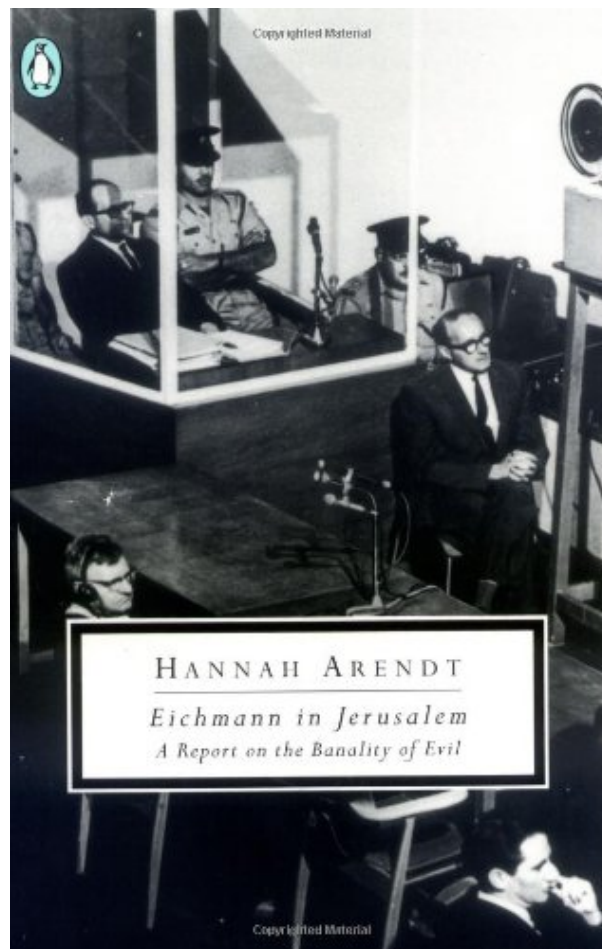
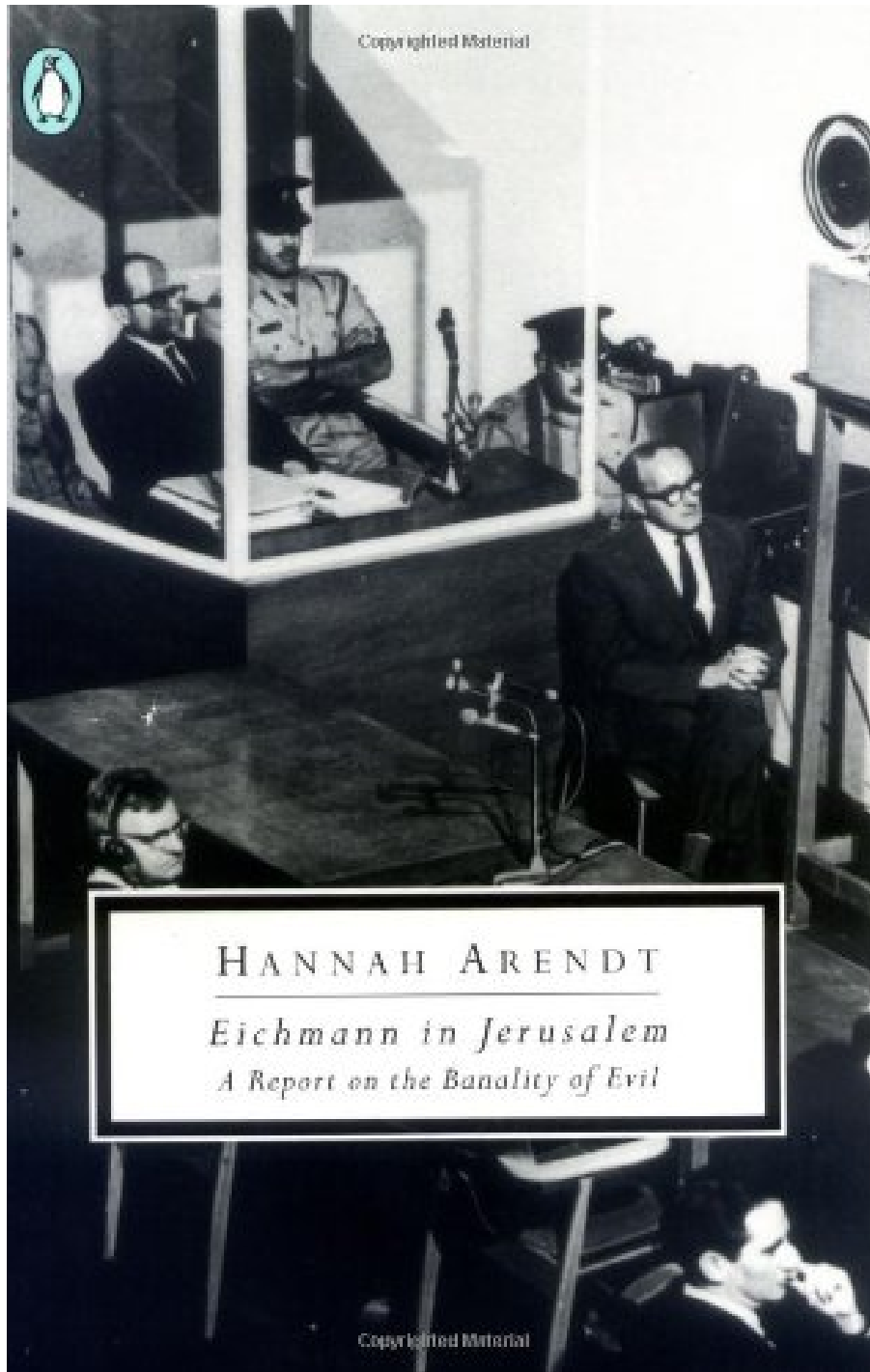


EICHMANN IN JERUSALEM: A REPORT ON THE BANALITY OF EVIL BY HANNAH ARENDT



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If, in recalling the period, one could shut one's eyes to the scenes of brutal massacre and stop one's ears to the screams of horror-stricken women and terrorized children as they saw the tornado of death sweeping toward them, one could almost assume that in some parts of the book the author is being whimsical. -- *The New York Times Book Review*

About the Author

Hannah Arendt (1906-1975) was University Professor of political philosophy in the graduate Faculty of the New School for Social Research, a visiting professor at several universities including California, Princeton, Columbia, and Chicago, a research director of the Conference on Jewish Relations, the chief editor of Schocken Books, and the executive director of Jewish Cultural Reconstruction in New York City. She was

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Betwixt Ignorance and Wisdom is Judgement

By Pretend Person

At one level, this book is a report on the trial of Adolf Eichmann in Jerusalem in which is considered the competency of the court to try Eichmann, the appropriateness of the law, the legality of Eichmann's kidnapping in Argentina, the fairness of the trial, the adequacy of the defense, the tactics of the prosecution, the conduct of judges etc. Nor, as stated by Hannah Arendt herself in the postscript, is this book intended to be about the greatest disaster in the history of the Jewish people, the nature of the Third Reich, a history of German people, a theoretical account of totalitarianism nor a philosophical treatise into the nature of evil. Having said this, there are still important insights into the human condition and the nature of human laws and human judgement in the course of shaping that condition. I have tried to provide here a narrative summary of these insights as I understand them.

Hannah Arendt explains how Himmler was able to twist the logic of morality to assuage the conscious of his handpicked, academically degreed, leaders. The commanders of the *Einsatzgruppen* were among the intellectual elite of the SS. What this says about the ability of the academically degreed to see through the sophistry, to the evil, is not discussed. So much for education being the path to moral excellence. In any case, Hannah Arendt points out that, for the most part, the members of the SS and the *Einsatzgruppen*, were not murders or sadist by nature. I guess that there were just not enough murderers or sadists around to perpetuate such monstrous evils on so gigantic a scale. There was actually a systematic effort to weed out the psychopaths under the understanding that soldiers are not killers and killers do not make good soldiers. This being the case, Himmler's problem was how to overcome the ordinary human feeling of pity that a normal person feels in the presence of physical suffering. Himmler was able to turn this normal instinctual feeling around. Instead of saying to oneself "What horrible things I did to people!" his men came to instead instantiate the perspective, "What horrible things I had to watch in the pursuance of my duties, how heavily the task weights upon my shoulders." That is, pity for the suffering is turned into self-pity, egoism in its most basic and vain form, the failure to put suffering into proper perspective against the greater setting of human history and the cold striking tragedies of the world. The SS men were now the victims for having to witness this suffering in the performance of their sacred duties. From here it was but a small step to hate the Jews for thrusting this unwanted and distasteful work upon upright and just men of duty. The SS men were thus able to stay convinced of their own civilized nature, there was no decent into barbarism under this formulation. What could be more twisted?

Hannah Arendt explains that this logic was important for Eichmann because at all times Eichmann was doing his duty in accordance with the law and in doing so he was fulfilling his moral duty while satisfying his psychological need for authority. Eichmann even manages to twist Kantian moral philosophy and deontological ethics to justify his actions and assuage his conscience. Eichmann was narrow minded enough to take his job seriously and avoid the temptation of interpreting, amending, or exceeding his orders. To do

so would have been unlawful and Eichmann, so as never to be found acting criminally, always acted in accordance with the law - never understanding that the regime pronouncing the law was itself criminal. Eichmann found himself in a contorted world where orders that were contrary to those issued by the criminal regime were considered to be criminal; a world of legal crimes. Eichmann was unable to recognize the self-canceling nature of criminal laws enacted by a criminal state and make moral judgments for himself. It is in just these sorts of cases where human judgment is paramount; when there are no longer any rules or principles of society or cultural values by which to guide one's judgment. This is when judgment is at its most risky and thus when it is most valuable to us as humans. The judgment of the individual in such circumstances, relying only upon the voice of inner conscious and felt reality of human fidelity, becomes the only safeguard against crimes against humanity. To exercise judgement under conditions of uncertainty is just what it means to be human. Where does this ability to judge based on inner conscious in the face of contrary cultural value and societal rules come from? Apparently, not from education alone given the actions of the Einsatzgruppen. When is the exercise of independent judgment justified and on what basis can it be made? This is the fundamental philosophical question of ethics as pointed out by Hannah Arendt. Most often, the soundness of our individual judgments is found in how well these judgments match up to the rules and expectations of society and the prevailing cultural values. This is how we know that our judgments are 'correct'. Even today, we often mistake social conditioning for ethics. Acting against these guidelines in making a judgement is the risk we take, this is the risk that just is the human condition. However, on her own account, (*The Origins of Totalitarianism*), totalitarianism was a new and unrepresented form of government that came into existence in the twentieth century and was a massive intrusion of criminal violence into the realm of politics (*On Violence*). Further, and again on her own account, how could Eichmann be expected to see his way clear? In (*On Violence*), Hannah Arendt adds bureaucracy to totalitarianism as one of the latest innovations in twentieth century politics. Bureaucracy is the rule of an intricate system of institutions in which no one, neither the best, nor the few, nor the many can be held responsible, it is effective rule by 'Nobody'. Rule by 'Nobody' is the most tyrannical of all since there is no one left to answer for what is being done. Eichmann was a part of state that was an admixture of two unprecedented modes of political rule. We must be honest and ask, how many of us today in the same position as Eichmann would act in the same way and fail to exercise human judgment and make a truly independent moral decision in a set of unprecedented cultural and social challenges such as those presented by totalitarianism? It is in just such an unprecedented environment that consequences of action cannot be foreseen. This is the terrifying reality and banality of evil that we must recognize in ourselves. We must face the reality that Eichmann can be 'Every-man' (Eichmann as Every-man is a conclusion the Hannah Arendt repudiates in the postscript because this would cast Eichmann as a scapegoat and absolve him of personal guilt and this cannot be the case because he is still guilty of not thinking and not making independent moral judgments). However, I believe that admission of this deep defect in the human condition is the only way to guard against its insidious ability to overtake any of us. Not making this admission is an open invitation to the banality of evil. After all, what are we to make of Martin Heidegger, a philosopher and eminent thinker of prodigious education, intimately known to Hannah Arendt, who flirted with, collaborated with, and joined the Nazi Party? Thinking itself is not a guarantee of good judgment and again education does not guarantee the path to moral excellence.

In Eichmann's mind, he was also the victim of a corrupt system, something that he could only see after the fact. Hannah Arendt, with sardonic wit, points out how, in this morally inverted world of the Third Reich, that the temptations to be resisted were the temptations not to murder and not to exploit and that too many Germans learned how to resist temptation. The key to this strategy is in exploiting the ability of the human being to rationalize and hence, the banality, or should we say, the rationality of evil. Owing to cultural failure and thus the inability for cultural values to serve as a standard for individual judgements, any evil can be justified and I believe this is Hannah Arendt's most unsettling insight into the human condition. In the case of the Third Reich, rationalization was based on the ordinariness of death, the exigencies of war, and the demands as well as the expectations of a perverted social construct. Individual judgments were now matched

up to these conditions to determine the correctness of the judgments and to determine right from wrong, good from evil. In this case, when human judgment is paramount but when there are no longer any rules or principles of society or cultural values by which to guide one's judgment, how is human judgment possible? How readily can we expect one to think originally and judge independently in a set of never before encountered social and cultural rules with no precedent as represented by totalitarianism? On what criteria is one to make such independent judgments when one is part of an unprecedented set of circumstances? Again, on her own account, (*The Human Condition*), human action becomes more difficult as the bigness of society increases. Action collapses into administration. The bigness of the society crowds out the realm of, and opportunity for, individual action. We thus become administrators, not actors, in the governmental and business bureaucratic machinery that the bigness of society compels. Hannah Arendt does not provide us with a formula for, or guaranteed way in which to make, the human judgments that are required to be made in unprecedented conditions; when there are no authentic social or cultural norms to guide our judgement. There is no sure path to independent individual human action when we are smothered by the imperatives of administrative necessity. There are no for sure guarantees in these unexplored territories and there were none for Eichmann as well. Hanna Ardent gives us no such formula for judgment or path to action because there is none to be had, this is the precarious position of the human condition. Hannah Arendt, I believe, tells us that what is in-between wisdom and ignorance is that rarefied quality of a kind called human judgement and that this is all that we have. This judgement, once made, further compels action. Arendt further indites Eichmann for his failure to act. "Arendt's theory of action and her revival of the ancient [Greek] notion of praxis represent one of the most original contributions to twentieth century political thought. ... Moreover, by viewing action as a mode of human togetherness, Arendt is able to develop a conception of participatory democracy which stands in direct contrast to the bureaucratized and elitist forms of politics so characteristic of the modern epoch." (d'Entreves, Maurizio Passerin (2006), "Hannah Arendt", *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*).

Most unsettling, Hannah Arendt also points out that the machinery mass genocidal murder was not possible without the cooperation of Jewish leaders themselves; Eichmann's SS deportation transport trains to the death camps were filled with people from the lists drawn up by the Jewish 'helpers'. It seems that the complete moral collapse and banality of evil was not the sole domain of the Nazis. Although Hannah Ardent was later sorry that she coined the phrase "banality of evil" (p. xviii of the Introduction by Amos Elton) I believe that the phrase still has great currency and aptly captures her unsettling insight into the human condition. Genocide and mass murder just is a permanent potential in the human condition, it can happen again and it actually has happened again since WWII on more than one occasion. I am glad the she coined the phrase and even feel that we should up the stakes and call it the terrifying banality of evil. What better phrase is there to understand what was for Eichmann a job, just a daily routine and literally the brutal and barbaric death for the people with whom he dealt in course of his bureaucratic job? Eichmann was indeed terrifyingly normal as Arendt points out.

The problem with justice, so called, is that it is backward looking and retributive. In any case, it is not available to us, only the law is available to us in governing the human condition. If we can realize the "banality of evil" perhaps we can work toward and someday come to realize the banality of goodness.

6 of 6 people found the following review helpful.

Troubling and Educational.

By Thomas M. Magee

The Holocaust is an often told story. Hundreds if not thousands of books are written about it. This book, "Eichmann in Jerusalem" has to be the book to read on the subject. The book tells the story of Adolph Eichmann's trial in Jerusalem for crimes committed in the Holocaust during WWII. This is a trial for a person who personally did not kill one Jew. He was a mere Lt. Colonel in a huge bureaucracy, buried deep

down in the organizational chart. How can that be? I think the answers in the book chill the average person to the bone. It touches on some subjects out of history that are very dark. It also is frighteningly real for today's world. I know that alone will scare most as well as any haunted house they go through.

This book flows very well. The author keeps the flow moving fast from chapter to chapter. She tells you the who on Eichmann, why it was important then in 1963, and goes over the events of the Holocaust. Her information comes straight from the trial transcripts. That adds a new angle to the event, closer to the timeline. I think that adds a lot to the story.

Overall the book is a great history of the Holocaust. It will give you facts that you haven't read before. These facts rattled the world then and I think it would now to anyone who reads it.

The book explains the whole final solution in intimate detail. It walks you through how it started as mercy killings due to low quality of life to a very large complex state owned machine. The book doesn't fill you with the horrible stories. It gives you the bureaucratic dry explanation on how the system worked. You learned how the elite was very much behind the process. That alone is something few other books offer. Through this line you learn that Eichmann was the person who made the whole system run. He made it run as only a Lt. Colonel buried in the bureaucracy who controlled very little. His office got the trains to put the Jews on. Then he coordinated with the camps to take the Jews. He did not run the camps himself. The Nazis also used the local Jews to make their system run. It was their local government which choose the names and Jews at gunpoint which guided them to the chambers in many camps. Their succession of lies to the Jews about a better tomorrow was a critical fuel that made the system run. Everyone would either trade in their neighbor or hung on in hope of a better tomorrow. German society also bore a piece of the guilt. Whole institutions jumped on board to make things happen.

Hannah Arendt also gives you the context from the period. Why the Israeli's conducted trial and the reaction from the world. The process of the trial in a way shaped world attitudes even to today. It brought out the horror of the system out of the shadows to see it was more than a mix of personal stories but it was a state sanctioned machine. I think it explained the system which no one on the outside understood.

There is one thing from the book I know will upset people. The question today is how can people do this? Why would people do this. The book explains who Eichmann was. He started as a private in the SS. He was an average worker in Germany before that; a salesman. He moved up the SS chain quickly through hard work and taking full advantage of opportunities as they came. He probably would have moved to the top of any bureaucracy, Walmart, Exxon, Ford, as he did with the SS. The only difference was then the mission was the Holocaust vs. selling odds and ends at Walmart. His story shows the importance of morals vs. just a good job. He was just a career climber in the business of the day. You can see how this principle of career success alone, outside of morals turns people into monsters. That element alone is what people can see happening tomorrow but won't admit it. That do that because they fear they too might do the same thing to advance or know someone who will.

This book

3 of 3 people found the following review helpful.

Sociopath? Mindless buffoon? Banal civil sesrvant?

By W. J. TAYLOR

Eichmann in Jerusalem, Hannah Arendt, 298 pages. Everyone should read a book about Hitler's Final Solution every ten years or so, just to get re-grounded in the terrible possibilities of being human. Arendt's reportage of the post-Nuremburg trial of Adolf Eichmann certainly offers such re-grounding. She chillingly

moves through the steps that Germany took—often in counter-productivity to its own war effort—to cleanse Europe of Jewry: first, deportation; second, concentration; thirdly, extermination. In many places, this is a report to skim, especially as Arendt discusses the legality of the entire trial in Israel. In many places, this is a report to follow closely, as when Arendt goes through each country's specific response to the demands of Nazi Germany. (Alas, only one country, Denmark, effectively denied Nazi demands for killing its Jewish citizens.) Arendt's final three chapters are marvelous—if such an adjective can be used to describe Eichmann and what went on. Her summation of his trial and execution read thus: “in those last minutes . . . the lesson that this long course in human wickedness had taught us—[was] the lesson of the fearsome, word-and-thought defying banality of evil.” I think that the word “sociopath” was not available to Arendt; she seems to alternately see Eichmann as a buffoon, as a banal, self-promoting civil-servant, and as someone willingly self-deluded. Perhaps all of those are involved in some degrees in the diagnosis of sociopath. And, I suppose, sociopaths are banal in that they are one-dimensional and lacking in imagination, a requirement of empathy.

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