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Journey in Thought – Hannah Arendt

By Jonathan Rée

Editorial note: The text published below is the transcript of a BBC radio feature in the series "Journeys in Thought" created by Jonathan Rée. Rée concentrates on turning points in the intellectual lives of great thinkers, exploring their ideas and positioning them in time and place. His journey to Israel "in the footsteps of the philosopher and political theorist Hannah Arendt" took him to Jerusalem, from where he returned with a unique and lively documentary radio programme, thus adding a valuable contribution to the debate on Arendt and her book *Eichmann in Jerusalem.* The programme was first broadcast on 23 November 2003, with a repeat on 28 August 2004; it can be listened to at http://www.bbc.co.uk/radio3/journeysinthought/pip/ashxz/. Having taught philosophy in London for nearly thirty years, Jonathan Rée became a househusband and freelance writer at the turn of the millenium. His books include *Proletarian Philosophers, Philosophical Tales, Heidegger*, and *I See a Voice*. For the last ten years he has been working on a history of philosophy. We are grateful to Jonathan Rée for permission to reproduce his programme.

This is King George V Street in West Jerusalem. It was here on the 9th of April 1961 that the New York writer Hannah Arendt checked into the Hotel Maria ready to tackle what would be the biggest journalistic assignment of her life. She was one of the greatest political thinkers of her time, and she had come to Jerusalem as a reporter for the *New Yorker* magazine to cover the trial of the former Gestapo officer Adolf Eichmann. Eichmann had been a Nazi functionary with a special interest in the Jewish question, and it was alleged that he, more than anyone else, was the logistical organizer of the murder of six million Jews in the Holocaust.

Arendt herself was a Jew of German origin, but she was now a citizen of the United States. Her overall coverage of the trial, published as *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, was to embroil her in damaging controversy, and there was one particular phrase – 'the banality of evil' – which many of her critics found totally unforgivable.

Richard Sennett:

"Hannah Arendt was not a cowardly person and she reveled in provocation."

Avishai Margalit:

"Everything she says about critical thought as the basis for moral action is crucial to our days."

Susan Neiman:

"I think it is one of the most important works of philosophy of the twentieth century."

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The Israeli secret service had kidnapped Eichmann in Argentina the year before and brought him to Jerusalem to face the accusation of crimes against humanity and against the Jewish people. But the trial was not just about what Eichmann was alleged to have

done – it was about Jewishness and genocide, about politics, history and collective memory.

Shlomo Avineri is a professor of philosophy in Jerusalem, and he sees the trial as an essential supplement to the Nuremberg War Crimes Tribunal of 1945.

Shlomo Avineri:

"I think Eichmann got a better hearing in Jerusalem than Göring and Ribbentrop and others got at Nuremberg after the war. However, it was a trial which was used to settle a historical account and to establish in the mind of Israelis – in the mind of the world – the enormity of the Holocaust. And therefore it had meaning beyond the individual fate of Eichmann."

I have now walked up to the hill, past the old classical Parliament building, and have come to the House of Justice where Eichmann's trial took place – except that it is not in fact a courtroom at all, but an 800-seat theatrical auditorium. At the moment, an exuberant group of students from a local high school are on the stage rehearsing their own dance project called "The World Belongs to Young Lovers". It takes some effort to recall the period from April to August 1961: this was the place where the 58-year-old Adolf Eichmann, balding and bespectacled, sat in a bullet-proof glass cage flanked by armed guards. On the tier above him was a team of translators, and above them were the stenographers and the three judges: Moshe Landau, Yitzhak Raveh and Benjamin Halevy. Down on the stage – face to face with Eichmann – was the prosecution team, led by a man who was to dominate the entire trial with his extravagant oratory and his sense of dramatic timing: the Israeli Attorney General, Gideon Hausner.

Gideon Hausner:

"Here with me, at this moment, stand six million prosecutors. But alas, they cannot rise to level the finger of accusation in the direction of the glass dock and cry out: 'J'accuse!' against the man who sits there."

Leora Bilsky:

"Gideon Hausner had a great sense of drama. And he was not a criminal lawyer before then actually. He was just appointed for the job two months before, and it became the case of his life."

Leora Bilsky, who teaches Law at Tel Aviv University.

The Israeli police had already spent the best part of the year interrogating Eichmann and preparing materials for the prosecution, including a selection of what was called 'suffering with the Jewish people witnesses'. But Hausner wasn't satisfied. With the backing of the Israeli Prime Minister, David Ben-Gurion, he wanted the tribunal to be much more than a trial of one individual Nazi. It was to be a judicial reckoning with the entire fate of the Jews in the Holocaust.

Leora Bilsky:

"He was given the names of fifty potential witnesses – survivors – to choose from them. And he said: 'No, no, no! I want a hundred of them. I want to tell the story of the Holocaust chronologically and step by step.' And actually, it was very important because even though every survivor thought they knew what the Holocaust was about, everybody had a very small part of this."

Hausner was addressing himself not only to the three judges but also to the dozens of international journalists, including Hannah Arendt; and the hundreds of Israeli citizens who together formed the audience in the House of Justice.

Avishai Margalit:

"If I have to mention a formative experience in my life, I would definitely mention the Eichmann trial."

Avishai Margalit, professor of philosophy at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem, who was a young soldier at the time of the trial.

Avishai Margalit:

"I became quite hooked on it to the point at which I was afraid that I will get an addict. I always was afraid of being mesmerized with the Holocaust pornography. I was attracted [to] and repelled by the whole story. But when the Eichmann trial came to the fore, I was swept by it and got very, very interested. It made a tremendous impression on my generation and on me personally. It is hard to overstate the impression that it made, because the Holocaust was not really discussed; there was deep silence and embarrassment. And the Eichmann trial suddenly brought it all out in a dramatic way."

Was the proceeding broadcast at the time?

Avishai Margalit:

"Almost all the time. There was a non-stop [broadcast] and there was only one channel. So the whole country was glued to it."

One of the people listening to those live broadcasts was the historian Idith Zertal, who was then a teenager, happily immersed in the collective life of her kibbutz some seventy kilometres out of Tel Aviv.

Idith Zertal:

"I was seventeen. I remember one episode that struck me really – about a Nazi officer killing a youngster who had stolen an apple. This I remember from the testimonies. I remember it very sharply. I remember myself listening to the radio entire days and weeping – crying! – and not being able to leave the radio. For me, it was a shock! A discovery. For the first time, I discovered the Holocaust through the witnesses' testimonies."

The revelations were in fact a double shock for Idith Zertal. But it had dawned on her that the Holocaust had affected lots of people she knew, including her own family. She had never heard it discussed.

Idith Zertal:

"This is almost paradoxical because my father fought in the war against the Nazis – he was a soldier in the British Army – and then he worked with Jewish survivors in Europe after the war; and yet he never talked about it. We never talked about it, they never talked about it, and it was very metaphorical for the silence – the organized silence in Israel in the collectivist, socialist Israel at the time. The Holocaust was not there."

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Hannah Arendt was born in Germany in 1906 – the same year as Eichmann himself. As a young woman, she had been a passionate student of philosophy and she had the great

Martin Heidegger not only as her teacher, but also for a while as her lover. But she was a Jew as well as a philosopher, and in 1933 after the Nazis came to power, she gave up all thoughts of an academic career and fled to Paris.

She was 26 years old and astonishingly good-looking with her cropped hair, boyish features and a cigarette constantly in her mouth. Before long, she found a job in Paris as a kind of social worker, preparing Jewish children for a new life in Palestine. In fact, she once escorted a group and made her first visit to Jerusalem in the mid-1930s. In 1941 she got to New York eventually making good money as an editor and writer. Her book on *The Origins of Totalitarianism* was one of the first systematic attempts to understand Nazi anti-Semitism. What is frightening in the rise of totalitarianism, she wrote, is not that it is something new, but that it has brought to life the ruin of our categories of thought and standards of judgment.

When Arendt got the chance to cover the Eichmann trial in Jerusalem, she felt she had no choice. It would undoubtedly be a very painful experience, but it was – she said – 'an obligation I owe to my past.'

Stephen Aschheim:

"Quite clearly she wanted to go because there was the overall recognition that the Eichmann trial encapsulated almost every aspect that was of interest to somebody who was Jewish, who was German, who had gone through German culture, who was identified in one way or another with the state of Israel, and who had to address the problem of genocide in our age; and it combined almost all of these questions in a way that – I think – has never ever occurred again."

Stephen Aschheim from the University of Wisconsin.

Arendt's account of the trial, *Eichmann in Jerusalem,* was published in five weekly instalments in *The New Yorker* in the spring of 1963 – thousands of column-inches of grim analysis and reportage threatening their way through hundreds of pages of advertisements for fashionable clothes, Scotch whisky and relaxing holiday cruises.

Quote Hannah Arendt, from *The New Yorker*, 16th February 1963: Our Reporter at Large, Eichmann in Jerusalem, Part One:

"Every morning, the words 'Bet Hamishpath' (The House of Justice), shouted by the court usher at the top of his voice, make us jump to our feet as they announce the arrival of the three judges, who, bare-headed and in black robes, walk into the courtroom from a side entrance to take their seats on the highest tier of the raised platform at the front of the long hall."

Hannah Arendt explains that Eichmann and all the rest of the non-Hebrew speakers including herself had to listen to simultaneous translations through headphones and that these translations were…

QUOTE Hannah Arendt:

"… excellent in French, bearable in English, and sheer comedy, frequently incomprehensible, in German."

Arendt quickly made it clear that while she admired Moshe Landau, the presiding judge, she loathed Gideon Hausner, the prosecutor. She regarded Hausner as a showman who treated the trial as if it were a mass meeting at which speaker after speaker does his best to arouse the audience. As far as she was concerned, the aim of the trial should have

been simply to establish what had actually been done by Eichmann rather than refer to every wrong that had been suffered by the Jews.

Some critics such as Leora Bilsky believe that there was an element of snobbishness in Arendt's attitude to Hausner. He was after all an 'Easterner' – a 'Yiddish speaker' – who came not from Western Europe but from Galicia, in what is now the Ukraine.

Leora Bilsky:

"I think that here came her touchdown. She was a German from a family that was very educated, middle-class, and Hausner represented to her the 'Ostjuden' – the Jews from the East – who talked with great pathos and sentimentality, liked dramas, and she could not stand it; she wanted calmness and objectivity – very calm talk. It was a personal disliking there."

Arendt's sarcasm about Attorney General Hausner was bound to annoy the government of the Israeli state and all its friends. But what upset them even more was her discussion of the Judenräte – the Jewish Councils – the Jewish elite which had been entrusted with some responsibility for Jewish life under the Nazis, and which – at least according to Eichmann's testimony – had been more than willing to collaborate with the Nazi authorities.

QUOTE Hannah Arendt:

"The moral problem lay in the amount of truth there was in Eichmann's description of the Jewish collaboration even under the conditions of the Final Solution. To a Jew, this role of the Jewish leaders in the destruction of their own people is undoubtedly the darkest chapter of the whole dark story."

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Copies of all the records of the Eichmann trial are held at Yad Vashem, Israel's centre for memorializing the Holocaust. Yaacov Lozowick is director of archives there.

Yaacov Lozowick:

“We are in one of the strong-rooms of the archive. It has in it a few miles of shelves – archivists love to measure the size of their collections by how many miles of shelves they have…”

… But this is a copy of the documentation that was prepared for the prosecution case in the trial.

Yaacov Lozowick:

“Yes…. We have all 1 600 or 1 700 files that the Israeli police collected for the prosecution prior to the trial – we have that; we have about 170 hours of video tape from what was taken in the courtroom itself; we have the transcripts of the trial, of course."

After we emerge from the archive, I ask Yaacov Lozowick what Arendt said about the Jewish Councils that was so contemptuous.

Yaacov Lozowick:

"That the Nazis would not have been able to murder millions of Jews had the Jewish leaderships in the various geographical areas or ghettos not participated – willingly or unwillingly – in this process. And this willingness of the Jewish leadership to cooperate with Nazi overlords made the Nazis' job much easier and ultimately more successful,

thereby putting a part of blame for the Holocaust on the Jewish leadership. Now, there are Jews – many survivors – who were willing to put specific blame on specific Jewish figures for specific events during the Holocaust. But turning it into a general statement that Nazis could not have murdered the Jews had the Jews not participated, had the Jews not cooperated, seemed to everybody absolutely bonkers. There was the divorce between Hannah Arendt and certainly the Jewish side. After she had written that, she was beyond appeal for them."

The other way in which Hannah Arendt won enemies was by quoting from Eichmann's testimony in order to explore the vast gap she saw between the unspeakable horror of the deeds and the undeniable ludicrousness of the man who had perpetrated them. For Arendt, Eichmann was not so much an infernal monster, but a mindless fool with what she called a 'horrible gift' for consoling himself with clichés. She found something strange and even comic in Eichmann, especially in his 'heroic fight' with the German language which invariably defeats him.

QUOTE Hannah Arendt:

"He was genuinely incapable of uttering a single sentence that was not a cliché. The longer one listened to him, the more obvious it became that his inability to speak was closely connected to his inability to think – namely to think from the standpoint of somebody else."

It struck her that the only topic Eichmann could talk about with conviction was himself.

QUOTE Hannah Arendt:

"He was perfectly sure that he was not what he called an 'innere Schweinehund' – a dirty bastard – in the depths of his heart; and as to his conscience, he remembered perfectly well that he would have had a bad conscience if he had not done what he had been ordered to. Despite all the effort of the prosecution, everybody could see that this man was not a monster, but it was difficult indeed not to suspect that he was a clown."

Eichmann a clown? Avishai Margalit of the Hebrew University is not persuaded, pointing out that Eichmann was also an ambitious ideologue who had done his best to become an expert on Jewish affairs.

Avishai Margalit:

"She describes him as a mindless, thoughtless bureaucrat. I think, she got him wrong. First, he prepared himself before the war. He became in charge of Jewish things before the war. Studied Heb[rew], came to Palestine to learn the place. He knows the stuff; he is an expert [sic!]."

Stephen Aschheim also takes this view of Hannah Arendt's interpretation of Eichmann's banality:.

Stephen Aschheim:

"The portrait of Eichmann not as an ideologically determined fanatic Anti-Semite, not indeed as a monster, but as a banal bureaucrat who in very determined fashion, once given a task to do, does it quite independently of his feelings or his notions; simply goes on with it as a bureaucratic deed, that is to say as a 'banality of evil' as she calls it. It was ordinary bureaucrats doing their job thoughtlessly once given the task. She was proposing here the idea – perhaps even more frightening than anti-Semitism – that genocide can be

done by people who don't necessarily harbour a hatred of their victims. That may be the nature of modern bureauratic genocide. In the case of Eichmann she was wrong."

I must say I find a big difference between what Arendt actually wrote in *Eichmann in Jerusalem* and what I hear about it from her critics. She may have found Eichmann absurd or even comic, but she had no doubt that what he had done was evil and that he deserved absolutely no mercy from the court. Here is the historian Idith Zertal again.

Idith Zertal:

"She was perceived as uncompassionate towards the Jews – but she was not – on the contrary! But she never, never – it is almost shameful that I should say – she never, never took Eichmann's side. She loathed Eichmann – his thoughtlessness, his ludicrousness, his emptiness, his nothingness. His being a docile executor of orders, of ideology was for her the sum up of everything she loathed in everybody everywhere. She couldn't take Eichmann's side, she couldn't sympathize with Eichmann. It was a total misunderstanding of what she wrote."

Hannah Arendt certainly thought that the trial had drawn a veil over the collaboration between Jewish leadership in Europe and the Nazi authorities. But she never for a moment suggested that Jews should be held responsible for their own destruction. The truth – it seems to me – is almost exactly the opposite: what she objected to was the attempt by the prosecution to present the Jews of the European Diaspora as solely feeble after centuries of anti-Semitism; that they had gone to their death like sheep. She criticized the trial for covering up the valiant work of Europe's Jewish resistance fighters and she was outraged by what she regarded as the cruel and silly leading question that Hausner put to all his witnesses: 'Why did you not protest?'

QUOTE Hannah Arendt:

"Mister Hausner wanted to demonstrate that whatever resistance there had been, had come from Zionists. As though of all the Jews only Zionists knew that if you could not save your life, it [would] be desirable to save your honor. There exist many things considerably worse than death, and the SS saw to it that none of them was ever very far from the mind and the imagination of their victims. In this respect, the deliberate attempt in Jerusalem to tell only the Jewish side of the story distorted the truth. Even the Jewish truth."

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In *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, Hannah Arendt was not only writing as a journalist and political commentator, but as a philosopher as well. One of her philosophical preoccupations had always been the nature of politics, or rather what she called 'political space.'

When she spoke of politics, she meant the kind of secular public realm in which individuals could leave their private lives behind them and interact simply as equal citizens. To Arendt, this political space was one of the most precious of historical achievements but also one of the most fragile. Engagement with politics was an essential dimension of any worthwhile life. But when the public world of politics got tangled up with the personal world of passion and love, the result was bound to be a disaster to both.

QUOTE Hannah Arendt:

"Whatever the passions and the emotions may be, they certainly are located in the human heart; and not only is the human heart a place of darkness which no human eye can penetrate – the qualities of the heart need the darkness and protection against the light of the public to grow and to remain what they are meant to be. However deeply heartfelt a motive may be, once it is brought out and exposed to public inspection, it becomes an object of suspicion."

Those remarks come from a book called *On Revolution*, which Arendt wrote and published in parallel with *Eichmann in Jerusalem*. Arendt's argument was that modern politics was endangered by a deepening obsession with private emotions. This obsession, she said, was typical of the totalitarian police states of the twentieth century – regimes which sought to control the thoughts of their citizens as well as their actions, and she traced it back to the reign of terror and suspicion in the French Revolution. The cool, dry intelligence of classical politics, she believed, was in danger of being drowned in floods of nostalgia and sentimentality.

She had some sympathy with the thoughts of Karl Marx, but she was horrified by his dismissive attitude to politics – his idea that it was merely a mechanism by which one class imposes its will on the other.

I asked Richard Sennett at the London School of Economics what he makes of Arendt's claims for the political public sphere and its distinctness from economic and social life.

Richard Sennett:

"This was her fundamental break with Marxism. People don't understand it, but there is nothing strange about it. I think – although I don't agree with it – I think it is a quite admirable attempt. What she wanted to do was to lift the human being as a 'political animal' out of the circumstances of scarcity, inequality, relative lack, differentiation in an arbitrary fashion. To accomplish that end, one has to celebrate the anonymity of political activists. Their identities, where they come from and so on are irrelevant to empowering them politically."

One consequence of Arendt's belief in the anonymity or impersonality of political action was that she was not prepared to let her Jewishness (which she regarded as a purely personal matter) become a factor in her political judgments – even when it came to Israel and the Eichmann trial. This stubborn refusal was to lead to some painful quarrels – not least with the celebrated Jewish scholar Gershom Scholem, whom she had first met in Berlin in the early thirties. When the *New Yorker* articles on “Eichmann in Jerusalem” were gathered together and published as a book, Scholem issued a fierce open letter denouncing his old friend. Scholem said he always used to regard her as 'a daughter of our people', but now he felt he had been deceived. Arendt had revealed herself, he said, as totally incapable of love for the Jewish people. In her reply, Arendt did not deny the fact, but she was appalled by the imputation.

QUOTE Hannah Arendt:

"You are quite right: I am not moved by any love of this sort. And for two reasons, I have never in my life loved any people or collective – neither the German people nor the French nor the American nor the working class or anything of that. I indeed only love my friends, and the only kind of love I know of or believe in, is the love of persons."

It seems that Arendt's revulsion from the idea of love of the Jewish people goes back to an evening in Jerusalem at the time of the Eichmann trial. Arendt had made friends with the Israeli historian Leni Yahil, and was glad of the chance to spend time with her and her family. But the friendship was not to survive the publication of *Eichmann in Jerusalem*.

Leni Yahil:

"I liked her very much. On the other side, when I read the book or when I read the articles, I was devastated, I could not understand."

Professor Yahil is now in her nineties, small but energetic and as passionate as ever. When I was around with a cup of very strong coffee in her little flat in Jerusalem, she recalled having Arendt over for dinner in her house one evening. Her husband, Chaim Yahil, a prominent diplomat and senior official at the Israeli Foreign Office, invited Golda Meir, Israel's foreign minister of the time, to come and join them afterwards.

Leni Yahil:

"My husband asked Golda Meir, who was his boss, if she is interested to meet Hannah Arendt, suggested she came that evening. When she entered the room all the people got up, and Hannah Arendt had eyes like that. She hadn't dreamed about it – that she could have a talk with somebody of the government. Then, later, a discussion developed [about] the relation of Golda Meir to the Jewish people."

Arendt recalled the discussion with Golda Meir, Israel's future prime minister, in her reply to Scholem's wounding open letter:

QUOTE Hannah Arendt:

"What she said – I'm not sure of the exact words any more – it ran to me like this: 'You will understand that I, as a socialist, of course do not believe in God. I believe in the Jewish people.' I found this a shocking statement and being too shocked, I did not reply at the time, but I could have answered: 'The greatness of this people was once that it believed in God, and now this people believes only in itself?! What good can come of that?' Well, in this sense, I do not love the Jews nor do I believe in them. I merely belong to them as a matter of course beyond dispute or argument."

In her letter to Scholem, Arendt went on to deplore the disastrous results of allowing emotions to be displayed in public and become a factor in political affairs. Throughout her life, she would find herself accused of lacking compassion for the victims of oppression; but as far as she was concerned, what was at stake was not her private capacity for sympathy but the overriding importance of keeping the political public sphere free of emotions and sentimentality.

QUOTE Hannah Arendt:

"Generally speaking, the role of the heart in politics seems to me altogether questionable."

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Sometimes Hannah Arendt had to work hard to tease out the philosophical issues from the masses of historical material brought up by the Eichmann trial. But on one remarkable day, the proceedings themselves turned explicitly to the moral philosophy of Immanuel Kant and Eichmann's interpretation of the categorical imperative – that is to

say of Kant's version of the idea that to act morally is to act in a way that we would want everyone else to act as well.

QUOTE Hannah Arendt:

"To the surprise of everybody, Eichmann came up with an approximately correct definition of the categorical imperative: I meant by my remark about Kant that the principle of my will must always be such that it can become the principle of universal laws."

Arendt was right: Eichmann's version of Kant's moral philosophy or what he called in a characteristic phrase 'Kantianism adapted for the household use of the little man' was far from stupid. But the categorical imperative also implies that morality involves autonomy or self-mastering; and here, Eichmann's explanation of Kant became decisively eccentric.

QUOTE Hannah Arendt:

"He then proceeded to explain that from the moment he was given responsibility for carrying out the Final Solution, he had consoled himself with the thought that he was no longer master of his own deeds."

Eichmann seems to have thought that because he was simply following orders, he was no longer responsible for his deeds. And once again, he was not entirely mistaken: Kant's philosophy really does imply that morality requires autonomy or 'mastery of one's own deeds,' as Eichmann called it – as opposed to heteronomy or dependence. Without self-determination, there could not be such thing as moral responsibility. But Eichmann had given Kant's doctrine a quite unexpected twist, thinking it would somehow exonerate him. As it happened, Avishai Margalit was also sitting in the House of Justice that day.

Avishai Margalit:

"This was the day I was in trial, the following exchange took place – the thing between Judge Raveh and Eichmann: Judge Raveh said to Eichmann: 'I read in the accounts by the police investigator, and you say you behaved according to the categorical imperative of Immanuel Kant.' So he asked him: 'What do you mean by that?' And Eichmann said: 'Look, Kant makes the distinction between autonomy and heteronomy. You should behave as a moral agent where you are free to act as such. But I wasn't free! So when I was free, I behaved accordingly, and when I wasn't free, I'm not accountable.'

I knew that people repudiated, but I found it at the time as a youngster... I was very troubled by this exchange, I must admit. There was nothing banal about it! I thought: He is making a point. And I don't think too many banal people who are thoughtless would have come up with this account."

As far as Arendt was concerned, the link between Kant and the Eichmann trial went far deeper: for Kant, who also wrestled with the so-called problem of evil, the question was how evil entered the world and how we can face up to evil without giving up our hope.

For Susan Neiman, director of the Einstein Forum in Berlin, *Eichmann in Jerusalem* is above all a contribution to the problem of evil.

Susan Neiman:

"Although I think Hannah Arendt was one of the great readers of Kant, in one very crucial way she broke with one of Kant's deepest assumptions about morality – namely that intention is the heart of morality. And this is one of the deepest assumptions that I think we all have so much so that we think that if people aren't accused of having evil

intentions, they can't be accused of actually having done evil. And this is at the heart of the claim of the book. Eichmann had no evil intentions; nevertheless what he did was evil. It's a simple enough point, you would think – and yet people continue to be outraged by it. But it is a very deep point because it goes against the heart of not just the most of modern moral philosophy, but a great deal of legal assumptions as well."

Arendt's view about Eichmann was certainly contemptuous, but perhaps sometimes deliberately misused. But she was not trying to find excuses for Eichmann. If anything, she was saying that he would still be guilty whatever thoughts might have been in his mind, that he was still utterly evil, even if he never meant to be.

If Arendt's treatment of Eichmann and evil has been widely misunderstood, then it is largely because of a sentence that appears towards the end of *Eichmann in Jerusalem* which immediately took on a life of its own. Arendt has just summarized the end-game of the trial – how on the 11th of December 1961 the judges returned a verdict of 'guilty' on all fifteen accounts; how a series of appeals came to an end on the 31st of May 1962, and how a few hours later, Eichmann marched confidently and with great dignity to the gallows. He was so completely himself, Arendt says, and so thoroughly cartooned in his ridiculous clichés that it was as if he had overlooked the rather significant fact that this was his own funeral and that it was indeed he who was to be hanged.

QUOTE Hannah Arendt:

"It was as though in those last minutes he was summing up the lesson that this long course in human wickedness had taught us – the lesson of the fearsome, word-and-thought-defying banality of evil."

This phrase – 'the banality of evil' – was often regarded as an attempt to excuse Eichmann's crimes; but it seems to me that it has not only particularly to do with Eichmann; it expresses a quite general idea: that evil events need not to be evidence of evil designs; or, as Arendt put it in her reply to Scholem, that the sources of even the most monstrous malignity may not go very deep.

QUOTE Hannah Arendt:

"It is indeed my opinion that evil is never radical, that it is only extreme; and that it possesses neither depth nor any demonic dimension. It can overgrow and lay waste the whole world precisely because it spreads like a fungus on the surface. That is its 'banality'."

We are wrong, in other words, to assume that if anything appalling happens, there must be some deep-rooted, demonic reason behind it. Perfectly trivial causes can be responsible for perfectly terrible effects.

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According to Susan Neiman, Arendt's attitude towards evil belongs to a tradition that starts with the unlucky figure of Job in the Old Testament – Job, the upright, God-fearing man, whose life was plagued with inexplicable misfortune.

Susan Neiman:

"The problem of evil, of course, goes back to the book of Job – Job's question not so much 'Why me?,' but 'How can good and righteous people suffer, and weakened, rotten

people triumph and flourish?' It is a question that even God couldn't answer, and Kant therefore said that it wasn't worth for us ever to try. Nevertheless, it is I think *the* philosophical question that has preoccupied both ordinary people and professional philosophers again up through Nietzsche, that is, up through the end of the nineteenth century. The question for Arendt was: 'Can I find my way about in the world without selling my soul in it?' And 'Can I love the world, at least that I have hope to go on in it?' was the major question of Arendt's thought."

Does that imply that an optimistic attitude towards the possibility of redemption from the evil in the world is one that depends on our will power rather than on the course of natural events?

Susan Neiman:

"It is an excellent question. Look, I want to distinguish between optimism and hope. Optimism is an assumption about the way the world is going and this is not only beyond our power. The way the world is going looks rather bad in those days. [Yet] we have an obligation to hope. That is, we need to keep hoping that our actions could actually make the world better. So yes, in a certain sense it is an act of the will, but it is a moral act of will and therefore not an arbitrary matter. Although I grant you that it is one of those facts about both philosophy and life that I still find the most mysterious and troubling."

In other words, hopefulness is a kind of duty. We owe it to ourselves and to humanity to carry on hoping, even when the objective state of the world seems pretty hopeless; in fact, especially then.

Hope is a matter not of predicting that things will get better, but of taking a certain kind of loving attitude towards the world and to human existence. Despair is therefore a moral pother, and hope a personal virtue. When she first read *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, Arendt's friend, the writer Mary McCarthy, said it had given her joy. Despite all the horrors in it, she said, she found it morally 'exhilarating.' Arendt was delighted.

QUOTE Hannah Arendt:

"You were the only reader to understand what otherwise I had never admitted: namely, that I wrote this book in a curious state of euphoria. Ever since I did it, I feel light-hearted about the whole matter. Don't tell anybody! Is it not proof positive that I have no soul!?"

But Arendt's optimism was philosophical rather than pathological. Her teacher, Martin Heidegger, always taught that our lives owe their significance to our mortality; that we act out our existences in a field where our always present boundary is our death. Arendt turned this notion around reminding us that birth or natality is as much a fact of life as death or mortality; and that every new existence is a new beginning, and that beginning is the supreme capacity of man.

The importance of this notion can hardly be exaggerated, according to Stephen Aschheim.

Stephen Aschheim:

"Heidegger who talks about 'being towards death' makes death the horizon of his philosophy. Hannah Arendt is the only one I know who says: what is most important about being in the world is not death but natality, being born and new beginning. That in my view is her central normative importance."

Not everyone agrees with this assessment, Professor Avineri for instance.

Shlomo Avineri:

"In the century of the Holocaust I think this is kitsch. I like to see the sun shining every morning, new babies being born – but for philosophy, it is kitsch."

Arendt found the hostility to *Eichmann in Jerusalem* difficult to take, and as Susan Neiman explains, she was shocked to find herself shunned and vilified by much of the Jewish community – especially in the United States.

Susan Neiman:

"She suffered enormously. She lost – as I'm sure you know – many and deep friendships. She was the subject of one of the most violent smear campaigns in the history of twentieth-century intellectual life. And it was enormously painful for her."

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Back in New York, Arendt's career prospered nevertheless. She had already held visiting professorships at Berkley and later at Princeton, and now she got a post at Chicago. In 1967, she was at last able to settle into a job near her home – at New York's New School for Social Research. But then, a great personal disaster befell her: her husband she had loved and shared her life with for more than thirty years, Heinrich Bluecher, a working-class socialist intellectual from Berlin, died in 1970, and she found herself terribly alone. She received a proposal of marriage from her old friend W.H. Auden, but she gently turned him down and tried to concentrate on philosophical work instead. She embarked on an ambitious three-part study of *The Life of the Mind*: first *Thinking*, then *Willing*, and then a culminating volume on what to her was the most important philosophical question of all: *Judging*.

Judging means the special skill or tact which is required where decisions are to be taken which cannot be made mechanically. Judging had been the constant theme of her life – from her decision to abandon her native Germany and the academic career [...] to her decision to take a job as a social worker for a Zionist organization in Paris, to her many years as a controversial New York intellectual, and her decision at whatever cost to her popularity to approach political issues not as a woman or as a Jew, but simply as a political citizen.

Judgment had been a central concern of Aristotle and more recently of Kant, especially in his so-called Third Critique – the *Critique of Judgment*. But for Hannah Arendt, it was also the noblest, the most demanding skill in the most elevated sphere of human activity, namely politics.

Leora Bilsky:

"As strange as it might sound, she found in Kant dealing with the experience of beauty (how we judge a picture to be beautiful) to give guidance to what is political judgment and – I think in certain cases, like the Eichmann trial – also legal judgment. How do you come afresh to a situation and judge it without rules? And she gave a seminar on Kant's *Critique of Judgment* and tried to develop it. She wrote that the Eichmann trial was the trigger to this seminar and to these thoughts about judgment."

Just as there were no mechanical rules for deciding what was ugly or beautiful, so there were none for telling political right from wrong. It is in the nature of political questions that they call not for dogma but for judgment.

But the book on judging was never to be written. Arendt was about to start on it when she died of a heart attack in her Riverside Drive apartment on the 4th of December, 1975. She was sixty-nine years old. Not long before that, she had received the last of many letters from Martin Heidegger: 'Die Urteilskraft ist eine schwierige Sache,' he wrote – the faculty of judgment is a difficult matter.

But for Arendt, the ultimate imperative always remained the same: to love the world and to judge it with care.

(Transcribed for HannahArendt.net by Anna Wiehl)