

Misconceptions Regarding Arendt on Eichmann

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Abstract: Hannah Arendt's controversial book *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* offered an account of the actions and motivations of the Holocaust perpetrator Adolf Eichmann. Arendt's book sparked lively debate and engendered polemical responses as a result of her portrayal of Eichmann as neither a cruel sadist nor a fanatical anti-Semite. Arendt described Eichmann as demonstrating the banality of evil, indicating that Eichmann's motivations were banal and petty rather than deeply evil. And yet the banality of his motives did not preclude him from participation in radical, extreme evil. This significant philosophical point is often obscured by the disputes surrounding Arendt's depiction of Eichmann. In this article I identify and challenge the main misconceptions and misunderstandings of Arendt's account of Eichmann, which have often overshadowed the philosophically pertinent discussions in the book, emphasizing the centrality of personal responsibility in Arendt's portrayal.

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Fifty years after its publication, Arendt's *Eichmann in Jerusalem* remains a contentious book. The bitter controversy it elicited has often obscured rather than illuminated the salient points. Arendt's argument in *Eichmann in Jerusalem* is also regularly misunderstood and taken to be representing a number of different positions to which Arendt was not in fact sympathetic. Here I offer some brief reflections on the main misunderstandings or misrepresentations of Arendt's ideas about Eichmann. I reject the claim that Arendt's understanding of Eichmann amounted to absolution for him and I challenge the notions that Eichmann's actions were the result of real coercion or deep institutionalisation in the Nazi system. Furthermore, I dispute both the characterisation of Eichmann as a particularly psychologically disturbed individual as well as the portrayal of his actions as representative of all humans and their weaknesses.

1. "Arendt exonerated Eichmann"

A frequent refrain among those critical of Arendt's work on Eichmann was the accusation that Arendt had, in her portrayal, effectively exonerated him for his crimes. Her notion that Eichmann exemplified the banality of evil was taken as an indication that she did not really blame him or hold him responsible. The concept of the banality of evil, the "fearsome, word-and-thought-defying *banality of evil*,"¹

(Arendt 2006, 252) is the notion that an individual with nothing other than petty, banal and self-serving intentions can nonetheless be complicit in acts of great evil; it is the recognition that evil deeds, even on a huge scale, do not necessarily presuppose correspondingly evil motives or intentions.

Arendt's portrayal of Eichmann, the high-ranking Nazi official with a central role in the Holocaust, is atypical. The popular image of Nazi perpetrators, particularly those as highly ranked as Eichmann, was one of evil, sadistic, fanatical monsters. For Arendt by contrast, Eichmann was not fanatical in his anti-Semitism despite his voluntary entrance into the S.S. and his enthusiastic organisation of Jewish deportations. Nor was he, on Arendt's reading, especially inclined toward violence or a sadistic pleasure derived from cruelty to others. This characterisation of an undoubtedly significant perpetrator of the Holocaust contradicts the common stereotype. It is typically held that those individuals in Nazi Germany who not only joined the party but became members of its most elite formations and indeed were active participants in some of its most diabolical policies are indisputable monsters. They were ideologically convinced anti-Semites who dreamed of making Europe *judenrein* (free of Jews) and depraved sadists who delighted in any and all forms of brutality. That Arendt presents an account which runs so markedly counter to the conventional understanding of perpetrators of the Holocaust – like that offered by Daniel Jonah Goldhagen in which he attributes a so-called “eliminationist antisemitism” to the German population in general – is part of the reason that *Eichmann in Jerusalem* engendered such a broad response and inspired such a deep controversy.ⁱⁱ This is also the reason why the book is philosophically interesting.

One argument prevalent among those who disputed Arendt's assessment was that Eichmann *must* have been a brutal and inhuman specimen in order to have been so deeply involved in the processes of deportation and execution.ⁱⁱⁱ Arendt's controversial contention was that he was not such a man, nor did he *need* to be: his banal motives could serve the greatest evil in the warped world of the Third Reich.

Arendt's assertion of the banal quality of Eichmann's motives led some to accuse her of exonerating the perpetrators of the Holocaust. By arguing that he had not been motivated by vicious depravity and that, therefore, there was a gross disparity between Eichmann's motivations and the hideous consequences of his actions, she was reproached, for example by Lionel Abel and Michael Musmanno, for having implied that Eichmann had, in some sense, not really *meant* or *intended* what he had done and so was, again in some sense, not responsible for the terrible consequences of his actions.

Two points are of importance in defending Arendt against such charges: first, Arendt certainly did consider Eichmann responsible and culpable for his crimes and she thought it right that he be put to death.^{iv} This is more than clear from the alternative judgment she proposes at the end of *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, in which

she states that

[w]e are concerned here only with what you did, and not with the possible non-criminal nature of your inner life and of your motives or with the criminal potentialities of those around you [...] Let us assume, for the sake of argument, that it was nothing more than misfortune that made you 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 [...] 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.^v

Second, it is clear from other comments Arendt makes in *Eichmann in Jerusalem* that she was not in the business of exculpating the orchestrators of the Holocaust: she was severely critical of the willingness in Adenauer's post-war Germany to continue the employment of many civil servants who had served the Nazi regime: "It has been estimated that of the eleven thousand five hundred judges in the *Bundesrepublik* [Federal Republic of Germany], five thousand were active in the courts under the Hitler regime."^{vi} She decried the reluctance of local German courts, in the wave of new arrests of former Nazis within Germany in the wake of Eichmann's capture, to prosecute these crimes, stating that this reluctance "showed itself only in the fantastically lenient sentences meted out to the accused."^{vii}

Arendt gives an example of such leniency: "Dr. Emanuel Schäfer, a special protégé of Heydrich...had to stand trial in a German criminal court after the war. For the gassing of 6,280 women and children, he was sentenced to six years and six months in prison."^{viii} Arendt concludes that

[I]t is the same story repeated over and over again: those who escaped the Nuremberg Trials and were not extradited to the countries where they had committed their crimes either were never brought to justice, or found in the German courts the greatest possible "understanding."^{ix}

Arendt's critical stance on the effective amnesty that many Nazis received in Germany after the war and on the willingness of the post-war German government to forget the former Nazi allegiances of many members of the civil service, demonstrates clearly that she did not seek to absolve the perpetrators of the Holocaust. She did, in fact, hold them to be fully responsible and deserving of punishment.

2. "Eichmann was coerced"

Another misreading one encounters is the presumption that the story Arendt is

recounting in *Eichmann in Jerusalem* and elsewhere is the story of an individual driven to commit atrocious acts out of fear and terror in the undeniably terrifying world of the Third Reich. Arendt's account of the offenders in the Third Reich and those who colluded with them is not, however, one coloured by the complications of fear and coercion: her interests lie in comprehending the behaviour of individuals exercising (at least relatively) free choice. It is well documented that Adolf Eichmann did not join the S.S. because of fear for himself or his loved ones, nor was he coerced to carry out his murderous duties – he *chose* to sign up and he *chose* to continue in his role organising deportations to the East long after he knew what this truly meant. Indeed, as Christopher Browning's study *Ordinary Men* made clear, individuals quite often retained a large degree of choice in their actions and many could opt out of killing duties.^x

Arendt herself mentioned this in her famous exchange of letters with Gershom Scholem in the pages of *Encounter*: 'the SS murderers also possessed, as we now know, a limited choice of alternatives. They could say: "I wish to be relieved of my murderous duties,' and nothing happened to them."^{xi} Hence Arendt felt her task to be to provide some kind of explanation for why normal, relatively free individuals would choose to participate in the murderous regime. This is not to say, of course, that there are no other relevant factors such as pressure to conform to group norms or to obey orders. Yet the fact remains: there were a range of (albeit rather limited) choices often open to individuals, the most basic of which was the choice between being complicit in murder or not. Even despite considerable pressure to obey, to conform to Nazi principles, there were ordinary individuals at every turn who resisted that pressure, who *chose* not to participate. None of the pressures to comply were universal or universally felt and, generally, choosing not to participate did not result in punitive or dangerous sanctions.

3. "Eichmann was a sociopath"

Some have assumed that Arendt's description of Eichmann shows him to be psychologically abnormal with a sociopathic (perhaps even psychopathic) inability to relate to his victims or show empathy or concern for their fate. Yet this is not Arendt's approach. Arendt's thinking on the perpetrators of the Holocaust and their motivations is not concerned with detailing psychological pathologies; she is not seeking to diagnose some pathology of mind in the perpetrators (or at least not those perpetrators of whom Eichmann is the paradigmatic example). Her goal is not to present the picture of a diseased mind and to determine the causes for this.

Her explanation is certainly not a psychoanalytical one which would turn toward Eichmann's unconscious and his childhood for indications as to why he volunteered to be complicit in the horrendous crimes of the Holocaust. Rather, Arendt's account underscores Eichmann's ordinariness – his assessment as 'normal' by a number of psychiatrists prior to the trial is cited clearly – and his motivations and actions are not presented as pathological.^{xii} Such an explanation would be exposed to problematic questions of responsibility – if Eichmann were considered to be

suffering any kind of psychological condition then he may be held less responsible for his actions. This is not a conclusion Arendt favours – it is clear that she holds Eichmann entirely and consciously responsible for his deeds and as such she requires an account of his behaviour which leaves no doubt as to the normality of his psychological character.

4. “The system produced Eichmann”

A key element of Arendt’s account is the negation of decisive external influence in motivating the actions of perpetrators like Eichmann. That is to say, Arendt does not imply that circumstances influenced Eichmann’s motives such that they *produced* his actions: Arendt is concerned with the free choices of individuals and to lay heavy emphasis on the context of those choices is to connote a causal relation which Arendt’s reading does not support. Indeed, this is a common misreading of Arendt’s ethical thought frequently encountered in the literature.

Larry May, for example, contends “Hannah Arendt argued that certain institutions were able to instill in their members a willingness to do virtually anything, even to participate in great evil.”^{xiii} Quite often the assumption is made that the tale which Arendt is recounting in the Eichmann book is that of an individual altered by the pressures and practices of totalitarian domination, an ordinary individual who becomes so institutionalised and is so influenced by the demands of Nazi principles that his own internal thought processes become corrupted and that this outside influence fulfills a causal function in actually inducing the commission of an evil action which this individual would otherwise not perpetrate if it were not for these corrupting external influences. This is not an accurate reading of Arendt’s work: attention to the detail of the Eichmann book and her other writings on ethics demonstrates that she is not concerned with institutionalisation. Nowhere does she venture the argument that Eichmann’s actions were caused by his being institutionalized within the S.S. She does recognise his suitability for the career which he embarked on within the elite Nazi party formation but does not contend that his being an S.S. member caused him to be able to be complicit in Nazi crimes to the extent that he was. The implication is that he was already such a person to begin with. It is not the case, on Arendt’s reading, that the S.S. made Eichmann into a desk killer; rather it was his aptitude for such a position which made him join the S.S. in the first place. Indeed this misreading is present in the background of other misreadings already discussed and it is problematic once again because of the issue of responsibility. To argue that Arendt considers Eichmann to have been institutionalized into a perpetrator denies his personal responsibility in the same way that viewing Eichmann as coerced or psychologically disturbed would do. But as we have seen, Arendt certainly does not deny Eichmann’s responsibility and so these kinds of reading of Arendt cannot be correct

5. “There is an Eichmann in all of us”

Arendt directly addressed this particular misreading when she participated in a conference on her work in Toronto in 1972: when the idea that ‘there is an Eichmann in each one of us’ was attributed to Arendt, her rebuttal was clear: “I

always hated this notion of ‘Eichmann in each one of us’. This is simply not true.”^{xiv} Those who misread her in this way tend to understand her argument as emphasizing Eichmann’s ordinariness and therefore implying that any other ordinary person would behave as he had. Yet Arendt was always at pains to point out Eichmann’s personal, individual guilt. She rejects the notion of an Eichmann in all of us because of its connotations regarding responsibility: to say there is an Eichmann in all of us is to say that any of us would have done precisely as he did were we to find ourselves in his position. This implies we cannot blame him since, put simply, anyone would have done the same.

But for Arendt of course, Eichmann is fully responsible and therefore blameworthy for his actions. Furthermore, as her essays “Personal Responsibility Under Dictatorship” and “Collective Responsibility”^{xv} demonstrate, Arendt is clear that the opposite is the case: not everyone was complicit. In fact, some resisted and others refused to participate in murder.^{xvi} It is not the case that anyone would have done as Eichmann did since at least some did not. Though this thought is not, perhaps, deeply comforting – the number of people who resisted or refused to participate in the evil of Nazism is vastly overshadowed by those who were, in one way or another, complicit – it does offer a glimmer of hope. For Arendt, some kind of redemption can be found in the fact that while collaboration or complicity was widespread, it was not universal:

under conditions of terror most people will comply but *some people will not*, just as the lesson of the countries to which the Final Solution was proposed is that ‘it could happen’ in most places but *it did not happen everywhere*. Humanly speaking, no more is required, and no more can reasonably be asked, for this planet to remain a place fit for human habitation.^{xvii}

It is important to identify, examine and critique these typical misreadings of Arendt on Eichmann, engendered in part by the intense controversy sparked by *Eichmann in Jerusalem*. The significant moral philosophical idea in the book i.e., the core argument that an individual in possession of merely petty and banal motivations can nonetheless become complicit in great evil, has too often been obscured by misunderstandings on the periphery. The foregoing has been a contribution to the identification and removal of such misunderstandings, all of which ultimately condense in the claim that Arendt is seeking to alleviate Eichmann’s responsibility. Yet, as we have seen, this is not the case and those advancing such arguments will continue to be confounded by Arendt’s clear and uncompromising attribution of responsibility to Adolf Eichmann for his crimes.

Notes

i Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (New York: Penguin, 2006), 252.

ii See Daniel Jonah Goldhagen, *Hitler’s Willing Executioners: Ordinary*

Germans and the Holocaust (New York: Vintage Books, 1997)

iii An example of this kind of reading can be found in Judge Musmanno's review of the Eichmann book – Musmanno had been a witness for the prosecution during the Jerusalem trial and had also acted as a judge during the Nuremberg trials. See Micheal A. Musmanno, 'Man With An Unspotted Conscience,' May 19, 1963. Another exemplar of this attitude was Lionel Abel in his review – see the discussion of this in Daniel Maier-Katkin, 'The Reception of Hannah Arendt's Eichmann in Jerusalem,' *Hannah Arendt.net: Zeitschrift für politisches Denken*, Bd. 6, Nr. 1/2 (2011): 4.

<http://www.hannaharendt.net/index.php/han/article/view/64/85>

iv See the discussion of this at the end of the Eichmann book: Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, 253-279.

v Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, 277-279.

vi Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, 16.

vii Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, 15.

viii Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, 184-185.

ix Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, 185.

x See Christopher Browning, *Ordinary Men: Reserve Police Battalion 101 and the Final Solution in Poland* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1998).

xi Hannah Arendt, 'A Letter to Gershom Scholem,' in Hannah Arendt, *The Jewish Writings*, ed. Jerome Kohn and Ron H. Feldman (New York: Schocken, 2007), 469.

xii Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, 26.

xiii Larry May, 'Socialization and Institutional Evil,' in *Hannah Arendt Twenty Years Later*, ed. Larry May and Jerome Kohn (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1997), 83.

xiv Hannah Arendt, 'On Hannah Arendt' in *Hannah Arendt: The Recovery of the Public World*, ed. Melvyn A. Hill (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1979), 308.

xv These essays are both in Hannah Arendt, *Responsibility and Judgment*, ed. Jerome Kohn (New York: Schocken, 2003).

xvi See Arendt's discussion of 'nonparticipants', those who did not participate in the crimes or in any aspect of the tainted public life of the Third Reich, in the essays in *Responsibility and Judgment*.

xvii Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, 233.