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[The Origins of Totalitarianism]: A Reply

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accepted; man is the new lawmaker; and on the tablets wiped clean of the past he will inscribe the "new discoveries in morality" which Burke had still considered impossible.

It sounds like a nihilistic nightmare. And a nightmare it is rather than a well considered theory. It would be unfair to hold the author responsible on the level of critical thought for what obviously is a traumatic shuddering under the impact of experiences that were stronger than the forces of spiritual and intellectual resistance. The book as a whole must not be judged by the theoretical derailments which occur mostly in its concluding part. The treatment of the subject matter itself is animated, if not always penetrated, by the age-old knowledge about human nature and the life of the spirit which, in the conclusions, the author wishes to discard and to replace by "new discoveries." Let us rather take comfort in the unconscious irony of the closing sentence of the work where the author appeals, for the "new" spirit of human solidarity, to Acts 16: 28: "Do thyself no harm; for we are all here." Perhaps, when the author progresses from quoting to hearing these words, her nightmarish fright will end like that of the jailer to whom they were addressed.

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### A REPLY

*By Hannah Arendt*

Much as I appreciate the unusual kindness of the editors of the *Review of Politics* who asked me to answer Prof. Eric Voegelin's criticism of my book, I am not quite sure that I decided wisely when I accepted their offer. I certainly would not, and should not, have accepted if his review were of the usual friendly or unfriendly kind. Such replies, by their very nature, all too easily tempt the author either to review his own book or to write a review of the review. In order to avoid such temptations, I have refrained as much as I could, even on the level of personal conversation, to take issue with any reviewer of my book, no matter how much I agreed or disagreed with him.

Professor Voegelin's criticism, however, is of a kind that can be answered in all propriety. He raises certain very general questions of method, on one side, and of general philosophical

implications on the other. Both of course belong together; but while I feel that within the necessary limitations of a historical study and political analysis I made myself sufficiently clear on certain general perplexities which have come to light through the full development of totalitarianism, I also know that I failed to explain the particular method which I came to use, and to account for a rather unusual approach — not to the different historical and political issues where account or justification would only distract — to the whole field of political and historical sciences as such. One of the difficulties of the book is that it does not belong to any school and hardly uses any of the officially recognized or officially controversial instruments.

The problem originally confronting me was simple and baffling at the same time: all historiography is necessarily salvation and frequently justification; it is due to man's fear that he may forget and to his striving for something which is even more than remembrance. These impulses are already implicit in the mere observation of chronological order and they are not likely to be overcome through the interference of value-judgments which usually interrupt the narrative and make the account appear biased and "unscientific." I think the history of antisemitism is a good example of this kind of history-writing. The reason why this whole literature is so extraordinarily poor in terms of scholarship is that the historians — if they were not conscious antisemites which of course they never were — had to write the history of a subject which they did not want to conserve; they had to write in a destructive way and to write history for purposes of destruction is somehow a contradiction in terms. The way out has been to hold on, so to speak, to the Jews, to make them the subject of conservation. But this was no solution, for to look at the events only from the side of the victim resulted in apologetics — which of course is no history at all.

Thus my first problem was how to write historically about something — totalitarianism — which I did not want to conserve but on the contrary felt engaged to destroy. My way of solving this problem has given rise to the reproach that the book was lacking in unity. What I did — and what I might have done anyway because of my previous training and the way of my thinking — was to discover the chief elements of totalitarianism

and to analyze them in historical terms, tracing these elements back in history as far as I deemed proper and necessary. That is, I did not write a history of totalitarianism but an analysis in terms of history; I did not write a history of antisemitism or of imperialism, but analyzed the element of Jew-hatred and the element of expansion insofar as these elements were still clearly visible and played a decisive role in the totalitarian phenomenon itself. The book, therefore, does not really deal with the "origins" of totalitarianism — as its title unfortunately claims — but gives a historical account of the elements which crystallized into totalitarianism, this account is followed by an analysis of the elemental structure of totalitarian movements and domination itself. The elementary structure of totalitarianism is the hidden structure of the book while its more apparent unity is provided by certain fundamental concepts which run like red threads through the whole.

The same problem of method can be approached from another side and then presents itself as a problem of "style." This has been praised as passionate and criticized as sentimental. Both judgments seem to me a little beside the point. I parted quite consciously with the tradition of *sine ira et studio* of whose greatness I was fully aware, and to me this was a methodological necessity closely connected with my particular subject matter.

Let us suppose — to take one among many possible examples — that the historian is confronted with excessive poverty in a society of great wealth, such as the poverty of the British working classes during the early stages of the industrial revolution. The natural human reaction to such conditions is one of anger and indignation because these conditions are against the dignity of man. If I describe these conditions without permitting my indignation to interfere, I have lifted this particular phenomenon out of its context in human society and have thereby robbed it of part of its nature, deprived it of one of its important inherent qualities. For to arouse indignation is one of the qualities of excessive poverty insofar as poverty occurs among human beings. I therefore can not agree with Professor Voegelin that the "morally abhorrent and the emotionally existing will overshadow the essential," because I believe them to form an integral part of it. This has nothing to do with sentimentality or moralizing,

although, of course, either can become a pitfall for the author. If I moralized or became sentimental, I simply did not do well what I was supposed to do, namely to describe the totalitarian phenomenon as occurring, not on the moon, but in the midst of human society. To describe the concentration camps *sine ira* is not to be "objective," but to condone them; and such condoning cannot be changed by a condemnation which the author may feel duty bound to add but which remains unrelated to the description itself. When I used the image of Hell, I did not mean this allegorically but literally: it seems rather obvious that men who have lost their faith in Paradise, will not be able to establish it on earth; but it is not so certain that those who have lost their belief in Hell as a place of the hereafter may not be willing and able to establish on earth exact imitations of what people used to believe about Hell. In this sense I think that a description of the camps as hell on earth is more "objective," that is, more adequate to their essence than statements of a purely sociological or psychological nature.

The problem of style is a problem of adequacy and of response. If I write in the same "objective" manner about the Elizabethan age and the twentieth century, it may well be that my dealing with both periods is inadequate because I have renounced the human faculty to respond to either. Thus the question of style is bound up with the problem of understanding which has plagued the historical sciences almost from their beginnings. I do not wish to go into this matter here, but I may add that I am convinced that understanding is closely related to that faculty of imagination which Kant called *Einbildungskraft* and which has nothing in common with fictional ability. The *Spiritual Exercises* are exercises of imagination and they may be more relevant to method in the historical sciences than academic training realizes.

Reflections of this kind, originally caused by the special nature of my subject, and the personal experience which is necessarily involved in an historical investigation that employs imagination consciously as an important tool of cognition, resulted in a critical approach toward almost all interpretation of contemporary history. I hinted at this in two short paragraphs of the Preface where I warned the reader against the concepts of Prog-

ress and of Doom as "two sides of the same medal" as well as against any attempt at "deducing the unprecedented from precedents." These two approaches are closely interconnected. The reason why Professor Voegelin can speak of "the putrefaction of Western civilization" and the "earthwide expansion of Western foulness" is that he treats "phenomenal differences"—which to me as differences of factuality are all-important—as minor outgrowths of some "essential sameness" of a doctrinal nature. Numerous affinities between totalitarianism and some other trends in Occidental political or intellectual history have been described with this result, in my opinion: they all failed to point out the distinct quality of what was actually happening. The "phenomenal differences," far from "obscuring" some essential sameness, are those phenomena which make totalitarianism "totalitarian," which distinguish this one form of government and movement from all others and therefore can alone help us in finding its essence. What is unprecedented in totalitarianism is not primarily its ideological content, but the *event* of totalitarian domination itself. This can be seen clearly if we have to admit that the deeds of its considered policies have exploded our traditional categories of political thought (totalitarian domination is unlike all forms of tyranny and despotism we know of) and the standards of our moral judgment (totalitarian crimes are very inadequately described as "murder" and totalitarian criminals can hardly be punished as "murderers").

Mr. Voegelin seems to think that totalitarianism is only the other side of liberalism, positivism and pragmatism. But whether one agrees with liberalism or not (and I may say here that I am rather certain that I am neither a liberal nor a positivist nor a pragmatist), the point is that liberals are clearly not totalitarians. This, of course, does not exclude the fact that liberal or positivistic elements also lend themselves to totalitarian thinking; but such affinities would only mean that one has to draw even sharper distinctions because of the *fact* that liberals are not totalitarians.

I hope that I do not belabor this point unduly. It is important to me because I think that what separates my approach from Professor Voegelin's is that I proceed from facts and events instead of intellectual affinities and influences. This is perhaps a

bit difficult to perceive because I am of course much concerned with philosophical implications and changes in spiritual self-interpretation. But this certainly does not mean that I described "a gradual revelation of the essence of totalitarianism from its inchoate forms in the eighteenth century to the fully developed," because this essence, in my opinion, did not exist before it had not come into being. I therefore talk only of "elements," which eventually crystallize into totalitarianism, some of which are traceable to the eighteenth century, some perhaps even farther back, (although I would doubt Voegelin's own theory that the "rise of immanentist sectarianism" since the late Middle Ages eventually ended in totalitarianism). Under no circumstances would I call any of them totalitarian.

For similar reasons and for the sake of distinguishing between ideas and actual events in history, I cannot agree with Mr. Voegelin's remark that "the spiritual disease is the decisive feature that distinguishes modern masses from those of earlier centuries." To me, modern masses are disintegrated by the fact that they are "masses" in a strict sense of the word. They are distinguished from the multitudes of former centuries in that they do not have common interests to bind them together nor any kind of common "consent" which, according to Cicero, constitutes *inter-est*, that which is between men, ranging all the way from material to spiritual and other matters. This "between" can be a common ground and it can be a common purpose; it always fulfills the double function of binding men together *and* separating them in an articulate way. The lack of common interest so characteristic of modern masses is therefore only another sign of their homelessness and rootlessness. But it alone accounts for the curious fact that these modern masses are formed by the atomization of society, that the mass-men who lack all communal relationships nevertheless offer the best possible "material" for movements in which peoples are so closely pressed together that they seem to have become One. The loss of interests is identical with the loss of "self," and modern masses are distinguished in my view by their self-lessness, that is their lack of "selfish interests."

I know that problems of this sort can be avoided if one interprets totalitarian movements as a new — and perverted — reli-

gion, a substitute for the lost creed of traditional beliefs. From this, it would follow that some "need for religion" is a cause of the rise of totalitarianism. I feel unable to follow even the very qualified form in which Professor Voegelin uses the concept of a secular religion. There is no substitute for God in the totalitarian ideologies — Hitler's use of the "Almighty" was a concession to what he himself believed to be a superstition. More than that, the metaphysical place for God has remained empty. The introduction of these semi-theological arguments in the discussion of totalitarianism, on the other side, is only too likely to further the wide-spread and strictly blasphemous modern "ideas" about a God who is "good for you"—for your mental or other health, for the integration of your personality and God knows what—that is "ideas" which make of God a function of man or society. This functionalization seems to me in many respects the last and perhaps the most dangerous stage of atheism.

By this, I do not mean to say that Professor Voegelin could ever become guilty of such functionalization. Nor do I deny that there is some connection between atheism and totalitarianism. But this connection seems to me purely negative and not at all peculiar to the rise of totalitarianism. It is true that a Christian cannot become a follower of either Hitler or Stalin; and it is true that morality as such is in jeopardy whenever the faith in God who gave the Ten Commandments is no longer secure. But this is at most a condition *sine qua non*, nothing which could positively explain whatever happened afterward. Those who conclude from the frightening events of our times that we have got to go back to religion and faith for political reasons seem to me to show just as much lack of faith in God as their opponents.

Mr. Voegelin deplures, as I do, the "insufficiency of theoretical instruments" in the political sciences (and with what to me appeared as inconsistency accuses me a few pages later of not having availed myself more readily of them). Apart from the present trends of psychologism and sociologism about which I think Mr. Voegelin and I are in agreement, my chief quarrel with the present state of the historical and political sciences is their growing incapacity for making distinctions. Terms like nationalism, imperialism, totalitarianism, etc. are used indiscrim-



inately for all kinds of political phenomena (usually just as “high-brow” words for aggression) and none of them is any longer understood with its particular historical background. The result is a generalization in which the words themselves lose all meaning. Imperialism does not mean a thing if it is used indiscriminately for Assyrian and Roman and British and Bolshevik history; nationalism is discussed in times and countries which never experienced the nation state; totalitarianism is discovered in all kinds of tyrannies or forms of collective communities, etc. This kind of confusion — where everything distinct disappears and everything that is new and shocking is (not explained but) explained away either through drawing some analogies or reducing it to a previously known chain of causes and influences — seems to me to be the hallmark of the modern historical and political sciences.

In conclusion, I may be permitted to clarify my statement that in our modern predicament “human nature as such is at stake,” a statement which provoked Mr. Voegelin’s sharpest criticism because he sees in the very idea of “changing the nature of man or of anything” and in the very fact that I took this claim of totalitarianism at all seriously a “symptom of the intellectual breakdown of Western civilization.” The problem of the relationship between essence and existence in Occidental thought seems to me to be a bit more complicated and controversial than Mr. Voegelin’s statement on “nature,” (identifying “a thing as a thing” and therefore incapable of change by definition) implies, but this I can hardly discuss here. It may be enough to say that, terminological differences apart, I hardly proposed more change of nature than Mr. Voegelin himself in his book on *The New Science of Politics*; discussing the Platonic-Aristotelian theory of soul, he states: “one might almost say that before the discovery of psyche man had no soul.” (p. 67) In Mr. Voegelin’s terms, I could have said that after the discoveries of totalitarian domination and its experiments we have reason to fear that man may lose his soul.

In other words, the success of totalitarianism is identical with a much more radical liquidation of freedom as a political and as a human reality than anything we have ever witnessed before. Under these conditions, it will be hardly consoling to cling to an

unchangeable nature of man and conclude that either man himself is being destroyed or that freedom does not belong to man's essential capabilities. Historically we know of man's nature only insofar as it has existence, and no realm of eternal essences will ever console us if man loses his essential capabilities.

My fear, when I wrote the concluding chapter of my book, was not unlike the fear which Montesquieu already expressed when he saw that Western civilization was no longer guaranteed by laws although its peoples were still ruled by customs which he did not deem sufficient to resist an onslaught of despotism. He says in the Preface to *L'Esprit des Lois* "L'homme, cet etre des autres, est egalement capable de connaitre sa propre nature flexible, se pliant dans la societe aux pensees et aux impressions lorsqu'on la lui montre, et d'en perdre jusqu'au sentiment lorsqu'on la lui derobe." (Man, this flexible being, who submits himself in society to the thoughts and impressions of his fellow-men, is equally capable of knowing his own nature when it is shown to him as it is and of losing it to the point where he has no realization that he is robbed of it.)

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### CONCLUDING REMARK

*By Eric Voegelin*

It does not happen often these days that a work in political science has sufficient theoretical texture to warrant an examination of principles. Since Dr. Arendt's book was distinguished by a high degree of theoretical consciousness, I felt obliged to acknowledge this quality and to pay it a sincere compliment by criticizing some of the formulations. The criticisms had the further pleasant consequence of stimulating the preceding, more elaborate explanation of the author's views concerning method. But this should be enough as an aid to the reader of the book. My word in conclusion, requested by the Editors of the *Review*, will therefore be of the briefest — a ceremony rather than an argument.

I shall do no more than draw attention to what we agree is the question at stake, though Dr. Arendt's answer differs from mine. It is the question of essence in history, the question of how