

*When the New Yorker sent me...
to report on the trial
of Adolf Eichmann,
I assumed...
that a courtroom
had only one interest-
to fulfill the demands of justice.
This was not a simple task,
because the court that tried Eichmann
was confronted with a crime...
it could not find in the law books...
and a criminal whose like was unknown in
any court prior to the Nuremberg trials.
But still, the court...
had to define Eichmann as a
man on trial for his deeds.
There was no system on trial,
no history, no ism,
not even anti-Semitism,
but only a person.
The trouble with a Nazi criminal
like Eichmann...
was that he insisted
on renouncing all personal qualities...
as if there was nobody left to
be either punished or forgiven.
He protested time and again,
contrary to
the prosecution's assertions,
that he had never done anything*

*out of his own initiative,
that he had no intentions whatsoever,
good or bad,
that he had only obeyed orders.
This... typical Nazi plea...
makes it clear that the greatest
evil in the world...
is the evil committed by nobodies-
evil committed by men without motive,
without convictions, without
wicked hearts or demonic wills.
By human beings
who refuse to be persons.
And it is this phenomenon...
that I have called the banality of evil.
Ms. Arendt.
You're avoiding the most important part
of the controversy.
You claimed that less Jews
would have died...
if their leaders hadn't cooperated.
This issue came up in the trial.
I reported on it,
and I had to clarify
the role of those Jewish leaders...
who participated directly
in Eichmann's activities.
You blame the Jewish people
for their own destruction.
I never blamed the Jewish people!*

*Resistance was impossible.
But perhaps...
there is something in between resistance...
and cooperation.
And only in that sense
do I say...
that maybe some of the Jewish leaders
might have behaved differently.
It is profoundly important...
to ask these questions,
because the role of the Jewish leaders...
gives the most striking insight...
into the totality of the moral collapse...
that the Nazis caused
in respectable European society.
And not only in Germany,
but in almost all countries.
Not only among the persecutors.
But also among the victims.
Yes?
The persecution was aimed at the Jews.
Why do you describe Eichmann's
offenses as crimes against humanity?
Because Jews are human,
the very status
the Nazis tried to deny them.
A crime against them is by
definition a crime against humanity.
I am, of course,
as you know, a Jew.*

*And I've been attacked
for being a self-hating Jew...
who defends Nazis
and scorns her own people.
This is not an argument.
That is a character assassination.
I wrote no defense of Eichmann.
But I did try to reconcile...
the shocking mediocrity of the man...
with his staggering deeds.
Trying to understand
is not the same as forgiveness.
I see it as my responsibility
to understand.
It is the responsibility of anyone who
dares to put pen to paper on the subject.
Since Socrates and Plato,
we usually call thinking...
"to be engaged in that silent dialogue
between me and myself."
In refusing to be a person,
Eichmann utterly surrendered...
that single most defining human quality:
that of being able to think.
And consequently, he was no longer
capable of making moral judgments.
This inability to think...
created the possibility
for many ordinary men...
to commit evil deeds*

*on a gigantic scale,
the like of which
one had never seen before.*

It is true.

*I have considered these questions
in a philosophical way.*

*The manifestation
of the wind of thought...
is not knowledge,
but the ability
to tell right from wrong,
beautiful from ugly.*

*And I hope...
that thinking gives people
the strength...
to prevent catastrophes
in these rare moments...
when the chips are down.*

Thank you.