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Arendt on Arendt: Reflecting on the Meaning of the Eichmann Controversy

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The Eichmann Controversy: The American Jewish Response to Hannah
Arendt's *Eichmann in Jerusalem*

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By

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A writer is nothing without her readers.

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There are no dangerous thoughts, thinking itself is dangerous—Hannah Arendt

Introduction

The controversy touched off by Hannah Arendt's *Eichmann In Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* did not take long to become vicious. Published initially as a five-part series¹ in *The New Yorker* and subsequently as a book in 1963, *Eichmann in Jerusalem* almost immediately provoked outrage amongst American Jews. By the end of March 1963 the uproar was palpable, and many of Arendt's friends wrote to her while she was vacationing in Europe to warn her of the storm brewing in America. As human rights activist Henry Schwarzschild put it in a March 29 letter to Arendt, "the entire Jewish community is up in arms."² The controversy, however, was both acrimonious and long-lasting. Even in 1966, the debate was far from over. In fact, the debate seemed only to have escalated over the course of three years. A man from Oregon named S. N. Karchmer, for example, wrote to Arendt in January 1966 to plead with her "to cease these frightening polemics."³ Dismayed by the vicious tone of the debate, Karchmer begged Arendt "to stop this public controversy...out of respect for the memory of the millions of innocent Jewish dead, victims of the horrible purge years."⁴ Unfortunately for Karchmer the debate did not end there, and, in any case, Arendt did not have the power to stop it. The controversy had a life of its own, outside of the terms established by Arendt in *Eichmann in Jerusalem*.

¹ The five-part series began on February 16, 1963, and ended on March 16, 1963.

² Henry Schwarzschild to Hannah Arendt, 19 March 1963. The Hannah Arendt Papers, Library of Congress.

³ S. N. Karchmer to Hannah Arendt, 28 January 1963. The Hannah Arendt Papers, Library of Congress.

⁴ Ibid.

Arendt's report covered the 1961 trial of the infamous Nazi, Adolf Eichmann, for his role in the "Final Solution." The topic was emotional in itself, but Hannah Arendt's coverage not only opened up raw wounds, but also probed these wounds with hard questions. Arendt forced her readers to confront the possibility that Eichmann, the murderer of the Jews, was not a sadistic monster but rather a banal, "terrifyingly normal"⁵ man. Moreover, in reporting on a trial about *Nazi* deeds, Arendt ventured to examine the behavior of the Jews during the Holocaust as well. Arendt was most controversial when she discussed the behavior of Jewish council leaders during the Nazi war on the Jews. As she put it in *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, "wherever Jews lived [during the Holocaust], there were recognized Jewish leaders, and this leadership, almost without exception, cooperated in one way or another, for one reason or another, with the Nazis."⁶

Although the report covered a landmark trial of international importance, the public reacted more strongly to the report than to the trial itself. The report helped provoke questions that went beyond merely Eichmann's role in the catastrophe, although Arendt was adamant that the scope of her report was limited to topics mentioned during the trial. To be sure, questions and topics abounded, and the controversy grew into a conversation more important and bigger than Adolf Eichmann. *The National Jewish Post & Opinion*, for example, noted in March 1963 that "there will be a furor raised by the series of five extensive articles by Hannah Arendt on the Eichmann trial," but the *Post* also remarked that the "consternation" about her report "could leave a more lasting impression on the Jews of the United States and the world than either his apprehension or the testimony in the Israeli court."⁷ It was not simply the trial of Adolf

⁵ Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (New York: Penguin Books, 2006), 76.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 125.

⁷ "Who Sent the Jews to the Camps?" *The National Jewish Post & Opinion*, March 8, 1963. The Hannah Arendt Papers, Library of Congress.

Eichmann that mattered, for it was Arendt's *retelling* of it that was the crucial concern. Even in the spring of 1964, people recognized the controversy's, as opposed to the trial's, importance. Writer Harris Dienstfrey, for example, wrote to Arendt telling her about his idea for "a book that would examine the response to *Eichmann in Jerusalem*."⁸ Although this book in particular never came to fruition, the conversation, distinct from the coverage about Adolf Eichmann, swirled into the center of attention.

And yet, roughly fifty years later after the publication of *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, a book⁹ entirely devoted to understanding the American Jewish reactions to Arendt's work has not been written. This is not to deny the fact that there is an enormous amount of scholarship that addresses and analyzes the controversy for its bearing on Arendt's legacy and on Jewish history. Those scholars who do address the controversy most often embed their understanding of the debate within larger arguments about Arendt's work or the history of the Holocaust. There is much less scholarship—with a few notable exception—that focuses primarily on the response to the event as a subject of inquiry in and of itself. This study thus hopes to explore *Eichmann in Jerusalem* and its response in America, extracting the controversy as a subject deserving attention in its own right. This is not to ignore the relevance of previous scholarship on Arendt's theories or the Holocaust to a story of the controversy. On the contrary, this study hopes to engage those larger studies as context in order to shed light on the meaning of the controversy.

Scholarship on Arendt is, unsurprisingly, quite vast, but its history has been colored and informed by a few crucial events. The first critiques of *Eichmann in Jerusalem* were primarily

⁸ Harris Dienstfrey to Hannah Arendt, 14 April 1964. The Hannah Arendt Papers, Library of Congress.

⁹ This is not to ignore the fact that there *are* some articles and chapters of books entirely devoted to the controversy. See Anson Rabinbach, "Eichmann in New York: The New York Intellectuals and the Hannah Arendt Controversy," *October* 108 (April 1, 2004): 97–111.

those embroiled in the controversy it provoked. This first stage of scholarly reaction will be a significant bulk of the *primary* source material for this project. As the distance grew from the event itself, scholarship moved the conversation away from the original debates of the 1960s. A year before Arendt's death in 1975, Margaret Canovan wrote *Hannah Arendt: A Reinterpretation of Her Political Thought* (1974),¹⁰ the first "book-length introduction to Arendt's political thought."¹¹ In her book, Canovan argued "responses to the most dramatic events of her time lie at the very centre of Arendt's thought,"¹² insisting that Arendt's thought must be centrally understood as "reflections on the political catastrophes of the mid-century."¹³ Later, in 1982, Elisabeth Young-Bruehl's acclaimed biography of Arendt, *Hannah Arendt: For Love of the World*,¹⁴ helped place her political thought within a historical and biographical context, not to mention the fact that her revelation of Arendt's affair with Martin Heidegger restarted controversy. Young-Bruehl's portrait of Arendt's private life and personal involvement in the affairs of the Jewish people deepened an understanding of Arendt's motivations and perspective. Arendt's personal history cast Arendt's political legacy in a different light: as a German-Jew, former-Zionist, and female political theorist, Arendt seemed to be altogether an ambiguous person, someone who could not easily fit into one category. Yet, as Young-Bruehl shows, Arendt's life had been deeply dictated by her own Jewishness. After getting arrested by the Gestapo in 1933 for her involvement with a Zionist organization that helped Jewish children leave Germany, Arendt fled to France. Although she was later imprisoned in a concentration

¹⁰ Margaret Canovan, *Hannah Arendt: A Reinterpretation of Her Political Thought* (Cambridge University Press, 1994).

¹¹ Richard J. Bernstein, *Hannah Arendt And The Jewish Question*, Lst MIT Press ed. (Cambridge, Mass: The MIT Press, 1996), 7.

¹² Canovan, *Hannah Arendt*, 7.

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ Elisabeth Young-Bruehl, *Hannah Arendt: For Love of the World*, 2nd ed. (New Haven, Conn.; London: Yale University Press, 2004).

camp under the Vichy regime,¹⁵ Arendt was able to escape to New York in 1941.

In 1978, however, Ron Feldman edited and helped release Arendt's so called "Jewish writings,"¹⁶ a collection of essays Arendt wrote on the "Jewish question" between the 1930s and her death in 1975. Before Feldman's collection, Arendt's work on Jewish history "were for the most part neglected and forgotten."¹⁷ As Feldman explains, Arendt "was subjected to a modern form of excommunication from the Jewish community"¹⁸ partly as a consequence of *Eichmann in Jerusalem* and the anger it provoked. Feldman's collection sparked great interest in a reinterpretation of Arendt's political thought as "essentially linked"¹⁹ with her conception of Jewish history. Given the release of Arendt's Jewish writings in 1978, it is no surprise that scholars almost immediately began to contextualize *Eichmann in Jerusalem* within Arendt's larger theories on Jewish history. In a 1981 article entitled "The Origins of Eichmann in Jerusalem: Hannah Arendt's Interpretation of Jewish History,"²⁰ for example, Sharon Muller argued that Arendt expresses her preconceived theories of Jewish history in *Eichmann*, for "the author's judgments on this issue were part and parcel of a larger theory of the Jewish experience in modern times, on which she had been working since the early 1930s."²¹

¹⁵ Young-Bruehl, *Hannah Arendt*, 105.

¹⁶ Hannah Arendt, *The Jew as Pariah: Jewish Identity and Politics in the Modern Age*, 1st Evergreen edition, ed. Ron Feldman (New York: Grove Press: distributed by Random House, 1978).

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, xlii.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ Sharon Muller, "The Origins of Eichmann in Jerusalem: Hannah Arendt's Interpretation of Jewish History," *Jewish Social Studies* 43, no. 3/4 (July 1, 1981): 237–54.

²¹ Muller, "The Origins of Eichmann," 237.

Along a similar vein, Dagmar Barnouw's 1990 book, *Visible Spaces: Hannah Arendt and the German-Jewish Experience*,²² asserted that Arendt's Jewish writings are an integral and defining part of Arendt's entire theoretical corpus. Barnouw's book, although not exclusively about the Eichmann controversy, proposed its own interpretation of the Eichmann debate in terms of a clash of contending notions of the diasporic Jew. As Barnouw explained, "my discussion of Arendt's analysis of the Eichmann trial focuses on the misunderstandings it engendered. These misunderstandings— psychologically motivated deliberate misreadings— are symptomatic of the problems she addressed in her critical discussions of the many different forms of assimilationism."²³ Barnouw, then, should be credited for trying to understand why Arendt's work was so particularly controversial in the Jewish community. Richard Bernstein's 1996 book, *Hannah Arendt and the Jewish Question*, essentially continued Barnouw's line of thought, adding detail but also forcefully asserting that "a split between Arendt's Jewish concerns and the rest of her work is untenable."²⁴ It is significant that these scholars have resituated the text within a larger Jewish history, for it is clear Arendt's report is not only a matter of political theory. As these scholars have argued, Arendt's understanding of Jewish history has a critical bearing on her political thought.

Rather than stressing the way Arendt's work implicitly engages Jewish identity and its allegiances, some scholars have argued that Arendt's work was controversial precisely because it seemed to eschew a Jewish approach. In other words, these scholars understand the controversy as a reaction against the way Arendt placed Eichmann's crimes outside a specifically Jewish context, supposedly making his crimes "universal." As these scholars have argued, the report

²² Dagmar Barnouw, *Visible Spaces: Hannah Arendt and the German-Jewish Experience* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998).

²³ *Ibid.*, 224.

²⁴ Bernstein, *Hannah Arendt*, 9.

embroiled the Jewish community in controversy because Arendt's writing seemed to universalize a specifically Jewish history. Dan Diner's 1997 article, "Hannah Arendt Reconsidered," for example, identified Arendt's "radical universalism" as an approach that clashed with other "narratives of Jewish experience and self-understanding."²⁵ For Diner, Arendt's supposed "universality" exacerbated tensions in Jewish identity, creating a moment of "Jewish self-reflection" for those involved in the controversy. More specifically, because Arendt was both Jewish and engaged in such "radical universalism," Diner argued that Arendt's report revisited a debate about "Jewish self-conception" that is "torn between a radical universalist, humanistic horizon on the one hand, and particularist resistances on the other."²⁶ For Diner, Arendt thus provoked controversy because she tested and unsettled tensions in Jewish identity, tensions between the "universal" and the particularly Jewish frame of mind.

Other scholars have emphasized that Arendt did not simply attempt to place the Holocaust outside a particularly Jewish history, but that she did so in such a way that aroused suspicions about her true intentions. For these scholars, Arendt's tone raised questions of her loyalties, inciting controversy particularly in the Jewish community. Richard Wolin's 1996 article, "The Ambivalences of German-Jewish Identity: Hannah Arendt in Jerusalem," stressed that Arendt's critics most profoundly took issue with her stunningly "cold" approach. Wolin explained that Arendt was so controversial because she seemed to refuse identification with the Jews, her own people.²⁷ Moreover, Arendt's apparent betrayal of loyalty and identity is not something Wolin himself would disagree with. In fact, he emphasizes Arendt's own

²⁵ Dan Diner and Rita Bashaw, "Hannah Arendt Reconsidered: On the Banal and the Evil in Her Holocaust Narrative," *New German Critique*, no. 71 (April 1, 1997): 178, doi:10.2307/488563.

²⁶ Diner, "Hannah Arendt Reconsidered," 190.

²⁷ Richard Wolin, "The Ambivalences of German-Jewish Identity: Hannah Arendt in Jerusalem," *History and Memory* 8, no. 2 (October 1, 1996): 9–34.

“ambiguous” biographical experience as a German-Jew, claiming that “by emphasizing the ‘universal’ constituents of the Final Solution at the expense of their specifically German qualities, she also managed to avoid implicating her country of origin— and thereby, in an act of narcissistic self protection, herself.”²⁸ Although Wolin’s analysis adds insight into the reasons behind the controversy and into Arendt’s own biases, he ultimately serves not to historicize *Eichmann in Jerusalem* but rather to engage in the very debate Arendt and her critics underwent during the Eichmann Controversy. Rather than examining the importance of the controversy, in other words, Wolin almost participates in it. Wolin concluded with the very argument Arendt’s critics used against her in the 1960s: that Arendt was both wrong and motivated by sympathy for her German, rather than her Jewish, identity.

Wolin’s failure to escape the terms of the original debate is a problem that has seeped into other studies on Arendt and her work in *Eichmann in Jerusalem*. Many other scholars have failed to understand Arendt’s work beyond the interpretation posed by her critics during the Eichmann controversy. More specifically, scholarship on Arendt has frequently misinterpreted her work as “the cornerstone of the so-called ‘functionalist’ interpretation of Auschwitz,”²⁹ an interpretation of Arendt in part birthed by her critics during the Eichmann debate. For example, Dan Diner described the Eichmann controversy as the battle between a functionalist and intentionalist understanding of history, also phrasing it as competing interpretations of modern evil in terms of “banalities” or “monstrosities.” It is the larger, interpretive implication involved in Arendt’s claims that make this moment controversial, for as Diner explained, “the one—the functional—pleads criminal negligence, while the other—the intentionalist—pleads guilty.”³⁰

²⁸ Ibid., 28.

²⁹ Ibid., 24.

³⁰ Diner, “Hannah Arendt Reconsidered,” 9.

While functionalists understand the policy of the “Final Solution” to have had some utilitarian rationale, intentionalists argue that the policy to exterminate Jews began with fierce anti-Semitism and ideological fervor. In other words, while functionalists believe the policy of the “Final Solution” began as a means to an end, intentionalists believe this policy began as the end in itself. Although Wolin and others have situated Arendt as the “cornerstone” of the functionalist approach, other scholars like political theorist Seyla Benhabib and German historian Roland Schindler have pointed out that “Arendt’s theory occupies a middle ground between ‘functionalist’ patterns of explanation...and ‘intentionalist’ accounts...According to Arendt, the concept of an ‘objective enemy’ did not serve an economic end but fortified the political purpose of total mastery and domination at which the Nazi regime aimed.”³¹ Framing the debate in terms of a clash between functionalism and intentionalism is thus misleading, for it relies on a misinterpretation of Arendt’s “banality” thesis. Categorizing Arendt as a “functionalist” misinterprets Arendt’s *Eichmann in Jerusalem* in two ways: first, Arendt’s “banality” thesis does not mean that she disregarded the role of ideology and anti-Semitism in motivating the Final Solution. Rather, Arendt described how anti-Semitism oriented and maintained the “banal” thinking that led to Eichmann’s crimes. Second, Arendt’s “banality” thesis described Eichmann in particular and was not meant to describe the entire Nazi system. Arendt never wanted to use “banality” as a larger theory of the Nazi system. In fact, Arendt was skeptical about these larger interpretive theories because she thought they limited the possibilities of understanding the past. Thus, this binary of interpretation between “functionalist” and “intentionalist” misleadingly places Arendt as a “functionalist” when, perhaps, she should not be in the binary at all.

³¹ Roland W. Schindler, “Hannah Arendt und die Historiker-Kontroverse um die ‘Rationalität’ der Judenvernichtung,” in *Dialektik* (Frankfurt: Felix Meiner Verlag, 1994), 146-160. Excerpted and translated in Seyla Benhabib, *The Reluctant Modernism of Hannah Arendt*, Revised edition (Lanham, Md: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2003), 96.

This misinterpretation has remained a trend in Holocaust scholarship. With his 1997 *Hitler's Willing Executioners*,³² for example, Daniel Goldhagen helped renew this binary by framing his book as an intentionalist response to the functionalist approach he ascribes to Arendt, historian Raul Hilberg, and historian Christopher Browning. Goldhagen categorized Arendt as a “functionalist” because he, too, misinterprets her “banality” thesis. Like her Jewish critics in the 1960s, Goldhagen understands Arendt’s “banality” thesis as an attempt both to characterize Nazis as simply obedient, robotic bureaucrats and to downplay the role intentionally murderous and anti-Semitic ideology played in the implementation of the Final Solution. With *Politics, Philosophy, Terror* (1999), political theorist Dana Villa has done an incredible job in explaining why Goldhagen’s book continued to misunderstand Arendt’s book in the same way her critics had in the 1960s. According to Villa, “many thought (and evidently still think) that Arendt lessened Eichmann's guilt by turning him into a mere 'cog' of the Nazi extermination machine (a notion she explicitly and repeatedly refutes in her trial report). Such misunderstandings have been given new life thanks to the debate spurred by Daniel Goldhagen's book, *Hitler's Willing Executioners*.”³³ Goldhagen’s broader point was that “studies of the Holocaust have been marred by a poor understanding and an under-theorizing of anti-Semitism,”³⁴ but Goldhagen used Arendt’s supposed “functionalism” as his counterpoint. In the end, this vein of historiography does not move our understanding of the controversy forward. Rather, these thinkers tend to adopt and reproduce the terms of the debate rather than derive new meaning from them.

³² Daniel Jonah Goldhagen, *Hitler's Willing Executioners: Ordinary Germans and the Holocaust*, 1st Vintage books ed (New York: Vintage Books, 1997).

³³ Dana Villa, *Politics, Philosophy, Terror* (Princeton, N.J: Princeton University Press, 1999), 6.

³⁴ Goldhagen, *Hitler's Willing Executioners*, 7.

Thus, Goldhagen and Wolin revisited the controversy only to argue against their understanding of Arendt, but this understanding is both incorrect and simply a reiteration of what her critics had to say in the 1960s. However, many scholars have approached the topic not in order to rehash the debate but to contextualize the stakes it involved. With respect to scholarship specific to the memory of the Holocaust, many thinkers have identified this moment as a turning point in the public's willingness to discuss the murder of the Jews. With her 1992 article, "The Eichmann Trial, The Jewish Question, and the American-Jewish Intelligentsia," Pnina Lahav argued that Arendt, by publicizing the trial, essentially forced the American Jewish population to confront questions that had hitherto been avoided, explaining that the controversy was so emotional because it was the first time this sensitive subject had been discussed publicly in America.³⁵ In *The Holocaust in American Life*, Peter Novick echoed Lahav's argument, explaining that through the Eichmann trial the Holocaust became an event in and of itself, something to be considered as distinct from other Nazi barbarisms.³⁶ Arendt, Novick explained, raised the stakes of this "new" conversation by writing her text before a *Gentile* audience. The Jews now had to consider, and try to themselves construct, American perceptions of the Holocaust.

It is only once the Holocaust became a focus of public conversation that, as Lahav and Novick have noted, its memory became a way to construct a political narrative. As Novick remarked, "the holocaust came to be regularly invoked—indeed brandished as a weapon—in American Jewry's struggles on behalf of an embattled Israel."³⁷ Novick, in fact, stressed that the controversy in large part was a battle of narratives, narratives that were used as political tools

³⁵ Pnina Lahav, "Eichmann Trial, The Jewish Question, and the American-Jewish Intelligentsia, The," *Boston University Law Review* 72 (1992): 555.

³⁶ Peter Novick, *The Holocaust in American Life* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1999).

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 154.

with which to further specific interests. In his 2004 article, “Eichmann in New York: The New York Intellectuals and the Hannah Arendt Controversy,” Anson Rabinbach explored more deeply the political aims behind American Jewry’s Holocaust narrative, explaining that the dispute rose at a crucial juncture of their political success in America that was threatened by the potential for Arendt’s provocative portrait of the Holocaust to inflame anti-Semitism.³⁸ Relying on Alexander Bloom’s 1986 history of New York Jews, *Prodigal Sons: The New York Intellectuals and Their World*,³⁹ Rabinbach provided a compelling understanding of the social and political stakes behind the controversy. In this way, Rabinbach’s article is especially notable in its attempt to focus on the American controversy itself, helping to build an understanding of its significance outside of its specific bearings on Arendt’s scholarship.

Like Novick and Rabinbach, Steven Aschheim has also helped to articulate the stakes of the controversy with his introduction to *Hannah Arendt in Jerusalem*,⁴⁰ a collection of essays that document the first conference on Arendt in Jerusalem (1997). While Novick and Rabinbach illuminated the importance of the debate in America, Aschheim primarily focused on the Israeli response to Arendt’s work. Aschheim explained that Arendt was controversial precisely because she refused all categories, isms, and loyalties.⁴¹ Indeed, for Aschheim Arendt’s ambiguous relationship to her own Jewishness was precisely what “rendered her challenges and the responses to them particularly charged, emotionally overdetermined.”⁴² By explaining the controversy in terms of her perceived disloyalty to her Jewish identity, Aschheim helped

³⁸ Anson Rabinbach, “Eichmann in New York: The New York Intellectuals and the Hannah Arendt Controversy,” *October* 108 (April 1, 2004): 97–111.

³⁹ Alexander Bloom, *Prodigal Sons: The New York Intellectuals and Their World*, First Printing edition (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986).

⁴⁰ Steven E. Aschheim, ed., *Hannah Arendt in Jerusalem* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001).

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 4.

⁴² *Ibid.*

refashion a historical understanding of Arendt's Jewish legacy, but also helped reveal how Arendt continues to be a controversial figure for the Jewish identity today. As Aschheim explained, it is a telling fact that Hannah Arendt's *Eichmann in Jerusalem* was not translated into Hebrew until 2000.⁴³

Yet, while these scholars have done an impressive job at historicizing the debate and explaining why it was so controversial, many scholars often fail to go beyond an explication of the perspectives that clashed. They fail, that is, in explaining that the controversy not only collided opposing approaches, but also that the controversy challenged and affected the approaches themselves. One cannot stop, like historian Hans Mommsen did in his article in Aschheim's collection of essays, *Hannah Arendt in Jerusalem*, at the understanding that "Arendt challenged the predominant interpretation of the origins and the implementation of the genocide and in doing so broke long-cherished political taboos."⁴⁴ The controversy cannot be fully understood by identifying the fact that opposing perspectives confronted each other, as Mommsen did here by framing it as Arendt's challenging interpretation versus "long-cherished political taboos." The controversy must be considered not only for what opposing perspectives it brought together, but also how the controversy impacted these views and subsequently built new ones in its wake. Histories like Mommsen's fail to account for the full importance of the controversy by neglecting to examine its *effect* on the perspectives embroiled in the debate.

It is also important to acknowledge the enormous contribution made by feminist reinterpretations of Arendt's legacy. Contrary to "'standard' readings of Arendt that categorize

⁴³ Ibid., 1.

⁴⁴ Hans Mommsen, "Hannah Arendt's Interpretation of the Holocaust as a Challenge to Human Existence: The Intellectual Background," in *Hannah Arendt in Jerusalem*, ed. Steven Aschheim (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), 225.

her as a classical philosopher,⁴⁵ some feminist thinkers have shifted their understanding of Arendt not as a thinker nostalgic for the Greek tradition and therefore ill-equipped to meet the modern world, but rather as a distinctly modern thinker, one who disrupts and challenges our traditions of thinking rather than blindly extolling them. Bonnie Honig, the author of *Political Theory and the Displacement of Politics* (1993) and the editor of *Feminist Interpretations of Hannah Arendt* (1995), argued such a reading of Arendt, explaining that “Arendt’s account of politics, law, and institutions is, like Nietzsche’s devoted to the preservation of the contest. Like Nietzsche, she admires the agon and seeks to protect it from closure, from domination by any one idea, truth, essence, individual, or institution.”⁴⁶ For thinkers like Honig, Arendt’s theories promote resistibility and contestation rather than consensus and agreement as the cornerstone of politics. Influenced by this feminist intervention, political theorist Seyla Benhabib is a central figure in Arendt scholarship. Benhabib has done a stunning job in her work *The Reluctant Modernism of Hannah Arendt*, forcefully arguing for Arendt’s “reluctant modernism” rather than her supposed nostalgia, as the title of her book suggests. Benhabib has done the best work to date in explaining Arendt’s nuanced approach to the problems of the twentieth century. As Benhabib argued, “Modernity, for Hannah Arendt, was not a seamless historical development but a process rich in contradictions.”⁴⁷ Lastly, philosopher and feminist theorist Judith Butler has contributed greatly to the scholarship on Arendt by refashioning her thought as a way to confront contemporary Jewish debates. In her 2012 book, *Parting Ways: Jewishness and the Critique of*

⁴⁵ Seyla Benhabib, *The Reluctant Modernism of Hannah Arendt*, Revised edition (Lanham, Md: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2003), xxxix.

⁴⁶ Bonnie Honig, *Political Theory and the Displacement of Politics*, Contestations (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993), 116.

⁴⁷ Benhabib, *Reluctant Modernism*, xi.

Zionism,⁴⁸ Judith Butler uses Arendt's theoretical legacy in order to address the problem that "if one openly and publicly criticizes Israeli state violence, then one is sometimes, and in certain circumstances almost always, considered anti-Semitic or anti-Jewish."⁴⁹ Butler reinterprets Arendt's approach to Judaism in order to promote a certain "Jewishness" that would break down demands for unyielding loyalty and loosen the possibilities of Jewish discourse. Butler continues to highlight the disruptive nature of Arendt's thinking, but she also takes a step further than Honig and Benhabib by refashioning Arendt's legacy in order to confront a contemporary problem.

Finally, it is important to note that in the past few years—with scholars such as David Cesarini, Deborah Lipstadt, and most recently Bettina Stangneth—scholarship has renewed its interest in the Eichmann trial.⁵⁰ Their focus is not on Arendt's controversy or larger importance, but rather on a re-interpretation of Eichmann's character. That is to say, in avoiding and in fact redoing Arendt's characterization of Eichmann, these scholars are rejecting Arendt's larger interpretive theory. As Cesarini put it, Arendt's "universalization of Eichmann was useful in a Cold War context, associating him with Soviet totalitarianism, but its value has faded and now seems arcane. ... Thanks in large part to the debate over *Hitler's Willing Executioners*, attention can be turned to Eichmann as a person."⁵¹ In their separate analysis of Eichmann, these scholars have above all emphasized that he was a fierce anti-Semite and hardly the banal, obedient

⁴⁸ Judith Butler, *Parting Ways: Jewishness and the Critique of Zionism* (Columbia University Press, 2012).

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 116.

⁵⁰ David Cesarini, *Becoming Eichmann: Rethinking the Life, Crimes, and Trial of a "Desk Murderer,"* 1st Da Capo Press ed (Cambridge, MA: Da Capo Press, 2006); Deborah E. Lipstadt, *The Eichmann Trial*, 1st ed. (New York: Schocken, 2011); Bettina Stangneth, *Eichmann Before Jerusalem: The Unexamined Life of a Mass Murderer*, 1st Edition edition (New York: Knopf, 2014).

⁵¹ Cesarini, *Becoming Eichmann*, 356.

character Arendt portrayed him to be—in this sense, these scholars are arguing against an incorrect assumption that Arendt used banal to mean that Eichmann simply followed orders. Particularly because Bettina Stangneth’s work painstakingly consulted the Sassen papers—which contain Eichmann’s “unpublished memoir, ‘The Others Spoke, Now Will I Speak,’ and an interview conducted over many months with a Nazi journalist and war criminal, Willem Sassen”⁵²—some have come to believe that Arendt was wrong about Eichmann because she did not have access to these sources, that she was misled by Eichmann’s façade of the bureaucrat and therefore ignored his deeper, more hateful character.

There is a problem with this trend in scholarship. First, as Hannah Arendt scholar Roger Berkowitz has pointed out, we must “admit that she [Arendt] was aware of much of the most damning evidence Stangneth has ‘uncovered’”⁵³—in other words, Berkowitz questions the extent to which Arendt would have changed her analysis of Eichmann had she seen everything.⁵⁴ Secondly, because these scholars fundamentally misunderstand Arendt’s depiction of Eichmann as a “dim-witted bureaucrat, a cog in the machinery of destruction,”⁵⁵ as Cesarani put it, these scholars wholly avoid a confrontation with what Arendt really meant by banality and thoughtlessness. Lipstadt declared that Stangneth has “shattered” Arendt, but ultimately this debate must be viewed as a distraction for the real issue at hand in this study: how Arendt and her critics engaged and challenged each other during the controversy. It also must be noted that, 50 years after the trial, these scholars have in some ways reignited the debate that immediately surrounded Arendt’s publication—they, too, are eager to “debunk” Arendt. Indeed, by

⁵² Roger Berkowitz, “Did Eichmann Think?” review of *Eichmann Before Jerusalem: The Unexamined Life of a Mass Murderer*, by Bettina Stangneth, *Amor Mundi Newsletter of the Hannah Arendt Center*, September 7, 2014, <http://www.hannaharendtcenter.org/?p=14259>.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Cesarini, *Becoming Eichmann*.

continuing to argue against this false representation of Arendt's argument, these scholars fail to engage the real issues Arendt raised.

In conclusion, this study hopes to consider and unite the broad array of interpretations of the event, but to also consider aspects of the debate previous scholarship has not. It seems there are plenty of histories of what *Eichmann in Jerusalem* means, but, generally speaking, this history has not been adequately extended to a consideration of the reaction to the text. Moreover, while there are many studies that address the controversy within the scope of larger arguments about Arendt or Holocaust historiography, there are fewer studies that understand the controversy as a subject in itself. Most often the scholarship that has examined the controversy fails to consider the full import of *both* sides of the Eichmann debate. On the one hand, Arendt supporters and theorists have done great work in helping to unpack what Arendt really meant to say in *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, yet their evaluation of her critics' response is often prematurely ended simply by labeling Arendt critics' perspectives as a collection of *misinterpretations*. Yet, as this study will argue, the responses are important not because they "miss the point" but because they themselves engaged Arendt's ideas and helped to construct new understandings of the Holocaust. On the other hand, Arendt's scholarly critics have continued to avoid a confrontation of Arendt's book in its full meaning, precluding an engagement with her ideas by ascribing a pre-established, misleading representation to Arendt's work.

This study hopes to understand the full significance of this event as a watershed of change in conceptions and understandings of the Holocaust, and by extension, its implications for Jewish identity and discourse in the modern world. This study will consider the meaning and impact of the ideas circulated over the course of the debate, identifying both the points at which these contending approaches clash and the points at which they engage and talk to each other.

This study will consider the importance of viewing the controversy as a conversation rather than simply a rigid dichotomy. In failing to see how each side communicated with the other, scholars sometimes themselves reinforce the rigidity of this division, either by emphasizing only the difference between each side or by defending one position over another. Viewing this controversy as a conversation will also allow this study to examine not only how pre-existing perspectives clashed in the debate, but also how these perspectives were in turn changed by this encounter. The controversy did not simply present opposing views, but built up new views as a result. In short, this study will examine the *social reality of an idea*.

There are questions that remain to be answered, questions that bear enormous importance on the central concepts of modernity. How did the controversy provide an opportunity for the formation of a public memory of the Holocaust? How did Arendt's text and its response construct new meanings of modernity, identity, and evil? What pre-existing conceptions did these theories challenge? How did the controversy itself build new understandings of Jewish history and identity?

This study consulted a variety of primary sources from the controversy. First, this study examined the public responses to Arendt's work, most notably in reading both her critics' and supporters' articles in publications like *The New Yorker*, *The New York Times*, *Dissent*, *Partisan Review* and *Jewish Frontier*. Secondly, this study examined the Hannah Arendt Papers, a collection of letters, newspaper clippings and unpublished manuscripts at the Library of Congress. Although this study primarily focuses on the public face of the controversy, Arendt's private correspondence was particularly helpful in revealing how Arendt's original intention was quickly swept away from her over the course of the controversy—in other words, the comparison between Arendt's public and private engagement in the controversy lends itself to an analysis of

how the public nature of the debate informed and warped its conclusions. The sources from *The Hannah Arendt Papers* did not present any material that was “new,” as many scholars have consulted these same documents. In this sense, this study hopes not to discover new sources but to revisit the pre-existing ones for new meaning not hitherto engaged.

In order to examine the controversy in its full scope, Chapter 1 of this study will explore the social, political and historical concerns at stake in the controversy. Arendt’s report was so controversial because it circulated a seemingly dangerous understanding of the Holocaust at the very moment that the public memory of the Holocaust was up for debate. More specifically, Arendt’s critics interpreted her “banality” thesis as a way to downplay Eichmann’s responsibility for the murder of six million Jews, while her discussion of the Jewish council’s behavior during the war was interpreted as a way to both obscure and tarnish the sanctity of Jewish victimhood. Because Arendt’s work was understood to be dangerous in its potential to circulate an anti-Semitic portrait of the Holocaust, Arendt’s critics demanded a flood of Holocaust scholarship that would help to contest Arendt’s report. That is to say, this controversy became a site of negotiation for the formation of a delineated memory of the Holocaust.

Chapter 2 of this study will focus on the relationship between identity and memory over the course of the controversy. Because the controversy debated Arendt’s violations of an appropriate approach to the Holocaust, the controversy was centrally about how one could approach this memory *as a Jew*. More specifically, this chapter explores how the controversy was not only a site of memory formation, but also a site of identity formation. The vicious reaction to Arendt’s supposed betrayal and self-hatred helped delineate a standard for the social expectations demanded of a Jew in the post-Holocaust world.

Chapter 3 of this study will re-examine the controversy through Arendt's eyes, analyzing its impact and efficacy in challenging our approach to the Holocaust. Because Arendt privately revealed that she did not believe the controversy to be a "real" one, this chapter will re-employ Arendt's own perspective on the controversy as a way to reconsider its efficacy. In using "Arendt contra Arendt," this chapter hopes to reveal dimensions of the debate that not only Arendt, but also her critics, failed to appreciate at the time. Chapter 3 concludes that the Eichmann controversy was indeed a "real" one, not only because it provoked a watershed of scholarship on the Holocaust, but also because both sides of the debate strongly argued for the importance of continually providing opportunities to contest, challenge and renegotiate the public memory of the Holocaust.

This study ends with a reflection on writing the history of this controversy. In disagreement with Arendt, this study believes the Eichmann controversy was a "real" controversy: it provoked a new and wider discussion in America, but also provided opportunities for further challenges to these hard questions. Using Arendt's own understanding of the role of the storyteller—of the historian or the poet, of those who tell the past—this study will examine the importance of *retelling* the narrative of the controversy in order to preserve and engage the ways in which it encouraged effective public discourse. Part of the perceived failure of the controversy is not only in what happened, but also in how we tell its story. It is ultimately up to the historian to reexamine the importance of the controversy, presenting it to the world as a way to reveal the contestation of perspectives, but also as a way to continue challenging our ways of thinking about the Holocaust.

Chapter 1

Building a Memory Through Controversy

On May 20, 1960, Israeli Prime Minister David Ben-Gurion announced that Adolf Eichmann had been found and captured by the Mossad in Argentina: Eichmann was to be brought to trial by an Israeli court. The world erupted with a mixture of excitement and anxiety. Had Israel breached international customs of war crime trials by kidnapping Eichmann? Should he be tried in an international court—as with the International Military Tribunal presiding over the Nuremberg Trials (1945-1946)—or was it Israel’s right to bring the Nazi who facilitated the Final Solution to justice? How can justice be found when faced with the enormity and unprecedented character of Eichmann’s crimes?

After the defeat of Nazi Germany, the international community began the work of understanding and prosecuting Nazi war crimes, including Hitler’s extensive plan to exterminate the Jews. Adolf Eichmann had escaped Germany shortly after the war, yet he remained a figure of great preoccupation. Eichmann seemed to be a symbolic figure for the catastrophe enacted upon the European Jews. Eichmann was the expert on the “Jewish Question” for the S.S., ultimately becoming the logistical manager of the consolidation, movement, and deportation of Jews across Europe to concentration and extermination camps. His job, in a word, facilitated and made possible the Holocaust, and thus Israel, as the de facto representative of the international Jewish community, felt it was their duty to put him on trial. As Chief Prosecutor for the trial Gideon Hausner put it, “there was only one man who had ever been almost entirely concerned with the Jews, whose business had been almost entirely with the Jews, whose business had been

their destruction.”¹ Eichmann was the Nazi who made the Holocaust possible, and the Jewish people were eager to see him brought to justice.

The Israeli court proceedings relied heavily on the Nuremberg precedent, and Eichmann was brought to trial under the Nazi Collaboration (Punishment) Law of 1950, a retroactive law that relied upon the precedent established by the Nuremberg Trials and its 1945 charter.² Yet, while the Nuremberg Trials addressed a variety of Nazi war crimes, Eichmann’s trial took on a more focused subject, for “this time ‘the tragedy of Jewry as a whole was to be the central concern.’”³ It was time to focus on the *Shoah* by itself, distinct from the rest of the atrocities of National Socialism. With such an agenda, “the Eichmann trial was one of the major news events in 1961, attracting the attention of an overwhelming majority of Americans.... Gallup Poll data indicate that 87 per cent of adult Americans had heard or read about the trial and that almost three-fourths were very or fairly interested in it.”⁴

Yet, from its outset, the Eichmann trial brought up more problems than it solved, and the prosecution of Eichmann proved to be far from a straightforward affair. First, Eichmann’s direct yet distanced role in the Final Solution promised to be a difficult crime to investigate, for, as Hannah Arendt noted, “Eichmann... had never committed an overt act [of killing]... it was an important point; it touched upon the very essence of this crime, which was no ordinary crime, and the very nature of this criminal, who was no common criminal; by implication, it also took

¹ Reported in Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (New York: Penguin Books, 2006), 6.

² Seyla Benhabib, *The Reluctant Modernism of Hannah Arendt*. Revised edition. (Lanham, Md: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2003), 182.

³ Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, 6.

⁴ Irving Crespi, “Public Reactions to the Eichmann Trial.” *The Public Opinion Quarterly* 28, no. 1 (April 1, 1964): 91.

cognizance of the weird fact that in the death camps it was usually the inmates and the victims who had actually wielded ‘the fatal instrument with [their] own hands.’”⁵

Although faced with the complexities of Eichmann’s peculiar role in the Nazi bureaucracy, initial reports about Eichmann’s capture focused on concerns about the legal proceedings of the proposed trial, and, as historian Peter Novick notes, “in the first weeks after Ben-Gurion’s announcement, newspaper editorials, by a margin of more than two to one, were negative in one way or another.”⁶ Beyond debates of Israel’s right to conduct the trial in the place of an international court, reports expressed concerns about the specific charge against Eichmann: “crimes against the Jewish people” rather than “crimes against humanity.” A lawyer at the Nuremberg Trials, Telford Taylor, took particular issue with the manner in which this charge disregarded the Nuremberg precedent, writing in January 1961 for the *New York Times* that “to define a crime in terms of religion or nationality of the victim, instead of the nature of the criminal act, is wholly out of keeping with the needs of the times and the trend of modern law.”⁷ Israeli Prime Minister Ben-Gurion, for one, anticipated this argument, arguing that it implicitly denies that Jews belong to the category of “humanity.” Writing in a 1960 *New York Times* article, Ben-Gurion noted, “Now I see it argued... [that] Eichmann’s crime, in its enormity, was against humanity and the conscience of humanity rather than against Jews as such. Only a Jew with an inferiority complex could say that: only one who does not reason that a Jew is a human being.”⁸

⁵ Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, 247.

⁶ Peter Novick, *The Holocaust in American Life* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1999), 137-138.

⁷ Telford Taylor, “Large Questions in the Eichmann Case: One Who Prosecuted Nazi War Criminals at Nuremberg Considers the Coming Trial in Israel and Asks If It Will Contribute to the Growth of International Law and Justice. Questions in the Eichmann Case,” *New York Times*, January 22, 1961.

⁸ “The Eichmann Case as Seen by Ben-Gurion,” *New York Times Magazine*, December 8, 1960.

Yet, precisely because Eichmann's crime was both incredibly painful to revisit and so difficult to legally categorize, the trial triggered a flood of other questions left largely unanswered in the wake of the Holocaust—larger questions about the Holocaust as opposed to simply Eichmann's role in it. Elie Wiesel, survivor and prominent writer, for example, took the trial as an opportunity to point out the failure of the international Jewish community to do more to stop the murder of so many of their people. In particular, Wiesel was outraged that the Palestinian and “American Jewish community never made use of its political and financial powers” to stop the catastrophe, and he therefore declared that “for the trial to have been conducted on its right moral plane—the plane of absolute truth—the prosecutor, Gideon Hausner (or Ben-Gurion himself as Witness), should have bowed his head and cried out in a voice loud enough to be heard by three generations: Before judging others, let us look into our own errors, our own weaknesses. We never attempted the impossible—we never exhausted the possible.”⁹ In what ironically foreshadowed the Arendt Controversy, Wiesel's attempt to condemn international Jewish complicity resulted in harsh responses in the letters to the editor of his 1961 *Commentary* piece, with one reviewer accusing him of destroying “the conventional distinction between the categories of criminal, onlooker, and victim.”¹⁰ More importantly, however, what Wiesel and others demonstrated in their response to the trial was the extent to which the American Jewish community had yet to tackle the painful problems confronting them after the Holocaust—thus the particular conundrum Eichmann presented to the public was less how to prosecute his role in the Holocaust than it was how to negotiate what larger understanding of the Holocaust would frame his deeds.

⁹ Elie Wiesel, “Eichmann's Victims and the Unheard Testimony.” *Commentary* 32, no. 6 (December 1, 1961): 513.

¹⁰ Elie Flatto, “Eichmanns Victims,” *Commentary*, April 1, 1962, <http://www.commentarymagazine.com/articles/eichmanns-victims/>.

Although Eichmann was hanged on May 31, 1962, his death was by no means the end of the debate. The publication of Arendt's report on the trial, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (1963), in both its five-part series in *The New Yorker* (beginning in Feb. of 1963) and the subsequent book combining those parts, ignited a storm across the Jewish community and beyond. The controversy in America provoked by Arendt's five-part series was, according to historian Anson Rabinbach, "certainly the most bitter public dispute among intellectuals and scholars concerning the Holocaust that has ever taken place."¹¹ In her book, Arendt had not only painted the court proceedings as a "show trial," but she also had called Eichmann banal at the same time she ventured to question the role Jewish leaders had in their own peoples' destruction. In America, although the Israeli community would play its role, the Jewish debate was particularly vicious and long-winded. Upon reflection two decades later, prominent Jewish thinker Irving Howe would call the early 60s a "civil war" amongst the New York intellectual elite.¹² Even in September 1963, Jewish writer for *Commentary* Norman Podhoretz pleaded with the American Jewish community to conduct the debate on less acrimonious terms: "the Nazis destroyed a third of the Jewish people. In the name of all that is humane, will the remnant never let up on itself?"¹³ He was, however, not soon to be done with the rift.

Many of the American Jewish intellectuals—most notably Lionel Abel, Irving Howe, Marie Syrkin, Daniel Bell, and Dwight Macdonald—participated in the controversy for years.

¹¹ Anson Rabinbach, "Eichmann in New York: The New York Intellectuals and the Hannah Arendt Controversy," *October* 108 (April 1, 2004): 97.

¹² Irving Howe, *A Margin of Hope: An Intellectual Autobiography* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1982), 290.

¹³ Norman Podhoretz, "Hannah Arendt on Eichmann: A Study in the Perversity of Brilliance," September 1, 1963. *Commentary*, <http://www.commentarymagazine.com/article/hannah-arendt-on-eichmann-a-study-in-the-perversity-of-brilliance/>.

However, the controversy was not limited to the Jewish community, for people like Judge Michael A. Musmanno and Arendt's close friend Mary McCarthy would greatly contribute to the fabric of the debate. Beginning with the first installment of Arendt's *New Yorker* series in February 1963, these intellectuals debated Arendt's controversial ideas publicly through a variety of means. In addition to writing articles in publications like *Partisan Review*, *The New York Times*, *Commentary*, and *Dissent*, these thinkers also participated in a broad array of public forums sponsored by Jewish organizations, broadening the conversation beyond the bounds of this group of Jewish intellectuals. Moreover, one of the central events that prolonged the controversy was the 1965 publication of Jacob Robinson's *And the Crooked Shall be Made Straight*, a book written with the sole purpose of refuting Arendt's arguments virtually line-by-line.

Why did Arendt's report on the Eichmann trial ignite such a fierce and long-lasting controversy in America, particularly among the American Jewish community? What specific points in her work were met with the most opposition, and what do her critics' reactions reveal about the post-Holocaust mood in America? How did Arendt and her critics take different approaches to the construction of a delineated memory of the Holocaust, and what happened when these two approaches collided?

Arendt's critics considered her report dangerous because her argument seemed, on the one hand, to diminish the blame of Eichmann and anti-Semitism for their part in the Final Solution, and on the other hand, to obscure and tarnish the sanctity of Jewish victimhood. Her report, "with its potential boomerangs,"¹⁴ was so controversial because it threatened to circulate a dangerous, potentially anti-Semitic portrait of the Holocaust at *the very moment the public*

¹⁴ Daniel Bell, "The Alphabet of Justice: Reflections on 'Eichmann in Jerusalem,'" *Partisan Review*, XXX/3 (fall 1963): 421.

memory of the Holocaust was up for debate. It could even be said that the anxiety surrounding Arendt's apparent argument—and its possibility to further inflame anti-Semitism— was itself the catalyst for the flood of public debates about what narrative the memory of the Holocaust should adopt. In response to the danger of Arendt, her critics were forced to themselves construct a public understanding of the Holocaust through their engagement with, and primarily refutation of, her work.

The controversy thus certainly transcended an empirical debate—it was a battle that sought to understand how one might understand and discuss morality, justice and truth in the face of the death of six million Jews. Furthermore, *Eichmann in Jerusalem* became the prism through which these matters were debated. Although the manner in which individuals approached the book was informed by these larger questions, the argument was in large part ensconced in quarrels over the book's content. That Arendt's book was deeply ambiguous certainly contributed to such quarrels, but this also rendered the book incredibly pliable—each player involved in the debate would interpret and exploit their own reading of Arendt to further their arguments. Implicit and explicit in these readings of *Eichmann in Jerusalem* are comments on how one should historicize tragedy, for the debate centered on the proper subject, style and frame one should use to approach the Holocaust. Arendt's work and her critics' response to it thus provided the terms upon which a site of Holocaust memory would form.

In order to study how the response of Arendt's work crystallized in a clash of approaches to the construction Holocaust memory, section 1 of this chapter will first examine the social, political, and historical stakes of the controversy. The controversy engendered one of the first public debates about how one can understand and talk about the Holocaust partly because Arendt's publication raised the urgency and importance of engaging the public perception of the

Holocaust and its bearing on Jewish identity. Section 2 will discuss the debate surrounding Arendt's understanding of Eichmann's evil as "banal." Her portrait of Eichmann as a clownish figure, incapable of thinking from the standpoint of someone else and willingly embracing the Nazi movement, was largely misunderstood as an intent to diminish his culpability in his crimes. Moreover, because Arendt's banality thesis both stressed modernity as opposed to anti-Semitism and seemed to be a universally applicable theory of evil, this controversy revealed and in some senses provoked an anxiety about universal frameworks of understanding the Holocaust that could deny the specific and willful catastrophe enacted upon the Jews. Section 3 will discuss how Arendt challenged the prevailing conception of evil *and* good, examining how her retelling of Jewish behavior under the conditions of Nazi terror was perceived as a narrative that emphasized Jewish complicity and blame rather than redemptive victimhood and martyrdom. In the clash of historical frameworks that converged in the debate, Arendt asserted the importance of understanding history not through its continuities or traditions, but rather through its ruptures and contingencies, challenging the extent to which her critics hoped to reimagine traditional frameworks in order to understand the meaning of the Holocaust and to preserve the memory of its victims.

In short, the chapter hopes to go further than simply identifying what Arendt meant with *Eichmann in Jerusalem* by investigating the clash of approaches and concerns that engendered the controversy. This chapter also hopes to reveal what each side considered to be crucially important or dangerous in the retelling of the Holocaust, examining how the interaction of their ideas helped delineate standards of understanding its history for the future.

The Stakes of a Memory

According to historian Peter Novick, the Eichmann Trial became “the first time that what we now call the Holocaust was presented to the American public as an entity in its own right, distinct from Nazi barbarism in general. In the United States, the word “Holocaust” first became firmly attached to the murder of European Jewry as a result of the trial.”⁷⁰ Arendt’s *New Yorker* series and subsequent book in large part provoked this public debate that began the work of constructing a narrative of the Holocaust in and of itself. In doing so, the trial offered both an opportunity and a danger for the Jewish community. The struggle “among the Jewish community and the survivors of the Holocaust as to how and in what terms one should appropriate the memory of the Holocaust and its victims”⁷¹ provided the potential for cathartic and enduring remembrance, but this project also had the possibility of failing because it could produce a portrait that disrespected their peoples’ memory, that neglected to tell the “truth,” or even that failed to impart the proper lessons for the future. Worse, the opportunity provided by the trial could be used to promote anti-Semitism and to further endanger the Jews. As Peter Novick explained, “The ADL also worried that the trial could ‘damage the image which many people have of Jews as a fair-minded and merciful people.’”⁷²

Hannah Arendt’s book was understood to be dangerous by her Jewish critics almost immediately. The central danger in the report was, according to her critics, its ambiguous, if not anti-Semitic, portrait of the Holocaust that emphasized Jewish rather than Nazi guilt. As Jewish thinker Norman Podheretz put it, “in the place of the monstrous Nazi, she gives us the 'banal' Nazi; in the place of the Jew as a virtuous martyr, she gives us the Jew as accomplice in evil; and

⁷⁰ Novick, *The Holocaust in American Life*, 142.

⁷¹ Benhabib, *Reluctant Modernism*, 180.

⁷² Novick, *The Holocaust in American Life*, 140.

in the place of the confrontation of guilt and innocence, she gives the 'collaboration' of criminal and victims."⁷³ The immediate anxiety surrounding Arendt's work prompted her critics to anticipate its impact by denying its merits publicly, ironically serving to further circulate versions of her ideas and establish the debate as a long-lasting interpretive structure. Arendt had a point when— after the publication of Jacob Robinson's *And the Crooked Shall Be Made Straight*, a book entirely devoted to refuting Arendt—she remarked that “Robinson's formidable supporters have put their whole power at the service of propagating what they were most anxious to avoid.”⁷⁴

At the outset, her critics responded with outcry, utter refutations of her arguments, and condemnations of Arendt's personal disposition, but organizations like the Anti-Defamation League took more active steps to prevent the book's potential harm. On March 11, 1963, the organization circulated a memorandum to all regional offices about the report, hoping to provide “a small assist in handling some aspects of the problem that may confront you.”⁷⁵ The assistance this memorandum provided was an interpretation or understanding of the book for its recipients, but the memorandum also identified the work as a dangerous and potentially long-lasting threat for the Jews, for Arendt had “given the world a concept about Jewish participation in the Nazi holocaust which may plague Jews for years to come.” The memorandum told its readers, then, that the book was centrally about the theory that “the Jews not only passively permitted themselves to be destroyed, but actually supervised the administrative details of the Final

⁷³ Podhoretz, “Hannah Arendt on Eichmann.”

⁷⁴ Hannah Arendt, “‘Formidable Dr. Robinson’: A Reply,” *New York Review of Books*, January 20, 1966, accessed March 1, 2015. <http://www.nybooks.com/articles/archives/1966/jan/20/the-formidable-dr-robinson-a-reply/5>

⁷⁵ Memorandum by Arnold Forster, March 11, 1963, “For Your Information Memorandum To ADL Regional Offices From Anti-Defamation League,” The Hannah Arendt Papers, Library of Congress.

Solution.”⁷⁶ Although Arendt rejected this interpretation, this nonetheless became the predominant mode of understanding her report over the course of the controversy.

In the ADL’s July-August of 1963 version of their publication, *Facts*, the ADL went a step further and provided an extensive article, written by one of Arendt’s central critics, Jacob Robinson, about the book. Robinson was harsh on Arendt’s work, believing it to be an attempt to blame the Jews for their own destruction. He concluded that Arendt’s work is not only an “effort to minimize Eichmann’s responsibility for the deaths,” but also an attempt to suggest that “the acts of Jews individually or collectively...resulted in the destruction of European Jewry.”⁷⁷ Robinson calls Arendt’s suggestions “unreal and evil,” not only for its prejudiced views, but also because of its potential for wide circulation and acceptance across the world—after all, Arendt was a globally respected authority on totalitarianism by the 1960s. “To the extent that it [*Eichmann in Jerusalem*] gains acceptance as a work of unquestioned authority—and undermines the realities of history,” Robinson writes to his readers, “it is an evil book.”⁷⁸

Arendt critics seemed terrified of both the specific content of Arendt’s work—they understood it to be a work that blames the Holocaust on the Jews themselves—and the potential Arendt’s work had to be widely circulated and accepted in the Gentile world. There was a potential, according to the critics, for a false portrait to go *unquestioned*. This prejudiced history could circulate and become the static, homogenous status quo of belief, breeding discrimination or violence. After the Holocaust, the possibility of violent danger in anti-Semitic discourse was haunting the conversation. It was, then, a controversy that did not only involve members of the

⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁷⁷ Jacob Robinson, “A Report on the Evil of Banality: The Arendt Book,” *Facts—Published by the Anti-Defamation League*, July-August, 1963, vol. 15, no. 1. The Hannah Arendt Papers Library of Congress.

⁷⁸ Ibid.

Jewish community. Because of the trial's importance and Arendt's choice of publication, the debate was also very much about how Gentile Americans would ultimately view the Jews during the Holocaust. It was not simply a battle for defining a memory amongst Jews, it was defining a memory for the public, for a wider audience; the political implications of that memory were heightened. There was a fear that Arendt's book would inform the image of the Jew for Americans. For American Jewry, her ideas were not simply offensive and false, they could also have disastrous effects on their social and political status.

The danger with Arendt's work resulted from the fact that she had not only circulated these damning ideas to the *Gentile* world (via *The New Yorker*), but also because she herself was an *authority* on the subject. Arendt's well-known role as a public intellectual and scholar lent her a great deal of credibility and authority. Her critics feared her reputation could have the result of rendering her work "the final word" on the subject. Thus, part of the controversy was an attempt to criticize Arendt's reputation as a credible *scholar*, emphasizing that her work was not only prejudiced, but false, incorrect and a result of poor research. Judge Michael Musmanno—who testified at the Eichmann Trial and wrote the original review of Arendt's book in the *New York Times*—highlighted this fact, arguing, "the disparity between what Miss Arendt states, and what the ascertained facts are, occurs with such disturbing frequency in her book that it can hardly be accepted as an authoritative historical work."⁷⁹

Her critics hoped to break down the potential for Arendt's work to become the singular, unquestioned narrative, trying to avoid the general public from simply receiving and accepting—

⁷⁹ Michael A. Musmanno, "Man With an Unspotted Conscience: Adolf Eichmann's Role in the Nazi Mania Is Weighed in Hannah Arendt's New Book Man With an Unspotted Conscience." *New York Times*, May 19, 1963.

rather than contesting and challenging—her book. Jewish intellectual Irving Howe, for example, expressed a fear he and writer Marie Syrkin both shared:

How many *New Yorker* readers... had ever before cared to read anything of the vast literature about Jewish resistance, martyrdom, and survival during World War II? How many would ever read anything about it again? ... For the *New Yorker* does not print polemics, rebuttals, or qualifying comments ... Her articles raised issues of the utmost gravity, for they contained charges against the European Jews, their institutions and leaders, which are certain to rouse the deepest emotions among those of us who—Jews who by an accident of geography—survive. These articles reached a mass audience almost certainly unequipped to judge them critically, a mass audience that would never see Lionel Abel's devastating critique or even hear that Dr. Robinson had prepared a point-by-point refutation."⁸⁰

The fact that the book was published in *The New Yorker* compounded their fear, for *The New Yorker* not only does not publish rebuttals, but also continued to refuse to do so over the course of the controversy. Arendt's critics yearned for the chance to re-negotiate the topic with Arendt's readership, particularly her Gentile one.

Judge Michael Musmanno worked tirelessly to publish his own reply to Arendt's work in *The New Yorker*, especially after the its editor William Shawn wrote Musmanno had chosen to "misunderstand" Arendt's book in Musmanno's May 19, 1963 review of *Eichmann in Jerusalem* for *The New York Times*. Musmanno wrote several letters to Shawn within a span of a few days, growing increasingly frustrated that *The New Yorker* refused to publish a letter he had prepared for them. After two letters to Shawn, Judge Musmanno had clearly only become more outraged, writing, "I am sending the letter by certified mail so that we will have a record of its having been received by the New Yorker. I can thus say that I have done everything to erase a most objectionable, unfair and misleading attack on me, so gratuitous and wholly unnecessary."⁸¹

⁸⁰ Irving Howe, "The New Yorker and Hannah Arendt," *Commentary*, Oct. 1, 1963, <http://www.commentarymagazine.com/article/the-new-yorker-and-hannah-arendt/>.

⁸¹ Michael A. Musmanno to William Shawn, 26 July 1963. The Hannah Arendt Papers. Library of Congress.

Even the editor of the *New York Times*, Lester Merkel, got involved in Musmanno's fight to open *The New Yorker* to replies, writing several letters to William Shawn about the affair. The two editors quibbled about allowing Musmanno to reply, but William Shawn adamantly refused. "All of us here at the New Yorker were dismayed," Shawn writes to Merkel, "first by the choice of reviewer (after all, he was an interested party who felt he had been maligned in Miss Arendt's book, and therefore should have been disqualified); second, by his practically total misunderstanding of Miss Arendt's book. This was no mere matter of opinion; Musmanno was saying that white was black."⁸² Arendt critics continued to fight for the opportunity to contest and challenge Arendt within the forum of *The New Yorker*, but Shawn decided their contestations were not legitimate—they were "opinions," "false" and refusing to engage in the real conversation at hand. In any case, the goal of Arendt's critics was clear: to have the opportunity to, in front of the Gentile public, challenge Arendt's claims, squashing its clout before it takes hold in the space of men's minds.

The narrative of the Holocaust and its bearing on the public perception of Jews was fundamentally a political and social concern of the Jews after Arendt's report. For Israeli Prime Minister Ben-Gurion and Prosecutor Hausner, the trial was an opportunity to educate the world about the horrors of anti-Semitism and, by extension, the necessity of a Jewish state to protect the Jewish people from a world that had always been hostile to them. For some American Jews, the narrative employed by Prime Minister Ben-Gurion and Gideon Hausner would be "regularly invoked—indeed brandished as a weapon—in American Jewry's struggles on behalf of an embattled Israel."⁸³ Arendt would take note of this broadened scope of the trial, effectively

⁸² William Shawn to Lester Merkel, July 25, 1963. The Hannah Arendt Papers, Library of Congress.

⁸³ Novick, *The Holocaust in American Life*, 154.

accusing Ben-Gurion of conducting a “show-trial” rather than concentrating on justice for Eichmann’s deeds. The opening to her book is filled with portraits of the court as a theatre, with staged narrative arcs and a world audience to receive them. “Whoever planned this auditorium in the newly built *Beth Ha’am*, the House of the People...had a theater in mind,” she notes. “Clearly, this courtroom is not a bad place for the show trial David Ben-Gurion, Prime Minister of Israel, had in mind ...The audience was supposed to represent the whole world...[and] this case was built on what the Jews had suffered, not on what Eichmann had done.”⁸⁴

Arendt was perhaps not mistaken in her interpretation of the trial’s purported goal. Prosecutor Hausner himself declared, “It is not an individual that is in the dock at this historic trial, and not the Nazi regime alone, but anti-Semitism throughout history.”⁸⁵ If Israel hoped to refashion the narrative of the Holocaust as a way to prove the need for a Jewish homeland, the American Jewish population also had social and political concerns about how the Holocaust would come to be discussed. Because the holocaust was increasingly a subject of debate in America—partly as a result of Arendt’s critics’ own outcry—Arendt’s critics were forced to reconsider the American perception of the Holocaust’s role in informing the relationship between Jew and non-Jew in America.

As historians Alexander Bloom and Anson Rabinbach have pointed out, American Jews had largely avoided a public confrontation with the history of the Holocaust before the trial. Irving Howe has pointed to this fact as a probable cause for the ferocity of the debate, explaining that during the controversy the “long-suppressed grief evoked by the Holocaust burst out. It was as if her views, which roused many of us to fury, enabled us to finally speak about the

⁸⁴ Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, 5-6.

⁸⁵ Reported in Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, 19.

unspeakable.”⁸⁶ Moreover, historian Anson Rabinbach has argued that the trial and its controversy emerged at a “crucial juncture in the history of American Jewry,” for they had finally found themselves in a “special position...of unprecedented Jewish success” in American politics.⁸⁷ By ironically relying upon Arendt’s comparison of Nazism and Stalinism in *Origins of Totalitarianism* before the Eichmann controversy, the Jewish elite had completed its “American political itinerary from the left of the 1930s to anti-Stalinism,” finding success in appealing to the Cold War’s paranoia about the Soviet Union.

And yet, the burgeoning discussion of the Holocaust could threaten their political success, both because it revealed the extent to which American Jews had hitherto avoided the topic and because of the potential for a damning portrait of the Holocaust to further marginalize the “pariahdom” of the Jews in America. In hopes of preserving the fact that the Holocaust and survivors had not yet “carried the stigma of Jewish pariahdom,”⁸⁸ Jewish intellectuals responded with fierce public outcry against Arendt’s report. As Rabinbach put it, Arendt’s report was so dangerous “precisely because it did not sanctify the Holocaust, because it continued to warn of the vulnerability of the pariah, and because it so manifestly seemed to question the virtue of victimhood, gave offense.”⁸⁹

The passion and emotion involved in the controversy seems understandable from the outset. And emotional it was. Arendt biographer Elizabeth Young-Bruehl explains that during a debate hosted by *The Dissent* in 1963 about *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, supporters of Arendt were

⁸⁶ Irving Howe, “Mid-Century Turning Point: An Intellectual Memoir,” *Midstream*, June-July 1975, 25.

⁸⁷ Rabinbach, “Eichmann in New York,” 110.

⁸⁸ Rabinbach, “Eichmann in New York,” 105.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*

“booed loudly from the audience, while Lionel Abel pounded the speaker’s table in outrage.”⁹⁰

Although Howe later refuted this portrait of the debate as exaggerated, “clearly, this controversy consisted of more than an agitated debate over facts, historical accuracy, and proper interpretation.”⁹¹ It was about defining a memory and a history that would very much inform the image of Jewish identity, both for Jews themselves and the communities in which they lived.

The Banality of Evil

For Arendt critics, the Holocaust was the historical example of pure evil *par excellence*. After Arendt attended the Eichmann trial, however, she found one of the most infamous Nazi criminals to be more of a clownish figure than a demonic monster, titling her book “a Report on the *Banality of Evil*.” Since Arendt coined the phrase, “banality of evil” had been understood in countless different ways, its meaning endlessly stretched, distorted, misunderstood and employed throughout the Eichmann controversy and afterwards. In this sense, Arendt’s friend and prominent Jewish scholar Gershom Scholem was not far off when he criticized Arendt for using the phrase—“this new thesis strikes me as a catchword: it does not impress me, certainly.”⁹² And yet, the pliability of the phrase renders it an interesting fulcrum of analysis, joining and engaging opposing perspectives under the same term: banality.

Arendt understood Eichmann not as a sadistic monster but rather as “terrifyingly normal,” a man who taught us “the lesson of the fearsome, word-and-thought defying *banality of*

⁹⁰ Elizabeth Young-Bruehl, *Hannah Arendt: For Love of the World*, 2nd ed. (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 2004), 360.

⁹¹ Dan Diner, and Rita Bashaw, “Hannah Arendt Reconsidered: On the Banal and the Evil in Her Holocaust Narrative.” *New German Critique*, no. 71 (April 1, 1997): 177–90.

⁹² Gershom Scholem, “Eichmann in Jerusalem,” *Encounter*, January 1964, 53. Accessed December 3, 2014, <http://www.UNZ.org/Pub/Encounter-1964jan-00051>.

evil.”⁹³ Arendt saw something new in Eichmann, something perhaps more terrifying than the evil hitherto encountered. As she wrote in her notes for a lecture to her students at the University of Chicago in October 1963, “it were the most banal motives, not especially wicked ones (like sadism or wish to humiliate or will to power) which made Eichmann such a frightful evil-doer.”⁹⁴ Arendt instead described Eichmann as “thoughtless,” in the sense of lacking both the ability to think without the “banister” of law and the ability to think from the standpoint of someone else. As political theorist Dana Villa argued in 1999, “the ‘new type of criminal’ represented by Eichmann is *neither a party fanatic* nor *an indoctrinated robot*. Rather, he is the individual who participates willingly in the activities of a criminal regime, while viewing himself as insulated from any and all responsibility for his actions by both organization structure and the law.”⁹⁵

Arendt’s portrait of Eichmann emerged primarily as a reflection upon his mode of *thinking* under the Nazi system. As Arendt would later ask in *Life of the Mind* (1977),⁹⁶ “Might the problem of good or evil, our faculty for telling right from wrong, be connected with our faculty of thought?” Arendt described Eichmann almost as if he were a twisted and failed version of Kant’s principles of reason. Arendt first addressed the matter when she discussed how Eichmann “declared with great emphasis that he had lived his whole life according to Kant’s moral precepts,” a comment Arendt found all too ironic, an irresistible glance into how Eichmann saw himself. She explained how Eichmann’s understanding of Kant’s formula— as

⁹³ Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, 252.

⁹⁴ Hannah Arendt. Chicago University Jewish Students Lecture Notes, 30 October 1963. The Hannah Arendt Papers, Library of Congress.

⁹⁵ Dana Villa, *Politics, Philosophy, Terror* (Princeton, N.J: Princeton University Press, 1999), 52. Emphasis Added.

⁹⁶ Hannah Arendt, *Thinking*, vol. 1, *The Life of The Mind* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1977), 3.

Eichmann puts it, “to act as if the principles of your actions were the same as that of the legislator or of the law of the land”⁹⁷— was almost the opposite of what Kant had meant. Arendt, a thinker greatly influenced by Kant’s precepts, goes on to explain how Eichmann’s perspective was a gross perversion of the type of thinking Kant had described. As opposed to obedience to an external law, Kant explains how “every man was a legislator the moment he started to act: by using his ‘practical reason’ man found the principles that could and should be the principles of law.”⁹⁸ Indeed, it was Eichmann’s own failure to exhibit a Kantian structure of thinking that made him banal, for it was his lack of capacity for independent thinking under Nazi totalitarian power that led to his crimes. He was a shallow man who could not undergo the “practical reasoning” that engaged the standpoints of others, someone who “instead commit themselves absolutely to the fictional truth of the movement.”⁹⁹ Arendt’s discussion here reveals more than Eichmann’s perverted understanding of himself—for Arendt, his failure to think independently and from the standpoint of others amounted to a failure *to* think more generally. This is what she calls “thoughtlessness.”

As Arendt explains, “banality” is intended to describe the specific character of Eichmann, arguing that he “lacked imagination” and “merely, to put the matter colloquially, never realized what he was doing.”¹⁰⁰ Arendt’s insistence that Eichmann “never realized what he was doing” is easily misunderstood, a statement that seems to disregard Eichmann’s knowledge of, and by extension responsibility for, the Final Solution. Yet, she certainly did not mean that Eichmann wasn’t aware of the plan to exterminate the Jews—as Arendt scholar Roger Berkowitz has

⁹⁷ Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, 136.

⁹⁸ Ibid.

⁹⁹ Roger Berkowitz, “Misreading ‘Eichmann in Jerusalem,’” *Opinionator*, *New York Times*, July 7, 2014, accessed April 10, 2015, <http://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2013/07/07/misreading-hannah-arendts-eichmann-in-jerusalem/>.

¹⁰⁰ Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, 287.

argued, “she [Arendt] knew that once the Fuhrer decided on physical liquidation, Eichmann embraced that decision. What she meant was that he acted thoughtlessly and dutifully, not as a robotic bureaucrat, but as part of a movement, as someone convinced that he was sacrificing an easy morality for a higher good.”¹⁰¹ Arendt’s portrait of Eichmann was met almost immediately with backlash—Eichmann’s supposed banality did not seem to be an appropriate conclusion to draw when considering the unspeakable horror of his crimes. The banality of evil disrupted the assumption that Eichmann’s demonic nature was a given, virtually indisputable. Lionel Abel, for example, asked simply, “How could the man not have been morally monstrous? And all the more a monster if he did not know he was one!”¹⁰²

The fact that her critics immediately rejected the phrase almost seems, upon reflection, “overdetermined,” for Arendt was well aware of the fact that her approach was decidedly opposed to “the tradition of Western thought, which saw evil in metaphysical terms as ultimate depravity, corruption, or sinfulness.”¹⁰³ In Arendt’s lecture notes for Jewish students at the University of Chicago in October 1963, she explains that “banality of evil” “goes against our whole tradition where Lucifer is a fallen archangel (implying the worst were once the best), against our beliefs of the demonic nature of evil, that there is something grand in it, that it may have positive results.”¹⁰⁴ One can see this clash of approaches quite well in Judge Michael Musmanno’s review of her book, as well as in the many letters Musmanno sent to the editor of *The New Yorker*, William Shawn during the controversy. Frustrated that Shawn wrote in *The New Yorker’s* June 1963 *Notes and Comments* that Musmanno had “chose[n] to misunderstand”

¹⁰¹ Berkowitz, “Misreading ‘Eichmann.’”

¹⁰² Lionel Abel, “The Aesthetics of Evil,” *The Partisan Review* (June 1963): 225. Accessed October 9, 2014. <http://www.UNZ.org/Pub/PartisanRev-1963q2-00211.225>

¹⁰³ Benhabib, *Reluctant Modernism*, 174.

¹⁰⁴ Hannah Arendt. Chicago University Jewish Students Lecture Notes, 30 October 1963. The Hannah Arendt Papers, Library of Congress.

Arendt's book, Musmanno fiercely defended his review in a letter to Shawn, calling Hitler and Himmler "arch-demons" and explaining that they were "the very personification of evil, that they represented the very dregs of humankind in the land gangsterism and murder."¹⁰⁵ Because Arendt rejected the "depravity, corruption, or sinfulness"¹⁰⁶ of evil, Musmanno responded by protesting the very fact that she had, in a word, broken down a narrative of the mythic proportions of evil.

This point was well noted by her audience, particularly her defenders. Hence journalist Richard Rhodes, writing in *The Kansas City Times* in June 1963, noted that Arendt was different from the "post-war books about the Nazis [that] read like morality plays in which Hitler is the Devil and his seconds the diabolic host."¹⁰⁷ Her supporters in fact, often celebrated her challenge to traditional moral frameworks. It was a welcome jolt for someone like Daniel Bell, a Jewish thinker and sociologist who largely supported Arendt's arguments that seemed to remind the Jews the ways in which traditional forms of understanding evil fail to account for—and confront—the full scope of modern horror. "It would be comfortable for all of us," he writes, if Eichmann was the "perverted sadist," the "monster."¹⁰⁸ Indeed, Bell notes, "Then evil could again be seen as something 'other,' as something cunning, mephitic or surrealistic, the conjuring of literary romancers like Lautreamont who in his *Chants De Ladorer* narrates a 'career of evil' through the incantations of sadism. But the reality of evil, as Simone Weil once noted, is that it is

¹⁰⁵ Michael A. Musmanno to William Shawn, 22 July 1963. The Hannah Arendt Papers. Library of Congress.

¹⁰⁶ Michael Rothberg, *Multidirectional Memory: Remembering the Holocaust in the Age of Decolonization*, Cultural Memory in the Present (Stanford, Calif: Stanford University Press, 2009), 174.

¹⁰⁷ Richard Rhodes, "The Difficult Questions Posed By Genocide," *Kansas City Times*, June 10, 1963. The Hannah Arendt Papers, Library of Congress.

¹⁰⁸ Bell, "The Alphabet of Justice," 423.

‘gloomy, monotonous, barren, and boring.’ Because evil, when done, is felt not as evil, but as a necessity or a duty. And this was the evil of Adolf Eichmann.”¹⁰⁹

One of the most frequently misinterpreted aspects of the “banality of evil” thesis is its applicability beyond Eichmann in particular. In *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, Arendt maintained that she was judging Eichmann as an individual, not as the representative of Nazism generally, and would continue to emphasize during the controversy that this was her intent. “Banality” was meant to signal the fact that one “cannot extract any diabolical or demonic profundity from Eichmann,” and it does *not* mean that Eichmann’s evil is the typical case—and for Arendt, this “is still far from calling commonplace.”¹¹⁰ In her notes for an October 1963 lecture to her Jewish students at the University of Chicago, Arendt also reminds her students that “in the center of every criminal court proceedings, you find the accused, an individual of flesh and blood—not a ‘system’ and not ‘history.’”¹¹¹ Her judgment of Eichmann— but also the scope of her trial report—was specific to Eichmann. As political theorist Dana Villa reminds us, ‘The banality of evil’ named Eichmann’s evil, not the evil of the perpetrators or the Holocaust in general.”¹¹²

And yet, “the banality of evil” was immediately misunderstood from her original intent, often represented as a general, structural theory about evil. Arendt tried to clarify her meaning in her January 1964 letter to prominent Jewish thinker Gershom Scholem, explaining this new notion of evil:

¹⁰⁹ Ibid.

¹¹⁰ Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, 288.

¹¹¹ Hannah Arendt. Chicago University Jewish Students Lecture Notes, 30 October 1963. The Hannah Arendt Papers, Library of Congress.

¹¹² Villa, *Politics, Philosophy, Terror*, 41.

It is indeed my opinion now that evil is never 'radical,' that it is only extreme, and that it possesses neither depth nor any demonic dimension. It can overgrow and lay waste the whole world precisely because it spreads like a fungus on the surface. It is 'thought-defying,' as I said, because thought tries to reach some depth, to go to the roots, and the moment it concerns itself with evil, it is frustrated because there is nothing. That is its 'banality.' Only the good has depth and can be radical.¹¹³

For Arendt, then, this evil is shallow and exists at the surface; it is rootless and therefore can be infectious.¹¹⁴ Despite this attempt at clarification, in this exchange with Scholem Arendt exacerbated the problem of the phrase's misinterpretation as a general theory about evil, almost explicitly arguing for a new universal concept of evil despite the fact that she elsewhere rejected this application of "banality." Her friend and mentor Karl Jaspers would point out this misstep in her exchange with Scholem. Jaspers, as did Arendt, believed that "the point is that *this* evil, not evil per se, is banal. I wasn't altogether happy with your phrasing of this point in your response to Scholem. *What* evil is stands *behind* your phrase characterizing Eichmann."¹¹⁵ Jaspers was right to express his dissatisfaction with her *Encounter* exchange, for she continued to give life to the idea that Eichmann was the prototype for a new theory on evil rather than explain her larger philosophical reflections were a result of her judgment of Eichmann in particular.¹¹⁶ The only general understanding one should glean from the trial, according to Arendt, was 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... it was a lesson, neither an explanation of the phenomenon nor a theory about it."¹¹⁷ For Arendt, Eichmann was only one

¹¹³ Hannah Arendt, "Eichmann in Jerusalem' by Gershom Scholem", *Encounter* (January 1964): 56.

¹¹⁴ Hannah Arendt. Columbia University Jewish Students Lecture Notes, July 23, 1963. *The Hannah Arendt Papers*, Library of Congress,

¹¹⁵ Karl Jaspers to Hannah Arendt, December 13, 1963 in Hannah Arendt, *Hannah Arendt/Karl Jaspers Correspondence, 1926-1969*, 1st U.S. ed (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1992), 542.

¹¹⁶ Villa, *Politics, Philosophy, Terror*, 58.

¹¹⁷ Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, 288.

type of Nazi. She of course believed that Nazis could be motivated by any number of things, for they could be “fanatics, sadists, thugs and brutes, as well as ‘desk murderers.’”¹¹⁸

Said in another way, Arendt “banality of evil” was a reflection upon Eichmann’s broken condition of *thinking* that could engender evil rather than a theory about evil per se. It was an unprecedented condition of thoughtlessness, linking our ability to *think* with morality itself. Yet, during the controversy many assumed she meant banal to be a new, universal theory about evil in the modern world. In one of the letters-to-the-editor for Musmanno’s original review in *The New York Times*, for example, one Joseph Kaskell wrote, “as shown by Miss Arendt, Eichmann was a prototype”¹¹⁹ of the modern perpetrator of evil. However, Arendt not only rejected the banality thesis as a general theory, but also rejected the notion of “general theories” themselves throughout her life. This resistance to generalization went well beyond a reluctance to find a universal notion of evil. She did not, unlike many sociologists of her day, believe historians should describe and implement universally applicable generalizations of historical or social phenomena. As Seyla Benhabib puts it, “one of Arendt’s chief quarrels with the social sciences of her day was that the dominant positivist paradigm led to ahistorical modes of thinking and to hasty enthusiasm for analogies and generalizations... one searched for the generalizable and cross culturally ‘similar,’ more often than not ending in banal generalization.”¹²⁰ In other words, Arendt was hesitant to derive a theory from the *specific case of Eichmann* that would be universally applicable to other, distinct historical events. For Arendt, it would be misleading to understand an event through a supposedly universal theory: positivistic law imposes its own meaning upon the event rather than deriving an independent judgment from the event itself.

¹¹⁸ Villa, *Politics, Philosophy, Terror*, 54

¹¹⁹ Joseph Kaskell, “Letters to the Editor: ‘Eichmann in Jerusalem,’” *New York Times*, July 14, 1963.

¹²⁰ Benhabib, *Reluctant Modernism*, 89.

Related to this misunderstanding surrounding the applicability of her banality thesis, Arendt's "banality of evil" was often understood as an argument in support of "cog theory"—a theory, already circulating before Arendt's 1963 publication of *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, that explained the potential for such massive crimes as a result of modern political or economic systems that use men like cogs in a bureaucratic, ideological machine. Arendt was not aligning herself with proponents of the "cog theory," and in fact reiterates that this was the notion suggested by Eichmann's defense during the trial. She outright rejected the idea that Eichmann was simply a robotic cog in a murderous bureaucratic machine in her 1963 book. "The whole cog theory is legally pointless," Arendt explained. "All the cogs in the machinery, no matter how insignificant, are in court forthwith transformed back into perpetrators, that is to say, into human beings."¹²¹ Arendt disliked the "cog theory" first and foremost because it was too large and abstract a scale with which to observe the case at hand: justice. Arendt's "banality of evil" is interested less in describing and understanding the Nazi system than how this individual engaged with and behaved under that system.

Despite Arendt's many explicit refutations of this interpretation of her work, she was nonetheless understood as one of the champions of this cog theory. Because of this, a debate for or against "cog theory" often provided the framework through which her supporters and critics approached the problem of evil. In an editorial for *The Reconstructionist* – a journal "dedicated to the advancement of Judaism as a religious civilization, to the upbuilding of Eretz Yisrael as the spiritual center of the Jewish People, and to the furtherance of universal freedom, justice and peace"—the author attributed "strange and inexplicable bias" to the fact that "Miss Arendt...seems to have become convinced that Eichmann was simply a small cog in a great

¹²¹ Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, 289.

machine. This is the very image of himself that Eichmann tried to project.”¹²² Interpreting Arendt as a proponent of “cog theory” was not relegated to her critics. Her supporters would also misunderstand her on this point. One of her supporters, political scientist Frederic Burin, for example, declared in 1964 “He [Eichmann] was but a cog.”¹²³

The “cog theory” was neither invented nor addressed by Arendt in her report. Before the publication of *Eichmann in Jerusalem* thinkers were already talking about this approach to Eichmann’s deed. Before the release of the verdict, American writer Harold Rosenberg, for example, explained the troubling way in which Eichmann’s deeds could be explained away as impersonal acts within a bureaucratic scheme—how are we to judge a cog if “a cog, cannot, of course, be concerned with suffering inflicted by the machine of which it is a part.”¹²⁴ After *Eichmann in Jerusalem* was published, both Arendt’s supporters and critics continued to circulate this idea, this time in relation to Arendt’s work. Virtually everyone believed her work proposed a theory about the representative perpetrator of modern evil, one that simply obeys orders within his bureaucratic web. In the face of the lacuna of scholarship on the Holocaust at this point, a general theory about bureaucratic evil was both compelling—because it helped explain how the Nazi machine could carry out such an extensive horror—and horrifying—because it could explain *away* and exonerate individual guilt in the crimes they took part in. For

¹²² “The New Yorker Series on Eichmann,” *The Reconstructionist*, March 22, 1963 vol. xxix, no. 3. The Hannah Arendt Papers, Library of Congress.

¹²³ Frederic S. Burin, “Review of Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil. by Hannah Arendt,” *Political Science Quarterly* 79, no. 1 (March 1, 1964): 124. doi:10.2307/2146583.

¹²⁴ Harold Rosenberg. “The Trial And Eichmann,” *Commentary*, November 1, 1961. https://www.commentarymagazine.com/articles/the-trial-and-eichmann/#gf_18.

historian David Villa, the widespread misinterpretation of Arendt's work "testifie[d] to a deeply rooted need for a picture of the 'representative perpetrator'"¹²⁵ in the aftermath of the Holocaust.

Certainly the controversy revealed a *need* in the sense that both her critics and defenders desperately sought to understand larger questions of evil after the Holocaust, particularly because the Holocaust was left largely unexamined in a public arena. Yet, the controversy also most starkly reveals her critics' anxiety about this particular interpretation of the Holocaust. In the first place, this understanding of Arendt was so vehemently rejected because it seemed to diminish Eichmann's blame in the murder of the Jewish people. Because the "banality of evil" was perceived as a general theory about the distanced, obedient-rather-than-hateful perpetrator, Arendt was understood as disregarding the ways in which Eichmann was guilty and directly responsible for his crimes. Arendt critics largely agreed that Arendt had provided a justification of Eichmann's only hope of defense at the trial. Thus, Lionel Abel argued that Arendt's "picture of him [Eichmann] is the very one Eichmann himself presented in Jerusalem at his trial. Now obviously he could not have justified himself morally or politically; thus his only tactic was to present himself as not such a bad fellow after all, as a mere administrator with a high sense of duty, who had done what his superiors had told him to do in service to a regime whose objectives at the time he could not even suspect were evil."¹²⁶ More importantly, however, placing Eichmann's evil in the context of modernity rather than anti-Semitism led to the belief that she diminished the critical role Nazi's Jew-hatred played in motivating the Final Solution. In reaction to Arendt's portrait of Eichmann's motives, Norman Podhoretz, for example, emphatically declared that "no person could have joined the Nazi party, let alone the S.S., who was not at the

¹²⁵ Villa, *Politics, Philosophy, Terror*, 59.

¹²⁶ Abel, "The Aesthetics of Evil," 221.

very least a *vicious* anti-Semite."¹²⁷ The central context in which Arendt sits her description of Eichmann's motivations goes beyond anti-Semitism—a frame that, according to her critics, could obscure *the specificity of Jewish victimhood*.

Arendt's approach to ideological education and conviction under totalitarianism was deeply complex and nuanced, and she explored the subject to an extraordinary degree in *Origins of Totalitarianism*. Arendt understood the central roots of totalitarian movements neither in terms of fanatical ideology nor in terms of the modern man's nature of conditioned obedience. We cannot simply stop at anti-Semitism as the explanatory motive for totalitarian genocide. Rather, we must understand the capacity for thinking and engaging under this ideology. As she put it in *Origins of Totalitarianism*, "The aim of totalitarian education has never been to instill convictions but to destroy the capacity to form any."¹²⁸ In *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, then, Arendt focused on Eichmann's anti-Semitism less as the driving force, and more as the context in which it was enacted. As Arendt stated in *Eichmann in Jerusalem* that "only the choice of the victims, not the nature of the crime, could be derived from the long history of Jew-hatred and anti-Semitism."¹²⁹ The *origins* of totalitarianism, so to speak, were not in anti-Semitism (which only target the victim), but in the rise of the modern, imperial nation-state, one that aimed to make men superfluous through stripping them the right of social and political humanity. In this sense, Arendt along with her mentor Jaspers would be a proponent of trying Eichmann for "crimes against humanity," not "crimes against the Jews." Framing the crime in such a way was crucial in our hopes of preventing such horror in the future. If only the choice of the victims were a result of anti-Semitism, then the Jews would not always be the only victims of genocide. Arendt

¹²⁷ Podhoretz, "Hannah Arendt on Eichmann", 6.

¹²⁸ Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (San Diego: Harcourt Brace, 1973), 468.

¹²⁹ Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, 269.

hoped to set a precedent for approaching this unprecedented crime, for “the unprecedented, once it has appeared, may become a precedent for the future, that all trials touching upon ‘crimes against humanity’ must be judged according to a standard that is today still an ‘ideal.’ If genocide is an actual possibility of the future, then no people on earth—least of all, of course, the Jewish People, in Israel or elsewhere—can feel reasonably sure of its continued existence without the help and the protection of international law.”¹³⁰

Bruno Bettelheim—Arendt supporter and prominent psychologist—thus stated that while the Israeli and Jewish community “viewed Hitlerism as a chapter, though the most lurid chapter, of anti-Semitism,” Arendt believed that “this was not the last chapter in anti-Semitism but rather one of the first chapters in modern totalitarianism.”¹³¹ This split exacerbated the tension in the controversy, and Arendt critics responded with a great deal of worry that Arendt’s frame would obscure the fact that this catastrophe was a *willful, targeted and culturally specific intent to exterminate the Jews*. Jacob Robinson, for example, was especially frustrated by what we might call the “secularity” or “universality” of her stance on the trial, also taking issue with the “substitution of ‘crimes against humanity’ for ‘crimes against the Jewish people’”—in his words, Arendt’s universality “would hardly do justice to the special place of the ‘Jewish question’ in the totality of Nazi doctrine and practice, and to the particular methods employed by the Nazis for dealing with Jews as compared with other racial, national, or political group.”¹³²

For Arendt’s American Jewish critics, her reluctance to stress the centrality of anti-Semitism in Eichmann’s motives failed to give proper weight to the particularity of Jewish

¹³⁰ Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, 273.

¹³¹ Bruno Bettelheim, “Eichmann; the System; the Victims.” *New Republic* 148, no. 24 (June 15, 1963): 27.

¹³² Jacob Robinson, *And the Crooked Shall Be Made Straight: The Eichmann Trial, the Jewish Catastrophe, and Hannah Arendt’s Narrative* (New York: Macmillan, 1965), 91.

victimhood and experience in her account of the Holocaust. In response, Arendt's critics not only disputed Arendt's understanding of Eichmann, but also hoped to re-establish the importance of approaching the memory of Holocaust through specifically Jewish terms and voices. The strong emphasis on the importance and authority of Jewish historical frames and perspectives did not go unnoticed. In Mary McCarthy's 1964 *Partisan Review* article, *The Hue and the Cry*, Arendt's longtime friend complained that her critics distorted and silenced the debate by arguing that only Jews could understand the Holocaust and thus the merits of Arendt's arguments—"as a Gentile," McCarthy writes bitterly, "I don't 'understand.'"¹³³ Marie Syrkin, one of Arendt's fiercest critics, responded by reaffirming that Jewish perspectives are not silencing the debate, but rather providing the most legitimate means to understand the Holocaust and honor its victims. The division between Arendt critics and supporters "would appear to be between the adequately informed, among whom Jews naturally predominate, and the uninformed, neither intellectually nor emotionally involved in the questions under debate."¹³⁴

Arendt critics in the controversy refashioned "their forefathers' traditions and culture...and the sacredness of their memory"¹³⁵ to stress their particular experience and understanding of the Holocaust. American Jewish critics sought to recover Jewish history and culture not only as a means to honor and respect the victims of the Holocaust, but also as a way to frame an understanding of the importance of this debate. For them it was a distinctly Jewish experience—by placing the history of the Holocaust outside of decades anti-Semitism and Jewish victimhood, Arendt was threatening Jewish power to tell their own narrative of the death of six million Jews. As Laurence Thomas, political scientist of Jewish and Black experiences,

¹³³ Mary McCarthy, "The Hue and The Cry," *Partisan Review* 1 (Winter 1964), 82.

¹³⁴ Marie Syrkin, "More on Eichmann," *Partisan Review* 2 (Vol. 31 1964), 253.

¹³⁵ Richard Cohen, "A Generation's Response to Eichmann in Jerusalem," in *Hannah Arendt in Jerusalem*, edited by Steven E. Aschheim. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), 277.

puts it in 1988, the Jews were fighting for “group autonomy” after the Holocaust, defined by Thomas as “when by and large it is regarded by other groups as the foremost interpreter of its own history and experiences.”¹³⁶ As Jewish thinkers fought for the proliferation of Holocaust memory *on Jewish terms*, American Jews refashioned an understanding of Jewish history and identity through which to approach this memory. In doing so, American Jews publicly re-examine their understanding of both the Holocaust and their own Jewish identity.

The Sacred Memory of the Victim

Arendt’s critics not only accused Arendt of obscuring the specificity of Jewish victimhood, for they also accused her of tarnishing the memory of those victims. With her infamous comments on Jewish council leaders complicity with their Nazi perpetrators, Arendt had violated the sacredness of victim memory. If with her banality thesis she challenged the mythic proportions of evil, with her comments on Jewish behavior she also challenged the mythic proportions of good. In seemingly both obscuring and defaming the memory of Jewish victims of the Holocaust, Arendt violated the inviolable: the respect, honor and sacredness of the memory of the victims. This, perhaps, was the deepest emotional offense Arendt committed in the eyes of her critics.

Arendt was not the first person to bring up the notion of complicity during the Holocaust. Raul Hilberg’s *The Destruction of the European Jews* (1961) was one of the first attempts to comprehensibly analyze the Holocaust, and it “attracted a good deal of attention because it came

¹³⁶ Laurence Thomas, “Essay on Liberalism and the Holocaust: An Essay on Trust and the Black-Jewish Relationships,” in *Echoes From The Holocaust: Philosophical Reflection on Dark Times* (Temple UP, 1988).

out in the middle of the Eichmann trial.”¹³⁷ As H.R. Trevor-Roper explains in his *Commentary* review of the text, “we cannot escape the fact that the Jews of Europe, obedient to their leaders and their own habits of mind, collaborated in their own destruction. Again and again this fact emerges from Mr. Hilberg's narrative. It is his most surprising revelation, and it will probably be the least welcome to his readers. But it is inescapable.”¹³⁸ This finding, of course, did not go unchallenged, but nor did it erupt in a controversy like Arendt's. Letters in response to Trevor-Roper's review noted that Hilberg's “generalizations . . . are untrue and are based on selected evidence, on half-truths,” rejecting Hilberg's thesis. In fact, the Jewish community, in America and in Israel, was no stranger to the charge of Jewish collaboration, and had debated the issue since the war ended. It should be noted that the “first time an Israeli court had to confront the Holocaust, it was a Jewish leader who was put on trial”¹³⁹—the Trial of Rudolf Kastner, a prominent Jewish leader accused of having collaborated with the Nazis in an effort to save roughly 1500 Hungarian Jews from certain death. As historian Leora Bilsky has pointed out, after his prosecution (wherein an Israeli judge told Kastner he had sold his soul to the devil), murder and posthumous pardon, “in the early 1960s, Israeli society was just recovering from the painful stage of accusing the victims for their own disaster and moving on to blame the victimizers.”¹⁴⁰

¹³⁷ Novick, *The Holocaust in American Life*, 147.

¹³⁸ H.R. Trevor-Roper, “The Destruction of the European Jews, by Raul Hilberg (Book Review).” *Commentary* 33, no. 4 (April 1, 1962), 354.

¹³⁹ Leora Bilsky, “Between Justice and Politics: The Competition of Storytellers in the Eichmann Trial” in *Hannah Arendt in Jerusalem*, ed. Steven E. Aschheim (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), 234.

¹⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 235.

It is not hard, however, to see why Arendt's comments in *Eichmann in Jerusalem* would have been particularly controversial. In one of the most debated sections of the report, Arendt wrote:

To a Jew this role of the Jewish leaders in the destruction of their own people is undoubtedly the darkest chapter of the whole dark story. It had been known about before, but it has now been exposed for the first time in all its pathetic and sordid detail by Raul Hilberg...the whole truth was that there existed Jewish community organizations and Jewish party and welfare organizations on both the local and the international level. Wherever Jews lived, there were recognized Jewish leaders, and this leadership, almost without exception, cooperated in one way or another, for one reason or another, with the Nazis. The whole truth was that if the Jewish people had really been unorganized and leaderless, there would have been chaos and plenty of misery but the total number of victims would hardly have been between four and a half and six million people.¹⁴¹

Here, Arendt is not addressing the behavior of the majority of Jews during the Holocaust, but is explicitly addressing the role of *Jewish leaders*. Arendt tries to be careful to distinguish between the conditions of terror for a majority of the Jews and for the Jewish leaders. In a letter to Mary McCarthy, Arendt explains that “the point of the matter is that the absolute terror of which I spoke in the *Origins of Totalitarianism*, was present for the Jews in the camps, and, generally speaking, for the Jewish people. But this was by no means true for the ‘leaders.’”¹⁴² Furthermore, it is not that Arendt critiques the Jewish leaders failure to resist the Nazis, for Arendt believes that “Resistance was well-nigh impossible also outside the camps though people did not act under the immediate impact of terror.” Arendt points out not that the leaders should have resisted, but that they should have not participated at all. As Arendt asserts, “what was possible

¹⁴¹ Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, 117-125.

¹⁴² Hannah Arendt to Mary McCarthy in response to Lionel Abel's review in *Partisan Review*, 1963. Letter. The Hannah Arendt Papers, Library of Congress.

there, the Jewish Councils, was non-participation. So the alternative is never: Resistance and rebellion, as Hausner indicated, but in the case of the Jewish Elders: non-participation.”¹⁴³

In her report, Arendt was particularly controversial not only because she challenged the sacredness of victimhood, but also because she identified specific leaders that were dear to the Jewish community. In particular Arendt shares a whole host of harsh words about Dr. Leo Baeck, a rabbi and Jewish leader who would come to be on the Jewish Council at the concentration camp Theresienstadt. In the original version of her series Arendt claimed some had called him the “Jewish Fuhrer”—although she would later remove this term—for his involvement in gathering the lists of those to be deported for death to Auschwitz. For Arendt, Baeck was a “voluntary ‘bearer of secrets’” for the Nazis, helping them with their work while aware of the imminent death of the people he listed for deportation. Although some called this silence a more ‘humane’ solution in the face of the inevitable, Arendt states that “during the Eichmann trial, one witness pointed out the unfortunate consequences of this kind of ‘humanity’—people volunteered for deportation from Theresienstadt to Auschwitz and denounced those who tried to tell them the truth as being ‘not sane.’”¹⁴⁴ She had, in short, dwelt on Jewish complicity in such a way that seemed to insult the honor of Jewish victims. Her critic Norman Podhoretz captured this violation perfectly: “In the place of the monstrous Nazi, she gives us the ‘banal’ Nazi; in the place of the Jew as a virtuous martyr, she gives us the Jew as accomplice in evil; and in the place of the confrontation of guilt and innocence, she gives the ‘collaboration’ of criminal and victims.”¹⁴⁵

¹⁴³ Hannah Arendt. Columbia University Jewish Students Lecture Notes, July 23, 1963. The Hannah Arendt Papers, Library of Congress.

¹⁴⁴ Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, 119.

¹⁴⁵ Podhoretz, “Hannah Arendt on Eichmann.”

Arendt, in *Eichmann in Jerusalem* and earlier in *Origins of Totalitarianism*, had also commented on the “well-known” fact that “the distinction between victim and persecutors was blurred in the concentration camps, deliberately and with calculations.”¹⁴⁶ Arendt challenged the conventional understanding of the victim of evil in approaching her analysis of totalitarian methods. For Arendt, this chapter of the story “offers the most striking insight into the totality of the moral collapse the Nazis caused in respectable European society—not only in Germany but in almost all countries, not only among the persecutors but also among the victims.”¹⁴⁷ Yet, Arendt was also adamant that “this is not what I mean by a Jewish share in the guilt...this was part of the system and had indeed nothing to do with the Jews.”¹⁴⁸ She deconstructs the distinction between victim and perpetrator not to place blame on the victim, but rather to express the insidious, repugnant ways in which Nazi totalitarianism prompted their victims to aid in their own destruction under conditions of terror.

The very premise of Arendt’s approach to understanding Jewish behavior in *Eichmann in Jerusalem* was often rejected outright by her critics. In response to Arendt’s idea that humans were “compelled to participate in their own extermination,” Gershom Scholem responds with outcry—“is the distinction between torturer and victim thereby blurred? What perversity!”¹⁴⁹ Arendt critics would resist any attempt to mar the sanctity of Jewish victims. Syrkin would of course agree with Scholem, arguing that it is “precisely the ‘evil’ of the victim that is at issue—whether in descending or ascending order of responsibility.”¹⁵⁰ Yet, more broadly, Arendt’s critics would take Arendt’s comments about Jewish council leaders and concentration camp

¹⁴⁶ Hannah Arendt, “Eichmann in Jerusalem’ by Gershom Scholem,” *Encounter* (January 1964).

¹⁴⁷ Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, 126.

¹⁴⁸ Hannah Arendt, “Eichmann in Jerusalem,” 55.

¹⁴⁹ *Ibid*, 52.

¹⁵⁰ Marie Syrkin, “Hannah Arendt: The Clothes of the Empress,” *Dissent*, September, 1963, 345, <http://search.opinionarchives.com/Summary/Dissent/V10I4P344-1.htm>.345.

victims together, portraying Arendt's book as an attempt to comprehensively place blame on the Jews for the murder of their own people. As Marie Syrkin argued, "her [Arendt's] accusation of the Jews, far from being ironic or even subtle, is explicit and unequivocal, and is not at all limited to "Jewish functionaries."¹⁵¹ All of her most prominent critics echoed Syrkin on this point and agreed that Arendt was judging the Jews for their own destruction, tarnishing victim's memory with the charge of complicity. Norman Podhoretz went further to argue that Arendt's critique of the leadership's actions is implicitly a critique of the Jew himself. "She is saying that if the Jews had not been Jews, the Nazis would not have been able to kill so many of them—which is a difficult proposition to dispute," Podhoretz insisted. "I do not think I am being unfair to Miss Arendt here. Consider: the Jews of Europe, even where they were 'highly assimilated,' were an organized people, and in most cases a centrally organized people."¹⁵²

Hence, in response to Arendt's book, Judge Michael Musmanno wrote an article in the *National Jewish Monthly* entitled "Did the 6,000,000 kill themselves?" arguing forcefully against what her critics believed to be her point: that the Jews were responsible for their own deaths. As he put it, Hannah Arendt had given "enthusiastic currency to Eichmann's mad claim that the Jews operated in their own destruction."¹⁵³ Central to this interpretation was an understanding that Arendt was not only charging complicity, but also blame for Jewish failure to resist. Elie Wiesel, for example, complained of a "kind of intellectual fad" to ask the Jews "'Why did they go off to the slaughter like sheep? Why didn't they revolt?'"¹⁵⁴ Wiesel explicitly named Arendt

¹⁵¹ Ibid, 345

¹⁵² Podhoretz, "Hannah Arendt on Eichmann," 5.

¹⁵³ Michael A. Musmanno, "Did The 6,000,000 Kill Themselves?" *National Jewish Monthly*, September 1963. The Hannah Arendt Papers, Library of Congress.

¹⁵⁴ Elie Wiesel in Oscar Handlin, "'Eichmann in Jerusalem By Hannah Arendt (Book Review).'" *New Leader*, August 5, 1963.

and Bruno Bettelheim as part of this “intellectual fad,” but the truth is Arendt herself called those questions “cruel and silly,”¹⁵⁵ condemning the prosecution for asking survivors those questions during the Eichmann Trial. Arendt was adamant that she was not making the victims responsible for their slaughter “by their failure to resist...Still, this accusation even found its way into the *Encyclopedia Judaica*,¹⁵⁶ becoming the predominant interpretation of Arendt’s discussion of Jewish behavior during the Holocaust.

Part of Arendt’s violation of the sanctity of Jewish victimhood was her refusal to grant the honor of martyrdom to Jewish victims. In a July 1963 lecture at Columbia University, Arendt tells her Jewish students that it is a *lie* to say “our dead were martyrs—but martyrs are only people who are given a choice. It was precisely martyrdom which the Nazi system had made impossible. Our dead were simply ‘innocents.’”¹⁵⁷ Certainly this approach provoked much misunderstanding and resentment for her apparent refusal to honor and respect the dead. Amongst other critics, the rabbi of Hillcrest Jewish Center in New York stated in April 1963 that Arendt “almost reverses the roles and makes the victims guilty of the crime. Why can we not let the martyred dead at least rest in peace?”¹⁵⁸ And yet, Arendt was not attempting to diminish the truth of the pain and suffering that this “thought-defying” evil could cause, nor was she trying to place all blame on the dead (indeed she called them innocent). Rather, in a sense, Arendt was critiquing the use of legend to approach history. She not only rejects the specific claim to

<http://search.proquest.com/hnplatimes/docview/1308961059/31BCF2AE79AA4587PQ/3?accountid=10141>.

¹⁵⁵ Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, 12.

¹⁵⁶ Amos Elon, introduction to *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* by Hannah Arendt (New York: Penguin Books, 2006), ix.

¹⁵⁷ Hannah Arendt. Columbia University Jewish Students Lecture Notes, 23 July 1963. *The Hannah Arendt Papers*, Library of Congress.

¹⁵⁸ Hillcrest Jewish Center Bulletin, “Rabbi’s Message,” April 19, 1963. *The Hannah Arendt Papers*. Library of Congress.

thinking about the Holocaust in terms of an almost mythical division between the devil and the sacred sacrifice of victims, but she also rejects legend as an interpretive vehicle itself. As she explained to her Jewish Students at Columbia in July 1963, “the alternative to this thinking and judging are legends: Their enormous importance in history, almost greater than historical events. I don’t say or think that legends are necessarily bad, but in our instance they hide the truth, more: they are lies, that is, they don’t explain reality but in legendary form argue it away.”¹⁵⁹

Furthermore, this debate reveals a deeper split in the manner in which Arendt and her critics drew meaning from a history of unspeakable horror. Both sides reflected a mood of loss—as Arendt explained, after Auschwitz “it was as if an abyss had opened.” Yet, they would approach this abyss of understanding quite differently. While her critics looked to the traditions and continuities in the history of the Jews in order to both preserve their memory and *refashion and remold* their meaning for a post-Holocaust world, Arendt proposed that historians should focus on *ruptures* of historical narratives, learning from the past in order to form *new* foundations for our thinking. She denied continuity and progressions that imply inevitabilities, and borrowed Walter Benjamin’s idea to “to break the chain of narrative continuity, to shatter chronology as the natural structure of narrative, to stress fragmentariness, historical dead ends, failures, and ruptures...it is also a way of ‘preserving the past’ without being enslaved by it, in particular without having one’s moral and political imagination stifled by arguments of ‘historical necessity.’”¹⁶⁰ Arendt, in sum, was arguing for a disruption of our relationship to the past, understanding our world not through the frameworks of past traditions but rather learning

¹⁵⁹ Hannah Arendt. Columbia University Jewish Students Lecture Notes, 23 July 1963. The Hannah Arendt Papers, Library of Congress.

¹⁶⁰ Benhabib, *Reluctant Modernism*, 88.

how to build new frameworks from the lessons of the past. “It seemed to me,” Arendt said in 1964, that “there should be a basis for a communication precisely in the abyss of Auschwitz.”¹⁶¹

¹⁶¹ Hannah Arendt, interview by Gunter Gaus, *Zur Person*, 1964.
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dsoImQfVsO4>.

Chapter 2

Negotiating Identity Through Memory

In the aftermath of Nazi horror, Theodor Adorno famously wrote that “to write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric.”¹ Although he later doubted the applicability of his own words, the mood of the post-Holocaust is well captured by his statement: it was a mood of loss, both of lives and pillars of thinking and approaches to the world. Many came to describe the crimes perpetrated upon the European Jews as indescribable, for the extremity of Nazi deeds seemed to surpass our ability to represent them. How does one express unspeakable horror? The Holocaust, in so grossly violating human understanding and imagination, presented the world with a problem of history. For many, this new, “unspeakable” horror rendered the prevailing approaches to the past limited, insufficient, even reductive. Yet, the need to share the reality of this horror was acutely felt. This history needed to be told, both to honor the dignity of its victims and to impart the lessons gleaned from their deaths. Attempts at representing the Holocaust were dangerous because there was a need for truth, but our collective ability to express those truths was (and still is) limited. Writing histories of the Holocaust has remained a daunting task since the fall of Nazi power. Historian Raul Hilberg wrote, even in the 1980s, that “the recreators of the Holocaust, be they historians, sculptors, architects, designers, novelists...are molding something new,” yet they take a risk “if they take poetic license to subtract something from the crude reality for the sake of heightened effect.”²

¹ Theodor W. Adorno, *Prisms: Essays in Cultural Criticism and Society* (MIT Press, 1982).

² Berel Lang and Aharon Appelfeld, eds. *Writing and the Holocaust*. (New York: Holmes & Meier, 1988), 23.

In his 1951 essay Adorno signaled a problem that the players in the Arendt controversy would confront, for the stakes involved in writing the history of the Holocaust were not just a matter of content. While almost everyone agreed that Holocaust history must be recorded, there remained, and indeed still remains, the problem of how to describe what happened. Beyond the problem of inexpressibility in the aftermath of trauma, there was also the problem of how to use these histories to understand, and most importantly, prevent, such horrors. One needed to preserve the memory of the victims through history, but, in doing so, one could also preserve the logic of their murderers. As Hannah Arendt told us about the difficulties she encountered while writing *Origins of Totalitarianism*, “my first problem was how to write historically about something—totalitarianism—which I did not want to conserve but on the contrary felt engaged to destroy.”³

The controversy that ensued after the 1963 publication of Arendt’s *Eichmann in Jerusalem* was partly a result of these difficulties of historical pursuits. Because Arendt had seemingly violated the terms and methods through which one should talk about the Holocaust, the debate about Arendt’s report provided an opportunity for her critics to negotiate and construct practices of memory. As Arendt critic Walter Laqueur so astutely pointed out in 1965, “Miss Arendt was attacked not so much for what she said, but for how she said it.”⁴ The controversy was precisely a struggle to define the ways one should approach the scene of this tragedy.

Over the course of the controversy, Arendt and her critics disputed each other’s approaches to writing the history of the Holocaust, becoming a conversation that served to

³ Hannah Arendt, “Reply to Eric Voegelin’s Review of *The Origins of Totalitarianism*,” *Review of Politics* 15 (January 1953): 79.

⁴ Walter Laqueur, “A Reply to Hannah Arendt,” *The New York Review of Books*, February 3, 1966, <http://www.nybooks.com/articles/archives/1966/feb/03/a-reply-to-hannah-arendt/>.

delineate and establish new standards of historical discourse. Those involved in the debate, particularly Arendt, did more than just negotiate standards of Holocaust histories. They identified and tested the *limits* of those standards. If Adorno declared that poetry after the Holocaust is an insult to the dead, Arendt and this controversy challenged Adorno's approach. In one example, a Jewish Columbia student named Don Levine wrote to Arendt in 1963, telling her "I had the pleasure of hearing your talk at the university...you had remarked during the talk something to the effect that 'the poets would have to get at this material.' I have often felt this way myself."⁵ Levine then used Arendt's lecture as an opportunity to make "an attempt" at describing the Holocaust through poetry: "I have distorted some of the facts and juggled history in favor of great concision and poetic effect...I am sending [my poem] to you partly out of egoistic reasons, but I would like to believe that I am also doing it to show you that not all of us in America have forgotten, that I have not forgotten, that there is a debt that I feel (to history if you like, or to man) which I am trying to cope with in the only terms I feel I can—poetry."⁶ One can imagine how Adorno, or even Raul Hilberg after him, might have been skeptical of the "distorted facts" and "juggled history" presented by this student, but Hannah Arendt welcomed, even encouraged, this type of pursuit. Arendt wrote back to Don Levine on January 13, 1964, telling him, "I was very moved by your poems...I think I know that it is precisely the poets who have not forgotten, no matter who or where they are. Must I send them back to you? I would very much like to keep them."⁷

Arendt, by virtue of publicly challenging modes of discourse, invited others to do the same. Don Levine was neither the first nor the last person to send Arendt his or her experiments

⁵ Don Levine to Arendt, The Hannah Arendt Papers, Library of Congress.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Hannah Arendt to Don Levine, January 13, 1964, The Hannah Arendt Papers, Library of Congress.

into exploring the Holocaust. One Thomas McAfee, for example, also sent her a poem that he wrote, entitling the work “Eichmann In Jerusalem—After Reading Hannah Arendt.”⁸ In his poem, McAfee echoed some of the specific ways in which Arendt’s book would provoke questions of discourse:

More in quarry, barred on top,
than in quandary,
as to where to presuppose,
we question, What
shall we, where shall we,
what shall we do
with this Jew Eichmann?

For we must presuppose ourselves.
Die at our own hands.
(Stupidity can be
lyrical. But there’s no lyric
in this solemn German whisper.)
We can set the monster
by a standard
How can we set
the less than ordinary head?⁹

McAfee, beyond venturing to use poetry, struggles to understand the “standard” by which we can judge Eichmann. Here, poetic expression is precisely how McAfee seeks to grasp a problem that lacks a guiding “standard.” Furthermore, McAfee calls Eichmann “a Jew,” a confusing, perhaps ironic suggestion that, in any case, would have been insulting to any Jewish reader at the time. Whether Arendt would have balked at this usage or not, the message is clear: Arendt herself became a tool through which one could present their own challenges to the limits and taboos of Holocaust history.

⁸ Thomas McAfee Poem to Arendt, n.d., The Hannah Arendt Papers, Library of Congress.

⁹ Ibid.

In challenging the way we can talk about the Holocaust, Arendt was also engaged in a conversation about how to approach this memory *as a Jew*. Indeed Arendt was Jewish herself, and in this sense provoked a discussion about how one's identity as a Jew informs and is informed by the memory of the destruction of six million Jews. If Arendt disrupted historical approaches, Arendt also disrupted understandings of a Jewish identity and how this identity dictated certain social expectations in America. Most centrally, Arendt had violated the expectations attached to this identity because she seemed to not only reject her own Jewishness, but also to have accepted the anti-Semite's belief in Jewish inferiority. In ceasing to speak from and for the Jewish people, Arendt's report pushed against the limits of acceptable behavior for a Jew in the post-Holocaust world. Yet, because she was so disruptive, her report also became a figure against which particular expectations attached to Jewish discourse were further delineated and solidified. It could be said that identity and its embedded social practices were built up over the course of the controversy—not because memory directly constructed their identity but because this memory provided an ongoing site of negotiation about how to historicize the Holocaust as a Jew.

In order to explore the relationship between Holocaust memory and the identity of American Jews, this chapter will first discuss how Arendt's ironic and detached tone provoked outcry because it seemed to eschew identification with the Jewish people and their suffering. Although Arendt's critics took issue with her refusal to speak from and for the perspective of the Jews, Arendt's approach explicitly advocated for a voice detached from any one identity. Through her understanding of storytelling, Arendt suggested that the historian must engage and present a multiplicity of perspectives. Section 2 of this chapter will discuss how Arendt's critics not only feared that she wished to reject her Jewish identity, but also understood her report to be

a signal of Arendt's *self-hatred* as a Jew. By marking Arendt as a self-hating Jew, Arendt's critics refashioned Arendt's report both as a test of one's Jewish allegiances and as a way to articulate the dangers of assimilation in an anti-Semitic world. Moreover, Arendt would become a figure that embodied the virtual "limit" of being Jewish—self-hatred marked the edge of acceptable Jewish self-criticism, for the point at which one's Jewishness flipped back to destroy itself was also the point at which one no longer should be considered to be speaking from a legitimate Jewish perspective. Finally, section 3 will discuss how Arendt did not wish to reject her own Jewishness, but rather advocated for a shifted notion of what being Jewish entailed: an embrace of Jewish "pariahdom," a self-conscious practice of engaging and promoting the perspectives of alterity and difference.

The Author and Her Story

Throughout *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, Arendt enraged her critics by exploring Eichmann's role in the Holocaust with a heavy-handed use of impersonal irony. As Arendt herself put it in 1964, "that the tone [of *Eichmann in Jerusalem*] is predominantly ironic is true."¹⁰ In describing Eichmann's perspective on the "Jewish Question," for example, Arendt explains that after reading the "famous Zionist classic" Theodor Herzl's *Der Judenstaat*, Eichmann was converted "promptly and forever to Zionism... From then on, as he repeated over and over, he thought of hardly anything but a 'political solution.'"¹¹ Arendt clearly did not believe Eichmann was a Zionist nor did she think that he understood its full meaning. Rather, she included Eichmann's

¹⁰ Hannah Arendt, interview by Gunter Gaus, *Zur Person*, 1964.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dsoImQfVsO4>

¹¹ Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (New York: Penguin Books, 2006), 41.

ironic self-understanding to present Eichmann's point of view. According to Arendt, Eichmann felt like a Zionist because he literally wanted to move Jews out of Germany to solve the "Jewish Question" before the "Final Solution" became the *only* solution. Mistaking Arendt's retelling of Eichmann's ironic self-conception as her *own* conception of Eichmann, many American Jews found the suggestion of Eichmann's Zionism to be insensitive, perhaps deliberately so. The Anti-Defamation League, for example, published a report in the July-August 1963 issue of their journal *Facts* wherein the author argued Arendt's suggestion that Eichmann was a "Zionist" was "somewhat like referring to Poles or Russians who engaged in pogroms, shouting 'Jews to Palestine!', as 'Zionists.'...the main function of much of his adult life was to destroy the Jewish people. The word 'Zionist' is, at best, misused by Dr. Arendt."¹² Her defenders would maintain that her critics were "blind to her gift of irony,"¹³ but whether they saw through the irony or not, the use of irony itself seemed to be the problem.

Arendt's critics primarily took issue with what the use of irony implied about Arendt's relationship to her fellow Jews: Arendt's distanced, cold, and dispassionate rhetoric demonstrated that she remained unmoved by Jewish suffering, unallied with their position in the world. Retelling the perspective of Eichmann, the judges at his trial and sometimes Eichmann's Jewish victims, Arendt did not primarily narrate the story from the perspective of a Jew, but rather maintained a distanced voice throughout her report. As Walter Laquer pointed out in 1983, "Hannah Arendt's reproaches were those of an outsider, lacking identification: they were almost

¹² Jacob Robinson, "A Report on the Evil of Banality: The Arendt Book," *Facts—Published by the Anti-Defamation League*, July-August, 1963, vol. 15, no. 1. The Hannah Arendt Papers Library of Congress.

¹³ Peter Davison, letter to the editor, *New York Times*. June 23, 1963, sec. The New York Times Book Review.

inhumanly cold.”¹⁴ Her “cold” or distanced approach was interpreted first and foremost as a disregard for the enormity of horror experienced by the Jews. For her critics, the emotional and horrifying nature of the subject demanded a personal and emotional response, and Arendt’s refusal to do so seemed to reveal a dismissal of her own people. The Director of Publications for the Anti-Defamation League, Henry Schwarzschild, warned Arendt of the storm that awaited her in America while she was abroad in March 1963, telling her that her tone would become a source of controversy. He tells her, “your tone in relating Eichmann’s own career is so studiously normal, so Kafkaesquely normal... Perhaps it is a mistake to stick with the technical terminology—final solution, transport, liquidation, etc.”¹⁵

A detached, unemotional approach was simply not appropriate for the subject at hand according to her critics, and her failure to exhibit her own emotional involvement in the topic revealed her lack of allegiance to the Jewish people. As Albert Hoschander Friedlander pointed out in the *Central Conference American Rabbis Journal* in October 1963, “the very nature of Miss Arendt’s material requires the involvement of passion.”¹⁶ For Friedlander and many others, Arendt was “the prototype of the intellectual,” for whom “the agonizing moral decisions of European community leaders who stand in the midst of a human situation become a cold intellectual problem that hindsight solves brilliantly.”¹⁷ In response to Arendt, her critics demanded that she personally engage the subject as a Jew, for the truth of this history was

¹⁴ Walter Laqueur, *America, Europe, and the Soviet Union: Selected Essays* (Transaction Publishers, 1983), 169.

¹⁵ Henry Schwarzschild to Hannah Arendt, 6 March 1963. The Hannah Arendt Papers, Library of Congress.

¹⁶ Albert Hoschander Friedlander, “The Arendt Report on Eichmann and the Jewish Community: An Evaluation,” *Central Conference American Rabbis Journal*, October 1963, The Hannah Arendt Papers, Library of Congress.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

inextricably tied to its emotional and personal nature. Thus Friedlander wrote that Arendt provides “an overly objective approach to a problem that required more subjectivity.”¹⁸

One of Arendt’s supporters, Daniel Bell, echoed this reading in fall 1963, explaining that Arendt’s report was controversial precisely because Arendt refused to write from and for the particularity of the Jewish identity. As he put it,

It is this tension between the parochial and the universal that explains the furious emotions over Miss Arendt’s book. For she writes from the standpoint of a universal principle which denies any parochial identity. It is this which gives her exposition a cold force and an abstract quality... the Jews remain a people, and the experiences of the race are the shaping elements of one’s identity. One feels that while many of Miss Arendt’s strictures are correct—if one can live by a universalistic standard—her response to the unbearable story reduces a tragic drama to a philosophical complexity. Can one exclude the existential person as a component of the human judgment? In this situation, one’s identity as a Jew, as well as *philosophe*, is relevant. The agony of Miss Arendt’s book is precisely that she takes her stand so unyieldingly on the side of disinterested justice, and that she judges both Nazi and Jew. But abstract justice, as the Talmudic wisdom knew, is sometimes too ‘strong’ a yardstick to judge the world.¹⁹

Bell, along with Arendt’s critics, believed Arendt was attempting to create a single universal standard with which to judge the past, explicitly eschewing and betraying a particularly Jewish voice and perspective. As Bell put it, Arendt “has cut all such ties [of parochial identity]: There is the unmoved quality of the Stoic, transcending tribe and nation.”²⁰

For Arendt, adopting her tone was not simply a matter of rhetorical strategy. It was the necessary path to understanding this past. As she reminded her students at the University of Chicago in October 1963, “the extent of the catastrophe, the moral catastrophe, we can only now slowly realize. We shall have to come to terms with it, but not by sentimentality and evading the

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Daniel Bell, “The Alphabet of Justice: Reflections on ‘Eichmann in Jerusalem,’” *Partisan Review*, XXX/3 (fall 1963): 428.

²⁰ Ibid.

issues.”²¹ Although Arendt certainly believed that the “role of the ‘heart in politics...[is] altogether questionable” because it often “conceals factual truth,”²² she most centrally took issue with the way in which social and pre-political facts like one’s Jewishness inform and even prescribe one’s public engagement and understanding of history. Said in another way, Arendt did not believe one’s identity should define their understanding of the world by providing the standards through which one will judge an issue. Arendt eschewed all pre-established standards through which to judge the past, accepting neither standards derived from one’s identity nor standards derived from supposedly “universal” experiences. Rather, Arendt hoped human judgment would be understood as “not bound by standards and rules under which particular cases are subsumed, but on the contrary, [as that which] produces its own principles by virtue of the judging activity itself: only under this assumption can we risk ourselves on this very slippery moral ground with some hope of finding some firm footing.”²³ It was not a choice between a universal or particular standard for Arendt, it was a question of a “standard” itself.

Bell wrote that Arendt judged from “the standpoint of a universal principle,” but Arendt was distinctly rejecting *any* principle through which to judge the past, whether it be universal or specific to the Jews. Arendt’s voice seemed detached not because of a reliance upon a “universal standard” or a refusal to identify with the Jews, but rather because she insisted on “thinking without banisters,” precisely an attempt to think without pre-established standards. During the 1972 Arendt conference covered by *Recovery of the Public World* (1979), Arendt described “thinking without banisters” through a physical metaphor of walking down stairs, explaining, “as

²¹ Hannah Arendt. Chicago University Jewish Students Lecture Notes, 30 October 1963. The Hannah Arendt Papers, Library of Congress.

²² Hannah Arendt, “Eichmann in Jerusalem’ by Gershom Scholem,” *Encounter* (January 1964), 54. Accessed December 3, 2014, <http://www.UNZ.org/Pub/Encounter-1964jan-00051>.

²³ Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, 27.

you go up and down the stairs you can always hold onto the bannister so that you don't fall down. But we have lost this bannister. That is the way I tell it to myself. And this is indeed what I try to do."²⁴ For Arendt, thinking "without banisters" destabilized the terms that guide our understanding of the world. It was thinking freed from reliance upon a singular standard that could falsely impose meaning rather than reveal truths. Arendt was aware that this approach was unsettling. As she put it in a 1972 Conference about her own political thought, "if you come up with such a thing and you take away their bannisters from people—their safe guiding lines (and then they talk about the breakdown of tradition but they have never realized what it means! That it means you really are out in the cold!) then, of course, the reaction is—and this has been my case quite often—that you are simply ignored. And I don't mind that. Sometimes you are attacked. But you usually are ignored, because even useful polemic cannot be carried through on my terms."²⁵

In order to "think without banisters" and escape a blinding reliance upon a singular point of view, Arendt suggested that the historian should represent, retell and engage multiple perspectives. Arendt hoped projects of history could undergo "storytelling," wherein the storyteller would narrate "the story of an event or situation from the plurality of perspectives that constitute it as a public phenomenon."²⁶ As political theorist Seyla Benhabib has argued, "At stake in such representational narrative was the ability 'to take the standpoint of the other,' which did not mean empathizing or even sympathizing with the other but re-creating the world as it

²⁴ Hannah Arendt and Melvyn A. Hill, eds., *Hannah Arendt, the Recovery of the Public World* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1979), 337.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 336.

²⁶ Lisa J. Disch, "More Truth Than Fact: Storytelling as Critical Understanding in the Writings of Hannah Arendt," *Political Theory* 21, no. 4 (November 1, 1993): 666.

appears through the eyes of others.”²⁷ Considering and representing other points of view is crucial in the quest to understand the world, for, as Arendt put it in *Promise of Politics*, “no one can adequately grasp the objective world in its full reality all on his own.”²⁸

For Arendt, it would be a mistake for the historian to impose a singular point of view. Thus, storytelling “reveals meaning without committing the error of defining it”²⁹ because it asks one to consider the multiple points of view on the same issue. A detached voice is precisely what Arendt hoped to achieve in *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, not in order to betray her Jewish identity or deny Jewish perspectives, but rather to encourage others to consider perspectives *in addition* to the Jewish ones. Thus, in Arendt’s explicit refusal to comprehensively speak from and for the Jews, her critics mistook her need to understand a plurality of perspectives as a denial of her own Jewish identity, allegiance and sympathies.

Self-Hatred and Self-Making

Arendt’s refusal to speak from and for the Jewish perspective seemed a refusal to *belong* to the Jews. Arendt’s report was itself controversial, but the fact that the report was written by a Jewish author made it all the more polemical. The extent to which Arendt’s critics questioned Arendt’s identity and personal motivations reveals that the controversy was not simply about how *anyone* could talk about the Holocaust, but about how *Jews* could talk about the Holocaust. By debating how Jews should speak about the Holocaust, Arendt’s critics revealed and rebuilt the expectations of discourse attached to one’s Jewish identity.

²⁷ Seyla Benhabib, *The Reluctant Modernism of Hannah Arendt*. Revised edition. (Lanham, Md: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2003), 89.

²⁸ Hannah Arendt, *The Promise of Politics*, 1st ed. (New York: Schocken Books, 2005), 129.

²⁹ Hannah Arendt, *Men in Dark Times* (New York: Harcourt, 1968), 105.

For Arendt's critics, one's Jewishness, as with other forms of identity, carried with it of course religious customs, but also expectations for what you could and could not say. As philosopher and feminist thinker Judith Butler has argued, "religion functions as a matrix of subject formation, an embedded framework for valuations, and a mode of belonging and embodied social practice."³⁰ Arendt's critics took issue with Arendt's failure to identify with and show love for the Jewish people in her discussion of the Holocaust. Her critics' loud condemnation of Arendt's betrayal of allegiance reveals Arendt had violated what had come to be expected of a Jewish perspective. Arendt's violation of her critics' expectations of public loyalty and support are nowhere better seen than in her famous correspondence with Gershom Scholem in *Encounter*. On June 12, 1963, Scholem wrote:

It is that heartless, frequently almost sneering and malicious tone with which these matters, touching the very quick of our life, are treated in your book to which I take exception... In the Jewish tradition there is a concept, hard to define and yet concrete enough, which we know as *Ahabath Israel*: "Love of the Jewish People..." In you, dear Hannah, as in so many intellectuals who came from the German Left, I find little trace of this... To speak of all this, however, in so wholly inappropriate a tone... this is not the way to approach the scene of that tragedy.³¹

In her reply, Arendt would provide an incredible insight into her approach to thinking in a world with so many allegiances and duties towards their people. She wrote to Scholem:

You are quite right—I am not moved by any 'love' of this sort, and for two reasons: I have never in my life 'loved' any people or collective—neither the German people, nor the French, nor the American, nor the working class or anything of that sort. I indeed love 'only' my friends and the only kind of love I know of and believe in is the love of persons. Secondly, this 'love of the Jews' would appear to me, since I am myself Jewish, as something rather suspect. I cannot love myself or anything which I know is part and

³⁰ Judith Butler, *Parting Ways: Jewishness and the Critique of Zionism* (Columbia University Press, 2012), 116.

³¹ Scholem, "Eichmann in Jerusalem," 51-52.

parcel of my own person... I do not 'love' the Jews, nor do I 'believe' in them; I merely belong to them as a matter of course, beyond dispute or arguments.³²

Arendt not only takes issue with the involvement of the “heart” in politics, but she also reveals that her identity should be treated as a fact “beyond dispute or arguments” rather than a guiding principle of her public engagement. Arendt, then, challenged this expectation of public “Love for the Jewish People,” taking issue primarily with allowing one’s identity to prescribe thinking in the public realm. As Arendt told Scholem, “what confuses you is that my arguments and my approach are different from what you are used to; in other words, the trouble is that I am independent. By this I mean, on the one hand, that I do not belong to any organization and always speak only for myself.”³³ By seemingly violating the expectations of public love and support for the Jewish people, Arendt’s report created a demand for such loyalty in the minds of her critics. Arendt’s violation, in other words, encouraged the solidification of the standard of allegiance she so harshly refused.

In addition to Arendt’s violations of speaking from and for the Jewish people, Arendt was also grossly challenging the assumed limits of Jewish self-criticism. She seemed to have crossed the line of acceptable Jewish critique of the Jewish people.³⁴ After the Holocaust there was, unsurprisingly, anxiety about the dangers of Jews criticizing Jews. As Jewish writer Elliot Cohen remarked in his 1949 *Commentary* piece, the “leadership of the Jewish ‘community’ urged ‘restraint’ on the ‘free and lively exchange of ideas’ for fear that the ‘goyim hear and use it against us.’”³⁵ Even so, Cohen and other American Jewish intellectuals defended the right to

³² Ibid, 54.

³³ Hannah Arendt, “‘Eichmann in Jerusalem’ by Gershom Scholem.”

³⁵ Glenn, Susan A., “The Vogue of Jewish Self-Hatred in Post- World War II America,” *Jewish Social Studies*, New Series, 12, no. 3 (April 1, 2006): 110.

engage in “‘decent’ Jewish ‘self-criticism’”³⁶ throughout the 50s and 60s. Historian Howard Sachar echoed Cohen’s earlier frustration with the anxiety about self-criticism found in the Jewish community when he spoke before the American Jewish Historical Society in 1966, for example. He challenged American Jewry to “take a step further in our evaluation of ourselves and or past, to liberate ourselves from the myth that a critical and analytical appraisal of Jewish life and Jewish history is somehow ‘washing our dirty linen’ in public?...I sometimes believe that not the least of wounds the Hitler epoch—anti-Semitism—inflicted upon us was the excuse it has given us for avoiding legitimate (as distinguished from pathological) self-criticism.”³⁷ This was not an uncommon frustration for many in the Jewish community, with one Jewish man, Gershon Weiler, writing to Arendt on July 1, 1963, “washing dirty linen in public is not a Jewish failing.”³⁸ Many American Jewish intellectuals, speaking before and during the Arendt controversy, defended the right of “decent” self-criticism, but it is this “decent” clause that Arendt seemed to have violated.

More specifically, Arendt’s critics believed that her critiques of Jewish behavior were derived not from independent self-reflection but from an internalization of an anti-Semitic viewpoint. The danger in Arendt’s Jewish criticism was not simply that it could inflame anti-Semitic fervor, but also that the hostile world was convincing *Jews* to believe in their own inferiority. The worst of the world’s endless hostility was not simply in its ability to provoke Gentile violence against the Jews, but in its ability to prompt Jews to be hostile to themselves. Arendt’s critics argued precisely that Arendt had internalized the viewpoint of the other, of the goyim who throughout history has remained anti-Semitic. Arendt’s work “can only be

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Howard Morley Sachar, “Objectivity and Jewish Social Science,” *American Jewish Historical Quarterly* 55, no. 4 (June 1966): 434–50.

³⁸ Gershon Weiler to Arendt, 1 July 1963. The Hannah Arendt Papers, Library of Congress.

understood as a sad result of diaspora,” for this “Jewess tries to interpret the tragedy of our people in such a one-sided way,” Michaelis-Stern states in her negative review in *Das Neue Isreal*.³⁹ Here, because Arendt is in “diaspora” and therefore surrounded by non-Jews, Arendt is being accused of internalizing or adopting the perspective of the hostile, Gentile world, the world that would judge the Jews in “such a one-sided way.” In other words, Michaelis-Stern attributes Arendt’s “one-sided” prejudice to her supposed adoption of the anti-Semite’s worldview.

What many were, in essence, accusing Arendt of was Jewish self-hatred, a concept that certainly existed before the War, but that had gained much popularity after. The concept of self-hatred was not one that was foreign to Jewish history and identity in America. According to historian Susan Glenn, the 1940s and 1950s in America saw the term widely used as a way to define the “neurosis” of the wartime generation.⁴⁰ For Glenn, the “vogue of ‘Jewish self-hatred’” was closely linked to the growing influence of “psychological thinking on American public life,” as well as the influence of “Jewish émigré intellectuals and social theorists...[who brought] European perspectives on anti-Semitism and Jewish self-consciousness to bear on wartime and postwar discussions of minority group psychology in the United States.”⁴¹ Although not the inventor of the phrase, Jean-Paul Sartre and his 1948 work, *The Anti-Semite and the Jew*, undoubtedly served to increase its use within a particularly Jewish context, though certainly Sartre’s concept had a close “analogue, ‘Negro self-hatred’”⁴² in America. Influenced by both Sartre’s and W.E.B. Du Bois’s notion of black “double consciousness,” Martiniquean

³⁹ Quoted in Dagme Barnouw, “The Secularity of Evil: Hannah Arendt and the Eichmann Controversy.” *Modern Judaism* 3, no. 1 (February 1, 1983): 82.

⁴⁰ Glenn, “The Vogue,” 98.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 99.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 100.

psychiatrist Frantz Fanon would continue to see convergences of the Jewish “self-hater” and his black counterpart, calling them as “brother[s] in misery.”⁴³

More specifically, however, Sartre describes how the world not only promotes anti-Semitic attitudes and behavior in the Gentile community, but also feeds an anti-Semitic view to the Jew himself, trying to convince him of his own inferiority. Trapped in an identity that alienates him from both society and self-love, the diasporic Jew is given a choice between the “inauthentic” and “authentic” Jew:

Such then is this haunted man, condemned to make his choice of himself on the basis of false problems and in a false situation, deprived of the metaphysical sense by the hostility of the society that surrounds him, driven to a rationalism of despair....He has been alienated even from his own body; his emotional life has been cut in two; he has been reduced to pursuing the impossible dream of universal brotherhood in a world that rejects him. It is we who constrain him to choose to be a Jew whether through flight from himself or through self-assertion; it is we who force him into the dilemma of Jewish authenticity or inauthenticity...The inauthentic Jew flees Jewish reality, and the anti-Semite makes him a Jew in spite of himself; but the authentic Jew *makes himself a Jew*, in the face of all and against all.⁴⁴

In the condition of exile, the Jew is forced between two options in the face of the anti-Semitic world: to deny and hate himself and his own Jewishness in order to assimilate and gain social acceptance, or to accept his own Jewishness, even if it means remaining an outsider. What Sartre calls the “inauthentic” Jew is precisely the “self-hating” Jew, one who flees from and despises his Jewish identity because he is convinced of its inferiority.

Taking cue from this history of Jewish preoccupation with self-hatred, Arendt’s critics frequently pointed to evidence of Arendt’s own self-hatred throughout the controversy. For example, Jacob Robinson, one of her fiercest critics, accused Arendt of internalizing Nazi logic

⁴³ Ibid., 101.

⁴⁴ Jean-Paul Sartre, *Anti-Semite and Jew: An Exploration of the Etiology of Hate*, Reissue edition (Schocken, 1995), 135-137.

when Arendt told Eichmann in her report that “no one, that is, no member of the human race, can be expected to want to share the earth with you. This is the reason, and the only reason, you must hang.”⁴⁵ Robinson noted that “this has the same ring as the 'sound instinct of the people' (Gesundes Volksempfinden)⁴⁶ guiding the notorious Nazi People's Courts that tried enemies of the regime.”⁴⁷ In other words, Arendt echoed the moral justifications of the Nazi ideology. Yet, accusations of Arendt’s personal prejudice were not always so subtle. In a headline that speaks for itself, *Intermountain Jewish News* published an article in April of 1963 entitled, “Self-hating Jewess Writes Pro-Eichmann Series for New Yorker Magazine.”⁴⁸ The author of the article and editor for the *Jewish News*, Trude Weiss, made the case that “Hannah Arendt’s Jewish self-hatred...is the motivation of her exercises to ‘play down’ the Jewish meaning and significance of all that has special Jewish meaning and significance.”⁴⁹ Weiss was not alone in making this charge of self-hatred explicit. Leo Mindlin, a Jewish writer for a March 1963 ADL memorandum, called Arendt’s work a “kind of agonizing Jewish self-hatred.”⁵⁰ For critics like Weiss, Arendt had internalized the anti-Semitic mindset and turned upon her own people. This trend only became more vicious. As Arendt friend Mary McCarthy noted in her emotional defense of Arendt in the *Partisan Review*, “her [Arendt’s] antagonists in private 'expose' her as

⁴⁵ Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, 279.

⁴⁶ The ‘Gesundes Volksempfinden’ was used in Nazi Courts as a justification for prosecuting supposed ‘enemies’—a term that allowed the Nazi authorities to interpret the ‘instinct’ of the people as they wanted, giving them great leeway to condemn who they wanted through the court system.

⁴⁷ Jacob Robinson, *And the Crooked Shall Be Made Straight: The Eichmann Trial, the Jewish Catastrophe, and Hannah Arendt’s Narrative* (New York: Macmillan, 1965), 125.

⁴⁸ Trude Weiss, “Self-Hating Jewess Writes Pro-Eichmann Series for New Yorker,” *Intermountain Jewish News*, 19 April 1963. The Hannah Arendt Papers, Library of Congress.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

⁵⁰ Leo Mindlin, “From: The Jewish Floridian, March 15, 1963,” March 16, 1963. Memorandum. The Hannah Arendt Papers, Library of Congress.

an anti-Semite, and a newspaper story speaks of the wife of an Israeli official in New York who kept calling her 'Hannah Eichmann'— by a slip of the tongue, of course."⁵¹

The use of the term “self-hatred” is a way to remind the Jewish community of the insidious effects of assimilation. Certainly the term “self-hatred” was used to articulate a *political* stance on the need for a Jewish homeland. Yet, the accusation of self-hatred can also be seen as a vehicle through which Jews delineated expectations of speaking and acting as a Jew in the post-Holocaust world. Indeed, it signaled a limit as to what could be “said by and about Jews in public and whether nonconforming individuals had a right to speak ‘as Jews.’”⁵² The mark of “self-hatred” identified Arendt’s report beyond the limit of acceptable Jewish behavior. Arendt’s violation helped identify the limit at which one no longer could speak *as a Jew*. In other words, Arendt’s report was identified as the point at which one was speaking explicitly from the internalized view of the non-Jew, when one was articulating a negation of Jewishness rather than an acceptable expression of it. In March 1963, Journalist Leo Mindlin thus stated in *The Jewish Floridian* that Arendt had “gratuitously insult[ed] the memory of the sainted dead as Jews...while Hannah Arendt, in the affluence of her intellectual constellation, no longer even knows how to live like one [a Jew].”⁵³ Mindlin’s case that Arendt “no longer even knows how to live like” a Jew reveals the extent to which reactions to Arendt’s blasphemous report helped identify exactly what it does mean to “live like a Jew.” By reacting so strongly to Arendt’s report and marking it with the tag of “self-hatred,” Arendt’s critics publicly established her

⁵¹ Mary McCarthy, “The Hue and the Cry,” *Partisan Review*, vol. 31, no. 1, (winter 1964): 82. Accessed December 3, 2014,

<http://www.bu.edu/partisanreview/books/PR1964V31N1/HTML/#82>

⁵² Glenn, “The Vogue,” 107.

⁵³ Leo Mindlin, “From: The Jewish Floridian, March 15, 1963,” March 16, 1963. Memorandum. The Hannah Arendt Papers, Library of Congress.

report as beyond the limits of acceptable Jewish behavior, and in doing so, began to delineate the terms upon which one still spoke as a Jew.

Furthermore, because Arendt's critics identified her report beyond the limits of acceptable Jewish behavior, her report itself became a yardstick with which one could measure one's Jewishness. One's reaction to her report became a sort of test for the mode of Jewishness one adopted. In spring 1963, for example, the author of an article covering Arendt's report in *The Carolina Israelite* pointed out that "the first reaction to these articles—'Did you read Hannah Arendt'—bespoke accusation."⁵⁴ In a telling video testimony, Dorrit Westheimer, the daughter of a Survivor and living in America at the time of the controversy, explained that her father became enraged after he found her with the book, and would not let her read it.⁵⁵ The book itself also became a taboo around which one's allegiances were defined. Even *reading* the book became a test of one's loyalties. As Steven Aschheim explains, "It is a quite remarkable but telling fact that none of Hannah Arendt's work was translated into Hebrew until 2000."⁵⁶ In other words, Arendt's report became the negative example against which one's Jewish loyalty was measured, and thus a rejection of her report was also a way to articulate and meet the public displays of loyalty expected by Jews.

Although Arendt's report and marks of "self-hatred" were vehicles through which American Jews established the limits of Jewish discourse, Arendt and her report also provided an opportunity to question those limits. When in 1963 Arendt received massive amounts of letters criticizing her report, many of the letters she received also welcomed the opportunity she seemed

⁵⁴ "Hannah Arendt and the Eichmann Trial," *The Carolina Israelite*, March-April, 1963. The Hannah Arendt Papers. Library of Congress

⁵⁵ Dorrit Westheimer, video testimony, *USC Shoah Foundation*, <http://vhaonline.usc.edu/viewingPage.aspx?testimonyID=36779&returnIndex=1>.

⁵⁶ Steven E. Aschheim, ed., *Hannah Arendt in Jerusalem* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001). 1.

to have granted the Jews: to speak openly, regardless of what was expected of them as Jews. In one of the most troubling letters, for example, a middle-aged Jewish man named Arnold Berson confessed to something he found “so difficult to explain to people.” For Berson, “though the man was cursed and detested by every Jewish person I know, I could not feel great hatred for Hitler.”⁵⁷ Berson did not expect that Arendt would agree with him (in fact he tells her that he expects her to disagree), but reached out to her because he viewed her as an opportunity to challenge the limits he perceived on Jewish discourse. Although an extreme case, Berson reveals an interesting point about Arendt’s role in the controversy. She, in breaching modes of conventional Jewish discourse, became a rallying figure for those who felt those conventional modes to be restricting or silencing. She would test limits of discourse, and so many would follow her, albeit in different ways.

A Pariah Among Pariahs

Hannah Arendt was accused of avoiding, even hating, her own identity, but Arendt did not wish to reject her own Jewishness. She was adamant that this fact was “indisputable.” A Jew could never escape their fate as a Jew, only renegotiate its possibilities. “If one is attacked as a Jew,” Arendt explained in an interview in 1964, “One must defend oneself as a Jew.”⁵⁸ Throughout her life, Arendt maintained this position. In *We Refugees* (1943), for example, she wrote:

Lacking the courage to fight for a change of our social and legal status, we [the Jews] have decided instead, so many of us, to try a change of identity. And this curious

⁵⁷ Arnold Berson to Hannah Arendt, 22 May 1963. The Hannah Arendt Papers, Library of Congress

⁵⁸ Hannah Arendt, interview by Gunter Gaus, *Zur Person*, 1964.
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dsoImQfVsO4>.

behavior makes matters much worse. The confusion in which we live is partly our own work... The recovering of a new personality is as difficult—and as hopeless—as a new creation of the world. Whatever we do, whatever we pretend to be, we reveal nothing but our insane desire to be changed, not to be Jews. All our activities are directed to attain this aim: we don't want to be refugees, since we don't want to be Jews; we pretend to be English-speaking people, since German-speaking immigrants of recent years are marked as Jews.⁵⁹

Arendt never encouraged a denial of one's Jewishness, arguing that a refusal to accept this fact was a dangerous path that only served to limit Jews' possibilities in the world. On this point Arendt and her critics ironically agreed: although she was accused of self-hatred, Arendt had also written for years on the importance of embracing one's Jewish identity.

In fact, Arendt had explored this very issue in the beginning of her career as an intellectual, writing *Rahel Varnhagen: The Life of a Jewish Woman* as part of her Ph.D. dissertation between the years of 1929 and 1933 (she first wrote on St. Augustine and love, and ultimately did not finish *Rahel* until 1938).⁶⁰ With her biography of Rahel, a German Jewish writer alive during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, Arendt intended to “narrate the story of Rahel's life as she herself might have told it,”⁶¹ but this historical pursuit also allowed her to examine the experience of living and being Jewish. Over the course of writing this biography, Arendt developed the idea of “fatefulness” attached to Jewishness. In a letter to Karl Jaspers on March 30, 1930, Arendt wrote that *Rahel* is “meant to show that on the foundation of being Jewish a certain possibility of existence *can* arise that I have tentatively and for the time being called fatefulness. This fatefulness arises from the very fact of ‘foundationlessness’ and

⁵⁹ Hannah Arendt, “We Refugees,” *The Menorah Journal*, Vol. xxxi (January 1943): 116-117

⁶⁰ Benhabib, *Reluctant Modernism*, 5

⁶¹ Hannah Arendt and Liliane Weissberg, *Rahel Varnhagen: The Life of a Jewess*, 1st complete ed (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997), xv- xvi.

can occur only in a separation from Judaism.”⁶² As historian Seyla Benhabib put it in 2003, “in other words, being Jewish is a form of fate—it is more than an accident, because fate, although accidental, determines one’s life more fundamentally and more continuously than does an accident.”⁶³

In telling the story of Rahel Varnhagen, Arendt describes the insidious ways in which the social “fact” of being Jewish in an anti-Semitic world comes to affect their political, economic, and personal ways of life. Arendt describes the “diabolic dilemma to which her [Rahel’s] life had been confined: on the one hand she had been deprived of everything by general social conditions, and on the other hand she had been able to purchase a social existence only by sacrificing nature.”⁶⁴ In approaching the experience of existing as a Jew, Arendt also borrows the concepts of “parvenu” and “pariah” from French Journalist Bernard Lazare in order to articulate the diasporic Jew’s relationship to his surroundings. As Arendt explains in *Rahel*, because an anti-Semitic world “attributed to her [Rahel] what it considered to be the Jewish qualities,”⁶⁵ Rahel could not escape the fate of the Jew. No matter what how hard Rahel tried to hide from her own Jewishness, “Rahel’s life was bound by their [the Jews’] inferiority, by her ‘infamous birth.’”⁶⁶ The Jews were left with the choice between the parvenu—Jews who “wanted to escape from Jewishness”⁶⁷ in order to assimilate and gain social acceptance—and the pariah—the Jews who remain outsiders. Like Sartre before her, Arendt argued that there was a choice imposed

⁶² Karl Jaspers To Hannah Arendt, March 30, 1930 in Hannah Arendt, *Hannah Arendt/Karl Jaspers Correspondence, 1926-1969*, 1st U.S. ed (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1992), 11.

⁶³ Benhabib, *Reluctant Modernism*, 9.

⁶⁴ Arendt, *Rahel*, 248.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 252.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 89.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 88.

upon the Jewish people, a choice, as Sartre puts it, between “flee[ing] reality, and the anti-Semite makes him a Jew in spite of himself,” and accepting one’s Jewishness, “making [oneself] a Jew, in the face of all and against all.”⁶⁸

Yet, Arendt also goes on to argue explicitly for an embrace of the position of the pariah as a way to loosen the rigidity of the fate assigned to the Jews. Rather than forever binding one’s identity to a rejection of Jewishness, Arendt explains that choosing to embrace one’s difference makes room for more freedom in the possibilities of self-definition. As Arendt puts it in *Rahel*, “the possibilities of being different from what one is are infinite. Once one has negated oneself, however, there are no longer any particularly choices. There is only one aim: always, at any given moment, to be different from what one is; never to assert oneself, but with infinite pliancy to become anything else, so long as it is not oneself.”⁶⁹ Arendt thus did not reject her own Jewishness but rather hoped to revisit its principles, arguing in support of the self-conscious pariah, who, as Seyla Benhabib has noted, “transforms difference from being a source of weakness and marginality into one of strength and defiance.”⁷⁰ Despite the fact that Arendt’s report was precisely an attempt to embrace the strength of Jewishness and its outsider perspective, Arendt’s critics misinterpreted her embrace of a multiplicity of perspectives as a betrayal of her particular Jewish identity.

Ironically enough, Arendt’s embrace of the self-conscious pariah would not have been something her critics would have necessarily hated. Both Arendt and her critics promoted a strong sense of Jewish identity that should not be denied nor hidden but rather refashioned as a

⁶⁸ Sartre, *Anti-Semite*, 135-137.

⁶⁹ Arendt, *Rahel*, 93.

⁷⁰ Benhabib, *Reluctant Modernism*, 10.

sense of strength. Yet, Arendt went further to explain that the pariah's embrace of difference must not only promote the acceptance of Jewish alterity, but also promote an acceptance of *all* forms of alterity. As Judith Butler said of Arendt's political thought in 2012, "the commitment to equality is a commitment to the process of differentiation itself... there is always a redoubling here that dislocates the claim from any specific community: *everyone* has the right of belonging."⁷¹ Arendt criticizes Israeli Prime Minister Ben-Gurion, for example, for failing to see that Israel was a "people among peoples, a nation among nations, a state among states, depending now on a plurality which no longer permits the age-old and, unfortunately, religiously anchored dichotomy of Jews and Gentiles."⁷² The Jewish pariah, according to Arendt, must use her outsider's perspective to reveal precisely the dangers of oppressing all forms of difference and plurality.

In other words, Arendt believed the pariah's role crucially involved providing an outsider's perspective. This perspective is invaluable not only because it does not conform but also because it demonstrated the importance of "looking at something from the outside," of challenging the status quo. Arendt invites an acceptance of not only Jewish difference but also difference itself. As Arendt's biographer Elizabeth Young-Bruehl has noted, Arendt "was a pariah even among pariahs,"⁷³ and learned to value non-conformist attitudes that could serve to promote further challenges to thinking. The value of the "outsider" was something Arendt had articulated many times before. As she put it in *Recovery of the Public World*, "You see, with the political business I had a certain advantage...you can see that I never felt the need to commit

⁷¹ Butler, *Parting Ways*, 126.

⁷² Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, 11.

⁷³ Elisabeth Young-Bruehl, *Hannah Arendt: For Love of the World*, 2nd ed (New Haven, Conn.; London: Yale University Press, 2004), 7.

myself [to any political party]...But still, I had this advantage to look at something from outside. And even in myself from outside.”⁷⁴ The pariah held a privileged perspective that became a source of political hope for Arendt, one that could ground itself in challenges to the beliefs and approaches of the status quo. From this vantage point of the outsider, the pariahs, according to Arendt, “have one priceless advantage: history is no longer a closed book to them.”⁷⁵ The “self-conscious pariah” can open our eyes to new meanings of history in promoting new and distinct perspectives.

⁷⁴ Arendt, *Recovery*, 306.

⁷⁵ Arendt, “We Refugees,” 77.

Chapter 3

Arendt on Arendt: Reflecting on the Meaning of a Public Controversy

Hannah Arendt's report on the 1961 trial of Adolf Eichmann did not take long to create waves of public outcry in America. After the first part of her five-part series for *The New Yorker* appeared on February 16, 1963, the controversy erupted, growing in strength as each installment deepened the stakes of the conversation. Later that year the series was edited and transformed into a book, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil*, but its publication only added to the controversy that had embroiled the New York Intellectuals in a fierce and emotional debate. Although almost all the actors involved in the controversy became frustrated and dismayed with its vicious and seemingly unproductive nature, almost no one was more frustrated than Arendt herself.

Three years later, and the controversy was hardly over: one of Arendt's most tireless critics, Jacob Robinson, published *And the Crooked Shall be Made Straight* in January 1966, devoting the entire book to refuting Arendt's *Eichmann in Jerusalem*. Amidst the renewed flames of the Eichmann controversy, a prominent rabbi named Arthur Hertzberg wrote to Hannah Arendt in order to apologize for an article he had written in praise of Robinson, against Arendt. In March 1966, he told her that his remarks had been wrong, declaring that "there are issues to be discussed, and that you [Arendt] raised almost all of them, but so far the discussion has not been equal to the searing dignity of the subject, or to the seriousness of your analysis,

which has been treated quite unfairly by almost everyone.”¹ Arendt, in her response, was delighted to have engaged and been understood by this Arthur Hertzberg, but Arendt also made it clear that this encounter was rare, an exception to the rule of an otherwise exhausting and unproductive affair. After thanking Rabbi Hertzberg, Arendt wrote:

Your letter ... came as a great surprise... What you did is almost never done; it is the unexpected after everything that had gone wrong is straightened out and is right again. As to the issues themselves: I know of course that I only raised them and did not answer my own questions. I had hoped for a real controversy, but you know what happened instead.²

What does Arendt mean by a “real controversy,” and why does she believe the controversy surrounding her own book did not qualify as one? Arendt’s low opinion of her *own* controversy is a rather interesting one. What does it mean for a public intellectual to eschew the controversy she herself provoked? What does it mean for Hannah Arendt, a thinker dedicated to recovering sites of political contestation and negotiation, to be disappointed, dismayed even, at the controversy surrounding her own book? If this controversy has failed, what, then, makes a “good” controversy and effective political discourse? Was Arendt wrong to reject the Eichmann controversy as a worthwhile one?

In her reply to Arthur Hertzberg, Arendt also explains that her book “raised” but did not answer her “own questions.” Arendt, as she makes clear here and elsewhere, did not scorn the controversy because it failed to provide the “right” answer or interpretation to her questions, but because it failed to inspire a multiplicity of contending answers. Arendt was hoping to provoke important questions, to open a debate, not to close it with an imposition of one “correct” answer. It was precisely engaged *disagreement* she had hoped for. With *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, Arendt

¹ Arthur Hertzberg to Hannah Arendt, 31 March 1966. The Hannah Arendt Papers, Library of Congress.

² Hannah Arendt to Arthur Hertzberg, 8 April 1966. The Hannah Arendt Papers, Library of Congress.

wanted to challenge her readership with hard questions and painful problems, for even by the 1960s the world had yet to face the scope of the “Final Solution” in its distinct horror. When the controversy emerged, the destruction of the European Jews was *a* Holocaust, not yet fully framed as *the* Holocaust, and the task of probing and telling the history of the Jewish catastrophe remained uncompleted. Even before the Eichmann trial, Arendt had been dedicated to exploring the twentieth century’s most difficult political problems. She was someone who wrote on the meaning of the public and the political, but also someone who hoped to engage in and recover those public and political debates as well. Witnessing Eichmann’s peculiar thoughtlessness, the unprecedented juridical-philosophical questions that the Nazi crimes provoked, and the burgeoning discussion of the Jewish functionary and council leader’s relationship to their murderers, Arendt could not resist engaging a problem that was as important as it was complex—particularly because this problem had affected her own life so greatly.

This study argues that Arendt is a thinker centrally devoted to examining and engaging public conversation. It could even be said that “controversy”—a site of public disagreement and debate—is a concept that is fundamental in Arendt’s political theory and legacy. This chapter will use “Arendt contra Arendt,” re-examining the meaning and efficacy of discourse in the Eichmann controversy through an Arendtian lens. In other words, this chapter will employ Arendt’s own conceptions of the public, the political, and effective discourse to re-approach the history of Arendt’s own controversy. In flipping Arendt back upon herself—to put the thinker in conversation with herself—this chapter hopes to examine dimensions of the debate that Arendt failed to appreciate during the controversy. This chapter thus hopes to use Arendt’s tradition of thought as a way to reinvigorate a dynamic understanding of both her own legacy and thinking about public discourse more generally. If, as noted in Chapter 2, Arendt hoped to tell the story of

Rahel Varnhagen's life "*as she herself might have told it*,"³ this chapter, too, hopes to tell the story of the controversy through Arendt's eyes, that is, as Arendt herself might have seen it.

In order to evaluate the dimensions of the controversy in terms of Arendt's political theory, section 1 of this chapter will introduce and provide an overview of Arendt's notions of the public and the political. This section will primarily consider *The Human Condition* (originally published in 1958), *Men in Dark Times* (1968), and *The Promise of Politics* (collected essays published in 2005) in order to review Arendt's remarks on politics throughout her life, both before and after the controversy. Arendt defined the political in terms of its fundamental plurality, exploring how men come together in a public world of appearances, being seen and heard not only to come together and share perspectives, but also to separate, to distinguish each man in his distinct perspective. Section 1 will also discuss Arendt's role as a public intellectual—Arendt was someone who not only theorized the possibilities and limitations of political action and speech, but also someone who hoped to wield effective discourse during the course of her own life as a public thinker.

Section 2 will explore Arendt's reactions to the controversy, first examining her initial reluctance to engage and respond to her critics, and then considering how and why she broke her silence, identifying the moments she used to reveal her increasing frustration with the manner in which the conversation had ensued. Arendt expressed her belief that the controversy had resulted in a campaign to reduce and present a false representation of her book, serving only to homogenize the circulation of ideas in the debate. The "image-makers" of the "Jewish Establishment," according to Arendt, had stifled a very real discussion in so vehemently rejecting the ideas in her book, using the controversy as an opportunity to promote a single

³ Hannah Arendt and Liliane Weissberg, *Rahel Varnhagen: The Life of a Jewess*, 1st complete ed (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997), 81. Emphasis Added.

interpretation—that Arendt’s provocations were prejudiced lies— rather than a site of contestation about these difficult questions.

Section 3 will go on to reflect upon the legacy and meaning of this controversy, identifying the changes and discussions the report helped foster. In re-examining the controversy, this study finds that this debate was a watershed in American public conversations about the Holocaust, a site wherein modes of *talking and remembering* the Holocaust were negotiated and established. Certainly the controversy helped construct modes of historical approach and taboos of discourse, but this study finds that the controversy also provided sites and opportunities around which to challenge, rupture and contest prevailing history and historiography of the Holocaust. In fact, although the controversy helped build a dichotomy of interpretation that could stifle other possibilities of approach, both sides of the controversy articulated a defense of the importance of contestation, plurality and disagreement. Arendt herself not only served as a figure against which to argue, she also became a tool around which ruptures and new challenges to conventional thinking adhered.

Arendt on Acting and Speaking in the Public World

Politics, Arendt explains, “is based on the fact of human plurality.”⁴ Arendt spent her lifetime thinking about how *men*⁵ come together, pondering the human condition not in terms of a single, human essence, but in the fact that men, in the plural, inhabit the world together. Yet, the crucial element of the public world is not just that men, as equals, come together, but rather than men, *distinct and unique*, must learn how to live together once the fact of their mutual

⁴ Hannah Arendt, *The Promise of Politics*, 1st ed. (New York: Schocken Books, 2005), 93.

⁵ This study will consciously use the male pronouns Arendt herself employed.

inhabitation of the world is birthed. For Arendt, we are “all the same, that is, human,” but only in such a way that “nobody is ever the same as anyone else who ever lived, lives, or will live.”⁶ We are all equal, but equal only in the fact of our utter distinction and difference from one another. The problem to examine is how *different* men come together to live in the world.

The space of politics, then, does not reside *within* man as some so-called inherent characteristic, but only “arises *between men*, and so quite *outside of man*.”⁷ The space in between men, the world, is the site of human politics, and this space provides the reality in which we all take part. The “in-between” is a spatial metaphor for the relationship between men in politics, providing a means by which Arendt conceives of the world, or that which is common to all of us. And yet, this space is not only the intangible that connects us, that “arises out of acting and speaking together,”⁸ but is also the space wherein men negotiate their separateness and distinctiveness. Sticking with spatial and physical metaphor, Arendt describes the world as a table which both connects and distinguishes men in their difference: “to live together in the world means essentially that a world of things is between those who have it in common, as a table is located between those who sit around it; the world, like every in-between, relates and separates men at the same time.”⁹

Although the public is intangible in the sense that it arises between men, wherever they are, it is also, according to Arendt, the site of appearances, wherein each man is seen and heard, in turn seeing and hearing those around him. It is, as opposed to the private sphere, the realm in which we reveal ourselves to the world, for the public “means, first, that everything that appears

⁶ Hannah Arendt and Margaret Canovan, *The Human Condition*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), Kindle Edition, location 1027.

⁷ Arendt, *The Human Condition*, location 986.

⁸ Arendt, *The Human Condition*, location 3039.

⁹ Arendt, *The Human Condition*, location 986.

in public can be seen and heard by everybody and has the widest possible publicity. For us, appearance—something that is being seen and heard by others as well as by ourselves—constitutes reality.”¹⁰ Men must appear in public, not only to present their distinct perspective, but also to engage the unique perspectives of those who share the world around him.

In describing the coming together of men, Arendt is also describing the process by which men and the world “attain their full reality.” For Arendt, it is not only that men “attain their full humanity, their full reality as men”¹¹ in the public-political realm, but also that “the political realm rises directly out of acting together, the ‘sharing of words and deeds’...[is] the one activity which constitutes it [the public world].”¹² Men come together to become men, while their action together forms the world that unites them in their difference. Yet, Arendt is centrally preoccupied with *how* distinct men come together and interact, how they understand and relate to one another. The way men relate to one another—how they understand each other’s distinct perspective on the world—is of crucial importance for Arendt’s thinking on politics. Arendt describes political thinking as process that can engage a variety of perspectives of the world as it appears to them, for this “this kind of understanding—seeing the world (as we rather tritely say today) from the other fellow’s point of view—is the political kind of insight par excellence.”¹³ The crucial understanding in politics for Arendt is that “no one can grasp the objective world in its full reality all on his own,” and as a result we can only explore the world “as it really is” by “understanding it as something that is shared by many people, lies between them, separates and

¹⁰ Arendt, *The Human Condition*, location 946.

¹¹ Arendt, *The Promise of Politics*, 21.

¹² Arendt, *The Human Condition*, location 3028.

¹³ Arendt, *Promise of Politics*, 18.

links them, showing itself differently to each.”¹⁴ We must, according to Arendt, see politics as a project of considering contesting standpoints, of negotiating plural and distinct points of view.

For Arendt to “recover” the public realm, she stressed the importance of preserving the plurality and difference in the visible perspectives that constitute the public. As Arendt explained, the public realm “relies on the simultaneous presence of innumerable perspectives and aspects in which the common world presents itself and for which no common measurement or denominator can ever be devised.”¹⁵ Thus, Arendt is dedicated to not only preserving *plurality and difference*, but also processes of pluralization and differentiation—political thinking involves considering different points of view, but also communicating, representing, engaging, sharing, and challenging those points of view in the public sphere. One should consider *and* encourage plurality, for “the end of the common world has come when it is seen only under one aspect and is permitted to present itself in only one perspective.”¹⁶

For Arendt, speech and action are the ways in which men relate to each other in the public realm. That is, through public speech and action, men “distinguish themselves instead of being merely distinct.”¹⁷ Arendt focuses on action as “the beginning of something new,”¹⁸ something that enters the web of relationships in the public sphere in an unexpected and unpredictable manner. Action, and action in the form of speech, erupts the new and unprecedented; human action introduces new foundations and perspectives. We can connect and negotiate with each other through action, but action also disrupts and contests the “pillars” of the world: “Action, moreover, no matter what its specific content, always establishes relationships

¹⁴ Arendt, *Promise of Politics*, 129.

¹⁵ Arendt, *The Human Condition*, location 1055.

¹⁶ Arendt, *The Human Condition*, location 1068.

¹⁷ Arendt, *The Human Condition*, location 2607.

¹⁸ Arendt, *Promise of Politics*, 50.

and therefore has an inherent tendency to force open all limitations and cut across all boundaries.”¹⁹ Arendt stressed, then, possibility, contingency and unpredictability in human action in the public realm.

Arendt’s political role and legacy can be seen as one that stresses possibility in sites of vibrant political discourse. Political and Feminist theorist Bonnie Honig as well as feminist thinker and philosopher Judith Butler have done a particularly remarkable job in renegotiating Arendt’s political theory as one that encourages and defines a modern theory of political difference. As Honig has noted, “Arendt theorizes politics as an always unfinished business, committed simultaneously and perpetually to the settlement and unsettlement of identities, both personal and institutional.”²⁰ We might consider Arendt’s role in this controversy, then, as one who at the outset hoped to provoke productive political discourse, one that not only engages a variety of perspectives, but one that promotes further possibilities of interpretations.

In *Men in Dark Times*, Arendt expresses her admiration for Enlightenment thinker Gotthold Lessing for his belief of this political plurality. Lessing’s “greatness,” she explains, “does not merely consist in a theoretical insight that there cannot be one single truth within the human world but in his gladness that it does not exist.”²¹ Arendt, the thinker who provoked the Eichmann controversy, was dedicated to understanding and promoting an understanding of human plurality. Arendt admired greatly this vibrant, plural ideal of politics, and hoped to preserve the public world in her own modern century, thinking without “banisters” and challenging our approach to the world. And yet, although she began the controversy—say, acted in the world—Arendt is not the only player in its process or result. Stories in the political realm

¹⁹ Arendt, *The Human Condition*, location 2913.

²⁰ Bonnie Honig, *Political Theory and the Displacement of Politics*, Contestations (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993), 77.

²¹ Hannah Arendt, *Men in Dark Times* (New York: Harcourt, 1968), 27.

cannot be *made* and attributed to one maker, it is begun by one but interacted and written by others—“nobody is its author.”²²

Although Arendt was surprised at the fact that she had provoked such a heated controversy, she is not the only player in its story. This is, in fact, how we must view a controversy: as a site of contesting perspectives and players, uniting but differentiating at the same time. There is a sense of possibility in all controversies, for, as Arendt puts it, “it in the nature of beginning something new is started which cannot be expected from whatever may have happened before...the fact that man is capable of action means that the unexpected can be expected from him, that he is able to perform what is infinitely improbable.”²³

Arendt and her Reluctance to Engage

Arendt returned home from her vacation to a controversy, one that she was unhappy to see. Roughly 10 days after she arrived back in America (June 19, 1963), Arendt wrote to the America Council for Judaism about the controversy, complaining that the “Z.O.A. [Zionist Organization of America] and the Anti-Defamation League have conducted an organized campaign of slander.”²⁴ For Arendt, this campaign was a “textbook case of manipulation of public opinion,” and although she seemed frustrated and dismayed to encounter the trouble, she also found it “rather interesting.”²⁵ Yet, while intrigued by the debate, Arendt initially refused to further publicly engage with the matter, withdrawing from opportunities to debate her work in public. “I already said it many times, that the organized power of the many is by definition

²² Arendt, *The Human Condition*, location 2816.

²³ Arendt, *The Human Condition*, location 2710.

²⁴ Hannah Arendt to Elmer Berger of the American Council for Judaism, 19 June 1963. The Hannah Arendt Papers, Library of Congress.

²⁵ *Ibid.*

superior to whatever strength an individual can muster,” Arendt wrote to the Council. “I have decided that it would be neither wise nor proper for me to step into this whole business.”²⁶

Arendt continued to show a reluctance to participate in the controversy, growing in frustration with the manner in which her critics had engaged her book. The “organized campaign” had corrupted the integrity of the conversation for Arendt. She was unwilling to attempt to deconstruct the rigid discourse of her critics, who, in the eyes of Arendt, had sacrificed genuine debate for a homogenized outcry. The campaign was a “substitution” for a real debate: “‘A Defense of Eichmann,’ which I supposedly wrote, is a substitution for the real issue: what kind of man was the accused and to what extent can our legal system take care of these new criminals who are not ordinary criminals.”²⁷ In one particularly telling correspondence with Shirley Passow of the Progress Committee, Arendt reveals her frustration with her critics. After Miss. Passow not only spells Arendt’s name wrong (‘Ahrendt’), but also asks Arendt to speak alongside Rabbi Joachim Prinz (who wrote a pamphlet for the ADL entitled “Arendt Nonsense”), Norman Podhoretz (a critic who wrote an article on the “perversity” of Arendt’s style), or Judge Michael Musmanno (who, of course, wrote the original, scathing review in the New York Times), Arendt replies in her typically assertive and strong manner. “I regret that my answer is no,” Arendt writes Passow frankly,

Your choice of speaker combined with your misspelling of my name has convinced me that you and your audience are more interested in the political campaign which was touched off by my book than in the book itself (the misspelling of my name is suggesting because it occurred only in this campaign literature). I myself, though I am a political

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Hannah Arendt to Mary McCarthy, October 3, 1963 in Hannah Arendt, *Between Friends: The Correspondence of Hannah Arendt and Mary McCarthy, 1949-1975*, 1st ed. (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1995), 152.

scientist, am not in politics, Jewish or otherwise. Hence, I am not interested in the kind of debate you have in mind.²⁸

Arendt asserts that she is “not in politics,” not simply with regards to this controversy, but seems to make a claim for her role in the public realm more generally. Arendt echoed this statement elsewhere throughout the beginning of the controversy. After a Public Relations representative asked to organize a lecture tour about her book, Arendt adamantly refused when she replied in September 1963, not only because “at this particular moment I think it would be unwise for me to reply directly to polemical criticisms,” but also because “I don’t go on lecture tours, I am not the kind of person to do that, and I also don’t want to make that kind of money out of a publicity which I personally regard as an unhappy incident.”²⁹

Although Arendt was known as a publically engaged intellectual—political theorist Dana Villa wrote that “from the mid-950s until her death in 1975, Arendt was best known as a public intellectual”³⁰—, Arendt also greatly valued intellectual engagement outside the boundaries of the public. In fact, Arendt seemed to reflect upon the importance of private or academic spaces of thinking as a result of the controversy. In her lecture notes for a University of Chicago lecture to Jewish students in October 1963, Arendt sets the rules of the discussion about her “book and not the reaction to it” by reflecting upon the importance of the academic space as opposed to the public:

The great advantage: Every single one is forced to make up his own mind and then exchange this opinion with others... This advantage of the academic world precludes a certain kind of publicity if it is to remain intact. The academic world has, and always has had, its own kind of being open and public, but it is not the same as the publicity that is necessarily part of the world around it. For this kind of opinion formation, which

²⁸ Hannah Arendt to Shirley S. Passow, 20 September 1963. The Hannah Arendt Papers, Library of Congress.

²⁹ Hannah Arendt to Gunther Lawrence, 8 September 1963. The Hannah Arendt Papers, Library of Congress.

³⁰ Dana Villa, *Politics, Philosophy, Terror* (Princeton, N.J: Princeton University Press, 1999), 3.

becomes rarer and rarer in the world around us, you need a certain amount of stillness and quiet. You need moreover the guarantee that what you said will not be shouted from the rooftops tomorrow, if you say it informally, casually, without preparation. We have too few rather than too many opportunities to speak to each other in an atmosphere of openness and frankness. The very spontaneity which is one of the great privileges of academic life is in jeopardy when the world around us is permitted to report to a so much larger audience than the words were originally meant to address, although they of course be very welcome to listen to it. The ivory tower is, thank God, a thing of the past, the academic and non-academic world, both public realms in their own right, today reach out to each other, but this does not mean that they coincide. The great privilege of the Academe is that it can foster, not indifference (that indeed would be disastrous), but impartiality and disinterestedness. As members of a University, this may be among the most important things we have to contribute to the world around us, to which we also belong—though in a different capacity.³¹

This introductory speech to her Jewish students reveals an interesting moment of Arendt's reflections on the controversy, for we see her trying to protect the academic sphere of discussion from the pernicious effects of the "public" world, from being "shouted from the rooftops." Arendt, particularly as a result of her experience in the Eichmann controversy, is articulating the limitations of the public forum as a space of contestation and discussion, arguing its "publicity" threatens to destroy the conditions of a kind of "opinion formation"—a space of openness, "impartiality," and spontaneity that tends to force everyone to "make us his own mind."

Arendt, in fact, had been a person dedicated to engaging alternative spaces of thinking outside of the "public" realm. She was both a fierce academic and someone who endlessly exchanged ideas with her friends. Arendt's friendship with Karl Jaspers and Mary McCarthy in particular had given a space through which to consider, develop and refine ideas, and she wrote endlessly on important issues outside of the public eye, between friends. This space of friends was crucially important to Arendt and her beliefs on thinking, and she made this clear in the controversy, especially when asked to publish her now famous letters with Gershom Sholem. When asked to publish them in *Encounter* by its editor John Mander, Arendt told him that she

³¹ Hannah Arendt. Chicago University Jewish Students Lecture Notes, 30 October 1963. The Hannah Arendt Papers, From Library of Congress.

“must consider the fact that I have kept silent throughout the polemics my book has aroused. I think this was the only right and proper thing to do under the rather peculiar circumstances.”³² Her thinking with friends is altogether different and not refined for public presentation, she told Mander, explaining the trouble with publishing the letters is that she must “avoid the impression that this letter to Scholem (an old friend) is all or even a significant part of what I would have to say if I should ever choose to reply in public.”³³ Yet, she ultimately agreed to publish them on the grounds that they were framed as ideas formed outside the terms of the public sphere— “My advice would be not to recast the letter in the third person,” Arendt tells Scholem, arguing that “the value of this controversy consists in its epistolary character, namely in the fact that it is informed by personal friendship.”³⁴

It is interesting that, although Arendt praised the sanctity and preservation of thinking in spaces *outside* the public, she also thought it worthwhile to *publish* these private letters between friends in 1964. The “value” in the letters for Arendt, then, was that they demonstrated ideas that challenged the terms of the controversy, not necessarily because of the content of the ideas but because the space of their formation stood in opposition to the limitations and dangers built into the structures of the public sphere. They were a public display of the controversy debated explicitly outside of the public eye, thus Arendt could find value in its ability to publicly question the validity of the terms of opinion formation during the controversy. Here, Arendt shows us her belief that the controversy failed not only because it resulted in a single misinterpretation of her book, but also because the “publicity” of the debate reinforced this

³² Hannah Arendt to John Mander, 14 September 1963. The Hannah Arendt Papers, From Library of Congress.

³³ *Ibid.*

³⁴ Hannah Arendt, “Eichmann in Jerusalem’ by Gershom Scholem,” *Encounter* (January 1964), 54. Accessed December 3, 2014, <http://www.UNZ.org/Pub/Encounter-1964jan-00051>.

³⁴ Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, 27.

homogeneity. “Publicity,” in other words, can spoil honest engagement because it subjects the process of opinion formation to the standards, demands and taboos of the public world. Not all public debating fails, but public engagement can discourage the openness and frankness that promotes freedom and plurality of ideas. If this is the case, one’s public engagement should be coupled with private engagements as such. Conversations with friends or family are never “all or even a significant part” of what we might say in the public eye because they provide space to test and engage one another’s ideas. Conversations of this sort are valuable precisely because they allow the speaker the freedom to change and refine their ideas before they present them to the public—and, most centrally, these spaces allow the speaker to form their ideas through *independent thought* rather than thought that is beholden to the standards of public opinion. One can see this well in the way Arendt spoke fondly of her relationship with her friend and mentor, Karl Jaspers. “What was so great in these conversations with Jaspers,” Arendt told us, “was that you could sustain such an effort, which was merely being tentative, which did not aim at any results....disagreement was never quite resolved. But the thinking about such a thing itself became immensely richer, through this exchange, as he said, ‘without reservations,’ that is, where you don’t keep anything back.”³⁵ By publishing the letters and articulating why, Arendt shows us the ways in which the *space*, public or private, very deeply informs the process of forming opinions.

Arendt was adamant that the debate had failed to provide the proper conditions for a “real” controversy, and by 1966 had grown exhausted by the tenacity of her critics’ assault. After the publication of Jacob Robinson’s *And the Crooked Shall be Made Straight*, a book virtually comprised of line-by-line refutations of *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, Arendt made an assertive

³⁵ Hannah Arendt and Melvyn A. Hill, eds., *Hannah Arendt, the Recovery of the Public World* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1979), 338.

entrance³⁶ into the public debate with an article entitled “‘The Formidable Dr. Robinson’—A Reply” in January 20, 1966 issue of *The New York Times Review of Books*. Arendt called Dr. Robinson formidable not because she considered him a worthy opponent—in fact the review is full of disparaging remarks about Robinson’s reading level—but because of the strength of his “image-making” in manipulating public opinion to believe in his misleading portrait of her book, something Arendt regarded as an unfortunate element of this controversy. Arendt wrote that “Mr. Robinson’s present book is only the last, the most elaborate, and the least competent variation of the “image” of a posthumous defense of Eichmann, a book that no one ever wrote but of whose reality even people who had read my book became convinced under this stupendous barrage, quickly changed their minds.”³⁷ Arendt lamented that “such campaigns” gain in “momentum and viciousness as they proceed,” seeing no end to the homogenizing effect of their pernicious representation of her book. Arendt remarked that almost all of the ideas in the 1963 ADL pamphlet (by Robinson) “were used then on by almost every reviewer. . . . as though, in Mary McCarthy’s telling phrase, they came out of a mimeographing machine.”³⁸

In this public reply, Arendt was explicit in her belief that there was a concerted attempt to defame her book, writing with clear irritation for the “campaign” of the “Jewish Establishment.” Arendt seems frustrated to an extreme degree in this reply, writing that “no one will doubt the effectiveness of modern image-making, and no one acquainted with Jewish organizations and their countless channels of communication outside their immediate range will underestimate their possibilities in influencing public opinion. For greater than their direct power of control is

³⁶ This was not the first time Arendt’s reaction had been publicly expressed, but certainly the biggest and most direct response Arendt gave to the controversy.

³⁷ Hannah Arendt, “‘Formidable Dr. Robinson’: A Reply.” *New York Review of Books*. January 20, 1966. Accessed March 1, 2015. <http://www.nybooks.com/articles/archives/1966/jan/20/the-formidable-dr-robinson-a-reply/>

³⁸ Ibid.

the voluntary outside help upon which they can draw from Jews who...will flock home, as it were, out of age-old fears...when their people or its leaders are criticized.”³⁹ Arendt’s rather harshly articulated defense tended to have the effect of providing her critics with more evidence of her personal prejudice against the Jews, and did not necessarily loosen the terms of the debate as she may have hoped. Marie Syrkin in particular did not take well to Arendt’s reply and used it to highlight her belief that Arendt’s motive was primarily prejudice, remarking that “Miss Arendt’s sinister version of powerful ‘Jewish organizations and their countless channels of communication outside their immediate range’ manipulating public opinion through all the ‘means of mass communication’ has an all too familiar ring.”⁴⁰

Arendt, of course, denied Marie Syrkin’s couched accusations of sinister prejudice, arguing that she “stated the fact of an organized propaganda campaign to manipulate public opinion; If all organizations and interest groups in the world that indulge in such activities were rewarded as “conspirators” the world would be full of conspiracies, which it is not.”⁴¹ According to Arendt, she was not trying to criticize the “Jewish Establishment” as a particularly “manipulative” or “conspiring” group, but rather was trying to critique a more common phenomenon of producing and receiving static ideas. Arendt here and in her other public replies hoped to defend not only against the specific misinterpretation of her book, but against the conditions of the debate that denied opportunities for multiple, contesting and engaged perspectives. It was less the specific interpretation than the fact that there was only *one*

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Marie Syrkin, “The Jewish Establishment: In Response to: ‘The Formidable Dr. Robinson: A Reply,’” *New York Review of Books*, March 17, 1966. Accessed March 1, 2015.

<http://www.nybooks.com/articles/archives/1966/mar/17/the-jewish-establishment-5/>

⁴¹ Hannah Arendt, “The Jewish Establishment: In Response to: ‘The Formidable Dr. Robinson: A Reply,’” *New York Review of Books*. March 17, 1966. Accessed March 1, 2015.

<http://www.nybooks.com/articles/archives/1966/mar/17/the-jewish-establishment-5/>

interpretation, a singular portrait circulated through “image-making.”

We could have expected this response from Arendt. She was a theorist who had always believed in preserving spaces for thinking; she focused not on finding “truth,” but on the spaces that permitted possibilities for thinking about truth. It is not her goal to find a platonic absolute (whether she believed in such a thing or not), but to foster the conditions for thinking itself—the process and terms that breathe possibility, contestation, spontaneity, movement. Her life is marked with declarations about this dedication. On August 20, 1954, for example, Arendt writes to Mary McCarthy about her views on Truth. For Arendt,

The chief fallacy is to believe that Truth is a result which comes at the end of a thought-process. Truth, on the contrary, is always the beginning of thought; thinking is always result-less. That is the difference between ‘philosophy’ and science: Science has results, philosophy never. Thinking starts after an experience of truth has struck home, so to speak. The difference between philosophers and other people is that the former refuse to let go, but not that they are the only receptacles of truth. This notion that truth is the result of thought is very old and goes back to ancient classical philosophy, possibly to Socrates himself. If I am right and it is a fallacy, then it probably is the oldest fallacy of Western philosophy. You can detect it in almost all definitions of truth.... Truth, in other words, is not ‘in’ thought, but to use Kant’s language[,] the condition for the possibility of thinking. It is both, beginning and a priori.⁴²

In a word, Arendt’s thinking on truth provides us with a way to understand why she believed the controversy failed to generate productive discourse. It is not that the controversy failed to arrive at the “correct” or “true” understanding of the Holocaust, but that it failed to promote a diverse set of contesting understandings. For Arendt, her critics provided a singular interpretation through which to engage these problems, and in doing so, inhibited possibility in our understanding rather than fostering it.

⁴² Hannah Arendt to Mary McCarthy, August 20, 1954 in Hannah Arendt, *Between Friends: The Correspondence of Hannah Arendt and Mary McCarthy, 1949-1975*, 1st ed. (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1995), 25.

A Conversation that Opens the Door

As historians like Peter Novick and Anson Rabinbach have pointed out, the Eichmann trial and controversy were among the first events in America that considered the memory of *the* Holocaust, distinct in its horror from other Nazi crimes. In fact, these historians have argued that the controversy “was a watershed in the public uses and public acceptance of discussion of Holocaust memory, a memory previously restricted to a relatively small, and relatively unknown, coterie of scholars.”⁴³ This study would agree with this conclusion—that the controversy opened the doors to public debates about Holocaust memory. Even with this broad interpretation of the debate, we can see why we might indeed call this controversy a “real” one. It did not provide the final word on Holocaust memory nor reach a consensus, but rather became a germinating seed of discourse, provoking a flood of scholarship and public discussion in the decades that followed.

Yet, this study would go further than Novick and Rabinbach, arguing that the controversy was not a watershed only because it helped begin the discussion about the subject of Holocaust memory, but because it was fundamentally a debate about *how* one can talk about Holocaust memory. It was not only a debate about the history of the Holocaust, it was a debate about how to talk, approach and represent this history. The *form* of approach to this history was of central concern for the beginning of Holocaust scholarship, not only because it was an event that largely still needed to be examined and recorded, but also because the actual event of the Holocaust seemed to challenge, or even destroy, the terms through which thinking and judging had hitherto been practiced. Adorno put it well in his 1966 *Negative Dialectics* when he told us “our metaphysical faculty is paralyzed because actual events have shattered the basis on which

⁴³ Anson Rabinbach, “Eichmann in New York: The New York Intellectuals and the Hannah Arendt Controversy,” *October* 108 (April 1, 2004): 103.

speculative metaphysical thought could be reconciled with experience.”⁴⁴ The Eichmann controversy was thus an initial attempt at rebuilding our ability to approach and examine the world, for the Holocaust had in many ways shattered our understanding of history itself—it presented us with both an intent to destroy specific histories and a history that, in its depth of unspeakable horror, escaped our ability to fully express it.

The Eichmann controversy, because it helped begin the conversation and largely failed to produce a satisfying consensus, ended in a demand for more studies and debates concerning the Holocaust. As Arendt noted in 1966, “literally everybody feels the need for a ‘major work’ on the Jewish conduct in the face of catastrophe.”⁴⁵ It was a watershed indeed, and a consciously produced one, for the controversy above all highlighted the need for and demanded *more* research. After Norman Podhoretz bemoaned the controversy because of the viciousness with which Jews attacked other Jews—he asked, “the Nazis destroyed a third of the Jewish people. In the name of all that is humane, will the remnant never let up on itself?”—one Manfred Stanley wrote a letter to the editors of *Commentary*, expressing the prevailing mood of the controversy quite well. As Stanley put it, “‘in the name of all that is humane’ we, the remnant—whatever our faith and nationality—can never dare to ‘let up’ on ourselves with regard to the larger issues which Hannah Arendt and others have done so much to bring to our attention.”⁴⁶ To be sure, there was an urgency expressed in the reactions to the controversy; a great and pressing demand for Holocaust scholarship in the face of the realization of its lacuna. As Walter Laqueur put it in

⁴⁴ Theodor W. Adorno and Theodor Wiesengrund Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 2nd ed. (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 1981).

⁴⁵ Arendt, “Formidable Dr. Robinson.”

⁴⁶ Stanley Manfred, “Letters to the Editor.” *Commentary*. January 1, 1964.

1966 in response to *And the Crooked Shall be Made Straight*, “the whole future of this official historiography is now in balance.”⁴⁷

This watershed of Holocaust research was itself a sign that this should be considered a “real” controversy, for this was merely the beginning of the debate, a point of departure. Even for Arendt, the controversy provided possibility for the future because it was the *beginning*: “These are serious and even terrible questions, and neither the present unanimity of Jewish official opinion nor any “coordination” of research will be able to prevent independent scholars from asking them and trying to find an answer. The greatest weakness of this unanimity is that it is of so very recent origin.”⁴⁸ By producing a demand for more scholarship, the controversy did provide a challenging landscape to the public debate, but the topics and form of the controversy also helped make this conversation a site of contestation—a “real” controversy. Arendt had crossed a boundary of acceptable discourse that had not yet been defined, and through her perceived violation Arendt provoked a debate that hoped to identify the boundary she had supposedly crossed. If Arendt had failed and violated proper terms, then what terms *should* one employ in histories of the Holocaust?

This study argues that the space of the controversy was a powerfully challenging one not only because it pushed for more scholarship, but also because both sides directly articulated a critique of static, homogenizing discourse. Arendt’s critics, on the one hand, promoted sites of contestation because they opposed the existence of the “final word” on the Holocaust, warning of the danger and discrimination the “final word” could bring if it is one of a prejudiced and anti-

⁴⁷ Walter Laqueur, “Footnotes to the Holocaust,” review of *And the Crooked Shall Be Made Straight: The Eichmann Trial, The Jewish Catastrophe and Hannah Arendt’s Narrative*, by Jacob Robinson, *The New York Review of Books*, November 11, 1966, <http://www.nybooks.com/articles/archives/1965/nov/11/footnotes-to-the-holocaust/>

⁴⁸ Arendt, “Formidable Dr. Robinson.”

Semitic nature—the power of prejudiced discourse and its potential for violence was acutely felt. Arendt, on the other hand, endlessly promoted the preservation of contending perspectives; of pluralism and possibility as necessary conditions for thought. Both sides of the controversy openly demanded forums for debate and disagreement, and both sides feared the pernicious effects of unanimity in public opinion. If there was one thing both could agree on, it was that agreeing could be dangerous in the modern world, particularly if they agreed on a destructive idea, and the ability to contest a perspective was a paramount one.

Arendt did not necessarily see that her critics were also promoting a sense of plurality. In fact, she was so dismayed at the homogeneity of responses that she did not consider many of her critics' opinions legitimate. That being said, Arendt went further in her push for contestation than her critics during the controversy because she articulated a defense of differentiation and pluralization in public discourse itself rather than fighting for the necessity of contestation in reference to a specific idea. Arendt's critics were less worried about homogeneity than they were homogeneity around their perceived interpretation of Arendt. In contrast, Arendt was more worried about promoting a multiplicity of perspectives on her book than correcting the specific misinterpretation circulated by her critics—in other words, she was more saddened by the consistency in her critics than their misunderstanding of her book. When she reviewed Jacob Robinson's book, she titled her article "Formidable Dr. Robinson," but what is formidable about Dr. Robinson was not his argument, but the fact that his argument became the singular way to see her book. As she puts it, "it *is* awe-inspiring that for years now, simply on his having said so, the news has echoed around the globe that my book contained 'hundreds of factual errors' and that I had not written a trial report but 'scrutinized the data concerned with the Nazi

extermination of European Jewry.”⁴⁹ In contrast, Arendt defends herself in order to encourage more disagreement, for “I [Arendt] try, not to indoctrinate, but to rouse or awaken.”⁵⁰

Most interestingly, Arendt not only articulated the terms by which a proper debate should conduct itself, but also became a figure (or symbol) through which those ideals could manifest in the debate about Holocaust memory. As noted in Chapter 2 of this study, Arendt became the figure around which contestations of the status quo of Jewish interpretation adhered. She was a disrupting figure and a figure of disruption. She articulated not simply challenging ideas, but also the need for *processes* of contestation. It was not new ideas Arendt looked for, but how to endlessly produce them, and through both her theory and the example of her public figure Arendt provided such a process of contestation.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Arendt, *Recovery*, 309.

Conclusion

Negotiating the Controversy Through History

Arendt is a thinker who challenges us, but she must not be viewed as the “mastermind” behind the controversy. From the perspective of the historian, the controversy surrounding *Eichmann in Jerusalem* should not be framed in terms of Arendt’s ability to direct or provoke conversation. “Action,” as Arendt reminds us in *Promise of Politics*, begins something new and causes “the formation of a chain of unpredictable consequences.”¹ Certainly the controversy was “unpredictable” in that it took on a life of its own, distinct from Arendt’s intentions. In fact, Arendt was frequently surprised and dismayed by the nature of the debate she helped provoke. In this sense, Arendt was only one actor in the controversy, and the subject and terms of the debate were different from what Arendt proposed in her report. If the controversy is to be better understood, the historian must acknowledge the many voices that impacted the nature of the debate.

In addition to viewing Arendt as one historical actor among many, this study approaches the controversy through Arendt’s own eyes. Arendt’s mode of thinking reaches even more useful lengths when refashioned as a historical lens through which we can revisit the controversy, learning from its events through an “Arendtian” retelling of the story. Employing an Arendtian lens does not preclude a plural portrait of the controversy nor does it subsume the other actors’ voices under Arendt’s. In fact, approaching the controversy through an Arendtian lens forces the historian to consider Arendt as only one actor among many—it is precisely an

¹ Hannah Arendt, *The Promise of Politics*, 1st ed. (New York: Schocken Books, 2005), 50.

Arendtian lens that demands a history comprised of many voices. By telling the story of this history we can understand Arendt as a subject *and* lens, revealing a deeper sense of the dimensions of her discourse and the extent to which an idea or thinker can impact the world and our understanding of it. Flipping Arendt back upon herself can also renegotiate the problems the controversy discussed, the ways they were debated, and what we can learn from the debate.

Although Arendt is a figure who disrupts, she is also a figure who wrote about writing and building history, of preserving and retelling the past. As Arendt put it, “it is the publicity of the public realm which can absorb and make shine through the centuries whatever men may want to save from the natural ruin of time.”² Arendt was devoted to preserving the past, to recovering the world that connected and separated men. History not only preserves the past for our world, but retells and therefore learns from it: “Action reveals itself fully only to the storyteller, that is, to the backward glance of the historian, who indeed always knows better what it was all about than the participants... [it is] the storyteller who perceives and ‘makes’ the story.”³ Through history we can “recall the significant events in our lives by relating them to ourselves and others,”⁴ connecting, constructing and learning from our world. For Arendt, history is not merely a means to understand the past, but also a means to build the world we live in. Arendt paints this negotiation with the past as an endlessly ongoing project, for if “storytelling reveals meaning without committing the error of defining it,” the past is left “undefined,” ripe in possibilities of meaning for the future. Arendt encourages us to view history not as a “closed book” but as a space of endless reinterpretation. The historian “makes” the story to understand the past, but the

² Hannah Arendt and Margaret Canovan, *The Human Condition*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), Kindle Edition, location 1027.

³ Arendt, *The Human Condition*, location 2939.

⁴ Hannah Arendt, *Men in Dark Times* (New York: Harcourt, 1968), 21.

historian in a sense also “makes” the world now and for the future. It is the future, and not only the past, at stake in Arendt’s thinking on history.

As hinted above, revisiting the controversy through Arendt’s eyes also forces the historian to consider the eyes of others in the controversy as distinct from one another. According to Seyla Benhabib’s understanding of Arendt, Arendt argues that “in re-creating this plural and perspectival quality of the shared world, the historian could accomplish his or her task only so far as his or her faculty of imagination was not limited to one of these viewpoints.”⁵ The historian must “recreate the world of others,” and present the world from multiple points of view. Arendt’s lens is one that demands a consideration of more than one perspective. As Arendt argues, “political thought is representative, I form an opinion by considering a given issue from different viewpoints, by making present to my mind the standpoints of those who are absent; that is, I represent them.”⁶ If we are to learn from this controversy, we must retell it, representing yet engaging its perspectives in terms of their distinctions and diversity. In this sense, the act of retelling the story is also a practice in thinking: as the historian narrates the story, she must form an independent thought yet consider the perspectives of others. It could even be said that the practice of Arendtian history is not only a means to an end (to an understanding of the past) but also an end in itself, conditioning the historian to the very thinking Arendt saw as the way to “recover” the world.

In considering the narrative through Arendt’s eyes, it is also interesting, perhaps ironic, that Arendt became one side of a dichotomy of interpretation over the course of the controversy, for Arendt eschewed thinking in terms of dichotomies and their restrictions on the multiplicity of

⁵ Seyla Benhabib, *The Reluctant Modernism of Hannah Arendt*, Rev. ed. (Lanham, Md: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2003), 89.

⁶ Hannah Arendt, *Between Past and Future*, Rev. ed. 1968 (New York: Viking Press, 1961), 241.

thought. For she was a side of a controversy that split into two, Arendt against her critics, yet Arendt would never have wanted such a limiting frame of interpretation. Arendt was refashioned and represented as a symbol for a view she never espoused, and this portrait of Arendt's work would become the figure against which her critics argued. Hence, her critics argued against what they perceived to be her argument, and in doing so, formed this dichotomy of interpretation that never quite was there to begin with. As Arendt has pointed out in 1966, "if they [her critics] had left well enough alone, this issue, which I had touched upon only marginally, would not have been trumpeted all over the world."⁷ Her critics created their own image of their opposition, constructing a "two-sided" debate that informed the controversy. Yet, neither Arendt's avoidance nor public comments helped to break down this structure. Moreover, this dichotomous frame tended to produce the very homogenous response that Arendt criticized. In always arguing *against* the same, false idea of Arendt's work, Arendt believed her critics formed a singular response. As Arendt put it in her 1964 postscript to *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, it was as "though the pieces written against the book (and more frequently against its author) came 'out of a mimeographing machine' (Mary McCarthy)...the clamor centered on the 'image' of a book which was never written, and touched upon subjects that often had not only not been mentioned by me but had never occurred to me before."⁸

This structure had the effect of stifling debates that challenged the participants' beliefs, not only in reducing the possibilities of interpretation but also in fostering an atmosphere of allegiance versus betrayal, marking certain reactions to her book as a measurement of one's

⁷ Hannah Arendt, "'Formidable Dr. Robinson': A Reply." *New York Review of Books*. January 20, 1966. Accessed March 1, 2015. <http://www.nybooks.com/articles/archives/1966/jan/20/the-formidable-dr-robinson-a-reply/>

⁸ Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (New York: Penguin Books, 2006), 283.

social loyalties. This atmosphere—that tied one’s reaction to Arendt to a display of one’s Jewishness—discouraged a thorough engagement with the text. In fact, Arendt’s critics presented her as a traitor, making the rejection of her book the unquestioned, almost default method of engagement. As one Jewish historian pointed out in 1966, “I have rarely addressed a Jewish forum without facing the interrogation of an outraged congregant who insists on knowing my reaction to Hannah Arendt’s ‘folk libel,’”⁹ suggesting the answer to the question was more a way to prove allegiance than an opportunity to consider her book.

And yet, re-examining the controversy through an “Arendtian” lens, one cannot simply characterize the controversy as a battle between two sides. If one considers, for example, the perspectives in the debate beyond a dichotomous frame, it is easy to identify more than two perspectives on the matter. The debate expressed a richer, more nuanced fabric of debate than simply a battle between two sides. “Arendt versus Critics” would be a misleading frame. It would ignore the many voices that gave life and meaning to the debate—from Jacob Robinson’s entire book of refutations to Norman Podhoretz’s plea for a less acrimonious debate; from Mary McCarthy’s emotional defense of Arendt to the students that sent Arendt poetry. Revisiting the controversy not only shows how the debate *did* present a plurality of perspectives, but also how almost everyone involved in the controversy articulated the importance of debate and contestation, even if only to defend the right to publicly challenge dangerous portraits of Jews and their history. If, as Arendt tells us, the world “is shared by many people, lies between them, separates...them,” the world also “links them...Only in the freedom of our speaking with one another does the world, as that about which we speak, emerge in its objectivity and visibility

⁹ Howard Morley Sachar, “Objectivity and Jewish Social Science,” *American Jewish Historical Quarterly* 55, no. 4 (June 1966): 6.

from all sides.”¹⁰ If the players in the Arendt controversy represented distinct views of the world, they also were connecting to each other, particularly in their shared appreciation for endless debate of Jewish history and identity. Moreover, Arendt and a majority of her critics were Jewish. In this sense, they were connected in “fate” as Jews. As Arendt put it in *Rahel Varnhagen*, “Judaism could not be cast off by separating oneself from the other Jews; it merely became converted from a historical destiny, from a shared social condition, from an impersonal ‘general woe’ into a character trait, a personal defect in character. Judaism was an innate in Rahel as the lame man’s too-short leg.”¹¹

In retelling the story of the Eichmann controversy, the historian thus should not simply dwell on the ways in which this “dichotomy” informed the debate. Moreover, the historian does not have to remain beholden to the structures of the controversy. Historiography leaves room for a negotiation with, not necessarily an adoption of, the perspectives presented in a history. The historian can draw meaning herself, for, as Arendt put it in *The Human Condition* (1958), “The trouble is that whatever the character and content of the subsequent story may be, whether it is placed in private or public life, whether it involves many or few actors, its full meaning can reveal itself only when it has ended.”¹² Thus, thinkers like Richard Wolin and Daniel Goldhagen take the wrong approach when they reinterpret Arendt and the controversy through some of the dangerous, misleading terms the debate itself employed. In Richard Wolin’s Fall 2014 review of Bettina Stangneth’s book, *Eichmann Before Jerusalem, The Unexamined Life of a Mass Murderer*, for example, Wolin tells us that Arendt “established an historical paradigm that managed simultaneously to downplay the executioners’ criminal liability, which she viewed as

¹⁰ Arendt, *The Promise of Politics*, 130.

¹¹ Hannah Arendt and Liliane Weissberg, *Rahel Varnhagen: The Life of a Jewess*, 1st complete ed (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997), 251.

¹² Arendt, *The Human Condition*, location 2926.

‘banal’ and bureaucratic, and to exaggerate the culpability of their Jewish victim... In seeking to downplay the German specificity of the Final Solution by universalizing it, Arendt also strove to safeguard the honor of the highly educated German cultural milieu from which she herself hailed.”¹³ Wolin’s argument almost exactly echoes Arendt’s 1960s critics’ point: that Arendt wanted to exculpate Eichmann and to place more blame on the Jews. Ultimately Wolin seems to shed little light on Arendt’s approach that the debate itself did not argue.¹⁴

In contrast, this study views Arendt as both a pillar and a disruption of this “dichotomy” in the controversy, and Arendt herself provides the conditions through which this limited approach can be challenged for us as historians. Thus, if the controversy produced a dichotomy that was unproductive—in the sense that Arendt’s critics often engaged the book through a dichotomous frame that tended to preclude an honest reading of her book—the controversy also produced the terms through which the dichotomy can be broken down. An “Arendtian lens” provides a frame of thinking that disrupts rigid discourse and encourages thinking in terms of possibilities and openness. Even in 1971, Arendt argued forcefully for such a frame, writing against forms of thinking that reduce possibility to rigid choices, for “the fallacy of such thinking begins with forcing the choices into mutually exclusive dilemmas; reality never presents us with anything so neat as premises for logical conclusions.”¹⁵ Arendt, employed as a historical subject

¹³ Richard Wolin, “The Banality of Evil: The Demise of a Legend,” review of *Eichmann Before Jerusalem: The Unexamined Life of a Mass Murderer*, by Bettina Stangneth, *Jewish Review of Books*, Fall 2004, <https://jewishreviewofbooks.com/articles/1106/the-banality-of-evil-the-demise-of-a-legend/>

¹⁴ It should be noted that after the *Jewish Review of Books* published his review, they also published several articles written back and forth between Seyla Benhabib and Richard Wolin on the subject. It is interesting to note how the controversy in some ways has continued on as it did in the 1960s. Although certainly less acrimonious, the conversation still rages on through a seemingly endless supply of back-and-forth articles published for all to read.

¹⁵ Hannah Arendt, “Lying in Politics: Reflections on the Pentagon Papers.” *The New York Review of Books*. November 18, 1971. Accessed March 15, 2015.

and lens, does not provide the answer to the controversy, but encourages the possibility for learning and sparking new ones. Thus the debate was a “real” controversy not only in the sense that it provoked challenging debates about how to talk about the Holocaust but also because revisiting its narrative provides the terms for renegotiating and challenging the conversation. As A.M. Hill tells us in the introduction to *Recovery of the Public World* (1979), “unlike theorists in the mainstream, Hannah Arendt does not so much tell us what to think or what to do, as she offers an example of how we might engage in thinking given the conditions of our world.”¹⁶

We must rewrite the historiography of Arendt, reclaim her mode of thinking that promotes possibility. As Arendt’s friend Karl Jaspers wrote to her in a letter to her on July 25, 1963, “You have hit many people's most sensitive nerve endings—a lie in their very existence—and they hate you...The truth will be beaten to death, as Kierkegaard said of Socrates and Jesus. Now, it has not come to this and it will not. But you have been given a *fama*, which, for you, is not the right thing, detestable. In the long run your character will, of course prevail and triumph radiantly.”¹⁷ Although here Jaspers hoped to console Arendt about her enduring legacy, there is more at stake in reclaiming Arendt than allowing her character to “triumph radiantly.” Indeed, Arendt’s thinking can be refashioned as a tool for a continued process of historical inquiry into *Eichmann in Jerusalem*. As Arendt tells us, it is the storyteller who makes the story and gives it meaning. In this sense, this study hopes to “make” Arendt’s story into one that will challenge how we think about our world, both past and future.

<http://www.nybooks.com/articles/archives/1971/nov/18/lying-in-politics-reflections-on-the-pentagon-pape/>

¹⁶ Melvyn A. Hill, introduction to *Hannah Arendt, Recovery of the Public World*, ed. Melvyn A. Hill (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1979), x.

¹⁷ Karl Jaspers to Hannah Arendt, 25 July 1963, in *Hannah Arendt/ Karl Jaspers Correspondence, 1926-1969*, ed. Lotte Kohler and Hans Saner (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1992), 354.

If, for example, we reconsider Arendt's retelling of Plato's cave allegory in *Promise of Politics*, we can begin to see how her thinking might promote possibility in interpretation and meaning. In discussing Plato's cave, Arendt describes how "Plato means to give a kind of concentrated biography of the philosopher."¹⁸ Plato's philosopher, unlike his fellow cave dwellers, is able to realize that "the images on the screen at which the cave dwellers stare are their *doxai*, what and how things appear to them. If they want to look at things as they really are, they must turn around, that is, change their position because, as we saw before, every *doxa* depends on and corresponds to one's position in the world."¹⁹ After he emerges from the cave to the world of "eternal essences" and truth, he returns back the cave, and "can no longer see in the darkness of the cave, they have lost their sense of orientation, they have lost what we would call their common sense."²⁰ The philosopher returns to a cave vicious and hostile to him.

In Arendt's retelling, Arendt describes how the philosopher stands in tension to the world of men, for "he is to an extent alienated from the city of men, which can only look with suspicion on everything that concerns man in the singular."²¹ Yet, the philosopher, in his perpetual state of wonder "at that which as it is"²² (*thaumadzein*), also has an advantage, for he is "the only one who has no distinct and clearly defined *doxa* to compete with other opinions, the truth or untruth of which common sense wants to decide."²³ The philosopher's state of wonder is also a state of asking questions, of endlessly opening up new possibilities. As Arendt puts it:

It is from the actual experience of not-knowing, in which one of the basic aspects of the human condition on earth reveals itself, that the ultimate questions arise—not from the rationalized, demonstrable fact that there are things man does not know, which believers

¹⁸ Arendt, *The Promise of Politics*, 29.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 29-30.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 35.

²² *Ibid.*, 34.

²³ *Ibid.*, 36.

in progress hope to see fully amended one day, or which positivists may discard as irrelevant. In asking the ultimate, unanswerable questions, man establishes himself as a question-asking being.²⁴

Arendt goes on to try to imagine the potential for “political philosophy” to maintain this sense of wonder, this perpetual state of asking questions and loosening opinion, while at the same time confronting the “alienation” the philosopher experiences as a result of his focus on “man in the singular.” Arendt tells us, “If philosophers, despite their necessary estrangement from the everyday life of human affairs, were ever to arrive at a true political philosophy, they would have to make the plurality of man, out of which arises the whole realm of human affairs—in its grandeur and misery—the object of their *thaumadzein*.”²⁵

If, then, we reimagine Arendt’s engagement in the Eichmann controversy as a “cave allegory” of sorts, we can see how Arendt’s approach to her world is different—and more destabilizing—than the philosopher’s in Plato’s cave. Although Arendt and Plato’s philosopher both confront a world that responds viciously to them, Arendt confronts the public world not as a philosopher, but as a political theorist, someone who adamantly maintained that she was not a philosopher because she was concerned with politics. Unlike Plato’s philosopher, she was concerned with *men*, not *man*. In fact, it is Arendt’s understanding of human plurality that defines her thinking in the political space. Moreover, Arendt does not hope to understand “eternal essences” or abstract truths like Plato’s philosopher. Arendt reveals and defends her views in *Eichmann in Jerusalem* not to stick to a singular viewpoint but rather to ask her critics to consider her work. Arendt hoped that her critics would engage her work not because she was stubborn and wanted them to agree with her, but because she hoped that in considering her work her critics would loosen their thinking and approach to the subject. She wanted her work to

²⁴ Ibid., 34.

²⁵ Ibid., 38.

promote the practice of thinking in terms of plurality, of considering other points of view.

Arendt's defense of her position is not like the philosopher who tries to impose their "truth" on the world. Arendt asked not for agreement but precisely for disagreement and contestation in the controversy.

Arendt is distinctly not Plato's philosopher. "I do not want to indoctrinate," Arendt told us in 1972. "That is really true. I do not want anybody to accept what I may think."²⁶

²⁶ Arendt, *Recovery*, 336.

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