

Hannah Arendt

By Pamela Katz and Margarethe von Trotta



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Commentary on *Hannah Arendt*

Someone from the Scientific Committee of the Brazilian Society of Clinical Oncology Annual Meeting invited me to give a lecture. The meeting organizers included me in a panel about evidence-based oncology and assigned me a challenging topic: Humanizing the Evidence. The panel coordinator explained he had read some of my articles about humanizing medicine and “all that movie stuff you use in your teaching. We want to bring up the *human* side of medicine, in the midst of the evidence.”

I have used cinema in medical education for a long time, not just to show the right way of doctoring but, primarily, to push learners to reflect.^{1,2} Fostering reflection, that’s the goal. And for this I show movie clips and provide comments while the movie is going on, always looking at the audience, at students’ faces, so I can appraise if they are following my logic. The challenge for the oncology meeting was to choose the right scenes and fit them in the short time the panel allowed me.

I decided to use *Hannah Arendt*. I had seen the movie some weeks before. Her lecture about her report (“Eichmann in Jerusalem”³) was powerful. And a six-minute clip spoke for itself.

I wrote no defense of Eichmann, but I did try to reconcile the shocking mediocrity of the man with his staggering deeds. [...] Since Socrates and Plato we usually call thinking to be engaged in that silent dialogue between me and myself. In refusing to be a person Eichmann utterly surrendered that single most defining human quality, that of being able to think. And consequently he was no longer capable of making moral judgments. This inability to think created the possibility for many ordinary men to commit evil deeds on a gigantic scale, the like of which one had never seen before. It’s true I have considered these questions in a philosophical way. The manifestation of the wind of thought is not knowledge, but the ability to tell right from wrong, beautiful from ugly. And I hope that

thinking gives people the strength to prevent catastrophes in these rare moments when the chips are down.

This clip epitomized the essential idea I wanted to convey: The process through which people—physicians included—sometimes give up their whole responsibility. We physicians usually don’t mistreat patients because we are malicious or because we don’t care about them. Rather, we just keep working, get into the scientific process, neglect details, ignore the patient’s world and feelings because we are too busy looking for the right evidence, finding the best medication. We are not wicked people; we just stop thinking.

The trouble with a Nazi criminal like Eichmann was that he insisted on renouncing all personal qualities, as if there was nobody left to be either punished or forgiven. He protested time and again, contrary to the Prosecution’s assertions, that he had never done anything out of his own initiative, that he had no intentions whatsoever, good or bad, that he had only obeyed orders.

As contemporary physicians, we follow protocols and guidelines. We make ourselves sure about the quality of care we deliver, according to the most up-to-date procedures. For sure, we obey orders. Do we allow room in this scientific endeavor to hear each patient’s voice? Do we realize we are dealing with human beings?

The greatest evil in the world is the evil committed by nobodies. Evil committed by men without motive, without convictions, without wicked hearts or demonic wills, by human beings who refuse to be persons. And it is this phenomenon that I have called the “banality of evil.”

Designating people monsters because of their behavior is easy for us. We are putting ourselves apart, and we do not risk becoming like them. They are

another type of being; they belong to a different species that is nothing like us regular people. Admitting that they *are* similar creatures, corrupted by their willingness to give up reflection, is an acknowledgment that the curse could affect us, that we are in danger.

After my lecture, the panel coordinator thanked me and recommended the film *Hannah Arendt* to the audience: “It brings up some important issues in ethics. Not just for politicians, but for doctors. Yes, we need to reflect on what we are doing.”

I’ve used clips from *Hannah Arendt* at two other conferences. High impact, deep silence in the dark auditorium, both of them. And every time I come to see it again, even alone, the message is clear: to never give up reflection, because reflection is the core of true doctoring, what really matters to our patients. And to never give in to mediocrity, because it is mediocrity that leads to the banality of evil.

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- 2 Blasco PG. Review of Henri Colt, Silvia Quadrelli, and Lester Friedman, eds. *The Picture of Health: Medical Ethics and the Movies: Getting Familiar with the Cinema Education Methodology*. *Am J Bioeth*. 2011;11:39–41.
- 3 Arendt H. *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil*. New York, NY: Viking Press; 1963.

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