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

Let me start by saying that if we are indeed discussing in this conference an intellectual focus on the world – or an “investments in the world” – Hannah Arendt’s postwar writings should be considered as a representative example. There are, I think, enough scholarly takes of Arendt that accentuate her being a kind of a torchbearer of “pro-cosmic” love of the world, or of the “secular” turn towards the worldly – what Peter Gordon for example called her “non-metaphysical account of the public world.” However, what I, and I believe also many people in this room, share, is an interest in weighing this investment in the world against its constant engagement with theology. And what I would like to explore are two, I would argue interrelated, areas of Arendt’s thought that may demonstrate such secular-theological relation. The first is Arendt’s discussion of “the problem of evil” which I would like to associate with Arendt’s retort to gnostic dualism. The second is Arendt’s unfinished theory of judgment and the way in which it could be traced back to its sources in the Roman immanent theology – a theology that Arendt declared lost for modernity.

(1) I would like to open with exploring Arendt’s engagement with evil. In 1945, profoundly shaken, no doubt, by the horrors of Nazism, Arendt proclaimed that “the problem of evil will be the fundamental question of postwar intellectual life in Europe.” And one could fairly say that this “problem” underlay much of her investigations in the 1950s and 1960s —from her examination of totalitarianism and anti-Semitism to her political writings. Yet, over the course of these two decades, Arendt’s treatment of evil was also dominated by a clear shift from a definition of evil as “radical” or “absolute” to her later claim that evil is “banal” – and I think it is hard to imagine a term that is more associated with Arendt, and with the controversies surrounding her work, than that of the “banality of evil.”

For example, 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 expands 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,” both of which it destroys whenever it appears. Absolute evil is therefore a potency that is separated not only from human “evil motives” but also from human explanation, or else from the possibility to explain such evil from a human standpoint.

A decade later, nonetheless, Arendt speaks – in contrast – of evil as “banal”, a concept that culminated in her the famed passage from her “Eichmann in Jerusalem.” Let me read the passage in full:

“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.”

Arendt clearly contrasts between banal and “diabolical or demonic” evil. “The very phrase: ‘banality of evil,’” Arendt writes to her friend Mary McCarthy, “stands in contrast to the phrase I used in the totalitarianism book, ‘radical evil’.” The contrast lies in that banal evil relates to a human deficiency – thoughtlessness – which for Arendt marks the inability to take other human beings into consideration; radical evil is articulated as a fully out-of-this-world, transcendent, “diabolic” or “demonic” force in action, beyond anything human. This distinction may provide an insight into what Arendt may have meant when she wrote retrospectively that banality of evil provided her with the answer to the question how to address “the problem of evil in an entirely secular setting.”[[1]](#footnote-1) A banalization of evil marks also its secularization because it is understood as a human failure to take other human beings into consideration (and not a transcendent power). But such a secular turn points, I think, specifically to a retreat from metaphysical dualism. To speak of radical evil as a transcendent out-of-this-world potency, is for Arendt to hold to a stark division between a diabolic force and its opposite immanent domain. In the idea of radical evil, Arendt identifies a clear divide between an absolute power and the world in which humans live, not only because the two are completely separated and put in opposition but also since the former destroys the latter when put into action. What could be, then, suggested is that Arendt’s retreat – from radical to banal evil – implies not only a withdrawal from asserting an existence of an absolute, transcendent force, but from holding to a dualism between transcendence and immanence.

There is a good reason to recall here Adolf von Harnack’s pointing to a type of dualism that holds to “polar opposites that are the moving forces in the world,” and that Harnack associated, in particular in his book on *Marcion*, with Gnostic theology.[[2]](#footnote-2) And if to build on Harnack, what Arendt takes issue with is an evil force that resembles the power of a 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 clear. In his letter (1963) to Arendt concerning her controversy with Gershom Scholem surrounding the publication of her Eichmann in Jerusalem, he stated: “Now you have delivered the crucial word against ‘radical evil,’ and the gnosis!” Banality of evil, so Jaspers’ argument goes, aims at overcoming the gnostic element that is central not only to modernity in general but also to the modern Jewish political experience in particular.

To some extent, Jaspers observation also points to the manner in which 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 gnosis in the 1920s and 1930s). I cannot describe in full these different scholarly takes on gnosis, and the manner in which they relate to each other. But I do want to suggest to consider Arendt’s turn against “demonic” evil as her way into the discussion, and especially into the possibility to “overcome” Gnosticism. For Arendt, to claim that evil has no “diabolical or demonic profundity”, or that there is “nothing demonic” about it, is to suggest an approach that eschew the gnostic inheritance that still reverberates in modernity, and that 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. So, if Harnack’s Marcion – which I mentioned briefly above – turns to Gnosis in order to liberate Christianity from a crisis, Arendt’s re-conceptualization of evil offers to liberate modernity from such a theology of liberation. This, however, with a certain twist, because Arendt does not take metaphysical dualism to represent a clear 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, at times contradicting, ways.

(2) I turn now to discuss Arendt’s theory of judgment. Taking Arendt’s response to Gnosticism into account, the opposite of evil is not good but judgement – 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. Her theory of judgment remained thus unfinished. Nonetheless, in some of her preceding publications she had already presented some of its key elements. First, that her definition of judgment is born out of Kant’s discussion of aesthetics in his *Critique of Judgment*. Second, that due to its sources in Kant’s discussion, such a faculty for her relates to our “enlarged mentality”, which Arendt understands as our ability to take other human beings, other perspectives, and indeed the very existence of others into consideration. Thus, if evil stands for the inability to think from the view point of others – the type of thoughtlessness that she ascribed to Eichmann’s criminality – judgment is the exact opposite, representing the capacity of taking other people, other viewpoints, other existences into account. What Arendt then determines is that in passing judgment we experience what she calls our “being among men [sic.]” Such a being characterizes political actors and provides them with the basis for their decisions how to perform in the public sphere. (I set aside, for the purpose of this discussion, the question whether Arendt has two different theories of judgment - one relating to political actors and the other to a remote observer - or whether she has a unified one). The being among humans, which is an experience inherent to judgments, points to a human faculty to be intimate with and to take into consideration the existence of other human beings, other viewpoints, other possibilities, different perspectives, indeed, all that relates to a recognizing that we share the world with others to whom we are deeply connected.

I would like to “zoom-in,” on Arendt’s association between our capacity to judge and the “being among” humans. Especially in this idea of togetherness, Arendt discloses the Roman theological sources of her thinking. First, Arendt’s idiom “being among men” is for her of Roman origin. It reposes on the Roman “*inter hominem esse*”, which according to Arendt defines also for the Romans the political sphere. Second, this Roman idea is anchored in theological imagination. Arendt speaks particularly of the Roman religious experience of divine revelation – what she calls “the immediate revealed presence of the gods” – that provides the basis for such a togetherness. Revelation means a formative moment of “the initial getting together” that involved divine presence and that presented “an authentic and undisputable experience common to all.” This was for the Romans the sacred moment of the “absolute new beginning”, originating in the approval of the gods who “gave Romulus the authority to found the city.” Such a foundation “was religious, for the city also offered the gods of the people a permanent home.” Arendt then concludes 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 (Sam Moyn comes here to mind) that it is possible to identify, for example 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 simile (בכל דור ודור חייב אדם לראות את עצמו כאילו הוא יצא ממצריים (משנה, פסחים י, ה). This might be also true of Arendt’s image of the 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 it was a Jewish polity that was established at Sinai, an idea that Paul Franks for example discusses in length, could be considered as bringing the two sources of Arendt’s thought together. Arendt, one could argue, takes Jewish traditional concepts to bear on her analysis of Roman theology, that serves in turn as a basis for her own conceptualization of judgment and of political actors. With this approach in mind, the plot that related to Jewish history is endowed with a universal meaning, shifting the discussion from the specific Jewish context to the general political theater, but also showing, perhaps, a possible way to think of the manner in which the concept of “hidden tradition”, that Arendt ascribed to Jewish history, may be applied to Arendt as well.

Arendt reworking of these theological ideas seems to point to a particular case of a spiritual investment in the world in which there is a divine presence manifested in an approval or disapproval of human actions, and conditioning these actions. When she speaks of godly presence in the Roman sense, she is then suggestive of an immanent theology taking what is transcendent and divine, to dwell in the world, among the people, rather than being external to it. Such a theology, however, “does not announce the demise of the transcendence” (in Agata’s words), but rather delineate its “new modes of being”, implying not the exorcising of a theological imagination, but rather its rearticulating.

What does it mean to rearticulate such a theological imagination? I ask this final question because there is no doubt that for Arendt the type of immanent theology that provides her worldliness with a basis, disappeared from the modern theatre. The argument that Arendt puts on display especially in her political writings from the 1960s is that the Roman theology, that reverberated from Antiquity over Christianity into “wherever the pax Romana created Western civilization on Roman foundations” is lost for modernity and that this is a vital aspect in what is for her the “crisis of modernity.” Unfortunately, I have no time to discuss at this point 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 Augustine Christianity, evaporated in the modern context, because of “the decline of Christian civilization” – a decline which Arendt, in a letter to Eric Voegelin, calls “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 Arendt’s investment in the world – her turn against dualism, her focus on the being with others (the so called being at home in the world) – with a basis. Arendt seems to rework the theological categories that she declares lost. We are dealing here with a rearticulating of a theological imagination in the aftermath of its disappearance. In such a compound manner what is highlighted is not only the disappearance of theology from the modern theater but also the possibility of holding to what is remained, after its full withdrawal.

That which remains after its disappearance is a phantom. I can think of no better metaphor to encapsulate Arendt’s holding to a lost organ of 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)