Hannah Arendt on Language Codes

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Presidential Address

I. INTRODUCTION

A major aspect of Hanna Arendt's thinking focuses on the notion of what she calls the "banality of evil." This is a term that refers to the seemingly paradoxical fact that acts of evil are often not committed by particularly evil people. This is pointedly illustrated by Arendt in her study of Adolf Eichmann. As it turned out, Eichmann was a reasonably sensible person who was not the monster that one might expect considering the sheer amount of evil the man perpetrated—evil that would not have been possible except for his keen bureaucratic skills. Arendt's analysis of Eichmann reveals that he was able to execute the acts of evil he did precisely because he was not "thinking."

The term "thinking" for Arendt has a specific meaning and carries with it some, to say the least, philosophically difficult problems. These problems, save for one, can be set aside for purposes of this talk. The problem to which I am referring is one in which Arendt's analysis suggests that there is some sort of perfect thinker (Arendt, "Thinking and Moral Considerations: A Lecture" 427). My philosophical interest here is that regardless of what "thinking" turns out to be, it seems to me that there is a missing step in Arendt's thought; there is something that Arendt seems to overlook in her assumptions that gets in the way of thinking and that might preclude most, if not all, humans from "thinking" in the Arendtian sense — language codes.

Language codes, as I will be using the term, are words and phrases that stand in place of and, therefore, mimic, knowledge and understanding. Once a language code has been adopted, then that code replaces any thinking and, therefore, any knowledge and understanding that Arendt would have us engage with. If I am right about language codes, then at best, Arendt's "thinking" would be much more difficult to achieve than might have been imagined; at worst, impossible.

My plan is as follows. First, I will introduce Arendt's story of Eichmann as the paradigm of the banality of evil. This will allow me to illustrate what Arendt means (even if only vaguely) by "thinking" and what is at stake when we do and do not engage in it. Second, it will also allow me to hone in on the problem of any sort of perfect thinker. Arendt herself is unclear about what a perfect thinker (a term she does not use) is aside from some mention of Socrates as an example. However, this does not pose a problem for my purposes. Whatever a perfect thinker turns out to be, there is still a problem of language codes. Third, I will introduce and discuss the concept of a language code and give some examples of what I have in mind. This will include Eichmann. I hope to show how his language codes prevented him from "thinking" in a way that Arendt misses out on. Finally, I will consider implications regarding my notion of language codes.

II. THE BANALITY OF EICHMANN

In 1961, Hannah Arendt was sent by the New Yorker to cover the trial of Adolf Eichmann, one of the architects of the Final Solution. Her published articles, which became the main text for her book, *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, generated significant controversy due to what many readers saw as sympathy for Eichmann and a general blaming of Jewish leaders–and later the Jews themselves for their treatment during the Holocaust. In her report, Arendt did point out that many Jewish leaders assisted the Nazis by creating lists of Jews in their areas and counseling Jews to work with the Nazis, believing, somewhat naively, that by working with the Reich, Jewish families would continue to be allowed to leave the country. However, she also noted that the seeming complacency with which many went to their deaths was due in large part to the fact that it was nearly impossible to grasp the sheer inhumanity awaiting them in the camps.

The accusation that Arendt was sympathetic to Eichmann came from her insistence that while Eichmann's deeds were monstrous, the man himself was not a monster; rather, he was bland and unoriginal. Arendt, like many others, went to Eichmann's trial expecting to see a sort of boogeyman. After all, this was the individual responsible for the transport of hundreds of thousands to death camps and gassing centers. History remembers Eichmann, along with Himmler and Heydrich, as one of the driving forces behind the mass extermination policy. Instead, she found a mild, rather boring bureaucrat, seemingly unable to speak in anything but euphemisms and party slogans. This was not due to stupidity or a deliberate attempt to mislead the prosecution, but rather an "authentic inability to think." This contradiction led Arendt to develop the theory of "the banality of evil." Simply put, Arendt wanted to know how to account for the fact that many of the most horrendous acts against humanity are committed by individuals who are not particularly evil. Eichmann's seeming inability for critical, independent thought was perplexing. By relying on stock phrases and the euphemisms of the

Nazi party, Eichmann seemed able not only to push away any meaningful mental interaction with his deeds, but also to avoid any crisis of conscience whatsoever. Was it possible, then, that the activity of thought and the development of conscience were connected, and that this connection could actually help condition one against evil-doing (Arendt, "Thinking and Moral Considerations" 418)?

This is a compelling question, but one that relies on a particular notion of "thought," or "thinking." Using a loose definition, where thinking refers to the ability to problem solve, evaluate consequences, and reflect upon experiences, then the answer would surely be no. As Lt. Col. Obersturmbannführer and head of department IV B4 for Jewish Affairs, Eichmann and his staff were responsible for the concentration of Jews into Ghettos and the orchestration of mass deportations that led to millions of deaths. Eichmann drafted plans for the evacuation and resettlement of Jews in Israel and Madagascar[1] and was a key participant in the Wanasee conference[2] where the Final Solution was first proposed. By all accounts, Eichmann had a keen mind for details. He was able to coordinate intricate travel schedules and keep track of which prisoners were sent to which of the camps. He visited the camps frequently and used his knowledge of their occupancy limit and available facilities when determining where to send the transports and how many within the camps were to be selected for transport to the killing centers. He certainly met the criteria of the aforementioned definition of "thinking," but displayed no remorse for his actions during the war. At his trial he repeatedly acknowledged that what he had done was wrong, but denied culpability by insisting he had been following orders. He seemed unable to recognize any personal responsibility for his deliberate actions. His only mention of conscience can be characterized by the remark that, "I will leap into my grave laughing because the feeling that I have five million human beings on my conscience is for me a source of extraordinary satisfaction (Arendt, *Eichman In Jerusalem* 46)." This certainly seems to put an end to Arendt's query. If thinking can work with conscience to help us avoid evil, an alternative definition of "thinking" is needed.

Recognizing this, Arendt devotes much of her essay, *On Thinking and Moral Understanding* to explaining the ways in which thought and the capacity for self-judgment could intersect with the distinction between right and wrong. Although she is quite vague when it comes to defining her terms, we can look to her descriptions of thinking to create a working definition. While Arendt agrees with Kant that thinking employs the use of reason, she also tells us that thinking is always reflective. By reflective, she means that thinking must interrupt all current activity and it must deal with objects that exist outside of our direct sense perception (Arendt, "Thinking and Moral Considerations)" 423). Once we begin thinking, we stop whatever it is that we have been doing and move into a mental world that is separate from the world of immediate experience (424). One way to describe this would be to consider the sensation we have when we come out of a deep thought and say that we have "been somewhere else." This type of separation

is essential for creating the sort of inner dialogue that allows for the faculty of judging. We must be able to enter into a discussion within ourselves where discord can be identified and remedied. However, it must also be something that all rational individuals are able to engage in. Therefore, the definition I propose looks something like this: Thinking employs the use of reason, is reflective, and is accessible to all rational individuals. This is what I will refer to henceforth as Arendtian thought.

Arendt proposes Socrates as an example of an ideal thinker; one able to employ thought in this way. This is due primarily to his approach in rousing the citizens of Athens to examine aspects of their lives they would prefer to ignore. Socrates asked people to acknowledge their pre-judgements and recognize how these pre-judgements inhibit thinking (Arendt, "Thinking and Moral Considerations" 432). He saw, Arendt tells us, the ability of thought to have an "undermining effect on all established criteria, values, measurements for good and evil, in short on those customs and rules of conduct we treat of in morals and ethics (434)." Where Arendt fails however, is in explaining how Socrates came to be an Ideal Thinker and how we can, practically speaking, follow his example. He was certainly able to push past his own pre-judgments, but the manner in which this was done remains obscure save for the fact that he was able to think, and this is hardly satisfactory.

It may be that the integration of Arendtian thought and conscience can safeguard us against immorality. However, before that claim can be tested, we must get past an important problem, and one that Arendt glosses over—our reliance on language codes.

III. LANGUAGE CODES

I intend the term "language codes" to be seen as describing those rhetorical devices such as clichés, stock phrases, and buzzwords that serve as a barrier between our interactions with the world and the sort of interaction between thought, conscience and the activity of judging that Arendt is calling for. Language codes mimic rational thought and eliminate the need for mental reflection. They provide the illusion of knowledge, but may or may not be meant to reflect truth or falsity.

To see how this might work, consider you are attending a seminar sponsored by your institution meant to introduce you to a new campus-wide initiative aimed at increasing student retention. The speaker informs us that he/she is aware that "aligning our assignments with our student learning outcomes can be a moving target that requires dynamic, forward thinking planning." They may ask for input from the audience to give ideas about how to accomplish such a task. A colleague raises her hand and says that she "makes sure to include student-centered learning in her classroom." This has the appearance of a thoughtful discussion and you may even find yourself nodding in agreement. However, if you are then asked to further define what dynamic thinking is, and why you believe it to be a valuable tool in

keeping students enrolled in college, you may find yourself at a loss. In this case, these buzzwords are not meant to capture truth per se, rather to describe a business strategy.

At times, however, language codes are intended to capture some sort of truth. Often in Ethics courses, instructors find it difficult to convince students to move beyond aphorisms when discussing morality. Asking a class to attempt to define morality, for example, typically results in a student exclaiming "we should treat others to as we want to be treated." If the instructor presses and ask the student to expand on this, they might offer, "I was taught to follow the golden rule." Another student may chime in at this point and add, "Yes, do unto others as you would have them do unto you." At this point students believe that they have offered a suitable definition for morality. It can be a herculean task to convince them that all they have really given is a moral cliché. Furthermore, when the class moves on to deontology, these same students find it incredibly difficult to distinguish between the golden rule and Kant's well-reasoned categorical imperative. As long as the reliance on the golden rule remains, Kant's theory is either conflated or discounted as unnecessary.

Whether or not a language code is meant to stand for truth, a reliance on such codes creates the illusion that one is engaging in rational thought. Having long since accepted language codes as a stand in for knowledge, we can shift between them easily, and use them unthinkingly. Language codes need to satisfy one important condition if they are to be accepted. We must be introduced to codes early in our intellectual development by an individual or group that has gained our trust. If we accept our first language codes from our parents, for example, then we will further accept codes they have endorsed. We will rely on the same clichés and stock phrases when confronted with an issue we need to explain that we have assimilated from our exposure to our parents. As we progress intellectually, we will adopt new codes based on how well they fit with these first codes. Likewise, they must also result in acceptance by individuals or groups we identify with. We tend to align ourselves with those language codes that reinforce our first codes. We find it easier to accept new language codes if they seem to build upon previous ones. For example, if I have been given the language codes of Christianity since infancy, it will be far easier to adopt the language codes of the Christian right.

There are certain benefits that come with the acceptance of language codes. For one, language codes bypass inconsistencies. If I find myself in a situation where I must display concern for humanity, then I would access the language codes of morality associated with compassion and perhaps respond with the saying "we should always help those in need." If, however, I later find myself in a competitive situation in which I need to display strength, I can switch to a different set of language codes associated with and respond by saying "it is a dog-eat-dog world where only the strong survive." These do not seem to conflict since they each belong to a different set of language codes, meant to be employed in different

situations.

One of the pitfalls of language codes is that they can cause us to believe that we have more knowledge about, and feel more strongly about, certain issues than may really be the case. It is worthwhile to mention that Eichmann had no special dislike for the Jewish people. Indeed, he considered himself somewhat of an expert in Jewish affairs and spoke during his trial of positive relationships he formed with many Jewish leaders, as if this could excuse his actions (Arendt, *Eichman in Jerusalem* 57). He had no particular desire to be a key player in the mass murder of nearly 11 million individuals. What he did have, however, was a deeply ingrained respect for the rules and order of institutions. After years spent in various associations, each with their own set of language codes, (he was involved in the YMCA and German Youth as a child, and was a mid-level salesman in a vacuum company before the war) he was able to exchange codes easily and once he had given his allegiance to the institution of the Reich, he was had no trouble assimilating and using their "language rules."

So long as he was acting in his official life, Eichmann was adept at navigating the mass bureaucratic system of the Nazi's and saw no issue with such distancing terminology as "the final solution," "evacuation," "special treatment," and other phrases and terms used to refer to the transport of camp prisoners to the gassing centers. These were simply parts of the code of the language codes of the Reich. During his trial, however, finding himself in a situation for which he had no such language codes, he was at a loss, and his words often made no sense, as in his final statement when he claimed that his guilt was obedience and that obedience was a virtue (Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem* 247).

IV. IMPLICATIONS

Language codes act as a barrier between our interactions with the world and contemplative thought. Arendt tells us that it is contemplative thought coupled with the ability to engage the faculty of judging, that allows us to recognize the flaws in our reasoning and correct our actions. She wants to show that by engaging in such thought, we may actually be safeguarding ourselves against committing moral atrocities. If I am right about Language codes, then this might be much more difficult to achieve than previously thought. By theorizing about language codes, I have tried to identify and give some structure to the reliance on the messy rhetorical devices that masquerade as knowledge and serve as a hindrance to the type of thought Arendt had in mind. If such codes exist, we must be able to dismantle them and create tools to do so which are accessible to all rational individuals, before we can begin to answer any questions regarding thought and morality. Much more work needs to be done in this area before any definitive conclusions can be made, however, I believe the implications this has for Arendt's theory to be grounds for further investigation.

NOTES

1.   Eichmann's solution to transport Germany's Jewish population to the island of Madagascar was ultimately scrapped as impractical.

2.   Prior to the conference, Eichmann provided Heydrich with a detailed list of the remaining Jews in each European country as well as statistics on emigration.

WORKS CITED

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