking. This perspective will allow to focus the dynamic traits of evil as negative energy.

**Keywords:** Evil; Evildoing; Banality of evil; Human agency; Metaphysics; System thinking; Void

## Beyond the Concept of Banality of Evil

Hannah Arendt, briefly after Eichmann in Jerusalem. A Report on Banality of Evil was issued (1963) [1], distanced herself from the formula "banality of evil" that she coined in her report about the trial against the Nazi officer sentenced to death (1962) for being a leading responsible of the Holocaust. The occasion to change her mind arose from, or at least was favoured by, the correspondence with her friend Gershom Scholem, in which Arendt updated the idea of evil she had already explored in *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1951) [2]. She assumed that «evil is never "radical", that it is only extreme (...) only the good has depth and can be radical». However, this is the very problem this paper explores, if evil is nothingness, and thought can neither grasp it, why can evil spread like a "fungus" as Arendt held? I suggest that the thinker's theoretical tools were not enough to focus on a fruitful strategy, although she got really close to a solution. Furthermore, she did not seem interested in deepen her insight about evil, not at that moment. In any case,

Arendt left a main anthropological problem wide open and still unresolved, which goes further the Eichmann's case. The dilemma (what is nothing cannot act as it were an entity) may be cleared out according to the doctrine of Thomas Aquinas, as this paper will argue, focusing on the concept of deagendo/nonactivity: a notion that Aquinas grounded on some valuable arguments in the *De Malo* [3] and furthermore updated in the *Summa Theologiae* [4]. It was properly this concept that Arendt grasped in an intuitive way in the idea of "thoughtlessness" of Eichmann. Hence, the notion of thoughtlessness, through this interpretation, is not primarily linked to the limits of the doer's intellect, but to the constraints of the action performed in evildoing. I'll conclude with some remarks about this topic holding that the idea of evil as a process can be acceptable without contradiction according to a change of paradigm: both good and evil are to be seen as activities. Is this idea thinkable? Yet, it is, if we consider the whole matter through the lens of the systemic view; this perspective, in fact, offers also

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a fruitful response to good as concreteness and fruitfully grounds its depth.

### A short account of the Arendt-Scholem controversy

Arendt and Scholem were friends since 1939, sharing a common interest about the Jewish heritage. It was the German philosopher Walter Benjamin (1892-1940) who brought them together in Paris during the Second World War. Their friendship, witnessed by 140 letters, went on for decades. In 1942 Arendt reviewed Scholem's Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism for the journal Menorah, unpublished, coming back again to the same topic when she wrote her Jewish History, Revised, in 1946 [5]. At the time of the Eichmann's controversy, they both were well recognized scholars. The trial celebrated in Jerusalem (1961) against the Nazi officer who was kidnapped in Argentina and prosecuted (1962) by the State of Israel in reason of his crimes against the Hebrew people, gave the two friends the chance to meet in Israel and to discuss the crucial steps of the process, as director Margarethe von Trotta finely highlighted in her 2012 biopic Hannah Arendt. Hannah and Gershom came to conflict in 1963, when Eichmann in Jerusalem. A Report of the Banality of Evil was issued, immediately fueling criticism worldwide against Arendt, especially within the Hebrew intellectual milieu [6]. A recent huge bibliography explores the bitter (for Arendt) aftermath of the trial [7] that I'm simply sketching, in order to introduce my investigation about the letter of the controversy (July 24, 1963), addressed by Arendt to Scholem [8]. It was written in response of a previous one in which the theologian claimed that the idea of the "banality of evil" contrasted with the notion of radical evil formulated in The Origins of Totalitarianism, the main Arendt's investigation on Nazi totalitarian regime. This topic was only a passage within a more articulated reply to the accusation of having negated her Jewishness – grounded on the shared principle of Ahvat Israel (Love to Israel) -by claiming that she could only love her friends, not people in general (Fisogni, 2019) [9]. Arendt was perfectly aware she was turning down her perspective, as we can realize from what the German thinker wrote to her friend Mary McCarthy: «The very phrase, the banality of evil stands in contrast to the phrase I used in the totalitarian book, "radical evil"» [10].

Three passages are especially offered to underline Arendt's theoretical turn. I'll sketch them briefly, before examining at the light of the political thinker's view in the following paragraphs:

- Arendt reconsidered and retracted her intuitions about evil as radical and banal as well
- Arendt connected the evil's lack of being to the very concrete ontological dimension of good
- Arendt assigned a certain ontological profile to evil, in terms of a process, which is strictly related to its viral capacity of contagion, for spreading like a fungus.

As I intend to prove, Arendt was nevertheless unable to bring the extreme consequence of her thought on a secure ground, unless she would have come back to the Aquinas's investigations, especially to the De Malo and the later Summa Theologiae. She didn't do it, although a chapter of her late and posthumous work On Willing [11] is about the Doctor Angelicus and recalls, at large, his doctrine about evil (Thomas Aquinas and the primacy of Intellect). In the second part of this brief investigation, I'll try to show how the Aquinas' thought can valuably integrate Arendt's lesson, solving the apparent contradiction between evil's nothingness and its processual dynamic. I'll do it after a short account of what I consider the three more relevant aspects of Arendt's turn on evil in her letters to Scholem.

### A radical change of mind

Addressing to Scholem, Arendt surprisingly sketches an essential geometry of good and evil: she provides a three-dimensional view of good; on the contrary, she claims that evil is only extreme, that's to say a two-dimension process. It is rather evident, according to Arendt's language, and especially to the use of the metaphor of the fungus spreading all over, that she looks at good as a substance (hypokeimenon/substratum) in Aristotle's terms (Metaphysics, VII, 1042a) [12]. I quote the entire passage of the text: «It is indeed my opinion now that evil is never 'radical', that is only extreme, and that it possesses neither depth nor any demonic dimension. It can overgrow and lay waste the whole world precisely because it spreads like a fungus on the surface. It is "thought-defying", as I said, because thought tries to reach some depth, to go to the roots, and the moment it concerns itself with evil, it is frustrated because there is nothing. This is "banality". Only the good has depth and can be radical» [8]. When the human thought tries to dig deeper into evil, Arendt assumes, it does not find anything. By sketching the profile of good as something depth and consistent, Arendt definitely goes beyond Kant's theory of radical evil, where "radical" means that wrongdoing is rooted in the very nature of mankind, as an original corruption formulated in Religion Within the Limits of Reason Alone (1793) [13]. The moral paradigm designed by the author of the Critique of Pure Reason was definitely broken down in the Nazi extermination camps, as Arendt argued in The Origins of Totalitarianism, where she theorized evil as "absolute", in the sense of ab-solutus, free from any parametrical and evaluative scale of human behaviour, without understandable reasons. It is absolute, she wrote, because it can no longer be deduced from humanly comprehensible motives. A concept that also Arendt underlined in the correspondence to Jaspers («we know that the great evils or radical evil has nothing to do anymore with such humanly understandable sinful motives») [14]. In The Origins Arendt did not follow Kant's idea of radical evil, although she borrowed the term from him, and got the conclusion that the Nazi

extermination camps were laboratories where «to eradicate the concept of the human being» [14]. Furthermore, in her essay about totalitarianism the German philosopher sketched a theory of ordinariness as a consequence of bureaucracy. In Eichmann in Jerusalem, she wrote that «the essence of totalitarian government (...) is to make functionaries and mere cogs in the machinery out of the men, and thus to dehumanize them» [1]. Nevertheless, more recent investigations about the role of the Nazi officer proved that Eichmann was not a mere dealer [15], but a very creative actor the Final Solution, to which he contributed «far beyond what was necessary» [16]. The Jerusalem trial that the thinker covered for The New Yorker magazine offered her the occasion to move a further step into the most entangled issue of the ethical conduct. Arendt criticized the validity of the conscience as a moral compass and held that Adolf Eichmann's criminal profile was a perfect case history about that phenomenology. The bureaucrat of the Final Solution firmly declared to have always acted according the rules. As Arendt underlined in her report, the Eichmann's case brought to its final stage the aporia of Kant's moral philosophy: the norms taken as a parameter of the action, ('you must') had been able to de-empower human responsibility both with respect to reason (I do not need to think about what I do, but only at the command of the norm) and will (which follows the 'you must' command).

### Evil's inconsistency

Eichmann's trial allowed the German thinker to realize evil's insubstantial stuff, reinforcing her assessment about its impossible radical feature. It was a powerful insight more than the result of a detailed argumentation. Arendt, in fact, mentioned the "banality of evil" only once in her essay about Eichmann in Jerusalem without formulating a theory, nor clarifying what precisely she intended with it. The report, as the author herself noted, exceeded the intention that inspired the book:

"I spoke of "banality of evil". Behind that phrase, I held no thesis or doctrine".

She spelled out punctually, in her report from Jerusalem that: "When I speak of the banality of evil, I do so only in the strictly factual level, pointing to a phenomenon which stared one in the face at the trial (...) Except for an extraordinary diligence in looking out for his personal advancement, (Eichmann) had no motives at all". (1).

It is interesting to note that, in the very first reference to the Eichmann's case, made by Arendt to her friend and former teacher, philosopher Karl Jaspers, the political thinker talked about the need to look at this walking disaster face to face in all his bizarre vacuousness [14]. Although the term "banality of evil" was not yet coined, Arendt's reference to vacuousness reveals at least the idea of ontological emptiness. A concept familiar to

Augustine's idea of evil, so close to Arendt. This given, the notion of banality as a quality of evil committed by persons through the uncritical acceptance of clichés and propaganda [17] should put into brackets through a veritable re-thinking of Arendt [18]. The exchange with Gershom Scholem, in summer 1963, gave the political thinker the possibility to reaffirm her theoretical turn and to deepen into it. She wrote to Gershom:

"You're completely right: I changed my mind and I do not talk more about "radical evil" (...) in brackets I do not understand why you call my expression "banality of evil" a phrase made or a slogan. As far as I know, nobody used this term before me; but this is not important" [8]. The close connection of the discourse about evil in relation to the positive side of experience (evil is never "radical", that it is only extreme (...)) Only the good has depth and can be radical) is also revealing of the thinker's effort to move from the case of the individual (Eichmann) to a more anthropological, ethical frame. This sharp change of mind from the banality of evil as an isolated case of thoughtlessness to a universal paradigm of human agency could not be without consequences, as we realize from the criticism moved by Jaspers, who invited Arendt to consider that banal was the doer, not the phenomenon of evil in itself "The point is that this evil, not evil per se, is banal" [14]. It is important to underline that Arendt's new perspective about the topic of evil-doing was strictly related to her coming back to her classical philosophical background, especially to the philosophy of Augustine.

### The contagion of evil and the limits of thought

Augustine's thought is at the core of Arendt passage concerning the banality of evil. When Arendt notes that, in search of evil, thought is frustrated because "there is nothing", she is seemingly following Augustine on his main theoretical path. I said, because thought tries to reach some depth, to go to the roots, and the moments it concerns itself with evil, it is frustrated because there is nothing. This is banality [8]. Arendt is here oriented to see human agency mainly inclined to the good, although evil can always affect it like a parasite. Nevertheless, Arendt's idea of the depth of good raises a series of unresolved questions. First of all, how can the consistency of good react to the contagion of evil secondarily: is human thought the veritable instrument to defend human beings from the pervasiveness of evil?

If we carefully read Arendt's letter to Scholem, we can realize that thought never really faces evil, because when it digs into it, it does not find anything. Furthermore, although being endowed with depth and ontological consistent (it is something), the good as a substratum needs to be activated by (critical) thinking to explicate its own positivity. It means that good is passive and evil, which moves all around it, is active in a peculiar way. This sounds contradictory because it would seem that evil could assume the characters of a substance. Without being able to



penetrate beyond the surface, which it simply affects superficially, evil cannot go to the bottom - according to Arendt - and yet it is able to reassure quietly until thought unmask it. As much as its robustness can be affirmed, the good seems to be condemned to inertia, in the face of a life of the mind which - being oriented by freedom - can take its time and allow itself to be enmeshed by doing, with respect to action. The main objection to Arendt's view of the spreading of evil/fungus all around the consistency of the good surprisingly recalls the criticism discussed by the Aquinas in the Quaestio 1 of the De Malo.

### **From Augustine to Aquinas: how to solve Arendt's knots**

Given all this, my basic strategy for overcome the difficulties that lie within Arendt's discourse, turns on two key questions:

- How can the consistency of good react to the contagion of evil?
- If good is the substratum, it seems that good is passive and evil, which moves around it as a parasite, is 'active' in a very peculiar way.

Arendt, as seen before, has sewn together nothingness of evil and consistency of good. This theoretical perspective is only partially close to Augustine's doctrine of which Arendt was finely aware since her youth and scholarly explored in her doctoral dissertation about The Concept of Love in Augustine (Der Lebesbegriff bei Augustine, 1929) [19]. Her philosophical background drawn Arendt to move from the case of a single evildoer (Eichmann) to theorize a more general conceptual frame about human agency where evil can be said "nothing" and, at the same time, it can give rise to a "contagion". Indeed, it was not Augustine who can bring Arendt's intuition on a secure ground. The Aquinas, in both the De Malo [3] and the Summa Theologiae [4], is facing the same problem that occurs in Arendt's letter. Aquinas was perfectly aware of the criticism that evil cannot be nothing because if it produces some effects. To overcome this contradiction, he finely distinguishes, in the De Malo, between two kinds of corruption: an active one, which pertains to the good and a formal one that is typical of evil. Moving from the conclusion that evil does not exist per se (Q. I, 1), he assumed that evil deprives the things to which it applies of some qualities: to be blind, for example, is not per se evil, but the impossibility to see is a defect.

Hence corruption belongs to the good as an efficient cause. A physical disease is considered evil: the impossibility of a correct walking is something that we can see; the defect does exist per se ipso. The difficulty to walk does not depend on itself, but it is the consequence of the body's response to an inner or an outer physical problem. The curved bone of the leg, which restricts the ability to walk is a formal limit of the person. In the Aquinas' perspective the first case is something that depends by an activity

(good) and the second describes a formal condition (evil). Once again, we reach the conclusion that the evil does not exist per se, it exists only in virtue of the good. Aquinas holds that evil damages everything to which it is related for the reason that it limits the inner perfection of the thing.

A further question can be moved to Aquinas' doctrine as well as to Arendt's insight about the spreading of evil, its viral activity:

If evil affects things, how can we say that it is not an act?

The Aquinas' strategy for avoiding contradiction digs into the kind of activity that intuitively we recognize to evil, that's to say a deficiency that - here is the novelty introduced by the Doctor Angelicus-refers also to its dynamics not only to evil's consistence. By introducing the concept of deagendo/nonactivity Aquinas provided an argument that faces essentially the same dilemma posed by the "fungus" described but not adequately supported by Arendt. Aquinas could go out the problem turning out a key idea. In short: corruption in the formal sense means being corrupted, it does not signify to cause movement nor acting; in active sense corruption concerns movement, yes, but in this case it belongs to the power of good (De Malo, I, 1, resp. 9) not to a proper quality.

In the Question 49 of the Summa Theologiae, the first article is about "Whether Good Can be the Cause of Evil?" Thomas recalls, from the De Malo, the concept of deagendo that he re-writes in terms of "a deficient effect", which follows a "deficient cause". What's new, then? In the De Malo the very idea of nonactivity comes from the formal corruption; in the Summa the discourse is about the kind of causality may give rise to evil. Translating Aquinas' passage, Richard Regan provides a clarification of the concept, by connecting nonactivity to the deficiency of active power, which is a primary trait of corruption. He, nevertheless, like friar Thomas assumes that evil is a sort of activity, for what corrupts brings something corrupt into actuality and as an effect (On Evil, Q.I, 1, 8). In the Summa, we do not see any reference to the deagendo. That term has not yet taken in consideration, I argue, not because that concept has been revised (a deficient cause refers to a process with some defect as well), but to overcome any possible ambiguity about active and efficient causality. Aquinas concedes that evil in some way has a cause (*malum aliquo modo causam habet*) for being caused by an agent, not directly, but accidentally

To briefly resume, evil for the Aquinas, on the ontological ground - as an entity - is not a part of the human nature. It is more precisely an accident and a corruption of the good (corruption boni), which is willed only under the aspect of an apparent good. Thomas Aquinas follows Aristotle when he assumes that evil does not exist out of things and that it exists exclusively as a potential good (everything can be good or bad). On the dynamic level, which more closely deals with human agency, Doctor Angelicus' solution is to highlight on the 'formal cause' of



corruption that fits for 'nonactivity'/deagendo (De Malo) or a deficient effect/effectus deficiens. However, Aquinas was perfectly aware that the problem of evil is far more complex to solve it through any argumentative process, which can provide some good theoretical frames but does not answer the fundamental questions about evil performed by humans and allowed by God. Arendt certainly follows Aquinas in recognizing that evil is not radical in the Kantian sense (it does not lie within the human nature), nor in the terms that she held in *The Origins of Totalitarianism* [2]: it can be absolute (ab-solutus)/disconnected from motives but it spreads over the human condition. Like Aquinas, she could bring to the extreme consequence that good, the very recipient and the origin of any perfection, is the ontological substratum of everything. In any case, for Arendt, as well as for Aquinas, evil still remains an open question: its ontological nothingness, in fact is in conflict with its formal nonactivity (De Malo) [3], which is not 'nothing' but a 'negative' activity. In other words, what really makes problem is evil within the human agency, an efficient causation (*Summa Theologiae*) [4]. Arendt had a sharp insight of it by examining Eichmann's profile. She found that the very understanding of evil could be grasped in the embodied stories of the person. That's why her report on from Jerusalem is not simply the investigation about an individual who committed evil, but a case history of how evil works in the human person: Jaspers was probably aware of it when suggested Arendt to consider "banal" the doer (Eichmann) not the phenomenon of evil in itself.

We can really relate Arendt's idea of thoughtlessness to the nonactivity/deagendo theorized by the Aquinas.

In brief: if human agency is constantly in search of an end, to which any act is inclined (Aquinas) and for it motives are needed (Arendt), Eichmann's moral profile recalls the ontological absence inclination and motives. His act is involved in an essential emptiness of sense because of the ontological/moral void. Hence, it is not the "stupidity" to affect Eichmann thought, but a more metaphysical loss of being/of good that is strictly related to the efficient causality of evil in the human agency. Nevertheless, this lack is at the same time a limit for the intellect (It is thought-defying), because the intentional performing of an act for being willed need to be known. Through the lens of the Arendt's perspective that results from the letter to Scholem, integrated with the Aquinas' reading of De Malo and the, we could assume that thoughtlessness was given by the nothingness evil, which was at the origin of Eichmann's incapacity to connect his will to his mind. The responsibility of the doer was immense, but it was nevertheless inscribed within a more general anthropological frame. In this perspective, as we can easily see, only good is really radical and any evil committed on a gigantic scale (like the Holocaust) cannot be interpreted as a mere

pathology of a single person or as the consequence of an ideology.

### Some Systemic Remarks

My investigation was directed at exploring Arendt's turn about the concept of evil in 1963. I tried to offer a better understanding of this subject matter through the lens of Aquinas' De Malo, arguing how close is the German political thinker's insight to the metaphysics of the Doctor Angelicus. The key word, I assumed, is nonactivity/deagendo, a term from De Malo that the highlights on the negative activity of evil. What Aquinas theorized in middle Ages, Arendt finely grasped in an intuitive form in contemporary times. At this point of the paper, I move my remarks, asking whether the Aquinas' arguments and Arendt's acuteness save nonactivity from the theoretical difficulties that the argument is supposed to uncover. What Arendt brings to surface about evil (evil is nothing but it contaminates reality) seems paradoxical. As I discussed in my paper, the German thinker, who certainly came back to Augustine's doctrine in reconsidering the 'banality of evil' at the time of Eichmann in Jerusalem, could have found some valuable arguments through the Aquinas' doctrine to solve that difficulty. Nevertheless, leaving apart the De Malo's explanation of two kinds of corruption or at the *Summa Theologiae*'s distinction between active and efficient causality that valuably fit for the purpose of clarifying Arendt's late thought, another possibility to grasp the complexity of the issue may be suggested. In her letter to Scholem, Arendt highlights evil in terms of a process (it spreads like a fungus), not an entity. Putting into brackets the Thomist concept of nonactivity, this idea can be acceptable without contradiction according to a change of paradigm through the lens of the systemic view; this perspective, in fact, offers also a fruitful response to good as concreteness and valuably grounds its depth. General System Thinking, the interdisciplinary approach to complexity formulated by Von Bertalanffy (1967) [20], invites us to look at the world of life in terms of systems that continually interact giving rise to new properties (second level or systemic properties). Good can be interpreted as a coherent strength of aggregation, connections and a powerful source of energy. From this point of view, we are allowed to think of the good as something for its generative capacity/activity to give rise to entities. At the same time also the idea of depth sounds correct as the result of the coherence which belongs to good. Evil, on the other side, recalls a negative activity (not simply a non-activity like the Thomist term deagendo). Precisely, it presides a dissipation of energy, a well-known process of systemic interactions that consists of the stability of dissipative structures is due to their ability to transfer a large amount of entropy to their environment [21]. On a systemic ground [22], dissipation is an event/activity among others (auto-organization, emergence, equivalence, balance, etc.) That allows



the surge of the emergences, or properties that cannot be reduced to any singular component of the constellation. For it, evil is not “something” intended as a coherent aggregation of parts (it is the opposite), nevertheless its being a process brings it to take a part (not generative but destructive) in the transformation of reality. Its spreading all over as a fungus refers to the evil’s blurring profile, between being and not-being, which cannot reveal itself (it’s nothing, indeed) but always throws light on the coherence of being (the depth of good/being as positive, a datum). In this way evil belongs to the living domain without being an entity.

As a dissipative process it is not productive in se nor it has consistence; nevertheless, it stimulates the response of the environment in reason of entropy: it’s a thought defying, as Arendt holds [23,24], only according to a linear thinking, not in a systemic view. Surprisingly, but not paradoxically, the loss of being corresponds to the growth of new properties: the most the evil spreads, the more can be experimented the positive of life. Or, to say it with the Arendt’s words, the depth of good is intuited. Even so barely stated the concept of evil [25] as a negative activity may be valuable to focus the generative power of a presumed non-being through dissipation.

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