

Hannah Arendt's Banality of Evil in the context of Gourevitch's portrayal of Jean Girumuhatse

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“If it can end that way, and after being punished I can return to my home and recover my life, I would accept that,” he told me. “If vengeance can end in this country and wrongdoers can be punished that would be best.” What he didn’t seem to grasp was that his leadership position during the genocide placed him firmly in Category One, where the death penalty could not be staved off with a confession.”<sup>1</sup>

“Eichmann’s astounding willingness in Argentina as well as in Jerusalem to admit his crimes was due less to his own criminal capacity for self-deception than to the aura of systematic mendacity that constituted the general, and generally accepted, atmosphere of the Third Reich. “Of course” he had played a role in the extermination of the Jews; of course if he “had not transported them, they would not have been delivered to the butcher.” “What” he asked, “is there to admit?” Now, he proceeded, he “would like to find peace with [his] former enemies”<sup>2</sup>

Hannah Arendt’s *Eichmann in Jerusalem* introduces a concept known as the Banality of Evil, which dictates that evil grows when people cease to comprehend how their actions affect others. This work, published in 1963, analyzes the infamous Adolf Eichmann, a Nazi who transported Jewish people to concentration camps. Thirty-one years later, a Rwandan man named Jean Girumuhitse became the leader of a road block during the Rwandan genocide. Girumuhitse’s contributions to the genocide led Phillip Gourevitch’s to investigate him in his book: *We Wish to Inform You that Tomorrow We will be Killed with All our Families: Stories from Rwanda*. The methods and analysis that Arendt utilized in characterizing Eichmann set a precedent for Gourevitch’s characterization of Girumuhitse.

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<sup>1</sup> Gourevitch, Phillip. *We wish to inform you that tomorrow we will be killed with our families: stories from Rwanda*. New York: Farrar, Straus, & Giroux, 1998. 310

<sup>2</sup> Arendt Hannah. *Eichmann in Jerusalem*. New York: Viking Press, 1963. 52-53

The first thing Arendt does in characterizing Eichmann is provide context for his banality by providing evidence of his crimes. She describes Eichmann's role in the genocide plainly: "Of course he had played a role in the extermination of the Jews."<sup>3</sup> Arendt's blunt description of Eichmann leaves no doubt in the readers mind of Eichmann's guilt. Arendt then goes on to say, "if he had not transported them, they would not have been delivered to the butcher."<sup>4</sup> This phrase is powerful because it references the dullness of Eichmann's work, he simply organized the transport, there was nothing glorious about his work. His role as transporter is like that of Charon, the Greek ferryman of souls to Hades. Eichmann transports the Jews to their demise the same way Charon does, and like Charon, who is so apathetic to the plight of the dead that he extracts a toll from them, Eichmann is also apathetic to the plight of the Jewish people. The dull nature of Eichmann's work and his apathy towards those his actions affect, fits with the thoughtlessness and carelessness associated with Arendt's Banality of Evil.

Gourevitch uses Arendt's style to create a foundation for his analysis on Girumuhatse. Gourevitch accomplishes this by establishing Girumuhatse as in "a leadership position" and a "Category One" criminal.<sup>5</sup> Gourevitch emphasizes Girumuhatse's role as leader in order to associate him with mass murder and the phrase "Category 1" denotes how heinous his crimes are. Gourevitch does this to highlight the evil surrounding Girumuhatse. Girumuhatse's penchant for following orders as roadblock leader and his inability to empathize with his victims both in the act of administrating massacre and after the fact demonstrates the unoriginality and thoughtlessness of his actions. This context allows Gourevitch to place Girumuhatse and

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<sup>3</sup> Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, 52

<sup>4</sup> Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, 52

<sup>5</sup> Gourevitch. *We wish to inform you that tomorrow we will be killed with our families: stories from Rwanda*. 310

Eichmann in the same conversation of apathy and therefore banality regarding his actions. This sets the stage for further analysis by Gourevitch through Arendt's lens.

Arendt's provision of context and background information regarding Eichmann's actions is followed by a direct analysis of Eichmann's speech with reference to banality. She portrays Eichmann as unable to comprehend the gravity of his crimes, including quotes saying, "What is there to admit" and of him wanting "to make peace with his enemies."<sup>6</sup> Arendt uses the same positive tone in the phrase "make peace" implying Eichmann believes he has had some personal development worthy of allowing him to "make peace" with the Jewish people. This misunderstanding implies that Eichmann does not realize the weight of his past actions, unable to comprehend that reconciliation with a group he helped to systematically murder is impossible. This means that when Eichmann was committing genocide, he was unable to comprehend his actions from the eyes of the Jewish people because his actions were banal, he was just taking orders and not thinking for himself.

Gourevitch takes Arendt's style of portraying Eichmann through direct quotes in order to view Girumuhatse's banality. Gourevitch provides quotes from Girumuhatse describing his desire "return to his home" and to "recover his life."<sup>7</sup> Gourevitch uses Arendt's technique of positive tone coupled with the already established genocidal context to demonstrate that Girumuhatse is delusional. Girumuhatse is delusional in that he still has hope that he can live a normal life after his crimes, displaying that he does not comprehend the gravity of his crimes. Gourevitch can make this connection because of the foundation set by Arendt in her

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<sup>6</sup> Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, 53

<sup>7</sup> Gourevitch. *We wish to inform you that tomorrow we will be killed with our families: stories from Rwanda*. 310

characterization of Eichmann as misunderstanding his situation. With this foundation, Gourevitch takes things a step further, portraying Girumuhatse as so delusional that he believes he can live with the same people he terrorized in the past. Like, Eichmann, Girumuhatse's delusion stems from that he believes he was carrying out orders and that since his actions were not his idea that he is innocent. As with Eichmann, Girumuhatse's extreme inability to comprehend the irreversible nature of his actions demonstrates that his actions were banal.

Gourevitch builds on this delusional characterization by insinuating that Girumuhatse is oblivious to the standard of punishment that fit the crimes he has committed. Gourevitch alludes to this with the phrase "What he didn't seem to grasp" which sends the message that Girumuhatse does not understand his current predicament.<sup>8</sup> Furthermore, by using the words with a condescending tone such as "seem" and "grasp", Gourevitch is suggesting Girumuhatse should know better. Gourevitch expands on this delusion by including a quote where Girumuhatse advises how genocidaires should be handled: "If vengeance can end in this country and wrongdoers can be punished that would be best."<sup>9</sup> Gourevitch includes this quote because of the didactic tone that Girumuhatse seems to take; referring to his cohorts as "wrongdoers" rather than war criminals or genocidaires, Girumuhatse is suggesting that their crimes are not as heinous as they seem. Furthermore, referring to Rwanda as "this country" implies that he is detached or above the Rwanda Crisis. This didactic tone is used by Gourevitch to display Girumuhatse's delusion, for how could a mass murderer ever take the position of a moral

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<sup>8</sup> Gourevitch. We wish to inform you that tomorrow we will be killed with our families: stories from Rwanda. 310

<sup>9</sup> Gourevitch. We wish to inform you that tomorrow we will be killed with our families: stories from Rwanda. 310

officialant. Girumuhatse's misconception as to his own place in the context of the genocide illustrates why his actions could be considered banal.

Arendt creates precedent yet again regarding the nature of misconception surrounding Girumuhatse. In her analysis of Eichmann, Arendt uses the term "criminal capacity for self-deception."<sup>10</sup> Arendt's extremely critical tone, calling Eichmann's delusion "criminal", sets a strong precedent for Gourevitch's portrayal of Girumuhatse. Arendt's strong, but concise description of Eichmann's misconstructions of his role in the Holocaust gives Gourevitch an idea to expand on in his examination Girumuhatse. This foundation allows Gourevitch to analyze Girumuhatse's moral self-perception of himself and characterize him as banal with the pretext that he is morally delusional.

The methods and analysis that Arendt uses to characterize Eichmann set a precedent for Gourevitch to expand on the Banality of Evil and characterize Girumuhatse's actions as banal. This is important because the foundation Arendt sets for Gourevitch allows him to expand the idea of Banality of Evil from the idea thoughtlessness with regards to oneself and their surroundings, to also their own moral perceptions. Gourevitch suggests that the Banality of Evil is accompanied with a corruption of moral perception.

How we see and imagine ourselves, others, and our surroundings is the root of empathic thought. In this vein, if one is unaware of their own ordinary actions and their effects on their surroundings, then this person is afflicted by Banality of Evil. They are unable to empathize with their victims and they cannot understand that their ordinary and avoidable actions are at fault for

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<sup>10</sup> Arendt, Eichmann in Jerusalem, 52

their victims suffering. Therefore, the Banality of Evil is the absence of empathy and the presence of delusion.