Hannah Arendt (1906 – 1975)

The sad truth is that most evil is done by people who never make up their minds to be good or evil.[1]

Hannah Arendt was a humanist thinker who thought boldly and provocatively about our shared political and ethical world. Inspired by philosophy, Arendt warned against the political dangers of ideology, and especially its potential to abstract and obfuscate the plurality and reality of our shared world. While Hannah Arendt fiercely defended the importance of the public sphere, she was also intensely private and defended the importance of privacy and solitude as prerequisites for a public life.



Figure 1. Hannah Arendt

Childhood and Early Education

Hannah Arendt was born in Hanover, Germany, in 1906. Her father died when she was seven and she was raised by her mother, Martha Cohn Arendt. Adolf Hitler came to power in 1933, and while Arendt was researching anti-Semitic propaganda for the Zionist Federation of Germany in Berlin that year, she was denounced and briefly imprisoned by the Gestapo. On release, she fled Germany, living in Czechoslovakia and Switzerland before settling in Paris.

Under conditions of tyranny it is far easier to act than to think. Under conditions of terror, most people will comply.[2]

From Nazi-Occupied France to New York

While in France, she worked for the organization *Youth Aliyah*, which rescued Jewish youth. There she met the man who would become her second husband, Heinrich Blücher. Arendt was imprisoned in a detention camp in Gurs in southwest France. After escaping, she and Blücher fled Nazi Europe, coming to New York in 1941. Through the 1940s Arendt wrote essays on anti-Semitism, refugees, and the need for a Jewish army for *Aufbau* and other German émigré journals. She worked as an editor for Schocken Books and served as Executive Director of The Jewish Cultural Reconstruction organization.

The point is that both Hitler and Stalin held out promises of stability in order to hide their intention of creating a state of permanent instability.[3]

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[1] *The Life of the Mind*
[2] *The Human Condition*
[3] *The Origins of Totalitarianism*

Major Works

The 1950s saw the publication of Arendt's major works: *The Origins of Totalitarianism,* her insightful study of the intellectual and historical foundations of the Nazi and Stalinist regimes, and *The Human Condition*, her account of the retreat of public life in the modern age. Arendt wrote intellectual history not as a historian but as a thinker, building upon events and exemplary actions to reach original and pregnant insights about the modern predisposition to totalitarianism and threats to human freedom posed by abstraction, duty, and bourgeois morality.

> ***Before mass leaders seize the power to fit reality to their lies, their propaganda is marked by its extreme contempt for facts as such, for in their opinion fact depends entirely on the power of man who can fabricate it.***[4]

Teaching Career and Publications

Fiercely independent, Hannah Arendt never accepted a tenure-track teaching job. She was nevertheless the first woman to be named a full professor at Princeton, and also taught at the University of Chicago, University of California Berkeley, Wesleyan University, and The New School.

> ***The essence of totalitarian government, and perhaps the nature of every bureaucracy, is to make functionaries and mere cogs in the administration machinery out of men, and thus to dehumanize them.***[5]

The Eichmann Trial

In 1961 Arendt jumped at the chance to cover the trial of Adolf Eichmann, responsible for the detention and transportation of Jews to concentration camps. It would be her last opportunity, she wrote, to see a Nazi official in the flesh. Her essays on the trial appeared in *The New Yorker* and became the book *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil*. Widely misread, Arendt's writings about Eichmann unleashed a storm of controversy.

> ***What he said was always the same, expressed with the same words. The longer one listened to him, the more obvious it became that his inability to speak was closely connected with an ability to think, namely, to think from the standpoint of somebody else.***[6]



Figure 2. Adolf Eichmann

[4] *The Origins of Totalitarianism*
[5] *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil*
[6] Ibid.

> ***The trouble with Eichmann was precisely that so many were like him, and that the many were neither perverted nor sadistic, that they were, and still are, terribly and terrifyingly normal. From the viewpoint of our legal institutions and of our moral standards of judgment, this normality was much more terrifying than all the atrocities put together.***[7]

In the spring of 1961, *The New Yorker* sent Hannah Arendt to Jerusalem to report on the trial of Adolf Eichmann. The desk of IV-B-4 in the R.S.H.A, to which Eichmann had been appointed in March 1941, had the task of regulating "Jewish affairs and evacuations." Until July 1944, it played a central role in organizing the deportation of European Jews to the killing centers. Eichmann was convicted on fifteen charges, among which were crimes against the Jewish people, crimes against humanity, and crimes of war. After the trial, which lasted from April to December 1961, Eichmann was sentenced to death. Israel's Supreme Court confirmed the judgment, and Eichmann was hanged on May 31,1962. Arendt's report on the trial appeared in *The New Yorker* as a series of articles in 1963. From these articles she later published a book entitled *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil.*

The Banality of Evil

> ***A lack of common measure between the gigantic scale on which the crimes (the evil) were committed and the insignificance (the banality) of the persons who were among those most responsible.***[8]

Arendt's term, the "banality of evil," does not refer to a theory or a doctrine, but fits "a phenomenon which stared one in the face at the trial" (Arendt, 1992: 287). It was the experience of an abyss: a lack of common measure between the gigantic scale on which the crimes (the evil) were committed and the insignificance (the banality) of the persons who were among those most responsible. Confronted with Eichmann in the flesh, Arendt felt it impossible to ascribe the phenomenon she observed to "any particularity of wickedness, pathology, or ideological conviction of the doer" (Arendt, 1971: 417).

> ***The greatest evil perpetrated is the evil committed by nobodies, that is, by human beings who refuse to be persons.***[9]

The banality did not concern all of the agents carrying out orders, but specifically the evil that was committed by Eichmann. His case was all the more exemplary because he had not been simply a subordinate . . . banality refers to Eichmann as a character: his way of speaking, his use of clichés and stock phrases applicable to any situation. Secondly, his motives were also banal: ordinary, trite, and intrinsically non-criminal. That is,

> ***He was ready to do anything to advance in the Nazi bureaucratic grades.***[10]

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[7] *Eichmann in Jerusalem*
[8] Ibid.
[9] *Some Questions of Moral Philosophy*
[10] *Eichmann in Jerusalem*

Eichmann knew perfectly well the train destinations and understood that the Jews were to be killed, and how they were to be killed. Yet, the enigma Arendt wants to emphasize was that he did not connect his activities to their eventual consequences. Arendt qualifies such a lack of imagination, pity, and the inability to adopt somebody else's viewpoint as "a curious, quite authentic inability to think" (Arendt, 1971: 41), as if he perceived reality through a screen. Moreover, when Eichmann considered his activities, he saw them as irreproachable; all the more so since he had carried them out as duties.

Morality and Evil in the Modern World

To understand Arendt's argument, one has to see that the focus of her questioning is moral. The problem is Eichmann's conscience: he never felt any remorse.

> ***He would have had a bad conscience only if he had NOT done what he had been ordered to – to ship millions of men, women, and children to their death with great zeal and meticulous care.[11]***

Yet, as anyone else in the western world, Eichmann had been brought up on the commandment "Thou shall not kill." His conscience first functioned as one would expect; then, after a short time, it functioned the other way round until completely extinguishing. What happened in that short time? What Arendt suggests is that Eichmann heard no voice saying "Thou shall not kill." Rather every voice he heard said, "Thou shall kill." In other words, Eichmann no longer had what is traditionally understood as conscience. For Arendt that means he was incapable of thinking. For her the conscience is the internal dialogue of thinking, the voice of oneself in agreement with oneself, that is the actualization of conscience, telling one what one cannot do if one is to go on living with oneself. But to understand how thoughtlessness becomes one of the conditions for the accomplishment of a crime against humanity, one has to consider also a criminal regime that presupposes a "new type of criminal,"

> ***one who commits his crimes under circumstances that make it well-nigh impossible to know or to feel that he is doing wrong.[12]***

Arendt neither defends Eichmann nor denies he is evil. She recognizes that he was an anti-Semite and she insists that Eichmann be hung for his evil deeds. But she also sees that his overriding motivations, alas, were neither monstrous nor sadistic.

> ***Eichmann participated in the greatest act of evil in world history because of his inability to think critically about his fidelity to a Nazi ideology that he clung to as a source of significance in a lonely and alienating world.[13]***

Such thoughtless ideological zealotry is, Arendt concludes, the face of evil in the modern world.

> ***Evil thrives on apathy and cannot survive without it.[14]***

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[11] *Eichmann in Jerusalem*
[12] *The Origins of Totalitarianism*
[13] *Eichmann in Jerusalem*
[14] *Some Questions of Moral Philosophy*

Other sources: *The Hannah Arendt Center at Bard College*
The New Yorker
Teaching Tolerance
Open Culture