



# God and Modern Thought

## Hannah Arendt

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*John 18: 33–end* extract from *Eichmann in Jerusalem* (1963/2006)

You can see a photo of Hannah Arendt in the centre page of your booklet and read of her major publications. Arendt was a chain-smoking Jewish intellectual who fled the Nazis in 1933, then to settle in the United States. Political philosophy was her field. One of Arendt's works stands out above the others in terms of public impact: *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A report on the banality of evil*. It began as a series of articles for the *New Yorker* magazine in 1961. When Arendt heard that the Nazi war criminal Adolf Eichmann was to be tried in Jerusalem, she jumped at the opportunity to document it first-hand.

At any courtroom trial, the purpose is to obtain the truth. A defendant and plaintiff appear, witnesses are called, evidence is tested, the law is interpreted, and a judge declares the sentence.

Arendt appreciated Franz Kafka's work and many of you will be familiar with his novel *The Trial*. A bank clerk named Joseph K is the main protagonist. At the beginning of the book he finds himself under house arrest. A legal and bureaucratic nightmare unfolds: he's on trial, but has no idea what his crime is, who is judging him or to what standard he's being held. It becomes clear that the problem wasn't so much with him, but a world gone mad. Kafka's story was a bleak insight into the cultural psyche of European civilisation as it faced the desolations of WW1 and anticipated the totalitarian nightmares of Nazism and Stalinism. Joseph K also represented Jews in the midst of anti-Semitism: perpetually on trial just for *being*.

Eventually Joseph K is apprehended by two agents of the state, taken to a quarry and stabbed. 'Like a dog' are his final words. Kafka paints a vision of a society where trials continue in the absence of any investment in notions of moral truth.

Turning to the gospel of John, we're presented with another trial scene. Here, Christ is on trial. Jesus comes to sit before Pilate: a judge who considered truth to be a luxury that political expediency couldn't afford. In one of the great ironies of John's gospel, it is Pilate—the one charged with administering impartial justice—who is supremely corrupt, and, in the end, subject to the righteous judgement of the one condemned. Jesus is nailed to the cross as a Jewish enemy of the Empire and a notorious blasphemer. And yet, for those who have eyes to see, it is this innocent victim of judicial murder who is the hidden Divine judge according to St John. In Christ's judgement human violence, political cowardice and religious hypocrisy are exposed to the light and condemned.

St John remembers these words of Jesus, spoken in anticipation of his trial and crucifixion: 'Now is the judgement of this world; now the ruler of this world will be driven out. And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself'. St John adds: [Jesus] said this to indicate the kind of death he was to die.

Hannah Arendt was raised in a Jewish family that had assimilated into the norms of secular, middle class life in Germany. Her academic talents became obvious early, and doors soon opened in what were otherwise chauvinistic university environments. She studied philosophy, Christian theology and classical Greek. Growing up amidst the anti-Semitism of inter-war Germany was the crucible in which Arendt embraced her own Jewish identity. Being a Jew gave her a sense of solidarity and—according to her own account—provoked her to thinking 'against the grain'. Arendt admired what she called the tradition of Jewish upstarts, among whom she numbered Franz Kafka, the novelist mentioned earlier: these were intellectuals who displayed what she called the 'vaunted Jewish qualities—the "Jewish heart", humanity, humour, disinterested intelligence'.<sup>1</sup>

Adolf Eichmann was a senior transport official in the Nazi Government. He'd reached the upper strata of mid-level bureaucracy by cultivating a specialisation in Jewish emigration. What began as a logistics exercise to resettle as many Jews out the Reich as possible, incrementally shifted to become a logistics exercise transporting Jews to the gas chambers. Eichmann's preoccupation was logistics, rather than events at the end of the line. After the war, Eichmann took a well-trodden path to Argentina, where he changed his name and lived an uneventful life until 11 May 1960. His trial in Jerusalem was a watershed moment for the fledgling Jewish state: the goal was to ensure that Eichmann faced a moment of truth. Israel now had a perpetrator of the holocaust at its mercy, and it was to afford him the sort of due process denied to millions of Nazi victims. The trial was always about more than Eichmann, however. History itself was in the dock.

At the centre of this spectacle was the awkward and diminutive Eichmann, who readily conceded the horrors of the holocaust, but remained adamant that he was not guilty—in *a strictly legal sense*. After all, he hadn't killed anyone directly, and nor was he the mastermind behind the so called 'final solution'. He was an ambitious bureaucrat operating within the laws of the Reich and fulfilling his allotted role.

Arendt once said that 'The sad truth is that most evil is done by people who never make up their minds to be good or evil'.<sup>2</sup>

One commentator notes that on confronting Eichmann in the courtroom,

Arendt was taken aback by ... the sheer ordinariness of the man who had been party to such enormous crimes: Eichmann spoke in endless clichés, gave little evidence of being motivated by a fanatical hatred of the Jews, and was most proud of being a "law abiding citizen". It was the shock of seeing Eichmann "in the flesh" that led Arendt to the thought that great wickedness was not a necessary condition for the performance of (or complicity in) great crimes. Evil could take a "banal" form, as it had in Eichmann.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Hannah Arendt, 'We Refugees', in *Altogether Elsewhere; Writers on Exile*, Marc Robinson (ed.), 1996, p. 119.

<sup>2</sup> Hannah Arendt, *The Life of the Mind* (1978).

<sup>3</sup> Seyla Benhabib, 'Arendt's Eichmann in Jerusalem', in D. Villa (ed.), *Cambridge Companion to Hannah Arendt*, 2000, Cambridge: CUP, pp. 65–85.

And so was born Arendt's famous ascription of 'a word-and-thought-denying banality of evil'.<sup>4</sup>

Soon after the publication of *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, Arendt was herself tried by the court of public opinion. Speaking of the 'banality of evil' enraged many of her fellow Jews. By rendering Eichmann into an 'every man', she was seen to be turning him into an object of pity; by treating him as a 'nobody', Arendt was accused of down-playing his malevolence.

In the wake of the holocaust, Arendt thought it was important to face honestly the evil wrought by the Nazis—the incalculable pain, the monstrous destruction of the holocaust—but she also wanted to undercut any sense of evil's philosophical prestige. Evil is a cold and empty heart. It is brutality overlooked by a vapid and pathetic absence of mind. Evil's seduction is pornographic. Arendt refused to see evil as an overwhelming spiritual force that overtook Eichmann and turned him into a monster; a freak; for to see him as an exceptional incarnation of evil would be to downplay his capacity for moral choice; it would be to down-play Eichmann's responsibility for the man he had become.

In the epilogue of *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, she addressed him directly with these words:

... 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 share the earth with you. This is the reason, and the only reason, you must hang.

There can be no forgiveness or redemption for the unrepentant Eichmann according to Arendt. Behind this withering dismissal, lies Arendt's philosophy of action. At the heart of this philosophy was a conviction that people can never be stripped entirely of the capacity to resist ideological brainwashing. She wanted to insist that Eichmann's biography needn't have been inevitable: other choices could have been made; alternative destinies chosen. Arendt believed that improbable acts of dissent can be demanded of people in proportion to the power they've accrued.

For Arendt, the inherent dignity of human life came with a capacity to step out of the systems in which we're enmeshed in order to make dissenting moral judgements. It also meant that we should avoid thinking of ourselves as subject to iron laws of historical fate. We can, through acts of promise making and forgiveness bind and loose ourselves in ways that ease the struggle of the human condition and secure a future that is liveable. Above all, we must use our agency to defy the alliance between the mob and the demagogue that always ends in barbarity and atrocity. As a resolutely secular thinker, Arendt sees no other way to resist evil's banality than for us to overcome passivity; to seek political association and action as a way of preventing the collapse of moral and political civility.

Christianity differs here: it sees the necessity of political action, but only when there is also space for a deep conversion of life brought about by an act of God: divine grace lifting us from the mire of sin and re-animating us as moral beings.

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<sup>4</sup> Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil*, Penguin, p. 252.

Arendt's philosophy is secular, but when she speaks of forgiveness and promise-making as the quintessential acts of the free person, I can't help but see the residue of the Jewish and Christian faith here. Throughout the bible we have images of God whose freedom is expressed in binding himself to his people by promises and freeing people from past failures through forgiveness.

In my judgement, Hannah Arendt was a figure of great moral stature, decency and humanity. She raged against the dying of the light. There is much in her work to provoke and inspire those of us who seek to follow the way of Jesus. Amen.