

Socrates in Jerusalem: Figuring the Banal in Hannah Arendt's Eichmann Report

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Abstract

Socrates in Jerusalem: Figuring the Banal in Hannah Arendt's Eichmann Report

Andrew Fransblow

This thesis examines the rhetorical significance of Hannah Arendt's report on the trial of Adolf Eichmann: *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (1963). I argue that there were, and still are, competing claims on the way this popular trial resonated with for the broader public. The Eichmann report, and in particular Arendt's rhetoric of the banal, was a disturbing challenge to what I describe as the prevailing aesthetic and rhetorical sensibility of Holocaust discourse, which was at this early point in its development predisposed to rhetorics of the sublime. I argue that with this event, these two rhetorical sensibilities would come up against each other, and while the prosecution would attempt to frame the accused as a diabolical personification of evil, Arendt's report figures Eichmann as merely thoughtless. The difficult irony that emerges for her audience is the possibility that the unthinkable could follow from thoughtlessness. Following from this thesis, I will suggest that this negative figuring of Eichmann is intended at the same time to constitute a Socratic ethos in Arendt's audience. That is, an ethos that embraces independent thinking and multiple perspectives. The more general question that Arendt's report continues to raise is what constitutes an acceptable or fitting response to the Holocaust, and I argue that a rhetoric of the banal significantly altered the conditions of Holocaust debate.

Acknowledgments and Dedication

I am grateful to Prof. Maurice Charland for introducing me to many of the ideas I address in the following thesis, and whose continued support was crucial to their development.

For my father, Peter, M Fransblow.

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Mistrials, Show-Trials and Public Response

On March 11, 2006, more than four years after his trial began, Slobodan Milosevic, the so-called ‘butcher of the Balkans,’ “was found lifeless on his bed in his cell at the *United Nations Detention Unit* in Scheveningen,”¹ only a few kilometers from the Hague. His passing elicited mixed reactions. A handful of Serbian loyalists, mostly elderly, went to considerable lengths to bill this occasion as the passing of an historic figure. State officials attempted to distance themselves from such reaction, and for that matter, any internal reaction that sought to figure the Milosevic legacy in anything other than criminal terms. Most notably, Serbian Foreign Minister Vuk Draskovic declared that “by promoting a serial killer into a national hero his victims are murdered again and Serbia disgraces itself ... as the state in which crime is a supreme virtue.”² His family members could not decide where to bury the former leader-Russia, Montenegro, or Serbia—a fact complicated further by the *Serbian Socialist Party’s* desire to have a funeral in Belgrade itself. From the side of the victims, one can only suspect that his passing would have produced a mixed sense of both relief and disappointment. The fact that he was no longer counted among the living may provide a measure of comfort, but this would not change the fact that within his lifetime, justice could restore no measure of honor to those counted among his victims. Chief prosecutor Carla Del Ponte clearly viewed the trial’s significance in terms of this failure: “It is a great pity for justice that the (Milosevic) trial will not be

¹ Press Release, United Nations, available from <http://www.un.org/icty/pressreal/2006/p1050-e.htm>; Internet; accessed March 16, 2006.

² From staff editorial, “Pride, Shame and Anger: Milosevic Death Divides Serbia,” *Deutsche Welle*, available from <http://www.dw-world.de/dw/article/0,2144,1932659,00.html>; Internet; accessed March 29, 2006.

completed and no verdict will be rendered.”³

While the Milosevic proceedings had lost much of their wider public interest by the end of 2005, due in large part to its perceived lack of progress, the trial of former Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein had begun. Unlike the Milosevic trial, which operated under the direction of the Hague and the authority of an international tribunal sanctioned by the United Nations, the *Iraqi Special Tribunal* was orchestrated by a newly constituted sovereign and interim Iraqi government, under the watchful eye of occupation forces. In only a short period of time, however, the decision to exercise justice within this new sovereign context began to produce less than encouraging results. As the sovereignty of this state appeared increasingly questionable -- so clearly dependent on elements of external economic, political, and military support -- this trial began to lose what limited public confidence it had begun with. For the purposes of justice, it appeared to many observers both internally and externally as a less than disinterested legal exercise. By the summer of 2006 the term “civil war” had entered editorial discourse concerning the war, and “Shia revenge” had entered into descriptive accounts of the trial itself. Audiences were now faced with the paradoxical situation of a less than convincing sovereign nation-state attempting to exercise its right to legally prosecute for crimes against humanity in accordance with this status. This situation quickly raised suspicions that the public was witnessing a displacement of justice by the staging of politics, or what is more commonly referred to in the legal vernacular as a “show trial.” The trial of Joan of Arc (1431), the second

³ Anthony Deutsch, “Chief U.N. Prosecutor Calls Milosević Death Before Verdict ‘Great Pity for Justice’,” *The Independent*, available from <http://news.independent.co.uk/europe/article350845.ece>; accessed March 13, 2006.

trial of Alfred Dreyfuss (1899), the trial of 16 (1936) all members of the Trotskyite-Zinovievite Terrorist Centre, the Nuremberg trials (1946), and the trial of Adolf Eichmann in (1961) had all fallen prey to public suspicions that guilt had been determined in advance, and that the disinterested ideals of justice had to greater or lesser degrees ceded to the interests of political groups. Despite mounting criticisms of the trial, and with the deaths of two defense lawyers and the resignation of one judge already behind it, the trial arrived at a guilty verdict and Hussein was hanged on December 30, 2006.

The execution of Saddam Hussein has been met with mixed forms of praise and protest, and yet both supporters and detractors of the trial's outcome seem to agree that the manner of the execution itself compromised the legitimacy of the verdict in the eyes of the public. Only days after the execution, Hasan Abu Nimah, a former Permanent Representative of Jordan at the United Nations, described the potentially long term significance of this event:

Many truths which the world deserved to know have perished forever with that savage execution. Yet, even if Saddam's trial had been impeccably handled, the fundamental principle of justice is equality before the law. Such "justice" has no chance of winning over the masses in this region when they observe that punishment is so swift and brutal when the accused is an Arab, Muslim head of state, while other accused former leaders, like Slobodan Milosevic, receive elaborate trials in The Hague (so long in Milosevic's case that he died of natural causes several years into the proceeding).⁴

With this event, already high levels of public skepticism have given way to a

⁴ Hasan Abu Nimah, "The Inevitable End of Saddam," *Electronic Iraq*, available from <http://electroniciraq.net/news/2790.shtml>; Internet; accessed January 8, 2007.

widespread belief that justice was incidental to the outcome of trial deliberations, and what will undoubtedly secure this belief for years to come is the lasting impression left by Hussein's hooded executioner, who supplemented the trial's verdict with the chorus of *Moktada, Moktada, Moktada*.⁵ With the emergence of these images, the sense that audiences make of this event has changed significantly, and the verdict of this trial has been submerged within a larger and more skeptical array of opinion. This suggestion finds support in accounts such as the following, which had indicated that the meaning of this event was becoming a more contested object of deliberation:

In the week since Saddam Hussein was hanged in an execution steeped in sectarian overtones, his public image in the Arab world, formerly that of a convicted dictator, has undergone a resurgence of admiration and awe.⁶

While there is little question that the overlap of the Milosevic and Hussein trials points to the increased frequency with which the public should expect to encounter criminals charged with offences against humanity, the failure of the former and the questionable conclusion to the latter both suggest that the difficulties which have constrained the project of international justice since the Nuremberg trials still obtain. Claims of "victor's justice" and the interests and disinterests of various political groups still complicate the integrity of verdicts. With respect to the Hussein trial in particular, there is the lingering suspicion of partisan revenge. As capital punishment is likely to become increasingly divisive amongst sovereign nations, so to the same

⁵ A provocative reference to the popular Shia Cleric Moktada al Sadr, accused of fuelling sectarian violence, and inciting crimes against the Sunni minority in Iraq.

⁶Hassan M. Fattah, "Hanging Images Make Hussein A Martyr to Many in Arab World," *The New York Times*, available from <http://www.nytimes.com/2007/01/06/world/middleeast/06arabs.html>; Internet, accessed January 10, 2007.

extent a universally acceptable form of punishment for crimes against humanity will likely constrain agreement amongst those nations participating in international law.⁷ The broader political significance of such trials, however, one that is due increasingly to more accessible and global networks of communication is the likelihood that such events will increasingly serve as forums for broadened public debate, and the public will find itself faced with not only the task of responding to these events, but of fitting these events into a collective outlook. Whether future trials are deemed show trials, or if they receive a more favorable and legitimate status in the eyes of a public, or whether the accused parties appear as diabolically monstrous or as “national heroes,” will in large part depend on the forms of public response to such trials. It is in a relationship to these highly publicized events that a society’s moral, ethical, and political bearings will be brokered, and out of this activity a society’s common sense will emerge.

Popular trials can be distinguished from most trials to the extent that once official legal deliberations have come to a close, these events are capable of resonating in the public realm for a much longer period of time. In his *Popular Trials*, Robert Hariman has suggested that “scholarship in communication would benefit from the critical study of popular trials as a genre,” and as such, one can distinguish

⁷ A lawyer and critic of capital punishment Scott Turow, has recently suggested that “The hanging of Saddam Hussein, in the face of ethnic jeers and smuggled cameras, will likely be remembered as yet another bungled episode in the Anglo-American misadventure of Iraq, rather than as a provocative example of what is wrong with capital punishment. But the execution of a person like Saddam, who committed such monstrous evil, inevitably provides an opportunity for reflection about this most vexed of all legal questions: whether the law may ever require the sacrifice of a life.” (Scott Turow, “Left Hanging,” *The Globe and Mail*, 13 January 2007, D15.)

between the “legal significance” and the “rhetorical significance” of these events.⁸

Legal significance means that a case influences subsequent legal judgment. Such a case influences lawyers as they decide whether and how to argue, and it influences judges and juries as they attempt to make reasoned judgments in accord with the law. A case has rhetorical significance if it becomes a standard reference in public argument... Obviously, many trials that are significant legally never catch the public eye, and many popular trials have considerable rhetorical significance but negligible legal significance.

...Rather than assume that the popular trial is irrevocably a legal proceeding, or ultimately a media event, the better approach is to conceptualize the trials as a class of events constituted by a unique intersection of legal and media practices functioning to maintain a community through persuasive argumentation and judgment.⁹

As public events, the mistrial of Milosevic and the trial of Hussein now share a higher degree of rhetorical significance, and it is difficult to say to what extent and in what ways they will resonate with those groups or individuals who choose to respond to them.

In what follows, I will be considering another popular trial that was both legally and rhetorically significant in the sense that Hariman uses these terms. On the one hand, the trial of Adolf Eichmann in 1961 signaled a number of noteworthy and controversial legal precedents for the prosecution of war criminals. Unlike the Nuremberg trials, the trial of Eichmann was set within a national as opposed to international context, and it was also the first trial that in addition to crimes against humanity and war crimes, charged the accused with crimes against a specific nation:

⁸ Robert Hariman, *Popular Trials: Rhetoric, Mass Media, and the Law*, (Tuscaloosa, The University of Alabama Press: 1990), 3.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 4.

the Jewish people. The legality of his capture and covert extradition from Argentina by the State of Israel, has been the subject of much legal debate, and therefore part of the legal significance of this trial. My concern in the following, however, will be with the rhetorical significance of this trial, which has proved to be no less contested than the legal questions it has raised. In particular I will be limiting my discussion to one individual's response to this event, Hannah Arendt's *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (1963), a work that has contributed much to this event's rhetorical significance.

Eichmann was found by the Israeli Secret Service in Argentina in 1959 where he was caught and brought to Jerusalem to stand trial for crimes against the Jewish people, war crimes, and crimes against humanity. While working for both the *Office for Jewish Emigration* and the *Reich Central Security Office* during the Nazi period, Eichmann's main responsibilities concerned the administration and mass evacuation of Jews during the war, and particularly the deportation of thousands to the eastern European killing centers during the period of the Final Solution. A well-known philosopher of German-Jewish descent, Arendt arrived in Jerusalem in 1960 to cover the Eichmann trial for *The New Yorker* magazine. In a letter to her former teacher Karl Jaspers in 1960, Arendt alludes to her personal interest in attending the trial:

To attend this trial is somehow, I feel, an obligation I owe my past...I would never be able to forgive myself if I didn't go and look at this walking disaster face to face in all his bizarre vacuousness without the mediation of the printed word.¹⁰

¹⁰ Richard Bernstein, *Hannah Arendt and the Jewish Question*, (Cambridge, MIT Press: 1996), 155.

Yet the disaster recalled in Arendt's report was not the disaster that many of her readers had expected to find, and her figuring of the accused posed a significant challenge to a common understanding of these types of crimes, and the types of individuals responsible for them. The subtitle of Arendt's report, *A Report on the Banality of Evil*, would arouse the indignation of many readers secure in the belief that Eichmann was a thoughtful and inspired incarnation of evil, or an instance of evil within a narrative of eternal anti-semitism. While such an understanding was supported and encouraged in the rhetoric of the main prosecutor, Gideon Hausner, Arendt's own observations of the accused led her to the belief that such understandings were unsupportable, and it is this belief that she attempts to persuade her audience of. While the prosecution attempted to fit Eichmann into a history of anti-semitism -- to flatter a popular belief that these types of crimes inevitably lead back to anti-semitism -- Arendt refused to accept such claims on the grounds that to arrive at such a belief, one would have to ignore the fact that in this case Eichmann displayed no positive signs of anti-semitism during the trial. Against the prosecution's positive figuring of Eichmann as a sublime incarnation of evil thinking and action, Arendt appealed to a negative scheme of evil, or the banality of mere thoughtlessness.

Arendt's response to the Eichmann trial, and the ways in which *banality* is figured in her report, significantly challenged and altered the acceptable manners of Holocaust discourse at a time when these manners were increasingly disposed to rhetorics of the *sublime*. The rhetorical significance of her report, therefore, is tied up with the larger question of how one sees fit to respond to a series of events like the Holocaust, and what is seen by others as acceptable or sensible. For although Arendt

was responding to a very specific event, and to a very unique individual, this event would ultimately be drawn into the larger discourse of the Holocaust. At this point in time, moreover, Holocaust debate was drawn to the more general questions raised by the Final Solution. Not surprisingly, these questions would often yield insufficient answers, and rhetorics of the sublime signaled and emphasized the limits of what could be known or understood about the Holocaust.

There are a number of possible reasons that Arendt would have for undertaking a strategy that was bound to meet with widespread public condemnation, and many have speculated that her report was designed to produce a broader debate concerning the nature of the Nazi genocide. This is certainly true, but I feel it does not go far enough, and I will argue that there is much in the Eichmann report that addresses more general questions concerning the nature of citizenship, and how the conditions of communication within a given society are capable of fostering or preventing these crimes.

One of the central themes that I will be considering is that Arendt is thoroughly concerned with measuring her audience against the type of citizen Eichmann was, and that her rhetoric does not allow for a self-satisfying judgment of the accused. That is, her appeal does not allow her readers to assume a moral position high above this citizen. If there is any truth to Arendt's claim that Eichmann could not think for himself, and that this led to unthinkable suffering, then her audience is persuaded to confront this reality and this particular aspect of the truth. Arendt's report leaves

readers with the disturbingly ironic impression that a positively unthinkable set of events might have followed from the negatively thoughtless acts of masses of citizens just like Eichmann, and that when faced with this terrifying truth, with this 'walking disaster', an audience which had gathered to pass judgment on Eichmann was perhaps itself not prepared to think about this situation before submitting it to a general rule of anti-semitism. I will be arguing that this general rule had secured itself within the public sensibility of many who followed the Eichmann trial, but for Arendt it was this rule that could have seriously negative long-term consequences. By figuring Eichmann's habits of thinking negatively, Arendt alludes at the same time to a type of positive citizenry, a public that was positive in the sense that it was made up of thinking and acting individuals.

I use the term 'Socratic ethos' in the following to designate an idea (or an ideal) of citizenship, for it is this ancient Greek character that best captures the importance Arendt places on the combined activities of thinking and acting. A Socratic ethos confronts the laziness of group morality, and the dependence on external criteria for judgment, both of which Arendt observed in the casual application of anti-semitism to the Eichmann trial. A Socratic ethos, therefore, constitutes an agonistic space for deliberation that is secured in independent thinking and acting, and it is such a space that enables and encourages citizens to see objects and situations from many perspectives. If the banality of thoughtless citizens is successfully figured in a relationship to the sublimity of Holocaust suffering, I will argue that a terrible irony presents itself to Arendt's audience, and it is this irony that

perplexes and purges the readers' shared wisdom in order to make room for independent thought. By making use of a rhetoric of the banal within an ironic frame, Arendt felt that her ideal citizen might emerge, a Socratic citizen that could think before acting and could resist the injustices of group morality tales.

Hannah Arendt and Socratic Ethos

Now that I look back, I realize that a life predicated on being obedient is a very comfortable life indeed. Living in such a way reduces to a minimum one's own need to think.¹¹

- Adolf Eichmann

Could the activity of thinking as such, the habit of examining and reflecting upon whatever happens to come to pass or to attract attention, regardless of results and specific content, could this activity be among the conditions that make men abstain from evil-doing or even actually "condition" them against it?¹²

- Hannah Arendt

The terms *vita activa* and *vita contemplativa*, which loosely translate from their latin origins as the 'life of action' and the 'life of contemplation' respectively, capture the concerns of the citizen -- the one who acts in the company of others and according to the finite and always shifting events of public life -- as distinguished from the concerns of the philosopher -- whose solitary way of thinking gravitates towards eternal and unchanging forms. How do the activities of thinking and acting, and their respective spheres of politics and philosophy, concern one another? Do they concern one another at all, or can they function in relative independence from one another? Can one of these activities be made useful or relevant to the other, and how does judgment mediate these activities? Is there a form of citizenship that accounts for a proper transaction between thinking and acting, and if so, what kind of ethos can we associate with such citizenship? It is questions like these that would occupy much of

¹¹ Dana Villa, Ed., *Cambridge Companion to Hannah Arendt* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 286.

¹² Hannah Arendt, *The Life of the Mind* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1978), 5.

Hannah Arendt's thoughts both leading up to the trial of Adolf Eichmann in 1961, and in the years that followed its conclusion in 1962. In her most theoretically conceived works, *The Human Condition* (1958) and *The Life of the Mind* (1978), one finds her most thorough attempts to both pose and answer such questions. Yet while Eichmann sat accused in a Jerusalem courtroom for his participation in "crimes against the Jewish people, crimes against humanity, and war crimes during the whole period of the Nazi regime,"¹³ one can hardly expect that political-philosophical considerations of this variety would have contributed much to the judges' own assessments of the accused, whose professional commitments would constrain them to weigh no more than the facts and testimony as they might appear in the course of this trial. One might fairly suspect, moreover, that for large portions of the public that had gathered in Jerusalem, such questions would remain about as far from this particular public's frame of mind as the suspicion of his innocence. When considered next to the prevailing public outlook of Zionism and next to the experiences of survivors, two groups that together would have undoubtedly formed the larger part of the trial's immediate audience in Jerusalem, it is only with some difficulty that we might imagine appealing to this public on the grounds of a political-philosophical understanding of the accused. In what ways could a philosophical line of inquiry contribute to the concrete goals of Zionism? How could the answers to such an inquiry possibly lessen the suffering of survivors? Yet it is upon precisely such

¹³ Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (Hereafter annotated as *EIJ*) (New York: Penguin Books, 1994), 21.

considerations that Arendt will build her own case for understanding Eichmann.

I would argue that Arendt undertakes a very specific performance of philosophical citizenship in her report, and while her rhetoric challenges the collective outlooks of her audience, it attempts at the same time to constitute a *Socratic ethos* in her audience and an agonistic space for debate that is tempered by independent thought. Socrates embodies the habits of independent thinking that Eichmann lacked, and Arendt's rhetoric challenges her audience to embrace independent thinking and self-examination in ways that the accused could not. By raising a red flag against consensus, and by challenging collective wisdoms and common assumptions, Arendt demands that her readers look at this event with new eyes and abstain from subsuming this particular event within a general historical outlook. Arendt's rhetoric measures Eichmann and her audience against a Socratic form of citizenship: a civic "awareness that man is a thinking and acting being in one -- someone, namely, whose thoughts invariably and unavoidably accompany his acts," and for Socrates, this "is what improves men and citizens."¹⁴ Josiah Ober points out that a Socratic code of ethics

...was stern and inflexible...As a citizen you are obliged to revere your polis (which includes special affection for your fellow citizens...), to spare no effort or expense in seeking to improve its residents, and never to harm it. ...If you are more knowledgeable (even if your knowledge is a negative recognition of your own moral ignorance) than the current rulers of the polis (in Athens: the entire citizenry), you are duty-bound to criticize them

¹⁴ Hannah Arendt, *The Promise of Politics* (New York: Schocken, 2005), 22.

by pointing out the nature, extent, and harmfulness of their ignorance. You must subject to your elenchus any and all of your fellows who prove willing to discuss serious matters with you (elite and non-elite alike). They will, however, probably choose not to reward you, but rather to punish you for criticizing their views. If they employ established laws and legal procedures, you are contractually bound to suffer the sentence, even if it substantially unjust.¹⁵

Elenchus and self-examination not only improves men and citizens in times of democratic stability, but for Arendt such habits are productive of an independent morality, a conscientious and self-sufficient form of citizenship that helps to guide citizens during “dark times,” times when a public’s shared sense of reality has been eclipsed by totalitarian oppression. For Arendt it was difficult, yet crucial, to consider the possibility that Eichmann’s thoughts never accompanied his actions, that this was part of a complex truth that was revealed in the course of trial deliberations in Jerusalem, and yet it was equally important that her audience also think for themselves and to question the claims of both common sense and general frameworks of understanding. Arendt’s report sets itself against the rhetoric of the state, which “speaks with the voice of Gideon Hausner, the attorney General,”¹⁶ and aims to reconstitute collective piety towards an official narrative of suffering and redemption. Hausner portrays Eichmann as the most recent link in an unbroken chain of historical suffering, a cosmic personification of anti-semitism that refers audience members towards a collective image of the future: the narrative of Zionism and its realization in

¹⁵ Josiah Ober, *Political Dissent in Democratic Athens: Intellectual Critics of Popular Rule* (Princeton: Princeton University Press: 1998), 184-185.

¹⁶ Arendt, *EIJ*, 5.

the state of Israel.

Arendt would ask her readers to resist such historicist frames and the consensus that they appeal to, and to think about what might be unique in this case. Rhetorics of the diabolical and the sublime might adequately capture the background of collective Jewish suffering, and the unlimited scope of this background. But such rhetorics, she argued, could only distort and eclipse the figure of Eichmann who stood in the foreground of discussion, an individual who appeared to her as significantly limited. Against such rhetorics Arendt's report attempts to clarify and make distinctions between the *unthinkable* background of suffering, and the individual who stands before them who appeared to be merely *thoughtless*. It is in formulating this distinction that a rhetoric of the sublime begins to come up against a rhetoric of the banal, and both would invite audiences to respond in different ways to this event. While a positive portrayal of anti-semitism invites audiences to embrace a Zionist and patriotic narrative of redemption, a negative scheme of thoughtlessness invites readers to embrace independent perspectives and narratives in ways that that Eichmann could not. As they are set against each other in this context, these competing rhetorics pull audiences in two different directions, one towards an agonistic and individual sensibility, and the other towards a more communitarian and collective sensibility. The gulf that the Eichmann report opens up between collective and agonistic readerships is captured by Shoshanna Felman, who suggests that Arendt's report appears as a "counternarrative" to the security and "solidarity"

offered by the official narrative, and that her

...critical history is the decanonizing and iconoclastic counternarrative of a resistant reader, whose faith is in diversity and separation (rather than in unity and in communal solidarity) and who speaks truth to power, from a "position...close to the classical anarchist one -- with anarchy understood to mean the absence of rulers, not the absence of law."¹⁷

For Arendt, false understandings result from narrow and unifying narratives of collective identification, while truth and reality result from a diversity of perspectives that illuminate the public sphere. Arendt's elenchus refutes what she suspects are the efforts of David Ben Gurion -- the Prime Minister of Israel at this time -- whom she characterizes as "the invisible stage manager of the trial,"¹⁸ to use this public event as a "springboard"¹⁹ for Zionism. To figure Eichmann as simply the next villain within a narrative of eternal anti-semitism, and as a more thoughtful and capable actor within this history, distorted the reality of this event for the purposes of solidifying public piety. As a philosophical outsider Arendt mobilizes a dissident rhetoric that seeks to purge this official opinion. Once purged, there is the hope that independent thought will liberate itself from public creed, and new narratives and perspectives will help to illuminate these events.

As Socratic forms of citizenship deviate from the piety of majority opinion, the

¹⁷ Shoshanna Felman, "Theaters of Justice: Arendt in Jerusalem, the Eichmann Trial, and the Redefinition of Legal Meaning in the Wake of the Holocaust," *Critical Inquiry* 27 no. 2 (2001): 222.

¹⁸ Arendt, *EIJ*, 5.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 285.

dissident actor assumes significant risks in relation to a broader polity. Within highly constituted communities the ‘gadfly’ and the ‘electric ray’ have much work to do, but he or she will find little accommodation amongst the faithful. Successful appeals will often arouse the indignation of popular opinion. Dana Villa has described the “peculiar martyrdom” assumed by acts of dissent within cohesive moral majorities as an informal exile from the community itself and from politics as such. While discussing the relationship between Socratic citizenship and the work of Alexis de Tocqueville, Villa points out that he

...fears the moral power a democratic majority exercises over opinion more than he does the physical power it wields over individuals and minorities. This power, according to Tocqueville, reaches into the domain of thought itself, producing a kind of “courtier-spirit” which affects almost everyone. Thus, “as long as the majority is in doubt, there is discussion; but as soon as it has irrevocably decided, all hold their peace; and friends and enemies seem equally to yoke themselves to its car.” If a dissident thinker or writer transgresses the “formidable circle” the majority has traced “around the province of thought,” he faces a peculiar martyrdom: not an auto-da-fe or public trial and condemnation, to be sure, but a series of “everyday persecutions” and an “infinity” of chagrins.” “To him,” Tocqueville writes, “the career of politics is closed; he has offended the sole power which could admit him into it.” The majority, living in “perpetual adoration of itself,” is mortally offended by the slightest reproach and insists that everything about it, “from the turn of its phraseology to its most solid virtues,” must be endlessly imitated and applauded.²⁰

Because Arendt never withdrew from the controversial public position she staked out, she paid both a personal and political price for the divisions this text encouraged within a broader Jewish community. For many of her intellectual colleagues, and for

²⁰ Dana Villa, *Socratic Citizenship* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), 67-68.

many more survivors Arendt was found guilty of circulating a misleading response to the Holocaust, or what Gershom Scholem described as a “malicious” perspective of her own people. The report was demonized by members of the Jewish establishment as a threat to broader solidarity within a post-Auschwitz malaise, and the backlash against both Arendt and the report was most evident in America, where she was subject to what Amos Elon described as a veritable “excommunication” within this establishment. According to Elon,

...more than three years after the publication of Hannah Arendt's *Eichmann in Jerusalem, A Report on the Banality of Evil* first appeared in print, the civil war it had launched among intellectuals in the United States and in Europe was still seething. Describing the debate that raged through his own and other families in New York, Anthony Grafton later wrote that no subject had fascinated and aroused such concern and serious discussion as the series of articles Hannah Arendt had published in *The New Yorker* about the Eichmann trial, and the book that grew out of them. Three years after the publication of the book, people were still bitterly divided over it. No book within living memory had elicited similar passions. A kind of excommunication seemed to have been imposed on the author by the Jewish establishment in America.²¹

Today, the Eichmann report retains a complex and controversial status, hailed by some as groundbreaking and still by others as heretical. There are those who continue to regard it as a deceptive piece of sophistry, and feel threatened by the very possibility of having their minds changed in such matters, and there are others who see her report as speaking a higher truth to this event. I prefer to see this work contributing to Holocaust discourse in a different way, and I don't think that the

²¹ Amos Elon, “The Excommunication of Hannah Arendt,” *World Policy Journal*, 23, No. 4, (2001): 93.

significance of this text can be reduced to the poles of undisputed truth or to sophistry in bad faith. I see her text functioning as a persistent rhetorical gadfly within this discourse, a text that continues to arouse questions concerning the political breakdowns that gave way to these dark times, and moreover, the conventional wisdoms that we use to make sense of these breakdowns. The possibility that such ordinary citizens could stand over and above such extraordinary crimes was a perplexity that was not easy for Arendt to dismiss, and it is this irony that displaces an understanding of this event being promoted by the established authorities. Arendt's report refuses to accept that Eichmann can be understood within a general framework of anti-semitism, and despite the prosecution's effort to figure him within such a tragic frame, this was, in Socratic terms, not a "real child" of thought, but merely a "wind-egg of which the bearer must be cleansed."²²

While political communities still face the difficult task of moving beyond this chapter of modern history, Arendt's report demanded that her audience proceed without using particular events to advance a politics of consensus, and to question those truths that appear undisputed within this discourse. Arendt presents her audience with a partial political truth, and her rhetoric asks not obedience to this truth, but encourages more partial perspectives and other unique idioms that might account for the novelty of these events. An accumulation of perspectives and disputes served not only to strengthen the reality of these new crimes, but Arendt argued that it was

²² Arendt, *The Life of the Mind*, 173.

the accumulation of diverse opinions as such that served to improve and fortify the public sphere against other movements that might demand piety towards a single and unifying narrative. For Arendt, such accumulations contributed to the development of robust agonistic spaces for debate, and public spheres that could ultimately shield communities from the dark times that follow from a collective embrace of totalizing ideas and the eventual collapse of discussion altogether. The Eichmann report served to rupture a discourse that Arendt saw moving ominously towards larger collective and patriotic judgments. As Socrates imagined his “sting could really...awaken at least some Athenians,”²³ so I would argue that Arendt hoped that a rhetoric of the banal could provide some of her readers with a discomfoting alternative to the security and consensus offered by the narrative of eternal anti-semitism within the broader Jewish community.

²³ Ober, 184.

The Jewish Question and the Herzlian Narrative

Prior to the emergence of Zionism as a popular Jewish movement, Arendt argued that the much older narrative of Jewish exile corresponded to a lengthy period of political “worldlessness” for the Jews, an experience that could be seen as both a blessing and a curse. According to Arendt, to be worldless meant to be free from social connection and prejudice, and Jewish independence from historical or political interests produced a sense of humanity that was different from other peoples or nations who were engaged as historical actors:

...the Jewish people are a classic example of a worldless people maintaining themselves throughout thousands of years...this worldlessness which the Jewish people suffered in being dispersed, and which -- as with all people who are pariahs -- generated a special warmth among those who belonged...²⁴

While Arendt regards the blessing of worldlessness as freedom from social connection and prejudice, such freedom comes at the price of an active relationship to history. To be free from prejudice is at the same time to lack the freedom to act and judge as a Jew, and to constitute a world that you are not merely subject to but productive of. Following the destruction of the second temple of Jerusalem in 70 c.e. the Jewish people had come to accept their position as spectators of history, subject to the actions of others and with few exceptions barred from its constitution. Arendt describes the situation of the Jews as a “people without a history within history,” and

²⁴ Hannah Arendt, *The Portable Hannah Arendt* (New York: Penguin Books, 2000), 17.

from “within a historical reality, from within a European secularized world, they are forced somehow to adopt themselves to this world, to form themselves. But for them formation is by necessity everything that is the non-Jewish world.”²⁵ Such worldlessness could be accommodated to greater or lesser degrees within a larger religious narrative of messianic redemption, a story that referred members to a distant but promised period of self-formation. Yet in the late 18th century the question of Jewish worldlessness would become the object of a broader public debate, a situation that Jews and non-Jews alike would be invited to respond to en masse. In Europe, the worldlessness of the Jews began to assume the form of a more generic field of inquiry know as “the Jewish question.”

Before an age messianic freedom could be realized, the wordlessness of the Jews would come into conflict with some of the more notable representatives of Enlightenment thought, and the Jewish question became a more frequent object of public debate. Intellectuals began to ask publicly if, and on what terms Jews could be accommodated within a universally Enlightened European context. From his essay *On the Civic Improvement of the Jews* (1781), Christian Willhelm Dohm formulated the Jewish question in the following way:

...if the Jews, along with their prejudices, did not exist-but since they do exist, do we really still have a choice from among the following: to wipe them off the face of the earth (presuming such a thing can even be conceived of in our day) all at once or by taking measures that gradually

²⁵ Kohn & Feldman, 16.

achieve that goal; or to let them remain in perpetuity the same unwholesome members of society that they have been thus far; or to make them better citizens of the world?²⁶

Before Hitler's Final Solution, two alternative solutions presented themselves to European Jews. Assimilation and Zionism were both political ideas that departed from a religiously conceived narrative of messianic redemption, and both concerned the very question of how the Jews would, or would not, constitute themselves collectively. Theodore Herzl's *The Jewish State* (1896) appeared one hundred years after Dohm officially raised the Jewish question for the European public, and this text -- written primarily in response to the trial of Alfred Dreyfuss -- proposed a spiritual and material solution that veered sharply from the ideology of assimilation. In *The Jewish State* Herzl restated the Jewish question for the Jewish masses, and his response suggested why he regarded assimilation as a flawed response,

I shall now put the Question in the briefest possible form: Are we to "get out" now and where to?

Or, may we yet remain? And, how long?

Let us first settle the point of staying where we are. Can we hope for better days, can we possess our souls in patience, can we wait in pious resignation till the princes and peoples of this earth are more mercifully disposed towards us? I say that we cannot hope for a change in the current of feeling. And why not? Even if we were as near to the hearts of princes as are their other subjects, they could not protect us. They would only feel popular hatred by showing us too much favor. By "too much," I really mean less than is claimed as a right by every ordinary citizen, or by every race. The nations in whose midst Jews live are all either covertly or openly Anti-Semitic.²⁷

²⁶ Cited from Hannah Arendt, *Antisemitism*, in Kohn & Ron H. Feldman, 64.

²⁷ Theodore Herzl, *The Jewish State* (New York: Dover Publications, 1989), 86.

With the emergence of modern anti-semitism, Herzl argues that assimilation ceased to present itself as tenable answer to the Jewish question, and Herzl's Zionism offers a counter-narrative to what he regards as the false ideals and hopes of assimilation. Modern anti-semitism, according to Arendt, was bold enough to assert that the Jew "was the evil principle of history," and was therefore beyond the possibility of "improvement" that had previously contextualized the Jewish question.²⁸ From a spirit of passive historical reception, Herzl appealed to a transformation of the Jewish character into an ethos of collective action and production. Such a transformation was meant to prepare the Jewish masses for the materialization of a Jewish homeland, and a permanent space within which they could constitute a new historical reality.

Arendt herself had early hopes that the Zionist movement could form the grounds on which broader and coordinated forms of Jewish action could emerge. Organized Jewish action signaled a widespread awakening from an ethos of political resignation, one that could draw the Jewish masses into a more active relationship with the "drama of the world."²⁹ The intellectual leaders of Zionism proposed a more direct confrontation with the realities of modern anti-semitism, and they rejected what they saw as an outdated concept of assimilation that merely obscured such realities. Zionism held out the potential to provide a new framework for self-understanding that no longer limited the Jewish masses to either enlightenment idealism or to an exhausted religious narrative of messianic redemption. In its early ferment, Zionism

²⁸ Kohn & Ron H. Feldman, 64.

²⁹ Kohn & Ron H. Feldman, 306.

appealed to Arendt because it was an unprecedented call to action within the history of the Jewish people, and she felt that “Herzl’s lasting greatness lay in his very desire to do something about the Jewish question, his desire to act and to solve the problem in political terms.”³⁰

Yet Arendt’s early enthusiasm for Zionism and the Herzlian outlook would turn to skepticism as she saw the majority of its followers embracing an “unchanging” idea of history, and a reality that depended largely on a fixed understanding of the Jewish place in the world. According to Arendt,

...the more ideological and utopian elements expressed in *The Jewish State* had greater influence in the long run on the formulations and practice of Zionism...Herzl’s will to reality at any price rested on a view that held reality to be an unchanging and unchangeable structure, always identical with itself. In this reality he saw eternally established nation-states arrayed compactly against the Jews on one side, and on the other side the Jews themselves, in dispersion and eternally persecuted. Nothing else mattered: differences in class structure, differences between political parties or movements, between various periods of history, did not exist for Herzl. All that did exist were unchanging bodies of people viewed as biological organisms mysteriously endowed with eternal life; these bodies breathed an unchanging hostility toward the Jews that was ready to take the form of pogroms or persecution at any moment. Any segment of reality that could not be defined by anti-semitism was not taken into account and any group that could not be definitely classed as anti-Semitic was not taken seriously as a political force.³¹

As Zionism shifted towards a more official doctrine of self-understanding, Arendt became more apprehensive about the manner in which Zionism would constitute a

³⁰ Kohn & Ron H. Feldman, 377.

³¹ Kohn & Ron H. Feldman, 381-382.

new reality for Jews around the world, and how events would become subject to a more determined scheme of history. Arendt's early hopes for an authentic Jewish politics began to diminish as collective piety towards an official narrative of Zionism inevitably increased in the aftermath of the Holocaust. The Final Solution ensured that masses of displaced Jews would ultimately recognize anti-Semitism as an underlying principle of history, and these same masses were therefore encouraged by a revitalized moral Jewish majority to embrace a stricter Herzlian narrative.

By the time of Eichmann's trial in 1961, Arendt had already distanced herself from the mainstream elements of the Zionist movement. According to Richard Bernstein, her early interests in Zionism were stimulated by her concerns for a "Jewish politics," yet with the founding of a sovereign state she had deep reservations concerning the movement of Israeli politics in accordance with a hardened ideological outlook:

Arendt criticized and was disappointed by the revisionist tendencies in Zionist ideology and politics...it was also in the context of these debates that Arendt came to appreciate the irreducibility and necessity for multiple perspectives and the clash of opinions (*doxoi*) in political communities. She thought of herself as a member of the "loyal opposition," not as an anti-Zionist.³²

The European experience of ideologies would lead Arendt to conclude that a stricter Herzlian perspective risked drawing a broader Jewish public out of a realistic frame of reference and creating a climate of cultural and political myopia. The urgent

³² Bernstein, 11.

question for Arendt was what kind of actors and citizens could be expected to emerge from an increasingly collectivist and historicist Zionist framework. For Arendt, piety towards a more ideological and Herzlian narrative of Zionism was an irresponsible shift in public outlook, and it could potentially set the political stage for further disasters for the Jewish people. According to Feldman,

...In the mid 1940's...advocacy of binationalism was out of step with the mainstream of the Zionist movement. While for many years the Zionist majority was in favor of coexistence with the Arabs in a binational Palestine, by the end of World War II, in reaction to the genocide of European Jewry, the Zionist maximum -- the establishment of a sovereign Jewish State -- had become the Zionist minimum. This shift in the Zionist position is the crux of Arendt's criticism of official Zionist policy throughout this period, for she maintained...that the creation of a Jewish State was out of touch with the realities of the situation in the Near East and the world at large....According to Arendt, this shift had the potential to become the basis for "an essentially sane Jewish political movement," for it indicated a desire to deal with reality and live freely in the world. The problem was that in their desire to overcome the centuries long experience of worldlessness, the Jews grasped on to the unrealistic ideological framework of Herzlian Zionism and its doctrine of eternal anti-semitism. The result was the famous "Masada complex" in which this newfound desire for dignity was transformed into a potentially suicidal attitude.³³

The trial was bound to emerge as the most significant public non-military event in the state's short history, and while many regarded it as an occasion to examine Zionism's other within a secured and Jewish political space, Arendt uses this event to raise questions about both self and other. By stepping out of the official Zionist narrative that binds the public sphere, and by refusing to frame Eichmann within an ideology of

³³ Ibid., lviii.

eternal anti-semitism, Arendt assumes the position of a conscious rebel amongst the majority of her own people. Her report on the Eichmann trial aims to awaken her audience from what she would regard as the common, but nonetheless “unrealistic framework of understanding”. By constituting a reality that does not perceive from the Herzlian position of eternal anti-semitism, it is likely that Arendt hoped to reorient her audience with a new perspective, one that did not see history as an orthodox struggle between moral opposites.

Kohn attributes the peculiarity of Arendt’s perspectivism to a more complicated relationship to both her Jewish identity and her development as a German philosopher, one that accepts neither the Jewish or European traditions uncritically but submits both to perspectives derived from the other. According to Kohn,

Not standing inside or outside either her Jewish or European heritage, Hannah Arendt uses both as platforms from which to gain a critical insight into the other. On the one hand, she consciously stands outside the Jewish tradition, subjecting the experience of the Jews in the modern world to the criticism of a German philosopher rooted in the European classics. Distinguishing between Jewishness -- an existential given that one cannot escape -- and Judaism -- a system of beliefs which one can adopt or reject -- she adamantly accepts the one and rejects the other. In doing so, she became a rebel among her own people. On the other hand, Arendt uses her experience as a Jew and her perspective as a conscious pariah standing outside the mainstream of Western society to analyze and gain an understanding of that society.³⁴

As a German philosopher Arendt could subject her own people to the critical insight of an outsider. To figure Eichmann as a specimen within the history of political-

³⁴ Kohn & Feldman, xliv.

philosophical thought, as opposed to a monster within the history of Jewish suffering, was to offer a new and alien framework for understanding this event. By inviting others to see and think from such a political-philosophical perspective, she encourages a certain skepticism towards the Herzlian doctrine of eternal anti-semitism. Arendt did not see Eichmann's trial in a way that was the "same for all" because her observations of his trial revealed no positive evidence of hatred or malice towards Jews. For Arendt, Eichmann's place within the Herzlian narrative of anti-semitism could not be reconciled against her own observations, and the observations of many others who were struck by how normal the accused appeared to be. Arendt saw an opportunity to address her own people from the background of European thought, to play the part of a skeptical outsider who saw the Jewish public falling into a trap of its own making. As it was constituted in the rhetoric of the prosecution, the reality of this event for Arendt was a false one, for it was forced out of an ideological framework that ignored the fact that the accused did not appear to have any positive connection with anti-semitism. To figure this event within Arendt's own history of political thought then was to step out of such a reality, and to offer readers a counter-reality that surveyed this event outside of the dominant frame of reference.

The Question of "Reality"

When Arendt arrived in Israel in 1961, there are a few reasons to think that a communitarian outlook would define a prevailing public sensibility, and particularly as it was secured under the aegis of Zionism. The Holocaust remained a difficult subject of personal and public discussion, yet such difficulties could be set aside as collective aspirations were directed towards securing the state against the threat of lingering conflicts. Circumstances of material uncertainty could only strengthen a sense of collective purpose, resolve, and the security that group identity offered. At the time Eichmann was brought to trial Zionism still presented itself to citizens as a moral compass, and political events, whether internal or external, could still be made intelligible as they were set against this collective view of history. Yet Eichmann's appearance at the trial did not immediately, or overtly, confirm the presence of anti-semitism, for he betrayed little in the way of outward pathological contempt for Jews *as Jews*. Despite the average impression that Eichmann left on many who followed the trial, a conscious effort was made to fit him into the mold of anti-semitism, and this effort, according to Arendt, was supported by the state. To frame Eichmann as the latest but inevitable incarnation of anti-semitic evil, Arendt accuses the state and the public of acting, not unlike Eichmann, without thinking for themselves. As Eichmann was cut off from the terrible reality of his actions by his sheer thoughtlessness, so Arendt's report argued that those members of the public gathering to pass judgment might also attempt to shield themselves from the more complicated

and unfamiliar reality of his crimes.

It is likely that Arendt saw Eichmann emerging from a different background, and that in fact he made more sense when placed within a Kantian, and therefore a European, framework of understanding. In particular, Arendt might have imagined Eichmann as being helplessly suspended in Kant's notion of a "self-incurred immaturity," for according to her own observations, he was habitually disposed to submit all situations to either conventional wisdom, or to his orders. Eichmann appears in Arendt's report as a citizen who has not yet taken responsibility for his own actions, one whose morality functions in a dependent relationship with organized authority. These attributes come close to Kant's characterizations of the "unenlightened" citizen, for whom...

It is so convenient to be immature! If I have a book to have understanding in place of me, a spiritual adviser to have a conscience for me, a doctor to judge my diet for me, and so on, I need not make any efforts at all. I need not think, so long as I can pay; others will soon enough take the tiresome job over for me.³⁵

Thoughtlessness is a form of "laziness," and for Kant the enlightened citizen was one who had been aroused from such laziness and had broken from the bonds of external authority. Yet Eichmann was bound to authority to a terrifyingly high degree, so much so that he never let his own thoughts get in the way of what he was told to do.

³⁵ Immanuel Kant, "An Answer to the Question: "What is Enlightenment," available from <http://philosophy.eserver.org/kant/what-is-enlightenment.txt>; Internet, accessed April 17, 2007.

From Arendt's point of view, both before and after the trial, the events and situations that Eichmann was confronted with never penetrated the depths of his own thinking, and such habits pointed at the best of times to a shallow sense of reality, and at the worst of times -- under the conditions of totalitarian rule -- to outright distortions of reality. Arendt's report relentlessly pursues this negative and immature figure of citizenship, recalling in one instance that

...in the setting of the Israeli court and prison procedures he functioned as well as he had functioned under the Nazi regime but, when confronted with situations for which such routine procedures did not exist, he was helpless, and his cliché-ridden language produced on the stand, as it had done in his official life, a kind of macabre comedy. Cliches, stock phrases, adherence to conventional, standardized codes of expression and conduct have the socially recognized function of protecting us against reality...³⁶

Arendt figures Eichmann as a morally "helpless" citizen, and when unprecedented "situations" presented themselves his instinct was to obey whatever structures of authority were at hand, however criminal they may have been. In the absence of external moral standards to guide his actions he could not internalize moral judgments because he could not think for himself. Orders were never questioned by Eichmann himself, and his fellow citizens never questioned the manner or devotion with which he carried them out. Yet if Eichmann's "cliché-ridden" speech merely served to shield him from the reality of crime and suffering that surrounded him, then for Arendt it appeared that her own audience, under significantly more favorable political conditions, might also shield itself from the reality of this new type of criminal. The

³⁶ Arendt, *Life of the Mind*, 4.

irony of this situation for Arendt was that those who sought to pass public judgment, and to make sense of this event, were unwilling to do so in a way that defied conventional explanations. By having recourse to caricatures or archetypes of evil, the public was seeking the easy way out of this unprecedented situation by avoiding a square confrontation with the accused. To submit Eichmann to similarly “conventional, standardized codes of expression,” and to figure his actions in accordance with more familiar historical forms of anti-semitism was to place this event within a shared mythology of evil, and it is arguably in such a mythology that both the aesthetics and rhetorics of the sublime in Holocaust discourse are most at home. Mythological figures of evil are capable of filling the narrative gap that such unprecedented crimes open up, and the prosecution at Eichmann’s trial would seek to fit Eichmann into this gap. To figure the accused as a significant antagonist within a narrative of eternal anti-semitism, a tale in which there were many anti-heroes with the same face, was to pay homage to common sense and to secure a communal solidarity. It is a reality that the prosecution sought to reconstitute for the public. Yet for Arendt this amounted to a simplification of the problem that presented itself to the public and was a collective distortion of this event’s reality.

Ben Gurion's Lessons and Arendt's Lesson of Thoughtlessness

Arendt harbored no illusions concerning the general “mood” of her fellow audience members in Jerusalem, and her descriptions of the courtroom suggest that a broader consensus had secured this public in advance against the appearance of something new with this event:

It was filled with “survivors,” with middle aged and elderly people, immigrants from Europe like myself, who knew by heart all there was to know, and who were in no mood to learn any lessons and certainly did not need this trial to draw their own conclusions.³⁷

The Israeli poet and novelist Haim Gouri was also covering this event for the newspaper *Lamerhav*, and his account of the prosecution’s rhetoric suggests a strategy of audience preservation, and a narrative appeal designed to secure this audience into an even more cohesive unit:

I went downstairs to look at the television monitor, which was showing the audience in the balcony. The panning camera captured in a few brief moments something no literary text could describe: hundreds of faces, amazingly similar in their expression, as if the prosecutor’s narrative had fused them into a single person.³⁸

Arendt sees an audience highly constituted in advance, one that already knew something about this individual and felt secure in its shared perspective, and Gouri’s description alludes to the effect of the prosecution’s narrative to preserve and further unite such an audience. Arendt had suspected that such a constitution compromised

³⁷ Arendt, *EIJ*, 8.

³⁸ Haim Gouri, *Facing the Glass Booth: The Jerusalem Trial of Adolf Eichmann* (Detroit, Wayne State University Press: 2004), 10.

both the integrity of the event itself and the possibility for a better understanding of the complexity of the crimes in question. Such unity meant that debate over this event would suffer and a narrow perspective of Eichmann risked concealing the novelty of his actions. If the public sphere is illuminated by a proliferation of debate and the appearance of multiple perspectives, then for Arendt such a united public perspective could only cast a shadow over Eichmann's appearance at the trial.³⁹ According to Elon, Arendt had suspected in advance that the Prime Minister of Israel, David Ben Gurion, would attempt to use this event as a "show trial," an event that could be used to secure consensus amongst a much broader audience. Elon states that

We know from her private correspondences that she had come to Jerusalem with preconceived ideas about Israel, its political system, its government, and its policies toward the Arabs. She was horrified by Ben Gurion's attempt to use the trial as a means of creating a sense of national unity among a mass of demoralized new immigrants.⁴⁰

Arendt supported these suspicions in her report with the few statements that she could find attributed to Ben Gurion prior to the opening sessions of the trial, statements that alluded to a more general indictment of "history" as opposed to an understanding of the accused and his crimes.⁴¹ To place history on trial was to point out for the world

³⁹ From her *Men in Dark Times*, Arendt figures the lightness of agonistic politics against the darkness of its collapse: "If it is the function of the public realm to throw light on the affairs of men by providing a space of appearances in which they can show in deed and word, for better and worse, who they are and what they can do, then darkness has come when this light is extinguished by 'credibility gaps' and 'invisible government', by speech that does not disclose what is but sweeps it under the carpet, by exhortations, moral and otherwise, that, under the pretext of upholding old truths, degrade all truth to meaningless triviality."

⁴⁰ Elon, 99.

⁴¹ Early in the report, Arendt clarifies her position with respect to the prosecution. She sought to emphasize that the proper interests of justice are always with *the accused* as opposed to a more general inquiry into *history*. According to Arendt "...it was history that, as far as the prosecution was

the enemies of the Jewish people at an historical level, but at the same time it was to show Jews themselves the manner in which they could secure themselves against these enemies and insert themselves into history with collective confidence.

In her introduction to the report, Arendt recalled that “the trial never became a play, but the show Ben Gurion had had in mind to begin with did take place, or, rather, the “lessons” he thought should be taught to the Jews and the Gentiles, to Israelis and Arabs, in short, to the whole world.”⁴² These lessons were intended on the one hand to solidify the collective outlook of a larger Jewish public, but also to respond to the inward gaze of various other groups around the world. Ben Gurion’s “...lesson to the non-Jewish world” was to “establish before the nations of the world how millions of people, because they happened to be Jews, and one million babies, because they happened to be Jewish babies, were murdered by the Nazis.”⁴³ Another lesson was aimed at diasporic Jews, whom Ben Gurion felt should

...remember how Judaism, “four thousand years old, with its spiritual creations and its ethical strivings, its messianic aspirations,” had always faced “a hostile world,” how the Jews had degenerated until they went to their death like sheep, and how the establishment of the Jewish state had enabled them to hit back, as Israelis...⁴⁴

concerned, stood at the center of the trial...it is not an individual that is in the dock at this historic trial, and not the Nazi regime alone, but anti-semitism throughout history” (Arendt, *EIJ*, 19). Gideon Hausner would later confirm this suspicion in his own reflections on the trial contained in an article he wrote for the *Saturday Evening Post*. In *Eichmann and His Trial*, Hausner claimed that “Although we were trying a single murderer...we were also exposing anti-semitism at large” (“Eichmann and His Trial” *Saturday Evening Post*, 19 November 1962, p. 86.)

⁴² Arendt, *EIJ*, 9.

⁴³ *Ibid.*

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 10.

For the Jews inside Israel, and in particular a younger generation of native Israelis, Ben Gurion felt that this segment of the public risked losing a tangible and immediate connection to the Jewish history of persecution that culminated with the Holocaust. By presenting the public with an unmediated link between the new state of Israel and the horrors of the Holocaust, a flesh and blood antagonist, the Prime Minister felt that Eichmann's trial could preserve and highlight a narrative continuity for the Israeli public.⁴⁵ Finally Arendt suspected that "one of the motives in bringing Eichmann to trial" was in Ben Gurion's own words, "to feret out other Nazis-for example, the connection between the Nazis and some Arab rulers."⁴⁶

Together, Ben Gurion's lessons would preserve and reinforce an existent understanding of historical suffering, and therefore, the position that Jews around the world should take in relation to this suffering. This position meant not only support for the Jewish state, but also for the narrative that served to bind this state. Zionism was no longer presented as a Jewish solution to the "Jewish question" in Europe, a question which by this time was irrelevant, but rather, as a fitting Jewish response to the Final Solution. For Jews and non-Jews alike, Ben Gurion's lessons were designed to publicly reaffirm and to reconstitute a piety towards this narrative, but also towards an idea of historical and collective justice. For Arendt, however, such piety towards a national narrative of suffering and redemption, or the Herzlian philosophy of history, risked more than simply obscuring the novelty of these crimes, such a unified public

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

constitution also assumed risks that would extend beyond the Eichmann trial itself. If citizens could not think independently, and more importantly, if a united public outlook could not think and see events from the perspective of others, then Arendt foresaw other political disasters looming on the horizon of the Jewish state, and particularly with respect to its policies towards the surrounding Arab nations. Within a larger narrative of collective justice, where other narratives could only be subverted or silenced, Arendt saw injustice as the probable and eventual outcome of increased and uncontested piety towards this narrative. Such disasters could only be averted with the constitution of an agonistic as opposed to a collective political ethos, and for Arendt this event invited an impious and dissident response that could disrupt the united public front that Ben Gurion had hoped for. An agonistically constituted public sphere increased the probability that more opinions and narratives might offer a more complicated perspective of this and future events.

For Arendt there was the possibility of something new and surprising revealing itself in the course of deliberations, and this trial offered a unique opportunity for the public to learn something about those responsible for the unthinkable crimes that were committed. The lessons that the state had hoped to recall were familiar, and they recounted well-known positions, but for Arendt they could not further a public understanding of this event in a way that did not distort it. She was a part of this audience, but chose to maintain a perspective that was independent, external, and ultimately critical of the lessons of suffering and the narrative of redemption offered

by the state. For Arendt, the disturbing novelty of this criminal was that he appeared to harbor no deep motives for his actions, and that he could not “know” or “feel” that his actions were wrong. She would boldly proclaim that

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. From the viewpoint of our legal institutions and of our moral standards of judgment, this normality was much more terrifying than all the atrocities put together, for it implied—as had been said at Nuremberg over and over again by the defendants and their counsels—that this new type of criminal, who is in actual fact *hostis generis humani*, commits his crimes under circumstances that make it well-nigh impossible for him to know or to feel that he is doing wrong.⁴⁷

Under Hitler’s rule Eichmann could not know right from wrong for there were no longer rules that provided for such distinctions, and he could not feel right from wrong because practically no one around him felt that the activities of mass murder were inconsistent with the will of their fuehrer, and therefore, would not question his sense of right and wrong. These are the “dark times” that follow from a complete collapse of the political sphere, times when all established rules have been discredited and all inter-subjective debate has subsided. Whatever uncertain distinctions between right and wrong that had once served to guide Eichmann’s actions had only completely subsided with his participation in the Wanssee conference, and lost with such distinctions were whatever hierarchies that might have previously held these

⁴⁷ Arendt, *EIJ*, 277.

terms in a moral balance.⁴⁸ Like many, Eichmann was not acting on any firm moral “foundation,” for all such foundations had been eroded, thus rendering the concepts of right and wrong all but interchangeable. Such terms no longer entered into a relationship with the orders he was given, or into the manners with which he had carried out his actions. Moral and ethical concepts had lost the substance that once served to limit or obstruct action, and to question the righteousness of the doer. Had a different “conference” transpired, however, one that fostered moral distinctions and dissenting opinions, Eichmann’s conscience might have been raised, his doubts could have been developed further and his actions could possibly have been different. The anti-political conditions of the Third Reich made it “well nigh impossible to know or feel right from wrong⁴⁹,” yet this did not preclude the possibility of such judgments altogether, nor for Arendt did it excuse immoral action under such conditions.⁵⁰ The only thing that could now obstruct and question Eichmann’s own actions, and the only safeguard against the crimes that he would ultimately commit were his own thoughts.

In such dark political times, in the absence of all external criteria for judgment, Arendt concluded that the responsibility to tell right from wrong rested with Eichmann alone. Even under conditions of totalitarian rule, where the possibility for

⁴⁸ Of his impressions of the Wanssee conference, Eichmann recalled that “...here now, during this conference, the most prominent people had spoken, the Popes of the Third Reich...at that moment, I sensed a kind of Pontias Pilate feeling, for I felt free of all guilt.” (Arendt, *EIJ*, 114.)

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 277.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 276.

criticism and dissenting opinions to raise Eichmann's conscience were almost non-existent, and where there appeared to be no laws to secure right actions against wrong, citizens remain responsible for arriving at moral distinctions independently. The unprecedented crimes Eichmann was accused of committing pointed at the same time for Arendt to an unprecedented level of personal and moral responsibility during periods of political crisis:

What we have demanded in these trials, where the defendants had committed "legal" crimes, is that human beings be capable of telling right from wrong when all they have to guide them is their own judgment, which, moreover, happens to be completely at odds with what they must regard as the unanimous opinion of all those around them... Since the whole of respectable society had in one way or another succumbed to Hitler, the moral maxims which determine social behavior and the religious commandments – "Thou shalt not kill" – which guide conscience had virtually vanished. Those few who were still able to tell right from wrong went really only by their own judgments, and they did so freely; there were no rules to be abided by, under which the particular cases with which they were confronted could be subsumed. They had to decide each instance as it arose, because no rules existed for the unprecedented.⁵¹

What finally prevented Eichmann from independent judgments of right and wrong was a less than satisfactory relationship between thinking and his actions. Without habits of independent thinking Eichmann could not function as a "moral individual," a citizen who could maintain distinctions between right and wrong without having recourse to standards for judgment. The fact that Eichmann was "genuinely incapable of uttering a single sentence that was not a cliché," suggested to Arendt that his actions were on the one hand completely dependent on external criteria such as rules

⁵¹ Ibid., 294.

or moral maxims, but also that his speech betrayed no personal motivation or conviction that might result from independent thought.⁵² Eichmann's speech functioned merely to shield him from the responsibilities of thinking for himself, and if there appeared to be no discernable connection between Eichmann's actions and his thoughts, then one was forced to consider the "shallowness" of the accused in relation to his unthinkable deeds. If evil was to be considered in this context, then what was most terrifying, and so unique with these crimes, was that they appeared to have no "deep roots" in relation to the "doer." Thinking was crucial in establishing a possible link between the accused and his actions, or what is legally known as *mens rea*, yet what was so frightening for Arendt was that such actions yielded no such positive motivations in the defendant. Arendt's "lesson of the fearsome, word-and-thought-defying *banality of evil*,"⁵³ was not the lesson of an unbroken chain of anti-semitism that Ben Gurion had hoped for, but rather, it was that there appeared to be no deep roots that connected the accused to any significant level of hatred for his victims, that no positive level of malice could bridge the gap between the unthinkable crimes and Eichmann's psychological disposition.⁵⁴ Arendt's lesson of thoughtlessness refuses to

⁵² Ibid., 48.

⁵³ Ibid., 252.

⁵⁴ The absence of *mens rea* was a theoretical obstacle that Arendt was partially successful in overcoming. Although she makes a theoretically sound argument in the following, it lacks any legal significance that the question of responsibility demands. Although Eichmann appeared to harbor no hatred for his victims, and he had never involved himself directly in acts of murder, Arendt had concluded that a decrease in psychological and physical proximity to acts of murder did not reflect a decreased level of responsibility:

...in such an enormous crime as the one we are now considering, wherein many people participated on various levels and in various modes of activity -- the planners, the organizers, and those executing the deeds, according to their various ranks -- there is not much point in using the ordinary concepts of counseling, and soliciting to commit a crime. For these crimes were committed en masse, not only in regard to the number of victims, but also in regard to the numbers of those who perpetrated the crime, and the extent to which any one of the many criminals was close to or remote

accept a thesis of anti-semitism because this presupposes a depth of conviction that Eichmann lacked.

Within ideological movements, independent thought is often incidental to the concern for reconstituting a central current of collective belief, and within the context of Zionism, Arendt's lesson of thoughtlessness would obviously fall well outside of this current. When considered together, however, one can imagine a lesson of thoughtlessness and the lesson of anti-semitism as competing claims for this event's rhetorical significance. There were perhaps many in positions of power, such as Ben Gurion, who saw this event as an opportunity to reproduce an idea of anti-semitism in the minds of the larger public. And there was Arendt who saw an opportunity to present a political idea that was so unfamiliar and marginal to the main avenues of her audience's sensibilities, that it was bound to go either unnoticed, or to unsettle the common sense of her audience. Both Arendt and the Zionist establishment saw this event as an opportunity either to preserve, or to transform a set of prevailing public beliefs. Robert Hariman has alluded to the relationship between popular trials, political ideas, and the potential belief that larger audiences have to invest in these ideas. He suggests that some

Popular trials have provided the impetus and the forum for major public debates, they have set some of the conditions of belief for those debates,

from the actual killer of the victim means nothing as far as the measure of his responsibility is concerned. On the contrary, in general this degree of responsibility increases as we draw further away from the man who uses the fatal instrument of death (Arendt, *EIJ*, 277).

and they have conferred powerful legitimacy upon particular political ideas.⁵⁵

The Eichmann trial undoubtedly falls into this category of popular trials. Arendt was as invested in the idea of thoughtlessness as it related to the Eichmann case, as the most committed Zionist would have been invested in the idea of anti-semitism as a broader historical principle. The fact that her report did not go unnoticed, and in fact became the source for much ongoing debate, suggests that more than a few of her readers were to some degree persuaded by this 'particular political idea.' Although Arendt's thesis maintains a marginal and dissident status to this day, it has proved to be a very stubborn and not easily dismissible anti-thesis to the presence of anti-semitism within Holocaust discourse. Both the centrality of the Eichmann report within Holocaust discourse, and the debate that continues to follow it suggests that the rhetorical significance of the Eichmann trial must somehow be divided between the ideas of anti-semitism and thoughtlessness. For ultimately, neither of these ideas has been able to settle the public dispute over Eichmann.

⁵⁵ Hariman, 1.

Rhetorics of the Banal and of the Sublime

With every onset of darkness he clambered to the treetop and watched the source of light disappear. In time he learned to do this not only with the coming of night, and not only to follow the course of the sun. Every natural phenomenon stirred his curiosity... he alone, this pitiful, narrow-skulled ape, weakest among the primates, devoid of natural weapons, dared to look danger in the face in order that he might observe and understand the phenomenon... It was as though he had to know everything, as though none of these evil things could come to pass without him.⁵⁶

Sholem Asch, *What I Believe*, 1941 (p. 4)

Only a few years before the final solution, Sholem Asch, the revered Yiddish storyteller from Poland, attempted to convey a set of beliefs to his audience. The background for this publication, his first notable work of non-fiction, was the appearance of a *Thousand Year Reich* in the midst of European society. While Hitler failed to extend this Reich beyond a period of twelve years, it is a failure overshadowed by the lasting impression we have of all the events that came to pass during this period. It is this impression that makes it difficult for one to imagine now, that of those caught within this concentrated period of destruction, many were prepared to look these new dangers 'in the face' and ultimately to 'know' them. We can only suspect that many would have been happy to leave these broader questions to future philosophical consideration, and the judgments of historians. Nevertheless, as Arendt arrived in Jerusalem it was with just such determination to understand and reflect upon what had come to pass, and moreover, to convey her understanding to a

⁵⁶ Sholem Asch, *What I Believe* (New York: G. P. Putnam's sons, 1941), 4.

larger audience.

Yet for many of her readers, the temptation not to understand Eichmann must have been great and Asch's parable fails to capture a spirit of skepticism that has followed from the Holocaust. Within Holocaust discourse, Asch's broader appraisal of human inquiry -- "as though he had to know everything" -- seems to have been displaced by a more obtuse and almost divine commandment "never to forget." In response to this unprecedented chapter in human history, all metaphors for "enlightened" thought have become duly suspect, and many of these suspicions have been realized in rhetorics that recall the infinite or the sublime. No tree seems high enough to capture the infinite contours of suffering, and no archimedian point offers audiences a complete picture of the Final Solution. Theodore Adorno's declaration that "to write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric" continues to mark holocaust discourse as limited in ways that are rarely specified in precise terms. These limits seem to find support in the more recent work of post-modern theorists such as Jean-Francois Lyotard, who casts the Holocaust as symbolic of the great failures of Humanist ideals such as consensus, universality, and commensurability. Citing Auschwitz as a catastrophic "differend" (an as yet un-phraseable excess of two incommensurable "language games."⁵⁷) Lyotard would invest experimental and avant-garde practices with the capacity to redeem this difference and to resist

⁵⁷ Situating the Holocaust in the context of Lyotard's work, Saul Friedlander suggests that "Lyotard takes "Auschwitz" as reference to demonstrate the impossibility of any single, integrated discourse about history and politics. The voices of the perpetrators those of the victims are fundamentally heterogeneous and mutually exclusive" (*Probing the Limits of Representation*, p.5).

teleological idioms. In the sublime, Lyotard sought an aesthetic proper to an experience of the differend, one that is both resistant to the teleological and ideological meta-narratives of modernity, and at the same time amenable to a post-modern conception of the political sphere as an irreducible phenomenon. The sublime is set against the good form of the beautiful, and conventions of taste that presuppose degrees of consensus and mutual understanding. According to Lyotard, "the beautiful results from a form, which is a limitation, its affinity lies with understanding."⁵⁸ In the sublime, the intensity of affect displaces the recognition of forms, and understanding gives way to the magnitude of phenomena and certain limit situations that cannot be brought within the register of understanding. For Lyotard, the difference between the beautiful and the sublime,

...is linked to the difference between the limited character of the object and the without limit of the object. The difference is not restricted to a difference between understanding, which would involve the limited character of the object, and reason, which would take charge of the unlimited. It is the limit itself that understanding cannot conceive of as its object.⁵⁹

For many observers and participants within Holocaust discourse, the desire for a sense of closure is frustrated by a common sense that has emerged, a sense that the Final Solution exceeds the limits of understanding and cannot be fully contemplated or known. One might infer that a rhetoric of the sublime had for first generation response become a precondition of fittingness, particularly as its desired effects aimed not at understanding, but rather at the condition of mental agitation that follows from

⁵⁸ Jean-Francois Lyotard, *Lessons on the Analytic of the Sublime: Kant's Critique of Judgment* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1994), 58.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 59.

an encounter with the unlimited. Writers such as Elie Weisel and Paul Celan, whose mystical and poetic works defy the closure and security offered by understanding (often associated with mimetic and narrative forms), are exemplary in this regard. Seeking a language and style appropriate to a post-Auschwitz epoch, more recent post-modern scholars have maintained that an affect proper to the sublime is somehow fitting with respect to a “post-modern condition,” for the sublime stands in an uneasy relationship with the “good form” of unified “meta-narratives.” Uneasy with mimetic language, some attempt to theorize at the limits of understanding. Thus, Dominick LaCapra points to Giorgio Agamben’s *Remnants of Auschwitz*, suggesting that “he seems constrained to raise the stakes or “up the ante” (which is already astronomically high) in theoretically daring, jarringly disconcerting claims if he is to make a significant mark as a major theorist.”⁶⁰ Yet in the process of elevating an idiom of the sublime, and by attempting to approximate an affect of the limit event itself in our responses to it, perhaps we have come to an impasse, one that comes to light increasingly as many second and third generation writers, artists, and audiences now seek levels of understanding. This impasse becomes more problematic as non-victim groups, after a period of absence, are now entering a discourse previously constituted mainly by Jewish response. Michael Bernard-Donals has suggested that “...the urgent question is whether, in speaking of the sublime in relation to the Shoah, we aren’t finding a way to name it, finding a way to make of the Shoah a divinity...a divinity in whose presence we dare not speak, as Moses dared not, whose negative

⁶⁰ Dominick LaCapra, *History and memory after Auschwitz* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1998), 269.

presence calls forth silence...what does the sublime obligate us to do?"⁶¹ Bernard-Donalds comments are suggestive of how the sublime risks casting an apolitical responsibility that runs contra Lyotard's very efforts to install the sublime as a norm of political affect.

In *Against Holocaust-Sublime* Zachary Braiterman has offered descriptions of some works that appear as alternatives to the poles of the beautiful and the sublime. Drawing on the aesthetics of Schiller and Mendelshon, as opposed to Kant, he contrasts aesthetics of the sublime, and rhetorics that call forth this aesthetic response, with an aesthetic of the *naïve*. He suggests that in "Enlightenment aesthetic theory, naïve refers to simplicity, but even more importantly to the illusion of simplicity and affective reserve." Braiterman recalls the childlike renderings in Art Spiegelmann's *Maus* in which audiences are presented with the "illusion of being naïve, cold, and cruel." In the Eichmann report, a rhetoric of the banal falls within a similarly marginalized vein of aesthetic sensibility. While banality questions the legitimacy of the sublime and its assault on understanding, it falls short of having recourse to the "good form" and common sense of the beautiful. While "received as totally surprising, and was to some shocking," Shoshana Felman has pointed out that Arendt's work also "added a new idiom to the discourse on the Holocaust," and I would add to this a new aesthetic affect which sits uneasily between the beautiful and the sublime. At a very early point in the development of this discourse, a time when

⁶¹ Michael Bernard-Donalds, *Between Witness and Testimony: The Holocaust and the Limits of Representation* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2001), 17.

the unthinkable limits of the Final Solution were increasingly set within idioms of the sublime, Arendt's report challenged the manners of Holocaust response.

Many of Arendt's readers anticipated Eichmann's "true" dimensions to be confirmed by a more diabolical personification of evil, and the prosecution's rhetoric of the sublime aims at constituting and verifying the reality of anti-semitism as a motive for the accused. Beneath a façade and performance of normality, Gideon Hausner argued that Eichmann was concealing a deep reserve of hatred and malice towards his victims, and although he too was struck by the harmless impression that Eichmann initially left on him, he claimed that he had unveiled a more terrible truth in the course of his examinations. Upon reflection, Hausner recalled that,

I suppose that when he finally appeared before me for the first time, I half expected to encounter some of the arrogance some of the posture and some of the diabolical strength of this Gestapo leader.

The shocker -- to me at least -- was that I saw none of these things. In fact, Eichmann looked like nothing much at all. The man facing me was the kind you might rub elbows with in the street any day and never notice him... The first unusual thing one noticed was an unusual twitch around his mouth which, when he lifted his lips, gave his face a strange, almost grotesque appearance. Only his narrow eyes behind the heavy eyeglasses disclosed his real personality. During the course of my cross-examination, when he was cornered on some particularly slippery ground, those eyes would light up with bottomless hatred.⁶²

It is arguable that many members of the public following the Eichmann trial would invest in Arendt a certain optimism, a hope that from a heightened philosophical

⁶² Hausner, 86.

perspective an elusive and unworldly truth could be derived from the defendant's ordinary appearance. The lesson for Arendt, however, was that Eichmann concealed no "bottomless" truths, that a more difficult truth was that he was not the deceptive and calculating liar that many had expected, nor the "devil in disguise" that the prosecution made him out to be. There was simply no reason to think that there was a hidden explanation for his actions. Arendt's figuring of the accused cuts against the grain of classical figures of evil, those that present a deeper and more sinister connection between immoral action and the thoughts of evil actors, and her rhetoric of the banal upsets the latent anti-semitism that is constituted by the prosecution. For Arendt, those bottomless reserves of hatred that the prosecution claimed to have revealed never appeared before the audience, and she would argue that it was misrepresenting the case to suggest otherwise. Paying more careful attention to Eichmann's speech as opposed to his physical features, she was impressed more by the fact that he could not utter a "single sentence that was not a cliché."⁶³ While reflecting on the efforts of the prosecution to establish Eichmann's deeper motivations, she would refute the claims made by Hausner, suggesting that

...for all this, it was essential that one take him seriously, and this was very hard to do, unless one sought the easiest way out of the dilemma between the unspeakable horror of the deeds and the undeniable ludicrousness of the man who perpetrated them, and declared him a clever, calculating liar-which he obviously was not. His own convictions on this matter were far from modest: "One of the few gifts fate has bestowed on me is a capacity for truth insofar as it depends on myself."

Despite all the efforts of the prosecution, everybody could see

⁶³ Arendt, *EIJ*, 48.

that this man was not a “monster,” but it was difficult not to suspect that he was a clown.⁶⁴

A rhetoric of banality and shallowness would find itself to be in contradiction to both the emotionally traumatized frame of mind of survivors, and the ideological sympathies of Zionists, two groups that for good reasons would be inclined to figure Eichmann as an inspired and capable thinker who defied the limits of understanding. It was more reasonable and made more sense for such audience members to figure Eichmann according to a classical scheme of evil, where with full knowledge of right and wrong, and contrary to all common sense, one is driven by a deep-seated hatred of one’s victims. It is such an audience persona that the prosecutor hoped to preserve, and despite appearances to the contrary he hoped to persuade all that Eichmann was indeed the monster that they had come to expect. Eichmann is rendered by Hausner in a more direct relationship to anti-semitism in order to meet favorably with his audience’s existing constitution, the most important of whom would be the jurors. To reconstitute the reality of eternal and unlimited anti-semitism, Hausner must lead his audience to an encounter with the sublime. Recalling Hausner’s introductory speech, Haim Gouri is overcome by the magnitude of what he has witnessed:

I want to say a few words about the problem of communication that have arisen at this trial.
This will be by way of an apology.
Do not ask me dear reader, to do the impossible.
They say, rightly, that the opening statement of the prosecutor, attorney General Gideon Hausner, was an unforgettable event. I can vouch for it; I

⁶⁴ Ibid., 54.

was there. Had I simply read about the things he described in any of the books about the era, I'm afraid I would have understood them only at some remove, rather than from within. These things are well known, but his having spoken them in a courtroom, in Jerusalem gave them a wondrous and unexpected power...

...Hausner's description of the murder of an entire Jewish family gave one the feeling that some powerful reaction by the outside world, proportional to the enormity of the event being described, was imminent: mountains would split in two, rivers would overflow, animals would flee in panic, the city would go up in flames. The sounds and events of an apocalypse were on their way.⁶⁵

As the painful background of Jewish suffering develops in Hausner's speech, Eichmann is drawn into a mutually ascending relationship, and ultimately he is invested with the positive powers of unlimited phenomena. The power of Hausner's rhetoric to convince observers that there was more to Eichmann ordinary appearances is confirmed by Gouri's continuing account of deliberations: "...the glass booth got narrower by the day. The man it grew larger before our very eyes. He was approaching his true dimensions."⁶⁶ Arendt rejected this claim, and would counter that such rhetoric merely confused the unlimited background of history with the limited actions of the individual on trial. For her, Eichmann did not grow in the positive and meaningful way suggested by Gouri's account, but rather, he was eclipsed and silenced by a rhetoric of the sublime, and his "true dimensions" were merely passed over by the prosecution:

...the more the calamity of the Jewish people in this generation unfolded and the more grandiose Mr. Hausner's rhetoric became, the paler and

⁶⁵ Gouri, 20.

⁶⁶ Ibid., 65.

more ghostlike became the figure in the glass booth, and no finger-wagging: "And there is the monster responsible for all this," could shout him back to life.⁶⁷

To place this case within a much larger and tragic narrative, Hausner's tone is one of tragic grandiloquence, and not unlike the aesthetics of the sublime, this tone attempts to account for much more than what appeared before his audience. It is this tone, moreover, that Arendt suspects has been passed down from the State itself:

This was the tone set by Ben Gurion and faithfully followed by Mr. Hausner, who began his opening address (which lasted through three sessions) with Pharaoh in Egypt and Haman's decree "to destroy, to slay, and to cause them to perish." He then quoted Ezekiel: "And when I [the Lord] passed by thee, and saw thee polluted in thine own blood, I said unto thee: In thy blood, live," explaining that these words must be understood as "the imperative that has confronted this nation ever since its first appearance on the stage of history." It was bad history and cheap rhetoric; worse, it was clearly at cross-purposes with putting Eichmann on trial, suggesting that perhaps he was only an innocent executor of some mysteriously foreordained destiny, or, for that matter, even of anti-semitism, which perhaps was necessary to blaze the trail of "the bloodstained road traveled by this people" to fulfill its destiny.⁶⁸

Despite Arendt's objections, this is a tone which at this time, and for this audience, would be familiar, recognizable, and it would resonate with a popular Holocaust sensibility. Gouri's response would be the prosecution's desired response, for it would signal that a rhetoric of the sublime had met with this sensibility, and that for members of the audience like Gouri, Eichmann had been cast as part of this larger tragedy. Arendt, however, never felt as though Eichmann was concealing a more

⁶⁷ Arendt, *EIJ*, 8.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 19.

sinister truth behind his ordinary appearances, or that he was even capable of such a ruse. Too much credit was being given by Hausner, or by others like Gerschom Scholem who felt that in the setting of the courtroom Eichmann had succeeded in concealing the substance of his past conviction, or that he had “acted differently once the party is over.”⁶⁹ Arendt found no easy way around the strikingly average impression of Eichmann, and she would ultimately decide to force these aspects into the foreground of public discussion. Irony and humor would provide the frame and tone for Arendt’s new idiom, and as she disposes of both in her report it is this decision that will arouse so much debate within her audience. At this time in the larger Holocaust discourse, a rhetoric of the sublime would satisfy popular expectations, but irony and humor within a rhetoric of the banal could be truly shocking.

⁶⁹ Ed. Anthony David Skinner, *Gerschom Scholem: A Life in Letters* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002), 396.

Irony, Humor, and Perplexity

The tone of Arendt's rhetoric remains a source of contention that cannot easily be dismissed by critics as either unnecessarily insensitive or necessarily antagonistic. Arendt straddled a threshold of acceptability, carefully balancing ironic truths against the sensitive position of her audience. At times, however, it is almost impossible not to suspect that she was willfully overstepping this threshold in order to prod her audience into moral debate. According to Richard Bernstein,

There is a great deal in her book that can legitimately be criticized -- both what she says and how she says it. Throughout she employed sarcastic irony. She did not attempt to tone down her strong opinions.⁷⁰

And according to Elon,

Some of the accusations voiced against the style and tone of the first version of her book, as published in *The New Yorker*, were well founded and were excised in the book, e.g. her description of Leo Baeck as the Jewish "Führer."⁷¹

At the time of the report's publication such sarcasm and irony gave way to a backlash led by prominent members of the Jewish intelligentsia. On behalf of the many survivors who were offended, Elie Weisel figured his disapproval epistemologically, and questioned Arendt's authority to make claims on behalf of knowledge: "I was there and I don't know. How can you possibly know when you were elsewhere?" To which Arendt would reply: "you're a novelist; you can cling to questions. I deal with

⁷⁰ Bernstein, 159.

⁷¹ Elon, 94.

human and political sciences. I have no right not to find answers.”⁷² From a Zionist perspective, Gerschom Scholem’s disapproval was less concerned with the epistemic assumptions of the report than with the national insensitivity that it concealed. In the course of a bitter exchange of letters, Scholem could not accept what appeared to him as an unbalanced portrayal of Jewish weakness and complicity. The notion of Jewish self-hatred has long been associated by intellectual Zionists with the forces of European assimilation, and a transformation of national character had long been held by its followers as requisite to the establishment of a Jewish homeland. In the following passage, Scholem emphasizes his belief that the tone of Arendt’s report was designed to promote a low sense of collective self-esteem, and a self-deprecating ethos that Zionism has fought long and hard to overcome:

Why does your account so dominate the events it records, which you rightly want people to reflect on? To the degree that I have an answer, I cannot hide it -- if only because of my high regard for you. It will clarify what stands between us. It is the heartless, the downright malicious tone you employ in dealing with a topic that so profoundly concerns the center of our life. There is something in the Jewish language that is completely indefinable, yet fully concrete -- what the Jews call *ahavath Israel*, or love for the Jewish people. With you, my dear Hannah, as with so many intellectuals coming from the German left, there is no trace of it. An exposition such as yours demands, if I may say so, the old-fashioned kind of objective and thorough treatment -- especially where, as in the case of the murder of a third of our people, such deep emotions are necessarily at work and are so greatly aroused. And I see you as nothing other than a member of this people.⁷³

To which Arendt would reply,

I do not belong to the “intellectuals coming from the German left.” This you couldn’t have known because we weren’t acquainted in our youth. It’s

⁷² Fellmann, 226.

⁷³ Skinner, 396.

hardly a fact to boast of...In my youth I was interested neither in history nor politics. If I hailed from anywhere at all, it was from German philosophy...How right you are that I have no such love, and for two reasons: I have never in my life "loved" any people or collective -- not the German, French, or American nation, or the working class, or whatever else might exist. The fact is that I love only my friends and am quite incapable of any other sort of love...That you could form the opinion that my book is a mockery of Zionism would have struck me as completely incomprehensible if I didn't know the extent to which Zionist circles have forgotten that they should avoid listening to opinions set in stone and embraced by everyone from the start...I mean on the one hand that I do not belong to any organization and speak only in my own name, and on the other that a person must think for himself and, whatever you may have against my results, you won't understand them unless you know that they are my results and no one else's.⁷⁴

Arendt's response to Scholem suggests on the one hand that she does not want to be held to those frames that solidify collective outlooks, and on the other that if she emerged from anywhere it was from the background of German philosophy.

Although merely representative of a much broader public and intellectually led rebuke that followed from the publication of her report, these correspondences highlight the communitarian and immanent perspectives against which Arendt would be attempting to secure herself and her report. While Weisel figures knowledge as an affront to survivor suffering, Scholem condemns Arendt for lacking solidarity and love for her own people, and in both cases it is a collective piety that has been breached and collective identity which has been violated.

What is common to both survivor experiences and to a Zionist outlook is the

⁷⁴ Ibid., 399.

emphasis placed on Jewish suffering, and it is this suffering that serves as the historical point of departure for both. While the former looks back with unthinkable and incomprehensible memories of all that has been, the latter looks forward with the determination and hope to overcome an eternal recurrence of suffering. Suffering serves to bind both the backward glance of the survivor and the forward momentum of Zionism within a collective frame of understanding. Jewish suffering and the Zionist movement form two aspects of the same narrative continuity, and a more general “idea” of Jewish historical destiny.

In the rhetoric of Gideon Hausner, Eichmann appears as a significant actor within this ontological narrative, a villain that reconstitutes and re-justifies the trajectory of the Zionist movement. The temptation for a broader public to situate Eichmann neatly within this interpretive frame would already be considerable, and the prosecution sought to realize and to put into words this latent understanding for the broader public. “Although we were trying a single murderer,” Hausner declared, “we were also exposing anti-semitism at large. This is the reason why the trial attracted the world’s attention. We were in a sense, trying a great many people.”⁷⁵ By foregrounding anti-semitism, Eichmann is submerged within this narrative in such a way that his actions fit into the public’s shared understanding of history. For a public that was in “no mood for lessons,” such a strategy moves towards the consensus and closure that such collective frameworks offer. This familiar and time honored-truth

⁷⁵ Hausner, 86.

provides a meaning that is more easily consumed because it is already constituted as an underlying principle. Yet for Arendt, Eichmann signaled a truth that was bound to be a less familiar and more difficult goal for public deliberation. In her correspondence with Thilo Koch, Arendt suggests that a less than demonized, or a negative understanding of Eichmann, might necessarily appear unbearable for many:

It seemed only too obvious to us all that we needed to demonize the catastrophe in order to find some historical meaning in it. And I admit, it is easier to bear the thought that the victim is the victim of the devil in disguise -- or as the prosecutor in the trial put it, of a historical principle stretching from Pharaoh to Haman -- the victim of a metaphysical principle, rather than the victim of some average man on the street who is not even crazy or particularly evil. What all of us cannot cope with about the recent past is not the number of victims, but the shabbiness of their so-called ideals.⁷⁶

These observations underly the irony of Arendt's thesis: that extraordinary crimes do not necessarily follow from extraordinary individuals. To be disturbed in this way, however, a strictly Jewish perspective, and the dominant interpretive framework of eternal anti-semitism, must give way to the appearance of other perspectives. An ironic frame incorporates not only the perspective of an eternal victim, but also of perpetrators, and more interestingly, a perspective of the "Jewish functionaries," those actors who do not appear to fit neatly into either the victim or perpetrator categories. The figure of the Jewish functionary within an ironic frame deconstructs the victim-perpetrator "abyss," or what Arendt describes as the "religiously anchored

⁷⁶ Kohn & Feldman, 488.

dichotomy of Jews and Gentiles.”⁷⁷ The irony is that the Jewish functionary represents neither the righteousness of the victims nor the maliciousness of the perpetrators, it is a more ambiguous moral category and the presence of this actor sheds a more complicated light on the situation that individuals found themselves in during these times. While discussing the willingness of German Jews to negotiate with Nazi authorities early in the war, Arendt suggests that

...these negotiations were separated by an abyss from the later collaboration of the *Judenrate*. No moral questions were involved yet, only a political decision whose “realism” was debatable: “concrete” help, thus the argument ran, was better than “abstract” denunciations. It was *Realpolitik* without the Machiavellian overtones, and its dangers came to light years later, after the outbreak of the war, when these daily contacts between Jewish organizations and the Nazi bureaucracy made it so much easier for the Jewish functionaries to cross the abyss between helping Jews to escape and helping the Nazis to deport them.⁷⁸

While Arendt’s treatment of the Jewish functionaries in her report has been criticized for overemphasis, I think this emphasis is designed not merely to arouse the indignation of readers. Rather, it is a strategy that forces readers to adopt a position other than the victim’s *or* the perpetrator’s. The Jewish functionary relates the victim and perpetrator positions at the same time that it unsettles them and conflates the reader’s secure moral bearings. The consensus that once served to secure the victim’s perspective, a single perspective that was supported in the rhetoric of the prosecution, is here replaced with an array of perspectives that supports no one perspective over

⁷⁷ Ibid., 11.

⁷⁸ Ibid.

the other. Irony in Arendt's report allows for a rhetorical perspectivism that yields a more complex image of the situation. Her rhetoric seemed to strip away the clarity and surety of absolute moral distinctions, and for most of her Jewish readers this account was anything but morally reassuring. It struck many as perplexing, personally offensive, and in most cases a possibly frustrated combination of both.

What appeared to be most unsettling for many readers were the irony-laden juxtapositions between Eichmann's own outlook and the outlook of Zionism.

According to Arendt, Eichmann's

...first personal contacts with Jewish functionaries, all of them well known Zionists of long standing, were thoroughly satisfactory. The reason he became so fascinated by the "Jewish question," he explained, was his own "idealism;" these Jews, unlike the assimilationists... were "idealists," like him. An idealist according to Eichmann's notions, was not merely a man who believed in an "idea"... an idealist was a man who lived for his idea.⁷⁹

What is problematic about "ideas" for Arendt is their tendency to distort a potentially more complex picture of events and to place them within a singular unifying perspective. If it is idealism that contributed to Eichmann's own distortions of reality, then the irony for Arendt is that the ideological elements of Zionism could also contribute to a distorted understanding of the accused. The ironic figuring of Eichmann in relation to Zionist idealism "stings," and such juxtapositions force individuals to reevaluate the very grounds of their collective wisdom. Next to the

⁷⁹ Arendt, *EIJ*, 41.

unquestionable moral ideals of Zionism, Eichmann is figured as a like-minded citizen, that is, a citizen whose actions were never allowed to come into conflict with his "idea." For those readers who sought clearer and more comfortable categories of absolute righteousness and absolute malevolence, such images were at odds with their collective expectations and common sense. Arendt's irony questions the received wisdom of her readers that the ideals of an uncritical Zionism are naturally good, and the ideals of an uncritical Eichmann were naturally bad, and her framing of Zionists in relation to Eichmann's own outlook suggests that idealistic doctrines as such, and those groups who cling to ideas as measuring sticks for judgment are guilty of avoiding the complexities of unprecedented situations. To cling to a narrow idea of history, and to let one's actions and judgments unfold in accordance with the determinations of external authority was damaging to both citizens and the public sphere, and in times of crisis such citizens could hardly be expected to take any personal moral responsibility.

The tone and style of Arendt's report have been strategically addressed by Iain Wilkinson, who proposes a more "controversial view" of her rhetoric by suggesting that she may have conspired to "infect" her audience with some of the "perplexities" of her own thinking:

...it may be that Arendt braved using a tone of language that was liable to arouse the moral outrage of her critics as a means to bring the 'banality of evil' within the sphere of political debate. She may have been prepared to have the 'banality' of a technical-rational language 'colour' the ways she

narrated the facts of the Nazi crimes, so as to have the emotional reaction against this dispassionate frame of reference provoke us into thinking about the cultural circumstances under which 'ordinary' people will thoughtlessly act in support of social systems that treat people as though they are superfluous. On this understanding, we may be presented here with an instance in which Arendt's efforts to infect others with the perplexities of her thinking led her to take the risk of exposing her work to moral outrage. Indeed, even if at first she was only 'dimly aware' of the likelihood of causing such offense, in later years there is evidence to suggest that she looked back on the negative reaction to her report on Eichmann's trial as having served to awaken some 'thinking' on the extent to which the nature of his criminality confounded traditional ethical responses to 'the problem of evil.'⁸⁰

Such a controversial view is confirmed in Arendt's correspondences with Karl Jaspers, where she claims that she could not avoid certain "formulations" that she had otherwise hoped to resist, and that her own perplexities had drawn her inevitably towards the familiar and "mythological." To Jaspers she writes, "we have to combat all impulses to mythologize the horrible, and to the extent that I can't avoid such formulations, I haven't actually understood what went on." Here Arendt seems to disavow a certain wisdom, and while suggesting negatively that one must refrain from resorting to false understandings, she does not offer a positive remedy to the problem of misunderstanding. Arendt begins here to resemble the "ideal type" of philosopher-citizen that she sees in Socrates⁸¹ and what she has to say about the manner in which Socrates acted tells us something about her possible motivations for the use of irony in her report. According to her sources it was not only in order to

⁸⁰ Iain Wilkinson, *Suffering: A Sociological Introduction* (Cambridge: Malden, MA: Polity, 2005), 89.

⁸¹ Arendt describes the ideal as one "...who in his person unified two apparently contradictory passions, for thinking and acting-not in the sense of being eager to apply his thoughts or to establish theoretical standards for action but in the much more relevant sense of being equally at home in both spheres and able to move from one sphere to another with the greatest apparent ease (Arendt, *The Life of the Mind*, 167).

arouse, but also in order to infect an interlocutor with some of the paralysis in thinking that Socrates himself experienced. Arendt explains that

He called himself a gadfly and a midwife; in Plato's account somebody else called him an "electric ray," a fish that paralyzes and numbs by contact, and Socrates recognized the likeness as apt, provided that his hearers understood that "the electric ray paralyzes others only through being paralyzed itself...It isn't that, knowing the answers myself, I perplex other people. The truth is rather that I infect them also with the perplexity that I feel myself."⁸²

Arendt's "lesson of the fearsome, word-and-thought-defying *banality of evil*"⁸³ has the capacity to both arouse and to infect perplexity. 'Word-and-thought-defying' encompasses the unthinkable suffering of victims at the same time as it encompasses the thought deficient activities of perpetrators. It is perplexing because the reader cannot be certain that it is either the victim or the perpetrator Arendt has in mind with this phrase. It arouses readers because it does not figure one perspective morally over the other. This figure of speech constitutes what Kenneth Burke describes as a "perspective on perspectives," a perspective that surveys from a more disinterested and unengaged position. From such a perspective one is invited to observe the interrelations of perspectives that engaged actors themselves cannot observe, and it is a perspective that lends itself to an array of other positions within a drama. Such a figure can only be misinterpreted as a single perspective that orients readers with Jewish suffering alone. In Giorgio Agamben's *Remnants of Auschwitz*, Arendt's banality of evil is transformed into the following sentence for his reader:

⁸² Arendt, *The Life of the Mind*, 172.

⁸³ Arendt, *EIJ*, 252.

This infamous zone of irresponsibility is our First Circle, from which no confession of responsibility will remove us and in which what is spelled out, minute by minute, is the lesson of the “*terrifying, unsayable and unimaginable banality of evil*” (emphasis added).⁸⁴

As the “word-and-thought-defying” are here displaced by the “unsayable” and “unimaginable,” the victim moves to the center of a more tragic frame, and the sublimity of Jewish suffering displaces the presence of Eichmann’s thoughtlessness. Agamben transforms Arendt’s ironic frame into the tragic frame of Jewish suffering, and a perspective of perspectives is lost to the feeling of a “cosmic” victim, to the witnesses and survivors who lack the proper language to give voice to such evils. As Agamben emphasizes the forms of language appropriate to Jewish witnessing -- an idiom of pure suffering that emerges out of Auschwitz -- the banality of evil that frames the victim in a relationship with the perpetrator gives way to the sublimity of Jewish testimony that is without limit. For Agamben, the reality of the camps is seen from the perspective of the *Muselmann*, the “...perfect cipher of the camp, the non-place in which all disciplinary barriers are destroyed and all embankments flooded.”⁸⁵ As Agamben’s *Muselmann* stands against an unlimited horizon, he conceals the scope of Jewish suffering that cannot be adequately expressed. In Agamben’s tragic frame all language collapses under the weight of the *Muselmann*’s perspective, and such a sublime horizon invites the audience into a “lacuna” of “non-language:”

But not even the survivor can bear witness completely, can speak his own

⁸⁴ Giorgio Agamben, *Remnants of Auschwitz: The Witness and the Archive* (New York: Zone Books, 2000), 21.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 48.

lacuna. This means that testimony is the distinction between two impossibilities of bearing witness; it means that language in order to bear witness, must give way to a non-language in order to show the impossibility of bearing witness. The language of testimony is a language that no longer signifies and that, in not signifying, advances into what is without language... To bear witness, it is therefore not enough to bring language to its own non-sense, to the pure undecidability of letters... it is necessary that this senseless sound be, in turn, the voice of something that, for entirely other reasons, cannot bear witness, the "lacuna" that constitutes human language collapses, giving way to a different impossibility of becoming witness-that which does not have language.⁸⁶

As the unthinkable is figured in Arendt's report in a relationship with thoughtlessness, Agamben's *Muselmann*, and the suffering he carries, must be seen in some proximity to the concrete figure of Eichmann, whose dimensions have been severely reduced from the demonic gravity of Pharaoh and Haman. According to Kenneth Burke, "comedy deals with *man in society*, tragedy with the *cosmic man*," and if Agamben's *Muselmann* appears to his readers as a cosmic incarnation of Jewish suffering, then Eichmann is figured by Arendt as a terrifying comedy of errors, but nonetheless, a man that is grounded *in society*.⁸⁷ Part of the terrifying reality of Eichmann's appearance in Jerusalem was that his performance yielded some less serious and more comical moments, and for Arendt, it provided some genuine insights into this new type of criminal. While referring to the taped police examinations of Eichmann prior to the trial, Arendt noted that each page "constitutes a veritable gold mine for a psychologist --provided he was wise enough to understand

⁸⁶ Ibid, 97.

⁸⁷ Kenneth Burke, *Attitudes Towards History* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1984), 42.

that the horrible can be not only ludicrous but outright funny.”⁸⁸ Next to the gravity of unthinkable crimes, the comical attributes of thoughtlessness make for a disturbingly Kafkaesque portrait of victimization, for the actions of the perpetrator appear to be disconnected from personal motivation. Arendt’s insights come disturbingly close to Burke’s description of dramatic irony, a frame that pictures antagonists not as “vicious” actors, but as “fools” that an audience discovers only having removed themselves from the perspectives of the characters themselves. Burke points out that

The progress of humane enlightenment can go no further than in picturing people not as *vicious*, but as *mistaken*. When you add that people are *necessarily* mistaken, that all people are exposed to situations in which they must act as fools, that *every* insight contains its own special kind of blindness, you complete the comic circle, returning again to the lesson of humility that underlies great tragedy. The audience, from its vantage point, sees the operation of errors that the characters of the play cannot see; thus seeing from two angles at once, it is chastened by dramatic irony; it is admonished to remember that when intelligence means wisdom..., it requires fear, resignation, the sense of limits, as an important ingredient.⁸⁹

From an ironic perspective, the flawed actions of the wicked are normalized within a human condition, and the disinterested spectator is encouraged to consider that he or she could also act mistakenly or foolishly. While the rhetoric of both Agamben and the prosecution encourages audience members to orient themselves with the tragic and eternally conceived perspective of a cosmic victim, Arendt attempts to persuade her Jewish audience to see from the perspective of a disinterested spectator, and by stepping out of a drama of historical victimization, her readers are invited to see a

⁸⁸ Arendt, *EIJ*, 48.

⁸⁹ Burke, 41-42.

“special kind of blindness” that is encouraged by a singular and official frame of interpretation. What is so terrifying with Arendt’s rhetoric of the banal is that under the conditions of mass society, to act foolishly or mistakenly has the potential to yield incomprehensible suffering. As Eichmann is constituted in Arendt’s rhetoric, he appears to readers as the model anti-citizen within mass society, as representative of a broader ethos of citizenship that can no longer be expected to harbor deep and personal motivations for moral action.⁹⁰ The irony of Arendt’s rhetoric, and the multiple perspectives that appear within her interpretive frame, serves to upset and perplex a common sense that has solidified the perspective of cosmic victimization in the minds of a broader Jewish public.

⁹⁰ In her response to Scholem, Arendt suggests that with respect to her thoughts on the nature of evil as a depthless and “thought-defying” phenomenon, “Eichmann may very well be the concrete model of what I have to say” (Kohn & Feldman, 471).

Common Sense in Holocaust Discourse

Arendt's report was originally submitted during the course of Eichmann's trial as separate installments for *The New Yorker* magazine, which is neither a scholarly nor philosophical journal, but a popular forum for opinion and critique of various public events and cultural activity. Despite career commitments to thinking through the conditions of the public sphere, Arendt herself was not a professional journalist, nor a frequent commentator on public affairs. Arendt was a professional philosopher, and she was perhaps less free to act in the public sphere than most of her co-reporters in Jerusalem, and more or less tied to the disciplines of independent philosophical thinking. As a philosopher, Arendt was faced with the task of making sense of this event for a very different audience than she would have been accustomed to.

According to Jerome Kohn, "Arendt saw an opportunity, unusual for philosophers, to confront the "realm of human affairs and human deeds . . . directly."⁹¹ Her own opinions on her possible relationship to both the political and philosophical spheres, however, were less certain than one might expect. In her introductory statements to *The Life of the Mind*, Arendt began by relating her topic, "thinking," to her own feelings with respect to its practice in philosophy:

Thinking seems to me so presumptuous that I feel I should start less with an apology than with a justification... what disturbs me is that I try my hand at it, for I have neither claim nor ambition to be a "philosopher" or be numbered among what Kant, not without irony, called...*Denker von*

⁹¹ Jerome Kohn, The Library of Congress "Evil: The Crime against Humanity"; available from <http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/arendhtml/essayc6.html>; Internet; accessed March 25, 2007.

Gewerbe (professional thinkers).⁹²

Yet as Margaret Canovan has pointed out, in an unpublished 1975 speech Arendt indicated that she had come to terms with the “solitary business” of the philosopher:

In the last year of her life, indeed, she went so far as to declare publicly that for all her praise of the public realm she herself was not a political animal, and that her early decision to study philosophy had “implied already, even though I may not have known it, a non-commitment to the public.” For, as she added, “Philosophy is a solitary business.”⁹³

These comments suggest a more personal, but also a more ambivalent orientation towards the spheres of philosophy and politics, as if Arendt harbored conflicting commitments to both of these spheres. Arendt saw that within the Western tradition of democracy, there is a lasting and underlying antagonism between truth and opinion that she also struggled with. For her, to speak of a tradition of political-philosophy, one must recognize that these terms form part of a divided and hierarchical relationship, for political-philosophy has traditionally attempted to look down at politics from the higher perspectives of philosophy, or to endow politics with philosophical wisdom. In another context this led Arendt to suggest that “if the philosopher starts to speak into this world of common sense, to which belong our commonly held prejudices and judgments, he will always be tempted to speak in terms of nonsense, or-to use Hegel’s phrase, to turn common sense upside down.”⁹⁴

Yet it is this divided relationship that Arendt concluded was untenable within the

⁹² Arendt, *Life of the Mind*, 3.

⁹³ Margaret Canovan, “Socrates or Heidegger? Hannah Arendt’s Reflections on Philosophy and Politics,” *Social Research* 57 no. 1, (1990): 1.

⁹⁴ Arendt, *The Promise of Politics*, 36.

context of modern and mass democracy, and as she addressed the public sphere with her Eichmann report, I would argue that her attention is very focused on her audience's common sense. It is this sense that she hopes to penetrate and to question its wisdom. Arendt attempts to bridge the political-philosophical divide not with an idiom of eternal truth or expert wisdom, but as a skeptical ironist who regards truth as an accumulation of perspectives. As a rebel among her own people, one who spoke with the insights of a German philosopher, Arendt is not tempted to make use of a metaphysical idiom, or a rhetoric that is disconnected from the sensibilities of her own people, but rather, she is more inclined to question the common sense of her Jewish audience with the uncommon sense of a detached spectator, with an idiom that was bound to open up more discussion. Such a perspective results from a more ambivalent relationship to both the main avenues of Jewish opinion and her thinking as a German philosopher. Between the spheres of Jewish politics and German thought, a Socratic critique of one of these spheres from the perspective of the other improves the conditions of understanding, for the reality of each is illuminated by a viewpoint that is detached from their central and common concerns. Arendt was not ignorant of the common prejudices and judgments of a broader Jewish public, but rather, she wanted to improve these sensibilities by holding onto a dissident position, and she was likely hopeful that other unique perspectives would follow from her report. Villa points out that Socratic forms of citizenship expose the "one-sidedness" of collective truth at the same time that a more "lively impression of the truth" is constituted. For Villa,

The more common service rendered by the upholder of dissident opinion

is that he or she reveals the one-sidedness of received opinion. This can be overcome only by the capacity to see the matter from another angle and to appreciate the new fragment of truth provided by this perspective. The dissident or gadfly, in other words, reminds us that truth in morality and human affairs is more likely to be many sided, complex rather than formulaic. He or she slows us down in our desire to act or to judge in accordance with local prejudice...⁹⁵

Arendt's uncommon sense of the Eichmann trial purges the common framework of a strictly Jewish and immanent understanding, and her rhetoric perplexes conventional wisdom in order to make room for independent thinking. While the prosecution submits Eichmann to a Herzlian formula for truth, or the eternal principle of Jewish catastrophe, Arendt approaches this event with certain skepticism, and her rhetoric upsets all formulas for a settled and undisputable truth. For Arendt, the perpetrator's perspective had as much claim on the truth as the victims, and to lose or to willfully exclude this perspective was to deny a certain reality to those events which had brought about his trial. For Arendt, the prosecutor's emphasis on Jewish suffering was "a deliberate attempt to tell only the Jewish side of the story," and yet according to her it is such one-sidedness that "distorted the truth, even the Jewish truth."⁹⁶

As a genre of public discourse, Hariman has argued that the rhetorical significance of popular trials emerges in a relationship with the common sense of a given community. He suggests that,

...rather than seeing popular trials as odd or embarrassing moments in legal practice, we should recognize how they provide opportunities to articulate ideas important to our larger understandings of legal

⁹⁵ Villa, *Socratic Citizenship*, 62.

⁹⁶ Arendt, *EIJ*, 12.

interpretation and the role of law in society. In particular, we should recognize how popular trials provide the most audience intensive approach to using the courts to construct and apply society's common sense.⁹⁷

I would add to this that in certain cases these events can also be used to question society's common sense and to transform a highly conventional sensibility, and I have argued that this was the case with the Eichmann report. In the larger Holocaust discourse that has unfolded since the time of this trial, a Holocaust sensibility has continued to develop rigid manners of response. Yet this discourse has also slowly made allowances for rhetorics that fall outside of the conventions of the sublime. Shoshana Fellman gives the Eichmann report credit for being the first work within Holocaust discourse that dared to depart from the established idioms. According to Fellman,

In the last half of the century, two works have marked what can be called conceptual breakthroughs in our apprehension of the Holocaust. The first was Hannah Arendt's *Eichmann in Jerusalem*...the second was the film *Shoah* by Claude Lanzmann, which first appeared in France in 1985. Twenty-two years apart and several decades after the war, both works revealed the Holocaust in completely new and unexpected light. Historical research, of course, existed before these works and after them, but it did not displace collective frameworks of perception and did not change the vocabulary of collective memory. These two works did. Acceptable or unacceptable, they added a *new idiom* to the discourse on the Holocaust, which after them did not remain the same as it had before them.⁹⁸

In addition to Lanzman's film *Shoah*, works such as Art Spiegelman's graphic novel *Maus: A Survivor's Tale* (1973) has pushed Holocaust discourse into areas that would have been well beyond the threshold of acceptability during the period of the

⁹⁷ Hariman, 8.

⁹⁸ Fellman, 201.

Eichmann trial. While common sense within Holocaust discourse has maintained anti-semitism as a central current of thought, these works signal a period that now allows for works that do not necessarily reproduce this idea as an historical principle. This condition also speaks to the fact that more recent respondents, Lanzman and Spiegelman included, have an indirect connection to the Holocaust. Limits for what is deemed acceptable or unacceptable within Holocaust discourse are no longer the exclusive concern of witnesses and survivors, and unlike first generation response, where emphasis is placed on the inability to comprehend all that had come to pass, there is a more concentrated effort by the descendents of survivors to arrive at some partial understandings.

At an early point in Holocaust discourse, however, I have argued that Arendt's report set the stage for future works to question Holocaust sensibility. Rather than make of the Holocaust an absolute lacuna of discourse, a discourse in which all claims to knowledge and understanding can be dismissed, the Eichmann report appeals to partial understandings. "The focus of every trial," according to Arendt, is

...upon the person of the defendant, a man of flesh and blood with an individual history, with an always unique set of qualities, peculiarities, behavior patterns, and circumstances. All things that go beyond that, such as the history of the Jewish people in their dispersion, and of anti-semitism, or the conduct of the German people and other peoples, or the ideologies of the time...etc. affect the trial only insofar as they form the background and the conditions under which the defendant committed his acts.⁹⁹

⁹⁹ Arendt, *EIJ*, 285.

While a full understanding of the Holocaust is an unlikely goal for discourse, this should not prevent discourse from pursuing particular events that might add to a fuller understanding of the Holocaust. The Eichmann report was perhaps one of the first works to distance itself from generalizing claims that bemoaned the limits of understanding, and emphasized rather, that against a possibly unfathomable background there were particular events to be addressed, debated, and understood. A fuller understanding would come about as more particulars were addressed by more respondents, and for Arendt, new and unfamiliar perspectives were a means for ensuring that darkness ultimately did not descend on the public sphere. More than forty years have passed since her report was published, and we can measure the success of Arendt's report against the continuing controversy that her text stimulates, one that Elon suggests has "never really been settled."¹⁰⁰ With Arendt's rhetoric of the banal and the constitution of a Socratic ethos, collective truth gives way to the regeneration of discussion, the reappearance of doubt, and the unprecedented appears more meaningful as it is subject to an accumulation of perspectives.

¹⁰⁰ Elon, 93.

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