Forgiving the Unforgivable
Forgiveness and reconciliation after grave forms of evil.
A Christian ethical and theological perspective

Enhancing Catholic School Identity Project
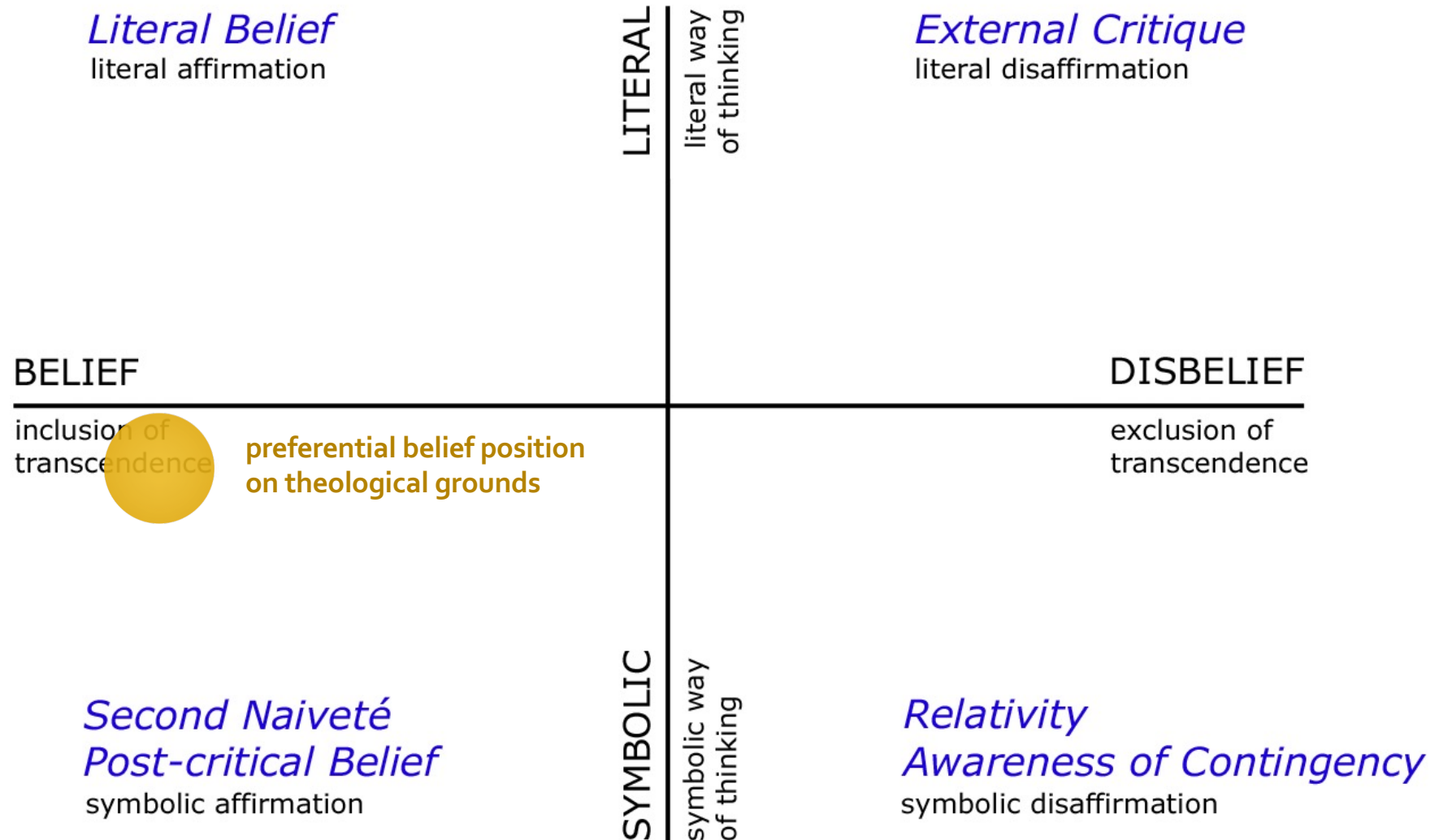
Prof. Dr. Didier Pollefeyt – Drs. Jan Bouwens

The Post-Critical Belief Scale *revisited*

Cognitive belief styles as building blocks for Catholic school identity
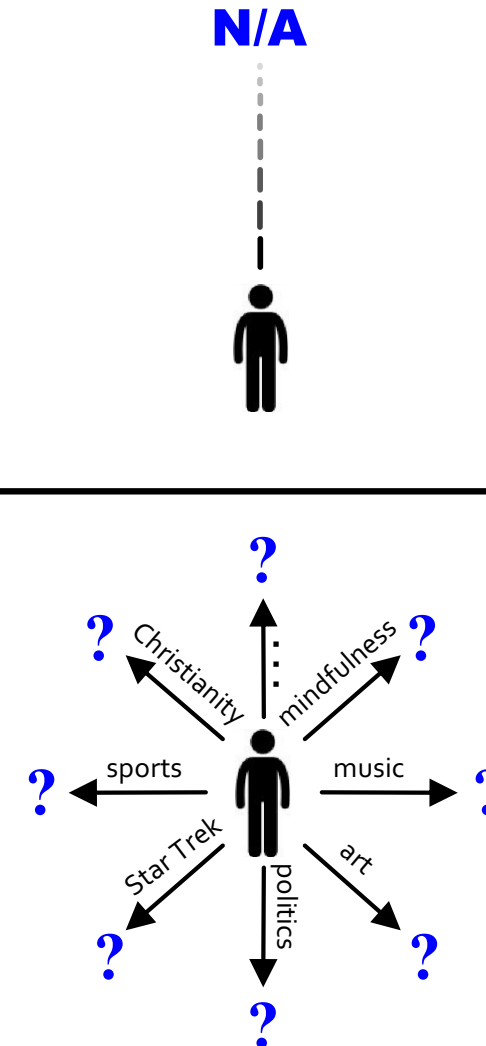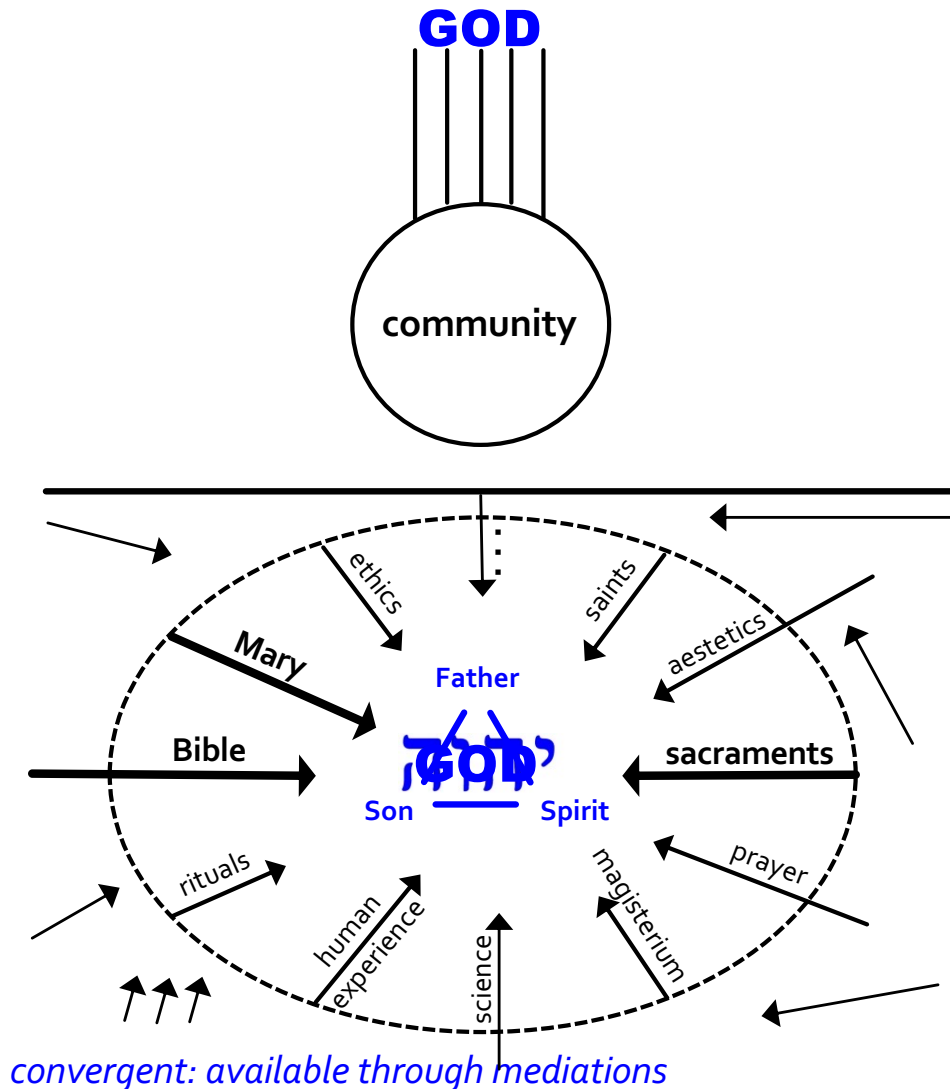
Post-Critical Belief Scale
Diagram

Literal Belief
literal affirmation

External Critique
literal disaffirmation

LITERAL — literal way of thinking

BELIEF

DISBELIEF

inclusion of transcendence

preferential belief position on theological grounds

exclusion of transcendence

SYMBOLIC — symbolic way of thinking

Second Naiveté
Post-critical Belief
symbolic affirmation

Relativity
Awareness of Contingency
symbolic disaffirmation

The Ontological Referent
Summary diagram

direct availability

no transcendent reality

GOD

community

N/A

ethics · saints · aesthetics

Mary

Bible

Father

"GOD"

Son · **Spirit**

sacraments

rituals · human experience · science · magisterium · prayer

? Christianity **?** mindfulness **?**

? sports music **?**

Star Trek politics art

? **?** **?**

convergent: available through mediations

divergent

What is a Catholic school?
Definition

(1) A Catholic school is an inclusive learning community,
an 'open space' of meanings and relationships,

(2) where mediations such as stories, symbols, rituals, values, rules for living etc.
are offered and animated in a conscious and caring manner.

(3) All members of the community are invited and are given the opportunity
to stand through these mediations in a living relationship
with a transcendent reality ('God'), uniquely incarnated in Christ,

(4) a relationship that is transformative
for both the educational context of the school
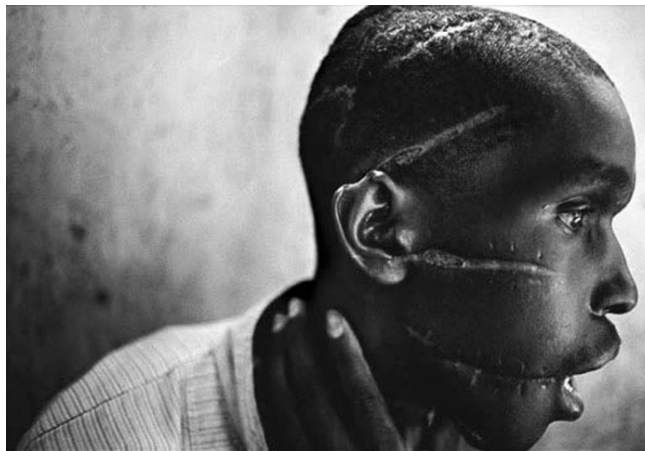and the total personal development of every community member.

Exploring the Catholic anthropology behind ECSIP

Theological reflections on good and evil

Horrible genocide in Rwanda in 1994: in a period of 100 days,
between 0.5 and 1 milion Tutsi's and Hutu's were slaughtered.

- The core problem of evil and reconciliation is the tension between **justice** and **love**.

- The temptation of 'easy solutions' so frequently results in too much:
  - ➤ **Mercy**, which risks enabling further evil
  - ➤ **Justice**, which risks abuse of power.

- Our **view of evil** will determine the possibilities or limits of forgiveness after atrocious crimes such as Auschwitz.

- Three paradigms of evil will be outlined:

    1. **Diabolising** the perpetrator

    2. **Trivialising** the perpetrator

    3. **Morally justifying** the perpetrator

1. Diabolicisation

When the evildoer is turned into a diabolical figure and the return of vengeance

Diabolising the perpetrator
The return of vengeance

- Evil elicits **moral indignation**: shattering a basic sense of trust and self-confidence.

- Diabolicisation springs from this indignant reaction: ethical fury against evil doesn't guarantee clarity of thought;

- A **dualism** develops with absolute GOOD against absolute EVIL on opposite poles.

- Diabolicisation affirms a **pessimistic anthropology**: within every man is an unchangeable beast.

Dave McKean (2002) - *Descent*

Cf. Thomas Hobbes' view on humanity: "Man is a wolf to his fellow man".

Diabolising the perpetrator
Good vs evil: black hats versus white hats in old westerns

Diabolising the perpetrator
The view of God in the model of diabolisation

Hans Memling (ca.1470) – *Day of Judgement*

Diabolising the perpetrator
The return of vengeance

- The driving force behind diabolicisation:
  a defense mechanism.

- Evil is externalised, separated and pushed far away from ourselves – a **radical difference** is defined between me (good) and the other (evil).

- Through this polarisation, a **personal identification** with evil is prevented and one's (positive) self-image is preserved.

- Yet diabolicisation is also a **source of evil** itself.

- If a person is considered to be wholly evil, he/she has no prospects: he/she cannot change or grow. Forgiveness is superfluous.

- **Condemnation** is the only possibility for the perpetually evil.

- The danger lies in forgetting that evil is not exclusive to those who perpetrate great atrocities – it is not so particularly **localised**.

Diabolising the perpetrator
Polarisation of evil and good

In reality, there is neither absolute good nor absolutely evil, but a graduated scale between good and evil.

- Diabolicisation then begets the logic of **vengeance**, which acts as an *imitation* of evil.

- In externalising all evil in the Nazis, we risk developing the same framework the Nazis used against the Jews!

- ⇨ The necessity of **de-diabolicisation**, breaking the polarity: this is the condition for healing the trauma of evil.

- But does this runs the risk of *trivialising evil* ?...

2. Banalisation

Trivialisation of the perpetrator and the inculpability of evil

Hannah Arendt
Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil, 1963

- Hannah Arendt criticised the diabolicisation of evildoers.

- Ethical dualism could not explain how thousands of people went along with the genocide, over a period of many years.

- Modern bureaucracy has placed humanity in a peculiar position: **the loss of autonomy**.

- Evil is **trivialised** in the modern state – to the point that it is no longer recognisable.

Trivialising the perpetrator
The exculpation of evil
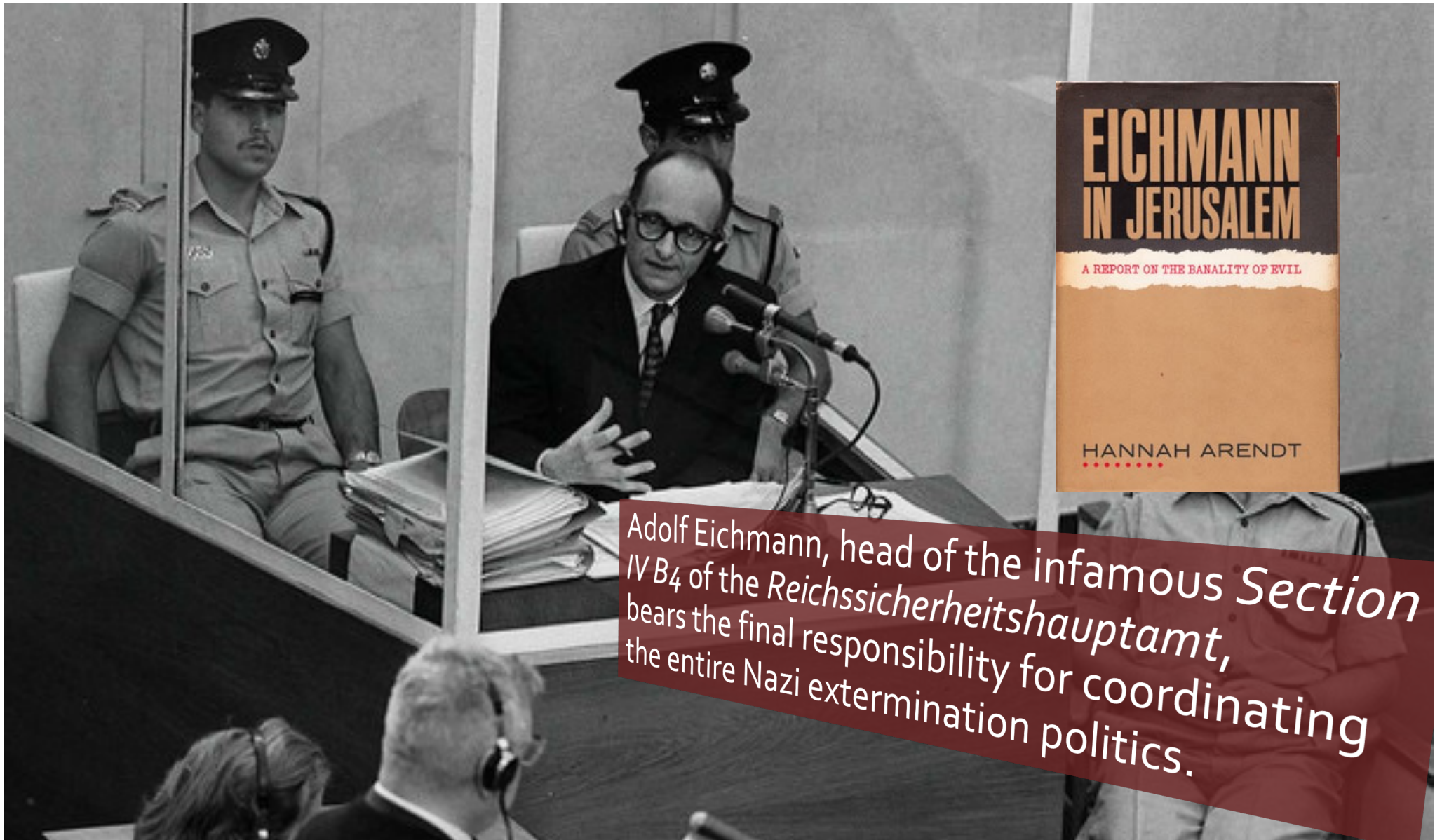
Adolf Eichmann, head of the infamous *Section IV B4* of the *Reichssicherheitshauptamt*, bears the final responsibility for coordinating the entire Nazi extermination politics.

Trivialising the perpetrator
The exculpation of evil

At the trial, Hausner's presentation of Eichmann as an **"arch monster"** was in stark contrast to how he appeared to Arendt – as an **"awfully normal" bureaucrat.**

"The world now understands the concept of **'desk murderer'.** We know that one doesn't need to be fanatical, sadistic, or mentally ill to murder millions; that it is enough to be a loyal follower eager to do one's duty".

– Simon Wiesenthal

Bernard Safran – *Adolf Eichmann* **(1961)**

Hannah Arendt

Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil, 1963

- Arendt's theory was published amidst controversy.

- To speak of the banality of evil appears to *reduce* evil.

- Arendt changed the fundamental question from *How do people commit egregious acts of evil?* to *How do people excuse themselves from involvement within evil situations?*

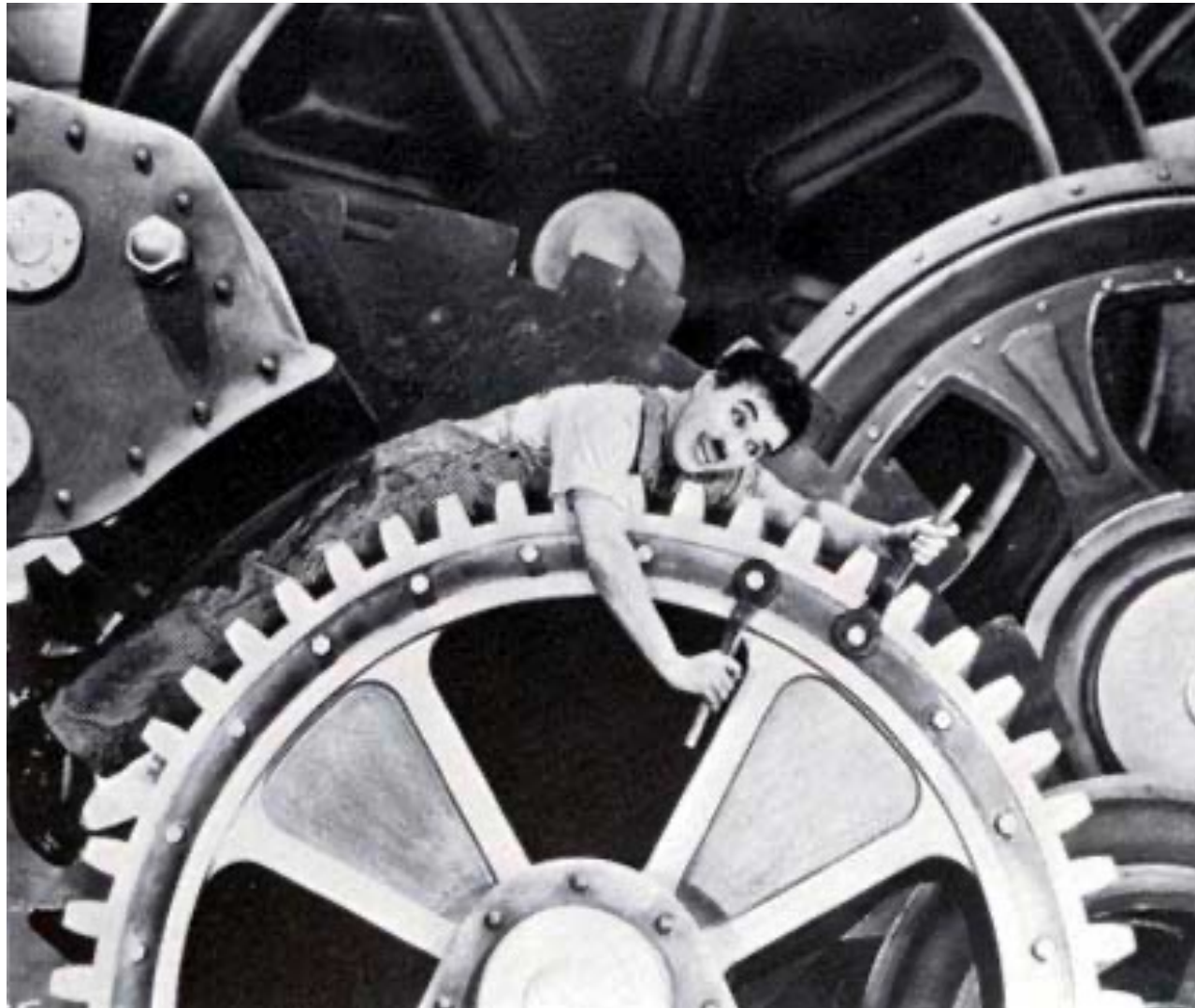- Genocide is not a deviation from western civilisation's history, but is its logical end.

Trivialising the perpetrator
The exculpation of evil

Charlie Chaplin – *Modern Times*, 1936

Trivialising the perpetrator
The exculpation of evil

Hannah Arendt
Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil, 1963

- **Optimistic anthropology**: humanity has an innate ethical reflex, but it can be heavily influenced by the surrounding community.

- **Depersonalisation**: by replacing names with numbers and seeing the Jewish people *en masse*, in uniform, moral resistance of the everyday German was weakened or eliminated.

- Evil has a dimension of **destiny**: the perpetrator is a victim of depersonalisation as well.

Hannah Arendt
Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil, 1963

- We find ourselves in the uncomfortable position of having to question *our* way of life and *our* civilisation.

- This questioning necessarily **breaks down the dualism** advanced by diabolicising evildoers

- Arendt was criticised for trivialising evildoers, but she was attempting to show how evil itself has been trivialised.

"*If only it were all so simple! If only there were evil people somewhere insidiously committing evil deeds, and it were necessary only to separate them from the rest of us and destroy them.* **But the line dividing good and evil cuts through the heart of every human being.** *And who is willing to destroy a piece of his own heart?*"

– Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, *The Gulag Archipelago*
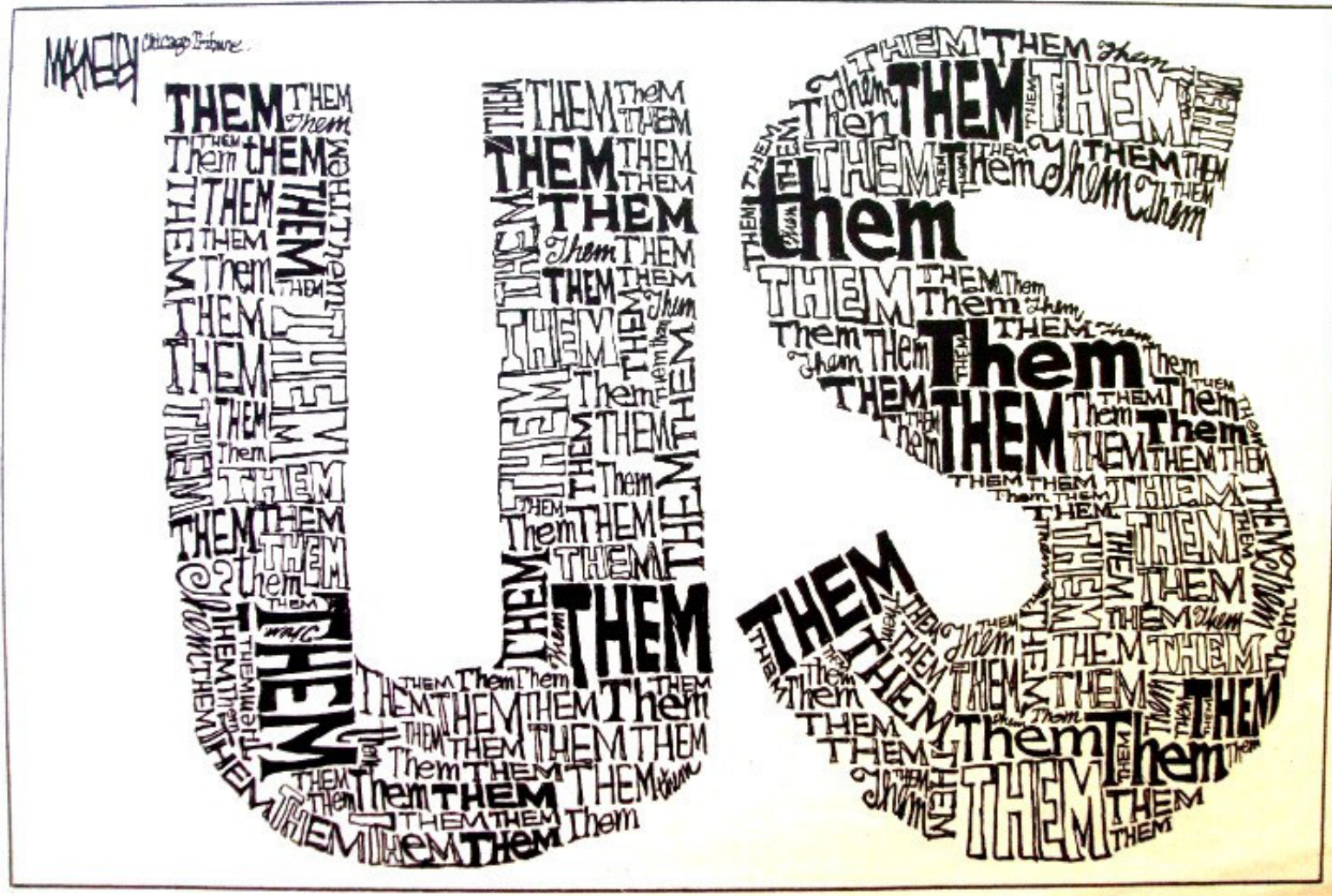
Trivialising the perpetrator
What does this mean for forgiveness?

- Emphasising the banality of evil risks an overly **deterministic** view of humanity, letting evildoers 'off the hook'.

- Taking away someone's culpability **diminishes the ethical dimension** of the evil deed and reduces the perpetrator's moral accountablity.

- Human failure overrides human evil, which risks underestimating humanity's evil characteristics.

- If we affirm human *freedom*, we must also concede to the **possibility of human evil**.

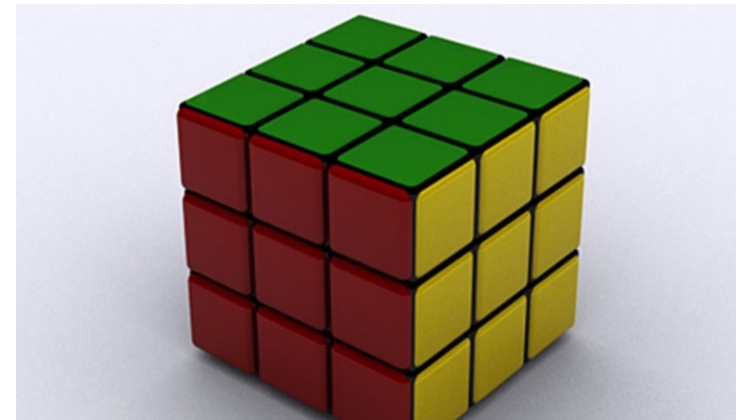# 3. Morally justifying the perpetrator

Whitewashing evil

Morally justifying the perpetrator
Simply a cog in the machine?

- The 'chain of command' gives the regular Nazi bureaucrat the appearance of following orders, but history has shown how midlevel bureaucrats demonstrated their own initiatives and 'creativity' in doing their duty.

- Without their ability to go above and beyond in finding solutions, many of Hitler's orders would not have been realised.

Morally justifying the perpetrator
Whitewashing evil

- There can be **personal motives** or **altruistic motives** for perpetrating evil.

- In the case of the Nazi ideology, this paradigm of evil argues that there was not an abandonment of ethics, but that the Germans realigned their **'ethics'** (e.g. patriotism, duty, service to country).

- Thus, the Holocaust did not spring from a moral vacuum, but **from a moral paradigm** rooted in recent European history.

Morally justifying the perpetrator
A critique of the third paradigm

- This perspective on evil considers evil to have a **'closed narrative'** – a beginning, a middle and an end.

- Evil is extenuated and whitewashed **through the apparent good** it is attempting to achieve (e.g. a unified Germany).

- But there is ethics and the misuse of ethics – *misuse* is no better than a lack of ethics.

Morally justifying the perpetrator
A critique of the third paradigm

- To morally justify the perpetrator is to **stop discussing morality**: the perpetrator *thought* they were doing good, so it is no longer a moral question

- Being unable to distinguish between ethics and misuse of ethics results in **moral relativism**, which renders attempts at forgiveness and reconciliation futile.

- Nazism is a manipulation and corruption of Christian ethics and the western tradition, rather than a rearrangement.

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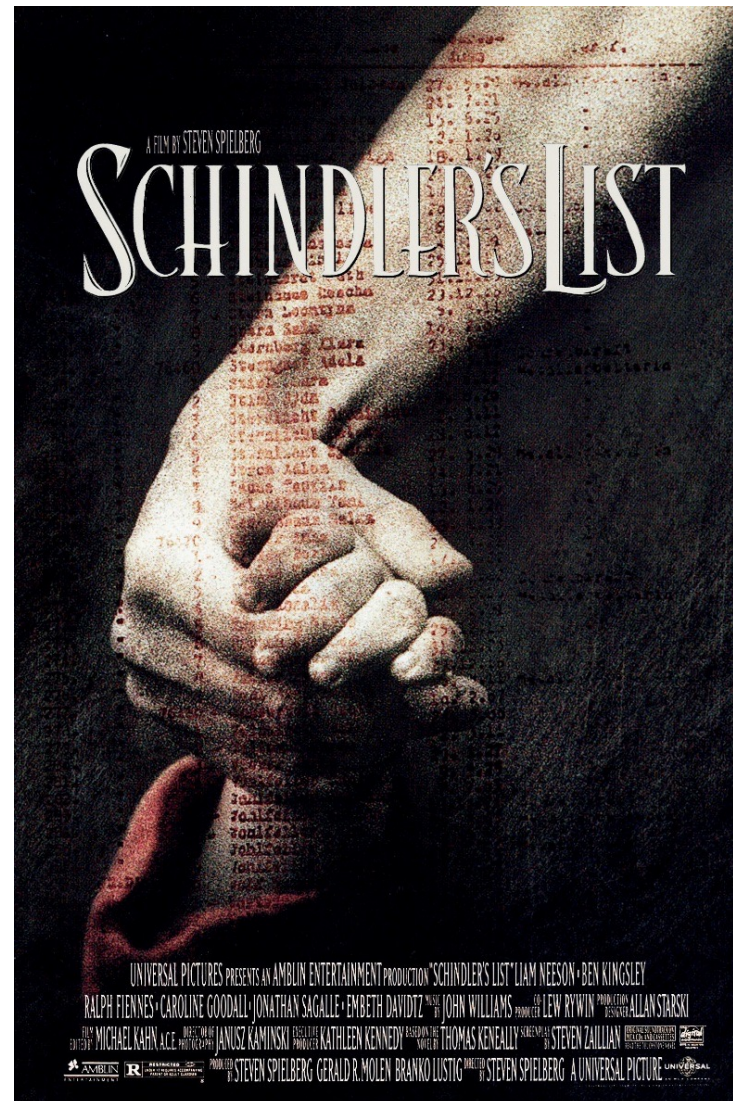Prof. Dr. Didier Pollefeyt – Drs. Jan Bouwens

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4. Beyond horror and excuse

The evildoer as self-deceiver and the meaning of forgiveness

Schindler's List (Steven Spielberg, 1993)
Recognising the paradigms

Fragments from the movie:

Schindler's List

Steven Spielberg, 1993

Starring: Liam Neeson (Oskar Schindler), Ben Kingsley (Itzhak Stern), Ralph Fiennes (Amon Göth), Caroline Goodall (Emilie Schindler).
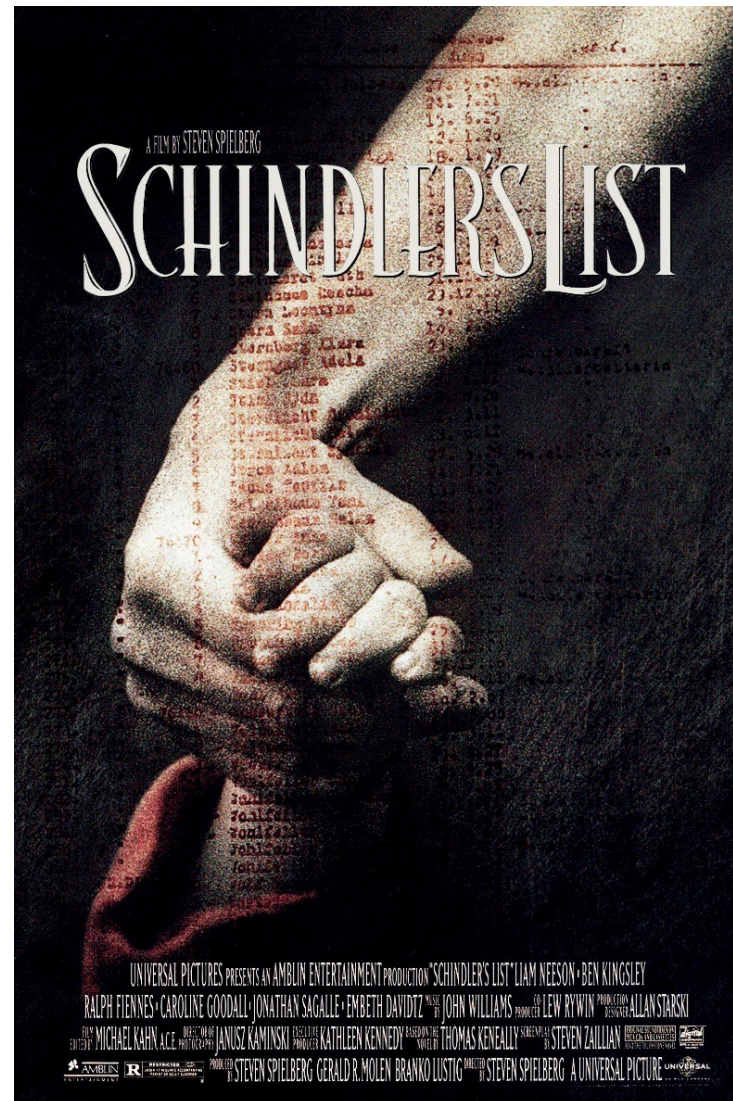
Based on the book Schindler's Ark written by Thomas Keneally

Music by John Williams

The film won seven Academy Awards, seven BAFTA Awards and three Golden Globes.

Towards an interpretation of evil
How do we set up a helpful paradigm of evil?

- How do we develop a vision of evil in which the evildoer is considered to be **both perpetrator and victim**?

- How do we condemn without diabolising?

- How can we understand the evildoer as **human** without condoning or minimising the evil he has committed?

Towards an interpretation of evil
The evil-doer as self-deceiver and the meaning of forgiveness

- Evil is not linked to a certain type of person, but becomes possible through **ordinary circumstances**.

- As a **daily vice**, evil becomes a normal part of life.

- **Fragmentation** facilitates evil: two ethics governed life at work and life at home.

- i.e. Nazi guards would commit atrocities during the day, then write letters to their sweethearts back home in the evening.
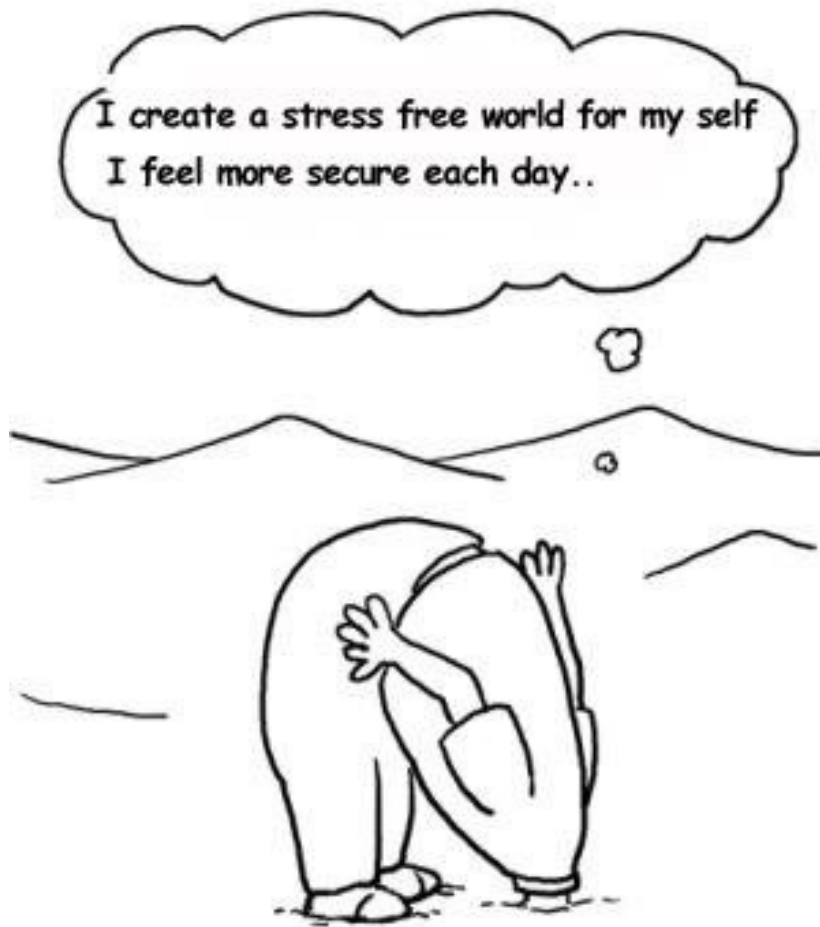
- Fragmentation is not evil in itself, but a **defense mechanism** against knowing one is cognisant of evil.

- One can only fragment when one is already *aware* of the existing evil.
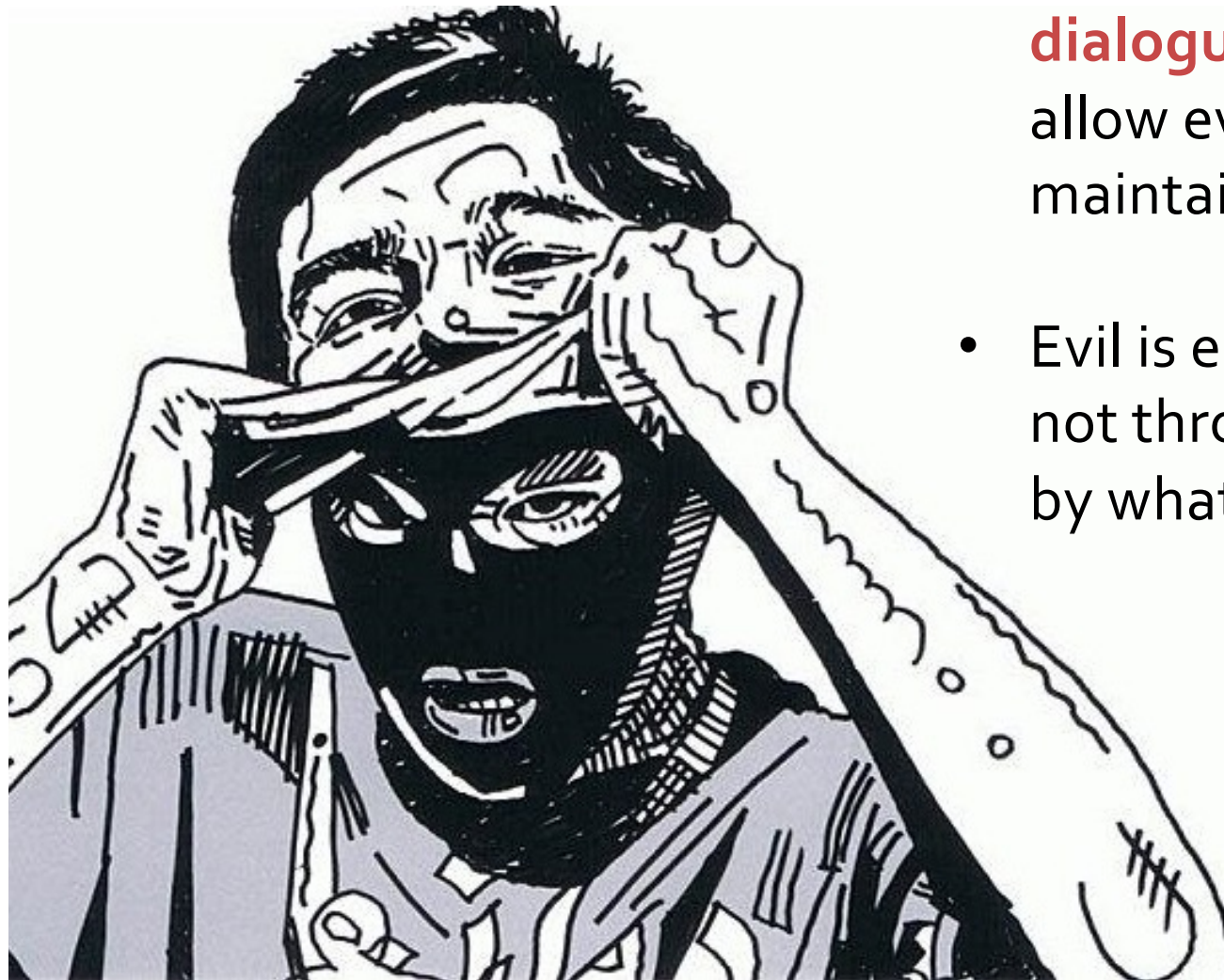
- Cf. the process of falling asleep.

- In self-deception, **the self-dialogue is manipulated** to allow evil to be done while maintaining a clear conscience

- Evil is especially made possible, not through what is done, but by what is left undone.

- The existence of evil depends on the good and simultaneously corrupts that good – **evil is parasitic**.

- If humanity was not essentially devoted to good, there would be no motivation for self-deceit.

- But the 'inhumane' urge for **self-justification** comes at the cost to a person's integrated self.

- When forgiveness is ruled out *a priori*, then ethics will become a closed system, perpetually self-deceptive, blaming the evil on others.

- When forgiveness is considered *a posteriori*, it must come from a moment of **reform**, not an extrinsic standpoint.

The essential conditions to arrive at authentic forgiveness are:

1. *Sincere repentance*

2. *Willingness to repair the damage (if possible)*

3. *Constructive punishment*

4. *Intention not to relapse*

5. *Keep the memory alive*

5. How to deal with evil?

Human tragedy and *'l'impardonnable'*

- The importance of **forgiveness** and **reconciliation** as possibilities – and their distinction.

- Forgiveness is an **act of healing**, centred in the heart of the victim and granted to the perpetrator when *they* are ready to receive it.

- Reconciliation goes a step further, but is not an *automatic* outcome of forgiveness.

How to deal with evil?
Implacability or the impossibility of reconciliation (*'l'impardonnable'*)

- The classical approach to implacability viewed *l'impardonnable* as a moral category, but a new interpretation of implacability instead sees **human tragedy**.

- Implacability refers to painful situations, not to people.

- A point of principle: implacability can never be *acquired* but is a situation one is **consigned to**.

- *L'impardonnable* refers to human **impenetrability**:
  the self-deceiving person remains closed off to forgiveness

- As long as the evildoer remains closed to the other (the victim), the evildoer will remain in a state of unforgiveness.

- *L'impardonnable* is therefore a **diagnosis of the present**, not a prognosis for the future.

- Ethics: not for law that moralises and opposes, but for **human desire for fullness and depth**.

How to deal with evil?
Is this really unforgiveable?

- *L'impardonnable* should always be read as *impardonnable?* – the question mark casting doubt on any permanent verdict of unforgiveability.

- The injury of **death** and the dramatic incapability of reconciliation – when a victim has died, they can no longer grant forgiveness.

- Forgiveness only pertains **to the living** – so what does forgiveness after Auschwitz mean today, when fewer and fewer survivors and perpetrators remain with us?

How to deal with evil?
Is this really unforgiveable?

**Shoes on the Danube Bank
Budapest, Hungary**

- A victim may be **unable to forgive** – the evil is too great and their hurt too deep.

- This is *still* a human tragedy, for evil still has the last word.

- The victim must be encouraged to **break through their own closedness**, conquering their own self-diabolicisation, in order to have a chance at healing.
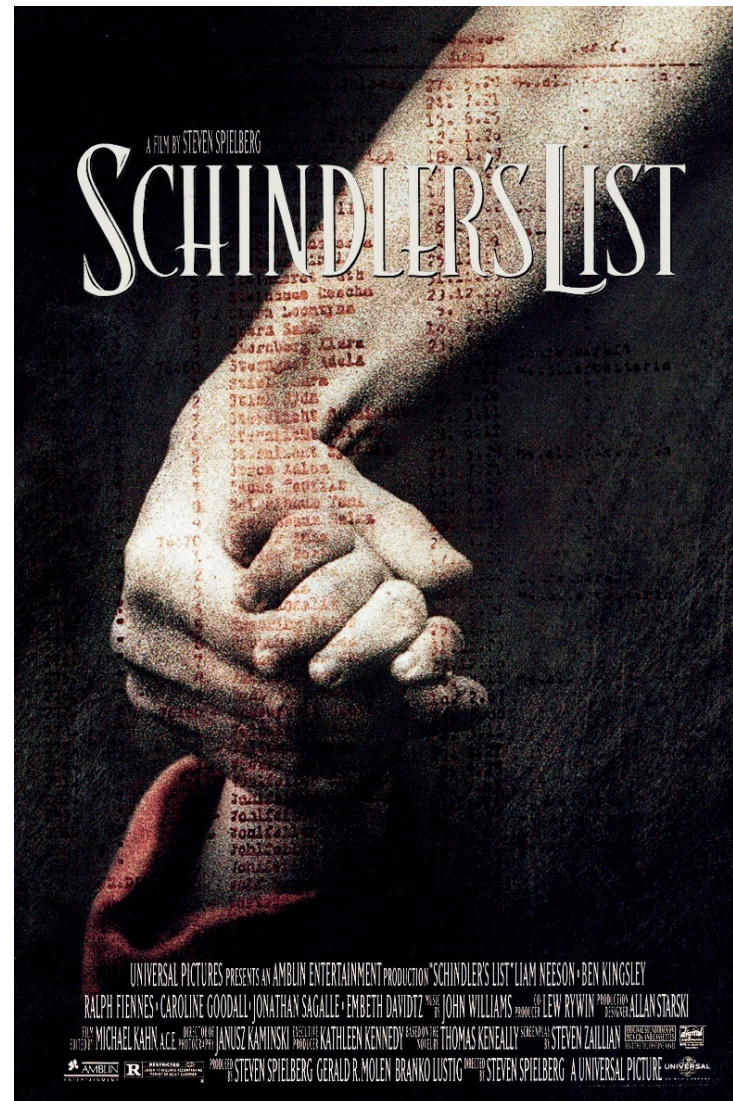
How to deal with evil?

What can we do?

- Dealing with victims

- Dealing with perpetrators

- Dealing with the relation between perpetrators and victims

- Dealing with counselors

- **The Christian perspective:** recognising the *limit* inherent to all human initiatives

How does a Catholic school give testimony of a *positive* anthropology?

How can a Catholic school deal with the relation between *law* and *grace*? (cf. *Recontextualisation*)

Can you recognise dualistic and diabolising patterns at work in schools? How to deal with school members who have a binary or literal religious mindset? (cf. *Literal Belief*)

Do you perceive levels of bureaucratisation at school and could this be considered a threat to its Catholic identity? (cf. *Colourless School*)

In what way can a Catholic anthropology be a response to the growing relativising of ethical and religious views and practices? (cf. *Relativism*)

Are processes of *fragmentation* recognisable in Catholic schools, especially in relation between private life and the role people assume at school? (cf. *Literal Belief* vs. *Relativism*)

How do we present God at school in light of human suffering? (cf. *Recontextualisation*)

Does forgiveness and reconciliation stand at the heart of Catholic schools, so that they become places and symbols of the 'already' of Christ's redemptive work in the world? (cf. *Post-Critical Belief*)

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