

Eichmann in Jerusalem

H. Arendt

June 7-8

The first time I certainly heard about Nazism was in connection with the Eichmann trial¹. I recall Swastikas mysteriously being painted as graffiti on the garage doors of our apartment building in Motala. And in fact the Eichmann trial did revive the Holocaust after it having been held in denial for the first fifteen years after the war². And this was also the express purpose of the trial, not just to mete out justice to a particular perpetrator, but to publicize the crimes against the Jews to the world at large. Those two purposes did not necessarily harmonize with each other, for one thing the business of a court is a narrow one, to interpret the law and draw the necessary consequences, not to make general moral pronouncements. One particular unfortunate consequence of this was the aggrandizement of Eichmann, making him up as a far more important figure than he really was (which no doubt played up to his vanity), a claim that Arendt tried to counter by her famous remarks as to the banality of evil.

Arendt's book, originally conceived and appearing as a series of articles for the New Yorker magazine, is foremost a philosophical inquiry into the question of guilt and justice, and as such I find it more in agreement with my own views than more modern accounts. Especially Arendt makes the following points.

- 1) The crimes committed were of an essentially new character without precedent
- 2) The crimes were not perpetrated by monsters, but by individuals displaying a disturbing normality.

Those two points need to be expounded upon. First, contrary to the opinion of many Jews, the Holocaust was not a logical consequence of traditional anti-semitism. It was of course inspired by such, but transcended it, and hence were not to be thought of as a crime against Jews as such but against humanity, violating the basic contract of common humanity. Arendt makes the point that murders are not persecuted and punished primarily because of the sufferings of the victims, but because they are offenses against a universal human code. A criminal suit is not the same thing as a civil suit, its point is to see that justice is had, which is not the same as compensation let alone revenge. In the case of crimes, especially crimes of that order, the question of compensation is moot. Thus in particular Arendt thinks that an International tribunal might have been better than a narrowly Israeli one³

Secondly the people like Eichmann were not monsters, although the acts they perpetrated were monstrous acts. This makes it particularly disturbing, and also from a

¹ I recalleven that for some brief time I confused Einstein with Eichmann!

² It is only as an adult I have appreciated how close my childhood was in time to the end of the Second World War and that most of its actors were then still alive and active

³ As it turns out, by holding the proceedings in Jerusalem, many witnesses for the defence were unable to testify

philosophical and moral point extremely interesting and important. With monsters there is no question of shared humanity, and hence no real question of guilt and justice. Where there is no conscience, there is no struggle, no question of individual wrong-doing. You could as well put hurricanes and earthquakes on trial.

In what way was Eichmann normal? Certainly he does not strike a very sympathetic figure. In fact Arendt is particular offended by his stupidity, his inability to articulate himself, and his obsession with empty stock-phrases, no so called *winged words* but empty clichés. Arendt probably would have respected him more had he been more educated, more intelligent, yes maybe even if more ruthless and callous. Eichmann certainly was not a sadist, in fact in the face of violence he might have been more squeemish than normal. The notion of what was happening at the other end of his work made him sick. Yet, the presence of normal feelings of revulsion are not by themselves mitigating, only to the extent that you act upon them (and this Eichmann did only exceptionally if at all⁴. Eichmann claimed that he felt no hatred for the Jews, and there is no reason not to doubt him, and this probably went for most of the perpetrators. This does not mitigate it, on the contrary it makes their actions if possible even more hideous, because after all you can understand acts committed out of blind hate and passion,. So in particular what comport is it that Eichmann had Jewish friends, that he treated Jewish leaders co-operating with the schemes with respect, nay even friendliness. Even Hitler is rumoured to have had a few Jewish friends, whom he exempted. And thus in fact when Nazism imploded under military onslaught, extermination, being a top-down affair (pace Godhagen) ceased⁵

It is very hard for humans to act against people they know, and that also goes for the average Nazi. Before people could be exterminated they had to be stripped of their humanity and be reduced to a home-less stateless rubble⁶. And of course Jews were split and categorized (although ultimately it did not make a difference). It was one thing to be a Deutschjude quite another thing to be an Ostjude, and in the views of the German Jews, so assimilated in German civilization, the chasm that existed was between them and they, not between them and the general German population. And in fact what is generally deplored in the medial minds are the distinguished cases, famous intellectuals being put to death. The extermination of the Gypsies is but a footnote in the general Holocaust, because where are the famous intellectual Gypsies? They provided, and still to a large extent, provides deplorable human debris in the eyes of many people.

So how did people like Eichmann react to the horrors that lay at the end? The normal thing to do is to redirect pity, from those who are actually being victimised to the observer himself. To watch such atrocities is painful, it makes you suffer, and the one who suffers is a victim. Thus second order suffering becomes first order, and hence the actions you perpetrate become so to speak glorified by the suffering you are forced to endure.

⁴ There are some indications that he redirected some deportations to fates not as drastically doomed, but in the end it did of course make no difference

⁵ Himmler when sensing the way the wind was blowing called an halt to operations with a naive view of being able to play a major rôle as a mediator between the Germans and the allies. Calling everything off as if it had been a bad joke.

⁶ How many people would be really very upset about atrocities committed against anonymous home-less people today, part of some general debris?

This is not a very pretty picture, but it is human all-too-human, and humanity does not in general present a very pretty picture. Moral heroism is an exception rather than the rule, and the rarity of its exception was in particular brought home by the records of the German populations. Whether the Jews were any better is of course a contentious question. On basic principles there is no reason to conclude that because you are a Jew you are more moral. The extermination of the Jews would not have occurred as smoothly, orderly and effectively had their organizations not abetted the process by being helpful in identification and administration. This active collusion in their own destruction, mirrors morally the complacency of the general German population, but of course with a very important distinction, where the general German population were the beneficiaries of the extermination, the Jewish collaborators were as much victims themselves.

The Nazis prided themselves on their ruthlessness. This is a myth, still prevalent today, which Arndt sets out to explode. In fact wherever the Nazis met determined opposition to their schemes they backed down, such as in Denmark and Bulgaria, two countries that Arndt singles out for exemplary behaviour⁷

Eichmann pleaded innocence on the basis of his obedience having been abused. This is of course a standard excuse, which has also been elevated to a legal principle. No one should be tried and convicted for offences retroactively, to do so would lead us all into an untenable situation. This addresses a key problem in judicial proceedings, and highlights the difference between the letter of the law as a formal set of rules, and the spirit of the law concerned with justice as such and endowed with a Platonic reality⁸ Arndt does of course not delve deeply into this notion, in particular not to what extent morality is a social construction in the sense of the post-modernisms or whether it should be justified by human evolution. She does point out that Eichmann had after all an exalted idea of what morality entails, that he had in fact read and studied and to some extent understood the teachings of Kant, although those had been distorted by identifying the individual conscience with the will of Hitler. Thus Eichmann was not just blindly following orders, he had tried to internalize the will of Hitler and thus testing every order to the extent it harmonized with the will of the Führer. This meant that he had after all been motivated by a moral vision, no matter how perverted, and thus not being just an automaton, although he in practice may have acted as such as well as desiring that lowly role.

How reliable was Eichmann in giving testimonies? A chilling fact is how selective his memory was, in the sense of being so narrowly focused on his own life and career. Things that did not directly concern himself he tended to forget completely, while he kept a very good record of the key events in his own rise as well as the moments of 'relations' of which we all keep a record of in our own lives. Once again this focusing on the private, the almost solipsistic, is yet another instance of what it means to be human, the very weakness of it.

⁷ Probably her accounts are gross simplifications, but you tend to ignore this as the stories she tells are so heart-warming. In principle one should be wary of anything that seem to smack of general national character. The Rumanian policies in contrast to those of her neighbour Bulgaria were hideous. But could Rumanians really be so much morally more depraved people than the Bulgarians (or people of Schleswig-Holstein so much worse than the Danes)? Clearly what we are witnessing are the consequences of a few key decisions, a knife can fall the one way or the other depending on the minute ways it is being poised.

⁸ Laws are not just formal, they reflect deeper realities.

Yet, unlike many higher fries, he did not appear overly evasive, and in fact he did often indulge in sentimental outbursts to the effect that he deserved to be hanged. And he did face his execution with dignity, asked not to have his hand tied to his back, so as to be able to walk erect, as well as waving aside the black hood, when the noose were about to be put around his neck .

Yet the personal fate of Eichmann is uninteresting in the larger picture. To once again come back to the two basic claims of Arendt, namely that the Holocaust was unprecedented and that it could be perpetrated by normal people.

Atrocities is nothing new in history. People have killed each other with a vengeance since time immorial, and historic narratives are seldom anything but sorry reports on ethnic cleansing. To kill innocent people because they are in the way is nothing new. It has been practised not only by Nazis. The white seizure of the New World was if anything a case of ruthless extermination, a genocidal crime whose extent still is being suppressed. The slave-trade is another one, more publicized and guilt-forming. To what extent do Nazi atrocities differ from those gruesome precedants? The generally accepted idea is that the difference in kind, not only of degree, lies in the systematic nature. Extermination was systematic and the ultimate goal, while in previous cases it was but a consequence⁹. The Nazis kept slave camps, in which people were literally worked to death. This is of course truly horrible, yet it does still present a vestige of rationality, and fits into a sorry existing tradition. But it is the next step, the systematic killing, that gives that extra chill, and amounts to a new depth of human depravity, made possible by technological advances . The question of a true innovation is of course being questioned. Many other ethnic groups, envious of the victimization of the Jews, vye to compete if only retroactively. Then of course one should not think of the Jews as being in a privileged position, although in the historical record they now occupy such a position, speculations are rampant that had the Nazis prevailed militarily, the next groups to be targeted would have been the Slavic populations. This wuld of course have augmented the tragedy tremebdously, but only in degree not in kind.

Finally what about the potential culpability of the ordinary individual? The idea being of the slippery slope. One thing leading to another in almost imperceptible degrees, each descent requiring its own re-orientations, but unless the individual taking a general view, he or she is invariably led to commit disastrous acts. The key concept is not evil or sadism or other demonic qualities, but mere evasion and ultimate absolvment of responsibility, the human weakness not to stare reality in the face, but instead the propensity to rationalize and to deny. We are all susceptible to such failings, and thus we are all potential perpetrators. This makes the issue not just one of individual morality, but also one of political. This underlies the duty not just to rely on individual consciences, because they can so easily be inhibited, but to pay attention to political creeds. In a world where everybody is brave and strong political ideology is not an issue.

Finally, how important is it really, that the Holocaust concerns Jews, that it is played against a background of centuries of anti-semitism and persecution, and thus by many is seen as a logical culmination of an almost inescapable Fate. Arendt understand that ulti-

⁹ Most Indians did not die because of outright murder, but because of disease to which they were particularly vulnerable.

mately the issues go deeper, that victimization is not what somewhat perversely could be termed an exclusive privilege of the Jews, that on the contrary there develops a potential threat to a much wider segment of humanity, especially as so many people are being marginalized by their ultimate superfluousness in a more and more automated economy. And what will be the fate of people who serve no purpose?

June 9, 2007 **Ulf Persson:** *Prof.em, Chalmers U.of Tech., Göteborg Sweden ulfp@chalmers.se*