



EICHMANN BEFORE JERUSALEM: THE UNEXAMINED LIFE OF A MASS MURDERER

BY BETTINA STANGNETH (TRANSLATED
FROM THE GERMAN BY RUTH MARTIN)

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Reviewed by Christopher C. Faille

Adolf Eichmann, on trial in Jerusalem in 1961, declared, “I have taken Kant’s categorical imperative as my norm. I did long ago. I have ordered my life by that imperative.”

But Eichmann also said that he found Immanuel Kant’s categorical imperative too difficult to understand, so he devised an adaptation of it that he said works for “the household use of the little man.” The household adaptation was that his duty was obedience to the Führer. Just as a reminder, the *actual* Kantian categorical imperative requires acting in such a way such that one’s act could be made a universal law, and—in another formulation—treating every person as an end in himself and not merely as a means. See the difference from Eichmann’s version?

Eichmann’s claim to Kantianism of *some* sort struck observers at the time as extraordinary, and these statements have evoked a range of responses. The idiosyncratic American philosopher-novelist Ayn Rand, always eager for a stick to hit Kantianism with, seized upon this. “It is not an accident that Eichmann was a Kantian,” she wrote. Her disciple Leonard Peikoff devoted most of a book, *The Ominous Parallels*, to the same proposed connection.

But is it even true that Eichmann *was* a Kantian? If it isn’t true, then we needn’t concern ourselves with whether it was an “accident” that he was, after all. Do we have anything more to support the connection than Eichmann’s say-so? And, if not, how seriously should we take that say-so? Are people on trial for mass murder and at grave risk of execution known to be reliable in their accounts of their own motives?

In her renowned reporting from that trial, in her book *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, Hannah Arendt characterized Eichmann thus: Except for an “extraordinary diligence in looking out for his personal advancement, he had no motives at all.” She saw this motivelessness as of a piece with an inability or an unwilling-

ness to think: in short, as of a piece with what she notoriously called the banality of evil.

Eichmann was not a Kantian, in Arendt’s telling, because he understood nothing more of Kant than that Kant was a German with a worldwide reputation. Seeing oneself as a Kantian for no greater reason than that doesn’t make one a Kantian. It does make one pretty banal, though.

Stangneth’s Take

Now, more than half a century after Arendt’s book and more than 30 years after Peikoff’s, Bettina Stangneth provides her own book-length take on the nest of issues involving Adolf Eichmann, philosophy, and the motivating power of the latter in the life of the former.

Stangneth comes to these disputes with an appropriate background. She wrote her dissertation on Kant’s idea of radical evil, or, in more familiar terms, original sin. This requires some explanation, because Kant’s discussion of the idea grows out of some of the less-visited areas of Kant’s philosophy. Kant believed that one evil tendency in human nature is the basis for all our more specific moral failings. This tendency, our “radical evil” as a species, is our conceit, our self-centeredness, and its propensity to overwhelm our understanding of our duty.

This radical evil is, in Kant’s view, universal but non-necessary. That is, it can be overcome. Obedience to our duty, which Kant understands as his famous categorical imperative, is difficult but not impossible. At any rate, the fact that Stangneth has studied Kantianism in some depth makes of her a natural candidate for untangling these issues.

In *Eichmann Before Jerusalem*, she contends that Eichmann was neither a Kantian nor banal. Both Kantianism and banality are masks that he wore when convenient. Sometimes he sought to persuade people (especially those who might decide on his life or death) that he accepted universal ideals as expressed by a prominent Enlightenment philosopher. Other times, he adopted another guise, again with the same goal of saving his own skin: the guise of the mindless functionary who was just a “little cog in the machine” of the Reich. Stangneth

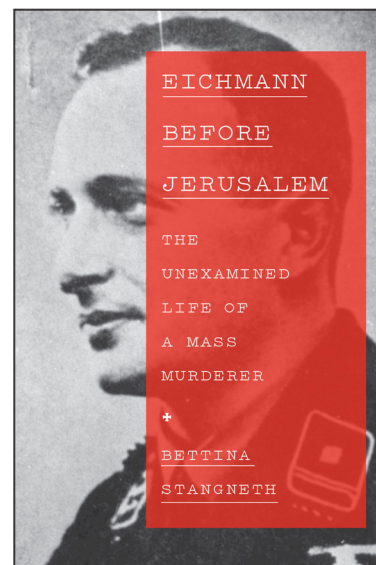
believes they were both lies.

So what is the truth? Among Stangneth’s key contentions are these:

1. Eichmann *was* capable of abstract thought, and he did engage in it. So engaged, he built himself a distinctive form of National Socialism, one somewhat at odds with the “official” version of that ideology propounded by Alfred Rosenberg;
2. As part of his own variant-Nazi worldview, Eichmann considered and rejected Kant—for he saw Kant’s philosophy as “international” and inadequately German;
3. He wasn’t a “little cog” during the war, but a key part of the machinery of death, pushing for bloodier results than were some of the other cogs;
4. The motivating power behind his actions may be found in the less cerebral parts of his personality;
5. After the war, he became part of a coterie of ex-Reich officials in Argentina who worked hard in surreptitious ways to shape the world’s perception of the then-recent war;
6. In some respects, the efforts of that coterie succeeded.

Non-cerebral motives

The first three of these propositions have already been much discussed in the commentary surrounding Stangneth’s book.



The others have been neglected, and I will focus upon them.

To her credit, Stangneth doesn't stick to an intellectualist sense of motivation. It is not at odds with either of the first two of those propositions that Eichmann, like the rest of us, could be driven by parts of his body a good deal below the skull.

There is considerable evidence that Eichmann, in power as an important official of the Reich, did what important and powerful men often do: He cheated on his wife. In particular, in 1938, he was having affairs with two ladies in Vienna, Maria Mösenbacher and Mitzi Bauer. The staff in his office knew about these affairs, though they may sometimes have confused Maria and Mitzi. Eichmann's womanizing became more frequent toward the end of the war.

"So what?," you might ask. Part of the answer, in Stangneth's view, is the way that Eichmann felt compelled to suppress this side of himself, both in Argentina (among friends, in the social circles of Nazi émigrés there) and in Jerusalem. In Argentina, Eichmann became close to a former SS man, Willem Sassen, who after the war had remade himself as a far-right journalist. Sassen interviewed Eichmann extensively, but the two men were working at cross purposes. Eichmann wanted to take credit for the Holocaust and boast about its rightness and his importance as a historical figure. Sassen wanted him to deny it ever took place. Their long back-and-forth over these contending objectives had a sexual side.

I'm Potent, Dammit!

"Even in all-male gatherings like the Sassen circle" in Argentina, Stangneth tells us, Eichmann "did not approve of ribaldry. Sassen's predilection for very obvious innuendo regularly caused Eichmann to fall silent. Much as he liked to keep pace, and had no difficulty making intolerably cynical remarks about the conditions in concentration camps, he stonewalled Sassen" as to extramarital affairs, and again on the matter of camp bordellos. By "cynical" in this context, Stangneth refers to Eichmann's habit of blaming the victims and sympathizing with the presumed trauma of the murderers.

So, on the one hand, Eichmann engaged in extramarital sex, while, on the other hand, he would not discuss such matters, having a sense of propriety that nevertheless did not keep him from discussing mass murder. Is there a third hand? Yes, and here the subject gets interesting.

On the third hand, when Eichmann did have something to say of a sexual nature, it was in language so incredibly stilted that it quite readily lends itself to medical or psychiatric speculation. In a 15-page paper he wrote in prison in Israel, "My Being and Doings," Eichmann said that "nature was kind enough to bestow upon me, too, that resource with which certain bearers of organic life generally seek to be endowed by the aforementioned nature. I am certainly no sexless common horsetail."

The first response of most people who read those sentences, the first of them in particular, is probably, "huh?" The second response, though, is the realization that Eichmann meant, "I'm heterosexual and potent, dammit!"

It does seem likely that there was a psychosexual component in the appeal Nazism held for such a man, and this component helps put into context any debate over whether the wrong philosophy, or the inability to philosophize, led Eichmann there.

Sassen and his Circle

Stangneth's discussion of the Sassen circle brings us to her contention numbered "5" above. Sassen, though of Dutch extraction, was the center of the coterie of German Nazi émigrés that formed in Argentina after the war under the protection of the sympathetic Perón government. Much of this book is given over to the specifics of that coterie, including the connections of its members with one another and with nationalistic movements in the rest of the world. (Yes, an internationalist alliance of rabid nationalisms does sound oxymoronic, but, in some always-fragile way, it occurred nonetheless.) The publisher Eberhard Fritsch was the moneybag of the group. It was Fritsch who leased a home to Sassen, and who then signed him up as an author.

Hans-Ulrich Rüdél was another critical figure here, in securing the group a degree of official protection. Rüdél, a Luftwaffe flying ace during the war, was connected at the highest level in Argentina, giving the president advice on building up that country's air force.

Stangneth's discussion of this coterie is valuable in itself, as a contribution to the sociology of defeated but undead political movements. It is also valuable for those who are concerned about the origins of some ideas that still circulate. Holocaust denial is a pernicious meme in our own day, and Stangneth documents here the extent to which certain of its characteristic contentions simply parrot debating points or blatant lies cooked up by the Sassen circle in the 1950s.

An Equivocal Relationship

In mid 1954, this group invented something that came to be known as "The Dr. Pinter Report." Stephen F. Pinter was supposedly a Jew from St. Louis, Missouri, who had been an officer in the U.S. Army and a prosecutor at the Dachau trial. He also supposedly became remorseful about his part in a scam, the lie of murder of the six million Jews. But Pinter never existed: He was fictional.

Sixty years later, denialist websites such as *Neues Europa* are still presenting "U.S. Army prosecuting attorney" Stephen Pinter as a witness to the unreliable nature of the evidence on which war-crimes charges were based. This always dates back to what Stangneth calls the "forgers' workshop in Buenos Aires": the Sassen circle.

Eichmann's relationship with the Sassen group was equivocal, though. Sassen wanted to write a book based on his taped conversations with Eichmann, but Eichmann didn't tell him what he wanted to hear. Stangneth quotes a tirade of Eichmann's, delivered in Sassen's home with a tape recorder running, in September or October 1957, in which Eichmann says that the only wrong in the Holocaust was that it was not completed. He, as a Nazi, had made it his goal to exterminate the Jews, which would have fulfilled a "duty to our blood and our people and to the freedom of the peoples, if we had exterminated the most cunning intellect of all the human intellects alive today."

This speech and subsequent efforts by Eichmann to clarify, backtrack, and then backtrack on the backtracking, all ended up persuading Sassen (in Stangneth's summary), that "if he wanted to remain a National Socialist, he had to stop working with Eichmann. It would be possible to falsify history, and dissociate Hitler and 'Germanness' from the murder of the Jews, only by going against Eichmann."

And here we might stop, though there is much else in *Eichmann Before Jerusalem* of great interest. I recommend it to anyone whose curiosity is at all piqued by Stangneth's six contentions set out above. ☉

Christopher C. Faille graduated from Western New England College School of Law in 1982 and became a member of the Connecticut Bar soon thereafter. He is at work on a book that will make the quants of Wall Street intelligible to sociology majors.