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It is often said that evil threatens sense and intelligibility by defeating our normative expectations.¹ From natural evils – catastrophes such as earthquakes – to moral evils – atrocities such as genocide – the suffering produced by evil raises questions about the metaphysical and ethical order of the world. We may, like Voltaire in the context of the Lisbon earthquake, wonder whether in the face of acute suffering our metaphysical conception of the world (in Voltaire’s case, Leibnizian optimism) has any explanatory traction. We may, like Hannah Arendt in her account of radical evil, find the motivations of perpetrators undecipherable, transgressing moral sense and meaning.² Evil’s ostensible unintelligibility also implicates the redemptive powers of art and poetry. As Theodor Adorno famously stated, in the face of the atrocities of the Holocaust, poetic forms of sense-making are not only inert but degenerative.³

These paradigmatic perspectives on evil suggest that the presence of evil threatens sense and intelligibility. If, however, evil alienates us from sense, and especially moral sense, it becomes unclear how we can respond to evil morally. Accounts of evil either undercut the unintelligibility of evil,⁴ in order to render it suitable for moral accountability or uphold its unintelligibility with the unpalatable consequence that evil comes to transcend the moral sense of the world. This paper proposes an account of evil that satisfies both the intuition that evil is intelligible from a moral standpoint and the intuition that evil is in some sense unintelligible. In order to incorporate both intuitions about evil, I propose that we distinguish between unintelligibility understood in terms of *perpetrator motivation* and unintelligibility *as a feature of suffering*. While the first kind of intelligibility concerns whether we can understand the perpetrators of evil from a moral standpoint, the second concerns how suffering impairs meaning and sense for victims and survivors. Distinguishing between these two accounts allows us to appreciate *varieties* of (un)intelligibility at stake in accounts of evil and enables us to see that the

view that evil is unintelligible is not tantamount to the idea that evil lies outside of moral sense.

Arendt's canonical accounts of radical and banal evil give us two distinctive ways in which perpetrator motivation can be understood. In her account of radical evil, unintelligibility shows up in how perpetrators of evil defy moral sense insofar as our ordinary moral responses – forgiveness, anger, revenge, etc. – fail with respect to them. Arendt's account of banal evil, by contrast, reveals that perpetrators are not, in fact, beyond comprehension but that their moral perspective is deeply distorted. Whereas the first account, falsely, as I will argue, attributes unintelligibility to perpetrators, the second account rightly treats evil as intelligible and morally tractable.

This, however, is not the final word on evil and intelligibility. The unintelligibility associated with evil involves more than the supposed inscrutability of perpetrators. A much-neglected way in which evil and unintelligibility are associated concerns how evil, understood in terms of suffering, destroys intelligibility at its foundations. In order to bring out this feature of evil, I put into dialogue Jean Améry's first-person reports of his experiences during and after the Holocaust as chronicled in *At the Mind's Limits*⁵ with Emmanuel's Levinas's essay "Useless Suffering."⁶ Reading Améry through Levinas reveals how the suffering of evil condemns the subject to sense-destroying isolation without recourse to intersubjective modes of sense-making. Together Arendt, Améry, and Levinas reveal that intelligibility means different things when we are talking about the perpetrators of evil and when we are talking about victims and survivors of evil.⁷

Radical Evil and Unintelligibility

Arendt introduces radical evil in the *Origins of Totalitarianism* as an unprecedented form of evil that evades moral understanding. The crimes and atrocities of totalitarian regimes, including the Third Reich, are a form of radical evil, because they are "unpunishable, unforgivable [...] no longer [...] understood and explained by the evil motives of self-interest, greed, covetousness, resentment, lust for power, and cowardice; and which therefore anger could not revenge, love could not endure, friendship could not forgive" (Arendt 1979, 459).⁸ In Arendt's view, no comprehensible motive – however perverse or unjust – can be attributed to the architects and executors of these atrocities. Arendt describes this incomprehensibility in terms of the "anti-utility" and "uselessness" that characterized Nazi enterprises, citing the fact that even when shortages of materials were impairing the war effort, the Nazis set aside the exigencies of war and persisted in the costly effort of maintaining concentration camps and the entire transportation network required to run them.⁹ The incomprehensible motives of totalitarian regimes are also encapsulated by the violent excesses that place them "beyond the pale

even of solidarity in human sinfulness.”¹⁰ We might find blameworthy or punishable utilitarian action that results in suffering taken during a conventional war, but we are, in Arendt’s view in *Origins*, unable to find punishable or blameworthy in the standard sense those actions whose motives confound us. Radical evil, therefore, paralyses our moral understanding.

Radical evil, Arendt argues, does not only lack comprehensible motives, it also does not participate in any foundational narratives about evil in Western thought. Arendt cites Kant’s account of radical evil, according to which the source of evil is a “perverted ill will,” a subject’s natural propensity to follow her inclinations.¹¹ Even the devil has a “celestial origin” in a cosmological drama, i.e., the devil as the long-standing adversary of God.¹² Radical evil does not participate in these overarching narratives because it can neither be explained in terms of our innate propensity for evil nor in terms of satanic malice. As Arendt puts it, “we actually have nothing to fall back on in order to understand a phenomenon that... breaks down all standards we know.”¹³

One might point out that in placing totalitarian regimes outside of Western narratives, Arendt also risks placing them outside history, even though *Origins of Totalitarianism* also shows continuities between Western imperialism and the Holocaust.¹⁴ The notion that the radical evil of 20th-century totalitarian regimes has no origins is, in fact, the result of a long-standing myth that portrays European atrocities during WWII as aberrations. It is also an example of what Achille Mbembe describes as a false exteriorization of violence, an invalid separation of the metropole and the colony that results in the artificial separation of domestic and colonial histories.¹⁵ This includes evident continuities between German colonial enterprises in South West Africa, where the first genocide of the 20th century occurred and where concentration camps were also established.¹⁶ The infrastructure of these camps, together with practices like human experimentation, are historical precursors to the Nazi camps. Furthermore, Arendt’s claim that radical evil made human beings superfluous by treating them as fully disposable and replaceable¹⁷ applies as much to the inmates of the concentration camps and gulags in Europe as to the genocide of indigenous populations in the Americas and to the Africans who perished in the Trans-Atlantic slave trade.

It could be argued that rendering human beings superfluous is a necessary but not sufficient condition for radical evil. A second necessary condition, as we have seen, is that radical evil is motiveless and non-utilitarian. What would then set apart the atrocities of totalitarian regimes in the 20th century from, say, the trans-Atlantic slave trade would be the latter’s putative utilitarianism. However, first, it is not entirely clear whether the radical evil of totalitarian regimes lacked utility – rendering a class of human beings superfluous for the purposes of establishing racial purity counts as a

means to an end. Second, it can equally be argued that the murder of millions of Africans owing to conditions aboard slave ships, for instance, did not follow any utilitarian logic. Like radical evil which destroys persons through destroying their status as legal, moral, and free persons, slavery consisted of a “triple loss... identical with absolute domination, natal alienation, and social death (expulsion from humanity altogether).”¹⁸ Arendt’s view, then, that radical evil has no comparisons and is therefore unintelligible, turns out to be unwarranted.

Banal Evil and Intelligibility

In her letters to Gershom Scholem, prior to writing *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, Arendt expresses a change of mind. Rather than demonic or deep, Arendt describes evil as a “fungus” that “lays the world to waste.”¹⁹ Evil should not, in other words, be apotheosized to theological prestige, as profound and inscrutable, but rather treated as the lowest and basest phenomenon. The turning point for Arendt is the recognition that characterizing evil as inscrutable confounds our moral understanding—that is, our attempt to see how “average people, neither good nor evil by nature, are able to bring about...immense ruin.”²⁰

Accordingly, in *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil*, Arendt abandons her conception of radical evil and, among other things, attempts to describe the moral framework of perpetrators. Rather than inscrutable depth, Arendt argues it is shallowness that is characteristic of the mentality of the perpetrator of evil. Adolf Eichmann is a case in point: what makes him evil is his failure to pick out what is morally salient in a situation through an internal dialogue within himself. Arendt’s treatment of evil as banal serves the purpose of demonstrating that, far from spontaneous and unfathomable, evil is open to moral traction – its perpetrators are not mysterious masterminds and distortions in their moral psychology are in fact open to view. While commentators typically discuss Arendt’s account of Adolf Eichmann’s thoughtlessness²¹ – his failure to pick out what is morally salient in a situation through an internal dialogue within himself – I would like to focus on Arendt’s attempt to make the banality of evil comprehensible as a *reversal of normative intuitions*, of which Arendt presents a brief but complex account.²²

Before I delve into the reversal of normative intuitions Arendt presents us with, let me begin with the associated and well-known claim that Eichmann forfeited Kant’s categorical imperative – one ought to act such that the principle of one’s action is in accordance with universal laws of reason – which gives the subject the status of self-legislator. As Arendt points out, Eichmann’s forfeiture of Kant’s categorical imperative rests on his rejection of *self-legislation or autonomy*.²³ He chooses instead to live by the “categorical imperative of the Third Reich”: “[a]ct in such a way that the Führer, if he knew

your action, would approve.”²⁴ Whereas Kant’s categorical imperative demands that one act in such a way that the principle of one’s action does not contradict the universal laws of reason, the categorical imperative of the Third Reich requires that the principle of one’s action does not contradict Hitler’s law, the *Führerprinzip*, according to which Hitler’s word transcends and overrules any written or constitutional laws. Any particular action must pass this new test. Far from a duty-driven cog, Eichmann *resisted* his duties when they conflicted with what he understood to be Hitler’s law. For example, Eichmann resisted Himmler’s directives towards the end of the war to desist from deporting Jews from Hungary in order to redirect resources to the war effort. In an expression of his loyalty to Hitler’s law, and in violation of direct orders, Eichmann remained faithful to the final solution. Arendt explains that rather than blind obedience to duty in whatever form, Eichmann had *unified* his will with Hitler’s law, internalizing its commandments and rejecting autonomy and self-legislation.

Let us now turn to the reversal of normative intuitions that constitutes part of Arendt’s account of Eichmann’s moral framework. Arendt’s key claim is that under Hitler’s imperative, the relation between one’s moral conscience and transgressions is reversed, such that what is ethically demanded by the conscience exchanges places with what is ordinarily considered a transgression.²⁵ From the perspective of ordinary morality, we may imagine the following situation: contrition struck Eichmann’s conscience again and again for sending millions to their deaths, but, at the same time, he failed to resist the temptation to climb the bureaucratic ladder. Arendt argues, however, that the distortion of ethical perspectives under the Third Reich meant that contrition strikes Eichmann when he does *not* send innocent people to their death.²⁶ As she puts it, “just as the law in civilized countries assumes that the voice of conscience tells everybody ‘Thou shalt not kill,’ even though man’s natural desires and inclinations may at times be murderous, so the law of Hitler’s land demanded that the voice of conscience tell everybody: ‘Thou shalt kill.’”²⁷ Eichmann’s conscience is troubled only when he fails or believes he has failed to fulfill his duty under Hitler’s law and not when he has failed to fulfill his actual moral obligations. The ethical, crucially, did not *disappear* altogether but appeared as a temptation under the Third Reich, “Many Germans and Nazis must have been tempted *not* to murder, *not* to rob, *not* to let their neighbors go off to their doom...and *not* to let themselves become accomplices in all these crimes by benefitting from them.”²⁸ Under the framework of Hitler’s imperative, however, it became “virtuous” to discard these “temptations.”

Thus, while radical evil obscures moral accountability by portraying the perpetration of evil as unintelligible, banal evil succeeds in bringing out how perpetrators, however distorted, still lie within the moral domain. For despite the inversion of conscience and temptation that Arendt describes, “the organizers of the massacre knew full well that murder is against the normal

desires and inclinations of most people.”²⁹ This understanding of evil is dialectical: it reveals that under the reversal of normative intuitions there is a counter-demand to the call to kill even if this counter-demand appears to perpetrators as temptation. Furthermore, those who sided with the Nazis had “learned how to resist temptation,” that is to say, they had actively taught themselves to resist the temptation *not* to commit murder (my emphasis).³⁰ This indicates that unlike radical evil, banal evil is *not* spontaneous but learned and diachronic.

The dialectical situation in which Eichmann participates reveals that he was neither blindly obeying orders nor acting from ignorance or stupidity. He *actively* – rather than merely passively, as a cog in the machinery of fascism – supported Hitler’s law. This active support is highlighted in Arendt’s essay “Personal Responsibility Under the Dictatorship”³¹ where Arendt criticizes the pairing of obedience with passivity. Obedience, in contrast to passivity, should be understood in terms of active support: “If I obey the laws of the land, I actually support its constitution, as becomes glaringly obvious in the case of revolutionists and rebels who disobey because they have withdrawn this tacit consent.”³² The relationship between support and opposition to which Arendt points demonstrates that choices were possible. The decision *not* to support the Third Reich or to join the resistance reveals that it was possible to reject the Third Reich’s picture of conscience and temptation, or to, even under the throes of the distortion, give in to “temptation” and to refuse to murder. The dialectic we have examined so far clarifies precisely this point, namely, that Eichmann, far from being enigmatically evil, outside moral sense and judgment, was in the sphere of moral decision-making.

A situation in which the evil at hand is incomprehensible, without origins, without a dialectic between what one ought to do and what one is tempted to do, is a situation in which there is no room for having made choices. There are simply no moral choices to be identified, only a fundamental or radical desire to produce destruction and suffering for its own sake. Radical evil, without origins, as we saw, is spontaneous and autotelic. If understood in terms of the dialectic I have described, Arendt’s conception of banal evil brings evil back into the moral sphere, by revealing distortions to perpetrators’ moral perspectives. As far as moral responses to someone like Eichmann are concerned, Arendt remarks in “Personal Responsibility Under the Dictatorship” that the Third Reich may *overwhelm* our ordinary sense of justice and associated responses (retribution, protection, rehabilitation, etc.), but it does not thereby destroy it. As Arendt states, “our sense of justice would find it intolerable to forego punishment and let those who murdered thousands and hundreds of thousands and millions go scot-free.”³³ This remark reveals that “our sense of justice,” though overwhelmed and fraught in the face of atrocity, is still operative insofar as it bars genocide from going unpunished. A conception of evil that characterizes it as wholly outside of the reach of justice neglects that our very recognition of evil is grounded in moral

sense. If evil destroys or escapes moral sense, we would not only be able to *identify* an act or agent as evil, we would also fail to rectify social life in such a way that evil is rendered impossible. Adorno describes this latter effort as a categorical imperative of a different kind: “Hitler has imposed a new categorical imperative upon humanity in the state of their unfreedom: to arrange their thinking and conduct, so that Auschwitz never repeats itself, so that nothing similar ever happen again.”³⁴ Our thinking and conduct, however, cannot be normatively rearranged if we believe evil has eluded moral sense.

Casting evil in the right terms is crucial so that evil can be brought back into the moral sphere and the nihilism that can set in as a consequence when evil defeats our normative expectations can be thwarted. Another consequence of bringing evil back into the moral sphere concerns our own proximity to, complicity with, or appropriation of evil. Arendt’s message is that ordinary people can commit evil – no demonic masterminds are needed. If we believe that perpetrators lie outside of moral sense, we end up “fetishizing” evil as something of which we, ourselves, are incapable. Furthermore, if we see perpetrators as so beyond the pale that they are undeserving of justice, we open ourselves to committing evil acts of our own. While Arendt’s account of radical evil characterized the brutality of the Third Reich as radically unintelligible is open to these dangers, banal evil, by contrast, opens it to moral traction. This, however, is not the final word on evil and intelligibility. In order to address how evil and unintelligibility still remain linked, I will now turn to Jean Améry’s first-person account of evil.

Améry: Homelessness and Trust in the World

In *At the Mind’s Limits*, Jean Améry chronicles his experiences of torture and internment in concentration camps as well as his life as a survivor of the Holocaust. Améry’s central aim, as he makes clear in the Preface of the collected essays, is to do justice to the first-person experience of eyewitnesses, victims, and survivors of the Holocaust. To this end, Améry explains that standard narratives that place the evil perpetrated by the Nazis in a third-person historical or sociological explanatory framework fail to honor the perspective of the witnesses and survivors of the Holocaust.³⁵ In fact, Améry is critical of Arendt on a similar count. She, too, he argues, leaves behind the victims of the Holocaust when she focusses exclusively on perpetrators, especially in her treatment of banal evil. Arendt’s foregrounding of Eichmann elides, as Améry sees it, the realities of those who underwent the consequences of his actions.³⁶ His own account of detainment and torture is rich in phenomenological detail, precisely because Améry is concerned with deepening our sense of the experiences of those who encounter evil.

Besides being at odds with some perspectives of his time, Améry’s approach stands in stark contrast to contemporary discussions of evil

(especially in the analytic context), which attempt to provide a theory of evil that often rests on identifying evil-making properties, e.g., the properties owing to which an act of wrongdoing turns into act of evil.³⁷ To this extent, Luke Russell argues that an act is evil if it aims to harm people, even if these harms are not actualized, e.g., the act of placing a bomb that is neutralized before it causes harm and injury.³⁸ Todd Calder, by contrast, argues an act is evil if it, does, in fact, actualize harm.³⁹ The question in these cases is criteriological: what are the criteria that a perpetrator/act must fulfill to count as evil? Unlike these perpetrator-focused theories, Claudia Card's account takes the violence endured by victims and survivors as crucial to any account of evil.⁴⁰ As Card is primarily concerned with laying out a theory of evil, however, the lived experience of victims and survivors does not take *phenomenological* precedence in her work. If we bring Améry's perspective to bear on these theories, with their attention to conceptual rather than phenomenological dimensions, such accounts leave the *phenomenon* of evil behind. Approaching evil, for Améry, requires phenomenological sensitivity and empathic perceptiveness, a turn to the original experience of the suffering subject rather than abstract theorizing. In targeting "objective" and third-person theories from political science and sociology for failing to account for the subjective dimensions of suffering, Améry does not argue that these theories should be cast aside. In his view, an *exclusive* attention to locating objective features – e.g., evil-making properties etc. – impairs the task of deepening our sense of the experiential dimensions of evil, that is, the original, existential and intersubjective field in which evil occurs.

To this end, Améry's essays abound with phenomenological descriptions of his encounters with evil, most notably his essay on torture where he describes his experiences under Gestapo custody after he was arrested for his involvement in the resistance. In describing torture as a physical and *metaphysical* incursion on the subject, Améry portrays the suffering of torture as the reduction of a person to "flesh and death" and the destruction of the *essence* of the subject -- "his soul, or his mind, or his consciousness, or his identity."⁴¹ This encounter with evil, furthermore, is not a temporally-bound event that ends once torture has ceased but remains latent in the subject as a form of "accumulated horror."⁴² These remarks on torture do not furnish the components of a theory of evil but deepen the phenomenological reality of suffering, throwing into sharp relief what it is about evil that overwhelms us. Part of suffering evil, for Améry, and in fact, the most enduring element of evil, is a fundamental loss of intelligibility. Améry describes loss of intelligibility through various registers and metaphors, most notably, as "homelessness" and "loss of trust" in the world.

For Améry homelessness is not only the literal expulsion of a person from their home but signifies a more existential, even metaphysical, sense of being bereft of home: "the loss of home entails an exile from community, language, and youth – a loss of one's past...houses, possessions, business, lands, forests,

cities.”⁴³ From an existential standpoint, homelessness includes a loss not only of the tangible but also the intangible mood of familiarity and intimacy that ties us to the world. While home stands for a secure anchorage, a situation in which “we are in full command of the dialectics of knowledge and recognition, of trust and confidence,” in the state of homelessness, one “stagger[s] through a world whose signs [remain] as inscrutable...as Etruscan script.”⁴⁴ To say that this loss of home is *fundamental* is to contrast it with the secondary state of confusion experienced by a traveler who, while she may feel perplexed and unmoored in a foreign place, still has recourse to the fundamental meanings where she is at home. It is access to these fundamental meanings that allow her to translate the foreign into the familiar and to find her bearings in a new world. The homelessness Améry describes, however, is one in which the former more original sense of intelligibility is impaired, so that one is condemned to a “world full of riddles.”⁴⁵

Levinas and Useless Suffering

It is evident that the loss of one’s home, language, and one’s relations with the other severs the relationships – phenomenologists often describe these relations as co-constitutive of meaning – that make meaning possible. What remains unclear in Améry’s account, however, is *how* suffering the violence of torture – the event that he describes in greatest phenomenological detail – condemns one to homelessness and unintelligibility. In the case of torture, Améry places unintelligibility in a different register, not homelessness, but “loss of trust” in the world. Améry describes how the shock of torture destroys trust in basic cognitive, existential, and intersubjective attitudes – torture destroys belief in “causality,” “inductive inference,” and the intersubjective faith that the other is not out to destroy us.⁴⁶ Still, Améry leaves unclear precisely how suffering torture destroys intelligibility, for it remains unclear how the torture situation is able to destroy these fundamental attitudes and certainties. In order to answer this question, I will now turn to Emmanuel Levinas’ essay, “Useless Suffering,” which elucidates how suffering, which he treats as tantamount to evil, results in loss of meaning and intelligibility.

Like Améry, Levinas considers evil from the first-person perspective, specifically addressing the relationship between *consciousness* and *suffering*. Levinas begins with the claim that consciousness is unable to “assume” suffering.⁴⁷ In the Kantian paradigm, which informs Levinas’s account, the “assumable” can be understood to refer to any particular that can be subsumed under the a priori forms of the sensibility and the understanding and thereby made intelligible. The intelligibility of experience rests on the ability of consciousness (the transcendental unity of apperception for Kant) to unify experiences by “assuming” them, that is, by synthesizing them under general rules and forms. Levinas maintains that the experience of suffering

“oppos[es] the assemblage of data [of experience] into a meaningful whole.”⁴⁸ If, following Kant in broad strokes, meaningful experience consists of integrating particulars into meaningful wholes, then suffering, Levinas claims, in disabling this unifying capacity, undercuts the possibility of meaning. Suffering, in other words, is an experience that outruns consciousness; it destroys the fundamental ability of the subject to make sense of the world, because, in Kantian terms, it is not integratable with empirical reality – it defies the rules of intelligible experience. Subjectivity shrinks from pain, finding it intolerable, unable to subsume it. Suffering, thus, impairs the *active* powers of consciousness to generate meaning and leaves the subject passive. This passivity or not-ness, Levinas explains, “[looms] as an evil more negative than any apophantic not.”⁴⁹ In other words, the “not” – sense-destroying potency – of evil, as a negation of the unifying powers of consciousness, is “a negativity extending as far as to the realm of unmeaning.”⁵⁰ Evil is “the deleterious per se” because it does not only damage our normative expectations but also because suffering makes *nonsense* of experience.

As suffering is the sort of experience that cannot be woven into the fabric of meaning, it stands as an *excess*, which Levinas describes in “Transcendence and Evil”⁵¹ in the following way:

While the notion of excess evokes first the quantitative idea of intensity, of a degree surpassing measure, evil is an excess in its very quiddity. This notation is very important: evil is not an excess because suffering can be terrible, and go beyond the endurable. The break with the normal and the normative, with order, with synthesis, with the world, already constitutes its qualitative essence. Suffering qua suffering is but a concrete and quasi-sensible manifestation of the non-integratable, the non-justifiable.⁵²

Here Levinas describes how the evil of suffering is excessive in terms of its very essence and quality rather than its quantity (it is excessive not because it exceeds a certain measurable threshold but is essentially excessive). The excessiveness of evil becomes evident in the fact that it cannot be integrated into experience, its “unassumability” from the essay “Useless Suffering.” While evil is often understood as a break from our normative expectations of the world, here Levinas’s claim is more fundamental and phenomenological. It is not only our expectations that evil defeats (the expectation that, in Améry’s case, for example, the other is not my destroyer) but the “synthetic” or “unifying” capacities of consciousness that give order and meaning to the world. The evil of suffering destroys this order by destroying the power of consciousness to render experience meaningful. Without such rendering, the event of suffering stands out as *excess*, as that which cannot be brought into the domain of sense, what Levinas describes as evil’s malignant heterogeneity.⁵³ Excess, then, takes on a different meaning in this context than the familiar one (i.e., “a degree surpassing measure”); evil is excess in relation

to meaning, that is, it lies outside of meaning. Bear in mind here, however, that what is beyond meaning or intelligibility is not the perpetrator's motivations, for example, but the *experience* of suffering itself.

From the Kantian standpoint, then, in destroying the unifying powers of consciousness, the suffering of evil destroys the transcendental conditions of experience and meaning. Yet while the experience of suffering itself is unintelligible or meaningless for the one who undergoes it, suffering opens into a meaningful dimension. Suffering, which renders one passive and condemns one to the loss of meaning, opens into what Levinas describes as the "intrahuman" world. In light of this intersubjective dimension, Levinas asks,

Is not the evil of suffering—extreme passivity, impotence, abandonment and solitude—also the unassumable and thus the possibility of a half opening, and, more precisely, the possibility that wherever a moan, a cry, a groan or a sigh happen there is the original call for aid, for curative help, for help from the other ego whose alterity, whose exteriority promises salvation?⁵⁴

The intrahuman is revealed in the very expression of suffering injury: whether it is a call for help or a wordless cry, the expression of suffering is a call to *someone*. Levinas links the unassumability of suffering to the call for aid. The suffering subject who has little intentional scope of her own expresses her pain through a call to the other, whose otherness is respite that "promises salvation." The isolation of suffering opens into transcendence and alterity, owing to this call (and response). For Levinas, however, this intrasubjective facet of suffering does not make suffering "useful." While the other can come to one's rescue, bring an end to suffering, and return one to the world of sense, suffering itself remains senseless, without justification, without reason, and without use. This perspective is at the heart of Levinas's rejection of theodicy, the attempt to justify suffering. Justification requires that what is being justified is meaningful; as we have seen, however, suffering is meaningless for the subject who undergoes it and thus undercuts justification. As Jennifer L. Geddes has argued, however, perhaps Levinas overstates his claim that suffering is meaningless for the one who undergoes it.⁵⁵ While I, the spectator or bystander, cannot make the other's pain justifiable/meaningful, I also cannot forbid the suffering subject from understanding her suffering as meaningful. Levinas can, however, be read as making the weaker claim that *one* dominant modality of suffering is that it impairs our ability to make sense of the world.

Let us return to the question I posed at the beginning of this section: how did torture result in unintelligibility for Améry (what he calls "loss of trust")? From the Levinasian perspective, Améry is thrust into meaninglessness owing to the suffering he underwent, since the suffering of torture destroys the ability of consciousness to generate meaning by destroying the synthetic

powers of consciousness. If, however, the intersubjective can restore sense, it remains unclear, then, why Améry did not recover from a state of meaninglessness and unintelligibility. Like Levinas, Améry describes the cry for help as the basic response to bodily injury, an aspect of what Améry calls, quoting Kropotkin, “mutual aid in nature.”⁵⁶ This intersubjective and reciprocal “expectation of help,” Améry holds, plays as fundamental a role for existence as the struggle for survival we are familiar with from the evolutionary standpoint.⁵⁷ In the social world we inhabit, aid is a fundamental presupposition: from the maternal relation, to the medical sphere, we expect aid in the event of injury.⁵⁸ In the torture situation, however, no help arrives: “Whoever would rush to the prisoner’s aid—a wife, a mother, a brother, or friend— he won’t get this far.”⁵⁹ As a result, with the first blow “against which there can be no defense and which no helping hand will ward off, a part of our life ends and it can never again be revived.”⁶⁰ Under torture, responses to pernicious others, e.g., retaliation or calling for aid, are unavailable and one is revealed to oneself as fundamentally alone and vulnerable.⁶¹ Rather than the ethical intrahuman that Levinas describes, the torture situation is the *reversal* of ethical relations: we are no longer in an intersubjective world, where if one injures us, another can grant us aid; we are placed defenselessly before the torturer. The intrahuman is annulled when the torturer attempts to destroy one side of the intersubjective relation, namely, the other, so that only he can remain, what Améry describes as the boundless egoism of the torturer.⁶²

If not immediate aid, then perhaps consolation, a kind of deferred aid, might provide relief subsequent to torture. Améry, however, remarks that torture cannot be compensated for “by any sort of subsequent human communication.”⁶³ Consolation cannot rehabilitate trust in the world, for consolation still relies on the terms of a world that the torture situation destroyed. To return to Levinas, without the intersubjective dimension having shown the suffering subject the ethical alternative to the senselessness of pain, the tortured subject is forever condemned to the isolation and meaninglessness of suffering.

Levinas and Améry also converge on the question of theodicy, whether suffering can be justified. If suffering is essentially meaningless it cannot be integrated into a theodicy whether religious or naturalistic. Améry, like Levinas, is fundamentally opposed to theodicy, rejecting the view that suffering is, for instance, soul-forging, e.g., it reveals the reality of spirit or brings us in communion with God etc. The suffering that Améry underwent, together with many of the inmates of Auschwitz, he explains, lacked any utility or any redemptive quality. Auschwitz did not leave the survivors with knowledge or wisdom.⁶⁴ Rather, those who survived Auschwitz emerged from it “stripped, robbed, emptied out, disoriented.”⁶⁵ The experience of Auschwitz was plainly destructive: it destroyed philosophical idealism, metaphysical certainty, and the intelligibility of the world. But Améry’s account should not be overdetermined to speak for all survivors as an

incontrovertible destiny. Many survivors of atrocities, owing to various dimensions of the intrahuman – e.g., solidarity and community – regain their trust in the world and are restored to intelligibility in spite of their suffering.

There is a relationship between evil and intelligibility that we have yet to cover. We have considered perpetrators as well as victims and survivors, but we have not yet considered how we, as spectators (or as readers of Améry) stand with respect to evil and intelligibility. How, in other words, does the unintelligibility of pain experienced by the suffering subject relate to my sense of intelligibility and meaning? Levinas makes clear that the pain of the other can be *meaningful* (while remaining unjustified) in *me*, as I can assume it into an ethical order in terms of my responsibility to the other. But there is another sense, unexplored by Levinas, in which the pain of the other raises a challenge of intelligibility for *everyone*. To understand this point, it is important to note, first and foremost, that while another subject's pain is *her* pain and not mine (though it might affect me in various ways), it is not a private experience in all senses of the word. As Ilit Faber maintains, accounts like Améry's may disclose one person's experience but they have universal value – they tell us something about ourselves and the world we, too, inhabit.⁶⁶ In reading Améry's account of torture, we draw close to him and the world as he encounters it. In fact, “[w]e are now with him, sharing his unavoidable doubt that the world might not always respond to our expectations (of logic, causality, society).”⁶⁷ Améry's work should not, therefore, be understood as a psychological or introspective account that is wholly particular – idiosyncratic experiences that can be cordoned off as belonging to the pathological universe of a traumatized subject. Relating to Améry, letting his work count for us today requires that we treat his world as *our* world. The events that unfolded in the cellar where Améry was tortured were events that occurred in our world – this is a fact, as Ferber rightly maintains, we, too, must contend with. For the world that Améry describes is also our world today, a world where suffering abounds. For this reason, then, the suffering subject's pain impairs not only her own sense of the world but the sense of the world for us, too, albeit in a distinct way. We, too, begin to wonder about the conduct of the political powers that govern us and their propagation of suffering, whether it is the migrants who drown in the Mediterranean Sea or the weapons that are sold only to rain down on innocent others. While Levinas's view that the suffering subject is isolated in the experience of her pain is accurate, the meaninglessness of her pain, her loss of intelligibility, has consequences for us: it reveals to us malignant actualities and possibilities of our world and it calls on us to reconsider the order of a world that propagates senseless (in Levinas's sense of the word) suffering. The only restoration of moral meaning in such a world, as Levinas maintains, is to draw close to those who are suffering and to bring them relief.

Conclusion

In *Evil: A Philosophical Investigation*, Luke Russell remarks that “we ought to deny that incomprehensibility is a necessary condition for evil action, and also deny that incomprehensible wrongdoing is sufficient for evil action.”⁶⁸ While Russell may be right in maintaining that perpetrator motivation should not be treated as incomprehensible, he neglects other ways in which incomprehensibility – what I have been calling unintelligibility – might play an important role in our understanding of evil. As I have argued in this paper, Arendt’s radical evil, in treating perpetrators as unintelligible, risks aggrandizing and exoticizing the perpetrator. This is, indeed, a deeply problematic way of addressing evil. Treating perpetrators as incomprehensible monsters creates ethical issues of its own, since in characterizing them as beyond the pale, we may end up demonizing them and risk committing evil acts of our own. It is crucial, therefore, that we bring perpetrators into the sphere of moral sense, as I argued Arendt’s account of banal evil suggests. Perpetrators are neither cogs in a machine with no agency nor demonic masterminds with an incomprehensible agency. They are, rather, individuals whose moral sense of the world is distorted, who have abandoned self-legislation in favor of external imperatives and turned what is typically a temptation (e.g., to murder) into a moral command.

I have argued, however, that this is only half the story about evil and unintelligibility. Both Arendt’s account of banal evil and Améry’s account of suffering work towards illuminating what is morally at stake, throwing into sharp relief where unintelligibility does and does not play a crucial role. Améry’s account of his experiences reveals that when addressing questions of evil and suffering, philosophy would do better to attend to them in their (phenomenological) concreteness. Turning to Améry made evident that evil and unintelligibility are associated in a way that is seldom accounted for in contemporary discussions, which treat incomprehensibility as a feature of perpetrators or as our inability to understand them. Suffering evil, I argued here, imposes a loss of intelligibility on the subject, which Améry describes as homelessness and loss of trust in the world. Turning to Levinas, we saw how suffering rends the unity of consciousness and that, while suffering may impose meaninglessness on the subject who undergoes it, it opens into an intersubjective sphere where consolation (and not, as Levinas’s anti-theodicy entails, justification or redemption) is possible. This may not redeem or justify suffering by making suffering meaningful for the subject who undergoes it, but it may restore moral sense by opening suffering to an intrahuman dimension. This, however, was not the case for Améry, for whom torture (among other forms of violence he endured) destroyed the basis of intelligibility – a fundamental trust in the world. Améry’s experiences of loss of intelligibility, however, are not restricted to his universe. The fact of evil raises questions of intelligibility for all of us about the senseless suffer brought upon others.

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- ¹ Susan Neiman, *Evil in Modern Thought* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2015).
- ² Hannah Arendt, *Origins of Totalitarianism* (San Diego: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1979), 445 (hereafter, *Origins*)
- ³ Theodor Adorno, “Cultural Criticism and Society.” *Prisms*, trans. Samuel and Shierry Webber (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1983), 34.
- ⁴ Luke Russell, *Evil A Philosophical Investigation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014) (hereafter: *Evil a Philosophical Investigation*).
- ⁵ Jean Amery, *At the Mind’s Limits*, trans. Sidney Rosenfeld and Stella P. Rosenfeld (Bloomington & Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1980) (hereafter: *At the Mind’s Limits*).
- ⁶ Levinas, Emmanuel, “Useless Suffering” in *Entre nous: Essays on Thinking-of-the-Other*, trans. Michael B. Smith and Barbara Harshaw (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998) (hereafter: *Useless Suffering*)
- ⁷ I submitted this paper in August 2023, months before the genocide of Palestinians in Gaza began. I find it important to state that while I revise this paper for publication given its themes of suffering and its perpetration, Gaza, and the atrocities we have all witnessed over the last two years, is at the forefront of my mind.
- ⁸ *Origins*, 459.
- ⁹ *Origins*, 445.
- ¹⁰ *Origins*, 459
- ¹¹ *Origins*, 459
- ¹² *Origins*, 459
- ¹³ *Origins*, 459
- ¹⁴ Robert Wald Sussman, *The Myth of Race: The Troubling Persistence of an Unscientific Idea* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2014).
- ¹⁵ Achille Mbembe, *Necropolitics* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2019) 26-27 (hereafter *Necropolitics*)
- ¹⁶ Erichsen and Olusoga, 2010 -- David Olusoga and Casper W. Erichsen, *The Kaiser’s Holocaust: Germany’s Forgotten Genocide and the Colonial Roots of Nazism*, (London: Faber & Faber, 2010).
- ¹⁷ *Origins*, 457.
- ¹⁸ *Necropolitics*, 75.
- ¹⁹ Hannah Arendt and Gershom Scholem, *The Correspondence of Hannah Arendt and Gershom Scholem*, ed. Marie Luise Knott, trans. Anthony David. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017), 209 (hereafter *Correspondence*)
- ²⁰ *Correspondence*, 217.
- ²¹ See, for example, Paul Formosa, “Thinking, Conscience and Acting in the Face of Mass Evil,” in *Power, Judgement and Political Evil: In Conversation with Hannah Arendt*, eds. Andrew Schaap, Danielle Celermajer, and Vrasidas Karalis (Farnham: Ashgate, 2010), 89-104; and Richard J.

- Bernstein, "Arendt on Thinking" in *The Cambridge Companion to Hannah Arendt*, Dana Villa (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 277-292.
- ²² Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (New York: Viking Press, 1974), 135-150 (hereafter: *Eichmann*).
- ²³ *Eichmann*, 136.
- ²⁴ Arendt quotes the Nazi governor of Poland, Hans Frank. *Eichmann*, 136.
- ²⁵ *Eichmann*, 150.
- ²⁶ *Eichmann*, 137-141.
- ²⁷ *Eichmann*, 150.
- ²⁸ *Eichmann*, 150.
- ²⁹ *Eichmann*, 150.
- ³⁰ *Eichmann*, 150.
- ³¹ Hannah Arendt, "Personal Responsibility Under Dictatorship" in *Responsibility and Judgment*, ed. (New York: Schocken Books, 2009), 17-48 (hereafter: "Personal Responsibility")
- ³² "Personal Responsibility," 47.
- ³³ "Personal Responsibility," 26.
- ³⁴ Adorno, *Negative Dialectic* (cited after German edition)
- ³⁵ *At the Mind's Limits*, viii.
- ³⁶ *At the Mind's Limits*, 25.
- ³⁷ Paul Formosa, "Different Substantive Conceptions of Evil Actions," in *The Routledge Handbook of the Philosophy of Evil*, eds. Thomas Nys and Stephen De Wijze (London and New York: Routledge, 2019), 256-266.
- ³⁸ *Evil: A Philosophical Investigation*.
- ³⁹ Todd Calder, "The Apparent Banality of Evil: The Relationship Between Evil Acts and Evil Character," *Journal of Social Philosophy* 34 (2003): 56, cited in *Evil: A Philosophical Investigation*, 54.
- ⁴⁰ Claudia Card, *The Atrocity Paradigm: A Theory of Evil* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002).
- ⁴¹ *At the Mind's Limits*, 40.
- ⁴² *At the Mind's Limits*, 40.
- ⁴³ Joseph Rosen, "Suffering and Responsibility," in *Between Améry and Levinas*, ed. Magdalena Zolkos (Lanham: Lexington, 2011), 279.
- ⁴⁴ *At the Mind's Limits*, 47.
- ⁴⁵ *At the Mind's Limits*, 47.
- ⁴⁶ *At the Mind's Limits*, 28.
- ⁴⁷ *Useless Suffering*, 91.
- ⁴⁸ *Useless Suffering*, 91.

⁴⁹ *Useless Suffering*, 92.

⁵⁰ *Useless Suffering*, 92.

⁵¹ Emmanuel Levinas, "Transcendence and Evil," in *Collected Philosophical Papers*. Translated by Alphonso Lingis. (Dordrecht: Martinus Nijhoff, 1987), 175-186 (hereafter: *Transcendence*).

⁵² *Transcendence*, 180.

⁵³ *Transcendence*, 180.

⁵⁴ *Transcendence*, 93.

⁵⁵ Jennifer L. Geddes, "Theodicy Useless Suffering, and Compassionate Asymmetry: Primo Levi, Emmanuel Levinas, and Anti-Theodicy," *Religions* 9(4) (2018).

⁵⁶ *At the Mind's Limits*, 28.

⁵⁷ *At the Mind's Limits*, 28.

⁵⁸ *At the Mind's Limits*, 28.

⁵⁹ *At the Mind's Limits*, 27.

⁶⁰ *At the Mind's Limits*, 29.

⁶¹ *At the Mind's Limits*, 28-29.

⁶² *At the Mind's Limits*, 105.

⁶³ *At the Mind's Limits*, 39.

⁶⁴ *At the Mind's Limits*, 20.

⁶⁵ *At the Mind's Limits*, 20.

⁶⁶ Ilit Ferber, "Pain as Yardstick: Jean Améry," *Journal of French and Francophone Philosophy*. 24/3 (2017): 3-16 (hereafter: *Pain as Yardstick*)

⁶⁷ "Pain as Yardstick," 11.

⁶⁸ *Evil: A Philosophical Investigation*, 61.