

Hannah Arendt's Chilling Thesis on Evil

Nine months after the Nazi war criminal Adolf Eichmann died at the end of a noose in Israel, a controversial but thoughtful commentary about his trial appeared in *The New Yorker*. The public reaction stunned its author, the famed political theorist and Holocaust survivor Hannah Arendt (1906-1975). It was February 1963.

Arendt's eyewitness assessment of Eichmann as "terribly and terrifyingly normal" took the world by surprise. Her phrase, "the banality of evil," entered the lexicon of social science, probably forever. It was taken for granted that Eichmann, despite his soft-spoken and avuncular demeanor, must be a monster of epic proportions to play such an important role in one of the greatest crimes of the 20th Century.

"I was only following orders," he claimed in the colorless, matter-of-fact fashion of a typical bureaucrat. The world thought his performance a fiendishly deceptive show, but Hannah Arendt concluded that Eichmann was indeed a rather "ordinary" and "unthinking" functionary.

How callous! A betrayal of her own Jewish people! How could any thoughtful person dismiss Eichmann so cavalierly?! Arendt's critics blasted her with such charges mercilessly, but they had missed the point. She did not condone or excuse Eichmann's complicity in the Holocaust. She witnessed the horrors of national socialism first-hand herself, having escaped Germany in 1933 after a short stint in a Gestapo jail for "anti-state propaganda." She did not claim that Eichmann was innocent, only that the crimes for which he was guilty did not require a "monster" to commit them.

How often have you noticed people behaving in anti-social ways because of a hope to blend in, a desire to avoid isolation as a recalcitrant, nonconforming individual? Did you ever see someone doing harm because “everybody else was doing it”? The fact that we all have observed such things, and that any one of the culprits might easily, under the right circumstances, have become an Adolf Eichmann, is a *chilling* realization.

As Arendt explained, “Going along with the rest and wanting to say ‘we’ were quite enough to make the greatest of all crimes possible.”

Eichmann was a “shallow” and “clueless” joiner, someone whose thoughts never ventured any deeper than how to become a cog in the great, historic Nazi machine. In a sense, he was a tool of Evil more than evil himself.

Commenting on Arendt’s “banality of evil” thesis, philosopher [Thomas White writes](#), “Eichmann reminds us of the protagonist in Albert Camus’s novel *The Stranger* (1942), who randomly and casually kills a man, but then afterwards feels no remorse. There was no particular intention or obvious evil motive: the deed just ‘happened.’”

Perhaps Hannah Arendt underestimated Eichmann. He did, after all, attempt to conceal evidence and cover his tracks long before [the Israelis nabbed him](#) in Argentina in 1960—facts which suggest he did indeed comprehend the gravity of his offenses. It is undeniable, however, that “ordinary” people are capable of horrific crimes when possessed with power or a desire to obtain it, especially if it helps them “fit in” with the gang that already wields it.

The big lesson of her thesis, I think, is this: If Evil comes calling, do not expect it to be stupid enough to advertise itself as such. It’s far more likely that it will look like your favorite uncle or your sweet grandmother. It just might cloak itself in grandiloquent platitudes like “equality,”

“social justice,” and the “common good.” It could even be a prominent member of Parliament or Congress.

Maximilien Robespierre and Louis Antoine de Saint-Just, I suggested [in a recent essay](#), were peas in the same pod as Eichmann—ordinary people who committed extraordinarily heinous acts.

Hannah Arendt is recognized as one of the leading political thinkers of the Twentieth Century. She was very prolific, and her books are good sellers still, nearly half a century after her death. She remains eminently quotable as well, authoring such pithy lines as “Political questions are far too serious to be left to the politicians,” “The most radical revolutionary will become a conservative the day after the revolution,” and “The sad truth of the matter is that most evil is done by people who never made up their minds to be or do either evil or good.”

Some of Arendt’s friends on the left swallowed the myth that Hitler and Stalin occupied opposite ends of the political spectrum. She knew better. Both were evil collectivists and enemies of the individual (see list of suggested readings below). “Hitler never intended to defend the West against Bolshevism,” she wrote in her 1951 book [The Origins of Totalitarianism](#), “but always remained ready to join ‘the Reds’ for the destruction of the West, even in the middle of the struggle against Soviet Russia.”

To appreciate Hannah Arendt more fully, I offer here a few additional samples of her writings:

The moment we no longer have a free press, anything can happen. What makes it possible for a totalitarian or any other dictatorship to rule is that people are not informed; how can you have an opinion if you are not informed? If

everybody always lies to you, the consequence is not that you believe the lies, but rather that nobody believes anything any longer. This is because lies, by their very nature, have to be changed, and a lying government has constantly to rewrite its own history. On the receiving end you get not only one lie—a lie which you could go on for the rest of your days—but you get a great number of lies, depending on how the political wind blows. And a people that no longer can believe anything cannot make up its mind. It is deprived not only of its capacity to act but also of its capacity to think and to judge. And with such a people you can then do what you please.

The ideal subject of totalitarian rule is not the convinced [Nazi](#) or the convinced [Communist](#), but people for whom the distinction between fact and fiction (i.e., the reality of experience) and the distinction between true and false (i.e., the standards of thought) no longer exist.

The essence of [totalitarian government](#), and perhaps the nature of every bureaucracy, is to make functionaries and mere cogs in the administrative machinery out of men, and thus to dehumanize them.

The trouble with Eichmann was precisely that so many were like him, and that the many were neither perverted nor sadistic, that they were, and still are, terribly and terrifyingly normal. From the viewpoint of our legal institutions and of our moral standards of judgment, this normality was much more terrifying than all the atrocities put together, for it implied—as had been said at Nuremberg

over and over again by the defendants and their counsels—that this new type of criminal, who is in actual fact *hostis generis humani*, commits his crimes under circumstances that make it well-nigh impossible for him to know or to feel that he is doing wrong.

Totalitarianism begins in contempt for what you have. The second step is the notion: “Things must change—no matter how. Anything is better than what we have.” Totalitarian rulers organize this kind of mass sentiment, and by organizing it they articulate it, and by articulating it they make the people somehow love it. They were told before, *thou shalt not kill*; and they didn’t kill. Now they are told, *thou shalt kill*; and although they think it’s very difficult to kill, they do it because it’s now part of the code of behavior.

The argument that we cannot judge if we were not present and involved ourselves seems to convince everyone everywhere, although it seems obvious that if it were true, neither the administration of justice nor the writing of history would ever be possible.

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