

On the “Evil of Mediocrity” in Teachers

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Abstract:

Arendt proposes that evil appears in the form of “mediocrity”, and in the current educational environment, it is easy to see that there is a phenomenon of teachers obeying the educational system every day, and when they acquiesce to factors in the system that are not conducive to student development, they accept them all without thinking, to a certain extent, jeopardising the development of students and thus creating the “evil of mediocrity” in teachers. This paper firstly discusses the origins of the concept of “the evil of mediocrity” and explores the core of what makes mediocrity an evil. Secondly, it discusses the “non-thinking” and “inaction” aspects of the “evil of mediocrity” that erode the ethical values of the teaching profession and their manifestations. Again, the dangers of the “evil of mediocrity” for teachers are discussed and analysed from the perspective of both teachers and students. Finally, the reasons for teachers’ mediocrity are clarified at the level of the school system and at the level of teachers, and suggestions are made for reflection and transcendence.

Keywords:

Arendt, The Evil of Mediocrity, Teachers, Reflection

1. The Origins of the Concept of “Banal Evil”

In February 1961, during the trial of the Nazis in Jerusalem, Eichmann was indicted for crimes against humanity, his main responsibility as a high-ranking officer in Nazi Germany being to send Jews to concentration camps for mass murder. In December of the same year, Eichmann was found guilty and, in June of the following year, was hanged. At the trial, Eichmann replied that “the duty of a soldier is to carry out orders”.

The trial caused an international debate, and Arendt, as a special correspondent for *The New Yorker*, witnessed the entire trial, which led to a new understanding of the problem of evil. Everything Eichmann answered in his defence came across as banal and shallow, responding to what was in front of him with a set of Nazi enforcer’s mindset, without the slightest thought of his own. He thinks he is just a cog, unaware that thousands of Nazi cogs twisted the entire bloody history of Auschwitz. He admits that he played an intermediary role in the heinous crimes committed by the Nazis against the Jewish people, but that he had no intention of killing any Jews himself, and that in his mind his role was accidental and that other Germans would have

fulfilled it instead of him, on the basis of which he saw the entire German population as potentially criminal. [1]

Subsequently, Arendt published a series of articles entitled “Eichmann in Jerusalem - A Report on the Evil of Mediocrity”, which presented the very revealing idea of the “evil of mediocrity” and for some time even turned the thinking on the concept of “evil” upside down. The basic form of evil need not be “vile” as the main motive, and it is entirely possible to appear as “banal”, i.e. not as “calculated evil” but as it is possible for the basic form to appear as “banal”, that is, not as “calculated evil” but as “banal evil”. This banality is more than ordinary, in the sense that the actor’s ego is always dormant, when he or she is constantly avoiding dialogue with morality, and will be so unaware of what he or she is doing that it will be difficult to judge his or her own actions in the true sense of the word, even if they are heinous, because they will be forgotten in a whirlwind without any ideological eradication. [2] According to Gao Xiaowen, the “sins” committed by mediocre evil people often have no commonly understood motives and appear in a mediocre way “A mediocre approach specifically means that the evil-doer does not think, that the individual assimilates completely into the system, obeys the system and acquiesces to the system’s own implied immoral or even anti-moral behaviour, becoming an unquestioning practitioner of the immoral body.” [3] This view is similar to the view that “obedience is support” that Arendt concluded at the end of the Eichmann trial. In relation to the evil of mediocrity, Arendt writes, “I was vaguely aware that Eichmann’s sinful behaviour was far removed from the reasons for sin in our traditional thinking”, and that it was not stupidity but thought - lessness that caused the evil of mediocrity. [4] If everyone does not think about the rules of the system, and less about the rightness of the system itself, then the “evil of mediocrity” will spread like a plague, as Arendt said.

2. The Different Paths of “Banal Evil” for Teachers

It is worth emphasising the difference between “fundamental evil” and “banal evil”. Fundamental evil, unlike mistakes caused by ignorance or good intentions, cannot be offset by any punishment. In this sense, fundamental evil is something that is almost unpunishable, certainly intolerable and incomprehensible, and can only seem to be traced and attributed to the nature of man within himself. If this is so, it is a fundamental denial of the inherent unfinishedness of the human person and of the social nature of the human person, a typical idealist view of human nature. As long as the unfinishedness and social nature of man are recognised, the fundamental evil of man must have a social origin; if the fundamental evil of man has a social origin, then it is understandable, if intolerable, and not without any possibility of being overcome and eliminated. Moreover, pure fundamental evil is extremely rare in modern society and cannot be condoned by modern laws and regulations, and must be severely punished. Therefore, the so-called fundamental evils of human beings are more often banal evils. Nor does the banal evil of teaching stem from the teacher’s stupidity or ignorance, for even if the teacher has sufficient knowledge of teaching, he may not be able to distinguish between right and wrong in teaching. [5] When mediocrity becomes evil, the context in which it occurs is inevitably the individual’s mediocre state in which he or she does something detrimental to the interests of others. To a large extent, the evil of mediocrity is based on the situation of “knowing goodness but not doing goodness”, and the individual teacher’s “evil of mediocrity” appears to be the result of individual chance and idiosyncratic factors, but in fact it is the result of the dilemma of authority and individuality, utilitarianism and morality, discipline and

freedom. The dilemma of authority versus individuality, utilitarianism versus morality, discipline versus freedom, and so on, is underpinned by a kind of mediocrity that is driven by third-party forces and that gradually erodes the ethical value of the teacher's role. [6] The "evil of mediocrity" of teachers is mainly manifested in their moral mediocrity, as some teachers place themselves in a state of invisibility, playing with the educational system and the ethical role of self-morality, but ultimately losing out to the "evil" product of mediocrity, namely "thoughtlessness" and "inaction".

In the practical state of "thoughtlessness" and "inaction", the "evil of mediocrity" is horizontally universal and diffuse, as it can occur in the life of each teacher and gradually extend to the community. In a vertical sense, the "evil of mediocrity" does not have the potential to produce immediate and serious consequences, but will gradually produce diffuse and serious consequences over time, and its impact is deep and wide enough to affect the development and construction of the entire teaching force.

2.1. Forms of "Inaction"

"Inaction" in everyday school life refers to the passive inaction of teachers who have become accustomed to the routine of their daily teaching work. The "inaction" of teachers is different from the moral "inaction", which tends to manifest itself in the form of an attitude of coping under a haze of formalism. Mei Yiqi once said, "The greatness of a university is not the presence of a building, but the presence of a master." The importance of universities is self-evident, and the basic education of primary and secondary schools is a reflection of the importance of the accumulation of the development of schools to move the development of society, teachers in schools as a preaching and teaching people, more need to look at themselves with a developmental perspective. If teachers "do nothing", they are, like Eichmann, caught in a situation where they appear to have no responsibility but in fact do. The pretext of protecting oneself, the indifference to one's responsibilities, and the indifference to a bad culture eat away at the positive image of the individual teacher's ethics. Formalistic inaction is also increasingly sapping the dedication and positive attitude of individual teachers.

2.2. Forms of "Non-Thinking"

In their routine work, teachers have long compared themselves to a cog in the national education machine, integrating themselves into it and working silently, without thinking, at the pace of their peers. This can be seen in the following ways.

a. the teaching habit of following the pace of the system and the collective, thus weakening one's own ability to think and judge, and the appearance of acquiescence that annihilates the individual's true ideas when faced with situations where the educational reality is unreasonable.

b. In the teaching process, teachers' over-reliance on so-called standards and authority overwhelms their own thinking and judgement about the value of education, and the mechanistic teaching methods used in the classroom make education even more programmatic. The emphasis on student achievement is far removed from the goal of "all-round development" and dilutes the colour of education.[7]

In my own experience, at the junior and senior secondary levels, the curriculum developed in accordance with the national curriculum standards and the requirements of "quality education" does not match the actual classroom at all, with the three major

subjects of language, mathematics and English dominating the curriculum, while the development of students' physical and mental development of music, physical education and aesthetics are few and far between. The reality is that in the face of the torrent of exam-oriented education, teachers have chosen to compromise and conform.

This "obedience", as in the case of Nazi Germany, was the result of a change in social norms, which were established in the form of laws and regulations, which most Germans did not resist but participated in naturally, with the aim of "yes for yes, no for no". If one simply accepts it, one is invariably an accomplice to the "evil of mediocrity" and therefore needs to think more about it, to "judge" everything, and this judgment should be based on the principle of "putting oneself in its place". This judgement should be based on the principle of "putting oneself in the place of others" and on the building of "empathy".

2.3. The "Theatre Effect" in the Form of Representation

At present, education is trapped in the quagmire of the "theatre effect", that is, watching a play in a theatre, some people stand up when they cannot see anymore, and those behind them have no choice but to stand up, as if all people are "kidnapped", yet the state is the same as at the beginning. This led to serious competition for extracurricular tuition and school choice. [8] In the face of this pressure, teachers who had intended to comply with theatre to stop the bleeding became victims of the benefits of mechanical indoctrination, day in and day out teaching, using the behaviour of other teachers as a minimum standard for their own actions. The teachers' failure to think and act constitutes the "evil of mediocrity", and under the influence of the "theatre effect", they are bound to their role as teachers and neglect their responsibility to nurture others.

3. The Dangers of Teachers' "Banal Evil"

Teachers' "banal evil" is a direct danger to their students' developmental journey, as they are unable to enter their students' inner worlds to guide them in their growth. At the same time, teachers' mediocre evil also affects their own development, their obedience to the system reduces them to tools, their indifference to the growth of students, and their loss of authority and responsibility as teachers, which will seriously affect society's sense of respect for the teaching profession.

3.1. The Impact on Students

The direct impact of teachers' mediocrity on their pupils must be a matter of deep reflection. The merit of students' performance determines the teacher's sole teaching objective, while the educational goal of developing the whole person is ignored. The current educational reality is more like a mass production machine, with a rigid education system and a huge discrepancy between top-level design and the reality of educational practice. Some are calm because they are used to the darkness, some stop crying because they are tired of crying and helpless, while others are overwhelmed by the fear of the darkness and are on a path of no return. While teachers are supposed to be responsible for guiding their students' growth, the evil of mediocrity leads to a deplorable homelessness within them.

3.2. The Impact on Teachers

The rigidity of the education system is underpinned by a series of quantitative assessments of teachers by society, by the need to learn by the seat of one's pants, by the fact that the content of education is more about exam subjects than about "how to become a more complete human being", by the growing tendency towards the utilitarianisation of education, by the loss of the ethical integrity of some teachers, by the growing sense of burnout, by the loss of a sense of meaning in the profession, by the obsession with personal gain and loss rather than with the value of a life of "service to students".

Arendt uses two phrases to distinguish between traditional and modern understandings of meaning: for the sake of... for the sake of and in order to... in order to. Traditionally, people acted for the sake of... for the sake of, e.g. a carpenter makes a table and chairs for the sake of realising its own meaning, i.e. for the sake of realising the identity of a blacksmith. And the latter, for the sake of... purpose, i.e. the carpenter makes a table and chair, is simply for the sake of the end product. The former harbours the possibility of realising its own meaning behind human action, while the meaning of the latter action ends at the moment of the activity of making it. [9] The mediocrity of teachers causes them to act for their own benefit rather than for the individual growth of their students, and as this phenomenon becomes more and more serious, the purpose of achieving meaning in life through their profession naturally shrinks.

4. Rethinking and Transcending the "Evil of Mediocrity" for Teachers

It is true that there is no way to eradicate the utilitarian status quo on campus, such as the hierarchical system, but this does not mean that the pursuit of the good is meaningless. The only way to turn ideals into reality is to try to transcend them through ongoing reflection, starting with the system itself, and establishing the ethics of the teaching profession.[10]

On the one hand, at the level of the school system, reform must be pursued in a comprehensive manner. Firstly, we must face up to the current institutional reality. The dangers of the "evil of mediocrity" are not sudden, nor can they be changed overnight, so we must look at the problem rationally. No system is perfect, in other words, immorality in the name of morality, and the trampling of rights in the name of rights, will always exist. Therefore, when confronted with the school system, we should advance with moral intent and not fall into a moralistic quagmire. Secondly, the overall dialogue should be confronted. There is no such thing as a morally perfect system, there is always good and evil in any system, just as there is always a tension between morality and utilitarianism in the school system, so we should be rational about the causes of "banal evil". Only with rational knowledge and practical behaviour can we "turn evil into good".

On the other hand, at the level of the teacher. Teachers as individuals have their own values, and the "banal evil" that they generate is inevitably the root cause of our desire to eradicate it, and therefore requires attention. Firstly, teachers' rights should be asserted. It is not only the defence of teachers' legal rights that is needed, but also respect for their natural rights. The fact that teachers' social status may appear high, but is actually low, forces them to be profit-driven. In addition to improving the material conditions of teachers' basic salaries and benefits, it is also important to strengthen the culture of respect and admiration for intellectuals in society, so that

teachers can truly become “human beings” with a capital “Teacher is the most glorious profession under the sun”, as Comenius put it, rather than existing as an appendage of the education system. Secondly, we must learn to reflect. As teachers ourselves, we should reflect on ourselves from time to time. Being a teacher cannot remain at the level of mere words, but should be put into practice. Therefore, the emphasis on the school system should be accompanied by a comprehensive focus on teacher reflection; only in this way will teachers not be reduced to teaching in a repetitive daily routine.

The “evil of mediocrity” of teachers is not just for individual teachers alone, but for the entire teaching community.

Conflicts of Interest

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