

Speech of Hannah Arendt – Eichmann trial

Perhaps just for today you will allow me to smoke, immediately.

When the New Yorker sent me to report on the trial of Adolf Eichmann, I assumed that the courtroom had only one interest: to fulfill the demand of Justice. This was not a simple task, because the court that tried Eichmann was confronted with a crime it could not find in the law books, and a criminal whose like was unknown in any court prior to the Nuremberg trial. But still, the court had to define Eichmann as a man on trial for his deeds. There was no system on trial, no history, no “ism”, not even anti-Semitism, but only a person.

The trouble with a Nazi criminal like Eichmann was that he insisted on renouncing all personal qualities, as if there was nobody left, to be either punished or forgiven. He protested, time and again, contrary to the prosecution’s assertions, that he had never done anything out of his own initiative, that he had no intentions, whatsoever, good or bad, that he had only obeyed orders.

This typical Nazi plea makes it clear that the greatest evil in the world is the evil committed by nobodies, evil committed by men without motive, without convictions, without wicked hearts or demonic wills, by human beings who refuse to be persons. And it is this phenomenon that I have called the “banality of evil”.

[Thomas Miller, one of the teachers opposed to Arendt, speaks]

Miss Arendt, you’re avoiding the most important part of the controversy. You claim that less Jews would have died if their leaders had not cooperated.

[Hannah Arendt]

This issue came up in the trial, I reported on it, and I had to clarify the role of those Jewish leaders who participated objectively in Eichmann’s activities.

[Thomas Miller]

You blame the Jewish people for their own destruction.

[Hannah Arendt]

I never blamed the Jewish people!

Resistance was impossible. But perhaps, there is something in-between resistance and cooperation. And only in that sense, do I say, that maybe, some of those Jewish leaders might have behaved differently. It is profoundly important to ask these questions, because the roles of the Jewish leaders gives the most striking insights into the totality of the moral collapse that the Nazis caused in respectable European society, and not only in Germany, but in almost all countries, not only among the persecutors, but also among the victims.

...

Yes?

[One student]

The persecution was aimed at the Jews. Why do you describe Eichmann’s offenses as crimes against humanity?

[Hannah Arendt]

Because Jews are humans, the very status the Nazis tried to deny them. A crime against them is by definition, a crime against humanity. I am of course as you know a Jew, and I've been attacked for being a self-hating Jew who defends Nazis and scorns her own people. This is not an argument. That is a character assassination!

I wrote no defense of Eichmann, but I did try to reconcile the shocking mediocrity of the man with his staggering deeds.

Trying to understand is not the same as forgiveness. I see it as my responsibility to understand, it is the responsibility of anyone who dares to put pen to paper on the subject. Since Socrates and Plato, we usually call thinking: "to be engaged in that silent dialogue between me and myself." In refusing to be a person, Eichmann utterly surrendered that single most defining human quality: that of being able to think. And consequently, he was no longer capable of making moral judgments. This inability to think creates the possibility for many ordinary men to commit evil deeds on a gigantic scale, the like of which one had never seen before.

It is true; I have considered these questions in a philosophical way. The manifestation of the wind of thought is not knowledge, but the ability to tell right or wrong, beautiful from ugly. And I hope that thinking gives people the strength to prevent catastrophes in these rare moments, when the chips are down.

Thank you.