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Hannah Arendt and the Banality of Evil

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TWO DECADES AGO Israeli agents captured Adolf Eichmann in Argentina. His trial opened in Jerusalem in April, 1961, lasted fourteen weeks and resulted in his conviction for "crimes against the Jewish people, crimes against humanity, war crimes and membership in criminal associations." After an unsuccessful appeal, the former lieutenant-colonel of the S.S. was hanged in May, 1962.

Although the capture and trial of Eichmann aroused legal controversy, it is doubtful whether any other court of law, anywhere else, could justifiably have reached any other verdict on his guilt. The fact that Eichmann had directed the transportation of the Jews of Nazi-occupied Europe to their deaths was not in dispute. What remains as puzzling and elusive as ever is the nature of the human being who performed such a task with such incontrovertible diligence. Twenty

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years after Eichmann appeared inside a glass booth before the civilized world, his motives and his character have defied fully satisfactory explanation.

The most striking and celebrated account was provided, not by the prosecution, but by the *New Yorker* magazine reporter who covered the trial, Hannah Arendt. In her book on the subject, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil*, she formulated a disturbing image—original in its thesis, modern in its implications, bold in its definition of criminality.¹ For Arendt argued that the defendant had simply been unaware of his own wickedness. He had neither killed anyone personally, nor had he ordered anyone to be killed. He was neither a pervert nor a sadist. Because his character was so devoid of force, even of demonic force, Eichmann seemed to her “terribly and terrifyingly normal.” Arendt later recalled being astonished “by a manifest shallowness in the doer which made it impossible to trace the incontestible evil of his deeds to any deeper level of roots or motives.” Eichmann was the sort of mass murderer for whom annihilation was not fiendish and not monstrous. It was instead impersonal and abstract—a matter of following rules, obeying orders, arranging schedules with the utmost meticulousness and dedication.

The observer from the *New Yorker* resisted the temptation to define Eichmann as the culmination of millenia of bigotry. It is true that his superiors had claimed that their own anti-Semitism was racial and “scientific” rather than religious and emotional. Yet the ex-lieutenant colonel himself seemed to hate neither by reflection nor by instinct. He lacked the obsessive wrath that might attach itself to an “idea.” He told his Israeli captors that he felt no hatred for the Jews; and Arendt believed him, finding in him no “firm ideological convictions,” no compulsive malignity. Though Eichmann prided himself on being an “idealist,” he really believed in nothing. Though the consequences of his actions were horrible, he exhibited no emotional connection with them. There was no idea Eichmann would have been willing to die for—certainly not the myth of the master race; and he lived only for the enhancement of his own career. “Except for an extraordinary diligence in looking out for his personal advancement,” Arendt concluded, “he had no motives at all.”²

Gershom Scholem was the first to point out that this interpretation differed markedly from Arendt’s earlier exploration of modern tyranny, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1951).³ In that book Arendt had insisted that the absolute had erupted in the politics of the Third Reich and of the Soviet Union. Under Hitler and Stalin, everything had become morally permissible and humanly possible. Hell, which had previously

been only imagined, had been established on earth—and this condition she had termed “radical evil.” Yet in observing Eichmann in Jerusalem, in studying the awful trajectory of his career, Arendt realized that evil could also be banal. The defendant’s wickedness had lacked depth or deliberateness: “Eichmann never realized what he was doing.” His career had demonstrated not fanaticism but thoughtlessness, not diabolism but shallowness, not anti-Semitic fury but an eerie indifference.

Though Scholem himself dismissed her subtitle, “the banality of evil,” as a “catchword” rather than “the product of profound analysis,” Arendt had coined a phrase that has become an inescapable part of the language of modern intellectual life.⁴ She denied intending the phrase to constitute a philosophical doctrine or thesis, but nevertheless there is an elusiveness and ambiguity to the term that she might have remedied. Arendt did not mean that banality is itself evil, nor did she assert that evil is always banal. (Whereas Eichmann held a series of conventional jobs in Argentina—managing a farm, working for a citrus business and at an automobile plant, Josef Mengele, the mephitic doctor at Auschwitz, is reportedly alive in Paraguay, actively engaged in the extermination of Indians.) Though Arendt was struck by Eichmann’s apparent normality, she never claimed that everyone has his propensities, that anyone could have done what he did.

Eichmann therefore represented something unprecedented, something peculiarly dangerous. His thoughtlessness and distance from reality helped wreak more devastation than had his motives been malign, because he served dutifully as a bureaucrat in a modern state. Having risen to a position of responsibility within the Reich Security Head Office (R.S.H.A.), Eichmann felt guided by his sense of official responsibility. His conscience would have bothered him only if he had *not* obeyed orders; and when those orders required the deportation of Jews, such a bureaucrat could not have imagined any alternative to subordination. That is why one of the most perceptive sentences in Arendt’s book is her claim that “evil in the Third Reich had lost the quality by which most people recognize it—the quality of temptation.”⁵ That is also why the allegations of the defendant’s personal feelings toward the Jews, upon which the prosecution placed such emphasis, seem not entirely on target.

At the end of the nineteenth century, Nietzsche’s descent into madness was punctuated by his wish: “I am just having all anti-Semites shot.”⁶ In the twentieth century the effort to have all the Jews murdered did not affect one’s sanity, for within a totalitarian system it was possible to kill without hatred or any other emotion, without a sense of guilt, without remorse. Eichmann was of course judged legally sane

and fully competent to stand trial, and this phenomenon disturbed other commentators. It occurred to Elie Wiesel, who also noticed the defendant's utter banality, that "if he were sane, I should choose madness. It was he or I . . . We could not inhabit the same universe."⁷ The monk Thomas Merton, in reflecting on the puzzle of Eichmann's personality, also surmised that the sane may be "the most dangerous," for they may be immune to what has traditionally passed for the demands of private conscience.⁸

Such reactions were understandable, even though it is dubious to define the problem as the perils of sanity. That is not a quality of which modern life boasts an excess. Eichmann's short-circuited sense of moral responsibility was so unnerving, so staggering to contemplate, that it was tempting to find refuge in the villainy depicted by the prosecuting attorney, Gideon Hausner, who "knew Eichmann to be a cunning, flint-hearted plotter, with a demonic personality which certainly was completely indifferent to the suffering he inflicted . . . and which reveled in the exercise of power." Eichmann, the prosecutor added, "was possessed of a dangerous, perverted personality."⁹

Several psychologists concurred. The results of the Szondi test, which is designed to locate anti-social impulses in criminals and which the prisoner had taken ten times, were sent to Szondi himself, who told the Israelis: "You have on your hands a most dangerous person." The psychologist claimed to have tested over six thousand criminals in twenty-four years; and this particular subject, whose identity had presumably not been disclosed, Szondi considered the most remarkable. An American political scientist, Michael Selzer, sent to six other psychologists Eichmann's drawings, as part of the Bender-Gestalt and the House-Person-Tree Tests. The scientists were told only the subject's sex, age, and the attribute of having been famous. Five of the psychologists responded by emphasizing his violent personality, obsessive-compulsive nature and paranoia, and were not—according to Selzer—"particularly surprised to learn that his name was Adolf Eichmann."¹⁰ (The sixth psychologist had figured out the subject to be much like Adlai Stevenson.)

There may have been a reason why those five psychologists were not "particularly surprised" when Eichmann's identity was revealed. As Thomas Litwack, a psychologist at John Jay College, pointed out, the diagnosticians could have assumed, since the test was presented to them by a political scientist, that an important political figure was being evaluated. It would also have been a fair assumption that the subject had suffered a terrible breakdown or committed atrocities, for "why else would he have been subjected to psychological tests?" It

would have been more impressive had the psychologists "picked Eichmann's drawings out of a random sample of drawings as being done by someone particularly violent or psychopathic."¹¹ This particular diagnostic skill Selzer's participants had not been asked to demonstrate. There is something much too pat about the audacity of the conclusions that Szondi and the other psychologists are reported to have reached. Anyone as hideously violent as the subject was supposed to have been should have appeared in the criminal courts of Austria or Weimar Germany. Yet far from having exhibited such dangerously anti-social tendencies, Eichmann was an entirely law-abiding citizen and stable family man. But even if his emotional life had been as violent as the evaluations suggested, the tests could in no way establish a link between such aggressiveness and the virulence of the anti-Semitism that the prosecutor and others attributed to him.

The brutality of the interior life sometimes claimed for Eichmann resembles less that of the typical party functionary than of the especially violent criminal. Here a comparison might be drawn to the two main characters in Truman Capote's "nonfiction novel," *In Cold Blood*. One of them told Capote he had not intended to harm a Kansas farmer, Herbert Clutter, and his family. The killer remembered Clutter as "a very nice gentleman. I thought so right up to the moment I cut his throat."¹² Between such multiple murderers and Eichmann, some parallel can perhaps be traced in terms of the absence of any human connection, any remorse, any emotional weight to be attached to their crimes. They were frighteningly estranged from the rest of the human race. The differences, however, are also striking—even apart from the fact that the criminals in *In Cold Blood* wanted to disguise their own identities and cover their tracks, whereas totalitarian executioners seek to obliterate all trace of their victims. For Eichmann could not be plausibly regarded as a psychopathic criminal writ large, given an S.S. uniform and some railroad schedules and allowed to gratify his lust for blood. Had the Weimar Republic not collapsed, the lethal impulses supposedly detected in the House-Person-Tree Test would almost certainly have been suppressed. Unlike other kinds of political criminals (Macbeth, for example), Eichmann never plotted to murder any of his superiors. He thus fit successfully into a totalitarian universe noteworthy for its absence of coup d'états. Such propriety and self-control may have been admirably devised to shield him from the awareness of his own wickedness.

In the Third Reich distance could be achieved between the executioners and their victims, between the oral command and the implementation of the Final Solution. Eichmann was a new kind of

criminal, not because he could not restrain his violent impulses, but because he operated within a political system dedicated to genocide. His character and his crimes showed how magnified was the problem that Freud posed earlier: "The state has forbidden to the individual the practice of wrong-doing, not because the state desires to abolish wrong-doing, but because the state desires to monopolize it."¹³ Yet in an important sense, Freud's own *Civilization and Its Discontents* did not anticipate the specific threat that totalitarianism engendered. His book stressed the irrational aggressiveness pressing so near the fragile membranes of organized society, the subterranean fury that might at any moment burst through the surface of civility. Yet the Nazi extinction policy could be so thorough and so effective in part because its agents were not rampaging Cossacks but clerks scrupulous in their obedience to regulations. The "scientific" racism of the Third Reich, of which Eichmann was an instrument, proved to be far more lethal than base passions could ever have been.

This sinister aspect of normality is not hypothetically confined to totalitarian rule in Europe in the 1930's and 1940's. It would be foolish to assume that anyone would have organized the transportation of Jews to their deaths, as Eichmann did. Nevertheless, a willingness to commit abhorrent acts under cover of authority is unlikely to be limited to the fraction of the populace that is psychopathic. That, at any rate, was the point of the experiments supervised by psychologist Stanley Milgram, in which "scientists" ordered unwitting subjects to administer shocks to ostensible participants in a learning test. Drawn from the ranks of ordinary people, almost two-thirds of the subjects were willing to inflict upon slow "learners" shocks of maximum voltage, which were supposed to be highly painful and very dangerous.

Although controversy still simmers from Milgram's interpretation of his results, he was justified in concluding that "Arendt's conception of the *Banality of Evil* comes closer to the truth than one might dare imagine. The ordinary person who shocked the victim did so out of a sense of obligation—a conception of his duties as a subject—and not from any peculiarly aggressive tendencies."¹⁴ Those who pressed the maximum voltage felt no particular antagonism toward their victims, just as Eichmann was neither sadist nor ideologue, just as S.S. men became camp guards only because—for one reason or another—they were unfit for military service. Milgram applied the concept of the banality of evil more indiscriminately than Arendt would have allowed for. But his ingenious experiment suggested an empirical validation for her "catchword," and indicated how morally unlimited acts sanctioned by authority might be.

Eichmann in Jerusalem was so constructed that, in arguing that such turpitude was novel and therefore misunderstood, the author sometimes appeared to be taking the side of the defendant. In order to penetrate the void of Eichmann's personality, Arendt accepted in many strategic points his own interpretation of his conduct and motives, his own memory as well as his admissions of forgetfulness. While it is impossible to exaggerate the crimes of the Nazi regime, it is conceivable that the prosecution might have overstated the particular foulness of Eichmann's own character. Therefore an attempt to rectify the balance in the interest of truth would necessarily make the defendant look a little better. The evidence did not always support her interpretation; Eichmann's zeal to annihilate *all* Hungarian Jews, for example, exceeded his actual orders. But by projecting herself into the circumstances of his life, Arendt—herself of course a refugee from barbarism—in no way excused his crimes or absolved him from the charge of genocide.

Though Eichmann thus was depicted as less diabolical than in the prosecutor's interpretation, the man in the glass booth became repulsive in a new way. By observing him so carefully and imaginatively, Arendt extended our knowledge of the nature of evil. Murder itself is of course ancient. It occurred as early as Genesis IV, when Cain, jealous over divine disrespect for his own offerings, "rose up against Abel his brother, and slew him." In history or in literature, few murders thereafter have been depicted as so motiveless as Eichmann's criminality, so affectless and so shallow. Evil in Milton and Goethe is demonic and represented with implacable intensity; and in Melville's *Billy Budd*, the jealous Claggart is gripped by an innate depravity. Unlike Shakespeare's Richard III, the former travelling salesman for the Socony Vacuum Company expressed no intention "to prove the villain." The poet Robert Lowell therefore commented, after reading *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, that he could not "think of a more terrifying character in either biography or fiction or one conceived in quite this manner."¹⁵

To affirm the originality of Arendt's portrait is not, of course, the same thing as accrediting her historical accuracy. Although no other explanation of his character has evoked such interest, its very cohesiveness and completeness suggest the probability of overstatement. Human history and human motive are too treacherous for any single analysis to encompass. But unless Arendt was entirely wrong, there is a sobering lesson to be drawn from her book. She refused to depict Eichmann as only the latest embodiment of the hatred that has scarred the history of the Jews. She suggested that anti-Semitism cannot adequately account for his criminality, that it was bureaucracy as well as

ideology that made him dangerous. Little more than a generation ago, neither a dutiful conscience nor official conscientiousness was an obstacle to mass murder. On the contrary, such virtues facilitated genocide, making the recognition of evil more problematic than had previously been suspected. That means that a lethal destructiveness, which once befell with such finality the Jews of Europe, must still be considered a threat—to everyone.

Notes

1 Hannah Arendt's interpretation of Adolf Eichmann's character and career was incorporated in the series of five articles on his 1961 trial published in the *New Yorker* in February and March, 1963. The articles were published in book form in May, 1963 and in a revised paperback edition as *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (New York: Viking, 1965), the edition cited in this article. The sharpest and fullest criticism of Arendt's general thesis, as well as her portrayal of Eichmann's character, is Jacob Robinson's *And the Crooked Shall Be Made Straight: The Eichmann Trial, the Jewish Catastrophe, and Hannah Arendt's Narrative* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1965). Robinson assisted in the Israeli government's prosecution, which was led by Gideon Hausner, whose *Justice in Jerusalem* (New York: Harper & Row, 1966) offers the most substantial treatment of Eichmann's career and the interpretation from which Arendt dissented. Responses to her book tended to be far more critical than favorable. See in particular the unsympathetic essays by Lionel Abel, "Aesthetics of Evil: Hannah Arendt on Eichmann and the Jews," *Partisan Review*, 30 (Summer 1963), 211-230; Norman Podhoretz, "Hannah Arendt on Eichmann," in *Doings and Undoings: The Fifties and After in American Writing* (New York: Farrar, Straus, 1964); and two review essays by Marie Syrkin, "Hannah Arendt: The Clothes of the Empress," *Dissent*, 10 (Autumn 1963), 344-352, and "Miss Arendt Surveys the Holocaust," *Jewish Frontier*, 30 (May 1963), 7-14. Her defenders have included Norman Fruchter, "Arendt's Eichmann and Jewish Identity," in James Weinstein and David W. Eakins (editors), *For a New America: Essays in History and Politics from "Studies on the Left"* (New York: Vintage, 1970); Dwight Macdonald, "Hannah Arendt and the Jewish Establishment," in *Discriminations: Essays and Afterthoughts, 1938-1974* (New York: Grossman, 1974); and Mary McCarthy, "The Hue and Cry," in *The Writing on the Wall and Other Literary Essays* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1970). Also valuable in the understanding of this controversy are the essays in Part III of Arendt's *The Jew as Pariah: Jewish Identity and Politics in the Modern Age*, edited by Ron H. Feldman (New York: Grove Press, 1978).

2 Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil*, rev. ed. (New York: Viking, 1965), 26, 41-42, 215, 276, 287.

3 Gershom Scholem and Hannah Arendt, "Eichmann in Jerusalem: An Exchange of Letters," *Encounter*, 22 (January 1964), 53, 56.

4 *Ibid.*

5 Arendt, *Eichmann*, 150.

6 Walter Kaufmann (ed.), *The Portable Nietzsche* (New York: Viking, 1954), 687.

7 Elie Wiesel, *One Generation After* (New York: Avon, 1972), 11.

8 Thomas Merton, *Raids on the Unspeakable* (New York: New Directions, 1966), 45-47.

9 Gideon Hausner, *Justice in Jerusalem* (New York: Harper and Row, 1966), 6, 7.

10 *Ibid.*; Michael Selzer, "The Murderous Mind," *New York Times Magazine*, November 27, 1977, 35, 112, 117, 121.

11 Thomas Litwack, Letter to the Editor, *New York Times Magazine*, December 18,

1977, 110; Selzer, *op. cit.*, 120.

12 Truman Capote, *In Cold Blood* (New York: Random House, 1966), 244, 245.

13 Sigmund Freud, *Character and Culture* (New York: Collier, 1963), 112.

14 Stanley Milgram, *Obedience to Authority: An Experimental View* (New York: Harper and Row, 1974), xv, 5-6, 22-23.

15 Robert Lowell, Letter to the Editor, *New York Times Book Review*, June 23, 1963, 5.