

# Hannah Arendt on Banality of Evil

Mab Huang<sup>\*</sup>

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This paper is primarily concerned with the controversy over the concept of “banality of evil” provoked by Hannah Arendt’s report from Jerusalem on Eichmann’s trial. It will briefly describe Eichmann the man, the background to his trial and Arendt’s first impression of him. Then it will take up the criticisms of Arendt’s position and her explanation why she came to think of Eichmann and judge him as she did and how did she give up her commitment to the concept of “radical evil”. To support Arendt in her arguments, brief descriptions of torture and murder and their perpetrators from two different situations are cited. Finally, the paper will end with a brief reference to Arendt as a pariah. Never is this paper intended as a comprehensive study of Arendt’s political philosophy, which is obviously a different project.

**Key words:** Hannah Arendt, radical evil, banality of evil, Eichmann’s trial, transitional justice

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\* Professor, Department of Political Science, Soochow University.

E-mail: mab@mail.scu.edu.tw

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As soon as the first installment of Arendt's five part series on the trial of Eichmann in Jerusalem appeared in the *New Yorker* in February 1963, the reactions from the Jewish communities were emotional and vicious; she had few defenders. Arendt was accused of many things, from being soulless to not caring for her own people to exonerating Eichmann. She was anti- Israel, anti-Zionist, a legal purist, a Kantian moralist, and ultimately, a Jewish-self-hater. The "Eichmann Controversy" focused on three main topics: Arendt's judgement of Eichmann the man; her analysis of the European Jewish councils and their role in the Nazi's Final Solution; and her discussion of the conduct of the trial, the legal questions posed by the trial and the political purposes pursued by the Israeli government. In this paper, only the controversy on the banality of evil will be dealt with. It will briefly describe the Eichmann the man, the background to his trial and Arendt's first impression of him. Then it will take up the criticisms of Arendt's position and her explanation why she came to think of Eichmann and judge him as she did. To support Arendt in her argument, brief descriptions of torture and murder from two different situations are cited. Finally, this paper will end with a reference to Arendt as a pariah.

## I. The Trial of Eichmann in Jerusalem

Adolf Eichmann was kidnapped by Israeli agents in Argentina on May 24, 1960 and brought back to Israel, provoking a diplomatic dispute between the two countries. Upon hearing that he would be put on trial in Jerusalem, Hannah Arendt decided that she must be present. She proposed to William Shawn of the *New Yorker* that she be appointed the trial reporter. In rearranging her 1961 schedule, she wrote to the Rockefeller Foundation with a sense of urgency: "You will understand I think why I should cover this trial; I missed the

Nuremberg Trials, I never saw these people in the flesh, and this is probably my only chance.” (cited in Young-Buehl, 1982: 329).<sup>1</sup> Again in her letter to Vassar College: “To attend this trial is somehow, I feel, an obligation I owe my past.” (Young-Buehl, 1982: 329).<sup>2</sup> Plainly, reporting on the trial was what Arendt had set her mind on, and indeed it turned out to be a momentous decision in her life.

Arendt was startled by her first impression of the man she would be writing about; she described him as “nicht einmal unheimlich” (cited in Young-Buehl, 1982: 329),<sup>3</sup> “not even sinister,” not inhuman or beyond comprehension. From this first impression, a great controversy was soon to engulf the reporter and the Jewish communities in all parts of the world.

Eichmann was born on March 19, 1906 to Karl Adolf Eichmann and Maria nee Schefferling in Solingen, a German town in the Rhineland. Coming from a middle class family, Eichmann did poorly in school, was unable to finish high school, or to graduate from the vocational school for engineering. Eichmann’s mother died when he was ten; and his father remarried. After working as a salesman for the Austrian Elektrobau Company for two years from 1925-27, he obtained a job with the Vacuum Oil Company of Vienna. As Arendt describes it, “the five and a half years with the Vacuum Oil Company must have been the happier ones in Eichmann’s life. He made a good living during a time of severe unemployment, and he was still living with his parents, except when he was out on the road.” (Arendt, 1977: 31). Yet this good life was brought to a close abruptly in 1932 when he was transferred from Linz to Salzburg, much against his inclinations. He was deeply depressed. “I lost all joy in my work, I no longer liked to sell, to make calls.” (Arendt, 1977: 31).

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1. A letter from Arendt to Thompson, Rockefeller Foundation, December 20, 1960, Library of Congress.

2. A letter from Arendt to Vassar College, January 2, 1961, Library of Congress.

3. A letter from Arendt to Blucher, April 15, 1961, Library of Congress.

Nevertheless, in April of that year, Eichmann joined the National Socialist Party and entered the S.S.; a year later, Eichmann left for Germany, and after fourteen months as a soldier, he applied for a job with the Security Service of the reichsfuhre S.S. Soon, he emerged as an expert on the Jewish Question and worked in planning and coordinating the transportation of the Jews to their death camps. If his testimony can be taken seriously, when Eichmann was told that Hilter had ordered the “final solution,” the physical extermination of the Jews, Eichmann did not expect it. He said he had never thought of...such a solution through violence...I now lost everything, all joy in my work, all initiative, all interest; I was, so to speak, blown out.” (Arendt, 1977: 31). Eichmann was promoted to the rank of S.S. Obersturmbannfuhrer, a rank equivalent to lieutenant colonel, by the time Germany surrendered in 1945.

Eichmann was indicted in the District Court in Jerusalem on fifteen counts. “Together with others” he was accused of having committed crimes against the Jewish people, crimes against humanity, and war crimes during the whole period of the Nazi regime and especially during the period of the Second World War. To each count Eichmann pleaded “Not guilty in the sense of the indictment.” But in what sense was Eichmann guilty? To the astonishment of Arendt, “in the long cross examination of the accused...neither the defense nor the prosecution nor, finally, any of the three judges ever bothered to ask him this obvious question.” (Arendt, 1977: 21). If his defense lawyer were to be believed, “Eichmann feels guilty before God, not before the law.” Yet this was never confirmed from the accused himself (Arendt, 1977: 21).

Arendt’s first reaction to the “man in the glass booth” in Jerusalem, as referred to above, was that he was nicht einmal unheimlich, “not even sinister.” She was startled: “That the man would gladly have himself hanged in public, you have probably read (in the new papers). I am flabbergasted (cited in

Young-Bruehl, 1982: 330).<sup>4</sup> Yet after initial discouragement with the trial, her interest revived, and Arendt began to understand the man she was reporting. As she describes it (Arendt, 1977: 33):

A leaf in the whirlwind of time, he was blown from Schlaraffia, the Never-Never Land of tables set by magic...into the marching column of the Thousand year Reich...At any rate, he did not enter the Party out of conviction, nor was he ever convinced by it...as he pointed out in court, "it was like being swallowed up by the Party against all expectations and without previous decision. It happened so quickly and suddenly." He had no time and less desire to be properly informed, he did not even know the Party program, he never read Mein Kampf. Kaltenbrunner had said to him: Why not join the S.S.? And he had replied, Why not? That was how it had happened, and that was about all there was to it.

The fact that Eichmann was swept into the Party and the S.S. without making a decision, however, did mean he was now part of History, of "a Movement that always kept moving and in which somebody like him-already a failure in the eyes of his social class, of his family, and hence in his own eyes as well-could start from the scratch and still make a career...And if he did not like what he had to do...He might still have preferred-if anyone had asked him-to be hanged as Obersturmbannfuhrer a. D. (in retirement) rather than living out his life quietly and normally as a traveling salesman for the Vacuum Oil Company." (Arendt, 1977: 33-34).

The defeat of Germany in 1945, it should not be difficult to understand, was significant for Eichmann "mainly because it then dawned upon him that thenceforward he would have to live without being a member of something or other. 'I sensed I would have to live a leaderless and difficult individual life, I would receive no directives from anybody, no orders and commands would any longer be issued to me, no pertinent ordinances would be there to consult-in

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4. A letter from Arendt to Blucher, April 20, 1961, Library of Congress.

brief, a life never known before lay before me.” (Arendt, 1977: 32).

Arendt’s judgment of Eichmann was by now clear. As she wrote to Jaspers in 1963: “He was eigentlich dumm,” “but also somehow not.” (cited in Young-Bruehl, 1982: 330).<sup>5</sup> He was simply unable to think: “He was not stupid. It was sheer thoughtlessness—something by no means identical with stupidity—that predisposed him to become one of the greatest criminals of that period. And if this is ‘banal’ and even funny, if with the best will in the world one cannot extract any diabolical or demonic profundity from Eichmann, that is still far from calling it commonplace.” (Arendt, 1977: 287-288).

## II. The Reactions of Jewish Communities

The reactions to the report were emotional and acrimonious. And it raged for three years and has hardly died down ever since. Arendt was accused of all kinds of offenses, many of which could not in fairness attributed to her. She was, for example, criticized for having said things like that Jews were incapable of resistance, that victims were as responsible as their executioners, etc. Of course, her judgment and how she presents her arguments must have convinced many people that she was arrogant and sarcastic. And she made errors in facts. She could not have been so knowledgeable in European Jewish history. It should not be surprising that she would be taken to task by experts pertaining to the choices made by the leaders of the Jewish Councils in specific situations. But it was obvious that she had threatened the self-identity and valued beliefs of the Jewish people and for that she was attacked.

The criticism and attacks began with a scathing review in the *New York*

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5. A letter from Arendt to Jaspers, December 29, 1963, Marbach.

*Times* on May 19, 1963. The reviewer Judge Michael Musmanno was formerly the American prosecutor at the Nuremberg Trials and served as a prosecution witness in Jerusalem. Entitled “Man with an Unspotted Conscience”, Judge Musmanno launched an all-out assault. He not only refuted Arendt on facts, defending the State of Israel and its leaders; he was angry with what he saw as Arendt’s reading of Eichmann the man. To quote:

There will be those who will wonder how Miss Arendt, after attending the Eichmann trial and studying the record and pertinent material, could announce, as she solemnly does in this book, that Eichmann was not really a Nazi at heart, that he did not know Hitler’s program when he joined the Nazi party,...all in all, Eichmann was really a modest man.

Again:

Miss Arendt devotes considerable space to Eichmann’s conscience and informs us that one of Eichmann’s points in his own defense was “that there were no voices from the outside to arouse his conscience.” How abysmally asleep is a conscience when it must be aroused to be told there is something morally wrong about pressing candy upon a little boy to induce him to enter a gas chamber of death?

The author believes that Eichmann was misjudged in Jerusalem and quotes, with astonishing credulity, his statement: “I myself had no hatred for the Jews.” Sympathizing with Eichmann, she laments: “Alas, nobody believe him.” (Musmanno, 1963).

Indeed, before the trial, The World Jewish Congress had already distributed a pamphlet in 1961 designed to show that Eichmann had been the person responsible for carrying out the Final Solution. The booklet, entitled *Eichmann: Master-Mind of the Nazi Murder-Machine* was introduced by Nehemiah Robinson, who was later to play a part in the controversy. In it, Eichmann was portrayed as inhuman and monstrous (cited in Young-Bruehl, 1982: 342).<sup>6</sup> This

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6. “Eichmann: Master- Mind of the Nazi Murder-Machine.”

claim the Court in Jerusalem completely rejected.

In 1963 Jacob Robinson helped the Anti-Defamation League of B'nai B'rith prepare a six-page summary of Arendt's "errors" for its journal, *Facts*. Then he set to work on a book length manuscript which was later published under the title *The Crooked Shall be Made Straight*. It provided the information widely cited in attacking Arendt's scholarship (Young-Bruehl, 1982: 342 ; 348). In his first draft summary chapter, the fear of future anti-Semitism and concern for the State of Israel was discernable. To quote:

The advice of Hannah Arendt to consider the past rather in sorrow than in anger is followed by reserving sorrow for Eichmann but expansively meting out anger to the Jews....Our enemies have for years been engaged in a campaign of whitewashing the culprits and blaming the victims. The latter, brutally murdered not so long ago, are now being killed for a second time by the defilers. Among these enemies Hannah Arendt now places herself (cited in Young-Bruehl, 1982: 356).<sup>7</sup>

As the controversy was gathering momentum in the U.S., Siggfried Moses, spokesman for the Council of Jews from Germany flew from Israel to meet with Arendt in Switzerland and asked her to stop the publication as a book so as to calm down the controversy. She refused, and warned Moses that her Jewish critics were going to make the book into a cause celebre and do more damage to the Jewish community than any thing she had said could possibly do (Young-Bruehl, 1982: 348-349).

And New York City Arendt's good friend Hans Morgenthau reported on a meeting in which he and Bruno Bettelheim attended and Beettelheim, defending Arendt, attempted to calm an angry audience. Morgenthau wrote: "The Jewish community is up in arms." Apparently, "Reality has protruded into the protective armor of illusion and the result is psychological havoc. (Hillel House,

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7. From a copy of Robinson's 1963 draft in the Yad Vashem Library, Jerusalem.



City College of New York) has had a meeting, with Bettelheim. After ten minutes, everyone was screaming, calling each other liar and threatening libel suits. It was a kind of collective psychoanalysis.” (Young-Bruehl, 1982: 348-349).

In an article in the *Commentary* in September 1963, Norman Podhoretz summed up the objections quite neatly which did not, however, fairly reflect the deepest concerns of Arendt in writing the book: “In the place of the monstrous Nazi, she gives us the ‘banal’ Nazi; in the place of the Jew as a virtuous martyr, she gives us the Jew as accomplice of evil; and in the place of the confrontation of guilt and innocence, she gives us the ‘collaboration’ of criminal and victim (cited in Young-Bruehl, 1982: 347).<sup>8</sup>

### III. Hannah Arendt on Banality of Evil

Arendt faced the attack with few defenders and many friendships of long years were broken up. Her husband Heinrich Blucher, Karl Jaspers, Mary McCarthy, J.Glenn Gray, Hans Morgenthau and a few others supported her. The termination of friendship with Kurt Blumenfeld had deeply hurt her, and her efforts to make up with him before his death in 1963 without success must be terribly painful to her. She knew quite well that the subtitle of the book—the banality of evil—had angered so many people and gave her grief, yet she did not give in. How and why did she settle on the subtitle? And what did she intend to convey?

Long before Arendt signed up as a reporter for the *New Yorker*, she had discussed with Jaspers the complex legal issues regarding the trial of Eichmann

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8. “Hannah Arendt on Eichmann” (Podhoretz, 1963).

in Jerusalem. Jaspers had felt that instead of trying Eichmann, the Israelis should have turned him over to an international tribunal, perhaps under the aegis of the United Nations. Nevertheless, Jaspers was persuaded by Arendt that Israel could speak for the Jews, if not in a legal sense, surely “in a political sense,” with the majority of European Jews who had survived the Holocaust now living in Israel. Arendt also did not think that Eichmann could be made into a martyr, yet she conceded “it would be a different case if we had a law against *hostes humani generis* (enemies of mankind) and not only against murder and crimes considered analogous to murder (cited in Young-Bruehl, 1982: 330).<sup>9</sup>

When Arendt reported her first impression of Eichmann to Jaspers, however, she did not persuade Jaspers at all. For Jaspers, Eichmann was less than a person, a monster. And reading newspaper accounts of Eichmann’s activities in Hungary, Jaspers was skeptical that Arendt’s first impression was correct. “You are now back in Israel (after a visit to Basal). In the meantime, Eichmann has shown another aspect, also personal brutal. Ultimately, can such a functionary for bureaucratic murder be, personally, without inhuman characteristics...? You will not have an easy time coming to a truly adequate portrait of the man.” (cited in Young-Bruehl, 1982: 520).<sup>10</sup> Blumenfeld was not convinced either.

Arendt did not back away from her judgment. It would appear her husband Blucher had much to do with her adopting the *Banality of Evil* as the subtitle of the book. Perhaps, the concept was referred to in a letter from Jaspers to Arendt some twenty five years before the report: “You say that what the Nazis did can not be comprehended as ‘crime’ - I am not altogether comfortable with your view, because a guilt that goes beyond all criminal guilt inevitably takes on a streak of

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9. Excerpts from Arendt to Jaspers, December 23, 1960 and Jaspers to Arendt, December 12, December 16, December 30, 1960, Marbach.

10. A letter from Jaspers to Arendt, June 8, 1961, Marbach.

‘greatness’- of satanic greatness-which is, for me, as inappropriate for the Nazis as all the talk about the ‘demonic’ element and so on. It seems to be that we have to see these things in their total banality (in their ganzen Banalitat), in their prosaic triviality, because that’s what truly characterizes them. Bacteria can cause epidemics that wipe out nations, but they remain merely bacteria.” (cited in Bernstein, 2002: 215).<sup>11</sup> Yet, Jaspers also wrote to Arendt that “Alcopol told me that Heinrich suggested the phrase ‘the banality of evil’ and is cursing himself for it now because you’ve had to take the heat for what the thought of...I think it’s a wonderful inspiration and right on the mark as the book’s subtitle. The point is that this evil, not evil per se, is banal.” (cited Bernstein, 2002: 268).<sup>12</sup>

Indeed Arendt told Jaspers that her husband had often considered the possibility that evil was a “superficial phenomenon,” and it was this formula that prompted Arendt to choose it as the subtitle of her book (cited in Young-Bruehl, 1982: 330).<sup>13</sup> Blucher, it is said, had come to acquire a sense of mordant human after long years of reading Brecht and sharing his friend Robert Gilbert’s satiric vision in looking at the world. Nevertheless, it was several years later that Blucher came across the passage of Brecht’s which expressed his own understanding and confirmed Blucher and Arendt in their conviction. The passage read:

The great political criminals must be exposed and exposed especially for laughter. They are not great political criminals, but people permitted great political crimes, which is something entirely different. The failure of his enterprises does not indicate that Hitler was an idiot and the extent of his enterprises does not make him a great man. If the ruling classes permit a

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11. A letter from Hannah Arendt to Jaspers: Correspondences: 62.

12. A letter from Hannah Arendt to Jaspers: Correspondences: 542.

13. A letter from Arendt to Jaspers, December 29, 1963, Marbach.

small crook to become a great crook, he is not entitled to a privileged position in our view of history. That is, the fact that he became a great crook, and that what he does has great consequences does not add to his stature... (Young-Bruehl, 1982: 330-331).<sup>14</sup>

Arendt was emphatic in her agreement with Brecht. In an interview she cited Brecht and said that it was important in assessing Hitler and people like him to insist "no matter what he does and if he killed ten million people, he is still a clown." (cited in Young-Bruehl, 1982: 331).<sup>15</sup>

For Arendt, the writing of the report had cured her of the kind of emotional involvement that makes good judgment impossible. In a letter to her friend Mary McCarthy: "You are the only reader to understand that I wrote this book in a curious euphoria. And that ever since I did it I feel-after twenty years-light-hearted about the whole matter. Don't tell anybody: is it not proof positive that I have no 'soul'?" (Young-Bruehl, 1982: 337).<sup>16</sup> For Arendt, the encounter with Eichmann "in the flesh" had taught her that she had overrated "the impact of ideology on the individual" and concluded that for Eichmann "extermination per se (was) more important than anti-Semitism or racism." (cited in Young-Bruehl: 367).<sup>17</sup> By taking note of the fact that the ideology of Nazism was less important to Eichmann than the movement in which he joined, Arendt rejected the concept of radical evil she had used in *The Origins of*

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14. The passage is taken from the notes Brecht wrote for the Resistable Rise of the Man Arturo Ui.

15. This is taken from a 1973 interview with Roger Ererra, excerpted for the New York Review of Books, October 26, 1978:18.

16. Arendt to McCarthy, June 23, 1964 (in McCarthy's possession). Also consult Benhabib (2000). Benhabib's comments on the use of the term "light-hearted" and the phrase "the banality of evil" is fair and insightful:

The use of the term "light-hearted," and the phrase "the banality of evil," is a terminological infelicity; she did not mean that she was joyful or carefree about the whole matter' she meant rather that her heart was lightened by having shed a burden. By voicing in public the shame, rage and sadness she had carried in private for thirty years, she was finally unloading some of the burden history had imposed on her.

17. Arendt to McCarthy, September 20, 1963 (in McCarthy's possession).

*Totalitarianism* to point at the incomprehensible nature of the Nazi. And as she did this, she freed herself of a long nightmare; she no longer had to live with the idea that monsters and demons had engineered the murder of million. The banality of evil, “fearsome word and thought defying” as it is, its existence is no proof of an original evil element in human nature and hence not an indictment of mankind (Young-Bruehl, 1982: 367).<sup>18</sup> In Arendt own words:

What I speak of the banality of evil, I do so only on the strictly factual level, pointing to a phenomenon which stared one in the face at the trial. Eichmann was not Lago and not Macbeth, and nothing would have been further from his mind than to determine with Richard III “to prove a villain.” Except for an extraordinary diligence in looking out for his personal advancement, he had no motives at all...He merely, to put the matter colloquially, never realized what he was doing (Arendt, 1977: 287).<sup>19</sup>

Again, several years after the publication of *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, Arendt returned to comment on what she meant by the banality of evil:

Some years ago, reporting the trial of Eichmann in Jerusalem, I spoke of “the Banality of evil” and meant with this no theory or doctrine but something quite factual, the phenomenon of evil deeds, committed on a gigantic scale, which could not be traced to any particularity of wickedness, pathology or ideological conviction in the doer, who only personal distinction was a perhaps extraordinary shallowness. However monstrous the deeds were, the doer was neither monstrous nor demonic, and the only specific characteristic one could detect on his part as well as in his behavior during the trial and the proceeding examination was something entirely negative: it was not stupidity but a curious, quite authentic inability to think (Arendt, 1971 also cited in Bernstein, 2002: 219).

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18. Richard Bernstein argues that this is not the case; Arendt had not repudiated the concept of “radical evil”. Consult Bernstein (2002: 218).

19. Bernstein (2002: 270) writes: “Arendt is being ingenuous. She is not simply describing facts, but making a controversial judgment about their banality.”

## IV. Banality of Evil in South Africa and Taiwan

Given Arendt's description of the banality of evil, it is of interest if more similar cases from different countries can be cited to support her arguments. For Arendt's arguments must imply to some degree a universal pattern, that is, bureaucrats taking part in heinous crimes committed by the states must act more or less alike. And indeed there are many such cases. Two will suffice.

For almost two years in the mid-Nineties as the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of South Africa was being set up and holding its hearings,<sup>20</sup> the poetess Antjie Krog was recruited to work as a radio network reporter, following the proceedings on a daily basis, very much like Arendt reporting on Eichmann's trial in Jerusalem. The events in South Africa were dramatic and tense, and the whole world was captivated by what they saw and heard: the display of great bravery and compassion as well as depravity and cruelty that ordinary men and women were capable of. For Krog, it was obviously a painful yet exhilarating experience, coming face to face with the past history of her country and the living realities of race relations. As a result, a super report was written, again reminiscent of Arendt giving her report on the trial of Eichmann. In it, the account of mindless killing and murder was vividly described:

Dick Coetzee was a notorious killer from Vlakplaas, literally a farm near Pretoria used as a base for police hit squads. Here is his testimony how Joe Pillay, a teacher, was tortured:

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20 For the origins, structure and functions of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of South Africa, consult Desmond Tutu (1999). Charles Villa-Vicencio and Wilhelm Verwoerd (2000) Wilmot James and Linda Van De Vijver (2000). ed. The Report of the Commission submitted in 1998 is useful as well for evaluating the work of the Commission. Also consult Mab Huang (2005).

They eventually decided then to bring in an army doctor in a brown uniform with a drip and the so-called Truth serum...they put Pillay on a stretcher and the doctor controlled the drip in his arm. He lost control over his thinking. It made him fall into a kind of relaxed position (Krog, 2000: 60).

Or how Sizwe Kondile was killed:

The drops have an effect. Four drops for not too big a person...and if you give more, it's like administering chloroform...more would bring such a deep sleep that one would die. We were all drinking. We gave Kondile his spiked drink. After twenty minutes he sat down uneasily...then he fell over backwards. Then Major Nic van Rensburg said: "Well chaps, let's get on with the job". Two of the younger constables with the jeep dragged some dense bushveld wood and tyres and made a fire...A man, tall and blond hair, took his Makarov pistol with a silencer and shot him on top of the head. His body gave a short jerk...

The burning of a body on an open fire takes seven hours. Whilst that happened we were drinking and braaing next to the fire (Krog, 2000: 60).

Or take the case of Bo Yang, an eminent writer and now a State Councilor to the President in Taiwan. For more than thirty years, Taiwan was ruled by a dictatorship: freedom of the press was heavily censored, and any political dissent was suppressed. Bo Yang was accused of being satirical against the then President Chiang Kai-shek and his son Chiang Ching-kuo when in early December of 1967 he translated for an evening newspaper in Taiwan an episode of Popeye the Sailor Man (周碧瑟, 1996).<sup>21</sup> Under the pressure of dateline, Bo Yang unconsciously put the words Chiang Kai-shek had always used when he addressed the people into the mouth of Popeye when Popeye and his son made an election speech in their desolated island. Ironically, Bo Yang had worked for years for the Patriotic Youth Corp headed by Chiang Ching-kuo and was well

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21. For a description of Bo Yang's arrest and torture in the Bureau of Investigation in Taipei, consult The Memoirs of Bo Yang, narrated by Bo Yang and written by Pesus Chou (周碧瑟, 1996).

career-wise. He was forced to resign, however, because he fell in love with a college student whose parents strongly opposed to their liaison and complained to Chiang Ching-kuo. Now he was arrested and tortured in the Bureau of Investigation. Several agents of the Bureau were implicated, including Liu Chan-hua and Kao Yi-rue. They played cat and mouse with Bo Yang, alternating promise of immediate release with threats. Bo Yang describes vividly how he was humiliated and tortured and made to confess his crimes by Liu Chan-hua. Citing Erich Maria Remarque, Bo Yang speculates that Liu and his colleagues must have been gentle and reliable friends in their community. Yet given the absolute power they enjoyed and the potential bestiality, their personalities became warped and twisted; they became torturers (周碧瑟, 1996: 270).

Upon being released in April 1977, Bo Yang resumed his career as a writer. When his Memoirs were serialized in the China Times, Liu Chen-hua wrote a letter threatening to take Bo Yang to court. Bo Yang challenged him to go ahead (周碧瑟, 1996: 401-409). As his Memoirs were about to be published as a book, Bo Yang planned to append Liu's letter. Yet Liu refused. Bo Yang wrote of his encounters with both Mr. Kao Yi-rue and Liu Chan-hua.

The meeting with Kao was accidental. In a gathering of a group of reporters from an evening newspaper, Kao was present and offered to toast Bo Yang as a gesture of apology. Bo Yang declined. The conversation between the two men went like this:

Kao: "I have been fair to all the friends present tonight, I only owned an apology to Bo Yang and so I drink this cup of wine as a punishment."

Bo Yang: "Indeed you owned me an apology. In the Bureau of Investigation, it was you who taught me to write my confessions and incriminate myself."

Kao: "Yes, I did. Yet you made up things yourself so perfectly."

Bo Yang (surprised): "If I did not do well, would I be off the rack?"



Kao (loudly): “Anyhow you were not a Communist spy, if you were sentenced to be executed, I would die with you.”

This encounter with Kao made Bo Yang eager to meet with Liu and study Liu’s expressions on his face. Giving assurances that he would not embarrass Liu, a luncheon was arranged. Liu arrived first. Bo Yang describes Liu as looking contented and self-assured. He grasped Bo Yang’s hand, as if meeting an old friend, saying that Bo Yang looked healthy and well. He then proceeded to tell of his role in arresting Shih Ming-teh and Huang Hsin-jieh, (two of the most influential opposition leaders challenging the government in the late 1970s,) saying no a word about the trial of Bo Yang. Bo Yang’s wife could not restrain herself any more and interrupted: “You tortured people in the Bureau, and any confessions could be exacted by torture.” At that point, Liu moved close to Bo Yang, holding Bo Yang’s right arm with both hands, saying “My venerable Sir, am I right that in the Bureau we never did such things”? Bo Yang was speechless.

What banality of evil.

## V. A Rejection of Radical Evil

It has taken much time and reflection for Arendt to reject the concept of radical evil and to speak of the banality of evil. Immanuel Kant in his work *Religion within the Limits of Reason* spoke of “a natural propensity to evil.” To quote:

Now this propensity must itself be considered as morally evil, yet not as a natural predisposition but rather as something that can be imputed to man, and consequently it must consist in maxims of the will which are contrary to the law...

Hence we call this a natural propensity to evil, and as we must, after all, ever hold man himself responsible for it, we can further call it a radical innate evil in human nature (yet none the less brought upon us ourselves) (Kant,1960: 27-28).

Again:

This evil is radical, because it corrupts the grounds of all maxims; it is, moreover, as a natural propensity, inextirpable by human powers, since extirpation could occur only through good maxims, and can not take place when the ultimate subjective ground of all maxims is postulated as corrupt; yet at the same time it must be possible to overcome it, since it is found in man, a being whose actions are free (Kant, 1960: 32).<sup>22</sup>

For Kant, to put it succinctly, radical evil is a natural propensity, yet it is brought upon himself by man.

When Arendt made use of the concept of radical evil in her book *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, she apparently had something else in mind:

It is inherent in our entire philosophic tradition that we cannot conceive of a “radical evil,” and this is true both for Christian theology, which conceded even to the Devil himself a celestial origin, as well as for Kant, the only philosopher who, in the word he coined for it, at least must have suspected the existence of this evil even though he immediately rationalized it in the concept of a “perverted ill will,” that could be explained by comprehensive motives. Therefore, we actually have nothing to fall back on in order to understand a phenomenon that nevertheless confronts us with its overpowering reality and breakdown all standards we know... (Arendt, 1958b: 459).

Again, in *The Human Condition*:

It is therefore quite significant, a structural element in the realm of human affairs, that men are unable to forgive what they can not punish and that they are unable to punish what has turned out to be unforgivable. This is the hallmark of those offenses which, since Kant, we call “radical evil” and about whose nature so little is known, even to us who have been exposed to one of

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22. Consult also Bernstein (2002: 11-45).

their rare outbursts on the public scene (Arendt, 1958a: 24).

When Arendt came to write her report on the trial of Eichmann in Jerusalem, she rejected the concept of radical evil, albeit with the stipulation that “when I speak of the banality of evil, I do so only on a strictly factual level, pointing to a phenomenon which stared one in the face at the trial.” (Young-Bruehl, 1982: 367). She did so in part due to the influence of her husband Blucher. Yet the judgment was hers; and the encounter with Eichmann in the courtroom confirmed her in her judgment. As she told Gershom Scholem: “It is indeed my opinion that evil is never ‘radical’ that it is only extreme, and that it possesses neither depth nor any demonic dimension. It can overgrow and lay waste the entire world precisely because it spread like a fungus on the surface. It is ‘thought-defying’ as I said, because thought tries to reach some depth, to go to the roots, and the moment it concern itself with evil, it is frustrated because there is nothing. That is its ‘banality’. Only the good has depth and can be radical.” (cited in Young-ruehl,1982: 369).<sup>23</sup>

## VI. Arendt as a Pariah

After “the Eichmann Controversy”, Arendt was even more than before determined to tackle the question of judgment. Her position was aptly summed up in the Postscript to the revised edition of *Eichmann in Jerusalem*:

The argument that we cannot judge if we were not present and involved ourselves seems to convince everyone everywhere; although it seems obvious that if it were true, neither the administration of justice nor the writing of history would ever be possible (Arendt, 1977: 295-6).

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23. From exchange of letters between Gershom Scholem and Hannah Arendt in MB, Tel Aviv, August 16, 1963, *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*, October 19, 1963, *Aufbau*, December 1963 and *Encounter*, January 1964.

Nor would she concede that the person who judge is self-righteous, as she herself has been so accused. Forgiveness and judgment can go together- “Even the judge who condemns a murderer can still say when he goes home: ‘And there, but for the grace of God, go I.’” (Arendt, 1977: 295-6).

Ultimately, Arendt made her own judgment because, as she put it herself, she was a pariah (Young-Bruehl, 1982: 347). Only the pariahs are the real people. They are the outsiders, not assimilated into the community. “Social non-conformism,” she wrote, “is the sine qua non of intellectual achievement.” (cited in Young-Bruehl, 1982: xv).<sup>24</sup> Being a pariah gave her the freedom and audacity to think her own thought and make her own judgment. She paid a price for it; yet what she has achieved amply compensated the pains and anguish she felt. She left behind a new perspective through which the heinous crimes planned by the State and executed by its bureaucrats in modern times could be better understood. It is indeed ironic that Eichmann in Jerusalem was her “most intensely Jewish work, in which she identifies herself morally and epistemologically with the Jewish people. It is as if some of the deepest paradoxes of retaining a Jewish identity under conditions of modernity came to the fore in Arendt’s search for the moral, political, and jurisprudential bases on which the trial and sentencing of Adolf Eichmann could take place.” (Benhabib, 2000: 65) Could it be that only in confronting her identity as a member of an ethnic community, a pariah confirms herself as a pariah, and in breaking from the community, she is what she chooses to be. And in this, there is again a universal pattern: in every civilization and every society, now and then, the pariah is always there to challenge the illusions, the stale and oppressive conventions of the community and to offer a new perspective, a new idea, a new language in understanding, judging and acting on the world.

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24. Arendt’s unpublished and untitled address at the Rand School, 1948, Library of Congress.

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# 漢娜·鄂蘭論「平庸的惡」

黃 默\*

Hannah Arendt 是當代最具影響力的一位政治哲學家，她著作等身，關懷許多議題。這篇文章集中於她對「惡」的看法，具體來說，討論下列三個問題：一、Hannah Arendt 採訪 Eichmann 在以色列法庭受審判經過的報導及其所引起的爭論；二、Hannah Arendt 如何逐步放棄根本惡（radical evil）的概念，而提出「平庸的惡」（banality of evil）的看法？三、初步探討 banality of evil 的普遍性，引述台灣與南非的兩個案例作為說明。這篇文章並非針對 Hannah Arendt 政治思想整體的研究。

關鍵詞：漢娜·鄂蘭、根本的惡、平庸的惡、艾希曼的審判、轉型正義

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\* 東吳大學政治學系教授。