

The Origins of Evil and the Banality of its Perpetrators:
Some Thoughts on Reflections by Kant, Schelling, Arendt,
Voegelin and Others

By

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Having lived for 42 years as a German citizen in the United States, I have realized long ago that historical Germany has provided Americans with the gold standard of evil. This standard by which to measure events of terror in history and the contemporary world becomes reinforced on an almost daily basis, from presidential and congressional speeches to the *New York Times* and cable news channels to Jon Stewart's *Daily-Show*. The standard becomes identified with the Jewish Holocaust and is commemorated in museums and memorials in most major cities, and Holocaust courses are taught at high schools, colleges and universities all over the US. A macro-crime committed by Germans in Europe against Europeans has become for Americans the focal point of the ethical-political education of the young and the nation as a whole. Peter Novick, the author of *The Holocaust in American Life* (1999), once asked a subversive question about the American Holocaust obsession: "What would we think if the Germans said the Holocaust is a terrible thing, but chose to build a museum in Berlin commemorating the American oppression of blacks? It would be grotesque. The problem is that an American encounter with slavery in a museum would make costly demands on our emotions, while the Holocaust is in danger of becoming an evasive route to bumper-sticker moral lessons."¹ In addition to all the other memorial sites, there exists now in Berlin since 2005 a Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe with 2,711 grey concrete slabs of different height near the Brandenburg Gate. It's only appropriate to repeat Novick's question in the year of the 150th anniversary of the beginning of the Civil War when there are still no memorials for slavery and Indian removal on the Washington Mall. The constant repetition of the escapist and often self-righteous American rhetoric is not the only reason

¹ Quoted in Roger Cohen, "The Germans Want Their History Back", in *The New York Times* (12 Sept. 1999)

why I still haven't applied for US citizenship; my late Black American wife provided another one when she repeatedly asked me whenever I was close to applying during the 35 years of our marriage why I wanted to emigrate from one genocidal society into another.

I begin my talk about evil with these personal notes because the question whether one can compare the German Nazi regime of terror with the American economy of evil, which manifested itself in Indian removal (*about which Pat Johnston will have something to say in his paper on Lincoln, MH*) and slavery to the Jim Crow regime after the Civil War, became for me the starting point for a larger comparative project. This comparative project on genocidal and other regimes of terror grew out of a preoccupation with the German record of destruction and the gradual processing of that past in West German society since the 1960s. Eric Voegelin's lectures on "Hitler and the Germans", which he delivered in the summer term of 1964 at the University of Munich and which I attended as a student (and in 2006 edited the original German text), can be seen retroactively as an intellectual marker of that process, though they had no impact at that time on the society as a whole because he refused to work on them for publication as a book. They were however an intellectual watershed experience for us students who had grown up in the great silence of post-war West Germany. The lectures were given at a time when the Eichmann trial in Jerusalem in 1961 and Hannah Arendt's trial "Report on the Banality of Evil", which was published in 1963, had begun to frame the discussion of the Nazi past with a new urgency and with sharper edges. Voegelin quoted the American edition in his lectures many times with approval. The German edition appeared in the fall of 1964. The Auschwitz trials in Frankfurt 1963-1965 provided Voegelin with additional daily

newspaper quotes to update his comments with details from the courtroom. Still, these lectures lacked a comparative dimension. As much as Voegelin delighted in his regular lectures in exposing us to all kinds of comparative civilizational scenarios, the Hitler lectures were German-centric. They were a personal reckoning with the society that had driven him into exile and they were a challenge for us students to recognize the complicity of all strata of society, but especially universities and the churches, in the rise and maintenance of the regime of terror. He explicitly warned us in a lecture that he gave one year later (1965) on the “German University and the Order of German Society” to not immerse ourselves in a descriptive history of the Nazi horrors. One couldn’t learn anything from that approach to the past. He demanded from us to undergo a spiritual conversion, a revolution of consciousness, to gain a critical perspective.

I abided by his recommendation to not deal with the horrors of the Third Reich until the summer of 1986 when the prominent German historian Ernst Nolte disturbed the intellectual peace of the West German public sphere by publishing an article about Hitler’s crimes being nothing but an imitation of Stalin’s crimes. For him, Stalin and the Bolsheviks deserved the primacy of having planned and orchestrated large scale killing events. The philosopher Jürgen Habermas immediately responded to Nolte’s thesis and triggered the so-called German historians’ debate (*Historikerstreit*). This debate, in which historians, social scientists, philosophers and public intellectuals participated on both sides of the Atlantic and in Israel, was concluded with the general understanding that the Holocaust was a truly unique historical event.

I was initially completely in support of the uniqueness thesis though my wife forced me indirectly to read up on the history of Western and especially American

slavery. I became convinced that one had to include slavery in a comparative understanding of regimes of terror. Yet what really made me question the uniqueness thesis of the Holocaust were visits to Auschwitz and Phnom Penh's Tuol Sleng in September and December 1997. Walking through Auschwitz-Birkenau and then a few months later through the halls of the Cambodian prison (*about which Steve DeBurger will have something to say*, MH) made me realize how unsustainable it was to essentialize the Jewish Holocaust as the unique manifestation of evil in human history. Accepting the uniqueness argument makes it impossible to talk about other mass killing events as comparative scenarios of human destruction. Contemporary historians of Russia and China add to this growing realization that the uniqueness thesis has to be abandoned. Norman Naimark remarks in his book on *Stalin's Genocides*: "Both totalitarian killers – Nazi Germany and Stalinist Russia – were perpetrators of genocide, the 'crime of crimes'"² Yang Su makes similar claims in his *Collective Killings in Rural China during the Cultural Revolution* (Cambridge 2011) as does Frank Dikötter in his *Mao's Great Famine. The History of China's Most Devastating Catastrophe, 1958-1962* (New York 2010). As important as the reluctance may be about the abandonment of the uniqueness thesis -- and I have written about this on various occasions -- I want to talk today about something else than the need for the comparative overcoming of the uniqueness notion of the Holocaust.

The more studies I have read about the Holocaust, the Soviet Gulag system, Mao's "Great Leap Forward" and the Cultural Revolution, Pol Pot's Khmer Rouge regime, the Rwandan carnage of 1994, the wars in Yugoslavia, other mass-killing scenarios and American slavery the less certain I have become about making sense of

² Norman Naimark, *Stalin's Genocides*. Princeton: 2010, p. 129.

these phenomena. If political regimes of various background on all continents are able of orchestrating these scenarios of destruction and make their peoples become their “willing executioners” or, at least, non-resisting bystanders, what is it that connects their pathologies? I think Goldhagen’s phrase raises an appropriate question for all regimes of terror, even if his 1996 book, *Hitler’s Willing Executioners*, singled out only Germany and only Jews as targets of Nazi destruction. Yet even if one includes in addition to Jews all the other groups that were targeted for destruction, Goldhagen’s ethno-centric focus does neither provide reliable answers for the German pathology itself nor all the other cases that have disgraced humanity in the 20th century or before. The cultural reductionism that is characteristic for much of the Holocaust literature is prevalent in most of the other case studies that focus on comparative mass-killing regimes as well. The answer I’m looking for cannot be found in ever more detailed macro-or micro-studies of regimes of terror around the world. I do therefore think that we have to reconsider questions about evil that philosophers from Kant and Schelling to Arendt and Voegelin have discussed, even if they didn’t leave us any convincing answers.

Contemporary philosophers who have written about evil agree basically on two things; they first reject the Holocaust uniqueness claim and they secondly refuse to engage questions of theodicy. The Norwegian philosopher Lars Svendsen sums up the Holocaust argument when he writes in his *A Philosophy of Evil*: “A paradoxical aspect of discussions concerning the Holocaust, therefore, is that it is considered a unique event, without parallels, while being used simultaneously as the standard by which all other evil must be measured. In my opinion, the thesis of the uniqueness of the Holocaust to be an absolute singularity, should be discarded entirely, once and for all. More than implying

that nothing like the Holocaust has ever before occurred in our history, this thesis also implies that nothing like it will ever happen again.”³ The Israeli philosopher Adi Ophir shares Svendsen’s attitude but becomes much more pointed in his rejection when he writes in his monumental study, *The Order of Evils. Toward an Ontology of Morals*: “...this work was born from an attempt to find a way to talk about Auschwitz without presupposing any meaning of ‘Auschwitz’ and without positing Auschwitz as an absolute negative pole that any discussion of Evil must lead to and stop at. I wanted to think Evil outside the halo of the name ‘Auschwitz’, in a way that would be liberated, as much as possible, from the shadow of this halo.” He wants to better understand Auschwitz and, at the same time, “think about Evil outside the shadow of Auschwitz, free from the imperative to place any other catastrophe on the scale of Evil that Auschwitz created by becoming the paradigm of absolute Evil.”⁴ Ophir becomes even more direct when he addresses his Israeli audience: “I refuse to accept the semireligious imperative, so prevalent in Israeli culture, that forbids any comparison between Auschwitz and other sites of Evil and that believes that such a comparison is blasphemous.” Ophir makes his Israeli readers understand that his “philosophical interest” in the question of evil was provoked by the Israeli occupation of the West Bank and Gaza.⁵

Ophir is not interested in reviving any of the metanarratives of evil that have been part of the civilizational make-up of Western culture. Instead of discussing essential features of evil, he “examines the unnecessary social and historical production of evil. Rather than discussing the evil urge”, he investigates “the production of evils – the evil things that make people’s lives bad: pain, suffering, loss, humiliation, damage, terror,

³ Lars Svendsen, *A Philosophy of Evil*. Champaign/London: Dalkey Archive Press 2010, p. 32.

⁴ Adi Ophir, *The Order of Evils. Toward an Ontology of Morals*. New York: Zone Books 2005, p. 22.

⁵ Ibid., p. 23.

alienation and ennui.”⁶ His impressive phenomenological study of “evils” picks up at one point the question of theodicy. I will return to it in a moment.

Voegelin ended his essay on *Die politischen Religionen* in 1938 with an enigmatic passage that refers to the theodicy. He wrote: “Neither knowledge nor Christian determination can solve the mystery of God and being. God’s creation contains evil, the splendor of Being is clouded by human misery, the order of the community is built on hate and blood, with misery and the apostasy of God. Schelling’s fundamental question – ‘Why is there something; why is there not nothing?’ – is followed by the other question, ‘Why is it the way it is?’ – the question of theodicy.”⁷ He didn’t elaborate on this passage then or anytime later. One doesn’t find any references to Schelling’s (or Leibniz’) theodicy in his lectures on ‘Hitler and the Germans’ either. When I mentioned in June to a friend in Munich, Dagmar Herwig, who had written her dissertation under Voegelin on Robert Musil’s magnificent novel on alienated existence, *The Man without Qualities*,⁸ and who had helped me with the German edition of the Hitler-lectures, that I wanted to revisit the question of evil, she became almost apoplectic: “Don’t re-theologize political philosophy! Voegelin has done a great job of keeping theology out of theory.” When I wrote her later that Jürgen Gebhardt had confirmed my suspicion that Voegelin never returned to an ontological understanding of evil and that the passage in *Political Religions* was in a way a speculative remnant of earlier intellectual interests in Satanism from his research in the early 1930s in Paris, she was relieved. But Jürgen Gebhardt

⁶ Ibid., p. 11.

⁷ Eric Voegelin, *The Political Religions*, in: E. Voegelin, *Modernity without Restraint*. Vol. 5 of *The Collected Works of E.V.*, ed. by Manfred Henningsen. Columbia/London: University of Missouri Press 2000, p. 71.

⁸ Dagmar Herwig, *Der Mensch in der Entfremdung. Studien zur Entfremdungsproblematik anhand des Werkes von Robert Musil*. Munich: List 1972.

reminded me of Voegelin's correspondence with Eduard Baumgarten, which is included in the *Correspondence* volume from 1924 to 1949 he has edited, where Voegelin tells Baumgarten about his satanic knowledge interests. He wrote in 1936: "I don't know if I ever told you that, for years now, I have been collecting material for a treatise on the 'devil', who appears to me very real, and I cannot foresee where the one series of experiences touches the other so that they could be systematically harmonized into one 'theory'. I have learned a great deal from the Satanism of the French and the English...; and as far as we Germans are concerned, he – the devil – seems to me to be so close to us that indeed we take him for God."⁹ Gebhardt comments in his introduction that Voegelin identified the "intra-mundane religions" as "religiously evil and satanic forces" and that he "held at times an ontological view of evil."¹⁰

I don't want to discuss Voegelin's suggestion that the devil may have a partly German DNA because that would certainly set off a new chapter in the debate about the uniqueness of the Holocaust. Whether he had, when making the comment to Baumgarten about the German divinization of the devil, also Goethe's *Faust* in mind I don't know. But I'm sure he would be somewhat disappointed rereading the tragedy today and the almost incomprehensible deal between Faust and Mephisto. The fate the young woman, Gretchen, suffers who was the price Mephisto had to pay for Faust surrendering his soul resembles circumstances that are daily staple for reality TV-shows or even soap operas. Even the fight Satan-Mephisto puts in on behalf of Faust against Gretchen's brother who

⁹ Letter to Eduard Baumgarten, September 13, 1936, in: Eric Voegelin, *Selected Correspondence 1924 – 1949*. Tr. from German by W. Petropulos and ed. by Jürgen Gebhardt. *Collected Works of E.V.* Vol. 29. Columbia/London: University of Missouri Press 2009, p. 135.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 34.

wants to punish Faust in a kind of tribal honor killing doesn't create any longer any exceptional responses. Goethe's *Faust I* has lost the power to inspire fear and trembling.

It is important to note that in the lectures on "Hitler and the Germans" he doesn't once mention the devil connection and he never uses 'satanic' as a qualifying adjective for Hitler. He discusses at one point at length the attempt by Percy Ernst Schramm, the medieval historian and editor of *Hitler's Table Talks* which provoked Voegelin's lectures in the first place, to provide Hitler by quoting Goethe with 'demonic' features. He ridicules Schramm's hermeneutic skills and then, using Alan Bullock's Hitler biography, talks about Hitler's end by suicide in the Führer's bunker in Berlin: "The end of the career of the libido without reason or spirit was reached. What he could not dominate he destroyed, and at the very end, he destroyed himself."¹¹ The critical language he is using on this occasion is that of Greek political philosophy.

Voegelin's portrayal of Hitler in the 1964 lectures is that of a man without any spiritual and rational qualities whose rhetorical skills and psychological stage presence made it possible for him to cover up the depth of his ignorance with the half baked ideas of a man who was self-taught. He never emerged in the lectures as a figure with any demonic or satanic characteristics. On the contrary, Voegelin's Hitler was scary because he made us understand that a man with these deficient qualities could become the leader of a country and take it with him to the edges of hell. Many readers of the lectures feel offended by the implication that a whole society fell for a man who was, according to Voegelin, actually a megalomaniacal fool or lunatic.

¹¹ Eric Voegelin, *Hitler and the Germans*. Tr. and ed. by D. Clemens and B. Purcell. *Collected Works of E.V.*, Vol. 31. London/Columbia: University of Missouri Press 1999, p. 154.

Hannah Arendt ran into similar responses with the subtitle of her *Eichmann in Jerusalem* book, namely *A Report on the Banality of Evil*. The 2011-exhibition on the Eichmann-Trial in the *Topographie des Terrors*-Museum in Berlin documents how the trial and Arendt's book became "inextricably linked". The catalogue elaborates what was on display on the walls of the exhibition: "She found it unsettling about Eichmann 'precisely that so many were like him, and that the many were neither perverted nor sadistic, and still are, terribly and terrifyingly normal.' She said that Eichmann, as a bureaucrat in a totalitarian state, acted without ideological zeal and was not a fanatic anti-Semite. Many found Arendt's judgment to be an untenable trivialization of the perpetrator."¹² As Voegelin did often in his lectures when talking about Hitler, Arendt couldn't help but emphasize the buffoon aspect of Eichmann's personality. She shrugged off the complaints about her confession that she had often to laugh loudly when reading Eichmann's answers in the Israeli police interrogation. "I can't do anything about it. But I can tell you one thing", she admitted in a German TV interview, "I would probably laugh three minutes before my certain death. And that, people say, is my style (*Ton*). The style is by and large ironic, naturally. That's completely true. The style is in this case the Mensch. If people charge me that I have accused the Jewish people: That's an ill-spirited propaganda lie and nothing else. The style, however, is the reservation about me as a person. I can't do anything about it."¹³ Having heard Voegelin's and Arendt's non-satanic views on evil, let's return to Adi Ohpir's phenomenological book, *The Order of Evils*.

¹² *Der Prozess – Adolf Eichmann vor Gericht./ Facing Justice -- Adolf Eichmann on Trial*. Berlin: Gedenk- und Bildungsstätte Haus der Wannsee-Konferenz/ Stiftung Topographie des Terrors/Stiftung Denkmal für die Ermordeten Juden Europas 2011, p. 246.

¹³ *Gespräch mit Hannah Arendt*. (The interview was conducted by Günter Gaus on 28 October 1964 in Zweites Deutsches Fernsehen). Munich: Piper 1965, p.18.

Ophir's aversion to an ontological casting of evil isn't that far removed from Voegelin's and Arendt's detachment when he writes: "Either there is or there isn't a God. If there is a God, it is necessary to explain why a world that could have been less evil is so replete with superfluous evils. All answers that ascribe Evil to human limitations should be sent back to their authors with the demand of an answer to why an omnipotent and boundlessly good God created human beings (and animals) so limited, why human limitation must be expressed through such a variety of horrendous forms of suffering, and why human beings need such suffering to understand that Evil is simply an 'absence'." Ophir concludes his overview of options with three choices: "... a wicked God, an exhausted God, or a dead God. And the responsibility for making this choice is ours."¹⁴ He engages the questions of the classic theodicy in elaborate detail in order to abandon them in the end and to accept "order of evils" as a name for the existential wasteland in which humans find themselves situated everywhere.

This process of constructively removing layers of doctrines ends with an understanding of 'Auschwitz' without a halo. On the way to that ending, he discusses Kant's notion of radical evil that Hannah Arendt viewed as the conceptual opposite of the banality she experienced in the trial in Jerusalem. He dismisses Kant's answers not out of hand but makes us understand why the Kantian Arendt disagreed with the philosopher's position. The "order of evils" that Ophir sees as the only acceptable formulation for the universal human condition contradicts Kant's understanding. When Kant is thinking about humans he means not, as he spells out in *The Contest of Faculties* (1798), "any

¹⁴ Ophir, *Order of Evils*, p. 441.

specific conception of mankind”, but the “whole of humanity”.¹⁵ He makes it clear that this human condition, which is found in its basic features everywhere, “remains unchanged”, stretched between good and evil.¹⁶ In his essay on *Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone* (1793) he clarifies his understanding of evil when he speaks of the “propensity to evil in human nature”. Kant concedes that this propensity may be innate but “can also be regarded as having been acquired if it is good), or brought by man upon himself (if it is evil).” Actualization of good and evil, however, is determined by free will. Still, this propensity can be considered “as belonging universally to mankind ..., it may be called a natural propensity in man to evil.” In a more detailed elaboration he talks about stages of actualization of free will and writes: “First, there is the weakness of the human heart in the general observance of adopted maxims, or in other words, the frailty of human nature; second, the propensity for mixing unmoral with moral motivating causes ..., that is impurity; third, the propensity to adopt evil maxims, that is the wickedness of human nature or of the human heart.”¹⁷

It is certainly questionable whether Kant’s categories cover the whole terrain of evil in the 20th and 21st century. Yet he recognizes at least that the evil propensity is “rooted in humanity itself. Hence we can call this a natural propensity to evil, and as we must, after all, ever hold man himself responsible for it, we can further call it a radical innate evil in human nature (yet none the less brought upon us by ourselves).”¹⁸ The illustrations, however, that he provides for this “radical evil” seem to indicate that he connects these acts of behavior primarily with people being connected in his time “with

¹⁵ Immanuel Kant, *The Contest of Faculties*, in: Kant, *Political Writings*. Ed. H. Reiss. Cambridge: Cambridge Texts in the History of Political Thought 1991, p. 177.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 179.

¹⁷ I. Kant, *Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone*. New York: Harper Torchbooks 1960, p. 23f.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 28.

the state of nature”, since they are all from reports about James Cook’s travels in the South Pacific.¹⁹ Kant’s imagination fails to think the unimaginable that became reality in Germany, Russia, China and other parts of the world, in societies that had historically overcome the state of nature centuries ago. For his enlightenment mind, humanity had worked itself out of the state of natural un-freedom and wasn’t going to fall back. He hoped: “Violence will gradually become less on the part of those in power, and obedience to the laws will increase.”²⁰ Free will, though a qualifying distinction for all humanity, irrespective of its geographical setting, seems for Kant to become robust the more “civilized” the conditions are under which humans find themselves situated (*a thesis that Louis Herman will have some fun with later on the panel*, MH). He makes references to “providence” but lets it form some kind of alliance with progress: “And in view of the frailty of human nature and the fortuitous circumstances which can intensify its effects, we can expect man’s hopes of progress to be fulfilled only under the positive condition of a higher wisdom (which, if it is invisible to us, is known as providence); and in so far as human beings can themselves accomplish anything or anything can be expected of them, it can only be through their negative wisdom in furthering their own ends. In the latter event, they will find themselves compelled to ensure that war, the greatest obstacle to morality and invariable enemy of progress, first becomes gradually more humane, then more infrequent, and finally disappears completely as a mode of aggression.”²¹

Kant rejects original sin as the origin of evil: “However the origin of moral evil in man is constituted, surely of all the explanations of the spread and propagation of this evil through all members and generations of our race (*alle Glieder unserer Gattung*), the most

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 29.

²⁰ Kant, *Contest of Faculties*, p. 188.

²¹ Ibid., p. 189.

inept is that which describes it as descending to us as an inheritance from our first parents...”²² Schelling whom Voegelin quoted in 1938 at the end of *Die politischen Religionen* had a different view. In his essay *Philosophical Investigations into the Essence of Human Freedom* from 1809 – Kant had died in 1804 – he actually restores in the context of discussing human freedom the notion of theodicy. He writes: “Thus God appears undeniably to share responsibility for evil in so far as permitting an entirely dependent being to do evil is surely not much better than to cause it to do so. Or, likewise, the reality of evil must be denied in one way or another. The proposition that everything positive in creatures comes from God must also be asserted in this system. If it is now assumed that there is something positive in evil then this positive comes also from God.”²³ Schelling’s radical search returns to the beginning: “For the simple reflection that only man (*Mensch*), the most complete of all visible creatures, is capable of evil, shows already that the ground of evil could not in any way lie in lack or deprivation. The devil, according to the Christian point of view, was not the most limited creature, but rather the least limited one. Imperfection in the general metaphysical sense is not the common character of evil, since evil often shows itself united with an excellence of individual forces, which far more rarely accompanies the good.”²⁴

I don’t want to go into the intricacies of Schelling’s reflections; I simply wanted to emphasize that there exists another way of speaking about evil. It is possible that most scholars of genocide and terror will not take this route because one of the obvious consequences of this thinking would be that historical specificities, including the

²² Kant, *Religion with the Limits of Reason Alone*, p. 35.

²³ Friedrich Wilhelm Joseph Schelling, *Philosophical Investigations into the Essence of Human Freedom*. Albany: Suny Press 2006, p. 23.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 36f.

uniqueness of the Holocaust, would become less important. The notion of a universal human propensity for evil would take the sting out of cultural reductionism since the willingness of executioners to commit their heinous acts or to participate in them or to do nothing is coded into human nature from the beginning of creation. On the other hand, Schelling's evil universalism makes it easier to understand orgies of killing like the ones that took place in 1965-1966 in Indonesia and especially in the island of Bali. Driving through Bali in July 2011 and being taken in, despite the forest of billboards, by the natural beauty that competes with Hawai'i for the paradise label, one is unprepared for Christian Gerlach's chapter on Indonesia in his book *Extremely Violent Societies* (2010). Yet his description of "spontaneous, rather uncontrolled pogrom-like events involving large crowds that tended to commit murder indiscriminately"²⁵ call for the kind of universal language that is based on Schelling's ontological understanding of human nature. His biblical metaphorology can be stripped to its existential core in order to make it applicable to the Bali of 1,000 Hindu temples that allowed the mass killing of tens of thousands of people to take place, which were suspected of nothing else but being affiliated with the Communist Party or some other left-leaning organization.

²⁵ Christian Gerlach, *Extremely Violent Societies. Mass Violence in the Twentieth-Century World*. Cambridge/New York: Cambridge University Press 2010, p. 40.