

Toward a Karendtian Theory of Political Evil

--Connecting Kant and Arendt on Political Wrongdoing--

Penultimate version.

Forthcoming in *Estudos Kantianos*.

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Introduction¹

This paper combines, transforms, and integrates Kant's and Arendt's thinking on evil into a unified "Karendtian" theory of political evil. For both, human evil is parasitic, feeding on human being so as to destroy it and make it suffer—analogous to how cancer operates on living organs—and the worse we lose our morally and emotionally healthy ways, the further we are detached from reality and engage not only in patterns of (self- and other) destruction but also in profound rationalizing and self-aggrandizing self-deception. Hence, to bring ourselves to partake in horrific wrongdoing, we self-deceptively destroy human being in the name of the good, be it morality, religion ("God"), our nation or people, or flourishing human nature. Political evil, correspondingly, is a type of self- and other destructive and self-aggrandizing action that we do together in the political sphere—what Arendt calls the sphere of action and Kant calls the public sphere—and in its worst forms, political evil involves establishing state practices of continuous self- and other destruction in the name of law and justice. Although Arendt engaged closely with neither Kant's legal-political philosophy nor his account of human nature, this paper joins the spirit of those—from Ronald Beiner, Seyla Benhabib, and Howard Williams onwards—who argue that Kant's deep influence on Arendt and Arendt's incredible ingenuity with regard to thinking anew and deeply about politics, makes bringing the two of them into conversation on the topic of political evil a particularly fruitful enterprise.²

Because human evil, for Kant and Arendt, necessarily is parasitic on human being, to understand both it is useful to understand their general accounts of human life on planet Earth—what Arendt calls "the human condition" and Kant calls "the predisposition to good" and the "propensity to evil" in human nature ("moral anthropology"). In addition, we need to understand their theories of how we realize ourselves well, as free and emotionally healthy and morally responsible beings, and doing this brings us to Kant's account of the highest (personal or political) good and Arendt's theory of action, solitude, and living as "somebody" rather than "nobody." Together, these theories critique how we realize ourselves as embodied, social, and free and creative beings in morally responsible ways—individually, as cultures, and by

¹ Thanks to Lucy Allais, Sven Arntzen, Zach Biondi, Jochen Bojanowski, Katerina Deligiorgi, Nick Dunn, Tamara Fakhoury, Sarah Holtman, Efrain Lazos, Olga Lenczewska, William Levine, Marita Rainsborough, Jordan Pascoe, Lara Scaglia, Susanne Sreedhar, Ashwini Vasanthakumar, James Warren, Shelley Weinberg, Elizabeth Widmer, Howard Williams, and the participants at AMINTAPHIL at Loyola University (September 2023), at the Murray Lecture at the University of Saskatchewan (November 2023), at the annual meeting of the Norwegian Society for Legal Philosophy at the University of Oslo (December 2023), and at the "What's Left of Kant" conference at the University of Chicago (March 2024). This is not to say that these thinkers necessarily agree with what I am arguing for in this paper; we each publish in our own names. But it is to say that I am very grateful that they are who they are, including being extraordinarily generous.

² Like most philosophers of her time, Arendt didn't work on Kant's "The Doctrine of Right," which is why she—like many other Kant-inspired scholars, like John Rawls and Jürgen Habermas—tried to develop one on Kant's behalf. She did so by drawing on his *Critique of Judgment*. For more on this, see Varden (in progress).

establishing public (legal and political) institutions. Once we have this conception of the human condition in view, we can explain why we do not always do this or why we have a temptation to do bad things—indeed, why we can become tempted to destroy ourselves, each other, our cultures, and our public institutions.

The first part below focuses on Kant. I sketch his ideas about the highest (personal and political) good; the predisposition to good in human nature; the propensity to evil; and the legal-political conditions of the republic, despotism, anarchy, and barbarism, including their related principles of law, freedom, and violence. Human evil for Kant, we see here, is destruction aimed at oneself or others, a kind of destruction that makes the highest good—whether personal or political—impossible for those subjected to it. Section 2 focuses on related, key proposals of Arendt’s theory of the human condition—including her theories of *vita activa* and *vita contemplativa*—before outlining her theories regarding human evil, including her theories of power vs. strength vs. force vs. violence; tyranny vs. totalitarianism; the mob vs. the elite vs. the totalitarian movement (masses and totalitarian leader); modernity; and the Pariah vs. the Parvenue. Section 3 takes a few further steps towards a Karendtian theory of political evil by weaving together some of Kant’s ideas on the propensity to evil and Arendt’s ideas on totalitarianism, whereas in the final section, I briefly explore what Arendt calls “a theory of judgment” and Kant refers to as “the principle of politics.” I conclude the paper by linking core ideas to Arendt’s and Kant’s theories of *sensus communis* and of the perspectives of the spectator vs. the actor.

1. Kant on the Highest Good and on Political Evil

Kant argues that from the first-personal point of view of virtue (first-personal ethics), the highest good is “the union and harmony of human morality ... and human happiness” (TP 8: 279), with “virtue ... [being] the condition ... [since it] is always the supreme [unconditional] good ... whereas happiness is something that ... is not of itself absolutely and in all respects good but always presupposes morally lawful conduct as its condition” (CPrR 5: 110–11).³ The highest first-personal good, then, is to pursue happiness within the bounds of morality, which means to pursue it within the bounds of virtue (“Tugend”) and right (“Recht”). The highest *political* good, in turn, is “perpetual peace” (MM 6: 355), which is only possible if we together develop good cultures and public political institutions within rightful legal frameworks of domestic, international, and cosmopolitan public right (“Recht”); only in this way is justice (“Gerecht”) established. Insofar as we strive to live in morally responsible ways, therefore, we strive to realize these first-personal personal and political highest goods. Instead of pursuing the highest (political) good, however, we often fail and participate in wrongdoing and we can find ourselves in situations from which there are no morally good ways out, where being subjected to or engaging in violence against others is unavoidable. To understand all of this, we need to acquaint ourselves with Kant’s accounts of what he calls the predisposition to good, the four legal-political conditions, the propensity to evil, and the distinction between formal and material wrongdoing.⁴

³ Throughout this text, all of Kant’s works are referenced by means of the standard Prussian Academy Pagination as well as the following abbreviations: “A” for *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View*; “GW” for *Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals*; “MM” for *The Metaphysics of Morals*; “R” for *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason*; “CPrR” for *Critique of Practical Reason*, and TP is “On the common saying: That may be correct in theory, but it is of no use in practice.” “R” appears in Kant (1996b); “A” in Kant (2007); while the rest appear in Kant (1996a).

⁴ Since other Kantians or I have already published a good deal on the Kant ideas covered in this section, the exposition here is brief. Also, since Arendt’s ideas are not commonly known among Kantians and Kantians are the main audience for this paper, I spend more time introducing her ideas in the next sections. Also, more generally,

Kant's theory of the predisposition to good in human nature is useful to understand both his conception of human happiness and some common ways in which we tend to engage in wrongdoing, whether as individuals or as societies. Kant views the predisposition to good as constituted by three other predispositions: to "animality" (which makes us a "living being"), to "humanity" (which makes us a "rational being"), and to "personality" (which makes us a "responsible being") (R 6: 26). Breaking these predispositions down further, Kant holds that our distinctly animalistic, earthly nature is enabled by three reflexively self-conscious drives, namely to self-preservation, to sex, and to affectionate community; our predisposition to humanity is enabled by our reflective social sense of self and drive to freedom (to set ends of our own); and, finally, our predisposition to personality is enabled by the reflectively self-conscious "I" and our practical reason, and it is characterized by moral feeling (the "ought").

Importantly too, Kant thinks that we develop this predisposition to good in human nature as a whole by means of our imagination—since "happiness is not an ideal of reason but of imagination" (GW 4: 418)—and we do so by means also of five further kinds of thought: abstract conceptual (theoretical and practical), associative, teleological, aesthetic, and judging. Moreover, to do all of this well—if we really do pursue the highest good by integrating, transforming, and unifying our animality, humanity, and personality into a unified, harmonious whole by means of our various capacities for thought—we must also learn realize them in ways attuned to what Kant calls our "natural" and "moral" vital forces; only then can we morally own what we are all about and go about our lives wisely.⁵ If we combine this with Kant's ideas of the highest (first-personal and political) good(s), we must pursue happiness within the parameters set by morality—understood as comprising both our first-personal (im/perfect) duties constitutive of virtuous internal freedom and the enforceable principles of right constitutive of rightful external freedom—in a republic that secures perpetual peace in the domestic, international, and cosmopolitan spheres.⁶ Our personal home, then, is ideally a foundation upon which we ground and constitute our animalistically embodied, social, and free and creative beings in morally responsible ways as who we are and who we strive to become, while our

this paper is written in the spirit of Kant('s Sapere Aude) and Arendt('s "thinking without a bannister") in that, like them, my aim is not to refute all other possible interpretations of the texts in question but to show what I believe can do philosophically with the ideas found there. This leaves open both the possibility of and encouragement to develop other interpretations that can do even more with the philosophical resources found in their texts.

⁵ For more on Kant on the vital forces, see, for example, CPR 5: 162 and MM 6: 400. For more on how I interpret this aspect of Kant, see Varden (2020a: 51–55). I believe Arendt, like many others, does not appreciate the importance of the natural vital force for Kant; that the natural vital force is an internal resource of ours that we need to attend to live well. Hence, Arendt says that for Kant, "Every inclination turns outward, it leans out of the self in the direction of whatever may affect me from the outside world.... Under no circumstances can my inclination be determined by my intercourse with myself; if I bring myself into play, if I reflect upon myself, I lose, as it were, the object of my inclination" (Arendt 1965–66/2003: 81) I agree with Arendt that my discussions with myself and my reflections are not, for Kant, the direct way to realize the non-moral aspects of myself. However, this does not mean that I do not have a duty to attend to them; it only means that I have an indirect duty to attend to—to feel—whether my realization of my non-moralizable aspects (my animality and my social sense of self) is harmonious and strong, how my ways of living affect my natural vital force. In my view, this is internally related to how Kant thinks that we have indirect, not direct, duties also with regard to other animals. For more on this last point, see Varden (2020b).

⁶ Arendt was unaware of how Kant distinguishes between right (what she calls "legality") and virtue (which she calls "morality"). Though she notices in her *Lectures* that Kant knows his argument about virtue cannot be used to solve core problem of legal and political philosophy (Arendt 1989: 17), she thinks Kant "never quite distinguished between legality and morality" (Arendt 1965–66/2003: 108). Relatedly, although common in her time, her reading of Kant's "Doctrine of Right" was quite poor. Finally, to the best of my knowledge, Arendt never worked on Kant's account of human nature—both the predisposition to good and the propensity to evil—as we find it in his *Religion*. For more on all these topics, see Varden (2020a; in progress).

countries are the legal, political, and cultural homes that ground our shared projects in various geographical locations for realizing who we are and who we strive to become. In these ways, morality (virtue and right) sets the framework within which we establish our grounding, personal homes (“my home”) and our grounding, shared political homes (“my country”).

To understand the highest political good as perpetual peace, it is also useful first to delineate Kant’s account of the ideal legal-political condition (“the republic”) as well as the other three possible legal-political conditions (“anarchy,” “despotism,” and “barbarism”). Kant’s argument is as follows: Law (“Gesetz”), freedom (“Freiheit”), and violence (“Gewalt”)⁷ can be combined in four different ways, resulting in four legal-political conditions: “the republic,” “despotism,” “barbarism,” and “anarchy” (A 7: 330–31). Anarchy is a free condition, but it is “devoid of justice” (MM 6: 312) because it lacks *rightful* coercion (it has “freedom” and provisional “law,” but no “violence”); barbarism is an unfree condition of only “violence” (and no “freedom” and no “law”); despotism is an unfree condition of “law” that aims to impose specific conceptions of happiness (it has “law” and “violence,” but no “freedom”); and, finally, the republic is the ideal condition we should strive toward because it realizes a condition of rightful external freedom that can exist in perpetuity (“law,” “freedom,” and “violence”). Therefore, although only anarchy is without violence, the republic is the only legal-political condition in which laws of freedom set the coercive (“Zwang”) framework within which everyone must interact, and though this condition is backed up by the threat of violence, insofar as people act rightfully, no violence is used against anyone residing in the territory. In this sense, only the republic has a coercive framework that puts the threat of violence in the hands of a public authority that represents every citizen but no one citizen in particular. Only the republic can, therefore, in theory sustain itself as a rightful reality in perpetuity since only it is consistent with each person’s right to freedom, understood as the right to interact with others in such a way that they are coercively subjected only to laws of freedom and not to one another’s arbitrary choices (MM 6: 237). Finally, since actual historical states begin in very non-ideal societal circumstances—with various social groups being oppressed—they always participate (actively or passively) in wrongdoing involving groups of citizens (A 7: 327–28).

According to Kant, all human evil (wrongdoing) aims at the destruction of a truly free world by undermining or attacking oneself or another.⁸ Kant’s theory of virtue maintains that we have perfect and imperfect duties: Perfect duties are duties not to act destructively against ourselves or others (personally or politically); to act only on universalizable maxims and thus, to use Arendt’s formulation, not “make yourself an exception ... [and thereby] contradict yourself” (1978: 188). Imperfect duties, in turn, are duties to work toward a more fully free world by perfecting our own ability to both set (personal and political) ends of our own (in line with what makes us flourish as the kinds of persons we are) and assist others in their (personal and political) end-setting (their pursuit of happiness). If we pursue our conception of happiness within the boundaries set by these duties, we are pursuing the highest personal and political good and we deserve to be happy; if we do not, we are engaging in wrongdoing and participate

⁷ There is disagreement about whether we should translate “Gewalt” as “force,” “power,” or “violence.” For more on this, see Varden (2022a). For the purposes of this paper, note that I translate “Gewalt” as violence, which fits well with Arendt’s ideas of violence vs. power vs. strength vs. force in the next section—and with Kant’s claim that there is no “Gewalt” in a state of anarchy.

⁸ Arendt interprets Kant on evil as being self-destructive. For example, in her *Lectures*, she notes that for Kant, “evil by its very nature is self-destructive,” quoting Kant in “Theory and Practice” where he says that “evil ... destroys itself” (Arendt 1989: 51). I agree that evil is necessarily self-destructive as it does not establish self-sustaining reality, but I think it is more accurate to say that it is self- and other destructive. To draw on the analogy to cancer again: cancer does destroy itself but in the process it also necessarily destroys (an) other living being(s).

in self- or other destruction (evil). Kant's account of right, in turn, shows us why we interact rightfully with others only insofar as we do not violate their innate, private, or public rights to freedom, which is only possible if we establish a public authority (a state) with a republican form. The public authority acts on behalf of the citizens—it is inherently representative—by positing, applying, and enforcing laws grounded on the principles of innate, private, and public right. This is why and how establishing the public authority is a moral precondition for living together peacefully as free and equal beings under laws of freedom in perpetuity.

Historically, however, as individuals and as cultures, we do not start from the moral point of view, but the finite point of view of “animality” and “humanity” (pursue happiness) and strive to develop “personality” (morality). For example, with regard to the challenges of developing moral cultures, Kant argues that “nature within the human being strives to lead him from culture to morality, and not (as reason prescribes) beginning with morality and its law, to lead him to a culture designed to be appropriate to morality” (A 7: 327–28). Kant also (in)famously argues that the project of developing public legal and political institutions of freedom is not dependent on individuals and cultures first becoming virtuous; he proposes that the problem of establishing a rightful state can be solved by a “nation of devils . . . if only they have understanding”—and, so, as not hell-bent on self- or other destruction (PP 8: 366). The idea here, I believe, is that as long as people are at least rationally self-interested (use their intellect or understanding—“Verstand”—to pursue their interests), they will seek peace, which is only possible if we establish public legal and political institutions.⁹

Consistent with the above, Kant thinks we have a perfect duty of virtue not to undermine and, as Barbara Herman recently (2022) has shown us so clearly, an imperfect juridical duty of virtue to support, uphold, and continue to develop and improve our legal-political institutional framework.¹⁰ In addition, we engage in punishable wrongdoing if we coercively refuse to interact with others as delineated by public laws of freedom or if we corrupt a public office we are entrusted with by treating it as if it is our private sphere of dominance. Finally, Kant argues that because we are animalistically embodied, social beings—and, so, we are always located, and, so, can be trapped, in space and time—we can find ourselves in situations from which there are no morally good ways out. In these situations, our options are either to let formal and material wrongdoing happen (to us or to others) or to commit a formal wrong. Kant's most famous example of this kind is found in his account of lying to the murderer at the door. By lying, one does not wrong the murderer materially (as the murderer is irrationally trying to

⁹ This general idea is tremendously influential in political theory. Hobbes's *Leviathan* represents an absolutely brilliant legal positivist instantiation of such a theory, and we also find it in the works of liberal thinkers. For example, we find this theory in the ideas of “modus vivendi” in both Anna J. Cooper (1892/1998: 128) and, much later, John Rawls (1993/2005: 147). Both Cooper and Rawls view this idea of modus vivendi as central to how the Enlightenment—understood as legal, political, ethical, and cultural principles of freedom becoming understood as fundamental to moral interactions—could happen in Europe. They both argue that, first, Europe had a long period of devastating wars that no one country was able to win. Cooper adds to this that if she is right in her judgment that the USA is a country of hope with regard to the project of freedom, then it is because internal to it, no one group can dominate all the others (Cooper 1892/1998: 127–30). And, of course, all three—Kant, Cooper, and Rawls—share the conviction that once freedom takes hold by being valued—whether for individuals, cultures, or states—the project of freedom becomes easier too. As indicated above, I agree that Kant has this argument, but that he add an ideal argument that shows that even perfectly virtuous, happy people will want to establish public legal and political institutions since they are the means through which we can interact consistent with each person's innate right to freedom and dignity.

¹⁰ See Barbara Herman (2022) for more on our imperfect judicial duties to build and improve our inherited legal-political institutions.

damage us), but one does commit a formal wrong (lying, even to protect ourselves, is inconsistent with treating the wrongdoer with dignity).¹¹

For our purposes here, we do not need to go into any further detail on the above points. Instead, we can turn directly to Kant's account of the propensity to evil, which he divides into three degrees: "frailty," "impurity," and "depravity" (R 6: 29–32). On my favored interpretation, frailty is an instance of self-deceived or non-self-deceived wrongdoing; impurity is a pattern of wrongdoing that also may or may not involve self-deception; and depravity is a self- and other destructive way of going about life that is always self-deceived. To be tempted in this way is to simply do what we want to do instead of making sure that we always act within the boundaries of what we are morally obligated to do. To use Kant's terms, we act out of mere "self-love" and not "moral love;" our natural and moral vital forces are not harmonious. Because it is unpleasant to be in disharmony, we are tempted to misdescribe what we are doing—or engage in self-deception. Moreover, acting in self-deceived ways—doing bad in the name of, or under the guise of, the good—is always worse than not since ridding oneself of self-deception adds its own layer of difficulty insofar as one strives to live better. Similarly, an instance of wrongdoing is generally better than having made the wrongdoing in question into a pattern or, even worse, part of a generally self- and other destructive way of living. To illustrate, stealing only once is less bad than if I make a habit of it, which in turn is less bad than if I generally try to live life such that I take as much as possible from what belongs to others. All evil, in turn, involves bad conscience for a morally conscientious or responsible person—someone who has "personality" or is susceptible to "moral feeling"—where bad conscience is "practical reason holding the human being's duty before [them] for [their] acquittal or condemnation in every case that comes under a law" (MM 6: 400).¹²

On this latter point, Arendt comes close to Kant in that she also views evil as involving an inability to be a person: to be "somebody" rather than "nobody" (1965–66/2003: 111). To be somebody is to have "personality," Arendt argues, which "is the simple, almost automatic result of thoughtfulness" (95). In "Some Questions of Moral Philosophy," Arendt draws on Socrates's conception of wrongdoing by saying that it "is whatever I cannot bear to have done, and the wrongdoer would be somebody unfit for intercourse, especially for the thinking intercourse of him with himself" (124). Interestingly too, Arendt argues that "the mode of existence present in this silent dialogue of myself with myself, I ... call solitude ... [which] means that I'm two-in-one" (98). Arendt continues by arguing that thoughts and memory are constitutive of solitude (understood as "two-in-one") and that people who refuse to do this are the most dangerous of individuals because they are unrooted and limitless in their possible evil. Risking drawing the analogy to illness too far: most illnesses will not kill you (but can even make you stronger); cancer, if not stopped, will kill you and thereby also itself. There are no boundaries.

To illustrate, in *Life of the Mind*, Arendt explains that one way to capture what made Eichmann's evil "banal" was not its "stupidity" but its "thoughtlessness" (1978: 4).¹³ Correspondingly, in "Some Questions of Moral Philosophy," Arendt argues that "the greatest

¹¹ I return to lying toward the end of this paper.

¹² I have changed the translation to make it gender neutral in a way that the original German is ("Denn Gewissen ist die dem Menschen in jedem Fall eines Gesetzes seine Pflicht zum Lossprechen oder Verurteilen vorhaltende praktische Vernunft").

¹³ See also Arendt (1978: 179–93) for more on the idea of the "two-in-one." In recent years, evidence has come to light that Eichmann's antisemitism was much deeper than he claimed during his trial. This fact does not, I believe, affect the core of the argument in this paper beyond saying that maybe some of Eichmann's terrifying ramblings were intentionally incoherent (in an effort to deceive). As we see below, in my view and in contrast to Arendt, I think that there is always a person there to hold accountable as long as the person is not simply incapable of moral responsibility at all and would need a legal guardian and mental health care.

evil is not radical, it has no roots, and because it has no roots it has no limitations, it can go to unthinkable extremes and sweep over the whole world.... [I]n rootless evil there is no person left whom one could ever forgive" (1965–66/2003: 95). Later, she writes:

If he is a thinking being, rooted in his thoughts and remembrances, and hence knowing that he has to live with himself, there will be limits to what he can permit himself to do, and these limits will not be imposed on him from the outside, but will be self-set;... but limitless, extreme evil is possible only where these self-grown roots, which automatically limit the possibilities, are entirely absent.... [T]he loss of [the capacity of] solitude ... [and] with it the loss of creativity ... [is] the loss of the self that constitutes the person. (101)

And later:

The greatest evil perpetrated is the evil committed by nobodies, that is, by human beings who refuse to be persons.... [W]rongdoers who refuse to think by themselves what they are doing and who also refuse in retrospect to think about it, that is, go back and remember what they did ... 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 the very least persons. (111–12)

Note that if we read Kant and Socrates in this two-in-one way, which in important ways I agree we should, then if we do bad things and do not morally own them by assuming responsibility for them, we are unable to be with ourselves and are thus emotionally unable to use our conscience as the incredible resource it is. Instead, we try to stay away from or block what we have done by avoiding solitude where we can remember and think about what we have done—or be with ourselves. Consistent with this, in "Personal Responsibility under Dictatorship," Arendt argues that not only was "*respectable society* ... the first to yield" to the Nazis and "the doubters and skeptics" much more reliable because "they are used to examine [*sic*] things and to make up their own minds," but "best of all" are "those who know only one thing for certain: that whatever else happens, as long as we live we shall have to live together with ourselves" (1964/2003: 44–45). In section 3 below, I argue that we can develop these ideas of Kant and Arendt by arguing that insofar as we fail to be morally responsible, we fail to constitute ourselves as not only "two-in-one" but also "three-in-one"; we stop being able to not only reflect functionally but also feel. Correspondingly, as we will see in the next section, totalitarian evil aims not only to make it impossible for people to set and pursue ends (their own and political ones), but also to totally numb them—to force them into a condition of living death.

2. Arendt on The Human Condition and on Political Evil

Arendt's *original* interest in philosophy was not in political philosophy. However, the realities of Nazism in Germany—Arendt was 26 years old when Hitler was elected to office in 1933—made political realities in general and political evil in particular the most important topics for her throughout her life. Also important were two extraordinary facts: first, that academic philosophers were generally unable to recognize the problem of totalitarianism—a fact that deeply unsettled and scared her; and second, that the philosophical canon did not have the necessary theoretical resources for understanding this reality, including, of course, the resources that would assist those who were either trying to protect themselves against it or to

stop it. In line with her analysis of the elite in *Origins* (see below), her 1964 “Zur Person” interview with Günter Gaus also draws attention to how it profoundly shook her that all her non-Jewish academic friends—at least for a moment—were excited when Hitler came to power in 1933.¹⁴ The problem of academics’ (including philosophers’) bad judgment and lack of comprehension of political evil were, in other words, major theoretical drivers throughout her life and work. Like the section on Kant above, this section also starts by outlining ideas about human good—what Arendt calls the human condition—before proceeding to her account of political evil in general as well as in modernity and in totalitarian regimes specifically. I also indicate, briefly, why she thinks the so-called Western¹⁵ philosophical tradition was ill-equipped to analyze politics; indeed, why she proposes that the unprecedented evil unleashed by modern totalitarianism made it evident that we need a new way of thinking about politics on planet Earth, one that allows us to transform our way of living on the planet into a new and better version.

The Human Condition divides human life into two parts: *vita activa* (the active life) and *vita contemplativa* (the philosophical or scholarly life). *Vita activa* (the main focus of *The Human Condition*), Arendt posits, is constituted by three types of activity: “labor,” “work,” and “action.” Labor, Arendt argues, produces what is needed for the self-sustaining activities of biological life (eating, drinking, resting). As *animal laborans*, we labor so that we can consume the products of labor, which, in turn, enables us to labor more. This continuous, repetitive cycle of reproductive activity “is prescribed by the biological process of the living organism,” and though the activity of all human animal laborans sustains the human species, the end of the “toil and trouble” of each individual animal laborans is “death” (Arendt 1958/1998: 98). Labor is also fundamentally a “worldless” activity, a fact we realize radically when we are in great physical pain since our human body is then “thrown back upon itself” by being forced to “concentrate ... [only on staying] alive, and [it] remains imprisoned in its metabolism with nature without ever transcending or freeing itself from the recurring cycle of its own functioning” (115). This feature of labor, in turn, is why it is tempting for humans to commit the “violent injustices” involved in “forcing one part of humanity” to pay the “enormous ... price for the elimination of life’s burden from the shoulders of” the rest via slavery and servitude (119). Paradoxically, however, even though it is tempting for humans to try to rid themselves of animal laborans’ necessity,

the price for absolute freedom from necessity is, in a sense, life itself, or rather the substitution for vicarious life for real life.... [Because] the necessities of life are so closely bound together in the biological life cycle ... the perfect elimination of the pain and effort of labor would not only rob biological life of its most natural pleasures but deprive the specifically human life of its very liveliness and vitality.... For mortals, the “easy life of the gods” would be a lifeless life. (119–20)

¹⁴ For the full interview, see <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dVSRJC4KAiE>. See also Arendt (1964/2003: 22–25). Beyond what I engage below, notice that Arendt’s proposal that an ineliminable source of moral and emotional danger for academics is their liability to make up a theory when there is something they don’t understand. To illustrate this, consider how instead of facing his racism, sexism, and heterosexism, for example, Kant came up with theories that “justified” his prejudices instead.

¹⁵ “Western” history, just like “Western” philosophy, is a complicated phrase. For example, in any true sense, the Western philosophical canon is not yet properly representative of “Western” philosophical thought.

Although this worldless aspect of us is such that being forced only to focus on it is not to live a full human life, it is also the case that a “philosophy of life that does not arrive ... at the affirmation of ‘eternal recurrence’ (*ewige Wiederkehr*) as the highest principle of all being, simply does not know what it is talking about” (97). Animal laborans—our animalistically embodied being—is an ineliminable, valuable aspect of earthly human life.

“Work,” in turn, refers to our ability as *homo faber* to create a world by fabricating artifacts that last through time, such as tools, roads, houses, and buildings. Although these artifacts can be used up—they are not eternally durable in the way substances of natural, biological things are—we do not consume them to stay alive. And because the worlds we create have durability, they have objectivity: “Against the subjectivity of men stands the objectivity of the man-made world rather than the sublime indifference of an untouched nature... Without a world between men and nature, there is eternal [biological, physical] movement, but no objectivity” (Arendt 1958/1998: 137). And as nature (through labor and consumption) is “the condition of human *life*,” work is “the condition under which this specifically human life can be at home on earth” (135). Importantly too, both labor and work involve violence; we consume (via labor) or make durable artifacts (via work) by destroying something natural. The necessary violence involved in work is why, Arendt suggests, “human productivity was by definition bound to result in a Promethean revolt because it could erect a man-made world only after destroying part of God-created nature” (135).

Whereas labor is private or worldless, work is world-making and public via “the exchange market,” where *homo faber* can showcase and be praised for their great products (Arendt 1958/1998: 160). This does not mean that work is fully public, however, because *homo faber* requires isolation to produce artifacts: “Isolation from others is the necessary life condition of every mastership which consists in being alone with the ‘idea,’ the mental image of the thing to be” (161). And via work, *homo faber*, unlike animal laborans, endures beyond death by means of the durability of its products, including works of art. In fact, Arendt thinks that “their outstanding permanence ... [makes] ... works of art ... the most intensely worldly of all tangible things; their durability is almost untouched by the corroding effect of natural processes, since they are not subject to the use of living creatures, a use which ... can only destroy them” (167). Inspired by religious or mythological stories, great art reveals “this thing-world ... spectacularly as the non-mortal home for mortal beings... [W]orldly stability ... [becomes] transparent in the permanence of art, so that ... something immortal achieved by mortal hands, has become tangibly present, to shine and to be seen, to sound and to be heard, to speak and to be read” (168).

The source of art, Arendt continues, is “the human capacity for thought” and “art works ... are thought things” (1958/1998: 168). Moreover, art does not merely transform; it transfigures material objects through thought before reifying and materializing them through making tangible things, “such as books, paintings, sculptures, and compositions” (168). The price for this reification and materialization “is life itself: it is always the ‘dead letter’ in which the ‘living spirit’ must survive, a deadness from which it can be rescued only when the dead letter comes again into contact with a life willing to resurrect it, although this resurrection of the dead shares with all living things that it, too, will die again” (169). Moreover, though thought is the source of art, Arendt maintains differences between art, science, and philosophy:

Thought and cognition are not the same. Thought, the source of art works, is manifest without transformation or transfiguration in all great philosophy, whereas the chief manifestation of the cognitive processes, by which we acquire and store up knowledge, is the sciences. Cognition always pursues a definite

aim.... Thought ... has neither an end nor an aim outside itself, and it does not even produce results. (170)¹⁶

Great philosophy simply manifests thought without transformation, science uses our cognitive powers to acquire and store knowledge, while art transforms and transfigures thought—and in this way makes human life on planet Earth an incredible home in the fullest sense. Importantly too, the language of modern science differs from common language, which is one reason why a scientist does not (as such) have the required language or knowledge to do politics (action) well. Common language is that through which action can be done, which requires that we use technology and science to further our purposes (rather than the other way around). Moreover, “thought ... is ... possible ... and actual ... whenever men live under the conditions of political freedom ... [and u]nfortunately ... no other human capacity is so vulnerable” (324). Free thought is, in other words, a great achievement for a society because it is both tremendously vulnerable and only possible under conditions of political freedom. Indeed, in her “Some Questions of Moral Philosophy,” Arendt argues that people who abandon their own project of being morally responsible persons—of living life with “integrity”—are unable to produce great works of art because, regardless of how artistically gifted they are, they are no longer capable of “thoughtfulness” (thought and remembrance) (1965–66/2003: 97).¹⁷ As we will see in sections 2.1 and 3 below, these ideas on art, science, and philosophy are tremendously useful as we try to understand political evil.

Through “action” we create the inherently “public part of the world,” the polis or that public space where free thought can exist; it “is the organization of the people as it arises out of acting and speaking together, and its true space lies between people living together for this purpose” (Arendt 1958/1998: 198). While labor pushes us into the human world out of “necessity” and work pushes us there for “utility,” it is our freedom—that each of us comes into the world with the innate capacity to begin “something new on our own initiative” and where the “I” that comes into the world is actually not just “the beginning of something but of somebody”—that pushes us into the human world through speech and action (177). Through action and deeds, humans

show who they are, reveal actively their unique personal identities and thus make their appearance in the human world, while their physical identities appear without any activity of their own in the unique shape of the body and sound of the voice. This disclosure of “who” in contradistinction to “what” somebody is—[their] qualities, gifts, talents, and shortcomings, which [they] may display or hide—is implicit in everything somebody says and does. It can be hidden only in complete silence and perfect passivity, but its disclosure can almost never be achieved as a willful purpose, as though one possessed and could dispose of this “who” in the same manner he has and can dispose of qualities. On the contrary, it is more than likely that the “who,” which appears so clearly and unmistakably to

¹⁶ For an excellent opening for further reflection on Arendt and Kant on thought and cognition—as well as on Arendt’s *The Human Condition* and *The Life of the Mind*—see Jonas (1977). Jonas also interestingly concludes his reflections by suggesting, contra Arendt, that published works of philosophy turn the “pure activity [of thinking] into a worldly deed” (43).

¹⁷ For a very different take on Arendt on this topic and her relationship to Kant, see Georg Kateb (1999). Notice also that follows from what I say above (and what is to come) that I disagree with Kateb’s take on both Kant’s and Arendt’s takes on political judgment. I find it implausible to attribute to Arendt political judgment as merely aesthetic judgement that subordinates morality to aesthetics or to Kant’s account political judgment as simply applications of abstract, universal truths (134).

others, remains hidden from the person himself, like the *daimon* in Greek religion which accompanies each [hu]man [being] throughout [their] life, always looking over ... [their] shoulder from behind and thus visible only to those ... [they] encounter. (179–80)

We each have a way of being spontaneous, of going about things, a way that is much more obvious to others than to ourselves. Also, with each human being there is an absolute new beginning. In fact, new human life (“natality”) has “the closest connection” to action (9), because it is in it that “the faculty of action is ontologically rooted” (247). And because each human being is different from every other—we live “as a distinct and unique being among equals” (178)—humankind is inherently characterized by “plurality” (175). Importantly too, it is here, in natality and plurality, Arendt thinks, that hope for a better future lies. Relatedly, she thinks that because action is “the infinite improbability which occurs regularly,” it is “the one miracle-working faculty of man ... [as was proposed by] Jesus of Nazareth, whose insights into this faculty can be compared in their originality and unprecedentedness with Socrates’s insights into the possibility of thought contribution” (247). Indeed, she thinks that this is why Jesus of Nazareth “likened the power to forgive to the more general power of performing miracles, putting both on the same level and within the reach of man” (247). Forgiveness can reach the roots and help us heal after we have done wrong.

Insofar as people live together in this public way—as free and equal—they become powerful: “Human power corresponds to the condition of plurality” (Arendt 1958/1998: 201).¹⁸ Hence, in contrast to “strength,” which is “the natural quality of an individual seen in isolation, power springs up between men when they act together and vanishes the moment they disperse” (200). “Power,” consequently exists “only where word and deed have not parted company, where words are not empty and deeds not brutal, where words are not used to veil intentions but to disclose realities, and deeds are not used to violate and destroy but to establish relations and create new realities” (200). Relatedly, and importantly,

the only alternative to power is not strength—which is helpless against power—but force, which indeed one [hu]man [being] alone can exert against ... [their] fellow ... [people] and of which one of a few can possess a monopoly by acquiring the means of violence. But while violence can destroy power, it can never become a substitute for it. From this results the by no means infrequent political combination of force and powerlessness.... [T]yranny, and the time-honored fear of this form of government is not exclusively inspired by its cruelty ... but by the impotence and futility to which it condemns the rulers as well as the ruled.... Tyranny prevents the development of power, not only in a particular segment of the public realm but in its entirety. (202)

Consequently too, Arendt proposes, the beginning of the end of “political communities is loss of power” (200).

Before we move on, notice also how Kant’s analysis of despotism and republic is compatible with this analysis. A tyranny is a despotic rule that has replaced power (free self-governance) with law-governed force backed up with the threat of violence, whereas a republic is a condition of power in which the people rule themselves through laws suited for free and equal persons. The main difference between the two is that Arendt does not propose a priori

¹⁸ This is not the only place where Arendt develops the account of power vs. force vs. violence vs. strength; she starts this discussion in *Origins* (1951/1985) and another useful resource is her *On Violence* (1970).

principles of innate, private, or public right as constitutive of “power” (the republic) and thus, in this regard, has a different theory of the highest political good than Kant. I regard this feature of Kant’s theory as a strength that should be incorporated into a new Kantian theory of political evil. If we do, then we can distinguish between “power” simpliciter and “rightful power” or “rightful authority,” where we let the latter refer to power that is grounded on a priori principles of freedom.

To illustrate this, notice Patrick Riley’s (1982) claim that Hannah Arendt’s reading of Kant takes insufficient account of Kant’s fundamental claim that “true politics can [not] ... take a step without having already paid homage to morals” (PP 8: 380, cf. 355). It follows from the above that I do not agree with this; I think Arendt does take this into account, even though, as we see below, Arendt argues—and Kant and I agree—that what Kant calls depraved or barbaric political evil and Arendt calls totalitarian evil does not pay homage to morals; instead, it self-deceptively uses morals to disguise its destruction. Indeed, in my view, we can get this argument regarding the importance of Kant’s a priori account of right into view if we pay attention to Arendt’s (formidable) original preface to *Origins*. She argues:

Antisemitism (not merely the hatred of Jews), imperialism (not merely conquest), totalitarianism (not merely dictatorship)—one after the other, one more brutally than the other—have demonstrated that human dignity needs a new guarantee which can be found only in a new political principle, in a new law on earth, whose validity this time must comprehend the whole of humanity while its power must remain strictly limited, rooted in and controlled by newly defined territorial entities. (1951/1985: ix)

My suggestion is that Kant’s theory of a priori right contains the argument she is looking for here. The new political principle to be contained in the law on earth is the right to freedom and the new laws of freedom are, correspondingly, the laws positing innate, private, and public right. And Kant agrees with Arendt, the Doctrine of Right shows, that these laws must have domestic, international, and cosmopolitan instantiations to them. I return to these topics in section 3 below.

Turning back to Arendt, she argues that in order to create a sustainable home that partakes in an ongoing and evolving history of the plurality of people living together in societies on planet Earth, labor, work, and action must be integrated in the right way—and this is what good politics does:

If the *animal laborans* needs the help of *homo faber* to ease ... [their] labor and remove ... [their] pain, and if mortals need the help of *homo faber* in ... [their] highest capacity, that is, the help of the artist, of poets and the historiographers, of monument-builders or writers, because without them the only product of their activity, the story they enact and tell, would not survive at all. In order to be what the world is always meant to be, a home for ... [human beings] during their life on earth, the human artifice must be a place fit for action and speech, for activities not only entirely useless for the necessities of life but of an entirely different nature from the manifold activities of fabrication by which the world itself and all things in it are produced. (1958/1998: 173–74)

This brings us to the question of why are we (still) not better at politics? Or as Arendt says this, there is an “irritating incompatibility between the actual power of modern ... [people] ...

(greater than ever before, great to the point where ... [they] might challenge the very existence of ... [their] own universe) and the impotence of modern ... [people] to live in, and understand the sense of, a world which their own strength had established" (1951/1985: viii). One reason is already given by the above. Both animal laborans and homo faber are inherently unpolitical; animal laborans identify life itself as the meaning of life, while homo faber identifies the created world as what gives life meaning. In this way, both activities are drawn "to denounce action and speech as idleness, idle busybodyness and idle talk, and generally will judge public activities in terms of their usefulness to supposedly higher ends—to make the world more useful and more beautiful in the case of *homo faber*, to make life easier and longer in the case of the *animal laborans*" (208).

Another reason, Arendt suggests, is the mind-blowing discrepancy between modern scientific advances and our inability to understand, let alone govern, the world we live in. To illustrate this, consider how social media and AI today are matched by vastly increased mental health problems and impotent politics. Moreover, it seems clear that around the world, instead of mobilizing increasingly sophisticated legal and political systems to deal with the radical technological and environmental challenges facing us, we are liable to turn to political movements whose visions can be described somewhere along the spectrum of fascist or despotic tyrannies (as understood above), which are often detached from reality in their descriptions of the world and include a hateful, barbaric, and violent targeting of minorities (also as understood above).

A third general reason we are not better at politics is, Arendt proposes, that the political sphere is messy and unruly given the plurality of the human condition, which makes it very tempting "for [humans] of action no less than for [humans] of thought, to find a substitute for action in the hope that the realm of human affairs may escape the haphazardness and moral irresponsibility inherent in the plurality of agents.... [Yet] the attempt to do away with this plurality is always tantamount to the abolition of the public realm itself" (1958/1998: 220). With each human being, there is a new beginning, and as each enters the public space through action and speech, the public space will change a little. Moreover, we do not know the consequences of our actions, and, so, the public space is continuously evolving and profoundly and irreducibly muddled; although perfection is to be strived for also here, perfection is never reached. It is thus tempting for those drawn to it as public leaders as well as those who analyze it theoretically (as spectators) to try to impose an order on it that, in effect, will limit people's influence and engagement with it. It is tempting, in other words, to strive to establish a dictatorship of various kinds rather than a free society, as was, for example, Plato's suggestion with his "philosopher kings."

Let us for a moment accept all of the above, including that modernity is not the first to denounce the idle uselessness of action and speech in particular and of politics in general. Even if we do, however, it still remains important to explore why Arendt proposes that although modernity revolutionized by developing theories of human dignity and human rights to freedom as well as scientific theories that took humankind to the moon, it is also characterized by a subterranean undercurrent that became expressed in new levels of human evil, horrific dehumanization, and the destruction of the conditions of healthy biological life on Earth (1951/1985: ix).

There are several reasons, Arendt thinks, why modernity was unable to live up to its promise of "Enlightenment": "Western" philosophy's low opinion of politics and earthly life; the fall of the Roman Empire; the influence and devaluing of our earthly home by Christianity; the successes of modern science; the Industrial Revolution's and capitalism's reshuffling of property and power relations; public bureaucracy's replacement of politicians. In his landmark

introduction to Arendt's *Lectures*, Ronald Beiner relatedly says that, for Arendt, "the real danger in contemporary societies is that the bureaucratic, technocratic, and depoliticized structures of modern life encourage indifference and increasingly render men less discriminating, less capable of critical thinking, and less inclined to assume responsibility" (1982/1989: 113). Internally related, though devastatingly worse, modernity saw the rise of totalitarian regimes. All of these facts also yielded reasons for Arendt to turn to Kant's 3rd *Critique*—with its focus on judgment and earthly life—for philosophical resources to envision a better future, though as we will see in the next section, they also give us good reasons to think that Kant's 3rd *Critique* and the related ideas and proposed solutions found in Arendt's political writings are insufficient for a complete Arendtian theory of political evil.

A major problem in the traditional European philosophical theories of human nature—traceable back to ancient Greece—is, Arendt argues, that they rank the various kinds of human activity in a hierarchy. This is evident in Aristotle's account of humans' unique rational soul as reigning supreme over the sensitive soul (which all animals have), which itself is superior to the nutritive soul (which plants also have). Even Arendt's distinctions could (wrongly) be read this way, with the *vita contemplativa* above *vita activa* and action above work and work above labor. Such theorizing diminishes the value and importance of our earthly home, and it often has involved expressing contempt for politicians relative to the ideal, contemplative life of the philosopher (scholar) as well as, of course, a lowering of the life- and world-sustaining activities of labor and work (Arendt 1958/1998: 195). Arendt argues—and I agree—that this worry does not directly apply to Kant—as he explicitly rejects the idea that the life of the philosopher is higher than any other kind of life—but we find a variant of this worry in the Kantian tradition too. For example, it is not uncommon to find Kantians who argue something along analogous lines: we should rank personality above humanity above animality in the sense that only personality (autonomy) matters while the rest—what we want to do, our social sense of self, and our animality (heteronomy)—is viewed as at best instrumentally valuable means to realize morality (and at worst as temptations that hinder us from becoming virtuous). Indeed, some even go so far as to argue that we should strive to live as infinite, disembodied, perfectly rational angel-like beings (or holy in this sense of the word). If we argue in this way, then, it seems fair to say, Arendt's argument applies to us too; we end up with a dangerous and radically alienating view of the highest good, whether personal and political—and we end up very far away from the ideas of the Kantian conception of personal and political homes above.

Turning back to Arendt, she furthermore argues that although the Greek philosophers did rank public legal and political leadership above other earthly activities, they were fundamentally "against politics"; it was "as though they had said that if [human beings] only renounce their capacity for action, with its futility, boundlessness, and uncertainty of outcome, there could be a remedy for the frailty of human affairs" (1958/1998: 195). The extreme solution to this is, again, seen in Plato's philosopher kings, who would be in charge of the public sphere in virtue of their supreme philosophical knowledge of the good—or dictatorship. The ancient exception to this trend, Arendt thinks, is the "the political genius of Rome," where the emphasis was on "legislation and foundation" (195). Arendt proposes that instead of ranking these different types of activities hierarchically, they should be seen as integrated spheres of activity enabling different types of value. Moreover, she argues that the tendency of philosophers to rank *vita contemplativa* over *vita activa* and then to rank the activities internal to *vita activa* is one reason why we are currently so unable to distinguish the value of the different activities. Philosophers tend to stay focused on *vita contemplativa* and deal with all activities of *vita activa* as fundamentally unimportant philosophically and, so, easily grouped

together as, for example, heteronomy (Kantian philosophy) or lower pleasures (Millian philosophy).

Another set of reasons modernity became so troubled, Arendt proposes, is the fall of the Roman Empire and the rise of the institution of Christianity. Indeed, Arendt argues:

The eventual victory of the concern with eternity over all kinds of aspirations toward immortality is not due to philosophic thought. The fall of the Roman Empire plainly demonstrated that no work of moral hands can be immortal, and it was accompanied by the rise of the Christian gospel of an everlasting individual life to its position as the exclusive religion of Western [hu]mankind. Both together made any striving for an earthly immortality futile and unnecessary. (1958/1998: 21)

The Roman Empire demonstrated once and for all that everything humans build will eventually crumble, while powerful institutions of Christianity devalued our earthly home by presenting earthly life as justifiable *because* it functioned as the necessary precursor to the only real, “otherworldly” thing (34), namely “salvation of the soul” or eternal life in heaven after earthly life was (finally!) over (55; see also 313–15). While philosophers thus regard the activities internal to *vita activa* as only instrumentally valuable in that they enable *vita contemplativa* (philosophy), Christianity viewed these activities as only instrumentally valuable because they enabled the influence of God’s will on planet Earth and, thereby, salvation of the individual’s immaterial soul (291–93). In addition, because modern science appeared much better at coming up with plausible theories for everything in spacetime—and made amazing strides—and because modern science was not in need of (philosophical or religious) handmaidens, not only religion but also philosophy lost appeal, and philosophical contemplation was “altogether eliminated” (291). Instead of being vibrant,

philosophy came to play second or even third fiddle.... The philosophers became either epistemologists, worrying about an all-over theory of science which the scientists did not need, or they became, indeed, what Hegel wanted them to be, the organs of the *Zeitgeist*, the mouthpieces in which the general mood of the time was expressed with conceptual clarity.... In both instances ... they tried to understand and come to terms with what happened without them. (294)

Therefore, instead of all of us—through action (politics)—ensuring that our new machines serve the needs of human life on planet Earth, the scientists became increasingly in charge of all human activities—and this is plainly not their expertise.

Arendt also argues that modernity’s capitalist reorganization of our working lives—where workers were becoming handmaidens to machines (1958/1998: 147) and workmanship only goes into the construction of the machines (125)—and the enormously increased production of consumer goods entailed that we became increasingly alienated from our laboring and world-creating selves, and our sense of self thus became overly social and consumerist. The distinctions between activities associated with labor, work, action, and contemplation correspondingly became eroded; all the activities have become transformed into a perverted ideal of labor aimed at “abundance,” while everything beyond this ideal is related to as (artistic) “playfulness” or “hobbies” (127–28). In modernity, we all have jobs that we perform in exchange for money, and we treat all objects as if they are consumer goods. From working the land to being a nurse, a professor, an artist, or even a queen, a prime minister, or a

president, everyone is just doing a job for which they get paid. Together with the growing dominance of modern bureaucracies (public administrations), this means that people no longer view action as a means for governing themselves through politics; being a politician is also just another job. Indeed, a major temptation for us is to incessantly strive for more wealth rather than stay focused on creating a healthy, good earthly home for us: “[If] the spare time of the *animal laborans* is ... [not] spent in anything but consumption ... the more time left to him, the greedier and more craving ... [their] appetites” (132; see also 134).

Although our laboring selves thus have an important and grounding value for us, the modern version of “labor” is profoundly unhealthy—in the sense of alienating—for us and it cannot be constitutive of a better future:

The rather uncomfortable truth of the matter is that the triumph the modern world has achieved over necessity is due to the emancipation of labor, that is, to the fact that the *animal laborans* was permitted to occupy the public realm; and yet, as long as the *animal laborans* remains in possession of it, there can be no true public realm, but only private activities displayed in the open. The outcome is ... mass culture, and its deep-rooted trouble is a universal unhappiness.... The universal demand for happiness and the widespread unhappiness in our society ... are among the most persuasive signs that we have begun to live in a labor society which lacks enough laboring to keep it contented. For only the *animal laborans* ... and neither the craftsman nor the ... [person] of action, has ever demanded to be “happy” or thought that mortal ... [human beings] could be happy. (Arendt 1958/1998: 134)

Labor’s ideal is to be happy; it is concerned with creating neither a world that can serve as a home for humans nor a healthy political sphere with a rich history. In other words, none of the three spheres (nor contemplation) can give us *the* ideal, it is only by integrating the three (or four, if we count contemplation) that we can create conditions of flourishing human life on planet Earth. Relatedly, Arendt proposes that our challenge regarding the machines we are creating is to make sure that they are constitutive of precisely a world that can “help the human life process. The question therefore is not so much whether we are the masters or the slaves of our machines, but whether machines still serve the world and its things, or if, on the contrary, they and the automatic motion of their processes have begun to rule and even destroy world and things” (Arendt 1958/1998: 151). Arendt, furthermore, emphasizes that “the enormous changes of the industrial revolution ... and the ... atomic revolution ... will remain changes of the world, and not changes in the basic condition of human life on earth” (121). The means through which this integration of different spheres of activities is achieved is action or politics. Action is the means through which we govern ourselves together through a public sphere. And this is, as mentioned above, a main reason why Arendt turns to Kant’s *3rd Critique* in her lectures on Kant’s political philosophy. The *3rd Critique* is concerned exactly with life on planet Earth: with teleology (parts and wholes), aesthetics (beauty), and the imagination (synthesizing ability). Our faculty of the imagination is central to accounting for how good action (politics) involves being able to combine the parts (the right, the good, and the beautiful) into a whole of a free political society with a view to judging how we are doing and how we can move things forward in good ways. After all, Arendt argues in *Lectures*, “imagination, the ability to make present what is absent, transforms the objects of the objective senses into ‘sensed’ objects, as though they were objects of inner sense. This happens by reflecting not on an object but on its

representation. The represented object now arouses one's pleasure or displeasure, not direct perception of the object" (1989, 65).

2.1 Totalitarianism

Central to Arendt's analysis of modernity, we saw above, is an emphasis on how industrialization, technology, and capitalism involved both a tremendous reshuffling of people and power structures in (early) modern Europe as well as a crumbling ability to engage in action or politics. Uprooted from their feudal societies—in which life's possibilities very much depended on what family a person was born into—people found modern society to be both more open and more uncertain as movement for work and opportunities increased tremendously. In addition, modernity saw the replacement of the aristocracy with the bourgeoisie (the new capitalist owners of the means of production), and with time, increasingly successful labor movements led to a radical rethinking of individual rights, political power, and citizenship—a re-envisioning that was carried out through the concepts of individual freedom and equality in this period. The increased mobility of people—for jobs and life opportunities—also came with increasingly distinctive and firm national borders and the institution of national citizenship. And it is in this context that historically marginalized social groups became more visible. Jewish people received special scrutiny in this regard through public and scholarly discussions of the so-called Jewish question—that is, to what extent Jewish people should have rights as full citizens. And as Jewish men started to gain entrance to public spheres—through voting rights as well as admittance to public civil service and higher education at universities—and were no longer vocationally limited to the banking sector, Arendt continues, the “old Jew hatred” (counterintuitively) was increasingly transformed into “antisemitism.” She proposes that “old Jew hatred” was the mobilization of Jewish people's religious-ethnic beliefs and practices to exclude them from political participation and influence in various periods and places, whereas antisemitism was the construal of the Jewish person *as such* as a problem, a development she saw as matched by some powerful Jewish people's interpretations of the “chosen people” as referring to a mysterious Jewish “essence.”¹⁹ Importantly too, Arendt argues that for Jewish individuals who were able to break through and enter new spaces, a “Pariah-Parvenue” logic arose: they could choose to act as a compliant Parvenue token of their social group *or* to live as a resisting outcast Pariah who works to increase the entrance of other members of their own group, as well as those of other oppressed groups and individuals, into the same spaces.²⁰

Central to the emergence of totalitarianism in twentieth-century Europe, Arendt then proposes, is the fact that too many people were unable to ground themselves in the new, modern world, including, as mentioned, because they were unable to create viable public political spaces. Instead, they experienced life as isolated, lonely, and atomized—and Arendt refers to these individuals (regardless of their background, history, or social class) as the “masses.” If we combine the concepts of Kant and Arendt here, we can say that the modern individual—as a member of the masses—experienced themselves as living in neither a peaceful anarchy, nor a flourishing republic, nor a forceful despotic regime, but instead in a numbing, violent, barbaric world that they felt powerless to change into something viable. This numbing

¹⁹ Arendt's full analysis of this shift—from the Dreyfus affair, the labor movements' antisemitism, national politics in various European countries, the first Jewish British prime minister Benjamin Disraeli, academia, the banking system, and the Rothschild family—is beyond both the scope of this paper and my skillset as a political philosopher.

²⁰ Arendt develops and uses this theory several times over the course of her career. For her discussion in *Origins*, see Arendt (1951/1985: 56–67); for other discussions of it, see, for example, Arendt (1943/2007 and 1944/2007).

and feeling of powerlessness, in turn, came from modern bureaucracies, science and technology, the legal system, and capitalist enterprises, all of which were removed from the necessary, healthy influence of politics and action. The masses, in turn, form the core of the totalitarian movement because they were precisely “mass organizations of atomized, isolated individuals” (Arendt 1951/1985: 323). The organization of the masses into such a movement happens, then, when a totalitarian leader succeeds in mobilizing the masses into political action. The totalitarian leader does this by making the masses feel like they are affectionately cared for as members of a powerful group, that they exist, and that they matter by virtue of being part of an incredible, world historical political movement—even though, of course, nothing could be further from the truth.

How do totalitarian leaders do this? Importantly, Arendt argues, they do it by identifying completely with the totalitarian movement they are channeling. There is, in other words, no Adolph—no “I”—in Hitler; all there is, is “Hitler-the-great-leader-of-the-great-Nazi-movement,” which corresponds to the lack of a personal “I” for each of the individuals comprising the masses; there is only the “us” that each and all of them identify fully with. Arendt writes:

The totalitarian leader is nothing more or less than the functionary of the masses he leads; he is not a power-hungry individual imposing a tyrannical and arbitrary will upon ... his subjects.... [H]e depends just as much on the “will” of the masses he embodies as the masses depend on him. Without him they would lack external representation and remain an amorphous horde; without the masses the leader is a nonentity. Hitler, who was fully aware of this interdependence, expressed it once in a speech addressed to the SA: “all you are, you are through me; all that I am, I am through you alone”.... Hitler ... was of the opinion that even “thinking ... [exists] only by virtue of giving or executing orders,” and thereby eliminated even theoretically the distinction between thinking and acting on the one hand, and between rulers and the ruled on the other. (1951/1985: 325–26)

The totalitarian leader, in other words, channels and transforms the existential frustrations of the masses into a political movement, which centrally requires both the leaders and the masses to have no aim beyond the movement itself. Consequently, Arendt argues, all “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” (459). The totalitarian leader channels the loneliness of the masses into a sense of belonging, transforms the sense of powerlessness and isolation into a violent political movement of destruction. If we describe the creation of this belonging within a movement using Kant’s concepts, totalitarianism zooms in on the social sense of self and makes this the foundation for everything else and uses this to destroy humanity. Hence, in Nazi-Germany, the masses felt as if their animality, humanity, and personality were deeply cared for, but this was an illusion: their animality (reflexively self-conscious drives for self-preservation, for sex, and for affectionate community) was transformed into destructive socio-political desires (for preserving, for procreating, and for affectionately loving the Aryan race); the social sense of self and freedom were madly identified with the Nazi movement; and moral personality was perverted into an identification with the will of Hitler, who, in turn, identified with the totalitarian movement. In this way, totalitarian movements also remove the distinction between the rulers and the ruled. Totalitarianism is, in other words,

what we with Kant can call full-blown political depravity and barbarism. It is self- and other destruction under the guise of the good (e.g., the Aryan race) and morality (virtue and justice); it is pure violence aimed destroying flourishing humanity within the parameters of laws of freedom. It is to become a nobody through the self-deceived guise of—or feeling and thinking involved in—becoming amazing, and it involves absolute abandonment of freedom, understood as flourishing self-governance (whether personal or political).

To understand this theory of totalitarianism, it is also useful to pay attention to how Arendt distinguishes it from fascism.²¹ Fascist leaders want tyranny, understood as a tremendous political force that makes the leaders, their families, friends, and allies the wealth-accumulating, center of a stable, growing empire—and at the very center of this political force stands the fascist leader, who demands to be considered a demigod to be adored and obeyed absolutely. To illustrate, consider Franco's fascist Spain. To establish his fascist system, Franco needed to work with the royal family, leading groups in the military, public administration, the Catholic church, business, and industry with the real promise that as he succeeded to replace the still fragile, emerging Spanish liberal democracy with his fascist regime, his supporters would remain or become part of the new elite. In Kant's conceptual scheme, Franco's Spain was despotism: law, violence, and no freedom.

Totalitarian movements, in contrast, are worse in that they have no aims of stability after the revolution is over; their revolution is envisioned as forever ongoing or a perpetual system of destructive violence. Hitler's and Stalin's

idea of domination was something that no state and no mere apparatus of violence can ever achieve, but only a movement that is constantly kept in motion: namely, the permanent domination of each single individual in each and every sphere of life. The seizure of power through the means of violence is never an end in itself but only the means to an end, and the seizure of power in any given country is only a welcome transitory stage but never the end of the movement.... [A] political goal that would constitute the end of the movement simply does not exist. (Arendt 1951/1985: 326, see also 311)

Totalitarian movements, then, are not grounded on or constituted by any existing, shared political experiences, political end goals, or political interests that unite the participants in realizing a good political society. What unifies them is, instead, what the leader, in responding and channeling the masses, commands at any time. In this sense, "totalitarianism is never content to rule by external means, namely, through the state and a machinery of violence; thanks to its peculiar ideology and the role assigned to it in this apparatus of coercion, totalitarianism has discovered a means of dominating and terrorizing human beings from within. In this sense, it eliminates the distance between the rulers and the ruled" (314). Because the distinction between the ruler and the ruled is eliminated, there are no private lives or thinking external to the stream of consciousness that holds the totalitarian movement together as a whole. Hence too, constitutive of a totalitarian movement is the attack and destruction of any public commitment to truthfulness and objective facts:

Before they seize power and establish a world according to their doctrines, totalitarian movements conjure up a lying world of consistency which is more adequate to the needs of the human mind than reality itself; in which, through

²¹ For more on the differences between "normal" dictatorships and totalitarian ones, see Arendt (1964/2003: 32–35, 42–44).

sheer imagination, uprooted masses can feel at home and are spared the never-ending shocks which real life and real experiences deal to human beings and their expectations. (353)

This brings us back to the point above about how power requires truthful words to ground deeds aimed not at violence and destruction but at the difficult task of creating a political reality in which the people—as free and equal—govern themselves. Totalitarianism attacks this not just by attacking power and seeking to replace it with [physical] force (fascism/tyranny, or for Kant, despotism), but by attacking the connection between truthfulness, words, and deeds as such and thereby making it impossible for the political reality to be grounded on a reality external to itself and instead simply channeling destructive violence under the guise of morality and the good (for Kant, barbarism).

This last point relates to a core, unifying idea in Arendt's analysis of totalitarianism, namely that it is a fundamental self- and other destructive flight away from human life with all its messiness, a journey no one who strives to live life to the fullest comes out of unscathed. Totalitarianism is to give in to the temptation to live as if life has simple truths, is easy, and does not involve constantly adjusting to the conditions of vulnerable earthly life, indeed, to linking the ability to be vulnerable in this way as a sign of strength and wisdom. Hence, instead of goals, facts, and relying on consistent reasoning and learning from day to day, repetition of the movement's simple, grand unmoored narrative becomes crucial:

Modern masses ... do not believe in anything visible, in the reality of their own experience; they do not trust their eyes and ears but only their imaginations, which may be caught by anything that is at once universal and consistent in itself. What convinces masses are not facts, not even invented facts, but only the consistency of the system of which they are presumably part.... Repetition ... is important only because it convinces them of consistency in time. (Arendt 1951/1985: 351)

The repeated, simple narrative is, non-accidentally, grounded on a non-existing metaphysical fact, which in Hitler's Nazi case was (the Aryan) race, while for Stalin's Bolshevism, it was (the working) class, though "practically speaking ... it ... make[s] little difference whether totalitarian movements adopt the pattern of Nazism or Bolshevism, organize the masses in the name of race or class, pretend to follow the laws of life and nature or of dialectics and economics" (313). It is centrally important that these grand narratives are based on non-existing metaphysical facts, because otherwise there would be a possible source of correction as to how one is doing—a bringing back of the political project to the reality of earthly life—and this cannot be. One of the remarkable facts about these movements is correspondingly "the curious contradiction between the totalitarian movements' avowed cynical 'realism' and their conspicuous disdain of the whole texture of reality" (313).

Importantly too, on Arendt's analysis, Hitler's and Stalin's totalitarian movements on their own were unable to grasp political power; they needed the help of two other groups, namely the mob and the elite. The mob is "the underworld of the bourgeois class," that is, people who were relatively unsuccessful compared to their peers and thus resentful (Arendt 1951/1985: 337). Moreover, because the masses were not already powerful and also lacked political and institutional experience, the mob joined their movement on the mistaken assumption that the masses would help them become the new elite. Members of the mob could therefore be, for example, lawyers, engineers, or businessmen who used their influence to

destroy the existing power structures in whatever way they could with an eye to becoming the new powerful elite. Hence, the mob pursues a fascist revolution whose “true goal [is] to seize power and establish the Fascist ‘elite’ as uncontested ruler over the country” (314). And in contrast to the masses, who rejected the values of the dominating groups, “the mob really believed that truth was whatever respectable society had hypocritically passed over, or covered up with corruption” (351). If we put this in Kant’s terms, the mob were self-deceived in a patterned way (impurity) in that they thought they were the “true” elite of the country—whether they desired domination via brute force, access to material gains, social recognition, influence, and power, or all of the above.

Arendt also argues that the single unifying characteristic of the mob and the masses was “that both stand outside all social ramifications and normal political representation” (1951/1985: 314). In contrast, the existing elite (including the intellectual elite), in turn, not only failed, like the mob, to recognize the dangers of the totalitarian movement, but they also took “genuine delight” in how the mob attacked the establishment’s hypocrisy and destroyed “respectability” (333). Finally, regarding all three groups, while the mob inherits “in a perverted form ... the standards and attitudes of the dominating class,” the masses instead “reflect and somehow pervert the standards and attitudes towards public affairs of all classes” (314). The masses, therefore, had members from all classes who were unified in their deep contempt for all established society. One way to put this point is that while the mob felt slighted that they were not part of the ruling elite and members of the elite took delight in how the mob lay bare the hypocrisy of the elite in patterned ways (impurity and despotism), the masses had deep disdain for the institutions themselves and rationalized their desire for destruction in self-deceived, moralized language, such as love of the Aryan race or the working class (depravity and barbarism). Institutions are difficult to develop, and even relatively good ones will typically have individuals who are better than the institutions themselves (which enables them to keep improving). The masses turned a generally felt deep frustration with existing institutions’ dysfunctional, unfair, or unjust aspects into a violent desire to destroy them altogether in the name of the good.

None of the above is to deny that totalitarian leaders needed to appear to play the fascist game for a while; they did. Rather, the point is that the sympathetic segments of both the elite and the mob fundamentally misunderstood what the totalitarian movement was all about—they did not believe they were really going to do what they said they were going to do all along—and, so, once they had helped the totalitarian movement into power, they were genuinely surprised to be eliminated. This, however, is how it had to go, Arendt argues; after all, the

initiative ... [of] the mob strata of the population ... could only be a threat to the totalitarian domination of [hu]man [beings].... For the ruthless machines of domination and extermination, the masses ... provided much better material and were capable of even greater crimes than so-called professional criminals, provided only that these crimes were well organized and assumed the appearance of routine jobs. (1951/1985: 337)

The logic of a totalitarian movement is to go only in the direction where it becomes maximally dominant; there are, as mentioned, no external political goals or real, shared political interests that orient or moderate it. Hence, the expectation that there would be a new, stable elite replacing the old (aristocratic/bourgeoise in Nazi Germany or aristocratic/communist ones in Stalin’s USSR) ones—let alone any loyalty to those who had helped along the way—was not only sheer fiction, but a type of fiction or self-deception fundamentally incompatible with the

logic of totalitarian movements. Hence, as soon as a totalitarian movement obtained political control, the “whole group of sympathizers was shaken off... before the regimes proceeded toward their greatest crimes” (339).

Another characteristic of totalitarianism in power was that the real legal and political force was moved behind a “façade” of what appeared to be normal public institutions, namely to “the superefficient and super-competent services of the secret police” (Arendt 1951/1985: 420).²² Importantly, the purpose of the secret police was “not to discover crimes, but to be on hand when the government decides to arrest a certain category of the population” (426). Correspondingly, the secret police “does not know better” than the totalitarian leader; it has simply become the leader’s extremely efficient and competent “executioner” (426). Moreover, as mentioned above, the masses came from all social groups in society, and what unified them was a literal, diehard commitment to the meta-narrative of the totalitarian movement, a self-deceived meta-narrative that was fundamentally detached from reality. Hence, for such movements, knowledge, initiative, and indeed spontaneity itself are threats that must be eliminated:

Intellectual, spiritual, and artistic initiative is as dangerous to totalitarianism as the gangster initiative of the mob, and both are more dangerous than mere political opposition. The consistent persecution of every higher form of intellectual activity by the new mass leaders springs from more than their natural resentment against everything they cannot understand. Total domination does not allow for free initiative in any field of life, for any activity that is not entirely predictable. Totalitarianism in power invariably replaces all first-rate talents, regardless of their sympathies, with those crackpots and fools whose lack of intelligence and creativity is still the best guarantee of their loyalty. (339)

Indeed, instead of knowledge, initiative, and spontaneity, the striving of totalitarianism is “total domination ... abolishing freedom, even ... eliminating human spontaneity in general” (405). Hence, “wherever ... [totalitarianism] has ruled, it has begun to destroy the essence of [hu]man [being]” (viii).

All of this also meant that these totalitarian regimes were less materially forceful than they appeared to be because they were “completely indifferent to national interest and the well-being of ... [their] people”; for the same reason, however, they were both more efficient and lethally dangerous (419). Again, to use Kant’s concepts, totalitarianism is state organized barbarism incarnate.²³ Totalitarianism’s only “aim” is destruction of all spontaneity—it regards any exercise of free spontaneity as a threat to be crushed—and it necessarily trails or follows being and cannot create being. In Arendt’s language, totalitarianism (as extreme evil) is like a fungus—though, as noted above, I believe drawing an analogy to cancer is more accurate—in that it is parasitic on and inherently destructive of being; it exists only insofar as and in the sense that it destroys being. As Arendt writes in a letter to Gershom Scholem:

²² Arendt (1964/2003) also emphasizes that the “civil servants without whose expert knowledge the Hitler regime ... would have been able to survive” simply replace one set of social rules and mores for another” (34); they were “the members of *respectable society* ... *who were the first to yield [and they] merely exchanged one system of values against another*” (44).

²³ In Varden (2021b), I argue that we can develop Kant’s and Arendt’s thoughts on barbarism and totalitarianism by distinguishing between “active” and “passive” barbarism and between “pure” and “totalitarian” barbarism.

Evil is never “radical,”... it is only extreme, and ... it possesses neither depth nor any demonic dimension. It can overgrow and lay waste the whole world precisely because it spreads like a fungus on the surface. It is “thought-defying ... because thought tries to reach some depth, to go to the roots, and the moment it concerns itself with evil, it is frustrated because there is nothing. That is its “banality.” Only the good has depth and can be radical. (1963/2007: 471)²⁴

Given the destructive, self-deceived pathologies constitutive of extreme evil, totalitarian revolutions do not envision the creation of a new type of stable society. Instead, the “final solution” of totalitarianism is the non-accidental creation of the concentration camp; it is the only permanent institutional element of the totalitarian regime. The concentration camp, Arendt furthermore argues, was “meant not only to exterminate people and degrade human beings, but also serve the ghastly experiment of eliminating, under scientifically controlled conditions, 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” (1951/1985: 438). The only feature that changes as the totalitarian regime evolves is which groups are sent there, which groups become the new state enemies. Arendt correspondingly proposes that “if it is true that in the final stages of totalitarianism an absolute evil appears (absolute because it can no longer be deduced from humanly comprehensible motives), it is also true that without it we might never have known the truly radical [extreme]²⁵ nature of Evil” (viii-ix). Totalitarian evil is absolute in that we cannot understand it from motives that are comprehensible to us; it involves total domination in a “world ... of the living dead” (441). It is a type of evil that cannot be explained in terms of the bad, yet ever so human motives we are liable have—such as selfishness, brute self-interest, revenge, pettiness, envy, etc.—because from these points of view, establishing state-organized concentration camps for some groups of the population simply does not make any sense. These points of view are points of view of the living: “Life in the concentration camps ... [with all its] horror can never be fully embraced by the imagination for the very reason that it stands outside of life and death. It can never be fully reported for the very reason that the survivor returns to the world of the living, which makes it impossible for him to believe fully in his own past experiences” (444).

Arendt sometimes illustrates some of these points by appealing to how economically inefficient these camps were (as labor camps) or from the strategic point of warfare. For example, she argues:

The incredibility of the horrors is closely bound up with their [the concentration camps] economic uselessness. The Nazis carried this uselessness to the point of open anti-utility when in the midst of the war, despite the shortage of building material and rolling stock, they set up enormous, costly extermination factories and transported millions of people back and forth... In the eyes of a strictly utilitarian world the obvious contradiction between these acts and military

²⁴ Contra Arendt, I believe that this view is also Kant’s own. For more on this, see the interchange between Janelle DeWitt and me in Dewitt (2021) and Varden (2021c). It also follows from my reading above that although I find Birmingham’s “Holes of Oblivion” a terrific resource for thinking about and with Arendt on evil, I disagree with Birmingham’s interpretation of Kant when she says that “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” (Birmingham 2003: 101). As indicated above, I believe Kant’s view is like Arendt’s here. Only the good has a “predisposition” for Kant; evil is a “propensity” and, so, fundamentally involves choice (see Varden 2020a and 2021c).

²⁵ As seen above, Arendt later abandons this “radical” way of describing evil in favor of describing it as “extreme,” because evil is parasitic on and cannot create being.

expedience gave the whole enterprise an air of mad unreality.... 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. To Hades correspond those relatively mild forms, once popular even in nontotalitarian countries, for getting undesirable elements of all sorts—refugees, stateless persons, the asocial and the unemployed—out of the way; as DP [Displaced Persons] camps, which are nothing other than camps for persons who have become superfluous and bothersome, they have survived the war. 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 camp perfected by the Nazis, in which the whole of life was thoroughly and systematically organized with a view to the greatest possible torment. (1951/1985: 445)

Notice that if we combine these categories with Kant’s three degrees of evil and we only look to the self-deceived versions of them—which we must do with totalitarianism given its foundational detachment from reality²⁶—then according to the mad logic of (1) Hades, the prisoners in DP camps have done an alleged, great wrong (“frailty”), such as finding themselves in a place where they are not wanted because they have not produced a “useful” skill,—and, so, they are “punished”; or (2) Purgatory, the prisoners are deemed as going about their life in the wrong way (“impurity”)—such as by having the “wrong” political or religious views—and, so, they must be forced to do something useful with themselves or “cured” through forced labor; or (3) Hell, the prisoners have done the greatest wrong, namely of existing at all as who they are because so existing is perverted (“depravity”). Versions of the first two—Hades and Purgatory—can happen also in despotic states since they are effective ways to, for example, rid oneself of political opponents or become politically popular by appealing to and flattering the prejudices of powerful oppressors. This is also why these types of incarcerations survived the war, Arendt suggests. The third—Hell—can only exist in and is a permanent feature of a “totalitarian” state.

Despite its many strengths, I don’t think this analysis is entirely correct. To start, I think we find strains or pockets of Hell²⁷—of what we with Kant calls “barbarism” (pure violence aimed at numbing and destroying spontaneity) in all historical societies insofar as the violence is linked to who people are. To give just a few examples, I believe strains of Hell are needed to capture European colonialism and the transatlantic slave trade (including the historically related institutions of apartheid in South Africa and Black slavery in the antebellum South), and I believe pockets of Hell are need to capture the internment schooling of Indigenous children in twentieth-century North America and Northern Europe; some of the historical and current institutionalized discrimination against religious, ethnic, and LGBTQIA+ life around the world; and, increasingly, the incarceration of refugees and immigrants and their children, Black mass incarceration in the US, and any state that effectively subjects a (religious, ethnic, etc.) group to terrorizing violence that they cannot escape. What makes it totalitarian, in my view, is the way in which the state not only is involved—either by facilitating or permitting it—but makes this destructive totalizing,

²⁶ This is consistent with saying that some might also be delusional. However, insofar as this is the explanation of why they do what they do, then, on the approach defended here, they are no longer culpable and have a right to legal guardians and mental health care.

²⁷ I’m very grateful to Lucy Allais and Cynthia Oliver for drawing this distinction between “strains” and “pockets” of Hell (or barbarism).

numbing use of force constitutive of so-called public legal and political institutions themselves. For Arendt, because the mad logic of totalitarianism stipulates that the good can only exist by virtue of a continuous, never-ending fight against state enemies, concentration camps are permanent features of totalitarian regimes; the only thing that changes is which groups are identified as belonging in which camp. In my view, insofar as we have any strains or pockets of barbaric destruction within our legal and political institutional framework and cultures, they have a similar function in the public psyche, which is why when we attempt to rid our societies of them, the response from some is sometimes extreme violence. For some, being able to hold onto their own sense of self—what it is, say, to be Norwegian or American—without at the same time lowering others. Hence, their response is rage if this (perverted) sense of identity is resisted or upset.²⁸

This Karendtian reimagining of this position is, not coincidentally, also consistent with Arendt's argument that "totalitarian solutions may well survive the fall of totalitarian regimes in the form of strong temptations which will come up whenever it seems impossible to alleviate political, social, or economic misery in a manner worthy of [hu]man [beings]" (1951/1985: 459). In other words, Arendt thinks that the dangers of totalitarianism were not eradicated with the fall of Hitler's and Stalin's regimes; they are dangers that persist—from modernity onward—insofar as we are unable to create powerful political societies through which grounded people govern themselves. In contrast, I contend that strains or pockets of barbarism preceded totalitarianism, that there were more of them than Arendt was able to see, and that many of them are still with us and new ones are appearing, including in countries constitutionally grounded on what Kant calls a republic: principles protecting each person's right to freedom—with corresponding public cultures officially committed to each person's dignity. Indeed, as Efrain Lazos has suggested to me (in conversation), it is entirely possible that around the world, the more apt description is that many states' basic legal and political institutions are best described as despotic or barbaric with strains or pockets of peaceful anarchical or rightful republic life within them.

Let me put some of these last points also from a different angle: Arendt identifies some ways in which totalitarian movements engage in the perpetual destruction of humanity—humanity's very essence—and maintains that these movements non-accidentally start with social groups that are already politically vulnerable because they are in the process of or have only recently gained rights. In light of this, it is important to pay attention to the analyses in *Origins* and elsewhere that reveal some of Arendt's own limitations and prejudices. To start, although Arendt fully acknowledges that Nazi concentration camps targeted disabled people, members of the LBGQTQIA+ community, the Roma people, and sex workers, she does not analyze the brutalization of these groups with the same level of detail, depth, and knowledge characteristic of her study of the horror she knew first-personally, namely Nazi Germany's antisemitism. Moreover, as mentioned above, in addition to totalitarianism and antisemitism, *Origins* also critiques modern imperialism. Arendt proposes that modern imperialism, in contrast to premodern empires, was not fundamentally informed by the logic of empire building—the Roman Empire, for instance, continuously grew by incorporating conquered peoples into its empire—but rather by a logic of world domination. Although I lack the relevant historical knowledge to comment on many historical aspects of her analysis, as indicated above, Arendt's analysis of Black slavery and anti-Black racism in the United States—both in *Origins* and later work—as a continuation of premodern slavery is plainly implausible.²⁹

²⁸ For more on this, see Varden (2022a, 2021b).

²⁹ See Kathryn Sophia Belle (2014) for more on this. See also the wonderful interview with Richard J. Bernstein on Hannah Arendt by Ulrich Baer in Baer's *Think about It* Series: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tOXhztwQiPI>.

The kinds of experiments in human suffering aimed at Jews, Africans, LGBTQIA+ people, sex workers, disabled people, Roma people, Indigenous peoples, and others—where the suffering is viewed as fundamentally divorced from any comprehensible human motive—reached new levels of evil with modernity. Moreover—and importantly—they were undertaken in the name of both left (Stalin) and right (Hitler) political ideologies. Even if Kant could not have imagined the level of horror involved in Hitler’s Nazi concentration camps and was (like Arendt) unable to judge, for example, Indigenous peoples, the transatlantic slave trade, women, and LGBTQIA+ peoples minimally correctly, ideas we find in his philosophy helps us see the ways in which his incorrect judgments about many dehumanized groups were not accidental given our propensity to evil: as individuals (in historical families) and as social groups (in historical cultures), we always start in a historical setting where the good and the bad is mixed together, and the worse we lose our way in life—as individuals or as social groups—the more we will use moralizing language (and, perhaps, for academics, theories), as this is the only way we can bring ourselves to stand by or participate in such horrific things. Moreover, Kant’s theory of the predisposition to good can help us see why when we lose our way, we utilize our social self together with a mad, moralized story of our own selves and a fundamentally numbing or self-destructive engagement with our own vulnerable animality.

In my view, it is also plausible to argue that in pre-modernity, barbaric strains or pockets of suffering often were legally permitted rather than actively organized by the state and often involved viewing animality as lower and then forcing some groups of individuals to identify with their animality. In contrast, from modernity onward, it is plausible to argue that the state more often took active part in barbaric (whether totalizing or not) dehumanization of vulnerable social groups through its “public” legal and political institutions and in ways that can plausibly only be seen as going to war against our animality. Hence, rather than simply being excluded from active participation and subjected to wrongful violence without legal consequence, vulnerable groups in modernity were, for example, sent to mental hospitals (e.g., LGBTQIA+ people and women who enjoyed sex), incarcerated at extreme levels (e.g., African Americans), or forced to attend boarding schools where they were subjected to totalizing violence in the name of science, the law, virtue, or cultivated being (Indigenous peoples).³⁰ Perhaps the types of violence used could be viewed in terms of degrees: from Hades to Purgatory to Hell depending on the level of resistance from those subjected to the terror. In addition, if we draw on Arendt’s analysis of art’s constitutive role in making life on planet Earth into a (personal and political) home, we can get into view how the aesthetic judgment—from being fundamentally unsuited to our needs to what we might with Kant call the horrifyingly sublime—was constitutive of the suffering so horrendous.

Even if Arendt’s inability to judge all aspects of her world well are not confined to our difficult histories, it seems fair to say that recent and contemporary political movements as well as recent legislation and political decisions around the world make one of Arendt’s concluding comments in her original preface to *Origins* feel eerily relevant:

We can no longer afford to take that which was good in the past and simply call it our heritage, to discard the bad and simply think of it as a dead load which by itself time will busy in oblivion. The subterranean stream of Western history has finally come to the surface and usurped the dignity of our tradition. This is the reality in which we live. And this is why all efforts to escape the grimness of the

³⁰ For more on these topics, see Varden (2021a, 2021b, 2022b, 2022c).

present into nostalgia for a still intact past, or into the anticipated oblivion of a better future, are vain. (1951/1985: ix)

This point also clearly applies to philosophy: we cannot afford to choose only the elements in, say, Kant and Arendt that we like and consider the rest a dead load (simple mistakes we can simply set aside or ignore). If we do, we will not take on the challenge of understanding political evil as it exists in the past or in the present—or who we are and what we have inherited. Arendt’s argument about the dangers of nostalgia, as we see in the quote above, are critical, because not only is going back not an option but doing so is also undesirable since what was in the past in, for example, the United States was a deep imbrication of the very good (freedom, human rights, scientific discoveries) and the very bad (brutal versions of the “isms”³¹).

3. Toward a Karendtian Theory of Political Evil

The deep compatibility between Kant and Arendt is, we have seen, not accidental since she was greatly influenced by him. Notice too, however, that there are at least three important nuances in Kant’s account that we can use to add to Arendt’s account here—and thereby take a first step toward a new Karendtian account. First, we can say with Kant that in my solitude, I’m not only two-in-one but also three-in-one: I’m deliberating with myself in this moral way (two-in-one or holding my ways up against my conscience), but I also need to be present with myself (self-reflexively) in that I feel my own natural and moral vital forces harmoniously (three-in-one).³² In other words, our challenge is not only to think and remember better but also to learn to feel and value our animalistic, social nature as in harmony with our personality—as this is required to strive to unify our natural and moral vital forces.³³ Notice too that this three-in-one move is one way to theorize how we can and should ground ourselves post modernity that I think Arendt’s two-in-one does not quite capture (as it is still too reflective). To put the point differently, the three-in-one is one way to capture how we can be whole and grounded whether we let the “eternally recurring” aspects of us—the activity that is constitutive of maintaining the human species as an earthly species—be captured by what Kant calls our “animality” and Arendt our “animal laborans.” As Arendt argues in *The Human Condition*, even though it is tempting for humans to try to rid themselves of animal laborans’ necessity, the price for doing so—choosing absolute freedom—is life itself (1958/1998: 119–20) Animal laborans—our animalistically embodied being—is an ineliminable, valuable aspect of earthly human life. Changing from two-in-one to three-in-one as our ideal to strive toward is thus a way to think of the highest good—of morality setting the framework within which we pursue our conceptions of the good—in a full, grounded, or “rooted” way.

Second, although we can do damage to our predispositions to animality and sociality (and, so, do damage to our ability to enjoy solitude), insofar as we are capable of moral responsibility at all—that is to say, insofar as we are not medically insane or in need of moral (legal and ethical) guardians—our capacity (even if not ability) to do so remains intact. In

³¹ I borrow this phrase of the isms from Anna J. Cooper (1892/1998: 131).

³² I believe this approach is more consistent not only with Arendt’s own account of *vita activa*—the active life—but also with her account of how modernity has alienated or ungrounded us. I return to both *vita activa* and modernity below.

³³ In Varden (2022b), I agree with Arendt that Western philosophy has typically failed to value our animality, but that in modernity, we went to war on our animality. I also return to this point briefly below. In addition, as with regard to our animality, I believe that it makes most sense to understand the way we have a moral duty to attend to our natural and vital forces as indirect; our (natural and moral) vital forces are not under our direct control. Kant thinks “one knows not how” the vital forces come about (CPrR 5: 162). Rather, what we can control is to attend to them and to strive to provide conditions under which they are strengthened rather than weakened.

Kant's language, although we can use the predispositions to animality and humanity "inappropriately," we cannot eradicate either, and the predisposition to personality is such that "nothing evil can be grafted" onto it (MM 6: 28). From another angle, we can say that our "animality" involves a fundamental, reflexively self-conscious orientation to affectionate, basic community, while "humanity" involves a fundamental, reflectively self-conscious orientation to set and pursue ends of our own and one's social sense of self. Hence, to set ends of one's own involves learning to master what Kant calls one's "unsocial sociality" (IUH 8: 20): to enjoy being at one (social) with others as well as having projects of one's own or to be at peace with oneself without others present (unsocial). How much one likes being in one's own company (solitude) obviously varies, but learning to master this aspect of ourselves is not only important to be able to live one's own life and not constantly compare oneself to others but also so that one can morally own the life one lives (as having "personality" commands). Notice too that insofar as I can be morally responsible at all—and, so, do not need a moral guardian—there is a path internal to me by means of which I can realize what I have done and move forward in a better way. In this sense, contrary to what Arendt says, there is also always a person there to hold morally accountable from the perspective of virtue and of right (even if, of course, this person may so far have failed to realize themselves as a somebody).³⁴

Third, if we draw on Kant's account of the imagination and judgement as well as abstract conceptual, associative, teleological, and aesthetic thought, we have more tools with which to capture how someone who has done very bad things and "gotten away with it" is not flourishing. The reason is not only that they proceed with a broken account of reality—and so, cannot, be two-in-one in solitude, as Arendt explains so well—but also that they cannot feel themselves as internally harmonious (be three-in-one). It is impossible for such people to feel truly at peace with themselves—they cannot feel in harmony with their natural and vital forces—and they will remain liable to uncontrolled outbreaks of anger and frustration (beyond what is appropriate given the situations at hand). This is, on this approach, not only because their account of reality (by means of abstract conceptual thought) is internally incoherent—to borrow from Lucy Allais (2016)—but also because their associative, teleological, and aesthetic thought are never under abstract conceptual control. On this approach, this is also why, as Allais (2021) argues, living in societies with grave injustices involves "fractured selves"; in these situations, none of us can experience ourselves as emotionally and morally whole.

Before delving into Arendt on evil in more detail, also note that Kant's account of the predisposition to good is useful to understand evil because it gives us a schema of ways in which we can and do wrong: we can do it for reasons ultimately grounded in animality (say, lust) or humanity (say, envy or narrow self-interest), and we can do it in ways that are triggered by or that employ the six different kinds of thought: I associate someone's action with something hurtful that once happened to me (associative thought); someone's description does not fit into the moral story I tell myself about who I am or what I'm all about (abstract conceptual thought); I can lower someone's standing by describing their ways of being as "unnatural" or "animalistic" (teleological thought); someone can hurt me by describing my actions as lacking elegance or as disgusting (aesthetic thought); my (personal or political) judgment can be immature or twisted because I have grown up in a dysfunctional family or

³⁴ This Kantian theory can therefore explain why Eichmann was responsible for his murders, which Arendt (in)famously cannot. I also believe that if one has done something as horrific as what Eichmann had done, fully owning one's actions typically comes with the temptation to suicide—which is one reason why many who have done terrible wrongs, out of fear, refuse to go there. For more on both these topics, see Varden (2014). For a fascinating analysis that opens up for a productive conversation with both this paper and Varden (2014), see Carmen L. Dege (2022).

culture; and I can imagine new ways of harming or hurting someone by applying oppressive principles in new, intersectional ways (judgment). (Indeed, because our imagination, as Arendt repeatedly emphasizes in *Lectures*, is a capacity to represent what is absent and to synthesize, and it involves aesthetic pleasure, combining these principles of wrongdoing in new ways can not only feel pleasant, but it is ineradicably tempting for us given our nature.³⁵) In addition, if we combine this schema for wrongdoing with Kant's account of the propensity to evil, we get another layer of complexity: we can do wrong once (say something sexist in anger, for example), as a pattern (often say sexist things to boost my own sense of self), or as a way of going about life (misogyny; engage in projects and life with a central aim being at "putting women in their rightful subordinate, submissive place").

In addition, the more morally lost we get, the more we will rationalize what we do by telling (increasingly self-deceived and fantastic) stories that justify the bad things we do either by describing them as "not really that bad, after all or really" or in the name of "the good," "morality," "goodness," "God," "science," "my country," and so forth. In light of this, it is also not surprising that Kant considers truthfulness the first virtue—indeed, he thinks of it as "a sacred command of reason prescribing unconditionally" (SRL 8: 427; cf. MM 6: 420, 429), and though he does not think lying should be a legal wrong as such (to lie as such is not a crime), it is a legal wrong when acting as a public authority, and we are legally responsible for the bad consequences of our private lies. With these ideas of Kant's at hand, let us now turn to Arendt's ideas on political evil one last time.³⁶

Arendt starts *Origins* by quoting Karl Jaspers as saying "Neither succumb to the past, nor to the future. It depends on being fully present" (1951/1985: vii). One problem with Arendt, then, was that she was unable to be fully present with anti-Black racism in the US, just as she was not able to be fully present with other isms, such as sexism or heterosexism, either. Later in the *Origins*, she argues:

The conviction that everything that happens on earth must be comprehensible to [hu]man [beings] can lead to interpreting history by commonplaces. 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. (viii)

Hence, Arendt's life demonstrates a remarkable ability to comprehend and resist, but this ability was also significantly limited to the reality she understood first-personally. Given that this inability to write well on topics one does not know first-personally is characteristic not only of Arendt, but, in my view, maybe all thinkers, it is possible that we are only able to fully comprehend and resist if we actually know—directly or indirectly through loved ones—the oppressed lives in question first-personally (directly or indirectly), while intuitively we are

³⁵ In my view—see Varden (2024)—this idea helps us explain why intersectional oppression (oppression that involves several oppressive forces) is more than the sum of each oppressive force.

³⁶ I read Kant as arguing that the increase in degree—from frailty to impurity to depravity—is fundamentally driven by the extent to which we are not able to let morality set the framework within which we pursue happiness. Moreover, because we strive to be a coherent whole—so that we can make sense of ourselves—the worse we lose our way, the more self-deceived we become.

liable to think that knowing one type of oppression is to know them all. Indeed, as Kant's life illustrated, rather than learning to feel and manage the oppressive forces coming at oneself, it can even be tempting not to understand and resist by not owning first-personally (three-in-one) the complexity of who one is.³⁷

Conclusion

Let me conclude by tying this last discussion to Arendt's important discussions of Kant's concept of "sensus communis" as well as the differences between the perspectives of the spectator and the actor in *Lectures*. Arendt draws inspiration from Kant's "sensus communis," and she emphasizes that in contrast to most so-called Western philosophers, Kant did not, as mentioned above, rank lives in a hierarchy and he also argued that a good philosopher must train their imagination to go visiting (in their minds) the people they live with in the world; doing so is necessary to develop an "enlarged mentality" (1989: 43), understood as a deep understanding of the lives of the many with whom philosophers live and theorize. Enlarged mentality is not to be confused with empathy or with passively accepting others' views of reality (which Arendt follows Kant in considering mere prejudice); rather, it is to understand their point of view even if one also disagrees or engages them more critically.³⁸ In addition, Arendt proposes that the theorist is a spectator (someone who judges from afar) and who they judge are the actors (those who finds themselves in the midst of the events)—and these perspectives are, importantly, not the same. In *Lectures*, Arendt uses Kant's discussion of the French Revolution to illustrate this point: Kant argues that we find ourselves hoping the revolutionaries win in their efforts to establish a republic, but it is also the case that we do not thereby morally justify partaking in violent, revolutionary movements. That is to say, when we are observing, we can see a specific historical event as a possible move toward historical progress (as spectators), but even though this is the case, we haven't thereby justified violently overthrowing the existing sovereign authority (as actors).

Let me illustrate this by using Kant's infamous example of lying to the murderer at the door. In imagining this scene, most people find themselves hoping the person who opens the door lies about the presence of the murderer's intended victim (whom the murderer intends to materially and formally wrong) in the house, thereby saving them. This is the perspective of the spectator. This, however, does not mean that we have thereby morally justified lying from the point of view of the actor. Kant argues that from this point of view, although we are not wronging the murderer when we lie, we are doing wrong in general, or formally, because we are performing an action (lying) whose maxim cannot be universalized. Hence, in this way too, because we are animalistic, social beings who live with others, we can find ourselves in situations from which there is no morally good way out—and that is what we have to own or learn to live with, including, as Arendt emphasizes, when we are on our own, in solitude (two-in-one).³⁹ Notice too that in order to check the plausibility of our theory, we need an enlarged mind on this topic—we need to listen to those who have these experiences and make sure that our theories are such that the ones we rightly admire among them would agree with our analysis; we need to proceed from the bottom up and learn to judge well. This, in my view, is what Kant and Arendt did not do with regard to many phenomena that historically track much oppression and for which they are rightly criticized today; indeed, their own theories caution them against what they did in these instances. They did not listen to those who knew those lives before they theorized and, so, their theorizing often channeled the oppression and their

³⁷ For more on this, see Varden (2020a).

³⁸ For more on this, see Varden (in progress).

³⁹ For more on how I understand this and Kant on lying, see Varden (2010, 2020a, 2021d).

own prejudices instead of resisting it. Moreover, in Kant's case with regard to heterosexism and maybe also to some extent in Arendt's case with regard to sexism, they did not learn to be both two- *and* three-in-one, namely, to make sure that they learned to feel how oppression affected them *and* to feel how they were themselves oppressed or oppressive in these regards. If we are only two-in-one, then we are only reflectively, and not reflexively, engaging with ourselves—and in our alienated and alienating modern lives, learning to feel also reflexively is constitutive of (re-)grounding ourselves on planet Earth; three-in-one is necessary. To put this point differently, if we combine Arendt's account here with Kant's account of the importance of both our natural and our moral vital forces—as ways we must ensure that we are grounded in ourselves harmoniously—and with our different kinds of thought, we are obtaining resources with which to capture not only how to heal (as individuals and as cultures, with the difficult histories we have) but also for checking ourselves as we move forward.⁴⁰

ABSTRACT:

This paper shows ways to develop, integrate, and transform Kant's and Arendt's theories on political evil into a unified Karendtian theory. Given the deep influence Kant had on Arendt's thinking, the deep philosophical compatibility between their projects is not surprising. But the results of drawing on the resources left by both is exciting and groundbreaking with regard to both political evil in general and the challenges of modernity and totalitarianism in particular.

KEYWORDS:

The highest (political) good; the predisposition to good in human nature; the propensity to evil; despotism, anarchy, and barbarism; power vs. strength vs. force vs. violence; tyranny vs. totalitarianism; the mob vs. the elite vs. the totalitarian movement (masses and totalitarian leader); modernity; Pariah vs. Parvenue.

⁴⁰ For more on this, see Varden (2024).

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