

A book never written

The roots of the Arendt controversy, 1963-1967

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Introduction

In February and March of 1963, Hannah Arendt's report on the Eichmann trial appeared in *The New Yorker*. It was controversial the moment it was published. In May of that same year, these articles appeared as a book: the (in)famous *Eichmann in Jerusalem*. The controversy spread, intensified; it did not die down until several years later. It cut deeply into Arendt's professional and private life.

This paper analyses the roots of this protracted, vehement debate. The Arendt-controversy is one of the foundational debates of Holocaust historiography. The book still sows discord, and some of the disagreements that fuelled the original controversy persist. Therefore it is important to understand precisely what these disagreements were (part 1), and why some of them appeared to be irreconcilable (part 2).

Discussions and analyses of *Eichmann in Jerusalem* are often hampered by misconstructions of Arendt's views. This is an inheritance of the original controversy in the nineteen-sixties. At the time, Arendt was ascribed views that she did not express; her standpoints and arguments were often caricatured. Her views were misrepresented by her opponents as well as her defenders; sometimes clearly deliberately, sometimes clearly inadvertently. Several of these misinterpretations exist to this day.

The gap between the discussants in the Arendt-controversy has been cemented in historiography. The substance of the discussion was largely binary, black-and-white. Consequently, the Arendt-controversy itself is often analysed in binary terms. Authority versus challenger; Jews versus Gentiles; Jew versus Jew. From a distance, these clean dichotomies seem to explain the vehement debate. Up close, however, the dichotomies fall apart: too many discussants do not conform to the dividing lines.¹ This controversy has many

¹ That these divisions can be too limiting is demonstrated in historian Richard Cohen's (otherwise excellent) analysis of the Arendt-controversy. Cohen divides controversy participants in "Jewish" and "Gentile." However, he accidentally placed some Jewish reviewers on the "Gentile" side of the controversy: J Suhl, Frederic Burin and Konrad Kellen. In an updated version eight years later, Burin and Suhl did not appear; Kellen was still referenced on the "Gentile" side. Richard I. Cohen, 'Breaking the code. Hannah Arendt's Eichmann in Jerusalem and the public polemic. Myth, memory and historical imagination', *Michael. On the history of the Jews in the diaspora* 13 no.90 (1993) 29-85, at 75,78. Idem, 'A generation's response to "Eichmann in Jerusa-

roots, and they are tangled. In two of her (rare) replies to her critics, Arendt dismissed much of the controversy as responses to 'a book which was never written.'² That is a fair defence only if we stay on the surface of the controversy: the debate of extreme, fictitious positions that were ascribed to her. That she "blamed all the victims for cooperating with their own murder" (she expressly did not).³ That she claimed that "Eichmann was just a cog in the machine" (this was in fact the standpoint of Eichmann's defence attorney).⁴ That she claimed "we can all become Eichmann" (she did not, as she explained in a Postscript to the second edition).⁵

However, when we look a little closer, it becomes clear that Arendt's opponents did more than respond to caricatures of her positions. Many of them designed arguments to counter specific standpoints and arguments of Arendt's, even if they did not always explicitly indicate which. When we carefully compare Arendt's text to the responses of her opponents, the core differences of opinion in this debate emerge. Looking closer still, it becomes clear that the discussion stopped where it really should have begun.

This research note is based on my dissertation on the Arendt-controversy in the US, West-Germany and France, from 1963 to 1967. The conclusions presented here are part of an extensive research project that comprised:

1. an expanded and updated historiography of this touchstone controversy;
2. a structured analysis of the precise points of contention at the time;
3. a systematic, argumentation-theoretical⁶ evaluation of procedural problems in the debate.

I have also collected a bibliography of the controversy in these three countries that is as complete as possible: nearly four hundred reviews and other opinion articles on Arendt's book, and over a hundred related primary sources. All are available in the open access database of the University of Amsterdam.⁷

lem" ', in: *Hannah Arendt in Jerusalem* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London 2001) 253-277, at 270-273, 403n45.

² Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem* (2nd edn.; London 1994) 283. Idem, 'Letters to the editor. "Eichmann in Jerusalem"', *The New York Times Book Review* (June 23, 1963).

³ Arendt explicitly excludes the 'ordinary Jews' from her judgments: they could not help responding as they did, she argues. The Jewish victims' 'lack of revolt' which not Arendt, but the prosecutor made a point of, was a universal response according to Arendt: 'no non-Jewish group or people had behaved differently,' she writes. Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem (EIJ)* 11-12, 115.

⁴ *EIJ*, 175.

⁵ *EIJ*, 286.

⁶ To analyse and evaluate historians' contributions to the controversy, I used the so-called *pragma-dialectical theory of argumentation*. Introduction to argumentation theory in general, and to this theory in particular, in Frans H. Van Eemeren et al., *Handbook of argumentation theory* (Dordrecht 2014).

⁷ Merel Boers, *A controversy on moral judgment. Fifteen historian-reviewers in the controversy on Hannah Arendt's book Eichmann in Jerusalem in the US, West-Germany and France, 1963-1967. A historical and a pragma-dialectical perspective* (dissertation, University of Amsterdam, 2016).

<<http://hdl.handle.net/11245/1.531041>> (accessed June 16, 2018). I am currently rewriting the dissertation to be published in Dutch.

1 The wheat: the substance of the discussion

A way into the book

One might picture the discussion of *Eichmann in Jerusalem* as a geological formation: layer upon layer of interpretation, misinterpretation, re-interpretation. At the bottom of the pile is the book itself. And though it might be compressed by the weight of all the interpretations stacked on top, the book still holds up, after all these years. It is an insightful, engaging, razor-sharp account of Eichmann's trial. It is also caustic, sometimes confusing or even inconsistent. Above all, it is chock-full. Arendt's portrait of Eichmann explicitly responds to the narratives of prosecution and defence, and to Eichmann's own account of his life. As if that were not enough, the book also contains her legal criticism of the trial; her political criticism of Israel and West-Germany; and, important in the context of the subsequent controversy, a political-philosophical treatment of the Nazi murder of the Jews. The sheer number of standpoints, topics and sidelines often blurs Arendt's main line of argument.

The trial itself is a good way into the book. Arendt went to the trial as a reporter, and her report discussed issues in the order that they were presented there. Her main antagonist is prosecutor Gideon Hausner.⁸ Laying her text next to his, Arendt's main line of argument emerges. Hausner presented Eichmann as an anti-Semitic monster, driven by murderous bloodlust; Arendt countered that Eichmann was a new type of criminal, because he committed his crimes without intent to do wrong, and without base motives. This is what she famously called 'the banality of evil'. Hausner presented the Nazi murder of the Jews as the ultimate pogrom; Arendt countered that the Nazi murder of the Jews was a new type of crime. Because, she argued, the people who did the actual murdering were, paradoxically, less guilty than the people who ordered and organised the mass murder. And how did this paradox, and the mass murderer with the clear conscience, come about? Arendt's answer: the total moral collapse of society under the Nazis. Eichmann, Arendt argues, explicitly said that his conscience did not play up when he committed his crimes, because all respectable people around him did as he did, and did so enthusiastically.⁹

This theory of a moral collapse led Arendt to moral judgments of not only the perpetrators and bystanders to the crime, but also the people who resisted the Nazis and, most controversially, some of their victims. The exclusion, deportation and murder of the Jews were not just accepted by the great majority of the Third Reich's subjects, she argues, many actually helped to make it happen. Including people the Reich sought to destroy. Arendt claims that 'respectable Jewish society', leading community figures before and during the war, had also been affected by the moral collapse: they accepted and cooperated with immoral Nazi measures and laws.¹⁰

8 Hausner presented his main argumentation in his opening statement. There is an English translation of the trial transcript online. <<http://www.nizkor.org/hweb/people/e/eichmann-adolf/transcripts/Sessions/Session-006-007-008-01.html>> (accessed June 16, 2018).

9 *EIJ*, 125-126, 129, 131, 246-247, 276, 279, 287-288, 297.

10 *EIJ*, 131.

Core differences of opinion in the discussion of the Jewish leaders

When studied in its entirety, the controversy on Arendt's book turns out to be surprisingly repetitive. In the hundreds of texts included in my study, there was a fixed set of positions that were discussed, over and over again, with a limited number of arguments to support or attack them. An important part of my research was to survey, to tally, to summarise these arguments, and compare them to Arendt's argumentation. This required separating the substance of the discussion from the straw men and the personal attacks – the rhetorical chaff so to speak.¹¹ From this, the core differences of opinion emerged. The larger part of Arendt's book was not controversial. What infuriated people most about the book were, one, her moral judgments of Jewish community leaders, who were also Nazi victims; and two, her moral evaluation of Eichmann, an important perpetrator. The bulk of Arendt's argumentation concerned Eichmann's crimes, what he did (not) do. That, however, was not what the controversy was about: Arendt and her critics clashed in their judgments of Eichmann's *nature*. In brief, the Arendt controversy was about (morally) judging historical actors.

Arendt passed one main judgment on the Jewish leaders: that they should not have cooperated with the Nazis. Her main argument: they thus contributed to the scale of the mass murder.¹² The relevant paragraph was often quoted by reviewers as the focal point of their criticism. There was one counter-argument, introduced at the onset of the controversy, that was repeated by reviewer after reviewer, from the US to Germany to France, in magazines, in newspapers, in radio talks: in the Soviet-Union there were no Jewish Councils, and the percentage of victims was no less there.

Arendt specified her main judgment by describing four moral problems she saw in the cooperation of the Jewish leaders during the war. Four moral dilemmas the Jewish Councils were faced with, making the wrong choice each time, she argued. The first concerned the cooperation in itself. She was realistic enough to see that non-cooperation was not an option; instead she thought that the Jewish leaders should have *complied* instead of *cooperated* with the Nazis.¹³ Second, Arendt criticised the abuse of power by Jewish Councilmen, for instance when they were in a position to decide who would be deported first.¹⁴ Third, she judged Jewish leaders who knew of the destination of the deportations, but kept that knowledge to themselves. They thus deprived people of a realistic choice between deportation and, for example, trying to go into hiding. Arendt writes bitterly of the “humane” considerations’ that led Leo Baeck, head of the Jewish Council in Theresienstadt, to keep this knowledge to himself, because he thought that ‘living in the expectation of death by gassing would only be the harder.’ Arendt adds: ‘During the Eichmann trial, one witness pointed out the unfortunate consequences of this kind of “humanity” – people volunteered for deportation from Theresienstadt to Auschwitz and denounced those who tried to tell them the truth as being “not sane”.’¹⁵ Fourth, Arendt criticised the accep-

11 This paper deals with the substance and the roots of the controversy. In my dissertation I also analysed “the chaff”, more precisely: recurrent procedural problems in the controversy. Boers, *A controversy on moral judgment*. Analysis in chapters 3 and 6; summary on pages 402-403.

12 *EIJ*, 123-126.

13 *EIJ*, 115, 117, 123.

14 *EIJ*, 117-118, 123.

15 *EIJ*, 119.

tance of the different categories of “Jews” that the Nazis had created since 1933. Some categories were (temporarily) exempt from persecution: veterans of the First World War for example; Jews married to Aryans; and, later on, members of the Jewish Councils. Here Arendt drew the reach of the ‘moral problem’ wider. She claimed that not only the Jewish Councils, but ‘respectable Jewish society’ as a whole accepted these exceptions.¹⁶

In the controversy, there were few people who sided with Arendt on this subject. The most common counter-arguments her critics provided are readily categorised: the **circumstances** the Jewish leaders found themselves in; their **good intentions and motives**. Discussants also presented the Jewish leaders’ **good deeds**, the things they “did right”; and the argument that the Jewish leaders were **only human**, that they acted as other people would have, and were fallible as all humans are.¹⁷ What united these counter-arguments is the desire to counterbalance Arendt’s moral judgments, to discuss aspects or criteria that she had glossed over. Critics reintroduced the Jewish leaders’ circumstances, because they thought that the circumstances of an act should be considered in the judgment of that act. They discussed the leaders’ good intentions, because they thought that the judgment of a deed is altered by knowledge of the intentions of the actor.

Looking more closely, one notices that these arguments were often tailored to respond specifically to Arendt’s ‘moral problems’, even if those problems themselves were rarely discussed explicitly. In his review, historian George Mosse for example argued that the Jewish leaders ‘thought the terror could be mitigated through cushioning the shock.’ This argument allusively answers Arendt’s third moral problem, that the Jewish leaders did not share their knowledge of the deportations’ destinations with the people they were responsible for.¹⁸ Another critic implicitly denied that there was any abuse of power (Arendt’s second moral problem), with the argument that the Jewish leaders did not know what happened to the deported: ‘Jewish councils of elders (...) were required to supply lists of Jews under the false assurances that the lists were intended for “resettlement” purposes.’¹⁹ And many critics posited ‘the impossibility of resistance’ for the Jewish leaders, denying by implication that there was a middle ground between cooperation and resistance, namely ‘mere compliance’ (Arendt’s first moral problem).²⁰ More generally, many reviewers, hostile or friendly, rejected Arendt’s main judgment of the Jewish leaders because it was a *collective* judgment. They presented examples of Jewish leaders who had resisted, who had not cooperated with the Nazi’s; who *had* made the right moral choice.²¹

16 *EIJ*, 118, 131-132.

17 Early instances of “circumstances”, “good deeds”, and “only human” arguments in Frederick R. Lachman, ‘Ein Meisterwerk ohne Seele’, *Aufbau/Reconstruction* no.13 (March 29 1963) 7, 20, 22; Herbert Strauss, ‘The thesis of Hanna [sic] Arendt’, *Aufbau/Reconstruction* no.20 (May 17 1963) 13-14. More examples and detailed discussion in Boers, *A controversy*, 92, 207-211, chapters 5.2.1, 6.1, 6.2.

18 George L. Mosse, ‘Captive Eichmann’, *The Progressive*, 27 no.7 (July 1963). Also see for instance Michel Borwicz, ‘Le “roman” d’Hannah Arendt’, *Les Nouveaux Cahiers* 2 no.8 (December 1966) 2-7, at 5.

19 Michael A. Musmanno, ‘Man with an unspotted conscience’, *The New York Times Book Review* (May 19 1963) 1, 41, at 41.

20 For instance Marie Syrkin, ‘Miss Arendt surveys the holocaust’, *Jewish Frontier*, 30 no.4 (May 1963) 7-14, at 15-16. *EIJ*, 115, 117.

21 For instance Gertrude Ezorsky, ‘Hannah Arendt against the facts’, 65-66. Borwicz, ‘Le “roman” d’Hannah Arendt’, 5.

Conflicting starting points in the discussion of the Jewish leaders

Arendt's moral judgments of the Jewish leaders operated on two important starting points. The first was that they had a choice to make in the moral dilemmas they were faced with. This conflicted with the starting point of many of her opponents, that the Jewish leaders were forced to act as they did. Arendt's critics did not only present the Jewish leaders' circumstances as examples of elements that should balance a too-severe judgment. The circumstances could also be presented as *causes* of the leaders' behaviour, as strait-jackets: there was no freedom of action. Historian Herbert Strauss wrote: 'When the war broke out the Jewish situation changed from relatively free choices to no choices at all. I suggest to think of these years in analogy to concentration camp life. Nobody among Jewish leaders participated in decision making.'²²

Arendt's second starting point was that one *must* judge the historical actors, Jewish leaders included, if anything is to be learned from these horrific historical events. In her famous reply to religious scholar Gershom Scholem, she wrote: 'And although you may be right that it is too early for a "balanced judgment", though I doubt this, I do believe that we shall only come to terms with this past if we begin to judge, and judge strongly.'²³ This clashed with the starting point of many of her opponents, that one could not or was not allowed to judge people in this situation, because they were victims themselves. 'Why judge [the Jewish leaders] with specific criteria (...),' wrote French historian Olga Wormser, when 'these men, sooner or later, suffered the [same] fate as those [other people] sent methodically to Auschwitz, by [means of] those telegrams signed 'Eichmann''²⁴

Just as the moral problems that Arendt presented, these conflicting starting points were not often discussed explicitly. When they were, the discussion not only became more clear, but also much more profound. One place where this happened was in Arendt's exchange of letters with Scholem, among the best remembered texts of the controversy. It also happened during the last flare-up of the American discussion, in the winter of 1965-1966, in the *New York Review of Books*. The occasion was a review of a counter-book written by Jacob Robinson, a jurist who was prosecutor Hausner's right-hand man during the Eichmann Trial.²⁵ The review was written by historian Walter Laqueur. Laqueur had just become director of the London Wiener Library, an institute that documented the fate of the Jews in the Nazi era.²⁶ Laqueur was sharply critical of both Robinson and Arendt; Arendt replied to defend herself.

²² Strauss, 'The thesis of Hanna [*sic*] Arendt', 14.

²³ Hannah Arendt, 'Eichmann in Jerusalem. An exchange of letters between Gershom Scholem and Hannah Arendt', *Encounter* 22 no.1 (January 1964) 53-56. The original German phrasing is even stronger than Arendt's own English translation. Idem, 'Ein Briefwechsel über Hannah Arendt's Buch', *Mitteilungsblatt (MB)* no.33 (August 16 1963) 4-5.

²⁴ Olga Wormser, 'Eichmann à Jerusalem, par Hannah Arendt', *L'éducation nationale. Revue hebdomadaire d'information pédagogique* (November 17 1966) 27-28, at 27.

²⁵ Jacob Robinson, *And the crooked shall be made straight... The Eichmann trial, the Jewish catastrophe, and Hannah Arendt's narrative* (New York 1965). As the book's title suggests, Robinson aimed at educating a large public on The Facts. 'The Jewish Catastrophe was manifoldly complex and could be presented only by an authority who could report, fact upon fact, what actually occurred,' the book's jacket read. 'Dr. Robinson does exactly that.'

²⁶ Walter Laqueur, 'Footnotes to the Holocaust', *The New York Review of Books*, 6 no.13 (November 11 1965). Steven E. Aschheim, *Beyond the border. The German-Jewish legacy abroad* (Princeton 2007) 57-58, 153.

Because Arendt went into specifics, her response to Laqueur and Robinson answered the question *why* she judged the Jewish leaders so severely. (In her book, Arendt did not discuss the moral problems she raised at length; they were relatively small parts in the larger argument she was trying to make). Firstly, she condemned the presumption of some leaders to decide over other peoples' lives. In his book, Jacob Robinson had written that 'legally and morally, the members of the Jewish Councils can no more be judged accomplices of their Nazi rulers than can a store owner be judged accomplice of an armed robber to whom he surrenders his store at gunpoint.'²⁷ Arendt shot back: 'The worst reproach one could level at the Jewish Councils would indeed be to accuse them of disposing of Jewish lives and properties as though they *owned* them, and no one to my knowledge has ever dared to go that far before.'²⁸ Secondly, Arendt judged the Jewish leaders because they had made the wrong choices. The problem with the Jewish Councils was not that they were 'forced at gunpoint' to do something they did not want, Arendt explained. It was that Jewish leaders *chose* to sit in the Councils. In her letter to Scholem, Arendt explained her position on this choice most clearly:

There was no possibility of resistance, but there was the possibility *to do nothing*. And to do nothing, one did not need to be a saint, but one needed only to say: I am a simple Jew, and I do not want to be more. If these people deserved to be hanged in all cases, is a wholly different question. What is at issue here, are the arguments with which they justified themselves before themselves and before others. We are allowed to judge these arguments. Moreover, these people did not stand under the direct pressure of terror either, but only under indirect [pressure]. I know about the gradations in these matters. There still was room for free choice and free action there.²⁹

In sharp contrast to her opponents, Arendt did not think that the Jewish leaders' victim status made them exempt from moral judgment. In her distinction between 'privileged' and 'ordinary Jews', between powerless victims and the Jewish leaders, she followed the survivors, who, according to her, insisted on this distinction.³⁰ Her judgments of the Jewish leaders were a response to what she had seen at the trial, particularly to the harrowing scene she witnessed when the Hungarian Jewish leader Pinchas Freudiger took the stand and members of the audience, Hungarian Holocaust survivors, started shouting at him.³¹ Thus Arendt took position in the survivors' discussion. This was considered a trans-

²⁷ Robinson, *The crooked*, 159.

²⁸ Arendt, 'The formidable Dr. Robinson', *The New York Review of Books* (January 20 1966). In her book, Arendt cites one of the Jewish leaders speaking of the people they tried to save as 'precious cargo'. *ELJ*, 118. On this issue also p. 295-296.

²⁹ I have translated from the original German. Arendt, 'Ein Briefwechsel', *Mitteilungsblatt*, 5. This passage is slightly adapted in Arendt, 'An exchange of letters', *Encounter*. More on the 'confusion over elementary questions of morality' and 'moral obtuseness' of her opponents in *ELJ*, 295-296 and in 'The formidable Dr. Robinson', *The New York Review of Books*.

³⁰ *ELJ*, 131, 284, 296-297.

³¹ Footage of this incident can be viewed online: *Eichmann Trial. Sessions 52 and 53. Testimonies of Pinchas [sic] Freudiger, Martin Foeldi, Ze'ev Sapir* (1961) (United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, May 25) FILM ID: 2064. <<https://collections.ushmm.org/search/catalog/irn1001587>> (accessed June 16, 2018).

gression by some: only the victims themselves, “those who were there,” could present such moral judgments.³²

Core differences of opinion in the discussion of Eichmann

The discussion of Eichmann revolved around the speculative question of his nature. According to Arendt, Eichmann had at some point aligned his conscience with the new Nazi morality. In this inverted moral universe, murdering Jews was not a crime. This inversion was not an invention of Arendt's: Eichmann himself had described the ‘revaluation of values which was prescribed by the State’.³³ And what motives did he have to help murder the Jews? According to Arendt, Eichmann was motivated by his desire to serve Hitler, a man he was in awe of; his desire to make a career; his related desire to be respected by society; and his desire to remain within the boundaries of the law, in all he did.³⁴ That was why, in her eyes, his evil was banal, and not radical, as she had believed when she wrote *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1951). It was empty in a way, devoid of base motives and criminal intent.³⁵

Arendt's opponents did not agree with this turn in thought; they insisted that Eichmann's evil was radical, essential, profound. He was a convinced anti-Semite; a sadistic killer. He did not have to align his conscience with the Nazi morals: at no point had he felt unease or guilt about his crimes. And even if he had not started out as intrinsically evil, then that is what he had become, through his actions/deeds.³⁶ Many critics suggested that diminishing the depth of his evil also diminished his guilt. Arendt was (and still is) much criticised for making Eichmann smaller than he actually was.

For a large part, the discussion of Eichmann was a fruitless exchange of yes-no positions. Arendt chose a perspective that was opposite to Hausner's, and inverted his interpretation of the (often problematic) evidence. Her opponents partly or wholly went back to Hausner's perspective. The same historical events were brought up over and over again, interpreted in an opposite manner. Eichmann's contradictory statements were either labelled as truth or as lies, according to what fit a discussant's argumentation; the same process was applied to the self-exculpatory testimony of his former colleagues.³⁷ Research on the Nazi genocide was still in its early stages. There were very few people knowledgea-

32 For instance, the Council of Jews from Germany wrote at the outset of the controversy: ‘It does not become those who were not there to pass moral judgments on this grim chapter.’ Council of Jews from Germany. ‘Jewish dignity and self-respect. A statement by the Council of Jews from Germany’, *Aufbau/Reconstruction* no.13 (March 29 1963) 7.

33 *EIJ*, 287.

34 *EIJ*, 44, 78, 127, 135-137, 149.

35 From *The Origins to Eichmann in Jerusalem*, Arendt retained the idea that the Nazi crimes were unpunishable and unforgivable. What changed was the foundation of the crime: Eichmann's evil was banal, she claimed, because it was driven by banal motives. The difference between her two concepts of radical and banal evil then, hinges on the (incomprehensible versus banal) *motives* of the perpetrators. Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (2nd edn.; Cleveland 1958) 449.

36 For instance Gertrude Ezorsky, ‘Hannah Arendt against the facts’, *New Politics* 2 no.4 (Autumn 1963) 53-73, at 62. Golo Mann, ‘Hannah Arendt und der Eichmann-Prozess’, *Neue Rundschau* 74 no.4 (1963) 626-633, at 628. Borwicz, ‘Le “roman” d’Hannah Arendt’, 3.

37 Boers, *A controversy*, 47-52, 46n72, 49n85, 100, 237, 411-412, 411n16.

ble enough to contextualise and critically weigh these statements; to present additional evidence.³⁸

It is hard to pin down the precise starting points that underlie the differences of opinion on Eichmann. Both sides simply seemed convinced of the correctness of their position, mostly without giving grounds for their conviction. One side appeared to operate from the belief that a person carries the potential of both good and evil in themselves; the other side seemed to believe that good and evil people are different species. According to Arendt, the cooperation of the Jewish leaders demonstrated that there was no clear-cut division between victims and perpetrators.³⁹ Her opponents by contrast thought it was imperative that the boundary between victims and perpetrators be upheld. This sometimes came with an argument phrased as a warning: by blurring the line between perpetrators and victims, Arendt gave ammunition to ex-Nazis and Nazi-apologists.⁴⁰

The whole point of Arendt's analysis of Eichmann's crimes is the context in which he committed his crimes, the 'moral collapse'.⁴¹ In other words: she considers circumstances in her moral judgment of him. By contrast, she did not appear to consider circumstances at all in her (moral) judgment of the Jewish leaders. This might be one of the reasons for the endlessly repeated straw man that Arendt "blamed the victims and exculpated the perpetrator(s)".⁴² For many people, her trying to understand Eichmann's psyche at all was taboo. It was sometimes even seen as sympathy, and was unfavourably contrasted with her supposed lack of empathy for the victims.⁴³ This seems to suggest that someone like Eichmann did not deserve a humanising perspective; that Arendt's saw Eichmann as a human being, whereas some of her opponents reasoned from the starting point that he was no longer one.

What was explicitly repeated over and over again, on both sides, was the conviction that the future was at stake: "we must understand Eichmann in precisely this or that manner, or else..." For some of Arendt's opponents, the Historical Truth was in the balance, and Arendt's lies might lead to Gentile moral escapism; renewed anti-Semitism; or help ex-Nazis dodge their punishment. Arendt's defenders by contrast promised a bleak future if Eichmann was not understood in Arendt's terms. They expressed fear of renewed genocide in the future; of totalitarianism still existing in the Soviet Union; of unchecked bureaucracy.⁴⁴ Arendt's friend Mary McCarthy suggested that Arendt's opponents, dwelling

38 Boers, *A controversy*, 29, 247n1. One such specialist was Wolfgang Scheffler, 'Hannah Arendt und der Mensch im totalitären Staat', *Aus Politik und Zeitgeschichte. Beilage zur Wochenzeitung Das Parlament* no.B45 (November 4 1964) 19-38.

39 *EIJ*, 119-120.

40 For instance Alfred Farau, 'Die Frage von Schuld und Mitschuld', *Aufbau/Reconstruction* no.21 (May 24 1963) 11. Mann, 'Hannah Arendt und der Eichmann-Prozess', 632. Léon Poliakov, 'L'histoire ne s'écrit pas avec des si...', *Les Nouveaux Cahiers* 2, no.8 (1966) 7-9, there 9.

41 Note that she explicitly dismisses his circumstances as an attenuating factor in her legal judgment of him. *EIJ*, 91, 276, 278-279.

42 As explained previously, she did consider these circumstances, but did not think of them as completely limiting the options of the Jewish leaders, as some of her opponents did. In the case of the 'ordinary' victims she explicitly mentions their harrowing circumstances. Arendt, *EIJ*, 11-12, 283.

43 For instance Michael A. Musmanno, 'Letters to the editor. *Eichmann in Jerusalem*', *The New York Times Book Review* (June 23 1963) 4-5.

44 For instance Ernest Van Den Haag, 'Crimes against humanity', *National Review*, 15 no.8 (August 27 1963) 154-157. Horst Köpke, 'Die Nazi-Verbrechen sind wiederholbar', *Frankfurter Rundschau* (September 19 1964) 3. Roger Paret, 'Qui n'est pas Adolf Eichmann?', *Preuves* 17 no.191 (January 1967) 8-17. Detailed discussion in Boers, *A controversy*, 106, 137-138, 222-224.

in the past, were ignoring the needs of future fellow men. '[T]he question is,' McCarthy wrote, 'whether those who merely grieve for their fellow beings show more compassion or proper feeling than those who in retrospect seek remedies, since to seek remedies implies a continuing concern that what happened shall never happen again.'⁴⁵ These worries of Arendt's opponents and defenders seemed incompatible.

2 The roots: the depth of the disagreement in the Arendt controversy

The root of one's identity

The most obvious explanation for the ardent response to Arendt's report is her infamous 'tone'. Her irony and sarcasm were deemed improper, or excessive; they showed a lack of empathy and of historical imagination, her critics claimed. Polemics were in no way taboo when discussing the bad guys. But sarcasm about victims, that was a different story. What is more, Arendt did not shirk from naming names of those who, in her eyes, had made immoral choices. The discussion of the mistakes the Jewish leaders had made was conducted in small circles, among survivors and specialists. Arendt's criticism was not unfounded; but the phrasing of that criticism, and the audience she presented it to, were not considered appropriate. What is more, some of the people she criticised (or their associates) were still alive – and watching the debate.⁴⁶ Arendt's friend and mentor Karl Jaspers called her 'endlessly naive' to be so surprised at ardent attacks from people whose self-justifications she had severely criticised.⁴⁷

However, Arendt's tone and the individuals she attacked are not enough to explain the protracted controversy. Another explanation, often discussed in the historiography of this controversy, is the expression of divergent ideas on what it meant to be Jewish. Here, the gloves came off. Opponents wrote that Arendt's opinions stemmed from her supposed anti-Zionist, assimilationist convictions; that she was a self-hating Jew.⁴⁸ 'Especially when she talks of the Zionists, her hatred burns like a torch,' wrote one of her French critics.⁴⁹ Opponents who classified Arendt as an enemy of the Jews, conflated her opinions with

45 Mary McCarthy, 'The hue and cry', *Partisan Review* 31 no.1 (Winter 1964) 82-94, at 92.

46 Boers, *A controversy*, 86, 95-96, 125, 134.

47 Hannah Arendt and Karl Jaspers, *Briefwechsel 1926-1969* (München 1985) 567.

48 Arendt considered herself a critical Zionist: in favour of a Jewish homeland, but not in agreement with the organisation of the Israeli state. She had written sharply about the issue of assimilation. Elisabeth Young-Bruehl, *Hannah Arendt. For Love of the World* (2nd edn.; Binghamton, NY 2004) 89, 182-183; 229-230, 455.

49 Rabi, 'Le cas Hannah Arendt. Sa haine éclate comme une torche vivante...', 13. The preoccupation with Arendt's motives was especially pronounced in the French discussion. Boers, *A controversy*, 159-160. Also for instance Syrkin, 'Arendt surveys the holocaust', 3-4, 7-8, 22-23. Trude Weiss-Rosmarin, 'Strategists of Hind-sight', *Jewish Spectator*, 28 no.6 (June 1963) 3-6, 30. Alexander Donat, 'Revisionist history of the Jewish catastrophe. Two examinations of Hannah Arendt. 2. An empiric examination', *Judaism* 12 no.4 (Autumn 1963) 416-435, at 435. Manès Sperber, 'Hourban ou l'inconcevable certitude.' *Preuves*, no.157 (March 1964): 3-15, at 9.

those of other “enemies from within”.⁵⁰ She was ascribed extreme views on issues she had not even discussed.⁵¹

This inter-Jewish conflict came to the foreground very clearly in Arendt’s exchange with Gershom Scholem. Scholem famously decried a lack of empathy in her judgment of the Jewish leaders, a lack of ‘love for the Jewish people’ stemming from her (presumed) German-Jewish-left-wing identity. Arendt, equally famously, defended herself by explaining that she loved no collectives, only individuals.⁵²

The inter-Jewish aspects of the controversy account for the discussion of the Jewish leaders, as well as for a large part of the American discussion, which was conducted mostly by Jewish reviewers, in Jewish and mainstream media. But they cannot account for the controversy over Arendt’s views on Eichmann, nor for the discussions in other countries, to which many non-Jewish reviewers contributed. At the time, there was one participant who tried to pin down the source of the trouble in a more precise manner. In the eyes of sociologist Daniel Bell, positions in the controversy were determined by beliefs that participants built their identities on, and their views of the world. People either looked at themselves and the world from their own ‘parochial’ group, or from a ‘universal’ perspective.⁵³ Bell described that in their argumentation against Arendt, the first group emphasised warmth, emotion, subjectivity, the individual, the division between good and evil. The second group by contrast defended Arendt by presenting more abstract, distanced arguments: they emphasised justice, humanity as a whole.⁵⁴ A lot of participants in the discussion can be placed into one of these two groups.

Unwritten rules

And still, these oppositions that Bell discerned (cold versus warmth; abstraction versus emotion; theories versus individual cases) were not absolute. Arendt was considered to be blinded by her theories and/or by irrational passions, and her opponents were accused of the same. Arendt’s treatment of the subject was considered too lofty, intellectual, theoretical, too ‘cold’ or ‘matter-of-factly’ by some; too popular, hasty, sweeping, scandalising, and not scholarly enough by others.⁵⁵ Excessive emotion or, conversely, a lack of feeling,

50 ‘Our Prophets warned us once that some of the greatest enemies we will encounter will come from the inside...’ Max Nussbaum, ‘Dr Nussbaum replies to *New Yorker* article’, *The Observer*, 48 no.16 (May 2 1963) 1, 4, at 1,4.

51 Arendt’s criticism of the Jewish leaders was regularly conflated with two other issues. The first was the issue of a “lack of organised Jewish resistance.” The second issue was that of Jews in Nazi Europe “going meekly to their deaths, like lambs to the slaughter.” Both issues were relics of the early post-war discussion of the murder of the Jews in Israel. Boers, *A controversy*, 88-89. For instance, Robert Rie, ‘Literarisches Nachspiel zum Eichmann-Prozess’ in: F.A. Krummacher ed., *Die Kontroverse. Hannah Arendt, Eichmann und die Juden* (München 1964) 33-38.

52 Detailed analysis in Boers, *A controversy*, 109-110.

53 One must be careful not to retro-label Arendt, her supporters and her opponents as “universalists” or “particularists”. Views that are considered diametrically opposed today, lived side by side in contributions to the Arendt-controversy. Arendt’s book and its discussion inspired modern-day universalism, but one can certainly not equate them.

54 Daniel Bell, ‘The alphabet of justice. Reflections on “Eichmann in Jerusalem”’, *Partisan Review* 30 no.3 (Autumn 1963) 417-429, at 417-418, 428.

55 For instance Eugene V. Rostow, ‘Do laws apply to so great an evil? The uses and misuses of justice’, *New York Herald Tribune* (May 19 1963) sec. Books, 1, 7. David Boroff, ‘Eichmann and Miss Arendt’, *New York*

was attributed to Arendt as well as to her opponents. As was rationality; or objectivity; or knowledge of The Facts.

On both sides, people argued with absolute certainty that they knew what The Facts were, and that their opponents did not. For Arendt's supporters, Arendt's book was largely fact. For Arendt's opponents, it was mostly judgment, or distortion.⁵⁶ Arendt herself said of her main judgment of the Jewish leaders that it was 'the whole truth.'⁵⁷ Some of Arendt's staunchest defendants boldly declared that she hardly presented any judgments at all.⁵⁸ Although discussants often boasted superior knowledge of The Facts, very few actually brought in new material. Instead, arguments accumulated and were endlessly repeated. Surviving victims, "those who were there", were put forward as the most authoritative sources.⁵⁹ Rarely did someone question this authority of experience. Yet "those who were there" could and did produce diametrically opposed views – as the letters from survivors in Arendt's personal papers testify.⁶⁰

That The Facts could not decide who was right, was distinctly demonstrated by the recurrence of crossover-arguments. For instance, Arendt's critics often argued that there were good guys and bad guys among the Jewish leaders, to prove that her criticism of Jewish leaders was not allowed, was unfair or pointless. However, the same argument could be used to argue that criticism *should* be allowed, was justified or relevant.⁶¹ These crossover-arguments indicate that discussants were not so absolutely opposed as they professed to be (a subject for another paper).

Arendt had evidently broken unwritten rules in her discussion of the Jewish Councils. 'In her attempt to blame the victims of the mass murder,' one reviewer wrote, 'she transgresses all permissible boundaries.'⁶² Reviews exposed a spectrum of views on the historical evaluation of the Nazi era. The overwhelming amount of angry replies made clear that moral judgment of the Jewish leaders was off limits. But critics offered different reasons for *why* this judgment was out of bounds. For one reviewer, Arendt had broken the rule that moral judgment should be left out of a historical reconstruction of events.⁶³ For others, the cardinal rule was that "only those who were there might presume to judge."⁶⁴

Post (July 21 1963) sec. Magazine. Albert Hoschander Friedlander, 'The Arendt report on Eichmann and the Jewish community. An evaluation', *Central Conference American Rabbis Journal (CCAR Journal)* 9 no.2 (October 1963) 47-55, at 47.

⁵⁶ Ezorsky, 'Arendt against the facts', *New Politics*.

⁵⁷ *EU*, 125.

⁵⁸ For example Frederic S. Burin, *Political Science Quarterly* 79 no.1 (March 1964) 122-125. Maier, 'Was hat Hannah Arendt eigentlich gesagt?' *Aufbau/Reconstruction* (December 20 1963) 17-18.

⁵⁹ For instance Syrkin, 'Arendt surveys the holocaust', 13-14.

⁶⁰ Survivors' letters can be found among the correspondence in the Arendt Papers: Eichmann File, folders 'Survivors of the Holocaust', 'Letters to the Editor, New Yorker' and 'Correspondence, Miscellaneous, German and French languages.' Most are accessible in the online archive. <<http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/arendt-html/mharendtFolderP03.html>> (accessed June 16, 2018).

⁶¹ Compare for instance Pierre Vidal-Naquet, 'La banalité du mal', *Le Monde* (January 13 1967) 16; Lederman, 'This book was not written too early', *Aufbau/Reconstruction* (May 10 1963) 5.

⁶² H.G. Adler, 'Was weiss Hannah Arendt von Eichmann und der "Endlösung"?'', *Allgemeine Wochenzeitung der Juden in Deutschland*, 19 no.34 (November 20 1964) 8-9, at 8.

⁶³ Les faits appartiennent aux historiens, le jugement moral aux victimes.' Vidal-Naquet, 'La banalité du mal'. Also for instance Norman Podhoretz, 'Hannah Arendt on Eichmann. A study in the perversity of brilliance', *Commentary*, 36 no.3 (September 1963) 201-208, at 202.

⁶⁴ For instance Gershom Scholem, *Eichmann in Jerusalem*. An Exchange of Letters between Gershom Scholem and Hannah Arendt', *Encounter* 22 no 1 (January 1964) 51-53, at 52. Abel, 'The aesthetics of evil', 228. Syr-

Another warned that ‘the very terms [collaboration and cooperation] are shockingly improper with reference to the Judenräte.’⁶⁵

Who owns the Historical Truth?

In a way, Arendt had served the purpose of the people who were most opposed to her. Before she wrote her report, the Nazi persecution and murder of the Jews were considered ‘Jewish history’, a niche subject. In the controversy over *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, they were discussed before a broad audience. That was exactly what people like Hausner and Robinson had envisioned. The problem was that the attainment of this goal also meant a loss of control over the subject.⁶⁶

At the time, historian Walter Laqueur explicitly described the Arendt-controversy as a fight to control the historical narrative. According to Laqueur, some of Arendt’s opponents, Robinson among them,

tried to monopolize the historiography of the catastrophe in their own hands; they did valuable work in collecting source material but discouraged all ‘outsiders’ and all the more ambitious projects to write the history of the period in one of the world’s main languages; they failed to enlist younger historians and make them partners in their work. (...) This was a mistaken policy and has resulted in a serious crisis: the whole future of this official historiography is now in the balance.⁶⁷

The Arendt-controversy was the result of this strategy, according to him: ‘It is precisely the absence of [major historical] works that provoked Miss Arendt’s book and the great debate around it.’ It was time for professional historians to take responsibility for the historiography of ‘this most tragic chapter in Jewish history,’ Laqueur wrote. To protect the subject from the ambitions of ‘amateurs’ (Robinson) or ‘those eager to write a *roman à thèse*’ (Arendt).⁶⁸ However, Arendt did not let herself be put aside as a novelist. In her reply to Laqueur she put the historians in second place as Guardians of the Historical Truth, *after* the reporters, among whom she counted herself: ‘(...) the men who stand guard over the facts are (...) the reporters, the historians, and finally the poets.’⁶⁹

3 Conclusion: a discussion never begun

Arendt and her defenders often presented the controversy as a massive onslaught on ‘a book which was never written.’⁷⁰ That is a very one-sided presentation of affairs, as I have argued here. Misrepresentations of Arendt’s views did indeed seriously muddle the dis-

kin, ‘Arendt surveys the holocaust’, 16-17.

65 Donat, ‘Revisionist history’, 435.

66 Boers, *A controversy*, 37, 117, 169-170.

67 Walter Laqueur, ‘A reply to Hannah Arendt’, *The New York Review of Books*, 6 no.1 (February 3 1966).

68 Laqueur, ‘Footnotes to the Holocaust’.

69 Hannah Arendt, ‘The Jewish Establishment. Hannah Arendt replies’, *The New York Review of Books*, 6 no.4 (March 17 1966).

70 *ELJ*, 283.

cussion, and some of them still do, particularly on the subject of Eichmann.⁷¹ Still, most of the responses can be traced back to Arendt's book. Arendt presented generalised judgments and sharp opinions on complex issues; there were delicate areas where she was imprecise.

Her opponents were imprecise, too. Using words like 'complicit', Arendt's opponents suggested that Arendt considered the Jewish leaders not just morally, but also legally responsible: 'Arendt accuses the Jewish people in its totality, in every part of the world, of complicity in the holocaust.'⁷² They were not entirely mistaken, perhaps, in detecting a certain undercurrent: in Arendt's book, 'cooperation' could mean 'collaboration'.⁷³ In a private letter, she used the word 'exoneration' in reference to the Jewish Councils, a word that also has a legal connotation.⁷⁴ In her Postscript to the second edition (1964), Arendt attempted to dispel the confusion by defining and separating her judgments: the moral, legal and political; the individual and the collective.⁷⁵

A lack of explicit and common definitions of core discussion concepts such as 'guilt', 'responsibility', 'cooperation', and 'collaboration', enabled discussants to consciously and unconsciously distort each other's viewpoints. This distortion hindered them from discussing their actual differences of opinion.⁷⁶ In addition, few people had enough factual knowledge of the subjects discussed to critically assess the arguments presented. After analysing the substance of the debate, one is left with the impression that the discussion stopped where it really should have begun: did the Jewish leaders have a choice in the moral dilemmas they faced; should one refrain from a moral judgment of them – because they were victims, and because the boundary of responsibility between victims and perpetrators should be upheld? Or is judgment a necessity, and do victims in certain positions still have a moral responsibility; if that moral responsibility exists, are only other victims allowed to judge that? Does the role of the Jewish leaders make Eichmann less responsible in a legal (or only in a moral) sense; does the nature of the crime dictate the nature of the criminal? Was Eichmann indeed a 'modern type' of criminal who threatens our future?

The discussion of these issues was further hampered by discordant ideas about the ownership of the historical events discussed. Arendt stood on the 'universal' side of Bell's divide. She was not out to air dirty linen in public, as some of her opponents thought; she wanted to discuss matters that she considered important to all of humanity. Many of her

71 Especially Arendt's views on Eichmann were and are still conflated with the views of others. For instance C.W. Szejnmann, 'Perpetrators of the Holocaust. A historiography', in: O. Jensen and C.W. Szejnmann eds., *Ordinary people as mass murderers: perpetrators in comparative perspective* (London 2008) 25-54. Donald Bloxham and Tony Kushner, *The Holocaust. Critical historical approaches* (Manchester 2008) 153. Deborah Lipstadt, *The Eichmann trial* (New York 2011) 168.

72 Marie Syrkin, 'Arguments. More on Eichmann', *Partisan Review* 31 no.2 (Spring 1964) 253-255, at 254.

73 The Jewish leaders did not only cooperate, Arendt says. They were given power, which they used to their personal advantage – for the short time they were in a position to do so, before being deported themselves. Although Arendt does not use the word on these pages, cooperation with the enemy for personal gain is one definition of the word collaboration. In the second edition, she actually uses the word collaboration once. *EIJ*, 10-11, 123.

74 Ylana N. Miller, 'Creating unity through history. The Eichmann trial as transition', *Journal of Modern Jewish Studies* 1 no.2 (2002) 131-149, at 142.

75 *EIJ*, 296-298.

76 Boers, *A controversy*, 403.

opponents looked at the world from the perspective of a smaller group. For them it was important that the history of the persecution of the Jews was presented in different ways to different audiences. Arendt's criticism was not new or even taboo; but one who uttered this criticism, they thought, was bound by certain rules of tone and place.

In sum, one could say that the theme in Arendt's book that reviewers responded to, was her theory of a moral collapse; the moral judgments that came with this theory; and her use of Eichmann as a model for this theory. This was where fundamental oppositions between the discussants arose: on her moral judgment of the Jewish leaders; on her view of Eichmann's conscience. According to biographer Young-Bruehl, 'in private, [Arendt] admitted candidly that she knew her work had moral implications she had not thought out.'⁷⁷ This however, was not something that Arendt was always willing to acknowledge. For instance, in her Postscript to the second edition of *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, she wrote that

(...) when I speak of the banality of evil, I do so only on the strictly factual level, pointing to a phenomenon that stared one in the face at the trial. (...) That such remoteness from reality and such thoughtlessness can wreak more havoc than all the vile instincts taken together which, perhaps, are inherent in man – that was, in fact, the lesson one could learn in Jerusalem. But it was a lesson, neither an explanation of the phenomenon nor a theory about it.⁷⁸

And when a German interviewer asked her which theses *Eichmann in Jerusalem* contained, she answered:

Properly speaking, there are no theses in the book. It is a report, where all the facts are addressed that were examined [tried] in the Jerusalem trial. (...) The fight over the book is unfortunately largely about facts and not about theses or opinions, about facts that are restyled as theories, to rob them of their factual character. At the centre of the book, as of the trial, stands the person of the accused. What came to light when his guilt was tried, was the totality of the moral collapse in the heart of Europe, *in all its frightening factuality* [my emphasis MB]. This factuality one can evade in many different ways – by denying it, by responding to it with pathetic, meaningless confessions of guilt, in which all that is specific is drowned, by speaking of a collective guilt of the German people or by claiming that what happened in Auschwitz, was only the consequence of the age-old hatred of Jews – the biggest pogrom of all time.⁷⁹

Arendt was not one person in the controversy. There was Arendt behind the scenes, corresponding with friends and readers about the nuances of history. There was Arendt speaking about the book in public, someone who, to the surprise of her interlocutors, showed herself much more knowledgeable, thoughtful and approachable than they had

⁷⁷ Young-Bruehl, *Hannah Arendt*, 374.

⁷⁸ *EIJ*, 287-288.

⁷⁹ Arendt, 1964 television interview with Thilo Koch, as quoted in Hannah Arendt, *Ich will verstehen. Selbstauskünfte zu Leben und Werk* (2nd ed., München 2013) 39, my translation MB.

imagined.⁸⁰ And then there was Arendt in her written public responses, facing legions of critics, distortions of her views, and personal attacks. This was the Arendt who kept underlining that her book was largely a simple report, presenting the facts of the case. Just as her opponents claimed factual status for their interpretations and evaluations.

During her reporting of the Eichmann trial, Arendt had changed her mind on the nature of evil.⁸¹ Listening to Eichmann, she had developed a new theory on the mechanism behind the Third Reich and its crimes: the moral collapse. She had begun to phrase criteria for resisting the moral collapse, and moral judgments of those who succumbed to the moral collapse – nearly everyone in the Reich and Nazi occupied Europe.⁸² This theory and these judgments were not as fully developed as they would have been if she had set out with the intention to write about them. To her readers, however, that was irrelevant: they took up what Arendt presented to them.

⁸⁰ Boers, *A controversy*, 86, 134-135, 164-165.

⁸¹ Arendt, 'An exchange of letters', *Encounter*, 56.

⁸² It is important to note here that Arendt does not proscribe active resistance. What she does expect, is that each individual acts in a manner that makes clear he refuses the moral collapse: everyone who succumbed to the moral collapse, she judges for shared responsibility for the genocide. She distinguishes several groups of people in the Reich and the occupied territories, and for each of these groups she names one or more criteria on which she bases her judgment. Boers, *A controversy*, 240.