



Adolf Eichmann: Understanding Evil in Form and Content

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Criminal Case 40/61, the Trial of Adolf Eichmann by Harry Mulisch. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2005.

Forty-four years after his execution, the “man in the glass booth” reappeared on the world stage. In early June 2006, the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) released previously classified documents detailing that as early as 1958 it had knowledge of Adolf Eichmann’s whereabouts in Argentina (Shane 2006). Following the lead of the West German government, which passed along its information on Eichmann (he was living under the pseudonym Ricardo Klement), the CIA avoided capturing him presumably to avoid the embarrassing scenario that Eichmann would name ex-Nazis who both held positions in the Adenauer government and who were employed by the spy agencies of multiple governments including the US, the USSR, Britain, West Germany, and France (Kempster 2001). On May 11, 1960, Israeli secret agents kidnapped Adolf Eichmann on the streets of Buenos Aires and, nine days later, transported him to Jerusalem to face trial for crimes against the Jewish people, crimes against humanity, and war crimes.

Eichmann’s reappearance must strike the reader as somewhat ironic, somewhat irksome, and somewhat prophetic: for this man who was simultaneously construed as the devil incarnate and recognized as so extraordinarily ordinary that he was easily forgotten by the media and the public both during his trial and soon after his execution, foretold at the gallows that “we shall all meet again” (Arendt 1964: 252). And so we have, repeatedly. Eichmann, the man who came to despise being invisible, admitted being relieved that Israeli agents seized him, for it ended his tiresome anonymity (5; also Arendt 1964: 242), habitually reappears: most recently in the form of Ward Churchill’s unseemly characterization of World Trade Center workers as “little Eichmanns;” the 2005 English language translation of Harry Mulisch’s reports for a Dutch newspaper from the 1961 trial; and declassification of CIA documents.

Yet the reappearances of Eichmann in all his forms do not seem to lend any further insight into his being specifically, or evil-doing generally. Ward Churchill’s invocation of Eichmann in relation to the World Trade Center victims of September 11, 2001 focused on the link between unreflective obedience and evil-doing—an important connection to be sure, but one already explored by Hannah Arendt and Harry Mulisch, among others. By likening the victims of the terrorist attack with Adolf Eichmann, *Obersturmbannführer*, head of Subsection IV (Gestapo)-B, (Section)-4 (Jews) of the Head Office for Reich Security (xii; also Arendt 1964: 31), Churchill conflates the bond trader with the executioner—an equation that may be fashionable in some anti-capitalist circles, but one which

glosses over substantive variations between the professions and which falsely establishes a direct relationship between obedience and evil-doing. Context, in the final analysis, matters. The CIA documents declassified in April 2001 and June 2006 simply reveal that the moral imperative and political prudence of national security often outweigh the ethical imperative of protecting human rights. But Machiavelli already told us that in so many words.

To be sure, there is some disconnect between the form and content of Eichmann and his reappearances. On the one hand, he was “being turned into a myth” at his trial (142)—and this mythology became Eichmann the person. *France Soir*, a French daily, declared he had “snake eyes,” while *Libération* remarked that “each of his eyes is a gas chamber” (37). A Dutch newspaper recounted the words of a popular minister: “Eichmann...has become a non-man, a phenomenon of absolute godlessness and non-humanness” (43). Either paraphrasing or quoting Gideon Hausner, attorney general for the State of Israel and chief prosecutor, Mulisch writes that “it is no longer possible to believe in God; now let it at least be possible to believe in the Devil” (50). And if the Devil was beyond the reach of the prosecution—theological matters seem too weighty and too inappropriate for a court procedure—Hausner at the very least wanted “to prove that Eichmann was ‘worse than Hitler’” (142).

The statement must strike us as quite odd, for surely Hitler—the personification of Nazi horror, of anti-Semitism *en extremis*, and of evil-doing generally—was the worst. But the statement aimed, first, “to satisfy the need for mankind to have a clear, simple, and horrible picture” of the Holocaust and its agents; second, to rouse, influence, and even, in some sense, conform to public opinion; and third, to prove Israeli stalwartness against, as Arendt noted, diasporic Jewish meekness (Arendt 1964: 10). As a philosophical statement, Hausner’s iteration, upon further analysis, allowed him (most likely unwittingly) to get at something much more poignant.



Criminal Case 40/61, the Trial of Adolf Eichmann reproduces, albeit for the first time in English, a series of reports by internationally renowned author Harry Mulisch that were composed for the Dutch daily *Elseviers Weekblad*. At the time, Mulisch, was already “up-and-coming,” having already produced an award-winning novel, Archibald Strohalm (1952), “two collections of novellas (1953, 1957), one book of aphorisms (1958), and three [additional] novels (1954, 1956, 1959)” (xiii). Written from the perspective of a novelist, who persistently seeks new experiences as fodder for his stories, Criminal Case 40/61 aims to “give an account of an experience” which differs “from a train of thought: it is subject to change. At the end one finds a different person, partly with different thoughts” (1). Mulisch provides an immensely personal account of the trial—wholly unchanged from the original series (1)—that is deftly intertwined with observations of Eichmann the man and Eichmann the myth, as well as observations regarding the development of the Israeli state which “had no long-established institutions” (xxi) and which found in the Eichmann trial a *raison d’être*, “an opportunity for creative nation-building” (xxi). In the end, both Mulisch and Israel change: Eichmann has cured Mulisch “of indignation without obligation...[and] carefreeness;” he has taught Mulisch “a certain vigilance: [his] eyes have opened a little wider” (159). Israel learned it could successfully counter demons and defeat Satan itself.

Mulisch opens his reports by confronting the mythology surrounding Eichmann by reproducing three depictions of Eichmann. Figure 1 is a photo taken of Eichmann on June 8, 1960, “shortly after his abduction to Israel. Figures 2 and 3 are portraits of men who have never existed and who never will. They were created by halving Eichmann’s photo straight down the middle and completing it with its mirror image” (9). Owing to the lighting in the original photo, “which comes from the upper left and from behind” (9), the face appears distorted. The left-side of Eichmann’s face sags, the lighting accentuates an indentation in his skull from an earlier fracture just above a shadowed eye, and his ear protrudes; the right side of Eichmann’s face is alighted, more hair is visible on the right than the left, and one detects a hint of a smile. Figure 2 reproduces this alighted, more appealing side of Eichmann. As a result, the “new” Eichmann, “bathed in sunlight against a lit background,” appears calm, with serious eyes, “and a glimmer of a smile around his mouth” (9). Figure 3 reproduces the shadowy, left side of Eichmann. Here, “the background is totally dark” and the result is rather sinister, with distorted mouth, sagging eyes, protruding ears, and, owing to the fracture, his skull seems smaller and more irregular than the skull in either the original photo or figure 2. Based on observations of the man at his trial, many would assert that figure 3 is the real photo of the merciless monster.

Yet Mulisch proposes a different reading. Eichmann was disgusted—literally scared out of his wits and made physically, violently ill—by what he observed at Chelmno (the killing of Jews in mobile gas vans); Minsk (the killing of Jews by shooting); Lwów (“a spring of blood like a fountain,” gushing from the earth, where Jews, both dead and alive, had been buried [Arendt 1964: 89]); and Treblinka (the gas chambers and crematorium [13f; also Arendt 1964: 87-89]). Based on this testimony, Mulisch suggests that,

we will be getting closer to the truth if we see the witness in figure 3. Figure 3 is the face that sees what the man in figure 2 does. Figure 2 is the slick, unmoved, merciless face of the killer; figure 3 is the face that observes the killing, filled with horror” (14). Figure 3 “is the part on which his crimes have had an effect, the side of the heart; [figure 2] is the part that committed the crimes (14).

What Mulisch suggests, then, is that Eichmann had a conscience, an issue more fully explored by Hannah Arendt who was commissioned by *The New Yorker* to report from the trial and whose observations were later assembled in book form as Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil. Based on such testimony, she maintained that Eichmann did have a conscience and that it functioned normally (or the way we would expect it to function) for about four weeks, “whereupon it began to function the other way around” (Arendt 1964: 95). The obvious question is why it ‘reversed itself’.

That the acts Eichmann witnessed at Chemno, Minsk, Lwów, and Treblinka repulsed him might plausibly be taken to affirm the existence of a normal conscience. In September 1941, shortly after these visits, Eichmann said, “‘for the first and last time’, took an initiative contrary to orders.” Instead of sending a shipment of 20,000 Jews from the Rhineland and 5,000 Gypsies to Riga or Minsk, “where they would have been immediately shot by the *Einsatzgruppen*, he directed the transport to the ghetto of Łódź, where he knew that no preparations for extermination had yet been made” (Arendt 1964: 94, 95). Arendt notes this decision, which got Eichmann into “considerable trouble,” but unfortunately does not explore it (nor did the court press the matter, which strikes me as a crucial oversight for it is an essential turning point in Eichmann’s life) (Arendt 1964: 94, 95). We can only imagine what sort of trouble rained down upon him, since three weeks later at a meeting in Prague

called by Reinhardt Heydrich, head of the SD,¹ Eichmann proposed that “the camps used for the detention of [Russian] Communists [a category to be liquidated on the spot by the *Einsatzgruppen*] can also include Jews” (Arendt 1964: 94, 95). To rectify his “misdeeds” concerning the Łódź ghetto incident, Eichmann was ordered to send 50,000 Jews from the Reich “to the centers of the *Einsatzgruppen* operations at Riga and Minsk” (Arendt 1964: 94, 95).

That Mulisch and Arendt focused to some degree on the content of Eichmann the man, a man endowed with some human attributes, earned them criticism from multiple circles—friends and foes alike. Damningly, their portraits contradicted prevailing public perceptions of Eichmann. How, after all, could someone so monstrous be affected by such heinous deeds? If the monster had had a conscience, would he not have resigned the post and returned to human life? To many, his “snake eyes,” or eyes akin to “gas chambers” told a vastly different story; he was “a non-man, a phenomenon of absolute godlessness and non-humanness” (43). As Hausner proclaimed, he was the Final Solution’s “organizer and executioner” (50), and one simply could not expect much humanity from its mastermind.

In a contemporary idiom, we might express the logic of the myth of Eichmann as follows: American soldiers torture and degrade Iraqi prisoners. Terrorists hijack airplanes and propel them into buildings. Armed militias exterminate black Sudanese in Darfur. Hutus slaughter Tutsis in Rwanda. When confronted with genocide or torture or terrorism or other horrifying forms of violence perpetrated on the human body and human mind, we invariably appeal to the image of the monster, the demonic, the demented, the renegade, to explain (*usually away*) the acts. Surely, only the abnormal, the extraordinary, the evil, the Satanic, are capable of committing such atrocities and grave abuses.

But Eichmann was, as Dr. Dieter Wechtenbruch put it, “improperly normal” (43) and no more mythical or larger than life than a rock.² Indeed, had the Israelis “put an empty SS uniform in the cage, with an SS hat hovering above it, they would have had a defendant of greater reality” (41). Eichmann was a virtual non-reality—or at least a reality without much substance. He was not a monster, not a demon, and certainly not Satan incarnate. Rather, he was human: “a somewhat grubby man with a cold, wearing glasses” (37). The tension between Eichmann the myth and Eichmann the man, or the difference between form and content, exposed, I think, the nature of Israeli public and political opinion at the time, aptly summarized by Israeli Prime Minister Ben Gurion. The trial aimed (a) “to establish before the nations of the world how millions of people...were murdered by the Nazis;” (b) to demonstrate that the Jews “had always faced ‘a hostile world’, how the Jews had degenerated until they went to their death like sheep, and how only the establishment of a Jewish state had enabled Jews to hit back;” (c) to educate young Jews inside Israel who “were in danger of losing their ties with the Jewish people and, by implication, with their own history;” (d) “to ferret out other Nazis—for example, the connection between the Nazis and some Arab rulers” (Arendt 1964: 9f); and (e) to prosecute someone—*anyone*—connected to the upper echelons of the Nazi machine. The “man in the glass booth” simply had to be larger than life;

¹ The initial task of the meeting was “to spy on [Nazi] party members, and thus to give the SS an ascendancy over the regular party apparatus.” See Arendt (1964: 94, 95, 36).

² Wechtenbruch served as assistant for the defense attorney, Robert Servatius, and spoke with Eichmann “for months, every day for at least three hours” (43). Multiple psychiatrists affirmed Wechtenbruch’s diagnosis.

anything less would have reduced the trial to a sham proceeding and would have fractured Israeli nation-building.

The trial thus became a tool to generate a grand narrative of what happened, when it happened, and how it happened. Israel already knew why it happened; and the “who question” was answered in part by the presence of Eichmann himself, as well as by grand theories that attributed guilt in some significant sense to all Germans (the latest manifestation of which is Daniel Goldhagen’s *Hitler’s Willing Executioners*, 1996). In the interests of Ben Gurion’s professed objectives, in the interests of truth, a significant portion of testimony recounted survivor stories that, if connected to Eichmann at all, were at best only marginally associated with him:

sick children, thrown out of the children’s ward on the fifth floor (witness Ross). Babies, ripped apart like a rag in front of their mothers’ eyes (witness Buzminsky). Neighborhoods, chosen at random, closed off, starved, and then burned. The inhabitants, jumping out of their windows and attempting to crawl with their broken limbs; the soldiers, first laughing at them for a while, and then throwing them into the fire. Churches filled with believers set ablaze (witness Masia). Old priests forced to play horseback-riding matches on each others’ backs (photograph). Old women made to scrub a square clean with toothbrushes (photograph). Orchestras playing dance music, while thousands of naked families are being executed (witness Wells)...Dogs being given sugar cubes for having bitten flesh out of a girl (witness Buzminsky)...Meadows covered with skulls and bones (witness Berman). Naked people in winter, covered with water and frozen (witness Neumann)...A man who has to choose between his wife and his mother; if not, both will be executed (witness Dworzeczki)... (88f).

Thus, not only did the myth predate the trial, but by admitting testimony of this kind to serve the pedagogical function envisioned by the Israeli state, the court contributed to enlarging, indeed, consecrating, the myth of Eichmann. The Appeals Court bought into the mythology, asserting (against the wisdom of the District Court judges) that “the appellant had received no superior orders at all. He was his own superior, and he gave all orders in matters that concerned Jewish affairs; he had, moreover, ‘eclipsed in importance all his superiors, including Müller’” (Arendt 1964: 249). In rejecting Eichmann’s appeal and sealing his fate, the judges maintained that “the idea of the Final Solution would never have assumed the infernal forms of the flayed skin and tortured flesh of millions of Jews without the fanatical zeal and the unquenchable blood thirst of the appellant and his accomplices” (Arendt 1964: 249). No wonder Eichmann periodically resurfaces; Satan himself could be not prouder of his blood child. Evil lives; evil revisits; and the myth of Adolf Eichmann is both its enduring image and its midwife.



No doubt Mulish and Arendt disagree with this exaggerated portrait. By accepting such diatribes, by explaining away acts of evil in theological terms or in terms of extreme anti-Semitism (as if the Holocaust was simply an extreme pogrom), we come no closer to understanding why humans commit egregious acts of evil. Indeed, we begin to miss the insights Adolf Eichmann and his multiple, post-mortem reappearances might communicate to us. Here, we must return to an earlier theme: that Hausner unwittingly suggested something profound by contending that Eichmann was “worse than Hitler.”

To understand this comment, Mulisch delved into the being that was Eichmann, making Eichmann the man, not Eichmann the myth or the trial itself, the center of his investigations. Yet the tendency to demonize and explain away such heinous acts unfortunately prevails, and those who attempt to understand evil-doing, as Mulisch and Arendt did, are sometimes vilified as justifying such behavior (see also Waller 2002: 15-18). Mulisch's friends (and foes) criticized him for identifying "too much with the subject" (158). Much like late-medieval/early-modern beliefs in witchcraft and sorcery, the logic avers that if one becomes too close to the demonic subject, one might become infected, impregnated with the Devil's seed.

No matter; Mulisch impugns those critics. Invoking Thomas Mann, Mulisch exhorts us to understand "that one must not coolly and wisely distance oneself from the areas from which the danger is imminent, but, more precisely, one must get in *contact* with the domains below the belt, with the darkness, with the 'myth'" (153). This summary of Mann suffices as a summary of Mulisch (and Arendt). The point is not merely philosophic or literary, but has wider practical implications. Mulisch recounts a situation in which an East German journalist beseeched Mulisch and Joel Brand, the surviving Jewish leader of Budapest who worked with Eichmann in 1944 and with whom Mulisch was speaking outside of the Jerusalem courtroom: "what matters is how today's Eichmanns are standing. The court here, just like the bourgeois press, is only talking about the dead, and about *those* pillars of Fascism that fell together with Hitler, but not about the ones that still exist..." (138). By confronting extant elements of Fascism and evil-doing itself, we come closer to understanding and combating them—if not solely within ourselves, then within society at large. Not having been invited to report from Jerusalem, unlike Arendt, Mulisch offered his services to a Dutch newspaper (159) as an attempt to understand himself and his times. Mulisch is what the Nazis would have called a half-Jew (his mother was Jewish), while his father was a Dutch collaborator, for which he served three years in prison (xiv). Against critics, Mulisch took the assignment as a personal/psychological journey into the "darkness." This is not to suggest that there is an Eichmann in each one of us, but to indicate the necessity of exploring the deep recesses of self and society within which the danger, the darkness, and the "myth" lurk. If we understand the source, perhaps we can better manage the symptom. In this regard, we might be better able to appreciate Judith Shklar's brand of liberalism. Kant famously urged us to "act always so that [we] treat humanity always as an end, but never as a means only." While human rights norms and law today have given that philosophical dictum some weight, abuses continue. To counter such realities, Shklar shined a different—some would say negative—light on liberalism's categorical imperative: she "put cruelty first," urging us not to ignore or forget the depth and persistence of the human propensity toward cruelty, but to engage and understand it because the halting of persecution and cruelty is a necessary precondition for democratic public life (Shklar 1984).

This English-language publication of Mulisch's journalistic, quasi-philosophic ruminations-quasi-report does not, I think, add any significant analysis of the trial or anything major to the public portrait of Eichmann, though it does prove to be a fascinating, at times emotionally difficult, and at times (dare I admit) entertaining, read. For better or for worse, much of Mulisch's book reads as a supplement to Arendt's *Eichmann in Jerusalem*; she even declared that Harry Mulisch "is almost the only writer on the subject to put the person of the defendant at the center of his report and whose evaluation of Eichmann coincides with my own on some essential points" (Arendt 1964: 282). Mulisch's use of Mann as exhortation, which appears in the final chapters of the book, places the entire report in particular perspective and directs us to Mulisch's central insight, which both shares

with Arendt and attains poignancy in this post-Holocaust, Cambodia/Rwanda/Congo/Uganda/Darfur genocidal world. This central insight, or “great lesson of National Socialism” (128), or “true origin of the horror” (104) concerns “the order as fate” and the unconditional obedience of the civil servant. Perhaps this is why Eichmann was presumably worse than Hitler.

The problem with such a conclusion—if there is a problem—is that the obedient is no agent in the specific sense of beginning something anew. So, how can this be the penetrating insight of the modern condition, or is it an apt but trite syllogism of the totalitarian age? The obedient is, after all, merely a doer of deeds, a performer, an actualizer of an image directed by an agent. If the Nazi horror had a precursor, an image, then, Mulisch writes, it was foreshadowed in art (88): in Dante’s ninth circle of hell and Goethe’s *Faust*; in E.T.A. Hoffmann’s *The Sandman* “who brings in misery, distress, and transitory, eternal destruction everywhere he enters the scene” (90), and in André Breton’s superlative imagery of obeying one’s “fiercest and most frequent impulses,” which would mean walking “out into the streets with a gun in [one’s] hands” to see what would happen (91). On this view, then, Hitler was no agent, though one could rightly argue he put into motion a systematic slaughter only inferentially imagined. Artistically and fantastically at least, “Hitler’s world was depicted before its arrival...” (92). And yet a Hitler was necessary to put image to task; in this sense, Hitler was an actualizer, an agent, who imagined and planned the final solution to the age-old Jewish question. “But no matter how hard one searches,” Mulisch remarks, “one person remains missing: Eichmann” (93).

Here is where we find that the true origin of the mythology of Eichmann overpowers the reality of the man. Eichmann is the “calm, dutiful civil servant” about whom no one thinks (93). Eichmann was driven neither by ideology (as was Himmler) nor by virulent anti-Semitism (as was Streicher)—facts affirmed, as much by Eichmann’s testimony as they were by the multiple psychologists who examined him. Indeed, Adolf Eichmann “had never read the official party literature,” and read *Mein Kampf* “only superficially and not in its entirety” (93). So what drove Eichmann? Startlingly, he announced to the court that he lived his life according to Kantian precepts: “As a norm I have adhered to the Kantian imperative, and for a long time already” (113). When pressed by Judge Yitzhak Raveh on this point—surely, if one takes the statement at face value, we are left with the unfathomable claim that “the death trains were rattling to Poland in the name of the categorical imperative, that the crematoriums were roaring in the name of morality” (113). Eichmann, to everyone’s surprise, “came up with an approximately correct definition of the categorical imperative: ‘I meant by my remark about Kant that the principle of my will must always be such that it can become the principle of general laws’” (Arendt 1964: 136).³ To his credit, Eichmann explained that “from the moment he was charged with carrying out the Final Solution he had ceased to live according to Kantian principles” (Arendt 1964: 136). But as Arendt notes, this was only part of the story. Rather, during this “period of crimes legalized by the state,” as he called it,

he had not simply dismissed the Kantian formula...[but] had distorted it to read: Act as if the principle of your actions were the same as that of the legislator or of the law of the land—or, in Hans Frank’s

³ The actual imperative as Kant framed it reads: “Act only according to that maxim by which you can at the same time will that it would become a universal law.” Mulisch only tangentially refers to this high point in Eichmann’s testimony (pages 113, 143, 156), and thus must be faulted for it.

formulation of “the categorical imperative in the Third Reich,” which Eichmann might have known: “Act in such a way that the Führer, if he knew your actions, would approve it” (Arendt 1964: 136).

Thus the order, specifically, Hitler’s, emerged “as something larger than the one giving it and the one receiving it—again as something mystical—as a superhuman power that has to be obeyed” (111). Rudolf Höss, Auschwitz camp commander, testified at Nuremberg that Eichmann “was not obsessed with the extermination of the Jews...but he was obsessed with ‘orders’” (111).

The obsession was consuming, indeed. In March 1944, facing defeat at the hands of the Soviet army, Himmler ordered both the extermination at Auschwitz and the evacuation of Hungarian Jews stopped. Eichmann, stationed in Budapest, the only major continental European urban center from which the Jews had not yet been liquidated, disobeyed his superior and worked unabated; even threatening, “according to a telegram...‘to seek a new decision from the Führer’” (Arendt 1964: 147; Mulisch 111f).⁴ According to Eichmann, Himmler betrayed the order and had become “‘a renegade,’ always a possibility with believers. But this is not an option if one does not hold the god inside...” (111). The order can only be superseded by another order, though Hitler never issued such an order. In fact, Hitler betrayed his own order, for he “wanted to let certain Jews escape” (112). Disturbed by this, Eichmann thought at least he had to act to fulfill the dictate consistently and unequivocally if the plan were to retain any consistency and meaning. While “Himmler believed in Hitler [at least until March 1944, at which point he became a renegade], Eichmann only believed in ‘the order’...When no more orders came, he immediately changed into a ‘peaceable citizen,’ as Servatius so rightly remarked” (93). And this is why Eichmann was worse than Hitler, for “he is less a criminal than he is someone who is capable of anything” (112).

What is so damning about this portrait is Eichmann’s *banality*, the characterization that got Arendt into so much trouble with her contemporaries by which I mean his very ordinariness. Following orders is, simply stated, banal. It requires no thought, and little will on one’s part to fulfill the order. One must simply agree to perform the order, and then perform it. One might be so inclined to laugh at what appears to be Eichmann’s mechanized behavior had he been, say, a banker or baker instead of a transporter of Jews to crematoria. His unquestioned obedience, his assertion that he had a job to do, and that he would do it correctly and thoroughly until ordered not to do so anymore strikes me, at least, as one-dimensional and, consequently, at once comical and tragic. “One is,” he remarked, “to click one’s heels together and say ‘Yes, sir’” (110). Perhaps Herbert Marcuse had Eichmann in mind when he wrote his masterpiece on one-dimensionality (1964); at the very least, the portraits of Eichmann provided for by Mulisch and Arendt illustrate Marcuse’s thesis. Marcuse reveals that it is precisely this one-dimensionality, this uncritical and conformist acceptance of and obedience to existing social structures and norms that modern capitalist societies share with communist and totalitarian societies. The qualitative difference, of course, lies with the results of obedience.

In mass society, the agent invariably needs a doer of deeds, a mimicker, a performer. In other words, the agent needs a cadre of obedient to actualize the content of the order. In the post-Holocaust world we have seen these obedient in the form of the rank and file of the Khmer Rouge;

⁴ “In less than two months, 147 trains, carrying 434,351 people in sealed freight cars, a hundred persons to a car, left [Hungary], and the gas chambers at Auschwitz were hardly able to cope with the multitude” (Arendt 1964: 140). This figure represents more than half the Jewish population.

ordinary Hutus who slaughtered ordinary Tutsis; Arab neighbors of Arab, animist, and Christian Darfurians; and jihadists.⁵ In each case, the atrocity was imagined, communicated, ordered, and cadres of obedient citizens actualized the images and orders by informing on, assaulting, and killing others (most often their neighbors). If Eichmann and the legions of ordinary killers who followed him are a cause for concern, then it is because they are

the difference between the artist and the murderer...[I]f...objects of art foreshadow future events, then...Eichmann did not foreshadow anything, because he is not what the artists wrote about, but why they wrote: the new element that they felt was approaching and about which they worried, and that enabled the celluloid Caligari finally to become a true Hitler—a symbol of “progress” (93).

“Progress” for Mulisch is, in a specific, technological sense, the dirty word of modernity. If Eichmann signifies progress, it is because, in his one-dimensionality, he behaves like a machine. He is exemplary of all those extraordinarily ordinary people who “obey their impulses, without the capability to examine their nature... This living dead person is the prototype of modern man, who created the machine in his own likeness” (117) and who, we might add, begins to mimic his creation. This person appears on the political scene silently, and just as silently disappears. If the killers in Cambodia and Rwanda and Uganda emerged suddenly, as it were, like a massive tsunami that changes the face of the civilization it strikes, they just as suddenly dispersed, blending back into the societies from which they sprung. They, as doers of the nasty deeds, are the silent killers, the ones who truly are worse than Hitler—for they did not plan, did not envision, did not administer, did not question; they simply did with impunity.

And this poses a central moral and legal dilemma for our day. If international tribunals (such as those for the Former Yugoslavia and Rwanda), and hybrid and special courts (for East Timor, Sierra Leone, Cambodia, Kosovo, and possibly very soon for Lebanon) only try those most responsible (usually high and mid-level officials) for crimes, what happens to the ordinary cadres of the obedient, to those who exist in microscopic relation to the killing by killing? If the construction of courts aims to replace an international culture of impunity with an international culture of liability, then by not prosecuting the cadres of obedient doers do we not replicate the culture of impunity domestically? Surely, prosecuting the thousands who participate in atrocities would ensnare domestic and international legal processes for decades, which would most likely endanger chances of long-term peace. But, by ignoring their role, we establish a context within which the desire for retribution may fester, then boil, and perpetuate a cycle of violence. Perhaps this proves Hausner correct in asserting all the Eichmanns of the world, all the doers of deeds, are worse than all the imaginers, all the planners, and all those ultimately dependent on the cadres of the obedient to perform their nasty little schemes and realize their nasty wills—in part because they are set free.



⁵ I hesitate to include jihadists because jihadists seem to share a radical zeal in their fanaticism, in their belief that God has ordained their missions, which does not share with the others on this list.

These musings invite the question that Mulisch asks in his report dated August 20, 1961: “How will we be protected against ourselves...?” (149). He begins to answer his query, albeit pessimistically:

neither the family nor the school nor any other institution is capable of building a dam of sufficient height against the barbarism. An education as rigorous as that of the Germans, one-sidedly geared toward knowledge and obedience, seemed even to boost it...The intellect does not offer any guarantee against the revelation....[I]t is perhaps not the responsibility of education to form dams against bloody revelations. That is more the job of another revelation. Which one? A moral one such as the Christian revelation...turned out to be worthless...[for, i]n the final analysis, Christians are happy with their deaths, even when it comes to them [as with the Jehovah’s Witnesses and Rudolf Höss] in the shape of the Nazis (150-52).

Mulisch is right in ascertaining that no institution can offer guarantees against barbarism, though I do not share his pessimism regarding the potential of education. Indeed, he praises English pedagogy as more “trustworthy than the German or Dutch” since it “is not primarily focused on obedience, knowledge, or intellect, but on cultivating all sorts of small rules of life, manners, habits, and faces, granted, resulting in English people, but at least not barbarians” (151). Ignoring his sarcasm, are not these the same sorts of social structures and rules which lead to unquestioned obedience? One might challenge Mulisch’s complacency; the British did colonize half the world and committed their own atrocities against, among others, the Mau Mau in Kenya.

But education in perhaps a Hegelian sense might prove an antidote to the sort of barbarism and psycho-technology that drives people into the cadres of the obedient. Hegel maintained that education is “the liberation...against pure subjectivity of demeanor, against the immediacy of desire, against the empty subjectivity of feeling and the caprice of inclination” (Hegel 1967: 125). In this regard, a Hegelian conception of education contravenes the one-dimensional Eichmanns of the world who “obey their impulses, without the capability to examine their nature” (117), and resurrects the living dead. In a Kantian/Arendtian idiom, we might call it *sensus communis*, or learning to think from the standpoint of others, which embeds the imperative of considering others in our thinking processes. Contra Churchill, obedience does not perforce spawn monstrosity. In the end, it seems, we have Mann’s exhortation to seek out the demons, to commune with them in an attempt to understand them rather than explain them away. To commune with the demons is to question our social structures, systems, and beliefs; and to think. From the bleak terrain of the 20th century, Mulisch draws wisdom and optimism:

the good side to the existence of nuclear weapons [and genocide, we might add]...is that from now on—for the first time since the Middle Ages—we will have to live with death again. The taboo on death for six centuries has been lifted for good: as in a medieval woodcut, it has danced back into daily life again—and this is precisely the moment for the beginning of a regeneration of man. The taboo on death generated absolute weapons; its lifting might teach us who we are again (162).

In other words, our regeneration evolves out of the recognition of the wholeness of human life, which invariably includes admission of death with life, destruction with creation, myth with reality, evil with good. Myth, to take up (if only briefly) one element, has proven especially destructive in the late 20th century: the sheer invocation of the myth of a “greater Serbia,” or the “Hamitic Hypothesis,” which affirmed the superiority of the Tutsi over the incompetence of the Hutu, or “Hutu fears of Tutsi perfidy” (Berkeley 2002: 104), or contamination of a pure Khmer soul by Western decadence has moved thousands into the cadres of the obedient. Any observer must

question the depth of any alleged indoctrination or acceptance of the mythology by the perpetrators since just as quickly as they appeared, they disappeared, ready to get on with life. Yet the point is that myth does motivate, and the presumed duties that these myths engender in the minds of ideologues become actualized only by a cadre of the willing, of the obedient. Recognizing the negative aspects of human life, treating the unreal and the surreal (of myth, fiction, destruction, evil, and death) as serious subjects for the policy maker and political scientist, might prove illusory in the end, but at least it provides *some* hope for understanding why humans commit egregious acts of evil and thus provides some hope for combating a perennial problem in human life. Recognizing the ramifications of our technologies, structures, systems, beliefs, and behaviors, and introducing (or re-introducing as it were) the vocabularies of death and destruction into our language, might mitigate the dangers of false complacency and the blind obedience of one-dimensionality.

If we are to extract something useful from Eichmann—useful, that is, in our attempts to mitigate evil-doing—then it is that we must, I think, purchase **both** Eichmann the myth and Eichmann the reality, *all the while realizing that myth is a product of ignorance and unwillingness to delve into the problem of evil*. When we do, we tap into something substantial, something that reveals the content of the form of Eichmann. The myth attains such bombastic proportions because of its content, because of Eichmann's one-dimensionality, which is inherently set in a particular context: that an extraordinarily ordinary person could commit such egregious acts that led directly to the deaths of millions in the course of doing a day's work owing to his categorical acceptance of a Nazi hierarchy of horror. "He was able to be so small because the technology was so great: the railways, the administration, the gas chambers, the crematoriums" (161).

But, because he appeared to the world to be something really small, much of the world thought that there must be something greater behind the man; hence the exaggerated status accorded to Eichmann, with his snake or gas chamber eyes, a Satanic incarnation, the architect and the mastermind of one of the world's worst nightmares. Those were, according to Mulisch and Arendt, incorrect assertions. Eichmann was not great, but rather the effects of his deeds were great both because of available technology and because of his categorical obedience to a particular regime.

And that is the double danger of our day.

A seemingly innocuous push of a button may foretell the annihilation of thousands. It is a truism that technology makes killing easier both by increasing the distance between perpetrator and victim, and making a distasteful task "easier." Pushing a button or flipping what appears to be a light switch: these tasks are banal, routine.

But also, more damningly, as we have seen in the genocides and atrocities of the late 20th century, technology need not play a prominent role. A machete can produce quite a spectacle of horror as we have seen. In those cases, what mattered more was obedience to some publicly asserted vitriol coupled with an imagined atrocity that, in the act of obedience, was actualized. And this begs the question: why do people obey such horrific orders?

The answers are varied: hate, racism, jealousy, greed, desire for power, revenge, and feelings of inferiority and superiority may all play a role. In the not too distant past, James Waller, professor and chair of the psychology department at Whitworth College in Spokane, Washington, attempted to explain "how ordinary people commit genocide and mass killing" vis-à-vis a four-pronged model that "considers the wide range of factors involved in the process of ordinary people committing

extraordinary evil” (Waller 2002: 19). The first prong of his model, **our ancestral shadow**, “focuses on three tendencies of human nature...that are particularly relevant in shaping our responses to authority,” including *ethnocentrism* (“the tendency to focus on one’s own group as the ‘right’ one”), *xenophobia* (“the tendency to fear outsiders or strangers”), and *the desire for social dominance* (Waller 2002: 19). The second prong deals with forces that mold the **identities of the perpetrators**, such as *cultural belief systems* (“about external, controlling influences on one’s life; authority orientation; ideological commitment”), *moral disengagement* “of the perpetrator from the victim, (facilitated by moral justification, euphemistic labeling of evil actions, and exonerating comparison),” and *rational self-interest* (“professional and personal”) [Waller 2002: 19, 20]. The third prong, or what Waller calls a **culture of cruelty**, considers the immediate social context within which evil-doing occurs, and concerns such matters as *professional socialization* (“built on escalating commitments, ritual conduct, and the repression of conscience”), *binding factors of the group* “that cement one’s adherence to the group and its activities (including diffusion of responsibility, deindividuation, and conformity to peer pressure),” and the *merger of the role and person*. The fourth prong “analyzes three features of the **social death of the victims**: *us-them thinking*, *dehumanization of the victims* (for example, the use of language in defining the victims as less than human), and *blaming the victims* (a legitimization of the victim as the enemy and, thus, deserving of their victimization” (Waller 2002: 19, 20).

Waller provides a laudably comprehensive account of evil-doing that my students (in a course I developed at the University of Denver on understanding evil) have accepted virtually as gospel. But one element seems missing to me: what I shall call *impoverishment of opportunity and capability*. All people aim to develop self-determined conceptions of self and pursue self-determined lives. Simply stated, people need meaning in their lives; most often, such meaning comes from within and from the myriad of roles we assume and perform at home and in our communities. But in many situations around the globe, people face severe, persistent deprivations; whether such deprivation be in terms of real capabilities (access to food, water, shelter, or employment; freedom of movement, speech, or participation in public affairs, and the like), or in the metaphysical terms of spiritual and psychological malaise that, I think, we saw in Germany during the interwar period.⁶ Over time, in the context of such impoverishment, people despair. And this, I think, is the central psycho-political insight of the United Nations’ human security agenda.⁷ Eichmann manifested this malaise: the bored salesman of the Austrian Vacuum Oil Company, by his own admission in so many words, joined the Nazi Party out of sheer ennui. “Why not join the S.S.,” asked Ernst Kaltenbrunner, “a young lawyer in Linz who later became chief of the Head Office for Reich Security.” And Eichmann replied, “Why not?” (Arendt 1964: 31ff).

So, perhaps when people lose all hope, when their impoverished lives, ripped open by fetid gashes that expose the sheer hollowness and stagnancy of their lives, they, driven by an *inherent, incessant, unquenchable (human) need to belong to something greater than themselves*, seek out the largesse of life that could only be given by a grand movement of History proclaimed by a demagogue in the image of a greater, purer homeland, or in the image of racial superiority. Eichmann did; we can imagine all

⁶ Two artists from the interwar period—Marlene Dietrich and Bertolt Brecht—in particular sang or wrote about this malaise in terms of boredom and pervasive self-interest and greed that undermined trust and confidence in others.

⁷ The human security agenda was developed in recognition of the fact that much post-Cold War conflict is intra-state rather than inter-state in nature, and can be traced to persistent deprivations. The agenda thus seems to focus in a preventive sort of way on situations in which such deprivations are acute and could lead to armed, violent conflict.

those limited by circumstance and unable to pursue alternative, more enriching lives, all those destitute in Cambodia, Rwanda, Darfur, Uganda, the Congo, and in the Middle East to do so also.⁸

In light of these unfortunate facts, we must recognize that the content of the Eichmann myth also serves as the content of the form that was Eichmann the man: a vast sea of nothingness, for he was driven neither by ideology, nor anti-Semitism, nor overt fanaticism, nor belief in Hitler, but by a sense of duty to a reality greater than his own. This is why Eichmann is worse than Hitler, and this is why we should be so concerned with the problem and sources of evil. For evil has assumed new form, a form divested of its previous theological, philosophic, and literary connotations. So many extraordinarily ordinary people have attained their proverbial fifteen minutes of fame (all the while remaining anonymous) precisely by doing what Eichmann did, albeit with microscopic proximity to their victims: the burning of Darfurian villages, the raping of Darfurian women, and the killing of Darfurian people; the taking up of machetes against Tutsis and moderate Hutus; the killing of Cambodian babies; the suicide bombings in restaurants, cafes, markets, and transportation systems. Arguably, they were not driven by ideological zeal, or by fanatical hatred, or psychological deformity, or by sadism, but by belief in the directive that “emerges as something larger than the one giving it and the one receiving it...as a superhuman power that has to be obeyed” (111). This was the reality, the content of Eichmann the man: he was all form. Tautological? Yes. Frightening? Yes. We can identify the ideologues of the world, but we cannot identify their followers for they emerge almost imperceptibly, moving about like the statues of Daedalus, only to retreat from the political scene just as silently as they emerged. This is the psycho-technology of modernity and the psycho-technology of horror, initially identified by Martin Heidegger and Ernst Jünger with National Socialism (115), but which, as Mulisch, Arendt, Marcuse, and the myriad of atrocities in our world demonstrate are just as easily found anywhere.

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⁸ My comments, apparently, are quite similar to Ted Robert Gurr’s “frustration—aggression thesis” in his seminal work, Why Men Rebel. I owe this point to an anonymous reviewer.

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