Rereading *Eichmann in Jerusalem*

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In 1963, Hannah Arendt's *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* was published. The book created a controversy that lasts until today, though the focus of the criticism has shifted over the years. The original controversy concerned a number of issues: Arendt's comments on how the trial was conducted and its political aspects, the ambiguous phrase "the banality of evil," which appears in the original version only in the subtitle and at the very end of the report, and Arendt's remarks on the Jewish councils.[1] In more recent years, the focus of the criticism has moved to her portrayal of Adolf Eichmann. Was he a thoughtless petty man, who committed monstrous deeds? (Arendt 1992, 287). Or was he "a case of …fanatical anti-Semitism"? (26; cf. Robin 2015).

Alongside these issues, there has also been disagreement about the nature of the work. Arendt calls it a "report" and speaks of "simple reporting" (Arendt 1992, 287). Yet, how does one report on the banality of evil? Some of her critics have considered the book a "faulty piece of historical writing, or even an incomplete sketch in moral history" (Neiman 2003, 66). Susan Neiman, in contrast, holds it to be "one of the best pieces of moral philosophy that the twentieth century has to offer" (Neiman 2010, 305). With Neiman, I regard the book as much more than a report on the trial. *Eichmann in Jerusalem* places Eichmann's story in a larger historical and political context, it reflects on the nature of the Nazi regime and it considers the political impact of the trial in Israel and elsewhere. Most importantly, it reflects on, what Arendt in *The Life of the Mind* describes as, the reversal of "mores and habits" in Nazi Germany (Arendt 1978a, 177-78) and thus shows itself to be a work of moral thought.

Related to Arendt's claim of "simple reporting" is another constant in the debate: the focus on factual accuracy. Her critics have denounced her use of evidence and her presentation of facts, but they have not always been accurate either. This is clear when *Eichmann in Jerusalem* was first published, and again in the more recent discussions generated by Bettina Stangneth's *Eichmann vor Jerusalem* (2011). Even though not all Arendt's "factual errors" are indeed errors, it is now generally agreed "that the

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work has its share of historical mistakes" (Borren and Vasterling 2022).[2] Still, the ramifications of the criticism are often overlooked. Why are the facts so important and can they decide the controversy?

In this article I show that different sides in the debate assume that mere facts are sufficient to end the dispute, taking Bernard Wasserman's Hannah Arendt lecture in Nijmegen in 2008 as starting point. I next argue against this assumption. Facts do not exist in isolation but always appear in a particular arrangement. I then look at the arrangement of parts of *Eichmann in Jerusalem* and offer a reading that shows it to be a response to a particular moral question. This reading of *Eichmann in Jerusalem* considers two stories in the book as pivotal. The first is about Feldwebel Anton Schmidt and the second is about Probst Heinrich Grüber.

In 2008 Bernard Wasserstein, then the Ulrich and Harriet Meyer Professor of Modern European Jewish History at the University of Chicago, was invited to give the annual Hannah Arendt lecture at Radboud University in Nijmegen, the Netherlands. He had been invited to speak about the main theme of his most recent publication, *Barbarism and Civilisation: A History of Europe in Our Time* (2007), and possibly bring in some of Arendt's works (Vugt 2010, 7-8) Yet, on the day, Wasserstein surprised his audience by not speaking about his book at all. Instead, he spent his time repudiating Arendt's work as faulty history. The lecture, later published as "Blame the victim: Hannah Arendt among the Nazis: the historian and her sources," is a "ferocious" attack, especially on *Eichmann in Jerusalem* (Horowitz 2010, 76). It started a heated debate in the audience, which resulted in a number of publications. In the discussion below I shall refer most of all to one of the more prominent publications, by Dirk de Schutter and Remi Peeters.[3]

The title of Wasserstein's lecture indicates the two major points of his criticism. He does not think highly of Arendt as a historian, because of her inadequate use of resources and because of a lack of compassion. Both points invite further reflection on facts, but first, it should be noted that it is far from obvious that Arendt is writing as a historian. Wasserstein decides very quickly that she is (Wasserstein 2009, 13, 14; cf. De Schutter and Peeters 2010, 57). For Wasserstein, two qualities of a good historian are their "balanced judgment and capacity to sift and weigh evidence" (Wasserstein 2009, 15). He judges Arendt to fail in both respects, especially when it comes to antisemitic sources. It is not just *what* evidence she uses, but also *how* she uses it (14). Wasserstein accuses her of uncritically drawing

on sources that were part of a political system that led to the displacement and the murder of millions of people and that abused facts for this purpose. More than once Arendt is found guilty by association, most deplorably when she uses a six-volume biography by Georg Schönerer of which, Wasserstein writes, the "first volume … had inspired the young Hitler in Vienna" (14-5; cf. De Schutter and Peeters 2010, 40-1.) Wasserstein presents her as corrupted by being overexposed to "the discourse of collective contempt and stigmatization that formed the object of her study" (Wasserstein 2009, 14-5). There is an obviously patronizing tone in that last comment, but it is also a reminder that the facts under consideration are horrific (cf. Friedlander 1972, 91).

Wasserstein's criticism addresses an aspect of totalitarianism that plays a central role in Arendt's thinking. For her, one of its dangers is that it tries to destroy any sense of reality and community, and with that, the ability to act freely. It does so not just by denying facts, but also by eliminating the distinction between fact and opinion (Arendt 2006, 232; 1994, 168; cf. Vasterling 2019, 17). It can do so, because facts are vulnerable (Arendt 1972, 6). With evidence gone, it is possible to convince people that an event did not take place at all. It is for this reason, as De Schutter and Peeters write, that Arendt emphasizes the political importance of people, like the historian, the judge, and the journalist, and of public institutions, like courts and universities. They regard the preservation of fact very highly (De Schutter and Peeters 2010, 67). A good historian, like anyone who is willing "to say what is," is a defense against totalitarianism (Arendt 1994, 404; Borren and Vasterling 2022). To fail at facts can thus have disastrous consequences.

Eichmann in Jerusalem is not without its historical mistakes, and yet Wasserstein dismisses the work all too soon. His account of Arendt's scholarship is problematic because he too is selective in his use of material. He accuses Arendt of using the work of nazi-historian Walter Frank but does not note how she problematizes this (De Schutter and Peeters 2010, 37; Wasserstein 2009, 14). Significantly, even Wasserstein admits at one point that he cannot square Arendt's apparently uncritical use of sources with her knowledge of nuances in the German language, and yet at no point is he sufficiently puzzled to solve this conundrum. It seems then, that Wasserstein and Arendt agree on the importance of critical use of sources, on trying to avoid making mistakes, and regarding sources

without bias.[4] Yet, if the accurate presentation of facts is the sole criterion, neither appears to live up to it.

It is doubtful that any recourse to facts alone will be able to solve the dispute. Facts do not exist in isolation. In Arendt's phenomenological understanding, facts cannot be fully distinguished from meaning. This is perhaps best understood through examples. If someone is nodding their head, we will try and give meaning to this gesture. We may think they are agreeing, pondering what we have said, or simply trying to appear encouraging. If American citizens enter their Capitol building with violence, we try to make sense of these facts by calling them a mob or freedom fighters. What these examples show is how we constantly try and make sense of facts by giving them meaning. What is more, disagreement about meaning is a means of establishing and retaining facts (cf. Vasterling 2019, 16; Vasterling 2002; see also Arendt 1978a, 15-6). We may disagree on the name of those citizens, but in our disagreement, we confirm that they went into the building that day. At the same time, "going into the building" does not fully capture the event.

The complex relation between fact and meaning comes to the fore too in another quality of the good historian that Wasserstein mentions: compassion.[5] Especially with regard to *Eichmann in Jerusalem* Arendt has been accused of lacking compassion for the victims of the Nazi atrocities (Robin 2015, 13). This accusation is often supported with quotes from the open correspondence between Gershom Scholem and Arendt that followed the publication of the first edition of *Eichmann in Jerusalem* in 1963. Michael Brenner, for instance, mentions that Scholem "criticized [*Eichmann in Jerusalem*] not for scholarly sins but for the author's lack of empathy for the Jewish people."[6] Brenner notes that this criterion is unusual, but he warns not to dismiss it too easily (Brenner 2006, 12). Wasserstein too reiterates Scholem's concern that Arendt showed little *ahavat Yisrael*, "love of the Jewish people" (Scholem 1978, 241; Wasserstein 2009, 14).

In her response to Scholem, Arendt agrees that she has never loved any group. She has love only for individuals (Arendt 1978b, 246). She does not think compassion has a role to play in this debate and points out how emotions of this kind can often be used to hide facts (Arendt 1992, 247). For that reason, she emphasizes the importance of factual reporting in the "Postscript" to the edition of 1965, which she wrote in response to the severe criticism with which the first edition met in 1963. Similarly, in the new introduction, she claims that all changes to the 1965 edition are "tech-

nical" (Arendt 1992, v). Yet, this assessment does not seem accurate. Commentators have noted that the tone is all but simple, but the issue is not just the tone. The book is a rich source of ideas that will engage Arendt for the rest of her life, as, for instance, the introduction to *The Life of the Mind* testifies (Arendt 1978a, 3-4; cf. Borren and Vasterling 2022).

Arendt's comments are also not in line with her own understanding of history or reporting. In "Truth and Politics" she writes: "Even if we admit that every generation has the right to write its own history, we admit no more than that it has the right to rearrange the facts in accordance with its own perspective" (Arendt 2006, 234). Responding again to the Eichmann controversy, Arendt not just emphasizes the importance of facts, but also mentions the act of arrangement. This latter aspect allows a move away from a debate that focuses solely on facts.

For the arrangement in *Eichmann in Jerusalem* does not simply follow the order of the trial or the chronology of the crimes. It is when studying the structure that an important moral concern for Arendt comes to the fore, as I show in the remainder of this article. My argument proceeds by outlining a reading of *Eichmann in Jerusalem* that considers two sets of stories in the book as pivotal. The first set comes near the end when Arendt relates the witness of Zindel Grynszpan, which is closely followed by the account of Feldwebel Anton Schmidt (Arendt 1992, 229-30). The second concerns Propst Heinrich Grüber and is found about a third into the work.

Grynszpan appears in the chapter on witnesses, a later chapter in *Eichmann in Jerusalem*. The presence of these witnesses in the trial was unprecedented and its significance has gone well beyond the trial. As Deborah Lipstadt relates, survivors may not have had a voice today were it not for the Eichmann trial (Lipstadt 2011, xi). Significantly, until this chapter, Arendt had been critical of their presence, because many of the stories were not relevant to the trial. The majority of the witnesses were from Poland and Lithuania, where, she writes, "Eichmann's competence and authority had been almost nil" (Arendt 1992, 225). She criticizes the fact that the witnesses were hardly questioned and instead "could talk almost as long as they wished" (121).

Yet, when Grynszpan takes the stand, Arendt changes her mind and seems to accept "'the right of witnesses to be irrelevant' as Yad Vashem … phrased it" (225). Grynszpan tells the story of the expulsion of Polish Jews from Germany in October 1938. He had lived in Germany for 27 years, until the night that he and his family were deported, along with approximately

17000 Polish Jews. In a period of only a few days, they were brought to the Polish border, where chaos ensued. They lost all they had. Arendt provides a harrowing account of his testimony and then writes: "This story took no more than perhaps ten minutes to tell, and when it was over – the senseless, needless destruction of twenty-seven years in less than twenty-four hours – one thought foolishly: Everyone, everyone should have his day in court," though she adds almost immediately how difficult it is to tell such a story well (229).

Yet, it is the consequent story of Schmidt that truly marks a pivotal moment in this chapter and in the book. It comes in the testimony of a resistance fighter, Abba Kovner, who tells how, for five months or so, Feldwebel Anton Schmidt helped the Jewish underground, until he was arrested and executed. Arendt writes how on hearing the story "a hush settled over the courtroom," as if to "observe the usual two minutes of silence in honor of the man named Anton Schmidt" (231). She muses that the world would be "utterly different... if only more such stories could have been told" and discusses the objection that any resistance would have been "practically useless." She concludes:

> "Nothing can ever be 'practically useless', at least, not in the long run. [...] under the conditions of terror most people will comply but *some people will no*t... Humanly speaking, no more is required, and no more can be reasonably asked, for this planet to remain a place fit for human habitation."
> (Arendt 1992, 233; cf. Neiman 2003, 85 ff.)

With this last quotation, it is obvious that Arendt's writing is itself an activity of resistance against totalitarianism. What is more, it also shows how any "saying what is" can be such resistance: in the preservation of facts and in the stories it tells. If this is the case, the preservation of facts cannot be a neutral undertaking, nor proceed from an "'Archimedean point,' an abstract or (quasi-)universalistic point of view" (Borren and Vasterling 2022).

In her reflection on Schmidt, Arendt speaks of a "planet ... fit for human habitation." Different commentators have argued that *Eichmann in Jerusalem* allowed her to reconcile herself in a way to the world she lived in, a world that had been characterized by senseless murder at an industrial scale. Young-Bruehl speaks in this context of *cura posterior*, words Arendt

used.[7] Neiman sees the book as Arendt's attempt to defend "a world that contained [Eichmann]" and quotes Arendt's letter to McCarthy, where she responds to McCarthy's experience of exhilaration when reading *Eichmann in Jerusalem*: "You were the only reader to understand what otherwise I have never admitted – namely that I wrote this book in a curious state of euphoria. And that ever since I did it, I feel – after 20 years – lighthearted about the whole matter" (Neiman 2003, 90).

If the story of Schmidt thus marks one pivotal moment in *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, the other is marked by Probst Heinrich Grüber. Where Schmidt reconciles Arendt to the world, with Grüber begins the descent into the deepest darkness. He appears at the end of the chapter on the Wannsee Conference, one-third into the book. What follows are chapters that are incredibly difficult to read. They relate the deportations of Jews from the various countries to the death camps. The section on Grüber marks a shift away from a situation in which other options seem still open. Until then the final solution has not appeared as a foregone conclusion. Arendt's writing exemplifies here an important characteristic of her historiography, as Marieke Borren and Veronica Vasterling describe it: its conditionality (Borren and Vasterling 2022). As a reader, one hopes against all knowledge that things will be different.

Grüber is introduced in the discussion on Eichmann's conscience when Arendt queries whether Eichmann encountered anyone who would oppose the unimaginable plans (Arendt 1992, 126-7). She concludes that he hardly did. Even those who opposed the regime would, by arguing the case for 'special' Jews, in a way confirm it. She writes: "[those who were engaged in the business of murder] ... must have felt, at least, that by being asked to make exceptions, and by occasionally granting them, and thus earning gratitude, they had convinced their opponents of the lawfulness of what they were doing" (132-3). Grüber was one of those who intervened on behalf of specific groups of people and was, for a time, incarcerated in Dachau.

The episode with Grüber has not been discussed much. Yet, in my reading of *Eichmann in Jerusalem* this story is structurally very important in the book. Grüber, a German like Schmidt, was not immediately involved as either perpetrator or victim. His examination at the trial allowed Eichmann to claim: "Nobody. . . came to me and reproached me for anything in the performance of my duties. Not even Pastor Grüber claims to have done so" (131). For Arendt, the negotiations for special cases did not just operate

as confirmation of the regime but also implied that some lives are more worth saving than others. Arendt ends this chapter reflecting on those Germans who even in the early 1960s did not see how the argument for special cases was deadly, reproaching those "who still publicly regret the fact that Germany sent Einstein packing, without realizing that it was a much greater crime to kill little Hans Cohn from around the corner, even though he was no genius" (134).

When the book is read as structured around the accounts of Schmidt and Grüber, two aspects come to the fore. First, the work fits Arendt's historiography. Until Grüber makes his appearance, it seems as if history could have been different. Yet, from that chapter onwards, the book turns very dark as we read, chapter after chapter, about the deportations of millions of people to their deaths in the camps. This only changes when Arendt writes first of Grynszpan and then of Schmidt. For Arendt, we are not fully in control, but neither are we cogs in a machine. We are neither sovereign nor fully dependent (cf. De Schutter and Peeters 2010, 60-61). As De Schutter and Peeters argue, she is as far removed as possible from the thought that *Die Weltgeschichte ist das Weltgericht*, history will judge (68). To value the act of individual judgment is an acknowledgment that things could have been different. It allows for novelty, which Arendt considers a fundamental characteristic of human beings – a characteristic, moreover, that totalitarianism threatened to eliminate (51).

Secondly, the two stories concern two people who, for Arendt, are both exceptional as Germans. Grüber was exceptional in his resistance to the Nazi regime. He was recognized as a "Righteous among the Nations" by Yad Vashem in 1964, and in the trial "[testified] to the existence of 'another Germany'" (Arendt 1992, 130). Schmidt's story is exceptional because stories of aid from non-Jews were rare and Schmidt's story was the only one told about a German (231). Highlighting these two stories brings back to mind Scholem's question: where is her *ahavat Yisrael*? It is clear that, as Corey Robin argues, Arendt's ambiguous relation to Israel plays a role in the background to her writing and to that of her critics (Robin 2015, 14-15). It is also clear that her relation to Germany is even more present.

Yet, this is not so much about Arendt's relation to countries as it is about making sense of horrific facts. When the book was first published, she acknowledges in private correspondence that "she knew her book had moral implications she had not thought out" (Young-Bruehl 1982, 374). In *The Life of the Mind,* she makes these explicit, first in relation to Eichmann

(Arendt 1978a, 3-5) and later in relation to the whole of Nazi Germany. In Nazi Germany "basic commandments of Western morality were reversed." The more respectable the person, the more likely people were to follow the new regime.[8] In a reading that considers the stories of Grüber and Schmidt as pivotal, this appears to be Arendt's prime concern.

This reading may not lessen the vehement nature of the controversy. Perhaps, this is not possible. Or, perhaps, as Jerome Kohn argues, a solution is not even desirable. The book should be challenging long-held beliefs (cf. Borren and Vasterling 2022). Another difficulty comes from the subject matter, which is of such a horrific nature that it seems to take away all agency and any license to judge. Yet, Arendt judges and her judgments are difficult (cf. Robin 2015, 23-4). What is more, against expectations, Arendt's first concern is not with the victims, but with the observation that morals were so easily reversed in Nazi Germany and again after the war. The victims, however, are present. Their stories help her to understand the moral issues, but also to contain the darkness in the central chapters. A discussion that confines itself to facts misses these insights and the important questions *Eichmann in Jerusalem* still raises.

Notes

1 Young-Bruehl 1982, 337. For an excellent account of the controversy then, see King 2015, 189-217. For an explanation of the criticism see also Ring 1998, the chapters on the Eichmann trial in Bilsky 2004 and, more recently, Robin 2015. Arendt explains the phrase 'banality of evil' succinctly in the introduction to *The Life of the Mind*: "The deeds were monstrous, but the doer – at least the very effective one now on trial – was quite ordinary, commonplace, and neither demonic nor monstrous" (Arendt 1978, 4).

2 A good number of the earliest critics consulted Jacob Robinson's *Facts* (Young Bruehl 1982, 355-7). See for comments on its accuracy Maier-Katkin and Stoltzfus 2013. For a discussion of Stangneth see Mahony 2020, 43-8.

3 The texts by Wasserman, by De Schutter and Peeters and by Horowitz are all included in *Hannah Arendt en de geschiedschrijving*: *een controverse* (2010). The texts by Wasserstein and Horowitz are also available in English, though the English and Dutch texts differ at points. Where a comment occurs in both versions, references will be to the English text only.

4 Wasserstein 2010, 16. This section is not in the English version.

5 Significantly, these characteristics do not appear in essential qualities of the historian as outlined by Lucian, which Wasserstein mentions at the very end of his article (Wasserstein 2009, 15, quoting Costa, *Lucian, selected dialogues*, 197; the reference is only found in Wasserstein 2010, 34). Indeed, De Schutter and Peeters note that for at least one of them, Lucian holds the exact opposite: for him a good historian must be without compassion (De Schutter and Peeters 2010, 58).

6 Scholem has doubts about factual accuracy, but it is not the focus of his criticism (Scholem 1978, 240).

7 Young-Bruehl 1982, 374. Earlier Young-Bruehl explains: "[Arendt] freed herself of a long nightmare; she no longer had to live with the idea that monsters and demons had engineered the murder of millions. The banality of evil, she said in the last sentence of the book, is 'fearsome, word-and-thought-defying.' But its existence is not proof of an original evil element in human nature and hence not an indictment of mankind" (367).

8 Arendt 1978a, 177-8. See also Ring 1998, who contrasts Arendt's Jewish identity with her identity as German scholar (Ring 1998, 2, 107-8, 166 ff.)

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