

ILLUMINATING EVIL: HANNAH ARENDT AND MORAL HISTORY*

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Hannah Arendt's well-known examinations of the problem of evil are not contradictory and they are central to her corpus. Evil can be banal in some cases (Adolf Eichmann) and radical (the phenomenon of totalitarianism) in others. But behind all expressions of evil, in Arendt's formulations, is the imperative that it be confronted by thinking subjects and thoroughly historicized. This led her away from a view of evil as radical to one of evil as banal. Arendt's ruminations on evil are illuminated, in part, by concerns that she shared with her fellow New York intellectuals about the withering effects of mass culture upon individual volition and understanding. In confronting the challenges of evil, Arendt functioned as a "moral historian," suggesting profitable ways that historians might look at history from a moral perspective. Indeed, her work may be viewed as anticipating a "moral turn" currently afoot in the historical profession.

Soon after her book *Eichmann in Jerusalem* was published in 1963, Hannah Arendt faced a hornet's nest of controversy for her strong moral judgments and engagement with the problem of evil. Arendt had certainly made some controversial moral judgments. First, she condemned the *Judenräte*, the Jewish councils formed during the Holocaust that, in her opinion, were guilty of collaboration with the Nazis. Second, she found Adolf Eichmann, who helped to organize the logistics of the Holocaust, to have been a mundane bureaucrat whose evil was located in his thoughtlessness, rather than in any demonic intent. With regard to Eichmann she coined the phrase "the banality of evil," a concept

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that seemed far removed from the monumental horrors of the Nazi era that she had earlier in *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1951) described as a “radical evil.”¹

“I know that the souls of our six million martyrs [Jewish Holocaust victims] whom you desecrated,” wrote J. Baron to Arendt, “will swarm about you day and night; they will give you no rest.”² In the *New York Times* review that had instigated Baron’s letter, Judge Michael A. Musmanno damned Arendt for presenting Eichmann in a favorable light and for making Jewish leaders into perpetrators rather than victims of the Holocaust.³ Even old friends turned on her. Norman Podhoretz, editor of the influential journal *Commentary*, condemned her “manipulation of the evidence” and “perversity of brilliance.”⁴

Hannah Arendt was controversial, to be sure, as an analyst of totalitarianism and in her judgments about Eichmann. Sometimes she was shoddy as a historian; she could be overbearing as a moral philosopher. Unlike the historian, Arendt

¹ An excellent place to begin for information on Arendt is Elizabeth Young-Bruehl, *Hannah Arendt: For Love of the World* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1982). For a strong but nuanced defense of Arendt’s work, especially on totalitarianism, see Stephen J. Whitfield, *Into the Dark: Hannah Arendt and Totalitarianism* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1980). Also excellent are Dagmar Barnouw, *Visible Spaces: Hannah Arendt and the German-Jewish Experience* (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990); Jeffrey C. Isaac, *Arendt, Camus, and Modern Rebellion* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1992). Helpful for her philosophy are Margaret Canovan, *The Political Thought of Hannah Arendt* (New York and London: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1974); *idem*, *Hannah Arendt: A Reinterpretation of Her Political Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992); Lisa Jane Disch, *Hannah Arendt and the Limits of Philosophy* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1994); George Kateb, *Hannah Arendt: Politics, Conscience, Evil* (Totowa, NJ: Rowman and Allanheld, 1984); Dana Villa, *Arendt and Heidegger: The Fate of the Political* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996); Dana Villa, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Hannah Arendt* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

² J. Baron to Hannah Arendt, 25 May 1963, Hannah Arendt Papers, Library of Congress, Adolf Eichmann File, online edition: <http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/arendhtml/MharendtFolderPO2.html>.

³ The review was by Judge Michael A. Musmanno, “Man with an Unspotted Conscience,” *New York Times Book Review*, 19 May 1963, 1, 40–41. Arendt’s reply, *New York Times Book Review*, 23 June 1963, 4. For her earlier “A Reporter at Large” coverage of the trial, see *The New Yorker*, issues for 16, 23 Feb. 1963; 2, 9, 16 March 1963.

⁴ N. Podhoretz, “Hannah Arendt on Eichmann: A Study in the Perversity of Brilliance,” in *idem*, *Doings and Undoings: The Fifties and after in American Writing* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1964), 334–53, 337. A vociferous attack on problems in Arendt’s research is Jacob Robinson, *And the Crooked Shall Be Made Straight: A New Look at the Eichmann Trial* (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society of America, 1965). Another correspondent, writing from Holland, asked Arendt, “How can you write about something [the Holocaust] you have not suffered yourself?” Mrs Lakmaker to Arendt, 22 Oct. 1964, Hannah Arendt Papers, Library of Congress, Adolf Eichmann File, online edition.

was not sufficiently careful to moderate her interpretative needs to the resistances of the facts. She sometimes practiced her historical analysis at a meta-level, uncomfortable with nuances that undermined her generalizations. At her best, however, she labored to bring her metaphysical and moral speculations down to earth. And she was engaged in two undertakings of great importance. First, her work suggests that historians and philosophers need not operate at cross-purposes. Second, she beckons historians to join her in analyses of evil.

Historians are of course most comfortable on the terra firma of established facts, no matter how much postmodernists may problematize that term. In addition to their trusty empiricism, historians are generally hesitant to render strong judgments, lest they be accused of moralizing, or of allowing present ideals to be applied, perhaps anachronistically, to the past, with its different cultural contexts. Yet the historian and the moral philosopher are both exemplary storytellers. Historical narratives are adept at illuminating moral challenges. Historians highlight possible beginnings and endings, roads taken and rejected, contexts near and far. Moreover, the manner in which historians craft a narrative and organize materials is full of implicit moral judgments. Even a traditionalist historian such as Richard J. Evans recognizes that historians, while they graze among the facts, also make moral judgments, albeit without heavy-handed “expressions of moral outrage.”⁵ Moral philosophy, in turn, although sometimes burdened by its admonitions and abstractions, works best when, like history, it allows for interpretation of concrete facts with attention to a variety of frameworks for understanding.⁶

But philosophers have been more willing than historians to grapple with the significant problem of evil, perhaps the central problem in moral philosophy. Before 9/11 brought the vocabulary of evil back into our conversation, American studies scholar Andrew Delbanco bemoaned how Americans had lost their sense of Satan and evil.⁷ Arendt, as a moral philosopher and historian, devoted twenty

⁵ For Arendt on historians see her sometimes off-key remarks in “Understanding and Politics,” in Arendt, *Essays in Understanding, 1930–1954: Uncollected and Unpublished Works*, ed. Jerome Kohn (New York: Harcourt Brace and Co., 1994), 320 ff. On narrative and morality see Richard Vann, “Historians and Moral Evaluations,” *History and Theory* 43 (Dec. 2004), 3–30. Richard J. Evans, *In Defense of History* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2000), 52. On how postmodernist historians intertwine morality and history see Hayden White, “Narrativity in the Representation of Reality,” in *idem*, *The Content of the Form: Narrative Discourse and Historical Representation* (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987).

⁶ Disch, *Arendt and the Limits of Philosophy*, 1–19.

⁷ A. Delbanco, *The Death of Satan: How Americans Have Lost the Sense of Evil* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1995). As will be clear from this essay, Delbanco omits many strenuous American engagements with evil and metaphysical issues. Inga Clendinnen

years to thinking about evil. Arendt's focus on evil connected her to the post-Second World War New York intellectual milieu, although philosophers fail to make this connection. More significantly, I find her famous shift, from thinking about evil as radical to thinking about it as banal, to be a movement more complementary than contradictory. While evil is sometimes banal in its public face and intent, it cannot be divorced from thinking and acting subjects.⁸ Evil can be demonic or radical, as in Hitler or Stalin, but it still must be anchored in history.⁹

With confident and complex steps, Arendt walked into the subject of evil. It was, in the aftermath of the Holocaust and the emergence of totalitarianism, the burden of her time. In so doing, Arendt bequeathed a legacy for historians through

claims that historians "are made restless" by talk of "Satan" and evil. I. Clendinnen, *Reading the Holocaust* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 23, 65, 104.

⁸ My thesis on the complementarity of Arendt's forms of evil comes closest to that of Richard J. Bernstein. But I contend that ideology plays a more major role in Eichmann than Arendt maintained. See R. J. Bernstein, "From Radical Evil to the Banality of Evil: From Superfluosity to Thoughtlessness," and "Evil, Thinking, and Judging," both in *idem*, *Hannah Arendt and the Jewish Question* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1996), 137–78; "Did Hannah Arendt Change Her Mind?: From Radical Evil to the Banality of Evil" in Larry May and Jerome Kohn, eds., *Hannah Arendt: Twenty Years Later* (Cambridge and London: The MIT Press, 1996), 127–46. The literature on Arendt's analysis of Eichmann and evil is immense. Excellent on Arendt as concrete with the notion of radical evil is Whitfield, *Into the Dark*, 153. A key issue for many is whether Arendt shifted her views, and to what degree, from evil as radical to evil as banal. For an emphasis on the connections in her views see Hannah Fenichel Pitkin, *The Attack of the Blob: Hannah Arendt's Concept of the Social* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1998), 209–10. Arendt maintained that she had changed her view or emphasis; see Arendt to Mary McCarthy, 20 Sept. 1963, in *Between Friends: The Correspondence of Hannah Arendt and Mary McCarthy, 1949–1975*, ed. Carol Brightman (New York: Harcourt Brace and Co., 1995), 148. Another issue is whether Arendt's presentation of Eichmann was a defense of her teacher and lover Martin Heidegger. For a convincing take on this see Richard Wolin, *Heidegger's Children: Hannah Arendt, Karl Lowith, Hans Jonas, and Herbert Marcuse* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2001), esp. 52–62. On her Eichmann book as not representing a general philosophical position on evil but rather a concrete expression of it within a historical individual, see Dana Villa, "Conscience, the Banality of Evil, and the Idea of a Representative Perpetrator," in *idem*, *Politics, Philosophy, Terror: Essays on the Thought of Hannah Arendt* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), 39–60. For contemporary attacks on Arendt see Lionel Abel, "The Aesthetics of Evil: Hannah Arendt on Eichmann and the Jews," *Partisan Review* 30 (1963), 211–30; Marie Syrkin, "Hannah Arendt: The Clothes of the Empress," *Partisan Review* 30 (1963), 344–52; and *idem*, "Miss Arendt Surveys the Holocaust," *Jewish Frontier* 30 (May 1963), 7–14.

⁹ Adi Ophir, *The Order of Evils: Toward an Ontology of Morals*, trans. Rela Mazali and Havi Carel (New York: Zone Books, 2005); R. J. Bernstein, *The Abuse of Evil: The Corruption of Politics and Religion since 9/11* (Cambridge and Malden, MA: Polity Press, 2005).

her willingness to engage with the thick reality of evil, and by her developing conceptualizations about it. She recognized the demonic and metaphysical qualities of evil, which threatened to place it outside the historical vision. But she also sought to render evil as something concrete and as something superfluous (as excess and as unnecessary). Evil must be surveyed as it has existed in the past so that it can be understood today. In sum, as Israeli philosopher Adi Ophir emphasizes, evil—as cruelty or humiliation—is anchored in social realities and capable of being combated. It is as much stuff for historians and philosophers as it is for preachers and politicians.¹⁰

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Arendt, in her engagement with totalitarianism and the Holocaust, faced difficulties in navigating the still unsettled waters and emerging meaning around the event. In many ways, the Holocaust resisted any easy narration of triumphalism or defeatism. While the total destruction of European Jewry had been stalled, it had come horribly close to achieving Hitler's totalitarian dream of exceeding the limits of possibility. A narrative of the Allied victory of reason, democracy, and morality victorious over Axis irrationality, dictatorship, and amorality was available after the war, but it missed much of the complexities of modernity, mass politics, and psychology that occupied Arendt's field of vision. Also, she composed *Origins*, one of the more ambitious and probing works of the recent horror, before much serious scholarly work had been done on the Holocaust. She did profit from some earlier work but she was, largely, setting out in a host of new and controversial directions.¹¹

Adding to the problems faced by Arendt in *Origins*, and even more in *Eichmann*, was her ambiguous status as both outsider and insider in relation to the Holocaust and its emerging communities of survivors. As her fellow exile Theodor Adorno put it, all exiles are, "without exception, mutilated."¹² This sense

¹⁰ Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 141 ff.; Judith N. Shklar, *Ordinary Vices* (Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 1984), 7–44. I would tie the work of David A. Hollinger to this imperative, given his emphasis on expanding the "circle of we" and cosmopolitanism; see D. A. Hollinger, *Postethnic America: Beyond Multiculturalism* (New York: Basic Books, 1995).

¹¹ Franz Neumann, *Behemoth: The Structure and Practice of National Socialism, 1933–1944* (New York: Octagon Books, 1963). Neumann's influence is also apparent in the work of his student Raul Hilberg. See R. Hilberg, *The Destruction of the European Jews* (Chicago: Quadrangle Books, 1961). For Hilberg on Neumann see R. Hilberg, *The Politics of Memory: The Journey of a Holocaust Historian* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 1996), 61–6.

¹² T. Adorno, *Minima Moralia: Reflections from Damaged Life*, trans. E. F. N. Jephcott (London: Verso, 1984), 33.

of mutilation was heightened depending upon one's own relationship with the Holocaust. Arendt was not, in a strict sense, a survivor, having escaped in 1933 to France, before coming to the United States in 1941. Fellow exile and historian Raul Hilberg noted the reality of a "rank order" among Holocaust victims. Survivors, those singed by the fire of the horrors, spoke with authenticity and power; those who escaped before the juggernaut had fully rolled were semi-privileged but nonetheless distanced observers.¹³ Arendt got out just in time to avoid the worst, but she lived in the shadow of that trauma, and it shaped her. Yet she was, by dint of her German birth and brushes with German authorities, an insider. More importantly, Arendt was a witness. She had lived through this event of monumental proportions to such a degree that, as philosopher Margaret Canovan and others note, she made her reflections about the rise of totalitarianism and its challenge to philosophy, morality, and democracy the key themes of her immense body of work.¹⁴

Born into comfortable circumstances in 1906, Arendt left Germany as a mature woman, already formed by her philosophical education with Martin Heidegger and Karl Jaspers, as well as by her activities in the anti-Nazi movement. The Reichstag Fire of 1933 burned itself in Arendt's memory as a moment of "immediate shock," the point at which her sense of well-being as a German of Jewish ancestry was shattered.¹⁵ At one point soon after, she was arrested in Berlin for involvement in anti-Nazi actions (she had been compiling excerpts of Nazi anti-Semitic utterances). She was released from jail after the fatherly intercession of a police officer. Later, while in exile in Paris, she did relief work for Jewish refugees before escaping from the advancing armies of the Third Reich to safe haven in the United States. Arendt brought with her the conviction that emotion and ideology polluted reason, along with a willingness to range far and wide in her attempts to uncover the causes for the calamity then transpiring.¹⁶

Arendt settled in New York City, along with her husband Heinrich Blücher, and she soon assumed a leading position among the Jewish intellectuals huddled around publications such as *Partisan Review* and *Commentary*.¹⁷ Arendt and

¹³ Saul Friedlander, "Trauma, Transference and 'Working Through,'" *History and Memory* 4 (1992), esp. 39–55

¹⁴ Canovan, *Hannah Arendt: A Reinterpretation*, 7; Richard J. Bernstein, "The Origins of Totalitarianism: Not History but Politics," *Social Research* 69 (Summer 2002) 391.

¹⁵ Arendt, "'What Remains?', The Language Remains': A Conversation with Gunter Gaus," in Arendt, *Essays in Understanding, 1930–1954: Uncollected and Unpublished Works*, ed. Jerome Kohn (New York: Harcourt Brace and Co., 1994), 5.

¹⁶ Young-Bruehl, *Hannah Arendt*, 115–63.

¹⁷ See George Cotkin, "The Tragic Predicament: Post-War American Intellectuals, Acceptance and Mass Culture," in Jeremy Jennings and Anthony Kemp-Welch, eds.,

her new comrades shared anti-Stalinist politics, support for most United States actions in the Cold War, wariness (to put it mildly) of mass culture, and a conviction of the value of a tragic sensibility. Her friend, writer Alfred Kazin, heralded Arendt's "intellectual courage before the moral terror the war had willed to us."¹⁸ She pushed her new companions to think more philosophically by pointing some of them towards Heidegger's work and by being a citadel for them of the best in European culture.

Arendt and the New York intellectuals wanted to deal with evil in a realistic manner. A willingness to think about evil and the tragic sense of life had been gaining vigor at least since the early 1920s in the conversation of intellectuals. In part this was a response to the horrors of the First World War and the challenges of modernity. Theologian Reinhold Niebuhr had long intoned the centrality of sin and evil in human existence, while editorialist Walter Lippmann stressed how "the acids of modernity" had contributed to a tragic modern malaise.¹⁹ After the Second World War, in the halls of Columbia University, according to political scientist Ira Katznelson, a tragic sensibility informed the work of political scientists and historians, ranging from David Truman to Richard Hofstadter.²⁰

Many non-academic intellectuals, forged in the crucible of disappointed dreams of Marxian revolution and working-class redemption, found in a tragic sensibility, tinged with evil, a logical antidote to the excesses of earlier utopian dreams. When Dwight Macdonald contemplated the horror of extermination camps and the dropping of the atomic bomb on Hiroshima and when theologian Will Herberg wondered about the fate of Jews in the modern world following the Holocaust, both of them acknowledged the power of a tragic perspective; they

Intellectuals in Politics: From the Dreyfus Affair to Salman Rushdie (London and New York: Routledge, 1997), esp. 253.

¹⁸ A. Kazin, *New York Jew* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1978), 195. Also *idem*, *Writing Was Everything* (Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 1995), 125–30.

¹⁹ On Niebuhr see Richard Fox, *Reinhold Niebuhr: A Biography* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1987). For Lippmann see *idem*, *A Preface to Morals* (New York: The Macmillan Co., 1929), 51 ff. While older terms entered into the vocabulary of intellectuals, newer terms, ranging from genocide to human rights, also gained currency, marks of a generation searching for meaning. On the new terms see the suggestive remarks in Alan Brinkley, "Legacies of World War II," in *idem*, *Liberalism and Its Discontents* (Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 1998), 94–110.

²⁰ Ira Katznelson, *Desolation and Enlightenment: Political Knowledge after Total War, Totalitarianism, and the Holocaust* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003), 107–51. Also David S. Brown, *Richard Hofstadter: An Intellectual Biography* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2006), 122–3.

had faced evil in their time.²¹ New York intellectuals joined with Arendt, despite the fact that most of them were resolutely secular, to engage with evil, as a concept and a reality, thus entering into that “frontier of metaphysics or mysticism” that T. S. Eliot had warned against following the First World War.²² While the New Yorkers’ embrace of tragedy and evil often fed into the power and presumptions of American foreign policy, it could also question deeply held ideals of progress and confidence. Evil in the chastened hands of many former Marxist radicals also posited human limitation and the propensity to act in both an irrational and a nefarious manner.²³

Arendt, then, worked within a coterie and context that supported her own concern with evil. Her view in 1950 was that since the Holocaust was an “altogether unprecedented phenomenon,” a unique evil, masked by an “unreality which surrounds the hellish experiment,” the traditional concepts and methods of social science would be stymied.²⁴ Evil must be examined. Arendt was determined to demonstrate how the Nazis had, through ideological fanaticism and bureaucratic rationales, reduced Jews to a species of non-being, making it all the easier for them to be eliminated. This action, this willingness to think that anything was possible and that people could be rendered superfluous, would form the core of her analysis of the nature of totalitarianism, and especially Nazi, evil.

Arendt published both her books when the Holocaust was relatively peripheral to the lives and minds of Americans. Even her fellow New York intellectuals, while increasingly intrigued by Judaism and drawn towards the tragic, did not focus on the event.²⁵ It was, as Michel Foucault and Ian Hacking would put it, an object that

²¹ On Macdonald’s anger see D. Macdonald, “The Bomb,” *politics 2* (Sept. 1945), 257–60; *idem*, “The Two Horrors,” *politics 2* (May 1945), 130–31; Will Herberg, *Judaism and Modern Man: An Interpretation of Jewish Religion* (New York: Farrar Straus and Young, 1951), 3–25.

²² T. S. Eliot, “Tradition and the Individual Talent,” in *idem*, *Selected Essays, 1917–1932* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1932), 11.

²³ For more on the tragic sensibility see George Cotkin, *Existential America* (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003). Excellent on the tragic perspective is Richard Wightman Fox, “Tragedy, Responsibility, and the American Intellectual, 1925–1950,” in Thomas P. Hughes and Agatha C. Hughes, eds., *Lewis Mumford, Public Intellectual* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), 323–37. Also, on the break of intellectuals with Marxism, see Howard Brick, *Daniel Bell and the Decline of Intellectual Radicalism: Social Theory and Political Reconciliation in the 1940s* (Madison and London: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1986).

²⁴ Arendt, “Social Science Techniques and the Study of Concentration Camps,” in Arendt, *Essays in Understanding*, 232–43.

²⁵ Robert B. Westbrook, “The Responsibility of Peoples: Dwight Macdonald and the Holocaust,” *Holocaust Studies Annual 1* (1983), 35–63. Also Alexander Bloom, *Prodigal Sons: The New York Intellectuals & Their World* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), 329 ff.

had not yet come into being or been constituted.²⁶ Jewish Americans, especially survivors or those related to survivors, experienced the Holocaust as trauma, often met by repression, silence, or engagement.²⁷ Only in the early 1960s, for a host of reasons, did the Holocaust enter fully into the American conscience.²⁸ Historian Peter Novick emphasizes that the trauma of the Holocaust was cast aside and transformed into a narrative that foreshadowed and defended the state of Israel.²⁹ However, Arendt was hardly an enthusiastic supporter of Israeli ethnocentrism and military policies, and her writing resists appropriation into any Zionist morality tale. She was after bigger, more ambitious game—to grab hold of a synoptic account of the horror that she had witnessed in full from the safe shores of America.³⁰

Arendt disdained metaphysical explanations even as she was placing evil and morality centrally in her analysis. While she failed to banish metaphysics sufficiently from her initial conception of evil, she shifted as already noted, away from evil as something radical in the 1940s and 1950s to evil as produced in an often banal manner in the early 1960s. Most controversially, as we will see, Arendt also addressed the politically and morally charged question of the role and responsibility of Jews in their own demise in *Eichmann in Jerusalem*.

Milton Himmelfarb, witty editor of *Commentary* magazine, once famously stated, “No Hitler, No Holocaust.”³¹ Arendt did not share his opinion. Indeed, in Arendt’s two works on the Holocaust, Hitler is at best a peripheral figure. In this approach, Arendt was hewing the line then favored by institutional historians and social-science methodology. The reasons for this conscious omission relate to the

²⁶ Ian Hacking, *Historical Ontology* (Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 2002), esp. 1–5.

²⁷ Kirsten Fermaglich, *American Dreams and Nazi Nightmares: Early Holocaust Consciousness and Liberal America, 1957–1965* (Waltham, MA.: Brandeis University Press, 2006).

²⁸ For an excellent overview of the extent of Holocaust consciousness before the explosion of attention see Lawrence Baron, “The Holocaust and American Public Memory, 1945–1960,” *Holocaust and Genocide Studies* 17 (Spring 2003), 62–88.

²⁹ While Novick presses the connection between Holocaust remembrance and the politics of Israel and the Jews, it does not diminish the complexity of the situation. P. Novick, *The Holocaust in American Life* (Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1999). On the initial reception of news about the Holocaust see Robert H. Abzug, *Inside the Vicious Heart: Americans and the Liberation of the Nazi Concentration Camps* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985), which includes many of the images published at that time.

³⁰ On Arendt’s relation to Zionism and Israel see the essays in Steven E. Aschheim, ed., *Hannah Arendt in Jerusalem* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), 149–202.

³¹ M. Himmelfarb, “No Hitler, No Holocaust,” *Commentary* 77 (March 1984), 37–43. For a strong rejection of Arendt’s refusal to deal with Hitler and Stalin see Kateb, *Hannah Arendt*, 54–5.

imperatives of Arendt's narrative and moral project. For Arendt, the depiction of totalitarianism and the Holocaust depended on analysis of large ideas and events: romanticism, imperialism, and anti-Semitism. And once totalitarianism had risen to power, it then demanded institutional analysis in order to understand how it functioned and maintained power through terror. Thus Arendt tried to combine large ideas with attention to details and "concrete things," both in *Origins* and in *Eichmann*.³² Focusing on Hitler, she feared, would open up the floodgates of the demonic. He might be viewed, over time, as the aesthete of evil and thereby gain a cultish following.

Others, however, pushed to recognize Hitler's central role in the making of history. Before her book on totalitarianism appeared in 1951, philosopher and New York intellectual Sidney Hook had written influentially about how individuals' roles in history should never be ignored, without slighting the importance of historical context. Hook responded to old issues of agency and determinism in Marxian theory.³³ Arendt was unconcerned with this debate, but she composed her work at a moment when fascination with Hitler threatened to swamp attention to historical forces and contingency. British historian Hugh Trevor-Roper's *The Last Days of Hitler* (1947) had been a sensationalistic bestseller, and soon after Arendt's work had been published, Alan Bullock's *Hitler: A Study in Tyranny* added to the fascination with Hitler.³⁴ Moreover, to place Hitler center stage would have forced Arendt to confront the problem of evil within a larger-than-life human being. She preferred, in *Origins*, to deal with evil as a manifestation of forces associated with modernity and corrosive of tradition.³⁵ When she finally did peer into the mind of a criminal, as in her analysis of Adolf Eichmann, she reduced evil to a function of his thoughtlessness and presence within an institutional structure of authority.

³² On her concern with facts see Arendt to McCarthy, 20 May 1962 and 16 Sept. 1983, in *Between Friends*, 131, 146.

³³ S. Hook, *The Hero in History: A Study in Limitation and Possibility* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1955; first published 1943). For an excellent analysis of Hook's journey through Marxism see Christopher Phelps, *Young Sidney Hook: Marxist and Pragmatist* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1997).

³⁴ H. Trevor-Roper, *The Last Days of Hitler* (New York: Macmillan, 1947); A. Bullock, *Hitler: A Study in Tyranny* (New York: Harper, 1952). The front flap of Trevor-Roper's book asked, "Is Hitler Dead?", while promising "many vivid scenes." A good study of the reception of Hitler studies in the decade after the war is needed.

³⁵ In perhaps her fullest discussion of Hitler she emphasizes simply his charisma and certitude as a leader of the masses, and she does not employ the term "evil." See Arendt, "At Table with Hitler," in Arendt, *Essays in Understanding*, 285–96.

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Arendt began in the mid-1940s to think long and hard about the problem of evil, and it would be central to her major work of 1951, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*. She published the book at the right historical moment of mounting Cold War tensions and ideological skirmishing. For Arendt totalitarianism represented a radical, and evil, break from previous political and social systems, in its administration, ultimate illogic, and terror. In a sense, totalitarianism was partly an outgrowth of modernization, especially in its emphasis on technologies of destruction, ideology of scientific racism, and ability to undermine traditional notions of moral responsibility.³⁶ Totalitarianism also emerged from other factors: the rise of anti-Semitism, the stateless position of Jews, the decline of the nation state, the resurrection of racial thinking and the development of the modern masses, imperialism, and nationalism. Only after close to four hundred pages on these events did she get to the moral heart of her evil subject—how totalitarian regimes seek to consign to “holes of oblivion” its victims’ bodies and memories.

Arendt was wary of firsthand testimony about the Holocaust because its veracity had not been strained through the sieve of time and trauma.³⁷ At those times when she does refer to accounts of the concentration camps, it is for background, rather than for thick description or emotionally wrenching testimony.³⁸ While there is some truth that Arendt’s presentation is unsentimental, it is also awash in powerful metaphors and hyperbole. Notions such as “holes of oblivion” or the “fabrication of corpses” serve as a way for Arendt to make clear the radical originality of the Holocaust and totalitarianism. But she remained wary of using the testimony of those who suffered most closely the

³⁶ Zygmunt Bauman, *Modernity and the Holocaust* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2000). On how modernist utopianism and state planning can combine to produce horrid ends see James C. Scott, *Seeing like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1998). Emphasis on modernization, technology of killing, and the rise of bureaucracy tends, in moral terms, to deflect emphasis from the active role of perpetrators and to feed into functionalist interpretations of the Holocaust.

³⁷ Jeremy D. Popkin, “Holocaust Memories, Historians’ Memoirs,” *History and Memory* 15 (Spring/Summer 2003), 49–84.

³⁸ See Bettelheim’s influential “Individual and Mass Behavior in Extreme Situations” (1943), in B. Bettelheim, *Surviving and Other Essays* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1979), 48–83; David Rousset, *The Other Kingdom*, trans. Ramon Guthrie (New York: Reynal and Hitchcock, 1947); Eugene Kogon, *The Theory and Practice of Hell: The German Concentration Camps and the System behind Them*, trans. Heinz Norden (New York: Farrar, Straus & Co., 2006). Hereafter, page citations for Rousset appear in the text.

outrage of totalitarianism. She found in survivor testimony a certain uniformity that suggested to her a scripted rather than a thoughtful engagement with the experience of evil.³⁹ There is not a single, if I am not mistaken, eyewitness account that could be described as emotionally compelling in *Origins*.

When Arendt composed *Origins* she lacked access to the mountain of survivor and perpetrator testimonies available today and to the subsequent flood of secondary accounts. Yet, as her footnotes clearly indicate, she had sufficient examples of survivor testimony near to hand. For instance, she had the example and writings of David Rousset. A fellow philosopher who had before the war taught in a French *lycée*, Rousset found himself deposited in a series of concentration camps for resistance-related activities. Arendt was familiar with his account, and he helped her to understand the chaos and illogic of a concentration camp world where “everything is possible.” His account is an intimate memory of horrors experienced, described, and comprehended. Unlike Arendt, Rousset pulls no punches in representing this “world like a dead planet laden with corpses” (168).

Evil abounds in the concentration camp. He describes how the *Sonderkommando* (special units of Jews charged with pushing victims into and then taking them out of the gas chamber) upon opening the gas chamber doors confront a “wall of corpses, inextricably intertwined.” In another passage, he relates how inmates with “a hideous hunger in their bellies,” in a confined space, “will massacre each other for a half an ounce of bread, for a bit of elbow room” (60–61). In this truly “monstrous” world, guards are “posted over the dead” with orders to kill those [inmates] who eat the scrawny, fetid flesh of the cadavers” (40).

Rousset was the philosopher returned from hell; he rejects the narrative and conceptual constraints favored by Arendt. In her political philosophy, Arendt always celebrated pluralism (“Plurality is the law of the earth”), the variety of viewpoints engaging one another in a cosmopolitan world of stirring debate and openness.⁴⁰ But Arendt never sufficiently confronted in her work the bodies and voices of the victims except in her abstract, analytical manner. If she had, then perhaps she might have been able to join her analysis with a rendering of the world of the concentration camp made flesh. To do this is, as Elaine Scarry points out, to hear the screams of the survivors (even if those screams cannot have “referential” content) and, as Susan Sontag came to realize, to put images of hell into a context.⁴¹

³⁹ Arendt, “Social Science and the Concentration Camps,” in Arendt, *Essays in Understanding*, 243. On Arendt’s style see Disch, *Limits of Philosophy*, 112–21.

⁴⁰ Arendt, “Appearance,” in Arendt, *The Life of the Mind: One Volume Edition* (New York and London: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1978), 19. Also Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1958).

⁴¹ Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain: The Making and the Unmaking of the World* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985), 5. On the contextualization of images as a

Arendt recognized totalitarian evil as something radically new in history, a sustained and manic attack against humanity. Borrowing a phrase from Rousset, Arendt stated that totalitarian regimes believed that “everything is possible,” and they aligned themselves with the deterministic forces of History and Nature.⁴² The danger of such identifications, or of revolutionary virtue without limitations, became a key theme of her *On Revolution* (1963). As she put it, “The evil of Robespierre’s virtue was that it did not accept any limitations.”⁴³ Fanatical marches of personal, philosophical, and/or natural necessity made human beings superfluous, as it had snuffed out Jews. Its insane logic applied to the Nazis themselves, hence the *Götterdämmerung* central to their apocalyptic vision. Erasure of the Jews began with minor, often absurd, sanctions designed to erode their legal and political rights as individuals, as well as their identities as Germans.⁴⁴ Once stripped of their rights and identity, without any connection to the nation or polity, the superfluous person is tossed easily into the concentration camp, that “terrible abyss that separates the world of the living from that of the living dead” (CR 441).

Totalitarian evil sought to erase all traces of its victims.⁴⁵ In the whirlwind of Nazi fanaticism and ideology, Jews were stripped of connection to the familiar objects of everyday life, beginning with job, wealth, political rights, and even living place. Ultimately, their few connecting threads to the past—photographs, lockets, and rings—are ripped from them upon entry into the concentration camp. Arendt compellingly stated, “Like the new type of murderer who kills his victims for no special purpose of self-interest, we may not be aware that anybody has been murdered at all if, for all practical purposes, he did not exist before” (CR 434).

Conditions in the camps, the grinding insanity and cruelty—the “excremental assault,” as Terrence Des Pres phrased it—corrodes the essence of being as an individual tied to a group or tradition; all that the individual can think about is

method of communication see Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others* (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 2003), 29 ff.

⁴² Arendt, “Concluding Remarks,” in *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Co., 1951), 433. Hereafter, citations to this edition appear in the text as CR. Other citations to this work in the text refer to a later edition, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1966).

⁴³ Arendt, *On Revolution* (New York: Viking, 1963), 86.

⁴⁴ On the attempt to make humans superfluous see Canovan, *Hannah Arendt: A Reinterpretation*, 12 ff. A powerful account of these various rules and regulations regarding Jews, and those “Aryans” married to Jews, is Victor Klemperer, *I Will Bear Witness, 1942–1945: A Diary of the Nazi Years*, trans. Martin Chalmers (New York: The Modern Library, 2001).

⁴⁵ Arendt to McCarthy, 20 Sept. 1963, in *Between Friends*, 147–8. The moral implications of this are examined in Susan Neiman, “Theodicy in Jerusalem,” in *Hannah Arendt in Jerusalem*, 87 ff.

survival.⁴⁶ Like the powers in Orwell's chilling *Nineteen Eighty Four*, totalitarians seek to control the future, in part, by securing the past. The totalitarian need to rewrite history, especially as evidenced by the Soviet desire for confession on the part of its victims, is central for Arendt. Through confession, even if the individual is innocent in "reality," he or she accepts the call of the Party "to play the role of the criminal," thus becoming in effect "objectively . . . the enemy of the Party" and confirming the original charges lodged against him (CR 473).

In this totalitarian nightmare the very foundations of moral judgment and historical truth are destroyed. In part, Arendt is aware that morality is in short supply in the concentration camps, run according to a monumental illogic and feeding upon chaos as a new rule of order. Her concern is with the morality of the perpetrators, in contrast to the morality of its victims. Here Arendt proves more insightful about the larger logic and less willing to judge the inmates than her fellow survivor and contemporary, Bruno Bettelheim.⁴⁷ As a resolute secularist, Arendt maintains that the notion of a God-given, biblical morality has been banished by the forces of modernity and the horrors recently unleashed. Leibniz had attempted to secure God's place in a world of terrible earthquakes, for example, by proclaiming that, ultimately, all is right with the world, that this is the best of all possible worlds. For Arendt, in her presentation of the totalitarian world as illogical, irrational, and bloodthirsty, even the Ten Commandments were inadequate in the face of the horror. No longer could the myths of Judeo-Christianity, in her view, secure authority. Beyond the decimation of religious ideals, Arendt argued that totalitarianism had sent "three thousand years of Western Civilization" "toppling down over our heads." In its radical insanity, its fantastical view of the world, and its rejection of rationality and of all "implied beliefs, traditions, standards of judgment," the totalitarian machine, in effect, had ended the traditional conversation of philosophy and morality (CR 434). Arendt no doubt agreed with survivor Primo Levi's famous observation, "there is Auschwitz, so there cannot be God."⁴⁸

⁴⁶ Yet Des Pres upholds that acts of morality, humanity, and comradeship are possible, even in these conditions. Des Pres, *The Survivor: An Anatomy of Life in the Death Camps* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1976). In the same vein, see Tzvetan Todorov, *Facing the Extreme: Moral Life in the Concentration Camps*, trans. Arthur Denner and Abigail Pollak (New York: Metropolitan Books, 1996).

⁴⁷ For Bettelheim's famous analysis, often revised and reprinted, of the concentration camp, see "Individual and Mass Behavior in Extreme Situations" (1943), in *Surviving and Other Essays*, 48–83. For a devastating picking-apart of his argument and its foundations in observation and experience see Richard Pollak, *The Creation of Dr. B: A Biography of Bruno Bettelheim* (New York: Touchstone, 1997), 116–26, 362–7

⁴⁸ P. Levi and Ferdinando Camon, *Conversations with Primo Levi*, trans. John Shepley (Marlboro, VT: The Marlboro Press, 1989), 68.

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“[T]he problem of evil,” wrote Arendt in the *Partisan Review* in 1945, “will be the fundamental question of postwar intellectual life in Europe.” Arendt initially engaged this problem in a lengthy review of Denis de Rougemont’s *The Devil’s Snare* (1944). She criticized his theological speculations, condemning him for a Gnosticism that posited “an eternal fight between God and the Devil” and for permitting undue metaphysical speculation to distance him from reality.⁴⁹ However, Arendt agreed with much in Rougement. He contended that Hitler was not the demonic principle incarnate, but rather someone wearing a “satanic insignia,” not apart from humanity. Hitler, in essence, personified the potential evil in all of us. Rougemont, with Niebuhr and Arendt, contended that evil resides within each of us, ready to emerge “under the cover of wretchedness or fatigue or some temporary disequilibrium,” such as an economic depression.⁵⁰

Rougemont anticipated the path that Arendt traveled over the next twenty years in her complex and productive confrontation with evil. To be sure, she remained consistent in refusing to discuss Hitler out of a fear of making him into an icon of evil. Arendt was at her best in trying to understand how evil appeared under particular conditions, rather than as some abstraction or metaphysical presence.⁵¹

In the mid-1940s Arendt could not shake her shivering sense that the Nazi moment had defied tried and true methods of comprehension. The problem for Arendt was to frame the challenge of evil without falling into mysticism or metaphysics, or making evil into something resembling an aesthetic choice. She wrote her philosophical mentor Karl Jaspers that Nazi inhumanity had opened up an “abyss” in understanding, “and I don’t know how we will ever get out of it.” Indeed, Arendt’s dilemma went beyond simple problems of morality. If the Nazis were guilty of crimes pervasively perverse against people who were conspicuously innocent, then could our traditional moral and legal categories enter into play? The guilt of the Nazis “explodes the limits of the law; and that is precisely what constitutes their monstrousness.”⁵²

Jaspers rejected Arendt’s initial tendency to view evil as metaphysical, perhaps beyond comprehension. Instead, he posited that evil had a “prosaic triviality”

⁴⁹ Arendt, “Nightmare and Flight,” in *Essays in Understanding*, 133–5.

⁵⁰ Denis de Rougemont, *The Devil’s Snare*, trans. Hakkon Chevalier (Washington, DC: Bollingen, 1944), 60, 86. Also Arendt’s “Organized Guilt and Universal Responsibility” (1945), in *Essays in Understanding*, 128–31

⁵¹ Here lies Arendt’s affinity with some of the emphases found in Ophir, *The Order of Evils*, 11–14, on the particular appearances and contexts of evil, and of its preventability.

⁵² Arendt to Jaspers, 17 Aug. 1946, in *Hannah Arendt/Karl Jaspers Correspondence, 1926–1969*, trans. Robert and Rita Kimber (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1992), 54.

rather than any taint of “satanic greatness.”⁵³ He worried that any “hint of myth and legend” would feed into a sort of pagan idolatry of Nazi evil. While Arendt agreed with him on this point, in the mid-1940s, she was unprepared to adopt it—the horrendous memory of Nazi atrocities against humanity still burned too menacingly. She held onto the perhaps common-sense view of differentiating between a murderer who kills out of passion or self-interest and the Nazi machine of destruction which erected “factories to produce corpses” out of a utopian and illogical fanaticism designed to “eradicate the concept of the human being.”⁵⁴ This, rather than any sense of “prosaic triviality,” was what constituted evil in its full flowering and what made it radical. But she did not recognize that both notions of evil need not cancel one another out.

Although she employed the term “evil” sparingly in *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, its presence informed nearly every page of the text, and it came already wrapped up in a long philosophical tradition. Many have pondered how Arendt’s invocation of the terms “radical” and “absolute” evil are connected to Kant’s classic discussion.⁵⁵ Kant did set up the categories and language for most subsequent discussions of the problem of evil. In brief, Kant posits that evil is not inherent in human nature; he rejects any notion of original sin. Evil arises when the individual will chooses an option; without freedom, there is no choice. Evil comes when the individual chooses without obedience to moral law. For Kant, the key is the intention of the actor, the desire of the individual to act, or not to act, in accord with practical reason. Hence evil is the weakness of our selfish nature, of our desire to act as if we were God, which undermines our sense of limits and altruism.⁵⁶ Radical evil, in Kantian terms, “corrupts the ground of all maxims,” it represents something wickedly new, a “perversity of the heart.”⁵⁷

But Arendt’s use of the term “radical evil” differs from Kant’s, as philosopher Richard J. Bernstein explains. For Kant, radical evil constitutes man’s break from the moral law; there is no sense in Kant of man choosing with full knowledge to become demonic or evil.⁵⁸ Arendt goes well beyond Kant’s formulation, in

⁵³ Jaspers to Arendt, 19 Oct. 1946, in *Hannah Arendt/Karl Jaspers Correspondence*, 62.

⁵⁴ Arendt to Jaspers, 17 Dec. 1946, in *Hannah Arendt/Karl Jaspers Correspondence*, 69.

⁵⁵ For the influence of Kant on Arendt see Jerome Kohn, “Evil and Plurality: Hannah Arendt’s Way to *The Life of the Mind*,” in *Twenty Years Later*, 150–51.

⁵⁶ On Kant’s notion of evil see Susan Neiman, *Evil in Modern Thought: An Alternative History of Philosophy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002), 64 ff.; Richard Bernstein, “Radical Evil: Kant at War with Himself,” in *idem*, *Radical Evil: A Philosophical Interrogation* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2002), 11–45.

⁵⁷ Kant, *Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone*, trans. Theodore M. Greene and Hoyt H. Hudson, 2nd edn (La Salle, IL: The Open Court Publishing Co., 1960), 32; original emphasis.

⁵⁸ Bernstein, “Radical Evil,” 43.

part, because after Auschwitz she had encountered actions that would have been incomprehensible to Kant's Enlightenment sensibility. Moreover, Arendt's view of radical evil began where Kant's notion left off. For Kant, evil depended upon freedom, upon contingency and choice. Totalitarianism had demolished them, along with spontaneity. In this world, evil had assumed a new face.

In her darkest moments, reflecting upon the production of totalitarianism as "the burden of our time," Arendt fell into her own hole of interpretative "oblivion."⁵⁹ Accept for the sake of argument her conclusion that totalitarian evil was radical—a form of terror previously unknown and unimagined in human history. The evil of the crusades, crucifixions, slavery, pogroms—the list is endless—pales in the face of modern totalitarian evils, as recounted by Arendt. At least with past evils, as she understood them, there was logic and self-interest at the core of the crimes. Totalitarian evil, while it upheld an ideal of transformation, was essentially aimless, an end in and of itself. Totalitarian evil also proved to be ineffable as a result. It was beyond the law, beyond reason, beyond punishment since the law and punishment depended upon moral assumptions that totalitarianism virtually transcended. Totalitarianism's "perverted will" (457–9) had transported it "beyond good and evil," in the least sympathetic reading imaginable of Nietzsche's terms.

Thus Arendt had painted herself into a narrow corner. If the crimes of totalitarianism were as original and immense as she averred, then could they be anything other than demonic? She never hesitated to describe them throughout *Origins* and articles as "monstrous"—as well they were. But her use the term "demonic" might place them outside the realm of explanation and the march of worldly events. The demonic can resist laws of nature or the wills of men. Even strong structures of representative democracy and public debate, it seemed, were futile against this demonic entity. Such was clearly not Arendt's intent. For example, she purposely ignored any substantial focus on the leaders of totalitarianism because to pay attention to them would have forced her into the realm of the demonic, of the individual infused with evil. She also refused to discuss at any length Hitler and Stalin to avoid romanticizing them or elevating them into heroes of the demonic. But they can be seen in demonic proportions without forcing them into an interpretative abyss. For these leaders were also part and parcel of a political, social, and cultural world that nurtured them in part, and that they also sought to destroy or reconfigure. Arendt was onto something when she remarked about the mysterious nature of evil as something not "humanly understandable." Everything need not be understandable on such terms, but it can be interpreted in more or less convincing fashion. Arendt's frustrations grew

⁵⁹ "The Burden of Our Time" was the original title intended for *Origins*. That title was used for the edition of *Origins* published in the United Kingdom.

to the point where, just *after* publication of *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, she proclaimed, “What radical evil is I don’t know.”⁶⁰

* * *

The trial of Adolf Eichmann in 1961 for the murder of millions of Jews afforded Arendt excellent opportunity to revisit unresolved issues about evil. In June 1960 Arendt wrote her friend, writer Mary McCarthy, that she was “half toying” with getting a commission to cover the trial.⁶¹ Much to her delight, *The New Yorker* magazine sent her as its representative. Arendt knew the stakes in the Eichmann trial were high. “The Eichmann trial has us all stirred up,” she wrote to Jaspers, “It will, in its totality, become a major symbol of the life of the mind today.”⁶²

Arendt’s report transformed Eichmann into a “major symbol” for a new form of evil—the banality of evil,” which became the controversial subtitle of her volume, *Eichmann in Jerusalem*. As noted earlier, the book was extremely controversial for a number of reasons. First, her coverage of the trial helped to usher in an era of Holocaust awareness.⁶³ Second, many readers felt that Arendt had belittled Eichmann’s responsibility as a leading Nazi war criminal and that her “banality of evil” thesis downplayed the monstrous nature of the evil that had rained down upon the Jews. Third, Arendt dismissed the testimony of survivors as unreliable and formulaic. Finally, building upon the recently published research by Raul Hilberg in his *The Destruction of the European Jews* (1961), Arendt devoted a few pages to unfavorably presenting Jewish councils as cooperative with the Nazis in the elimination of the Jews.

Arendt’s Eichmann was a relatively innocuous fellow, a dedicated bureaucrat, and a man without any independence of mind. She now embraced Jaspers’s earlier claim that evil was “prosaic” and “banal.” And, as we shall see, her new conception of evil well fitted what she understood as the numbing effects of mass culture on the individual’s ability to think morally and complexly. If her initial formulation of the problem of totalitarian evil was that it was demonic and metaphysically elusive, the problem with the “banality of evil” thesis was that evil was now ubiquitous. “Therein lies the horror and,” wrote Arendt, “at the same time, the banality of evil.”⁶⁴ Even if evil did not beat in the heart of every

⁶⁰ Arendt to Jaspers, 4 March 1951, in *Hannah Arendt/Karl Jaspers Correspondence*, 166.

⁶¹ Arendt to McCarthy, 20 June 1960, in *Between Friends*, 81–2.

⁶² Arendt to Jaspers, in *Hannah Arendt/Karl Jaspers Correspondence*, 1 April 1961, 432.

⁶³ Peter Novick, *The Holocaust in American Life* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1999).

⁶⁴ Quoted in Jerome Kohn, “Evil and Plurality,” *Twenty Years Later*, 174. For similar perceptions of Eichmann see Jochen von Lang, ed., *Eichmann Interrogated: Transcripts from the Archives of the Israeli Police*, trans. Ralph Manheim (New York: Farrar, Straus and

mindless bureaucrat, the upshot of Arendt's analysis for many was that under certain conditions individuals might well act no differently than had Eichmann. The solution to this new face of evil seemed to be a call to think, to live an active life of the mind so that when the individual confronted momentous, moral choices, such a confrontation would include the moral reflection necessary to deflect evil possibilities.

Arendt was in league with many New York and European intellectuals in using mass culture as an analytic concept to explain evil. Although they often differed about how capitalism and mass culture were related, and about the value of Marxian analytic tools for understanding mass culture, all shared a genuine fear that traditional culture and its institutions were being devalued and destroyed by mass culture. Most famously, social theorist Erich Fromm—no less than Arendt in *Origins*—argued that modern alienated masses had become easy prey for fascist fantasies of power and possibility. While this fear of mass man was more muted in postwar America, it was a common way of comprehending anti-intellectualism, middle-brow culture's presumed hegemony, and the allure of populist and fascist movements among the masses.

Arendt, beginning in 1947, became close friends with David Riesman, a key theorist of culture. The paradox of mass culture, as Riesman recognized, was that it helped to destroy traditional bonds of community, thereby increasing individual loneliness and alienation. At the same time, mass culture offered alternative modes of belonging—through consumption, cooperation, ideology, and new collective identities. No one examined mass culture more fully, and subtly, in this period than Riesman. He had read and critiqued, and been influenced by his reading in 1949 of, a draft manuscript of Arendt's *Origins*. She, in turn, greatly respected his work, *The Lonely Crowd* (1950). She agreed with his early hypothesis that those individuals that were generally indignant about various issues were fodder for the totalistic critique of fascism.⁶⁵ Riesman brilliantly described a change in the national character, from an inner-directed to an other-directed personality. From a highly rigid and individualistic sense of self in the nineteenth century, Americans had moved to a personality type that was dependent less on family or internal certitude than on peer approval, mass advertising, and

Giroux, 1983), v; Harry Mulisch, *Criminal Case 40/61, The Trial of Adolf Eichmann: An Eyewitness Account*, trans. Robert Naborn (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2005), 36–7, 95, 109.

⁶⁵ Hannah Arendt to David Riesman, 21 May 1948, Hannah Arendt Papers, Correspondence, Library of Congress, online edition. Arendt discusses her view of mass culture, kitsch, and the problem of the alienation of mass men most fully in essays collected in *Between Past and Future: Eight Exercises in Political Thought* (New York: The Viking Press, 1968), 45, 90, 197.

consumerism. Sinister readings could be placed upon this analysis, and Arendt herself reacted to Riesman's other-directed personality by seeing it as akin to her own descriptions of the alienated masses in the period before the rise of the Nazis.⁶⁶

While Arendt and Riesman were concerned with mass culture and its effects, other social theorists took their ideas, and joined them to the more hyper-critical views of Frankfurt School theorists, to suggest that mass culture was a distinct threat to American democracy and values. Thus fellow New York intellectuals Richard Hofstadter and Daniel Bell, shocked by the anti-intellectualism of the McCarthyites of the 1950s, saw lurking behind mass politics in the era signs of proto-fascism or at least populist mediocrity and paranoia. In the language of mass-culture critique, Hofstadter identified "rootlessness" as partly impelling the "pseudo-conservatism" of the period. Moreover, "Mass communications have aroused the mass man." The implicit danger in this, as Hofstadter emphasized, was not a quick descent into totalitarianism. But he did fret that the arrival of mass man on the political and cultural stage in America would soon result in a weakening of political leadership and in cultural mediocrity.⁶⁷

Or, more tellingly, as in the case of Eichmann people followed orders because they were incapable of thinking deeply or of examining moral perplexities. They had, in this view, been trained to be nothing more than cogs in whatever machine wanted them, for whatever purposes it wanted served. Borrowing from the analysis of Theodor Adorno, Irving Howe described Donald Duck as "a frustrated little monster who has something of the SS man in him and whom we, also having something of the SS man in us, naturally find quite charming." In like fashion and in anticipation of Arendt's emphasis on the deadening role of clichés in Eichmann's mind, conservative social critic Ernst Van Den Haag found that 1950s American culture was being overrun by "familiar clichés" that undermined thinking and diluted culture.⁶⁸

Thus the equation of mass culture with other-directedness, of mass culture with non-thinking, or thinking in clichés, was crucial for Arendt's take on Adolf Eichmann. It helped her to frame evil in a way that made it non-demonic and intrinsically concrete; it also promised a solution for preventing the individual

⁶⁶ On Riesman and Arendt the best analysis is Wilfred M. McClay, *The Masterless Self and Society in Modern America* (Chapel Hill and London: The University of North Carolina Press, 1994), 234–68.

⁶⁷ Hofstadter, "The Pseudo-Conservative Revolt" (1955), in Daniel Bell, ed., *The New American Right* (New York: Criterion Books, 1955), 69, 78–9.

⁶⁸ For a discussion of these figures, and citations for these quotes, see Cotkin, "The Tragic Predicament," 225. Arendt, along with Dwight Macdonald, was nearly singular among the New York Intellectuals in addressing the Holocaust. Westbrook, "The Responsibility of Peoples," 35–63.

from plunging into evil actions. She presented Eichmann as a mere functionary, a man without qualities. She found him a “normal” or “average” man (26). However, when she had first contemplated covering the trial, Arendt described Eichmann as “the most intelligent of the lot” of Nazis.⁶⁹ As the trial progressed and she waded through the testimony, she concluded that Eichmann “was a buffoon.” It was all she could do to control her laughter about his self-inflated importance and cheerful wallowing in empty clichés, as she read the transcript of his interrogation.⁷⁰ Moreover, Arendt argued that Eichmann was no fanatic, lacking even a hint of “insane hatred of Jews” or of ideological indoctrination (26, 36). He was, in effect, modern mass man. A careerist, comfortable in the womb of the bureaucracy, Eichmann was like the individual that Arendt had described in an early essay, “Organized Guilt and Universal Responsibility” (1945)—a man concerned with his family, fearful of unemployment, willing to follow orders, and capable of self-deception.⁷¹

Arendt explained how Eichmann compartmentalized his life, practiced self-deception, and denied playing any role in the killing of Jews. In some ways, Arendt presented Eichmann as the ironic apotheosis of the *parvenu*, the newcomer to power, the person who wears the garments of the bourgeoisie in the gaudiest fashion. Arendt—a self-proclaimed pariah against the weaknesses of the “*Spiessburger*” (the affected, ceremonious bourgeoisie)—hated him and those of his ilk.⁷² In addition, and in keeping with his bourgeois nature, Eichmann simply followed orders, moving the trains with their human cargo along more efficiently. He became a perfect example of a man doing his job, compartmentalized within the bureaucracy, unwilling to peer too closely at reality. He understood the trees but missed the forest. Critic Lionel Abel bellowed that Arendt’s Eichmann appeared as nothing more than “an utterly replaceable instrument . . . a mere cog in the machine” of the bureaucracy of murder.⁷³

⁶⁹ Arendt to McCarthy, 20 June 1960, in *Between Friends*, 81.

⁷⁰ Arendt, “What Remains, The Language Remains,” 17.

⁷¹ Arendt, “Organized Guilt and Universal Responsibility” (1945), in *Essays in Understanding*, 129–30.

⁷² The strongest presentation of this view is Walter Laqueur, “The Arendt Cult,” in *Hannah Arendt in Jerusalem*, 52, 63–4. For a more subtle view see Robert B. Pippin, “Hannah Arendt and the Bourgeois Origins of Totalitarian Evil,” in Alan D. Schrift, ed., *Modernity and the Problem of Evil* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2005), 148–60. For an early description of the Eichmann “personality” linked with the bourgeois “modern type of man” see Arendt, “Organized Guilt and Universal Responsibility,” in Arendt, *Essays in Understanding*, 130.

⁷³ L. Abel, “The Aesthetics of Evil: Hannah Arendt on Eichmann and the Jews,” *Partisan Review* 30 (1963), 211.

Arendt recorded faithfully, rarely with any skepticism, Eichmann's memory of events and of his role in them. He stated that he had only bumped up accidentally against the Holocaust. He had often visited Auschwitz, but its eighteen square miles presumably allowed him to miss the places where the killing went on (89). He had, however, seen on the Eastern Front mobile gas vans that were used to execute Jews. Eichmann protested, however, that "I hardly looked. I could not." It "upset" him too much. He retreated back into his sense of duty and loyalty to Hitler, and to the shuffling of papers (82).

Arendt as a moral historian judged Eichmann, even while she explained his "innocence" as a thoughtless human being. She never doubted that he deserved to be hanged. His actions were evil, even if his intentions were not. Hence the evil of Eichmann was judged by its results rather than its motivations.⁷⁴ Eichmann was a banal man capable of doing great evil.

Although Eichmann at the trial managed to invoke a close-to-the text description of Kant's categorical imperative in his defense, claiming that he was following the moral law (as laid down by the Führer), Eichmann missed the essential point. For Arendt, and for Kant, the point was that the individual chose only through the act of thinking, of judging possibilities. To act responsibly, one had to think in terms larger than oneself or blind devotion to someone like Hitler, who should never be viewed as synonymous with any moral order of things (22, 49).

Arendt greatly underestimated both Eichmann and his milieu. The notion that such a mediocre fellow could rise so high into the upper echelon of the Nazi killing machine strained credulity, as did her seconding of Eichmann's contention that he was ideologically naive or disinterested. "What is most striking in Miss Arendt's picture of Eichmann," wrote Abel, "is her omission of any reference to the man's ideology."⁷⁵ Thanks to the painstaking research of David Cesarani into Eichmann's development and to Yaacov Lozowick into the bureaucracy of the Nazi security police, a different picture of Eichmann emerges. Eichmann jumped on the evil, ideological train of Nazism early and enthusiastically. He rose quickly in the bureaucracy, despite his limited education, and he enjoyed exercising his power and finding creative solutions to the essential problem of how to kill millions of Jews as efficiently and cheaply as possible. As Cesarani phrases it, Eichmann "was a knowing and willing accomplice to genocide." He made choices; he knew what he was doing. And, at the same time, he learned,

⁷⁴ On the importance of this approach to Eichmann see S. Neiman, "Theodicy in Jerusalem," in Aschheim, *Hannah Arendt in Jerusalem*, 77–81.

⁷⁵ Abel, "The Aesthetics of Evil," 221.

evolved into a person willing and able to engage in genocide. There was nothing banal about him, his institutional setting, intentions, or actions.⁷⁶

Arendt also contradicted herself in her understanding of Eichmann as a banal bureaucrat, someone blindly and loyally following orders. As Albert Breton and Ronald Wintrobe have indicated, the Nazi murder machine was an immense and decentralized bureaucracy. In order to rise to a central position, as had Eichmann, one had to master a labyrinth of intrigue, to compete with other sections that were always seeking to increase their own power and authority. In such a dog-eat-dog reality, Eichmann's emergence meant that he was both a brilliant player and a dedicated one.⁷⁷ Arendt's own evidence should have led her in this direction. In *Origins* she devoted many insightful pages to the bizarre Nazi bureaucracy, with its multiplication of offices, competing powers, vague orders, power struggles, and constant shifting of authority (399–420). She reiterated, albeit more briefly, this same understanding in *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, finding “fierce competition” in the bureaucracy. Clearly, her image of Eichmann as a rather normal, banal, cliché-ridden individual failed to connect with his rather scandalous bureaucratic success in the Nazi killing machine.

Why, then, did Arendt get so much wrong, and yet so much right, about Eichmann and evil? While she made great strides in adopting the concept of the banality of evil, to make it work in this particular situation she had to shoehorn Eichmann into it. In fact, Eichmann may have been many things, but he was not an ideologically impotent bureaucrat. But she got much right by bringing evil down to a concrete level as it might appear in the figure of the cliché-ridden, unthinking bureaucrat. Had Eichmann been capable of strenuous thought, of confronting moral choices, then he, and others, might have been less prone to follow orders, to fail to see and appreciate the necessary plurality of the world.

Thus the banality of evil that she evoked with Eichmann replaced the ineffability and potentially demonic metaphysics that lurked behind her earlier conception of radical evil. Evil had to be pulled down from the heights of the demonic to the lows of modern bureaucracy and thoughtlessness. The problem with different forms of demonism, as she had been lectured by Jaspers, was that it threatened to become almost beyond comprehension. And, of equal threat, the hugeness of demonism might be appealing, a way for some to transcend

⁷⁶ David Cesarani, *Becoming Eichmann: Rethinking the Life, Crimes, and Trial of a “Desk Murderer”* (New York: DaCapo Press, 2006), 6. Yaacov Lozowick, *Hitler's Bureaucracies: The Nazi Security Police and the Banality of Evil*, trans. Haim Watzman (London and New York: Continuum, 2000). Also Richard Overy, *Interrogations: The Nazi Elite in Allied Hands, 1945* (New York: Viking, 2001), 360, where Dieter Wisliceny recalls being told by Eichmann not to be “sentimental” about orders to kill Jews.

⁷⁷ A. Breton and R. Wintrobe, “The Bureaucracy of Murder Revisited,” *Journal of Political Economy* 94/5 (1986), 905–26.

the mundane into a sense of greatness.⁷⁸ Thus Arendt, in contrast, argued that Eichmann was a mediocrity rather than a figure of any demonic proportions. He could be condemned as a moral midget and a thoughtless clown, someone whose “talents” had been nurtured within the bureaucratic machine. Arendt had nailed an important reality of Eichmann and the phenomenon of “the banality of evil.” Her new conception, even if it did have aspects of being a mere “catchword,” as Gershom Scholem averred, did some heavy lifting for Arendt, and others that followed in her wake.⁷⁹ Gone was any hint of a Devil fallen from grace, or of individuals seeking demonic powers. There was no aesthetic charge to evil. Instead, the banality hypothesis allowed evil to be situated in totally secular terms, as a function of everyday tasks done by individuals who refuse to make, or prove themselves to be incapable of making, moral decisions. Years later, Arendt summed up her view thus: “it was not stupidity but *thoughtlessness*” that was at the core of the evil committed by Eichmann.⁸⁰

Such thoughtlessness opened up a space for the solution to the problem of the banality of evil. As a moralist, Arendt believed that individuals must make choices, and good choices can arise only out of a strenuous process of thought. Thoughtlessness, as Arendt argued, was helpful to the successful functioning of the Nazi bureaucracy. “Clichés, stock phrases, adherence to standardized codes of expression and conduct” undermine thought and stymie moral judgments; they undermine our openness to “reality.”⁸¹ Perhaps. Certainly no one would want to argue against serious thought or confrontation with moral issues. But, as David Cesarani indicates, Eichmann did think, did choose to make himself into what he became, a “*genocidaire*.”⁸² If so, then such thinking mocks Arendt’s pretensions to the humane implications of thought and moral considerations. Eichmann, no less than Martin Heidegger (her philosophical mentor and one-time lover), then, was hardly thoughtless; he was a thinker that chose evil, after weighing the evidence and considering the implications of his actions. But this was a troubling

⁷⁸ Jaspers to Arendt, 19 Oct. 1946, *Hannah Arendt/Karl Jaspers Correspondence*, 62.

⁷⁹ G. Scholem, “‘Eichmann in Jerusalem’: An Exchange of Letters between Gershom Scholem and Hannah Arendt,” *Encounter* (Jan. 1964), 56. For the placement of this debate within the context of Jewish history see David Suchoff, “Gershom Scholem, Hannah Arendt, and the Scandal of Jewish Particularity,” *Germanic Review* 72/3 (1997), 57–76; Dan Diner, “Hannah Arendt Reconsidered: On the Banal and the Evil in Her Holocaust Narrative,” trans. Rita Bradshaw, *New German Critique* 71 (Spring–Summer 1997), 177–90.

⁸⁰ Arendt, *The Life of the Mind*, 3–4; original emphasis. On Arendt and plurality and thought as potentially able to overcome moral dilemmas see Canovan, *Hannah Arendt: A Reinterpretation*, 190 ff.

⁸¹ Arendt, *The Life of the Mind*, 4.

⁸² Cesarani, *Becoming Eichmann*, 6, 11, 344–55. For this view as applied to Heidegger see Dana Villa, “The Banality of Philosophy: Arendt on Heidegger and Eichmann,” in *Twenty Years Later*, 179–96.

conclusion, because it meant that those who did think and could ponder morality still chose evil. If so, then her plea for greater depth of thought might seem beside the point; that, she could not countenance. Moreover, there was no reason for Arendt to think in either/or terms concerning her two hypotheses of evil. Radical evil could coexist with banality, the one capturing a certain monumentality of evil, in intent and scale, and the other a mode of acting so as not to confront the reality of radical evil.

* * *

How to deal with evil became another issue that Arendt dealt with in controversial fashion. In part, the trial of Eichmann was intended as a show, to point up how Israel now stood ready to defend Jews everywhere and every time. Accounts of resistance to the Holocaust on the part of Jews became sacred texts, anticipations of the state of Israel's stance as defender of the Jews. The problem with this theme of heroic Jewish resistance, for Arendt, was that it erased a deeper historical reality, one that survivors were either not allowed to, or preferred not to, confront—the role of Jewish councils, the *Judenräte*, in cooperating with the Nazi officials. Although she devoted less than ten pages to this issue, it would prove to be some of the most controversial parts of her account. She wanted to balance the ledger, to demonstrate the “true dimensions” of the “totality of the moral collapse” (111). Borrowing heavily from Hilberg's recent account, and picking up on themes that Bruno Bettelheim was pursuing at the same time, Arendt found that Jewish leaders had aided the Nazis.⁸³ She did not peer deeply into the perplexing situation and the possibility of mixed motives, of what Primo

⁸³ Hilberg, *The Destruction of the European Jews*, argues that it was Jewish traditionalism, the belief that all horrors will pass and that one should never make waves with the Gentiles, that allowed these leaders and millions of Jewish peasants to cooperate fully and willingly in their own destruction. Suffice it to say, Hilberg's interpretation of this aspect of the Holocaust has come under fire. Indeed, even Arendt could be viewed as critical of it, since she remarks in *Eichmann* (9) that in the face of the tremendous force of the Nazis “no non-Jewish group or people had behaved differently.” B. Bettelheim, “Freedom from Ghetto Thinking,” *Midstream* (Spring, 1962), 16–25. Strong arguments against the presentation of the *Judenräte* in Arendt and Hilberg are Isaiah Trunk, *Judenrat: The Jewish Councils in Eastern Europe under Nazi Occupation* (New York: Macmillan, 1972); Michael R. Marrus, *The Holocaust in History* (New York: Meridian, 1987), 113–21; Yehuda Bauer, *A History of the Holocaust* (New York: Franklin Watts, 1982), 155–67; Bauer, *Rethinking the Holocaust* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2001), 77–82; Abigail L. Rosenthal, “The Right Way to Act: Indicting the Victims,” in Alan Rosenberg and Gerald E. Myers, eds., *Echoes from the Holocaust: Philosophical Reflections on a Dark Time* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1988), 149–62.

Levi had famously described as the “Gray Zone.”⁸⁴ Instead, Arendt claimed that these leaders, such as Chaim Rumkowski in Łódź, who renamed himself Chaim I and issued stamps with his portrait and currency with his signature, acted as they had because they enjoyed their power, however illusory it ended up being. But was this not precisely the type of concern for motives and intentions that she had condemned in Eichmann? As to the argument that these leaders had acted morally within the murky limits of possibility and understanding, Arendt was disdainful. Dr Kastner in Hungary, Arendt related, became one of many “instruments of murder” for the Nazis; the truth was “gruesome.” Kastner had saved 1,684 people while helping the Nazis collect 476,000 others for their deaths. From Arendt’s perspective this was morally heinous, and she maintained that other choices did exist. The Jewish leaders should not have cooperated; “there would have been chaos and plenty of misery but the total number of victims would hardly have been” as large (111).

* * *

Arendt’s work as a moral historian, then, however problematic in its particulars, combined judgment with explanation. Sometimes her judgments were harsh, sometimes they were simply mistaken. Too often she attempted to fit her historical research into her preconceived notions.⁸⁵ But in all of her work she highlighted moral issues, focused on individual agents and their responsibility for their actions, and upon the context(s) in which they make them. She also accepted the crunching reality of evil that still festered in the ashes of the Holocaust. She attempted to explain the forces that had brought evil forth into the world and how it had sought both the physical and historical extermination of a people. In tandem with the concerns of her fellow New York intellectuals about mass culture and wary of metaphysical and demonic explanations of evil, Arendt shifted her perspective on evil. She came to emphasize evil as largely a function of thoughtlessness, something that was at times banal in intent but horrendous in its consequences. At all times, Arendt upheld the responsibility of the individual to resist incorporation into the mass, to remain attuned to personal choice and responsibility in the formulation and pursuit of moral choices. This marked her work and influence as a moral historian.

Hardly surprising, then, that Arendt would appeal to some in a generation coming of age in the 1960s, seething with antagonism against a world that often seemed imprisoned by the illogic of mutually assured atomic destruction and by

⁸⁴ P. Levi, *The Drowned and the Saved*, trans. Raymond Rosenthal (New York: Vintage International, 1989), 36–69.

⁸⁵ Cesarani, *Becoming Eichmann*, 344.

the war in Vietnam. Psychologist Stanley Milgram's experiments into how normal people would, upon orders given by authority figures, inflict punishment on innocent subjects, owed much to Arendt's considerations of totalitarianism and evil. Many in the New Left in the 1960s embraced Arendt's morally infused analysis and her conception of the banality of evil, based on a thoughtless following of orders.⁸⁶

Arendt deserves our attention as a helpful precursor to the moral turn afoot today in historical studies.⁸⁷ Such a moral turn means that historians increasingly desire to employ concepts from moral philosophy to interrogate historical events while moral philosophers turn to history to find ways of thickening their moral concepts.⁸⁸ This can be seen, for example, in Harry S. Stout's recent work, where he employs the concept of "just war" to examine the Civil War. While he finds the war justified on the part of the North (to maintain the Union and later to end slavery), he argues that the means employed by both sides, but especially by the North, in total war to have been immoral. And he seeks to understand

⁸⁶ Novick, *The Holocaust in American Life*, 136–7. S. Milgram, *Obedience to Authority* (New York: Harper & Row, 1974). On Milgram see Thomas Blass, *The Man Who Shocked the World: The Life and Legacy of Stanley Milgram* (New York: Basic Books, 2004), esp. 75–130. Gerald E. Myers, "The Psychology of Man After Auschwitz," in Rosenberg and Myers, *Echoes*, 311–13. For a New Left take on Arendt, linking Nazi totalitarianism with American hegemony, see Norman Fruchter, "Arendt's Eichmann and Jewish Identity" (1965), in *idem*, *For a New America: Essays in History and Politics from Studies on the Left, 1959–1967* (New York: Random House, 1970), esp. 428–9.

⁸⁷ Perhaps a first flowering of this turn can be seen in Richard Wightman Fox and Robert B. Westbrook, eds., *In the Face of the Facts: Moral Inquiry in American Scholarship* (Cambridge: Woodrow Wilson Press and Cambridge University Press, 1998), esp. Introduction, 1–9.

⁸⁸ Jonathan Glover, *Humanity: A Moral History of the Twentieth Century* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2001), esp. Part Two, "The Moral Psychology of Waging War," where he discusses both Hiroshima and My Lai. H. S. Stout, *Upon the Altar of the Nation: A Moral History of the Civil War* (New York: Viking, 2006). I agree with Allan Megill's criticisms of Glover's weaknesses as a historian. Megill also raises central issues that will confront any project of moral history. A. Megill, "Two Para-historical Approaches to Atrocity," *History and Theory* 41 (Dec. 2002), 104–23. A. C. Grayling, *Among the Dead Cities: The History and Moral Legacy of the WWII Bombing of Civilians in Germany and Japan* (New York: Walker and Co., 2006). Stout's views of just-war theory, and the application of it to concrete situations, was influenced by the important work of Michael Walzer, *Just and Unjust Wars: A Moral Argument with Historical Illustrations* (2nd edn, New York: Basic Books, 1992), where he discusses Sherman's total war, America in Vietnam, and other examples of moral complexity. For a work that allows historical memory to be employed for moral lessons see Robert Jay Lifton, *Death in Life: Survivors of Hiroshima* (New York: Random House, 1967). For strong criticisms of Stout's approach, see James M. McPherson, "Was It a Just War?," *The New York Review of Books*, 23 March 2006, 16–19. The value of such a contretemps about moral issues is that it raises large and important questions, pointing to the conversation of morality as the key.

the underlying ideology of messianic mission, as preached from pulpits in both North and South as a type of baptism in oratory that prefigured the bloody reality of the war. Yet in applying moral concepts, either Arendt's on banality or those of just war, historians should also look to how concepts must be revised, or at least reconsidered, in the face of historical complexities. Thus, while just-war theory is no doubt correct in noting, in Kantian terms, that means should never be subsumed to ends, might certain historical situations "override" or question moral admonitions? Might situations of "supreme emergency," to use philosopher Michael Walzer's term, such as occurred after the crushing Union defeat at the Second Battle of Bull Run in 1862, warrant extreme and immoral means in order to save a just cause?⁸⁹ Historians, and moral philosophers, in any event, are best served when affixing blame or judgment is less central than a full and complex understanding about means and ends within specific historical contexts. This desire for complexity is at the heart of the "moral mind," which Eichmann noticeably lacked and which Arendt celebrated. But as Arendt and others from her milieu, such as Lionel Trilling, realized, such a mind is the starting point for understanding and evaluation, as well as for sophisticated judgment attuned to contradiction and ambiguity.⁹⁰

⁸⁹ Walzer, *Just and Unjust Wars*, 251. Walzer notes that even if immoral actions are taken, they do not "override" the correctness of a moral response. Therein is the tragedy of action.

⁹⁰ L. Trilling, *The Liberal Imagination* (New York, 1953; first published 1950), xi–xii, 9.