

## **“Banality of Evil” as “Big Idea” – A blog entry**

*By Elisabeth Young-Bruehl*

A book would be required to report how “the banality of evil” has become banal over the decades since Hannah Arendt published her controversial “Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil” (1963). Her enemies thought she had absolved Eichmann of responsibility either by describing him as a “cog in the machine” or (worse) by saying that his deeds were banal; her supporters thought she had said there is an Eichmann in all of us, ready to do evil. Worn away by these kinds of misinterpretations, the phrase became like an ancient hieroglyph, portentous but illegible.

So, what was she trying to convey? First, and most immediately, that the man she saw and heard in the Jerusalem court room in 1961 was not a Richard III sort, not a man who had set out to “prove a villain.” His testimony revealed no deep motivation like revenge or lust for power—two words, perhaps, for the same thing. In the bureaucratic German he spoke there was no trace of psychopathy, no sadistic pleasure from inflicting pain. Some Nazis undoubtedly were “radically” evil in the sense that their deeds grew from a deep or twisted root, but Eichmann’s motives seemed to Arendt banal – superficial. He talked in court about his desire to move up in the Nazi bureaucracy, for example. His ideal was to be a good servant to his Fuhrer’s ideas and programs.

Arendt consistently used the word “thoughtless” to explicate Eichmann’s banality. He could recite moral rules; he could even, when asked to do so in court, recite Kant’s famous categorical imperative. But for him all rules referenced “the Fuhrer’s will,” they were all the Fuhrer’s commandments. Eichmann could neither ask himself nor think through the question that Arendt considered essential to moral experience, one that she (very challengingly) held was not at all a matter of following rules or serving any leader’s will: “Could I live with myself if I did this deed?”

She was prompted to a question by Eichmann’s careerism and his thoughtless conformity: Can banal motives block or stifle human fellow feeling and make a person inhumanly thoughtless, that is, unable to think? In her trial report, Arendt was laying the factual foundation for a psychological exploration of this question. For example, she described the moment when Eichmann dedicated himself without hesitation to obeying the Fuhrer’s will: it was four weeks after the head of the S.S. intelligence service, Reinhardt Heydrich, informed him, on July 31, 1941, that a Final Solution of the Jewish question – that is, extermination of the Jews – had become official policy. For a month, Eichmann was “on the ground” (as we now say) observing firsthand the grisly preliminary killing operations in Poland, and feeling repelled by them. But after that period, his feelings of repulsion disappeared and he was, simply, the transport officer, conscientiously carrying out the policy. Arendt remarked: It is of great political interest to know how long it takes an average person to overcome his innate repugnance toward crime, and what exactly happens to him once he has reached that point ... Yes, he had a

conscience, and his conscience functioned in the expected way for about four weeks, whereupon it began to function the other way around.”

In Arendt’s reconstruction of “what exactly happened to him,” there were three key ingredients. First, he never heard a word of questioning much less political debate among his peers or superiors. Second, he received a clarifying idea, a ‘truth,’ from the S.S. head Heinrich Himmler. Mass killings, Himmler said, were a heroic task requiring great courage, loyalty to the Führer, and ability to bear the suffering involved in being an executioner. A state executioner is a hero, tough, loyal and brave. Third, Eichmann adopted a “different personal attitude” (in his own words). He became numbed to seeing dead people all around him: “We did not care if we died today or only tomorrow.” Having redefined executioners as heroic sufferers and having stifled his empathy for human suffering, including his own, Eichmann was numb enough to follow his new conscience.

True villains and true psychopaths are, fortunately, rather rare; but, in the right circumstances, becoming unfeelingly obedient and inhuman in this way can become a common condition. When political life atrophies and debate and questioning cease, while thoughtful moral experience is blocked internally, the resulting capacity for evil can spread like an epidemic. Before she went to Jerusalem, Arendt had feared that thoughtlessness – “the headless recklessness or hopeless confusion or complacent repetition of ‘truths’ which have become trivial and empty,” as she described it in *The Human Condition* (1958)– had become “among the outstanding characteristics of our time.” Eichmann convinced her of the rightness of this judgment. And the thoughtlessness of the controversy over her book seems to me further evidence.

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