

## EVIL AND APPEARANCES

EVIL AND APPEARANCES:  
CLARIFYING ARENDTIAN POLITICAL ONTOLOGY

By

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## ABSTRACT

This thesis explores and clarifies Hannah Arendt's conception of evil and its impact on her political theory. While following Arendt's reflections on evil over the course of her career—from *The Origins of Totalitarianism* through *Eichmann in Jerusalem* and *The Life of the Mind*—I make the argument that the common thread in her apparently divergent accounts is a certain understanding of evil's negative ontology. I then demonstrate that Arendt's alternative "ontology of appearances" results in an account of "conscience" that prevents action based on cognitive certainty, and thus, evil. In the third chapter, I suggest that Arendt's political theory, with its opposition to biological "life," is a direct response to totalitarianism's emphasis on animality and its de-emphasis on appearance. I claim furthermore that the difficulties of Arendt's political thought (particularly her vacuous account of freedom and its troubling connection to immortality) are best explained in relation to her account of evil. On this point I suggest critically that her notion of political freedom is paralyzing or preventative in a way that resonates with her account of conscience. Finally, I propose that in seeking to articulate the meaning of immortalizing action, Arendt might have instead elucidated the difference between a totalitarian perversion of human desire, where desires become cognitive prescriptions, and a Platonic notion of properly erotic desire, where action manifests a desiring orientation to an independent object, but in a decisively non-totalitarian fashion.

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## Introduction

This thesis sets out to explore whether and how Hannah Arendt's conception of evil is informative about her political thought. The immediate problem that arises for such an investigation is the apparently equivocal nature of Arendt's understanding of evil. In *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, Arendt speaks of a "radical evil"<sup>1</sup> unknown prior to the twentieth-century phenomena of totalitarianism, and by the time she writes *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, evil has become "banal."<sup>2</sup> Arendt's 1963 exchange of letters with Gershom Scholem<sup>3</sup> has—unfortunately and unnecessarily, I believe—done much to justify readings of her work that make this "equivocation" on evil a centrally important point. Scholem wrote to Arendt after reading *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil*, and his main concern with the book centered on Arendt's "flippancy" about the misdeeds of the *Judenrate* during the Holocaust. Scholem did not understand how Arendt could so easily extend criticism to Jews in a report on the trial of a Nazi war criminal, and furthermore why she could not be more clearly condemning of the man on trial. This frustration lies at the root of his concluding remarks:

I remain unconvinced by your thesis concerning the "banality of evil"—a thesis which, if your sub-title is to be believed, underlies your entire argument...it does not impress me, certainly, as the product of profound analysis—an analysis such as you gave us so convincingly, in the service of quite a different, indeed *contradictory* thesis, in your book on totalitarianism...Of that "radical evil," to which your then analysis bore such eloquent and erudite witness, nothing remains but this slogan. (*JP* 245; emphasis added)

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<sup>1</sup> Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (New York: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1973 [1951]), ix. Hereafter referred to in text as "OT."

<sup>2</sup> Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (New York: The Viking Press, 1964), 252. Hereafter referred to in text as "EJ."

<sup>3</sup> See "'Eichmann in Jerusalem': Exchange of Letters Between Gershom Scholem and Hannah Arendt (January 1964)," in Hannah Arendt, *The Jew as Pariah: Jewish Identity and Politics in the Modern Age*, edited and with an introduction by Ron H. Feldman (New York: Grove Press, Inc.), pp. 240-251. Hereafter referred to in text as "JP."

I believe Scholem's problem with the "banality thesis" is connected to his understandable discomfort over Arendt's apparent ambivalence about who was guilty of the Holocaust. It is one thing to say that some Jews were complicit in the Nazis' Final Solution to the Jewish problem, but it is quite another if one cannot still speak of the radical or demonic motives of the actual oppressors, and thus distinguish Nazi from Jew, even from the Jews of the *Judenrate*. In her response, Arendt does not expand on what she might have meant by "radical" in the first place, though she clearly understands Scholem's uneasiness and does not intend to console him at that level:

You are quite right: I changed my mind and do no longer speak of "radical evil" ... It is indeed my opinion now that evil is never "radical," that it is only extreme, and that it possesses *neither depth nor any demonic dimension*. It can overgrow and lay waste the whole world precisely because it spreads like a fungus on the surface. It is 'thought-defying,' as I said, because thought tries to reach some depth, to go to the roots, and the moment it concerns itself with evil, it is frustrated because there is nothing. (*JP* 250-1; emphasis added)

Such a definitive "change of mind" seems at first like a nice and tidy explanation for Arendt's confusing terminological shift. It is important to note, however, that as early as the first edition of *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1950), Arendt called evil "radical" and "absolute" precisely because it could not be "deduced from humanly comprehensible motives" (*OT* ix), which sounds at least compatible with her explanation of "thought-defying" above—i.e., with evil there is nothing for thought to "deduce." In that earlier book she furthermore suggests that the horror of totalitarian concentration camps "can never be fully embraced by the imagination for the very reason that it stands outside of life and death" (*OT* 444). This at least implies that the "radical" evil of totalitarian concentration camps cannot be *thought*, that in terms of life and death, or the realm from

which thinking and imagination derive their sense, it is “nothing.” In the case of her letter to Scholem, I believe Arendt sought through her disavowal of “radical” to prevent a possible misreading of her claim that evil “stands outside of life and death” as a suggestion that evil has a kind of mythical or legitimately supernatural significance, but I do not think this is what she actually meant in the first place. At the very least, based only upon this cursory investigation we can see that Arendt’s two positions on evil are not as obviously “contradictory” as Scholem would have it.

Richard Bernstein’s recent work on this subject is helpful in coming to a more nuanced understanding of the “shift” in Arendt’s account of evil.<sup>4</sup> I think Bernstein is correct to point out that the significance of Arendt’s “change of mind” really centers on whether Arendt ever believed that evil had what she refers to above as a “demonic dimension.” Bernstein uses careful analyses of many of Arendt’s early and then supposedly “revisionist” reflections on radical evil—including the abovementioned exchange with Scholem—to show that, concerning totalitarianism, Arendt never held anything like the “idea that monsters and demons had engineered the murder of millions.”<sup>5</sup> As a particularly significant piece of evidence, Bernstein astutely points out a 1946 exchange of correspondence between Arendt and Karl Jaspers in which Arendt suggests the following about the Nazis:

One thing is certain: We have to combat all impulses to mythologize the horrible, and to the extent that I can’t avoid such formulations, I haven’t understood what actually went on. Perhaps what is behind it all is only that individual human beings did not kill other

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<sup>4</sup> Richard J. Bernstein, “From Radical Evil to the Banality of Evil: From Superfluosity to Thoughtlessness,” in *Hannah Arendt and The Jewish Question* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1996), pp. 137-153. See also Bernstein, *Radical Evil: A Philosophical Interrogation* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2002).

<sup>5</sup> Bernstein, “From Radical Evil to the Banality of Evil,” 142.

individual human beings for human reasons, but that an organized attempt was made to eradicate the concept of the human being.<sup>6</sup>

Bernstein believes this early comment explains both why Arendt conceives of evil as “radical,” and why her use of this label is so unexpected: evil is radical precisely “because it has nothing to do with humanly understandable ‘evil motives.’”<sup>7</sup> This is opposed to traditional notions of radical evil, according to which even demonic figures have been humanly understandable, as bearers of some hideous will-to-power that we nevertheless recognize, or as driven by inverted human motives but in this sense still *driven* in a comprehensible manner. For Arendt, radical evil has nothing to do with specifically human motives or even with the structure of human motivation. Bernstein suggests that for her it is rather the attempt “to transform human nature so that what is essential to live a *human* life—plurality, spontaneity, natality, and individuality—is destroyed.”<sup>8</sup> It is in this sense that evil is “thought-defying” for Arendt even and especially in terms of its radical nature.

Of course, there is a shift in Arendt’s focus between *The Origins of Totalitarianism* and *Eichmann in Jerusalem*. In Bernstein’s words,

It is as if Arendt had initially felt the need to understand what was unprecedented in the evil that had erupted with the advent of twentieth-century totalitarianism... But after the Eichmann trial she became preoccupied with a new and different question: how to account for the ‘monstrous deeds’ committed by persons who in other circumstances seemed so ‘normal’ and ‘ordinary.’<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Hannah Arendt, *Hannah Arendt/Karl Jaspers: Correspondence 1926*, edited by Lotte Kohler and Hans Saner, translated from the German by Robert and Rita Kimber (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1992), 69. See Bernstein, 148-9.

<sup>7</sup> Bernstein, 145.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 144.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 152.

According to Bernstein, Arendt does not contradict herself in attempting to account for these deeds and motivations, but she does move from a concern with radical evil and its attempt to make humans “superfluous” by destroying altogether what is properly human, to the banality of evil from the perspective of individual psychology, where evil is manifest in mere “thoughtlessness.” “Thoughtlessness” is Arendt’s answer to Bernstein’s “questions regarding the intentions and motivations of the individuals responsible for this radical evil,”<sup>10</sup> and given her claim that evil is radical because it is heterogeneous to comprehensible motivations, we cannot expect a much more robust answer. In the end, however, Bernstein is altogether unsatisfied with “thoughtlessness” as an expansion of Arendt’s earlier reflections on evil. His final complaint against Arendt is that she “never *justifies* the crucial claim that thinking has this liberating effect on the faculty of judging,”<sup>11</sup> which is to say that she does not succeed in proving that thinking has a disjunctive relationship to evil. Thus, while Bernstein aptly demonstrates that Arendt’s understanding of radical evil is unique and that it is compatible with a notion of “banal” evil, he cannot find a way to understand the relation of these two concepts.

This brief engagement with Bernstein helps to raise the two problems that the first two chapters of this thesis will address, namely, the problem of how best to understand the connection of Arendt’s two distinct approaches to evil, and the problem of reaching a satisfactory account of the role of thinking in preventing evil. I shall demonstrate that the most helpful resolution to the problem of how Arendt’s accounts of evil actually relate to each other is achieved by focusing on their ontological premises. The first chapter of this

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<sup>10</sup> Bernstein, *Radical Evil: A Philosophical Interrogation*, 216.

thesis will try to bring these premises to light, by showing that Arendt does not necessarily move from an exclusive focus on “superfluosity” to one on “thoughtlessness,” but rather that in both *The Origins of Totalitarianism* and *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, Arendt emphasizes evil’s “contempt for reality” (OT 458). It is true that this focus on “reality” remains in certain ways undeveloped in both books, but nevertheless it is too seldom recognized, which leads scholars to ignore Arendt’s more systematic ontology in *The Life of the Mind*<sup>12</sup> and its implications for her account of the thinking activity and its relation to evil. The second chapter of this thesis will consider this late work’s assertion that “Being and *Appearing* coincide” (LMI 19; emphasis added), in light of Arendt’s earlier claims about the centrality of a “contempt for reality” in the meaning of evil. This analysis will possibly serve to “justify” thinking’s disjunctive relationship to evil in a way that Bernstein misses. In the third and final chapter I shall flesh out the implications of Arendt’s late systematization of her ontology for her political thought, with the intent of shedding new light on her difficult concept of political action, as well as her notion of immortality.

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<sup>11</sup> Bernstein, “Evil, Thinking, and Judging,” in *Hannah Arendt and the Jewish Question*, 177.

<sup>12</sup> Hannah Arendt, *The Life of the Mind* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1977). Hereafter referred to in text as “LMI” or “LM2,” depending on which volume is cited.

## Chapter 1: Evil and Reality

### I. *Totalitarianism: Total Loyalty and the Masses*

In the Preface to the first edition of *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, Hannah Arendt suggests that without encountering the various twentieth-century phenomena of totalitarianism, “we might never have known the truly radical nature of Evil” (OT ix). Specifically, Arendt believes that Nazi Germany and Soviet Russia both manifested an unprecedented and radical evil, despite their myriad differences in ideology and in background development. While Arendt gives “historical” accounts of these developments to show the similarity of their ends (which she does compellingly), the argument could be made that in both cases she is really only articulating totalitarianism as a unique (anti-)political concept, in an attempt to express the *meaning* of certain events, but at some remove from the historian’s usual rigor and specificity. Arendt’s work is most significant for these meaning-claims anyway, and so I will exegete her historical accounts largely uncritically, with the intention of unpacking their broader conceptual implications. In the first half of this chapter I will seek to clarify the conceptual link between evil and totalitarianism for Arendt. To some extent this will be an endeavor simply to distinguish totalitarianism from other political forms, since Arendt claims that totalitarianism *as such* reveals the nature of evil with a new and unique clarity. I think it is helpful to introduce and summarize Arendt’s theoretical claim in this regard by saying that totalitarianism is distinct from other political forms because of the way it conceives of its authority as immediate in the masses, rather than exercised upon them (OT 325). What does this mean?

In 1966 Arendt added a chapter to *Totalitarianism* called “Ideology and Terror,” containing “certain insights of a strictly theoretical nature...which [she] did not possess when [she] finished the original manuscript” (OT xxiv). This almost suggests that the original edition of the text was a non-theoretical, factual report that required Arendt’s later interpretation. However, while “Ideology and Terror” does add some abstract philosophic systematization to her earlier reflections, it clarifies and expands on nascent theorizations more often than it gives wholly new formulations, and presently it can crystallize what Arendt means about the peculiarity of totalitarian authority. Arendt expands on her original idea that totalitarianism conceives of its authority as immediate in the masses by saying that in fact it “pretends to have found a way to establish the rule of justice on earth” (OT 462). But since all societies strive for justice in some sense, we must ask what is unique about *this* “rule of justice,” and how any orientation to *justice* can be at the root of a new and profound revelation of evil.

For Arendt totalitarianism’s quest for justice goes beyond the aspirations of positive law, and so beyond what seem to be the commonplace concerns of all societies with justice. Positive law traditionally seeks to mediate justice to the political realm, or “to translate and realize the immutable *ius naturale* or the eternal commandments of God into standards of right and wrong” that make sense politically (OT 464). Totalitarianism views this mediate status of the law’s authority as a problem, and so its quest for justice prescribes not simply new legislation, but an entirely unmediated understanding of the relation of justice to the world, and therefore of authority in general: “In the body politic of totalitarian government, this place of positive laws is taken by total terror, which is

designed to translate into reality the law of movement of history or nature” (OT 464). As Dana R. Villa puts it in his recent book on Arendt’s political theory, totalitarian rule seeks “to eliminate the gap between the ‘external’ ground of authority and the organicity of the community,”<sup>13</sup> which is to say that it seeks to govern in such a way that each individual conforms immediately to the *ius naturale* without the possibility of any opposition, and so without the need for a mediation of external authority. It is in this sense that Arendt says totalitarian government “claims to transform the human species into an active unfailing carrier of a law to which human beings otherwise would only passively and reluctantly be subjected” (OT 462). Speaking in general terms, ideal subjects of totalitarian regimes will therefore possess no capacities that go beyond the capacity to *be* the *ius naturale*.

The uniqueness of the totalitarian concept of authority certainly tends to support Bernstein’s argument that Arendt’s early reflections on evil mostly have to do with the “superfluity” of human beings in totalitarian situations, the trivialization of their particularly human capacities. And indeed, Arendt clearly says in her original text that “radical evil has emerged in connection with a system in which all men have become equally superfluous” (OT 459). However, while the superfluity of human beings may be central in the totalitarian system, one needs to take a step back in order to see the evil root of totalitarianism itself. The question that must be asked is, what makes totalitarianism make human beings superfluous?<sup>14</sup> I hope to demonstrate below that Arendt cannot

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<sup>13</sup> Dana R. Villa, *Arendt and Heidegger: The Fate of the Political* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996), 255.

<sup>14</sup> This question applies equally to Jerome Kohn’s suggestion that totalitarian evil for Arendt is most aptly defined as the destruction of plurality. See Jerome Kohn, “Evil and Plurality: Hannah Arendt’s way to *The*

account for the achievement of total loyalty and total domination, key elements in any totalitarian system of superfluity, without making totalitarianism's "direct confrontation with reality" its primary feature (OT 392). This is why even before she wrote "Ideology and Terror," Arendt emphasized the particularly problematic nature for totalitarianism of the human capacity for experience. She writes that in truly totalitarian situations, "identification with the movement and total conformism seem to have destroyed the very capacity for experience, even if it be as extreme as torture or the fear of death" (OT 308). In fact, totalitarianism as such requires what Arendt calls "total loyalty," by which she implies the destruction of the capacity for experience. In other words, *total loyalty as a unique prerequisite for successful totalitarian rule, as a precondition of superfluous human beings, requires and prescribes a complete disregard for reality.*

That total loyalty cannot tolerate the human capacity for experience means that the loyal totalitarian subject is not capable of true subjectively intelligible assent. What kind of person is capable of such "loyalty"? The answer to this question lies in Arendt's description of "the modern masses" as a new condition of humanity, and as totalitarianism's unique foundation. Arendt claims that the masses alone are capable of total loyalty, and that therefore, "the totalitarian regimes, so long as they are in power, and the totalitarian leaders, so long as they are alive, 'command and rest upon mass support' up to the end" (OT 306). For reasons that begin to shed light on their nature, the masses are also in a certain sense the downfall of totalitarianism. This is because of what Arendt calls their "fickleness," which ensures that the primary characteristic of

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*Life of the Mind*, 1," in *Hannah Arendt: Twenty Years Later*, eds. Larry May & Jerome Kohn (Cambridge,

totalitarian movements is their impermanence, their inability to attain political immortality because of the ease with which they are forgotten (*OT* 305ff). The fact that the masses are fickle in this way suggests the strangeness of their loyalty. In resting solely upon mass support, totalitarian regimes rest upon the potential of human beings to become subjectively empty vessels of government ideology. What is unique about this?

Arendt says that “the attraction of evil and crime for the mob mentality is nothing new,” (*OT* 307), which suggests that large numbers of unified subjects cannot alone constitute the uniqueness of totalitarianism or the masses. What is peculiar to a totalitarian movement (and so also to the masses) in this respect is “the true selflessness of its adherents” (*OT* 307), rather than any basic collective penchant for violence or crime. What is the difference? For Arendt, the “selflessness” peculiar to the masses and so also to subjects of totalitarianism signifies individuals’ inability to consider their actions—or even the regime’s actions taken against them—from the standpoint of their own subjective interests. It is as if they have no selves, for they demonstrate a total lack of ability to experience the world with reference to the particularities of their perspectives. It is in this sense that they have lost their capacity for experience. Arendt suggests that we can see examples of this especially in “the Russian brand of totalitarianism,” where a subject of the regime “may even be willing to help in his own prosecution and frame his own death sentence if only his status as a member of the movement is not touched” (*OT* 307). Whereas the mob mentality has historically produced a kind of conformism that makes large groups attractive to crime and evil,

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Mass.: MIT Press, 1996), 158.

Arendt believes that outside of totalitarian—i.e., *radically* evil—situations, this conformism can be explained in terms that at least possibly correspond to the genuine interests of individual members of the group, and that here selflessness is only achieved “for *the moment* of collective action” (*OT* 314; emphasis added). The goals (if not the actions) of the criminal mob, she thinks, are still rooted in its members’ capacities for experience. Totalitarianism sees a greater potential and flexibility in the mass individual, to whom certain interests can be prescribed *without the possibility* of subjectively intelligible resistance. That is, totalitarianism sees in the mass individual the potential for a loyalty that is more “total” than traditionally “loyal.” Drawing on this perception, “totalitarian movements aim at and succeed in organizing masses—not classes, like the old interest parties of the Continental nation-states; not citizens with opinions about, and interests in, the handling of public affairs, like the parties of Anglo-Saxon countries” (*OT* 308). But simply saying that masses are conglomerations of uniquely selfless individuals does not really help us to understand them. How is lasting selflessness ever attained? In the case of continental Europe, which pertains to the rise of Nazism in Germany, Arendt gives a historical response, which regardless of its accuracy is helpful in understanding what she means by selflessness.

Arendt suggests that a social motif of individual (capitalist) competition coupled with a functioning class system meant that nineteenth-century Europeans faced a difficult task of self-construction; they adopted the interests of the classes to which they belonged, but only passively, as a way of framing their “individual” struggles. She explains that on the one hand membership in a class worked against the social motif of competitiveness to

prevent individual subjectivities from becoming truly *personal*, and on the other hand competitiveness worked against the class system by preventing individuals' full subjective engagement in matters of *common* life. The collapse of the class system with the social destruction of the First World War thus tended to actualize a kind of hidden atomism, a precondition for the existence of masses, which are potential "in every country" (OT 311). Margaret Canovan insightfully describes the masses as "conformists who no longer had a system to conform to, people who would have been unthinking members of the class into which they were born, if it had still existed."<sup>15</sup> The unthinking class conformist (unthinking because truly concerned only with herself, but conformist so as to avoid the confusion of utter self-isolation) need only lose her class membership to be capable of the pure unthinking conformism of total loyalty.

Politically speaking, in continental Europe the fall of the class system—resulting from confusing displacements of entire populations during and after the First World War—meant the fall of the party system, since parties represented class interests. And the destruction of classes really meant the elimination of *interests* as such, common and personal, since the apathetic individual class member had still lived his life-struggle in terms of the interests of his class, even if he defined himself against his fellows. Ultimately this meant the invalidation of the role of the dominant class's interests as a focal point for the general resentment or negativity of the majority:

The fall of protecting class walls transformed the slumbering majorities behind all parties into one great unorganized, structureless mass of furious individuals who had nothing in common except their vague apprehension that the hopes of party members were doomed, that, consequently, the most respected, articulate and representative members of the

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<sup>15</sup> Margaret Canovan, *Hannah Arendt: A Reinterpretation of Her Political Thought* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 53.

community were fools and that all the powers that be were not so much evil as they were equally stupid and fraudulent. (OT 315)

The absence of a focal point for the interests of the majority brought about what Arendt calls a “new and terrifying negative solidarity” and a “self-centered bitterness” that could not be truly unifying “because it was based on no common interest” (OT 315). Arendt would later say that the precondition of this new solidarity was “loneliness,” which signifies the mass individual’s inability to relate to anyone around him, or even properly to himself. In these reflections Arendt calls loneliness “the common ground for terror, the essence of totalitarian government, and for ideology or logicity, the preparation of its executioners and victims” (OT 475). Jerome Kohn helpfully explains that “for Arendt loneliness is a condition of the ‘desert,’ and the human desert is where totalitarianism is likely to occur by appearing as an answer to the predicaments of those who live there,”<sup>16</sup> by which he means the predicaments of those who live outside an enduring world that is authentically *common*. The individualism of the nineteenth century guaranteed the atomization of European citizenry, preventing any truly personal adoption of anything like a “common” interest, and therefore what remained after the collapse of the class system were not the interests themselves, but the empty negativity that originally attended their appropriation. Totalitarian leaders were the first to make use of this disinterested yet negative solidarity of the masses, and totalitarianism was the first form of government to achieve its control and maintenance, proving in original fashion “that an organization could succeed in extinguishing individual identity permanently and not just for the moment of collective action” (OT 314).

The radically disinterested and yet significantly negative spirit of the modern masses ensured the efficacy of totalitarianism's unique form of political persuasion. Arendt claims that the masses "thought in continents and felt in centuries" because they had no attachment to the material interests right in front of them (*OT* 316). Their conditioning in individualism had the effect of disconfirming the reality of their true subjective interests, because they could not share them, and the stabilizing force of passively-adopted class interests had been destroyed. The mass individual was therefore more likely to respond to grand abstractions that explained her fundamental confusions than she was to understand reasonable appeals to her genuine interests. This meant that unlike other parties, which had always argued with each other reasonably, but only for the sake of the few intelligibly interested citizens, the Nazis could speak successfully to the majority of disinterested citizens without needing to justify their claims based on the tangible realities of each citizen's perspective. The Nazis thus used racism rather than nationalism as a rhetorical force of amalgamation in Germany, both because their goal of world-comprehensive authority extended beyond national borders, and because the vision of the masses was sufficiently abstract to demand such comprehensiveness. Racism goes straight to the physical nature of all human beings, offering the kind of "explanation" that fits the vision of the masses, even if it does not correspond to a legitimate vision of reality. As Margaret Canovan summarizes,

Unlike ordinary political demagoguery, [totalitarian propaganda] did not appeal to its audience's interests and promise them benefits. What it offered instead was a reassuring claim to infallibility, prophecy based on a supposed insight into the inevitable forces of history.... Bereft of social status and communal relations by unexpected catastrophes, [the

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<sup>16</sup> Jerome Kohn, "Evil and Plurality," 160.

masses] had lost their ability to distinguish reality from unreality and had become hungry for any doctrine, however preposterous, that would reveal some kind of consistent pattern within the bewildering events of their time.<sup>17</sup>

This is why Arendt says that totalitarian movements “consistently preferred methods which ended in death rather than persuasion, which spelled terror rather than conviction” (OT 312), and why total loyalty does not really correspond to conviction or subjective assent. For example, on Arendt’s account Nazi doctrine was persuasive to the masses based mostly upon its claimed infallibility, and this infallibility in itself implied the “impossibility” of ideological deviation, an impossibility which would be proven literally in the death camps—terror is always the other side of totalitarianism’s brand of ideological consistency. An individual sufficiently prepared to embrace such a claim to infallibility is almost automatically prevented from dissension, and so can become totally loyal without much manipulation. Sufficient preparation implies the mass condition and specifically a loss of the “capacity for experience.” But what does this say about totalitarianism’s particular *evil*? On Arendt’s account, the Nazis stumbled onto an entire population of mass individuals who were already prepared to embrace what amounted to world-comprehensive ideological terror. This fortuity somewhat obscures the evil of Nazism per se. In order to suggest that Stalin’s totalitarianism was the same political phenomenon, Arendt must undertake a different explanation, but one that is perhaps more informative about totalitarianism’s connection to evil.

Totalitarian *rule* in Nazi Germany—i.e., the use of terror to secure each mass individual’s isolation from his experience and so from reality—was preceded by a

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<sup>17</sup> Canovan, *Hannah Arendt*, 55.

totalitarian *movement*—i.e., an enterprise of “persuasion”—that was itself preceded by the existence of generally selfless masses of human beings. In contrast, the atomization of Soviet Russian society, constituted by a population that had not been exposed to the destructive force of capitalist competition, was almost entirely a creative achievement. Where a totalitarian movement is not possible as a means of securing power because of the absence of masses as such, “the movement has to be organized afterward and the conditions for its growth have artificially to be created in order to make total loyalty—the psychological basis for total domination—at all possible” (*OT* 323). The creation of the conditions for total loyalty means the forcible destruction of human beings’ capacities for experience, rather than the simple utilization of prepared masses. Such an intentional enterprise can tell us more about what is at stake with the capacity for experience. In Soviet society, this capacity was destroyed “by the skillful use of repeated purges” (*OT* 323). Where the capacity for experience is targeted and social atomism is not a historical reality, relationships are totalitarianism’s primary enemy because they validate individuals’ particular experiences dialogically, and thereby form in those individuals subjectivities based on the reality of their experiences. Relationships therefore destabilize total loyalty by suggesting a plurality of valid understandings of the world and appropriately encouraging people to trust what they see from their own perspectives, rather than relying on the univocal vision of government ideology. As such, the direct goal of Stalin’s purges was to destroy social relationships, even if in a more abstract sense it was to destroy the human capacity for experience:

The purges are conducted in such a way as to threaten with the same fate the defendant and all his ordinary relations....The consequence of the simple and ingenious device of

“guilt by association” is that as soon as a man is accused, his former friends are transformed immediately into his bitterest enemies...they volunteer information and rush in with denunciations to corroborate the nonexistent evidence against him; this obviously is the only way to prove their own trustworthiness. (OT 323)

In this way, the capacity for experience is given a position of the least importance possible in the life of individual subjects of the regime. What individuals have actually seen or heard about their accused neighbor is excluded from what they are “allowed” to know. Instead, they are forced simply to testify to their neighbor’s guilt, to give testimony based not upon their experience, but upon an abstract conception of guilt that derives from their cognitive recognition of government ideology. These purges both atomize the population by dissociating individuals from each other, and orchestrate a loyalty in which intelligible subjectivity is irrelevant. Arendt’s construal of this artificial creation of mass humanity shows all the more clearly her presupposition that totalitarianism’s battle with the human capacity for experience is fundamentally a confrontation with reality, which is to say that its goal of total loyalty is blatantly opposed to sensible human existence. I shall now proceed to demonstrate that this battle with reality is in fact the primary and distinguishing premise of totalitarianism as such for Arendt, by highlighting some explicit but often-ignored comments that accompany her analysis of total domination.

## *II. Total Domination and “Reality”*

In terms of totalitarianism’s uniqueness, and so also in terms of its evil character, Arendt places significant emphasis on the nature and scope of the totalitarian quest for authority. She claims that complete world domination is a requirement of any true totalitarian success, and that this requirement is quite separate from any particular human

being's will to power. World domination is written into totalitarian ideology, but not on its leader's heart. To introduce this idea with a counter-example, Mussolini's fascist political movement apparently employed totalitarian methods of persuasion, showing contempt for rational self-justification and a tendency toward terror; but this was not totalitarianism because the methods of persuasion were in this case used only to "seize power and establish the Fascist 'elite' as uncontested ruler over the country" (OT 325). Mussolini's sought-after "domination" was not totalitarian because it was satisfied with a traditional structure of authority, where the powerful stand over and against their specified subjects. In the case of a totalitarian movement, its method of persuasion is already an essential part of a unique political vision. In the end, and in contradistinction to the power-politics of fascism, "totalitarianism is never content to rule by external means, namely, through the state and a machinery of violence" (OT 325). Totalitarianism does not use terror as a means to power, and it does not seek world domination on the model of external mediations of power. Instead, totalitarianism *is* terror, and successful totalitarian rule is total, world domination, *independent of all opposition*. Totalitarianism

eliminates the distance between the rulers and the ruled and achieves a condition in which power and the will to power, as we understand them, play no role, or at best, a secondary role. In substance, the totalitarian leader is nothing more nor less than the functionary of the masses he leads; he is not a power-hungry individual imposing a tyrannical and arbitrary will upon his subjects. Being a mere functionary, he can be replaced at any time, and he depends just as much on the 'will' of the masses he embodies as the masses depend on him. (OT 325)

In this sense, a leader is not truly totalitarian, and is in fact commonplace on the political landscape, if he is driven by a will to power. It seems like this would be a difficult argument to make in the case of Stalin's Russia, since there the concept "masses" had to

be imposed on and created in the people, seemingly at the will of their leader. However, on Arendt's account a will to lead the masses is different from a will to power. This is because totalitarian aspirations are based on a recognition of the nature of the masses—or if the masses do not exist, then on a recognition of the potentialities of a totally atomized and selfless population—which already accepts a fluidity between ruler and ruled that trivializes any conventional will to power. This is why the totalitarian necessity for total domination is unique and perhaps also why it is able to reveal the nature of evil from a new angle. Totalitarian aspirations, because they are bound up with a desire for the immediacy of *ius naturale* and a corresponding recognition of the need for the total loyalty of the masses, cannot be understood in personal, selfish terms. In fact, totalitarianism is driven less by the economics of how to take over the world—i.e., by humanly understandable motivations—than it is by its ideological aims. This is the only way of understanding why the Nazis and Stalinists both devoted scarce resources to insane projects that did not strengthen their rule in practical terms.<sup>18</sup> But then what is particularly evil about being ideologically motivated? That is, how can we understand the evil-ness of totalitarianism's quest for total domination, if it does not simply come down to extreme or demonic bloodlust? In order to answer this question, we must be more precise about the implications of total domination.

Arendt claims that the concentration camps (the bloodiest of totalitarian institutions) are implied at the very core of totalitarian ideology: “The appalling spectacle of the camps themselves is supposed to furnish the ‘theoretical’ verification of

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<sup>18</sup> See Margaret Canovan, *Hannah Arendt*, 52.

the ideology” (OT 438). That is to say, the concentration camps provide verification of totalitarianism’s original claim that human beings can be made into immediate carriers of the law of nature or history, which requires a kind of loyalty where resistance is no longer thinkable. Total domination, by way of the camps,

strives to organize the infinite plurality and differentiation of human beings as if all of humanity were just one individual, [and this] is possible only if each and every person can be reduced to a never-changing identity of reactions, so that each of these bundles of reactions can be exchanged at random for any other. *The problem is to fabricate something that does not exist, namely, a kind of human species resembling other animal species whose only ‘freedom’ would consist in ‘preserving the species.’* (OT 438; emphasis added)

Total domination is a mere extension of the demand for total loyalty, the fabrication of a being that possesses none of the usual human characteristics that are dangerous to loyalty. For these reasons, the camps are not some bizarre excess of totalitarianism proper, or some evil addition to standard tyrannical politics, but are instead “the guiding social ideal of total domination in general” (OT 438).

The camps are exemplary of totalitarianism as such because they constitute a microcosm of successful total domination, a place where total loyalty is almost guaranteed, by a secure barrier between camp and world. But domination is never completely secure until there actually exists no external factual opposition to the ideology. This means that total domination is inseparable from world domination, since “factuality itself depends for its very existence upon the existence of the nontotalitarian world” (OT 388). That is to say, the creation of a “humanity” that can become the *ius naturale* demands that the totalitarian destruction of the human capacity for experience be

spread over the entire world, so that no external interference can awaken securely dominated subjects. As Arendt puts it,

The struggle for total domination of the total population of the earth, the elimination of every competing nontotalitarian reality, is inherent in the totalitarian regimes themselves; if they do not pursue global rule as their ultimate goal, they are only too likely to lose whatever power they have already seized. (*OT* 392)

This is not to say that total domination's quest for the entire earth has anything to do with personal ambition, or conversely, insecurity on the part of totalitarian leaders. The need for total domination is "inherent" in totalitarianism's concept of authority, its goal of eliminating the gap between external and internal in terms of political rule. There can be no true and secure integration here until there is no longer any possible "external." What this suggests, which makes totalitarianism unique and therefore helps us to understand its connection to evil, is an explicit battle with reality and a commitment to fiction: "Power means a direct confrontation with reality, and totalitarianism in power is constantly concerned with overcoming this challenge" (*OT* 392).

As she explains more specifically the stages along the way to total domination, it becomes even clearer that Arendt understands the radical evil of totalitarianism in terms of its battle with reality. On her account, the end result of total domination is human beings that are not only superfluous, but nonexistent, in a more profound sense than the way in which this is also the end result of simple murder. Even those humans who are left physically alive by totalitarianism somehow do not exist, or at least exist only in a world of fiction, as "men who can no longer be psychologically understood, whose return to the psychologically or otherwise intelligibly human world closely resembles the resurrection of Lazarus" (*OT* 441). Arendt is always serious about the metaphors she

uses, and this is no exception. In terms of the world of reality, in which human beings experience phenomena and think and reason about their experiences, victims of total domination are dead. And in fact they are more “dead” even than Lazarus, for in the camps, “it is indeed as if there were a possibility to give permanence to the process of dying itself and to enforce a condition in which both death and life are obstructed equally effectively” (*OT* 443). Totalitarian destruction is not simply murderous; it is nihilistic in a much more comprehensive sense. Totalitarianism does not only want to bring some particular and real object to the end of its reality, but instead wants to bring destruction to reality itself, so that neither life nor death can make sense, because “sense” itself has been eradicated. The difference here is profound: when a murderer “wipes out any traces, they are those of his own identity, and not the memory and grief of the persons who loved his victim; he destroys a life, but he does not destroy the fact of existence itself” (*OT* 442). On the contrary for totalitarianism and its need for total domination: in the concentration camps, “the status of the inmates in the world of the living, where nobody is supposed to know if they are alive or dead, is such that it is as though they had never been born” (*OT* 444). As Arendt moves through the steps of exactly how total domination proceeds in its “historically and politically intelligible preparation of living corpses” (*OT* 447), which is to say, its fabrication of “bundles of reactions” where human beings once were, her focus remains on totalitarianism’s unique ontological task, its confrontation with “the fact of existence itself.” That is to say, I think we must read her description of the methods of total domination as a description of totalitarianism’s attempt to create a kind of “world without reality.”

The road to total domination begins with the endeavor “to kill the juridical person in man” (*OT* 447), which means to destroy his capacity to judge right from wrong on the basis of what he experiences. Total loyalty cannot tolerate any scenario in which each individual can judge reality for himself, because this inserts a critical, reflective moment between the subject and his requisite conformity to the ideology, and more importantly because it introduces the possibility of a dissenting judgment, which would shatter conformity altogether. Totalitarianism targets the juridical person in man through the attempt “to have the whole camp population composed of innocent people” (*OT* 449). The system that sends people to the camps must be completely arbitrary if it is to have the effect of destroying the juridical capacities of those it influences. There may be ideological reasons for certain arrests (racism, etc.), but these must remain ideological, non-worldly reasons. There must not be any valid criteria a person can *see* operating in the arrest procedure, or else that person will remain a free subject:

Any, even the most tyrannical, restriction of this arbitrary persecution to certain opinions of a religious or political nature, to certain modes of intellectual or erotic social behavior, to certain freshly invented “crimes,” would render the camps superfluous, because in the long run no attitude and no opinion can withstand the threat of so much horror; and above all it would make for a new system of justice, which, given any stability at all, could not fail to produce a new juridical person in man, that would elude the total domination. (*OT* 451)

Totalitarianism wants to keep the sensible world in which all of its operations must of course take place, but it wants to replace the meaning of what happens in that world with its own meaning, so that reality and meaning no longer go together, and meaning only comes from fiction. The necessity of this first step in total domination is therefore quite

obvious. Individuals cannot get their “why” from their own reflections on reality itself, but only from government ideology.

Arendt enumerates a second step on the road to total domination, which is “the murder of the moral person in man,” and suggests that “this is done in the main by making martyrdom, for the first time in history, impossible” (*OT* 451). Martyrdom is bound up with the potential to be remembered in death for a meaningful life. The Nazi and Soviet concentration camps, by producing a radical anonymity and by making their selection processes completely arbitrary, effectively prevented remembrance because they destroyed any way to speak meaningfully about any particular life. The death of an inmate in these camps “merely set a seal on the fact that he had never really existed” (*OT* 452). But of course just because no one can tell a story later does not stop unique resisting individuals from acting in such a way as to live a good story—i.e., from making moral, sensible decisions. This is where totalitarianism scored its most impressive victory, “when it succeeded in cutting the moral person off from the individualist escape and in making the decisions of conscience absolutely questionable and equivocal” (*OT* 452). Total domination achieved this by giving a man only “the alternative of betraying and thus murdering his friends or of sending his wife and children, for whom he is in every sense responsible, to their death; when even suicide would mean the immediate murder of his own family—how is he to decide?” (*OT* 452). By making every decision into one between murder and murder, total domination succeeds in convincing the moral person that there is no “reality” on which to base his decisions that makes more sense than the fiction provided by government ideology. Thus, “the distinguishing line

between persecutor and persecuted, between the murderer and his victim, is constantly blurred” (OT 453).

What finally remains to prevent the outright success of total domination “is the differentiation of the individual, his unique identity” (OT 453). Individuality is offensive to total domination because total domination demands that each human being be a completely exchangeable and predictable bundle of reactions. Anything that distinguishes humans from each other is therefore excessive to their *being* in totalitarian situations, because it poses a problem for complete predictability. Total domination recognizes this fact, and correspondingly that “to destroy individuality is to destroy spontaneity, man’s power to begin something new out of his own resources, something that cannot be explained on the basis of reactions to environment and events” (OT 455). But of course reality itself is made up of these things that cannot be explained logically, things that refute any claim to the law of nature’s immediacy on earth. That is why meaningful explanations based on real, personal experiences of the world do not result in totalitarianism; such explanations refuse to take the liberty of imposing predictability and calculability where it does not exist. In contrast to this understanding of reality, “the curious logicity of all -isms, their simple-minded trust in the salvation value of stubborn devotion without regard for specific, varying factors, already harbors the first germs of totalitarian contempt for reality and factuality” (OT 458). While many less harmful “isms” do not recognize the fact that their structured logicity takes them further and further from the reality of the sensible experiences that perhaps inspired their original quest for meaning, Arendt believes totalitarianism confronts this problem explicitly:

“Totalitarian regimes establish a functioning world of no-sense” (OT 458). That is to say, totalitarianism re-orders the universe such that the only world that “functions” in terms of meaning, as reality should, is the logical world of the ideology. The world of the senses, where the very conditions for understanding existence as such traditionally inhere, is destroyed in its very capacity to be reality:

Everything that was done in the camps is known to us from the world of perverse, malignant fantasies. The difficult thing to understand is that, like such fantasies, these gruesome crimes took place *in a phantom world*, which, however, has materialized, as it were, into a world which is complete with all sensual data of reality but lacks that structure of consequence and responsibility without which reality remains for us a mass of incomprehensible data. (OT 445; emphasis added)

This assault on reality is inherent even in the first steps of totalitarianism, the way it seeks masses and not a mob, total rather than momentary selflessness. This again explains why total domination is not driven by a humanly understandable will. It is directed against human understanding altogether. Totalitarianism feverishly seeks to expand “only for ideological reasons: to make the world consistent, to prove that its respective supersense has been right” (OT 458).

Arendt finally claims that “radical evil has emerged in connection with a system in which all men have become equally superfluous” (OT 459). I have attempted to show that at the root of totalitarianism’s creation of superfluity is a more fundamental element, its contempt for reality as humans experience it. This point is the driving force in each of Arendt’s explanations of the particularities of totalitarianism, and I think we can conclude that it constitutes the link between totalitarianism and “the truly radical nature of evil” for Arendt. If we return now to “Ideology and Terror,” the final chapter of the latest edition of *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, we can see that she too believed she was moving in the

direction of an ontological suggestion about evil. She claims that ideological thinking, totalitarianism's unique *modus operandi*,

becomes emancipated from *the reality that we perceive with our five senses*, and insists on a "truer" reality concealed behind all *perceptible things*, dominating them from this place of concealment and requiring a sixth sense that enables us to become aware of it...Once the movements have come to power, they proceed to *change reality in accordance with their ideological claims*. (OT 471; emphasis added)

These added remarks are certainly the product of more systematic ontological reflections, but as an interpretation of her original text they confirm the basic notion that totalitarianism's unique relationship to evil was for Arendt always rooted in its antithetical stance toward reality. It is with this focus in mind that I now move on to Arendt's treatment of Adolf Eichmann, her exemplary totalitarian executioner (and in some sense, victim).

### III. *Eichmann and the World of No-Sense*

Arendt's report on the Israeli government's trial of Adolf Eichmann, who amounted to something like a senior bureaucrat in the Third Reich, is an attempt to investigate the psychology of the evil person. Inasmuch as the book bears the subtitle, "A Report on the Banality of Evil," we can see that there has been a shift in Arendt's focus. Whereas evil is radical in terms of its creation of an ideological world that directly confronts reality and makes no sense in human terms, when Arendt looked at an individual perpetrator of this radical evil, she got no real view of a legitimate "other world," but only the sense of Eichmann's strange lack of personal presence in this world:

When I speak of the banality of evil, I do so only on the strictly factual level, pointing to a phenomenon which stared one in the face at the trial. Eichmann was not Iago and not Macbeth, and nothing would have been farther from his mind than to determine with Richard III "to prove a villain." Except for an extraordinary diligence in looking out for his personal advancement, he had no motives at all. And this diligence in itself was in no

way criminal; he certainly would never have murdered his superior in order to inherit his post. He *merely*, to put the matter colloquially, *never realized what he was doing*. (*EJ* 287)

Put simply, Arendt discovered that radical evil derives from psychological banality. Rather than contradicting her former thesis, this only confirms that evil is not the result of competition between two legitimate realities, but between reality and fiction. In order to grasp this continuity in spite of her terminological shift, it is important to keep in mind the effort that Arendt goes to in *The Origins of Totalitarianism* to avoid attributing the monstrous, radical results of totalitarian evil to any particularly hideous will, or to the actuality of totalitarianism's ideological world. Even there it is a "phantom world," and in terms of the human subjects carrying out the totalitarian program, Arendt is always talking about dominated—and in that sense, banal—human beings, whose adherence to the ideology meant that they only "realized what they were doing" in a world that is altogether outside of human "doing".

It is fitting that after working through Arendt's paradoxical notion of totalitarian ideological loyalty (cognitive adherence coupled with a crippled capacity for experience), we should be able to see in what senses Eichmann considered himself an "idealist." According to Arendt, for Eichmann "an 'idealist' was a man who *lived* for his idea and who was prepared to sacrifice for his idea everything and, especially, everybody" (*EJ* 42). Eichmann "lived" for his idea; he derived from it his very living reality. The ability to sacrifice everything—i.e., all of experienced reality—to his idea was for Eichmann true idealism and generally the most accurate way of seeing the world, or the best way of seeing the most accurate world—through or *as* his idea. That Eichmann was able to

“see” only in this manner Arendt claims was perceptible to spectators at the trial especially in the accounts he gave of certain of his “good deeds” for particular Jews. Eichmann believed that during the trauma of the Final Solution, Jews “would come running to him ‘to unburden their hearts,’ to tell him ‘all their grief and sorrow,’ and to ask for help” (*EJ* 48). Eichmann said these and other offensively insensitive things with all sincerity, as the man responsible for the deaths of thousands of Jews. He believed he was working “with” the Jews toward a solution to a mutual problem. He evaluated himself from the standpoint of his idea, not the real world, and this is why Arendt says that the most decisive “flaw in Eichmann’s character was his almost total inability ever to look at anything from the other fellow’s point of view” (*EJ* 47-8). This is rooted in his idealism, because the idea pretends to encompass all points of view. Thus Eichmann could also forgo his own legitimate perspective, which is why his interrogation did not yield anything like a compelling account. At least as Arendt portrays him, Eichmann obviously considered interrogative questions in terms of what they asked his idea, not what they asked him as a *person* who might have answers. Thus, “he was genuinely incapable of uttering a single sentence that was not a cliché” (*EJ* 48).

Clichés are the product of a certain kind of thinking, a sort of mental computation that depends upon reliable and comprehensive “software.” To be an idealist in the sense that Eichmann was is to carry out many mental operations, to be sure. The world of nonsense or supersense is nothing if not cognitive, and Eichmann was anything but mentally incompetent. For Arendt, however, this cognitive activity is not the same as thinking, and she claims that Eichmann’s “inability to speak was closely connected with an

inability to *think*, namely, to think from the standpoint of somebody else” (EJ 49). To think from the standpoint of somebody else requires no idea, no mental software, but only a capacity for perceiving the other person’s speech and appearance, and a recognition that the reality of that other person does not depend upon your mental operations. Eichmann had no reason to see the world or reality in this manner; he was in fact protected *against* this world by his easy access to clichés. When reality confronted him, he used his idea to combat it. However, Arendt claims that there is no reason to believe that he did this intentionally, for his idea actually provided him with a convincing semblance of another fully functioning world:

To be sure, the judges were right when they finally told the accused that all he had said was “empty talk”—except that they thought the emptiness was feigned, and that the accused wished to cover up other thoughts which, though hideous, were not empty....[In fact,] no communication was possible with him, not because he lied but because he was surrounded by the most reliable of all safeguards against the words and the presence of others, and hence *against reality as such*. (EJ 49; emphasis added)

Generally speaking then, Eichmann’s evil as an individual is the same as the evil of totalitarianism; it resides in the fact that Eichmann in his idealism stands “against reality as such.”

On Arendt’s account Eichmann does not tell us “more” about evil, for example by manifesting evil’s “real” motivations; instead he tells us nothing, or that evil has a bent toward nothingness. Eichmann could quite easily acknowledge what he had done in the Final Solution, but he could only see and speak about it in terms of his idealism, in terms of nothing (EJ 52). That is to say, Eichmann admitted his crimes without being self-deceived about what he had done, but he thought he should be evaluated in terms of the ideal, and he could not see the mendaciousness of this evaluation. He could not

understand that he should be evaluated for what he had done from the standpoint of where the “doing” actually happened. Arendt paraphrases and cites Eichmann’s last statement as follows:

His hopes for justice were disappointed; the court had not believed him, though he had always done his best to tell the truth. The court did not understand him: he had never been a Jew-hater, and he had never willed the murder of human beings. His guilt came from his obedience, and obedience is praised as a virtue....“I am not the monster I am made out to be,” Eichmann said. “I am the victim of a fallacy.” (*EJ* 247-8)

The victim of a fallacy indeed. In terms of his human subjectivity, Eichmann was equally corpse-like to all other victims of the totalitarian fallacy. This is why Arendt agreed with the court’s original judgment, which took an appropriately nuanced approach to the difficult matter of pronouncing guilt for totalitarian crimes (*EJ* 246-7). The appeal court upheld the original judgment, but unfortunately, says Arendt, it adopted the language of the prosecution, claiming, “the idea of the Final Solution would never have assumed the infernal forms of the flayed skin and tortured flesh of millions of Jews without the fanatical zeal and the unquenchable blood thirst of the appellant and his accomplices” (*EJ* 249). Arendt believes that as a middle-manager plucked out of the machine of the Final Solution, Eichmann does not tell us simply that the bloodthirsty need to be hanged, but instead tells us what it takes at a psychological level to create a phenomenon of evil that goes beyond blood thirst, especially since most Eichmann types never saw blood at all. Eichmann teaches us that the loyalty or “obedience” that totalitarianism and radical evil require is achieved psychologically through a banal thoughtlessness. As if he desired to make a final attestation to this psychological phenomenon, Eichmann chose clichés over any fanatical “last hurrah” for his final

words—and he could not even choose clichés that were consistent with each other. On Arendt’s account, “he was summing up the lesson that this long course in human wickedness had taught us—the lesson of the fearsome, word-and-thought-defying *banality of evil*” (EJ 252).

In her “Postscript,” Arendt emphasizes the point with which I will conclude this chapter, namely, the ontological import of Eichmann’s lesson about evil, which is that “such *remoteness from reality* and such thoughtlessness can wreak more havoc than all the evil instincts taken together” (EJ 288). I want to re-emphasize that in both of Arendt’s accounts, evil means ideas against the world, or fiction against reality. With totalitarianism, we have a system that demands total loyalty and therefore cannot tolerate the human capacity for experience, and eventually total domination, which seeks and destroys humanity’s juridical and moral capacities along with the characteristic of individuality, all for the sake of ideological fiction. With Eichmann, we see close up that the perpetrator of such a system is also a dominated individual. In both cases it is supersense that overrules common sense, the thought-world over reality. In the next chapter I will give a close reading of Arendt’s philosophical speculations in *The Life of the Mind*, where she gives systematic shape to her ontological implications regarding evil and the thinking activity. Ultimately it is Arendt’s strict ontology that supports her unique account of the thinking activity, and understanding thinking in this light will go a long way to explain how it can prevent the development of Eichmann’s evil psychology, and furthermore how it can (ostensibly) make way for a different kind of “doing,” namely, true political action.

## Chapter 2: Thinking and Appearances

### I. Introduction

Between the Eichmann trial and her death, Hannah Arendt spent much of her time reflecting on the life of the mind. Her friend Mary McCarthy suggests that she “consecrated” the last part of her life to these reflections, which she treated as “a task laid on her as a vigorously thinking being” (“Editor’s Postface,” *LM2* 241). Whatever the case may have been in this vocational respect, Arendt was seeking at least in part to demonstrate the broader validity of her necessarily anecdotal conclusions about thoughtlessness and evil in *Eichmann in Jerusalem*. She conceived the fruit of her reflections as a three-part book, *The Life of the Mind*, which we now have in two-volume form, unfinished at the time of her death. In this chapter I will focus mostly on the first volume, *Thinking*, which Arendt originally gave as Gifford Lectures in 1973. I intend to show that in this work Arendt justifies her former conclusions about evil primarily by clarifying evil’s ontological implications. In other words, in *Thinking* we find Arendt making precise claims about the nature of the “reality” that is “directly confronted” by evil, and it is my argument that maintaining her precision on this point is the key to understanding her account of conscience, which constitutes thinking’s disjunctive relationship to evil.

Arendt makes the link between this late philosophical work and her earlier reflections on evil explicit in her “Introduction,” writing that “the immediate impulse” to reflect on the mental activities “came from [her] attending the Eichmann trial in Jerusalem” (*LMI* 3). Arendt will now attempt to defend her discovery concerning

Eichmann's psychology, which she realized ran counter to conventional thinking about evil. Traditionally, says Arendt, we conceive of evil as "something demonic," rooted in "that *superbia* of which only the best are capable: they don't want to serve God but to be like Him" (*LMI* 3). We know from *Eichmann in Jerusalem* that Arendt could detect no such *superbia* in Eichmann, and here she claims again that as an evil person, Eichmann's "only notable characteristic...was not stupidity but *thoughtlessness*" (*LMI* 4). However, Arendt now states more precisely that Eichmann's thoughtlessness was of a piece with his ignorance of "the claim on our thinking attention that all events and facts make *by virtue of their existence*" (*LMI* 4; emphasis added). By relating to the world only through thoughtless clichés, Eichmann ignored existent things—specifically, "events and facts"—and this resulted in his evildoing. It is in the context of this assessment of Eichmann's thoughtlessness that Arendt asks the question, "Could the activity of thinking as such, the habit of examining whatever happens to come to pass or to attract attention, regardless of results and specific content...be among the conditions that make men abstain from evil-doing or even actually 'condition' them against it?" (*LMI* 5). It is first of all in response to this question that Arendt takes up her considerations in *The Life of the Mind*.

We find an additional—but not unrelated—motivation in Arendt's claim to have been bothered, since *The Human Condition*,<sup>1</sup> by the fact that the term she used for the active life, *vita activa*, "was coined by men who were devoted to the contemplative way of life and who looked upon all kinds of being alive from that perspective" (*LMI* 6). Traditionally, "that perspective" has been one from which the *vita contemplativa* is

defined by the notion that “thinking aims at and ends in contemplation, and contemplation is not an activity but a passivity; it is the point where mental activity comes to rest” (*LMI* 6). The presumed restfulness of the contemplative life is problematic for Arendt because it so contrasts with the *vita activa* as to blur any distinctions within the active life, such as those between labor, work, and action. This notion of the contemplative life thus obscures from contemplation a full or appropriately sophisticated view of life in the world. On this issue, Jerome Kohn is certainly correct to note that as a result of Arendt’s assessment of contemplation she “is critical of philosophy...insofar as it presupposes, or just takes for granted, any relation between its analyses of ethical or political theorems and the actual goings-on of this world.”<sup>2</sup> But if contemplation has no relation to “the actual goings-on of this world,” and if it is the end to which the thinking process is properly subordinated, then how can thinking *as such* have a disjunctive relationship to evil? Of course, Arendt herself never did equate the mind’s activities with a process that leads to a remote mental stillness, and in fact she ends *The Human Condition* by citing Cato on the interminable activeness of thinking: “Never is [a man] more active than when he does nothing, never is he less alone than when he is by himself” (*HC* 325). She reminds her readers of this dissenting perspective again at the beginning of *The Life of the Mind*, in order to destabilize the default understanding of thinking as instrumental to contemplation, and thereby to legitimate the (re-)posing of her central questions: “What are we ‘doing’ when we do nothing but

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<sup>1</sup> Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958). Hereafter referred to in text as “*HC*.”

<sup>2</sup> Jerome Kohn, “Thinking/Acting,” *Social Research* 57 (1990): 110.

think? Where are we when we, normally always surrounded by our fellow-men, are together with no one but ourselves?” (*LMI* 7).

Arendt turns first to the mental disciplines of metaphysics and philosophy, which have answered the question about what thinking is in contemplative language—i.e., by holding up the ideal of knowing the *truth* of things “not given to sense-perception,” but which “transcend” sense experience (*LMI* 13). Because only a few (and maybe none) can actually arrive at such transcendent truth, it has made sense to metaphysicians and philosophers that only the few can be true thinkers, true participants in the *vita contemplativa*. With respect to Arendt’s claims about evil, this conception of thinking will not do, for if “the ability to tell right from wrong should turn out to have anything to do with the ability to think, then we must be able to ‘demand’ its exercise from every sane person” (*LMI* 13). Furthermore, thinking must not be an activity that terminates in contemplation, lest the ability to tell right from wrong should be equally terminal.

Arendt believes that Kant was unique among philosophers in his criticism of the notion that only the few could be thinkers, a criticism that lies in the distinction he made “between *Vernunft* and *Verstand*, ‘reason’ and ‘intellect’” (*LMI* 13). This distinction forbids philosophy’s exclusivism because it is linked to Kant’s discovery of “the ‘scandal of reason,’ that is, the fact that our mind is *not capable of certain and verifiable knowledge regarding matters and questions that it nevertheless cannot help thinking about*” (*LMI* 14; emphasis added). This “scandal” means first of all that there are some things that the mind can never simply contemplate “restfully.” Secondly it suggests that the mind is somehow *compelled* to reason about these very things, which is to say that the

sheer activity of reasoning as an end in itself is constitutive of the human mental life, regardless of intellectual abilities. What Arendt then does is to identify her “thinking” with Kant’s “reason”: “[Kant’s] distinguishing of the two faculties, reason and intellect, coincides with a distinction between two altogether different mental activities, thinking and knowing, and two altogether different concerns, meaning, in the first category, and cognition, in the second” (LMI 14). As helpful as Kant is to Arendt on this point, it is significant that he does not quite make Arendt’s “coinciding” distinctions, which means that this is where we begin to see the particularities of Arendt’s project.

Arendt suggests that Kant was still too mired in the tradition to know just how to work out the implications of his correct distinction between reason and intellect. First of all he mistakenly concluded that he had “found it necessary to deny knowledge [to reason]...to make room for *faith*.”<sup>3</sup> Arendt implies that faith for Kant is a simple substitute for the more intellectually rigorous knowledge of the intellect, but built on the same model as that knowledge, namely the mind’s grasping of an object. On her account, rather, Kant “had not made room for faith; he had made room for thought, and he had not ‘denied knowledge’ but separated knowledge from thinking” (LMI 14). Faith was Kant’s traditionally contemplative resolution to the “scandal of reason,” but by making this provision he forgot that the scandal itself separates reason from the “entirely justifiable criteria [*Verstand*] has established for its own purposes, that is, for quenching our thirst, and meeting our need, for knowledge and cognition” (LMI 15). *Vernunft* is not *Verstand*, and thus it does not need the resolution of faith’s quasi-knowledge. The equation of

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<sup>3</sup> *Critique of Pure Reason*, Bxxx. Cited in LMI 14.

thinking and cognition is what Arendt calls the most primary metaphysical fallacy, and she summarizes this point clearly: “*The need of reason is not inspired by the quest for truth but by the quest for meaning. And truth and meaning are not the same*” (LMI 15; Arendt’s emphasis). Unfortunately, Arendt believes, Kant’s successors—and chief among them, Hegel—also could not understand this point, and in fact they promptly proceeded to ignore Kant’s distinction altogether: “Pursuing the Cartesian ideal of certainty as though Kant had never existed, they believed that the results of their speculations possessed the same kind of validity as the results of cognitive processes” (LMI 16). This is the kind of fallacy that Arendt wants to correct, and she does so, as we shall see below, by pursuing an ontology of appearance that resonates with Nietzsche’s familiar complaint that “*our treasure is where the hives of our knowledge are...As far as the rest of life is concerned, the so-called ‘experiences,’—who of us ever has enough seriousness for them?*”<sup>4</sup> Arendt attempts to justify a new seriousness about experiences, and to flesh out the implications of this seriousness for thinking as an activity distinct from knowing.

## II. *Being and Appearing*

From the very beginning, Arendt’s volume on thinking emphasizes the connection between appearances and reality in the world. Her first sentence is as follows: “The world men are born into contains many things...all of which have in common that they *appear* and hence are meant...to be perceived by sentient creatures endowed with the appropriate sense organs” (LMI 19). If this is what all worldly things have in common,

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<sup>4</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morality*, trans. Carol Diethe (Cambridge: Cambridge

Arendt concludes that there must be a relation between this commonality and worldly existence as such. Not putting too fine a point on it, she claims, “in this world which we enter, appearing from a nowhere, and from which we disappear into a nowhere, *Being and Appearing coincide*” (LMI 19). Moreover, if things exist only inasmuch as they are appearances, then their existence cannot but “presuppose a spectator.” In fact, the interplay between spectator and appearance constitutes worldliness itself: “The worldliness of living things means that there is no subject that is not also an object and appears as such to somebody else, who guarantees its ‘objective’ reality” (LMI 19). And because no object looks the same from more than one perspective and no two spectators occupy the same place, Arendt concludes that “plurality is the law of the earth” (LMI 19). The coincidence of Being and Appearing thus articulated immediately implies an ontological significance in Arendt’s claim that thinking is characterized by “a *withdrawal* from the world as it appears and a bending back toward the self” (LMI 22). If thinking implied a withdrawal to our “true” home, Arendt would have no problems with contemplatives. But because in this world “Being and Appearing coincide,” Arendt concludes of human beings that they “*are of the world and not merely in it,*” at least, inasmuch as they *are* at all (LMI 22; Arendt’s emphasis). The world of appearances is our “true” home.

To Arendt it is obvious that “the world of appearances is *prior* to whatever region the philosopher may *choose* as his ‘true’ home but into which he was not born” (LMI 23). But she wants this priority to mean more than simply that as a contingent fact,

human beings encounter the apparent world before they do the thought-world, and she argues to this effect first of all by demonstrating the importance of the metaphor of perception even in the most ostensibly invisible or philosophical quests for “truth.” She suggests that the philosophical notion of an ontological truth “behind” appearances—“*aletheia*, that which is disclosed (Heidegger)—can be conceived only as another ‘appearance,’ another phenomenon originally hidden but of a supposedly higher order, thus signifying the lasting predominance of appearance” (*LMI* 24). Even more obviously, where modern science has in fact succeeded in attaining knowledge of the “causes” behind many appearances, this has and could only happen by means of disclosure. But this still leaves the following question unanswered: What is the ontological import of the fact that such causes are hidden by default, if they are still “disclosable” in principle? In order to answer this question, Arendt construes any forcibly disclosive manner of inquiry as the violation of “authentic” appearances for the sake of making apparent that which is “authentically” hidden. The ironic results of modern scientific endeavors in particular lend support to Arendt’s notion of “authenticity”: “No man, it has turned out, can *live* among ‘causes’ or give full account in normal human language of a Being whose truth can be scientifically demonstrated in the laboratory and tested practically in the real world through technology” (*LMI* 26). The “default” hiddenness of causes is therefore not accidental, since their revelation does not challenge the ontological primacy of appearances.

In our technological society, Arendt’s is a highly contested claim, and accordingly she spends a lot of time on it. But rather than discussing further whether or not

technology comes close to explaining Being, she attempts to discredit the very notion that what is behind or beneath appearances should ever have told us worldly, apparent beings anything of a higher order than what we find on the unviolated surfaces of things. She asks, “since we live in an *appearing* world, is it not much more plausible that the relevant and the meaningful in this world of ours should be located precisely on the surface?” (LMI 27). Modern scientists would respond that in the case of organic life-forms, it seems obvious that outsides exist only to help or protect their more important insides. Biologically speaking, Being seems to emanate from behind the surface, in the heart rather than the epidermis, so to speak. If this is true, then appearances exist *for the sake of* their grounds or causes, and thus we must now ask whether or not appearances can be explained in these terms. Arendt answers this question negatively, with the help of Swiss biologist Adolf Portmann, whose work suggests that the appearances of living things “cannot be accounted for by the common theories that understand life in terms of functionality” (LMI 28). More specifically, Portmann’s findings indicate that many of the outside features of living beings serve no functional purpose and are in fact totally superfluous to the subsistence of their insides. Arendt adds that in contrast to outsides or “authentic” appearances, when insides are forced to appear, they “are never pleasing to the eye,” and they all “look alike” (LMI 29). This revelation of sameness is a perversely ironic twist for those who cut open appearances in a bid to discover the ground of their unique being. A living thing in an apparent world authentically displays what it is by presenting “not its ‘inner self’ but itself as an individual” (LMI 29), its unique and inexplicable surface. This is how a worldly thing *is worldly*, how it participates in the

plurality that is “the law of the earth.” Orchestrating the inauthentic disclosure of insides is possible, but it is misguided and doomed to failure because it is bound to destroy what is *meant* to participate in reality, under the auspices of coming to know reality more accurately. Arendt believes that Portmann’s thesis helps us to understand this point, from which we can conclude “that our common conviction that what is inside ourselves, our ‘inner life,’ is more relevant to what we ‘are’ than what appears on the outside is an illusion” (*LMI* 30).

Of course, often when we speak of an inner life that determines our “true” being, we do not mean our internal organs, but instead what Arendt calls “the life of the soul” (*LM I* 30). Most of us have some notion that our apparent self-expressions depend upon or disclose our soul-life, the real ground of our being. However, Arendt suggests that souls, with their emotional, passionate content, take on a sameness akin to biological insides when they are disclosed, which indicates that souls are not worldly, that they “are no more *meant* to be shown in their unadulterated state than the inner organs by which we live” (*LMI* 32). This is confirmed, for example, by “the monotonous sameness and pervasive ugliness so highly characteristic of the findings of modern psychology” (*LMI* 35). The reason for this is that speech, the medium through which “distinction and individuation occur,” is inadequate to the experiences of the soul (*LMI* 34). Again, forceful disclosure is possible through psychology, as it is biologically through modern science, but the appearances that derive from this enterprise are both monotonous and inauthentic. We might think that we can express our soul-life uniquely in speech, but in fact “what becomes manifest when we speak about psychic experiences is never the

experience itself but whatever we *think* about it when we reflect upon it” (LMI 31). Speech is adequate to thinking because that mental activity is already a verbal one, “inconceivable” apart from speech. All of this goes to suggest that who you *are*, as a particular “somebody” and not only an example of the human biological mechanism, inheres in your unique, authentic appearance. Inasmuch as this appearance presupposes and is objectively confirmed only by spectators, who you end up *being* depends “on the consistency and duration of the image thereby presented to the world,” rather than the “content” of your soul (LMI 36). You *are* as you *appear* to those who perceive you. This is not as radical as it might sound, however, since we do in fact assess our fellow human beings based on their appearances over time, not on some primary knowledge of their souls, for how could we claim such knowledge? Even when we discover that a particular person is “really” someone else, it must be based on a contradictory appearance. Arendt’s suggestion is that if a person succeeds in never appearing a certain way, then it is meaningless to claim that he might have been hiding the “truth” about what he was.

### *III. Knowledge vs. Meaning*

Why then have modern science and modern psychology gone “beyond” appearances, sometimes convincingly, in their quest for knowledge of what is? In brief, Arendt claims that such modern developments have resulted from the misuse of thinking, which is properly concerned with *meaning*, in the pursuit of *knowledge*. In order to understand what Arendt means by this we can begin by looking at how the thinking activity might naturally suggest an affinity with the pursuit of knowledge. What about

thinking influenced Kant, for example, to conclude that there was more to Being than appearances, or that there was a “thing in itself” that determined the being of an apparent thing? Arendt believes that Kant’s claim that appearances rest

upon something which in principle is of an altogether different [i.e., superior] ontological order, *seems clearly drawn in analogy to phenomena of this world*, which contains both authentic and inauthentic appearances, and in which the inauthentic appearances, insofar as they contain the very apparatus of the life process, seem to *cause* the authentic ones. (LMI 41; emphasis added)

In other words, rather than discovering a *real* “thing in itself,” Kant simply confirms that the practice of speculation seems at times to mirror the real life experience of discovering the inner “causes” of an authentic appearance. By removing itself from an apparent object and its *seeming* nature, the mind suggests an ability to grasp that object’s rational, ontological “causes” (which seem to “appear” to the mind), or at least to make a foray into their realm. Moreover, the thinking ego, with its characteristic swiftness in dealing logically with thought-objects, is suggestive of the ontological supremacy of its conclusions. Their seamlessness is compelling. Kant’s metaphysical hierarchy is therefore understandable because it comes from a being that, “though itself part of the world of appearances, is in possession of a faculty, the ability to think, that permits the mind to withdraw from the world *without ever being able to leave it or transcend it*” (LMI 45; emphasis added).

I emphasize the last clause because for Arendt it signifies the final mistakenness (albeit understandable) of Kant’s hierarchy, the fact that his conclusion “that there exist ‘things in themselves’ which, in their own intelligible sphere, *are* as we ‘are’ in a world of appearances belongs among the metaphysical fallacies” (LMI 44). The mind indeed

withdraws, but only to a “nowhere” (*LMI* 199). Our ability to know the truth about an object “depends entirely upon the object’s also appearing as such to others and being acknowledged by them” (*LMI* 46). The mind’s withdrawal from the world of apparent objects therefore implies a withdrawal from objective reality. Hence the absurdity of Cartesian solipsism, to which Arendt responds as follows:

No consciousness of an acting self that had suspended all faith in the reality of its intentional objects, would ever have been able to convince [Descartes] of his own reality had he actually been born in a desert, without a body and its senses to perceive “material” things and without fellow-creatures to assure him that what he perceived was perceived by them too. (*LMI* 48)

For Arendt, reality is guaranteed not by the self’s detection of its own isolated movement—which would in fact be undetectable but for memories of reality—but rather by a “threefold commonness”: the fact that the five senses, other members of our species, and other sensate beings all agree on the reality of certain objects (*LMI* 50). When the thinking ego withdraws from the world of appearances it therefore removes itself from guaranteed reality. The “thing in itself” is *not* the “real” thing.

Inasmuch as science is the quest for knowledge of what is, it need not go further than the common investigation of authentic appearances. Kant’s *Vernunft*, on the other hand—which Arendt calls “thinking”—is compelled to go further, to reason indefinitely even about that which *cannot* be known. Ironically, however, it was thinking in its insatiability that “drove scientists to ever-new discoveries, each one giving rise to a new theory, so that those caught in the movement were subject to the illusion of a never-ending process—the *process* of progress” (*LMI* 55). This is where Kant’s *Vernunft* and *Verstand* were conflated, so that *Vernunft*, or reason, came to be used in service of the

goals of *Verstand*. The so-called “appearances” of the thought-world began to suggest their reality, and hence their knowability. Arendt says that properly understood, “the intellect (*Verstand*) desires to grasp what is given to the senses, but reason (*Vernunft*) wishes to understand its *meaning*” (*LMI* 57). In fact, and again ironically, “the questions raised by thinking...are all unanswerable by...science” (*LMI* 58-9). That is to say, thinking does not require graspable verification, for it seeks meaning among thought-objects that are not apparent, and thus incapable of being grasped in commonness. The human desire for knowledge, on the contrary, needs factual verification, which is demonstrated by the fact that even though theoretical sciences claim to go “beyond” common sense or apparent reality,

they must finally come back to some form of it or lose all sense of realness in the object of their investigation. And this return is possible only via the man-made, artificial world of the laboratory, where that which does not appear of its own accord is forced to appear and to disclose itself. (*LMI* 56-7)

Because thinking is compelled to go beyond what can be known, or what is factual, its results cannot be shown to be “true,” except perhaps by making the real, apparent world into something it is not. This has been the path taken by modern science, which mistakenly seeks to verify thought-objects it presumes to “know.” Knowledge and reality (read: appearances) go hand in hand, but thinking is withdrawn from the apparent world and thus ill-fitted to the task of knowing. Arendt claims explicitly that “to expect truth to come from thinking signifies that we mistake the need to think with the urge to know” (*LMI* 61). As Kant understood, reason has a compulsive concern with things that can never be part of a factual statement derived from a commonly perceived appearance—i.e., from reality (*LMI* 63). Given that Adolf Eichmann’s inability to *think*

ostensibly coincided with his evil stance against reality, it is strange that Arendt now says the thinking activity “cannot come into being except through a deliberate *withdrawal* from appearances” (*LMI* 75). Does she contradict herself? What is thinking doing in its withdrawal, if it is not assuming a posture against the world?

When thinking takes its ostensible leave of the world, it first prepares “particulars given to the senses in such a way that the mind is able to handle them in their absence; it must, in brief, *de-sense* them” (*LMI* 77). This is what Arendt calls the process of imagination, whereby ontologically primary apparent objects become remembered images, “thought-objects.” Arendt says that through its operations with thought-objects, “the mind learns how to deal with things that are absent and prepares to ‘go further,’ toward the understanding of *things that are always absent*, that cannot be remembered because they were never present to sense experience” (*LMI* 77; emphasis added). Unlike particular thought-objects, which are at least derived from authentic appearances, thinking’s “result” or goal *was never present*, which reaffirms the fact that it is ill-fitted to verification. As Arendt herself puts it, “all thought arises out of experience, but no experience yields any meaning or even coherence without undergoing the operations of imagining and thinking” (*LMI* 87). Thinking never terminates in a meaning that is “adequate” to what *is*, because meaning *is not*. Instead, the thinking activity as such is non-terminal, “like Penelope’s web; it undoes every morning what it has finished the night before” (*LMI* 88). Thinking leaves nothing so tangible behind as a verifiable statement, but only the naturally unstable evidence of an attempt at understanding (e.g., meaningful speech, which we shall come to below). From a worldly perspective,

thinking is quite useless, which leads naturally to Arendt's conclusion that "in our world there is no clearer or more radical opposition than that between thinking and doing" (*LMI* 71). Does *this* mean that thinking entails a posture against reality?

Knowledge, because it concerns what truly exists, inheres ultimately in truth not as linguistic and propositional but as vision confirmed in threefold commonness. Whatever role common sense reasoning may play in guiding the truth-seeker, knowledge itself is sight (*LMI* 117). Even the metaphysical tradition has known enough to parody this model, conceiving of truth as an interior intuition akin to real sight. Modern science, too, in its search for the truth behind appearances, has quested after revelations rather than linguistic propositions per se, and this is confirmed by "the very fact that mathematical symbols can be substituted for actual words and be even more expressive of the underlying phenomena that are forced by instruments to appear, as it were, against their own bent" (*LMI* 121). Symbolic language communicates truth by *appearing* in such a way that vision can *grasp* it. This is the only kind of language that the quest for knowledge really needs. Thinking, on the other hand,

needs speech not only to sound out and become manifest; it needs it to be activated at all. And since speech is enacted in sequences of sentences, the end of thinking can never be an intuition; nor can it be confirmed by some piece of self-evidence beheld in speechless contemplation. (*LMI* 121)

Because speech does not produce anything like an apparent object, it is out of its league when related to truth. Truth can be grasped because it can be seen, it *is*. Conversely, "meaning, which can be said and spoken about, is slippery; if the philosopher wants to *see* and *grasp* it, it 'slips away'" (*LMI* 122). *Conflating knowing and thinking is dangerous because it entails an understanding of truth dissociated from reality, a shift*

from knowledge “understood as analogous to the agreement of vision with the seen object—to the mere *form* of thinking, whose basic rule is the axiom of non-contradiction” (*LMI* 122). Once *truth* takes on the mere form of thinking, then *reality* can only inhere in a world where that form is possible, which is decidedly not the world of plural appearances. Totalitarianism remedies this tension with its world of “super-sense,” but the ultimate inadequacy of super-sense is borne out by the fact that in the end totalitarianism too requires complete factual verification, or total domination, as we saw in the previous chapter. Thus ensues the endeavor to eliminate spontaneity from the world of appearances—which means to destroy authentic appearances and therefore Being altogether. At last we can see how, on Arendt’s account, evil is related to a perversion of the thinking activity; but it remains to be seen whether thinking as such possesses some quality that stands against its own perversions and is thereby engaged in preventing evil, as Arendt also seems to suggest.

#### *IV. The Two-in-One and Conscience*

Socrates is Arendt’s paradigmatic thinker, which means he probably holds the key to her thesis about thinking and evil. For Arendt, Socrates’ distinguishing characteristic among the thinkers of our tradition is his ability to stay focused on thinking’s quest for meaning, which is to say, his refusal to reify inherently slippery thoughts in systematic language. Arendt derives this characteristic of Socrates from Plato’s early dialogues: “The first thing that strikes us in Plato’s Socratic dialogues is that they are all aporetic. The argument either leads nowhere or goes around in circles” (*LMI* 169). It is even more significant to Arendt that these aporetic dialogues are “conceptual,” concerned with

questions of “justice” or “happiness” as such. She wants to suggest that such terms as these are interesting to Socrates not inasmuch as they define clearly what is “true” and static, but rather, inasmuch as they originally contain a collection of particular experiences. Socrates is interested in opening these concepts up, revealing their instability, rather than affirming certain definitions. Arendt gives the example of the word “house,” which she says “could not exist unless one presupposed thinking about being housed, dwelling, having a home,” and these are all things we *know* from our worldly experience, not from the experiences of the thinking ego. She goes on to say, “*the word ‘house’ is something like a frozen thought that thinking must unfreeze whenever it wants to find out the original meaning*” (*LMI* 171; Arendt’s emphasis). According to Arendt’s account of his life, Socrates went around reminding his interlocutors that the concepts they believed to be “true” were but provisionally frozen thoughts—perhaps meaningful, but never “adequate.” Socrates, “unlike the professional philosophers, felt the urge to check with his fellow-men to learn whether his perplexities were shared by them—and this is quite different from the inclination to find solutions for riddles and then demonstrate them to others” (*LMI* 172).

Arendt gives us the first indication about how this characteristic of Socrates might relate to the prevention of evil-doing when she says that he “purged people of their ‘opinions,’ that is, of those unexamined pre-judgments that would prevent them from thinking—helping them, as Plato said, *to get rid of the bad in them*, their opinions, yet without making them good, giving them truth” (*LMI* 173; emphasis added). From this we can imagine that having Socrates as an interlocutor might have made Eichmann less

comfortable with his clichés, less likely to mistake their frozen character for the solidity of reality. Correspondingly, this kind of thinking would have made him less likely to act on the basis of his “idea,” and instead to be mindful of the ontologically appropriate opposition between thinking and doing, the thought-world and reality. Socratic thinking gets rid of the bad by unfreezing frozen thoughts and thus also *prevents* the bad by paralyzing ideological action. After engaging in the thinking activity, “if what you were *doing* consisted in applying general rules of conduct to particular cases as they arise in ordinary life, you will find yourself paralyzed because no such rules can withstand the wind of thought” (*LMI* 175; emphasis added). This kind of thinking does not of itself discover the “right” rules to live by, which raises some interesting questions for Arendt’s concept of political action, but its induced paralysis does prevent evil conceived as the destruction of appearances or Being for the sake of invisible ideas, and this paralysis is properly interminable. “Thinking *must always begin afresh*; it is an activity that accompanies living” (*LMI* 178; emphasis added).

Arendt is aware that this is a radical departure from conventional Platonic moral thinking. Because Plato has Socrates conceive of the quest for meaning in terms of an *erotic* journey, Arendt acknowledges the legitimacy of the more common interpretation of Socratic thinking’s relation to evil. She writes, “because thought’s quest is a kind of desirous love, the objects of thought can only be lovable things—beauty, wisdom, justice, and so on” (*LMI* 179). Unlovable things like evil may turn up as objects of thought, but they are privative and thus “have no roots of their own,” and thinking “must dissolve these ‘negative’ concepts into their original meaninglessness, that is, into nothing for the

thinking ego” (*LMI* 179). On this interpretation, Arendt concedes that Socrates falls into line with “almost all Occidental philosophers,” who claim simply that those who “do philosophy’ would be incapable of doing evil” (*LMI* 179). Joseph Beatty, who is roundly critical of Arendt on thinking and thus can serve as a helpful and ultimately clarifying challenger in this chapter, suggests that Arendt wants to use this traditional occidental thesis in order to shore up her weak account of thinking as a force that paralyzes evil. He claims that

Arendt’s “negativity argument” founders because it does not necessarily rule out evil-doing. If thinking yields absolutely no positive results, then there can be no necessary connection between thinking and (moral) respect for persons. But she would doubtless rejoin that the concepts of “thinking” and “evil” are necessarily disjunctive for the object of reason *is* and is of value whereas “evil” lacks being and value.<sup>5</sup>

In other words, Beatty first suggests that purging people of their opinions in the way Arendt describes will not necessarily prevent evil because ultimately what is needed is a “positive doctrine” of moral respect for persons. Without this, even thinkers who unfreeze their ideals will still sometimes *do* bad things. Beatty then goes on to say that Arendt would “doubtless” suggest that in fact the thinking activity can *only* deal with things like “positive doctrines,” even if neither Socrates nor she was particularly picky about which ones.

Beatty’s claims here present us with an occasion to reinforce the *ontological* connotations of Arendt’s notion of evil that I have been outlining from the beginning of this thesis, and more specifically in this chapter. For Arendt, evil does not have to do with “humanly understandable motives,” but instead with a stance against reality. This

means that she will not be concerned with why an individual does not have “moral respect” for persons, *per se*. The negative or at least perplexing results of thinking really have nothing to do with a “doctrine” of moral respect, and Beatty is right to pick up on this. However, for Arendt, these results of thinking are still sufficient to prevent evil as she defines it in relation to totalitarianism and Eichmann. That is, and to repeat myself, Eichmann *as a thinker* would have avoided evil—on Arendt’s understanding—because his tendency to act only by applying abstract and unreal ideas to an ontologically primary world of appearances would have been curbed. Indeed, for Arendt, even action on the basis of Beatty’s positive doctrines would be evil, and this is why she is not enthused about the positive “reeducation” of post-Third Reich Germany (*LMI* 177-8). The prevention of evil is, for Arendt, the prevention of any ideological action, which because of the ontological primacy of the apparent world always entails a destruction of Being. This is why if we are still unsure, as Beatty is, how Socratic thinking itself “paralyzes” evil-doing, we cannot appeal to “positive doctrines” in order to fix up Arendt’s argument. Her entire case stands against doctrinal action.

Secondly, even though Arendt brings up the traditional occidental interpretation of Socrates on evil, her foregoing association of being with appearance seems to refute Beatty’s claim that Arendt would defend herself by affirming that “the object of reason *is*.” For Arendt, we must know by now that thought-objects are *not*, precisely because they are de-sensed and invisible, removed from any guarantees of reality. The

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<sup>5</sup> Joseph Beatty, “Thinking and Moral Considerations: Socrates and Arendt’s Eichmann,” in *Hannah Arendt: Critical Essays*, eds. Lewis P. Hinchman & Sandra K. Hinchman (Albany: SUNY Press, 1994), 63.

interpretation of Socrates that makes goodness the domain of philosophers who “know” the good is already Plato’s defense of professional thinking, a self-serving attempt to reinterpret thinking’s worldly uselessness. For Socrates himself, as Arendt mentions on the very next page of her book, “if there is anything in thinking that can prevent men from doing evil, it must be some property inherent in the activity itself, *regardless of its objects*” (*LMI* 180; emphasis added).<sup>6</sup> This key property is “the two-in-one that Socrates discovered as the essence of thought” (*LMI* 185).<sup>7</sup> We must now ask, what does this property entail, and how can it better explain thinking’s interminable paralysis of evil?

Arendt suggests that the thinking activity is constituted by a “*duality of myself with myself*... in which I am both the one who asks and the one who answers” (*LMI* 185). The oneness of my identity that I take for granted is therefore somewhat problematic. The existence of the two-in-one implies that my identity comes about only through the unification of my mental interlocutors. However, “it is not the thinking activity that constitutes the unity, unifies the two-in-one; on the contrary, the two-in-one become One again when the outside world intrudes upon the thinker and cuts short the thinking process” (*LMI* 185). Thinking as an activity does not itself seek unification, but instead dialectically investigates frozen thoughts, which means that the experience of withdrawal and solitude always implies a relationship. Like any relationship, the health of this one requires some care and attention: “The only criterion of Socratic thinking is agreement, to be consistent with oneself: its opposite, to be in contradiction with oneself, actually

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<sup>6</sup> On this point see also Elisabeth Young-Bruehl, “Reflections on Hannah Arendt’s *The Life of the Mind*,” in *Hannah Arendt: Critical Essays*, eds. Lewis P. Hinchman & Sandra K. Hinchman (Albany: SUNY Press, 1994), 337.

<sup>7</sup> Here Arendt is drawing on the *Gorgias*, 482c.

means becoming one's own adversary" (*LMI* 186). We shall see presently that the validity of Arendt's account hangs largely on how we interpret this "agreement." It is immediately obvious, however, how this criterion of thinking relates to Socrates' thesis about wrongdoing.<sup>8</sup> As Arendt puts it, "it is better to suffer wrong than to do wrong, because you can remain the friend of the sufferer; who would want to be the friend of and have to live together with a murderer?" (*LMI* 188). But is this still just a simplistic account in need of the help of "positive doctrines"?

Joseph Beatty certainly thinks so. Beatty suggests that Arendt must show how the health of the two-in-one relationship "necessitates abstention from evil, where *evil* means not harm to oneself but harm to others. For it is conceivable, even in certain circumstances plausible, that one could achieve one's own utmost psychic harmony by harming others."<sup>9</sup> That is to say, if the only criterion of thinking is the "agreement" of the two-in-one, then what ensures that the two do not agree on some sinister course of action? This objection to Arendt is helpful in clarifying first of all what she means by "evil" and then what she means by the "agreement" of the two-in-one. Beatty here assumes that Arendt does or at least should conceive of evil as "harm to others." He thus interprets the preventative function of the two-in-one in the following manner:

Why precisely does [Arendt] maintain that if one thinks then he will necessarily upset his "relationship with himself" by doing evil? She holds this because she regards the soul's dialogue with itself as an interiorization of the individual's dialogue with others. Thus, when she speaks of taking "this otherness...into account," she seems to be suggesting, although this is not stated explicitly here, that we take *others* into account.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> *Gorgias*, 474b.

<sup>9</sup> Beatty, "Thinking and Moral Considerations," 64.

<sup>10</sup> Beatty, 64-5.

As I have mentioned above, I think Arendt does not state Beatty's interpretation of evil "explicitly" or in any other way because she does not share it. For Arendt, evil is an attack on reality, or action calculated on the basis of a presumptuously certain knowledge of the world. If this is the case, then it is unlikely that Arendt is really susceptible to Beatty's other critique that the "harmony" of the thinking ego might be achieved by doing evil, for harmony so conceived actually suggests ideological action, the premature unification of the two-in-one. Our final question for Arendt then, raised instead of answered by Beatty, concerns what she means by "agreement."

We know first of all that the agreement of the two-in-one cannot mean unity: "it is not the thinking activity that...unifies the two-in-one" (*LMI* 185). The thinking activity does not terminate in a unifying conclusion, because neither of my inner interlocutors can ever legitimately answer the other with a concept or explanation that is more solid than a provisionally frozen thought. This means that the inner dialogue of thinking is endless, and so is not validated, but is instead destroyed, by any conclusion. Again, thinking and doing are radically opposed. If the mind can prescribe an action, good or bad, then the thinking ego is no longer dual, which means the thinking activity has ceased prematurely. Thinking prevents evil by preventing the Eichmannesque sacrifice of "everything" to an idea. The harmony of the two-in-one even at its "utmost" is no unity. What can agreement mean then, and how, in being "agreement," can it actually prevent the mental unity that leads to evil?

Thankfully, Arendt also uses the more helpful motif of friendship to explain the relation of the two-in-one, which clarifies this relation's important opposition to

assimilation or sameness. Rather than straightforwardly suggesting—as Beatty would have it—that we act whenever we “agree” with ourselves about what to do, Arendt says instead that “the self that we all are must take care not to do anything that would make it impossible for the two-in-one *to be friends* and live in harmony” (*LMI* 191; emphasis added). With friendship, “twoness” and harmony go hand in hand. Friends as such must remain individuals, which is to say that in fostering harmony they must resist the unity in which one friend is subsumed by the other. Linking this motif with the prevention of evil, Arendt invokes it in her definition of “conscience” as “the anticipation of the fellow who awaits you if and when you come home” (*LMI* 191). In order for one’s conscience to serve the preventative role Arendt gives it, one’s inner dialogue must first be healthy in the foregoing sense—i.e., it must be harmoniously dual. When for any reason it is not both harmonious and dual, cognitive prescriptions of action need not “anticipate” a critical perspective. In other words, when the thinking ego becomes univocal, conscience as the unfreezing voice of another perspective loses its meaning, and the mind becomes free to conclude its thought trains, ostensibly in “knowledge” about the world with which it should only be perplexed. Any such univocal thinking potentially warrants certain actions, and on Arendt’s account, this is why only the non-thinker is capable of evil, so thoroughly has he silenced one of the two-in-one.

The fruit of a healthy thinking ego is not knowledge. Thinking “does not create values; it will not find out, once and for all, what ‘the good’ is; it does not confirm but, rather, dissolves accepted rules of conduct” (*LMI* 192). When a political movement like totalitarianism encounters a thinking individual, it meets resistance not because the

thinker knows the good, but because thinking “brings out the implications of unexamined opinions and thereby destroys them—values, doctrines, theories, and even convictions” (*LMI* 192). Thinking’s strictly negative character—i.e., the manner in which it melts certainties and paralyzes ideological action—is thus shown to have “a liberating effect on another faculty, the faculty of judgment....the faculty that judges *particulars* without subsuming them under general rules which can be taught and learned” (*LMI* 192). Judgment is the worldly effect of thinking that Arendt has been looking for; it “realizes thinking” and as such “it is the ability to tell right from wrong, beautiful from ugly” (*LMI* 193). For Arendt, the ability to tell right from wrong is constituted by a willingness to allow particulars to appear authentically, without first being placed in unreal cognitive categories (“general rules”). But what exactly does this mean? As Jerome Kohn asks, “If I judge that Auschwitz was wrong and ought never to have happened, and Auschwitz was unprecedented, what standard am I employing? If Auschwitz cannot become ‘general,’ what *meaning* has it apart from its ‘truth,’ the brute fact of its horror?”<sup>11</sup>

The question we are left with, finally, is how do I tell right from wrong, if I don’t know the good? That is to say, *why* is it the case that Auschwitz ought never to have happened? Kohn interprets Arendt’s answer in terms of the thinking ego’s dialogical structure. The thinking ego as two-in-one reflects the plurality of beings in the world, and the thinking activity thus involves the consideration of various perspectives. Its result is therefore the practiced ability to see from another perspective. The Arendtian judge judges by placing himself in the position of the particular that is being judged: he

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<sup>11</sup> Jerome Kohn, “Evil and Plurality,” 165.

takes on the role of the victim of Auschwitz and from that standpoint (not the lofty standpoint of general rules) judges that Auschwitz ought never to have happened. Kohn seems right about this, but he now remains susceptible to Beatty's criticism that nothing about a dialogical activity per se necessitates a moral respect for other perspectives. What we must add to Kohn's claim, then, is something especially pertinent to Arendt's conception of evil, more so even than "plurality."

We have seen that for Arendt evil most importantly involves a stance against reality, which she defines strictly as appearance. Indeed, she spends most of her volume on thinking discussing this ontology. In these most Arendtian of terms, thinking prevents evil as the destruction of Being by paralyzing any action calculated on the basis of univocal cognitive conclusions, which always run counter to an unpredictable world of plural appearances. The thinking ego as such recognizes and engages in protecting the ontological primacy of the apparent world. What this means is that judgment, as Arendt's "ability to tell right from wrong," is liberated or actualized by thinking not only because thinking enables one to see from another perspective, but because dialogical thinking safeguards a kind of vision that is "ontologically correct." That is to say, the Arendtian thinker is able to take the standpoint of the Auschwitz victim because he recognizes that worldly standpoint as ontologically valid. Moreover, his assumption of this perspective will reveal to him the negative ontological posture of the whole situation—Auschwitz's attack on authentic appearances. This explains in Arendt's own terms why the judge who takes on another perspective is able to tell right from wrong, without giving judgment a general rule. In each case, it is a different and unique

particular that is judged, and each judgment springs from the reaction of a unique subject to the circumstance of that particular. And yet, inasmuch as it is a telling of right from wrong, each judgment will necessarily bear witness to true being, which is to say, to the primacy of authentic appearances.

V. *Conclusion: Univocity and Superbia*

In her “Introduction” to *Thinking*, Arendt mentions the “traditional” notion of evil as something rooted in “that *superbia* of which only the best are capable: they don’t want to serve God but to be like Him,” and contrasts it with her own understanding of evil as thoughtlessness (*LMI* 3). When she actually observed a human being responsible for evil (Adolf Eichmann), she was “struck by a manifest shallowness in the doer that made it impossible to trace the uncontestable evil of his deeds to any deeper level of roots or motives” (*LMI* 4). In *Thinking*, Arendt attempts to explain this shallowness of the evildoer in broad terms, by showing us the meaning of “thoughtlessness.” After first establishing the ontological primacy and the infinite plurality of the world of appearances, Arendt concludes that thinking’s non-apparent nature bars it from having any direct relationship to truth. If thought-objects are invisible and thus unreal, then the “results” of thinking cannot give us knowledge of reality. Rather, thinking is oriented to meaning, which is an attempt to understand, rather than to know, the world. For Arendt meaning is a category that is inherently non-correspondent, and thus it is foreign to any “verification” efforts. Thinking is concerned with understanding what *cannot be known*. Even if your mental operations seem to say something unchallengeably “true” about reality, the dialogical thinking activity will show you “that you have nothing in your

grasp but perplexities, and the best we can do with them is share them with each other” (*LMI* 175). The friendly relation of the thinking ego’s mental interlocutors resists any univocal solution to the world’s perplexities, which might lead to ideological action, or evil. All the thinking activity as such can achieve is equivocal understanding. When actions are carried out on the basis of knowledge that has its root in the mind rather than in common sense, those actions, by enacting the non-apparent, act out nothingness and thereby destroy reality. The shallowness of the evildoer results from the fact that when his mind is dead in thoughtlessness, it has no alternative perspective from which to challenge its created world of “super-sense.” The actions of the thoughtless end up being destructive, but all they manifest is an inability to empathize and a penchant for speaking in clichés, rather than any blatant *superbia*. As Elisabeth Young-Bruehl puts it,

the thoughtless person who does evil is different, in Arendt’s terms, from the person who is wicked. A wicked person must overcome his thinking partner, silence all objections; the thoughtless person, who does not know that silent intercourse, hears no objections or has somehow ceased to hear objections.<sup>12</sup>

Interestingly, however, this citation provides a way into a final, and I think valid, critique of Arendt’s account of evil. Arendt does not in fact explain the “wicked person” as needing to negotiate the workings of the thinking ego at all, though she might have. What Young-Bruehl’s ostensible opposition of wickedness and thoughtlessness in fact accomplishes is to beg the question of just how the thoughtless person “somehow” hears no objections. Why is it not the case that the evil of thoughtlessness is in fact rooted in *superbia*, a prior overcoming of one mental interlocutor by the other so that the self can possess knowledge of the unknowable? If this was the case, then even the banality of

evil would be explainable in terms of human desire or motives, which would enable Arendt to talk about desire and motivation (perhaps reordered) in her account of political action (she does not, as we shall see below). To be satisfied with the perplexities that result from existing as a creature not responsible for its own or the world's being may sound like the obvious thing to do, but it is certainly not the proudest. It seems in fact that some—and from time to time, all—human beings refuse to continue in equivocation. The result of their univocity may indeed appear to be shallow, and it will also be destructive, as Arendt says. But it might be rooted in dissatisfaction with the limits, and the reality, of human knowledge. As Karl Barth says of human beings, in language interestingly resonant with Arendt's, "our *arrogance* demands that, in addition to everything else, *some super-world should also be known and accessible to us.*"<sup>13</sup> With respect to a requisite satisfaction with equivocation and perplexity, Barth states, "those who do not shun the contradiction have been hidden in God."<sup>14</sup> Certainly Barth has a Christian understanding of evil that is informed by the Eden story of *superbia*. But the question he raises for Arendt is whether such a prideful orientation of desire best accounts for evil-doing's requisite thoughtlessness. In fact Arendt does not well account for the *development* of thoughtlessness otherwise, and she may not be able to. Young-Bruehl's uncertain "somehow" reveals a lot here. In the next chapter I shall explore the implications of Arendt's understanding of conscience for her political thought. More specifically, I will first clarify the connection between Arendt's ontology and her concept

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<sup>12</sup> Elisabeth Young-Bruehl, "Reflections on Hannah Arendt's *The Life of the Mind*," 338.

<sup>13</sup> Karl Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, trans. Edwyn C. Hoskyns (New York: Oxford University Press, 1933), 44. Emphasis added.

<sup>14</sup> Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 41.

of political immortality, and then consider the challenges that the “paralysis” of conscience poses for Arendtian political action.

### **Chapter 3: Hannah Arendt's Political Ontology**

#### *I. Evil and Animality*

In the previous two chapters, I focused on Hannah Arendt's conception of evil, and particularly the ontological premise that connects her supposedly divergent accounts of totalitarian evil and Eichmann's evil-doing. For Arendt, as we have seen, totalitarianism is evil primarily because it posits an ideological world of "supersense" as a substitute for empirical reality, which in turn renders superfluous any perplexing features of the apparent world, and thereby justifies their brutal elimination. In the character of Adolf Eichmann, Arendt shows us that the individual evil-doer is such because of a curious "remoteness from reality," by which she means an inability to understand the world and his actions in it, except through thoughtless clichés. In *The Life of the Mind*, Arendt gives her most developed formulation of what she means by "reality," which helps explain why thoughtlessness is the precondition of evil-doing. Her premise, "Being and Appearing coincide," means that whatever is only *is* inasmuch as it appears to a variety of spectators, whose common vision confirms its objective reality. That each spectator has a unique perspective means "plurality is the law of the earth," and implies that univocal ideas can never adequately capture reality. Because the thinking activity as such functions in the manner of a dialogical friendship, its exercise prevents univocal cognitive prescriptions of action, which thus prevents Eichmannesque action on the basis of ideas or clichés.

To follow through on my original claim to derive a fuller understanding of Arendt's political thought from her conception of evil, I shall now shift my focus

somewhat, to the important connection between action and immortality in *The Human Condition*. In making this shift I will argue for the reliance of Arendt's political theory on an inversion of the very conceptual framework that she claims totalitarian evil sets for itself. I shall then explore the implications of her political thought in light of this conceptual reliance, and finish with the most problematic of these implications, when I flesh out the connection between the paralysis of conscience and the "freedom" of Arendt's political actor. In more general terms, in this chapter I will argue that Arendt's political ontology is based on a simplistic inversion of her account of evil ontology, and that this ironically leaves her political actor at a crippling remove from reality, somewhere close to Adolf Eichmann. But let us proceed slowly to this conclusion.

Given the negative ontological posture of evil in Arendt's view, it is not surprising that she asserts a corresponding negative relation between evil and worldly endurance. Concerning totalitarianism, she says, "nothing is more characteristic of the totalitarian movements in general and of the quality of fame of their leaders in particular than the startling swiftness with which they are forgotten and the startling ease with which they can be replaced" (*OT* 305). This inability to endure is an indirect result of totalitarianism's disdain for reality as it is beheld from a plurality of perspectives. Recall, for example, that totalitarianism targets the "mass man" because of his isolation from his fellow human beings, which entails his alienation from the common world. His corresponding lack of a capacity for experience makes the mass man capable of loyalty that is "total," incapable of dissent, yet devoid of the most sophisticated characteristics of human assent. In short, mass loyalty is "fickle," because it is not grounded in actual

human experiences. But rather than making a legitimate appeal to the diversifying human capacity for experience, totalitarianism's ideological approach to reality *embraces* the mass man, even to the extent of fabricating "something that does not exist, namely, a kind of human species resembling other species whose only 'freedom' would consist in 'preserving the species'" (OT 438). Against the apparent fact of human plurality and its attendant complexities for achieving loyalty, totalitarianism posits, and then actively verifies, the "higher" or more "natural" reality of human animality. The conception of humanity as one species among others excludes both the significance of individual distinction and the ability to sense and remember such distinction. In other words, such a conception trivializes human participation in worldly reality, thus revealing a connection between animality and evil, in Arendt's terms. This connection provides a way of understanding just how Arendt's political thought, with its explicit concern with immortality and the transcendence of biological "life," is shaped by her conception of evil.<sup>1</sup>

In *The Human Condition*, Arendt says that human beings are

'the mortals,' the only mortal things in existence, because unlike animals they do not exist only as members of a species whose immortal life is guaranteed through procreation. The mortality of men lies in the fact that individual life, with a recognizable life-story from birth to death, rises out of biological life....This is mortality: to move

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<sup>1</sup> Margaret Canovan has made much of the connection between Arendt's reflections on the centrality of animality in totalitarianism and her analysis of nature in *The Human Condition*, especially in Chapters 2-4 of *Hannah Arendt: A Reinterpretation of Her Political Thought*. Canovan notes in particular Nazism's reliance on racism, and by exploring Arendt's unpublished work on Marxism between *The Origins of Totalitarianism* and *The Human Condition*, she argues the consistency of Arendt's similar assessment of Stalinism. She writes that Arendt "found in Marxism an antihumanist materialism that seemed to her to cancel out individuality and reduce people to their physical constitution just as much as racism did" (40). Canovan concludes that out of this comes Arendt's association of the necessities of life and nature with the activity of "labor" in *The Human Condition*. I will develop the connection between Arendt's reflections on totalitarianism and her political theory in a similar fashion to Canovan, but focus more on Arendtian politics as a response to *evil*.

along a rectilinear line in a universe where everything, if it moves at all, moves in a cyclical order. (HC 18-9)

Her claim is that human mortality is evident in the tension between human individuality and the impersonal cycle of life, which recurs without bearing witness to human beings in the plural. Other species are not mortal, because they endure en masse; their actions do not explicitly reveal individual “life-stories.” Arendt believes that human beings as such have unique individuating capacities, making “cyclical-immortality” inadequate for them. That is to say, humans qua human are mortal, because their distinct life-stories are doomed to end when the cycle of nature determines them to die. Species move in cycles, but individuals move “along a rectilinear line.” Human immortality is therefore only possible via an extension of the rectilinear line beyond the confines of life’s cycle. Totalitarianism, for one, prevents this extension by reinforcing the mass individual’s world-alienation, which entirely blocks human individuality from making a perceived worldly appearance. In such a context, the rectilinear line cannot even begin, let alone be extended.

When Arendt attempts to formulate the meaning of the active life in *The Human Condition*, she seems to make it her goal to articulate a political alternative to totalitarianism’s mortalizing ontological posture. She ostensibly gets the most support in this regard from the ancient Greeks,<sup>2</sup> who prized immortality as “endurance in time, deathless life on this earth and in this world” (HC 18). Arendt interprets “deathless” to have meant liberation from natural concerns and parameters, which thus implied that

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<sup>2</sup> While Arendt is rather vague about her sources concerning these generally “Greek” ideas, she does cite Homer, Herodotus, and Heraclitus when she introduces the concept of immortality, as these authors all seem to have understood and taken seriously humanity’s unique capacity for great deeds. See HC 17-21.

immortalizing action could have nothing to do with “natural” behavior. For the Greeks, one could not be immortalized for behaving like an animal. Rather, immortality was possible only through individuating acts that could make lasting impressions on receptive spectators. This idea’s implication, as Arendt reads it, is that, “by their capacity for the immortal *deed*, by their ability to leave non-perishable traces behind, men, their individual mortality notwithstanding, attain an immortality of their own” (HC 19; emphasis added). Thus, while the story-making capacity for deeds is first of all the confirmation of human *mortality*, the ancient Greeks are exemplary because they intentionally took upon themselves this fact of human existence, and discovered their ability to transcend it by leaving traces behind. On the contrary, twentieth-century totalitarianism reinforced its adherents’ inability to witness and thus remember distinguishing deeds, and, in the concentration camps, attempted to phase out the very idea of the human individual. (One of the stages on the way to “total domination” was the “eradication of the moral person” in human beings, which entailed the impossibility of living a meaningful life-story [OT 451].) Totalitarianism tried to transcend mortality by obscuring it, by preventing any possible “rise” out of biological life. It is important to keep this in mind as we move along, that Arendt’s opposition of politics to “life,” ostensibly derived from “Greek” categories, is at the same time a direct inversion of certain characteristics of totalitarianism.

## II. *The Political Realm and Immortality*

In *The Human Condition*, Arendt delineates three basic “conditions” of human life: “life itself,” “worldliness,” and “plurality” (HC 7ff). To these conditions

correspond the activities of labor, work, and action, respectively. Labor functions within the cyclical metabolism of life and thus it is not immortalizing; work goes beyond labor to culminate in a durable and worldly—but impersonal—product; and only action immortalizes a distinct “who.” To this extent action is the highest and most human of activities, signifying the potential to distinguish oneself from the species at large. Arendt thus affirmatively paraphrases the ancient Greek notion that “only the best (*aristoi*), who constantly prove themselves to be the best and who ‘prefer immortal fame to mortal things,’ are really human; the others, content with whatever pleasures nature will yield them, live and die like animals” (HC 19). Politics becomes part of the discussion because, under normal circumstances, the chances of winning “immortal fame,” which demands that one be perceived and remembered for a distinguishing act, present themselves infrequently at best. That the Greeks could recognize immortality as a human possibility at all was due to Homer’s durable poetic record of the long-dead heroes of the Trojan War. But this record alone could not have been very encouraging about immortality as a general human possibility. Rather,

the very fact that so great an enterprise as the Trojan War could have been forgotten without a poet to immortalize it several hundred years later offered only too good an example of what could happen to human greatness if it had nothing but poets to rely on for its permanence. (HC 197)

Accordingly, the ancient Greeks conceived the *polis*, as a way “to multiply the chances for everybody to distinguish himself, to show in deed and word who he was in his unique distinctness” (HC 197). Arendt believes the polis mitigated the risk of life inherent in all action by making remembrance a reliable possibility, “capturing” an audience, so to speak: “It is as though the walls of the *polis* and the boundaries of the law were drawn

around an already existing public space which, however, without such stabilizing protection could not endure” (HC 198). Consequently, while actors had to forgo their biological concerns in order to distinguish themselves, the polis went some distance towards ensuring that such risks would not be in vain, that actors’ individual identities would indeed achieve immortalizing disclosure.

The Greek polis ensured a space for action’s appearance and perception, but this does not yet tell us much about immortalizing action itself, or the “shape” it takes as an alternative to totalitarian, animal behavior. Let me explain this comment briefly. Concerning the other two human activities, we know that labor does not disclose an individual, but only a member of the human species, and likewise that the products of work endure without disclosing their maker. As such, both labor and fabrication are inadequate answers to the fact of human mortality, even if fabrication is at least worldly in some sense. Arendt always associates “the *immortal* deed” instead with “the moment of action and speech,” making action and speech the essentially human responses to the unique predicament of mortality. She writes: “With word and deed we insert ourselves into the human world, and this insertion is like a second birth, in which we confirm and take upon ourselves the naked fact of our original physical appearance” (HC 176-7). Action and speech thus intentionally reaffirm the essentially apparent nature of human existence; in doing so, they disclose the individual whose peculiar identity was intimated in his physical birth. But so far, this allows us to say only that Arendtian politics is different from totalitarianism in its inverted political ontology. In other words, the polis as a space for immortalizing action is based not on a direct confrontation with the

murderous “shape” of totalitarian behavior, from which we could expect a discussion of concrete, alternative actions. Rather, because totalitarianism imposed on human beings the singular “shape” of species-behavior, Arendt believes that to escape its terms she can propose only (unqualified) distinction as the truly political alternative action. But I would suggest that this is unsatisfying even on Arendt’s own terms, for if totalitarianism’s evil ontology jettisoned the highest of human characteristics by substituting an idea of animality for reality, Arendt should be able, in opposing totalitarianism, to speak of such characteristics in terms of a “higher” mark of membership in humanity. A capacity for “distinction” seems all too banal in this regard, and thus far it comes without any reassuring construal of the likely results of its expression, or any articulation of how the eventual shape of the political realm, formed as it is by immortalizing, distinct performances, will satisfy something like a (non-biological) *human* aspiration. I do not think Arendt is oblivious to this problem, and accordingly she describes the human capacity for distinction in interesting, potentially constructive terms—for example, when she calls it a “capacity to perform miracles.” Let us now move on to consider the substance of these characterizations.

### *III. The Miracle of Action*

Concerning the “specific character” of action, Arendt claims only that without “the shining brightness we once called glory,” action becomes “one form of achievement among others” (HC 180). But while “brightness” seems a rather empty criterion, action does make a meaningful impact on the human world. Arendt suggests that the performances of actors “overlay” the world of tangible objects with a distinctly human

reality: “We call this reality the ‘web’ of human relationships, indicating by this metaphor its somewhat intangible quality” (*HC* 183). Political action occurs at this ontological level, which makes the web of relationships into the “page” upon which human life-stories are inscribed. For this reason, it is also the “bearer” of human immortality. Human beings must participate in this “web” if they wish to answer adequately to the fact of their existence. But the question is once again how to characterize such participation. Because the web of human relationships relates myriad unpredictable individuals to each other, “action almost never achieves its purpose; but it is also because of this medium, in which action alone is real, that it ‘produces’ stories with or without intention as naturally as fabrication produces tangible things” (*HC* 184). To enter into this reality does not, then, require sovereignty over the “results” of an action, which properly understood are not purposes anyway, but stories that accordingly “reveal an agent,” but not “an author or producer” (*HC* 184). To act must mean to become such an agent, whose role, Arendt believes, is further elucidated by the fact that in both Greek and Latin, “it seems as though each action were divided into two parts, the beginning made by a single person and the achievement in which many join by ‘bearing’ and ‘finishing’ the enterprise, by seeing it through” (*HC* 189).

Therefore, where totalitarianism actively reduces humanity to animality, the political realm as a place for immortalizing individuation is a place for—and here we are inclined to add, “mere”—beginners. For Arendt, however, the capacity to begin is of no small importance. Compared with the eternally recurring cycle of biological life, “beginning” is something like the fundamental principle of linearity. To begin is to

accomplish the peculiarly human exit from life's cycle of necessity. Seen from the perspective of that cycle, the beginning inherent in action "always happens against the overwhelming odds of statistical laws and their probability, which for all practical, everyday purposes amounts to certainty; the new therefore always appears in the guise of a miracle" (*HC* 178). This is precisely why action as such has nothing to do with the achievement of certain objective goals, for when the realm of human affairs is understood only in terms of the objective consequences of actions and reactions, and not of the inexplicabilities of performances, it takes on its own kind of statistical "naturalness." But action, in its non-objective, performative dimension, "interrupts the inexorable automatic course of daily life" (*HC* 246). The "miracle" is that, in the midst of calculable objective concerns, every action has an apparent, performative dimension, irreducible to the mechanics of objective achievement. But once again, in terms of action's "immortalizing" character, its opposition to life and so to totalitarianism, we are left only with the criterion of brightness, even if we now know that action shines most brightly in its "interruptive" capacity, or when it manifests what Arendt calls "the fact of natality, in which the faculty of action is ontologically rooted" (*HC* 247). With the hope of fleshing out action's interruptive capacity, let us now consider Arendt's non-Greek sources on "natality."

Human natality as the ontological root of action signifies the bestowal of "faith and hope" on the realm of human affairs, and for Arendt, "it is this faith in and hope for the world that found perhaps its most glorious and most succinct expression in the few words with which the Gospels announced their 'glad tidings': 'A child has been born

unto us” (HC 247). It is fascinating that the Gospels should so succinctly capture the immortalizing component of human worldliness for Arendt, despite their obvious relationship to the “worldless” religion of Christianity (HC 50ff). In fact, it is not just the Gospels’ general emphasis on birth and rebirth that catches Arendt’s eye; also of much interest to her is their construal of forgiveness, which she gives central importance in her own account of action (and which has a direct connection to natality). For Arendt, each of the three human activities needs redemption from certain inherent predicaments, and this is where forgiveness functions within action. The activity of labor is redeemed from its endless cycle of life by “worldliness, which is sustained by fabrication,” or the creation of objects that are not consumed by life (HC 236). Similarly, *homo faber*, or the human being as maker, is redeemed from the meaninglessness of means and ends, the inability of products of work to determine their own meaning, “only through the interrelated faculties of action and speech, which produce meaningful stories as naturally as fabrication produces use objects” (HC 236). Through action and speech, the human artifice becomes more than just a heap of objects. However, action is similarly problematic, for it carries within itself “the burden of irreversibility and unpredictability” (HC 233). Both aspects of this burden are the result of the stage upon which action is set, the web of human relationships, which ensures that every action has an irreversible ripple-effect, the course of which cannot be predetermined. But because action is the highest human activity, it cannot, like the other activities, require an external remedy for its dangerous characteristics; instead its redemption must be “one of the potentialities of action itself” (HC 237). Furthermore, action’s dangerous characteristics are part of what

distinguishes it from labor and work, which means the dangers can be mitigated, but not eliminated altogether. For Arendt, “the possible redemption from the predicament of irreversibility—of being unable to undo what one has done though one did not, and could not, have known what he was doing—is the faculty of forgiving” (*HC* 237). Although Arendt names “the faculty to make and keep promises” as the specific remedy for unpredictability, we can see in the foregoing quotation that forgiveness really pertains to both facets of action’s burden. By releasing an actor from the irreversible consequences of his action, forgiveness also directly acknowledges his inability to predict those consequences.

The “faculty of forgiving” has a direct connection to natality, and therefore it can potentially give substance to immortalizing action as an expression of the human capacity to perform miracles. Irreversibility is a burden rather than a boon of action because every action has unintended consequences that could possibly spark endless and endlessly vengeful reactions. Forgiveness breaks this potentially cyclical chain of consequences because it comes unexpectedly:

In contrast to revenge, which is the natural, automatic reaction to transgression and which because of the irreversibility of the action process can be expected and even calculated, the act of forgiving can never be predicted; it is the only reaction that acts in an unexpected way and thus retains, though being a reaction, something of the original character of action. (*HC* 241)

Perhaps in this contrast between revenge and forgiveness there lies a satisfying way to fill out the contrast between totalitarian evil and immortalizing politics. Vengeance is at least a potential manifestation of totalitarian evil, because it ascribes to the unpredictable realm of human affairs a certain kind of necessity. Rather than recognizing actors’

inability to predict the consequences of their actions, vengeance reads a calculable logic into contingent historical events, thereby utterly binding all subsequent actions to what came before them. As a result, revenge, like totalitarianism, “verifies” its unreal ideology. But while revenge “can be expected,” at least according to its own logic, forgiveness is totally unexpected, and thus it functions so as to disconfirm, rather than to verify, the reality of ideology. An action’s ripple-effect on the web of human relationships could swell interminably with the momentum of revenge if not for the act of forgiveness, which miraculously dissipates the wave it would more logically catch. And if we take Arendt seriously about “the process character of action” (*HC* 230ff), then we must assume that in some respect, every action is a reaction, and that “natality” is only really actualized in the mode of forgiveness. Forgiveness in this sense actually names the immortalizing component of action, the inauguration of a story that has no necessary relation to what came before. Based on this description of the interruptive capacity of forgiveness, its enabling of a new human reality freed from ostensibly “necessary” processes, most Christians would probably agree with Arendt that “the discoverer of the role of forgiveness in the realm of human affairs was Jesus of Nazareth” (*HC* 238). However, I think that exploring some differences on this point will reveal the banality even of Arendt’s use of terms like “revenge” and “forgiveness,” which is to say, the banality of her political theory as an alternative to totalitarian evil. Let me explain.

For Christians, we might say, the “discoverer” of forgiveness *himself* redeemed human affairs from their bondage to vengeance. He did this by revealing and enacting the appropriate human relation to the divine, reorienting the human world to its eternal

origin and *thereby* making immortality a human possibility, which the church proclaims is actualized through imitative obedience and the partaking of the Eucharist. The Christian account generally accords with Arendt's suggestions that in the self-contained human world, vengeance can indeed "be expected," while forgiveness is miraculous. But while Arendt has no reason to claim this expectancy, since she believes that forgiveness is actually more "human" than vengeance, Christians say that vengeance is the expression of disordered, self-contained human desire. By contrast the true fulfillment of human desire requires reorientation toward an external, authoritative object. Christians proclaim Jesus to be the mediator of this object, and accordingly the "shape" of his life represents the end toward which redeemed human action tends. Forgiveness is part of the shape of Jesus' life, and is thus at least a partial expression of human desire oriented toward its true, divine object. Forgiveness miraculously interrupts the human cycle of vengeance not simply because it is unexpected and hence displays a distinct appearance, but because it witnesses to an "other," but still a unified, object of desire. In Christian terms, then, miraculous human actions are somehow both incalculable *and* united in their integrity.

For Arendt, forgiveness is important because it begins a new process when it might have remained entangled in another, but this does not mean that forgiveness tends toward a certain object. Rather, forgiveness intentionally participates in worldly reality instead of giving the "necessary" equation of vengeance ontological primacy. Vengeance does not signify for Arendt a particularly evil object of desire, or even a problem of desire at all. Instead, the evil of vengeance is simply its dangerous functional necessity, which regardless of its content trivializes and so threatens to destroy the ontologically

primary world of appearances. In fact, given Arendt's ontology of appearance, the notion of an external "object" to which human action might be rightly oriented sounds just as dangerous as ideological action itself. The central importance of Jesus for Arendt is therefore his emphasis that "the power to forgive is primarily a human power: God forgives 'us our debts, as we forgive our debtors'" (HC 239n). The salience of this point is that if forgiveness is a *human* capacity, then action is saved from having an external redemption, which interestingly is the same thing as saying that totalitarian evil remains completely inverted. In other words, because Arendt cannot conceive of a difference between a totalitarian orientation to a "necessary" ideology and an obedient orientation to an authoritative object of desire, forgiveness can be significant only because it rejects necessity and saves a space for the appearance of shapeless brightness. When Arendt emphasizes that "the reason for [Jesus'] insistence on a duty to forgive is clearly 'for they know not what they do,'" she interprets it to mean that Jesus did not want to open the self-contained human cycle of vengeance to the mediation of a new "order," but only to bring the human world to its fullest, but still self-contained, potential (HC 239). In short, the lack of "content" in Arendt's account of the political realm is a direct result of her ontology's wholesale rejection of the reality of the non-empirical. Such ontological claims are rooted in her belief that evil in our century has resulted in a degradation of "being human" by explaining the apparent world only in terms of its relation to ideologies, which she believes is equivalent to a refusal to let the capacity for individuation *stand on its own*. Now the question is whether or not Arendt can make sense of action at all without an account of its desiring orientation, the answer to which

lies in the relation between freedom and conscience in her work, and particularly in what comes of the “paralyzing” function of conscience that we discovered in the last chapter.

#### IV. *Freedom and Conscience*

I shall now turn to Arendt’s essay, “What is Freedom?”,<sup>3</sup> both because her account of freedom constitutes her clearest refusal to determine the shape or proper orientation of immortalizing action, and also because freedom is ostensibly an enabling concept—i.e., freedom ought to be freeing. This is where we should be able to tell how Arendt’s conception of action fares without an account of desire and its orientation. Like most of the other “familiar” terms Arendt makes use of, she turns freedom into something unfamiliar for the sake of overcoming traditional “fallacies.” She claims in this case that a traditional mistakenness lies in the association of freedom with will-power. Arendt believes that since Paul and Augustine, the discoverer and first philosopher of the will, respectively, we usually imagine freedom to be the condition in which a human agent is able to *accomplish* whatever she *would*. That is to say, we conceive of freedom in terms of the self’s sovereignty over the surrounding world. Arendt believes that this conception cannot but spell doom for freedom, which is why “Christian will-power was discovered as an organ of self-liberation and immediately found wanting. It is as though the I-will immediately paralyzed the I-can, as though the moment men *willed* freedom, they lost their capacity to *be free*” (*BPF* 162). In other words, when humans *willed* their freedom, they willed that there be no conflict between the I-will and the I-can, such that “free” action would have all of and only its *intended*

consequences. This freedom's requisite ability to accomplish whatever the will wills, however, could not but be refuted by the human agent's actual relationship with the surrounding world, which is why such an idea effectively stopped the willing person from acting at all, or from what Arendt calls *being* free. For Arendt the achievement of goals belongs to the realm of making and so has nothing to do with action, which is always a *beginning*, carried through by others on whom the actor depends but does not control. Freedom thus cannot mean the state of "being able." In fact, "under human conditions, which are determined by the fact that not man but men live on the earth, freedom and sovereignty are so little identical that they cannot exist simultaneously" (*BPF* 165). What is freedom, then, and might it constitute an appropriately freeing remedy for the paralysis of freedom-as-sovereignty?

In opposition to the traditional association of freedom with will-power, Arendt says the freedom of action is "the freedom to call something into being which did not exist before, not even as an object of cognition or imagination, and which therefore, strictly speaking, could not be known" (*BPF* 151). To call something new into being in this way is the same thing as actualizing human natality, or enacting a true beginning. To *be* free is to do just that, namely, to give a performance that is distinguishing and immortalizing precisely because it is undetermined. Arendt writes: "Men *are* free—as distinguished from their possessing the gift for freedom—as long as they act, neither before nor after; for to *be* free and to act are the same" (*BPF* 153; Arendt's emphasis). On this account, action is not free because it accomplishes what it sets out to accomplish,

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<sup>3</sup> Hannah Arendt, "What is Freedom?" in *Between Past and Future: Eight Exercises in Political Thought*

but because as it displays something totally new, which did not previously exist even in the mind. Action is definitive of what Arendt means by freedom not because it restores the actor's sovereignty, but quite the opposite, because it is "free from motive on the one side, from its intended goal as a predictable effect on the other" (*BPF* 151).

At this point we can begin to see the connection between Arendt's concepts of freedom—the "liberation" of action from objects of cognition, be they motives or goals—and conscience. Recall that conscience has a disjunctive relationship to evil because it prevents behavior based on cognitive conclusions, which fail to affirm the ontological primacy of the apparent world. This is why after you engage in thinking, "if what you were *doing* consisted in applying general rules of conduct to particular cases as they arise in ordinary life, you will find yourself *paralyzed* because no such rules can withstand the wind of thought" (*LMI* 175; emphasis added). Interestingly, this paralysis bears a striking resemblance to political freedom for Arendt, where "action insofar as it is free is neither under the guidance of the intellect nor under the dictate of the will" (*BPF* 152). This requires a peculiar understanding of how exactly an actor comes to execute a free action, and we must now ask if there is anything in Arendt's account of freedom that turns conscience's paralysis into a substantive response to evil, or if her political thought is finally crippled by her ontology. In other words, can Arendt's conception of freedom, which consists in an actor's complete heterogeneity to his own motivations, be anything more than paralyzing?

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(New York: Penguin Books, 1968). Hereafter cited in text as "*BPF*."

Surprisingly, perhaps, Arendt does speak of action “springing” from something that she calls “a principle” (*BPF* 152). But she then more characteristically claims that principles inspire action “from without,” which means they do not operate as motives and cognition do; they do not orient an individual’s mind or will. Rather, “unlike the judgment of the intellect which precedes action, and unlike the command of the will which initiates it, the inspiring principle becomes fully manifest only in the performing act itself” (*BPF* 152). While every act is preceded by intellection and a command of the will, the inspiring principle of an action per se does not guide either of those processes, but rather, it is displayed only in the brightness and distinction of the actor’s performance. Therefore, there is a sense in which “principles” are of little importance to an actor herself; they cannot be seen or apprehended internally, prior to her act, but are instead displayed precisely when she acts and is unable to see her own appearance. The principle inspiring a particular performance can only be judged retrospectively by spectators who can see the whole picture. This is what Arendt means when she says, in *The Life of the Mind*, that the actor “depends on the spectator’s it-seems-to-me; he is not his own master, not what Kant would later call autonomous; *he must conduct himself in accordance with what spectators expect of him*, and the final verdict of success or failure is in their hands” (*LMI* 94; emphasis added). Consequently, an actor does not succeed through the execution of commands of the will that accord with a principle, but rather by performing in accordance with the vision of his spectators, who themselves decide on his “inspiration.” In fact, because of the operations of conscience, which destabilize any judgment of the intellect, the will always makes a command that is not deliberative but

purely decisive, which is to say that the will never “knows” what to command, except in cases of evil behavior when the will is in fact trumped by a cognitive prescription (*LMI* 213). But this can only raise the question of how Arendt’s concept of freedom is any less paralyzing than her characterization of Paul’s or Augustine’s. For why would the will ever make a command in the midst of its utter uncertainty? And why must Arendt prevent the actor from having legitimate, internal orientation to certain principles or authoritative objects, as a non-ideological remedy for the will’s paralysis?

The answer that is emerging in this chapter is that, rather than exploring several alternatives to the flawed ontology of totalitarian evil, Arendt simplistically inverts that ontology, so that any principles or ideas like justice, if they are not yet apparent, simply *are not*. The result is, at best, the political actor’s complete disconnection from his immortalizing “inspiration,” and at worst, his total paralysis. In the end this is because “Being and Appearance coincide” is a rather banal ontological claim, so that pursuing an immortalizing participation in Being, if such a “pursuit” was even sensible on Arendt’s terms, can be no more substantive than “pursuing appearance.” As such, even Arendt’s attempts to make use of words like “principles” founder in confusion. To give a counter-example, in Plato’s *Symposium*, Socrates claims that *eros* brings an actor into line with Being as “the beautiful,” the sight of which enables him “to engender not phantom images of virtue—because he does not lay hold of a phantom—but true, because he lays hold of the true.”<sup>4</sup> This virtue informed by “the true” allows the actor “to become dear to

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<sup>4</sup> Plato, *Plato’s “Symposium,”* trans. Seth Benardete (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001), 212a.

god and, if it is possible for any human being, to become immortal as well.”<sup>5</sup> Arendt cannot put forward such a notion of informed virtue, and I hope it is clear by now that this is because of her ultimately simplistic conception of evil. Arendt—understandably—so fears the degradation of the world of appearances that she cannot or will not conceive of a “laying hold of the true” that is experienced outside of simple empirical perception. Virtue *must* be diluted to “virtuosity” on her account, and virtuosity considered immortalizing only because it “shows up.” Arendt relies on the assumption that whatever is the brightest in the vision of the spectators will naturally be the greatest and the highest. If this were true, it might serve as a guarantee, from the other end, of the substance of political virtue. But there is nothing to assure us that spectators have this kind of vision, that they, if not the actors, have “laid hold of the true,” in light of which they can judge what they see. In fact, Arendt emphasizes that spectators’ judgments “are not arrived at by either deduction or induction; in short, they have nothing in common with logical operations,” but everything in common with “taste” (*LMI* 215). Here we return again to Arendt’s disdain for “logical operations,” and her apparent inability to conceive of informed judgment, like informed virtue, apart from dangerous and simplistic calculation. Though Arendt claims to derive her theory of aesthetic, non-ultimate judgment from Kant, Hans Jonas, for one, helpfully counters that “it is not the case that Kant simply made appeal to judgment. He also made appeal to the concept of the good.”<sup>6</sup> I suggest that Arendt refuses to ground “taste” in something like the good for the same

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<sup>5</sup> *Symposium*, 212a.

<sup>6</sup> See Hannah Arendt, “On Hannah Arendt,” in *Hannah Arendt: The Recovery of the Public World*, ed. Melvyn A. Hill (New York: St. martin’s Press, 1979), 312.

reason that she will not allow action any association with motives—i.e., because she ignores how evil’s attack on reality perverts the mind’s ability to see “the true” just as much as it obscures apparent reality from the senses.

Plato again provides a helpful critique of Arendt’s suggestion that “taste” is adequate to the task of bestowing immortality when something simply shines brightly in its eye. In the *Symposium*, the tragedian Agathon undoubtedly gives the virtuoso performance in his eulogy of Eros, for which “all those present applauded vigorously.”<sup>7</sup> Socrates himself comments on Agathon’s speech: “Who would not be thunderstruck on hearing the beauty of its words and phrases?”<sup>8</sup> Yet it would be absurd to declare Agathon’s performance the most “successful,” in an immortalizing sense. Socrates, in fact, specifically criticizes his fellow symposiasts for performing their eulogies of Eros with only an empty desire for virtuosity, or, in other words, without an erotic orientation toward truth. He says: “You assert that [Eros] is of this sort and that sort and the cause of so many things, so that he may seem to be as beautiful and good as possible—plainly to those who do not know, for this surely is not the case for those who do know—and so the praise turns out to be beautiful and awesome.”<sup>9</sup> Arendt seems to give her actors only the same motivation as Socrates’ fellow speakers, a desire to shine brightly, to appear “as apparently as possible,” for in the end, she suggests, immortality depends on being noticed and affirmed by spectators whose judgment of brightness is not determined by vision that is grounded in truth. Arendt’s articulation of conscience’s “paralyzing”

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<sup>7</sup> *Symposium*, 198a.

<sup>8</sup> 198b.

<sup>9</sup> 198e-199a.

response to evil thus applies equally to her conception of political action, which means that the free actor is bound rather than loosed in terms of his capacity for immortalizing action. Precisely at the moment that he actualizes his identity through free, undetermined action, Arendt's political actor is furthest from comprehending his own motivations, totally removed from any sense of reality that might inform his action. He can aim at immortality only by acting without aim, desire, *eros*.

#### V. *Critical Responses*

When it comes time to give an account of the general implications of Arendt's political theory and its corresponding weaknesses, many critics fail to point out her theory's simplistic and paralyzing reversal of evil ontology, and instead focus on its potential slide into subjectivism. Dana R. Villa claims that Arendt's political thought responds in large part "to the Platonic instrumentalization of action and its degradation of the world of appearances by self-consciously *aestheticizing* action," or, as I too have put it above, by assessing action "in terms of *performance*."<sup>10</sup> According to Villa, the emphasis on pure performance "raises the question of whether Arendt's anti-Platonism leads her...into an uncritical endorsement of agonistic subjectivity."<sup>11</sup> In other words, it raises the question of whether Arendt can explain the greatness of action without invoking its "true" *telos*, but also without resorting to a meaningless and violent notion of "victory" over rival subjects. Villa believes these questions can be answered with Arendt's own theory of judgment, which he says "limits an excessive agonism not by

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<sup>10</sup> Dana R. Villa, "Beyond Good and Evil: Arendt, Nietzsche, and the Aestheticization of Political Action," *Political Theory* 20 (1992): 276.

<sup>11</sup> "Beyond Good and Evil," 287-8.

abandoning the aestheticization of action but by *completing* it.”<sup>12</sup> Judgment mitigates the dangers of pure aestheticism by bringing valid meaning back into politics, though without re-instrumentalizing political action. Because Arendtian judgment must resonate across a plurality of spectators holding the event of a political act in common, it “displaces the locus of meaning creation from the virtuoso actor and/or the isolated spectator,”<sup>13</sup> thereby discouraging actors from seeking unqualified victory over each other. But the “validity” of Arendtian judgment depends only upon this plurality of spectators, and not on something “ultimate,” which means that judgments remain matters of taste, or that they “complete” rather than abandon the aestheticism of political action, as Villa puts it. Unfortunately, this argument bypasses Arendt’s paralysis of actors and neglects to address the dangers of giving even a plurality of spectators the task of creating meaning, especially when that meaning is to have no external referent. Villa does not tell us how, in preventing the actor from pursuing unqualified “victory,” Arendt can enable *any* other pursuit, or what (and why not agonistic competition?) would in fact accord with the vision of spectators. These problems of action and judgment are both rooted in Arendt’s reversal of totalitarian ontology, which is often straightforwardly embraced, by postmodern critics like Villa, as a standard disavowal of metaphysics. Such a disavowal may itself be haunted by the spectre of Agathon’s banal virtuosity; but that aside, Arendt’s political theory at least seems to be so haunted, and Villa’s reading of Arendt suffers for not addressing it.

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<sup>12</sup> “Beyond Good and Evil,” 288.

<sup>13</sup> “Beyond Good and Evil,” 292.

Not all critics attempt to rescue Arendt's aestheticism simply by restating her theory of judgment. For example, in her interesting book on aesthetic political experience, Kimberly Curtis attempts to fill out Arendt's political response to evil by reading an "ethical" dimension into it.<sup>14</sup> This approach at least holds the promise of breaking free of action's paralysis via some sort of injunction. Curtis begins from the fact that Arendt's work is shaped primarily by her experience of totalitarianism, and in particular by totalitarianism's destruction of "our sense of reality."<sup>15</sup> Like Villa, Curtis too suggests that Arendt responds to totalitarianism through an "aesthetic turn," which is fortified by a theory of communicable judgments that ostensibly rebuild our sense of reality precisely because they make no appeals to non-apparent "ultimates." When it comes to deliberating over judgments, appeals can only be made to the apparent world itself: "The politically relevant point is that there is no overarching truth to mediate here. The essence of politics is not about this; it is not, in its most elemental sense, an epistemic phenomenon."<sup>16</sup> For her part, however, Curtis acknowledges that Arendt's "conception of the public sphere as a space of appearances for beautiful words and deeds seems to be strangely devoid of content."<sup>17</sup> This suggestion indicates some recognition of the paralyzing dimension of Arendt's ontology of appearance, but Curtis thinks this lack of content can be remedied by reading Arendt's political ontology "ethically." She writes that Arendt's true aim in seeking a viable public realm is "to sustain and intensify

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<sup>14</sup> Kimberly Curtis, *Our Sense of the Real: Aesthetic Experience and Arendtian Politics*, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1999).

<sup>15</sup> *Our Sense of the Real*, 7.

<sup>16</sup> *Our Sense of the Real*, 14.

<sup>17</sup> *Our Sense of the Real*, 17.

our awareness of reality. And this is a profoundly ethical need.”<sup>18</sup> Because our “capacity to sense the real depends on a mutual provocation between apparent beings, which is aesthetic in nature,”<sup>19</sup> the ethical dimension must come in the form of an obligation to engage in this provocation. Appropriately, then, Curtis believes that conscience as Arendt articulates it does not just *prevent* the destruction of provocative appearances, but also

opens us out upon ourselves as plural beings and, we might say, conditions us to feel the pleasures of intensification that are brought by the plurality of voices arising from the duality inherent in the thinking ego. From this conditioning we become entwined in an obligation toward *whatever* will keep that plurality in being.<sup>20</sup>

This “ethical” thesis does not add much to the account of conscience that I gave in Chapter 2 above, since there too, whenever one acts, one must do so in such a way that plurality is not destroyed on the basis of univocal “ideas.” Curtis adds the dimension of an “obligating pleasure” that comes from active engagement in plurality, which we would assume means an obligation to act in the mode of self-display. Such an ethical injunction would not allow for paralysis. Action’s lack of substantive direction remains, however, for Curtis cannot explain adequately what it means to act in obligation to “whatever will keep plurality in being.” If conscience’s preventative character still functions by dissolving cognitive prescriptions of action, and if action is still free from the determinations of intellect and will, then we are left with no way of explaining how the actor could respond to an ethical injunction. Furthermore, the concept of an “obligating pleasure” introduces the idea that human beings have some kind of natural “yearning”

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<sup>18</sup> *Our Sense of the Real*, 19.

<sup>19</sup> *Our Sense of the Real*, 36.

<sup>20</sup> *Our Sense of the Real*, 58.

(Curtis even uses this word)<sup>21</sup> that is most properly, or at least most pleasurably, oriented toward the apparent world. As I have shown above, I have not encountered anything in Arendt's thought that would support this notion, at least in terms of politics, where human beings do not express generic human desires, but rather actualize utter uniqueness. Curtis might concede all of this, inasmuch as it relates specifically to her reading of Arendt and not her own creative project, but she would counter that Arendt's attempt to make us "attentive" to the real is indispensable to adequate political praxis, even if it is not prescriptive, since "our very capacity to formulate effective courses of action requires such vigilant and open attentiveness."<sup>22</sup> It may be true that attentiveness to the real is indispensable to political action, especially in light of totalitarianism. What this claim ignores, however, is that the specificity of Arendt's ontology is limiting, not freeing, when it comes to "formulating courses of action," a phrase I do not think Arendt could even use. The most important element in a general assessment of Arendt's political theory—here ignored once again—is a direct engagement with the vacuity of freedom, which in the end requires one to question the appropriateness of Arendt's political ontology, ultimately rooted in her peculiar account of evil.

While most critics, like Villa and Curtis, note the powerful shaping influence of totalitarianism on Arendt's political thought, George Kateb is one of only a few who suggest that the influence may be dangerous, particularly in its relation to political freedom.<sup>23</sup> Kateb astutely highlights the peculiarity of Arendtian political freedom, the

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<sup>21</sup> *Our Sense of the Real*, 36.

<sup>22</sup> *Our Sense of the Real*, 17.

<sup>23</sup> George Kateb, *Hannah Arendt: Politics, Conscience, Evil* (Totowa, New Jersey: Rowman & Allanheld, 1984).

fact that “Arendt is trying to purge the definition of right political action from inner determination.”<sup>24</sup> “Inner” signifies non-apparent, unreal determination, which is why action cannot be said to be “motivated,” and why “principles” inspire always from without—leaving us to wonder how they can be said to “inspire” at all. Kateb writes: “A political actor does not *pursue* honor, for example; he does all that he does honorably, or he does honorable deeds.”<sup>25</sup> Kateb admits that this is difficult to explain, and I have argued that we must conclude that the achievement of honor has only to do with the judgment of spectators, not with the prior orientation of actors. Because of Arendt’s disdain for the non-apparent as a criterion for action *or* judgment, Kateb concludes that “there is radical discontinuity between political action and everything else on earth and in heaven.”<sup>26</sup> Kateb realizes that this discontinuity is a result of Arendt’s belief that totalitarianism established the reality of its supersensual “heaven,” to the destruction of the apparent world; but he goes on to point out some ironic connections between Arendt’s theory of action and the totalitarian politics she so desperately wants to escape. Similarly to Arendtian political actors, Kateb suggests, totalitarian leaders “had no interests, no goals, no love of power for its own sake. They were profoundly anti-utilitarian.”<sup>27</sup> This insight resonates with the argument of this thesis: totalitarians were indeed removed from “reality” in such a way that they were also alienated from their authentic interests and loves, and yet Arendt’s political theory, by simply inverting totalitarianism’s ontological mistake, disallows a connection between inner and outer, “heaven and the

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<sup>24</sup> *Hannah Arendt*, 12.

<sup>25</sup> *Hannah Arendt*, 13.

<sup>26</sup> *Hannah Arendt*, 13.

<sup>27</sup> *Hannah Arendt*, 29.

world,” as Kateb puts it, and so it too ends up alienating political actors from their interests and loves, on the grounds that these are not “apparent,” and so not truly *human* and immortalizing. Unfortunately, Kateb takes the connection further by saying that just as totalitarian deeds are brutal, Arendtian action, with its lack of content, can only make sense in terms of an agonistic game, which “turns into a bloody caricature.”<sup>28</sup> This once again ignores the connection between freedom and conscience, where Arendt’s simplistic inversion of totalitarian ontology is the most crippling, but also where her response to evil as she conceives of it is the most effective. That is to say, just as conscience prevents Eichmannian idealism, so too will it prevent action that is calculated to achieve “victory” in an agonistic struggle. The Arendtian actor’s distance from his own motivations means that Arendt could never consistently be said to encourage a certain kind of action, and in fact she always refused to give herself this role.<sup>29</sup> My own argument has been that while Arendt’s interesting account of freedom (especially in its negative relation to totalitarian evildoing) saves her from Villa’s and Kateb’s “agonistic subjectivity,” it elucidates a different problem, namely the limits of her political ontology. On this account, therefore, Arendt’s political realm does not mimic totalitarianism in terms of brutality, but rather in terms of its separation from reality. Actors’ capacities for experience are not in fact restored by Arendt’s political ontology, but the damage is only reversed, and thus experience of “the true” or “the real” remains incapable of engendering virtue.

## VI. *Conclusion*

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<sup>28</sup> Hannah Arendt, 18.

<sup>29</sup> See “On Hannah Arendt,” 309-10.

In the present chapter I have attempted to use Arendt's understanding of evil, and particularly the ontology it reveals, to shed light on her political theory. The negative relation between evil and politics in Arendt's work becomes evident in the opposition of totalitarianism's "mortalizing" focus on animality to her own explicit concern with immortality and the transcendence of "life." Whereas totalitarianism sought to eliminate all human characteristics that exceeded participation in the human species, Arendt suggests that only through individuation can human beings fulfill their unique capacity for immortality. Contrary to the cyclical endurance of nature, truly human immortality requires the remembrance of linear individual identities, a reliable possibility only when distinguishing actions occur in a polis-like "space of appearance," where they are sure to be seen from a plurality of perspectives. Immortalizing action thus implies unique and spontaneous *performances*, not predictable behavior or calculated achievements. In this sense, action is the performative articulation of precisely those human characteristics destroyed by totalitarianism. If such performances truly break with the determinations of other human activities, they will take on a "miraculous" character, appearing in the form of a totally new beginning. But because even the intangible plane of human relationships, on which action as performance has its effect, can turn the "process character" of action into a cycle of vengeance, true beginnings must also occur in the mode of forgiveness, which releases a previous actor from his trespasses, and likewise the forgiver from the destructive bonds of revenge. At this point Arendt draws on Jesus of Nazareth, who, she believes, understood well the importance of forgiveness in the realm of human affairs.

The Christian counter-claim that Jesus represents a true authority, whose commands thus require obedience and engender humanity's reorientation to its divine origin, is helpful in revealing a curious lack of such substance in the orientation of the Arendtian actor. To explore this question more fully, I turned to Arendt's account of freedom and its interesting resonance with her understanding of conscience. Arendt's strange conception of freedom demonstrates her desire to liberate action from any internal determination, even those "determinations" usually associated with freedom, and this means that an action's inspiration is decided upon by judging spectators, but not experienced by the actor himself. For the actor, virtue means only virtuosity, a need to shine brightly in the eyes of the most spectators. And because Arendt's theory of judgment is not mediated by any external point of reference, nothing guarantees that the vision of spectators will hold in common any but the most banal elements in a performance. The *Symposium's* construal of Agathon's performance is an entirely pertinent prediction that a self-contained relation between actor and audience will result only in "phantom virtue." For Socrates, instead, a human being must relate himself erotically to beauty so as to eventually "lay hold of the true," and thereby engender immortalizing virtue. The reaction of spectators to this virtue does not confirm or disconfirm its authenticity, but rather reveals the state of the spectators' own erotic relations to beauty.

In the end, the relation of Arendt's political theory to her account of evil manifests itself in an exclusion of "humanly comprehensible motives" from immortalizing action, ironically also one of the key elements in the psychology of the evil

person. Arendt's account of evil astutely points out the misrelation of human beings to reality, but her ostensibly alternative notion of political freedom is unable to right the relation, because her conception of reality is too simplistic. In this, Arendt remains bound to totalitarianism's categories, despite her best efforts. Where totalitarianism affirms the exclusive reality of its ideological world, Arendt discounts the reality of ideas altogether. The resulting vacuity of freedom is indeed paralyzing for the political actor, preventing, as Arendt sought to do, the destruction of appearances via calculated action. Most critics miss the effectiveness of Arendt's argument on this point, and instead skip ahead to try and resolve the potential "agonism" of political action. The real problem is rather that Arendt maintains a "radical discontinuity between political action and everything else on earth and in heaven,"<sup>30</sup> as George Kateb puts it. Ultimately she does not seem to have believed that this "discontinuity" could be remedied in a non-totalitarian fashion. Plato, for one, disagreed. His argument aside, however, I have tried to show that Arendt fails on her own terms, that her political formulations, based on her construal of the metaphysical fallacies of totalitarian evil, cement rather than restore human beings' alienation from themselves and from reality, and thus forgo any substantive "miracle" of human action for a vacuous freedom.

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<sup>30</sup> *Hannah Arendt*, 13.

**Concluding Remarks: An Assessment of Arendt on Evil**

I mentioned in my “Introduction” that this thesis would seek to explore whether and how Hannah Arendt’s conception of evil can be informative about her political thought. Having now fulfilled this task, at least to some degree, I shall presently attempt to restate my argument in summary form, so as to be able to articulate more succinctly my critiques and affirmations of Arendt’s work, particularly in relation to her conception of evil.

In the first two chapters, I traced Arendt’s thoughts on evil over the course of her career. In Chapter 1, I was concerned with demonstrating the consistency of Arendt’s assertions of the “radical” nature of totalitarian evil and the “banality” of Adolf Eichmann’s motives. As I put it, our primary consideration on this point should be the fact that Arendt never meant by her use of “radical” to ascribe demonic motives to evildoers, but instead to highlight totalitarian evil’s utter heterogeneity to “humanly comprehensible motives,” heterogeneity unmatched even by our notions of the demonic. In the end this turns out to accord well with Arendt’s description of Eichmann, who, she says, never determined “to prove a villain.” Beyond this mere compatibility, however, I suggest that a substantive link between Arendt’s two characterizations of evil lies in their implicit ontological claims. Totalitarianism’s uniquely evil character is primarily its ontological posture, which is skewed so as to exclude from reality the apparent world and its spontaneous, unpredictable character, thereby rendering human beings, in the plural, superfluous. Totalitarianism substitutes for reality an ideological world of “supersense,” just as Eichmann acted in the world only by “sacrificing everything” to his idea.

Psychologically speaking, Eichmann's evil was his thoughtlessness, which caused him to privilege his cognitively-derived "reality" above the realm in which his actions really occurred. Thus, in his own mind, Eichmann was working "together" with the Jews toward a solution to a "mutual problem." From the first chapter we can therefore conclude that Arendt provides a way of thinking about a link between evil's negative ontological posture and its separation of human beings from their truly "human" motivations. What does this mean?

The attractiveness of totalitarianism's world of "super-sense" to the mass mind has everything to do with the mass individual's inability to understand himself as a subject anchored in a certain reality. The mass individual does not know *how* to act because he cannot trust the reality or understand the meaning of the objects that surround him. Isolated from his fellow human beings, he has no access to the "web of human relationships," which means he cannot interpret his place in it and from there articulate meaningful motivations. Instead of restoring meaning to the apparent world, which would require the reinstatement of a common realm and would engender truly human—i.e., truly spontaneous and unpredictable—agents, ideologies obscure appearances and cement the self- and world-alienation of mass humanity. The false "motivations" provided by ideologies are not *human* because they are not comprehensible (in retrospect) according to the judgment of *sensus communis*; rather, they are merely the logical outworkings of some all-comprehensive cognitive premise. Thus human beings like Eichmann could oppose, "in principle," the murder of Jews, and yet, because they understood their agency only in terms of an "idea," they could at the same time carry out

actions whose worldly consequences were of absolutely no import to them. Eichmann's logical striving for "solutions" coincided exactly with the real-world creation of death camps, but he could not understand the connection. Humanly speaking, his *actions* were unmotivated. Arendt's subsequent work on evil does much to address the psychological root of world-alienation in the evil person, by pursuing the theme of thoughtlessness and articulating an account of conscience that prevents the destruction of appearances. It is important to keep in mind, however, that originally she construed evil also as a problem of motivation, which requires her to demonstrate how a restored connection to "reality" can furnish truly human motives. As my third chapter makes clear, I believe Arendt's account ultimately fails to right this wrong. Let us now reconsider the path Arendt takes in her explanation of "thoughtlessness," in order to determine where motives got lost along the way.

When Arendt, late in life, sought to continue her reflections on evil, she decided to revisit and follow through on the connection between thoughtlessness and evildoing that she had discovered in the person of Adolf Eichmann. This time she prefaced her account of thinking's disjunctive relationship to evil with the explicit ontology on which it is based, namely, her argument that "Being and Appearing coincide." From this assertion she concludes that thinking is an activity withdrawn from reality, which deals with remembered images of real appearances, but not with truer or more *real* "things in themselves." Peculiar to the thinking activity is a need to reason dialogically about whatever presents itself to the senses, but in order to understand its "meaning," not its truth. The quest for meaning is non-terminal as such, since no final line can be drawn

between real appearances and the “nowhere” of the thinking ego, without doing violence to reality. True thinking itself prevents such dangerous termination, because it amounts to a dialogue between friends, incapable of utter resolution except when the friendship collapses. Thinking thus prevents any relation between ideas and action in the world, and this destabilization of calculated behavior Arendt calls conscience. But conscience unfortunately remains limited to prevention or paralysis, the possibility of its positive contribution being excluded by the same ontological claims through which Arendt seeks to subvert totalitarian evil. In other words, because Arendt makes the ontological primacy of appearances her fundamental premise, thinking’s disjunctive relationship to evil can have nothing to do with the mediation of thought-objects, which do not appear and are thus unreal, to the apparent world. Thought’s function can only be to dissolve cognitive prescriptions of action, which, because of the fact of plurality, are never as correct as they seem.

Arendt’s destabilization of calculated behavior expresses, I think, the final limitations of her account of evil, especially inasmuch as it prevents her from fulfilling her own original claims. Arendt says that evil divorces people from human motivations altogether. She then demonstrates effectively how a totalitarian approach to knowledge is at the root of evil’s perversion of human motives, because such an approach makes a fallacious attempt to reach beyond reality as it is given and confirmed in commonness. But rather than address what exactly happens to human motives under totalitarianism, or what is peculiar about its approach to knowledge, she simply inverts totalitarian ontology, and—with her account of conscience—disables thinking from going “too far” ever again.

What this means is that conscience indeed sees the world in a non-totalitarian manner, which allows its subject to experience and understand authentic appearances without “knowing” them destructively, but also that it does so without providing restored access to non-totalitarian motivations, or at least without giving us any resources for explaining what such motives would look like or how they would function. This becomes clearest in Arendt’s more political work, where her attempt to articulate the non-totalitarian “inspiration” of immortalizing action, in terms of the human subject’s situatedness in a meaningful context, is the most sustained, but also the most confusing without an understanding of her account of evil. I believe that the failure or banality of this sustained attempt ultimately reveals the mistakenness of Arendt’s approach to evil, and particularly her misreading of its perversion of human motives. In brief, her claim that evil motives are inhuman simply because they are oriented by something “beyond” the apparent world misses the *nature* of their orientation, or rather, I would suggest, misses their *superbia*. This disables the Arendtian subject from understanding her actions in terms of her desiring orientation, because such a notion has been thrown out wholesale with totalitarianism’s ultimately very specific “instrumentalization” of action. I shall return to this critique after briefly re-exploring the political implications of Arendt’s ontology.

In the third chapter, I established and fleshed out a connection between Arendt’s assessment of totalitarianism and the starting point for her own reflections on politics. Arendt suggests that totalitarianism’s lack of worldly stamina is related to its conception of humanity as a species, and on that same note, she begins her political formulations by

opposing immortality to biological “life.” What becomes important almost immediately in Arendt’s discussion of political immortality is the human being’s ability to distinguish herself from the species, or more simply, the human capacity for individuation. Human beings are unique among other species because they have capacities (action and speech) that bring into being individual life-stories, whose linearity stands against the cyclical movement of biological life. Immortality, because it requires an extension of the linearity of human life through common remembrance, is necessarily a *political* concept, in the sense of Arendt’s interpretation of the Greek polis as a place for the performance and perception of distinguishing actions. In this respect, the polis is the antithesis of totalitarian death camps, which, as the “central institution” of totalitarianism, set out to eliminate both the human capacity to act in such a way as to manifest an individual story, and the human capacity to recognize one’s fellow men and women as having individual identities at all. In human terms, the camps sought to prove that their victims “never existed,” while the political realm properly makes possible and then prolongs its members’ existence. As the outworking of evil, totalitarianism has a particularly murderous “shape,” but political action as Arendt construes it is distinct from totalitarian behavior because it is birthed in an ontologically correct posture, *not* because it has a discernibly opposite shape. Totalitarianism’s inclination to impose structures on human spontaneity means that Arendt will not try to fit immortalizing action into a unified paradigm. However, it also means that she really cannot say much about action beyond the important distinctiveness of performances.

What she does say beyond this, however, suggests some promise for the restoration of human motivations to actors. I claimed above that evil's heterogeneity to "humanly comprehensible motives" has something to do with the evildoer's isolation from his fellow human beings, which implies his inability to comprehend his own subjectivity, or in other words, his lack of access to the meaning of his context and his situatedness in it. Arendt helpfully suggests that political action leaves its trace on the world in the form of a "web of human relationships," an intangible layer of meaning that overlays the world of otherwise incomprehensible objects. To act means to participate in this web, or to engage intentionally in meaningful reality. To so engage means to orient oneself (though Arendt cannot quite put it this way) according to the meaning of past performances, or in Arendt's terms, to resist orienting oneself by the unreality of cognitive conclusions. Authentic participation will thus appear in the world as a "new beginning," an unpredictable performance that, as such, is unrelated to what preceded it, or only related in the mode of forgiveness, as I have argued above. To act is to refuse calculation, and therefore, vengeance. Arendt's reading of Jesus on forgiveness accordingly emphasizes what she takes to be his concern to make forgiveness a self-contained human possibility, based on no "unreal" knowledge. I offered another possible interpretation of Jesus, as a model of properly-ordered human desire, the imitation of whom entails both a relinquishment of the right to calculate, *and* an obedient orientation to an external object of desire, which can give even diverse human actions motivational integrity. For Arendt, however, action must provide its own redemption, which is to say, its role as a political alternative to totalitarian evil cannot be founded on an object of

desire that is “beyond” the diverse appearances of the public realm. Such a structure of desire, with its suggested “instrumentalization” of action to a *telos*, cannot but intimate totalitarianism, on Arendt’s account. The question with which I ended the third chapter, and to which I shall now return, is whether this leaves Arendt with any resources for explaining not just the restoration of humans’ ability to “sense the real,” as Kimberly Curtis puts it, but also the restoration of properly human motivations.

The difficulties of Arendt’s political theory are nowhere more blatant—and for the purposes of this thesis, instructive—than in her consideration of freedom. That is to say, the peculiarities of Arendt’s conception of freedom are best explained in terms of her understanding of evil, or so I have argued. Arendt claims that the traditional (Christian) association of freedom with will-power implies freedom-as-sovereignty, and she argues that such a notion of freedom had to be defeated by “the fact that not man but men live on the earth” (*BPF* 165). Freedom cannot mean sovereignty because human beings are so clearly not sovereign over the world that surrounds them. Arendt suggests that this mistakeness about freedom led to the paralysis of human beings, their loss of ability “to *be free*.” I think it is appropriate for us to add here that freedom-as-sovereignty, with its implication that freedom is confirmed via the *achievement* of calculated goals, distracted humans from their miracle-working capacity to begin something totally new. For Arendt, accordingly, a proper understanding of freedom, one that reinforces humans’ immortalizing potential, says that freedom involves calling “something into being which did not exist before, not even as an object of cognition or imagination” (*BPF* 151). This is where we see Arendt explicitly abandon the attempt to use motivation or desire as a

way of giving action (which she calls the most “human” of capacities) any unifying integrity. Indeed, she claims action is both “free from motive on the one side, from its intended goal as a predictable effect on the other” (*BPF* 151). This suggests that Arendt cannot conceive of a difference between the Eichmannian use of ideas to calculate action, and the influence on action of any motivations whatsoever. As a result, neither the totalitarian functionary nor the Arendtian actor is animated by humanly comprehensible motivations.

At this point, the connection between freedom and Arendt’s account of conscience becomes clearer. Just as conscience “paralyzes” calculated action (*LMI* 175), freedom, or the immortalizing, performative dimension of an action, is totally heterogeneous to the actor’s aims (apparently only conceivable as calculations). When Arendt speaks of “inspiration,” rather than “motivation,” she goes to great lengths to emphasize that an inspiring principle does not work from within, but rather is evident only in the performative act itself, and must therefore be decided upon by spectators. Accordingly, the closest Arendt comes to discussing the proper reasons for, or aims of, action, is to say that the actor “must conduct himself with what spectators expect of him, and the final verdict of success or failure is in their hands” (*LMI* 94). In the third chapter, I raised the alternative account presented in Plato’s *Symposium*, where spectators vigorously affirm the most unabashedly spectacular performance, but also the one that has the least substance. In contrast, Socrates, who professes to be erotically oriented towards the beautiful, in which a person can engender true virtue—and who refuses simply to render spectators “thunderstruck,” as Agathon does—is applauded only by

“some.” This counter-argument does not speak primarily to Arendtian actors to dissuade them from a calculated orchestration of affirmation, since she adequately secures actors even against that calculation. Rather, it speaks to her political theory as a whole, inasmuch as the self-contained, “non-ultimate” judgment of spectators ostensibly saves Arendtian politics from total banality, but without “re-instrumentalizing” action, as Villa puts it. Plato seems to suggest that a self-contained audience simply has no reason to affirm substantive virtue. In the end, then, as I have it, Arendt’s political theory fails as an alternative to totalitarian evil in that the manner in which it rectifies human beings’ ontological posture keeps them from understanding themselves and their actions in reality, and even paralyzes them in equivocation. Arendt’s difficulty is finally that human beings experience their desiring orientation inwardly, or somehow *beyond empirical perception*, even if they are oriented by an “external” object. Where might we locate a point in Arendt’s account from which to make a few brief alternative formulations?

I think we must look primarily at Arendt’s explanation of evil motivations. She says early in her career that evil is devoid of “humanly comprehensible motives,” and then later that the evildoer as she interprets him is not motivated by *superbia*, but is instead mired in banal thoughtlessness. At the end of the second chapter, I challenged Arendt’s explanation of the development of thoughtlessness, intending to raise the question of how exactly the dialogue of the thinking ego collapses prematurely. This seems to me a very significant point. Arendt’s claim that evil is not a problem of human desire forces her to conclude that the evil of totalitarianism and of Eichmann’s

psychology lies simply in the fact of their idealism, which is to say that evil's negative ontological posture consists simply in its orientation toward the non-apparent. This means that immortalizing action, inasmuch as it is the properly human opposition to the cycle of life, is immortalizing only because it is *not* oriented toward the non-apparent. Hence Arendt's radical exclusion of heaven from earth, in George Kateb's terminology, and hence the emptiness of her description of action as the highest articulation of "the human." On the other hand, if we say that evildoing is rooted in a perversion of human desire, we can give more sophisticated accounts of both the development of thoughtlessness and the alternative to evil. We might say, for example, that thoughtlessness as the premature unification of the two-in-one results from a perverted desire for the true, which seeks above all to possess and master it. In Platonic terms, rather than pursuing the object of one's desire erotically—i.e., by loving that which one lacks—evil prescribes the self-fulfillment of desire by silencing one mental interlocutor and thus becoming the unified master of at least an image of the true, via the achievement of cognitive certainty. This would be to agree with Arendt that the totalitarian approach to the true does not in fact achieve its aim, but it would also be to disagree with her claim that this is simply because of totalitarianism's insistence on going beyond appearances. Rather, totalitarianism's pretension to knowledge of a world of "super-sense" proves to be a phantom world, and its claim to go "beyond" proves to be an exercise in self-containment, not because of the inherent fallaciousness of all things "beyond," but because totalitarian evil pretends to possess and master what it in fact desires and lacks.

An alternative approach to evil, and an appropriate ontological posture, might therefore be achieved through the authentic enactment of desire, which accordingly refuses to give itself its own, false object, but rather accepts, by affirming its need, the authority of its true object, which can therefore only be received, not possessed or mastered. Such desiring action *cannot* abandon the apparent world for the cognitive one, for that is to remain self-contained. Instead, true desire draws its subject toward appearances, which, it discovers, participate in something beyond or larger than themselves—the true object of desire, or what Diotima in the *Symposium* calls “the perfect end.”<sup>1</sup> On Arendt’s account, Plato’s notion that *eros* pursues “the beautiful,” which cannot be wholly contained in any particular, empirical appearance, raises all kinds of “ontological” problems. To take one’s direction from an object of desire that is not perceived in Arendt’s “threefold commonness,” is to come dangerously close to Eichmann’s idealism. Interestingly, however, as I have been suggesting, only a certain perverse idealism, which tries to satisfy its desire with its own creation, can afford to shut out the apparent world. A correct understanding of desire, on the other hand, demands one’s engagement with the apparent world, and precisely the kind of engagement that lets appearances appear of their own accord, for if they participate in that which the subject desires and lacks, then to control or manipulate them is again to be falsely *self*-satisfied.

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<sup>1</sup> *Symposium*, 211b. Though I will stick with Plato as my counter-example, there are also several recent Christian examples of this kind of thinking. For example, Jean-Luc Marion develops an account of iconography in which he suggests that the icon is important because it is a “visible” that refers the gaze that falls on it to that which is beyond, and which the gaze is truly seeking. See *God Without Being*, trans. Thomas A. Carlson (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991). Also, Stanley Hauerwas has recently proposed a conception of “natural theology” in which we come to know the truth of creation through our worldly encounters with “witnesses” to Christ, in whom Christians believe God creates and redeems the

This is the substance of Socrates' critique, through Diotima, of Aristophanes' suggestion that eros is love of one's own. Diotima says, "I suspect that each does not cleave to his own (unless one calls the good one's own and belonging to oneself, and the bad alien to oneself) since there is nothing that human beings love other than the good."<sup>2</sup> And furthermore, those who love that which is already *their own* cannot be said to be in very good shape, erotically, since "he who does not believe that he is in need does not desire that which he does not believe he needs."<sup>3</sup> Therefore, a certain kind of love of one's own indeed subverts eros, on Diotima's account, but because eros is in the end "common to all,"<sup>4</sup> we can say that these self-lovers are erotically dysfunctional without claiming they are devoid of human desire completely. Properly ordered eros seeks "engendering and bringing to birth in the beautiful,"<sup>5</sup> which means it is oriented toward the beauty in beautiful things, that "perfect" beauty in which "all other beautiful things" share.<sup>6</sup> And since Diotima has already critiqued the self-contained and disordered eros of self-love, she can assure Socrates that one who has seen "beauty itself" will not remain enclosed in his mind, oblivious to the world like Adolf Eichmann. Since eros loves that which it lacks, even its movement "inward," or "beyond appearances," is always a movement *towards* the world and being. This re-ordering of desire is the true alternative to evil, and Arendt's account lacks its capacity to restore both a correct ontological posture *and* a connection to the highest human motivations, which do not, simply by

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world. See *With the Grain of the Universe: The Church's Witness and Natural Theology* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2001).

<sup>2</sup> *Symposium*, 205e.

<sup>3</sup> *Symposium*, 204a.

<sup>4</sup> *Symposium*, 205a.

<sup>5</sup> *Symposium*, 206e.

functioning as desires that mediate between “heaven and earth,” thereby destroy the apparent world. Diotima puts the challenge to Arendt best:

“Do you believe,” she said, “that life would prove to be a sorry sort of thing, when a human being gazes in the direction of the beautiful and beholds it with the instrument with which he must and is together with it? Or don’t you realize,” she said, “that only here, in seeing in the way the beautiful is seeable, will he get to engender not phantom images of virtue—because he does not lay hold of a phantom—but true, because he lays hold of the true; and that once he has given birth to and cherished true virtue, it lies within him to become dear to god and, if it is possible for any human being, to become immortal as well?”<sup>7</sup>

I am by no means a qualified apologist for or even interpreter of Plato. I simply use the *Symposium* because it offers an instructive alternative to Arendt’s conception of the human achievement of virtue and immortality, and one that operates on the basis of human desire and its relation to that which is “always being.”<sup>8</sup> Ultimately I believe Arendt’s account of evil misses evil’s perversion of human desire, which eventuates in her limiting ontology of appearance. Because totalitarianism pretends to go beyond the world but only destroys it, she concludes that going beyond is destructive, or at least that desiring action is too much like means-ends calculation to be immortalizing in a sense that opposes evil’s attachment to ideology. I have suggested that thoughtless evildoing represents the subversion of desire, which implies need, via the violent triangulation of the two-in-one for the sake of mastering and possessing *an* object, even if it is not *the* object of desire. Arendt’s account of evil is helpful inasmuch as it brings to light the fact that totalitarianism’s claimed “super-sense,” and the evildoer’s ostensible “idealism,” represent nothing but “phantom worlds” and “fictions.” In this, Arendt is also usefully

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<sup>6</sup> *Symposium*, 211b.

<sup>7</sup> *Symposium*, 212a.

<sup>8</sup> *Symposium*, 211a.

critical of a certain kind of epistemology in general, since she so well captures and explores the problematic logicity of all “isms,” their incongruity with a world in which plurality is fundamental. However, she allows her discovery in this regard to determine her ontology in such a way that her understanding of all prior “determinations” of action becomes clouded. This clouded understanding results in her vacuous notion of freedom and her paralyzing account of conscience, which finally give her political actor too much in common with Adolf Eichmann. Without understanding their desires, neither Eichmann nor the Arendtian actor can engage in the pursuit of immortalizing virtue, which means that both are left without an adequate alternative to evil.

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