

DEBATING TOTALITARIANISM: AN EXCHANGE OF LETTERS BETWEEN HANNAH ARENDT AND ERIC VOEGELIN

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ABSTRACT

In 1952, Waldemar Gurian, founding editor of *The Review of Politics*, commissioned Eric Voegelin, then a professor of political science at Louisiana State University, to review Hannah Arendt's recently published *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1951). She was given the right to reply; Voegelin would furnish a concluding note. Preceding this dialogue, Voegelin wrote a letter to Arendt anticipating aspects of his review; she responded in kind. Arendt's letter to Voegelin on totalitarianism, written in German, has never appeared in print before. She wrote two drafts of it, the first and longest being the more interesting. It contained an early reference to her thinking about the relationship among plurality, politics, and philosophy. It also invoked her notion of the compelling "logic" of totalitarian ideology. But this was not the letter Voegelin received. Because of this, he misunderstood significant parts of her argument. Below, the two versions of Arendt's letter are translated. They are prefaced by a translation of Voegelin's initial message to Arendt. An introduction compares Arendt's letters, offers context, and provides a snapshot of Arendt's and Voegelin's perceptions of each other. Their views of political religion and human nature are also highlighted. Keyed to Arendt and Voegelin's letters are pertinent aspects of the debate in *The Review of Politics* that followed their epistolary exchange.

Keywords: Arendt, ideology, plurality, political religion, totalitarianism, Voegelin

I. INTRODUCTION

Blighted careers and ruined hopes disfigured the lives of many émigré scholars who survived Nazified Europe. Hannah Arendt (1906–1975) and Eric Voegelin (1901–1985) were more fortunate. It was in America, their new home, that both scholars first received major acclaim. Arendt, a German Jew, fled Berlin shortly after Hitler's ascent to power in January 1933; following a sojourn in Paris, she arrived on American shores in May 1941. Voegelin, a German whose family relocated to Vienna when he was nine, repaired to the United States following the *Anschluss* of March 1938 and his dismissal from the University of Vienna.

1. Our thanks to Carol Leadham at the Hoover Institution Archives for her aid in retrieving the Voegelin-Arendt correspondence; Dwight Browne for facilitating permission to publish the Voegelin letter; Jerome Kohn, Trustee of the Hannah Arendt Bluecher Literary Trust, for granting permission to use the Arendt letters; and Barry Cooper, Joshua Derman, Volker Meja, Guido Parietti, and Ellis Sandoz for their suggestions and advice on previous versions of this article. The archival research on which this article is based was funded by Hong Kong's University Grants Committee. Grant number: CB11A2 (LU 340110).

American citizens by naturalization, neither scholar resettled permanently in their homeland after the war. And neither yearned for times past. Characteristic in this respect is Voegelin's remark to Wolfram Ender. "I am not an 'exile' author. America to me is not an exile, but has been home to me since my student years."²

Different as persons in many ways, Arendt and Voegelin concurred on many issues. Both questioned the idea of German collective guilt, insisting that guilt was an individual attribute, responsibility a collective one. Both rejected as absurdly question-begging the view that National Socialism's triumph was a result of Hitler's charisma. Fiercely honest and independent-minded scholars, both opposed ideology from whatever quarter it came. Both indicted sociology and depth psychology as obscurantist pseudo-disciplines. And both, of course, were outliers in American political science, having as little time for positivism as they did for German neo-Kantianism. Their marginality from the mainstream should not be exaggerated, however. Recognition came early: Voegelin was the subject of a cover story in *Time* magazine in 1953; Arendt had been featured on the cover of the *Saturday Review of Literature* two years before. Their reputations meant they were hard to ignore if easy to resent. Bonded more by common aversions than by shared enthusiasms, both scholars flayed the *Zeitgeist*.

Mutual appreciation, though not a deep friendship, marked these coordinates.³ Arendt praised Voegelin's book on *Race and State* (1933)⁴ and commended *The New Science of Politics* (1952) to Karl Jaspers ("the book is on the wrong track, but important nonetheless"⁵). She also co-edited and contributed to a volume celebrating Voegelin's sixtieth birthday.⁶ In turn, Voegelin sent her a stream of

2. Letter to Wolfram Ender, November 1, 1971, in *Eric Voegelin: Selected Correspondence 1950–1984*, vol. 30, *Collected Works*, ed. Thomas A. Hollweck, transl. Sandy Adler, Thomas A. Hollweck, and William Petropulos (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2007), 708. Voegelin describes his early American experiences in *Autobiographical Reflections*, ed. Ellis Sandoz (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1989), 28–33. Between 1924 and 1926, he studied at Columbia, Harvard, and Wisconsin courtesy of a Rockefeller Foundation grant.

3. Lissy and Eric Voegelin were, Arendt told her husband Heinrich Blücher, "very nice." *Within Four Walls: The Correspondence between Hannah Arendt and Heinrich Blücher 1936–1968*, ed. Lotte Kohler, transl. Peter Constantine (New York: Harcourt), 378. Letter from Arendt to Blücher, June 4, 1961. The Voegelins' attitude toward Arendt, in contrast, was less complimentary. Lissy found her an inferior thinker to her husband, extending that view toward women intellectuals more generally. See Manfred Henningsen's observation in *Voegelin Recollected: Conversations on a Life*, ed. Barry Cooper and Jodi Bruhn (Columbia and London: University of Missouri Press, 2008), 85. *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, Voegelin wrote to Carl Friedrich in a letter of April 24, 1953, was a "rather messy performance, valuable only for its historical materials" (Hollweck, ed., *Eric Voegelin: Selected Correspondence 1950–1984*, 155). Voegelin put the matter more courteously, if less candidly, in both the letter he wrote to Arendt and in his review of her book.

4. "The best historical account of race-thinking in the pattern of the 'history of ideas'" (Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1951) [New York: Harcourt Brace, 1973], 158, n. 3). Arendt also mentions on p. 346, n. 12, Voegelin's article for *Social Research* (Dec. 1948), "The Origins of Scientism."

5. *Hannah Arendt–Karl Jaspers Correspondence 1926–1969*, ed. Lotte Kohler and Hans Saner, transl. Robert and Rita Kimber (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1992), 203. Letter from Arendt to Gertrud Jaspers, November 1, 1952.

6. Hannah Arendt, "Action and 'The Pursuit of Happiness,'" in *Politische Ordnung und menschliche Existenz: Festgabe für Eric Voegelin zum 60. Geburtstag*, ed. Alois Dempf, Hannah Arendt, and F. Engel-Janosi (Munich: Beck, 1962), 1–16. Arendt incorporated the article into *On Revolution* (New York: Penguin, 1963). On January 11, 1961 Voegelin wrote (in German), thanking Arendt for her contribution: "I should like to thank you sincerely for taking on this work, together with the other editors. You must have gone to a lot of trouble to bring people together and to ensure that manuscripts

his books on publication, invited her to Munich in June 1961 to speak at his Institute for Political Science, and took her side during the *Eichmann in Jerusalem* controversy. He enjoyed Arendt's attention—though not always the admiration she received from his students.⁷ Their contrasting teaching styles were caught by Michael Hereth, one of Voegelin's students at Munich:

Voegelin was quite vigorous and imposing; Hannah Arendt [seated on a table, chain smoking] wanted to convince. Voegelin, I don't know if he was convinced. He convinced by forcing us to read, not by talking! Do you see the difference? Hannah Arendt convinced by talking, by saying, "You must understand. . . ." And Voegelin would say, "You have to read that and when you read that, you won't pose any silly questions!" . . . Hannah Arendt represented the political life, and Voegelin represented the academic life.⁸

Most relevant for our purpose here, Arendt and Voegelin offered strikingly contrasting perspectives on totalitarianism. Those perspectives are evident in the letters printed and translated below,⁹ and also in the exchange in *The Review of Politics* that followed soon after.¹⁰

The Arendt–Voegelin correspondence is available in the literary remains of both scholars. Neither cache is complete or fully synchronized with the other; some letters of Arendt's to Voegelin she failed to carbon copy, and vice versa.¹¹ One omission from the Voegelin archive at the Hoover Institution Archives (HIA) at Stanford is especially germane to their debate about totalitarianism. The Hannah Arendt Papers contain two letters that Arendt wrote to Voegelin. In his letter of March 16, 1951, Voegelin had introduced himself and offered an informal verdict on *Origins of Totalitarianism*. On April 8, Arendt typed a letter in response but never sent it. On April 22, she tried again and this time the result was mailed to its addressee. The first version, however, is not only longer but also more informative than the second. Why did she rework and truncate it? The

were sent in on time. I am very touched that you have taken this trouble for me—especially since I have a dark suspicion that you regard me as a dreadful reactionary or at least a 'conservative'" (Hannah Arendt Papers, Correspondence File, 1938–1976). The Hannah Arendt Papers are now fully digitized but not all of them are available off-site. This applies to the Voegelin–Arendt correspondence. In the United States, the Library of Congress (Washington, DC), and the New School for Social Research (New York), offer on-site perusal. For details of the collection, see <http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/arendthtml/arendthome.html> (accessed March 16, 2012). In the letter written to Wolfram Ender, cited in note 2 above, Voegelin rebutted the suggestion that he was a conservative. He added, "The only person who is willing to characterize herself as a conservative and whom I have known for many years is Hannah Arendt." See also Margaret Canovan, "Hannah Arendt as a Conservative Thinker," in *Hannah Arendt: Twenty Years Later*, ed. Larry May and Jerome Kohn (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1996), 11–32.

7. Cooper and Bruhn, eds., *Voegelin Recollected: Conversations on a Life*, 77–78.

8. *Ibid.*, 78.

9. The letters are catalogued in the Correspondence File, 1938–1976, n.d. Voegelin's letter of March 16, 1951 appears as number 010399/010400/010401, Arendt's (never sent) letter of April 8, 1951 as 010388-92 and her (actually sent) letter of April 22, 1951 as 010395/010396/010394 (the numbers as filed in the Hannah Arendt Papers are out of sequence).

10. Eric Voegelin, "The Origins of Totalitarianism," *The Review of Politics*, 15, no. 1 (1953), 68–76. Hannah Arendt, "A Reply," *The Review of Politics*, 15, no. 1 (1953), 76–84. Eric Voegelin, "Concluding Remark," *The Review of Politics*, 15, no. 1 (1953), 84–85.

11. The Eric Voegelin Collection is listed in the Hoover Institution Archives at <http://www.oac.cdlib.org/findaid/ark:/13030/tf4m3nb041> (accessed March 16, 2012). The correspondence is filed under Box 6/folder 23. A letter from Voegelin to Waldemar Gurian, of November 16, 1952, is filed under Box 15/folder 27. None of this material is available off-site.

letter she did send offers a plausible reason: “At the moment my own thinking is just at the stage (the in-between stage) at which it is both too late and too early to be brief.” Arendt may simply not have wished to articulate ideas that were still embryonic. The result of this omission was to deprive him, however, of intimations that we now think of as the very signature of Arendt’s political thought.

Notably, the unsent letter contains an early statement of Arendt’s concept of “plurality,” a leitmotif of her postwar work. Margaret Canovan describes the concept as Arendt’s most fundamental contribution to political theory.¹² Already in August 1950, Arendt had jotted down an entry into her diary that spelled out its elemental features: “What is politics? Politics is based on the fact of human plurality. God created *man* . . . [but politics] deals with the coexistence and association of *different men*.” Politics does not reside in human nature. It “arises *between men*, and so quite *outside of man*. . . . Hobbes understood this.”¹³ By the time of *The Human Condition* (1958), the idea was almost fully formed. As chapter 1 announced:

Action, the only activity that goes on directly between men without the intermediary of things or matter, corresponds to the human condition of plurality, to the fact that men, not Man, live on the earth and inhabit the world. While all aspects of the human condition are somehow related to politics, this plurality is specifically the condition—not only the *conditio sine qua non*, but the *conditio per quam*—of all political life.¹⁴

Her indictment of the Western philosophical “tradition” from Plato to Heidegger turned on its failure to grasp the implications of plurality for political life. Only God is one. Not the People, not the Nation, not the State. No single secular design for humans can plausibly encompass their awkward multiplicity. Politics considered as rulership; virtue considered as submission; sovereignty considered as a single will—all, for Arendt, collided with plurality. The extermination of the Jews and other outlawed peoples was not a crime against a particular group. It was a crime against the human status as such, the status of plurality. For to the extent to which humanity is plural, an attempt to remove part of its plurality is inhuman.¹⁵

In highly abbreviated form, Arendt gestured toward these contentions in her never-sent remarks to Voegelin. She also hinted at something else—omitted from the second letter—in an observation about ideology as perverted logic. The remark alluded to the concluding pages of *The Origins of Totalitarianism* where Arendt argued that political ideologies are relatively harmless when all they claim to offer is a broad orientation to life. In other circumstances and articulations, however,

12. Margaret Canovan, *Hannah Arendt: A Reinterpretation of Her Political Thought* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 281.

13. Hannah Arendt, *Denktagebuch 1950 bis 1973 Erster Band*, ed. Ursula Ludz and Ingeborg Nordmann (Munich: Piper, 2002), 15-18, translation in Hannah Arendt, *The Promise of Politics*, ed. with an introduction by Jerome Kohn (New York: Schocken, 2005), 93-96. And, more ominously, “If Man is the topic of philosophy and Men the subject of politics, then totalitarianism signifies the victory of ‘philosophy’ over politics—and not the other way round. It is as though the final victory of philosophy would mean the final extermination of the philosophers. Perhaps they have become ‘superfluous’” (*Denktagebuch*, 43, letter of November 1950). (Only the month, not the precise date, of composition is provided.)

14. Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958), 7.

15. Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem* (New York: Penguin, 1963), 252-298.

they are lethal. When the logic of an idea, and the demand for consistency it requires, dominates thought, ideology becomes a haven for “paranoiacs.”¹⁶

She expanded on this contention in an appendix to the second edition of *Origins* entitled “Ideology and Terror: A Novel Form of Government.” It is a mistake to believe, Arendt declared, that terror alone is sufficient to determine totalitarian compliance. Terror determines what must be done but not what to think—or rather what not to think. Adapting Montesquieu, she argued that although terror is the essence of totalitarianism, ideology is its “principle of action” (or substitute for such a principle) whose axiomatic force allows no contradiction or dissonance among those who count as its adherents. Totalitarian ideologies offer pseudo-explanations of the grand historical process in which actual events have no substance or meaning other than their mandated role in establishing World Communism or the Thousand Year Reich. Ideologies distill a bewildering world into one postulate whose grip on the mind is simultaneously mesmerizing and compelling (the “merciless dialectics” of Communism; Hitler’s professed enchantment with “ice cold reasoning”). Intellectually comatose to new experiences, conspiratorial in outlook, eager to subsume many-sided realities under pre-established stereotypes, the subjects of ideology have, in effect, stopped thinking for and among themselves. Yet the allure of ideology is explicable. Faced with a world characterized by disintegration and superfluity, ideology provides a refuge for those “masses—people devoid of any discernible human bond—who serve the predatory teleology of the movement.”¹⁷

Arendt signaled these ideas to Voegelin (“There is something truly crazy about this [logicality]”) in the first draft of the letter to him; then replaced them with something more pedestrian—“I believe I hate ideologies as much as you do.” This innocuous-looking amendment encouraged her correspondent to take the credit for prompting Arendt to think harder about the role of ideology in totalitarianism. Soon after their debate he wrote triumphantly to Marshall McLuhan: “The good lady who was the subject of my critique was so disturbed by it, that she wrote a whole article [“Ideology and Terror”] clarifying her point after a fashion in a more recent issue of the same periodical.”¹⁸ In fact, the origins of “Ideology and Terror” go back to a lecture Arendt delivered with that title at the University of Notre Dame in November 1950 and hence around four months before she received Voegelin’s first communication. Voegelin’s mistake was his own. But Arendt’s letter of April 22 did appear to give ground on an issue about which she had serious misgivings: political religion theory, a specialty of Voegelin and Waldemar Gurian.¹⁹ “[L]ike you,” she affirmed, “I believe that their [ideologies’]

16. Arendt, *Origins of Totalitarianism*, 457-458.

17. Hannah Arendt, “Ideology and Terror: A Novel Form of Government,” in *Origins of Totalitarianism*, 460-479.

18. Hollweck, ed., *Eric Voegelin: Selected Correspondence 1950-1984*, vol. 30, p. 174, letter of July 17, 1953.

19. Eric Voegelin, “The Political Religions” (1938), in *Modernity without Restraint: The Political Religions, The New Science of Politics, and Science, Politics, and Gnosticism*, ed. Manfred Henningsen, transl. Virginia Ann Schildauer (Columbia and London: University of Missouri Press, 2000), 20-73. Waldemar Gurian, *Bolshevism: Theory and Practice*, transl. E. I. Watkin [1931] (New York: Macmillan, 1932); Gurian, “Totalitarianism as a Political Religion,” in *Totalitarianism*, ed. Carl J. Friedrich [1954] (New York: Grosset and Dunlap, 1964). The political religion/secular religion thesis

origin can to some degree be traced back to a part of the great tradition and the continuum of ‘heresies’ . . .” The point is worth clarifying.

The uncanny resemblance between aspects of established religious devotion and the rituals, festivals, liturgies, and leader worship characteristic of totalitarianism had been noted by a number of authors since the 1930s. Voegelin was an early theorist. He depicted religion as a structure of symbols—hierarchy, ecclesia, revelation—that links humans to a larger order of reality through which the divine becomes palpable. Although God can be demeaned by human arrogance, He cannot be expunged from human life. Religion reasserts itself because it is the elemental constituent of humanity’s quest for meaning. “When God is invisible behind the world, the contents of the world will become new gods; when the symbols of transcendent religiosity are banned, new symbols develop,”²⁰ and these seek to replace the divine by the immanent. A secular collective subject becomes the putative ground for redemption.

In the letters printed below, Arendt says nothing about political religion specifically; she simply alludes to it in the remark already quoted. In *The Review of Politics*, however, she stated her dissent from a theory that envisaged totalitarianism as a “substitute for the lost creed of traditional beliefs.” Such a contention implied or flatly affirmed that a “need for religion” lay at the core of totalitarianism’s attraction. Arendt denied that contention. For one thing, totalitarian ideologies have no real substitute for God: “Hitler’s use of the ‘Almighty’ was a concession to what he himself believed was a superstition.” For another, the introduction of these “semi-theological arguments in the discussion of totalitarianism” appears to “make 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.”²¹

To be sure, Arendt added gingerly, “I do not mean to say that Professor Voegelin could ever become guilty of such functionalization.” But if not as a kind of functionalization how was Voegelin’s view of political religion to be characterized? And what did “functionalization” itself amount to? She answered both questions elsewhere by drawing a contrast between two types of “political or secular religion” theory:

There is first the historical approach for which a secular religion is quite literally a religion growing out of the spiritual secularity of our present world so that Communism is only the most radical version of an “immanentist heresy.”²² And there is second the approach of the social sciences which treat ideology and religion as one and the same thing because they believe that Communism (or nationalism or imperialism, etc.) fulfills the same “function” that religious denominations fulfill in a free society.²³

was a key intellectual affinity between Voegelin and Gurian, who advanced his own variant of the notion in *Bolshevism: An Introduction to Soviet Communism* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1952). Arendt reviewed it in the September–October 1953 issue of *Partisan Review*. It is reprinted in *Essays in Understanding, 1930–1954*, ed. Jerome Kohn (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1994), 363–367.

20. Voegelin, *The Political Religions*, 60.

21. Arendt, “A Reply,” 81–82.

22. “By far the most brilliant and most thoughtful exposition is to be found in Eric Voegelin, *The New Science of Politics*” (Arendt, “Religion and Politics” in Kohn, ed., *Essays in Understanding, 1930–1954*, 387, n. 11).

23. *Ibid.*, 372.

Arendt presumably meant to emphasize that, for Voegelin, religion was not simply coterminous with any ideological creed or deeply held set of convictions. Nor was it something that could be readily substituted with something else that was not religious, such as nationalism or imperialism. Religion is *sui generis* and ineradicable, a divinely mandated symbolic structure. Totalitarianism partook of religious symbolism and manifested a real religious property—evil.

In contrast, social science approached religion as if it were something wholly contrived and constructed. Religion, from the standpoint of social science, is effectively what religion does, a social form bereft of divinity. Accordingly it may be interchangeable with other forms such as ideology, nationalism, imperialism—anything, so long as they play the same role as religion does in pertinent respects. Arendt judged execrable this effacing of conceptual boundaries and erasure of ontological substance.²⁴ The practices were symptomatic of “present trends of psychologism and sociologism” and their “incapacity of making distinctions.” In consequence, “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.”²⁵ She also found questionable in all accounts of political religion, Voegelin’s included, the fact that “that the term originally derived from anthropological studies and not from an interpretation of Western tradition *per se*. Anthropological and tribal psychological implications of the term are still quite manifest in its use by the social sciences.”²⁶ That lineage, she seems to have thought, imposed on the Western tradition of politics (and religion too?) an alien set of categories.

One final point about Arendt’s communication to Voegelin deserves comment. Both in her letters and in her “Reply” in *The Review of Politics*, Arendt’s tone is remarkable for its graciousness and restraint. She was, after all, faced with a critic who, some compliments aside, lambasted her for a host of inadequacies: conceptual incoherence, emotional distraction, historical superficiality, methodological naiveté, and an unintended affinity to totalitarian “immanentist ideology”!²⁷ Arendt’s *sang froid* is confirmation of her toughness, her self-confidence, and probably her respect for a philosopher of Voegelin’s stature who took time to engage with her work at an especially deep level. It may also reflect her loyalty to Waldemar Gurian, a friend since the early 1930s and a man for whom Jewish-

24. Chapter 4 of Peter Baehr, *Hannah Arendt, Totalitarianism, and the Social Sciences* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2010) examines in more detail Arendt’s critique of political/secular religion theory. Her main foil was Jules Monnerot, co-founder with Roger Caillois and Georges Batailles, of the College of Sociology.

25. Arendt, “A Reply,” 82-83.

26. This is perhaps an allusion to Emile Durkheim’s *Elementary Forms of Religious Life* (1913). Arendt, following Voegelin’s own reference, cites Alexander Ular’s work as an antecedent of “political religion” theory. She quotes him from an article in *Die Gesellschaft* (1906) stating that “The medieval god of the Christians is in fact nothing but a totem of monstrous dimensions The Christian is his child as the Australian native is the child of the kangaroo.” Arendt notes that Voegelin, too, in his book on *The Political Religions*, “uses primarily examples from Tibetan religions as justification for his argument.” She adds that “he later abandoned this line of reasoning entirely” (Arendt, “Religion and Politics,” 387, n. 10).

27. For a comprehensive, finely judged review of the Voegelin–Arendt exchange in *The Review of Politics*, see Barry Cooper, *Eric Voegelin and the Foundations of Modern Political Science* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1999), 130-160.

ness was “no longer a fact of personal life” but a “political issue” that required him to “solidarize himself with those who were persecuted.”²⁸ Since Gurian was the initiator and intermediary of the exchange in *The Review of Politics*, a testy or belligerent reply may have reflected badly on his judgment. In any event, Voegelin himself was unimpressed with what passed between him and his German interlocutor. The eight-and-a-half-page review absorbed almost the whole summer of 1952, much to his chagrin and that of his wife. When the exasperated Lissy Voegelin asked her husband “What are you doing?” he replied, “I know what I’m doing. I have to know first what I want to say!”²⁹ Worse, Voegelin believed his efforts were in vain. He told Gurian: “The good lady, in spite of all her merits, has, I am afraid, not quite understood the explosive implications of what she is doing in theory. I have committed the mistake of honoring her with a careful review, taking her seriously, and entering into the issues. One shouldn’t do that; it has cost me a lot of time to disentangle the decisive points from a rambling context, and the time seems to have been wasted.”³⁰

Arendt’s letters follow sequentially. Keyed to them, as footnotes, are related statements that appeared in *The Review of Politics* dialogue that followed.

II. THE LETTERS³¹

COPY

Louisiana State University
College of Arts and Sciences
University Station
Baton Rouge, Louisiana

Department of Government

March 16, 1951

Dear Frau Arendt,

Your publisher was kind enough to send me your book on “The Origins of Totalitarianism”—on your instigation, I assume—and I

28. “Waldemar Gurian, 1903–1954,” in Hannah Arendt, *Men in Dark Times* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1983), 252. The article was her affectionate obituary published originally in *The Review of Politics* (1955). Gurian was a Roman Catholic of Russian extraction and Jewish origin. “His erudition,” Arendt observed, “was only another form of his enormous capacity for loyalty.” The statement fits Arendt herself, on which see Peter Baehr, “The Grammar of Prudence: Arendt, Jaspers, and the Appraisal of Max Weber,” in *Hannah Arendt in Jerusalem*, ed. Steven E. Aschheim (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), 306–324.

29. Cooper and Bruhn, eds., *Voegelin Recollected*, 177.

30. Voegelin to Waldemar Gurian HIA, 15/27.

31. The Hannah Arendt Papers contain two letters from Voegelin dated March 16, 1951, but, unlike Arendt’s, they are indistinguishable aside from correction of misprints. One version is numbered as 010399. The second, numbered 010402, appears to be the one he sent, as (among other things) it has been signed by hand, whereas in 010399 the “signature” is only typed (Eric Voegelin). Another indication that 010399 is the first draft is that it has more corrections and deletions than its successor.

should like to thank you very warmly. After your articles in the *Review of Politics* I was eagerly looking forward to it, especially after what Gurian, who I saw recently, told me about it.

All my expectations have been met and surpassed, particularly because the work goes far beyond its title, dealing not only with the “origins” but also the horrific consequences.³² It is scarcely possible to go into detail in the context of a letter, but I should like, if I may, to say something about the principal sections. In the first part I admired the vivid (and admirably detached and unemotional) treatment of the Jewish problem, and the succinct analysis of the Dreyfus affair; in the second part I especially liked the inclusion of imperialism in the context of questions of totalitarianism; and in the third part in particular the description of the police and the concentration camps. All in all, the lasting importance of this book as a standard work is likely to lie in its masterly categorization of a huge mass of material, and the way in which it clarifies the links between individual elements, which previous authors have only succeeded in tackling piecemeal.

Certain details seem to me to be dubious (e.g., the interpretation of Hobbes’s *Leviathan*); but in view of the overall achievement it would be petty to quibble over minor details of this kind. My criticism relates not to details, nor to construction and execution, but to the broad historical perspective that is implicit in the work and is, in part, made explicit in the conclusion.³³ In general, the phenomenon, in your view, is determined by the Jewish question and consequently does not go back further than 1700; in itself, this is a perfectly legitimate assumption, as the Western crisis of society has become (pragmatically and morally) dreadfully symptomatic of the treatment of the Jews up to the catastrophe of our time.³⁴ Retrospectively viewed from the catastrophe of the gas chambers, the historical context is correctly construed. I would just mention that one cannot be anti-Semitic (in the modern sense) if one is a Christian; where modern anti-Semitism appears, it is a symptom of the decline of Christianity in the sociological sense, as a civilizing force. In my view, therefore, totalitarian movements ought to be placed in the context of the decline of a Christian civilization; the continuum of these forces of destruction originates in the medieval sectarian movements and goes at least as far back as the twelfth cen-

32. “What no religious founder, no philosopher, no imperial conqueror of the past has achieved—to create a community of mankind by creating a common concern for all men—has now been realized through the community of suffering under the earthwide expansion of Western foulness” (Voegelin, “Origins of Totalitarianism,” 68).

33. “This book on the troubles of the age, however, is also marked by these troubles, for it bears the scars of the unsatisfactory state of theory to which we have alluded. It abounds with brilliant formulations and profound insights . . . but, surprisingly, when the author pursues these insights into their consequences, the elaboration veers toward regrettable flatness. Such derailments, while embarrassing, are nevertheless instructive—sometimes more instructive than the insights themselves—because they reveal the intellectual confusion of the age . . .” (*ibid.*, 69).

34. The phrasing is odd. One would think the reverse; that the treatment of the Jews is symptomatic of the crisis of society—Tr.

ture. What is happening today is not new in idea or intention, but is the devastating outcome of the social realization of pathological aberrations (as, for example, the idea of changing human nature, i.e., replacing the divine by the human creature) after the collapse of institutional obstacles.³⁵ I would therefore not agree with you when you speak of a gulf between totalitarian atrocities and more or less harmless, non-critical, nineteenth-century opinions and ideologies. These ideologies were not harmless (and are not harmless today), but are symptoms of the destruction of the person that takes place in the concentration camp. Those who dispute that the source of order is found in the *ratio aeterna* will discover how the *bezbozhniki*³⁶ treat them, according to their order of things; those who dispute Plato's dictum that "God is the measure of all things" will find that man is the measure; those who anticipate that the meaning of their life will be in conformity with the meaning of history will be made to conform with history; and so on. The liberal clergyman who disputes original sin, the secular intellectual who maintains that man is good, the philosopher who justifies utilitarian ethics, the legal positivist who disputes natural law, the psychologist who interprets the phenomena of the mind in terms of the life of the instincts—they, none of them, commit crimes like an SS murderer in a concentration camp—but they are his spiritual fathers, his immediate historical cause.³⁷ In short, ideology (the *doxa* in the Platonic sense of the word) is not a harmless, noncommittal opinion, but the very expression of the destruction of one's own person; and through publication, this ideology is appealing for public and binding

35. Voegelin acknowledged Arendt's view in *Origins of Totalitarianism* that just as "the popularized feature of Marx's classless society have [sic] a queer resemblance to the Messianic age, so the reality of the concentration camps resembles nothing so much as mediaeval pictures of hell." He cites, as well, her contention that nothing perhaps "distinguishes modern masses as radically from those of previous centuries as the loss of faith in a Last Judgment." Yet Arendt had still not seen the virulence of the "spiritual disease" of modern times because her focus on institutional breakdown was a framework too restricted to identify its dimensions. "Dr. Arendt . . . does not draw the theoretical conclusions from her own insights." Had she done so, "the origins of totalitarianism would not have to be sought primarily in the fate of the national state and attendant social and economic changes since the eighteenth century, but rather in the rise of immanentist sectarianism since the high Middle Ages; and the totalitarian movements would not be simply revolutionary movements of functionally dislocated people, but immanentist creed movements in which mediaeval heresies have come to fruition" (Voegelin, "The Origins of Totalitarianism," 73-74).

36. Russian for "atheists"—Tr.

37. "The true dividing line in the contemporary crisis does not run between liberals and totalitarians, but between the religious and philosophical transcendentalists on the one side, and the liberal and totalitarian immanentist sectarians on the other side. It is sad, but it must be reported, that the author herself draws this line." Liberals and totalitarians, Voegelin insisted, have much in common; "the essential immanentism which unites them overrides the differences of ethos which separate them" (Voegelin, "The Origins of Totalitarianism," 75). Arendt was unhappy with this conclusion. "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" (Arendt "A Reply," 80).

validity, which quite obviously can only be achieved at the expense of the existing public order; disorder, *dysnomia* (as you have so clearly shown) becomes the attractive exception, the fascinating vice, the tolerated difference and, finally, the norm. (All this, by the way, can be found in the *Politeia*.)

As regards the techniques of historical causal attribution, the consequence would be that totalitarian catastrophes cannot be exclusively explained by reference to the political, social, or economic situation within which they appear, but that the situation itself, i.e., the behavior of the dominant groups and persons responsible for the order of things, and the behavior of the victims reacting to a desperate situation, must be interpreted according to the health or sickness of the psychological order.³⁸

Regarding a therapy, therefore, I would tend to agree with Burke rather than with your suggestion that we should find new moral truths. I believe we are perfectly well equipped with truths of order through the Jewish prophets, the Greek philosophers, and Christianity. (The only truly significant new “truth” seems to me to be the discovery of tolerance, founded on mysticism, the principal and so far only expression of which is found in the politics of Bodin—and which, by the way, Sabine describes not well but, on the contrary, extremely poorly, as the good man has neither worked through the works of Bodin nor read the considerable body of monographic literature on the subject). In order to halt the destructive process, there should be an end to the systematic destruction of truths of order (which are neither old nor new, but simply “true”) by intellectuals, writers, and journalists, so that the lost priority accorded to these truths might be re-established. To name an example that you yourself have repeatedly cited: “human nature” cannot, of course, change or be changed. “Nature” is a philosophical concept; the nature of a thing is its identifying essence; if a nature “changes” (a meaningless formulation), a thing would have become something different. Talk of a change of human nature implies the antireligious revolt against the *imago Dei*. And the attempt to change this nature ends (as you quite rightly state) with its destruction. The intellectual, nineteenth-century idiocy of publicly discussing the possibilities of changing human nature, for example, ought to cease; as (1) from a technical philosophical point of view it is a nonsense, and

38. Voegelin developed the point in his review article, coming close to accusing Arendt of sociological reductionism: “The treatment of movements of the totalitarian type on the level of social situations and change, as well as of types of conduct determined by them, is apt to endow historical causality with an aura of fatality. Situations and changes, to be sure, require, but they do not determine a response. The character of a man, the range and intensity of his passions, the controls exerted by his virtues, and his spiritual freedom, enter as further determinants . . . Dr. Arendt is aware of this problem. She knows that changes in the economic and social situations do not simply make people superfluous, and that superfluous people do not respond by necessity with resentment, cruelty and violence . . .” (Voegelin, “The Origins of Totalitarianism,” 72-73).

(2) it is politically dangerous and, as the consequences have shown, is complicity in murder.³⁹

In conclusion, may I say that I found your interpretation of “totalitarian domination” particularly useful, because it highlights the idea of symbolic content as a final judgment. The problem of the liturgy of the court in any political order has been a concern of mine for a long time. The liturgical types correspond respectively to the religious and metaphysical symbolism of order. Your analysis offers an important new case of a liturgy, corresponding to a metaphysics of the creation of humans by humans.

With many thanks and best wishes,

Very sincerely yours

Eric Voegelin⁴⁰

Hannah Arendt 130 Morningside Drive New York 27, N.Y.

April 8, 1951

Dear Herr Voegelin –

I was really delighted to receive your letter! I owe a great debt to your writings; they have always been very close to my own thinking, even if I have not always agreed with everything you said. I now await with eager anticipation your history of political ideas (and will then stop singing the praises of Sabine; you are quite right, of course), especially since I read your study of Marx in the *Review of Politics* with your masterly and quite new interpretation of the Feuerbach *Theses*.

39. “Human nature as such is at stake,” Arendt remarked in *Origins*, describing the totalitarian experiment to erase spontaneity and plurality in the death camps. Voegelin was incredulous about this particular “derailment” of her work. “When I read this sentence, I could hardly believe my eyes. . . . To conceive the idea of ‘changing the nature’ of man (or of anything) is a symptom of the intellectual breakdown of Western civilization. The author, in fact, adopts the immanentist ideology; she keeps an ‘open mind’ with regard to the totalitarian atrocities; she considers the question of a ‘change of nature’ a matter that will have to be settled by ‘trial and error’ . . .” (Voegelin, “The Origins of Totalitarianism,” 75). In Arendt’s response in *The Review of Politics* she parried: “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 hardly be 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” (Arendt, “A Reply,” 83-84).

40. For an alternative translation of this letter, see Hollweck, ed., *Eric Voegelin: Selected Correspondence*, vol. 30, 69-72.

I should like to reply to you and hope this is acceptable to you. Your fine critique of the total perspective reaches the heart of the matter so precisely that I should like to try, however inadequately, at least to formulate my questions more clearly.

First of all regarding the chronological time frame: As you yourself say, the modern Jewish question, which has nothing to do with the Christian Jewish problem and the Christian hatred of the Jews, was crucial for me in this regard. Moreover, I have always tended to restrict both the historical time frame and the elements operating within this time frame as much as possible, so as to avoid at all costs furnishing these gentlemen with an illustrious ancestral line. The decline of Christian civilization is, as it were, the framework within which the whole of modern history is played out, both good and evil—as it seems to me, speaking as one who is not a Christian.

But even if I were to accept the Christian standpoint (and I am very happy to accept what is implied in your allusion to a continuum of Christian heresy), the context of this decline would be too comprehensive to “explain” a phenomenon as specific as the totalitarian movements. It would be different if, instead of asking about the origins in a positive manner, as in my book, one were to ask the negative question: How is it that in our tradition we were not able to answer the political questions posed by our time? This leads to the further question: What is politics since Plato? And are the answers given since Plato adequate? I know it will sound paradoxical⁴¹ to you if I say: I don’t believe so. I suspect that from this purely political viewpoint there is something wrong with our philosophical tradition. I don’t know what it is, but it seems to me to be connected with the plurality of human beings and with the fact that philosophy has been principally concerned with *the* human being.

To put it another way, if it is true that the quintessence of totalitarianism can be summed up in the sentence: The omnipotence of *man* makes *men* superfluous (just as monotheism is necessarily the consequence of the omnipotence of God), then totalitarianism’s power to destroy humans and the world lies not only in the delusion that everything is possible, but also in the delusion that there is such a thing as *man*. You can see that this delusion is implied when you consider that totalitarian leaders are not concerned with the quality of humans and that their treatment of the succession question presupposes that they take the view that anyone can do the job.

But *man* exists only as God’s creature. The power of *man* is limited by the fact that he has not created himself, whereas the power of *men* is limited not so much by nature as by the fact of plurality—the factual existence of my kind. It does not help me, as the humanists would have it, that I see *man* in every human being, as this by no means

41. The German has “hybrid.”

necessarily leads to respect or recognition for human dignity, but can equally well mislead us into believing in a surplus and in superfluity.

It is, of course, true that this can only happen when the Judaeo-Christian world picture is in decline and the image of God is no longer believed. But this, after all, is a fact and cannot simply be altered by regress. This decline is itself more than “intellectual idiocy”; it is itself an event in which we are caught up, which, although it may be only a symptom, should be taken seriously, even if the substantial contents are as shockingly absurd as de facto they often are.

I am quite happy to withdraw my “suggestion” (to use your tongue-in-cheek expression) that we should find new moral truths, if someone can convince me that “crimes” committed in our time can be framed in the old religious or moral categories. Is it not almost comic to speak of murder and of “Thou shalt not kill” when one is faced with the building of expensive factories for the manufacture of corpses—and these factories were built by people who had not the slightest interest in these murders and had, so to speak, nothing evil (in the traditional sense) in mind?

And this brings me to probably the most important element of the difference between us, the question of the connection between thinking and acting, or my assertion that there is a gulf between ideologies and their supersense on the one hand and totalitarian practice on the other. In choosing the word “gulf” [*Abgrund*], I was unconsciously adopting an expression of Herder’s, who once spoke of the gulf separating the crime that is merely conceivable or possible, and real crime. You are quite right, murder already lurks within all these ideologies, and logically one can derive almost anything from them. But this logic, when taken to extremes, is itself highly remarkable—I prefer to call it logicity. There is something truly crazy about this, i.e., not only the premises, which may be, and are, untenable, but a form of *real* logic that refuses to be deterred by any reality. And this reliance on the logic that is inherent in a concept, eliminating any judgment, is new and cannot be derived from the ideologies themselves.

It seems to me that the actual difference between us does not consist in the fact that you are primarily a historian of ideas, or a humanities specialist, and I primarily offer explanations from a “political, social, and economic viewpoint,” but in a difference of attitude to the event as such. In contrast to anything that is merely imagined, it is neither repeatable nor retractable nor forgettable. I know of no thought in the entire arsenal of ideologies of which I would say: human beings ought never to have been allowed to think this (“allowed” not in the moral sense but in the sense of an irredeemable catastrophe), but it seems to me that the only thing we must say about the extermination camps is that this ought never to have been allowed. This too, of course, is not because of the people who lost their lives in them.

This may be an extreme case, but the specific valency [*Valeur*] of events, their actual specific gravity, can never be derived from any ideology or from any specific context within the history of ideas. In the event as such, there is always revealed something that was not present, or capable of being contained, in any preparatory generality.⁴² The gulf consists not only in the fact that things could always have turned out differently, but in the fact that the ideologues would probably never have been prepared to release the logicity of their systems into reality.

Hannah Arendt 130 Morningside Drive New York 27

April 22, 1951

Dear Herr Voegelin –

I was delighted to receive your letter! I owe a great debt to your writings; they have always been very close to my own thinking, even if I have not always agreed with everything you said. I now await with eager anticipation your history of political ideas, especially since I read your study of Marx in the *Review of Politics* with your mastery and quite new interpretation of the Feuerbach *Theses*.

I have delayed this reply because I really wanted to send you a full answer. Your critique of the total perspective undoubtedly reaches the heart of my concern. In the meantime, however, it has become clear to me that a proper answer would exceed all the normal bounds of a letter. At the moment my own thinking is just at the stage (the in-between stage) at which it is both too late and too early to be brief.

I shall therefore simply reply from the outside, so to speak. You agree with me regarding the chronological time frame as far as the Jewish question is concerned, i.e., anti-Semitism (which, of course, has nothing to do with the Christian hatred of the Jews). Moreover, I have tended to restrict both the historical time frame and the tendencies operating within this time frame as much as possible, so as to avoid at

42. "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" (Arendt, "A Reply," 80).

all costs furnishing the totalitarian movements, these products of the “penny dreadful” tradition of the West, with an illustrious ancestral line.⁴³

The decline of Christian civilization is, for me, the framework within which the whole of modern history is played out, and that means for me, speaking as one who is not a Christian, both good and evil. But even if I could accept the Christian standpoint (and I am very happy to accept what is implied in your allusion to a continuum of Christian heresy since the twelfth century), the context of this decline would be too broad to explain a phenomenon as specific as the totalitarian movements and forms of domination. It would be different if, instead of asking about the origin in a positive manner, one were to ask the negative question: How is it that in our tradition we were not able to answer and “solve” the political questions and problems posed by our time? Indeed, this question would force open the entire background of our tradition, i.e., of our tradition of political thought; I do not ask it and believe I did not need to ask it.

I believe I hate ideologies as much as you do. If, nevertheless, I insist on their relative “harmlessness,” then I do so precisely because, like you, I believe that their origin can to some degree be traced back to a part of the great tradition and the continuum of “heresies,” i.e., that in them the decisive break with the whole tradition of the West—as far as it is connected to, and erupts in, the concentration camps and everything related to them—is not yet completed. I was primarily concerned with this break, or at least the representation of it. I take the view that it has become the decisive event. This does not have much to do with how we propose to “explain” this break (such “explanations” will, of course, always be inadequate). For example, simply from the perspective of the history of ideologies or the history of politics, I can well imagine that the break need not have happened. Unfortunately, this can give us little comfort, and does not change the fact that we today find ourselves in a reality that is defined by this break.

Expressed differently, or rather, in relation to another passage in your letter, I could also say that, in my opinion, the “destructive process” cannot be “halted,” because in crucial areas of our intellectual and geographical world it has already come to an end. I could only retract my suggestion that we should find new moral truths if I could be persuaded that the “crimes” committed in our time could be framed

43. In her “Reply,” Arendt explained that her task 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. . . . 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” (Arendt, “A Reply,” 77-78).

within the old religious and moral categories. Is it not grotesque to speak of murder when one is faced with the building of expensive factories for the manufacture of corpses? Or to say to people "Thou shalt not kill," when they neither had any interest in these murders nor in any other way had evil (in the traditional sense) in mind?

May I now thank you with all my heart for your detailed criticism. I am sure you already know that this is the best thing that can happen to anyone. It is all one could ever hope for.⁴⁴

With all good wishes for your work,

Sincerely yours

Lingnan University (Hong Kong) (Peter Baehr)

Gordon C. Wells is a freelance translator who lives in England

44. One point omitted from the letters assumes some importance in the *Review of Politics* debate. There Voegelin claims that "the fate of the Jews, the mass slaughter and the homelessness of displaced persons, is for the author a center of emotional shock, the center from which radiates her desire to inquire into the causes of the horror" (Voegelin, "The Origins of Totalitarianism," 70). Voegelin is not quite accusing her of being over-emotional; indeed he says that she writes with "admirable detachment from the partisan strife of the day" (71). He also states that the "delimitation of subject matter through the emotions aroused by the fate of human beings is the strength of Dr. Arendt's book" (71). Yet he does implicate Arendt in the regrettable tendency of modern times to allow "the morally abhorrent and the emotionally existing" to "overshadow the essential" (68). In her "Reply," Arendt is adamant that the "morally abhorrent and the emotionally existing" form "an integral part of" the essential. The ironic implication is that Voegelin's failure to see this might itself be cited as an aspect of the "insufficiency of theoretical instruments" he deplores (Voegelin, "The Origins of Totalitarianism," 68). For totalitarianism occurred "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. . . . 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" (Arendt, "A Reply," 78-79).