

Introduction

Totalitarianism and the Problem of Evil in Politics

In her 1954 essay “Understanding and Politics,” commenting on the recent emergence of “the popular use of the word ‘totalitarianism’ for the purpose of denouncing some supreme political evil,” Hannah Arendt claims,

Yet while popular language thus recognizes a new event by accepting a new word, it invariably uses such concepts as synonyms for others signifying old and familiar evils—aggression and lust for conquest in the case of imperialism, terror and lust for power in the case of totalitarianism. . . . It is as though with the first step, finding a new name for the new force which will determine our political destinies, we orient ourselves toward new and specific conditions, whereas with a second step (and, as it were, on second thought) we regret our boldness and console ourselves that nothing worse or less familiar will take place than general human sinfulness.¹

Ever since the end of World War II, we have been aware that “totalitarianism” represents a new form of evil, which is why a new word has appeared to designate it. Yet the acknowledgment of this novelty does not necessarily mean that we have come to terms with it, that we have overcome the temptation to go back to familiar ground by interpreting the new under the light of older, long-established concepts. In order to fully accept the novelty of a phenomenon, it is necessary to have the boldness to move and remain beyond our familiar conceptions about the

conditions in which we live. This is what Arendt calls “understanding”: the judgment of that which has ruined our standards for judgment, so that by our own initiative we become capable of finding new meaning in a world that has seemingly lost it.² The very appearance of the word *totalitarianism* shows that a new form of political evil emerged in the middle of the twentieth century, but the work of understanding this novelty is indefinitely open: “if we want to be at home on this earth, even at the price of being at home in this century, we must try to take part in the interminable dialogue with the essence of totalitarianism.”³

Although Arendt wrote these remarks in the years following the discovery of the camps, the impact of totalitarianism on politics and political theory is very much present today. Together with other events of around the middle of the twentieth century, such as total war and anticolonial struggles, totalitarianism constitutes a foundational experience for contemporary political theory. It marks the end of the Enlightenment’s confidence in reason and historical progress as a ground for political action, and the transition to an intellectual context that has been repeatedly characterized as “postmetaphysical,” “postfoundational” and “postmodern.” The fact that terror and systematic mass murder could happen along, and not against, the forces of progress and modernization, showed to what extent the whole conceptual framework of modern political thought needed to be revised.⁴ Today, as political phenomena that resemble central aspects of totalitarianism, such as ethno-nationalism, authoritarianism, detention camps, and widespread lying in the public sphere, become once again prominent features of Western politics, the need to revisit many of the questions connected to the emergence of totalitarianism becomes pressing.

This book is concerned with one of the central challenges that, according to Arendt, totalitarianism presented to the modern world, namely, understanding a new form of evil. I argue, following a series of remarks by Arendt, that our understanding of evil is imbedded in our conception of action and judgment. Departing from a series of previous studies that focus exclusively on Arendt’s and Kant’s notions of evil, I examine how the problem of understanding the emergence of a new form of evil contributes to shape notions of action and judgment in moral and political philosophy. I explore this issue in Kant, Arendt, and Lyotard, because the three thinkers develop their notions of action and judgment to a large extent in response to their views on evil. Following their perspectives, one central goal of my inquiry is to show that the

problem of evil is not an independent, isolated concern for political theory, but rather essential in the development of some of the central categories of the field. Specifically, my claim is that in order to understand the kind of evil displayed by totalitarianism, we need an understanding of action and judgment that accounts for it. This approach is indebted to Susan Neiman's study of the centrality of the problem of evil in the development of modern philosophy.⁵ However, while Neiman focuses on the importance of the problem of evil for questions of knowledge, I focus on its impact on questions of moral and political action and judgment.

In order to arrive at a conception of action and judgment that responds to the kind of evil displayed by totalitarianism, I develop an interpretative and a theoretical argument. The interpretative argument is that the concern with the emergence of a new form of evil in modernity can be traced back to Kant's moral philosophy, and that this concern contributes to shape the concepts of action and judgment in Kant as well as in two post-Kantian political thinkers influenced by the experience of totalitarianism, namely, Arendt and Lyotard. Going back to Kant for an understanding of totalitarian evil may seem counterintuitive, given Arendt's claim that it represents a new kind of evil. However, this claim does not mean, as Arendt shows in *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, that the multiple trends that would culminate in totalitarianism had not been unfolding in the decades and even centuries before it. Kant knew nothing of totalitarianism as a political movement or regime, but he did observe the incipient development of new forms of evil that contained the seeds of the totalitarian mentality. Richard J. Bernstein has noted the originality of Kant's conception of evil in his late writings, which break with the long-standing philosophical view of evil as deficiency.⁶ Building on Bernstein's thesis, I will argue in chapters 2 and 3 that Kant's concern with a new kind of evil plays a central role in his conception of action and judgment.

The relevance of Kant's practical philosophy for an understanding of totalitarianism becomes clear if we read it in dialogue with Arendt and Lyotard, whose work is deeply influenced by it. Both authors are concerned with the novelty of totalitarian evil, and develop their notions of action and judgment in response to it. In so doing, they continue Kant's insight into the nature of action and judgment in modernity, while explicitly unpacking its political implications. This does not mean that they follow every aspect of Kant's thought, or that the three authors have identical views. However, as I will show throughout the chapters, they pursue a

similar conceptual framework stemming in part from the acknowledgment of the emergence of a new form of evil in modernity. By reconstructing this conceptual framework running through Kant, Arendt, and Lyotard, my interpretative argument will stress the importance of the problem of evil for our understanding of action and judgment in modern politics.

The interpretative argument that will orient my inquiry leads to a theoretical argument regarding the nature of evil in modern politics. On the basis of my readings of Kant, Arendt, and Lyotard, I will argue that the kind of evil displayed by totalitarianism consists in the refusal of a fundamental uncertainty involved in action and judgment. I will show that, for the three authors, action and judgment involve an experience of uncertainty in the following two senses: the actor does not know the meaning or the outcome of her action when it takes place, and the person who judges lacks an unquestionable rule that guarantees that her judgment is valid. By contrast to the long-standing view of evil as failure to comply with a law, principle, or procedure, I will claim that evil, or at least the kind of evil characteristic of those who become complicit in totalitarian regimes, stems from a decision to refuse the fundamental uncertainty involved in action and judgment. This experience of uncertainty, I will hold, constitutes a basis for a nonfoundationalist political ethics that, instead of grounding moral action and judgment on a rule, affirms the exposure to uncertainty that is inherent to them. According to this political ethics, the good (which, as we will see, should be understood as “the lesser evil”) consists in accepting the fundamental uncertainty involved in acting and judging, while evil consists in refusing this uncertainty and striving to eliminate it.

The Problem: A “New” Form of Evil

The point of departure of my inquiry is Arendt’s claim that totalitarianism constitutes a new form of evil. It is therefore necessary to specify what exactly she means by this. Arendt explains the novelty of totalitarianism in her essay “Social Science Techniques and the Study of Concentration Camps.” The camps, she claims, represent a “stumbling-block on the road toward the proper understanding of contemporary politics and society,” which must lead social scientists “to reconsider their hitherto unquestioned fundamental preconceptions regarding the course of the world and human behavior.”⁷ The main perplexity that the camps present

to our conception of human behavior is that they have no utility, that is, they serve no evident purpose that could be explained in terms of self-interest. Given the usual idea that evil deeds stem from serving some sort of self-interest, the existence of the camps appears to be completely senseless: "If we assume that most of our actions are of a utilitarian nature and that our evil deeds spring from some 'exaggeration' of self-interest, then we are forced to conclude that this particular institution of totalitarianism is beyond human understanding."⁸ The systematic extermination of entire populations, according to Arendt, was not only useless for the war efforts, but even detrimental to them, to the point that "it was as though Nazis were convinced that it was of greater importance to run extermination factories than to win the war."⁹ It is this anti-utilitarian nature of totalitarian crimes that renders them "unprecedented." While mass murder for the sake of economic gains or power has been frequent throughout human history, the extermination of entire populations against any visible self-interest is new: "The extraordinary difficulty which we have in attempting to understand the institution of the concentration camp and to fit it into the record of human history is precisely the absence of such utilitarian criteria."¹⁰

Totalitarian evil is then "new" because it lacks the utilitarian motivations that we usually associate with evil deeds, which makes difficult to understand in what sense it is "evil" at all. But if this nonutilitarian evil is new, how does it differ from "old" kinds of evil? We find a partial response to this question in *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, where Arendt claims that "it is inherent in our entire philosophical tradition that we cannot conceive of a 'radical evil,'" which she describes as an evil beyond recognizable evil motives such as self-interest, greed, covetousness, resentment, lust for power, and cowardice.¹¹ Arendt does not explain why philosophers have not conceived of an evil beyond these motivations. In a later essay, however, she claims: "that evil is a mere privation, negation, or exception from the rule is the nearly unanimous opinion of all philosophers."¹² From the viewpoint of philosophy, evil is never done willingly, but only as the effect of a failure to do good. If I kill an innocent person, it must be because of some sort of self-interest that prevents me from doing good, and not because killing an innocent person is an end in itself. Therefore, according to this conception, evil must always be explained in terms of a utilitarian motive that prevents us from doing good, as opposed to a willful choice. In the case of totalitarianism, this framework does not work, because systematic mass murder

produces no evident benefit. How, then, are we to understand the crimes that took place in the Nazi death camps?

We can further specify the contrast between the new kind of evil displayed by the camps and the traditional, pretotalitarian image of evil by turning to Jean-Luc Nancy, who analyzes the novelty of the camps for the philosophy of evil. In *The Experience of Freedom*, commenting on Thomas Mann's words from 1939, according to which "we know once again what good and evil are," Nancy claims that "the first requirement is not to understand by this the return to a 'well-known' good and evil."¹³ In order to explain this "well-known" understanding of evil to which we must not return, Nancy claims that there are three lessons we must heed:

1. the closure of all theodicy or logodicy, and the affirmation that evil is strictly unjustifiable;
2. the closure of every thought of evil as the defect or perversion of a particular being, and its inscription in the being of existence: evil as positive wickedness;
3. the actual incarnation of evil in the exterminating horror of the mass grave: evil is unbearable and unpardonable.¹⁴

These three elements constitute what Nancy calls "the modern knowledge of evil," which is "different in nature and intensity from every prior knowledge, though it still harbors certain of its traits (essentially, in sum, the evil that was 'nothing' has become 'something' that thought cannot reduce)."¹⁵ Before modernity, most philosophers saw evil as nothing, in the sense that it had no cause or substance on its own, but was rather the deficiency of a cause or substance. We can only know what the good is, and then proceed to know evil by subtracting something from it. This means, in turn, that nothing "produces" evil. There is no force of evil, but only a force of goodness that, for reasons that must be explained, sometimes fails to be effective. It is the attempt at an explanation of the absence of complete goodness that has led to theodicy and logodicy, that is, to the idea that evil is ultimately justifiable and therefore, at least from a certain viewpoint, forgivable. According to this conception, the only reason why someone would do evil is because of an incapacity to do good, never because of a willful choice, never as "positive wickedness."

Reading Nancy's remarks on the philosophy of evil in dialogue with Arendt's description of the nature of the camps, we see that the nov-

elty of totalitarian evil consists in that it does not fit the long-standing philosophical association of evil with deficiency. We cannot explain the existence of the camps in Nazi Germany in terms of ignorance, irrational impulses, or exaggerated self-interest, as if Nazi criminals lacked knowledge, reason, or self-restraint. As both Arendt and Nancy point out, this idea of evil as deficiency is a consistent image in the philosophical tradition, from Plato's claim that injustice brings disharmony to the soul, through Aristotle's idea that evil stems from error regarding what is good, Plotinus's conception of evil as an imperfect imitation of the good, Augustine's and Leibniz's claims that evil is not a cause but the privation of a cause, Spinoza's view that evil stems from a failure to understand the necessity of one's own actions, to Hegel's interpretation of evil as a necessary moment in the unfolding of reason.¹⁶ Although all these philosophers suggest at some points that evil is something more than mere absence of goodness, they all repeatedly identify evil with lack of knowledge or lack of self-mastery. The problem posed by totalitarian evil is that it does not correspond to this image and to the motivations associated with it, which is why we need a new understanding.

Although few scholars today defend the view of evil as deficiency, few studies have developed an alternative to it. Recent inquiries into the problem of evil influenced by Arendt have adopted three main approaches. One approach, developed by Charles T. Mathewes, revisits the notion of evil as deficiency in response to Arendt's views on totalitarian evil. These views, Mathewes argues, are part of what he calls an "Augustinian tradition" on evil, according to which "evil action is a kind of action which fails, in an important way, to be action at all."¹⁷ A second approach, developed by Neiman, Richard Bernstein, and Peter Dews, traces the importance of the problem of evil in the history of philosophy, showing that it plays a more prominent role than it is usually believed.¹⁸ A third approach, presented by María Pía Lara and Bernstein in another study, shifts the focus from evil as such to the ways in which we respond to novel experiences of evil, developing new ways to talk about it and to judge it.¹⁹ While Mathewes remains within the paradigm of evil as deficiency, Neiman, Bernstein, Dews, and Lara refrain from developing a theory of evil, shifting the focus instead to the ways in which philosophers and ordinary people write and talk about evil. Thus, it would seem like there is no theoretically sound notion of evil that replaces the image of deficiency. Either we remain and actualize this image, as Mathewes proposes, or we leave behind the

attempt to develop a theory of evil on the grounds that what we call “evil” is mutable and unpredictable, as Neiman, Bernstein, Dews, and Lara suggest in different ways.

One goal of this book is to move the discussion on evil forward by proposing a new, theoretically coherent perspective that departs from the model of deficiency and the motivations associated with it. According to my theoretical argument of evil as a refusal of uncertainty, people do not engage in the kind of evil displayed by totalitarianism because their capacity to do the right thing is overpowered by prejudice, ignorance, selfishness, or hatred. Instead, they engage in this kind of evil because they choose to act and to judge in a way that conceals the uncertainty regarding the meaning and outcome of action and the validity of judgment. As we will see in each of the chapters, action and judgment involve uncertainty because they generate relations with other actions and judgments. This uncertainty is a source of anxiety, because there is no guarantee that the meaning of our action or the validity of our judgment will remain the way we intended. In the face of this anxiety, one may choose to act and to judge in such a way that one endures the uncertainty that is inherent to the establishment of relationships, or otherwise seek to cover the anxiety under rules for action and judgment that determine their meaning. The kind of evil displayed by totalitarianism stems from this choice.

Of course, totalitarian evil is a complex and multifaceted phenomenon, and I do not intend to cover all its aspects. There are certainly people who play a role in totalitarian movements on the basis of many different motivations. However, one kind of motivation that is especially difficult to understand is that of people who seem perfectly normal and usually capable of distinguishing between right and wrong, yet adapt and become functional to widespread crimes. This kind of complicity is perhaps the least spectacular, for it is characteristic of everyday functionaries rather than ideological leaders. But it is likely the most widespread under totalitarianism, for it underlies the support of millions of otherwise normal people to the regime. For the sake of conceptual simplicity, I will often use the term *evil* to refer to this specific kind of evil. I will bracket the question of how it connects to other kinds of evil—for example, that of those with long-standing ideological commitments to totalitarian ideologies, or who become complicit with them out of sheer opportunistic selfishness. The goal of this study is not to settle the problem of evil by

reducing it to one of its faces, but rather to illuminate one of its most perplexing manifestations.

Uncertainty

In the context of this book, “uncertainty” refers to lack of mastery over the meaning of action and the validity of judgment by virtue of their inherent exposure to other actions and judgments. Every time we act with or on others, the action is exposed to their reactions, and every time we express a judgment to others, our judgment is exposed to other judgments. As a consequence of this exposure, the meaning of action and the validity of judgment are uncertain. An action that seems courageous, virtuous, or generous at the instant it takes place may be considered cowardly, vicious, or selfish later on. A judgment that seems justified may be later revealed as flawed, erroneous, or deceitful. This may sound like a banal fact, for it is obvious that we are limited beings who cannot achieve absolute certainty over the meaning of action and the validity of judgment. However, for the authors that are at the center of this book, uncertainty is not merely an empirical limitation to our capacity to master our actions and judgments, but rather a fundamental experience without which we would be unable to act and to judge at all. Uncertainty is not only the absence of certainty, which just happens to be out of reach for us. Instead, the lack of mastery that we experience in action and judgment is essential to them, because it is part of our capacity to establish relations with others. Uncertainty is not only an epistemic category, but also an experience—a kind of feeling that emerges out of the establishment of relations.

The experience of uncertainty that is involved in action and judgment is at the basis of different ethical stances. As we will see in chapter 1, Arendt believes that the unpredictability of action produces frustration, and thus the desire to withdraw from action altogether. Building on Arendt’s views on this point, I will argue throughout the chapters that action and judgment generate a desire to withdraw from their uncertainty, in an attempt to make their meaning and validity secure. Whether we accept uncertainty or pursue the desire to overcome it is a fundamental ethical choice that determines two ways of acting and judging. If we accept the uncertainty of action and judgment, we

welcome our exposure to the establishment of unpredictable relationships with others. If, by contrast, we reject uncertainty, we attempt to subordinate these relationships to fixed rules and patterns that reduce and potentially eliminate unpredictability. The kind of evil that is at the basis of complicity in totalitarianism, according to my theoretical argument, consists in an extreme form of this attempt to overcome uncertainty. In the context of this book, evil refers to an attitude by which abiding by a rule that determines that our actions are morally good, and our judgments valid, takes primacy over the uncertain outcome of acting and judging in ways that expose their meaning and validity to relationships with others.

In order to avoid misunderstandings, some preliminary clarifications (to which I will return in the conclusion) are important. First, the alternative between accepting and rejecting uncertainty is often concealed behind everyday practices and comes to the fore only in exceptional occasions. It is in situations where we face ethical decisions that uncertainty becomes an issue. Evidently, we cannot always act as if our values were questionable and mutable. There are moments, however, when we do experience the uncertainty of such values, or the fact that we do not clearly know how to act or judge on their basis. As we will see in chapter 1, this is the kind of situation produced by totalitarian regimes, which overturn long-standing values and replace them with new ones. In this kind of situation, people face the choice of whether to look for some kind of rule that conceals uncertainty and provides them with peace of mind, or accept the fact that the meaning of their actions and the validity of their judgments will be determined by the web of actions and judgments in which they insert themselves, and which they partly constitute. While the second stance does not guarantee that one will do the right thing, the first stance is at the core of the kind of evil that leads to complicity in totalitarianism. To reject uncertainty means that when confronting situations where our values become problematic, we hold on to rules or procedures that provide a sense of moral assurance. As we will see in chapters 1 and 2, this attitude undermines our sense of responsibility and makes us indifferent to the moral worth of our actions.

A second point of clarification is that accepting uncertainty does not lead to a sort of skepticism, but rather to a specific attitude toward the meaning of action and the validity of judgment. Awareness that the values on the basis of which we act and judge are ambivalent and changing does not imply that we should not really believe in them. It is

perfectly possible to act on the basis of an idea, while remaining aware that whether our action or judgment adequately expresses this idea is uncertain. As it will become clear, especially in chapter 3, practical ideas, that is, the ideas that determine the worth of actions, are inherently unpresentable (there are courageous actions, but no action that corresponds to the idea of courage). We do not know what courage, justice, or goodness as such look like, even if we need these ideas to orient our actions toward others. Given that the ideas that orient the establishment of relationships with others involve uncertainty (we cannot know if our actions and judgments truly correspond to these ideas), we cannot act or judge without confronting this uncertainty. Yet precisely because this uncertainty is involved in every action and judgment, accepting uncertainty is an attitude that enables the universalistic aspirations of political action and judgment. As we will see in part 2, judgments are universal not by virtue of correctly applying a rule, but rather by virtue of expressing the experience of uncertainty that is inherently involved in every action and judgment. This is the kind of universality grounded on feeling that Kant identifies as specific to aesthetic judgments.

Finally, the distinction between accepting and refusing uncertainty does not overlap with a new straightforward distinction between good and evil. While refusing uncertainty is at the basis of the kind of evil characteristic of totalitarianism, accepting uncertainty is not equivalent to moral virtue. As I will argue in the conclusion, accepting the uncertainty of action and judgment entails replacing a politics oriented to the good with one oriented to what Lyotard calls “the lesser evil.” This means that action and judgment should not be oriented to the realization of moral ideas, because we can never know whether our representation of such ideas is adequate. Instead, action and judgment should strive to counteract an evil with another evil: injustice with a lesser injustice, exclusion with a lesser exclusion, oppression with a lesser oppression. Of course, we never know what the “lesser” evil is, but this is precisely why we must be ready to face the unpredictable meaning of our actions and judgments. Unlike the politics of the good, which seeks to approximate moral ideals that are presumed to be objects of knowledge, the politics of the lesser evil acts and judges on the basis of the uncertainty of such ideas, welcoming unexpected responses that may expose their complicity with injustice, exclusion, and domination.

This last point of clarification should warn against the idea that uncertainty constitutes a new moral foundation on which we can rely

to orient action and judgment, as if any attempt to limit them through predictable, durable institutions and social behaviors were complicit with evil. Evidently, this is not what Kant, Arendt, or Lyotard have in mind. Accepting uncertainty does not mean rejecting anything predictable, stable, or durable—on the contrary, it means welcoming the fragile relations between actions and judgments that are the source of predictability, stability, and durability. Accepting uncertainty means accepting that the meaning and validity of the institutions and social relations that orient action and judgment may change and call for new actions and judgments, leading to new institutions and kinds of social relations. Evil in politics, according to my thesis, is not an effect of limiting uncertainty. Instead, it is an effect of imagining and positing standards for action and judgment that are certain, in the sense that they are independent of responses by other actions and judgments. In other words, evil in politics takes place when we attempt to replace the predictability, stability, and durability that we build within relationships between actions and judgments with purportedly certain standards that stand above them.

By putting uncertainty at the center of the problem of evil, this book seeks to contribute to our understanding of political ethics in a context of growing pluralism. In the last decades, a number of political theorists have argued for an ethics based on the acknowledgment of the radical pluralism characteristic of modern societies, by contrast to the search for transcendental moral foundations for action and judgment.²⁰ One of the implications of pluralism is that different values are often in conflict with one another, and it is difficult, if not impossible, to find universally shared principles for action and judgment. While I agree that political ethics in contemporary societies must take pluralism as a point of departure, as opposed to subordinating it under transcendental principles, it is also the case that the uncertainty generated by this pluralism is a potential source of new forms of evil in politics. The instability and plasticity of values generates anxiety and the desire for stable, secure rules for action and judgment. Although this book is partly an attempt to understand political ethics in a way that is responsive to value pluralism and the readiness to endure uncertainty that it demands, it also brings attention to the dangerous reactions that such pluralism may generate. In my view, it is important that political theorists examine not only the foundations and orientation of political ethics, but also the reasons why political actors often disregard and even undermine ethical consideration altogether.

Given that this book is mainly concerned with the problem of evil in politics, I will devote more systematic attention to the ways in which people refuse uncertainty than to the question of how to accept uncertainty. This latter question is of course essential, and it has been the subject of multiple studies in recent decades. In examining the attitude of those who refuse uncertainty, I will touch on the issue of how action and judgment can accept uncertainty. “The politics of the lesser evil,” which I briefly develop in the conclusion on the basis of my reading of Lyotard in chapter 4, hints at a possible orientation in response to the fundamental uncertainty involved in action and judgment. If I do not engage with this and other implications of the thesis of evil as a refusal of uncertainty more systematically, it is in order to keep the inquiry focused on the problem of evil in politics. Because of this focus, the question of “what not to do” will be more central throughout the book than the question of “what to do.” My hope is that my account of evil, based on my readings of Kant, Arendt, and Lyotard, will inform future studies of political ethics in contemporary societies.

The Nature of Totalitarian Crimes

My inquiry takes as its point of departure a question that was a sustained concern in Arendt’s late writings, as well as in historical studies of Nazi crimes: why do ordinary people, usually capable to distinguishing between right and wrong, become complicit with regimes that demand that they act in ways that are glaringly morally criminal? Arendt’s famous and polemical notion of “the banality of evil” emerged to a large extent in response to this question. I will examine the implications of this notion in detail in chapter 1. But before turning to the conceptual analysis that will orient my inquiry, it is necessary to consider to what extent Arendt’s reflections adequately respond to historical facts, as far as historical research has described them. While it is beyond the scope of this book to engage in historiographical debates regarding the motivations and psychological traits of ordinary people who turned into willful executioners of mass murder, it is important to stress that historical studies do not disprove, but rather support the relevance of Arendt’s perspective, as well as of the focus on uncertainty that will be at the center of my inquiry.

In a recent book, historian Bettina Stangneth challenges Arendt’s account of Adolf Eichmann, the man responsible for executing the “Final Solution” and exterminating all European Jews, on the grounds

that it wrongly dismisses his ideological commitment to the worldview of National Socialism. After the Israeli Foreign Intelligence Service detected and seized Eichmann in Argentina, where he was living under a false identity since the end of the War, he was taken to Jerusalem, where he stood trial for crimes against the Jews in 1961. While according to Arendt, who witnessed the trial and wrote weekly reports on it for *The New Yorker*, Eichmann was above all a careerist, largely indifferent to the task that he had to perform for the sake of his personal advancement, Stangneth shows that Eichmann remained an anti-Semite well after his involvement in the Final Solution. In trying to understand Eichmann by taking his words at face value, Stangneth claims, Arendt “fell into his trap: Eichmann-in-Jerusalem was little more than a mask.”²¹ In other words, Arendt’s description of Eichmann as a thoughtless individual, lacking ideological convictions, was nothing but a misrepresentation produced by Eichmann himself. In reality, according to Stangneth, Eichmann shared and wanted to actively pursue the cause of National Socialism.

While Stangneth’s historical analysis complicates parts of Arendt’s description of Eichmann, it does not remove the problem that she referred to with the notion of “the banality of evil.” Stangneth believes that Eichmann’s long-standing anti-Semitism shows that he was not thoughtless, but rather ideologically committed to the Final Solution. However, as we will see in chapter 1, Arendt does not see thoughtlessness and ideological commitment as contradictory or mutually exclusive. She may have neglected, due to unavailable information at the time, Eichmann’s enduring anti-Semitism, but she did not deny the fact that he had been committed to the cause for which he was acting. In her report of Eichmann’s trial, it is clear that Eichmann did become committed to the execution of the Final Solution, even to the point of disobeying direct orders by his superiors and putting his own well-being in danger toward the end of the war. The core of the problem involved in the notion of “the banality of evil,” which concerned Arendt in her late writings, is not whether individuals believe or not in the cause for which they are acting, but rather how they believe in this cause. Arendt does not deny that Eichmann was committed to the Final Solution when he was responsible for it, but she believes that this commitment was “superficial” and “shallow,” because it was detached from any thinking about the meaning of his actions. For Eichmann, subjecting himself to a cause and sacrificing his self-interest for it was an assurance that he was doing the right thing—that he was “a good citizen.”

Historical debates around the nature of totalitarian crimes suggest that Arendt's reflections in *Eichmann in Jerusalem* and later writings are not empirically misguided. In this regard, it is worth considering part of the controversy that followed the publication of Daniel Goldhagen's *Hitler's Willing Executioners*. In this book, Goldhagen argues that the main reason why hundreds of thousands of Germans became complicit with mass murder is a long-standing, progressively "eliminationist" anti-Semitism characteristic of Germany. As he puts it succinctly: "antisemitism moved many thousands of 'ordinary' Germans—and would have moved millions more, had they been appropriately positioned—to slaughter Jews."²² This anti-Semitism, Goldhagen argues, constituted a "dominant cognitive thread" that allowed people to quickly adapt to the eliminationist program developed by National Socialism.²³ Even if most people had previously never engaged in actions against the Jews, strong negative beliefs about them were so ingrained among Germans that many were predisposed to be convinced that such actions were necessary. In sum, an anti-Semite worldview explains why ordinary people became willfully complicit with the mass murder of Jews, even if they did not actively participate in the development of the extermination plan.

The responses that followed Goldhagen's book show how difficult it is to describe the actions of people who became complicit in mass murder without considering theoretical problems concerning moral agency. Leaving aside the debates around the evidence supporting Goldhagen's argument, one central point of discussion was whether his analysis adequately described the active complicity, as opposed to passive submission, of those responsible for executing criminal orders. By emphasizing anti-Semitism as a primary, and even sole, causal element determining complicity in totalitarian crimes, Goldhagen sought to stress the willfulness of the criminals, so as to dispel the idea that they were forced to act against their will. Yet Goldhagen's emphasis on anti-Semitism leads to another kind of seemingly exculpatory account: if the Germans saw the world through an anti-Semitic cognitive framework, was their will not deterministically shaped by it?²⁴ Is not the anti-Semitic cognitive framework, rather than any moral choice, responsible for what happened? As historian Christopher Browning pointed out, the dichotomy between doing something willfully or against one's will does not exhaust the possibilities involved in making moral decisions. Shifting the focus from "willfulness" to "choice," Browning claims that "the perpetrators not only had the capacity to choose but exercised that choice in various

ways that covered the spectrum from enthusiastic participation, through dutiful, nominal, or regretful compliance, to different degrees of evasion.”²⁵

Browning’s nuanced reflections on the motivations of complicity in totalitarian crimes capture the depth of the problem in a way that resembles Arendt’s own inquiries. According to Arendt, Eichmann’s actions, as well as those of other Nazi criminals, challenged long-standing ideas about moral agency and personal responsibility, because they acted as if they had made no moral choice. By describing Eichmann as “unable to think,” Arendt conveyed the idea that he had performed his duty without ever considering the moral implications of doing so. Moreover, he took for granted that compliance with duty above any regard for his own interests was the only morally right thing to do. Based on an analysis of the members of the Police Battalion 101, which was deployed to Poland during the war to capture and kill Jews, Browning arrives at a fairly similar idea:

The largest group within the battalion did whatever they were asked to do, without ever risking the onus of confronting authority or appearing weak, but they did not volunteer for or celebrate the killing. Increasingly numb and brutalized, they felt more pity for themselves because of the “unpleasant” work they had been assigned than they did for their dehumanized victims. For the most part, they did not think what they were doing was wrong or immoral, because the killing was sanctioned by legitimate authority. Indeed, for the most part they did not try to think, period.²⁶

Like Arendt, Browning identifies a kind of engagement in glaringly criminal actions (killing hundreds of innocent people) that lacks the traditional marks of evil, such as selfishness, cruelty, or hatred. Moreover, these actions have an element in common with moral virtue, namely, the fulfillment of one’s duty even against one’s own wishes. The problem posed by the complicity of otherwise ordinary people in totalitarian crimes is to understand the kind of moral agency that is involved in them. In chapter 1, I will argue that it is this kind of moral agency that Arendt captured with her notion of “the banality of evil,” and which is ultimately rooted in a refusal to relate to others by means of action and judgment.

As Browning points out in the end of his book, the perplexing fact that ordinary people are capable of becoming willfully complicit in

mass murder cannot be reduced to the deterministic effect of preexisting systems of beliefs. In order to understand the nature of totalitarian evil, at least as far as complicity by ordinary people is concerned, it is necessary to problematize the categories by which we understand moral and political action. Eichmann and the members of Police Battalion 101 did not become involved in mass murder out of a genuine belief in a murderous ideology, but rather out of a willingness to adapt to this ideology as it became dominant at the time. Their actions are perplexing because they combine a strong sense of duty and commitment to the cause with an almost complete indifference to the moral implications of the cause itself. It is as if acting for the sake of a cause was the only important thing, while the content of the cause was of no concern at all. My theoretical argument of evil as a refusal of uncertainty represents an attempt to explain this strange mentality. According to this argument, the uncertainty involved in action and judgment produces what Arendt calls “frustration,” and thus the desire to subordinate them to rules and processes that regulate them. As the desire for rules for action and judgment becomes more important than what the rules are, people become indifferent to the meaning of what they do. Totalitarian ideologies foment and latch on this indifference.

Subjective Evil and Bureaucratization

My focus on the motivation that underlies complicity in totalitarianism builds on Simona Forti’s recent contribution to our understanding of evil in contemporary politics on the basis of biopolitics, but also departs from it in important ways. Forti claims that while modern philosophers such as Kant, Schelling, and Nietzsche conceived of evil as a striving for absolute power, posttotalitarian thinkers such as Arendt and Foucault conceive of it in terms of what she calls (modifying Arendt’s notion) “the normality of evil,” which unfolds through the mechanisms of biopower. Focusing on these mechanisms, Forti identifies a posttotalitarian paradigm according to which evil does not stem from any subjective intention, but rather from the routinization and normalization of a series of practices that render individuals unconcerned with the moral implications of their actions. This represents a shift “from a purely subjective idea of evil—hence, aimed at grasping the actor’s evil attitude and intentions—to a notion that we might call the ‘bureaucratization of evil.’”²⁷ Thus,

following Forti, instead of inquiring into the subjective motivations that underlie evil actions, we should focus on the mechanisms that produce the bureaucratic mentality by which individuals become tools of evil. The lesson of totalitarianism is that political evil requires more than evil intentions—it requires thoughtless individuals unwilling to question their bureaucratic duties.

Forti's analysis is crucial for our understanding of evil in politics in two ways. First, she acknowledges that totalitarianism represents a historical turning point in our understanding of evil, which requires that we reconsider our approach to political action more broadly. Second, and perhaps more significantly, she shifts the focus from evil ideologies to evil as an ordinary, almost everyday phenomenon. One of the central problems posed by totalitarianism, which has long-standing implications for the conditions that make political evil possible, is that it relies on the complicity of thousands and even millions of seemingly normal individuals. Why do people adapt so easily to practices that we usually consider to be glaringly against basic moral values? Answering this question, as Forti shows, requires more than an analysis of totalitarian ideologies. It also requires an understanding of the conditions by which people become indifferent to the moral implications of these ideologies, to the point that their moral values are radically subverted.

While this book is indebted to Forti's thesis on the historical transformation of the predominant approach to evil, as well as to her focus on ordinary complicity in evil ideologies, my interpretative and theoretical arguments depart from her perspective. According to my interpretative argument, concerns with a kind of evil that is not grandiose and absolute but rather normalized and bureaucratized did not begin with totalitarianism. Instead, as I will show in chapter 2, this concern can be traced at least back to Kant. Despite frequent misinterpretations, Kant's analysis of the subjective motivations that underlie evil actions does not imply that evil stems from a demonic intention, as a sort of mysterious determination to transgress moral principles. Instead, Kant, like some of his contemporaries and followers, observed the dangerous development of a bureaucratic mentality that makes evil deceptive and normalized. Therefore, I read his thesis of "radical evil" not as part of a pretotalitarian paradigm on evil, but rather as an important reference point to better understand the theoretical problems posed by what Arendt called "the banality of evil."

My theoretical argument, on the other hand, departs from Forti's biopolitical approach by taking what we may call a "subjective" approach

to evil, that is, by focusing on the attitude of evildoers rather than on the social structures that produce it. My claim is that the mechanisms of power described by Forti can only succeed in making individuals complicit in evil if individuals decide to become complicit, and that this decision to be complicit is determined by the desire to overcome the uncertainty constitutive of action and judgment. In this sense, evil is not merely a structural, but also a subjective phenomenon. If social structures could completely eliminate the capacity of individuals to choose what to do, then their actions would cease to be evil, for the very idea of evil presupposes the capacity to make moral choices. Following Arendt, I will claim that totalitarian evil takes place when individuals choose to eliminate or efface their own capacity to choose, thus behaving like thoughtless functionaries.

Of course, the focus on individual choice does not remove the need to examine the social structures and processes that produce or facilitate evil. Kant examined this issue in his writings on history, Arendt above all in *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, and Lyotard in the sections on totalitarianism in *The Differend*. However, it is no coincidence that the concept of evil appears most insistently in the context of reflections on moral philosophy. As Arendt claims in *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, the focus on larger processes and structures characteristic of the social sciences tends to explain away personal responsibility, and there is no evil in the moral sense without personal responsibility.²⁸ This book focuses on the subjective dimension of evil partly in order to avoid the potential self-exculpatory mentality that stems from situating the source of evil actions in impersonal structures and processes. This does not mean, however, that this subjective dimension is unrelated to structures and processes that contribute to generate and feed from evil actions. While I will not ignore this latter aspect, I acknowledge that my engagement with it will be limited. My hope is that my analysis of the subjective basis of evil will provide a new perspective by which to consider how structures and processes (such as bureaucracy, capitalism, ideology, and colonialism, among others) are linked to evil actions performed by individuals.

Moral Foundations

My theoretical argument regarding the link between totalitarian evil and refusal of uncertainty represents a contribution to a nonfoundationalist approach to political ethics. Foundationalist approaches to political ethics,

such as those developed by Jürgen Habermas and John Rawls, assume that it is possible to find a procedure that determines the distinction between good and evil, but they say little about the reasons why people choose one or the other. This is not necessarily a problem, for it may be the case that the nature of moral agency simply falls outside the scope of their inquiries. However, leaving aside the subjective dimension of morality can be a problem if it conveys the idea that people have a natural tendency to do what is good and reject what is wrong, provided that they know how to make the distinction between one and the other. As mentioned above, one of the lessons of totalitarianism is that people do not do evil only because they fail to know what is truly good or to act on the basis of it, but rather, in many cases, because they actively choose to act in a way contrary to basic moral principles. Both Habermas and Rawls acknowledge that their projects of bringing society progressively in agreement with universal moral foundations encounter a limit in those who refuse to recognize such foundations as binding.²⁹ However, they say little about the moral decision involved in either recognizing or otherwise ignoring such foundations. My claim is that understanding the nature of such decision is essential for political theory because prominent cases of political evil stem from it. Given the persistence of evil in politics, and thus the need to respond to it, it is important not to leave the problem of evil aside as if it were a sort of mystery inaccessible to theoretical understanding. If political actors want to make the world less evil, it is not enough that they achieve a better understanding of what is objectively good. It is also necessary that they understand why individuals and groups often choose to do what is wrong.

This point can be further specified by means of Simon Critchley's contrast between "justifying reasons" and "exciting reasons."³⁰ Justifying reasons refers to the practice of identifying universally valid moral foundations. Exciting reasons, by contrast, refers to the "ethical experience" of being motivated to act morally. Rawls and Habermas, according to Critchley, are concerned above all with justifying reasons. As Critchley points out, however, the point of departure for the practice of justifying reasons is a subjective ethical experience: "ethical experience furnishes an account of the motivational force to act morally, of that by virtue of which a self decides to pledge itself to some conception of the good."³¹ Note that, as Critchley points out, pledging oneself to "some" conception of the good precedes the determination of what is the right conception of the good. If this is the case, the project of determining the right moral