HANNAH ARENDT: POLITICS AND UNDERSTANDING AFTER THE HOLOCAUST

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MAKING SENSE OF THE SENSELESS

Hannah Arendt described the Holocaust as a ‘rupture with civilisation’ that shattered all existing ideas of progress, all feelings of optimism, all previously engraved images of Europe as a civilised community, all notions of the innocence of modern political thought. In ‘Mankind and Terror’, for example, she writes: ‘Not only are all our political concepts and definitions insufficient for an understanding of totalitarian phenomena but also all our categories of thought and standards of judgement seem to explode in our hands the instant we try to apply them’. Arendt was one of the first to argue that the attempted extermination of Jews – only later to be called the Holocaust or the Shoah – was an event that marked, or should mark, a caesura in modern social and political thought.

The concern of this paper is with this notion of a ‘gap’ between past and future – of a ‘fracture’ in the continuity of political thought and moral judgement – which is provoked by the thought of the holocaust. From the point of view of social theory, this question may be seen as a particular case study of the impact of historical events on social

theorising and presupposes that social theory does not develop in isolation from the political world of which it is part. The focus on the writings of Hannah Arendt is chosen not only because she took seriously this question, the question of social theory after the holocaust, soon after she learnt about the holocaust itself, and not only because she was an extraordinarily gifted and radical political thinker; it is chosen also because she offered a ‘worldly’ perspective on this rupture with civilisation which was rather lost in the later reflections on the holocaust which stressed the uniqueness, singularity, non-representability and ineffability of the holocaust and which treated ‘Auschwitz’ as an emblem for the breakdown of human history and the limits of human understanding. I am thinking here of a diverse tradition of thought, which Gillian Rose dubs ‘holocaust piety’ because of its insistence on ‘silence, prayer, the banishment equally of poetry and knowledge, in short, the witness of ineffability’ at the expense of both understanding and politics. In relation to this tradition of thought, Rose writes of its tendency to ‘mystify something we dare not understand, because we fear that it may be all too understandable, all too continuous with what we are – human, all too human’. She asks of it: ‘what is it that we do not want to understand? What is it that holocaust piety … protects us from

2 See also the important paper in this volume on the neglected works of H.G. Adler by Jeremy Adler.

As the title of an essay she wrote in 1954 indicates – ‘Understanding and Politics’ – Arendt was one who at an early date foresaw the dangers of ‘holocaust piety’ and resisted them. The difference between Arendt’s way of thinking and this later Holocaust discourse might be illustrated by a passage from the author-survivor, Elie Wiesel, in which he criticises the television drama called Holocaust:

The series treats the Holocaust as if it were just another event… Whether culmination or aberration of history, the Holocaust transcends history… The dead are in possession of a secret that we, the living, are neither worthy of nor capable of recovering… The Holocaust? The ultimate event, the ultimate mystery, never to be comprehended or transmitted.

Equally, it may be illustrated by the thought-experiment conducted by the French philosopher, Jean-François Lyotard, where he draws an analogy between the holocaust and the image of an earthquake so catastrophic as to ‘destroy not only lives, buildings, and objects but also the instruments used to measure earthquakes directly and

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4 Rose, *Mourning…*, p. 43.


indirectly’. In Lyotard’s thought-experiment, it is not only Jews who are exterminated in the holocaust, but the means to prove that Jews were exterminated are also exterminated. The point Lyotard seems to make is that Auschwitz cannot be grasped in thought simply as an historical event subject to the normal procedures of historical investigation and understanding. Imagine that there are no indicators of its existence that survive, all documents are destroyed, there is nothing to preserve memory from oblivion, the victims are condemned to silence, and the authority of the tribunal supposed to establish the crime and its quantity is itself discredited on the ground that the judge is ‘merely a criminal more fortunate than the defendant in war’. Lyotard offers this thought-experiment to demonstrate that ‘the name of Auschwitz marks the confines wherein historical knowledge sees its competence impugned’, and on this basis he advances an ethical relation to ‘Auschwitz’ different from one based on understanding and politics: ‘the impossibility of quantitatively measuring it, does not prohibit but rather inspires in the minds of the survivors the idea of a very great seismic force’.

Now, Arendt also speaks of the ‘explosion’ of our categories of thought and standards of judgement when confronted by the holocaust, but the conclusion she draws is not the same. Consider one key example of this ‘rupture’ which she offers: that of the impossibility of applying a ‘means – ends’ calculus to the phenomena of totalitarian

7 Jean François Lyotard, The Differend: phrases in dispute, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1988, p.56
terror. In the conventional use of terror, she argues in ‘Understanding and Politics’, violence is exercised as a means either to retain power, or to intimidate enemies, or force people to work. But in circumstances where opposition has already become impossible, where it does not make a jot of difference what I do for my fate is already sealed, and where the exploitation of labour is at most only a secondary benefit subordinate to the main goal of extermination, such rationales make little sense. In the totalitarian use of terror, violence ceases to be a means to an end; it is deprived of that element of rational calculation which governs its exercise even in the worst of states; it becomes instead the very essence of rule and ends up, as it did in the Holocaust, in a ‘frenzy of destruction’ without political, economic or military utility.  

If this characterisation of totalitarian terror is correct, then Arendt’s point is that categories of thought and standards of judgement which presuppose an element of rational choice on the part of social actors, are stretched beyond their limit in the attempt to understand such phenomena. In an earlier essay on ‘Social Science Techniques and the Study of Concentration Camps’ (1950) Arendt explores this issue from its other side – that of the appearance of the impossibility of human understanding – when she writes as follows:

If we assume that most of our actions are of a utilitarian nature and that our evil deeds spring from some “exaggeration” of self-interest, then we are forced to conclude that this particular institution of totalitarianism is beyond human understanding… it is not only the non-utilitarian character of the camps

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9 Arendt, Essays... p.316.
themselves – the senselessness of “punishing” completely innocent people, the failure to keep them in a condition so that profitable work might be extorted from them, the superfluousness of frightening a completely subdued population – which gives them their distinctive and disturbing qualities, but their anti-utilitarian function, the fact that not even the supreme emergencies of military activities were allowed to interfere with these “demographic policies”. It was as though the Nazis were convinced that it was of greater importance to run extermination factories than to win the war.\(^\text{10}\)

Arendt did not share the view that the death camps were ‘beyond human understanding’. Rather, her argument is that it is only because we have a restrictively rationalistic model of human action that the death camps appear to be ‘beyond human understanding’. The path which Arendt herself took was not to revert to the conventional view (characteristic of liberalism and Marxism alike) that there must be some ‘rational’ explanation for the Holocaust in terms of economics, politics or military strategy, but neither was it to conclude that the Holocaust is ‘beyond human understanding’. The path she took is indicated by the sub-title of the essay on ‘Understanding and Politics’: it is ‘The difficulties of understanding’. Neither ease of understanding nor impossibility of understanding but difficulty of understanding.

The conventional view and the radicalism which declares that the holocaust is beyond human understanding are two sides of the same medal. The former cannot come to terms

\(^{10}\) Arendt, Essays... p.233
with what is ‘unprecedented’ about the Holocaust. Most modern forms of organised
violence are comprehensible inasmuch as they have a ‘definite purpose’ and ‘benefit the
ruler in the same way as an ordinary burglary benefits the burglar’. 11 Arendt mentions in
this context aggressive wars, massacres of enemy populations, extermination of ‘natives’
in the process of colonisation, enslavement of subject peoples, etc. These modern forms
of organised violence doubtless paved the way for totalitarian terror but they were
different in kind. In totalitarian terror itself, she saw the absence of any such utilitarian
criteria. Thus in respect of the Holocaust Arendt writes:

The gas chambers did not benefit anybody. The deportations themselves, during a
period of acute shortage of rolling stock, the establishment of costly factories, the
manpower employed and badly needed for the war effort, the general
demoralising effect on the German military forces as well as on the population in
the occupied territories – all this interfered disastrously with the war in the East,
as the military authorities as well as Nazi officials… pointed out repeatedly…
And the office of Himmler issued one order after another, warning the military
commanders… that no economic or military considerations were to interfere with
the extermination programme. 12

It is this absence of instrumental or utilitarian rationality which not only gives to
totalitarian terror in general, and to the Holocaust in particular, their ‘horrible originality’

11 Arendt, Essays… p.234
12 Arendt, Essays… p.236
but makes them incomprehensible to a social science fixed within rationalistic ways of thinking. The counter-proposition, that the Holocaust is ‘beyond human understanding’, has the definite merit of recognising that ‘rational choice’ models of social science cannot begin to explain the holocaust nor other phenomena of totalitarian terror, but it refuses to extend human understanding beyond these rationalistic limits. Contra both ways of thinking, Arendt’s basic message is that in the face of the Holocaust we do not encounter the limits of understanding as such, but rather the limits of a particular understanding which presupposes the rationality of human action.

Arendt defends the activity of understanding as such. It is, in and of itself, a mark of our humanity and a resistance to the conditions which made the holocaust possible. It is an activity which totalitarianism suppresses and which conversely is one mark of our resistance to totalitarianism. It is an activity which ‘begins where violence ends’, which is ‘profoundly and fundamentally human’; it is a way in which ‘we come to terms with and reconcile ourselves to reality’ and try to be ‘at home in the world’; it is ‘the specifically human way of being alive; for every single person needs to be reconciled to a world into which he was born a stranger and in which, to the extent of his distinct uniqueness, he always remains a stranger’.\textsuperscript{13} To abandon the quest for understanding is to surrender to the totalitarian elements which survive within our own society. On the one hand, there is a moral argument: if people in the camps who were defencelessly exposed to a seemingly inexplicable power sometimes find the resources to make sense of it (let us think

\textsuperscript{13} Arendt, \textit{Essays...}, p.308
especially of Primo Levi or Paul Celan or Tadeusz Borowski\(^{14}\), then there is all the more reason for those of us who are not so exposed to ensure that this ‘absolute betrayal of human values’ does not rule supreme. In this context, the human activity of understanding is itself a re-affirmation of human values.

On the other hand, there is an intellectual argument. The perception that our existing categories of thought and standards of judgement are lacking when it comes to the holocaust, does not invalidate all our categories and standards and does not mean that they must all be abandoned. The notion that Auschwitz represents a novum in the exercise of evil implies that we still have the categories and standards which make it possible to recognise how unprecedented and original the holocaust was in human history. The activity of understanding is not the imperium of the modern philosophical subject who represents the holocaust like a voyeur removed from the terrible events which she observes. It is not about imposing abstract concepts onto lived experience and re-iterating the false promise of a universal politics. It is not a sign of disrespect for the silence which the suffering of the victims demands nor an appropriation of their experience by the theoretician. It is certainly not about forgiving the perpetrators in the sense that tout comprendre, c’est tout pardonner, nor is it about using the holocaust to indoctrinate people with ‘final results’ that can serve as weapons in some ideological warfare. It does not mean engaging in some kind of ‘dialectical acrobatics’ based on the

‘superstition that something good might come from evil’ - a view which can only be justified as long as ‘the worst that man could inflict upon man was murder’. If such traits are confirmed in this or that representation of the holocaust, it does not invalidate representation as such but demands reflection on the difficulties of representation. Making sense of the senseless remains the essential element in recovering the idea of humanity after the holocaust.

The activity of understanding will not be able to confront the ‘burden of events’ which weigh down upon the twentieth century if, as Nietzsche put it in _The Will to Power_, it determines to ‘reduce the unknown to something which is known’, or, as Arendt reformulates it, to ‘submerge what is unfamiliar in a welter of familiarities’. We resist the presumption that nothing can happen which our categories are not equipped to understand and which cannot be deduced from its precedents. In the case of the holocaust and of other forms of totalitarian terror, ‘all parallels create confusion and distract attention from what is essential’. If the holocaust has deprived us of our traditional tools of understanding, still we must confront the difficulty of constructing new tools: not of dissolving the unknown into the known but rather the opposite, of dissolving the known in the unknown. Every fixed idea dissolves in the face of the holocaust.

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15 Arendt, _Origins…_ p.442


17 Arendt, _Essays…_ p.313

18 Arendt, _Origins…_ p.444
In her *Origins of Totalitarianism* Arendt acknowledges the ‘great temptation to explain away the intrinsically incredible by means of liberal rationalisations’ – in each one of us, she writes, ‘there lurks such a liberal wheedling us with the voice of common sense’. The failure of liberalism to live up to its own ideals or effectively to oppose those who devalue them seemed to Arendt to be a clear and distinct lesson to be drawn from the origins of totalitarianism. Liberalism, she wrote in ‘The Eggs Speak Up’ (1951), has ‘demonstrated its inability to resist totalitarianism so often that its failure may already be counted among the historical facts of our century’. To former Communists who wanted to return after the war to the ‘democratic way of life’, she declares with some apparent scorn that it is ‘the same world against whose complacency, injustice and hypocrisy these same men once raised a radical protest… where the elements which eventually crystallised … into totalitarianism are still to be found’. We might look back on the heyday of the liberal tradition with a certain nostalgic affection but not pretend that ‘the past is alive in the sense that it is in our power to return to it’. The liberal way of thinking allows us only to ‘take that which was good in the past and simply call it our heritage’ and to ‘discard the bad and simply think of it as a dead load which by itself time will bury in oblivion’. Liberalism promises only ‘an eventual restoration of the old world order’, but if we are to confront the ‘eventness’ of the holocaust, then we cannot remain content

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20 Arendt, *Essays…* p.282

21 Arendt, *Essays…* p.281

22 Arendt, *Origins* pp.viii-ix
with this thin gruel.

*If* the catastrophe were so consuming as to destroy all our categories of thought and all our standards of judgement, then the task of understanding would indeed be hopeless: ‘how can we measure length if we do not have a yardstick, how could we count things without the notion of numbers?’ The conclusion, however, which Arendt draws from this thought-experiment is not that drawn by Lyotard. It is a representation of what might have been if the voice of resistance had been silenced, if the attempt to exterminate Jews – and the successors of the Jews – had been successfully carried to its conclusion, if the yardsticks which make possible human understanding, including the idea of humanity itself, were destroyed. This thought-experiment highlights the fact that ‘total domination’ was fully actualised – in the sense that it succeeded in destroying not only human beings but also the idea of humanity – only within the confines of the concentration and death camps. If it had been extended to the social body as a whole, then the activity of understanding may well have been killed along with the victims, but this hypothetical possibility reveals ‘the necessary limitations to an experiment which requires global control in order to show conclusive results’.

These sealed-off camps were to totalitarianism in power what the ‘panopticon’ was to normal disciplinary power or the factory was to capitalist production: they were the ‘central institution’ of totalitarian power because it was in these camps alone that the experiment of total domination, impossible to accomplish under normal circumstances,

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23 Arendt, *Origins...* p.459

could be actualised. They were the laboratories in which the nihilistic credo that ‘everything is possible’ was translated into the totalitarian persuasion that ‘everything can be destroyed’, including the idea of humanity itself. They were the site on which the project of stripping human beings of all that makes them human – human solidarity, a functioning body, a name, a space to make moral choices, the possibility of understanding – was tried and tested before the mass disposal of the bodies themselves.

In the camps destruction was not a by-product of production, in the sense that one cannot make a wooden table without destroying a tree, nor in the sense that one cannot build a canal without killing workers. Destruction was rather the aim of production – an end in itself which was deprived of any ‘element of utilitarian calculation’. The achievement of the camps lay neither in the making of the ‘new man’ nor in the making a ‘new order of things’. It did not lie in making anything but in ‘robbing man of his nature… under the pretext of changing it’. The camps were the visible proof that human beings can be turned into inanimate things and that murder can be made as impersonal as ‘the squashing of a gnat’.

It was this ‘peculiar unreality and lack of credibility’ of life in the camps which generated the mystery of ‘Auschwitz’ as the emblem of that which is beyond human understanding. The extreme difficulty that faces victims or eyewitnesses or anyone else, is to make sense of what happened, and for the victims it is even harder to find ways of communicating this which happened to ‘normal people’ in the outside world. Commenting on the reports


of survivors that were available at the time of writing *Origins*... (first published in 1951), as well as on their reception, Arendt describes the difficulties with great insight:

There are numerous reports by survivors. The more authentic they are, the less they attempt to communicate things that evade human understanding and human experience – sufferings, that is, that transform men into ‘uncomplaining animals’. None of these reports inspires those passions of outrage and sympathy through which men have always been mobilised for justice. On the contrary, anyone speaking or writing about concentration camps is still regarded as suspect; and if the speaker has resolutely returned to the world of the living, he himself is often assailed by doubts with regard to his own truthfulness, as though he had mistaken a nightmare for reality... What common sense and ‘normal people’ refuse to believe is that everything is possible. We attempt to understand elements in present or recollected experience that simply surpass our powers of understanding. We attempt to classify as criminal a thing which, as we all feel, no such category was ever intended to cover. What meaning has the concept of murder when we are confronted with the mass production of corpses... If it is true that the concentration camps are the most consequential institutions of totalitarian rule, ‘dwelling on horrors’ would seem to be indispensable for the understanding of totalitarianism. But recollection can no more do this than can the uncommunicative eyewitness report. In both these genres there is an inherent tendency to run away from the experience; instinctively or rationally, both types of writer are so much aware of the terrible abyss that separates the world of the
living from that of the living dead that they cannot supply anything more than a series of remembered occurrences that must seem just as incredible to those who relate them as to their audience… Only the fearful imagination of those who have been aroused by such reports but have not actually been smitten in their own flesh, of those who are consequently free from the bestial desperate terror which, when confronted by real, present horror, inexorably paralyses everything that is not mere reaction, can afford to keep thinking about horrors. Such thoughts are useful only for the perception of political contexts and the mobilisation of political passions.\(^{26}\)

In passages such as these, Arendt expresses the difficulty confronted by survivors of distinguishing nightmare from reality; our own difficulty of understanding when confronted by the lunacy of a process based on the ‘mass manufacture of corpses’; the difficulty faced by the human imagination in ‘dwelling upon horrors’; the difficult relation between survivors and people like herself, who are aroused by their reports and have the capacity to draw political conclusions precisely because they are not themselves traumatised by the actuality of ‘real, present horror’. Difficulty compounded upon difficulty. Why should people construct this micro-world of senselessness in which ‘punishment is meted out without connection with crime… exploitation is practised without profit, and … work is performed without product’;\(^{27}\) why on earth should they make this representation of Hell in which ‘the whole of life was thoroughly and

\(^{26}\) Arendt, *Origins…* pp.439-41

\(^{27}\) Arendt, *Origins…* p. 443
systematically organised with a view to the greatest possible torment’.\textsuperscript{28} The only
categories which seem to make sense of this world are those of senselessness, madness,
unreality, insanity. It has the appearance, as Arendt put it in a term drawn from Kant, of
‘some radical evil previously unknown to us’.\textsuperscript{29}

The sheer insanity of the camps is the overriding reason why they seem incomprehensible
according to the normal rules of historical knowledge. But what was still to be explained,
as afar as Arendt was concerned writing in the 1950s, is ‘the disturbing fact that our
great tradition has remained so peculiarly silent, so obviously wanting in productive
replies, when challenged by the “moral” and political questions of our time’.\textsuperscript{30} The
general silence with which the questions posed by the camps were met, at the time when
Arendt was writing, was not because of any shortage of documents and testimonies, nor
because the perpetrators succeeded in their attempt to abolish all trace of the camps and
the killing fields – there survived an abundance of documents, signs, traces and
testimonies precisely because the perpetrators in the end failed to eliminate Jews from the
face of the earth. It was according because the sources from which such answers should
have sprung had themselves dried up. These sources were precisely ‘the quest for
meaning and need for understanding’ which are the mark of our humanity. It was the
drying up of these sources which Arendt discovered behind the idea of the ‘ineffability’

\textsuperscript{28} Arendt, Origins…. p.445

\textsuperscript{29} Arendt, Origins…. p. 443

\textsuperscript{30} Arendt, Essays … p.316
of the holocaust. To yield to the impossibility of understanding is an abdication that would grant totalitarian terror, as it were, the last word. But why do we lose the quest for meaning and the need for understanding? What is it that we do not want to understand?

THE JURIDICAL POINT OF VIEW

The ‘difficulties of understanding’ were certainly evident in the juridical categories that were applied to some perpetrators of the Holocaust after the war and institutionalised at Nuremberg. Both in legal prosecutions and in everyday speech the terms ‘crime’ and ‘criminal’ were regularly used to refer to the acts and agents of the Holocaust. Arendt certainly did not wish to invalidate under the aegis of ‘non-identity’ the use of these categories, but she did problematise their application to the perpetrators and their deeds. First, she observed in relation to the violence perpetrated by the Nazis against Jews and other victims of the Holocaust that the category of ‘crime’ and ‘criminal’ is hopelessly inadequate. She emphasised the difference between mere criminality and the facts of mass extermination – between ‘a man who sets out to murder his old aunt’ and ‘people who without considering the economic usefulness of their actions at all … built factories to produce corpses’. What is distinctive about the latter is that they ‘explode the limits of the law’ and their guilt, in contrast to all criminal guilt, ‘oversteps and shatters any and all legal systems’. Arendt emphasised the disproportion between the few Nazis who

31 Arendt, Essays … p.317


33 Arendt and Jaspers, p.54.
were tried and punished at Nuremberg and the mass of perpetrators who committed the deeds in question. When the machinery of mass murder forces practically everyone in a society to participate in one way or another, ‘the human need for justice can find no satisfactory reply to the total mobilisation of a people to that purpose. Where all are guilty, nobody in the last analysis can be judged’.\textsuperscript{34} The effacement of visible signs of distinction between the guilty and the innocent – through a policy of making each individual dependent upon committing crimes or being complicit in them or at least appearing to be complicit in them – marks the limit of criminal law.

The inadequacy of legal categories was apparent in the language of ‘personal responsibility’ which criminal law presupposes. The perpetrators, as they appeared to Arendt, typically saw themselves as ‘cogs in the mass murder machine’ who did the job of killing ‘only in a professional capacity, without passion or ill will’, and no longer recognised any contradiction between being a good father, husband and dog-owner at home and killing Jews if that was his public duty and legal obligation. Between this ‘modern type of man’ and conventional notions of responsibility, a new kind of gap opens up: ‘if we tell a member of this new occupational class which our time has produced that he is being held to account for what he did, he will feel nothing except that he has been betrayed’.\textsuperscript{35} According to Arendt, this might explain why the Nuremberg trials met with so much sullen resentment on the part of Germans who would not recognise their own responsibility in the execution of the Holocaust, or on the part of a

\textsuperscript{34} Arendt, Essays… p.126.

\textsuperscript{35} Arendt, Essays… p.130.
few Germans with an anguished guilt which in political terms was of little use. This new type of ‘bourgeois’ is no longer the *citoyen* who combines the public virtue of civic patriotism with the private virtue of personal responsibility, but the ‘man of the masses’ who does his duty, even at the expense of his own inclinations, and cannot think otherwise.

Such perpetrators are human beings, not cogs in a machine, yet they conceive of themselves *as if* they were cogs in a machine. It is this ‘as if…’ quality that is so difficult to comprehend. On the one hand, those positivistic social sciences which declare that the perpetrators were *in fact* merely cogs in a killing machine incapable of moral decision and which claim that modern bureaucratic rationality has *in fact* deprived them of all moral awareness, merely mirror the illusions of the world they purport to explain. Against this Arendt saw it as a definite achievement of the trials that ‘all the cogs in the machinery, no matter how insignificant, are *in court* forthwith transformed back into perpetrators, that is to say, into human beings’. 36 However, the juridical conception of personal responsibility would be a mere legal fiction if it were imposed upon a

36 Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil*, New York: Penguin, 1994, p. 289. Alain Finkielkraut picked up a similar theme when he argued in relation to the Barbie Trial that though the Holocaust was ‘from Eichmann to the engineers on the trains... a crime of employees… it was precisely to remove from crime the excuse of service and to restore the quality of killers to law-abiding citizens … that the category of “crimes against humanity” was formulated’. See Alain Finkielkraut, *Remembering in Vain*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1992 pp. 3-4.
recalcitrant social reality in which responsibility had no factual existence (like holding peasants dispossessed of their land responsible for becoming vagrants). The difficulty concerns the relation between the concept and its existence – between the representation of responsibility in court and the social reality thus represented.

If the question of responsibility cannot be adequately handled either by a positivism which denies its existence or by a juridical consciousness which turns it into an ontological absolute, Arendt’s own writings initiate an approach which foregoes all a priori, metaphysical conceptions of responsibility in order to explore the actuality of moral responsibility within the killing machines. The sub-text of her argument was that, if totalitarianism indicated the collapse of all existing moral standards, it was accompanied by a restructured moral point of view in which personal responsibility was not simply annulled but reconfigured as a matter of political organisation and consciousness. This is a complicated matter and beyond the terrain of this paper, but Arendt seeks to demonstrate that the totalitarian form of organisation is based on ‘authority’ rather than naked force and as such depends on ‘the unquestioning recognition of orders’ by those who are asked to obey, so that neither coercion nor persuasion are

37 See Karl Marx, Capital, Vol.I, Harmondsworth: Penguin, p896. Marx writes: ‘at the end of the 15th and during the whole of the 16th centuries a bloody legislation against vagabondage was enforced throughout Western Europe. The fathers of the present working class were chastised for their enforced transformation into vagabonds and paupers. Legislators treated them as ‘voluntary’ criminals and assumed it was entirely within their powers to go on working under the old conditions’.
needed. The fact of the matter is that the perpetrators of the Holocaust did not generally question orders, let alone disobey them, membership of murder-squads was not on the whole compulsory and individuals were not generally forced to kill under pain of death themselves. It was not a case, as Dwight Macdonald mistakenly thought, of ‘kill or be killed’, and if it had been, this would have been a legitimate defence or at least plea of mitigation at Nuremberg. As Adolf Eichmann put it in his trial, he acted according to his conscience and his conscience would have troubled him only if he had questioned orders – a thought which seems never to have occurred to him.

Max Weber long ago demonstrated that in a rational bureaucracy officials are not simply cogs in a machine, for the very act of ‘following a rule’ requires for its fulfilment all manner of interpretative endeavour and moral evaluation. In the organisation of the Holocaust some use was made of some elements of rational bureaucracy, but these elements were subordinated to the Nazi movement and its secret police forces, and radically reconfigured according to the so-called Führerprinzip or Leader Principle. In place of hierarchical order, the Leader Principle demanded that every member of the killing machine think and act in accordance with the will of the Leader and owe

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39 See, for example, Christopher Browning, Ordinary Men, New York, Harper Collins, 1993.

40 Dwight Macdonald, Politics, 1945.

allegiance to the Leader himself. As Hans Frank formulated it, in mockery of Kant, the categorical imperative of the Third Reich was: ‘Act in such a way as the Führer, if he knew your action would approve it’. Wide latitude was given to officials in the execution of general policies and every holder of position was responsible not only for their own actions but also for the actions of their subordinates – even when they disobeyed or failed to fulfil orders. To grasp the ‘will of the Führer’ in this context demanded zeal and creativity far in excess of the old-fashioned plodding bureaucrat.

If this, or something like this, was the actuality of ‘personal responsibility’ in the Nazi killing machines – a responsibility which goes beyond the bureaucratic role of the perpetrator – the question raised by Arendt (drawn from Karl Jaspers and referring to Kierkegaard) was how to create a new sense of ‘universal responsibility’ in which human beings … assume responsibility for all crimes committed by human beings, in which no one people are assigned a monopoly of guilt and none considers itself superior, in which good citizens would not shrink back in horror at German crimes and declare “Thank God, I am not like that”, but rather recognise in fear and trembling the incalculable evil which humanity is capable of and fight fearlessly, uncompromisingly, everywhere against it.

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42 Arendt, Eichmann..., p.11.


44 Arendt, Essays..., p.32.
One way was through the establishment of what Kant called ‘cosmopolitan law’ which would hold to account the perpetrators of such atrocities as were committed in the Holocaust. In spite of her reservations, Arendt saw the glimmer of a new dawn of cosmopolitan order in the Nuremberg Charter and the prosecution of leading Nazis that followed. It was an event that announced that individuals, rather than states, can be held responsible for crimes under international law; that individuals acting within the legality of their own state can be tried as criminals; that service to the state does not (as Finkielkraut put it) exonerate any official in any bureaucracy or any scientist in any laboratory from his or her responsibilities as a thinking individual; that no one can hide behind the excuse of ‘only obeying orders’ and that those who sit behind desks planning atrocities are as guilty as those who participate directly in their execution. Not least, it announced that atrocities committed against one set of people, be it Jews or Poles or Roma, are an affront not only to these particular people but also to humanity as a whole and that humanity would find means of bringing the perpetrators to justice.⁴⁵

⁴⁵ According to Article Six, “Leaders, organisers, instigators and accomplices participating in the formulation or execution of a common plan or conspiracy to commit any of the foregoing crimes are responsible for all acts performed by any persons in execution of such plan”. Article 7 added that “The official position of defendants, whether as Heads of State or responsible officials in Government Departments, shall not be considered as freeing them from responsibility or mitigating punishment”. Article 8 added that “The fact that the Defendant acted pursuant to order of his Government or of a superior shall not free him from responsibility, but may be considered in mitigation of punishment if the Tribunal determines that justice so requires”. Articles 9, 10 and 11
To be sure, the promise of a new cosmopolitan order was precarious and almost stillborn. At Nuremberg it excluded in principle crimes committed by the Allied powers (including the terror committed under Stalin), and in respect of the Germans it focused mainly on traditional ‘war crimes’ and ‘crimes against peace’ rather than on the ‘crimes against humanity’ committed in the camps and killing fields. After Nuremberg, the cosmopolitan precedent set by the Charter and these trials quickly went into abeyance as consensus collapsed and the rival interests of cold war prevailed. Even in the few cases that were held for crimes against humanity (exclusively, as far as I know, in relation to the wartime activities of Nazis and none in relation to atrocities committed by colonial powers or anti-colonial movements after the war) Arendt saw the promise of a new cosmopolitan order distorted by nationalist aims.

This was the nub of Arendt’s criticisms of the Eichmann trial. On the one hand, she upheld the legitimacy of the trial: the fact that Eichmann had been illegally kidnapped from Argentina was justifiable given that he had been indicted at Nuremberg, charged with crimes against humanity and was hiding in a country with such a bad record of extradition as Argentina. The use of an Israeli national court was justifiable in the absence of an international court or a successor court to Nuremberg and in light of the fact that Eichmann’s job was to organise the killing only of Jews. The contention that authorised the Tribunal to declare that a particular organisation, like the Nazi party, is criminal and that individuals who join such an organisation are personally responsible for both for their membership and for their participation in its criminal activities.\textsuperscript{45}
there were more important issues at stake than the trial of a single individual – e.g. the political character of modern anti-Semitism, the origins of totalitarianism, the nature of evil, the question of why the Germans? etc. – was no reason not to seek justice in this particular case.\(^46\) For Arendt, the trial of Eichmann was one of the means by which the abstract conception of universal responsibility which drew from the experience of the Holocaust, could be made concrete and actual.

On the other hand, Arendt criticised the Eichmann trial for its misuse in the service of Israeli nationalist aims: the contention that only in Israel could a Jew be safe, the attempt to camouflage the existence of ethnic distinctions in Israeli society, the concealment of the co-operation of certain Jewish leaders in the administration of the Holocaust, etc.\(^47\) What Arendt expressed was a growing sense of lost opportunity: that the precedent set by Nuremberg was being ignored in the era of cold war, that the universalistic import of crimes against humanity was being corralled back into a nationalist frame of reference,

\(^{46}\) Arendt and Jaspers, pp.419ff.

\(^{47}\) It is for these comments that Arendt’s account is most remembered by her critics, but she acknowledged the more positive effects of the trial: it encouraged the prosecution of leading Nazis in West Germany, it publicised the Holocaust to the world, it offered a forum for the testimony of victims, it accomplished a touch of justice (she had no compunction, for instance, about the imposition of the death penalty: ‘no member of the human race can be expected to want to share the earth with a man who 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’).
that the ethical significance of the holocaust was being lost to a moral division of the world between them and us, good and evil, which served only as an index of a world purged of all political profundity. To those who thought that the institution of ‘crimes against humanity’ could achieve some sort of release from the elements of totalitarian thought which inhere within the modern world, the fear that Arendt expressed was that it was being used to reinforce the very situation it had sought to correct – the breaking up of the human race into a multitude of competing states and nations.48

48 It was this sense of lost opportunity that was echoed some twenty five years later by Alain Finkielkraut in his celebrated study of the Barbie trial, when he analysed contemporary trends toward the ‘banalisation’ of crimes against humanity, as it became part of the ‘competition of memories’ between different national movements and was extended to include all those forms of ‘man’s inhumanity to man’ of which we might disapprove. Thus in the Barbie case Finkielkraut criticised the decision of the French court to muddy the distinction between the killing of Jews for what they were, and the killing of resistance fighters for what they did, and its decision to stretch the concept of crimes against humanity to include both. He also criticised the attempt on the part of Barbie’s defence team to diminish the distinction between the extermination of the Jews and the violence of European colonialism. A certain ‘emotional confusion’ arises, he argued, when on the one hand the definition of crimes against humanity expands to include inhuman actions of every sort and on the other hand contracts to exclude those crimes that cannot be ascribed to Western imperialism. In its actual use, Finkielkraut argued along the same lines as Arendt, the concept was serving to reduce ‘the unmasterable multitude of mankind to an exultant face to face confrontation between
Far from trashing all juridical categories, Arendt argued that the category of ‘crimes against humanity’ was particularly well chosen since in the most literal sense such crimes as the perpetrators of the Holocaust committed were ‘against humanity’. In the Holocaust, as Arendt perceived it, ‘individual human beings did not kill other individual human beings for human reasons’; rather an organised attempt was made to ‘eradicate the concept of the human being’. If the camps were an attempt not only to eradicate human beings but the idea of humanity, the institution of the legal category of ‘crimes against humanity’ was a re-affirmation of the idea of humanity. It expressed the realisation that:

Something seems to be involved in modern politics that actually should never be involved in politics as we used to understand it, namely all or nothing – all, and that is an undetermined infinity of forms of human living together, or nothing, for a victory of the concentration camp system would mean the same inexorable doom for human beings as the use of the hydrogen bomb would mean the doom of the human race.  

It was a politics which strove for ‘total domination by ‘eliminating under scientifically

Innocence and the Unspeakable Beast’, and to re-write the Holocaust as a ‘meaningless idiot’s tale’ which signifies nothing and leaves only a ‘gaping black hole’ (Finkielkraut, pp.60-61).

49 Arendt and Jaspers, p.69.

50 Arendt, Origins…, p.443.
controlled conditions spontaneity itself as an expression of human behaviour and of transforming the human personality into a mere thing’; a politics whose aim was the destruction of all human spontaneity, plurality and differentiation; a politics based on the notion that ‘all men have become equally superfluous’. 51 The international lawyers were more right than they probably knew when they said that the holocaust was directed literally ‘against humanity’ and that the institution of ‘crimes against humanity’ was visible proof that the holocaust did not and would not succeed. For Arendt, the point was not to declare prematurely the ‘death of man’, but to try to understand why the idea of humanity appeared as something so offensive that it had to be destroyed and how the idea of humanity could be restored as something more than an empty slogan or deception of power.

**TOTALITARIANISM AND THE QUESTION OF EVIL**

When Arendt wrote of the ‘appearance of some radical evil’, it was doubtless to distinguish her use of the concept from any ontological conception of radical evil. This appearance was due to the ambition of the holocaust project: to get rid of not just Jews and other ‘undesirables’ but the idea of humanity. If the idea of humanity is the achievement of the modern age, the holocaust may be understood as the ultimately failed attempt to undo this achievement both in means and ends. To declare the idea of humanity dead is to grant the Nazis a posthumous victory.

Implicit in the use of the term ‘radical evil’ is an opposition to any relativising of the evil

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of the holocaust. The collapse of moral standards that was encountered in totalitarian
terror, and the equally rapid adaptation of former Nazis to the ‘democratic way of life’
after the war, gives the impression that what we call morality consists merely of ‘our
habits’ and is no more than ‘a set of mores, customs and manners which could be
exchanged for another set with hardly more trouble than it would take to change the table
manners of an individual or a people’. If ‘society’ is the sole condition of moral life, as
is sometimes held within sociology, and if the submission of individuals to ‘society’ is
the condition of their liberation from their passions, then there can be no grounds for
complaint against perpetrators who conform to the normative order of their society,
internalise its values and act according to its conception of social duty - sometimes at
great personal cost. The concept of ‘radical evil’ may be read as opposing any tendency
in social theory to relativise morals in relation to contingent and transitory social norms.
The Holocaust was visible proof, if any were needed, that the reduction of what is right to
mere opinions about what is right is the mark of a subjectivism which leaves wide open
the question of substance.

Karl Jaspers highlighted the risk involved in the use of this term ‘radical evil’ in his
correspondence with Arendt after the war. Jaspers argued that it might endow the
perpetrators with what he called a ‘streak of satanic greatness’ and mystify them and their
deeds in ‘myth and legend’. It was against this danger that Jaspers emphasised the

See the excellent discussion of this in Richard Bernstein, Hannah Arendt and the Jewish
‘prosaic triviality’ of the perpetrators and coined the phrase ‘the banality of evil’ to bring this to the surface. He argued, for instance, that the great advantage of treating the perpetrators as ‘mere criminals’ was to present them ‘in their total banality’. Arendt immediately expressed her agreement in principle and acknowledged that in her own use of the term she was coming too close to ‘mythologising the horrible’. No longer mindful of its original source she only introduced the term ‘banality of evil’ in her writings at the time of the Eichmann trial, to face up to the fact that the perpetrators were ‘men like ourselves’ who demonstrated what terrible deeds ‘ordinary men’ are capable of. It was a rejoinder to conventional images of the ‘Nazi monster’ that had nothing to do with ‘men like ourselves’ and which painted the world in terms of a dichotomy between our own absolute innocence and the unspeakable Nazi beast. What she took from the Eichmann case was that the perpetrators of the most radical evil could be rather pedestrian, bourgeois individuals, rooted in an everydayness that made them incapable of critical reflection or serious moral judgement, marked more by ‘thoughtlessness’ and ‘remoteness from reality’ than by any streak of Satanic greatness. She thought that nothing was further from Eichmann’s mind than to ‘to prove a villain’ nor was he even a convinced anti-Semite; in fact, he had few motives beyond his diligence in looking out for his own career advancement. The mark of his character was sheer ‘thoughtlessness’ and it was this which predisposed him to become one of the greatest criminals of the modern age. The lesson Arendt took from Jerusalem was that ‘such remoteness from reality and such thoughtlessness can wreak more havoc than all the evil instincts taken

53 Arendt and Jaspers, p.62.
54 Arendt and Jaspers, p.69.
together’, and that we have to come to terms with the fact that the man responsible for the execution of the Holocaust was terrifyingly normal: ‘the deeds were monstrous but the doer … was quite ordinary, commonplace, and neither demonic nor monstrous’.

The change in Arendt’s work from the terminology of ‘radical evil’ to that of ‘banality of evil’ is a question I do not wish to pursue here, save to say that, as Richard Bernstein has demonstrated, between the ‘monstrous deed’ (the appearance of radical evil) and the ‘commonplace doer’ (the banality of evil) there is no contradiction. What I do wish to raise, however, is the sub-text of this terminological turn as a situated response to new ways of ‘mythologising the horrible’ and endowing perpetrators with ‘a streak of satanic greatness’ that were emerging in the 1960s in the shape of what I earlier referred to as ‘holocaust piety’. The experience of watching and hearing Eichmann was the trigger for Arendt’s re-affirmation of a humanist tradition according to which only good is radical and evil is merely the deprivation of good with no independent reality of its own. Evil is never radical, she argued, ‘it is only extreme, and… it possesses neither depths nor any demonic dimension… Only the good has depths and can be radical’. With the Eichmann trial, the wall of silence which so often surrounded victims of the Holocaust during the 1950s was increasingly broken. Arendt welcomed, of course, this development.

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55 Arendt, Eichmann…, p.288.
56 Arendt, Eichmann…, p.3-4
57 Bernstein, Hannah Arendt…, ch.7 ‘From radical evil to the banality of evil’.
but what was at issue was the form in which the silence is broken and the Shoah is written.

The new discourse makes use of old theological terms like the ‘Holocaust’ and ‘Shoah’ to name the unnameable Event. It insists upon its uniqueness and singularity. It takes Auschwitz as the synecdoche for the holocaust as a whole – giving rise to all manner of illusion about the ‘industrial’ and ‘technological’ character of the mass killing of Jews. On the one hand, the Jewish catastrophe is isolated from the wider catastrophe embodied in the rise of totalitarianism. On the other hand, Auschwitz is treated as irrefutable proof that, as Adorno put it, ‘culture had failed’:

All post-Auschwitz culture, including its urgent critique, is garbage… Whoever pleads for the maintenance of this radically culpable and shabby culture becomes its accomplice, while the man who says no to culture is directly furthering the barbarism which our culture showed itself to be…. Not even silence gets us out of the circle. In silence we simply use the state of objective truth to rationalise our subjective incapacity, once more degrading truth into a lie.  

Drawing on the ontology of Martin Heidegger, philosophy even imputed the murderous tendencies evinced in the holocaust to the metaphysics of the subject and to hubris of

From Arendt’s point of view, the concept of ‘radical evil’ was

60 In his Letter on Humanism (1945) Heidegger argued that the consciousness that establishes `humanity’ as an absolute standard against which to measure the extreme violence of the age, forgets that it is the principle of humanity that precipitates this violence by destroying everything and everyone deemed to be ‘inhuman’. Humanism implies a technological relation to the world based on the domination of things and people, and despite its anti-technological and anti-humanistic roots he argued that Nazism was a variant of the same technology and humanism. Humanism is an ‘ism’ which puts the human being at the centre of the world and elevates the human being as master of all things. Heidegger insisted that when he spoke against humanism, this did not mean that his argument was ‘destructive’ or that it implied ‘a defence of the inhuman’. The vista he wished to open up was that humanistic interpretations of `man’ could not realise ‘the proper dignity of man’. Humanism is opposed, as he put it, because ‘it does not set the humanitas of man high enough’. The higher responsibility is to overcome the limits of humanism, to assume ‘guardianship’ and ‘care’ in the ‘clearing of Being’, to ‘let beings be’ or to `will not to will’. Nazism was a catastrophe for humanitas only because it turned opposition to humanism into an advocacy of the inhuman. The higher goal remained `to think the humanity of homo humanus...without humanism’. The story of the influence of this text, mediated via French Marxism, is recounted in Anson Rabinbach’s excellent In the Shadow of Catastrophe: German Intellectuals between Apocalypse and Enlightenment, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1977, ch.3 ‘Heidegger’s “Letter on Humanism” as Text and Event’, pp.97-128. See Martin Heidegger, ‘Letter on Humanism’, in David Krell (ed.), Basic Writings, San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1976,
implicated in a discourse which went against the grain of the essentially political and humanistic response to the attempted extermination of Jews which informed her own work.

The idea of ‘the banality of evil’ was challenged by Jewish critics on the ground that it diminished the significance of the Holocaust. Gershom Scholem was by no means alone in reading the phrase as trivialising the Holocaust and diminishing the *novum* of this event. For both Scholem and Arendt the holocaust was the pivotal event in the definition of political modernity. The *real* difference between them, however, concerned Arendt’s refusal to ‘singularise’ the Holocaust, to extract it from the wider phenomena of totalitarian terror, to accept its ineffability, or to rule out an essentially political response. For Arendt, too, the holocaust was not just another event; it was a sign that new categories, new ways of thinking, new standards of judgement were needed. In this sense, it was a *novum*: not as a sign of something beyond human understanding but as the birth of an unprecedented violence. In this context, the use of the term ‘banality of evil’ was, I think, her way of saying that the holocaust was ‘human, all too human’.

In his memoir *At the Mind’s Limits: Contemplations by a Survivor on Auschwitz and Its Realities* (1966) Jean Améry argues with equal force that Arendt was unable to come face to face with the Event because she saw only ‘codified abstractions’. Her use of the concept of totalitarianism is a case in point. Améry writes with unconcealed impatience:

\[p.219.\]

\[61\] Arendt and Jaspers, pp. 240-245.
I hear indignant objection being raised, hear it said that not Hitler embodied torture but rather something unclear, ‘totalitarianism’. I hear especially the example of Communism being shouted at me. And didn’t I myself just say that in the Soviet Union torture was practised for 34 years? And did not already Arthur Koestler…? Oh yes, I know, I know.62

Améry goes on to write that Stalin and Hitler were different in principle: the one ‘still symbolises an idea of man’, the other ‘hated the word “humanity” like the pious man hates sin’ (p.180). Yet this contrast, between one who symbolised the idea of man and the one who hated the word humanity, takes Stalin at his word and lets him off the hook on which Arendt hung him. Be that as it may, the crucial point for Améry takes off from a discussion of Proust:

Proust writes somewhere: Nothing really happens as we hope it will, nor as we fear it will. But not because the occurrence, as one says, perhaps ‘goes beyond the imagination’… but because it is reality and not fantasy. … What one tends to call ‘normal life’ may coincide with anticipatory imagination and trivial statement. I buy a newspaper and am ‘a man who buys a newspaper’. The act does not differ from the image through which I anticipated it, and I hardly differentiate myself personally from the millions who performed it before me. Because my imagination did not suffice to entirely capture such an event? No, rather because

62 Extracts to be found in John Roth and Michael Berenbaum (Eds), Holocaust: Religious and Philosophical Implications, New York: Paragon House, p. 179.
even in direct experience everyday life is nothing but codified abstraction. Only in rare moments of life do we truly stand face to face with the event and, with it, reality.  

One such rare moment of life for Améry is when he faced torture by the Gestapo.

Gestapo men in leather coats, pistol pointed at their victim – that is correct, all right. But, then, almost amazingly it dawns on one that the fellows not only have leather coats and pistols, but also faces … like anyone else’s. Plain, ordinary faces. And the enormous perception at a later stage, one that destroys all abstractive imagination, makes clear to us how the plain, ordinary faces finally become Gestapo faces after all, and how evil overlays and exceeds banality. For there is no ‘banality of evil’ and Hannah Arendt… knew the enemy of mankind only from hearsay, saw him only through the glass cage.

The ‘codified abstraction’ of totalitarianism offends Améry because it draws the reader away from the sheer corporeality and sadism of that reality:

National Socialism in its totality was stamped less with the seal of a hardly definable ‘totalitarianism’ than with that of sadism. Sadism as radical negation of the other, as the denial of the social principle as well as the reality principle. The

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63 Roth and Berenbaum p.175.

64 Roth and Berenbaum p.175.
sadist wants to nullify this world, and by negating his fellow man, who also in an entirely specific sense is ‘hell’ for him, he wants to realise his own total sovereignty.  

‘I have experienced the ineffable’, Améry writes, ‘I am filled with it entirely’. In this context ‘thinking is almost nothing else but a great astonishment’.

According to Améry, then, Arendt dissolves the experience of the holocaust into an abstract codification, ‘totalitarianism’, spuriously identifies Hitler and Stalin as one and same thing, views the perpetrators only through a glass cage and diminishes the sheer sadism of their practices. And yet we must distinguish between the memoir of the survivor and the analysis of one who is moved by the survivor’s account. This is not the place to defend in detail Arendt’s specific use of the term ‘totalitarianism’, except to say that a new word was needed to capture a new phenomenon. The term ‘totalitarianism’ had been coined by the Italian fascist, Giovanni Gentile, in the 1920s to express the actuality of ‘total freedom’ when the self-realisation of the individual is absolutely identified with the universality of the state and when the state itself is ‘comprehensive, all embracing, pervasive … total’. Arendt’s extraction of the concept from the megalomaniac ambitions of a fascist ideologue may be accused of turning the fantasy of the ‘total’ state into the actuality of a political formation and of neglecting the fact that

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65 Roth and Berenbaum p.184.

66 Roth and Berenbaum p.187.
megalomaniac ambitions encounter the obstacle of other people. But this was precisely Arendt’s point: the totalitarian dreamt of total domination but it was less the realisation of this dream than its collapse that led them into escalating orgies of destruction. The concept of totalitarianism helps us to make sense of the senseless – not by offering an analytic of a social formation but by revealing the dynamics of madness that lie at its core. In this usage, totalitarianism was not, as for example Dana Villa has argued, the ‘terrible revelation’ of the essence of the West to itself:

‘The presencing of everything as orderable and controllable is the conditio sine qua non for everything appearing to be possible – for the totalitarian project as such’. 68

Totalitarianism was not the ‘result’ or ‘product’ or ‘final culmination’ of any underlying tendency in modern political life. But it was a ‘crystallisation’ or ‘reconfiguration of elements’ which deprived of innocence all our categories of understanding and standards of judgement.

67 We know, for instance, that social atomisation in Stalinist Russia was far less complete than the concept of totalitarianism might suggest.

THE WILL TO DESTROY

Why did the idea of humanity cause such offence and why did movements arise which tried so hard to destroy it? Arendt’s answer draws on Nietzsche’s *Will to Power* where he defines nihilism thus: ‘what does nihilism mean? That the highest values devaluate themselves. The aim is lacking; ”why?” finds no answer’. Nietzsche pre-figured the fin-de-siècle mood of irredeemable decline when the values and beliefs that were taken as the highest manifestation of the spirit of the West lost their validity. He believed that this loss of values bred a destructive and spiritless radicalism, full of hostility to culture and images of destruction, and the spectre of barbarism which he anticipated turned out to

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70 In a passage from *Untimely Meditations* Nietzsche captured the experience of ‘devaluation’ thus:

Now how does the philosopher see the culture of our time? Naturally quite differently than those philosophy professors who are satisfied with their state. When he thinks of the universal haste and the increasing speed with which things are falling, of the cessation of all contemplativeness and simplicity, it almost seems to him as if her were seeing the symptoms of a total extermination and uprooting of culture. The waters of religion are ebbing and they are leaving behind swamps or ponds; the nations are again separating from one another in the most hostile manner and they are trying to rip each other to shreds. The sciences, without any measure and pursued in the blindest spirit of laisser faire, are breaking apart and dissolving everything which is firmly believed; the edified classes and states are being swept along by a money economy which is
be a pale image of the barbarism of later totalitarian movements.

Following Nietzsche, Arendt viewed European nihilism not so much as a pathological state of mind but as a valid expression of a disenchanted world. Nihilism was the spectre haunting Europe because it was well grounded and because all thinking beings shared the sense of revulsion felt by those who confronted the gulf between established values and the experience of extreme violence in the Great War:

Simply to brand as outbursts of nihilism this violent dissatisfaction with the pre-war age ... is to overlook how justified disgust can be in a society wholly permeated with the ideological outlook and moral standards of the bourgeoisie. 71

Disillusionment fed the ‘anti-humanist, anti-liberal, anti-individualist and anti-cultural instincts’ of a front generation which elevated violence, power and cruelty as the ‘supreme capacities of humankind’ and became ‘completely absorbed by their desire to see the ruin of this whole world of fake security, fake culture and fake life’. What emerged in the place of conventional values was disgust with all existing standards and enormously contemptible. Never was the world more a world, never was it poorer in love and good. The educated classes are no longer lighthouses or sanctuaries in the midst of all this turbulent secularisation; they themselves become more turbulent by the day, more thoughtless and loveless. Everything, contemporary art and science included, serves the coming barbarism. (Nietzsche 1983, pp. 148-9).

71 Arendt, Origins...p. 328.
with every power that be; the hope that the whole culture and texture of life might go down in ‘storms of steel’ (Jünger); ‘destruction without mitigation, chaos and ruin as such assumed the dignity of supreme values’. For the front generation, war was not just the offspring of the old world but the progenitor of the new: a means of ‘chastisement’ and ‘purification’ in a corrupt age (Thomas Mann), the ‘great equaliser’ in class-ridden societies (Lenin), the arena where ‘selflessness’ obliterates bourgeois egoism (Bakunin), the site of the ‘doomed man’ with ‘no personal interest, no affairs, no sentiments, attachments, property, not even a name of his own’ (Nechaev), the ruined ground on which philosophies of action dream of escape from society into the world of doing something, heroic or criminal, that is undetermined. The double standards of bourgeois civil society incited a politics of unmasking:

Since the bourgeoisie claimed to be the guardian of Western traditions and confounded all moral issues by parading publicly virtues which it not only did not possess in private and business life, but actually held in contempt, it seemed revolutionary to admit cruelty, disregard of human values, and general amorality, because this at least destroyed the duplicity upon which the existing society seemed to rest.  

In the twilight of double moral standards, it seemed radical to flaunt extreme attitudes: ‘to wear publicly the mask of cruelty if everybody ... pretended to be gentle’. Arendt cited the case of Celine’s Bagatelles pour un Massacre in which he proposed the massacre of

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72 Arendt, Origins…p. 334
all Jews, and the welcome which Andre Gide gave to it, ‘not of course because he wanted to kill the Jews... but because he rejoiced in the blunt admission of such a desire and in the fascinating contradiction between Celine's bluntness and the hypocritical politeness which surrounded the Jewish question in all respectable quarters’. Such ‘spiritless radicalism’ exposed the double standards endemic in the separation of citoyen and bourgeois only to attack the very separation of public and private life in the name of the wholeness of man. It revealed the false trust on which representative institutions were based, only to promote a philosophy of universal distrust. It turned the untruths of the bourgeois system of rule into a repudiation of the very distinction between truth and falsehood. Its contempt for facts preceded the determinate lies of totalitarian movements. Its contempt for political parties was channelled into a doctrine of ‘movements’ that suppressed all forms of representation except the totalitarian movement itself. The devaluation of the idea of humanity impelled many thinking beings into totalitarian movements, even if they later discovered that these movements were basically anti-intellectual and either devoured or spat out their intellectuals.

The desire for blunt admission and the blunt admission of desire were often welcome to a bourgeoisie tired of managing the tension between words and deeds and ready to take off their masks and reveal a more naked brutality. Drawing on Marx as well as Nietzsche, Arendt argued that it was under imperialism, when the political rule of the bourgeoisie was finally consolidated, that power was freed from all restraint and expansion for expansion's sake became the credo of the age:

73 Arendt, Origins...p. 335.
Expansion as a permanent and supreme aim of politics is the central political idea of imperialism... it is an entirely new concept in the long history of political thought and action ... this concept is not really political at all, but has its origin in the realm of business speculation.\textsuperscript{74} 

The bourgeois principle of power came to mirror that of economics: unlimited accumulation of power accompanying unlimited accumulation of capital. What was new was not, of course, violence as such but the fact that violence now became the aim of the body politic and would not rest until there was ‘nothing left to violate’.\textsuperscript{75} In the age of imperialism the ‘will to power’ was increasingly emancipated from moral constraints and the ground laid for a power which ‘left to itself can achieve nothing but more power’. Nihilism in this sense became the spirit of the age. If the practical nihilism of bourgeois society came up against political limitations – imposed by the proletariat and the nation-state at home and by the growth of national consciousness among conquered peoples abroad – the idea of a common humanity was further imperilled to the extent that proletariats, nation-states and national movements were themselves invested with the standards of violence and racism which they most opposed. It is in this context that the attempt to destroy the idea of humanity begins – but only begins – to become understandable as a political and philosophical end.

\textsuperscript{74} Arendt, Origins… p. 125. 

\textsuperscript{75} Arendt, Origins… p.137.
THE IDEA OF HUMANITY

If totalitarianism shows that traditional moral values are no longer sufficient to prevent evil, because society reduces morals to the relativity of this or that normative order and can change them at the drop of a hat, we may want to believe that there is something about the human condition – some capacity for `beginning’, some individual particularity, some voice of conscience, some sense of judgement – that cannot be transformed according to plan: some relation that resists all reworking. The text of *Origins* is punctuated by Arendt’s attempts to find this `something’ that resists all transformation. In a world where lives are ‘superfluous’ and the notion ‘I want you not to be’ prevails, she looked primarily among the victims, pariah peoples, stateless refugees to find those who affirm what she called that `grace of love, which says with Augustine… “I want you to be” without being able to give any particular reason for such supreme and unsurpassable affirmation.’ In a world which suppresses uniqueness and portrays difference as alien, she looked to those who recognise ‘the fact of difference as such and the disturbing miracle contained in the fact that each of us is made as he is - single, unique, unchangeable’. In a world of the camps, where all spontaneity is denied, she looked to the capacity of human beings for creative action: ‘That a beginning be made man was created', said Augustine’. In a world in which friendship was subordinated to

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76 Arendt, *Origins…*p.301

77 Arendt, *Origins…*p.300

78 Arendt, *Origins…*pp.478-9
party loyalty and the duty to denounce disloyalty, she looked to a conception of friendship which is not only personal but makes its own political demands. In a world where politics was equated with total domination, she looked to a conception of politics whose *raison d’être* is total freedom.

Arendt did not idealise the pariah as the cradle of a new universal class. When civilisation forces millions of people into ‘conditions of savages’, it may equally well produce new barbarians. People who have lost the rights and protection that nationality once gave them, may resort all the more desperately to nationalism; communal relationships built in the hope of preserving some ‘minimum of humanity in a world grown inhuman’ may generate a ‘worldlessness’ vulnerable to its own forms of barbarism. The capacity to judge what is right and wrong and act according to conscience are not the exclusive property of the oppressed minorities – witness the case of the German sergeant, Anton Schmidt, executed for helping Jews – but what makes this planet ‘a place fit for human habitation’, as Arendt saw it, is simply that there are always some people who will not comply with power even under conditions of terror.

Richard Bernstein points out that, while in *The Origins of Totalitarianism* Arendt did not

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80 Arendt, *Origins…* p.302


hesitate to write about human nature and its transformation, but that later in The Human Condition she repudiated the notion of human nature:

The human condition is not the same as human nature and the sum total of human activities and capabilities which correspond to the human condition does not constitute anything like human nature… The problem of human nature…. seems unanswerable… It is highly unlikely that we who can know, determine and define the natural essences of all things surrounding us… should ever be able to do the same for ourselves – this would be like jumping over our own shadows. … Nothing entitles us to assume that man has a nature or essence in the same sense as other things.”

Behind these words we may see Arendt’s abandonment of the consolation that there is ‘something deep down in human beings that will resist the totalitarian impulse to prove that “everything is possible”.’ The spectre that the organised attempt to ‘eradicate the concept of the human being’ might succeed haunted Arendt, but her work also expresses the conviction that in the modern age the idea of humanity has a persistence and a resistance that was in this instance able to stand up to the supreme example of destructive will. The endless activity of understanding which her work both defends and exemplifies is one crucial aspect of this persistent resistance.


84 Bernstein, p. 146.