

Merel Boers. (2016) *A Controversy on Moral Judgment*. University of Amsterdam. Doctoral Dissertation

**Reviewed by Jan Albert van Laar**

In 1961, Hannah Arendt attended Eichmann's trial. Her book "Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil," published in 1963, immediately stirred a vehement debate in the United States and Europe. In her dissertation, Merel Boers meticulously scrutinizes this Holocaust controversy, as it raged between 1963 and 1969 among historians and non-historians in newspapers and magazines.

In the introduction, Boers writes that "this type of controversy does not further knowledge, neither among historians not among the general public. (...) It is hard to see what good Holocaust controversies serve" (p. 13). Boers focuses on what exactly constitutes the deeply problematic nature of this discussion. She makes ample use of the pragma-dialectical argumentation theory to reconstruct the argumentation of fifteen reviews of Arendt's book, all written by historians, and to assess to what extent these reviews facilitated or hindered the search for a substantial resolution of the differences of opinion that underlay the controversy.

Boers starts by expounding Arendt's positions, as laid out in her book on Eichmann. Arendt opposes the attorney general's depiction of Eichmann as the satanic mastermind of the Holocaust. Instead, she portrays Eichmann as a new type of criminal, whose crimes are not to be explained by vile personal motives, but by the complete moral collapse of European society in conjunction to Eichmann's thoughtlessness and law-abidingness. Boers distinguishes three themes that Arendt's position triggered in the subsequent controversy. The *perpetrator theme* dealt with the issue whether Eichmann, as Arendt alleged, was a bureaucrat who organized the murder of Jews out of diligence and obedience to Hitler, and not out of hatred and murderous intent. Eichmann was in a sense a normal, law-abiding man, yet living in an abnormal world where morality had been collapsed ("a re-valuation," as Eichmann worded it in his final statement to the court). The *victim theme* dealt with whether, as Arendt alleged, the work of the Nazi's appointed Jewish Councils is to be judged as a form of cooperation, and indicative of the moral collapse of leading Jewish figures. The *bystander theme* dealt with whether, as Arendt alleged, the moral collapse in Germany was well-nigh complete, including all public institutions, and even witnessed by the sparse resistance being imbued with Nazi ideology.

Boers continues with a detailed and well-readable chronology of the controversy, and concludes it with a list of the controversy's problematic characteristics. The most serious problems she identifies are: misrepresentation, personal attack, and the presentation of debatable points of departure as undeniable facts.

In the next chapter, Boers presents her methodology of reconstructing and evaluating argumentative discourse, which is based on the pragma-dialectical approach as developed by Frans van Eemeren, together with Rob Grootendorst and Peter Houtlosser. She proceeds with an account of the various standpoints adopted in the fifteen reviews, and discusses the most relevant parts of the argumentation in support of these standpoints, adding the complete reconstructions of the defenses in an appendix. She uses the reconstructed arguments to show how exactly the disputants clashed, arguing about topics such as whether or not Jewish leaders succumbed to the moral collapse, whether Arendt is trying to rehabilitate Eichmann, whether Eichmann's crimes are specifically German or Nazi, and so forth for many, many other more and less central issues.

The heart of the book is the Chapter where Boers evaluates the argumentation that she distilled from the reviews. She does so by determining to what extent the various parts of the argumentation fit the ideal procedure of resolving differences of opinion on the merits of both sides. Take for example the issue of the diverging starting points. Arendt and her supporters assume that we can and should judge the behavior of the Jewish leaders, whereas her opponents assume we ought to refrain from such moral judgments. These assumptions merit a serious investigation in the debate. Unfortunately though, they remain undiscussed points of departure. This procedural flaw, then, is identified as one of the sources of the problematic nature of the controversy. Further, Boers shows how many of the reviewers misrepresented Arendt's position or attacked her personally, and sometimes in a combined way, as when suggesting that Arendt "blamed the victims and exculpated Eichmann" (p. 329). Again, procedural hindrances to conflict resolution are identified as a source of the controversy's troubles. Boers also pays attention to the attempts by participants to repair such procedural defects, for example when a reviewer points out that Arendt's thesis on the banality of evil contains a well-intentioned warning that the kind of crimes that Eichmann committed can be repeated in the future (p. 338).

Merel Boers provides a convincing historiographical and argumentative account of the Arendt-controversy, steering between the opposing controversy tales that victimize Arendt as the underdog or blame her as a provocateur. What fascinates in her study is the persistent attempt to provide a broad historical overview of the global, macro-level features of this complex controversy that is founded on local, micro-level analyses of textual contributions in the pragma-dialectical tradition. Her book succeeds in showing the relevance of pragma-dialectic

methodology for doing historiographical research by providing a highly interesting, well-written, and plausible account of how Arendt and the fifteen historians struggled in their strategic maneuverings. Yet, one obvious question remains unanswered. How is it possible that a controversy that, as Boers writes herself, has been a marker of change, both in the scholarly as well as in the non-scholarly understanding of the Holocaust, can be qualified as furthering no knowledge and serving no good? Absent the answer, it would be challenging to search within the argumentative discourses for the seeds of this changing and enriched understanding of the Holocaust, amidst the procedural flaws that have been exposed.

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