



IN CONTEXT

BRANCH

Ethics

APPROACH

Existentialism

BEFORE

c.350 St Augustine of Hippo writes that evil is not a force, but comes from a lack of goodness.

1200s Thomas Aquinas writes *Disputed questions on evil*, exploring the idea of evil as a lack of something, rather than a thing in itself.

AFTER

1971 American social scientist Philip Zimbardo conducts the notorious "Stanford Prison Experiment" in which ordinary students are persuaded to participate in "evil" acts that would normally be considered unthinkable both to themselves and to others.

THE BANALITY OF EVIL

HANNAH ARENDT (1906–1975)

In 1961, the philosopher Hannah Arendt witnessed the trial of Adolph Eichmann, one of the architects of the Holocaust. In her book *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, Arendt writes of the apparent "everydayness" of Eichmann. The figure before her in the dock did not resemble the kind of monster we might imagine. In fact, he would not have looked out of place in a café or in the street.

A failure of judgement

After witnessing the trial, Arendt came to the conclusion that evil does not come from malevolence or a delight in doing wrong. Instead, she suggests, the reasons people act in such ways is that they fall victim to failures of thinking and judgement. Oppressive political systems are able to take advantage of our tendencies toward such failures, and can make acts that we might usually consider to be "unthinkable" seem normal.

The idea that evil is banal does not strip evil acts of their horror. Instead, refusing to see people



Eichmann committed atrocities not through a hatred of the Jewish community, Arendt suggests, but because he unthinkingly followed orders, disengaging from their effects.

who commit terrible acts as "monsters", brings these acts closer to our everyday lives, challenging us to consider how evil may be something of which we are all capable. We should guard against the failures of our political regimes, says Arendt, and the possible failures in our own thinking and judgement. ■

See also: St Augustine of Hippo 72–73 ■ Thomas Aquinas 88–95 ■ Theodor Adorno 266–67