

Editorial

Egon Gál

Banal Evil

A few weeks after the end of the Second World War, Hannah Arendt wrote that the central problem for intellectual discussion in the second half of the 20th century would be the problem of evil. Rather paradoxically, the most turbulent intellectual discussion developed only after publication of a book reporting on the trial of Adolf Eichmann in Jerusalem, and not about the problem of evil, but about the term „banal evil“ used in the subtitle of the book: Eichmann in Jerusalem. A Report on the Banality of Evil. The book uses the term „banality of evil“ only in its final sentence: „The lesson we can get from this trial is a lesson about human evil, about the terrible banality of evil before which words fail and thought collapses.“ Arendt’s Eichmann was a „banally normal person“, without any pathological deviations or ideological fanaticism. His only special characteristic was unthinking conformism, loyalty, obedience and shallowness.

Half a dozen psychiatrists reported that this man, who transported millions of men, women and children to their deaths, was entirely normal. “He is certainly more normal than I am” said one of them. Another stated that “his relationship to women, children, relations and friends is

not only normal, but highly desirable.” The priest who regularly visited Eichmann in prison, said that he is a “person with very positive ideas”. The cause of this “farce from experts on the human soul”, noted Arendt, was the hard reality that this person did not show any signs of abnormality in ordinary life and was no different from millions of other ordinary, boring citizens of this world.

Critics of Arendt reproached her for an interpretation of Eichmann that devalues the basic social virtues of respect for authority, loyalty and obedience. Others praised her for unmasking the evil embodied in impersonal state institutions and the conformism of the human herd instinct. She protested against both interpretations for many years. In a letter to one of the critics, who she really respected, she wrote: “I really think that evil is never radical, it is only extreme and it has no depth and no demonic dimension. It can grow and devastate the whole world precisely because it spreads like a fungus. It is beyond thought, because thought strives to reach depth, to touch the roots, and when it does not succeed, it is frustrated, because it does not find any. That is its “banality”, only good has depth.”

The research of psychologists into conformism and the influence of social pres-

sure on the thoughts and actions of people were much more interesting than the intellectual discussions of philosophers and political sciences in response to Arendt's attempt to provoke them to think about the dark side of human nature. The most horrifying lesson of the holocaust, which we have learnt from its perpetrators, is not the fact that "it" could happen to us, but that we could do it to others, wrote Zygmunt Bauman after learning about this research.

How can a normal person become a Nazi? This is the question asked by the American social psychologist Solomon Asch independently of Arendt and a few years before her. Is there something "specifically German", some special suggestibility, a tendency to submit to manipulation, to uncritically and conformably accept any idea? Asch was convinced that such a thing would not have a chance in America, and he proposed a brilliantly simple experiment to test his hypothesis. Details are given in the article Views and social pressure, which we publish in this issue. The results were rather depressing: "That we have found the tendency to conformity in our society so strong that reasonable intelligent and well-meaning young people are willing to call white black is a matter of concern."

The experiments did not satisfy Stanley Milgram because they lacked the moral aspect. It seemed too banal to him that the willingness of people to commit evil actions could be judged from their conformist estimates of the lengths of lines. He proposed another experiment. The subjects were "teachers", who were told that the experiment was intended to test the influence of punishment on human memory. The "pupils" were given pairs of

words, which they had to memorize, and when the "teacher" said one word from the pair, the "pupil" had to say the second. If he was wrong, he got an electric shock. The "teachers" did not know that the shocks were simulated and the electrodes were not really connected to a current. During this "teaching" they were willing to punish the "pupils" for mistakes with such strong electric shocks that the "pupils" appeared to writhe with pain. Milgram himself was rather shocked by the result. "If you created a system similar to a concentration camp in any American village, you would always find enough people, who would be willing to work there" he wrote. He was not far from the truth, as Philip Zimbardo later found in the famous Stanford prison experiment (*P. Zimbardo: Memories of the Stanford prison experiment: the power of the situation*).

The moral instinct

In perhaps the most cited book on political philosophy from the second half of the twentieth century, *The Theory of Justice*, John Rawls devoted one short paragraph with the title "Some comments on the theory of morality" to a consideration of the human sense of morality: "Let us suppose", he wrote, "that every person over a certain age, with the necessary intellectual ability and normal social conditions, is equipped with a sense for justice. This means that he is able to judge what is just and what is unjust." In this consideration, he started from an analogy between our moral sense and our sense for the grammatical correctness of sentences in our mother tongue.

As Noam Chomsky proved, every person is able to distinguish a grammatically correct sentence from an incorrect sentence

without explicitly mastering the rules of syntax of the language, by which it is directed. According to Chomsky, these rules are innate and we use them instinctively and unconsciously. Rawls expressed an assumption similar to Chomsky's theory of a language instinct. Just as every normal person has an innate universal grammar of language, which enables us to distinguish a grammatically correct sentence from an incorrect sentence, according to Rawls, everybody has an inborn universal grammar of morality, which enables us to distinguish morally acceptable from unacceptable behaviour. Just as philosophers and political scientists ignored Arendt's idea of banal evil for many years, they also ignored Rawl's idea of the moral instinct for a long time.

In contrast to philosophers, whose considerations of morality start either from Kant's moral imperative or Hobbes' contractualism, the psychologist and ethologist Marc Hauser was inspired by the analogy with Chomsky's theory of universal grammar. With two of his students, he proposed a Moral sense test. He constructed several scenarios, each of them containing a moral dilemma, some of them mentioned by Hauser in his discussion with Josie Glasiusz and some by Martin Kanovský in his article, both published in this issue. These scenarios were published on the Internet in 2003 (moral.wjh.harvard.edu). In the course of a year, they collected 60,000 replies from respondents in 120 countries, ranging in age from 7 to 70. They included Christians, atheists, Buddhists, Hindus, Moslems and Sikhs. The conclusion they reached is more than interesting. Morality is a product of innate mental structures, just like language.

How is this connected?

What is the connection of the research by psychologists into human conformism and the willingness of normal people to commit collective evil if it is sanctioned by authority, with the results of other psychologists on an inborn moral instinct with which all normal people are equipped, including all the micro-Eichmanns hidden inside many of us. According to Zimbardo, circumstances can force any of us to become perpetrators or spectators of evil. However, circumstances can also reveal an inner hero in people. "We are all capable of heroism in the ordinary sense" (Zeno Franco, Philip Zimbardo: Everyday heroism, in this issue). The problem is that the perpetrators and spectators of evil were also equipped, by evolution, with the moral instinct, if Hauser is really correct. According to Arendt, the main cause of banal evil is thoughtless conformism. However, the moral instinct, like every other instinct, is essentially a thoughtless reaction to a situation. It is difficult to say, but it seems more probable to me that people do not commit evil actions because they do not think, but more because they think that what they are doing is right. They are convinced of this by the members of the group they want to belong to, and by those they regard as authorities – the various Tisos and Slotas.

In any case, perhaps Steve Pinker is right to state that: "Our habit of moralizing problems, merging them with intuitions of purity and contamination, and resting content when we feel the right feelings, can get in the way of doing the right thing."