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Are Arendt's Reflections on Evil Still Relevant?

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Abstract: The relevance of Arendt's reflections on evil is analyzed in three respects. She warns that the appeal to absolutes (good or evil) destroys politics; her claim that radical evil involves making human beings as human beings superfluous is relevant to contemporary concerns with the vast refugee and stateless populations; and her idea of the banality of evil focuses our attention on the evil deeds that persons commit even when they do not have evil motives or intentions.

> I have always believed that, no matter how abstract our theories may sound or how consistent our arguments may appear, there are incidents and stories behind them which, at least for ourselves, contain in a nutshell the full meaning of whatever we have to say. Thought itself . . . arises out of the actuality of incidents, and incidents of living experience must remain its guideposts by which it takes its bearings if it is not to lose itself in the heights to which thinking soars, or in the depths to which it must descend.
>
> —Hannah Arendt, 1962

This statement is especially revealing for understanding Hannah Arendt as an independent thinker. We know that many of the incidents that provoked her thinking were directly related to her attempt to comprehend what seemed so outrageous: the unprecedented, the novel events of twentieth-century totalitarianism, especially Nazi totalitarianism. In the preface to *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, she declares: "And if it is true that in the final stages of totalitarianism an absolute evil appears (absolute because it can no longer be deduced from humanly comprehensible motives), it is also true that without it we might never have known the truly radical nature of Evil."[1] In 1945, she had already said that "the problem of evil will be the fundamental question of postwar intellectual life in Europe."[2] Few postwar intellectuals directly confronted the problem of evil, but it did become fundamental for Hannah Arendt. She returned to it over and over again, and she was still struggling with it at the time of her death.

[1]Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, 3rd ed. rev. (New York: Harcourt, Brace Jovanovich, 1968).

[2]Hannah Arendt, *Essays in Understanding, 1930–1954*, ed. Jerome Kohn (New York: Harcourt, Brace & Co., 1994), 134.

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But if we take seriously the opening quotation from Arendt, we have to ask whether her reflections on evil are still relevant in our attempts to understand a very different world. We may be living through dark times, but we are not living through the type of totalitarianism that Arendt experienced. I will argue, however, that Arendt's reflections about evil do have contemporary relevance, and they can serve as a corrective to some of the current careless ways of speaking about evil.

I will focus on three issues. First, Arendt's warning about introducing absolutes (good and evil) into politics. Second, I want to show how her understanding of radical evil—making human beings superfluous as human beings—is relevant to contemporary issues about statelessness, refugees, and immigration. Finally, I want to show how her reflections on the banality of evil help us to understand evil and responsibility in a globalized bureaucratic world.

Before turning to my main discussion, I want to say something about Arendt as an independent thinker (*Selbstdenker*), especially her thinking about the question of evil. One of the greatest sources of misunderstanding of Arendt results from the misreading of her as proposing explanatory theories that presumably have a universal scope. The most notorious example is the way in which many of her critics and defenders speak of her theory of the banality of evil—as if it were a theory intended to epitomize Nazi evil. Arendt never spoke in this manner; she explicitly denied that the banality of evil is a theory. Rather it was "a phenomenon which stared one in the face at the [Eichmann] trial."[3] To think of Arendt as a theorist in this sense—as proposing universally explanatory theories—is to miss what is most distinctive about her thinking. To use a metaphor that she favored, her thinking consists of "thought-trains." These "thought-trains," provoked by incidents of living experience, crisscross and interweave. Sometimes they reinforce each other. But sometimes they also clash with one another and cannot be easily reconciled.[4]

I want to begin my discussion with Arendt's remarks about good and evil in *On Revolution*, a text that is frequently neglected in dealing with the more striking themes of radical evil and the banality of evil. In her controversial chapter on "The Social Question," she introduces a brief discussion of Melville's *Billy Budd* and Dostoevsky's "The Grand Inquisitor." She tells us that "if we want to know what absolute goodness would signify for the course of human affairs . . . we had better turn to the poets.. . . At least we learn from them that absolute goodness is hardly any less dangerous than

[3]Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem*: *A Report on the Banality of Evil*, 2nd ed. (New York: Viking Press, 1965), 287.

[4]See Margaret Canovan's discussion of Arendt's "thought-trains" in her introduction to *Hannah Arendt: A Reinterpretation of her Political Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992).

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absolute evil."[5] By absolute goodness and evil, she means goodness and evil "that are beyond ordinary virtue and vice."

> Claggart was "struck by an angel of God! Yet the angel must hang!" The tragedy is that law is made for men, and neither for angels nor for devils. Laws and all "lasting institutions" break down not only under the onslaught of elemental evil but under the impact of absolute innocence as well. The law, moving between crime and virtue, cannot recognize what is beyond it, and while it has no punishment to mete out to elemental evil, it cannot but punish elemental goodness even if the virtuous man, Captain Vere, recognizes that only the violence of this goodness is adequate to the depraved power of evil. The absolute ... spells doom to everyone when it is introduced into the political realm.[6]

"The absolute spells doom to everyone when it is introduced into the political realm"— this might well be taken as the epigraph for the corruption of politics in the United States since 9/11. From that infamous day, we have witnessed an abuse of evil—a simplistic dichotomy that divides the world into absolute evil and good.

In my book, *The Abuse of Evil*, I have argued that this discourse of good and evil reflects a dangerous mentality—a mentality that is drawn to absolutes, simplistic and clear dichotomies, and alleged moral certainties. In the so-called War on Terror, nuance, subtlety, and fallibility are (mis)taken to be signs of weakness and indecision. But if we think that politics requires judgment, formulating judicious opinions, and making careful discriminations, and deliberation—as Arendt does—then this talk of absolute evil is profoundly antipolitical; it corrupts politics. The fashionable discourse of good and evil is being used as a cynical political weapon to stifle critical thinking and obscure complex issues. To speak and think in this way, to speak about the "evil ones," "the servants of evil," "the axis of evil," as our political leaders so frequently do, may be highly successful in playing on people's fears and anxieties, but it corrupts politics.

Arendt's reflections on politics remind us of a human potentiality that is rooted in our spontaneity, natality, and plurality, and they serve as a critical standard for judging "really existing politics." Everything that we learn from Arendt about politics teaches us that politics involves (or rather ought to involve) judgment, debate, and the type of tangible public freedom that come into existence when human beings act and speak together as equals. Whatever criticism we may want to make about the limitations of her conception of politics, Arendt does capture something that is vital for any conception of genuinely democratic politics. Consequently, the first lesson we might learn from Arendt is to be on our guard when absolutes—absolute evil and good—are introduced into politics. Samantha Power eloquently

[5]Hannah Arendt, *On Revolution* (New York: Viking Press, 1963), 77.
[6]Ibid., 79.

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describes the contrast between Arendt's more thoughtful responses to evil and the new stark opposition of evil (black) and good (white).

> Arendt used the phrase "radical evil" to describe totalitarianism, and this idea has been brought back in circulation. Yet while Arendt did not allow such branding to deter her from exploring the sources of that evil, the less subtle minds who invoke the concept of today do so to mute criticisms of their responses. (Who, after all, can be against combating evil?)
>
> But sheltering behind black-and-white characterizations is not only questionable for moral and epistemological reasons, it poses a practical problem because it blinds us from understanding and thus undermines our long-term ability to prevent and surmount what we don't know and most fear. "Evil," whether radical or banal, is met most often with unimaginativeness. Terrorism is a threat that demands a complex and elaborate effort to distinguish the sympathizers from the militants and to keep its converts to a minimum. Terrorism also requires understanding how our past policies helped to give rise to such venomous grievances.[7]

Although absolutes are disastrous when they are introduced into the political realm, it does not follow that we should neglect the character of evil in our time. Arendt thought it was unavoidable, and I agree with her. But it requires that we carefully rethink what we mean by evil. And this clarity is what she sought in her struggle to come to grips with an unprecedented radical evil of totalitarianism. I think there are actually several different thought-trains that she follows in her discussions of radical evil, but I want to concentrate on the phenomenon that she takes to be at the heart of radical evil—"making human beings as human beings superfluous."

In 1951, before *The Origins* appeared in bookstores, Arendt sent a copy to Karl Jaspers so it would arrive for his birthday. Delighted to receive the book, he quickly read the preface and conclusion, and dashed off a note with a cryptic question: "Hasn't Jahwe faded too far out of sight?" In her next letter to Jaspers, Arendt wrote that this question "has been on my mind for weeks now without my being able to come up with an answer to it." Jaspers's question did provoke the following response about radical evil.

> Evil has proved to be more radical than expected. In objective terms, modern crimes are not provided for in the Ten Commandments. Or: the Western Tradition is suffering from the preconception that the most evil things human beings can do arise from the vice of selfishness. Yet we know that the greatest evils or radical evil has nothing to do anymore with such humanly understandable, sinful motives. What radical evil really is I don't know, but it seems to me it somehow has to do with the following phenomenon: making human beings as human beings superfluous (not using them as means to an end, which leaves their essence as humans untouched and impinges only on their human dignity; rather,

[7]Samantha Power, "Hannah Arendt's Lesson," *New York Review of Books* (April 29, 2004), 37.

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> making them superfluous as human beings). This happens as soon as all unpredictability—which, in human beings, is the equivalent of spontaneity—is eliminated. And all this in turn arises from—or, better goes along with—the delusion of the omnipotence (not simply with the lust for power) of an individual man. If an individual man qua man were omnipotent, then there is in fact no reason why men in the plural should exist at all.[8]

Arendt presents a three-stage analytic model of the "logic" of total domination—one that has rarely been surpassed for its trenchant insight. She claims that the concentration and extermination camps are the "most consequential institution of totalitarian rule";[9] they "serve as laboratories in which the fundamental belief of totalitarianism that everything is possible is being verified."[10]

"The first essential step on the road to total domination is to kill the juridical person in man."[11] This started long before the Nazis established the death camps. Arendt is referring to the legal restrictions that stripped Jews (and other groups such as homosexuals and gypsies) of their juridical rights. "The aim of an arbitrary system is to destroy the civil rights of the whole population, who ultimately become just as outlawed in their own country as the stateless and the homeless. The destruction of man's rights, the killing of the juridical person in him, is a prerequisite for dominating him entirely."

"The next decisive step in the preparation of living corpses is the murder of the moral person in man."[12] The SS, who supervised the camps, were perversely brilliant in their attempt to break down human solidarity.

> When a man is faced with the alternative of betraying and thus murdering his friends or sending his wife and children, for whom he is in every sense responsible, to their death; and when even suicide would mean the immediate murder of his own family, how is he to decide? The alternative is no longer between good and evil, but between murder and murder. Who could solve the moral dilemma of the Greek mother, who was allowed by the Nazis to choose which of her three children should be killed?[13]

But this is not yet the worst. There is a third step on the way to total domination—and it is where we come face to face with radical evil.

[8]Hannah Arendt and Karl Jaspers, *Correspondence, 1926–1969*, ed. Lotte Kohler and Hans Saner, trans. Robert and Rita Kimber (New York: Harcourt Brace & Co., 1995), 166.
[9]Arendt, *Origins of Totalitarianism*, 441.
[10]Ibid., 437.
[11]Ibid., 447.
[12]Ibid., 451.
[13]Ibid., 452.

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> After the murder of the moral person and the annihilation of the juridical person, the destruction of individuality is almost always successful. . . . 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.[14]

The camps served the ghastly experiment of seeking to eliminate any vestige of human spontaneity and plurality. They sought to transform human beings into things not quite human—beings who were at once human and nonhuman. This is what Arendt took to be the most extreme form of unprecedented radical evil; this is what she meant by making human beings superfluous as human beings. Arendt is referring to those *Musselmänner*, the living corpses that were later to be so graphically described by Primo Levi.

> Their life is short, but their number is endless; they are the Musselmänner, the drowned, they form the backbone of the camp, an anonymous mass, continually renewed and always identical, of non-men who march and labor in silence, the divine spark dead in them, already too empty to really suffer. One hesitates to call them living: one hesitates to call their death death, in the face of which they have no fear, as they are too tired to understand.
>
> They crowd my memory with their faceless presence, and if I could enclose all the evil of our time in one image, I would choose this image which is familiar to me: an emaciated man, with head dropped and shoulders curved, on whose face and in whose eyes not a trace of thought is to be seen.[15]

By "dwelling on the horrors," Arendt came to the shocking realization that the not-so-hidden aim of totalitarianism is the deliberate attempt to make human beings qua human superfluous, to transform human beings in order to eliminate their humanity—to destroy their plurality, spontaneity, natality, and individuality. This observation is the closest she came to grasping radical evil—a new unprecedented phenomenon that "confronts us with its overpowering reality and breaks down all standards we know." Mass murder, genocide, torture, and terror have happened before in history. But the aim of totalitarianism is not oppression, not even "total domination," if this still is understood as the total domination of *human beings*. Totalitarianism, as Arendt understands it, strives to obliterate people's humanity.

If this is what Arendt means by radical evil then the question arises, is it relevant for us today? Since the time of the Shoah, we have lived through

[14]Ibid., 455.

[15]Primo Levi, *Survival in Auschwitz*; and, *The Reawakening: Two Memoirs*, trans. Stuart Woolf (New York: Summit Books, 1986), 90. See also Giorgio Agamben's discussion of the *Musselmann* in *Remnants of Auschwitz: The Witness and the Archive*, trans. Danile Heller-Roazen (New York: Zone Books, 1999).

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genocides, mass murders, and sadistic tortures. But these actions are not the same as the systematic attempt to transform human nature into something that is nonhuman, the condition that Arendt analyzes, and that Primo Levi so graphically describes. Yet radical evil is the final stage of the process of making human beings superfluous. And the theme of superfluousness is one that runs through *The Origins* like a red thread. She takes up the theme of superfluousness in "The Decline of the Nation-State and the End of the Rights of Man." She tells us that statelessness is "the newest mass phenomenon in contemporary history, and the existence of an ever-growing new people comprised of stateless persons, [is] the most symptomatic group in contemporary politics."[16] Arendt makes the disturbing but extremely perceptive observation that "if we consider the different groups among the stateless it appears that every political event since the end of the First World War inevitably added a new category to those who lived outside the pale of law."[17] What Arendt wrote more than fifty years ago is even more relevant in our own time. Arendt, who was stateless for eighteen years, poignantly highlights the plight of the stateless human being—the superfluous nonperson—who has no legitimate legal or political status. To be a stateless person is to be "unprotected by any specific law or political convention." She argued that the emergence of masses of refugees was one of the most intractable problems of the twentieth century—and it is turning out to be just as intractable—perhaps even more so—in the twenty-first century. In the final pages of *The Origins*, she presciently tells us that "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, and economic misery in a manner worthy of man."[18]

This recurring creation of masses of refugees and stateless nonpersons is at the heart of Arendt's sharp critique of appeals to abstract Rights of Man—the inalienable rights that a human being is supposed to possess qua human being. "The Rights of Man, after all, had been defined as 'inalienable' because they were supposed to be independent of all governments, but it turned out that the moment human beings lacked their own government and had to fall back upon their minimum rights, no authority was left to protect them and no institution was willing to guarantee them."[19] This is the condition where one becomes superfluous—a situation that is at once precarious and extremely dangerous. This is why Arendt argued that the most fundamental right is "the right to have rights"—the right to belong to a political community that will protect and guarantee one's rights as a citizen.

[16]Arendt, *Origins of Totalitarianism*, 277.
[17]Ibid., 277.
[18]Ibid., 458.
[19]Ibid., 291–92.

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> The calamity of the rightless is not that they are deprived of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness, or of equality before the law and freedom of opinion—formulas which were designed to solve problems *within* given communities—but they no longer belong to any community whatsoever. Their plight is not that they are not equal before the law, but that no law exists for them; not that they are oppressed but that nobody wants even to oppress them. Only in the last stage of a rather lengthy process is their right to life threatened; only if they remain perfectly "superfluous," if nobody can be found to "claim" them, may their lives be in danger.[20]

The problems of the stateless, refugees, "illegal immigrants," even of legal immigrants who are treated as second class citizens (or even as noncitizens) have become more diversified, complex, and fraught with explosive tensions in our time than ever before. We should take to heart Arendt's warning about what can happen when masses of people are suddenly rendered superfluous. Unless we find ways to address this phenomenon humanely, ways that recognize fundamentally "the right to have rights," then totalitarian solutions to the problem of superfluousness will continue to remain a strong temptation.

In her famous exchange with Gershom Scholem after the publication of *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, Arendt wrote:

> Indeed my opinion now is 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 over the surface. It is 'thought-defying,' as I said, because thought tries to reach some depth, to go to the roots, and the moment it concerns itself with evil, it is frustrated because there is nothing.[21]

In *Hannah Arendt and the Jewish Question*, I have argued that Arendt's statement is misleading in so far as it suggests that she repudiated her claims about the way she described radical evil in *The Origins*—the making of human beings superfluous. She never repudiated her original analysis—not even in this passage. Rather she questions whether it is appropriate to call this phenomenon "radical evil." The literal meaning of "radical" is to get at the roots, which suggests that evil is something deep and buried. But she came to believe that the metaphor of "roots" is misleading; fungus is a more appropriate metaphor, because it spreads quickly on the surface. The banality of evil is not only compatible with the radical evil of making human beings superfluous, the banality of evil enables us to understand how desk murderers like Eichmann accomplished this with such efficiency.[22]

[20]Ibid., 295–96.

[21]Hannah Arendt, *The Jew as Pariah*, ed. Ron H. Feldman (New York: The Grove Press, 1978), 250–51.

[22]Richard J. Bernstein, *Hannah Arendt and the Jewish Question* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1996).

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What precisely is the banality of evil? Is this notion still relevant for confronting evil today? The phrase the "banality of evil" is a primary reason why *Eichmann in Jerusalem* provoked—and still provokes—so much controversy. It might have been better if Arendt has used a less provocative expression, such as the one suggested by Seyla Benhabib—the "routinization of evil."[23] But "the banality of evil" has a shocking power to compel us to stop and think—to face up to the new forms that evil has taken in our time.

Before turning to what Arendt means by the banality of evil, and why it is so relevant for us today, let me reiterate a few facts. The phrase "the banality of evil" appears only once in her report on Eichmann—in the final sentence of her main text—just before her epilogue. She quotes what were reported to be Eichmann's last words before he went to the gallows. "After a short while, gentleman, we shall all meet again. Such is the fate of all men. Long live Germany, long live Argentina, long live Austria. I shall not forget them." Arendt then comments:

> In the face of death, he had found the cliché used in funeral oratory. Under the gallows, his memory played him the last trick; he was elated and he forgot that this was his own funeral.
>
> It was 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*.[24]

That's it!—That is the only mention of "the banality of evil" in the entire report. When her report was published as book, she did use the subtitle, "A Report on the Banality of Evil," but this subtitle did not even appear in the original *New Yorker* articles.

One of Arendt's clearest statements about "the banality of evil" occurs in her 1971 lecture "Thinking and Moral Considerations":

> Some years ago, reporting the trial of *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, I spoke of the "banality of evil" and meant with this no theory or doctrine but something quite factual, the phenomenon of evil deeds, committed on a gigantic scale, which could not be traced to any particularity of wickedness, pathology, or ideological conviction in the doer, whose only personal distinction was perhaps extraordinary shallowness. However monstrous the deeds were, the doer was neither monstrous nor demonic, and the only specific characteristic one could detect in his past as well as in his behavior during the trial and the preceding police examination was something entirely negative: it was not stupidity but a curious, quite authentic inability to think.[25]

[23]Seyla Benhabib, "Hannah Arendt and the Redemptive Power of Narrative," *Social Research* 57, no.1 (Spring 1990): 185.

[24]Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem*: *A Report on the Banality of Evil*, 252.

[25]Hannah Arendt, "Thinking and Mortal Considerations: A Lecture," *Social Research* 38, no. 3 (Fall, 1971): 417.

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Arendt calls into question one of our oldest and most entrenched moral and legal convictions: people who do evil deeds must have evil motives and intentions. They are vicious, sadistic, wicked, demonic, and pathological. But Eichmann was not a pathological, sadistic monster—the way in which the prosecutor sought to portray him. He was "terrifyingly normal." "He was a new type of criminal who commits his crimes in circumstances that make it well-nigh impossible to know or feel that he is doing wrong."[26] His deeds were monstrous, and he deserved to hang, but his motives and intentions were banal. So "the banality of evil" is not an expression that refers to Eichmann's deeds; there was nothing banal about these. Rather "the banality of evil" refers to his motives and intentions. Historians have raised many questions about the factual accuracy of Arendt's portrait of Eichmann, but I do not think that this diminishes her main point: normal people with banal motives and intentions can commit horrendous crimes and evil deeds.[27] Susan Neiman sums up why *Eichmann in Jerusalem* makes such an important contribution to our understanding of evil in the contemporary world.

> Auschwitz embodied evil that confuted two centuries of modern assumptions about intention.
>
> Those assumptions identify evil and evil intention so thoroughly that denying the latter is normally viewed as a way of denying the former. Where evil intention is absent, we may hold agents liable for the wrongs they inflict, but we view them as matters of criminal negligence. Alternatively, anyone who denies criminal intention is present in a particular action is thought to exonerate the criminal. This is the source of the furor that still surrounds Arendt's *Eichmann in Jerusalem*.... The conviction that guilt requires malice and forethought led most readers to conclude that Arendt denied guilt because she denied malice and forethought—though she often repeated that Eichmann was guilty, and was convinced that he ought to hang.[28]

[26]Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil*, 276.

[27]Christopher R. Browning, the eminent historian of the Holocaust, sums up the judgment of many historians when he writes: "I consider Arendt's concept of the 'banality of evil' a very important insight for understanding many of the perpetuators of the Holocaust, but not Eichmann himself. Arendt was fooled by Eichmann's strategy of self-representation in part because there were so many perpetrators of the kind he was pretending to be." In his recent biography of Eichmann, David Cesarani sets out to show how mistaken Arendt was in her characterization of Eichmann (*Eichmann: His Life and Crimes* [London: William Heinemann, 2004]). But ironically, as Barry Gewen remarks in his recent review, "Cesarani believes his details add up to a portrait at odds with Arendt's banal bureaucrat, but what is striking is how far his research goes to reinforce her fundamental arguments" ("A Portrait of Eichmann as an Ordinary Man," *International Herald Tribune*, May 12, 2006).

[28]Susan Neiman, *Evil in Modern Thought: An Alternative History of Philosophy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), 271–72.

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Although Arendt did not think that Eichmann was a satanic monster, he was responsible for his deeds; he was not a mere bureaucratic cog in the Nazi death machine. Arendt categorically rejects what she called "the cog theory." In response to the claim that one was merely a cog in a machine, it is always appropriate to ask: "And why did you become a cog or continue to be a wheel in such circumstances?"[29]

Why is the concept of "the banality of evil" so controversial? I suggest that the reason is related to Arendt as an independent thinker. She was convinced that with the event of totalitarianism there had been a radical break in tradition. We can no longer rely on traditional categories, concepts, and standards to comprehend what has happened. The task is to forge new concepts and categories that illuminate the darkness of our times. We have to learn to break away from simplistic dichotomies where it is falsely assumed that if we deny that someone has deliberate evil intentions, we are affirming his innocence. We have to learn to understand how someone may not have evil intentions and be "terrifyingly normal," and yet be accountable and responsible for his deeds. We have to learn to think without banisters (*Denken ohne Geländer*). But when someone really challenges our conventional and deeply entrenched ways of thinking, it is threatening—it seems to leave us without any support. Arendt shows us that if we really want to understand what is new and distinctive about evil in our time, we cannot rely on our traditional notion that evil deeds are committed by persons with evil intentions, that monstrous deeds are caused by monsters. Ironically, such traditional thought is a reassuring and comforting idea because it removes evil from everyday normal life—we presumably "know" that *we*, at least, are not monsters! I believe that this regression, in which our enemies are demonized, is all too characteristic of the rhetoric of our political leaders. Let me remind that on 9/11, in his address to the nation, George W. Bush said, "Today our nation saw evil, the very worst of human nature." And it behooves us to remember that Bush's rhetoric is matched by Islamic militants. On April 7, 2004, Moktada al-Sadr declared, "America has shown its evil intentions and the proud Iraqi people cannot accept it."

Arendt emphatically did not think that there is an Eichmann in each of us, but she might well agree with David Cesarani when he writes in the conclusion of his biography:

> The *génocidaire* has become a common feature of humanity and to that extent Eichmann is typical rather than aberrant. This is not the same as saying that "we are all potential Eichmanns"; rather, that the matrices which generate the perpetrators of atrocity and genocide have multiplied. In these circumstances normal people can and do commit mass murder or engineer it...

[29]Hannah Arendt, "Personal Responsibility under Dictatorship," *Listener*, August 6, 1964.

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> Now, in the twenty-first century, in a world awash with refugees and the victims of "ethnic cleansing," when racism and fanaticism continue to dominate politics, and when international tribunals are trying the foot soldiers of genocide and their commanders in the military and political echelons, Eichmann appears more and more like a man of our time.[30]

This is the primary lesson of the banality of evil. One does not have to be a monster, a sadist, or a vicious person to commit horrendously evil deeds. Normal people in their everyday lives, "decent citizens," even respectable political leaders, who are convinced of the righteousness of their cause, can commit monstrous deeds. The bureaucratic and technological conditions of modernity make this phenomenon a much more likely and dangerous possibility. But, as Arendt emphasizes, this does not mitigate the accountability and responsibility of those who commit such deeds. Arendt wants us to confront honestly the "paradox" that even though normal persons may commit horrendous deeds without deliberate intention, they are, nevertheless, fully responsible for these deeds and must be held accountable.

I have stated that the currently fashionable discourse of good and evil is actually a regression to a primitive and mythic conception of evil by which we divide the world in a simple (and simplistic) dichotomy between forces of evil and the force of good. The evil ones are demonic and satanic, but the good guys are innocent and virtuous. In this quasi-Manichean world, the great battle of Good and Evil is fought. It is "quasi" Manichean, because unlike the Manicheans who thought that Good and Evil were equiprimordial and engaged in an eternal struggle, in our mythology—so pervasive in our Hollywood movies, popular culture, and political rhetoric—we "know" that Good will ultimately triumph over Evil. Understanding evil in this way mystifies and obscures the new face of evil in a post-totalitarian world. Today when we are discovering the extent to which policies made in Washington encourage the terrible abuses that have taken place in Abu Ghraib and many other prisons, when we learn how lawyers in the White House, sitting at their desks, devise sophisticated justifications to legalize torture, the banality of evil takes on new meaning.

Arendt compels us to face up to difficult and painful questions about the meaning of evil in the contemporary world, the ease with which human beings are made superfluous, the feebleness of the so-called voice of conscience, the subtle forms of complicity and cooperation that go along with murderous deeds. These, unfortunately, are not issues restricted to Nazi horrors. They are still very much with us and demand that we struggle with them over and over again.

It is important to remember that even though Arendt was critical—even scornful—of the melodramatic chief prosecutor, Gideon Hauser, she expressed the highest regard for the judges who tried Eichmann. She

[30]Cesarani, *Eichmann: His Life and Crimes*, 386.

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endorsed their judgment about Eichmann's responsibility. She wrote, "What the judgment had to say on this point was more than correct, it was the truth." I want to conclude with the passage from their judgment that she cited. The judges were, of course, speaking about Eichmann. But what they have to say about responsibility is as relevant today as it was for Eichmann.

> [In] such an enormous and complicated crime as the one we are now considering, wherein many people participated, on various levels and in various modes of activity—the planners, the organizers, and those executing the deeds, according to their various ranks—there is not much point in using ordinary concepts of counseling and soliciting to commit a crime. For these crimes were committed en masse, not only in regard to the number of victims, but also in regard to the numbers of those who perpetuated the crime, and the extent to which any one of the many criminals was close or remote from the actual killer of the victim means nothing, as far as the measure of responsibility is concerned. On the contrary, in general *the degree of responsibility increases as we draw further away from the man who uses the fatal instrument with his own hands*.[31] (Arendt's emphasis)

[31] Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: Report on the Banality of Evil*, 246–47.

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