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EVIL'S INSCRUTABILITY
IN ARENDT AND LEVINAS[1]

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Since 2001, quite a few volumes in Continental philosophy have been dedicated to the topic of evil. Most of these works make reference to the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks.[2] In these studies, the terms "evil" and "terrorism" imply one another, suggesting that the epitome of evil in the 21st century is found in the terrorist acts committed by Islamist[3] groups. Although some reject defining terrorism as evil[4], the common tendency has been to use these terms in conjunction. Observing the parallelism drawn between the terms "evil" and "terrorism" in the Continental literature on evil, my contention is that this parallelism is connected to the idea that evil is an inscrutable phenomenon.[5]

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2. Some of the most well-known works published since 2001 that refer to 9/11 are as follows: Alan D. SCHRIFT (ed.) *Modernity and the Problem of Evil*, Bloomington IN, Indiana University Press, 2005; Susan NEIMAN, *Evil in Modern Thought: An Alternative History of Philosophy*, Princeton NJ, Princeton University Press, 2002; Richard J. BERNSTEIN, *Radical Evil: A Philosophical Interrogation*, Malden MA, Blackwell, 2002; Peter DEWS, *The Idea of Evil*, Malden MA, Blackwell, 2008.

3. The term "Islamist," as opposed to "Islamic," has been suggested as a more appropriate term for identifying agents who engage in terrorist violence in the name of Islam, as it refers to "a political ideology that strives to derive legitimacy from Islam." See Soner CAGAPTAY, "'Islamist' or 'Islamic'? The Difference is Huge," *The Washington Institute,* July 11, 2016, http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/islamist-or-islamic-the-difference-is-huge.

4. See Terry EAGLETON, *An Essay on Evil*, New Haven CT, Yale University Press, 2010, p. 159.

5. In the mainstream interpretation, Islamist terrorists are depicted as inscrutable, in the sense of being devoid of rational motives. As cultural anthropologist Talal Asad puts it, "their motives are unexpressed" (*On Suicide Bombing*, New York NY, Columbia University Press, 2007, p. 30). Similarly, scholar Marie Breen Smyth suggests that there is "a climate where comprehensive processes of 'othering' and demonizing the 'terrorist' […] subject" occurs, which then hides the political motivation of these groups" ("Subjectivities, 'suspect communities,' governments, and the ethics of research on 'terrorism'" in Richard JACKSON, Marie BREEN SMYTH and Jeroen GUNNING (eds.), *Critical Terrorism Studies: A New Research Agenda*, New York NY, Routledge, 2009, p.195. Furthermore, Başak Ertür notes that the process of "becoming a terrorist" is

Continental scholars have suggested that we are forced to rethink the category of evil as we face acts of terrorism on a global scale. In light of this suggestion, this paper traces the idea of the "inscrutability of evil" as a common, yet overlooked theme in Continental philosophy. This idea finds its first modern formulation in Kant's theory of radical evil. Here, I argue that Hannah Arendt and Emmanuel Levinas follow Kant in identifying evil as an inscrutable phenomenon. Discerning this theme in their accounts is significant because it underscores that Levinas and Arendt rely on the framework of Kant's theory of evil, despite the fact that they wish to distance themselves from it. And more importantly, we must attend to evil's inscrutability, which I argue is a shared theme in Kant's, Levinas' and Arendt's approaches, because it continues to dominate our approach to the question of evil today, and, I think, occludes our thinking, in particular with respect to the phenomenon of global terrorism.

My aim, then, is to reorient Continental scholarship on evil by showing that Kant, Arendt and Levinas all appeal to its inscrutability[6], although their accounts of why evil is inscrutable differ considerably. Although Arendt's interpretation of Kant's notion of radical evil has been a point of dispute among critics[7], none of the critics have focused upon inscrutability as the common element in Arendt's and Kant's accounts of evil.[8] Neither have critics underscored inscrutability as a shared marker of evil in Levinas' and Kant's accounts. While all three thinkers agree that evil cannot be rationalized, integrated into reason, or understood within the framework of a theodicy, for Kant evil is inscrutable because it is grounded in freedom. For Arendt, evil is

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explained away with the term "radicalization," a process which does not disclose the extremely violent social, historical, and geographical contexts within which this radicalization is fostered. She states, "the mainstream institutional approach to "explaining" terrorism has also shifted in the fifteen years […] after 2004 the concept of "radicalization" began to have currency in policy-making and policing, first in the UK, and soon after in the US. […] the notion of radicalization is based on the assumption that terrorists come from a wider milieu of non-violent extremism, and that a combination of individual psychological circumstances, and theological and ideological indoctrination turns some extremists into terrorists." (Başak ERTÜR, "The Onus of Thought in the War on Terror," *Theory & Event*, 20 (2017), p. 70.

6. I focus on the concept of inscrutability as well as relevant senses associated with this term, such as the incomprehensible, inexpressible, and unaccountable.

7. For Arendt's interpretation of Kant's notion of radical evil, see Hannah ARENDT, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, New York NY, Harcourt Press – Brace & Co., 1951, p. 459. The most well-known criticism of Arendt has been offered by Henry Allison. See Henry E. ALLISON, "Reflections on the Banality of (Radical) Evil: A Kantian Analysis," in Maria Pia LARA (ed.), *Rethinking Evil,* New York NY, Columbia University Press, 2007. Richard Bernstein notes Arendt's critical relation to Kant on the question of evil; see Richard BERNSTEIN, "Arendt: Radical Evil and the Banality of Evil," in *Radical Evil: A Philosophical Interrogation*, Malden MA, Polity Press, 2002, p. 208, see also p. 214.

8. Although Bernstein does not suggest evil's inscrutability as a common theme in Kant's, Arendt's and Levinas' approaches, he does underline "inscrutability" and "incomprehensibility" in his analyses of their accounts. See Richard BERNSTEIN, *Radical Evil: A Philosophical Interrogation*, p. 12, see also pp. 44-45 and p. 175.

inscrutable because it is "banal." And for Levinas, evil is inscrutable because it is "excessive" and "useless." My analysis demonstrates that inscrutability is an essential marker of the concept of evil, since it is found in all three accounts as a feature of evil, regardless of the fact that in each account a different type of evil is at stake (moral, political and existential, respectively).

Although they have strikingly different philosophical approaches, both Arendt and Levinas discuss evil's inscrutability within the context of the Holocaust. Arendt locates evil as a profoundly political issue, whereas for Levinas it is at the very core of existence. In distinction from both, Kant speaks of evil as a moral issue–as a problem of how an individual must and must not act. The Kantian doctrine of radical evil, considered on its own, does not provide us with the intellectual tools to grasp the emergence of evil actions in the social sphere because Kant limits the discussion of evil to the adoption of maxims by the individual.[9] To put it differently, the question of how the individual is politically motivated to engage in evil actions is not addressed in the doctrine of radical evil, because Kant identifies evil as an innate propensity of the human species.

Regardless of their difference from Kant, I argue that Arendt's identification of Nazi evil as banal (i.e., without depth; spreading like a "fungus"[10]) and Levinas' description of evil as useless (through his notion of "useless suffering"[11]) are both developed in the trajectory of thought facilitated by Kant's doctrine of radical evil. This trajectory is marked by two aspects: evil's non-theological nature and its inscrutability.

There is general agreement that Kant's theory of evil is significant because it departs from previous theorizations of evil, which confine it to theodicy. I begin by reviewing Kant's doctrine of radical evil as the first modern account in which the question of evil is treated beyond theodicy. Having outlined how Kant's account of evil moves beyond theodicy, I then go on to suggest that Kant's doctrine of radical evil, and his ethical commitments in general,

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9. Although in isolation Kant's doctrine of radical evil limits the discussion of evil to the individual, there have been attempts to connect the doctrine of radical evil to Kant's anthropological writings, as suggested by Allen Wood, Philip Rossi and Sharen Anderson-Gold. These efforts have successfully shown that the doctrine of radical evil is supported by Kant's notion of "unsocial sociability" (i.e., the antagonistic tendencies of the individual within his/her social world). To follow this discussion further, see Allen Wood, *Kant's Ethical Thought,* Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1999, pp. 286-291; Philip Rossi, *The Social Authority of Reason: Kant's Critique, Radical Evil, and the Destiny of Humankind*, Albany NY, SUNY Press, 2005, pp. 77-79; Sharon Anderson-Gold, "God and Community: An Inquiry into the Religious Implications of the Highest Good," in Philip Rossi, and Michael J. Wreen (eds.), *Kant's Philosophy of Religion Reconsidered*, Bloomington IN: Indiana University Press, 1991 (referenced by Allen Wood in *Kant's Ethical Thought*, p. 287, n. 8).

10. Hannah Arendt, *Jew as Pariah: Jewish Identity and Politics in the Modern Age*, New York NY, Grove Press, 1978, p. 251.

11. Emmanuel Levinas, "Useless Suffering." *Entre Nous. Essays on Thinking-of-the-Other*, trans. Michael B. Smith and Barbara Harshav, New York NY, Continuum, 2006.

constitute the most decisive theoretical grounds for Arendt's and Levinas' rethinking of evil. Both philosophers follow Kant in locating evil beyond theodicy. However, unlike Kant, they emphasize its political, existential and "useless" nature. According to Levinas, the philosophy of Hitlerism is the political foundation of an evil that is "useless." Similarly, for Arendt, the totalitarian nature of Nazi rule has no utilitarian purpose for the suffering that it causes. For both thinkers, then, what characterizes the nature of Nazi evil is its non-pragmatic essence, and this is the sense in which Levinas calls evil "excessive" and Arendt calls it "unprecedented."

Kant's doctrine of radical evil and evil's inscrutability

Kant scholarship is replete with endless debates as to what Kant means by radical evil, i.e., "the propensity towards evil in human nature." My interpretation does not focus on these debates. Rather, my aim is to highlight two points that are central to my argument: Kant's notion of radical evil situates evil beyond theodicy and it grounds the source of evil in a maxim (i.e., in human freedom). The substance of his claim that evil is an inscrutable phenomenon is contained in the move beyond theodicy and Kant's identification of the source of evil in a maxim.

Kant's notion of radical evil has puzzled many of his critics since it first appeared on the pages of *Berlinische Monatsschrift* in 1792. His contemporaries interpreted Kant's account as a reconfiguration of the doctrine of original sin. According to this view, Kant compromised his critical philosophy in order to maintain a source of evil within human nature. However, a close look at *Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone* reveals that Kant's notion of radical evil is not a return to the doctrine of original sin. In fact, it is a direct challenge to the doctrine of original sin, insofar as he wishes to think evil within the boundaries of reason. With the notion of radical evil, Kant attempts to think evil beyond "the problem of evil," challenging the accounts of theodicy. In the *Religion,* to oppose the idea that original sin is the source of moral evil, Kant proposes situating the origin of moral evil neither in time nor in an event, but rather in relation to reason.[12] What this means is that moral evil will be considered as an effect, the cause of which will depend on the laws of freedom. Kant considers freedom of choice to be the ultimate cause that makes possible the existence of both good and evil. According to Kant, the predicates "good" and "evil" are not ascribed to people on the basis of experience, but rather on the basis of maxims – those subjective principles upon which one determines

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12. Immanuel KANT, *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason and Other Writings*, ed. and trans. Allen WOOD, George di GIOVANNI, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2009, 6:42-43. Hereafter cited as *Religion*.

one's freedom of choice (*Willkür*). Hence, what makes someone evil is not the performance of evil actions, but rather her maxims.

Kant coins the term "radical evil" to refer to a propensity towards evil. To be more exact, it is the adjective "radical" that signifies this common propensity in human nature. Hence, the adjective "radical" does not refer to evil's magnitude, to its intensity, or to its extremity. Rather, as Henry Allison suggests, it refers to "the root or ground of the very possibility of all moral evil."[13] In other words, all evils committed by humans are enabled by this propensity. Evil is radical only in the sense of its commonality; that all humans have an inherent propensity towards it. Furthermore, what makes someone evil is not the performance of evil actions, as I have stated above. Kant writes, "the judgment that an agent is an evil human being cannot reliably be based on experience."[14] And he continues, "we call a human being evil, however, not because he performs actions that are evil (contrary to law), but because these are so constituted that they allow the inference of evil maxims in him."[15]

According to Kant, then, a person is evil because she adopts evil maxims. Evil maxims are those maxims that incorporate subjective incentives rather than the objective incentive of the moral law. As Gordon E. Michalson argues, "the distilled product of moral evil resides in the form of a maxim, the evil itself is a property of the act of the will that freely subordinates one incentive to another, the moral to the sensuous."[16] The crucial point here is that the adoption of the evil maxim is not grounded in experience. Kant writes in the *Religion*:

> In order, then, to call a human being evil, it must be possible to infer *a priori* from a number of consciously evil actions […] an underlying evil maxim, and, from this, the presence in the subject of a common ground, itself a maxim, of all particular morally evil maxims.[17]

This common ground is what Kant identifies as "the propensity to evil in human nature." This ground is inferred from the adoption of evil maxims and is itself a maxim. This inference of an evil maxim underlying other evil maxims shows, according to Kant, the human propensity towards evil. As a result, Kant stresses that we have a propensity to adopt maxims that are immoral. Here, with the concept of "propensity," Kant wishes to underline that although this inclination towards choosing immoral maxims is natural (or innate), it

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13. Henry ALLISON, *Kant's Theory of Freedom*, New York NY, Cambridge University Press, 1990, p. 147.
14. Immanuel KANT, *Religion*, 6:20.
15. *Ibid.*
16. Gordon E. MICHALSON, "The Inscrutability of Moral Evil in Kant," *The Thomist*, 51 (1987), pp. 246-269 (p. 250).
17. Immanuel KANT, *Religion*, 6:20.

can be understood as "brought by the human being upon himself."[18] How can there be a natural propensity to evil in humans and at the same time free choice to commit evil? As many have suggested, this perplexity lies at the heart of the Kantian notion of radical evil, and is inherently connected to Kant's understanding of human freedom.

On this point, Kantian scholarship has offered diverging interpretations. Critics such as Bernstein and Michalson suggest that Kant does not offer an explanation as to *why* evil exists, which ultimately renders evil an inscrutable phenomenon.[19] On a different note, Allen Wood suggests that Kant's doctrine of radical evil should be read as part of his Anthropology. In his suggestion, Wood is accompanied by scholars Philip Rossi[20] and Sharon Anderson-Gold, who consider the notion of radical evil to be linked to the idea of the progress of humanity.[21]

In his doctrine, Kant identifies three types of radical evil.[22] The upshot of Kant's argument about the three types of evil is that his doctrine of radical evil contains no idea of a diabolical will (wanting evil for its own sake).[23] Kant writes,

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18. Having a "propensity" to evil means according to Kant the following: "It is distinguished from a disposition in that a propensity can indeed be innate yet *may* be represented as not being as such: it can rather be thought of […] (if evil) as *brought* by the human being *upon* himself." (*Religion*, 6:29)

19. My reading of Kant's radical evil is very much in line with that of Michalson and Bernstein, who ultimately argue that it is the attempt to ground evil in the free choice of the will (i.e., freely choosing an evil maxim) that makes evil inscrutable according to Kant. For their discussion, see Gordon E. MICHALSON, "The Inscrutability of Moral Evil in Kant" and Richard BERNSTEIN, "Radical Evil: Kant at War with Himself," in *Radical Evil: A Philosophical Interrogation*, pp. 11-45.

20. Philip Rossi (*The Social Authority of Reason: Kant's Critique, Radical Evil, and the Destiny of Humankind*, Albany NY, SUNY Press, 2005, p. 79) reads Kant's doctrine of radical evil together with "Idea for a Universal History from a Cosmopolitan Point of View," where Kant discusses antagonism ("unsociable sociability") as a necessary element for the progress of humanity. Rossi writes that "unsociable sociability is an integral element in the completion of his account of radical evil in human life. It functions as the condition for actualizing the human propensity to evil."

21. Allen WOOD, *Kant's Ethical Thought*, p. 288.

22. The first type is referred to as "frailty" and it is the condition in which the subjective incentive is stronger than the objective one, even though the objective incentive is rationally understood to be desirable. This is a case in which the subjective incentive overpowers the objective incentive, yet the author of the act is aware of this weakness. The second type of evil is called "impurity." This is when the objective incentive is not adopted for its own sake, but is supported based on a subjective incentive – for example, when we help someone in order to feel good about ourselves. The third type of evil is called "corruption or perversity." This happens when the ordering of the incentives is reversed – namely, when the moral incentive is not given priority in determining the character of the maxims. For Kant's discussion, see *Religion* 6:29-31.

23. Wood generally agrees with Allison and others on this point. However, he also suggests that there is a situation that is close to "doing evil for evil's sake." In the case of the third type of radical evil (namely, corruption), if "someone chooses to disobey the moral law simply because they know that obeying it is what they ought to do," this, according to Wood, could be considered an instance of doing evil for its own sake (Allen WOOD, "Kant and the Intelligibility of

> Whenever we therefore say, "The human being is by nature good," or, "He is by nature evil," this only means that he holds within himself a first ground (*to us inscrutable*) [emphasis added] for the adoption of good or evil (unlawful) maxims [...].[24]

In a footnote to this passage, Kant further explains what he means by the terms "ground" and "inscrutable." Ground, in this context, is a maxim; it is the first adopted evil maxim, and in being so, it expresses the *propensity to evil in human nature*. Kant calls this first evil maxim the ground because it implies the possibility of adopting other evil maxims. That is to say, it is not a ground because it generates a maxim. Rather, it is a ground whose very existence informs us that the adoption of further evil maxims is possible:

> That the first subjective ground of the adoption of moral maxims is *inscrutable* [emphasis added] can be seen provisionally from this: Since the adoption is free, its ground (i.e., why I have adopted an evil maxim and not a good one instead) must not be sought in any incentive of nature, but always again in a maxim [...] without ever being able to come to the first ground.[25]

As this passage suggests, the adoption of the first evil maxim is inscrutable because it is the result of an act of freedom. Furthermore, this ground is a freely adopted maxim, and therefore cannot be explained with respect to any incentive of nature. Hence, the first evil maxim is *presupposed* rather than explained. The consequence of Kant's argument is that evil is inscrutable because evil is grounded in freedom of choice.[26] The implication of this for his morality is that the moral law has to be articulated as a categorical imperative precisely because humans have this natural propensity to evil.

In the following section, I turn to Arendt's reflections on evil with a focus on her two notions of evil (i.e., radical evil and banality of evil). As will become clear, Arendt's notion of radical evil is a direct response to Kant's. Arendt is critical of Kant for not articulating an adequate account of evil to capture politically motivated evildoing. Taking this task upon herself, Arendt's theoretical move will be to coin the term "banality of evil." By way of this term, Arendt moves the category of evil away from morality to situate it within the realm of politics. With this move, I argue, her remarks about evil formulate a distinct and peculiar new ontology of evil. This new ontology departs from that of Kant's in that rather than viewing evil as a positive phenomenon like

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Evil," in Sharon Anderson-Gold and Pablo Muchnik (eds.), *Kant's Anatomy of Evil*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2014, p. 155.

24. Immanuel Kant, *Religion*, 6:21.

25. Immanuel Kant, *Religion*, 6:21 ft.

26. For an in-depth analysis of the inscrutability of evil in Kant, see Allen W. Wood, "Kant and the Intelligibility of Evil"; Gordon E. Michalson, "The Inscrutability of Moral Evil in Kant"; Richard Bernstein, "Radical Evil: Kant at War with Himself."

the Kantian "propensity to evil," Arendt defines evil as a suffering from lack of being and depth.

The ontology of Arendt's conception of evil

We have seen that Kant's concept of evil locates it in a maxim, and in doing so, approaches evil as a moral phenomenon. I now turn to Arendt's conception of evil, which politicizes it and understands it not as a positive propensity, but rather as an ontological lack. According to Richard Bernstein, "Arendt (like Levinas) believes that the evil burst forth in the Nazi period indicates a *rupture* [emphasis added] with tradition, and reveals the inadequacy of traditional accounts of morals and ethics to deal with evil."[27] Traditional theories of evil cannot effectively account for the evil committed during the Holocaust because they regard evil either as a theological or a moral issue. Bernstein, following Arendt, contends that old accounts of evil cannot be deployed to make sense of this new form of evil. My argument concerns how Arendt articulates this new form of evil through her concept of banality of evil. This notion, I argue, presents a new ontology of evil. I begin my reflections by discussing the link between Arendt's notions of radical evil and banality of evil.

It has been widely noted that Hannah Arendt is the first Continental philosopher to explicitly raise the question of evil to a strictly political level. With Arendt's forceful remarks in the *The Origins of Totalitarianism*[28] and *Eichmann in Jerusalem,* the question of evil rapidly becomes, for her, one of social criticism and political philosophy. Yet there is still a controversy in Arendt scholarship as to the relation between her earlier conception of "radical evil" in *The Origins* (1951) and her later formulation of the "banality of evil" in *Eichmann in Jerusalem* (1963).[29] Henry Allison's 1996 essay discusses Arendt's usage of these two terms (radical evil and banality of evil) and offers a comparative reading with Kant's radical evil.[30] Allison argues that Arendt's notions of banality of evil and radical evil are very different, even contrastable. To

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27. Richard BERNSTEIN, "Levinas: Evil and the Temptation of Theodicy," in *Radical Evil*, p. 168.

28. Hereafter cited as *Origins*.

29. The controversy regarding Arendt's notions of "radical evil" and "banality of evil" has been underscored by the following scholars: Peg BIRMINGHAM, "Holes of Oblivion: The Banality of Radical Evil," *Hypatia*, 18 (2003), p. 81; Berel LANG, "Hannah Arendt and the Politics of Evil," in Lewis P. HINCHMAN and Sandra K. HINCHMAN (eds.), *Hannah Arendt Critical Essays*, Albany NY, SUNY Press, 1994, p. 44; Adi OPHIR, "Between Eichmann and Kant: Thinking on Evil after Arendt" *History and Memory*, 8 (1996), p. 89; Seyla BENHABIB, "Arendt's *Eichmann in Jerusalem*," in *Cambridge Companion to Hannah Arendt*, in Dana VILLA (ed.), Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2001, p. 74; Henry E. ALLISON, "Reflections on the Banality of (Radical) Evil: A Kantian Analysis," in Maria Pia LARA (ed.), *Rethinking Evil: Contemporary Perspectives*, Berkeley CA, University of California Press, 2001.

30. Henry E. ALLISON, "Reflections on the Banality of (Radical) Evil: A Kantian Analysis."

develop his argument, Allison's essay begins with a quote by Arendt from her letter to Gershom Scholem in July 24, 1963:

> It is indeed my opinion now that evil is never "radical," that it is only extreme, and that *it possesses neither depth nor any demonic dimension* [emphasis added]. It can over-grow and lay waste the whole world precisely because *it spreads like a fungus on the surface* [emphasis added]. It is *"thought-defying,"* [emphasis added] as I said because thought tries to reach some depth, to go to the roots, and the moment it concerns itself with evil, it is frustrated because *there is nothing* [emphasis added]. That is its "banality." Only the good has depth and can be radical.[31]

According to Allison, "Arendt is here [in the above passage] contrasting her post-Eichmann view of evil with that of her earlier work, *The Origins*."[32] In contrast to Allison, I argue that there is a continuity between these two formulations of evil, and that, furthermore, the inscrutable nature of evil is manifested in Arendt's reflections on the banality of evil. I first examine her notions of radical evil and banality of evil, and then return to the above passage to stress my earlier point about Arendt's new ontology of evil. I conclude that it is within this new ontology of evil that evil gains an inscrutable character for Arendt.

In *Origins,* Arendt systematically traces the socio-historical emergence of the conditions of Nazi horror and its political implications. Towards the end, under the section entitled "Total Domination," Arendt criticizes the Western philosophical tradition, Kant included, for failing to provide an adequate understanding of "radical evil":

> It is inherent in our entire philosophical tradition that we cannot conceive of a 'radical evil,' and this is true for both Christian theology […], as well as for Kant, the only philosopher who, in the word he coined for it, at least must have suspected the existence of *this evil* [emphasis added] even though he immediately rationalized it in the concept of a "perverted ill will" that could be explained by comprehensible motives. Therefore, we actually have nothing to fall back on in order to understand a phenomenon that nevertheless confronts us with its overpowering reality and breaks down all standards we know. There is only one thing that seems to be discernible: we may say that radical evil has emerged in connection with a system in which all men have become equally superfluous.[33]

Here, by "radical evil," Arendt means evil that is political in nature and is "unprecedented," exemplified by systematic mass killings and new techniques of killing that are developed and organized by a nation-state. It is *this phenomenon* that has been unknown before. With the term "radical evil," we are

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31. Hannah ARENDT, *Jew as Pariah*, pp. 250-251.
32. Henry E. ALLISON, "Reflections on the Banality of (Radical) Evil: A Kantian Analysis," p. 86.
33. Hannah ARENDT, *Origins*, p. 459.

not in the realm of moral evil, but rather that of political evil. Yet only the former has been the concern of the Western philosophical tradition, as she concludes above. For such evil to be committed on a "gigantic scale," it must be state-administered, but there is no previous account of evil that addresses the state as the originator of evil. Hence, Arendt is criticizing the tradition for its lack of political accounts of evil.[34]

With regard to the passage above, Allison suggests that Arendt misunderstands Kant's notion of radical evil. He implies that she is not justified in her criticism of Kant because she misinterprets Kant's radical evil as referring to a "deeply rooted demonic evil."[35] Yet nowhere in her corpus has Arendt ever suggested that Nazi evil had a "demonic" nature. Quite to the contrary, she insisted that it "could not be traced to any particularity of wickedness, pathology."[36] It appears that Allison's above misreading of Arendt issues from his commitment to distinguishing what he identifies as "Arendt's earlier and post-Eichmann views of evil," as if these two are entirely different conceptions of evil. This becomes clear with Allison's further suggestion that, despite Arendt's misreading of Kant's notion of radical evil, Kant's notion of radical evil is similar to Arendt's notion of the banality of evil, because both Kant and Arendt *reject* the idea that evildoing is related to the possession of a demonic nature.[37] Allison assumes that Arendt entirely changed her views about evil when she attended the trial of Adolf Eichmann. In distinction to Allison, I think that with the term "banality of evil," Arendt emphasizes the conditions

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34. We could pause here and ask whether the Holocaust was "unprecedented," as Arendt claims. And if it was unprecedented, can Arendt blame Kant for not providing an adequate account? Or rather, was the Holocaust an intensified version of old forms of evil-doing, but now taking place at the heart of Europe, effectively put into practice with the scientific racism of the day, which had been previously developed to maintain and support the ideological basis of the Transatlantic slave trade and other colonialist endeavours? There is common agreement that the discourses and practices of anti-Semitism, which were at the core of the genocidal act, were already part of the governing ideologies of Europe, centuries before the Nazis came to power. In addition, German rulers had already practiced the extermination of the Herero people in South West Africa at the beginning of the 20th century. Furthermore, as Eric Weitz notes, "German military and civilian officials supported the Young Turk government and, thereby, became complicit in the Armenian Genocide." Cf. Eric D. WEITZ, "Germany and the Young Turks," in *A Question of Genocide: Armenians and Turks at the End of the Ottoman Empire*, in Ronald Grigor SUNY, Fatma Müge GÖÇEK, Norman M. NAIMARK (eds.), Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2011, pp. 196-197. I think all of the above suggest a continuity and not a rupture in politically and ideologically motivated evildoing. Perhaps the continuity is highlighted most significantly by Hitler's famous remark, "who still talks nowadays about the extermination of the Armenians?"

35. Henry ALLISON, "Reflections on The Banality of (Radical) Evil: A Kantian Analysis," p. 87.

36. Hannah ARENDT, "Thinking and Moral Considerations," in *Responsibility and Judgment*, New York NY, Schocken Books, 2003, p. 159. Originally published in 1971.

37. Henry ALLISON, "Reflections on The Banality of (Radical) Evil: A Kantian Analysis," p. 87.

of emergence (at the individual level) of the radical evil she identifies as Nazi totalitarianism. And I contend that Arendt's point with regard to Kant is accurate insofar as she wants to underscore the trajectory of thought within which Kant's ideas about evil operate. Kant does not consider the concept of evil to have any political implications, at least within the scope of his doctrine of radical evil.

According to Arendt in the *Origins*, Nazi evil is radical in the sense of its "unprecedented" nature. It was unknown to us in two senses. First, this evil involved total domination, and was enabled by the technology of the concentration camps, the gas chambers and all the methods used to render man "superfluous." According to Arendt, there were three steps to rendering man superfluous, which required total domination. In the attempt to achieve total domination, the Nazi government first attacked "the juridical person." This meant that the rapid criminalization of Jews and other victims was followed by deprivation of rights. The second step was to kill "the moral person," referring to the fact that Nazis specifically aimed at corrupting solidarity among the inmates.[38] The third step was to kill "the individuality of the person." On this point, Arendt writes, "once the moral person has been killed, the one thing that still prevents men from being made into living corpses is the differentiation of the individual, his unique identity."[39] Stripping individuals of their spontaneity was possible only by means of total domination, and the Nazis' supreme political principle aimed at precisely that. Total domination was the inevitable result of Nazi rule and was only possible by making all complicit in the crime:

> Through the creation of conditions under which conscience ceases to be adequate and to do good becomes utterly impossible, the consciously organized complicity of all men in the crimes of totalitarian regimes is extended to the victims and thus made really total.[40]

The second sense in which the evil of the Nazi regime was unprecedented was in its "non-appearance" as evil. At the time of these "crimes against humanity," the German people were not able to identify "the evil" that was taking place. This was again, according to Arendt, the effect of total domination, the end result of which was the creation of a social world where people never realized what they were doing.[41] I think this is the point at which Arendt's notions of radical evil and banality of evil merge.

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38. Hannah ARENDT, *Origins*, p. 452.
39. Hannah ARENDT, *Origins*, p. 453.
40. Hannah ARENDT, *Origins*, p. 452.
41. Hannah ARENDT, *Eichmann in Jerusalem, A Report on the Banality of Evil*, New York NY, Penguin Books, 2006, p. 288.

It is the appearance of some *radical evil, previously unknown to us* [emphasis added], […] the realization that something seems to be involved in modern politics that actually should never be involved in politics […], namely, all or *nothing* [emphasis added].[42]

It was this "nothing" at which the Nazis aimed, according to Arendt. And again it was this "nothing" that prevented the evil of the Nazi regime from appearing to the German public as "evil." This point about "nothing" brings us to the discussion of Arendt's new ontology of evil. Arendt stresses the ontologically negative nature of evil in her later writings. In 1963, in the book based on her report on Adolf Eichmann's trial in Jerusalem, Arendt for the first time suggests the term "banality of evil."[43] Here, she clearly indicates that banality of evil refers to a phenomenon:

When I speak of the banality of evil, I do so only on the strictly factual level, pointing to a phenomenon which stared one in the face at the trial. […] It was sheer *thoughtlessness* [emphasis added] – something by no means identical with stupidity – that predisposed him to become one of the greatest criminals of that period.[44]

The phenomenon which she uncovers is Adolf Eichmann, who is a paradigmatic example of a person who cannot distinguish right from wrong.[45] Arendt contends that "he [Eichmann] had no motives at all"; in fact, he "never realized what he was doing."[46] This testifies to his "sheer thoughtlessness"[47]. Faced with Eichmann's disposition during his trial, Arendt sees a "quite authentic inability to think," proposing that the nature of Eichmann's evildoing was "banal."[48]

In *Origins*, Arendt had identified the total domination of Nazi rule as "radical" evil. Attending Eichmann's trial in Jerusalem, she observed that such a domination produced subjects whose evil was "banal," i.e., "without depth." Arendt highlights this point in her 1971 essay, "Thinking and Moral Considerations":

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42. Hannah ARENDT, *Origins*, p. 443.

43. However, long before Arendt formulated her notion of the banality of evil in the 1963 publication, it had first been suggested by Karl Jaspers in his October 19, 1946 letter to Arendt. In the letter, Jaspers writes: "It seems to me that we have to see these things in their total *banality* [emphasis added], in their prosaic triviality, because that's what truly characterizes them. Bacteria can cause epidemics that wipe out nations, but they remain merely bacteria." *Hannah Arendt - Karl Jaspers: Correspondence 1926-1969*, ed. Lotte KOHLER and Jans SANER, trans. Robert and Rita KIMBER, New York NY, Harcourt Brace, 1992, p. 62.

44. Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, p. 287.

45. Seyla Benhabib suggests that "Eichmann becomes for her a paradigm case": "Arendt's *Eichmann in Jerusalem*," in Dana VILLA (ed.), *Cambridge Companion to Hannah Arendt*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2001, p. 68.

46. Hannah ARENDT, *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, p. 287.

47. *Ibid*.

48. Hannah ARENDT, "Thinking and Moral Considerations," p. 159.

Some years ago, reporting the trial of Eichmann in Jerusalem, I spoke of "the banality of evil" and meant with this no theory or doctrine but something quite factual, the phenomenon of evil deeds, committed on a gigantic scale, which could not be traced to any particularity of wickedness, pathology, or ideological conviction in the doer, whose only personal distinction was a perhaps *extraordinary shallowness* [emphasis added].[49]

As we can see above, with the notion of banality of evil, Arendt wants to stress that this evil "committed on a gigantic scale" cannot be traced back to the intentions of the individual. It is this point that she communicates when she writes, "[h]owever monstrous the deeds were, the doer [Eichmann] was neither monstrous nor demonic."[50] On this point, Berel Lang rightly claims that Arendt's notion of the banality of evil captures a "new *kind* of evil-doer."[51] This new kind of evil-doer is the production of a new form of political life, namely, totalitarianism. The implication of Lang's interpretation is that we need to think of forms of evil as productions of certain ideologies and of politics.[52] In other words, "banality of evil" is a phrase for understanding how one could take part in the production of evil on a gigantic scale by participating in a social rule that is robustly totalitarian.

Now, let's turn back to the first quote that I referred to at the very beginning of my discussion of Arendt:

[E]vil […] *possesses neither depth nor any demonic dimension* [emphasis added]. It can over-grow and lay waste the whole world precisely because *it spreads like a fungus* [emphasis added]. It is *"thought-defying,"* [emphasis added] as I said because […] the moment it [thought] concerns itself with evil, it is frustrated because *there is nothing* [emphasis added]. That is its "banality." [53]

In this passage, Arendt explicitly concludes that evil is inscrutable. This new evil is inscrutable because it cannot be traced back to a cause within the subject, nor does it have a being of its own. It presents *a fungus-like behavior*, which feeds off of and destroys the living organism to which it is attached. Nazi evil "spread[s] like a fungus," this is why it is "extreme" yet without any depth, and whenever thought tries to engage with this evil there is "nothing" to grasp. In this depiction of evil, wherein "banality" refers to a "lack of depth," we can clearly detect *a peculiar and new ontology of evil*. Arendt's reading of Eichmann underscores this *fungus-like behavior*, a man "whose only personal

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49. *Ibid.*

50. *Ibid.*

51. Berel Lang, "Hannah Arendt and the Politics of Evil," p. 49 (emphasis not mine).

52. According to this logic, then, the phenomenon of Islamist terrorism should force us to devise another kind of concept or notion (that is to say, an intellectual toolkit) that can capture the kind of evil these horrific acts present.

53. Hannah Arendt, *Jew as Pariah*, pp. 250-251.

distinction was perhaps *extraordinary shallowness*."[54] It is this lack of depth that turned him into one of the worst war criminals of the 20th century.

Charles Mathewes suggests that Arendt's analysis of Eichmann brings her close to the Augustinian conception of evil as privation.[55] I agree that Arendt's emphasis on the negative character of evil is Augustinian.[56] It is precisely this negative ontology of evil, articulated through the concept of banality of evil, that underlies the difference between Arendt's and Kant's formulations. As we have seen above, Kant does not understand evil negatively, but rather positively – through the affirmation of a propensity to evil in human nature.

My discussion of Arendt's criticism of Kantian radical evil was partially oriented by a polemical engagement with Allison's essay. This polemic allowed me to clarify the distinction between Arendt's and Kant's notions of radical evil. And moreover, it facilitated my argument concerning the banality of evil, as a more in-depth analysis of the operation of radical evil at the level of the individual.

In the beginning of this section, I mentioned Bernstein's claim that the Holocaust constitutes a rupture in the thinking of evil for both Levinas and Arendt. I demonstrated that this rupture, for Arendt, is the result of a "new kind of evil-doer" and implies a new ontology of evil. Levinas addresses the same phenomenon (Nazi evil) with a different terminology and methodology. His phenomenological and existential analysis of the suffering body marks both his engagement with the question of evil and his difference from Arendt.

The experience of evil: Levinas' existential and phenomenological approach

We have seen from our previous discussion that Kant wishes to think the question of evil non-theologically. With a similar gesture, Levinas insists on locating the question beyond the paradigm of theodicy. In this section, I argue that Levinas follows Kant in formulating an understanding of evil that is at once inscrutable and rejects theodicy. Yet unlike both Kant and Arendt, his

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54. Hannah Arendt, "Thinking and Moral Considerations," p. 159.

55. Charles Mathewes' study *Evil and the Augustinian Tradition* focuses on Arendt, whose treatment of evil, he argues, falls within the Augustinian tradition. According to Mathewes, "Arendt's work on totalitarianism and 'the banality of evil' develops an Augustinian account of evil as privation […]" (p. 7). Mathewes further argues that Arendt follows Augustine in claiming that "evil is nothing precisely because it is wholly negative, a self-annihilating vacuum […]." (p. 151) Arendt's depiction of Eichmann is her way of suggesting that evil is merely a defect. According to Mathewes, "her claim that Eichmann's evil is banal implied simply that Eichmann's shallowness was as deep as evil could go" (p. 168): cf. Charles MATHEWES, *Evil and the Augustinian Tradition*, New York NY, Cambridge University Press, 2001.

56. The scope of this article does not allow me to further elaborate the Augustinian roots of Arendt's notion of banality of evil. Though, I should note that my interpretation is very much influenced by Mathewes' above-mentioned study.

approach to evil is robustly phenomenological and existential. As we shall see, Levinas is concerned with the question of evil at the level of existence, and here, the notion of "suffering" is key. It addresses physical evil experienced at the level of the body.

Reading Paul Davies' article, "Sincerity and the end of theodicy"[57], one is assured that a comparative reading of Kant and Levinas is a favorable path for situating Levinas' ethical project. Davies clearly shows that Levinas' notion of "responsibility, always asymmetrically and sincerely *for the other* [emphasis in original], belongs to the analysis of an affectivity that contrasts sharply and deliberately with that of [Kantian] respect."[58] Kant and Levinas differ in their formulations of how one becomes an ethical self; for Kant it is an active and willful endeavor, whereas for Levinas, becoming responsible for the other is not determined by my decision. Levinas writes, "the responsibility for the other cannot have begun in my commitment, in my decision."[59] My analysis below will develop out of the assessment of Levinas' ethical project as a reflection upon and a response to Kant's moral philosophy.

I agree with Paul Davies' suggestion that Levinas offers a "polemical engagement with Kant," where the latter situates ethical responsibility in one's respect for the moral law, grounded in an autonomous being, who is fully *active* in her appropriation of the moral law; whereas for the former, it is *passivity* that signifies my relationship with the other. I suggest that we can nevertheless detect three fundamental themes that Levinas' ethical theorization shares with Kant's. These themes are as follows: 1) the rejection of theodicy; 2) the ethics of transcendence; and 3) the inscrutable character of evil.[60]

Following from these common themes, Levinas and Kant formulate an understanding of evil that is, on the one hand, inscrutable, and, on the other, rejects theodicy. Leaving aside the diverging formation of ethical subjectivity in Kant and Levinas that Davies rightly identifies, it should be noted that both

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57. Paul Davies, "Sincerity and the end of theodicy: three remarks on Levinas and Kant," in Simon Critchley and Robert Bernasconi (eds.), *Cambridge Companion to Levinas,* Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2004.

58. Paul Davies, "Sincerity and the end of theodicy," p. 163. Peter Dews also offers a comparative analysis that underscores the similarities and differences of Levinas' and Kant's ethical projects ("Levinas: Ethics *à l'Outrance,"* in *The Idea of Evil,* pp. 160-179). In particular, the issue of transcendence, namely, the requirement that my relationship to the other must transcend all determinations of the social sphere, is at the core of both theories of ethics.

59. Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise Than Being or Beyond Essence*, trans. Alphonso Lingis, Pittsburgh PA, Duquesne University Press, 1998, p. 10.

60. For the purposes of my argument, I focus only on the first and the third points. The second point would require me to offer an analysis of Kant's ethical theory beginning from his earlier writings. The necessity of the categorical imperative for Kant's morality, which gives it its transcendent character, is explicitly articulated in the *Groundwork*. Similarly, the central role of transcendence in Levinasian ethics is articulated in *Totality and Infinity* and *Otherwise than Being*, the discussion of which would exceed the scope of this paper.

philosophers project these two characteristics (i.e., the inscrutability of evil and the rejection of theodicy) in the service of their radical ethics.

In the scholarship there is agreement that Levinas' philosophical oeuvre can be read as a response to evil.[61] I consider the following four texts as essential for understanding Levinas' approach to the question of evil: "Reflections on the Philosophy of Hitlerism"[62] (1934); *Existence and Existents*[63] (1947); "Transcendence and Evil" (1978); and "Useless Suffering," (1982).[64] Within these texts, three notions orient Levinas' discussion of evil: "elemental Evil," the "horror of being," and "useless suffering." I begin my exposition with "elemental Evil" and offer a reading that connects it with the other two terms.

"Elemental Evil" is the definitive term in Levinas' 1934 essay "Reflections." In fact, he states that the purpose of the essay is to express "elemental Evil," which he identifies with the horror of National Socialism. Here, the term "elemental" refers to the "elementary feelings" of blood and flesh. Hitlerism claims a re-appropriation of the realm of the body.[65] In the opposite direction, we find Western liberalism and Christian universalism residing within the same trajectory, one in which "man is absolutely free in his relations with the world"[66], as opposed to the philosophy of Hitlerism in which man is "chained to his body, […] refusing the power to escape from himself."[67] Hence, Hitlerism pits communal "fate" against the "freedom" of spirit. According to Levinas, in calling for "rootedness" in facticity, Hitlerism denies "freedom," "infinity" and "transcendence," and this is the point that brings together the philosophies of Heidegger and Hitlerism. For Levinas, Heideggerian ontology is an "ontology of a being concerned with being."[68] As we shall see shortly, in contrast to Heidegger, Levinas wishes to articulate "the Being independent of beings," through his notion of "there is" ("il y a").

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61. Richard Bᴇʀɴsᴛᴇɪɴ, "Levinas: Evil and The Temptation of Theodicy," p. 167; Simona Fᴏʀᴛɪ, *New Demons Rethinking Power and Evil Today*, trans. Zakiya Hᴀɴᴀꜰɪ, Standford CA, Standford University Press, 2014, p. 109. Howard Caygill suggests that the "revenge of evil" is central to the project of *Totality and Infinity*: cf. Howard Cᴀʏɢɪʟʟ, *Levinas and the Political*, New York NY, Routledge, 2002, p. 98.

62. Emmanuel Lᴇᴠɪɴᴀs, "Reflections on the Philosophy of Hitlerism," *Critical Inquiry*, 17 (1990), pp. 63-71, hereafter cited as "Reflections." The publication years in brackets refer to the originals French texts.

63. Emmanuel Lᴇᴠɪɴᴀs, *Existence and Existents,* trans. Alphonso Lɪɴɢɪs, Pittsburgh PA, Duquesne University Press, 2001.

64. Emmanuel Lᴇᴠɪɴᴀs, "Transcendence and Evil," in *Collected Philosophical Papers*, trans. Alphonso Lɪɴɢɪs, Pittsburgh PA, Duquesne University Press, 1998, pp. 175-186.

65. Simon Critchley stresses that for Levinas, "National Socialism is a philosophy of the *elemental*": cf. "Levinas and Hitlerism," *Graduate Faculty Philosophy Journal*, 35 (2014), p. 227.

66. Emmanuel Lᴇᴠɪɴᴀs, "Reflections," p. 64.

67. Emmanuel Lᴇᴠɪɴᴀs, "Reflections," p. 70.

68. Emmanuel Lᴇᴠɪɴᴀs, "Reflections," p. 63. Robert Bernasconi clarifies what is at stake for Levinas in Heidegger's ontology. He writes, "whereas Heidegger had insisted that Being is always the Being of a being, Levinas sought access to Being independent of beings." (Foreword to Emmanuel Levinas, *Existence and Existents*, p. xi)

In "Reflections," Levinas writes, "man's essence no longer lies in freedom, but in a kind of bondage."[69] The racism of Hitlerism is constructed against the liberal ideal of the free spirit not bound by history and that which transcends the body. Levinas contends that "the importance attributed to this feeling for the body, with which the Western spirit has never wished to content itself, is at the basis of a new conception of man."[70] This new conception of man promised by Hitlerism projects itself through the communal bond of racial solidarity.

It is my contention that one can read Levinas' *Existence and Existents* as a phenomenological analysis of the "elemental Evil" that Levinas identified in the "Reflections." The central position of the body in Nazi ideology, in which the body understood as race is at the root of racial solidarity, gives way to racial purification, which then necessitates, according to Hitlerism, the elimination of the other's body. Hence, Nazi ideology targets the body of the Other. This is why, in each of his writings about evil, Levinas emphasizes that the experience of evil is an embodied experience. This is also the very point of *Existence and Existents.*

Levinas is very explicit about his criticism of Heideggerian ontology in the introduction to *Existence and Existents,* where he stresses that his aim is to challenge Heidegger for not recognizing the tragic aspect of existence, what Levinas here calls an "underlying evil in its very positivity."[71] Levinas' essay "Transcendence and Evil" makes a similar point, once again criticizing Heidegger.[72] Hence, these two texts also deal with the question of evil through an engagement with and criticism of Heideggerian ontology.

The concept that marks *Existence and Existents* is the "horror of being," or, as Levinas sometimes calls it, the "tragedy of existence." For Levinas, the tragedy of existence need not entail any diabolical element to be horrific; the tragedy of existence is testified to by the very struggle for life – in the Nazi camps. He writes, "already in what is called the struggle for life […] there is the objective of existence itself, bare existence […]."[73] I suffer when I am deprived of the needs required to satisfy my embodied life, when the mere fact of existence appears to be burdensome and horrific. In this text, Levinas mainly opposes the privileging of Dasein's neutral relation to the world – the fact that the world is not described as having impediments, horrors and evils, but rather one in which *Dasein* finds itself "free to choose" in caring for it or being absorbed in *idle talk*. Hence, Levinas' reflections here are "governed by

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69. Emmanuel Levinas, "Reflections," p. 69.

70. *Ibid.*

71. Emmanuel Levinas, *Existence and Existents*, trans. Alphonso Lingis, Pittsburgh PA, Duquesne University Press, 2001, p. 4.

72. Emmanuel Levinas, "Transcendence and Evil," in *Collected Philosophical Papers*, trans. Alphonso Lingis, Pittsburgh PA, Duquesne University Press, 1998, p. 178.

73. Emmanuel Levinas, *Existence and Existents*, p. 10.

a profound need to leave the climate of that [Heideggerian] philosophy."[74] Levinas sees in Heideggerian ontology no evil at the existential level.

Moreover, *Dasein*'s existence is personal; by contrast, for Levinas, existence is anonymous. It refers to the horizon at which I find my experience among others' experiences. Contra Heidegger, for whom *Dasein* is "in each case mine," for Levinas existence does not belong to the individual. Rather, Levinas describes a movement from the anonymity of "existence" (i.e., "the Being independent of beings," in other words, *there is* or *il y a*) to an "existent." He identifies this process as burdensome. The existence is not given, but is taken up by the existent, because it entails effort. While for Heidegger *Dasein*'s anxiety arises with respect to its own finitude, according to Levinas, existence itself is horrific and causes anxiety. Levinas writes, "*existence of itself* [emphasis added] harbors something tragic which is not only there because of its finitude."[75] Existence is tragic because one lives with a body that can suffer.

Levinas re-articulates this point in "Transcendence and Evil," where he states that "physical evil is the very depth of anxiety. [A]nxiety in its carnal severity, is the root of all social miseries, all human dereliction."[76] In contrast to Heidegger, for whom "the essential in anxiety" is *being towards death*, Levinas agrees with Philip Nemo about the "conjunction of evil and anxiety" conditioned by a bodily existence.[77] Evil shows itself in the form of bodily harm, damage and suffering and not necessarily in death. The tragedy of existence comes to the fore when to be is to suffer as body. This suffering is "excessive" according to Levinas. It is this very relation between bodily suffering and evil's excessive nature that orients Levinas' formulation of evil as an inscrutable experience.

In "Transcendence and Evil," Levinas stresses evil's inscrutability due to its excessive nature:

> In its malignancy as evil, evil is an excess. While the notion of excess evokes first the quantitative idea of intensity, of a degree surpassing measure, evil is an excess in its very quiddity. This notation is very important: evil is not an excess because suffering can be terrible, and go beyond the endurable. The break with the normal and the normative, with order, with synthesis, with the world already constitutes its qualitative essence. Suffering qua suffering is but a concrete and quasi-sensible manifestation of the non-integratable, the non-justifiable.[78]

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74. Emmanuel LEVINAS, *Existence and Existents*, p. 4.
75. Emmanuel LEVINAS, *Existence and Existents*, p. 5.
76. Emmanuel LEVINAS, "Transcendence and Evil," in *Collected Philosophical Papers*, trans. Alphonso LINGIS, Pittsburgh PA, Duquesne University Press, 1998, p. 179.
77. 77. *Ibid.*
78. Emmanuel LEVINAS, "Transcendence and Evil," p. 180. With respect to this passage, Bernstein underscores that it is this excessive nature of evil that makes it incomprehensible according to Levinas. My analysis agrees with Bernstein's on this point. However, he reads this incomprehensibility in connection with Kant's idea of the sublime and does not link it to the

As he suggests above, evil is excessive, but this does not refer to a quantitative measure. Evil is excessive not because there is *too much* bodily suffering. Here, the term excess designates "non-integratability" and "non-justifiability." This is the sense in which Levinas construes evil as an excess, and thereby, as an incomprehensible experience.

I would like to stress further evil's inscrutability in Levinas by focusing on the essay "Useless Suffering." This is Levinas' final text specifically on the question of evil. The text involves, on the one hand, a phenomenological analysis of suffering, and on the other, a critique of theodicy. With the term "useless evil," Levinas' intention is to offer a thinking of evil beyond theodicy, because according to Levinas, theodicy tames evil and makes it "integratable." He states: "Beliefs presupposed by Theodicy! That is the grand idea necessary to the inner peace of souls in our distressed world. It is called upon to make sufferings here below comprehensible."[79] According to Simona Forti, with the term "theodicy," Levinas explicitly refers to "the temptation to make the suffering of the innocent bearable by giving a meaning."[80] Against theodicy, Levinas coins the term "useless evil." Evil is "useless" in the sense that it is not a part of a greater whole. It is "the non-integratable" and "the non-justifiable," as the above quote from "Transcendence and Evil" suggests. Evil has no specific purpose; it is not accountable. Evil is found at the level of existence, which is always already bodily. It is the experience of the suffering body that turns one's existence into an "anonymous existence." When one suffers in the Nazi camps, one suffers not as an individual, as Arendt also states, but as a species, as a "living corpse." Hence, one suffers anonymously. Anonymity of suffering is anonymity of bodily presence.

Levinas' prior phenomenological analysis of suffering in *Existence and Existents* is key to understanding his analysis of "useless evil."[81] This analysis shows why he rejects the taming of evil by theodicy, since integration – the very aim of theodicy – does further injustice to the dead who are awaiting justice.[82] Hence, for Levinas, "useless evil" means "useless suffering," a suffering that cannot be integrated. In "Useless Suffering," the excess of suffering is described with the following words:

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inscrutable nature of radical evil: cf. Richard J. BERNSTEIN, "Levinas: Evil and The Temptation of Theodicy," p. 175.

79. Emmanuel LEVINAS, "Useless Suffering," in *Entre Nous*, trans. Michael B. SMITH and Barbara HARSHAV, New York NY, Continuum, 2006, p. 82.

80. Simona FORTI, *New Demons*, p. 110.

81. Here "useless" is used in the sense of not being oriented towards a purpose.

82. Howard Caygill expresses this point as follows: "The horror of *il y a* is intricately bound to haunting, to the dead who cannot be forgotten – *il y a* is the continual 'presence' of the murdered awaiting justice. The pressure of this responsibility lends urgency and rigour to the refusal of any ontology that would privilege the projects and the acts of the living." ("Levinas and the Political," p. 52)

an excess, an unwelcome superfluity, that is inscribed in a sensorial content, penetrating, as suffering, the dimensions of meaning that seem to open themselves to it, or become grafted onto it. […] It is as if suffering were not just a datum, […] but the way in which the refusal, opposing the assemblage of data into a meaningful whole, rejects it; at once what disturbs order and this disturbance itself.[83]

As the above passage suggests, suffering, although it presents itself as a "sensorial content," is a content that cannot be read just as a "datum." A datum makes sense; it is part of a larger whole. A datum gives meaning. In contrast, suffering is described as an intentionality, as a "way" of relating, which gains its meaning in refusal. Suffering refuses integration; it is both refusing something else and the act of refusing. Levinas defines suffering as an "excess." Later in the text, he also indicates that it is a "modality," a "passivity."[84] The passivity of suffering is what makes suffering evil.[85] In bodily suffering there is no "I" that can escape it. Suffering captures me as an anonymous being, because it reduces me to pure body, and this happens for no purpose, "for nothing" (this is its uselessness). Suffering is the passive experience of the "horror of being," when the body that is the cause of suffering chains me to an anonymous existence.

Levinas' phenomenological analysis of the "horror of being" and his concept of "useless suffering" attest to an ontology of evil where evil is not a lack of being, but rather an excess of being. This is what makes it beyond comprehension. Similarly, with Kant's notion of radical evil, evil is not a lack of being, but is positive in the sense that it refers to a propensity of human nature, and it is this propensity that makes it unaccountable. For both thinkers, then, evil has a positive ontological status and is inscrutable. Their point of divergence is that Levinas discusses evil's inscrutability within the context of the Holocaust. He focuses on the experience of evil from an existential and phenomenological point of view, whereas Kant speaks of evil as a moral issue. Nonetheless, both thinkers understood the phenomenon of evil as possessing a positive ontological status, which led them to formulate their ethical theories in such a radical fashion.

Conclusion

As I have shown above, each thinker means something quite different by inscrutability, while at the same time all agree that the phenomenon of evil is unaccountable and inscrutable. For Levinas, the excessive character of evil results from its "useless" nature; it is experienced as a non-integratable ele-

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83. Emmanuel LEVINAS, "Useless Suffering, p. 78.
84. Emmanuel LEVINAS, "Useless Suffering, p. 79.
85. *Ibid.*

ment. This point can also be found in *Origins* when Arendt refers to the pragmatic "uselessness" of the committed acts:

> The incredibility of the horrors is closely bound up with their economic uselessness. The Nazis carried this uselessness to the point of open anti-utility when in the midst of war, despite the shortage of building material and rolling stock, they set up enormous, costly extermination factories and transported millions of people back and forth.[86]

Arendt notes that it is precisely this "uselessness" that conditions total destruction and gives totalitarianism its essence.[87] It is important to note that by the term "uselessness," these thinkers do not mean "serving no purpose." Rather, they refer to a kind of evil that aims at total destruction and that cannot be rationalized away as a means to an end. The act of killing millions of people had no ulterior aim apart from their destruction; it was precisely their destruction that was the goal.

My discussion of Arendt and Levinas shows that their treatment of evil is nonetheless haunted by a trajectory of thinking that stresses the incomprehensible nature of evil. Although both thinkers orient our discussion of evil through an existential-political lens that transcends previous accounts of evil, the very vocabulary they use still expresses evil's inscrutability. Hence, I have demonstrated the continuity between Kant, Levinas and Arendt by focusing on the notion of evil's inscrutability, while at the same time underlining how Levinas and Arendt differ from Kant. For Levinas, evil is inscrutable because it refers to the excessive state of bodily suffering. As distinguished from this, Arendt's explanation of evil's inscrutability is linked to evil's lack of being because there is no-thing to comprehend.

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SUMMARY

Since 2001, Continental philosophical studies of evil suggest that we are forced to rethink the category of evil as we face acts of terrorism on a global scale. In light of this suggestion, this paper traces the idea of the "inscrutability of evil" as a common lens through which we associate the category of evil with the phenomena we identify as evil. This idea finds its first modern formulation in Kant's theory of radical evil. In this article, I argue that Hannah Arendt and

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86. Hannah ARENDT, *Origins,* p. 445.
87. Hannah ARENDT, *Origins,* p. 456.

Emmanuel Levinas follow Kant in identifying evil as an inscrutable phenomenon. While they all agree that evil cannot be rationalized, integrated into reason, or understood within the framework of a theodicy, for Kant, evil is inscrutable because it is grounded in freedom; for Arendt, evil is inscrutable because it is "banal;" and for Levinas, evil is inscrutable because it is "excessive" and "useless." My analysis demonstrates that inscrutability is an essential marker of the concept of evil, since it is found in all three accounts as a feature of evil, regardless of the fact that in each account a different type of evil is at stake (moral, political and existential).

SOMMAIRE

Depuis 2001, la réflexion philosophique continentale sur la question du mal met de l'avant l'idée que la confrontation à l'expérience répandue du terrorisme nous force à repenser la notion même du mal. Dans cette perspective, cet article scrute l'idée du caractère impénétrable du mal comme lentille commune à travers laquelle nous associons la notion du mal au phénomène que nous identifions comme tel. Cette idée a trouvé sa première formulation moderne chez Kant dans sa théorie du mal radical. Selon la perspective que je développe ici, Hannah Arendt et Emmanuel Levinas s'inscrivent dans la suite de Kant en identifiant le mal comme un phénomène impénétrable. S'ils s'entendent pour affirmer que le mal ne saurait être rationnalisé, soit en étant intégré du point de vue rationnel, soit en étant compris dans le cadre d'une théodicée, les trois rendent compte différemment de son caractère impénétrable : pour Kant, en tant que le mal s'enracine dans la liberté, pour Arendt en tant qu'il est "banal", pour Levinas en tant qu'il s'avère "excessif" et "inutile". Chez les trois cependant, le caractère énigmatique se présente comme une composante essentielle de la notion du mal, celui-ci étant envisagé dans chaque cas sous un angle différent, soit moral, soit politique, soit existentiel.