An Extreme Example? Using Arendt’s Eichmann in Jerusalem in the Business Ethics Classroom

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Abstract

With *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, we have, I would admit, a most unlikely case study for use in a business ethics classroom. The story of Eichmann is already some sixty years old, and his activities in his career as a Nazi were far beyond the pale of even the most egregious cases found in the typical business ethics case books. No doubt, there is some truth to the fact that introducing Eichmann’s story into an applied ethics class would inevitably depict an unseemly analogy between the practices of latter day corporations and the bureaucracy of the Nazi era. My argument here, though, is that the story of Adolf Eichmann, as depicted in Hannah Arendt’s well-known *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, offers a philosophically cogent account of judgment and ethical decision-making that future business managers and employees would do well to heed. Indeed, *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, originally a series of press accounts for *New Yorker* magazine, deserves consideration alongside the Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics*, Kant’s *Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals*, and other classic ethics texts in a business ethics syllabus. This is not to say that Arendt’s work is uncontroversial; there are serious questions to be raised about both her depiction of Eichmann and her conclusions about “the banality of evil.” Nevertheless, her account of ethics, which, with its account of ethical duties and its case study of Eichmann’s character, shows both its Aristotelian and Kantian influences, is a warning to readers who would conflate morality with state laws and their duties with the needs of superiors. In short, I argue that, despite her well-known critique of modern large scale economies and her general avoidance of discussions of post-industrial corporations, Arendt may be a business ethicist of the first order.

After living some ten years under the assumed name of Ricardo Klement, Adolf Eichmann, a former high official in the German army, was abducted by the Israeli Mossad, which transported him in May 1960 to Israel to face charges of crimes against the Jewish people, crimes against humanity, and war crimes. The next year, after an international controversy set off by the abduction that rekindled the memories of atrocities in Europe some believed best forgotten, Eichmann faced a prosecution depicting him as the anti-Semitic mastermind of the final solution. Four months of testimony, hundreds of witnesses, and thousands of pages of documentary evidence, including transcripts of Eichmann’s interrogations by Israeli officials, provided the world with stark details about Eichmann and his role in the Final Solution. Eichmann’s defense was meager—Eichmann would claim that he was simply following orders, a defense
that had been tried and had failed at Nuremberg—and the result of the trial seemed pre-determined from the moment of his abduction. Eichmann would hang for his responsibility in the Nazi slaughter of six million Jews.

With this, we have, I would admit, a most unlikely case study for use in a business ethics classroom. The story of Eichmann is already some sixty years old, and his activities in his career as a Nazi were far beyond the pale of even the most egregious cases found in the typical business ethics case books.1 There would be, of course, some truth to the view that introducing Eichmann’s story into an applied ethics class would inescapably depict an unseemly analogy between the practices of latter day corporations and the bureaucracy of the Nazi era. My argument here, though, is that Hannah Arendt’s well-known *Eichmann in Jerusalem* offers a philosophically cogent account of judgment and ethical decision-making that business managers and employees would do well to heed. *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, originally a series of press accounts for New Yorker magazine, deserves consideration alongside the Aristotle’s *Nichomachean Ethics*, Kant’s *Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals*, and other classic ethics texts in a business ethics syllabus. Indeed, Arendt’s account offers a narrative structure amenable to the story-based pedagogy favored by a number of business ethicists, who increasingly argue for the importance of such “experiential” knowledge for the effective teaching of business ethics. Charles Watson, for example, argues that stories provide an essential way for students to see the practical import of the ethical theories under study.2 To use the language of recent pedagogical studies in ethics, through a close reading of Arendt’s work and its theory, the hope is that students would be led from the level of cognitive competence of ethical theory found in the typical ethics texts to a behavioral competence that is the goal of business ethics courses. G. L. Rossouw contrasts cognitive and behavioral competence as follows:

> Seen from the behavioral competence position, the purpose of teaching business ethics is to develop the capacity of students to behave morally in a business setting. In contrast to the cognitive competence position, adherents of this approach argue that cognitive competence to deal with ethical issues will not necessarily translate into a willingness to behave morally as well. It is possible to score very high on cognitive competence and yet to be a poor ethical performer in business.3

Arendt’s work is not uncontroversial: there are serious questions to be raised about both her depiction of Eichmann and her conclusions about “the banality of evil.” Nevertheless, her account of ethics, which, with its depiction of ethical duties and its case study of Eichmann’s character does not fit squarely within either a virtue or deontological ethics, is a warning to readers who would conflate morality with state laws and their duties with the needs of superiors. In short, I will argue that, despite her critique of modern large scale economies and her general avoidance of discussions of post-industrial corporations, Arendt may be a business ethicist of the first order.

Arendt’s work is not, though, a traditional work of ethics. *Eichmann in Jerusalem* is a long study in character—the character of a man Arendt fears is exceptional in his display of symptoms common to “modern bureaucratic man.”4 Conformist to his core, this “modern bureaucratic man” is unable to see beyond the needs and dictates of his career and is ineluctably unimaginative in his consideration of life’s deep ethical and political questions. As Michael Marrus puts it, “Eichmann was the quintessential example of the totalitarian bureaucrat—unable to speak except in officialese [*Amtssprache*], unable to think outside the framework of his bureaucratic function, unable to
contemplate wider issues of right and wrong or a transcendant morality.” In short, he was ignorant “of everything that was not directly, technically, and bureaucratically connected with his job (EJ, 54).

Arendt argues that in modernity, men are exceptionally a-political, viewing their role in the life of their nation and communities as mere cogs in a power structure for which they bear not even the slightest responsibility. Within this structure, the task of thought—defined by Arendt as the ability to see from the vantage point of the other—is displaced onto a system, or worse, a leader-figure that unburdens each man of his individual responsibility. Arendt is scornful of Eichmann’s claim that he was simply following orders for which he had no choice, on threat of violence, to obey. Nevertheless, she recognizes in his defense a larger truth about the nature of responsibility in modernity: judgment and decision-making are always the responsibility of others, and thus, no one.

What is particularly dispiriting in Arendt’s account is how short a time she believes it takes for one’s conscience to be co-opted by a corrupt social system. “It was of great political relevance,” she writes about the outcome of the Eichmann trial, “to know how long it takes an average person to overcome his innate repugnance toward crime” (EJ, 93). Eichmann accomplished this by elevating the laws of Hitler to the status of a perverse Kantian categorical imperative. For Kant, the categorical imperative, from which it follows that one’s maxims for action are such that they can be made into a self-consistent and universal law of nature, is the self-legislated duty of each free being using its practical reason. One’s maxims for action were to be aligned with this internal law, even if, as is often enough the case, it called for an action opposed to one’s inclinations. Arendt does not, in strict Kantian fashion, argue that Eichmann, because of his inclinations, elevated his hypothetical imperatives relating to his job security over the duties of the categorical imperative. Rather Eichmann, Arendt writes, viewed his moral responsibility to be that he should act in such a way that the Führer, if he knew of his actions, would approve of them (136).

What is often missed in Arendt’s analysis is the way in which Eichmann still retains a measure of Kantian freedom to self-legislate. “In his household use [of Kant’s categorical imperative], all that is left of Kant’s spirit is the demand that a man do more than obey the law, that he go beyond the mere call of obedience and identify his own will with the principle behind the law … [here] the will of the Führer” (136-7). That Eichmann did not allow, as he admitted, any exceptions to this law, that he acted freely against his “inclination,” is proof, Eichmann argued, that he was merely doing what he took to be his duty.

But, whatever the perversity of his modes of thinking, Eichmann never lost the capacity to judge, to say what was and was not in accord with duty (even if his notion of the latter was tragically skewed). It is this point that needs to be underscored. Critics of Arendt too often highlight her strong account of the rampant conformism of modern society and the crushing oblivion of Nazi totalitarianism to suggest that she believed that Eichmann bore no responsibility for his crimes, that the usurpation of his practical reason by Hitler’s edicts was inevitable given the time and place in which he lived.

Arendt is certainly interested in Eichmann’s “mechanism” and notes that relatively few “still knew right from wrong” under the Nazi regime, or were prepared at least to act upon the innate pity that humans feel in the face of suffering (EJ, 104, 106). Eichmann, she writes, considered himself to be
a mere civil servant, and in many ways he was, as he said, “a law abiding citizen” (24). He was not stupid, but he was thoughtless. He could speak in nothing but clichés, in the officialese and euphemistic language the Nazi apparatus used in the commission of its horrors. What for the Jews, Arendt notes, was “quite literally the end of the world,” was for Eichmann “a job with daily routine and its ups and downs” (153). There was a “remarkable monotony” to Eichmann’s job, given what was at stake, but this monotony—the job security and occasional promotions—provided Eichmann with his self-described Arbeitenfreude, a certain contentment and satisfaction with his work. And it is notable, as Arendt points out, that Eichmann’s faulty memory, even at the trial in 1961, could recall only those events during the Nazi period that directly affected his career: promotions and changes in responsibilities. The evil of Eichmann, Arendt argues, was his extreme careerism, which kept him focused on the monstrous and “routine” business of the Holocaust that rendered the lives of millions subservient to the utility of his prospects in the Nazi hierarchy (82). Eichmann’s evil, according to Arendt, lies not in some Augustinian stain upon his soul, but rather in his so-called normality, his exceptional attention to being nothing other than normal within even the most extreme circumstances. The judges in the case, Arendt writes, “were too good, and perhaps also too conscious of the very foundations of their profession, to admit that an average, ‘normal’ person, neither feeble minded nor indoctrinated, nor cynical, could be perfectly incapable of telling right from wrong… Eichmann was indeed normal insofar as he was ‘no exception within the Nazi regime’” (26).

Eichmann in Jerusalem, whatever its faults as history or character study, offers an essential rethinking of morality and evil in the contemporary age. Arendt was struck at the trial, she said, “by a manifest shallowness in the doer [Eichmann] 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 … was quite ordinary, commonplace, and neither demonic nor monstrous.” Arendt, who had written her doctoral dissertation on Augustine, knew that this formulation ran against an entire current of Western considerations of evil. Though she doesn’t find Eichmann to be monstrous, her depiction of his character is just as chilling:

[W]hen I speak of the banality of evil, I do so only on the strictly factual level, pointing to the phenomenon which stared one in the face at the trial. Eichmann 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.” Except for an extraordinary diligence in looking out for his personal advancement, he had no motives at all. (287)

In other words, Eichmann’s evil manifested itself in very particular ways, one that does mesh with the thorough-going ruthlessness and pathology of a Iago or Macbeth. Arendt notes, for example, that Eichmann’s wish for personal advancement would not be exercised in any “criminal” way: “he certainly would never have murdered his superior in order to inherit his post. He merely, to put the matter colloquially, never realized what he was doing” (287). This is the great ethical problem of modernity, Arendt claims: “That such remoteness from reality and such thoughtlessness can wreak more havoc than all the evil instincts taken together which, perhaps, are inherent in men—that was, in fact, the lesson one could learn in Jerusalem” (288). And it is this very banality that needs to be thought, given the genocidaires of Rwanda and elsewhere in the past forty years, who have treated their gruesome task as but another nine-to-five job. The evil witnessed in the past century has not always manifested itself through social pathology, as Arendt recognizes in Eichmann in Jerusalem,
but through its opposite: men and women conforming rigidly to social and political codes even as those codes are turned into the tools of genocide. Like Eichmann, the genocidaires of modernity are all too often law abiding citizens.

Arendt claims Eichmann is a symptom of a wider problem in modernity that needs to be thought, the way in which one’s normal aversion to pity can be occluded through the mediation of new technologies and bureaucratic language rules. Arendt worries that past is prologue in the Eichmann case, that “it is quite conceivable that in the automated economy of a not-too-distant future, men may be tempted to exterminate all those whose intelligence quotient is below a certain level” (289); what worries Arendt, then, is the continued privileging of the technical reasoning of the bureaucrat over the thinking and judging of practical reason.

But despite the very banality of Eichmann, Arendt does not claim that he was without responsibility. “The moment you come to the individual person,” Arendt later argued, “the question to be raised is no longer, how did this system function, but why did the defendant become a functionary in this organization?” To explain Eichmann’s behavior is not to excuse him ethically or judicially. Let me quote from Arendt at length on this point:

We heard the protestations of the defense [at the trial] that Eichmann was after all only a “tiny cog” in the machinery of the Third Reich. … If the defendant excuses himself on the ground that he acted not as a man but as a mere functionary whose functions could just as easily have been carried out by anyone else, it is as if a criminal pointed to the statistics on crime—which set forth that so-and-so many crimes per day are committed in such-and-such a place—and declared that he only did what was statistically expected, that it was mere accident that he did it and not somebody else, since after all somebody had to do it. … [We have grown used] to explaining away the responsibility of the doer for his deed in terms of this or that kind of determinism. … No judicial procedure would be possible on the basis of them. (289-90)

Thus, if it is true that “those few who were still able to tell right from wrong went really only by their own judgments, and … did so freely,” the reverse is also true: Eichmann, even against a backdrop where the law and general consensus of his society was murderous, was left to his “own judgment,” the kind of judgment that needs to valorized even in an era Arendt sees has reacted coldly to the traditional idea of judging others (295-6).

This kind of “free judgment,” a refusal to conflate one’s ethics with the laws of state, is especially necessary in the contemporary era in which modern capitalist enterprises operate. Students should not just study Arendt’s depiction of Eichmann simply because, as she argues, it raises the central political and ethical issues of our age—though this should be reason enough. Richard J. Klonoski offers a well-formulated defense of a non-utilitarian approach to teaching business ethics, arguing that ethics courses should provide a broader depth of philosophical study than is typical of most pedagogical approaches, since such an “unapplied” component provides students with a greater conception of the real ethical issues at hand, rather than what Klonoski suggests is the arbitrarily delimited “decision-making” pedagogy of most business ethics courses. After reviewing a business case in which one firm made money in a “death futures market”—betting on the deaths of insurance policy holders—Klonoski argues that a business ethicist would be remiss in leading a class on the morality of such a market without first discussing the real human issues at hand.
In reflecting on the myriad ethical questions surrounding such deals, I am prompted to return to classical philosophy and to ask about the nature and meaning of human mortality. I am prompted not to let the most important questions revolve around legal ins and outs, and thin ethical arguments about free enterprise rights of liberty and profitability. But rather I ask how does our view of death affect our conception of what it means to be human and whether such a view alters culture for better or worse. I ask [in my classes] what this latest commercialization of death signals for the way in which we will come to understand human mortality and the value of human persons.11

The example cited by Klonoski is, of course, not fortuitous to the case of Eichmann. Nevertheless, I would argue that students should not just study the Eichmann case because it raises the specter of the ethical and political catastrophe of the past century. They should also study the case since it raises the central tensions—between technical and practical reason, between utility and moral consequence—that they will face as workers in the contemporary economy, one that moves across a number of legal and national boundaries, such that workers need to make decisions without the guidance of local laws: “Companies are increasingly entrusted with their own responsibility to contribute to a balanced social, ecological, and economic development. … It appears that business is an important, if not the dominant actor, . . . in the common responsibility of society.”12

It is probably no accident that business ethics arose as a discipline during an era in which governments across the West have deregulated industries and provided less oversight over corporations and their activities. Communities and nations are now, it seems to me, more and more at the mercy of the good faith of corporations, since governments are less and less likely to step in on the community’s behalf. In other words, without legal constraints that would otherwise coerce them into “moral” behavior, communities must hope for corporations to have the ethical wherewithal to act on the behalf of the stakeholders, and not just the shareholders, of a corporation. But the community cannot have this hope if business managers and employees reduce human existence to the march of the technical reason of profits and losses—to the detriment of the deeper aspects of being human about which Klonoski reminds us. Too often, though, this is the case. In an appraisal that echoes, however distantly, Arendt’s depiction of Eichmann, Pat Werhane reminds us of the too-limited moral capacities of modern day managers:

[S]ome managers . . . lack a sense of the variety of possibilities and moral consequences of their decisions, as well as the ability to imagine a wide range of possible issues, consequences and solutions . . . . Still other managers are so focused on their roles and their responsibilities to a particular organization that they fail to consider simple norms of morality.13

In short, too many managers and employees have a “muted conscience” (“VMI,” 28), experiencing Arbeitsfreude even as their firms traffic in sweatshop labor, hide damaging reports from investors, and pollute the local environment, to cite the most recognizable examples. Arendt’s Eichmann in Jerusalem offers a profound thinking of the systemic problems in modern society that underlie what Werhane references in her discussion of the myopic allegiance of some managers to a particular organization. Despite her systemic critique of modernity, Arendt’s extended meditation on contemporary human existence shows the continued viability of the notion of responsibility. After
all, even if the example of Eichmann is extreme, is it not in response to the central problem raised by Arendt’s work—to obey evil is to support it—the very reason business ethics classes are offered in the first place?

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Notes

1. Patrick Maclagan offers a succinct framework of the standard questions by which the relevance of business ethics’ cases studies should be judged: “(1) What are the moral issues? Can we identify the moral agents, establishing the locus of responsibility for things that have happened, and for taking corrective action in the future? (2) Is there also a dilemma? If so, whose dilemmas? (3) What sort of dilemmas are they? Where do they lie on a scale from acute to quasi-moral? Does self-interest enter into the picture, and if so, in what manner? (4) What are the possible functions of moral theory? Distinguish between the evaluation of issues and the resolution of dilemmas. (5) What function might other theory perform, for example regarding the explanation of, or justification for, individual or group conduct? (6) What can we do with the concept of moral imagination? (7) What need might individuals have for other, non-cognitive, attributes? Is there evidence of persons’ failure to act on their moral beliefs?” “Varieties of Moral Issue and Dilemma: A Framework for the Analysis of Case Material in Business Ethics Education,” Journal of Business Ethics, V. 48 [2003], pp. 21–32. Henceforth cited as “VMI.”

2. Charles E. Watson, “Using Stories to Teach Business Ethics,” Teaching Business Ethics, V. 7, no. 1 (Feb. 2003), pp. 93-105. Watson’s approach calls, against what can be expected in teaching Eichmann in Jerusalem, for studying exemplary ethical models through “uplifting stories.” See also Patrick Maclagan, “Varieties of Moral Issue and Dilemma: A Framework for the Analysis of Case Material in Business Ethics Education.” Maclagan argues that narratives (he specifically mentions visual depictions) “may be more relevant in that context than it is to students’ understanding of the purely cognitive, theoretical, aspect of business ethics” (“VMI,” 25).

3. G. J. Rossouw, “Three Approaches to Teaching Business Ethics,” Teaching Business Ethics, V. 7, no. 2, 409-432, p. 413. Needless to say, teaching Eichmann in Jerusalem may only help cognitive and not behavioral competence. Within the scope of the classroom, Watson (see n. 2) is probably correct in his suggestion that narrative depictions of ethical and moral deeds are as close as an instructor can come to providing “experiential” learning to prepare the student to be competent in performing morally in the work place.


6. I will stick to Arendt’s gender specific usage in part to highlight Arendt’s blinkered approach to the question of the feminine in modernity.


Bibliography


Rossouw, G. J., “Three Approaches to Teaching Business Ethics,” Teaching Business Ethics, V. 7,
no. 2, 409-432.


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