

The Change in Conversation --- Scholarly Debates Around Hannah Arendt's *Eichmann on Jerusalem* and "Banality of Evil" Between 1963 and 1964

Sarah Zhang,
Humanity 103: Conflicts and Connections,
Oct. 31st, 2019

A passionate discussion was triggered by the publication of *Eichmann In Jerusalem*, a series of report by Hannah Arendt, published on the New Yorker in 1963 February. Later she published an enlarged and revised book that reflected on Eichmann's trial, *Eichmann in Jerusalem --- A Report on the Banality of Evil*, in which she raises the concept of "banality of evil". The debate became even more intense with this controversial concept because it was proposed not as a sophisticated theory, but rather a simple statement that concluded her observation on Eichmann, misreading was common among her readers and critics. What Arendt meant by "banality of evil" was not that "Eichmann is everywhere" or "everybody has the potential of becoming Eichmann-like", but rather the stupidity, the thoughtlessness that consciously motivated Eichmann was not exceptional.

This paper summarizes the scholarly conversation between 1963 and 1964. With a closer look, one should realize that it revolves around three major standpoints that gradually shifted from rebut on factual information, to misreading Arendt's position and her inappropriate literary portrait, and finally to personal attacks among the critics. In this conversation, many arguments against Arendt's work portray Eichmann in a different manner than in Arendt's text.

Shortly after the publication of the book, Michael A. Musmanno, a justice of the Supreme Court of Pennsylvania as well as a witness at the Eichmann trial and a judge at the Nuremburg trial, first criticized Hannah Arendt for concluding her lesson with "banality of evil" and her "frequent evidences of pure private prejudice"¹ in a book review for *the New York Times*. Misreading was so common that Arendt disappointedly suspected "the editor himself didn't read the book"² and expressed a surprise at the "bizarre"³ choice of reviewer.

¹ Michael A. Musmanno, "Man with an Unspotted Conscience," *New York Times*, May 19, 1963.

² Hannah Arendt, "Letters to the Editor: 'Eichmann in Jerusalem,'" *New York Times*, Jun 23, 1963, 212.

³ Arendt, "Letter to the Editor," 21

His argument set the tone for future debates with two major arguments. In his wrong understanding, Arendt, by declaring the Eichmann trial fails to provide “a valid definition of the ‘crime against humanity’” and no punishment to ever possess “enough power of deterrence to prevent the commission of crimes”, meant that Eichmann should not be punished at all.⁴ This argument was further elaborated into Arendt was “sympathizing with Eichmann”⁵, which would become a thread that ran through the whole conversation between 1963 and 1964. Also, he argued that Arendt was not presenting “the ascertained facts”⁶ and her book could not qualify as an “authoritative historical”⁷ work. For example, while Arendt argued that there was no evidence to prove Eichmann’s involvement in Kristallnacht since his name was not shown on the documents, Musmanno refuted, saying it was “simply ludicrous and not worthy of discussion” to claim this “Hitler idolater” to not know about his plan.⁸ To this Arendt dismissed as “most basic error,”⁹ misconstruing facts. What is interesting about this “disparity”, as Musmanno sees, between Arendt’s statements and the truth is that the two scholars were seeing inversed truths from the same factual information. The debate based on inversed truths would become more common in later debates. Another scholar, Jacob Robinson, who in 1965 published *And the Crooked Shall Be Made Straight: The Eichmann Trial, The Jewish Catastrophe, and Hannah Arendt’s Narrative*, gathered 400 factual errors that denounces Arendt’s scholarly contribution.

It is also worth noting the public’s response to this debate, which revealed a sense of barrier and a lack of communication between the two sides, Arendt’s supporters and critics. Shown by the excerpts from letters to the editor, those defending Arendt’s book argued that

⁴ Michael A. Musmanno, “*Letters to the Editor: ‘Eichmann in Jerusalem,’*” *New York Times*, Jun 23, 1963, 212.

⁵ Musmanno, “*Letter to the Editor,*” 213.

⁶ Musmanno, “*Man with an Unspotted Conscience.*”

⁷ Musmanno, “*Man with an Unspotted Conscience.*”

⁸ Musmanno, “*Letters to the Editor.*”

⁹ Arendt, “*Letter to the Editor.*”

she was brave to acknowledge one of the most horrifying aspect of humanity, while those supporting Musmanno claimed that he had defended the entire humanity from the potential of participating in evil and Arendt was sympathizing with Eichmann. The two parts were expressing their own arguments, without engaging each other, and in fact, ever truly understanding each other.

The discussion intensified in 1963, when Lionel Abel, well-known for his dislike towards Arendt, published a scathing review in *Partisan Review*. Rebut on factual information was still present as Abel argued that because Eichmann had read Herzl's Judenstat and had converted "forever" in Zionism, he must had also thought about Hitlerism. At the same time, the critique directed more at Arendt's inappropriate portrait on a literary level. He targeted on Arendt's criticism on the limited capability of the current political and moral system to judge totalitarian state, and thus her critique "could only be couched by her aesthetic term," never from a political nor moral standpoint.¹⁰ Another argument Abel raised was that, Arendt was blaming the Jewish leadership for being "knaves or fools bent on facilitating their destruction" and "so compliant that Eichmann ... was even denied the opportunity to be conscience stricken as he sent them off to die"¹¹ without specific facts, even avoiding to address the Jews in Russia where there was no Jewish leadership. His statement -- Eichmann came off so much better in her book than did his victims --- later resonated in many critiques in 1964. In conclusion, he argued that Arendt suggested Eichmann as "aesthetically palatable, while his victims are aesthetically repulsive,"¹² which followed closely with the Musmanno line: "the book was soft on Eichmann, hard on the Jews."¹³

¹⁰ Abel, "*The Aesthetics of Evil*," 219.

¹¹ Abel, "*The Aesthetics of Evil*," 217.

¹² Lionel Abel, "*The Aesthetics of Evil*," *Partisan Review*, Volume XXX, No 1, Spring 1963, 230.

¹³ "More on Eichmann," *Partisan Review*, Volume XXXI, No 2, Spring 1964, 262.

Most importantly, Abel believed that Eichmann was a moral monster, which was directly contradictory to Arendt's depiction of Eichmann as an ordinary person. The explanation Arendt offered to Eichmann's famous statement "I will jump into my grave laughing because the fact that I have the death of five million Jews on my conscience gives me extraordinary satisfaction" was sheer "bragging". However, what stood out for Abel was the cruelty of the content of the sentence.¹⁴ He believed that Eichmann was simply trying to present himself in a better image, consciously knowing that he "could not have justified himself morally or politically,"¹⁵ while Arendt was deceived by the surface. And thus, he rejected the idea of "banality of evil" from its premise, insisting that Eichmann was not banal.

A rather objective review came in September 1963, when Norman Podhoretz, the editor of *Commentary*, published *Hannah Arendt on Eichmann: A Study in the Perversity of Brilliance*. Podhoretz acknowledged that if the system was not so tight and if the Jews could fight back, Eichmann wouldn't be able to engage in mass murder. However, in her work, Arendt displayed the resistances, although pathetically thin and small, as "relatively insignificant" inappropriately. He also acknowledged the "almost universal complicity of Christian Europe, and especially German people" as well as the still-prevailing unwillingness of Federal Republic to execute punishment to Nazi War criminals.¹⁶ But on balance, with his statement "in place of the monstrous Nazi, she gives us the 'banal' Nazi; in place of the Jews as virtuous martyr, she gives us the Jew as accomplice in evil,"¹⁷ he agreed with Musmanno's "soft on Eichmann and harsh on the Jews" critique.

Norman also believed that Eichmann was monstrous and dismissed the inference that Eichmann's statement was sheer bragger. After insisting that Eichmann, who embodied "the

¹⁴ Abel, "The Aesthetics of Evil," 225.

¹⁵ Abel, "The Aesthetics of Evil," 221.

¹⁶ Norman Podhoretz, "*Hannah Arendt on Eichmann: A Study in the Perversity of Brilliance*", *Commentary*, Sep 1963.

¹⁷ Podhoretz, "*Hannah Arendt on Eichmann.*"

Nature of Totalitarianism,” was an anti-Semite consciously, he jumped to the conclusion that believing such “dazzle” was against our knowledge on “the Nature of Man.”¹⁸ But this statement on “Nature of Man” came out of nowhere.

The only eloquent supporter brave enough to speak up for Arendt in this conversation was Mary McCarthy, who, in response to Abel, suggested the existing bias in judging Arendt, “all Miss Arendt’s hostile reviews, not counting these, have come from Jews, and those favorable to her from Gentiles.”¹⁹ Based off from that, she suggested such discussion deepens the division between the Jews and the Gentiles.²⁰ She accused Abel for eagerly portraying Arendt as an anti-Semite. Regarding Abel’s critique that Eichmann was “aesthetically palatable”, she wrote that he “offered no evidence on behalf of this idea”²¹ and this was only his personal impression. This statement triggered the next phase of debate that involves emotional personal attacks, not against Arendt but among the critics. She also pointed out that Abel had been misreading Arendt’s work. In response to Abel’s claim that Arendt blamed the Jewish leadership for not having resisted, she explained that in fact Arendt acknowledged resistance was more likely impossible.²² Moreover, she pointed out that the critiques had not been objective enough, focusing only on eight pages about Jewish leadership of the two-hundred-and-sixty-pages book.

The image McCarthy perceived of Eichmann was also identical to that of Arendt. Abel argued that Eichmann should have considered about personally investing in Nazism since he had thought about Zionism. However, for McCarthy, it was precisely Eichmann’s idealist and stupidity that assisted the administrative tasks, accomplished through a process of “distancing” between the “collective will of the German people” and its location of

¹⁸Podhoretz, “*Hannah Arendt on Eichmann.*”

¹⁹ Podhoretz, “*Hannah Arendt on Eichmann.*”

²⁰ Mary McCarthy, “The Hue and Cry,” *Partisan Review*, Volume XXXI, No 1, Winter 1964, 82.

²¹ McCarthy, “The Hue and Cry,” 83-84.

²² McCarthy, “The Hue and Cry,” 85.

execution, not only on a geographical level but also a psychic level.²³ She also questioned why people want to call Eichmann a monster, since calling him a monster actually, by treating him as “beasts and devils,” reduces his guilt.²⁴

Another supporter, Dwight Macdonald, backed up Arendt after McCarthy on a factual information level. He objected some of Arendt’s generalization, but these objections didn’t reject the whole book. He pointed out that Abel, when claiming his facts to be backed up by Jacob Robinson, only presented “what the argument must have been,” meaning that the arguments were merely based on conjecture.²⁵ He also accused him of using a “gross” analogy, comparing Arendt’s seemingly “heartless” aesthetic literary device to the whole ghastly business of life threats.²⁶ But his article contributed more to the elevation from a scholarly conversation to personal attacks. He “find(s) it depressing to have to talk about ‘Jewish friends’ and ‘Jewish critics,’” which he considered as racial labels that should no longer be the determining factors in a serious discussion. And it was the “labels” that explains, for Macdonald, the “virulence and unfairness” among the critics.²⁷

In response to Abel’s statement that Arendt had changed her idea from “radical evil” in *the Origin of Totalitarianism* to “banality of evil,” Macdonald saw nothing shocking here. In fact, he suggested that such banality --- the “discrepancy between the personal mediocrity of Stalin and Hitler, the banality of their ideas and the vastness of the evils they inflicted”²⁸ -- - should be so obvious that Arendt should not be the first to notice. But admittedly it could be

²³ McCarthy, “*The Hue and Cry*,” 87.

²⁴ McCarthy, “*The Hue and Cry*,” 88.

²⁵ “*More on Eichmann*,” 264.

²⁶ To mock Arendt’s attitude towards Eichmann and the Jews, Abel used the analogy “the man with a gun will be aesthetically less ugly than the one who out of fear has killed his friend. “*More on Eichmann*,” 262.

²⁷ “*More on Eichmann*,” 267-268.

²⁸ “*More on Eichmann*,” 265.

hard for the survivors to accept. The fact that five million Jews could have been slaughtered by mediocrities evoked greater terror and “robes it of meaning.”²⁹

Of these accusations, Lionel Abel later responded that McCarthy’s argument was “worthless” while McDonald, unable to advance any argument of his own chose to “abuse” him, discriminating against his Jewish identity, “It all comes down finally to calling people ‘Jews’,”³⁰ he said. This time he provided evidence for his argument, again from Jacob Robinson, to hold his statement and further elaborate the blame on Arendt’s wrong judgement on Jewish leaders: the two leaders, Nazi exterminators Heydrich and Frank, for Jewish groups in Russia were not Jewish, thus it was wrong to condemn Jewish leadership. Abel’s supporter, Marie Syrkin, also dismissed McCarthy as “intellectual irresponsible” in her vitriolic review. She condemned McCarthy for her paraphrase of Arendt’s text covered up “the extent to which Arendt accuses the Jewish in totality” and the complicity in the Holocaust.³¹

Abel again refuted “banality of evil” by asserting that Eichmann was not who Arendt described. He still rejected the idea of Eichmann as “normal,” and his statement being merely cliché. Factual information, again, assisted him in insisting that Eichmann was not confirmed to be “normal.” More importantly, he pointed out a self-contradiction in the idea of “banality of evil” --- if, and precisely because, Eichmann was an ordinary person, the fact that he chose to be a Nazi and conducted these murders by himself already made him a monster.³² Thus, Arendt meant that Eichmann, who did not need any political idea to justify his actions, represented a monster under modernity and the “banality of evil” came from the potential of everyone being capable of mass murder without political conviction. Abel argued that Arendt

²⁹ “*More on Eichmann*,” 265.

³⁰ “*More on Eichmann*,” 275.

³¹ Marie Syrkin, “*Hannah Arendt: The Clothes of the Empress*,” *Dissent* X, No. 4, Autumn 1963, 344.

³² It is apparent that [Arendt] herself considers Eichmann a monster, and precisely because she considers him ordinary. “*More on Eichmann*,” 273.

was turning civilization into barbarism and abolishing “the difference between the ‘ordinary’ and the ‘monstrous,’³³ a moral corruption.

With this summary on the conversation between scholars between 1963 and 1964, we can see that people are still debating on the working process and concept of “banality of evil”. In future debates, there will be more that applies lesson from Eichmann’s trial to current humanity.

³³ “*More on Eichmann,*” 273

Bibliography

- Abel, Lionel, "*The Aesthetics of Evil*," *Partisan Review*, Volume XXX, No 1, Spring 1963.
- A. Musmanno, Michael, "*Letters to the Editor: 'Eichmann in Jerusalem,'*" *New York Times*, Jun 23, 1963.
- A. Musmanno, Michael, "*Man with an Unspotted Conscience*," *New York Times*, May 19, 1963.
- Arendt, Hannah, "*Letters to the Editor: 'Eichmann in Jerusalem,'*" *New York Times*, Jun 23, 1963.
- McCarthy, Mary, "The Hue and Cry," *Partisan Review*, Volume XXXI, No 1, Winter 1964.
- "More on Eichmann," *Partisan Review*, Volume XXXI, No 2, Spring 1964.
- Podhoretz, Norman, "*Hannah Arendt on Eichmann: A Study in the Perversity of Brilliance*",
Commentary, Sep 1963.
- Syrkin, Marie, "*Hannah Arendt: The Clothes of the Empress*," *Dissent* X, No. 4, Autumn 1963.