Hannah Arendt

Hannah Arendt & the Banality of Evil

Georgia Arkell reconsiders Arendt's explosive report on the trial of Eichmann.

On the evening of 11th May 1960, the Israeli intelligence agency Mossad grabbed Adolf Eichmann off a street in a quiet district of Buenos Aires. Eichmann, formerly an SS officer and administrator, had been the key figure in organising the transportation of millions of Jews across Europe to the Nazi concentration camps. It was no wonder that Mossad wanted a word with him.

Upon capture, he was flown to Israel, and taken to trial on the 11th April 1961. *The New Yorker* commissioned the German Jewish political thinker Hannah Arendt to cover the trial. The trial ended in December 1961 with Eichmann's conviction for "crimes against the Jewish people, crimes against humanity, and war crimes during the whole period of the Nazi regime." Arendt's report, based on her observations of the defendant and of the conduct of the trial, was published in 1963 in her book *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil*.

In her report, Arendt grappled with an enigmatic question: can one commit evil deeds without being innately evil? Her conclusion was a shocking and provocative theory which defied the conventional representation of evil as exceptional and demonic. Arendt did not see in Eichmann the monstrosity of a psychopath, but rather the mediocrity of a bland, mundane, unimaginative human being who, in her words, was "neither perverted nor sadistic… but terribly and terrifyingly normal" (p.276). According to Arendt, Eichmann had not recognised the atrocity of his acts due to a particular "inability to think, namely, to think from the standpoint of somebody else" (p.49). On the basis of what she saw and heard at the trial, she concluded that while acts of evil can result in monumental tragedies, the perpetrators of these acts need not in every case be inherently evil people. They may have motives they do not recognise as evil, and which may, indeed, be 'banal'.

Arendt was also harshly critical of the conduct of the trial (which she labelled a 'show trial') as being erroneously centered on the sufferings of the Jews rather than on the ethical nature of the deeds perpetrated by the accused. In her view, the judges failed to understand Eichmann, obscuring what, according to her was "the lesson that this long course in human wickedness had taught us – the lesson of the fearsome, word-and-thought-defying banality of evil" (*Eichmann*, p.252).

This theory immediately stirred up a storm of debates and controversies. Critics accused her of being a 'self-hating Jew'; of justifying Eichmann; and of trivializing the Holocaust as an unexceptional event. But what did she *actually* mean when she wrote of 'the banality of evil'?

Arendt had devised a theory to explain a "phenomenon which stared one in the face at the trial" (p.282). She was not seeking to provide a universal interpretation of evil, but rather to interpret the specific nature of the deeds committed by Eichmann, based on her observation of him giving evidence. Arendt concluded that Eichmann's dazzled way of speaking and his constant resort to clichés and stock phrases were indicative of shallowness and 'thoughtlessness' (p.49). His use of a dry and obscure officialese (*Amtssprache*) as his only language evidently reflected a crippling inability to think critically for himself. His reliance on undigested gobbets of conventional wisdom when talking of heinous crimes was all the more emphasised by the absurdity of the final words he uttered before being hanged. He recited various stock phrases used in German funerals and ended with: "Such is the fate of all men. Long live Germany, long live Argentina… I shall not forget them" (p.252).

Arendt's term 'banality' additionally referred to the defendant's motives, personal ambition and desire to please his superiors, and even to his activities - which in themselves were mainly bureaucratic. Eichmann was responsible for the logistics of the Final Solution: his job consisted mostly of office work, sitting behind a desk, making phone calls, issuing instructions, reorganizing train schedules, solving problems, allocating personnel and resources. As Arendt pointed out, there is nothing intrinsically murderous in activities of this kind, which can be found in a million offices around the world every day. The controversy lies in his conscious awareness of the murderous end result of his actions – an awareness which, according to Arendt was in some way dormant, due to his 'lack of imagination' (p.287), which prevented him from fully realizing what he was actually doing. With this in mind, it is not surprising that to each of the fifteen charges brought against him he pleaded: "Not guilty in the sense of the indictment" (p.21). He didn't feel guilty because he personally did not kill any Jews, nor did he personally send the orders to kill them. Perhaps most shockingly, he even claimed he hadn't harboured ill feelings against his victims. As he declared in his final plea: "I am guilty of having been obedient, of having subordinated myself to my official duties." Arendt claims that Eichmann would have felt guilty had he *not* done his duty; had he not obeyed orders. However, in law obedience implies support; by obeying, he had supported and enabled a policy of mass murder. Yet he claimed his obedience was not driven by anti-Semitism (and he may have had personal reasons *not* to hate Jews – some rumours suggest he even had a Jewish mistress); he was merely driven by a rampant desire to cooperate, to feel part of a greater order to which he could submit his will. As he personally declared, "I feared to live a leaderless and difficult individual life, in which I would receive no directives from anybody." For this reason Arendt portrayed him as a mere 'joiner' – a shallow and clueless bureaucrat who had drifted into the Nazi Party "as a leaf in the whirlwind of time." Moreover, a great number of psychiatrists had certified his sanity, describing him as a "man with very positive ideas" (pp. 25-6) and a 'desirable' psychological outlook – thus scientifically underpinning Arendt's theory. But this is precisely what Hannah Arendt meant by 'the banality of evil': "the dilemma between the unspeakable horror of the deeds and the undeniable ludicrousness of the man who perpetrated them" (p.54).

While conceiving a lack of critical thinking as Eichmann's foremost characteristic, one must not fail to analyse the dynamics of the Nazi regime which meant 'thoughtlessness' created a new category of modern criminal. Arendt believed that modernity – in this case, specifically bureaucratic industrialized culture – supplied the necessary conditions to disguise the monstrous and sadistic evil involved in the Holocaust. The success of any totalitarian regime relies primarily on its capability to destroy the thinking process of its subjects, transforming human beings into automatic and 'banal' receivers of orders. Thus the new type of criminal was, precisely and most shockingly, the ordinary law-abiding bureaucrat.

This idea was shared by the Polish thinker Zygmunt Bauman. In *Modernity and The Holocaust* (1989), Bauman says modern bureaucratic culture and technology provide the preconditions for ordinary people to carry out what they deem 'normal activities' in nonetheless exceedingly abnormal conditions and ways. He wrote, "most bureaucrats composed memoranda, talked on the phone and participated in conferences. They could destroy a whole people by sitting at their desk" (p.24).

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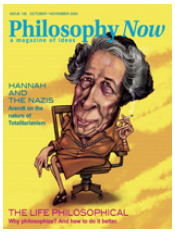

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Jerusalem, 1961: Adolf Eichmann has his day in court

How then did modernity turn normal, if somewhat bureaucratic, people into evil perpetrators of genocides? Bauman identifies three specific conditions aimed at keeping the whole killing system in a strictly businesslike framework, and thus purposefully eroding moral inhibitions: *authority*, *routinisation*, and *dehumanisation*. The first principle acts by foisting a moral sense of obedience and subordination upon its subjects. The second principle annihilates the thinking process by rendering the acts of violence mechanical, automatic, rule-governed acts. And 'dehumanizing' the Jews – in other words, referring to and seeing them as non-human entities – allowed the administration to solve the moral conundrum of committing a crime against humanity. The concept of dehumanisation indeed forms a large part of Arendt's wider argument about totalitarianism. In her words, "The essence of totalitarian government, and perhaps the nature of every bureaucracy, is to make functionaries and mere cogs in the administrative machinery out of men, and thus to dehumanize them" (*The Origins of Totalitarianism*, 1951).

As the historian Dana Villa suggests, despite important convergences between Bauman and Arendt, the two thinkers adopt an altogether different approach to totalitarian politics. While for Bauman the success of totalitarian ideology hinges chiefly on the substitution of 'technical responsibility' for moral responsibility, Arendt, on the contrary, believes that though totalitarian regimes annihilate the power of thought, they nonetheless do not destroy conscious moral choice and responsibility (see *The Cambridge Companion to Hannah Arendt*, 2000, pp.15-18). In this sense, Arendt believed that although Eichmann was lacking the reflective rationality to distinguish right from wrong in his work, he was not entirely devoid of a conscience. His obedience to the system and submission to orders were the result of his conscious will to follow the ideology of the *Führerprinzip*. So, since guilt lies in the shadows of moral responsibility, Arendt *did* consider Eichmann unquestionably guilty of perpetrating a crime against humanity, since he evidently did have a conscience. Arendt believed that Eichmann's evil actions were devoid of evil intentions solely because he failed to think: "It was sheer thoughtlessness… that predisposed him to become one of the greatest criminals of that period."

Herein lies the controversy which led to the misinterpretation of Arendt's notion of banality. It was erroneously considered by her critics as a means of justifying or exonerating Eichmann – while, as Richard Bernstein rightly points out in *Radical Evil* (p.227, 2002), its real purpose was to draw awareness to a different conception of evil, rooted in the failure to engage in the critical and reflective discourse with one's conscience.

The Banality of Criticism

Arendt's book came out in the spring of 1963, nine months after Eichmann was hanged. Scholars and journalists were quick to express their objections to her thesis by severely confronting the author with harsh accusations. A few shared her views, notably the American philosopher Walter Kaufmann, who was struck by Eichmann's 'nauseous triviality'; but the majority of her critics deemed it inconceivable that someone who played a key role in the Nazi genocide could have been devoid of evil intentions. They argued that 'mere common sense' demanded that the nature of the criminal coincides with the nature of the crime. Indeed, it had always been depicted as such, through Shakespeare's characters Macbeth and Richard III, or the grotesque creatures turned by sin into satanic monsters in Dante's *Inferno*, through to the more modern psychological portrayal of evil in Dostoevsky's works. Yet it was evident that Eichmann's persona was far from matching these traditional portrayals of evil, bearing instead greater resemblance to the emotionless and indifferent protagonist Merseult in Albert Camus' novel *The Outsider (* 1942). Merseult, much like Eichmann, feels no remorse for the murder he committed. Mersault attends his trial and execution with apparent indifference and emotional detachment, he "went to the gallows with great dignity… He was in complete command of himself, nay, he was more, he was completely himself." (The poet Robert Lowell went as far as commenting that he could not "think of a more terrifying character in either biography or fiction.")

Arendt was criticised specifically on two grounds: her concept of 'banality', and her idea that by failing to rebel, the Jews had indirectly collaborated with the Nazis – a claim for which she was accused by Gershom Scholem of lacking *Ahabath Israel* (love of the Jewish people).

An interesting rebuttal to Arendt's conception of the banality of evil was provided by the historian David Cesarani. In his book *Becoming Eichmann* (2004), he considered Arendt's depiction of the accused to be a self-serving proof of her theory of totalitarianism, which itself succeeded precisely because it offered an explanation of then-current issues, specifically, of the threat of nuclear war during the Cold War. It showed the public eye how men could inflict weapons of mass destruction on harmless civilians: the whole process of mechanically pressing a button or pulling a trigger was facilitated by not coming into contact with the victim, thus creating emotional disengagement. As Zygmunt Bauman argued in *Modernity and The Holocaust* : "The increase in the physical and/or psychic distance between the act and its consequences achieves more than the suspension of moral inhibition; it quashes the moral significance of the act and thereby pre-empts all conflict between personal standards of moral decency and immorality of the social consequences of the act." But Cesarani further argues that Arendt's portrayal of Eichmann was biased by the fact that she attended only a few days of the trial – those in which the defendant was intentionally passive and cooperative. He suggests instead that Eichmann was in reality a brutal anti-Semite who willingly forced the Jews to the death camps, motivated by fanaticism. Indeed, Cesarani provides several pieces of evidence that Eichmann was physically present for some of the deportations in Hungary, as well as presenting a firsthand account of a Hungarian Jewish survivor who witnessed Eichmann killing a Jewish boy in Budapest in the summer of 1944.

Arendt replied to her critics in the Postscript of the reprinted report, explaining why Eichmann's persona, albeit far from demonic, was not to be misconceived as 'commonplace', as well as clarifying that when speaking of the 'banality of evil', she did so strictly on a factual level. (Bernstein claims that the controversy could have been easily avoided had Arendt explained more forcefully that by talking about the 'factual' dimension of evil, she was exclusively referring to the deeds committed by Eichmann, not to the universal essence of evil.)

Arendt's Theoretical Context

According to the historian Shiraz Dossa in *The Review of Politics* (Vol 46, No.2, April 1984), much of the controversy that arose around *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, and specifically around Arendt's depiction of the accused, was due to a lack of understanding of Arendt's wider thought, particularly of her distinction between the private and the public spheres. This lies at the heart of her political theory. To avoid misinterpretations, we therefore need to retrace the origins of her political thought in her earlier works. Here we can appreciate some preliminary philosophical reflections on the nature of evil which subsequently led to her conception of it as 'banal'.

In *The Human Condition* (1958), Arendt articulated her distinction between the public sphere – a tolerant and open-minded community of citizens who respect one another – and the private sphere – a realm marked by egocentric individualism and self-centred interests. She argues that the public domain's increasing interest in private concerns furnished the preconditions for totalitarianism. In her opinion, Nazism utterly reshaped the link between the public and the private by excessively privatising the public sphere and depriving it of its original human virtuousness. In this sense, she viewed Eichmann as an ordinary 'private man' who launched himself into the public realm exclusively driven by personal advancement and self-preservation.

While *The Human Condition* is the philosophical and political hearth of Arendt's thought, its first bricks had been laid down in her earlier, 1951, book *The Origins of Totalitarianism*. There she first began to grapple with the question of political evil, which she there called 'radical', borrowing the word from the Enlightenment thinker Immanuel Kant. Arendt conceived radical evil as an instrument of erosion of human spontaneity. In her opinion, Nazism and Stalinism were revolutionary forms of government which, unlike the classical Greek conception of a political regime, were grounded on the ideological forces of the perversion of truth - the perversion of human subjectivity and judgment through the annihilation of the power of thought, and the perversion of the law by erroneously reducing history to a mere power struggle, hinging on the concepts of Natural Selection and Social Darwinism, the latter representing a perfect example of the distortions of ideology.

Arendt argues that totalitarian regimes established their power and influence precisely by making humanity the incarnation of the law. This was all the more evident when facing Eichmann in court, when he claimed to have led his entire life according to the Kantian moral imperative (even though one formulation of that is, 'Never treat another rational being as merely a means to your own ends'). Arendt was horrified upon hearing such a paradoxical statement: "This was outrageous, and also incomprehensible, since Kant's moral philosophy is so closely bound up with man's faculty of judgment, which rules out blind obedience." However, the reporter was quick to realise that Eichmann had essentially distorted the Kantian Law, making Hitler's principles the embodiment of Kant's universal law of reason, making Hitler the legislator and seeking thus to comply with the legislator's will. However, Kant had conceived of the legislator as one's own inner practical reason ('Act only in such ways as you could will your actions to be universal laws'), whereas Eichmann knowingly misinterpreted it for Hitler's will: hence he declared himself as having acted in a way that 'the Führer would approve'.


In the year of disaster: Hannah Arendt in 1933

It is clear the trial represented an opportunity for Arendt to prove the theories she had developed in *The Origins of Totalitarianism*. Scholars still debate whether she adopted different perspectives on the nature of evil once confronted with the triviality of Eichmann – whether her original understanding of it as 'radical' was then abandoned for its interpretation as 'banal'. But as Richard Bernstein suggests, the two interpretations coexist simultaneously in her philosophical and political thought, and inasmuch as they differ, they do not actually contradict one another (*Radical Evil: A Philosophical Interrogation*, p.231, 2002). Indeed, Arendt consistently argues that evil does not have a demonic nature. This is evident as early as 1945, when she already states that 'the Nazis are men like ourselves'. She reinforces this idea in 1951 in a letter to her friend the philosopher Karl Jaspers: "it seems to me [radical evil] has something to do with making human beings superfluous". Arendt was a great admirer of Jasper's philosophy. Correspondence in 1946 between the two thinkers suggests that Jaspers may have influenced Arendt in her progressive acknowledgment of the absence of any demonic dimension of evil, as well as in the use of the term 'banality'. Indeed, it was Jaspers who first employed that word: "It seems to me that we have to see things in their total banality." However, when in *The Origins of Totalitarianism* Arendt refers to the concentration camps as 'medieval pictures of Hell', scholars rightly pointed out that Arendt was undeniably alluding to a demonic dimension of evil, echoing philosophers such as Schelling and Plato.

Nonetheless, there is evidence of her philosophical shift in a letter written to the historian Gershom Scholem in 1964, wherein she openly admitted to having changed her views following the Eichmann trial: "You are quite right, I changed my mind and do no longer speak of radical evil. It is indeed my opinion now that evil is never 'radical,' that it is only extreme, and that it possesses neither depth nor any demonic dimension." Instead, "it spreads like a fungus on the surface of human existence". As Bernstein argues, the understanding of evil as lacking depth is compatible with an understanding of it as banal. As a matter of fact, this is precisely what makes it banal.

In light of these clarifications, we can now better comprehend Arendt's arguments, and so engage in a more informed discussion of her political theories.

It is evident that, as a fervent believer in the *vita activa* (the active political life), Arendt was against assuming the innocence of victims of genocide. She believed that every human being, as a public citizen, is partly responsible for the fate that befalls them, either by actively triggering it or by passively failing to prevent it. In failing to act as public selves, the Jews had allowed their tragic fate to engulf them. However, never did she even come close to implying that this made the Jews culpable. Furthermore, it is on account of her distinction between the private and public spheres that Arendt condemns Eichmann: he failed as a public citizen for "not wanting to share the Earth with the Jewish people", thereby violating the eternal and incorruptible foundational truth of the 'private sphere', according to which "we *ought* to want to share the world with other people."

Conclusions

Arendt's idea of 'the banality of evil' still appears incredibly controversial today. While an emerging critical consensus moderately accepts Arendt's theory – for instance, Christopher Browning commented that "Arendt grasped an important concept but not the right example" – new findings continue to underpin the widespread view that Arendt made an ill-informed judgement of Eichmann due to not giving full weight to all of the testimony proving his anti-Semitism. Indeed, it was not until after the trial that some of Eichmann's personal writings – including an unpublished memoir written while living with former Nazi officials in Argentina, and an interview with a fugitive Nazi journalist, Willem Sassen – became available to the public.

However, all in all, very few scholars have sought to truly understand Arendt and analyse the general picture 'from the standpoint of somebody else': that is, from the standpoint of someone who bore on her very flesh the cruelties of the Nazis (a Jew herself, Arendt was arrested and imprisoned by the Gestapo in 1933, then while awaiting trial escaped over the mountains into exile), and who sought to break free from the chains of the traditional 'demonic' depiction of evil, unveiling new, 'banal' ways through which it may express itself. What Arendt had tried to do was to understand; and "to understand is not to condone, excuse or forgive, it is to reconcile ourselves to the reality of a world in which such things are possible" ('Hannah Arendt on Eichmann: The Public, The Private and Evil', Shiraz Dossa, p,167).

While calling for a rethinking of the concept of evil, Arendt, most importantly, demands a rethinking of the notion of moral responsibility, by claiming that every human being not only holds the potential to eradicate evil, but has the *responsibility* to do so, through the power of critical thinking. Indeed "we resist evil by beginning to think, by reaching another dimension than the horizon of everyday life" (*Hannah Arendt: Legal Theory and The Eichmann Trial*, Peter Burdon, 2017, p.279).

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