

SLEEPWALKER: ARENDT, THOUGHTLESSNESS, AND
THE QUESTION OF LITTLE EICHMANNS

Larry Busk

“There are no dangerous thoughts; thinking itself is dangerous.”¹

“Thinking...is political by implication”²

In 2005, a gale of controversy erupted over an essay penned by Ward Churchill, professor of ethnic studies at The University of Colorado, entitled “Some People Push Back: Reflections on the Justice of Roosting Chickens.” The essay, written on September 11th 2001 and expanded into a book in 2003, concerns the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center. In it, Churchill argues that the attacks are best understood as a predictable response to American imperial practices; its title is a reference to Malcolm X’s comment after the assassination of JFK—“the chickens have finally come home to roost.”³ The (delayed)⁴ controversy was not centered specifically around these claims, however. Reactions to the essay focused exclusively on a single passage in which Churchill characterizes some of the victims of 9/11 as “little Eichmanns,” referring to the convicted Nazi war criminal Adolf Eichmann, and, implicitly, to Hannah Arendt’s 1963 work *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (the term “little Eichmann” is borrowed from John Zerzan,⁵ though its attribution to the WTC victims is original). In fact, as Fritch et al. point out,⁶ virtually no commentator quoted anything from the piece except these two words. The outrage and calumny that followed the exposure of the essay flowed directly

¹ Hannah Arendt, “Thinking and Moral Considerations,” in *Social Research* 38, no. 3 (1971), 435.

² Arendt, *The Life of the Mind* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1977), 192.

³ See Ward Churchill, *On the Justice of Roosting Chickens* (Edinburgh: AK Press, 2003), 5.

⁴ For an account of *why* the reaction to the essay (and book) was so delayed, see Fritch et al., “Disingenuous Controversy: Responses to Ward Churchill’s 9/11 Essay,” *Argumentation and Advocacy* 42 (Spring 2006): 190-205.

⁵ See Churchill, *On the Justice of Roosting Chickens*, 33.

⁶ See Fritch et al., 195-196. They also point out that several critics and philosophers (Zizek, Chomsky) have made arguments similar to Churchill’s, and suggest that the latter was singled out strictly because of the “little Eichmanns” comment (192).

from this incendiary comparison, from the suggestion that those who died in the World Trade Center had any connection to the evil officer of the Third Reich. Churchill has since been dismissed from his position at Colorado.

There have been several defenses of Churchill from the academic community. All that I can find, however, defend only his right to free expression and not what he actually said. Just as the indignant reactions to Churchill's argument focus only on its sheer audacity and offensiveness without analyzing any of the claims made, the defenses concern themselves narrowly with the issues of academic freedom and open critical discourse, not risking an examination of the content of the piece itself.⁷ This is what I attempt to do in what follows, to consider both the motive and the implications of Churchill's now infamous statement. Given the tone of the backlash, one would think that he had only wanted to say something derogatory about victims of terrorism. If this were the case, then why, given the wide range of possible libel, make use of such a specific reference? What does it mean to be a little Eichmann? Since he is invoking Arendt here, it will be necessary to ask this question in terms of her work. To understand what it means to be a little Eichmann we must first understand what it means to be an Eichmann. Much of the controversy—on both the indignant and defensive sides—stems from a misunderstanding of Churchill's comment and a failure to link it with Arendt's thesis on the banality of evil. The condemned remark turns on the connection, made by Arendt throughout her work, between thinking and moral agency. This essay gives an account of that connection in order to understand the origin and the significance of the contentious "little Eichmanns" assertion. It comes down, as

⁷ See:

Fritch et al.

C. Richard King, "Some Academics Try to Push Back: Ward Churchill, the War on Truth, and the Improbabilities of Interruption," in *Critical Studies* ⇔ *Critical Methodologies* 9 (2009): 31-40.

Robert M. O'Neil, "Limits of Freedom: The Ward Churchill Case," in *Change* (September/October 2006): 34-41.

Tim Simpson, "Editorial: Defending Ward Churchill," in *Political Theology* 6.2 (2005): 149-152.

Ward Churchill, "The Myth of Academic Freedom," in *Social Text* 90, vol. 25, no. 1 (Spring 2007): 17-39.

we will see, to a question of the moral responsibility of thought—or, rather, the moral responsibility of thoughtlessness. I will begin with an analysis of this theme as it appears in Arendt, and move from there to discuss the substance of Churchill’s argument.

Early on in the *Eichmann* book, Arendt states what she understands to be the “moral challenge” of the former Nazi’s trial in Jerusalem, one overlooked by the presiding authorities:

[The judges were unable to] admit that an average, “normal” person, neither feeble-minded nor indoctrinated nor cynical, could be perfectly incapable of telling right from wrong. [The judges] preferred to conclude from his occasional lies that he was a liar—and missed the greatest moral, even legal challenge of the whole case. Their cases rested on the assumption that the defendant, like all “normal persons,” must have been aware of the criminal nature of his acts, and Eichmann was indeed normal insofar as he was “no exception within the Nazi regime.” However, under the conditions of the Third Reich only “exceptions” could be expected to react “normally.”⁸

In *Eichmann*, Arendt did not find a passionate anti-Semite, a criminal mastermind, or a sneering cartoonish maniac.⁹ He “was not Iago and not Macbeth, and nothing would have been farther from his mind than to determine with Richard III, ‘to prove a villain’.”¹⁰ She found instead a markedly ordinary and mediocre bureaucrat, whom “half a dozen psychiatrists had certified” as “normal”¹¹ and who “was incapable of uttering a single sentence that was not a cliché.”¹² This does *not* mean that Eichmann was not evil or that he did not deserve the death sentence eventually handed him. It is this key point about Arendt’s famous thesis of “the banality of evil” that was so misunderstood by many contemporary readers and even some today.¹³ The claim is not that evil is banal “it itself,” or that the Third Reich and the Holocaust were boring or

⁸ Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (New York: Penguin Books, 1977), 26-27.

⁹ “His was obviously also no case of insane hatred of Jews, of fanatical anti-Semitism or indoctrination of any kind.” Ibid, 26.

¹⁰ Ibid, 287.

¹¹ Ibid, 25.

¹² Ibid, 48.

¹³ For an account of these reactions, see Richard I. Cohen, “A Generation’s Response to *Eichmann in Jerusalem*,” in *Hannah Arendt in Jerusalem*, ed. Steven E. Aschheim (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), 253-277.

unremarkable affairs.¹⁴ The implication is that, in certain situations, average and entirely mundane people can become complicit in acts of disquieting horror.¹⁵ It is the fact that Eichmann was “normal,” that was he was “no exception,” and yet still unquestionably and profoundly evil, that Arendt finds unsettling: “The trouble with Eichmann was precisely that so many were like him, and that the many were neither perverted nor sadistic, that they were, and still are, terribly and terrifyingly normal [...] this normality was much more terrifying than all the atrocities put together.”¹⁶

Of course, Eichmann was not on trial for his mediocrity, and normality cannot be “more terrifying than all the atrocities put together” simply by virtue of being normality. He was hanged not because he was banal, but because of his central role in the deportation of millions of people to camps of extermination, which, though never his idea, he carried out with diligence and precision. Arendt no doubt understands this. What worries her is the relationship between the former (banality) and the latter (evil). It is the realization, represented and symbolized by the Eichmann trial, that an explicit and fanatical malice—Iago’s scheming or Richard III’s desire to “prove a villain”—is not a necessary condition for the orchestration of mass atrocities. But it is obvious that normality (or banality) by itself is not linked to evil; it would be inconceivable to suggest that being average or unremarkable *as such* could lead to moral depravity. To establish her basic thesis about the Eichmann trial, Arendt requires the additional category of

¹⁴ There has been much scholarship on the question of the relationship between the “banality of evil” thesis in *Eichmann* and Arendt’s discussion of “radical evil” in *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, a question left aside in these reflections. For an interesting take (and a nice summary of the debate so far), see Paul Formosa, “Is radical evil banal? Is banal evil radical?” in *Philosophy and Social Criticism* 33 (2007): 717-735.

¹⁵ Seyla Benhabib: “The phrase the ‘banality of evil’ was meant to refer to a *specific quality of mind and character* of the doer himself, but neither to the deeds nor to the principles behind those deeds.” See “Arendt’s *Eichmann in Jerusalem*,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Hannah Arendt*, ed. Dana Villa (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 74.

¹⁶ Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, 276.

thoughtlessness, which she is careful (here and later)¹⁷ to distinguish from stupidity: “[Eichmann] was not stupid. It was sheer thoughtlessness—something by no means identical with stupidity—that predisposed him to become one of the greatest criminals of that period.”¹⁸

Because Eichmann was not a passionate devotee of Nazi ideology, and because his mediocrity is by no means enough to account for his behavior, the question of how this humdrum and cliché-prone pencil-pusher became so integral to “the bureaucracy of murder”¹⁹ must be addressed in terms of his (dis)inclination to think. In the context of certain political situations, it is this condition—the condition of thoughtlessness—that enables “normal” people to become complicit in horrors and atrocities. It would be entirely different, and Arendt’s suggestion would make no sense, if everyone under the Third Reich had been a ferocious Nazi zealot, an Iago or Richard III. This notion is refuted not only by the existence of Eichmann, but by the fact that, as Arendt has it above, “so many were like him.”²⁰ It is indeed quite common in informal conversation about the Reich and the Holocaust to assume that responsibility lies with a few patent lunatics who by ill-fortune happened to rise to power (Hitler, Goebbels, Heydrich, etc.). Forgotten by such talk is an old truism: it takes a nation. In this context, Arendt suggests, it took a nation characterized by thoughtlessness. This is the dark historical and political reality that she confronts with her thesis on banality—“the strange interdependence of thoughtlessness and evil.”²¹

¹⁷ “Inability to think is not stupidity; it can be found in highly intelligent people, and wickedness is hardly its cause, if only because thoughtlessness as well as stupidity are much more frequent phenomena than wickedness. The trouble is precisely that no wicked heart, a relatively rare phenomena, is necessary to cause great evil.” Arendt, “Thinking and Moral Considerations,” 423.

¹⁸ Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, 287-288.

¹⁹ *Ibid*, 172.

²⁰ She points elsewhere in the book to “the almost ubiquitous complicity, which had stretched far beyond the ranks of Party membership.” *Ibid*, 18.

²¹ *Ibid*, 288.

It will be asked at this point exactly what Arendt means by “thinking” and “thoughtlessness.” There is no explicit theoretical discussion of this question in the book on Eichmann. The theme makes its appearance in her work, however, at least as early as *The Human Condition*, where she writes in the preface: “[T]houghtlessness—the heedless recklessness or hopeless confusion or complacent repetition of ‘truths’ which have become trivial and empty—seems to me among the outstanding characteristics of our time.”²² Two things are important in this passage. The first is the (admittedly brief) definition of thoughtlessness, particularly the third clause about “complacent repetition” of “trivial and empty” ‘truths’ (recall Eichmann’s clichés). The second is Arendt’s claim that thoughtlessness—the same thoughtlessness that defined Eichmann—is not only prevalent in “our time,” but is one of its “outstanding characteristics.” This suggests that, in analyzing the “banality of evil” encountered at the Eichmann trial, Arendt is not only concerned with a particularly dark (but closed) chapter in the history of Western civilization (*die Nazizeit*, as the Germans say), but with an affliction that remains with us today. The banality thesis thus represents a *present* problem with potential consequences as morally and politically momentous as they were during the Third Reich. She invokes such terms again in *On Violence* with regard to “scientifically minded” government officials dealing in weapons of mass destruction: “The trouble is not that they are cold-blooded enough to ‘think the unthinkable,’ but that they do not *think*.”²³ But for a thorough elaboration of Arendt’s conceptions of thinking and thoughtlessness, we must turn to *The Life of the Mind*.²⁴

The first volume of Arendt’s (would-be) three-volume final work is devoted to “thinking.” The introduction reveals that the project was undertaken at least partially as an

²² Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1958), 5.

²³ Arendt, *On Violence* (Orlando: Harcourt: 1970), 6.

²⁴ Much of what went into the key chapters of *The Life of the Mind* first appeared in “Thinking and Moral Considerations.”

elaboration of a point she had only gestured toward and hinted at in *Eichmann in Jerusalem*. I will quote this passage at length:

The immediate impulse [for writing the book] came from my attending the Eichmann trial in Jerusalem. In my report of it I spoke of “the banality of evil.” Behind the phrase, I held no thesis or doctrine, although I was dimly aware of the fact that it went counter to our tradition of thought—literary, theological, or philosophic—about the phenomenon of evil. Evil, we have learned, is something demonic [...Iago...] However, what I was confronted with was utterly different and still undeniably factual. I was struck by a manifest shallowness in the doer that made it impossible to trace the uncontestable evil of his deeds to any deeper level of roots or motives. 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. There was no sign in him of firm ideological convictions or of specific evil motives, and the only notable characteristic one could detect in his past behavior during the trial and throughout the pre-trial police examination was something entirely negative: it was not stupidity but *thoughtlessness*.²⁵

In order to understand how the phenomenon of Eichmann was possible—how the “manifest shallowness” of his character related to the “uncontestable evil” of his actions—Arendt attempts an analysis of the faculty of thinking, and, more importantly for her purposes (and ours), its connection with moral responsibility. The “strange interdependence” alluded to in the *Eichmann* book now appears in the form of a question: “Is wickedness, however we may define it, this being ‘determined to prove a villain,’ *not* a necessary condition for evil-doing? Might the problem of good and evil, our faculty for telling right from wrong, be connected with our faculty of thought?”²⁶ The suggestion is not that thinking will necessarily lead to right action, but that thoughtlessness alone is sufficient to vouchsafe evil behavior—no *kakia* required. If she is correct in her hypothesis, then thinking and thoughtlessness emerge as moral categories: “If...the ability to tell right from wrong should turn out to have anything to do with the ability to think, then we must be able to ‘demand’ its exercise from every sane person, no matter how erudite or ignorant, intelligent or stupid, he may happen to be.”²⁷ It is the insistence on the *moral* dimension of thinking that sets Arendt’s work apart from the endlessly repeated trite platitude

²⁵ Arendt, *The Life of the Mind*, 3-4.

²⁶ *Ibid*, 4-5.

²⁷ *Ibid*, 13.

that ‘critical thinking is important.’ Thinking is not merely a healthy exercise to keep the mind sharp, but a moral imperative that we must “be able to demand”; this means, likewise, that those whose lives are characterized by thoughtlessness are morally culpable as such, even if they are not wearing the S.S. uniform of Eichmann. This theme recalls Adorno’s famous remark from *Minima Moralia* that “intelligence is a moral category,”²⁸ though for Arendt, as we have seen, thinking is not the same as intelligence; one may be extraordinarily intelligent without ever “thinking.” But we still have yet to give an account of what she means by this word.

Throughout the first volume of *The Life of the Mind*, Arendt considers various answers to the question “why think?” She is skeptical of both the traditional philosophic (i.e., Platonic) notion that thinking can reveal some fundamental truth or reality and the stoic perspective that thinking could help us cope with the difficulties of life. Her answer comes in the figure of Socrates, and it is in her discussion of Socratic method that her conception of “thinking” emerges. In sum, thinking is the inquisitive, critical examination of well-entrenched and well-assumed values, concepts, mores, and behaviors. Socrates is the key figure for Arendt because, the Plato/Socrates problem aside, he does not attempt to come to any definite conclusion, to build an elaborate theory, or to settle questions by arriving at certain answers; his virtue as a thinker is the same as his virtue as a “gadfly”—to perturb, perplex, and leave his interlocutor in *aporia*. It is this negative, doubt-raising quality of thinking that interests Arendt:

[T]hinking inevitably has a destructive, undermining effect on all established criteria, values, measurements of good and evil, in short, on those customs and rules of conduct we treat of in morals and ethics. These frozen thoughts, Socrates seems to say, come so handily that you can use them in your sleep; but if the wind of thinking, which I shall now stir in you, has shaken you from your sleep and made you fully awake and alive, then you will see that you have nothing in your grasp but perplexities, and the best we can do with them is share them with each other.²⁹

²⁸ Theodor Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, trans. E.F. N. Jephcott (New York: Verso, 2005), 197.

²⁹ Arendt, *The Life of the Mind*, 174-175.

The “frozen thoughts” that are undermined by thinking are thereby left without certified foundations and are not replaced by others. It is not the vocation of thinking, Arendt suggests, to conceive of new “criteria, values, measurements of good and evil, customs and rules of conduct” but to question the “established” ones. She realizes, of course, that to do this constantly would be overwhelming and bewildering such that one could never act. She likewise never advocates isolated introspection, a “worldless” reflection that removes itself with finality from its surroundings, a retreat inward; her work is something of a testament to the contrary. But while she does not offer any crude quotas or ultimatums (‘one must think for two hours each week’), her discussion of thinking is meant to illustrate its fundamental moral and political importance, which becomes clear when she turns to consider its opposite.

Thoughtlessness, for Arendt, is characterized by a blind conformism that never critically confronts its surroundings, its ideology, or its value system. It is a kind of obstinate complacency clinging to an unreflective set of norms:

[N]on-thinking...by shielding people from the dangers of examination...teaches them to hold fast to whatever the prescribed rules of conduct may be at a given time in a given society. What people then get used to is less the content of the rules, a close examination of which would always lead them into perplexity, than the *possession* of rules under which to subsume particulars.³⁰

The sense of thinking as “dangerous” is important here. Its danger lies in its ability to divest people of their “prescribed rules of conduct” along with the facile justifications that accompany them. It disrupts the “complacent repetition of ‘truths’ which have become trivial and empty.” Thoughtlessness refuses to confront this danger. The thoughtless person, then, is one for whom these trivial and empty truths represent a bounded horizon, one who “holds fast” to the “prescribed rules” of their given time and society, one who has not been shaken from sleep by “the wind of thought.” Again and again Arendt analogizes thinking and thoughtlessness with

³⁰ Ibid, 177.

waking life and sleep, respectively, carrying the analogy so far as to claim that thinking is the very essence of life and that thoughtlessness is something like a living death:

Thinking accompanies life and is itself the de-materialized quintessence of being alive; and since life is a process, its quintessence can only lie in the actual thinking process and not in any solid results or specific thoughts. A life without thinking is quite possible; it then fails to develop its own essence—it is not merely meaningless; it is not fully alive. Unthinking men are like sleepwalkers.³¹

The moral and political dimensions of thinking are encapsulated in this startling simile. Thoughtlessness is akin to sleepwalking, i.e., to performing actions without self awareness, reflection, or meaning. And, as Eichmann's thoughtless banality revealed so forcefully, this kind of somnambulism is by no means innocuous or neutral, either morally or politically. For it was sleepwalking, and not diabolical passion, that conditioned Eichmann to become "a mass murderer who had never killed."³² Thinking in Arendt's sense becomes momentous in those times and places where thoughtlessness is the norm, when the danger to conformity and complacency represented by Socrates the gadfly is resisted or ignored altogether:

When everybody is swept away unthinkingly by what everybody else does and believes in, those who think are drawn out of hiding because their refusal to join in is conspicuous and thereby becomes a kind of action. In such emergencies, it turns out that the purging component of thinking (Socrates' midwifery, which brings out the implications of unexamined opinions and thereby destroys them—values, doctrines, theories, and even convictions) is political by implication.³³

It is the ability of thinking to wrest us from our "sleepwalking" that Arendt finds so politically important, and it is the consequences of political actions that makes the thinking activity—so markedly absent in the likes of Eichmann—a moral imperative that must be demanded from everyone.

³¹ Ibid, 191. See also: "The only possible metaphor one may conceive of for the life of the mind is the sensation of being alive. *Without the breath of life the human body is a corpse; without thinking the human mind is dead.*" Ibid, 123.

³² Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, 215.

³³ Arendt, *The Life of the Mind*, 192.

Before moving on to discuss Churchill, it is necessary to respond to a couple of objections raised by Richard J. Bernstein, who questions Arendt's association of thinking and moral agency. First, he criticizes Arendt for not giving an "adequate" account of the relationship between thought and morality: "Arendt desperately wants to show that thinking does have moral consequences—at least 'indirectly'...But although she asserts this categorically, she never gives us adequate reasons to show this connection."³⁴ She furthermore fails to give an "account of why...some persons lose or show no signs of the ability to think and (a few) others still maintain their ability to judge."³⁵ I would simply ask what kind of "account" would be satisfactory for Bernstein. In her book on the Eichmann trial, Arendt spends much time elaborating the banality that she takes to be characteristic of the defendant, and in an attempt to understand how such a mediocre character could orchestrate such monstrous deeds, she develops in *The Life of the Mind* an analysis of how thoughtlessness could—and, in the case of those like Eichmann, *did*—engender morally reprehensible actions. Thoughtlessness alone suffices; *kakia* is not a necessary condition for evil-doing. Given the scope of her claim (that thinking and thoughtlessness, because of their potential consequences, have moral and political implications), I would say that an adequate account has been given. As for the question of *why* some people show no signs of thinking while others do, this is neither here nor there for the claim at hand. It is not Arendt's (or any moral theorist's) task to explain why some people behave morally while others fail to.

Bernstein's second objection concerns what we might call 'the Heidegger problem.' If there is such a connection between thinking and moral action, how could Heidegger, who no doubt thought, have been such a complicit fellow-traveler with the Third Reich? Bernstein writes: "At the very least, the example of Heidegger should make us *stop and think* whether there

³⁴ Richard J. Bernstein, "'The Banality of Evil' Reconsidered," in *Hannah Arendt and the Meaning of Politics*, ed. Craig Calhoun and John McGowan (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 313-314.

³⁵ *Ibid*, 317.

really is any ‘intrinsic’ connection between thinking and evil.”³⁶ He takes special note of the fact that Arendt published “Thinking and Moral Considerations” around the same time as her laudatory “Martin Heidegger at Eighty.” This objection, however, only stands insofar as we ascribe to Arendt the claim that thinking will by necessity lead to right action, and this would be a false ascription. She explicitly denies that thinking could ever “produce” a moral action on its own accord.³⁷ There is likewise nothing to suggest that she holds the position that one may do the right thing *only if* one thinks Socratically. Her claim that thinking and thoughtlessness have political consequences and are thus moral categories does not commit her to the view that thinking is either a necessary or sufficient condition for moral deeds. Therefore, Heidegger’s complicity as such does not pose a problem for Arendt’s claim about the connection between thinking and morality.³⁸

Having given an account of the stakes of Arendt’s perspective on banality, thoughtlessness, and moral responsibility, I turn now to discuss Churchill’s anathematized article and its infamous comparison. Strangely enough, the uproar over Churchill’s piece mirrors the uproar over Arendt’s book; in both cases, an attempt to understand the perspective being offered was secondary to a reflexive indignation at the rhetoric used (death threats are common to both cases also). Many objected to the phrase “banality of evil” without pausing to reflect on the meaning or the gravity of the claim being made, and much the same thing has happened with

³⁶ Bernstein, “Arendt on thinking,” in Villa (2000), 290. The Heidegger problem also shows up in “‘The Banality of Evil’ Reconsidered,” 312-318.

³⁷ Arendt, *The Life of the Mind*, 5.

³⁸ Dana Villa has an interesting take on ‘the Heidegger problem.’ She argues that “Arendt’s ‘defense’ of Heidegger is, in fact, an attack on philosophy and the activity of thinking in its pure unadulterated form. She wants not to excuse Heidegger or defend philosophy so much as to reveal what George Kateb has called the ‘strange alliance’ between *thoughtlessness* and *philosophy*.” See “The Banality of Philosophy: Arendt on Heidegger and Eichmann,” in *Hannah Arendt: Twenty Years Later*, ed. Larry May and Jerome Kohn (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1996), 181. For another source that indicates that Arendt’s relationship to Heidegger was more complex than Bernstein assumes, see Arendt, “Heidegger the Fox,” in *The Portable Hannah Arendt*, ed. Peter Baehr (New York: Penguin Books, 2000), 543-544.

Churchill's "little Eichmanns" remark. Given a serious reading, it becomes clear that the essay is not a defense or a justification of the events of September 11th, but a call to understand terrorist attacks against the United States in the context of American practices worldwide. He gives various (but by no means exhaustive) examples: the aerial bombing of Iraq during the Gulf War that killed many civilians (and left many others to starve to death due to damaged infrastructure), support for the Israeli oppression of Palestine, the overthrow of democratically elected leaders in Guatemala (and elsewhere in Central and South America) and their replacement with murderous but capital-friendly dictators, and complicity with Indonesian-led massacres in East Timor. In each case, strategic or economic interests took precedence over the value of human lives, let alone any ideals about "freedom" and "democracy." Each case also represents an instance of the global hegemonic power of the United States, a power intent ensuring its own enrichment and domination rather than peace and prosperity for all. It becomes very difficult, given these facts, to understand a terrorist attack directed against the U.S. as an evil, violent force impinging upon a beacon of liberty and righteousness. This point does not necessarily entail an apology for any given terrorist action.

This perspective does, however, raise questions about the millions of people who explicitly or implicitly support the American empire without being directly involved in acts of violence. Churchill, completely incredulous to appeals to ignorance, paints a dismal picture:

Claims that American "didn't know" what was being perpetrated in their name are...rather less than credible. Americans by-and-large greeted [news of genocide] with yawns and blank stares, returning their attention almost immediately to what they considered far weightier matters: the Dow Jones and American League batting averages, for instance, or pursuit of the perfect cappuccino. Braying like donkeys into their eternal cell-phones, they went right on arranging their stock transfers and real estate deals and dinner dates, conducting business as usual, never exhibiting so much as a collective flicker of concern.³⁹

³⁹ Churchill, *On the Justice of Roosting Chickens*, 6. I quote here from the expanded version of the essay published in book form. The original is: "Some People Push Back: Reflections on the Justice of Roosting Chickens," in *Pockets of Resistance* 27 (September 2001).

Though one might take issue with some of the magniloquence used here, it would be a moot point to deny the basic thrust of the claim being made. There are certainly activists and intellectuals who point out and object to America's violent empire, but these are certainly the exception rather than the rule; Churchill speaks of the populace "by and large," not universally. Whether or not they are "braying like donkeys" into "eternal cell phones," we must admit the absence of a visible culture of dissent on the level of American neoliberal capitalist hegemony. The ideology that the United States stands for truth, justice, and liberty, that it is 'the greatest nation on earth,' and that it only engages in violence to protect and ensure freedom for all, is much more firmly rooted than any critical confrontation with its actual practices, the dogmatic belief system that sustains these practices, or its history.⁴⁰ The distinction between the right and the left in the United States ("conservatives" vs. "liberals") means little in this regard.

The matter becomes more serious when this ideology translates into an active participation in the apparatuses of empire, and it is in *this context* that Churchill makes his scandalous comparison:

A decided majority of those killed in the WTC attack might be more accurately viewed as "little Eichmanns"—that is, as a cadre of faceless bureaucrats and technical experts who had willingly (and profitably) harnessed themselves to the task [of] making America's genocidal world order hum with maximal efficiency—than as "innocents."⁴¹

Notice that he does not label *every* victim of the terrorist attacks in this way, only those he considers integral in some sense to the bureaucracy of America's global empire. Now, that such people represent a "decided majority" of 9/11's victims cannot be more than speculation. Churchill does not seem to consider those working in the buildings in service capacities, or those who happened to be on the planes (who, for all we know, were revolutionary activists). These

⁴⁰ Hence Arendt's remark that "Every intellectual [in the United States] is a member of the opposition simply because he is an intellectual." See "That 'Infinitely Complex Red-tape Existence': From a Letter to Karl Jaspers," in *The Portable Hannah Arendt*, 27.

⁴¹ Churchill, *On The Justice of Roosting Chickens*, 19.

reservations granted, the referents of the term “little Eichmann” are clear enough: those who had contributed, if only in minor functionary ways, to “America’s genocidal world order.”

Even granting everything Churchill has said about American empire and about some of the 9/11 victims’ bureaucratic complicity with it, one might still object to his insensitivity. Thousands of people lost loved ones in these attacks, and, no matter what the moral standing of the person lost, it is unacceptable to disrupt a grieving process with such flippant defamation. Churchill’s response to this point is easy to anticipate: Who is shedding tears for the Iraqi children left without food or water by aerial bombing? For the East Timorese? For Salvador Allende and his cabinet? What is “insensitive” is American citizens carrying on business as usual even as tremendous bloodshed is perpetrated in their name. What is “flippant” is to act as though we Americans are the “good guys” and that we only mete out violence in the name of justice. The essential point lying beyond Churchill’s remark is not a claim about any particular person among the three thousand or so victims of the attacks, but a *perspective* on the role of the United States in the world order. The crux of it is not to disavow someone of mourning the loss of a friend, or to claim that those killed “deserved it” (keep in mind that he nowhere *defends* the attacks), but to enjoin us to seriously rethink the interpretation of these events according to which an evil force intruded upon a just society of “innocents.” Perhaps the remark remains unnecessarily cruel and ill-timed; my concern is that, in countenancing this, we throw the baby out with the bathwater. The WTC attacks represent an act of terrorism, but the United States is the terrorist nation par excellence. Our collective failure to recognize this, Churchill thinks, is tantamount to mass delusion: “Why should ‘they’ hate ‘us’? The very question is on its face absurd, delusional, revealing of an aggregate detachment from reality so virulent in its

evasiveness as to be deemed clinically pathological.”⁴² One cannot help but be reminded of Arendt’s description of one of the central organizing principles of totalitarian regimes: “[A] general training in supreme contempt for all facts and all reality.”⁴³

It would nevertheless be a mistake to characterize the “almost ubiquitous complicity” of the American people with a violent empire—even the complicity of those more integral to its operations—as wickedness, *kakia*, or a kind a diabolical scheming. Many are loving parents, generous friends, ‘nice people,’ etc. The fact that such practices of global terrorism continue virtually unquestioned and unspoken, and the fact that an overwhelming majority subscribes to a mystifying ideology that either explains away these practices or simply denies them, point to a mass social phenomenon that can only be called sleepwalking. Arendt wrote in the 1950’s that “thoughtlessness” was “among the most outstanding characteristics of our time,” and it is as true now as it was then.⁴⁴ Most Americans are “swept away unthinkingly by what everybody else does and believes in,” avoiding “the dangers of examination” by “holding fast to prescribed rules of conduct” while an empire of violence consolidates its power behind their backs and under their noses.⁴⁵ Just as in the Eichmann case, the animating factor in the perpetuation of this empire

⁴² Ibid, 13.

⁴³ Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (Orlando: Harvest Books, 1968), 385.

⁴⁴ In his classic study of “American anti-intellectualism,” Richard Hofstadter argues that the present form of this phenomenon manifests itself as an implicit distinction between “intelligence” and “intellect,” where the former is valued and the latter is denigrated. Intelligence involves a practical, predictable manipulation for some narrow, immediate end, while intellect is “critical, creative, and contemplative.” In other words: “Whereas intelligence seeks to grasp, manipulate, re-order, adjust, intellect examines, ponders, wonders, theorizes, criticizes, imagines. Intelligence will seize the immediate meaning in a situation and evaluate it. Intellect evaluates evaluations, and looks for the meanings of situations as a whole.” See *Anti-Intellectualism in American Life* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1966), 25. It should be noticed that Hofstadter’s “intellect” sounds quite a bit like Arendt’s “thinking.”

⁴⁵ For a remarkable reflection on the role of the American philosopher in the context of American empire, see John Lysaker, “Essaying America: A Declaration of Independence,” in *The Journal of Speculative Philosophy* 26, no. 3 (2012): 531-553. Lysaker also has an insightful piece on thoughtlessness in higher education. See “Life Takes Visa,” in *The Journal of Speculative Philosophy* 22, no. 2 (2008): 71-81.

is not (in most instances) a malicious villainy, but an unwillingness, as Arendt puts it, “to think what we are doing.”⁴⁶

The thoughtlessness and banality that characterized Eichmann had disastrous moral and political consequences. An altogether similar disinclination for thinking characterizes the American majority, and its consequences are no less dire. That the United States is not doing precisely what the Nazis did does not change the fact that it represents an empire of violent coercion maintaining itself in plain view of a seemingly oblivious populace. And if thinking and thoughtlessness are moral categories, then all those who thoughtlessly reinforce this particular way of life are morally culpable as such. Even if one is not actively campaigning on behalf of this empire, and even if one is a ‘nice person,’ the role of the uncritical fellow-traveler is enough, given the impact of this, to confer responsibility. As Arendt has it: “Politics is not like the nursery; in politics obedience and support are the same.”⁴⁷ In certain situations, as she took pains to show with the example of Eichmann, *normality is no guarantee against evil*. Churchill’s evocation of her thesis on banality in connection with such ‘normal people’ thus becomes comprehensible,⁴⁸ and we must at this point come before the question of collective guilt, mass guilt, mass evil. We are forced to conclude that all of the innocuous, thoughtless goers-along—Arendt’s “sleepwalkers”—are not so innocuous after all. These unreflective people—the majority, to be sure—are, then, to some extent “evil,” and Churchill’s labeling some particularly involved ones “little Eichmanns” is not without warrant, even if his particular attribution should have been more carefully qualified and better timed. The full import of his remarks only

⁴⁶ Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 5.

⁴⁷ Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, 279.

⁴⁸ He refers to the banality thesis specifically as a “devastating insight.” This comes in the context of his discussion of “postmodern liberals” who excuse their complicity in American empire by reference to “objective structures.” He writes: “The parallels between this ‘cutting edge’ conception and the defense mounted by postwar Germans—including the Nazis at Nuremberg—are as eerie as they are obvious.” Churchill, *On the Justice of Roosting Chickens*, 19-20.

becomes clear when we consider, reading Arendt, what Eichmann really represents: “That such remoteness from reality and such thoughtlessness can wreak more havoc than all the evil instincts taken together...that was, in fact, the lesson one could learn in Jerusalem.”⁴⁹ It is evidently a lesson we have yet to take to heart.

There is a line in Billy Wilder’s *Sunset Boulevard* that will carry us to our conclusion: “You don’t yell at a sleepwalker...he may fall and break his neck.”⁵⁰ If we look beyond the shock value of the words used, and connect it with Arendt’s theses on morality and banality, then what Churchill’s essay represents is a call to thinking in an age of thoughtlessness, as well as a bitter, incendiary denunciation of the thoughtless themselves along with those who would excuse such behavior as “neutral” or “innocuous.” With his bombastic exposure of collective guilt, he is shouting at the sleepwalkers to wake up—“The burden must be made still more irksome by awakening a consciousness of it, and shame must be made more shameful still by rendering it public.”⁵¹ The vitriolic reaction to the piece confirms Wilder’s protagonist: sleepwalkers do not like to be shouted at, to be shaken from their sleep; there is a very concrete danger that in the confusion they will collapse from disorientation and loss of equilibrium. To bring the metaphor back down: the guilty do not like to be told that they are guilty; the responsible cannot continue their present course of life if they are made to feel responsible. Once again, there is an analogy to be made here with something Arendt wrote, this time concerning the post-war years:

The youth of Germany is surrounded, on all sides and in all walks of life, by men in positions of authority and in public office who are very guilty indeed but who *feel* nothing of the sort. The normal reaction to this state of affairs should be indignation, but indignation would be quite risky—not a danger to life and limb but definitely a handicap in a career.⁵²

⁴⁹ Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, 288.

⁵⁰ Charles Brackett, D.M. Marshman Jr., and Billy Wilder, *Sunset Boulevard* (Hollywood: Paramount Pictures, 1950).

⁵¹ Karl Marx, “Contribution to the Critique of Hegel’s *Philosophy of Right*: Introduction,” trans. Joseph J. O’Malley, in *The Marx-Engels Reader*, ed. Robert C. Tucker (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1978), 56.

⁵² Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, 251.

The risk involved in indignation is obviously a lesson Churchill has learned well. The fact that, despite all that has happened, he has refused to retract or apologize for the essay, indicates that he has remembered another lesson from Arendt, one that we must bear in mind as we move forward in thinking about the problems raised here: “Better to be at odds with the whole world than be at odds with the only one you are forced to live together with when you have left company behind.”⁵³

⁵³ Arendt, *The Life of the Mind*, 188.

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