

# The Seduction of Banality Evil Reconsidered



Internationale Tagung  
Freitag, 26. – Samstag, 27. Juni

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What is deeper, good or evil? Arendt's thesis of the banality of evil is an attempt to undermine evil by demystifying it. Her report on Adolf Eichmann's trial in Jerusalem provoked more controversy than any philosophical work of the 20th century. Bettina Stangneth's *Eichmann Before Jerusalem* has reignited international discussion by analyzing thousands of documents, some newly discovered, to show that Eichmann was not a thoughtless man without evil motives: however badly, he thought a good deal about the particularly German anti-Semitic ideology he promoted. This does not in fact preclude the existence of banal evil or support Arendt's polemical critics. Using new philosophical frameworks we will examine the variety of forms of evil and what is at stake when evil is banal—and when it is not.



## SPEAKERS AND THEMES

**Jeffrey Andrew Barash, Paris**

*The Silence of Conscience:*

*Reflections on the Concept of the Banality of Evil*

As the title of this conference indicates, Hannah Arendt's concept of the "banality of evil," which she employed in her analysis of Adolf Eichmann and his sinister functions during the Third Reich, has provided a salient framework for our contemporary discussion of evil and of its sociological and political significance. My brief examination of this theme will underscore the close connection between Arendt's concept of the banality of evil and her understanding of the phenomenon of moral conscience. Beyond a clarification of the much discussed concept, my purpose in examining its relation to conscience, above all to the potential silence of conscience, will be to critically highlight what I take to be a key political dimension of this theme that her interpretation curiously leaves unexamined.

*Jeffrey Andrew Barash* is Professor of Philosophy at the University of Amiens, France. His publications have focused on the themes of political philosophy, historicism, and modern German thought. He has served as Alexander von Humboldt Fellow at the University of Bielefeld, Ernst Cassirer Gastprofessor at the University of Hamburg, Lady Davis Fellow at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, Hans-Georg Gadamer Professor at Boston College and Max Planck Fellow at the University of Konstanz. He is currently completing a book titled *Collective Memory and the Historical Past* and is also preparing a work on political myth.

## **Omer Bartov, Providence**

*From Mundane Lives to Pleasurable Evil and Back:  
Local Murderers and the Best Years of Their Lives*

The talk will present the biographical portraits of several low- and mid-ranking Nazi perpetrators who murdered an estimated 60,000 Jews in the space of less than a year in the Czortków-Buczacz region of Eastern Galicia, and attempt to understand how these mostly utterly normal men became genocidal killers, why they seem to have taken so much pleasure from playing mass murderers, how easily they slipped back into normality, and to what extent their subsequent trials succeeded in uncovering their motivation and in gauging their guilt. This discussion will hopefully also shed light on the case of Adolf Eichmann and the concrete relationship between banality and evil.

*Omer Bartov* is the John P. Birkelund Distinguished Professor of European History at Brown University and one of the leading authorities on the subject of genocide. He is the author of *The "Jew" in Cinema* (2005); *Germany's War and the Holocaust* (2003); *Mirrors of Destruction: War, Genocide, and Modern Identity* (2000); *Murder in Our Midst: The Holocaust, Industrial Killing, and Representation* (1996); *Hitler's Army: Soldiers, Nazis, and War in the Third Reich* (1991); *The Eastern Front, 1941-45* (1985); and editor of volumes on the Holocaust, genocide, and war crimes. He has contributed articles to *The New Republic*, *The Washington Post*, and *The Times Literary Supplement*. Among his accolades, Bartov has received fellowships from the Guggenheim Foundation, the Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Study, the NEH, Harvard's Society of Fellows, the Alexander von Humboldt Foundation, and Princeton's Davis Center, and he is a member of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences.

## **Jay Bernstein, New York**

*The Living Dead, Ghastly Marionettes, and Superfluous Beings: Arendt's Victim Conception of Radical Evil*

Although based on a massive misunderstanding, an insistent charge against Arendt's conception of the banality of evil is that she diminishes the extraordinary moral destructiveness of the camps. Yet in *The Origins of Totalitarianism* Arendt provides the most penetrating ethical analysis of camp practices we have. The Nazis discovered that being human is not an essence or a given quality but a standing or status that is bestowed on our social fellows; what they then demonstrated in the camps is that this standing or status could be destroyed while its bearer, the solitary living body, remained alive.

*Jay Bernstein* is Professor of Philosophy at the New School for Social Research. His publications include *Art and Aesthetics after Adorno* (2010); *Against Voluptuous Bodies: Late Modernism and the Meaning of Painting* (2005); *Adorno: Disenchantment and Ethics* (2001), and *The Fate of Art: Aesthetic Alienation from Kant to Derrida and Adorno* (1993).

## **Michelle-Irène Brudny, Paris**

*Banality, Evil, and Destructiveness*

Bettina Stangneth's 2011 book reignited international discussion about Eichmann and, as a consequence, about the nature of evil. The seductiveness of Arendt's word "banality" explains in part the recurrent controversy. Arendt did not elaborate a theory of evil or a moral philosophy as such despite her long effort in the unfinished *Life of the Mind*. Susan Neiman and Isabelle Delpla argue that Arendt sought to reinstate a form of theodicy to secure a common future. But the line of reasoning that Arendt borrows from Kant, and on which her whole outlook is based, only makes sense in an argument against theologians. The destruction of the European Jews or the Rwanda genocide points inevitably to a deeply entrenched human "quality" or drive,

i.e. destructiveness. Faced with it, our only hope and course of action seems to be to try and repair the world.

*Michelle-Irène Brudny* is a political philosopher and American Studies specialist who has written extensively on Hannah Arendt's work and correspondence. She is the author of *Eichmann à Jérusalem et la controverse à New York* (2011); *Destins de "La banalité du mal": Suivi d'un dossier sur Eichmann à Jérusalem, de Hannah Arendt* (2011); *Hannah Arendt: An Intellectual Biography* (2008); and *La Polémique Scholem/Arendt ou le rapport à la "tradition"* (2002). Brudny is one of a team of scholars charged with editing and publishing Arendt's posthumous work.

### **Mary Fulbrook, London**

#### *Toward an Anatomy of Evil and Guilt*

When we are talking about a system of state-sanctioned collective violence, the question of "how was it possible?" goes to the heart of what might be called an anatomy of evil and guilt. A significant strand of perpetrator research on the Third Reich has focused on individual personalities, the role of ideology, and personal motives; but others have pointed to the importance of situational factors, including processes of brutalization and peer group pressure. In the first part of this paper I discuss the significance of inner distancing as a psychological concomitant of living within an intrusive regime; and I explore the ways in which people were mobilized to perform specific roles, as cogs in the machine, without feeling personally responsible for the consequences of their actions—however close to or distant from the ultimately murderous outcomes they might be. The second part of the paper turns to questions around guilt, both in the legal sense of who was held to be culpable, and in the experiential sense of who felt guilty. I reconsider questions of perpetratorhood in terms of different legal systems, and in terms of the differing ways in which people sought retrospectively to narrate and justify their acts in order to live with an uncomfortable past. By proposing an analytical schema



for understanding anatomies of evil and guilt, here primarily developed with reference to the Holocaust, I try to recombine psychological and historical analyses in ways that do justice to at least some of the complexities.

*Mary Fulbrook* is Professor of German History, Director of the European Institute, and Dean of the Faculty of Social and Historical Sciences at University College London. Fulbrook's most recent publications are *A Small Town near Auschwitz: Ordinary Nazis and the Holocaust* (2012) and *Dissonant Lives: Generations and Violence through the German Dictatorships* (2011). She is the author or editor of more than twenty books, including the best-selling *Concise History of Germany* (2<sup>nd</sup> edition 2002) and *A History of Germany 1918–2014: The Divided Nation* (4<sup>th</sup> edition 2014). She is currently writing a book provisionally titled *Living with a Nazi Past*.

### **Raimond Gaita, Melbourne**

*Arendt, Genocide, and Evil*

Hannah Arendt's discussion of genocide in *Eichmann in Jerusalem* is still one of the most interesting. Her work on this has been misunderstood partly because its ethically complex argument and tone have been judged in the light of an assumption that morality is the only relevant ethical category with which to do it. I shall develop that claim in order to discuss what she says about the concept of evil in *Eichmann in Jerusalem* and also in *On Revolution*, where she says that "the men of the eighteenth century" did not acknowledge "that there exists goodness beyond virtue and evil beyond vice." Few contemporary writers on evil have thought it relevant to consider its connections with goodness of a kind that might invite a capital 'G'—goodness, for example, as it shows in some the works of saintly love. To some, but important, degree Arendt was an exception.

*Raimond Gaita* is Professor of Moral Philosophy at King's College, University of London, and Foundation Professor of Philosophy at the Australian Catholic University. He has published widely in moral philosophy, including *Good and Evil: An Absolute Conception* (1991); *The Philosopher's Dog* (2002); *Breach of Trust: Truth, Morality and Politics* (2004); *Why the War Was Wrong* (2003; as editor and contributor), and *Romulus, My Father* (1998).

**Philip Gourevitch, New York**

*Not Banal*

Reflections on my encounters over the past twenty years with Gasumari, an avid Rwandan *génocidaire* turned avid, but not exactly convincing, penitent—an unknown peasant who became a fate to his neighbors and loved every minute of the slaughter—with some thoughts mixed in on the general worthlessness of the banal slogan, “the banality of evil,” for apprehending, much less comprehending, the reality of a mass murderer.

*Philip Gourevitch*, a staff writer at *The New Yorker*, is a former editor of *The Paris Review* and the author of three books: *The Ballad Of Abu Ghraib* (2008), *A Cold Case* (2002), and *We Wish To Inform You That Tomorrow We Will Be Killed With Our Families: Stories from Rwanda* (1998), which won, among other prizes, a National Book Critics Circle Award and The New York Public Library's Helen Bernstein Award.

## **Avishai Margalit, Jerusalem**

### *Forgiveness: Overcoming Justified Resentment*

There are two restorative ideas related to forgiveness. One is restoration of an impaired relationship between an offender and a victim. Serious wrongdoing doesn't just harm the interest of the victim; it also harms the relationship between the offender and the victim. Forgiveness is predominately about healing the impaired relationship. The other is restoration of the victim's sovereignty once breached by the wrongdoing of the offender. A wrongdoing that impairs a relationship and breaches sovereignty is paradigmatically a combination of harm (to the victim's interests) and offense (to the victim's emotions). It is insult added to injury. Forgiveness is about overcoming the insult on top of coping with the injury.

*Avishai Margalit* is Professor at the Institute for Advanced Study at Princeton University and Emeritus Professor of Philosophy at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. In his research he focusses on social and political philosophy, the philosophy of religion and culture, and the philosophical implications of social and cognitive psychology. He is also a highly-regarded observer of the conflicts between Israel and Palestine and commentator on the relations between Islam and the West. He has written a considerable number of books including *The Decent Society* (1998); *Idolatry* (1998); *The Ethics of Memory* (2004); *Occidentalism: The West in the Eyes of its Enemies* (2004); and, more recently, *On Compromise and Rotten Compromises* (2009). He is the winner of the 2012 Ernst Bloch Prize in philosophy.

**David Mikics, Houston**

*Evil and Innocence since Dostoevsky*

In Dostoevsky's *Demons* and *The Brothers Karamazov* evil's target is innocence. The evil person often harms children, sometimes just physically, but sometimes by corrupting the child and making her feel guilty (the canceled chapter "At Tikhon's" in *Demons*). In *The Brothers Karamazov's* Grand Inquisitor parable, innocence is evil's target in a different way: evil turns adults into ersatz children. I'll be arguing that Dostoevsky has something to tell us about why, in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, the suffering of an innocent child is so often seen as the signature of evil—and why totalitarianism treats grown-ups like children.

*David Mikics* is John and Rebecca Moores Professor of English at the University of Houston. He has written several books, including *Slow Reading in a Hurried Age* (2013); *The Art of the Sonnet* (2010), and *Who Was Jacques Derrida?* (2009). Mikics is also the editor of *The Annotated Emerson* and a regular columnist for *Tablet Magazine*. He is currently working on a book about Saul Bellow.

**James Ponet, New Haven**

*Arendt: Pariah as Jewish Thinker and Actor*

While it is generally recognized that the singular dilemma of being a Jew in the world informs and conditions much, if not all, of Arendt's political thought, this talk explores how Arendt's work on the problem of evil, the concepts of freedom and natality, the nature of the political, the role of forgiveness, the distinctions between responsibility and guilt and between pariah and parvenu, the significance of friendship, and *amor mundi*, the nature and function of history may together constitute a foundation for a future Judaism.

*James Ponet* is the Howard M. Holtzmann Jewish Chaplain at Yale, where he has served as a religious leader since 1981. He earned his undergraduate degree from Yale in Religious Studies and his masters and doctoral degrees from Hebrew Union College, where he was ordained in 1973. Rabbi Ponet lived in Israel from 1974–1981, studying Jewish thought at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem and serving as a Fellow and teacher at both the Shalom Hartman Institute and the Pardes Institute. He returned from Israel in 1981 to become Yale’s Jewish Chaplain, a position he has held ever since.

**Bettina Stangneth, Hamburg**

*Academic Evil, or Beyond Thoughtlessness*

The author’s talk will be based on conclusions drawn from *Eichmann Before Jerusalem*.

*Bettina Stangneth* is an independent philosopher and journalist. She studied under Klaus Oehler and Wolfgang Bartuschat in Hamburg, earning her Ph.D. with a dissertation on Immanuel Kant’s concept of radical evil. She has written on the history of antisemitism in the eighteenth century, on the philosophy of the Nazis, and on the theory of the lie. Her book *Eichmann vor Jerusalem* received the 2011 NDR book prize for nonfiction and its English translation appeared on the *The New York Times*’ 100 Notable Books list for 2014. In 2012 she edited a volume of diary entries by Avner W. Less, a German-born Israeli police officer who interrogated Eichmann after his capture.

**Jessica Stern, Cambridge, Mass.**

*ISIS: The Use of Evil as Psychological Warfare*

Unlike the Nazis and other perpetrators of mass atrocities, ISIS flaunts its acts of barbarism. In my talk I will consider the possibility that ISIS is perpetrating, and displaying, theatrical acts of barbarism as a form of psychological warfare.

*Jessica Stern* is a Lecturer on Terrorism at Harvard University, an Advanced Academic Candidate at the Massachusetts Institute of Psychoanalysis and serves on the Hoover Institution Task Force on National Security and Law. She is the author of *Denial: A Memoir of Terror* (2010); *Terror in the Name of God: Why Religious Militants Kill* (2004), and *The Ultimate Terrorists* (2000).

**Willi Winkler, Munich**

*"She was of course a kind of intellectual dominatrix..."*

Postwar Germany embraced Hannah Arendt. Intellectuals liked the idea of a banality of evil because it seemed to offer the chance of an amnesty for all but Adolf Eichmann. "The girl from abroad" stirred emotions among the older generations and enabled a younger generation to find their voice. Sounds difficult? Hear for yourself.

*Willi Winkler* is a journalist mostly writing today for the *Süddeutsche Zeitung*. He previously worked as an editor for *Die Zeit* and was head of arts and culture at *Der Spiegel*. The topics of his books range from the Beatles and the Stones to left-wing violence and Arab nationalist terrorism in the 1970s and 80s. His most recent book is *Deutschland, eine Winterreise* (2014). He is the recipient of the Ben Witter Prize (1998), the Otto Brenner Prize for Critical Journalism (2010), and the Michael Althen Prize (2013).



## PROGRAM

### Friday, June 26

10:00 Susan Neiman  
*Introduction*

10:15 Raimond Gaita  
*Arendt, Genocide, and Evil*

11:15 Mary Fulbrook  
*Toward an Anatomy of Evil and Guilt*

12:15 Omer Bartov  
*From Mundane Lives to Pleasurable Evil and Back: Local Murderers and the Best Years of Their Lives*

15:00 Philip Gourevitch  
*Not Banal*

16:00 Jessica Stern  
*ISIS: The Use of Evil as Psychological Warfare*

17.30 David Mikics  
*Evil and Innocence since Dostoevsky*

18.30 Avishai Margalit  
*Forgiveness: Overcoming Justified Resentment*

### Saturday, June 27

10:30 Jeffrey Andrew Barash  
*The Silence of Conscience: Reflections on the Concept of the Banality of Evil*

11:30 Jay Bernstein  
*The Living Dead, Ghastly Marionettes, and Superfluous Beings: Arendt's Victim Conception of Radical Evil*

12:30 James Ponet  
*Arendt: Pariah as Jewish Thinker and Actor*

15.00 Willi Winkler  
*"She was of course a kind of intellectual dominatrix..."*

16:00 Michelle-Irène Brudny  
*Banality, Evil, and Destructiveness*

17:00 Bettina Stangneth  
*Academic Evil, or, Beyond Thoughtlessness*