

SUMMARY AND EXCERPTS OF HANNAH ARENDT'S *EICHMANN IN JERUSALEM: A REPORT ON THE BANALITY OF EVIL*

“The sad truth is that most evil is done by people who never make up their minds to be good or evil.” — Hannah Arendt, *The Life of the Mind*

Background: Adolf Eichmann was the man tasked by the Third Reich (Nazi Germany) with managing the logistics for the mass deportation of Jews to ghettos and concentration camps. Essentially, he was in charge of ensuring that the trains kept running. By all accounts he ran a very efficient operation. For his role in the Final Solution (the extermination of the Jews), he was tried in Jerusalem, found guilty, and executed by hanging in 1962.

Despite Eichmann's admission that he had done everything that he was charged of—namely shipping countless Jews off to their deaths—he claimed that he was still innocent. “Whatever [Eichmann] did he did, as far as he could see, as a law-abiding citizen. He did his duty ... he not only obeyed orders, he also obeyed the law.” Even more than that, Eichmann considered himself an ethical man. He bore no ill will toward anyone (including Jews) in his heart. He had followed the law of the German land (namely, Hitler's will) almost perfectly.

Eichmann ‘confessed’ of two exceptions to his obedience: out of pity, he had twice helped people of Jewish ancestry to escape the country. But rather than viewing this as a defense of himself as a good man, he was embarrassed by it: “when he was questioned about it during cross-examination, he became openly apologetic: he had ‘confessed his sins’ to his superiors.”

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Hannah Arendt (1906-1975) was a philosopher who first gained recognition for her work, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, which analyzed the conditions and beliefs that enabled Stalinism and Nazism to take firm root in Russia and Germany. A decade later, when Eichmann was captured and delivered to Israel, Arendt covered his trial for *The New Yorker*. She revised those articles and published them as *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil*.

Excerpts:

Evil In The Third Reich

- 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 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.
- 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 for it implied - as had been said at Nuremberg over and over again by the defendants and their counsels - that this new type of criminal, who is in actual act *hostis generis humani*, commits his crime - under circumstances that make it well-nigh impossible for him to know or to feel that he is doing wrong.
- Foremost among the larger issues at stake in the Eichmann trial was the assumption current in all modern legal systems that intent to do wrong is necessary for the commission of a crime. On nothing, perhaps, has civilized jurisprudence prided itself more than on this taking into account of the subjective factor. Where this intent is absent, where, for whatever reasons, even reasons of moral insanity, the ability to distinguish between right and wrong is impaired, we feel no crime has been committed.

Eichmann's Character?

- [The judges were entirely helpless when confronted with] the task of understanding the criminal [Eichmann] whom they had come to judge. Clearly, it was not enough that they did not follow the prosecution in its obviously mistaken description of the accused as a "perverted sadist," nor would it have been enough if they had gone one step further and shown the inconsistency of the case for the prosecution, in which Mr. Hausner wanted to try the most abnormal monster the world had ever seen and, at the same time, try in him "many like him," even the "whole Nazi movement and anti-Semitism at large." They knew, of course, that it would have been very comforting indeed to believe that Eichmann was a monster ... 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.
- Much of the horribly painstaking thoroughness in the execution of the Final Solution - a thoroughness that usually strikes the observer as typically German, or else as characteristic of the perfect bureaucrat - can be traced to the odd notion, indeed very common in Germany, that to be law-abiding means not merely to obey the laws but to act as though one were the legislator of the laws that one obeys. Hence the conviction that nothing less than going beyond the call of duty will do. Whatever Kant's role in the formation of "the little man's" mentality in Germany may have been, there is not the slightest doubt that in one respect Eichmann did indeed follow Kant's precepts: 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 [Eichmann] 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."

- 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.
- What he had done he had done, he did not want to deny it; rather, he proposed "to hang myself in public as a warning example for all anti-Semites on this earth."
- "This was why I did not escape ... when I knew the search commando was closing in on me... After conversations about the guilt feeling among young people in Germany, which made such a deep impression on me, I felt I no longer had the right to disappear. This is also why I offered, in a written statement, at the beginning of this examination . . . to hang myself in public. I wanted to do my part in lifting the burden of guilt from German youth, for these young people are, after all, innocent of the events, and of the acts of their fathers, during the last war"

Telling Right From Wrong

- What we have demanded in these trials, where the defendants had committed "legal" crimes, is that human beings be capable of telling right from wrong even when all they have to guide them is their own judgment, which, moreover, happens to be completely at odds with what they must regard as the unanimous opinion of all those around them. And this question is all the more serious as we know that the few who were "arrogant" enough to trust only their own judgment were by no means identical with those persons who continued to abide by old values, or who were guided by a religious belief.

- Since the whole of respectable society had in one way or another succumbed to Hitler, the moral maxims which determine social behavior and the religious commandments - "Thou shalt not kill!" - which guide conscience had virtually vanished. Those few who were still able to tell right from wrong went really only by their own judgments, and they did so freely; there were no rules to be abided by, under which the particular cases with which they were confronted could be subsumed. They had to decide each instance as it arose, because no rules existed for the unprecedented.

Eichmann's Last Statement

- Then came Eichmann's last statement: His hopes for justice were disappointed; the court had not believed him, though he had always done his best to tell the truth. The court did not understand him: he had never been a Jew-hater, and he had never willed the murder of human beings. His guilt came from his obedience, and obedience is praised as a virtue. His virtue had been abused by the Nazi leaders. But he was not one of the ruling clique, he was a victim, and only the leaders deserved punishment. ... "I am not the monster I am made out to be," Eichmann said. "I am the victim of a fallacy." He did not use the word "scapegoat," but he confirmed what Servatius had said: it was his "profound conviction that [he] must suffer for the acts of others."

The Judgement That Was Pronounced

- It was now found that "[Eichmann] had received no 'superior orders' at all. He was his own superior, and he gave all orders in matters that concerned Jewish affairs"; he had, moreover, "eclipsed in importance all his superiors, including Müller." And, in reply to the obvious argument of the defense that the Jews would have been no better off had Eichmann never existed, the judges now stated that "the idea of the Final Solution would never have assumed the infernal forms of the flayed skin and tortured flesh of millions of Jews without the fanatical zeal and the unquenchable blood thirst of the appellant and his accomplices."

The Judgement That Arendt Wished Had Been Pronounced

- “Let us assume, for the sake of argument, that it was nothing more than misfortune that made you [Eichmann] a willing instrument in the organization of mass murder: there still remains the fact that you have carried out, and therefore actively supported, a policy of mass murder. ... And just as you supported and carried out a policy of not wanting to share the earth with the Jewish people and the people of a number of other nations - as though you and your superiors had any right to determine who should and who should not inhabit the world - we find that no one, that is, no member of the human race, can be expected to want to share the earth with you. This is the reason, and the only reason, you must hang.”