

HANNAH ARENDT
AND
"THE FINAL SOLUTION"



THE
BANALITY
OF

EVIL

B E R N A R D J . B E R G E N

The Banality of Evil

The Banality of Evil

Hannah Arendt and "The Final Solution"

BERNARD J. BERGEN

ROWMAN & LITTLEFIELD PUBLISHERS, INC.

Lanham • Boulder • New York • Oxford

ROWMAN & LITTLEFIELD PUBLISHERS, INC.

Published in the United States of America
by Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc.
4720 Boston Way, Lanham, Maryland 20706

12 Hid's Copse Road
Cumnor Hill, Oxford OX2 9JJ, England

Copyright © 1998 by Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc.

Excerpts from *The Life of the Mind* by Hannah Arendt, copyright © 1978 by Harcourt Brace & Company, reprinted by permission of the publisher. Excerpts from *Essays in Understanding: 1930–1954* by Hannah Arendt, copyright © 1994 by The Literary Trustees of Hannah Arendt Bluecher, Mary McCarthy West, Trustee, reprinted by permission of Harcourt Brace & Company. Excerpts from *The Origins of Totalitarianism* by Hannah Arendt, copyright © 1951 and renewed 1979 by Mary McCarthy West, reprinted by permission of Harcourt Brace & Company. Excerpts from *Eichmann in Jerusalem* by Hannah Arendt, copyright © 1963, 1964 by Hannah Arendt, used by permission of Viking Penguin, a division of Penguin Putnam Inc. Excerpts from *Time: Narrative and History* by David Carr, copyright © 1991 by Indiana University Press, used by permission of the publisher.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise, without the prior permission of the publisher.

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Information Available

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Bergen, Bernard J.

The banality of evil : Hannah Arendt and "the final solution" /

Bernard J. Bergen.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 0-8476-9209-4 (alk. paper). — ISBN 0-8476-9210-8 (pbk.: alk. paper)

1. Arendt, Hannah—Views on the Holocaust. 2. Holocaust, Jewish (1939–1945)—Causes. 3. Arendt, Hannah. *Eichmann in Jerusalem*. I. Title.

D804.3.B463 1998

940.53'18—dc21

98-4044

CIP

Printed in the United States of America



The paper used in this publication meets the minimum requirements of American National Standard for Information Sciences—Permanence of Paper for Printed Library Materials, ANSI Z39.48–1984.

*This book is for my two fathers, Solomon and Eugene, who
asserted themselves as individuals despite knowing
full well how little they amounted to in that
fabled "grand scheme of things."*

Contents

Preface	ix
Acknowledgments	xvii
1 The Problem of “The Final Solution”	1
2 The Problem of Thinking	39
3 The Problem of “The Political”	79
4 The Problem of Terror	119
Index	165
About the Author	169

Preface

The first book I read by Hannah Arendt was *Eichmann in Jerusalem*. Before I read it in 1963, all I knew about her was that she was a Jewish political scientist of some prominence who had escaped Nazi Germany and emigrated eventually to the United States. Her book, subtitled *A Report on the Banality of Evil*, had been previously serialized in the *New Yorker* and was provoking a firestorm of argument and conflict on the talk and party circuit that was obligatory for those, like me, who were just beginning an academic career. These were just skirmishes in what was becoming a mean war fought through book reviews, letters to the editor, and essays and articles in various newspapers, journals, and magazines, as well as in tumultuous public meetings.¹ It was an unforgiving war because it was being fought over the right to define what Arendt meant by associating the words *banal* and *evil* in the context of the most massive moral failure of the century: what the Nazis had called “the final solution of the problem of the Jews.”

Ironically, what very few, if any, of the combatants on either side recognized at that time was that while Arendt, like everybody, defined the Final Solution as a massive moral failure, this was only the obvious starting point for defining *the banality of evil* in very different terms. The war was serious, and while everybody was certain of the righteousness of their cause, very few, I am convinced, including myself, actually knew what the war was truly about.

At the time there were two ways of reading *Eichmann in Jerusalem* that functioned like flags rallying both Jews and non-Jews to opposing armies. The army that I eagerly joined read *the banality of evil* as telling us that we are all Eichmanns—that is, there is an Eichmann in each of us waiting only for the correct sociohistorical conditions to be released. We knew, with the certainty that makes good soldiers and without bothering to question what Arendt wanted us to know, that her phrase *the*

banality of evil signified the need for a moral mission to prevent the repetition of genocidal murder by shaping the world's political systems in our time to both allow for and protect individual rights and freedoms. In other words, we read the egregious moral failure of the Final Solution as calling us to discover the causal laws that govern the forms that humans give to the social institutions that govern them. It did not really matter whether we knew or not the extent to which Arendt shunned being called a "political scientist." As a Jewish refugee from Nazi tyranny, could she have been anything but a partisan for the human sciences, knowing that *prevention* was a word that naturally followed *causality* and *prediction*?

The opposition, on the other hand, regarded our interpretation of *the banality of evil* as a three-pronged, egregious insult to the Jewish victims of the Nazi genocide. In the first place, went the argument, grounding an understanding of the Final Solution in abstract, universal, sociohistorical laws that presumably govern the form and function of the societies in which all humans must live means viewing the Jews themselves as having been an integral part of European societies that had never treated them as anything but hated outsiders from the beginning of the history of the Jewish Diaspora in Europe. In the second place (and related to this), to read into the meaning of the Final Solution a call to search for its causes means to willfully look away from what was plain for all to see: that the Nazi murder of the Jews was an event in Jewish history in which Gentiles throughout the world were, at best, observers secretly deriving pleasure from a pornography of death, or, at worst, Germans bringing to a culmination the long history of European anti-Semitism. And in the third place, related to this, to associate the word *banal* with the Nazi genocide against the Jews dissipates its singular horrors by merging them into the stream of commonplace horrors that marks the movement of human history. To add injury to this insult, associating the singular horrors of the Nazi genocide with other murderous events in history is an open invitation to formulate causes that can only amount to mitigation of the guilt of the Nazis for their atrocities. This, in fact, actually proved to be the case in later years.²

The war, however, between these opposed readings of the meaning of *the banality of evil* was truly being fought by armies that were clashing in the dark of night. Everybody involved seemed blind to recogniz-

ing that for Arendt, defining the meaning of the Final Solution as a massive moral failure is to state the obvious, which, as is almost always the case, misses the meaning of things. In retrospect, I find that this blindness was unremarkable because both the small skirmishes I was involved in and the major battles fought through the media were almost always conducted on the ground of the one text, *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, which hardly dealt at all with what every combative argument eventually boiled down to: the origins of totalitarianism and the human condition. *Eichmann in Jerusalem* was designed to be a very thin book, a “report” that would contain little, if any, dense conceptual material about either subject. Arendt had already published two books, which carried her reputation at that time, with the titles of those subjects (*The Origins of Totalitarianism* and *The Human Condition*). *Eichmann in Jerusalem* could be read as an isolated report, but it was actually part of a continuously unfolding body of work that would never be finished until Arendt’s death.

What was remarkable, in retrospect, was Arendt’s naive belief that her report would not provoke a heated battle in which both sides would ignore those books. The phrase *the banality of evil* was too provocative, too inflammatory to allow reading *Eichmann in Jerusalem* as part of a continuing work-in-progress. It would have meant not fighting over its meaning but affirming rather Arendt’s admission, made at least twice in her work,³ that she herself was not sure of its meaning when she first used it because its meaning could only emerge from her work-in-progress that, like all other works-in-progress, is a continuous struggle to articulate its own meaning. It would not be amiss to say that the ultimate trope in this regard was provided by Freud when he likened his own work to an archaeological dig. For Arendt, calling Eichmann the “banality of evil” was part of her “dig.”

True, I would be ingenuous to a fault to argue that Arendt went to Jerusalem solely to further disclose to herself the meaning of her collective work. She no doubt had other agendas of which she herself was probably not fully aware. But these are beside the point. They were certainly not, as so many said outright, to side with the Nazis against the Jews. The point that is important here is that both sides that were fighting the war instigated by the appearance of *Eichmann in Jerusalem* saw no need to read her work that preceded and grounded it. Perhaps we did

not want to read her work because it would have prepared us to follow her thinking about the problem that Eichmann represented in a direction that would have subverted the call to arms of both warring parties.

Arendt went to Jerusalem prepared by her previous work to define Eichmann as a problem who could not be made to go away with rhetorical magic. No preconceptions—legal, scientific, or otherwise—could substitute for listening to him as he literally appeared to her in that courtroom: As a person who was conveying the meaning of his experiences to others by speaking about himself. But during his long cross-examination and even before, when he spoke to his interrogators in the pretrial examination, Eichmann spoke about himself as if no time at all had passed since he had been the SS officer responsible for shipping millions of Jews to their deaths. There was nothing that Eichmann said about himself, during or leading up to that long trial, that he would not have said about himself when he was vested with the power of the Nazi SS.

It was not until many years after the battle over Arendt's book had receded—the war never really ended: it just subsided—when I was motivated to read everything Arendt wrote because I was going to use her work in a course on totalitarianism I was to teach that I realized how my indifference to this fact about Eichmann had blinded me to what the war had really been about. That Eichmann had nothing new to say about himself fifteen years after the horrendous crimes he had committed seemed totally unremarkable to me and, as I see it now, to almost everyone else who fought on either side. It signaled that being an SS officer, with all that that entailed both behaviorally and psychologically, had been his *identity*: the concept that, in our time, has come to anchor both the possibilities and the limits of the self. It continues to be the concept—I think *trope* would label it more accurately⁴—that solves, for our time, the problem presented by the discovery of the power of the self born with the origin of modernity. For how could we create modern political systems on the basis of rights, obligations, and duties that accrue to individuals unless individuals think of themselves as having a persistent identity that is continuous through time? For my side, Eichmann's identity had been anchored to his role as an SS officer by the powerful forces of society that shaped his entire development as a self. It was just a question of knowing the details of how those perverse

causal forces played on him. For the other side, his identity was anchored to the poisonous forces of anti-Semitism, whose toxic effect on him was manifest in every detail of the grotesque extermination program of the Jews in which he played a key role. We had been fighting a war, in effect, over who had the proprietary rights to that trope *identity*, which we took to be the referent for Arendt's phrase *the banality of evil*.

It was precisely the power of this trope *identity* that blinded us to the direction that Arendt was taking toward the meaning of the term. That Eichmann on trial in Jerusalem was unable to say anything new about himself was indeed his way of telling us about his unchanging identity. But Arendt came to Jerusalem prepared by her previous work to refuse to use *identity* as a concept that exhaustively accounts for what one hears when others speak about their experiences. With this refusal she was reversing the modern formula that we combatants were apparently unable to reverse: Identity is not the end point but the starting point for understanding the meaning of what somebody is saying about who they are. To treat identity as the end point would have been to dissolve the concrete form of Eichmann by which he was experienced by everyone who saw and heard him as an individual speaking about himself into an object shaped by causal forces, social or attitudinal. By refusing to compromise her way of experiencing Eichmann's appearance, Arendt put into relief a different and unforeseen direction for establishing the meaning of *the banality of evil* barely visible in that thin book *Eichmann in Jerusalem* but nevertheless clearly stated: an inability to think.

Arendt tells us throughout her work that regarding totalitarianism, what is unprecedented cannot be measured by the tradition of thought in the so-called human sciences, which treat their concepts as if they referred to causal forces that determine the experiences of humans and the shape of the world they build. In *The Human Condition* Arendt tells us what her work is all about: "[N]othing more than to think what we are doing."⁵ This is worthy of being read as an epigraph for her entire body of work, especially if we were to amend it to read: "To think what we are doing by thinking over from the very beginning everything we ever thought we were doing." What must be thought through from the beginning about the meaning of the Final Solution is something far more radical than its meaning as a moral failure: the very idea of the individual. *The banality of evil* does not refer to the Final Solution as

just one more commonplace evil in human history, but to an unprecedented evil that arose from the commonplace in the sense of “the ordinary.” And there is nothing that can strike us as more ordinary than the existence of human individuals who speak to each other constantly about their experiences.

From the moment when the idea of the individual became significant—and who can say exactly when that historical moment was except that we have mythologized it as the very origin of our modernity—the sign of being an individual has been thought of as being an experiencing being who conveys the meaning of his experiences to himself and to others. But the Final Solution forces us to think about the authority that meaning can wield over experience.

Arendt said she wanted to go to Jerusalem to see Eichmann, but she was surely not naive enough to believe that she would see someone whose appearance would be monstrous. In fact, what she brought with her to Jerusalem was an unfolding work that prepared her to hear something monstrous that no one else heard, at least in that courtroom: Eichmann represented a line that had been crossed by virtually an entire nation into a region where meaning assumed total authority over experience—erasing experience itself as the sign for experiencing beings that they were individuals.

In describing Eichmann as *the banality of evil*, Arendt had invented a phrase whose foundation she had already laid in terms of the fragility of individuals thinking of themselves as individuals simply because they speak about their experience of the meaning of things. The full meaning of this fragility would preoccupy her in the years following her Eichmann book until she came to grips with it in her final book, left incomplete by her death, *The Life of the Mind*. Arendt, who had the temerity to make a virtue of the term *pariah*, would see at the beginning of her work that it is the experience of being an individual that insulates us from committing great evils like the Final Solution, and, by the end of her work, would define that experience in radically unique terms.

To read Arendt is to allow ourselves to be stripped of the armor of our preconceptions that deflects reading anything whose meaning does not work to predict a future that always seems to slip out of our control. To grasp the meaning of the Final Solution is to grasp it as a call to think through from the beginning our most treasured belief: That we speak as

individuals when we give an account of what we are doing. What Arendt saw clearly from the beginning to the end of her work is that we will never understand the Final Solution in terms of the abstractions of political and moral theory, but only in terms of what it means to think, will, and judge; to use the life of the mind that, when it is moribund, defines a line that was once crossed into a region in which terror becomes a normal feature of the world. It is in Arendt's work that we find the immense significance of the Final Solution pointing to where we can locate that line: in the fragile banalities of who we think we are and what we think we are doing.



Arendt's work confronts a broad spectrum of traditional concepts central to the canonical literature of modern political philosophy and the human sciences. Reading her work calls for a binocular focus on the new meanings she gives to old, reliable words such as *freedom*, *action*, *identity*, *society*, *politics*, *anti-Semitism*, *causality*, and many more. As a result, her work has given rise to what Scott and Stark have called "an academic cottage industry"⁶ that has produced a substantial number of in-depth studies of the way her concepts articulate with one or more traditional meanings. This book, however, is not one of them. My binocular reading has been on the Final Solution and the direction her work takes toward its meaning. This is not along a road straight as an arrow and clearly marked like those highways in our Western states that are always startling to an Easterner like myself. Her work meanders considerably, but I have tried to mark its direction by organizing it around four interlocking problems that I feel are crucial to reading it as a continuous journey toward understanding the Final Solution as *the banality of evil*: the problem of the Final Solution, the problem of thinking, the problem of "The Political," and the problem of terror.

Finally, I should point out the spirit in which I hope this book will be read. There is one way in which I do not follow Arendt: while she used the definite article in the title of her books, I do not offer in this book *the* reading of Arendt's work, but only *a* reading of it.

Notes

1. Those who think I am exaggerating when I call what was going on a “mean war” should consult the chapter “Curia Posterior: Eichmann in Jerusalem” in Elisabeth Young-Bruehl’s *Hannah Arendt: For Love of the World* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1982), esp. 347–49.

2. See Perry Anderson, “On Emplotment: Two Kinds of Ruin,” in *Probing the Limits of Representation: Nazism and the Final Solution*, ed. Saul Friedlander (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992), 54.

3. Once in an exchange of letters with Scholem shortly after publication of *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, and once in her last work, published posthumously, *The Life of the Mind*. See “An Exchange of Letters Between Gershom Scholem and Hannah Arendt,” *Encounter* (January 1964): 51–56; and Hannah Arendt, “Introduction” in *The Life of the Mind* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovitch, 1978), 3.

4. *Identity* as a concept is meant to represent the self as a system of unified components such as drives, desires, traits, memories, self-images, etc. But as Roger Brown has confessed in his textbook on social psychology, “Identity is a concept no one has defined with precision, but it seems we can move ahead anyway, because everyone roughly understands what is meant.” Quoted in William Ray Arney, *Thoughts Out of School* (in press).

5. Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958), 5.

6. Joanna Vecchiarelli Scott and Judith Chelius Stark, eds., “Introduction: ‘New Beginnings’,” in *Love and Saint Augustine by Hannah Arendt* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 125.

Acknowledgments

My thanks to Claudewell S. Thomas, M.D., for lighting a fire under the project during our visit to Auschwitz; Lou Renza, Ph.D., for his impeccable insights into structuring texts; George Patrick, M.D., for many hours of fruitful discussion about Arendt and her work; the late Professor Bernard Segal, Ph.D., for pressing me to think critically about totalitarianism; Daniel Krymkowski, Ph.D., for helping me think about Europe, Poland, and the Jews in new ways; and William Ray Arney, Ph.D., and Vera Bergen for critically reading the completed manuscript.

