
HANNAH ARENDT

Hannah Arendt (1906-1975) was a philosopher, journalist, and public intellectual who did groundbreaking work on totalitarianism and other modern developments. Born in Hanover, Germany, she received her doctorate from the University of Heidelberg at the age of twenty-two after studying under Martin Heidegger, Edmund Husserl, and Karl Jaspers. She went to France in 1933 to escape the Nazis and worked to emigrate Jewish refugee children to Palestine. In 1941 she fled to the United States and became a citizen in 1951. Arendt was research director of the Conference on Jewish Relations, chief editor of Schocken Books, and later a visiting professor at Princeton, Columbia, and Chicago. She held professorships at Berkeley and the New School for Social Research. Among her books are *Origins of Totalitarianism* (1951), *On Violence* (1970), and the posthumous *Life of the Mind* (1978). Her papers are now part of the holdings of the Library of Congress.

Arendt's most famous book is the modern classic, *Eichmann in Jerusalem* (1963), which she wrote after reporting for *The New Yorker* magazine on the 1961 war crimes trial of Adolf Eichmann. Eichmann—the S.S. Lieutenant-Colonel who was chief of the Jewish Office of the Gestapo during World War II and implemented the “Final Solution” that attempted the total extermination of European Jewry—fled to Argentina after World War II. In 1960 he was kidnapped and brought to Israel. After nine months on trial in Jerusalem District Court, he was convicted on most counts. Eichmann was hanged and cremated by the state of Israel on May 31, 1962.

Eichmann was accused of crimes against the Jewish people, crimes against humanity, and war crimes. The prosecution tried to portray him as a monster on the order of Hitler and Himmler. But what came out was equally discomfiting. Eichmann was not a monster but a functionary, and his evil, while extraordinarily evil, was the evil of a very ordinary man. This conclusion led Arendt to her controversial but compelling account of “the banality of evil,” a term that emerged in her correspondence with the philosopher Karl Jaspers.

More Dangerous Are the Common Men

“We have to see these things in their total banality, in their prosaic triviality, because that's what truly characterizes them.” —Karl Jaspers, 1946 letter to Arendt

“Monsters exist, but they are too few in number to be truly dangerous. More dangerous are the common men, the functionaries ready to believe and to act without asking questions.” —Primo Levi, *Survival in Auschwitz*

“How can one understand and, perhaps, forestall extraordinary evil? By getting a better understanding of how ordinary behavior can contribute to evil.”

—Fred Emil Katz, *Ordinary People and Extraordinary Evil*

The purpose of *Eichmann in Jerusalem* was “to destroy the legend of the greatness of evil, of the demonic force.” —Hannah Arendt, *New York Review of Books*, 1978

More Dangerous Are the Common Men, continued

"The basic story of *Eichmann in Jerusalem* is the mutual incomprehension of the parties involved in the trial. Not only did Eichmann not understand what was happening to and around him, but also the judges, the prosecution, and indeed the audience did not grasp what Eichmann really represented. At his trial, Eichmann displayed none of the demonic character attributed to him; the chasm between the fumbling fool in the docket and the satanic anti-hero conjured up by the prosecution's rhetoric seemed unbridgeable."
—Charles T. Mathewes

Eichmann in Jerusalem

The German text of the taped police examination, conducted from May 29, 1960, to January 17, 1961, each page corrected and approved by Eichmann, constitutes a veritable gold mine for a psychologist—provided he is wise enough to understand that the horrible can be not only ludicrous but outright funny. Some of the comedy cannot be conveyed in English, because it lies in Eichmann's heroic fight with the German language, which invariably defeats him. It is funny when he speaks, *passim*, of "winged words" (*geflügelte Worte*, a German colloquialism for famous quotes from the classics) when he means stock phrases, *Redensarten*, or slogans, *Schlagworte*. . . . Dimly aware of a defect that must have plagued him even in school—it amounted to a mild case of aphasia—he apologized, saying, "Officialese [*Amtssprache*] is my only language." But the point here is that officialese became his language because he was genuinely incapable of uttering a single sentence that was not a cliché. . . .

To be sure, the judges were right when they finally told the accused that all he had said was "empty talk"—except that they thought the emptiness was feigned, and that the accused wished to cover up other thoughts which, though hideous, were not empty. This supposition seems refuted by the striking consistency with which Eichmann, despite his rather bad memory, repeated word for word the same stock phrases and self-invented clichés (when he did succeed in constructing a sentence of his own, he repeated it until it became a cliché) each time he referred to an incident or event of importance to him. Whether writing his memoirs in Argentina or in Jerusalem, whether speaking to the police examiner or to the court, what he said was always the same, expressed in the same words. The longer one listened to him, the more obvious it became that his inability to speak was closely connected with an inability to think, namely, to think from the standpoint of somebody else. No communication was possible with him, not because he lied but because he was surrounded by the most reliable of all safeguards against the words and the presence of others, and hence against reality as such.

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Despite all the efforts of the prosecution, everybody could see that this man was not a "monster," but it was difficult indeed not to suspect that he was a clown. And since this suspicion would have been fatal to the whole enterprise, and was also rather hard to sustain in view of the sufferings he and his like had caused to millions of people, his worst clowneries were hardly noticed and almost never reported.

Good society

Eichmann, in contrast to other elements in the Nazi movement, had always been overawed by "good society," and the politeness he often showed to German-speaking Jewish functionaries was to a large extent the result of his recognition that he was

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dealing with people who were socially his superiors. . . . What he fervently believed in up to the end was success, the chief standard of "good society" as he knew it. Typical was his last word on the subject of Hitler. . . . Hitler, he said, "may have been wrong all down the line, but one thing is beyond dispute: the man was able to work his way up from lance corporal in the German Army to Führer of a people of almost eighty million. . . . His success alone proved to me that I should subordinate myself to this man." His conscience was indeed set at rest when he saw the zeal and eagerness with which "good society" everywhere reacted as he did. He 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.

Duties of a Law-Abiding Citizen

So Eichmann's opportunities for feeling like Pontius Pilate were many, and as the months and the years went by, he lost the need to feel anything at all. This was the way things were, this was the new law of the land, based on the Führer's order; whatever he did he did, as far as he could see, as a law-abiding citizen. He did his *duty*, as he told the police and the court over and over again; he not only obeyed *orders*, he also obeyed the *law*. . . .

[A] law was a law, there could be no exceptions. In Jerusalem, he admitted only two such exceptions during the time when "eighty million Germans" had each had "his decent Jew": he had helped a half-Jewish cousin, and a Jewish couple in Vienna for whom his uncle had intervened. This inconsistency still made him feel somewhat uncomfortable, and when he was questioned about it during cross-examination, he became openly apologetic: he had "confessed his sins" to his superiors. This uncompromising attitude toward the performance of his murderous duties damned him in the eyes of the judges more than anything else, which was comprehensible, but in his own eyes it was precisely what justified him, as it had once silenced whatever conscience he might have had left. No exceptions—this was the proof that he had always acted against his "inclinations," whether they were sentimental or inspired by interest, that he had always done his "duty."

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That Eichmann had at all times done his best to make the Final Solution final was therefore not in dispute. The question was only whether this was indeed proof of his fanaticism, his boundless hatred of Jews, and whether he had lied to the police and committed perjury in court when he claimed he had always obeyed orders. No other explanation ever occurred to the judges, who tried so hard to understand the accused, and treated him with a consideration and an authentic, shining humanity such as he had probably never encountered before in his whole life. . . . That they never did come to understand him may be proof of the "goodness" of the three men, of their untroubled and slightly old-fashioned faith in the moral foundations of their profession. For the sad and very uncomfortable truth of the matter probably was that it was not his fanaticism but his very conscience that prompted Eichmann to adopt his uncompromising attitude during the last year of the war, as it had prompted him to move in the opposite direction for a short time three years before. Eichmann knew that Himmler's orders ran directly counter to the Führer's order.

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In Jerusalem, confronted with documentary proof of his extraordinary loyalty to Hitler and the Führer's order, Eichmann tried a number of times to explain that during the Third Reich "the Führer's words had the force of law" (*Führerworte haben Gesetzeskraft*), which meant, among other things, that if the order came directly from Hitler it did not have to be in writing. He tried to explain that this was why he had never asked for a written order from Hitler (no such document relating to the Final Solution has ever been found; probably it never existed), but had demanded to see a written order from Himmler. To be sure, this was a fantastic state of affairs, and whole libraries of very "learned" juridical comment have been written, all demonstrating that the Führer's words, his oral pronouncements, were the basic law of the land. Within this "legal" framework, every order contrary in letter or spirit to a word spoken by Hitler was, by definition, unlawful.

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. . . To be sure, it was not merely Eichmann's conviction that Himmler was now giving "criminal" orders that determined his actions. But the personal element undoubtedly involved was not fanaticism, it was his genuine, "boundless and immoderate admiration for Hitler" (as one of the defense witnesses called it)—for the man who had made it "from lance corporal to Chancellor of the Reich." It would be idle to try to figure out which was stronger in him, his admiration for Hitler or his determination to remain a law-abiding citizen of the Third Reich when Germany was already in ruins. Both motives came into play once more during the last days of the war, when he was in Berlin and saw with violent indignation how everybody around him was sensibly enough getting himself fixed up with forged papers before the arrival of the Russians or the Americans. A few weeks later, Eichmann, too, began to travel under an assumed name, but by then Hitler was dead, and the "law of the land" was no longer in existence, and he, as he pointed out, was no longer bound by his oath. For the oath taken by the members of the S.S. differed from the military oath sworn by the soldiers in that it bound them only to Hitler, not to Germany.

The case of the conscience of Adolf Eichmann, which is admittedly complicated but is by no means unique, is scarcely comparable to the case of the German generals, one of whom, when asked at Nuremberg, "How was it possible that all you honorable generals could continue to serve a murderer with such unquestioning loyalty?," replied that it was "not the task of a soldier to act as judge over his supreme commander. Let history do that or God in heaven." (Thus General Alfred Jodl, hanged at Nuremberg.) Eichmann, much less intelligent and without any education to speak of, at least dimly realized that it was not an order but a law which had turned them all into criminals. The distinction between an order and the Führer's word was that the latter's validity was not limited in time and space, which is the outstanding characteristic of the former. This is also the true reason why the Führer's order for the Final Solution was followed by a huge shower of regulations and directives, all drafted by expert lawyers and legal advisers, not by mere administrators; this order, in contrast to ordinary orders, was treated as a law. Needless to add, the resulting legal paraphernalia, far from being a mere symptom of German pedantry or thoroughness, served most effectively to give the whole business its outward appearance of legality.

And just as the law in civilized countries assumes that the voice of conscience tells everybody "Thou shalt not kill," even though man's natural desires and inclinations may at times be murderous, so the law of Hitler's land demanded that the voice of conscience tell everybody: "Thou shalt kill," although the organizers of the massacres knew full well that murder is against the normal desires and inclinations of most people. Evil in the Third Reich had lost the quality by which most people recognize

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it—the quality of temptation. Many Germans and many Nazis, probably an overwhelming majority of them, must have been tempted *not* to murder, *not* to rob, *not* to let their neighbors go off to their doom (for that the Jews were transported to their doom they knew, of course, even though many of them may not have known the gruesome details), and not to become accomplices in all these crimes by benefiting from them. But, God knows, they had learned how to resist temptation.

At the Gallows

Adolf Eichmann went to the gallows with great dignity. He had asked for a bottle of red wine and had drunk half of it. He refused the help of the Protestant minister, the Reverend William Hull, who offered to read the Bible with him: he had only two more hours to live, and therefore no “time to waste.” He walked the fifty yards from his cell to the execution chamber calm and erect, with his hands bound behind him. When the guards tied his ankles and knees, he asked them to loosen the bonds so that he could stand straight. “I don’t need that,” he said when the black hood was offered him. He was in complete command of himself, nay, he was more: he was completely himself. Nothing could have demonstrated this more convincingly than the grotesque silliness of his last words. He began by stating emphatically that he was a *Gottgläubiger*, to express in common Nazi fashion that he was no Christian and did not believe in life after death. He then proceeded: “After a short while, gentlemen, *we shall all meet again*. Such is the fate of all men. Long live Germany, long live Argentina, long live Austria. I *shall not forget them*.” In the face of death, he had found the cliché used in funeral oratory. Under the gallows, his memory played him the last trick; he was “elated” and he forgot that this was his own funeral.

It was as though in those last minutes he was summing up the lesson that this long course in human wickedness had taught us—the lesson of the fearsome, word-and-thought-defying *banality of evil*.

From Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (New York: Penguin, 1963, 1994).

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Don't Wake the Canary

He was “a very ordinary little man.” —Bertrand Russell, on Auschwitz commandant Rudolf Höss, who supervised the execution of 2 million persons

“Half a dozen psychiatrists certified him as a ‘normal’—‘more normal, at any rate, than I am after having examined him,’ one of them was said to have exclaimed.” —Hannah Arendt on Adolf Eichmann

“In one of his articles in the French Resistance journal *Combat*, Albert Camus tells a story about Heinrich Himmler, who, under Hitler, was responsible for the humiliation, torture, and murder of millions of defenseless people. When Himmler was working near Munich and had to come home late at night, he would enter very quietly, from the rear, through the kitchen door. Before he stepped into the house he would remove his jackboots. He did not want to awaken his canary.” —Philip Hallie, “The Eye of the Hurricane”

Questions

1. What factors explain the complete suppression of Eichmann’s conscience?
2. What do you think of this idea that “extraordinary evil” can sometimes be done by very “ordinary people”?