

Arendt on Conscience*

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Abstract

Hannah Arendt was a first-rate political philosopher who is often remembered for the phrase «banality of evil». This phrase grew out of her coverage of the Eichmann trial and deserves to be remembered; however, her other main focus in that trial was on Eichmann's conscience. He believed that he was doing his duty and was following his conscience; in contrast, Arendt maintained that his conscience was fundamentally flawed. It was flawed because he followed numerous others in his use of generalities, platitudes, and even lies. Thus, Arendt's account indicates that the traditional view of conscience as solely involving one's moral self is erroneous and Eichmann's actions showed that one's conscience can, and do, lead to catastrophic moral and political consequences. As Arendt tried to make clear, Eichmann was one person, but he could be anybody. In light of this, her examination of conscience is not only important for political scientists and scholarly historians, but also has present-day ramifications for all thinking people.

Keywords: conscience, Hannah Arendt, Adolf Eichmann, Gewissen

Riassunto. La "coscienza" in Arendt

Hannah Arendt è stata una filosofa politica di grande rilevanza, spesso ricordata per la celebre espressione «banalità del male», che deriva dalla sua analisi del processo Eichmann e merita di essere ricordata. Tuttavia, l'altra principale osservazione di Arendt in quel processo concerne la coscienza di Eichmann. Mentre quest'ultimo credeva di adempiere al suo dovere e di seguire la propria coscienza, Arendt sosteneva che la sua coscienza fosse fondamentalmente corrotta, perché seguiva altri nell'uso di generalità, luoghi comuni e persino bugie. Il resoconto di Arendt indica quindi che la visione tradizionale della coscienza, limitata esclusivamente al proprio io morale, è errata, mentre le azioni di Eichmann hanno dimostrato che la coscienza può anche portare – e di fatto porta – a conseguenze morali e politiche catastrofiche. Come Arendt ha voluto puntualizzare, Eichmann era un individuo, ma avrebbe potuto trattarsi di chiunque. Alla luce di ciò, la sua analisi della coscienza non è importante solo per gli scienziati politici e gli storici colti, ma ha implicazioni attuali per tutte le persone pensanti.

Parole chiave: coscienza, Hannah Arendt, Adolf Eichmann, Gewisse

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1. Introduction

Hannah Arendt is remembered for a number of things; among them for being a first-rate political thinker, for being an expert of totalitarianism, and for being the originator of the phrase «the banality of evil». What she is not noted for is being an expert on the concept of conscience¹, which is rather remarkable given that the concept is prevalent in much of her

¹ Although Arendt tended to write mostly in terms of thinking and not so often in terms of consciousness, it will become clear that her notions of thinking and consciousness are connected to “conscience”. For instance, in his article on “Gewissen”, M. Kähler (1899 p. 645) noted that historically «Gewissen» signified «bewußt und Bewußtsein» («conscious and consciousness»). Because other scholars have dealt with thinking/consciousness, my concentration is on “conscience.”

later work². It is frequently found in the volume on “willing” in *The Life of the Mind*, it is a major focus of *Thinking and Moral Considerations*, but it has its greatest prominence in *Eichmann in Jerusalem*³. That work was devoted to her coverage of the Eichmann trial which resulted in her discovery that evil could be banal⁴. However, her coverage also led to other discoveries, such as her understanding of what a conscience is and how it functions. Not only that, she discovered how a conscience can malfunction and she recognized the far-reaching results of such a faulty conscience. These points can be stated in the following ways: First, what she discovered was that his conscience was mostly faulty. Second, she found that the historical understanding of conscience was mostly wrong. Regarding the first, she found that on one level Eichmann’s conscience could function, but not on another. That is, Eichmann could follow his conscience in order to do his duty, which was to arrange for the deaths of millions of Jews, but his conscience could not convince him that this was not just wrong, but terribly wrong. Regarding the second, she understood that just as a human being does not act “politically” in isolation; she also recognized that a human being does not act according to one’s conscience in isolation. In *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, Arendt tried to

² That Arendt’s conception of “conscience” has not been investigated may be explained by two factors: First, those few scholars who have taken up the issue have done so because of other concerns. Thus, Serena Parekh utilizes conscience in her attempt to provide a basis for human rights, Garrath Williams briefly discusses conscience in his attempt to develop Arendt’s conception of morality, and Johan Vetlesen seeks to clarify her notion of evil. See Parekh (2008), Williams (2007), and Vetlesen (2001). Parekh, Williams, and Vetlesen offer rather persuasive accounts for their respective theses; but, in all three accounts “conscience” is mostly subservient to other concepts. This is also clear by the title for William’s entry “Gewissen/Moral” in the *Arendt Handbuch*. See Williams (2011). Something similar may be said about Michael M. Musmanno’s “Der Mann mit dem unbleckten Gewissen.” Although he correctly noted that Arendt devoted much of her account to a discussion of Eichmann’s “Gewissen”, he is not concerned with that but rather with her faulty account of the trial. See Musmanno, 1964. Second, the concept of “conscience” is not found either in *The Origins of Totalitarianism* or in *The Human Condition* which leads me to believe that Arendt’s covering of the Eichmann trial made her aware of the importance of conscience. See Arendt (1976; 1998a). According to Jerome Kohn, Arendt herself was the only person who seemed to recognize the importance of Eichman’s conscience. He saw that there were numerous misunderstandings and problems with people’s lack of understanding her book, including «the truly bewildering problem of Eichmann’s conscience, which no one apart from Arendt either saw, understood, or cared to broach». See Arendt (2003, p. xvi).

³ My concern is not so much with Eichmann’s trial itself as it is with Arendt’s investigations of his conscience. It appears that people have been more concerned with Arendt’s coverage of the trial about Eichmann’s crimes than with her comments on his conscience. In many ways this is understandable, as Hans Mommsen as pointed out. In his introduction to the German translation, he noted that Eichmann’s capture offered the chance that «finally full light could be brought into the darkness» («endlich volles Licht in das Dunkel bringen») and that Eichmann’s trial was the second-most observed trial after the Nürnberg trials. See Arendt (1998b, p. 9).

⁴ It is no doubt important that both the original English book and the German translation of it carry the subtitle about the «banality of evil». Nonetheless, the subtitle helps to mask the fact that Arendt was very concerned with the concept of the conscience. See *Eichmann in Jerusalem. A Report on the Banality of Evil* and *Eichmann in Jerusalem. Ein Bericht von der Banalität des Bösen*.

understand the workings of a conscience, but what she found in investigating Eichmann's case then prompted her to issue warnings about the terrible and tragic consequences of not having a fully functioning conscience⁵. In addition, she found that while it is certainly correct to insist that one must follow one's *own* conscience, to obey it or to disobey it has repercussions not just for one's self, but for many, many others.

The central importance of conscience in *Eichmann in Jerusalem* is indicated by the introductory sentence to Chapter VII. There, Arendt wrote «My report on Eichmann's conscience has thus far followed evidence which he himself had forgotten» (1994, p. 112). In fact, the subtitle to *Eichmann in Jerusalem* could well have been «My report on Eichmann's Conscience» instead of its actual subtitle: «A Report on the Banality of Evil». Yet, Arendt's notion of conscience has not received much attention⁶. Arne Johan Vetlesen was correct when he wrote «Conscience does not figure among the topics for which Hannah Arendt's work is most known». That was in 2001, and regarding the topic Arendt and conscience things have not much changed since then. As much as Vetlesen believed that conscience was an important theme for Arendt, his main focus was on evil. Yet, conscience, or the lack of conscience, is one of Arendt's defining notions. The lack of conscience along with the lack of thinking, were combined to produce the unspeakable horrors of the Holocaust. While many scholars have justifiably focused their efforts on investigating

⁵ Arendt's account of the trial and of Eichmann himself has been contested. See Judith Adler's *Eichmann in Jerusalem: Heuristic Myth and Social Science* for a recent account of some of these controversies (2017). Mommsen observed that Arendt's interpretation was not without gaps, was sometimes contradictory, and her use of sources was not always the best (Arendt, 1998b, p. 14). There is at least one entire volume devoted to the controversy surrounding Arendt's account of Eichmann's trial: *Die Kontroverse. Hannah Arendt, Eichmann, und die Juden*. This is a collection of twenty-five essays which are mostly critical of her account. They include those by Bruno Bettelheim, Martin Buber, and Golo Mann (Krummacker, 1964).

⁶ To offer a number of examples: despite the title *Hannah Arendt. Politics, Conscience, Evil* George Kateb devotes most of his efforts to discussions about politics, modernity, and morality and very little to conscience. "Conscience" is not even listed in the index to John McGowan's *Hannah Arendt. An Introduction* (McGowan, 1998). Nor, is it listed in the index to the twelve essays which make up *Hannah Arendt and the Meaning of Politics* (Calhoun and McGowan, 1997). It is mentioned a few times but only in passing in Richard Bernstein's *Hannah Arendt and the Jewish Question* (Bernstein, 1996). Joseph Beatty mentions "conscience" twice in his *Thinking and Moral Considerations* but it is again mostly in passing and in any case, he is highly critical of Arendt (Beatty, 1994). In *Arendt's Eichmann in Jerusalem* Seyla Benhabib mentions conscience only once and that is in a quotation from Arendt's 1971 lecture *Thinking and Moral Considerations* (Benhabib, 2000, pp. 76, 84, note 40). What makes this omission of the concept more perplexing is that Benhabib's essay is important. It is important, if for no other reason, than because of her suggestion that *Eichmann in Jerusalem* was Hannah Arendt's most "Jewish" book (Benhabib, 2000, p. 65). I would add that it is also probably her most "personal" one. In the recently published *Anthem Companion to Hannah Arendt* "conscience" has a listing of a dozen times in the Index but the notion is mostly relegated to a minor role in the chapters in the book (Baehr and Walsh, 2017, p. 271).

Arendt's positions regarding morality and evil, my concern here is with her concerns with the intersection of the "erosion of conscience" and the lack of thinking⁷. Throughout much of history, people have thought that only great people could do great evil, but it is to Arendt's credit that she showed that a person who appeared to be rather average could also be responsible for great evil⁸. What was so remarkable about Eichmann was that he was not at all remarkable. One of Arendt's major points was that he was not some incredible monster but a mere bureaucrat. What made him so dangerous was his combination of the lack of functioning conscience with the lack of the ability to think – he never stopped to think that what he was doing was somehow wrong and he never listened to a conscience that should have told him to stop. Another of her major points was that too many other people never seemed to stop to think, and that they, too, did not seem to listen to their conscience. Another of Arendt's points was to argue that the history of the Holocaust indicated that when ordinary citizens did think and did listen to their consciences, they did say «No» – and that was sufficient enough to cause the Nazi officials to back down. Whether Arendt was justified in hinting that if enough people had said «No» that the Holocaust might not have occurred is debatable. What is not debatable is her belief in the necessity of having a conscience and thinking; that is the conjoining of conscience and consciousness.

2. Conscience – a Short History⁹

In the *Postscriptum* to the volume on thinking in *The Life of the Mind* Arendt briefly mentioned conscience. She noted that it was regarded as «the divine voice of either God or

⁷ «Erosion of conscience» is a phrase used by Peter Baehr (1998). After I had written much of this essay, I read Baehr's comments and have noticed some level of agreement. His comments are the only ones I know of that go directly to the problem of conscience in *Eichmann in Jerusalem*.

⁸ The notion of great people doing great evil has its counterparts, one of which is great power comes with great responsibility.

⁹ The best history of "Gewissen" is still Kähler's article. Although quite old, it is rather comprehensive. For a much shorter and a more recent account, see Schaede (2015, pp. 165, 169). This is not to claim that Arendt was completely familiar with the history of "Gewissen." However, that she knew something about this is supported by a work that she wrote in 1930 in which she indicated that the Christian tradition of remembering took two different paths: «Catholic confessional and Protestant conscience». See Arendt's *Augustine and Protestantism* which is a translation of *Augustin und der Protestantismus* (1994b, pp. 24, 27).

reason» and that it «told you what to do, what not to do, and what to repent of» (1978, p. 215; 1992, p. 4). Thus, Arendt identifies three different notions of conscience; two of which can be positive in that they often tell one what to do but occasionally indicate what one cannot do. This is done either explicitly, but it can also be done by inference. Then, there is one of which is almost entirely negative and it tells one what not to do. It is unclear what Arendt bases her notion of repentance upon since it is not found in much of the literature¹⁰. In contrast, the idea that the conscience is positive is accounted for in various historical discussions of conscience. For example, the idea that conscience is the voice of God can be traced back to the Old Testament. However, it is in Protestantism that obeying one's conscience takes on central importance. When Martin Luther maintained «Here I stand, I can do no other, God help me, Amen», he was doing what his conscience told him to do¹¹. Two points need to be made here. First, although Luther's conscience is telling him what to do, it is also telling him what not to do, and that is not to stand his ground. Second, God is not the source to instruct Luther; but rather it is Luther's own conscience that is telling him what to do. Stephan Schaede helped to make this point clear when he wrote that no one could judge whether Luther's conscience erred – not the official in Trier, not the Pope in Rome, but only God. It is not God's voice but Luther's conscience; thus, only God can judge him¹². Writing in 1917, the theologian Karl Holl, who was the student of Adolf Harnack, maintained that «Luther's religion is the *religion of conscience*», thus indicating the central place that conscience played in Luther's religious thinking¹³.

Luther's appeals to his conscience were amplified by a number of German Protestant theologians around the middle of the nineteenth century. Some of them drew attention to the attempts to unify the Reformed Church (the Calvinists) and the Evangelical Church (the

¹⁰ There is no mention of a conscience instructing someone to repent in any of the articles on "Gewissen" found in the three editions of the *Religion in Geschichte und Gegenwart*. See Hoffmann (1910), Sieberg (1928), and Wolf (1958). Nor, is it mentioned in the article on "Gewissen" in the third, and final, edition of the *Realencyklopädie für protestantische Theologie und Kirche*. See Kähler (1899).

¹¹ «Hier ich stehe, ich kann nicht anders, Gott helfe mir, Amen».

¹² «Denn Luther war klar: Nicht der Trierer Offizial, auch nicht der Papst zu Rom, sondern allein Gott könnte urteilen, ob sein Gewissen irre» (Schaede, 2015, p. 152). A case can be made that it was Calvin that emphasized that one's conscience was the voice of God, but no such case can be made here.

¹³ «Luthers Religion ist *Gewissensreligion* im ausgeprägten Sinne des Worts» (Holl, 1932, p. 35). Holl refers to a passage in Luther's Latin writings where he says as much.

Lutherans) and some looked to the notion of conscience to draw attention to the claim that the Protestants were independent thinkers who followed their own consciences, in contrast to the Catholics, who were bound to follow the teachings of the Pope in Rome. Both matters became increasingly more urgent with the Papal Decree concerning the Virgin Birth and more importantly, the matters leading up to the decree proclaiming Papal Infallibility. These theologians included Richard Roth, Wilhelm Gass, and Albrecht Ritschl, but the one who was perhaps the biggest defender of the notion of conscience was Daniel Schenkel¹⁴. It was Schenkel who explicitly contrasted the Protestants with the Catholics. Not only were the Protestants to listen to their own consciences, their consciences served as the bedrock of tolerance. If Catholics were theologically bound to obey the authorities of the Church and were instructed to disapprove of any non-Catholics, Protestants were encouraged to think for themselves. Even if they did not actively embrace other religions, they were at least encouraged to openly tolerate them. For Schenkel, even more than for many of the Protestant theologians, the strength of Protestantism resided primarily in the exceptional belief in “Gewissensfreiheit” (“freedom of conscience”).

Having briefly mentioned two of the three usages which Arendt mentions, this leaves the notion of conscience as that which tells one what *not* to do. Unlike the Protestant notion of conscience, which can be either positive or negative, this one is almost entirely negative. The best and most famous example of this is Socrates and it is the one that Hannah Arendt sometimes mentions. It is found towards the end of the “Apology” where Socrates suggests that death cannot be something bad; if it were, his “daimon” would have appeared to dissuade him from going down this path.¹⁵ This notion is also the one which I think Arendt herself endorses and it is certainly the usage which is the most prevalent in *Eichmann in Jerusalem*.¹⁶

¹⁴ For an admirable account of this theologian who is now forgotten but at the time was very influential, see Noordveld-Lorenz (2015). For her account of the importance of conscience for Schenkel, see especially pages 134-183. She concludes that «Protestantism is [the] religion of conscience» («Der Protestantismus ist Gewissensreligion» – Noordveld-Lorenz, 2015, p. 183).

¹⁵ “Apology.” 40 c-d. See Plato (1961).

¹⁶ In her *Note to the Reader* Arendt wrote that this book is a revised and enlarged version of the book which had appeared in May, 1963 and that it stemmed from her coverage of the Eichmann trial in 1961. Her account was first published in an abbreviated form in *The New Yorker* in early 1963.

3. Arendt on Conscience – *Eichmann in Jerusalem*

There is no doubt that *Eichmann in Jerusalem* is Arendt's most famous work, just as there is little doubt that it is the most contentious one¹⁷. Critics have attacked her book as well as her, while others have defended both the book as well as its author. I will leave this debate up to others, because my sole concern here is with Arendt's notions of conscience¹⁸. In *Eichmann in Jerusalem* the notion of conscience seems somewhat confused. I will try to show that her concept of conscience is not so much confused as it represents two different notions. In one respect, Arendt suggested that Eichmann's conscience was faulty and in a second respect she indicated that it had failed. Before discussing the different stages of conscience, I wish to explore Arendt's account of who Eichmann was.

It is obvious from *Eichmann in Jerusalem* that Hannah Arendt was unimpressed by Adolf Eichmann¹⁹. She noted that since he was neither hard-working nor gifted, he was a poor student (1994a, pp. 28-29). For much of his life Eichmann was a failure, both in terms of employment and in terms of social standing (1994a, pp. 29-32). Furthermore, he was neither particularly bright (he had «modest mental gifts», 1994a, pp. 135), nor did he have much of a memory. In fact, one of the points which Arendt repeatedly stressed was Eichmann's faulty memory. She wrote that his memory was «bad», that «he remembered none of the facts», and that «he only remembered moods» (1994a, pp. 58, 61, 62). Arendt indicated that Eichmann had a «defective memory» and she wrote «More damning, however, than any objective fact, was Eichmann's own faulty memory». (1994a, pp. 106, 63). Arendt was not the only person who had recognized this fundamental flaw, so did others. In fact, Judge Landau was so exasperated by Eichmann's faulty memory that he finally asked him «What

¹⁷ Walter Z. Laqueur wrote that «it provoked violent denunciation» and «emphatic assent». See (Arendt, 1978, p. 252). Arendt seemed wounded by some of the criticism and she appeared justified in being somewhat defensive. See Arendt (1978, pp. 245, 251). She also has suggested that it prompted her to give her lecture *Personal Responsibility and Dictatorship* (Arendt, 1994a, p. 282; 2003, p. 17).

¹⁸ I do not have the inclination to enter into this debate nor do I have the proper standing to do so. I agree with Benhabib that *Eichmann in Jerusalem* is Arendt's most Jewish book and it is likely that her strong defense of the Jews is one of the things that occasionally clouded her judgment. It is partially because of this clouded judgment that I am convinced that this is also her most personal book.

¹⁹ In his Introduction to *Responsibility and Judgment* Jerome Kohn wrote that Arendt regarded Eichmann as «an ordinary, normal man, a 'buffoon'». See Arendt, 2003, p. xv.

can you remember?» (Arendt, 1994a, p. 53). But, as Arendt pointed out, it was not that Eichmann lacked a memory, only that it was faulty. It did not function normally, but it was more than simply “erratic”. Instead, «It was like a storehouse, filled with human interest stories of the worst type». (1994a, p. 81). What he could remember were strange occurrences, such as when he was among a group of high-ranking officials in Prague. He remembered this because «it was an honor», because he rarely was invited to meetings with high officials (Arendt, 1994a, p. 81). Then, there was Eichmann’s struggle with the German language; while Arendt suggests that this was a “heroic struggle” she also indicated that he was “invariably” defeated by it (1994a, p. 48). Instead, Eichmann’s language skills were confined to “Amtssprache” or bureaucratic jargon. However, he realized this and even apologized, saying that «Officialese [*Amtssprache*] is my only language» (Arendt, 1994a, p. 48). He could only speak in jargon, catch phrases, and clichés (Arendt, 1994a, pp. 53, 55, 105, 131). The lack of normal mental capacity, the lack of a reliable memory, and the lack of the ability to speak in understandable German meant that his accounts were often distorted (Arendt, 1994a, p. 40). Equally, if not more important, was the fact that Eichmann’s own world view was “devoid of reality” and that he suffered under “distortions of reality” (Arendt, 1994a, pp. 53, 58). Despite these limitations Eichmann was not a total loser, in fact, Arendt showed that between 1937 and 1941 he was promoted four times (1994a, pp. 65, 75). Moreover, he began to be regarded as an “expert”. Initially, he was an expert on «matters of emigration» and then he became an expert for «transportation» (Arendt, 1994a, pp. 67, 218). He may not have been gifted in many ways but he was in one – he had extraordinary «organizational gifts» (Arendt, 1994a, p. 190). Eichmann may not have been able to “think big” very often; instead, «He always thought within the narrow limits of whatever laws and decrees were valid at any given moment» (Arendt, 1994a, p. 157). This was another indication that he always took his job seriously and that he always tried to do his best (Arendt, 1994a, pp. 143, 146). In response to a question from the Prosecutor, Eichmann insisted that «Nobody came to me and reproached me for anything in the performance of my duties»²⁰. He did his duty, and his duty was to obey the law (Arendt,

²⁰ See Arendt (1994a, p. 131). The Prosecutor was Dr. Robert Servatius, a tax lawyer from Köln. Arendt’s opinion of

1994a, p. 135). Does that mean that Eichmann did have a conscience and if he did, what did that mean?

There are many instances in *Eichmann in Jerusalem* which reveal that Arendt clearly believed Eichmann possessed a conscience. As alluded to earlier, Arendt began Chapter Seven with «My report on Eichmann's conscience...»²¹ Or, later in her work, Arendt wrote «The case of the conscience of Adolf Eichmann...» (1994a, p. 149). However, it is also clear that Arendt believed that Eichmann's conscience was merely faulty during the early years of the war and then it ultimately failed. As much as *Eichmann in Jerusalem* can be considered an account of Eichmann's conscience, it is by no means a straightforward one. One reason for this is the sheer horror of what Eichmann did and Arendt's book is an examination of that. In this vein, her account of Eichmann's conscience is subservient to her larger account about Eichmann's deeds. A second reason is that Arendt seemed somewhat surprised by the importance of the notion of conscience and so it comes into her focus and it fades out of it. Both of these reasons could help account for why most commentators did not recognize the critical role that conscience played in *Eichmann in Jerusalem*.

The first mention of conscience occurs when Arendt reported that Eichmann claimed to have the death of five million Jews on his conscience. However, as Arendt indicated, if he did have anything on his conscience, it was for having slapped the face of Dr. Josef Löwenhertz. At the time, Löwenhertz was the head of the Vienna Jewish community and he «later became one of his favorite Jews» (Arendt, 1994a, p. 47). What is remarkable is that Eichmann could feel genuine remorse for slapping an individual while he could (falsely) boast about arranging the deaths of five million. Later, Arendt pointed out that the judges repeatedly asked Eichmann whether the killing of Jews ever went against his conscience; but she pointed out that this was not a legal question but a moral one (Arendt, 1994a, pp. 90-91). She also noted that almost everyone was interested in the moral question which was

him seems mixed, but one of the moments in the trial which seemed to impress her was when Servatius spoke of «medical matters». One of the judges interrupted to ask whether this was a slip of the tongue and Servatius replied that it was not – that for the Nazis killing was a «medical matter». Arendt added that Servatius was «well acquainted with “medical matters”» (Arendt, 1994a, pp. 69-70).

²¹ The full sentence is: «My report on Eichmann's conscience has thus far followed evidence that he himself had forgotten» (Arendt, 1994a, p. 112).

whether Eichmann even had a conscience. Her response was that he had one, but that it functioned normally for only a few weeks and even then it functioned within «rather odd limits» (1994a, p. 95). When faced with the question whether it was humane to kill the Jews who could not work immediately rather than to let them starve, Eichmann's response was not at the horror of the thought of killing Jews. Instead, it was the horror at the thought of killing German Jews (Arendt, 1994a, pp. 96-97). Eichmann was not the only person not to be troubled about killing Jews, so long as they were thought to be foreign and inferior people. They were, however, deeply troubled about the idea of killing German Jews – because they were neither foreign nor inferior²². Arendt recognized that there were Germans who did not ever suffer from any “crises of conscience” and there were those who did. For the Nazis, those who did not suffer from “crises of conscience” were no problem, but for those who did, they did pose a problem. That is why many Nazis became adept at dealing with this latter group, and no one seemed more adept at this than Heinrich Himmler. It was he who solved “problems of conscience” by inventing slogans and catchwords, like the «famous watchword of the S.S.: “My honor is my loyalty”» (Arendt, 1994a, p. 105). Himmler did not have so much a “problem of conscience” as to have what Arendt called “animal pity”. Himmler disliked having to see people suffer physically; to deal with this, he turned it around. Instead of saying «What horrible things I did to people», he would say «What horrible things I had to watch in the pursuance of my duties, how heavily the task weighed upon my shoulders» (Arendt, 1994a, p. 106). These were sentiments which Eichmann could share, as long as he suffered from “crises of conscience”. However, there came a moment when he no longer had to suffer from such crises, and Arendt points to January 1942 as being that moment.

This moment probably occurred at the conference of the Undersecretaries and it was devoted to various questions regarding the implementation of the Final Solution. Arendt noted that it is now referred to as the «Wannsee Conference» because it was held in that

²² Arendt devoted a number of pages to the question of conscience as it pertained to those people who participated in the July 1944 plot to assassinate Hitler. Her comments are interesting but are not relevant to the issue of Eichmann's conscience. In fact, she doubted that he knew them and she mentioned that even later when he was living in Argentine, he regarded them as «traitors and scoundrels» (1994a, pp. 97-103).

suburb of Berlin (1994a, pp. 112-113). It marked the turning point for Eichmann's conscience because up to then, he harbored some doubts about the Final Solution. Eichmann was there as a secretary to take minutes and it was not just seeing how the people there struggled to develop solutions but afterwards to watch them relax after such a strenuous time by smoking, drinking, and chatting (Arendt, 1994a, pp. 113-114). As Eichmann later recalled «At that moment, I sensed a kind of Pontius Pilate feeling, for I felt free of all guilt». As Arendt noted: «*Who was he to judge?*» (1994a, p. 114). Arendt made much of this moment because it was at this time that he asked «Who was he 'to have [his] own thoughts in this matter?'» (1994a, p. 114)²³. This was a moment in which his conscience was “soothed” because it was then that Eichmann realized there was no one that he knew who was against the Final Solution. There was, however, one person: a Dr. Kastner in Hungary, who asked Eichmann to stop «the death mills at Auschwitz». Eichmann replied that he would if he could but it was outside his “competence”²⁴. Arendt notes that Kastner evidently made a significant impression on Eichmann because he made reference to this several times (1994a, pp. 116-117). It may have been because Dr. Kastner was a member of “respectable society” and as Arendt indicated, Eichmann had always been «overawed by “good society”». However, it was the fact that “good society” seemed not to be troubled by this mass murdering which soothed Eichmann's conscience. As Arendt put it, it was not that Eichmann had to «close his ears to the voice of conscience» but that «his conscience spoke with a “respectable voice”» – the voice of the «respectable society around him» (1994a, p. 126). If there were no voices of conscience outside of Eichmann, there was little hope that he could find it within himself. Arendt argued that part of this lay in a peculiar portion of German mentality, what she referred to as the “little man”. Eichmann himself used this phrase when he recounted his version of Kant's Categorical opinion, stating it was «Kant

²³ Arendt has been criticized as being too hard on the Jews and too easy on the Germans, but she has also been accused of being too hard on the Germans. However much she was tempted to assign blame, her main goal was to understand. One of the best indications of that occurs in her discussion of the issue of conscience for Germans after 1942. She acknowledged that many Germans suffered; many because of the devastating losses during the battle of Stalingrad but many also suffered from the saturation bombing of German cities. She suggested that this might have «contributed to the easing, or rather extinguishing, of conscience, had any conscience been left» (1994a, p. 116).

²⁴ Not only did Eichmann believe that this would be outside of his “competence”, but he believed that it would have been outside the “competence” of his superiors. Eichmann was evidently employing “competence” as a legal term.

“for the household use of the little man”»²⁵. Arendt differentiated Kant’s formulation from that of Eichmann. In Kant’s moral philosophy the source of the law is practical reason; for Eichmann, the source was the will of the Führer (1994a, p. 137). Despite this fundamental difference in the sources for moral action, Arendt pointed out that Eichmann’s and Kant’s “precepts” were one and the same; namely, that «a law was a law and there could be no exceptions» (Arendt, 1994a, p. 137). Eichmann almost always followed this precept, but he admitted to having made two exceptions – one involving a Jewish couple and another involving a half-Jewish cousin. However, both instances weighed heavily on his conscience. Arendt indicated that this uncompromising dedication to duty was offensive to the judges, but it justified his own behavior in his own eyes. It also showed that he always did his duty because «he always acted against his “inclinations”». Furthermore, by always doing his duty, whatever conscience he had left was silenced (1994a, p. 137).

As Arendt noted almost immediately, Eichmann still had a conscience which was evidenced by having «his last crisis of conscience» (1994a, p. 137). This did not happen in January of 1942 but more than two years later. In fact, Arendt noted that between January of 1942 and March of 1944, Eichmann did not have any crises of conscience (1994a, p. 151). Rather, he was rather pleased with himself for knowing that he was not just doing his duty, but that he was doing it exceptionally well. Nonetheless, by early 1944 it was becoming increasingly apparent that Germany was going to be defeated and more and more people were begging Eichmann for exceptions. Unfortunately, making exceptions was, of course, against his conscience. According to Arendt, this last crisis of conscience began in March of 1944 when he was sent to Hungary. Arendt noted that before the war, Hungary had some 500,000 Jews but by 1944 this had increased to close to 800,000. Eichmann was sent to Budapest to oversee that the “necessary steps” be taken to settle the “Jewish question”. Eichmann was unconcerned about this; his concern was that there might be resistance.

²⁵ Arendt (1994a, p. 136). The phrase “Kleiner Mann” may very well have been Eichmann’s reference to a rather strange novel that was extremely popular in Germany during the 1930s. The book *Kleiner Mann – was nun?* was written by Hans Fallada and was first published around 1933. It is the story of a strange man and his wife who live a rather unstable life in Germany during the last years of the Weimar Republic. Pinneberger is a lowly official who is frequently lazy and often finds himself in trouble, yet he is not a bad person. Over the decades the book has gone through dozens of printings, with a recent one from 2011. See Fallada (1933).

There was none, but Eichmann had a problem because there were three people with orders, some of which were in conflict. No single individual was responsible; rather, three different people who belonged to three different departments, with three different emphases (Arendt, 1994a, pp. 140-141). Another problem was that some of these people were businessmen and they saw ways to make money, but to Eichmann, this was wrong – one had to follow one's conscience and do one's duty (Arendt, 1994a, pp. 141-143). Times had changed and it seemed as if Eichmann would have to change with them. However, he refused to do so – he refused to follow what he regarded as criminal orders and instead, his conscience dictated that he must follow the Führer's words.

Arendt contended that the case of Eichmann's conscience was “admittedly complicated” but it was not unique. It was, however «scarcely comparable to the case of the German generals» (1994a, p. 149). Yet, what she wrote about them seemed to apply equally well to Eichmann, so it is difficult to see what made the generals' case much different. Arendt's point was that they (like Eichmann and everyone else) were bound to follow the Führer's orders, not just because they were the laws. If they were simply laws, then they would be «limited in time and space», but as they were his word, they had a far more powerful reach (1994a, p. 149). As she put it, in civilized lands the voice of conscience said «thou shall not kill» but in the land of Hitler's word, the voice of conscience said that «thou shall kill»²⁶. Many Germans were probably tempted «*not* to kill, *not* to rob, *not* to let their neighbors go off to their doom», but most of them had learned to listen to their new consciences and thus they had «learned to resist temptation» (1994a, p. 150). Perhaps the difference between Eichmann and the generals was that as his refusal to make exceptions showed, he was so good at resisting temptation. But maybe it was because he resisted the temptation not only to “think big” but to think at all²⁷.

Although Arendt had not yet recognized the close connection between conscience and thinking, she did sense that much of Eichmann's problem was that he could not think. This

²⁶ In *Personal Responsibility Under Dictatorship* Arendt wrote about Hitler's Germany where «They acted under conditions in which every moral act was illegal and every legal act was a crime» (2003, p. 41). She wrote this piece in 1964 partly in response to criticism of *Eichmann in Jerusalem*.

²⁷ Kohn emphasized that Arendt did not regard Eichmann as stupid; rather, he just did not think. See Arendt (2003, p. xv).

is evidenced by a number of remarks. Arendt did not define thinking in this book but she indicated that it meant the ability to look at something from another person's point of view – something that she emphasized Eichmann could not do²⁸. Part of Eichmann's inability to think was because he regarded himself as an "idealist". As an "idealist", he refused to accept bribes and refused to steal. In addition, it meant that he could not have been a regular businessman. A businessman was practical but an "idealist" was someone who not only "lived for his idea" but was even willing to sacrifice everything for it. Eichmann's said that he would even be willing to kill his own father if it were necessary for his "idea's" success (Arendt, 1994a, pp. 41-42). But, part of Eichmann's inability to think was also because of his being bound by what Arendt referred to as "language rules". Although Arendt never clarifies this, these "language rules" apparently differed from Eichmann's use of jargon. Unlike jargon, these "language rules" were a fundamental part of the Nazi regime and their purpose was to «deceive and to camouflage» (1994a, p. 108). These were code words and as Arendt pointed out even the term "Sprachregelung" ("language rule") «was itself a code word». As she also indicated, this is «what in ordinary language would be called a lie» (1994a, p. 85). One of the "benefits" of these "language rules" was that it helped the killers by making what they did seem "objective" (*Sachlichkeit*) and scientific. A particularly repulsive example of this was the insistence that killing by gas was a "medical matter". Arendt recounts the instance in which a judge interrupted Dr. Servatius by suggesting that he had misspoken. Servatius replied that he had not, that «it was a matter of killing and killing, too, is a medical matter» (1994a, pp. 69, 108). Thus, not only was Eichmann not very bright, but that his inability to think stemmed from his inclination to speak in jargon and his willingness to follow these "language rules." In light of this, Arendt's comment that Eichmann «was not very interested in metaphysics» was an understatement (1994a, p. 27). However, she was rather impressed that Eichmann offered a rather close account of Kant's categorical imperative (1994a, pp. 134-137). Unfortunately, Eichmann could not understand that Kant's moral philosophy meant not just that one had to do one's duty, but that one had

²⁸ Arendt wrote «The longer that one listened to him, the more obvious it became that his inability to speak was closely connected with an inability to think, namely, to think from the standpoint of somebody else» (1994a, pp. 48-49).

to think and to judge – capacities which Eichmann clearly lacked.

The problem was not just that Eichmann could not think, but that too many of the participants in the trial apparently could not, or more likely would not, think. Most of them apparently could not recognize Eichmann for who he actually was nor could they see what they were actually doing. They wanted to believe that he was an abnormally evil individual when, as Arendt repeatedly showed him to be a normal, if not a somewhat ludicrous person. Yet, even here there are some tensions in Arendt's account – while she maintains that despite the efforts by the prosecution, people realized that he was not a “monster”, but what they could not seem to see that he was more like a “clown” (Arendt, 1994a, p. 54). While Eichmann did indeed tell an occasional lie, it was not, as many needed to believe, because he was a habitual liar (Arendt, 1994a, p. 26). Rather, much of it was because of his inclination to boast²⁹. Arendt pointed out that Eichmann frequently bragged and boasted; some of this was because of his predilection to “talk big”; yet, many of these were simply outright exaggerations (1994a, pp. 164, 210). Included in the latter were Eichmann's claims that he «“invented” the ghetto system» and that he had «given birth to the idea of shipping all European Jews to Madagascar» (1994a, p. 47). It also included his claim that he had saved «hundreds of thousands of Jews» – a claim which was simply “preposterous” and had been «laughed out of court» (p. 61). Unfortunately, very few people wanted to acknowledge that Eichmann was prone to exaggerate but that he was not a liar; just as very few were willing to admit that his trial was primarily a “show trial”³⁰. Arendt repeatedly made this point by noting that this was no ordinary trial (1994a, pp. 56, 90, 93). And, she made it many times by pointing out that it was really a show trial and that it was more or less a play³¹. It was not the Israeli judiciary which insisted that Eichmann be kidnapped in Argentina and brought to Jerusalem to stand trial, but the Prime Minister Ben-Gurion. Furthermore, Ben-Gurion was the “invisible stage manager” while the lead actor was not

²⁹ Arendt claimed that «Bragging was the vice that was Eichmann's undoing» and she pointed to his claim that he was responsible for the deaths of five million Jews (1994a, p. 46).

³⁰ That Arendt regarded Eichmann's trial as a show trial is indicated by her observation that in normal cases the person on trial is «deemed innocent until proven guilty», but in Eichmann's case this «was an obvious fiction» (1994a, p. 209).

³¹ Arendt also suggested that it was not a show trial but it was more like a «mass meeting, at which speaker after speaker does his best to arouse the audience» (1994a, p. 121).

Eichmann, but Gideon Hauser. Hauser was the Attorney General prosecuting Eichmann, but he did not do it by professional standards as much as with a «love of showmanship» (Arendt, 1994a, pp. 4-5). However, Arendt suggested that it never really became a play but degenerated into the «bloody show» – the «show that Ben-Gurion had had in mind» (1994a, pp. 8-9)³². Although Arendt never said it, the implication was that truth and justice were forced to take a back seat to the politics of appearances and illusions of legality.

If Arendt demonstrated that normal people could do horrible crimes, she also showed that normal people could stop those crimes. It was not that they needed great strength, but that they did need to heed their consciences. Arendt wrote specifically about several people at the trial. One was a German by the name of Anton Schmidt. Anton Schmidt was a sergeant in the German army stationed in Poland. In his course of duty, he met a number of members of the Jewish underground and supplied them with forged papers and military trucks (Arendt, 1994a, p. 230). That he was able to do this for five months before he was discovered and executed was remarkable. What was more remarkable to the audience was «He did not do it for money». But what was even more remarkable was that during the few minutes that the person told this story the courtroom became hushed. Arendt took this silence as an indication of the peoples' honoring of Anton Schmidt. What she took from this was far more significant – that if more people had done what Schmidt had done, then the world would have been far more different³³. A second person also told a story but his was a first-person account. That person told of being rounded up in Germany at the end of October 1938, along with hundreds of other Jews and being deposited at the German-Polish border. His story of the brutality was not unusual but what made it so extraordinary was that this

³² Arendt excluded the three judges from these criticisms; she noted that they were always professional and that they rejected any attempts at deception. This comes through rather humorously with their refusal to wait for the translation of Eichmann's comments into Hebrew. All three were born and educated in Germany so they had no difficulty understanding Eichmann's testimony. What makes this even more bizarre in Arendt's view was that the Hebrew was accompanied by simultaneous radio transmissions which were «excellent in French, bearable in English, and sheer comedy, frequently incomprehensible, in German». She believed it «one of the minor mysteries of the new state» that it could not find an adequate translator that the accused and his counsel could understand – given the high percentage of German born citizens (1994a, p. 3).

³³ It is worth quoting Arendt's account: «And in those two minutes, which seemed like a sudden burst of light in the midst of impenetrable, unfathomable darkness, a single thought stood out clearly, irrefutably, beyond question – how utterly different everything would be today in this courtroom, in Israel, in Germany, in all of Europe, and perhaps in all countries of the world, if only more such stories could have been told» (1994a, p. 231).

man was Zindel Grynszpan who was the father of Herschel Grynszpan. On November 7, 1938, Herschel went to the German embassy in Paris and assassinated a German official. This was the underlying cause of the *Kristallnacht* pogrom which occurred two nights later (Arendt, 1994a, p. 227). Arendt described Zindel Grynszpan as «an old man, wearing the traditional Jewish skullcap, small, very frail, with sparse white hair and a beard, holding himself quite erect» (1994a, p. 227). It took him ten minutes to tell his story of «the senseless, needless destruction of twenty-seven years in less than twenty-four hours». Arendt insisted that each person should have their day in court to tell their story, but she also insisted that to do this was extremely difficult. She insisted that «it needed a purity of soul, an unmirrored, unreflected innocence of heart and mind that only the righteous possess» (1994a, p. 229). What Arendt did not say was that these two people, Schmidt and Grynszpan, acted according to their conscience. What Arendt also did not say at the time was how these two individuals, who were so normal, were yet so powerful, because they refused to do wrong. In *Eichmann in Jerusalem* Arendt invoked two and only two philosophers: Kant and Karl Jaspers; later she would invoke a third – Socrates.

In a number of works written after *Eichmann in Jerusalem* Arendt invoked Socrates' claim «It is better to suffer wrong than to do wrong». She recognized that there was a problem with this statement because when Socrates said it, he believed that it was a “statement of reason” but as she pointed out, this could never be proven (2003, pp. 72, 82-83). For Arendt, this was a moral question and she addresses it in *Thinking and Moral Considerations*. There, she suggests that this is a question of conscience and she distinguishes between the voice of God which tells us both what to do and what not to do, and the conscience which tells us what not to do – like Socrates' “daimon”. It came to him only when he was about to do something wrong (2003, pp. 186-187). Her larger point is that this is an internal matter – for Socrates it is a question whether he could live with himself. Arendt actually clarified this in *Some Questions of Moral Philosophy* where she indicated that “conscience” is closely connected to “consciousness”³⁴. For Socrates, to do wrong is to

³⁴ Part of the importance of “daimon” for Arendt stems from Jaspers, and much of its importance for Jaspers stemmed from Max Weber. This is an intriguing topic but will not be pursued here.

invite “self-contradiction” (Arendt, 2003, p. 78). And, she emphasized that Socrates did not need outside threats of punishment or coercion; what was worse was to live in self-contradiction (2003, pp. 77-78). But this meant that one had to know one’s self; that one had to think. Unfortunately, Eichmann had no interest in self-knowledge and it was apparent that he had little capacity to think. Eichmann lacked a normal, functioning conscience, one which should have told him not to do what he was doing. However, he continued to do what he did and he did it far too well. Arendt concluded that what was a routine job for Adolf Eichmann was «for the Jews quite literally the end of the world» (1994a, pp. 153-154).

4. Concluding Remarks

This essay was not intended to reveal Arendt’s complete account of the notion of conscience and that is because she never wrote one. Nonetheless, this “reconstructed” one is a rather compelling one, and for at least for two fundamental reasons. First, just as Arendt demonstrated that Eichmann did not need to be a “great man” like Hitler to do great harm, she also showed one did not need to be a great holy person like Jesus to do great good. Like Socrates, Anton Schmidt and Zeldin Grynszpan listened to their consciences which told them not to do evil. Schmidt and Grynszpan may not have known of Socrates’ conviction that it is better to suffer wrongly than to do wrong, yet they acted as if they did. Arendt’s second major point was that everyone should live in accordance with their consciences and that if everyone did that, then many of the world’s catastrophes would not have happened. Hannah Arendt deserves to be remembered for being a first-rate political thinker, for being the first major investigator into origins of totalitarianism, and for being the inventor of the phrase «the banality of evil». However, she also deserves to be remembered for having written the book which could have been entitled *My Report of Eichmann’s Conscience*; because Arendt demonstrated that much of what we had believed about conscience was not accurate. She revealed that one having a conscience was not necessarily a good thing because one could have a conscience that was both intact and faulty. And she showed that

the belief that the conscience was a strictly personal thing was incorrect because when one obeys or disobeys one's own conscience, others will also feel the results³⁵. Arendt may not have been fully aware of the ramifications of her ideas about conscience, yet we should follow her lead and rethink what we know about the concept of conscience³⁶.

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³⁵ Eichmann's actions were remarkable both for their evil and for their far-reaching effects. It is on both accounts that Arendt believed that he was guilty of crimes against humanity. See Cohn's comments in Arendt (2003, pp. vi-xv)

³⁶ Kohn commented «For whatever reason, the phenomenon of conscience seems recalcitrant to analysis» (Arendt, 2003, p. xvii). Yet, Arendt showed that this is not entirely true.

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