

The Danger of Following Rules: Reflections on *Eichmann in Jerusalem*

Laura Zanotti, Virginia Tech (lzanotti@vt.edu)

Abstract: In this article I build upon Hanna Arendt's reflections on the "banality of evil" to elaborate on the dangers of unreflectively embracing abstract norms and bureaucratic reasoning as guidelines and justifications for behavior. By offering validation for our actions (or the lack thereof) regardless of their likely effects, abstract norms and rules harbor the danger of appeasing consciences and relieving us from our responsibility towards other human beings. I exemplify the effects of bureaucratic reasoning through the United Nations' failures in Rwanda and Srebrenica. In *Eichmann in Jerusalem* Hannah Arendt warned against the banal evil hidden in the uncritical following of accepted norms and rules of behavior. I conclude that in order to avoid the danger of becoming Eichmanns of some sort we need to carefully and prudently assess the potential effects of our actions and embrace responsibility for the consequences they may produce in the concrete circumstances we engage with.

Keywords: BANALITY OF EVIL, BUREAUCRATIC REASONING, ETHICS, NORMATIVITY, RESPONSIBILITY, UNITED NATIONS

In *Eichmann in Jerusalem: a Report on the Banality of Evil* Hannah Arendt drew on reports she first prepared for *The New Yorker* of her direct observation of Adolf Eichmann's trial to describe "the strange interdependence of thoughtlessness and evil" in modern bureaucratic societies.ⁱ The Nazi criminal tried and executed in Israel in 1962, Arendt argued, was not an eager activist for the extermination of Jews. Instead, he was a bureaucrat following rules, characterized by the "horrible gift of consoling himself with clichés."ⁱⁱ In Arendt's view, Eichmann was not a monster, just an average man in harmony with his world, embracing an ideology considered "normal" and socially acceptable. He was also a bureaucrat who privileged obedience to rules over thinking empathically about other human beings.

I will not seek in this brief reflection to assess the historical accuracy of Arendt's interpretation of Eichmann or his behavior. That assessment has been controversial and debated by many since the publication of the *New Yorker* articles. I want to engage instead with a broader controversy surrounding the notion of the "banality of evil," rekindled by Margarethe von Trotta's recent film on Hannah Arendt and the trial. For example, Roger Berkowitzⁱⁱⁱ argued on the *New York Times* that Arendt's warning was not against following institutionalized rules, but about uncritically embracing an ideal: "What she meant was that he acted thoughtlessly and dutifully, not as a robotic bureaucrat, but as part of a movement, as someone convinced that

he was sacrificing an easy morality for a higher good.”^{iv} Instead, I argue that bureaucratic reasoning is central for understanding the “banality of evil” and consequently for a critical scrutiny of the relationships among ethics, abstract and universal normativity, and rule following. Having worked for many years at the United Nations Department of Peacekeeping Operations and taken part in international interventions justified by appeal to “universal norms” and operationalized through bureaucratic procedures, I see such reflection as extremely important.

Contrary to what constructivist scholars such as Martha Finnemore^v have contended, norms are not necessarily enabling causes for action. Instead, they are radically ambiguous not only with regard to their meaning but also with regard to the practices they justify and foster. Accepted patterns of behavior may be hijacked and twisted to justify the very deeds they in principle forbid. In analyzing norms prohibiting torture and their interpretation by the Bush Administration, for example, Anthony Lang insightfully argued that “while we assume that rules will prohibit torture, what rules actually do is create a world in which torture is possible... what we imagine the rules can do for us—restrain violence and make the world more peaceful—is not what the rules actually do.”^{vi} The Bush Administration’s relabeling of torture as “harsh interrogation” and its accompanying attempts to define carefully the degree of pain admissible before questioning becomes torture are examples of the substitution of anodyne language and apparently precise technical guidelines to obscure the horror evoked by the word ‘torture’ and replace it with images of bureaucratic efficiency aimed at attaining the benign goal of protecting America’s national security.

As Nicholas Onuf argued “to suggest that there are rules for torture... at least some observers may regard as morally dubious because it cloaks an unmitigated evil in the legitimizing language of rules.”^{vii} “Rational” and detached universal normative systems, such as those that aim at defining the number of civilian deaths that can be tolerated in war, harbor the potential for justifying evil. David Kennedy has shown that the bland rhetoric of *jus in bello* that provides standardized criteria regarding the number of acceptable civilian casualties (conveniently called collateral damage) produces the effect of diverting responsibility from those who conduct war while assuaging their consciences concerning the injuries and deaths their choices are inflicting.^{viii} Kennedy also observed that the universal human rights regime (what he calls “the invisible college”) accords higher standing to abstract principles and claims than to careful consideration of the political and distributive consequences and tradeoffs that efforts to protect human rights entail. ^{ix}

“Universal norms” and bureaucratic routines play a major role in prescribing and justifying UN peacekeeping interventions. The same norms and rules, however, can also offer grounds for appeasement. The massacres that occurred in Rwanda and Srebrenica in the 1990s provide examples of how by uncritically following institutionalized rules United Nations peacekeepers permitted atrocities. UN

employees are not cold-blooded monsters or extremely callous individuals. They follow norms and rules, key examples of which include the principle of “impartiality,” Security Council mandates, and “rules of engagement.” By doing so, however, they have often fallen short of considering the possible consequences of decisions in specific situations. The United Nations failure to take action to prevent the Rwanda genocide testifies to the fact that bureaucratic reasoning that prescribes to follow universal norms (i.e. the imperative to preserve impartiality) and rules of engagement (i.e. to not intervene to disarm any party of the conflict) set the stage for avoiding a careful assessment of what was at stake at the eve of the massacre and appeased consciences for not taking decisions accountable to the people in danger. The answer General Romeo Dallaire, the Canadian force commander of the UN mission in Rwanda, received from UN headquarters when he warned that large-scale killings were imminent and asked for authorization to take action to disarm the factions that were preparing them provides a chilling example of how UN Headquarters’ leaders devotion to “proper process” allowed evil to occur:

I woke up and this cable came in, signed by Kofi Annan in his normal staff responsibilities that essentially said cease and desist. Conduct no such operations. It’s out of your mandate. On top of that, in the proper process of a Chapter VI, you will inform the ex-belligerent of the shortcomings that we notice and make it quite clear that he’s got to rectify these shortcomings within a very short time frame, or else we will be in a position to have to review the mission, and ultimately their commitment to the peace agreement. x

The United Nations report on Srebrenica provides another disturbing example of how bureaucratic reasoning may fail to prevent atrocity and massacres. The UN headquarters staff’s lack of response to Dutch peacekeepers in charge of protecting the Srebrenica “safe haven” requests for air strikes on the approaching Serb forces in July 1995 provides unsettling testimony of how adherence to norms and rules such as “impartiality” and “rules of engagement” could allow a situation where Ratko Mladic and his paramilitary troops, known as the Skorpions, were easily able to prevail over the UN Blue Helmets and proceed with a genocidal act with impunity. Unlike Eichmann, the United Nations officials did not order the killings. Nevertheless, their adherence to abstract norms and institutionalized routines in lieu of assuming responsibility for unfolding events on the ground allowed UN officials to distance themselves from the humanity of those whom they let die.

Universal norms and rules may not offer good guidelines for moral decisions, and indeed they may provide appeasement for immoral ones. In fact universal norms and rules apply only where *ceteris paribus* conditions obtain, and this is rarely the case in practice, especially in conflict situations. Embracing an ethics of responsibility towards other human beings and carefully assessing the possible consequences of our actions in specific circumstances may offer a better way to avoid calamities in the future. Brent Steele warned against assessing the morality of any action based primarily upon “intentions” and invited decision-makers to analyze

prudently the consequences of their behavior and choices.^{xi} Friedrich Kratochwil warned that good ways of making political decisions rely less on abstract theorizing than on a careful assessment of the forces at play in specific situations.^{xii} Jacques Derrida argued that acting ethically involves embracing uncertainty and making decisions that are not regulated by existing laws or rules.^{xiii} In a similar vein, feminist metaethical theorist Peg O'Connor has observed that arguments suggesting that ethics can be derived from universal axioms alone are riddled with danger because they divert attention from our responsibility to others.^{xiv} Indeed in O'Connor's words:

hiding behind abstract rules makes it much easier not to see the pain and suffering of others and not to see ourselves, in whatever way, as like them. It also makes it easier to feel more allegiance to the rules rather than to the people.^{xv}

She has suggested an attitude of prudence and skepticism toward universalist claims that aspire to offer a blueprint for solutions to all evils that affect humanity. Ethics involves addressing the question *cui bono* (with benefit to whom) and asking what kind of effects any given action may produce for particular people in specific circumstances.

By alerting her readers to the tremendous devastation that the potential for banal evil always latent in bureaucratic thinking may produce, Hannah Arendt made a very important contribution in *Eichmann in Jerusalem*. She warned against thoughtlessly "following rules" and called for an ethics of reflexivity and responsibility. Ironically, blatantly extreme evil may ultimately be less insidious than bureaucratized countenancing of evil. Radical evil does not "look like us." Its modalities of operation are not embedded in the ongoing rhythm of our everyday lives and it is therefore easy to spot. When hidden in the banality of accepted ideologies, normativity, and bureaucratic prescriptions, however, evil becomes more difficult to detect and, perversely, perhaps even palatable and reassuring. Arendt's call to beware of the too smug surety provided by "following rules" is, in my view, extremely important. It reminds us we all possess a certain degree of potential to become Eichmanns. Self-awareness and vigilance are critical to preventing such episodes in the future.

Acknowledgments: I would like to thank Scott Nelson for inviting me to take part in the ASPECT panel "Hannah Arendt in Jerusalem: The Banality of Evil and the Politics of Responsibility" held at Virginia Tech on November 19, 2013. This reflection is based on my remarks at that event. I am also very grateful to Max Stephenson and to Amy Shuster for their insightful comments and editorial suggestions on this piece. The usual disclaimers apply.

Notes

- i Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: a report on the banality of evil* (New York: Viking Press, 1964), 288.
- ii Ibid.,55.
- iii Roger Berkowitz, “Misreading ‘Eichmann in Jerusalem,’” *New York Times*, July 7 (2013).
- iv Ibid.,
- v Martha Finnemore, “Constructing Norms of Humanitarian Intervention,” in *The Culture of National Security: Norms and Identity in World Politics*, ed. Peter J. Katzenstein (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996),153-185.
- vi Anthony Lang F., Jr. “ Introduction: Rules and International Security: Dilemmas of a New World Order,” in *War, Torture and Terrorism: Rethinking the Rules of International Security*, ed. Anthony F. Lang Jr. and Amanda Russell Beattie, (New York: Routledge, 2009), 8
- vii Nicholas Onuf, “ Rules for Torture?,” in *War, Torture and Terrorism*, 25-38, 25.
- viii David Kennedy, *Of war and law* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2006)
- ix David Kennedy, *The dark sides of virtue: reassessing international humanitarianism* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2004).
- x Romeo Dallaire, *Frontline, PBS interview* (2004).
<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/ghosts/interviews/dallaire.html>
accessed July 15, 2014.
- xi Brent Steele,“Alternative Accountability after the ‘Naughts’,” *Review of International Studies* 37(5) (2011): 2603–25.
- xii Friedrich Kratochwil, “Of false promises and good bets: a plea for a pragmatic approach to theory building (the Tartu lecture),” *Journal of International Relations and Development* 10 (2011): 1–15.
- xiii Jacques Derrida “Force of Law: The ‘Mystical Foundation of Authority’,” in *Deconstruction and the Possibility of Justice*, ed. Drucilla Cornell, Michel Rosenfeld and David Gray Carlson (New York and London: Routledge, 1992), 3-67.
- xiv Peg O’Connor, *Morality and our Complicated Form of Life. Feminist Wittgensteinian Metaethics* (University Park, PA: Penn State University Press, 2008).
- xv Ibid.,167.