

Ordinary People May Become Willing Instruments of Extraordinary Evil

Moral philosopher Elizabeth Minnich has recently written a highly regarded book titled *The Evil of Banality*. The title alone suggested to me a possible column to address our currently degraded state of public affairs.

But first, it seemed, I should delve into Hannah Arendt's classic work on the trial of Nazi functionary Adolf Eichmann, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil*.

As Arendt presents her case, Eichmann unquestionably deserved to be hanged. Justice demanded the death penalty for a man who "carried out, and therefore actively supported, a policy of mass murder," "the greatest crime in recorded history."

The challenge for Arendt, as she formulates it, is how to make the case against a man who, while never denying his role in what took place, claimed that he had never acted from base motives, never had any inclination to kill anybody (and never did so directly), never hated Jews, and did not feel guilty. Rather, he believed that he could not have acted otherwise. Eichmann maintained, moreover, that his role in Hitler's Final Solution was more or less an accident, that almost anybody could have acted in his place.

Arendt writes, "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. . . . [T]his normality was much more terrifying than all the atrocities put together, for it implied . . . that this new type of criminal . . . commits his crimes under circumstances that make it well-nigh impossible for him to know or to feel that he is doing wrong."

What if, contrary to current assumption in most legal systems, the intent to do wrong is not necessary for certain crimes to be committed? What if, rather, the presumed wrong-doing seems justified, either out of necessity or even perhaps as an obligation to achieve a higher purpose? Eichmann became "a willing instrument in the organization of mass murder." Arendt seeks to resolve the issue by pointing to the objective fact of what was done, and the objective guilt of Eichmann (in this case) as someone who participated in doing it. That is what made him personally responsible, rather than merely a product of circumstance, and that is why his guilt merited the penalty of death.

There are too many moral and legal nuances in Arendt's work for consideration here. I don't think she makes an incontrovertible case for Eichmann's execution, and I'm unsure about some other points.. Her chief accomplishment, in my view, is a most compelling presentation of a perennial question of our collective life: Why, or how, or in what way, are the individual members of a state, or nation, or governing political entity, responsible for the evil perpetrated by that state, nation, or entity? Insofar as one obeys the laws by which one is governed, follows the orders of those to whom one is subject, or willingly supports the leadership and policies and practices of those who govern, does one become objectively guilty of the objective harm that follows from such laws, orders, and governance?

Here is not a question of good or bad intentions, nor a question of whether one means to accomplish benefit or harm. Here is a question of whether or not, in fact, one's decisions and actions help make for a world that is manifestly just or unjust, better or worse. It is a question every citizen of a democratic society should face. We must face it today.

Reflections on The Evil of Banality another time.

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