ON THE
LIFE AND DEATH
IMPORTANCE
OF THINKING

ELIZABETH
MINNICH

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It was particularly timely encouragement to be invited to contribute "The evil of banality/Arendt revisited" to the Special Issue of the fine journal, *Arts and Humanities in Higher Education*, vol. 13 (1–2), 2014: "Humanities and the Liberal University: Calls to Action and Exemplary Essays" (http://ahh.sagepub.com/content/13/1-2.toc). (Thank you, Jan Parker.)

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Is our ability to judge, to tell right from wrong, beautiful from ugly, dependent upon our faculty of thought? Do the inability to think and a disastrous failure of what we commonly call conscience coincide? . . . An answer, if at all, can come only from the thinking experience, the performance itself, which means that we have to trace experiences rather than doctrines.—Hannah Arendt.

Introduction

What Were They Thinking?

In an interview, a man who worked as a killer of Tutsis thinks back to a particular day during the three months of the Rwandan genocide. He remembers one of his many victims: "Me, I knew this old man by name, but I had heard nothing unpleasant about him. That evening I told my wife everything. She knew only routine details about him, we did not discuss it, and I went to sleep."[1]

> *The killing was a job, not a vendetta; it was nothing personal; working hours pretty well contained it. The killers could sleep well, and, next day, continue their work.*

Holding in mind the searing history of such massive, violative harms done to all of humanity—these are crimes against humanity but experienced always individual by individual, as suffering is, and dying—I have for many years been asking myself, *How could they do it?* What was going on in the minds of those whose job it was to kill, to colonize, to exploit and oppress in Africa, America, under the Third Reich, in Armenia, Bosnia, Rwanda, Kosovo; in fields, factories, camps, homes—too many times and places, and still today? What were they thinking when they faced their victims, among them acquaintances, friends, unthreatening strangers, children, workers they saw every day? How can people actually, close in, choose and act as they must do to enslave, exploit unto death, rape as an act of war and genocide, traffic in children? It is a very old, searingly new question to which there are many responses.

I have not found most responses adequate both to the intensity and to the extent of the moral significance of the question, a question which carries within it its apparent obverse: how could some remain, do, be good when all around them others failed? Encountering the good with profound relief, I have again been asking: What were they thinking in those moments when their actions could have joined them to the harm-doing of others and they

chose differently? This book is my report, or more aptly, my reflections from and on my effort to comprehend. It will take a winding path, circling in toward and back out around instances and thoughts that seem to me most difficult, and central, and illuminating.

Two of the most basic conclusions to which I have come are these:

No great harm to many people could ever be perpetrated if distorted systems had to rely on moral monsters to do it, nor would great good affecting many people happen if we had to depend on saints.

But great harm is done. I fear that this is also the case:

People who are not thinking are capable of anything.

A man who was in charge of and actively participated in some of the most brutal acts of apartheid South Africa, Eugene de Kock, later said, "[T]he dirtiest war you can ever get is the one fought in the shadows. And I was there in the middle of it. There are no rules except to win. There are no lines drawn to mark where you cannot cross. So you can go very low—I mean very low—and still it doesn't hit you. It's not like you stop and think. No. Your goal is to get it done."[2]

I have learned that when systems are turned bad, when the extraordinary becomes ordinary, it does not take a Hitler, an Idi Amin, a Jeffrey Dahmer, a Charles Manson, or any other unusual sort to become a perpetrator. It just takes a practiced conventionality, a clichéd conscience, emotional conformity, susceptibility to small scale bribery by salary, loot, status, a sense of isolation and distrust of the reliability of others that works against taking a differing public stand. It just takes, that is, much of what in better times keeps a society and its economy provided with reliable and ambitious workers, status-anxious consumers, polite neighbors, agreeable team players, citizens who make no waves. It just takes, in short, an ability to go along thoughtlessly—by which I mean without paying attention, reflecting, questioning—to play the game as careerists everywhere do, hoping to win if, by unquestioned rules, one plays it well.

Startling as it may be, we now know, for example, that Charles Manson,[3] leader of a small cult in California in the late nineteen sixties, taught himself how to recruit and keep the followers who later murdered seven people at his direction by reading one of the best-selling self-help/success books, Dale Carnegie's *How to Win Friends And Influence People* (1936). Carnegie's still-followed advice covers "self-improvement, salesmanship, corporate training, public speaking, and interpersonal skills."[4]

In *Becoming Eichmann: Rethinking the Life, Crimes, and Trial of a 'Desk Murderer,'* David Cesarani draws on decades of scholarship and recent

research to help us understand Adolf Eichmann, the Nazi "engineer of The Final Solution," a man who has been described as deeply disturbed; an anti-Semitic monster; someone who was just following orders, being obedient to authority; a colorless bureaucrat. Cesarani tells us, in a passage that touches on several key issues, that, "Much as we may want Eichmann to be a psychotic individual and so unlike us, he was not. . . . Adolf Eichmann was a normal person who had what was for his time a normal upbringing and education. He had an active social life, girlfriends, and, later, a wife and family. He was, according to several who knew him, conventionally bourgeois."[5] He did not start out with virulent hatred of Jews, and only gradually, as the Nazis emerged from being misfits into real power and his career became involved with them, did he take up the already available, classic anti-Semitic view that there was a Jewish conspiracy to run the world. Even then, it took a while for Eichmann to lose all connection with the humanity of the people he first 'helped' to emigrate, and only later sent to their deaths in massive numbers. Cesarani observes that "the language and thinking of warfare merged with racial eugenics,"[6] and together blocked Eichmann's thinking about what he was doing except—and this matters greatly—in enclosed terms. He could and did think about warfare and eugenics, but also, and crucially, he thought about these as they enabled and gave meaning to his career. Eichmann rose in power and rank when, given this work to do, he "bent to his fresh task with all the managerial skills at his disposal. The deportation of humans to their death was treated with the same problem-solving skills, can-do, corporate mentality as arranging shipments of gasoline to petrol stations [an earlier job of Eichmann's]." Cesarani concludes, "Eichmann was not insane, nor was he a robotic receiver of orders. He was educated to genocide and chose to put what he learned into operation."[7]

Pumla Gobodo-Madikizla, a clinical psychologist originally from a township in South Africa who grew up knowing too well the violence against her own people, did the interview with de Kock cited above. As she talked to "Prime Evil," the name by which he was widely called then—a romanticizing name that marked de Kock's crimes off even from other apartheid perpetrators'—she realized that she "was more afraid of confronting" "a human being capable of feeling, crying, and knowing pain," a complexly human de Kock, than she was afraid of continuing to experience him as the dehumanized figure of "Prime Evil."[8] She had then to deal with "something I was probably not prepared for—that good and evil exist in our lives, and that evil, like good, is always a possibility. And that was what frightened me."[9] This is more striking because this psychologist is not saying that there is good even in some bad people, or that good people are capable of doing bad things. We all know that; even if untested, we know it from our own lives. What she encountered, as through the inquiry that drives this book will we, was something actually

quite different: a "thin line" not between good and bad, but between good and evil. There is also, as we shall see, a startlingly close connection between what we usually call conventionality, banality, clichés, insider jargon and our ability to move even quite quickly from being conventionally good people to perpetrators of extensive evils.

THINKING CLOSE-IN

These are challenging things to think about carefully, to approach closely, or ought to be. As Dr. Gobodo-Madikizla discovered, the closer in we move, the harder it is to hold onto ways we have had of thinking about evildoers and, as it turns out, those who are remarkably good as well. I believe that close in is the only way we can think if we want to get past explanations and interpretations that have not reached us on levels that bring about real change. Many fine people I know would follow just that observation with a call to engage not just our minds, but our feelings, to find ways not only to instruct but to make people really care. I agree that we need to care more, but I am afraid that I do not trust feelings more than minds. I will say more about this later; for now, I simply want you to know that my focus really is on the questions, *What and how were they thinking, how and when were they not thinking*—the actual doers of great harm, the actual doers of great good, each always as individuals, to individuals, close-in, however massive the final numbers, of which we must also but differently take account.

WHY DO I WRITE?

Some years ago I was invited to discuss a paper of mine titled "Why Not Lie?"[10] with a group of prisoners at a men's medium security facility who were studying humanities with a professor from the local university at which I had been invited to speak. The men had been particularly taken with a paper of mine that the professor had included in their course reader and wanted to meet me. I was introduced; there was a moment of silence; I asked if they had anything they wanted to ask or say to me about what they had read. A large man at the end of the table around which we were gathered leaned back, cocked his head to one side, and said, *"Why did you write it?"* "What do you want to know?" I responded: "Help me, so I can answer what you're really asking, not just what I think you might want to know." *"What was your ulterior motive?"* "Oh," I said; "Well, I can assure you that it wasn't money, and it wasn't fame, and it wasn't power. Would those count as 'ulterior motives'?" *"Yes, I guess so."* "May I ask you another question?" *"Yes."* "Why does it

matter to you whether I had an ulterior motive, and what it is?" *"Because I read your paper, and I'm taking it in, and for all I know, you might be toxic."* "Me, not the paper?" *"Yes, of course. Smart people can slip things by you, and you might never know it, but it can do harm to you."* To my mind, this man, who had become acutely aware that he had "gone wrong" in his life and was now being careful to think about what he took in, was the kind of serious reader anyone ought to want, and to honor: being fully attentive matters greatly (another thought to be explored further as we go).

I believe, then, that if we are going to think together through this book, which it is true that I, personally, have been motivated to write, I should tell you a bit about the long journey that led me to such conclusions and the need to write it as I have, as an ongoing inquiry through and about experiences. I have been looking for illumination, for meanings, more than, in any scientific sense, truth.

There are, of course, personal stories as well as philosophical and moral inclinations that inform any choice to undertake the journey of a long-term inquiry, and perhaps particularly so an inquiry that, I promise you I do know, most people would far rather avoid. I have wanted to stop, but simply could not. Among other reasons of which I am aware, there has always also been this: I cannot know how I would act if tested more severely than I have been, nor do I have reason to assume I would act well, or well enough. I profoundly wish that I did know, but I do not. My questions about others are never only about "them," as if I were morally safe, which also means there are no answers that are cut to fit all sizes, serve for all occasions.

MORE PERSONALLY

Like many children, I was early outraged by unfairness, but I confess that when I confronted it beyond the playground, in the adult world, what really gripped me and has led to my work of years now was realizing that I just could not understand it. That is a confession, I think: it turns out that, as much as injustice troubles me, what activates me most is a need to understand.

I was completely baffled by the two kinds of racial prejudice of which I first became aware, white/black racism and anti-Semitism. I encountered both where my family lived, outside of Washington, DC, when, in the 1950s—before the great justice movements of the late 1960s and 1970s had taken off, but as they were indeed in preparation—my parents decided we needed to find a new house. It came up, one day, that we were not looking in some neighborhoods because the people who lived there would not sell either to black people or to Jews. We were evidently neither, but my parents said they did not want prejudiced people as neighbors. More, they did not think

such restrictions were acceptable in any way. That made sense to me. I was young, as I have said, and "That's not *fair*!" had some real passion behind it. What did not make sense was why anyone had anything against people of color and/or Jews. I cannot be sure that, had my seriously puzzled "Why?" been answered differently than it was, I would have resisted indoctrination. Maybe, maybe not. But I was fortunate—my parents made it clear that I was entirely right to be so confounded. It was a kind of (what my older self will now call) moral, political idiocy on the part of the excluders that was the real issue. Nothing whatsoever wrong with the recipients of that idiocy: about this, my parents were entirely clear. Racism, white against black, Christian against Jews, and its other ugly and ludicrous formulations, was and is and always shall be the failure of the racists. That does not, of course, mean that others do not suffer the problem of the racists. As long as the racists are also those in power, whole systems are deformed and the most vulnerable take the brunt of viral prejudice, clear unto dying from it when yet again common failings contribute to the rise and setting in of uncommonly rotten systems on a grand scale.

When my family was looking for a house in those years, what people restricting sales were doing was illegal. It was, however, still widely practiced. Signs I saw as we drove around read, for example, "Sensibly restricted." My first conscious hearing of "racist" and "prejudice" was coupled then not only with "unfair" but with "unjust," even when such practices were both common and legal. My mother later went to work for fair housing, going door to door to find out which of our neighbors—all white, I then realized, unless they were "foreign" and so, by prevailing white notions, okay—would sell to black people wanting to move from central DC to a Maryland suburb such as ours. I often went with my mother. The experience did nothing to help me comprehend what was going on with those who, usually politely but not always, quickly and firmly closed their door not only against us. I learned early on that usually polite, good citizens in nice houses in neighborhoods populated by professionals with extensive libraries could be part of great wrongs, that few of them indeed would take even small steps to act rightly. Still, some did; that, too, I learned.

Slowly through those years, as the fifties finally ended and the sixties stirred in the wind, I began to realize that, unspoken as it was, my family carried within it the effects of experiencing the massive harms and horrors that followed the Russian Revolution, born in such hope, and of the Third Reich, conceived in bloody nationalism and its scientized racisms, as well as in the ancient imperial and religious strife and poverty of the Old World. My beloved grandfather and his brothers had fled Russia after the revolution. They were prominent intellectuals and liberals, both unsafe things to be in revolutionary times. My great-grandfather represented the Jews in the

Duma, a short-lived parliament set up after the Czar was removed that did not survive the turmoil from which the Soviet order emerged. Working for justice through the law was a family tradition, aligning them, among others, with the idealistic reformer as well as the great writer, Leo Tolstoy. Part of the family fled to Germany, from where it then became necessary to move again. Although I cannot remember when or how, I found out that my grandfather and his brothers had twin sisters who had returned from France to Germany. They disappeared; if anyone knew what happened to them, I never heard it. When I first heard of the Nazi doctors' experiments on twins, my heart stopped. I still know nothing more.

There was almost no talk of those times, traumas, and losses, at least when the children were around. Perhaps you noticed that earlier I said my family was "evidently" neither black nor Jewish. I knew my grandfather, whose name was Emmanuel Goldenweiser, was Jewish, but I also knew that my grandmother, Pearl Ann Allen from Luray, Virginia, was not, and that they raised their children with no religion or old-country traditions. My father's family was Polish Catholic, immigrants determined to become American and leave all the old bloody wars and poverty behind. What I heard, or experienced in the silences and non-affiliations, was that my people came to America to escape the horrors and to work very hard not only to enjoy but, realists as they were, to build a better world. My originally Russian-Jewish maternal grandfather and my Polish no-longer-Catholic father studied economics and went to work against the causes of poverty; my mother went from fair housing to broader citizen work for democracy. One great uncle became an international lawyer who worked with refugees and immigrants, seeking and gaining reparations from Germany. Another great uncle was a noted, if controversial, anthropologist and Progressive. Radical as he was, he nonetheless spoke out early about changes that enabled the rise of Stalin.

Trying to understand in order to try to fix the world—just that: to work at it, not to believe in Grand Solutions—is nothing unusual. It was until recently simply central to my family's culture as it has been to so many. For my part, I have worked as an educator on the college and university level for more than a few decades. When I look back on that work and consider its relation to all that I have explored in trying to understand *how people can do such things, both good and evil*, I find that I have come to believe that education—given the unhappy record of other social, economic, and political institutions, most assuredly including religious ones—is at the very least a crucial strand of the weave of efforts we are morally required to explore if we are ever to make *Never again* anything other than a tragically failed cry of the heart. To ask, *What were they thinking? Were they thinking?* seems to me evidently to lead to questions about how they, and we, and the future in its generations have been and will be educated.

HANNAH ARENDT, "THE BANALITY OF EVIL"

Passing over a great deal: in the late 1960s I returned from a Fulbright Fellowship to teach and to study classic Indian dance (*Bharat Natyam)* in Gujarat, India, and shortly thereafter started graduate work at the University of California, Berkeley. Those were stormy, fascinating, irregular times. I studied political science and theory, a fine accompaniment to all that was going on outside of class, but I left Berkeley just short of a year later, exhausted in part by the transition to California from my year in India and travels through the East. I drove to New York City, was hired to teach undergraduates at The New School College, and was then accepted to The Graduate Faculty of Political and Social Science of The New School.

After an interview, I was also accepted by the political philosopher Hannah Arendt. She admitted me, all unqualified as I was, to her advanced seminar, "Political Experiences of the 20th Century." I wrote my first paper for her as an attempt to solve a puzzle I did not yet know came from my depths and would, in differing forms, drive me for decades more: how could so many deeply idealistic people, in this case Communists in the early days of the Soviet Union, have failed to see, and to stop, what was happening as Stalin took power? I read journals, memoirs, novels, studies that took readers inside the consciousness of people—even some sent to the gulags who were starved and worked like slaves—who went on believing in Stalin. *If he only knew what is happening, he would stop it immediately*, people said. It was extraordinarily difficult, I had to realize, to think outside of the ways they had for so long thought, to question what they had believed so fully that it had given meaning to virtually all moments of their daily lives. They were not blinded ideologues, though, I also found as I read. They were people who needed to make sense of things, as we all do, who found it exceedingly difficult to do so if everything they had believed in, figured out, lived by was implicated, now, in violently negating its own premises and promises. In short, they were in extraordinary circumstances, horrifying ones, but I no longer found them unusual.

At the end of that course, Arendt asked me to be her teaching assistant, so I continued taking her advanced seminars while also sitting in on her larger lecture courses in order to be able to assist her with them as needed. She was then still dealing with the impassioned criticism of her book, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (1963). She took me with her to discussions of the book, as well as to debates in which she participated on the Vietnam War and other hot issues of the times. Arendt's thoughts about Eichmann, a significant perpetrator of the Holocaust, had taken her to conclusions for which many people evidently were not ready. It was not only that there was a lot of disagreement that struck me; it was how vitriolic and highly

personalized it often was. Right or wrong in her interpretations, Arendt's thinking had clearly gone off the tracks many people required even to listen. I was troubled and fascinated by blocks to thinking that were anything but "merely" intellectual in their effects. That was what Arendt's "report" on Eichmann explored: what being "thoughtless" meant in the highly specific instance of Adolf Eichmann. Those who could not listen to Arendt's thinking were realms away from Eichmann, of course, as, in different ways, were the Communists who could not stop believing in Stalin, and my family's white neighbors who were so frightened of change in their suburban enclave. Nonetheless, my interest in the version of my question that focuses it for me intensified: *What, how, are they thinking? Are we thinking?*

THE EVIL OF BANALITY

Reflecting on Arendt's work and its early reception by good people who were deeply pained, I found myself reversing her [in]famous phrase and, having done so, thinking that perhaps it would have helped had she spoken, as she did not, of "the evil of banality," rather than—or, as I now think, in addition to—"the banality of evil." To think of evil as "banal" was then altogether too difficult: these were times in which "unthinkable" went with "evil," with the Holocaust—*unthinkable, unspeakable, radical evil*, the very opposite of "banal."

The evil of banality has haunted my thinking ever since it occurred to me, illuminating Arendt's work, especially her use of "thoughtlessness" to describe what was most extreme, most striking, about the man on trial in Jerusalem but then also much more of her work, and that of other philosophers to whom I turned (Plato's Socrates, Heidegger, Husserl, Jaspers, Dewey, Addams, James, Weil, among others). So, whatever else I have been doing, studying, teaching, writing, I have continued since that first paper I wrote for Arendt reading memoirs, novels, interviews, studies that offer the chance to get in close to what and how people caught up in extraordinary events as perpetrators, as resisters, as victims, as immediate observers were thinking—or not—about what they were doing.

Perhaps this focus on making sense, on thinking, is bizarre on my part. I have been told that it is, and all the more often as, in the first decades of our new millennium, so much pressure has been brought to bear on schools at all levels to "deliver content," to "hold people accountable" for achieving pre-set "outcomes"—in short, for the production of predictable products measureable by the sort of standardized evaluation methods that are precisely not suited for the free act of thinking (which Socrates, perhaps *the* Western exemplar of thinking, likened without contradiction to a wind that blows

everything down; a stinging fly that awakens; an electric eel that paralyzes). But I realize now that, since my first encounters with dramatic injustices that did not shatter my own life but that have haunted and driven it, I have increasingly felt that understanding thinking—and so also thoughtlessness, and so also banality in its many forms—is for me the most pressing moral and political quest.

What were you thinking?! we say to a friend, a child, someone we are interviewing when we just plain cannot imagine how a thinking person could have done *that*, whatever it was. At root, that is the question of this book, which is informed by a lifetime, now, of pursuing such questions, many experiences and conversations, reading, and research. More recently I have had invitations to talk with wonderfully thoughtful and morally serious audiences in classes, academic gatherings, conferences on genocide, community groups, and it is that thinking, as engaged as it is with the world and others, that I bring to you now in the hope that you will join in.

And then I need to say this: one of Hannah Arendt's thinking friends once said, "I am not duty-bound to resolve the difficulties I create. . . . if only they are ideas in which readers will find material that stirs them to think for themselves."[11] I think this could be said as a preemptive excuse, uncaringly or arrogantly; I hope I invoke it here as a value for which to strive so that I do not produce a book that is in its own ways self-contradictory.

MEANINGFUL CONTEXTS, LARGER SYSTEMS

I have started by speaking personally and have posed my morally pressing questions about individual thinking. The individual is finally where moral responsibility lies, and people have been my focus, but it is important also to emphasize here, at the very beginning, that all the many systems—governmental, economic, military, social, cultural, linguistic and communications, material and architectural—within which we live our lives matter a great deal. We have, then, a bit more exploring to do to locate this particular inquiry if we are to understand each other well enough to think together.

It is what happens when systems are turned rotten by a few people but many people enable that turn and keep it going—except for the few good souls who resist, and there are always a few—that I have been trying to understand for so long. I am not, though, going to focus on the systems. Many have done that, including Arendt, who wrote *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1951) very soon after World War II and well before *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil.* I am neither a sociologist nor a political analyst, let alone a scholar of the other systems with and within which polities and societies run. I am a philosopher and an educator, and what I want to know

of all those people—far beyond the few on top—who enable and perpetrate systems concerns *thinking*, which we do ourselves, but also *meaning*, which we cannot make all by ourselves. So I also ask, *How could they make sense of what they were doing?* If we can understand better that nodal point, the making of sense drawing on meanings shared among individuals, I actually do believe we might learn something crucial about ourselves, first, and then about how to educate the newcomers who join our world so that more of us, more people everywhere, will find themselves unable, when the time comes, to do the work that systems going bad require.

So, while it does not suffice to focus only on individuals as if we live, love, and have our being all on our own, it also does not work to assign all agency to systems, whether conceptual, moral, material, political, and/or economic. We need to consider individuals in meaningful contexts.

Consider these observations by a visitor to Baghdad that come together to raise very large questions:

> To receive this briefing [re: what the U.S. Embassy had, or—as it turned, out, had not—done for its highly vulnerable Iraqi employees], I had passed through three security doors into the Embassy's classified section, where there were no Iraqis and no natural light; it seemed as if every molecule of Baghdad air had been sealed off behind the last security door. The Embassy officials struck me as decent, overworked people, yet I left the interview with a feeling of shame. The problem lay . . . with the politics of the American project in Iraq, which from the beginning had been conducted under the illusion that controlling the message mattered more than the reality. A former official at the Embassy told me, "When we say that the corridors of power are insulated, is it that the officials aren't receiving the information, or is it because the construct under which they're operating doesn't even allow them to absorb it?"[12]

This is astute thinking by an attentive reporter who recognizes both individual responsibility and the system-defined contexts within which we find—or do not find—it meaningful, do or do not accept it, and still there are questions to be raised. "The construct under which they are operating" includes systems of differing but complementary sorts, from actual buildings to professionalized meanings, language, hierarchies, protocols, career paths, and on to individual ways of making sense of what is going on. So I want to ask something additional and a bit different. I want to ask, not whether "the construct under which they are operating doesn't even allow them to absorb it" but, *How, day by day by day, do most of them choose to think within that construct when, as the thinking creatures that we humans are, at any moment any one of them could, like their visitor, be startled back into thinking—really could stop, and think.*

In truth, much as we might rather not admit it, we usually do know what is going on. We just find ways not to think about it, and you cannot care about,

and need not take action concerning, something or someone you simply do not take into or hold in your mind. *Don't take it home with you*, friends advise. *Be a team player*, we tell people who start asking uncomfortable questions. *It's not our business*; *I was just doing my job; everyone else seemed okay with it; who was I to question the guys in the big offices? I had a family to support. There was a promotion I could get if I played it right.* There are all sorts of conventional banalities ready to hand that work very well when we choose to avoid thinking about what we are doing within and in service of larger systems.

We might say that systems can be *conditions of possibility*, and so seem possible grounds for *excuses*, but in moral fact, they are not *causes*.

OVERVIEW

Part I of this book is concerned with how monstrous evils actually become normalized, providing the conditions of possibility, and excuses, for the great many perpetrators they require. In chapter 7, about midway through, there is a keystone to the arch of the whole book: I introduce the concepts *extensive evil, extensive good*, and *intensive evil, intensive good.* In part II, my inquiry turns to the doing of good by a few people even in the face of the worst that it seems everyone else is doing: What, how, were *they* thinking? After listening carefully in hope of learning from those who will not collaborate with systemic evils, I have found, among other telling factors, that here too, above all, we need to practice being attentive to the obvious as well as the elaborate, the familiar and daily as well as the professional and technical. Part III then returns to evils—now focusing especially on ways they thrive when places, peoples, meanings have become *enclosed*, by walls, logics, bureaucracies, authoritative "knowledge." These enablers too turn out to be seeded in everyday life.

Among the bolder threads in the patterns of the arc held by the keystone *extensive/intensive* distinction, those that emerge as significant as we move in close to many, many experiences, these also stand out:

> *Mindlessness enables unthinkable acts. Attentiveness that awakens thinking enables simple goodness.*

And then I, as an educator as well as a philosopher, have to say, with breath held:

> *Education can develop either attentiveness or thoughtlessness. There are individual and collective choices to be made. Mostly, I fear, we have made them*

wrongly. Had we not, the materials for this book would have been far less ready to hand.

SECULAR MORAL THINKING

My invitation to you, then, is to join me in thinking and rethinking precisely the mindlessness that is perhaps—I believe it is—the most dangerous state of our most dangerous species, considering also what we may learn by reflecting on how we become so thoughtless, but might become thinkers instead. This means, as I understand it, that mine is a secular inquiry into good and evil, depending on and returning to no invocations of deity, dogma, or theology (or, for that matter, any particular schools of philosophy, although I do teach moral philosophy and it is in my mind as I write). There are ways to connect any inquiry into evil and good to religious teachings, of course, but it is not my calling (nor my ulterior motive) to do so, and there are also tensions here insofar as unthinking adherence is of great concern to me no matter to what, or to whom, it is given.

Part I

THINKING THE UNTHINKABLE

Chapter One

Truth and Fiction

Camus' The Plague

I do not know if Hannah Arendt and the philosopher, resistance fighter, and novelist Albert Camus ever spoke, although they may have (I have heard that she admired him). Nonetheless, her thoughts and his have been in conversation in my mind for a long time now. I believe Camus' story will help us imaginatively "trace experiences rather than doctrines," as Arendt suggested we do in our effort to comprehend evil, in quest of goodness.

Among Camus' many written works, it is a novel, *The Plague*, to which I have returned through the years. It continues to provide us with a story, images, characters that simultaneously provoke thought, imagination, and feeling while being at a remove from the more abstract challenges of philosophical writing, on the one hand, and searing historical realities, on the other.

I want, then, to move into our inquiry with *The Plague* upfront so we can return to its evocative fictional truths as strands to follow throughout. The dead rats that herald the arrival of the plague in Camus' novel come to mark among other things the importance of paying attention, and not only to the big but to the apparently small things that seem only somewhat odd, if that, at first.

The Plague is a prolonged allegorical reflection on how extensive evil emerges, takes hold, and finally entirely takes over a small city. We come to know some of the people trapped there as the city becomes, in its profound trouble and suffering, radically cut off physically, existentially, morally from others still living ordinary lives elsewhere who are unaware, yet, of their own vulnerability, of the germs that can lie dormant for years in the most ordinary of places, in drawers, chests of linens, cupboards.

PHILOSOPHER, RESISTANCE FIGHTER

In 1948, Albert Camus—a philosopher who wrote fiction, a member of the French Resistance that struggled against the Nazis, and editor of its clandestine newspaper, *Combat*—published a novel he titled *The Plague*. France had been occupied by the Nazis (May 1940–August 1944) and, under the old French war hero Field Marshall Petain, became actively complicit. Both independently and led by General Charles de Gaulle from exile, Camus and others who opted to resist had to then evade capture, incarceration, potentially also torture and death at the hands of collaborators among their own people as well as the unambiguously threatening and morally appalling enemy. There is heroism in evidence here, and—more rare and essential to action in times of extensive evil—there is evidence of astute moral as well as political judgment of the sort that tends to atrophy when systems go bad. Camus, then, knew firsthand about perpetrators and enablers of large-scale atrocities, and he knew still more intimately what it took for some to resist.

AN ORDINARY TOWN

The Plague tells the story of Oran, an ordinary town on the northern coast of Algeria that is taken over and decimated by an outbreak of something very like the bubonic plague. The anonymous narrator of the story, we find out toward the end, is a doctor who in his professional role sees more of the intimate as well as general effects of this horrific visitation than others. *The Plague* becomes a tale of how differing individuals deal with an unavoidably shared yet profoundly isolating situation in which all that was once ordinary has been turned upside down and inside out, suffering and death become ordinary, and still people must choose how to live, what to do each day while they remain uninfected. When their town is quarantined, they are even more isolated, without hope of rescue from outside and fearful of contamination from all those with whom they are now terribly bonded, from whom they cannot escape.

At the end of this allegorical novel—Camus clearly had the Occupation by the Nazis in mind, but is seeking through it for transhistorical meanings—Dr. Rieux, the narrator and doctor who, at risk to his own life, has quietly persisted in doing whatever he can to fight the plague even though, as he says, doing so once it has fully set in meant "a never ending defeat,"[1] stands listening to the joyous celebration of the townspeople finally delivered from the deadly epidemic that has isolated and, over many months, indiscriminately

brought agonizing deaths to children, lovers, friends, strangers, good and bad, cruel and generous, people of faith and of doubt, significant and just plain ordinary people:

> He knew what those jubilant crowds did not know but could have learned from books: that the plague bacillus never dies nor disappears for good; that it can lie dormant for years and years in furniture and linen-chests; that it bides its time in bedrooms, cellars, trunks, and bookshelves; and that perhaps the day would come when, for the bane and enlightening of men, it would rouse up its rats again and send them forth to die in a happy city.[2]

The people of Oran and their officials never wanted to know that there is always the potential for a plague to break out. Still more, they did not want to know what was happening when plague first came to them, to their ordinary city just going about its business. When the first few rats appeared, dead and dying from infection by plague bacillus-carrying fleas, in the streets, in their lodgings, by the docks, the people who found them were curious, but not bothered. *Something odd is going on*, those who encountered the bloated bodies said to each other, and then they went on with their day. They threw the dead rats away so as not to have to look at them, and when the rat bodies, increasing daily in number, kept piling up, they agitated for better pickup services and fussed as usual about municipal government. And then people started dying. Like the rats, there were just a few at the beginning, and little social or official note was taken despite the terrible suffering of each individual.

The first person Dr. Rieux tries fruitlessly to keep from dying is his landlord, who, from the time of the first rat found dead on Rieux's landing, has insisted there are no rats in his building. They must be being put there, he announces, by wicked boys playing nasty tricks. The town officials, told by Dr. Rieux and another, even blunter, doctor that strict and immediate measures must be taken, quibble defensively about whether it really is plague or perhaps something else. Dr. Rieux tells them it does not matter. If they do not act, at least half the population will die. Avoiding the word "plague," the officials finally post signs in out-of-the-way places suggesting halfhearted measures. As always, they do not want the public upset, nor to concern their superiors. Meanwhile, every day more people are suffering and dying.

Dr. Rieux barely lingers on the failures of the citizens to do more than fuss at the inconvenience of it all, of the town officers' choice not to advertise the troubles by taking preventive measures. None of this was surprising. Camus' characters live in an ordinary town in what, before the extraordinary outbreak of the plague, were persistently ordinary times.

They had come to concern themselves mostly with a quest for comfort, and modestly, as he says, "cultivating habits"[3]—visiting in the same cafes after work, strolling the same avenues in the cool of the early night, drinking the same amount too much, loving moderately, indulging in illicit flirtations without fuss or bother—rather than anything as dramatic as virtues or vices. Mostly, the respectable citizens gave their attention to working hard to make more money.

ON BEING UNPREPARED

Their lives, their conventional realities, meant they were not prepared to recognize that a few rats dying oddly in public called for an immediate reaction rather than avoidance, nor were they prepared to choose whether or not to take the mortal risks of caring for the ill, collecting and burying the dead, honoring or trying to flee in defiance of the quarantine that was belatedly imposed on them. Variously, they try radically isolating themselves in hope of escaping contamination; seeking oblivion through drink or anything else possible; muddling on as if nothing has changed. And even as death stalks the streets, people look for ways to profit from the situation.

A mysterious man who seems to have no work but lives discretely among them welcomes the quarantine. We learn finally that he is being pursued by authorities who think him guilty of a "mistake," he says; for him, there is relief and safety in having everyone around him also living as if under an indictment. He welcomes the company. Other people, those who had been living for something other than pleasantly fulfilling success or the warmth of fitting in properly with others, are also caught in the epidemic. A journalist, trapped in Oran by the quarantine and so separated from a newly found great love who lives in Paris, tries at first to escape: he puts happiness over any sense of obligation to others. Dr. Rieux, who knows that we are all always and already vulnerable to such loss, does not condemn him. An admired priest, Father Paneloux, first preaches to his flock that the plague is God's wrath at their failures, a winnowing of the good from the wicked. Even later, when he has watched children die, and friends, the good priest cannot find a differing way to read what is happening without threatening his bedrock faith. He does help remove the bodies with the others who risk their lives to do so, but when plague comes to him, he will not let the doctor even try to fight it. Like the doctor, his life was pledged to saving people, but unlike the doctor, he could not accept defeats, deaths he could not justify. Tarrou, another character who once wanted to save people (in his case, from economic injustices), fights the

plague without hope of meaning but still believing that with enough study, the human condition can be, if never justified, comprehended. He, too, dies, but thoughtfully, and without complaint, accepting what his friends try to do for him.

In all the choices, from joining the dangerous body-removal squad, to preaching that the plague is God's flail winnowing the good from the bad, to profiteering or determinedly trying to leave a quarantined city in a defiant quest for personal happiness, Camus presents his characters making choices that issue from their own most familiar ways of being in the world. The plague exaggerates them by its horrors; what is exaggerated, however, was already there.

EXTRAORDINARY

But death by plague, by mass terror, by perverted policy on a scale beyond grandiosity: these are extraordinary events. The mind quails. They are precisely not ordinary. Right? They cry out for antihero perpetrators big enough to match the consequences of horrific deeds, and heroic warriors even bigger to meet and beat such a demonic enemy. It seems so, but Camus refuses to give us antiheroes, monsters, or saints: death by plague is monstrous but its causes are not, nor is the choice to fight it heroic in any romantic sense. It is, the doctor knows, simply what must be done when the plague bacillus does what it does, no more, no less, as do the rats that carry it into the streets. Fighting the plague when it has settled in, affecting every aspect and moment of all lives, is anything but romantic: it is simply the only way to avoid colluding with it.

Camus reminds us of Oran, the town on the coast of Algeria, that it is above all ordinary and cannot be romanticized. It is "ugly. It has a smug, placid air and you need time to discover what it is that makes it different from so many business centers in other parts of the world."[4] Physically, its streets and squares are built so that it turns its back on the sea, the great, pulsating, changing expanse that could give it vistas, character, connections with other lands, other lives than the "doing business" that is its citizens' "chief aim in life."[5] These citizens in this ordinary town are not obvious candidates for the plague, which is so clearly extraordinary: the citizens of Camus' Oran are proud that their merely pleasant lives are so persuasive that "social unrest is quite unknown" among them.[6] How could mere habits, business as usual, minor cultivated pleasures that simply refresh enough to return to one's job prepare people to deal with plague, let alone suggest that they might be vulnerable to colluding with it?

ATTENDING TO THE SMALLEST THINGS

Camus' tale suggests that it is not the dramatic vices that threaten us with extensive evil, nor is it dramatic faith, such as that of his novel's priest, nor quests for justice, such as that of Tarrou, the doctor's friend and former believer in economic salvation, that protect us from it.

> *It is the small virtues and vices that neither religion nor education pay much attention to, those that blink on and off without our noticing anymore as we move through our days, that can make all the difference when systems start changing.*

It is a remarkable thing Camus has done, this resistance fighter, philosopher, novelist, journalist. He has invited us to reflect on how our daily, most ordinary, ways of thinking of ourselves and of acting are more or less already implicated with the most extraordinary harms we can imagine. We might then think: The capacity of the ordinary, the daily, to turn first banal and then deadly needs to be fully attended to, so perhaps, when the first infected rat next comes out to die in the street, we will be ready and this time, perhaps, we will act on time.

A moralist for a modern world in which we know, now, how entirely discrepant causes and conditions can be to their effects—an inherited condition that can lead to great suffering; millions of people enjoying modest comforts contributing to climate change; ambitious financiers finding new ways to profit but crashing global economies—Camus tried to tell us instead to pay attention, close attention, now, here, to the smallest of dangers, the first rat dead in the street of a bacillus we cannot see at all and that cares not one whit about us. He also told us to attend to friendship, to the small pleasures, to the eccentricities that keep us living against the grain: Dr. Rieux and Tarrou, the man who sets up brigades to clear the dead bodies when the authorities fail to do so and becomes an ally and a friend of the doctor, take long swims under the moon at night in the ocean on which Oran turns its back. Tarrou writes in his diary stories of quirky neighbors who manage to remain who they are throughout the plague; he has learned to admire quirkiness, to be leery of convention as of certainties.

Camus also quietly explores the simple reasons there are for doing good things. Joseph Grand, a clerk who, having failed through the years to assert himself enough to ask his superior for a long-promised, never implemented raise, barely supports himself but happily works every evening on improving his knowledge and use of language. He is writing a novel; it is this he lives for. He cannot get past the first sentence, but his dedication to getting language right keeps him going. It is a great quest for him, and he gives himself

to it entirely. Each word matters. Grand says, when asked if he will help remove bodies that could still carry the infection, "Why, that's not difficult! Plague is here and we've got to make a stand. Ah, I only wish everything were as simple!"[7]

Despair for Camus in a world that has had plagues and remains subject to them is not absolute, then. There are people who can recognize and fight the plague, and there are survivors, but Camus came to believe that any lessons hopefully gleaned from these few must remain informed by realizations similar to Arendt's: that we are not in control even as we must act; that love must be "the love of persons," not abstractions such as "any people or collective"[8]; and that finally nothing, nothing whatsoever—no ideology, faith, or science; no conventionality, greed, or ambition; no fear, or obedience—justifies collaborating with death, with suffering.

Chapter Two

Thinking about Not-Thinking

> Our darkest feelings do not mind being trusted out of hand. Though immediacy is the true reality, the presence of our soul and our feelings are not simply there like given facts of life. Rather, they are communicated by our inner activities, our thoughts, our knowledge. They are deepened and clarified in the measure that we think. Feeling as such is unreliable. To plead feelings means to evade naively the objectivity of what we can know and think.[1]

I have started with a philosopher, Hannah Arendt, and a philosopher–resistance fighter-novelist, Albert Camus. We have help in trying to comprehend also from others. For some years now, social scientists, especially historians and social psychologists—notably among them, Raul Hilberg, Christopher Browning, Claudia Koonz, Daniel Jonah Goldhagen, Stanley Milgram, Philip Zimbardo, James Waller, Robert Jay Lifton—have been trying to teach us to think of the evils of massive purposeful harm as something we can study not only secularly but empirically. James Waller, for example, cites cross-cultural evidence of purposeful preparations for "genocide and mass killing" by engineering the prior "social death of the victims" through "us-them thinking," "dehumanization of the victims," and "blaming the victims."[2] Preparation is among my concerns as well, albeit not from the slant of social psychology, useful as that is. Journalists, committed to facts and informed interpretation more than proof, have joined in (e.g., Samantha Power's *"A Problem from Hell": America and the Age of Genocide*, and Chris Hedges, the author of *War is a Force that Gives Life Meaning*).

Scholars of the humanities have also recognized as well as contributed to a heightened receptivity to such concerns (notably, Susan Neiman on evil; Martha Nussbaum on goodness), turning as always to philosophy, theology, literature in a quest to discern meaning from events, facts, conceptual framings.

These are excellent studies, offering a rich array of ways to try to comprehend historical phenomena that are often called "unthinkable." My inquiry would have been utterly impossible without such works, and, of course, it differs from them. I focus on the close-in *thinking* and the tragically more common *thoughtlessness*—the failure to be attentive to and reflective about what we are doing—that keeps us from seeing through the categories, labels, conventionalities that can be mobilized in ways that Waller, among others, has aptly described. I see that we can speak of what mass killers do as, for instance, enabled by "dehumanizing" people, and then I have to ask, *How is it* that we can go from seeing someone as a neighbor, as many of the Hutus and Tutsis, the non-Jewish and Jewish Germans were, through various stages of "social distancing" until finally (and sometimes in remarkably short order) we can see—and kill—real people, many of them but each also singular? Without repeatedly asking, *What were they thinking?* I fear that emphasis on what is now commonly called *Othering* in its differing modes is a description rather than an analysis.

People do that: they turn people into "others" and then they can kill them. Yes, but how do they do it, how do they keep doing it, and do they all really always see each individual they kill as, for example, a vermin, a cockroach (a term used in Rwanda as in Germany)? That is actually quite a difficult feat. It is aided by taking away victims' dignity, stripping the fragile significations of personhood from them—clothes, upright posture, ability to look us in the eye, to speak and be heard. And still, the indignities themselves must be done by someone to people not yet so humiliated; once done, they must not move individual perpetrators to sympathy, to empathy, rather than scorn and distance. Seeing other humans like that must not awaken conscience, shame. The deadly distancing must be learned, embraced, integrated, and practiced to be effective, and, during the months, years, of truly extensive evils, it must also coexist with an ability to return after work to familiar relationships with other human beings.

Those who have to get the work of massive harm done know very well just how difficult that balance is. The Nazi leader Heinrich Himmler "ordered that when executions were carried out in concentration camps, those responsible 'are to be influenced in such a way as to suffer no ill effect in their character and mental attitudes.'" Later, Himmler was proud to observe "that the S.S. had wiped out the Jews 'without our leaders and their men suffering any damage in their minds and souls. The danger was considerable, for there was only a narrow path between the Scylla of their becoming heartless ruffians unable any longer to treasure life, and the Charybdis of their becoming soft and suffering nervous breakdowns.'"[3]

Not an easy balance, that, but required if you are to have capable people doing horrific things over time. There are reports of high-ranking Nazis being sickened, throwing up, when they saw what their orders were making

happen to people they were nonetheless used to thinking and speaking of as "parasites," "degenerates," threats to the Master Race the Nazis planned to breed from "pure," "uncontaminated stock." All that dehumanization did not shockproof even Franz Stangl, soon to be Commandant of Treblinka, the largest extermination camp.[4] Stangl told an interviewer about his first visit to Chelmno, an extermination camp already in operation:

> "I can't describe to you what it was like," Stangl said; he spoke slowly now, in his more formal German, his face strained and grim. He passed his hand over his eyes and rubbed his forehead " . . . It was a one-story building. The smell . . . " he said, "Oh God, the smell. It was everywhere. Wirth [The officer in charge] wasn't in his office. I remember, they took me to him . . . he was standing on a hill, next to the pits . . . the pits . . . full . . . they were full. I can't tell you; not hundreds, thousands, thousands of corpses . . . oh God. That's when Wirth told me—he said that was what Sobibor was for. And that he was putting me officially in charge."[5]

Stangl was there because he was being made supervisor of construction at Sobibor.

And after that profound shock, what did Franz Stangl do? "The same thing; I continued the construction of the camp. . . . At Sobibor, one could avoid seeing almost all of it—it all happened so far away from the camp-buildings."[6] His prior conditioning did not prepare him; he was indeed horrified, and said he wanted to work anyplace else, to leave. He did not. He continued his work, pursued his career "upwards," to become Commandant of Treblinka, the largest of the extermination camps.

There is more to uncover here. Remember the opening quote of the Introduction to this book? A Hutu *genocidaire*, a killer of Tutsis in the three-month Rwandan genocide, said of one of his victims, "Me, I knew this old man by name, but I had heard nothing unpleasant about him. That evening I told my wife everything. She knew only routine details about him, we did not discuss it, and I went to sleep." Neither the man nor his wife saw a cockroach, an Other, a threat; they knew this man, "had heard nothing unpleasant about him," "knew only routine details about him." And still the killing job went on without disruption by the kind of thinking we call "conscience," the kind that awakens when we become aware of what we are doing—when indeed we stop and think, *What am I doing?* Or, far better, *I can't do* that.

THINKING, MORALITY

I want particularly to note, then, that since the late 1960s we have also had Hannah Arendt's initially scandalizing, now widely accepted (if almost always misunderstood) concept and phrase, *the banality of evil.* She thought


image
not
available

Nazis and "normal" when systems have not been taken so horrifically wrong were rarely heard. Few others had consciously been trying for decades *not* to see the Nazis as larger than life. There was the hold of that powerful, familiar concept, *radical evil.* There was the sheer horror that feels radical in the base meaning of the term: it shakes us to our roots. And, not at all insignificantly, the Nazis were masters of pageantry and costume and propaganda, all used to make them appear to be more than human, a Master Race.

In South Africa, de Kock, you recall, was also widely seen as both sub- and super-human—as "Prime Evil." We could easily proliferate examples of monstrous harm-doers depicted as themselves monstrous, super-sized, from headlines in the media to popular horror movies, electronic games, "comics." No one—not the terrorists who want us paralyzed by fear; not the apologists or analysts who try to make sense of something that does shatter categories; not those who must live afterwards with such acts irretrievably in our histories; not observers near or far—finds it easy to speak of evil as continuous in any way at all with everyday life. Even Camus gives us germs and rats as the carriers of infection. However common they are, they are not human.

STOPPING MINDS

What Arendt was saying almost literally could not be heard as she meant it. This is entirely understandable: in the face of horrors, most of us need whatever help we can find not to be utterly silenced, reduced to wordless weeping, to screaming silently if not screaming out loud. Listen to the painful, heart-wrenching words of community members when a school shooter has killed their children, and to the ways deeply moved, well-meaning reporters try to tell the rest of us what has happened. Almost everyone uses the most familiar of phrases to help them speak of what they cannot take into their minds lest their broken hearts finally shatter. A parent, after requesting anonymity, told a reporter checking in two years after a school shooting:

> "Well, back-to-school was bittersweet. . . . I watched my youngest board the bus. Watched his little face in the window. . . ." His voice trailed off into a whispery human ellipse like the 26 innocent lives that were left suddenly unfinished that awful day when the monster marched into Sandy Hook Elementary School with the loaded Bushmaster AR-15 semi-automatic rifle. . . . "We're not a story; we're a town. With families trying to put the . . . trying to put the bad day in the rear view mirror. Looking ahead."[14]

Arendt reflected[15] that it takes at least ten years for writing to begin to deal with disasters with the unflinching, direct clarity that allows for fresh

language and images, and still there are few with the art, the heart, the courage to do so. Even writers, I thought then; so much more the rest of us. Arendt, who rarely used concepts or language of the sort thankfully available to the Newtown parent and the respectful reporter when words yet again failed, was misheard by virtually everyone. She spoke the wrong language, and has since, through the years, been sharply criticized for that, and for the irony she did invoke faced with category-breaking discrepancies: "For all this [Eichmann's trial], it was essential that one take him seriously, and this was very hard to do, unless one sought the easiest way out of the dilemma between the unspeakable horror of the deeds, and the undeniable ludicrousness of the man who perpetrated them, and declared him a clever, calculating liar—which he obviously was not."[16]

Despite all those real emotional and conceptual difficulties, *the banality of evil* is an illuminating concept and, over time, it has ceased being as painful, insulting, infuriating to as many people as it was before. In fact now, when an outrageously harmful event erupts yet again, one can hardly pick up a newspaper or listen to National Public Radio without encountering a reference to Arendt and "the banality of evil." So, in the middle of the thundering oratory by political and religious leaders about evil to which, I am sorry to say, we were returned in the last years of the twentieth century and the first years of the twenty-first—in politics, for example, Reagan's "Evil Empire," George W. Bush's "Axis of Evil"—there remains available that quieter call to think close-in, to refuse romanticism from any side that gives us monsters, devils and saints, and world-scale events to divert our attention from the actual ordinary world that is in our keeping for good and for ill every day.

TWO-FACED EVIL

What I hear when I tune in to secular talk and writing about evil these days is a view of evil as Janus-faced. One face, vividly painted and waved before us by people who want us terrorized—including terrorists (consider ISIS, under whatever name) as well as those who want us mobilized against them—is effectively a Medusa's head, snakes coiling in place of hair, paralyzing any who gaze on it. The actual face that is used thus to terrorize us varies, of course: it depends on whom we are supposed to demonize as The Enemy. In stark contrast, the other face of evil resembles what is taken to be Arendt's portrait of Adolf Eichmann: an Everyman Bureaucrat, a pale office-dwelling worker, a problem-solving engineer in a suit, as at his trial, needing protection by a glass booth from the passionate hatred of others.

Arendt's phrase, coined to capture her realization that what was startlingly *unusual* about Eichmann was "a perhaps extraordinary shallowness," "not

stupidity but a curious, quite authentic inability to think"[17] has lost its original meaning, the challenge it poses. Rarely does it lead to Arendt's own question: "Is our ability to judge, to tell right from wrong, beautiful from ugly, dependent upon our faculty of thought? Do the inability to think and a disastrous failure of what we commonly call conscience coincide?"[18] This, I need to note now although we will return to it later, is a philosophical question. Arendt is not asking if "We are all Eichmanns."

However, the ordinary "petty bureaucrat" face of evil is now generalized and variously infused with images of ordinary people doing terrible things akin to those we have heard about in widely read social science studies such as those I mentioned earlier, most notably Stanley Milgram's and Philip Zimbardo's. The former is often referred to as "Milgram's 'Eichmann' study"; the latter, as "the Stanford prison experiment." Both experiments have entered mainstream consciousness as demonstrating that perfectly ordinary people become willing and able to do thoroughly nasty things to other people when in an authoritarian situation—as when an eminent university professor tells you to administer what is staged to appear a very painful shock to another person as part of an experiment; or you are enacting the role of a prison guard, or supervisor, as in Milgram and Zimbardo's studies, respectively. These researchers' groundbreaking works are more complex than that: I am here working with popular understandings, with the "takeaway" phrases that have clustered with "the banality of evil," after being reduced to *obedience to authority* and variants that are to account for our propensity to take on and fully play out whatever social role we are given, including harming other people when authority tells, or a system allows, us to.

Blurred together with such likewise crucial and now common notions, I fear that *the banality of evil* is itself becoming a banality, a cliché, in ways that gut the force of all these realizations. Mainstream press and commentators on the news use these phrases almost glibly, albeit in stentorian tones. The more thoughtful make it evident that they know any such conceptual labels need to be explained, but their explanations tend to be perfunctory. In general, what they tell us is close to what I said just now: that "the banality of evil" means that "ordinary people," and not just Grand Villains, are capable of doing excessive harm.

That is not wrong, but by itself it is utterly inadequate if taken to be an answer we can just add to our stock with no examination of what it does if taken seriously. What, for instance, might "ordinary life" mean if we take that statement seriously? It blends with the common knowledge we have mentioned before, that people are mixtures of good and bad, leaving out of account how very much harder it is to understand how an ordinary human being can also do things that are *Prime Evil.* It also slides toward a notion

that *collective responsibility* can be used to reduce individual responsibility unto the vanishing point. *Well, we're all capable of it. . . .* The corollary is not stated but there it is*: so this person, this act . . . well, nothing so special. Could have been you or me.* And then? *Forgive and forget, as I would want others to do for me. . . ?*

As popularly understood, collective responsibility and collective guilt together create an appealing position that acknowledges guilt, but keeps it from turning us inward and isolating us, leaving us alone with our own consciences and responsibility. It gives us company (as the plague did for Camus' character who welcomed it because it meant he was no longer the only one under indictment), and that is a fine way to avoid those dark nights of the soul in which we take account of our lives. So, many people today may rather easily shrug and say, *Yes, "the banality of evil." That racist group: well, we're not exempt, any of us.* That feels good because it doesn't "demonize," and it does recognize and rather nobly, if without any consequences whosoever, seem to share responsibility, to clarify that we know we are not perfect either (as if that were at issue).

But move in close, and we cannot sustain that. Step outside the already clichéd "We're all capable" in order to think afresh. Try this—find out that your loving uncle spent thirty years torturing and killing squirrels in his basement to rid the world of this vermin, and you will not just say, *Ah, yes: we are all capable of that.* With our minds stopped before even more extreme horror, however, we do sometimes use undifferentiated categorical terms. I assure you, though, that, *We are all alike, all "little Eichmanns,"* is not what Hannah Arendt meant. She was struck by how extreme was his thoughtlessness, his enclosure within conventions, clichés, system languages. This kind of avoidance of demonizing Nazis, other virulent racists, exploiters of desperate workers, can be as useless in helping us understand and act effectively as imagining them to be radically different from the rest of humanity in their unmatched monstrousness. It is not an either/or judgment, monster or nonentity, that we need. We are called to think more carefully than that.

ADOLF EICHMANN, SADDAM HUSSEIN

The headline of the veteran reporter John F. Burns' report on Saddam Hussein's trial in Baghdad was "Judgment Days: From Banality to Audacity." I will quote from the piece at length; it has several strands of interest for us here. Burns wrote:

> During Saddam Hussein's remorseless harangues from the dock last week, one spectator sitting in the glassed-off viewing galleries found his mind moving

> back more than 40 years, to a court in another Middle Eastern country where a man accused of mass murder stood on trial for his life.
>
> The man was Adolf Eichmann, and the venue of the court was Jerusalem. His was a trial memorialized by Hannah Arendt's famous phrase, in *The New Yorker*, about the banality of evil—Eichmann was an almost pitiable figure, a man so ordinary when stripped of the trappings of fear and power, who in fact saw himself as so ordinary, that he seemed quite out of proportion to the slaughter of millions in which he had been among the most lethal practitioners.
>
> In Baghdad, Mr. Hussein has been monstrous in his lack of pity for sobbing witnesses and their tales of torture, rape and execution in the gulag fashioned to sustain his power. Day after day, until he refused to attend at all, he commanded the court to attend to the outrages committed against himself—as a captive of the American "occupiers" and as a man who for 30 years had been "your leader," as he admonished the chief prosecutor, and synonymous with Iraq.
>
> But pitiable he has not been. Tragic, perhaps, in the sense of a man incapable of the repentance that might lend him at least a glimmer of humanity in this, the extreme passage of his life; wildly deluded, too, in his insistence that he is Iraq's legitimate ruler. . . .
>
> But of a reduction like Eichmann's, to a figure so commonplace, so insignificant, that he seemed inadequate to his grotesque place in history, there has been no sign.[19]

Even John Burns has misunderstood. The evil Arendt called "banal" after observing Eichmann's trial does not refer to the deportment or style of dress, nor to the self-perceptions of the person presenting himself through these as well as other enactments of self. That oddly theatrical reading of character suggests the old romanticized notion, the idea—perhaps actually the hope—that *those people* are so radically other than you and me that it must show, no matter how cleverly they try to hide it. Eichmann was not remotely, let alone "almost," "pitiable." Indeed, people rarely speak of "bureaucrats" or "bureaucracy" with anything but scorn unto contempt, even if they themselves work at an office, or in a cubicle, in a large organization. Would you pity a dry, tight, self-absorbed, bumblingly inarticulate, self-contradictory man whose bureaucratic skills and ambitions were key to what made the extremely difficult work of murdering millions of people possible? If he seemed inadequate to deeds as horrific as his actually were, that is not grounds for the kind of pity we feel for someone who has blundered into bad deeds, who somehow got in "over his head," or fell into "bad ways" after being badly treated herself. Eichmann was good at what he did, and ambitious, not reluctant.

An impulse to pity can express a need to understand something that we are still trying to comprehend, something that sends us in quest of concepts and

the fact that he, an underling unlike Saddam, tried to go along with superiors, rather than ordering everyone around, although he did that, too, when he was the more powerful one: it was all a matter of roles, hierarchy, whatever doing his job required, and allowed. And, in captivity still in Argentina, Eichmann responded to hearing about the fate of his guard's sister—the Nazis murdered her and her children—by falling abruptly silent, and then asking, pitifully, if Malkin was going to kill *him*.

Both, bizarre as it may seem, showed us during their trials that what caught, held, and dominated their attention was almost exclusively their own efforts to be treated rightly by the world, to get what was theirs, to be respected for the hard workers they actually were. Both got easily aggrieved on their own behalf. No, I do not mean that they were narcissists or any other diagnostic type, similar as they may seem. How many narcissists could do what either of these men did? Although one of the best studies I know, Elisabeth Young-Bruehl's *Anatomy of Prejudices*, shows a way to make use of psychoanalytic categories within historical, political situations that enable differing psychological pathologies in particular ways, I fear that diagnostic categories too readily serve as another way of avoiding attentiveness particularly when applied to historical individuals the analyst has never met, or interviewed, let alone analyzed. We diagnose, and that is that: done. Nothing more to comprehend politically, morally. *Torturers? They're all psychopaths.*

A CONTINUUM OF ATTENTIVENESS

Eichmann and Saddam could together be said to mark the extreme end of a continuum of attentiveness to the realities we can experience. At their end, there is obtuse, closed refusal to recognize as significant anything but what one has already categorized, encapsulated, settled with regard to oneself and demands it might make on one. On the other end, we take in—we sense, perceive, apprehend something, someone—with full consciousness. We reflect respectfully, remaining open to new encounters, to the uniqueness even of the familiar. Imagine being in the country, falling silent and coming, slowly, to hear sounds you have never paused to listen to. Imagine interviewing a person you have disliked for years but never before really listened to. Imagine hearing her, staying with what she says, trying to discern what she is wanting to mean. We may then find ourselves with new insight, shifting categories, reconfiguring interpretations that continue to unfold: thinking, and not merely sorting through possibly applicable categories. Reaching for fresh language, too, as poets may.

On the encapsulated end, we do not take in: rather, we put out onto the world what we have already decided, foreclosing any possibility of encountering uniqueness, whether of the familiar or, indeed, of the radically strange that ought to capture our attention. This end of the attentiveness continuum is too easy to imagine: we all have prejudices, prejudgments, that keep us from meeting the actual person who looks like a "kind" of person that, say, we believe to be more prone to violence, or stupider, or smarter than we are. But daily, most of us move back and forth along the continuum, differing in how characteristically attentive or inattentive we are. We also differ as the work we do rewards or punishes unoriginal thinking, or as the times in which we live do, in how far toward the extremes we go, and how persistently we stay there.

What was unusual about Eichmann was not that he (like Stangl, the Commandant of Treblinka as we earlier found, and the Hutu *genocidaire*) could sometimes be out of touch with the realities of what he did, but that he appeared before, during, and after his trial to be *unable* to relate to the world attentively, to think at all if "without a bannister." Arendt saw him as filtering through conventions and clichés to figure out what he was supposed to do when he was on trial for his life rather than sending other people to theirs. His captor, Peter Malkin, reports several quite astonishing examples: Eichmann keeping his eyes shut when they finally removed the blindfold used during the actual capture—until ordered to open them, which he then did immediately; Eichmann refusing to eat when offered food until, again, ordered and only then hungrily doing so; even, Eichmann awaiting permission, for which he did not ask, to relieve himself. I join my students here: this is *weird.* And it is of a piece with the man who went on arranging for the death of Jews even as the war had been lost and other Nazis were preparing to pretend no such thing had been done, or if it had, they were not responsible. Eichmann was an extremely reliable worker, quick to obey but, once sure of his job, seems to have been capable of doing it on his own. In the game of being a prisoner, that meant doing what you are told, and only that.

This is how conceptual banality works: like the kudzu plant, it spreads quickly over the surface until there appears to be an eerie quilt over landscapes once defined by their differing plant life, the contours of their ground. It is hard, then, for anything new or different to make its way through into the sunlight and air.

Arendt reported that, standing under the gallows on the day of his own execution, Eichmann delivered himself of edifying words appropriate for someone else's funeral. He needed conventions and clichés to know what to think, what to say; lacking any such things for a gallows speech, let alone his own, his mind produced eloquent words suited for death. Close enough for

him: he gave his speech without being startled back into attentiveness and thought even by his own imminent death. Arendt writes: "That such remoteness from reality and such thoughtlessness can wreak more havoc than all the evil instincts taken together, which, perhaps, are inherent in man—that was, in fact, the lesson one could learn in Jerusalem."

And then, to keep us thinking, she wrote, "But it was a lesson, neither an explanation of the phenomenon nor a theory about it."[22]

We are not, then, done with *the banality of evil.* We need now to focus on how daily clichés, conventions, and other ways of going on autopilot can actually do the not-so-easy task of disabling our minds, and so our consciences.

Chapter Three

Changing Minds

There is no one sort of banality; almost anything can become banal if we use it so often that it prefigures the world for us without our even noticing anymore. Not only clichés and conventions: insider jargon, technical terms, field-specific logics, and scientific, political, military, economic, psychological, religious, and other domain-defining categories can function as entrance requirements to our attention. Thus, Lakeesha becomes *an ADHD kid*; a Christian named Maria becomes *an infidel*; a friend who gets fired becomes *a loser*; a nation becomes *the enemy;* a whole generation becomes *millennials*; all unhappy families become *dysfunctional*; destroying communities in pursuit of more profit becomes *creative destruction*. There is so much we need not think about once we have used the right conventional or technical term, and there are so many people who will reward us with their attention if we use code words that show we too are insiders and ready to chat safely within the fences of our proudly shared expertise. None of this is unusual, and indeed it has its functions; that is why it is a ubiquitous human phenomenon.

In extreme instances, however, we know that we humans can shift our minds into making sense of and accepting things that, before we became insiders of utterly distorted systems, we would have found impossible to imagine ourselves approving of, let alone doing. Among other evidence, we know this by the sheer number of people involved in carrying out genocides, slavery, colonialism, exploitative labor practices, child pornography, sex trafficking, and other profoundly shocking harms. After the fact, if we survive and become able to look back on ourselves or on what others did, we might well say to those who were not there and are now judging those times and actions, *Well, but that's not how we thought of it. We were so obsessed by [whatever—perhaps, serving the Queen and her Empire; now, going global; growing the economy; joining the one percent; developing the latest big thing]*

even face to face, shooting people one by one. Those who sell children into service equivalent to slavery today? They see those children; sometimes they are their own. In "honor killings," men kill their own daughters, sisters.

I regret pressing this point, but I have found that if I do not, we avoid it by moving to abstract explanations too quickly. I understand that. How could I not? But our explanations have done nothing to lessen the outbreaks of the plagues of massive harm. Surely we have to keep trying.

We remain challenged to move in close enough to discern how peoples' minds are and are not working, making sense of and carefully interpreting as acceptable the egregious acts by which they ought to be utterly appalled as they prepare to do them—beforehand, but also anew each day. Aspects of our question unfold: How are vices turned into virtues, virtues into vices? How are realities turned into pale, wan things with no unavoidable claim to recognition? How can an adult personally and repeatedly, with breaks in between to go home, to see children, friends, neighbors, continue to slaughter children, seeing *Catholics, Protestants, Tutsis, Jews, Armenians, Gypsies, blacks, Muslims, Infidels, enemies, cockroaches* (categories, from the polite to the insulting), but also just plain people, including people the killer knows, people evidently like those the killer knows, people with whom eye contact can often be made, people the killer had many friendly beers with, people who are known *not* to be radically different, inferior, people who can speak, cry, bleed?

When I asked a Rwandan at an international conference on genocide how the Hutu knew who was a Tutsi and who was not, he said, *Oh, that wasn't hard. We were neighbors; we knew each other.* Mostly all were Catholic, too, and spoke the same language. There had been a lot of intermarriage. Despite deeply troubled relations at differing times, these were not people who had alienated themselves from each other to such an extent that they did not know their neighbors were real people, and individuals. Remember the earlier quote from the man who told his wife about the old man he had killed that day? The killer knew the man, had nothing against him, killed him, and told his wife, who also remembered the old man. They had dinner, and slept. He did not see that old man as some disgusting animal or someone he had learned to have something against, worthy of killing him. He just did it, did his job—as, he told his interviewer, did the South African Eugene de Kock, the one called "Prime Evil." As did Eichmann and Stangl—and thousands and thousands more.

Those who do the work of violating others even unto death are not entirely unprepared: there was a lead in, a transitional time, for many of them (as, importantly, we will also see when we turn to reflecting on the doing of great good: preparation, lead-in time, can be crucial there too). The man who was getting ready to murder his old friend, "Innocent," among many others, "preferred," in the time leading up to the genocide, "putting in hours at closed

meetings with influential people" (as we have heard). In a quite literal sense, he chose to resocialize himself in order to be, as he saw it, ready to be on the "winning side." Notice that, whether or not he had heard those with whom he aligned himself call people he knew "cockroaches," there is no evidence that he was on a personally motivated killing spree to rid the world of them. He had chosen sides, and he wanted his side to win since that is, indeed, why he chose to join it. Unfortunately, his old friend was on what he now, preemptively, thought of as the losing side. He was not thinking about what he was going to do in a direct, attentive way. He was thinking about those meetings and the powerful people he liked hanging around with, and he looked forward to being rewarded for his troubles.

In part III, we will look far more carefully at what can shift and how it occurs in times of transition from, let us say for now, friendship or neutrality to a deadly absence of mind. I have to mark as with a deep red dye a strand of the weave that has reemerged here, as it will throughout, though. The statement, which we have no reason to disbelieve or discredit experientially, that *It was my job, and I did it*, recurs hauntingly, along with some not uncommon corollaries, a taste for status, ambition, money. As I said, when times are changing, the usually small everyday vices and virtues can make all the difference. They do so for good as well as for ill: we will explore that too.

REVERSING

Faced with many such examples, I have discovered that there is a great deal to learn from my reversal of Arendt's concept as a way to go deeper into the on-the-ground meanings of *the banality of evil*. It holds before us *the lack of congruence between monstrous acts and the petty people who do them, between the horrors of plague and its cause, a mere bacillus.* And then, well before we get to the actual doing of evil when systems have gone bad, we encounter and have to face up to *the evil of banality* that makes so many of us vulnerable to being thus changed.

Here, too, we have to reflect on meanings. Neither of these phrases—*the banality of evil, the evil of banality*—at first seems quite right by our more common use of these words, as reactions to Arendt's concept keep making evident. There is nothing at all "banal" about what we want to mean by "evil," and it seems absurd to attribute "evil" to the "banal." The faith that there is a moral, epistemological, and ontological chasm between the dully ordinary and the monstrous extraordinary recurs here, as it does every step of the way. We cannot just change our minds about that once and be done with it. Arendt herself, as we have seen, struggled for decades to understand the insight that she shared with her teacher and friend, the philosopher Karl Jaspers. Ways

of thinking that I believe can turn out to function as a kind of excuse—key among which is the conviction that evil is by definition and always radical—persist because they do work for us.

In good enough times and places, unreflective assumptions, including those we make about the chasm between good and evil but hardly it alone, shield us from the tiring daily demands of realities on our attentiveness, and so from a felt need for moral reflection. In rotten times, unreflective assumptions shield us from the searing realities with which even silence makes us complicit—and right there, in such shielding in good as in rotten times, lies a germ of their complicity with the evildoing that requires many of us to happen at all.

We are all, if to varying degrees, practiced in avoiding awareness of things that might divert our attention from a task, irritate us, trouble us emotionally, challenge us morally. We practice allotting our attention daily. If we did not, we would find it hard to get through a day, to do our jobs, to focus on a friend, a child, learning a new computer skill, deciding whether to do this rather than that in response to a friend's need.

We are also therefore all too able to see in the first dead rat in the street nothing but a bother, an embarrassment to our establishment, another sign of the ineptitude of our municipal service providers. Even if the rat spewed blood from its mouth, staggered, died at our feet, and evidently ought to have caught our full attention, we can manage to keep walking and remember it later only as a bit of gossip to tell a friend over coffee so we can enjoy sharing a *frisson* of shock.

A German diarist, the linguist Klemperer mentioned earlier, attuned to observing even small shifts in meaning, wrote one day early in the rise of the Nazis, but *not* before there was evidence of their brutality: "On the way home from the theater, [I] noticed a colleague who was 'anything but a Nazi' wearing a discreet swastika lapel pin. Why? I asked. 'Well! Why not? I'm no risk-taker.'"[3]

When the majority of basically decent people do not refuse to go along with the early small changes by means of which regimes, social orders, cultures, economic systems, historical eras, religions take over definitional power of "good," of "decent," of "ordinary," a very dangerous slide has already begun. There is no awareness, no judgment—or, awareness is only as processed through no longer apt categories, and thus no effective judgment. As in Camus' tale of a city struck by the plague, most of us, forced finally to see what is happening, then call on the kinds of judgment we have learned to depend on—as Camus' character, Father Paneloux, judges the plague to be the act of a just God winnowing the good from the bad among his flock.

Thinking about *thoughtlessness;* the *out of touch* end of the thinking continuum; the role of clichés, conventions, insider concepts, prejudgment

categories; people accepting early, lead-in system changes; deflected awareness—these together suggest a relation of *banality* and *evil* at *all* times.

This—the implication of what seem very small things with the worst of all—brings us to the very heart of the matter.

THE HEART OF THE MATTER

Having dramatically said that, I have to observe that in the dominant tradition of the West, we want the "heart of the matter" to be almost anything other than thinking or its opposite, thoughtlessness. Pale and wan, thinking, is it not? Really not the sort of thing that could possibly enable good, strengthen us to go against the grain of a difficult world, let alone in its absence as thoughtlessness actually enable evil. We need to change hearts, not minds, not thinking, to make people really care for each other, the environment, justice, peace, do we not? Perhaps I have gone off on the wrong track.

I am often asked, *Why do you not speak of love? Isn't that what really matters?*

I do invoke love and its failures sometimes, but not, in any case, without a whole lot of attention to thinking. Thinking is how we make sense of what is happening, what is before our eyes, in our memories, in our hearts and bodies. It is the activity of consciousness, of awareness, and we cannot develop consciences that attune us well to the world and others if we are unaware of—inattentive to—our thinking. Nor, when we become aware, can conscience develop further to become illuminating (if never a certain guide) without reflexivity and reflection, without our being thoughtful even about our own thinking.

Love and care can go as wrong as reason when we are not thinking, being attentive, reflecting. We are as responsible for thinking about our feelings as about anything else. "I loved . . ."; "I hated . . ."; "I desired . . ."; "I feared . . .": these are every bit as complex, or superficial; clichéd, or profound; apt, or wildly inappropriate as any other report from our consciousness we might make. Feelings too can be the result of inattentiveness; unthought-through, they too can be banal—and deadly. Both Eichmann and Stangl spoke to their interviewers about their lack of hatred for Jews, of their respect and fondness for some people who were Jewish. Stangl, out of touch as he was, even got his feelings hurt when a young Jewish man he thought was a "nice boy" when he knew him as a forced worker held in Treblinka later testified against him. These Nazi murderers seem to have thought their lack of personal hatred for their victims mattered, and that people needed to understand that about them.

I would suggest that having felt respect, friendship, fondness for people who were Jewish when that was a death sentence they themselves were carrying out helped them do their job with a clearer conscience and contributed to protecting them from the overwhelming guilt, and the shame, they so strikingly did not feel afterwards. They felt themselves to be good people. They had not descended into ugly, crass hatred of their victims; they make a point of telling us about the crude men they encountered who *did* hate, marking themselves as superior. Morally superior. Because they continued to have the feelings of decent folks while they did horrific harm. No, I do not think feelings, including love, are a more reliable prod to moral reflection and action than attentive, reflective, free thinking.

THOUGHT EXPERIMENTS

What were they thinking, those white medical establishment people, when black men, never told what was going on, were used as research subjects infected with a deadly virus? (I am making a thought experiment but yes, there is history here: the Tuskegee syphilis experiment.) What were they thinking when each of those individual men who had been turned into experimental subjects without knowing it was met by other individuals carrying out the work of the study? When food went from that real hand to that other, known person's hand every day, with exchanges of pleasantries, what was the one who was fed, the one who knew, thinking? When researchers came to know each other, laughed together, kept public silence about key provisions of their research through the years that the research stretched on, what were they thinking, each of them, all of them, those who funded them, those who read their reports, those who actually knew, and those who suspected?

What were we thinking when we felt exultant and cheered on hearing reports of deaths, of massive destruction to a densely inhabited city halfway across the world (consider "shock and awe," and Baghdad), in the same way we cheer ourselves on in video games when we zap The Enemy? If we had been thinking of—not about, but *of, with*—what was actually happening, actually being done, really being experienced by individuals, how many of us would still have cheered, whether we approved of the war or not?

What were we thinking when they worked on an explosive device capable of obliterating huge numbers of individual human beings, each and all unique and irreplaceable? Many people have worked on those atomic and then nuclear bombs, from eminent scientists to those who fed the workers at the research facilities, and their families. Many people in the surrounding communities, public officials, congresspeople who funded them knew. *How did they all manage thoughts about what it would actually do to people*

Chapter Four

Escaping Explanations, Excuses

There is a catch-22 right at the heart of what we are doing through this inquiry that I do have to pause to recognize. I have found that when I speak about genocides and other "unthinkable" human-perpetrated horrors, there are a familiar few, user-friendly conceptual categorizations I hear people muttering to themselves or dropping into a comment or question addressed to me after my talk. Some but not all come from the key thinkers in this area I have already mentioned. Unfortunately, even those important categories can be turned into clichés that stop, rather than activate, our minds. The concepts and phrases I use, too, the ones that both capture what I have found and can be used to illuminate other situations as categories can—especially *the evil of banality, the continuum of attentiveness, thinking, mindlessness, thoughtlessness, out of touch*; and those not yet introduced, *being on time* and, notably, *extensive evil, intensive evil* and *extensive good, intensive good*— are not exempt from being used for precisely the opposite function than that for which they are intended. We are capable of turning anything into a cliché, jargon, a banality. Since we cannot do without categories, it is crucial that we remember that their use is for thinking, no more, no less. This is one of the reasons one can be very knowledgeable and still thoughtless: categories are achievements and building blocks for knowledge. *Ah, yes: that is a microaggression.* Done; we know what it is. But at first that was a fresh term that made us think about and not just with it, and such categorizations can always be questioned, refreshed again, if the knowledgeable do not enclose their turf. To be both knowledgeable and in touch with our messy, changing worlds, the point is precisely not to settle and contain thinking by invoking familiar categories but, on the contrary, to startle us back into thought, to inform and renew thinking.

When we are actually thinking, we will not fall back into concepts that can block us from apprehending reality, from being open to experiences, because thinking, as Hannah Arendt puts it, *unfreezes concepts*—even those we have discovered, or created, ourselves. After citing the philosopher Immanuel Kant's observation that "our mind has a natural aversion" to accepting even its own conclusions as settled once and for all, Arendt says:

> From which it follows that the business of thinking is like Penelope's web; it undoes every morning what it has finished the night before. For the need to think can never be stilled by allegedly definite insights of "wise men"; it can be satisfied only through thinking, and the thoughts I had yesterday will satisfy this need today only to the extent that I want and am able to think them anew.[1]

Please excuse me, then, if I seem to repeat myself: I am not assuming you did not understand the first time. I am turning concepts this way and that, revisiting them, unfreezing them, so as to keep thinking with, about, through them. In quest of, and to keep practicing, fresh thinking, I am trying to avoid just adding another couple of conceptual pens to our mental holding areas.

CATCH-ALL PHRASES

Here are several of the ways I have found people responding to, *How could they?* None are wrong; they have their significant uses. As always, the issue is whether we use them to stop thinking or to further and keep it going.

Compartmentalization is common among these explanations: *Ah, yes. You are talking about* compartmentalizing. *We all do that, put what we are doing over here, in this box, as if it has nothing to do with anything else. That's how we avoid guilt.* Quite right, but when we have said, *Ah, that's compartmentalizing*, we have not yet done anything more than capture a flock of meanings in an already-labeled pen. We may not have thought much as we did so, nor continued thinking carefully afterwards. It is an irony approaching a catch-22—but also the moral conceptual heart of the matter—that the very effort we make to understand can protect us from doing so, as we have noted in today's misuse and overuse of "the banality of evil" that threatens to reduce even that startling concept to a banality.

On occasion, someone recurs to a very different sort of prepackaged category such as ***original sin***. More often than to religion, though, at least in comments made out loud in the secular settings in which I am more likely to be talking about these matters, people turn to the sciences that may stand in

for religions as authorities on human nature for a lot of people today. ***Genetics*** are invoked, for example, sometimes as used by evolutionary psychologists. In neither case, "original sin" or "genetics," am I sure what the speaker means, and I fear that when I ask, I have most often encountered a retreat to the authority of religion or science rather than efforts to understand. For example, I hear that so-frequent phrase, "studies show," with no further information concerning *which* studies, by *whom, when*, *under what conditions*, let alone information that might give us a chance to evaluate the pertinence, soundness, scope of their findings. I will risk saying that "studies show" is thus akin to multiple variants of, "The minister/the sacred book says." Authority has spoken; we can stop thinking.

It's original sin, or, *It's genetics, et al* may satisfy our desire for something not only authoritative but neatly causal, insofar as both are understood as naming something that unavoidably and significantly shapes who we become, what we do. These satisfactions are also problematic, though. Without some knowledgeable theological or scientific discussion, what we are left with is another excuse available to anyone, anywhere, no matter what: *They did it because humans are weak and sinful creatures; they did it because they were genetically programmed, because we are hard-wired to*—say, *fear The Other.* We have then in one leap sailed right over the whole realm of human mind, choice, responsibility, not to mention the universe of our differences.

More commonly, though, I hear, ***They were just following orders***, which carries with it as a given, ***because they had to, were afraid, would have been killed had they not***, all of which is to say**,** ***They did it because they had to.*** This one also worries me because it so evidently denies choice and so also responsibility. In truth, although someone can threaten me with death if I do not murder my child, they have tempted rather than forced me to do something very wrong. I may not be required by ethics, law, or my society to do so, but I *could* choose to refuse.[2] Furthermore, it is not even factually the case that everyone—or even many—of those who did the work genocide requires for the Nazis, or the Hutu in Rwanda, or anywhere else, or those who are slave drivers, or factory bosses in sweat shops, or soldiers raping and plundering, actually were under threat of death, or torture, or even, I have to say, consequential disapproval. You could not get a genocide or any of those other massive harms done if you had to provide guards with guns to force the perpetrators to do their work every day, every time. I am afraid it turns out that people will do that work for far more mundane reasons.

I hasten to add that I do not equate even evidently thoughtless uses of *the banality of evil*, *obedience to authority, compartmentalization* with *they did it because they had to.* It is, however, among the most common explanations I am offered, not for those at the top giving orders, of course, but for underlings with whom more of us are more likely to feel uneasily implicated.

In *Ordinary Men: Reserve Police Battalion 101 and The Final Solution in Poland*, Christopher Browning gives us access to the testimony of a policeman ordered, with his battalion, to murder Jews—not abstractly, not one of these days, not from a distance, but immediately, face to face. Without ambiguity, the policeman says:

> It was in no way the case that those who did not want to or could not carry out the shooting of human beings with their own hands could not keep themselves out of this task. No strict control was being carried out here. I therefore remained by the arriving trucks and kept myself busy at the arrival point. In any case I gave my activity such an appearance. It could not be avoided that one or another of my comrades noticed that I was not going to the executions to fire away at the victims. They showered me with remarks such as "shithead" and "weakling" to express their disgust. But I suffered no consequences for my actions. I must mention here that I was not the only one who kept himself out of participating in the executions.[3]

You see? We cannot trot out our usual generalizations to explain how they could have done it. Some actively resisted; some did not do it; some found ways to do less of it; some did it for a while and then became unable to continue; some just went on doing it, one way or another; and a few enjoyed it (and were on occasion therefore stopped from continuing: unreliable, that sort). We must not overlook the lack of coercion to murder, to exploit, to rape: there is by no means always certain, unavoidable punishment awaiting those who refuse to do so.

Painful as it is to admit, but in full awareness that there are other ways of getting people to do both bad and good things than by direct, mortal threat, *They made me do it* is not necessarily an adequate, and so not quite a credible, explanation or excuse.

Furthermore, the thing about obedience, whether by a conventionally docile soul or a strong one who has directly been coerced, is that it can be withheld, refused, rejected from one order to the next. Mere obedience is simply not reliable. As the famed military strategist and theorist Otto von Bismarck is said to have observed, *You can do anything with bayonets except sit on them.* You can take over peoples' lives and force them to do things, but you cannot then expect them to stay obedient without the provision of indubitable, constant threat for each and every one.

Everyone was doing it then. What about another familiar line, proffered not so much as a full explanation but as a kind of moral exculpation: *Everybody was doing it. Nothing special that I did too.* Well, no, everyone did not do it, as we have seen. One way or another, whatever the evil we have in mind, there were some who did not become, or remain, victimizers. As just illustrated, at some point or other—and especially when actions must be carried

out over time and in many places because of their sheer scale and scope—there will be times and ways to slip out, to refuse without even taking a stand, by avoiding. How easy it is to avoid doing what one is being asked or told or invited to do at such times of course varies enormously. No easy generalizations here. Nonetheless, we do need to know that even in the belly of the beast, some do manage not to join in, and more important still, we need to realize that early on, when evils are spreading but are not yet normalized, if more people simply turned away from doing the work involved, histories would be quite different.

Hannah Arendt used to observe that soldiers and others who do the work of legitimated state violence can choose to put down their guns. Each one individually picks his/her weapon up; each individually can put it down; and the group consciousness that can encourage us to do bad, unto evil, if others are doing it can also encourage us to do good. One soldier, one guard putting down a gun can break the spell, kick individual thinking back into action. Choices with groups are not guaranteed moral, though. Officials, police, soldiers can refuse to help just as they can refuse to harm: point is, they have each and all made choices. *Everybody was doing it* is not factual. It is also never a moral argument. How many children have tried that one and heard, *If Mira stuck her hand in the fire, would you?* If we do not accept this effort at an explanation that might pass as an excuse from our children, how odd it is that we do tend to invoke it when faced with a time when great numbers of adults did terrible, terrible things.

Self-defensive fear drove them. Yes, it can—but carrying out and then perpetuating, defending the massive harms and violations that last beyond, say, conquest, as enslavement has, and colonialism, take more and other than any kind of lashing out. As Gandhi realized, fighting off protestors or revolutionaries face to face in the line of duty wears its doers out physically after the first adrenalin rush of fear and, perhaps, anger, or excitement at doing battle, wears off. British colonial officers sometimes literally became so exhausted that they had to quit beating Indian people trained in *satyagraha*, soul force, "passive resistance" (which is actually not passive at all, of course). Exhausted by fending off people who just kept coming, who walked right into range of their crowd-control weapons, the soldiers' arms dropped, they stopped, and more than before saw the people around them who were not harming them, not threatening them physically—just persisting in doing what they claimed the right to do (such as getting essential salt from free sea water). It became hard for some of those officers to go on doing their jobs. Passions can be sated, run down, become boring; the body simply wears out, the mind wanders, the spirit quails—in most of us. Not in all: there are genuine murderers (as there are secular saints) among us. They just do not suffice for sustained action on a significant scale.