

# "The Banality of Evil" and Modern Education

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**Abstract.** The American political theorist Hannah Arendt, in her book "Eichmann in Jerusalem," introduced the concept of "the banality of evil." This concept can be related to the "banality of evil" present in modern education, where educators fully assimilate themselves into the authority and system of education, complying with the arrangements of the system. This paper will discuss the current state of "the banality of evil" in modern education from three aspects: non-thinking, non-action, and blind obedience with mental rigidity, and propose ways to resolve this issue.

**Keywords:** The banality of evil, modern education, non-thinking, non-action, blind obedience, Mental Rigidity.

## 1. The Meaning of "The Banality of Evil"

On April 11, 1961, the Israeli government conducted a trial against Adolf Eichmann, who had been in hiding in Jerusalem for 18 years and was a principal executor of the "Final Solution" during the Holocaust. He was indicted on fifteen counts, including crimes against the Jewish people, crimes against humanity, and war crimes during the Nazi regime, particularly during World War II. Eichmann's response to each charge was: "I do not admit this charge." Eichmann firmly believed that as a citizen, his actions were in accordance with the laws of the state at the time; as a soldier, he was merely following and executing the orders given by the military.

Hannah Arendt, a Jewish-American political theorist, covered the trial in its entirety and used it as the basis for her book "Eichmann in Jerusalem," in which she introduced the concept of "the banality of evil." She argued that there are two types of evil: one is the "radical evil" of totalitarian rulers themselves; the other is the "banality of evil" participated in by those ruled. In her view, the embodiment of evil is not necessarily a raging demon but could also be ordinary, common people. "The banality of evil" refers to the crime committed without thought, blindly obeying under the pretext of "state action" or "following orders" within an ideological machine.

Arendt believed that Eichmann's crimes did not stem from his subjective intent and personal will but from the forced obedience to the powerful authority of a totalitarian society. Under the long-term totalitarian rule and high-pressure policies of the Nazi government, citizens were in a state of fear and could only adopt an indifferent and permissive attitude towards the evil around them, blindly following the state's orders. Therefore, she argued that anyone in the same situation as Eichmann would have made the same choice. Fundamentally, the root cause of "the banality of evil" lies in the social structure and systemic policies themselves. A singular totalitarian society and high-pressure systemic policies cause members of society to lose their ability to make subjective judgments, blindly follow under the influence of power, and unconsciously commit the crime of "the banality of evil." However, this does not excuse the heinous crimes committed by Eichmann. He saw his job, which involved the slaughter of countless innocent lives, as "just a job," and its moral destructiveness is profound.

## 2. The Current State of "The Banality of Evil" in Modern Education

The result of "the banality of evil" is that ordinary people lose their proper judgment of the surrounding world, fully assimilate themselves into the system, blindly obey its directives, and acquiesce to all unreasonable behaviors within the system. The "banality of evil" in modern education primarily manifests as educators' non-thinking, non-action, blind obedience, and mental rigidity.

Compared to the evil of the system, this participation in obvious evil without resistance is even more egregious.

### **2.1. Non-thinking in Modern Education**

The primary manifestation of "the banality of evil" in modern education is that educators do not think about educational actions and phenomena, only act according to the so-called "requirements," blindly pursue teaching efficiency, and lose the quality of diligent thinking. "Non-thinking" is the core of "the banality of evil" and also the root of other forms of it. The non-thinking of teachers, on one hand, is unwilling to spend time and energy considering whether the educational instructions from superiors and their own educational actions contribute to students' learning and development, and only execute teaching tasks without thinking; on the other hand, even if they do think, they mostly consider how to improve teaching efficiency and students' grades, and rarely ponder the purpose and meaning of education, and how to cultivate students into well-rounded individuals.

Firstly, educators do not consider their professional value orientation. True education requires teachers to impart knowledge to students and also teach them how to learn and encourage them to explore the value of knowledge. Mediocre modern teachers only explain knowledge and do not guide students to explore it or encourage them to question it, fearing that students will ask questions beyond their consideration. If a student asks "why," the teacher will unthinkingly say: "This is stipulated in the book," and the quality of students' curiosity is slowly stifled.

Secondly, educators do not consider whether the teaching methods conform to the laws of students' physical and mental development and whether they can meet students' real development needs. For example, some teachers make students memorize large passages they cannot yet understand and use the "sea of questions" tactic to make students do a large number of problems, which do not match the level of students' physical and mental development. Some teachers also hold seemingly "exquisite" activities to cope with school inspections, but the themes and activities chosen are not what students are truly interested in and need. The most prominent and common issue in modern Chinese education is the use of the "sea of questions" tactic to improve students' scores. Students spend a lot of time and energy on problems, with no time for their interests or even exercise, leading to poor physical quality. Educators never reflect on the adverse effects of this approach on students, only recognizing the importance of scores in a highly competitive environment and using scores as the sole measure of student development.

In addition, the teaching syllabus dictates the teaching plan and course content, and teachers often do not consider whether they are truly suitable for students, nor do they adjust the teaching plan or change the course content based on their own experience and teaching characteristics, only teaching according to traditional practices. Even if some educators actively consider the current educational situation, they are mostly influenced by mainstream voices, and their own thinking melts into the larger environment.

Therefore, educators who never think and reflect, and only obey, are like Eichmann, who never considered whether the massacre of Jews was morally ethical, and only followed orders. They are all creators of "the banality of evil."

### **2.2. Non-action in Modern Education**

The second manifestation of "the banality of evil" in modern education is that educators, aware of unreasonable educational phenomena, adopt a negative attitude and do not make changes, that is, "non-action." Non-action is based on reflection, but the results of reflection are often unsatisfactory, making it a deeper issue than "non-thinking."

Teachers' non-action takes various forms, divided into non-action before, during, and after teaching. Non-action before teaching is evident in insufficient lesson preparation and unfamiliarity with the content of materials; non-action during teaching is evident in avoiding classroom interactions, reluctance to demonstrate and explain, etc.; non-action after teaching is evident in teachers not correcting their own homework, not reflecting on, or improving problems that arise in teaching, etc.

Non-action can also be divided into voluntary and involuntary non-action. Voluntary non-action is evident when teachers, to speed up the class's teaching progress and complete the teaching plan, deliberately neglect slow learners. However, slow learners also have the basic right to learn and should be treated equally by teachers, not ignored. Teachers often do not realize the seriousness of the "banality of evil" caused by neglecting slow learners, and many slow learners develop self-abandonment due to the unfair treatment of teachers, and even severe depression tendencies. Involuntary non-action is evident when teachers are indignant about many practices that violate educational ideals and students' physical and mental development laws but feel powerless to resist due to their small influence and pressure from the system, schools, parents, etc.

According to the content of non-action, it can be divided into non-action in moral education, intellectual education, physical education, aesthetic education, and labor education. Modern teachers overly focus on students' intellectual development and are relatively inactive in other areas, leading to students who are not well-rounded talents, which is a form of "the banality of evil." Non-action in moral education is evident when teachers do not pay attention to their words and deeds and their subtle influence on students, not setting a good example. The teaching syllabus requires integrating moral education into classroom teaching, but some teachers treat it as a task, only inserting relevant content into their slides or mentioning it briefly in class, without truly educating students morally. Moral education is at the core of the five aspects of education; students lacking moral education may develop selfish, uncooperative, and irresponsible qualities. Non-action in physical and aesthetic education is evident when main subject teachers occupy physical education and art classes, or when schools do not offer related courses. Students lacking physical education have poor physical quality, and "health is the capital of revolution"; students lacking aesthetic education may find it difficult to develop an intrinsic pursuit of beauty. In terms of labor education, the inaction is evident in teachers' failure to cultivate students' practical skills, leaving them unable to solve real-life problems.

### **2.3. Blind Obedience and Mental Rigidity in Modern Education**

Facing a powerful authority system, teachers inevitably focus their daily work on how to obey superiors' orders and achieve the targets set by them. Under such an authoritative system, teachers can easily succumb to blind obedience, gradually losing their independent thinking and forming a rigid mindset, ultimately leading to "the banality of evil."

In recent years, with the advancement of technology and the increase in demand for online teaching, new teaching formats such as MOOCs, micro-courses, and flipped classrooms have emerged. Teachers often do not consider whether these new teaching methods are beneficial to students' learning or suitable for the characteristics of the subjects they teach, and blindly follow trends. When faced with the teaching methods of renowned teachers, many teachers only see the surface and blindly follow the steps and methods of these teachers, without truly understanding the uniqueness of their teaching design and the educational philosophy behind it. Therefore, in the process of educational reform, many educators use advanced teaching technologies and imitate classes that are widely accepted with good teaching effect, mistakenly believing they are innovating, when in reality they are just blindly following the crowd, unconsciously contributing to "the banality of evil."

During the preparation and delivery of lessons, due to the stipulations of the teaching syllabus and teachers' over-reliance on teaching guides, teachers become mere reciters of the script, with teaching content becoming rigid and inflexible. The focus of teaching is gradually becoming rigid, with teachers often concentrating on teaching examination points and problem-solving skills, weakening the cultivation of students' exploration and questioning of knowledge. Knowledge becomes an absolute truth that only needs to be memorized. Teachers also guide students' thinking towards "standard answers," causing students' thinking to become rigid as well, forming a mindset that converges on reference answers. Even if students have innovative ideas, they are unwilling to express them, and creative thinking naturally does not develop. At the end of the class, teachers usually ask students, "Have you understood? Are there any students who still don't understand?" This is also a

manifestation of mental rigidity; such questioning is naturally ineffective. Students, out of fear of teachers, rarely answer "I didn't understand" or "I don't know."

### **3. How to Resolve "The Banality of Evil" in Modern Education**

To resolve the dilemma of "the banality of evil" in modern education, joint efforts from all sectors of society are required, and educators must think, act, not blindly follow, and avoid mental rigidity.

#### **3.1. Resolving the Current State of Non-thinking in Modern Education.**

Being good at thinking and having the ability to reflect are prerequisites for high-quality teachers. Only through the process of thinking can educators continuously improve their teaching level and more clearly recognize the nobility of the teaching profession and the greatness of the educational cause. When every educator is not good at thinking and reflecting, they become the creators of "the banality of evil," and the development of the modern educational cause will fall into difficulty.

In response to this, educational departments should establish platforms for teachers to communicate with each other and set up reward mechanisms for teachers' sharing, vigorously advocating that teachers approach educational life with a reflective attitude. Schools should fully recognize the importance of reflection for teachers and teaching, and through regular meetings, encourage teachers to report their thoughts, fostering a quality of diligent thinking. Teachers can learn from each other, thereby improving the quality of their thinking.

Thinking also requires the efforts of teachers themselves. Teachers need to frequently consider the value of their profession, take the cultivation of well-rounded individuals as the fundamental starting point of teaching activities, and actively engage in the educational cause. Teachers should always maintain a state of love for thinking and the habit of it, often reflecting on and improving their own teaching shortcomings. Teachers can ask themselves questions at any time and place, such as, "Is the current teaching method suitable for teaching this knowledge point?" or "What kind of teaching organization form should be used to arouse students' enthusiasm?" Gradually, by questioning, they can cultivate their good habit of being good at thinking.

#### **3.2. Resolving the Current State of Non-action in Modern Education.**

On the basis of thinking, teachers should think thrice before acting, strive to correct their own non-action, and actively invest time and energy to produce more positive and effective educational actions.

In response to the phenomenon of non-action in classroom teaching, teachers must understand the principle of educating others before educating oneself, consciously and actively engage in the era of new curriculum standards, and continuously adjust their teaching plans. Teachers should transform the teaching methods and guiding principles in the curriculum standards into interactions and communications with students, demonstrate and operate with their hands in teaching practice, guide students to master methods in a timely manner, and make the classroom "come alive."

In response to the current situation where some teachers do not pay attention to slow learners and harm their equal right to education, educational resource allocation should be tilted towards them, and the state should enact relevant educational laws and regulations to ensure the equal right to education for every student. Obviously, the non-action of some teachers has risen to the level of educational equity, which requires teachers to continuously improve their cognitive abilities, establish a correct view of fairness, face the existence of differences among students, give more care to slow learners, and help them find possibilities for development.

In response to the non-action of teachers in moral education, physical education, aesthetic education, and labor education, teachers should clarify that cultivating well-rounded individuals in the new era is the core concept of education, and continuously update their educational philosophy. In the teaching process, teachers should lead by example, imbue students' minds with moral concepts in a gentle way, and must not inculcate moral ideas and neglect the value of moral education. Schools should respond to the call to cultivate comprehensive talents, add courses in physical education, art,

and labor education, include them in the standards for assessing students' comprehensive quality, and supervise the implementation of each class to prevent main subject teachers from occupying classes.

In modern Chinese education, the most prominent problem is that of exam-oriented education, which is a situation that teachers cannot change by their own strength. Educational departments should closely connect with the characteristics of the times and social needs, vigorously explore and reform the curriculum structure, focus on cultivating students' creativity and practical abilities. Of course, completely weakening scores is also unfeasible, as it ignores the survival pressure children will face in the future and loses educational equity. Therefore, educational departments should consider various aspects, explore teaching models and standards for assessing students that truly suit student development, effectively reduce the burden on students, and allow students to receive education in happiness.

### **3.3. Resolving the Current State of Blind Obedience and Mental Rigidity in Modern Education.**

As important channels for the transmission of social culture, schools often have a great dependency on traditional conventions, and individuals within them are inevitably affected. Teachers, as individuals, become blindly obedient and mentally rigid under the pull of institutional conventions, unknowingly becoming accomplices to "the banality of evil."

To avoid becoming an accomplice to "the banality of evil," teachers need to awaken themselves, extricate themselves from institutional conventions, and gradually form independent and complete personalities. Teachers should establish the concept of lifelong learning, persist in learning new theories and knowledge, adapt to the needs of the times, and prevent mental rigidity. Teachers should regard the teaching syllabus as a guiding principle for teaching, not the only principle, and should not overly rely on teaching guides or blindly follow others' teaching methods. Instead, they should combine their teaching characteristics to form their unique teaching methods. In the teaching process, teachers should also focus closely on students, truly implement the student-centered educational philosophy, encourage students to think more when they have a desire to learn, explore with students, and not confine students' thinking with "the textbook stipulates this" and the so-called "standard answers."

To prevent educators from blindly obeying and becoming mentally rigid, various institutional safeguards should be provided. While the education system pays attention to teachers' legal rights, it should also pay attention to teachers' natural rights, include natural rights in institutional safeguards, and make teachers truly human, not just appendages of the system. Educational departments should simplify administration and delegate power, giving schools more autonomy and allowing teachers to play the role of masters, promoting their independent thinking and innovation.

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