

Can — Or Rather, Should We — We Call the Trump Administration “Evil”?
After all, social theory says we could all become Steve Bannon or Steven Miller

The Trump administration’s travel ban —which bars travel and immigration to the U.S. from eight nations, six of which are predominantly Muslim — continues to make headlines in 2018. This time, a second federal appeals court ruled it [unconstitutional](#). And no matter how the Trump administration tries to disguise it, the travel ban must be seen for what it truly is: Anti-Muslim prejudice. Some are going so far to say it’s [an attempt at ethnic cleansing](#) in America.

As soon as the ban was announced in early 2017, questions quickly turned to who was really behind this agenda, as people doubted that Trump himself came up with it. Its main architect was [Stephen Miller](#), Donald Trump’s senior policy advisor and the man who spearheaded the Trump administration crackdown on sanctuary cities and the push to reduce the number of refugees allowed into the U.S. Miller had ties to White Nationalist Richard Spencer while attending Duke University, and he is ideologically aligned with Steve Bannon, former White House Chief Strategist and executive chairman of the alt-right *Breitbart News*.

The travel ban and the slew of other Trump administration actions have become center stage for not just policy debates, but larger moral ones as well. The racial superiority and white supremacy shown by the likes of Miller and Bannon reeks of *evil*—or so people say.

But we need to ask ourselves: Can we really call these masterminds behind the Trump administration’s xenophobic message “evil”? And if so, what exactly do we mean when we say Stephen Miller or Steve Bannon is evil? And how about those who support Miller and Bannon’s agendas like Hope Hicks and Kellyanne Conway — are they evil?

What Do We Mean by “Evil”?

Social theorists have debated the concept of evil since ancient times. Classical Greek philosopher [Plato](#) wrote around 400 BCE that no person does evil on purpose; they mistake evil for good. In contrast, the Manichean sect, dating back to the first century, believed the world was the clash between two fundamental principles: good and evil. The question of the concept of evil became particularly notable during the twentieth century in the midst of two world wars and countless modern genocides. But the debate over how to even categorize evil is still up for debate, as evidenced by philosopher Hannah Arendt’s remark in a 1964 letter to historian Gershom Scholem: “Evil ... is ‘thought-defying,’ ... because thought tries to reach some depth, to go to roots, and the moment it concerns itself with evil, it is frustrated because there is nothing.”

Arendt is correct in saying that evil as a concept is thought-defying because we cannot really describe what we mean when we believe someone or something to be evil. We also have yet to learn the motives behind extremely immoral actions. In that sense, evil seems to be a useless notion with no real substance. However, the mere fact that the word “evil” exists in our vocabulary is proof that it remains a necessary concept. Without the word “evil,” we would not

be able to capture the immoral extreme or characterize morally despicable acts, such as the Holocaust, the Rwandan Genocide, and September 11th. To quote Daniel Haybron, “Prefix your adjectives [such as ‘wrong’ or ‘bad’] with as many ‘very’s as you like; you still fall short. Only ‘evil’ will do.” So, how do we reconcile the fact that evil seems to be a meaningless yet necessary concept?

Ancient reflections on the concept of evil, stemming from the Neo-Platonist and Manichean sects, tended to mystify evil, attributing it to dark, magical forces. This demonization of evil has contributed to our distorted perception of “evil” and resulted in our inability to grasp the true meaning behind the concept. Evil lacks explanatory power precisely because we continue to disguise it as something supernatural and mystical when it is actually an inherent, fundamental human characteristic. We do so because we refuse to believe that we are capable of committing extremely immoral acts. Evil is also almost always associated with the “other” and the “abnormal.”

However, although the concept of “evil” can be used to identify extreme human behavior, it should not be used to designate merely abnormal human behavior. Labeling morally reprehensible figures such as Bannon or Miller “evil” is dangerous because doing so circumvents the actual problem they represent and makes similar figures appear non-human, and thus unstoppable. “Evil” is a grotesquely human characteristic and not the result of dark, mystical forces.

Where Do Complicit Figures Fit Into All of This?

Hannah Arendt’s analysis of Otto Adolf Eichmann in her controversial study *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* explains why we shouldn’t call Trump and Trump supporters “evil.”

Eichmann rose through Adolf Hitler’s ranks during the 1930s and 40s to become a German Nazi SS-Obersturmbannführer and the head of the Gestapo’s section for Jewish affairs. He is often pointed to as one of the Nazi officials most responsible for implementing Hitler’s Final Solution, as he crafted the deportation plans down to the last detail. In other words, Eichmann was the man who had the authority to order six million Jews and countless others to the gas chambers. Most wouldn’t hesitate to label him “evil.” According to Arendt, we shouldn’t be quick to do so.

Arendt explains that Eichmann was not a wicked, monstrous person, but rather a “terrifyingly normal” man. Moreover, Arendt insists Eichmann’s behavior reflected “no case of insane hatred of Jews, of fanatical anti-Semitism or indoctrination of any kind.” Rather, according to Arendt, Eichmann was an ordinary man who committed morally despicable acts out of sheer thoughtlessness. A similar charge might be leveled at officials in the Trump administration, such as Hope Hicks or Kellyanne Conway, who, unlike Bannon or Miller, do not appear to be motivated by racial animus but who nevertheless defend morally reprehensible policies like the Muslim ban. As Arendt might note, such people are equally – or even more – problematic than

figures like Bannon and Miller because though not seemingly motivated by evil purposes, they thoughtlessly work to enable cruel and profoundly unjust policies to flourish.

In *Thinking and Moral Considerations*, Arendt defends her theory of the “banality of evil” and explains that “not stupidity but a curious, authentic inability to think” makes ordinary people capable of horrendous actions. To Arendt, the act of thinking, or “unfreezing” previously accepted ideas, helps counteract evil. Thinking, however, seems to be contrary to the human condition because it goes beyond the everyday senses, has no real practical purposes, and requires a lot of effort. Therefore, we cannot frame evil as “out of the ordinary,” since this inability to think, which often results in evil, is inherently human. Modern psychological research, such as the work of psychologists Stanley Milgram and Philip Zimbardo, support Arendt’s banality of evil.

Milgram’s study, where participant “teachers” were encouraged to electroshock “learners” every time they answered questions incorrectly, and Zimbardo’s study, in which participants began conforming to their roles as either “guard” or “prisoners,” prove that we can all fall victim to this “inability to think.” Humans blindly follow social norms, authority figures, and assigned roles. Thus, we are all perfectly capable of evil. To begin to understand and to combat evil, we must therefore stop mystifying and considering evil as “foreign” or not human.

Not every thinker buys Arendt’s theory of human morality. Since its publication, Arendt’s *Eichmann in Jerusalem* has been a highly controversial book, attacked often for appearing to less Nazi crimes. More broadly, some philosophers do not share Arendt’s belief that the essence of evil is thoughtlessness. In 1946, prominent French thinker Jean-Paul Sartre wrote an essay entitled *Anti-Semite and Jew* in which he says that humans have a selective reading of their respective experiences, and they choose the socio-cultural norms that they are shaped and influenced by. Thus, the anti-Semite, by “choosing himself as a person” who evades all truth and reality, orients himself towards external factors that support and verify his already-held beliefs. In this view, evil needs to be redefined as extreme, morally despicable, irreversible acts resulting from ordinary human failure. When faced with societal pressures and other influences — such as our “aversion” to thinking — that push us towards evil, any person can very quickly commit acts labeled evil. In that sense, good is, in reality, extraordinary, as it is often easier for us to consciously or subconsciously choose evil.

So, What Do We Do in the Face of Evil—Or the Banality of Evil?

Present-day figures such as Stephen Miller and Steve Bannon can seem eerily reminiscent of past figures from totalitarian movements. History, unfortunately, seems to be repeating itself. So, how do we stop this from happening? How do we prevent seemingly “evil” people from seizing power?

There are two major things we need to consider. First, evil should never be used to characterize people, as the concept of “evil” has a strong dehumanizing power. People like Trump, Bannon,

and Miller must not be labeled evil, for that leads to a very dangerous mindset that undermines human growth and reform. Characterizing a person as “evil” is also a vicious, self-fulfilling prophecy. Once labeled “evil,” why would anyone strive to do good? Moreover, if evil people aren’t considered “human,” then we falsely claim we could never fall into similar territory.

Second, as Hannah Arendt argued in *Thinking and Moral Considerations*, thinking appears to be one cure for evil. Therefore, we must continuously rethink our definition of “evil” so that we do not allow it become a “frozen thought.” Of course, the country has a long way to go: The U.S. is the least educated high-income nation in the world, and [studies](#) have shown that the U.S. performed the lowest of all developed nations in numeracy and was on the low end of developed nations in terms of literacy. State funding for public higher education continues to decrease, and current trends in higher education show that the humanities major — the [foundation of critical thinking skills](#) — is shrinking steadily; in 2015, humanities degrees made up only 12% of degrees conferred.

What would bringing thoughtfulness back to America look like? It would consist of increasing our literacy and numeracy rates and further developing our critical thinking skills. In pursuit of that goal, we must re-strengthen our commitment to public and higher education and stop discouraging students from pursuing humanities degrees. In the age of “conspiracy theories,” pseudoscience, and Fake News, a healthy dose of skepticism and critical thinking have never been more urgent.