Toward Forgiveness: Arendt’s Banality of Evil
Lucy Britt, Wesleyan University (lbritt@wesleyan.edu)

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Abstract: This essay employs Hannah Arendt’s idea of banal evil from Eichmann in Jerusalem (1963) as a possible route to understanding or forgiving violent crimes. Through the mechanism of empathy, Arendt’s concept of the banality of evil may facilitate conceptions of forgiveness, despite Arendt’s resistance to forgiveness of serious offenses. If we can see perpetrators as unthinking, rather than as demonically or maniacally evil, we might be able make space for forgiveness by attempting to understand their motivations for complying with the violent order and committing their crimes. Arendt is in a way writing a warning to humankind: Eichmann’s banality of evil could potentially manifest itself in any human who ceases to think; anyone could be evil. Perhaps if victims understood or empathized with the human process by which one is transformed from a human to an inhuman killing machine as a bureaucratic and banal process that could happen to anyone, they would more readily consider forgiveness. Here, the opening banality gives to forgiveness can facilitate a reconsideration of Arendt’s restriction of forgiveness to minor offenses only, especially in light of recent atrocities.

Introduction
Hannah Arendt’s concept of the banality of evil remains one of the most contentious and misunderstood ideas of the 20th century. From the 2012 release of Arendt’s biographical feature film to the British street artist Banksy’s depiction of a Nazi soldier in his 2013 piece “The Banality of the Banality of Evil” and debate surrounding the 2012 documentary The Act of Killing, the phrase remains relevant today. A critical examination of forgiveness after genocide or violent crime may employ the banality of evil to reveal the perpetrator’s humanity to the victim through empathy. Against her own use of the concept, Hannah Arendt’s theory of banality of evil may provide a pathway to understanding healing after extreme evil and violence through empathy and forgiveness.

1. Arendt on Evil
Arendt’s theory about the nature of evil and the impossibility of forgiving it evolves over time, beginning in a Kantian understanding of radical evil in The Origins of Totalitarianism and evolving to the biblical citation of Jesus drawing the line for forgiveness at extreme evil in The Human Condition; the assertion that evil should be neither forgiven nor punished in The Promise of Politics; the famous concept of the banality of evil in Eichmann in Jerusalem; and the suggestion of extrajudicial sentencing for those crimes that can be neither punished nor forgiven in Responsibility
and Judgment. In *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, she employs a description of the Nazi system as “radical evil,” which, although it is different from Kant’s formulation, puts an end to Hegelian or teleological progress and modernization in politics. She describes the concentration camps as hell within the dehumanizing Nazi state, which created a “new law” of Hitler’s rule that “consisted of the command ‘Thou shalt kill.’” However, her 1963 trial report introduces the “fearsome, word-and-thought-defying banality of evil.” Whereas she first thinks in terms of Kantian extreme “radical evil,” she writes shortly after *Eichmann* was published to her friend Gershom Scholem, “You are quite right: I changed my mind and do no longer speak of ‘radical evil.’”

Within the totalitarian state Arendt sees the criminal of her case study, the middle-level Nazi bureaucrat Adolf Eichmann, as a perpetrator of banal evil. One of the most controversial claims in the book, the banality of evil assumes that Eichmann killed not out of ideological furor but out of a lack of imagination or thinking. Arendt sees Eichmann’s banality as “obviously also no case of insane hatred of Jews, of fanatical anti-Semitism or indoctrination of any kind” (although Bettina Stangneth’s 2011 *Eichmann Before Jerusalem – The Unexamined Life of a Mass Murderer*, not yet translated into English, indicates that Eichmann was likely pretending to be more banal and less fanatic than he actually was). Arendt’s point of departure from radical evil for banal evil marks an important moment for her theory’s understanding of violence and restoration. The concept of banality is both groundbreaking and relevant to understanding violent acts and healing (through understanding, empathy, and perhaps even forgiveness).

2. Arendt on Forgiveness

Arendt gives much weight to forgiveness of nonviolent and daily offenses, following the teachings of Jesus. However, while she makes a strong case for forgiveness of minor offenses committed accidentally in daily life, in the case of deliberate violence or horrific crimes such as murder or genocide she denies the possibility of either forgiveness or punishment, for a variety of disjointed and sometimes inconsistent reasons. Her first argument against forgiving grave crimes is that the Nazis removed their own personhood by focusing on their duties to the totalitarian system and by not thinking or judging. The Nazi evildoers were effectively no longer persons, perpetrating “the evil committed by nobodies, that is, by human beings who refuse to be persons.” Arendt denies the Nazis and all banal evildoers the possibility of forgiveness: “in granting pardon, it is the person and not the crime that is forgiven; in rootless evil there is no person left whom one could ever forgive.” Their complicity in atrocities eliminates their personhood and thus their potential to be forgiven. George Kateb describes several morality schemas that Arendt sees totalitarianism as offending, including biblical morality, Socratic morality, and “the morality of authentic politics” in which she situates forgiveness and promise-keeping. The individual perpetrators and the totalitarian system alike violate everything Arendt holds dear in her system of action:

Totalitarian regimes have discovered without knowing it that there are crimes which men can neither punish nor forgive. When the impossible was made possible it became the unpunishable, unforgivable absolute evil which could
no longer be understood… this newest species of criminals is beyond the pale even of solidarity in human sinfulness.x

Arendt gives several other reasons why grave crimes should not be forgiven. One, in The Human Condition, is that the forgiveness of serious offenses is not the prerogative of men, quoting the Bible’s prediction that serious offenses will be dealt with in the Last Judgment, which “is not characterized by forgiveness but by just retribution.”xi Through the biblical metaphor of the skandalon (or mikshol, a stumbling block placed intentionally in front of a blind man), Arendt explains why certain extreme evils, those that are intentional, malicious, or violent, are so severe that they surpass human judgment, let alone forgiveness. Rather, it would be better that the offender be flung into the sea with a millstone hung around his neck.xii Moreover, the person who commits the skandalon cannot “be reformed through punishment, or, if he is beyond improvement, will offer through his sufferings a deterrent example for others; the agent is an offender to the world order as such.”xiii Arendt finds the idea of conciliation between the Nazi perpetrators (or even German bystanders) and Jews ridiculous: she incredulously quotes Eichmann saying he “would like to find peace with [his] former enemies’ – a sentiment he shared… unbelievably, with many ordinary Germans, who were heard to express themselves in exactly the same terms at the end of the war.”xiv

Moreover, in Eichmann Arendt argues against the possibility of empathizing with the offender: “The reflection that you yourself might have done wrong under the same circumstances may kindle a spirit of forgiveness, but those who today refer to Christian charity seem strangely confused on this issue too… Justice, but not mercy, is a matter of judgment.”xv Her strange elimination of mercy from the category of judgments aside, her rejection of Christian formulations of forgiveness based on empathy or affect in favor of objective judgment of the facts is curious. Her elimination of forgiveness, mercy, and “Christian charity” from the category of judgments rests on a flawed dichotomy between rational, objective judgment and affective actions such as forgiveness. Finally, in her Denktagebuch (“thinking book” or diary) she expresses hesitancy about forgiveness in reference to her relationship with Martin Heidegger, writing that forgiveness eliminates the possibility of a relationship between the forgiver and the forgiven.xvi

While Arendt clearly rejects forgiveness in the face of both the radical evil and the banal deeds of Eichmann and his associates, the following will attempt to counter her resistance to forgiveness of grave crimes by using her own concept of banal evil as a possible route to forgiving.

3. Empathy and the Route from Banal Evil to Forgiveness
Arendt’s analysis of Eichmann’s character takes two directions: on one hand, she elevates his acts to “transcend the realm of human affairs and the potentialities of human power.xvii by judging his deeds to be beyond human punishment or forgiveness; on the other hand, she insists that Eichmann’s evil deeds were banal,
or even “stupid.” This analysis focuses on the banality argument rather than on Arendt’s unexplained argument that certain crimes are grave enough to be so severe as to be transcendentally beyond forgiving. In terms of banality, she claims that Eichmann lacked imagination and did not think. This explanation of Eichmann’s evil deeds, along with her careful biographical portrait of the Nazi criminal, from his childhood to his careerism and his vapid adherence to Hitler’s-word-as-law, helps the reader understand how and why he played his part in the Nazi machine. Indeed, some passages put the reader in Eichmann’s shoes, even as they scorn and deride his empty-headedness, his lack of imagination, and his unthinkingness. For example:

In March, 1941, during the preparation for the war against Russia, Eichmann was suddenly put in charge of a new subsection, or rather, the name of his subsection was changed from Emigration and Evacuation to Jewish Affairs, Evacuation. From then on, though he was not yet informed of the Final Solution, he should have been aware not only that emigration had definitely come to an end, but that deportation was to take its place. But Eichmann was not a man to take hints, and since no one had yet told him differently, he continued to think in terms of emigration.xviii

In this passage as in the rest of the book, Arendt does not (as her detractors claimed) cut the criminal any slack; earlier in the report, she finds Eichmann’s assumption that in his testimony he would find “‘normal, human’ sympathy for a hard-luck story.”xix laughable. However, her careful consideration of Eichmann’s internal dialogue, his personal history and his motivations – and above all his vacuousness – gives the reader the possibility of empathy, of imagining or understanding why Eichmann carried out the Nazi mission to the end. It is precisely an understanding of Eichmann’s banal attitude about his gruesome paper-pushing that may provide observers or even survivors with an empathetic attitude toward why he participated. This empathy – an emotional sharing of experiences through understanding – can lead to forgiveness by allowing the victim to see the offender’s personhood.

Such attempts to understand the processes of evil-doers like Eichmann who merely do not think (recent evidence of ideological extremism from Bettina Stangneth aside) may facilitate understanding of evil acts on a human level, rather than elevating them to a superhuman or religious status as Arendt does in her analysis of skandalon. In The Human Condition, forgiveness requires lowering oneself to the level of the perpetrator, realizing one could have done wrong, too, and benefitting the person being forgiven by releasing him from his past actions. She realizes the importance of forgiving small offenses to allow for future actions, restoring the relationships between people and allows for future actions without miring people in the past. What she does not recognize – or if she does, is unwilling to recognize – is the potential of her framework for Eichmann’s evil for helping bring forgiveness about by understanding and de-mythicizing evil. Contemporary criticism has the potential to salvage the radical generative nature of Arendtian forgiveness for post-
genocide or post-conflict healing.

A *Realpolitik* view might contend that the conditions for political life preclude the intrusion of Pollyannaish emotional acts such as forgiveness upon the rational choices of self-interested individuals. However, the distinction between rational judgment and sentimentality is a false dichotomy to begin with, especially in terms of judgments surrounding violence and its aftermath. The airing of affect such as forgiveness allows for a more realistic view of action in the public sphere, as transitional justice truth commissions such as the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission show us. Moreover, acknowledging the political implications of forgiveness elevates this previously abstract moral or religious concept and empowers it as a generative action for good in a rough political landscape. This is not an easy feat, but it is important to give forgiveness a chance to have political impact in serious cases.

Arendt herself would reject the progression from banality to empathy and forgiveness: she would prefer not an empathetic or an affective reaction to the crime, but rather that the criminal “think” and act to stop the violence. Her theory of thinking and judging relies on Kantian *sensus communus* (sense of others, literally “common sense”) and expanded worldview, representing the viewpoint of another and using a common or higher sense of right and wrong rather than empathy or emotion to make moral decisions. Indeed, Arendt specifically attempts to replace the concept of empathy with that of imagination, explaining that an observer of poverty imagines but does not conform to the experiences of another by “representing to myself how I would feel if I had to live there, that is, I try to think in the place of the slum-dweller.”xx. However, the above passage reveals a lapse in Arendt’s own language; even as she is urging imagination and thinking instead of empathy and feeling, she slips into the language of emotion, describing how she would “feel.” Therefore, even Arendt cannot entirely avoid the concept of empathy, which we may employ as a mechanism by which the banality of evil concept can lead to greater understanding and forgiveness. Her failure to completely distinguish understanding another person’s plight in a rational sense from imagining the feeling of the other, even if she means “feeling” in the Heideggerian sense of Being, shows slippage in her theory that leaves room for interpretation. The concept of empathy is one useful route to understanding this disconnect. Any attempt to understand or share another’s internal motivations and existential experiences has the potential to lead to empathy, and empathy can lead to forgiveness by increasing understanding and emotional connection between the victim and perpetrator, even if the two never meet again. By understanding the experiences of a perpetrator and putting him or herself in his or her shoes, a reader of *Eichmann in Jerusalem* or another account of a perpetrator’s career could reasonably progress from understanding the banality of evil – the psychological, political, and bureaucratic path a person could take to committing unimaginable atrocities – to empathizing with a banal criminal and eventually to forgiving him or her. Although *Eichmann* does not hint at encouraging forgiveness of the Nazis, and Arendt was strongly against the idea, the description
of Eichmann’s careerist motivations, bureaucratic mindset, and totalitarian experiences places the reader within the “desk-murderer’s” experiences. Forgiveness requires the victim to understand the perpetrator and his or her actions not merely as criminal or evil, but also as part of a complex personal and political context, and an understanding of the banality of the atrocities Eichmann and others committed such as that which is revealed by Arendt herself is helpful to such an understanding. The critical response to the banality of evil, then, should not be a parsing of Arendt’s theoretical intentions between banal and radical evil, but rather an extension of her understanding of evil to the possibility of forgiveness through empathy.

This progression from banality to understanding to empathy to forgiveness suggests the possibility of Arendt’s own philosophical tools expanding the framework of forgiveness in politics and in the case of serious offenses. The understanding of a crime and the person who commits it in a totalitarian system that is facilitated by her concept of the banality of evil may, although Arendt would resist this use of the idea, facilitate the kind of understanding that is necessary to and can lead to forgiveness. The project of salvaging Arendtian forgiveness, rather than trying to formulate a concept of empathy-based forgiveness outside of her banality of evil theory, is productive if it employs the radical generative power with which Arendt forgiveness – the power to create new futures and actions. It is thus important to bridge the gap between The Human Condition’s description of powerfully generative forgiveness of everyday or minor offenses and Eichmann’s grave crimes. The banality of evil helps us understand those who participate in violence, and although this is not the direction in which Arendt takes the theory, it can help facilitate the kinds of understanding that can lead to empathy and forgiveness of violent offenders. Such an expanded view of this contentious concept is necessary to rebuild political worlds after community-shattering violence, a pervasive contemporary problem.

Notes
i I define empathy in this project as the ability to experience the feelings or emotions of another person.
iv Arendt, Eichmann in Jerusalem: 252.
viii Ibid., 95.
 xvi Hannah Arendt, Ursula Ludz, and Ingeborg Nordmann, *Denktagebuch (Thinking Diary)*, Cited in Maier-Katkin 186 (Munich: Piper, 2002). 3.
 xix Ibid., 50.
 xx Ibid., 140.