

# EVIL IS 'THOUGHT-DEFYING'

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Two weeks ago over 60 million Americans voted to elect a fascist for president. Today I am revisiting Arendt—one of my first and greatest loves—at a moment of despair. I turn to her as a source of resistance to “normalization”—that is, a desire to go about our everyday lives in denial that something akin to totalitarianism could revisit us here on the other side of the Atlantic, in the new world, in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. She draws our attention to the liar as a “man of action,” desirous of changing the world, and to the bourgeoisie’s secret delight in the mob’s pulling the curtain on the bourgeoisie’s own hypocrisy. She draws our attention to the moments at which the boundaries of the possible shift, and the unimaginable suddenly becomes the new normal. She reminds us that the totalitarian temptation cannot be attributed to the genetic peculiarity of any race or nation, that this vulnerability belongs rather to a universal human condition. For very many people the argument of “national character,” of some kind of immutable substance—the idea that the Germans were simply evil—possesses a certain appeal, as it offers the possibility of sleeping soundly at night, far away from any Germans. Arendt’s idea that it was neither in the essence of Germans to be executioners nor in the essence of Jews to be victims is an infinitely more disturbing one. For if the Holocaust was rather the exploitation of a universal human potential, then no one should ever sleep soundly again.

The present is not a moment for sleeping soundly.

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## Hannah Arendt

“It is true, considerably more than the whims of historians would be needed to eliminate from the record the fact that on the night of August 4, 1914, German troops crossed the frontier of Belgium; it would require no less than a power monopoly over the entire civilized world. But such a power monopoly is far from being inconceivable...”

*Truth and Politics*



“...the contingent character of facts, which could always have been otherwise, and which therefore possess by themselves no trace of self-evidence or plausibility for the human mind. Since the liar is free to fashion his ‘facts’ to fit the profit and pleasure, or even the mere expectations of his audience, the chances are that he will be more persuasive than the truth-teller. Indeed, he will usually have plausibility on his side; his exposition will sound more logical, as it were, since the element of unexpectedness—one of the outstanding characteristics of all events—has mercifully disappeared. It is not only rational truth that, in the Hegelian phrase, stands common sense on its head; reality quite frequently offends the soundness of common-sense reasoning no less than it offends profit and pleasure.”

*Truth and Politics*

“[The liar] is an actor by nature; he says what is not so because he wants things to be different from what they are—that is, he wants to change the world. He takes advantage of the undeniable affinity of our capacity for action, for changing reality, with this mysterious faculty of ours that enables us to say, ‘The sun is shining,’ when it is raining cats and dogs. If we were as thoroughly conditioned in our behavior as some philosophies have wished us to be, we could never be able to accomplish this little miracle. In other words, our ability to lie—but not necessarily our ability to tell the truth—belongs among the few obvious, demonstrable data that confirm human freedom.”

*Truth and Politics*

“[T]he traditional lie concerned only particulars and was never meant to deceive literally everybody; it was directed at the enemy and was meant to deceive only him... . Since facts always occur in a context, a particular lie—that is, a falsehood that makes no attempt to change the whole context—tears, as it were, a hole in the fabric of factuality. As every historian knows, one can spot a lie by noticing incongruities, holes, or the junctures of patched-up places. As long as the texture as a whole is kept intact, the lie will eventually show up as if of its own accord... [T]he modern political lies are so big that they require a complete rearrangement of the whole factual texture—the making of another reality, as it were, into which they will fit without seam, crack, or fissure, exactly as the facts fitted into their original context.”

*Truth and Politics*

“For it is quite conceivable, and even within the realm of practical political possibilities, that one fine day a highly organized and mechanized humanity will conclude quite democratically—namely by majority decision—that for humanity as a whole it would be better to liquidate certain parts thereof.”

Origins of Totalitarianism

“The theme song in the play, “*Erst kommt das Fressen, dann kommt die Moral,*” was greeted with frantic applause by exactly everybody, though for different reasons. The mob applauded because it took the statement literally; the bourgeoisie applauded because it had been fooled by its own hypocrisy for so long that it had grown tired of the tension and found deep wisdom in the expression of the banality by which it lived; the elite applauded because the unveiling of hypocrisy was such superior and wonderful fun.”

Origins of Totalitarianism

“What binds these men together is a firm and sincere belief in human omnipotence. Their moral cynicism, their belief that everything is permitted, rests on the solid conviction that everything is possible.”

Origins of Totalitarianism

“[W]e may say that radical evil has emerged in connection with a system in which all men have become equally superfluous.”

Origins of Totalitarianism

“But what historians, sadly preoccupied with the phenomenon in itself, failed to grasp was that the mob could not be identified with the growing industrial working class, and certainly not with the people as a whole, but that it was composed actually of the refuse of all classes. This composition made it seem that the mob and its representative had abolished class differences, that those standing outside the class-divided nation were the people itself (the *Volksgemeinschaft*, as the Nazis would call it) rather than its distortion and caricature. The historical pessimists understood the essential irresponsibility of this new social stratum, and they also correctly foresaw the possibility of converting democracy into a despotism whose tyrants would rise from the mob and lean on it for support. What they failed to understand was that the mob is not only the refuse but also the by-product of bourgeois society, directly produced by it and therefore never quite separable from it. They failed for this reason to notice high society's constantly growing admiration for the underworld, which runs like a red thread through the nineteenth century...”

Origins of Totalitarianism

“The concentration camps, by making death itself anonymous ... robbed death of its meaning as the end of a fulfilled life. In a sense they took away the individual's own death, proving that henceforth nothing belonged to him and he belonged to no one. His death merely set a seal on the fact that he had never really existed.”

Origins of Totalitarianism

“The concentration and extermination camps of totalitarian regimes serve as the laboratories in which the fundamental belief of totalitarianism that everything is possible is being verified.”

Origins of Totalitarianism

“The longer one listened to him, the more obvious it became that his inability to speak was closely connected with an inability to *think*.”

*Eichmann in Jerusalem*

“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. It can overgrow and lay waste the whole world precisely because it spreads like a fungus on the surface. It is ‘thought-defying,’ 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. That is its ‘banality.’ Only the good has depth and can be radical.”

*A Letter to Gershom Scholem*

“I have never in my life ‘loved’ any people or collective—neither the German people, nor the French, nor the American, nor the working class or anything of that sort. I indeed love ‘only’ my friends and the only kind of love I know of and believe in is this love of persons.”

*A Letter to Gershom Scholem*

“You know, what was decisive was not the year 1933, at least not for me. What was decisive was the day we learned about Auschwitz. That was in 1943. At first we didn’t believe it.... Before that we said: Well, one has enemies. That is entirely natural. Why shouldn’t a people have enemies? But this was different. It was as if an abyss had opened. Because we had the idea that amends could somehow be made for everything else, as amends can be made for just about everything at some point in politics. But not this. *This ought not to have happened.*”

*‘What remains? The Language Remains’: A Conversation with Günther Gaus*

“I do not believe that there is any thought process possible without personal experience. Every thought is an afterthought...”

*‘What remains? The Language Remains’: A Conversation with Günther Gaus*

“If we should start telling the truth that we are nothing but Jews, it would mean that we expose ourselves to the fate of human beings who, unprotected by any specific law or political convention, are nothing but human beings. I can hardly imagine an attitude more dangerous, since we actually live in a world in which human beings as such have ceased to exist for quite a while...”

*We Refugees*

“For many years now we have met Germans who declare that they are ashamed of being Germans. I have often felt tempted to answer that I am ashamed of being human.”

*Organized Guilt and Collective Responsibility*

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