

**INTRODUCTORY NOTE TO “MORAL RESPONSIBILITY UNDER
TOTALITARIAN DICTATORSHIPS”, BY HANNAH ARENDT**

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One of the first issues Hannah Arendt focused on after the publication of *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* was that of responsibility, revisiting her concerns from two decades earlier, in the immediate postwar period, when she published “Organized Guilt and Universal Responsibility” (1945). In this text, Arendt insists that the identification of all Germans as Nazis by the Allies represented a victory for the Nazi strategy, especially at the end of the war, of implicating the entire German people by making public atrocities that had previously been known only to restricted groups. The practical effect of this strategy is that “where all are guilty, nobody in the last analysis can be judged”¹.

In the controversy that followed *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, one of the accusations leveled against Arendt was that she had been merciless toward people who made controversial decisions about cooperation with the Nazis in extreme situations. Additionally, she was accused of absolving Eichmann by claiming that he did not appear to have any evil motivation in his actions, and of giving too much credit to his claim that he was not antisemitic and had nothing against the Jews.

Regarding the first case, she stated that “what needs to be discussed is not the people, but the arguments with which they justified themselves, both to themselves and to others. “Concerning these arguments, we have entitled to pass judgment”². Furthermore, she has always maintained that the fact that we are not in the same situation – and that if we were, we might possibly do the same – does not prevent us from judging impartially.

With respect to Eichmann, the challenge was how to hold someone accountable legally and morally without being able to attribute his monstrous deeds to any criminal motivation. Arendt argued at the same time that Eichmann was not fully aware of what he was doing and that he should be punished for what he did. She described him as a new type of criminal, who “commits his crimes under circumstances that make it well-nigh impossible for him to know or to feel that he is doing wrong”³. As Judith Butler rightly noted, “Eichmann himself is a new kind of person or an

¹ Hannah Arendt, “Organized guilt and universal responsibility”, In: _____. *Essays in understanding – 1930-1954: Formation, Exile, and Totalitarianism*, New York, Schocken Books, p. 126.

² Id., “The Eichmann Controversy: A Letter to Gershom Scholem”, In: _____. *The Jewish writings*, New York, Schocken Books, p. 469.

³ Id., *Eichmann in Jerusalem: a report on the banality of evil*, New York, Penguin, 2006, p. 276.

unprecedented sort of criminal, and so the mechanisms and terms of justice have to be rethought and remade in order to address this new situation”⁴.

In the text “*Personal Responsibility Under Dictatorship*” (1964), Arendt insists that we have the right to judge people’s choices, ranging from opportunistic adherence to desperate cooperation, from suicidal confrontation against the totalitarian regime to complete and deliberate refusal to participate. Our capacity to create independent standards of understanding, which enable us to face and combat even that which baffles us, depends on this courage to judge, especially in the face of the failure of our traditional standards of judgment.

The text we have edited here, “Moral responsibility under totalitarian dictatorships”, although undated, dialogues directly with “Personal responsibility under dictatorship” (1964) and the courses “Some questions of moral philosophy” (1965) and “Basic moral propositions” (1966), from the probable period in which it was written. It also reverberates directly in the text “Collective Responsibility” (1968). With the exception of “Basic moral propositions”, all these texts were compiled in the work *Responsibility and Judgment*. In “Moral responsibility under totalitarian dictatorships”, however, Arendt makes a number of conceptual articulations that are unique to this text.

In “Moral responsibility under totalitarian dictatorships”, Arendt emphasizes the importance of distinguishing between moral and political responsibility and also of contrasting obedience with non-participation, understood as decisions made by individuals who chose to behave in one way or another. She insists that in the context of totalitarian domination, active resistance was practically impossible, but it was still possible not to participate in order to avoid complicity, whether through thoughtlessness or opportunism. In this sense, those who obeyed must be held accountable for their commitment, and this responsibility cannot be delegated to the superiors who commanded them.

Those who said no, who interested Arendt as much as those who said yes because they didn’t have an answer to the question “*why not?*”, were the ones who managed to keep their consciences intact even amidst the collapse of all standards. The consciences of those accustomed to unthinkingly adhering to standards, through “the habit of having standards to hold onto something”, were precisely the most susceptible to being adjusted by the new order. This is why Arendt emphasizes in this text that people who doubt and are skeptical are more reliable, especially in situations of political emergency. She insists that those who said no were certainly those who live together with themselves through thought and valued that company above all else. In this attitude, which may be politically innocuous or even irresponsible in republics or democracies, lies the hope that totalitarian leaders

⁴ Judith Butler, “Hannah Arendt’s death sentences”, *Comparative Literature Studies*, Vol. 48, No. 3, Special Issue Trials of Trauma (2011), p. 288.

will be weakened by individuals who do not go along with what is in force simply because it has prevailed.

Non-participation, refusal to go along, and disobedience are not only important for the individual who does so in order to preserve his or her moral integrity but, in emergencies such as “totalitarian tyrannies”, they represent the political form of possible resistance.