

HANNAH ARENDT'S CONCEPTUALIZATIONS OF EVIL

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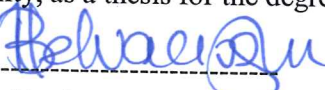
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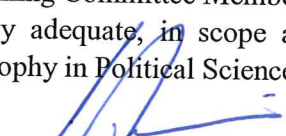
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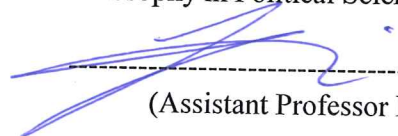
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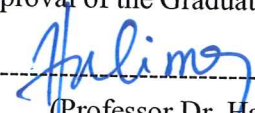
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ABSTRACT

HANNAH ARENDT'S CONCEPTUALIZATIONS OF EVIL

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We owe to Hannah Arendt the notion of “radical evil” and “the banality of evil”. The word “evil” appears with a surprising frequency in Arendt’s work, even though she never wrote a theory of evil and she was not a moralist. Arendt was not a systematic thinker. In this thesis I reconstruct Hannah Arendt’s accounts of evil by presenting them in relation to other fundamental concepts for which Arendt is well-known. My argument is that in order to understand the many nuances of the concept of evil that feature in Hannah Arendt’s body of work we need to look at the relation between evil and freedom. As Arendt’s two notions of freedom (I-can of the new beginning and I-will of the freedom of will) point towards two different conceptualizations of evil (radicality of evil and the banality of evil), it is the reality of evil which serves as the linchpin that helps us see the relation that exists between these two conceptualizations.

Keywords: Hannah Arendt, Evil, Freedom, Action, Judgment, Morality

ÖZET

HANNAH ARENDT'İN KÖTÜLÜK KAVRAMSALLAŞTIRMASI

Shkreli, Etrit

Doktora, Siyasi Bilimi ve Kamu Yönetimi Bölümü

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Siyaset düşüncesindeki kötülüğün sıradanlığı ve radikal kötülük kavramlarını Hannah Arendt'e borçluyuz. Kötülük kavramı Arendt'in eserlerinde oldukça sık karşımıza çıkmasına rağmen, Arendt'te bir kötülük kuramı bulmak mümkün değildir, ayrıca Arendt'i ahlak kuramcısı olarak düşünmek de yanlış olacaktır. Onun düşüncesinde dört başı mamur sistematik bir düşünce silsilesini takip etmek de mümkün değildir. Bu tez Arendt'in kötülük anlayışını yine Arendt tarafından ortaya atılmış diğer önemli kavramlar ışığında sistematikleştirerek ortaya koymaktadır. Bir çok farklı anlamda, zaman zaman birbirine zıt ya da çelişkili biçimlerde karşımıza çıkan kötülük kavramı Arendt'in özgürlük fikri ile beraber düşünüldüğünde kendi içinde tutarlı bir anlam kazanabilmektedir. Arendt'in iki farklı özgürlük anlayışı (yeni bir şey başlatma imkanı olarak özgürlük ve özgür irade) yine onun tarafından ortaya atılmış olan iki farklı kötülük anlayışı (kötülüğün sıradanlığı ve radikal kötülük) ile örtüşmektedir. Tüm bu ikilileri bir birine bağlayan en temel kavramsallaştırma da kötülüğün gerçekliği anlayışında açığa çıkmaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Hannah Arendt, Kötülük, Özgürlük, Eylem, Muhakeme, Ahlak

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INTRODUCTION

This thesis is a study of the political thought of Hannah Arendt in terms of her conceptualizations of evil. The notion of radical evil transcended the sphere of philosophy where it originally appeared and entered the sphere of political science through Arendt's first book *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1950). Almost a decade and a half later another concept of evil, signaled by the notorious phrase "the banality of evil," was introduced by Arendt to our political vocabulary through her book *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (1963). The word "evil" persistently recurs throughout Arendt's work, whether she is referring to political or philosophical evil. Arendt never wrote a theory of evil, but her formulations of the radicality and banality of evil have been at the heart of the controversy that has surrounded her work even during her lifetime.

This study offers a reconstruction of Arendt's accounts of evil and argues that in order to understand the many nuances of the concept of evil that feature in Hannah Arendt's body of work we need to investigate the relation between evil and freedom. Arendt did not only produce two accounts of evil, she also adopted two interpretations of the concept of freedom. This study shows that Arendt's two notions of freedom (I-can of the new beginning and I-will of the freedom of will) point towards two different conceptualizations of evil (radicality of evil and the banality of evil), however it is the reality of evil which serves as the linchpin that helps us see the problematic relation that exists between these two conceptualizations.

There are two ways in which evil can relate to freedom in Arendt's writings. The first is the existential relation. Evil in this relation is radical and utterly destructive. It

poses an existential threat to the relationship that made possible its very existence. The notion of freedom that we will be dealing with is freedom as the new beginning. This notion, whose origin Arendt traces to Saint Augustine, in Arendt's writings gains an existential dimension and transforms into the human capacity for both good and evil. Freedom understood as new beginning involves novelty and actualization. Arendt appears to be interested in the theoretical relationship between freedom and evil to the extent that these ruminations help her understand the reality of evil. Therefore in order to appreciate the existential dimension of the relation between evil and freedom we need to explore the parallels between radical evil and political action.

Evil is commonly considered to pertain to the field of morality; however the first relation presents a conundrum with regard to morality. How are we to think of individual responsibility in the context of radical evil which appears, for lack of a better word, as a systemic evil? Arendt is aware of this problem and we will see that she attempts to confront it through a second formulation of the relation between evil and freedom. I have called this second relation the moral-political relation. Thus, even though the concepts involved are again evil and freedom, the operating definitions for them change. Freedom in this relation is the freedom of the will, where our will serves as an arbiter between good and evil; it is the freedom of choice which brings along responsibility. But we see that Arendt moves beyond this moral dimensions and adds to it the political dimension. We do not only choose between good and evil, we also choose sides and are therefore politically responsible for our choice.

At this point, we are confronted with a great discrepancy with regard to the reality of evil, i.e. the fact that evil exists. While the evil in the first account is active, energetic

and destructive, the evil in the second account is marked by passivity. The wording Arendt uses for the banality of evil is the inability to think, thoughtlessness, failure of conscience, and lack of judgment. Approaching evil in terms of deficiency is nothing new in philosophy. But this approach makes Arendt contradict her own interpretation of the philosophical tradition, i.e. philosophers tell us that evil does not possess real existence and thus we have been left vulnerable to evil (Arendt, 1978a).

The matter becomes all the more complex when we consider the fact that Arendt was not a systematic thinker. The obvious implication is that she may and does contradict herself. The inconsistencies in Arendt's thought have produced two responses. The first is that we should refrain from the temptation of trying to build a system out of her ideas because this endeavor would distort them. The second is that there is nonetheless a web of concepts that are systematically interwoven in her writings. Arendt herself seems to associate being systematic with philosophers and implies that writing about politics is inconsistent with the creation of systems of ideas. In my reading of Arendt, I see the inconsistencies in her thought as integral to her theorizing because, as I will be explaining below, Arendt's prerogative is beginning and being truthful to experience rather than being internally consistent as a thinker.

In collecting the material for this thesis (I initially made a catalog of all the instances where Arendt used the word "evil") I have followed Margaret Canovan's advice: "what we need to do is to follow her thought trains, to situate her best-known works within them and to show how they were related to one another." The advantage of this method, as it will become clear in the exposition of the chapter in this thesis, is that it allows us to see the origins as well as the development of a particular concept in Arendt's

body of work. This is not a chronological or historical study: it is, in effect, a rational reconstruction (Rorty). This is why I use the present tense. The disadvantage of this method is that it relegates context and chronology to a secondary position. Chronology is not to be dismissed but need not be primary when we approach Arendt's writings. What remains static through Arendt's body of work are the questions and themes she grapples with, rather than the answers and explanations she comes up with (Balibar, 2007: 727-8). The advantage of this reconstruction is it gives Arendt a certain credit, theoretically, and asks whether there is anything we can take from her struggle to think through the concepts of evil.

Evil is one of the themes to which Arendt keeps returning; this means that it needs to be traced throughout her work if we are to understand what Arendt is doing with it. The only way we can make sense of the phrases 'radical evil' and 'the banality of evil' is if we see what Arendt meant by evil, what criticisms she made of established theories of evil, and what her actual theory was about how the evil she discerned in her time should be dealt with. This last part requires me to consider not only what she said about evil: it requires me also to turn to some of the other themes running through her writing—specifically, 'freedom', 'action', and 'judgment'—to see how there is a sense in which we can characterize her entire work as a response to a distinctively modern version of the problem of evil.

To talk about method with regard to Arendt's writings is challenging because method presupposes the existence of a theory that is detached from the objected under investigation. Arendt engages in thinking about politics which "does not posit itself a priori outside the political field" (Vollrath, 1977: 163). Arendt's "assumption is that

thought itself arises out of incidents of living experience and must remain bound to them as only guidepost by which to take its bearings” (Arendt, 1993: 14). Thus, like Aristotle Arendt also begins the premise of basing everything on experience and remaining faithful to it. However, unlike Aristotle who aims to uncover universal laws, Arendt’s endeavor culminates in what she calls understanding, which aims make us feel at home in the world.

Beginning with experience is very important if we are to grasp what Arendt does with and through her conceptualizations of evil. Theoretical knowledge is born out of, sustained and nourished by experience. To illustrate, with regard to *The Origins of Totalitarianism* Arendt (1953: 78) says: “I did not write a history of antisemitism or of imperialism, but analyzed the element of Jew-hatred and the element of expansion insofar as these elements were still clearly visible and played a decisive role in the totalitarian phenomenon itself.” In writing about the Eichmann trial, when she claims that Eichmann is marked by thoughtlessness, this was not a preconceived idea but rather it was the expression of Arendt’s experience of the trial; subsequently, she reflected, refined and articulated this concept into a philosophical analysis in the second volume of *The Life of the Mind*, “Thinking.” Her position is that experience gives us access to a greater range of facts and possesses richer meaning and language expressions compared to abstract theory. For Arendt, concepts are modes of conceiving and understanding experience, therefore, concepts have identifiable correspondents in experience. This also means that their validity needs to remain close to the experience that serves as its basis. The Eichmann example also serves to make the point that the student of experience must pay close attention to human experience, give it a fair hearing and let it suggest its own

interpretation, rather than impose forcefully her own theoretically based order on it. “Experience is not mute: it is the philosopher who is deaf” (Parekh, 1981: 70).

Thus, the meaning of experience is not imposed by the student of experience but it is embedded in the experience itself. In other words, we must not approach an experience with preconceived theories and traditional interpretations, otherwise is risk diluting its meaning in the already existing theories and fail to see what is particular to it. Like Hegel and Marx, Arendt believes that she lives in privileged times because the established tradition has lost credibility and the new tradition has not been established yet (Parekh, 1981: 68). The important implication to take with us at this point is that the breakdown of tradition means that the theological and philosophical past no longer has authority over our interpretations. We can apply to it in order to make clarifications but they are not the ultimate last word (Grunenberg, 2007).

Yet even if we are not bound by the philosophical tradition, one problem nonetheless persists. How are we to deal with this richness of information that comes from experience without diluting it or imposing a preconceived order upon it? Arendt’s answer is storytelling. Storytelling is critical understanding because storytelling has the double function of situating theory in the experience from which it derives and also of engaging the public in thinking critically but in a way that differs from a theoretical argument (Disch, 1993: 669). Yet this is not an easy task. Understanding “is a complicated process which never produces unequivocal results” (Arendt, 2005a: 307). We cannot expect understanding to provide “specifically helpful or inspiring” results when we fight totalitarianism, but in the absence of understanding this fight would be only for mere survival (310). Understanding never stops, but is subject to constant change

and variation, and this is why “it cannot produce final results” (308). However the endeavor is worthy because, through the process of understanding “we come to terms with and reconcile ourselves to reality, that is, [we] try to be at home in the world” (308). In words that she later uses to describe judgment, Arendt tells us that understanding is the other side of political action “by which acting men (and not men who are engaged in contemplating some progressive or doomed course of history) eventually can come to terms with what irrevocably happened and be reconciled with what unavoidably exists” (321-2).

Arendt’s approach of beginning with experience is far from controversial. Reading her work through the eyes of a philosopher, Bhikhu Parekh takes issue Arendt’s claim we let experience suggest interpretations rather than have theory impose meaning on it. Since all observation entails selection, definition, and interpretation, what matters is that we are aware that we are interpreting from a framework. Parekh sustains that just because we engage directly with experience does not mean that we are any less prejudiced or dogmatic. He reads Arendt to be concerned with approaching “experience with a ‘naive’ and ‘fresh eye’ and comprehend it ‘as it is’” (Parekh, 1981:82) It seems to me that this is a misreading of Arendt. Arendt is adamant on ‘eyes’ rather than the ‘eye.’ She is keen on giving us multiple standpoints of whatever subject she is discussing. In fact, her definition of objectivity is what she calls the Homeric impartiality, where one offers as many sides to the story as possible. So she says: “Greeks learned to understand - not to understand one another as individual persons, but to look upon the same world from one another's standpoint, to see the same in very different and frequently opposing aspects” (Arendt, 1993: 51).

After this lengthy note on Arendt's method let me say a few words about my approach to Arendt. I see Arendt as a fascinating but inconsistent thinker. My reading of Arendt is a reconstruction of her thought, and as such it endeavors to provide a consistent account of her inconsistencies. My account may at times give the impression that Arendt is consistent. This is one of the limitations of this thesis that results from having spent too much time in the company of Arendt's thoughts. When dealing with a brilliant thinker like Arendt, it is rather easy for an inexperienced writer like me to have her voice lost. As it has been pointed out to me frequently, there are times in the course of this thesis where it is not clear whether I am speaking or Arendt is. To clear this confusion, I beg of my reader to think of everything that is written here as my reconstruction or my reading of Arendt and everything that you find in here is my interpretation unless it is presented as a direct quotation from Arendt.

The thesis firstly deals with Arendt's insistence on the reality of evil. It is very important to note that the reality of evil is the linchpin between Arendt's notions of the radicality and the banality of evil. Noting this is one of the ways the current thesis contributes to the literature on Arendt and evil. I argue that Arendt fights a battle on two separate fronts in order to affirm the existence of evil. She engages with the rhetoric of evil while she decries the false use of evil (Chapter 1). At the same time, she attempts to salvage the concept of evil from its theological and philosophical background in order to show that it is real and it poses a great danger to human life. In other words, Arendt attacks the usage of the word 'evil' in order to reclaim it and use it herself (Chapter 2). In this context, the word 'evil' appears together with the variants 'demonic' and 'devilish.' Arendt's notion of "the banality of evil" rests on the basis that evil needs not to be

Satanic, i.e. does not have to have suprahuman powers, in order to do grave damage. By going back to the earlier writings, I argue against Hanna Pitkin (1998) that Arendt does not create a demonic imagery of evil and then change her mind about it after witnessing the Eichmann trial. I will show that from her earlier writings we see Arendt respond seriously to the usage of the language of evil in the political rhetoric of Hitler and wider anti-Semitic discourse that appeal to demonic descriptions and returns to these criticisms once again when a similar rhetoric appears in the Eichmann case. While Arendt mocks and ridicules intellectuals who believe that theological notions of evil can help us understand political events, she mounts a formidable campaign against theologians and philosophers who have contributed to the formulation of the ‘problem of evil’ and in doing so, they have, according to Arendt, deprived evil of its reality. Arendt’s originality surfaces when we consider her rhetoric and rumination on the reality of evil in the light of “the problem of evil” in the philosophical and theological tradition. I argue that she affirms the reality of evil by discussing phenomena like loneliness, homelessness and rootlessness as well as her analysis of macro-phenomena like imperialism.

Next, I argue for a new way of approaching Arendt’s attempts at understanding evil and for a reading of evil in terms of her writings on freedom (Chapter 3 and 5). Arendt insists that radical evil is unprecedented (Arendt, 2005a: 321). She is adamant on its novelty, but the trait of being novel is also shared with political actions. The ability to begin something new is considered the trademark of political action. Margaret Canovan (2000: 27) sustains that the proximity of the horrible originality of totalitarianism and the natality of action constitute a paradox. George Kateb has also referred to the same affinity and argued that unless we can think of ways to break this apparent connection

between totalitarianism and action, then Arendt's greatest contribution to political theory "may be more shocking and more foreign than it is tolerable." This, he asserts, is "the severest test that can be made of Arendt's theory of political action" (Kateb, 1983: 30). My argument is that Arendt's conceptualizations of evil can be best understood when we think of them in relation to Arendt's notions of freedom. The radicality of evil is the product of human freedom to bring about something new and unexpected. Evil appears as radical when it attempts to erase the ground that made possible its very existence, i.e. human freedom. The banality of evil has its origin in the human freedom to choose between good and evil. Evil appears as banal when it is the result of the refusal of the individual to engage in making a choice (effortless evil). We grasp the full meaning of Arendt's radical evil when we accept that it springs from the human capacity to begin something new. Human freedom cannot be considered such unless is capable of bringing about both good and evil. We already know that the notion of freedom is fundamental in Arendt political theory. When we read freedom together with her concepts of evil, we can grasp better the centrality of the notion of evil for Arendt's work.

Furthermore, I propose to consider the notion of "the banality of evil" in relation to the faculty of will. Freedom of will is what makes us individuals different from other people. This is also how we become responsible and are held accountable for our acts. In exercising our free will we also become agents/ doers. Our deeds are imputed to us and we reveal to ourselves and to others who we are. Note that, for Arendt, we do not know in advance who we are and what we are capable of, thus, acts are always like small miracles in the sense that they are unexpected. My approach differs from the common tendency in literature to read "the banality of evil" through the notions of the faculty of

thinking and conscience (Vetlesen, 2001; Parekh, 2008: 150-63). My argument is that the banality of evil should be understood as the passivity of the agent, who through the refusal to make a choice produces effortless evil. This is evil supported by the law and by common morality. I discuss Arendt's analysis of the ways in which morality fails to guide us in Chapter 4. The analysis of radical evil shows that Arendt believes that evil cannot be destroyed, in fact, it should not. But because of its disastrous effects, it needs to be resisted. In Arendt's analysis, morality fails to help us resist evil because morality in all the versions Arendt considers prioritizes the self over the common world shared with fellow human beings. However, for Arendt evil is not simply a threat to the self, but to the common world which is characterized by plurality. Since for Arendt evil is neither theological nor metaphysical but rather a political phenomenon, the only appropriate response to it is a political one. So in Chapter 6 I discuss faculty of judgment with the intent of understanding how it operates in order to help us in dealing with evil.

Reading Arendt, it is easy to come under the impression that her understanding of evil consists of a negative account. Very often she tells us what evil is not, or how philosophers and theologians have got it wrong. In this part of the thesis, I present Arendt's own positive account of evil. It consists of three underpinnings: 1 - The cause of evil is the human belief in unlimitedness; thinking that everything is possible. This position features predominantly in her notion of radical evil. 2 – The question what is evil, where Arendt defines evil in terms of the response it elicits in us. Confronted with evil we say: this should never have happened. This position features predominantly in her notion of the banality of evil. 3- Human freedom is the capacity for good and evil, therefore evil cannot be eradicated unless we eradicate human freedom. Our choice of

good and evil is embedded in a larger ontological reality within which good and evil acquire significance in the first place. This means that the choice between good and evil is not simply a matter of anthropocentric “willing” (Love and Schmidt, 2006: xxiv). The important point we take from Chapter 5 is that even the banality of evil is defined in negative terms (as a lack and deficiency) it differs the negation that results from the philosopher’s conception of evil because it begins with the premise that evil is real, it is part of the human condition and the passive person becomes its enabler.

This thesis contribution is that by reading Arendt through the perspective of her writings on evil it offers another way of drawing out her most basic assumptions. It reveals an angle of vision that she maintained even as she altered the focus and emphasis in her various writings. My contribution to the Arendt literature is to elucidate what Arendt had the genius to see: the fundamental role that evil plays in human life to the extent that we are political beings. Arendt’s writings are characterized throughout by a distinctive, even idiosyncratic, style. She writes in what we can only call an essayistic manner: writing in an elegant, literary, allusive and digressive style. Yet, there are undeniable tendencies towards a system in her writing. We only have to think of the distinctions between ‘public’ and ‘private’, between ‘action’, ‘work’ and ‘labor’ and between ‘thinking’, ‘willing’ and ‘judging’. But she never forced her thought into a system. If we use her own oft-repeated cliché, many ideas and many novelties ran through her works like a set of colored threads. Making sense of her writings is therefore extremely difficult. Something of an industry of trying to make sense of them has emerged in the academy since her death, originally begun by some of her closest students. This thesis is in a sense a contribution to that industry.

CHAPTER I

THE RHETORIC OF EVIL

I begin the analysis of Arendt's conceptions of evil by talking about her reactions to the use of the word "evil" in the public discourse by either politicians or intellectuals. This may seem a peculiar way to begin. Yet I think that it must be so because, as I will show in this chapter, Arendt is adamant that the word "evil" is being used incorrectly. Paying attention to her protestations is important because through them we get to understand what Arendt thinks that evil is not and also what we should not do with the word "evil."

Given that the aim of this thesis is to present and analyze Arendt's conceptualizations of evil, knowing what evil is *not* according to Arendt seems as important as knowing what evil *is*; particularly when we remember it is not uncommon for Arendt to build her arguments through a *via negativa*,¹ i.e., she first will explain a concept by telling us how it has been misunderstood. In this chapter I am laying bricks of her negative path by looking the usages of word evil through her work. This means that at this point I not go into the discussion of what Arendt thinks evil is or how we should understand it. This is the task of the second part of this thesis.

In the course of this chapter we will see that Arendt is critical of the use of the word 'evil' as part of rhetoric that aims to rally partisans and identify opponents. In these

¹ See Young-Bruehl, Elizabeth. "Reflections on Hannah Arendt's The life of the Mind." *Political Theory* (1982b): 277-305, for a detailed discussion of Arendt's *via negativa* approach in *Thinking and Willing*.

cases “evil” is either given religious connotations by references to the demonic, or is used with moralizing tones to express the superiority of one side over the other. Quite often these two positions overlap, and I have distinguished between them only for an analytical purpose. Despite her criticisms against the facile use of the word “evil” it is interesting to note that Arendt does not shy from using the word “evil” rhetorically herself, especially when she is writing as a commentator during the war.

It is important to emphasize that Arendt is not dismissive of the misuses of the word “evil.” She engages and confronts the writers and intellectuals who are employing the word “evil” without thinking seriously of the consequences of such usage. Her style is usually ironic, as if she is saying “you don’t really know what you are talking about.” This brings me to the second reason I think it is important to begin with the rhetoric of evil. Implied in Arendt’s criticism is the idea that evil is in fact real. It has a presence and it is a force. In this sense understanding what evil is not, prepares the ground for the critique Arendt mounts on the whole theological and philosophical tradition by arguing that they have denied the reality of evil and thus have made us more vulnerable to it. This I will be discussing in the next chapter, where I discuss the explicit cases Arendt makes about the reality of evil. Thus, it is important to note the relation that exists between these two chapters.

And finally, my third reason for beginning with the rhetoric of evil is following: Arendt scholars have shown that Arendt’s thought is shaped by the totalitarian experience (Canovan, 1992: 7; Bernstein, 2002). An analysis of her writings during the Second World War and for the first decade after it points out to a second dynamic. Arendt was not only reacting to and thinking about the totalitarian experience, she was also engaging

with the response of fellow intellectuals to the. She was trained as philosopher and was versatile with the language of theology and metaphysics, but Arendt was also living in New York and was in close contact with secular leftists. In her intellectual environment there was a mixed reaction to theological and mystical explanations of Nazi rule. Arendt's environment matters because as I will show in this chapter, her position on evil as presented by the writings of this period reflects the *mélange* of her academic and cultural background and also the setting in which she thinks and writes. The first decade and a half of the twenty-first century has seen a proliferation of works on evil. This is remarkable when we consider that Andrew Delbanco, an American studies scholar, in his book *Death of Satan* published in 1995 complains that Americans have lost their sense of Satan and evil. A mere six years later we have witnessed the revival of the language of evil in political discourse and in scholarly publications.² By now we are familiar with the denunciations of evil in political speeches, the moralizing tones that accompany them and the wars waged on evil in the name of the good. Thinkers on the left of the political spectrum believe that the word 'evil' is used by politicians in blatantly ideological ways (Eagleton, 2010). Others have sustained that the concept of evil can be decoupled from

² George W. Bush made popular again "the axis of evil;" Tony Blair called Saddam Hussein "uniquely evil;" and more recently Barack Obama spoke of "ISIS's brand of evil," while David Cameron called ISIS "an evil organization." For further examples of references to evil in political speeches see Gray, John. "The Truth about Evil" *The Guardian*, <http://www.theguardian.com/news/2014/oct/21/-sp-the-truth-about-evil-john-gray>, accessed online 13 October 2015. Some academic publications on the subject include: Card, Claudia. *The Atrocity Paradigm: A Theory of Evil*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002); Staub, Ervin. *Overcoming Evil: Genocide, Violent Conflict, and Terrorism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011); Vetlesen, Arne Johan. *Evil and Human Agency: Understanding Collective Evildoing* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005); Badiou, Alain, and Peter Hallward. *Ethics: An Essay on the Understanding of Evil*. (London: Verso, 2002); Dews, Peter. *The idea of evil*. (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012); Wolfe, Alan. *On Political Evil: What It is and How to Combat It*. (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2011); Eagleton, Terry. *On Evil*. (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2010).

religion.³ In studying Arendt's approach to the rhetoric of evil it is interesting to see that all these concerns were also hers as she wrote over fifty years ago.

I have organized this chapter in two parts. In the first part I analyze what I have called "demonic evil," a comprehensive term for the instances where Arendt uses the words "demon," "devil," and "devilishness." The phrase followed an interesting path as Arendt began by upholding it, to being critical and ridiculing it, to finally rejecting it. This background sheds a different light on Arendt's complete rejection of the portrayal of Eichmann as demonically evil.

In the second part of this chapter I discuss what I have called the "moralistic" dimension of evil. This consists of cases where Arendt expresses her criticism of the word "evil" being used judgmentally while at the same time "evil" is considered self-explanatory. In all the instances discussed in this chapter, Arendt was not advocating a better use of the word "evil" but rather warns the reader off the fallacies behind the facile use of the word "evil."⁴

1.1. Demonic Evil

Arendt arrived in the United States in 1941 after living for almost a decade in Paris, where she worked with Jewish refugees who wanted to settle in Palestine. During her first years in America, Arendt lived in New York and worked as editor for Schocken

³ Badiou in his *Ethics* says "Every effort to turn ethics into the principle of thought and action is essentially religious." (Badiou, 2001: 23).

⁴ There is a parallel between what Arendt is doing in her criticism of the misuses of the word "evil" and of her treatment of conspiracy theories that create the narrative of anti-Semitism. She does not dismiss them, quite the opposite. She insists that we must become aware of the bits of information that lend truth to these positions.

Books of New York. She frequently wrote book reviews and gave public lectures.⁵ Arendt and her husband, a former activist in the circle of Rosa Luxemburg, were well-known among the leftist Jewish intellectuals who read and wrote for publications such as “Partisan Review” and “Commentary” (Cotkin, 1997: 253). According to George Cotkin, a historian of American public intellectuals in the post- Second World War period, the circle that Arendt and her husband frequented shared the following common characteristics: they were leftists who had an anti-Stalinist stance in politics; they mostly supported the actions of the United States in the Cold War; they showed distrust and dislike towards mass culture; and believed in “the value of a tragic sensibility,” i.e. they believed that men need to be aware of the existence of inevitable forces that can be neither controlled nor prevented (Cotkin, 2007: 469) ⁶. Arendt is addressing this belief when she writes in the introduction to *The Origins of Totalitarianism* that “this book has been written against a background of both reckless optimism and reckless despair. It holds that Progress and Doom are two sides of the same medal; that both are articles of superstition, not of faith” (Arendt 1979: vii).

In this environment to talk and think in terms of evil while contemplating the tragedy of life was not uncommon. Hans Morgenthau, Arendt’s fellow émigré and father of the realist paradigm in International Relations, is also known for his tragic perspective. He has claimed that a tragic perspective allows us to tackle directly the unforgiving realities of politics, both the evil present in human nature and the ethical compromises we

⁵ Lectures and book review are collected in *Essays in Understanding*.

⁶ Cotkin quotes several public intellectuals among whom are: writer Alfred Kazin, who praised Arendt by saying she showed “intellectual courage before the moral terror the war had willed to us”; editorialist Walter Lippman talked about “the acids of modernity” that contributed to tragic modern angst; and also the work of David Truman and Richard Hofstadter, influential professors at Columbia University after the Second World War (Cotkin, 2007: 469). “Tragic sensibility” is an echo of Unamuno’s book *The Tragic Sense of Life*, but while for Unamuno the primary concern is the tragedy that results from the clash between reason and faith, the American public intellectuals set religion aside.

are required to make (Morgenthau, 1945). We also know of the significant role that the sense of the tragic plays in Arendt's thought through the work of Robert Pirro (2001). In keeping with the aesthetic angle connoted by the tragic sensibility, the language of evil we encounter in Arendt writings of this period makes frequent references to the demonic: the "devil," "demon" and "devilishness."

In March 1942 Arendt began writing a biweekly column for 'Jewish World,' a supplement to *Aufbau*, a newspaper addressed to the German speaking public who lived in the United States. Written in parenthesis under the title, in English, were the words 'This Means You.'⁷ As hinted by the subtitle, Arendt's tone in this column was very direct. She commented on the latest developments of the Second World War but did not shy from offering her opinion on what should be done (Arendt, 2007: 263). The word "devil" features for the first time in Arendt's writings in the title of the column that appeared in May 1942 which is an exposition of the latest of Hitler's speeches. Arendt draws attention to what Hitler's propaganda is doing and to the kind of picture of the world it is depicting (Arendt, 2007: 156-7). Arendt points to the simplistic portrayal of the Second World War that the speech achieves. Firstly, she says, Hitler claimed the war was between the Germans and the Jews. Secondly, the war is happening in a world that is made up of people and governments. All people are good, except for the Jews. All governments are evil, except for the German one. The reason for the evil of all the other governments is that they are secretly controlled by the Jews, who do not have their own government but use the other government to secure world domination. Essentially the war in Hitler's propaganda is one for life or death, between the supernaturally good and the supernaturally evil. I am not able to certify whether Arendt is using Hitler's own

⁷ Arendt, *The Jewish Writings*, editor's note, 149

words when she talks about the “supernaturally good” and the “supernaturally evil.” Yet the fact that writes “world domination” in quotation marks but fails to do so for the supernaturally good and evil seems to suggest that even though Hitler may have used the words “good” and “evil” it is Arendt who is adding the qualifier “supernaturally” in order to caricature the already simplistic image of the war and the world that Hitler’s propaganda creates. The imagery of struggle for life and death, between supernatural good and evil evokes the primordial Manichean teachings about the world. Arendt suggests that Hitler’s propaganda is nothing short of diabolical – “devil’s rhetoric” – because its Manichean simplicity is overwhelming and “openly and brazenly flies in the face of all facts”⁸ (Arendt, 2007: 157).

Arendt explicitly calls Hitler “the devil.”⁹ However, in Arendt’s view, Hitler is not demonic in his supernatural powers; rather he is diabolic in his cleverness. The “devilish cleverness” consists in providing very simple answers to complicated issues not by outright lying, but by what Arendt (2005a: 111-2) calls “lying the truth” and “turning lying into a universal principle” (71). By this she means that even though the answers of the Nazi propaganda had some grain of truth when they were identifying the problems that plagued post-First World War Europe, the solutions they provided for these problems were completely false and yet extremely successful in making people believe in their truthfulness. But more importantly, Arendt bemoans the loss the color shades that

⁸ What it conceals while also relying on it as its basic assumption is the idea of inequality of peoples. Arendt claims that believing in “the natural inequality of peoples,” the natural superiority of a group of people over others, “is the form that injustice has taken in our times.” These are themes that she will explore in detail in the second book of *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, published less than ten years after this article appeared.

⁹ In the essay on Herman Broch she wrote in 1955 Arendt states that “it is not only that he defined kitsch as “evil in the value system of art.” It is that he saw the criminal element and the element of radical evil as personified in the figure of the aestheticizing literary man (in which category, for instance, he placed Nero and even Hitler), and as one and the same with kitsch” (Arendt, 1995: 122).

naturally characterize our world. She says it is a catastrophe “there is no longer any gray, only black; which of course does not mean that we have all miraculously turned snow-white.”¹⁰ Note that she is taking a political stand expressed as mixture of aesthetics and morality. I will be discussing Arendt’s aesthetic sensibility and its relations to morality the later chapters, but I would like to point out their co-recurrence in Arendt’s writings.

Although this article was the first where Arendt referred to Hitler as “the devil,” she continued to do so whenever she mentioned him up until the end of the war. Without saying so specifically at this point, she was attributing to him the evil genius of Iago and Richard III. What distinguishes Hitler from his contemporaries is the fact that he is willing to make judgments and take sides in argument (Arendt, 2005a: 291). In a second example of her usage of the euphemism “devil” to refer to Hitler she is most insistent in raising awareness to the seriousness of the war and its meaning for all peoples rather than just the Jews. Arendt is vehemently stressing that Hitler or the Nazis are not only a problem of the Jews. The Jews were the original target; very soon all people living in occupied countries become fair game under the laws of the Reich. Besides stating the facts, Arendt paints this picture of a modern and ingeniously diabolic operated machine which disseminates terror indiscriminately of nationality to intentionally harm people and not necessarily limiting itself to the Jews (Arendt, 2007: 162-3). It is also worth noting Arendt’s stand on how we should react to what she called “the rule of devil on earth.” Arendt rejects mercy instead she demands justice and solidarity. In a Kantian fashion, Arendt is aware of the superhuman imagery that the war inspires. Indeed she uses it to

¹⁰ Arendt writes: “We live in a time when all those many little injustices with which we have been only too happy to reconcile ourselves have become one single organized injustice, the rule of the *devil* on earth. The catastrophe is in fact that there is no longer any gray, only black; which of course does not mean that we have all miraculously turned snow-white” (Arendt, 2007: 179).

urge her public to take action. It is also difficult to miss her insistence that the injustice be set to right by man-made institutions. This is also a theme that will appear in her later writings, in particular *On Revolution*, published in 1963. In the essay “Understanding and Politics” published in 1954, Arendt states in a footnote that “justice is the essence of men’s living together” (Arendt, 2005a: 325). From this we see that even though she is willing to phrase the problem in theological language her solution is always political.

With the end of the war we see a shift in Arendt’s use of the word “devil.” She tells us that the idea that Nazi leaders were evil and that indeed Hitler was the “incarnation of all evil” was also promoted by the German resistance movement (Arendt, 1977: 99). Similar claims about Hitler were also made by his fellow commanders who later turned on him. Arendt gives a list of names these commanders gave Hitler:

“What united these men [of the resistance movement] was that they saw in Hitler a “swindler,” a “dilettante,” who “sacrificed whole armies against the counsel of his experts,” a “madman” and a “*demon*,” “the incarnation of all *evil*,” which in the German context meant something both more and less than when they called him a “criminal and a fool,” which they occasionally did” (Arendt, 1977: 50).

Arendt is no longer using “devil” herself but is commenting on how it is used by others. This marks the beginning of the period where Arendt becomes uncomfortable to explicitly using “devil” as if it were self-explanatory. In the fifties the American public discourse scene was full of references to evil. Influential political figures talked of the axis of evil and mass culture in America was also full of such references.¹¹ The situation

¹¹ President Eisenhower is quoted to have said: “Rarely have the forces of good and evil been so amassed against one another.” J. Edgar Hoover, in March 1947 said “Communism, in reality, is not a political party, it is a way of life, an evil and malignant way of life.” Comic books in the 1950s featured daring agents battling ‘evil’ Russian and Chinese. In the years between the world wars, adventurous tales of FBI government agents- G-men, and their fights against evil-doers played out daily in newspapers. G-men became the popular heroes of the era.

is not very different in Europe. In Arendt's own words we find a description of what she calls "Post-Fascist state of mind of Europe's intellectuals":

"[Read] *Devil's Share* – carefully, patiently and (meaning no offence) with charity. The shortcomings of the author and the book are obvious, glaring to an irritating degree. They confuse the reader as they have confused the author. But the point is that this confusion is the direct result of experiences to which the author bears witness and from which he does not try to escape. Such experience as well as confusion will be common to all who survive and refuse to return to the deceptive security of those "keys to history" that pretend to explain everything, all trends and tendencies, that actually could not reveal any single real event" (Arendt, 2005a: 133).

We see that Arendt is sympathetic to the need for the kind of language that references evil. However there is one particular characteristic that distinguished Arendt from other writers who were employing a similar language at the time. As already mentioned, Arendt never meant "devil" in the cosmological sense of supernaturally powerful demon. Arendt never had any doubt that Hitler and the Nazis were fully human. We see Arendt argue against the position that good and evil are involved in a Gnostic fight for dominance (Arendt, 2005a: 133). As Peg Birmingham has pointed out, radical evil does not indicate demonic nature but it is a capacity (Birmingham, 2003: 82)¹². Arendt insists that it is the humanness of the actors makes their deeds thought-defying and produces a nightmare because "they have proven beyond doubt, what men are capable of" (Arendt, 2005a: 134). In a book review wrote in 1945 she states:

"Rougemont [the author of the book] knows that ascribing all evils and evil as such, to any social order or to, society as such is "a flight from reality." But instead of facing the music of man's genuine capacity for evil and analyzing the nature of man, he in turn ventures into a flight from reality and writes on the nature of the Devil, thereby, despite all dialectics, evading the responsibility of man for his deeds" (Arendt, 2005a: 134).

¹² The capacity for evil is an important point which I will explore in the second part of the thesis.

Despite her plea for charity when reading books that accept as explanatory arguments that feature the devil, Arendt's own tone is far from charitable. She warns against mystification and the ascribing of human actions to abstracted, personified agency beyond human influence. This strong attitude eventually became known around the world with her report on the Eichmann case.

Consistently with her attitude in the review of de Rougemont's book, her attempt at demystification of events is stated one more time in the pages of *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, where Arendt lists the effects of the First World War in all their brutality. She insists that the responsibility of the consequences may even be laid at the door of stupidity, an entirely human characteristic. In an acute analysis of the background that provided a suitable environment for the inception and proliferation of the Nazi ideology, Arendt is adamant that this ideology did not spring in the middle of Europe out of nothing; it was the product of a maelstrom. It was too late and too big to be stopped at the last minute because, she argues, these events had been in movement for a long time. Therefore Arendt was proposing to go to the very beginnings in order to find answers that help us understand. This is not simply laying blame and responsibility on someone else, even if it is God or the devil (Arendt, 1979: 267). Thus once again we see Arendt calling for a response to evil that is political, by her standards. We saw previously that she was asked for justice through institutions; that is the political that comes through action. The other face of the political is the activity in which the spectator engages. This involves understanding and judgment; but this a point on which I will expand in second part of the thesis. At this point is also significant to notice that Arendt's explanations revolve around what can be called the mechanism of events, how they came about and became so wide-

spread. Less attention is paid to the individual, which is made to feel powerless in Arendt's own words when she says "nothing which was being done, no matter how stupid, no matter how many people knew and foretold the consequences, could be undone or prevented." However, the fact that there is no place for man, the human being, does not automatically mean that the events can be attributed to superhuman or supernatural powers, be they good or evil. This is how Hanna Pitkin read *The Origins*; she argues that Arendt was contributing a turning evil into something of mythical proportions (Pitkin, 1998: 209). Yet this was exactly what Arendt did not want to do. In a letter to Karl Jaspers she says:

In the way I have expressed this up to now, I come dangerously close to the 'satanic greatness' that I, like you, totally reject....One thing is certain: all formulations that mythologize the horrible must be resisted, and to the extent that I can't escape such formulations, I haven't understood what actually went on (Arendt and Jaspers, 1992: 62).

This was in 1946, four years before the publication of *The Origins*. Steven Aschheim has noted the difficulties with finding a way of representing the phenomenon of totalitarianism which does not result in mystification. His conclusion is this struggle "is endemic to the material and perhaps irresolvable" (Aschheim, 1997: 132). Arendt was more of her position by 1970, where in an interview she states that "God" and "Devil" in human affairs are human creations (Arendt, 1972: 222). She recognizes the rhetorical appeal that such creations have in attracting masses and inciting partisan passions. Yet, for her, they are also empty and devoid of touch with reality.

1.2. 'Devilishness' and the Antisemitic Rhetoric

The demonic appears in Arendt's writings also through the word "devilish." The context for it is mostly antisemitism, a subject matter which Jerome Kohn called "one of Arendt's great topics" (Kohn, 2007: xix). "Devilish" is not a thought-train; Arendt uses it in irony and frustration. But to my surprise it brings together a clear account of Arendt's study of antisemitism, which otherwise is easy to miss because of nature of her presentation. Antisemitism serves as the basis for conspiracy theories and strong prejudices. Again, Arendt is not being dismissive but rather engages us through facts, which at times can be overwhelming in their sheer number. Focusing on the word "devilish" brings the story together but not as an explanation, so it belongs to Arendt's rhetoric of evil.

Antisemitism, a long essay on which she worked while a refugee in France, is a precursor to the first book of *The Origins of Totalitarianism* which bears the same title. Its purpose is to understand the roots of antisemitism in Germany which later transforms into Nazi guiding principle. Arendt refers to the work of the German professor Werner Sombart, who has written on the influence of the economic role the Jews played in the European society. She calls Sombart's theory "demagogic, bogus." (Arendt, 2007: 114). Arendt uses 'evil' ironically, criticizing the author for his purposefully facile way of depicting all things German good and commendable, and all things Jewish evil and condemnable (Arendt, 2007: 116). Her criticism to Sombart occurs only in an endnote to the text Arendt had prepared. However, it contains the formulation of the points she reiterated several times over the years: antisemitism in its current form was novel and had developed in the last two hundred years; modern antisemitism was not comparable to its

medieval version. This is also the first time we encounter Arendt's of a historical view that fails to notice the new by generalizing from the past. This point becomes very important in her interpretation of the faculty of judgment. With regard to evil, we encounter Arendt objections of Manichean analysis, again something that she returns when she discusses the speech delivered by Hitler.

Arendt refers to social antisemitism as devilish machinery. Later on, in the same essay, she explains modern antisemitism and how it makes use of the ideas of Enlightenment. She talks about the creation of 'the Jew' as the embodiment of an evil principle, hence a people is turned into a principle.¹³ Finally in the pages of *The Origins of Totalitarianism* we see a combination of her arguments of social antisemitism and modern antisemitism to form modern social antisemitism as an integral part of the modern propaganda both in national and colonial politics. The word "devilish" serves to feed our imagination; and as with the word "devil" we see Arendt recur to aesthetical images in order to appeal her case, but she does not to offer these images as explanation.

Let me begin by presenting Arendt's account of antisemitism. Firstly she distinguishes two forms of antisemitism, the social and the political. "Political antisemitism developed because the Jews were a separate body, while social discrimination [antisemitism] arose because of the growing equality of Jews with all

¹³ In Arendt's narrative "the Jew" first appeared when the Jewish Question was formulated in terms of emancipation in the name of human liberation and progress. Lessing and Mendelssohn served as examples that "the Jew *can* be noble." Equating the liberation of the Jew with what it means to be human meant that the Jew from the beginning was transformed into a principle. "Jews in all their concrete noxiousness are to be overlooked for the sake of *the Jew*, whose oppression is a disgrace to mankind. The issue was turned into such an abstraction, because there was such unanimity as to Jewish noxiousness." The anti-Semites perverted the universal principle of equality of men (Arendt [1938-9] 62-4); Arendt explains how social discrimination, i.e. social antisemitism was the discoverer of "The Jew" by identifying the philistine with the Jew who will do anything to be accepted into society (Arendt [1951] 1979: 61-2); Less than a century and a half later "the Jew" became one of the cornerstones of Hitler's propaganda. In one of the early articles for *Aufbau* Arendt writes: "Hitler has once again spoken and presented in detail his opinions about both the role of the Jews in this war and the role of *the Jew* in world history" (Arendt, 2007: 156).

other groups” (Arendt, 1979: 54). It is not completely clear which form preceded which, because while claiming that “in Europe, [social antisemitism] had little influence on the rise of political anti-Semitism,” (Arendt, 1979: 55) a few pages later she states that the Nazi brand of antisemitism “in its most sinister aspect owed much of its success to [social antisemitism] which virtually constituted a consent [to political antisemitism] by public opinion” (Arendt, 1979: 87). What matters for Arendt is the fluctuation between these two forms.¹⁴ Richard Bernstein has pointed out that the distinction between Arendt “*social* hatred of the Jews” and “*political* anti-Semitism” is not made explicitly in the biography Arendt wrote of Rahel Varnhagen. “It became central for her [Arendt] when she sought to comprehend the “origins” of Nazi totalitarianism. She remained skeptical about the possibility of ever eliminating social discrimination and social hatred of the Jews” (Bernstein, 1996: 24-25).

Arendt argues that the political victory of the Jews was not on religious grounds (Arendt, 1979: 54). Their rights were part of a universalist discourse which was based on the Enlightenment principle of treating all human beings equally, independently of their religion. Jews were being granted an equality that had been previously denied to them, and by these rights they were elevated to the same platform as all the other citizens of the nation-state. In terms of their socio-political position, the Jews were allies of the absolute monarchy, which was declining and becoming socially unpopular.

¹⁴ “The entire nineteenth century is permeated with instances of antisemitism’s being transformed back into a purely social and ostensibly harmless phenomenon” (Arendt 2007: 100). Anti-Semites failed politically but were successful socially because their role in society was not undermined by the lack of political success. So while the Jews were gaining more political rights they were and losing their social place. Arendt clearly makes the argument that relegating something to the realm of the social, dismissing it from politics, by no way means turning it into something irrelevant. Arendt is not demeaning the social, but she is more comfortable with the political because in the latter sphere the rules and mechanisms at work are clearer and it is legitimate to demand equality.

Arendt speaks of the ‘devilish machinery’ and the imagery it creates may as well be out of a Kafka story (Arendt, 2007: 101). Her bursts into literary descriptions are strictly preceded and succeeded by detailed analysis of events and conditions. While the analytical arguments appeal to the mind, the gloomy depictions are meant to appeal to the heart. When she wrote “Antisemitism” she had a specific public in mind. She intends to write a political history of the Jews that takes into account antisemitism without “attempts to defend the honor of the Jewish people” as the nationalists do, and without “the apologetics of a history written by assimilationists” (Arendt, 2007: 48-49). As Canovan puts it: “If one of Arendt's aims in 'Antisemitism' was to explain why the Jews had been the prime victims of Nazi totalitarianism, a second objective was to argue that they should not be seen *simply* as victims” (Canovan, 1992: 44). Arendt is adamant that Jews should know their own history. “Ignorance or misunderstanding of their own past were partly responsible for their fatal underestimation of the actual and unprecedented dangers which lay ahead” (Arendt, 1979: 8).

The political antisemitism of the Nazi period laid claims to the medieval superstitions about the Jews and combined it with the new arguments of social antisemitism. Antisemitism brought forth what Arendt called “the doctrine of eternal hostility,” which does away with all specific historical conditions (Arendt, 1979: 8). By selective bringing together historical facts and giving them the desired twist political antisemitism lies the truth, that is it gives a only a partial version of the truth while claiming that it is the whole of it (Arendt, 2007: 66). Arendt uses “devilish cleverness” to reject the argument that leaders of totalitarian movements possess a devilish cleverness in using and abusing freedoms provided by a democratic regime.

“It has frequently been pointed out that totalitarian movements use and abuse democratic freedoms in order to abolish them. This is not just *devilish cleverness* on the part of the leaders or childish stupidity on the part of the masses. Democratic freedoms may be based on the equality of all citizens before the law; yet they acquire their meaning and function organically only where the citizens belong to and are represented by groups or form a social and political hierarchy” (Arendt, 1979: 312).

Again, we see her use the word “devilish” to evoke a particular imagery but her suggested solution is a political one; throughout her writings the political issues is a matter of equality and justice. Thus, she takes care to illustrate step by step the breakdown of the political system among the European nation-states and the birth of the masses. For Arendt, antisemitism conceals the historical roots and developments of the relations between Jews and gentiles by constructing the Jews as passive victims of their fate. We find a vivid depiction of Jewishness as a social burden in the story of Rahel Varnhagen, where Arendt says: “The evil of being a Jew seemed specialized, concentrated entirely upon herself; it became her individual fate, as inescapable as a hump of the back or a club-foot” (Arendt, 1997: 251).¹⁵ By perverting the ideals of Enlightenment about human liberation antisemitism, Arendt Argues, creates “the Jew,” a stereotype and evil principle on whom every fault can be blamed. In the same line of thought, Arendt (1979: 202) argues in *The Origins* that imperialism expanded into new territories antisemitism intertwined with racism and the Jews were considered the embodiment of a devilish principle which challenged the preconception of Dutch chosenness in South Africa.

¹⁵ Interestingly, Jaspers was not comfortable with Arendt’s analysis of antisemitism. In a letter he tells her that Arendt’s view of Rahel is “loveless,” and that Arendt is harsh and moralistic in her judgment of Rahel’s action. “Your book can make one feel that if a person is a Jew he cannot really live his life to the full” (Arendt & Jaspers, 1992: 194).

1.3. The Rhetoric of the Eichmann Case

We witness a reappearance of the demonic language in relation to evil when Arendt covers the Eichmann trial in Jerusalem. We also see that her increased vehemence on the wrongness of associating evil with the demonic.

Reporting on the Eichmann became one of the turning points in Arendt's life not only because the baffling experience of coming face to face with Eichmann made her rethink what she had previously said about evil, but also because of the personal consequences that resulted from the controversy after the publication of her book.

The Eichmann trial was to contribute to the greater public discussion of the legal, moral, and political dimensions of the genocide (Benhabib, 2000: 67). To this aim Eichmann was presented as brutal, satanic, sadistic, perpetrator of crimes that the Jews had suffered for centuries.¹⁶ While calling the totalitarian experience "radical evil" was acceptable and indeed praiseworthy, portraying one of the perpetrators as a banal person, rather the monster the Israeli authorities had made him to be before the beginning of the trial, was far less so. The greatest objections however were in relation to her comments about the collaborating role of the Jewish community leaders with the Nazi. Arendt's ironic style was also attacked, with one of the more benevolent reviewers claiming that the controversies that the publication of the book created were not so much about what it said as how it said it (Walter Laqueur, as cited in Young-Bruehl, 1982a: 338). Arendt was

¹⁶ Whitfield quotes the prosecuting attorney saying he "knew Eichmann to be the cunning, flint-hearted plotter, with a demonic personality, which was completely indifferent to the suffering he inflicted... and which reveled in the exercise of power. ... Eichmann was possessed of a dangerous, perverted personality" (Whitefield, 1981: 472).

accused of being a self-hating Jew, a person who had no compassion, and lacked love for her people.¹⁷

Let me bring in a brief biographic note. Arendt was arrested in Berlin in 1933 for participating in anti-Nazi activities as she was working on compiling a citation of anti-Semitic statements. She was interrogated for eight days but then had a lucky escape and therefore did not have a firsthand experience of the concentration camps (Young-Bruehl, 1982a: 106). This matters because from the very beginning of her life in America, the degree of closeness to the totalitarian experience was perceived as grounds for legitimacy of what one is saying. The words of survivors have authenticity and power, those like Arendt who were able to escape utter the words of the semi-privileged, and they are considered distanced observers (Friedlander, 1992). Nonetheless, Arendt held fast to her position. Arendt tells us that even “with the best will in the world one cannot extract any diabolical or demonic profundity from Eichmann” (Arendt, 1977: 288). Barnouw argues that Arendt was convinced that “seeing the Nazi-regime as “devilish,” “incredibly evil,” “demonic,” as do Robinson and Simon in their attacks on her report is not only not useful but harmful” (Barnouw, 1983: 82).

As shown also in the previous sections of this chapter, Arendt has an aversion to demonic depictions of evil passed as explanations. Already in *The Origins* Arendt maintained that the popular statement of the post Second World War period that leaders of the Nazi movement were devilishly clever and that the masses were childishly stupid was too simple (Arendt, 1979: 312). The same is true of “the banality of evil.” Arendt

¹⁷ The last accusation was made by Gershom Scholem in “‘Eichmann in Jerusalem’: An Exchange of Letters between Gershom Scholem and Hannah Arendt,” *Encounter* 22 (Jan. 1964): 51–56; reprinted in Hannah Arendt, *The Jew as Pariah: Jewish Identity and Politics in the Modern Age*, ed. Ron H. Feldman (New York: Grove Press, 1978), 241.

calls it a lesson, the fact that remoteness from reality and thoughtlessness “can wreak more havoc than all the evil instincts taken together... neither an explanation of the phenomenon nor a theory about it” (Arendt, 1977: 288).

In the interview Arendt was explicitly asked why she thought it was important to remove Eichmann and the Eichmann case from the realm of the demonic. Arendt’s reply is very clear:

“In my opinion I haven't done that with Eichmann, he took care of that himself, and so fundamentally that it bordered on the truly comical. *I merely wanted to point out what being "demonic" is all about when you get a close look at it.* I learned a good many things myself from all this, and in fact I think it might be important if others were to learn from it as well. For instance, *the idea that evil is demonic, which, moreover, sees its precedence in the tale of the fallen angel Lucifer, is extraordinarily appealing to people.* (Perhaps you recall the lines from Stefan George's poem "The Culprit": "Who never has measured the spot where the dagger should pierce, how paltry his life, how frail the train of his thought.") *Precisely because these criminals were not driven by the evil and murderous motives that we're familiar with-they murdered not to murder, but simply as a part of their career-it seemed only too obvious to us all that we needed to demonize the catastrophe in order to find some historical meaning in it.* And I admit, *it is easier to bear the thought that the victim is the victim of the devil in human disguise-or as the prosecutor in the Eichmann trial put it, of a historical principle stretching from Pharaoh to Haman-the victim of a metaphysical principle, rather than the victim of some average man on the street who is not even crazy or particularly evil.*”¹⁸(Arendt, 2007: 487-8).

Arendt makes a double argument. The demonic is attractive to people and Arendt wants to deprive evil of its appeal. Demonic evil attracts us in its gruesomeness. After all there is a cinema genre called horror; and even before that let us recall the wide readership of the horror stories of Alan Edgar Poe and H. P. Lovecraft.¹⁹ For Arendt, evil

¹⁸ Arendt, “The Eichmann Case and the Germans” in *The Jewish Writings*, 487-8. The note from the editor tells us that in the Bible Haman decreed “to destroy, to slay, and to cause [the Jews] to perish.” Emphasis added.

¹⁹ For an excellent treatment of horror in modern times see Adriana Cavarero, *Horrorism: Naming Contemporary Violence*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011).

should not be attributed metaphysical origins and deprive the doer of his or her responsibility.²⁰ In second argument, Arendt stresses that we want our suffering and even death to have meaning; suffering by the hands of a devil in human form is more glorious “historically meaningful” than suffering that is for nothing and at the hands of ordinary people. In both these reasons she gives, I see Arendt making aesthetic arguments; for Arendt meaning is something that the spectators attribute to the event, once it is over. As we will see in the later chapters also, meaning is created through stories, narratives.

1.4. Moralistic Evil

As mentioned in the beginning, evil as used in the public discourse either partakes of the demonic or is introduced through moralistic tones with emphasis on the superiority of one side and the inferiority of the other. More often than not these two positions are intertwined. The post postwar narrative, rife with references to evil, announced Allies victory as a triumph of reason, democracy and morality and denounced the Axis for their irrationality, dictatorship and amorality (Cotkin, 2007: 467). In 1948 Reinhold Niebuhr asked: “Must we not warn victorious nations that they are wrong in regarding their victory as a proof of their virtue?” (Niebuhr, 1953: 113). As we will see from the examples from Arendt’s writings, she agreed with Niebuhr that talk of moral superiority

²⁰ Benhabib calls Arendt fearless “in exploring the nature of political evil and personal responsibility found further expression in Eichmann in Jerusalem (1963)”. Benhabib, Seyla. Introduction. *Politics in Dark Times*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010) 1. Arendt is willing to acknowledge the metaphysical origin of the first Man, which she immediately qualifies as mythical. This origin serves only to show that equality can be created on earth. “...according to Jewish-Christian tradition, another equality, expressed in the concept of one common origin beyond human history, human nature, and human purpose – the common origin in the mythical, unidentifiable Man who alone is God’s creation. This divine origin is the metaphysical concept on which the political equality of purpose may be based, the purpose of establishing mankind on earth.” (Arendt, 1979: 234).

is irrelevant to politics, but she is also concerned that the inappropriate usage of the word ‘evil’ in public discourse fails to capture the complexities of the modern condition and mass politics.

We see Arendt’s ridicule of the moralistic use the word “evil” in the public talk she delivered in 1948 as part of the Rand School lectures. The audience was composed of intellectuals and Socialists from New York, many of whom were Arendt’s acquaintances. The topic, anti-Stalinism, was sensitive to the audience members (Arendt, 2005a: 217). Throughout the essay Arendt discusses the differences, misunderstandings and prejudices of American and European political thinking among the left intelligentsia. In her criticism of ‘anti-Stalinism’ Arendt among other things raises the issue that the term is too vague with regard to the specific political convictions, and what is worse it gathers all political issues in a single person (Arendt, 2005a: 218-9). The paragraph where the word ‘evil’ appears in the moralistic sense is at the very end of the lecture.

It is precisely because the past of American anti-Stalinists has been so closely connected with events in other parts of the world that they are so reluctant to part with it. Yet, if they want to remain contemporary with the rest of humanity they will have to realize that totalitarianism is not just an invention of “evil Mr. Stalin” and that there are more important things to know and worry about in the world today than the inner struggles of the party of the Russian Revolution (Arendt, 2005a: 227).

By saying “totalitarianism is not just an invention of "evil Mr. Stalin" and that there are more important things to know and worry about in the world today” Arendt wants to draw further attention to the phenomenon of totalitarianism, or what she calls “possibly the most crucial political experience of our time” (Arendt, 2005a: 226). American leftists had not lived through the totalitarian experience as their European counterparts had. Arendt observes that disagreements over anti-Stalinism takes away from what is more important, i.e. awareness of totalitarianism and its elements. In this

context she uses the word 'evil' to emphasize how simplistic it is to take sides pro or against Stalin as a personality. This is also in line with the point she raises at the beginning of the lecture: anti-Stalinism is a catch-all word that centers complex political issues in one person. She insists that calling Stalin 'evil' will not help understand the entangled political issues which the term seems to amalgamate.

We find another example of Arendt's criticism of moralistic evil in the review of the book *Hitler's Table Talk*, written by Henry Picker, who was present at Hitler's dinners between 1941 and 1942 and took notes of what was said during them. Arendt argues the talks of these dinners were calculated speeches Hitler made to his army commanders in the hope of "convincing them of his national goals and cautiously prepare them for his actual plans" (Arendt, 2005a: 286). They were not his genuine opinions and presentations of actual plans. These statements, Arendt suggests, should have been verified by looking at what Hitler expressed in the speeches and what he proceeded to do in reality. Arendt's objection is that the book reported only what was being said without the background against which it was being expressed, thus depriving the readers of the opportunity to weigh the facts for themselves. Arendt's book review focus on the introduction of the book, written by the editor, professor Gerhard Ritter. In the introduction there are claims about Hitler's charismatic personality. Arendt is clearly dismissive of the portrayal of 'good Hitler' ignorant of 'evil Himmler's deeds.' (Arendt, 2005a: 287). In the review Arendt puts forward arguments as to why this account is not truthful. I think it is important to notice that she takes time to do this. For Arendt this is an opportunity to think about the inability of people to make judgments and their preference for the easy escape routes in the form of moralistic dichotomies of good and

evil. This style of thinking makes people miss the inconsistencies in Hitler's thought, Arendt sustains (Arendt, 2005a: 289-290). It also leads her to conclude that the book poses a particular danger to the social and political environment of post-war Germany, where Nazism was transmuting into Neo-Nazism. According to George Cotkin, Arendt feared that "focusing on Hitler... would open up the floodgates of the demonic. He might be viewed, over time, as the aesthete of evil and thereby gain a cultish following" (Cotkin, 2007: 472).

In this book review we see a third aspect that is a characteristic of moralistic evil. The facileness with which people or events are called evil prevents further thinking and evaluation of facts. The inability to think, to weight up facts and come to a conclusion by oneself is what eventually leads Arendt claim that evil is banal. Hence we can see the traces of her line of thinking on banal evil, which I will take up in separate section, as early as this book review written shortly after the publication of *The Origins of Totalitarianism*.

Two more instances where we see Arendt express her discomfort at the usage of the word 'evil' moralistic manner are in relation to reactions to her book on the Eichmann trial. A few months after the publication of the Eichmann report Arendt became a victim of the moralizing language against which she had warned we need to be careful.

I received many letters from Jews supporting my book. ... Before the campaign started, the reaction was different. There was, for instance, a Yiddish critic, I think by the name of Glattstein, who wrote a favorable review. Four weeks later, as though he never had said anything of the sort, he wrote about an *evil book by an evil person*-or something to that effect. More interesting: The first report in the Jerusalem Post about The New Yorker articles was quite favorable. And the important Hebrew daily Haaretz asked for serial rights (they printed, indeed, two large installments without any derogatory remarks by the editors) and for an option for the

Hebrew rights for the Schocken publishing house, Gustav Schocken being the editor and owner of Haaretz (Arendt, 2007: 483-4; emphasis added).

The quote above is from a written interview that was not published until 2007. The journalist sent Arendt his questions and she replied in writing. Arendt's reply was written in September 1963. Here she recalls being called 'evil' and being accused of having written an 'evil' book. The next quote is taken from Arendt's reply to a book review of her report on the Eichmann trial. The essay is written in 1966 and we see Arendt being fully aware that she has become a target of what she calls the 'image-makers.'

The image they had created was that of an "*evil book*;" now they had to prove that it was written by an "*evil person*." When this happened there were still quite a few Jewish functionaries who thought that things had gone too far. Thus, I received a letter from an officer of the United Restitution Organization-on whose help Mr. Robinson so heavily relied-telling me that he could only "shake his head in uneasiness" when he" read the "very vicious [*gehassige*] discussion, especially in the whole Jewish press" (mentioning, incidentally, the "New York Times and the London Observer"), and he singled out the articles "of Syrkin, Steiner, Nehemiah Robinson, Jacob Robinson, etc." This was in July 1963; a few months later, this communication would have been impossible (Arendt, 2007: 509-10; emphasis added).

As the quotes above illustrate, Arendt believes that she was being judged and labeled not because of what she said but because of the image that was painted of her. Dossa (1984: 163) has noted that even before the publication of the Eichmann report Arendt was "a cultural figure of repute, a literary phenomenon, more conversed about than thoughtfully read."

The people set on calling Arendt an 'evil person' and the book an 'evil book' were trying to turn the tables on her because the subtitle of the book read 'A Report on the Banality of Evil.' In the media, this subtitle eventually came to mean that evil suffered by victims of the totalitarian regimes was banal. Arendt vehemently objected to

this interpretation and what I will discuss what she meant by that phrase in the section on banal evil. To her the facile label is part of a systematic plan, which aims to stop people from reading and judging for themselves. Arendt is objecting to the defamation of her own good name, as well as the implication of the label for the audience of her book. The major discovery of the Eichmann trial for Arendt was that there is not necessarily a convergence between the evil of the deed and the doer. The doer need not be deeply and profoundly evil to commit atrocious acts. For Arendt, the media and the image-makers who were criticizing her were consciously being dismissive of this distinction. As we will see, for Arendt the difference is essential. Indeed, as she writes in the introduction of *The Life of the Mind*, it is what provokes her to probe in the human faculties of thinking, willing and judging (Arendt [1978] 1981: 3-6).

As a final example of the category of moralistic evil, we see the word ‘evil’ applied in reference to technology.²¹ In “Europe and the Atom Bomb” Arendt discusses Europeans’ post-war attitude towards the atomic bomb. Arendt argues that the European approach had been to denounce atomic technology as “inherently evil and destructive” and to look at this development as something American that had nothing to do with Europe (Arendt, 2005a: 419). Throughout the text, Arendt shares the European worry towards the atomic bomb. However calling the invention ‘evil’ and putting the blame on others is a simplistic idea which may serve to ease one’s conscience but fails to face the situation. Arendt asserts that the scientists who developed the bomb were Europeans, who had to leave their home countries. This fact locates the advancement of new technology

²¹ For a discussion of Arendt’s position on technology see Dana Villa’s “From *Homo Faber* to the *Animal Laborans*: Instrumentality, Technology, and the “Destruction of the Common World”” in Villa, Dana. *Arendt and Heidegger: the fate of the political*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995), 193-201

at the heart of European modern development. For Arendt, the European denunciation of technological developments as ‘evil’ is a sign of Europe’s inability to come to terms with what lays inside its cultural heritage.

1.5. Concluding Remarks

In this chapter I have analyzed Arendt’s writings where she used the word evil, and its variations devil, devilish, and demonic rhetorically. I have argued that Arendt’s criticism is fueled by the concern that misuses and misattributions of the word evil prevent us in recognizing the reality of evil and leave us unprepared in dealing with that reality. Her reactions are guided not only by the experience of totalitarianism but also by the reaction of public intellectuals to totalitarian evil. Demonic evil makes an appearance quite early in Arendt’s writings. She called the bureaucratic machinery devilish in 1938-9 when she was writing about antisemitism. A few years later in 1942, reporting and commenting on one of Hitler’s speeches she called him the devil and the Nazi regime “devil’s rule on earth.” By 1945 she made fun of intellectuals who thought that attributing the Nazis supernatural demonic powers could explain their deeds. But still uses phrases like “devilish principle” even as late as 1950 in *The Origins of Totalitarianism* to refer to how Jews were perceived by pan- movements. She becomes very skeptical of references to demonic evil also because she is aware of the aesthetic appeal that evil possess. This fear is expressed twice in Arendt’s writings. The first is her concern expressed in *The Origins*, even though it is simply in a footnote that references Bataille’s essays on Sade but without a longer comment. Arendt remarks that since the

1930 the literary avant-garde in France has developed a penchant for Sade's writings and who search "the sublime in the infamous, for the great in the subversive" (Jean Paulhan cited in Arendt, 1979: 335, fn 56). Arendt believes that this has to do with of the survivors of the First World War, whom she calls "the front generation." According to Adriana Cavarero, "Arendt is here trying to isolate the linkage between the sacrificeability of the self that characterizes mass man in totalitarian regimes and the "yearning for 'losing themselves'" that the generation of the front" exhibits (Cavarero, 2009: 49). The fear of aesthetic appeal of the demonic is mentioned again, when Arendt discusses the revival of neo-Nazi sentiment among the German youth so soon after the war (Arendt, 2005a: 286).

Throughout her work we see attempts to demystify and demythologize evil in order to fight is a political problem, even when she expresses her concern about her ability to do this in her letter to Jaspers, as we saw. Against moralistic evil, Arendt argues that this is very far from the truth and such employment of the word does not help us understand something, but quite the contrary can cloud judgment to a degree that we stop thinking for ourselves and hide behind simplistic labels.

To the demonic and moralistic approaches to evil I see Arendt emphasizing the need for a political response through the stress she puts on concepts like equality, rights and justice. She does this even as she does not define what evil is. Her objections are based on the following reasons: firstly, using the word 'evil' moralistically draws Manichean pictures of the world. Such images obfuscate what they are meant to clarify. Secondly, the simplicity with which moralistic evil rouses passions and gathers sympathizers but those who use it miss the more important aspects of the matter they

wanted to understand. Thirdly, calling a person or an event ‘evil’ in a moralistic way induces laziness in thinking. The label is easy to use, so it does not encourage the evaluation of people or events by using one’s own judgment. Her reproaches to demonic and moralistic evil reveal that for Arendt, evil has a reality; it is the product of human behavior and it is a human capacity; and human beings need to assume full responsibility for their doings even though in a totalitarian system this seems a self-defeating effort. They also point to the poignancy that judgment has for Arendt even during her early writings. I will be returning to these topics throughout the thesis as I analyze Arendt’s conceptualizations of evil.

CHAPTER II

THE REALITY OF EVIL

In this chapter I want to examine the fact that Arendt, despite her contempt for casual or rhetorical uses of evil by others, appears to believe that evil does have real existence. We know that evil is real, states Arendt, because when we are confronted with it “the real evil” “causes us speechless horror,” and “all we can say is: This should never have happened” (Arendt, 2003: 75). To say that evil is real means that the ontological status of evil does not consist in mere privation, negation or exception from the rule. It should be stated from the very beginning that Arendt does not attempt to justify her belief; she simply accepts the existence of evil and proceeds to explore the phenomena that have been worthy of this name in recent history.

In this chapter I will reconstruct what I think is Arendt account of the reality of evil and explore the implications of this position. The purpose, therefore, is to look for answers to the question what is significance of the reality of evil for Arendt’s conceptualizations of evil.

Where do we see Arendt affirming the reality of evil? Considered with her full oeuvre in sight it is possible to say that Arendt’s affirmation of the reality of evil consists of a double act: firstly, there is the critique of the Western philosophical and theological

tradition that systematically, in Arendt view, negates the reality of evil. Some of the forms this negation takes are: conceiving of evil as deficiency; or sustaining that its contemplation leads to meaningless and thus marks to limits of what we can think; or wrongly associating evil with fear and death and thus advocating isolation from reality. Secondly, without formulating a theory of evil, Arendt's political and historical account of the reality of evil prepares the ground for her concept of radical evil which appears under totalitarianism with the aim to comprehend evil without justifying it. I see this as Arendt's attempt to negotiate the fine border between moral evil (where human agency is clearly identifiable) and a secular but metaphysical and amoral evil (excludes God but not quite the Devil; identifies forces that are beyond the individual but contribute to the shaping of reality, i.e. the products of these forces are tangible: e.g. the formation of new nations states and the stateless of refugees). She does this by formulating a political and historical account of evil. Such account allows for explanations that are intelligible but not deterministic, understandable but also contingent (Neiman, 2002: 44).

Neither her negative account (the critique of philosophy and theology) nor her positive account (politics and history) of the reality of evil are problem free. Scholars have frequently pointed out Arendt's idiosyncratic way of engaging with philosophers.²² Arendt herself was completely aware of her approach. It is in fact one her major methodological claims regarding the philosophical tradition that we have read texts in the hope that they will help us see our current predicaments from a different light. However,

²² Consider the works of the following two authors as examples of the debates about Arendt's misappropriation of Kant and Augustine. For Kant see Allison, Henry. "Reflections on the Banality of (Radical) Evil: A Kantian Analysis" in Lara, María Pía ed. *Rethinking evil: Contemporary perspectives*. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), 86-100. Allison argues that Arendt misunderstood what Kant meant by radical evil. For Augustine see Miles, Margaret. "Volo ut sis: Arendt and Augustine." *Dialog* 41, no. 3 (2002): 221-230. Miles argues that Arendt's interpretation of Augustine's concept of "love" is so far-fetched it can no longer be considered Augustinian.

these texts should not be treated as the ultimate authority (Arendt 1993: 17-40; Stern and Yarbrough, 1978: 347). It is in the light of this interpretation that she sees fit to take what she can and leave behind what she believes is not needed from the philosophical cannon.

In contrast to the Frankfurt School, her political and historical account of conditions that led to totalitarian rule sets out to show the practices rather than the ideas that made possible the appearance of radical evil.²³ In the final part of this chapter I will turn to the implications of Arendt's position for her conceptualizations of evil. Here we see that even though Arendt was highly critical of the theological stance on reality of evil, she nonetheless retains the idea that evil is a temptation. Secondly, having a positive account of the existence of evil allows us to distinguish between the various forms and degrees of evil. Evil, Arendt tells us, culminates in totalitarianism, the "arch-evil of our time" (Arendt, 2005a: 150).²⁴ So it has real existence not only in totalitarianism but also in other political forms. This raises the question of how we can deal with evil. This is where the first and second implications become intertwined. Evil must be resisted, can it be eradicated? This question leads us to the heart of Arendt's philosophical engagement with evil because it points towards Arendt's understanding of human freedom, which I will be discussing in the next chapter, but to anticipate: Arendt is providing us with a tool of understanding with which we move beyond the strict liberal position of human freedom that centers on the individual at the expense of the context in the individual lives while still managing to preserve individual responsibility. Furthermore, because for

²³ Canovan remarks on Arendt's reliance on Rosa Luxemburg's idea that it is the triumph of imperialism that leads to the destruction of culture and not the reverse. So for Arendt, totalitarianism owes less to the collapse of the Romantic ideals and more to the appropriation of the capitalist-imperialist practices (Canovan, 1992: 22).

²⁴ For a more detailed analysis of how Arendt is different from the Frankfurt School see Villa, Dana. *Arendt and Heidegger: The Fate of the Political*. (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1996), Chp 6 and Neiman, Susan. *Evil in Modern Thought*. (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2002), Chp 4.

Arendt evil existed even before it appeared in its most radical form, this position suggests that conceptually we need to reverse the chronological order in which they are presented by Arendt. Therefore I will be pursuing with these implications of the reality of evil in the next two chapters also.

2.1. The Problematic Philosophical and Theological Tradition

Let me begin by noting that Arendt's critique of the philosophical and theological tradition is preceded by what I have called her positive, or non-philosophical, account of the existence of evil. While the arguments of her critique that I will present in this chapter are scattered throughout *The Life of the Mind*, we find most of the arguments for her account of reality of evil throughout her less philosophical and more political writings. I think the reversal in presentation is warranted because it will help to bear in mind what Arendt is opposing by stating that evil has a reality and also shows that this is a position to which she subscribed consistently throughout her work. Arendt's claim is that Western philosophy, since its inception, makes no place for the factual existence of evil (Arendt, 1978a: 150). This is also the justification of her statement that the Western philosophical tradition has been broken and it cannot help us understand if we take it as the ultimate authority. And before I begin, as a warning to my reader: this rather long section is important in order to see the grounds upon which Arendt builds her own account by repudiating the authority of the tradition. However Arendt's non-philosophical account of the reality of evil is complicated, multi-faced, multi-layered all by itself and there is not a one to one correspondence between the arguments she raises in these two accounts.

Let us now consider in some detail the forms that the denial of the existence of evil takes in ancient thought. Arendt sustains that in the cases Socrates, Plato, and Democritus we are facing an outright negation of the existence of evil. However, in the instances of Epicurus, Epictetus and Cicero evil is identified with fear and/or death.

Evil is denied reality when its ontological status is defined as absence. Following Socrates, Arendt shows how evil is negated: positive concepts dissolve in their original meaningfulness through the activity of thinking; negative concepts do the same, they also can be traced to their origins. But when a negative concept attempts to revert to its original meaning the result is meaninglessness. In other words, something is beautiful because it partakes from the Idea that is beauty. Evil, as absence of good is an absence; it is something that is not, it is nothing. Therefore there are only two possible alternatives: either people are “in love with examining and thus do philosophy” or they do evil and are in fact incapable of thought (Arendt, 1978a: 179).²⁵ The implication is that evil can be overcome by reason. Arendt is not happy with this Socratic conclusion also because this is a position that is reiterated from St. Aquinas, to Duns Scotus and also Kant (Arendt, 1978b: 131-2). Furthermore, she notes that it leads to the misconception that everyone wants to do what is good; but “the sad truth of the matter is that most evil is done by people who never made up their minds to be either evil or good”(Arendt, 1978a: 180).²⁶

²⁵ On This point Yarbrough and Stern offer the following explanation: “If it is true that no one voluntarily wills evil as evil, this does not mean that there is not evil in the world, that the evil we encounter is merely a delusion to which we as fallible creatures are prone. It may be that the evil in the world arises from our inclination toward nothingness, which would then account for its banality. Such a suggestion seems to fit in with Arendt's general reflections, but since Arendt does not discuss the matter in detail, it is impossible to say with any certainty what she thought of the problem” (Yarbrough & Stern, 1981: 351).

²⁶ In writing this Arendt obviously has in mind Eichmann. Ranasinghe has argued that suspending judgment is in fact the appropriate attitude for the impersonal civil servant that forks for the state. See Ranasinghe, Nalin. "Ethics for the little man: Kant, Eichmann, and the Banality of evil." *The Journal of Value Inquiry* 36, no. 2 (2002): 299-317. Martin Buber similarly to Arendt argues for evil that comes from

Thus, one of the ways in which evil is denied reality in philosophy is to think that it is inconceivable for human being to do evil voluntarily.²⁷ While Socrates denies the existence of evil based on the activity of thinking, Democritus approaches evil from its relation to speech. He nonetheless made a similar argument to that of Socrates. For Democritus speech is to action what shadow is to real objects. Therefore he advises not to speak of evil. This would turn evil deeds into ghosts, semblances, things with no shadow (Arendt, 1978a: 179).

Plato develops further the Socratic point that thinking about evil leads to meaninglessness. Plato tells us that there are places where reason and understanding are not supposed to venture. Reiterating the argument for the ontological status of evil, Plato in Arendt's reading argues that deficiencies "have no roots of their own, no essence that thought could get hold of." In the dialogue *Parmenides* young Socrates and Parmenides discuss the inconsequential and indecorous things like "hair and mud and dirt" which no one admires. Socrates, who up to that point had been talking about the world of Ideas behind appearances, rejects outright the possibility that there may be any Idea behind "hair and mud and dirt." Socrates claims that it is better to retreat, "in these cases, the things are just the things we see." To try and think on them further means "falling into the

indecision: "He does not choose, he doubts. Doubt is unchoice, indecision. Out of it arises evil" (Buber, 1953: 104).

²⁷ To do evil voluntarily is the definition of moral evil. To what degree is an act considered evil when done willingly depends on cultural norms, that is, the rules of conduct that govern the society in which we live. See Heller, Agnes. "Radical Evil in Modernity: On Genocide, Totalitarian Terror and the Holocaust". *Thesis Eleven* (2010):106-117, 107. To foreshadow one of the points of this chapter: reality is defined by Arendt as the fact that something is true because other people beside me confirm what I see and hear. This definition of reality makes the moral definition of evil even more problematic, because it raises the issue "How could he/she have known better if there was no one to tell him/her so." I will return to this point in the chapter on morality. For now I only mean to draw attention to the salience of reality to evil.

bottomless pit of nonsense.”²⁸ Parmenides replies to say that Socrates’ answer is the naïve product of his youth, but does not pursue the issue. Arendt is keen to point out that it is beauty, rather than ugliness or evil that inspires Plato to think about Ideas and philosophize. Why is this case? Arendt’s explanation is the following: The need of reason is inspired by the quest for meaning (Arendt, 1978a: 15). In the Socratic language the quest for meaning is called Eros, which is a need, a desire that for which it does not have. By this definition the objects of this desire and love can only be lovable, and they are: beauty, wisdom, and justice and so on. The obvious implication is that ugliness and evil are automatically excluded from this definition. They cannot be the concern of thinking. The only way they may feature is in the form of deficiencies, where ugliness is the lack of beauty and evil is the lack of good. Plato does not have a philosophical explanation for the existence of evil, however in the *Gorgias* he admits that men can voluntarily do evil. His solution, Arendt suggest, was to rely on threats as a means of combating evil (Arendt, 1978a: 179-80). Young-Bruehl remarks on the impasse of philosophers in confront evil “as long as the thinker's noble nature or the thinker's moral maxim are still at work in the inquiry” (Young-Bruehl, 1982b: 282).

The Romans also deny the reality of evil, but they did so differently from the Greeks. They associate evil with fear and death. Arendt’s argument is that the cost the Romans have to pay for this association is the distortion of reality. The teachings of Epictetus are a good example because according to Epictetus both good and evil lie in what we today would call will power. What the will cannot control is neither good nor evil. Arendt singled out Epictetus because he does not base his arguments on

²⁸ Admiration of wonder was considered the starting point of philosophy, thus leaving no room for “the factual existence of disharmony, of ugliness, and finally evil” (Arendt, 1978a: 150).

metaphysical tenets or derive from them how man ought to think and live (Arendt, 1978b: 74).²⁹ Thinking for Epictetus is action, where one acts on one's self with the aim of changing nothing but one's self. Arendt suggests that the implication of Epictetus teaching is that "the only action left when acting in the world has become futile" (Arendt, 1978a: 161). The result of Epictetus's action is the imperviousness and disinterestedness, the characteristics of the wise men that refuse to respond to whatever good or evil may befall them. Arendt however is very critical of self-inflicted isolation (Berger, 2009: 164). Epictetus aims to dismiss and make unreal that which is actual. This according to Arendt is "the bracketing of reality" and is made possible not by the power of the will, as Epictetus sustains, but by the nature of the faculty of thinking.³⁰ Epictetus's counsel is that "whether what affects you exists or is a mere illusion depends on your decision whether or not you will recognize it as real" (Arendt, 1978a: 155). To Arendt escape from reality means that the wise man of Epictetus turns into a ghost walking through the world not noticing anything because omnipotence of the will means to "let your will be that events should happen as they do" (Epictetus, quoted in Arendt, 1978b: 81). Arendt would have agreed with Rousseau, who said that "to deny the existence of evil is a most convenient way of excusing the author of that evil; the Stoics formerly made themselves a laughing-stock for less" (Rousseau, quoted in Neiman, 2002: 41). Arendt also has

²⁹ Epictetus' starting point is that all men wish to be happy. Since life is ridden with fear and eventually ends in death it cannot give real happiness without a special effort of the will.

³⁰ To achieve "the bracketing of reality" it is necessary to the shift from the perceived object to the perception itself. The shift has the double function of allowing the self to detach completely from the object that was originally sensed and also turning the perceived object into what Epictetus called "an impression," whatever the subject perceives it to be, thus severing it also from the rest of the world. Arendt calls "the bracketing of reality" a trick of the Stoic philosophy: reality cannot touch us even if we are still in the midst of it. For Arendt this relief is unreal and serves only to sooth anxiety and fear. She says: "I still doubt that there ever was anybody who remained master of his "impressions" when toasted in the Phalarian Bull" (Arendt, 1978a: 155-7).

serious doubts about the absolute tranquility man will find by turning inward once he has successfully separated from outward appearances.³¹

So far we have discussed the three ways in which philosophers deny the reality of evil: by claiming that evil cannot be done voluntarily, by arguing that the contemplation of evil leads to meaninglessness, and associating evil with either fear or death thus isolating themselves from reality. For all these reasons, Arendt argues, we cannot rely on ancient philosophers to guide us if we want to affirm the reality of evil. The situation does not improve when evil becomes a theological as well as a philosophical problem.

Beginning with Augustine, evil is attributed meaning and purpose that is beyond the grasp of human beings. Arendt reminds us that Augustine argued everything that is good by the fact that it is, and this includes evil and sin “and this not only because of their divine origin and because of a belief in a Creator-God, but also because your own existence prevents you from either thinking or willing absolute non-existence” (Arendt, 1978b: 91). Aristotle before him, and Kant after him made similar remarks. Mathewes has suggested that the justification of the existence of evil in terms of purpose serves to affirm our moral hopes and faith in the justice and goodness of the world by offering us reasons for that faith (Mathewes, 2001: 36). It is Arendt’s view that the culmination of this line of argument comes in Aquinas, who argues that it is impossible for something

³¹ Looking inwards man is confronted with the “abyss” which is concealed “in the good heart and in the evil heart” (Arendt, 1978b: 84). Human wickedness that lies hidden in the heart is point that Arendt mentions also in *The Life of the Mind* (Arendt, 1978a:35), where she quotes from Schelling’s *Of Human Freedom* “The emotions are glorious when they stay in the depths, but not when they come forth into the day and wish to become of the essence and to rule.” In *Origins* 1979: 189), *On Revolution* 1990a: 194) and “Some Questions of Moral Philosophy” (2003: 74) she reiterates her point, however she seems to consider this a subject fit for psychology and literature and as such unable tell us anything specific about the nature of evil. In *Lectures on Kant’s Political Philosophy* (1989: 50) she agrees with Kant that only God is the omniscient knower of the heart. Peter Kivy pursues the trail of the wickedness that lies in human heart and calls it the secular problem of evil. See Kivy, Peter. “Melville’s “Billy” and the Secular Problem of Evil: The Worm in the Bud.” *The Monist* 63, (1980): 480-493.

that is wholly evil to exist, because “if the wholly evil could be, it would destroy itself” (Aquinas, as cited in Arendt, 1978b: 118). Arendt further states this “remains the most resilient and ever-repeated traditional argument against the real existence of evil” (118). It is tantamount to saying radical or absolute evil cannot exist. This for her is unacceptable because how do you confront something that is threatening your existence when you are told that the threat does not actually exist?

But let us resume the narrative of the philosophers. The argument for the purposefulness of evil becomes conjoined with the formulation of evil as privation. Arendt points out that to say evil is privation means seeing evil as part of the whole. In this logic when we call something evil we are failing to notice the part evil plays in the whole. Spinoza, also said that evil is only an aspect in which the unquestionable goodness appears to the human eye (Arendt, 2003: 126). Arendt tells us that the only challenge to the tradition comes from Duns Scotus, almost a contemporary of Aquinas. He argued that, for man, the actual thing has a higher ontological status to the image of the thing, even though we would not be able to identify the thing as the thing if we did not have a prior mental image of it. This is the reversal of the Thomistic order (Arendt, 1978b:120-1).³²

Arendt remarks that justifying “evil and ugliness as necessary part of the whole that appear evil and ugly only to the limited perspective of men” would never occur to the Greeks but by now it has become common justification (Arendt, 1978a: 150). This is a point where she contradicts herself. In her analysis of the relation between philosophy and politics she is keen to stress that almost everyone since Plato has taken politics to be

³² Arendt points out that Kierkegaard took a similar stance against Hegel when he said that “*this* particular man ranks higher than, and precedes, the species or the mere thought of mankind.”

a “necessary evil.” Plato’s philosophy serves as the foundation for the hierarchy between appearances and reality to the detriment of the former.

Reality is something beyond appearance. Reality consists of the truth and only philosophers live to search for truth. Politics has to do with appearances; it is based on *doxa* – opinions.³³ The condemnation of Socrates by the Athenians induced Plato to think up a city that would be safe for the philosopher and a form of ruling that would prevent future injustices. So political philosophy is not about the political experience but about philosopher’s ideal about what politics should be (Arendt, 1990b: 99-100). Getting away from experience makes it difficult to deal with the reality of evil because instead of confronting the real evil that exists in the world, philosophy defines evil in relation to itself. Thus for philosophy, politics becomes a necessary evil that has to be tolerated because of human nature.³⁴ This attitude towards politics has been supported by theology which itself adds a new nuance. Human nature is fallen and therefore it is “permissible,” for government to do evil in order to avoid greater evil.³⁵ This explanation, similarly to

³³ It appears in many of her writings. She originally framed this issue in the essay “Philosophy and Politics” which was part of a series of lectures prepared in 1954. Reiterations of this theme appear in *The Human Condition*, *Between Past and Future*, and *The Life of the Mind*. It is important to note that these reiterations are not merely repetitions. In “Philosophy and Politics” the stress is on how the world misunderstands the philosopher, thus making it impossible for him or her to live, eventually driving the philosopher, like Socrates, to death. In *The Human Condition* the emphasis is on how the imposition of philosophical ideas in the real world imperils plurality, which is the very essence of humanity. What is repeatedly affirmed by Arendt is that the relationship between philosophers and politics is strained and marked by animosity.

³⁴ “A philosophy of mankind is distinguished from a philosophy of man by its insistence on the fact that not Man, talking to himself in the dialogue of solitude, but men talking and communicating with each other, inhabit the earth. Of course, the philosophy of mankind cannot prescribe any particular political action, but it may comprehend politics as one of the great human realms of life as against all former philosophies which, since Plato, thought of the *bios politicos* as an inferior way of life and of politics as a necessary evil or, in the words of Madison, “the greatest of all reflections on human nature” (Arendt, 1995: 91).

³⁵ Refraining from commenting and abstaining from involvement in European politics became the official policy of Vatican during the inter-war period and Second World War. Arendt writes: “And in 1941, when the deportations of Jews from Germany began, the bishops of Cologne and Paderborn could actually recommend “that non-Aryan or half-Aryan priests and nuns volunteer to accompany the deportees” to the East (Guenter Lewy in *Commentary*)—that is, those members of the Church who were subject to deportation anyhow. I can’t help thinking that if there was any group of people during the years of the Final Solution who were more forsaken by all mankind than the Jews traveling to their death, it must have been

the philosophical one, belittles the affairs of men and advises keeping a distance from them. The difference is that whereas the philosophical position encourages disengagement from politics so as to preserve the liberties of the individual, the theological one advises abstaining from worldly affairs in order not to become further implicated in sin (Arendt, 1998: 60). From the religious point of view the argument for government's necessary evil presents a further complication because it ends up implicating God: it is after all God who permits evil to happen. As Dallmayr has remarked, this position adds a further difficulty to the already problematic conundrum of theodicy.³⁶

George Kateb has pointed out that "Arendt would resist conceiving of political action (or even government) as a necessary evil (Kateb, 1977: 168). Nonetheless that she is aware that the cliché "government is a necessary evil" is shared by both thinkers on the right and the left of the political spectrum. Those on the right consider government a necessary evil because they would like to see the least of it possible; those on the left regard it as a necessary evil that will eventually wither away. Arendt draws attention to Hobbes famous phrase life is nasty, brutish and short in order to emphasize that it is we who do evil to one another, as opposed to the belief that evil has a supernatural source.³⁷

these Catholic "non-Aryans" who had left Judaism and who now were singled out, as a group apart, by the highest dignitaries of the Church. We don't know what they thought on their way to the gas chambers—are there no survivors among them?—but it is difficult to gainsay Hochhuth's remark that they were "abandoned by everyone, abandoned even by the Deputy of Christ. So it was in Europe from 1941 to 1944" (Arendt, 2003: 225).

³⁶ Legitimizing the necessary evil of government through religion raises a further problem that is still with us today. As Fred Dallmayr has remarked "George W. Bush's rationale for the invasion of Iraq in 2003 rested crucially on the argument that it was a necessary evil" or at least a "permissible evil—permissible meaning that the Americans gave themselves permission for it, drawing upon their immense resources of divine approval, the trust fund that God gave them when they started out." Dallmyr, Fred. "An End to Evil? Philosophical and Political Reflections", *International Journal of Philosophy and Religion* (2006) 60:169–186, 184, fn 25.

³⁷ Arendt discusses Hobbes' and Locke's ideas with regard to political philosophy and property, throughout *The Human Condition*.

Hobbes—and this is all in Arendt’s paraphrase—states that only the establishment of a sovereign ruler can reduce this evil by imposing rules and laws, so making life more bearable and less arbitrary than it would be if the sovereign were absent. For Arendt, Locke supposes that the establishment of a government will ensure that an individual’s life, liberty and property will be protected. But for the sake of the received protection the individual is ready to give up natural freedom, for which otherwise he or she would be constantly forced to fight. Any imposition on life, liberty and property is evil, but due to the benefits it provides ruling is a necessary evil. Hence government can be a symbol of evil because it is a response to natural human evil in a Hobbesian sense, while not being evil in itself; or because it is powerful, dominating and therefore in a Lockean sense it infringes on the space of the individual. In *The Human Condition* we find the argument that human wickedness makes government necessary and what is good and productive belongs to the society. Arendt quotes Thomas Paine: “Society in every state is a blessing, but government, even in the best state, a necessary evil”; and she quotes James Madison: “But what is government itself but the greatest of all reflections on human nature? If men were angels, no government would be necessary” (Arendt, 1998:110, fn 54).

It is worth noting here Arendt’s enthusiastic reaction to Catholic converts and neo-Catholics. She praises Chesterton, Péguy and Bernanos for not adopting the all too common justification of “necessary evil” and instead recognizing the anti-democratic tendency of the time (Arendt, 2005a: 153). Arendt believes that in order to understand what was going on in Europe between wars and what eventually led to the rise of Nazism, we need to do look at the social, political and economic conditions which (wrongly) make evils seem necessary and inevitable. It is important to note that one

means by which unnecessary evils can seem to be necessary is when we are presented with an apparent choice between a greater evil and a lesser evil.

The argument that evil serves a purpose as a part that in fact belongs to the whole reaches its highest achievement in Hegel's philosophy, according to Arendt.³⁸ Her claim is that Hegel's whole philosophy is founded on the "power of negation," (Arendt, 2007: 479) which "combines the best and the worst" (Arendt, 2003: 74) and "by virtue of which opposites do not destroy but smoothly develop into each other because contradictions promote and do not paralyze development" (Arendt, 1970: 56). In this philosophy evil is "the powerful force that drives the dialectics of becoming" (Arendt, 2003: 126). Arendt challenges the dialectical interpretation of politics that something good might come out of evil because the totalitarian experience shows that the alternative we are contending with is no longer a choice between good and evil but between murder and murder (Arendt, 1979a: 442, 452; Arendt, 2005a: 444).

Who would dare to reconcile himself with the reality of the extermination camps or play the game of thesis-antithesis-synthesis until his dialectics have discovered "meaning" in slave labor? Wherever we find similar arguments in present day philosophy, we remain either unconvinced of the inherent lack of a sense of reality or we begin to suspect bad faith (Arendt, 2005a: 444).³⁹

Arendt does not distinguish between Hegel and Marx in their approach to evil and considers them both members of the dialectical movement that see purpose in evil

³⁸ We see that Kant also belongs to the tradition that attributes purpose to evil. Evil is not futile since it can make humankind, if not the individual human being, more virtuous. Arendt says that Kant believed that wars and disasters were a product of culture, and if they did not come about human beings would not know progress and would live only to satisfy their animal needs (Arendt and Beiner, 1989: 26).

³⁹ Ursula Ludz also points the subject of reconciliation came up during Arendt's first visit with Heidegger after the war in 1950. Arendt was influenced by this conversation and the first 5 pages of the thought journal are dedicated to the topic of reconciliation. Ludz, Ursula "Arendt's Observations and Thoughts on Ethical Questions", *Social Research* 74 (2007): 797-810. I will return Arendt's argument for reconciliation and what that means in the chapter on judgment. I agree with Berkowitz's conclusion that for Arendt "the judgment of reconciliation or non-reconciliation when confronted with the burden of our past is, in other words, the essential political question by which we form and transform our common world." (Berkowitz, 2011: 21).

(Arendt, 1998: 105). She observes that their position is based on “a much older philosophical prejudice that evil is no more than the primitives modus of good, that good can come out of evil, that, in short, evil is but a temporary manifestation of a still-hidden good” (Arendt, 1970: 56). Arendt sustains that these positions have survived for a long time because they inspire hope and dispel fear, but insists that twentieth century experience has proved these opinions to be dangerous; the hope they produce is treacherous and the fear they dispel is legitimate (Arendt, 1970: 56).⁴⁰ Therefore these attitudes to evil continue in the tradition that encourages escape from reality rather than confrontation with it.⁴¹

2.2. Arendt’s Non-Philosophical Account of the Reality of Evil

The task confronting Arendt in the aftermath of Nazi rule is to think about a phenomenon that has a reality which no word other than “evil” seems to capture. On the other hand, “evil” belongs either to the sphere of religion or to moral philosophy, and neither of them is willing to attribute it reality. Arendt thinks we all need an alternative way to think about the evil of our time because, she repeats again and again, its coming into existence has challenged both our categories of thought and standards of judgment. However, the reality of evil needs no longer be denied when we approach it through

⁴⁰ We find another example when Arendt voices her objection to the argument that evil serves a purpose. In the notes to an interview she was to give in 1963 she draws attention to Zionist argument *the evil of antisemitism was necessary* for the good of the Jewish people. She sees this argument as the application of Hegel’s “power of negation” which brings about “the realm of freedom” (Arendt, 2007: 479; emphasis added).

⁴¹ It is important to bear in mind that this how I see Arendt reading the theological and philosophical tradition on evil. It is possible to construct an alternative story by focusing on great thinkers Arendt leaves out or interpreting differently those she engages with. Such an enterprise is beyond the scope of this thesis.

historical explanations, as Rousseau did, thus we make “the world more comprehensible in theory, and more acceptable in practice” (Neiman, 2002: 44).⁴² Arendt seems to have agreed with this sentiment, if not Rousseau’s arguments. In the first introduction to the *Origins* she famously wrote:

Comprehension does not mean denying the outrageous, deducing the unprecedented from precedents, or explaining phenomena by such analogies and generalities that the impact of reality and the shock of experience are no longer felt. It means, rather, examining and bearing consciously the burden which our century has placed on us-neither denying its existence nor submitting meekly to its weight. Comprehension, in short, means the unpremeditated, attentive facing up to, and resisting of, reality-whatever it may be. (Arendt, 1979: viii)

For Arendt “facing up to reality” means taking responsibility for what is happening in the world (Canovan, 1992: 11). That is, giving up the alternative open in front of the thinker - philosopher who chooses to retreat inwardly after the way of the Epictetus. However, Arendt’s realism has been subject to criticism especially by her Francophone readers. Jean-François Lyotard draws attention to “the objectivation and realism predominant in the 1951 text,” which, he argues “in no way detracts from the importance of the analysis... but does limit its [philosophical] significance” (Lyotard, 1993: 158).⁴³ In this section I will reconstruct Arendt’s non-philosophical account of the existence of evil. However, in the next section will show Arendt’s realism does have philosophical significance when considered from the perspective of “evil” in the sense that it raises questions about the nature of evil. Let us begin by looking at the following remark Arendt made in an essay in 1950:

⁴² Arendt does not agree with Rousseau’s position on evil; she states that Rousseau understood evil as hypocrisy and selfishness. These characteristics describe wickedness, but not the radical evil of totalitarianism. See Arendt, *On Revolution*, 81

⁴³ For similar criticism see also Nancy, Jean-Luc and Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe. “The “Retreat” of the Political” in *Retreating the Political*, (New York: Routledge, 1997) 126-34; and also Agamben, Giorgio. *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*. Trans. D. Roazen. (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), 4, 20

To state that totalitarianism is the central political issue of our time makes sense only if one also admits that all other evils of the century show a tendency eventually to crystallize into that one supreme and radical evil we call totalitarian government. All these other evils to be sure, are lesser evils, if compared with totalitarianism... Yet this statement is meaningless, because this may well be true of all evils in our entire history. The trouble begins whenever one comes to the conclusion that no other “lesser evil” is worth fighting. Some anti-totalitarians have already started even to praise certain “lesser evils” because the not-so-far-away time when these evils ruled in a world still ignorant of the worst of all evils looks like the good old days by comparison. Yet all historical and political evidence clearly points to the more-than-intimate connection between the lesser and the greater evil. ...The natural conclusion from true insight into a century so fraught with danger of the greatest evil should be a radical negation of the whole concept of the lesser evil in politics, because far from protecting us against the greater ones, the lesser evils have invariably led us into them (Arendt, 2005a: 271).

In this paragraph Arendt is telling us not only that the totalitarian government is the supreme, radical, and worst of all evils we have witnessed in history but also that evil throughout the ages appears in lesser and greater degrees, and that the lesser evil and the greater one are closely connected. Why does totalitarian rule deserve to be called the worst evil of all will be the subject of the next chapter. At this point in the thesis our aim is to understand what the lesser evils are.

Lesser evils are compromises we are willing to make; they are suboptimal choices with which we can live. To anticipate the argument, Arendt thinks that this is one of the biggest mistakes we make in politics. We find several examples of lesser evil in an essay Arendt wrote in 1942. The first is the German vote for Hindenburg, a war hero general, who suspended civil liberties, dissolved the parliament and eventually granted Hitler legislative power, thus contributing to the coming to power of the Nazis. Hindenburg's acts were a lesser evil that eased the way and made more acceptable the greater evil, is Arendt's comment. A second example is the reaction of the Jews in the French internment camps who were happy to think that they were not suffering as much as the

people in Dachau. In a third example from Italy, the Jews supported Mussolini because they thought that he could stand up to Hitler. Arendt's conclusion is that "when out of fear you twist the lesser evil into the lie that it is something good, you eventually rob people of the capacity to differentiate between good and evil" (Arendt, 2007: 166). This point will be important when we discuss both morality and judgment in the later chapters. Lesser evil appears a choice and as such it is normally considered part of morality.

"Lesser evil" continues to feature in Arendt's writing also after the war. In an essay written in 1945 identifies as "lesser evil" the political vacuum that gave rise to fascism as. Her euphemisms for this political condition are "Nothing," and "vacuum", but also "maelstrom."⁴⁴ "Vacuum," Arendt tells us, is "the Nothing from which Nazism sprang." But she does not give any metaphysical explanations, even though the formulation brings to mind *creatio ex nihilo*. She proceeds to explain the vacuum in less mystical terms as "an almost simultaneous breakdown of Europe's social and political structures" (Arendt, 2005a: 111).

How does this vacuum come about? The answer matters because Arendt is constructing a reality of evil that does not rely explicitly on theological arguments. In doing so she is critical of "lesser evil" presented as the guise of a "cure" for the existing problems. Judith Shklar notes that "[t]he representation of the past through the chronological arrangement of all the available evidence struck her as trivial. She had no interest in explaining how something came to be, step by step" (Shklar, 1983: 69). Put in

⁴⁴ Here are two examples of Arendt's use of the word "maelstrom": "...none of the old forces which produced the maelstrom of the vacuum is so terrible as the new force which springs from this maelstrom and whose aim is to organize people according to the law of the maelstrom-which is destruction itself" (Arendt, 2005a: 112); and "Hitler knew from his own most personal experience what the maelstrom was like into which modern man is drawn and in which he changes his political or other "philosophy" from day to day on the basis of whatever options are offered him as he whirls helplessly about" (Arendt, 2005a:293-4).

a nutshell, the breakdown of the European political and social structure consists of the decomposition of the class structure. Millions of individuals were deprived of their civil rights, employment and lived with constant fear their lives. Analyzed through theoretical tools, in the Western Europe the problem has to do with the problematic definitions of the concepts of the nation, the state, and the hierarchy among citizens that replaced the idea of equality. In the East it involves the imperial legacy of the Habsburg and Romanov empires, the struggle for the creation of new nation-states, and their policies towards minorities and refugees. For Arendt, the rise of the nationalist movement posed a serious threat to the idea of the state as the legal defender of rights of men. When the state became identified with the nation, the rights of men were transformed into the rights of the national citizens of the state; the state considers itself obliged to protect and guarantee only the rights of the people it identifies as belonging to the nation (Arendt, 2007: 353). So she argues against the French sociologist J. T. Delos that “the evil of our times” consists in the “deification of the state” because it is not the state but rather the nation that is venerated as God used to be (Arendt, 2005a: 209). In Eastern Europe the new states were created as an alternative and “a cure to the evil” presented by the crumbling state structure that existed formerly in Europe. However, the lack of correspondence between nation and state meant that 100 million people were recognized as exceptions and were protected by minority treaties (Arendt, 1979a: 271).

Arendt’s arguments for the decline of the nation-state have been called both confused and confusing;⁴⁵ however her discussion of the problem of the human rights has

⁴⁵ Isaiah Berlin sustained Arendt “produces no arguments, no evidence of serious philosophical or historical thought. It is all a stream of metaphysical free association.” See Ramin Jahanbegloo, *Conversations with Isaiah Berlin* (New York: Scribner's, 1991) 82. And even a more sympathetic read of Arendt’s work admitted that Arendt “writes about the downfall of the nation-state in terms that might give one the

given rise to fruitful academic debates.⁴⁶ What is important for my argument is that what we see here, then, is that Arendt supposes there is a “political evil”, which is due especially to nationalism, and which forms the background to imperialism and totalitarianism.

In Arendt’s analysis, imperialism is of course the missing link between nationalism and totalitarianism; and is considered important enough to deserve its own discussion in the *Origins* (Arendt, 2005a: 211). Imperialism was originally an attempt to deal with the decay of social and political structures in Europe. Imperialism was thought to be—and it is important to note this—“a cure for all evils” and was applauded by large sections of the educated society (Arendt, 1979a: 147). In Arendt’s dialectical history, as it is often the case with lesser evils, imperialism itself became cause of evil, “in the end the remedy proved worse than the evil—which, incidentally, it did not cure” (Arendt, 1979a: 154-5).

So what did imperialism have to offer? Why was imperialism “appealing?” Imperialism was meant to bring a solution to the problem of the superfluous people (the mob) and superfluous capital, both of them being redundant and unable to find a place under the existing social conditions (Arendt, 1979a: 150).⁴⁷ Arendt’s argument is that the

impression that Europe had consisted of such states until the coming of imperialism. When one considers, however, that most of Europe, and particularly the German and Austro-Hungarian parts of it, with which she is most concerned, had belonged to states that could not possibly be thought of as national, it is difficult to tell what she is talking about” (Canovan, 1974: 42).

⁴⁶ In the *Origins* Arendt proceeds to identify the paradox of being stateless and realizing that being nothing but human means that the individual can no longer make claim to human rights. Serena Parekh has argued that this central to Arendt’s understanding of the threats to human dignity in the 20th century. See Parekh, Serena. *Hannah Arendt and the challenge of modernity: a phenomenology of human rights*. (New York: Routledge, 2008). Arendt’s discussion of human rights has already become a subfield in Arendtian studies, but it is beyond the scope of the present chapter. For an excellent treatment of the subject see Birmingham, Peg. *Hannah Arendt and human rights: the predicament of common responsibility*. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006)

⁴⁷ Her analysis is clearly wholly indebted to Hobson’s book *Imperialism*. In her analysis of imperialism, Arendt asserts Europe suffered from a superfluity of capital which was the result of increased capitalist

conditions of superfluosity during the long nineteenth century, “foreshadow the even more helpless condition of superfluity experienced first by disoriented “masses” after the First World War, and ultimately by victims in the extermination camps” (Canovan, 1992: 32). Imperialism is characterized by ever-expanding borders and limits, a trait it shares with totalitarianism. If borders define the nation-state, aspirations of expansion characterize the imperial and then the totalitarian state. “What imperialists actually wanted was the expansion of the political power without the foundation of a body politic” (Arendt, 1979a: 135). Again, a comparison with the logic of nation-state may help. In Arendt’s understanding, the political structures of “state” and “nation” are man-made, and the fact that they are constructed that makes men feel at home (Canovan, 1992: 32). The natural world is a given, a world in which men find themselves. But they take responsibility and become inhabitants of the shared world created by their common deeds and actions. “If nature and the earth generally constitute the condition of human *life*, then the world and the things of the world constitute the condition under which this specifically human life can be at home on earth” (Arendt, 1998: 134).⁴⁸

It is important to note that this is the point where “lesser evil” meets “necessary evil” in Arendt’s thought. Under imperial rule, bureaucracy exercises political power without the need for a body politic. Even if we are willing to accept the claim that the

production in a social system that functioned under unfair distribution. The policy of over-saving results in an accumulation of capital that cannot find a place in the existing national capacity for production and consumption. The owners of this superfluous capital are the bourgeoisie, who are concerned in only in the enhancement of their own personal interest without getting involved in the public life the country. This induced the wrath of the displaced, rootless people, which Arendt calls the mob. Phillip Hansen locates Arendt on the left of the political spectrum and defends her reading of mass society as proceeding from a radical viewpoint. Hansen also argues that the bourgeois component of modernity is the culprit in the rise of totalitarianism. See Hansen, Phillip. *Hannah Arendt: Politics, History and Citizenship* (Cambridge, UK: Polity, 1993) 133.

⁴⁸ This theme has its origins in Arendt’s dissertation on Saint Augustine, but is elaborated further in *The Human Condition*. It was here that she attempted to theorize her view that once a political theory attempts to transcend human beings as individuals, as was the case with the nationalist arguments and the Nazi arguments about the state, feelings of homelessness and uprootedness are the result.

government is a necessary evil, bureaucracy as government is more than a necessary evil. This is the intensified form of bureaucratic rule which was implicit in imperial government and became absolutely manifest in totalitarian rule. It is recognizable because its central aim is endless political expansion.⁴⁹ A bureaucratic government is concerned not with ruling as a means to some political good but as a means to the end of imperially extending rule. A second characteristic is that bureaucratic rule is based on extreme secrecy. The ruling bureaucrats are appointed not elected. This makes them unaccountable to the people they rule. “And it is this pseudo mysticism that is the stamp of bureaucracy when it becomes a form of government” (Arendt, 1979a: 245).⁵⁰ The “rule of nobody” creates a veil of obscurity which conceals the reasons for actions and makes the individual feel helpless and useless when confronted by it. This does not mean that there is anarchy or complete lack of rule but rather, everyone is rendered equally powerless by being deprived of political freedom; this is “a tyranny without a tyrant” (Arendt, 1972a: 179). Arendt draws attention to this aspect even in her early writings, when illustrate helplessness she used characters from Kafka’s novels. “Kafka’s so-called prophecies were but a sober analysis of underlying structures which today have come into the open. These ruinous structures were supported, and the process of ruin itself accelerated, by the belief, almost universal in his time, in a necessary and automatic process to which man must submit” (Arendt, 2005a: 74). Thus we see that Arendt is both conscious of and also troubled by the fatalism implied in the “rule of nobody.” The rulers do not have to explain or justify their actions which lead us to a third characteristic.

⁴⁹ “Bureaucracy [is] the organization of the great game of expansion in which every area was considered a stepping-stone to further involvements and every people an instrument for further conquest” (Arendt [1951] 1979a: 186).

⁵⁰ For a more detailed elaboration of this point see Rogozinski, Jacob. “Hell on earth: Hannah Arendt in the face of Hitler” in *Law and Evil*, Ari Hirvonen and Janne Porttikivi eds. (New York: Routledge, 2010), 97- 116

Bureaucratic rule undermines politics based on the rule of law and perpetuates its existence in a rule of violence. It is important to note that this rule was present in Europe before the Nazism came to power. Echoing Edmund Burke's concern about imperial rule Arendt's argument is that this bureaucratic rule that is more than necessary evil was first established in the colonies and then imported to Europe.⁵¹ Yet while Arendt denounces imperialism as evil (Arendt, 1979a: 150). it is unclear in her writing whether the proponents and implementers of this policy were cognizant of the implications of what they were doing. What we have to notice here is that there is a dialectic of evils here: imperialism, although intended to remedy certain evils, is itself a cause of further, even more extreme, evil.

So far we have seen a political and historical analysis of the reality of evil. Arendt also takes an existentialist approach to this reality and we learn of it through Arendt's use of the threefold of rootlessness, homelessness and loneliness, which she repeats as a sort of litany, to describe the existential facet of the reality of evil. This analysis of the political dynamics of uprooting, atomization, and loneliness has been criticized for being theoretical-psychological on the one hand and historical on the other (Stanley, 1987: 181). Aschheim draws attention to the fact that rootlessness, homelessness and loneliness are based on a flawed and by now a rejected socio-psychological model of mass society (Aschheim, 1997: 124). Stephen Whitfield (1980) has argued that the lack of integration, weakness of collective entity, and loneliness were more applicable to Germany than to

⁵¹ Arendt quotes Burke's line from *Reflections on the French Revolution* about the need to keep "the breaker of the law in India from becoming the maker of law for England" (Arendt [1951] 1979a: 183).

either peasant Russia which became totalitarian or industrial Western Europe that did not.⁵²

For my argument, the trio matters because we can think of them as lesser evils given Arendt's claim that "if homelessness, rootlessness, and the disintegration of political bodies and social classes do not directly produce totalitarianism, they at least produce almost all of the elements that eventually go into its formation" (Arendt, 2005a: 271-2).⁵³ But more importantly I think that Arendt's existentialist exposition of reality of evil help us understand "the appeal" of totalitarianism. I want to draw attention to this aspect because for Arendt, evil is always a temptation.

But let us take a brief look at Arendt's narrative. Arendt indicates that while homelessness refers to the physical lack of a home as is the case with the refugees, rootlessness has to do with social belonging – with feeling that you are part of a society of equals (Arendt, 1979a: 475). The "masses" come into being when people are not able to integrate in any organization, such as a political party, trade union, or municipal government (Arendt, 1979a: 311). They are the product of a highly fragmented society which used to be organized in social classes. The mass man is marked by isolation and lack social relationships, not brutality (Arendt, 1979a: 317). Arendt calls "permanent evil" the social threat posed by the mob, a fear widely spread in the European society of the time and that is traceable to the French Revolution. It is a consequence of the breakdown of a social recognition of individuals as individual. The masses are, for

⁵² Whitfield, Stephen. *Into the Dark: Hannah Arendt and Totalitarianism*. (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, "1980). For a defense of Arendt's analysis see Crick, Bernard. "On Rereading "The Origins of Totalitarianism" *Social Research*, 44, (1977): 106-126. Drawing a thin and disputable line that Arendt also upheld, Crick sustains that "to find the causes of a phenomenon is not, strictly speaking, to explain it but simply to understand it better;" i.e. to understand how something becomes plausible (Crick, 1977: 110).

⁵³ For more on rootlessness see *Origins*, Chapter on Continental Imperialism: The Pan-Movements, 233.

Arendt, the large number of neutral people who are not engaged politically and that rarely vote (Arendt, 1979a: 311). Arendt argues that isolation in the political sphere corresponds to loneliness in the social sphere. However, she goes on to argue, loneliness is worse than isolation. While isolation means that one is not able to act as one is deprived of the company of others, loneliness is far worse because it means that one is isolated from the others, but also ultimately from one's own self.⁵⁴

Loneliness and solitude is not the same thing. Solitude, for Arendt, is the name we give one's company with oneself, that is, the condition in which thinking is possible because the individual can dialogue with himself or herself. Solitude is transformed into loneliness if man cannot find a friendship that rescues him from the dyadic nature (myself and me) of solitude. Arendt uses the close connection that exists between solitude and loneliness in her defense of Heidegger, who believed "anti-Semitism was a necessary evil in order to forge the national renewal of Germany" (Grunenberg, 2007: 1003). Arendt writes: "...[do we] call the people who fall for totalitarian propaganda stupid, wicked or ill-informed? They are nothing of the sort. They have only escaped the despair of loneliness by becoming addicted to the vices of solitude" (Arendt, 2005a: 358). Arendt's conclusion is that while solitude is good for the philosopher, it can make him complicit in evil, since it is a turning inwards: a refusal to see that socially one is alone. Berger has remarked on Arendt's concern regarding the self-imposed isolation of the solitude; when

⁵⁴ "By destroying all space between men and pressing men against each other, even the productive potentialities of isolation are annihilated; ... *organized loneliness* is considerably more dangerous than the unorganized impotence of all those who are ruled by the tyrannical and arbitrary will of a single man. Its danger is that it threatens to ravage the world as we know it—a world which everywhere seems to have come to an end—before a new beginning rising from this end has had time to assert itself" (Arendt [1951] 1979a: 478).

it turns into a mass phenomenon it makes the individual vulnerable to ideologies that offer simplistic answers to a very complicated reality (Berger, 2009: 163).

So far I have analyzed what Arendt means by the breakdown of the political and social structures in Europe as well as the effect this has on the individual. We saw that Arendt metaphorically referred to it as maelstrom and vacuum. This is important because it constitutes Arendt's account of the reality evil and I believe has philosophical significance. At no point is Arendt condemning the suffering of the individual. For all its faults her account emphasizes evil as a political phenomenon. And therefore the response to it needs to be political also. With this in mind let us now turn to the implications of the existence of evil.

2.3. The Implications of the Reality of Evil

If this account is correct, then in Arendt's account of the reality of evil we see Arendt endeavoring to establish a balance between moral evil and a quasi-secular, quasi-metaphysical and quasi-moral evil. Let me try and explain each of these qualifications in turn.

We saw that Arendt is critical of the stance that theological thought has towards the reality of evil. Note, however, that this does not stop Arendt from adopting herself a quasi-religious language in her realistic but non-philosophical account. Evil for Arendt is always a temptation, but this is also a quality that evil loses during Nazi rule.⁵⁵ For Arendt, the appeal of the Nazi arguments lies in the simplicity of their answers to the

⁵⁵ We know evil because it tempts us. So widespread is this belief that we think that we are attracted to evil things but need to make an effort towards doing good things (Arendt, 2003: 79).

vortex of uncertainty in which the individual finds himself or herself. These answers are “false promises” but their merit is “their frank recognition of this vacuum” (Arendt, 2005a: 111). Nazi propaganda, which Arendt invariably calls lies, was successful because it found resonance in the fundamental experiences of the everyday life. “One can say that to some extent fascism has added a new variation to the old art of lying—the most devilish variation—that of *lying* the truth” (Arendt, 2005a: 111). Temptation through lies is the work of the Devil. Arendt (2003: 33-6) thinks that compromise with “lesser evil” should be rejected: “the weakness of the argument has always been that those who choose the lesser evil forget very quickly that they chose evil.” Her eventual claim, then, is that the “lesser evil”—in our time—is nonetheless evil, and in its consequences, no different from the greater evil, or “the evil of our times.”

But what does it mean to be able to resist the vortex that she herself described? She is aware that she is demanding a great deal from the common man, *pater familias*, who by her own admission showed “earnest concentration on the welfare of his family, his solemn determination to make life easy for his wife and children” and because he was “worried about nothing so much as his security,” “the pressure of the chaotic economic conditions of our time” transformed him into “an involuntary adventurer, who for all his industry and care could never be certain what the next day would bring.” This meant that “for the sake of his pension, his life insurance, the security of his wife and children, such a man was ready to sacrifice his beliefs, his honor, and his human dignity” (Arendt, 2005a: 128). These were the men that Himmler employed in his bureaucratic machine. Eichmann is such a man, according to Arendt. And his story is nothing if not Job’s story but with a dramatically reversed ending. Job went through the vortex; he did not live in

fear of losing everything. He lost everything. And all the while he was tempted by the Devil with easy but false salvation. Arendt even attributes to Himmler satanic greatness for recognizing that the good family man is willing to do anything and only asks to be exempt from responsibility for his doings (Arendt, 2005a: 128).

Kateb disagrees with Arendt's position and complains that Arendt, in calling for no compromise with evil (because such acts inevitably implicate the actor in evil), is not giving a fair hearing to the argument for lesser and necessary evil. He claims that political actors regularly claim that they do a lesser evil in order to prevent a greater evil, thus equating lesser evil with necessary evil. For Kateb this is a common procedure in political life, because this life involves means-ends calculation. "The lesser but necessary evil is, by definition, still evil, but it is not pure evil, and ideally it is stamped with reluctance and regret," his argument follows (Kateb, 2007: 845). However with his argument, Kateb is obscuring a point that Arendt's analysis allows us to clarify. The lesser evil may be resisted exactly because it is a temptation; the greater evil is no longer a temptation. Arendt asserts that evil under totalitarian rule loses its quality of temptation because the law orders to kill and lie.⁵⁶ Moreover, through her distinction between loneliness and solitude, Arendt challenges the idea that it is not only the little bourgeois that is in danger of being seduced by evil; the philosopher faces the same danger because he chooses to leave the world of men and dwell in his den.⁵⁷

⁵⁶ "Evil in the Third Reich had lost the quality by which most people recognize it - the quality of temptation. Many Germans and many Nazis, probably an overwhelming majority of them, must have been tempted not to murder, not to rob, not to let their neighbors go off to their doom (for that the Jews were transported to their doom they knew, of course, even though many of them may not have known the gruesome details), and not to become accomplices in all these crimes by benefiting from them. But, God knows, they had learned how to resist temptation" (Arendt, 1977: 150).

⁵⁷ See Arendt's *Essays in Understanding* (2005a). For a beautiful commentary of Arendt's essay see Boym, Svetlana. *Another freedom: the alternative history of an idea*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012), 190-5.

The quasi-metaphysical and quasi-moral aspect of Arendt's account of the reality of evil becomes evident when we consider the three distinctive phrases that we encounter in Arendt's writings. These are "necessary evil," "lesser evil," and "the evil of our times" and they make us see that evil, for Arendt, appears in degrees. However, while the idea that there is a choice is present in "necessary evil" and in "lesser evil," the possibility of choice is easily lost in "the evil of our time." We are never completely sure who the individual that makes that choice is. So to summarize:

1. by "necessary evil" she tends to mean politics, government or bureaucracy—sometimes she thinks these are necessary evils, but sometimes she thinks they wrongly taken to be necessary evils when they are not evil at all (as in the case of politics);

2. by "lesser evil" she refers to an evil which is not necessary, but is chosen, although it is chosen usually because it forms a contrast with a "greater evil"—here she suggests that a lesser evil, so far from being the alternative to a greater evil, may be the cause of greater evil arising; and

3. by "the evil of our times" she means this greater evil—namely, totalitarianism (which she characterizes in a variety of ways)—which is of course also an unnecessary evil, but is nonetheless a distinctive evil which has arisen contingently out of history, and which can be understood as somehow having emerged out of misunderstandings of necessary evils and conscious attempts to adopt lesser evils.

The first two phrases are part of the public lexicon, as in the case when collaborating with the Nazis is justified in terms of a "lesser evil", or when the government is called a "necessary evil", whose absence would lead to chaos. We can

even say they are clichés.⁵⁸ Arendt uses these phrases to acknowledge that others use them, and is also sometimes critical of them. But by making frequent use of the slightly less familiar phrase “the evil of our time” she contributes far more emphatically to the view that there is indeed something evil occurring in history. She does not simply denounce evil but offers a historical analysis of the recent past, considering both large-scale explanations of international politics, economics and ideologies, and also smaller-scale explanations of the reactions of individuals to these developments. This is where I see the quasi-metaphysical aspect of her account. These macro forces shape the reality of evil and the individual (the refugee, the family man) feels these consequences of the actions of these forces. We see Arendt adopting a historical narrative of decline, portraying the degeneration of the Western political, moral, economic and social order.⁵⁹ As we will see in the coming chapters also, the point of her narrative is to show that we cannot rely on concepts or arguments that were valid in the past. At the individual level, the lesson is that each person needs to use his or her own judgment, and dare to think and judge for themselves. Eventually, this becomes her way of explaining why the so-called “lesser evil” was nonetheless an evil—for the very simple reason that the “lesser evil” was not opposed to a “greater evil” but subtly blurred into it.

⁵⁸ Arendt is aware that “lesser evil” and “necessary evil” are clichés, and because of this she believes that they should be taken seriously rather than be dismissed offhandedly. For her understanding begins when we pay attention at the popular use of language. From there we should proceed to knowledge in political science. But then we need to return to the public usage “in order to re-establish contact between knowledge and understanding.” See Arendt, 2005a: 311. At this point, by paying attention to the language of common sense she trying to affirm that evil in the public realm exists.

⁵⁹ The narrative of decline was never simply a prophecy of doom. In Arendt’s own words: “I warned the reader against the concepts of Progress and of Doom as “two sides of the same medal” as well as against any attempt at “deducing the unprecedented from precedents.” These two approaches are closely interconnected.” Arendt, Hannah. “The Origins of Totalitarianism: A Reply”, *The Review of Politics*, 15, (1953):76-84, 80

What distinguishes its modern appearance from the older ones, in Arendt's opinion, is that in modern times the degrees of evil become political practices that acclimatize us to policies would be unacceptable otherwise. In the essays that appear after Arendt covers the Eichmann trial, she returns to the notion of "lesser evil" but this time the emphasis is on the concept of morality.⁶⁰ So even though she seems to believe that evil has a real existence, she nonetheless still wants the notion of responsibility to be central to the problem of evil. In other words, she is always adamant that evil is done by humans, so there is a moral aspect of the reality of evil as presented through the idea of lesser evil. The implication is that evil must be resisted. There is however, also a quasi-metaphysical aspect seems to indicate that evil is pervasive and impossible to eradicate. Thinking of this aspect in moral terms seems not only misguided but also limits the ways in which we can understand evil. In the next chapter I argue that in order to understand significance of Arendt's insight about the quasi-metaphysical aspect of evil, we need to look at Arendt's stance on freedom and the role that evil plays in it.

⁶⁰ The titles of the essays where she discusses lesser evil are "Some Questions of Moral Philosophy" and "Thinking and Moral Considerations".

CHAPTER III

RADICAL EVIL AND POLITICAL ACTION

In the previous chapter we saw that Arendt believes in the real existence of evil (evil exists before and after its radical form) and sees it as the result of human deeds (“the reality is that “the Nazis are men like ourselves;” the nightmare is that they have shown, have proven beyond doubt what man is capable of”) (Arendt, 2005a:134).

Now let us consider the complexity of the task Arendt sets for herself: understanding a world where evil is possible, without negating human responsibility for it, even as the deeds confound our ability to make sense of them. In this chapter I propose to tackle this complexity by firstly presenting the strong parallels that exists between radical evil and political action. The purpose is to show that both radical evil and political action have their source in human freedom. Reading Arendt it becomes clear very quickly that political action is a synonym for freedom, but it is important to note that freedom is also behind radical evil, if we are to take seriously Arendt’s statement that “the reality is that “the Nazis are men like ourselves.”

To those familiar with the Arendtian scholarship my proposal may seem counterintuitive. Margaret Canovan has called the proximity of the horrible originality of totalitarianism and the natality of action a paradox (Canovan, 2000: 27). She has also drawn attention to the fact that Arendt political theory, where action plays a pivotal role

emerged as a reaction to the experience of totalitarianism.⁶¹ Canovan does not elaborate on the connection between the two, except for seeing action as a response to totalitarian evil. Richard Bernstein agrees with Canovan. It is because Arendt looked “deeply into the abyss of the practices of total domination,” he argues, that she came to appreciate “what is distinctive about our humanity—individuality, natality, plurality, spontaneity and freedom” (Bernstein, 2002: 390). Furthermore, George Kateb commenting on the same proximity suggests that unless we can think of ways to breaks this apparent connection between totalitarianism and action, then Arendt’s greatest contribution to political theory “may be more shocking and more foreign than it is tolerable.” This, he asserts, is “the severest test that can be made of Arendt’s theory of political action” (Kateb, 1983: 30).

My argument is that for Arendt political action is more than simply a reaction to the experience of totalitarianism. Political action and radical evil stand in close proximity to each other also conceptually. Radical evil and political action do not only have strong parallels, they are related together at the source. This is so because both of them are rooted in human freedom, the capacity to begin something new, as illustrated by the parallels between the two of them.

There is however a second dimension to their relationship; this is the concept of human plurality. For Arendt, plurality is a fact (*Human Condition*) and it is the law of the earth (*Eichmann in Jerusalem*). While “action is the only human faculty that demands a plurality of men,” (Arendt, [1963] 1990a: 175) the totalitarian regime is grounded in the

⁶¹ For an elaboration of the first point see Canovan, Margaret. 1983. “Arendt, Rousseau, and Human Plurality in Politics.” *The Journal of Politics* 45 (02): 285-302; for the second point see Canovan, Margaret. 1992. *Hannah Arendt, A reinterpretation of her Political Thought*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 7.

idea of omnipotence and “aspiration toward omnipotence always implies—apart from its Utopian *hubris*—the destruction of plurality” (Arendt, 1998: 202).

The notion of human plurality is important also because it allows us to temporarily bracket the question of morality in the analysis of radical evil and political action. Approaching these two phenomena through the lens of morality is not only redundant (we will see that morality does not help us understand or judge either of them) but more importantly it obfuscates our ability to see the relationship that exists between them. Both radical evil and political have real existence but the moment they materialize they do so at the expense of each other. If radical evil becomes manifest then political action has disappeared; and if political action is present radical evil has disappeared. This is because radical evil (the absolute denial of plurality – absolute monism) and political action (the absolute affirmation of plurality – absolute plurality) pull and push against each other. This is the implication of the notion of freedom as the capacity for good and evil. When we adopt a moral interpretation “we forget that good and evil could not strive apart from each other if they were not intrinsically striving against each other and that they could never strive against each other if they did mutually thrust into each other and were not together” in the source.⁶²

In the last pages of the *Origins* Arendt writes that totalitarianism is “not a mere threat from outside.” This is evil done by men; and if my reading of the relationship

⁶² I have taken this formulation from one of Heidegger’s comments on Schelling’s Treatise on human freedom because it clarifies not only the complex relation that exists between good and evil, but also explains succinctly this relationship in existential rather than moral terms: “...from this reciprocal relation between good and evil we take at the same time a reference as to how the “and” between both, their unity, and the reality of this unity, is to be conceived. *In any case not as “morality,” for here the good is what ought to be and the bad is what ought not to be.* Here good and evil are the aims of striving and repugnance. They are held apart by the directions of this striving, and only this being apart and away from each other remains in view. Thus precisely in the moral interpretation we forget that good and evil could not strive in the ground as they are.” (Heidegger, 1985: 157; emphasis added).

between radical evil and political action is correct (they are both grounded in the human freedom), then it makes sense that despite her sense of indignation at the evil made possible by the “entirely new form of government,” one Arendt considers “an ever-present danger,” she ends the book with the promise of new beginning.

3.1. Understanding Radical Evil and Political Action

At the beginning of a comparison it is common practice to begin with a definition of terms. In our case this is not easily achieved. In a letter to Karl Jaspers, written in reply to his comments upon reading *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, Arendt writes that she does not know what radical evil is.

Evil has proved to be more radical than expected. In objective terms, modern crimes are not provided for in the Ten Commandments. Or: the Western Tradition is suffering from the preconception that the most evil things human beings can do arise from the vice of selfishness. Yet we know that the greatest evils or radical evil has nothing to do anymore with such humanly understandable, sinful motives. *What radical evil really is I don't know, but it seems to me it somehow has to do with the following phenomenon: making human beings as human beings superfluous (not using them as means to an end, which leaves their essence as humans untouched and impinges only on their human dignity; rather, making them superfluous as human beings). This happens as soon as all unpredictability-which, in human beings, is the equivalent of spontaneity-is eliminated.* And all this in turn arises from or, better, goes along with the delusion of the omnipotence (not simply with the lust for power) of an individual man. *If an individual man qua man were omnipotent, then there is in fact no reason why men in the plural should exist at all* just as in monotheism it is only God's omnipotence that makes him ONE. So, in this same way, the omnipotence of an individual man would make men superfluous (Arendt & Jaspers [1946] 1992: 166; emphasis added).

We do not have definition of what is radical evil, but in the passage above Arendt identifies the keywords that we need to take into consideration in order to approach the

phenomenon of radical evil. These are: superfluousness, unpredictability/ spontaneity, and the delusion of omnipotence. There is one more keyword and this is the plurality of men. We need to pay special attention because this is the linchpin between radical evil and political action.

What is action? “To act, in its most general sense, means to take an initiative, to begin (as the Greek word *archein*, "to begin," "to lead," and eventually "to rule," indicates), to set something into motion (which is the original meaning of the Latin *agere*)” (Arendt, 1998: 177). Arendt is clear from the very beginning about the close connection between freedom and action. Men are “newcomers and beginners by virtue of birth, men take initiative, are prompted into action; ... the principle of freedom was created when man was created but not before” (177). While we need labor (the capacity to sustain life) and work (the ability to build a durable world) to survive in the physical world, it is action that makes our world human (by establishing and maintaining relationships between men who live on earth and inherit the world). “Action is the political activity par excellence” (9); it is a human condition which “exists because men in plurality” (8). Action consists of deeds and speech and “is entirely dependent upon the constant presence of others” (23). Action is also a faculty, which “is ontologically rooted” in the fact of natality, i.e. in the birth of new men and in their capacity for new beginnings (247). But action is also boundless because “one deed, and sometimes one word, suffices to change every constellation” (190). Action is also unpredictable and irreversible (232-3). Thus in discussing action we are referring a public initiation of new beginnings which allow individuals to disclose and realize their individuality. Actions are distinct and if we try to think of them in terms of cause and effect we lose sight of their

distinctiveness. By the same logic, actions cannot be understood in terms of motives and goals; instead they are “inspired” by “principles” such as honor, glory, excellence, love of equality, but also fear, distrust and hatred (Arendt, [1961] 1993: 152).

After this brief introduction of the “definitions” let us now look at the traits of radical evil and political action. I will discuss each of them beginning with the same order that Arendt used in her letter to Jaspers.

3.2. The Challenge of Novelty

Both in the case radical evil and political action we are dealing with something new. While in the latter the novelty is associated with a new beginning that brings to mind birth, a joyous occasion, the former is a horrific novelty.

Firstly we need to note that the novelty of radical evil denotes at least two things. From Arendt’s letter it we can infer that she is referring to the nature of the totalitarian crime. But for Arendt novel is also totalitarianism itself as a form of government. In relation the novelty of the crimes Arendt emphasizes the difference between the acts of the totalitarian regime and the waging of aggressive wars, the massacres on enemy populations, the extermination of natives during the process of colonization in America, Africa and Australia, slavery and forced labor. She sustains that all those were motivated by the desire to rule the world and lust for power (Arendt, 2005a: 233-4). With regard to the novelty of the form of government she insists that totalitarian evil is unprecedented because it takes place during a form of government which defies comparison. Her argument is that the totalitarian government “has exploded the very alternative on which

definitions of the nature of government have relied since the beginning of Western political thought (Arendt, 2005a: 339).⁶³ While monarchy, aristocracy and democracy are defined by their lawful government and the legitimate use of power, despotism, tyranny and dictatorship are characterized by lawlessness and arbitrary use of power. Arendt insists that totalitarianism is lawful, but it achieves its lawfulness by changing radically the meaning and function of the law (Arendt, 1979: 461). The meaning of the law is changed when the discrepancy that exists between legality (positive law) and justice (the validating authority, either secular or religious, from which laws are derived) is terminated. The discrepancy is cancelled when man is made the embodiment of the law (462), the law is defined as laws of Nature or of History and more importantly they are laws that are perpetual movement (463). In this analysis, man reaches the highest possible point only (by embodying to law) to be dropped to the deepest pit (cannot claim responsibility because they are enacting a marching law which would occur eventually with or without them). The function of the law changes because “when the Nazis talked about the law of nature or when the Bolsheviks talk about the law of history, neither nature nor history is any longer the stabilizing source of authority for the actions of mortal men; they are movements in themselves” (463). Therefore, despite the resemblances to tyranny and dictatorship, in totalitarianism we are not dealing with lawlessness but a new kind of lawfulness (Taminieaux, 2002: 442).

Consequently, focusing on the commonalities between totalitarianism and similar previous forms of rule hinders our understanding. By concentrating on shared characteristics, we lose the ability to grasp what is unparalleled because “in the realm of

⁶³ This remark is also explored in detail in the chapter on “Ideology and Terror” of *The Origins of Totalitarianism*.

pure theory and isolated concepts, there can be nothing new under the sun; but such similarities disappear completely as soon as one neglects theoretical formulations and concentrates on their practical application” (Arendt, 2005a: 310).

Arendt was aware that her claims for the novelty of totalitarianism were contestable. Her preferred word for the novelty ushered by the totalitarian regime is unprecedentedness, a word she adopted after Justice Robert H. Jackson used it in his opening address at the Nuremberg trials (Arendt, 2005a: 243, fn4). Young-Bruehl suggests that Arendt accepted the responsibility that the use of “unprecedented” implied so she did her best to be rigorous about the its application by specifying what she means by it (Young-Bruehl, 2002: 568). This argument however does not allow for the fact that Arendt’s position with regard to the novelty of totalitarianism changed. In 1950 she writes:

The unprecedented is neither the murder itself nor the number of victims and not even lithe number of persons who united to perpetrate them. It is much rather the ideological nonsense which caused them, the mechanization of their execution, and the careful and calculated establishment of a world of the dying in which nothing any longer made sense (Arendt, 2005a: 243).

Only three years later she takes back her point about the importance of ideology when she suggests that “what is unprecedented in totalitarianism is not primarily its ideological content, but the *event* of the total domination itself” (Arendt, 1953: 80). And still again, in the Eichmann report Arendt argues that the unprecedented nature of Eichmann crime consisted in the direct attack of “human diversity as such” (Arendt, 1967: 270).

Moreover, Arendt's critics have been far from satisfied with Arendt's arguments for unprecedentedness which in the language of her critics is referred to as "uniqueness." Dossa (1980:320) argues that the reason why Arendt stresses the uniqueness of the crimes in totalitarianism is that she is proceeding from an ethnocentric moral and cultural context. The crimes that seemed ordinary in other continents became unacceptable in the heart of Europe. Thus, argues Dossa (1980:317), "Arendt's real concern is less the fact of the mass murder or the number of the victims, than the manner of the murder". In a similar vein, rebutting Arendt's argument for novelty of totalitarianism as a form of argument Stanley sustains that if Arendt had paid more attention to the psychology of the totalitarian leaders, to the past history of ideology "histories of past despotism (especially of the Zulu) in comparing totalitarianism with tyranny and despotism," as well as "the interpretations of tyranny and of tyrants in classical political thought" then Arendt would have been more willing "to accepting totalitarianism as an extreme form of despotism" (Stanley, 1987: 178). Insisting on the unprecedentedness and uniqueness of totalitarianism is a double edged sword. On the one hand this position reinforces the perception that Nazism is "the most radical embodiment of evil." Since it has been wiped out, then we are politically justified not to take action against current forms of similar crimes. On the other hand invoking constantly Auschwitz "as a model, a metaphor, an analogy produces a reflexive sort of moral deadening and rhetorical numbing" (Aschheim, 1997:137-8).

For the purpose of this thesis, we need to understand what Arendt wants to achieve by her claim. Firstly she is identifying as unprecedented the threat that totalitarian rule poses to human dignity and human status. The totalitarian crimes

violate the uniqueness of the individual, as we will see in the discussion below, by making the individual as individual superfluous. Secondly, recognizing that the traditional political, legal and moral categories are no longer applicable and that the elements that brought forth totalitarianism still persist means that the reemergence of totalitarian evil is far from being a thing of the past (Kohn, 2002: 630). Thirdly, her inconsistency in the definition of the content of unprecedentedness points out her shift in the definition of human plurality. We see a vacillation between plurality defined as the many that the totalitarian regimes aim to transform into one - through its experiments in concentrations camps; and plurality defined as human diversity - Eichmann must hang because he did not want “to share the world with the Jewish people and the people of other nations” (Arendt, 1967: 279). In other words, the unprecedented is not longer violation individuality but rather a violation of diversity. For our purpose, it is important to note that in both cases we are dealing with the danger radical evil poses to human plurality by trying to eliminate it.

Let us now look at the novelty that action introduces. We saw that for Arendt to act means to begin something new. The “undeniable freedom of men, which is identical with the fact that each man is a new beginning and in that sense begins the world anew” (Arendt, 2005a: 343). Moreover, it is important to note that freedom is not a possession, i.e. something that one has or has not but rather free is something that one is or is not. “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” (Arendt [1961] 1993: 153). This is an existentialist understanding of freedom, which also helps us understand Arendt’s claim that “totalitarianism is the most radical denial of freedom” (Arendt,

2005a: 328). In approaching the challenge of novelty presented by radical evil we are in fact dealing with the situation when the new that comes through evil tries to destroy the very ground that made it possible, i.e. human freedom. The “paradox of totalitarian novelty was that it represented an assault on that very ability to act and think as a unique individual” (Canovan, 2000: 27). I would argue that this is not simply a paradox, it is an aporia. And we can understand it as such only when we understand that Arendt is operating with the notion that freedom is the capacity for good and evil. And neither can be eliminated without radically changing what it means to be human. Totalitarian evil and political action are not Manichean opposites because they are not engaged in a fight of equals. Action cannot resist evil; it is existentially endangered by it and in the case of totalitarianism completely destroyed by evil. “That a beginning be made, man was created” – while evil cannot be eradicated, Arendt acknowledging that good cannot be eradicated either, as long as men live. That is why Arendt believes that despite everything there is hope.

3.3. The Challenge to Common Sense

Margaret Canovan (1992: 213) has pointed out that at the heart of Arendt’s thinking about freedom is the distinction between “the sheer capacity to begin” which is present in all individuals and “the full reality of freedom as a tangible, worldly reality among us.” The first kind of freedom is pre-political, and the second is political. Freedom is political when it “can manifest itself and become reality” (Arendt, cited in Canovan, 1992: 213). Throughout her body of work Arendt consistently maintained that reality is

made possible by the presence of others. We know that something is real because there are other people like us who confirm it. In other words, human plurality is the basis for reality, according to Arendt. How do we make sense of the plural world of things and people? We do so through common sense, which Arendt calls the sixth sense that “fits us into the world of appearances and make us at home in the world given by our five senses” (Arendt, 1978a: 59). “It is by virtue of common sense that the other sense perceptions are known to disclose reality.... A noticeable decrease in common sense in any given community ... [is] almost infallible signs of alienation from the world. This alienation [is] the atrophy of the space of appearance and the withering of common sense” (Arendt, 1998: 208-9). Lisa Disch has pointed out that “the problem is that in the wake of a political regime that exercised power by means of the fabrication of reality, it must be acknowledged that ‘truth’ can be a *construct* of power” (Disch, 1994: 113)

But also there is a second way in which totalitarian evil challenges our common sense. When faced with the reality of radical evil the judgment of common sense explanations based on ideas of self-interest, utilitarian calculations, or sinfulness fail us (Arendt, 1979: 316). In the *Origins* Arendt sustains that the aggressiveness of the totalitarian regime towards other countries can no longer be justified in terms of bourgeois profit and power. The concentration camps all utilitarian assumptions: they are places where completely innocent people are punished; the inmates are kept in such conditions that they are not fit for work; their population consists of people who were completely subdued from the beginning,⁶⁴ yet they are kept under a condition constant

⁶⁴ “We were taught not to give up hope. That is why we die in the gas oven.” *Hope stronger than man-that* means hope destructive of the very humanity of man. And even more destructive perhaps of this humanity was the very innocence of those who were trapped in this whole monstrosity, namely, that they were

fear; the camps are kept going even under the conditions of supreme military emergency. Hence Arendt concludes that “it was as if the Nazis were convinced that it is more important to run extermination factories than to win the war” (Arendt, 2005a: 233).

Put succinctly the challenge to common sense can be formulated thus: to someone living under totalitarian rule everything is all too sensible, and to someone lives outside the totalitarian rule but is able to observe it the whole system seems insane. The question is how this is possible. Arendt returns to this question again and again.⁶⁵

What exactly happens to common sense in a totalitarian regime? Arendt’s answer is that common sense is substituted by “logicality.” Arendt defines logicality as the totalitarian transformation through which an idea is perverted into a premise. In other words, you posit something and deduce the rest of the argument from the original idea. And if what you are saying has no correspondence in the real world, then proceed to make the world fit your idea (Arendt, 2005a: 317). So while common sense is the result of a world shared with other fellow beings, logicality can still exist and even becomes more powerful “only under conditions where the common realm *between* men is destroyed and the only reliability left consists in the meaningless tautologies of the self-evident” (Arendt, 2005a: 318).⁶⁶ Arendt argues that common sense and utilitarian thinking has to stop functioning in the totalitarian regime because the totalitarian world is

innocent even from the viewpoint of their persecutors. Their apathy was to a very large extent the almost physical, automatic response to the challenge of *absolute meaninglessness*” (Arendt, 2007: 494).

⁶⁵ Consider the following analogy proposed by Lyotard: “Suppose that an earthquake destroys not only lives, buildings, and objects but also the instruments used to measure earthquakes directly and indirectly. The impossibility of quantitatively measuring it does not prohibit, but rather inspires in the minds of the survivors the idea of a very great seismic force” (Lyotard, 1988: 56). This is also the reason why Canovan and Bernstein argue that we need keep the experience of totalitarianism constantly in mind as we read Arendt’s work.

⁶⁶ Arendt continues the same line of thought with the following: “To equate thought and understanding with these logical operations means to level the capacity for thought, which for thousands of years has been deemed to be the highest capacity of man, to its lowest common denominator, where no differences in actual existence count any longer, not even the qualitative difference between the essence of God and men” (Arendt, 2005a: 318).

ordered based on the consistency of the results produced by logicity. The supremacy and authority attributed to logicity and consistency leads to contempt to the reality as a plural human effort. To illustrate with another example Arendt gives:

What makes a truly totalitarian device out of the Bolshevik claim that the present Russian system is superior to all others is the fact that the totalitarian ruler draws from this claim the logically impeccable conclusion that without this system people never could have built such a wonderful thing as, let us say, a subway; from this, he again draws the logical conclusion that anyone who knows of the existence of the Paris subway is a suspect because he may cause people to doubt that one can do things only in the Bolshevik way. This leads to the final conclusion that in order to remain a loyal Bolshevik, you have to destroy the Paris subway. Nothing matters but consistency (Arendt, 1979: 458).

The implication, as Arendt sees it, is that for the sake of consistency “it is necessary for totalitarianism to destroy every trace of what we commonly call human dignity. For respect for human dignity implies the recognition of my fellow-men or our fellow-nations as subjects, as builders of worlds or cobuilders of a common world” (Arendt, 1979: 458).

Arendt also identifies isolation and loneliness as the enforcers of the need for consistency. Isolation produces the loss of stable relationship and this is followed naturally for Arendt by the loss of common sense. Loneliness is defined as an even more extreme condition because it refers to the desperately disorienting condition “of losing the company of even one's own solitary thoughts” (Tsao, 2002: 610). Arendt says “... within the organizational framework of the movement, so long as it holds together, the

fanaticized members can be reached by neither experience nor argument; identification with the movement and total conformism seem to have destroyed the very capacity for experience” (Arendt, 1979: 307-308). This is an argument that we will develop further in the discussion of superfluosity. Arendt’s point is that common sense does not help us understand an evil so radical that even the fanatics of the regime become convinced of their own superfluosity. Under totalitarian rule everyone is subjectively innocent, remarks Arendt: “the murdered because they did nothing against the system, and the murderers because they do not really murder but execute a death sentence pronounced by some higher tribunal. The rulers themselves do not claim to be just or wise, but only to execute historical or natural laws; they do not apply laws, but execute a movement in accordance with its inherent law” (Arendt, 1979: 465). The fanatics are devoted to a movement that transcends the life and even death of any individual. “This is why she thought that the appeal to conventional utilitarian categories or appeals to common sense were completely inadequate to account for the phenomenon of radical evil” (Bernstein, 2002: 386). But more importantly, we can see that the radical isolation which is concomitant with the loss of common sense paves the way to moral “thoughtlessness” (Berger, 2009: 174).

3.4. The Challenge of Punishment and Forgiveness

The subject of punishment and forgiveness is shows radical evil and political action as inverted mirror images. “Totalitarian crimes are very inadequately described as “murder” and totalitarian criminals can hardly be punished as

"murderers"”(Arendt, 1953: 80).⁶⁷ By pushing the boundaries of what is humanly possible “totalitarian regimes have discovered without knowing it that there are crimes which men can neither punish nor forgive” (Arendt, 1979: 459). But political action is not innocent either. For all its capacity to forge relationships that make us feel at home in the world, political action is unbound.

The limitations of the law are never entirely reliable safeguards against action from within the body politic, just as the boundaries of the territory are never entirely reliable safeguards against action from without. The boundlessness of action is only the other side of its tremendous capacity for establishing relationships, that is, its specific productivity; this is why the old virtue of moderation, of keeping within bounds, is indeed one of the political virtues par excellence (Arendt, 1998: 191).

Let us explore the parallels between political action and radical evil a little further in order to see where they diverge and converge.

Political action is marked by two predicaments: unpredictability of its outcome and the irreversibility of its process. We share words and deeds with others and therefore never act in isolation but are surrounded by “the web of the acts and words of other men” (Arendt, 1998: 188). The existence of the web of human relationships also means that there are innumerable conflicting will and intentions, which means that “action almost never achieves its purpose” (Arendt, 1998: 184). Moreover, Arendt maintains that “he who acts never quite knows what he is doing, that he always becomes “guilty” of consequences he never intended or even foresaw, that no matter how disastrous and unexpected the consequences of his deed *he can never undo it*” (Arendt, 1998: 233).

⁶⁷ Arendt considers the crimes of the totalitarian regime an extension of the belief that everything is possible. “When the impossible was made possible it became the unpunishable, unforgivable absolute evil which could no longer be understood and explained by the evil motives of self-interest, greed, covetousness, resentment, lust for power, and cowardice; and which therefore anger could not revenge, love could not endure, friendship could not forgive” (Arendt 1979: 459).

The remedies for the predicaments of action are the forgiving of transgressions and the keeping of promises. The remedy for irreversibility, the inability to undo what we did not know in advance we were doing, is to forgive. The antidote for unpredictability, the chaotic and tumultuous uncertainty of the future is to make and keep promises. While forgiveness ensures that we can recover from the deeds of the past and regain the ability to act again, making promises is the act that creates stable institutions in politics as well as in the rest of human relationships (Arendt, 1998: 237). Examples of promises are contracts, treaties and constitutions which bind and enable future collective acting. The law provides a much needed stability to the unpredictability of men. In totalitarianism the law is conceived as constantly moving, and human beings deprived of their spontaneity become stable and predictable (Birmingham, 2003: 88). Forgiveness is the result of the unpredictable cooperation of others; therefore no one can forgive herself. The case is similar for promises, in that promises are valid binding acts when they are made to others. They both are dependent on human plurality: “forgiving and promising enacted in solitude or isolation remain without reality and can signify no more than a role played before one's self” (Arendt, 1998: 237). As Gottlieb (2003:153) has pointed out, it is important to note that for Arendt forgiveness is prior to promises since “the stabilizing power of promising is predicated on the interruptive faculty of forgiveness” (Gottlieb, 2003: 153). We need to forgive so that we can act together again. However, as Tsao (2010: 55) notes what concerns Arendt is not that we *must* forgive when asked for it, “but simply that we might.” This is because on the capacity to forgive, rather than the religious command to do so. And as already mentioned; the capacity to forgive makes possible the actualization of freedom to begin something new.

There are, however, conditions under which forgiveness cannot be practiced. While acknowledging that forgiveness breaks the chain of revenge, Arendt also is adamant that radical evil cannot be forgiven.⁶⁸ This happens for two reasons. Firstly, radical evil destroys the realm of human affairs whenever it makes its appearance (Arendt, 1998: 241). Forgiveness for Arendt pertains to the domain of public affairs, a realm that is characterized by plurality. Totalitarian evil is the nemesis of the public realm and as such cannot partake of the benefits of the public realm.⁶⁹ Secondly radical evil is perpetuated through the rule of nobody (the convoluted bureaucracy that minimizes responsibility which makes very difficult the identification of the doer). If there is doer to forgive, there can be no forgiveness. This is so because deeds reveal to us who the doer is therefore we forgive something for the sake of who did it. Only through action can the self become the “who” that is identified with the deed. We do not know who we are and what we are capable of before we do it. Since acting always takes place in front of an audience that will suffer the consequences of the act it is important that they free the acting self to initiate new action and to make promises.⁷⁰

⁶⁸ For a different position on forgiving the unforgivable see Derrida, Jacques. 2001. *On cosmopolitanism and forgiveness*. Psychology Press. Arendt sustains that forgiveness can come only as a result of the repentance of the offender. Derrida insists on a purer formulation of forgiveness and sees forgiveness dependent upon repentance as conditional (2001:42). I take his argument to be that responsibility becomes possible only when there is a swing back and forth between possible and impossible forgiving (2001: 51).

⁶⁹ This resonates the verdict Arendt writes for Eichmann where she states: “And just as you supported and carried out a policy of not wanting to share the earth with the Jewish people and the people of a number of other nations - as though you and your superiors had any right to determine who should and who should not inhabit the world - we find that no one, that is, no member of the human race, can be expected to want to share the earth with you. This is the reason, and the only reason, you must hang” (Arendt, 1977: 279).

⁷⁰ While interpreting Arendt’s turn to Abraham to illustrate the power of promises Gottlieb (2003: 153) writes: “It is as if Abraham could not have set out on his journey without some sense that he could be forgiven his trespasses, including, of course, the binding of Isaac. The anxiety surrounding the act of promising...is potentially so great that this act would issue into a speechlessness that would deprive the speaker of the capacity to promise – were it not for a prior promise, issued by another, of forgiveness for failing to fulfill one’s promises.” This is a reversal of the order that exists in the philosophical tradition in general and in Nietzsche in particular. For a detailed account see Gottlieb’s *Regions of Sorrow*.

3.5. The Radical Nature of Evil

So far we have seen the parallels, convergences and divergences between radical evil and political action as well as the relation of the two of them to the notions of freedom and plurality. This section will focus almost exclusively radical evil. The purpose is to show how radical evil destroys the ground that makes its very existence possible. In order to understand the implication of this position we have to think in existential rather than moral terms.

Let us recall once again Arendt's letter to Jaspers. She said that radical evil appears when human beings become superfluous. The condition of superfluity is realized when unpredictability (one of the qualities of action, but in this case a quality of the individual), i.e. spontaneity is eliminated. This is made possible by the delusion of omnipotence. So let us consider what Arendt has to say about superfluity in the condition of total domination and the delusion of omnipotence.

3.5.1. Total Domination

Under totalitarian rule all men become equally superfluous, i.e. victims and perpetrators alike (Arendt, 1979: 459). Canovan (1992: 29) has argued that at the center of Arendt's understanding of totalitarian rule "lies a drive toward unlimited expansion of power, not as the means to any human purpose, but as a self-perpetuating momentum to which totalitarians were prepared to sacrifice themselves and everyone else." Canovan also identifies an idea that we will explore in some depth in the next section. This is the

unlimitedness of the quest for power, which translate into world conquest in which ties to specific national territory were abandoned” and “the pursuit of ‘total domination’ in the concentration camps” (Canovan, 1992: 29).

“Totalitarian states strive constantly, though never with complete success, to establish the superfluity of man—by the arbitrary selection of various groups for concentration camps, by constant purges of the ruling apparatus, by mass liquidations” (Arendt, 1979: 457). Arendt identified three steps that lead to the total domination of man in concentration camps. The first is the killing of the juridical person. This is achieved by putting a certain group of people outside the protection of the law and situating the concentration camps outside the ordinary penal system. The inmates are not selected by the judicial procedure whereby a predictable link exists between offense and punishment. The groups of inmates include “Jews, carriers of diseases, representatives of dying classes” but also criminals, thieves and murderers (Arendt, 1979: 447). Arendt sustains that this is deliberate and “effective means of camouflage: this happens only to criminals and nothing worse is happening than that what deservedly happens to criminals” (Arendt, 1979: 448). The purpose of the arbitrary system established by the totalitarian regime is to destroy civil rights. What begins with special categories of people is later extended to every resident of the totalitarian state (Arendt, 1979: 451).

The second step to the total domination of man is the destruction of the moral person. The inmates are faced with moral dilemmas which involve choosing between sending to death loved ones, members of the family or betray and murder friends. Hence, “the alternative is no longer between good and evil, but between murder and murder” (Arendt, 1979: 452). This, Arendt argues, is the most terrible accomplishment of

totalitarian terror: “it succeeded in cutting the moral person off from the individualist escape and in making the decisions of conscience absolutely questionable and equivocal” (Arendt, 1979: 452).

The third step is the killing of man's individuality. By individuality, Arendt means those characteristics that make someone unique (Arendt, 1979: 454).⁷¹ She goes on to argue that this killing “creates a horror that vastly overshadows the outrage of the juridical-political person and the despair of the moral person” (Arendt, 1979: 454). For Arendt the totalitarian regime is set out to destroy that characteristics of human beings that distinguish men from each other, but also those traits that differentiate them from the other animals. In a formulation that gave rise to controversy Arendt asserted that totalitarianism is set to change human nature.

... the experience of the concentration camps does show that human beings can be transformed into specimens of the human animal, and that man's "nature" is only "human" insofar as it opens up to man the possibility of becoming something highly unnatural, that is, a man.... For 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. Nothing then remains but ghastly marionettes with human faces, which all behave like the dog in Pavlov's experiments (Arendt, 1979: 455)

What does it mean to change human nature? As Arendt's interlocutor in the controversy argued, “a change in human nature is an oxymoron” (Arendt, 1953: 83). Arendt's argument, which she later develops further in the *Human Condition*, is that what makes man different from the rest of the creation is that men can step out of the cycle of nature and create a world of their own. They can do this because they are individuals, they are spontaneous and they cooperate. Spontaneity, or unpredictability, means that we

⁷¹ Arendt says that a man's individuality is something that we are so much used to take for granted, that when we meet identical twins we experience a certain unease.

cannot know in advance what the doer is going to disclose. In fact neither the doer nor those watching him or her know in advance, and that is the new deed cannot be explained in terms of the reactions to environment or events. When men are made to lose their individuality and their capacity for spontaneity, then “hell has been established on earth.”⁷² Jacob Rogozinski (2010: 99) has noted that the concentrations camps are a gesture of mad excess and total domination is a mutilated hell that by lacking a sense of justice is actually devoid of the idea of God. Jaspers (1992:165) raised a similar point in a letter to Arendt. He asked: “Hasn't Jahwe faded too far out of sight?" I would argue that God is not missing at all but he seems out of sight because we only see God's perverted form in Arendt's notion of delusion of omnipotence.

3.5.2. The Delusion of Omnipotence

What does omnipotence mean? We find a definition of it in the second volume of *The Life of the Mind* which is consistent with her earlier uses in the *Origins*. Being omnipotent means willing “what is and thus never be “at odds with outward things;”” “underlying all the arguments for such omnipotence is the matter-of- course assumption that reality *for me* gets its realness from my consent” (Arendt, 1978b: 81-2). Totalitarianism presents us with a “godlike power on earth that desires absolute rule” (Birmingham, 2003: 84). This godlike power transcends the bounds of both religious and

⁷² Arendt explains what she means by using the image of hell: “When I used the image of Hell, I did not mean this allegorically but literally: it seems rather obvious that men who have lost their faith in Paradise will not be able to establish it on earth; but it is not so certain that those who have lost their belief in Hell as a place of the hereafter may not be willing and able to establish on earth exact imitations of what people used to believe about Hell. In this sense I think that a description of the camps as Hell on earth is more “objective,” that is, more adequate to their essence than statements of a purely sociological or psychological nature” (Arendt, 2005a: 404).

moral law. We saw that Arendt claimed that the perverted “mutilated” hell established on earth does not recognize moral or divine justice. In doing so the radical evil that becomes manifest with the totalitarian rule goes beyond “everything is permitted” when God is dead. Arendt asserts that “everything is possible” is the central assumption of the totalitarian form of government (Arendt, 1979: 427). This is what totalitarian rule sets to achieve. What does it take to make it come true?

Believing that everything is possible involves begin with a hypothesis and turning it into a fact through a course of consistent action. In other words, it requires the “consistent elimination of all factual restraints” and complete disregard for “the absurd and terrible consequence” (Arendt, 1979: 427). This course of action will consistently produce a world in which the original hypothesis becomes axiomatic and self-evident (Arendt, 1993: 88). “The frightening arbitrariness with which we are confronted whenever we decide to embark upon this type of action, which is the exact counterpart of consistent logical processes, is even more obvious in the political than in the natural realm” (Arendt, 1993: 88).

In order to achieve its vision, totalitarian rule perverts the meaning of what it means to be a human being (deprived of spontaneity, man is stable) and also the function of the law (conceived as constant motion, it does not set limits and boundaries). Limitlessness in the totalitarian system is the translation of the assumption “everything is possible.” Totalitarian rule has to “stabilize” men in order to liberate the forces of nature or history” (Arendt, 1979: 465). We already saw that the concentration and extermination camps of totalitarian regimes function as the laboratories where “the fundamental belief of totalitarianism that everything is possible is being verified” (Arendt, 1979: 437).

At this point I want to explore further what Arendt has to say about the law because this is the aspect that gives us a greater insight to her conceptualization of radical evil. As noted the perversity of totalitarianism consists in the “systematic decision to bridge the gap between legality and justice, to establish “the direct reign of justice on earth” (Arendt, 1979: 462), to be the fulfillment of an ultimate law” (Taminieaux, 2002: 441). Because the totalitarian rule claims to be enacting the law of Nature or of History which would have its course anyway, doing everything to fit the world to this vision of the content of the law is acceptable.

When Kant explained radical evil, this was not simply “perverted ill will” as Arendt claims (Arendt, 1979: 459). Kant was the first philosopher who used the expression “radical evil” while giving a detailed account of moral evil in his book *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason*. Kant’s position on evil is closely related to his concept of freedom. Roughly, freedom is the ability of a human being to act in such a way that through the action she expresses her own will exclusively. The will is bound by principles, maxims, which are internal to it, since the will willed them. These maxims make up the moral law which has authority over the individual because they are the product of one’s own reason. It is important to note that whether a human being is good or evil lies not in the subjective ground on which a maxim is based, but in the *order* of the maxims, an argument which is remindful of Augustine’s order of love, also made in a similar context.⁷³ Kant identified two types of grounds for maxims, those that come from our natural inclinations and are not subjected to reason, and those that are born from

⁷³ Arendt wrote her doctoral dissertation on Augustine’s concept of love and wrote a full chapter entitled “The Order of Love.” In this chapter there is a discussion of evil as a result of wrong order of what we should want. See Arendt, Hannah. 1996. *Love and Saint Augustine*. Scott Vecchiarelli, Joanna and Judith Chelius Stark, eds. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

reason and establish moral order. The stress on the agency is crucial because Kant rejected that evil could be a weakness which would be explained natural inclinations victory over reason (Kant, 2005: 78), or lack of good (48) or folly, that is mental confusion (77). For Kant moral evil was such that it proceeded from individuals own free choice, or otherwise it could not be attributable to him or her and he or she could not be responsible for it (Kant, 2005: 57-9). If a propensity to reverse maxims contrary to the moral order exists in the human nature, then this is the human being a propensity to evil. On the other hand, the propensity to good and the good will request a proper ordering of motivations and subordination of inclinations to moral law. Human being do evil because they lie to themselves, they reverse the order of the maxims but do not admit it even to themselves. Arendt points out that Kant calls mendacity, “the sore or foul spot” in human nature (Arendt, 2003: 63).

By saying that a human being is by nature good or evil, Kant meant that each person holds a subjective ground, that is inscrutable to us (like an mathematical axiom), but which is universal (present in all human beings) and informed by freedom of choice (that is the maxims in it allow the person to act either ways, good or bad) and therefore human nature does not predetermine the choice of action. By ‘radical evil’ Kant means the kind of evil that utterly corrupts the whole grounds on which maxims are based. Hence, the phrase refers to *radices*, the roots.

Arendt believes that Kant was brilliant enough to conceive of the possibility of radical evil in theory. Mari Pia Lara (2007:28) has noted that Arendt understood that Kant’s greatest achievement with regard to evil was to formulate evil as a problem of that concerns only human freedom. She was critical of Kant for being too quick to dismiss the

actuality of radical evil as a moral absurdity. Discussing whether Arendt understood Kant correctly is beside the scope of this thesis. It is important to note though the parallel that exists between Arendt's analysis of radical evil and Kant's.

Like Kant, Arendt is referring to an inversion of the law. For Arendt "plurality is the law of the earth" (1978a: 19). Totalitarian rule substitutes plurality with mankind, and "it claims to make mankind itself the embodiment of the law" (Arendt, 1979: 462). This is the substitution of the particular for the universal. What Arendt is pointing out here and what becomes clearer as she addresses Eichmann is that totalitarian rule presents itself as the ultimate universal which can decide who is fit to live and who is not. In Žižek's words:

"Evil" in its most elementary form is such a "short circuit" between the particular and the universal, such a presumption to believe that my words and deeds are directly words and deeds of the big Other (nation, culture, state, God), a presumption which "inverts" the proper relationship between the particular and the universal: when I proclaim myself the immediate "functionary of humanity" (or nation or culture), I thereby effectively accomplish the exact opposite of what I claim to be doing—that is, I degrade the universal dimension to which I refer (humanity, nation, state) to my own particularity. . . . The more I refer to the universal in order to legitimate my acts, the more effectively I abase it to a means of my own self-assertion (Žižek 1996, pp. 64–65).

This has serious implications for the way we deal with evil. When we think radical evil together with political action we put the emphasis on plurality. Arendt does not have in mind any abstract universals. The particular is the monist "mankind" that the totalitarian rule tries to fabricate and the universal is the plurality that characterizes the world. It is important to note that it is not the particular as such that is evil, it is rather the "perverted unity" of the particular with the universal; in other words, not 'egotism' as such, but egotism in the guise of its opposite" (Bernstein 2002a: 91)."

Radical evil appears when men exercising their ultimate freedom believing that they are omnipotent. But the omnipotence of the men is unlike God's because it cannot create from nothing. It is like God's because it has the power to destroy everything. The totalitarian rule sets out to eliminate "any spontaneous human action" (Arendt, 1979: 465) and to achieve it destroys the elements required for action "the new beginning and the individual end which the life of each man actually is" (465). Where action relies on plurality, totalitarian rule is "a band of iron which holds (individual men) so tightly together that it is as though their plurality had disappeared into one Man of gigantic dimensions" (465-466). While action is made possible by the spaces that exist between men, totalitarian rule "by pressing men against each other ... destroys the space between them. . . . It destroys the one essential prerequisite of all freedom, which is the capacity of motion which cannot exist without space" (466).

For Arendt, omnipotence is a delusion, a self-deception. And here we see another parallel with Kant's notion of mendacity. Arendt returns to the theme of self-deception over the course of her work, especially in emphasizing the conditions that make individuals isolated and anonymous like is the case in her biography of Rahel Varnhagen (Nelson, 275). Discussing the leaders of the totalitarian rule she writes:

What binds these men together is a firm and sincere belief in human omnipotence. Their moral cynicism, their belief that everything is permitted, rests on the solid conviction that everything is possible. It is true that these men, few in number, are not easily caught in their own specific lies and that they do not necessarily believe in racism or economics, in the conspiracy of the Jews or of Wall Street. Yet they too are deceived, deceived by their impudent conceited idea that everything can be done and their contemptuous conviction that everything that exists is merely a temporary obstacle that superior organization will certainly destroy (Arendt, 1979: 378; emphasis added)

Unlike Arendt's analysis differs from Kant's in that it points out that evil cannot be thought simply within the framework of individual choice. Evil has a reality in the world and under certain conditions it may even take a radical form. Arendt expressively sustains that radical evil may return in the world even when Nazism and Stalinism have been vanquished. The conditions for making individuals superfluous are still present in our times as they were in hers. Punishment without connection to crime, exploitation without profit, work without a concrete product, and lack of meaning still persist (Arendt, 1979: 457). Bernstein (2008) and Hayden (2010) have both studied the ways in which Arendt's writings are relevant today: the meaning of evil, her insights into superfluousness, the weakness of voice of conscience as well the explicit and implicit forms of cooperation with murderous deeds. She calls them "the small and not so small evils with which the road to hell is paved" (Arendt, 2005a: 271). But more importantly, I think Arendt through her conceptions of evil makes us aware that evil cannot be vanquished once and for all and that we need to be wary of solution that propose to deliver us from evil. Comparing radical with political action helps us to understand that "the word 'human' is not a suitable synonym for 'generous' or 'merciful'. This is why human beings will never be delivered from evil. Our only hope is not to eradicate it definitively but to try to understand it, to contain and to tame it [set limits], recognizing that it is also present in us" (Todorov, 2009: 462).

CHAPTER IV

THE FAILURE OF MORALITY

Thus far I have presented Arendt's treatment of evil as a political and philosophical issue. Arendt does not deny the moral aspect of evil. As we saw in the previous chapter "everything is possible" once we go beyond and above the moral premise that "everything is permitted." If Arendt had not conceived of the human condition as something that has a moral dimension, she would not have complained as frequently as she did about "the monstrous immorality" of the totalitarian rule (Dossa, 1980: 316). It is important to note, however, that approaching the subject of evil from the moral perspective alone cannot help us either understanding or resisting evil. This chapter explores how and why morality fails us, according to Arendt.

Arendt believes that the unspeakable horror of the totalitarian experience, of which we can learn about only from what is communicated directly and which has nothing to teach is different from the experience of moral conduct of people. The latter raises questions of judgment and ethics and may even provoke disgust (Arendt, 2003: 56). Reading Arendt, we see that for her evil becomes moral as well as political when it is attributed to a person. The totalitarian experience made Arendt claim that what had happened could never be forgiven and never be punished. Morality has to do with the individual person and it appears more frequently in Arendt's work especially after the Eichmann trial because this and similar trials brought forth moral questions: a person, not

a system stands trial. Moreover, the people standing trial were not ordinary criminals “but rather very ordinary people who had committed crimes with more or less enthusiasm, simply because they did what they had been told to do” (Arendt, 2003: 59). Arendt is looking for answer to the question under what conditions can “a cog in the machine” retain agency and to be responsible for his or her deeds. This is a shift from trying to study the totalitarian regime as a system to comprehending the role of the individual. Arendt writes: “We know from recent experiences that active and sometimes heroic resistance to evil governments comes much rather from men and women who participated in them than from outsiders who were innocent of any guilt” (Arendt, 2003: 155). Thinking of the moral experience of the defendants against the backdrop of the reaction provoked by the totalitarian experience makes Arendt believe that we need to rethink our moral categories. This is not a question of finding better values than the one we have, but rather questioning the meaning of morality.

We find five sources of morality in Arendt’s writings. They are so many because Arendt is trying to understand how we can resist evil that confronts us in the public realm. (i) the morality of mores, rules and habit that govern conduct in one’s society; (ii) the morality expressed in absolutes that is allowed to enter the political realm with the French revolution; (iii) the morality of religion as an institution and (iv) the morality that can be derived by the teachings of Jesus. Arendt often made references to Christianity as represented by the Church while asserting that the example of moral behavior we see in Jesus is completely a different matter and belongs to the category of absolute goodness. (v) But there is also the morality we have inherited from our philosophical tradition where Arendt pays special attention to Socratic and Kantian morality, which advises

disharmony with commonly shared norms in a society at a particular time for the sake of being at peace with one's principles.

On several occasions Arendt claims that morality and politics are not related. Following Machiavelli, Arendt asserts that "in the center of moral considerations of human conduct stands the self; in the center of political considerations stands the world" (Arendt, 2003: 153). If this the case then why does she preoccupy herself so much with morality? Because, as we saw in the previous chapter, Arendt is aware that evil takes its worst form when there are no limitations set to human behavior. These moralities are distinct and incoherent fragments that characterize our moral universe after the totalitarian experience (Canovan, 1992: 173). These moralities are not always connected with each other but they all have in common their relation to limitlessness as the cause of evil.

4.1. Mores, Moral Collapse and Evil

Arendt's first approach to morality defines it as customs and mores, the code of conduct that guides a person's behavior in society. Arendt has a difficult relation with this kind of morality. She saw herself as belonging to a generation for whom morality was obvious, in other words there is nothing to talk or discuss about it.⁷⁴ Living in the 20th century had a shocking effect, which is captured succinctly in the words of Winston Churchill: "Scarcely anything, material or established, which I was brought up to believe

⁷⁴ During the lecture on personal responsibility under dictatorship she says "... we were brought up under the assumption: *Das Moralische versteht sich von selbst*, moral conduct is a matter of course" (Arendt, 2003: 22).

was permanent and vital, has lasted. Everything I was sure, or was taught to be sure, was impossible, has happened” (quoted in Arendt, 2003: 50).

Morality used to be discussed in terms of virtues. Virtues refer to states of character that were intrinsically good. For the Greeks and the Romans virtues are political, for Christians they become cardinal traits. Independently of the source of the moral law, i.e. human reason or divine command, the prevailing assumption was that every sane person, “carried within himself a voice that tells him what is right and what is wrong, and this regardless of the law of the land and regardless of the voices of his fellowmen” (Arendt, 2003: 60). In other words, moral knowledge of what is right and wrong was considered a matter of course, while moral conduct was not.

For Arendt, modern society has to face the fact that moral knowledge, and not only moral conduct, has collapsed. Arendt’s claim is that as the bourgeois takes over the *citoyen*, we see the demise of the language of virtues and its replacement by the language of values. Arendt echoes Marx in saying that the bourgeois is the epitome of all that is wrong with modern society. The bourgeois is self-centered, prejudiced, narrow-minded, and greedy. The bourgeois employs the cheap calculations to maximize his personal benefit no matter what the cost. Arendt attributes to Hobbes the precocious identification of the bourgeois mentality:

There is hardly a single bourgeois moral standard which has not been anticipated by the unequaled magnificence of Hobbes's logic. He gives an almost complete picture, not of Man but of the bourgeois man, an analysis which in three hundred years has neither been outdated nor excelled. "Reason ... is nothing but Reckoning"; "a free Subject, a free Will . . . [are] words . . . without meaning; that is to say. Absurd." A being without reason, without the capacity for truth, and without free will-that is, without the capacity for responsibility - man is essentially a function of society and judged therefore according to his "value or worth ... his price; that is to say so much as would be given for the use of his power." This price is

constantly evaluated and re-evaluated by society, the "esteem of others," depending upon the law of supply and demand (Arendt, 1979a: 139).

“Good” is no longer absolute and it turns into “good for” (Meade, 1997: 111). The ominous consequence is that it becomes possible to put value or worth on the life of man, on human dignity. The transformation began gradually in Hobbes’ time and it is completed when bourgeois morality becomes dominant. Moreover, Arendt bemoans the lack of capacity for truth and responsibility of the bourgeois, but not because she is moralist. She believes that morality belongs to the private sphere and as such individuals should be able to do and be whatever they want in their private lives. The problem begins when the private and the public sphere merge, with the public being taken over by the private. Being governed by morality is the trademark of bourgeois society, which convolutes moral standards with laws. While both the law and moral norms deal with individuals, laws are impartial in that they address the person as an individual (Arendt, 2003: 57). Societal rules or mores are based on prejudice and address the individual not simply as himself or herself but as member of a class or group. She sustains that “the seeming broadmindedness that equates crime and vice, if allowed to establish its own code of law, will invariably prove more cruel and inhuman than laws” because even though laws may be severe, they “respect and recognize man's independent responsibility for his behavior” (Arendt [195] 1979a: 81). Different from societal prejudice, laws address the individual and punish him or her only if the accused is proved guilty of crime. Laws do not address or punish races. Society can find someone guilty of a vice simply based on prejudice that a person belongs to a certain race.

Wherever society was permitted to invade, to overgrow, and eventually to absorb the political realm, it imposed its own mores and 'moral' standards, the intrigues and perfidies of high society, to which the lower strata responded by violence and brutality (Arendt, 1990a: 105).

On the one hand she is preoccupied with the transformation of prejudice into discriminatory and segregating laws. This leads to a divided society that sees “the other” as an enemy that poses threats to one’s existence, as exemplified by anti-Semitism. But a second consequence of the prevalence of bourgeois morality is that it shuffles completely the class structure to the point that it destroys it. It produces the mob, which in Arendt’s words “consists of the refuse of all strata of society.”⁷⁵ The result is the alliance of the mob with the elite; this signals the complete breakdown of the moral code, for Arendt.⁷⁶ As already noted in the chapter on “The experience of evil” in the totalitarian regime the corrosion of the moral person is the second stage of destruction and annihilation of the human beings. This takes place in concentration camps, “the holes of oblivion” that are separated from the rest of the world and where even martyrdom becomes “senseless, empty, and ridiculous” (Arendt, 2005a: 240).

By 1963, when *On Revolution* was published, Arendt agrees with Montesquieu that “*mores* and morality, which are so important for the life of society and so irrelevant for the body politic - would give way quickly in any case of emergency” (Arendt 1990a: 116) and therefore they are not a reliable guide when we judge what is right and wrong. The problem with bourgeois morality is not that it ushers in new values, but that it negates morality by emptying its meaning. Morality collapses when it turns into a set of

⁷⁵“What they [the historians] failed to understand was that the mob is not only the refuse but also the by-product of bourgeois society, directly produced by it and therefore never quite separable from it. They failed for this reason to notice high society’s constantly growing admiration for the underworld, which runs like a red thread through the nineteenth century, its continuous step-by-step retreat on all questions of morality, and its growing taste for the anarchical cynicism of its offspring. At the turn of the century, the Dreyfus Affair showed that underworld and high society in France were so closely bound together that it was difficult definitely to place any of the “heroes” among the Anti-Dreyfusards in either category” (Arendt [1951] 1979a: 155).

⁷⁶ Arendt writes: “The very fact that the “original sin” of “original accumulation of capital” would need additional sins to keep the system going was far more effective in persuading the bourgeoisie to shake off the restraints of Western tradition than either its philosopher or its underworld. It finally induced the German bourgeoisie to throw off the mask of hypocrisy and openly confess its relationship to the mob, calling on it expressly to champion its property interests” (Arendt [1951] 1979a: 159).

mores that are valid as long as they are socially accepted, independently of their content (Arendt, 2003: 54). Morality based on values is unstable to subject to relativity. It cannot help prevent wrongdoing and is futile also afterwards as a measure to judging wrongdoing after the totalitarian experience.

4.2. Wickedness and Absolutes

The second approach to morality for Arendt takes the form of morality expressed in absolutes. This is absolute wickedness and absolute good. Understanding what Arendt has to say about this approach to morality is important because we see here a continuation of the theme discussed in the previous chapter; namely the perverted relation between the universal and the particular. This time the universal appears under the heading of absolute goodness. So we note that for Arendt, any attempt to impose the absolute is in fact a monist attempt that inevitably strives against the natural condition of plurality.

Arendt identifies the logic of absolute morality in Descartes' philosophy and science; Arendt believes that both Cartesian philosophy and science have important implications for modern morality. Modern men acknowledge the end of certainty that what we perceive through our sense is the real world and accept that we cannot rely on our sense to see what is out there has meant. "The modern cardinal virtues - success, industry, and truthfulness - are at the same time the greatest virtues of modern science" (Arendt 1998: 277-8). They become the ideals of modern morality also. This earnest quest for truthfulness has very serious implications for the way human beings relate to the

world and to each-other. It means that we are approaching reality with absolutes, and this in politics can lead to disasters.

Morality expressed in absolutes is the kind of morality that takes over politics completely. According to Arendt, it is capable of producing disastrous results, independently of whether it is “absolute good” or “absolute evil.” At this point, it is not difficult to understand her claim that absolute evil is catastrophic based on the previous chapters. What is surprising is Arendt’s warning that we need to be aware of absolute goodness in politics. While the last part of the book *The Origins of Totalitarianism* is dedicated to show totalitarianism destroys any possibility for politics, in the pages of the *On Revolution* we see similar arguments about absolute goodness.

There are four contexts in which Arendt discusses this morality phrased in absolutes: Firstly we come across it when Arendt reflects on the concentration camps. In the essay “The Image of Hell” written in 1946, Arendt discusses the wickedness of the individuals who conceived equality based on the lowest common denominator, organic life. Arendt argues that in the face of this experience that defies human comprehension we react by saying: no one deserves such death (Arendt, 2005a: 198). But in fact what we are doing is identifying the perpetrators and their acts as absolute evil and the victims become examples of absolute innocence, i.e. absolute goodness. This is an argument that is repeated in the beginning of *The Origins*, where Arendt points out her dissatisfaction with arguments that refer to the “perfect innocence of the victims” of concentration camps. She is unhappy with theories that discharge victims of responsibility but never says that victims are guilty either (Arendt, 1979a: 5).⁷⁷ In this first encounter with moral

⁷⁷ Arendt sees no contradiction in emphasizing the role of the Jewish Councils in the Final Solution but objects to questioning of the survivors during the trial in Jerusalem as to why they did not resist against the

absolutes, Arendt is adamant that this wickedness beyond human comprehension and innocence have no bearing in political reality (Arendt, 2005a: 199).⁷⁸ Arendt, however, gives no explanation or justification as to why this is so.

The second instance of Arendt engaging with moral absolutes is in the book *On Revolution*, where she returns to and explores in full the connotations of creating and using categories of absolute goodness and absolute evil. We need to pay attention to the fact that Arendt turns to literature to define the absolutes and borrows the wording from Melville and Dostoyevsky. She is using Melville and Dostoyevsky to counter the arguments and actions of Rousseau and Robespierre. This is because for Arendt, at this point in her thinking, absolute good cannot exist outside literature. And even when it does, when a character in possession of such a trait is created she or he has to die because there is no place for them in this world. This is how she interprets the actors and acts of the French Revolution. For Robespierre, the building of a better society involved also the building of a “better” individual. According to Arendt the guiding principle of the Frenchmen is not only reason, but due to the teaching of Rousseau, passion and compassion are added as well. Arendt defines passion as the ability to suffer, to feel pain while compassion is defined as the capacity of suffering with other (Arendt 1990a: 81). Even though the affirmation of the human dignity was being done without any references

Nazis. The members of the Jewish Councils were bourgeois and as such legitimate targets. For Arendt social class has priority over ethnicity or nationality. For Arendt’s attitude towards the bourgeoisie see Margaret Canovan’s *A Reinterpretation of Arendt’s Thought* (1992: 20) “Arendt’s new activism had a distinctly radical tinge which included a pronounced hostility to the bourgeoisie, including the Jewish bourgeoisie.” For Arendt the argument for the perfect innocence of the victim is related to the scapegoat theories, to which she refers in *Antisemitism* when trying to show the role Jews played in history and then later in the Eichmann trial to show that Eichmann cannot be dismissed as a the unlucky scapegoat.

⁷⁸ Although the phrase ‘absolute evil’ appears in the pages of the *Origins*, and the last book, *Totalitarianism*, can be read as a detailed analysis of what it would take to establish hell on earth, the book is devoid of moral judgment because Arendt’s concern is describe the reality that denotes by this expression.

to religion, the notions of good and evil were preoccupying the men of the revolution. Thus, for Arendt, the men of the French revolution defined absolute goodness as goodness beyond virtue. She identifies it as a natural goodness and contrasts with absolute evil or absolute wickedness or radical evil (she uses the words interchangeably); absolute evil she defines as “evil beyond vice”, “a depravity according to nature which partakes nothing of the sordid or sensual” (Arendt 1990a: 81-87).

It is significant that Arendt frames her reflections on what is said about absolute good and evil by Rousseau, Robespierre, Melville and Dostoyevsky by placing them within the context of the French and American revolutions. She asserts that the French revolutionaries in their definition of evil started with the assumption that human beings are intrinsically good and society corrupts. On the other hand in the understanding of the American revolutionaries human beings were sinful but the society that is created by their coming together does not necessarily reflect this sinful nature, indeed forming such a society is the way to fight evil and wickedness (Arendt 1990a: 174). Based on their assumption of what is evil, Arendt subsequently maintains that the French revolutionaries were aspiring to the eradication of evil, among other things. However, continues Arendt, the Frenchmen of the late eighteenth century were more familiar with vice than with evil - where vice is the ordinary capricious wrongdoing and evil something far more involved - ⁷⁹, because the greatest fault they saw with their society was hypocrisy and selfishness: that is to say, the revolutionaries never had any experience of ‘evil’ as such. Again, there is no definition of evil on her part, but this claim makes sense when we assume that the background of her thinking is shaped by the experience of totalitarianism. Hence, she is implicitly distinguishing political evil from evil based on vice and selfishness.

⁷⁹ In this case we see she makes a distinction between vice and evil (Arendt, 1990a: 81)

The third instance of morality expressed in absolutes is “absolute goodness.” Arendt says that the problem with absolute goodness is that it is ignorant of argumentative reason. She sees a parallel between the stuttering Billy Budd and the silent Jesus in *The Grand Inquisitor*.

Jesus's silence in 'The Grand Inquisitor' and Billy Budd's stammer indicate the same, namely their incapacity (or unwillingness) for all kinds of predicative or argumentative speech, in which someone talks to somebody about something that is of interest to both because it inter-est, it is between them. Such talkative and argumentative interest in the world is entirely alien to compassion, which is directed solely, and with passionate intensity, towards suffering man himself; compassion speaks only to the extent that it has to reply directly to the sheer expressionist sound and gestures through which suffering becomes audible and visible in the world (Arendt 1990a: 86).

Moreover, absolute goodness operates in the realm of compassion by speaking to no one but the sufferer. Compassion is problematic because it is something one can feel for the victim as well as for the evildoer (Arendt, 1995: 12). Because it eliminates the in-between men it is not political. Compassion does not know the art of talking and persuasion but still wants immediate action; in order to ease the suffering of the victim it makes recourse to violence, hence emulating evil (Arendt, 1990a: 87). Thus for Arendt, once the good nature encounters evil, the former becomes corrupted (83) That is, even though absolute good is right, in terms of motivating power or intentions, in punishing absolute evil, because it has to recur to similar methods as those of evil, absolute goodness becomes tainted and the law has to punish it as well.

In Arendt's reading of Melville's *Billy Budd*, this is the story of Cain and Abel told in reverse, because Melville was responding to the men of the French Revolution, who had reversed the proposition of the original sin with the proposition of the original goodness (man is born good but corrupt by selfishness and hypocrisy in society). So

Arendt shares with Melville the conclusion that “goodness is strong, stronger perhaps even than wickedness, but that it shares with ‘elemental evil’ the elementary violence inherent in all strength and detrimental to all forms of political organization” (Arendt 1990a: 87). In the reversal of the myth, that Arendt acknowledges plays an important role in the Western tradition of political thought, Arendt asks:

Let us suppose that from now on the foundation stone of our political life will be that Abel slew Cain. Don't you see that from this deed of violence the same chain of wrongdoing will follow, only that now mankind will not even have the consolation that the violence it must call crime is indeed characteristic of evil men only? (Arendt 1990a: 87-8)

This to Arendt means that committing a crime is not the prerogative of evil men only (Arendt, 1990a: 88) and most importantly, “the absolute spells doom to everyone when it is introduced into the political realm” (84). There seems to be a relation between morality expressed in absolutes and limitlessness as the cause of evil. As notes in the previous chapters, under the totalitarian regime there is a pervasive belief that everything is possible which justifies attempts to change human nature.

Similarly, Arendt writes about revolutionary virtue that knows no limitation when discussing Robespierre. In *On Revolution* she states, “The evil of Robespierre’s virtue was that it did not accept any limitations” (86). Arendt’s insistence on limitations is worth special emphasis: for she is saying that it was not mere vice or even evil which we need to be aware of but any form of absolute, even good.

There is a further implication to this move: she is separating motive from act. Here her vision of politics is consistent with that proposed in *The Human Condition*. She is emphasizing the speech and persuasion, against one-sided imposition of how to act. Political action can be guided by principles but cannot be based on motives and goals. In a way, Arendt is presenting us with her interpretation of the old adage that says the road

to hell is paved with good intentions. More importantly, she is discarding absolute goodness as a means of fighting absolute evil. Her insistence on absolute goodness's inability to use words already shows that for her political evil can be countered only with political means.

And finally in rejecting the dichotomy between absolute innocence and absolute evil, Arendt is also rejecting a Manichaean view of the world (Fine, 2001: 143). This is consistent with her position that the doers of even the most unspeakable evil are men like us. But it also means that evil is not an attribute of the other; it is something we all share. And if this is the case, then a war on evil *a la* Robespierre or *a la* George W. Bush cannot deliver the "goodness" it promises.

4.3. Morality through the Teachings of Jesus

Morality according to Jesus embodies the Christian concept of absolute goodness, so in a sense it is a variation of absolute morality. At the same time it needs to be treated separately because the example of Jesus is used by Arendt as standard of judgment, that which provides exemplary validity and which is essential to the faculty of judgment as we will see in the last chapter. This morality is also very problematic because applied properly it encourages loneliness and shying away from the public realm.

Arendt is very clear about the place of morality based on the example of Jesus: "the Christian concept of an absolute goodness which is not of this world;" this concept is valid, "but only in the private sphere of human life; in the public realm of politics" it has no more place than its opposite, evil (Arendt 1993: 137). However, Arendt also returns to

the example set by Jesus times and again throughout her writings, and for this reason it deserves a separate subheading.

Firstly, it should be mentioned that Arendt differentiates between Christian morality derived from the teaching of the Church and morality that originates the example set by Jesus.

For Arendt Jesus of Nazareth, with his preaching and his deeds, speaks to the men as they live in this world together with others, but Christ crucified and resurrected is concerned with man's soul, that is, personal and individual immortality. As such, the Church "has always insisted that everybody should mind his own business" and it has considered political responsibility to "constitute first of all a burden, undertaken exclusively for the sake of the well-being and salvation of those it freed from worry about public affairs (Arendt 1998: 60).

For Arendt, the difference is between what Jesus is reported to have said and Paul's interpretations of his words. The examples that Arendt gives stress the fact that Jesus told people what they should do, how they should behave. Paul, according to Arendt, is the first to become aware of the discrepancy between wishing to do good and not being able to do so; the divided will becomes apparent "precisely when he "wants to do right (*to kalon*)" he finds that "evil lies close at hand" (7:21)" (Arendt, 1978b: 64). Arendt cites the Gospels where Jesus says "follow me and go and do likewise," "sell what you have and distribute to the poor," "love your enemies," "to him who strikes you on the cheek, offer the other also," "from him who takes away your cloak do not withhold your coat as well," and "love your neighbor as yourself." Paul, on the other hand, in the *Letter to the Romans* switches the stress from doing to believing (67). This shift involves

making intentions as important as deeds. So while deeds can be witnessed by others and belong to the world of appearances, intentions can be scrutinized only by God. This to Arendt means that religion advocates retreating completely to the private realm and focusing on the struggle with the self.

Good, in Arendt's reading of the teaching of Jesus, is to be done without being seen or heard. She cites two quotes: "take heed that ye do not your alms before men, to be seen of them" and "Let not thy left hand know what thy right hand doeth" (Arendt 1998: 74). Only the good that is not witnessed by others is done for its own sake; a good deed done in public is "useful as organized charity or an act of solidarity" (74). Moreover,

good deeds can never keep anybody company; they must be forgotten the moment they are done, because even memory will destroy their quality of being "good." ... Good works, because they must be forgotten instantly, can never become part of the world; they come and go, leaving no trace (Arendt 1998: 76).

This leads Arendt to conclude that

In a sense, therefore, goodness and loneliness are of much greater relevance to politics than wisdom and solitude yet only solitude can become an authentic way of life in the figure of the philosopher, whereas the much more general experience of loneliness is so contradictory to the human condition of plurality that it is simply unbearable for any length of time and needs the company of God, the only imaginable witness of good works, if it is not to annihilate human existence altogether (Arendt 1998: 76).⁸⁰

Goodness, Arendt believes, can have destructive effects when it enters public life. She sees a parallel between Rousseau's "man is good but becomes evil through society" and "the good" preached by Jesus. She takes Rousseau to mean that society makes man indifferent to the suffering of others, which is a quality that it is innate in men. Arendt argues that society corrupts this quality, but even Rousseau could not imagine deliberate

⁸⁰ Solitude is trait of philosophers, who are alone but for their thoughts. Loneliness is the condition in which the person does not have even the company of his or her thought.

wickedness or evil. In Rousseau's thinking because the good is associated with selflessness and compassion, we see evil defined in terms of selfishness and hypocrisy. This for Arendt is the very essence of the teachings of Jesus, which is "deliberate self-extinction for the sake of God or the sake of my neighbor" (Arendt, 2003: 116).

4.4. Religion and Morality

It used to be the case that morality was rooted in the religious system, which provided the yardstick for judging behavior in order to tell what is right and wrong. This derived not only from the belief that laws come from God or from the worship of Highest Being. It was also due to the concern for what happens to the soul in the eternal life; therefore the future state of rewards and punishments serves as foundation for guiding behavior in this world.⁸¹ While this was nothing but common sense in the eighteenth century,⁸² the age of enlightenment brought along the secularization of the world, which involves the disjoining of religious and political sphere of life.

For no matter how religious our world may turn again, or how much authentic faith still exists in it, or how deeply our moral values may be rooted in our religious systems, the fear of hell is no longer among the motives which would prevent or stimulate the actions of a majority (Arendt 1993: 135).

⁸¹"The modern age is not the same as the modern world. Scientifically, the modern age which began in the seventeenth century came to an end at the beginning of the twentieth century; politically, the modern world, in which we live today, was born with the first atomic explosions" (Arendt 1998: 6).

⁸² Arendt quotes John Adams on the constitution of Massachusetts: "Religious sanction for man-made laws presently turned out to require much more than a mere theoretical construction of a 'higher law', more even than belief in an Immortal Legislator and worship of a Supreme Being; it required a firm belief in 'a future state of rewards and punishments' as the 'only true foundation of morality'" (Arendt [1963] 1990a: 190). In the essays "What is Authority?" she says that this attitude with regard to morality was good common sense. "The conviction that "good morals" in civil society ultimately depended upon fear and hope for another life may still have appeared to the political men of the eighteenth century no more than good common sense" (Arendt, 1993: 135).

In Arendt's narrative the modern world is marked by doubt and crises and the secular individual has an aesthetic attitude towards life. This dramatically changed world makes it very difficult for the individual to live the unconditional religious life prescribed in the holy books. When Arendt states that "to be radically religious in such a world means to be alone not only in the sense that one stands alone before God but also in the sense that no one else stands before God" (Arendt, 2005a: 47) she hints both to the loneliness that characterizes the modern world but also to the individual responsibility for deeds. Arendt's concept of loneliness has parallels with Durkheim's anomie, the sense of loss that results from the breakdown of rules that could and should have guided our behavior. Individual responsibility refers to being separate from the crowd or the masses and standing up and admitting the consequences of one's deeds. If religion was ever successful in preventing people from behaving badly or motivated them to behave rightly, this was in the days before the crisis of tradition, because "the breakdown of any of the three – religion, authority, tradition – inevitably has carried with it the downfall of the other two" (Arendt, 2005b: 51).

This did not stop people from looking for answers and moral standards in religion. Arendt remarks on the neo-Catholicism of Peguy in France and Chesterton in England, who were looking for solace against "the invasion of bourgeois morals and standards into all the walks of life and all classes of people."⁸³

⁸³ "When Chesterton describes the rich man who for the pretended sake of humanity has adopted some fancy new vegetarian rule as the man who does not go "without gardens and gorgeous rooms which poor men can't enjoy" but has "abolished meat because poor men like meat," or when he denounces the "modern philanthropist" who does not give up "petrol or ... servants" but rather "some simple universal things" like "beef or sleep, because these pleasures remind him that he is only a man" then Chesterton has better described the fundamental ambitions of the ruling classes than have all the academic discussions of the functions of capitalists. And in Peguy's endless repetition, "All evil comes from the bourgeoisie," is more

Arendt juxtaposes their stances towards evil to the one promoted by the Catholic Church at the time, which still flagged the Pauline motto identifying any concern with political activity with the evil of the time (Arendt, 2005a: 154-5). For Arendt, the basic difference is that Chesterton and Peguy were taking a stand against threat posed by the bourgeois morality, which culminates in the transformation of prejudice into law, as discussed in the previous section. Arendt's claim is that Chesterton and Peguy recognized the danger and did what they could to fight it. The Catholic Church, on the other hand, was still argued for the need to save one's soul and not to get involved with evil. Paying evil with evil makes a Christian guilty in the eyes of the God of Mercy (Arendt, 1977: 296). Religious morality as taught by the religious institutions, in Arendt reading, advocates not doing anything against evil, because the world is evil and any fight against it necessitates becoming implicated in evil (Arendt, 2003: 152). This is logic has its origins in the beginnings of Christianity where caring for the soul takes priority over caring for this world. "The only interest Christianity has in secular government is to protect its own freedom" (Arendt, 2005a: 373). This teaching is apolitical and cannot help us resist political evil. For Arendt being passive when confronted by evil is as bad as compromising with it in the hope that good will come out of evil. Arendt mentions the forbidding commands of the Talmud concerning the sacrifice of a human life in hope to save the others, and also quotes John XXIII, who warns against collaborating with evil while hoping to be helpful to people (Arendt, 2003: 336).

elementary hatred than in the collected speeches of Jaures. ... With the whole of Western culture at stake once bourgeois rule had entered the path of imperialism, it is not surprising that the oldest weapons, the fundamental convictions of Western mankind, sufficed to show at least the extent of the evil. The great advantage of these neo-Catholic writers was that when they went back to Christianity they broke with the standards of their surroundings more radically than any other sect or party" (Arendt, 2005a: 152-4).

Thus the Talmud holds, as I was told during a recent discussion of these matters: if they ask you to sacrifice one man for the security of the community, don't surrender him; if they ask you to give one woman to be ravished for the sake of all women, don't let her be ravished. And it is in the same vein, and clearly remembering Vatican policy during the last war, that Pope John XXIII wrote about the political behavior of Pope and Bishop, which is called the "practice of prudence": they "must beware of ... in any way conniving with evil in the hope that by doing so they may be useful to someone" (Arendt, 2003: 336).

There is, however, a second reason for which Arendt believed that conversion to Catholicism was significant.

There was something more in Christianity than its highly useful denunciation of the rich man as a wicked man. The insistence of the Christian doctrine on man's limited condition was somehow enough of a philosophy to allow its adherents a very deep insight into the essential inhumanity of all those modern attempts-psychological, technical, biological-to change man into the monster of a superman. They realized that a pursuit of happiness which actually means to wipe away all tears will pretty quickly end by wiping out all laughter. It was again Christianity which taught them that nothing human can exist beyond tears and laughter, except the silence of despair. This is the reason why Chesterton, having once and for all accepted the tears, could put real laughter into his most violent attacks.⁸⁴

Once again, we see Arendt return to the idea that limitlessness is the cause of evil. It seems to me that in this search for tools to resist political evil, it is not the moral teaching of Christianity but what its doctrine on the limitedness of the man which makes a difference. The despair to which Arendt refers has existential connotations, but Arendt gives it a political meaning as well. She writes, "Politically speaking fear, (and I am not talking about anxiety) is despair over my impotence when I have reached the limits within which action is possible" (Arendt, 2005b: 68). Therefore "out of general powerlessness, fear arises, and from this fear come both the will of the tyrant to subdue all others and the preparation of its subjects to endure domination" (Arendt, 2005b: 69).

⁸⁴ Arendt, "Christianity and Revolution," 154 (Arendt, 2005a: 154; emphasis added)

For Arendt, “if the Christian from Paul to Luther defended himself against worldliness and the secularization of existence, that “evil” world was a world fundamentally different from the one we actually inhabit” (Arendt, 2005a: 47). That is, the modern world characterized by doubt and crises on the one hand, and pervaded en masse by bourgeois morality on the other, contrasts radically with the world addressed by the fathers of the Church. Arendt objects to approaching religion in terms of functionality and sustains that the belief that going back to religion will prevent evil from happening, shows as little faith in God as those who committed totalitarian crimes.

The introduction of these semi-theological arguments in the discussion of totalitarianism, on the other side, is only too likely to further the wide-spread and strictly blasphemous modern “ideas” about a God who is “good for you”-for your mental or other health, for the integration of your personality and God knows what- that is “ideas” which make of God a function of man or society. ... It is true that a Christian cannot become a follower of either Hitler or Stalin; and it is true that morality as such is in jeopardy whenever the faith in God who gave the Ten Commandments is no longer secure. But this is at most a condition sine qua non, nothing which could positively explain whatever happened afterward. Those who conclude from the frightening events of our times that we have got to go back to religion and faith for political reasons seem to me to show just as much lack of faith in God as their opponents (Arendt, 1953: 82).

Similar to her claims concerning the corrosion of the philosophical tradition, Arendt’s argument about religious morality is that there cannot be a return to it. The totalitarian experience showed that religiously or morally wrong deeds have no association with the punishment inflicted on people in concentration camps because wrong deeds and punishment lose their cause effect connection in totalitarian movements (Arendt, 2005a). Arendt seems to have agreed with Primo Levi’s observation “there is Auschwitz, so there cannot be God” (Levi, 1989: 68). But at the same time she believes that religious teaching may save the individual, hence the reason Kierkegaard is the

closest theological figure that has faced modern crises. When it comes to resisting evil, Arendt consistently argues for the individual who engages in thinking, acts and feels responsible accordingly for his or her deeds.

4.5. Philosophers and Morality

In what follows I discuss what Arendt thinks philosophers have to teach us about how to conduct ourselves. In particular the emphasis will be on how we can avoid evil-doing. Two philosophers are discussed at greater length over several of Arendt's essays. These are Socrates and Kant. It is important to note that Arendt turns to philosophers even though she believes that none of them actually think that human beings can do evil for evil's sake (Arendt, 2003: 62, 72). For Socrates doing evil voluntarily is not possible because evil "consists in an absence, in something that is not" (Arendt, 1978a: 179). Similarly, Kant called doing evil intentionally moral absurdity, because we cannot be free and will evil at the same time (Arendt, 2003: 62). Nonetheless what they both have to tell about how and why we should avoid doing evil is important to Arendt because both philosophers relate not doing evil to the faculty of thinking. This stands in great contrast to Arendt's interpretation of morality according to Jesus. Jerome Kohn (Arendt, 2003: xxiii) has noted that in Arendt's reading of the teachings of Jesus, we avoid doing evil when we act selflessly; for Socrates and Kant evil can be avoided by being self-reflecting. The product of this faculty, according to Arendt, is the wind of thought which aides us in extreme situations and "may prevent catastrophes, at least for myself, in the rare moments when the chips are down" (Arendt, 2003: 189). Arendt however, is not

completely satisfied with Kant's and Socrates' stance because in her interpretation of them both philosophers are saying can avoid evil doing if we obey the command of reason.⁸⁵ For Arendt, if this was indeed the case then the faculty of will would not exist independently from reason, when in fact it does as we saw in the previous chapter.

Let us look at what Arendt thinks Socrates has to tell us about morality. She states that Socratic morality is based on two propositions. The first is that it is better to suffer wrong than to do wrong. The second is that I, being one, it is better that I am in agreement with myself, rather than in agreement with others at the cost of contradicting myself (Arendt, 2003: 181). These two propositions are interrelated. Arendt suggests that Socrates came to formulate them because he was approaching the issue of wrong-doing from the perspective of the thinker. Thinking is the dialogue that goes on between me and myself. I want to be able to respect the other me, so I cannot live with a murderer or a thief. This is the logic of the second proposition also, and this is why the self has priority over others and harmony with one's self is more important than harmony with others.

In Arendt's interpretation Kant's propositions are similar to Socrates. For Kant moral transgressions are exceptions that a person is tempted to make from a law with otherwise he or she recognizes as valid. Therefore Kant is saying that people do wrong, but they cannot justify their wrongdoing to themselves so they make excuses for their behavior. Kant calls mendacity, the faculty of lying, "the sore or foul spot" in human nature (Arendt, 2003: 63). This is all done in order to avoid self-contempt. Thus in a

⁸⁵ "Socrates still believed that with sufficient reason before you, you cannot fail to act accordingly, whereas Kant, knowing that the will – this faculty unknown to antiquity – can say no to reason, felt it necessary to introduce an obligation. The obligation, however, is by no means self-evident, and it has never been proved without stepping outside the range of rational discourse. Behind the "thou shall," "thou shall not," stands an "or else," the threat of a sanction enforced by an avenging God or by the consent of the community, or by conscience, which is the threat of the self-punishment which we commonly call repentance. In the case of Kant, conscience threatens you with self-contempt; in the case of Socrates,... with self contradiction" (Arendt, 2003: 77-78).

slight variation to Socrates, Kant is saying that I cannot contradict myself, i.e. I have to be in harmony with the commands of my reason, or else I will despise myself. So we see that Kant, not unlike Socrates, is claiming that we have a duty to the self that is prior to the duty to others. This, according to Arendt, means that for Kant the standard for moral behavior is “neither the love of some neighbor nor the love of self, but self-respect” (Arendt, 2003: 67).

Thinking about myself rather than the world is the trademark of morality and that is why Arendt is dissatisfied with it but also declares herself puzzled. After all, is not morality the code of conduct that tells us how to behave towards others? “...those who fear self-contempt or self-contradiction *are again those who live with themselves*; they find moral propositions self-evident, they do not need the obligation” (Arendt, 2003: 78). Considered from the perspective of the world, i.e. politically in the Arendtian sense, morality tells us what we should not do in order to protect the self and therefore displays an irresponsible attitude towards the common world. From the perspective of the self then, evil is attributed to selfishness and egoism. This cannot help us resist evil in the world. We are told that we do evil by ignorance (Socrates), or by inclination (Kant). We have to be tempted to do evil. This, according to Arendt, does not correspond at all to the totalitarian experience, where evil has lost its quality to temptation.⁸⁶

There is, however, one way in which Socratic morality can help us in the face of evil. The activity of thinking, according to Arendt, is inherently destructive because when

⁸⁶ “Those who resisted could be found in all walks of life, among poor and entirely uneducated people as among members of good and high society. They said very little and the argument was always the same. There was no *conflict*, no struggle, the evil was no temptation. They did not say, we are afraid of an all-seeing and avenging god, not even when they were religious; and it would not have helped because the religions had become quite nicely adjusted too. They simply said, I can't, I'd rather die, for life would not be worthwhile when I had done it.” Arendt, 2003: 278, fn 10. For a similar argument regarding evil and temptation see *The Human Condition* (Arendt 1998: 241).

we think we examine the established criteria and standards of good and evil. Arendt explains the effects of thinking through the metaphor of a strong wind which shakes the foundations of what we know and leaves only perplexities in its aftermath (Arendt, 2003: 175). Kantian morality can help us also, but in a very different way. In the *Lectures on Kant's Political Philosophy* while discussing morality according to Kant Arendt emphasizes the criterion of publicity. "Morality means fit to be seen" while evil "is characterized by withdrawal from the public realm" (Arendt & Beiner, 1989: 49-50). As we will see in the next chapter, Arendt builds her argument for the effectiveness of the exercise of the faculty of judgment on these two arguments and this is why it is important to note them here.

To the Socratic and Kantian stance on avoiding evil through morality that centers on the self, Arendt juxtaposes Machiavelli and his republican virtues, which are political because they put the common world at the center. Machiavelli's *virtu*, according to Arendt is a political quality, so it is not related to the moral character. *Virtu* is what a person shows to the world in the face of the unpredictable that is brought on by *fortuna*. Virtue does not have to do with either the wisdom of the statesman, the moral excellence of the individual or the competence of experts. But it appears when a person is ready to put the self at risk for the sake of the city (Arendt 1993: 137). Because Machiavelli "is interested in Florence than in the salvation of his soul," Arendt thinks that he is important for moral philosophy (Arendt, 2003: 80). In her interpretation of Machiavelli, Arendt also stresses the point that "people who are more concerned with the salvation of souls than with the world should keep out of politics" (Arendt, 2003: 80). In a reversal of the Kantian logic Arendt states that she believes that not only people make an effort to do

evil but that also they have to be tempted to do good. When Machiavelli is teaching the Prince not to be good he is not saying that the Prince should be evil but rather than he should try “to avoid both inclinations, and to act according to political, as distinguished from moral and religious, as well as from criminal principles” (Arendt, 2003: 80). This point is very important to Arendt, so she repeats it in *The Human Condition*, *On Revolution*, and in the essay “Truth and Politics” (Arendt, 1998: 78; Arendt, 1990a: 36; Arendt, 1993: 245). As we noted above, being good according to religious principles means not resisting evil. Arendt’s Machiavelli believes that evil will spread violently if men do not do resist it. They have to do so even if the action they have to take would endanger their lives (Arendt, 1989: 50-1).

4.6. Concluding Remarks

Almost ten years after her work on forgiveness in *The Human Condition*, Arendt radicalizes further her position on the unforgivable character of evil. In “Some Questions in Moral Philosophy” she derives from Jesus quote the implication that we are actually wishing that this person who was part of evil was never born. This time however, she has identified not only the perpetrator but also the close link that exists between thinking and acting. She has insisted all along that forgiveness involves forgiving the doer, not the deed (Arendt, 2003: 95, 111). The Eichmann case, which brings out the banality of evil, serves as further evidence that she was correct before. Following Socrates, she argues that a person and the personality are constituted as such and reconstituted every time through the act of thinking. Through the act of forgiving what one forgives is the person,

not the crime. The perpetrator of evil is someone who does not think, who does not face his own consciousness, and this makes forgiving evil impossible to forgive, because there is no one there to forgive; the perpetrator is not a person. How does a human being come to this point? As we saw in the discussion of the Socratic morality, thinking means that we stop to ponder what one is doing rather than getting carried away by the events (Arendt, 2003: 101). So Arendt, in addition to forgiveness, considers the activity of thinking as the border setting faculty to our acts. However, the tension between thinking and acting is one of the unsolved tensions in Arendt's political thought.⁸⁷

Kateb is one the scholars who is famously dissatisfied with Arendt's account of political morality because in his interpretation of Arendt "political morality is a *selective* version of ordinary morality, meaning that it assumes the heightened presence of certain desirable qualities of character in the actor and expects that those qualities will preclude moral atrocity... There will be limits after all" (Kateb, 1983: 34). I think Kateb is being unfair to Arendt. Political morality in the Arendtian sense cannot be a selective version of ordinary morality because modern ordinary morality stands on values, while Arendt's moral political theory puts and emphasis on virtues like courage and moderation. Jacobitti has argued that besides the faculties of promises and forgiveness she also identifies moderation and courage as intrinsically linked to Arendt's notion of politics. Moderation is required because action can incite hubris which with acting with distinction in the public sphere; therefore moderation becomes the political virtue that keeps the excessive pride of the actor under check. Courage is needed because through

⁸⁷ See Jonas, Hans. "Acting, knowing, thinking: gleanings from hannah arendt's philosophical work." *Social Research* (1977): 25-43; Kohn, Jerome. "Thinking / acting." *Social Research* (1990): 105-134; and Young-Bruehl, Elizabeth. "Reflections on Hannah Arendt's The life of the Mind." *Political Theory* (1982): 277-305.

action we not only initiate events over which we do not have any control but also expose ourselves to the public scrutiny (Jacobitti, 1991: 287). As noted in the discussion of collapse of moral standards, Arendt believes that it is because we see morality and moral standards as values that they fail us so easily in extreme situations. Values by definition are valuable only in comparison i.e. they are exchangeable; are acceptable as long as all agree, independently of their internal content. Contrary to Kateb's claim, Arendt is under no illusion that it is individual qualities that preclude moral atrocities. This is interpreting her position within the moral tradition that centers on the self rather than seeing the self in relation to equal others. I do not think that Arendt is claiming that action can prevent totalitarian evil, but rather that it destroys the conditions under which action can take place. Because, as we saw forgiveness and promises arise within action and are not external to it, radical evil cannot be forgiven. Arendt is, however, saying that there can be disastrous results when promises are broken. In the essay "Civil Disobedience" Arendt tells us that "if the original contractual model of the associations – mutual promises with the moral imperative *pacta sunt servanda* – should be lost" then the association loses its gift for action. This happens when ideological commitments become actual goals. Under these conditions "all evil demons could be let loose" (Arendt, 1972: 97-8).

This chapter looked at the different sources of morality and considered what they have to teach us about dealing with political evil. Arendt does not think that we can find answers in morality. "Morality depends on freedom of choice" (Kohn, 2003: xiv). Does the fact that morality fails us when confronted with political evil mean that freedom conceived as freedom of choice, i.e. freedom of the will, has no political relevance?

Arendt is in no way advocating an amoral attitude. However, she does not subscribe fully to the Kantian notion that the choice between good and evil can be explained only in terms of the exercise of the individual free will. Given her analysis of the larger reality of evil, the fact that evil persists even when totalitarian regimes have collapsed, we can say that the choice of the individual is embedded in the larger reality through which good and evil acquire significance in the first place. The question that we need to consider next is how we can think of “human responsibility” under these conditions. In order to do so we turn to Arendt’s analysis of Eichmann, the epitome of moral failure and of the incapacity to think and thus judge.

CHAPTER V

“THE BANALITY OF EVIL”: RESPONSIBILITY AND FREEDOM

“The banality of evil” is the phrase that made Arendt notorious. It is also a provocative and still unresolved way of thinking about evil, and not because of the furor raised by the book. We can distinguish two moments in terms of the reaction that the phrase has provoked. The first is the immediate criticizing reaction to the book and the second is a later reaction that interacts with Arendt’s ideas by taking them seriously, even when the intent is to disprove them. Both of these moments are important to us because they induced Arendt elaborate her position further. Arendt’s response to her critics provides valuable material for my novel reconstruction of her conceptualization of “the banality of evil.”

The first reaction is a sharp criticism of the portrayal of Eichmann and Arendt’s comments on the role of the Jewish leaders during the war. The critical attitude towards Arendt’s account began as soon as the articles of the reports were published in *The New Yorker* in 1963 and have been revived even as late as 2013 by Margaret von Trotta’s film “Hannah Arendt.” One of Arendt’s harshest critics admitted years later that controversies like the Eichmann one never resolve satisfactorily; “they die down, simmer, and erupt again” (Howe, 2013: n/a).

The second reaction has been to engage with Arendt’s arguments and to situate them within the framework of her thought. The focus has been specifically on the notion

of conscience and the faculty of thinking (Vetlesen, 2001; Parekh, 2008: 150-63). This is not surprising given Arendt's emphasis on Eichmann's inability to think. Moreover, Jerome Kohn (2003: xvi) has argued "that Eichmann's "conscience" came to light in the course of the trial is integral to the meaning of the banality of evil." But Arendt conscience is not the little voice inside us that helps us distinguish right from wrong (Stern and Yarbrough, 1981:337). Rather it refers to the internal dialogue which each person carries out with himself or herself and with for Arendt is an integral part of thinking. While taking into consideration conscience is very important, Arendt does not stop there and proceeds to write her philosophical work, *The Life of Mind*, where she explores the faculty of the will.

In this chapter I reconstruct Arendt's account of evil denoted by the phrase "the banality of evil" through Arendt's writings on the free will. I propose to examine Arendt's argument about the banality of evil by paying attention to two very specific concepts: human responsibility and freedom, understood as moral and political agency. As we saw in the previous chapter conscience for Arendt has to be with the ability to have a dialogue with oneself, the Socratic two-into-one. This was something that Eichmann failed to do. Arendt makes it explicit in her later writings and it is also already established in the literature that the inability to think is related to the inability to judge (Arendt, 2003: 159-89; Bernstein, 1996: 154-178; Villa, 1999: 87-106). But we need to bear in mind that for Arendt evil is political and the answer as well needs to be political. This is why morality is an important consideration but does not suffice. We understand this only if we read Eichmann with an eye on what Arendt is telling us about

responsibility. The language of conscience translates into personal and also political responsibility.

Conceptually responsibility implies freedom, but in Arendt's writings this freedom is different from the one discussed in the previous chapters. Just as we are dealing with a new aspect of evil, the banality of evil, we are also dealing with an aspect of freedom that extends beyond the one implied in the new beginning. This is freedom defined as the choice between good and evil (a definition also shared by moral philosophers) which in political terms translated into choosing sides and being responsible for the acts of your chosen side (political responsibility).

5.1. The Experience of the Eichmann Trial

Experience is important to Arendt. It is not only that experience initiates her thinking, but Arendt lets experience guide her theorizing. It is this crucial fact that made possible her formulation of the banality of evil. In my reconstructive account of the banality of evil, Arendt's experience of the trial is important because it provides me with the keyword responsibility. Only once we understand the pivotal role the notion of responsibility has in Arendt's thinking, we are able to grasp the significance of Arendt's notion of freedom as free will for her novel approach to evil.

Why does the Eichmann trial matter so much to Arendt? The Nuremberg trials set a precedent whereby Nazis were held responsible for their act under international law even though their acts were legal under the Nazi regime. These were crimes against humanity and judging them by a nationalist reference meant losing the ethical

significance of these crimes (Fine, 2001: 142). Thinking dualistically persisted, as the Cold War took over where the Second World War left. This is very important to how we approach evil. The nationalist reference adopted itself easily to the Manichean dichotomy of the absolutely good “us” and the absolutely evil “them.”

To this nationalist dichotomy Arendt juxtaposes the idea of humanity, which for her signifies recognizing “the evil potentialities of men,” and still “assume responsibility for all crimes committed by men;” in other words, “all nations share the onus of evil committed by all others” (Arendt, 2005a: 131).⁸⁸ Thinking along the lines of race and nations, for Arendt, means conceding a victory to Nazism even after it has been defeated. Hitler wanted the world to think of itself in terms of races and nations and reversing who we think of as an “evil” race (Jews no longer are evil, the Germans are) leave the core reasoning unchallenged and unchanged. Alweiss (2003: 309) makes the argument that Arendt’s emphasis on humanity makes her sound as if she is arguing from a universal position, but in fact we cannot help but see her stance as situated. That is, if it were a German person rather than a Jewish one who said that we need all of us to take responsibility for the acts of totalitarian regime this would have come across as an attempt to diffuse responsibility. Arendt’s notion of humanity, however, is not the unified, monolithic, abstract concept in the name of which countries feel entitled to wage wars on other countries. In Arendt’s interpretation humanity comprises all the people that populate the world, in other words it signifies the plurality of the world, so a crime

⁸⁸ Arendt wrote these words in 1945 and was opposing nationalist analyses that put all the blame for Nazism on the German national character. This has led scholars like Richard Wolin (1996:27) to sustain that the logical conclusion of this approach is that “the Holocaust could have happened anywhere.” I think Wolin is missing Arendt’s nuanced argument that we cannot understand evil if we see it only as a national trait of certain people. She is also attempting to develop a political approach to the concept of responsibility rather than a moral and moralist one.

against humanity is in fact a crime against the order of the world. Arendt supports the position that the legal concept “crimes against humanity” should be applied in the case of genocide because “individual human beings did not kill other individual human beings for human reasons, but that an organized attempt was made to eradicate the concept of the human being” (Arendt and Jaspers, 1992: 69).

Arendt volunteered to write a report on the Eichmann trial. When asked in an interview why she wanted to attend the trial she identified as “the most powerful motive” her desire to expose herself to the evildoer himself, given that she had been thinking about the nature of evil for the past thirty years (Arendt, 2007: 475). This is also what she writes to the Rockefeller Foundation as she asked them to postpone a grant she had been awarded: “You will understand why I should cover this trial; I missed the Nuremberg Trials, I never saw these people in the flesh, and this is probably my only chance” (Arendt, cited in Bergen, 1998: 39). And to her friend Mary McCarthy Arendt writes that she is curious about Eichmann because “he used to be one of the most intelligent of the lot” (Arendt, 1995c: 81-2).

Eichmann’s trial opened in Jerusalem in April 1961. Arendt saw Eichmann in the glass dock and listened to the prosecution present him as a moral monster guilty of the suffering of the Jews, of anti-Semitism and racism (Arendt, 1977: 5). Dossa (1984: 168) notes that it is only good common sense to expect the criminal to fit the crime. Thus only a monster can be the cause of death of millions of people. “Even for men like literary critic Harold Rosenberg, schooled in the moral ambiguities of human life, Eichmann was not only guilty of evil deeds, he was himself evil and he had intended to commit evil” (168). This is not what Arendt saw in the court. Years later Arendt (1978a: 4) asserts: “... what I

was confronted with was utterly different and still undeniably factual. ...The deeds were monstrous, but the doer - at least the very effective one now on trial - was quite ordinary, commonplace, and neither demonic nor monstrous.” Arendt did not change the story to fit her original expectations and her portrayal of Eichmann is still debated.⁸⁹

Her account was considered very problematic as soon as it appeared. Her harsher critics claimed that Eichmann was a calculating criminal, a Jew-hater, a moral monster rather than the clown Arendt maintained; that Arendt was in effect accusing the Jewish victims of complicity in their persecution, that in the report Eichmann came better off than the victims, that she presumed to judge the behavior of the leaders of the Jewish Councils when they were facing choices that Arendt never did, that justice is was not done in Jerusalem (Syrkin, 1963; Abel, 1963; Ezorsky, 1963). The milder critics said that it was not so much the content as much as the sarcastic and demeaning tone in which Arendt had written (Lacquer, 1983: 119). One of her closest friends, Mary McCarthy (1970: 58), said Arendt was like “somebody who criticizes at a funeral.”

In reply to her critics Arendt appeals again and again to the notion of individual responsibility. To her the trial matters because “it is the grandeur of court proceedings that even a cog can become a person again;” in other words, even someone who believes that he or she has only acted on orders from their superiors and that anyone else in his place would have done the same, “the moment he appears in a court of justice he appears as a person and is judged according to what he did” (Arendt, 2003: 148).

⁸⁹ Some of the latest works are from historians. Cesarani, David. 2006. *Becoming Eichmann: Rethinking the Life, Crimes, and Trial of a “Desk Murderer”*. Cambridge, MA: Da Capo Press and Stangneth, Bettina. 2014. *Eichmann before Jerusalem: The Unexamined Life of a Mass Murderer*. New York: Random House. Using the latest evidence on Eichmann both authors argue that Arendt was right in her argument for the banality of evil but was wrong on Eichmann. Cesarani believes that Arendt depicted Eichmann as a “dull-witted clerk or a robotic bureaucrat.” This is not what Arendt wrote. One of the points she was trying to make is that Eichmann did not simply follow orders and was more than a robot, or a cog in the machine (Arendt, 1977: 289).

Arendt views “the banality of evil” as a reformulation of her earlier position on evil which aims to bring evil within the grasp of human judgment and legal punishment. She never has doubts about the graveness of the crime. But Arendt does believe that she unintentionally contributed to a demonic understanding of evil, and she wants to undo that. In a written interview Arendt (2007: 475) suggests that the description of evil she had provided before had contributed to the idea that radical evil explodes our legal limits, hence it is impossible to punish. Punishing totalitarian evil means addressing the question of whether we can render justice through the legal system to crimes and criminals that “defy the possibility of human judgment and explode the framework of our legal institutions” (Arendt, 2007: 475). As was the case with her analysis of the radicality of evil, here again Arendt is concerned with the novelty presented by the new kind of crime and the new kind of criminal. Eichmann, according to Arendt, is a *hostis humani generis*, an enemy of all mankind. This legal phrase was used for pirates before a framework of international law was developed. Arendt’s use of the phrase indicates that the current international law does not yet have a category of the new kind of criminal that totalitarian regimes produce. She calls Eichmann the desk murderer par excellence; his instruments were “typewriters, telephones, and teletypes... [and he is] guiltier than those who actually operated the extermination machinery, threw the gas pellets into the chambers, manned the machine guns for the massacre of civilians, or were busy with the cremation of mountains of corpses (Arendt, 2003: 241).

The totalitarian crimes are committed in a collective and organized fashion; this erodes the sense of personal responsibility of the perpetrator (Bilsky, 2012: 132). Moreover, the convoluted division of labor in the Nazi bureaucracy together with the

dehumanization of victims through ideology created the conditions for “remoteness from reality” (Arendt, 1977: 288) under which “millions of ordinary Germans to set aside their instinctual sense of responsibility for their neighbors, colleagues, customers and friends” (Bauman, 1993 cited in Bowring, 2011: 56). For Bauman remoteness is the product of the bureaucratic structure that replaces moral responsibility with technical responsibility; for Arendt, Eichmann’s remoteness is moral and political and he justifies it by claiming to be executing the law (Villa, 1999: 229, fn 64). Like Bauman, Larry May (1997: 101) argues that in bureaucracies, because of the anonymity that results from institutional socialization, the way shame and guilt operate within the individual changes. Arguing from a position formulated earlier by Kekes (1990), May sustains that it is not necessarily intentional evil but rather the possibility of the appearance of evil that is made possible in bureaucracies. Arendt, however, insists that Eichmann is considered responsible for what he did however based on the legitimate juridical and moral presupposition that he had the choice reject the final solution and say no to evil (Dossa, 1984: 178).

5.2. Human Responsibility

Human responsibility is the notion around which a court trial is built. It means identifying the doer of the crime. This concept features heavily in Arendt’s writing on the Eichmann trial and in her responses to the criticism of her arguments concerning Eichmann. We also need to bear in mind that we are dealing not only with a crime, but also with an act that is evil. In this sense establishing human responsibility through human agency becomes doubly important. We saw in the discussion of radical evil that Arendt does not

subscribe to the position that there is something demonic in totalitarian rules even as she calls concentration camps hell on earth. Therefore if totalitarian evil is the result of human deeds then it follows that we have to think in terms of human responsibility.

What is responsibility? Human responsibility presents itself in a wide spectrum, which takes the forms of moral, personal but also political and collective responsibility. It is however, to be distinguished from guilt. Arendt defines guilt as personal; it is the blame we take for our actions or intentions as individuals. Responsibility can also be personal and it is found in individuals who demand to think and judge for themselves rather than obey the common morality of the society in which they find themselves.

The first step in experiencing personal responsibility is the ability to think. During the trial Eichmann refuses all personal responsibility for his deeds. Jerome Kohn (2003: xv) notes that when Arendt talked of the banality of evil she was referring to the “factual nature of the evil perpetrated by one thoughtless human being-by someone who never thought about what he was doing, either in his career as a Gestapo officer in charge of the transportation of Jews or as a prisoner in the dock.” What does it mean to think? For Arendt this means being able to have a dialogue between you and yourself and it also means awareness (having a conscience) that you have to live with your elf after every deed that you do. Eichmann is incapable of thinking and this leads Arendt to formulate the following question about the faculty of thinking: “Could the activity of thinking as such, the habit of examining whatever happens to come to pass or to attract attention, regardless of the results and specific content, could this activity be among the conditions that make men abstain from evil-doing or even actually “condition” them against it?” (Arendt, 1978a: 5). In Jerome Kohn’s (1997: 52) interpretation, Eichmann’s crimes

against humanity include his own humanity. This is because Eichmann has already destroyed his own ability to be a person by not being able to think. “As a thoughtless evasion of responsibility, the banality of evil might, she speculated, be vulnerable to the activity of thinking” (Berkowitz, 2009: 11).

While personal responsibility is established through thinking, Arendt finds this faculty wanting in dealing with evil because thinking contributes to treating evil as something that does not have reality. Reading about Eichmann it is easy to conclude that evil is superficial while thinking means going deeper looking for the roots and so people who do not think are more prone to do evil. But Arendt's also knows that this is not completely true. The inability to think (Eichmann) and the ability to think (Heidegger) have serious implications and Arendt believed that “[there is an] inner connection between the ability or inability to think the problem of evil” (Arendt 2003: 166). Posing moral questions led her not only to “the various traditional answers that “ethics,” the branch of philosophy, has offered to the problem of evil” but also to the answer of the question of what is thinking (Arendt, 1978a: 6). The difficulty of what Arendt is trying to do, therefore, is a result of contemplating simultaneously moral issues in general and the problem of evil in particular. She also attempting to take into account the perspective of factual experience and challenge factual experience poses to philosophy. Arendt is analyzing the faculty of thinking, which typically falls under the domain of philosophy, in order to understand the relation that exists between the ability to think and the ability to do evil. This is her reckoning not only with Eichmann, the thoughtless, self-centered bourgeois, but also with philosophy and philosophers, the men and women with the most active minds.

Let us turn now to political responsibility. Responsibility is collective and therefore political because it refers to the liability resulting from being a member of group; it is predicated on the duties of the citizen (Schaap, 2001: 750). To illustrate with an example Arendt herself gives: when Napoleon came to power after the revolution he declared that he was assuming responsibility for all the acts done in France the days of Louis the Saint to the Committee of Public Safety. In Arendt's interpretation political responsibility is something we inherit and pass on to next generation; "every generation, by virtue of being born into a historical continuum, is burdened by the sins of the fathers as it is blessed with the deeds of the ancestors" (Arendt, 2003: 27). From this we take that collective responsibility, which is always political for Arendt, is vicarious because it refers to something that we did not do and it is also involuntary because we do not choose the national group in which we are born (Schaap, 2001: 752).

Political responsibility is and has been confused with collective guilt. In the case of German citizens under Nazi rule, Arendt (2005a: 125) argues the responsible people are those who were sympathetic to Hitler as long as possible, who assisted his rise to power, and who approved of his act in Germany and in Europe. But these people are not legally guilty of war crimes, even though they were unable to judge modern political organizations. Guilt, on the other hand, is a feeling we experience we have done something and can be held accountable for it the face of the law. Guilt is always personal; it is something that only the individual can rightly feel. This distinction is crucial to Arendt because as she repeats over and over "where all are guilty no one is" (Arendt, 1977: 278; Arendt 2003: 21, 28, 147; Arendt, 2005a: 126). The conflation of collective guilt and political responsibility results in personal and political irresponsibility because,

as we already saw in the previous section, it gives the impression that there was nothing the individual could have done.

Arendt defines political responsibility as responsibility for the world, i.e. the common space and web of relationships. The moral person is capable of political responsibility because the moral person is constituted through the incessant dialogue with the self. This means both the employment of language which is socially constituted and of the use of *sensus communis*, i.e. taking into account the standpoints of others (Ned Curthoys, 2011: 70). Therefore thoughtlessness carries the meaning of losing touch not only with your conscience but also with the world. We find this meaning of thoughtlessness in *The Human Condition* which was published in 1958, and predates the Eichmann trial by three years. Thoughtlessness as the loss of the common world involves “the heedless recklessness or hopeless confusion or complacent repetition of “truths” which have become trivial and empty” and Arendt proceeds to call it “the outstanding characteristics of our time” (Arendt, 1998: 5). She returns to the idea of thoughtlessness when writing about Eichmann because she had witnessed firsthand that neither wickedness nor stupidity (sources of evil identified by philosophers), but thoughtlessness characterized the doer of deeds that were monstrous.

It should be noted that Arendt (2003:45) acknowledges an extreme situation where political responsibility is not possible. This is the situation where political power has disappeared. Powerlessness is a valid excuse for not assuming responsibility, according to Arendt, because it requires “a certain moral quality even to recognize powerlessness, the good will and good faith to face realities and not to live in illusions.

... in this admission of one's own impotence ... a last remnant of strength and even power can still be preserved even under desperate conditions” Arendt (2003:45).

So far we have seen that thinking and conscience are involved in the creation of human responsibility. Eichmann is the epitome of thoughtlessness, the man who refuses to think or is incapable of thinking about the consequences of his actions. “His thoughtlessness condemned him because, if generalized to all men, it made civilized life impossible” (Stern and Yarbrough, 1981: 326). But in order to understand what is at stake, i.e. human responsibility, it is not enough to engage with the faculty of thinking or even the notion of conscience. The questions raised by the faculty of thinking lead Arendt to the examination of the faculty of willing. The discovery of the faculty of willing, which Arendt attributes to St. Augustine, contributes to the formulation of the problem of evil, says Arendt, because through the faculty of willing we recognize the human capacity for both good and evil.

The freedom of will presents itself as freedom of choice. Arendt agrees with Kant that the function of the will is “to be the faculty by which we act freely and are held morally responsible” (Jacobitti, 1988: 61). But she is unhappy with the Kantian formulation of the will that is subjugated to reason, so she supplements his formulation with ideas from Augustine (each individual is a new beginning) and Duns Scotus (the emphasis on contingency and the particular). This brings about a novel but also perplexing approach to the faculty of will because as she writes in the last chapter of her book on willing, will becomes something that both philosophers and men of action want to tame and control.

It is important to note that that freedom that brings about personal responsibility also is the creator of character. Similar to her argument about human nature, which we saw in the chapter on radical evil, Arendt understands character as something that is not fixed but rather revealed every time we act. Our actions are expressions of our will. Each person has a character, an identity, because of they possess will. It is will, in Arendt's view, that makes us different from one another, that differentiates us by creating "a person's specific identity" (Arendt, 1978b: 195).

More importantly, Arendt tells us "the greatest evil perpetrated is the evil committed by nobodies" (Arendt, 2003: 111). How does Arendt define the nobodies?

[Nobodies are] human beings who refuse to be persons.... the wrongdoers who refuse to think by themselves what they are doing and who also refuse in retrospect to think about it, that is, to go back and remember what they did (which is teshuvah or repentance), have actually failed to constitute themselves into somebodies. By stubbornly remaining nobodies they prove themselves unfit for intercourse with others who, good, bad, or indifferent, are at least persons (Arendt, 2003: 112).

Eichmann was a member of the rule of Nobody (Arendt's (1977: 289) phrase for bureaucracy), but as Arendt understood it Eichmann was above all a nobody because he refused to constitute himself as a person by refusing to think about what he did and to exercise his will (Arendt, 2003: 111). So far we have seen Eichmann's action cannot be justified in terms of either in terms of his national identity (German), or his occupation (a bureaucrat in the Nazi regime), or his membership to the human race (original sin). All these terms can serve as extenuating circumstances, but they do not do way with his responsibility. So why is Eichmann responsible according to Arendt? In order to answer this question we have to turn to her analysis of the faculty of the will because this is where we see that evil can be banal, i.e. effortless evil.

5.3. Effortless Evil

The meaning of “the banality of evil” is unclear and has been open to interpretation. Arendt never clarified what she meant by phrase the banality of evil. Was Eichmann banal, or was the whole of the Nazi movement, or was the mass murder of millions of people, or was evil itself?

Let us consider some of the ways in which this phrase and its meaning have been interpreted in the literature. Jerome Kohn, (2003: xv) has noted that the banality of evil is a fact; it shocked Arendt because not only it goes against the theories of evil but also because it points “to something that though it is “true” is not in the least “plausible.””

Shiraz Dossa (1984) has argued that “the banality of evil” is made possible by the fact that the private take precedence over the public for Eichmann. Arendt herself says something to this effect when she notes that “each time Eichmann tried to think, he thought immediately of his career, which up to the end was the thing uppermost in his mind” (Arendt, 2007: 480). This argument recalls Kant’s who said that a person who breaks the law is making an exception for himself, and this person lies in order to keep his self-consistency and not to despise his self; therefore being wicked for wickedness’ sake is not justifiable to reason and a moral absurdity. This analysis connects to the line of argument about the breakdown of morality during the Third Reich and evil’s loss of its quality of temptation. And it is for this reason that Arendt frequently adds that only with the experience of the Holocaust the phrase gained its true meaning. Yet she argues that

we know very little about its nature, except that it destroys the human realm and the potentialities of human power whenever it appears (Arendt, 1998: 241).

One of Arendt's most influential interpreters, Margaret Canovan (1992) has argued that the banality of evil has to do with the fact that Eichmann for Arendt represents the total collapse of the moral values. Arendt knew this to be true even before seeing Eichmann but coming face to face with it was no less shocking. The only remedy left is judgment, according to Canovan.

Another commonly agreed interpretation is that the banality of evil is a *cura posterior* from original sin (Young-Bruehl, 1982a; Benhabib, 2000; Villa, 1999). The argument is that through this formulation Arendt was looking for the secular foundations of evil, so banality of evil as the after-cure for original sin means that men are not fundamentally bad. Similarly, Susan Neiman (2010) has read "the banality of evil" as a modernist theodicy which sees evil as something that exists but is neither a necessary part of the Creation, of the world, or of the human condition. In this sense it is then a vindication of original sin, Neiman argues (307). However, this interpretation seems inaccurate when we consider that never believed in the original sin as a possible explanation for evil. Original sin attributes universal guilt, and as we saw in the previous section Arendt objects to this because "where all are guilty, no one is" (Arendt, 2003: 28). Arendt writes this in "Personal Responsibility under Dictatorship" (1964) but it echoes the same argument of "Organized Guilt and Universal Responsibility" (1945).

Robert Fine (2001: 144) has remarked that the Eichmann case, and the phrase "the banality of evil," can be seen as Arendt's objection to how the silence over the Holocaust was being broken. We know also from the work of the historian Peter Novick (1999) that

the American's public reaction to that news about the extermination of millions of Jews during the Second World War was not considered extraordinary. It took approximately twenty years and the advent of identity politics, among other factors, for "Holocaust consciousness" to develop. Arendt arguments from the *Origins* had contributed to the formation of a radical view which argued that the Holocaust is unprecedented and we can never understand it. This view was a response to the more conventional one compared the Holocaust to previous aggressive wars, massacres, extermination of populations and enslavement. Arendt does not subscribe fully to the radical view. As we saw in the previous chapter she insists that the extermination camps are unprecedented, and the novelty of the totalitarian crime is a theme to which she returns repeatedly in the Eichmann report also. But she does not agree with the argument that this crime cannot be understood. Yes it is a challenge, but for Arendt this means that we need to revise the way we think, not give up attempts at understanding all together. Thus against the radical view, Arendt is stressing the point that we have not reached the limits of understanding us such, but only of one form of understanding that relies on utilitarian and means-ends rationality in human action (Fine, 2001: 134).

I argue that the banality of evil is effortless evil. What does "effortless" mean? Consider the poem *The Mask of Evil* by Bertolt Brecht. *On my wall hangs a Japanese carving, / The mask of an evil demon, decorated with gold lacquer. / Sympathetically I observe / The swollen veins of the forehead, indicating / What a strain it is to be evil.* Effortless evil means that evil is out there in the world, evil exists in the world. Moreover, evil requires an effort. You have to be tempted to be evil, as Arendt points out. You know that you are going against something, whether it is the law of the country, the

rules of society, or your own principles. That is why evil is a strain. And yet, under certain conditions this is not true. Arendt tells us that totalitarian evil loses the quality of temptation. All that is required for evil to become effortless is for the individual to lose touch with his own conscience and her common world. Evil exists in the world and by decided to be passive the individual becomes the enabler of evil. “To be responsible is not to be bereft of social influences, but to relate to such influences in a particular way. It is to be more than just a puppet of them” (Eagleton, 2010: 12).

My interpretation of the banality of evil as effortless evil is supported by the language she adopts in dealing with evil. She does not aim to defeat evil, conquer over evil once and for all. She does not think that an absolute triumph of the good is possible. In fact if someone comes to us and says I can conquer evil, I can deliver absolute victory over evil than we should be suspicious of this promise and can safely assume that there is something wrong going on there. We can see this throughout history. The example that Arendt gives in *On Revolution* is Robespierre who came to power by claims of squashing the greatest evil, which by his definition was hypocrisy, and ended up by bringing about the reign of terror. So is also the case in other revolutions, because in the moment of the revolution freedom is actualized and good and evil coexist, then the beautiful beginning of the revolution in all its plurality of human voices is crashed by the dominance of only one voice and only one point of view; we thus witness the birth of monism and the death of plurality that made possible its coming into existence. This is what I discussed in chapter on radical evil, but it is fact the existence of the banality of evil, the fact that there are these little people who claim passivity, who say that they are obeying order and serving some higher greater purpose that make possible the appearance of evil in its

radicality. This is an interpretation that Hannah Pitkin (1998) and Simona Forti (2015) also share. The both argue that it is the banality of evil that prepares the ground for evil's radicality.

The banality of evil thus points out the fact that good and evil exists in reality and choices people make are shaped by this reality but the ultimate responsibility for the choice remains with the individual. So even as we say that the banality of evil is effortless evil this is the very opposite of denying the existence of evil. We are affirming its existence when we say that evil exists if it can come about effortlessly. Effortless evil seems like a negation of evil because linguistically we are dealing with a negative. The fact that evil is passive does not evil a deficiency. Effortless evil makes possible the appearance of radical evil. Am I saying that effortless evil serves a purpose; that it has a function? Effortless evil when it accumulates can produce radical evil but not necessarily so and we should not limit the interpretation to functionality. Effortless evil is a kind of evil in and of itself and needs to be taken seriously.

5.4. “The Banality of Evil” and the Reality of Evil

So far in this thesis we have established that Arendt believes that evil has a reality that is pervasive; that it exists before it appears in its most radical form and that it continues to exist even after the end of totalitarian regimes. We saw that for Arendt freedom, defined as the capacity to make a new beginning is the source of radical evil as well as political action. Radical evil aims the destructions of human plurality understood both as human individuality, and also as the law of the earth, “the fact that men, not Man, live on the

earth and inhabit the world” (Arendt, 1998: 7). Radical evil is the product of human freedom but it also attempts to destroy the very freedom that makes it possible. Evil is radical when it cannot be explained by humanly comprehensible motives like greed, envy, resentment or hatred. It also challenges our means to understand and judge it. We also saw that even through morality will not help us either understand or resist radical evil the theme of human responsibility persists in Arendt’s thought. The Eichmann case ushers a new way for Arendt to thinking about the question of evil, “the banality of evil.”

In the banality of evil we are dealing with a new aspect of evil and alternate definition of freedom. This freedom is no longer simply the freedom to bring about something new that cannot be explained in terms of what existed before, rather it freedom that is the result of choice. The banality of evil is the effortless evil. It is done without giving in to temptation because there is no temptation involved. It is done without malice because there is motive involved. It is evil that is the product of the inability to think, to will and to judge. And yet the doer is not any less responsible. Like Pitkin (1998: 209), I argue that Arendt’s notion of “banality of evil” needs to be read through human responsibility. For Pitkin however, this is Arendt attempt to escape the monstrosity narrative of the totalitarian evil she had created in the *Origins*. In my reading this is only partially true. Through the notion of responsibility Arendt returns to the analysis of the law and in doing so comes to terms with an evil that seems impugned because of the existing legal notions and is also unforgivable. But the move to the notion of banality of evil is not because Arendt “no longer felt a duty to the victims to diabolize” and had redefined her duty as the need “to demythologize even the most extreme oppression” to human agency (212). Pitkin interpretation is congruent with Kateb’s (1984; 2010) –

Arendt has an existentialist philosophical position on human freedom and she tries to defend it at all cost. In my Arendt is more interested in how to resist evil – an evitable aspect of human existence, rather than a philosophical commitment of human agency or of any other kind. I think this is the reason that the content of nature of evil becomes secondary and it is important only to the degree that it helps us fight and resist evil. Arendt's commitment is primarily political – engagement with the world, philosophical or otherwise, that ensures that the plurality of the world is preserved.

Arendt's definition of the freedom of will, however, is different from both that of Kant's and Aristotle's. In Arendt's reading, Aristotle the freedom of will appears as *proairesis*, which determines the means through which these goals can be pursued. These goals are determined by reason, i.e. natural human purposes. In her reading, Kant also resents the will as organ that executes the commands of reason, i.e. the universal categorical imperative. Thus, Arendt claims that neither Kant nor Aristotle made room for human freedom (Jacobitti 1988: 68).

Arendt executes a double move in her definition of freedom as free will. The choices are not entirely dependent and defined by human reason. They are also shaped by the context in which the person finds herself. That's why she thinks that it is important to keep in mind the conditions of freedom under totalitarian regimes and talks about the wisdom of knowing when the exercise of personal responsibility is not possible (Arendt, 2003: 45). Yet not everything is determined by the social and conditions either. So in explaining why she wanted to attend the trial she says she wanted to learn: "Who was Eichmann? What were his deeds, not insofar as his crimes were part and parcel of the Nazi system, but insofar as he was a free agent?" (Arendt, 2007: 475). Note the emphasis

on “free agent.” Following her customarily via negative, Arendt establishes Eichmann’s free agency by criticizing two “theories” that explain human behavior in terms of the environment, social conditions at the detriment of human agency. The first is what she calls “the scapegoat theory” (Arendt, 1979: 5) which we already encountered in the *Origins*; and the second is “the cog theory” (Arendt, 2003: 29). I will explore them at some length because by thinking critically about the different facets of responsibility Arendt is in effect establishing the conditions for the existence of freedom.

Scapegoat theories tend surface during political trials. One individual, the scapegoat, is made emblematic of the role played by the group they supposedly represent. The prosecutor not only meant to bring Eichmann to justice for the crimes against humanity and his role in the implementation of the “Final Solution” but also was considered this an opportunity to teach the public opinion in Israel and the world about the nature and extent of the extermination of the Jewry in Europe. Arendt equates this stance with making Eichmann responsible for all the crimes committed by the human race and the original sin (Arendt, 1977: 286). This to her is unacceptable. When Eichmann is considered as a symbol of the totalitarian bureaucracy, the more the details are obfuscated, the more innocent the perpetrator is made to appear. Focusing on the question of individual responsibility, makes problematic the stance that Eichmann was being tried for all the crimes that ‘all the Germans’ committed towards ‘all the Jews.’ When the focus in on the individual person rather than a symbol of a system, “the question to be raised is no longer, How did this system function? but, Why did the defendant become a functionary in this organization?” (Arendt, 2003: 58). This also raises the possibility that the defendant could have acted otherwise. It is important to

clarify that Arendt at no point says that the victims of the Nazi regime could have acted differently. Indeed when the prosecution at the Eichmann trial brings up such questions, Arendt reports them but also dismisses them right away as “cruel and silly” (Arendt, 1977: 11, 283; Arendt, 2007: 496). Arendt’s critics, however, attributed this position to her.⁹⁰ She does however say that the leaders of the Jewish Councils could have acted differently and considers their collaboration with the Nazis a sign of the moral collapse what has spread throughout interwar Europe (Arendt, 1977: 125-8). Arendt’s contention is that even “when the normal world has fallen apart,” “we still have the right to expect the individual to think for himself and freely resist evil against all odds” (Dossa, 1984: 178).

The arguments of “the cog theory” are similar to those of “the scapegoat theory,” but shifting the focus from the defendant to the group he allegedly represents as does the latter, “the cog theory” blames the system. Eichmann thus is presented only as obeying orders and should not be faulted for doing what anyone in his place would have done. Arendt does not dismiss the context; the fact is that “such a crime could only be committed only by a giant bureaucracy using the resources of government” (Arendt, 1977: 289). But for Arendt, these only constitute the circumstances of the crime “just as, in a case of theft, the economic plight of the thief is taken into account without excusing the theft, let alone wiping it off the slate” (289). It is only the process of the court trial that we have the opportunity to go beyond “the cog theory” because at a trial one faces

⁹⁰ Among her critics Lionel Abel (1963: 219) wrote that Arendt had a repugnance towards those who did not act to save their lives while under the duress of the totalitarian regime. Marie Syrkin (1963: 346) wrote “to kill millions is banal... But to be among the suffers is somehow culpable.” For Arendt, one of the most wounding remarks came from her old friend and colleague Gershom Scholem (Arendt, 1978: 241), who accused her of being flippant and said that he felt shame and bitterness towards Arendt after having finished reading the book.

the person and his or her deeds, motivations, decisions (Arendt, 2003: 57). Arendt emphasizes in particular the last sentence of the judgment of the court: when considering mass crimes that take place under the guise of bureaucracy, “the degree of responsibility increases as we draw further away from the man who uses the fatal instrument with his own hands” (Arendt, 1977: 247).

Baehr (2009: 139-142) has argued that by emphasizing the interconnection between evil and thoughtlessness Arendt does not do justice to the reality of totalitarian evil, which actively destroys and harm other. By presenting Arendt’s argument against “the cog theory” and “the scapegoat” I have argued that the opposite is true. It is because she knows of the unconquerable reality of evil that Arendt insists that it is possible to talk about a certain degree of human freedom and responsibility under totalitarian rule. The language used to define the banality of evil is phrased in negative terms: inability to think, inability to exercise one’s will, inability to judge. But effortless evil point to the fact that evil exists, as a reality and you do not in fact need to try to be evil. But sheer passivity the person who refuses to constitute and reveal herself as the doer of deeds becomes an enabler of evil that is extreme, rather than radical.

5.5. Concluding Remarks

This chapter posed the following question: if the reality of evil is pervasive, if evil appears in its most radical form during the totalitarian regime, how are we to count for human responsibility? Note the parallel between the question of human responsibility in totalitarian regimes and the Kantian formulation of human freedom in relation to necessity. I have argued that Arendt turned both to the faculty of thinking and that of

willing in order to establish human responsibility, given the pervasiveness of evil. The Nuremberg trials were the first attempt to deal with individual perpetrators and to put a human face on what Arendt (2003: 241) calls the desk-murderers by establishing responsibility and criminal guilt. Furthermore, Arendt hoped the Eichmann trial would help to establish in actuality universal responsibility; i.e. individuals rather than states would be held responsible under international law (Fine, 2001: 141). In understanding the argument Arendt uses to build the case for Eichmann's responsibility, we can see her formulation of the banality of evil in light different from that of the controversy.

Arendt identifies several types of responsibility and as it is her custom draws also a few distinctions. There is personal responsibility and collective responsibility; there is moral responsibility and political responsibility. Despite the link that exists between evil and the inability to think Arendt continues her analysis of the question of evil by discussing the faculties of willing and judging. Judgment becomes very important in Arendt's analysis because she already agreed with Nietzsche that moral and values have come to an end (Canovan, 1992: 174). Free will means choice, but how is the content of the choice established? The answer to this questions matters because even though evil is ultimately the choice of the individual, this choice is shaped through a certain reality that gives meaning to good and evil in the first place. Ultimately it seems that even though through the faculty of judgment deciding becomes something which begins with the individual, expands beyond him into the intersubjective realm through which the content of the decision is constituted it then comes back to the individual who bares the ultimate responsibility for the decision.

CHAPTER VI

THE FACULTY OF JUDGMENT

As tradition falls apart the possibility is created for new interpretations which do more justice to real world phenomena than older authoritative sources do. It also means that understanding is no longer a prerogative of the thinker but an activity in which all human beings need to engage in if we are to come to terms with a world where absolute evil can appear, i.e. it becomes a means of resisting and also surviving evil.⁹¹

In the final chapter of this thesis I would like to turn to Arendt's work on judgment. Judgment is a human faculty, just like thinking and willing; therefore it is something that every individual possess. What distinguishes judgment, however, is that it when it is operating it does so by taking into consideration the presence of others. For this reason Arendt calls it the most political of our faculties.

It is part of Arendt's style that her arguments begin by discrediting that has previously been said on a subject, therefore giving us a negative account of it. Only afterwards does she offer a positive account. Her discussion of the faculty of judgment, however, consists only of a positive account. The reason is that Arendt did not write the final book of the *Life of the Mind*, which was meant to be about judging. If she had written it, I think at this point it is safe to assume that we would have to wade through a

⁹¹ Since this has to do with what Arendt calls our faculty of judgment, I will elaborate this point in the last chapter of the thesis.

negative account of has been written about judging so far and how all this is wrong, before we be able to read her positive account.

In chapter 3 we saw that the concept that underlies Arendt's theory of action is freedom as the ability to make new beginnings. In the essay "Understanding and Politics" (2005a: 321) Arendt tells us that judgment is the other side of political action. As a faculty that is the most political of them all, it has to do with freedom. Yet this is not the freedom do something new; judgment does not initiate anything. But it formulates a story and gives meaning to what has happened. There is freedom in judgment, as we will see. This is the freedom to decide; to choose between alternatives. This is the notion of freedom as a consequence of the practice of free will. While under the heading of free will this freedom is completely individualistic, in Arendt's analysis it is transformed and becomes political because it is the freedom through which we take sides and also become responsible even when we are not the actors.

The logic of the freedom that operates in Arendt's theory of judgment helps us see the link between Arendt's theory of the life of the mind and that of the life of action. The relation between these two lives remains problematic. Beiner (1989: 93) and Bernstein (1986:221) have both emphasized the contradiction between thinking and acting that is presented by Arendt's theory of judgment. If judging is the political faculty *par excellence* and it is shared by both the actor and the spectator, does this mean action is not unique?

6.1. Evil and Judgment

The exercise of the faculty of judging can come to our aid in ordinary as well as extraordinary times. We may judge as actors *in* the public space or as spectators *of* the public space, but what matters most is that we have a duty to judge, if we are to resist political evil. The scholarship that has developed on Arendt's work has focused on the dichotomy between actor and spectator and on the conundrums it creates for Arendt's thought. I argue that considered from the perspective of resisting evil, Arendt's writings on judgment possess a greater sense of unity than previously acknowledged in the literature. My second argument is that the coherence of Arendt's reflections on judgment becomes visible when we looked at it from the concept of the new. The possibility of something new makes Arendt write a triumphant rather than a despairing ending when is talking about absolute evil in *The Origins of Totalitarianism*. The new is a particular event, and this is the specialty of the faculty of judgment. The new is what freedom produces; it can be either good or evil. This points out once more to the importance of judgment, the faculty which helps us to cope in the face of evil. Nonetheless, Arendt's proposed solution remains still problematic.

Judging is the faculty concerned with telling right from wrong. In order to form the core of her argument about this faculty Arendt turns to Kant, specifically to his concept of judgment. This is a counterintuitive move. After all, for Kant the ability to tell right from wrong falls under the sphere of practical reason and it belongs to the sphere of morality. The guiding principles are universal and we act in such a way that the maxim of our acts can become a universal law. To understand her motive for turning to Kant we need to keep in mind arguments from Arendt's earlier works. Soon after the publication

of *The Origins* in 1951, Arendt states that our standards for moral judgment have collapsed and are no longer valid (Arendt, 1953b: 303-279; Arendt, 2005a: 310-313).

How do we bring side by side the study of how to judge beauty and art with the study of judging as survivors of two world wars? Adorno (1983: 34) notably claimed that writing poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric. “Literary sensibility is usually concerned with capturing meaning through imagery and narrative, according to a vision of beautiful; while philosophy by way of logic argument, aims at what is true. It was Hannah Arendt’s genius to combine the two modes” (Stern and Yarbrough, 1978: 378) After presenting the context for her problem, Arendt proceeds to ask: how do we judge when we do not have pre-existing standards to guide us anymore. Her answer is that our moral judgment predicament bears strong resemblance to that of the people concerned with aesthetic taste in the eighteenth century. The greatest difference is that our moral judgments have more perilous consequences. So she turns to Kant, who “was outraged that the question of beauty should be decided arbitrarily, without possibility of dispute and mutual agreement, in the spirit of *de gustibus non disputandum est*” (Arendt, 2003: 139). So in Arendt’s reading, *The Critique of Judgment* is Kant’s attempt to construct the grounds for generally valid aesthetic judgments that deal with the particular as particular (Arendt and Beiner, 1989: 13). Arendt herself is not interested in aesthetics, therefore Kant’s aesthetic problem and subsequent solution to it is reformulated by Arendt in the more general “How do I judge?” (Degryse, 2011: 349)

Arendt is engaging simultaneously with two intertwined issues but which we need to decouple in order to make sense for Arendt’s argument. The first is judgment that

can be generally valid and the second is the study of the particular as the particular, that is, without subsuming it in the general.

The issue of general validity for judgment after the collapse of commonly held standards is one that Arendt struggles through in the writings on judgment. She intentionally says “generally” rather than “universally” valid. For Arendt, the rules that guide Kant’s aesthetic judgment “are strictly limited in their validity to the human beings on earth,” as distinguished from his moral principles, which are valid for all intelligible beings and therefore have claims of universality. Arendt consciously restricts the validity of judgment to the people judging then and there. Eventually, the activity of judging matters more than the ultimate results such activity produces. In the course of her work Arendt proposes two solutions, which I will be discussing in this chapter, but we are still left with a few loose ends on this point.

I see the second issue, the appreciation of the particular as such, as closely related to Arendt’s argument of the new. Being new, bringing into the world something new is one of the characteristics she attributes to action. The new is not unconditionally good, but rather it is something that we have to look out for because otherwise we may miss it. Even before that, Arendt’s argued throughout *The Origins* is that totalitarianism is novel, consequently what we have known in the past about forms of government will not help us understand it. She insists that doing that will in fact be detrimental to our making sense of and dealing with it (Arendt, 2005a: 312). Hence, I think, her appreciation of Kant’s approach because it emphasizes the particular.

In this chapter I begin by discussing the subject of judging, that is, Arendt’s answer to the question who judges. Then I present the way in which the faculty of

judging operates; next I address the concerns about general validity and Arendt's way of dealing with them. In the last section I discuss the relation between the judgment and resisting evil by also taking into consideration the interpretative perplexities created by Arendt's account of the faculty of judgment.

6.2. Actors and Spectators

There are two separate positions from which one can judge. One is the actor, and the other is the spectator. The actor uses judgment to decide how to act in public life. In this sense, the judgment of the actor is the Greek *phronesis*, the insight of how to act in the public realm. Arendt tells us that the actor's capacity to judge is a political capability and it involves the ability to see things from the standpoint of all the people who are present in the act not only one's own. Therefore "judgment may be one of the fundamental abilities of man as a political being insofar as it enables him to orient himself in the public realm." Moreover, "in the common world these are insights that are virtually as old as articulated political experience" (Arendt, 1993: 221). In the secondary literature this has been identified as the Aristotelian perspective (Yar, 2000; Arendt, and Beiner, 1989:104).

The judgment of the spectator resembles the act of the historian. Through judgment spectators recover the meaning of the past, but also become authors because in

formulating their judgment they create narratives. This is also how they reconcile themselves with tragedy.⁹²

This version of judgment is closer to Kant's aesthetic judgment, which Arendt adapts to moral and political judgment. In Arendt's reading, the Kantian spectator forms on judgment of what she witnesses, compares this formulation with the possible opinions of others in a process called enlarged thinking, and only then shares it publicly.

The spectator is a story teller because even though the actor may know "the principles that inspired their acts," they do not know "the meaning of the story which eventually was to result from them" (Arendt, 1990a: 82). Thus it is the spectator the attributes meaning to action.

Passerin D' Entreves (2002) has been argued is that Arendt is operating with two different models of judgment: one particular and context bound (Aristotelian) and the other universalist (Kantian). Arendtian politics pulls our attention almost exclusively on actors. However, when discussing judgment, if we focus too much on the perspective of the actor we fail to see the importance of the spectators. We risk to miss the "fundamental insight that whatever appears is there to be seen, that the very concept of appearance demands a spectator, and that therefore to see and to behold are activities of the highest rank" (cited in Arendt, 2003: 140).

⁹² In the essays "Isak Dinesen: 1885-1963" Arendt tells us that storytelling "reveals meaning without committing the error of defining it" and "brings consent and reconciliation with things as they really are" (1995:105). This reconciliation refers to making peace with the human condition, the human affairs and not destiny. Recourse to "narrative" would actually have brought Arendt closer to the modes of thought with which she explicitly aimed to break. Buckler underscores: "Arendt's 'storytelling' amounts to nothing resembling a general, confirming narrative and rather consists in the fragmented deployment of particular narrative for purposes of exemplifications that provoke and provide matter for ongoing reflection"(46). In sum, it is crucial not to use these terms "narrative" and "storytelling" interchangeably as some of this earlier work tended to do (Disch, 2014: 365).

Let us look at how the actor and the spectator judge. The analysis of judgment from the perspective of the spectator helps us to see the relation between action and judgment. Arendt uses the metaphor of genius also adopted by Kant. Action is like the work of genius in that it is rare and it brings about something new and unexpected. However just as we need taste in order to be able appreciate genius, so we need judgment to be capable of recognize and acknowledge action. "Genius is required for the production of art works, while, for judging them, for deciding whether or not they are beautiful objects, "no more" (we would say, but not Kant) is required than taste" (Arendt and Beiner. 1989: 63). Arendt goes on to praise the spectator further by saying:

The faculty that guides this communicability is taste, and taste or judgment is not the privilege of genius. The condition sine qua non for the existence of beautiful objects is communicability; the judgment of the spectator creates the space without which no such objects could appear at all. The public realm is constituted by the critics and the spectators, not by the actors or the makers (Arendt and Beiner. 1989: 63).

Analyzing the judgment of the spectator also helps us to see in a new light the relation between thinking and judging. Thinking is commonly considered the territory of philosophers. Arendt has nothing but praise for Kant who notices "that it is truly marvelous and remarkable: "how little difference there is between the learned and the ignorant in judging, while there is the greatest difference in making"" (Arendt and Beiner. 1989: 63). For Arendt it is important to break this stereotype, so she emphasizing the difference between the spectator and the philosopher. When the spectator judges she inhabits a plural space and is fully engaged with human affairs. The philosopher is after the truth and so she withdraws from the world of human relationships. Philosophy, Arendt tells us, is by nature a solitary activity. One of the greatest dangers Arendt sees in the activity of philosophy is that it can lead to the loss of *sensus communis*. The

philosopher in treating from the world does no longer feel at home upon her return. Feeling at home for Arendt means that the world becomes a meaningful place and this understanding is shared with others. Philosopher's search for truth impedes her from being able to deal with the world. In fact she becomes alienated to the point of becoming impatient with the contingencies that mark worldly affairs and develops a penchant for tyrants (Arendt, 1971). It is for this reason that thinking cannot be the prerogative of a certain group. Secondly, thinking has serious implication for politics, the first of which being the concept of representation (Arendt, 2002: 734).

Witnessing the Eichmann trial is the instigator of Arendt's work on the faculties of thinking, willing and judging. As we saw in the previous chapter Eichmann's case presents several challenges chief among which Arendt identifies the absence of thinking, i.e. to stop and thinking about what one is doing and the lack of motive in doing something, the lack of desire and intention to do evil (Arendt, 1978a: 4-5). This prompts Arendt to investigate the relation between the problem good and evil and our faculty for telling right and wrong. She asks the question: could "the habit of examining whatever happens to come to pass or to attract attention, regardless of results and specific content, could this activity be among the conditions that make men abstain from evil-doing or even actually "condition" them against it?" (Arendt, 1978a: 5).

Thoughtlessness the inability to reflect, to think freely and critically about one's deeds and to take into consideration the point of view of others become for Arendt the qualities of the true mark of evil in the 20th century. Thus *Life of the Mind* is Arendt endeavor to explore the kinds of mental activity that protect us against such evil and condition us to abstain from evil-doing. Throughout the first two volumes of *Life of the*

Mind she hints that the answers are in the last part called *Judging*. Based on this statement, I propose to look at Arendt's writings with a particular focus on 'judgment' in order to understand what she has to say about resisting evil. Even though Arendt never got to write her full account of the faculty of judging because she passed away while she was working on it,⁹³ comments and arguments about judging are scattered however through all of Arendt's work.

Arendt is unequivocal in claiming that everyone has the duty to judge. This is all the more important for the sphere of politics, where "one constantly has to act and therefore constantly has to make judgments, it is indeed altogether correct in a practical sense and more advantageous to reach any judgment and to pursue any course of action than not to judge and not to act at all" (Arendt, 2005a: 293).

By saying this she is going against the tradition that attributes judging a particular group of people. For the Greeks exercising political judgment was the privilege of citizens engaged in politics. *Phronesis* is the virtue of having political insight and being able to conduct oneself accordingly in the public space. In modern times, she identifies three impediments on the path of exercising the faculty of judging: the first is the loss of our standards of judgment, the yardstick for telling what is right and what is wrong. The second is the reluctance of people to judge in the face of social possibilities. To that effect she says: "Not to judge and not to act at all is a condition devoutly desired by many in the modern world" (Arendt, 2005a: 293). Part of Arendt's analysis of the modern times is argument that the loss of meaning seen in modern society means that the individual

⁹³ What we know of Arendt's take on judgment is from her mentioning of this concept in her other works and from the lecture notes called *Lectures on Kant's Political Philosophy (KLPP)* published by her former student, Ronald Beiner.

becomes more vulnerable to apodictic judgments since this is the kind of judgment that offers some comfort where everything else feels arbitrary (291-2). This is how in 1945 Arendt explains Hitler's charisma.

The awareness of the social possibilities that the modern inability to judge offered, and the ability to exploit them, were supported by the vastly more telling insight that in the modern world's chaos of opinion the normal mortal is yanked about from one opinion to another without the slightest understanding of what distinguishes the one from the other. ...Hitler's real superiority consisted in the fact that under any and all circumstances he had an opinion and that his opinion always fit perfectly into his over-all "philosophy" (Arendt, 2005a: 293).

Besides the confusion associated with plurality of alternatives, the third impediment is prejudice that "a man in some little village [cannot] assess the vital questions that concern entire continents" (Arendt, 2005a: 293). This line of argument was used by Hitler as well and Arendt thinks that it had a great impact in Germany because it was superimposed by the logic of job specialization associated with effective production. One has to be the master of a job in order to say anything meaningful about it. All these ideas occur in the book review entitled "At the table with Hitler" written in 1951-2. In the third impediment to judgment Arendt is already formulating her position against the widespread claim that judgment is a matter of knowledge. In Arendt's understanding knowledge resembles technical capability. On the other hand judgment is a "purely human activity" and "has always had to do with questions of right and wrong" (Arendt, 2005a: 293). I will come back to this point later in this chapter. For now let us focus on the subject that judges.

6.3. Taste and Common Sense

The faculty of judging operates following these steps: an object is sensed, we imagine the representation of this object when it is absent, we then respond to this representation with pleasure or displeasure, and finally reflect on this pleasure or displeasure with either approbation or disapprobation, this depending on the community sense. In other words, the faculty of judgment performs reflectively by communicating its pleasure or displeasure of the pleasure or displeasure caused by the representation of the object we sensed.

Similar reflective or recoiling operations are performed by the faculty of thinking, the two-into-one when we have a silent dialogue between me and myself. And also by the faculty of willing which in Arendt's analysis has to resolve the self-contraction expressed in the form of I-will and I-nill in the face of every decision. However, the reflective operation of judging is different because it is plural. The reflective step in judging involves others. The initial pleasure or displeasure we experience is then communicated to others we imaginatively make present in our minds. This plurality constitutes the community that serves as our reference point. Kant called the process through which we are able to imagine the standpoints of others enlarged mentality. Therefore, judging involves an internal public space where we compare our judgment with the possible judgment of others made present in our imagination and attempt to see how it looks from their standpoint (Young-Bruehl, 1982b: 295). I share with others my judgment in the hope that they will see it the way I do, "I woo the agreement of everyone else" (Arendt and Beiner, 1989: 72). This is what gives my judgment validity, a point which I will elaborate in detail later on in this chapter.

Following Kant, Arendt derives the initial workings of the faculty of judging from the sense of taste. This is counterintuitive because we would expect judgment to have to do with reason. Arendt makes it very clear that this is not the case.

Judgment is not practical reason; practical reason "reasons" and tells me what to do and what not to do; it lays down the law and is identical with the will, and the will utters commands; it speaks in imperatives. Judgment, on the contrary, arises from "a merely contemplative pleasure or inactive delight [untätiges Wohlgefallen]" (Arendt and Beiner, 1989: 15).

After dismissing outright the commands of reason as possible grounds for judgment, Arendt explains why it is taste and smell, specifically, and not the other senses that resemble the operating preliminary mode of judging. Taste is judgment by comparison rather than by rules (Arendt, 2002: 765).

A judgment of taste discriminates not by immediate sensation but upon reflection. In addition, these two senses are incommunicable; cannot be related to other people immediately like something that is seen, i.e. as a demonstrable fact and cannot be expressed in words at all (Arendt and Beiner, 1989: 64). Why should the judgment of right and wrong be based on these two private senses? Arendt raises the question but does not give us a direct answer. These two senses "are discriminatory by their very nature," claims Arendt, and "only these senses relate to the particular *qua* particular" (Arendt and Beiner, 1989: 66). They do not sense an object but a sensation, therefore they are subjective and the most private of senses (66). This is important because it means the first step of the process of judging is both idiosyncratic and discriminating, in that it begins inside the person and deals with one particular thing in its particularity. The second step is called imagination. This creates a distance from the sensed object and the immediate feeling we have of it, because it involves making present what is absent. In imagination,

the object is no longer out there but becomes and internalized. In this distance from direct sensation we become able to reflect on the feeling of pleasure or displeasure which is not provoked by our sensing of the object by our mental representation of it. This is the step that prepares us for the operation of reflection, which is the act of judging as such.

The distance, the removal of the object from our senses, establishes the conditions for impartiality (Arendt and Beiner, 1989: 67). For Arendt, impartiality equals the enlarged mind, which means “comparing our judgment with the possible rather than the actual judgment of others and by putting ourselves in the place of every other man” (43). This is made possible by the faculty of imagination. The others are made present in our minds by the force of imagination, and this for Arendt means that “imagination moves in a space that is potentially public” (43).

In a final step, we reflect on our feeling of pleasure or displeasure by comparing it to the possible judgments of others. “I judge as a member of this [human] community and not as a member of the supersensible world, perhaps inhabited with beings endowed with reason but not same sense apparatus” (Arendt and Beiner, 1989: 68). This is common sense. This is the sense that allows us to communicate to others something that originally is incommunicable. This sixth sense, Arendt calls it, allows us to share with others in a form that they would understand what we have judged. What we are communicating is not our sensation of the world, rather our opinion of that experience. That is why judgment is something very personal that becomes public. What we express is our approbation or disapprobation of the pleasure or displeasure we have felt. How do we choose between approbation and disapprobation? The criterion is communicability, being able to share it with others. And the standard of deciding is common sense.

Common sense is the sixth sense that brings harmony to the other five senses and that makes us fit into the world that we share with others. Two clarifications are needed: ‘common’ does not mean ordinary but rather something that is shared, that comes into being by being shared with others. ‘Sense’ also has a double meaning. For Arendt, it is both an extra sense to be added on the top of the other five, and also it means meaning. In other words, common sense is the meaning shared by a community. The community from which we draw the sense we use to share our opinions with others is not necessarily the physical community in which we live. This is an instance of the difference between actor and spectator. The actor is involved in the act and if she is to act in concert with others, only they can constitute the community that serves as point of reference. The spectator is handicapped in not being able to express and disclose herself in action, but has the advantage of choosing the community with which she will side. To support her argument, Arendt cites Cicero and Master Eckhart to say that judgment also acts like the faculty of will, the arbiter. But it does so in choosing with whom I side. She is not talking about the common sense, as the common understanding that prevails in my current community in this particular time. By choosing with whom I want to belong, whose company I want to share, I can transcend the actual physical community. Hence the relevance of Cicero’s quote: “I prefer before heaven to go astray with Plato rather than hold true views with his opponents” (Arendt, 1993: 224). This argument becomes all the more salient against the background of morality during totalitarian rule.

To sum up, the perception of taste is incommunicable. What we can communicate is whether we are pleased or displeased by it. Similarly to taste, judgment is about making such claims and expressing our opinions to others. How are we able to

communicate to others? We do it through common sense. Arendt's analysis of Eichmann may help us think more concretely about the theoretical points presented above. Arendt tells us at length about Eichmann's reactions to the sights he saw during his visits of the killing centers in Eastern Europe. He felt physically ill, could not stand it, had to leave (disappear is the word Arendt uses). This episode points to Arendt that Kant was right when he said the opposite of beauty is not ugly, but rather disgust. Eichmann was feeling disgust at the horrors he was witnessing. He struggles against his own sense of disgust – he tells his superiors that he cannot handle such views justifying his reaction by saying that he is not a soldier and has never been fighting in the front. Once he is back in his office everything was back to the usual. Eichmann interrupted the activity of judging. And he had a twofold justification for this: 1- the killing centers and the physical elimination of the Jews were express orders of the Fuhrer; 2- no one else was objecting to them, not even his social betters to whom he was willing to defer. “As Eichmann told it, the most potent factor in the soothing of his conscience was the simple fact that he could see no one, no one at all, who actively was against the Final Solution” (Arendt, 1977: 116). So what we see here is that Eichmann never began the reflective operation of judging. His faculty of imagination was not even engaged. He suppressed his feelings of disgust and dismissed them as a weakness. As his chosen community from which he derived common sense, Eichmann had decided to be with other people that were as law abiding as him.

When we are judging without pre-existing standards, as Arendt claims we are doing after the breakdown of our standards of judgment and moral codes, then attempting to derive a rule from what we know to apply to a particular case is futile. So how is

judgment at all possible when we do not have a yardstick? Since “I cannot judge one particular by another particular; in order to determine its worth, I need a *tertium quid* or a *tertium comparationis*, something related to the two particulars and yet distinct from both” (Arendt and Beiner, 1989: 76). Arendt’s solution is that we can be guided by examples from history. As Disch has pointed out “Arendt aims to excavate examples and instances from the past not as authoritative models whose purpose would be to govern conduct in the present. Rather, they are to spark thinking about present events” (Disch, 2014: 363).

She refers to Jesus, St. Francis and Achilles. I argue that Arendt is saying that we need to preserve the extraordinary good and evil because they serve as the third measure, the one that establishes intersubjective validity.

6.4. Thinking, Willing, Judging

The faculty of thinking provides us with the examples that the faculty of judging may be able to use for guidance. Thinking deals with “invisibles,” i.e. mental representations of absent things, and always tends to generalize. The faculty of judging, while also working with mental representations, deals the particular, i.e. things that are “close at hand.”

Thinking and judging are closely interrelated because “judging is the by-product of the liberating effects of thinking.”⁹⁴ The translation of thinking into judging is of

⁹⁴ “If thinking-the two-in-one of the soundless dialogue- actualizes the difference within our identity as given in consciousness and thereby results in conscience as its byproduct, then judging, the by-product of the liberating effect of thinking, realizes thinking, makes it manifest in the world of appearances, where I

crucial importance, says Arendt, because judging serves to actualize thought. Thus thinking is the precondition for judging, it is the ability to tell right from wrong. Thought that is no longer “invisible” and is general is not knowledge but “it is the ability to tell right from wrong, beautiful from ugly. *And this, at the rare⁹⁵ moments when the stakes are on the table, may indeed prevent catastrophes, at least for the self*” (Arendt, 2003: 193; emphasis added). When thinking fails to function, as was the case for Eichmann, then other forms of guidance take over. These include but are not limited to truth, necessity, the law, or even Fuhrer’s will (Young-Bruehl, 1982: 303).

We already saw in the previous chapter that the exercise of the will is what individualizes us, i.e. what makes us distinct from others. At the same time the faculty of the will produces “an ‘enduring I’ that directs all particular acts of volition” and thus “it creates the self’s *character* and therefore was sometimes understood as the *principium individuationis*, the source of the person’s specific identity” (Arendt, 1978b: 195). In other words, I do not know who I am before I act and in acting I disclose myself to myself as well as to the others (Kalyvas, 2004:336). “The basic problem of the will is that willing itself provides no standards for right or wrong, as thinking provides the standard of non-contradiction” (Arendt, 2002: 774).

In her Thinking Book Arendt (2002: 767- 8) writes:

Against freedom as a phenomenon of the will – the choice between good and evil, as if they are substances, - Freedom as “initium” – to begin something. From the capacity to choose comes the capacity to judge, the capacity to differentiate, to tell right from wrong. Wickedness is a

am never alone and always too busy to be able to think. The manifestation of the wind of thought is not knowledge; it is the ability to tell right from wrong, beautiful from ugly. And this, at the rare moments when the stakes are on the table, may indeed prevent catastrophes, at least for the self” (Arendt, 2003: 193).

⁹⁵ Dianna Taylor (2002) claims that those moments are not necessarily rare. Dark times are long and pervasive. Does rare refer to the case in an individual’s life and dark times to a more general period of time?

phenomenon of the will. Evil is a phenomenon of the lack of the faculty of judgment. Since the faculty of judgment reflects on others [takes other into consideration], it is only an evil man who cannot judge, cannot tell the difference, who is capable of everything. Judging for yourself depends on thinking, as in thinking the difference, in so far as they together actualize the innate plurality. Wickedness takes others into consideration, has a conscience etc. See Richard III. ... Evil in the will: if it was missing there would be no freedom (Schelling).⁹⁶

This quote illustrates the relation that exists between thinking and judging because it is thinking that prepared the ground for judging. However, thinking in itself does not contain a plurality. Arendt rejects Jaspers' idea that the internal dialogue between me and myself is the most elemental version of plurality. And yet, Arendt believes that there is an innate plurality in us. This comes from the faculty of judgment's ability to imagine and see the world from the perspective of others. Thus, someone who is incapable of judging is someone who is incapable of seeing the world from the perspective of others. As the case of Eichmann shows, such a person is also capable of the most extreme evil.

6.5. The Validity of Judgment

The faculty of judging poses a conundrum from Arendt. Judging concerns making sense of the single event or act that induced us to think and form an opinion of it. So judging deals with the particular. How do you judge the particular without losing its significance in the process, given that we are striving to reach a generally accepted position?

For Arendt, judging appeals to universality without making claims to truth criteria and without subsuming the particular under the general rule. In other words, judgment

⁹⁶ Arendt is writing about Schelling's *The Nature of Human Freedom*.

ascends from the particular to the general, but not to reach validity (Beiner, 1989: 104). The judgment Arendt has in mind when she is referring to politics or morality is reflective judgment, the kind of judgment that operates when general categories cannot be found. Reflective judgment is contrasted with determinative judgments. An example of determinative judgment is the moral judgment as we see in Kant. In that case the individual appeals to a universal maxim and derives from it the principle according to which she is going to act. For Arendt, after the experience of totalitarianism we can no longer talk about general standards of judgment. Like Kant when he was working on aesthetic judgment, Arendt is asking how can we make objective claims in the absence of a general law and how can we make others agree with our claim.

Arendt is opposed those who say that we have no right judge. To Scholem, who claimed that we do not have the necessary perspective and objectivity to make a historical judgment about the Holocaust, she replied saying: "I do believe that we shall only come to terms with the past if we begin to judge and to be frank about it" (Arendt, 2007: 468).

Arguments about perspective and objectivity regard the validity of our judgments. Judgment is prone a double contingency. It deals with the particular and as such is bound by the circumstances of the case. It also depends on the group or community with which we have elected to share this judgment. Arendt is emphatic that judgment binds only the people who willing to think critically about the particular and thus to engage in the activity of judging.

This creates a tension between judgment and claims to universal or general validity. For Arendt, this does not mean that a judgment cannot have objective validity. Arendt's definition of objective validity is impartiality as understood by the Greeks. This

kind of objectivity does not rely on an external, superior position to grant to it validity but rather becomes valid when several points of view – preferably opposing ones – are taken into account. Impartiality is earned through enlarged thought or enlarged mentality. It involves taking the standpoint of others. It is not empathy because it does not presume to know what actually goes on in the other person's mind. Such a presumption would raise the difference between persons. Instead what happens is that I think my own thoughts from the place of someone else. In other words I strive to see what the world looks like from this new place. Impartiality according to Arendt involves putting different perspectives in relation to another without the need of an external position that oversees everything. Hence, her emphasis on the argument that judgment is valid only for the people involved and no one else.

In the course of her writings Arendt suggests two validity tests for judgment. Let us begin by looking at the tests.

In *Between Past and Future* Arendt argues that judgment is valid because it carries with it the possibility of coming to some agreement. How do we judge? Not by trying to be consistent or in agreement with the self - as we would do in Kantian and Socratic morality – but rather by thinking in the place of everyone else. This is called enlarged mentality. By this Arendt means that the thinking process active in judging, i.e. when I am quietly making up my mind, is an anticipation of communication with others with whom I must come to some agreement. This potential agreement gives judgment its specific validity and it is where the power of judgment rests.

This argument has inspired Habermas and his followers, but it has also been cause for frustration. The posited potential agreement⁹⁷ refers to the intersubjective field, the internal public space inhabited by me and others whose points' of view I keep in mind while reaching my judgment. By this move Arendt has made judgment dependent on other human beings. This is something that Habermas, the sociologist, appreciates very much. However, in his attempt to find a firm ground for intersubjectivity he goes one step further and makes reason and reasonableness as criteria for legitimate participation in the communicative public sphere. For Arendt, arguments that base their legitimacy in the force of reason spell doom for the public sphere because reason, a close relative of truth, dictates; its path is one and only; and it is the archenemy of plurality in human affairs. Arendt repeatedly states that political judgment cannot be truth claims – Habermas objects and accuses Arendt of depriving the realm of politics of rational processes of validation (Habermas, 1977). Truth, with its stress on the singular and absolute, poses a vital danger to human plurality and as a result to politics. Plurality is the only way through which freedom can appear. In politics by disclosing arguments and opinions the person reveals who she is, discloses herself through language. Arendt is adamant that truth claims compromise *humanitas*, the core that gives humans their dignity. Judgment has to be free and cannot be compelled by reason.

Judgment, differently from thinking does aim at consistency. The rule of not contradicting oneself is the rule Aristotle identified as the first principle of thinking, Arendt tells us. Kant called it the rule of consistency and applied to thinking but also extended it to moral judgment. Benhabib attributes Kant's position to Arendt and sustains

⁹⁷ "...the judging person as Kant says quite beautifully can only "woo the consent of everyone else" *in the hope of coming to an agreement with him eventually*" (Arendt [1961] 1993: 222; emphasis added).

that by emphasizing harmony Arendt is making “being the home with ourselves” the basis for validity which in turn means that the validity of judgment is a matter of idiosyncrasies of individual psyche (Benhabib, 1988: 45). I think this is a misreading of Arendt, because on this point I believe Arendt’s argument is that while thinking is the faculty that makes us at home with ourselves on moral issues, judgment makes at home in the world.⁹⁸ The validity of my judgments does not depend on self-consistency but rather on being able woo the consent of others and/ or being able to communicate my opinion publicly.

Arendt insists on establishing judgment’s independence from truth, whether it is scientific or philosophical, and even from beauty. Therefore, for Arendt, judgment also is not about knowledge. It does not add to our previous knowledge of the world. Beiner criticizes Arendt and agrees with Habermas by adding that excluding knowledge from political judgment “renders one incapable of speaking of 'uninformed' judgment and of distinguishing differential capacities for knowledge so that some persons may be recognized as more qualified, and some as less qualified, to judge” (Arendt and Beiner, 1989: 136). Zerilli objects to this criticism by arguing that in Arendt’s analysis opinion formation and judgment cannot be a question of epistemology, which would deal with the application of concepts to particulars and rational adjudication of knowledge (Zerilli, 2005:166).

Judgment must not be coerced. To this effect she cites Cicero who said: “In what concerns my association with men and things, I refuse to be coerced even by truth, even by beauty” (Arendt, 1993: 225). You have to be persuaded, consent has to be wooed –

⁹⁸ Arendt attributes this duty to common sense, one of the founding elements of judgment (Arendt and Beiner, 1989: 70).

says Kant, as quoted by Arendt. In this sense, Arendt finds parallels between the activity of judging and taste.

The activity of taste decides how this world, independent of its utility and our vital interests in it, is to look and sound, what men will see and what they will hear in it. ... For judgments of taste, the world is the primary thing, not man, neither man's life nor his self. Taste judgments, furthermore, are currently held to be arbitrary because they do not compel in the sense in which demonstrable facts or truth proved by argument compels agreement (Arendt, 1993: 222).

Arendt sees a parallel between Kant's argument for earning the consent of others and the persuading and convincing speeches that were part of the repertoire of the Greek citizen. "Persuasion ruled the intercourse of the citizens of the polis because it excluded physical violence; the philosophers knew that it was also distinguished from another non-violent form of coercion, the coercion by truth" (Arendt, 1993: 222-3).⁹⁹ By taking on Kant's version of taste as the practice of judgment Arendt can extend the Greek notion of *phronesis*, the practical wisdom associated with the political realm and distinguished from the wisdom of the philosophers. *Phronesis* is the concept of judgment which existed among the Greeks and it refers to the practical wisdom that characterized statesmen. Judgment is no longer the prerogative of the active citizen. The citizen who is not active in a real public space can practice her judgment as a world spectator. Indeed she is expected to, because as we saw in the reply to Scholem and as Arendt stresses in her essays collected in *Responsibility and Judgment* we all have a duty to judge. Through the activity of judging is we develop and exercise our principles, so that when confronted with evil we do not say "I have not made up my mind." The people who resisted evil

⁹⁹ Consider the following dialogue between Socrates and Agathon. "I cannot refute you, Socrates." "Ah no," is Socrates' answer. "Say rather, dear Agathon, that you cannot refute the truth, for Socrates is easily refuted" (Hamilton, 1956: 81).

during the Nazi times were those who had principles and said “I cannot” rather than “I should not” (Arendt, 2003: 78-9).

Let us look at the second form the validity test takes, which is communicability. This concept implies a community which one can address. The community listens and can be listened to (Arendt and Beiner, 1989: 40). In the *Lectures* the Arendtian political community is not based on people who agree but rather people to keep talking to each other. We see Arendt drop the references to agreement to put more emphasis on communicability. The validity of judgments of taste, like that of the political judgments, relies on “general communicability,” that is, on their ability to communicate to others (Arendt and Beiner, 1989: 40). Arendt tells us that communicability is the validity test of truth in social sciences and human affairs. It goes hand in hand with publicity, the freedom not only to think but also to make public orally or in writing your ideas to share them with others (19). Arendt quotes Kant to say: “For it is a natural vocation of mankind to communicate and speak one's mind, especially in all matters concerning man as such” (40).

The notion of publicity is implied in communicability. This is relevant to Arendt's concern with evil also through its opposite, secretiveness. Arendt asserts “in politics, as distinguished from morals, everything depends on *“public conduct”*” (Arendt and Beiner, 1989: 18).¹⁰⁰ She calls publicity one of the core principles of Kant's political thinking and sustains that in Kant's understanding evil thoughts are by definition secret.¹⁰¹ But

¹⁰⁰ In Arendt's reading the trademark of Enlightenment is “the public use of one's reason” which means the freedom to speak and publish has become as important as the freedom to think. So for Kant, says Arendt, political freedom constantly and consistently refers to the ability “to *make public use of one's reason at every point*” (Arendt and Beiner, 1989: 39).

¹⁰¹ Hence her interpretation of Kant's phrase “race of devils” as the people who are inclined to exempt themselves from the laws they wish everyone else to abide. These people would not publicly ask to be

how do you judge publicly while subject to a political system that not only does not encourage criticism but expressively forbids it? Kant addressed this issue with reference to the public use of reason, which Arendt argues is restricted by Kant's own claim that a person should make use of reason "as a scholar before the reading public" (Arendt and Beiner, 1989: 39). The qualification "as a scholar" is important to Arendt because it implies that the community of reference is not the citizenry, who have to be law-abiding and therefore cannot be critical if this is forbidden by the law. In Kant's example: the officer in service has to obey orders and cannot point out the military mistakes he thinks are being made, but when he makes use of reason publicly he operates like the scholar, who in Arendt's reading of Kant, is a world citizen and as such is entitled to make remarks on the errors of her government and lay them for public judgment. This for Kant is how one can resolve the tension of being a loyal and law-abiding subject without giving up on the exercise of reason. In the Eichmann case, Arendt explicitly argues that Eichmann is not guilty because he was obeyed the Nazi laws but because he refused to judge at all.

While we are judging and are about to decide on whether we approve or disapprove the criterion we use is communicability and "the standard of deciding about it is common sense" (Arendt and Beiner, 1989: 69) because "when one judges, one judges as a member of a community" (72). In judging we are trying to communicate it-pleases-or-displeases-me. This is a feeling that is private and would be incommunicable were it not for our appeal to *sensus communis* we share with others.

exempted because this would be against the common interest and they would be enemies of the people (Arendt and Beiner, 1989: 17).

Arendt goes on to say that this validity of judgments communicated to common sense is different from that of the scientific propositions because the former do not compel by reason or evidence. Common sense is also different from philosophy, because common sense sees the world as it is, philosophy turns it on its head.

In her former books Arendt compares common sense to Ariadne's red thread. Common sense helps us find the way in the common world just as the red thread helped Ariadne in Minotaur's cave. Common sense fits the particular and peculiar data "of our other senses into a world we inhabit together and share in common." Different from the other sense, like hearing or seeing, that function well enough when man is on his own, common sense needs other human beings because "in the human condition of plurality men check their particular sense data against the common data of others" (Arendt, Hannah. 2005b: 41). Given its nature, common sense operates in the domain of politics and morals.

6.6. Resisting Evil

Arendt's claim is that judgment can help us resist evil, at least at the individual level. How does judgment accomplish this? Here are several assertions that Arendt makes about the faculty of judging.

In order to function, judging needs the presence of other human beings. Arendt tells us that Kant called this condition the sociability of man, that is, "the fact that no man can live alone, that men are interdependent not merely in their needs and cares but in their highest faculty, the human mind, which will not function outside human society"

(Arendt and Beiner, 1989: 10). Arendt equates Kant's sociability with her concept of plurality, the fact that men rather than Man live on the face of the earth is the condition that makes possible the functioning of the faculty of judging. While thinking and willing refer to the interaction of the self with the self, judging takes into account the presence of others. This is why judgment is of "eminent political significance – that is, important for the political" (Arendt and Beiner, 1989: 14).¹⁰² Political evil destroys human plurality. Preserving plurality means fighting the *unifying* effect of political evil.

The activity of judging is empowering to us as human beings vis-à-vis the grand historical narratives. It restores our human dignity, and our *humanitas*, which Arendt defines as the integrity of a person as a person (Arendt, 1993: 224). This point stands in tension with the idea of progress in history. The faculty of judging is concerned with the particular as particular. This distinguishes it from the faculty of thinking which deals with our mental representation of what appears in the world, rather than directly with appearances (Arendt and Beiner, 1989: 3). By exercising the faculty of judgment we become masters of history, we are no longer bound by ideas of progress.

This means that we appreciate the particular for itself rather than for what it can lead to in the future. The concept of progress dismisses the particular as meaningless in itself, thus attributing meaning to it only in the context of the general. And yet the particular is the founding block of the general (Arendt and Beiner, 1989: 26). Moreover,

¹⁰² The self proclaimed aim of the lectures is to construct Kant's political theory for him and Arendt goes about doing it from a very unlikely text, *The Critique of Judgment*. It may be safe to say that this would never have occurred to Kant himself because what he understood from politics was not colored and shaped by the experience of totalitarianism, the way Arendt's understanding of politics is. She makes a point of going through works that have been accepted as Kant's political writings, the first ten of the thirteen lectures is dedicated to these works, in order to show that they are in fact lacking in what they have to say about politics. Only in the last three lectures we read more explicitly about the faculty of judgment. Consequently what we read in the lectures is a new approach to Arendtian politics explained in terms derived from Kant.

focusing on the particular may be the only way we recognize “the new” that enters the common world. The new can be either good or evil. And in both cases it is very important not to miss it.

Actors in actualizing their human potential bring about the new, but it is the actors that identify the new as such as give it meaning. Arendt tells us that newness is the realm of the historian, who is interested only with what happens once. Historian’s job is unlike that of the natural scientist’s who looks for patterns of ever-repeating events. However, as soon as she assigns this role to the historian, Arendt warns of the pitfalls and professional deformations a historian risks by insisting on causal explanations, i.e. explaining the new event by looking at the past. For Arendt actual meaning transcends the causes thus creating a “grotesque disparity between "cause" and "effect" in an event like the First World War” (Arendt, 2005a: 319). And in a classical Arendt move of setting things on their head, she executes what in pop culture is known as the Russian reversal:

Only when something irrevocable has happened can we even try to trace its history backward. The event illuminates its own past; it can never be deduced from it. Whenever an event occurs that is great enough to illuminate its own past, history comes into being. Only then does the chaotic maze of past happenings emerge as a story which can be told, because it has a beginning and an end (Arendt, 2005a: 319).

The problem of thinking causally and justifying the new by looking at the old is a theme to which Arendt returns repeatedly. In “Understanding and Politics” Arendt proposed solution is to turn to a political science that is not dominated by historical methods and categories (Arendt, 2005a: 321).

By definition history deals with the past, and because we already know how the story ends it is easy to think that this was inevitable. This logic makes the subject of history seem weak. According to Arendt, if we get to tell the story - this is what we do

when we judge – then we are no longer passive, but fully engaged with the event that we are narrating. This is how we assert the autonomy of our minds over events that came to pass.

By judging we take sides and assume responsibility for the acts done by the party with whom we side. We choose the company we keep. The activity of judging involves choosing a community, the audience to speak to and to listen to as well. This is why common sense, or *sensus communis*, transcends the real community in which we live and is based on the faculty of imagination. This is necessarily so, when we think of this point from the perspective of Eichmann, whose claim was that everyone in his actual community appeared to be law abiding and unquestioning of Fuhrer's orders. Arendt gives two examples: of Cicero who says "By God I'd much rather go astray with Plato than hold true views with these people" and of Meister Eckhart who is reported to have agreed with the statement that "I'd much rather be in hell with God than in heaven without Him." The point in both cases is that when we judge the objective criteria of truth are suspended and overridden by the subjective criterion of with whom we will side (Arendt, 2003: 110-111). This is what is meant by saying that in judging we choose the company we keep. The implication of this position for the question of evil is that we are indicted for what we do, but we are forgiven for who we are. Acts constitute and reveal who we are. Taking responsibility for acts, owning up to them constitutes us as persons. As we saw in the section on forgiveness, a person is forgiven, the act is not. The greatest evil is done by nobodies, says Arendt, because Nazi officials like Eichmann insisted that were not responsible for their acts- they had only followed orders. This is why we cannot forgive Eichmann, says Arendt. "By stubbornly remaining nobodies they prove

themselves unfit for intercourse with others who, good, bad, or indifferent, are at the very least persons” (Arendt, 2003: 111-2).

The question of plurality, which for Arendt is a political concept, is tied closely to the faculty of judgment. According to Zerilli (2005:165) we need to take account of plurality when we decide what will count as part of our commonly shared world. Judging is the faculty we use to do this because judgment reflects the plurality of ways in which we see and understand the world. Through judgment’s impartiality we are able to look upon, watch and form opinions as we reflect on human affairs. In this understanding of judgment we do not learn how to act or apply wisdom but rather how to take others into account (Arendt and Beiner, 1989: 58).

The faculty of judging is not only closely related to politics, as Arendt understands it, she also calls it the most political of our mental faculties. Again the criterion for Arendt is plurality. As we saw, the concepts she uses to explain this faculty are: sociability, by which she means judgment functions only under the condition of sociability, that is, men are dependent on their fellow human beings for their mental faculties; publicity, which means opinions shared with others through writing or speech; impartiality or enlarged thought, that is comparing our judgments with the possible rather than actual judgment of others by putting ourselves in the place of any other man; critical thinking or the activity of thinking that even though it functions in isolation, it works in a space that is potentially public because others are made present by the faculty of imagination and which is in principle anti-authoritarian (Arendt and Beiner, 1989: 43); communicability, which Arendt called the validity test of truth in social sciences and

human affairs. The faculty of judging allows us to navigate the common world and orient ourselves in the public realm (Arendt, 1993: 221).

Our common world consists of actors and spectators. By the common world Arendt means “the space in which things become public” (Arendt, 2005a: 20). We reveal who we are others and are seen; in turn we see as others disclose themselves also. Kalyvas argues that “For Arendt, the “touchstone of a free act is always our awareness that we could also have left undone what we actually did.” He continues, “Arendt admits that “Action in the sense of how men want to appear needs a deliberate planning ahead . . . choice becomes the starting point of the actions themselves.” Here Arendt revisits her notion of freedom as self-disclosure by inserting an element of volition that was lacking from the original formulation. One does not disclose one’s self in front of an audience without willing to do so. One must will to publicly reveal one’s self in order to decide to participate in” the public space (Kalyvas, 2004: 336).

Arendt aims to expand the political beyond the sphere of action (Arendt, 1993: 223). Arendt says that we have the duty to judge, and we do not need special knowledge or great intellectual powers to do so. Quite the opposite, being a learned person sometime can work at the disadvantage and impair your faculty of judgment. By de-intellectualizing judgment, she is asserting that judging is a faculty that has to be exercised by the common man and also the wise man.

What prevents the common man from thinking and judging? The Eichmann qualities: inability to think and refusing to judge. Eichmann is so scary to Arendt because his plight is all too common. No we are not all Eichmanns (Arendt refuses this when she is asked explicitly at a conference organized in her honor) but under the conditions of

modern society we are only steps away from becoming him. What prevents the philosopher from judging? The search for truth, which has always been the reason philosophers are not well tolerated and do not tolerate well themselves the city. But also our modern notions of history, objectivity, necessity and progress play significant parts.

Politics in the Arendtian sense appears rarely and those moments are to be treasured. Her approach to judgment would mean that they can more common and witnessed more often. It would mean that human dignity can be restored even under the modern conditions of consumerism and objection with the self rather than the common world. Asking whether the position of actor or spectator is superior is misleading and defeats the purpose of what Arendt was trying to do. Judging is valuable to Arendt because of the activity itself. In this sense judgment bears a strong resemblance to action. Judging well does not mean coming up with the best decision possible in the absolute. Judging is the activity, which when practiced long enough, can save from committing act which we would not be able to own up. I think Arendt, a self-professed great believer in Lessing's *selbstdenken*, would agree with my modification of Lessing's quote: "Judge wrongly, if you please, but in all cases judge for yourself."

CONCLUDING ANALYSIS

This study has argued for the interpretation of Hannah Arendt's conceptualizations of evil through notions of freedom. The basic argument has been that while we witness the appearance of the radicality of evil through the concept of freedom as new beginning, the banality of evil becomes apparent through the concept of the freedom of will. The relationship between these two conceptualizations of evil is far from consistent but this is also reflected in the problematic relation that exists between the two notions of freedom. I also argue that the linchpin that elucidates the relationship that exists between these two conceptualizations of evil is the reality of evil.

This study involves the reconstruction of a great thinker's accounts of evil and freedom. This task is challenging not only because of the inherent inconsistencies that each concept involves. Arendt was aware of the inconsistencies of the notion of freedom and tackles them directly on two separate works, the essay "What is Freedom" and the second volume of her *The Life of the Mind* – "Willing". We saw that she was also aware of the dissonance between her previously proposed notion radical evil and the latter "banality of evil." But she never wrote a full account in which she clearly defined either of these conceptualizations of evil or of the points of divergence and convergence. What has made my current task even more challenging has been the articulation of my position in a voice that is clearly distinct from that of Arendt. This is the greatest limitation of this study and I kindly ask my reader, when in doubt, to safely assume that what they are reading is attributable to me rather than to Arendt since this study is my reading of her body of work.

It is customary in the conclusion chapter to point out the contribution that the thesis makes to the already existing literature. I propose to accomplish this task by reiterating the arguments I have made in the thesis in relation to what has already been established by other scholars.

Radical has several meanings. What is radical about evil? Is it the fact that human beings are made superfluous? Is it the perversion of the law? These two positions are very different but also both are perfectly valid because Arendt's text allows for both these readings. The first position has been made famous by Richard Bernstein. The second, which in way is a more Kantian reading of Arendt has been proposed by Adi Ophir. My position is that radical evil is a perversion of the law of the earth, which states that human beings exist in plurality.

Arendt scholarship tends to treat the relation between the radicality and the banality of evil: there are those who argue for a consistency (Bernstein) and there are those who argue for an irreconcilable - two positions that are completely irreconcilable, a position of absolute inconsistency (Pitkin). I think that this distinction is valid, and so is the question of whether there is consistency or inconsistency in Arendt's accounts of evil. This is the kind of questions that helps us to sharpen the boundaries between the radicality and the banality of evil. But once we have formulated these two positions I think we should drop it; because insisting further on the subject of reconciliation or irreconciliation becomes a barrier in thinking rather than something that helps us think. The point I have reached in my formulation of these two accounts: when I say that radical evil is evil conceived as a force that does not create but destroys everything but as such is an absolute force and when I say that the banality of evil is absolute passivity; in both

cases we have to do with freedom. In the first case we are dealing with the exercise of freedom and in the other we are confronted with the refusal to exercise freedom; in both cases the linchpin is the notion of freedom, they both are the product of freedom. That is why I argue that in order to understand what Arendt has to say about evil we need to understand what she has to say about freedom.

Secondly, the relation between these two aspects of evil is in my opinion one of complementary opposites. They are constitutive of each other; they go together. They should not be thought independently of each other. The position of consistency/inconsistency does not help us because it perpetuates the binary thinking that prevents us to see the organic relationship that exists between these two aspects of evil. The radicality of evil appears only once the banality of evil becomes pervasive; the banality of evil would not present itself as a challenge to thinking if we did not know that it can transform and attempt to destroy human existence as we know it, i.e. pave the way to radical evil. They are interconnected, but this connection between them should not be read as a question of consistency/inconsistency in Arendt's thinking. This is the point when we transcend Arendt's writings and engage with the implications of her ideas for our understanding of the phenomenon of evil.

Arendt never formulated the relation that exists between radical evil and the banality of evil. She does not even formulate consist accounts of either the radicality or banality of evil. So in this thesis first I have constructed an account of the radicality of evil and then an account of the banality of evil. And my argument is that when we think of the relationship between the two- how they come together and where do they differ helps us only to the point of clarifying these two aspects of evil, but no further. Was

Arendt consistent? No she was not and furthermore she was aware of her inconsistency in thinking. She admits in her letter to Scholem that she was wrong, that evil is never radical but only extreme. She knows that she has changed her position. She knows that when she is talking about the banality of evil she is discussing a very different aspect of evil, she knows that she is dealing with a new account of evil.

Freedom has a very a positive connotation. When we read Arendt's work it is possible to see freedom as only the capacity for good. Freedom gives us politics, freedom is what makes us human beings. Freedom is not a possession, it is not something you hold. Freedom is a capacity, when we act we know that it exists, i.e. it unfolds and reveals who we are.

Freedom is also the capacity for evil. But good and evil exist together and we know them as such only in the moment in which they are revealed. We do not know beforehand. When freedom is exercised in the negative sense it appears as deficiency and deprivation. Freedom understood in the negative sense brings what Arendt has to say about evil, in this case the banality of evil, very close to the Augustinian tradition. There is an optimum point, and there you are good. If you go beyond that you become corrupt and the result is evil. If you are below this optimum point, you are deprived, underdeveloped, and the result is again evil. Evil is corruption, but it is also deprivation, not being good enough.

We need to think of the banality of evil in relation to freedom. This freedom is different however; it is not the freedom of beginning something new. Freedom constitutes the common ground between the radical and the banal aspect of evil. In order to understand these two different aspects and in turn the different accounts that results from

our understanding of them we need to see them in relation to freedom. This consistency gives us an impression of consistency, but this consistency is only superficial because the moment we begin to analyze the meaning of freedom we see that we are dealing with two very different things. In the first case we are dealing with the freedom to begin something new, and in the second case we are discussing the freedom of will. Freedom of the will is what individualizes us, it is what makes us a person, it distinguishes us from anyone else; it is also the freedom to decide between what is good and right. The decision is made between two already existing alternatives, thus this is not creating something new. Freedom understood as the exercise of will is controversial when considered in the light of Arendt's previous work on freedom. She acknowledges it and she seems to be doing so in order to dismiss it. Yes this understanding exists, but it belongs to the philosophers. This freedom is internal, it has to do with the individual and therefore is not and cannot be political. This freedom is not external. However, it can appear externally and when it does so it takes the form of sovereignty, freedom of will as general will in the Rousseauian sense. And this is the moment when things start going wrong in politics. When we begin to talk about general will we are suppressing the individual. We are creating something monistic and this brings us back to radical evil. The problem with radical evil is that it appears as monism that aims to suppress plurality.

But at the same time freedom is the *raison d'être* of politics. This contradiction in the formulation of freedom according to Arendt is the result of the perversion of the notion of freedom by theologians and philosophers. When the ancient Greeks thought of freedom they had in mind I can; from the Romans onward I can is forgotten and replaced with I will.

In this thesis I have also argued that we need to look at the banality of evil in relation to the freedom of will because this approach gives us a new perspective. So far the banality of evil has been interpreted in terms of the inability to think and as a failure of conscience. This interpretation is encouraged by Arendt's writings after Eichmann also. These two concepts are very important. Yes, Eichmann seems incapable of thinking and that is why he seems incapable of having an internal dialogue with himself and this is a failure of consciousness. When we interpret the banality of evil in relation of freedom of will however, we see why we cannot forgive Eichmann. Eichmann is not a person. By his own acts he refuses to be a person, by not thinking by not taking responsibility he refuses to become a person. If there is no person to forgive, forgiveness cannot take place and this we know from Arendt's writings in the Human Condition. We already saw this in the chapter on morality where I discussed the moral aspect of political action. Promises and forgiveness are the two criteria that bind political action. But the precondition for these two things to exist is that there is a doer, you can define someone, a person that does this.

Secondly, I am defining the banality of evil as effortless evil. Because these pre-existing choices that we eventually make, that we choose between are already there- and Arendt is aware of this, that's why my interpretation is justified. We function and exist in a prearranged social situation. In this sense evil becomes effortless. If doing evil is sanctioned by law, it is sanctioned by rules of morality and on top of that if you have an un-functioning conscience, then effortless evil becomes a straightforward matter. Just like sitting at the table and eating your food using a fork when you have been eating this way all your life. The banality of evil in Arendt's writing can have several meanings so it is

unclear what she exactly means by it. But I am choosing to interpret it to mean effortless evil because this interpretation sheds a new light on the reality of evil. The reality of evil becomes problematic in the notion of the banality of evil. It points out to the discrepancy that exists between radical evil and the banality of evil. The reason for it is the following: radical evil is evil that has a presence, it the result of a certain way of doing things; it aims to destroy plurality and this means that evil has a presence and is a force. It is destructive to is arouses our admiration, you look at it and you admire it. You admire it power and strength and decisiveness. It is attractive and it tempting. It is also evil as has been defined by the religious sources. The banality of evil on the other hand has nothing that inspires admiration. The image that Arendt paints of the evil that is banal is one of willful complete passivity. It impossible to admire someone does not own up to their deeds, who claim to have done only what they were told to do, who sees himself as a cog in the machine, who believes that they are a tool. You do not feel respect for someone like that. You do not admire someone like that. Moreover, when we look at how we define with the banality of evil, we always come up with negatives, we talk of the inability to think, failure of consciousness, effortless evil. It seems like we are going back to an Augustinian understanding of evil where evil is seen in terms of lack, in terms of deficiency. But what is Arendt doing? She writes Eichmann and depicts and analyzes his inability to think, and then she writes *The Life of Mind* where is discusses extensively how philosophers have misguided us into thinking that evil does not have a reality by defining it in terms of lack and deficiency. So it seems that she is doing exactly the same thing. So once evil is interpreted as a deficiency we are in fact doing away with its reality. In the analysis of radical evil it was about evil that has a strong physical presence,

and now she is negating the reality of evil. She is destroying the reality of evil with her new formulation. This would be a great inconsistency. On the one hand she would be fine with it. She admits openly that she has changed her mind and somewhere [the concept of history while discussing Marx] she says that great minds think in contradictory terms because they are not interested in being consistent with themselves, they are interested in tackling the real phenomena that are out there in the world. That's why these great minds are still helpful to us today; they are not talking to themselves, rather they are addressing issues that are very pertinent to us. These are issues that have been around for a long time and they give us new eyes on the same old thing. That's why we keep going back to them and is also what makes these great minds great. Not the consistency in their thinking but rather the fact that they engage with problem that are still valid today. So Arendt would be fine with saying I used to think of the subject like that and now I have to think of it like this. However, when we look at what she has to say about evil from the perspective of freedom and when we define the banality of evil as effortless evil that evil is being defined in negative terms but without denying the reality of evil. Effortless evil means that evil is out there in the world, evil exists in the world.

This interpretation is supported by the language she adopts in dealing with evil. She does not aim to defeat evil, conquer over evil once and for all. She does not think that an absolute triumph of the good is possible. In fact if someone comes to us and says I can conquer evil, I can deliver absolute victory over evil than we should be suspicious of this promise and can safely assume that there is something wrong going on there. We can see this throughout history. The example that Arendt gives is Robespierre who came to

power by claims of squashing the greatest evil, which by his definition was hypocrisy, and ended up by bringing about the reign of terror.

So is also the case in other revolutions, because in the moment of the revolution freedom is actualized and good and evil coexist, then the beautiful beginning of the revolution in all its plurality of human voices is crashed by the dominance of only one voice and only one point of view; we thus witness the birth of monism and the death of plurality that made possible its coming into existence. This is what I discussed in chapter on radical evil, but it is a fact the existence of the banality of evil, the fact that there are these little people who claim passivity, who say that they are obeying order and serving some higher greater purpose that make possible the appearance of evil in its radicality. This is an interpretation that Hannah Pitkin and Simona Forti also share. It is the banality of evil that prepares the ground for evil's radicality. The banality of evil thus points out the fact that good and evil exists in reality and choices people make are shaped by this reality but the ultimate responsibility for the choice remains with the individual.

Even as we say that the banality of evil is effortless evil this is the very opposite of denying the existence of evil. We are affirming its existence when we say that evil exists if it can come about effortlessly. Effortless evil seems like a negation of evil because linguistically we are dealing with a negative. The fact that evil is passive does not entail a deficiency. Effortless evil makes possible the appearance of radical evil. Am I saying that effortless evil serves a purpose; that it has a function? Effortless evil when it accumulates can produce radical evil but not necessarily so and we should not limit the interpretation to functionality. Effortless evil is a kind of evil in and of itself and needs to be taken seriously.

How does freedom come into this? The banality of evil appears when you do not exercise your freedom, when you refuse to take responsibility for your acts, you refuse to acknowledge yourself as the doer. In this sense it is a question of freedom. At each step the banality of evil is conceived as a deficiency: it is a deficiency of thinking, a deficiency of willing, a deficiency of judging, a deficiency of effort. Radical evil is the result of freedom. The banality of evil is lack of freedom. Freedom is the capacity for both good and evil. The banality of evil is the refusal to acknowledge that one is exercising freedom. That why I call it effortless because it is not necessarily a conscious decision not to do something.

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