

# Theodicy in Jerusalem

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I must admit that I shall be in fullest sympathy with a *Zeitgeist* that would bring the intellectuals to the point of no longer considering the tremendous body of past philosophy as the “errors of the past.”

—Arendt, “*Religion and the Intellectuals*”

Whose trial was it?

The question haunts the pages of *Eichmann in Jerusalem* and much of the controversy surrounding it. Arendt charged that in soliciting victims’ testimony, the state of Israel was trying the history of anti-Semitism, rather than the particular deeds of a particular criminal, as simple justice demands. Arendt’s critics found her discussion of the role of the *Judenräte* even more gratuitous. Her insistence on confronting the question of Jewish complicity in this context suggested that not Eichmann, but the *Judenräte* were on trial and led many to conclude that Arendt had taken it on herself to indict the victims. That *Eichmann in Jerusalem* provoked enormous controversy at its publication when the issues it broached had been little discussed in the Jewish or German communities is no surprise. More puzzling is the violent passion the book continues to inspire some thirty-five years later, when we can hardly be said to suffer from a dearth of discussion of the Holocaust. The ferocity of discussion cannot be explained by the book’s apparent content. Thus, it remains unstilled by further examination of historical data or by the suggestion that Arendt was simply careless in her choice of expression.<sup>1</sup>

In what follows, I shall offer a reading of the book in terms that are unavailable on its surface. Discussion of her notion of the banality of evil has emphasized her attempt to capture the specifically modern character of evil. I do not intend to evaluate her view, shared by many, that the

Holocaust involves a radically unique form of evil, or the success of her attempts to characterize its nature. Without deciding the question of whether the twentieth century presents something fundamentally new in the quality of evil, I wish to situate the question in an older one. Much about the book and the debate it engenders becomes clearer when we cease to view it as a faulty piece of historical writing, or even an incomplete sketch in moral theory. What was on trial was not (only) German war crimes, or Jewish complicity in them, but Creation itself. Among other things, this explains why Arendt's critics were right to sense she was engaged in more than the simple reporting she claimed. There is no doubt that Arendt undertook to defend something whose justification should make us more than a little uneasy. It was not, however, Adolf Eichmann, but a world that contained him.

My argument proceeds as follows. I begin with a summary of the modern problem of evil in order to place the issues raised by Arendt in traditional context. I then discuss Arendt's use of theological discourse and her remarks about philosophy in order to outline the constraints her project must face: If Arendt's work provides a (substitute for) theodicy, it does so in radically modern form. Her decided antipathy to Hegelian attempts to justify Creation through history is as much rooted in Kantian metaphysics as in the experience of the Shoah and must entail rejecting any hint of suggestion that this world is the best of all possible ones. I proceed to examine her discussion of evil as a piece of moral psychology and philosophy whose goal is to preserve individual moral responsibility without relying on a notion of intention. Finally, I discuss the ways in which that discussion serves practical and theoretical ends. It responds to concrete political dangers Arendt correctly anticipated while providing a metaphysical framework that allows us to preserve the stance she ascribed to Lessing: not entirely at home in the world, but committed to it (*MDT*, 5).

The problem of evil can be divided into three separate questions:

- (1) Defining the nature of evil.
- (2) Explaining how people (knowingly) commit evil actions.
- (3) Understanding how (a benevolent and powerful) God could create a world containing innocent suffering.

For most modern readers, these are thoroughly different projects, so that the eighteenth-century designation of all of them as somehow belonging together can seem simply confused. That human cruelty and natural disaster were both called evils may appear but a historical mis-

take—perhaps a natural mistake in a group of theists, for whom everything is ultimately in God’s hands, but one we’ve been forced to correct. Even optimists among us no longer expect benevolence and intelligibility from the natural world but confine our hopes to encountering them occasionally among human beings. Thus, the case of Eichmann may seem to have nothing in common with the traditional problem of evil but an accident of name. So Arendt, it could be urged, never deeply addresses any of the three questions listed above. “Banal” is not a definition of evil, but at best a description of it. More than one reader has found it not merely offensive, but lacking in the rigor or structure that a well-developed account should provide. It is arguable that no one has succeeded in giving an interesting definition of evil. Augustine’s appeal to privation is more a piece of theodicy than of explication. To say that evil is not-Being is to say something formal about its Creator. It hardly counts as having said something about the subject itself. But whether or not other definitions of evil were more illuminating, Arendt’s own cannot be adequate.<sup>2</sup>

Her contribution to the second project can seem equally unsatisfactory. We may be willing to forego a definition of evil in exchange for an explanation of the actions that are unquestionably so. But her answer to the question of what allows people to engage in evil actions is thoroughly schematic. Historically, she adds little to the accounts that were available in 1963 of the process by which the Nazis created a system of compliant extermination. Philosophically, she sketches an idea about judgment and thoughtlessness that says next to nothing about why some of us turn out to be Eichmann and others Anton Schmidt—particularly unsettling in view of the fact that some of us turn out to be Heidegger. I will argue that Arendt’s discussion of moral judgment is less sketchy than has been thought. Nevertheless, as attempts to give detailed analyses of the two modern questions concerning the problem of evil, Arendt’s account is hard to view as successful.<sup>3</sup> Yet the work continues to evoke levels of response that find in it depth and significance, touching nerves that show that it is surely addressing something.

How could it be the third question? The suggestion that Arendt’s project might have its roots in the eighteenth century can seem to result not merely from conceptual confusion, but from morally revolting conceptual confusion. Discussing in similar terms what we now radically separate as moral evil and natural suffering would leave God’s responsibility for both a matter for speculation. Perhaps atheists, more than others, recoil from a line of thinking that could make God, at best, a *Mitläufer*.

But if contemplating God's culpability for Auschwitz seems too noxious to consider, we must recall that the problems facing Leibniz were hardly easier. In focusing on the freedom of Judas as the act most in need of explanation, the Christian philosopher forces himself to contemplate God's complicity in the murder of the Christ. And though he himself rejected the doctrine, Leibniz felt bound to defend even a God who condemns unbaptized babies to eternal damnation, as Calvinists believed. Arendt's deep and repeated conviction that totalitarian governments succeed in creating Hell on earth can also be read backward: if unspeakable torture is inflicted without ground in one realm, the sense of Creation is precarious in all of them.

The term "theodicy"—from *theos*, as in "God," and *dike*, as in "justice"—was introduced by Leibniz in 1710 in the book of the same name. His justification of God was undertaken against the charge of gross negligence so persuasively stated by Pierre Bayle: A God whose Creation includes the set of crimes and misfortunes of which human history is constructed can be worshipped only in an act of blind faith. Leibniz's attempt to answer him by insisting evils are just and intelligible was seen as flawed in inception. After the Lisbon earthquake, at the very latest, it was merely the object of sport.

Contemporary readers no longer demand an account of natural evils and have no wish to give God the responsibility for moral ones. Indeed, insofar as God is admitted at all, He is not admitted into explanation. It is worth remembering that the very development that split the two questions decisively began by connecting them. Rousseau's second *Discourse* is the first great attempt to examine evil as a political and psychological phenomenon. Rousseau replaced theological with historical discourse, yet he did so in answer to a cosmological problem. He thereby initiated a discussion of the social bases of evil in which we can recognize our own problems, but he was driven by concerns that strike us as remote.

They are not. As Arendt wrote: "behind the theodicies of the modern age, that is, in the justifications of God, there lurks of course the suspicion that life as we know it stands in great need of being justified" (*Lectures*, 24). She was lecturing on Kant, for whom the connection between the various aspects of the problem of evil is not only historical, but conceptual. His essay "On the Failure of All Future Attempts at Theodicy" comments extensively on the Book of Job and decisively disallows, on moral and political grounds, just the sort of rejuvenation of Leibnizian solutions Hegel would attempt a generation later. But if Kant removed the problem from the realm of the (decently) answerable, and surely

from one in which theological categories can be used to discuss it, he left it all the more firmly anchored in the structure of reality. The problem of evil is, for Kant, a necessary one. It cannot be resolved by theology (for which suffering could be understood as punishment and hence justified) or by a messianic vision of history (for which suffering could be understood as necessary and hence redeemed). A past in which Adam ate no apples, or a future in which a classless society is realized, are big contingencies, but contingencies for all that. Kant, by contrast, defines the problem of evil in metaphysical terms. A world in which reason and nature have equally pressing claims is one that is *systematically* out of joint. The absence of all but accidental connection between virtue and happiness cannot be resolved by reducing one to the other; but this is the source of permanent tension both in theory and in practice.

Whether or not we follow Kant in thinking that a disjunction between happiness and virtue structures the human condition, it is clear that the structure changes. The way in which all the assumptions on which civilized understanding is founded were threatened by Auschwitz is not the way in which they were threatened by the Lisbon earthquake, and it is hardly my purpose to deny a difference between them. I do insist that we understand that development against a background of commonality. To trace what has changed in our understanding of ourselves and our place in the world, we must keep in focus something permanent.<sup>4</sup>

It starts as a matter of tone: of everything that happens before and after argument begins. Arendt's writings are charged with theological language. It is hard to think of a twentieth-century philosopher whose work as often uses concepts like "soul" and "hell" and "redemption" and "blasphemy," or a nonobservant Jew who more naturally refers to the *Avinu Malkenu* or Yom Kippur prayers on the Talmudic legend of the thirty-six righteous souls. Arendt never hesitates to take up Eichmann's New Testament allusion and subtitle her chapter on the Wannsee Conference "Pontius Pilate" or to return Scholem's charge that she is short on *ahavat Israel* with the observation that the people of Israel have replaced that love of God in which their greatness once consisted with simple narcissism. Lest one take her use of sacred language as metaphorical, Arendt is explicit:

When I used the image of Hell, I did not mean this allegorically but literally: it seems rather obvious that men who have lost their faith in Paradise will not be able to establish it on earth; but it is not so certain that those who have lost their belief in Hell as a place of the hereafter may not be willing and able to establish on earth exact imitations of what people used to believe about

Hell. In this sense I think that a description of the camps as Hell on earth is more "objective," that is, more adequate to their essence than statements of a purely sociological or psychological nature. ("Reply to Eric Voegelin," in *EU*, 404)<sup>5</sup>

One suspects that Arendt would have been just as happy to defend a literal analysis of the word "soul." Indeed, the features Arendt holds to be most definitive of the human, natality and plurality, are just those that distinguish us from the God of Abraham: He is eternal, and He is one. The warning against the tendency to overstep human limits in the wrong sort of attempt to imitate God is an old one. In any case, there is even more direct testimony of an attitude toward religion that, like so much in Arendt's work, is deeply and persuasively Kantian. She dismisses atheists as "fools who pretend to know what no man can know" (*MDT*, 67) and writes more explicitly to Jaspers: "Personally, I make my way through the world (and indeed rather better than worse) with a kind of (childish? because unquestioned?) trust in God (as distinguished from faith, which always believes to know and thus lands in doubts and paradoxes). Of course, one can't do anything with this but be happy about it" (March 4, 1951). Much like Kant himself, Arendt disallows any role for private faith in the public realm. Throughout his final years, Kant was clearly longing to assert the same argument from design he had conclusively undermined. His self-restraint on this score, like Arendt's, was based not primarily in epistemological concerns: Any claims about God and his workings must exceed the limits of human reason. Far more important are political ones: Asserting the goodness of Creation would both validate the existing order and undermine human freedom to change it.<sup>6</sup>

The tension between a clear, but nearly private inclination to think in sacred categories and a healthy suspicion of the transcendent, which leads to a resolute insistence on secular ones, can seem to result from bad faith. I believe it does not. Kant may have closed the eighteenth century by insisting on the separation of philosophical and theological discourse, but Nietzsche closed the nineteenth by insisting on their inextricability. Little could be further from a denial of God's presence than the claim that He is dead. Some readings of Nietzsche, or positivism, explain the tension by insisting we have not yet heard the news: grammatical errors, or the shadows of the dead God, still cloud our ability to think clearly. But the persistence of the sacred in the most serious of secular discourse suggests the entanglement to be more than a mere mistake. It is common enough to say that Hegel replaces the theological no-

tion of providence with the secular notion of history.<sup>7</sup> The trouble with statements like these is their assumption of a linear notion of the history of ideas, implying that having once made this turn, we could be done with God—at least intellectually—once and for all. Hegel asserts just the opposite when asserting that philosophy should *become* theodicy and acknowledging his roots in Leibniz. Rousseau wasn't done with cosmology when he invented psychology in order to cope with it; nor was his ongoing preoccupation simply an oversight, that is, itself a psychological matter. It is, of course, too soon to reflect on what closed the twentieth century, but Arendt's work is a better place than most to begin. Much of its power derives from its refusal to respect traditional disciplinary boundaries and her consequent ability to live with creative confusion. Her use of philosophical theology is an unexplored instance of these capacities.

But before arguing that *Eichmann in Jerusalem* can be read as theodicy, we may require an argument that it can be read as philosophy at all. Here one might ask: How can a book about the nature of evil, the conditions of freedom, and the relations between thought and action *not* be read as philosophy? The fact that it wasn't published by a university press is unimportant when we recall how many enduring philosophical essays were first published in the *Berlinische Monatsschrift*, the eighteenth century's version of the *New Yorker*. But *Eichmann in Jerusalem* presents graver problems. The first is Arendt's own word that it is not philosophy and she is not a philosopher. The second is its relentless particularity—relentless not only because it tries to confine itself to descriptions of particular deeds committed by particular agents, but because it time and again criticizes the prosecution for failing to do so. Writing to Mary McCarthy, Arendt claims there are no ideas, but only facts, in what she disingenuously continues to call a report (*BF*, September 20, 1963).<sup>8</sup> She is merciless in attacking Ben-Gurion and prosecutor Hausner for concentrating on “general issues of greater import” rather than on the question of the individual guilt of the accused (*EiJ*, 5, 18). Lest there remain ambiguity about her intentions, Arendt adds in the “Postscript”: “This book is [not] . . . finally and least of all, a theoretical treatise on the nature of evil. The focus of every trial is upon the person of the defendant, a man of flesh and blood with an individual history, with an always unique set of qualities, peculiarities, behavior patterns and circumstances” (*EiJ*, 285).

It is possible to dismiss such remarks by denying that authors' wishes about their texts have greater claims to fulfillment than any others, but

there is a good deal more to be said. Concerning the question of particularity: *Eichmann in Jerusalem* is a work about judgment, the capacity to relate the universal to the particular.<sup>9</sup> Arendt's final book was to have been devoted to the question, but one wonders how much further she would have come on the subject than Kant himself. While his *Critique of Judgment* devotes four hundred pages to central and interesting features of judgment, he comes no closer to a theoretical account of it than he did when first mentioning the faculty in the *Critique of Pure Reason*. There, in a statement Arendt was fond of quoting, he tells us that judgment is a peculiar talent that cannot be taught, but only practiced, and that those who are deficient in it are ordinarily called stupid—a failure for which there is no remedy.<sup>10</sup> This suggests, as we will see, that a general account of how judgment works will be impossible, for one cannot give general rules for applying the universal to the particular. One can, as Kant does, give a set of maxims that specify the general exhortation to think for oneself,<sup>11</sup> or one can work with exemplars.

The latter course is the one taken by *Eichmann in Jerusalem*. Precisely because it focuses on “a man of flesh and blood with an individual history,” it can serve as a case from which we might learn. We understand judgment through examining particular and individual instances of it, in all their specificity. Here, bad judgment can be just as instructive as its opposite. In this sense, Eichmann provides “a lesson, neither an explanation nor a theory” (*EiJ*, 288). Just because it is a lesson that confines itself to the particular, it may succeed in conveying Arendt's central moral message, namely, that it is only individuals who act. The connection between the general capacity to apply the universal to the particular and the judicial act of deciding which actions are instances of what law is more than an etymological one, and it is no accident that the history of philosophy is full of legal metaphors. Except for the *Apology*, however, it stops short of considering a real trial. Perhaps because it seems increasingly clear that the hard question is not whether we can find shared general principles, but whether we can learn to apply them, philosophy must turn to the particular. (Nothing displays this more chillingly than Eichmann's own ability to cite Kant with a certain amount of accuracy.) In short, this book can be read as a work of philosophy not only because it is a philosopher's discussion of general philosophical questions as reflected in one particular case, but because just this particularity is the route philosophy must take if it is to understand the nature of judgment.

Writing to Jaspers, Arendt describes her concern to free the Western

tradition from the suspicion of having contributed to totalitarianism (March 4, 1951). That she can only do so as a philosopher seems clear. It's no accident that she refers to Kant's claim that "we can therefore be sure that however cold or contemptuously critical may be the attitude of those who judge a science not by its nature but by its accidental effects, we shall always return to metaphysics as to a beloved with whom we have had a quarrel" (*Critique of Pure Reason*, A850/B878, quoted in *Thinking*, 9). In other words, you don't have to be a student of Heidegger to be ambivalent about philosophy. Arendt's strongest expression of revulsion toward the subject occurs in discussing the intellectual embrace of Nazism: Precisely the capacity to use well-trained wit to provide interesting rationalizations of Nazism made philosophy permanently suspect.<sup>12</sup> But in just the discussion in which, for these reasons, she most vehemently rejects her interviewer's inclination to call her a philosopher, Arendt undercuts her own position. Defending her claim to have bid farewell to philosophy, she appeals to what she calls philosophy's essential hostility to the political—from which she immediately excepts Kant (Gaus, V, 45). Later she would generalize to describe Kant as "so singularly free of all the specifically philosophical vices" (T, 83). Be that as it may, this is fairly respectable company to keep for one who insists she has said farewell to philosophy.

Arendt's criticisms of philosophy cannot be examined here in detail.<sup>13</sup> I wish only to note that for every statement expressing her aversion to philosophy there is another recording her devotion to it; and that though she had excellent historical grounds for wanting to distance herself from the subject, she is hardly the first philosopher to have quite general ones for doing so. There are even those who view ambivalence toward philosophy as a criterion of seriousness, and certainly of good taste in it. Nor is this only a modern phenomenon, but one that can be seen in Socrates' false, ironic, pathological, and nonetheless serious humility. To say that true love of wisdom requires acknowledgment that the object of desire is unattainable is to say that philosophy can never be done without pain or paradox.

I have claimed that Arendt's theological language is neither allegorical nor atavistic, that her protestations against being called a philosopher must be read with their negations. This puts us in position to consider the work as theodicy, but only with the severest of constraints. Arendt herself defines theodicies as "those strange justifications of God or Being which, ever since the seventeenth century, philosophers felt were needed to reconcile man's mind to the world in which he was to

spend his life" (*W*, 21). Arendt's distanced description requires discussion, as does her use of the word "reconcile."

Recall that traditional theodicy undertakes to defend God from the charges of negligence or cruelty evoked by the presence of innocent suffering in the Creation for which He is responsible. The defense can take two strategies. It can argue that the crime itself is not as grave as charged, or it can argue that the accused could not have acted otherwise. The first is the route taken by those who claim that apparent evils are only apparent. The second is the attempt to prove the Creator free of blame. Traditional methods of absolution will be hard to apply. The claim that an agent wasn't knowledgeable enough to anticipate the consequences of his actions, or powerful enough to prevent them, can sound feeble enough in ordinary courtrooms but will be intolerable when applied to the Creator Himself. The assertion that evils are not truly real can express the urge to escape reality that, Arendt tells us, has infected philosophy since Plato. If one doesn't take this route, one is left with the attempt to absolve the Creator by arguing that the evils we experience are necessary in service of the greater good of the whole—in short, that ends justify means. Few claims were attacked by Arendt as often and consistently as this one. This is clearly one source of her deep rejection of every form of Hegelianism, which she read not only as entailing justification of any evil that can be said to be necessary in the order of the world as a whole, but consequently as denying contingency itself.<sup>14</sup> For Hegel, evils are necessary, thus justified.

Combating such claims was an ongoing and diverse task. Arendt opened a 1942 meeting attacking Revisionist Zionism by charging: "They have all made a secret pact with the *Weltgeist*."<sup>15</sup> Historiography itself, she wrote, is necessarily salvation and frequently justification. In making history his central metaphysical concept, Hegel offered redemption from the melancholy haphazardness human affairs seems to present (*EU*, 402; *BPF*, 85). Hegel's claim to give us a more determinate version of Leibniz's theodicy is the claim that only time is missing to show the world order to be necessary: While it may not yet be the best possible creation, it surely will become so. Arendt's earliest philosophical commitments might have been enough to preserve her from any of this, for nothing is more repugnant to a Kantian than a philosophy that offers the "insight" that the real world is as it ought to be (Hegel, quoted in *W*, 47). But all such views become intolerable, at the latest, through the Shoah. Indeed, one question at issue in the question of the uniqueness of

Auschwitz is the refutation of whatever remains of Hegelianism. Were we presented with a relapse to barbarism, we might yet maintain something close to Lessing's position: The ways of Providence are peculiarly crooked, but it may be possible to trace within them a forward path. If civilization itself presents thoroughly new forms of evil, seeking meaning in history seems merely madness.<sup>16</sup>

If the attempt to find determinate meaning within the historical process has become unacceptable since Auschwitz, Arendt attributes all assignment of such meaning to the "superstitious belief in necessity, be this a necessity of doom or salvation" ("Understanding and Politics," in *EU*, 326). Narratives of history as inevitable decline are to be just as surely rejected as narratives of inevitable progress. Neither leaves room for the forces of fortune, contingency, and accident on which Arendt insists. On these depend freedom, the capacity for beginning both represented and realized every time a human being is born into the world. One cannot have it both ways. "Finally we shall be left with the only alternative there is in these matters—we can either say with Hegel: *Die Weltgeschichte ist das Weltgericht*, leaving the ultimate judgment to success, or we can maintain with Kant the autonomy of the minds of men and their possible independence of things as they are or have come into being" (*T*, 216).

Just the possibility to be independent of things as they are is at issue in *Eichmann in Jerusalem*. This is why Arendt opens the book by accusing *both* prosecutor Hausner and defense attorney Servatius of Hegelianism and bad history, "clearly at cross-purposes with putting Eichmann on trial" (*EiJ*, 19–20). To suggest that the cunning of history might use the Holocaust to create the state of Israel is not only to suggest that there are ends through which any means could be justified, but to veer toward the worst resources of anti-Semitism. And if anything about this history was necessary, then Eichmann, or any other individual actor in it, must be just the helpless vehicle of larger forces that his counsel had claimed.

Every form of Hegelian theodicy must therefore be rejected: Arendt cannot accept a response to evil that would excuse or redeem it. Yet she writes, more autobiographically than prophetically, that "the problem of evil will be the fundamental question of postwar intellectual life in Europe—as death became the fundamental problem after the last war" ("Nightmare and Flight," *EU*, 134). A grant application in 1969 says that "behind all these seemingly academic problems looms the ques-

tion: how can we approach the problem of evil in an entirely secular setting?"<sup>17</sup> The problem is not secularity, but contingency, for Hegel provides quite enough of the former. What alternatives remain?

Arendt does not correctly describe Kant's view about the impossibility of theodicy in equating it with "Job's position: God's ways are inscrutable" (*Lectures*, 30).<sup>18</sup> She is, however, quite right in identifying the question that would have been at issue had Kant written a theodicy as the question of whether human beings fit into the world.<sup>19</sup> Arendt herself tried a number of formulations of the relation for which she needs to make room. Love of the world, rightly seen by Young-Bruehl as central, is necessary, but not quite sufficient, just because she knows love can be less than open-eyed. To show that we are at home in the world would make us too comfortable for anyone so profoundly cosmopolitan, as she recognizes when refraining from attributing such a standpoint to Lessing. To provide a framework that would reconcile us to reality could support a passive stance which threatens to acquiesce in it (*BPF*, 86). Perhaps her most successful formulation of the goal to which our efforts should be directed occurs in a dedication to Jaspers: "to find my way around in reality without selling my soul to it the way people in earlier times sold their souls to the devil" ("Dedication to Jaspers," *EU*, 2183).

The goal of her investigation, then, is a framework that helps us find our way about in the world without making us too comfortable within it. To seek a framework in which to set evil is to seek something less than a full theoretical explanation of it. Several readers have argued that such an explanation is missing not only in *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, but in the later *Thinking*, which was meant to provide the former volume's theoretical underpinnings.<sup>20</sup> These criticisms do not vitiate Arendt's goal. Quite the contrary. Too exhaustive a theoretical explanation would restrict the room of the inexplicable that accompanies any act that takes place in the realm of freedom. To claim that evil is comprehensible in principle is not to claim that any instance of it is transparent. It is rather to deny that supernatural forces, divine or demonic, are required to account for it. It is also to say that while natural processes are responsible for it, natural processes can be just as easily used to avoid it. The faculty of judgment we were given to relate our ideas about the world to the particulars that compose it is fundamentally sound.<sup>21</sup>

Part of the significance of the fungus metaphor she uses in her letter to Scholem is its place in the realm of natural science: "Evil 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" (V, 36).<sup>22</sup> Arendt, of course, is far too sophisticated and too determined to avoid causal explanations in the moral realm to suggest that, like bacteria, evil could be given a genuinely scientific explanation. But the metaphor expresses the ways in which Arendt attempts to defuse the *conceptually* threatening element in the novelty of modern evil. Biological warfare could destroy humankind, but it is not the bacteria that thereby call the value of life into question. That something so paltry could cause such devastation may be the source of a certain kind of horror, but it is a horror that is close to disgust.

The fungus metaphor thus signals evil that can be comprehended. It also indicates an object in which intention plays no role. Here Arendt's discussion most radically diverges from philosophical tradition. Intention, or motive, has been viewed as the heart and soul of action, the thing that determines its very meaning. Kant's greengrocer example exhibits this well: a shopkeeper facing competition may decide to increase his clientele by acquiring a reputation for honesty so that even children can buy from him. Here "the people are served honestly," but we are loathe to call this a moral action (*Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, 397). The persistent possibility of self-deception, rather than any commitment to two-world metaphysics, fuels Kant's emphasis on our capacity to do the right thing for the wrong reasons. Thus he concludes that the only unconditioned good is the good will. Even should misfortune prevent it from ever accomplishing anything, the good will "would still shine like a jewel for its own sake as something which has its full value in itself" (*Groundwork*, 394).

What's wrong with good intentions? For a start, they pave the road to hell.<sup>23</sup> It's significant that Arendt alludes to the English aphorism, rather than the more elegant but less stark German one: the opposite of "good" is "good intention." Here, Arendt's claim to be engaged in simple observation seems quite justified. Not only were Eichmann's intentions not wicked, in the sense of stemming from hatred or other base or abhorrent motives; they were thoroughly disconnected from the consequences of his actions. To shut one's eyes to Nazism, and even to profit from it, was *not* to intend the chain of events that ended at Auschwitz. The Holocaust was nevertheless the consequence of a series of discrete actions whose agents could have done otherwise. "We didn't mean it that way" (*So haben wir es nicht gemeint*) is just as true, and just as unacceptable, as "We didn't know at all" (*Das haben wir alles nicht gewusst*). So much the worse for intention.

That is to say: Arendt is hardly attempting to mitigate the guilt of

Eichmann or of anyone like him. On the contrary: she is insisting on the need for a moral theory that locates guilt and responsibility in something other than intention. It is the observation of what she termed the total moral collapse of European society that makes that need acute. If a good will were unconditionally valuable, there would be nothing wrong with “inner emigration.” Kant does, of course, distinguish good will from merely wishing, but his critique of consequentialism emphasizes the degree to which the consequences of actions may be out of our hands. The potential for the abuse of such claims in the land often charged with confining freedom, and hence responsibility, to the realm of the spirit is all too clear. Kant’s claim that good will may be rendered useless by “some special disfavor of destiny” comes perilously close to Eichmann’s tale of bad luck. As in her discussion of the claims of the inner emigrants, Arendt insists on the insignificance of sincerity. What is important is not whether one’s claims to have been inwardly opposed to the Final Solution are genuine, but the complete irrelevance of one’s inner state. If your good will can shine like a jewel while your neighbor is being deported, it cannot be the thing that matters.

I believe that it is concern to show the irrelevance of intention that leads Arendt to the very controversial introduction of the *Judenräte*, whose role in the context of discussion has not been satisfactorily explained.<sup>24</sup> Nor is it accidental that she discusses the behavior of the *Judenräte* and that of the “inner emigrants” in one breath (*EiJ*, 121–28). The point is not to equate their intentions, but to show the equal irrelevance of intention. Eichmann’s motive may have been nothing but extraordinary diligence in looking out for his personal advancement. The inner emigrants may have been less diligent, hence less energetic, hence less culpable. The members of the *Judenräte* were acting not only from motives that are not, in themselves, particularly reprehensible, but from those that are positively admirable. Arendt never seriously questions the claim that the members of the *Judenräte* acted in what they believed to be the best interests of the Jewish people, intending to save lives and prevent pain by any means in their control. Yet their very well intended actions had the result of enabling the murder of the Jews to occur with a thoroughness and efficiency it would otherwise have lacked.

It is this sort of data—combined with the fact that the core of Eichmann’s defense was the absence of bad intentions, allowing him to plead “not guilty in the sense of the indictment”—that lead Arendt to conclude that intention is not the issue. In questioning Eichmann’s sincerity, Arendt maintained that the judges missed the greatest moral and even

legal challenge of the case. Their judgment rested on the moral assumption that intention is the locus of praise and blame. The difference between murder and manslaughter rests on the defendant's ability to convince a court that he didn't really mean it, where "meaning it" signifies that he neither acted out of base motives nor desired the consequences of his action. "On nothing, perhaps, has civilized jurisprudence prided itself more than this taking into account of the subjective factor" (*Eij*, 277). Trials like Eichmann's force us to conclude that the lack of bad intentions does not even mitigate—it plays exactly no role. So it led her to ask: "Is evil doing (the sins of omission, as well as commission) possible in default of not just 'base motives' (as the law calls them) but of any motives whatever, of any particular prompting of interest or volition? Is wickedness, however we may define it, this being 'determined to prove a villain,' *not* a necessary condition for evil doing?" (*T*, 4). Arendt might have put the issue in stronger terms. It is not only the motive for an action that is irrelevant to its being a good or an evil one, but every other feature of the agent's intended aim. That one could have done nothing other than sign a paper, without experiencing vile emotions, without willing—or even being comfortable contemplating—the consequences to which it led, and nevertheless be guilty of murder is a fact that shows the limits of traditional categories. In the Third Reich, the *meaning* of action was not determined by intentionality.

It may be unsurprising that much twentieth-century moral and legal philosophy has been devoted to understanding the notion of intention—with uncertain results. The opacity of much discussion of the question signals equivocation in the concept itself. Here, ordinary intuitions and philosophical reflection can be equally murky. Even should we return, *per impossibile*, to a Cartesian understanding of intention as private mental state, which mental state would it be? The attitude with which one undertakes an action? The state of affairs one hopes to achieve by it? Is intention fundamentally cognitive, my ability to understand the consequences of my action? Or is it primarily volitional, my desire that those consequences should come about? Both features are contained in the ordinary use of the concept and often sidestepped in philosophical analysis of it. Classical discussion relies less on the metaphysics of inner states than on the assumption of a stable distinction between *what* you did and *why* you did it. Just this distinction is thrown into question both by contemporary thought on the subject and by contemporary practice. It cannot be my purpose to begin to survey or clarify this discussion, nor to argue that Arendt's conception of intention is itself clear. The incom-

pleteness of her account of judgment has been well argued by others.<sup>25</sup> I wish here only to argue that it will seem more substantial when understood in conjunction with an (equally incomplete) account of intention. In each of its features, judgment is to be contrasted with intention. While neither her notion of judgment nor her notion of intention is ever adequately elaborated, the contrast between the two forms a rich and suggestive signpost for further thought.

Are there cases where classical notions of intention still have force? Arendt writes of the judgment demanded in situations that are radically new. The uniqueness of the Shoah is not, again, a question that will be treated in this essay, though I suspect that the breakdown of the notion of intention is connected with the general breakdown of moral categories that event engendered. Moral categories, like others, presuppose a framework that gives them reference and function. Where the framework is broken, categories within it lose meaning and weight. If the concept of intention is pointless for understanding and judging crimes like Eichmann's, it may be because the Shoah threatens all ordinary projects of making sense.<sup>26</sup>

It clearly threatens our notions of the person, in more ways than one. As the subject was destroyed by the murderers, so notions of subjectivity themselves become void. Arendt's readers will understand the following in frightening form: "Why do I want to tell him about an intention too, as well as telling him what I did?—Not because the intention was also something which was going on at that time. But because I want to tell him something about *myself*, which goes beyond what happened at that time" (Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, # 659). Wittgenstein's response to the hopelessness of specifying an adequate account of intention is to call on intention itself: what I want when appealing to intentions is to tell you something crucial of myself. It is easy enough to think of hosts of ordinary cases this captures. Eichmann's nearly alarming willingness to cooperate with the prosecution was also a desire for just that. And Arendt's claim that evil can be banal is the claim not just that the self that undertakes it may be thoroughly undemonic, but that it can be literally insignificant: it simply drops out. Eichmann's eerie complaints to an Israeli examiner about the failures in his SS career—which Arendt uses as evidence for his utter thoughtlessness—are just as uninteresting as the prosecution's tale of fanatical hatred. For moral purposes, it matters little whether the correct version of events is the sort offered by writers like Daniel Goldhagen or the sort provided by Eichmann himself. Intentionality takes place in the world of the subjective,

while for Arendt, guilt and innocence are objective matters—radically objective. If mass murderers' intentions can be unexceptionable, we are not to conclude that nobody is responsible for anything, but to locate responsibility elsewhere.

If the focus on intention often results from observation of those who do the right thing for the wrong reasons, Arendt is concerned with those who do the wrong thing for the right reasons—or, at least, not the wrong ones. This is the modern question, against which questions of bad faith simply pale.<sup>27</sup> It is precisely the question of judgment. For Arendt, a Kantian account of moral worth requires both too little and too much. It requires too little because it can too easily allow us to have no other attitude toward the worst consequences of our actions but the feckless one of not intending them. It requires too much because it devalues those actions undertaken for motives that are less than pure. In Kant's example, "the people are served honestly" by the calculating green-grocer. How much better European history would have been 'if the people had been served honestly by agents less concerned with purity of intention! All the more so since intentions are ultimately unknowable—as Kant quite rightly insists, and as the phenomena of self-deception underscore, we can never be sure of our own good intentions, much less those of others.

By contrast, judgment takes place in the world we share with others.<sup>28</sup> There is no room behind a judgment that needs to be evaluated or explored—a judgment is constituted by the act of judging itself. The centrality of the category of action and the privileging of the political are of a piece with Arendt's shift to the question of judgment. The inaccessibility of judgment is part of its unreliability. In general, Arendt distrusts moral emotions as not merely private, but passive, and hence manipulable.<sup>29</sup> The *feeling* of guilt, so easily manipulable for so many purposes, is such an unreliable index of the agent's real guilt that it may indicate the opposite: As the case of Eichmann showed, it may often be criminals who enjoy the sense of clear conscience, while it is the best people who are capable of self-reproach (*T*, 5). Compassion and pity are suspect as bases for political action because, as Lessing noted, "we feel something akin to compassion for the evildoer also" (*MDT*, 12). Just this feeling could be successfully exploited by Himmler, whom Arendt described as the member of the Nazi hierarchy most gifted at solving problems of conscience. Since an effort was made to remove simple sadists from the troops expected to murder, "the problem was how to overcome not so much their conscience as the animal pity by which all

normal men are affected in the presence of physical suffering.” Himmler overcame this, she writes, “by turning those instincts around, as it were, in directing them toward the self. So that instead of saying: what horrible things I did to people! the murderers would be able to say: what horrible things I had to watch in the pursuance of my duties, how heavily the task weighed upon my shoulders!” (*EiJ*, 106).

Himmler’s reversal plays on the ways in which guilt is and is not taken to be an inner state. On the one hand, if conscience is a matter of feeling, the presence of feelings that are grand or sublime—that may even run counter to the natural pity that Rousseau insists we share with mere animals—are enough to attest to the murderers’ conscience. The “terrifyingly normal” SS officer didn’t know or feel that he did wrong because he relied on intentional criteria. Introspection into his soul reveals nothing he can regard as base or wicked motives. So Arendt writes that evil lost the quality by which one recognizes it, the quality of temptation—indeed, the temptation was to do just the opposite (*EiJ*, 150). Arendt is determined to take at face value Eichmann’s description of the revulsion he felt when watching an instance of mass murder. It probably caused him pain. Rightly manipulated, the very pain it caused could be used to support the Nazis’ resolve in carrying through murder, for it clearly did nothing to stop them.

In her 1948 essay “The Concentration Camps,” Arendt argues against “the attempt to understand the behavior of concentration camp inmates and SS men psychologically, when the very thing that must be realized is that the psyche (or character) can be destroyed.” Arendt’s strong distinction between public and private must incline her to disregard the psychological as a morally relevant focus of action in any case: Your intention is, at most, your business. It may also be the case that intention is fundamentally backward-looking or timeless. Focusing on an action’s intention means focusing on its origin, instead of its end. Judgment is a series of concrete and particular actions that take place in time and is hence opposed to the essentialist thrust of the intentional. If guilt and responsibility are located in intention, it makes sense to ask if one is, fundamentally, good or evil. If they are instead located in judgment, the question can never be answered once and for all.

This leads, I think, to Arendt’s strongest reason to move from intention to judgment. One solution to the problems involved in analyzing intention as an inner state has been an attempt to analyze it as disposition or potential. Whether or not this analysis is successful, the focus on intention obscures just the “*abyss*” between potential and actual evil that

Arendt was determined to preserve (*EiJ*, 278). Suppose intention cannot be discovered by introspection. The only test of your intention to commit a crime is your potential, under appropriate circumstances, to commit that crime. Arendt is well aware that, under circumstances like Eichmann's, many around him would have acted as he did—and this is not a fact about Germans. Her awareness of that potential led to the charge that she posits an “Eichmann in all of us.” Her vehement rejection of it depends on her insistence that guilt and innocence are “objective matters,” as she states in her imagined address to Eichmann: “We are concerned only with what you did, and not with the possible noncriminal nature of your inner life and of your motives or with the criminal potentialities of those around you” (*EiJ*, 278). Time and again, she rejected the notion of collective guilt as based on sentiment, which substitutes an attempt at sincerity for a search for truth. Where all are guilty, no one really is. It is worse than ironic that her denial of the moral relevance of intention should have been taken as an attempt to erase responsibility or to show that evil is “merely structural.” Replacing intention with judgment is precisely the attempt to delimit the gap between the actual crimes of Eichmann and the potential crimes of others, the gap that make guilt and innocence matters not of feeling, but of fact.

Cosmological fact, no less. In accepting as sincere Eichmann's claim to have acted without evil intention, Arendt is so very far from exonerating him that she takes his guilt to be a matter not of the death of millions of people, but of a violation of the order of mankind (*EiJ*, 272). Her insistence on the radical objectivity of guilt and innocence leads to a (once again Kantian) position few modern thinkers would express:

We refuse, and consider as barbaric, the propositions “that a great crime offends nature, so that the very earth cries out for vengeance; that evil violates a natural harmony which only retribution can restore; that a wronged collectivity owes a duty to the moral order to punish the criminal” (Yosal Rogat). And yet I think it is undeniable that it was precisely on the ground of these long-forgotten propositions that Eichmann was brought to justice to begin with, and that they were, in fact, the supreme justification for the death penalty. (*EiJ*, 277)

To say that guilt and innocence are objective is not to say they are easy to determine. Nothing in Arendt's discussion makes sympathetic readers so uneasy as the indeterminacy of the faculty of judgment. Arendt offers no criterion for telling good judgments from bad ones, no guidelines for making good judgments except Kant's extraordinarily general ones, and no advice about teaching judgment except Kant's remark that one

cannot. The appeal to another authority from Königsberg cannot be enough to allay our uneasiness with Arendt's account, even when accompanied by the quite accurate reflection that, in principle, one cannot give a rule for applying rules (*T*, 69). Three factors may, however, make the absence of a recipe for good judgment seem less disturbing.

First is the fact that its source is not, or not only, the general helplessness of a philosopher, but the astuteness of a careful observer.<sup>30</sup> Arendt's awareness of the difficulties of moral judgment rests on keen attention to the ways in which the Third Reich destroyed it. So she recorded the shock that lay in the recognition "not of what our enemies did, but of what our friends did," and wrote, in a 1945 essay originally titled "German Guilt":

Whether any person in Germany is a Nazi or an anti-Nazi can be determined only by the One who knows the secrets of the human heart, which no human eye can penetrate. . . . The most extreme slogan which this war has evoked, among the Allies, that the only "good German" is a "dead German," has this much basis in fact: the only way in which we can identify an anti-Nazi is when the Nazis have hanged him. There is no other reliable token. (*EU*, 124)

Arendt is not the first to point out the fact that Nazism was devoted to blurring moral distinctions, implicating those who would elsewhere have remained merely victims or bystanders, absolving those one would elsewhere clearly condemn. Nazism thrived by effacing distinctions between guilt and innocence, indeed, by trying to create conditions in which the very concepts lose their sense.<sup>31</sup> She may be the first to insist that we need a new moral theory to cope with it. The solution cannot be to acquiesce in obfuscation—either by erasing all distinctions and concluding that everyone, or everyone of a certain group, is guilty, or by attempting to determine guilt by seeking formulas.

Nothing provides a better lesson in the vanity of the attempt to derive moral judgment by formal rules than the procedures of denazification the Allies introduced in postwar Germany. Arendt takes those procedures to have been (more or less) well-intentioned attempts to introduce moral judgment into a society desperately in need of it. The problem was not that these procedures were too crude, refinable by doing more of the same thing more carefully. Their crudity was irreparable, vitiating the entire process, because "they helped to conceal and thus to perpetuate moral confusion." Arendt continues:

The injustices of the denazification system were simple and monotonous: the city-employed garbage collector, who under Hitler had to become a party member or look for another job, was caught in the denazification net, while

his superiors either went scot-free because they knew how to manage these matters, or else suffered the same penalty as he—to them, of course, a much less serious matter. Worse than these daily injustices was the fact that the system, devised to draw clear moral and political distinctions in the chaos of a completely disorganized people, actually tended to blur even the few genuine distinctions that had survived the Nazi regime. Active opponents of the regime naturally had to enter a Nazi organization in order to camouflage their illegal activities, and those members of any such resistance movement as had existed in Germany were caught in the same net as their enemies, to the great pleasure of the latter. (“The Aftermath of Nazi Rule,” *EU*, 257)

The utter failure of denazification would be well worth further study by those impatient with trying to make moral distinctions through a “net” of fixed rules. The solution cannot of course be to abandon efforts at moral judgment, but to answer the fascist attempt to abolish moral distinctions by making more of them.

Arendt’s insistence on the indeterminacy of moral judgment is thus based on the hardest of observation. If it doesn’t give us formulas, it’s because formulas do not work. Moreover, the contrast between judgment and intention shows that we are, at least, better off when locating guilt in judgment than when locating it in intention. If judgment cannot be taught, it can at least be shown—unlike intention, which is in principle inaccessible. Moreover, judgment can be practiced, which means that we can do more toward being good than merely wanting to become so. Where intention is the locus of goodness, we can answer the question of how one becomes good only with a mystery: by willing it. Not surprisingly, theology has had more to say about this mystery than philosophy, though the answer seems to be that one waits for grace. Locating goodness in judgment, however, gives one something to do.

One can study exemplars. One studies exemplars not only because one cannot obtain general formulas, but because judgment concerns that very particular individual that totalitarianism is concerned to destroy. It is one of history’s happier ironies that this attempt to destroy human freedom was belied by just the unpredictability of response to totalitarianism itself. Here Arendt, like others, was struck by utter contingency: Who sold their soul and who did not, at what price and in what manner, stood completely undetermined by prior experience or education or origin, or anything else that seems amenable to causal explanation.<sup>32</sup> If the goal of totalitarianism is to make human individuality superfluous, it is focus on the individual case that will constitute a response.<sup>33</sup> Exemplars like Eichmann show us *what it means* to make wrong moral judgment. Exemplars like Anton Schmidt show us the opposite. We can

do *more* than Arendt does on this score, but we cannot do something fundamentally different. At issue is not something that lies behind the set of judgments that make up character, but all the sorts of detail history and literature can present to fill out a life. These are not primarily inner qualities, which is as it should be, for what is at stake is something in which the inner and the outer are so thoroughly suffused that one cannot imagine the one without the other.

Arendt called it “dignity.” Writing of the Nazis’ success in implicating German Jews by persuading them to accept categories that privileged them, Arendt writes of a modern tendency to suppose “that there existed a law of human nature compelling everybody to lose his dignity in the face of disaster” (*Eij*, 131). To disprove such a law, one need but show the variety of all the actions that might be thought to fall under it, but don’t. Both dignity and judgment resist attempts at placement. Neither can be traced to a singular feeling. They are instead constituted by discrete, often ordinary actions, without being reducible to any of them. Like dignity, however, good judgment must be manifest: You do not have it if you fail to show it.

If the argument I have outlined is correct, Arendt’s account of judgment, while embryonic, is much richer than often supposed. It is based on three considerations. The first is empirical observation of both the breakdown of moral judgment and the utter inadequacy of general rules for restoring it that occurred in Nazi and postwar Germany. The second is the contrast with intention, that complex of private and passive phenomena that proved useless in either preventing guilt or determining it. The third is reflection on the totalitarian destruction of the unrepeatably particular in every human individual that moral judgment must strain to preserve. All these considerations could be taken to explicate and extend Arendt’s notion of judgment so that the notion could become a full-fledged account. (The difficulties of elucidating the concept of intention have, after all, prevented neither moral philosophy nor legal practice from relying on it to locate guilt and innocence.) Still, one may ask: What does any of this have to do with theodicy?

The possibility of an account of evil is the possibility of intelligibility. I have examined Arendt’s discussion in some detail because the account has to work, that is, to provide a better understanding of the facts—in this case, the way in which the greatest crimes can be carried out by men who have none of the marks of the criminal. If the account is successful, it will serve two functions. The first is political: An account of evil allows us to act. Where sin is neither original nor inevitable, it may be avoided.

If we understand the causes of evil and the forces that conceal it, we have some chance of recognizing it in the future. The chance may not be great, but it is the only one we have: To insist that evil is demonic is not only to insist that it is fundamentally mysterious, but thereby to relegate it to religion, rather than to politics. Arendt's discussion has been said to focus on the criminal, rather than on the victim. Insofar as this is the case, it is not because her sympathies lie more with the one than with the other, but because her concern is more with the future than with the past. In this, as elsewhere, she remains resolutely anti-Hegelian. Her concern is not to vindicate reality, but to make room for resisting it, room provided by the very un-Hegelian insistence on the role of fortune in the past and contingency in the future.

Understanding and justification are nevertheless related.<sup>34</sup> For Arendt, thinking and being alive are reciprocal metaphors. Each is absolutely noninstrumental, and each is a good in itself.<sup>35</sup> If they are to be justified, it will therefore be together. This does not mean that one could be justified through the other—as if thinking were justified because it helps us to live better, or, even more absurdly, life were acceptable as long as it enables us to think. The meaning of each must be sought, and found, in the activity itself. Yet Arendt compares the feeling of understanding to the feeling of being at home (Gaus, V, 47). Like the experience of natural beauty, our capacity to comprehend what seemed incomprehensible is evidence for the idea that we and the world were made for each other. And this, as the *Critique of Judgment* showed us, is as close to the argument from design as we should ever come.

Even this is far too close for the view of Jean Améry, who worked to show the complete paralysis of human reason in the face of evil by showing that the intellectual was less equipped to cope with Auschwitz than those whose moral and instrumental reasoning were less developed.<sup>36</sup> Améry thus offers what I take to be the only genuine alternative to Arendt's position. This is the claim that the refusal to comprehend Auschwitz is the only moral response to it, for successful comprehension would be evidence of an intelligible world. Any proof that reason can understand evil is thus a hint of a proof of the argument from design, and such hints are indecent. My purpose here is not to evaluate these positions, but to state what is at stake in them: Both Arendt's insistence on the comprehensibility of radical evil and much of the attack on it rest not on epistemological but on moral demands.

Arendt's attempt to deny that reason leaves us helpless when confronted with horror is, then, a validation: Our natural faculties are cor-

ruptible, but not inherently corrupt. Nor are they, as Hume so well argued, principally impotent. We have means both to understand the world and to act in it. Substituting judgment for intention provides no guarantee for the results of moral reasoning, but it does save the prospect of it. And this is to save a great deal. It is sometimes claimed that the Holocaust threatens our very notion of rationality in at least two ways: The extermination of the Jews proceeded to the detriment of the German war effort and hence was counter to instrumentally rational interests of the Nazis themselves, and Jewish survival in the Third Reich was so utterly fortuitous as to make all attempts at calculation meaningless.<sup>37</sup> To use Rawls's distinction: Arendt is less concerned with the rational than with the reasonable—more precisely, with its possible destruction.<sup>38</sup> Her own description of Eichmann as “not stupid but thoughtless” is less helpful in marking the difference we draw between the choices involved in instrumental reasoning and those involved in that determination of ends, a difference that is basic to moral reasoning, but the latter choices are her primary concern. Conscience broke down under Nazism. It proved to be a fully inadequate instrument in helping agents negotiate decent behavior. Not only could it easily remain private and passive; it simply provided no touchstone for anything at all. Collective guilt, *qua* feeling, was worth nothing to the victims, nor was its absence a clue to the absence of real guilt. Most murderers could, like Eichmann, introspect all motives and find their consciences perfectly clear. We could thus conclude that conscience, or moral reasoning, is perfectly useless for guiding us in navigating the world, or that, in considering it as inward phenomenon, we have misdescribed its structure and form. Arendt's discussion of judgment is an argument for the latter alternative.

Evil is not demonic if we can give a naturalistic account of both its development and the forces that allow us to resist it. Arendt's contrast between the banal and the demonic is her most important. Writing about the problem of evil in 1946, she described gnosticism as the most dangerous, attractive, and widespread heresy of tomorrow (“Nightmare and Flight,” *EU*, 135). Here, Arendt was brilliant, prescient, and very nearly literal. Denying that evil is demonic means, first, attacking the tendency of totalitarianism to make everything possible. The search for omnipotence that enabled the Nazis to create facts that continue to elude our imagination is what must be undermined. And here, citing Brecht, she maintains that comedy is more effective than tragedy, for the latter reinforces the apocalyptic quality that lends evil the sense of sublime.

Arendt sought a formulation of the nature of evil that resists all im-

ages of “Satanic greatness,” combats “all impulses to mythologize the horrible.”<sup>39</sup> Let’s be more explicit: Mythology involves a mixture of the sacred and the erotic that infects too many discussions of the Third Reich. Like Hell itself, the demonic can be given a literal interpretation: gnosticism today involves what Susan Sontag identified as fascination with fascism. To call evil banal is to call it boring. And if nothing about it is interesting, it can become no object of temptation. A fungus, after all, is anything but erotic.

The other side of fascination with fascism is the sacralization of the Holocaust, which serves as the historical event whose foundational status threatens to replace the revelation at Sinai. It thus stands at risk of becoming both the event most constitutive of Jewish identity and the telos toward which Jewish history was directed. The urge to leave the Holocaust untouched by explanation can appear as the urge to leave the mystery intact, sometimes frankly described as a need to avoid desacralizing the Holocaust. Arendt must find such urges loathsome. She is far too decided a monotheist to grant supernatural powers to sin or suffering, far too good an observer of history to permit the desire for transcendence political space. To deny that the forces of evil have depth or dimension is to say that gnosticism is false. But then, as she wrote to Kurt Blumenfeld: “The world as God created it seems to me a good one.”

That this is the question at issue is clear from her discussion of Anton Schmidt. Arendt maintains that only good, not evil, is the bearer of depth. Thus, it is entirely fitting that the tone she takes in discussing Eichmann is the ironic distance that enraged many readers. Moral passion emerges only when she discusses the man who was Eichmann’s counterpart. Here, her uses of rhetoric approach the sublime. Arendt describes the hush that fell over the crowded courtroom at the story of the German sergeant who sacrificed his life to help Jewish partisans—a hush “like a sudden burst of light in the midst of impenetrable, unfathomable darkness.” She concludes her discussion thus:

The lesson of such stories is simple and within everybody’s grasp. Politically speaking, it is that under conditions of terror most people will comply but *some people will not*, just as the lesson of the countries in which the Final Solution was proposed is that “it could happen” in most places but *it did not happen everywhere*. Humanly speaking, no more is required, and no more can reasonably be asked, for this planet to remain a place fit for human habitation. (*EiJ*, 233)

The passage cannot but recall the righteous thirty-six whose presence in the world, according to Jewish legend, is enough to guarantee our con-

tinued existence.<sup>40</sup> Those who think the Anton Schmidts are too few in number to redeem the world should recall that God would have spared Sodom and Gomorrah for the sake of a mere ten—in the story that Arendt recommends to Eichmann's attention in her final chapter. If it is the righteous among us who make the earth habitable, someone like Eichmann threatens its moral balance. And so she concludes the address she would have made him:

Just as you supported and carried out a policy of not wanting to share the earth with the Jewish people and the people of a number of other nations—as though you and your superiors had any right to determine who should and who should not inhabit the world—we find that no one, that is, no member of the human race, can be expected to want to share the earth with you. This is the reason, and the only reason, you must hang. (*EiJ*, 279)

In a passage replete with allusion to one of Kant's best essays, Arendt describes understanding the world as providing orientation in it. Understanding results in meaning, "which we originate in the very process of living insofar as we try to reconcile ourselves to what we do and what we suffer" ("Understanding and Politics," *EU*, 325). This is something less than justification and something more than hope. Améry called it trust in the world, and he could not regain it. To show the unimaginable to be comprehensible is a feat that ransoms both Creation and our own capacities, and it does indeed suggest they were made for each other. No wonder that *Eichmann in Jerusalem* produced in Mary McCarthy an exhilaration akin to hearing *Figaro* or *The Messiah*, "both of which are concerned with redemption" (*BF*, 166). Arendt's reply deserves closest attention: "you were the only reader to understand what otherwise I have never admitted—namely that I wrote this book in a curious state of euphoria. And that ever since I did it, I feel—after 20 years—light-hearted about the whole matter. Don't tell anybody; is it not proof positive that I have no 'soul'?" (*BF*, 168).

One wishes tones of voice could be heard in a letter, for the passage is open to several: irony, defiance, and even fear. How could it be otherwise? One concerned with redemption will feel the risk of perdition. One capable of awe will know the threat of sacrilege. Distinguishing between respect and false piety will be, like most matters of consequence, a question of judgment, and here Arendt herself could err.<sup>41</sup> Yet euphoria can be explained only by the sense of wonder and gratitude for all that is that Arendt saw as the beginning of thought itself. We may find ourselves at home, after all.