**The Phantom of Theology: Arendt on Judgment and Evil**

Let me begin by saying that if we are discussing in this conference “investment in the world,” an intellectual focus on the world, then Hannah Arendt’s postwar writings should be considered as a representative example. There are scholarly takes on Arendt that accentuate her being a kind of torchbearer for “pro-cosmic” love of the world, or for the “secular” turn towards the worldly. Peter Gordon called this orientation her “non-metaphysical account of the public world.” However, I, and presumably many others in this room, share an interest in weighing Arendt’s investment in the world against her constant engagement with theology. Today, I want to explore two interrelated areas of Arendt’s thought that demonstrate such secular-theological relations. The first is Arendt’s discussion of “the problem of evil” which I would like to associate with Arendt’s response to Gnostic dualism. The second is Arendt’s unfinished theory of judgment and how its sources can be traced to Roman immanent theology – a theology that Arendt declared lost for modernity.

(1) Let me open by exploring Arendt’s engagement with the concept of evil. In 1945, no doubt profoundly shaken by the horrors of Nazism, Arendt proclaimed that “the problem of evil will be the fundamental question of postwar intellectual life in Europe.” One could fairly say that this “problem” was at the root of her work in the 1950s and 1960s which included her examinations of totalitarianism and anti-Semitism and various political writings. Over these two decades, there was a clear shift in Arendt’s treatment of evil, from a focus on “radical” or “absolute” evil to her later analysis of how evil can be “banal.” It is hard to imagine a term more associated with Arendt and the controversies surrounding her work, than the “banality of evil.”

To illustrate this shift, in her book “The Burden of Our Time” (published in 1951), Arendt speaks of “unpunishable, unforgivable, **absolute evil** which could no longer be understood and explained by the evil motives of self-interest, greed, covetousness, resentment, lust for power, and cowardice.” Here, she is expanding rather loosely on Kant’s concept of absolute evil (representing for Kant a transcendental condition, for any deviation (*Abweichung*) from the moral law), by making absolute evil a force in action. As such a force, it relates to what Arendt terms “the demonic” which “transcends the realm of human affairs and the potentialities of human power,” destroying both whenever it appears. Absolute evil is therefore a potency that is separated not only from human “evil motives” but also from human explanation, or at least from the possibility of being explained from a human standpoint.

A decade later, nonetheless, Arendt writes of evil as “banal”, a treatment that culminated in a famed passage from *Eichmann in Jerusalem* that I want to read for you:

“He [Eichmann] was not stupid. It was sheer thoughtlessness—something by no means identical with stupidity—that predisposed him to become one of the greatest criminals of that period. And if this is ‘**banal’** and even funny, if with the best will in the world*,* one cannot extract any **diabolical** or **demonic** profundity from Eichmann, that is still far from calling it commonplace.”

Here Arendt clearly contrasts between banal and “diabolical or demonic” evil. “The very phrase: ‘banality of evil,’” Arendt wrote to her friend Mary McCarthy, “stands in contrast to the phrase I used in the totalitarianism book, ‘radical evil’.” Banal evil is a human deficiency – in Eichman’s case, thoughtlessness – which for Arendt marks the inability to take other human beings into consideration; radical evil, in contrast, is an out-of-this-world, transcendent, “diabolic” or “demonic” force, beyond anything human. This distinction may provide an insight into what Arendt meant when she wrote later that the banality of evil provided her with the answer to the question of how to address “the problem of evil in an entirely secular setting.”[[1]](#footnote-1) The banalization of evil is also its secularization – it is understood as a human failure to take other human beings into consideration and not as a transcendent power. This secular turn points, I believe, to a retreat from metaphysical dualism. Arendt’s conception of radical evil as a transcendent out-of-this-world potency sets up a stark division between a diabolic force and its opposite immanent domain. Radical evil, according to Arendt, is an absolute power that is distinct from the world in which humans live; the two are not only completely separated and in opposition to one another but the former destroys the latter when it is manifest. Arendt’s retreat from radical to banal evil is a withdrawal from asserting the existence of an absolute, transcendent force and as such, from a metaphysical dualism of transcendence and immanence.

It is worth recalling here Adolf von Harnack’s pointing to a type of dualism that holds to “polar opposites that are the moving forces in the world,” that Harnack associated, in particular in his book on *Marcion*, with Gnostic theology.[[2]](#footnote-2) Building on Harnack, we can conceive of Arendt’s radical evil as an evil force that resembles the Demiurge, the traditional Gnostic counterpart of the loving benevolent God. Karl Jaspers, from whom Arendt adopted the phrase “banality of evil”, makes the case rather clearly. In his letter (1963) to Arendt concerning her controversy with Gershom Scholem surrounding the publication of *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, he wrote: “Now you have delivered the crucial word against ‘radical evil,’ and the gnosis!” The banality of evil, Jaspers argues, is an attempt to overcome the Gnostic element that is central not only to modernity in general but also to the modern Jewish political experience in particular.

Jaspers's observation also points to how Arendt’s discussion of evil relates to the postwar intellectual re-engagement with Gnostic theology. Especially in the 1950s and 1960s Gnostic dualism and its relation to modernity was addressed in the writings of scholars like Hans Blumenberg, Eric Voegelin, Hans Jonas, and Gershom Scholem (the last two already began taking an interest in Gnosticism in the 1920s and 1930s). I cannot describe in full these different scholarly takes on Gnosticism, and how they relate to each other. But I do want to suggest considering Arendt’s turn against “demonic” evil as her way into the discussion, and especially into the possibility of “overcoming” Gnosticism. Arendt’s claim that evil has no “diabolical or demonic profundity”, or that there is “nothing demonic” about it suggests an approach that eschews the Gnostic inheritance that still reverberates in modernity, and offers an antidote to its possible political implications.

In this sense, Arendt provides an argument not against theology in general but against a particular theological approach that takes the notion of transcendence so radically as to represent an area that is hidden from the world and alien to it. Harnack’s Marcion – which I mentioned briefly above – turns to Gnosticism to liberate Christianity from a crisis; Arendt’s re-conceptualization of evil offers to liberate modernity from such a theology of liberation. Arendt’s project, however, comes with a twist because she does not understand metaphysical as the dissociation between an alien benevolent God, and an evil world, but rather, inversely, between an estranged demiurgic power, and the world of human beings. One can perhaps speak here of an inverse Gnosticism, demonstrating also the elasticity of the concept of gnosis that this generation of scholars used in different and at times contradictory ways.

(2) I turn now to Arendt’s theory of judgment. Taking Arendt’s response to Gnosticism into account, the opposite of evil is not good but judgment – the human capacity to tell “right from wrong, beautiful from ugly.” Arendt planned a full engagement with judgment in her last work (*The Life of the Mind*), which she never completed. Although it remains unfinished, some of the key elements of Arendt’s theory of judgment appear in her earlier works. Her definition of judgment is derived from Kant’s discussion of aesthetics in the *Critique of Judgment*. For Arendt, the faculty of judgment relates to our “enlarged mentality.” which she understands as our ability to take other human beings, other perspectives, and the very existence of others into consideration. If evil stands for the inability to think from the other’s point of view – the type of thoughtlessness that she ascribed to Eichmann’s criminality – then judgment is its exact opposite, representing the capacity to take other people, viewpoints, and existences into account. In judging in this manner, we experience what she calls “being among men [sic.]” This being characterizes political actors and provides them with the basis for their decisions on how to perform in the public sphere. (I set aside, for this discussion, the question of whether Arendt has a unified theory or two different theories of judgment – one for political actors and another for a remote observer). Being among humans (I have adjusted the term for our ears), is an experience inherent to judgments involving the human faculty to be intimate with and to take into consideration the existence of other human beings, their different viewpoints, possibilities, and perspectives. It includes everything that relates to the recognition that we share the world with others with whom we are deeply connected.

I would like to “zoom-in,” on Arendt’s association between our capacity to judge and “being among” humans. In this idea of togetherness, Arendt discloses the Roman theological sources of her thinking. First, Arendt’s idiom “being among men” is of Roman origin. It recalls the Roman “*inter hominem esse,*” which according to Arendt defined the political sphere for the Romans. Second, this Roman idea is anchored in the Roman theological imagination. Arendt describes the Roman experience of divine revelation – what she calls “the immediate revealed presence of the gods” – as that which provides the basis for such togetherness. Revelation means a formative moment of “the initial getting together” involving divine presence and presenting “an authentic and undisputable experience common to all.” For the Romans, this was the sacred moment of the “absolute new beginning,” originating in the approval of the gods who “gave Romulus the authority to found the city.” This foundation “was religious, for the city also offered the gods of the people a permanent home.” Arendt concluded that within this Roman political theology, all generations are bound by this “sacred” moment of revelation because they see themselves—or must see themselves— reflected in it as if they too were present in the formative experience.

I tend to agree with the argument made by others (Sam Moyn comes to mind) that it is possible to identify in these passages a mixture of Roman and Jewish sources of Arendt’s thought. I offer this option for discussion because the idea that all generations must see themselves reflected in a “sacred” experience of revelation, as if they too were present in the formative event is also a well-known rabbinic idea (בכל דור ודור חייב אדם לראות את עצמו כאילו הוא יצא ממצריים (משנה, פסחים י, ה). This dual inspiration might be also true of Arendt’s image of handing down from one generation to another that which was revealed in a mythic and binding moment of revelation, providing all generations with a shared political foundation. The idea that the Jewish polity was established at Sinai, an idea that Paul Franks, for example, has discussed at length, can be understood as bringing the two sources of Arendt’s thought together. We can conceive of Arendt as bringing Jewish traditional concepts to bear on her analysis of Roman theology, as the basis for her conceptualization of judgment for political actors. In doing so, a tradition about Jewish nationhood was endowed with a universal meaning, shifting the discussion from the specific Jewish context to the theater of politics in general. We can also perhaps see this as a case of a “hidden tradition,” a concept of Arendt ascribed to Jewish history, that can be applied to Arendt’ thought as well.

Arendt’s reworking of these theological ideas is a particular case of a spiritual investment in the world in which a divine presence manifests in approval or disapproval of human actions, and conditions these actions. Arendt’s evocation of godly presence in the Roman sense is suggestive of an immanent theology wherein the divine is not external to the world but dwells in it, among the people. This type of theology, however, “does not announce the demise of the transcendence” (in Agata’s words), but rather delineates “new modes of being” for it, implying not the exorcising of the theological imagination, but rather its re-articulation.

What does it mean to rearticulate the theological imagination? I ask this final question because there is no doubt that this type of immanent theology that provided a basis for Arendt’s has disappeared from modern discourse. Especially in her political writings from the 1960s, Arendt argues that the Roman theology reverberated from Antiquity through Christianity into “wherever the pax Romana created Western civilization on Roman foundations” is lost for modernity and that the absence of this vital aspect is, for her, the “crisis of modernity.” Unfortunately, I have no time to discuss the role that Arendt ascribes to Augustine in this context – how for her, Augustine, the “greatest theorist of Christian politics,” is “still firmly rooted in the Roman tradition” and how the “Christian Augustine” can be fully grasped, only “if we take into account the ambiguity of his existence as both a Roman and a Christian.” The point that I do wish to note is that for Arendt, the Roman tradition that tacitly informed Augustine’s theology (“against his best wishes” as she puts it), and through it, Augustinian Christianity, has evaporated in the modern context, because of “the decline of Christian civilization.” Arendt, in a letter to Eric Voegelin, calls this decline “the framework within which the whole of modern history is played out.” Within this historical framework, Roman theology is lost for modernity, which means that we can no longer make sense of its categories and engage with them in a meaningful manner.

At the same time, it is this unavailable immanent theology that provides a basis for Arendt’s investment in the world – her turn against dualism, her focus on being with others (the so-called being at home in the world). Arendt appears to have reworked the theological categories that she declared lost. This can be described as the re-articulation of the theological imagination in the aftermath of its disappearance. This re-articulation highlights is not only the disappearance of theology from the modern world but also the possibility of holding on to what remains, after its disappearance.

That which remains after its disappearance is a phantom. I can think of no better metaphor to encapsulate Arendt’s holding on to a lost theology that cannot be held anymore. What is recovered is a theological investment in the world against the background of its ultimate evaporation. In such a creative theoretical scheme, one holds – or may hold – onto an unholdable theology, pointing perhaps not to a return to the idea of revelation but to the revealing of this idea as a source for society and politics.

1. Arendt’s letter to Kenneth Thompson of the Rockefeller Foundation from 1969. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Marcion, 12. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)