

Hans Blumenberg

The Rigorism of Truth - »Moses the Egyptian« and other Texts on Freud and Arendt

Edited, with commentary and an afterword by Ahlrich Meyer

2015

pp 134

© Suhrkamp Verlag Berlin

The following translation sample consists of the central text by Hans Blumenberg entitled “Moses the Egyptian” and added commentary by the translator Joe Paul Kroll. The commentary has only an informative function regarding the submission to foreign publishers. It is not part of the German publication by Suhrkamp Verlag from 2015 and should not appear in any translated edition. The original German publication includes an authorized commentary by professor Ahlrich Meyer and his commentary shall be included in all translations.

Hans Blumenberg
Moses the Egyptian

Hans Blumenberg's writings on the Holocaust, National Socialism and the Second World War are scarce. As the son of a Jewish mother, though baptized a Roman Catholic, the young Blumenberg experienced mounting persecution after 1933, first finding himself barred from higher education, then being subjected to forced labour and living out the last months of the war in hiding. The philosopher Dieter Henrich remarked on Blumenberg's reluctance to discuss these experiences, noting that he "had to cope with the wounds of persecution for so-called racial reasons and, at the same time, of the abandonment of his experiment with Christianity and Catholic teachings. In the writings of the 1950s with which he first made an impression, no word on any of this can be found. But in the intensity and originality with which he developed their themes it was nonetheless present."¹

Where Blumenberg did discuss this period in his writings, he tended to do so from a somewhat oblique angle. The question whether Hitler was an appropriate subject for historical comparisons was considered in the light of the historical memory of Napoleon.² Heidegger was taken to task for an episode in which he had visited his former student Karl Löwith in his Roman exile, without even having the tact to remove the Nazi Party badge from his lapel.³ These texts were written in the latter half of the 1980s, by which time Blumenberg had retired from teaching at the University of Münster. This is also the period during which the text presented here seems to have been written, though it was never published in Blumenberg's lifetime. It presents a

¹ Quoted in Ahlrich Meyer, "Hans Blumenberg oder: Die Kunst, sich herauszuhalten", in Thomas Jung and Stefan Müller-Doohm (eds.), *Fliegende Fische. Eine Soziologie des Intellektuellen in 20 Porträts* (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 2009), pp. 337-362, p. 349. Meyer's essay provides a highly illuminating account of Blumenberg's reluctance to discuss his formative years in public.

² Hans Blumenberg, "Vergleichsverbot", in idem., *Begriffe in Geschichten*. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1998, pp. 221-223. (Apparently unpublished in Blumenberg's lifetime.)

³ Hans Blumenberg, "Der Parteibeitrag", in idem., *Die Verführbarkeit des Philosophen* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2000), pp. 75-79. (Originally published in *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*, February 11, 1988.)

striking and altogether original comparison of two of the most controversial books to have been written by and about Jews in the 20th century, Sigmund Freud's *Moses and Monotheism* and Hannah Arendt's *Eichmann in Jerusalem*.⁴

Though it is tempting to relate this text to the short pieces mentioned above on account of its subject matter, and to Blumenberg's major study *Arbeit am Mythos* (*Work on Myth*, 1979) for its forgiving stance on myth, it is worth considering at least one other book as providing close context. In *Höhlenausgänge* (1989), parts of which, at least, must have been written around the same time as the present text, Blumenberg traces Plato's parable of the cave through the ages in a manner comparable to his work on the myth of Prometheus ten years previously. The exit from the cave is treated as a metaphor for enlightenment and its difficulties: though reality can be perceived only as a shadow of its true self, yet the cave offers shelter from the "absolutism of reality". Blumenberg also takes into account the psychoanalytic dimension of leaving the cave as a symbol of birth.

An anthropological insight guiding the book is that the cave is well suited to a "creature [whose] desire for realism is limited",⁵ and that reality is best confronted with the possibility of retreat. Truth, as an epistemological and moral category, is an instance of the absolutism that man seeks, if not to avoid outright, then to keep at a safe distance and approach with caution. "Moses der Ägypter" seems to make a similar point: Freud and Arendt had set the truth (as they saw it) above the legitimate concern of the Jewish people for its own survival and safety. Although he accuses both of failing to appreciate the importance of founding myths to survival, in the diaspora and then in the State of Israel, the motivations and aporias Blumenberg identifies in the work of each are what make this text such a remarkable addition to the corpus of his work.

⁴ The part of the text dealing with *Eichmann in Jerusalem* was published under the title "Eichmann—der 'negative Held' des Staates Israel" in *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*, March 1, 2014. Ahlrich Meyer, who edited and commented upon that excerpt, states that Blumenberg's notebooks show him first to have read *Eichmann in Jerusalem* in its entirety in 1978. The dating of the text to the 1980s is also Meyer's, and is supported by internal clues.

⁵ Hans Blumenberg, *Höhlenausgänge*, Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1989, p. 53.

The following text is translated from a typescript in the Deutsches Literaturarchiv Marbach. Its pages are numbered UNF (*Unerlaubte Fragmente*) 350-360. The title “Moses der Ägypter” is Blumenberg’s own. In translating the text, I have tried to strike a balance between remaining faithful to Blumenberg’s sometimes surprising lexical and syntactic choices and the avoidance of rendering his words in a needlessly awkward idiom. Additions are indicated by square brackets; all emphases are Blumenberg’s own.

I am grateful to Bettina Blumenberg for granting permission to translate and publish this text and to Dorit Krusche (DLA Marbach) for providing a copy of the typescript.

Moses, the Egyptian of pharaonic blood, was invented by Sigmund Freud as an affront⁶ to his people, as he had long before, in succession to the blows delivered by Copernicus and Darwin, affronted humanity with the unconscious. He was one of those people who trust the truth to achieve anything, even freedom, and thus from their love of truth feel entitled to expect everything of themselves and of others. The year 1939 did not, to him, seem the wrongest moment to take from the beaten and humiliated [Jews] the man who, in the beginning, had founded their trust in history. Freud had a low opinion of that history’s documents; to him, they were memories devised to cover up the murderous outcome of a great deed, concealing the murder of Moses in the desert and with it the failure of the most tremendous sublimation: the rising of the people from the mist of their libidinous state in Egypt to the lawfulness and purity of their forty-year education in the desert. To Stefan Zweig, Freud seems to have expressed qualms about depriving the Jews, in their most dreadful hour, when everything was

⁶ Blumenberg writes *Kränkung* and the verb, *kränken*, following Freud’s phrase, which is usually translated as “major blows”. (Sigmund Freud, “Introductory Lectures on Psycho-Analysis” (1916 / 1917), in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*. Translated from the German under the General Editorship of James Strachey; in collaboration with Anna Freud; assisted by Alix Strachey and Alan Tyson. London: Vintage, 1999, vol. XVI, pp. 284-285.)

being taken from them, of their best man.⁷ But what was that against his making, as he wrote to Hanns Sachs, “a worthy exit”?⁸ Ten years previously, he would have recognized in this trait the *vir impavidus* as Horace had exalted him, the stoic in the face of the end of the world, whom he had diagnosed as a case of narcissism.⁹ It was not even about the truth, as Freud himself knew very well. One would refuse to believe this if he had not himself shown so little confidence in his own discovery that

⁷ Following a personal conversation about an early draft of the book, Freud wrote to Zweig that “Moses shall never be made public” (letter of November 5, 1935; in Stefan Zweig, *Briefwechsel mit Hermann Bahr, Sigmund Freud, Rainer Maria Rilke und Arthur Schnitzler*, Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 1987, p. 207). Freud makes these qualms explicit, albeit without direct reference to the contemporary situation, in the opening paragraph of *Moses and Monotheism* (1939): “To deprive a people of the man they take pride in as the greatest of their own is not a thing to be gladly or carelessly undertaken, least of all by someone who is himself one of them.” (Tr. Katherine Jones, *Standard Edition* vol. XXIII, p.7.)

⁸ Letter dated March 12, 1939, quoted in Hanns Sachs, *Freud. Master and Friend*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1944, p. 184.

⁹ “The man of firm and righteous will, / [...] Should Nature’s pillar’d frame give way, / That wreck would strike one fearless head.” (Horace, *Odes* III.3, tr. John Conington.) Freud quotes the line *impavidum ferient ruinae* in a letter to Stefan Zweig dated November 17, 1937 (*Briefwechsel*, pp. 213-214). Blumenberg refers to these lines of Horace’s in his book *Höhlenausgänge* (p. 281), written around the same time as the present text.—“Ten years previously” most likely refers to an episode recounted by Richard F. Sterba (*Reminiscences of a Viennese Psychoanalyst*, Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1982, pp. 113-116). The context is a discussion, in March 1930, among a small circle of colleagues, of Freud’s recently published *Civilization and its Discontents*. Sterba recalls Freud regretting that “the book does mention the only condition for happiness that is really sufficient.” Freud had then quoted the lines “*Si fractus illabatur orbis / impavidum ferient ruinae*” and given a (not entirely accurate) German translation, before continuing: “This possibility of happiness is so very sad. It is the person who relies completely upon himself. A caricature of this type is Falstaff. We can tolerate him as a caricature, but otherwise he is unbearable. This is the absolute narcissist. This unassailability by anything is only given to the absolute narcissist.” Sterba criticizes Freud for taking the lines out of context, failing to recognize Horace’s point that “the brave man obtains his fearlessness and moral fortitude not from narcissism but from the strength of his moral convictions.” A discussion of Freud’s use of the quotation and Sterba’s recollections can be found in Todd Dufresne, *Tales from the Freudian Crypt. The Death Drive in Text and Context*, Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2000, pp. 159, 202 n. 19.

he would fain have subtitled *Moses and Monotheism* a “historical novel”.¹⁰ Perhaps “demi-novel” would have been the more fitting term to convey how little it took to arouse mistrust in the founder of a national history, the heroic liberator, an alien representing the alien God—to use Marcion’s phrase¹¹—, whom he alone claimed to have seen and heard.

Freud had the Egyptian prince Moses despise the people he wrested from slavery. This contempt for “the mob” that could muster no faith in God’s imagelessness Freud first read in the face of Michelangelo’s Moses in Rome.¹² Egypt and the humiliations suffered at the pyramids were merely the consequence of the despicability of the patriarchal stories going all the way back to Joseph. Only a stranger could push all that aside, with a different God and a new law in sight, as though the covenants of that base prehistory, which Moses may not have so much as heard recounted—having only ever dealt with this proletariat through an intermediary—, had never existed. For all that is problematic about his discovery, there is one thing that Freud is quite correct in recognizing: Only a stranger could exercise this measure of violence, this terrible weaning from gods and idols, from the comfortable anticipation of the next day, in order to compel renunciation in favor of the unknown. All of it came and could only come from the desert, from the overcoming of the temptation to keep the gods close at hand and as guarantors of the fleshpots.

But how could Moses do this for [the benefit of] those he despised? Here, Freud appears to have seen too little of what is political about his version of this story’s beginning. It has always been the case that those who sought to win power for themselves and their idea have drawn on the potential of the despised, whom they could not love, but whom they promised themselves and others to love as soon as they [i.e. the despised] became what they not yet were: worthy of power and beneficence.

¹⁰ Sigmund Freud / Arnold Zweig: *Briefwechsel*, Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 1968, p. 102.

¹¹ Adolf von Harnack, *Marcion: The Gospel of the Alien God* (1924), tr. John E. Steely and Lyle D. Bierma, Durham, NC : Labyrinth Press, 1990.

¹² “Sometimes I have crept cautiously out of the half-gloom of the interior as though I myself belonged to the mob upon whom his eye is turned—the mob which can hold fast no conviction, which has neither faith nor patience, and which rejoices when it has regained its illusory idols.” (Freud, *The Moses of Michelangelo* (1914), tr. James Strachey, *Standard Edition* vol. XIII, p. 213.)

That is why an ideology of liberation must contain both: contempt for the present as a result of the past *and* affection for the future as the result of the present. It is because Moses, the stranger, makes use of his adopted people only as the organ of his vision of things to come that he can chastise it so ruthlessly towards this end. It must not remain what it is if he should be able not to despise it.

As soon as the liberated became aware of being but the medium of an abstract revolt, they would murder him. They must do so as much they must presently forget having done so, in order not to have to feel shame for the history thus gained. This would entail complicated rituals of guilt relief, and no historian would ever be able to decide whether it was worth the expense.

Nothing is less certain than that the truth wishes to be loved, can be loved, should be loved. Freud's "exposure" of the origins of Moses is also an "exposure" concerning himself and his relationship with the truth. What he did in publishing *Moses and Monotheism*—which he would not have shown anyone in Vienna, so as not to endanger the existence of psychoanalysis—so unhesitatingly in London,¹³ although the self-confidence of his people was at stake, was to offer this people an analysis—not because the truth would set it free, but because Freud the scientist, who had always identified his patients with his own theoretical curiosity, had no qualms about transferring it onto them, obliging them to love and to serve the truth.

In this situation, at the apex of Hitler's power and of the wretchedness of those he persecuted, there was no other motive to justify this publication but the absolutism of truth. Freud did not believe that something like analysis could help the victims. Worse still: He did not even believe in the mechanism of repetition, in which a stranger, one possessed by the fury of blood, would once more renew the sublimating chastisements of the desert and yet, in the wildest autism, only serve the historical interest of the chastised. None of these possibilities of his theory would justify Freud. He thought only of the "worthy exit", which he was preparing for himself.

¹³ The first two sections of *Moses and Monotheism* were published separately, in the journal *Imago*, before Freud's exile. Freud discusses the threat to psychoanalysis and his decision to publish the third section in two introductory notes, one dated shortly before, the other after the *Anschluss* of Austria and Freud's escape to London in 1938.

Nonetheless: The Egyptian Moses, who drove the descendants of Jacob into the desert and whom they put to death, was also an incomparable model of that which was to follow only after Freud's last word. That stranger had believed and desired to submit the people to his metaphysical idea of power; but in the long view of history, he had become the instrument of the people. Even the memories devised to cover up the murder of the cultural hero became the source of a ritualized self-punishment, whose forms and obligations, whose curtailments of life [*Lebensreduktionen*] were to anticipate the singular organization of a will to survive which bestowed [upon the Jews] the ability to endure all future deserts and captivities. The *felix culpa* of Augustine in its worldliest form. The story's method¹⁴ was embedded too deeply in memory for even the strangest object or person ever not to be assimilable to this story. Freud's great and last blow to humanity in the shape of its most afflicted turned out not to cause such offense as he might have expected, of which he might have been ashamed. But it became an unexpected preliminary to something else, an aid to understanding the incredible. This was to become apparent only when, three decades later, another book caused offense of another [degree of] unbearableness: Hannah Arendt's *Eichmann in Jerusalem*. The book, which emerged from a series of reports in *The New Yorker*, first appeared in 1963, in German in 1964. It has the subtitle: "A Report on the Banality of Evil". This phrase creates a continuity with Hannah Arendt's earlier work on the mechanism of the totalitarian state. The dictatorship chose not the great demons and malefactors, but the little family men, as accessories to its evil deeds, as functionaries of a malice of which they would never have been capable in the private and professional spheres of their bourgeois existence. They had nothing of that which distinguished the successful actions they performed in massed anonymity: the dimension of the inconceivable. The many little men brought about the one big thing. Adolf Eichmann was something like the protagonist of such banality. Hannah Arendt's rigorism is very much like that of Sigmund Freud. She believes in the truth—that it is her truth, she can neither change nor prevent. Nobody has access to this relationship with what is truth to him, and nobody can be expected to have it. Hannah Arendt takes fearless analysis to be the therapy which she thinks she owes her

¹⁴ *Das Verfahren der Geschichte*, which can also mean the historical method or process.

comrades in affliction, who have by now become the people of a state, although nothing is more alien to her than the dash of Freudianism which has now become customary. Even [the notion] that “resistance” should indicate the truth only symptomatically, indeed should be the first to set free its salutary property, is something her project seems almost to assume. The outcry of indignation now strikes an *impavida*, the wreckage of the *orbis fractus* comes crashing upon her: another case of the kind that Freud, in 1930, used Horace’s ode to diagnose as [one of] narcissism.¹⁵ Which, after all, had meant even then: There is no love of truth. Maybe because there can be none.

In my turn prepared to court indignation, I am aghast at the deep-rooted similarities between *Moses and Monotheism* and *Eichmann in Jerusalem*. Similarities that can be discerned even in the equivalence of their effects. As Freud took Moses the man from his people, so Hannah Arendt took Adolf Eichmann from the State of Israel.

Some states are founded by their enemies. Nobody else could have managed to circumvent the improbability of their existence. They exist, although or because everything that might otherwise have favored their establishment was too weak, too benign, too ideal, too literary to prevail against a world of opposition. But then they are there, because nobody realistically wanted them except those who had nearly destroyed the conditions of their possibility. There is such a thing as the negative national hero as a state’s founder. He must be killed, like Moses, although he created the conditions of the possibility of this nationhood.

Eichmann did not even do so against his own will. He studied his victims carefully and connected their utopia of nationhood with the *idée fixe* of self-purification. In Zionism, he found what he had sought to create by force. What is astonishing is that it is Zionism that Hannah Arendt could not forgive for this. Why was this so? The organization of an idea corrupts what it strives to make real. It is preordained thus in the concept of the idea ever since Plato devised it. What is more important still is that this pattern is now applied to the self-organization of the persecuted, in which Hannah Arendt sees something like the suffocation of morality, the prevention of resistance and thus once again a collaboration with the persecutors. Without the involvement of

¹⁵ See above, note 5.

the Councils and Elders, without the persecutors making arrangements with the institutional mode of existence, the entirety of extermination for which Eichmann was in the dock would not have functioned.

Does Hannah Arendt really believe this? It is the charge she brings against those who thought that something could be salvaged or who merely pretended to have come to a realistic appraisal of the situation. But it was a reality of the incredible, which nobody can be expected to reckon with. What Hannah Arendt demands is to have thought the incredible, the possibility of resistance to a machine with which the world had for years failed to deal, and which for this undertaking mustered more ingenuity and imagination, accepted any disadvantage on already strained front lines, in order to bring at least this one to completion, if none of the others. The whole thing would not have taken place so discreetly if it had not worked so smoothly? Perhaps, but it would have worked. Hannah Arendt did not know all that could be done [by the Nazis] if only it was accorded the appropriate priority.

Nonetheless, it is true that the self-organization of the persecuted deprived the individual of his chance to wager everything, to cry out loud just once. Every kind of organization reduces the possibility of making ultimate personal decisions, meeting absolute standards to which only the individual can ever be equal. Taking this thought to its consequence means nothing less than that, to the political scientist, that very state, which is something like the continuation of the urge of the persecuted towards self-organization, is suspect. Not because it is this state, but because it is a state, does it fail by the absolutism of those norms under which judgment might have been passed on Eichmann—if he could ever have been brought before this court.

It is no mere coincidence and no *coincidentia oppositorum* that the Nazis, when they were not sure of their home-grown final solution, had favored the idea of this state, had even imitated it in proto-autonomous forms within their occupied territories. Eichmann's entire knowledge of Judaism, as Hannah Arendt stresses, was derived from Theodor Herzl's *Judenstaat*, and he would have taken the ideologue of this state exactly by his word, had not the outbreak of war stood in the way of such large-scale evictions. Extermination was, blasphemous though it may sound, only a variant urged

by circumstance of the idea of relocation to “firm ground under the feet of the Jews”.¹⁶ And then there is a scene which, in retrospect, seems unimaginable, the farce [*das Schelmenstück*] of Eichmann’s invitation to Palestine by Jewish emissaries. These analogies, verging on the inconceivable yet politically almost inevitable, determine the odium with which the political scientist contemplates the full extent of the Eichmann case. To study such failure to comprehend is, viewed another quarter-century later, a singular specimen for a theory of nonconceptuality.¹⁷

On the surface of it, to observe the observer is only the representation of an experiment in eminent acuity. She sees everything juridically, for she does not want to admit a state of exception and, as a citizen of the USA, has no need to do so. A historic process was not reenacted, but at long last carried out: a legitimacy emerging from, and only from, the state of exception. The only death sentence ever passed in this state, in spite of the danger it has faced from within and without. The Federal Republic [of Germany], though arising from sheer nothingness, would have been unable thus to punish even the destroyer of the Reich as whose legal successor it emerged. Then what of Eichmann?

Of course it was the prosecution in the trial, bound by instructions, upon which the critic of the court pours her scorn, finding it incompetent to prove what it had announced it would prove—although, had it succeeded in doing so, it would have placed the prosecution outside the scope of the one special law.¹⁸ The worst thing was

¹⁶ Arendt repeatedly quotes this phrase in connection with Eichmann’s early advocacy of a deportation of the European Jews to Madagascar, e.g. in Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem* (1963), New York: Penguin, 1994, p. 41.

¹⁷ Blumenberg’s move, in the last two sentences, from *des Unbegreiflichen* through *Unbegreifen* to *Unbegrifflichkeit*, is impossible to replicate in English. The “theory of nonconceptuality” refers to the project inaugurated with *Paradigms for a Metaphorology* (1960) and reformulated in the appendix to *Shipwreck With Spectator* (1979). Although only a posthumously edited book bears the title *Theorie der Unbegrifflichkeit*, Blumenberg’s work in the last two decades of his life may be seen as part of this undertaking.

¹⁸ Eichmann was tried under Israel’s *Nazis and Nazi Collaborators (Punishment) Law* of 1950. This law covers crimes against the Jewish people and crimes against humanity, and Eichmann was charged with and found guilty of both. Arendt takes issue with “the inclination of the court to claim competence in the name of universal jurisdiction”, which she takes as an attempt to justify the legality of Eichmann’s abduction (*Eichmann in Jerusalem*, p. 261).

that, even after the execution, the prosecution made public psychiatric reports that qualified Eichmann as a sadistic and murderous, at any rate pathological figure, whose legal responsibility would then have had to be ascertained. But even in the absence of this clinical aspect, Hannah Arendt had long made up her mind that an intelligence of such a low order would never have come up with the final solution himself. Eichmann thus stands for the thesis stated much earlier, in her theory of totalitarianism, whereby the ever-eager functionary came from the background of the petty bourgeois run wild and the manipulable paterfamilias¹⁹ or became involved, as did this particular specimen, because he was “bored to distraction”.²⁰

Finally, the witnesses. They projected onto the accused everything that had been done to them. They thus saw him even where he had not been, but might as well have, while he was elsewhere, doing much the same. Perhaps the witnesses did not believe in the court in the Valley of Josaphat²¹ near Jerusalem, where judgment would be passed not only on what someone had done, but also on what he would have done. The court was right to apply judicial norms in leaving such things aside and not to consider them in their sentencing. From a legal perspective, there is no such thing as a singular case, nor can there be, for jurisdiction depends on subsumption. But there can be no subsumption where the organizer of a genocide is, in a kind of state ceremony, made a scapegoat, in part and even not least for that which he would only potentially have done. One may be fervently opposed to this ritual; but first one must have appreciated what it means to the others, to what insignificance this condemns one’s criticism. Hannah Arendt’s point is that this scapegoat stands for *those* sins which the others committed or might have committed, i.e. the Germans. And this event certainly

¹⁹ Ahlrich Meyer notes that Blumenberg is likely to have found this idea not in Arendt’s *Origins of Totalitarianism*, but in her earlier essay, “Organized Guilt and Universal Responsibility” (1945, in Peter Baehr [ed.], *The Portable Hannah Arendt* 2000, New York: Penguin, 2003, esp. pp. 152-153).

²⁰ Cf. *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, p. 35: “Thus bored to distraction, he [Eichmann] heard that the Security Service of the Reichsführer S.S. [...] had jobs open, and applied immediately.”

²¹ This Biblical locale is nowhere mentioned in *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, but its supposed site is not far from the Jerusalem District Court, where Eichmann was tried. Blumenberg may also be alluding to Joel 3:12: “Let the heathen be wakened, and come up to the valley of Jehoshaphat: for there will I sit to judge all the heathen round about.”

attracts attempts at delegation, hopes for the expunction of guilt, datings of the finality of file closures. With all respect for the rightness of such considerations, one must say that universal moralism fails to touch what is of none but a mythical necessity. It was after all the same state that accepted reparations, which could never possibly be a moral compensation, but an act of reason of state: Every day's delay, as has become clear anyhow, could only devalue politically what was anyhow impossible to evaluate morally.

What the mythical act must concentrate in *one* figure, because it cannot otherwise attain the level of lucidity [*Anschaulichkeit*] that every claim to legitimacy requires, appears diffuse to the political scientist. Contrary to her self-definition,²² her thinking in this matter is neither philosophical nor politological, but sociological: Society may be culpable, but then it no longer allows for principal culprits. That is why *Eichmann in Jerusalem* is above all a book against Eichmann's sole guilt. This [guilt] however is the political core of the process, which can be affected or even destroyed by any question as to who had made the murderous bureaucrats possible and might now be hiding behind the imaginary vastness of the negative hero. But one cannot have both at once: the analysis and the myth.

Hannah Arendt, who preferred to be addressed as a political scientist and was embarrassed when suspected of philosophy, was a moralist. Her book is a document of rigorism, the definition of which is the refusal to acknowledge an ultimate and inexorable dilemma in human action. One can and must at all times be certain of what is to be done and what remains the right thing to do. To moralize the political implies that it too can be fraught with dilemmas only on the surface, in the final instance being capable of the unity of the will.

For this reason, it is necessary to confront the political scientist with her own actions: The very buffoon, to whom she sees Eichmann degraded before all eyes, seems to her underexposed on the stage of this *national* tribunal. She wishes to see his figure from the vantage point of humanity, out of reluctance to leave it to Zionism. Her

²² "I do not belong to the circle of philosophers. My profession, if one can even speak of it at all, is political theory." (Hannah Arendt, "What Remains? The Language Remains": A Conversation with Günter Gaus" (1964), in *The Portable Hannah Arendt*, p. 3.)

*Pathosformel*²³ is magnificent, but misses everything that distinguishes this process: Because Eichmann had appointed himself judge over who was and who was not permitted to inhabit the Earth, nobody could henceforth be expected to share the Earth with the maker of such a claim. He belonged before a tribunal of all human beings. But precisely that would have removed him from his function of entering the national myth as the vanquished necessary enemy, who may have claimed victims but, in doing so, had forced upon their sacrifice the only purpose still possible. Yet Hannah Arendt considered it a greater task still to expose the victims of an atrocity as its accessories, because that would be the kind of moral situation which might recur at any time.

It is the line of thought in which moral rigorism and apolitical sociologism converge: The criminal could only be the way he was because his victims were the way they were. A tribunal of all humanity, a secularized form of the Last Judgment, would have to sentence the victims, too. As a crime against humanity, however, the case of Eichmann would have been “internationalized”, no crime of the most monstrous singularity against the Jewish people and not the warrant, impervious to any realistic objection, for [the foundation of] this state. For that reason, there was to be no internalization of the accused’s guilt towards a personal sense of wrongdoing; and it is no coincidence that Eichmann evidently lacked any such thing. The monster’s conscience is clear. It is put to death, not punished, made to disappear from the face of the Earth. Even the ashes are scattered not over the Holy Land, but over the sea. Here, Hannah Arendt sees the syndrome of “long-forgotten propositions”,²⁴ according to which everything had supposedly taken place, including those of *ius talionis*,²⁵ even outright revenge. When, in 1964, Günter Gaus confronts her with some passages from *Eichmann in Jerusalem* on television, she keeps thinking that what she stands accused of was a lack of piety towards the victims.²⁶ She does not perceive the hiatus between the categories. In failing to recognize the public and political status of the trial as staking a claim to national legitimacy, she sees the victims and their descendants as engaging in an act of

²³ Possibly “the banality of evil”.

²⁴ *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, p. 277.

²⁵ The law of equivalent retaliation, “an eye for an eye”.

²⁶ Cf. “What Remains? The Language Remains”, pp. 15-17.

retribution. Even if this act of state should not have been a particularly fine example of the fulfillment of its intentions, it is all the more important to see what was or must have been the intention. It was precisely not the business of the victims' descendants to avenge them, but the business of a people of a state to have captured and sentenced its historic enemy and negative founder of the state, just as the Germans must have wished²⁷ to have tried the negative founder of their rump states, although they would have had no law under which to do so but that of unique historic right. This statement is not meant to retract [a previous statement] that those who were not only victims, not even only partly responsible victims, would certainly not have managed to do so. But they too would hardly have tolerated seeing the destroyer of their state, more still: the denier of their right to exist,²⁸ as a figure of ridicule rather than as the demon it took a world of others to overcome.

To un-demonize Hitler was something historians could dare only at a delay and only because the Germans had not been capable of bringing him to justice. Eichmann, who was judged in the heart of the state that would not have arisen without him, could stand before this court only as the phenotype of nondescriptness. He became the self-desubstantiating phantom of a figure that was able to "make" history only once he had been captured and killed. This is why it was never to be said that this man had been a buffoon.²⁹ To have captured and executed a pathetic straw man discredits the act of state which was and had to be made of it.

Hannah Arendt could not have written this book any differently from the way she wrote it; every reader will be persuaded of this. That is precisely why she should not

²⁷ *Hätten wünschen müssen* is ambiguous, conveying both descriptive and prescriptive meanings.

²⁸ As many historians have concluded, among them recently Ian Kershaw: "The plight of the German people did not concern him [i.e. Hitler]. They had proved weak in the war, and deserved to go under." (Ian Kershaw, *The End: The Defiance and Destruction of Hitler's Germany, 1944-1945*, New York: Penguin, 2011, p. 397.)

²⁹ Blumenberg gives a reference here: Adelbert Reif (ed.), *Gespräche mit Hannah Arendt*, Munich: Piper, 1976, p. 26. This corresponds to the interview with Günter Gaus cited above ("What Remains? The Language Remains", p. 15): "I was really of the opinion that Eichmann was a buffoon [*ein Hanswurst*]. I'll tell you this: I read the transcript of his police investigation, thirty-six hundred pages, read it, and read it very carefully, and I do not know how many times I laughed—laughed out loud! People took this reaction in a bad way."

have written it. Could then a book of this rank on this singular event not have been written at all? Though an anachronism, it may be thought in the irrealis mood: Sigmund Freud could have written this book. This may sound like a mere witty paradox after all that needed to be said on the ruthlessness of *Moses and Monotheism*. But that was not so much about Freud's vision of the stranger who had come to save and purify a people as about the time of its publication. What Freud, if we can imagine him witnessing this, would have immediately recognized, is the mythical dimension of killing the negative hero of the state. Here it was not the father of the primal horde, who had pursued his sons with his cannibalism and whom they had to kill in order to survive, but the founder of the state, who had become so by means of the greatest massacre in history—and by its [i.e. history's] devious ways. On this occasion, too, Freud would not have written a book apt to please his people. The stranger in Eichmann required no revealing. That was what he was. Freud would, one hardly dares to think it, have projected onto Moses the Egyptian, who was barred from setting foot in the Promised Land, the monstrosity of Adolf Eichmann, whose ashes were more than that very country could bear.

Translated by Joe Paul Kroll