

PROFESSOR CESARANI ON “EVIL”

As we face the disturbing issues that terror and warfare bring in their wake, Professor David Cesarani raises again a question that deserves examination: how willing are human beings to go along with mass murder or random killing? (*The Record*, “OTHER VOICES,” Monday, May 1, 2006, p. L7) He opens by taking us back to the twentieth century, commenting that “The image of Adolf Eichmann sitting inside a bulletproof glass booth...has come to encapsulate the satisfying story of the perpetrator meeting justice at the hands of his victims.” However, justice cannot be delivered by “the hands of . . . victims.” The idea that they--in this instance slaughtered millions of Jews, Gypsies, Catholics, Protestants, the alleged physically and mentally handicapped, political dissenters and homosexuals--can deliver justice with their own hands is nonsensical. It can be dispensed authoritatively only by a designated political agency, usually a court. Not even grieving, justifiably enraged relatives of those victims can legitimately mete it out.

The professor makes other puzzling assertions. He writes that “[Eichmann] was responsible for driving through the ‘Final Solution,’” a statement difficult to decipher. Does he mean by “driving through” that the seemingly obsessive Eichmann was responsible for continuation of the killing after the likelihood of German defeat had become obvious to almost everyone? Or was Eichmann’s “driving through” evidence that he had originally conjured up the entire horrifying business, execution of those whose “crime” consisted merely of existing or of having an opinion but who had broken no laws? Neither of these possibilities can be taken seriously, and what Cesarani is trying to say remains unclear.

The assertion, moreover, that observers were comforted by the portrayal of Eichmann as a rabid Jew-hater bent on pursuing a “racial (sic) vendetta” is sheer fantasy. There was, there is, no comfort whatsoever in contemplating Eichmann and his equivalents among Nazis, Stalinists, Cambodian slaughterers or genocidal killers of Armenians, whatever “image” of the perpetrators is conjured up. Perhaps then, this is simply an example of inappropriate phrasing readily corrected by noting that some people may have been comforted by the myth that Eichmann’s actions flowed from deep-seated, virulent prejudices, even though it doesn’t explain his conduct. What it does do

is avoid more perplexing issues than prejudice run amok.

Whatever the case, this portrait of Eichmann was undermined, according to Professor Cesarani, by Hannah Arendt, who saw through the prosecution's attempt to convert Eichmann into the personification of evil. He then argues that she created a different myth, namely, that Eichmann was an ordinary man, a kind of Everyman, whose story exemplifies the fate of human beings under the heels of totalitarian masters. The dynamic in Arendt's myth, as he presents it, is that people can be so driven by fear and terror that to save themselves they are willing to do anything. To this interpretation of Arendt the professor conjoins the so-called Milgram experiment published roughly at the same time as *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, since Milgram's work appears to substantiate the claim that any ordinary person could and would obey commands to injure and inflict severe pain on others.

There is, however, no evidence that Arendt was in any way influenced by Milgram. Nor does Cesarani note that Milgram's "experiment" involved a handful of subjects, that some participants were fully aware of what was going on in a so-called laboratory setting where individuals were ordered to deliver severe electric shocks to others, that some participants knew that they were doing something "wrong," that the experiment was carried out at Yale University, thus larded with an aura of academic respectability, or that on learning what was afoot possible participants chose to withdraw.

What the Milgram study has to do with the robbing, transportation, dehumanization and eventual gassing and shooting of millions of human beings--what it has to do with the reality of killing fields and gas chambers--is beyond comprehension. To equate Milgram's laboratory attempt to confirm "scientifically" that humans more or less readily agree to inflict pain and harm on others with the mass murder of millions is, to be kind, offensive and insulting to the reader and to the handful of survivors of these dark moments in human history.

As to Arendt's views in *Eichmann in Jerusalem* and elsewhere, Professor Cesarani may not have done his homework. Yes, Arendt talked about Eichmann's ordinariness. But her point was not that by reason of being ordinary, whatever that may mean, any individual person is ipso facto capable of doing what Eichmann and others like him did. She did not

believe that “evil” is “banal,” commonplace, trite or necessarily a constant possibility in the conduct of each and every human being. Arendt employs the phrase “the banality of evil” to suggest that Eichmann engaged in evil thoughtlessly, mindlessly, or, if you will, as she might say, shallowly and without consideration. Her point therefore is the opposite of what the professor claims. Ordinarity does not mean going along with every violation of morality; it is thoughtlessness that is the hallmark of the willing participant in Nazi and other crimes. “The banality of evil” actually derives, at the very least, from two possible outlooks and their complementary behavior patterns. There is conduct based on the belief that any company is “good enough” whatever the misdeeds of one’s companions, associates or friends; and there is, in Arendt’s words, the “widespread tendency to refuse to judge,” the constant iteration and reiteration of the phrase, “who has the right to judge others?” and the consequent unwillingness to speak out or resist. Each of these makes evil acts little more than everyday commonplaces, as trite and thoughtless as the act of tying one’s shoe laces. They are performed “without consideration,” which is precisely what Eichmann and others did when they participated in engines of mass slaughter, thus their “banality.”

Arendt made herself quite clear despite the controversy that surrounded her study of Eichmann’s trial. She writes that “under conditions of terror most people will comply but *some people will not.*” Murderous activities, to quote her again, “did not happen everywhere” and, one might add, did not convert every ordinary human being into a cooperative agent in the carrying out of mass murder.

Professor Cesanari wants to claim that Arendt’s real interest was in giving substance to an abstract construct, a totalitarian man who appears to be a human being but is actually a robotic byproduct of the system. And having thus read her mind, he concludes that she had found in the flesh her robot, Adolf Eichmann. Again, her words suggest how wrong he is. Her view is that legal and moral standards, however abstract they may be, “always relate to the person and what the person has done.” They have to do not with a hypothetical condition, but to the deeds of individuals in actual social and political settings. They refer concretely to conduct, to actions undertaken, not to typologies, hypothetical musings or the humanoids of science fiction. As Arendt puts it, “the question is never whether an individual is good [(a moral

consideration)] but whether his conduct is good for the world [(a political consideration)].” What is at issue is the world, the place where “we” not “I” alone actually live and must deal with actual situations. In sum, what is front and center for Arendt is the conduct of “real” human beings on this globe. At the heart of her speculations was the view that these issues of conduct were palpable during that time when the Nazis dominated Europe and wreaked havoc on everyone including the people of Germany. And I suspect that she would hold that they are still true.

In reporting on the Eichmann trial, Arendt spoke of the “banality of evil” and meant by this phrase “no theory or doctrine but something quite factual” and down to earth, namely, “the phenomenon of evil deeds committed on a gigantic scale, which could not be traced to any particularity of wickedness, pathology, or ideological conviction in the doer, whose only personal distinction was a perhaps extraordinary shallowness.” This comment, written years after the publication of her Eichmann book, suggests that it is not Arendt but Cesarani, as well as Milgram, who believe in abstract forces that govern human behavior. Milgram believed that under any circumstance the vast majority of humans are readily persuaded that it may be necessary to harm other humans, even if fatally. Worse yet, Cesarani suggests that ordinariness conditions humans so that they are ready to do the foulest of deeds including mass murder. No wonder he concludes that any system that seeks to perpetuate this kind of crime “will find men and women to carry it out, not because they are atypical but because they are ordinary,” that “Eichmann was a normal man” and that “as long as there is a genocidal impulse”--presumably rooted in human nature--there will be Eichmanns.” If he is even remotely close to the truth, we have moved in the many decades since Arendt speculated about “the banality of evil” from sophisticated study seeking to explain how such monstrous deeds come to be to the gloomy, simple-minded assertion that ‘ordinary’ humans carry in them a genocidal impulse. This may satisfy those who seek to waive away responsibility for the crimes committed randomly these days in the name of righting wrongs. But it can do little for those who believe that human beings are responsible, that they make choices, that in the final analysis they can choose to think what they are doing and that thoughtfulness saves them from becoming an Eichmann and therefore willing adjutants of ideologically driven, destructive leaders.

Erwin A. Jaffe
125 Prospect Avenue, Apt. 3F
Hackensack, NJ 07601
Two4Mozart@aol.com

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