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COVINGTON, COLINE. 'Hannah Arendt, evil and the eradication of thought'. *The International Journal of Psychoanalysis*, 2012, 93, pp. 1215-1236.

Coline Covington has written a moving and thought-provoking paper looking at the nature of evil from a psychoanalytic perspective. She explores evil as a state of mind to which we are all vulnerable by weaving together studies from anthropology, the Holocaust and Cambodian genocides, the literature of Nobel Prize winner Imre Kertész, the Oscar award-winning film *Lives of Others*, and most especially the philosophical writings of Hannah Arendt. Employing Arendt's concept of the 'banality of evil', Covington explores the chilling acts of evil perpetrated by individuals who 'follow orders' under a totalitarian regime. She illuminates how an individual capable of love and affection can also commit horrific crimes under the sway of an idealized leader such as Hitler or Pol Pot. She identifies the all too human tendency to turn our thinking and singularity over to inner and outer 'totalitarian leaders' in exchange for narcissistic fantasies of total care and safety. Most significantly, her astute analysis links the psychoanalytic work of developing the capacities for self-reflection, memory, and remorse with the possibility of averting 'banal evil'. For me, this underlines the view that psychoanalysis is, at its core, an ethical undertaking.

Covington accepts Arendt's definition of a 'person' as a human being who has the capacity to think and to remember. In order to think, a 'person' has to be capable of imagination (Arendt's term)¹ and have the ability to place themselves in the other's shoes. This capacity to imagine the actual other is what allows for the emergence of an internal dialogue between the observing ego and the activities of the self. 'Thought', according to Arendt, is defined as the

¹ Arendt eschews the term 'empathy' in favor of 'the capacity for imagining the other'. She sees empathy as destroying critical thinking to the extent that it tries to "know what *actually* goes on in the mind of all others" as opposed to the comparing our judgment with the possible judgments of others (*Lectures on Kant's Political Philosophy*, 43).

inner dialogue between two selves; she refers to Socrates' concept of the thinking person as someone who is 'two-in-one' -- the conscious self that can reflect on its own inner activity². *Memory* depends on this internal dialogue and the ability to reflect on past experiences. Only when there is imagination, thought and then memory can there be remorse for the harm one has done to another. Arendt explains that 'banal evil' consists of heinous, incomprehensible acts based on a refusal or lack of capacity for inner dialogue-- an abdication of thought and personhood—and is not merely due to innate sadism or re-enactment of trauma. She says that when there is no thought, evil is 'rootless' and 'because it has no roots it has no limitations, it can go to unthinkable extremes and sweep over the whole world' (p.1223).

Arendt defines a 'person' as one who has the capacity to think, over and against a 'nobody'. A 'nobody' is an individual who becomes a follower, giving up their capacity to think and to remember in exchange for the omnipotent promise of total security and complete protection. When economic and political conditions threatened German national identity, Hitler offered the 'Nazi ego ideal' of a purified and strengthened Aryan race with its illusion of ultimate security. Covington sees the 'follower' as the most dangerous perpetrator of evil, because they become unthinking automatons, the 'faceless vehicles' that carry out the ideology of the totalitarian regime.

Besides thinking of evil as a result of trauma ('madness') or an intentional sadistic action ('badness'), Covington explores evil as a *state of mind* where an individual surrenders their thinking to the idealized leader. This form of evil can emerge in a political situation such as Nazi Germany, or in an interpersonal situation where an individual defends against helplessness and dependence by eradicating feeling and thought through dissociative defenses (described below). She uses Adolf Eichmann as an example of a 'nobody' who appeared in his trials as

² Originally the concepts of 'conscience' and 'conscious' were identical. Only with the religious turn in the Middle Ages did 'conscience' become awareness of an inner voice that was specifically tuned into obeying the precepts or moral law of an omnipotent Deity.

neither sadistic nor mad, but who thoughtlessly committed horrific crimes of 'banal evil'. However, she critiques Arendt's understanding of evil being perpetrated by 'nobodies' by pointing out that 'the problem was not that Eichmann was a "nobody" in every respect but that he was a "nobody" only in certain respects' (p. 1220).

Covington explores how psychoanalytic thought can account for the dilemma of an individual's capacity to think in some contexts, but not in others. She turns to the work of Whitmer, who reformulates dissociation as 'an impairment of subjectivity' (rather than splitting and repression). Whitmer posits that dissociation is a different way of *knowing oneself through another*.

The subjective sense of dividedness stems from a division of labour: the task of knowing is divided between two different minds: that of the subject who perceives, and that of another who names that perception (p.1229).

When the 'nobody' turns their thinking over to the idealized authority, then the authority becomes the one whose *thoughts* determine and *give meaning* to the follower's *perceptions*. This explains how individuals such as Eichmann could carry out the ideology of the Nazi regimen, issuing orders to exterminate prisoners without empathy for his victims, while at the same time maintaining bonds of affection with his family. His behavior was internally congruous because he had turned the *interpretation* of his perceptions over to a higher authority, the Nazi ego ideal. Covington also explores Šebek's concept of the 'totalitarian object'. The totalitarian object, whether an internal object or an actual other, 'uses power to force the self to total compliance and obedience' (p.1231). The totalitarian object stresses unity and sameness and experiences difference as threatening; it serves a defensive function and allows those who feel weak or threatened to idealize and identify with the totalitarian order.

What I especially appreciate is Covington's determination to 'lay morality at our own feet'. We would like to think that followers of totalitarian regimes are monsters or aberrations, in order to maintain the belief that we could not commit horrific crimes. She points out that the

psychological experiments of Milgram at Yale and Zimbardo at Stanford demonstrate how easily thoughtful individuals can turn to sadistic violence, relinquishing their superego functions to an authoritarian leader. She emphasizes that efforts to cast all evil doers as 'mad or bad' or to simply say that evil is 'contingent' is to defend against the reality that any of us are capable of a *state of mind* wherein it is possible to commit acts of 'banal' evil. This state is based on a regressive narcissistic fantasy of merging with the mind of the one promising care and security, and relinquishing judgments and decision-making to them. Since life is full of uncertainties, we are all capable of such evasions of responsibility and of the resultant evil.

In a very compelling clinical narrative, Covington brings these ideas into the consulting room and demonstrates what happens when 'the ego has become entirely subordinated to a collective superego that gives orders relentlessly and rigidly... It is a totalitarian internal landscape that obliterates spontaneity and symbolization. There is no internal awareness of time or space and therefore no observing ego' (p. 1224). 'Mrs. Smith' grew up in a violent family where her parents lacked the capacity to think about her except for basic physical needs. In order to survive the terror of her mother's cruel and mindless tyranny, she obliterated her own capacity to think and to imagine in order to maintain an illusion of security in her chaotic family. Through dissociation (as described by Whitmer), her childhood perceptions were given meaning only by her cruel and demanding parents, thus creating her tyrannical superego. Covington describes the pain, terror and shame that Mrs. Smith was eventually able to feel and remember within the containing presence of the analyst's mind. An observing ego gradually emerged, creating the capacities for self-reflection and internal dialogue, which allowed Mrs. Smith to think and form her own judgments about life situations. Using the film *Lives of Others*, Covington further amplifies the role of imagination in transforming a 'nobody' – (a member of the *Stasi* secret police) --into a 'person' in the moving conclusion to her paper.

Our life worlds are fraught with ambiguities and complexities. The face of the stranger evokes fear of the unknown and we feel threatened by their difference. We yearn for the

comforting illusion that we are all the same. The fantasy that any group can achieve a completely secure and harmonious existence is a dangerous fiction of a purity that is predicated on the annihilation of difference. As Covington so powerfully points out, the leaders of totalitarian regimes understand our human yearnings for security and safety and twist this vulnerability to their purposes. Using the terrifying examples of Eichmann and Comrade Duch, along with the moving story of an analysand's inner totalitarian system, Covington offers a significant psychoanalytic contribution to the interdisciplinary struggle against the timeless horror of unthinking evil. A great strength of Covington's paper lies in her own very imaginative and ethical thinking. Her writing is engaging and psychoactive. Indeed, I found her ideas creatively disturbing at times, leading to self-reflection on the everyday situations where we are tempted to eradicate our own thoughts in exchange for the fantasy of security, the promise of 'absolute truth', and the illusory protection of the 'higher' authority. This paper is a rich and rewarding read that I highly recommend.

References

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