Women and Freedom of Canonical Thought: A Propaedeutics

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Abstract

Because we do not have a unified account of the presence and absence of women in male or patriarchal canonical thought – if that is even possible or desirable – I refer to their presence and absence as the ways of women in canonical thought, hereafter “the ways of women”. We also do not know yet whether we as women are making different ways into canonical thought, whether we are creating a women's canonical thought, or whether we could abandon the idea of canonical thought. Taking this uncertainty to heart, I consider what these possibilities have in common, namely, a demand for a freedom of canonical thought. By freedom of canonical thought, I understand a freedom to conform or not to canonical thinking. I consider some basic epistemological assumptions about such a freedom, and whether this may be a step toward a critique of the ways of women in thinking canons.

Keywords


1 What Is in a Canon?

A recent scholarly work on how canons form describes the historical origin of canons as follows:

Canons begin with choice and authorization: the more or less formal decision, by some authority, that a given group of works deserve to be set apart as authoritative. In some cases, a constituted authority – a ruler or
a set of officials – makes the choice … in other cases, however, it may be
scribes or printers who do so. (…) ‘Tools must be forged: Concepts must be
developed to help in identifying difficult passages and techniques must
be elaborated for trying to solve them … clarity (most frequently) or ob-
scurity (more rarely) tends to be the preferred model of textual produc-
tion. “Obscurity” is a scholarly diagnostic tool that leads to the invention
and codification of a variety of concrete textual practices and explanato-
ry efforts. (…) Often, but by no means always, those who do this sort of
work are trying … to domesticate the text in question: to make it seem
familiar and to show that it meets the needs and matches the tastes of
readers.

Grafton and Most, 2016, 8–9

It is safe to compare this account of how canons formed historically with
what happens in our own time and see that works continue to be chosen to
enter a canon because of their predicted power over readers. The authority
that or who decides ‘that a given group of works deserve to be set apart as
authoritative’ exercises political power through their canonical choices and
decision-making concerning what counts as relevant attributes of works that
deserve canonization.

What gives this political authority a legitimacy, such that readers who
are aware that their readership is tied to a canon accept and follow its rec-
ommended readings? According to the entry for “Authority” in the Stanford
Encyclopaedia of Philosophy, ‘Most theorists have argued that the legitimacy
of political authority is one that holds only when the political authority satis-
fies certain normatively important conditions’ (Christiano, 2020). We can par-
aphrase this proposition as follows: A political authority is legitimate only to
the extent that it performs normative power, that is, only to the extent that it
oversees the creation or demise of norms and rules.

For example, in most text-based cultures men have for centuries overseen
the creation and demise of what counts as a normatively acceptable work
of philosophical thought. In so doing, men oversee which works can enter a
canon, and, with the works, which authors may count as candidates for the
title of canonical thinkers. Sarah Hutton (2022) describes some key aspects of
this exercise of normative authority and power:

The circumstances in which a woman philosophized are only apparent
when we pay attention to the context in which she and other female
philosophers practiced philosophy. For the vast majority of women, to
be able to philosophize meant overcoming deep-seated customs and
prejudices about women’s capabilities and social destiny. The fact women have not had the same educational advantages as men and have been constrained socially by their gender roles (e.g., domestic duties, or the expectation that they should confine mental activity to spiritual matters) is still true today.

HUTTON, 2022, 12

There is no question about the importance of challenging norms and rules that overtly sacrifice works and authors on the altar of canonical thought. As Hutton argues in the same article, these norms and rules have often struggled to make sense of alterity and context of women’s voices, consistently failing women in their own time and place. The ways of women in canonical thought remain badly under-recognised – as Hutton intimates: this is not a time for complacency.

On the other hand, it is possible that inquiries into the ways of women in canonical thought share a certain logic. This possibility deserves pause for thought. At the end of the day, where there are norms, there are posited rules to be followed. More importantly, some norms and rules of canonical thought are neither rational nor reasonable, but rather expressions of bias.¹

Norms and rules that express bias tend to persist in unwritten form as vague, not fully understood assumptions, either because those who uphold them are unaware of their bias quality and/or because of a strong fear of personal or social sanctions. So, if we are to search for and recover the ways of women

¹ The Dictionary of Psychology of the American Psychological Association (APA) defines bias as ‘1. partiality: an inclination or predisposition for or against something. See also prejudice.’ (https://dictionary.apa.org/bias). The Dictionary defines prejudice as ‘1. a negative attitude toward another person or group formed in advance of any experience with that person or group. Prejudices include an affective component (emotions that range from mild nervousness to hatred), a cognitive component (assumptions and beliefs about groups, including stereotypes), and a behavioral component (negative behaviors, including discrimination and violence). They tend to be resistant to change because they distort the prejudiced individual’s perception of information pertaining to the group. Prejudice based on racial grouping is racism; prejudice based on sex is sexism; prejudice based on chronological age is ageism; and prejudice based on disability is ableism.’ (https://dictionary.apa.org/prejudice). The psychological literature on bias further distinguishes between cognitive bias and logical fallacy. For instance, recent studies reject the hypothesis that high cognitive ability, especially where this expresses as analytical abilities, predicts reduced cognitive bias (see Stanovich and West, 2008). I follow this distinction when I propose an investigation into the logic of unwritten assumptions in canonical thought. While much cognitive bias is found in male or patriarchal canonical thought, this does not preclude such canons from having a logic of their own that can be critiqued, as opposed to being reneged as fallacious or accepted as one canonical logic among possible others.
in canonical thought, we may benefit from looking also into these unwritten norms and rules, and the assumptions they harbour.

Take, for example, the unwritten norm that ideas that do not enter an explicit dialogue with existing canonical works must be rendered invisible or excluded as candidates for canonization. This norm renders irrelevant and unimportant, from the outset, a vast body of non-male or non-patriarchal and/or non-European texts. Moreover, it generates rules of oral and written abandonment of these texts through their physical displacement, misplacement, deterioration, loss, or destruction.

Where norms and rules are followed by a large enough number of peoples, individuals, institutions, or automated/artificial processes, it is safe to say that they have a logic of their own that underpins beliefs, judgement, feelings, behaviour, or action. If we accept that canonical thought has a logic of its own, then we must know the principles of canonical thought *toto genere*. Expounding this knowledge can put us in a good place to ask if it is possible to have freedom of canonical thought, that is, freedom to conform or not to canonical thinking.

2 Canonical Thought and Identity

So, what do we know about canonical thought? We know a few things, albeit, for some of us, only tacitly. We know, for example, that we relate to canonical thought in ways that are inseparable from beliefs about normativity – about what makes our ideas acceptable in relation to an established body of ideas – and beliefs about some general rules or norms to express our ideas according to such a body of ideas. The latter beliefs concern what and how to say or write, what topics and whom to address, what aesthetic feelings and ethical experiences to value positively or negatively, how to behave as someone whose views and texts belong in canonical thought.

So, we know that we relate to canonical thought as to a marker of our or others’ identity by engaging with normative judgements that concern “thinking proper”. And we know that we consider such normative judgements meaningful insofar as they say something about canonical thought as a marker of

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2 The topic of identity is a vast one. I do not explore it here beyond the basic sense in which I use the word “identity”, namely, in the sense of a motive to enter, remain in, or leave, a relation to something or someone, which motive is negotiable in terms of what is normatively acceptable or non-acceptable. For an introduction to the topic of identity, see Noonan, Harold and Ben Curtis (2022)
identity. We thus know that, in whatever ways we speak of canonical thought, we are referring to a category of thought, namely one that conveys identity.

Considering this basic understanding of canonical thought, can we have freedom of canonical thought, that is, freedom to conform or not to canonical thought? This understanding about canonical thought entails that the relevant attributes of works that are candidates for canonization are expressed in normative judgements that convey thought identity, by which I mean the identification of oneself as a thinker by reference to certain ideas and beliefs and not others. Take some commonly held normative judgements about thought identity: That only those who have studied a certain set of texts may identify as thinkers proper; that cultural and societal identity may influence but do not determine thought identity; that canonical thinking is a function of the canonized texts we read as much as they are a function of cultural and societal identities.

This mutual entailment of normative judgement and thought identity seems to imply, among other things, that to conform or not to canonical thought is little more than a function of normative judgements about canonical thought. The non-conforming act of identifying as a thinker proper without having studied a certain set of canonized texts is at once a judgement about canonical thought and an assertion of my thought identity. In other words, freedom of canonical thought – freedom to conform or not to canonical thought – may not be possible except as a second-order realization of its own constraints.

Indeed, how could normative judgments convey freedom? Take the silencing of the voices of non-academic women and women outside academia. For those who detract or ignore these women and their work, women's acts of self-identification as “thinkers proper” are attacks against thinking proper. Consequently, any demand for a freedom to conform or not to canonical thought is a demand for a freedom that normative judgements do not convey.

Or take the opposite normative judgement, according to which a thinker proper does not conceive ideas that chime with normative ways of thinking. The rule is thus posited that, if I am such a thinker, then I do not belong among those who follow canonical ideas. But what am I then exactly if I am identified as such thinker proper? In the worst-case scenario, I am seen as an undesirable intellectual eccentricity and denied academic existence. In the least worst-case scenario, I am seen as a fiction and doubted out of linguistic existence: I have gone too far in identifying as a “thinker” in the first instance.

But we know that I cannot be a fictional thinker any more than a thinker proper who knows to conceive normative ideas. The borders of linguistic fiction and reality are too sharp to be ignored, but also too thin for bold statements.
They run along psychological, cultural, and societal fault-lines. When it comes to thought identity, we all ask ourselves at some point: what makes my ways of thinking normative enough or non-normative?

3 Thinking as a Marker of Identity

When we demand freedom of canonical thought–to conform or not to canonical thought–we seem to demand more than changes in normative attitudes to canonical thought. We seem to demand acceptance of who we are as thinkers. Yet, as we know, albeit tacitly, this demand cannot be fulfilled: in relating to canonical thought as to a marker of identity, we indicate that the motive of this relation is unnegotiable in conversations about what is normatively acceptable or non-acceptable. So, paradoxically, who we are as thinkers in relation to canonical thought is neither “acceptable” nor “non-acceptable”.

Canon-related conflict, violence, and injustice, thrive on the tacit problem of a freedom of canonical thought that canonical norms cannot express because there is something unique about thinking itself, i.e., thought identity, whose content cannot be generalised or reduced to dimensions of a thinker’s life such as their gender, ethnicity, culture, society, economic circumstances. And if the very idea of a freedom of canonical thought – to conform or not to any canonical thought – is problematic, what are we to make of specific demands for a freedom of male or patriarchal canonical thought, or possible demands for a women’s canon of ideas?

So, canon-related conflict may be rooted in a conflict between identity demands that we create for ourselves, such as the fight for self-identification, and identity demands that nature or others create for us, such as the social class we are perceived to belong in, racial features we are said to have, the sex that others write in our birth certificate or documents, or the body characteristics that we are seen to be born with. How does canonical thinking – specifically, European canonical thinking – tend to reconcile these two classes of demands?

4 Normative and Natural Ways of Thinking

We can say, so far, that the conflict between these two classes of demand – those that we create for ourselves and those that nature or others create for us – appears to originate in two general assumptions: that thinking is a marker of identity, and that relating to thinking is an act of freedom. To uphold these
assumptions is somewhat to believe, among other things, that we can choose how we relate to thinking. Can we? What do the norms and expectations of canonical thinking tell us about this?

In the history of European philosophy, they have been often explained by reference to two general sets of norms and expectations that regulate human life in general: those of human nature and those of nature at large. The former set of norms regulates social and cultural ways of relating to each other, including my and your ways of thinking and seeing the world. The latter set of norms regulates wider, biological and environmental ways of relating to each other. The natural philosophy of Oliva Sabuco can be seen, I suggested elsewhere (Lopes, 2022), as an instance of this canonical model of normativity.

Oliva Sabuco de Nantes Barrera (1562–1629) is famously associated with the book published in 1587 in Madrid, Spain, entitled Nueva Filosofía de la Naturaleza del Hombre, No Conocida Ni Alcanzada de los Grandes Filósofos Antiguos: La Qual Mejora la Vida y la Salud Humana [New Philosophy of Human Nature Neither Known to nor Attained by the Great Ancient Philosophers, Which Will Improve Human Life and Health]. The authorship of this book remains a matter of controversy – the so-called “Sabuco Question” – for some who defend that the book is more likely to be a work of her father, Miguel Sabuco, and that feminists are misguided in attributing it to Oliva.3

I considered (Lopes, 2022) two readings of New Philosophy by Rosalía Romero Pérez (2008) and Gianna Pomata (2010). They have separately argued on what makes New Philosophy a distinctively woman’s work. Pérez notes that Oliva’s claims about the brain challenged received androcentric perspectives on what constitutes a human being and on the general ethical function of affects or emotions. Pomata emphasizes New Philosophy’s attack on medical androcentrism by replacing the received belief that the sun and heat are the sources of health or illness with the claim that the moon and moisture are the principal medium of an affective regulatory system that integrates the activities of the body and of the soul or rational mind.

Yet, Oliva's philosophical recommendations that stem from her ideas about human physiology, namely, on how women should regulate their emotions and general bodily affects by aligning them with traditional patriarchal virtues such as motherhood and parenting, require some careful consideration. How

3 The Sabuco scholar Mary-Ellen Waite (2008, 18–19) shows in no uncertain terms the importance of proper historical considerations: ‘... none of Miguel Sabuco’s contemporaries credited his claim [of authorship of New Philosophy], and ... Oliva Sabuco’s authorship was never doubted by the royal and ecclesiastical inquisition authorities who would be in a position to know.’
to reconcile an identity reading of *New Philosophy*, namely feminist or women-oriented, if the text itself appears to recommend the absorption of such an identity, right down to our affective experiences, into the patriarchal canonical fabric of thinking?

In translating all treatises that comprise *New Philosophy*, Waithe et al. (2007) offered a nuanced perspective on the place of this book in the androcentric canon of the European history of philosophy. On the one hand, Oliva’s moral philosophy makes no departure from the canonical virtue ethics of her time: ‘... her moral philosophy fits squarely in the tradition of virtue ethics ...’ (Waithe et al., 2007). On the other hand, Oliva’s empirical dualism challenged the dominant androcentric medical thought of the day: ‘Sabuco’s views on human anatomy break with tradition .... Natural science, not geometry, and human, not male, is Sabuco’s paradigm for medical theory’ (Waithe et al., 2007, 33) Oliva’s dualism also anticipated some of aspects of Descartes’ philosophy: ‘A century later, Descartes, credited with marking the advent of modern philosophy, would present a more rigorous and more methodical analysis of the problem to which Sabuco had offered an empirical solution’ (Waithe et al., 2007, 35–36)

We find in Ásda’s *Categories We Live By* (2018) a more recent attempt to conceive of freedom of canonical thought through a bridging over natural and normative categories:

> When we focus on the fact that having certain features, such as certain body parts, sex assignment, skin color, or ancestry serves as the basis for the conferral of a social status in many contexts, we see that there is differential treatment on the basis of these features in many different parts of the world. We can thus draw general conclusions on the basis of how widespread differential treatment on the basis of these features is. And as people come together to each new encounter with the social maps that have operated in their prior contexts, we can get a picture of the systemicity of certain sorts of differential treatment in a way that still preserves the dynamic nature of human interaction and does not posit structures or structural agency. The creators and maintainers of our institutions and practices are individual human agents.
> ÁSDA, 2018, 128

Fully fledged or partially biological categories such as body parts, sex, skin color, and ancestry, seem to be offered in this passage as an explanatory basis for ‘differential treatment’ among people. The passage seems to suggest that ‘differential treatment’ can both underpin systematic oppression or structural
discrimination and enable counterclaims for a freedom from ‘structures or structural agency’.

Attempts to account for the struggle to reconcile canonical normative thinking and demands for freedom of it are patent in the field of policymaking concerning the relation between the categories of sex and gender. Take for example the 2016 report by the Institute of Medicine (US) Committee on Assessing Interactions Among Social, Behavioral, and Genetic Factors in Health titled Genes, Behavior, and the Social Environment: Moving Beyond the Nature/Nurture Debate. It suffices here to quote a closing statement of its Chapter 5:

The challenge is to parse out how health outcomes are influenced by genetic variations, behavioral and cultural practices, and social environments independently and as they interact with each other, while recognizing that sex, gender, race, and ethnicity may play important roles in their own right and because of their social meanings.

Hernandez and Blazer, 2006, Chapter 5

I proposed above that there is a European canonical model of normative thinking that hinges on two canonical sets of norms and expectations that regulate human life, namely those of human nature and those of nature at large. One important aspect of this model is that these two normative sets are often thought of as influencing each other to some extent, or in probable or in indetermined ways. So, let me propose that, to the extent alone that it may be difficult to separate these two sets of norms and expectations within some canons, it is possible to postulate that the term “nature” and its cognates can be taken to mean “a realm of conditions of living which human beings somewhat, i.e., to some extent, or to some probable or indetermined ways, cannot help but follow, uphold, or assent to – and which might thus include normative conditions.”

Yet, this close semantic approximation, or reconciliation, of the natural and normative dimensions of human life will raise canonical eyebrows. In Western philosophy and science canons, we live and breathe a long tradition of sharply distinguishing things that belong in the realm of nature and things that belong in the realm of humankind, for example, in the realm of morality.

5 The Possible Freedom of Canonical Thought

There are norms and rules, mostly created men, that regulate sentiment and behaviour regarding canonical ways of thinking. But it seems that no one can
create, for example, the physiological and physical processes in the human body that are known by science to regulate sexual desires. No one can, it seems, bear square normative responsibility for such processes.

So, from the perspective of Western canonical thought, one cannot argue for a conflation of the natural and the normative. One may, however, propose that within this canonical tradition there is a grey conceptual area between those two realms, which is implied by what I have called earlier canon-related conflicts. The proposition of this grey conceptual area may thus take the postulate form indicated above: the term “nature” and its cognates can be taken to mean “a realm of conditions of living which human beings somewhat, i.e., to some extent, or to some probable or indetermined ways, cannot help but follow, uphold, or assent to—and which might thus include normative conditions.”

This proposition is consonant with a current peer-reviewed – by definition canonical in our time – account of “natural” formulated by Cian Dorr for the entry “Natural Properties” in the *Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy*. Dorr notes that “artificial” is sometimes thought to oppose “natural”, namely as the property of things that are influenced by humans. But as Dorr points out:

Even when a property is highly unnatural, we may have little or no ability to influence what instantiates it, or whether it exists. (Indeed many hold that all properties exist necessarily.) For this reason it may be misleading to use ‘artificial’ as the antonym of ‘natural’. ‘Arbitrary’ is better, and ‘germandered’ is popular.4

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4 Dorr, 2022. Dorr puts to the reader that there is a relevant – we can say a canonical – use of the term “natural” in philosophy, but that this relevant use is controversial: ‘Those who use “natural” in the relevant way conceive naturalness to be an objective matter, at least in the following sense: if $F$ is more natural than $G$, $F$ would still have been more natural than $G$ if our interests and practices had been very different, and indeed even if intelligent life had not existed at all. Most would endorse the stronger claim that when $F$ is more natural than $G$, it is necessary that $F$ is more natural than $G$. Like most philosophical terms of art which lack official, uncontroversial definitions, the relevant use of ‘natural’ is controversial: many philosophers regard it as too unclear, or too closely tied to some false presupposition, to be helpful. Among this group, some would go so far as to deny that there is any interesting or theoretically important relation holding between the pairs of properties listed in the above table, at least if we set aside relations (like being expressible more briefly than) whose pattern of instantiation would have been different if our interests or practices had been different. On this picture, the very idea that some properties are more natural than others embodies a mistaken projection onto the world itself of differences which are in fact just a matter of the contingent concerns and purposes of human beings.’
We can infer from Dorr’s remark, among other things, that the class of non-natural properties include those that humans may or may not create or have an influence over, and so are better called arbitrary or gerrymandered instead of artificial properties.

This canonical account of “arbitrary” as the opposite of “natural” does away with a conception of “non-natural” as “that which is necessarily created or influenced by humans” and its opposite conception of “natural” as “that which necessarily is not created or influenced by humans”. It seems to follow that “natural” rather means “that which may or may not be created or influenced by non-human factors”.

Following also from this canonical sense of “natural”, we may take “freedom” to mean “struggle with nature”. Now, if we relate to canonical thought as to a marker of identity, and if we were to demand that this relational act be understood as an act of freedom of canonical thought – to conform or not to canonical thought – then we can understand why the Western canonical view of human thought is that it generally struggles with nature. The struggle is theoretical as much as it is practical.

6 Final Considerations: A Provisional View on Canonical Thought and its Freedom

The above senses of “nature” and “freedom” allow for the proposition that freedom to conform or not to canonical thought is, to some extent, or somewhat, mediated by nature. A contemporary and exemplary case in point is what I see as Judith Butler’s counter-canonical – not contra-canonical – statement that ‘Sex and gender are “constructed” in a way that is neither fully determined nor fully chosen but rather caught up in the recurrent tension between determinism and freedom’ (Butler, 2019).

A demand for a freedom of canonical thought seems to presuppose canonical ideas about identity, freedom, and nature, that require philosophical investigation for their possible role in many canon-based conflicts, not least the conflict between human life in nature, that is, embodied in female, male, and non-binary bodies, and in free, safe, collaborative social co-existence. Indeed, in an important historical sense, the call for such an investigation is somewhat heard whenever canonical thought debate takes place. The challenge of creating new ways of understanding and relating to thinking is on.

The same European philosophical canon that has created and maintains the problem of canonical thought offers solutions for it. The risk with internal (constitutive) ways of addressing a canonical problem is that they overestimate
the function that canonical awareness of a problem has in solving it. We may well call this the *canonical bias*.

Canonical bias has likely formed prickly protective hedges around the problems it generates. There is the hyper-realistic attitude of looking hard enough at the object of a problem, for example, the degree of prescience of women’s texts or their influence on canonical, male texts, and declaring that the *object itself* of texts is independent of such question – that “it is what it is” – an attitude that may discourage or overwhelm sceptical curiosity and imagination. There is also the hyper-logical attitude of analysing a problem into various sub-types, their myriad of constant and variable components, thus creating a demand for decision-making rules to resolve it. There is also the hyper-idealistic attitude of inflating a problem that leads to its disappearing act in plain sight into the thin air of thinking.

Demands for a freedom of canonical thought concern a radical limitation to individual and collective linguistic will-power, a limitation that is difficult to accept because of its powerful personal and societal implications. The awareness of this limitation manifests as frustration, anger, and violence in face of alterity and context, to recall Sarah Hutton’s point. These emotional responses may themselves be manifestations of a received canonical conception of will, according to which for every perceived limitation presented by nature (in the canonical sense that I have considered), there must be a way of overcoming it.

Such canonical conception of will has had many philosophical (not to mention scientific) incarnations since Aristotle, from the stoic view of will as the most determinant aspect in individual and social life and wellness (wellbeing or wealth), to its over-valuing in Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, and Marx, to name but a few. That it continues to manifest in the form of subtle as well as extreme acts of social, cultural, and political cowardice and epistemic bravado for or against women’s demands of a freedom of canonical thought, speaks more, I believe, of the final throes of dominant canonical conceptions of freedom, nature, and will, than of a need to overturn the idea of shared humanity.

There is a received philosophical understanding of the relation of freedom and nature that drives the current debate on the ways of women in canonical thought and which is recognizably European. It is common knowledge that the histories of Europe are inseparable from activities of global submission and destruction of modes of co-existence that do not conform to European norms of thinking or living. The tenets of the current debate on freedom of canonical thought are likely inseparable from core beliefs and arguments that keep this history going.

As a result of imperialism and globalism, we may well be locked, across cultures, in a logical as much as in a moral perception of canonical thought that
works like a mirror-box: it reflects us, but we neither fit in nor know how to exit it. If so, any escape from such self-consuming conflict must start with a full acknowledgement of the entrapment. This means looking at its philosophy. A passage by Hannah Arendt (Arendt, 1971) seems to convey well our problem, and so offers itself as an appropriate closing point:

If the ability to tell right from wrong should have anything to do with the ability to think, then we must be able to “demand” its exercise in every sane person no matter how erudite or ignorant, how intelligent or stupid he may prove to be. Kant, in this respect almost alone among the philosophers, was much bothered by the common opinion that philosophy is only for the few precisely because of this opinion’s moral implications. In this vein, he once remarked, “Stupidity is caused by a wicked heart,” a statement which in this form is not true. Inability to think is not stupidity; it can be found in highly intelligent people, and wickedness is hardly its cause, if only because thoughtlessness as well as stupidity are much more frequent phenomena than wickedness. The trouble is precisely that no wicked heart, a relatively rare phenomenon, is necessary to cause great evil.

Arendt, 1971, 422–423

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