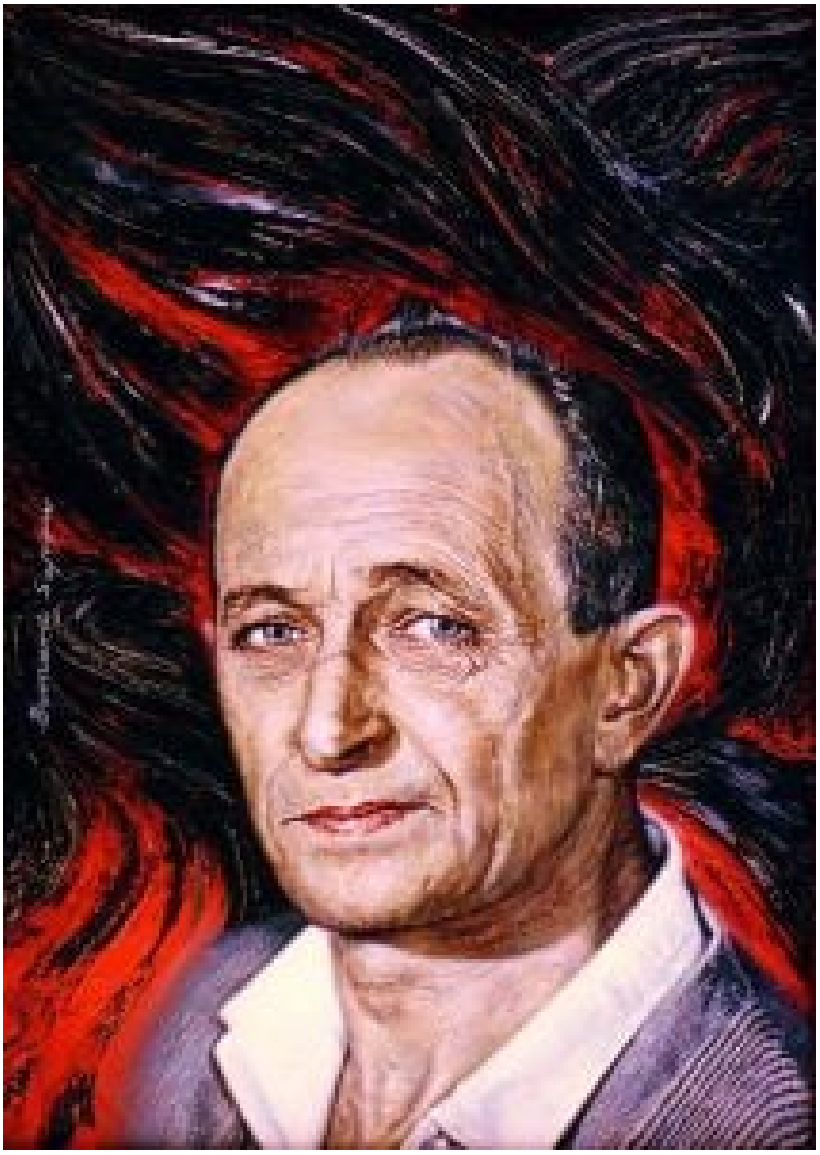
Adolf Eichmann, Hannah Arendt, and the Romanticizing of Evil

by Jillian Becker (May 2022)



Nazi SS Lieutenant Colonel Adolf Eichmann 1939-1945 World War II War Criminal (for Time Magazine), Bernard, Safran, 1961

June 1, 2022, will be the 60th anniversary of the execution of

Adolf Eichmann.

He was the arch administrator of Hitler's "final solution of the Jewish problem" by systematic murder. The plan was conceived by Heinrich Himmler, Reichsführer of the SS and Hitler's second-in command. Between 1942 and 1945—the last three years of the Second World War—SS-Obersturmbannführer Eichmann carried it out. He organized the killing of approximately six million Jews of all ages, most of them by poison gas.

After the Third Reich was defeated in 1945 and Hitler and Himmler had committed suicide, Eichmann sought refuge from justice in South America under the name Ricardo Klement. Some twelve years after the establishment in 1948 of the independent Jewish state of Israel, the Israeli secret service traced Eichmann to Argentina, captured him, smuggled him out of the country and brought him to Jerusalem. There he was humanely imprisoned, politely interrogated, tried by a legally constituted tribunal, judged, and condemned.

The proceedings were conducted with scrupulous regard to the law and all the safeguards it provided: due process, evidence, cross examination of witnesses, argument for the defense. He was found guilty of multiple crimes against the Jewish People, of crimes against humanity, and of war crimes; and he was acquitted on certain parts of the indictment where proof was considered inadequate. He was sentenced to death.

Granted permission to appeal, he had his death sentence confirmed by the higher court. The appeal judges declared: "In deciding to confirm both the verdict and the sentence passed on Adolf Eichmann, we know only too well how utterly inadequate is the death sentence when we consider the millions of deaths for which he was responsible. Even as there is no word in human speech to describe his deeds, so there is no punishment in human law to match his guilt." And on June 1,1962, a few minutes after midnight, he was hanged.

Hannah Arendt, the German-Jewish-American philosopher, was sent by the chic *New Yorker* magazine to report on Eichmann's trial. She considered the proceedings to be flawed. She questioned whether the Israeli court had jurisdiction to try the crimes of which Eichmann stood accused. She argued that the Nazi policy of discrimination against the Jews was a "national issue," so persons accused of implementing it should be tried in a German court. Deportations, however, affect other countries, therefore those accused of organizing them should be brought before an international court. So should those accused of genocide because it is "a crime against humanity." The specific human genus marked down for total extermination in this case was the Jewish people, but the crime was nevertheless, in her view, against all humankind, so the obligation fell upon the world, not the Jewish state, to call its perpetrators to account. The fact that the world had shown little interest in tracking down Nazi fugitives was no discouragement to her optimism that it would see justice done.

She was not alone in having doubts on the question of jurisdiction. Legal opinion had been divided over the legitimacy of the court which had tried Nazi leaders at Nuremberg. Argument over type of tribunal, applicable law, and definition of Eichmann's crimes were necessary, and the Jerusalem court itself examined such questions and gave reasoned answers to them. Fortunately, the judges had a more realistic understanding than Arendt of how the murder of Jews was estimated by the world at large, so they kept him well secured in their own jurisdiction.

Arendt's criticism was not limited to those conscientiously debated issues. She also objected to the terms of the judgment. Although she accepted that the "guilty" verdict was just, and even agreed that Eichmann deserved the sentence of death (unlike some other liberal critics – such as the British publisher Victor Gollancz, who recommended that he be acquitted with the words, "Go, and sin no more"), she caviled

at the judges' *reasons* for their verdict. They should, she thought, have "dared to address their defendant" in these terms:

> "Let us assume, for the sake of argument, that it was nothing more than misfortune [Eichmann's defense being chiefly that he too was a victim of the Nazi regime, forced to obey immoral orders] that made you a willing instrument in the organization of mass murder; there still remains the fact that you have carried out, and therefore actively supported, a policy of mass murder. For politics is not like the nursery; in politics obedience and support are the same. And just as you supported and carried out a policy of not wanting to share the earth with the Jewish people and the people of a number of other nations—as though you and your superiors had any right to determine who should and who should not inhabit the world—we find that no one, that is, no member of the human race, can be expected to want to share the earth with you. This is the reason, and the only reason, you must hang."

In other words, what Arendt thought Eichmann the mass murderer was most guilty of; what she identified as his chief and most appalling offense; what she thought his judges should be hardest on; what alone would justify his being put to death, was—*hubris*.

This coolly detached opinion of hers is not, however, the point to which she most urgently directed her readers' attention. The most important lesson she drew is encapsulated in her famous generalization, a phrase on the nature of evil. It is displayed in the title of her book *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil*, and the book ends (but for an Epilogue and Postscript) with a re-statement of it. It is her firm conclusion.

> "Adolf Eichmann went to the gallows with great dignity. He had asked for a bottle of red wine and had drunk half of

> it. He refused the help of the Protestant minister … who offered to read the Bible with him … He walked the fifty yards from his cell to the execution chamber calm and erect, with his hands bound behind him. When the guards tied his ankles and knees, he asked them to loosen the bonds so that he could stand straight. 'I don't need that,' he said when the black hood was offered him. He was in complete command of himself, nay, he was more: he was completely himself. Nothing could have demonstrated this more convincingly than the grotesque silliness of his last words. He began by stating emphatically that he was a *Gottgläubige* [a God believer], to express in common Nazi fashion that he was no Christian and did not believe in life after death. [Yet] he then proceeded: 'After a short while, gentlemen, *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*.' 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 as though in those last minutes he was summing up the lessons that this long course in human wickedness had taught us—the lesson of the fearsome, word-and-thought-defying *banality of evil*." [All italics are the author's].

For Hannah Arendt, the story required a fascinating demon, not a bespectacled clerk. Even when he stood under the noose, she laments, when history needed him to speak pathetic or terrifying words of pride or remorse, the best he could come up with were embarrassingly trivial funeral clichés. He was a dull person; not exactly stupid in her assessment, but not a thinking man. He was a mere instrument of evil, but with his final banal remarks he summed up a lesson that evil itself was banal.

Hannah Arendt was wrong about what Eichmann had been. He had not been a lowly bureaucrat unthinkingly carrying out orders;

not “just a small cog in Adolf Hitler’s extermination machine” as he claimed, but a zealous, dedicated, ideological, leading Nazi. He had an entire bureau under him, a department of his own in the Reich Security Head Office.

She apparently never found this out. Between 1973 and 1975, she delivered a series of lectures on how philosophers from ancient Greece to modern Germany have dealt with the subjects of thinking and willing. They were collected—and published after her death—in two volumes under the title *The Life of the Mind*. In her introduction, she refers to her report on the Eichmann trial and changes what she had meant by “the banality of evil”: not that evil was banal (which is clearly what she wrote), but only that this particular evil-doer was banal. “I was struck by a manifest shallowness [in him] … The deeds were monstrous, but the doer … was quite ordinary, commonplace, and neither demonic nor monstrous.” And she added: “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 the phenomenon of evil.”

“Dimly aware”? Of “our” tradition of thought? She was *perfectly* aware that it went counter to her tradition of thought. She had studied philosophy at Marburg under Martin Heidegger—with whom she had a love-affair—and at Heidelberg under Karl Jaspers. In the introduction to *The Life of the Mind* she clearly states: “Evil, we have learned, is something demonic; its incarnation is … the fallen angel … that *superbia* of which only the best are capable.”

That is as far as she goes in dealing with the aggrandizement of evil in “our tradition of thought”. She does not touch on it again in the chapters that follow.

Who are the “we” who learned that evil is something “of which only the best are capable”? The answer is: students of German philosophy. For over a hundred years, the most esteemed German

philosophers—and artists—had been romanticizing evil. More and worse, they urged its practice. They despised morality. Most influentially, Arthur Schopenhauer (1788-1860) denigrated it; Richard Wagner (1813-1883) considered it a corrupting imposition on the pure, brave, superior, heroic German character, a taint for which the Jews, through Christianity, were to blame; and Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900), hated it with raging passion. And with raging passion he praised evil, praised the powerful who do evil on a vast scale. To him evil was "beautiful", a source of intoxicating joy. He tops the list of revered German sages who romanticized evil, but Arendt does not so much as mention this, though she writes about him at length in *The Life of the Mind*.

It wasn't as if Nietzsche did not know what evil was. He knew it was suffering, physical torment, mental anguish. He was a sick man, subject to acute pain and nausea, but in the worst throes of his suffering he would cry out for more of it, because to endure and rise above suffering was a means to attain genius—the creative genius of the Superman.

In *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, through the persona of Zarathustra (who bears no resemblance to the historical figure), he urges those who would be "noble" to be "ruthless." In *Beyond Good and Evil* he eagerly anticipates a new caste of supermen who will rule over Europe. Under their enlightened rule, slavery will be necessary. In *The Joyous Science* he declares that these heroes will be able to commit terrible deeds of cruelty, torture, and mass murder, and yet remain blithe and light-hearted. "All those who create are hard … the noblest are totally hard." They will be the glory of the human race, acting out of instinct, not thought. Thinking, reason, morality destroy creative inspiration and are inimical to life. "Life itself, its eternal fruitfulness and return, necessitates torment, destruction, the will to annihilate."

The Nazis took the philosophy of Nietzsche as an instruction textbook, and Heinrich Himmler echoed him when he said in his

infamous 1943 speech to SS officers explaining how just was the genocide of the Jews:

> "Most of you will know what it means when 100 bodies lie together, when 500 are there or when there are 1000. And to have seen this through and—with the exception of human weakness—to have remained decent, has made us hard and is a page of glory never mentioned and never to be mentioned."

Martin Heidegger—teacher, mentor, lover of Hannah Arendt, and to her mind a profound thinker—was a devout Nazi. He declared emphatically that he was not concerned with ethics. What he was greatly concerned with was the German nation, which must, he said in his rectorial address at the University of Freiburg in 1933, "preserve at the deepest level those forces that are rooted in the earth and its own blood". The essence of the race, he said, was embodied in Adolf Hitler. "The Führer himself and he alone is the German reality, present and future, and its law." Hitler, he said, would "heal" the nation. Only when, contrary to this prediction, the Führer led Germany to defeat and shame, did Martin Heidegger discern something he could call evil meaning it was bad. He wrote in a Letter on Humanism two years after the ending of the Second World War, when the atrocity of the Holocaust was known throughout the world: "Perhaps the distinguishing feature of the present age lies in the fact that wholeness as a dimension of experience is closed to us. Perhaps this is the only evil."

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Jillian Becker writes both fiction and non-fiction. Her first novel, *The Keep*, is now a Penguin Modern Classic. Her best known work of non-fiction is *Hitler's Children: The Story of the Baader-Meinhof Terrorist Gang*, an international best-seller and Newsweek (Europe) Book of the Year 1977. She was

Director of the London-based Institute for the Study of Terrorism 1985-1990, and on the subject of terrorism contributed to TV and radio current affairs programs in Britain, the US, Canada, and Germany. Among her published studies of terrorism is *The PLO: the Rise and Fall of the Palestine Liberation Organization*. Her articles on various subjects have been published in newspapers and periodicals on both sides of the Atlantic, among them *Commentary, The New Criterion, The Wall Street Journal* (Europe), *Encounter, The Times* (UK), *The Telegraph Magazine*, and *Standpoint*. She was born in South Africa but made her home in London. All her early books were banned or embargoed in the land of her birth while it was under an all-white government. In 2007 she moved to California to be near two of her three daughters and four of her six grandchildren. Her website is www.theatheistconservative.com.

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