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Eichmann in Athens: Hannah Arendt, Emmanuel Levinas and the New Problem of Evil

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I. Religious and Secular Theodicies: Providence and Progress

Evil is a problem for its victims, to be sure, but that doesn’t make it a philosophical problem. If, like Sophie, you are invited to choose which child to save and which to have carted off to the gas chambers, or, like some Tutsi men in Rwanda, you are forced at gunpoint by the Hutu militia to bite off your father’s penis, and then your father is put in a similar position towards you, you have problems. But, as Nietzsche remarks, the philosophical problem arises not from suffering as such but from the apparent senselessness of so much suffering. We can bear torment if we believe it serves a greater purpose or higher meaning.

In our Western philosophical tradition, the so-called “problem of evil” has been defined quite narrowly in terms of “theodicy”: the view that the world was created by an almighty, just God. Any reasonable believer must ask: why does God allow there to be evil – and so much of it – in the world? Theodicy solves the problem by holding that suffering, whether inflicted by “acts of God” or men, is “justified”: a rationally necessary means to an overall good end, an indispensable chapter in a larger, harmonious story. According to theodicy, whatever happens occurs “for a good reason.” Evil is not a positive reality, but a privation of the good: a “merely apparent” part of “the bigger
picture” that, if only we had access to it, would reveal even the most grotesque events to be for the best, all things considered. Theodicy must be distinguished from the more palatable view that we should make the best of whatever hand fate deals us or, in other words, turn lemons into lemonade. Theodicy claims that there aren’t really lemons, as in Leibniz’s theory that our world, being the creation of God, must be “the best of all possible worlds.”

Voltaire’s Candide lampoons Leibniz’s saccharine view after the Lisbon earthquake of 1775 crushes thousands of unwitting innocents in their sleep and decimates one of Europe’s most glorious cities. It’s always open for believers to insist that we of finite intellect can’t comprehend the mysterious ways of an infinite God. No argument can disprove Leibniz’s theodicy. But given that it can’t be proven either, a sober feeling for the evidence would seem to support Voltaire’s opinion that theodicy is a desperate exercise in mental gymnastics. And if no one created the world and no one is in charge of it, then evil is tragic and horrendous, but perhaps not philosophically puzzling. As Bernard Williams puts it, “There is a problem of evil only for those who expect the world to be good.”

But theodicy isn’t so easily put to rest, for it outlives its theological formulation. In the Enlightenment, religious faith tends to get replaced by confidence in historical progress, a secular analogue of divine providence. If Leibniz is the poster-child for classical theodicy, then Hegel is surely the flag-bearer of its updated version. For Hegel, “Reason” shows great cunning by being the guiding force in history, appearances notwithstanding. In the progressive development of humanity, all evils are eventually “sublated” in a synthesis by which “Spirit” heals itself and doesn’t leave any scars.
Modernity, Hegel assures us, comprises “the end of History,” the culmination of humanity’s fits and starts, the dialectical reconciliation of events that seemed to be evil in the past but turn out to have been rationally necessary for historical progress.

Two major books published recently on the topic of evil seem to propose contradictory theses. In *Radical Evil: A Philosophical Interrogation* Richard Bernstein holds that theodicies, both religious and secular, should be pronounced dead once and for all, for “after Auschwitz” the very idea of “justifying” evil and denying its brute reality is “obscene.” He supports his obscenity thesis by turning to the work of Emmanuel Levinas, Hans Jonas and Hannah Arendt: three post-Holocaust Jewish philosophers who agree that Auschwitz offers the best possible proof that theodicy’s solution to the problem of evil is a cruel hoax, a further affront to the victims. But Susan Neiman in *Evil in Modern Thought: an Alternative History of Philosophy* makes the apparently “obscene” claim that Levinas, Jonas and Arendt are actually continuing the project of theodicy and that, of the three, “Arendt’s *Eichmann in Jerusalem* is the best attempt at theodicy postwar philosophy has produced.” The very same thinkers whom Bernstein applauds as critics of theodicy, Neiman calls defenders of it.

I shall show that Bernstein and Neiman are not as allergic to each other as it might appear, for Neiman introduces an unorthodox interpretation of the meaning of theodicy. But ultimately I shall take issue with Neiman’s revised definition of theodicy and argue that Levinas in particular fails to fit into it, and in a way that challenges the core of Arendt’s position.
II. Richard Bernstein’s Radical Evil: A Philosophical Interrogation:

The “Obscenity” of Theodicy after Auschwitz

Bernstein’s thesis seems more intuitively plausible than Neiman’s. Anyone who still believes in theodicy today would seem to be living a pipe dream and, worse yet, making a mockery of history’s victims. If Lisbon shattered the 18th century’s faith that nature is a sign of divine providence, a faith further challenged by Darwin, Auschwitz undermines a more recalcitrant trust that history is a story of human progress under the direction of reason. There is no longer any possibility of reconciling ourselves to our cruel past – and most of all our past century. After Auschwitz, the gulags and Hiroshima, not to mention countless other atrocities, Bernstein holds, we must doubt the existence of “a deep layer of solidarity among humans in a civilized society.”

If “the problem of evil” is parasitic on theodicy, then we might expect Levinas, Jonas and Arendt to concur with Bernard Williams that the problem disappears once one loses faith that everything in the world is somehow for the best. Yet in 1945 Arendt declares: “The problem of evil will be the fundamental question of postwar intellectual life in Europe.” If theodicy is dead, though, how should the problem of evil be framed? Levinas offers an answer: “The philosophical problem posed by evil – that is, [suffering for nothing], the useless pain that appears in its fundamental malignity in the twentieth century - concerns the meaning that religiosity, but also the human morality of goodness, can continue to have after the end of theodicy.” Bernstein agrees, stating that our problem is not how to “justify” evil, but how to justify living in the face of it: in
particular, how to believe in morality and responsibility “after the utter failure of morality.” “The problem of evil” does not evaporate but changes. In the heyday of theodicy the question was how to rationalize evil in a world that is, in spite of all appearances, good. Today the issue is how to conceive of and justify religious faith and moral goodness in a world that is so full of real evil.

Bernstein is drawn to Levinas, Jonas and Arendt because they squarely face the unprecedented horrors of the 20th century – horrors that engulfed them and their families - and they dare to rethink the meaning of both evil and human responsibility on the brink of the abyss. Yet Bernstein identifies an important difference in what they focus on. Levinas and Jonas are still concerned with the theological question: How is Jewish faith possible after Auschwitz? And they agree that Jewish faith would be an “obscenity” if it rested on belief in the God of theodicy: a “God for children,” as Levinas calls Him, who would make this world, in Jonas’s words, “a guaranteed success-story.” Each refuses to attribute the “perfection” of omnipotence to the living God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, for conceiving of God as almighty renders us mere pawns in a divine drama and so diminishes the dialogical relationship between God and man. Authentic Jewish faith must reject theodicy’s claim that history is “a guaranteed success-story,” and instead return us to our responsibility to repair an ever-broken world for God’s sake (tikkun olam).

Yet “Judaism as a religion,” Bernstein notes, “was far more significant for Levinas and Jonas than it was for the more secular-oriented Arendt.” Arendt rejects not only theodicy but also theology, for she is “a secular Jew” who in 1951 confesses to Karl Jaspers that “all traditional religion as such, whether Jewish or Christian, holds nothing whatsoever for me anymore.” Bernstein and Neiman alike turn to Arendt because she
most deeply explores the novel, “radical” character of totalitarian evil. Yet Bernstein still speaks of “the theological aura” of Arendt’s work, and Neiman goes even further: insisting that Arendt (along with the more officially religious Levinas and Jonas) offers a theodicy. Before examining their divergent interpretations of Arendt, we must consider for ourselves what she means when she claims that “the problem of evil will be the fundamental question of postwar intellectual life in Europe.”

III. Hannah Arendt : Auschwitz and a New “Problem of Evil”

Following Nietzsche and Heidegger, Arendt claims that metaphysics itself – the attempt to orient our lives by any sort of transcendent foundation – is a thing of the past. She believes that we today must dare to think “without banisters.” So she does not construe “the problem of evil” in theological terms. Instead, she sees Auschwitz as introducing a problem that our religious and philosophical traditions don’t prepare us to understand, for they teach us that all normal people possess a conscience that lets us know evil when we see it. According to Arendt, “the great villains who became the negative heroes in literature… usually acted out of envy and resentment” and “eventually met their midnight disaster”, while “the [new] problem of evil that rears its head in the 20th century is that no wicked heart (a rare phenomenon) is necessary to cause great evil.” She labels this problem “the banality of evil” by which she means “the phenomenon of evil deeds, committed on a gigantic scale, which could not be traced to any particularity of wickedness, pathology, or ideological conviction in the doer, whose only personal distinction was perhaps extraordinary shallowness” 15

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Arendt coined the notorious concept, “the banality of evil,” while covering the 1961 trial of Adolf Eichmann in Israel for The New Yorker magazine. Eichmann, whom the Israeli secret service captured in Argentina, was a failed traveling salesman who advanced steadily in Himmler’s SS until 1942 when he became the bureaucrat responsible for organizing the identification, assembly and transportation of Jews from all over occupied Europe to their final destinations at Auschwitz and other extermination camps in Poland. Arendt expected to see a monster on the stand, and that is how the Israeli prosecution portrayed him, but instead she witnessed a mousy “organization man” who insisted he had nothing to be ashamed of, was just obeying superior orders, hadn’t violated the law, was only responsible for transportation, didn’t know about “the liquidation,” was the sort of man who couldn’t stomach the idea of gassing people and wouldn’t even tell a lie. He even claimed to live by Kantian principles and could quote the Categorical Imperative verbatim, though he meant by it, “Act in such a way that the Fuehrer, whose will is the law, would approve of your action.” As Arendt listened to Eichmann babble on, she realized she was confronted not by a man of “Satanic depth,” but by a superficial functionary desperate to finally succeed at an important post by proving to his superiors that he could do his job well and efficiently. His self-presentation was couched in clichés that enabled him to sleep easily at night by crippling his ability to think from the standpoint of another and hence to make independent judgments.

How is it that banality can be the root of evil? Arendt writes,

“By shielding people against the dangers of examination, [not-thinking] teaches them to hold fast to whatever the prescribed rules of conduct may be at a given
time in a given society. What people then get used to is not so much the content of the rules, a close examination of which would lead them into perplexity, as the possession of rules under which to subsume particulars. In other words, they get used to never making up their minds. If somebody should then show up who, for whatever reasons and purposes, wishes to abolish the old “values” or virtues, he will find it easy enough provided he offers a new code, and he will need no force and no persuasion – no proof that the new values are better than the old ones – to establish it. The faster men held to the old code, the more eager will they be to assimilate themselves to the new one; the ease with which such reversals can take place under certain circumstances suggests that everybody is asleep when they occur. This century has offered some experience in such matters: How easy it was for the totalitarian rulers to reverse the basic commandments – “Thou shalt not kill” in the case of Hitler’s Germany, “Thou shalt not bear false witness against thy neighbor” in the case of Stalin’s Russia.”

Arendt describes how her philosophical generation was blind-sided by this new irruption of evil. They had assumed with Kant that “morality is a matter of course,” for most people know and do what’s right, and they presumed with Socrates that it is better to suffer wrong than to do wrong. These assumptions rested on a sharp distinction between legality and morality, and on the consensus that, first, the law of the land in a civilized state generally articulates what the moral law demands and, second, when legality conflicts with morality, the moral law is higher and must be obeyed. In other words, it was presumed that every sane individual harbors a universal voice of conscience within
and that this voice speaks with greater authority than the law of the land or popular opinion. But then the few rules and standards whose validity seemed self-evident collapsed almost overnight, Arendt writes, “as if moral axioms were mere customs that could be exchanged like table manners.” 19

Even the judges in the Eichmann case presumed that “a feeling of moral lawfulness” had been inbred in us for so long that it couldn’t have been suddenly lost. Surely we could trust that pangs of conscience in the defendant would contradict the will of the Fuehrer. But Arendt finds this faith “very doubtful” given the evidence of a society where “every moral act was illegal and every legal act a crime.” When evil becomes the “normal” state of affairs, it can lose the quality of temptation in relation to which one feels guilty about doing something wrong. The Nazi leadership’s “coordination” of ordinary, law-abiding citizens depended not on fear-inspired hypocrisy, Arendt contends, but on “an eagerness not to miss the train of History” that enabled the most respected members of respectable society to change their opinions overnight and easily break long-standing friendships. They were not responsible for the Nazis in the first place, but they were, Arendt states, “unable to pit their own judgment against the verdict of History, as they read it.” It is impossible to understand what happened, she tells us, without taking into account a breakdown not only in personal responsibility but also in the capacity for sound judgment itself.

From the example of Eichmann, she draws the following lesson:

I am certain that the greatest evils we know of are not due to him who has to face himself again and whose curse is that he cannot forget. The greatest evildoers
don’t remember because they have never given thought to the matter, and, without remembrance, nothing can hold them back. By stubbornly remaining nobodies they prove themselves unfit for intercourse with others who, good, bad, or indifferent, are at the very least persons… For persons, thinking of past matters means moving in the dimension of depth, striking roots and thus stabilizing themselves, so as not to be swept away by whatever may occur – the Zeitgeist or History or simple temptation. The greatest 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.  

Since the publication of Eichmann in Jerusalem, critics have excoriated Arendt for overlooking Eichmann’s anti-Semitism, ideological zeal and cunning, and for presenting “banality” as the root of “the greatest evils” - rather than, e.g., resentment and/or envy whipped up into hatred with the help of an ideology promoted by charismatic leaders, not to mention weapons technology. If we accept Arendt’s diagnosis at face value for the moment, however, it invites the troubling idea that it is unfair to hold “the greatest evildoers” liable for their deeds because they are like “the criminally insane” whose guilt we deny on the grounds that they couldn’t have known better or couldn’t have resisted their impulses. And this would seem to support the oft-made excuse that those who complied with “law and order” were just a “cogs in a machine.” Furthermore, if we might have become “nobodies” who played by the rules under similar circumstances - if there is “an Eichmann in all of us” - who are we to judge? Unless there exists a faculty of independent judgment possessed by all – some surrogate for what has
traditionally been called “conscience” – how can we hold these “banal” criminals responsible for what they did?

IV. Arendt’s Response to the “New Problem of Evil”:

Conscience as a By-product of Thinking

The sad truth, Arendt concludes, is that “it is easier to condition human behavior to act in unexpected and outrageous ways than to persuade everyone to learn from experience by thinking and judging for themselves. And an effective way of conditioning behavior is by applying formulae deeply engrained, but whose basis of experience has been long forgotten and whose plausibility lies in their intellectual consistency rather than their adequacy to actual events.” 21 The question that haunts Arendt is this: If not-thinking can be responsible for radical evil, might thinking be an antidote to it? Should we have any confidence that the activity of thinking and judging for oneself – without reliance on the “banisters” of metaphysical “first things” or fixed rules – helps one to identify and resist evil in extreme situations where “every moral act is illegal and every legal act a crime”? Is it possible that thinking – apparently the most worldless of activities - puts us in touch with experiences that comprise what Arendt calls “the forgotten basis of time-honored moral principles”?

Just when Arendt seems to have brought our Western philosophical tradition to the point of shipwreck, she returns to its origin in Socrates to argue that the activity of thinking is of such a nature as to condition us against evil. Arendt distinguishes between “cognition” which aims at truth that can be certified and “thinking” which seeks meaning.
Though Kant claimed to “show us the limits of knowledge to make room for faith,” he should have said, Arendt suggests, that he would reveal the limits of cognition to make room for thinking. The brunt of Kant’s project was to raise the question: “Where everything that can be known has been proven, what becomes of all the rest: the matters that invite us to think about the meaning of things as a whole?” Socrates exemplifies the activity of thinking: a process that, like Penelope spinning her web, undoes each night what seemed conclusive the day before. Thinking destroys unexamined opinions and dissolves “established criteria.” But at least it has the negative power to make us stop what we are doing and question authority.

According to Arendt, the experience of thinking as an open-ended quest for meaning, not a more focused reflection on moral dilemmas, leads Socrates to his two main propositions. First, “it is better for me to suffer wrong than to do wrong.” Arendt notes that Socrates speaks more as an individual concerned with his own integrity than as a citizen concerned with the world. In Plato’s Gorgias, Socrates says to the hedonist Callicles, “IF you were like me, in love with wisdom and in need of self-examination, and IF the world should be as you depict it, THEN you would agree with me that it is better to suffer wrong than to do wrong.”

But prerequisite to this first proposition is a second, “It’s better that the multitudes disagree with me than I, being one, should be out of tune with myself.” I appear to others as one, Arendt notes, but for myself I am a “two-in-one” if I think: that is, engage in a dialogue with myself. And thinking, moved by a desire for integrity or harmony with oneself, requires that the “two-in-one” be partners or friends. It is better to suffer wrong than to do wrong, Arendt claims, because you can’t befriend and live together with an
evildoer, though you can remain friends with a victim. Arendt concludes that conscience is a “by-product” of thinking. Those who, like Socrates, fear self-contradiction, or, like Kant, fear self-contempt are capable of resisting socially sanctioned evil, Arendt asserts, neither because they possess a better set of values nor because old standards were firmly implanted in their minds and hearts, but because, disposed to think about what they are doing, they find themselves unable to live with themselves as murderers.  

But the Socratic argument - that my life would become worthless for me if I collaborated - applies only to people who care about being in dialogue with themselves. Hence Socrates’ argument compels only those whose consciences have already been activated by self-examination. Arendt writes, “He who does not know the intercourse between me and myself (in which we examine what we say and do) will not mind contradicting himself, and this means he will never be either able or willing to give account of what he says or does; nor will he mind committing any crime, since he can be sure it will be forgotten the next moment.”  

But the good news is, though Arendt does not say it outright, that those like Eichmann are guilty of negligence for their failure to think, for thinking is not the special province of intellectuals, much less professional philosophers.

“Thinking in its noncognitive, nonspecialized sense as a natural need of human life, the actualization of the difference given in consciousness, is not a prerogative of the few but an ever-present faculty of everybody; by the same token, the inability to think is not the “prerogative” of those many who lack brain-power, but
the ever-present possibility for everybody – to shun that intercourse with oneself whose possibility and importance Socrates first discovered.”

Arendt claims that the standard excuse – “I was just a cog in the machine” – fails to pass muster because it makes no sense in the courtroom where “a person is on trial, not a system or an ‘ism.’” The relevant question to the defendant is “Why did you let yourself become and continue to be a cog, a nobody?” – which means, “Why didn’t you stop and think and seek to become a person with integrity?”

The Western tradition, as Arendt reads it, presumes that the life of an evildoer becomes in a sense meaningless: a moral absurdity, a disintegration of the self. The villain must “meet his midnight disaster.” Even after the end of theodicy, a longing for “poetic justice” persists in the idea that although evil inflicts “useless suffering,” the wicked at least get their comeuppance at the level of psychic disharmony. Arendt denies us even this consolation when she claims that the greatest evils of the 20th century may well have left the evildoers without a second thought. Yet she, too, seems ultimately reassured by two ideas: 1) that thinking as “an ever-present faculty of everybody” justifies our holding such evildoers responsible for their negligence, and 2) that the life of the mind, even without recourse to metaphysical first principles or fixed moral rules, can be counted upon to generate conscientious resistance to “limitless, extreme evil.” Consequently, “the greatest evils,” even if they “spread over the world like a fungus,” are not deep, but superficial. There remains something within our nature that we can rely upon even under the circumstance of “total moral collapse”: namely, the call of conscience awakened by the activity of “thinking without banisters.”
V. Bernstein on “the Theological Aura” of Arendt’s Work

Most interpreters have taken Arendt to be rejecting “radical evil” when she points out time and again in the 60’s and 70’s that “the greatest evil is not radical.” But Richard Bernstein argues persuasively that “Arendt never repudiates the thought-trains that led her to believe in radical evil [in the 40’s and 50’s]; in fact, the banality of evil presupposes it.” On Bernstein’s reading, *Eichmann in Jerusalem* clarifies an ambiguity about the motivation behind the radical evil she describes in *The Origins of Totalitarianism*.

In *The Origins*, Arendt defines “absolute evil” as evil no longer deducible from humanly comprehensible motives and “radical evil” as evil that involves not merely using other human beings as means, but making them “superfluous” as human beings. Arendt describes “the logic of total domination” by which the Nazis aimed to eliminate the spontaneity that Kant took to be a transcendental condition of humanity. First, they killed “the juridical person”; then, “the moral person”; and finally they destroyed any individuality or spontaneity, organizing a plurality of humans as if all of humanity were just one mass person. This evil deserves to be called “radical” because it goes beyond exploiting people; it aims to make them “superfluous” as human beings. Arendt agrees with Kant that spontaneity is essential for rational life, but she believes, in Bernstein’s words, that “even this apparently transcendental condition of a human life can be eliminated empirically by totalitarian methods.”

In *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, Arendt identifies a second sense in which Auschwitz shatters Kantian categories. For Kant evil requires an intentional adoption of evil
maxims, and yet Arendt claims that the banality of evil defies this demand. Evil loses the quality of temptation and becomes the “normal” state of affairs in which the criminal ceases to know or feel that he is doing anything wrong. Her denial that such evil is “radical” remains consistent with her earlier point that the Nazis aimed to make human beings “superfluous” as human beings. She means only to make the “motivational” point that this evil depended less on villains who acted from motives of “Satanic greatness and depth” than on superficial “desk murderers” like Adolf Eichmann. There was no proportion between the horror of his deeds and his motives. Arendt’s account of this disproportion, her account of how banality can enable radical evil, according to Bernstein, conveys “the real horror of totalitarianism.”

Though Bernstein accepts Arendt’s description of herself as a secular Jew, he holds that Arendt’s Jewishness is “an essential perspective for gaining an understanding of the most characteristic themes of her thinking – and, in particular, her reflections on evil.” 31 Her “blind spot,” he alleges, is the “unresolved” relationship between her Jewishness – the meaning she accords to the factual matter of her having been born a Jew – and Judaism as a religious set of beliefs, rituals and practices. 32 Arendt acknowledges that “being Jewish is an indisputable fact of my life” and that “if you’re attacked as a Jew, you have to fight back as a Jew.” 33 And Bernstein shows how her account of the meaning of politics arises in the context of debates over Zionism, where Arendt argues that a Jewish homeland is a better alternative than a Jewish nation-state, and throws her support to Judah Magnes’s Brit Shalom movement and its dream of a binational confederation. Though she comes to see that her position is a lost cause and ultimately
breaks with Zionism, she “always considers herself part of the loyal opposition (rather than anti-Zionist).”

Yet Arendt cannot ground her defense of a Jewish homeland in an appeal to Jewish belief or even to “a love of the Jewish people” (ahavath Israel), and this, as she replies to Gershom Scholem, for two reasons. First, “I have never in my life ‘loved’ any people or collective… I indeed love ‘only’ my friends and the only kind of love I know of is the love of persons.” Second, to the thought that one might “believe in the Jewish people, but not in God,” she replies: “The greatness of this people was once that it believed in God, and believed in Him in such a way that its trust and love towards Him was greater than its fear. And now this people believes only in itself? What good can come out of that? – Well, in this sense I do not ‘love’ the Jews, nor do I ‘believe’ in them; I merely belong to them as a matter of course, beyond dispute or argument.”

Despite Arendt’s antipathy to Judaism, whose basis lies, after all, in a metaphysical belief in a transcendent Creator that she, following Nietzsche and Heidegger, rejects, Bernstein claims that Gershom Scholem was correct to insist, in his famous reply to the Eichmann book, that Arendt remains “a daughter of the Jewish people,” though, Bernstein remarks, “in ways which even [Scholem] didn’t recognize.” Although Arendt affirms the fact of her Jewishness in a secular way - as part of “a basic gratitude for everything that is as it is, for what has been given and was not, could not be, made” – this affirmation of Jewish identity, according to Bernstein, has “deep resonances within the tradition of Judaism [as a religion].” In Arendt’s notion of amor mundi – or “love of world” – Bernstein hears echoes of Rosenzweig and Levinas who insist that Judaism puts its emphasis on the world or creation, not on God, the creator, much less on
the self. Second, he discerns “a theological aura” in her characterization of “radical evil” as stemming from the delusion of omnipotence that attempts to debase the world as created – a world marked by plurality and freedom. Third, he finds it appropriate to describe Arendt as possessing a “half-religious passion for justice” and tangible public freedom: precisely the terms she used to characterize Judah Magnes and Heinrich Heine. Fourth, he notes that her writings express pride in the accomplishments of her Jewish people and passionate criticisms of their failures. Finally, she takes heart from the example set by Jews who seek to set a higher example in “dark times”: who keep alive the tradition of independent thinking to which “the Jewish pariah” like Rahel Varnhagen bears witness.  

Though Arendt asserts that traditional religion holds nothing for her, Bernstein brings Arendt back into the company of Levinas and Jonas, representatives of “Jewish theology after the death of theodicy,” with his claim that a “theological aura” surrounds her view that totalitarianism exhibits the ultimate hubris of human beings aspiring to God-like omnipotence. Totalitarianism represents a perversion of theodicy: a “diabolicy” in which History bears out the will of the Fuehrer who takes himself to like God. But the debasement of creation by anyone who would imitate God’s omnipotence must also be a debasement of God, for omnipotence cannot be an attribute of a Creator who meant humanity to be free. Jewish critics of theodicy, like Levinas and Jonas, object to its failure not only to honestly face real evil in the world, but also to acknowledge that God’s goodness depends on the reality of human freedom, for freedom makes our contribution important. In Arendt’s critique of the totalitarian mentality Bernstein hears echoes of her more religious counterparts.
This invites us to pose a speculative question that Bernstein never raises. Why did Arendt entitle her book, *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, not *Eichmann in Israel*? Israel was after all the state that tracked Eichmann down, extradited him, put him on trial. The principle reason, I think, is that Arendt had misgivings not about Eichmann’s guilt, but about the way a judicial framework must define “these newfangled murderers.” To stay within the strictures of legal culpability, the prosecution needed to portray Eichmann as a classic criminal with the usual motives. But for Arendt “banality” defies the Kantian description of the villain with wicked intentions, haunted by a guilty conscience. The problem, according to Arendt, is that none of the ordinary grounds for punishment applied to Eichmann. Yet, she asserts, he and those like him must be banished from the company of men. But is it fair to banish him if he was unable to think? I have argued that she must construe his behavior as involving culpable negligence. One must suppose that he could have stopped to think and that, having done so, he needn’t have become “a cog in the machine.” Yet even “negligence” seems too mild a term to capture the mens rea of Nazi functionaries.

Second, though Jerusalem is associated with Judaism, Israel is associated with Zionism, and, as Arendt’s correspondence with Gershom Scholem proves, Arendt had difficulty with Zionism and the idea of “ahavath Israel,” love of the people of Israel, upon which Scholem insisted. Arendt holds that a plurality of different individuals is the root of politics, and a polity rooted in love or compassion, as opposed to respect, runs the risk of “Volkisch” exclusivism.

Third, the inclusion of “Jerusalem” in the title bears a trace of the classic distinction between Athens, the birthplace of philosophical reason in the West, and
Jerusalem, site of faith in the one God who created humanity in His image. For Eichmann to be brought before the tribunal in Jerusalem symbolizes the core of Jewish faith: that all are created equal and none stands beyond the claim of God’s commandments. One might think that this confirms Bernstein’s thesis that Arendt’s work harbors “a theological aura.”

Yet the fact remains that Arendt does not turn to “Jerusalem” to address the Western philosophical tradition’s failure to comprehend the phenomenon of radical evil enabled by “thoughtlessness.” Instead, she returns to “Athens.” Reading the philosophical tradition against itself, she discovers an antidote to evil in the activity of thinking itself. On the one hand, she holds, Western political theory stemming from Plato has difficulty comprehending totalitarian evil, and, beyond that, the tradition encourages a totalitarian impulse in “professional thinkers” who desire to know the absolute truth and organize the polis in light of it. This Platonic drive to know the Good expresses the monological spirit of “metaphysics”: a spirit inimical to the meaning of politics, which requires the protection of plurality, individuality and spontaneity. In this respect, Arendt bears an affinity with Martin Buber, who contrasts the monological impulse of Greek thought with the way of dialogue. 39 On the other hand, Buber traces the way of dialogue back to the “Biblical humanism” of “Jerusalem,” while Arendt seeks to counter the totalitarian tendency of metaphysics with an interpretation of “the life of the mind” that centers on unorthodox, “post-metaphysical” readings of Socrates and Kant. At the heart of her “faculty psychology” is a distinction between cognition aimed at certain truth and thinking oriented to meaning. While conscience is “a by-product” of thinking – the ability to resist evil when the chips are down even without relying on fixed rules or first
principles – thinking also plays the role of “liberating” the faculty of judgment and its capacity for “representative thinking” - or thinking from the standpoint of others - so that one may form whole-minded opinions.

Arendt hopes to rescue the tradition of political philosophy from its totalitarian tendency to obliterate human plurality: the condition in virtue of which each of us has a different perspective on a world we share in common. In politics or the public space of appearances there ought to be a contest of opinions not, as J.S. Mill suggested, so that we might better zero in on one single TRUTH, but so as to lead us to a better-informed, more well-justified opinion about what is best for the polis as a whole. 40 Though truth is important for the formation of opinion – and can be decisive in critical situations - the clash of opinions is not ultimately measured by standards of truth. Arendt develops her view of political judgment through a creative, if strained, reading of Kant’s theory of “reflective judgment” in his Third Critique. Whereas Kant tries to make sense of aesthetic taste as involving judgments about beauty that are meant to have universal validity but cannot be subsumed under universal rules, Arendt thinks this applies to political judgments about what is right which she takes to be to “opinions” based on “representative thinking.” 41

Despite Bernstein’s attempt to draw Arendt within the orbit of “Jerusalem” – or “Jewish theology after the death of theodicy” - he understands that the center of her philosophical universe lies in Athens. Haunted by the question of whether there is a capacity within ourselves that we can rely on when fixed rules or commandments fail us, Arendt turns to the activity of “thinking without banisters.” Yet, as Bernstein himself points out, this is precisely where her own speculation proves most shaky. He offers three
criticisms of Arendt’s attempt to relate the activity of thinking to the capacity for good judgment. First, she never justifies her claim that thinking has a liberating effect on the faculty of judgment. Though she is critical of optimistic views of human nature, she wants to believe that we possess a critical faculty of judgment that can save us “when the chips are down.” Second, she never explains what we are asserting when we judge a particular deed to be right and distinguish it from wrong. How, e.g., are good and evil to be distinguished from beautiful and ugly? Third, she offers no account of why a few maintain their ability to judge while most do not. She cannot explain the differences between resisters who remain capable of judging what’s evil and acting according to conscience and, on the other hand, accomplices who lost – or never had – this ability.

Several issues are in play here. Is the cultivation of thinking necessary for resistance? As Philip Hallie’s study of Le Chambon suggests, the habit of compassionate helpfulness may be more important than thinking. Finally, is thinking sufficient for resistance? Is it the key to having the courage to actively resist evil? Bernstein admits that a “noncircular” explanation eludes Arendt. Yet, he concedes, such an explanation “may always elude us.”

Richard Bernstein presents Levinas, Jonas and Arendt as Jewish philosophers who confirm his thesis that Auschwitz has rendered theodicies of any sort “obscene.” The problem these philosophers face is not how evil in history can be "justified," but how to believe in morality in the face of so much “useless suffering” and without any appeal to "a Happy Ending." Bernstein holds that Arendt is the most radical of the trio, for her “banality of evil” thesis challenges not only the idea of theodicy but the presuppositions of our religious and philosophical traditions – and especially the Kantian framework - that were meant to help us make sense of and respond to evil in a far-from-perfect world.
Though Arendt is best read as a defender of “Athens,” who tries to save the remnants of the Western rationalism in the face of totalitarian evil unknown to the Enlightenment, her arguments on behalf of the salvific power of thinking are weak. While Bernstein’s interpretation of Arendt allows us to see her as a contributor, along with Levinas and Jonas, to Jewish theological reflection after the death of theodicy, he admits that she remained an unbelieving Jew who never resolved the relationship between the fact of her Jewishness and Judaism as a religion. And ultimately, he concedes, she should be regarded as a secular Jew who sought to rescue philosophy from the rubble of the 20th century, but who failed to provide a convincing case for the saving power of “thinking.”

VI. Susan Neiman on Arendt’s *Eichmann in Jerusalem* as “the Best Attempt at Theodicy Postwar Philosophy Produced”

In her recent book, *Evil in Modern Thought: an Alternative History of Philosophy*, Susan Neiman makes the apparently “obscene” claim that Levinas, Jonas and Arendt - the very thinkers whom Bernstein draws on to make his case for “the death of theodicy” - are actually continuing the project of theodicy, and that, of the three, “Arendt’s *Eichmann in Jerusalem* is the best attempt at theodicy postwar philosophy has produced.” 44 Arendt, whom Bernstein calls the most “secular-oriented” of the three, turns out, on Neiman’s interpretation, to be the foremost representative of theodicy. How is this possible?

Neiman’s arresting thesis hinges on a distinction between narrow and broad theodicies. “Narrow theodicies” justify evil by appealing to providence - an all-powerful,
benevolent Creator - or progress - the hidden hand of “Reason.” But they are, she argues, derivative expressions of a more basic drive of the human mind to which Arendt was keenly attuned: namely, reason’s quest for meaning above and beyond what we can know. Evil threatens reason’s need “to find and create meaning adequate to a world that seems determined to thwart these capacities.” "Broad theodicies" demand not that everything happens for the best, but only that the world be "intelligible" enough that we can affirm, “in spite of all appearances, [that] we and the world are made for eachother.” 45 “Broad theodicies” help us face evil without giving in to despair; they place evils within structures that may not reconcile us to the past, but at least help us to go on so as to prevent future evils. Neiman also calls this "metaphysics": the drive to "make sense" of the world given that things often go very wrong. 46

Neiman would concur with Bernstein that "narrow theodicies” are moribund. “The problem of evil” remains alive, however, because evil is a threat not only to beliefs in providence or progress, but, more fundamentally, to the very "intelligibility" of the world. The atrocities of the 20th century, Neiman warns, threaten to make us "homeless" because they seem to leave us without "the conceptual resources to do more than bear witness." Although Neiman presents Arendt, Levinas, Camus, and Rawls alike as exemplars of "metaphysics" or "broad theodicy" in her concluding chapter, "Homeless," she clearly has the deepest sympathy for Arendt. Arendt remains "metaphysical" in Neiman's sense of the term, despite her agreement with Heidegger against Kant that “two-world metaphysics” is a thing of the past, because “thinking” proves sufficient to answer evil, if only barely.
So long as Neiman’s broadening of the meaning of theodicy would persuade Bernstein, there need be no dispute between them, for Bernstein is referring to “narrow theodicy” when he claims that theodicy after Auschwitz is “obscene,” while Neiman is speaking of “broad theodicy” when she applauds Arendt for offering the most powerful theodicy after Auschwitz. Because Neiman’s notion of “broad theodicy” involves no commitment to the “narrow” idea that evils are “justified” by their contribution to the greater good – indeed no commitment to the existence of God at all – Bernstein need not deem this notion “obscene.” Still, the question remains whether Neiman’s unorthodox thesis provides a helpful way of understanding the sense in which modern thought responds to “the problem of evil,” regardless of whether one has given up on God and theology.

Considering Neiman’s *Evil in Modern Thought* in light of her earlier work, *The Unity of Reason: Rereading Kant*, I conclude that Neiman sees her heroes, especially Arendt, through the lens of “metaphysics” or “broad theodicy” because she wants to defend the Kantian ideal of "the unity of reason." She reads Arendt as working out this ideal in *The Life of the Mind*, but in a world fractured by evil beyond what Kant could have imagined. Recall that Kant opens the door for metaphysics not as a science grounded on knowledge but as a speculative system based on faith: a system that enables us to make the best sense of “the starry heavens above and the moral law within.” Far beyond entitling us to make the minimal judgment that evil is morally wrong, Kant allows us to postulate a teleological order that grounds freedom in nature, a moral order that gives us reason to hope for progress in history, and the ultimate coincidence of virtue and happiness in an immortal soul that is appropriately judged by God, the moral author
of nature. We ought not to see Kant’s Ideas of Reason as “failed constitutive principles,” Neiman insists, because “the questions they are intended to settle are not questions about the world but about the behavior of human beings in the world.” 47

Taking her cue from Kant, Neiman holds that the principle of sufficient reason - a principle we bring to the world - is the basis of reason’s quest for meaning. 48 We are so structured as to “expect a world that meets us halfway, for we can’t make meaning alone.” 49 The drive to seek reasons in the world, she says, is a drive as deep as any drive we have – even if we must make do with less reason than we once hoped for in the heyday of systematic philosophy. 50 Neiman wants to maintain the core of Kant’s idea of “the unity of Reason” – namely, its orientation to “the Good-in-itself” – but without making Kant’s “greatest error”: to “mistake the demand for reason with the demand for System.” 51

Though the child’s endless urge to find reason in the world “can verge on the ridiculous,” abandoning the urge means foregoing the assumptions that drive humankind to grow up. 52 We stop asking “Why?” when either everything is as it should be or there’s no point in judging “what is” by “what ought to be.” Even without appealing to providence or progress, the legitimacy of judging “what is” in light of “what ought to be,” Neiman tells us, presupposes that the world is “intelligible”: that evil, even if overwhelming and unjustifiable, is not demonic and that “we and the world are made for each other.” 53 Metaphysics, rooted in the principle of sufficient reason and moved by the urge to unite “is” and “ought,” keeps the problem of evil alive. “Ethics and metaphysics are not accidentally connected,” Neiman concludes, for “whatever attempts we make to
live rightly are attempts to live in the world": that is, a world that allows us to hold evildoers accountable for the useless suffering they inflict. 54

Arendt divides The Life of the Mind into three parts corresponding to three "faculties" - thinking, willing and judging - that echo the topics of Kant’s three critiques: theoretical reason, practical reason, and judgment. But the world Arendt encounters falls far short of the ‘meanings” constructed by the “regulative” deployment of Kantian reason. According to Arendt, Kant claimed that he was showing the limits of knowledge in order to make room for faith; but he should have said that he was making room for meaning. In its quest for meaning, Arendtian "thinking" is closer to Nietzsche and Heidegger than to Kant, for it doesn’t culminate in the outworn Ideas of two-world metaphysics. Without recourse to God and the immortality of soul, Arendt seeks to find in “thinking without banisters” the resources to generate enough this-worldly meaning to give us the courage to go on even in the face of radical evil. Arendt sustains the legitimacy of theodicy and metaphysics after all, Neiman claims, but without buying into the Kantian demand for a "System," for Eichmann in Jerusalem is a defense not of Eichmann but of the world that contains him.

Auschwitz raises doubts about whether we can apply moral categories to human beings at all. Helpless, we feel homeless. Arendt rescues "reason" from the brink of shipwreck with her notion that the thinking process, though it does not aim at practical results, has two salutary side-effects. First, it activates the “two-in-one” of dialogue with oneself, and this inclines one towards moral “integrity” in light of which one must refuse to comply with clear cases of evil. In this regard, thinking produces the voice of conscience “as a by-product.” Arendt suggests that if only the “thoughtless” Eichmann
had stopped to think, he would have had a conscience and been unable to live with himself as a murderer. Second, the activity of thinking has “a liberating effect” on the faculty of “judging,” the ability to discern the difference between right and wrong based on “an enlarged mentality”: the power to think “representatively” from “the standpoint of everyone else.” So "reason" can secure our place in the world so long as it remains fair to expect that people ought to act "reasonably" - i.e., within the bounds set by the second version of Kant's Categorical Imperative: namely, act so as to treat the humanity in others never solely as a means, but also always as an end-in-itself. So long as "the moral law" withstands the pressures put upon it by "Auschwitz," Neiman seems to think, we remain "at home" because evil fails to undermine the “intelligibility” of the world after all.

“To call evil ‘banal’ is a theodicy,” Neiman contends, for it implies that the sources of it “are not mysterious or profound but fully within our grasp”: not deep or demonic, but superficial, “like a fungus.” 55 Eichmann's "banality" offers no excuse, therefore, because he is liable for having let himself become "a cog in the machine." We can attribute guilt without intention after all because the potential for “judgment” exists even in those evildoers who lack bad intentions and do not suffer a guilty conscience. We can give “a naturalistic account of the development of evil and the forces which allow us to resist it,” and this lets us avoid the “gnostic” or “nihilistic” outcome that evil has depth, is truly demonic and hence defies reason’s quest for meaning.

Arendt does not deny that under conditions of totalitarian terror, most will comply with authority. But she tries to make sense of why they do, why it makes sense to hold them accountable for their compliance, and why conscience, activated by the faculty of thinking, can help us navigate the world in the darkest of times. Although the
“unintentionality” of Eichmann's evil pushes our moral categories to their limits, Arendt's account rescues Kant's "moral order of the world" from the brink of nihilism - by way of Socrates. The unity of reason is not shattered, after all, by radical, banal evil. Eichmann in Jerusalem is “the best attempt at theodicy postwar philosophy has produced” because Arendt’s argument satisfies the demands of the principle of sufficient reason. If unthinkable, limitless evil is both comprehensible and resistible, this provides “evidence” that we are at home in the world, even if by the thinnest of threads. But even this effort to make moral sense of a broken world, Neiman suggests, fulfills Arendt’s goal, stated in her dedication to her teacher, Karl Jaspers: “to find my way around in reality without selling my soul to it, the way people in earlier times sold their soul to the devil.”

Despite Arendt’s official repudiation of Jewish theology, Neiman claims that Arendt draws on Socrates to make a point very much at the heart of the Jewish tradition: that “no more is required, and no more can be reasonably asked, for this place to remain a place fit for human habitation than that some people will not comply.” As Neiman points out, “this passage cannot but recall the righteous thirty-six, whose presence in the world, according to Jewish legend, is enough to guarantee our continued existence.” Still, if “thinking” is the basis of the conscientious individual’s power of resistance and “thoughtlessness” the root of Eichmann’s complicity, then Arendt ultimately finds Eichmann guilty before a tribunal located in “Athens,” not in “Jerusalem” as the title of her book suggests.
VII. Neiman’s Assimilation of Levinas to Arendt: Back to Jerusalem?

In Radical Evil, Richard Bernstein argues that while Arendt opposes not only (narrow) theodicy but “traditional religion as such, whether Jewish or Christian,” her work retains a “theological aura,” and Judaism remains “an essential perspective for gaining an understanding of the most characteristic themes of her thinking” – and, in particular, her reflections on evil.” Still, I contend, Bernstein would agree with my conclusion that the core of her thinking remains bound to “Athens.” And yet, as Bernstein himself shows, Arendt’s attempt to root conscience in Socratic “thinking without banisters” comprises one of the weakest points on her speculative path. She fails to demonstrate that the activity of thinking is the key to having the courage to resist evil.

In Evil in Modern Thought, Susan Neiman relies heavily on Arendt to show that “broad theodicy” is alive after Auschwitz. Eichmann in Jerusalem is a defense not of Eichmann but of the “intelligibility” of the world that contains him, according to Neiman, because, insofar as the most radical evil in the modern world is rooted in banality, such evil is not deep and demonic, but superficial “like a fungus.” The principle of sufficient reason still applies to such a world, for it remains fair to expect an Eichmann to act “reasonably,” even if his evil is “unintentional.” As evidence of the resiliency of conscience, Arendt turns to Anton Schmidt, a German sergeant “in charge of a patrol in Poland that collected stray German soldiers who were cut off from their units.” Upon running into members of the Jewish underground, “Schmidt helped the Jewish partisans by supplying them with forged papers and military trucks, and not for money.” 58 Arendt concludes that resistance from the non-Jewish world was possible even under conditions
of terror, though she laments: “How different everything today would be… if only more such stories could have been told.”

But does the example of Anton Schmidt support Arendt’s theoretical point that we can count on "thinking" as an antidote to evil in a situation of "total moral collapse"? Somehow, to be sure, Schmidt was able to reach out to "the other" and find in him a fellow human being. But there is no evidence that Schmidt resisted because, like Socrates, he engaged in the activity of thinking and found himself "unable to live with himself as a murderer." I suspect that unless a person’s thinking process is already "claimed" by an affective sense of responsibility for “the other,” thinking will not suffice to generate a conscientious refusal to comply with evil. I would call this pre-reflective feeling of being “called” by “the other” the "Jerusalem" moment - and contrast it with Arendt's “Athenian” emphasis on "thinking" with its roots in Socratic (and later, Kantian) "intellectualism" and the desire to be in harmony with oneself.

Neiman elides the difference between "Athens" and "Jerusalem," as Emmanuel Levinas himself construes it, by including Arendt and Levinas alike in her family of post-Auschwitz thinkers who offer “broad theodicies.” Levinas does not make the meaning of life in a world of horrors depend upon a belief that the world remains "intelligible," appearances notwithstanding. Levinas sees himself as writing not only after the end of “narrow theodicy,” but also after the mind has abandoned any hope of justifying faith in God or moral goodness on “rational” grounds. Evil is a kind of “madness,” but so is holiness. This is the force of Levinas's putting "ethics" before "ontology," responsibility prior to reason.
For Levinas, as I understand him, “holiness” requires being-for-the-other even without the “consolation” that evil is “comprehensible.” This makes the holy one even less “at home in the world” than Arendt’s Socrates or Kant who can rely on the power of “thinking” and ultimately reassure themselves of the “intelligibility” of the world. When Levinas asks, in all seriousness, the outrageous question, “Is it righteous to be?,” he means that ethics takes its cue from a mood – shame in the face of the other – that is antithetical to the ontological desire to “be at home in the world.” Levinas must dissent from the cornerstone of Neiman’s “broad theodicy” - the belief that “we and the world are made for each other” – when he states:

I am not saying that men are saints or are inclined towards holiness, only that the vocation of holiness is recognized by every human being as a value and that this recognition defines the human… But the holiness of gratuitous goodness is fragile before the power of evil. It is as if the weak and simple “holy ones” want to extinguish the world conflagration with a wash basin. Still, despite all the horrors that men have engendered, this poor goodness holds its own… Might we stand at the eve of a new form of faith, a faith without triumph, as though the only incontestable value were holiness, when the sole right to recompense belonged to the one who is not expecting any? The first and the last manifestation of God would be to be without promise. 60

Levinas stands for “a faith without triumph” in which “poor, mad goodness” holds its own… without belief in a happy ending.” The "mad goodness" to which Levinas refers
cannot be equated with Arendtian "thinking" without a sleight-of-hand that disguises the difference between the ways of Athens and Jerusalem.\(^6\)

By Levinas’s lights, Arendt ultimately defends the existence of a faculty of judgment independent of metaphysical "first things," fixed rules and public opinion from the standpoint of an "Athenian" philosopher. And, Levinas would add, Neiman stays on the "rationalistic" road of "Athens" and so cannot get to the heart of the response to evil. Arendt and Neiman put too much emphasis on the drive for intelligibility, and so overlook the priority of responsibility over comprehension. Only by affirming our homelessness, according to Levinas, can we do justice to the uncanniness of responsibility. Hence, Arendt’s classic should really be called \textit{Eichmann in Athens}, and Levinas is the one entitled to carry out the project of Arendt's actual title, \textit{Eichmann in Jerusalem}. Neiman skirts over this parting of ways, dedicated as she is to assimilating her heroes under the banner of “the unity of reason.”

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In “Jewish Philosophies after Heidegger: Imagining a Dialogue between Jonas and Levinas,” (The Graduate Faculty Philosophy Journal, Volume 23, Number 1, 2001) I compare Levinas’s and Jonas’s ways of offering a Jewish theology without recourse to theodicy. Suffice it to say, for now, that Jonas is more committed to traditional arguments stemming from “rational theology,” whereas Levinas follows Buber’s prioritizing of “relationship” over “objectifying thought.” But their differences should not obscure the fact that both Levinas and Jonas are hostile to theodicy.

Levinas remarks, “Judaism is not valid because of the ‘happy end’ of its history, but because of the faithfulness of this history to the teachings of Torah.” (Entre Nous, 206) The Other’s suffering is meaningful not because it happens “for a reason” – that would be “the temptation of theodicy” – but only insofar as it elicits the suffering of ethical responsibility in me and without any expectation of reward. Levinas gives a phenomenological description of “the face of the Other” that purports to show that the very presence of another person to me reveals a Good-in-itself, a trace of the otherwise absent God, that commands my responsibility, even to the point of requiring that I sacrifice myself for the Other’s sake. To theodicy’s assumption that God is all-powerful and so “the whole world’s in His hands,” Levinas retorts, “One should love Torah more than God.”

Jonas echoes Levinas’s outrage, “The disgrace of Auschwitz is not to be charged to some all-powerful Providence or to some dialectically wise necessity, as if it were an antithesis demanding a synthesis or a step on the road to salvation. We human beings have inflicted this on the deity, we who have failed in the administering of his things. It remains on our account, and it is we who must again wash away the disgrace from our own disfigured faces, indeed, from the very countenance of God. Don’t talk to me here about the cunning of reason!” (Mortality and Morality, 188) Drawing on the Lurianic idea of tzimtzum or the self-contracting deity, Jonas speculates that God, having spent all of his energy on creation, is powerless to intervene in the course of history. But he takes heart from the testimony of Etty Hillesum, a Dutch Jewess who volunteered to enter the concentration camp at Westerbork “in order be of help there and to take part in the destiny of her people.” Hillesum found meaning at the limit-point of evil, for though the “caring, suffering and becoming” Creator is powerless to help us, “we must help you and defend up to the last your dwelling within us.”

Jonas bids us not to forget that of all the freedoms of the human mind, moral freedom is “the most precarious, for it is also the freedom of self-refusal, of chosen deafness, yes, of an opting-against, all the way up to radical evil, which can still, as we have learned, dress up in the guise of the highest good.” (Mortality and Morality, 175) Jonas’s allusion to “radical evil” refers, of course, to the Nazis’ Final Solution: destructiveness beyond
comprehension that nonetheless “dressed itself up” as “devotion to an absolute ideal.” Ultimately, however, Jonas, like Levinas, holds that a basic knowledge of good and evil and capacity for responsibility are part of what it means to be created in the image of God, and so the Nazis are accountable for actions done in the name of their “delusory construct… of a misguided eros.”

12 Bernstein, Radical Evil, p. 6.
16 Ibid., p. 159.
20 Ibid., pp. 111-112 and 95.
23 Ibid., p. 187.
24 Ibid.
25 Ibid., p. 188.
29 Bernstein, Radical Evil, p. 218.
30 Ibid., p. 208.
31 Ibid., p. 9.
32 Ibid., p. 186.
33 Ibid., p. 101.
34 Ibid., pp. 104 and 11.
36 Bernstein, Hannah Arendt and the Jewish Question, pp. 188-9.
38 Bernstein, Radical Evil, p. 213.
40 Bernstein, Hannah Arendt and the Jewish Question, p. 106.

For Bernstein’s three criticisms of Arendt, see his *Hannah Arendt and the Jewish Question*, p. 178.


Ibid., p. 303.

Ibid., pp. 239 and 291.


Ibid., p. 323.

Ibid., p. 322.

Ibid., pp. 322 and 326.

Ibid., p. 321.

Ibid., p. 303.

Ibid., p. 327.

Ibid., p. 303.

Arendt, “Dedication to Jaspers,” *Essays in Understanding*.


Ibid., p. 230.

Ibid., p. 231.


Richard Bernstein legitimately identifies a “structural parallel between Levinas’s critique of the dialectic of the same and the other… and Arendt’s critique of the tradition of political philosophy that seeks to ignore or obliterate the irreducibility of human plurality.” (Radical Evil, 212) Levinas and Arendt alike are suspicious of the “totalitarian” tendencies of the philosopher’s desire to know the whole truth: a project whose consummation would require a comprehensive grasp of “the whole” in the mind of a single thinker. Bernstein is correct about the affinity between Levinas’s opposition between totality and infinity and Arendt’s between totalitarianism and politics. But the ultimate question remains: How should one ground conscience’s sense of responsibility for the singularity of others as human individuals? Here, I am arguing, Levinas and Arendt part company.