



The Man Who Didn't Ask Questions

HANNAH ARENDT

The Nazi Adolf Eichmann was a hard-working administrator. From 1942 he was in charge of transporting the Jews of Europe to concentration camps in Poland, including Auschwitz. This was part of Adolf Hitler's 'Final Solution': his plan to kill all Jews living in land occupied by the German forces. Eichmann wasn't responsible for the policy of systematic killing – it was not his idea. But he was heavily involved in organizing the railway system that made it possible.

Since the 1930s the Nazis had been introducing laws that took away the rights of Jewish people. Hitler blamed almost everything that was wrong with Germany on the Jews and had a mad wish to get revenge on them. These laws prevented Jews from going to state-run schools, forced them to hand over money and property, and made them wear a yellow star. Jews were rounded up and forced to live in ghettos – overcrowded sections of cities that became prisons for them. Food was scarce,

and life was difficult. But the Final Solution introduced a new level of evil. Hitler's decision to murder millions of people simply because of their race meant that the Nazis needed a way of getting the Jews out of the cities to places where they could be killed in large numbers. Existing concentration camps were turned into factories for gassing and cremating hundreds of people a day. As many of these camps were in Poland, someone had to organize the trains that transported the Jews to their deaths.

While Eichmann sat shuffling bits of paper in an office and making important telephone calls, millions died as a result of what he did. Some perished from typhoid or starvation, others were made to work until they died, but most were killed with gas. In Nazi Germany the trains ran on time – Eichmann and people like him made sure of that. Their efficiency kept the cattle trucks full. Inside were men, women and children, all on a long and painful journey to their death, usually without food or water, sometimes in intense heat or cold. Many died on the journey, particularly the old and sick.

The survivors arrived weak and terrified, only to be forced into chambers disguised as shower rooms where they were made to strip naked. The doors were locked. It was here that the Nazis murdered them with Zyklon gas. Their bodies were burned and their possessions plundered. If they weren't selected for immediate death in this way, the stronger ones among them might be forced to work in atrocious conditions with little food. The Nazi guards would beat or even shoot them for fun.

Eichmann played a significant role in these crimes. Yet after the Second World War ended he managed to escape from the Allies, eventually arriving in Argentina, where he lived for some years in secret. In 1960, though, members of the Israeli secret police, Mossad, tracked him down to Buenos Aires and

captured him. They drugged him and flew him back to Israel to stand trial.

Was Eichmann some kind of evil beast, a sadist who enjoyed other people's suffering? That was what most people believed before the trial began. How else could he have played this part in the Holocaust? For several years his job was to find efficient ways to send people to their death. Surely only a monster would be capable of sleeping at night after that kind of work.

The philosopher Hannah Arendt (1906–75), a German Jew who had emigrated to the United States, reported on Eichmann's trial for the *New Yorker* magazine. She was interested in coming face to face with a product of the Nazi totalitarian state, a society in which there was little room to think for yourself. She wanted to understand this man, get a sense of what he was like; and see how he could have done such terrible things.

Eichmann was very far from the first Nazi that Arendt had met. She fled the Nazis herself, leaving Germany for France, but eventually becoming a US citizen. As a young woman at the University of Marburg her teacher had been the philosopher Martin Heidegger. For a short while they were lovers even though she was only 18 and he was married. Heidegger was busy writing *Being and Time* (1962), an incredibly difficult book that some people think is a major contribution to philosophy and others a deliberately obscure piece of writing. Later he would become a committed member of the Nazi Party, supporting its anti-Jewish policies. He even removed the name of his former friend, the philosopher Edmund Husserl, from the dedication page of *Being and Time* because he was Jewish.

But now in Jerusalem, Arendt was to meet a very different sort of Nazi. Here was a rather ordinary man who chose not to think too hard about what he was doing. His failure to think had

disastrous consequences. But he wasn't the evil sadist that she might have expected to find. He was something far more common but equally dangerous: an unthinking man. In a Germany where the worst forms of racism had been written into the law, it was easy for him to persuade himself that what he was doing was right. Circumstances gave him the opportunity for a successful career, and he took it. Hitler's Final Solution was an opportunity for Eichmann to do well, to show that he could do a good job. This is difficult to imagine, and many critics of Arendt don't think she was right, but she felt that he was sincere when he claimed to be doing his duty.

Unlike some Nazis, Eichmann didn't seem to be driven by a strong hatred of Jews. He had none of Hitler's venom. There were plenty of Nazis who would have happily beaten a Jew to death in the street for failing to give the 'Heil Hitler!' greeting, but he wasn't one of them. Yet he had taken on the official Nazi line and had accepted it, but far, far worse than that, he had helped send millions to their death. Even as he listened to the evidence against him he seemed to see little wrong with what he had done. As far as he was concerned, since he had not broken any laws, and had never directly killed anyone himself or asked anyone else to do that for him, he had behaved reasonably. He had been brought up to obey the law and trained to follow orders, and all around him people were doing the same as he was. By taking commands from other people he avoided feeling responsible for the results of his daily work.

There was no need for Eichmann to see people bundled into cattle trucks or to visit the death camps, so he didn't. This was a man who told the court he couldn't have become a doctor because he was afraid of the sight of blood. Yet the blood was still on his hands. He was a product of a system that had somehow prevented him thinking critically about his own

actions and the results they produced for real people. It was as if he couldn't imagine other people's feelings at all. He carried on with his deluded belief in his innocence all through his trial. Either that, or he had decided that his best line of defence was to say he was only obeying the law; if so, he took Arendt in.

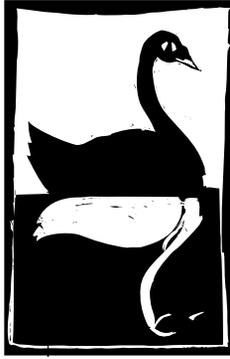
Arendt used the words 'the banality of evil' to describe what she saw in Eichmann. If something is 'banal', it is common, boring and unoriginal. Eichmann's evil was, she claimed, banal in the sense that it was the evil of a bureaucrat, of an office manager, rather than a devil. Here was this very ordinary sort of man who had allowed Nazi views to affect everything he did.

Arendt's philosophy was inspired by events around her. She wasn't the kind of philosopher to spend her life in an armchair thinking about purely abstract ideas or debating endlessly about the precise meaning of a word. Her philosophy was linked to recent history and lived experience. What she wrote in her book *Eichmann in Jerusalem* was based on her observations of one man and the sorts of language and justifications he gave. From what she saw she developed more general explanations of evil in a totalitarian state and its effects on those who did not resist its thought patterns.

Eichmann, like many Nazis during that era, failed to see things from someone else's perspective. He wasn't brave enough to question the rules that he was given: he simply looked for the best way to follow them. He lacked imagination. Arendt described him as shallow and brainless – though that too could have been an act. Had he been a monster he would have been terrifying. But at least monsters are rare and usually quite easy to spot. What was perhaps more terrifying still was the fact that he appeared so normal. He was an ordinary man who, by failing to question what he was doing, took part in some of the most

evil acts known to humanity. If he had not lived in Nazi Germany it is unlikely that he would have been an evil man. Circumstances were against him. But that doesn't remove his guilt. He was obedient to immoral orders. And obeying Nazi orders was, as far as Arendt was concerned, the same as supporting the Final Solution. By failing to question what he was told to do, and by carrying out those orders, he took part in mass murder even though from his point of view he was just creating train timetables. At one point in his trial he even claimed to be acting according to Immanuel Kant's theory of moral duty – as if he had done the right thing by following orders. He completely failed to understand that Kant believed that treating human beings with respect and dignity was fundamental to morality.

Karl Popper was a Viennese intellectual fortunate enough to escape the Holocaust and Eichmann's well-timetabled trains.



Learning from Mistakes

KARL POPPER AND THOMAS KUHN

In 1666 a young scientist was sitting in a garden when an apple fell to the ground. This made him wonder why apples fall straight down, rather than going off to the side or upwards. The scientist was Isaac Newton, and the incident inspired him to come up with his theory of gravity, a theory that explained the movements of planets as well as apples. But what happened next? Do you think that Newton then gathered evidence that *proved* beyond all doubt that his theory was true? Not according to Karl Popper (1902–94).

Scientists, like all of us, learn from their mistakes. Science progresses when we realize that a particular way of thinking about reality is false. That, in two sentences, was Karl Popper's view of how humanity's best hope for knowledge about the world functions. Before he developed his ideas most people believed that scientists begin with a hunch about how the world is, and then gather evidence that shows their hunch was correct.