

Demystifying Hannah Arendt's

"Banality of Evil"

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We will never forget the genocidal slaughter of six million Jews, including one and a half million children, in the Nazi Holocaust of 1933-1945.

We will never forget the cruel apathy of a world which allowed that Holocaust and the deliberate murder of millions of other people to happen.

We will never forget the martyrs of that evil abyss in human history. Nor will we forget those Jews and the righteous of all faiths who resisted and fought that evil.

In the memory of those martyrs and fighters, we pledge our lives to the creation of a world in which such evil and such apathy will not be tolerated.

It is with that memory and that resolve that we dedicate this memorial.

In Remembrance is the Secret of Redemption

George Segal, *The Holocaust*

If we were to name, in the manner of some TV game show, the top five world events that would serve as perfect illustrations of evil, the Nazi Holocaust would doubtlessly emerge as a close second or third, if not the top answer. The poignant lines above borrowed from George Segal caused quite a stir not only because they carry the emotion-laden refrain, "*We will never forget,*" but moreso because, thrice, they employ the word "evil" as a substitute word for the Holocaust. *Time Magazine*, in a 1991 issue, devoted a cover story to the question, "*Evil: Does it Exist — or Do Bad Things Just Happen?*"¹ and did not fail to mention the

¹Lance Morrow, "Evil: Does it Exist — or Do Bad Things Just Happen?," *Time*, vol. 137, no. 23 (June 10, 1991), pp. 40-45.

extermination of six million Jews in the Nazi death camps. Mention was made of Adolf Hitler—"the century's measure of individual evil"—not only because of the carnage he wrought, but also because of his inauguration of a new form of systematic malignity. Albert Camus wrote in his notebook at the beginning World War II in 1939: "The reign of beasts has begun."

"The evil that men do lives after them," asserted William Shakespeare. The horrors of evil committed by men are recorded in the different pages of world history. They are likewise immortalized in stones and public markers in different parts of the world. A case in point is the Lincoln Park in San Francisco, California, where visitors are greeted with marble carvings of lifeless bodies of Jews sprawled on the ground. The site is marked by a marble tablet upon which has been engraved the roster of 23 extermination camps, including Auschwitz, Buchenwald, Dachau, Sobibor, Treblinka and so forth.

The truth of evil outliving its perpetrators comes up again in the case of Karl Adolf Eichmann (1906-1962), a Nazi war criminal born in Solingen, Germany. Eichmann became an SS officer in 1932 and the organizer of the deportations and evacuations of Jews in a number of Eastern European countries under the Nazi rule. Captured by US forces in 1945, he escaped from prison some months later, having kept his identity hidden, and in 1950 showed up in Argentina. Eventually, his whereabouts were traced by Israeli agents, who planned and carried out his abduction and then his transport to Israel in 1960, where he was made to trial for his war crimes against the Jewish people and against humanity. Sentenced to death, he was executed in 1962. Thirty-eight years later, with the release by Israel, on March 1, 2000, of his 1961 prison memoir, the name of Eichmann resurfaces, and he becomes once again an object of international talk. For in the 1,300-page manuscript, which he had penned in precise German Gothic script, this overseer of the Holocaust describes in pedantic detail the workings of the Nazi death machine, and minimizes his own role as "a misled idealist and an obedient bureaucrat who abhorred his frequent trips to the killing fields of Easter Europe and drowned his nightmares in alcohol."² In reaction,

²Associated Press, "Eichmann's Memoir Describes Nazi Death Machine," in *Philippine Daily Inquirer*, vol.15, no.85 (March 2, 2000), p. 10.

some Israeli historians dismissed Eichmann's account as so distorted and self-serving as to be historically worthless.

A similar, if not more intense, stir, was created among those who, thirty years earlier, had witnessed Eichmann's trial in person. The trial marked, for Hannah Arendt — she had attended it to fulfill "an obligation I owe[d] my past"³ — a turning point in her life. An earlier "real shock" greeted her upon first learning of the true extent of the horrors of the Holocaust. She writes:

What was decisive was the day we learned about Auschwitz. That was in 1943. At first we didn't believe it — although my husband and I always said that we expected anything from that bunch. But we didn't believe this because militarily it was unnecessary and uncalled for And then a half-year later we believed it all, because we had the proof. That was the real shock It was really as if an abyss had opened. Because we had the idea that amends can somehow be made for just about everything else, as amends can be made for just about everything at some point in politics. But not for this. *This ought not to have happened.* And I don't mean just the number of victims. I mean the method, the fabrication of corpses and so on — I don't need to go into that. This should not have happened. Something happened there to which we cannot reconcile ourselves. None of us ever can.⁴

Confronted by the Holocaust-event, by "the real evil [that] causes speechless horror,"⁵ Arendt could only say, in face of her own incredulity, that "*This should not have happened,*" attempting at the same time to understand how, despite everything, it did happen. This was the motive for the work she put into *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1951).

Confronted with the phenomenon of Eichmann, Arendt coined the phrase, "the banality of evil."⁶ Behind that phrase, I held no thesis or doctrine, although I was dimly aware of the fact that it went counter to our tradition of thought — literary, theological, or philosophic — about

³Elisabeth Young-Bruehl, *Hannah Arendt: For Love of the World* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1982), p. 329.

⁴Hannah Arendt, *Essays in Understanding, 1930-1954*, ed. Jerome Kohn (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1994), pp. 13-14.

⁵Hannah Arendt, "Some Questions of Moral Philosophy," in *Social Research*, vol. 61, no. 4 (Winter 1994), p. 763. Hereafter referred to as SQ.

the phenomenon of evil.”⁶ The courtroom experience, and the fierce reaction to her “report” on the trial (*Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil*, 1963), incited her to address the problem of evil.

I do not intend here to enter into the heated debate over Arendt’s portrait of Eichmann, particularly over the question whether it had the effect of exculpating him of his war crimes. Nor will I address the question concerning her projection of the Holocaust victims as collaborators in their own massacre in view, especially, of the Jewish leaders’ accommodation to the Nazis. Nor will I present a thesis on evil or offer solutions to the centuries-old theological *aporia*: “*God is all powerful. God is all good. Terrible things happen.*” My intention is simply to place the Arendtian expression, “the banality of evil,” in proper perspective, through an exploration of her philosophical meditation on radical evil — which, in Arendt’s view, traditional philosophy denies, but which she hopes to be able to do something about. My principal textual interlocutors on this question will be her books, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil*, and *The Life of the Mind (Thinking and Willing)*, a two-volume work which, to a large extent, can be treated as Arendt’s attempt to provide a philosophical underpinning to her political theories.

The Denial of Evil in the Traditional Perspective

Does evil exist? One man in his study burning midnight candles over philosophy books thinks it does not. Another man who has survived Auschwitz and still remembers the smell of burning flesh claims it does. It would, indeed, be interesting to have the two of them discuss the matter one evening and see whose truth-claim is able to nullify the other.

The Western philosophical tradition either psychologizes evil or denies its reality. The psychologists explain evil by attributing its cause to self-interest, resentment, greed, envy, or what Arendt calls “the powerful hatred wickedness feels for sheer goodness.”⁷ The philosophers, especially the Scholastics, make a distinction between evil in the material sense and evil in the formal sense. Evil, materially considered,

⁶Hannah Arendt, *The Life of the Mind*, vol. I (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1981), p. 3. Hereafter referred to as LOM.

⁷LOM, p. 4.

refers to a being (thing or action) deprived of a good that needed to have been present for the being to be the it was intended to be; conceived as a mode of being, evil is a form of reason with a foundation in a reality that has been deprived of a perfection due to it (*ens rationis cum fundamento in re*). Death, for instance, is evil inasmuch as it is the privation of life; blindness is evil inasmuch as a person is deprived of the sense of sight; crime is evil inasmuch as it involves a privation of the moral goodness due to a human act. Evil, formally considered, refers to non-being; accordingly, absolute evil cannot exist because it would be absolute non-being (nothing). Evil in itself is considered to possess no positive reality, just as death itself is not perceived to be walking about, or blindness itself is not perceived as groping in the dark.

Negators of evil, in general, either subscribe to some holistic vision in which evil is always ordered to some good or good always comes from evil (God, after all, can "write straight with crooked lines"), or else wrack their brains in trying to explain the Pauline tension of the will failing to do what reason knows as good ("For I do not do the good I want, but I do the evil I do not want" — Rom 7:19). Arendt notes that tradition is marked by a consistent "evasion ... sidestepping, or... explaining away of human wickedness. If the tradition of moral philosophy... is agreed on one point from Socrates to Kant and... to the present, then that is that it is impossible for men to do wicked things deliberately, to want evil for evil's sake."⁸ There's no mistaking the metaphysical principle: No cause has a natural ordination towards evil as its proper effect. No agent intends and acts for evil as such.

Those who deny the existence of evil are certainly aware of the terrible things happening in the world. They know that humanity is very much prone to malignity, atrocity, violence, corruption. They understand that nature's ways (read: cruelties and caprices) simply defy human reasoning. But, then, to describe all that as evil — moral or physical — is to give evil too much power and status, it is to confer on what is merely putrid and pathetic the prestige of the absolute. The author of the aforementioned *Time* article put it rather picturesquely: "You

⁶Hannah Arendt, *The Life of the Mind*, vol. I (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1981), p. 3. Hereafter referred to as LOM.

⁷LOM, p. 4.

must not allow lower instincts and natural calamities to get dressed up as a big idea and come to the table with their betters and smoke cigars. Keep the metaphysics manageable: much of what passes for evil may be just a nightmare of accidents. Or sheer stupidity, that sovereign, unacknowledged force in the universe.”⁹

Radical Evil in the Arendtian Perspective

Against a whole philosophical tradition’s recurrent blind spot in regard to evil, Arendt deems the general conception that something good might result from evil a “superstition”¹⁰ and posits the reality of a “radical evil” which, she avers, is co-substantial with Totalitarianism. She writes:

It is inherent in our entire philosophical tradition that we cannot conceive of a ‘radical evil,’ and this is true both for Christian theology, which conceded even to the Devil himself a celestial origin, as well as for Kant, the only philosopher who, in the word he coined for it, at least must have suspected the existence of this evil even though he immediately rationalized it in the concept of a ‘perverted ill will’ that could be explained by comprehensible motives. Therefore, we actually have nothing to fall back on in order to understand a phenomenon that nevertheless confronts us with its overpowering reality and breaks down all standards we know. There is only one thing that seems to be discernible: we may say that radical evil has emerged in connection with a system in which all men have become equally superfluous.¹¹

Radical evil, in Arendt’s view, arises with a system that spells “superfluousness” for humanity. Such is totalitarianism, a form of politics which strives not towards a despotic rule over men, but towards an organized set-up in which men are rendered superfluous. The totalitarian system is a product of the development of mass society and the converging elements of “race-thinking,” nationalism and imperialism. Mass society is most fundamentally a condition in which the individual — the mass man whose chief characteristic is “not brutality and backward-

⁹“Evil: Does it Exist?,” p. 41.

¹⁰Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (San Diego: Harcourt Brace, 1966), p. 442. Hereafter referred to as OT.

¹¹OT, p. 459.

ness, but his isolation and lack of normal social relationships"¹² — loses his sense of identity and uniqueness; this experience of senselessness, consequently, breeds superfluousness, "the feeling of being expendable."¹³ For Arendt, politics is a highly specific human activity that takes place in a specific realm — the public space — for a specific reason: freedom. Freedom is the power to act in ways that produce and manifest two crucial entities: the individual's distinct and unique identity and the "world" which is the publicly shared reality of common sense. The proliferation of identities through action is what Arendt calls "plurality," the many-sided diversity in which we find ourselves and which constitutes the "world" where humans can experience freedom. Totalitarianism represents the attempt to obliterate plurality and freedom — and, hence, to obliterate the "world" of human action itself.

Totalitarianism comes with a gruesome face: the concentration camps. For Arendt, the concentration camps are not an accidental growth but an essential institution of totalitarian rule, "the true central institution of totalitarian organizational power."¹⁴ They are the extreme expression of the superfluousness and, hence, of the dispensability of individuals who are made functionaries and mere cogs in the Nazi administrative apparatus. By calling them "*death or corpse factories*," "*holes of oblivion*"¹⁵ and "laboratories in the experiment of total domination,"¹⁶ Arendt has practically defined the operational vision-mission of these camps as an organized machinery of dehumanization and destruction.

The camps are meant not only to exterminate people and degrade human beings, but also serve the ghastly experiment of eliminating, under scientifically controlled conditions, spontaneity itself as an expression of human behavior and of transforming the human personality into a mere thing, into something that even animals are not...."¹⁷

¹²OT, p. 317.

¹³OT, p. 315.

¹⁴OT, p. 438.

¹⁵OT, p. 459.

¹⁶OT, p. 436.

¹⁷OT, p. 438.

The real horror of the concentration and extermination camps lies in the fact that the inmates, even if they happen to keep alive, are more effectively cut off from the world of the living than if they had died, because terror enforces oblivion. Here, murder is as impersonal as the squashing of a gnat. Someone may die as the result of systematic torture or starvation, or because the camp is overcrowded and superfluous human material must be liquidated.¹⁸

It would have been far better if this systematic destruction involved merely the snuffing out of physical lives. Any form of liquidation that is brief and immediate would have been kinder and more humane. But total domination demanded a process of destruction in three stages: destruction of the juridical person, of the moral person, and finally, of one's individuality. The annihilation of all that is specifically human in the individual save for the most elementary, animal-like reactions is far worse than physical death itself. Arendt describes this absolutely cold and systematic destruction of individuals in these concentration camps:

The methods of dealing with this uniqueness of the human person are numerous and we shall not attempt to list them. They begin with the monstrous conditions in the transports to the camps, when hundreds of human beings are packed into a cattle-car stark naked, glued to each other, and shunted back and forth over the countryside for days on end; they continue upon arrival at the camp, the well-organized shock of the first hours, the shaving of the head, the grotesque camp clothing; and they end in the utterly unimaginable tortures so gauged as not to kill the body, at any event not quickly. The aim of all these methods, in any case, is to manipulate the human body — with its infinite possibilities of suffering — in such a way as to make it destroy the human person as inexorably as do certain mental diseases of organic origin.¹⁹

And again:

Conceivably, some laws of mass psychology may be found to explain why millions of human beings allowed themselves to be marched unresistingly into the gas chambers, although these laws would explain nothing else but the destruction of individuality....

¹⁸OT, p. 443.

¹⁹OT, p. 453.

For to destroy individuality is to destroy spontaneity, man's power to begin something new out of his own resources, something that cannot be explained on the basis of reactions to environment and events. Nothing that remains but ghastly marionettes with human faces, which all behave like the dog in Pavlov's experiments, which all react with perfect reliability even when going to their own death, and which do nothing but react.²⁰

And again:

This is the real triumph of the system: "The triumph of the SS demands that the tortured victim allow himself to be led to the noose without protesting, that he renounce and abandon himself to the point of ceasing to affirm his identity.... Nothing is more terrible than these processions of human beings going like dummies to their death. The man who sees this says to himself: 'For them to be thus reduced, what power must be concealed in the hands of the masters, and he turns away, full of bitterness but defeated.'"²¹

The system transforms the concentration camp-inmates into living corpses:

Concentration camps can very aptly be divided into three types corresponding to three basic Western conceptions of a life after death: Hades, Purgatory, and Hell.... All three types have one thing in common: the human masses sealed off in them are treated as if they no longer existed, as if what happened to them were no longer of any interest to anybody, as if they were already dead and some evil spirit gone mad were amusing himself by stopping them for a while between life and death before admitting them to eternal peace.²²

And the concentration camps themselves are turned into places of the living dead:

The concentration camps, by making death itself anonymous (making it impossible to find out whether a prisoner is dead or alive) robbed death of its meaning as the end of a fulfilled life. In a

²⁰OT, p. 455.

²¹David Rousset, *The Other Kingdom* (New York, 1947), p. 525; OT, p. 455.

²²OT, p. 445.

sense they took away the individual's own death, proving that henceforth nothing belonged to him and he belonged to no one. His death merely set a seal on the fact that he had never really existed.²³

This catena of Arendtian citations establishes her point that the existence of the extermination camps and the inhuman operations therein betray the reality of what she calls "radical evil." They embody such a malignity that cannot simply be dismissed as a non-entity or a thing of the mind. This radical evil is "an evil so immense in its scope and outrageous in its underlying assumptions that it mocks both just retribution and rational justification as the precursor of some ultimate good."²⁴ It is an evil that stands unsurpassed and unequalled in the history of man's political life in the question of annihilation of our status as political beings — nay more, of our dignity as human beings. Arendt even goes to the extent of bestowing on this evil an absolute character but at the same time denying it the capacity to be punished or forgiven.

Until now the totalitarian belief that everything is possible seems to have proved only that everything can be destroyed. Yet, in their effort to prove that everything is possible, totalitarian regimes have discovered without knowing it that there are crimes which men can neither punish nor forgive. When the impossible was made possible it became the unpunishable, unforgiveable absolute evil which could no longer be understood and explained by the evil motives of self-interest, greed, covetousness, resentment, lust for power, and cowardice; and which therefore anger could not revenge, love could not endure, friendship could not forgive. Just as the victims in the death factories or the holes of oblivion are no longer 'human' in the eyes of their executioners, so this newest species of criminals is beyond the pale even of solidarity in human sinfulness.²⁵

Arendt does not spare this absolute evil the harsh words of disgust and contempt, something which her prosaic expressions could not cushion. These laboratories in the experiment of total domination, which include all other despicable experiments in the field of medicine con-

²³OT, p. 452.

²⁴Phillip Hansen, *Hannah Arendt: Politics, History and Citizenship*, p. 149.

²⁵OT, p. 459. (Emphasis added).

ducted by Nazi physicians on helpless human specimens, are, for her, nothing less than the very objectification of hell.

Suddenly it becomes evident that things which for thousands of years the human imagination had banished to a realm beyond human competence can be manufactured right here on earth, that Hell and Purgatory, and even a shadow of their perpetual duration, can be established by the most modern methods of destruction and therapy. To these people, the totalitarian hell proves only that the power of man is greater than they ever dared to think, and that man can realize hellish fantasies without making the sky fall or the earth open.²⁶

While making all these assertions about the reality of radical evil or absolute evil, Arendt likewise notes the protective shroud of incredulity surrounding the Nazi malignity. First of all, the horrors of the concentration camps are simply unimaginable that people of the outside world who hear and read about them would not readily believe them. Arendt calls this the "common-sense disinclination to believe the monstrous."²⁷ Her statement of incredulity — "*This should not have happened*" — can very well be anyone's own.

There are no parallels to the life in the concentration camps. Its horror can never be fully embraced by the imagination for the very reason that it stands outside of life and death. It can never be fully reported for the very reason that the survivor returns to the world of the living, which makes it impossible for him to believe fully in his own past experiences. It is as though he had a story to tell of another planet, for the status of the inmates in the world of the living, when nobody is supposed to know if they are alive or dead, is such that it is as though they had never been born.²⁸

More than any material apparatus designed to preserve the secrecy of these concentration camps, it is the atmosphere of madness and unreality that stands as the "real iron curtain" concealing their intramural atrocities from the eyes of the world.

²⁶OT, p. 446.

²⁷OT, p. 437.

²⁸OT, p. 444.

It is not so much the barbed wire as the skillfully manufactured unreality of those whom it fences in that provokes such enormous cruelties and ultimately makes extermination look like a perfectly normal measure. Everything that was done in the camps is known to us from the world of perverse, malignant fantasies. The difficult thing to understand is that, like such fantasies, these gruesome crimes took place in a phantom world, which however, has materialized, as it were, into a world which is complete with all sensual data of reality but lacks that structure of consequence and responsibility without which reality remains for us a mass of incomprehensible data. The result is that a place has been established where men can be tortured and slaughtered, and yet neither the tormentors nor the tormented, and least of all the outsider, can be aware that what is happening is anything more than a cruel game or an absurd dream.²⁹

As it appears, totalitarianism is founded on nothing but the myth that it produces of itself. Through its propaganda the very difference between crime and virtue, persecutor and persecuted, reality and fantasy is erased. And here lies precisely the subtlety and consequent effectivity of its ideology — its fundamental belief that “*everything is possible*.” It has created an image of “normalcy” of the totalitarian rule to the extent that its murderous machinery operating on “arbitrary selection of various groups for concentration camps, constant purges of the ruling apparatus, and mass liquidations”³⁰ are projected as normal, meaningful, even legitimate, matter-of-fact parts of everyday life.

Within the framework of the totalitarian ideology, nothing could be more sensible and logical; if the inmates are vermin, it is logical that they should be killed by poison gas; if they are degenerate, they should not be allowed to contaminate the population; if they have “slave-like souls” (Himmler), no one should waste his time trying to re-educate them. Seen through the eyes of the ideology, the trouble with the camps is almost that they make too much sense, that the execution of the doctrine is too consistent.³¹

²⁹OT, pp. 445-446.

³⁰OT, p. 457.

³¹OT, p. 457.

Arendt has a term for this normalcy, this consistency, this ordinariness. She calls it "*the banality of evil.*"

Arendt's Banality of Evil

A good number of commentators have remarked that the coup de grace of *The Origins of Totalitarianism* lies not in that work, but rather in Arendt's articles on the trial of Eichmann. Arendt served as a special correspondent for the *New Yorker* and covered the trial. Her five-part report, published in February and March 1963 and subsequently as the book *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* made her famous as well as infamous. With the phrase "the banality of evil," which she applied to both the persecutors and the persecuted in the Holocaust-event, Arendt added a fresh entry to the English lexicon but at the same time heaped copious criticisms for her interpretation of Eichmann and the well-organized Jewish deportations.

One important matter is to be clarified right off: though Arendt was openly contemptuous of the prosecution which she perceived to be hell-bent on depicting Eichmann as a criminal mastermind and architect of the Holocaust, she explicitly commended the three presiding judges, their "guilty" verdict on Eichmann's crimes against humanity, and the justice of his death penalty.

What struck Arendt most at the trial was the dissonance between the perceived image of Eichmann the man-monster and Jew-hater, and the real, innocuous and completely ordinary individual. In Arendt's eyes, Eichmann was a man devoid of spirit and emotion, a mere cog in the Nazi machinery, a functionary who did his job and was so absorbed in the ordinary, the *banal*, the task at hand, a man limited in imagination to be anything but absolutely content with his unexceptional status, and deprived of the capacity to distinguish right from wrong. Eichmann's external demeanor and his factual role in orchestrating the deaths of vast numbers of Jews confirmed for Arendt that the Nazi genocide resulted from the most *banal*, most systematic, efficiently-driven and bureaucratically-inspired motives.

In the light of Arendt's attempt to demystify totalitarianism, the figure of Eichmann became indispensable. The Holocaust architect was the embodiment of the shallowness and ordinariness of the Nazi enterprise. Accordingly, the totalitarian evil could now be clearly seen as

the outcome of thoughtlessness, of unquestioning obedience, regardless of the ends to be achieved, regardless of the cost in human life. Whether Eichmann in particular and the Nazi regime in general sought to renovate the railway services or exterminate millions of members of the human race made no difference; devising the most effective means for achieving the end and obeying the orders of the Fuhrer were all that mattered. The real horror of totalitarianism, then, lies not in any profound psychological proposition, nor in any volatile political will, but in the banality and utter servility of its agents. This, for Arendt, is totalitarian evil unmasked.

If her interpretation of Eichmann created a spark, Arendt's depiction of the Jewish response to the Nazi enterprise caused a conflagration.

As a reporter, Arendt sought to state the facts of the case. But in trying to describe how the Jewish councils and their local leaders were used by the Nazis to organize the deportations, Arendt sounded as though she was accusing the Jewish leaders of collaborating with the real perpetrators in the Holocaust.

But the whole truth was that there existed Jewish community organizations and Jewish party and welfare organizations on both the local and international level. Wherever Jews lived, there were recognized Jewish leaders, and this leadership, almost without exception, cooperated in one way or another, for one reason or another, with the Nazis. The whole truth was that if the Jewish people had really been unorganized and leaderless, there would have been chaos and plenty of misery but the total number of victims would hardly have been between four and a half and six million people.³²

These lines, if read out of context, could be taken to mean that the Jewish leaders practically handed their people over to their executioners. But Arendt's actual position was rather more complex than that. To begin with, she did not believe that the denial of the role played by the Jewish leadership could amount to anything good. That would mean a refusal to face the facts, or worse, the futile attempt to rewrite history. Instead, she believed that Jewish collaboration demonstrated the way

³²Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (New York: Penguin Books, 1977), p. 125.

the totalitarian rule was able to transform the unthinkable into "the perfectly normal"—into an ordinary part of everyday existence precisely by creating the image of "normalcy"—a taken-for-granted, daily reality that offers no alternatives. By exposing how even some Jews "participated"—to use her carefully chosen word—in the Holocaust, Arendt was in no way pointing an accusing finger at the victims but was putting on record the deplorable depth of the moral decadence precipitated by the Nazi regime.

This is the sense of Arendt's "banality of evil." Evil becomes "*banal*" when it is *the* reality of the world people occupy, a reality whose sheer facticity makes it incredibly difficult to imagine or believe that things could be otherwise. Evil was "*banal*" in the context of Totalitarianism. This totalitarian evil managed to gain sway over scores of people—persecutors and persecuted alike—by exploiting individuals enmeshed in a world of daily demands, leaving little, if any, space for reflection or even the consideration of the possibility that the world might be otherwise or that they might act differently. The mother of totalitarian evil, thus, remains to be thoughtlessness.

The whole controversy sparked by Arendt's report on the banality of evil placed the Holocaust issue at the center of various discussion tables until the present time. Much historical research has been made since the publication of Arendt's book. Some of her facts were later found to be inaccurate, but none crucial enough to destroy the merit of her argument. And the merit of her case lies on her understanding and underscoring of the reality of evil and the options the Jews had to confront under the totalitarian rule. That the evil of the Holocaust was utterly unimaginable and that those options were restricted—they were little more than different ways of facing death for millions of Jews—do not, to Arendt's mind, absolve us, survivors who must not forget this despicable event in our history, from the obligation to understand the unthinkable and to judge both the persecutors and the persecuted, the functionaries and the victims, who lived acted under such extreme conditions.

*Aftermath of the Arendtian Controversy:
Overcoming the Banality of Evil*

Recently many philosophers have argued that the most serious version of the problem of evil concerns not its logical but its evidential dimension. The mere logical possibility that a student has broken all four limbs and has been hospitalized will win him no extension of term paper deadlines if the professor can see that the student is in fact physically sound. Likewise, the evidential argument contends, many actual evils—as for instance, the slow and painful death of a child fatally wounded by a stray bullet during the New Year revelry — simply defies the category of the hypothetical and demands its rightful place in the realm of the real, as evidenced by the dying child, the stray bullet, even death itself — all of which are very real.

The Holocaust has shown itself to be an extremely difficult matter to philosophize about. This is because of the enormity and complexity of the issues it raises for human reflection in general and for Jewish philosophical deliberation in particular. It has not been shown that the *Shoah* (Holocaust) disconfirms all pre-Holocaust metaphysical and theological systems; but, given the reality that is the *Shoah*, it is correct to require that all philosophical and theological judgments be called upon to measure their conceptual adequacy against the circumstances of Auschwitz and Dachau.

As it was in the time of Augustine and Aquinas, evil, from the philosophical standpoint today, remains as something “negative,” always a “lack,” always a “privation of good.” Philosophical tradition, in its view of evil, has stood its ground. But lest we dismiss evil right off as a harmless privation or being of the mind, we see the merits of Arendt’s perspective of radical evil in the light of her analysis of the Holocaust-event. To reject altogether her view of radical evil simply because it goes against the grain of a whole philosophical tradition is to crush the nut with the shell, to toss the grain with the chaff, to throw the baby with the bathwater.

Evil becomes *radical* in subjects, systems and structures that render goodness nil and that serve the annihilation of all that is specifically human in humanity. Evil becomes *evidentially real* in the human experiences of statelessness, senselessness, and superfluousness, as well as in anything that smacks of totalitarian reign.

On the possibility of the resurgence of radical evil that is Totalitarianism, Arendt issues a stern warning for modern man at the end of her chapter on "Totalitarianism in Power":

The danger of the corpse factories and holes of oblivion is that today, with populations and homelessness everywhere on the increase, masses of people are continuously rendered superfluous if we continue to think of our world in utilitarian terms. Political, social and economic events everywhere are in a silent conspiracy with totalitarian instruments devised for making men superfluous. The implied temptation is well understood by the utilitarian common sense of the masses, who in most countries are too desperate to retain much fear of death. The Nazis and the Bolsheviks can be sure that their factories of annihilation which demonstrate the swiftest solution to the problem of overpopulation, of economically superfluous and socially rootless human masses, are as much of an attraction as a warning. Totalitarian solutions may well survive the fall of totalitarian regimes in the form of strong temptations which will come up whenever it seems impossible to alleviate political, social, or economic misery in a manner worthy of man.³³

The "moral phenomenon" of our present times, perhaps, is the discovery that people assume their moral standards so completely and so unquestioningly from the world that surrounds them and the political system that rules them that the unthinkable and the unimaginable can be transformed into the matter-of-fact and the taken-for-granted almost overnight.

Arendt's banal evil can create and sustain such a world, one that gives individuals a space, a script, and a series of chores that get them engaged and entangled from day to day without any stopping, without any stirring that the world might be otherwise, that their actions might be different, that the perfectly normal things might be wrong.

Arendt's "banality of evil" does make a lot of sense in today's world where we have lost the sense of sin,³⁴ where we have fallen prey to an

³³OT, p. 459.

³⁴"The sin of the century is the loss of the sense of sin." Pope John Paul II, *Reconciliatio et Paenitentia: Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation on Reconciliation and Penance in the Mission of the Church Today* (Rome: December 2, 1984), p. 66.

eclipse or 'deadening' of conscience, where we have become perpetrators ourselves of evil—losers by default—all because in the face of evil we simply kept silent and did nothing to counter it with goodness.

Overcoming this banality of evil, according to Arendt, requires the introduction of some stirrings that can set individuals free from the slavery of the system. In *The Life of the Mind*, she posits a safeguard against banal evil: Thinking. Diametrically opposed to thoughtlessness, the mother of totalitarian evil, "thinking" as a private dialogue of myself with myself, and thus, as a mental process also known as autoconsciousness, awakens me to the realization of my inalienable dignity as an *imago Dei* — a human person endowed with a unique and unrepeatable existence, and a *dominus sui* — a moral subject capable of making free choices and decisions; it develops in me a sensitivity and an acuteness of perception for identifying the many guises under which sin manifests itself; and it distances me from the collective evil of the world that surrounds me, especially when all the world becomes destructive. Arendt's "thinking" not only brings her and us closer to traditional philosophy's accent on the exercise of critical reflection or to moral theology's call for attentiveness to the "voice of conscience"; nay, it wonderfully brings mankind back to the heart of the Jewish truth and conviction: "IN REMEMBRANCE IS THE SECRET OF REDEMPTION."

The totalitarian evil — the evil that is the Holocaust — is already a thing of the past. But just like Banquo's ghost in Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, it is persistent and would not be downed. It remains "as a potentiality and an ever-present danger [that] is only too likely to stay with us from now on, just as other forms of government which came about at different historical moments and rested on different fundamental experiences have stayed with mankind regardless of temporary defeats — monarchies, and republics, tyrannies, dictatorships and despotism."³⁵

The world-stage is not all shadows, though. It has its own share of pools of light. "Never Say There Is No Hope" — as the song of the 1943 Jewish Resistance Fighters goes. Evil makes way for goodness. Death gives birth to life. And for Arendt, the end of totalitarian ideology signals the beginning of a new humanity.

³⁵OT, p. 478.

Arendt fittingly closes *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, with the hope-filled words:

But there remains also the truth that every end in history necessarily contains a new beginning; this beginning is the promise, the only "message" which the end can ever produce. Beginning, before it becomes a historical event, is the supreme capacity of man; politically, it is identical with man's freedom. *Initium ut esset homo creatus est*—"that a beginning be made man was created" said Augustine.³⁶ This beginning is guaranteed by each new birth; it is indeed every man.³⁷

Indeed, humanity can begin again.

NAY MORE, WE CAN BE AGAIN! 

³⁶*De Civitate Dei*, bk. 12, chp. 20.

³⁷OT, pp. 478-479.