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Topic:

“Many people today would agree that there is no such thing as collective guilt or, for that matter, collective innocence, and that if there were, no one person could ever be guilty or innocent. This, of course, is not to deny that there is such a thing as political responsibility which, however, exists quite apart from what the individual member of the group has done and therefore can neither be judged in moral terms nor be brought before a criminal court.”

(Hannah Arendt, 1963, *Eichmann in Jerusalem. A Report on the Banality of Evil*. Viking Press, New York. Rev. ed. 1965, p. 298.)

ESSAY

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On collective and individual responsibility

Hannah Arendt thinks it is commonly accepted that a group cannot as a unit be morally guilty or innocent because the weight of responsibility couldn't then be individualized to any person. Political responsibility, on the other hand, is what Arendt sees as a form of possible collective responsibility. It cannot be morally or judicially used against an individual for it is separate from their actions. It is thus necessary to ask what this political responsibility consist of if not of the actions of an individual. And what is collectivity in general?

The collective political responsibility in a group can be seen to build not on an individual's wrong actions but on their omissions and ways of being. They can build up to be collective moral wrong, and this is what Arendt called banal evil. If said political responsibility would be dependent on morally wrong acts done by the individual, it would lose its meaning and be best described as moral responsibility of a single person. Banal evil describes the deeds of a group of bystanders. Political is a good term for the collective responsibility built on banal evil for politics are always linked with collectivity. Things are political only in relation to others and politics often build upon social questions. Collectivity is the core of politics, and a group can act in a way politically.

Why isn't this collective political responsibility carried on the shoulders of the individual? The answer can be partly reasoned with the help of social psychology. Philosophical and psychological conformity is one thing that can lower an independently moral person down to a level they wouldn't represent on their own. We want to fit in for our safety and convenience and these inherently social qualities in us are automatically in control. Banal evil is therefore often not worth a burden of guilt.

That said, social circumstances affect selves and selves control our actions. That was why a decent person was quiet under the rule of the nazi government and why people close their eyes from everyday evil living nearby. In for instance a war, fear numbs the moral self and what is left quickly starts to follow the rules of survival and conformity. This is what happened to millions of normal people during the holocaust, which is precisely what Arendt has famously researched.

This is a process of stripping the individual of their agency. A morally numb person does not carry responsibility because they are not in a position of choice. One may ask: how can we separate choice from involuntary behavior? The most crucial difference is the philosophical space a person is given in the situation that requires a next move or a reaction. For example: a citizen in a totalitarian society is brought up to believe they don't have the right to a choice

and an imprisoned person in a situation of moral wrong has given away not only their physical freedom but also the freedom of thought. Injustice spreads in helplessness.

Circumstances determine the level of agency a person is enjoying, and a person cannot be expected to free themselves of that burden. Thus: political responsibility is not up to an individual.

We have just discussed collective matters, but couldn't one claim that there can be no such agent as a group at all? Yes, and I wouldn't completely be opposed to it. A group can be seen as only a word to describe many people. But what in reality binds them together is an essence beyond the individuals that is about mental, behavioral and psychological similarities and differences. In a group, an individual becomes a representation of different qualities and gives away their individuality in change for unity. People in a group cannot be separated as lone agents for social matters keep them as a unit that starts to become something more than the sum of their people. The differences of people in a group show themselves as relativity, not as individuality.

A group is therefore able to collectively act in different ways and still share its responsibility with the people in it; collectivity and individuality go hand in hand. A big part of the responsibility is on the shoulders of the said essence of the group, the rest on all the individuals together.

As I have already let you know, Arendt implies that collective guilt and political responsibility have the same characteristics; they are not carried by an individual. A valid question arises: what sets collective guilt or innocence and political responsibility apart? Let us focus on guilt and responsibility for collective innocence is the absence of collective guilt and is therefore present only in discussing guilt, in relation to it.

Guilt is a strong term with an emotional connotation. It compared to responsibility suggests that an emotional burden is carried on an agent's shoulders. A guilty person has done something morally wrong and is awaited to regret it while a person carrying responsibility purely is answerable for something. That is why a collective group of people cannot carry an emotional burden, in other words guilt, if they as individuals have not directly acted morally wrong. Responsibility as a more neutral term better describes the weight they actually do carry. That is to say: responsibility can include the effect of indirect omissions while guilt implies that a bad action has been directly committed. A person can carry indirect responsibility but cannot be indirectly guilty.

To summarize: a group carries political responsibility of their actions even if they have consisted of omissions and conformity, but the people behind a collective movement of banal evil are not to be held morally guilty. Banal evil is a phenomenon that an individual does not make possible on their own.