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### August 4, 2013: Hannah Arendt and the Banality of Evil

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Title: Hannah Arendt and the Banality of Evil

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8/4/2013—I attended a showing of the movie, Hannah Arendt yesterday in Pittsburgh. I have a number of reactions to the movie and I will be referring to them in this blog over the next few days.

One reaction is that the person who reviewed Hannah Arendt's book about the Eichmann trial was none other than Michael Musmanno, Justice of the Pennsylvania Supreme Court from 1952 to 1968, who served as part of the prosecutor team at the Nuremberg trials and was a witness in the Eichmann trial in Jerusalem. Musmanno was very much a part of the controversy over Arendt's view of Eichmann. (I take some pride in this sense the Musmanno archives are located here at Duquesne Law School).

The most important part of the movie was a line that may or may not have been uttered by Arendt. Toward the end of the film, she says, almost to herself, that the real error that she made was not in referring to Eichmann as banal and his evil as banal, but in referring to the evil involved in the Holocaust as radical. Evil, she concludes, is never radical. Only good can be radical. I guess you could extrapolate and say that evil can be destructive, very destructive, but is always the same. Only good is really creative. This is a very profound thought for us to consider.

In retrospect, what is to be learned from the controversy over Arendt's reporting on the Eichmann trial, and the resulting book, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: a Report of the Banality of Evil*? In the movie, what infuriated people was a kind of empirical observation that if the Jews had not been so well organized, and if the Jews had not had such effective leadership, the Nazis would have had a hard time killing so many people.

As a purely empirical matter, I don't have any idea whether this is true, but it does not seem to be something to be upset about. There must have been a deeper implication, which is only hinted at in the movie, that this observation is not about organization but is about decision-making. In some way that is not clear to me, Arendt must have been understood as suggesting that the Jewish leadership in question decided to cooperate with the Nazis rather than to oppose them.

If this is in part what the controversy was about, the strong reaction is understandable. There were obviously no good choices available to any Jew in Europe confronting the Nazis. If a particular Jewish leader decided that some kind of organization was healthier for everyone than a complete breakdown in society, well, who can say that this was a poor choice?

Musmanno's criticism of Arendt was very different. Primarily, he denied that Eichmann was banal and he denied that Eichmann was primarily a bureaucrat. Musmanno insisted that Eichmann hated the Jews like any other fanatical Nazi and that his actions could be understood much more as a matter of personal guilt than as systemic and structural. In other words, Musmanno disagreed with Arendt philosophically, at least in this instance.