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THE POLITICAL THEORY OF THE CLICHÉ

HANNAH ARENDT READING ADOLF EICHMANN

Jakob Norberg

In *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil*, Hannah Arendt studies Adolf Eichmann through his words: she notes what he says during cross-examinations at the trial, she reviews transcripts from police interrogations, and she reads extracts from the memoirs he began to write in Argentina. The character sketch that builds on these materials famously identifies Eichmann as a “*déclassé* son of a solid middle-class family” (1964, 31) whose severely limited verbal repertoire and robotic delivery made him a figure of “undeniable ludicrousness” (54). But how does Arendt arrive at these judgments, or what method of reading does she rely on to draw her conclusions? Her inferences about Eichmann are informed by an understanding of class and social types in European society.¹ And her observations about Eichmann’s manners of speech—his blend of stock phrases, Nazi jargon, and officialese—indicate a sensitivity to degrees of verbal aptitude. But while Arendt’s characterization of Eichmann as disturbingly ordinary has shaped and even defined his public image, and influenced the way that modern genocide is conceptualized, it remains difficult to identify Arendt’s mode of analysis.² Reluctant to identify herself with any school of thought or discipline, she seems to employ no particular body of interpretive techniques that would allow her to move from single observations to a global judgment of Eichmann’s person.

To many of the first readers and reviewers of *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, Arendt’s approach—or her lack of one—was part of the problem with the book. Originally reporting for the magazine the *New Yorker*, Arendt seemed to speak as a member of an urbane literary elite who aimed to dazzle rather than to analyze, and her report was criticized as impressionistic, perversely concerned with its own brilliance, and attuned to aesthetic rather than moral values.³ Later scholarship has

done much to correct this damning view of Arendt's commitments and motivations. According to numerous commentators, Arendt is able to demonstrate how Eichmann's immersion in Nazi ideology and his implementation of genocidal policies stemmed from his failure to understand himself as a responsible political agent, who in fact lent the apparatus of mass murder his active support in every act of unquestioning obedience.⁴ Eichmann's character is judged corrupt from the standpoint of an appreciation of human agency, according to which people are at all times obliged to assume full responsibility for their actions and words rather than abdicate autonomy with reference to their apparently minor positions in complex and overpowering organizations.⁵ Beyond noting how the portrait of Eichmann featured remarks on his rigidified speech, however, recent secondary literature has said almost nothing about Arendt's method.

While Arendt's general statements have been positively reevaluated, then, her interest in Eichmann's clichéd speech has not been accorded much scrutiny.⁶ One would have to assume from this that her notes on his patterns of speech do not conform or amount to a worked-out procedure of assessment and interpretation. Judging by the literature, *Eichmann in Jerusalem* can be treated as a reflection on the Holocaust as an unprecedented crime, as a tract on evil, or as a critical portrait of the Israeli state, but not as an exercise in reading.⁷

To remedy this lacuna in the discussion of the book, we must ask a series of questions. What is involved in the recognition of clichéd speech, or what type of attention does it require? And what does the detection of frozen patterns of speech possibly allow one to say about the person who has uttered them? We must in other words focus on Arendt's consideration of Eichmann's verbal tics and near-clownish delivery of stale expressions, and trace her path to certain judgments of his character. Rather than deny or downplay this dimension of the Jerusalem report, one must understand its fundamental contribution to its overall statement.

THE POLITICAL THEORY OF THE CLICHÉ

The central fact about Eichmann, the observation to which Arendt returns again and again, is that his speech consists of phrases and

quotations, a litany of prefabricated verbal units: “[O]fficialese became [Eichmann’s] only language because he was genuinely incapable of uttering a single sentence that was not a cliché. . . . Whether writing his memoirs in Jerusalem or in Argentina, whether speaking to the police examiner or to the court, what he said was always the same, expressed in the same words” (1964, 48–49).

Eichmann in Jerusalem is a study of a criminal personality, but in place of references to the literature of social science, or summaries of its methodological premises and its techniques of experimentation and examination, one finds observations on clichéd speech. Arendt does not expound the psychology of the authoritarian personality but seems content to register and label particular statements and to refer Eichmann’s utterances to a slender lexicon of slogans and “*Redensarten*” (48). Critics have not neglected this peculiar emphasis in Arendt’s account, and yet they have seemed unable to do much more than mention it. While Arendt’s appraisal of Eichmann is well known and the “banality of evil” figures prominently in debates on the Holocaust, her critique of his clichéd speech has never been treated as a defined mode of reading. The observations of his verbal behavior, the vocabulary employed to describe it, remains idiosyncratic—few have affirmed or put pressure on the concept of the cliché.⁸

This is all the more surprising since the comments on clichéd speech do not represent a provisional and nonessential description, which Arendt abandons as soon as the scene has been set for a more probing character analysis. Far more than an easily available instrument for flippant and ungrounded ridicule, Arendt’s concern with clichés in fact encapsulates an aesthetically informed reaction to the phenomenon of perfect conformity in social settings. To be alert to the cliché is ultimately to link questions of verbal form to the study of maintained consensus within groups. The inclination to conform, the concern with the cliché implies, can be detected in a person’s speech: it becomes manifest at the level of the sentence. Indeed, insofar as this critique of phraseology can and must be linked to the critique of forms of smooth cooperation and conformity that deaden political life, Arendt’s comments on clichéd speech provide a link between two characteristics ascribed to her writing, the irreconcilability of which has puzzled readers—the alleged snobbishness and supposed

flair for rhetorical ingenuity and brilliance on the one hand, and the demanding political philosophy on the other.

The concept of the cliché does not belong to any recognized discipline. As a notion that gained currency in the nineteenth century, it does not occupy a place in the field of rhetoric, the practice of persuasive argumentation and vivifying elocution.⁹ Nor does it have a function in the science of linguistics, which has little use for a concept freighted with pejorative connotations.¹⁰ Originally a name for “metal casts of preformed block plates for mass production of printed matter,” remarks about clichés do function as an instrument of critique in the cultural realm (Fore, 126). The cliché continues to be invoked in reviews, cultural debates, and everyday speech, without necessarily being subject to more precise definitions.¹¹ Rather than to try to circumscribe a stable object or a particular domain of utterances to which the concept refers, however, one can say that the concern with the cliché reveals a specific type of attention, namely an aesthetic sensitivity. On the most basic level, to call an expression a cliché is to remark on its (subjectively determined) overuse.¹² In the few passages in which Arendt describes Eichmann’s verbal behavior in a way that indicates what she means by a cliché, she speaks of the “striking consistency” of his speech patterns, and adds that he could fabricate stock phrases on his own by means of unending reiteration (1964, 49). Following the conventional notion to which she refers, one can say that a cliché is a statement that has become, because of its repeated employment, annoyingly familiar to the person exposed to it. This aversion to the overly recognizable is an expression of aesthetic offense, in the broad sense of the term, for it criticizes a use of language on the grounds that it fails to excite or engage. Utterances are negatively labeled as clichés when the work of understanding has become routinized to a point where our faculties are undertaxed.¹³ A particular statement can be rejected as clichéd because it provides no novel information, neither on the semantic nor on the stylistic level, and its easy intelligibility provokes an impression of flatness and hollowness; it requires no active engagement on the part of the listener or reader, who is already in full possession of its meaning. There is nothing in the statement that resists immediate absorption, or nothing in it to digest.¹⁴

When Arendt draws attention to Eichmann’s clichés, then, she

does not present a detailed, argumentatively based refutation of the content of what he is saying, or of the Nazi jargon for which he is the ventriloquist's dummy, but states her observation of, or even her irritation at, recurrence. If the discernment of clichéd speech is an aesthetic reflex that bespeaks a certain demand for stimulation, for something that resists instant assimilation, it is not difficult to understand why Arendt appeared as someone scanning the world for newness or interesting moments of ambiguity rather than a philosopher representing a principled moral position. Indeed, in the eyes of her critics, Arendt's repeated characterizations of Eichmann's statements as clichés betrayed a curious wish to display sophistication and literary sensitivity.

Arendt's reaction to the cliché is nevertheless not a failure to concentrate on serious matters. Rather, the curious aversion to the cliché is grounded in her commitment to politics as the activity through which human plurality becomes manifest. Specifically, it is tied to a complex idealized vision of how multiple subjects relate to one another, as they co-constitute a shared reality by means of vigorous and contentious discourse.¹⁵ To understand the judgment on the cliché and how it frames her entire analysis of Eichmann, we must first reconstruct Arendt's thoughts on politics as a form of contestation that opens up when a community's established conceptual resources no longer map the world that it inhabits. Although Arendt herself nowhere explicitly develops a political theory of the cliché, it can be inferred from her theoretical works.

To begin with, Arendt accepts that people usually operate with the help of stable, institutionalized attitudes—prejudices—that they unthinkingly apply to familiar occurrences in the world.¹⁶ But new situations may unsettle previously formed and suddenly inadequate notions, and the response to the widening gap between experience and an established repertoire of concepts involves a renegotiation with others who are in a similar situation. Suddenly stripped of ready categories for experience, individual actors must turn to one another for epistemic support when reforming their understanding of their surroundings. The lack of concepts for a world threatens to bring with it a breakdown in communication, but at the same time the loss of orientation can only be remedied through such communication,¹⁷ for those who seek to evaluate an unknown and uncertain situation are compelled to at least woo acceptance for their judgments from others

in a similar situation. When people are confronted with new problems, intersubjective validation becomes the sole source of legitimacy for their judgments. Partly in response to the Eichmann trial, Arendt later endeavored to develop a theory of political judgment that rested on Kant's notion of reflective judgment in the *Third Critique*. Drawing on Kant, Arendt maintained that the act of judging, insofar as it did not simply involve the application of previously formed concepts, depended on the judging subject's commitment to communicate with others and be a suitor for their agreement. In Ronald Beiner's words, Arendt was inspired by Kant's idea that there was, in matters of taste, "no epistemically secure foundation for achieving correspondence to the object judged short of consensus arrived at in the actual course of truth-seeking communication" (119–20).

The sudden eruption of a novel reality, as well as the attempt to form concepts with which to deal with it, relies on considering the presence of others engaged in a similar project of understanding. Within this narrative frame sketched out by Arendt, refreshed attention to the world, reflection on its shifting conditions, and the ability to appreciate and contribute to a shared pool of multiple standpoints are closely interlinked activities. For Arendt, the moment of frustrated understanding and destabilized meaning can enliven society, because it converts the aggregate of individuals, each enjoying the dubious comforts of prejudice, into a community whose members must turn to one another. They are suddenly compelled to orient themselves and enunciate their own tentative and preliminary standpoints, each one of them trying to solicit the agreement of others in thinking through an unprecedented situation. The name for the ensuing discursive engagement, insofar as it will take place between separate and perhaps ultimately irreconcilable standpoints, is politics.¹⁸ To the extent that erupting realities generate differentiated viewpoints among which a new terrain can be established, there is such a thing as politics. Or if one chooses to emphasize the dimension of conflict and contestation, one can say that politics involves the thematization of a problematic reality within the community, and hence also points to an enhanced perception of this reality. Shared prejudices, on the other hand, may dampen political life, because as long as they reign, they limit the need for an explicit and even combative refocusing of the common world.

Against the backdrop of her notion of politics as an activated and often contentious renegotiation of the world, one can see that Arendt's understanding of social consensus has a cognitive dimension and, conversely, that routinized cognitive work has a social dimension. People are untroubled by the world because they lean on implicit agreements about its constitution, a shared understanding about the nature of their surroundings, and how one should navigate them. What can be easily recognized and swiftly categorized is what has already been firmly established with others. Hence, what people know and sense with confidence usually coincides with what is undeniable to the community of which they are part. Consensus designates both the effortless social cooperation among individuals and the effortless cooperation of the senses in their encounters with the world; the two are mutually supportive.

The concept of the cliché must be understood in the context outlined above. To complain about clichés is generally a way to express irritation at statements for their failure to diverge even in the slightest degree from complete recognizability. It is, again, to demand more stimulation for the senses. Since the intelligible is rooted in agreement not only of the senses, but in the (progressively calcified) agreement within the community, the irritation with “overly intelligible” statements can also be the expression of aesthetic malaise within a system of socially anchored axioms. The person who repudiates the cliché declares irritation or even exasperation at the form of what everyone knows and everyone says, and hence signals his or her impatience with the maxims and categories that are shared within the community. It is at this point that we can provide a definition of the cliché that is in line with Arendt's political thought: the cliché is the name for the moment when the smooth and unquestioned social consensus—that to which everyone is implicitly expected to consent without contestation—demands too little of the senses.

To level a critique at clichéd speech has often been a way for individuals to pull away from the crystallized and verbally manifest cohesion of a group. Compilers of collections of phrases such as Gustave Flaubert and Karl Kraus have construed the cliché as the linguistic cipher of a stagnant society; to express disdain for the coagulated phrase is often, by extension, to attack the social class or group in which this phrase endlessly circulates.¹⁹ But as indicated above, the

charge against the cliché can also be infused with a definite political meaning. By attacking what is taken for granted and requires no discussion within a specific collectivity, one does not necessarily ask for newness or flashes of originality, but for something else, namely greater degrees of disputability. To identify and disparage the cliché is then ultimately to call for the communal revision of what has previously counted as transparent and undeniable. If such a process of revision requires the community's members to actively engage one another in order to secure a novel agreement about the world, and hence also to face rejection and disagreement, then the problem with the cliché may be complacency. In comparison with the newly formed judgment, articulated in the process of "wooing" others without the help of settled prejudices, the cliché is a poor suitor; it takes the support of others for granted.

Arendt's implicit theory of the cliché teaches us that it does not designate a particular stock of utterances with some shared, stable property that can be identified regardless of context. Rather, the cliché becomes recognizable as a problem in the passage of time, through repetitions that indicate and embody socially prevailing notions. There is no "formal" definition of the cliché, only the judgment of readers and listeners who may have different levels of tolerance to recurring sequences of words (Amossy, 34–35). Against the backdrop of Arendt's vision of politics as a "zone in which the order of human things is in contention," however, we can see that the recognition of the cliché, or the alertness to recognizability that belongs to the critics of clichés, can be put to political use (Balakrishnan, 152). Calling a statement clichéd is a critical operation that puts a sample of the social stock of indisputable notions in question, and thus potentially spotlights the lack of political space around some specific point in the community's discourse. To identify the cliché is to try to open up the possibility of dissent in the domain of the obvious.

ADOLF EICHMANN AND THE SOCIAL STRUCTURE OF CRIME

How is the cliché put to political use in Arendt's analysis of Eichmann? First of all, *Eichmann in Jerusalem* offers, in rudimentary form, an analysis of the social and organizational structures that underpin

criminal acts. As in other, earlier writings such as “Organized Guilt,”²⁰ Arendt was less concerned with the psychology of single individuals prone to aggression and sadism than the formation of collectives that sustain criminal behavior among larger populations.²¹ *Eichmann in Jerusalem* can partly be read as a study in conformist behavior, and in its peculiar brittleness. In the latter chapters of the book, which cover the deportations of Jews from all areas of Europe, Arendt describes the attitudes of the National Socialists in general, and of the SS and the Gestapo in particular. Here she speaks of the ethos of “rücksichtlose Härte,” a quality that the Nazi leadership demanded of the men responsible for carrying out genocidal policies (1964, 161). The actual bearer of this “ruthless toughness,” however, was the group and rarely if ever the individual. Fanaticism and brutality, Arendt contends, must be inculcated and sustained within circles of men carefully shielded from exposure to any alternative patterns of behavior and belief. “Ruthless toughness” only functioned as long as the insularity of the Nazi troops could be guarded, as long as they remained unexposed to the noise of manifold demands and positions available in more complex social surroundings. Indeed, when local Nazi authorities came into prolonged contact with a resisting population, something that happened in Denmark in 1943, they soon seemed unreliable in the eyes of their government: “[The Nazi representatives in Denmark] had met resistance based on principle, and their ‘toughness’ had melted like butter in the sun” (175).

According to Arendt, such unexpected deviations from core principles reveal that the commitment to fanatical views, the collective habitus of “ruthless toughness,” relied on the maintenance of carefully contained environments: the terrible ideal of toughness was, she claims, “nothing but a myth of self-deception, concealing a ruthless desire for conformity at any price” (175). The proclaimed ideal of pitiless determination was, then, seldom the stable attribute of single subjects irrespective of context.²² The adoption of certain attitudes and the pursuit of certain goals are meaningful within a community with sealed borders; as soon as this community disintegrates, these attitudes and pursuits are deprived of their supportive framework and tend to dissolve.

In accordance with her suspicion that the fanaticism sustained within a group can be better explained by the formation and maintenance of collective attitudes than the psychology of its individual

members, Arendt's portrait of Eichmann first establishes the memberships and modes of interconnectedness that he sought out. Arendt does refer to Eichmann's character, and produces scattered notes on a thoroughly dull personality: she describes him as prone to self-pity, easily bored, and, centrally, as a man of "modest mental gifts" (1964, 135). But her analysis is focused on how Eichmann operated in various communities, fit into hierarchies and chains of command, and conducted seemingly lateral relationships of bargaining and cooperation. Arendt calls Eichmann a "joiner," a man who, even before he entered the Nazi party and the ranks of the SS, had gone from one enrollment to another in the various organizations available to him: the Young Men's Christian Association, the Wandervogel, the Jungfrontkämpferverband, and, briefly, the association of "respectable philistines," the Freemasons (32–33).

Eichmann is, in Arendt's account, a person who functions well and adjusts quickly within military and quasi-military organizations. He is decent to his subordinates, obedient to his immediate superiors, and, in the case of conflicting claims issued from different strata of the organization, loyal to the "Führer" as the highest commander. Accustomed to operating within the constricted frames of recently proclaimed laws and decrees, he dreads an existence without secure membership, fearing the unexpected burden of a "leaderless and difficult individual life" (1964, 32). While this picture resembles the conventional image of the German fatally socialized within and dependent on authoritarian structures, Arendt also relates Eichmann's enthusiasm and facility during moments of supposedly egalitarian deal-making, in which parties negotiate on the basis of "mutuality" (57). What unites these various situations is the fact that the homogeneity of ideological commitments, or at least the seamless compatibility of matching interests, remains undisturbed. Eichmann cannot handle, or rather, he cannot even discern, moments of fracture, in which the viewpoints of individuals or groups do not coincide, or in which such non-coincidence cannot be easily and unambiguously resolved with reference to an available standard or a supreme authority. He is not so much averse as he is blind to contention.

To Arendt, Eichmann presents the spectacle of a person whose imperviousness to diverging beliefs and commitments is near perfect, for the reason that he lacks even the most minimal conception of

their existence. She therefore also doubts that Eichmann, unlike the other Nazi functionaries she speaks of, would be as reliant on strict information management to keep working efficiently toward the goals outlined by his superiors. Eichmann does not simply adapt to the dominant ideology and implement prescribed programs without question: he seems, in Arendt's eyes, to be completely oblivious to the possibility of any discordance surrounding their execution. If the "ordinary criminal" is able to avoid the value system of the noncriminal world "only within the narrow limits of his gang" and demands lifelong isolation from claims and judgments that do not conform to his conceptions in order to maintain his self-image, Eichmann did not possess any sensitivity to or understanding of the plurality of views to begin with, which means that he may in fact be less in need of the constant filtering (1964, 52). At no point was he genuinely able to accommodate or grasp the existence of contrary viewpoints, desires, or interests, and his seeming inability to form and hold on to any opinions and convictions about matters were rooted in an inability to understand that there are any distinct viewpoints at all.²³ A chilling example of this is Eichmann's assumption that he and the Jewish leadership, during the period that he organized enforced Jewish emigration, "were all 'pulling together'" to reach solutions beneficial to all—"at the trial," Arendt writes, "he never gave an inch when it came to this part of the story" (48).

In Arendt's account, Eichmann was unable to see tensions between distinct interlocutors. He never noticed the presence of conflicting opinions or interests, which means that he never saw himself as taking a specific stand. In fact, his adherence to rules or execution of orders cannot be seen as based on his active agreement or support, which would indicate that he was at least minimally conscious of traversing some distance between himself and others. When Arendt speaks of Eichmann's "inability to ever look at anything from the other fellow's point of view," she does not so much deplore his egoism as point to his strangely a-personal character, since registering another viewpoint requires one to understand that one also holds a specific point of view (1964, 52).

Confronted with this image of Eichmann, however, we must ask what makes Arendt picture him in this way. She offers a portrait based on an analysis of his statements and demeanor, but what features in

his responses does she deem salient, and how does she use them to support her conclusions? Again, Arendt's initial and indeed central observation about Eichmann is the seemingly simple one that his speech consists of clichés. As the general discussion of the cliché above made clear, the complaint about its circulation has often worked as an instrument with which to express (aesthetic) impatience with socially prevailing ideas. To call a statement a cliché is to say that the verbally coagulated consensus provides too little in the way of stimulation. When Arendt mobilizes the cliché in *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, or transfers it from the cultural arena of aesthetically informed antibourgeois criticism to the Jerusalem courtroom, she does still make an aesthetic judgment: Eichmann's speech, she implies, is above all curiously void of interest. Entirely composed of recycled phrases, proverbs, and jargon, it does not surprise or engage.

Yet to rely on the coined and already-said is at the same time to rely on that which all members of a certain group supposedly agree, that which does not require any discussion or collective review. In Eichmann's case, this reliance is so extensive and complete as to take on a new quality. His clichéd speech does not betray a merely local or temporal complacency about the existence of a safe consensus that could, under some extraordinary circumstances, become destabilized. Claiming that Eichmann was "genuinely incapable of uttering a single sentence that was not a cliché," Arendt implicitly asserts that he only moves within the confines of a sealed-off realm of axioms and idioms that is in fact never ruptured by discursive contention. There is no single non-cliché in his discourse, and hence no point at which a renewed negotiation about the meaning, validity, or adequacy of any concept can be opened up. As Arendt would write looking back at the trial:

Clichés, stock phrases, adherence to conventional, standardized codes of expression and conduct have the socially recognizable function of protecting us against reality, that is, against the claim on our thinking attention which all events and facts arouse by virtue of their existence. . . . [T]he difference in Eichmann was only that he clearly knew of no such claim at all. (1994, 160)

Eichmann was shielded from reality. In line with Arendt's claim that our "thinking attention" to reality is always a collective enterprise

because we must turn to one another to solicit support for our novel judgments about the world, Eichmann was also shielded from the existence of others.²⁴ His complete inability to extricate himself from a code indicates his inability to rethink and rename the make-up of reality, which in turn points to his ignorance of the presence of distinct others, among whom and with whom such rethinking must take place. For Eichmann, the world is never put in question, and hence the differing viewpoints of others are never genuinely needed and never really intrude. This complete dependence on stock phrases can be accorded a political meaning, for Eichmann's clichéd speech demonstrates that he is forever deaf to the possibility of renegotiating the world in the medium of disputes. We could say that, in Arendt's view, Eichmann misses the specifically political moment of human interaction, in which individuals are forced to attend to the world again as well as to each other, suddenly expelled from the lulling conditions of their prior agreements and reminded of their membership in a volatile, endangered, and invigorated community. Eichmann never suffered such expulsion and hence was never exposed to the political play of disagreement and agreement within a potentially fractured community.

Eichmann's isolation from plurality, finally, put definite limits on Arendt's strategy of representation in her report. In *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, Arendt at points simply lifts his agglomeration of clichés into her text, inserting her own comments between chunks of simultaneously bland and horrific phraseology. As Dagmar Barnouw has argued, Arendt's readiness to let "Eichmann's voice be heard" directly provoked much controversy (21–24). Yet her decision to include statements by Eichmann can paradoxically be ascribed to his utter lack of a distinctive voice. It is as if someone who cannot speak without falling back on chains of pre-articulated sentences also cannot and should not be fully translated into the voice of an outside narrator. Such an operation would only run the risk of covering over the dead linguistic banalities and hence conceal the emptiness of Eichmann's words. As Arendt stated in a reply to Gershom Scholem's critical review of her book, she had indeed consistently opted for "reporting Eichmann's own words" (Barnouw, 23), but here one must add that she had done this not despite but precisely because of his inability to speak. It is because Eichmann cannot speak or has no words of his "own" that he also cannot be spoken for by someone else, since that

would pull him too far into the realm of articulate and interacting subjects. The flatness or deadness of his words demands to be shown.

In conclusion, it is senseless to deny that Arendt's reaction to Eichmann's speech, her observation of his clichés, is aesthetic in character. Her contemporary critics were right to feel that she relied on aesthetic judgment. Yet they were wrong to dismiss her report as trivializing on this ground. Her comments on the cliché mark the moments in which Eichmann's blindness to the plurality of views becomes aesthetically manifest through the sheer dullness and repetitiousness of his speech. Arendt's preoccupation with his blindness to contention also illuminates her view of the political rather than simply moral nature of his crime: the source of Eichmann's guilt is his impenetrable ignorance of the plurality constitutive of politics. His crime, Arendt effectively argues, was a crime against the particular conditions of political life. If the contemporary critics thought that Arendt first and foremost sought to demonstrate her aesthetic sensitivity in the most inappropriate of contexts, this very sensitivity helped her identify a person oblivious to the complementary possibilities of dissent and consent that define political discourse. Every cliché points to an arrested discussion, and to read the cliché in the way Arendt does, to discern it and point it out, is to read politically.

CLICHÉ AND METHOD: ARENDT AGAINST PSYCHOLOGY

Arendt's portrait of Eichmann describes a mind so thickly coated as to repel completely the intrusion of alternative views on any given matter, the actual grasp of which might have complicated the strict adherence to rules channeled from above. To some contemporary readers, the report seemed at least affiliated with contemporary social psychology, and exponents of this field of study even understood it as a corroborating case study for their discipline.²⁵ Yet Arendt's focus on cliché in *Eichmann in Jerusalem* indicates that she may have been more affiliated with the idiosyncratic sensibilities of literary authors such as Flaubert and Kraus than with the scientific gaze of contemporary social psychologists. Indeed, *Eichmann in Jerusalem* not only makes a case for the validity of the aversion to clichés as a device when determining Eichmann's fatal inabilities. The report in effect

argues that it is a superior instrument of analysis, a position that emerges in Arendt's discussions of alternative diagnoses, such as those delivered by the many psychiatrists called in to profile Eichmann.

According to Arendt, the half dozen psychiatrists did not even notice the cliché in their investigations of Eichmann's personality, but instead read his repetitions of the already-said as proofs of a well-adjusted character.²⁶ She claims that the psychiatric experts all certified the accused as a normal person and, in a sardonic aside, she suggests that it was precisely Eichmann's exclusive reliance on clichés "that the psychiatrists thought so 'normal' and 'desirable'" (1964, 48). The problem with someone who only speaks in clichés and therefore hardly speaks at all is of course not that he is not normal, but that he is only normal and nothing else. To Arendt, the psychiatric technique of examination and testing, insofar as they are geared toward the classification of an individual along a scale from normal to pathological, are therefore less illuminating in the Eichmann case, in which the problem is not that the accused cannot be identified as a member of a certain type, but that he is, as the perfect medium of a jargon, nothing beyond a type. A listener demanding a degree of aesthetic stimulation, and hence irritated rather than reassured by bland and ordinary statements, would perhaps have had a more appropriate reaction to Eichmann.

The psychiatrists may thus have been better served by an aesthetic sense attuned to degrees of verbal ingenuity than by their usual investigative methods, with the help of which they were only able to conclude that Eichmann was an eminently pro-social character, who seemed quite capable of entertaining relations with family and friends. Arendt's comments on the "comedy of the soul experts" are brief but telling, because they reveal a fundamental difference between her frame of judgment and the one she deems typical in modern psychology (1964, 26). In Arendt's opinion, the fact that the psychiatrists cannot detect anything wrong with Eichmann is at bottom a testimony to the discipline's blindness to the political dimension of human interactions. The "striking consistency" of Eichmann's speech, or its tendency to render his environment consistent, makes it impossible to communicate with him in the sense of co-articulating a range of differing points of view. Eichmann does not fail at cooperative behavior or communal membership, skills or inclinations that are valued in society, but he does fail to relate to others as speech-agents in a network

of plural beings, each with an individual standpoint toward a world whose constitution is under debate. His complete submission to a narrow linguistic code demonstrates his inability both to perceive and to enunciate distinct positions in relation to speaking others.²⁷

In contradistinction to Arendt's political attention to Eichmann, which identifies his absence to a community in which people articulate their opinions and commitments in manifold lateral relations to one another, the psychiatrists—at least according to Arendt—apply criteria of normality to their object of examination, criteria presumably derived from the study of large populations of individuals.²⁸ In politics as Arendt conceives of it, however, there can be no normality, only viewpoints whose differences crystallize within a multiplicity that emerges through deliberation and contestation. The extraction of a standard of normality through surveys is alien to politics, because it does not consider the specific interconnectedness in the medium of which politics is practiced. Psychiatry may be attentively directed toward the single individual and seek to make him visible by means of its precise instruments of classification, yet it has already occluded the ongoing and fluctuating differentiation of positions and opinions particular to the political situation, and instead dissolved the discursive community into a mass of discrete individuals to be reorganized into clusters distributed along a continuum.²⁹ It has in other words dismantled the context in which Eichmann's blank nonparticipation would become apparent.

Arendt's comment on the "comedy of the soul experts" is no isolated occurrence. The first couple of chapters of *Eichmann in Jerusalem* even constitute one statement in a long-standing but somewhat unsystematically conducted critique of psychological methods for their failure to appreciate and protect the integrity of the political sphere. The problem with psychology is that its effort to recognize stable patterns in behavior or identify motivations and desires driving human agents leads it to treat the utterances of these agents with respect to themselves and the world as mere material for further interpretation. A stated opinion or idea never carries any significance in itself, but can be read as a symptom of an underlying motive or a trend observable for the detached analyst no longer caught up in the contents of the argumentation of those whom he studies. To Arendt, this methodologically necessary disregard for the actual positions that people formulate

and support, all in the interest of acquiring greater knowledge of the mechanisms behind their actions, means that people are “robbed” of “the very faculty of speech” (1994, 338). They are quite simply deprived of the authority over their own statements, as professional interpreters make claims to be able to tell what real trends they objectively represent. Cast in a slightly different idiom, Arendt charges the practitioners of deeper interpretation with “indiscretion,” for they seek to go beyond the public aspect that each person presents, or the aspect that is constituted in and through public interaction, and they try to penetrate regions not available to the speaking subjects themselves (1974, xviii).

Those versed in the practice of such interpretations are less likely to be bothered by or even notice the cliché, because they are not disturbed by the overt lack of resistance to immediate comprehension. Their eagerness to decode what is said can always satisfy itself in the extended search for supposedly unconscious, concealed, or repressed meanings, and it is therefore spurred rather than irritated by the apparent absence of mystery. The cliché is framed as an enhanced hermeneutic challenge rather than as the irritating end of further interpretive labor.³⁰ The cliché appears only to the reader or listener superficial enough to demand a more instant kind of stimulation and who refuses to delve deeper into the speaker’s mind. To say that a statement is a cliché is to say that it has already been understood, that no further acts of decoding are required, or that the statement’s meaning is so easily available and its verbal form so easily recognizable that it has become a source of annoyance.

To complain about the banality of someone’s speech can paradoxically be a sign of minimal respect for that person’s authority over his words, and hence a measure to protect the political context of interlinked positions and standpoints from disciplines for which it has no independent existence. Arendt may have been accused of aestheticism and superficiality when she remarked on the sheer banality of Eichmann’s speech, but in a sense, she had in her book already charged psychology for not being sufficiently superficial. Those who try to interpret Eichmann’s speech in some way are not shallow enough to linger only on what is being said, without seeking to push beyond it to identify hidden or unconscious motivations and desires. Despite Arendt’s constant remarks about Eichmann’s inability to speak, she

does not, like the psychologists she mentions, deny him this capacity by vigorously rewriting his statements according to a key. If Arendt ends up noting that his speech is really a form of muteness, then it is in fact only because she was prepared to grant him the “faculty of speech” to begin with.

Notes

1. For an analysis of Arendt’s writings on the attitude and character of the social climber in a European society structured by class, see Pitkin. Pitkin also points out that Arendt quickly grasped Eichmann as a parvenu: “Eichmann, in short, was a parvenu, diligently obedient in his career, deferential to his social betters, and eager for their approval” (126).

2. David Cesarani notes that “Arendt’s role in shaping Eichmann’s legacy cannot be under-estimated. Her *obiter dicta* had more resonance than anything he said or wrote, and far outweighed the mountain of documents and testimony presented at the trial” (344).

3. For an overview of the responses to *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, especially among New York intellectuals, see Rabinbach. Norman Prodhoretz spoke of Arendt’s “perversity of brilliance,” and Lionel Abel contended that Arendt relied on “aesthetic categories” to “account for [Eichmann’s] actions” (Rabinbach, 100–101). For critical statements by German reviewers such as Golo Mann, see Krummacher.

4. In a recent article on Arendt’s report, for instance, Benjamin Robinson claims that Arendt shows how Eichmann “falls short of the specifically political demands of the *vita activa*” (72).

5. Arendt concludes the report with an indictment of Eichmann’s attempt to deflect responsibility and blame onto circumstance and overpowering organizations: “Let us assume, for the sake of argument, that it was nothing more than misfortune that made you a willing instrument in the organization of mass murder; there still remains the fact that you have carried out, and therefore actively supported, a policy of mass murder. For politics is not like the nursery; in politics obedience and support are the same” (1964, 279).

6. Many commentators do touch on Arendt’s preoccupation with the cliché, but they do not make it the primary object of their analysis. In an article that challenges Arendt’s understanding of jurisprudence, for instance, Shoshana Felman speaks of her observations of Eichmann’s clichéd speech: “As a parrotlike ‘clown,’ Eichmann does not speak the borrowed (Nazi) language; he is rather *spoken by it*, *spoken for* by its clichés, whose criminality he does not come to realize” (205). Characteristically, this discussion takes place in a long footnote.

7. For an overview of the historical background and the major issues dealt with in *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, see Benhabib.

8. Commentators have of course leveled criticism at Arendt’s assertion that Eichmann could only speak in clichés, and have contended that his speech was

part of a performance aimed to craft a specific courtroom identity. David Cesarani, for instance, argues that Eichmann's consistent demeanor across a number of examinations was in fact part of a conscious rhetorical strategy devised by the defense: "Eichmann's disinterested pose was part of the defence strategy: to avoid any display of a violent temperament or giving any justification for the view that he attacked his work with passion" (258). Arendt implicitly dismissed the notion that Eichmann was capable of strategic conduct in her comment on the judges' conviction that the "emptiness [of Eichmann's speech] was feigned" (1964, 48). The judges had to assume that Eichmann was concealing his real thoughts, she contends, because the idea that he had simply acted in conformity with the laws within a system rather than out of any subjective motive or criminal purpose would damage the legitimacy of the legal procedure.

9. Cliché is a modern term, connected to the technology of the printing press, and hence it does not appear in works on rhetoric, an art developed in antiquity. While the notion of the commonplace is central to rhetoric, the system of *topoi* as "dense and finely branched semantic clusters" that can be relied upon to equip a speaker with chains of arguments must be kept conceptually distinct from the more recent (and negatively slanted) idea of circulating clichés (Bender and Wellbery, 15). Fredric Jameson has suggestively proposed that the repertoire of commonplaces typical of a premodern culture of textual production can be seen as a "clichés *before the fall*, the received ideas of an older and socially more vital culture" (80).

10. In a recent introduction to the study of idioms, the linguist Harald Burger maintains that cliché is used in popular contexts and has no productive role within a scientific discourse on linguistic structure.

11. For a light compendium of samples from literary debates for and against the cliché, see Bagnall. Two recent articles exemplify a theoretically informed study of the cliché in literary texts: Timothy Bewes has explored the proliferation of clichés in novels that seek to represent the inarticulacy of the subject under colonial rule, and Thomas Pfau has analyzed the appearance of the cliché in Romanticist poetry that blurs the distinction between citation and invention to confound empathetic readings. See Bewes and Pfau.

12. Ruth Amossy has emphasized that clichés are "reading effects": clichés "emerge through an act of recognition. It would never be enough to define them in purely formal terms, since clichés are based not only on spatial arrangements (figures of speech, structures), but on a temporal dimension as well: clichés are clichés by virtue of a phenomenon of repetition (of which the reader is the only judge)" (34–35).

13. I draw this expression from James Phillips's reading of Samuel Beckett: "Beckett courts the boring. This is the most conspicuous perversity of his art. The passage in *Watt* on Mr. Knott's physical appearance drives towards a 'Too much' that is anything but the declaration of the Kantian sublime. . . . Instead of overtaxing the faculty of understanding, it undertaxes it" (252).

14. This distinguishes the label "cliché" from the label "bullshit," recently analyzed by the philosopher Harry G. Frankfurt. One calls something bullshit out

of a concern with truth, whereas one calls something a cliché out of a concern with newness or stimulation.

15. For a study of how Arendt draws on, but also departs from, Heidegger in order to establish how multiple agents co-constitute the political space, see Flakne.

16. Arendt discusses prejudices at length in her unfinished manuscript entitled “Was ist Politik?” Her approach to prejudices is not negative in any undifferentiated manner. Rather, she recognizes the vital function of stable prejudices in regulating the exposure of the subject to a world that threatens to inundate it. Yet for her, the political only begins when people have to negotiate a world without the filters of prejudice. See Arendt 1993. A consideration of the Heideggerian roots of Arendt’s concept of prejudice lies outside the scope of this essay.

17. Steve Buckler has examined how Arendt posits a close and mutually supporting relationship between “human plurality and cognitive certification” (287). In line with this, Arendt also believed that the emasculation of human plurality enforced by totalitarian regimes through terror and ideology threatened the subsequent attempts to comprehend its nature.

18. Much like Alexis de Tocqueville, Arendt understood the political as “a zone in which the order of human things is in contention,” and grasped modernity as the era of the eclipse of the political through the “pseudo-consensual management of mass society” (Balakrishnan, 152, 154).

19. Anne Herschberg-Pierrot (1988) discusses Flaubert’s concept of the cliché and the received idea in *Le Dictionnaire des Idées Recues*. In an article entitled “Barthes and Doxa,” Herschberg-Pierrot (2002) also discusses received ideas in terms of socially prevailing ideas. For a review of Karl Kraus’s self-defeating attempts to compile and banish clichés, see Norberg.

20. Arendt’s article “Organized Guilt and Universal Responsibility,” written during World War II, is included in the volume *Essays in Understanding 1930–1954* (Arendt 1994).

21. Arendt’s organizational emphasis is discussed in a recent article by Devin O. Pendas. Reading Arendt’s commentaries on postwar trials, Pendas reviews her attention to how the National Socialist movement, in possession of the state apparatus, mobilized “functionally independent actors from all (or nearly all) domains of social and institutional life for genocide” (79).

22. In her interest in the sociological rather than the psychological or individual dimension of crime, Arendt’s theoretical endeavors can be read alongside recent literature on the social causes of fanaticism. See for instance Russell Hardin’s work on the tendency of homogeneous and isolated groups to develop self-reinforcing (extremist) views: “It is generally the group that produces and sustains fanaticism” (4).

23. Eichmann’s lack of opinions or ideological convictions in the genuine sense of understanding that one holds one view as opposed to other views does not mean that he was bereft of motives. Indeed, his lack of convictions in the authentic sense went along with a sustained effort to “make it” within an organization.

As Corey Robin writes: “Eichmann was a careerist of the first order. He had ‘no motives at all,’ Arendt insisted, ‘except for an extraordinary diligence in looking out for his personal advancement’” (20).

24. Rei Terada offers a different view in her analysis of Eichmann’s “infinite art of evasion” (94). Relying partly on Freud, she claims that thinking involves noticing an external reality at odds with one’s desires—neither to deny this reality’s existence completely nor to affirm it as if it were unchangeable. The self in contact with reality thus registers “facts and feelings that it does *not* accept” (92). Building on this account, she claims that Eichmann’s inability to perceive reality is rooted in his unwillingness to admit any disharmony between his wishes and the state of things: he effectively “ignores genocide in order to ignore his own hardship” (93). To become a thinking human being, then, he would first have had to concede that he was in fact not feeling well, a mental act that would precede the discernment of others and their views (94). This intriguing reading does not address the fact that in *Eichmann in Jerusalem* Arendt states that thinking about and reflecting upon the world always involves thinking “from the standpoint of somebody else” (1964, 49).

25. From 1960 to 1963, the sociologist Stanley Milgram conducted experiments designed to determine people’s readiness to obey authority even when they were asked to administer electric shocks to innocent subjects. In the preface to his study, Milgram himself cites Arendt’s report as a possible parallel to his findings: “After witnessing hundreds of ordinary people submit to the authority in our own experiments, I must conclude that Arendt’s conception of *the banality of evil* comes closer to the truth than one might dare imagine. The ordinary person who shocked the victim did so out of a sense of obligation—a conception of his duties as a subject—and not from any peculiarly aggressive tendencies” (6).

26. Based on records made available much later, David Cesarani disputes that all or most of the psychiatrists certified Eichmann as normal, citing evaluators who concluded that Eichmann’s responses to various examinations (such as the Rorschach test) revealed him to be a “murderous robot” (358).

27. This formulation relies on Arendt’s vocabulary in *The Human Condition*: “Speech and action reveal . . . distinctness. Through [speech and action], men distinguish themselves instead of being merely distinct; they are modes in which human beings appear to each other, not indeed as physical objects, but *qua* men” (1958, 176). As this quotation indicates, people are not distinct outside of the contexts in which they interact and speak to each other, but distinguish themselves and acquire identities through ongoing communication. As Michael Bösch writes, “Die Identität des Individuums ist im Vollzug des Sich-selbst-Unterscheidens gegeben” (571).

28. In his extensive study of the production of normality, *Versuch über den Normalismus*, Jürgen Link has traced how, in the modern world, normality is discursively generated through aggregation of statistical data within disciplines such as sociology and psychology, but also how the resulting construct is represented for a broader audience in the context of popular media. As Rembert Hüser

formulates it in a recent introduction to Link's work: "Link defines normalism neither as a given nor as a substance of its own. Rather, normalism emerges as an effective strategy of self-observation and control, traceable in the statistical records of a few information societies dating back to the beginning of modernity in the eighteenth century. . . . To sustain the 'will to normality' in sufficiently large sections of the population, the state needs to translate this generally incomprehensible 'landscape of curves' from the language of experts into a self-steering fantasy of the subjects" (6).

29. Michael Gamper has described how modern statistics, developed by figures such as the Belgian mathematician Adolphe Quetelet in the early nineteenth century, must methodologically bracket the life and composition of small groups of interrelated individuals and instead map populations of atoms that can be studied without reference to their relationships of interdependency and mutual influence. The object of scrutiny is never the specific developments and chains of actions within smaller communities, but frequencies in the population as a whole, irrespective of causes or reasons in particular cases. See also Jürgen Link's analysis of the dissolution of older social formations into an atomized population.

30. According to Arendt, the judges at the trial approached Eichmann's speech in an analogous way, namely as a hermeneutical problem. As judges in a criminal trial, they were unable or unwilling to accept Eichmann's comments as indicating his complete lack of individual personality and concluded instead that the "emptiness [of Eichmann's speech] was feigned" and that he "wished to cover up other thoughts, which, though hideous, were not empty" (1964, 49). They could, in other words, not accept that Eichmann was only able to repeat the already-said within his organization and as an individual had harbored no specific desire to do evil. To avoid this conclusion, they grasped his speech behavior as a particularly difficult hermeneutic challenge, that is, as a particularly well-executed act of deception. Their suspicion was, at bottom, an attempt to defend the trial they were presiding over, for according to "an assumption current in all modern legal systems" an accused who could not for himself distinguish between right and wrong could also not be sentenced for his deeds (277).

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