The Case of Eichmann Restaged: Arendt, Evil, and the Complexity of Mimesis

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Abstract
This essay reframes Hannah Arendt’s evaluation of the “banality of evil” in light of Eichmann’s mimetic psychology, which Arendt intuited but did not fully articulate. Rather than considering the banality of evil as symptomatic of Eichmann’s “inability to think,” the essay foregrounds the affective, contagious, and, in this sense, mimetic tendencies at play in Eichmann’s personality (from Latin, *persona*, theatrical mask). This move is instrumental to articulate a middle path between Arendt’s theoretical diagnostic of Eichmann as “terrifyingly normal” and Bettina Stangneth’s recent historical account of Eichmann as a “fanatical National Socialist.” My wager is that the ancient problematic of *mimēsis* (from Greek, *mimos*, mime) casts a new and original light on the psychic foundations of a type of evil that is as relevant to understand the psychology of fascism in the past century as its rising shadow in the present century.

Keywords
Hannah Arendt, Eichmann, banality of evil, Nazism, (new) fascism, mimesis

The trouble with Eichmann was precisely that so many were like him, and that the many were neither perverted nor sadistic, that they were, and still are, terribly and terrifyingly normal.

—Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, 276.

Like a mirror he reflected people’s fears and expectations, whether they were fearing for their own lives or hoping he would confirm a theory of evil.

—Bettina Stangneth, *Eichmann before Jerusalem*, 367.

It might not be popular to say it, but a plurality of critical voices is currently warning us that the shadow of fascism haunts, once again, the contemporary scene. Political theorists, historians, and philosophers have recently claimed that the growing popularity of far-right leaders, in Europe, the United States, and elsewhere around the world, should not simply be defined as conservative, right-wing, or populist. Rather, influential scholars across disciplines forcefully show that phenomena like Donald Trump in the United States, Marine Le Pen in France, Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil, and Boris Johnson in the United Kingdom, among many others, may not be identical to fascist leaders like Mussolini and Hitler, and should thus not be confused with them.¹ And yet, to borrow William Connolly’s (2017a) phrase, they “aspire to fascism” nonetheless in their rhetoric, bodily drives, and tyrannical policies. They also manifest characteristics of what Umberto Eco, writing in the 1990s, called “Ur-Fascism,” which include “fear of difference,” “the appeal to a frustrated middle class,” “machismo,” “irrationalism,” “disagreement is treason,” and “contempt for the weak” (Eco 1995). Interestingly, among emerging symptoms, Eco also included a type of TV “newspeak,” or “impoverished Internet language,” we are by now accustomed to. It has, in fact, become the *lingua franca* of politicians with an authoritarian bent who rely on new media to trigger a type of mimetic contagion that is constitutive of what I called, “(new) fascism” (Lawtoo 2019a).

Building on emerging genealogies of fascism, old and new, I now seek to reevaluate the contagious powers of mimesis at play not only in authoritarian leaders but in submissive subjects and supporters, mimetic and unconscious powers that can deprive otherwise normal people of the ability to think critically, and thus act ethically. I shall do so by revisiting Umberto Eco’s untimely observation about an “impoverished vocabulary” that has the power “to limit the instruments for complex and critical reasoning” (Eco 1995)—a symptom characteristic of

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Ur-Fascism, which can be reloaded and amplified via new media in (new) fascism as well. That this linguistic impoverishment is an obstacle to the development of thought in ages in which apprentice presidents are masters is now loud and clear. Less clear is that this symptom might also be at play in less spectacular, more ordinary, but not less dangerous forms: among bureaucrats working for hypernationalist administrations that implement, defend, and promote inhuman laws that, in periods of economic, political, and identity crisis, reawaken fascist phantoms that risk being normalized—a disconcerting phenomenon most visible in the consequences of anti-immigration policies in Europe, child detention camps in the United States, and assaults on the environment globally, all of which are constitutive of (new) fascist policies.

Considered legal within national governments’ administrations predicated on a violent hierarchy between “us” and “them,” sameness and difference, and human and nonhuman lives, these thought-defying forms of administrative cruelty warn us about the phantom return of what Hannah Arendt ([1963] 2006) controversially called the “banality of evil.” I say the phantom of that banality and not the banality of evil itself to mark an obvious mimetic difference between old and (new) fascism, let alone Nazism. Although the number of deaths that ensue from economic, political, and identity crises, reawaken fascist phantoms that risk being normalized—a disconcerting phenomenon most visible in the consequences of anti-immigration policies in Europe, child detention camps in the United States, and assaults on the environment globally, all of which are constitutive of (new) fascist policies.

Rather than hastening to define the “banality of evil” in terms of Eichmann’s “inability to think,” I shall consider the banality of evil as part of a more general mimetic state of mind that is not entirely inimical to thought, is highly contagious, and is animated by both affective and rational principles characteristic of actors who play roles so convincingly that they become their role. Recent historians who have reopened the Eichmann dossier in light of his Argentina Papers have, in fact, challenged Arendt’s picture of Eichmann as a mediocre bureaucrat who was simply a cog in the Nazi machine for he remained a “fanatical National Socialist” on “active duty” till his capture in 1960 (Stangneth 2014, xix). Informed by Eichmann’s writings before Jerusalem, Bettina Stangneth (2014, xvii) argues that this self-proclaimed “cog in the machine” turns out to have had a “talent for self-dramatization” which allowed him to play, chameleon-like, “many roles” in his career. This mimetic talent characteristic of an actor, or mime was, in her view, effectively staged during the trial and allowed Eichmann to reflect, like a “mirror” (Stangneth 2014, 367), the expectations of both witnesses and judges—stretching, at one remove, to cast a spell on political theorists intent on understanding this case via the tools of reason, or thought.

A mimetic approach to the case forges a middle path between these competing philosophical/historical perspectives. On one side, furthering Arendt’s account, I pay closer diagnostic attention than she did to the enthusiastic affect, or pathos, internal to Eichmann’s psychology, a mimetic psychology that made him vulnerable to the will to power of Nazi models, rending him, if not entirely unable to think, at least pathologically thoughtless—subject to what I also call a patho-logical state to designate the will to power of affect to cast a spell on his thought. On the other side, furthering Stangneth (2014, 367), I take seriously the hypothesis of Eichmann’s “role-play,” or “masquerade” during the trial, and further it by suggesting that it is Eichmann’s mimetic capitulation to the Nazi idea in his youth that led him to set up a “mirror” to people’s “fears and expectations” in the 1960s. At one remove, this role-play might also set up a mirror to contemporary administrators and spokespersons working for leaders who intentionally use old theatrical methods to manipulate people’s expectations via new media—what I call patho-logy to indicate the power of mimetic thought to manipulate affects.

Once joined, we shall be in a position to see that the case of Eichmann does not allow for clear-cut evaluations that simply oppose a mindless inability to think to a fanatical ability to act—and enact horrors. The banality of evil is, in fact, triggered by the complexity of mimesis, a complexity based on a dynamic interplay between contagious affects that generate an irrational pathos, on the one hand, and a cold capacity to play a mirroring role from a rational distance, on the other. Together, these mimetic principles give birth to a complex (rather than banal) chameleon subject. He is not simply pathological but...
patho-logical, in the double sense that he is animated by the dynamic interplay of affect and thought, pathos and logos. In a mirroring move, I attend to these mimetic principles to reevaluate both the affective and rational foundations of a type of evil that led to unprecedented horrors in the past century and—under different masks and dramatic personae—can potentially lead to new horrors in the present century.

Reopening the Case: Eichmann’s Anti-mimetic Patho-logy

Much has been said about Arendt’s ([1963] 2006) report on Adolf Eichmann’s 1961 trial, published first as articles in The New Yorker and then as a book titled, Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil, so much so that the juridical case is by now well-known and does not need to be reiterated in detail.4 Arendt’s (1951 [1976]) presence at the trial in Jerusalem forced her to revisit her previous evaluation of the horror of the Holocaust in the Kantian terms of “radical evil” that still informed The Origins of Totalitarianism. Rather than the “monster” she expected to find on trial as she confronted the Origins of Totalitarianism. Rather than the “monster” she expected to find on trial as she confronted the Obersturmbannführer responsible for organizing the transportation system that led to the extermination of millions of Jews, she found a “ghostlike” bureaucrat she labeled “banal” in a phrase that was used rarely in the book, but provided its subtitle nonetheless.5 In the wake of Arendt’s publication, the controversy that ensued around this phrase was not without performatice, mirroring effects. As Judith Butler (2011) notes, due to its reiteration “the banality of evil” has become a sort of “intellectual cliché” that is often echoed but not sufficiently thought through, which also means that those who use it risk redoubling the type of “banality” the phrase designates and seeks to counter. It is perhaps also due to its iteration that, on either side of the controversy, insufficient attention has been given to the fact that this oxymoronic phrase, which applies to Eichmann’s psychology not to his crime, is animated by a contradictory push–pull between mimetic and anti-mimetic drives that are in urgent need of diagnostic reevaluation for genealogical reasons that are both past and future oriented.

Reopening the dossier of Eichmann in the twenty-first century from a genealogical perspective attentive to what the Greeks called enigmatically mimēsis might surprise. This is especially evident if we consider that, in recent years, a number of developments in continental philosophy, critical theory, political theory, and the social sciences have been shifting dominant accounts of mimesis as a homogeneous aesthetic category restricted to realistic representation toward a heterogeneous conception of mimesis understood as behavioral imitation that revitalizes the ancient philosophical insight that humans are, for better and worse, mimetic creatures.6 Thus reframed, “mimesis” covers a wide range of phenomena, such as imitation and mimicry, adaptation and conformism, but also mirroring reflexes, emotional contagion, identification, unconscious influences, psychic suggestibility, and sympathy (sym-pathos, feeling with)—all of which share the characteristic of blurring the distinction between self and others, introducing affective continuities in place of discontinuities.

In this contemporary psychological sense, then, mimesis has not been considered relevant to understand the case of Eichmann. And rightly so, for a strong anti-mimetic drive is constitutive of the banality of evil as Arendt defined it. It is in fact crucial to recall that, for Arendt, Eichmann’s so-called “banality” was not linked to his actions (what he did), which she uncompromisingly condemned, but to his speech (how he spoke), which she tried to understand. Given the unspeakable horror of his actions, the language he used to account for it sounded eerily ordinary, commonplace, and in this sense banal. Soon after the trial started, Arendt ([1963] 2006, 8) noticed in fact that the “ghostlike” figure behind the glass booth expressed himself in an impoverished administrative language, or “officialese [Amtsprache],” a language which Eichmann considered “his only language” (Arendt [1963] 2006, 48) and which Arendt identified as the main symptom of the banality of evil. As she puts it in an often-quoted passage that attempts to pinpoint what she meant with this enigmatic phrase: “The longer one listened to him, the more obvious it became that his inability to speak was closely connected with his inability to think, namely, to think from the standpoint of somebody else” (Arendt [1963] 2006, 49).

At first sight, the diagnostic seems clear, rational, and utterly deprived of mimetic elements. Arendt (2000b), in fact, considered Eichmann’s inability to speak, except in administrative clichés and ready-made Nazi slogans, as symptomatic of his “inability to think” in general, by which she meant a “silent [Socratic] dialogue” within the mind in which a “duality” or contradiction turned toward “‘oneness’ or consistency.”7 Moreover, for Arendt ([1963] 2006, 287), Eichmann seemed especially unable to think, and thus develop a dia-logos, by taking into consideration the perspective of his victims, via what she called, drawing on Kant’s third Critique, a “lack of imagination.”8 What we must add is that Eichmann also seems unable to feel his victims’ suffering, or pathos, via sympathy (sym-pathos) or pity (Mitleid). Although Arendt (in)famously did not consider pity central to political judgment, this affect—or lack thereof—is nonetheless tied to a dramatic mimesis constitutive of what I call Eichmann’s patho-logy.

Language, thought, affect. Arendt is not a Platonic or an idealist thinker, quite the contrary. And yet, a vertical
hierarchy animates this diagnostic in which an impoverished language (or logos) masks an impoverished thought based on an internal dialogue (or dia-logos) which, in turn, blocks the development of a shared affect (or pathos) that is constitutive of what I call Eichmann’s anti-mimetic patho-logy, understood not simply as sickness—for Eichmann in Arendt’s view was disquietingly normal—but as a logos disability that prevents the development of any shared affect, sym-pathos, or pity. Thus, at a key moment during the trial, Arendt ([1963] 2006, 25) reports the following exchange: “Mr. Witness, in the negotiations with your superiors, did you express any pity for the Jews, and did you say there was room to help them?” Eichmann’s reply: “I am here under oath and must speak the truth. Not out of mercy did I launch this transaction.” From this logocentric perspective that privileges thought and language over affects and bodies, Eichmann is framed as a cold, sealed-off, autonomous, and disconnected monad who is not inclined to “think” from the perspective of the victims he is facing at the trial, let alone step in their shoes and feel their pain in affective terms that would generate “bad conscience” for the horror of the Holocaust. This, at least, is the dominant image of Eichmann that, in the wake of Arendt’s diagnostic, is often repeated.

If we now want to go further, we might still wonder what, exactly, triggered this complete identification with a bureaucratic language, role, and perspective that deprives Eichmann not only of a private language but also of the human capacity to think from the perspective of the other and, at one remove, feel basic human emotions when put face to face with the victims of the atrocities he implemented. Paradoxically, for Arendt, Eichmann’s inability to think (or patho-logy) is generated by a concept that is usually associated with thought, namely, an idea, which is constitutive of Nazi thought (or ideo-logy). Although Arendt no longer relies on the language of ideology she had used in The Origins of Totalitarianism, she makes clear that Eichmann is nonetheless blindly driven by what she calls “an idea.” Hence, she defines Eichmann as a “perfect ‘idealist’” who “had of course his personal feelings and emotions, but he would never permit them to interfere with his actions if they came into conflict with his ‘idea’” (Arendt [1963] 2006, 43), no matter how unspeakable or horrifying that idea, and the actions it led to, actually was. Hence again, Arendt ([1963] 2006, 42) specifies that Eichmann was “a man who lived for his idea . . . and who was prepared to sacrifice for his idea everything and, especially everybody.”

In many ways, Stangneth’s (2014, 183–310) historical scrutiny of the Argentina Papers might challenge Arendt’s evaluation of Eichmann’s so-called banality theory; yet her emphasis on Eichmann as a thoroughgoing “fanatical National Socialist” confirms that he never let go of the Nazi idea in practice. On this point, then, Arendt and Stangneth agree that it is was first and foremost because Eichmann was an idealist in the sense that he bowed down to the Nazi idea, and was ready to sacrifice everyone and everything to it, that he could enthusiastically contribute to the Holocaust’s “unspeakable horror” (Arendt [1963] 2006, 54), as Arendt puts it, echoing Joseph Conrad’s narrative account of the horror in Heart of Darkness. This, at least, is the anti-mimetic diagnostic that emerges from Arendt’s detached account of the disabled logos at play in the banality of evil.

And yet, as the Conradian echoes suggest, it is equally important to note that Arendt’s report is not only a distanced clinical account of a juridical case she sets out to understand with the tools of reason; it is also a political narrative which is polemical in nature, ironic in tone, and attentive to both linguistic and emotional elements that are constitutive of the psychological case she dramatizes. The theatrical language of dramatization is particularly apt for a reason that is at least double: first, because Arendt (1998, 188; see also 175–248) in The Human Condition famously drew on the theater, which she considered “the political art par excellence . . . [for] it is the only art whose sole subject is man in his relationship to others” to articulate her relational account of the vita activa based on “actors” (rather than spectators) that inject plurality in the sphere of political action; second, because Arendt notes at the outset of Eichmann in Jerusalem that the trial had the elements of a theatrical stage. As she puts it: “Whoever planned this auditorium had a theater in mind, complete with orchestra and gallery, with proscenium and stage, and with side doors for the actors’ entrance” (Arendt [1963] 2006, 4). Although the theorist’s focus is on understanding, then, the narrative voice suggests that this “theater” or “spectacle” cannot fail to generate “sensational” (Arendt [1963] 2006, 6) effects that affected the audience, the witnesses, the jury, and, at one remove, in-formed (gave form to) Arendt’s report as well. It does so in terms that are not only conceptual and based on thought, but also dramatic and based on affect. Both sides are animated by mimetic principles.

Restaging the Case: Eichmann’s Mimetic Patho-logy

The opening chapter of Eichmann in Jerusalem titled, “The House of Justice,” narrates a trial that aims to be impartial and objective, yet, given the theatrical setting it entails, it also sets the stage for mimetic principles internal to what Adriana Cavarero (2000) would call “relating narrative.” Drawing on a theatrical register that doubles and frames her theoretical report from the outset, Arendt ([1963] 2006, 8) is, in fact, critically sensitive to what she
calls “the play aspect of the trial” insofar as it reveals a fundamental structural problem that leads to a narrow focus on one protagonist qua “hero,” clear-cut roles, and predictable conclusions. As she puts it:

A trial resembles a play in that both begin and end with the doer, not with the victim. A show trial needs even more urgently than an ordinary trial a limited and well-defined outline of what was done and how it was done. In the center of a trial can only be the one who did—in this respect, he is like the hero in the play—and if he suffers, he must suffer for what he has done, not for what he has caused others to suffer. (Arendt [1963] 2006, 8–9)

What is true for a classical play is redoubled in a sensational show. The mimetic logic of the spectacle is implicit in Arendt’s ironic account and can be schematically summarized as follows: first, the focus on the “doer” qua tragic “hero” who, due to a reversal of fortune, is supposed to recognize his fault relegates the plural voices of the “victims” to the backstage of the show; second, the logic of the play/show is dependent on a well-defined “outline” that, because Aristotle (1987, 37) defined tragedy as a “mimesis of an action,” is structured around a conflict, or agôn, that is complex in the case of classic tragic plays, yet, in the case of a “show” that degenerates into a “comedy of the soul” (Arendt [1963] 2006, 26), reduces this complexity to clear-cut opposition of simple roles (accuser/accused, victim/doer, high/low characters, good/evil); and third the simplistic frame of the show cannot do justice to the complexity of a case that could not be focused on a single figure alone, no matter how guilty this figure was, for, as Arendt makes clear, it implicated eighty million Germans. Adding to the controversy, Arendt ([1963] 2006, 8–7) partially implicated the victims and accusers—most notably the Jewish council or Judenräte—in the horror they set out to denounce, leading “the play aspect of the trial” to collapse “under the weight of the hair-raising atrocities” that blurred the clear-cut oppositions the trial attempted to stage. The scene is thus set in inevitably mimetic terms, not simply in the sense that it realistically reports or re-presents horrific actions that the audience can contemplate from a visual distance. Rather, the scene is mimetic in the classical sense in which the actors that impersonate a role produce contagious effects on the audience generating a dramatic scene. A scene Arendt, at one remove, sets out to narrate—beginning, middle, and end.

In Arendt’s ([1963] 2006, 9) view, taken as a whole, these dramatic elements did not allow for the emergence of an impartial judgment, but rather led the trial to degenerate into a “bloody show”: “what the presiding judge also called, drawing on a Platonic analogy, “a rudderless ship tossed about on the waves.” From the critical distance of the involved observer, Arendt noticed how the trial qua “play” did not live up to an Aristotelian (1987, 41) conception of tragedy as an imitation of an action predicated on rational laws of causality and necessity that, due to their universal character, are “more philosophical and more serious than history”; nor did it lead to the katharsis of tragic emotions like “pity and fear” in terms that Aristotle considers characteristic of complex tragic plays. Rather, the shadow-play generated a sensational outbreak of pathos that, as Plato noted in the Republic, was far removed from the truth, yet generated mimetic effects, nonetheless. In particular, it triggered violent contagious affects, or pathoi, that spread contagiously in the audience, led to a sacrificial expulsion of the doer who considered himself a “scapegoat” (a view Arendt disputed), and above all prevented the members of the trial to think through the new type of crime represented by this singular yet exemplary case. Hence, in Arendt’s view, the trial was reduced to a show, for it failed to evaluate rationally a new type of evil that, once staged, needed to be understood precisely because it went beyond established moral evaluations.

Given this theatrical frame, then, readers who want to supplement Arendt’s theoretical logos on the banality of the evil from the angle of a pathos constitutive of theatrical spectacles are led to wonder about the mimetic strategies of impersonation displayed by the protagonist on the scene. Was Eichmann a shallow bureaucratic cog in the machine fundamentally “unaware” of what he was doing and deprived of the ability “to think”—as Arendt suggests? Or was this image of Eichmann a theatrical mask designed to hide a “fanatical” Nazi who manipulated his personality (from Latin, persona, mask worn in the theater) as a mirror by carefully staging a bureaucratic role—as Stangneth argues? Or perhaps an untidy intermixture of both? Whichever way, what needs to be noted is that although Arendt and Stangneth disagree in theory on their psychic evaluation of the case, they once again agree in practice in drawing from a theatrical, dramatic, and, in this sense, mimetic register to frame the case—an indication that a diagnostic of what the ancients called mimēsis (from Greek, mimos, mime or performance) provides an Ariadne’s thread to find our way into the labyrinth of a case that might go beyond good and evil evaluations.

Let us now deepen, with and contra Arendt, our diagnostic reevaluation of the case from a genealogical perspective attentive the mimetic interplay between conscious impersonation and unconscious identification, mirroring speech (logos) and contagious affect (pathos), which I consider constitutive of the case of Eichmann and, at one remove, of (new) fascist patho-logies more generally. To that end, a linguistic fact in Arendt’s interpretation is worth highlighting, namely, that “inability to think” was,
strictly speaking, not Arendt’s privileged phrase to account for the banality of evil—she spoke of *Gedankenlosigkeit*. As Amos Elon states, Arendt’s long-time friend

Mary McCarthy would soon take [Arendt] to task, and not for the first time vainly, for the use of the word *Gedankenlosigkeit*, which in English didn’t mean what it means in German. In English, “thoughtlessness” means forgetfulness or neglect. “Inability to think,” McCarthy suggested, would have been better. (qtd. in Arendt [1963] 2006, n7, xxiii)11

But is it really better?

German native speakers might object that “*Gedankenlosigkeit*” is not all that equivalent to “inability to think.” If “inability to think” implies the presence of a thinking subject, or *res cogitans*, who lacks the skills to develop a rational dialectical thought, or Socratic dialogue, *Gedankenlosigkeit* questions the very presence of a subject who is in a position to take distance from himself and consciously articulate such dual thoughts. Irrespective of its Kantian or Heideggerian origins,12 what *Gedankenlosigkeit* seems to indicate for Arendt is, in fact, a disconcerting kind of “thoughtlessness” that is not simply a failure to master a rational thought—Eichmann, as Arendt readily noted, could think perfectly within the narrow limits of his bureaucratic role. Rather, it suggests a type of absentmindedness, hypnotic slumber, or half-sleep that indicates an altered state of mind: here the subject is so under the influence, or spell of an other, or an idea, that, paradoxically, it cannot think outside of its own ideology and in this sense cannot develop an independent * logos* that would integrate the perspective of the other. This is why Arendt (2000b, 413) says elsewhere that “unthinking men are like sleepwalkers.”

We can now go further in the diagnostic and say that unthinking men are under the influence of mimetic affects. There is, in fact, nothing rational at the origin of this patho-*logy*, for it is driven by an affect or pathos that, once shared by a majority, disables one’s personal ability to think, or develop a *logos*. This patho-logical state is psychosomatic in nature and is symptomatic of an affective, subliminal, and quasi-hypnotic psychic dispossessment that belongs to what a pre-Freudian tradition of the unconscious called hypnotic “suggestion,” a “mimetic unconscious” (Lawtoo 2013) that has involuntary forms of mimesis as a *via regia*. For our purpose, it suffices to say that “suggestion” was originally defined as the assumption of an idea that belongs to another into the self so fundamentally that the idea is experienced as one’s own and transformed into action. As Hippolyte Bernheim (1957, 137, 5), from the School of Nancy who promoted a psychological theory that had hypnosis as a *via regia* to the psyche, defined it, suggestion entails the “peculiar aptitude for transforming the idea received into an action,” and he specifies that all subjects are to a degree vulnerable to suggestion, including “very intelligent people.”13 There might thus be no fundamental contradiction between thought and affect, at least if we rely on a conception of the unconscious that is animated by both dramatic pathos and rational distance or, as Nietzsche called it, a “pathos of distance.” The mimetic unconscious is, in fact, distinct from the psychoanalytical variant insofar as it does not set up a clear split between consciousness and the unconscious based on a repressive hypothesis to be accessed via the interpretation of dreams. Rather, it is more attentive to degrees of consciousness, is relational rather than monadic in nature, and is based on a mimetic hypothesis that manifests itself in everyday life. Specifically, relational processes like emotional contagion triggered by mimicry, identification, influence, crowd behavior, and involuntary mirroring reflexes that the neurosciences currently group under the rubric of mirror neurons are among its most common, all too common manifestations.14

Arendt does not explicitly identify mimetic symptoms as constitutive of Eichmann’s psychology at the general level of her anti-mimetic thought, or rational logos. As Stangneth (2014, xxii) critically puts it, “like all philosophers she wanted to understand,” and such a will did not lead her to consider sufficiently Eichmann’s theatrical “talent for self-dramatization.” Perhaps Arendt was partially blinded by her faith in understanding. And yet, to be fair to Arendt, she registers the drama of Eichmann’s idea implicitly, at the microlevel of her narrative dramatization of Eichmann’s mimetic pathos via formulations that require an interpretative effort to bring them to the fore. We are in fact told, time and again, that the dramatic register of emotions—be they true or false—is constitutive of Eichmann’s psychology. Thus, Arendt ([1963] 2006, 28) reports that he was in an “elated state,” “in an elated mood, full of enthusiasm about this unique opportunity ‘to pour forth everything . . .’,” driven by “changing moods” and “elating shock phrases” (Arendt [1963] 2006, 55), “in an extraordinary state of elation to think that [he] was exiting from the stage this way” (Arendt [1963] 2006, 47), and so on. And as the story unfolds, it is clear that this emotional state is not restricted to Eichmann alone; far from it. Thus, Arendt ([1963] 2006, 113) relates that, at the Wannsee Conference in 1942, whose aim was the coordination and implementation of the Jewish genocide, “The Final Solution was greeted with extraordinary enthusiasm” by all present.”

The notion of “enthusiasm” can thus not be peeled off from the banality of evil; nor can it be confined to the case of Eichmann alone. We shall go farther in the affective perspective Arendt opened up but did not pursue by saying that there is a path that leads from enthusiasm, to elated states of psychic (dis)possession that render the
case in question but not only, gedankenlos, and thus unable to both think and feel from the perspective of the victim—a complex mimetic path-ology that, to different degrees, might reach into the present.

### Banality of Evil/Mimetic Complexity

We were initially wondering: how does the banality of evil spread, rhizomatically, like a fungus? And why is it endowed with contagious powers that induce Gedankenlosigkeit? Despite Arendt’s supposed devotion to the rational perspective of the “philosopher” (a title she actually rejected), as a political theorist trained in classics, she would have known that “enthusiasm” is a philosophical concept that belongs to the register of affective, dramatic, and thus theatrical mimesis. Plato, for instance, in a dialogue titled Ion, refers to “enthusiasm” to diagnose a reciter of poetry (or rhapsode) specialized in Homer inspired by a strange dramatic power. Ion’s mastery in recitation and impersonation, Plato’s dialogue goes, does not stem from reason (logos) or know-how (teche). Instead, he is characterized by a mimetic state of being en-theos, in the god, that is, possessed by a god and dispossessed of its own rational thought. He is divinely inspired. This (dis)possession, in turn, triggers an altered state of mind that is hypnotic, intoxicating, and highly contagious. As Plato (1961, 221:536a) puts it, under the mask of Socrates engaged in dialectical thinking, or dia-logos, it generates a form of mimetic communication he compares to magnetism in which a magnetic stone “imparts to the rings a force enabling them to do the same thing as the stone.” Thus, this magnetic force spreads through different vertical “rings,” from Apollo to the Muses to the poet and rhapsode generating an enthusiastic outbreak of (dis)possession in the public, which Plato (1961, 220:534a) compares to the Dionysian revelers or “worshipping Coryabantes” who are “not in their senses (see also Lawtoo 2013, 58-65).”

Although Arendt does not acknowledge such a genealogy explicitly, there is nonetheless a magnetic, hypnotic, or, as Plato will also say, mimetic path that leads from “enthusiasm,” to a state of “elation” and enthusiastic dispossession that renders Eichmann gedankenlos and thus unable to think his own thoughts—perhaps because he is already possessed by the thoughts of another. Interestingly, this is also the diagnostic that emerges from Stangneth’s account of the psychic state in which Eichmann wrote the Argentina Papers. Inferring his emotional state from the manuscripts she consulted, Stangneth (2014, xix) paints the following dramatic picture of Eichmann: he “was capable of throwing books against the wall and tearing them to pieces, filling them with aggressive marginalia, insults, and invectives, and covering mountains of paper with commentaries, writing like a man possessed” (emphasis added). Eichmann’s notorious Sassen Interviews in Argentina also corroborate this point. Addressing “Comrade Sassen”—a Dutch-German journalist and former Nazi collaborator—and a large group of friends assembled for the occasion, Eichmann recites what Stangneth calls an “untimely peroration,” imbued with dramatic pathos: “I say this. I—and I tell you this as a conclusion to our matters—I, the ‘cautions bureaucrat’ that was me, yes indeed.” But then he specifies, “the ‘cautions bureaucrat’ was attended by a . . . a fanatic warrior fighting for the freedom of my blood . . . led by inspiration [inspirierend geleitet]”—that is, inspired not by a god, but by the “people” [Volk] (Eichmann, qtd. in Stangneth 2014, 303; trans. modified). Eichmann considers this dramatic conclusion as an “address” to the future, “for study of some kind” (Stangneth 2014, 304). Indeed, his case has been studied. What had so far not been diagnosed is that submission to the Nazi völkisch idea generated an irrational pathos that not only informed Eichmann’s fanatical ideology as he put it on paper; it also took mimetic possession of his ego, generating a “ghostly” figure that is a phantom of the ego ready to sacrifice millions of Jews in real life.

A lot of symptoms in Arendt’s ([1963] 2006, 50) report support the mimetic hypothesis that Eichmann embodies an “inspired” case so much under the influence of another that he is indeed possessed, and thus dispossessed of a proper self: from the clichés Eichmann hypnotically repeats from the beginning of the trial whenever he hears words like “S.S.,” or “career,” or “Himmler” which “triggered in him a mechanism that had become completely unalterable” to his chameleon-like “personality change” (Arendt, [1963] 2006, 65) in which his Nazi role becomes so constitutive of his personality that a witness reported he “did not know whether [he] was meeting the same man. So terrible was the change . . .” (Arendt, [1963] 2006, 64); from his docile acceptance of the most unspeakable horror due to the fact that “he could see no one, no one at all, who actually was against the Final Solution” (Arendt, [1963] 2006, 116) to his very last words before the execution in which the enthusiastic state of “elation” Arendt staged at the beginning of the trial show is re-enacted, one last time, which the enthusiastic state of “elation” Arendt staged at the beginning of the trial show is re-enacted, one last time, in a mimetic confusion of identity with others I shall return to at the end—from all these symptoms, it is clear that the shadow of affective mimesis was cast on Eichmann’s ego.

And yet, the decisive shortcut to the path that reveals the mimetic, contagious, and rhizomatic foundations of the banality of evil “fungus” stems from the Wannsee Conference reported in the middle, which marks a radical transformation in both Eichmann’s career and personality. Arendt ([1963] 2006, 114) reports it in a free indirect speech that mixes her detached third-person diegetic narrative voice with Eichmann’s mimetic speech imbued with pathos:
Now he could see with his own eyes and hear with his own ears that not only Hitler, nor only Heydrich or the “sphinx” Mueller, not just the S. S. or the Party, but the élite of the good old Civil Service were vying and fighting with each other for the honor of taking the lead in these “bloody” matters. “At that moment, I sensed a kind of Pontius Pilate feeling, for I felt free of all guilt.” Who was he to judge? Who was he “to have [his] own thoughts in this matter?” (emphasis added)

Sensing, feeling, thoughts. Notice the overturning of perspective: the hierarchy Arendt had set up in theory is now overhauled in her narrative practice. If Eichmann cannot have personal thoughts, cannot think for himself, and is *gedankenlos* when it comes to the ethical effects of “his” idea once set in practice, it is because he is up to the neck in mimetic affects! He is magnetically, hypnotically, mimetically chained to Nazi models that—from the *Führer* to the Nazi officials to the “élite of the Civil Service”—are eager to implement the Final Solution with much “enthusiasm.” As Nietzsche recognized in *The Birth of Tragedy*, such enthusiasm is contagious, disrupts the boundaries of individuation, and reveals a Dionysian flow of mimetic communication that takes possession of the subject, rendering it *en-theos*, elated, uncapable of sensing, feeling, for I felt free of all guilt.” Thus reframed, we cannot say that it was individual “thoughtlessness” that was at the origin of the banality of evil. On the contrary, it is a *shared mimetic pathos* that induced the presumptive “lack of thought,” or better hypnotic slumber, constitutive of the banality of evil. In fact, it is only because an affective identification with fascist models leads to a mimetic dispossession of the ego, or enthusiasm, that a *Gedankenlosigkeit*, depriving the ego of his own thoughts and—Eichmann crucially adds—feelings, ensues, leading him to “feel free of all guilt.” Thus, the shadow of mimesis was cast on Eichmann’s ego turning it into a phantom of other egos: the banality of evil is born out of this complex mimetic *patho-logos*.

And yet, in such a complex case, we should be careful not to offer unilateral evaluations. If a Nazi *patho-logos* took possession of Eichmann’s ego as of 1942, this does not mean that at the trial in 1961 he was unable to use the tools of refined reason, or *patho-logos* to stage a performance at the trial in view of saving his life. On the contrary, since the birth of dramatic theory, actors have been known to oscillate, pendulum-like, from (Dionysian) states of enthusiastic dispossession in which a role is impersonated unconsciously to more conscious forms of dramatization in which the actor manipulates the effects of the audience via identification with an (Apollonian) image or idea based on visual mimesis. This is already at play in the Socratic dialogue *Ion*, a mimetic *dia-logos* that may aspire to lead from duality to oneness in Plato’s idealist theory, yet leaves open contradictory possibilities in Ion’s dramatic practice. In fact, although this dialogue inaugurates the view of the inspired and dispossessed artist qua actor who impersonates a role with the enthusiasm pathos we have considered, it also stages, at the same time—in an aporia “Socrates” is wise *not* to resolve—a much more self-aware, mimetic figure who consciously plays a role to manipulate the audience’s emotions from a mirroring distance. Thus, the following dramatic dialogue ensues between Socrates and Ion:

Socrates: Now then, are you aware that you produce the same effects in most of the spectators too?
The mimetic complexity I restaged cannot be reduced to an inability to think, as Arendt suggested; nor can it be restricted to a virtuoso play of roles, as Stangneth indicates. It is rather based on a dynamic interplay between dramatic thoughts and affects, pathos and logos, constitutive of the patho-logy that animates the banality of evil. That Eichmann’s so-called mirroring performance continued to be in touch with the enthusiastic mimetic affects that drove him throughout his life is confirmed, one last time, by the way Eichmann exited the stage as he faced his execution. Having diagnosed the powers of mimesis at play at the beginning and the middle of this theatrical trial, I turn to this last scene, in guise of conclusion.

**Coda: Exiting the Stage**

Insufficiently attentive to the powers of affective mimesis in her political theory, Arendt nonetheless used mimetic principles to structure her account of the trial in her narrative practice. She ends her account by dramatizing the scene of Eichmann’s execution in detail, specifying that “this horrible gift for consoling himself with clichés did not leave him in the hour of his death” (Arendt [1963] 2006, 55). The scene is imbued with both tragic pathos and ironic distance constitutive of the two sides of the complexity of mimesis:

Adolf Eichmann went to the gallows with great dignity. He had asked for a bottle of red wine and had drunk half of it. He refused the help of the Protestant minister, the Reverend William Hull, who offered to read the Bible with him: he had only two more hours to live, and therefore no “time to waste.” . . . He was in complete command of himself, nay ye more: he was completely himself. (Arendt [1963] 2006, 252)

How can a subject whose defining characteristic is to have a chameleon personality that designates no original self, but only a mask or role, be “completely himself”? Wouldn’t it entail that Eichmann is most himself when he is completely dispossessed of selfhood, so mimetically confused with others that there is, strictly speaking, no self to speak of? This ironic possibility is indeed the one Arendt pursues as she continues,

Nothing could have demonstrated this more convincingly than the grotesque silliness of his last words. He began by stating emphatically that he was a Gottgläubiger, to express in common Nazi fashion that he was no Christian and did not believe in life after death. He then proceeded: “After a short while, gentlemen, we shall all meet again. Such is the fate of all men. Long live Germany, long live Argentina, long live Austria. I shall not forget them.” In the face of death, he had found the cliché used in funeral oratory. Under the gallows, his memory played him the last trick; he was “elated” and he forgot that it was his own funeral. (Arendt [1963] 2006, 252)

An enthusiastic state of “elation” haunts the case of Eichmann, beginning, middle, and end, providing him with a tragi-comic ending in which it is not clear who is the subject hanged. It is not that Eichmann “forgot” he was at his own funeral—for he was already other. Arendt’s narrative framing, in fact, indicates that, in the face of the real pathos of death, Eichmann, who after half a bottle of wine has regained the state of “elation” he
displayed at the beginning of the trial show, finds in the phrase used in “funeral oratory” the last cliché that renders him, quite literally, en-theos, possessed by another and dispossessed by his proper thoughts. And this mimetic thoughtlessness that leads him to be “completely himself” while being in the position of someone other sums up the final lesson of the banality of evil. As Arendt ([1963] 2006, 252) puts it, “It was as though in those last minutes he was summing up the lesson that this long course in human wickedness had taught us—the lesson of the fearsome, word-and-thought-defying banality of evil.”

This lesson, as we indicated, is symptomatic of a Gedankenlosigkeit that troubles not only moral conscience, but the very ethical foundations of consciousness. What we have seen is that this thought-defying state cannot be satisfactorily explained in terms of a “faulty memory” or an “inability to think”—for purely rational thought is precisely defied when confronted with this case; nor is it the sole effect of a virtuoso “masquerade” that sets up a mirror to what the audience feels—for there is no audience to speak of at the end. Rather, the funerary cliché Eichmann falls back on, and the mimetic confusion it entails, mirrors, in an embodied and unconscious way, the mimetic patho-logy that has been at play throughout the entire trial and that we finally unmasked.

That a mimetic pathos triggers this state of elated dispossessions and the banal reenactment of the clichés it entails is clear. Amplified by wine and by the imminence of death, the complexity of mimesis generates a psychosomatic automatism that had been constitutive of Eichmann’s personality all along. It could be summarized as follows: first, the cliché allows Eichmann to play a role in which the script is given in advance and is part of the “image” he may want to project, if not for others, at least for himself—what Stangneth calls “masquerade”; second, the recitation has a ritual function that allows him to impersonate via a first-person direct speech (mimesis) a phrase that he recalls perfectly due to multiple recitals and repetitions, is comforting due to its shared, communal nature, and does not require any individual thought but an affective participation instead; and third it is this mimetic speech that leads him to “exit the stage,” so to speak, by identifying his position with the dead Nazi others of the past, thereby approximating that position of “being himself,” while being tied to a mythic chain of others. Thus, while being “completely himself,” he returns to the position of ghost, shadow, or a phantom he had been from the beginning of the trial—unconscious that his mimetic, all too mimetic ego is already vanished.

In the end, restaging the Case of Eichmann reveals the complexity of mimesis at play in the banality of evil. It also warns us that the phantom of evil can always potentially reappear under different masks, spreading contagiously, like a fungus whose rhizomes reach into the present. Arendt did not sufficiently stress the mimetic powers at play in the banality of evil, leaving its pathos in the backstage of her attempt to understand Eichmann. She lacked a mimetic theory to do justice to Eichmann’s mimetic patho-logy. And yet, she recognized that Eichmann’s “thoughtlessness,” while extreme, should not be confined to his case alone and should be studied closely for it threatens to spread contagiously via new technologies of communication. As she puts it in The Human Condition, we risk becoming “thoughtless creatures at the mercy of every gadget which is technically possible, no matter how murderous it is” (Arendt 1998, 3). Hence, the urgency to consider the unconscious powers of mimesis reloaded via new digital media to influence subjects from bodies to minds, affects to thoughts, pathos to logos—and vice versa—so that we can be, not immune, but at least on guard against the spread of the evil patho-logies constitutive of both old and (new) fascism.

But mimesis itself, I add in guise of conclusion, goes beyond good and evil. If it generates evil pathologies that are part of the problem, mimesis can also affirm pathologies that open up a plurality of democratic solutions, which can generate mimetic transformations for the better. Interestingly, despite her anti-mimetic focus on individual “uniqueness,” Arendt (1998, 181) eventually came to appreciate the powers of mimesis as she realized that the logos of truth cannot be dissociated from mimetic practices. As she puts it in a later essay, “truth can become ‘practical’ and inspire action without violating the rules of the political realms only when it manages to become manifest in the guise of an example” (Arendt 2000c, 561). And what is an example if not a mimetic model whose powers are first and foremost affective, yet can generate thoughts nonetheless?

After a long struggle with a complex case under the spell of evil, Arendt came to the realization that mimesis can inspire good as well, and that mimetic phantoms can be countered via mimetic antidotes. Let us thus conclude her agonistic confrontation with Eichmann with the following insight: “examples teach or persuade by inspiration, so that whenever we try to perform a deed of courage or of goodness it is as though we imitate someone else” (Arendt 2000c, 561). On this affirmative, perhaps “banal,” but certainly mimetic, all too mimetic note, I will draw this complex case to an end.

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Notes
1. See Connolly (2017a), Snyder (2018), Stanley (2018), and Albright (2018).
2. See https://uploads.guim.co.uk/2018/06/19/TheList.pdf (accessed December 2019).
3. As William Connolly (1997, 15) notes, “Arendt’s thought involved a ‘depreciation of the body in ethics and politics’.” On Connolly, mimesis and (new) fascist politics see also Lawtoo (2019b). As we will see, this depreciation negatively affected her evaluation of Eichmann.
4. For a representative sample see Bergen (1998), Mack (2009, 35–60), Villa (1999, 39–60), Berkowitz, Katz, and Keenan (2010, 131–160), Bernstein (1996, 137–178), Feldman (2001), and Benhabib (1996).
5. How much of Eichmann’s trial Arendt witnessed has been a subject of debate. According to David Cesariani (2007, 346), she “only saw Eichmann in action for four days.” A limited exposure to Eichmann’s oral testimony (substituted by a written representation) might partially account for Arendt’s limited insights into his mimetic impersonation.
6. See Gebauer and Wulf (1995) and the ERC-funded project Homo Mimeticus (www.homomimeticus.eu).
7. As Arendt (2000b, 408) puts it in The Life of the Mind, “It is this duality of myself with myself that makes thinking a true activity, in which I am both the one who asks and the one who answers.”
8. On Arendt’s reliance on Kant’s aesthetic notion of the “imagination” to account for political judgment, see Zerilli (2005). I consider this (Kantian) view noble but hopelessly idealistic—hence the need for an immanent (Nietzschean) supplement.
9. In The Origins of Totalitarianism, Arendt ([1951] 1976, 183) had considered Heart of Darkness as “the most illuminating work on actual race experience in Africa.” She must thus have sensed that the “idea” that drives the case of Eichmann to the “unspeakable horror” of the Holocaust is not unlike the “idea” that drives Kurtz to the “unspeakable horror” internal to Heart of Darkness. Both cases of genocidal racism are, in fact, based on what Conrad (2010, 47, 192) calls “not a sentimental pretense, but an idea, and an unselfish belief in the idea—something you can set up, and bow down before, and offer a sacrifice to . . .” For diagnostics of mimetic pathologies in Heart of Darkness that prefigure Nazi horrors, see Lawtoo (2010) and Cavarero (2016).
10. For an account of Arendt attentive to “storytelling as a way of combating the violence theory does to human experience” and to the theater as a “guide in her effort to understand what meaningful action might be like,” see Swift (2009, 38, 41; see also 74–85).
11. See Supplementary Material.
12. See Supplementary Material.
13. For a recent rehabilitation of “suggestion” in social theory, see also Borch (2019).
14. My mimetic theory is attentive to mimesis in both its good and evil manifestations. On good mimesis, see also Lawtoo (2013, 260–305; 2017).
15. For an emerging mimetic turn in contemporary political theory that emphasizes pluralist forms of democratic mimesis, see Connolly (2017), Lawtoo (2019b), Bennett (2020), Schoolman (2020), and Cavarero (2019).

Supplemental Material
Supplemental materials for this article are available with the manuscript on the Political Research Quarterly (PRQ) website.

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