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# Holes of Oblivion: The Banality of Radical Evil

PEG BIRMINGHAM

*This essay offers a reflection on Arendt's notion of radical evil, arguing that her later understanding of the banality of evil is already at work in her earlier reflections on the nature of radical evil as banal, and furthermore, that Arendt's understanding of the "banality of radical evil" has its source in the very event that offers a possible remedy to it, namely, the event of natality. Kristeva's recent work (2001) on Arendt is important to this proposal insofar as her notion of "abjection" illuminates Arendt's claim that understanding the superfluousness of the modern human being is inseparable from grasping the emergence of radical evil. In the final part of the essay, I argue that Arendt's "politics of natality" emerges from out of these two inseparable moments of the event of natality, offering the only possible remedy to the threat of radical evil by modifying our relationship to temporality.*

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Radical evil has emerged in connection with a system in which all men have become equally superfluous. The manipulators of this system believe in their own superfluousness as much as in that of all others and the totalitarian murderers are all the more dangerous because they do not care if they themselves are alive or dead, if they ever lived or never were born. The danger of the corpse factories and holes of oblivion is that today, with populations and homelessness everywhere on the increase, masses of people are continuously rendered superfluous if we continue to think of our world in utilitarian terms.

—Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*

In her 1945 review of Denis de Rougemont's "*The Devil's Share*" (1944) Hannah Arendt argues, "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." She writes, "In other words, the problem of evil will be the fundamental question of postwar intellectual life in Europe" (1994, 134). Certainly, nearly three decades of Arendt's writing have offered readers ample arsenal for debate about whether she changes her mind on the nature of evil, whether the radical evil she attempts to comprehend in *Origins of Totalitarianism* (1951) is rejected in favor of evil as banal in *Eichmann in Jerusalem* (1963), with some trying to show that both conceptions of evil have a place in her thought, and though distinct, are not incompatible (for example, see Berstein 1996). Strangely absent, however, in discussions of Arendt's political thought is how the problem of radical evil is Arendt's *own* fundamental and enduring preoccupation throughout her writings, and more importantly, how the problem of evil informs the key notions of her political thought, such as natality, action, solidarity, the *sensus communis*, and above all, what she calls the "predicament of common responsibility" in the face of our shared humanity (1951, 236). This absence has resulted in a general view of Arendt's notion of political action that is curiously (and falsely) optimistic—an unconditional, unhesitating celebration of action as the miracle and joy of human beginning rooted in the event of human natality (see Bowen-Moore 1989; D'Entreves 1994; and Taminioux 1997).<sup>1</sup>

The human capacity for radical evil renders such optimism untenable. There is evil. This fact marks the beginning and enduring preoccupation of Arendt's thought.<sup>2</sup> In what follows, I propose that Arendt does not change her mind regarding the nature of evil. Already in *Origins of Totalitarianism* (1951), her analysis of the superfluousness of the modern human being grasps the banality of radical evil. Her later report on the trial of Eichmann (Arendt 1963) further elucidates this banality, but does not in any way refute or alter what she has argued in the earlier work. In the second part of the essay, I take up Julia Kristeva's recent work on Arendt, *Life: Hannah Arendt or Action as Birth and Estrangement* (2001). Kristeva's analysis is important to this proposal insofar as her concept of abjection illuminates Arendt's claim that the superfluousness of the modern human being accounts for the emergence of radical evil. To go further, Kristeva's concept of abjection suggests that the banality of radical evil is the ever-present threat to the "fragility of human affairs" (Arendt 1958, 188), *precisely because* of the event of natality.<sup>3</sup> In other words, two inseparable moments comprise the event of natality: 1) the abject desolation that carries with it the ever-present threat of radical evil and 2) the activity of beginning that allows for the transformation and fragile redemption of finitude itself, a transformation that holds at bay but never eradicates this threat. In the final part of the essay, I argue that Arendt's "politics of natality" emerges from

out of these two inseparable moments of the event of natality, offering the only possible remedy to the threat of radical evil by modifying our relationship to temporality, which in turn allows for a transformed sense of the “solidarity of humanity” through the affective bond of political friendship.

### I. RADICAL BANALITY, ABJECTION, AND THE HORROR OF HUMANITY

Arendt’s essay “Organized Guilt and Universal Responsibility” (1945) is her first extended analysis of the problem of evil. Here she argues that a sense of shame is all that remains of any sense of human solidarity: “For many years I have met Germans who declare that they are ashamed to be German. I have often been tempted to answer that I am ashamed to be a human being. This elemental shame, which many people of the most various nationalities share with one another is what finally is left of our sense of international solidarity; and it has not yet found an adequate political expression” (1994, 131). Arendt argues that this sense of shame is the pre-political or nonpolitical expression of the insight that “in one form or another men must assume responsibility for all crimes committed by human beings and that all nations share the onus of evil committed by all others (1994, 131). The international solidarity of humanity lies in this almost unbearable burden of global responsibility; it is a solidarity that has its roots in facing up to the human capacity for evil: “Those who today are ready to follow this road in a modern version do not content themselves with the hypocritical confession, “God be thanked, I am not like that” in horror of the undreamed of potentialities of the German national character. Rather, in fear and trembling, have they finally realized of what man is capable—and this indeed is the condition for any modern political thinking. Upon them and only upon them, who are filled with a genuine fear of the inescapable guilt of the human race, can there be any reliance when it comes to fighting fearlessly, uncompromisingly, everywhere against the incalculable evil that men are capable of bringing about” (1994, 132). Arendt, however, is not arguing that evil is an inherent trait of human beings. In her review of *The Devil’s Share* (1944), she takes issue with the argument that good and evil are inherent to the human condition, involved in a Gnostic fight for dominance (1944, 135). Radical evil does not point to a demonic nature; instead it is a *capacity*.<sup>4</sup> The problem for Arendt is that the Western tradition has not faced up to our very real capacity for incalculable evil, preferring instead to see evil as a kind of nothingness—a lack of Being or the Good.

In her 1954 essay, “Concern with Politics in Recent European Thought,” Arendt has not changed her mind concerning the origin of modern political thought. While agreeing with the Greeks that philosophy begins with wonder at what is, Arendt harbors no nostalgia for recovering the Greek experience. Instead, she claims that whereas the Greek experience of wonder was rooted

in the experience of beauty (*Kalon*), the experience of wonder today—if not engaged in a flight from reality—is rooted in the experience of horror at what humans are capable of, the speechless horror that philosophically must be endured and politically instituted against: “It is as though in this refusal to own up to the experience of horror and take it seriously the philosophers have inherited the traditional refusal to grant the realm of human affairs that *thaumadzein*, that wonder at what is as it is. For the speechless horror at what man may do and what the world may become is in many ways related to the speechless wonder of gratitude from which the questions of philosophy spring” (1994, 445). Speechless horror, not beauty, marks the contemporary experience of wonder. This facing up to the human capacity for evil also separates Arendt from her Enlightenment predecessors who, she argues, were too naive in their view of humanity: “Our fathers’ enchantment with humanity was of a sort which not only light-mindedly ignored the national question; what is far worse, it did not even conceive of the terror of the idea of humanity” (1994, 132).

Arendt, however, makes an attempt to articulate the speechless horror of the twentieth century; she names it *hell*. The terror and total domination of the death camps is the fabrication of hell on earth: “Concentration camps can very aptly be divided into three types corresponding to three basic Western conceptions of a life after death: Hades, Purgatory, and Hell.” Hades, Arendt argues, corresponds to “those relatively mild forms, once popular even in non-totalitarian countries, for getting undesirable elements of all sorts—refugees, stateless persons, the asocial and the unemployed—out of the way.” She goes on to write, “Purgatory is represented by the Soviet Union’s labor camps, where neglect is combined with chaotic forced labor. Hell in the most literal sense was embodied by those types of camps perfected by the Nazis, in which the whole of life was thoroughly and systematically organized with a view to the greatest possible torment” (1951, 445).

Arendt suggests that the emergence of total domination and terror is the hubristic appropriation of religious limits, specifically the belief in hell<sup>5</sup>; it materializes this belief by incarnating it in immanence:

Suddenly it becomes evident that things which for thousands of years the human imagination had banished to a realm beyond human competence can be manufactured right here on earth, that Hell and Purgatory, and even a shadow of their perpetual duration, can be established by the most modern methods of destruction. Nothing perhaps distinguishes modern masses as radically from those of previous centuries as the loss of faith in a Last Judgment; the worst have lost their fear and the best have lost their hope. Unable as yet to live without fear and hope, these masses are attracted by every effort which seems to prom-

ise a man-made fabrication of the Paradise they had longed for and of the Hell they had feared. The one thing that cannot be reproduced is what made the traditional conceptions of Hell tolerable to man: the Last Judgment, the idea of an absolute standard of justice combined with the infinite possibility of grace." (1951, 446–47)

In this passage Arendt points to the symbolic function that images of heaven and hell have played in political thought since Plato's *Republic* (1968): they arouse both our longings and our fears. Religion, however, puts heaven and hell beyond the reach of human fabrication. Although the modern political space is marked by an abyss opened by the loss of its theological underpinnings and a loss of belief in the Last Judgment, Arendt suggests that these representations still continue to play a political role at the level of our hopes and fears (see Lefort 1988). In other words, the separation of the theologico-political opens the way for the possibility of these representations to be brought down to earth: "the totalitarian hell proves only that the power of man is greater than they ever dared to think, and that man can realize hellish fantasies" (1951, 446). In her essay "Religion and Politics" (1953), Arendt reiterates this insight: "In totalitarian states we see the almost deliberate attempt to build, in concentration camps and torture cellars, a kind of earthly hell" (1994, 383).

Indeed, in a 1951 letter to Karl Jaspers, Arendt clarifies the above point, suggesting that the totalitarian vision of hell is an attempt to establish an *omnipotent* presence on the earth itself: "What radical evil 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. 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 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." Arendt calls this desire for omnipotence the "madness for the superlative," a madness that brings God down to earth in the figure of a particular omnipotent individual. Arendt is clear in her letter to Jaspers that this "madness for the superlative" is very different from the desire for power that is found in Hobbes; for Hobbes, she argues, the desire for power remains comparative, relative to the power of other human beings (Kohler and Saner 1992, 166). On the other hand, the desire for omnipotence is a rejection of plurality altogether in favor of "being one," a godlike power on earth that desires absolute rule.

The hell of radical evil lies in the refusal of symbolic transcendence, represented by religious and moral limits, substituting instead the fantasies of

immanent ideologies and omnipotent dreams. Here we grasp the full import of Arendt's insistence that radical evil requires a move from "everything is permitted" to "everything is possible" (1951, 303). Facing the death of God, "everything is permitted" still recognizes the exigency of judgment, of making a distinction between the permissible and the impermissible, even if the impermissible is emptied of any absolute measure. "Everything is possible" refuses both the death of God *and* the exigency of judgment. In other words, it reestablishes an omnipotent presence on earth without any hope of pardon or grace.

The rage against the symbolic, the collapse of transcendence into immanence, is also true of totalitarianism's relation to the Law. Arendt insists that these regimes are not lawless. A totalitarian regime, she argues, "claims to obey strictly and unequivocally those laws of Nature or of History from which all positive laws always have been supposed to spring" (1951, 461). Raging against the constraining and absent symbolic law, totalitarian politics "promises justice on earth because it claims to make mankind itself the embodiment of the law" (1951, 462). Totalitarianism substitutes another law, a law that would be incarnate and reassuring because the law can now be known—it literally dwells among us, having been brought down to earth.

This is evident in the trial of Eichmann. Arendt reports that Eichmann suddenly declared that he had lived his whole life according to the Kantian moral imperative (1963, 135). At first Arendt is affronted at such an outrage against Kant. Upon further examination, however, Arendt grasps that what Eichmann actually did was to pervert the Kantian law, substituting the will of Hitler for the universal and *transcendent* law of reason: "[Eichmann] had not simply dismissed the Kantian formula as no longer applicable, he had distorted it to read: Act as if the principle of your actions were the same as that of the legislator or of the law the land—or, in Hans Frank's formulation of the "categorical imperative in the Third Reich," which Eichmann might have known: "Act in such a way that the Fuhrer, if he knew your action, would approve it" (1963, 136). Facing Eichmann, Arendt is confronted with the specificity of the general claim she first made in *Origins in Totalitarianism* (1951): the terror of radical evil and total domination is possible through the perversion of the symbolic dimension of the Law, that is, a human being becomes its embodiment, its sovereign will: "In Kant's philosophy, that source [of the law] was practical reason; in Eichmann's household use of him, it was the will of the Fuhrer" (1963, 137).

The perversion of the law is accompanied by a perversion of desire. While attention has been paid to Arendt's analysis of the role of duty for the law-abiding citizen, it is not often noticed that her analysis of the dutiful citizen concludes with a discussion of the inseparability of Eichmann's sense of duty from his resistance to the *temptation* to do good: "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. But, God knows, they had learned how to resist temptation” (1963, 150). The resistance to desire occurs through the fascist imperative of obedience and sacrifice; it is an imperative delivered most forcefully by what Eichmann terms the “winged words” of Heinrich Himmler, who was the most gifted, Arendt argues, at solving the problem of conscience—the desire to resist evil (Arendt, 1963, 105). The effect of these winged words on Eichmann was one of *elation* in which the slogans and watchwords were no longer felt to be issued from above but instead self-fabricated: “and you could see what an “extraordinary sense of elation” it gave to the speaker the moment it popped out of his mouth” (1963, 53). Indeed, Arendt points out that whenever the judges “tried to appeal to his conscience, they were met with “elation,” and they were outraged as well as disconcerted when they learned that the accused had at his disposal a different elating cliché for each period of his life and each of his activities” (1963, 53).

Eichmann’s voice of conscience was not silenced—it was carried away, caught up in the voice of another; his voice had literally been “voiced over” with the voice of Himmler. His elated voice of conscience not only identifies the Law with the Will of Hitler, but at the same time, Eichmann’s desires and fantasies become identified with Hitler’s. The elated voice of conscience tells Eichmann to ignore his own desire and dutifully carry out the law of the land: “And just as the law in civilized countries assumes that the voice of conscience tells everybody, “Thou shalt not kill,” even though man’s natural desires and inclinations may at times be murderous, so the law of Hitler’s land demanded that the voice of conscience tell everybody: “Thou shalt kill,” although the organizers of the massacres knew full well that murder is against the normal desires and inclinations of most people” (1963, 150).

Citing the court’s judgment, Arendt points out that for justice to be based on the voice of conscience, “orders to be disobeyed must be “manifestly unlawful” and unlawfulness must “fly like a black flag above them as warning: ‘Prohibited!’”—as the judgment pointed out (1963, 148). She goes on to argue, however, that in Hitler’s regime: “this black flag” with its “warning sign” flies as “manifestly” above what normally is a lawful order—for instance, not to kill innocent people just because they happen to be Jews—as it flies above a criminal order under normal circumstances. To fall back on an unequivocal voice of conscience—or in the even vaguer language of the jurist, on a “general sentiment of humanity” (Oppenheim-Lauterpacht in *International Law*, 1952)—not only begs the question, it signifies a deliberate refusal to take notice of the central moral, legal, and political phenomena of our century” (1963, 148). The moral, legal, and political phenomena of our century is twofold: the fragile status of both the law and its subject. The transformation of the transcendent



law into perverse immanence attests to the fragility of the law in modernity. Eichmann's all too easily "voiced over" voice of conscience, an elated voice in which he identifies with both the law and the desires of the fuhrrer, points to the fragile identity of the modern subject.

In Eichmann's case, the sacrifice of his desire through the elated voice of conscience is accomplished, Arendt argues, by turning basic instincts such as the instinct of pity whereby we recoil at the suffering of others back upon the self: "The trick used by Himmler consisted in turning these instincts around, as it were, in directing them toward the self. So that instead of saying: What horrible things I did to people!, the murderers would be able to say: What horrible things I had to watch in the pursuance of my duties" (1963, 106). Himmler's trick, accomplished through slogans and stock phrases (for example, "My honor is my loyalty"), is effective because it promises the *unity* of the subject if only the subject gives way on its desires. In other words, sacrificing desire for duty, the subject has the fantasy of a stable and fixed identity. In a perverse departure from Jean-Jacques Rousseau, self-pity allows for a unified *amour propre* only on the condition that the subject becomes an elated and at the same time a dutiful instrument of the other's fantasies. In other words, Rousseau argues that pity is the move from the *amour de soi* to the *amour propre*. *Amour de soi*, the level of need, becomes the *amour propre* through the awakening of desire in which the sentiment of pity becomes socialized. To turn pity back on the self is to move from desire back to need. In Eichmann's case, this has the effect of a "post-desire" need which explains why he is able so easily to give up his desire (see Rousseau, 1979, 222). I will return to this issue in the next section when addressing Kristeva's notion of phobia.

Scant attention has been paid to how the fragile identity of the modern subject informs Arendt's analysis of radical evil. Arendt understands radical evil as the attempt to eliminate spontaneity from the human race; it is the attempt to reshape human nature itself by doing away with the very unpredictability that lies at the root of human freedom and action; it is the attempt to stabilize human behavior in order to allow the law of history or the law of nature to progress: "The camps are meant not only to exterminate people and degrade human beings, but also serve the ghastly experiment of eliminating spontaneity itself as an expression of human behavior and of transforming the human personality into a mere thing, into something that even animals are not; for Pavlov's dog, which, as we know, was trained to eat not when it was hungry but when a bell rang, was a perverted animal" (Arendt, 1951, 438). Again, the terror of totalitarianism is involved in the inseparable perversion of both the law and human subjectivity: 1) it perverts humanity by eliminating the capacity for action, the capacity for new beginnings; and 2) it perverts the very meaning of the law, transforming the law from its traditional sense as that which provides limits and boundaries to human action into the law as

that which is itself is limitless and constantly on the move. The movement of the law now requires human beings to be static and fixed.

Indeed, Arendt locates the appeal of totalitarian ideology with its claim of carrying out the law of nature or history in the longing for a fixed and stable identity: "Just as fear and the impotence from which fear springs are antipolitical principles and throw men into a situation contrary to political action, so loneliness and the logical-ideological deducing the worst that comes from it represent an anti-political solution and harbor a principle destructive for all human living-together. The 'ice-cold reasoning' and the mighty tentacle of dialectics which 'seize you as in a vise' appears like a last support in a world where nobody is reliable and nothing can be relied upon. It is the inner coercion whose only content is the strident avoidance of contradictions that seems to confirm a man's identity outside all relationships with others" (1951, 478). Fascist ideology promises a ready made, unified identity—fixed, static, without contradiction and utterly reliable. In still other words, the "madness for the superlative," Arendt argues, is mirrored in the desire of the individual, desolate human being who also wants to reject the plurality (the two-in-one) at the very heart of the self in favor of a completeness, an integrity promised in submitting to a fantasy of omnipotence.

For Arendt, the appeal of this promise of unity has its roots in the modern phenomenon of superfluosity. Radical evil, she writes in *Origins* (1951), "has appeared in connection with a system in which all men have become superfluous in some way" (475). It is the desolation of individuals who are economically superfluous and socially uprooted that provides the conditions for radical evil. A peculiar kind of loneliness is key to understanding this evil: "Loneliness, the common ground for terror, the essence of totalitarian government, and for ideology and logicity, the preparation of its executions and victims, is closely connected with uprootedness and superfluosity which have been the curse of modern masses. To be uprooted means to have no place in the world, recognized and guaranteed by others, to be superfluous means not to belong to the world at all" (475). While Arendt argues that superfluosity is a peculiarly modern phenomena, nevertheless, "we have only to remind ourselves that one day we shall have to leave this common world which will go on as before and for whose continuity we are superfluous in order to realize loneliness, the experience of being abandoned by everything and everybody" (476).

In other words, a radical superfluosity or abandonment marks human finitude itself. Banality comes from the same root as abandon: *bannum*. Something was said to be banal when it was no longer under the jurisdiction of the lord, but instead abandoned, given over to the use of the entire community. Banality is the condition of humanity who has been forsaken, banished—we are "holes of oblivion" (459). In the past, this desolation or banality has been covered over by the tripartite structure of authority, tradition, and religion.

Modernity, Arendt argues, is marked by the splintering of this structure, a splintering in which our desolation appears at the very center of our existence (see Arendt's essay "Tradition and the Modern Age" in *Between Past and Future* 1961). This oblivion or banality is the secular ordeal of modernity. The banality of radical evil is the refusal to endure this ordeal.

Here we arrive full circle to Arendt's claims as laid out at the beginning of this essay, namely, that the idea of humanity is terrifying. Arendt argues against the popular notion that the more we know about each other, the more we will come to like each other. On the contrary, Arendt writes, "The more peoples know about one another, the less they want to recognize other peoples as their equals, the more they recoil from the ideal of humanity" (1951, 235). Arendt's insistence is important that the element that most unites us, humanity, is also the element that causes terror and a recoiling. The ideal of humanity, purged of all sentimentality, demands that human beings assume political responsibility for all crimes and evils committed by human beings. At the same time, she argues, this demand is terrifying; this is "the predicament of common responsibility" (1951, 236). Our predicament lies in the double face of humanity: our humanity is at once that which unites us in common responsibility and what causes us to recoil in terror. The recoil, Arendt suggests, is in the face of our banality, our desolation. Still further, our terror lies in facing up to our lack of being, our being "holes of oblivion." In a letter to Gershom Scholem, Arendt argues that radical evil is not demonic because it is not "deep;" instead it spreads like a fungus on the surface of human existence (Arendt, 1978a, 251). The horror of the banality of radical evil is precisely this fungus-like quality that attempts to fill in the cracks and holes of human finitude with dreams and deliriums of fabricating the absolute on earth; it necessarily lies on the surface insofar as it attempts to cover over the abyssal nature of human existence. Critical of the Western tradition's understanding of evil as nothing—a lack of the good—Arendt suggests that the banality of radical evil lies in the disavowal of our own nothingness, our own desolation and impossibility of being. Of utmost importance here is Arendt's insight that the event of natality itself carries with it this desolation and, therefore, the ever-present threat of radical evil as the refusal of this desolation.

## II. RADICAL EVIL AND THE EVENT OF NATALITY

In *The Human Condition* (1958), Arendt writes, "With word and deed we insert ourselves into the human world, and this insertion is like a *second birth*, in which we confirm and take upon ourselves the naked fact of our original physical appearance" (176; italics added). This second birth, argues Arendt, allows human beings to appear and without this birth humans would be dead to the world: "A life without speech and without action is literally dead to the world,

it has ceased to be a human life because it is no longer lived among men" (176). Through this *linguistic* birth, humans become political kinds of beings. Arendt cites Aristotle's definition of man as *zoon logon ekhon*, one for whom exists "a way of life in which speech and only speech made sense" (27). This linguistic birth is the birth of the "who," the unique self, insofar as the event of linguistic natality is the being-born of the unexpected and the new. In other words, the birth of the political self, the "who," is the birth of the unexpected word.

It would be easy, but also a mistake, to think of this second birth as the birth of a kind of heroic individuality, distinct in the sense of being "a word unto itself." Arendt rejects any notion of the self as a "singular word," arguing that the unexpected word is always already immersed in a web of relationships and plurality of enacted stories (181). The Arendtian notion of a "web" reveals that the unexpected word erupts from within a plurality of discourses that are entangled and interwoven in their sedimented histories. At the same time, Arendt makes only a brief reference to the unexpected word as tied to an *embodied* web: "To be sure, this web is no less bound to the objective world of things than speech is to the existence of a living body, but the relationship is not like that of a facade or, in Marxian terminology, of an essentially superfluous superstructure affixed to the useful structure of the building itself" (183).

The above passage suggests that Arendt's all-too tidy-distinction between the first birth, the "naked fact of our physical appearance" and the second, linguistic birth of the "who," is eventually rejected in her thought. Linguistic natality cannot be "laid over" physical natality, suggesting that both births must be thought as intimately connected. Yet, it is striking that Arendt does not develop her account of the first birth and its connection with the second. At this point Kristeva's reading of Arendt, particularly Kristeva's notion of abjection, is helpful, insofar as her notion of abjection points to a "primary natality" that provides further insight into the banality of radical evil. In *Powers of Horror* (1982), Kristeva argues that abjection is the "the result of a primary natality, the birth pangs of a body becoming separated from another body in order to be" (10). Our desolation, our banality, is due to the very first birth pangs of embodiment, the traces of which we carry with us into linguistic natality. Prior to linguistic natality, the subject is "located" in processes that cannot be named. In other words, the identity/nonidentity of the subject as a signifying process exists prior to "birth" into the symbolic order of language under the "father's law." Kristeva claims that abjection rises from a primal repression when the infant struggles to separate from the mother's body that nourishes and comforts, from the ambivalent struggle to establish a separate bodily schema, still seeking a continuity with the mother's body which it seeks to incorporate (1982, 10). Thus, the subject enters into language from a background of conflict between attraction and repulsion with an image of the pre-oedipal archaic mother.

The subject that emerges from this unnameable point of division is a split subject, identifying its previous, fragmentary experience which only “exists” as affect—bare want, loss that is unrepresentable—with the mother’s body. Before desire—the movement out from a self to the objects on which it is directed—there are drives that involve preoedipal semiotic functions and energy discharges that connect and orient the body to the mother. Abjection is the moment of separation, the border between the “I” and the other, before an “I” is formed; it is want itself—an unassimilable nonunity experienced by one who is neither in the symbolic order nor outside of it.

Abjection is the place between signs; it is a trace, a rhythm, an excess or disturbance that destabilizes and threatens to undermine all signifying processes. Abjection, therefore, is that place “where the subject is both generated and negated, the place where his unity succumbs before the process of charges and stases that produce him” (Kristeva 1984, 105). Thus the emergent subject is infused with a negativity, an alterity that is definitive of its emergent subjectivity. And this negativity is both pleasurable and painful; it is both the source of creation and meaning and of absence, estrangement, desolation. The latter is important insofar as Kristeva stresses that abjection ought not be “designated as such, that is, as other, as something to be ejected, or separated” (1982, 127). Abjection, therefore, is associated with the disintegration, or perhaps more precisely, the heterogeneity that exists at the very heart of the self.

Important here is the affective dynamic of attraction and repulsion with the mother’s body in the labor pains of emerging subjectivity. For Kristeva, abjection as the moment of separation is always double; it is the feeling of loathing and disgust the subject has in encountering certain matter, images, and fantasies—the horrible, to which it can only respond with aversion, with nausea and distraction—and it is at the same time it is the feeling of fascination, drawing the subject towards it in order to repel it. Kristeva argues that “abjection is above all ambiguity. Because, while releasing a hold, it does not radically cut off the subject from what threatens it—on the contrary, abjection acknowledges it to be in perpetual danger. But also because abjection itself is a composite of judgment and affect, of condemnation and yearning” (1982, 10–11). Kristeva points out that while Arendt is aware of Hitler’s fascination with the protocols of the *Elders of Zion* (it is said that he knew them by heart), she misses the abjection that drives Hitler’s interest. In her analysis of Arendt, Kristeva argues: “Nazi propaganda proceeded by negatively identifying with an enemy slated for death while at the same time imitating him with a hateful fascination” (2001, 138). Thus Hitler does not denounce the Protocols but seeks instead to establish an exact replica in reality, designating the Jew as his worst enemy in a delirious and yet fascinated revulsion.

Moreover, Kristeva insists that abjection is a historically and culturally specific response to the fragility of the law; in modernity, it is tied to the secular

ordeal of the collapse of the religious foundation of the political order (1982, 68). Kristeva agrees with Arendt's analysis of the immanent status of the law in totalitarian regimes, but criticizes her for not taking into account the sadomasochistic dimension that accompanies the fragility of the law and contributes to the fabrication of hell on earth: "Arendt touches upon the theme of sadomasochism when she delves into the Christian concept of authority, particularly the fear of hell that is its basis. Nor does Arendt analyze the specific fate of the alchemy between fear and authority that operates at the heart of the secularized modern world, which has clearly left the fear of hell behind but which has in no way diffused the sadomasochistic spirit of what Arendt cautiously refers to as the 'frailty of human affairs'" (Kristeva 2001, 181). Certainly Arendt is not unaware of the "instinct for submission," the alchemy between fear and authority, at the heart of the human psyche. In *On Violence* (1970), Arendt observes, "If we were to trust our own experiences in these matters, we should know that the instinct of submission, an ardent desire to obey and be ruled by some strong man, is at least as prominent in human psychology as the will to power, and, politically, perhaps more relevant" (39). Yet, Arendt does not explore this instinct nor articulate its political relevance.

Kristeva, on the other hand, suggests that in modernity the political relevance of this desire for submission (what she is calling the sadomasochistic dimension) lies in the instability of the symbolic dimension of the law that manifests itself in abjection: the permeability of the inside and the outside boundaries, the weakness of cultural prohibitions, and the crisis of symbolic identity. The fragility of the law exposed in abjection is linked specifically to a crisis of authority. This crisis manifests itself in phobia, an elaboration of want and aggression: "In phobia, fear and aggressivity come back to me from the outside. The fantasy of incorporation by means of which I attempt to escape fear threatens me nonetheless, for a symbolic, paternal prohibition already dwells in me. In the face of this second threat I attempt another procedure: I am not the one that devours, I am being devoured by him" (1982, 39).

To offset the fear associated with the weakness of the symbolic order, the phobic subject regresses to the narcissistic fantasy of fusion with the maternal body; yet this fantasy is threatening because the subject is always already in the symbolic order governed by the paternal prohibition of incest. Thus the fantasy is inverted—rather than devouring the mother (the fantasy of incorporation which promises jouissance and the escape from fear), the subject fantasizes that it is being devoured. This phobic fantasy then constructs an imaginary other who becomes the metaphor of the subject's own aggression. Insofar as the phobic fantasy is always culturally and historically specific, fascist regimes are able to mobilize these phobic fantasies onto the social body. Kristeva argues: "The imaginary machinery is transformed into a social institution—and what you get is the infamy of fascism" (1982, 25).

Most important, the phobic fantasy operates at the level of drive rather than desire—it is the unleashing of the death drives onto the social body. However, insofar as the subject is already in the symbolic (the paternal prohibition is in effect), these drives *postdate* desire. Kristeva's analysis of phobia allows us to better understand Himmler's successful trick of inverting basic instincts such as the instinct of pity. Recall the earlier discussion in which we saw that Himmler successfully inverts the instinct of pity for the suffering of the other into self-pity. Reading this inversion through Kristeva's analysis, Himmler's "winged words" produce phobic fantasies at the level of drives incorporated by a subject who has the double fantasy of incorporation and unity (fusion with the maternal/social body) and projection that displaces aggression onto the imaginary other (the Jew) who now seems to threaten from without. Elatedly, Eichmann is caught up in the phobic fantasy which demands only that he sacrifice his desire (the temptation to do good) and carry out his duty to the law; it is a law, however, that mobilizes at the level of drives and fantasies rather than at the level of the symbolic. The phobic fantasy is mobilized by "winged words" that hollow out language with its infinity of significations, substituting instead clichés and slogans that operate at the level of drives—"phobia is a metaphor that has mistaken its place, forsaking language for drive and sight" (1982, 35).

In an age where power and the symbolic "exclusionary prohibition" no longer belong to the ultimate Judge—"God who preserves humanity from abjection while setting aside for himself alone the prerogative of violence," Kristeva argues that the "exclusionary prohibition" now belongs to discourse itself (1982, 132). Discourse itself is now the location of the "prohibition that has us speak." The fascist and racist discourses of Celine and Hitler give legitimacy to hatred as they rage against the monotheistic symbolic law (itself infused with negativity and loss) and substitute in its place another law that would be "absolute, reassuring, and fully incarnated" (1982, 178). At the same time, seeking to resecure the boundaries of the immanent law, this discourse turns the Jewish body, which is deliriously viewed by Celine and Hitler as the embodiment of the monotheistic symbolic law, into the rejected site of all forces of negativity, loss, and dissolution.

Reading Celine's pamphlets, Kristeva (1982) shows how his writings transform an experience of abjection and the fragility of the law into the phallic ambition to name the unnamable. Celine's anti-Semitism and fascism can be seen, therefore, as "a kind of parareligious formation" into a fantasy of "the immanence of substance and meaning, of the natural/racial/familial, of the feminine and the masculine, of life and death—a glorification of the Phallus that does not speak its name" (179). Raging against the symbolic law, Celine substitutes an immanent substantial law in the phantasmatic revitalization of the social body: "Again carrying out a rejection, without redemption, himself forfeited, Celine will become body and tongue, the apogee of that moral,

political and stylistic revulsion that brands our time. A time that seems to have, for a century now, gone into unending labor pains" (23). Like Arendt, Kristeva gives the name "hell" to the horror of the fascist discourse: "This is the horror of hell without God: if no means of salvation, no optimism, not even a humanistic one, looms on the horizon, then the verdict is in, with no hope of pardon" (147).

Kristeva, therefore, provides a much needed supplement to Arendt's understanding of the "event of natality," a supplement that allows us to see the ambiguous and fragile status of this event. The frailty of human affairs arises first out of the abjection of a "primary natality," an abjection that means we must face the ever present threat of the banality of radical evil, a banality that can be traced to a radical abandonment—a desolation inherent in embodiment itself. Kristeva reminds us that the Arendtian "second birth" (linguistic natality) is not only inseparable from this first birth, but bears within it the traces of these primary birth pains. At the same time, it would be a mistake to think the abjection of "primary natality" as itself inherently delirious or evil. Kristeva agrees with Arendt: evil is a capacity, not an inherent trait, of human beings. Evil is our capacity for self-deception that is fundamentally a denial of abjection. More precisely, the banality of radical evil lies in our inability to live with the object—to live with the ambiguity, abandonment, and negativity that infuses the event of natality at both its levels: bodily and linguistically.

### III. RADICAL EVIL AND A "POLITICS OF NATALITY"

In her reading of Arendt, Kristeva asks: "If we resist the traditional safeguard of religions, with their focus on admonishment, guilt, and consolation, how can our individual and collective desires avoid the trap of melancholic destruction, manic fanaticism, or tyrannical paranoia?" (2001, 129). I want to argue in the final section of this essay that Arendt answers Kristeva's question by arguing for a transformation of temporality. In other words, given the human capacity for evil, rooted as I have tried to show in our banal denial of abjection, Arendt suggests that the only possible remedy for the modern, secular world is to change our relationship to time through a *politics* of natality.

In *The Human Condition* (1958), Arendt begins her analysis of the *vita activa* with a distinction between eternity and immortality. While her discussion of immortality is often read as an argument for heroic deeds and speech that distinguish the actor in the public realm, and thereby ensure through remembrance his or her endurance in time, close examination of Arendt's argument reveals that she is not so much interested in the endurance of individual deeds as she is about the endurance of humanity itself. Immortality, she argues, is the concern of those beings who are mortal: "Imbedded in a cosmos where everything was immortal, mortality became the hallmark of human existence. Men



are “the mortals,” the only mortal thing in existence, because unlike animals they do not exist only as members of a species whose immortal life is guaranteed through procreation. The mortality of men lies in the fact the individual life, with a recognizable life-story from birth to death, rises out of biological life” (18–19). Mortality marks the division between life and death; it marks a cut in time whereby human beings move “along a rectilinear line in a universe where everything, if it moves at all, moves in a cyclical order” (19). This transformation of linear into rectilinear time distinguishes the human being from other animal species. To put it more strongly: to be fully human requires a transformation of time. This transformation, Arendt argues, is accomplished only insofar as mortality is linked to a concern with immortality, the latter inseparable from a political life: “Without this transcendence into a potential earthly immortality, no politics, strictly speaking, no common world and no public realm is possible. But such a common world can survive the coming and going of the generations only to the extent that it appears in public. It is the publicity of the public realm which can absorb and make shine through the centuries whatever men may want to save from the natural ruin of time” (55). In negative terms, Arendt argues that the decline of modern humanity is inseparable from the decline in a concern with immortality and the public world: “There is perhaps no clearer testimony to the loss of the public realm in the modern age than the almost complete loss of authentic concern with immortality” (55).

Immortality, therefore, is a political achievement that institutes an enduring, common world. Neither a religious sentiment nor founded in the fear of death, the desire for immortality is the desire for a common world that delivers us from obscurity; it is the desire to be visible—to be seen and recognized by equals; it is the desire for our own image granted only through the perspectives of others. Far from celebrating a politics of heroic individualism, Arendt’s emphasis on immortality is rooted in the desire to appear; that is, the desire to be: “The term ‘public’ means, first, that everything that appears in public can be seen and heard by everybody has the widest possible publicity. For us, appearance—something that is being seen and heard by others as well as by ourselves—constitutes reality” (50). The fulfillment of this desire depends on there being a plurality of others who share a common world. Citing Aristotle, she argues, “To men the reality of the world is guaranteed by the presence of others, by its appearing to all; “for what appears to all, this we call Being,” and whatever lacks this appearance comes and passes away like a dream” (199). Indeed, our very sense of reality “depends utterly upon appearance” in a common world, the reality of which “relies on the simultaneous presence of innumerable perspectives and aspects in which the common world presents itself and for which no common measurement or denominator can ever be devised” (57). (It is clear in these passages that Arendt is thinking of the soli-

arity of humanity not as a solidarity that identifies with the other nor as one established in a reciprocity of identifications; rather, solidarity emerges out of the irreducible nonintegration of different standpoints wherein there is equality, not identification, in difference: “sameness in utter diversity” (57).)

Arendt (1978b) goes so far as to call this desire to appear an “innate impulse” as compelling as the fear that accompanies the urge for self-preservation: “It is indeed as though everything that is alive—in addition to the fact that its surface is made for appearance, fit to be seen and meant to appear to others—has an *urge to appear*, to fit itself into the world of appearances by displaying and showing, not its “inner self” but itself as an individual” (29). Looking to the research of the Swiss biologist and zoologist Adolf Portmann, Arendt argues that this “urge to appear” cannot be explained in functional terms; instead, she suggests, the “urge to appear” is gratuitous, having to do with the sheer pleasure of self-display (29). Human beings, who have a concern with an *enduring* image, transform this urge to self-display into a desire for self-presentation that she argues involves a “promise to the world, to those to whom I appear, to act in accordance with my pleasure” (36). The hypocrite, on the other hand, is one who breaks his or her promise to act in accordance with his or her pleasure.<sup>6</sup>

The division between the natural and mortal/immortal being, therefore, coincides with the first division between the private and public realm. To return to Kristeva’s question posed at the outset of this section: for Arendt the only way our individual and collective desires can avoid the fanaticism and madness of radical evil is for the *political institution* of a different form of time—the time of immortality—rooted not in religion or fear but in the desire for an enduring image and mode of appearance. This is a desire met only in a public space with an irreducible plurality of others with whom we promise our pleasures rather than assert our needs.

Indeed, Kristeva (2001) herself suggests that Arendt’s highly controversial distinction between the social and the political be understood against the background of this transformation of temporality. Kristeva asks whether Arendt’s distinction between *zoe* and *bios* is not another way to articulate the distinction between needs that link the subject to an archaic realm and its dependence on the mother and desires that afford the dangerous freedom of bonds with other people in the space of appearance: “To transform the nascent being into a speaking and thinking being, the maternal psyche takes the form of a passageway between *zoe* and *bios*, between physiology and biography, between nature and spirit” (47). Quoting Arendt, “the ‘nature’ of man is “human” only to the extent that it gives him the possibility of becoming something highly unnatural, that is, a man” (1994, 455). Kristeva argues that Arendt’s distinction between *zoe* and *bios* is rooted in her analysis of the death camps wherein the metamorphosis of human beings into nature serves to transform them into

“living cadavers” (140). Emerging from the event of natality, the human being is a beginner, which means that the “nature” of the human being is inherently flexible and open-ended. At the same time, this capacity can all too easily be foreclosed. Arendt is fond of quoting Montesquieu’s Preface to the *Spirit of the Laws* (1977): “Man, this flexible being who submits himself in society to the thoughts and impressions of his fellow-men, is equally capable of knowing his own nature when it is shown to him and of losing it to the point where he has no realization that he is robbed of it” (for example, see 1994, 408). As we have seen throughout this essay, the loss of the human occurs whenever the attempt is made to stabilize the “nature” of the human being: to make it unified, complete, without contradiction or heterogeneity.

Finally, Arendt suggests that the political institution of the temporality of immortality must be accompanied by an affectivity that provides an animating or dynamic basis for the political bond or what Arendt calls “the solidarity of humanity.”<sup>7</sup> Here I want to argue that Arendt goes much further than Kristeva in understanding the need for a *political* remedy for the fantasies and deliriums that accompany the banality of radical evil. In other words, Kristeva seems still to appeal to fear and authority when thinking about the affectivity of the political bond. In her reading of Arendt, she argues, “She [Arendt] delves into the Christian concept of authority, particularly the fear of hell that is its basis. She correctly considers the interplay between rewards and punishments, as well as the arousing fear that stems from its being a substratum of faith, to be “the only political element in traditional religion” (Arendt 1961, 133). And yet she concerns herself with neither the psychological foundation of this dynamic nor the indispensable support that it offers the political bond as such. “*Are perhaps all political bonds based on an arousing fear?*” (2001, 180–81; italics added).

With this last question, Kristeva seems still too close to a kind of Hobbesian position wherein the dynamic of fear and authority found in religion is transposed into the fear of the sovereign with the introduction of the modern Leviathan. It should not go unnoticed that in Hobbes’s *Leviathan*, chapter 12, “On Religion,” directly precedes the all-important chapter 13, “Natural Condition of Mankind as Concerning Their Felicity and Misery.” While Kristeva would certainly not follow Hobbes in the direction of the sovereign (indeed her work on abjection as well as on the stranger directly calls Hobbes into question), it does seem that she is not able to think something other than fear as the animating political bond.

Arendt clearly rejects fear as the affect capable of instituting the political bond, arguing, as we saw in an earlier passage cited above, that fear is a *non-political* emotion rooted in the isolating self-interest of the individual human being (1951, 478).<sup>8</sup> While Arendt agrees that fear can be used as a political tool for dominating individuals, it cannot be the animating or affective bond of a “we” (1994, 337). Indeed, one could read her “politics of natality” and its

insistence on the move from the natural to the mortal/immortal, from *zoe* to *bios*, as adding another properly *political* chapter to Hobbes's understanding of the human being. Contrary to Hobbes's natural position, Arendt's political understanding of the human being insists on the transformation of the time of self-interest to the temporality of public happiness with its promise of shared pleasures. This, in turn, allows her to reformulate the "solidarity of humanity" and its predicament of common responsibility.

In her essay *On Violence* (1970), Arendt takes up the issue of whether "enlightened self-interest" can adequately resolve conflict and prevent violence. Using the example of a rent dispute between tenant and landlord, Arendt argues that "enlightened interest would focus on a building fit for human habitation; however, the argument that "*in the long run* the interest of the building is the *true* interest of both the landlord and the tenant" leaves out of account the time factor which is of paramount importance for all concerned" (78). Because of mortality, she argues, the self *qua* self cannot calculate in long-term interest: "Self-interest, when asked to yield to 'true interest'—that is, the interest of the world as distinguished from that of the self—will always reply, 'Near is my shirt, but nearer is my skin.' It is the not very noble but adequate response to the time discrepancy between men's private lives and the altogether different life expectancy of the public world" (78). To move from self-interest to "world-interest" requires a move from fear to love of the "public thing."

Love of the "public thing" occurs only through the vigilant partiality of political friendship, which rejects from the outset any notion of truth, engaging instead in the practice of questioning and doubt that marks the secular ordeal of modern humanity: "If the solidarity of mankind is to be based on something more solid than the justified fear of man's demonic capabilities, if the new universal neighborship of all countries is to result in something more promising than a tremendous increase in mutual hatred and a somewhat universal irritability of everybody against everybody else, than a process of mutual understanding and progressing self-clarification on a gigantic scale must take place" (Arendt 1971, 84). For Arendt, Gottfried Lessing is the figure who embraces this secular ordeal: "He was glad that—to use his parable—the genuine ring, if it had ever existed, had been lost; he was glad for the sake of the infinite number of opinions that arise when men discuss the affairs of this world. If the genuine ring did exist, that would mean an end to discourse and thus to friendship and thus to humanness" (Arendt 1968, 26). Lessing rejoices in that very thing that has caused so much distress, namely, "that the truth once uttered becomes one opinion among many, is contested, reformulated, reduced to one subject of discourse among others" (27). Arendt goes on to suggest that Lessing was a "completely *political* person" because of this understanding of the relation between truth and humanity: "he insisted that truth can exist only where it is humanized by discourse, only where each man says not what just happens to

occur to him at the moment, but what he “deems truth.” But such speech is virtually impossible in solitude; it belongs to an arena in which there are many voices and where the announcement of what each “deems truth” both links and separates men, establishing in fact those distances between men which together comprise the world” (30–31). This does not amount to tolerance; instead, “it has a great deal to do with the gift of friendship, with openness to the world, and finally with a genuine love of mankind” (30–31).

Lessing's antimony between truth and humanity provides Arendt with a kind of thought experiment. She asks the reader to assume for a moment that the racial theories of the Third Reich could have been proved: “Suppose that a race could indeed be shown, by indubitable scientific evidence, to be inferior; would that fact justify its extermination? (1968, 29). She asks the reader not to make the experiment too easy by invoking a religious or moral principle such as “thou shalt not kill;” she asks this in order to show a kind of thinking governed by neither legal, moral, nor religious principles (she asks this in the sober recognition that legal, moral, and religious principles did not prevent the worst from happening). This way of thinking without recourse to transcendent principles paradoxically gives rise to a fundamental political principle by which to judge our “truths”: “*Would any such doctrine, however convincingly proved, be worth the sacrifice of so much as a single friendship between two men?*” (1968, 29; italics in original).

The political principle is friendship: any doctrine that in principle barred the possibility of friendship must be rejected.<sup>9</sup> Political friendship retreats from a notion of truth as “objective”; nonetheless, Arendt argues, it has nothing to do with a kind of subjective relativism where everything is viewed in terms of the self and its interests; instead, “it is always framed in terms of the relationship of men to their world, in terms of their positions and opinions” (1968, 29). His understanding of friendship, therefore, has nothing to do with the warmth of fraternity that desires above all to avoid disputes and conflicts. The excessive closeness of brotherliness, Arendt claims, obliterates all distinctions and Lessing understood this: “He wanted to be the friend of many men, but no man's brother” (30). Finally, while political friendship does not recognize any ultimate arbiter for its disputes and disagreements, nonetheless, it is guided by a fundamental exigency: we must assume responsibility for what is just and what is unjust, answering for our deeds and words. Our only remedy for radical evil, Arendt suggests, are these fragile friendships that in the face of humanity's demonic capabilities provide the animating or affective dimension of the solidarity of humanity.<sup>10</sup> These friendships are animated by the willingness to endure the burden of questioning and doubt inherent in the very event of natality itself, characterized at once by a desolation and abandonment that makes the banality of radical evil an ever-present threat even as it allows for the miracle of new beginnings and rebirth.

## NOTES

1. For a more cautious analysis of Arendt's notion of action, one that insists on taking into account the negative side of action, that is, violence, see McGowan's "Must Politics Be Violent? Arendt's Utopian Vision" in Calhoun and McGowan 1997. McGowan's account of violence, however, does not consider Arendt's understanding of evil. Indeed, he argues that "Arendt consistently refused throughout her career to attempt any explanation of evil while persistently calling our attention to the relevance of its existence as a political fact" (269). McGowan does give an account of Arendt's understanding of evil, but views it entirely through the Arendtian lens of thinking and judging, neglecting altogether her notion of radical evil. While I do not disagree that Arendt's later analyses of thinking and judging add to our understanding of evil, I want to argue that her understanding of the banality of evil is rooted in her account of radical evil and the radical superfluosity of human beings, a superfluosity that itself can only be understood through Arendt's account of natality. Steven Aschheim's (2001) work on Arendt is to my mind the least optimistic about action as the promise of new beginnings, arguing that Arendt's analysis of radical evil rejects understanding evil in terms of particular national and historical categories, instead favoring more general historical and psychological categories (120). He implicitly suggests that Arendt's insight into the psychological roots of evil would yield a far less optimistic reading of Arendt's notion of action. Aschheim, however, does not develop Arendt's psychological insights. This essay attempts to do this through an analysis of Arendt's understanding of the event of natality. [See note 3 below.]

2. I am indebted to George Kateb's seminal work (1984) on Hannah Arendt's understanding of evil, particularly his discussion of the "pseudomoral" at the conclusion of his long analysis of totalitarian evil. Kateb argues that Nazism was the enactment of a myth of punishment in which Jews and Gypsies were punished for the worse possible *sin* (not crime)—the sin of being unclean and hence unfit to live or to share the earth (80). Kateb points out that the pseudomoral myth of punishment is a myth of exorcism, which he points out is a self-exorcism: "To kill the Jew in oneself, one must kill all Jews" (81). Kateb raises several urgent questions concerning the nature of this exorcism: "What is the Jew that must be exorcised? And by extension, what groups might one day be assigned the role of victim in a new ideology, a new myth of punishment? Most of the human race? The best counsel is to remain in perplexity" (81). This essay takes seriously Kateb's questions even as it does not follow his counsel; it seeks to clarify the pseudomoral (or pseudoreligious) myth that animates Nazism and radical evil through an analysis of Arendt's imagery of the death camps as "hell on earth" (1951, 445), an analysis illuminated by Kristeva's notion of abjection (see Kristeva 2001). This notion provides clarification of Kateb's insight that a radical exorcism is at work in the pseudomoral myth while avoiding (as does Kateb) the theory of the eternal scapegoat—a theory Arendt rejects at the outset of the *Origins of Totalitarianism* (1951).

3. For a ground-breaking analysis of how Kristeva's notion of abjection provides crucial illumination of Arendt's thought see Moruzzi (2000). Moruzzi's analysis focuses on the ways in which Arendt's political thought attempts both to exclude the abject

from political life while at the same recognizes the force of the abject in her analysis of the worldly achievement of artifice and her understanding of political performance as requiring the actor to assume the masquerade of individual self-representation. Moruzzi devotes an entire chapter to an analysis of the banality of evil, arguing that it is rooted in the thoughtless refusal of this masquerade (2000, 114–35). She ends her analysis of evil emphasizing the hopefulness inherent in new beginnings. My focus in this essay is to render problematic the promise of beginning granted in the event of natality, arguing that the event of natality carries its abjection with it, and thereby the promise of beginning is tempered by the threat of radical evil. Unfortunately, Moruzzi is not able to consider Kristeva's work on Arendt which only appeared in French in 1999 and was not available before Moruzzi's book went to press.

4. We must be careful, therefore, not to jump to the conclusion that Arendt changes her mind on radical evil. She agrees with Jaspers that radical evil cannot be attributed to a demonic nature. Later in her exchange with Gershom Scholem, she argues that evil is not radical if by that is understood "deep." Rather, she writes, evil is like a fungus that spreads on the surface of things (1978a, 251). That it spreads like a fungus, however, does not make it any less radical or horrible. As I shall argue later in the essay, the fungus of radical evil points to its banality—that it is an attempt to fill in the cracks and holes that characterize human finitude. Arendt's use of the metaphor of fungus indicates that she disagrees with Kant's argument that radical evil has a *root* in human nature.

5. See also "Social Science and Concentration Camps" in *Essays in Understanding* (1994). Arendt writes, "The concentration camps are the laboratories in the experiment of total domination, for human nature being what it is, this goal can be achieved only under the extreme circumstances of a *human-made hell*" (1994, 240; italics added).

6. For a detailed analysis of Arendt's understanding of the hypocrite, see Moruzzi 2000, 32–37. Confining her analysis to Arendt's *On Revolution*, Moruzzi emphasizes the hypocrite's refusal to understand the self as artifice, a multiple and changing appearance among a multiplicity of appearances. While entirely in agreement with Moruzzi's reading of the hypocrite in *On Revolution*, I want to suggest that Arendt in *Life of the Mind* (1978b) adds significantly to her own understanding of the hypocrite by introducing the hypocrite's "broken promise to pleasure." While it is beyond the scope of this paper, Arendt's notion of the "broken promise to pleasure" further illuminates those like Eichmann who were all too ready to sacrifice desire for duty.

7. Insisting on an affective dimension to political life, Arendt is in the tradition of Montesquieu who argues that the laws and institutions (the form) of any political regime are always animated by an *affective principle* (the spirit of the laws) that establishes the political bond. Thus, the laws and institutions of a monarchy are animated by the love of honor, while the laws and institutions of a republic are animated by love of virtue. For Montesquieu's argument see *Spirit of the Laws*, especially Part I. For Arendt's reading of Montesquieu on this point, see Arendt 1994, 331–33.

8. Indeed, in "Philosophy and Religion," Arendt argues that the remedy to totalitarian evil is to embrace the *doubt* that characterizes the modern secular world rather than belief in heaven or fear of hell (1994, 384).

9. For an extended analysis of Arendt, Lessing, and the ways in which friendship might provide a bulwark against radical evil, see Disch (1994). Disch and I do not disagree on the centrality of friendship for confronting the evil of totalitarianism. Disch's analysis, however, concentrates on how given identities can be challenged by the "vigilant partisanship" of friendship. My focus differs from Disch's analysis in that I argue that political friendship is the affective principle that animates the political bond or what Arendt calls the "solidarity of humanity." The "predicament of common responsibility" in which this solidarity is both terrifying and unifying is able to be borne through this type of friendship.

10. Following Montesquieu, I want to emphasize that in arguing for political friendship as a remedy for radical evil, it is also the case that this affective dimension of political life cannot be divorced from the institutions and laws that form governments. It is outside the scope of this paper to raise the further question, "What would the form of institutions and laws look like if animated by these fragile friendships that insist on the burden of questioning and doubt?" While this may seem to provide a "weak remedy" to radical evil, it seems to me that such weakness or lack of guarantees is endemic to what Arendt calls the "fragility of human affairs."

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