Clichés and (Other) Crimes Against Humanity

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"Adolf Eichmann went to the gallows with great dignity."[1] So writes Hannah Arendt in her conclusion to *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, famous for its controversial claim about the "fearsome, word-and-thought-defying *banality of evil*."[2] That Arendt could note any dignity in someone found guilty on fifteen counts of crimes against both the Jewish people and humanity speaks to the radically strange situation on which she reports. While Arendt is careful not to assert a universal theory about evil, her study of Eichmann's penchant for clichés leads her to raise concerns about the "strange interdependence of thoughtlessness and evil."[3] The result of this character study is ultimately a warning that reliance on stock phrases renders judgment unnecessary and is thus politically and morally dangerous. Given the grotesque nature of Arendt's subject, Oded Zipory's "Can Education Be Rid of Clichés?," which brings Arendt's work to educational discourse, is both bold and thought-provoking.

Zipory takes Arendt's warning seriously, exploring the rise and use of clichés within modernity and their manifestation in contemporary educational discourse. His account challenges ordinary conceptions of the cliché as simply empty, ineffective speech, arguing that such "automatization of speech" functions to regulate emotional responses and short circuit thought and conversation.[4] A cliché guarantees that "nothing of substance will be added to the conversation, least of all, reflection, disagreement, critique or judgment."[5] While he engages meaningfully several theorists of the cliché, Zipory relies significantly on Arendt's work to highlight the way the cliché offers its speaker cognitive and emotional comfort and thus obstructs the possibility of genuine moral reflection.

Zipory extends this notion of the cliché's dangerousness to the field of education, suggesting that education is inherently susceptible to clichés due to its dependence on other disciplines, requirement for application, and fundamental optimism. He points to the ways refrains like "children are the future" or the

"growth mindset" facilitate agreement and preempt the need to ask what is meant by these phrases or consider the potential complexities underlying them. I resist the urge to add to Zipory's list of examples and trust the reader can imagine the all too many fanatically adopted stock phrases in education that could be added to this list. Ultimately, Zipory offers two suggestions: First, he makes an argument for philosophy of education, which is "aware and critical of its own speech" to take a more prominent role in educational discourse. Second, he suggests Arendt's "non-methodical" approach as essential for "freeing educational discourse from banality."[6] In what follows, I consider these suggestions before offering a brief reflection on Zipory's underlying moral concerns.

Zipory commends Arendt's mode of thinking, which he characterizes as an "intellectual practice that requires both loyalty to the facts and their constant critique" for its ability to avoid and undermine the power of clichés.[7] Arendt is important for Zipory because of her simultaneous allegiance to the idiosyncratic nature of Eichmann and his trial *and* her consideration of the way neither Eichmann nor his trial neatly fit within accepted concepts of evil, justice, normalcy, and crimes against humanity, among other things. She insists that while we can articulate general theories about people, in a court of law only the individual is on trial: "Justice demands that the accused be prosecuted, defended, and judged, and that all the other questions of seemingly greater import—'How could it happen?' and 'Why did it happen?,' or 'Why the Jews?' and 'Why the Germans?,' or 'What was the role of other nations' … be left in abeyance."[8] Yet, since she is not an actor in the courtroom, Arendt weaves close analysis of the details of the case with relentless reflection, offering a trenchant analysis of the concepts underlying the trial that she finds problematically unexamined. As Zipory writes, Arendt "keeps asking difficult questions," and in so doing she "embraces reality."[9]

I share Zipory's sense that Arendt models a way of thinking that "could be rightly seen as the exact opposite of the cliché," and I think this assertion merits even further elaboration.[10] Yet we must be careful not to suggest that Arendt is exemplary simply for interrogating common concepts. Zipory does qualify his claim, aptly characterizing her work as "active, creative, imaginative"

and alert to the "character and function of speech."[11] It would be instructive to clarify with more depth and precision what makes her work so unique, even for a philosopher. To this end, I have tried to add a little more detail above in characterizing her work, but there is certainly more work to do.[12] Further, while I agree enthusiastically with Zipory that more thinking like Arendt's is needed, I wonder whether he recommends such thinking for *all* or simply *more* of the following groups: philosophers of education, educational scholars, educational practitioners, or simply scholars in general? I mention this latter category because I am not yet convinced the problem of clichés is exclusive to education, and I worry that even scholars are susceptible to clichés, or at least, to a "limit on *permissible* ingenuity," as Nietzsche calls it.[13] I wonder whether Zipory would agree—and if so, to what extent?

In addition, although, Zipory characterizes Eichmann's use of clichés as emblematic of modernity, I suggest we consider situating them more specifically within totalitarianism. Arendt contends that totalitarianism functions by eliminating individuality, spontaneity, morality, truth, a sense of reality, and the importance of one's own thoughts. In "Total Domination" she suggests the concentration camps represent the literal manifestation of the attempt to "eliminate under scientifically controlled conditions, spontaneity itself as an expression of human behavior … "[14] Further, the "skillfully manufactured unreality"[15] of the camps make it look perfectly normal.[16] This perversion of truth leads inmates to doubt their perceptions and the reality of their own experience such that actual thoughts and ordinary concepts cease to matter. In fact, they no longer make sense. The result on both the inmates and their captors, she claims, is "inanimate men, i.e. men who can no longer be psychologically understood," perhaps people like Eichmann.[17] Ultimately, she contends, the camps deprive people of the ability to act and to think morally.[18]

Limitations of space do not allow here the in-depth exploration of Arendt's work on totalitarianism required to adequately make this case, but I want to offer a preliminary hypothesis that the cliché functions in a way similar to the camp, or perhaps the cliché is a sign that the aims of the camp have been met. Arendt warns: "Totalitarian solutions may well survive the fall of totalitar-

ian regimes."[19] I wonder whether the cliché is one such survivor? If people are reduced to "a bundle of reactions … [that can] be exchanged at random for any other," then the reduction of language to meaningless phrases that can be uttered by anyone in any situation is one such reaction.[20] After all, the power of the cliché is precisely that it is an automatic reaction to a situation rather than an authentic engagement with it. Although I hesitate to claim clichés are necessarily and always totalitarian, I posit that clichés have a particular relationship with totalitarianism, and not simply with modernity, and that this relationship is worth further exploration.

All of which is to suggest that there is more thinking to do about the moral and political nature of clichés and the implications of these ideas for education. Zipory indicates that clichéd educational discourse is far from benign, and by grounding this claim in Arendt's work he introduces gravity to the discussion. Admittedly, the title of this paper is technically inaccurate: clichés are *not* crimes against humanity in the legal sense. But in another sense, clichés might be dangerous to humanity. Ultimately, then, I suggest we ask not *can* education be rid of clichés, but *should* education be rid of clichés? In asking the latter, we accentuate the moral implications of the prevalence of clichés in educational discourse. I suspect the answer to the latter question is yes and, if so, then the answer to the first question must also be yes. Put simply, we must grapple seriously with the potential effects of educational clichés not only on our students, but on humanity itself.

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1 Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (New York: Penguin Books, 1994), 252.
2 Arendt, *Eichmann,* 252.
3 Arendt, *Eichmann,* 288.
4 Zipory, "Can Education be Rid of Clichés," this volume.
5 Ibid.
6 Ibid.
7 Ibid.
8 Arendt, *Eichmann*, 5.

9 Zipory, this volume.

10 Ibid.

11 Ibid.

12 I have written explicitly on Arendt's mode of writing as exemplary and on her concept of thinking elsewhere, including: Stephanie Mackler, "The Company We Keep: In Search of a More Genuine Partnership Between Mind and Body, Theory and Practice, Scholarship and Life," *Teachers College Record*, December 21, 2005. http://www.tcrecord.org; Stephanie Mackler, *Learning for Meaning's Sake: Toward the Hermeneutic University* (Rotterdam: Sense Publishers, 2009).

13 Friedrich Nietzsche, "Schopenhauer as Educator," in *Unmodern Observations*, trans. William Arrowsmith (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990), 205.

14 Hannah Arendt, "Total Domination," in *The Portable Hannah Arendt Reader*, ed. Peter Baehr (New York: Penguin Books, 2000), 119.

15 Arendt, "Total Domination," 126.

16 Ibid., 124.

17 Ibid., 122.

18 Ibid., 132.

19 Ibid., 140.

20 Ibid., 119.