A Note on the Banality of Evil

The Holocaust, the Soviet purges, and other enormities of the 20th century cry out for explanation. The only answer the century has yet produced now appears misbegotten.

by Stephen Miller

If Hannah Arendt (1906–75) leaves no other intellectual legacy, her notion of "the banality of evil" seems certain to ensure her a place in the history of Western thought. The idea, emblazoned in the subtitle of her controversial 1963 book, *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, impressed many people as a fundamental insight into a new and distinctly modern kind of evil. Adolf Eichmann had been a leading official in Nazi Germany's SS, one of the key figures in the implementation of the Final Solution, and he had managed to remain in hiding in Argentina until Israeli agents captured him in 1960. In her critical account of his 1961 trial for crimes against the Jewish people and humanity, Arendt argued that Eichmann, far from being a "monster," as the Israeli prosecutor insisted, was nothing more than a thoughtless bureaucrat, passionate only in his desire to please his superiors. Eichmann, the unthinking functionary capable of enormous evil, revealed the dark potential of modern bureaucratic man.

This idea of evil was almost entirely new. Before the Enlightenment, most theological and philosophical thinking about the nature of evil rested on the assumption that evil

Adolf Eichmann

deeds are the product of strong passions—pride, ambition, envy, hatred. During the Enlightenment and into the 19th century, many Western thinkers suggested that evil grew less out of man's dark passions than from unjust social conditions, and many assumed that it would eventually be eradicated through social and political transfor-

mation. By Arendt's time, that confidence had been shattered by the terrors of Nazi-occupied Europe, Japanese-occupied China, and the Soviet Union. Secular intellectuals were left groping for new explanations, and to many it appeared that Arendt had found one. The killing fields of Cambodia, Rwanda, and Bosnia have kept the question—and Arendt's answer—very much alive. "We have a sense of evil," Susan Sontag has said, but we no longer have "the religious or philosophical language to talk intelligently about evil."

Arendt's thesis about Eichmann was attacked in the popular press and questioned by historians of the Nazi era, but many intellectuals have staunchly supported her. The novelist Leslie Epstein, writing in 1987, argued that "the outrage . . . that greeted Arendt's thesis when applied to Adolf Eichmann indicates the depth of our need to think of that bureaucrat as different from ourselves, to respond to him, indeed, as a typical character in Holocaust fiction—a beast, a pervert, a monster." Epstein's point is that modern bureaucratic man, unthinkingly going about his daily routine, whatever it is, is always a potential Eichmann.

While the controversy over Arendt's idea has continued, the phrase *banality of evil* has slipped easily into the language, becoming a commonplace, almost a banality itself. Journalists and others freely apply it as an all-purpose explanation—for the racist treatment of African Americans, the terror of Saddam Hussein's rule in Iraq, and even, in the case of one theater critic, the betrayal of Sir Thomas More in *A Man for All Seasons*. In the intellectual world, it remains an idea of consequence. Bernard Williams, Britain's pre-eminent moral philosopher, cites Arendt in declaring that "the modern world . . . has made evil, like other things, a collective enterprise." It is remarkable how much enthusiasm has been aroused by an idea that is so deeply flawed.

Hannah Arendt in 1963

Banal is not a word that one would normally associate with evil. Its modern meaning—commonplace, trivial, without originality—did not arise until the 19th century. In feudal times, *banal* referred to land or property held in common, or property that feudal tenants were required to use, such as a "bannal-mill." By the 1830s, the neutral word signifying what was held in common had become a pejorative signifying ideas—often concerning scientific and commercial progress—that were popular with the rising middle class. In France, where the term had much the same career, the novelist Gustave Flaubert complained in 1862 that his country had become a place where "the banal, the facile, and the foolish are invariably applauded, adopted, and adored"—a development he blamed largely on the increasing popularity of that most modern creation, the newspaper. "The banality of life," he declared in another letter, "must make one vomit with sadness when one considers it closely." His *Madame Bovary* (1857) can be seen as a portrait of a woman with profound longings that she can express only in banal language.

It is a long way from Emma Bovary to Adolf Eichmann, but the Eichmann described by Arendt has one thing in common with Flaubert's protagonist: he was, she writes, "genuinely incapable of uttering a

single sentence that was not a cliché." Even on the day he was to be hanged, Eichmann spoke in clichés. "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* [emphasis in original]."

This startling conclusion is given without further explanation, but Arendt had been brooding about the nature of evil for at least two decades. In 1945, she wrote that "the problem of evil will be the fundamental question of postwar intellectual life in Europe." She knew something of the "problem" from personal experience, having fled Germany for Paris when the Nazis came to power in 1933, then taking refuge in the United States in 1941. A student of the philosophers Karl Jaspers and Martin Heidegger during her years in Germany, she eventually made her way onto the faculty of the New School for Social Research in New York City.

Glimmerings of her banality thesis appeared in *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1951), her first book, in which she argued that the rise of totalitarianism had pointed to the existence of a new kind of evil: "absolute evil," which, she says "could no longer be understood and explained by the evil motives of self-interest, greed, covetousness, resentment, thirst for power, and cowardice." She often said that traditional understandings of evil were of no help in coming to grips with this modern variant, and she may have wanted to attend the Eichmann trial, which she covered for the *New Yorker*, in order to confront it and clarify her ideas.

Arendt must have thought that the meaning of her phrase was obvious, since she did not explain it, but even some of her friends were puzzled. The novelist Mary McCarthy told her that their mutual friend Nicolo Chiaramonte "thinks he agrees with what you are saying but he is not sure he has understood you." And Karl Jaspers suggested that she needed to make clear that she was referring to the evil acts committed by the Nazis: "The point is that this evil, not evil per se, is banal."

Banal was a curious word choice. It is an aesthetic term, not a moral one. It applies more to ideas, as Flaubert used it, than to deeds. One could perhaps speak of the banality of an evil act if one were engaged in the dubious task of judging how inventive a particular evil deed was, as Thomas De Quincey jokingly pretends to do in his 1854 essay "Murder Considered as One of the Fine Arts." Were the murderous deeds committed by the Nazis banal? The question makes no sense. Evil acts, it seems clear, are neither banal nor not banal. The term *banality* does not apply to evil, just as it does not apply to goodness.

It makes sense to use the term *banal* when talking about ideas, but are the ideas that motivated the leading Nazis banal? The pseudoscientific categorization of millions of people as less than human and therefore worthy of extermination is a repulsive idea, but it is not a banal or "commonplace" idea. As historian Saul Friedlander says in *Nazi Germany and the Jews* (1997), "Nazi persecutions and exterminations were perpetrated by ordinary people who lived and acted within a modern society not unlike our own; the goals of these actions, however, were formulated by a regime, an ideology, and a political culture that were anything but commonplace."

Angered by the attacks on *Eichmann in Jersualem*, Arendt claimed that her book had nothing to do with ideas. "As I see it," she said to McCarthy, "there are no 'ideas' in this Report, there are only facts with a few conclusions. . . . My point would be that what the whole furor is about are facts, and neither theories nor ideas." In a postscript written for the paperback edition, she makes a similar point: "When I speak of the banality of evil, I do so only on the strictly factual level, pointing to a phenomenon which stared one in the face at the trial." Indeed, the book's subtitle is *A Report on the Banality of Evil*.

But the banality of evil cannot be regarded as a fact. Even Arendt implied as much

Banality of Evil/Struthof (1989), by Judy Chicago. In the background is the Natzweiler concentration camp, in the Alsace-Lorraine region of France.

in a letter to McCarthy: "The very phrase, 'the banality of evil,' stands in contrast to the phrase I used in the totalitarianism book [*The Origins of Totalitarianism*], 'radical evil.' This is too difficult a subject to be dealt with here, but it is important." In another letter to McCarthy, she seems to admit that she has conflated two different questions: the nature of evil and the nature of the man who committed the evil. "My 'basic notion' of the ordinariness of Eichmann is much less a notion than a faithful description of a phenomenon. I am sure that there can be drawn many conclusions from this phenomenon and the most general I drew is indicated: 'banality of evil.' I may sometime want to write about this, and then I would write about the nature of evil."

According to Arendt, then, she wasn't writing about the nature of evil when she spoke of the banality of evil. She was only writing about the nature of Eichmann, whom she regarded as a banal man—banal insofar as he was an ordinary bureaucrat who "except for an extraordinary diligence in looking out for his personal advancement . . . had no motives at all." Her point is that Eichmann, though a high-level Nazi official, was not strongly influenced by Nazi ideas. As she wrote to McCarthy, "One sees that Eichmann was

much less influenced by ideology than I assumed in the book on totalitarianism."

Was Arendt right about Eichmann? She was right to say that it made no sense to call Eichmann, as the Israeli prosecutor would have it, "a perverted sadist." And she was right to say that "with the best will in the world one cannot extract any diabolical or demonic profundity from Eichmann" (though no serious thinker has suggested that evil people are necessarily diabolic or demonic). But she was wrong to conclude that because Eichmann was not a fanatical anti-Semite he therefore wasn't a fanatic. She herself admits that he was a fanatical believer in Hitler; she speaks of "his genuine, 'boundless and immoderate admiration for Hitler' (as one of the defense witnesses called it)," and she implies that he subscribed to the Nazi formulation of Kant's categorical imperative: "Act in such a way that the Führer, if he knew your action, would approve it." Eichmann's fanatical devotion to Hitler led him to reject Heinrich Himmler's orders in the last year of the war to stop the Final Solution. Eichmann was not a Nazi fanatic but a Hitler fanatic—a distinction without a difference, since Hitler was a fanatical anti-Semite. To be sure, if Hitler had changed his mind and

said that all Jews should be given apartments on the Riviera, Eichmann would have zealously carried out those orders as well.

Arendt was so preoccupied with proving that Eichmann was an unfanatical bureaucrat that she refused to take seriously the speech he gave before he went to the gallows, in which he made it clear that he still believed in the glories of Hitler's fallen Third Reich. Describing Eichmann's final speech, she says: "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." In other words, he was still a good Nazi who believed in the Germanic gods; he was not a Christian. Then she quotes Eichmann as saying: "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*." Arendt dismisses these remarks as so much "grotesque silliness." They are not completely coherent, but the main point is clear: Eichmann is paying homage to the "ideal" Germany of Hitler; he is looking back nostalgically to the glorious days when men like himself were in power.

Perhaps Arendt was so insistent that Eichmann was an ordinary bureaucrat because she thought the key to the evils of the modern world was the increasing power of bureaucracies. In *The Human Condition* (1958), she argued that bureaucracy, which she defined as "rule by nobody," is "not necessarily no-rule; it may indeed, under certain circumstances, even turn out to be one of its cruelest and most tyrannical versions." In this she was influenced by the great sociologist Max Weber (1864–1920), who spoke in despairing terms about the rise of bureaucratic man. "It is horrible to think," he declared, "that the world could one day be filled with nothing but those little cogs, little men clinging to their jobs and striving towards bigger ones." Arendt, in the postscript to *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, strongly echoes Weber: "The essence of totalitarian government, and perhaps the nature of every bureaucracy, is to make functionaries and mere cogs in the administrative machinery out of men, and thus to dehumanize them." In her view, Eichmann was so much the bureaucratic man that he "*never realized what he was doing* [emphasis in original]."

Arendt strongly implies that the essence of totalitarianism is bureaucratization, or that there is a high degree of correlation between the two, even though in the 20th century the democracies have become increasingly bureaucratic states without embracing totalitarianism. Moreover, as many scholars have pointed out, the German state bureaucracy at times hindered the Nazi Party's effort to destroy the Jews. What distinguishes Nazi Germany from other regimes is not its bureaucratic nature but its racial ideas. These ideas were what led to the murder of millions, not only in concentration camps administered by impersonal bureaucracies but by wide-ranging special forces who rounded up Jews and shot them after forcing them to dig their own graves.

In her earlier writings, Arendt put more emphasis on the ideology of totalitarian regimes than on their bureaucratic nature. In 1963, however, she told McCarthy that she had overestimated the impact of ideology. What was most disturbing about totalitarian regimes, she often suggested in the last decade of her life, was their production of "ordinary" bureaucratic men who lead compartmentalized lives—dutifully and even eagerly obeying orders to kill and torture people during the day while remaining good family men at night. This notion of a motiveless, thoughtless bureaucratic man was what she meant by the "banality of evil."

Arendt never changed her view of Eichmann. In the introduction to *Thinking*, which she wrote in the early 1970s, she says: "The deeds [of Eichmann] were monstrous, but the doer . . . was quite ordinary, commonplace, and neither demonic nor monstrous. There was no sign in him of firm ideological convictions or of specific evil motives." And she repeats what she said in the earlier book's postscript: Eichmann's main characteristic was thoughtlessness, which is not—she says— the same thing as stupidity.

In *Thinking* she decides to make even greater claims for her thesis by saying that

she was not describing a modern kind of evil but attempting to clarify the nature of evil in general. "Is evil-doing . . . possible in default of not just 'base motives' . . . but of any motives whatever? . . . Is wickedness, however we may define it . . . not a necessary condition for evil-doing? Might the problem of good and evil, our faculty for telling right from wrong, be connected with our faculty of thought?"

Given the roll call of "thoughtful" people who have supported evil regimes, it seems odd to blame "thoughtlessness." One of them—at least during the early days of Hitler's triumph—was Martin Heidegger (1889–1976), Arendt's mentor (and one-time-lover), who declared in 1933 that "the Führer alone personifies German reality and German laws, now and in the future." Heidegger can hardly be called "thoughtless," unless we say that anyone who has a foolish political idea is thoughtless. Heidegger found in Nazism an antidote to the evils of modernity—bureaucraticization, industrialism, materialism, scientism— which, in his view, deprived human beings of their authenticity, and cost them a loss of Being. Looking at Hitler from the mountain peaks of German philosophical thought, Heidegger may not have noticed that racial anti-Semitism was at the heart of his thinking—but this is giving Heidegger the benefit of the doubt.

Some critics have suggested that there is a connection between Arendt's depiction of Eichmann as "thoughtless" and her defense of the "thoughtful" Heidegger, with whom she maintained a friendship until the end of her life, visiting him on numerous occasions even though his wife was intensely jealous of her. In the *Times Literary Supplement* recently, novelist and screenwriter Frederic Raphael suggested that "Arendt's 'understanding' of Eichmann might have been a function of her unspoken desire to exempt her Nazi lover . . . from the damnation he deserved." There is no question that Arendt tried to play down Heidegger's connection with the Nazis, saying to the philosopher J. Glenn Gray that Heidegger's pro-Hitler 1933 speech was "not Nazi . . . [but] a very unpleasant product of nationalism." But even though in the postwar years Arendt renewed her friendship with Heidegger, she grew increasingly critical of his ideas. Perhaps her treatment of Eichmann was influenced by her loyalty to Heidegger, but the main idea that shaped her thinking was Weber's notion of bureaucratization.

From banality to thoughtlessness, there is a common denominator in Arendt's attempts to clarify the nature of evil, which is that evil is less a choice than the outcome of certain circumstances. Arendt's seeming embrace of determinism bothered McCarthy: "One cannot help feeling that this mental oblivion [of Eichmann's] is *chosen*, by the heart or the moral will—an active preference." She said that Arendt was creating a monster of her own. "Perhaps I'm dull-witted, but 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? If you allow him a wicked heart, then you leave him some freedom, which permits our condemnation." Thus, even Arendt's closest friend and strongest defender had grave doubts about her explanation of Eichmann.

While she grappled for decades with the question of evil, Arendt never seriously considered the objections of her critics. It seems not to have occurred to her that her own attempts to analyze evil were a muddle. No doubt she was fortified by the continuing support for her views in intellectual circles. Writing only recently in the *New York Review of Books*, the Israeli journalist Amos Elon rehearsed many of the old arguments again, suggesting that those who were unable to accept Arendt's view of Eichmann as an evildoer devoid of evil qualities were led astray by their repugnance toward his crimes. Arendt, Elon said, "made many small errors . . . but she also got many of the big things right, and for this she deserves to be remembered." Not so. She got two very big things wrong: the nature of Eichmann and the nature of evil.