Standing between Us and Our Grave Wrongdoings

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This, however, is certain: upon them and only upon them, who are filled with genuine fear of the inescapable guilt of the human race, can there be any reliance when it comes to fighting fearlessly, uncompromisingly, everywhere against the incalculable evil that men are capable of bringing about.

Hannah Arendt, 1945

Antisemism (not merely the hatred of Jews), imperialism (not merely conquest), totalitarianism (not merely dictatorship)—one after the other, one more brutally than the other, have demonstrated that human dignity needs a new guarantee which can be found only in a new political principle, in a new law on earth.

Hannah Arendt, 1950

1. STILL LEARNING FROM HANNAH ARENDT ABOUT EVIL

I have found in the work of Hannah Arendt a wealth of insights that continue to attract me intellectually because engaging with them critically has usually turned into an opportunity for thinking, or thinking anew, about some of my questions regarding violence and politics. But, since Arendt wrote about and for her time, and since my interests are in practical ideas that may be of some use in the present, the significance and worth of her intuitions, views, and historico-theoretical analyses to the present in which I think and write has been an issue for me. When it comes to a normative understanding of evil and how to respond to it, the issue of relevance
gets complicated by my reluctance to center evil, though not grave wrongdoings, as a practical concern and my worries about the ideological enlistments of the notion of evil post 9/11, especially given its still strong connections to religious doctrines.1

It is easy to find in Arendt’s writings support for my suspicions of the political uses of the idea of evil and the importance of religious connotations to the mobilizing success of branding states or groups as evil. In her analysis of anti-Semitism, imperialist and nationalist racisms, as well as of totalitarianism, Arendt pointed out how bifurcated absolute values such as “good” and “evil” are invoked in order to unify and rally people in ways that jeopardize liberal-democratic processes. In addition, though Arendt declared at the end of World War II that a significant outcome of the realization that the Nazis were overall quite ordinary people is that “the problem of evil will be the fundamental question of post-war intellectual life in Europe,”2 both then and later she criticized the tendency to demonize Nazi cruelties because she was worried that it would undermine holding Nazis to account for their actions and called attention to the semi-religious manichean assumptions or messianic world views that demonizations of this sort presuppose.

Still, worried as she was about the political abuses of evil and mistakes already made in the immediate post-war period in analyses that tried to explain Nazi conduct with reference to evil, Arendt herself continued to use the word “evil” in her work, did not withdraw her claim about the centrality of “the problem of evil,” and seems to have considered it as important beyond the confines of post-war intellectual life in Europe. Her early views and her own later comments about changes that her intellectual concerns underwent since the immediate post World War II period have led to the interpretive construction of *Eichmann in Jerusalem* and some post-Eichmann in Jerusalem essays3 as the primary works in which Arendt herself finally took on the intellectual task of probing into “the problem of evil.”

Arendt made two suggestions in *Eichmann in Jerusalem* that were quite controversial when the book was first published. Both are best seen in light of her interest in developing explanations that leave room for holding evil doers accountable for their evil deeds. One of her suggestion was that Adolf Eichmann, from 1941 one of the chief Nazi planners for and executers of “the Final Solution to the Jewish Question,” had quite “banal” motives for joining the Nazi Party and the S.S.,

3. The commonly used edition of *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (New York: Penguin Books) and the one I am using is the revised 1964 edition but the book’s first publication took place in 1963 and the essays on which it is based were published in *The New Yorker* in 1961. Some of the most important post-Eichmann essays that touch on questions regarding the human capacity for evil have been collected by Jerome Kohn into *Responsibility and Judgment* (New York: Schocken Books, 2003), The 1964 “Personal Responsibility under Dictatorship” which is part of this collection (17–48), offers a few autobiographical remarks that it was indeed her witnessing of and reporting about Eichmann’s trial that led her back to thinking about the human capacity for evil.
and for pursuing (without much success) advancement in the S.S. ranks as a specialist for “the Jewish Question.” The other suggestion was that sometimes due to “banal” motives, sometimes because they could not imagine alternatives, and almost always because they did not consider simply refusing the Nazis, the members of the Jewish Councils, which were set up by the Nazis to facilitate the implementation of their genocidal plans, were complicit in the Holocaust.4

Arendt might have been wrong about Eichmann. He could have been a psychopath, which fits with her description of him as someone who did not take the perspective of his victims.5 But, even if wrong about Eichmann, Arendt’s suggestion that ordinary people engage in grave wrongdoings for “banal” reasons that for them trump moral considerations and intuitions that might have pulled or pushed them to choose and act differently, has been corroborated empirically6 and so remains relevant for the present, which, unfortunately, is still riddled with atrocities. As a result of present atrocities, there is a continued need for the kind of historical and local human-size explanations of human evil deeds and if, like Arendt, one is concerned with accountability, explanations that do not elide the possibility of holding evil doers accountable for their deeds. One is reminded to look for such explanations, if one is attuned to the idea of the “banality of evil.”

The needs of the present require also heeding Arendt’s second controversial suggestion and paying attention to the contributions of the complicity of members of victim groups to the victimization of their group. Arendt was wrong to believe that refusal by the Jewish Councils to comply with Nazi demands would have undermined the Nazi plans enough to result in a notably better rate of Jewish survival. But, she was not wrong to think of complicity as part of the larger picture that was the Holocaust. Independently of how rationalized, complicity of the kind that the Jewish Councils were involved in, just like the choices and acts of perpetrators, needs to be explained historically and locally and, again, if one is concerned with accountability, in such a way that holding people who are complicit in evil deeds accountable for them is possible.7

Richard Bernstein believes that in addition to Arendt’s ideas about the dangers of political abuses of the notion of evil and “banal evil,” Arendt’s idea of “radical evil” is also relevant for the present.8 He is especially interested in her

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7. For an interesting example at theorizing complicity, which is undertheorized, see Claudia Card’s development of Primo Levi’s idea of “grey zones” in The Atrocity Paradigm: A Theory of Evil (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002).
8. Bernstein argues for the relevance of Arendt’s thought in “Are Arendt’s Reflections on Evil Still Relevant?” The Review of Politics 70 (2008): 64–76. He lists the idea of “banal evil” and
conception of it as a treatment of people that is worse than treating them as means and therefore as superfluous and so as beings who are human and at the same time outside of humanity and, therefore, are not known and understood, protected, or remembered, in the usual ways that insiders to humanity are. Bernstein believes that thinking in terms of a superfluous humanity illuminates the grave wrongness of the situation of the vast number of contemporary refugees and stateless persons. Arguing along similar lines Patrick Hyden points out that the Arendtian idea of superfluous humanity can be used to illuminate the grave wrongness of the situation of additional groups as well and especially that of the global poor.

There is, I think, more to Arendt’s ideas about “radical evil” that is probably relevant to the present. Taking *The Origins of Totalitarianism* and *Eichmann in Jerusalem* together one can construct for Arendt a two-pronged explanation of the necessary but not sufficient conditions for the occurrence of “radical evil.” Recall that Arendt claimed that the intellectual challenge that is posed by the “problem of evil” is a function of the realization that overall the Nazis were ordinary people. This realization implies another, which is that the capacity for evil deeds is quite human and ordinary. But if so, what needs explaining is why and how only sometimes does the ordinary capacity for grave wrongdoings ends in the actual performance of “radically” evil deeds.

The first prong of the explanation is part of Arendt’s construction of a diagnostic distinction between wrongdoings. The distinction invokes the social, political and legal conditions of their possibility as critical to their understanding. The second prong of the explanation is part of observations that Arendt makes regarding the fragility of ordinary morality. The fragility in question is of both the moral self and the moral community in which this self is embedded. In what follows I discuss each part of the Arendtian explanation of “radical evil” in turn, tease out some of their implications, and consider the value that an Arendtian explanation holds for the present.

## 2. EVIL DEEDS: DIAGNOSTIC DISTINCTIONS

Arendt’s deepest apprehensions with regard to grave wrongdoings revolves around a subset of what she takes to be preventable evil deeds—appalling her concern about abuses of the idea of evil as relevant as well. Bernstein argues for the importance of thinking about evil in the present in *Radical Evil: A Philosophical Interrogation* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2002).

9. This theme of Arendt has been elaborated on by Giorgio Agamben starting with *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1998).


11. The commonly used edition of *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (New York: Harcourt Brace and Company) is the 1958 revised edition and it is the edition that I am using. The 1958 edition includes analyses that Arendt developed after the publication of the first edition in 1951. The first edition contains analyses on which Arendt had been at work since the mid-1940s.

12. Arendt’s commitments to human freedom were such that she would have not tried to identify any “sufficient conditions.” For her, history is always contingent in the sense that it could be otherwise.
violations of people that are systematically sanctioned, incited, or tolerated by political regimes, organizations, or movements. According to Arendt, the systematic sanctioning, incitement, or toleration of such evil deeds assumes, facilitates, and even institutes their normalizing revaluation. They also lead to the incorporation of the performance of these evil deeds and their revaluations into the positive identity of the political regimes, organizations, or movements that do so and into the positive identity of their members. Furthermore, they merge, amplify, and augment them in ways that radicalize them.

What I believe Arendt suggests is an uncommon distinction between evil deeds. According to this distinction, a particular grave wrongdoing, say a rape, while an appalling violation, is not so in exactly the same way in all situations. Rather, its magnitude and therefore radicality depend on its position in the nexus of social relations and the normative understanding of its worth and how these constitute the context of its performance and its meaning. What defines rape as a grave wrongdoing in the first place is that it is a seriously harmful transgression. But, it matters whether its performance is socially marginalized, detested, criminalized, and punishable under law, or alternatively, though considered in negative terms, also put up with and somehow exempted, as many rapes still are. It matters even more if the informal acceptance of and consequent immunity for rape happens in the context of violent conflicts, as were, for example, the rapes of about two million German women and girls, mostly by gangs of Russian soldiers, during the last six months of World War II. And it matters in yet another way if rapes are officially or semi-officially sanctioned, incited, or tolerated as in the case of 200–500 thousand rapes of primarily Tutsi women and girls by groups of Hutu men that took place during the Rwandan Genocide (1994) or the 20–60 thousand rapes of mostly Bosnian women and girls by Serb soldiers and militias that took place in rape camps or rape houses but also throughout towns and villages during the Bosnian War (1992–1995).13

Generally, when rape is tolerated, while it remains a grave wrongdoing, its normative understanding as such is blunted and becomes ambiguous and confusing. This is so even in the case of war rapes, as extensive as they may be. War rapes may, however, be closer as a type to genocidal rapes. As Claudia Card argues, genocidal rapes are different. Like all rapes they involve an instrumentalization of their victims. But, they also can and many times do result in the victims’ “social death,” due to the exclusions of the victims of genocidal rapes from their communities of origins and their rejection from other communities as well.14


14. The basic feminist argument regarding rape highlights and calls attention to it being a violation of dignity and the invisibilization of this normative fact about rape in patriarchal sexist societies. See, for example, Susan Brownmiller’s *Against Our Will: Men, Women, and Rape* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1975). Feminists have offered an analysis of rape in war and during genocide in an attempt to articulate the importance of the socio-normative circumstances in which a rape takes place. Claudia Card’s work has been pivotal in this effort. See her “Rape as a Weapon of War,” *Hypatia* 11 (1996): 5–18 and “The Paradox of Genocidal Rape Aimed at Enforced
Rape is not Arendt’s exemplary case of an evil deed that can be and has been radicalized through its sanctioning, incitement, and toleration. Her exemplary case is murder—an unjustifiable and inexcusable killing—that in most organized societies is a marginalized, shocking, yet a “limited evil” because “the murderer still moves within the realm of life and death familiar to us.” According to Arendt, murder changed quite significantly in the context of the Nazi movement and regime.

The Nazi movement committed a familiar version of murder when its members used it as a politically motivated and instrumentally rationalized technique of intimidation. Murder’s success as a technique of intimidation depends on the relative strength of the rule of law. Nazi murder was successful as a technique of intimidation because the Weimar Republic was too weak to intervene with any of the politically motivated murders between 1918–1919 and 1933 and especially with Nazi-committed murders and, consequently, its instrumental value for the Nazis increased in accordance.

The instrumentality of murder had another dimension for the Nazis since it consolidates relations among the members of the Nazi movement, just as it consolidates relations among members of criminal groups. In the case of the Nazis, Arendt points out, “murders were publicly paraded and officially admitted... so that open complicity made it well-nigh impossible for members to quit the movement.” Unless particularly outraged and courageous, members of the Nazi movement did not leave the movement and eventually could not leave because the “public parading” of murder by the Nazis condoned Nazi-committed murders and distinguished all Nazis, independently of their actual roles and relations to specific Nazi-committed murders, from non-Nazis as it made them aware that through their affiliation and complicity in the murders committed by some Nazis, they have “left for good the normal world which outlaws murder.”

For Arendt, the Nazi world, which was a world in which murder was not outlawed and was often required and applauded, is best understood as a world that embodies two fundamental action-guiding principles. One principle—“everything is permitted”—was shared by the Nazi movement and the regime that the Nazis put in place starting in 1933. According to Arendt, the Nazi regime is best understood in light of the concentration camps that the Nazis began to establish within weeks of Adolf Hitler’s appointment as Chancellor and where it took on its most


dystopian dimensions. She argued that the Nazi concentration camps revealed the institutionalization of the principle that “everything is permitted” and an additional principle according to which “everything is possible.”

Arendt suggested that the difference between the two Nazi principles is that even for the Nazis the principle that “everything is permitted” was understood as still connected to utilitarian and self-interested motives. The principle that “everything is possible” was disconnected from such motives and so did not impose even constraints that would otherwise be imposed by utilitarian or self-interested calculi. This is why as an action-guiding principle it pushed action further and further and opened the space for people to engage in acts and practices that are otherwise inconceivable. Arendt was aware that her distinction may seem rather implausible and suggested that the feeling of implausibility is a function of a strong temptation to comprehend Nazi practices with conceptual tools that fail to make sense of them. To emphasize this point Arendt asked, “What meaning has the concept of murder when we are confronted with the mass production of corpses?”

For Arendt, who could have but did not choose to use the concept of genocide when formulating her question, even this (new) concept did not do the right conceptual work, or at best did it only partially. This is because a “mass production of corpses” of the kind that took place in Nazi concentration camps, may be but is not necessarily one or more genocides—the Nazis engaged in politicides and interned “ordinary” criminals in their concentration camps—and the corpses that were mass produced in the concentration camps, unlike in the case of murder, were not always biologically dead. What is, then, problematic about the term “genocide” for Arendt is that by focusing attention on the extermination of groups and their cultures it shifts attention away from individuals whose individuality is both deeply embedded in their cultures but at the same time is unique to them. Because individuality is an achievement, murder is just one of the many ways that can be undertaken to eliminate an individualized individual. And so Arendt notes that, “the very thing that must be realized is that the psyche can be destroyed even without the destruction of the physical man” and the end result of the various practices that were intentionally enacted in Nazi concentration camps on an industrial scale as large as the one that produced biologically dead corpses was “inanimate men; men who can no longer be psychologically understood.”

20. Arendt must have been familiar with the term. Raphael Lemkin was arguing for the importance of recognizing the crime of genocide for what it is in various forums before the 1951 publication of The Origins of Totalitarianism. The United Nations General Assembly declared in 1946 that genocide is a crime under international law (Resolution 96 [I]). The Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide was approved by the General Assembly of the United Nations in 1948 and came into force in 1951. For a discussion of conceptual relations between Arendt and Lemkin see Seyla Benhabib’s “International Law and Human Plurality in the Shadow of Totalitarianism: Hannah Arendt and Raphael Lemkin,” Constellations 16 (2009): 331–350.
21. Arendt, Origins of Totalitarianism, 441. Arendt’s observations agree with many psychological studies. But Arendt’s claims are not just about the inmates who were victimized by the Nazis, they are also about the Nazis themselves. She might have been somewhat wrong on this point.
Arendt’s analysis of the duality of the “mass production of corpses” in the Nazi concentration camps is innovative. However, it suffers from a similar problem to that suffered by the term “genocide” and captures just one of the ways in which evil deeds were radicalized in the concentration camps and in some cases in similar ways in Nazi Germany. The Nazi concentration camps were sites where multiple grave wrongdoings took place flagrantly and all the time side by side with “the mass production of corpses,” with many but not necessarily all, contributing to it. The enormity of these wrongdoings is staggering especially when taking into consideration that the Nazis operated concentrations camps for twelve years and that during this time the camps processed for murder on arrival or housed millions of people, most surviving a very short time.  

Less shocking by themselves but horrifying in context are the economic crimes that took place in the camps. Fitting with the pervasive systematic pillaging in which Nazi Germany engaged, plunder was also systematic in the camps. The camps had warehouses in which, especially after 1939 when World War II began, the last few belongings of incoming victims, such as clothes, shoes, and hairbrushes, were sorted and temporarily stored and from which they were shipped out for distribution. They also had warehouses for the temporary storage of the silver and gold that was extracted from victims’ teeth. These, like other silver and gold items that made their way into the camps, were sent to the Reichsbank. Slave labor was routine at the camps and inmates worked in the camps themselves or were sent out to work. Between 1941 and 1945, for example, about 400,000 people who were encamped in Auschwitz, half of them Jewish, were deployed as slave laborers. In 1944, 83,000 of them worked for I.G. Farben, which opened a factory near Auschwitz in 1942. Torture, planned starvation, rape, and the arbitrary abuse of detainees as a pastime were commonplace. Less common but still widespread were the cruel medical human experiments that took place in seven major camps: Auschwitz, Buchenwald, Dachau, Natzweiler, Neuengamme, Ravensbrueck, and Sachsenhausen.

3. THE FRAGILITY OF MORALITY

One need not agree with all of Arendt’s distinctions among evil deeds in order to agree with what I take to be the major claim that she makes when she draws them, which is that there are socio-political conditions in which grave wrongdoings proliferate, intensify, and crystallize into patterned practices that become part of the socio-political conditions in question, and there are socio-political conditions that are less conducive to the proliferations, intensifications, and crystallizations of grave wrong doings and so are not themselves changed to incorporate them. Since


socio-political conditions are human-made, the standard normative move when finding fault with them is to look for better normative action guidance. Arendt was not quick to take such a turn when thinking about what can and should be done to intervene with and prevent evil deeds such as those that were performed under the auspices and as a constitutive aspect of Nazi totalitarianism.

For Arendt, in mid-twentieth century, with the experiences of the Holocaust and World War II still raw, it was obvious that ordinary moral understandings, irrespective of whether they are represented by principles, virtues, or conscience, each in its way motivating the acceptance of and compliance with simple yet central moral precepts, such as “do not kill,” are terribly fragile. Arendt reported that for her, the discovery of this fragility began to reveal itself more clearly when she began thinking about the “coordination” of beliefs, opinions, and attitudes that the majority of Germans, including the educated elite, engaged in due to their eagerness to have a part in the Nazi utopian future. As a result of this “coordination” social relations were quickly remade and “life long friendships were broken and discarded.” Arendt describes these changes as features of a “moral disintegration” that was first “hardly perceptible to outsiders” and was “a kind of dress rehearsal for its total breakdown which was to occur during the war years.”

Since Arendt studied and in some of her work turned to Greek philosophers for an intellectual conversation from which to learn about a variety of moral and political issues, one should probably take her at her own words when she explains the delay in her own thinking about the “moral problem” that the Nazi movement and regime made apparent. What she appeals to is lack of preparation that resulted from being trained to analyze socio-political failures and to take moral conduct for granted. Describing herself and her peers she says that, “To be sure, every once in a while we were confronted with moral weakness, with lack of steadfastness or loyalty, with this curious, almost automatic yielding under pressure, especially of public opinion ... but we had no idea how serious such things were and least of all where they could lead. ... and I am afraid we cared even less.”

Arendt realized that starting in 1933 that not knowing or caring about the “moral problem” that she was observing but not exactly understanding, while it was altering her life forever, was compounded by moral intuitions that she and others had and that resulted in “unspeakable” moral outrage at the horrors that were unfolding. “In this speechless horror” she writes, “we all tended to forget the strictly moral and manageable lessons we were taught before and would be taught again.”

Arendt does not specify what these lessons are. But her writings suggest three such lessons. One of them is about the strength of the temptation to do

27. Martha Nussbaum has analysed the Greek philosophical tradition regarding the fragility of morality in The Fragility of Goodness: Luck and Ethics in Greek Tragedy and Philosophy (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1986).
wrong. Arendt was especially concerned with a version of this temptation—the argument that when presented with a choice between two evils, one ought to opt for the “lesser” one. Arendt argues that in the context of Nazi Germany the argument made no moral sense because the wrongdoings and violations one was presented with under Nazism were too extreme to be considered along a continuum that allows for normatively acceptable quantitative distinctions between evils. In addition, Arendt called attention to the habituation of thought and action that take place as one chooses “lesser” evils. In the case of the Nazis this had pernicious consequences as, for example, when people accepted “a very gradual sequence of anti-Jewish measures.”

A second lesson is that in the case of adult morality, one ought to rethink the idea of “obedience” to a moral rule that is implicit in the ideas of moral duties or moral obligations. Arendt became acutely aware of the problem as she tried to understand Adolph Eichmann’s claim that he adhered to the Kantian categorical imperative. What she concludes is that where there is a “moral disintegration” of the kind that took place in Germany, “what will be left is the mere habit of holding on fast to something.” Obedience, then, is dangerous. It habituates to itself and so to more obedience and under conditions of “moral disintegration” the outcome is an empty adherence to a semblance of moral rules. Arendt believed that if “obedience” is marginalized, or better excluded from morality, morality opens up to critical thought and judgment, according to her, an essential trait of people who were able to maintain their moral integrity even under the conditions imposed by the Nazis. This is the beginning of Arendt’s third lesson.

Arendt’s remarks about the importance of critical thinking and judgment for a morality that is stressed by social and political conditions has been taken as the primary lesson that Arendt learned from her analyses of Nazi Germany and of people like Eichmann. Critical thinking and judgment are complicated and can be quite demanding and Arendt was aware of this. For Arendt, however, and this is where the third lesson leads her, there is a version of critical thinking and judgment that most adults can partake in easily, exactly because it is not especially burdening. It is captured by a question that she thinks one ought to pose to oneself in order to avoid obedience and deal with the temptation of wrongdoing or complicity with

31. I borrow this phrase from Cynthia Willett who develops it in Maternal Ethics and Other Slave Moralities (New York: Routledge, 1995).
wrongdoing. Its general form is “Can I live with the wrongdoer that I will become if I perform (or are complicit in) the wrongdoing I am tempted to perform (or become complicit in)?”36 To the extent that the question is slightly more complicated than it appears, it is because it is intended to be asked a second time if the first answer to it is affirmative. Namely, it is directing one to question not only what appears to oneself as what one is willing to live with but one’s own sense of moral integrity.

The kind of questioning that Arendt advocated presupposes that wrongdoing is still normatively meaningful for people and that one can still perceive murder (and rape), and other grave wrongdoings as they “really” are—appalling violations of some sort. It also presupposes that moral mental life involves and includes internal conversations between oneself and oneself about the moral self that one is and desires to be in the future. Another of its presuppositions is that the internal conversations people have with themselves have the power to motivate their choices and future actions. All of these presuppositions are problematic. As Arendt herself shows, it is possible to create an alternate reality. As to the conversations about their future moral selves that people have with themselves, they may be and often are forms of rationalizations. And, people are social animals and much more heteronomous than autonomous when it comes to the inducement of changes in their moral selves.37

4. NOW WHAT?

As problematic as the presuppositions are, they do not undermine a weak enough version of the kind of questioning that Arendt advocates. She could have added to her advocacy that one have friends that are similarly inclined toward critical thinking and judgment. She could also allow for rationalization but insist on there being some space for a genuine internal conversation, and she could also insist that even an alternate reality cannot make the truth fully disappear. After all, where there are grave violations, there is visible suffering that would cause enough of a discomfort for most people that they would necessarily be facing a choice that can, and Arendt is arguing that they ought to be, accompanied by moral self-doubts.

Notwithstanding, to me this seems to be far from promising a challenge to “radical evil.” Everyday, even if not complicit in, I am a bystander to grave wrongdoings. Some are performed in my name. From others I benefit economically. Others I just know of because I am a news junkie. Even when I question myself along Arendtian lines about the moral self that I become as I go on accepting my situation on a daily basis, I am usually not motivated to do much more than I already do.38

37. This is suggested by studies of morality and moral choice by neuroscientists. The literature is vast. One can trace one line of it on Jonathan Haidt’s webpage at http://people.virginia.edu/~jdh6n/
38. The issue that I am facing is that of moral demandingness and others have placed the lines differently then I have placed them for myself. See Peter Singer’s original engagement with this issue in his 1972 “Famine, Affluence and Morality;” Philosophy and Public Affairs 1 (1972): 229–43.
Arendt, though, does not put all of her expectations for the prevention of or intervention with “radical evil” on moral self-doubts. She puts some of them behind collective political action. On the face of it this is strange because her analyses of anti-Jewish anti-Semitism, imperialism, and totalitarianism, the French and American revolutions, the post World War II political situations in Europe and the United States, Zionism, and of modernity more generally show that like morality, politics, and therefore also law, are also always fragile.

But amidst the fragility Arendt found a story of political resilience that serves as the counterstory to the story of Eichmann (which stands in for the stories of Nazi perpetrators and their many collaborators) and the story of the Jewish Councils (which stands in for stories of complicity with the Nazis). This is the story of what took place in Denmark after its occupation by the Nazis began on April 9, 1940. The Germans hoped to set up in Denmark a model of cooperation. While some cooperation did take place, governmental cooperation undermined the Danish Nazi party, which was unable to garner strong popular support (it won 1.8 percent of the popular vote in 1939 and 2.1 percent of the popular vote in 1943).

“One is tempted to recommend the story” of the conduct of the Danish government and people, Arendt writes, “as required reading in political science for all students who wish to learn something about the enormous power potential inherent in non-violent action and in resistance to an opponent possessing vastly superior means of violence.”39 The story as Arendt tells it has several elements. The first is about both recognizing social difference (such as that of Jewish religion) and refusing it politically as grounds for official segregation. The second element took the first further by extending the recognition and refusal from the about 7,500 Danish Jewish citizens to the 1,000 or so non-Danish Jewish refugees and their 700 non-Jewish relatives. The third involved active intervention in any attempts at pogrom-like behavior by Danish Nazi supporters in 1941 and 1942, when arson was tried in Copenhagen synagogues. The fourth extended activity to the actual rescue of most of the Jewish population (Danish and endangered refugees) who were offered places to hide in Denmark as well as smuggled from occupied Denmark to neutral Sweden. As a result of the rescue, only about 470 of the Jews residing in Denmark were caught by the Nazis who acted without the Danish authorities and police cooperation, and only about 120 died in the Holocaust.

Arendt believes that the best way to interpret the many actions that constitute these four-elements story is in political terms40 and says of the non-Jewish Danes that they acted out of an “authentic political sense, an inbred comprehension of the requirements and responsibilities of citizenship and independence.”41 Leny Yahil concurs with Arendt’s interpretation. According to her, “the Danish populace and leadership had feared a serious assault on their national freedom and

41. Arendt, Eichmann in Jerusalem, 179.
the democratic character of their society... and took the threat to the Jews to be just the tip of the iceberg."42

There are, of course, ways to detract from the Danish rescue story. Unlike Arendt, who emphasizes the non-Jewish Danes’ sense of citizenship as inclusive of all who resided in Denmark, Yahil unintentionally implies that they were protecting the Jews in order to protect themselves, which they saw as different from the Jews. One can then go on to point out that self-interest might have been an even stronger motive than it seems since in 1943 the Danes knew that the Nazis could be and were likely to be defeated. The war took a decisive turn in February, when the Soviet Union won the Battle of Stalingrad. By May the German Afrika Korps and Italian forces in North Africa surrendered to the allies. And in early September Italy surrendered to the Allies. The Danish resistance, however, could have not acted on this to motivate actions that would make Denmark better off at the end of the war. The Resistance would have known that the Allies expected the war to go on for a while (and in the case of Denmark it lasted till Germany withdrew its forces from Denmark starting on May 5, 1945). Moreover, elsewhere the Nazis still found collaborators. Between May and July 1944, when it was well known that the Nazis were on the retreat, the Hungarian government and gendarmes, in cooperation with Eichmann, gathered and deported 440 thousand Jews, most of whom ended in Auschwitz.

Even when compared to other rescue stories,43 the Danish story stands out. The Jewish population of Bulgaria (about fifty thousand people) also survived the Holocaust quite intact. But Bulgaria’s story includes the institutionalization of anti-Jewish legislation starting in 1940, voluntary association with Nazi Germany from 1941, when Bulgaria joined the Axis, and the extraction of labor from Jewish men who were drafted into forced labor from 1941. In addition, Bulgaria expelled twenty thousand Jews from the capital Sofia to Bulgarian provinces and it did not shelter non-Bulgarian Jews but rather to the contrary deported them.44

Some other rescuers saved more Jews then the Danes. The most famous of them is Raoul Wallenberg who with the authorization of the Swedish government and the aid of colleagues from the Swedish legation probably saved close to 100 thousand Hungarian Jews at the very time that the Hungarian government tried to deport them. While no other rescuers might have saved as many Jews, many who did not have as much help as Wallenberg did still succeeded in helping more Jews than the non-Jewish Danes. For example, in June 1940 Aristides de Sousa Mendes,


43. For information about rescuers see http://www1.yadvashem.org/yv/en/righteous/index.asp

a Portuguese diplomat stationed in Bordeaux, deliberately disobeyed Portuguese official policy and issued 12 thousand visas to Jews seeking to leave occupied France. Nonetheless, even when compared to other resistance movements, only the non-Jewish Danes, though probably motivated in many different ways in addition to their sense of themselves as Danish citizens, acted in concert to help their fellow citizens and extended themselves to refugees as well.45

Like Arendt, I find the Danish story unique and inspiring. With her I think that it is an excellent teaching story and one that recommends trusting political action as a response to exactly the subset of grave wrongdoings that she thought can and ought to be prevented. Indeed it is the kind of story that shows that “radical evil” can be intervened with and stopped. At the same time, though, the story does not teach what has to be done. According to Arendt, the only thing it actually teaches is about the potential of non-violent political action. For Arendt, that is good enough. The role of stories is to reveal possibilities rather than offer action guidance.

The story, though, is of course suggestive in some ways. For example, it seems to recommend an inclusive sense of citizenship that does not erase group differences but recognizes their social importance to people and their sense of themselves as individuals. It also seems to recommend an inclusive form of protective hospitality for asylum seekers. More abstractly, it seems to recommends an active conception of liberal-democratic citizenship that can motivate rallying when needed in the name of that citizenship. While there is no action guidance in these values, they can be used as aspirational guideposts for individuals telling them to ask themselves a question of the following general form: “Can I live with the citizen that I will become if I do not act together with others in ways that affirm the liberal-democratic values that undergird my citizenship?”

As in the case of moral self-doubt, this is a question about integrity, though in its case at stake is political integrity. Its most problematic presupposition is that political citizenship matters. But what may political citizenship mean today? Arendt herself has already commented on the decline of the nation state. And the more recent reconstruction of the political world under globalization has weakened the state even further. At the same time cosmopolitan citizenship is impossible in practice. Federative regionalisms are possible but, as the European arrangements have shown they suffer from a democratic deficit, and when they come under economic stress they tend to teeter quite dangerously as pernicious nationalisms reassert themselves.

I believe that the question of the possibility of and stakes in meaningful political citizenship is a crucial question for the present and the immediate future, if indeed political citizenship matters for intervention with and the prevention of that subset of grave wrongdoings that otherwise proliferate, intensify, and crystallize into identity defining features of people and groups. I take the intricate story

45. It is interesting to note in this respect that according to Yad Vashem, the Danish Underground asked that all its members who participated in the rescue of the Jews be commemorated as a group and not listed individually. See http://www1.yadvashem.org/yv/en/righteous/statistics.asp (accessed June 2012).
that Arendt tells between *The Origins of Totalitarianism* and *Eichmann in Jerusalem* to tell us this. But it also points at some room for a very guarded pessimistic optimism. As I read her work, what Arendt tells us very clearly is that, on the one hand, all we have is ourselves, yet on the other hand, what that means is that we can insert ourselves between ourselves and our grave wrongdoings morally (by asking ourselves what is the future self that we are willing to live with) and especially politically (by responding to the political question about the meaning of citizenship through political action with others, though with a historically inspired healthy dose of suspicion of what we are doing and what we are actually contributing to).  