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## Evil Banalized

### Eichmann's Master Performance in Jerusalem

Since the publication of *Eichmann in Jerusalem* in 1963, the unintended consequences of Hannah Arendt's depiction of Eichmann have been to reduce the moral consequence of evil actions.<sup>1</sup> Whether she meant only that the evil of this man, Eichmann, was banal, as Jaspers considered, her concept has been taken to mean that evil generally speaking is a banal phenomenon.<sup>2</sup> It is evident to me that humankind has become inured to the mass genocides that characterize this age: to the horrors of Nanjing, Hiroshima, Auschwitz, Rwanda, Somalia, and Dafur. The immediate purpose of this article is to examine Hannah Arendt's analysis of Adolf Eichmann in order to point out the groundlessness of her argument that evil, whether in the person of Eichmann himself, or in general, can be treated as banal. The wider purpose of this article is to divest any argument that is based on the concept that evil is banal, ordinary, or trivial of any valid grounding.

Regardless of authorial intent, if Arendt's text itself, *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, contains the direct statements and/or implications that Eichmann's evil actions were banal, or the work of an ordinary man, then ex hypothesi, to arise from a normal base, his evil actions and by extension, all evil actions, are ipso facto *normalized and trivialized*. If evil behavior is perceived as the benchmark of what is normal and therefore to be expected, it follows

<sup>1</sup> Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (New York, Penguin, 1994); henceforth *EJ*. It has been pointed out to me that a similar point of view to mine has been expressed by Elhanan Yakira in his book, *Post Holocaust Post Zionism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009). While this book was not available to me at the time of writing this article, I have seen it since. It does not appear to me to be making the same argument.

<sup>2</sup> *Hannah Arendt/Karl Jaspers Correspondence, 1926–1969*, ed. Lotte Kohler and Hans Saner, trans. Robert & Rita Kimber (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1992), p. 542.

that whenever evil occurs, particularly mass slaughter, shoulders will be shrugged and little will be done. Why should any action be taken to stop mass slaughter when it is considered banal or trivial?

The Holocaust serves as an example of unmitigated evil. Since, empirically, it has been so well documented – perhaps, because it was the work of Western Europeans, the German nation, considered as the most “civilized of cultures” – it stands out as a horror that cannot find any excuse in ignorance. The Holocaust is a call to remembrance of all horrors man has done to man. Eichmann is the icon of the perpetrator just as Anne Frank is the icon of the victim. Eichmann, more than Hitler, for while one can always find counterparts of evil rulers throughout history, of Caligulas and Neros, it is difficult to find an example of a more willing and obedient bureaucratic murderer than Eichmann.

### *Analyzing the Language of Evil*

As a philosopher, I want to lodge a severe protest against Hannah Arendt’s use of language for language has a power to influence us no matter what the language user’s actual intentions might or might not be. I want to extirpate the meaning of ‘banal’ from the vocabulary of evil. For ‘banal’ implies not only ordinariness, but a certain connotation of that which is beneath notice, that which is so ordinary as to be not worthy of our attention. If this connotation of the word ‘banal’ is communicated, then the net effect of calling Adolf Eichmann’s evil ‘banal’ is egregious, for instead of calling attention to evil, it numbs us to its presence. It renders evil, in effect, not worthy of our attention.

Consider the dictionary definition of the word ‘banal’. According to Webster’s Unabridged 2nd Edition, “to banalize = To render or make banal; trivialize: *Television has often been accused of banalizing even the most serious subjects.*” While dictionary definitions are of course not legislative, they do reflect historical usage. Hannah Arendt’s use of the term ‘banal’ in connection with the evil of Adolf Eichmann does in the mind of the English language-user trivialize the evil that it modifies. And, this is precisely what we should not do. Evil, as a serious subject, should never be trivialized.

The language that one uses is a reflection of our thoughts. Thus, the exploration of the use of the term ‘banal’ in connection with evil is not only an exercise in language analysis. It is designed to stimulate us to

think more deeply about the meaning of evil. Hannah Arendt's use of the term 'banal' in connection with evil is, to use her description of Eichmann, 'thoughtless'.

This is the charge. That Hannah Arendt should never have used the word 'banal' in connection with evil. To be properly scholarly, we should now examine how she came to use such a word. Perhaps, an examination of why she chose such a word will be of assistance in helping us to realize that the reasons for such a choice were not well founded and that that is all the more reason why such a choice should be avoided.

#### *Hannah Arendt's Choice of a Book Title*

The first question we can raise is, What exactly did Hannah Arendt find to be banal? Was it the magnitude of the crimes Eichmann committed? Was it the nature of the crimes? Was it the personal character of Eichmann? Of course, what comes to mind is that what she obviously must have meant was not the magnitude or the nature of the crimes, but the character of the perpetrator. But, if this is what she meant, why in the subtitle of her book, is this not specified? In the subtitle of her book, which has had more influence than anything else she may have said in the body of her work, the phrase is not qualified. The phrase reads, 'The Banality of Evil'. It is not Eichmann's character that is described as ordinary or trivial: it is the very nature of evil itself. This subtitle is seriously misleading and we cannot fault anyone who takes her meaning to be that evil itself, the very evil that Eichmann perpetrated (for the main title does refer to Eichmann) was trivial. At the very least, such a subtitle is thoughtless. And thoughtlessness in a philosopher is equivalent to a lack of digital dexterity in a surgeon.

One can, of course, attempt to rescue Hannah Arendt and argue that the subtitle modifies the entire title, 'Eichmann in Jerusalem', and intends that the trial of Eichmann in Jerusalem was a testament to the banality of evil, but this only places the onus for evil being banal or trivial on the proceedings. It still leaves the reader with the connotation that evil is trivial, but the cause for the triviality is the fact that Eichmann was tried at all, was tried in Jerusalem, or was tried in the manner in which the prosecution conducted the trial. If this is Hannah Arendt's meaning, and there are suggestions in the book that this is not entirely wrong, it might carry an even more sinister connotation, to wit, that to prosecute evil is to trivialize it.

What other connotation can one draw from this fantastic title? One could imagine that it is Eichmann's character or personality that is on trial (instead of his deeds). Then, 'Eichmann in Jerusalem' refers to the presence of this person named Eichmann in Jerusalem (on trial). 'The banality of evil' is a phrase that modifies Eichmann: either Eichmann as a person personifies the banality of evil, or Eichmann as a person personifies the banality of the evil-doer. It is not the evil that Eichmann has committed that is trivial, but it is that evil has been perpetrated by such a trivial person. This is indeed how Hannah Arendt has argued that this is what she meant. But, such an interpretation stretches the meaning of the words in the title beyond credulity. For if this is what she meant, she should have entitled the work, 'Eichmann in Jerusalem: The Banality of the Criminal' or 'Eichmann in Jerusalem: The Banality of the Evil-Doer'. For 'banal' in the subtitle still modifies 'evil', not 'Eichmann'. Hannah Arendt does not mean what she says and she does not say what she means.

Even if one grants that Arendt's choice of a title referred only to the personality of Eichmann as being banal, it would carry untoward consequences. First of all, it is difficult for the ordinary reader, or repeater of the title of her book (for repeaters of titles of books far outnumber actual readers of books), to make the subtle distinction between Eichmann's personality and his deeds. The force of the subtitle, which has become the most infamous phrase of Arendt's and possibly the second most infamous phrase of a philosopher, 'the banality of evil', has become a power of influence all of its own. (The most infamous phrase, 'G-d is dead', was actually coined by Martin Luther, but has been attributed to Nietzsche).

Second, it is difficult, in the end, to separate character from action. If one's character is truly ordinary, then by definition, one's behavior is truly ordinary. Character, Heracleitus once wrote, is destiny. If one is a perfectly ordinary person, then one's intentions, one's moral nature, are acceptable. Thus, even if the intention is to capture only the personality of the perpetrator, it is not completely clear that this character depiction does not extend to the deeds carried out by the perpetrator. For Aristotle and Confucius, character is intimately linked to moral or immoral actions. For Aristotle, moral actions are the means to building one's moral character. Immoral actions would build an immoral character.

In Aristotle's account of morality in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, what one ultimately attempts to achieve in life is a moral character. Every noble action,

for Aristotle, builds one's moral character. One can say, with equal justice, that every ignoble action builds an immoral character. In this sense, one cannot separate character from behavior. One's behavior would be a result of one's character and one's character would be a result of one's behavior. Thus, even if it is only Eichmann the man who is perceived of as ordinary, as normal, as banal, then, for Aristotle, this banality, this ordinariness, is also the result of the deeds that he had committed. If evil deeds contribute to the make-up of an ordinary, normal, and banal character, then it becomes difficult to conceive of the deeds as extraordinary, abnormal, and outrageous.

If one thinks seriously about the matter, if one's personality is ordinary and beneath notice, it is an easy transition to the concept that the deeds of such a person will be ordinary and *therefore* beneath notice. The more one emphasizes the ordinariness of the evil-doer, the more difficult it becomes to feel stirred to outrage at the deeds of the evil-doer. The brushstroke of the painting of the label of ordinariness is broad. It covers evil-doer and evil-done alike in one stroke.

There are two questions which I would like to raise. The first is, How did Hannah Arendt obtain the impression of the banality of Adolf Eichmann in the first place? The second is, What are the consequences of considering evil as trivial? While Hannah Arendt's supporters will argue that she did not mean that evil was trivial, it is my contention that either part of her did consider that evil was trivial or that her communication, regardless of her intention, did carry the meaning that evil was trivial. I think that evidence can be cited for both of these conclusions, but it is not important for my purposes to prove that part of Hannah Arendt did believe that evil was trivial. It is very important to show that Hannah Arendt *communicated* that evil was trivial. She also communicated that the horror of the crimes committed by Eichmann was reprehensible and horrible. But she communicated both of these points irrespective of her intention. In effect, Hannah Arendt sent out a double message. And, in my opinion, the message that evil is ordinary or trivial has obliterated her message that certain crimes are so extraordinary that they are crimes against humanity as such.

#### *Adolf Eichmann's Performance in Jerusalem*

Since the first question raised above influenced the second, we should attempt to answer it first. Hannah Arendt would never have argued that the

evil-doer, Adolf Eichmann, was banal unless she were convinced that he was banal. So our first question is, What led Hannah Arendt to think that Adolf Eichmann was a banal or trivial person in the first place?

This is a question that is raised with acute skill by Jules Steinberg.<sup>3</sup> Steinberg argues, citing evidence from the text, *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, that Hannah Arendt did not see Adolf Eichmann in his terrifying Nazi uniform visiting camps where Jews were shot, but saw a harmless man sitting, dressed in a suit, inside a glass cage. Hannah Arendt mistook the man in the glass cage for the Nazi murderer. The man in the glass cage was a harmless man in a suit. But he *had been* a Nazi murderer of millions of people. That he appeared unprepossessing *now* did not mean that he was a harmless dolt *then*.

I would like to take note of Steinberg's brilliant analysis. It is not only that Arendt is misled by Eichmann's appearance. It is that Eichmann *fooled* Hannah Arendt. For the reasons Eichmann gave for his actions, we only have the testimony of Adolf Eichmann. Hannah Arendt accepts Eichmann's testimony on his own behalf at face value. She does not question the veracity of his statements. If Eichmann claims that he was not aware that what he was doing was wrong, she accepts this *prima facie*. It is as if Hannah Arendt is accepting the evidence of the fox that the chickens were always safe under his watchful eye. *If Eichmann was a murderer, had it not occurred to her that he could be a liar?* Even if it is the case that her intention is not to convey the impression that mass murder is trivial, but only that this infamous mass murderer is a trivial man, this entire belief, that he is a trivial man, is almost certainly the invention of an extremely clever Adolf Eichmann. Her representation of the personification of the banality of evil is itself based upon an outrageous falsehood. Adolf Eichmann, the master killer, duped millions of people into thinking that he was sending them to labor camps. It was a banal accomplishment on his part that he fooled Hannah Arendt into thinking that he was a harmless bureaucrat.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Jules Steinberg, *Hannah Arendt on the Holocaust: A Study of the Suppression of Truth* (New York: Edwin Mellen Press, 2000).

<sup>4</sup> According to newly declassified tapes, recorded in the 1950s while Eichmann was hiding in Argentina and now in the German Federal Archive in Koblenz, Eichmann boasted that he "was no ordinary recipient of orders" and that he "was part of the thinking process; an idealist." "I didn't just take orders," Eichmann is heard saying. "If I had been that kind of person, I would have been a fool." The tapes demonstrate

This is not unlike the often cited remark that Heidegger's association with Nazism was forgivable because he was "politically idiotic." This thinker, whom some rank as the foremost philosopher of the twentieth century, accepted Nazism because of sloppy thinking. Eichmann, too, accepted his role, in his case as a mass murderer, because he was 'thoughtless'. It is difficult to discern which exoneration is more ludicrous.

Hannah Arendt apparently thinks that she is simply reporting what she observed. Her subtitle reflects this as it reads: "A Report on the Banality of Evil." She says in a letter to her friend Mary McCarthy that "My 'basic notion' of the ordinariness of Eichmann is much less a notion than a faithful description of a phenomenon. . . . the most general [conclusion] I drew is indicated: 'banality of evil'."<sup>5</sup>

What we can do is to examine some passages in *Eichmann in Jerusalem* which show that Eichmann was not as unthinking as Arendt thought that he was. Arendt herself supplies the evidence for Eichmann's extraordinary thinking powers. It is only puzzling why she does not draw the conclusion that he is diabolically clever from the evidence that she presents.

Jules Steinberg quotes from Jean Améry (Hans Maier), from a chapter entitled "Torture" in Améry's book, *At the Mind's Limits: Contemplation by a Survivor on Auschwitz and Its Realities*: "For there is no 'banality of evil', and Hannah Arendt, who wrote about it in her Eichmann book, knew the enemy of mankind only from hearsay, saw him only through the glass cage. When an event places the most extreme demands on us, one ought not to speak of banality."<sup>6</sup> The 'us' to which Améry refers must refer to Adolf

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that Eichmann's defense of himself as simply following orders was a ruse. Indeed, his guilt is magnified when one considers his disappointment that when looking back upon his role in organizing the systematic slaughter of Jews, gypsies, and other groups, he says, "We didn't do our work correctly. We could have done more." See, <http://www.spiegel.de/international/germany/0,1518,7554486,00.html> While I was unaware of these tapes at the time of the writing of this article, Eichmann's recorded remarks do add further evidence to my thesis that his self-defense at his trial was a master performance.

<sup>5</sup> *Between Friends: The Correspondence of Hannah Arendt and Mary McCarthy, 1949–1975*, ed. Carol Brightman (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1995), p. 152.

<sup>6</sup> Jules Steinberg, *Hannah Arendt on the Holocaust*, pp. 34–35; Jean Améry, *At the Mind's Limits: Contemplation by a Survivor on Auschwitz and Its Realities* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1980), p. 25.

Eichmann. The demand to murder millions of people is the event which places the most extreme demands on someone. In this context, one cannot speak of one's reaction to this as trivial or banal. One's reaction to this, even if masked as an ordinary reaction, cannot be taken to be an ordinary reaction. If one reacts in an ordinary way to such an extraordinary demand, an ordinary reaction becomes monstrous.

Steinberg goes on to point out that Eichmann's portrayal of himself as an ordinary bureaucrat seeking only his personal advancement is a disguise because earlier in her own work, Arendt herself supplies a different motivation for his actions: "earlier in the book [*Eichmann in Jerusalem*], Arendt had provided Eichmann with another, very different motive, for participating in this enormous crime of murdering all the Jews: 'What stuck in the mind of these men who had become murderers was simply the notion of being involved in something historic, grandiose, unique ('a great task that occurs once in two thousand years')."<sup>7</sup>

If Eichmann had such a motivation, how could she classify him as ordinary? Are these ordinary aspirations? According to Steinberg's analysis of Améry, "Arendt is *duped* by Adolph Eichmann, who pretended to be small, sniveling, timid, fearful, in Arendt's words, thoroughly banal."<sup>8</sup> For Eichmann gave a master performance in court. Could this be the same Eichmann who murdered millions of people? Why would Hannah Arendt take this depiction as an accurate representation of the real Eichmann? According to Seyla Benhabib, the evidence that Arendt was persuaded by was: "Eichmann spoke in endless clichés, gave little evidence of being motivated by a fanatical hatred of the Jews, and was most proud of being a 'law-abiding citizen'."<sup>9</sup>

#### *The Duping of Other Commentators*

What seems amazing is that other commentators also accept Arendt's interpretation of Eichmann as Mr. Ordinary. For example, Dana R. Villa writes, "It was Eichmann's 'extraordinary shallowness', his one distinguishing characteristic, which led Arendt to name an evil that required neither

<sup>7</sup> Steinberg, p. 39 and *EJ*, p. 105.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 220, emphasis in original.

<sup>9</sup> Seyla Benhabib, "Arendt's *Eichmann in Jerusalem*," in Dana Villa (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Hannah Arendt* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), p. 67.

exceptional wickedness nor depravity, but only a profound lack of thought and judgment.”<sup>10</sup> But, why accept Arendt’s understanding of Eichmann as shallow and without thought? This is, certainly, how Eichmann meant for the Court to understand him so as to exempt him from responsibility. Eichmann wanted to be taken as a faceless and mindless bureaucrat who was carrying out legal orders. This is how Eichmann wanted to be perceived. But, why did she then take this *opera buffa* at face value? Can anyone believe that someone who knew that he was sending millions of people to die was doing so merely out of a desire to achieve personal advancement? Arendt, and seemingly Villa after Arendt, take Eichmann’s pose to be reality. This entire idea of ‘the banality of evil’ is, according to Villa and to Arendt herself, Arendt’s central idea. And what if it is entirely a pretense on the part of a criminal hoping to escape indictment? In this case Arendt’s central idea is based upon a deceitful fabrication. The so-called banality of evil never existed in the first place.

Villa seems to take Eichmann’s self-portrayal as veridical. For Villa, the Eichmann book is about “the fate of conscience as a moral faculty in the midst of a generalized ‘moral collapse’ such as the one brought about by the Nazi regime. Eichmann’s case demonstrated how conscience, in such a context, is perverted: it no longer tells individuals what is right and what is wrong. But, neither is it totally silenced, for it continues to tell people like Eichmann what their ‘duty’ is.”<sup>11</sup>

This was, of course, Eichmann’s self-defense. But, what is utterly amazing is that Arendt and Villa after her seem to swallow it whole: “Eichmann, according to Arendt, did not need to ‘close his ears to the voice of conscience’, as the judgment has it, not because he had none, but because his conscience spoke with a ‘respectable voice’, with the voice of respectable society around him.”<sup>12</sup>

Not only is this disingenuous, for conscience must oppose seemingly respectable society when respectable society voices views which are morally abhorrent, but it is astonishing that Arendt and Villa are persuaded by such

<sup>10</sup> Dana R. Villa, *Politics, Philosophy and Terror: Essays on the Thought of Hannah Arendt* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), pp. 40–41.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 45.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 48–49; Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (New York: Harcourt Brace and Jovanovich, 1973), p. 455.

a diabolical twist of the meaning of the concept of conscience. What we are beginning to notice is that Eichmann's thinking powers, far from being insipid and weak, are incredibly powerful. Eichmann's thinking powers are so powerful that they can seduce the minds of intelligentsia such as Arendt and Villa. In a stroke worthy of a Hegel, he is capable of turning the meaning of the concept of conscience into its opposite. Such dialectical cleverness is only matched by the credulousness and simple-mindedness of his commentators. They even think that someone whose mind is capable of performing such feats of skill is weak-minded and thoughtless.

There is more to come. Eichmann actually justifies his thinking by reference to Kant, whose ideas on morality, with which he shows not only a passing familiarity but a studied familiarity, he has adapted to his own moral conduct. How many "banal and ordinary men" not only quote Kant in their own defense, but show how their actions correspond to his moral theory? The notion of Eichmann as being a "banal bureaucrat" begins to sound very much like Antony's characterization of Brutus as an "honorable man." The only difference is that it is Antony who speaks ironically, while Arendt and Villa appear to actually believe in spite of their own evidence that Eichmann is a simple-minded dolt.

It is only necessary to quote from Villa's account of Arendt:

As Arendt relates, Eichmann surprised everyone at the trial by coming up with a relatively correct formulation of Kant's Categorical Imperative: "I meant by my remark about Kant that the principle of my will must always be such that it can become the principle of general laws." [This shows the banality of his weak thinking powers!] He added that he had read Kant's *Critique of Practical Reason* [the everyday man's average reading matter – apparently he had not bothered with the relatively simpler *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*]. (Ibid., p. 50; *EJ*, pp. 135–36)

Despite evidence of his scholarship and abstract thinking ability, she, and apparently Villa, conclude that "she draws our attention to the morally most puzzling aspect of the case, the fact that Eichmann 'had no motives at all', that he *merely*, to put the matter colloquially, *never realized what he was doing*" (p. 51; *EJ*, p. 287).

This is only morally puzzling if one takes as a *fact* (rather than Eichmann's artful pretense) that he had no motives at all. Could a simple-minded man even come up with such a self-portrayal? Or, does this not sound more like an artful criminal, portraying himself as merely carrying out the orders of those in authority above him?

Arendt objects to Eichmann's interpretation of Kant (she thus engages in a scholarly duel with this "average man"). She objects that he has distorted it to read: "Act as if the principle of your actions were the same as that of the legislator or of the law of the land."<sup>13</sup> Eichmann's appropriation of Kant is ingenious. Her objection might be valid. But what the exchange proves beyond the shadow of a doubt is that she considers his thinking a worthy opponent for her to combat. His appropriation is original and clever beyond words. She feels that it is so powerful that it is necessary to prove it to be wrong. Who is right in this debate is not settled by this short exchange. But, it is an exchange between Kantian scholars. And, one of these Kantian scholars is "thoughtless and banal Eichmann."

There is no need to belabor the obvious. Eichmann was possessed of a very subtle and learned mind. He was by no means a representative of the "man on the street." This awareness, that he was a subtle slaughterer, certainly makes more sense out of his criminality than the thought that he was a dull bureaucratic pencil pusher. But, consider Arendt's reduction of this Kantian scholar back to the average man: "The trouble with Eichmann was precisely that so many were like him, and that the many were neither perverted or sadistic, that they were, and still are, terribly and terrifyingly *normal* . . . this new type of criminal . . . commits his crimes under circumstances that make it well-nigh impossible for him to know or feel that he is doing wrong."<sup>14</sup>

Arendt and perhaps Villa after her have swallowed Eichmann's pretense hook, line, and sinker. Not only that, but such a swallowing can now make way for further criminals to justify their actions by appealing to the moral denseness of their times and their inability therefore to know right from wrong. It is odd that some individuals, suffering from the same social pressure, were capable of telling right from wrong under these conditions. What are we to make of all this? In the case of Villa, perhaps he is persuaded by Arendt's arguments. What of Seyla Benhabib? She hypothesizes that "The phrase the 'banality of evil' was meant to refer to a *specific quality of mind and character* of the doer himself, but neither to the deeds nor to the principle behind those deeds."<sup>15</sup> Benhabib appears also to accept Arendt's

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., p. 50; *Hannah Arendt/Karl Jaspers Correspondence* (note 2 above), p. 166.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., p. 53; Hannah Arendt, *Essays in Understanding, 1930–1954*, ed. Jerome Kohn (New York: Harcourt, Brace & Company, 1994), p. 276, emphasis added.

<sup>15</sup> Benhabib, "Arendt's *Eichmann in Jerusalem*" (note 9 above), p. 74, emphasis in original.

uncritical acceptance of Eichmann's self-portrayal as an unthinking actor. She quotes Arendt approvingly:

It was precisely this lack of imagination which enabled him to sit for months on end facing a German Jew who was conducting the police interrogation . . . It was sheer thoughtlessness – something by no means identical with stupidity – that predisposed him to become one of the greatest criminals of that period. (Ibid., p. 75)

But, this is a judgment. This is Benhabib's interpretation. What enabled him to sit through such a trial might well have been strong discipline rather than a lack of imagination. Would someone with a lack of imagination come up with such an incredible appropriation of Kant? Would someone who was thoughtless been capable of reading Kant in the first place? Eichmann did not bother with Kant's simple works such as his essay "What is Enlightenment?" or the *Groundwork*, but took on Kant's work of middle difficulty. And, take note of the strange qualification of thoughtlessness to make it unequal to stupidity. There is an awareness that Eichmann is not stupid. Somehow, one can be smart and yet thoughtless. It seems that Arendt and her followers are even better than Eichmann at coming up with artful defenses of his dreadful criminality. In the end, he is referred to as "one of the greatest criminals of that period." This achievement, out of thoughtlessness, absent-mindedness, blundering?

Julia Kristeva, in her book, *Hannah Arendt*, also assumes that Arendt is correct in her assessment of Eichmann as the 'Joe average'. It seems that, after Eichmann's duping of Arendt, what results is a domino effect in which each further commentator is duped by the previous commentator's duping. Kristeva writes, "Eichmann (in my opinion) presents a persona of being a mild bureaucrat with no opinions of his own." Arendt assumes that this outward presentation is not artifice, but is the genuine Eichmann. And others, writing of Eichmann or Arendt, follow in turn, like philosophical dominos. Consider these statements of Kristeva:

Among the targets of the attacks against Arendt, her main thesis on the "banality of evil," as embodied by Eichmann, was no doubt the most difficult to dispose of [I infer from this that Kristeva finds Arendt's account of Eichmann valid and well based]. The political theorist makes herself into a narrator here and recounts the biography of an ordinary German, "neither feeble-minded nor indoctrinated nor cynical." This "average," "normal" person upset her during the entire trial because he proved himself "perfectly incapable of telling right from wrong."<sup>16</sup>

<sup>16</sup> Julia Kristeva, *Hannah Arendt*, trans. Ross Guberman (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001), p. 147; *EJ*, p. 26.

*Evidence from Arendt's Text that Eichmann was Thoughtful*

What is Arendt's evidence for Eichmann being incapable of telling right from wrong? It is Eichmann himself, his self-testimony that convinces her. Someone who putatively cannot tell right from wrong is capable of telling truth from falsehood and thus capable of telling the truth. Apparently, an incapacity to tell right from wrong is no obstacle to telling truth from falsehood. Someone who cannot tell right from wrong is considered a credible witness of himself. Is it not more likely that the person who cannot tell right from wrong also cannot tell truth from falsehood? Or, is it not more plausible that the person can tell right from wrong and can also tell truth from falsehood and is simply lying? Why would one bend over backwards to accept someone's self-testimony that implies that they cannot tell right from wrong? Is it not rather *prima facie* suspect that someone is lying when they allege that they cannot discern that what they are doing is wrong? Is it not uncritical to accept that they are offering truthful testimony when the testimony that they are presenting clearly has the motive of self exoneration? Would all of this not be more plausible to account for on the hypothesis of skillful pretense?

Eichmann's statements are not always inane. Consider, for example, the statement he made at the end of the war: "I will jump into my grave laughing, because the fact that I have the death of five million Jews on my conscience gives me enormous satisfaction" (*EJ*, p. 46). Is the ability to conjure up this image of jumping into his own grave and the fantastic juxtaposition of satisfaction with having death on his conscience the wit and statements of a man with feeble imagination? Is 'to jump into my grave laughing' a trite image? He also told the court in Jerusalem that "I shall gladly hang myself in public as a warning example for all anti-Semites on this earth" (*EJ*, p. 53). Again, is this ability to conjure up a public hanging to make an impression for all 'on this earth', the conjuring of a man with little or no imagination? Again, in Arendt's reading of Eichmann, the vision of himself "laughing" had given Eichmann "an extraordinary sense of elation to think that [he] was exiting from the stage in this way" (*ibid.*). To be fair, this is Arendt's attribution, but in this case since it is her attribution, he must not have appeared banal since she describes him as thinking of himself as making a *stage exit*. And she describes his interior mirth as well. Do ordinary bureaucrats imagine themselves as exiting from a stage? Are dull, insipid minds capable of extraordinary senses of elation? One is reminded

of the startled reaction – “Wally, a poet?” – of one of Wallace Stevens’ co-workers at the bank at which he worked when this co-worker attended the famous poet’s funeral. Wallace Stevens did work at a bank, but he was not an ordinary teller. Einstein also worked at a patent office.

There are other proofs of Eichmann’s extraordinariness. Eichmann did not only have the capacity for grandeur or the grand gesture. He was also the master of the concise statement, another feature of the well-honed mind. Consider his infamous statement, “A hundred dead people is a catastrophe; six million dead is a statistic.”<sup>17</sup> Is this the statement of a man with no imagination; a dull bureaucrat? A man incapable of thinking? A man capable of speaking only in clichés? Is this not the statement of a man with a mind so crisp as to be capable of reducing unimaginable horror and an unimaginable figure to a commonplace, mathematical notion? To be able to reduce unmitigated horror to a commonplace notion, a statistic, thus wrenching the horribleness out of it with one swift motion of thought, does this not take an astonishing and diabolical skill? To be able to take mass murder and reduce it to something else altogether, to a mathematical description, to be able to take bloodthirsty horror, moral evil beyond imagination, and to change it to the pure and abstract clarity of mathematics, why, this is absolute genius. How could anyone, save a swift thinker, a thinker possessing the skills of dialectical reduction, have come up with such an epigram worthy of Oscar Wilde? (Though Wilde’s mind did not take such cruel turns.) This is a thinker with a rapier wit, *par excellence*.

And, it does not stop there. For Eichmann’s selective incapacitation is used by Arendt, according to Kristeva, to conclude further that the vast majority of the Nazis were also of the same ilk. They were not moral monsters. They were simply thoughtless, absent minded bumbles, as they meticulously

<sup>17</sup> This remark is attributed to Eichmann by Simon Wiesenthal. Eleanor Ayer and Stephen Chicone write, “In order to demonstrate Eichmann’s knowledge of and participation in Hitler’s ‘Final Solution’, Wiesenthal told of a report from a Nazi meeting in Budapest, Hungary, in 1944. Some of Eichmann’s cohorts asked how many Jews had been exterminated so far. When Eichmann responded, ‘5 million’, they asked him if he were nervous about what might happen to him when Germans lost the war. Reported Wiesenthal, Eichmann gave a very astute answer that shows he knew how the world worked. ‘A hundred dead people is a catastrophe’, he said. ‘Six million dead is a statistic’.” See Eleanor Ayer and Stephen Chicone, *Holocaust: From the Ashes: 1945 and After* (Woodbridge, Conn.: Blackbirch Press, 1998), pp. 47–48.

planned and carried out their mass executions. The “excuse for Eichmann” stands for all Nazis and, as we shall see below, for all human misdeeds in the future. Consider Kristeva again:

Eichmann gave her [Arendt] the opportunity to prove that because the vast majority of those who enacted Nazism were not sadistic monsters or inveterate torturers, they shared this banal – because it was widespread and because it was often deemed innocuous – condition of renouncing personal judgment.<sup>18</sup>

Presumably this banal quality also would comfort those troubled by Hutus wielding machetes and cutting the throats of Tutsis in Rwanda. After all, it was widespread and perhaps considered innocuous inside the peer evaluation system. To be fair, Arendt did not consider that the evil that appeared in the banal form of Eichmann was other than evil. But, by cloaking evil in the terminology of the ‘banal’ she has done harm: What she wants her readers to learn from *Eichmann in Jerusalem* is “the lesson of the fearsome, word-and-thought-defying banality of evil” (*EJ*, pp. 259, 262), but this message is buried under her rhetoric. And, its word-and-thought-defying quality is simply due to Arendt having been seduced by Eichmann’s pretense that he was ordinary. If Eichmann were in fact a dull, ordinary thinker, and all of his justifications of his actions were genuine, then, it might be said – if one follows Arendt’s reasoning so far – that his evil must stem from his ordinariness. It would be a simple mistake on Arendt’s part, but the consequences of this simple mistake, this thoughtlessness on Arendt’s part, has had widespread consequences.

On the other hand, we can also separate intellectual agility from moral culpability. We can hold Eichmann as morally guilty even if we accept, her evidence to the contrary, that he was of dull normal intelligence. For Arendt and her legion of scholarly followers, one’s evil is banal or trivial if it is the product of an ordinary mind. But, why make this equation? A mass murderer, even if not an adept thinker, is nonetheless guilty of a monstrous crime which in no way is banal or ordinary. Arendt is saying that an ordinary person can commit mass murder. This flies in the face of the concept of the normal or ordinary. An ordinary person cannot commit mass murder. If one commits mass murder, one by definition steps outside the bounds of normality. A norm is a standard either of what is considered average or most common or it is a standard of what is considered acceptable or good. Normalcy has two

<sup>18</sup> Kristeva (note 16 above), pp. 148–49.

meanings: (1) Something is normal in terms of being considered common or typical in which case mass murder must be abnormal; (2) Something is normal as in the medical description of normal as applied to physical health to indicate good health. In the case of the medical use of the term ‘normal’ to stand for good, Eichmann’s actions could not be taken as normal.

*The Influence of Arendt on Holocaust Studies*

While it would take us too far astray to trace all of the premises and the consequences of Arendt’s writings, we can focus for a brief moment on a well-known case of these consequences, the work of Daniel Goldhagen: In a book entitled *The “Goldhagen Effect,”* several scholars make reference to Hannah Arendt. Omer Bartov refers to the notorious work of Stanley Milgram. He points out that Milgram “concludes 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 [in Milgram’s experiment] did so out of a sense of obligation – a conception of his duties as a subject – and not from any peculiarly aggressive tendencies.” Hence, Milgram writes, “the most fundamental lesson of our study” is that “ordinary people, simply doing their jobs, and without any particular hostility on their part, can become agents in a terrible destructive process.”<sup>19</sup>

This concept of the ordinary totally excludes moral thinking from the domain of the ordinary or the normal. Anyone can, without hostility, perform mass murder. First of all, how in the world can one know that someone who on the surface displays no hostility is without hostility? Such a statement shows only the most woeful ignorance of psychology. Second, all of Milgram’s subjects are aware they are participating in a study. One cannot then say that this is how they would act in real life. Third, if they would act so in real life, then how does this mean that they are ordinary? All such subjects who would act in such a way to produce pain cannot be taken to be normal or ordinary just because of their behavior. Even if it were true that the majority of subjects behave so as to condone the inflicting of pain, that does not mean that these subjects are normal. It might only signify something

<sup>19</sup> Omer Bartov, “Reception and Perception: Goldhagen’s Holocaust and the World,” in Geoff Eley (ed.), *The “Goldhagen Effect”* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2000), p. 79; Stanley Milgram, *Obedience to Authority: An Experimental View* (New York: Harper Collins, 1983), p. xii.

about the abnormality of both this study taking place and the abnormality of this period of “civilization.” That subjects who do not consider morality are in the majority does not make such thinking ordinary.

How many others have been influenced by Arendt’s thesis? Browning reaches similar conclusions: “If the men of Reserve Police Battalion 101 could become killers under such circumstances, what group of men cannot?”<sup>20</sup> Such analyses, devoid of moral scrutiny, find human behavior fatalistically inclined to obey authority. While not sanctioning evil-doing, such analyses tend to exonerate it and remove the moral sanctions that might be instrumental in preventing it from occurring in the first place.

According to Michael Morgan, Richard L. Rubenstein argues that “the extermination process [is] the work not of fanatics or maniacs, but rather of normal bureaucrats.”<sup>21</sup> In Morgan’s view, Emil Fackenheim takes part of Arendt’s thesis and couples it with the totalitarian system such that “horrific actions were performed willingly, knowingly and intentionally by ordinary people” (p. 186). Where is morality in all this? What makes the performers ordinary? That they held down normal jobs? In that case, Hitler was normal for he was a head of State.

So long as we have totalitarianism and ordinary people, we have evil. Morality, it seems, is in slumberland. But, the crucial part of the thesis, that these individuals were “ordinary,” is simply another bastard child of Hannah Arendt’s illicit conclusion, a conclusion that Eichmann was an ordinary, dull bureaucrat, a conclusion that has had startling and widespread consequences on the literature of evil.

### *An Analysis of Arendt*

What of Arendt, since the others are mere followers of her conclusions? Hannah Arendt’s case is difficult to decipher. On the one hand, a subtle thinker; on the other, easily taken in by Nazi performances. In her impressionable years, she was under the spell of Heidegger; later, at the trial, she falls under Eichmann’s spell. But, does she? In her confidential correspondence with

<sup>20</sup> Bartov (p. 80) cites Browning; see Christopher R. Browning, *Ordinary Men: Reserve Police Battalion 101 and the Final Solution in Poland* (New York: Harper Collins, 1992), p. 189.

<sup>21</sup> Michael L. Morgan, *Beyond Auschwitz: Post-Holocaust Jewish Thought in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), p. 104.

Mary McCarthy, she makes a remarkable revelation:

you were the only reader to understand what otherwise I have never admitted – namely that I wrote this book [*EJ*] in a curious state of euphoria. And that ever since I did it, I feel – after twenty years [since the war] – light-hearted about the whole matter. Don't tell anybody, is it not proof positive that I have no "soul"?<sup>22</sup>

What does this mean? To me, it does seem odd that the subject of Eichmann and his brutal co-murder of millions of people would provoke a state of euphoria. And, that such a feeling lingered for twenty years. While it may not prove that Hannah Arendt did not have a soul, it does seem to suggest that she did not seem to be strongly affected by Eichmann's misdeeds.<sup>23</sup> Her not having the appropriate affect might suggest why she thought of Eichmann as a banal creature. Since his misdeeds did not occasion any great outrage and sadness in her, perhaps he struck her as inconsequential, even humorous – in the manner of a Charlie Chaplin portrayal of Hitler – for such a reading of Eichmann might produce light-heartedness. *It might, in the end, be Hannah Arendt's lack of appropriate emotional response to Eichmann that caused her to think of him as trivial.* This is not necessarily contradictory to her being taken in by his act. She may well have taken him to be a small-time bureaucrat and also have found his actions laughable. Not his actions, perhaps, but that he, a small-time bureaucrat had been the one responsible for millions of murders. Perhaps, it was this fact that occasioned her euphoria. Her euphoria was an effect of the original misreading of Eichmann as an inconsequential figure with limited thinking abilities. And, the incongruity of such a figure as this being responsible for millions of murders – this – is what tickled Hannah Arendt's concept of the ludicrous and what continued to amuse her twenty years on.

This interpretation of Hannah Arendt's confidential comments to her friend seems to make more sense than the interpretation ventured by

<sup>22</sup> *Between Friends: The Correspondence of Hannah Arendt and Mary McCarthy* (note 5 above), p. 168.

<sup>23</sup> If Eichmann's deeds did indeed provoke outrage and sadness in Arendt, this is not what she writes. From a psychoanalytic perspective, Arendt's self-description of a light-hearted response could be analyzed as her attempt to cope with her outrage and sadness by closing her heart. Nonetheless, history is left with her interpretation of Eichmann (whether or not her heart closure is due to a coping mechanism). Arendt is not an ordinary survivor; she is a philosopher. She has a responsibility to reflect deeply or else she herself is guilty of thoughtlessness. Thoughtlessness in a philosopher is not acceptable.

Seyla Benhabib. For Benhabib, “The use of the term ‘light-hearted’, like the phrase ‘the banality of evil’, is a terminological infelicity; [such is the liberty afforded to philosophers] she did not mean that she was joyful or carefree about the whole matter; she meant rather that her heart was lightened by having shed a burden.”<sup>24</sup> This, to my mind, reads too much into Arendt’s text. The text in no way implies that Arendt had a burden in the first place and then was glad to have shed it. From Arendt’s text we learn that the feeling of light-heartedness was already *present* during the writing of *EJ* and *remained* twenty years later. There is no evidence in Arendt’s text for this psychoanalytic motivation attributed to her by Benhabib. On the contrary, Arendt’s confidential confession to her friend is consistent with the sometimes sarcastic tone of the text of *EJ*, of her ridicule of the German of the prosecutor, of the removed tone of the work as a whole.

There is further textual evidence for Arendt’s “comic” interpretation of Eichmann. Elisabeth Young-Bruehl writes: “Arendt had realized how pathetically comic he [Eichmann] was.”<sup>25</sup> Where did this comic reading of Eichmann come from? Young Bruehl continues: “Arendt told Jaspers that her husband, [Blücher], had often considered the possibility that evil ‘was a superficial phenomenon’ and it was this formula that prompted Arendt to give her book the subtitle ‘The Banality of Evil’ ” (ibid.). According to Young-Bruehl, both Hannah Arendt’s husband and she took confidence in their concept from reading a passage from Brecht and “Arendt cited Brecht . . . in an interview and then added her own remark, worthy of Eichmann himself, that she thought it was important in assessing Hitler and his like to remember that ‘no matter what he does and if he killed ten million people, he is still a clown’ ” (p. 331). And again, Arendt herself in a letter to Mary McCarthy: “I am half-way recovered from the Eichmann torture which was not without a macabre touch of humour.”<sup>26</sup>

What of Arendt’s lack of appropriate affect both during the trial and afterwards?

<sup>24</sup> Benhabib, “Arendt’s *Eichmann in Jerusalem*,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Hannah Arendt*, p. 66.

<sup>25</sup> Elisabeth Young-Bruehl, *Hannah Arendt: For Love of the World* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992), p. 330.

<sup>26</sup> *Between Friends: The Correspondence of Hannah Arendt and Mary McCarthy*, p. 119.

They hanged Eichmann yesterday; my reaction was curious, rather shrugging, [in a remark worthy of Eichmann himself], Well, one more life – what difference does it make? . . . To execute a man and excite a reaction of indifference is to bring people too close to the way the Nazis felt about human life – “One more gone.”

I am glad that they hanged Eichmann. Not that it mattered.<sup>27</sup>

What do these sayings imply about Hannah Arendt’s heart? Did she lack an appropriate ethical sensibility? Were her thoughtless comments due to the lack of an appropriate ethical sensitivity? (her own self-analysis) Or, was her lack of an appropriate ethical sensitivity due to her thoughtlessness? According to Arendt’s critique of Kant (leaving aside the question of whether this is a correct interpretation of Kant), Kant once observed that “stupidity is caused by a wicked heart.” This is not true, she contended, “Absence of thought is not stupidity, it can be found in highly intelligent people, and a wicked heart is not its cause, it is probably the other way round, that wickedness may be caused by the absence of thought.”<sup>28</sup> Arendt, taking her cue from Eichmann’s performance in Jerusalem, thought the origin of evil was thoughtlessness. That thoughtlessness was the cause of a wicked heart. That if Eichmann had been more *thoughtful*, none of this would ever have happened.

Eichmann, to my mind, was extremely thoughtful. His thoughtfulness was responsible for a performance of thoughtlessness flawed only by betraying flashes of wicked humor, mock martyrdom, and brilliant self-serving adaptations of Kantian philosophy. Why Arendt did not notice these inconsistencies with his self-portrayal as a simple-minded clod is a commentary on *her* thoughtlessness. And, since Arendt can hardly be perceived as unintelligent, the only explanation that makes sense is that Arendt’s thoughtlessness is a result of her having a wicked heart – a fear of which she virtually reveals to her correspondent in that moment of revelatory candor when she confessed to her light-hearted response to Eichmann.

I am inclined to agree with Mary McCarthy’s critique of her friend Hannah Arendt: “Here I rather agree with Kant . . . that stupidity is caused, not by brain failure, but by a wicked heart. Insensitivity . . . It seems to me that what you are saying is that Eichmann lacks an inherent human quality: the capacity for thought, consciousness – conscience. But then isn’t he a monster simply?”<sup>29</sup>

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 134–35, 136.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. xxvii–xxviii. Carol Brightman cites this quotation from Arendt.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 296–97.

And Jaspers, in one of his more illuminating remarks on the issue:

Eichmann has shown still other aspects of himself, among them some personally brutal ones. Such a functionary of bureaucratic murder cannot, after all, be without personally inhuman qualities, which under the proper circumstances come to the surface, even though under “normal” conditions he would not have become a criminal.<sup>30</sup>

### Conclusion

What to conclude from all of this? The central point I would like to make is that ordinariness is not an excuse for crime. We are all ordinary men and women: to put it graphically, the King sits on two thrones. *But just as all men and women are equal in moral worth; so all men and women are equal in moral responsibility.* That someone, a group of people or a whole culture, commits evil is not forgivable because that someone, that group or that whole culture, is made up of ordinary people.

Our morality is in danger of being extinguished. The mass crimes that have been perpetrated, whether in Nazi Germany or Rwanda, are not somehow excusable because they were all accomplished by ordinary men and women. This is the terrible legacy of Arendt’s flawed concept of the banality of evil. Evil is never banal. Evil by definition is to be taken seriously. Evil is not a subject of light comedy. Hannah Arendt may have been possessed of a jaded sensibility and may have been highly gullible. This combination, of a jaded sensibility and a highly impressionable nature, may have resulted in her reading of Adolf Eichmann as a small-time bureaucrat who perpetrated large crimes the incongruity of which occasioned her satire and aroused her light-heartedness. But, that is not a sufficient reason why we, her readers and the readers of those who comment upon her, should persist in this interpretive folly. For it is in the mass merchandising of evil as commonplace that our moral senses become vitiated.

However commonplace evil becomes, it must never be thought of as ordinary or as banal. If evil is perceived as ordinary or banal, that perception is warped. The very thought of evil as ordinary is a monstrous thought. If evil is perceived of as perpetrated by ordinary men and women, that is the beginning of evil. Evil must always be thought of as perverted, as abnormal, as distorted. It cannot become the norm. If evil *is* the norm, this proves that

<sup>30</sup> *Hannah Arendt/Karl Jaspers Correspondence*, p. 439.

the times are evil. This is the message of *Macbeth*. That evil is the norm does not prove ordinariness or normality. It proves that morality has disappeared or has gone underground.

Goldhagen's Germans were not ordinary Germans. They were moral monsters. They were ordinary only in the sense of having two ears and two eyes. But their hearts were black. If this blackness of heart was shared by a majority of Germans, that does not make it ordinary. It means that immorality was paramount. The mass slaughters in Rwanda do not mean that they are a measure of normality. It is a measure of immorality, however widespread and acceptable it has become. Evil is never banal. Hannah Arendt was taken in by a performance, not a reality. Eichmann was an evil genius, not a dull bureaucrat. Those who commit murders, regardless of what occupations they come from, are not ordinary men and women. They are *inhuman*. They may not possess Eichmann's wit, his gift at repartée or his thespian abilities, and so they may not be evil geniuses. But, they are evil accomplices and can never be thought of as ordinary men and women. The banality of evil is Hannah Arendt's legacy. It needs to be replaced with the monstrosity and the inhumanity of evil. We also need to be more critical judges of theatrical performances.

### Postscript on a Pseudo-Project

The question arises in the minds of Arendt's commentators whether she abandoned her original concept of 'radical evil' or whether her concept of the 'banality of evil' is a continuation of her concept of radical evil. If, as is the thesis of this article, her concept of the banality of evil is an overlay which is a false deduction from Eichmann's acting performance in Jerusalem, this question is a pseudo-project. Nevertheless, it is worth analyzing for what it might disclose.

According to Julia Kristeva, "Arendt posited that radical evil . . . encourages [men] to destroy mercilessly a segment of humanity. Arendt believed in the existence of an 'incalculable evil that men are capable of bringing about' . . . She associated this radical evil with what Kant called 'absolute evil' . . . Arendt maintained, for her part, because its horror, beyond its anti-Semitism alone, is in the realm of the unreal."<sup>31</sup>

<sup>31</sup> Julia Kristeva, *Hannah Arendt* (note 16 above), pp. 143–44.

It is a real question, to my mind, how the existence of radical evil can encourage men to do anything. This seems a flip side to the “banality of evil” explanation. Human responsibility is diminished because this time it is radical evil that is responsible.

Later, in a response to Scholem, Arendt alters her view about radical evil. She says, “It is my opinion now that evil is never ‘radical’, that it is only extreme, and that it possesses neither depth nor any demonic dimension. . . . It is ‘thought-defying’, as I said, because thought tries to reach some depth, to go to the roots, and the moment it concerns itself with evil, it is frustrated because there is nothing. That is its ‘banality’. Only the good has depth and can be radical.”<sup>32</sup> *It is highly significant to take note here that Arendt is discussing evil itself as banal, not the personality of the evil-doer.*

In her Gifford lectures, she states: “In my report of [the Eichmann trial] I spoke of ‘the banality of evil’. [Again, it must be noted that she is not speaking about Eichmann’s banal personality, but of the nature of evil itself as banal.] Behind that phrase, I held no thesis or doctrine, although I was dimly aware of the fact that it went counter to our tradition of thought – literary, theological, or philosophic – about the phenomenon of evil.”<sup>33</sup> Should we take her ‘dim awareness’ as a thoughtful reflection on evil? “What I was confronted with was utterly different [from villains who made their motives clear such as Iago] and still undeniably factual [she uncritically accepts Eichmann’s presentation of himself as factual]. I was struck by a manifest shallowness in the doer that made it impossible to trace the uncontestable evil of his deeds to any deeper level of roots or motives [such was the brilliance of the performance]. The deeds were monstrous, but the doer – at least the very effective one now on trial [notice the unwitting acknowledgement of the prowess of this dull one] – was quite ordinary, common-place, and neither demonic nor monstrous. [Did she expect him to foam at the mouth?] There was no sign in him of firm ideological convictions or of specific evil motives [did she expect him to indict himself?]” (ibid., p. 4).

<sup>32</sup> Julia Kristeva quotes this famous passage (ibid., p. 152). Michael Morgan (note 21 above, p. 223) finds this quotation in Hannah Arendt, *The Jew as Pariah*, ed. Ron H. Feldman (New York: Grove Press, 1978), pp. 250–51. According to Morgan (p. 223, n. 61), this passage was first printed in *Encounter*, January 1964, pp. 51–66, and this excerpt from Arendt’s famous letter to Gershom Scholem was dated July 24, 1963.

<sup>33</sup> Hannah Arendt, *The Life of the Mind* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & Company, 1971), p. 3.

In my view, once again, she has taken Eichmann's performance as reality. If one assumes that at the root of Eichmann's motivation is banality, his evil will seem of course to be empty. But, why take a performance to be real? The Nazi justification of its destruction of Jewry speaks for itself. There does not need to be an additional explanation (radical evil) or no explanation (empty banality). The entire project of either distinguishing between or conflating radical evil and banal evil is indeed a pseudo-project.

For Villa, the "banality of evil" named Eichmann's evil, not the evil of the perpetrators or the Holocaust in general. This is also in accord with Jaspers' view.<sup>34</sup> But, this is not how Arendt's thesis of the banality of evil has come to influence the world. And, if it is meant to apply only to Eichmann and to no one else as a unique category of explanation, this would make Eichmann out to be a peculiar monster. It is evident, both from the passage in her letter to Scholem and from her Gifford lectures quoted above, that her concept of the banality of evil is not limited, in her view, to being applied to Eichmann alone. Morgan argues that the thrust of Arendt's analysis of Eichmann is not to limit this analysis to him alone: "The trouble with Eichmann was precisely that so many were like him, and that the many were neither perverted or sadistic, that they were, and still are, terribly and terrifyingly normal . . . this new type of criminal . . . commits his crimes under circumstances that make it well-nigh impossible for him to know or feel that he is doing wrong."<sup>35</sup>

It is this extension of Arendt's thesis that is worrying. For such an extension can now be used to justify and mitigate any present and future crimes.

According to Morgan, Young-Bruehl distinguishes between Arendt's earlier concept of radical evil and her later concept of banal evil by arguing that radical evil is "rooted in motives so base as to be beyond human comprehension . . . [while in the case of Eichmann] motives become superfluous, evil is banal" (p. 20). Morgan comments that this is invalid because the earlier concept of Nazi crimes being motiveless only meant motiveless in terms of a lust for power or greed (ibid.). While it seems to me that Morgan has misunderstood Young-Bruehl as she plainly states that the motives are beyond human comprehension not that they are motiveless –

<sup>34</sup> Villa, *Politics, Philosophy and Terror* (note 10 above), p. 41; *Hannah Arendt/Karl Jaspers Correspondence*, p. 542.

<sup>35</sup> Morgan, *Beyond Auschwitz*, p. 53; see also Arendt, *Essays in Understanding* (note 14 above), p. 276.

and, in any case, why should a lack of lust for power or greed imply that there are no other motives – the main point is that to take Eichmann's actions as motiveless is to accept at face value Eichmann's self-defense. For Morgan, if Young-Bruehl's interpretation is correct, the shift from the language of radical evil to banal evil is only terminological. In my view, there is a genuine difference in Arendt's earlier and later versions of evil, for radical evil means for Arendt "extreme and with positive content" and since Eichmann's crime is evil but thoughtless and hence without positive content, his crime cannot be "radical evil" (Morgan, pp. 21–22). Again, the problem is due to taking Eichmann's self-portrayal as sincere. The entire concept of the banality of evil is based on the notion of action without motive, a totally empty action. It is a concept that is based on a false premise, in fact, an empty premise. *If in fact there were such an action which was without motive, it would demarcate an evil of momentous proportions. For it is exactly the absence of a conscience that marks the presence of an evil personality.* If this absence of conscience is of momentous proportions, the evil of the personality is magnified by the proportions of its absence. From this standpoint, Eichmann represents the face of evil itself.

There is no doubt in my mind that the defense of empty action that only follows orders is a deceit. It is simply a means of abrogating responsibility. To build an entire interpretive category on a deceit gives a posthumous victory to Hitler. There is another explanation for the seeming banality or routineness with which Nazi murderers butchered their victims. To make what is murderous into something routine is simply another way of psychologically tolerating the commission of crimes too horrendous to commit. There is no doubt that the attempt to create the impression of banality is designed to accomplish this end as well. But, it is really two sides of the same coin. Banality is a way of making what is unspeakable possible. At the same time it is a defense of one's unspeakable acts. If one does not possess an evil motive, one is guiltless. One is simply following orders. Banality can fulfill both functions. It can make the unspeakable speakable and acceptable at the time of its commission and it can exonerate the commission of evil in memory. *It can also immunize the mind against feeling outrage against the commission of evil in the future.* To accept banality as a true explanation of the reason for the action in the first place is a mistake of major magnitude. To say that it was the explanation is a deceit of major magnitude.

All of the discussion of whether Arendt changed from “radical evil” to “banal evil” is based on there even being a genuine concept of banal evil in the first place. Banal evil is a fabrication twice invented. It was invented by perpetrators to enable them to accept their misdeeds. It was invented by perpetrators to defend themselves from accusations. There is no need to “invent” an explanation for the evil of the Holocaust. The Nazis have already supplied it: virulent anti-Semitism. While it may seem to some that the evils of the Holocaust are incomprehensible, this only means that to those who grasp at the straw of incomprehensibility cannot themselves comprehend the virulence of anti-Semitism. It is difficult indeed for good people to comprehend evil. This does not mean that evil is incomprehensible. Anti-Semitism was motive enough for the authors of the Holocaust. These master minds were not masterminding a motiveless slaughter. To them what they were doing was eminently comprehensible. It would behoove good people to understand the motives of evil people and not spin their wheels inventing motivations or the lack of motivations for them. There is no need to explain the seeming incomprehensibility of the existence of evil. For an explanation of the motivation to perform evil deeds, one need only read the writings or the recorded sayings of its perpetrators.

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