Defining Evil Away: Arendt's Forgiveness

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Abstract
Arendt claims that evil is banal and its perpetrators merely shallow. Deliberate evil she takes to be extremely rare. However, nonrare examples of deliberate evil, whose aim is to spoil one's story, abound in everyday life. Arendt also makes forgiveness personal, not requiring repentance. This prompts a consideration of certain personal relations among philosophers. Heidegger's relation to Husserl shows a betrayal of teacher by student. His seductive and philosophic power over Arendt, a betrayal of student by teacher, should not be dismissed in terms of reductive Freudian notions. Faced with a real feminine predicament, Arendt made the wrong choices: in her exoneration of Heidegger, her report on the Eichmann trial, and her exculpatory doctrine of evil.

The name of Hannah Arendt is indelibly linked with the explanation of evil. Arendt's most influential claims concerned the character of Adolf Eichmann, and the behavior of his victims. Of Eichmann, the Nazi official assigned to implement the Holocaust, she later recalled that his 'only personal distinction was a perhaps extraordinary shallowness … a curious, quite authentic inability to think.'[1] Her detailed contentions about Eichmann and his victims have been addressed in a previous work.[2] Here we want to look at her conclusions about the mind-set of the *génocidaire*.

The Eichmann trial was held in 1961. Arendt attended it and her *Eichmann in Jerusalem*: *A Report on the Banality of Evil*,[3] was the

[1] Hannah Arendt, 'Thinking and Moral Considerations' (1971) in J. Kohn (ed.) *Responsibility and Judgment* (New York: Schocken Books, 2003), 159.

[2] Abigail L. Rosenthal, *A Good Look at Evil* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1987), 163–80, 189–207. A relevant subsection, anthologized as 'The Right Way to Act: Indicting the Victims', can also be found in A. Rosenberg and G.E. Meyers (eds.) *Echoes from the Holocaust: Philosophical Reflections on a Dark Time* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1988), and R.S. Gottlieb (ed.) *Thinking the Unthinkable: Meanings of the Holocaust* (New York/Mahwah, N.J.: Paulist Press, 1990).

[3] Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (New York: Viking Press, 1964).

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expansion of her coverage of it in a five-part article for *The New Yorker Magazine*. But she brought to the Jerusalem courtroom conclusions about evil that she had published in *The Human Condition* by 1958, at least three years before she ever saw Eichmann in his bullet-proof glass cage.[4] Although the aphoristic style of *The Human Condition* is more erudite, vibrant and elegant than anything in experimental psychologists such as Philip Zimbardo or Stanley Milgram, its concept of evil may be assigned to the same behaviorist family of views.[5] By 1958, Arendt too had concluded that people do not deliberately choose to do monstrous deeds. They merely conform thoughtlessly to the conditions in which they find themselves, and the *results* can be monstrous.

Did she find any place for willful evil? Yes and no. She wrote that it can't be punished and can't be forgiven, since those correctives take place *within* the web of human relations – whereas deliberate evil destroys that web. Fortunately, she thought, evil of that stripe is very rare.[6] By analogy (not her analogy), meteors do occasionally hit the earth without disintegrating, but the prospect of one landing in the front yard need not trouble the prudent householder. For ordinary conceptual purposes, intentional evil can be put out of play. In a post-War letter to Karl Jaspers, she warned against attributing to the Nazis any 'satanic greatness', adding, 'We have to combat all impulses to mythologize the horrible … '.[7]

If willful evil was put out of play as early as Arendt's 1958 work, our normal human interactions still admitted many wrong turns or 'trespasses', each bearing its chain of ramifications. Relief from trespasses can be found, she wrote, in forgiveness. When it is invoked, human relations can begin again, with the offender released from the incalculable consequences of his act, which he did not know of

[4] Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958, Second Edition with an Introduction by Margaret Canovan, 1998).

[5] On the Yale electric shock experiments, see Stanley Milgram, *Obedience to Authority: An Experimental View* (New York: Harper & Row, 1974). On the Stanford Prison experiments, see Philip Zimbardo, *The Lucifer Effect: Understanding How Good People Turn Bad* (New York: Random House Trade Paperbacks, 2008).

[6] Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 240.

[7] Quoted in Daniel Maier-Katkin, *Stranger from Abroad: Hannah Arendt, Martin Heidegger, Friendship and Forgiveness* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 2010), 135. Maier-Katkin's source is *Hannah Arendt and Karl Jaspers, Correspondence, 1926–1969*, eds. Lotte Kohler and Hans Saner; tr. Kimber and Kimber (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1992).

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or intend. The pardoner forgives, not because the offender deserves to be forgiven, but because of *who* he is.[8]

Is this view right? Here we take a different view of deliberate evil. There is nothing in the concept of evil that determines its frequency. We have not found it especially rare, although of course it won't arrive wearing a signboard. It may be found in competition with a good life. It must be resisted if it is to remain visible *as evil* – and not just swallow up its victims. (From inside the belly of the whale, the one who has been swallowed can't see much.) Evil also works to render its resister imperceptible *qua resister*. To prevail, it must marshal resources equal or superior to those its resister enjoys.

To delineate these stratagems of evil is not to personify it. If one can trace the pathways of love, the way it has to go if it is to keep its character, one may do as much for evil. Likewise, one may view love either as a pathos, or as an active and discerning power. Both must be admitted to be real, if one is to take in features of the world of experience, rather than stipulate in advance that they can't be what they seem. By the same token, there is something to be seen when evil is viewed as a choice, which cannot be seen when it is treated as a mere weakness.

What resources has malevolence? The good life demands that one *hold on* to one's own narrative in its continuity. Malevolence must therefore summon distraction, misrepresentation, and obfuscation *of that very narrative*. These can be spread round as covert counter-narratives, compounded of half-truths and fictions. Obfuscations can be also be thrown directly into the face of the resister. There is *aggressive*, face-to-face disbelief – to which strong arm tactics are not extraneous, whether inside or outside the law. *Argumentum ad baculum* may be fallacious but it is highly persuasive. The aim of all this is to shake the resister's belief in his or her own story. One cannot resist one's detractors if one has joined them.

Here one must distinguish. Prosaic short-sightedness will declare that there is not – there never has been – such a thing as one's story. Short-sightedness can take the hyper-empiricist form that life itself must be episodic. I recall reading a paper on this subject at a university in the south of England. In the Q and A, a young philosophy student objected, 'I don't *have* a story.' Out of tact, I made no reply, but I thought, *I'd like to know the story behind your not having a story*.

[8] Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 240–43.

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By contrast, post-modernism has admitted plenty of stories, but on condition that they be received as near-fictions. The storyteller is deemed mostly unconscious of the repressed fact of the matter. When post-modernism was in flower in New York, I attended a conference on the art of memoir. One contributor described her own long, painstaking effort to piece together the clues that led her to her real father. Another described the torment of her divorce, a third the effects of childhood abuse. These writers strove to *tell true stories credibly*. That is just what people should maintain the ability to do. However, their task was not made easier by the stipulation beclouding the conference: that no first-person story can be true *as told*.

The denial that there is such a thing as one's story need not be taken personally. It can reflect an impersonal hypothesis about human life, entirely acceptable socially and intellectually when applied across the board. Although it is not correct, it is practically a commonplace. Malevolence on the other hand has this epistemological advantage: it *knows* that one's story is real. It *discerns* the connecting thread of one's life. It *picks up on* the meaning of one's history. Malevolence sets about deliberately to smother and erase all traces of it.

One's own story is not a pose. It does not crystallize by fiat. Its plot line is normally more visible in retrospect than in the heat of the present hour. Malevolence will work to thicken the fog. In the changing circumstances of one's life, one strives to pull together the evidence for one's defining aims – evidence that one can find none better, nor any better fitted to one's history and its resources – and that one's instruments will serve (or with modifications still serve) one's aims. Malice will hide or disguise the instruments, or report that they were dedicated to unworthy ends.

In sum, a good life unfolds beset by many obstacles. If, finally, experience should convince one to replace an original aim with a successor, then – *if one is to continue as oneself* – one will need to remember why that change was made, and how it can be integrated into one's unbroken story. One ought not to back down before the seeming fault lines. More than once, in fact again and again, one needs to find the heart for going on *as one's self*. Malevolence has its work already cut out: it seeks to *dis*hearten. Far from being all that rare, the deliberate dishearteners are in fact very common.

Clearly, they can include one's self. One can give in to a tempting but deflecting offer from without. Success may provide the setting

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for self-subversion, as readily as failure.[9] Fear is a common trigger. In her journal entry for April, 1925, Hannah Arendt at nineteen noted a 'sense of being hunted' (as indeed German Jews like her would be, eight years later), and the option disclosed by this inner crisis: either to 'learn patience and the simplicity and freedom of organic growth', or else 'to pursue her life in idle experiments and a curiosity without rights or foundation … '.[10] The dishearteners come in many guises. To hold on to the person one has been is a delicate business, and a tough one.

Deliberate evil has some peculiar and striking features, but it's not found in a dimension outside the normal metrics. It's not so rare that we are exempted from the task of keeping a weather eye on self and other for signs of it. Although it misrepresents the face and form of its victims, it is also disastrous to the one who has set aside his own story in order to be the spoiler of another's. Someone I once knew acted dishonorably in a public matter, and suffered no ill effects. In after years, he apparently lost his memory of the act and of the entire episode in which it was embedded. The whole thing simply disappeared into the oubliette. This seems astonishing, but it is not. Before he lost the memory – an important link in the narrative of himself – he had lost *the heart to remember*. Nevertheless, given our freedom to do evil deliberately, the will to remember misdeeds and remake ourselves must likewise be a possibility.

[9] The biographer of the theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who was martyred by the Hitler regime, reports, 'There were days when he was overcome by what he later called his "*accidie, tristitia*, with all its menacing consequences." … His own power to control and influence others shocked him.' Eberhand Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer: A Biography* tr. Mosbacherb, Ross, Clarke and Glen-Doepel (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1970; Minneapolis: Fortress Press 2000), 506. A different example of the self-subverting power of success is in E. M. Forster's charming *Room With A View*. Lucy, the novel's heroine, has finally succeeded in breaking off her engagement to a foppish young man. But she does so on a pretense and soon feels the captive of her pretense. 'It did not do to think, nor, for the matter of that to feel. She gave up trying to understand herself, and the vast armies of the benighted, who follow neither the heart nor the brain, and march to their destiny by catch-words.' *Room with a View*, (Cassia Press, 2009), 143.

[10] Arendt, 'Shadows', in Ursula Ludz (ed.), *Letters: 1925–1975, Hannah Arendt and Martin Heidegger* tr. Andrew Shields (New York: Harcourt Inc., 2004; *Briefe 1925–1975*, Frankfurt am Main: Vittorio Klostermann, 1998), 15f.

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In her late essays, Arendt will claim that being alone with oneself in the mode of 'thinking', which is the dialogue of oneself with oneself, is what exerts the moralizing pressure. Because of the mirroring doubleness of thinking, one says inwardly, *I can't do that because I couldn't live with the person who did it*. I can't look at a murderer, close up; I can't room with an embezzler, and so forth. What follows, for Arendt, is that the greatest evils are done by the hyper-ordinary people who refuse this two-in-oneness of inner dialogue. They let themselves collapse into mere one-level existence.[11] They fail to converse with themselves. They become ciphers, not persons. She deemed Eichmann 'banal' rather than willfully evil, because he showed no signs of this inner dialogue.

Did the person I mentioned, who had lost the memory of a dishonorable episode, belong in that category? Was he banal? Was his a case of arrested *thinking*? I think not. Certainly there was no memory loss while the episode was in play. In those days, he showed strategic cunning and triumphant laughter in the corridors of power. He did not quite win but, had he won, he might have been happy to live with the victor.

There is a host of counter-examples to Arendt's claim that the thinking person would not want to live with the wrong-doer who is himself. It takes as much thinking power to do effective harm to another, as it does to do good. The harm-doer must dispose of enough self-awareness to get his work done. He must know who he really is, how to play the part of someone he is not, and – like a hunter – he must know his prey.

To take another example: a friend of mine discovered that a respectable embezzler had expertly siphoned off his life savings. The predator had carried through his masquerade from the cover of a prestigious academic department. Eventually he went to jail for it, and later came out unimproved. My friend recalled that his despoiler had paid him a visit some weeks before the crime was discovered. Lying on a side table was a copy of my book, *A Good Look at Evil*. The secret embezzler paid me the compliment of picking it up and sitting down to read it with evident relish. My friend later came to think that he was having the rare pleasure of reading a portrayal of himself *as he looked to himself*.

If – despite Arendt – malevolence is neither rare nor the result of a refusal to think, what becomes of her view of forgiveness? The topic has religious overtones. Indeed, Arendt repeatedly enlists Jesus on

[11] Arendt, 'Some Questions of Moral Philosophy', (1965–66) in J. Kohn (ed.) *Responsibility and Judgment*, 90–97.

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the side of her own view, briskly bracketing out God from the carpenter's teaching on that subject. Although Jesus warns of an evil so bad that it were better for the doer if he had never been born,[12] that most extreme evil remains nameless and (Arendt continues to presume) very rare. Every other kind of evil seems in principle forgivable. Those who do it can't be *thinking*. Hence they know not what they do.

Arendt describes her candidate for forgiveness as someone who 'did not, and could not, have known what he was doing … Forgiving', she writes, 'and the relationship it establishes is always an eminently personal (though not necessarily individual or private) affair in which *what* was done is forgiven for the sake of *who* did it.'[13] This seems very pointed. Is she thinking of anyone in particular? Who is '*who*'?

Philosophy is also personal. Most of us who entered 'the profession' were moved thither by a teacher who modeled the work and the life of the philosopher for us. In Athens too, that's how it began. Or at least, it became intensely and dramatically interesting there because of three persons, linked one to the next as teacher to student, by filial piety and admiration: Socrates, Plato and Aristotle. Plato's dialogues are, among other things, an appeal in the court of public opinion on behalf of Socrates, 'the best man then living'[14] who'd been executed after an Athenian jury had convicted him of impiety. If the ideal aim of a speaker or writer is to merit immortal influence,[15] then Plato politicked immortally on behalf of the teacher his city had wronged. Aristotle studied in Plato's Academy, honed his own problematic against his teacher's, founded his own university and – where he felt compelled 'for the sake of maintaining the truth' to go beyond his teacher – wrote candidly, 'while both are dear, piety requires us to honour truth above our friends.'[16] Or as the proverb puts it, Plato is dear but truth is dearer.

In the twentieth century, philosophy on the European continent also had its founding triple lineage of men linked as teacher to student, intellectually and personally: Franz Brentano, Edmund Husserl, and Martin Heidegger. Of the influence of Brentano, who introduced the concept of intentionality into the study of

[12] Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 24l, and 'Some Questions of Moral Philosophy', op. cit. 73f, 125f.

[13] Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 237, 241.

[14] *Seventh Letter* 324.

[15] *Phaedrus* 277.

[16] *Nicomachean Ethics* 1096a.

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consciousness, Husserl wrote: 'It was from [Brentano's] lectures that I took the conviction which gave me the courage to choose philosophy as the vocation of my life …' At the University of Freiburg, where Husserl held the professorship, his young assistants included Heidegger, who dedicated *Being and Time* to his mentor, 'in friendship and admiration'.[17] The book was published in the *Jahrbuch für Philosophie and phånomenologische Forschung*, volume eight, of April 1927, which Husserl co-edited. Its publication was a crucial career stepping stone for Heidegger. When Husserl was about to retire, *Being and Time* made it possible for him to politick effectively to get the younger man named as his successor at Freiburg. Husserl said of Heidegger that he was 'predestined to be a philosopher of great stature, a leader far beyond the confusions and frailties of the present age.'[18]

But here, the analogies with philosophy's Athenian progenitors cease. In May 1, 1933, Heidegger joined the Nazi party. He stayed in the Party until 1945, when of course it ceased to exist because Germany had lost the War. On April 21, 1933, Heidegger was elected Rector of the University of Freiburg. 'Elected' is a euphemism. His predecessor, Wilhelm von Möllendorf, a respected professor of medicine, was ousted after serving but a few days in his post, under a hailstorm of accusations from Franz Kerber, the

[17] Herbert Spiegelberg, *The Phenomenological Movement: A Historical Introduction*, vol. one (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1960), 77, 277. Heidegger also claimed that Brentano's *The Manifold Meaning of Being*, given to him at the age of eighteen, significantly influenced his development as a philosopher. See Victor Farias, *Heidegger and Nazism* tr. Burrell and Ricci (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1989), 18.

[18] Maier-Katkin, *Stranger from Abroad* 67f. Husserl's crucial support for Heidegger in his previous appointment as associate professor at the university of Marburg is detailed in Farias, Heidegger and Nazism 57–60. With Husserl's backing as 'his most valuable assistant', Heidegger taught for five years at Marburg, starting in 1923. But not before 'the publication of *Being and Time* in Husserl's *Jahrbuch* in 1927 did the ministry agree to Heidegger's appointment [as associate professor].' When Heidegger left Marburg to take the professorship of philosophy at Freiburg, from which Husserl had just retired, the Marburg faculty pressed him to stay. 'The principal argument he gave was that his master, Husserl, had requested his collaboration in pursuing research together.' Farias notes that he has 'been unable to reconstruct the precise circumstances of Heidegger's return to the faculty at Freiburg because the relevant papers are not accessible. But we can assume that Husserl strongly supported Heidegger's return.' Ibid. 68.

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soon-to-be-named Nazi mayor of Freiburg. The university's elections were held in an atmosphere of terror. Members of parliament as well as local officials had been arrested, trucked through the streets to nearby concentration camps (later removed to death camps) – all this punctuated by assassinations. Jewish businesses were being boycotted. Lists of Jewish professionals were made public ominously, and the universities and civil service were being emptied of Jews.

Nor did Heidegger serve as Rector in the traditional sense. By October 1, 1933, a new constitution was imposed on the university. It authorized the Rector to act as Adolf Hitler's arm in ending university self-governance, centralizing authority under the *Führerprinzip*, and terminating careers of dissenting graduate students and faculty. The new Rector could name administrators at will, and the ones Heidegger named were either Nazi Party members or sympathizers. His May 27, 1933 Rector's Address, delivered to the accompaniment of Brahms, Wagner and the Horst Wessel song (lyrics gleeful at the prospect of Jewish blood in the streets), called on students and faculty, in Nazi style, to subordinate their academic commitments to the will, essence or destiny of the German nation.[19] In November, 1933, Heidegger wrote in the student newspaper, 'Do not let principles and "ideas" be the rules of your existence. The Führer himself, and he alone, is the German reality of today, and of the future, and of its law. … Heil Hitler! Rector Martin Heidegger.'[20]

Among the letters of dismissal that went out over Heidegger's signature was the one sent to Emeritus Professor Edmund Husserl, removing his emeritus status and barring him from the university premises on account of Husserl's half-Jewish origin.[21] Heidegger also allowed the deletion of the dedication to Husserl from subsequent editions of *Being and Time*, though not the references to his academic protector and mentor inside the text. By this time the proverb would need amending: my teacher is dear, but evil is dearer.

[19] My account of the political context in which Heidegger was named Rector is drawn from Farias, who appears to have painstakingly assembled the available pieces of evidence, (*Heidegger and Nazism*, 83–86). The ceremony of his investiture, and the place of the Rector's Address in the spectrum of approaches to the nazification of the university is also described in Farias, (Ibid. 96–112).

[20] Ibid. 118f.

[21] Maier-Katkin, *Stranger From Abroad* 97, where Arendt is also quoted as writing to Jaspers, 'signed by anyone else, Husserl would have been indifferent and could have risen above it; but as it came over Heidegger's signature it almost killed him.'

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Arendt was also of Jewish origin. Had she not left Germany in 1933, the year Hitler became chancellor and Heidegger Rector, she would have come due for these banishments, and eventually of course, far far worse. She had been Heidegger's student. The filial piety and alliance in pursuit of truth, which ideally colors the relation between the teacher and student of philosophy, had already been ruptured in one other way. Heidegger had been her lover. But who or what was Heidegger?

He was an enormously talented philosopher, considered by some the greatest of the twentieth century, and by the mature Arendt herself the 'secret king in the empire of thinking'.[22] If, after the War, he was a repentant Nazi, he never said so plainly.[23] Among philosophers at the present time, there is controversy over the link, if any, between Heidegger's philosophy and the stretch he put in as a Nazi official and Party member.[24] Some hold that there is a link – possibly even to the fundaments of his thought – but that he should still be evaluated on his merits philosophically, not dismissed on account of these possible implications.[25] Others, Arendt included, regard the Nazi interlude as an aberration, an 'escapade', to be pardoned because he was out of his element, and had no grasp of what he was getting into.[26] Still others think he had been a Nazi, or a proto-Nazi, *before* he became a credentialed philosopher. On that view, he managed to corrupt philosophy itself, in ways still consequential, by introducing a Hitlerian message into its precincts.[27]

[22] Arendt, letter #116, containing her public tribute to Heidegger, in *Letters*, 148–63, 151. In an earlier-published English version, 'Martin Heidegger at Eighty', tr. Albert Hofstadter, it appeared in the *New York Review of Books*, October 21, 1971.

[23] For a fine-grained evaluation of this fact, see Berel Lang, *Heidegger's Silence* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1996).

[24] The range of philosophers' opinions in the Heidegger controversy is surveyed in Lang, *Heidegger's Silence*, 86–90; in Tom Rockmore and Joseph Margolis' foreward to Farias, *Heidegger and Nazism*, and most recently, in Tom Rockmore's forward to Emmanuel Faye, *Heidegger: The Introduction of Nazism into Philosophy in Light of the Unpublished Seminars of 1933–1935*, tr. Michael B. Smith (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009; *Heidegger, l'introduction du Nazism dans la philosophie*, Paris: Editions Albin Michel, 2005).

[25] See Lang, *Heidegger's Silence*, 95–100.

[26] Arendt, *Letters*, 160.

[27] The view that Heidegger was a Nazi before he was a philosopher, and that his philosophy is only his Nazism decked out in obscure coinages, is

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These questions – the who and the what of Heidegger – are hardly trivial. To see what in Heidegger's deplorable academic career was accidental and what essential to his thought, we need an evaluation of the Nazi turn that starts from his contribution as a philosopher. In setting out such an account here, I am thoroughly indebted to Michael Wyschogrod's *Body of Faith*, which addresses the Heidegger question in those terms precisely.[28]

Following Wyschogrod, we should ask of Heidegger, as of any philosopher, what was the primary problem for him? For Heidegger, it was how to think of the *ground* of all the objects and individuals that fill experience. From what do they issue? From what do they get their defining character? Obviously not from any sleight of hand that things can perform on themselves. And here it would be unresponsive to offer as an explanation, say, superstrings. Superstrings depend on the ground that makes them possible: Being itself.

Being, for Heidegger, is the thing that is more worth thinking about than any other thing. But anything of which we want to think with definiteness has to be delineated *against* what it *isn't*. In this respect, Being is no different. If we are to think our way into Being, we can find it only against the backdrop of what it is not. Being is *not* nonbeing. It's not Nothing.

At this point, I normally succumb to irreverence. Philosophers are not usually funny *while philosophizing*, but Heidegger's 'the Nothing nothings' has always seemed to me about as funny as they get.[29] Pondering all this recently however, a lost personal episode floated back up to mind. It was my first 'philosophic' anxiety. I was about eleven when it happened, so at childhood's end. It came over me that the most palpable and ordinary things – this fleshy arm, this table, this voice – were being carried away, downriver as it were, by the river of Time. It was as if Time were at floodtide in perpetuity. From moment to moment, each solid thing was changing into the

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urged most strongly in Faye, *op. cit. n.* 24, 12–30, 65, 74, 92, 149, 243f, 287, 291ff.

[28] Michael Wyschogrod, *The Body of Faith: Judaism as Corporeal Election* (New York: The Seabury Press, 1983), 152–160.

[29] Martin Heidegger, 'What is Metaphysics' in D. Farrell Krell (ed. & trans.), *Basic Writings*, (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1993), 103. Originally a lecture given June 24, 1929, the German publication of *Was ist Metaphysik* is in Heidegger, *Wegmarken* (Frankfurt am Main: Vittorio Klostermann, 1967). In Krell, '*Das Nichts selbst nichtet'* is translated, 'The nothing itself nihilates'.

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most gossamer thing in the world: memory. The solid thing fades out, and nothing can hold it here. It's gone while we speak, and so is the next moment of its being here, and the next. Its future nonexistence invades its present existence, and there is nothing to be done about it. So it seems that the child I once was *noticed* that the Nothing was intruding on Being in a threatening way.

While unsought moods such as anxiety can disclose nonbeing, Heidegger's thought also tries to get at it deliberately. By making Being itself temporal, he thinks his way into the borderland between Being and nonbeing. But here his thought is perforce frustrated. When all is said and done, we can only think *what is*. Even our language, when it bespeaks the Nothing, makes it sound like another *something*. Stretched thin in that way, language sounds either contradictory or comical.

There is a surer path to nonbeing: the path of action. Action objectifies what it acts on, thus doing violence to it in some degree. Among actions, there is one kind that embraces nonbeing at will and full face: destruction. Of course, even destruction cannot literally make something into nothing. But it can take a thing that was a whole of parts, and disarrange the parts, so that they cease to make up the unity that was there before. This is so for a rock, but even more for a living thing. When destruction kills a human being – that most articulated, purposive and correspondingly vulnerable form of life – it thereby embraces nonbeing as thoroughly as it can. Wyschogrod comments, 'The essence of the Nazi movement was rage .... Philosophy here turns against itself because it has caught a glimpse of the power of nonbeing and therefore finds itself unhinged, driven out of the realm of discourse into violence.'[30]

To sum up: Heidegger's Nazism can be seen as the consequence of his catching the defining *ambition* of thought: to think the whole, being and nonbeing together. He has followed that lure all the way down. By contrast, philosophy's three classical forefathers held back from hubris of that ilk: Socrates by confessing his ignorance at every possible turn; Plato by invoking factors beyond dialectic in the form of Ideas, myths and the character of Socrates; Aristotle by insisting that argument stop at its own presuppositions. The Promethean ambition of Heidegger stopped at nothing; and it did not even stop there. So Hannah Arendt was in a sense quite right that Heidegger was the king of the empire of thinking.

What did that sovereignty mean for a project of seduction? Here is a philosopher of the first rank who wants in his thought to encompass

[30] Wyschogrod, *The Body of Faith*, 159.

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Being (a traditional object for a metaphysician), but also nonbeing. That is unusual and magnetic. It partakes of the sex act's objectification-as-violence.[31] It also partakes of the gritty sex appeal of the outlaw. A woman who succumbs to a man in virtue of what is 'bad' about him can seem to herself to realize the totality of experience: the being of the body's imperatives and the nonbeing of thresholds and prohibitions transgressed. But imagine a woman who also has the philosophic ambition, to find the heights accessible only to knowers. Imagine her approached with seductive intent by a philosopher who seems capable of encompassing *what is* and *what is not*. Such a woman is only accidentally safe from such a philosopher.

So it is worth noting that, in the annals of seduction, Heidegger may also be the king. Hannah Arendt was a nineteen-year old student with whom he'd enjoyed just one office hour, punctuated by his professorial questions and her poised yet diffident answers. On February 10th of 1925, he wrote her as follows: 'Dear Miss Arendt! I must come see you this evening and speak to your heart. Everything should be simple and clear and pure between us. Only then will we be worthy of having been allowed to meet. You are my pupil and I your teacher, but that is only the occasion for what has happened to us. I will never be able to call you mine, but from now on you will belong in my life, and it shall grow with you … '.[32] Tying her future to his growth, he had thereby captured the soul of a woman. It was like trapping a rabbit, and then tagging it. When *The Human Condition* appeared in German translation in 1960, Arendt wrote to Heidegger: 'If things had ever worked out properly between us – and I mean *between*, that is, neither you nor me – I would have asked you if I might dedicate it to you; it came directly out of the first Freiburg days and hence owes practically everything to you in every respect.'[33]

He had a feminine soul on a string. But why? What is a 'feminine soul'? Is it even allowable to talk that way? Why should such an encounter register on a woman's life as indelibly as a brand? Is it credible that real women will take intimacy with real men to involve abstract entities like Being and Nothingness? Is it plausible to claim that a

[31] Cf. Wyschogrod, *The Body of Faith*, 156 and Andrea Dworkin who describes intercourse as the inherently asymmetric act by which the woman 'is occupied, physically, internally, in her privacy.' Quoted in Steven E. Rhoads, *Taking Sex Differences Seriously* (San Francisco: Encounter Books, 2004), 111.

[32] Martin Heidegger, letter #1, in *Letters*, 3.

[33] Arendt, letter # 89, ibid. 124.

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mere seduction might also be an event that involves intangibles like a project of thought, a climate of opinion, or the spirit of an era? And can an otherwise brilliant and healthy-minded woman believe, if such a connection occurs and is not resolved advantageously, that she can *never* get over it?

That this can indeed be the lot of a real and highly intelligent woman is precisely the tale told in a biography Arendt wrote in Paris, just after she left Germany as a refugee. She titled her study, *Rahel Varnhagen: The Life of a Jewess*, and called its eighteenth-century subject, 'my closest friend, though she has been dead for some hundred years.'[34] The biography reflects Arendt's unforced and thorough identification with her subject. Making use of her letters, it comes through as a near-autobiography, from inside Rahel's own optic. To my mind, it is an unusually intelligent and trustworthy book.

Rahel was a remarkably perceptive and reflective Jewish woman who achieved some renown as a salon hostess, in that brief period when Enlightenment values were ascendant in Germany. It was a moment when the intellectual and artistic talent of the period could collect together socially without barriers of caste and religion. The key encounter of Rahel's life was her brief engagement with a nobleman. In the milieu of the salon, his inherited substantiality did not count and she outshone him. In his world, a Jewess counted for nothing. She invited him to show his seriousness as a suitor by backing the courtship with all his personal force. She would have accepted him if he had *really* asked her. He in turn indicated to her that he could be won if only she became the more decisive suitor. But she had no platform from which to stage such a role reversal. Standing on social nonentity did not give her the leverage. So here were two people who felt a powerful mutual attraction, but also knew themselves to embody, in Arendt's words, 'an objectification … of the historical conditions of a life … It seems as if certain people are so exposed

[34] Arendt, *Rahel Varnhagen: The Life of a Jewess*. Liliane Weissberg (ed.), Winston and Winston (trans), (Baltimore: the Johns Hopkins Paperbacks Edition, 2000; Leo Baeck Institute 1957), 5. The study was published in English after the war, but also submitted as Arendt's *Habilitation* thesis in a claim against the West German government that she began in 1957 and was finally successful on appeal in 1971. At that time, she was awarded the title of professor of philosophy, retroactive to July 1, 1933 with reparations. Introduction, 39–41.

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in their own lives … that they become, as it were, junction points and concrete objectifications of "life".'[35]

Arendt deciphers their predicament with the skill of a master. She has no ideological qualms about making clear that a defeat of this nature, for a woman, simply precluded recovery. Rahel could do many things in aid of distraction and physical and social survival, and she did them. But the self she had risked in this engagement would never come whole again. 'Passion's insistence upon absoluteness caused her capacity for novelty to perish, its organ to atrophy. Where hope does not wait expectantly, it is difficult for anything unexpected to occur. Her future would now be prolongation of the past …. This was the "truest unhappiness," for she had arrived at a point when she could no longer "wish to be happy by force."'[36]

These uncompromising pronouncements, which trace with precision the intangible edges of a woman's experience in such a case, are certainly *not* conformed to the received opinion of modern and post-modern societies. But here it is received opinion that needs to be revisited and corrected. What should be noted is that the real life of desire can be mangled by received opinion, quite as much as the other way round. In the production of now-received opinion, philosophy itself has been a player. Philosophy offered its recent misreadings of the life of desire as if reading *from* the great book of nature. But here philosophy was reading *to* the great book of nature, reading in German, and reading the wrong story.

Views of the erotic are not fixtures in the landscape of culture. The history of a now-prevalent misrepresentation of eros can be traced. Although no genealogy of ideas can be exhaustive, there is one such lineage I would like to single out, because of its continuing power to becloud the stories of actual women. Since at least the First World War (when the idea of world progress came to seem delusive), the stream of dark German Romanticism, in the form of Arthur Schopenhauer's will to life, Friedrich Nietzsche's will to power, and Sigmund Freud's id, burst through extant conceptual barriers to swamp the erotic field. On the view urged by these three theorists and satellite thinkers, there is an impersonal, unconscious, undifferentiated, and all-consuming life of desire. It pushes and pulsates under all the beliefs and desires of which we are aware, and under our articulated projects. It constitutes the repressed reality of ourselves.

[35] Arendt, ibid., quoted from Arendt's first sketch of the project, March 24, 1930, Weissberg's Introduction, 31. Weissberg's source is *Hannah Arendt and Karl Jaspers, Correspondence*.

[36] Arendt, *Rahel Varnhagen*, 123.

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Despite the by-now received opinion, to the best of my knowledge there is absolutely no empirical evidence for the existence of a life force of that description. Ethology finds highly differentiated and functional activities in species other than our own, but no streaming, undifferentiated life force. The only thing in nature that seems to act like Schopenhauer's will to life, Nietzsche's will to power, or Freud's id – seeking replication and expansion at the expense of confined and disciplined function – is cancer. Cancer is of course an illness, not a feature of organisms in their healthy state.

It is astonishing that writers as sophisticated as Lionel Trilling and Bernard Williams equate authenticity with acknowledgment of this imaginary life force.[37] Jean-Paul Sartre's *Being and Nothingness* even gives as prime example of bad faith a woman who pretends not to notice – instead of acknowledging with equal libidinal frankness – the fact that her companion has placed his hand over hers on their café table.[38] The real bad faith, amazingly overlooked in recent discussions of female freedom, is that these purportedly dispassionate theoretical claims have been advanced by powerful male thinkers who have managed thereby to frame the erotic scene for women. Women who wanted to appear authentic had to figure out how to make their personal projects appear to fit a highly abstract thesis, which has proved a convenience for men and one more hazardous social complication for women.

'I know what you need', a café acquaintance said insinuatingly to a friend of mine in Paris many years ago. Instantly she shot back, 'that's the last thing I need and, *if* I needed it, you're the last person I would go to, to get it.' Alas, few women understand the heavy-handedness of this seducer's apparatus as clearly as my friend did then.

What's hazardous about the thesis of an amoral, impersonal, unisex life force, from a woman's point of view? A review of the basics will allow us to see if the liberating influence of modernity and postmodernity has changed any of them. We can still suffer untimely

[37] See Lionel Trilling, *Sincerity and Authenticity: The Charles Eliot Norton Lectures, 1969–1970* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1971, Harvard Paperback, 1974), 131ff, 138, 140–159; also Bernard Williams, *Truth and Truthfulness: An Essay in Genealogy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002), 189ff, 200, 204f. Some of the blinders that can be worn with this view of authenticity are noted in Abigail L. Rosenthal, 'Moral Competence and Bernard Williams', *Philosophy* **81** (2006): 255–77.

[38] Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness: An Essay on Phenomenological Ontology*, Hazel E. Barnes (trans.) (New York: Philosophical Library, 1956), 55f.

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impregnation, can be molested or raped (outside of prison) more easily than men, are disturbingly vulnerable – much more than men – to sexually transmitted diseases, and are still condemned to try to *attract* our lovers and protectors, rather than choose among those who have succeeded in attracting us. Even women who accept the modernist and post-modernist thesis of sex delivered authentic, straight up and unembellished, still hope that more intimate and protective ties will follow the unencumbered connection. Men are weighted down by no such hopes.[39]

When women need to consult with one another privately about the erotic pitfalls of their lives, they bypass received opinion. The terrible secret is that relations between men and women are not symmetrical. Women have inbuilt vulnerabilities that men do not have. Men have propensities and aggression that women do not have. It is not women's fault that this is so. And it is not necessarily men's fault. As Anne of Jane Austen's *Persuasion* says, 'we each begin, probably, with a little bias towards our own sex … '. So it belongs to this picture that a manipulative woman can use her potential for victimization to control a conscientious man. A malevolent woman can help men abuse other women in order to secure her own power. Abuses are as rife as opportunities. How to deal with the asymmetry *fairly* remains hard for members of enlightened societies to figure out: in terms of the law, of money, child care, the exercise of a woman's abilities, and in personal terms. But this *is* the erotic hazard of life, its heartbreak, and its choreography.

Why is the role played by women's reputation, their good name, their appearing to be above it all, so important to their social maneuverability? Why is it so important for a woman not to appear compromised? Heidegger's reputation is sullied by his Nazi phase. It is quite unmarked by his liaison with Hannah Arendt. Arendt however can scarcely be mentioned today without the Heidegger attachment. Posthumously, it has compromised her power to be evaluated on her intellectual terms alone. And why is the attack on a woman who becomes controversial nearly always sexual – impugning both her merits and her desirability – each of which must be kept in balance if she is to pay proper regard to her role in the world of other women and of men? What is a woman's reputation worth?

It's worth *everything*. It's her shelter in the world. Although the men and women in her inner circle came to know about Arendt's affair and lifelong intimacy of the mind and heart with Heidegger, the public did not know. When I read her 'Martin Heidegger is

[39] Rhoads, *Taking Sex Difference Seriously*, 105–108.

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Eighty' in the *New York Review of Books* in 1971, I was at that time unable to evaluate the philosophical or factual content of her defense of him. Her philosophical claims, that Heidegger was the king of thinking, that his thinking was not attached to the empirical world of actions and results, and that his true contribution lay in mapping the woodpaths of Being, were puzzling, but I was not in a position to have an opinion about them. Her factual claims, that he had never read *Mein Kampf*, that he got his fascism from Italian Futurists, that he stepped into the 'world of human affairs' naively, for the sake of others, that he took risks from higher moral ground than colleagues who had stayed within the abstract precincts of philosophy, and that he had learned from his 'mistake' to return to his primary place, the residence of thinking, were not then open to ready inspection. Some of the relevant materials were not yet available. I did not know that the points bearing on his Nazism were fabrications closely matching what Heidegger himself had offered to the University of Freiburg's denazification commission by way of self-exculpation after the War.[40] I did not so much follow the labyrinthine elegance of her argument, which interwove factual and philosophical claims, as accept the premise that made it influential: her disinterestedness. So she carried a discreditable secret. Why discreditable? A person who has an interest in a case is not properly a judge. Whatever its force, she had an interest and failed to disclose it, or recuse herself. She could not disclose it without embarrassing him, his wife, and herself. That being the case, she was morally obligated to stay out of it.

There was potential discredit of a second kind. The vulnerability of women is not a point in our favor, and we will do what we can to minimize the effect of it in our world. She had become vulnerable to him, because of him. He failed to take any responsibility for his shaping impact on her mind and heart, and had held out no social protection. When he accepted the professorship at Freiburg, he made it clear to her that his professional standing could not be risked by a continuation of their liaison.[41]

The trap in which she found herself is inescapably feminine. There was a degree of suffering built into it. If she was to pass beyond its limits, she would have to face into Heidegger unblinking, in terms of the harms he had done, to her personally and in the larger world. But why is a woman, especially a high thinker who has put

[40] Maier-Katkin, *Stranger From Abroad*, 170ff.

[41] Elzbieta Ettinger, *Hannah Arendt Martin Heidegger* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), 29.

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on the armor of philosophic culture, so discredited by her vulnerabilities? 'Why can't a woman be more like a man?'

It is simply and literally 'too much'. The strategy of being a woman member of the society of high thinkers involves a balancing act. On the one side, there is whatever seeming grace and mobility the woman has acquired, via talent, productivity, personal ties, ambition, and a cultured mind. On the other hand, there are the tugs of multiple vulnerabilities, each compounded by the symbolic and reified meanings, the 'doublings' or mirroring images that such vulnerabilities have acquired over time: in literature, in poetry, in painting and sculpture, in song, in fashion and in gossip. The balancing act is more exacting than it looks. It is not supposed to look hard. It should be done so that it looks easy.

All her life, Arendt carried a socially discreditable secret. She had two options. She could suffer greatly and quietly, registering the meaning of the suffering that was Heidegger's high-handed personal bequest to her. The suffering would have come from the concealment of an important fact in the life of a public intellectual, and from the shaping influence of a love that held no social protection for her. In time, she might have truly thought it through, without becoming indiscrete. We all might have learned something.

There was one other way she could have handled it. She could have concealed her interest, denied that he had knowingly harmed her or others in any way profitable to himself, and used her interested position, with its intimate knowledge of his case, to exonerate him as one who 'really does not know and is hardly in a position to find out what devil had then possessed him.'[42] One cannot find that this exoneration of Heidegger was reasonable. Was he 'not in a position to find out' that he owed his career to Husserl? Was his letter banning Husserl from the university the consequence of his forgetting *to think*?

On account of Hannah Arendt, evil is today widely and erroneously believed to be 'banal'. Whatever one may say of the personal context in which Arendt came to hold that view, *it* is the reverse of banal. It is extraordinary. It is almost gothic. No one who is aware of this story can doubt that some of us at least live *stories*. Hers with Heidegger is a story of life lessons lived in reverse. But a story with a moral nevertheless, like all real stories. She was an interested party, and ought therefore to have recused herself from all discussion of Heidegger's guilt or innocence. She put deliberate evil out of play in her theoretical work, for the question-begging reason that it is too rare to warrant

[42] Ibid. 45, quoted from a March, 1951 letter by Arendt to Jaspers.

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consideration. She urged forgiveness without regard to what was to be forgiven, thus allowing the concept to shield the offender. (Although Arendt did Heidegger many favors, her forgiving him was not one of them.) She professedly owed her entire doctrine of exoneration to a man who had betrayed her as teacher, lover, and political actor, and stood particularly to benefit from her doctrine. She privately forgave her betrayer because of who he was to her – a large philosophic talent and indelible lover – but pretended in public that he was not in fact guilty because he had acted without knowledge.

To her friend Mary McCarthy, Arendt wrote, 'you were the only reader to understand what otherwise I have never admitted – namely that I wrote [*Eichmann in Jerusalem*] in a curious state of euphoria.' In a television interview with Günter Gaus she said, 'I have read [Eichmann's] police report, all 3,600 pages, and I have read it very carefully. I don't know how often I burst into laughter, and had to laugh loudly!'[43]

Speaking for myself, I did not attend the trial, but did read in full the transcript to which she refers. There is not a smile in it. But if one is setting about to shrink into banality an agent of the same evil to which one's secret, lifelong, philosophic intimate contributed significantly … well, there is a smile in that.

This story of two philosophers, originally private and personal, came to acquire a world-historical setting. By 1945, the Jewish people had been reduced to the beleaguered survivors of six million murder victims. Within three years, there was a Hebrew-speaking Jewish state in its ancient land, for the first time in approximately two thousand years. Thirteen years later, the Nazis' chief executioner had been spirited from Buenos Aires to the precincts of the modern Jewish state, to stand trial for his murders. Seldom has a table turning of that size been seen on the world stage. For Hannah Arendt to show up in that scene in such a way that it became not the drama of crime and punishment that it was, but a debate about *her report* – was to spoil the story and deeply dishearten those whose story it was.

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[43] Letter to Mary McCarthy quoted in Maier-Katkin, *Stranger From Abroad*, 277; interview with Günter Gaus quoted in Weissberg's Introduction to *Rahel Varnhagen*, 25.

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