Eichmann, Kant and the Banality of Evil

DOLF EICHMANN was born in Solingen in the Rhineland in 1906. He joined the Nazi Party and then the SS in 1932. In 1938 he founded the Central Office for Jewish Emigration in Vienna, and the Reich Central Office followed in 1939. From 1942 onwards his job as Transportation Administrator for the ‘Final Solution to the Jewish Question’ involved organising the transport of Jews from all over Europe to the death camps in Poland. It was his responsibility to organise the round-up and provide the special trains to take them to ‘eternity’.

After the war, Eichmann was in US custody but escaped to Italy and then to Argentina. In May 1960 he was tracked down in a suburb of Buenos Aires and kidnapped by Israeli agents, who smuggled him to Israel. On 11th April 1961 he was brought to trial in Jerusalem on 15 counts, including crimes against the Jewish people, crimes against humanity and war crimes during the period of Nazi rule. On 11th December 50 years ago, he was convicted on all counts and on 15th December the court pronounced the death sentence. Eichmann appealed the verdict, but it was upheld by Israel’s Supreme Court and on 31st May 1962 he was hanged.

Hannah Arendt was born into a family of secular German Jews in Hanover in 1906, the same year as Eichmann. Significantly, as we shall see, she grew up in Königsberg, the birthplace of Prussian philosopher Immanuel Kant. At the University of Marburg she studied philosophy with Martin Heidegger, with whom she embarked on a stormy affair for which she was later criticised because of his support for the Nazi party while he was rector of Freiburg University.

In the wake of one of their breakups, Arendt moved to Heidelberg, where in 1929 she wrote her dissertation on the concept of love in the thought of Saint Augustine, under the existentialist philosopher Karl Jaspers. But she was prevented from teaching because she was Jewish and, after being interrogated by the Gestapo in 1933, she fled to Paris and then in 1941 to the United States where she acquired citizenship in 1950. By the early 1960s she was a professor and author and had been elected a Fellow of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences.

In the spring of 1961 Arendt suggested to The New Yorker that she should go to Jerusalem and report on Eichmann’s trial. Her articles appeared in the magazine in 1963 and later in expanded form as a book entitled Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil (1963). The work caused great controversy and many outraged Jews accused her of being anti-Semitic. Some even claimed that she exonerated Eichmann but condemned the Jews and thus offended the memory of the dead. As Amos Elon says in his introduction to the 2006 Penguin edition, a kind of excommunication seemed to have been imposed on the author by the Jewish establishment in America.

The critics were, of course, largely talking nonsense. Although there was – and still is – a tendency to regard all Nazis as malevolent monsters or perverted sadists, what struck Arendt about the man in the Jerusalem court was his ordinariness: “The trouble with Eichmann was precisely that so many were like him, and that the many were neither perverted, nor sadistic, that they were, and still are, terribly and terrifyingly normal” (p276). In fact, half a dozen psychiatrists had certified him as ‘normal’ – “more normal, at any rate, than I am after having examined him”, one of them was said to have exclaimed (p25). Another found that his whole psychological outlook, his attitude to his wife and children, mother and father, brothers, sisters and friends, was not only normal but most desirable” (pp25-26).

Arendt refers to the ‘fearsome, word-and-thought-defying banality of evil’ only in the last sentence of the main text but returns to it in a postscript she added in 1964: “Eichmann was not Iago and not Macbeth, and nothing would have been further from his mind than to determine with Richard II ‘to prove a villain’. Except for an extraordinary diligence in looking out for his personal advancement, he had no motives at all. And this diligence in itself was in no way criminal; he certainly would not have murdered his superior in order to inherit his post. He merely, to put the matter colloquially, never realized what he was doing… He was not stupid. It was sheer thoughtlessness – something by no means identical with stupidity – that predisposed him to become one of the greatest criminals of that period. And if this is ‘banal’ and even funny, if with the best will in the world one cannot extract any diabolical or demonic profundity from Eichmann, that is still far from calling it commonplace’ (pp287-288).

Both his character and motives were ordinary and non-criminal. They were neither wicked, nor pathological, nor ideological. He was an ordinary man doing his duty and looking after his own career interests. The banality therefore resided in the man but not his actions, which were indeed monstrous or – if we prefer – evil. And the lesson to learn in Jerusalem was that “such thoughtlessness can wreak more havoc than all the evil instincts taken together” (p288).

Yet, is it that simple? Chapter 8 of the book, which is entitled ‘Duties of a Law-Abiding Citizen’, includes a discussion of the philosophy of Immanuel Kant. During the police examination Eichmann suddenly declared with great emphasis that he had lived his life according to Kant’s moral precepts, and especially according to a Kantian definition of duty. As Arendt says, “this was outrageous, on the face of it, and also incomprehensible, since Kant’s moral philosophy is so closely bound up with man’s faculty of judgment, which rules out blind obedience” (p136). At the trial, one of the three judges raised the issue and, ‘to the surprise of everybody’, Eichmann came up with an approximately correct definition of the categorical imperative: “I mean by my will must always be such that it can
become the principle of general laws” (p136).

Upon further questioning, he added that he had read Kant’s Critique of Practical Reason. “He then proceeded to explain that from the moment he was charged with carrying out the Final Solution he had ceased to live according to Kantian principles, that he had known it, and that he had consoled himself with the thought that he no longer ‘was master of his own deeds’, that he was unable ‘to change anything’. What he failed to point out in court was that… he had not simply dismissed the Kantian formula as no longer applicable, he had distorted it to read: Act as if the principle of your actions were the same as that of the legislator or of the law of the land – or, in Hans Frank’s formulation of the ‘categorical imperative in the Third Reich’, which Eichmann might have known: ‘Act in such a way that the Führer, if he knew your action, would approve it’” (p136).

As Arendt suggests, Kant argued that, on the contrary, every man was a legislator the moment he started to act, and by using his ‘practical reason’ he found the principles that could and should be the principles of law. “But it is true that Eichmann’s unconscious distortion agrees with what he himself called the version of Kant ‘for the household use of the little man’. In this household use, all that is left of Kant’s spirit is the demand that a man do more than obey the law, that he go beyond the mere call of obedience and identify his own will with the principle behind the law – the source from which the law sprang. In Kant’s philosophy, that source was practical reason; in Eichmann’s household use of him, it was the will of the Führer” (pp136-137).

It must have been particularly galling for Arendt, whose entire philosophy was broadly Kantian, to witness this monumental distortion of the great philosopher’s ideas. Duty for Kant was internal and something we impose upon ourselves, not external and imposed by others. Far from being a matter of ‘just following orders’, it was a freely chosen course produced by our reason. So any suggestion that Kant’s philosophy paved the way for the Holocaust is absurd. Moreover, the golden rule, equality of respect and reciprocity implicit in the categorical imperative were totally ignored by Eichmann. If he had applied them, he would never have treated Jews as different from other people and as means to Nazi ends.

Arguably, therefore, another lesson of the trial is that a ‘little learning is a dangerous thing’. If Eichmann had read Kant properly and thoroughly, he would have followed an entirely different course of action. He would have actually defended Jews against the Nazi regime. Arendt believes that thinking, specifically critical reflection, would have protected him from committing evil. Throughout her writings, she stresses her belief that this kind of thinking consists of a soundless dialogue that a person has with himself. It is a Socratic dialectical interchange, consisting of questioning and answering not of others, but of ourselves. This internal dialogue leads the person to act in accordance with sound moral judgments and to avoid committing evil.

Are Arendt and Kant right? Does thinking prevent evil? It is certainly true that many people who have committed what we might call evil acts appear ‘banal’ and ordinary, rather than wicked. A similar picture is painted by Gitta Sereny in her book Into that Darkness (Deutsch, 1974, Pimlico, 1995) on Franz Stangl, the commandant of Treblinka from 1942 to 1943. He told her: “My conscience is clear about what I did”.

Joachim Fest in The Face of the Third Reich (Penguin, 1972) tells a not dissimilar story about Rudolph Höss, commandant of Auschwitz from 1941-43. Höss wrote in his Autobiography: “I had been brought up by my parents to be respectful and obedient towards all grown-up people”. He also said: “I am completely normal. Even while I was carrying out the task of extermination I led a normal family life and so on”. Fest says that among his most outstanding characteristics were strict attention to duty and ‘a marked hankering after morality, an abnormal tendency to submit himself to strict imperatives and to feel authority over him’ (p.418).

All three shared an unthinking obedience to authority. There was, however, one apparent difference between Eichmann and Höss. The latter was seduced by the ideology. Perhaps the remark of Steven Weinberg is appropriate, applying it to a secular religion such as Nazism: “With or without it, you’d have good people doing good things and evil people doing bad things, but for good people to do bad things, it takes religion”.

Arthur Koestler explains the process in his essay The Urge to Self-destruction (reprinted in The Heel of Achilles, Pan, 1976). He argues that mass crimes of violence committed for selfish, personal motives are historically insignificant compared to those committed out of a self-sacrificing devotion to a flag, a leader, a religious faith or a political conviction. He calls it the self-transcending tendency and concludes that the trouble with our species is not an overdose of self-asserting aggression, but an excess of self-transcending devotion.

We do not need to go quite as far as Koestler to acknowledge that there is much sense in his argument. Mass violence - ‘collective evil’ - is motivated as much by love of one’s tribe and its ideology as by hatred of another. Koestler cites the radiant love of the Führer on the faces of the Hitler Youth and on the faces of little Chinese boys reciting the words of Chairman Mao. They are transfixed with love like monks in ecstasy on religious paintings: “The sound of the nation’s anthem, the sight of its proud flag, makes you feel part of a wonderfully loving community” (p19).

Koestler maintains that the predicament of humankind is not caused by the aggression of individuals but by the dialectics of group-formation, by our irresistible urge to identify with the group and espouse its beliefs enthusiastically and uncritically. We have a peculiar tendency to submit himself to strict imperatives and to feel authority over him”. We do not need to go quite as far as Koestler to acknowledge that there is much sense in his argument. Mass violence - ‘collective evil’ - is motivated as much by love of one’s tribe and its ideology as by hatred of another. Koestler cites the radiant love of the Führer on the faces of the Hitler Youth and on the faces of little Chinese boys reciting the words of Chairman Mao. They are transfixed with love like monks in ecstasy on religious paintings: “The sound of the nation’s anthem, the sight of its proud flag, makes you feel part of a wonderfully loving community” (p19).

Koestler maintains that the predicament of humankind is not caused by the aggression of individuals but by the dialectics of group-formation, by our irresistible urge to identify with the group and espouse its beliefs enthusiastically and uncritically. We have a peculiar capacity to become emotionally committed to beliefs which are impervious to reasoning, indifferent to self-interest and even to the claims of self-preservation. Man is “as susceptible to being imprinted with slogans and symbols as he is to infectious diseases” (p20).

But, hold on a minute. We cannot be saying that all evil is the product of unthinking obedience to authority and/or enslavement to religious or political ideologies. What about the Fred Wests or the Josef Fritzls? And consider a man who did the opposite of Eichmann, Stangl and Höss, a man who saved 1,100 Jews from the gas chambers. The man, of course, was Oskar Schindler.
In contrast to these upright, law-abiding Reich citizens, Schindler was a drunkard, womanizer, chancer, adventurer and exploiter of slave labour. Yet, whereas Eichmann sent the Jews to Auschwitz and Höss supervised their extermination there, Schindler bought his Jewish workers to prevent them from going there. Why did the apparently 'good' men partake of such evil while the 'immoral' man heroically resisted it and proved an inspiration to us all? Why this profiteer turned protector must remain something of a mystery -- and indeed Spielberg's cinematic masterpiece Schindler's List doesn't even attempt an explanation -- but we can offer some suggestions.

Schindler was clearly a risk-taker and someone who enjoyed 'fouling up the system' and defying authority. He went his own way, despite the pressures to conform. Secondly, he had not imbibed the Nazi ideology but had joined the party purely for his own convenience. Last, but not least, he was also, despite his indulgences, a basically decent person who disliked physical cruelty. Ultimately, Schindler's exceptional heroism probably stemmed from an elemental sense of decency and humanity. In short, he knew where to draw the line. In a 1964 interview he said: “a thinking man, who had overcome his inner cowardice, simply had to help. There was no other choice”.

The case of Schindler suggests that the character of a person relates more to evil in its most apparent manifestations than Arendtian failures of reason and imagination. At both macro and micro levels, the word conjures up a range of demonic characters from merciless tyrants like Attila the Hun, Genghis Khan, Stalin, Hitler, Pol Pot and Saddam Hussein, to mass murderers like Harold Shipman, Fred West and Anders Breivik. Here the evil seems to be inextricably bound up with the people themselves – that there is, in fact, an evil gene which some people possess but most of us don't.

A recent BBC Horizon programme, Are You Good or Evil?, suggested that this 'evil gene' could, however, be counteracted if we are brought up in the right environment and work at being good. At this point we call in aid another philosopher. Aristotle maintained that moral behaviour is related to character. Goodness or badness derives from our nature and if we want to live a good life we need to develop the right habits. Being a virtuous person is a practice, like being a skilled pilot or surgeon. This approach has been labelled 'virtue ethics' because it begins not with the acts themselves but with the people themselves -- that there is, in fact, an evil gene which some people possess but most of us don't.

But was not Arendt right in another sense which she did not perhaps envisage? Is not the very concept of evil banal? It is variously defined as the violation of a moral code; serious undeserved harm and suffering; a wicked crime; an act of moral insanity; a heinous sin. The last raises a problem for Humanists in that the word itself has religious overtones, so that 'evil people' are often seen as those who have 'sinned' and are bereft of God. It was for this reason that atheists and freethinkers were once regarded as evil and burnt at the stake.

The Nazis regarded the Jews as 'evil', which justified removing them from the earth, the very behaviour that others now regard as the epitome of 'evil'. Indeed, throughout history the very concept has been at the root of most violence and the desire to inflict harm on others. Yet it is rarely explained, perhaps because subconsciously we imagine that some supernatural force is at work for which there can be no rational explanation.

The concept of evil is banal because it ends all discussion and all attempt at understanding. It is, like the word 'fascist', a term of abuse to demonise the enemy or express revulsion and disapproval. For George W Bush Al-Qaeda was part of an 'axis of evil'; for some of his opponents, Bush himself was 'evil'. The 'evil empire' was the Soviet Union or the USA, depending on your point of view. Such loose talk does little to contribute to intelligent discourse.

There are allegedly 'natural' evils like tsunamis and childhood cancers and moral evils like Auschwitz and the Gulag. There are weak evils like moral incompetence, willingness to follow orders, and lack of imagination, and there are strong evils like evil people, horrendous atrocities, the evil within, and so on. The word is used so generally and so loosely to embrace such a wide range of undesirable events that it has become an emotive term devoid of all precision and significance. 'Evil-doers' are not necessarily evil people. Arendt's analysis and the experiments of Milgram (Obedience to Authority) and Zimbardo (The Lucifer Effect) offer clear evidence that monstrous deeds are not necessarily committed by monsters. Similarly, 'evil people' don't necessarily perform any 'evil' acts. Thus Adolf Hitler, often regarded as the paradigm of an 'evil' person, never killed anybody and indeed was awarded an Iron Cross for saving people's lives. This points to our dual nature, to the fact that human beings are neither totally good nor totally bad but have the potential to be either. We are a mongrel species, capable of extraordinary altruism and also obscene destructiveness. As Solzhenitsyn wrote: “If only there were evil people somewhere, insidiously committing evil deeds, and it were necessary only to separate them from the rest of us and destroy them. But the dividing line between good and evil cuts through the heart of every human being. And who is willing to destroy a piece of his own heart?”

In his history of Nazi war crimes, The Scourge of the Scavengers, Lord Russell of Liverpool describes what was found in Dachau after liberation in 1945. Nailed to a box for wild birds, 'placed there by some schizophrenic SS man'. And Russell concludes: “Then and then only was it possible to understand why the nation which gave the world Goethe and Beethoven, Schiller and Schumann, gave it also Auschwitz and Belsen, Ravensbruck and Dachau".
tive and sets out on a trail of havoc that ends in the inevitable destruction of them both.

If we all have the potential to be destructive - if there is ‘something wicked’ in all of us - then there is no point in laying the blame elsewhere - on a Jekyll or a Frankenstein or even a God. We alone bear the blame. History has confronted us squarely with our own demonic capacities, whether in Nazi Germany, Chile, Cambodia, Uganda, Vietnam, Serbia and Rwanda: “We have, like Faust finally coming face to face with Mephistopheles, been forced to concede that the mask he wears bears features very much like our own”.

We laugh when someone slips on a banana skin, and we take pleasure at the defeat or pain of a rival. When we display exaggerated feelings about others, feel humiliated, find excessive fault, display unreasonable anger, it is our dark shadow in action. But most of us keep it under control. We have never killed anyone. We behave civilly because, as Watson says, we are this world's first ethical animals, at the mercy of our biology, but capable also of rising above it. We can civilise and control our desires.

We should also bear in mind that every time we damn another person - a competitor at work, at love, at sport, at belief - we are really damning the Other in ourselves. In doing others down, we do ourselves down. We see it clearly here in our own society, where the criticisms each tribe makes of the other are so tragically applicable to themselves. In their deadly blame game, each tribe is really damning its own reflection.

Finally, two points need to be stressed from a Humanist perspective. First, in so far as the concept has any meaning at all, evil is not a positive demonic force but a negative consequence of human malice or stupidity. Second, most Humanists would reject the idea that we are essentially good in favour of the more existential position that we are neither good nor bad but have the potentiality to be both. Evil is not a corruption of ‘good’ but its rival, and in some cases its dominant rival. Why this happens can be explained in a number of ways: the lust for power over others; the dehumanisation of others (‘Brits’, ‘Taigs’, ‘Dinks’, ‘Yids’, and so on); the desensitisation of the emotions by absence of love, media violence, and so on; blind obedience to authority and authority figures; the surrender of the intellect to absolute and extremist ideologies.

We are a mongrel species capable of extraordinary altruism and also obscene, destructive selfishness. We do not have to be a committed Nazi or a psychopath to do evil things. As Solzhenitsyn wrote: “If only there were evil people somewhere, insidiously committing evil deeds, and it were necessary only to separate them from the rest of us and destroy them. But the line dividing good and evil cuts through the heart of every human being. And who is willing to destroy a piece of his own heart?”

The American philosopher and psychologist William James (1842-1910) described how he spent a week at the Chautauqua Community, a place that was all sweetness and light, and that when he emerged into the ‘dark and wicked world’, he was astonished to find himself heaving a deep sigh of relief and thinking: “Now for something more primordial and savage, even though it were as bad as an Armenian massacre”.

James suggested that what we need is the moral equivalent of war - fierce struggle and conflict that does not do any harm.

Clearly, one of the central tasks of Humanism is to develop a code and a lifestyle that will maximise good and minimise evil. The Enlightenment values of reason and decency are very important here, but the dastardly crimes of the 20th century have shown that we are still weak vessels. Our will to resist the bad - not to take ‘short cuts’, as Samuel Johnson put it - and instead to opt for the good must be fortified, if the next century is to be an improvement on that about to end. One imperative might be to heed the words of Bertrand Russell: “Remember your humanity and forget the rest”.

NOTES AND REFERENCES
2. quoted in J. Fest: The Face of the Third Reich, Penguin, 1972, p421
6. Watson, op. cit. p247
7. A. Solzhenitsyn: The Gulag Archipelago
• The ringed face of the pupil at the top right of the first page of this article (page 14) was the man whom George Steiner in a play called A.H. - the person who is taken as the archetype of evil. Attempts to ‘explain’ Hitler and therefore evil have met with limited success. See, for example, Ron Rosenbaum: Explaining Hitler, 1999