Introduction

> "When I came to men I found them sitting on an old conceit: the conceit that they have long known what is good and evil. . . . and whoever wanted to sleep well talked of good and evil before going to sleep."
> –Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*

In 1945, in one of her first essays following the end of the war in Europe, the renowned philosopher Hannah Arendt wrote that "the problem of evil will be the fundamental question of postwar intellectual life."[i] In many ways she was prescient. In recent years the concept of evil has reemerged as a significant trope in common parlance, in political discourse,[ii] and in the work of philosophers, as well as political scientists, psychologists, and cultural critics.[iii] A phenomenon with a lingering enigmatic quality, evil has, it seems, been "re-discovered" as a highly suggestive phenomenon today.

The resurgence of the concept of evil ought to strike moderns, particularly modern philosophers, as an oddity, since it remains a theologically-laden term for wrong-doing involving the illusion of dark forces. The problem of evil, in modernity, has become putatively demystified. Evil is a problem, it seems, only in so far as we remain obsessed with a worn-out intellectual horizon that understands evil as deeply contrary to the cosmic order. By tying the problem of evil to an all too human cause, the problem not only dissolves, but evil itself becomes an anachronism, a term for wrongdoing in a sacramental universe that in an age of enlightenment can be mitigated. For people for whom there is no such religion or god, there is no problem that needs to be solved. And there is no need to maintain in pious humility that there is no solution because the "ought not be" uttered in response to evil no longer stands in relation to the order generated by power and goodness; it *merely* stands in relation to the vicious capacity of humans.

Yet against this "naturalizing" task arises a second set of issues, especially after the Second World War. In the face of a "century that has known two world wars, the totalitarianism of right and left, Hitlerism and Stalinism, Hiroshima, the Gulag, and the genocides of Auschwitz and Cambodia"[iv] some philosophers have argued that despite our desperate attempts at comprehending such events we are ultimately unable to reconcile ourselves to these modern occurrences of evil. So, long after the problem of evil as transcendent of thought and management was set aside, long after the death of the Being that necessitated such an evil was proclaimed, recent events have revived its transcendence.[v] Evil's source once again appears too deep, its orbit too wide. In the face of the excessive character of evil, in Hannah Arendt's words "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"[vi] rendering all usual and historical moral systems obsolete.

Evil's resurgence, then, might be particularly relevant, highlighting lacunae in predominant tendencies of modern thought, specifically in our moral vocabulary. Although betraying assumptions that for most contemporary thinkers are long out of fashion, evil generates an intellectually irresistible promise of allowing privileged access to murky yet potent revelations about who we are as moral beings. Yet exactly how evil remains a "problem" in the contemporary world is not always so clear for many politicians, political scientists, and philosophers who employ the word, especially when it has

been ripped from its religious moorings. Arendt, for one, does not wish to reassert the traditional analytic problem involving the question of the reconcilability of evil and God. She declared "that the way God had been thought of for thousands of years is no longer convincing: if anything is dead . . . not that the old questions which are coeval with the appearance of men on earth have become 'meaningless,' but that the way they were framed and answered has lost plausibility."[vii] How then does this theological problem, that has come to be narrowly defined, find broad relevance for addressing the challenges of our genocidal age?

Through multiple approaches and analyses of various texts and media, the authors included in this special issue of *Janus Head* take up Arendt's insight: the problem of evil remains a fundamental intellectual problem. Evil, to say the least, has become a polysemic term. It is the work of these authors to describe various kinds of phenomena and events as evil—each in their own way thinking anew the perennial problem of evil in the contemporary setting.

Eric Boynton
Meadville, Pennsylvania

Notes

---

[i] Hannah Arendt, "Nightmare and Flight," *Partisan Review*, Vol. 12, No. 2 (1945), reprinted in *Essays in Understanding, 1930–1954*, edited by Jerome Kohn (Harcourt Brace, 1994), pp. 133–135.
[ii] See for instance President George W. Bush, "State of the Union Address, January 29, 2002," at http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/release/2002/01/20020129-11html.
[iii] See for instance Richard J. Bernstein, *Radical Evil: a Philosophical Interrogation* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2002); Peter Dews, *The Idea of Evil* (Massachusetts: Blackwell Publishing, 2008); Jennifer Geddes, *Evil After Postmodernism* (London: Taylor and Francis Group, 2001); Ruth W. Grant, *Naming Evil, Judging Evil* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006); María Pía Lara, *Rethinking Evil: Contemporary Perspectives* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001); Martin Beck Matustík, *Radical Evil and the Scarcity of Hope: Postsecular Meditations* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2008); Susan Neiman, *Evil in Modern Thought: An Alternative History of Philosophy.* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002); Alan Schrift, *Modernity and the Problem of Evil* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2005); Robin May Schott, *Feminist Philosophy and the Problem of Evil* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2007).
[iv] Emmanuel Levinas, "Useless Suffering," in *The Provocation of Levinas: Rethinking the Other*, ed. Robert Bernasconi and David Wood (London: Routledge, 1988), 162.
[v] Emmanuel Levinas, "Transcendence and Evil," in *The Phenomenology of Man and of the Human Condition* (Dordrecht: D. Reidel, 1983).
[vi] Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1968), 459.
[vii] Hannah Arendt, *The Life of the Mind: Thinking* (New York, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich: 1971), 10.