RITUAL AS PRAXIS:
THE RESPONSIBILITY OF ACTIVISTS
IN THE FACE OF GENOCIDE; OR, BETWEEN ETHICS AND POLITICS

by

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Abstract

The most urgent ethical task in the face of genocide is the demand to stop it. But how can the seeming moral clarity of opposition to genocide be reconciled with the failure of adequate political responses? I begin by problematizing the demand and response through the lens of the Save Darfur movement that mobilized millions of people against genocide in the 2000s, and which I suggest articulates the ethical and political challenges at the core of genocide research and its goal of prevention. Within current models of anti-genocide activism, the response remains problematically restricted to the execution of international legal principles and attempts to persuade politicians in powerful countries to “do the right thing” and intervene. In this dissertation, I argue that the ethical demand to stop genocide calls us to imagine anti-genocide activism otherwise.

To this end, I retrace the activist call of “never again” to its roots in the Shoah (Holocaust) through theories of witnessing that disturb the positionality of activists in the face of total destruction. The position of the witness clarifies the initial ethical and political challenges of anti-genocide activism as problems of responsibility or the possibility of response. I then conceptualize the gap between the demand and the response as the fault-line of responsibility, which splits open along the faces of ethics and politics. The phenomenological approaches of Emmanuel Levinas and Hannah Arendt make sensible the ethical and political dimensions of responsibility in the full depth of the fault. The tension I stress in the faultline thus resists totalizing narratives of salvation on the one hand, and dehumanizing instrumentalization of restrictive concepts on the other.

In the gap of the faultline, questions of judgement and justice open up as situated, contingent, and pluralistic. Attending to the irreducible gap maintains the possibility of response without yielding answers; instead, the separation of the ethical call to respond from political action opens the space and time for a
ritualized, collective movement that can take us from thinking to action and back again: praxis. The task at hand is to prepare anti-genocide activists for the restlessness of the questions.
Lay Summary

Anti-genocide activism elicits many questions – questions of ethics, of politics, and of education – that call into question our responsibility for and in the world. In particular, how do we reconcile the seeming moral clarity of opposition to genocide in human rights discourse and the total failure of an adequate political response to genocide on the global stage? Taking a phenomenological approach embedded in Jewish philosophy, I think through the responsibility of activists in the face of genocide alongside Hannah Arendt and Emmanuel Levinas to posit a theory of praxis to address the problem of action or response to genocide. In the final analysis, I reconceptualize the slogan “never again” as an ethical and political call that cannot be generalized and can only be meaningful in the company of others, turned toward a restless justice.
Preface

This dissertation is the product of my original intellectual work, designed and executed in consultation with my committee members Dr. Erin Baines, Dr. Barbara Weber, and Dr. Samuel D. Rocha, as well as many others, who provided feedback and guidance. In the common course of conceptual writing, it has undergone a number of iterations over the years, some of which have been published and shared elsewhere.

A draft of the first section of chapter four (4.1) was presented virtually at the Arendt Circle conference on March 25 2022 (Loyola University Chicago). My reading of Levinas was first developed in the following publications and presentations: Adi Burton, “Facing the Perfect Stranger: Disrupting a Mythology of Innocence in Education and Beyond,” Philosophy of Education 2018: 171-184 (which was also presented at the Philosophy of Education Society (PES) conference in Chicago, 2018 and in an earlier version at PES 2017 in Seattle); Adi Burton and Samuel D. Rocha, “The Phenomenology of the Utterance and Prophetic Teaching in the Threshold,” Journal for Continental Philosophy of Religion 3 (2021): 144-163; and Itamar Manoff and Adi Burton, “Havruta: Reading as Radical Dialogue,” presented on March 12 2022 at PES in San Jose, CA. Chapters four and five in particular owe debts to those collaborations; all direct references are cited accordingly.

I initially developed portions of chapter five (5.2) in a paper called “Now What? The Risk of Action and the Responsibility of the Teacher,” which was presented at PES 2019 in Richmond, VA (and in an earlier form at PES 2018) and published in Philosophy of Education 2019: 606–619. In writing chapters one, two, and five, I drew significant inspiration from my time as a member of STAND UBC and from my experiences as co-director of programming and education at STAND Canada from 2014, which led to many long discussions with members of those groups about these issues in the practical, ethical, and conceptual aspects of activism. Many other such influences have shaped my thinking and approach.
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I have good luck with teachers in general and have known many over my lifetime. I want to thank my parents and my first teachers, Shoshana and Steven Burton, who taught me to love learning in every aspect of life, invested in my education, and helped me invest myself in it as an adult. My interdisciplinary streak I attribute to my father, who taught me to pursue diverse passions and find appreciation for every form of skill and knowledge. I learned how to be a teacher from my mother, who always included me in her work even when all I was old enough to do was draw designs for t-shirts and posters. From a young age, she led me to activism with her deep sense of care for others and community, her infectious enthusiasm that motivates entire schools to action for the sake of kindness, her unparalleled ability to manage logistics (which should never be underestimated, even as it is mostly invisible), and her persistent respect for children. Both of my parents have always treated me like a person with value and, as time goes by, I only appreciate their confidence in me and its impact on my life more. In addition to them and Barbara, Erin,
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In this sense, I also express deep gratitude to the many wonderful reading partners and peers I have known over the years in classes and outside of them. In particular, my understanding of Levinas and Arendt is deeply indebted to my reading partners: Itamar Manoff, with whom I have been reading Levinas (and his influences) since 2017 with some excursions into Arendt’s revelatory biographic essays; Anna Ryoo and Addyson Frattura, who read the Life of the Mind and Lectures on Kant’s Political Philosophy with me in 2019–2021; and the reading group led by Sam Rocha from 2017–2020. A few other selected names to mention are Jessica Lussier, Dan Clegg, Fernando Murillo, Zack Weiner, Julie Farrell (z”l), Natacha Monestel Mora, Sarah Munwar, Sophia Lindgren, Nessa Aref, and AJ Batalden. I am indebted also to my writing partners for their unflagging support with encouragement and feedback especially since the 2020 pandemic, when their concentrating faces in the corner of my computer screen kept me on task, and their eyes, generously offered for editing and proofreading, put me at ease: Itamar Manoff, Anna Ryoo, Jade Ho, Craig Stenstrud, Dan Clegg, Arthur Wolf, Parmis Aslanimehr, and AJ Batalden. All errors in and failures of the final text, are, of course, mine.

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to fight for their place in their discipline. The incredible and extremely difficult work done by these activists and scholars has informed my thinking greatly, and I offer my gratitude and the hope that I can contribute to that body of work and action.

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At the exact moment of this writing I am feeling particularly and overwhelmingly grateful to my extended family, the Fadidas and Caspis, who hosted me in the last days of preparing this document for defence under exceptional circumstances. I am lucky to have many more grandparents, aunts, uncles, cousins, siblings, and more recently the same again as in-laws, whom I will have to thank in person. With me through every crisis of the last five years and through many more late nights and bleary-eyed mornings is my partner, AJ Batalden, whose profoundly courageous heart inspires me to step onto the road without needing to keep my feet. The privilege of his company in thinking, reading, cooking, walking, and in our lives together leaves its mark in every keystroke and every page.

Some acknowledgements are required for other reasons. The topic that motivates my scholarship is anti-genocide activism, so before we begin I would like to stop and acknowledge the genocidal history of the University of British Columbia, which grants me this degree and which resides upon and draws its immense wealth from unceded land stolen from the xʷməθkʷəy̓əm (Musqueam) First Nation. UBC is invested, quite literally, in maintaining the dispossession of the xʷməθkʷəy̓əm people and other Indigenous
peoples and also furthering that dispossession. It is crucial to attend to the close links between genocidal programs and land theft, in addition to other aspects of Canadian colonization like the theft, abuse, and murder of children, the destruction and persecution of language and culture, and the systematic political and economic subjugation of the colonized. I say that it is crucial to attend to these close links, but in genocide discourse the “status” of colonial genocides is still disputed. Here we arrive already, without even beginning, at the problems of the concept and politics of genocide that demand reflection and action. What does it mean to act against genocide in a settler colonial state, and through the political machinery that itself has never even fully acknowledged its genocidal roots? What does it mean to attend an institution built on genocide to learn about fighting genocide? What does a doctoral degree signify in such a context?

In the work to follow, I commit myself to taking these questions in the seriousness they are due, and to affirm the movement from reflection to action (especially in political life). I am grateful to the xʷməθkʷəy̓əm people for sharing their tireless and heavy work of remembrance and witnessing, even against a formidable institution like UBC. I believe that attention to the xʷməθkʷəy̓əm traditions of thought and action, and Indigenous presence and perseverance more broadly, is the proper place to begin a discussion on responsibility in the face of genocide from this place, where I live and work. I hope that this context will be kept in mind throughout; however, this particular work began in a different ethical and political crisis. Whether it is capable of paying attention in the way that I think it should, now, is an open question for me.
Dedication

To my grandmothers, whose love of learning was always interrupted.

To my parents, who always fostered and supported mine.

And to my beloved, who is a partner in it.

***

כי-עזתה כמות אהביה
נה בת שמחה ידיל
שולםית בת רחל ידיל
Chapter One

A Beginning in Broken Faultline Questions

The thoughts come to me,
I am no longer a stranger to them.
I grow them as in a place,
As in a plowed field.
– Hannah Arendt, 1952

1.1 For the Sake of the Heavens

There is a feeling. A tremble, really. It comes in degrees and varies in frequency, in those moments when a hole is suddenly poked through your view of the world – sometimes with a tapered needle and sometimes with a swinging weight – and something new enters into your field of vision. Or perhaps it arrives as a disturbance of sound, a buzzing frequency that even when faint disrupts the rhythm of your thoughts and causes you to falter on an unfamiliar beat. Either way, this tremble arises and unsettles, shifting and opening the earth and allowing us a glimpse into the unknown.

Any student is familiar with the sensation of not knowing. It can be a heavy weight and a crushing weight, all the things you do not know. The feeling – the tremble – is amplified (whether pleasurably or painfully) in those instances when you thought you knew something; these can be shallow ripples that make you hyper-aware of your outer skin and the way you appear to others in your new not-knowing. Other times, the tremble goes beyond insecurities and displaces your sense of self, forcing you to sensitise yourself to the furled borders of your worldview, at the heart of where you have built your home in the world. No structure can withstand these deep trembles intact. What am I doing? What do I even know? What do I

believe? And why, for all of it? The feeling hits and hits hard, fruitfully multiplying its originating question into yet more, dangerous questions. These kinds of questions can pull so strongly that they strain against reality and threaten to untether you from the world, from your communities, from yourself. They threaten to send you falling through darkness.

***

In *Pirkei Avot*, a collection of teachings contained within the *Mishna*, it is written:

כל מחלוקת שהיא לשם שמים, סופה להתקין. ושאינה לשם שמים, אין סופה להתקין. איזו היא מחלוקת לשם שמים, זו מחלוקת הלל ושמאי. ושאינה לשם שמים, זו מחלוקת קודר כל עדתו.

This teaching can be translated literally as something like, “Every debate/dispute that is in the name (for the sake) of the heavens is destined to endure (to exist without end). And what is not in the name of the heavens, will not be destined to endure. Which are those debates that are in the name of the heavens? Those debates between Hillel and Shammai. And which are not in the name of the heavens? That debate of Korach and all of his company.” These words are written, but they were not always written. In the rabbinic tradition that has shaped the inheritance of Jewish texts today, the *Mishna* is the codification of the oral tradition that accompanies the *Tanakh*, which itself contains the *Torah* (the Five Books of Moses), *Nevi'im* (Prophets), and *Ketuvim* (literally, Writings). According to this tradition, the commentaries and stories in the *Mishna* were never meant to be laid out in static text; it is only catastrophe that provoked the community leaders of the time to attempt to preserve, in ink and skins, what was passed down through generations, in order for the next generations to have the chance to do the same.

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2 *Pirkei Avot*, 5:17. *Pirkei Avot* literally translates as “Chapters of the Fathers,” but this translation does not reveal much. It is often translated into English as the *Ethics of the Fathers* because it deals with matters of ethics. The reference to fathers in the title could describe those within the patriarchal traditions of Judaism who relayed the lessons within its pages, but the word “avot” in the titles of Jewish texts more commonly conveys a metaphorical sense of “fundamental” or “foundational.” This text dates at least to the third century CE and is located in the fourth order of the *Mishnah* (in “Nezikin” or the “Order of Damages”). My translation is based on the Sefaria community translation.
It is neither easy nor simple to read any part of the *Mishna* or to include it in a dissertation, one that is in many ways apart from that tradition. Mishnaic texts are thickly interwoven commentaries carefully curated across centuries, and so there are many explanations passed on for the passage written above and its constituent parts, expounding on constructive methods for dispute or interjecting pedagogical, spiritual, and political lessons on the historical and legendary figures of Hillel, Shammai, and Korach, among many other lines of reflection. I include this fragment of *Pirkei Avot* here, at the beginning, because I think it points to a particular quality of some kinds of questions (in the words of the *Mishna*, מָכְרֶה or *makhloket*) that lead their askers into a metaphysical irreconcilability. In other words, there are some questions that have no answers in this world; but the asking of them becomes a part of our existence in it. The questions endure, and with them, so too do we. The problem with beginning this text with this *Mishna* fragment is that I am taking it out of its context. The word *makhloket* is used to refer to debates elicited by the interpretation of sacred texts, and their connection to the lived experiences of the Jewish communities who have studied and debated them over thousands of years. As such, it is not appropriate for me to claim that the questions raised here (before the writing and during it) are part of a *makhloket*.

Instead, I take my cue from this tradition and mark the debates that unsettle and displace, that open up the earth beneath our feet. I call these questions “faultline questions.” In the gap of the faultline, there is nothing and there is impossibility; there is a resistance to the possibility of reconciliation between the faces of its sides, the sides of the debate itself. The faultline is held open by irreconcilability, irreconcilability that will endure and prevent the question from settling into a smooth and stable surface, the kind that would make a good foundation for a house. I invite you, reader, to join me in enduring memories that have shaped the way I understand, respond to, and ask questions. This story’s relevance is that it raised for me the questions that I attempt to address here and that I – perhaps unkindly – hope to provoke in you. What follows is my memory of falling into the faultline that induced me to undertake this study, one that emerged
beneath the concept of genocide. Following the initial interlude of memory and story, I will explain the structure of the chapters to come.

1.2 A Personal Accounting of “Never Again”: An Autobiographical Opening

I propose a scenario as invitation. Imagine you were raised with the words “Never Again!” in your mouth. Imagine the community that raised you repeated those words ritualistically and with conviction, shaping who you are becoming and the way you understand the world around you. Not just for you; the words are well-worn and passed down, even lived in. They are the cornerstone for generations of your people. That community taught you to believe, strongly and deeply, that to stand idly by as a people are targeted and destroyed is a crime, a transgression: genocide. The name, genocide, is special; it signifies the worst humanity can do to one another. You believe that you have a responsibility to help the targeted and victimized, whom you do not know and who exist for you as a mostly nameless and featureless mass in news articles and earnest documentaries, and also in history books and in the stories told in your community. This responsibility to stand up, to do something, is the highest ethical charge, reflective of the severity of the crime. History must not repeat itself.

“Never again” is not addressed to the past, but to the future. Imagine that you take up this charge of responsibility. The words are your weapons in a war against injustice. They are forged in the suffering of millions and honed with vengeance and righteousness. But what do you do with it? The present is here. The past is ever farther away, and the future is no help yet. It is 2003, and in Darfur, Sudan, there is a war that people are starting to name a genocide. In the years that follow, thousands of civilians are murdered; the true number (if such a thing can be numbered) is concealed in mass graves and scattered ashes. The violence uproots millions from their homes, people who are then locked in camps for refugees and the internally displaced. You see pictures in the news of destroyed communities, erased from the scorched earth that smoulders. You hear, in some detail, accounts of government-sponsored campaigns of sexual violence,
aimed at breaking apart families and persons. You read about people struggling to piece their lives back together in the new and terrifying landscape of the camps, a precarious refuge. You ask, what can be done? At school, perhaps you work with students and teachers to “raise awareness” so that people know. Maybe there is a hotline to call the head of government (support the UNAMID mission!) and it has a catchy name like 1-800-GENOCID(e). But time stretches on, seemingly stuck on its course, and you begin to ask yourself, now what? The words, spoken aloud by thousands of activists in unison, only echo; there is little change. What is the power of “never again,” if not for this?

Imagine you are raised in a society that believes in human rights. You learn about these rights as inalienable and genocide as a violation of them. Everyone has human rights, by virtue of being human. They are secured by the law, which is the arbitrator of justice. This law is not your national law, or your religious Law. It is a Universal Declaration, it is an international Convention, it is even, in principle, a Responsibility to Protect. The court, likewise, is no ordinary court, but an International Criminal Court of sufficiently high stature for the crimes at hand. In 2009, when that Court issues an arrest warrant for Sudan’s (then) president, Omar Hassan Ahmad al-Bashir, you are elated. There is a problem, and part of that problem is that al-Bashir is committing genocide with intolerable impunity. International human rights law is not being enforced. In this moment, the possibility of arrest is irresistible. Not only could the primary person responsible be brought to trial, but the indictment is also a global call to action for the humanitarian crisis in the region and for human rights advocacy generally. Your heart asks quietly, is this “never again”? Perhaps this is a foundational step toward the elusive dream. Perhaps we, as an international community, are beginning to find solutions, smooth out the discord, rewrite the music of our shared worldview into a euphony that is our moral vision coming into reality. You imagine the future and the world seems to shake.

But then you learn: actions initiate and so come with re-actions. The first sitting head of state to ever be indicted by the ICC, al-Bashir retaliates by expelling thirteen international aid agencies from the
Darfur region and revoking the licenses of three national ones. At least a million people, those displaced people awaiting your help, are left without essential emergency aid provided by these organizations. You hear their voices crying out to you from newsreels, special reports, and in dozens of emails sent to your inbox weekly. What do you do? The shaking of the world looks different now. You begin to feel it – the tremble – but not right away. At first, you remain unmoved. You assure yourself that this is the price of justice, that we are on the road to a utopia just coming into grasp. These actions will ultimately end the genocide, will prevent future genocides.

But what about those people, looking at me right now? Who is “never again” for, if not for them? (If not now, when?) The fiery hope of “never again” becomes cold and heavy, now a crushing doubt. The discord persists as time goes on, and nothing happens except more suffering. Fifteen years later, despite the strength of the communities in Darfur and in the diaspora, one third of the population in Darfur is still living in camps for internally displaced persons. There is no grand arrest – barely a disruption in al-Bashir’s travel schedules, crafted to avoid Rome Statute signatories and then not even bothering with that. What did it mean, to charge “genocide” in the language of international law? What did it cost? And who paid the price? The questions take root and grow. At first you ignore them, because seriously asking those questions not only means that you have to risk finding answers that will undermine everything, but also that you have to risk not finding answers at all. You will be standing on moving ground, and anti-genocide work is not easy even when the world is still and solid beneath your feet. What now?

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1.3 A Phenomenological Approach to Faultline Questions

That experience may have felt directed toward you, or it may not have felt that way. You may have been able to imagine yourself in such a position, or it may have felt alien to you – and still further, you may have refused to imagine it, out of offense or embarrassment (for me or you) or pain or something else. None of these outcomes is better or truer than another; each is specific to you. Whether you share in the ideals espoused or not, perhaps my accounting can find some resonances with something in your experience, something my descriptions reminded you of. But it is not within my ability to judge what that might be, disrupted as we are by time and space. Inasmuch as you are free to think what you like about these words, the words themselves are written with intent and intentionality. With these words I am attempting to describe a crisis that I experienced as a youth activist in the Save Darfur movement, one which can be described in many ways and from other perspectives too. I have offered two descriptions: first, anti-genocide activism caught between a particular past and an unknown future (“never again”), and second, anti-genocide activism as a restless universal, never descending into the world. The order merely reflects the sequence of my own experiences, but one or the other may suffice on its own. There are more that I have not included here, some that I should have spoken of and some that you could teach me about. Indeed, what was unspoken until now is a third description: of genocide victims victimized by an international community and their own government, both of which claimed to be for them. This description does not belong to me, but I witness its appearance and my relationship with it. One of the claims of this dissertation is that, as witness, I also assume a responsibility for that relationship.

Responsibility is the main topic of this work, but it will take some more work to get there. First there is a problem to describe. I will describe it a few more times before the end. One description is never enough for things that appear; however many descriptions there are in these pages is not enough either. It is up to you, and to me, how that description is heard. What is at stake is not the hearing of the truth of what happened, but the understanding of its meaning. Meaning is not universal. Therefore, I restrict the field of
questioning further. The meaning sought is the meaning of “never again,” the meaning of anti-genocide activism, and with those, the meanings of a whole host of other things that extend beyond that. Some of those things that extend beyond are present in this text, and many are not. The goal is to maintain the boundaries of the question, to attend to the faultline, not to make the question answerable but to sustain its journey or its shape, just long enough. The boundaries are constraints and freedom; they are phenomenal limits and conceptual fences, but also guides, like a surface that bounces light back into my retina so that I can see. They are the faces of the debate itself, which is not two sides but an infinity of facets and edges, always overflowing itself.

The meaning of “never again” is not the final articulation of the question, which must be clarified further to be read in our present context. (The questions posed here are always interrupting themselves.) To attend to the boundaries of the inquiry I articulate my central research question in the following way: **what is the responsibility of activists in the face of genocide?** This is a question that appears in many forms – it is full of even more questions in each word and clause. “Responsibility,” I have addressed already (without addressing), and I have hinted toward “genocide.” “Activist” is another that invites inquiry, already splitting from the plural. And what does it mean, “in the face”? There is an abundance of prepositional questions: who is responsible for whom, when, and where? And crucially, for what? Why “what,” and not another question?

“What” indicates the main methodological approach of this study, which is phenomenological. Phenomenological methods demand that I attend to the limits of my inquiry, which is limited by what appears to me as the author (phenomena) and what does not. What appears in my research question and what I submit for examination in the work to follow is: genocide, activists, and responsibility, and the question itself, asked by me, the questioner. Each of these is problematic. Genocide, for example, I do not
necessarily affirm as a discrete phenomenon. But the phenomenological method gives me leave to contemplate the concept without requiring it to have an empirical phenomenal reality or final cause. Genocide will thus be examined in chapter two not in its empirical appearance as a discrete form of violence, but as a concept that can be observed in its operation and in its contexts (i.e., historical, legal, political, ethical, sociological, etc.). Furthermore, in chapter three, it will be encountered (many times removed) again as the experience of “total destruction,” not an empirical definition but as a name that caught some possibility of describing the unthinkable, or rather, the impossibility of describing it. Likewise, activists will be thought through not as an object but through the experience of witnessing atrocities, and responsibility to the response of witnessing. The final term, which brings us back to action but also to education, is absent from the question itself and has a double-appearance as “ritual” and “praxis.” The mental process of delimiting the object of inquiry is referred to in phenomenology as a bracketing or suspension. It is my goal to suspend the central research question as much as possible, and to avoid taking for granted what appears and does not appear in the question and response.

Not all phenomenological approaches are identical. I owe mine to two thinkers in particular: Hannah Arendt and Emmanuel Levinas. Though they both engage their own versions of phenomenological

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5 Whether genocide is a discrete phenomenon or not is debated in the literature. In his helpful overview of the concept, historian Mark Levene emphasizes the lack of scholarly consensus on the ways in which genocide becomes an applicable and relevant category for researchers. His book attempts to engage with genocide as a discrete phenomenon only in the broader historical context of “an emerging, global, interlocking system of nation-states which finally came to its fullest fruition in the twentieth century,” Genocide in the Age of the Nation State (London: I.B. Tauris, 2005), 1:144. See in particular the introduction to the text, especially pp. 32–36. An alternative approach to the norm in genocide studies is provided also in Anne O’Byrne and Martin Shuster’s edited book Logics of Genocide: The Structures of Violence and the Contemporary World (New York: Routledge, 2020), which presents a range of specifically philosophical approaches to these problems.

6 I would like to acknowledge that my thinking on Arendt’s political theory in chapters four and five are informed by a political theory class taught by Dr. Mark Warren in Fall 2015, where I read Arendt in depth for the first time and began writing about the problem of action. A paper written for that course was presented at the Philosophy of Education Society Conference (PES) as a working paper in 2017, again in the next iterations as a peer-reviewed session in 2018, and published in their journal in 2019 as “Now What? The Risk of Action and the Responsibility of the Teacher.” Portions of chapter five (5.2) were also initially developed in that paper. I benefited greatly from the
methods in their thinking, they show the first disciplinary split of this dissertation between ethics and politics. Both figures studied phenomenology under the field’s founder, Edmund Husserl. While studying with Husserl, both became entranced by the person who was considered Husserl’s successor, Martin Heidegger, and were deeply affected by his philosophical interventions into the Husserlian method. Furthermore, as Jews, both were deeply betrayed and traumatized by the rise of the Third Reich in the 1930s, and by Heidegger’s early allegiance with the Nazi Party in that period. This betrayal accompanied or instigated a major turning point in their respective thinking, that they each characterized as a break with western philosophy. At the same time, each point of comparison I just provided can be complicated.

feedback of my respondents at PES, Dr. Cristina Cammarano and Dr. Rachel Wahl, as well as from the session attendees (in particular Addyson Frattura).

I would also like to state the influence of my co-supervisor Dr. Barbara Weber’s phenomenological methods course in Spring 2016, for which I wrote my first essay on Levinas with the benefit of her historical and disciplinary contextualization. That essay was later presented at PES, as a working paper in 2017 and then as a peer-reviewed session in 2018, subsequently published in that year’s issue of the Philosophy of Education journal as “Facing the Perfect Stranger: Disrupting a Mythology of Innocence in Education and Beyond.” It, along with the comprehensive exam essay from November 2017, informed the early drafts of the Levinas potions of chapter four (4.2 and 4.3). The respondents to my papers at PES, Dr. Jason Wozniak and Dr. Frank Margonis, provided helpful and much appreciated feedback in those early stages. Dr. Clarence Joldersma and Nassim Noroozi similarly shared their thoughts and influenced my thinking, especially on the limitations and possibilities of Levinas’ ethics.

There is only one recorded meeting between Arendt and Levinas; as told by Simon Critchley, they were both receiving honorary degrees in Chicago and Levinas commented that Arendt was a “crazy woman” for the way she sang the American anthem. Simon Critchley, The Problem with Levinas, edited by Alexis Dianda (Oxford University Press: 2015), lecture four. “Pluralism, the Break with the One.” Arendt does cite Levinas once when describing antisemitism in France, on his “interesting remarks” on Proust in the article “L’Autre dans Proust.” Hannah Arendt The Origins of Totalitarianism, 2nd ed. (New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 1968), 80n62.

To my knowledge, Levinas never cited Arendt in his work. Philosopher Françoise Collin, who was among the first to popularize Arendt in France (not unlike Levinas with his French translations Husserl and Heidegger), hints in an essay that Levinas’ feelings about Arendt were quite negative, implying that when she brought up her work on Arendt with Levinas he reacted so strongly she felt she should not speak about it with him again (“Mes rencontres avec Emmanuel Lévinas s’interrompirent en raison de l’intérêt que m’inspirait l’œuvre de Hannah Arendt sur laquelle il portait un jugement tellement péremptoire qu’il me paralysait.”). Françoise Collin, “Du don à la visitation,” in Emmanuel Lévinas-Maurice Blanchot, penser la différence, ed. Éric Hoppenot and Alain Milon (Nanterre: Presses Universitaires de Paris Nanterre: 2008), n4, http://books.openedition.org/pupo/858. She makes a similar comment in her essay, “Le visage et le langage Variations iconoclastes sur le mitsein,” in Arrachement et évaison: Levinas et Arendt face à l’histoire, ed. Mylene Botbol-Baum and Anne-Marie Roviello (Paris: VRIN, 2013), n2.

I have noticed a discrepancy between the years listed for Arendt’s birth, sometimes as 1906 and sometimes as 1905. This may relate to a calendar translation issue.
Though there are striking intersections, Arendt and Levinas’ engagement with Husserl and Heidegger (philosophically and personally) are certainly distinct from one another. Their Jewish backgrounds represented a typical split in European Jewry between the secular, middle class, German-speaking Jew from Prussia (Arendt) and the traditionally raised, Lithuanian Jew from Kaunas who spoke Yiddish and many other languages (Levinas). Neither wrote in their mother tongue: when Arendt escaped Europe and settled in the United States, she adopted English for her scholarly work; Levinas, who settled in France as a teenager before the war and stayed there afterwards, showed his thinking mostly in French.

I emphasize these (oversimplified) biographical contrasts and similarities because it is the tension between the two that guides their role in this dissertation. The biographical details only add lived specificity to this tension, which is expressed in chapters four and five in philosophical terms. Most significantly, after the war, Levinas split from Heidegger to argue for ethics as first philosophy over the more traditional ontology, and which entailed developing a phenomenology of the ethical relation, expressed as responsibility. For much of Levinas’ life, he derided politics and continually upheld his commitment to ethics as a field distinct from (and prior to) other theoretical enterprises. Arendt’s break with Heidegger was a break with philosophy as a discipline (though not phenomenology as a method); her

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9 All of my characterizations thus far can be complicated again. For example, Arendt’s family was only in Prussia for a relatively short time, emigrating from Imperial Russia. During the war, Arendt was briefly detained by the Gestapo but fled to France and then the United States, where she became a citizen in 1950 and lived until her death in 1975. Levinas, who became a French citizen in 1930, was detained as an officer in the French army in a work camp but survived and remained in France until his death in 1995. For Arendt, I refer primarily to Young-Bruehl’s biography, *For Love of the World*; for Levinas, Critchley’s the *Problem with Levinas* was helpful. Anya Topolski’s book, *Arendt, Levinas and the Politics of Relationality* (London: Rowman and Littlefield International, 2015) also informed by understanding of both figures and their lives in relation.

10 Though I did not know in advance how Arendt and Levinas would play a role in my thinking on responsibility, I have always been in awe of the ways in which they seem to be speaking to each other when I read them. I know that this is not actually the case. I do worry that this dissertation will diminish the differences and conflicts between the two thinkers. I also chose to focus as much as possible on Levinas’ and Arendt’s writings and, as a result, draw only lightly from the extensive secondary literature on them, which in my view is a weakness of this study at the current stage. Though I hope to contribute to the limited research on Arendt and Levinas together, I do not sufficiently engage with the others who have already done so. I hope to be able to address both in future.
new chosen field was political theory. She condemned philosophy’s distaste for and even aggression against politics, the domain of action and new beginnings that appear in the world that should be studied and appreciated in their very appearance. Though she engages with ethical questions in her work, especially later in life, she is adamant that (traditional) ethics or the Good have no place in politics. Of course, again this split is not so neat and will be further complicated in chapter four. What it represents at this stage is the fundamental tension between Arendt and Levinas, which is also a disciplinary tension in my text while retaining the methodological context of phenomenology. By focusing on the “what” questions from either side of the faultline (ethics and politics), Arendt and Levinas demonstrate how to address difficult and impossible questions without becoming locked up, pre-emptively, in the paralysis of the “whys” and “hows.” I likewise attempt an interplay between ethical theory and political theory, which I also try to root phenomenologically in my own experiences and perception. On this basis I take the liberty of re-think Arendt and Levinas’ questions through the context of anti-genocide activism.

Such a re-thinking is not without its risks. In particular, it is vulnerable to and even indefensible against charges raised by anti-colonial, decolonial, and Indigenous activists and scholars, whose work shows how dangerous (murderous, genocidal) it is to ignore the ways that colonialism and white supremacy structures the political realities from which I am writing, thinking, and acting. I have attempted to be critical of and careful of the ways the context of colonialism affects my thinking, and I have addressed or pointed out some of them, mostly in footnotes. However, with regards to this work, I remain troubled by a sense of unease and suspicion of my own decisions and know I have much more to do on this topic. It is important

11 The connection between Arendt’s notion of plurality and Levinas’ of alterity (especially through phenomenology), is remarked upon by a number of scholars and developed by a much smaller number, most notably by the political and ethical philosopher Anya Topolski in her 2015 book *Arendt, Levinas, and the Politics of Relationality*. The collection of essays edited by bioethicist Mylene Botbol-Baum and political philosopher Anne-Marie Roviello, *Arrachement et évasion: Levinas et Arendt face à l’histoire* (which includes an entry from Topolski) is another notable text. Both texts bear significant resemblances to my presentation of Arendt and Levinas and make similar connections between the two figures.

12 Questions of who, when, and where fall under the category of “what.”
to say this because the risks elucidated by Arendt and Levinas (and repeated by me) are immeasurably greater without this context in mind. I am pointing toward the aspect of European colonialism that is the drive to universalize and make absolutes (in order to justify itself), to “annex the stars,” as Arendt quotes the genocidal British imperialist Cecil Rhodes (in her insufficient analysis of colonialism in the history of western and modern politics). This is a real problem with my dissertation that I feel will need to be addressed at a later stage because its fingerprints are all over the text to follow.¹³

The reason why I do not go full throttle on identifying the issues with colonialism, especially in relation to Arendt and Levinas’ thinking, is because they themselves do not do it. They come tantalizingly close at times, but I want to make it clear that both remain thinkers deeply embedded in European conceptions of race, civilization, and other fundamental premises of the colonial project, even as they lay their criticisms at its feet. While they draw connections between Nazism and numerous aspects of modern concepts and ideologies, they do not understand or engage with the direct relationship between the Final Solution and European colonization more broadly, a relationship that has been elucidated in Indigenous and anti-colonial political movements as well as in Holocaust scholarship.¹⁴ Furthermore, Arendt and Levinas

¹³ One particular challenge has been resisting the dichotomy between the west and the rest of the world, which is itself a modern colonial expansion of the older opposition between the Occident and Orient (of course, both are deeply problematic). This challenge cannot be avoided in conversation with Arendt and Levinas (my small interruption is to keep western lower case when it seems unavoidable).

¹⁴ “We Charge Genocide” petition from 1951 shows this, tabled within months of the Genocide Convention going into effect. References to Nazism or Hitler can be found on pp. xv-xvi, 5, 7, 8, 37, 144, 153–154, 186, 196, including specific examples of explicit links between Nazi and American ideology and policies and the financial ties of Wall Street to Nazi Germany. William L. Patterson, ed. We Charge Genocide: The Historic Petition to the United Nations for Relief from a Crime of the United States Government Against the Negro People, 3rd ed. (New York: Civil Rights Congress, 1952).

each perpetuate racist and colonial tropes and ideologies in their thinking, making it more difficult to extract specific points that do speak to the ethical and political chasm opened by European colonization. These are fundamental and theoretical weaknesses in their thinking, in addition to political and ethical failures. For me to address these issues through Arendt and Levinas would have been (a) problematic if not impossible, and (b) a much more extensive scholarly project since their thinking about colonization is one that extends across their entire lifespan of work but is not a specific topic in and of itself. Though the task is challenging, Arendt scholars and Levinas scholars, respectively, are doing this work. There is a lot to say about that emerging literature, but I am trying to limit the scope of inquiry here. I do want to emphasize that these problems are taken into consideration throughout this dissertation and that I hope to continue to address in the next stages of my scholarly research.

Apart from inviting Arendt and Levinas – for better or worse – as my “thinking companions” on this thought train, I have introduced a number of other disciplinary strands into the present project that I shall explain briefly, and also mention a few notable exclusions. Though I try to stay in the bounds of activism and the literature I establish in the chapters to come, my understanding of anti-genocide activism is often filtered through educational concerns and contexts, even if I do not state them explicitly. This is partly a result of my engagement with educational theories, partly because my mother is a teacher and I have always been surrounded by teachers, and mostly because so many of my experiences as an activist seem to shift over into the mode of teaching. (It seems an inevitable pull to me, but I do not know if that is true for others.) As such, yet another interdisciplinary field that informs this study – though covertly – is education, and specifically philosophy of education and philosophy with children.15 It was not my intention

15 My sense of the relationship between justice and education comes from my own upbringing and communities, and especially my parents, but I want to state that my engagement with these questions in a scholarly way began in 2014 with a course titled Pedagogy of the Oppressed Revis(it)ed: Freire, Illich, and Liberation Theology with Dr. Sam Rocha, that introduced me to philosophy of education, and through Dr. Barbara Weber, who introduced me to Philosophy with Children (PwC). My collaboration with Dr. Rocha on three papers on eros and education published
to pursue this project from a predominantly educational angle at the outset. This dissertation sits a little uncomfortably in that tension, pulled toward education but not quite arriving there; in conversation with educational literature that is not yet audible in the text’s unfolding. I hope in future work to change that, especially since genocide education (particularly in K–12) gains prominence in ways that I worry are radically disconnected from the critiques of the Save Darfur movement. At the same time, when it comes to matters of justice and politics, the emphasis on education outside of the classroom setting, more so than inside of it, is part of why I feel pulled in and out of the discipline.

That being said, my focus on education has brought out three claims I will make here at the outset, and which are implied throughout the text. First, my own experiences as a student have taught me how damaging and ultimately disrespectful oversimplification can be, especially in matters of politics and ethics. “Philosophy with children” as a practice have shown me different approaches to opening complex topics for appropriate settings, age groups, and within other constraints. Second, not all educational spaces are located within schools and classrooms; in my experience, they can form under exceedingly strange circumstances and in negative spaces, where they may not be expected or even welcomed. This is palpable in activist communities. Third, teaching is a powerful way to change dynamics and deepen ties when the hierarchy between teacher and student is viewed loosely. Sharing (and relinquishing) the role of teacher is an important part of building activist communities.

from 2017-2021 influenced my thinking on teaching, politics, and ethics and extended my readings of Paulo Freire and religious philosophy, which hovers in the background of chapter five in particular.

16 Other constraints can be time, physical space (or virtual), ability, language, etc. A phenomenological approach can be useful to consider framing questions at different levels or strata without (over)simplification. That is, you can open big questions with very little, as most conversations with young children reveals all too well. I have learned this from practitioners of philosophy with children like Barbara Weber and Walter Kohan.

17 That is, I do not think a rigid hierarchy is necessary in this context. I do not mean to make any sweeping claims about the authority of the teacher or of knowledge. I think by becoming a teacher it is easier to be a student; as a teacher it is easier to be compassionate with others than it is to be compassionate of my own ignorance and shortcomings, and this experience can be translated back as a kind of self-teaching.
To address questions of anti-genocide activism more generally, I also draw on genocide and Holocaust scholarship, and the related literature called witnessing theory, to contextualize and historicize anti-genocide activism and the concept of genocide.\(^{18}\) These fields are also interdisciplinary in and of themselves, engaging scholars and methodologies from history, political science, anthropology, sociology, cultural studies, literary criticism, psychology, law, etc. My engagement with genocide studies here is limited in scope mainly in order to focus on the problems of action and activism, which can be distorted or diluted through genocide scholarship (where the persona of the scholar-activist is commonly adopted). The body of work that has come to be known as “critical genocide studies” has the most obvious relevance to this project but is also engaged only tangentially for reasons of scope and space.\(^ {19}\) However, I try to incorporate notes and other references to indicate where the major issues of critical genocide scholarship arise. I do consider this literature to be essential reading for anti-genocide activists and I make an effort to offer suggestions and context when prudent.

Alongside critical genocide scholars, I believe the realities of anti-genocide activism since its inception in the post-WWII era demands a rethinking. The last thirty years has produced invaluable academic work to this purpose, in particular with reference to colonial genocides. The researchers who have produced this work are often more attentive than most to the boundary between scholar and activist, which

\(^{18}\) My reading of witnessing theory also takes us from Holocaust studies up to the threshold of the field of memory studies, which is intimately related to witnessing. I skirt around memory, again an important part of this discussion that has been excluded or severely limited in this chapter (and appears only tangentially in the following chapters as it relates to consciousness and reflection). I justify this exclusion or limitation on the basis of memory’s relationship to anti-genocide activism specifically. Memory, of course, has political implications, but anti-genocide activism and intervention, in the present, involves memorialization largely insofar as doing so builds solidarity and for the purposes of anti-genocide education. That is not to say that other aspects of memory are not relevant or discussed in the course of the text, but it does not feature prominently as a concept or theme.

means that there remains a great deal of work to be done to bring this literature into conversation with anti-
genocide activists and any other group that takes up the concept in action. On that note, I also clarify that it is not my explicit intention to contribute to genocide scholarship on cases, definitions, or other such concerns. My focus on genocide is predominantly on its political meaning and manifestations, which are often elided in the mainstream genocide discourse. I accomplish this re-focusing by revisiting the issues through the example of the Save Darfur movement, issues which I aim to show are repeated in multiple other examples across the “canonical” cases of genocide and genocide intervention/response. I wish to acknowledge also that the focus on a “canon” (it may be blasphemous to some to put it that way; I mean genocides recognized as such by politically powerful institutions) neglects, to its detriment, the outlier and marginalized cases that are extremely important and interesting study, and which have, regretfully, largely been excluded from this work. I have tried to create some space for these omissions in the footnotes throughout, though such an approach is unsatisfying and unsatisfactory.

Another disciplinary strand comes from Jewish philosophy and religious thinking at key points in my argument, in parallel and sometimes in conversation with Levinas. This is most prominent in the final chapter, where I bring in the Shabbat (Sabbath) ritual as a non-theoretical framework for thinking about praxis. As Levinas does to some degree or other, I try to remain cautious about the relationship between philosophical thinking and religious thinking, however, especially when engaging with Levinas, the division is rarely clear. It so happens that in my descriptions and analysis of Levinas’ ethics, I have removed references to God or theological concepts for simplicity’s sake (Levinas’ use of “God” in his philosophical texts is more philosophical than theological). What I wish to carry over from my experiences of Jewish life (including study, debate, and action) can largely be characterized as social and philosophical concepts and

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20 An excellent place to start is the fundamental origin story of genocide as a concept. The historical work of critical genocide scholars in particular is outstanding, and the literature is abundant with case studies and boundary situations that are invaluable pedagogical tools for genocide education. Some genocide scholars like Joyce Apsel have tried to address the educational aspects directly.
practices. They do not rely on confessional belief. Like Levinas, I do not ask anyone to “believe in God” (a concept that is not quite sensible to many Jewish ears) to follow my arguments. I do acknowledge a debt to specific characteristics of Jewish thought that I think can be tracked across this text (time, separation, hospitality, question-asking, study, knowledge, and so on). Some of those influences can be traced, more by way of relation than origin, through liberation theology and its conceptualization of oppression.21

Also excluded are other specific, political discussions including those that are referenced directly but only briefly or hover in the background. For example, witnessing leads us into the problems of anti-genocide activism while accepting implicitly some degree of authenticity in the moral outcry expressed in the slogan, “never again.” I am not saying that “never again” is always uttered in authentic way (insofar as that means something) and I am not intending to imply that the specific contexts in which “never again” is uttered in Jewish communities, in the diaspora but especially in relation to the State of Israel, should be taken at face value or that greater political and ethical problems do not arise in those contexts. To explore those problems as it pertains to this discussion of anti-genocide activism is a much more extensive project than what I aim to accomplish here. I justify this exclusion on the basis that, though I write from the position of a Jewish person (no less one who was given citizenship in the State of Israel from birth even as a non-resident), I am not speaking from the point of view of anti-genocide activism within Jewish communities specifically, but from anti-genocide activism as part of a broader movement that includes many positions, histories, and contexts. At the same time, my position from within anti-genocide activism more broadly does not mean that I should not make explicit my own personal connection to the Shoah, which I think is important to be reflective about insofar as it impacts the way that I understand and assign meaning. In short, my specific history with genocide as a concept in relation to the Shoah affects the way I judge. Becoming attentive to that context is an important aspect of the ethical project that I attempt to describe.

21 Paulo Freire’s version of praxis is not unrelated, for example.
Lastly, some notes about voice and the writing process. A major part of this project is to take these reflections and make them intelligible for an audience of anti-genocide activists, especially student activists. Some may read that sentence and laugh aloud; I freely admit that I do not pretend to keep the promise I made at the outset of this project to have this dissertation be accessible to a wider audience, and one that skews young (I had youth activists in mind when I began). In the last chapter especially, I do hope that I can move around a little bit in the language that I use, and that is one of the reasons I am engaging the more personal voice at the beginning and the end. The use of metaphorical language (i.e., the faultline) and the move to the personal register are intended to render the text more welcoming, and to acknowledge that in it, my words are inseparable from who I am and how I relate to the world. I recognize that my use of religious concepts and of specifically Jewish concepts may have the opposite effect that my stated intention.

At least three distinct voices emerge from the landscape I have sketched thus far. There is the voice of the philosopher (or student), who seeks meaningful concepts and frameworks to understand their own questions (a reflexive and unending movement). There is the voice of the activist, who is trying to initiate meaningful action and change with all the urgency of justice. And there is the voice of the teacher, who wants to prepare others for the tasks of both, and more. All of them are personal and inseparable from me, the writer/speaker, and so I am obligated to write honestly in the first-person.22 Though this dissertation can be read as my way of working through my own questions about anti-genocide activism, when I write I feel that I am speaking in that third voice of the teacher more so than any other. Perhaps there is something about writing that is more like teaching than thinking or acting.23 Writing in the voice of a teacher, to me, means setting the table for the questions at hand, whatever they may be. In this way, “setting the table”

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22 The presentation of the first-person will change, and at times transition into a second- and third-person.
23 What is obviously different is that I cannot respond to you, the reader, as I could a student.
describes my approach to writing through all these different voices, and it is what I rely upon when everything becomes too tangled up.

Put another way, the beginning of this dissertation engages the first- and second-person to indicate an ethical and educational register. The third-person voice generally refers to the theoretical (in Levinasian terms, the realm of the said or the thematized). The first-person voice in the singular is in dialogue with Levinas’ ethical demand; it is wrestling with the question in the first-person, that is, I am speaking personally and specifically. The first-person voice in the plural aims to reach across the faultline from ethics into politics, the move from “I” to “we.” I do my best to ensure that the “we” is not taken for granted as a neutral term (a theme in disguise). The second-person voice enters into the text in an ambiguous space, as reading and writing are ambiguous. The multiple voices, reflected in different pronouns (though not consistently), also reflect the interdisciplinary strands of my research: phenomenology, ethics, political theory, philosophy of education, genocide studies, and Jewish philosophy. In writing, all are theoretical, but my goal has been to maintain their connection to the ground of our shared realities in the spirit of Levinas’ and Arendt’s phenomenological methods. Writing across different disciplines and voices is a challenge. Writing in general is a constant struggle, a wrestling of the saying and the said (in Levinas’ terms). My writing process can be characterized as the slow reconciliation with the incompleteness of this work and the cultivation of appreciation for the middle steps of creative or thinking processes. It requires that I acclimate myself to the state of interruption, which is constant. It is fitting, then, that the process of wrestling with questions is a major theme of this work.

1.4 Chapter Structure

This project began in 2014 as a proposal for a master’s thesis, which had an instrumental goal. My intention was to take the time to pursue (and draw legitimacy from) graduate studies to re-develop a workshop about ethics and anti-genocide activism that I was working on with a group of other activists belonging to STAND
Canada, a youth-led advocacy organization that works to make ending and preventing genocide a cornerstone of Canadian foreign and domestic policy. The workshop, in turn, was inspired by the deeply troubling questions that had arisen for me and my fellow activists around the concept of genocide and its political meaning during the years of the Save Darfur movement (roughly 2004–2011). It was largely motivated by outrage: outrage that in growing up within social justice communities these questions came to us too late – or so it felt at the time. In some sense we wanted to teach our younger selves and correct what we saw as the primary error of oversimplification in youth-based activism. Though fascinating and stimulating, the workshop did not satisfy the outrage, and the problems we faced in creating it, and the feedback we received from the students who participated, kept growing and multiplying. Through many unexpected turns, including a turn into doctoral studies and academia, and nearly eight years, this text is the result of that project to answer to the questions raised in the workshop. I articulate those questions in this dissertation as: What is the responsibility of activists in the face of genocide?

It is not my intention to attempt an answer to it, but rather to commit to the asking of the question in the course of the response. Such an approach may seem strange, especially if the question seems simple or straightforward. Surely the responsibility of activists is to stop genocide, wherever it is encountered? But even if we were to begin by accepting wholesale the moral obligation to intervene as I presented it in 1.2, it still does not answer the question of how. This challenge is not only profoundly practical but also conceptual, one that is continually contested in genocide scholarship, juridical proceedings, public discourse, and political speech. Chapter one has begun to introduce the context that elicited the question, namely my experiences in anti-genocide activism, which began in childhood. In it, I have described that context as the conceptual plane of a faultline, a chasm or abyss that is opened in the earth by unanswerable questions and on whose edge we teeter. The faultline metaphor is intended to describe the terror and risk of
such a position, while providing the terrain to think through the problems posed by it. This metaphor is developed across the dissertation.24

Chapter two begins by reframing or contextualizing the “problem of action against genocide” that motivates this study with reference to the war in Darfur and the international response to it. One of the most prominent actors during this period was the Save Darfur Coalition, the main driver behind a political movement that mobilized millions of people from 2004 to 2011. Though I approach the topic via scholarly and activist literature, underpinning this chapter (in the background) are my personal struggles as a member of that movement, or more specifically, its student arm, STAND (formerly Students Taking Action Now: Darfur). This perspective helps me focus on the stakes for activists as opposed to other groups (e.g., genocide scholars). By examining the critiques of activist responses to the war in Darfur and contextualizing them within anti-genocide activism and critical genocide scholarship, I posit that alongside a compounding series of ethical and political crises is the emergence of a ringing demand to rethink anti-genocide activism full stop. Chapter two attempts to cover over a decade of discussions and learning and articulates a significant political shift for me personally, which was not undertaken alone.

Chapter three pivots backwards in time to the Shoah (the Holocaust) to recover the ethical and political challenges at the heart of another aspect of anti-genocide activist discourse: that of bearing witness. In this chapter, I review a sample of the philosophical literature called witnessing theory to discern a sense of witnessing that extends beyond its everyday meaning as an eyewitness in a court of law, etc.25 It is important to note that witnessing theory (and Holocaust studies) offers and indeed can very significantly

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24 An earlier version of 1.1 was originally written for an interdisciplinary methods course in 2015 and benefited from the feedback of my classmates and Dr. Hillel Goelman. A portion of 1.1 was initially written for an Indigenous methodologies course taught in the Educational Studies department by Dr. Cash Ahenakew, whose comments are similarly appreciated.

25 The first draft of chapter three chapter was written for my comprehensive exams in December 2017 and benefited from the feedback of my committee. It also owes a debt to a course I took on the politics of witnessing with my co-supervisor Dr. Erin Baines in 2015.
highlight the ethical and political challenges that I raise in the previous chapter. It is not the case that after the Holocaust, things became more complicated or other examples are not proper cases; even the Shoah itself (which, according to Genocide Convention that informs much of anti-genocide activism, must remain a case only, though some argue an exemplary case) demonstrates the turmoil of these challenges, for those who are willing and able to face the enormity of the calamity in its many levels of horror. For this reason and due to its own genealogical relationship to my personal history of anti-genocide activism, I engage witnessing theory to think through these problems from that orientation of “never again” specifically, where I return to activism through the notion of humanitarian witnessing in political theorist Michal Givoni’s work and conceptualize (as well as complicate) the position of anti-genocide activists as witnesses to genocide (total destruction). Givoni’s account of humanitarian crises of witnessing via the non-governmental organization (NGO) *Médecins Sans Frontières* (MSF) exposes the tension between the ethical gesture of bearing witness and witnessing as a political act, or the gap between ethics and politics. Givoni’s call to widen the gap opens the space to discern the crises of witnessing as problems of response, of proximity, and of the practice of witnessing itself – for anti-genocide activists, crises for which witnessing cannot provide an answer.

In chapter four, I return to the Shoah again from yet another perspective, in an examination of the notion of responsibility with Arendt and Levinas. Following their lead, I do not begin out of a need for the truth of responsibility but out of a desire for its meaning in the face of total destruction. That is, the question “what is the responsibility of activists in the face of genocide?” is not a question that has a true answer. With that in mind, the responsibility chapter is the theoretical core of the dissertation in that it is the one that attempts to, not quite answer, but reframe the notion of responsibility (of activists) through the tension of ethics and politics, or what I present as “total destruction” (the faultline). I begin with Arendt’s distinction between political and personal (ethical) responsibility to suspend the ethical imperative in order to recover the worldly stakes of response as action. In the end, however, Arendt’s concern with the political
phenomenon of totalitarianism focuses her attention on the limit situations in which action becomes impossible: it is here that ethical questions emerge again with all the weight of the future, contingent upon the actions of people caught in relations of responsibility. The second half of the chapter re-intensifies the ethical demand inherent in the response with Levinas’ writings on responsibility as a persecution and insomnia, leaving us with more paradoxes and a sense of justice that is inescapably concrete and particular, rather than abstract and universalized.26

For the final chapter, I also return to the personal register established in the introduction in order to demonstrate the depth of the turmoil the question guiding this dissertation has elicited in me personally, which is not abstract. Similarly, the Jewish teachings and practices from the introduction re-appear in fuller form; they are intended here as non-theoretical openings to think about the problems of action and response in the framework of praxis.27 I call this non-theoretical sense of praxis “ritual,” which I present through the Jewish practice of Shabbat (the Sabbath) and my own personal experience with it. I invite readers to consider how the separation enacted in the Shabbat ritual contextualizes or crystallizes the concrete problems of action in the face of genocide in my reflections on paralysis in contexts of genocide education that follow. My hope is that this accounting of ritual as praxis can bring to life the ways in which movement can be introduced into ethical and political deadlocks, and reveal something of the relationship of this movement to education in its ethical and political dimensions. To that end, the penultimate section of this dissertation is an attempt to think about my own past in anti-genocide activism and offer what I have taken

26 Earlier drafts of chapter four focused on Levinas’ 1961 book Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority (1961); the present version refers almost exclusively to his later book, Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence (1974), which reflects a shift in my thinking that is indebted to the ongoing collaboration with Itamar Manoff on the ethics and pedagogy of Havruta learning, which was presented at the Educational Studies Department Research Day in April 2021 and at PES in a March 2022 session entitled “Havruta: Reading as Radical Dialogue.” A similar shift occurred in my reading of Arendt; the early versions of the chapter drew mostly on the Human Condition (1958) but has since expanded to cover a much wider range of her work.

27 Consider the way Jewish philosophy and practice hovers in Levinas’ philosophical writings, which are in a tense relationship with his writings on Judaism and Jewish philosophy and politics.
forward from it, which I think is relevant for activists primarily in matters of education. I do not claim that education and praxis are the same, nor do I claim that what I am doing in the writing of this dissertation is praxis, though it might follow or bear a trace of what that might be. My speculative conclusion is that the response (in responsibility, gently opposed to an “answer”) in Levinas’ and Arendt’s configuration (and mine) can be understood as a kind of praxis articulated in their respective thinking as the turn to the third or the third turn, or the movement between ethics and politics.

28 Though I provide a brief overview of the concept of praxis to emphasize what I do not mean by the word, it is not anywhere near exhaustive. Praxis (not unlike responsibility and witnessing) is a concept with thousands of years of philosophical thinking behind it, and there is even an extensive literature on Arendt and praxis that has not been explored enough in this work. In writing chapter five, I drew upon a number of presentations and materials I have prepared over the course of the years, including from the ethics workshop that inspired me to pursue graduate studies. A much earlier version of my thinking on Arendtian judgement (that emphasized the distinction between actor and spectator) was first written for a transitional justice class with Dr. Baines in spring 2015. During the writing process, the content of 5.3 (returning to Arendt and Levinas) moved back and forth between chapters four and five and also to and from a discarded additional chapter that focused solely on judgement.
Chapter Two

Opening the Faultline: How Do You Stop a Genocide?

[A] portion of our common world is destroyed, an aspect of the world that has revealed itself to us until now but can never reveal itself again.

– Hannah Arendt, 1958/1959¹

2.1 Protection and the Depoliticization of the War in Darfur

We stand on a precipice, the edge of a faultline. Our first task is not to mend the gap – to fix it, Save Darfur or anti-genocide activism – but to apprehend the enormity of the cracks and depths before us that will not be unified. As we shall see in this chapter and in each chapter to come, acknowledging irreconcilability is not self-defeating. Rather, it opens up possibilities that were thus far unanticipatable or impossible. Before we can consider anti-genocide activism after Darfur, we must reconsider what lies behind us. More particularly, the ethical demand in the wake of Darfur involves re-examining the story we tell about what genocide is and what we should do about it.

We will begin to explore some of these questions by revisiting the international response to the war in Darfur, which is the starting point for this inquiry because it was the start of this inquiry for me as an anti-genocide activist, but also because the war in the northwestern region of Sudan and the international response to it constituted a distinct and instructive moment in the history of anti-genocide activism. The retrospective account of anti-genocide activism to follow is intended to complicate the concept of genocide and start to shake its foundations, bringing the cracks and faultlines into view and submerging us into

meaning beyond symbol, if it can be found. My goal in this opening chapter is to not only describe but provoke in you the uncertainty and confusion that waits in the face of what we call genocide.

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The phrase “NOT ON OUR WATCH” was emblazoned in uppercase letters on a bookmark I had picked up at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum during a 2005 school trip. It hung over my desk throughout high school, an emblem of the Save Darfur movement that defined my youth. I did not know the origin of the phrase then, but it came from a story about the American president George W. Bush. In 2003, the story goes, Bush read a summary of Samantha Power’s bestselling book from the previous year, “A Problem from Hell:” America and the Age of Genocide. In it, Power, a high-profile academic who would later be the American Ambassador to the United Nations under Bush’s successor, lays out her criticism of American foreign policy and inaction against genocides of the twentieth century. A lack of will to intervene, she argues, is the source of a massive moral failure on the part of the United States, which has the military and political power to take action against genocide.² In the margins of the summary, Bush reportedly wrote the words, “NOT ON MY WATCH.”³

That was the year that the war in Darfur, Sudan erupted. By 2004, as the world marked the tenth anniversary of the Rwandan genocide, this “new” war was rapidly gaining international attention. The condemnation of international (and American) inaction in Rwanda was still ringing loudly from Power and others, and Bush was not the only one who remembered Power’s admonition of the Clinton Administration’s reticence to use the word “genocide” to describe the violence in Rwanda even as the

events unfolded on the world stage. The American decision to call the war in Darfur a genocide on September 9th, 2004 was framed as a sign of moral courage on that grim anniversary, as well as a global call to action.

Against this backdrop, Darfur gained distinction at the outset of the twenty-first century as the site of the world’s first genocide of a new era. It was a new era in more than just the measure of years since the birth of Christ; the global inaction in the face of genocides in Rwanda and Srebrenica had mobilized coalitions of Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs), as well as various government and international institutions, to re-approach the interventionist stance against genocide that had once been expressed in the call-to-action “never again,” sloganized after the Second World War. The “problem of sovereignty” that had plagued any attempts to stop genocide since the UN adoption of the Convention for the Prevention and

As journalist Julie Flint and Sudan researcher Alex De Waal note, “The day before the 7 April anniversary [marking the beginning of the Rwandan genocide], the New York Times published an opinion column by Samantha Power entitled ‘Remember Rwanda, but Take Action in Sudan’, which drove the point home, and – as Power intended – impelled Bush to refer to Darfur.” Darfur: A Short History of a Long War, rev. ed. (London: Zed Books, 2008), 179. Similar warnings were made by many others.


Rogaia Mustafa Abusharaf, “Debating Darfur in the World,” The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science 632, no. 1 (2010): 67. Whether this was an appropriate label is neither certain nor necessarily important.

See, for instance, René Provost and Payam Akhavan’s introductory chapter to their edited volume Confronting Genocide (Dordrecht: Springer, 2011):

Amidst the anticipation and euphoria of a new epoch, the Genocide Convention was hailed as a triumph of international law. But the vow to ‘never again’ allow such horrors to happen again soon became an empty mantra as millions more became the targets of genocide, victims of tyranny and cynicism. [...] These immeasurable tragedies speak to our repeated failure to give effect to the righteous declarations and lofty utterances that create the illusion of progress. One step that has been taken to revive the international criminal law regime which had remained dormant since the days following the Second World War. The ad hoc criminal tribunals created for the former Yugoslavia, Rwanda, Sierra Leone, Cambodia, and the permanent International Criminal Court, all stand for one form of commitment to react to genocide by holding individual authors accountable for that crime. Yet while we remember, regret, and sometimes prosecute these past abomination of the 20th century, another genocide unfolds in the Darfur region of Sudan. In the opening years of the 21st century, the world appears to fail the victims once more. It seems “never again” has become “ever again.” (2)
Punishment of the Crime of Genocide in 1948 seemed like it could be, finally, resolvable:

a significant proportion of UN member states had ratified the Rome Statute, which in 2002 brought into being the first permanent International Criminal Court (ICC), and three years later UN member states would adopt the (nonbinding) Responsibility to Protect doctrine (R2P).

It was in this spirit of humanitarian, global responsibility that, in a report on the role of the UN in the new millennium, UN Secretary General Kofi Annan asked, “if humanitarian intervention is, indeed, an unacceptable assault on sovereignty, how should we respond to a Rwanda, to a Srebrenica – to gross and systematic violations of human rights that offend every precept of our common humanity?”

He answered as follows:

Humanitarian intervention is a sensitive issue, fraught with political difficulty and not susceptible to easy answers. But surely no legal principle – not even sovereignty – can ever shield crimes against humanity. Where such crimes occur and peaceful attempts to halt them have been exhausted, the Security Council has a moral duty to act on behalf of the international community. The fact that we cannot protect people everywhere is no reason for doing nothing when we can. Armed intervention must always remain the option of last resort, but in the face of mass murder it is an option that cannot be relinquished. (my emphasis)

The sense of moral duty expressed by Annan and others required action to be realized. In July 2004, as the 10-year memorialization of the Rwanda genocide was concluding, the United States Holocaust

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8 It is worth noting that the popular answer to the problem of sovereignty in international criminal law at the time was supplied by South Sudanese scholar Francis Deng through the notion of “sovereignty as responsibility.” See Francis Deng, Sovereignty as Responsibility: Conflict Management in Africa (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution, 1996).

9 The Responsibility to Protect (R2P) doctrine was endorsed by UN member states in 2005 and attempts to provide a framework to reconcile principles of sovereignty in international law with the authority of states/the UN to intervene in cases of human rights violations in sovereign states. The re-emergence of genocide in this period can be read through a variety of histories; this presentation draws together only a few of them. Other factors to consider include the ending of the Cold War and the ratification of the Convention by the United States in 1988. See Ann Curthoys and John Docker, “Defining Genocide,” in The Historiography of Genocide, ed. Dan Stone (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 32; Dominik J. Schaller and Jürgen Zimmerer’s introduction to The Origins of Genocide: Raphael Lemkin as a Historian of Mass Violence, ed. Dominik J. Schaller and Jürgen Zimmerer (Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 2009), 2.


11 Annan, We the Peoples, 48.
Memorial Museum and the American Jewish World Service organized a “Darfur Emergency Summit in New York City” in response to mass violence in the Darfur region of Sudan. The summit birthed the Save Darfur Coalition, constituted by over 100 faith-based and interreligious organizations that came to represent tens of millions of members and activists. Its sole purpose was to raise awareness for, and mobilize intervention in, the war in Darfur on the basis of these international norms of human rights laid out for the new epoch of globalization and in the spirit of “never again.” Postcolonial scholar Mahmood Mamdani has claimed that this movement constituted the largest organized student movement in the United States since the anti-Vietnam war protests three decades earlier. Others frame the Save Darfur movement as the largest international social movement since the anti-apartheid campaigns against South Africa. Save Darfur was immensely successful at focusing American and international attention on the conflict in the northwest region of Sudan, which soon drew the largest humanitarian operation on the earth and by 2012 had become host to the largest peacekeeping operation in the world with an annual budget of almost USD $1.7 billion.

12 Lanz, Responsibility to Protect in Darfur, 54.
16 Christian Dorsch and Thomas Dörfler, “Organized Hypocrisy of the International Community: An Institutionalist Explanation of the UN Security Council’s Contradictory Activity on Darfur,” Zeitschrift Für Genozidforschung 15, no. 1–2 (2014): 9. See also Save Darfur Coalition’s impact on these developments and others in Gunnar M. Sørbø and
In 2007, as the Save Darfur movement gathered momentum, one of the leading academic experts on Sudan, Alex de Waal, published an article in *International Affairs* titled “Darfur and the Failure of Responsibility to Protect.” “The pursuit of the responsibility to protect in Darfur has not achieved its goal,” he stated bluntly. It was not his first attempt to ring an alarm bell on the response to Darfur nor would it be the last. While the international community was mobilizing aid and peacekeeping forces, De Waal and other critical scholars and activists were repeatedly calling for a drastic shift in approach that was more strategic, peace-oriented, and localized. Their frustration only grew as time went on and the underlying factors of the conflict remained unaddressed and even further complicated. From the beginning, critics pointed out the lack of clear mission for the African Union and then the hybrid United Nations-African Union peacekeeping forces, as well as a myriad of political and logistical problems around funding and staffing. Their task was extremely complex if not outright impossible. Darfur, and Sudan in general, are highly diverse parts of the world with complex traditions of mediation, peacemaking, and reconciliation.


Further information on traditional practices and relations of justice in Darfur can be found in Tsega Etafa, *The Origins of Ethnic Conflict in Africa: Politics and Violence in Darfur, Oromia, and the Tana Delta* (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019). See also Mamdani, *Saviors and Survivors*; Hassan, “A Left Perspective.”
Political tensions around the relationship between the post-colonial government in Khartoum and the different communities of Darfur were high and rooted in historical grievances, the civil war that began in the 1980s, economic pressures, and systemic problems of governance. All of these relationships were playing out in a place of high geopolitical significance, especially in terms of Sudan’s oil reserves, its political influence in the region, and its strategic significance in the American War on Terror.

This complexity was not reflected in the international response to the crisis nor in the messaging of the Save Darfur movement. De Waal provides an insight into the challenge international peacekeeping operations faced:

The greatest frustration of the AU mediation team’s security advisors, and the senior DPKO [UN Department of Peacekeeping Operations] staff assigned to the Darfur file is that their professional advice has been consistently brushed aside by political concerns. Thus, DPKO staff argued strongly that the priority was a sound peace agreement and that peacekeepers could be dispatched only in support of such an agreement. They were overruled by the politicians’ demand for protection first and peace second. The AU’s security advisors argued for a longer process of capacity-building and confidence-building among the commanders in the field, and when that was rejected, for a longer time to develop the basic concepts for advancing security in Darfur and obtaining the agreement of the parties. They were overruled by the politicians’ demand for haste.

Despite repeated calls from local leaders, foreign and local experts, and professional security staff, the long-term priorities of the peacekeeping operations in Darfur remained nebulous and poorly conceived. De Waal identifies this problem as originating in the conceptualization of the principle of responsibility to protect itself, which he emphasizes prioritizes “protection first and peace second.” The emphasis on protection over other forms of engagement shifted all conversations toward “when and whether to intervene, not how to do so and with what aim in mind.” The moral urgency that fueled anti-genocide activism – “not on my watch” – thus took centre stage and superseded all other interests when it came to resolving the conflict. That moral

22 De Waal, “Darfur and the Failure of Responsibility to Protect,” 1053.
23 De Waal, “Darfur and the Failure of Responsibility to Protect,” 1045.
urgency was particularly amplified by Darfur activists in the United States who were exerting enormous pressure on the American government to increase UN presence in the region, fueling what De Waal calls “erroneous and unrealistic expectations of what UN troops would do in Darfur.”

Mamdani picks up this criticism of the notion of protection in his 2009 book *Saviors and Survivors: Darfur, Politics, and the War on Terror*, in which he lays out a detailed and piercing critique of the Save Darfur movement. He sees the centrality of protection as a symptom of a bigger shift, or what he calls “a systemic transition in international relations.”

“The standard of responsibility is no longer international law but has shifted, fatefully, from law to rights,” he argues. On this basis humanitarian intervention is divorced from the law (where it would be subject to nuance and deliberation) and instead motivated by something primordial and moral. “If the rights of the citizen are pointedly political,” Mamdani continues, “the rights of the human pertain to sheer survival; they are summed up in one word: *protection*. The new language refers to its subjects not as bearers of rights – and thus active agents in their own emancipation – but as passive beneficiaries of an external ‘responsibility to protect.’”

The domineering attitude of the international response to Darfur, the repeated rejection of local and otherwise professional perspectives on the conflict itself, was thereby justified through a supra-legal and apolitical (even anti-political) moral demand to protect the helpless.

In Mamdani’s reading, the shift from citizen to human is emblematic of this apolitical, moral response. It was by the same logic that former American Secretary of State Madeleine Albright could respond to accusations of American imperialism in Darfur by saying in a 2006 interview that “the protection

of the innocent is a universal responsibility […] this is not about politics, it is about people.”

27 But the innocent were suffering because of a civil war, and that war was political, as Mamdani spends a large portion of his book explaining and as numerous other scholars and Sudanese leaders have also emphasized at length. “It’s a civil war,” De Waal explains succinctly, “and like all wars it needs a political settlement.” People in Sudan would have to live alongside one another again, rebuild communities, and create a shared future. Instead of a political response, however, the Save Darfur movement and the international community reinforced the idea that politics (and political rights) must be superseded for the sake of human rights. It is this depoliticization of the citizen into the human that Mamdani sees as the source of the Save Darfur movement’s popular success.

27 Albright’s 2006 speech delivered in New York City is quoted in Jodi Eichler-Levine and Rosemary Hicks, “‘As Americans Against Genocide’: The Crisis in Darfur and Interreligious Political Activism,” American Quarterly 59, no. 3 (2007): 729.

28 Strong criticisms on this point are exhaustively laid out by the authors in De Waal’s edited volume War in Darfur and the Search for Peace (London: Global Equity Initiative, Harvard University, 2007), which draws together a series of essays by leading Sudanese and international specialists on Darfur. See also Hassan and Ray’s edited volume Darfur and the Crisis of Governance in Sudan: A Critical Reader, which assembled entries from scholars, activists, NGO and aid workers, members of government and Darfurian rebel movements, and artists in an interdisciplinary collection resulting from a 2008 conference in Addis Ababa. For a detailed argument against the depoliticization of the war in Darfur, see Etefa’s The Origins of Ethnic Conflict in Africa. Unfortunately, I was only able to consult English-language sources on Sudan and Darfur.


30 Political rights here could be understood in relation to the sovereignty of the state, but I think Mamdani is thinking more of restoring the citizenship of refugees and IDPs, i.e., bringing them back into the political context as active members (see Mamdani’s famous 2009 debate at Columbia University with John Prendergast, known as “The Darfur Debate”).

31 Mamdani, Saviors and Survivors, 60.
2.2 Saving Darfur: Activism and Justice in the Moral Shadow of Genocide

“Like the War on Terror, the Save Darfur Coalition speaks in the language of good and evil: Where there is evil, the response must be moral, not political,” Mamdani writes. The violent images and inflamed rhetoric that covered the Save Darfur website and advertisements leaned into this split, capitalizing on the moral need to bear witness to horrific suffering and inoculating viewers to the political dimensions of the conflict and responses to it. The effect of the “good versus evil” framework that was repeated endlessly in international media achieved the result of “obscuring the politics of the violence and [positioning] readers as virtuous, and not just concerned, observers.” Postcolonial scholar Ilan Kapoor examines this effect of sensationalist messaging of the Save Darfur movement in his book Celebrity Humanitarianism: The Ideology of Global Charity, arguing along with Mamdani that the framing of good vs. evil rendered complex situations and relationships morally simple, allowing activists to evade their moral and political responsibilities rather than engage more deeply with them. Moral simplification also enabled (and was partially justified by) the movement’s focus on youth engagement, with a significant proportion of members being university students and schoolchildren.

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32 Mamdani, Saviors and Survivors, 62. This reduction to a conflict between good and evil is also criticized explicitly by Flint and De Waal in Darfur, 184.


34 Mamdani, Saviors and Survivors, 66–67.

35 Ilan Kapoor, Celebrity Humanitarianism: The Ideology of Global Charity (New York: Routledge), 95–96. Kapoor and Mamdani are referring here, among other things, to the shift in the focus of the American citizenry from the war in Iraq to the war in Darfur, even though their own government was directly responsible for the violence in Iraq, which also claimed many more lives than in Darfur.

36 Mamdani, Saviors and Survivors, 52ff.
In order to maintain and propagate this simplistic narrative, the context of the war in Darfur was sidelined if not obscured. The greatest and most dangerous decontextualization occurred around the issue of race and ethnicity in Sudan, which was essential to the labelling of the conflict as a genocide since international legal definitions of genocide require the targeting of a religious, racial, ethnic, or national group. The central claim of the Save Darfur movement was that “ethnically Black African” farmers were being targeted by “foreign” Arab herdsmen, or some variation on that theme. In the introduction to the edited volume *Darfur and the Crisis of Governance in Sudan: A Critical Reader*, Sudanese art historian and critic Salah Hassan and African Studies scholar Carina E. Ray preface with a cautionary note about the use of the term “tribe” as well as “African,” “Black African,” and “Arab” that characterized popular representations of the conflict:

The use of tribe in the context of Darfur is especially troubling because it gives the wrongheaded impression that the conflict is rooted in primordial identities. The casual use of the term tribe obscures rather than clarifies our understanding of how ethnic identities and groups have evolved and interacted with one another over time, and in relation to such factors as state and class formation; economic, social and political change; environmental factors; as well as more mundane facts of life such as migration and intermarriage. While there is no doubt that ethnic tensions, which have a long history in Darfur, have affected how the violence has unfolded, to characterize the violence as a “tribal” or “race” war neither speaks to the ethnic dimensions of the violence nor to other important factors, such as unequal access to political and economic power, that have coalesced to bring about this unprecedented wave of destruction at this particular moment. Nor does it acknowledge the leading role that violent conflicts play in concretizing previously fluid categories of ethnic identity and creating new forms of ethnic affiliation, which in turn can intensify existing conflicts or become fodder for future ones.\(^37\)

I quote Hassan and Ray at length because they gesture toward many elements of a complex topic far more extensive than the discussion I present here.\(^38\) The point that must be made presently can be summed up as follows, by Hassan and Ray again:

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\(^{37}\) Hassan and Ray, “Critically Reading Darfur and the Crisis of Governance in Sudan,” introduction to *Darfur and the Crisis of Governance in Sudan*, 17–18.

\(^{38}\) Useful sources for further discussion include Mamdani’s *Saviors and Survivors*, De Waal’s *War in Darfur*, and Etafa’s *Origins of Ethnic Conflict in Africa*. Also instructive are Mahgoub El-Tigani Mahmoud, “Inside Darfur: Ethnic Genocide by a Governance Crisis,” *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa, and the Middle East* 24, no. 2 (2004):
Just as the use of the term tribe obscures rather than clarifies the dynamics of the conflict in Darfur, so too does the use of African or Black African and Arab to describe not only the involved parties, but also to explain the root of the conflict. Let us be clear from the beginning that we take the position that this is not a “race war” and that the multiple parties involved are all indigenous Africans whose ethnic identities have increasingly become racialized as a result of the conflict, but are by no means the sole cause of it.  

With the perpetuation of the simplistic, decontextualized, and misinformed classification of ethnicities and race in Darfur, the messaging of the Save Darfur movement poured hot oil on an already tense situation, exacerbating anti-Arab rhetoric and violence in Sudan, the United States, and elsewhere in the world and excluding Arabs (or those perceived to be Arabs) from political and humanitarian activities.  

Traditional forms of justice and peacemaking were also disrupted, perhaps irreversibly, by changing conceptions of identity among populations in Darfur, especially those in the camps and in the diaspora who were constantly exposed to the distorted framing in international media reporting. Hassan also argues that, as a result of the focus on Arabs vs. Africans, the National Islamic Front government led by al-Bashir was

3–17: Abusharaf’s “Debating Darfur in the World” (which explores the way ethnic identities are experienced by different diaspora groups in the United States and Qatar as well); the rest of Hassan and Ray’s book as well as Hassan’s article “A Left Perspective”; Daniel Rothbart and Adeeb Yousif, “Ideology and Cultural Violence in Darfur,” Conflict Trends 3 (2016): 36–41 (which delves into some of the complexities around Arabization movements and their effects in Sudan); and Suliman’s The Darfur Conflict (see especially p. 9).  


40 For the effects of this kind of rhetoric on prospects for peace and local politics in Darfur, see for example Sørbø and Ahmed, “Justice by Default?,” 245. On the effects of anti-Arab rhetoric in international (in particular American) media and politics, see Eichler-Levine and Hicks, “As Americans’ Against ‘Genocide’” and Mustafa Taha, “Decoding the Darfur Conflict: Media Framing of a Complex Humanitarian Crisis,” Journal of Arab & Muslim Research 5, no. 2 (2012): 147–166. The negative impact on humanitarian aid workers (especially local aid workers and Arab aid workers who faced violence as a result of the inflamed rhetoric and shifting identities) is discussed in Weissman, Humanitarian Dilemmas in Darfur, 14; Duursma and Müller, “ICC Indictment Against Al-Bashir,” 900.  

41 See Hassan’s argument on how Western media discourse “perpetuated internalized racialization” in some Sudanese groups (“A Left Perspective,” 106). Hassan expresses his fears of the impact on prospects to peace in his home country: “I am deeply concerned and terribly saddened by the tragedy in Darfur. Yet I am also disturbed by the nature of activism around Africa-related crises and issues and more specifically the Save Darfur movement and the damage it has done not only in its representation of the conflict in Darfur but also to the prospects for a final and just solution to the current crisis” (96). See also Sørbø and Ahmed, “Justice by Default?,” 245.
able to shift political responsibility for the violence in Darfur away from its political roots. In other words, this oversimplification justified itself by prioritizing protection (of some) over the long-term prospects for peace, and indeed damaged those prospects.

The people of Darfur themselves were not given much say in the matter. Sudanese voices were consistently marginalized or absent in much of the Save Darfur movement’s activities, even when organizers were explicitly engaging diaspora communities. Hassan writes that “In the few cases where the press or other media have chosen to involve Sudanese in general or Darfurians in particular, they have selected victimized people whose trauma only serves as a backdrop to Western heroism.”

International relations scholars Asteris Huliaras and Nikolaos Tzifakis examine the role of celebrity figureheads in the Save Darfur movement in their 2012 paper, “The Fallacy of the Autonomous Celebrity Activist in International Politics: George Clooney and Mia Farrow in Darfur” (an often-criticized part of humanitarian and human rights advocacy). While celebrities usually only amplify the rhetoric of the organizations they are working with, they argue, celebrity voices are a primary vehicle for moral simplification that accompanies depoliticization. Moreover, Kapoor observes that by forefronting celebrity activists along with NGOs and aid workers, it is easier to imagine that those on whose behalf they are speaking are literally

42 Hassan, “A Left Perspective,” 98.
43 Hassan, “A Left Perspective,” 97. See also Abusharaf, “Debating Darfur in the World,” for discussion on the way Darfur diaspora was engaged in political movements in USA compared to the large diaspora community in Qatar.
44 Hassan, “A Left Perspective,” 97. The “West” here and throughout the dissertation refers to the inheritors of the major European colonial empires.
The “perseverance, resilience, and resourcefulness” that Hassan saw in his home country was completely elided in this constructed picture of hapless victims in the dusty desert. By 2007, however, some of these criticisms had penetrated into the Save Darfur Coalition’s executive board and the organization underwent what the New York Times described as a “shake up.” The situation escalated to the point where numerous aid groups (including the coalition of aid groups InterAction) publicly called out Save Darfur’s advertising and spread of misinformation. “I am deeply concerned by the inability of Save Darfur to be informed by the realities on the ground and to understand the consequences of your proposed actions,” the president of InterAction wrote to Save Darfur’s director David Rubenstein. He was referring to the recent advertising blitz that was calling for more aggressive action on Darfur and the implementation of a no-flight zone, both policy actions opposed by aid organizations on the ground in that it would severely damage their ability to deliver essential aid to the millions of displaced people. Rubinstein was fired in the aftermath, and the Save Darfur Coalition added two Darfuri members and a South Sudanese member to their Board. Around this time, the organization issued a document entitled “Notes on Ethnic Terminology” that walked back some of their rhetoric on race

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46 Kapoor, Celebrity Humanitarianism, 95. He goes on to argue that this is another manifestation of the white man’s burden. Picking up on Mamdani’s critiques in an essay entitled “Childhood, Redemption and the Prosais of Waiting,” professor of political science and Africana Samson Okoth Opondo notes how the silencing of survivors is the consequence of a “humanitarianist mode of sensing.” The humanitarian figure thus comes to speak for survivors and uses the artifacts of their own experiences (autobiographies, photographs, NGO atrocity reports, and the like) to stand in for a decontextualized snapshot of the lives of survivors. “Childhood, Redemption and the Prosais of Waiting” in Time, Temporality and Violence in International Relations, ed. Anna M. Agathangelou and Kyle D. Killan (London: Routledge, 2016), 207–208. The topic of witnessing and humanitarian witnessing in particular will be revisited in chapter three, though I only draw on a small segment of the substantial literature.

47 Hassan, “A Left Perspective,” 97. Kapoor maps the hero’s journey onto the Save Darfur narrative to demonstrate how it functions as a narrative of white saviourism (Celebrity Humanitarianism, 94–95).


49 Strom and Polgreen, “Shake-Up.”

50 Budabin, “Diasporas as Development Partners,” 175.
and ethnicity in Darfur and acknowledged the oversimplification of the Arab/African distinction. There were efforts made to include Darfuri diaspora members among presenters and eyewitnesses in advocacy efforts. However, according to human rights scholar Alexandra Cosima Budabin who studied the alliance between the Darfuri diaspora and Save Darfur, even after years of such attempts, many Sudanese diaspora members remained mistrustful of Save Darfur’s approach and critical of the movement’s failure to include their voices in the debates around Darfur and the response to it.

In her study of Save Darfur’s rhetoric, Budabin concludes that the organization knew they were oversimplifying and sensationalizing the conflict, and that they specifically did so in order to be more politically effective in drawing activists into the movement and affecting political change from outside of Sudan. Moreover, it was not only the decontextualization of the conflict into a race war that was being misrepresented. In 2006, an American governmental auditing body assembled a panel to review six disparate mortality reports from Darfur and assess the reliability of each study’s methodology. The panel found that the high-end numbers employed by Save Darfur (often stated as 400,000 dead) were unfounded.
and based in fundamentally flawed research. The estimate the panel determined to be most reliable was from the Centre for Research on the Epidemiology of Disasters, which put the number of excess deaths between September 2003 and January 2005 at 118,142.\textsuperscript{54} Save Darfur was still using the 400,000 dead figure in their advertising in 2008 when the British Advertising Standards Authority asked the Coalition to present that number as opinion rather than as fact.\textsuperscript{55} The organization’s messaging remained unchanged.\textsuperscript{56}

It is a complex task to estimate mortality rates in a conflict zone and in the conditions under which many researchers were working in Darfur. It is even harder to quantify the suffering and violence of human beings. The salient point is not that the numbers were exaggerated, but rather that Save Darfur’s messaging showed itself to be consistently and consciously apart from and even in opposition to the “on the ground” realities. Mamdani analyzes the organization’s messaging in the context of the timeline of the conflict in \textit{Saviors and Survivors} and draws the conclusion that in order to fuel their advertising campaigns, “the rhetoric of the Save Darfur movement in the United States escalated as the mortality in Darfur declined” and dropped below emergency levels for multiple years.\textsuperscript{57} In \textit{Darfur: A New History of a Long War}, Flint

\begin{itemize}
\item Mamdani, \textit{Saviors and Survivors}, 29–30.
\item In 2011, the Save Darfur Coalition, the Genocide Intervention Network, and the Sudan Divestment Taskforce merged to form United to End Genocide. As of June 15 2021, the United to End Genocide website displayed “300 000” dead on their Sudan web page (“Sudan,” on United to End Genocide’s website, accessed June 15 2021, \url{http://endgenocide.org/conflict-areas/sudan/}). By May 5 2022, their website was taken down. As of May 16 2022, their Twitter profile read that they merged with the Enough Project and Fortify Rights in July 2016 (@endgenocide, Twitter profile, accessed May 16 2022, \url{https://twitter.com/endgenocide}). The Enough Project’s online activity seems to have stalled in fall 2020, though Fortify Rights is still active.
\end{itemize}

The 300,000 figure appears to be drawn from a 2010 study by Oliver Degomme and Debarati Guha-Sapir, which concluded that there had been approximately 300,000 excess deaths in Darfur between March 2003 and December 2008; however, they also note that with two exceptions, the mortality rate in Darfur remained below emergency levels from 2005 and that 80% of these deaths were not the result of violence but rather from disease and other effects of the overcrowded, precarious IDP camps. Oliver Degomme and Debarati Guha-Sapir, “Patterns of Mortality Rates in Darfur Conflict,” \textit{The Lancet} 375 (2010): 297–298.

\textsuperscript{57} Mamdani, \textit{Saviors and Survivors}, 50–51. Bhakti Shringarpure notes that sensationalist numbers were already fed into a new digital activism machine, where the representation of data, the use of violent and desperate imagery, and youth-focused engagement could best play out. “Africa and the Digital Savior Complex,” \textit{Journal of African}
and De Waal remark with astonishment how the Save Darfur messaging markedly diverged from the realities experienced by the people in the region. They cite Fabrice Weissman, who headed the Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) mission in Darfur from 2005-2006 and told an interviewer the following year that “reading the newspaper or listening to some advocacy groups, we get the impression that Darfur is a place full of concentration camps surrounded by exterminating Arab militia in search of the last African tribes to eradicate. I must say that, after ten months in Darfur, where I traveled a lot, this representation seems to me a gross misrepresentation of the situation.” As the main causes of death shifted from violence to diarrhoeal diseases and malaria in 2005, advocacy organizations and even some aid organizations did not seem interested in addressing those problems.

Instead, Save Darfur doubled down on the anti-genocide messaging, sending postcards to then US President Bush calling for intervention in “the first genocide of the twenty-first century.” “Once the twin narrative themes of genocide and ‘things are getting worse’ were established, they could not be shifted,” Flint and De Waal conclude. In the moral shadow of genocide, any response less than intervention was absurd. Weissman, in a 2007 interview with Flint and De Waal, sums it up thusly: “For them [NGOs], feeding the displaced was like giving sandwiches to the survivors of Auschwitz. Anything less than military

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Cultural Studies 32, no. 2 (2020): 187. See her article for a look at the impact of digital activism on the conflict and the Save Darfur movement. In particular, Shringarpure highlights the 2008 video game “Darfur is Dying,” which enacts a grotesque puppet show in which the player must face dangerous situations in the place of a Darfuri – a dramatic and extreme example of the callousness of sensationalist activism (187).

58 Flint and De Waal, Darfur, 188.
60 Flint and De Waal, Darfur, 186. In their citation, they (presumably in error) list the interview date as November 2007.
61 Flint and De Waal, Darfur, 180, referring to Rebecca Hamilton and Chad Hazlett, “‘Not on Our Watch’: The Emergence of the American Movement for Darfur,” in De Waal, War in Darfur and the Search for Peace, 337–368.
62 Flint and De Waal, Darfur, 189.
intervention was not acceptable.”⁶³ Through the lens of genocide, and specifically through the lens of the Shoah and Rwandan genocide, the war in Darfur would only be further decontextualized. Neither frame was a suitable point for comparison if one wanted to understand the war in Darfur, the people involved, their concerns, and possible resolutions.⁶⁴ And yet, while he was serving as the first prosecutor at the ICC in 2007, Luis Moreno-Ocampo compared internally displaced persons (IDP) camps under the authority of Sudanese government officials to concentration camps.⁶⁵ When charges were filed against al-Bashir in 2008, Moreno-Ocampo told the press that, “They [Bashir’s forces] don’t need gas chambers because the desert will kill them.”⁶⁶ In 2010, as charges of genocide were about to be added, the international press widely reported on his claim that the camps “were under genocide conditions, like a gigantic Auschwitz.”⁶⁷ “The Save Darfur Movement claims to have learned from Rwanda,” Mamdani writes. “But what is the lesson of Rwanda? For many of those mobilised to save Darfur, the lesson is to rescue before it is too late, to act before seeking to understand […] What is new about Darfur, human rights interventionists will tell you, is the realization that sometimes we must respond ethically and not wait. That time is when genocide is occurring.”⁶⁸ As the decade came to a close, the urgency of anti-genocide activists shifted focus from protection to justice, centred around the crime of genocide.

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⁶³ Flint and De Waal, Darfur, 186.
⁶⁴ For more on the comparisons between Rwanda and Darfur during this time, see especially Darren Brunk, “Dissecting Darfur: The Anatomy of a Genocide Debate,” International Relations 22, no. 1 (March 2008): 25–44. He writes in sum, “Darfur is not Rwanda. And yet, through the analogical lens of the Rwandan genocide, Darfur has been perceived through meanings and memories which are not its own. By summoning the memory of Rwanda, international actors also invoked the meanings within it – most notably, the twin spectres of genocide and international failure” (“Dissecting Darfur,” 27).
⁶⁵ Flint and De Waal, Darfur, 249.
⁶⁸ Mamdani, Saviors and Survivors, 3.
On March 4, 2009, after years of activists charging “genocide” in Darfur, the ICC issued an arrest warrant for Sudan’s president Omar al-Bashir on counts of war crimes and crimes against humanity; another was issued the following year with further charges of genocide. The Government of Sudan did not recognize these warrants and al-Bashir told the judges of the ICC to “swallow” them. Sudan had signed but not ratified the Rome Statute, the source of the ICC’s legal authority. The prosecutor, Moreno-Ocampo, was only able to lay charges against Sudanese officials because, for the first time in history, the investigation was referred to the ICC by the UN Security Council, overriding the Government of Sudan’s objections. In a coordinated response to the ICC announcement, the Government of Sudan expelled thirteen international NGOs from their borders and revoked the licences of three national NGOs, justifying these actions with the allegation that these agencies had collaborated with the ICC investigation against the government. A report published in the chaotic aftermath found that as a result of this backlash, the ability to deliver aid to more than two million IDPs was more than halved and the number of aid workers in the region was reduced by 40%. This reduction affected all sectors of aid: food distribution, food security, nutrition, health, shelter, protection, and especially water and sanitation (crucial to health in IDP camps) – even in other regions of Sudan.


70 Sørø and Ahmed, “Justice by Default?,” 225. They go on to explain that the Sudanese government concurrently announced a plan to nationalize humanitarian aid within a year.

71 Sara Pantuliano, Susanne Jaspars, and Deepayan Basu Ray, Where to Now? Agency Expulsions in Sudan: Consequences and Next Steps, Active Learning Network for Accountability and Performance (ALNAP) report, March 26 2009, https://www.alnap.org/help-library/where-to-now-agency-expulsions-in-sudan-consequences-and-next-steps, 1. The same report shows that 7610 aid workers (308 international and 7302 national) were directly affected by the expulsion order. The authors go into some detail about capacity problems and how a combination of factors posed serious challenges, all compounded by the retaliation. On the ALNAP website, the published date is listed as January 1 2009, however this is clearly an error (a default date assigned to the post). The correct date is listed on other websites that linked to the report at the time (ODI and African Arguments).

72 Pantuliano, Jaspars, and Basu Ray, Where to Now?, 4. Humanitarian operations in other regions of Sudan, including what would soon become the new state of South Sudan, were also documented in this report. For more information on the politics and effectiveness of humanitarian operations in Darfur, I recommend Jide Okeke, Why Humanitarian Aid in Darfur is Not a Practice of the “Responsibility to Protect,” Discussion Paper 60 (Uppsala,
Though several international human rights and advocacy organizations supported the indictment, others did not. Activists, organizations, and scholars all expressed worry that the arrest warrant would foreclose on possibilities for peace in Darfur, as well as jeopardize the fragile 2005 peace agreement with the south (later South Sudan) that ended a 22-year war. Weissman relates that, “Diplomats from the African Union – whose troops are deployed in Darfur, and which is in charge of peace negotiations in collaboration with the UN – are among the most critical. They justifiably point out that the charges against al-Bashir have helped radicalize the positions of both sides, and destroyed any prospects for peace.” Very real fears around the sustained delivery of emergency aid, which turned out to be well founded when the aid agencies were expelled shortly after the indictment announcement, also persisted. After the expulsion, aid workers (especially Sudanese aid workers) struggling to fill the gaps faced regular intimidation and even violent attacks. For those living in the aftermath, the ICC’s call for justice came into conflict with

Sweden: Nordiska Afrikainstitutet, 2011). Note also that these effects were long term: when peacekeepers began withdrawing from Darfur in 2018, one third of the population of Darfur was still in IDP camps and even more dependent on humanitarian aid (Lanz, Responsibility to Protect in Darfur, 2).


Sørbø and Ahmed, Justice by Default?, 225. Allard Duursma, a scholar who specializes in international mediation, and professor of political sociology Tanja Müller write that “[…] ICC indictments against government officials are not only detrimental to the prospects for peace, but also negatively affect everyday practices of peacekeepers and humanitarian workers, and through this, directly or indirectly, local populations groups” (“ICC Indictment Against Al-Bashir,” 890).


Duursma and Müller, “ICC Indictment Against Al-Bashir,” 897ff. They also faced bureaucratic hurdles that functioned as intimidation: non-renewal of visas, rejection of re-entry to the country, and so on. This all contributed to a climate of fear among aid workers and further damaged the relationship between aid organizations and the Government of Sudan until al-Bashir’s removal in 2019. See Jacob Kurtzer and Nadia Schaaophk, “Sudan at a Crossroads: A Humanitarian Opening?,” Center for Strategic and International Studies, August 5 2020, https://www.csis.org/analysis/sudan-crossroads-humanitarian-opening.
both peace and protection. And for the anti-genocide activist, the faithful pursuit of justice, justified by
the ultimate ends of international criminal law, came into sharp contrast with the humanitarian demand
rooted in the real, living people of Darfur who were put into greater danger as a result of that pursuit.

The slogan that was commonly used after al-Bashir’s indictment, “no peace without justice,” indicates a deeper ideological problem with the ICC, much like “protection before peace” revealed a
fundamental flaw with R2P earlier in this chapter. In his indictment of R2P, Weissman argues that the
expression “no peace without justice” is prescriptive: “It means that only agreements signed by non-war
criminals are worthy of being reached.” In other words, the ICC indictment and the rallying around that
particular slogan sent a clear message to al-Bashir and his ruling government in Khartoum that there was
no political future for him. This position was reiterated by Moreno-Ocampo in a press interview, where he
bluntly stated that al-Bashir could not be a part of peace negotiations in Darfur or in the south.

Impunity is certainly a serious problem for the prospects of international criminal justice, and for
anti-genocide activists. But Weissman points out that by actively pursuing international criminal
prosecution against a sitting head of state, “who commands an army and a domestic security force, and who
has numerous allies both within his own country and internationally,” and who refuses to acknowledge or
engage with the Court that brought charges against him, is, in effect, a proposal for war. “In practice,”

77 The tension between peace and justice has been the subject of much scholarly writing. See Provost and Akhavan’s edited volume *Confronting Genocide*, for example, to start (I would characterize this text as a largely noncritical source).

78 Most notably, this expression was used by the French Secretary of State for Human Rights, Rama Yade, in a visit to Ethiopia in April 2009. See “No Peace in Darfur without Justice – French Official,” *Sudan Tribune*, April 12 2009, https://sudantribune.com/article30712/.


80 Weissman, *Grounds for Divorce*, 8. See also an interview with Moreno-Ocampo from a press conference on the charges against al-Bashir: “ICC Genocide Charges Against Sudan’s President; Sudan Reax,” press conference coverage, AP Television (Paris/Khartoum), July 13 2010, http://www.aparchive.com/metadata/view/45f08ec25bf2be3682e65bf00fcf6a6?subClipIn=00:00:00&subClipOut=00:02:55.

Weissman writes, “the exercise of international criminal justice in wartime has a greater tendency to radicalize conflicts than to pacify them.” I emphasize “in wartime” because it bears repeating that al-Bashir’s indictment preceded any resolutions to the conflict, making this case different from those of other leaders like Slobodan Milosevic or Charles Taylor who were tried after they were removed from power.

The pursuit of justice for Darfur, therefore, was predicated on the necessity of a regime change in Sudan that would result not from local politics, but from international pressure or, “as a last resort,” UN-backed military intervention.

It was in this context that the arrest warrant was criticized by the African Union, the Arab League, and many non-Western countries as well as scholarly experts. Mamdani, along with many other scholars who approach the topic with a postcolonial frame, identifies the logic of R2P and international criminal justice within a broader critique of Western imperialism and neocolonial attitudes and policies. Support for the indictment was fueled by the same depoliticization that Mamdani identifies as the source of Save Darfur’s success: with a conflict still very much in progress, the ICC indictment again pulled attention away from the localized, political approaches to the problem and toward a universalized external concept: the convergence of (Western) human rights and (Western) international law.

Even if one were to interpret the humanitarian motives of ICC supporters generously, the very perception of the ICC’s biases toward the West – which frankly cannot be denied – put the ICC’s legitimacy at risk as well as the legitimacy of other

82 Weissman, Grounds for Divorce, 8. (my emphasis)
83 Weissman, Grounds for Divorce, 8. He also notes that these two former leaders were brought to trial after they were ousted with support from international military operations.
84 Duursma and Müller note that this made the ICC indictment an attractive tool for al-Bashir’s enemies, including rebel groups in Darfur who themselves had committed atrocities but who were now able to shift responsibility to al-Bashir (“The ICC Indictment Against Al-Bashir,” 898).
86 For example, Mamdani, Saviors and Survivors, 300.
operations carried out in the name of the international community, such as the same peacekeeping and humanitarian operations that were threatened by the Sudanese government’s backlash against the indictment. Following this logic, justice is brought into conflict with protection and peace within the borders of Darfur once more.

Along with (hypothetically) addressing the question of impunity, ICC supporters also often cite the benefits of deterrence to justify the indictment. Again, this issue is debated in the literature and is mostly outside of the point here. Weissman again points out a critical flaw in the framing of the problem itself:

[...] what is misleading is the use of the ordinary crime paradigm to address mass atrocities. The extreme violence that the ICC is being called upon to judge is not a collection of isolated incidents attributable to a handful of sociopaths unacquainted with international laws and standards of moral behavior, but rather the fruit of political agendas, requiring the collaboration of large segments of society, if not the entire State apparatus, and the complicity of a legal system in itself criminal. The collective and political dimension of the crimes prosecuted by the ICC raises specific questions on its deterrent function.

In other words, assuming that the personal threat of prosecution would deter someone about to commit a war crime, crimes against humanity, or genocide, ignores the political context in which these crimes occur. Without this political context, the way to stop a genocide seems simple: using the arm of international criminal law, remove the criminals from positions of power and the genocide will end. The criminal who

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88 Duursma and Müller, “ICC Indictment Against Al-Bashir,” 893.
90 It is obviously difficult if not impossible to demonstrate evidence of the ICC’s ability to deter future crimes. However, Benjamin Appel conducted an empirical study, published in 2018, that examines the issue in depth and poses a persuasive argument against the validity of deterrence in this case. See Benjamin Appel, “In the Shadow of the International Criminal Court: Does the ICC Deter Human Rights Violations?,” Journal of Conflict Resolution 62, no. 1 (2018): 3–28. Duursma and Müller examine the ICC indictment and its aftermath in their 2019 article and provide a useful overview of the arguments for and against deterrence (“ICC Indictment Against Al-Bashir,” 892–893).
91 Weissman, Grounds for Divorce, 5.
came to represent this crime in the imagination of Save Darfur activists was Omar al-Bashir – never mind what effect the arrest of this particular person would have on the conflict itself.

Genocide, in particular, lends itself to this depoliticizing logic as the “crime of crimes.” 92 With the crime of genocide as the focal point, Flint and De Waal note that Save Darfur activists could depict Darfur as the present installment in a criminal sequence that began with the Nazi Holocaust, and, as such, demanded an urgent and principled response, including – “if absolutely necessary” – forceful intervention. 93 At this point, it is useful to venture out of the Darfur case and into the broader critiques of genocide in order to raise a few important points about anti-genocide activism and law from the growing field called “critical genocide studies.”

### 2.3 Conceptual Problems with Prevention and “The Crime of Crimes”

In his 2013 review of critical genocide studies, anthropologist Alexander Laban Hinton clarifies that “the goal [of critical genocide studies] is not to be critical in a negative sense, but to consider, even as a canon becomes ensconced, what is said and unsaid, who has voice and who is silenced, and how such questions

92 For two good examples of this critique of the “crime of crimes,” see Larry May, *Genocide: A Normative Account* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 1; and Moses,  *Problems of Genocide*, 1. In her 2019 dissertation, Rochelle Nadine Johnston argues that:

[...] the definition of genocide in the Genocide Convention preserves the interests of colonizing nations. This has led to a bifurcation: of fragile and colonized nations, such as Sudan, being policed for genocide and stable and colonizing nations, such as Canada, policing for genocide. This bifurcation allows colonized/fragile/policed states to dismiss charges of genocide as another form of imperialism, and it transforms their citizens into wards of the international community without agency to interrupt genocide. Furthermore, it forecloses the possibility that policing nations harbour genocide. “Standing by and Doing Nothing About Genocide in Sudan and Canada,” PhD diss., (University of Toronto, 2019), 30, ProQuest (2305843650).

93 Flint and De Waal, *Darfur*, 181. But we must also consider whether Darfur really was the first genocide of the twentieth century. There were a number of other conflicts that were ongoing at the time that could have been “candidates.” Critics (see especially Moses) note that the unbroken chain of criminality that extends from the Nazis cleverly remains delegated to the mostly recently decolonized countries and should be read in that context. This is especially relevant since the US and Canada, for example, have been diligent in suppressing, and conducting campaigns of discreditation against, allegations of genocide from Indigenous peoples, the descendants of enslaved people, and other groups.
may be linked to issues of power and knowledge.” As such, texts like Hinton’s are enormously useful for activists in delving deeper into questions about genocide. Drawing mainly from the work of the historian and critical genocide scholar A. Dirk Moses, I will conclude the chapter with some final notes on the political operation and consequences of the notion of genocide as “the crime of crimes,” for critical genocide scholars affirm and expand upon the critique offered by Flint and De Waal that such a notion has a chilling and depoliticizing effect on justice.

The term “crime of crimes,” commonly used to describe genocide especially in public discourse, refers to the crime defined in the Genocide Convention, and which is by no means an apolitical or empirical document. Historian Mark Levene notes that most genocide scholars see the UN definition as seriously flawed, especially for the purposes of research. As it is, it is no help that the UN definition is presented as if it possesses a “pre-existing teleology, almost to the point where the actors responsible for genocide were governed by a fixed and given blueprint of what they were going to do.” Nevertheless, especially for activists and most especially for activists working within the framework of international law, the UN definition plays a central role in determining what is labelled as genocide and what is not, and therefore who is protected by the Convention and who is not.


95 The UN definition, Mark Levene explains, is of relevance as it is to the scholar of international law, but it is not sufficient for the study of history or historiographies of genocide (Genocide in the Age of the Nation State, 1:35–36). The unsuitability of the UN definition for historians is also repeated in Stone’s introduction to Historiography of Genocide (3). Iconic genocide scholars Frank Chalk and Kurt Jonassohn note in their seminal book that sociologists have found the UN definition to be useless for their discipline. See The History and Sociology of Genocide: Analyses and Case Studies (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1990), 13. Historian Anton Weiss-Wendt points out that the methodological implications of a definition of genocide are different for historians and sociologists (“Problems in Comparative Genocide Scholarship” in Stone, Historiography of Genocide, 48).

96 Levene, Genocide in the Age of the Nation State, 1:35–36. Note that it was precisely fifty years before the first conviction for the crime of genocide in international law took place. The International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda convicted the mayor of Taba, Jean-Paul Akayesu, for genocide and crimes against humanity in 1998 (Akhavan, Reducing Genocide to Law, 8).

97 Giorgia Doná, who studies conflict and displacement, reminds us that, “The United Nations Genocide Convention provides a powerful narrative frame that structures our understanding of events and regulates actions, and has
The first trouble is that many crucial features of the canonical final version, such as the categories of protected groups and the question of intent, are politically motivated and highly controversial.98 The contested nature of the definition in the final version of the Convention is recorded in the documented debates that took place during its drafting, and in the national debates of the countries that adopted it.99 Those records show that the removal of political groups from the list of categories protected by the Convention (racial, ethnic, national, religious) indicate that the removal was the result of lobbying by the Soviet Union in the midst of Stalin’s political terror.100 We can also see the removal of the explicit mention of cultural genocide (which remained included, but weakened, in the clause about forcible transfer of children) as the result of lobbying by the United States, Canada, and the United Kingdom.101 Like the Soviet Union, these states were motivated by self-interest; they were explicitly trying to avoid accusations of genocide against Indigenous peoples still resisting colonial dispossession and forced assimilation.102 In the valorized story of the adoption of the Convention, the tellers often omit that the United States did not adopt the Convention until 1988 in the last years of the Cold War, forty years after it was adopted by other member

become a dominant master-narrative whose power is prescriptive as well as descriptive.” The Marginalised in Genocide Narratives (London: Routledge, 2019), 1. For this reason much of the discussion outside of genocide studies will begin with the UN Convention.

98 Moses, Problems of Genocide, 19.


100 Moses, Problems of Genocide, 227.


102 Of course, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission report found that the state of Canada committed cultural genocide against Indigenous peoples, a finding accepted by the colonial government, though they have not acted upon the 99 calls to action in the final report. TRC of Canada, Honouring the Truth, Reconciling for the Future: Summary of the Final Report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (Winnipeg: TRC, 2015), 1, http://nctr.ca/assets/reports/Final%20Reports/Executive_Summary_English_Web.pdf.
Congressional records show that, again, the explicit concern of the American government was that even with the elimination of cultural genocide from the text, the United States could be credibly accused of genocide by Indigenous peoples within their borders, by the descendants of enslaved people, and racial minorities who experienced systematic discrimination and state violence in the Jim Crow era (these categories of course are not mutually exclusive). Senior American officials were also concerned that accusations of genocide would emerge – and did in fact emerge from the Russell Tribunal of 1966, in which famed philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre accused the United States of genocide against the people of Vietnam, echoing the concerns expressed by the Civil Rights Congress a decade earlier in the We Charge Genocide petition that encapsulated the reasons why the United States was motivated to discredit accusations of genocide domestically and internationally.


105 The Civil Rights Congress, led by William Patterson (the head of the International Labour Defence and a leader of the Communist Party USA), wrote and presented a petition at the UN entitled *We Charge Genocide: The Crime of Government Against the Negro People*, despite the best efforts of the American government to prevent the petition from arriving at either the UN Secretariat in New York or the 5th Session of the General Assembly in Paris (1951). Across more than 200 pages, the text goes into gruelling and gruesome detail about the daily lives – and deaths – of Black Americans in a state hostile to them. As one of its main arguments, “We Charge Genocide” explicitly lays out the concern that American genocidal policies and ideologies at home would be replicated abroad: “We, Negro petitioners whose communities have been laid waste, whose homes have been burned and looted, whose children have been killed, whose women have been raped, have noted with peculiar horror that the genocidal doctrines and actions of the American white supremacists have already been exported to the colored peoples of Asia.” William L. Patterson ed., *We Charge Genocide: The Historic Petition to the United Nations for Relief from a Crime of the United States Government Against the Negro People*, 3rd ed. (New York: Civil Rights Congress, 1952), 7.

It is important for anti-genocide activists to be aware of this history because such biases are baked in all the way into the Convention’s definition, and in the concept of genocide itself. Consider for example the ways in which colonial genocides have been excluded from the “canon” of genocides by genocide studies, states, and international institutions. It is historically incontrovertible that colonial empires (including Britain) and their successors (including Canada) developed and carried out specific and detailed plans to erase or exterminate Indigenous peoples from the land they appropriated for their own use and wealth. In some cases, they succeeded in fully destroying entire communities from the face of the earth (the most famous case here is Tasmania). Euphemisms are useless; indeed, Moses points out that these colonial governments themselves and their contemporaries used “approximate synonyms” for genocide such as “destruction, extermination, and extirpation as well as associated terms like extinction.” Raphael Lemkin, who coined the term genocide in his 1944 book *Axis Rule in Occupied Europe*, himself acknowledged and researched colonial genocides. And yet, some genocide scholars (whom Moses refers to as “settlers”) have continued to marginalize and exclude Indigenous histories from the “canon” of genocides.


109 Raphaël Lemkin, *Axis Rule in Occupied Europe: Laws of Occupation, Analysis of Government, Proposals for Redress* (Washington, DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, Division of International Law, 1944), 79. His stated intent was “to denote an old practice in its modern development, […] made from the ancient Greek word *genos* (race, tribe) and the Latin *cide* (killing).” Lemkin’s work on colonialism is interesting but problematic, see Schaller and Zimmerer, introduction to *Origins of Genocide*; Curthoys and Docker, “Defining Genocide,” in Stone,
to as “scholarly genocide deniers”) balk at the term genocide when it is used to describe colonial policies, projects, and actions.\textsuperscript{110}

Interpreting these aspects of the history of genocide (“the crime of crimes”) as blind spots or something in that vein, would be a grave error, as Moses demonstrates. His 2021 book, \textit{The Problems of Genocide: Permanent Security and the Language of Transgression}, builds a formidable base of evidence for a much bigger problem at the core, a problem he identifies by tracing the political functioning of genocide as a concept in history and politics. Namely, with genocide at the top of a hierarchy of violence as “the crime of crimes,” Moses identifies a conceptual problem, rooted in the political one, that can be historicized: that genocide is distinct from “noninternational armed conflict (civil war: rebellion,

\textit{Historiography of Genocide}, 12–14. Historian Tony Barta was an early writer on the topic of genocide and colonialism; for an interesting treatment of Lemkin on this topic see “‘He in Whose Interest it was, did it’: Lemkin’s Lost Law of Genocide,” \textit{Global Dialogue} 15, no. 1 (2013): 11–20.

\textsuperscript{110} Moses, “Moving the Genocide Debate,” 255. In Sartre’s 1967 essay “On Genocide” (in which he accuses the US of committing genocide in Vietnam), he also describes the French colonization in Algeria – an extremely controversial topic at the time – as “by its very nature an act of cultural genocide” (quoted in Curthoys and Docker, “Defining Genocide,” in Stone, \textit{Historiography of Genocide}, 24). Sartre’s assessment of the links between genocide and colonialism, which he repeated as chair of the Russell Commission investigating the Americans for crimes of genocide in Vietnam, was (according to Curthoys and Docker) received semi-favourably by genocide scholars like Leo Kuper, who acknowledge the systemic resemblance – with caveats (25–26). Curthoys and Docker report that Kuper saw the need for greater distinctions between settler colonialism and other kinds of colonialism. Similarly, prominent genocide scholar and historian Irving Horowitz, though he insisted on the distinction between genocide and war as well as the role of state actors, explicitly affirmed the existence and relevance of colonial genocide, the Vietnamese, and \textit{We Charge Genocide} cases (27–28). Barta began writing about Australian colonial genocides shortly afterward in the 1980s, investigating the ways that land theft and the imposition of notions of personal property has contributed or driven genocide of Aboriginal peoples. However, Curthoys and Docker point out that genocide scholars like Barta would be in the minority until the end of the last century (29). Since then, there has been a growing body of work on the links between colonialism and genocide, a fair section of it driven by Lemkin scholars (30).

Indeed, historian Donald Bloxham rightfully admonishes many of the deniers of colonial genocide (speaking specifically of Omer Bartov in this passage) that they “cannot merely decree that there is no relevant connection [between the Holocaust and colonial genocides] without engaging with the intellectuals who have made the case over the last 60 years and more […]” “Holocaust Studies and Genocide Studies: Past, Present, and Future,” in Apsel and Verdeja, \textit{Genocide Matters}, 74. Barta points out that the scholarship on Nazism far surpasses any on the genocides in British colonies or the American frontier – there is still a mountain of work ahead (“Lemkin’s Lost Law,” 19–20). Perhaps more problematically, as Lillain Friedberg points out in her essay “Dare to Compare,” “the historical archive of the American Holocaust has been compiled, collated, and indeed constructed to a large degree by perpetrators, their descendants, and beneficiaries writing from a subject position inflected with a vested interest in maintaining the illusion of innocence concerning the ‘facts of the case’.” Lilian Friedberg, “Dare to Compare,” \textit{American Indian Quarterly} 24, no. 3 (2000): 357–358.
insurgency, and belligerency) and international armed conflict (interstate war).” He continues: “That is, by defining genocide in such narrow terms, governments can undertake drastic measures against population groups in the name of security, self-preservation, ‘military necessity,’ and opposing ‘terrorists.’” Moses refers to Darfur as an example of violence justified by such a campaign of “military necessity” (“counterinsurgency logic”) on the part of the Sudanese government while also pointing out how the use of the label “genocide” by the American government functioned to shift western attention toward Darfur and away from Iraq, even if the bombing of civilians was taking place in both places.

Through this analysis Moses reframes genocide to show a deeply troubling picture: “Indeed, as I argue in these pages, the fetish of genocide as the ‘crime of crimes’ effectively licenses rather than proscribes many forms of mass violence against civilians.” By other kinds of violence Moses is including much of the tactics of modern warfare and especially counterinsurgency and counterterrorism, which uses bombs, drones, blockades, and sanctions with catastrophic effects on human life. These measures are only available to already wealthy and powerful states (or ones with strategic alliances), and so serve to consolidate power. With genocide as “the crime of crimes,” these other forms of mass violence have not only slipped down a hierarchy and out of view, they are, to some degree, justified on the basis that the destruction they cause is not “intentionally” directed toward non-combatants of one particular group. Moses points to how the logic of genocide, politically and conceptually, ends up providing justification for

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111 Moses, Problems of Genocide, 7.

112 Moses, Problems of Genocide, 8–12. This argument is also a main feature of Mamdani’s book.

113 Moses, Problems of Genocide, 11–12. A more in-depth discussion on genocide as “the crime of crimes” continues on pp. 21–26. Within the “crime of crimes” argument is an entire legal discussion about the dolus specialis or special intent of genocide, a burden of proof that is unique to the Genocide Convention. The issue of intent is discussed in relation to Moses’ work; however I will note here that it is a much bigger topic than I am presenting it to be. For a broader view, see also Paul Behrens and Ralph Henham eds., The Criminal Law of Genocide: International, Comparative and Contextual Aspects (London: Routledge, 2007), 10–11.

114 For example, Moses, Problems of Genocide, 1, 43, 44.

115 Moses also critiques the distinction between combatant and non-combatant, which he traces to the Geneva Convention. The distinction is the basis of his analysis of what he calls “the language of transgression.”
Western colonial powers to enact violence without it being the “bad kind of violence.” He refers to this as the logic of “permanent security,” which he argues can justify nearly anything.

What I would like to emphasize from Moses’ fascinating study on the functioning of the concept of genocide is that the same movement can be found in other contexts, even without the implicit project of upholding colonial power. For example, many genocide scholars have created typologies or hierarchies of genocide for the purposes of research and study.116 Moses and other critical genocide scholars have pointed out the tendency for these typologies to display a number of biases, one of which centres again on the construction of intent underpinning the significance and distinctiveness of genocide as a concept.117

116 See for example Weiss-Wendt’s overview of the field, where he comments on the significance of typologies to major genocide scholars like Leo Kuper, Frank Chalk, Helen Fein, and Samuel Totten (“Problems in Comparative Genocide Scholarship,” in Stone, Historiography of Genocide, 62–63).


Another feature, which is not discussed here directly because I think it is addressed through my own thinking and presentation, is the paradigm problem in genocide studies, i.e., that at the top of the hierarchy is a particular exemplary case. The Shoah is commonly regarded as the “exemplary” genocide (or paradigm, standard, prototype) according to which all other genocides are measured or judged. For more on the Holocaust as a paradigm of genocide studies, see especially Briggs, “Genocide,” in Goldberg and Solomos, Companion to Racial and Ethnic Studies; Moses, “Conceptual Blockages”; Moses, Problems of Genocide; Bloxham, “Holocaust Studies,” in Apsel and Verdeja, Genocide Matters; Hinton, “Critical Genocide Studies,” in Apsel and Verdeja, Genocide Matters. Hinton points out that the Rwandan genocide has destabilized the paradigm somewhat (52).

Genocide scholars who oppose the (uncritical) use of paradigms have expressed their concern about the ways in which it can undermine the academic rigour of genocide research and present methodological obstacles or contradictions. These criticisms are loudest among the comparative genocide studies group, which sees the paradigm as fundamentally impeding the ability to identify “conceptual, contextual, phenomenal, or causal” relationships between distinct cases (Bloxham, “Holocaust Studies,” 76). Instead, the critics argue, the paradigm encourages unilinear and one-dimensional readings of history that ignore connections between larger events, such as the links between Nazi imperialist genocides and colonial imperialist ones (Levene, Genocide and the Nation State, 1:19; Bloxham, “Holocaust Studies,” 64). Some academics may even feel pressure to fit their research cases into the Holocaust paradigm, as Bloxham and Moses note in the editor’s introduction to the Oxford Handbook of Genocide Studies (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), p. 4. Furthermore, proponents of the paradigm view fail to provide logical or methodologically-sound grounding for itself. See Dan Stone, “The Historiography of Genocide: Beyond ‘Uniqueness’ and Ethnic Competition,” Rethinking History 8, vol. 1 (2004): 129–130. Finally, it leads to disciplinary biases, such as an emphasis on the role of the state and state ideology, as well as through other pressures like the availability of research materials, the perceived historical relevance of certain cases, and fear of political reprisals and denied/revoked funding (Hinton, “Critical Genocide Studies,” 53–55; Briggs, “Genocide,” 35–36). Bloxham sums it up as follows: “What is ultimately at stake is the validity of a plurality of approaches […] There is
back to colonial genocides and their inclusion/exclusion in the literature, even for those scholars who do recognize colonial genocides, there is a tendency to categorize them through one of these typologies or hierarchies according to a perception of intent. At the top of the hierarchy are genocides motivated by “pure” ideological (e.g., racial) hatred, while colonial genocides are put into “non-ideological” categories as genocides that have a purpose other than pure hatred. Such a motivation might be, as in colonialism, land, labour, and resource theft. Within the logic of genocide and its implicit hierarchy of intent, even the literal and complete erasure of an entire people (defined as close as can be to the UN definition) can be framed as less genocidal or of a lower order of genocide, that is, not quite “the crime of crimes.” Historian Mark Mazower explains that there is a problem with the

[...] widely-held unspoken assumption that the mass killing of African or American peoples was distant and, in some senses, an “inevitable” part of progress while what was genuinely shocking was the attempt to exterminate an entire people in Europe. This assumption may rest on an implicit racism, or simply upon a failure of historical imagination; it leads, in either case, to the view that it was specifically with the Holocaust that European civilization – the values of the Enlightenment, a confidence in progress and modernization – finally undermined itself.118

simply no set monolithic context with reference to which different discursive decisions can be measured against each other” (“Holocaust Studies,” 67).

More broadly, however, it is important to recognize that by constantly situating the Shoah at the centre of (generalized) genocide discourse, other genocides and aspects to genocide are necessarily pushed out of view. Even other victims of the Nazis, whose friends and family perished in the same death camps, experience this sense of exclusion from genocide discourse and from widespread memorialization efforts (Bloxham, “Holocaust Studies,” 65–69). Some of the proponents of the paradigm even assert that the Shoah is a unique event, an unprecedented genocide, or the only “true” genocide. Most troublingly for the goals of anti-genocide activism, in its most extreme but by no means uncommon manifestation, the uniqueness argument can lead perpetrators and non-perpetrators to deny genocide on the basis that a conflict or event does not sufficiently resemble the paradigm (in this case, the Shoah) in the mind of some, especially non-experts. In just one example, Curthoys and Docker explain via Barta that in Australian public discourse on the colonial genocide of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, the charge of genocide is rejected out of hand for just this reason (“Defining Genocide,” 28). See also Tony Barta, “After the Holocaust: Consciousness of Genocide in Australia,” Australian Journal of Politics and History 31, no. 1 (1985): 154–161. Some may even be offended at the suggestion of a comparison, asserting that the application of “genocide” to a different context “trivializes” the Shoah despite the fact that colonial genocides entail mass murder, policies of extermination, programs of forced assimilation, and forced sterilization (Briggs, “Genocide,” 35–36).

118 Mark Mazower, “After Lemkin: Genocide, the Holocaust and History,” Jewish Quarterly 5 (1994): 5–8, quoted in Bloxham, “Holocaust Studies,” in Apsel and Verdeja, Genocide Matters, 74. On why colonial genocides have been ignored or diminished in the literature, see Hinton on how critical genocide studies inquires as to the reasons why (“Critical Genocide Studies,” in Apsel and Verdeja, Genocide Matters, 53–55); see Dominik Schaller on the
Mazower’s point should be kept in mind as we continue into the subsequent chapters. At this point, suffice to say that anti-genocide activists should be aware of the implicit dangers of the notion of special intent encoded in most definitions of genocide, which cannot sustain themselves as objective or empirical measures for violence, criminality, or evil. Furthermore, Mazower, Moses, and others challenge anti-genocide activists to ask why intent matters so much in cases of mass violence, if the outcome is the same in terms of loss and devastation. Again, we can return and ask: what shows itself in this interplay? What conceals itself?

While we are considering the implicit assumptions of the concept of genocide, we may as well ask, where did the idea of pure hatred come from in the first place? What drove Lemkin to create a special law, “the crime of crimes,” was specifically his belief that the dawning regime of universal but individual human rights could not attempt to address the problem of collective destruction. Why was Lemkin so fixated on the group? How did he understand the notion of groups? I am referring here to a persistent problem in genocide activism and scholarship that I already raised in the discussion on Darfur, where the distinction between ethnic and racial groups is not a simple matter. Therein lies a clue: Moses, Donald Bloxham, Dominik Schaller and other critical genocide scholars have produced extensive research on the history and philosophy of Lemkin’s thinking on the group, which derives its confidence from an idea that Moses calls “groupism.”119 The groupism in Lemkin’s thinking leads him to think of ethnic, national, or racial groups as static and homogeneous identity categories that have an ontological status, and are ontologically in


opposition to one another (as pure hatred, enmity). Bloxham and Moses trace Lemkin’s beliefs to Polish romantic nationalism and ideas of culture from Johann Gottfried Herder and Giuseppe Mazzini. These beliefs are also directly related to Nazism, which justified the racial or cultural superiority of some groups over others on the basis of their immutability. Such beliefs were pervasive across European philosophy, science, and the arts in this period, and, before as well as during the Nazi rise to power, these beliefs were used to justify colonial violence all over the world. They have also been disproven again and again in the decades since. The “group,” especially the racial or ethnic group, is not a metaphysical fact and does not refer to an objective distinction like being alive or dead. Identities shift, they blur, and they change according to context. Hinton writes that, “More disturbingly, the [Genocide Convention] has created a set of privileged protected groups while leaving others unprotected and analytically invisible.” “Historians need to beware of the ontological claims that can come with the genocide concept,” Moses warns. It is the same for activists.

All of this is embedded just in the sense of genocide as “the crime of crimes.” By the end of the chapter, genocide has become burdened, implicated ethically and politically from many sides. We arrive back at depoliticization via Moses’ presentation of groupism: “Using this imagery of ultimate criminality, genocide was depoliticized by being defined as murderous attacks on people solely on the basis of their

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120 Bloxham and Moses, “Editors’ Introduction,” 32–34 (they are referring to Barta, “Lemkin’s Lost Law”). In Problems of Genocide, Moses writes, “As we see in Chapter 3, his imaginary of humanity as an ensemble of peoples with unique national “spirits” was a product of his Zionism, itself a version of “small nations” consciousness and its intense attachment to vulnerable cultural identity. We have adopted this ethnic-national human ontology and made it the barely acknowledged basis of the hierarchy of criminality. This adoption is one of the problems of genocide” (18).

121 Some genocide scholarship offers fascinating and fluid conceptions of groups that attempts to think outside of these constraints. In particular, philosopher Anne O’Byrne’s concept of “generational being” in the chapter of the same name in Logics of Genocide comes to mind (pp. 95–111).


123 Moses, Problems of Genocide, 267.
hated group membership: merely for who they are.”

Furthermore, he writes, “In this way, treating genocide as a non-political hate crime blinds us (and politically and legally ties our hands) when faced with mass criminality that contains political dimensions; it obscures the reality that all such criminality is saturated with political logics.” Moses’ critical analysis shows that when the concept of genocide is emptied of all political content as “the crime of crimes,” it can be understood as merely a blinding hatred that informs mass criminality. For his purposes (history and historiography), such an account of genocide is useless, and worse, insidiously harmful.

The problem for activists, as opposed to scholars, is mentioned by Moses but can be teased out more fully here. The relationship between the problem for activists and scholars lies in the pursuit of understanding about genocide (however defined); these conceptual problems affect the political as well, tying our hands “politically and legally” through the depoliticization of violence and its totalizing moralization, a grotesque distortion. Though it is not his primary concern, Moses points out one facet of

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124 Moses, Problems of Genocide, 18. Moses identifies the idea of political and nonpolitical violence as coming from Arendt and Leo Kuper, i.e., the depoliticization of violence (pp. 445–446). It would be interesting to trace Moses’ reading of Arendt from the more favourable texts like “Conceptual Blockages” (2001) to the recent Problems of Genocide, where Moses dedicates a chapter to his critique of Arendt and Lemkin.

125 Moses, Problems of Genocide, 467. Moses notes specifically that, “The challenges posed by the nonpolitical understanding of genocide was never so apparent as in the report of the United Nations International Commission of Inquiry on Darfur, delivered in 2007” (469).

126 In Problems of Genocide, Moses fully shifts his position from a more tortured relationship to the concept of genocide (see for example his 2002 seminal essay “Conceptual Blockages”) to a rejection of it. I am persuaded by his arguments and understand his cynicism as overall hopeful and courageous, though I still feel the pull that he felt in 2002 when he wrote that, “Too much trauma has been caused, and too many individual and group emotions and political claims are invested in the term for it to be regarded as a purely heuristic device” (22). That pull has increased especially in the past year (as of this writing) during which numerous mass graves have been recovered at state and Church run “Indian Residential Schools” in Canada, and Indigenous communities have used the word “genocide” (a shift from the earlier “cultural genocide” used in the 2015 TRC report) to articulate the terrible sorrow, loss, and anger that these mass graves signify in a long and painful struggle. They have also used this term in increasingly unchallenged ways, suggesting to me that genocide’s political power or capital may still yet be used by those who are in the most need of such power. This second approach, which must remain in a constant tension with the first, is well articulated in Benjamin Meiches’ book The Politics of Annihilation: A Genealogy of Genocide (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2019). See also TRC of Canada, Honouring the Truth, Reconciling for the Future: Summary of the Final Report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (Winnipeg: TRC, 2015), http://nctr.ca/assets/reports/Final%20Reports/Executive_Summary_English_Web.pdf.
the problem of action at its conceptual root. Even if activists attempt to take action from within this paradigm, what does that even mean? Problems erupt underneath problems, and the enterprise itself is disjointed and violent, as in Darfur. The only way out is to double down on the universality of the genocide concept and take it to be something real enough to study empirically, to encode in law. The double persona of the scholar-activist, commonly assumed in genocide studies, expresses this avenue through the field’s overarching aim of prevention.\footnote{Moses traces the scholar-activist persona back to Raphaël Lemkin (who coined the word genocide), noting that “Lemkin’s intention to reorient historical study was therefore explicitly activist: historical knowledge was to serve consciousness-raising in the present” (“Moving the Genocide Debate,” 251). Weiss-Wendt traces back activist tendencies in genocide studies to Israel Charny’s book with Chanan Rapaport, How Can We Commit the Unthinkable? Genocide, the Human Cancer (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1982.), in which he advocates for the development of early warning systems. Some, like prominent scholar-activist Gregory Stanton (founder of Genocide Watch), argue that the label of genocide itself can help end mass violence (Weiss-Wendt, “Problems in Comparative Genocide Research,” 62–63).}{127} The problem with this, critical genocide scholars point out, is that prevention is often framed as a forceful ethical imperative that can skip over or defer critical reflection.\footnote{Schaller goes so far as to say that the self-satisfaction derived from this ethical imperative compounds the problem, especially given that the purported impact of prevention work is nebulous (“From Lemkin to Clooney,” 246). Moses notes that if we take international law for granted as a moral good, so too do we take for granted that the concepts of “progress” and “civilization” touted in the Convention are not in themselves implicated in genocide (Problems of Genocide, 5).}{128} Furthermore, they provide numerous examples and arguments to show that the work produced through this framework often has serious methodological and conceptual flaws.\footnote{See for example Levene, Genocide in the Age of the Nation State, especially the preface (1–7) and introduction (8–34); Hinton, “Critical Genocide Studies,” in Apsel and Verdeja, Genocide Matters, 44–46; Dan Stone, introduction to Stone, Historiography of Genocide, 5; Schaller, “From Lemkin to Clooney,” 246–254. The most dangerous and extreme manifestation of this is in genocide research taken as an applied science (see Schaller, “From Lemkin to Clooney,” 246–247).}{129} Their issue is not that all research on prevention, such as early warning systems, have no value or use; rather, critical genocide scholars demonstrate through thoughtful and detailed critique how shaky the conceptual ground of genocide really is, and seek the limits of empirical or analytic claims that emerge from such a context.\footnote{Prominent genocide scholars like historian Dan Stone urge caution, worried that genocide scholars are prone to overestimating the impact of their work (introduction to Historiography of Genocide, 5). Critical genocide scholars may also extend the critique beyond the limitations of genocide studies and question the coherence of the concept or}
It may seem callous to reject or suspend the ethical imperative put forward by genocide scholars like psychologist Israel Charny, who wrote in 1994 that, “Insofar as there is ever a major discrepancy between the reality of masses of dead people and our legal-scholarly definitions, it is the latter which must yield and change.” But from the activist side of the hyphen, we can discern that the same problems persist here too. On the one hand, scholars like Charny tend to assume, to some degree or other, that the priorities and objectives of scholars and activists are identical or universal. The definitional debates that frequently dominate genocide discourse within academia and in public are a useful example of why this is not the case. To an international lawyer or legal scholar, for instance, the UN definition of genocide is inescapably fundamental, while a sociologist may find that same definition functionally useless for their research. For an activist, the definition may have yet other criteria of meaning, ones that are likely not even stable across multiple contexts. Similarly, the impact of such a determination is not the same from these differing perspectives. For a definition developed by psychologists to study the motivations of genocide perpetrators, which cases are included and excluded in that study based on that definition can be more a matter of methodology than of politics. Not so for the anti-genocide activist, for whom such a definition could determine whether or not the machinery of international law, peacekeeping, humanitarian aid, and intervention are deployed in this or that conflict. That is, the same question in a scholarly or political context could have negligible consequences in one sphere and be a matter of life or death in another. This distortion adds considerable tension to the scholar-activist paradigm.

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discipline itself (for example, in Weiss-Wendt, “Problems in Comparative Genocide Scholarship, 46ff), or by situating genocide studies within and complicit in a wider ideological program, as Mamdani does in Saviours and Survivors (American imperialism) and as Dirk Moses does in Problems of Genocide (liberal internationalism/colonialism).


\textsuperscript{132} In order to avoid the definitional debates around genocide and their ethically and politically charged consequences, most anti-genocide organizations have broadened their mandate in recent years. STAND, the youth-led organization that came out of the Save Darfur movement, has expanded their mandate to cover mass atrocities in 2009 when it
Furthermore, it has become more common in the last thirty years to regard genocide studies as a kind of applied science. Following this logic, the task of anti-genocide activism becomes, in the words of political theorist Benjamin Meiches, one of “successfully applying the concept to motivate states as part of the gradual expansion of international law and morality.” He continues, “Consequently, the critical task of genocide prevention involves working on political will to stimulate public demands to oblige powerful states to respond to mass atrocities by bolstering the strength of international institutions. The primary means for achieving this goal is a campaign centered on better communication, information, and awareness concerning genocide, a persuasive effort that deploys a brutal menagerie of thanatographic images and narratives.”

By treating the work of activists and scholars as one and the same, especially through a separated from the Save Darfur Coalition’s successor, the Genocide Intervention Network. STAND Now, “History,” accessed July 12 2021, https://standnow.org/about/history/. STAND now operates under the banner of the British NGO Aegis Trust (“Aegis” comes from the Greek word for protection), which similarly adds “mass atrocities” to genocide in their mandate. In their logo they have crimes against humanity as well, but their messaging is focused mostly on genocide prevention (“Our Starting Point,” Aegis Trust, accessed July 12 2021, http://aegistrust.org/what-we-do/our-starting-point/). The Enough Project takes a similar approach (“About,” Enough Project, accessed July 12 2021, https://enoughproject.org/about, website no longer available as of May 5 2022). Gregory Stanton’s Genocide Watch now also monitors “political mass murder, mass rape, and other genocide-like crimes” (“About Us,” Genocide Watch, accessed July 12 2021, https://www.genocidewatch.com/copy-of-about-us). The Alliance Against Genocide, which is comprised of 96 member organizations including STAND, Aegis Trust, and Genocide Watch, writes on its website that “it does not get bogged down in debates about whether mass killing meets the legal definition of genocide. Its goal is to prevent and stop all forms of mass murder” (“About,” Alliance Against Genocide, accessed July 12 2021, http://www.against-genocide.org/about). Note that STAND Canada and STAND Now (USA) are independent organizations.

See a useful overview in Hiebert, “Questioning Boundaries,” in Apsel and Verdeja, Genocide Matters, 34–35.

Meiches, Politics of Annihilation, 6. This is what Meiches refers to as “the progressive account,” which is basically analogous to what I am calling the dominant narrative in this text. An example of this approach in genocide scholarship is by the prominent figure Samuel Totten in 2013:

Despite all of the talk, all the meetings and conferences, reports, position papers, and promises vis-à-vis the prevention of and intervention of genocide, one has to wonder whether, in the end, to paraphrase Shakespeare, it will all constitute little more than sound and fury signifying nothing. Of course, we all hope it is not, but it really does seem that the more we talk about prevention and intervention, the more we allow crimes against humanity and genocide to break out and continue unabated, only to be followed by half-witted, half-hearted, undermanned, under-resourced missions with weak mandates that leave tens, if not hundreds, of thousands or more in the lurch. Impediments to the Prevention and Intervention of Genocide, ed. Samuel Totten, vol. 9, Genocide: A Critical Bibliographic Review (New York: Routledge, 2017), 2.

It is striking to compare two foundational documents of contemporary anti-genocide activism as well: the Genocide Prevention Taskforce’s 2008 publication Genocide: A Blueprint for U.S. Policymakers ([Washington, DC]):
positivist framework, genocide scholars effectively limit the scope of political action to a very narrow field – indeed, the exact field that dominated the approach of the Save Darfur movement. In the wake of Darfur, perhaps more so than other conflicts that came before (prior to the ICC, etc.), activists have every reason to doubt that this blueprint for action that emerged from genocide studies is effective. They also have no reasons left to excuse the moral and political failures which we examined in the previous section. There comes a point, which is always too late, when even well-intentioned action becomes irresponsible and the ethical imperative justifying it must be re-examined.

Put another way, to accede to the ethical imperative as presented by many genocide scholars (and activists as well) leaves no time or space to consider what that imperative actually is; its urgency suffocates all questions and challenges across the scholar-activist divide. It seems that the choice before anti-genocide activists is to carry on, perhaps with modifications or caveats, or to abandon genocide as a basis for collective action. This problem of action is not the primary concern of critical genocide scholars, and I have engaged the scholarship to help think about these questions for activists, not in order to give an account of genocide studies’ conclusions. The historical context and conceptual reflections that have come out of genocide studies, however, are an invaluable and undervalued pedagogical resource for the difficult task ahead. Thinking about the past can help us suspend the ethical imperative to fight genocide long enough to observe its shape and movement – a key goal of the prevention approach in the first place.

The political power wielded in the call to action to end genocide is significant. In the Darfur case it drew together disparate political, religious, and national groups at a crucial historical moment. It can draw

Genocide Prevention Taskforce, 2008), jointly sponsored by the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, the American Academy of Diplomacy, and the Endowment of the United States Institute of Peace, and the Montreal Institute for Genocide Studies’ 2009 text Mobilizing the Will to Intervene: Leadership and Action to Prevent Mass Atrocities (Montreal, QC: Montreal Institute for Genocide and Human Rights Studies, 2009). Both lay out what anti-genocide activism should be in technical terms as a form of lobbying, awareness raising, and institutional capacity building. Both focus on mobilizing political will, or “the will to intervene.”
international attention to urgent humanitarian crises. It claims to end impunity and deliver justice and peace. But it also seems to have very little to do with the specific contexts and the real people living in them, and more to do with genocide as a category, or more particularly a crime, that demands a certain kind of universal, moral response. What of this should be carried forward into future activism? As this Darfur chapter in the history of anti-genocide activism draws to a close and we survey the impact of the last twenty years, it is important to grapple with the cracking, quaking ground, the contradictions, tensions, and destabilizations to the “conventional wisdom” about anti-genocide activism. I have tried to show that the cracks that have appeared thus far are indicative of deep chasms that extend far below the Darfur case and into the origins and logics of genocide as a concept. With the concept of genocide thus complicated, we can carry these questions further to examine another facet of the question: who is it who faces genocide?
Chapter Three

Irreducible Gaps: Witnessing in the Face of Genocide

It is said that we tell stories so that we do not die of truth. But we also tell stories to know who we are and to make sense of the world [...]. We listen to one another’s stories so that we share carrying the truth. But we also listen to stories in order to [...] be changed. At the end of the story, we do not want to be the same person as the one who started listening.

– Antjie Krog, 2009

3.1 Crises of Response: Ethics and the Curse to Bear Witness

We began with the central question of this dissertation: what is the responsibility of activists in the face of genocide? In this chapter I will posit the practice of “bearing witness” as the attempt to face genocide, which from the previous chapter locates us not just on unstable territory, but within a deep, abyssal faultline. Torn from and into the earth, the faultline is a gap that cannot be closed or mended. Indeed, it strains against its own faces. The faultline is total destruction, and that is what must be faced, even if it cannot be seen.

The theories of witnessing that I wish to evoke here emerge from a particular historical event: the Shoah. It was in the aftermath of the Shoah that theories of witnessing, which in western traditions have long histories in both law and theology, began a new trajectory. That trajectory has shown itself to be relevant

1 Antjie Krog, Nosisi Mpolweni, and KopanoRATELE, There was this Goat: Investigating the Truth Commission Testimony of Notrose Nobomvu Konile (Scottsville, South Africa: University of KwaZulu-Natal Press, 2009), 19.

2 Though I am presenting the genealogy of witnessing from the Shoah, that is by no means the only or best way to trace the ideas raised in this chapter. In my view, a wider engagement with witnessing literature is warranted. A particular strand of witnessing discourse stands out in need of mentioning as distinctly political, which is the theories of witnessing in the politics of Indigenous resurgence as well as in the politics of reconciliation movements. Witnessing theories home to the place in which I live, study, and work, in contradistinction to traditions that are unreflective about the impacts of colonial violence (as genocidal), seems to me to be an appropriate and perhaps more appropriate beginning. However, it is clear to me that such an engagement with Indigenous knowledge and traditions should be part of a more sustained study conducted in relation to community and land. David Gaertner’s book The Theatre of Regret: Literature, Art, and the Politics of Reconciliation in Canada provides an example of such an engagement as a settler scholar. Gaertner’s approach, crucial in the context of reconciliation discourses, is
to activism and politics in a world that struggled to grapple with the testimonies of suffering that followed the defeat of Nazi Germany, as well as the testimonies of suffering that are ever present in all times. Situated as bearing witness in the face of genocide, witnessing theory will bring out three aporetic crises that widen the gap of the faultline: the crisis of witnessing the Shoah (bearing witness), the crisis of the impossibility of bearing witness to the Shoah (positionality or proximity), and finally the crisis that activists face in the gap between the ethical response and action or change. In this chapter I will engage the position of the witness to clarify the initial ethical and political challenges of anti-genocide activism explored in the previous chapter, which by the following chapter will be fully visible as problems of responsibility, or of the possibility of response.

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In this section, I will begin with the distinction between the eyewitness and bearing witness that has emerged through philosophical literature collectively known as witnessing theory, a distinction predicated on the confrontation with the Shoah (a term for the Holocaust I translate loosely as “total destruction”). I begin with this literature because, in the aftermath of the Shoah, the world wrestled with the outpouring of

intended to decentre witnessing theories that have been imported to this land via colonial expansion and violence. He begins with local Coast Salish witnessing traditions (in particular xʷməθkʷəy̓əm and Stó:lō) that were shared with him, and engages also with Indigenous scholarly work on witnessing, artistic and cultural works, and testimonies and documents from the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC). Gaertner explains: “In Indigenous studies, the act of bearing witness is generated in the reciprocal act of listening to and sharing stories and the active deconstruction of settler colonial narratives” (10). Furthermore, “If ‘reconciliation’ becomes that which is unobjectionable [as a necessary good], then to bear witness means to object and to stand in solidarity with those who would dare to do the same” (11).

In this chapter, I use the words “suffering” and “trauma” interchangeably. The difference for my purposes seems mostly disciplinary, with suffering belonging to a more theological vocabulary (older) and trauma in the language of psychology (newer). I do not feel a particular allegiance to either and resist the desire to define suffering other than as I have above, as an overflowing. I will say one thing that I do not mean: suffering here is not meant in the Christian sense, where the suffering is often presented as a sign of love, sacrifice, etc. I follow Levinas’ distinction in “Useless Suffering” (1982), in which Levinas distinguishes a more Judaic sense of suffering in which one can learn from suffering without any attempt to justify it. To use the salient example, the suffering of the victims of the Shoah is not redemptive or salvific (theodicy). It should never have happened and the fact that it did is a terrible wrong that can never be corrected or justified. At the same time, from suffering, understanding can emerge. Emmanuel Levinas, “Useless Suffering” in Entre Nous: Thinking of the Other, trans. Michael B. Smith and Barbara Harshaw (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 91–101.
testimonies from survivors and so created the space for a new conversation about witnessing. This outpouring did not happen all at once, but over painful decades, during which a shift in scholarly and public conceptions of witnessing occurred – not just across the world, but across disciplines such as literature, psychology, philosophy, and political theory. In what French historian Annette Wieviorka calls “the Era of the Witness,” the volume of survivor testimonies increased following the televised trial of the Nazi Adolf Eichmann in 1961, the publication of iconic memoirs such as Elie Wiesel’s *Night* (originally published in French in 1955) and Primo Levi’s *If This Is a Man* (originally published in Italian in 1947), and, in particular, the release of the American miniseries *Holocaust* (1978) and the French documentary *Shoah* (1985) that greatly contributed to public awareness of Nazi atrocities.\(^4\)

In the commonly presented narrative, the shift crystallized with the 1992 publication of a ground-breaking text by Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub, *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History*. Both professors at Yale University, Felman is a literary critic and Laub, himself a child survivor of the Shoah, a psychoanalyst and co-founder of the Fortunoff Video Archive for Holocaust Testimonies. *Testimony* responds to the project of gathering personal testimonies from witnesses to the Shoah (in which Laub played an important early role) and the study and impact of those testimonies, with particular aim toward expanding the conception of the witness beyond its dominant meaning in western legal traditions.

Laub’s oft-cited anecdote of the testimony of one survivor best illustrates his and Felman’s goal and the shift in the focus of the literature. The story begins with a woman in her late sixties who gave her

account of the Auschwitz uprising to Laub and other interviewers at Yale. In October 1944, upon learning that their death was imminent, the group of Auschwitz inmates known as the Sonderkommando used carefully collected gunpowder to blow up one of the crematoria used to incinerate the corpses of the murdered. In a testimony that Laub found particularly impactful in its ability to bring the moment to life and break “the deadly timelessness of Auschwitz,” the witness describes: “All of sudden, we saw four chimneys going up in flames, exploding. The flames shot into the sky, people were running. It was unbelievable.” Despite the fact that Laub refers to this testimony as a dazzling meteor from the past, the historical fact is that only one chimney was destroyed in this event. The debate amongst scholars ensued as to whether the factual inaccuracy rendered her testimony invalid. Laub explains his view on the matter:

The woman was testifying [...] not to the number of chimneys blown up, but to something else, more radical, more crucial: the reality of an unimaginable occurrence. One chimney blown up in Auschwitz was as incredible as four. The number mattered less than the fact of the occurrence. The event itself was almost inconceivable. The woman testified to an event that broke the all compelling frame of Auschwitz, where Jewish armed revolts just did not happen, and had no place. She testified to the breakage of a framework. That was historical truth.

Felman and Laub’s text exposes a crucial tension of witnessing, what philosopher Kelly Oliver describes as, “The double meaning of witnessing – eyewitness testimony based on first-hand knowledge, on the one hand, and bearing witness to something beyond recognition that can’t be seen, on the other…” Wieviorka’s 1998 book The Era of the Witness illustrates the shift of focus to the latter notion of witnessing in her comparison of the Nuremberg trials of Nazis in 1945-1946 and Eichmann’s trial in 1961. At Nuremberg, she tells us, the prosecution relied primarily upon documentary evidence that proved the individual, criminal guilt of the defendants within a system (i.e., Nazism) that was subsequently proven to

6 Felman and Laub, Testimony, 60.
7 Kelly Oliver, Witnessing: Beyond Recognition (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001), 16. Oliver opens her book with this anecdote.
be criminal itself. The legal innovation of Nuremberg was in international law and the introduction of the collective “crimes against humanity” (not genocide), but hardly any witnesses were called upon to testify, in person, to the crimes committed against them as persons. That is, responsibility for the personal suffering of victims was not on trial at Nuremberg.\(^8\)

In the Eichmann trial, on the other hand, this was the exclusive focus. Captured by Nazi-hunters in Argentina, drugged, and smuggled to the relatively new State of Israel in 1960, Eichmann was tried in what is now widely regarded as a show trial designed to testify to the world the extent of Nazi crimes against the Jews. The first trial to be televised in its entirety, the prosecution opened the doors for witnesses, carefully vetted, to come forward and tell their stories. The testimonies of the survivors became the focus of international media attention, surpassing the interest in Eichmann himself. As Wieviorka explains:

The witnesses told their own stories and that is what gave weight to their words. The extraordinary force their words acquired can also be attributed to the place where they were pronounced, which gave them a political and social significance no book could confer. Their political dimension lay in the fact that the state, represented by the prosecutor, underwrote their testimony and thus lent it all the weight of the state’s legitimacy and institutional and symbolic power. The witnesses’ words attained a social dimension because they were uttered before judges whose responsibility it was to acknowledge the truth they contained and because they were relayed to the world media as a whole. For the first time since the end of the war, the witnesses had the feeling that they were being heard.\(^9\)

In this sense, the advent of the era of the witness brought with it a rupture in conventional ways of understanding truth with regard to testimony: suddenly, the person gained more significance than the document.

Witnessing theory attempts to grasp or describe what was so compelling and important about giving testimony or bearing witness to the Shoah, both in public discourse and for the survivors themselves. Wieviorka explains that in the immediate aftermath of the Shoah, it was not uncommon for survivors to

\(^8\) Wieviorka, *Era of the Witness*, 88–89.

experience a “hemorrhaging of expression,”\textsuperscript{10} where the survivor would not even necessarily remember the testimony they had given afterward. “When those first words were poured on paper,” Wieviorka writes, “there was probably no thought of writing a book, there was simply the compulsion to be free of certain elements of one’s experience and to reclaim, through these scribblings, one’s own identity.”\textsuperscript{11} Laub, a psychiatrist by training, understands the urge to testify as follows: “There is, in each survivor, an imperative need to tell and thus to come to know one’s story [...] Yet no amount of telling seems ever to do justice to this inner compulsion.”\textsuperscript{12} Laub and others understand this phenomenon as evidence of the inner trauma or essential, metaphysical violence that transforms subjects into objects, thereby undermining or destroying the subjectivity of the victim.\textsuperscript{13} Through these terms, witnessing theory means to describe the Nazi project of dehumanization (or de-subjectification, objectification), in addition to murder and other crimes.

Oliver is one of those theorists who positions witnessing as a challenge to this kind of objectifying violence. If the process of objectification is understood (by Oliver and other witnessing theorists) as deeply traumatic and wounding on a metaphysical level, such that victims are made into “inhuman objects” that are “unable to speak,”\textsuperscript{14} then their silence, or more precisely, their speechlessness, perpetuates the objectifying violence.\textsuperscript{15} This is the weight of the Final Solution’s evil. Further, it raises a problem of

\textsuperscript{10} Wieviorka, \textit{Era of the Witness}, 43–44. Wieviorka borrows the term from Robert Antelme, French writer and survivor of Buchenwald.

\textsuperscript{11} Wieviorka, \textit{Era of the Witness}, 43–44. Wieviorka also points to the explicit desire of some survivors, Wiesel notable among them, to testify as an act of revenge and as a political act (38–39).

\textsuperscript{12} Felman and Laub, \textit{Testimony}, 78. In addition to the shame Wieviorka points out that the silence of survivors after the war was not necessarily only due to shame, as often claimed. Many survivors remained silent because no one wanted to hear them (\textit{Era of the Witness}, 72).

\textsuperscript{13} A greater engagement with the notion of violence would be interesting and useful, especially since it would be interesting to read Arendt and Levinas side by side on the topic more closely. Already published on this topic is, for example, Joe Larios, “Arendt, Levinas, and the Justification of Violence,” \textit{Arendt Studies} 4 (2020): 177–202.

\textsuperscript{14} Oliver, \textit{Witnessing: Beyond Recognition}, 89.

\textsuperscript{15} Oliver, \textit{Witnessing: Beyond Recognition}, 99. Oliver articulates this view in its more political form as such: “One of my arguments throughout \textit{Witnessing} is that the dichotomy between subject and other or subject and object is itself a result of the pathology of oppression. To see oneself as a subject and to see other people as the other or
witnessing in the theory: how can a person witness their own objectification if witnessing is accomplished by subjects? Unable to speak, victims of metaphysical violence are thus unable to bear witness even to their own trauma. The process of witnessing after-the-fact, so to speak, then becomes a reliving. It is also unending, repeated out of time, and so able to repeat indefinitely in an unceasing renewal of trauma through memory. In witnessing theory, what is witnessed is often described as suffering. Suffering exceeds our ability to witness as eyewitnesses alone; any account of suffering must be able to encompass both the visible and the invisible in addition to the possible and impossible. In other words, one must witness the Shoah (though this is limited to time and place), and one must bear witness to it (this is unlimited to time and place but bound to relationship).

Laub describes the process of witnessing as “living through testimony:” the witness regains their subjectivity as a witness, able to speak and listen not only with others, but within themselves. He explains: “[Witnessing] is a dialogic process of exploration and reconciliation of two worlds – the one that was brutally destroyed and the one that is – that are different and will always remain so. The testimony is inherently a process of facing loss – of going through the pain of the act of witnessing, and of the ending of the act of witnessing – which entails yet another repetition of separation and loss. It re-enacts the passage through difference in such a way, however, that it allows perhaps a certain repossession of it.” The powerful experience of reclaiming one’s identity led Laub, a psychoanalyst, to believe that witnessing could be an act of healing, that “silence suffocates us,” and further distorts the events, causing additional suffering objects not only alienates one from those around him or her but also enables the dehumanization inherent in oppression and domination” (3). The silence of witnesses is also conceived in other ways (see note in next section).

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16 Felman and Laub, Testimony, 85.

17 Felman and Laub, Testimony, 91. The dialogic nature of witnessing is clearly influenced by Jewish philosophers of the twentieth century, most notably Levinas. Felman and Laub acknowledge Levinas’ influence on their work (3) along with Hatley, Oliver (Witnessing: Beyond Recognition, 18–19), and others. See later note for a fuller commentary on Levinas’ influence.
to the survivor and thereby continuing Nazi atrocities into their everyday lives.\(^{18}\) This belief in the healing power of giving testimony underpins Laub’s entire project of helping other survivors bear witness, as well as his work with Felman.

Laub’s belief in the healing power of testimony relies on at least two participants, the witness and the listener. The listener has a critical role to play in the reconstruction of subjectivity. Laub, who specializes in instructing listeners through his video testimony project at Yale, insists on the presence of an empathetic listener.\(^{19}\) Without this listener, without an addressable other to hear and then testify to the reality of the suffering of the witness, witnessing cannot take place. This is another form of violence.\(^{20}\) Oliver makes a similar argument from the philosophical rather than psychoanalytic perspective. Her definition of witnessing itself is rooted in the subjectivity of the response to the other.\(^{21}\) It is in the act of witnessing – of speaking – that subjectivity can be regained. The objectification within an oppressive system removes the conditions of subjectivity, which Oliver identifies in ethical terms as address-ability (the presence of the addressable other, as in Laub) and response-ability.\(^{22}\) Without subjectivity, the agency of the person is nullified, and action – and ethics – becomes impossible without a subject among addressable and


\(^{19}\) The empathetic part is important to Laub at least partly because of the ways in which Holocaust survivors were actively discouraged from speaking about their experiences after the war. “This denial by the listener inflicts, according to the film, the ultimately fateful blow, beyond the eighty blows that a man, in Jewish tradition, can sustain and survive. The absence of an empathic listener, or more radically, the absence of an addressable other, an other who can hear the anguish of one’s memories and thus affirm and recognize their realness, annihilates the story” (68). This last part of Laub’s argument seems to me too strong, see the note above and my commentary on the critiques of Laub and Felman to follow, in particular the shift noted by Sandor Goodhart in his 1992 review of *Testimony* between Laub’s first and second essay (here I think we can see evidence of the Goodhart’s issue with the second in the first as well).

\(^{20}\) Felman and Laub, *Testimony*, 68.

\(^{21}\) Oliver, *Witnessing: Beyond Recognition*, 15. As noted already, witnessing theory is already in conversation with Levinas, who will only be taken up fully in the next chapter.

\(^{22}\) Oliver, *Witnessing: Beyond Recognition*, 7.
responsible others.\textsuperscript{23} The address and response inherent in Oliver’s conception of witnessing, however, does not only require that dialogue take place with another person. Part of the process of healing, as in Laub, comes from the reestablishment of the inner witness, where the witness re-witnesses their own experiences, affirms their reality, and thus transforms them. Dialogue from within and without becomes possible again, liberating the witness from the pathology of victimhood (which craves recognition and reverts to guilt and self-abuse) and restoring agency and humanity.\textsuperscript{24}

The ability of witnessing to meaningfully address the trauma of the Shoah, however, is challenged in the literature as well. In \textit{Suffering Witness: The Quandary of Responsibility After the Irreparable} (2000), philosopher James Hatley begins his discussion of witnessing with Levinas and the Auschwitz survivor and writer Primo Levi, who point us to the inescapable limitations of witnessing, especially for healing and learning. To Levinas and Levi, in a very literal sense, witnessing is always in some sense impossible because so many of the eyewitnesses or those who bore witness to the true terror of Nazism are not able to testify. Furthermore, the absence of their testimony leaves the capacity for others to bear witness incomplete. This is an essential aspect of understanding the Shoah as “total destruction” – the scale of the trauma encompassed the loss of an entire world that is truly lost even as it endures in memory, suffering, and impossible resurgence.\textsuperscript{25} Levi argues that something greater than historical truth or objective knowledge is

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\textsuperscript{23} Oliver, \textit{Witnessing: Beyond Recognition}, 18.
\textsuperscript{24} Oliver, \textit{Witnessing: Beyond Recognition}, 92–93; Felman and Laub, \textit{Testimony}, 88. See Oliver’s discussion on the internalization of interpersonal dialogue and the necessity of the inner-witness in Laub, and also in Mae Gwendolyn Henderson’s work on the testimony of Black women in the United States, which draws upon the notion of inner dialogue from Mikhail Bakhtin (in Oliver, \textit{Witnessing: Beyond Recognition}, 87–93).
\textsuperscript{25} The sense of losing a piece of the world is expressed in Arendt’s writings, especially: “If a people or a nation, or even just some specific human group, which offers a unique view of the world arising from its particular vision of the world […] [that] is annihilated, it is not merely that a people or a nation or a given number of individuals perishes, but rather that a portion of our common world is destroyed, an aspect of the world that has revealed itself to us until now but can never reveal itself again” (“Introduction into Politics,” 175). I am thinking also of Itamar Manoff’s succinct distinction: “Before the Holocaust there was an entire Jewish world in Europe, and after the war that world was gone” (personal discussion, May 11 2022).
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ruined in the total absence of the “complete witnesses;””26 “I must repeat,” Levi tells us, “we, the survivors, are not the true witnesses.”27 Those whom Levi calls the Drowned – all those who truly looked into the face of the radical evil of Nazism – were killed or rendered mute; they are voiceless.28 They are also nameless, which is the term that Levinas uses to refer to witnesses in their absence in his 1976 text Proper Names, given that the dead were left with no one even to mourn and remember them.29

With both Levi and Levinas in mind, Hatley aims to complicate the notion of healing after the Shoah laid out in Testimony. As a philosopher, Hatley is not trying to negate the truth of Laub’s theory and experiences of healing, but with Levi and Levinas’ personal experiences as a reference, he posits that it is the resistance of the experiences of the Shoah to healing, and to witnessing, that makes it so horrific. For the survivor, the need to tell the story may never be satisfied or achieve closure, and for the one who bears witness, true understanding is always out of reach. And yet, there is still witnessing. The dedication in one of Levinas’ most important works on ethics, Otherwise Than Being or Beyond Essence, reads as follows:


28 Though Wiesel also wrote about the shame of survival, he also saw the reclaiming of voice in the act of witnessing (or, more specifically, writing) as a form of vengeance against Nazism (see Wieviorka’s commentary on Wiesel’s view in Era of the Witness, pp. 38–39; see also Weissman’s explanation of Wiesel’s view of adding our voices to the silence of dead, p. 74). French philosopher Jean-Francois Lyotard also takes up the idea of the avenging-witness in The Differend: Phrases in Dispute (1983). See Michal Givoni’s discussion on Lyotard’s avenging-witness and the religious figure of the martyr in the Care of the Witness: A Contemporary History of Testimony in Crisis (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 66.

29 Levinas writes: “But who will say the loneliness of the victims who died in a world put in question by Hitler’s triumphs, in which lies were not even necessary to Evil, certain of its excellence? Who will say the loneliness of those who thought themselves dying at the same time as Justice, at a time when judgements between good and evil found no criterion but in the hidden recesses of subjective conscience, no sign from without?” (Proper Names, 119).
To the memory of those who were closest among the six million assassinated by the National Socialists, and of the millions on millions of all confessions and all nations, victims of the same hatred of the other man, the same anti-semitism.  

The inscription below the dedication is written in Hebrew, but it is not a translation of the text above it. In sacred letters, Levinas begins the text with an epitaph for his closest family members who were murdered, with their traditional Jewish names. At the end of the epitaph is the customary inscription for tombstones and memorials, which of course, for those murdered by National Socialists and disappeared into mass graves and brick ovens, will never appear on an ever-absent memorial. In these pages, their names appear still, and Levinas’ ethics, which we will explore in chapter four, can be read as a testament to them.

The absence of the Drowned and the Nameless haunts the act of witnessing in witnessing theory, which as such sits within an irresolvable tension between the “total destruction” of the Shoah and the ethical demand to bear witness to it. Bearing witness always stretches toward and beyond what is possible, but an essential part of the ethical demand is to face something bottomless and terrible. What is demanded here is something more than Laub’s empathy. Levi orders the reader, addressed directly, to look at the bare reality of Auschwitz, without idealizing or idolizing the victims and without being offered any sense of hope or redemption, without the possibility of rescuing the victims or the survivors from their fate or their suffering. In the prologue to his first memoir, originally published with the title If This is a Man, Levi writes:

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Tully, a philosopher of law and politics, explains in his book that the demand for synthetic rubber was driven by the loss of Germany’s colonies earlier in the century and isolation from supply chains during the two
You who live safe
In your warm houses,
You who find, returning in the evening,
Hot food and friendly faces:
Consider if this is a man
Who works in the mud
Who does not know peace
Who fights for a scrap of bread
Who dies because of a yes or a no.
Consider if this is a woman
Without hair and without name
With no more strength to remember,
Her eyes empty and her womb cold
Like a frog in winter.
Meditate that this came about:
I commend these words to you
Carve them in your hearts
At home, in the street,
Going to bed, rising;
Repeat them to your children,
Or may your house fall apart
May illness impede you
May your children turn their faces from you. 

The words, as Hatley explains in *Suffering Witness*, echo one of the most important prayers in the Jewish liturgy: the *Shema*. In addition to being part of daily prayers (to be recited upon waking and before falling asleep), the *Shema* is also associated with political and religious persecution and resistance. Many Jewish children learn that the words of the *Shema* were the last words of the great sage Rabbi Akiva before he was executed by the Roman Empire following the Bar Kochba revolt in the second century CE. The *Shema* has

World Wars. He notes that Western colonial powers controlled 93% of the world’s rubber supply in 1940 (294) and rubber manufacturing was a key part of Hitler’s war effort (288, 292–293). Slave labour and inhuman practices, however, were not new to the rubber industry, even though synthetic rubber manufacturing was new. Tully writes, “Fifty years or more before the IG Farben rubber plant rose from the Silesian plains, rubber companies were exterminating Indians in the valley of the Putumayo in Peru and King Leopold’s rubber men were butchering the people of the Congo basin on a colossal scale” (15). Created from a merger of several major companies in 1925, IG Farben was liquidated in 2011, but its former subsidiaries continue today (in various forms) as some of the biggest chemical, pharmaceutical, and technology companies in the world (BASF, Bayer, Agfa-Gavaert, and Sanofi-Aventis).

32 Primo Levi, *Survival in Auschwitz*, trans. Giulio Einaudi (New York: Touchstone, 1996), 11. *Survival in Auschwitz* was first published in 1947 as *Se questo è un uomo*, and in English as *If This is a Man*.

therefore become an assertion of faith (in particular Jewish faith) in the face of oppression and even death. In this poetic opening, Levi uses these words, which attest to the oneness and mastery of God, to devastating effect. Instead of inspiring the responsibility to love God, maintain the Jewish community across generations, and honour the Covenant with God, Levi’s words point instead to the immeasurable and unceasing suffering, trauma, and tragedy of the Shoah – total destruction – itself.

Here Levi testifies also to the suffering of the reader whom he orders to look anyway, to “meditate” on what had happened and carve his words into one’s heart. To face the realities requires one to recognize that the Drowned cannot speak or show. Yet, like Levinas, Levi’s memoires and other writings still attempt to bear witness to what is at once inescapable and impossible. His final book, the Drowned and the Saved, challenges the reader yet again to share in the shame, disgust, and inhumanity that the Häftlings endured – to extend our imagination beyond its limits, beyond what can be known.34 Without mercy, we are then asked to answer the question: is this a man? Could one remain a human person at Auschwitz?35 The piercing and perhaps unbearable pain of these demands is why Hatley calls Levi’s prologue a “curse,” as he explains: “Levi’s command – not only to look upon the victim but to consider whether he or she is human – torments the reader. One would rather look away than admit the degradation of a human being.”36 To look in the way Levi demands does not lead to seeing or knowing. Nor should it lead to wonder or inspiration, feeding one’s “aesthetic imagination.” To look requires that one acknowledge the difference between me in the safety of my home and Levi, between us and the Drowned. To look, therefore, is not to know but to attend (to be

34 In specifying that the “act of imagination” that Levi requires “put[s] one at the very limit of imagination,” Hatley draws a comparison to Arendt’s act of “fearful imagination” (Suffering Witness, 38–39).
35 Hatley, Suffering Witness, 17–18.
36 Hatley, Suffering Witness, 19. He continues, “But even if one manages to turn toward the victim, one still experiences the tendency to reduce her or him to a mere spectacle, a mania of appearance in which no focal point resides, for which no meaning can be given. One looks away, even as one looks. But this too Levi not only forbids but also curses.” Another sense in which Levi’s prologue is a curse is in the impossibility of mourning (see Hatley, Suffering Witness, 31).
attentive), to respond, to be responsible, not in general but in particular. Hatley explains that, “Here attentiveness only begets yet more attentiveness; the witness is called to insomnia.” Following Levinas, he sees this insomnia as a contributor to that which makes the violence of the aggressor possible, in that violence emerges from the desire to escape this insomnia, which is deeply uncomfortable to say the least – it is an “incessant call to righteousness.”

Felman and Laub understand the insomnia or awakened, sleepless discomfort as the inevitable confrontation with the existential questions of the Shoah, questions of death, time, meaning, powerlessness, loss, loneliness, otherness, responsibility, love, and so on. These questions arise when the listeners “[pass] through the crisis of experiencing their boundaries, their separateness, their functionality, and indeed their sanity…” This becomes a dangerous endeavour, one that can destabilize their epistemological and metaphysical grounding in the world. It is an exhausting encounter with utter strangeness. Felman turns to the Jewish poet and survivor Paul Celan for an understanding of this encounter. Celan’s poetry, heavily influenced by the Shoah (in which his family was murdered), relates these breakages of crisis. His poetry is, according to Felman, almost anti-aesthetic in its rhythms, displacement of sound in media res, and broken diction. “Through their very breakdown,” she writes, “the sounds testify, henceforth, precisely to

37 Hatley, Suffering Witness, 38–39. This is the connecting point between Levi and Levinas in Hatley’s book. Witnessing here only refers to passivity, not action, an approach I explore in the next chapter.

38 Hatley, Suffering Witness, 3. Insomnia is another Levinasian term, which is consistent with the views on the irreparability of the Shoah in his work (as well as many survivors like Levi).

39 Hatley, Suffering Witness, 3.

40 Felman and Laub, Testimony, 72.

41 Felman and Laub, Testimony, xvii.

42 Felman and Laub, Testimony, xvii. In the next section I will claim that they failed to avoid these dangers.

43 Felman and Laub, Testimony, 7.

44 Theodor Adorno famously stated that “poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric.” For discussions on Adorno’s claim, see Thomas Trezise, Witnessing Witnessing: On the Reception of Holocaust Survivor Testimony (New York: Fordham University Press, 2013), 159–160 (followed by an extended discussion on aesthetics and Levinas in the context of the Shoah).
a knowledge they do not possess, by unleashing, and by drifting into, their own buried depths of silence.”

It is the strangeness or otherness of Celan’s poetry that addresses the reader and makes it testimony to the Shoah. In this, Felman is in step with Michael Bernard-Donals and Richard Glejzer, both scholars of memory and rhetoric, who argue that it is only in the breaks and stutters of both written and oral testimony that witnessing can occur. Furthermore, they state that the experience of witnessing within the “breaks and stutters” precludes any universalization, in particular any universalized ethics. To experience witnessing is to be uprooted, uncomfortable, unstable, unknowing.

Philosophically, this breakage or rupture – the encounter with otherness – is referred to as the aporia. Philosopher Berel Lang uses this term, which appropriately describes the indescribability of the Shoah and the experiences of witnesses, to signify the somehow unceasing interruption of the aporia that the encounter with otherness, necessary for the relationship of witnessing, can take place. In Maurice Blanchot’s view, it is the very unknowability of the Shoah, or the impossibility of remembering all that was lost, that makes it truly immemorial.

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45 Felman and Laub, Testimony, 37. We will return to Felman’s notion of silence and its problems in the next section.
46 Felman and Laub, Testimony, 38.
48 Berel Lang, Philosophical Witnessing: The Holocaust as Presence (Waltham, MA: Brandeis University Press, 2009), 79. Oliver, also using the Levinasian sense of insomnia, sees the openness to the experience of the aporia, a turn toward the other, as love. Love in this sense is likewise never settled, pinned down, or quantified, but it enables an empathetic encounter (Witnessing, 220).
49 Maurice Blanchot, Political Writings, 1953–1993, trans. Zakir Paul (New York: Fordham University Press, 2010), 128. “Must we say once again (yes, we must) that Auschwitz, an event that makes a ceaseless appeal to us, demands, through testimony, the inexhaustible duty not to forget: Remember, beware of forgetting and yet, in this faithful Memory, never will you know. I emphasize this, for what is said here sends us back to that for which there is no memory, to the unrepresentable, to unspeakable horror, which, however, is always, in one way or another, and always in anguish, the immemorial.”
3.2 Crises of Position: The Nonwitness in the Face of Total Destruction

The conception of “bearing witness” presented thus far is not without its problems. Witnessing theorists and Holocaust studies scholars more broadly are deeply concerned with the tension between truth and representation in the literature and its implications for writing and teaching history, prosecuting perpetrators, and public memorialization. Some scholars, famously Theodor Adorno and Giorgio Agamben, have claimed that the Shoah represents the limits of knowledge and comprehension; it cannot be known and cannot be testified to. In this section I will elaborate upon the problems of representability of the Shoah raised in the previous section, focusing on the critique of Shoshana Felman’s notion of the Shoah as an event with no witnesses and honing in on the problems of positionality and proximity embedded in much of the literature.

As Felman and Laub assert, it is impossible to tell the Shoah. The “crisis of witnessing” depicted in Testimony refers to the idea that the Shoah is an event without a witness. In the final chapter Felman clarifies that the event without a witness is:

an event which historically consists in the scheme of the literal erasure of its witnesses but which, moreover, philosophically consists in an accidenting of perception, in a splitting of eyewitnessing as such; an event, thus, not empirically, but cognitively and perceptually without a witness both because it precludes seeing and because it precludes the possibility of a community of seeing: an event which radically annihilates the recourse (the appeal) to visual corroboration (to the commensurability between two different seeings) and thus dissolves the possibility of any community of witnessing. (my emphasis)

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51 Felman and Laub, Testimony, 79.

52 Felman and Laub, Testimony, 210–211; other relevant passages can be found on 224, 227, 231–232. A version of the argument is repeated by Laub in his chapter as well (indeed the second chapter is titled “An Event without a Witness,” but for clarity I will keep the two separate for now until my discussion of Goodhart’s reading of Laub’s chapters, which will shed light on why separating them is prudent).
In this passage, Felman asserts the literal impossibility of witnessing the Shoah, putting together a number of ideas that are developed in the book and culminating in her discussion of Claude Lanzmann’s documentary film *Shoah*. In her reading, the objectification of Nazi violence makes it impossible to witness, even for survivors. The only recourse – not so much for survivors but for us, the ones who are born to witness – is through the medium of art, like filmmaking. The final pages of the book are a celebration of the capacity of Lanzmann’s *Shoah* to make witnessing possible through song. She concludes that, “As a fragment of reality and as a crossroad between art and history, the song – like the whole film – enfolds what is in history untestifiable and embodies, at the same time, what in art captures reality and enables witnessing. In much the same way as the testimony, the song exemplifies the power of the film to address, and hauntingly demands a hearing.”

That is, for Felman, in the impossibility of witnessing the Shoah, the *only* way to “capture reality” and witness is through the way that art mediates representation and the unrepresentable.

Other witnessing scholars take the impossibility of witnessing as more of an inescapable tension than an ontological fact. Bernard-Donals and Glejzer understand the limits of knowledge in terms of the distinction between witnessing and testimony, where witnessing is the moment of seeing (but not of knowing or understanding) and testimony is “bearing the burden of not knowing by attempting to know.” A moment of witnessing, then, “is not history but the event as it precedes our ability to bring it into language”

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54 Adorno’s view is also in the “more complicated” category.

55 Bernard-Donals and Glejzer, *Between Witness and Testimony*, 173. Of all the texts cited, Bernard-Donals and Glejzer’s and Givoni’s are the only ones who specifically attend to the difference between witnessing and testimony in a significant way. They write, “We intend to question both these conclusions based on the premise that the epistemology of witness does not involve a competition between two different worldviews, each of which has a coherence incompatible with the other, but instead involves an incommensurability between witness and testimony, an incommensurability made palpable in its most extreme form by the enormity of the event of the Shoah itself. Because this incommensurability, this incompatibility, of witness and testimony is a structural one, it is available in written testimonies as much as it is in oral ones” (53).
at all.”

This truth is inexpressible through the historical mode of the eyewitness, which claims to see and understand simultaneously. For Bernard-Donals and Glejzer, the Shoah itself resists signification as a generalized historical reality; its scale and depth as a specific moment and experience can only be witnessed in the barest glimpses, and those glimpses exceed the limits of knowledge.

The problem of time between witnessing and testifying is further complicated again by Oliver, who, drawing on Levinas and Jacques Derrida, views history as always incomplete, always being reconceived as we witness our experiences again and again. Recalling the philosophical idea of aporia once more, our experience of time is constantly disrupted; here Oliver cites Martin Heidegger’s concept of the Augenblick, the blinking of the eye that disrupts the witnessing of the present and challenges our reliability as eyewitnesses. Bernard-Donals and Glejzer also acknowledge the limitations of the witness in the flow of time; they cite Sigmund Freud and trauma scholar Cathy Caruth in their explanation that witnessing and testimony cannot occur simultaneously. The witness, who sees without knowing, does not testify to the historical event itself. Rather, “Witnessing can only be accessible to the extent that it is not fully perceived or experienced as it occurs, and it can only be grasped in the very inaccessibility of its occurrence.” Following her earlier distinction between the legal “eyewitness” and bearing witness to that which cannot be seen, Oliver agrees that historical truth does not suffice to actually represent that truth of the Shoah.

58 Bernard-Donals and Glejzer, *Between Witness and Testimony*, 68
61 Oliver, *Witnessing: Beyond Recognition*, 142. Of course, it does not escape notice that Heidegger was, himself, at one time a member of the Nazi Party.
facts, Oliver writes, “are dead to the process of witnessing, that which cannot be reported by the eyewitness, the unseen in vision and the unspoken in speech […]” Oliver advocates for an understanding of “reality” that is also shaped by phenomenological truths of experience, which are constantly being remade and transformed through witnessing and listening, and which cannot be recognized through empirical or historical facts alone.

Wieviorka, as a historian, takes issue with the impossibility of witnessing to historical truth. Wieviorka was among the first to come out strongly in favour of preserving the integrity of historical truth in relation to the Shoah, writing against Felman and Laub in particular. She disputes the notion that history, portrayed by Felman and Laub and others as dead facts, cannot contain the emotional weight of trauma. “Holding events at a distance,” she writes, “does not preclude feelings of empathy with the victims of horror at the complex system that produced mass death. It restored dignity to the thinking person, a dignity that Nazism had precisely derided by playing on feelings such as hate or on emotions such as those generated at mass rallies.” Furthermore, Wieviorka wonders at the new historical methods that emerged, in her view, as a result of the Eichmann trial. She singles out Daniel Goldhagen in his book, Hitler’s Willing Executioners: Ordinary Germans and the Holocaust, which she derides as containing a “strange” view of history that would have historical narratives replaced by the individualization of six million testimonies.

She explains: “One might wonder what the heuristic value of such a history is, or simply whether the absence of the desire to think in more general terms is not in effect the very negation of history. It would

63 Oliver, Witnessing: Beyond Recognition, 2.
64 Oliver, Witnessing: Beyond Recognition, 106. Recognition is a major topic of Oliver’s text and her opening into the political philosophy of witnessing theory, with specific reference to politics of race and colonialism. There is another pathway to critique the politics of witnessing through the route of the politics of recognition. In particular it would be interesting read Oliver’s text again in light of the critical scholarship of the politics of recognition in recent years, most notably Glen Coulthard’s 2014 book Red Skin, White Masks: Rejecting the Colonial Politics of Recognition (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press).
65 Wieviorka, Era of the Witness, 90.
66 Wieviorka, Era of the Witness, 92.
signify a death of the intellectual operation that consists in constructing a story and which is called, precisely, the writing of history. In the place of a narrative that seeks both to establish the facts of the past and to give them meaning, there would be other, individual narratives privileging horror.”

Wieviorka’s insistence on respect for the intellectual project of history and its connection to the dignity of the human person is as important a point as those from the others listed above. The philosopher Berel Lang offers words of caution in flirting with the outright or wholesale rejection of the possibility of historical truth. While no single person can occupy a universal perspective, this does not mean that historical accuracy loses its significance. Instead, he argues, the moral crisis of the Shoah urges us to attend as closely as possible to historical truth, lest the power of the horror be lessened by exaggerations, errors, or misrepresentations. This is particularly true in light of factions that would deny the historical reality of the Shoah in total – surely the threat of the erasure of the Shoah poses a greater danger to its testimony and memorialization than the so-called dead facts. For Lang, the reality of the Shoah means that the talk of the impossibility to describe or represent the event, taken literally and in the extreme, can be a harmful proposition: “To claim that there is no adequate way of speaking about the Holocaust – implying that this limitation distinguishes it from other events – suggests for the Holocaust extrahistorical status, a place outside of history and thus also beyond intelligibility: the indescribable here moves into the incomprehensible.”

In short, the claim that comes out of witnessing theory that the Shoah is literally unwitnessable (not just indescribable but incomprehensible) can come at the very high costs of opening the door for denial, making memorialization (let alone education) impossible, and devaluing the testimony of the survivors whose experiences inspired the “era of the witness” in the first place.

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68 Lang, *Philosophical Witnessing*, 16. Note that Lang’s position in the uniqueness debate (discussed in chapter two) is problematic. I have tried to be careful to engage Lang in ways that do not rely on that argument, but a closer reading is warranted.

69 Lang, *Philosophical Witnessing*, 80.
As Lang hints with the indescribable that becomes incomprehensible, there are a range of kinds of claims about the impossibility of witnessing, not all of which go so far as to assert the Shoah’s unwitnessability. Felman and Laub’s framing of the crisis of witnessing and of the impossible witness in Testimony is a particularly illustrative example of the dangers inherent in such claims taken to their extreme, and how those dangers express broader challenges to the positioning of the witness as one who “bears witness” to something that cannot be seen. For a deeper analysis, I turn to two of the incisive review essays that immediately followed Testimony’s 1992 publication, authored by Holocaust literary scholar Sara Horowitz and literary theorist and Judaic scholar Sandor Goodhart. Both reviewers carefully contextualize their criticism away from Laub’s experiences as a child survivor and his work on gathering and thinking about testimony. Instead, they direct their criticism mostly at the way they read Felman as overdetermining or distorting the text’s psychoanalytical insights into more metaphysical claims about the nature of witnessing, in particular the major claim in the text that the Shoah is an event without witnesses.70

Horowitz expresses a number of concerns with this argument in her review. Her issue is not necessarily with the ways in which witnessing is challenged by Felman and Laub in Testimony. The literal sense of being unable to describe one’s traumatic experiences is certainly a challenge, for example. Like Wieviorka and Lang, what does concern Horowitz is that Felman’s argument loses sight of the fact that the Shoah is an event that was, in the end, very much witnessed even before the film Shoah was released in 1985 and before the first artistic representation came into the world; “Its proof comes in many forms,” she writes, “[…] In fact, the Holocaust may well be the most well-documented event in historical memory.”71

70 In a footnote, Horowitz writes that since Laub only wrote two of the five chapters and, in her reading, the tone of the other chapters and the main work seem to belong to Felman, she considers Felman to be the primary author of Testimony. Sara R. Horowitz, “Review Essay: Rethinking Holocaust Testimony: The Making and Unmaking of the Witness,” Cardozo Studies in Law and Literature 4, no. 1 (1992): n9. Goodhart directs his critique at Laub’s two chapters, but I read this as a way to avoid having to discuss Felman’s directly. His main criticisms are directed toward Felman, though addressed mostly at Laub (as we shall see).

Horowitz traces the problems with this argument through what she calls Felman’s “therapeutic paradigm” that is “problematic, and in the final analysis, seriously flawed in a number of important respects.” First, in Felman’s configuration of witnessing, the focus is on the listener who acts in the role of psychoanalyst, helping the witness to allow their unconscious to speak (i.e., the memories that they cannot experience because they were experienced not as subjects but as objects). Horowitz objects on the grounds that the “uncritical” use of this paradigm oversimplifies and flattens the actual experiences of testimony and witnessing, which do not fit into the rigid, synchronous categories of Felman’s encounter between witness and witness. Such a flattening focuses all significance on the initial, verbal testimony of unconscious memory, implicitly devaluing all other aspects of witnessing and testimony.

Second, within this paradigm, Horowitz points out that the experience of witnessing is generalized outside of the witness themselves and into a “collective primal scene,” threatening “to displace the real testimony.” Felman’s use of the term witness begins to blur into different kinds of witnessing that are not differentiated. The result is that, thirdly, Felman ends up “overstat[ing] the non-experiential listener. […] Felman’s analysis tries to make witnessing the witness into the experiential, moral and emotional equivalent of living through Nazi atrocity.” Lastly, Horowitz takes issue with how a therapeutic paradigm (in both Felman and Laub) makes the Shoah into “something to be ‘worked through’ in the process of testimony.” Testimony, she objects, does not provide a “cure” for trauma. But while “Laub looks hopefully to psychotherapy to resolve the trauma of the survivor, Felman more problematically looks to ‘art’ – broadly

72 Horowitz, “Rethinking Holocaust Testimony,” 55.

73 Horowitz points out that Felman neglects nonsynchronous forms of testimony like memoirs and poetry, “which exist independent of a reader” (“Rethinking Holocaust Testimony,” 56).

74 Horowitz, “Rethinking Holocaust Testimony,” 56.

75 Horowitz, “Rethinking Holocaust Testimony,” 56.

76 Horowitz, “Rethinking Holocaust Testimony,” 56.

77 Horowitz, “Rethinking Holocaust Testimony,” 57.
and heuristically defined – to resolve the crisis of testimony for Western civilization.”

Horowitz shares Felman’s appreciation for the power of the artistic imagination to engage with issues of representation, but she is concerned that such a conceptualization transforms the Shoah as well as survivor trauma into a “crisis of art” and representation, and testimony into “an impossibly objective ‘outside’ stance [...].” What began as a way to describe the ability to “bear witness to that which cannot be seen” is now distorted and turned back upon itself.

Ultimately, for Horowitz the idea of the Shoah as a literally unwitnessable event leads Felman to privilege “all speakers equally,” or even to put the listener above the witness as more able to bear witness than the one testifying. “The blurring of different kinds of ‘witnesses’ and ‘testimonies’ becomes particularly troublesome in Felman’s discussion of witnesses whose wartime behavior was questionable,” Horowitz argues. She points especially to the fifth chapter of the book entitled “After the Apocalypse: Paul de Man and the Fall to Silence.” Paul de Man was (in Felman’s words) “a controversial yet widely admired and highly influential thinker and literary critic, who died in 1983 as the Sterling Professor of Humanities at Yale.” After his death, a journalist uncovered that during the war de Man had written over 150 articles for a literary column in a pro-Nazi newspaper, which included reviews of fascist writings and at least one explicitly antisemitic entry. Felman’s chapter is a defence of de Man’s decision to maintain this “secret” in silence. Using Primo Levi’s description of the “grey zone” from the Drowned and the Saved, Felman argues that de Man should not be judged hastily as a Nazi, and that in the suspension of judgement, a truth

78 Horowitz, “Rethinking Holocaust Testimony,” 57.
80 Felman and Laub, Testimony, 120.
81 Horowitz, “Rethinking Holocaust Testimony,” 60.
82 Felman writes that, “I will here argue that de Man’s silence has an altogether different personal and historical significance, and thus has much more profound and far-reaching implications than this simplistic psychological interpretation can either suspect or account for” (Testimony, 121).
more true than what can be said in words is found behind his silence, thereby revealing again the impossibility of the witness (as silent).  

It seems to me that such a claim should be evaluated with direct reference to Levi’s book, which is a devastating exploration of life in Auschwitz on a more theoretical level than his earlier memoirs and fiction. The “grey zone” concept refers to the conditions of “extreme pressure” in the Lagers in which the line between victims and persecutor was blurred by the willingness of many victims to collaborate in their own persecution – and the persecution of others – in order to “preserve and consolidate established privilege vis-à-vis those without privilege.” Such situations are not commonplace in everyday life; using examples like the Sonderkommando (Special Squads) from Laub’s story, who were Haftlings (inmates) tasked with loading corpses into the crematoria, or the Kapos who were Haftlings put in charge of other Haftlings, Levi shows how the Nazis deliberately introduced internal hierarchies within a landscape that did not have enough to support the bare minimums of life, precisely in order to bring out the worst of human behaviours among victims. “Conceiving and organizing the squads was National Socialism’s most demonic crime,” Levi records grimly. He explains that the effect was to “shift onto others – specifically, the victims – the burden of guilt, so that they were deprived of even the solace of innocence.” Though these matters of complex guilt and innocence are difficult to discuss, Levi raises them to avoid the desire for

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83 This is my summary of the argument in her chapter. Felman and Laub see silence as a stage of witnessing, where language must “pass through its own answerlessness” (Testimony, 50–51). For other, less problematic, discussions of the role of silence in witnessing see Laub on listening to silence in Testimony, 55–59 and Hatley’s discussion of Simon Wiesenthal’s “attentive silence” in Suffering Witness, 8, as well as Hatley’s discussion on ontological silence on p. 20. In Philosophical Witnessing, Lang identifies several different types of silence, including political, moral, and aesthetic silence (78). Furthermore, Lang also notes that there is a form of responsible silence, a silence that resists crossing an ethical boundary, that shows too much, that becomes a violation or a transgression against something almost sacred in its profanity (88). Bernard-Donals and Glejzer have an excellent discussion on the relationship between silence and language throughout their book, but especially in the chapter “Between Witness and Testimony,” and on pp. 17, 65, and 173.

84 Levi, Drowned and the Saved, 43.

85 Levi, Drowned and the Saved, 53. Levi is referring specifically to the Sonderkommandos in this passage, but the point holds across contexts. He also refers to this system as a microcosm of totalitarian society (48).
oversimplification, that will paper over the realities of what happened and why it was so terrible. Writing about the most challenging cases, the unsympathetic victims and the truly disturbing and uncomfortable limits of human violence and cruelty, is unavoidable if we want to understand “how to defend our souls when a similar test should once more loom before us, or even if we only want to understand what takes place in a big industrial factory.” Levi cautions against judging people who have lived in the “grey zone” out of hand, for he notes that it is, yes, impossible to understand why they did what they did under such extreme conditions. In Levi’s writings and in witnessing theory, the guilt and, more especially, shame around one’s own actions as a victim is only a means of compounding the persecution and trauma.

What Levi explicitly warns against in the text is allowing the perpetrators to successfully shift the reality of the line between themselves and their victims. He prefaces his discussion of the difficult cases with the following:

I am not an expert on the unconscious and the mind’s depths, but I do know that few people are experts in this sphere and that these few are the most cautious. I do not know, and it does not much interest me to know, whether in my depths there lurks a murderer, but I do know that I was a guiltless victim and I was not a murderer. I know that the murderers existed, not only in Germany, and still exist, retired or on active duty, and that to confuse them with their victims is a moral disease or an aesthetic affectation or a sinister sign of complicity; above all, it is a precious service rendered (intentionally or not) to the negators of truth.

In the register of the witness, in the first-person, Levi makes it clear that he does not intend to present the topic at hand for judgement to a general audience, as if to ask readers what they might have done in such a situation. The point is that they cannot know. The “grey zone” is not a generalized concept; Levi goes specifically out of his way to warn against extending the caution against quick judgement to others outside its bounds, especially perpetrators who did not live under analogous conditions to their victims. In the

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86 Levi, Drowned and the Saved, 40.
87 Levi, Drowned and the Saved, 48–49. This passage sounds like Arendt’s Eichmann in Jerusalem to me, and Felman’s misreading of Levi reminds me of the misreadings of Eichmann in Jerusalem as well.
passage above, he provides three possible motivations for such an extension with the overall disclaimer that such a blurring distorts the truth of what was done and indeed perpetuates the crime into the future.

It is a disturbing feature of Felman’s chapter in Testimony, then, when she uses Levi’s argument “not to judge” in order to defend de Man on these very grounds. Since the Shoah is not witnessable, she argues, it is not possible for de Man to be a witness, even to himself, in speech. He can only do so in silence, where testimony can be transmitted indirectly and with distance. “For it is, I would suggest,” Felman writes, “precisely de Man’s theories that inscribe the testimony of the muted witness and that address the lesson of historical events, not (as some would have it) as a cover-up or a dissimulation of the past, but as an ongoing, active transformation of the very act of bearing witness.” Despite her denial, Felman’s use of and

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88 For example (Felman quotes Levi directly before and after this passage): “De Man was ‘Nazi’; in denouncing him as one of ‘them,’ we believe we place ourselves in a different zone of ethics and of temporality; ‘we,’ as opposed to ‘they,’ are on the right side of history – a side untouched, untainted by the evil of the Holocaust. But the very nature of the Holocaust was precisely to belie this opposition between ‘we’ and ‘they’” (Felman and Laub, Testimony, 122).

89 Felman and Laub, Testimony, 140. Along with a misreading of Levi, Felman also draws on Levinas incorrectly for the sense of witnessing through testimony that she uses to defend de Man. The idea of witnessing through (silence, artistic representations) is decidedly un-Levinasian. Consider the quotation from the introduction to Testimony:

And yet, the appointment to bear witness is, paradoxically enough, an appointment to transgress the confines of that isolated stance, to speak for other and to others. The French philosopher Emmanuel Levinas can thus suggest that the witness’s speech is one which, by its very definition, transcends the witness who is but its medium, the medium of realization of the testimony. “The witness,” writes Levinas, “testifies to what has been said through him. Because the witness has said ‘here I am’ before the other.” By virtue of the fact that the testimony is addressed to others, the witness, from within the solitude of his own stance, is the vehicle of an occurrence, a reality, a stance or a dimension beyond himself (3).

There is much to discuss in this passage, and some of it is closer to Levinas than other parts. What I would like to pull out from it are the italicized words, mostly prepositions (i.e., these are errors of positionality), in particular the word “through,” which Felman notes is her own emphasis to her own translation of Levinas’ French language interview with Philippe Nemo. The original passage reads (extending a bit beyond Felman’s excerpt): “Le témoin témoigne de ce qui s’est dit par lui. Car il a dit “Me voici!” devant autrui; et du fait que devant autrui il reconnaît la responsabilité qui lui incombe, il se trouve avoir manifesté ce que le visage d’autrui. Éthique et Infini: Dialogues avec Philippe Nemo (Paris: Librairie Arthème Fayard et Radio-France, 1982), 115. Richard A. Cohen’s translation is as follows: “The witness testifies to what was said by himself. For he has said “Here I am!” before the Other; and from the fact that before the Other he recognizes the responsibility which is incumbent on himself, he has manifested what the face of the Other signified for him. The glory of the Infinite reveals itself through what it is capable of doing in the witness” (Ethics and Infinity, 109).

Cohen’s translation of “by himself” is more faithful; knowingly or not, Felman is distorting Levinas to make the opposite point. The witness in Levinas is never a medium, that would be to instrumentalize (or thematize)
characterization of Levi’s “grey zone” is, at best, an inattentive reading of the text. Horowitz is understandably perturbed by the claim that de Man’s silence as a collaborator becomes a form of testimony more powerful and truer than the literal testimony of the de-subjectified victims. Such a configuration eschews responsibility for one’s actions, both de Man’s, Felman’s, and ours, as readers of history and actors in the world. It is to go against the very core of what Levi wrote in the *Drowned and the Saved*, his final book published just a year before his tragic death: that the painstaking process of “(re)construct[ing] a means to make moral distinctions and enact moral choices” requires facing up to the past.90 Facing up to the past involves testifying to it, which he does in his writings. To live up to Levi’s charge, Horowitz argues, “we – like Levi – must insist on distinguishing rigorously and precisely between different kinds of witnessing, different kinds of silence, different kinds of deeds.”91

Goodhart makes almost the same argument in his review of *Testimony*. Directing his words at Laub almost exclusively, he focuses his objections on the idea of the “impossible witness” that becomes “no witnesses” over the course of Laub’s two chapters in *Testimony*.92 In Laub’s argument in his first chapter, witnessing and undo Levinas’ ethics. The witness testifies to their very words, which are not merely a vehicle for something greater, neither metaphorical nor representational. Furthermore, the words that are uttered as witness are only those words “here I am” – Levinas’ encounter allows for neither speaking to nor speaking for the absolute Other. It is not a dialogue, and responsibility is never disconnected from the other or represented or communicated by an object. In other words, Levinas’ witnessing is not bi-directional (Felman switches the positions), he is only referring to bearing witness as listener (the utter passivity of the ethical relation), not the response of a dialogue, or an address to an other, and definitely not an address to others in the plural. The “beyond” in her last sentence similarly does not refer to a reality more real than reality. Nor does it refer to the transcendence of artistic expression, but to a relation with absolute difference (the Other) whose call I hear from a place and time before, outside, beyond where I am in consciousness.

90 Horowitz, “Rethinking Holocaust Testimony,” 63.
91 Horowitz, “Rethinking Holocaust Testimony,” 63.
92 Sandor Goodhart, “The Witness of Trauma: A Review Essay,” *Modern Judaism* 12, no. 2 (1992): 204. Felman is listed as the author on all chapters except for chapter 2 (“Bearing Witness, or the Vicissitudes of Listening”) and chapter 3 (“An Event without a Witness: Truth, Testimony, and Survival”), which are attributed to Laub. Note that the title for chapter 2 mirrors that of chapter 1 (“Education and the Crisis, or the Vicissitudes of Teaching”), which sets up Felman as the teacher and scholar, and Laub as the listener and psychologist. In 2017, Goodhart published a chapter revisiting *Testimony* in *Möbian Nights: Reading Literature and Darkness* (New York: Bloomsbury Publishing Inc, 2017), which would be interesting to review for future study.
Goodhart notes, Laub is referring to the “impossible witness” as the “absent memory of the trauma victim.” By the second chapter, the “impossible witness” is the impossibility of any witness, including the perpetrators or bystanders who presumably do not have the same memory trauma as the victim does (i.e., they can remember as subjects). Like Horowitz, Goodhart rejects this argument as overdetermined and sensationalist, mistaking the “symptomatic” claim for “a representational assertion.” More specifically, it is the way the authors develop their argument so as to be self-defeating – needlessly amplifying the “crisis of witnessing” and the problem of representation rather than addressing it in a meaningful way – that constitutes the basis for Goodhart’s critique.93

Goodhart’s overall approach in his critical review is somewhat unusual. In evaluating the psychoanalytic claims of the book, he also analyzes the authors themselves in light of the work they produced (that is, as a testimony). He makes sure to praise Laub’s contributions in the text as a psychotherapist, in particular Laub’s work on gathering and commenting thoughtfully on survivor testimonies in *Testimony* and through the Fortunoff Archive; at the same time, he claims that as soon as Laub switches from his psychotherapist mode to “address the historical phenomenon of the Holocaust, he would appear to confuse his survivor status with that of an analytic theorist.”94 In this tension, Goodhart reads Laub’s overextended assertion of the “impossible witness” as the testimony of a child survivor of trauma, one who was radically disconnected from the world around them, an event remembered with no witnesses, totally alone, and so without the ability to understand their own reality.95 The simultaneous experience, again especially common in young children still new to the complexities of language, of witnessing something so intensely without being able to describe it, is deeply destabilizing for a child’s psychological development. From that perspective, it would indeed feel like there are no witnesses at all.

94 Goodhart, “Witness of Trauma,” 214.
95 Goodhart, “Witness of Trauma,” 212.
But while (in Goodhart’s reading), Laub seems to be attentive to these matters in his psychoanalyst mode, in the second of his chapters in *Testimony*, his argument becomes untethered from the experiences that informed the project in the first place and generalized into representational claims.

The issues of the impossible witness in Laub’s writings are, to Goodhart, a testimony in and of themselves, bearing witness to Laub’s own struggle to understand the paradoxes of witnessing trauma, especially in childhood. Felman, on the other hand, occupies another position entirely, one that he notes is far less visible or shown than that of Laub, whose personal story is embedded in the narrative of *Testimony*. I include his comments about Felman’s own personal context to demonstrate the importance of positionality in witnessing theory, even on the meta-level of the theorists under discussion. Going back to Felman’s reading of Primo Levi’s “grey zone” and its application to de Man’s case (to argue for de Man as the true, silent witness), Goodhart is deeply critical, not only of the implications of her argument but because of *her* implication; he discloses that de Man was Felman’s “mentor, teacher, and friend in the Comparative Literature Department at Yale.”96 That is, in her defence of a “deceased elder counsellor,” Felman’s move to make de Man the true witness, and to distort Levi’s concept of the “grey zone” so grotesquely, leads Goodhart to read Felman psychologically, as he does Laub, but not in the position of the “impossible witness” who is struggling with their own trauma. Instead, he situates Felman in the position of someone who wants to recover the memory and reputation of a beloved friend who collaborated with the Nazis.

In appropriating Levi’s caution against easy judgement of those who were in a situation that they could not have chosen for the defence of a collaborator (or even a bystander), Felman reveals exactly the problem that Horowitz diagnosed in her critical review and that can be extended with Goodhart’s words: the “grey zone” argument demands that we recover the ability to distinguish between Primo Levi and Paul de Man, between the silence of survivors and the “silence of perpetrators, collaborating bystanders, or the

96 Goodhart, “Witness of Trauma,” 211.
contemporary descendants of either.” The possibility of testimony itself is what is at stake in the claim that the Shoah is literally unwitnessable, and with it, all hope of accountability or responsibility.

Even as these problems emerge dramatically in Testimony, the distinction between these positions is present in the text. In Laub’s configuration, drawn from the project of collecting survivor testimonies, we may recall that the process of witnessing is dialogical, involving one speaker and one listener. The speaker is the “experiential witness,” while the listener is also a witness, but a “non-experiential” witness. Gary Weissman addresses the confusion with the doubling of witness positions by referring to the listener as the “nonwitness,” a term he chooses specifically to resist the “wishful blurring of otherwise obvious and meaningful distinctions between the victims and ourselves, between the Holocaust and our own historical moment.” The nonwitness, a category broader than other configurations like second-hand witness,

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97 Goodhart, “Witness of Trauma,” 214. An analogous argument is gestured at briefly in a footnote of Hatley’s book (in which he thanks Goodhart directly, once in the “Acknowledgements” and again in the footnote I am referring to), also landing on the point that we cannot collapse the distinction between the witness and what he calls the nonwitness, let alone victim and perpetrator (Suffering Witness, 227n23). Critical theorist Debarati Sanyal argues that Felman’s reading of Levi ends up transforming the grey zone “into a metaphor for her readers’ moral landscape.” See “A Soccer Match in Auschwitz: Passing Culpability in Holocaust Criticism,” Representations 79 (Summer 2002): 15. This is extremely damaging and politically dangerous. Like Goodhart and Horowitz, Sanyal is careful to say that she is directing her critique at Felman and not Laub (n24). Ruth Leys levies the same accusation at Giorgio Agamben, another major witnessing theorist. According to Leys, Levi does not suggest, as Agamben would have it, that the extermination camps brought out a reversal of roles between victim and perpetrators, but, rather, points to the forced collaboration of victims in the extermination process as an additional aspect of the Nazi crime. For Levi, she emphasizes, the perpetrator’s guilt is absolute. From Guilt to Shame: Auschwitz and After (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007), 160; also cited in Givoni, Care of the Witness, 72n49).

98 Laub identifies three levels of witnessing in his own writings as well: witnessing to experience, witnessing to testimony, and witnessing to the process of witnessing itself (Testimony, 75.). Witnessing to experience encompasses the notion of the survivor-witness, or the first-hand witness who is close to the event (or experience), while witnessing to testimony describes the position of the second-hand witness, who is farther away from the event (in this case for Laub, as a witness to the testimony of other unique survivors). The third level, the process of witnessing itself, is a more problematic notion that will be discussed in the following section. In brief, while Laub puts forward the important idea about observing oneself and one’s own, constantly interrupted relationships to truth and representation, he generalizes that experience and re-forms it into another form of witnessing entirely. The claim that the third form of witnessing is distinct, rather than a reflection of the meta-narrative about witnessing in general, seems to me overdetermined. I wonder if the “inner witness” is also a non-experiential witness to Laub.

99 Weissman, Fantasies of Witnessing, 20. Weissman is thinking here of a more benign nonwitness than Felman’s. His book is attentive to the problems with the nonwitness position throughout and raises many other issues that are not explored here. I consider it to be a good source for discussions on the complexities of bearing witness to the
encompasses scholars, teachers, and artists and their audiences who “bear witness” to the Shoah as the ability to listen to survivors directly slips away with the passage of time. The role of the nonwitness, then, does not describe any relationship of eyewitnessing but rather the search “for ways to gain access to and “remember” the Holocaust that eludes us,” even without immediate or personal connection to it. While mediated by necessity and therefore distinctly different from what is experienced by survivors, the experience of “bearing witness” in this way can still be highly impactful and even traumatic. Bernard-Donals and Glejzer understand the experience of “bearing witness” as the experience of “testimonies that

Shoah as we move father away from it in time. Weissman writes that “In an effort to distinguish between the actual witnesses who lived through the Holocaust and those who know the Holocaust only in mediated form, some commentators refer to the latter as ‘secondary witnesses,’ ‘vicarious witnesses,’ ‘retrospective witnesses,’ ‘witnesses by adoption,’ or ‘witnesses through imagination.’ I resist these terms because I believe that such a broadening of the term witness, as well as similar uses of the terms memory and trauma, contributes to a wishful blurring of otherwise obvious and meaningful distinctions between the victims and ourselves, and between the Holocaust and our own historical moment” (20).

Weissman, Fantasies of Witnessing, 6–7. Weissman reviews a number of other articulations or conceptions of the listener, as well as conventions in Holocaust Studies for describing the distance these terms attempt to signify. For example, a common convention in the Jewish community is to express the gap generationally, where the first-generation witnesses are the survivors, the second-generation are their children who were raised with inherited trauma, and so on (20). This configuration implies a continuous familial or social relationship to the victims (through inherited trauma) and so is not generalizable; as Weissman notes, it is also increasingly less relevant as time goes on, prompting Holocaust studies scholars and Jewish communities to reinvent these relational concepts.

Trauma can be passed down in this way even without direct genealogical lines, however. The nonwitness, in Weissman’s reading, also can be used to refer specifically to Jews who search for their connection to the Shoah out of the knowledge that they would not have been born had the Nazi regime not come to an end when it did (14). This point is also raised by Lang: “Thus witnessing becomes a current imperative for Jews alive now who were not in the Holocaust or even born at the time […] It is as if they too may – ought to – count themselves as survivors: not has having suffered the physical wounds, but as having escaped an ominous near miss […] The identification involved in this witnessing is not only imaginative, but factual: the life, or more precisely, the death, that might have been” (Philosophical Witnessing, 7). While compelling on some level, this seems to me to be dangerous territory given the argument of the chapter about the risks of blurring lines like these.

Weissman, Fantasies of Witnessing, 5. Weissman’s explanation of the need for nonwitnesses to “feel the horror” and the articulation of this need in what he calls a “hierarchy of suffering” is a valuable conversation that spans the entirety of his book.

Refer to, as Weissman does (Fantasies of Witnessing, 20), Dominick LaCapra’s Representing the Holocaust: History, Theory, Trauma (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1994), in which LaCapra explores the notions of “secondary witnessing,” “secondary memory” and “secondary trauma.” LaCapra’s critique of Felman and Laub is an important counterpoint to their work, but rests mostly in those domains limited from extended treatment here (i.e., memory, trauma, representation).
are shot through with a kernel of the event,“103 and so can traumatize the listener as well.104 Hatley, using the Levinasian idea of responsibility as a persecution or trauma (which I shall return to in the next chapter), understands the process of bearing witness as an “ethical involvement” (beyond knowledge, truth): “In this attentiveness, the wounding of the other is registered in the first place not as an objective fact but as a subjective blow, a persecution, a trauma. The witness refuses to forget the weight of this blow, or the depth of the wound it inflicts.”105 Bearing witness to the Shoah is therefore distinct from the literal witnessing of it from the position of a survivor because it does not involve, as in Laub, a process of healing or closure but one of traumatization, even deliberate self-traumatization.

What makes bearing witness significant, as I stated in the last section, is not a process of acquiring knowledge but a confrontation that demands a response.106 The manner of that response takes various forms in the literature and public discourse. Witnessing theory that is situated in relation to the Shoah begins with and derives its meaning from the way that so many survivors saw their task of witnessing as not only an aim but the aim of survival: that is, they survived in order to tell their story.107 Wieviorka points out that many other survivors found purpose in the attempt to fulfil a promise to a loved one prior to their death, “[…] a promise to tell the world what happened to them [the deceased] and thus to save them from oblivion – to make death a little less futile.”108 As such, it is one of the most common imperatives of Shoah literature, education, and memorialization to remember, to act as a guardian of that testimony so that the witnesses,

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103 Bernard-Donals and Glejzer, Between Witness and Testimony, xiii.
104 Bernard-Donals and Glejzer, xiii. Bernard-Donals and Glejzer, along with Hatley in Suffering Witness, draw more heavily on theological sources. Bernard-Donals and Glejzer put forward their argument for redemptive witnessing, based on the Kabbalistic writings (Jewish mysticism) of Gershom Scholem among others. Hatley, with some similarities, builds upon Emmanuel Levinas’ writings for his notion of the prophetic witness.
105 Hatley, Suffering Witness, 3.
106 As in Hatley, Suffering Witness, 2.
107 Lang, Philosophical Witnessing, 4.
or victims, are not surrendered to oblivion, so that “total destruction” is always resisted. This is one sense of the slogan, “never again” – never again shall the loss repeat itself; we (nonwitnesses) shall maintain the memory even as the rememberers pass from this life.

A fuller conception of “never again” reflects the backwards direction of memory as well as push toward the future through action: never again should the Shoah (or something like it) be repeated. As we have seen, this sense of “never again” comes directly from survivors, as in Levi’s curse to face the terrible truth that always escapes our grasp. In the *Drowned and the Saved*, Levi reiterates what he sees as the responsibility of the survivor to speak and answer the “most urgent question:” “What can each of us do so that in this world pregnant with threats at least this threat will be nullified?” In the “Conclusion,” he writes, “We [survivors] must be listened to: above and beyond our personal experiences, we have collectively witnessed a fundamental, unexpected event, fundamental precisely because unexpected, not foreseen by anyone. […] It happened, and therefore it can happen again: this is the core of what we have to say. It can happen, and it can happen anywhere. […] It only awaits its new buffoon (there is no dearth of candidates) to organize it, legalize it, declare it necessary and mandatory, and so contaminate the world.”

109 See for example, Felman and Laub, *Testimony*, 58.

110 Just as “never again” has meant many things over decades, there is of course a huge range of what this action can refer to, and what the word Shoah (or any of the other words) can contain or signify, or what the words “something like it” can cover. It is not my intention to narrow the scope more than necessary, though I will caution against associating it exclusively with messages of peace, love, etc. It is also a slogan that has been used to justify terrorism, racism, and ethnonationalism, for example as the official slogan of the Jewish Defence League. See Meir Kahane’s manifesto for that organization titled *Never Again: A Program for Survival* (Los Angeles: Nash Pub, 1971).

On the topic of witnessing and education, I regretfully exclude it from the present version of the study. I do want to point out the instructive, critical context that Michal Givoni provides in *Care of the Witness*, specifically chapter four, “Empathic Listeners and Alarmed Spectators: Secondary Witnessing and Existential Ruin in the Fortunoff Video Archive for Holocaust Testimonies” (136–171). In particular she discusses the ways in which witnessing and “facing history” were developed for Holocaust education into extensive pedagogical approaches.


112 Levi, *Drowned and the Saved*, 199. In this passage and in the one cited in the note prior (on the question), Levi refers to the Shoah as a unique event, distinct from colonial violence (21), and as shocking for taking place in “civilized” Europe (199). I have already noted the problems with this framing and the fallacies it perpetuates about the uniqueness of Nazi violence. I also want to note that he uses the same argument to justify the creation of “in the
Implicit in Levi’s answer is the urgent need to learn from the past. For Lang, this is the role of philosophy; the experience of the nonwitness (to maintain Weissman’s terminology) is “more than only a vicarious or imaginative projection; [...] its significance is both moral and epistemic, involving work that philosophy not only can but ought to undertake.”\textsuperscript{113} His notion of philosophical witnessing (or “thinking-the-Holocaust”), exemplified by Hannah Arendt, involves the philosopher who is able to perform the valuable task of moving specific, historical moments from the past into the present through witnessing.\textsuperscript{114}

Here Weissman offers insight that reflects the decades of Holocaust memorialization since Levi’s book. Just as knowing is not a product of bearing witness, so too is political understanding not an automatic product of projects or programs of “thinking-the-Holocaust.” He explains,

> It is, I believe, far easier to think of the Holocaust as an unimaginably horrifying event that properly repels us, until, in recognition of our duty to “never forget” and to learn from the past (lest we “repeat it”), we force ourselves to confront its horrors. But this story, while dramatically and morally appealing, is untrue. American aversion to the Holocaust has less to do with the event’s “tremendous magnitude” than with a more banal tendency to overlook, forget, repress, and otherwise divert one’s attention from unpleasant matters large and small, particularly those which lack immediate relevance to the concerns of everyday life. For the American public, notoriously ignorant of history, confronting the Holocaust is less a matter of overcoming a profound fear of its horror than of developing an interest in the subject.\textsuperscript{115}

Weissman’s reminder is an important addendum to any charge of “never again,” which is now often regarded as an empty cliché that seems to have done little to intervene in or prevent genocide and mass

\textsuperscript{113} Lang, \textit{Philosophical Witnessing}, xiv.

\textsuperscript{114} Lang, \textit{Philosophical Witnessing}, 13–15. Recall the earlier criticisms of the uniqueness thesis, which is in operation in Lang’s texts.

\textsuperscript{115} Weissman, \textit{Fantasies of Witnessing}, 26–27. This seems to me to be as equally an Arendtian reading as Lang’s view is, if not more so.
atrocities. It also mirrors, or amplifies, the aporetic character of witnessing itself, which is always unsettled and unfinished, in contradiction with itself. In responding to total destruction, there is only persecution, insomnia, and perhaps, as in Hatley and Oliver, thus only attentiveness and openness in responsibility. “Never again” is always in a tension with the incessant demand to “bear witness” over and over again.

3.3 Crises of Action: The Gap Between Ethical Gesture and Political Act

Bearing witness in the senses discussed so far derives its meaning as a mode of response (by a nonwitness) rather than by transmitting or acquiring knowledge (indirectly, as in, not as a direct eyewitness). I have briefly touched upon the therapeutic, pedagogical, historical, and memorialization aspects of response, but the political (i.e., response through political action) has been largely excluded.

In this section I will first explore the depoliticizing effects of witnessing theory and their consequences before re-examining the

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116 Mark Lattimer, former Executive Director of Minority Rights International and as of this writing currently of the Ceasefire Centre for Civilian Rights, makes the bigger point eloquently:

In the lexicon of political cliches on genocide, “We will never forget” is almost as popular as “Never again.” Both characterize a discourse of resolute optimism that is ill-equipped to deal with the ongoing threat – and practice – of mass killing. Much of the literature on genocide appears understandably motivated by an ambition to move beyond simple memorialization, yet at precisely the moment at which it attempts to signal a departure from the past, it is in danger of slipping into the banality of political speech. The near impossibility of thinking that – that what is done cannot be undone, and will be done again, that the horror of the past is also the future – haunts the literature. Often, what is most valuable are not empty visions of a world without genocide, but the contributions directed toward confronting the present, such as Borneman’s insight that departure from violence, are not a matter of finding the proper balance between remembering and forgetting but of reconciling the self and the group with the permanence of loss. Introduction to Genocide and Human Rights, ed. Mark Lattimer (Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 2007), xxii.

117 Attentiveness, trauma, and persecution are terms that Hatley borrows from Levinas. By this point the list of writers specifically drawing from Levinas in conceptualizing the response of the witness, or responsibility of the (non)witness, has grown to include Horowitz and Goodhart.

118 Oliver’s book attends to the ways in which witnessing theory, in her reading, can destabilize the politics of recognition underpinning colonial political theory and institutions, and open possibilities for responsibility without (or beyond) recognition. This argument alludes to a transformation of relationships and structures, but even as Oliver begins from political concerns of witnessing (within the politics of recognition), she stays within the theoretical and nonpolitical realms in her conclusion, in which such transformations emerge from “imagining otherwise” and the transformative power of love.
narrative of the “era of the witness” in order to discern the migration of the ethical witness into political life. The chapter concludes with a return to the crises of witnessing, by then with reference to problems of response and proximity in the ethical and political dimensions of activism.

Part of the way witnessing theory neglects the political aspects of witnessing is by omitting the decades of explicitly political debates around the positionality of the humanitarian-witness. Political theorist Michal Givoni’s 2016 book, the Care of the Witness: A Contemporary History of Testimony in Crises, aims to address this lack in the witnessing literature through a critical re-reading of the “the era of the witness” narrative, which she finds obscures the political and ethical problems within witnessing theory.¹¹⁹ In contradistinction, Givoni’s text highlights the ways in which the “visceral appearance of the witness,” dependent on the personal experience of witnessing suffering, is now an essential aspect of public life, involved in the formation of political truths and action, and driven by the social and moral sentiments and judgements involved in “bearing witness.” The modes of witnessing and testimony, which have exploded in number alongside modern communications technologies, cover a wide range of practices that are unified by the sense that the act of witnessing is an ethical act that has a direct and practical impact on the world. “Acts of witnessing and testimonial narratives have been so deeply integrated in political life,” Givoni writes in her introduction, “that it is hard to imagine politics without witnesses and testimonies and to think of witnesses and testimonies as confined to juridical and historiographical areas of truth making as they have been in the past.”¹²⁰ In short, what has been missed in the discussion of witnessing thus far is the

¹¹⁹ Givoni also argues that it is an unhelpful framing because it removes from the frame witnessing traditions that predated the Shoah, including a number of examples from European contexts from the eighteenth century onward and culminating in a discussion of witnessing theory that emerged from WWI, in particular the testimonial literature by Jean Norton Cru in Témoins (Witnesses) from 1929 (Care of the Witness, 99).

¹²⁰ Givoni, Care of the Witness, 4.
enormous significance of the witness in global politics, especially in the domain of human rights and humanitarian activism relevant for the anti-genocide activist.\footnote{Givoni comments briefly upon a few sets of witnessing scholarship that do address the public/political aspects of witnessing, namely: the broader research on and critiques of the detrimental impacts of legal and scientific standards of witnessing on justice, etc.; the literature that focuses on collective witnessing in relation to nation-building; and the witnessing literature that has come out of the TRC of South Africa (other TRC literature on witnessing is not mentioned, see note in introduction to the chapter for brief comment on TRC of Canada). Givoni’s issue with this diverse body of work is that it largely neglects the journey of the specific conceptions of the witness popular today into the public sphere (20–22). She also notes that a more critical reading of witnessing in public/collective has come out of media studies (46–47).}

In Givoni’s reading, the neglect of the political by witnessing theorists is reflective of a wider problem of depoliticization in witnessing theory. The split between the eyewitness and the act of bearing witness that characterizes such theories emerged from a concern for the “human toll” of political, legal, and scientific modes of witnessing that minimized or silenced the truths of horrific human suffering that exceeded empirical or linguistic description.\footnote{Givoni, Care of the Witness, 6–7.} In particular, as we have seen in the discussion thus far, these theories focus on the immense suffering of the Shoah and the challenges of witnessing that event in particular (“the crisis of witnessing,” metaphysical violence, trauma, unknowability, impossibility, etc.). In the face of such suffering, the act of witnessing is not a technical task but a deeply intimate and ethical gesture of subjective transformation that is always interrupted. As such, Givoni posits that even though witnessing theory began out of an interest in and concern for the political power of witnessing for collective memory, justice, and action (e.g., “never again”), the primacy of the ethical dimension of witnessing often renders the political contexts in which witnessing occurs (or can occur) only relevant in the literature incidentally, or as an intrusion/problem to be addressed.\footnote{Givoni, Care of the Witness, 6–9.}

The problem is most pronounced in what Givoni refers to as poststructuralist witnessing theory, which she identifies and analyzes through three major texts: Jean-François Lyotard’s the \textit{Differend: Phrases}
in Dispute (1983), Felman’s Testimony (1992), and Giorgio Agamben’s Remnants of Auschwitz: The Witness and the Archive (1998). Givoni groups these particular works together because they focus not on the common or even mundane aspects of witnessing essential to everyday life, but on the extreme “limit situation” of the Shoah, where the usual social practice of witnessing failed utterly. For Givoni, this emphasis on the Shoah has two major effects on witnessing theory. First, the underlying argument behind the limit situation approach is that such a limit situation exceeds the bounds of existing morality. Witnessing theory thus begins from a kind of anxiety about the existential challenge to subjectivity, and in particular subjectivity within the ethics of western philosophy that collapsed in the face of the Shoah. In Givoni’s reading, Lyotard, Felman, and Agamben take up the notion of the witness to “cast witnessing and testimony as ethical performances of subjectivity in an irremediable crisis.” In their focus on the ethical project of witnessing in limit situations, the figure of the witness that emerges in these theories drifts away from more usual practices of witnessing and into ambiguous metaphorical spaces that are beyond discourse, beyond history, or beyond politics. Givoni’s claim is that in Lyotard, Felman, and Agamben’s respective attempts

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124 Remnants of Auschwitz was published in Italian under the title Quel che resta di Auschwitz. L’archivio e il testimone; it is also referred to as Homo Sacer III. Lyotard’s text was published in French as Le Différend. Of course, Felman’s text includes Laub as a co-author as well, but like the others cited in the previous section, Givoni reads the philosophical/existential/epistemological claims about witnessing as distinct from Laub’s psychoanalytic and therapeutic project involving survivor testimonies (Care of the Witness, 83). I rely on Givoni’s reading of Agamben’s and Lyotard’s texts, despite the fact that they are foundational texts of witnessing theory. A fuller engagement with both books is warranted and bookmarked for future iterations of this work. I am also summarizing Givoni’s more extensive and detailed argument. Note that Givoni’s approach to her analysis is Foucauldian.

125 Givoni, Care of the Witness, 50–51.

126 Givoni, Care of the Witness, 15.

127 Givoni reviews Lyotard, then Agamben, and then Felman “in ascending order according to their relative depoliticization of witnessing and testimony” (Care of the Witness, 55). A crude reading of Givoni’s critique could follow these lines: Lyotard’s witness is situated beyond discourse (68); Agamben’s witness is also beyond discourse (74–75) and beyond law (69), and morality (72), and cut off from politics (77); Felman’s witness is beyond objective truth or history (79–81; 86), and also beyond time (90). Felman’s conception, especially, occurs in solitude, unrelated to a community of witnesses that makes public witnessing meaningful (85). Givoni does attend to the differences between the theorists as well (i.e., they are not presented as a monolithic group). One other aspect of Givoni’s reading that I omitted here is the way that the figure of the witness, in Lyotard and Agamben in particular, becomes a martyr (65–66). This idea is critiqued especially by survivors, for example Levi and Levinas.
to recover a sense of witnessing that can be used to confront or disrupt atrocities through the power of testimony, “their ethical renderings of witnessing and testimony proceed by way of their analytic de-politicization.”128 With the ethical dimensions of witnessing thus centred, political concerns and other contexts relevant to ethics are always subordinated to moral sentiments.

Second, Givoni highlights the significance of witnessing theorists’ attention toward one limit situation in particular: the Shoah. In other words, by understanding the act of bearing witness through a “structural and phenomenological analysis of the catastrophe,” witnessing theorists often tie their analysis to the particular catastrophe without considering what may not be generalizable in the operationalization of their philosophical paradigm.129 More specifically, bearing witness is made meaningful as an ethical act through the way the theory made the response to the Shoah and survivor testimonies meaningful, and so the ethical dimension of witnessing is implicitly predicated on the ability to evoke the terrible loss associated with the Shoah. Givoni writes that,

This association of witnessing and testimony with the performance of a crisis that was aggravated as a result of one particular historical event and yet embodied a general and ineluctable condition was precisely the operation that allowed the poststructuralist theory of testimony to posit testimony as the most elementary ethical gesture. By folding the historically singular into the ontological given and by unsettling any predetermined definition of the ethical and the political, its ethicalized notions of witnessing and testimony could be rendered more transposable across boundaries of space and time and could be seen as applicable to any context of atrocity and desolation.130

In establishing the tension between the paradoxical claims of the unique, unrepresentability of the Shoah (crisis of witnessing) and of the paradigmatic character of witnessing the Shoah, Givoni challenges

128 Givoni, Care of the Witness, 55. Givoni also points out that “though it is never stated in explicit terms, testimony theory also harbors a thesis about the logic of political violence”: that oppressive regimes specifically attack the ability to bear witness (which had to be recovered after the Shoah); that this attack is more harmful than other forms of violence; and that as a result, testimony is an act against the power of perpetrators, and therefore “has a political value in and of itself” in the context of this power asymmetry. Givoni reads this logic as part of a “liberal view of political power […] whose oppressive tendencies should be curbed by governmental arrangements and public supervision” (93–94).

129 Givoni, Care of the Witness, 92–93.

witnessing theory’s framing of the ethical demand of witnessing and its consequences. Moreover, as I indicated at the beginning of the section, the problems with the depoliticization of the act of witnessing are practical as well as conceptual. The reconceptualization of the witness as one who bears witness recovers witnessing as an ethical act at the cost of “losing the ethical and political specificity of witnessing and testimony as distinct responses to atrocities,” Givoni writes.\textsuperscript{131} As a result, the “abstract, if not mystical model of witnessing and testimony […] is insufficiently sensitive to the political settings in which acts of witnessing and testimony are embedded and [furthermore, due to the Shoah paradigm] too rigid to accommodate their historical mutations.”\textsuperscript{132} Indeed, the paradigm of the Shoah in witnessing theory disqualifies it for Givoni from being able to “address the moral and political issues raised by global witnessing to contemporary political disasters, whose dynamics do not replicate, and indeed profoundly diverge from, the logic of the Nazi persecution and extermination.”\textsuperscript{133}

The inflexibility of the model is shown in the narrative of the “era of the witness” popularized in the literature and in public discourse, which tends to gloss over the historical precedence for the sense of “bearing witness” touted as transformative thus far. Bearing witness as an ethical act, for example, can also be read through the theological senses of witnessing to the actions or creation of God in Abrahamic religions.\textsuperscript{134} Alternatively, the interest in testimony and testimony of catastrophe in particular can be traced back with similar confidence to the earlier post-World War I literature, or farther back to other examples.\textsuperscript{135}

\begin{footnotes}
\item[131] Givoni, \textit{Care of the Witness}, 52.
\item[132] Givoni, \textit{Care of the Witness}, 52.
\item[133] Givoni, \textit{Care of the Witness}, 15.
\item[134] This is most prominently seen in Christian theology, where witnessing has come to take on a number of meanings. The word for witness in the New Testament is the same word as martyr (μάρτυς), see Givoni, \textit{Care of the Witness}, 12. The ethical sense of witnessing as a duty toward God exists in other Abrahamic religions as well. I believe a similar etymological link between witness and martyr can also be found in the Islamic shaheed (شهيد); in Judaism, I do not believe there to be a linguistic link, but the sense of bearing witness to/for God can be found for example in Isaiah 48:9–12.
\end{footnotes}
The point is not that the concept of “bearing witness” is not new, but rather that inasmuch as it refers to an ethical act, it is also an everyday practice that occurs in multiple different contexts.\(^{136}\) The positioning of witnessing in relation to horrific suffering in limit situations distances witnessing yet further from the many practices of witnessing that are enacted in the course of ordinary life today and that have been taken up in political discourses worldwide, and further makes it harder for witnessing theory to address or even account for the practical issues that have grown alongside witnessing’s rise in those contexts.

Indeed, abstracted from the regular problems of witnessing, it is hard to see how the paradigm criticized by Givoni could be able to fulfil the ethical role assigned to it in the literature when that role (and the paradigm) is extended to contemporary political contexts. The dyadic paradigm of witness and listener (or witness and nonwitness) may shed light on some of what makes the act of testimony meaningful or not, and even on the important tasks of listening and response, but it does not help, for example, in the common and even inevitable situation where one is faced with multiple testimonies that diverge from or contradict one another.\(^{137}\) Givoni notes that witnesses (in the sense of survivors) themselves will dispute the primacy of the first-person report privileged in the paradigm, which immediately complicates the ethical imperative of witnessing and calls into question its ability to produce an ethical response to the particular matters at hand, that is, in its own context. “In their preoccupation with the prospects and troubles of witnessing,” Givoni explains, “witnesses as well as those intellectuals and experts sympathetic to their cause have made it clear that in order to become a witness to exceptional manifestations of human suffering and degradation it is not always required and not always enough to perform the same gestures by which individuals could

\(^{136}\) Felman’s conception in particular strikes Givoni as a “rather elitist venture that finds its quintessential expression in highbrow art and literature […]” (Care of the Witness, 53).

\(^{137}\) The problems here are related to the defence of history mounted by Wieviorka and others, but the methodological concerns of the historian are still distinct from political ones, i.e., what may work for reconciling testimonies in the writing of history is not transposable into the messiness of addressing those contradictions in political life, or even in a legal context (which may use yet other methods).
effectively turn themselves into eyewitnesses in more mundane settings.”

By neglecting these contexts and staying within the depoliticized paradigm of bearing witness to catastrophe, “testimony theory fails, almost by necessity,” Givoni writes, “to account both for the dramatic transformation that witnessing has undergone as it became a popular conduit of moral concern, and for the ambitious formulations of idioms, protocols, forums, and devices of testimony that have boosted witnessing’s ascent.”

In the Care of the Witness, Givoni aims to confront these gaps in the literature by retracing the migration of the ethical gesture of bearing witness into public and political contexts over the period labelled, perhaps simplistically, as “the era of the witness.” Her method of bringing the relatively new political manifestations of bearing witness as an ethical practice to light requires that the metaphysical claims of witnessing theory be suspended to make visible the possibilities and challenges of bearing witness as both an ethical response and as a political act. To this end, Givoni turns her attention, and ours, not to the study of testimonies themselves but to what she calls “meta-testimonial discourses,” or the discourses about witnessing as a concept and as a practice, and not only within the scholarship but in the context of nongovernmental humanitarian and human rights activism. What interests Givoni about these meta-testimonial discourses is less the different conceptualizations of witnessing that have emerged in them and more the “incisive preoccupations with the conditions of witnessing and testimony, their risks, and the keys to their effective performance.” That is, Givoni’s goal is not to dismantle the ethical claims of “bearing witness” but to reframe them in relation to the political and ethical challenges that appear in the practical discourses of NGOs, and in particular the NGO Médecins sans Frontières (MSF, Doctors Without Borders).

138 Givoni, Care of the Witness, 6–7.
139 Givoni, Care of the Witness, 53. This is not a complete account of her critique of philosophical and post-structuralist witnessing. Her discussion on the topic is extensive and cannot be covered here in full.
140 Givoni, Care of the Witness, 5–6.
141 Givoni, Care of the Witness, 8–9.
Givoni’s choice of MSF for her study provides a useful counterexample to the Save Darfur movement while at the same time helping historicize, and therefore interrogate, the figure of the activist who bears witness to genocide (in Givoni’s more general terms, to genocide, war, and disaster). For Givoni’s purposes, the MSF case is instructive for locating witnessing in its fully public, political senses because of the organization’s sustained – and well-documented – struggle with the principle of witnessing in its ethical and political dimensions, a principle that is enshrined in MSF’s institutional discourse as témoignage (or witnessing, testimony, speaking out). Givoni is particularly interested in how, at MSF, “far from curbing the growth and expansion of witnessing and testimony, the sustained confrontation with their problematic performance has been integral to their consolidation as the tenacious trace of humanity in politics.”

Givoni concludes from her study of MSF that the NGO’s highly contested and fraught meta-testimonial discourses about témoignage demonstrates what she describes as “reflexive humanitarianism,” predicated on a “new moral subjectivity of the witness that nongovernmental humanitarianism both fostered and preserved.” What Givoni does not discuss directly is how MSF’s debates about témoignage intersect exactly with the crises discussed in the previous chapter relating to the response to the war in Darfur, with MSF opposing the Save Darfur Coalition’s approach in a number of significant ways.

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142 Givoni, Care of the Witness, 174. Givoni is careful to note that she does not claim to generalize her findings about the MSF case to humanitarian witnessing generally; by “representative case” she means a case that demonstrates what she has identified as a distinct form or sense of witnessing that has emerged in the last half-century.

143 Givoni, Care of the Witness, 5.

144 Givoni, Care of the Witness, 174.

145 Indeed, MSF’s positions regarding (1) the naming of genocide, (2) the problems of intervention and protection, (3) the use of international law, and (4) prioritization of humanitarian aid and access, all directly opposed the Save Darfur Coalition’s approaches to the same issues. A counterexample to Save Darfur like this one is also important in order to represent the diversity of responses to the war in Darfur by a range of NGOs that worked in the region and on issues relating to the conflict. In their article, “NGOs, IOs, and the ICC: Diagnosing and Framing Darfur,” Meghan Zacher, Hollie Nyseth Berhm, and Joachim J. Savelsberg point out that the hyper-focus on the Save Darfur movement by critics like Mamdani has generalized that organization’s failures onto all the others and thereby oversimplified the role of NGOs in the conflict and its aftermath. Sociological Forum 29, no. 1 (2014): 29–51.
careful and thoughtful engagement with the ethical and political problems that emerged in the Darfur case as well as the continued relevance of that engagement to the present day, I suspect that MSF’s témoignage discourse is correspondingly a more useful (and accessible) resource for critical reflection on anti-genocide activism. Conversely, both Givoni and MSF as an organization are careful to distinguish between humanitarian activism and human rights activism; the latter, which includes the Save Darfur Coalition, refers to activists who are engaging in explicitly political projects based on the human rights framework, while the former describes organizations like MSF whose goals of delivering assistance are oriented toward the universal alleviation of human suffering irrespective of political circumstances. Whether or not the distinction is meaningful or substantiated in general, I suggest that it highlights how MSF’s rigorous defence of the limits of humanitarianism against its subsumption into political projects of human rights advocacy may be particularly helpful for critical reflection on witnessing in particular, but it also indicates

146 Note that my analysis of the Darfur case draws on MSF’s extensive literature on the topic (especially Fabrice Weissman’s published work via CRASH, which is also cited in chapter two of this dissertation). I have only referred directly to a relatively small portion of that work, which is rather unfortunate since it was produced precisely for the purposes of critical reflection on activist practices. In particular, the conversation within MSF about intervention and the Responsibility to Protect doctrine is a rich resource to draw out that aspect of the critique presented in this dissertation (a topic that in my view is somewhat neglected in the final analysis given its depth and breadth). While Givoni does not discuss Darfur directly, she refers to discussions at MSF that are directly about Darfur even if that specific example does not appear in the book. A comparable account within the Save Darfur Coalition would have to be reconstructed in much more challenging circumstances, not just due to MSF’s methodical approach to institutional memory (and public archives) but since Save Darfur did not engage especially with the concept of “bearing witness” that made its way into their organizational principles and messaging covertly and uncritically. That is, while “bearing witness” was not among the most common phrases in the organization’s messaging, I contend that the logic of bearing witness as an enactment of “never again” implicitly informed their entire approach (consider the role of the US Holocaust Memorial Museum and their first ever “genocide alert” in the founding of the Coalition in 2004, which I reference in the previous chapter). I also want to specify that the Save Darfur Coalition proper was only one organization in a very large movement that has since expanded and transformed into a diverse range of activist communities. That is, there is a vast wellspring of institutional and public discourse (especially online) about “bearing witness” to Darfur and to genocide since Darfur, some of it assembled and analyzed in critical research, that is not engaged with directly in this dissertation in significant depth. I do not wish to imply that such discourses do not exist; I myself entered into this topic through the informal debates about response to genocide within activist communities. Based on my own experiences, I would anticipate that representative cases could be reasonably identified but constructing a thorough overview of those debates, which took place in so many different forums (a number of which are now defunct, and some discredited) and are spread out across significant time and distance (especially in virtual space) would be quite challenging.
that the specific discussions within MSF may have more or less relevance to anti-genocide activists depending on the context, i.e., my discussion of the MSF case is not fully generalizable.

Givoni’s investigation into MSF’s history shows that the organization has struggled with the ethical and political challenges of bearing witness since its founding in 1971, when it distinguished itself from established organizations like the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) by insisting on medical access to crisis zones over and above diplomatic or bureaucratic concerns. At this early stage, witnessing in its ethical sense did not yet figure as a significant framework for conceptualizing humanitarian action, and Givoni claims that debates about it emerged not from theoretical discussions but alongside the practical consequences of a subtle shift that occurred in MSF’s early years as the organization formed. That is, while the nascent MSF continued to enshrine the longstanding ICRC principles of neutrality and impartiality, the organization’s mandate to deliver medical assistance to those who needed it the most, without political interference and “beyond borders,” led to a series of decisions and circumstances in which a new sense of bearing witness could take root. With doctors venturing into the most inaccessible and dangerous places on earth, Givoni traces the emerging significance of witnessing to a sense that going “where others don’t

147 See the 1971 MSF Charter translated and printed in Laurence Binet and Martin Saulnier, *Medecins Sans Frontieres, Evolution of an International Movement: Associative History 1971–2011* (n.p.: MSF, February 2019), 24. See also on the following page (25) an English translation reprint of Jean-Claude Guillebaud’s article “Providing Assistance First” in *Le Monde* from March 7 1973. Further supporting Givoni’s critique of the linear story laid out as “the era of the witness,” MSF’s story of witnessing atrocities begins not with the Shoah but with the Biafran war (1967–1970). In order to bring out these issues for anti-genocide activists, I will rely on Givoni’s text but also refer to archival documents made public by MSF in the years since *Care of the Witness* was published in 2016, and that in my view further support her thesis. Givoni writes in her preface that she received access to MSF archives (mostly through MSF France) during the research for her book and thanks in particular Rony Brauman, Laurence Binet (who is one of the named authors on *Evolution*, the main document that was not yet available during Givoni’s research), Fabrice Weissman, Judith Soussan, and Xavier Crombé (viii). My use of the archival documents is not necessarily to add to or change anything significant about Givoni’s thorough study. Since the primary documents were now available, I chose to use them, though mostly for the historical points and to pull out some specific information that relates directly to anti-genocide activism (which has ended up mostly in footnotes).

148 Givoni, *Care of the Witness*, 184. She notes that the keyword in this early period was not humanitarianism but “medical responsibility to relieve human suffering” (184–185). This shows that MSF’s sense of witnessing developed significantly over time. The story of MSF’s immediate commitment to témoignage as a courageous act in the face of genocide in Biafra, or that the founders of MSF spoke out at the time out of concern for becoming complicit in genocide, has been shown to be false (181–182).
go” (in the words of MSF’s popular slogan from the 1970s) as a volunteer humanitarian imbued the delivery of medical assistance with a moral meaning and sense of personal transformation; in the presence of terrible suffering, the skilled professional also became an ethical, responsible agent through their humanitarian action. Many MSF volunteers felt moved by their first-hand experiences of witnessing suffering in such distant places to speak and write about them for people back home, testifying to their own personal transformation in the process. Indeed, Givoni clarifies that these eyewitness accounts were more focused on expressing something about the volunteers themselves than making public the suffering that was otherwise hidden from view. Bearing witness in this sense became “a protocol that experts could follow so as to become new subjects endowed with both technical skills and humane capacities.” In short, the position of the witness in the early years of MSF was one that could be adopted as a moral persona, the character of a skilled volunteer working to alleviate suffering in troubled, far away countries, and, by virtue of their proximity, leveraging their expert status to testify to what they saw there. The ethical aspect of witnessing is here reached as a product of the witnessing process, i.e., in the manifestation of the moral persona.

Even as the act of witnessing invigorated the movement with a sense of moral purpose in this period, bearing witness publicly (témoignage; for example, through media interviews) remained expressly against the principles laid out in the MSF charter, which included the requirement to “observe confidentiality and refrain from judging or publicly expressing an opinion – positive or negative – about events, forces, or leaders that have accepted their assistance.” That is, MSF’s rejection of ICRC’s method

149 Givoni, Care of the Witness, 193.
150 Givoni, Care of the Witness, 195.
151 Givoni, Care of the Witness, 176.
152 See the fourth principle listed in the 1971 MSF Charter (Binet and Saulnier, Evolution, 24). Givoni spends some time establishing the significance of the expert eyewitness role in humanitarian witnessing, which is implicated both in colonial thinking (of the relation between the west and distant places of suffering) and “neoliberal political rationality” (see Care of the Witness, 178).
of operation complicated the meaning of neutrality and impartiality but did not extend to putting medical access to emergency zones at risk by angering any party through public criticism or the perception of political influence. Yet, the growing sense that providing medical assistance was also an act of care, protection, and solidarity, and that the doctor could provide assistance also by becoming an expert eyewitness for western publics, had already become a commonly held view (and practice) in the membership.\textsuperscript{153} By 1979, the controversy between these positions was one of the main factors that led the group to split, sparking a decade-long dispute around the principle of neutrality and the apolitical integrity of medical humanitarianism that involved an extended legal battle over the MSF trademark.\textsuperscript{154} The turmoil over the unintended consequences of “speaking out” and the uncertainty of its benefits disturbed the uninhibited manifestation of the moral persona of the witness, emphasizing that the very real stakes of witnessing could not be removed from their political context and consequently igniting the already inflamed tension between the moral imperatives of humanitarianism against the repercussions of political action as a response to suffering within an apolitical humanitarian mission.\textsuperscript{155}

\textsuperscript{153} Givoni, \textit{Care of the Witness}, 191. In the role of expert witness, I believe we can discern another blurring of positionality as in the last section. By valuing the testimony of expert witnesses, who is the witness and who is the nonwitness? In this configuration, a gap between the two emerges that is problematic in the broader context as well, in the sense that the person who witnesses comes from a colonial world and the one who is witnessed (in this sense the actual witness) is displaced from their own narrative, voice, and context. They cannot witness themselves. The witness is externalized, beyond the event, and the priority of witnessing in its original sense as a way to “work through” and regain subjectivity is now completely absent. Perhaps what the Holocaust literature did do for witnessing theory was delay that detachment. The actual witness (even if not the most actual witness as per Levinas and Levi) was always there and considered important, a source of witnessing in and of themselves that was transmitted. The humanitarian witness makes the other witness redundant; they might as well remain an object. As was noted in the previous section, such problems become more salient for Holocaust studies and Holocaust education as the capacity to listen to survivors fades away with time.

\textsuperscript{154} Binet and Saulnier, \textit{Evolution}, 50; 56. MSF continued under the leadership of those opposed to politicization. The other major issue was MSF’s decision to introduce some forms of payment for those who volunteered for periods over six months. The group that split off is called \textit{Liberté sans Frontières}. The trademark battle was related to the neutrality debate, since MSF was concerned that the more political positions of \textit{Liberté sans Frontières} would endanger MSF missions and personnel (see for example \textit{Evolution}, 56).

\textsuperscript{155} “Apolitical” is the word used by MSF most frequently in my research, though Givoni does not use it. At times I will substitute “nonpolitical” for apolitical in order to indicate the difference between asserting the distinction between politics and something else (i.e., humanitarianism) and the implication that a person, situation, or decision...
The politicization of witnessing within MSF continued in fierce debates, especially between the national sections of the organization. However, the debate between sections was changing as the landscape for humanitarianism changed toward the end of the twentieth century, and Givoni traces another shift in the meaning of témoignage within MSF during that period. The infrastructure of international NGOs had grown significantly as it became increasingly more frequent for neoliberal governments in wealthy nations to subcontract international aid in the 1980s, so that NGOs effectively began operating as governments in and of themselves through extensive private-public networks. By the 1990s, Givoni explains, the growing regime of international security was more and more interested in capitalizing on NGO infrastructure, presence, and expertise in stations around the globe. From within the paradigm of ethical witnessing in an increasingly neoliberal political context, the politicization of humanitarian operations could be seen positively as a more efficient form of relief delivery to victims of suffering (note victim, not witness) through the forging of more direct, intricate ties between the war- and poverty-stricken countries (where NGOs operated in this way) and the sources of global power from where NGO workers originated.

The persona of the moral witness articulated through such a neoliberal rationale also became the figure of an expert helping their own government intervene abroad to make the world a safer place for everyone. With such internal motivations as well as external pressures from those governments to accommodate and even assist in establishing national security interests, Givoni notes that “humanitarian organizations began

has no political affiliations or biases at all. While I consider nonpolitical to be a more useful term here, I think in most places MSF is specifically not trying to claim no political influences (except in the sense of the humanitarian project, distinct from the specific contexts and people involved in the actual work).

See debates in 1989–1990 in Binet and Saulnier, Evolution, 144–146. MSF France, for example, championed the emerging sense of witnessing specifically as public advocacy (témoignage) against the more cautious sections like MSF Luxembourg and MSF Switzerland.

Givoni, Care of the Witness, 195–196, 199.

Givoni, Care of the Witness, 197. Recall Mamdani’s argument about the shift from active citizen to the passive recipient of humanitarian protection and assistance from the previous chapter. Part of the critique here is that this framing (of passive recipients) fails to acknowledge the direct links between war and poverty in some places and the exploitation of wealth and power by Western colonial and neocolonial states.
to play an increasingly important role in the ‘securitization’ of the unruly global peripheries, merging care for and control of populations whose distress was now constructed as a threat to liberal peace and security.”¹⁵⁹ The combination of independence, expertise, and presence that had signified the value of the witness thus far could double as a tool for military operations and the advancement of international security priorities.¹⁶⁰

The shift in témoignage to mean “public advocacy” took on a different meaning in this context, as MSF (especially the French section) loudly criticized the politicization of humanitarianism and in particular the “political instrumentalization of aid” that went against the non-discrimination principles of MSF’s Charter (which focused instead of delivering aid based on greatest need).¹⁶¹ Through this articulation, témoignage was reconceptualized as a way of recovering the ethical aspects of humanitarian witnessing from the grips of ethical and political crises as a form of speaking out about those crises. The testimony of MSF members became not just a way of feeling personally fulfilled in their role of responsible medical provider, but a way of calling out the political systems that made their work necessary in the first place and a way of fighting back against the appropriation of humanitarian witnessing into “violent political projects.”¹⁶²

But, as the meta-testimonial discourses of the organization show, MSF members were acutely aware of the fact that such an approach came with a price. Givoni reads MSF’s reaction to these events in relation to a flood of critical literature published by practitioners, activists, researchers, and journalists in the 1990s on humanitarianism, its unintended consequences, and its harmful political effects that honed in exactly on the issues raised thus far and more. These critiques, Givoni explains, “cast the humanitarian endeavor as inherently problematic” and framed it as a series of paradoxical dilemmas that constituted a

¹⁵⁹ Givoni, Care of the Witness, 196–197.
¹⁶⁰ Givoni, Care of the Witness, 196–197.
¹⁶¹ Givoni, Care of the Witness, 199–200.
¹⁶² Givoni, Care of the Witness, 199–200.
constellation of starting points for a “new humanitarian ethics.” The earlier concern about the need to appease powerful actors for access to emergency zones in MSF deliberations was recast in a new light; indeed, in highly politicized, “extreme situations,” the act of speaking out could have a greater impact on the health of populations (for example, through obtaining access that was previously refused) than neutral and impartial silence would. The debate about témoignage became less a matter of whether it should be done and more a matter of codifying what it meant in order to reach consensus on how it should be done.

Put another way, the shift in the meaning of témoignage that Givoni traces suggests that the moral persona of the expert witness became inextricably entangled in ethical and political dilemmas, both in relation to the suffering witnessed (which always took place in a political context) and in the mode of witnessing itself (as a politically implicated ethical gesture). Such challenges cannot not be addressed through the character of an apolitical witness, interested in the personal transformation that comes with volunteering abroad; indeed, the ethical and political challenges posed by the practice of witnessing constituted a crisis of humanitarian witnessing precisely because they interrupt that transformation. What is left is another sense of witnessing as a critical practice of responding to the innumerable, irresolvable, and inescapable dilemmas of humanitarian action, and which Givoni refers to as a form of ethical reasoning.

As Givoni emphasizes, MSF’s witnessing discourse is instructive in unpacking the ethical and political problems of witnessing theory because their struggles stemmed from practical issues of humanitarian action and humanitarian witnessing in an active context. The dilemmas that characterized these debates were multifaceted and numerous and took place in many venues within MSF. In the late 1980s

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163 Givoni, Care of the Witness, 173.
164 Givoni, Care of the Witness, 201.
165 Binet and Saulnier, Evolution, 144.
166 Givoni, Care of the Witness, 199–200.
and early 1990s, for example, the organization was also in the midst of a rocky international expansion of their operations and institutional structure, which brought out pressing issues of governance and policy. *Témoignage* entered into these discussions as a major policy issue centred over a heated dispute over the risks associated with one section (branch) of MSF speaking out in a way that could put another at risk.\(^{167}\)

How does one section of MSF decide when and how to “speak out” when their decisions affect the entire organization? How can such decisions be conducted with transparency and according to agreed-upon principles? *Témoignage* also figured in the growing role of international humanitarian law, adding further layers to the debates: how could *témoignage* support or undermine new legal approaches to intervention and protection?\(^{168}\)

Most significant, however, were the political crises that the principle of *témoignage* both tried to address and brought to a head during this time, especially the political manipulation of humanitarian operations by western powers described already (MSF debated the cases of Somalia and Bosnia in the 1990s especially) and the exploitation of humanitarian infrastructure by other governments and nonstate actors (such as in 1985 during the infamous famine in Ethiopia).\(^{169}\) Under these conditions of highly politicized humanitarianism, the dilemma over whether or not to speak out expanded to become a dilemma over whether to provide aid or whether to refuse to do so – a paradox between MSF’s core mission of providing medical assistance first and foremost, and the sense of responsibility to speak out against injustice and

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\(^{167}\) The disputes between MSF sections about how to address the dangers posed by speaking out for the other sections is discussed extensively in Binet and Saulnier, *Evolution* (see for example 144ff.).

\(^{168}\) *Evolution* marks MSF’s interest in international humanitarian law as beginning in 1990, when François Bouchet-Saulnier wrote a report for MSF on how international humanitarian law could support MSF activities. In the years following, humanitarian law became another important locus of debate at MSF (134ff). Bouchet-Saulnier notes in an interview included in *Evolution* that they were trying to respond, in particular, to the challenge of running aid operations on either side of a conflict by using the principles of humanitarian law “to create a [new] notion of a humanitarian space […] to work under the ‘protection’ of armed opposition groups and without agreement of the state party to the conflict” (91).

\(^{169}\) Givoni, *Care of the Witness*, 180. In 1985, the Ethiopian government used humanitarian operations to forcibly relocate hundreds of thousands of citizens to devastating losses. See also MSF’s Nobel Prize acceptance speech (1999), which also mentions the Ethiopian case directly as a major event in MSF’s internal discourse on *témoignage*. 
refuse to be implicated in political manipulation. This question reached a critical point for MSF in the turbulent period of the Rwandan genocide (1994) and its aftermath. After learning that génocidaires were diverting resources from Hutu refugee camps in the Democratic Republic of Congo and Tanzania (refugees who had fled the genocide) and manipulating humanitarian presence and infrastructure as a cover for a military insurgency campaign, MSF France decided to shut down their operations in those locations. Givoni explains that their decision, carrying the mark of a humanitarian dilemma with no good solution, “was framed and construed as an act of testimony” that was “the high point of a series of dissenting statements in which [MSF] highlighted the negative side effects of humanitarian action or warned of the drift that humanitarian compassion is bound to produce.”

The centrality of témoignage in such high stakes decision-making led MSF to finally codify témoignage as an organizational principle and attempt to define it at a 1995 conference in Chantilly, France. The Chantilly Principles produced at that conference enshrined témoignage as an essential (if secondary) complement to the humanitarian act of providing medical care. “Témoignage is done with the intention of improving the situation for populations in danger,” the document reads. “It is expressed through: the presence of volunteers with people in danger as they provide medical care which implies being near and listening; a duty to raise public awareness about these people; the possibility to openly criticise or denounce breaches of international conventions.” Importantly, however, Chantilly also codified the first

170 Givoni, Care of the Witness, 180. The Democratic Republic of Congo was called Zaire at the time, as Givoni notes on this page.

171 Binet and Saulnier, Evolution, 153–154. The path to the Chantilly conference, intended to revisit the vision of the organization at its 25th anniversary, was more complicated than I presented in the text above. Chantilly was proposed as a second Melun conference (the first Melun conference in 1992 also tried to address these major organizational issues) and followed a frustrated earlier attempt referred to in Evolution as the Royaumont retreat. Témoignage was also debated as a major agenda item at the first European Convention of MSF in Toulouse, France in 1989 (Binet and Saulnier, Evolution, 144–145). The minutes from the January 1995 International Council meetings (excerpted in Evolution) reads: “One of the steps in thinking about the principles that guide our actions will be to define how we rank these principles in relation to each other: independence, impartiality, compared with neutrality” (154).

172 “Chantilly Principles on MSF Identity” (November 20, 1995 in English and French) was reprinted in Binet and Saulnier, Evolution, 157–158.
formal limitations on témoignage as well, as the statement continues: “[Témoignage] is a last resort used when MSF volunteers witness mass violations of human rights […] In exceptional cases, it may be in the best interest of the victims for MSF volunteers to provide assistance without speaking out publicly or to denounce without providing assistance, for example when humanitarian aid is ‘manipulated.’” In other words, the adoption of témoignage as an MSF principle in the Chantilly document did not abandon the earlier principle of neutrality; it introduced the institutional ability as well as the moral justification to drop the neutrality requirement in exceptional circumstances, i.e., situations characterized by the humanitarian dilemma in which the principle of neutrality would be weighed against other MSF principles.

The definition provided in the Chantilly Principles was not intended to be definitive or to resolve the witnessing debates that continued to take place within MSF, however. The conference was succeeded by Chantilly II in 1996 and another, more unusual attempt to follow up on the critical discussions, which began in 1998 under the name of the Témoignage Case Binder project (later changed to the Speaking Out Case Studies). The goal of this project was threefold: first, a commission was established to develop a series of cases that could facilitate the discussion of témoignage and the creation of a Code of Conduct at future conferences by using real examples from collective MSF experiences; second, the product of the

173 Binet and Saulnier, Evolution, 158. See also pp. 144–148 for an earlier articulation of this distinction in the 1991 revision to the MSF Charter, which included the following policy (set for a one-year trial period) in an appendix: “Regarding public advocacy, MSF does not define itself as a human rights organisation, and has no intention of replacing human rights organisations, does not consider it to be a rule of action. In the framework below, Médecins sans Frontières does not prohibit advocacy or taking a position publicly, taking into account the fact that the impact of its public advocacy is due to its exceptional and non-political nature” (Binet and Saulnier, Evolution, 148). The framework emphasized that public advocacy (like speaking to the media) must be directly about human rights or humanitarian abuses, must be directly witnessed by MSF in places where it is hard for others to investigate, and must always be a last resort after methods of “silent diplomacy” have failed.

174 The seventh Chantilly Principle on “a spirit of neutrality” makes this explicit: “MSF does not take sides in armed conflicts and in this sense adheres to the principle of neutrality. However, in extreme cases where volunteers are witness to mass violations of Human Rights, MSF may resort to denunciation as a last available means in helping the populations it assists. In these cases, simple assistance is rendered in vain when violations persist. For this reason, MSF will drop its strict observance of the principle of neutrality and will speak out to mobilise concern in an attempt to stop the exactions and improve the situation for these populations” (Binet and Saulnier, Evolution, 158).

175 Givoni, Care of the Witness, 161; see Binet and Saulnier, Evolution, 203–204.
commission’s activities was intended to preserve institutional memory and accountability about important discussions and decisions made by the organization; and third (this one was added later, after the first case binders were produced) to be used as a pedagogical tool for MSF training. What is striking for Givoni is what the case binders demonstrate about MSF’s approach to humanitarian dilemmas. She quotes from the preface republished in each volume, which explains that the editors’ goal was to create a helpful reference document and not a set of guidelines. “Témoignage cannot be reduced to a mechanical application of rules and procedures,” it reads, “as it involves an understanding of the dilemmas inherent in every instance of humanitarian action.” Furthermore, “Faced with the difficulty of defining the term témoignage, the editorial committee decided to focus the series on case studies in which speaking out posed a dilemma for MSF and thus meant taking a risk.”

The Témoignage Case Binders project was extended and expanded after its initial launch, fostering discussion seemingly without giving anyone in the organization a sense of closure or progress. In 2006, MSF hosted what was supposed to be Chantilly III but ended up being called the La Mancha Conference, named after the hapless Don Quixote “tilting at windmills.” The resulting La Mancha Agreement was

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176 MSF, Témoignage Case Binder (TCB)/Speaking Out Case Studies, MSF Associative History (website), “Fact Sheets,” http://associativehistory.msf.org/fact-sheets, 3. The case studies were supposed to provide relevant examples that would “take the heat off” the highly contentious debates that ensued (1). The discussion about the pedagogical use of the case binders went through a few different phases and was renamed as the “Speaking Out Case Studies” series, which is ongoing alongside similar projects. The Témoignage Case Binder (TCB)/Speaking Out Case Studies document I am referring to was downloaded from the MSF Associative History website (“Fact Sheets”). A shorter version is published in Binet and Saulnier, Evolution, 203–204. Since Givoni indicates she was given access to MSF archival documents, she likely was able to review far more material that is not publicly available.

177 Laurence Binet, the MSF Speaking Out Case Studies: MSF and the Rohingya (1992–2014) (Fondation MSF / CRASH, November 2020), 3, quoted also in Givoni, 2, though from an earlier case study that has an identical foreword. I included the most recently published volume to demonstrate the continuity into the current decade.

178 Binet, MSF and the Rohingya, 3.

179 Binet and Saulnier, Evolution, 347. I think this name is reflective of a general mood toward the impossibility of resolving the témoignage debates. In Evolution, an alternative proposal for the conference was noted down as “Nothing Toulouse.” Givoni does not discuss the La Mancha conference in her book; my discussion reflects my thoughts on it after reading her text.
targeted toward addressing a new series of humanitarian dilemmas in the decade since the first Chantilly conference. It begins with the following, “The La Mancha process grew out of a need to address internal and external challenges facing MSF’s work. After over a year of discussion and debate, it is clear that all sections of MSF have a common understanding of the basis for our action as both medical and humanitarian, and inextricably linked with the expression of public positions and describing our experiences (‘témoignage’) to the points that the separation of the concept of ‘témoignage’ from operations has disappeared.” The La Mancha Agreement reaffirmed the aspects of témoignage laid out in the MSF Charter and the Chantilly Principles as well as the case specificity from the Témoignage Case Binders project, but displays a greater sense of caution toward the impacts of témoignage, intended and unintended. The “Actions” listed in the document reaffirmed the ethical imperative to speak publicly in situations of “massive and neglected acts of violence against individuals and groups,” but also adds some new distinctions. Most significantly for our purposes, La Mancha clarifies that témoignage involves speaking out according to MSF’s internal decisions about when and how to do so, thereby limiting humanitarian responsibility and re-asserting the organization’s autonomy over its decision-making and operations. This reflected what was perhaps the only conclusion yielded by MSF’s reflexive witnessing

180 “La Mancha Agreement” (finalized on June 25 2006 in English, French, and Spanish) is reprinted in Binet and Saulnier, Evolution, 351–364. The passage in this note is from p. 351.

181 Binet and Saulnier, Evolution, 351.

182 See Actions 1.9–1.14 in Binet and Saulnier, Evolution, 363. See also MSF’s acceptance speech for the Nobel Peace Prize on December 10 1999, reprinted in Binet and Saulnier, Evolution, 198–201. Right after the Témoignage Case Binder project began, MSF was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize, which the NGO took as an opportunity to speak out about the dilemmas and limits of humanitarian action. In his acceptance speech on behalf of the organization, President of the MSF International Council James Orbinski articulated a major feature of the témoignage debates in his community by distinguishing between humanitarianism and politics first: “Humanitarianism occurs where the political has failed or is in crisis. We act not to assume political responsibility, but firstly to relieve the inhuman suffering of that failure. The act must be free of political influence, and the political must recognize its responsibility to ensure that the humanitarian can exist” (198–199).

Orbinski’s speech emphasizes the distinction that characterizes MSF’s conception of witnessing from the very beginning, namely, that humanitarianism is not political. It is driven by a universal ethical principle in the face of suffering, a principle that does not discriminate based on the borders of identities or political maps and that
endeavors: that the principle of témoignage became an important site for MSF to conceptualize and articulate the limits of their ability to bear witness as both ethical gesture and political act.¹⁸³

Givoni concludes from her study of the MSF’s meta-testimonial discourses that speaking out about the dilemmas in this way was for MSF their only means to reassert their legitimacy as non-political, autonomous actors from within the dilemmas provoked by the humanitarian moral witness persona.¹⁸⁴ First, by enacting témoignage through a reflexive process undertaken collectively rather than as an individual endeavor, in Givoni’s reading MSF was able to reconceptualize witnessing as a fraught practice and end in itself instead of as a procedure of self-transformation.¹⁸⁵ Witnessing – here more distinctly a verb than a noun – refers instead to a radical openness of universalist humanitarian principles to the paradoxes of political life, a practice that resists the application of rules to unique contexts while retaining a “coherent and reflexive model for moral existence.”¹⁸⁶ Second, in the face of a hyper-politicized context, MSF’s

refuses to make “political decisions” that involve sacrificing the weak and vulnerable for other ends. Indeed, humanitarianism strives to be apolitical, “the most apolitical of all acts” (200). He asserts the limits of humanitarianism precisely in order to resist transgressing its principles by assuming political responsibility for what humanitarianism cannot address by definition. “Humanitarianism is not a tool to end war or to create peace. It is a citizens’ response to a political failure,” Orbinski repeats (199). No matter what a humanitarian actor may do, they cannot be a substitute for political response; the sentiment is captured in the now famous phrase, “no doctor can stop a genocide.” Orbinski adds, “And no humanitarian can make peace. These are political responsibilities, not humanitarian imperatives” (199).

What Orbinski asserts is not the political responsibility of MSF but its moral responsibility in proximity to suffering. Consider the point about peace in the context of his speech and our discussion thus far about the militarization and securitization of humanitarian operations. Here he is vigorously defending NGOs from the encroachment of militaries on their operations and the expansion of NGO responsibilities to address political crises through aid. The full speech can be found at on the MSF website.

¹⁸³ According to Evolutions, the distinctions were the only aspect of the process that garnered anything close to consensus (360).

¹⁸⁴ Givoni, Care of the Witness, 77. I am leaving behind the language of autonomy, as it is part of a bigger argument for Givoni regarding neoliberalism that I cannot address adequately here. I read autonomy language also as a way of articulating the freedom to distinguish contexts and refuse political responsibility, which is likely problematic since I do not engage with how MSF uses autonomy in any depth (as Givoni does).

¹⁸⁵ Givoni, Care of the Witness, 77.

¹⁸⁶ Givoni, Care of the Witness, 210–211. Givoni reads this as a “self-contained ethical universe,” I am eschewing that language since I consider my rephrasing to “openness” as still faithful to the book’s argument (a Levinasian revision on my part). Contrast MSF here with the Save Darfur Coalition on the topic of naming genocide. This
redeployment of witnessing aimed to recover their ethical position as humanitarians by distinguishing themselves from politics without denying the political context in which they operated and the political implications of their actions. In doing so, they politicized witnessing by transforming it into a public practice untethered to any instrumentalized end, and thereby opening possibilities for political acts of refusal and speech that are politically meaningful as modes of dissent. As Givoni sums up, “By simultaneously separating and bringing together the moral and the political, witnessing overturned what Bruno Latour has called in a different context “the modern Constitution” of humanitarianism.”

A new controversy (in which MSF played a central role as a major NGO that publicly criticized the application of genocide to the war in Darfur at the time) was one of three main dilemmas that spurred MSF to finally plan what became the La Mancha process (see Binet and Saulnier, *Evolution*, 344–345). The use of the word genocide can here be understood as a kind of bearing witness; by using that specific word, the intention is to verbalize or make visible a form of violence thus far invisible or ignored (see Meiches, *The Politics of Annihilation* for more on this potentiality). MSF thus debated the use of the term genocide in that context and evaluated the decision through the limited framework of témoignage to assess whether (a) the term accurately described the violence (a complicated issue, as we saw in the last chapter) and (b) whether the attention drawn by the term would alleviate suffering according to humanitarian principles. Those who opposed the use of the word genocide (rightfully, as it turned out) were concerned that its primary target of action and likely effect was the mobilization of military intervention by Western powers in Sudan. Whether or not MSF’s decision was justified, the deliberation that took place within the organization at the time, and the reflections since then, emphasizes in my reading attentiveness, accountability, specificity, and care for the victims in accordance with Givoni’s evaluation. A full case study on the Darfur case was published by MSF in 2008, see Judith Soussan, “Appendix 2: Case Study – MSF Intervention in Darfur, Sudan, 2003–2006” in *MSF and Protection: Pending or Closed? Discourse and Practice Surrounding the “Protection of Civilians”* (Paris: Fondation MSF / CRASH, July 2008), 85–112, [http://msf-crash.org/en/publications/msf-et-la-protection-une-question-reglee/appendix-2-case-study-msf-intervention-darfur](http://msf-crash.org/en/publications/msf-et-la-protection-une-question-reglee/appendix-2-case-study-msf-intervention-darfur).

In contrast, the organizations that championed the use of the term genocide have been unable to adequately articulate or address the ethical and political predicaments embedded in the deployment of the concept for purposes of justice (alternatively, as ethical response). The Save Darfur Coalition and the various other coalitions that succeeded them have dissolved or broadened their mandates beyond genocide (see notes in chapter two). Broadening mandates is one way that anti-genocide organizations have sidestepped the political and ethical challenges embedded in their institutional practices and judgements. By this I do not mean that anti-genocide activists who have taken a broader view of what genocide means have turned away from the ethical and political problems of their work (indeed, I would think the opposite). Rather, I take issue with organizations that expand their mandates beyond genocide to address the very real ethical and political consequences to the naming debates discussed in the previous chapter, but then also maintain the uncritical use of genocide and genocide discourse in their activities and messaging. Givoni’s assessment of MSF’s ability to engage with ethical and political challenges to their work resonates with me for these reasons. I think Givoni’s point is further supported by the ways anti-genocide activism markedly neglects the critical discussions of witnessing and associated practices, even as they are entrenched in these organizations (implicitly and explicitly).

187 Givoni, *Care of the Witness*, 177–178; see also p. 181, 199.

188 Givoni, *Care of the Witness*, 201, 202–203.
sense of witnessing took shape that was not the relationship of the Shoah survivor re-subjectified by testifying to a listener, nor a nonwitness striving to experience something beyond their perception. Humanitarian witnessing, in Givoni’s interpretation of MSF’s reflexive practice, shed light on the ways in which “a certain reflective relation to testimonies has come to qualify as an act of witnessing in its own right.”\textsuperscript{189}

Whether Givoni’s assessment of MSF’s enactment of witnessing as “reflexive humanitarianism” is adequate to the tasks set before it is beyond the scope of this chapter; what I aim to bring out from Givoni’s analysis is her observations of witnessing’s ethical and political dimensions. Crucially, neither the reflexive practice of self-critique and public debate regarding humanitarian dilemmas nor acts of political dissent create a new, more solid foundation for humanitarianism, still teetering on the edge of those dilemmas. Humanitarianism remains on unstable ground, neither totally moral nor totally political – as does humanitarian witnessing. The ethical responsibility entailed in bearing witness to suffering (or genocide, disaster, and war) is necessarily bound to the political contexts that remain relevant for any humanitarian action.\textsuperscript{190} Put another way, ethics and politics are not opposed; though distinct they are related to one another, as sides of a faultline. When witnessing is, in Givoni’s words, “ethicalized” through reflexive discussion and deliberation, any practical solutions that emerge from that practice are not generalizable. What is generalizable is a “framework for articulating ethical problems” that “opens up a space – of thought, discussion, and deliberation – between the moral commitment to bear witness and its instantiations.”\textsuperscript{191}

\textsuperscript{189} Givoni, \textit{Care of the Witness}, 9.
\textsuperscript{190} Givoni, \textit{Care of the Witness}, 203.
\textsuperscript{191} Givoni, \textit{Care of the Witness}, 28. A longer excerpt:

[...] witnessing and testimony have been instrumental to nongovernmental politics not just by virtue of the practical solutions they offered for making public claims but also by providing a framework for articulating ethical problems. The ethicalization of witnessing and testimony opened up a space – of thought, discussion, and deliberation – between the moral commitment to bear witness and its instantiations. Their indeterminacy channeled and helped crystallize the prospects, limits, and stakes of nongovernmental action,
Reflexive witnessing thereby signifies a suspension of the ethical imperative to bear witness to suffering, which in turn makes it possible to attend to and articulate the specific contexts and dilemmas relating to what is witnessed, and concurrently holds open the act of witnessing as itself a mode of ethical response. Givoni describes this suspension as the gap between the “the fact of witnessing – being on the spot, observing with one’s own eyes, living through the historical events – and being a witness,” a gap that Givoni sets out to widen in her book.192

In sum, Givoni’s critique of the philosophical witnessing literature (subjectivity, including post-structuralist theory) tries to recover the political context of witnessing while maintaining what it was that made witnessing theory meaningful in addressing Shoah testimony. Conversely, she criticizes the theories of witnessing that focus on its political dimensions but neglect to attend to the metaphysical subject or the way the subject who bears witness has migrated from a deeply intimate, dyadic ethical gesture into the light of the public. As a result, Givoni warns against an oversimplification of the practice of witnessing and its operation. Such discourses of witnessing concerned with “global justice, human rights, and humanitarianism” that take for granted the position and context of the humanitarian witness tend to view the crisis of witnessing in another light entirely, as a crisis of too much witnessing in a world “saturated with media images of suffering.”193 Witnessing is here fully instrumentalized again as a tool for mobilizing public sentiment and action, reduced to the transmission of information that now includes affective

While at the same time maintaining the responsibility of nongovernmental witnesses and the procedures that bring them into being as open and contested issues that cannot be settled in a universal way or addressed by philosophical means alone.

192 Givoni, Care of the Witness, 9. Interestingly, a trace of Levinas emerges here in Givoni’s distinction (though the distinctive phrasing of “saying and said” could refer to another writer): “Throughout the book and in line with their OED definitions, the terms “witnessing” and “bearing witness” will be employed interchangeably. By contrast, since this book sets out to historicize the intertwining of witnessing and testimony (the act and its discursive product, the “saying” and the “said”), I have generally preferred to preserve the distinction between these two terms and sometimes use them in pair (“witnessing and testimony”)” (2n1).

193 Givoni, Care of the Witness, 8–9.
experience, “merely an especially compelling way to establish truth and tell a larger story,” as Givoni puts it.\textsuperscript{194} What witnessing is tasked to evoke is not the “extreme and hitherto inaccessible trauma” of the philosophical witnessing theorists, but public interest and engagement about something specific. The crisis of witnessing described in this literature is indeed a real one: horrific atrocities fade from news cycles, people become desensitized to suffering, and alongside the hyper exposure of digital media is the scourge of disinformation and propaganda mixed in. The miraculous possibilities of witnessing in the digital world are countered with the proliferation of the suppression, exploitation, and falsification of testimonies.\textsuperscript{195} As Wieviorka points out as well, witnessing is not only impossible when the witness does not speak, but also when the world – beyond the empathetic listener of testimony in the settings that Laub describes – does not want to listen.

Returning to the concerns that arise from practice before theory or morals, the trouble for political responses is that bearing witness – even if the testimony witnessed rings loudly with truth, exudes affective power, and rouses moral sentiment – does not automatically translate into action or change. Bearing witness as an ethical act yields neither instructions nor results. Givoni’s account of witnessing intervenes in the literature to attend to the pressing task of witnessing today, ethically and politically: not to comprehend the enormity of each unique instance of suffering or to reconcile testimonies into truths but to inquire after the meta-testimonial discourses that can help us reflect upon and change practices of witnessing commonly taken up in publics around the world.\textsuperscript{196} Witnessing here is collective and pluralistic, moving beyond the

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\textsuperscript{194} Givoni, \textit{Care of the Witness}, 8–9. Filtered through the technologies of mass media, the figure of the witness and the practice of witnessing are being subsumed, in part, into “assemblages of people and machines, of human narratives and computer software, and of bodies and technologies from which human elements no longer care to isolate themselves neatly. As such, these posthuman witnesses seem to erode what was until recently the major task of witnessing – to preserve some form of humanity in horrendously inhuman events […]” (212).

\textsuperscript{195} Givoni, \textit{Care of the Witness}, 95.

\textsuperscript{196} Givoni, \textit{Care of the Witness}, 96–97.
duality of the survivor-nonwitness relation. Givoni’s version of the “era of the witness” at the end is not a coherent story, but a bigger discussion of all the paradoxes and crises that includes the impossibility of witnessing total destruction (Shoah) as well as the ethical imperative to bear witness through action (“never again”). Witnessing theory is not a culmination of the crisis of the Shoah and the breakage of truth and morality, but a “multifaceted struggle that […] is still trying to find its bearings.” Her analysis calls us, readers, activists, and scholars, to attend to the gap between the fact of witnessing and the act of bearing witness, but such an operation can be extended further. In the first section, I widened the gap between witnessing and bearing witness, which in the aporia of the irreducible gap drew our attention to the response of witnessing as attentiveness and insomnia. In the second section, I widened the gap between the witness and the nonwitness, raising ethical and political challenges of positionality that called the ability of witnessing to respond into question. In the last section, Givoni advocated for a widening of the gap between ethics and politics, between the ethical imperative to bear witness and the political conditions for action, unearthing that like the concept of genocide, bearing witness brings one right up to the edge of the faultline.

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197 Givoni, Care of the Witness, 54. For more on the notion of public or collective witnessing, see Trezise, Witnessing Witnessing, 223; Bernard-Donals and Glejzer, Fantasies of Witnessing, 158–159.

198 Givoni, Care of the Witness, 10–11.
Chapter Four

An-Archical Ethics: Responsibility Before and After Politics

Does the subject arrive at the human condition prior to assuming responsibility for the other man in the act of election that raises him up to this height?

– Emmanuel Levinas, 1990

4.1 Recovering Responsibility with Hannah Arendt’s Political Thinking

In the last chapter, the troubled position of witness to genocide opened the gap between the ethical demand to respond and political acts of response. Now, at the precipice, I invite you to think about the response to genocide anew in the terms of responsibility. The discussion of responsibility that I offer does not attempt to close the gap or fill up the abyss. In the face of genocide, the fault is inescapable. I conceptualize the fault along two faces of the faultline, along ethics and politics, to think through the problem of action in a way that responds to the tension between them.

First, let us review the problem of action against genocide as I have presented it in this dissertation. What drives anti-genocide activism like the Save Darfur movement is a sense that genocide should not happen in general and that we, as citizens of the world, are obligated to intervene when we see it. In my first response to this problem in chapter two, I showed how this framing already takes for granted what genocide means or can mean in the context of activism, already undermining anti-genocide activism by

1 Emmanuel Levinas, prefatory note to “Reflections on the Philosophy of Hitlerism,” trans. Seán Hand, Critical Inquiry 17, no. 1 (Autumn 1990): 63. The “Prefatory Note” was written by Levinas in 1990 for the re-publication of the 1934 essay. The terms “man” and “men” will sometimes be used to refer generally to people of all genders; this archaic usage appears exclusively in quotations and where the historical context of the phrasing is relevant.

2 The task becomes reduced to the process of identification, which involves both a legalistic (or even social scientific) process of interpretation and categorization as well as a (liberal) moral education centered around awareness, tolerance, and benevolence. The activist component only comes after, to gather public support to “mobilize political will,” i.e., to deploy existing institutional tools of intervention.
assuming empirical validity for its political and ethical objectives. That is, the target of action is neither universal nor specific but general, and therefore problematically disconnected from political contexts (depoliticized) and subsumed into pseudo-universalist ones based in (absolutist) moralism. In the case of the Save Darfur movement, we saw how the moral outrage to do something can and does obscure the equally critical (political) questions of what should be done, how, and by whom. Genocides, insofar as they are a discrete phenomenon, do not happen out of nowhere, just as peace, justice, reconciliation, and social repair do not materialize out of nothing; they occur within political contexts. Along the same lines, those who are responding to genocide (in the present context, the “we” who “see” genocide, i.e., the activists as witnesses) do not do so from an unimplicated, unrelated position (like the goodness of my heart). When moral outrage serves to depoliticize war (i.e., remove or flatten the political context in favour of absolutist approaches), the problem for activists is that the ability to respond, politically and ethically, is narrowed dramatically. The point is not that we must know with certainty how to act, but to acknowledge that not all actions are equally appropriate or desirable, and there is no one universal action in politics or ethics. In short, the point is that it matters what we (here assuming activists) choose to do.

Our choices are not one or the other. The response to genocide demands both the political and the ethical, but the problems of anti-genocide activism that I am trying to address here will benefit, I argue in a similar vein to Givoni, from the suspension of the ethical in order to reclaim political ground for inquiry and discussion. Of course, that separation is not absolute; I do not claim that it is possible to completely excise one question from the other. What I propose is a temporary ordering that will be reordered throughout this chapter. To examine these sides of the faultline and the gap between I engage two thinking companions, both eminently concerned with the response to genocide (in particular, the Shoah) as well as with the

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3 In this dissertation I use the terms “morality” and “ethics” interchangeably. Arendt frequently comments that their etymological roots (Latin mores and Greek ethos) both refer to a sense of customs or habits that are changeable. For clarity I try to refer to the distinction between ethics and politics in those specific terms.
separation between the ethical and political: Hannah Arendt and Emmanuel Levinas. Starting with Arendt, I aim to recover the political problems of the response to genocide through Arendt’s distinction between personal and political responsibility, which resists the depoliticization and moralization that has troubled our discussion thus far. I then follow Arendt back into ethical matters at the margins of politics, where we meet Levinas to re-intensify the ethical challenges of responsibility, exposing the ruptures and messiness of response, especially in the face of something like genocide. 4

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4 Though I will be engaging Arendt and Levinas in my questioning, I will attempt to pull out certain thoughts that speak to our present circumstances. A fuller exploration of Arendt and Levinas’ thinking side-by-side is warranted and already begun by a small number of scholars (as I mentioned in the introduction), most relevantly Anya Topolski (especially Arendt, Levinas, and the Politics of Relationality) and the contributors of Arrachement et évasion: Levinas et Arendt face à l’histoire, edited by Mylène Botbol-Baum and Anne-Marie Roviello. Recently, Nathan Bell published Refugees: Towards a Politics of Responsibility (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2021) that is good further reading for the specific topic of refugees and statelessness, a central aspect of anti-genocide activism (arguably a more specific site for study than mine).


The connections between major concepts in their thinking (for example: Arendt’s plurality and Levinas’ alterity; Arendt’s natality and Levinas’ fecundity), their uses of the phenomenological method and emphasis on the phenomenal world, their engagement with the Shoah (political and ethical crises), their commitment to contingency and non-normative frameworks, their discussions of topics like time, freedom, justice, humanity/humanism, thinking, and language are all explored in these texts. The conversation between the two thinkers has been picked up especially productively to critique the philosophy and politics of human rights (as well as humanism and liberalism), which is only slightly beyond the scope of the present work. It is important to point out that along with their great strengths for the purposes of those kinds of critiques, their thought is also unequipped to address matters of colonialism and racism (as Judith Butler argues in relation to both, and in Arendt and Levinas studies, respectively, this is also a subject of generative scholarship). Arendt and Levinas’ thinking on economics would be another interesting point of comparison for future study.
Hannah Arendt’s 1951 book the *Origins of Totalitarianism* is framed by the author’s own acute concern for the political problems posed by Nazism and what she terms the totalitarian movements of the twentieth century. In her prefaces and revised prefaces to the text, Arendt reflects on the urgency she felt in writing it during and after the Second World War: “It was, at any rate,” she records, “the first possible moment to articulate and to elaborate the questions with which my generation had been forced to live with for the better part of its adult life: What happened? Why did it happen? How could it have happened?”

*Origins of Totalitarianism* is an attempt to comprehend the reality of the Shoah, not in order to subsume the shock and horror of the particular into facts and figures, but to pursue the “unpremeditated, attentive facing up to, and resisting of, reality – whatever it may be or might have been.” For Arendt, this is a deeply personal project. What has to be faced is a world war and the destruction of an entire world, the world of her birth as a German-born Jew, and not out of nowhere but as the result of people’s actions, including her own neighbours, friends, and fellow citizens. What has to be faced is “the outrageous fact that so small (and, in

5 Hannah Arendt, preface to part three to *Origins of Totalitarianism*, xxiv.

6 Arendt, preface to part one to *Origins of Totalitarianism*, xiv. Even though Arendt wrote little about genocide as a concept directly (and even asserts her preference for the term “administrative massacre” in *Eichmann in Jerusalem* and elsewhere), genocide scholars have engaged her work in *Origins of Totalitarianism*, and other texts to articulate the political dimensions of genocide in the broader project of “comprehension” as well as prevention, from early genocide scholars like Irving Horowitz to contemporary texts like Anne O’Byrne and Martin Shuster’s edited volume *Logics of Genocide*. For historical context for Arendt’s influence on genocide studies see Richard H. King and Dan Stone’s introduction to *Hannah Arendt and the Uses of History: Imperialism, Nation, Race, and Genocide*, ed. Richard H. King and Dan Stone (New York: Berghahn Books, 2007).

7 Arendt’s description in “Introduction into Politics,” which I quoted in chapter three, I now include in expanded form: “If it is true that a thing is real […] only if it can show itself and be perceived from all sides, then there must always be a plurality of individuals or peoples […] to make reality even possible and to guarantee its continuation. In other words, the world comes into being only if there are perspectives […] If a people or a nation, or even just some specific human group, which offers a unique view of the world arising from its particular vision of the world […] [that] is annihilated, it is not merely that a people or a nation or a given number of individuals perishes, but rather that a portion of our common world is destroyed, an aspect of the world that has revealed itself to us until now but can never reveal itself again. Annihilation is therefore not just tantamount to the end of the world; it also takes its annihilator with it.” Hannah Arendt, “Introduction into Politics,” 175. See also more specifically (as mentioned on a previous page in-text): “What for Eichmann was a job, with its daily routine, its ups and downs, was for the Jews quite literally the end of the world.” Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil*, rev. ed., Penguin edition (London: Penguin Books, 2006), 153.
world politics, so unimportant) a phenomenon as the Jewish question and antisemitism could become the catalytic agent for first, the Nazi movement, then a world war, and finally the establishment of the death factories.” Her analysis extends her alarm deeper, to face the legacies of European imperialism and the totalitarian perversion of reality, and overall to face the political crisis of the modern world in which the great power of modern man is pitted against the profound impotence of modern life (alienation). In other words, what her questions demand is a political response that can account not just for the scale and depth of the suffering, but for the actions and systems responsible for its occurrence in the first place – and the implications for the present and future.

In the text itself, Arendt presents a political genealogy of totalitarianism that inquires after the specific influences and conditions that gave rise to Nazism as a political innovation that continues to pose a palpable threat to the world. In her view, the pressing task of comprehension is therefore one for political science, where the political threats and risks can be understood in that context.9 This approach is an intentional divergence from what Arendt sees as a more prevalent one, namely, the public fascination with the moral problem of evil. Arendt is indeed gravely concerned with the collapse of moral and political principles and systems in Europe writ large that occurred before everyone’s eyes and permitted genocide among myriads of other crimes, involving perpetrators and victims alike.10 However, she examines that

8 Arendt, preface to part one to Origins of Totalitarianism, xiv.
9 See “Understanding and Politics” (318, 326n17) and “On the Nature of Totalitarianism” (339) in Essays in Understanding 1930–1954: Formation, Exile, and Totalitarianism, ed. Jerome Kohn (New York: Schocken Books, 1994). Arendt sets this task for political scientists in opposition to philosophers, historians, and scientists, whom she sees as over-reliant on the concept of causality and thus miss the spontaneity and contingency of human action in politics. I came to the texts from Essays in Understanding via Topolski’s discussion on Arendt’s political goals for the Origins of Totalitarianism, in chapter three (“On the Political: From Ashes to Hope”), pp. 43–76.
10 See her original preface to the first edition of the Origins of Totalitarianism, and also her comments on the Jewish councils in Eichmann in Jerusalem, where she writes, “I have dwelt on this [extremely difficult] chapter of the story, which the Jerusalem trial failed to put before the eyes of the world in its true dimensions, because it offers the most striking insight into the totality of the moral collapse the Nazis caused in respectable European society – not only Germany but in almost all countries, not only among the persecutors but also among the victims.” Eichmann in Jerusalem, 125–126; quoted in Young-Bruehl, For the Love of the World, 346.
collapse not through a framework of Good and Evil but as part of a new political system, totalitarianism: in a footnote to the *Origins of Totalitarianism*, she writes, “The sudden decay of morals in the Western world seems to be caused less by an autonomous development of certain “ideas” than by a series of new political events and new political and social problems which confronted a bewildered and confused humanity.” The ordering is important; by beginning with political questions rather than moral or psychological ones, Arendt aims to inquire after the devastating moral effects of National Socialism not as unprecedented evils beyond understanding but as part of an explicit political program that accomplished the unthinkable. Through this project of comprehension, Arendt is less concerned with the academic significance of her study than with recovering the ground for political thinking in response to this new political phenomenon (totalitarianism), a phenomenon she sees as intimately connected with the present and future as well as the past. Arendt takes up this project of political thinking in her life’s work, notably

11 Arendt, *Origins of Totalitarianism*, 179n53. Later she writes, “However that may be, let us keep in mind this distinction between the speechless horror, in which one learns nothing other than what can be directly communicated, and the not horrible but often disgusting experiences where people’s conduct is open to normal judgment and where the question of morals and ethics arises.” “Some Questions of Moral Philosophy” in *Responsibility and Judgment*, ed. Jerome Kohn (New York: Schocken Books, 2003), 56.

12 Unthinkable but not out of nowhere. Inasmuch as the cruelty and violence of National Socialism was shocking, Arendt reminds us that it was not an entirely novel phenomenon either, and it would be disingenuous to act as if the atrocities committed were an eruption of primordial evil, unconnected to the people and institutions that enacted it. She writes in the essay “Personal Responsibility Under Dictatorship”: “Thus we were outraged, but not morally disturbed, by the bestial behavior of the storm troopers in the concentration camps and the torture cells of the secret police, and it would have been strange indeed to grow morally indignant over the speeches of the Nazi bigwigs in power, whose opinions had been common knowledge for years” (“Personal Responsibility Under Dictatorship,” in *Responsibility and Judgment*, ed. Kohn, 24).

Arendt points obliquely to a kind of self-indulgence or willful blindness that can crop into accounts of mass atrocities when the primary interest after-the-fact is the moral psychology of the criminal rather than the specific context (i.e., the reality that must be faced up to). Perhaps it is even more difficult to discern this lesson from the point of view of genocide education many decades later, where students learn of the events all at once instead of in the sequence of lived time. Too often the shock at genocide or any number of atrocities is tainted by a self-serving unwillingness to believe threats and violence to be what they plainly proclaim themselves to be (not excluding the idealistic or naïve brand of unwillingness that may be claimed by those other than perpetrators and collaborators). It is easy to forget that the shock expressed by some must have felt absurd indeed to those who watched the Nazi rise to power with dread.

13 Consider the parallels with Levi’s call to face the brutal realities of the Lager. Memory studies scholar Michael Rothberg argues that Levi’s focus on the distinction between victims and perpetrators is inverted by Arendt to show
in her seminal book the *Human Condition* (1958), which begins with the call to her readers “to think what we are doing” in the face of present crises.\(^{14}\)

The political meaning of responsibility, which otherwise is not a major theme in Arendt’s corpus, comes out in response to the problem of collective guilt after World War II, by which she means a sense of guilt for “things done in [one’s] name but not by them – things in which they did not participate and from which they did not profit.”\(^{15}\) Arendt is highly critical of expressions of collective guilt in political discourse (such as the claim that all Germans are equally guilty for the death camps) as morally inauthentic and politically dangerous. Compassion through solidarity, she writes in one of her subsequent responsibility essays, is “authentic only so long as I realize that it is, after all, not I but somebody else who suffers.”\(^{16}\)

Collective guilt, on the other hand, expresses solidarity not with the victims but with the wrongdoers (the

“how a dictatorship draws privileged subjects into forms of implication that differ from perpetration and criminal guilt but are nevertheless essential to the catastrophe of absolute power.” Unlike Levi, Arendt is thinking beyond Auschwitz, opening up, in Rothberg’s words, a “diachronic, or historical dimension” to guilt and responsibility by focusing more broadly on political violence and its aftermath. Arendt thus identifies other kinds of grey zones of complicity, or, in Rothberg’s presentation, implication. *The Implicated Subject: Beyond Victims and Perpetrators* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2019), 45–46.

Political scientist Tuija Parvikko writes that,*Eichmann in Jerusalem* can be understood as one of the first attempts to read the Holocaust politically. In contrast to the present-day scholars of the Holocaust, Arendt emphasised the importance of reading the Holocaust in the general European political context as opposed to separately and immanently in its own terms. While Holocaust studies tend to absolutise and depoliticise the Holocaust by claiming it was an indecipherable and incomparable phenomenon, Arendt invites us to approach it in political terms as an historical and political phenomenon that can be understood only by looking at it in its general context. I will argue that Arendt’s book remains controversial to this day because it goes against the prevailing trend in Holocaust studies of mystifying victims and putting them on a pedestal as heroes of survival, thus refusing to see them as active contributors to their own history. *Arendt, Eichmann and the Politics of the Past* (Helsinki: Helsinki University Press, 2021), 20.


\(^{15}\) Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, 278.

guilty), making it singularly inadequate for addressing the enormous and extraordinarily difficult task of determining guilt in the aftermath of war and of taking responsibility for the present and future.\(^\text{17}\) The political danger at this stage is that the cry “We are all guilty!” depoliticizes, defers, or deliberately covers up the real issues facing the world in the aftermath of the Shoah. In 1963, Arendt remarks dryly that “[t]hose young German men and women who every once in a while – on the occasion of all the *Diary of Anne Frank* hubbub and of the Eichmann trial – treat us to hysterical outbreaks of guilt feelings are not staggering under the burden of their past, their fathers’ guilt; rather, they are trying to escape from the pressure of very present and actual problems into cheap sentimentality.”\(^\text{18}\) Such expressions of collective guilt, then, become an obstacle to, if not sabotage of, her project of “facing up to reality” (or “to think what we are doing”), a project that is not only directed toward addressing the past but also the pressing problems of the present and future, such as the truly unprecedented threat of nuclear annihilation.

Though Arendt’s political thinking focuses her attention on these problems already in 1945, her extensive treatment of the topic of collective guilt only emerged after she secured an assignment to cover the 1961 trial of Adolf Eichmann in Jerusalem for the *New Yorker*.\(^\text{19}\) As much as the popular and morbid fixation with an organizer of the Final Solution,\(^\text{20}\) Arendt was drawn to the trial as a major public and

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\(^\text{18}\) Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, 251. One can see how Arendt’s tone in the Eichmann essays might have been off putting to some, especially at the time.

\(^\text{19}\) Arendt suggests as early as 1945 (in the essay “German Guilt,” published in *Jewish Frontier*) that collective guilt emerged to respond to genuinely difficult political conditions in Germany at the time, in that everyone who supported or sympathized with the regime was in some sense complicit. “Organized Guilt and Universal Responsibility,” in *Essays in Understanding*, ed. Kohn, especially pp. 124–125.

The Eichmann essays were initially published two years after the trial in the *New Yorker* magazine before they appeared as a book that same year, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (1963). A revised edition, which I refer to, was published in 1965 (a year after the German translation appeared) and included some corrections to factual information in the text and, most significantly, a “Postscript” that addresses the intense controversy sparked by the Eichmann essays. See “Note to the Reader” in *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (New York: Penguin, 2006).

\(^\text{20}\) Arendt, *Eichmann*, xii. SS-Obersturmbannführer Adolf Eichmann (1906–1962) orchestrated the mass deportation of Jews from across Europe to the death camps. The “Final Solution (to the Jewish Question)” refers to the planned,
historical event (as we saw in chapter three on the era of the witness) and to what the testimony, defence, setting, judgement, and public discourse around the trial would reveal about the problems of totalitarianism that had occupied her thus far. In particular, it was collective guilt that was put on stage in the theatre of the Eichmann trial, not only in the public discourse surrounding the trial (and in the corresponding idea of collective innocence put forward by the prosecution), but in the defence of the accused that he was “but a ‘small cog’ in the extermination machine of the Third Reich.”

In the conclusion to her series of essays (published in 1963 as Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil), Arendt rejects Eichmann’s attempt to defend himself with the “newfangled notion” of collective guilt, which she detects in what she calls “cog theory.” The cogs refer to expendable and interchangeable members of a bureaucratic system, who can always tell themselves that their actions are inevitable and their agency insignificant; “if I had not done it, somebody else could and would have.” She writes, addressing Eichmann directly in her own judgement of him:

You also said that your role in the Final Solution was an accident and that almost anybody could have taken your place, so that potentially almost all Germans are equally guilty. What you meant to say was that where all, or almost all, are guilty, nobody is. […] You yourself claimed not the actuality but only the potentiality of equal guilt on the part of all who lived in a state whose main political purpose had become the commission of unheard-of crimes. And no matter through what accidents of exterior or interior circumstances you were pushed onto the road of becoming a systematic murder of millions of Jews in the second half of WWII (developed in January 1942 at the Wannsee Conference).

21 Attorney-General of the Government of Israel v. Adolf Eichmann, (District Court Judgment, 12 December 1961), 36 ILR 5 (1968), 225–226, quoted in Joseph Powderly, “The Trials of Eichmann, Barbie and Finta” in Routledge Handbook of International Criminal Law, ed. William A. Schabas and Nadia Bernaz (Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 2011), 36–37. Powderly’s text is a helpful overview. Arendt notes that Eichmann’s layer Robert Servatius said in a press interview that “Eichmann feels guilty before God, not before the law” (Eichmann in Jerusalem, 25). In court he pled “not guilty in the sense of the indictment,” that is, he did not deny that he had done the things he was accused of, what he denied were the motives and criminality ascribed to him in the indictment. In his view, he was just doing his job (25).

criminal, there is an abyss between the actuality of what you did and the potentiality of what others might have done.\textsuperscript{23}

In this passage, Arendt’s political interest in totalitarianism focuses her attention on the ways in which the logic of collective guilt can obscure and even absolve someone like Eichmann of those actions that he did in fact perform. To accede to this logic means to accept, on some level, the claim that Eichmann had no ability to do otherwise than he did and, by extension, that another person would have done the same. For Arendt, this defence is inadequate, writing that, “even if eighty million Germans had done as you did, this would not have been an excuse for you.”\textsuperscript{24} That is, Arendt is precisely concerned with preserving the ability to judge Eichmann solely on the basis of his own monstrous actions, and through the lens of collective guilt his actions have no particular significance compared to anyone else’s.

One of Arendt’s priorities in the Eichmann essays is to bring attention back from abstract and moralizing notions of collective guilt and toward the actual guilt for actions that were committed by someone (Eichmann). It is for his actions, she insists, that Eichmann is put on trial. The very premise of the trial requires that Eichmann can be held personally responsible for what he did; in fact, the trial itself must transform Eichmann from a cog, a nobody, into a human person able to stand for judgement: not a system, not Germany, not Nazism, but Adolf Eichmann who “supported and carried out a policy of not wanting to share the earth with the Jewish people and a number of other nations […]”.\textsuperscript{25} The political challenge of

\textsuperscript{23} Arendt, \textit{Eichmann in Jerusalem}, 278. The phrase “where all are guilty, no one is” repeats across Arendt’s work, appearing as early as the 1945 essay mentioned earlier (“Collective Guilt and Universal Responsibility”). Her judgement of Eichmann is written not from a personal perspective but from the view of humanity.

\textsuperscript{24} Arendt, \textit{Eichmann in Jerusalem}, 278.

\textsuperscript{25} Arendt, \textit{Eichmann in Jerusalem}, 279. Arendt’s critique of the prosecution’s role is important for understanding Arendt’s critique but is excluded for length. I include a brief excerpt below:

For it was history that, as far as the prosecution was concerned, stood at the centre of the trial. ‘It is not an individual that is in the dock at this historic trial, and not the Nazi regime alone, but anti-Semitism throughout history.’ This was the tone set by [Israeli Prime Minister David] Ben-Gurion and faithfully followed by [Prosecutor] Mr. Hausner, who began his opening address (which lasted through three sessions) with Pharaoh in Egypt and Haman’s decree [...] It was bad history and cheap rhetoric; worse, it was clearly at cross purposes with putting Eichmann on trial, suggesting that perhaps he was only an
recovering Eichmann’s guilt from the diffusion of collective guilt is that the cog theory defence revealed in Eichmann’s testimony reflects a feature and function of the political crisis posed by totalitarianism (and to a lesser degree, any form of tyranny). Through the legalistic and at times moralizing emphasis on intent in the trial and in public discourse, Eichmann’s “cog theory” defence could be easily dismissed as a self-serving lie to cover up his evil character as the architect of the Final Solution.26 Arendt’s interest in Eichmann’s psychology, in contrast, is specifically directed toward taking cog theory seriously in that it highlights the salient political point: the architecture of the Final Solution necessarily depended on cogs, not just a few cogs but many. Eichmann’s crimes were not individualized and did not take place in a vacuum; indeed, they required a vast number of collaborators and supporters, who acted for a number of reasons and in a number of different ways.27 His motivations were only relevant to Arendt insofar as they explained how the cogs facilitated the workings of the machine.28 Eichmann’s own actions reveal for Arendt

innocent executor of some mysteriously foreordained destiny, of, for that matter, of anti-Semitism [...].

(19)

26 In the 1964 postscript to Eichmann in Jerusalem, Arendt writes:

Of course it is important to the political and social sciences that the essence of totalitarian government, and perhaps the nature of every bureaucracy, is to make functionaries and mere cogs in the administrative machinery out of men, and thus to dehumanize them. And one can debate long and profitably on the rule of Nobody, which is what the political form known as bureaucracy truly is. Only one must realize clearly that the administration of justice can consider these factors only to the extent that they are the circumstances of the crime [...]. True, we have become very much accustomed by modern psychology and sociology, not to speak of modern bureaucracy, to explaining away the responsibility of the doer for his deed in terms of this or that kind of determinism. (290)

Arendt’s contributions to legal theory have been explored in recent scholarship, see especially Peter Burdon, Hannah Arendt: Legal Theory and the Eichmann Trial (Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 2018).

27 This is one of the responses to Arendt’s critics, who dismissed her reading of Eichmann’s lack of ideological hatred as naïve. Arendt’s ability to account for collective action and maintain her focus on the political significance of Eichmann’s actions was a crucial part of her approach that was lost in the heated debates. Corey Robin, “The Trials of Hannah Arendt,” Nation 300, no. 22 (2015): 17–19; see also Rothberg, Implicated Subject, 45–48, in which he discusses Arendt’s emphasis on collective action even against her mentor Karl Jaspers (who was himself a major figure in the post-war discourse on responsibility). Robin puts it succinctly: “The body count of the Holocaust was so massive that it rendered any intention, no matter how malignant, moot” (“Trials of Hannah Arendt,” 17).

28 In this sense Arendt’s construction of totalitarianism shows its debt to Heidegger’s critique of technology, see Villa, Arendt and Heidegger, 253ff (the section is titled “Art, Technology, and Totalitarianism”).
not the actions of a sadistic torturer or mass murderer, for whom determining guilt may be a matter of simple evidence, but the actions of an administrator of death – actions that are murderous only in the context of that horrific structure, and irrespective of his intent. Arendt’s detailed discussion of Eichmann’s biography, professional aspirations, and daily life is not an attempt to get at his psychological state but to identify his actions within her longstanding research on Nazi perpetrators. This context is necessary to understand the scale of the crisis – political and moral – at hand, that “[w]hat for Eichmann was a job, with its daily routine, its ups and downs, was for the Jews quite literally the end of the world.”

The political absurdity of cog theory, in which no one is responsible, here reaches yet another level in the political situation of the Eichmann trial. Arendt reads that collective guilt draws attention away from actual guilt, but the political issue (as opposed to a legal or ethical one pertaining to the judgement of a mass murderer) is that it also obscures the much more complex webs of complicity that permeated German society after the war, complicity that Germans had no way to account for or to address. There were, of course, many cogs, of varying significance and capacities, and judging or determining the responsibility of the cogs within the Nazi system was and is extraordinarily difficult, extraordinary in the sense that it involved the novel political system of totalitarianism. The pressing political problem in the aftermath of the

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30 Parvikko emphasizes that the broader context of Arendt’s research on the “character of the Nazi criminal” is often ignored by her critiques (*Politics of the Past*, x). In her coverage of the Eichmann trial, Arendt points to her political interest in the actions of Nazis: “[…] it was of great political interest to know how long it takes an average person to overcome his innate repugnance toward crime, and what exactly happens to him once he has reached that point. To this question, the case of Adolf Eichmann supplied an answer that could not have been clearer and more precise” (*Eichmann in Jerusalem*, 93). Arendt emphasizes here how limited political action and the possibilities for learning become when people focus unduly on the psychology or moral character of figures like Eichmann (a mass murderer). The highly moralistic approaches to genocide education indulge in this kind of shallow fascination with evil and monsters, which only serve to obscure the crucial political lessons and histories at play. They are also extremely effective tools of propaganda.

Shoah is that expressions of collective guilt only served to justify the enormous reluctance in post-war Germany (and elsewhere) to hold individuals accountable, resulting in half-hearted and partial prosecutions, with Nazis openly evading judgement and maintaining prominent roles in government and society. Politically, the concept of collective guilt, Arendt says, “turned into a highly effective whitewash of all those who had actually done something […]” and became an important political tool of the post-war regime.32

The Eichmann case crystallized for Arendt this crisis of responsibility in the aftermath of totalitarian violence, in particular because of the way the prosecution and the public shied away from these difficult questions.33 It is somewhat ironic that Arendt is best known for her essays on the famous Nazi trial, not for her political analysis but for her moral evaluation of the accused suggested by Arendt’s now idiomatic phrase, “the banality of evil.” Her emphasis on the political context and consequences of the trial (necessary to understand her argument and judgement of Eichmann) was lost in the highly contentious reception of the Eichmann essays, which sparked a furious campaign against her and a controversy that continues more than fifty years later.34 Arendt’s attempts to clarify her argument about the political response

32 Arendt, “Personal Responsibility Under Dictatorship,” 21. A similar error is made by Eichmann’s prosecutor, Gideon Hausner, and the Israeli government’s framing of the trial as a whole. In Arendt’s view it is also a mistake to put Eichmann on trial as a symbol or representative of Nazism instead of judging him on the basis of his own actions. This approach also diminishes the power of judgement since it ascribes to Eichmann more than what he did himself, an unnecessary extension of what was already an unforgiveable offence.

33 Arendt, Eichmann in Jerusalem, 17–19.

34 Given her idiosyncratic writing style and specific theoretical focus, which do not lend themselves to easy comprehension in the best of circumstances, Arendt anticipated criticism for some of her claims and language (some of which she came to regret and removed from later editions), but the ways in which her arguments were misread and misrepresented amplified the sting of the considerable backlash. See Young-Bruehl, For the Love of the World, chapter 8, “Cura Posterior: Eichmann in Jerusalem (1961–1965),” 328–378.

In my accounting there are four main misreadings/misrepresentations of Arendt’s argument that are commonly found even today. First, critics claim that Arendt’s discussion of Jewish collaborators (in particular her claim that Jewish councils helped facilitate the Final Solution faster or more efficiently than it might have if they had resisted) implies that the Jews shared responsibility or were more responsible for their own slaughter than Eichmann. Second, critics are offended by Arendt’s claim that Eichmann was not particularly motivated by antisemitic or ideological hatred, a topic that has only become more heated as documents from Eichmann’s interrogations and other interviews were made public in recent years; see for example Deborah E. Lipstadt’s 2011
to Nazism and the problems of collective guilt took her deeper into questions of responsibility, and it is this thread that I will attempt to follow through her subsequent works.35

Responsibility entered into Arendt’s political vocabulary in order to address the politically important sense expressed in collective guilt of being responsible for something that one has not done. Such a situation is not a matter of guilt and innocence (legal or moral) or personal responsibility, which Arendt argues only makes sense on the basis of an individual’s actions. Rather, it is a matter of political responsibility, which refers to the responsibility assumed on behalf of one’s community, conferred “by virtue of being born into a historical continuum […] burdened by the sins of the fathers as […] blessed with the deeds of our ancestors.”36

It is political responsibility, as the concern for the fate of the world and the vicarious responsibility for the actions of others in my community, that builds the solidarity necessary for

book The Eichmann Trial (New York: Schoken Books, 2011), and After Eichmann: Collective Memory and the Holocaust since 1961, ed. David Cesarani (Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 2005). Third, they read “the banality of evil” as diminishing or minimizing the scale of the Nazi (radical) evil. Fourth (and this one is common among the more sympathetic readers of Arendt also), they understand Arendt’s concern with Eichmann’s banality as an argument that the lesson Eichmann offers is that even normal, regular people have the capacity for terrible evil.

All of these arguments fail to take into account that Arendt’s writings on the Eichmann trial focused on a political analysis of the events within a broader theoretical project she had begun in the 1930s (see especially Robin. Trials of Hannah Arendt”; Burdon, Hannah Arendt; Parvikko, Politics of the Past). The misreadings of Arendt continue into current scholarship; one very recent example is The Eichmann Trial Reconsidered, edited by Rebecca Wittmann (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2021). The trial and Arendt’s coverage of it remains controversial partially because new evidence continues to emerge, and it is important to revisit the trial and its controversy in light of these developments. Another example of a recent, edited volume that has attempted this task but with greater attentiveness to Arendt’s thinking is The Trial that Never Ends: Hannah Arendt’s Eichmann in Jerusalem in Retrospect, edited by Richard J. Golsan and Sarah M. Misemer (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2017).

35 In this section I will focus mostly on a series of essays anthologized in a volume titled Responsibility and Judgment (2005), edited by Arendt’s former graduate student Jerome Kohn. In particular: “Personal Responsibility Under Dictatorship” (based on a 1964 interview), “Some Questions of Moral Philosophy” (edited lectures from a course Arendt taught in 1965–1966), and “Collective Responsibility” (a 1968 lecture delivered at a symposium with that title held by the American Philosophical Society). See Kohn’s introduction to the text and note to readers for useful context.

36 Arendt, “Personal Responsibility Under Dictatorship,” 27. Arendt refers to political responsibility as “collective responsibility” as well. I choose to use the former term because her use of the latter was contextual. She wrote the essay “Collective Responsibility” as a respondent to a paper at a symposium on collective responsibility in 1968; following Kohn’s explanation in the beginning of Responsibility and Judgment, I suggest that political responsibility may be a more appropriate reflection of her thinking on this matter (Kohn, introduction to Arendt’s Responsibility and Judgment, xxxii). The term also better delineates the relationship between political responsibilities and the divide between politics and ethics for my purposes.
action and, as Anya Topolski has observed, strengthens the web of human relations that forms the community itself.\footnote{Topolski, \textit{Politics of Relationality}, 99. Topolski points out, rightly in my view, that political responsibility here functions similarly to promises and forgiveness, which are given political dimension in the \textit{Human Condition} as the faculties that can create and strengthen bonds in community (Arendt, \textit{Human Condition}, 232–245). Arendt is drawing this distinction between personal and political responsibility from Machiavelli (“Some Questions of Moral Philosophy,” 80).} In short, it is only in community with others that power, in Arendt’s specific usage, gathers and can erupt into something new (action).\footnote{The following explanation of power from the \textit{Human Condition} is instructive:}

> What first undermines and then kills political communities is loss of power and final impotence; and power cannot be stored up and kept in reserve for emergencies, like the instruments of violence, but exists only in its actualization. Where power is not actualized, it passes away, and history is full of examples that the greatest material riches cannot compensate for this loss. Power is actualized only where word and deed have not parted company, where words are not empty and deeds are not brutal, where words are not used to veil intentions but to disclose realities, and deeds are not used to violate and destroy but to establish relations and create new realities. […] Power is what keeps the public realm, the potential space of appearance between acting and speaking men, in existence. […] Power is always, as we would say, a power potential and not unchangeable, measurable, and reliable entity like force or strength. While strength is the natural quality of an individual seen in isolation, power brings up between men when they act together and vanishes the moment they disperse. (200)}

Political responsibility, in contrast to personal responsibility, can provide an account of this kind of vicarious responsibility, which extends even across time, but it also shows that this kind of responsibility can only be assumed when one belongs to a community of others.\footnote{In addition to the condition of taking responsibility for the actions of the community as a whole, membership in a community has one other criterion according to Arendt: the membership can be that “[which no voluntary act of mine can dissolve. […] We can escape this political and strictly collective responsibility only by leaving the community, and since no man can live without belonging to some community, this would simply mean to exchange one community for another and hence one kind of responsibility for another” (“Collective Responsibility,” 149–150). In other words, one must maintain this belonging, but membership in one community can be exchanged for membership in another. In this sense, political responsibility is omnipresent but not immutable. Arendt’s reference to the “nation” at times should not suggest that she refers exclusively to the State (particularly in a modern context, as opposed to the Greek \textit{polis}). Consider, however, the ways in which the critiques of groupism from chapter two apply here as well. A valuable consideration of the shortcomings of Arendt’s conception of the group and reliance on citizenship (as political issues) can be found in Michael Rothberg’s \textit{Implicated Subject}, see especially p. 50. See also 215n22, in which he discusses the benefits of Arendt’s conception in describing complex political spaces but criticizes her simplification of how political responsibility operates in situations of immigration. On the other hand, Arendt does not attempt to define communities concretely and stays (deliberately) vague about what they might look like, which in my opinion is why Arendt is still picked up productively in genocide discourse by some scholars. See especially Anne O’Byrne’s work on “generational being” in \textit{Logics of Genocide} (2020); see also Hannah Arendt and the Uses of History, edited by historians King and Stone.}
Through her distinctions between collective guilt, personal responsibility, and political responsibility, Arendt refers to larger political problems that extend beyond the context of post-war Germany. “Totalitarian society, as distinguished from totalitarian government,” she says in a 1964 essay titled “Personal Responsibility Under Dictatorship,” “is indeed monolithic: all manifestations, cultural, artistic, learned, and all organizations, welfare and social services, even sports and entertainment, are ‘coordinated.’” In her description, totalitarianism collapses the boundaries between all spheres of life, so that not just those boundaries but also individuals and groups become subsumed into the coordinated, totalizing whole. One is alienated from one’s private life, separate from mass society (for example, the ability to continue on in the political, social, and economic life of the Third Reich while refusing to become a Party member) and one is alienated from the public life, which, in Arendt’s political theory, requires a plurality of perspectives to sustain itself as “the common world” (or “the space of appearances”). The loss of plurality destroys the public sphere and with it the political, as Arendt explains: “This can happen under conditions of radical isolation, where nobody can any longer agree with anybody else, as is usually the case in tyrannies. But it may also happen under conditions of mass society or mass hysteria, where we see all people suddenly behave as though they were members of one family, each multiplying and prolonging the perspective of his neighbor.” Totalitarian society is one such context in the modern world that destroys the public realm and so is characterized by the condition of loneliness and the breakdown of political responsibility, a form of responsibility that cannot endure when the solidarity of community is cut off and the possibility to appear in public through one’s words and deeds is shut down.

41 Arendt, Human Condition, 57–58.
42 See also “Collective Responsibility,” 156, where she refers to such contexts as “marginal situations.” Topolski cautions in a footnote against identifying personal and political responsibility with the private and public realms, respectively, since Arendt claimed that Hitler was both personally and politically responsible (Topolski, Politics of Relationality, 107n21; for Arendt on Hitler’s responsibility see Arendt, “Personal Responsibility Under Dictatorship,” 30). Perhaps I can speculate that political responsibility belongs exclusively to the public realm,
Here the lack of political responsibility becomes another crisis of totalitarianism that must be faced. “[P]olitical responsibility always presupposes at least a minimum of political power,” Arendt writes. Under “extreme situations” like totalitarianism, where the public realm is destroyed and innumerable obstacles exist in the formation of solidarity and community, that sense of “complete powerlessness” is in Arendt’s view “a valid excuse” for doing nothing. Here her point is more descriptive than moral or legal. If someone feels powerless, action seems impossible and therefore becomes impossible, even if it is not literally so. Thus, this (phenomenological) limit of powerlessness is, as she specifies in the 1968 paper “Collective Responsibility,” “entirely subjective; its authenticity can be demonstrated only by the willingness to suffer.”

It is important for Arendt not to underestimate the danger of powerlessness as a political phenomenon, but the Eichmann case demonstrates that it may be a defence against charges of political irresponsibility, not personal irresponsibility, that relates to guilt and innocence. That is, even if one were to accept wholesale Eichmann’s impotence and therefore his inability to take political responsibility for the crimes of the Third Reich, Arendt holds that he can still be responsible for his own actions as an organizer of genocide. Indeed, as a cog in the administrative machine of death, Eichmann and others might have felt politically impotent, but they were not fully helpless. Reading against the western tradition of obedience as a political virtue, Arendt refutes the common Nazi defence of “just following orders” by pointing out that

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where politics appears, but personal responsibility is extended from the private sphere (where I am an individual, where I am when I think) into the public, since I also appear in politics and action as a singular person. As such I think the private/public distinction is, like all of Arendt’s distinctions, not really absolute, but nevertheless a helpful tool for thinking.

the cogs in this political structure are not obedient but supportive of the regime. Without the cogs, the machine breaks down. Arendt emphasizes the political significance of this refutation: if Eichmann and others had refused to do their job, the administrative machine of death would not have been able to achieve its political purpose, and a moment’s reflection on the possibility of enough people acting “irresponsibly and refus[ing] support, even without active resistance and rebellion, [shows] how effective a weapon this could be.” In short, Arendt argues, “there is no such thing as obedience in political and moral matters. […] Hence the question addressed to those who participated and obeyed orders should never be, ‘Why did you obey?’ but ‘Why did you support?’.”

Bracketing political responsibility reveals more starkly what is left when people are politically powerless; as Arendt elaborates in a 1964 interview, “We need to realize that in totalitarian circumstances the phenomenon of powerlessness exists, and we need to realize that even in circumstances of absolute powerlessness, the border between obedience and support is never completely sharp. It is always possible to draw a line somewhere, and to say, ‘Here we are dealing with obedience, and here with support.’ But the line is always somewhat blurred.”

Put another way, in “What is Authority?” Arendt discusses the role of obedience in more depth, specifying that authority which rests on obedience implies consent as well, since it refers to the sense that people comply with authority without the need for force or violence. The blurriness of the concept is the reason why Arendt finds it unhelpful for political thinking. Note that for Arendt, political equality is distinct in that it is not absolute but also contextual and finite. In political spaces, actors are “equalized” for a particular purpose and for that particular context, creating a space of appearances between them where they can speak and be heard by others. See especially Arendt’s treatment of equality (equality of antiquity and equality of modernity) in the *Human Condition* (215ff).

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46 See Arendt, “Personal Responsibility Under Dictatorship,” 46ff, though the point is made elsewhere regarding Eichmann and other Nazi trials. See for example, “Some Questions of Moral Philosophy;” Hannah Arendt, *On Violence* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1970); Hannah Arendt, “What is Authority?” in *Between Past and Future: Eight Exercises in Political Thought* (New York: Penguin Books, 2006), 91–141. Arendt draws the distinction between obedience and support from the observation of the imbalance between the person in a situation of helplessness (for example, the enslaved person who obeys their oppressor or the concentration camp inmate who obeys their jailor) and a person whose participation maintains the structure or action, i.e., if they withdraw their obedience the leader is helpless as action requires supporters. To summarize the presently relevant parts of Arendt discussion of obedience, insofar as obedience is political (here, in Arendt’s sense, implying a sense of equality), it always implies some level of consent (as a member of the structure whose obedience is politically meaningful). This is a completely different circumstance than one in which obedience is demanded via coercion or violence (“Personal Responsibility Under Dictatorship,” 47).

47 See Arendt, “Personal Responsibility Under Dictatorship,” 47–48. See also Arendt’s comments along these lines in other contexts, for example in On *Violence*: “The sudden dramatic breakdown of power that usters in revolutions reveals in a flash how civil obedience – to laws, to rulers, to institutions – is but the outward manifestation of support and consent” (49).

powerlessness there are still ways of behaving.”  

Under conditions of totalitarianism (i.e., the collapse of the private and public spheres of life), the problem is that every aspect of a person’s life involves situations of support for the structure. For Eichmann, as for many others, to legitimately deny or refuse responsibility for the crimes of the Third Reich and of his fellow party members without giving up personal responsibility, he would have had to completely withdraw from society. At the same time, without political power, moral propositions underpinning personal, non-political acts of nonparticipation (or the withdrawal of support as a matter of personal responsibility) gain political significance. Arendt draws this conclusion against the background of those who did in fact withdraw their support, either by leaving society or in solitary acts of nonparticipation. Such stories of nonparticipation, such as the story of the German soldier Anton Schmidt, who risked and lost his life saving Jewish resistance fighters, would be “practically useful,” as she explains directly in the Eichmann essays: “For the lesson of such stories is simple and within everybody’s grasp. Politically speaking, it is that under conditions of terror most people will comply but some people will not, just as the lesson of the countries to which the Final Solution was proposed is that “it could happen” in most

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49 Hannah Arendt, “Eichmann was Outrageously Stupid,” interview by Joachim Fest, Das Thema, SWR TV, Germany, November 9 1964, trans. Andrew Brown, printed in The Last Interview and Other Conversations (Brooklyn, NY: Melville House Publishing, 2013), ebook. The entire passage is worth including in full:

We need to realize that in totalitarian circumstances the phenomenon of powerlessness exists, and we need to realize that even in circumstances of absolute powerlessness there are still ways of behaving. In other words, it doesn’t imply that you absolutely have to become a criminal. The phenomenon of powerlessness tips the scales, and this was of course the situation of all these people. They became absolutely powerless. There was no possibility of resisting, since they were all isolated, since they didn’t belong together anywhere, since not even a dozen people could get together, as it were, and trust one another.

50 Arendt, “Personal Responsibility Under Dictatorship,” 32–34. Note that public is a broader category for Arendt than political.

Whoever participates in public life at all, regardless of party membership or membership in the elite formations of the regime, is implicated one way or another in the deeds of the regime as a whole. What the courts demand in all these postwar trials is that the defendants should not have participated in crimes legalized by that government, and this nonparticipation taken as a legal standard for right and wrong poses considerable problems precisely with respect to the question of responsibility. For the simple truth of the matter is that only those who withdrew from public life altogether, who refused political responsibility of any sort, could avoid being implicated in crimes, that is, could avoid legal and moral responsibility. (33–34)
places but it did not happen everywhere."\textsuperscript{51} That is, the political danger in the illusion of obedience – including obedience to history or progress or other such ideas – is that it ends up securing totalitarian success by surrendering action to narratives of inevitability or lesser evils. Without retaining the possibility of refusal, action, and with it, new beginnings, are indeed impossible and other futures are surrendered or sacrificed. Furthermore, as Arendt elaborates in her 1968 lecture on political responsibility, nonparticipation can become political when it is enacted in the plural (with others) and when there is “hope that resistance in the form of refusal to participate will bring about a change in policy.”\textsuperscript{52} Acting together with a hope for, or belief toward, change brings responsibility into its political register, where “what is in the center of consideration is not the self […] but the fate of the nation and its conduct toward other nations in the world.”\textsuperscript{53}

What has the capacity to break open totalitarian logic and open possibilities for response therefore exists on multiple levels: in action with others (politically), but also as a curiously private withdrawal from the world through personal (moral) responsibility, which in extreme situations becomes politically meaningful. Arendt’s explanation for the nonparticipants, those who did not necessary resist but abstained, refusing to be implicated by their own actions even at the cost of life, is the opposite of Eichmann’s thoughtlessness. As a last resort, support can always be withdrawn if a person realizes through the activity of thinking – which for Arendt refers to the Socratic sense of being with oneself, questioning and answering oneself – that they can no longer support and remain able to live together with themselves.\textsuperscript{54} To think in this manner requires solitude, the withdrawal from the world to be in one’s own company. If one commits murder, then, Arendt points out that one must live with a murderer in one’s own mind unless one were to

\textsuperscript{51} Arendt, \textit{Eichmann in Jerusalem}, 233.
\textsuperscript{52} Arendt, “Collective Responsibility,” 155.
\textsuperscript{53} Arendt, “Collective Responsibility,” 155.
\textsuperscript{54} Arendt, “Some Questions of Moral Philosophy,” 166.
cease the activity of thinking with oneself altogether. Eichmann’s unsettling thoughtlessness is thus understood again as a refusal to be a somebody, even to himself, and rather as the persistent choice to be a nobody and refuse responsibility. From this Arendt concludes that although the thinking activity is not in itself political, it is still “an activity that has certain moral results, namely that he who thinks constitutes himself into a somebody, a person or a personality.”

It is such questions, and the ability to pose them to oneself (thinking), that constitutes the last bastion against totalitarian logic and opens the door to responsibility and judgement in extreme situations when usual standards and rules fail. However, when someone asks themselves, “can I live with myself?” it is no less subjective a question than that of powerlessness. The lack of moral grounding or guarantee is a part of Arendt’s response to Nazism, one that reflects harshly on the limits of moral standards and personal conscience. While everyone must have the ability to think, nothing guarantees it – including education and moral instruction. In “Some Questions of Moral Philosophy,” Arendt illustrates her reasons for rejecting

55 Arendt, “Some Questions of Moral Philosophy,” 111–112. Eichmann’s refusal to think and remember (i.e., be responsible) makes him “unfit” for human togetherness in Arendt’s view. This is the basis of the death sentence delivered in her judgement.


57 Arendt makes this point as early as the Origins of Totalitarianism:

The next decisive step in the preparation of living corpses is the murder of the moral person in man. [...] This attack on the moral person might still have been opposed by man’s conscience which tells him that it is better to die a victim than to live as a bureaucrat of murder. Totalitarian terror achieved its most terrible triumph when it succeeded in cutting the moral person off from the individualist escape and in making the decisions of conscience absolutely questionable and equivocal. [...] Through the creation of conditions under which conscience ceases to be adequate and to do good becomes utterly impossible, the consciously organized complicity of all men in the crimes of totalitarian regimes is extended to the victims and thus made really total. The SS implicated concentration-camp inmates – criminals, politicals, Jews – in their crimes by making them responsible for a large part of the administration, thus confronting them with the hopeless dilemma whether to send their friends to their death, or to help murder other men who happened to be strangers, and forcing them, in any event, to behave like murderers. The point is not only that hatred is diverted from those who are guilty (the capos were more hated than the SS), but that the distinguishing line between persecutor and persecuted, between the murderer and his victim, is constantly blurred. Once the moral person has been killed, the one thing that still prevents men from being made into living corpses is the differentiation of the individual, his unique identity. (451–453)

58 Arendt, “Collective Responsibility,” 156–157. “No objective sign of social or educational standing can assure its presence or absence.”
what she sees as the demonstrably false premise that moral correctness is self-evident, which fails utterly to explain the mass immorality in Nazi Germany. She repeats the argument she makes elsewhere several times and attributes to her “nontheoretical moral education” at the outset of the Nazis’ rise to power, that: “Morality collapsed into a mere set of mores – manners, customs, conventions to be changed at will – not with criminals, but with ordinary people, who, as long as moral standards were socially accepted, never dreamt of doubting what they had been taught to believe in. […] Hence we must say that we witnessed the total collapse of a “moral” order not once but twice, and this sudden return to “normality” contrary to what is often complacently assumed, can only reinforce our doubts.”

Out of doubt and mistrust rooted in the traumatic experiences of the Second World War, Arendt does not shy away from the subjectiveness of moral questions in the face of the Shoah and instead makes it central to her thinking. What prevents someone from becoming an Eichmann cannot be determined in positive terms, which collapse in the face of total destruction. She offers instead a discussion of responsibility that is “highly subjective” and “entirely negative:” responsibility dependent upon (political) power and the ability to endure one’s own company. When personal responsibility becomes the last resort in a crisis, “[i]t will never tell you what to do, only prevent you from doing certain things, even though they are done by everybody around you.”

What I would like to highlight at this point is Arendt’s embrace of the contingent, contextual, and particular in opposition to the totalizing, on both sides of the faultline: politics and ethics. Whether we are thinking or judging or acting together, the question of responsibility can never be abstracted. Inasmuch as it is subjective it is also inescapably concrete in an emergency: “can I live with myself?” is not a theoretical

60 I think this is also where she tends to rely, in a complex and tense way, on phenomenology as a method for approaching ethics. In fact, in her personal correspondence Arendt indicates that at this point she is trying to construct a political ethics, grounded in political principles and the experience of action, plurality, freedom. See Topolski, Politics of Relationality, 102; also quoted in Young-Bruehl, For the Love of the World, 376.
question for personal responsibility just as the world is at stake concretely in the political. Responsibility through Arendt’s analysis is pulled away from abstract questions to fixate instead on action, on the response itself, in politics and – in a crisis – in ethics as well.

4.2 Prior to Response: Thinking Apart the Totality

From the responsibility essays until her sudden death in 1975, Arendt continued to pursue the questions she posed in Eichmann in Jerusalem through an unfinished, three-part book on the mental (i.e., invisible) faculties of thinking, willing, and judging that she titled the Life of the Mind. The introduction to the first part, “Thinking,” begins with a brief reflection on her concept of the “banality of evil,” which she claims she introduced with “no thesis or doctrine” though she was “dimly aware of the fact that it went counter to our tradition of thought – literary, theological, or philosophic – about the phenomenon of evil.” What struck Arendt about Eichmann’s “banality” was that “the manifest shallowness in the doer made it impossible to trace the uncontestable evil of his deeds to any deeper level of roots or motives.” The unnerving disconnect between the scale of Eichmann’s crimes and the man’s attitude toward them directly obstructed Arendt’s project of “facing up to” the past by understanding something about how people could have done the things that they did, not through the lens of a moral crisis but through political analysis of contexts and relationships. But behind Eichmann’s monstrous deeds, Arendt was disturbed to find not a typically immoral character, nor “moral insanity,” nor even sheer stupidity, but an abyssal form of

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64 Arendt, Life of the Mind, 1:3. I refer to the two volumes of the Life of the Mind in the same manner as this note throughout.

65 Arendt, Life of the Mind, 1:4.
thoughtlessness permeating his defence, even in non-moral matters.\textsuperscript{66} The pressing political question, then, is about the relationship between this kind of thoughtlessness and action, and between thought and action more generally (a major theme in the \textit{Human Condition} as the dichotomy between the \textit{vita activa} and the \textit{vita contemplativa}). Correspondingly, Arendt begins the \textit{Life of the Mind} by asking whether “the activity of thinking as such” can “condition” a person against “evil-doing.”\textsuperscript{67}

By specifying “evil-doing,” Arendt continues to draw focus away from discussions on the nature of evil (the domain of ethics and theology) and toward understanding the conditions that lead one to do evil, or not. That is, along with Eichmann she has in mind Anton Schmidt; in the face of such evil, along with perpetrators and collaborators there are also nonparticipators and even resisters. Even when there is political powerlessness with no community, no course of action, nor hope for change, there is still the possibility to withdraw support if one is willing and able to do so. Here in the face of extreme situations of moral and political crisis (total destruction), Arendt’s questions of ethical (or personal) responsibility push her to expand her theoretical scope to the politically marginal, for the inquiry into the conditions that lead one to do evil is also an inquiry into the conditions for non-political action (such as nonparticipation). Just as she does not seek a theory of evil, neither does she aim toward a theory of the Good and thereby toward the foundation of a new ethics.\textsuperscript{68} Instead, Arendt continues her phenomenological investigation into the

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\textsuperscript{66} Arendt, \textit{Life of the Mind}, 1:4. Arendt helpfully includes clichés as an example of Eichmann’s thoughtlessness here (a phrase that can be used without thought or judgement of particulars).

\textsuperscript{67} Arendt, \textit{Life of the Mind}, 1:5. Here Arendt is softening the somewhat hard distinction between the \textit{vita activa} (active life, politics, newness, immortality) and the \textit{vita contemplativa} (contemplative life, philosophy, stillness, eternity) from the \textit{Human Condition}, based on the observation that the more antagonistic characterization she used in the earlier text itself comes from the opponents of the \textit{vita activa} and could bear rethinking from another place. At this point, she is as concerned with the relationship between thinking and acting as she is in distinguishing them from one another. The overall argument is prefigured in “Some Questions of Moral Philosophy,” where she also specifies that thinking is an activity in contradistinction to contemplation: see especially pp. 105–106.

\textsuperscript{68} Refer to note 60 of the previous section for Arendt’s description of her work as an attempt at a “political ethics” (i.e., non-normative). See also Arendt’s introduction to \textit{Life of the Mind}, 1:3.
experience of “thinking with oneself” (connected to conscience, as con-science) that takes into account the thinking activity’s own lack of grounding and inability to produce moral responses independently. From the beginning, she is clear that though thinking is an activity – “Whenever we think, we stop whatever else we may have been doing, and as long as we are two-in-one, we are unable to do anything but think” – but not an action: undertaken in solitude (where I am split into more than one) or in the company of “the self of another” (e.g., a friend), thinking has no results in the world except as a “kind of by-product […] It is not the same as the goal at which an act aims at and consciously intends.”

What is it, then, about the thinking activity that can recover the last vestiges or the trace of plurality in action, not to provide maxims but to be responsible in times of crisis? In this section, I will follow Arendt’s discussion of personal responsibility from the responsibility essays and into the Life of the Mind, where thinking and acting (or, as we shall see, ethics and politics) are explored through distinction and “inherent tension” rather than opposition. I will then turn to Levinas’ notion of responsibility from the other side of the faultline to re-intensify the ethical paradoxes of responsibility in the face of genocide without depoliticizing them.

Toward the end of part one of Life of the Mind (“Thinking”), Arendt returns to the figure of Socrates, whom she situates as the quintessential observer of the thinking process, and his description of it as a dialogue that I have with myself. Arendt draws out two positive maxims from Socrates’ dialogue in

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69 Arendt, Life of the Mind, 1:5.

70 Arendt, “Some Questions of Moral Philosophy,” 105–106. Thinking is a private experience that I can only undertake with myself (and so I split into more than one) or with “the self of another,” whereas action is always undertaken with others.

71 All of this is already said explicitly in “Some Questions of Moral Philosophy,” especially pp. 105–106. The language of the “trace” is also Arendt’s own: “But this two-in-one, looked upon from the standpoint of human plurality, is like the last trace of company – even when being one by myself, I am or can become two – which becomes so very important only because we discover plurality where we would least expect it” (106).


73 Arendt’s reading of Socratic thinking as the “two-in-one” appears throughout her work and should be read in relation to Heidegger’s commentaries on Plato. The following discussion on the relationship of thinking to ethics was developed by Arendt over multiple years and appears prominently in the moral philosophy courses she taught at the
the *Gorgias* that she notes are rare offerings from an aporetic thinker who claimed to know nothing.\(^7^4\) Read together, Arendt concludes that these two maxims reveal fundamental characteristics of thinking as a two-in-one process, characteristics that shed light on the activity’s relationship to a non-normative morality that might explain the actions of nonparticipants, which in extreme situations becomes political. The first maxim is that it is better to suffer wrong than to do wrong; the second is that it is better to be in disagreement with others than in contradiction with myself.\(^7^5\) Arendt notes that the first proposition is entirely subjective, i.e., dependent on the position of the person speaking. In other words, it is not a universal principle or a political one (in Arendt’s sense, from the point of view of the world), but a paradoxical statement about Socrates himself as “the man chiefly devoted to thinking.”\(^7^6\)

When read with the second proposition, however, Arendt pulls out a connection between the two that relates thinking to her moral question of personal responsibility. The second maxim is similarly paradoxical, as Arendt writes,

> Socrates talks of being one and therefore not being able to risk getting out of harmony with himself. But nothing that is identical with itself, truly and absolutely *One*, as A is A, can be either in or out of harmony with itself; you always need at least two tones to produce a harmonious sound. […] We call *consciousness* (literally, as we have seen, “to know with myself”) the curious fact that in a sense I also am for myself, though I hardly appear to me, which indicates that the Socratic “being one” is not so unproblematic as it seems; I am not only for others but for myself, and in this latter case, I clearly am not just one. A difference is inserted into my Oneness.\(^7^7\)

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\(^7^4\) It is worth noting that Arendt’s reading of Socrates is idiosyncratic to say the least, especially in the sense that she makes a distinction between the voices of Socrates and Plato (see “Socrates” in Kohn, *The Promise of Politics*).

\(^7^5\) Arendt, *Life of the Mind*, 1:181. More specifically, “It would be better for me that my lyre or a chorus I directed should be out of tune and loud with discord, and that the multitudes of men should disagree with me rather than I, *being one*, should be out of harmony with myself and contradict me” (181, presumably her emphasis).


\(^7^7\) Arendt, *Life of the Mind*, 1:183.
This reading, that in thinking, I am with myself and thereby introduce a space of dissonance or difference into my own mind, highlights Arendt’s overall argument that “plurality is the law of the earth” and is the human condition. Even in my own mind, I encounter plurality in the dialogue I have with myself. This suggests a relationship to the political in-between that is the space of appearances in the Human Condition: where persons can speak and be heard, where plurality is a metaphysical fact because I cannot speak politically with myself just as I cannot act in the singular. Similarly, I can also somehow appear to myself, to speak with myself and be heard by myself and answer myself, and this capacity is built upon my relations with others.

Arendt juxtaposes her understanding of the two-in-one in this section with what she reads (idiosyncratically) as Plato’s inversion of Socrates’ description of thinking. She ascribes the Platonic inversion also to her former teacher Martin Heidegger. Against Heidegger’s interpretation of the Platonic dialogue The Sophist, Arendt posits that altereitas (otherness) does not express the relation of the self with the difference inherent in itself (or referring back to itself), a difference that is to be mediated and unified. “This construction,” she puts forward, […] seems to me erroneous. […] what is being transferred here is the experience of the thinking ego to things themselves.” Rather, thinking as the two-in-one shows us the opposite, that “Nothing perhaps indicates more strongly that man exists essentially in the plural than that

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78 Arendt, Life of the Mind, 1:20. Arendt’s more extensive discussion on plurality can be found in the Human Condition, especially regarding plurality’s political significance and in relation to altereitas (182).

79 “I first talk with others before I talk with myself, examining whatever the joint talk may have been about, and then discover that I can conduct a dialogue not only with others but with myself as well.” Arendt, Life of the Mind, 1:189.

80 Specifically, Heidegger’s 1924–1925 lectures on The Sophist that Arendt attended along with Hans Georg Gadamer, who was similarly affected by Heidegger’s philosophical approach at the time (Villa, Arendt and Heidegger, 228).

81 Arendt, Life of the Mind, 1:184–185.
his solitude actualizes his merely being conscious of himself […] into a duality during the thinking activity.\textsuperscript{82}

More than a reflection of other forms of relations, the dialogue I have with myself is then an actualization of consciousness based or structured in plurality that manifests when I am in solitude. Alone with myself, I find myself pluralized and fragmented. The experience of plurality in myself does not reveal an authentic or resolute self (or actor) behind itself, but the opposite – it is only in action that I become one again in the eyes of others, that I am called “out of the dialogue of thought” and become a person speaking with one unified voice.\textsuperscript{83} In other words, the political point is that when I am with others I appear as one. The moral point is that if I must be with myself in my own company, I am alone with myself and so split into many. “Without that original split [of difference in identity], Socrates’ statement about harmony in a being that to all appearances is One would be meaningless,” Arendt observes.\textsuperscript{84} The split is what Arendt uses to relate Socrates’ maxims to one another: “it is better to suffer wrong than to do wrong, because you can remain the friend of a sufferer; who would want to be the friend or have to live together with a murderer?” and “If you make yourself an exception, you have contradicted yourself.”\textsuperscript{85} This trace of

\textsuperscript{82} Arendt, \textit{Life of the Mind}, 1:185. She continues, “It is the \textit{duality} of myself with myself that makes thinking a true activity, in which I am both the one who asks and the one who answers.”


\textsuperscript{84} Arendt, \textit{Life of the Mind}, 1:187, also quoted in Topolski.

\textsuperscript{85} Arendt, \textit{Life of the Mind}, 1:188. Perhaps Arendt’s critique can be extended further. Now we can see that the moral question for Arendt in the previous section (“can I live with myself?”) relies on the fact of plurality within myself. The broader question (political but I would suspect also ethical for Levinas) then, perhaps, is “can I live with others?” or perhaps more importantly, “will others live with me?” With this shift, it is interesting to re-read Arendt’s judgement of Eichmann: “And just as you supported and carried out a policy of not wanting to share the earth with the Jewish people and the people of a number of other nations – as though you and your superiors had any right to determine who should and who should not inhabit the world – we find that no one, that is, no member of the human race, can be expected to want to share the earth with you. That is the reason, and the only reason, you must hang” (Arendt, \textit{Eichmann in Jerusalem}, 279). In “Some Questions of Moral Philosophy,” she writes that, “According to Socrates, wrong would be whatever I cannot bear to have done, and the wrongdoer would be somebody unfit for intercourse, especially for the thinking intercourse of him with himself” (124). The ability to live with myself is perhaps only meaningful if I can also live with others, if others are also able and willing to live with me. In this
plurality in thinking as the two-in-one process is what makes personal responsibility the guardrail against total destruction, but as Arendt emphasizes in “Some Questions of Moral Responsibility,” even the ability to think cannot tell you what to do.

The tension between thinking and action that comes out strongly in matters of responsibility is one that Arendt considers to be overlooked by philosophers, who in their love of thinking tend to hold it to be a form of “inner action.” While thinking is an activity, as we have said, it is not an action in the Arendtian sense; it does not initiate anything in the world on its own. Merely thinking against Hitler is simply not enough of a response, neither for politics nor for ethics. Even a non-political action like nonparticipation, which is done not in public but in private (else it becomes resistance), requires more than the thinking process itself.

In the second part of the Life of the Mind (“Willing”), Arendt returns to the significance of plurality in her critique of Heidegger to make this point, which takes on a concrete and personal meaning. Some aspects of Heidegger’s biography are now relevant to the present discussion: a well-respected professor of philosophy who succeeded his (Jewish) mentor Husserl in his post at the University of Freiburg, in 1933 Heidegger was elected rector of the university and shortly thereafter became a member of the Nazi party. Here the matter of nonparticipation is, as I have said, a concrete one; it is an historical example of its failure.

In Heidegger’s philosophy, Arendt detects another flavour of refusal of responsibility, and of the possibility of action (political or otherwise), not so different from the depoliticizing narrative of collective guilt. Or

sense Arendt’s question is a limit situation, the cause of last resort. I wonder if this is the case. Does one refuse to murder another because they do not want to live with a murderer, or because the person set to be murdered is demanding “don’t kill me!”? Is there a more originary relationship, of first and last resort, between myself and the actual Other, instead of between myself and myself?


87 Villa’s overview of the relationship between Arendt and Heidegger on this topic is instructive, see especially Arendt and Heidegger, 230ff.
perhaps more precisely, she reads in Heidegger a shift that constituted a collapsing of the political that renders action moot.

Arendt begins her main critique of Heidegger with an account of that shift, famously referred to as Heidegger’s “reversal” (Kehre) of thinking that took place in the mid-1930s, a turning point that, Arendt notes, “one is tempted to date […] as a concrete autobiographical event precisely between volume I and volume II” of his two-volume work Nietzsche.\(^8\) Though he minimized and misrepresented the extent of his Nazi sympathies and support until his death, Heidegger corroborated Arendt’s reading when he identified the Nietzsche lectures (1936 to 1940) that informed the writing of his book as “a confrontation with National Socialism.”\(^8\) Arendt is suggesting that the Kehre refers to the period between Heidegger’s infamous pro-Nazi inaugural address as rector (\textit{Die Selbstbehauptung der deutschen Universität} or “The Self-Assertion of the German University”) and the Nietzsche lectures that began in 1936, after he had resigned from his post as rector and fallen from favour.\(^9\) She writes that, “The relevance of this dating seems evident: what


\(^9\) Martin Heidegger, “‘Only a God Can Save Us’: The Spiegel Interview (1966)” in \textit{Heidegger: The Man and the Thinker}, ed. Sheehan Thomas (New York: Routledge, 2017), 53. The quotation is from an interview that Heidegger gave to the German newspaper \textit{Der Spiegel} on September 23, 1966 with the instruction to print it only after his death; it was published in 1976 five days after Heidegger died in Freiburg. The translated text (by William J. Richardson) was published in a 1981 book without the context of the evidence we have today, and so the translator seems to accept Heidegger’s equivocations and re-writings of the past even as the interviewers question him (that is, the historical footnotes are insufficient to provide the proper context to a contemporary reader). The exact nature of Heidegger’s support for Nazism has been subject to much debate, though his antisemitic views and the extent of the support for Nazism in his philosophical thought were proven definitively with the posthumous publication of the “Black Notebooks” in 2014. In the quotation cited, Heidegger is disingenuously presenting his Nietzsche lectures as a covert critique of National Socialism. For more recent treatments of the topic see: \textit{Reading Heidegger’s Black Notebooks 1931–1941}, ed. Ingo Farin and Jeff Malpas (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2016); \textit{Heidegger’s Black Notebooks and the Future of Theology}, ed. by Mårten Björk and Jayne Svenungsson (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017; Richard Wolin, “On Heidegger’s Antisemitism: The Peter Trawny Affair,” \textit{Antisemitism Studies} 1, no. 2 (Fall 2017): 245–279. I restrict myself from commenting overmuch on Heidegger since my primary interest here lies in Arendt’s reading of him.

the reversal originally turns against is primarily [Nietzsche’s] will-to-power. In Heidegger’s understanding, the will to rule and to dominate is a kind of original sin, of which he has found himself guilty when he tried to come to terms with his brief past in the Nazi movement.”91 That is, to Arendt, the Kehre refers to a brief moment when Heidegger entered into political activity in support of Hitler’s regime, and his subsequent withdrawal from it.92 With this context in mind, Arendt lays out her critique of Heidegger’s post-Kehre thought as an extension of her earlier critique of plurality’s relationship to consciousness.

Heidegger’s original question of Being, which inspired Arendt’s own philosophical thinking, undergoes a sort of reversal or return; in this period of his later work, thrown back upon itself, Being then demands the thinker ask, “Who is Man?” Arendt summarizes that in Heidegger, “the first demand Being makes of man is to think out the “ontological difference,” that is, the difference between the sheer isness of beings and the Being of this isness itself, the Being of Being.”93 Since for Heidegger, plurality begins with the inherent plurality of Being in me rather than the plurality of thinking reflecting the inherent plurality of the world, the answer to the question “Who is Man?” is answered by Being itself through thinking, by listening to the “silent claim of being” and transforming it into speech through thought.94 Arendt’s primary

the salvation of our people’s essence’, ‘led by the relentlessness of that spiritual mission that forces the destiny of the German people into the shape of its history”’ (37). The meaning of such calls and others like during this period is multilayered.

There are also variations that must be accounted for; in the quotation above, for example, the second part (“led by the restlessness...”) is directly from the published version of the Rectoral Address, while the first part is pulled from an address published in the student newspaper. Heidegger claimed that what was printed in the student paper was the result of external pressure, implying that it did not reflect his true views on the matter (see the Der Spiegel interview), however, he also retroactively edited his texts to appear less guilty in at least a few cases. Regardless of his intent, however, Heidegger’s words and position were used to rally students to the cause of the war, both with his enthusiastic participation and conflicted, partial withdrawal. Heidegger’s other actions in support of the Nazi Party and in his brief position as rector are not mentioned here and require a more complex account than I can provide in a footnote.

91 Arendt, Life of the Mind, 2:173.
92 Interesting to compare Arendt’s rather strange allegorical essay “Heidegger the Fox” with her essay in honour of Heidegger’s 80th birthday on this point.
93 Arendt, Life of the Mind, 2:174.
concern with this argument is that “it centers on the notion that to think, namely, “to say the unspoken word of Being,” is the only authentic “doing” (Tun) of man; in it, the “History of Being” (Seingeschichte), transcending all mere human acts and superior to them, actually comes to pass.” Arendt identifies Heidegger’s move as an innovation upon a more classical one that she traces back at least to Plato, “that the actions of men are inexplicable by themselves and can be understood only as the work of some hidden purpose or some hidden actor.” This error of philosophy denies the inherent plurality of action, in that it cannot be carried out alone and can never be determined by a single person, as well denying its essential contingency, in that action (for Arendt, by definition) always refers to what might have been otherwise. Heidegger’s error, in Arendt’s view, is even more serious: “for Heidegger, however, it is Being itself that, forever changing, manifests itself in the thinking of the actor so that acting and thinking coincide.” The consequence is that in Heidegger’s later work, “solitary thinking in itself constitutes the only relevant action in the factual record of history [...].”

The thinking self, now in direct communion with Being through language and apart from others, actualizes being as authenticity in utter solitude, an “existential solipsism.” “With Heidegger,” Arendt writes,

this is not just the elimination of the subject-object split in order to desubjectivize the Cartesian ego, but actual fusion of the changes in the “history of being” (Seinsgeschichte) with the activity of thinking in the thinkers. [...] Here the personified concept [of Being] whose ghostlike existence

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96 Arendt, Life of the Mind, 2:179.

97 Arendt, Life of the Mind, 2:180.

98 Arendt, Life of the Mind, 2:180.

99 Arendt, Life of the Mind, 2:181. Arendt is also referring to a second point of Heidegger’s, namely that thinking is the same as thanking, a discussion I am omitting because I do not find it absolutely necessary for the point (which is not to provide a full account of Arendt and Heidegger’s disagreements).

100 Arendt, Life of the Mind, 2:182–185. My summary is omitting much. Here Arendt also addresses Heidegger’s sense of conscience and its consequence of “by making all men who listen to the “call of conscience” equally guilty, he was actually proclaiming universal innocence: where everybody is guilty, nobody is” (184).
brought about the last great enlivenment of philosophy in German Idealism has become fully incarnated; there is a Somebody who acts out the hidden meaning of Being and thus provides the disastrous course of events with a counter-current of wholesomeness.¹⁰¹

The problem here is different from Eichmann’s thoughtlessness, which turned him into a nobody. Heidegger’s thinker is not a nobody, but they neither are they somebodies in the plural, related to and of the world where action takes place. “In this context,” Arendt writes, “the “reversal” means that the Self no longer acts in itself [...] but, obedient to Being, enacts by sheer thinking the counter-current of Being underlying the “foam” of beings – the mere appearances whose current is steered by the will-to-power.”¹⁰²

The person who “acts out the hidden meaning of Being” for Heidegger is “the thinker, who acts while he does nothing [...] He remains the “solus ipse” in “existential solipsism,” except that now the fate of the world, the History of Being, has come to depend on him.”¹⁰³

What emerges from Arendt’s analysis, in my reading, is that the activity of thinking cannot resolve the problem of thoughtlessness on its own. Responsibility does not automatically come from the thinking process itself, as Heidegger’s philosophy and biography show. Examining this particular case reveals, moreover, the fundamental lack of the thinking activity in the face of total destruction – for all that thinking refers to the plurality of action in that I can ask myself questions and answer myself in dialogue, it “stands in the sharpest possible opposition” to the plural “we” that forms in action, i.e., when people are “engaged

in changing our common world." Thinking alone is simply not enough to meet the ethical demands of responsibility when it is a response only to myself, when it remains referring only to myself.

Arendt’s response to western philosophy, and Heidegger, is an interesting point of comparison with Levinas from the other side of the faultline between ethics and politics. For Levinas, the abstraction from the other pervasive in western philosophy makes it a philosophy of oppression and injustice, and his project is to return us (phenomenally and ethically) back toward the encounter with the Other which is prior to being, prior to experience, and prior to philosophy. Philosophically and methodologically, Levinas’

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104 Arendt, Life of the Mind, 2:200. Arendt identifies this error of the extension of the plurality of thought into the realm of action, and who by way of this extension require communication to guarantee truth, in the philosophies of her mentor Karl Jaspers as well as Martin Buber. Here she overlaps with Levinas (see 4.3 on the problem of communication vs. the problem of truth).

105 For all that Arendt relies upon the concreteness of speech with others, the imagined interlocutor in the thinking process and especially in the faculty of judgement undermines her distinction, at least somewhat. Arendt’s commitment to the metaphorical or imaginative is a problem in other parts of her work, for example her use of Kant’s concept of imagination (also Plato) to argue for a kind of thinking that can imagine or “go visiting” into other contexts and experiences. The limitations of such a view have been thoroughly criticized from an antiracist or intersectional lens in that they take for granted the ability to grasp through imagination alone; see especially Katherine Sophia Bell’s (formerly Gines) critique of “representational thinking” in her conclusion to Hannah Arendt and the Negro Question (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2014).

106 There is much to say about the figure of Heidegger in Arendt and Levinas’ writings, respectively, which has been the topic of extensive scholarship. My point here is to note that Arendt and Levinas both situate their political and ethical response to Nazism in direct relation to their critiques of Heidegger. Though obviously very different, there are some similarities in their responses to Heidegger and the questions posed by his Nazism. Two particularly useful sources on Arendt and Levinas in relation to Heidegger are Jonathan Judaken, “Heidegger’s Shadow: Levinas, Arendt, and the Magician from Messkirch,” in the Routledge Companion to Philosophy of Race, ed. Paul C. Taylor, Linda Martin Alcoff, and Luvell Anderson (New York: Routledge, 2018), 61–74, and Robert Eaglestone, “The Subterranean Stream of Western History: Arendt and Levinas after Heidegger” in King and Stone, Hannah Arendt and the Uses of History, 205–216.

107 Though all of Levinas’ texts are relevant for this discussion that touches on so many of the core aspects of his thought, I will mainly focus on the 1974 text Otherwise than Being, or Beyond Essence and draw a limited number of Levinasian ethical concepts from it to intensify the ethical dimensions of responsibility. Otherwise than Being is the second of Levinas’ two major works, the first being the 1961 book Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority. Much of the latter text is also relevant for this discussion and earlier versions of this chapter relied on it exclusively. However, I choose to follow Levinas’ language shift in his later work, which attempts to put aside ontological language for more visceral and sensual imagery that I find more compelling. The bulk of the concepts presented through Otherwise than Being are also present in Totality and Infinity with a fair level of consistency across the texts. However, the main difference is in Levinas’ shift in the construction of subjectivity, which is deepened and subtly altered in the later texts. For more on these major topics, see for example Richard A. Cohen’s foreword to Otherwise than Being’s English translation by Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Press, 1998);
theory of ethics and responsibility relies on the phenomenality of what appears to us (presence) and is sensed by us (proximity) in the experiences of enjoyment and suffering. The affirmation of the phenomenal world, not as unity but through the breaking up of being’s essence, is Levinas’ main philosophical task. More specifically, the argument of *Otherwise than Being* begins with the examination of the implications of the questions “what shows itself under the name of being? And who looks?” to refer to a sensibility of presence to phenomenal being, and of proximity to the hither side of being prior to appearance. Appearance and sensibility remain crucial for Levinas because the phenomenological method that he employs can only be turned toward what can be seen by consciousness. What his reduction claims to describe is not the Other themselves, but the experience of the interruption of being, in which lies the trace of the Other. Interrupted, “a diachrony without synthesis,” truth emerges in shuddering breaths, always subject to refutation.

Levinas is invested in observing the limits of phenomenology (and of objective knowledge) because he is interested in the relation to what lies beyond it (namely, the Other). As such, he concerns himself with the beyond without requiring knowledge or truth to be disclosed or forced from its otherness. In other words, his methodological approach aims to establish that the relationship with the beyond, or the

Adriaan Theodoor Peperzak, *To the Other: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas* (West Lafayette, IN: Purdue University Press, 1993). The biggest omission right now from *Otherwise than Being* is that I do not engage the sense of the "saying and the said," which I excluded for brevity. However, there are many opportunities to rethink this chapter with those concepts in mind. I mark some places in the footnotes where the lack of “saying and said” is evident and even problematic.


109 I am not systematic about it, but I try to reserve the uppercase Other for times when the illeity (see the end of the chapter) is specifically referenced. Otherwise, I use the lowercase “other,” mostly for aesthetic reasons. In French, Levinas uses *autre* and *autrui*, both translated into English as “other,” and which he uses in both uppercase and lowercase depending on context. My approach goes against the convention in Levinas studies, begun by Alphonso Lingis. My choice is something to re-consider more carefully in future revisions.

110 Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, 183–184. The entire passage is instructive of Levinas’ version of phenomenological reduction. Also, skepticism “puts an interval between saying and said” and that is what philosophy should do. “Skepticism is refutable, but it returns” (168).
relationship with the Other across absolute difference, informs phenomenological reality, not as a unification or coinciding of Being and Appearance in an originary and universal Truth, but as meaning overflowing from the gaps and gasps of subjectivity. Responsibility refers to this relationship with alterity, the ethical relation that constitutes a diachronous subjectivity and, in utter passivity and inequality, brings me into the synchronous time of response in the world of others. In this way, Levinas intends to found a radical, non-normative ethics in opposition to Heidegger, and arguably it is on Arendt’s very point about the plurality as essential to the human condition that Levinas uses to delineate the foundation. ¹¹¹

Though Levinas focuses on ethics, many scholars have noted that his project arises from political concerns and has (implicit and explicit) political implications. ¹¹² Recall the dedication to the book from the previous chapter: “To the memory of those who were closest among the six million assassinated by the National Socialists, and of the millions on millions of all confessions and all nations, victims of the same hatred of the other man, the same anti-semitism.” Going back to Levinas’ earlier writings and in particular Levinas’ 1934 essay “Reflections on the Philosophy of Hitlerism” and On Escape (1935), Critchley emphasizes that what troubles Levinas about western philosophy, epitomized in Heidegger’s ontology, is the way that the unity of a self-enclosed subject “extends the unthinking privilege of theoretical

¹¹¹ The insertion of difference (as infinity and not the same returning to itself) into the oneness of the subject in thinking is arguably the link between for both writers. Topolski picks up on this resonance between Arendt and Levinas in her book, which proposes a “politics of relationality” based in Arendt’s plurality and Levinas’ alterity, which both refer to this irreducible relation that cannot be dichotomized even as it is separated into two sides.

¹¹² Howard Caygill, for example, argues that “the motivation for putting into question ontology and the formulation of an ethics of alterity is first and foremost political.” “Levinas’s Political Judgement: The Esprit Articles 1934–1983,” in Emmanuel Levinas: Critical Assessments of Leading Philosophers, ed. Claire Katz and Lara Trout, vol. 4, Beyond Levinas (Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 2005), 93. (I refer to a number of essays from this four volume bibliography compiled by Katz and Trout; note that all the articles cited in these volumes were first published elsewhere. Caygill’s article was originally published in 2000.) A number of scholars have developed Levinas’ political writings or built upon them, a body of work that I engage only very narrowly because I am trying to restrict Levinas to one side of the faultline. The “prophetic politics” or (via Derrida) “utopian politics” literature is marked for future iterations of this work and will require a more in-depth engagement with the relationship between Judaism and politics.
consciousness onto the political domain […]”. In the 1990 preface to the re-publication of “Reflections on the Philosophy of Hitlerism,” Levinas writes that,

The article stems from the conviction that the source of the bloody barbarism of National Socialism lies not in some contingent anomaly within human reasoning, nor in some accidental ideological misunderstanding. This article expresses the conviction that this source stems from the essential possibility of elemental Evil into which we can be led by logic and against which Western philosophy has not sufficiently insured itself. This possibility is inscribed within the ontology of a being concerned with being a being […]).

Levinas’ concern contradicts, to some degree, Arendt’s focus on the political structures at play (i.e., the contingent), in that he identifies the moral crisis of Nazism in western philosophy itself and, indeed, in logic and rationality. The thinking process that Levinas is interested in for his ethics is something other than a process of reasoning.

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113 Critchley, Problem with Levinas, lecture two, “Elemental Evil.” Critchley argues that Levinas shows the opposition between Nazism and liberalism to be a false one, and he engages Levinas to criticize liberalism. It is interesting that both Levinas and Arendt are often misread as liberal theorists and never fit neatly in any other category, and that both of them are used to critique liberalism and universal rights; see for example Peg Birmingham’s Hannah Arendt and Human Rights: The Predicament of Common Responsibility (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006). This can be explained, at least partially, by their philosophical opposition to idealism.


115 Levinas’ discussions of ethics and politics, and of philosophy generally, as a debate between Athens and Jerusalem yields many interesting observations and claims but also comes with racist views toward the nonwestern others and a hit-and-miss effect for his politics. For the purposes of this discussion, I avoid engaging Levinas’ political thinking more than necessary, even though there are points where it is relevant, since it is difficult to draw from Levinas in this regard without engaging more broadly on his work on such topics. I am also not sure how “useful” Levinas is for thinking about politics beyond what I propose in the next chapter on justice and judgement. Critchley’s puts it succinctly:

The Germans thought they could do the same thing in Eastern Europe because the Germans thought it was obvious that those people were natural slaves, i.e., Slavs. They adapted the techniques of colonial rule, namely, the concentration camp – which the Spanish introduced in Cuba and the British in South Africa – and they extended it to Europe. I find aspects of the way in which the Holocaust is discussed intensely limited. You still see this at The New School and elsewhere: the Holocaust is unique because it happened in Europe. Wow! How shocking! It’s nonsense. That’s never been the issue. Europe was always a question of lines of flight, movement, domination, exploitation, extermination, colonialism, and imperialism. What happened under the Third Reich is just a modification of the deep logic of colonialism. But that’s me. Levinas doesn’t go that far. He remained a Europhile until the end. (Problem with Levinas, lecture two, “Why Europe is So Great”)
Like Arendt, Levinas also pushes back against a Heideggerian notion of being and subjectivity that can only refer to itself, which he does specifically in order to address the possibility of personal or ethical responsibility. In making this argument, he similarly references the Socratic “dialogue with myself” to point out the inherent intersubjectivity of thinking, or more particularly in the passage below, questioning. Levinas writes, “The silent coming and going from question to response, with which Plato characterized thought, already refers to a plot in which is tied up the node of subjectivity, by the other commanding the same. The reference is there even when, turned toward being in its manifestation, thought knows itself. Asking oneself and questioning oneself does not undo the torsion of the same and the other in subjectivity; it refers to it” (my emphasis). Levinas characterizes the intersubjective relationship as the relation between the Self and the absolutely Other and situates the Other in contrast to the Same. In questioning myself, I do not merely imagine an interlocutor to converse with but actually sense a trace of the Other in

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116 The transition between Totality and Infinity (1961) to Otherwise than Being can be tracked along this very point; see especially Jacques Derrida’s 1964 critique of Totality and Infinity in the essay “Violence and Metaphysics,” in which Derrida pushes back against Levinas’ reading of Heidegger, to see one facet of Levinas’ struggle with these questions that he attempts to address in the later work. An English translation of “Violence and Metaphysics” can be found in Writing and Difference, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), 79–153.

117 For consistency with Arendt, I will continue to refer to Socrates over Plato though Levinas’ does not make the same distinction in the same way (he has his own idiosyncratic reading of Descartes, to come). I suspect that Levinas also makes a distinction between Socrates and Plato for other reasons. It is important to note that Levinas is critical of Socrates on a related point, specifically Socratic maieutics, which characterizes teaching as remembering what is already contained in the self. In Levinas’ reading, this contradicts the infinity of the Other, which comes from beyond memory as absolutely Other. A more in-depth discussion on this topic can be found, for example, in Norman Wirzba, “From Maieutics to Metanois: Levinas’s Understanding of the Philosophical Task,” in Emmanuel Levinas: Critical Assessments of Leading Philosophers, ed. Claire Katz and Lara Trout, vol. 1, Levinas, Phenomenology and His Critics (Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 2005), 387–401.

118 Levinas, Otherwise than Being, 25–26. We can already see some of the intensification of subjectivity that comes in this text compared to Totality and Infinity. In his postscript to Levinas’ published lectures God, Death, and Time, Jacques Rolland writes that one of the shifts from Totality and Infinity to Otherwise than Being, is that the content or identity of the self in its most preliminary form (as preoriginal subjectivity) comes literally from outside the self too as “the-Other-in-the-Same.” Postscript to God, Death, and Time, trans. Bettina Bergo (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000), 234–235. The point that subjectivity is intensified in Otherwise than Being resonates also with Critchley’s reading. In the section titled “In Itself One: This is Not a Metaphor,” Critchley disagrees with Robert Bernasconi’s claim that Levinas’ turn to the concept of substitution in Otherwise than Being undermined the philosophical concept of identity that he managed to retain in Totality and Infinity. Critchley writes, “However, I want to claim that substitution is not a challenging of the concept of identity but a deepening of it. This is the force of Levinas’ claim about the subject in-itself as “in itself one.”
me, in my sameness. In questioning, we can sense an interval or gap in thinking that at once introduces and disrupts the question and which refers to this relation with the Other. That is, in Levinas’ reading of Socratic thinking, the dialogue with myself refers not to a self-enclosed identity, but to that insertion of difference into my oneness that Arendt describes as well. For Levinas, that insertion of difference is an intrigue or a plot that is reflected in the ambiguity and surprise of the thinking experience “from question to response,” interrupting rather than manifesting being. Instead, the thinking ego “does not coincide with itself […] opening up, like a reverse conatus, an inversion of essence, […] a relationship across absolute difference.” The self that does not coincide with itself (“the-other-in-thesame”) bursts and overflows itself in this contradiction and tension; it is “exiled in its own fullness.”

The reversal Levinas proposes takes the Other outside of the grasp of phenomenal perception and so outside of the bounds of what the phenomenological method can approach. This is because the self is not formed by itself, but comes to itself already formed, i.e., with an attachment before memory and before being, and therefore outside of the bounds of experiences or appearances that delimit phenomenological inquiry. That is, by ethics Levinas refers to a relationship that pre-exists subjectivity itself, a responsibility

119 Here Levinas is contradicting Martin Buber, best known for his philosophy of I and Thou that bears resemblance to Levinas’ ethics (though Levinas is closer to Buber’s friend and collaborator, Rosenzweig). In one of his critiques of Buber, Levinas writes: “The transition from the subject/object relation to the I-Thou relation is also the movement of consciousness into that new sphere of existence: the interval, the between, the Zwischen. Buber forcefully asserts the radical difference between the soul’s silent dialogue with itself and the real dialogue with the other” (“Martin Buber and the Theory of Knowledge,” in Proper Names, 33). Levinas continues, “Buber, who articulated with such penetration the Relation and the distancing that makes it possible, did not take separation seriously. Man is not just the category of distance and meeting, he is also a separate being. He accomplishes that isolation in a process of subjectification that is not just the recoil from the word Thou. Buber does not give expression to the movement, distinct from distancing and the relation, in which the I emerges from the self. It is impossible for man to forget his metamorphosis of subjectivity” (35). Note the similarity to Arendt’s critique of Buber in a previous footnote.

120 Levinas, Otherwise than Being, 70.

121 Levinas, Otherwise than Being, 103. In Totality and Infinity, Levinas tends much more toward the use of terms like desire and eros to describe this overflowing. In his later work he moves away from such terminology, even asserting that the ethical response is non-erotic, “responsibility before eros” (see pp. 53, 123, 177, 192n27).

122 As he continues from the block quotation above, “There is an intrigue of the other in the same which does not amount to an openness of the other to the same. The other to whom the petition of the question is addressed does not belong to the intelligible sphere to be explored” (25–26).
that precedes the subject. The responsible subject and the call to responsibility are thus split across time, non-coinciding, introducing a gap between the self and Other that in thinking will always break apart a duality with its infinite irreducibility. Levinas describes this schism in time as “diachrony,” which refers to both the separation across the gap and the untimely relationship therein. He likens the diachronic separation/relation to the Cartesian duality of body and soul, which inasmuch as they are separate, they are also “in accord prior to thematization, in an accord, a chord, which is possible only as an arpeggio.”

Indeed, like Arendt, Levinas points out that a chord or harmony always requires difference and separation. In questioning myself, in the face of infinity overflowing from the gap between the self and Other, the self can open up to the Other who is already in relation to me. Calling myself into question (as a particular sense of thinking) is therefore for Levinas fundamentally ethical in that it relates to the Other beyond my

123 In his foreword to Otherwise than Being, Cohen specifies that Heidegger discovers ecstatic temporality beneath clock time, “But undercutting all these forms of ecstatic temporality, and the practical and ontological structures they supported, Levinas discovered an even sharper sense of time’s dimensions, its past and future, in the very de-phasing of a moral subjectivity beholden not to being beholden not to being but to the other person. The transcending dimensions of time itself, its core diachrony, would derive from the inter-subjective relation, hence would ethical, a moral denucleating of self-presence by an “immemorial past never present” and “a future always future” encountered in proximity to the other” (xi).

124 Levinas, Otherwise than Being, 70. In a rather idiosyncratic reading not unlike Arendt’s take on the figure of Socrates, it is from the Cartesian meditations (on God) that Levinas pulls the notion of infinity to break apart sameness. Restricting Levinas’ concept of infinity to Descartes, however, would miss the major influence of the philosopher Franz Rosenzweig, whose book Stern der Erlösung (Star of Redemption) is “too often present in this book [the earlier Totality and Infinity] to be cited.” Introduction to Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Press, 1969), 23. The relationship between Levinas and Rosenzweig’s thinking has been expertly explained by Robert Gibbs in Correlations in Rosenzweig and Levinas (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992). Gibbs writes,

First, Levinas claimed recently that the most important aspect of Rosenzweig’s shattering of the ‘all’ [totality] is the discovery that a human has no genus, that each is unique. I am unique and the other is unique, and even the third is unique. [...] The pluralism that replaces totality abandons the logic of subordinating members to their class. In Rosenzweig’s logic, this is the ‘Yes’ of the unknowability of God or World or the Human to which the ‘No’ of will must still be added. That rational process of classification totalizes over the unique individual and presupposes that each has its being or its worth only by belonging to a more universal class. Even Heidegger’s ontology subordinates the being of each person to the question of Being, which is given priority. Levinas finds in Rosenzweig the requirement that each person is an infinite end (and as such had unique worth) not subordinatable to some general assessment of human value. (24).

125 Levinas, Otherwise than Being, 70.
grasp without attempting to obtain them or reduce the distance between us. That is, from the non-place (the gap) I am called into question in utter passivity. ᵃ“It is not a question of assuring the ontological dignity of man, as though essence sufficed for dignity,” Levinas writes (with a direct reference to Heidegger), “but of contesting the philosophical privilege of being, of inquiring what is beyond or its hither side.” ᵃ²⁷ The inversion of essence that Levinas centres in his ethics is not related with truth and knowledge, but sensed in the questioning of the self and the extensions of its sameness. What phenomenology can do is help us describe the approach of the Other, sensed as a trace. ᵃ²⁸

The notion of essence or being that Levinas is attempting to invert is identified as the western philosophical tradition from Parmenides to Hegel, focusing especially on idealism and moving into contemporary philosophy, including phenomenology (via Levinas’ teacher Husserl), “contemporary ontology” (again referring to Heidegger), and existentialism (referring to Sartre). ᵃ²⁹ What draws such a broad range of philosophical thought “from Parmenides” together in this critique is what Levinas sees as the reduction of being to its manifestation, so that being and appearance coincide as one unity. ᵃ³⁰ The problem with this coinciding is expressed (among other ways) in the specific terms of subjectivity as the “reduction of subjectivity to consciousness, […] which since Hegel has been trying to overcome the duality

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ᵃ²⁶ Levinas, Otherwise than Being, 103–105. “The oneself cannot form itself; it is already formed with absolute passivity. […] The passivity is that of an attachment that has already been made, as something irreversibly past, prior to all memory and all recall. It was made in an irrecoverable time which the present, represented in recall, does not equal, in a time of birth or creation, of which nature or creation retains a trace, unconvertible into a memory. Recurrence is more past than any rememberable past, any past convertible into a present.” Recall the figure of the witness, who is similarly passive. We shall return to the witness in the next section.

ᵃ²⁷ Levinas, Otherwise than Being, 18.

ᵃ²⁸ Levinas, Otherwise than Being, 121.

ᵃ²⁹ This argument is repeated in Levinas’ works several times. In Otherwise than Being, see especially pp. 63–64 on Husserl and Heidegger; pp. 103–105 on Hegel and Sartre; p. 17 on Hegel and Heidegger (in a section titled “Subjectivity is Not a Modality of Essence”).

ᵃ³⁰ I am oversimplifying here for the purpose of focusing on the question at hand, but this is a major critique of western philosophy by Levinas.
of being and thought, by identifying, under different figures, substance and subject.”¹³¹ In this configuration, the turning back upon oneself in thinking (questioning) is understood as self-consciousness, which unites or totalizes the Other in the same as the same merely referring to itself. The gap from which I call myself into question is closed, and the relation with the Other as absolutely Other is destroyed.¹³² Instead of “the-other-in-the-same,” the thinking ego is “the-same-for-itself.”¹³³

To tease apart subjectivity and consciousness again, Levinas distinguishes consciousness as always directed at a phenomenon (i.e., intentional in phenomenological terms) and so always objectifying the object of consciousness. However, as we have seen, infinity (and the Other) cannot be grasped by consciousness; to encounter the idea of infinity is not to be conscious of it or think about it (intentionality), but a disruption of thinking itself that surprises me from outside and before I am even myself. In opposition to the infinite ethical relation with the Other that is intersubjective rather than objective, Levinas refers to this relationship of consciousness to objects as a thematizing relationship, which is consumptive or assimilates difference.¹³⁴ Consciousness can be described as a “folding back of being upon itself, where the effect of being remains correlative with being,” but “the self formed by this fold […] does not go to the

¹³¹ Levinas, Otherwise than Being, 103–105.

¹³² As Simon Critchley writes in the Problem with Levinas: “Being has always already begun. We find ourselves thrown and the beginning point or the origin is something that recedes from us. Levinas is very closely working through Heidegger’s idea of facticity. We are not self-constituting or self-legislating beings. We do not authorize ourselves. We are authored by something that is outside of our control. The fantasy of philosophy is a fantasy of authorship – ‘I think, therefore I am.’ For Levinas, I am, but I wish to God that I was not – that I could not be, that I could escape being me” (lecture two, “The Impetus of Being”).

¹³³ Levinas configuration here does evoke a commonly cited fragment from Hillel the Elder, the founder of a major Jewish school at the turn of the first millennium (or the fourth millennium in the Jewish calendar) who was known for his ethical maxims. The maxim in question from Pirkei Avot (1:14) is not commented on by Levinas in much depth. However, Levinas scholars have presented several readings of Levinas' concept of the self in relation to Hillel’s fragment from Pirkei Avot. See especially Edith Wyschogrod’s overview, in which she argues that even without direct textual references, “Levinas’s conception of the separated self and its disruption by alterity must be seen in the light of this chain of transmission” (“From Ethics to Language: The Imperative of the Other,” in Katz and Trout, Emmanuel Levinas, 1:75).

¹³⁴ Levinas, Otherwise than Being, 25–26. The omission of the saying and the said is felt more keenly here.
crux of subjectivity.” Subjectivity is formed, rather, when consciousness turned back upon itself ties a knot, that is, exposes itself to the questioning provoked by the trace of the Other without and indeed prior to any preconditions or reservations. It is in this knot that responsibility emerges:

The knot tied in subjectivity, which when subjectivity becomes consciousness of being is still attested to in questioning, signifies an allegiance to the same to the other, imposed before any exhibition of the other, preliminary to all consciousness – or a being affected by the other whom I do not know and who could not justify himself with any identity, who as other will not identify himself with anything. This allegiance will be described as a responsibility of the same for the other, as a response to his proximity before any question.\(^\text{136}\)

Responsibility, Levinas elaborates, signifies the “gestation of the other in the same” or the overflowing of infinity in me.\(^\text{137}\) This notion of responsibility can only emerge from this diachrony of being, of subjectivity structured as the-other-in-the-same, the insertion of difference in myself and the inherent plurality of myself that comes from the other in their trace.\(^\text{138}\) “The psyche is the other in me,” Levinas emphasizes in stark terms.\(^\text{139}\) Situated in relation to infinity and the absolute difference of the Other, Levinas’ subject enters into responsibility obliquely, from this hither side, otherwise than being. From this non-place (non-lieu), an-

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\(^\text{135}\) Levinas, Otherwise than Being, 25–26.

\(^\text{136}\) Levinas, Otherwise than Being, 25–26.

\(^\text{137}\) Levinas, Otherwise than Being, 105.

\(^\text{138}\) Annabel Herzog provides an interesting note about the relationship of Levinas’ “trace” to Walter Benjamin: “In my mind, Lévinas’ notion of trace is identical to that of Benjamin, especially when Lévinas writes that ‘A trace is the insertion of space in time’ (SS 67; MS 105) or when he speaks of passages. Moreover, both authors reject the possibility of referring to the trace through memory. Benjamin turns to remembrance (Eingedenken), whereas, as Casey notes, there is no name to the diachronic relation to the trace in Lévinas’ work. However, much more could be said about the comparison between Lévinas and Benjamin.” “Is Liberalism ‘All We Need’? Levinas’s Politics of Surplus,” Political Theory 30, no. (2002): n42. Benjamin was a major figure for Arendt; it would be interesting to read that thread of the trace through Benjamin to Arendt and Levinas both. Herzog’s essay is also re-published in Katz and Trout, Emmanuel Levinas, vol. 4. See subsequent paper, Annabel Herzog, “Levinas, Benjamin, and the Oppressed,” Journal of Jewish Thought and Philosophy 12, no. 2 (August 2003): 123–138.

\(^\text{139}\) Levinas, Otherwise than Being, 68–69. “In the form of responsibility, the psyche is the soul of the other in me, a malady of identity, both accused and self, the same for the other, the same by the other.” In a footnote, he elaborates further: “The soul is the other in me. The psyche, the one-for-the-other, can be a possession and a psychosis; the soul is already a seed of folly” (191n3). In tracing Levinas’ commentary on Socratic thinking through his writings, I noticed that the word psyche and soul often refer to Plato and thinking in the sense of “theory with respect for exteriority” (a phrase from Totality and Infinity, 43). Interestingly, Arendt omits the psyche and soul almost entirely; for her the key phrases referring to Plato are the “two-in-one” and “dialogue with myself.”
archical, I am without the principle (arche) “characteristic of identity.”¹⁴⁰ Instead of returning to myself (self-consciousness), I contract and break open again and again (recurrence) as I am called into question. What is broken is “the principle of being in me.”¹⁴¹ The significance of plurality to the structure of subjectivity (beyond consciousness) is precisely expressed in responsibility as the ethical relation: “A does not, as in identity, return to A, but retreats to the hither side of its point of departure. Is not the signification of responsibility stated in this trope?”¹⁴²

Since I must answer to the Other outside of my perception, before my own consciousness and subjectivity and therefore before I have done anything at all, the responsibility for the Other binds me like a hostage and persecutes me. In the same way it is an-archical, responsibility is ana-chronistic, demanded of me even before I have the possibility to accept or reject it.¹⁴³ In passivity this sense of responsibility is enormous because it is complete vulnerability; it is my skin drawing too tightly across my body, it is exposure. Levinas describes passive (ethical) responsibility as a trauma and a persecution that is repeated in myself as I call my own freedom into question (recurrence). It is inescapable, and I am hostage to it.¹⁴⁴

With vivid language he attends to the infinite demand of such an ethics:

¹⁴⁰ Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, 114.
¹⁴¹ Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, 114.
¹⁴² Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, 114. Note the similarity to Arendt’s phrasing of her critique of Heidegger. In responsibility, the self becomes the-one-for-the-other, dedicated and open to the Other whom I can sense as proximal but cannot touch. As the-one-for-the-other, this relationship is not one of equals. Whereas Arendt sees friendship as an attribute of thinking as the two-in-one, Levinas sees a relation that is non-reciprocal, different from a conversation or dialogue which is an exchange. “Subjectivity is the other in the same, in a way that also differs from the presence of interlocutors to one another in a dialogue, in which they are at peace and agreement with one another. The other in the same determinative of subjectivity is the very restlessness of the same disturbed by the Other” (25–26).
¹⁴³ Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, 112.
¹⁴⁴ Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, 111. See also pp. 105–106. The intense, sensuous language Levinas uses in *Otherwise than Being* is markedly different from *Totality and Infinity*, where his descriptions draw much more from the vocabulary of metaphysics than sensibility or psychoanalysis. Adrien Peperzak notes that, “In *Otherwise than Being*, we find a whole series of words that were scarcely or never used in *Totality and Infinity* (such as subjectivité, proximité, obsession, substitution, otage, persécution, illéité, énigme), whereas key words of the earlier work (such as totalité, extériorité, séparation, investiture, hauteur) seldom or never appear in the later one. A partial explanation
There is the pain which confounds the ego or in vertigo draws it like an abyss, and prevents it from assuming the other that wounds it in an intentional movement when it posits itself in itself and for itself. Then there is produced in this vulnerability whereby the other inspires the same, pain, an overflowing of meaning by nonsense. Then sense bypasses nonsense – that sense which is the-same-for-the-other. [...] The psyche is the form of a peculiar dephasing, a loosening up or unclamping of identity: the same prevented from coinciding with itself, at odds, torn up from its rest, between sleep and insomnia, panting, shivering. It is not an abdication of the same, now alienated and slave to the other, but an abnegation of oneself fully responsible for the other. This identity is brought out by responsibility and at the service of the other. 145

In other words, the-other-in-the-same is agonizing, it calls me to infinite responsibility that cannot be satisfied or resolved by intentional (i.e., directed) movement. Instead, not through cognition or consciousness but through the more visceral obsession, I am turned back upon myself, but against myself, unable to meet the Other, and the pain and restlessness inspired by the Other in myself opens the vulnerability to sense the approach of the Other. 146

of this difference in terminology can be found in the fact that Levinas has chosen another perspective in Otherwise than Being for his approach to transcendence and the infinite. In Totality and Infinity, the central place was taken by the Other and its visage; in Otherwise than Being, Levinas meditates on the “position” and the meaning of the subject; of the self who meets the other,” Adriaan Peperzak, To the Other: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas (West Lafayette, IN: Purdue University Press, 1993), 212.

In Cohen’s foreword to Otherwise than Being, he notes that Levinas builds upon sensibility and enjoyment from Totality and Infinity in chapters 2–5, “elucidating in terms of sensibility itself the obsessive trauma of moral exigencies” (xv). In this sense Levinas seems to be attempting to assemble a vocabulary of ethics that is rooted in phenomenal experience of the approach of the Other that does not overdetermine itself to imagine that it describes the Other directly. Cohen writes that, “Otherwise than Being advances Levinas’s ethical challenge into the deepest recesses of Heidegger’s later ‘turn’ (Kehre) [...] In Totality and Infinity Levinas had already objected: ‘Speaking, rather than “letting be,” solicits the Other.’ In Otherwise than Being Levinas deepens this challenge. Before language is a poetic harkening, it is a radical ethical sincerity: saying as ‘my exposure without reserve to the other,’ inspiration, witness, prophecy, risk, glory – ‘proximity and not truth about proximity’” (xv).

145 Levinas, Otherwise than Being, 64; the second half of quotation is from pp. 68–69.

146 Since the psyche is not able to grasp the Other like truth grasps through cognition or thematization, “The psyche involved in intentionality does not lie in consciousness of..., its power to thematize, or in the “truth of Being” [...]” (Levinas, Otherwise than Being 68–69). Also: “The recurrence of the self in responsibility for others, a persecuting obsession, goes against intentionality, such that responsibility for others could never mean altruistic will, instinct of ‘natural benevolence,’ or love” (111–112). This puts in stark terms again how unsatisfiable responsibility is for Levinas, and how contrary the approach of prevention (in genocide discourse) is to such relations. How can I (or especially we) anticipate and act upon responsibility before it is put upon me, specifically and concretely? In abstracting to the future, do we neglect the present and the very real needs at hand? How do we take responsibility for the existing relationships that may or may not include or constitute genocide at some point? Note as well that the purpose of categories for murder (like group murder) are always abstractions as well and so they are not a part of Levinas’ ethics, which remains on the level of self and Other as a dualism (that bursts open infinity). The question of the third (others in the plural) is bracketed for the next section, when we return to politics via justice.
Sensing and sensibility, whether as enjoyment or suffering, is accomplished through responsibility, which is the most concrete relation to the Other who approaches me from beyond being and in the face of whom I am utterly passive.\(^{147}\) The sensibility opened by vulnerability is “by the other and for the other, for another. Not in elevated feelings, in ‘belles lettres,’ but as in a tearing away of bread from the mouth that tastes it, to give it to the other.”\(^{148}\) More concrete than the questions I ask myself in thinking that refer to and relate me to the absolute Other, the real and immediate demand to be for the Other, is not abstracted but embodied through infinite responsibility for the Other.\(^{149}\)

\(^{147}\) Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, 90. “The caress is the not coinciding proper to contact, a denuding never naked enough. The neighbor does not satisfy the approach. The tenderness of skin is the very gap between approach and approached, a disparity, a non-intentionality, a non-teleology. Whence the disorder of caresses, the diachrony, a pleasure without present, pity, painfulness. Proximity, immediacy, is to enjoy and to suffer by the other. But I can enjoy and suffer by the other only because I am-for-the-other, am signification, because the contact with skin is still a proximity of a face, a responsibility, an obsession with the other, being-one-for-the-other, which is the very birth of signification beyond being.”

\(^{148}\) Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, 64. Critchley elaborates in the third lecture in the *Problem with Levinas* under a section titled “In Itself One: This is Not a Metaphor:”

Levinas does not want his words to fly. He wants us to understand what he’s saying literally, in a really obvious way. One is literally in oneself. One is in one’s skin as the “heart beating against the lining of one’s chest.” You could conclude from that, though Levinas doesn’t, that the in-itself is the body. The body is not a metaphor. It’s a bloody body. I think that’s what Levinas is saying. This stuff that I am wrapped in is skin. I’m a bag of skin. You too. The French signifier *peau* is skin, but it’s also something in-itself. What Levinas is trying to push at here is something like an in-itself that is a body. The self is a body-self. This is what Levinas also calls “a nameless singularity by bestowing it with a role, the fulcrum of the mind is a personal pronoun” (SUB 85). The in-itself is not a metaphor. That heart beating against a chest is not a name: it’s not Bill or Jane, it is he, she, or s/he. It’s a pronoun, a pronominal movement.

\(^{149}\) Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, 142. “It is the subjectivity of a man of flesh and blood, more passive in its extradition to the other than the passivity of effects in a causal chain, for it is beyond the unity of apperception of the I think, which is actuality itself. It is a being torn up from oneself for another in the giving to the other of the bread out of one’s own mouth. This is not an anodyne formal relation, but all the gravity of the body extirpated from its *conatus essendi* in the possibility of giving. The identity of the subject is here brought out, not by a rest on itself, but by a restlessness that drives me outside of the nucleus of my substantiality.” Embodiment in Levinas is a complex topic (see his commentary and engagement with Maurice Merleau-Ponty for example). Note that Levinas’ embodied subject is gendered and binary (specifically the figures of the mother and maternity and the father and paternity, there is also the son and fecundity), though the binary is not absolute. It may be easy to dismiss Levinas’ rather unsatisfying account of gender, however scholars like Claire Elise Katz have shown that there is still much to think about in Levinas’ use of gender in his philosophy. See especially her book *Levinas, Judaism, and the Feminine: The Silent Footsteps of Rebecca* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2003), which reads Levinas’ engagement with gender and femininity/maternity in particular through Jewish sources.
The particularity of both terms of the ethical relation (self and Other) is crucial in Levinas’ thinking, but the concrete terms are not reducible, interchangeable (equal), or finite. The absolute Other is absolutely beyond my grasp, and the self is not an absolute self but structured as intersubjectivity (“the-other-in-the-same”). Put another way, the self that is born from diachronous, anarchical subjectivity is not an ideal unity enclosed in itself and self-sustaining; its unity is only brought out in responsibility (“incarnated passivity”), where I am irreplaceable and so become one again. That is, I become one when I am called upon by the Other (or the trace of the Other in me) to respond, and no one can respond for me. My uniqueness as a person consists in my responsibility to the other as “the-one-for-the-other,” “an assignation to answer without evasions, which assigns the self to be a self.” Identity emerges as unique, without reference to any systems, in the irreplaceability of being in my own skin and “having-the-other-in-one’s-skin.” Levinas posits this in the most concrete (but not empirical) way: responsibility and with it subjectivity is literally pluralistic and not metaphorically so, and sensed with a body with a heart that beats and races, with

150 Levinas, Otherwise than Being, 105–106. Recall again Arendt’s point about the fragmented self in thinking who becomes one again when they appear in the world as an actor with a distinct voice. See also Levinas on pp. 111–112: “It is in the passivity of obsession, or incarnated passivity, that an identity individuates itself as unique without recourse to any system of references, in the impossibility of evading the assignation of the other without blame. The re-presentation of self grasps it already in its trace. The absolution of the one is neither an evasion, not an abstraction; it is a concreteness more concrete than the simply coherent in totality. For under accusation by everyone, the responsibility for everyone goes to the point of substitution. A subject is hostage.”

151 Levinas, Otherwise than Being, 105–106. Prior to subjectivity, in consciousness the self is a “hypostasis” with a mask and a borrowed name (a pro-noun).

152 Levinas, Otherwise than Being, 115. According to Critchley (who is referring specifically to another text of Levinas’, but the point is general), “without reference” points again to Levinas’ critique of Heidegger, for whom the world is “the referential totality of things referring to other things. The world is full of Zeug, and Zeug is referentially structured: pen to paper to desk to floor to room to building. Whatever the in-itself is, identity is prior to that system of references, prior to world, independent of world” (Problem with Levinas, lecture three, “In Itself One: This is Not a Metaphor”). Critchley is referring to Emmanuel Levinas, “Substitution,” in Basic Philosophical Writings, ed. and trans. Adriaan T. Peperzak, Simon Critchley, and Robert Bernasconi (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996), 88.
exposed skin and gasping lungs. Held hostage, trapped in myself, folding back upon myself but not to myself, I come into my body and oneness through this crisis of restlessness, which Levinas calls proximity.

4.3 Emmanuel Levinas and Responsibility at the Limits of Ethics

One might say such a sense of responsibility and ethics is crushing; Levinas says that “The self is a subjectum; it is under the weight of the universe, responsible for everything.” It is through responsibility that I encounter the universe from every direction, and from every direction it accuses me. Responsibility is therefore infinite as well, increasing in the measure that I become aware of it: “The more I return to myself, the more I divest myself, under the traumatic effect of persecution, of my freedom as a constituted, willful, imperialist subject, the more I discover myself to be responsible; the more just I am, the more guilty I am.” Worse, the accusation cannot be chosen or refused without blame since it is anachronistic, “a debt preceding a loan,” and assumed in utter passivity prior to the will. That is, Levinas’ infinite responsibility for the Other is put upon me before I can refuse it, I can never respond in time because I am always too late, and since responsibility is assumed in utter passivity I can only respond in utter passivity, meaning that it becomes infinite again as ungraspable and unfulfillable (beyond the gaze of intentionality).

153 I say concrete here, but Levinas means something like “more than” biological body, such as on p. 109: “The concept of the incarnate subject is not a biological concept…” The concreteness of the ethical demand here is still unchallenged and directed outward, specific but not reduced to physical terminology. This is one of the main thrusts of Levinas’ corpus. Critchley summarizes: “At the heart of the heart of Levinas’ later project (which is the structural heart of the later work, and maybe the whole of his work) we find a discussion of the bodily heart that is not a metaphor […]” (Problem with Levinas, lecture three, “In Itself One: This is Not a Metaphor”). Critchley’s emphasis is repeated by other Levinas scholars, like Peperzak and Cohen (in the aforementioned texts).

154 Levinas, Otherwise than Being, 116. Succinctly: “In a sense nothing is more burdensome than a neighbor” (88).

155 Levinas, Otherwise than Being, 111–112. Another phrasing: “The more I answer the more I am responsible, the more I approach the neighbor with which I am encharged the further away I am. This debit which increases in infinity as an infinition of the infinite, as glory” (93).

156 Levinas, Otherwise than Being, 112.

157 In Levinas’ sense, the truth pursued by cognition (intentional and thematizing) is constrained by the same structural problem of subjectivity. Truth becomes a matter of certainty, “of the coinciding of self with self, as though
What, then, can such a response even be? My goal in this section is to intensify the ethical problems of response yet further, from the trauma of persecution, a subject accused from all sides to the restlessness and aspiration of the response, which in turn leads us finally back to justice and politics. Recall the knot tied by subjectivity as dedication to the Other. Levinas’ radical ethics does not rest on logical necessity but in response: “The psyche is the other in the same, without alienating the same.”158 In recognizing my irreplaceability in my responsibility for the Other, I can only escape the crushing weight of responsibility by tying the knot and committing myself to the Other. The contracting and overflowing of identity against infinity opens space/time for me to escape the inescapable and substitute myself as for-the-other rather than be a for-itself. In such a substitution I am “more passive still than the passivity conjoined with action,” a “self without a concept, unequal in identity […]”.159

The inequality of the ethical relation is for Levinas radical, reflective of a non-reciprocal relationship that is concerned for the Other above me in a radical inversion of Hegel’s master-slave dialectic.160 From radical passivity and inequality, Levinas’ ethical responsibility only offers one word of response, that in French is split into two and in English into three. In the sacred language of the Torah, the coinciding were the ultimate secret of communication, and as though truth were only disclosure” (119). Instead Levinas offers a transcendental truth that he identifies through language:

[…] we suppose that there is in the transcendence involved in language a relationship that is not an empirical speech, but responsibility. This relationship is also a resignation (prior to any decision, in passivity) at the risk of misunderstanding (like in love, where, unless one does not love with love, one has to resign oneself to not being loved), at the risk of lack of and refusal of communication. The ego that thematizes is also founded in this responsibility and substitution. Regarding communication and transcendence one can indeed only speak of their uncertainty. Communication is an adventure of a subjectivity, different from that which is dominated by the concern to recover itself, different from that of coinciding in consciousness; it will involve uncertainty. (120)

158 Levinas, Otherwise than Being, 111–112.
159 Levinas, Otherwise than Being, 115.
160 In the present discussion of subjectivity, Levinas cites Hegel as the carrier of a tradition in which “the ego is an equality with itself, and consequently, the return of being to itself is a concrete universality, being having separated itself from itself in the universality of the concept and death. But viewed out of the obsession of passivity, of itself anarchical, there is brought out, behind the equality of consciousness, an inequality” (Otherwise than Being, 115).
word is “hineni,” translated by Levinas as “me voici” and into English as “here I am.” I do not say “here I am” to the other in front of me as an equal, but to the Infinite Other who “on the ‘other side’ of presence, already past, out of reach, a thought behind thoughts which is too lofty to push itself up front.”

“Here I am” is a sign given to the Other “without having anything to identify myself with, but the sound of my voice or the figure of my gesture [...]”

It is sincerity, overflowing myself without caveats, an enormous demand not compelled but inspired by the question. Levinas continues,

It is the coming of the order to which I am subjected before hearing it, or which I hear in my own saying. It is an august command, but one that does not constrain or dominate and leaves me outside of any correlation with its source. No structure is set up with a correlate. Thus the saying that comes to me is my own word. Authority is not somewhere, where a look could go seek it, like an idol, or assume it like a logos. It is not only outside of all intuition, but outside of all thematization, even that of symbolism. It is the pure trace of a “wandering cause,” inscribed in me.

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161 Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, 149. The Infinite here signifies God, as the term “hineni” refers to the word uttered by Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Moses at crucial moments of their responses to God in the Torah. The instances in which hineni occurs in the Torah (five books of Moses) are as follows (quoted from myself in another publication): “[…] Abraham responds with “hineni” when God speaks to him (Gen. 22:1) and commands him to sacrifice Isaac, when Isaac calls to his father (Gen. 22:7) and asks where the lamb for the offering was, and when the angel intervenes (Gen. 22:11) and Isaac is spared. Isaac calls out to his son Esau in Gen. 31:1 and Esau replies, “hineni.” Later, in Gen. 27:18, Isaac calls out to Esau again and Jacob, impersonating Esau, answers, “hineni,” thus claiming the birthright of his elder twin and his place as a forefather of the Jewish people. Jacob again answers with “hineni” when an angel speaks to him in a dream (Gen. 31:11) and commands him to leave his father-in-law Laban’s house and return to the land of his birth, Canaan. Jacob also responds with “hineni” when God speaks to him through a dream again (Gen. 46:2) and tells him to go to the land of Egypt. Jacob’s son, Joseph, replies, “hineni” when Jacob calls him and tells him to join his brothers in Shechem, who then sell him into slavery (Gen. 37:13). Furthermore, when Moses hears God’s voice from the burning bush on Mount Sinai, he replies with “hineni” (Exod. 3:4). […]” Adi Burton and Samuel Rocha, “A Phenomenology of the Utterance, or Teaching in the Threshold,” *Journal for Continental Philosophy of Religion* 3, no. 2 (2021): 158n37.

Other instance of hineni in the Tanakh (in Nevi’im, i.e., Prophets) are uttered by the prophets Samuel and Isaiah. Levinas cites the passages from *Isaiah* (6:8) directly (199n11). Levinas elaborates,

“Here I am, in the name of God,” without referring myself directly to his presence. “Here I am,” just that! The word God is still absent from the phrase in which God is for the first time involved in words. It does not at all state, “I believe in God.” To bear witness God is precisely not to state this extraordinary word, as though glory would be lodged in a theme and be posited as a thesis or become being’s essence. As a sign given to the other of this very signification, the “here I am” signifies me in the name of God, at the service of men that look at me, without having anything to identify myself with, but the sound of my voice or the figure of my gesture – the saying itself. This recurrence is quite the opposite of return upon oneself, self-consciousness. It is sincerity, effusion of oneself, “extraditing” of the self to the neighbor. (149)

162 Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, 149.

163 Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, 150.
To utter “here I am” with my mouth and breath is to tie the knot of subjectivity that brings myself into being with and for others, a response that dramatically limits responsibility to the moment of ethics prior to being and beginnings. It is therefore a relation prior to freedom, prior to equality, prior to politics, and prior to justice, but, impossibly, still a relation even across absolute difference.

Before we turn again to those topics after ethics, we can see here how important the disunity, or infinity, of the self in consciousness is for Levinas, which maintains an absolutely absent term to whom I cannot face as an equal from this side of being. Subjectivity announces my relationship with the Other from across the irreducible divide of difference, precisely because of my inequality that penetrates even into my own consciousness. Socrates’ “dialogue of the soul with itself” takes on an increasingly modified meaning in Levinas’ later work, a meaning that pulls him away from Arendt’s thinking on personal responsibility and deeper into ethics as a phenomenal description of responsibility. In his lectures on “Death and Time” (1975–1976), Levinas puts it succinctly: “The turning of the Same toward the Infinite, which is neither aiming nor vision, is the question, a question that is also a response, but in no way a dialogue of the soul with itself. A question, a prayer – is this not prior to dialogue? The question contains the response as ethical responsibility, as an impossible escape.” That is, the trace of the other in thinking that Levinas draws into ethics is not my own voice speaking to myself as a friend, or analogous to dialogue as a reciprocal exchange. The thinking of subjectivity (rather than consciousness) consists of being called into question, the inspiration of the other in my own thoughts that stirs me to respond, even to something that I cannot

164 Absence does not imply a hiddenness: “The trace of a past in a face is not the absence of a yet non-revealed, but the anarchy of what has never been present, of an infinite which commands in the face of the other, and which, like an excluded middle, could not be aimed at” (Otherwise than Being, 97).

165 Levinas, God, Death, and Time, 116–117. This book contains lectures for two courses that Levinas taught in 1975–1976; I am referring to the final lecture of the first course, “Death and Time.” A closer engagement with this text is marked for future study on this topic.
know or see or touch or even fulfil. It is “a surplus of meaning of which consciousness all by itself would be incapable.”

The distinction between consciousness and subjectivity, the latter of which is “neither aiming nor vision,” underscores again the limits of intentionality and therefore phenomenology that trail off at the boundary of ethics. Without intentionality, thinking as “calling myself into question” is not directed toward knowledge or truth. Subjectivity is not the production of a cognitive subject, but “[t]he subject opening up to the thought and truth of being […]” that cannot be derived from cognition. Instead of cognition Levinas offers witnessing:

Ethics is the breakup of the originary unity of transcendental apperception, that is, it is beyond experience. Witnessed, and not thematized, in the sign given to the other “[‘here I am’], the Infinite signifies out of responsibility for the other, out of the-one-for-the-other, a subject supporting everything, subject to everything, that is, suffering for everyone, but charged with everything, without having had to decide for this taking charge, which is gloriously amplified in the measure that it is imposed. Obedience precedes any hearing of the command. The possibility of finding, anachronously, the order in the obedience itself, and of receiving the order out of oneself, this reverting of heteronomy into autonomy, is the very way the Infinite passes itself.

166 Levinas, Otherwise than Being, 152. Again, the fact that I have left out the saying and the said from Levinas flattens this section.

167 Levinas, Otherwise than Being, 25–26. For further context (with the introduction of the saying and the said immediately following):

Being then would not be the construction of a cognitive subject, contrary to what idealism claims. The subject opening up to the thought and truth of being, as it incontestably does, opens upon a way quite different from that which lets the subject be seen as an ontology or an understanding of being. Being would not derive from cognition. This not coming from cognition has a quite different meaning than ontology supposes. […] Both being and the vision of being refer to a subject that has risen earlier than being and cognition, earlier than and on this side of them, in an immemorial time which a reminiscence could not recuperate as an a priori. The “birth” of being in the questioning where the cognitive subject stands would thus refer to a before the questioning, to the anarchy of responsibility, as it were on this side of all birth. (26)

168 Levinas, Otherwise than Being, 148. Hineni as a phrase is also associated with the Jewish credo, na’aseh va nishma (or “we shall do and we shall here”), often interpreted to mean that faithful action precedes understanding. In Isaiah 6:8, Isaiah hears God’s voice asking, “Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?” Isaiah responds, “Hineni; send me.” God then replies, “Go and say to this people, ‘Indeed you hear, but you do not understand; indeed you see, but you do not know’” (Isaiah 6:9). See also Emmanuel Levinas, “The Temptation of the Temptation,” in Nine Talmudic Readings, trans. Annette Aronowicz (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990), 30–50.
Witnessing is a mode of relation that is not thematizing because it is not directed backward toward the call that has already been issued. Witnessing is the enacting of responsibility through the utterance “here I am,” in passivity and ambivalence, taken by surprise by the trauma and disturbance of the question. It is an obedience to an order that is out of order – the paradox of the ethical subject that does not coincide with itself. It is not an understanding, a comprehension, or a reunification of the self with itself. Language itself shows us that we can communicate through an openness that does not require recognition. When I speak, I do not know with certainty that I will be understood, and when I listen, I do not know with certainty that I understand. And yet I speak, and I listen without being lost and alone, even often. In listening and responding with “here I am,” i.e., witnessing, I substitute the Other for myself as the-self-for-the-Other for no empirical reasons. There is no necessity of understanding. To assert otherwise, Levinas cautions, would be to reduce the problem of communication to a problem of truth. It would be to deny that in language, solidarity precedes cognition, and that in ethics it is the same way. It would be to deny that the commandment “Thou shalt not kill” is not a rational limit on the subject that can be enforced (with force) but an ethical term. Responsibility grips me before truth and certainty, before I can deliberate, merely because of my sense of the Other’s approach and the question the approach evokes and for no other reason.

Levinas, Otherwise than Being, 150. “But this singular obedience to the order to go, without understanding the order, this obedience prior to all representation, this allegiance before any oath, this responsibility prior to any commitment, is precisely the other in the same, inspiration and prophecy, the passing itself of the Infinite.”

Arendt makes the exact point as a critique of Karl Jaspers and Martin Buber in Life of the Mind, 2:200.

Levinas, “The Paradox of Morality,” 175. In this interview Levinas is making a distinction between authority and force, where authority here refers to the power of the law that commands without force, the order that precedes itself (“Thou shalt not kill”). I should note that the Hebrew commandment is technically against murder (specifically) and not killing in general.

Levinas, Otherwise than Being, 119–120.
If we must speak of reasons, the “anarchic reason” that underpins responsibility is a “reason” with no principle and does not emerge from the will.173 It is not initiated. What draws me to respond to the Other is nothing other than the simple fact that I am in proximity to them.174 Responsibility cannot be oriented toward reasons or truth because it refers to what is prior to any theme. Indeed, it cannot be directed toward anything within the horizon of my experience. On the level of subjectivity, the proximity of the Other is sensed from beyond that horizon and so is not empirical.175 Who, then, am I in proximity to if not a person of flesh and blood, the other whom Levinas takes great pains to say is to be fed with the bread from my own mouth? Where is the indescribable, absent, but still concrete other who is not me, not merely an imagined other self referring to itself? The other is also supposed to be my neighbor, the stranger, widow, and orphan.

Levinas answers again that proximity is not empirical and can be distinguished from presence: “The other as other, as neighbor, is in his presence never equal to his proximity. […] Proximity is a difference, a non-coinciding, an arrythmia in time, a diachrony refractory to thematization.”176 It is a restlessness split

173 I acknowledge that there is an opening here for a whole other discussion with Arendt about the nature of the faculty of the will. That is beyond the scope of the dissertation at its present stage. I will say that her discussion of consciousness and the splitting of the will seems to me to have further points of resonance with Levinas, but also dissonances. See for example Life of the Mind, 2:94–95, where Arendt writes that, “The split within the Will is a conflict, and not a dialogue, and it is independent of the content that is willed.” On 2:104, Arendt adds: “Men do not become just by knowing what is just but by loving justice. […] there is no greater assertion of something or somebody than to love it, that is, to say: I will that you be – Amo: Volo ut sis” (quoting Augustine, see section beginning on 2:101). As I said, there is room for further analysis.

174 Levinas, Otherwise than Being, 166–167. “Proximity thus signifies a reason before the thematization of signification by a thinking subject, before the assembling of terms in a present, a pre-original reason that does not proceed from any initiative of the subject, an anarchic reason.”

175 Levinas, Otherwise than Being, 160. “To require that a communication be sure of being heard is to confuse communication and knowledge, to efface the difference, to fail to recognize the signifyingness of the-one-for-the-other in me. I am extracted from the concept of the ego, and am not measured by being and death, that is, escape totality and structures. I am reduced to myself in responsibility, outside of the fundamental historicity Merleau-Ponty speaks of. Reason is the-one-for-the-other!” (166–167).

176 Levinas, Otherwise than Being, 166.
across temporalities, on either side of appearance/phenomena.\textsuperscript{177} From within the gap, I cannot respond except by detour.\textsuperscript{178} In other words, the coinciding of the commandment and response is still not a coinciding as a unification because my response (“here I am”) is never settled or satisfied in a single moment. It is infinite. At the very same time that I am ordered to my neighbor in responsibility, I am interrupted by the third, the “illeity,” who issues the order by surprise, without revealing itself to me, turning me back upon myself again and again. The trace of the Other “obsesses the subject [me] without staying in correlation with him [me], without equalling me in a consciousness, ordering me before appearing […].”\textsuperscript{179} The order that issues from the Other (illeity) coincides with the response to the other (neighbour) without coinciding, and so resists thematization from both ends.\textsuperscript{180}

In turning me to my neighbour, the illeity also signifies the ethical problems of responsibility as ones of proximity that arise when we consider responsibility in the plural and in the present. Namely, responsibilities compound exponentially, infinitely, not just in relation to the Other but in relation to others: “The third party [who] is other than the neighbor, but also another neighbor, and also a neighbor of the other, and not simply his fellow. What then are the other and the third party for one another? What have they done to one another? Which passes before the other? The other stands in relationship with the third

\textsuperscript{177} The disturbance of time is important: “The proximity does not enter into the common time of clocks, which makes meetings possible. It is a disturbance. [...] Proximity is a disturbance of the rememberable time. [...] The obligation aroused by the proximity of the neighbor is not to the measure of the images he gives me; it concerns me before or otherwise. Such is the sense of the non-phenomenality of the face” (Levinas, \textit{Otherwise than Being}, 89).

\textsuperscript{178} Levinas, \textit{Otherwise than Being}, 85.

\textsuperscript{179} Levinas, \textit{Otherwise than Being}, 93–94. Levinas emphasizes the absolutely non-phenomenal nature of the face of the Other on the same pages:

A face as a trace, trace of itself, trace expelled in a trace, does not signify an indeterminate phenomenon; its ambiguity is not an indetermination of a noema, but an invitation to the fine risk of approach qua approach, to the exposure of one to the other, to the exposure of exposedness, the expression of exposure, saying. In the approach of a face the flesh becomes word, a caress a saying. The thematization of a face undoes the face and undoes the approach. The mode in which a face indicates its own absence is my responsibility requires a description that can be formed only in ethical language.

\textsuperscript{180} Levinas, \textit{Otherwise than Being}, 150.
party, for whom I cannot entirely answer, even if I alone answer, before any question, for my neighbor.”181

The burden is again unbearable, a persecution and trauma. As subject, not only am I irreplaceable, unable
to refuse responsibility without fault, I am at the same time irreplaceable to the Other and to others,
responsible for everyone and everything, even for what I have not yet done, introducing a contradiction that
cannot be resolved (paradox). Here Levinas demarcates the limit of responsibility, which as a paradox is
more like the knot than a border:

The third party introduces a contradiction in the saying whose signification before the other until
then went in one direction. It is of itself the limit of responsibility and the birth of the question:
What do I have to do with justice? A question of consciousness. Justice is necessary, that is,
comparison, coexistence, contemporaneousness, assembling, order, thematicization, the visibility of
faces, and thus intentionality and the intellect, the intelligibility of a system, and thence also a
copresence on an equal footing as before a court of justice. Essence as synchrony is togetherness
in a place.182

Put another way, as soon as I consider multiple, intersecting responsibilities as a subject in a world with
many relations, I have crossed the threshold from the diachrony of the relation with the Other (a duality
that overflows with infinity, from beyond being and a non-place), and entered into the contemporaneous
space of consciousness where objects can appear and be grasped and where there is not me and the non-
phenomenal other but me and others, many others. This crossing over is initiated or signified by the third
party, the illeity, sensed in proximity as a subject, an “apparition” that is “the very origin of appearing,”
calling me into the world.183

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essay was useful in building my reading of Levinas on justice, which draws more from his last writings. I especially
appreciate her references to both the original French texts and the English translations. Caygill’s article on Levinas’ 
*Esprit* articles is a similarly helpful source for Levinas’ politics, which is a topic I am trying to engage only in a very
limited sense.


183 Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, 161.
The question, “what have I to do with justice?” is a question that belongs to the order of appearances and themes even though it is asked from the obsession of proximity, already in responsibility. It is a question in search of a principle and which has need of a principle, and so is asked after the anarchical diachronous time of ethics and in the domain of thematization, along with “society and the State, comparison and possession, thought and science, commerce and philosophy […].” In the phenomenal world where I appear as an empirical being in front of others, I need the thematizable for responsibility to be possible or meaningful at all. To some degree or other, I need to be able to weigh and judge, to compare, to make systems and institutions, to deal with concepts. If not, I would not be able to speak of responsibility at all (certainly, philosophical writing about ethics would be utterly useless). What is important is that justice and judgement cannot be anonymous or totalizing. “Justice is impossible without the one that renders it finding himself in proximity. […] The judge is not outside the conflict, but the law is in the midst of proximity,” Levinas writes. The judgement of justice, even in thematization, cannot rely on general rules but must relate to the particular cases at hand or not be justice at all. What is justice as anonymity, without the specificity of the person in the present? It is only by way of infinity that I can talk of justice, it is only in the appearance of the third party who does not appear but whose absence makes appearance possible that justice arises. Levinas’ claim is that everything appears in proximity, beginning with the third party. He follows that with the further claim that, if everything appears in proximity, then everything shows itself for

184 Levinas, Otherwise than Being, 158.
185 Levinas, Otherwise than Being, 161–162. Levinas notes in the interview published as “The Paradox of Morality” that in Totality and Infinity justice is associated with ethics, “for the relationship between two people.” In his later work, Levinas switches so that justice becomes inseparable from politics and “distinguishing[ed] from ethics, which is primary” (107). The question of justice and the question of ethics are split along the line of the principle (arche). Recall a similar shift in Arendt’s reading of the distinction between the vita activa and the vita contemplativa from the Human Condition to her later writings. Levinas’ use of an-archical is an interesting point of comparison with Arendt and, once again, with Heidegger also.
186 Levinas, Otherwise than Being, 159.
187 Levinas, Otherwise than Being, 160. The interplay across this divide is what Levinas’ refers to as the saying and the said.
the sake of justice. Justice is the order of a rationality (read: thematization) through which responsibility is enacted in the visible world of many but that only arises out of the “extravagancies” of substitution, from the encounter with the Other in proximity.\textsuperscript{188} “The foundation of consciousness is justice,” Levinas writes, “[…] It is the necessary interruption of the Infinite being fixed in structures, community and totality.”\textsuperscript{189} After the question of justice has been asked, “the moment of consciousness and intentionality” opens up again but in relation to “an objectivity beyond or on the hither side of the nakedness of the face […] An objectivity born of justice and founded in justice […].”\textsuperscript{190}

Objectivity founded in justice still does not unify being, nor being and appearance. It is not a synthesis. Returning to the earlier distinction between consciousness and subjectivity, justice must found

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\textsuperscript{188} Levinas, \textit{Otherwise than Being}, 161. He elaborates:

The pre-original, anarchic saying is proximity, contact, duty without end, a saying still indifferent to the said and saying itself without giving the said, the-one-for-the-other, a substitution. It requires the signification of the thematizable, states the idealized said, weighs and judges in justice. Judgments and propositions are born in justice, which is putting together, assembling, the being of entities. Here with a problem begins the concern for truth, for the disclosure of being. But it is for justice that everything shows itself, and to the extravagance of substitution is superimposed, through the exigencies for responsibility itself which substitution is, a rational order, the ancillary or angelic order of justice, and the very fact of seeing, seeing everywhere clearly and recounting everything.

\textsuperscript{189} Levinas, \textit{Otherwise than Being}, 160–161. Note that in French, consciousness and conscience are the same word (conscience). The full quotation reads (showing multiple reversals and tensions):

It is the necessary interruption of the Infinite being fixed in structures, community and totality. Synchronization is the act of consciousness which, through representation and the said, institutes “with the help of God,” the original locus of justice, a terrain common to me and the others where I am counted among them, that is, where subjectivity is a citizen with all the duties and rights measured and measurable which the equilibrated ego involves, or equilibrating itself by the concourse of duties and the concurrence of rights. But justice can be established only if I, always evaded from the concept of the ego, always destitute and divested of being, always in non-reciprocatable relationship with the other, always for the other, can become an other like the others. Is not the Infinite which enigmatically commands me, commanding and not commanding, from the other, and the turning of the I into “like the others,” for which it is important to concern oneself and take care? My lot is important. But it is still out of my responsibility that my salvation has meaning, despite the danger in which it puts this responsibility, which it may encompass and swallow up, just as the State issued from the proximity of the neighbor is always on the verge of integrating him into a we, which congeals both me and the neighbor.

Here Levinas addresses the issue of caring for the self as well, putting it in the territory of justice (note similarities again to Hillel).

consciousness (and through intentionality objectivity) because the question of justice is always asked in relation with the absolutely Other, out of obsession rather than cognition or reason, and, consequently, unanswerable and unfulfillable, another persecution. That is, justice in proximity always has to justify itself, it always has to be interrupted or it (and objectivity) would extend outward forever and become a totality.\textsuperscript{191} It is not an escape from the profound asymmetry and radical inequality proximity entails. “What does justice have to do with me?” signifies my subjectivity as infinite responsibility, my infinite inequality before the Other, at the same time as it makes me into someone who is a subject like other subjects, responsible for one another. At the same time that consciousness, through justice, institutes “a terrain common to me and others where I am counted among them” (such as a citizen with rights and duties), it demands that I assume infinite responsibility for everyone and everything.\textsuperscript{192}

Proximity is not equal and not universal. It is contingent and particular, but also infinite. Justice attempts to address the gap, which can only be addressed not by filling up the unfillable but by my own inequality in responsibility (as substitution) that introduces the third party and the questions of justice in the first place. As proximity, the limit of responsibility is not a limitation on anarchical ethics – that would be to undo the breaking apart of the unity accomplished in infinity at the very last stage! The problem of the third (justice), the limit of responsibility at the contradiction of proximity, does not limit responsibility. In arriving at justice through multiple folds of consciousness and subjectivity that are in relation with the infinite beyond being and beyond essence, Levinas demonstrates how deeply plurality is embedded in responsibility.\textsuperscript{193} Infinity is signified in the trace of the Other in me, not an imagined interlocutor but the

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\textsuperscript{191} Levinas, Otherwise than Being, 163.
\textsuperscript{192} Levinas, Otherwise than Being, 160–161.
\textsuperscript{193} Simon Critchley, comparing Levinas’ plurality unfavourably to Arendt’s, highlights the radicality of his configuration:

Although Levinas doesn’t have Arendt in mind (they only met once, in Chicago, while receiving honorary degrees. After watching her sing along enthusiastically to the American national anthem, Levinas was
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infinite difference beyond being that structures my very subjectivity, that persecutes me, takes me hostage, and in substitution cracks open being’s essence. Responsibility becomes justice as it becomes inter-subjective, but the inter-subjectivity in the common world always refers to the diachrony of being, persecuted.

At this point, we may seem quite far away from the questions of responsibility raised for Arendt at the Eichmann trial. In a late interview published as “The Paradox of Morality,” Levinas reflects whether there can be a reason for morality after Auschwitz. In the previous section, we saw that Arendt does not find confidence in recovering or founding a new moral law to replace what was shattered, but wonders if the experience of thinking provides a moral guardrail that is not compelled but taken up in personal responsibility. Levinas finds that morality after Auschwitz is a law without a “Happy End,” “a piety without apparently heard to mutter, “Cette femme est folle” [“That woman is crazy”], this is how he would respond to her thinking of plurality: it is a plurality of individuals. Levinas’ thought is more radical: plurality is being’s multiplicity. We are plural. Plurality isn’t some kind of political idea of pluralism where we have a plurality of citizens, agents, or actors. Rather, plurality is something that ontologically structures our relation to and through the child. Also, and perhaps more importantly, because we’re all children too, we’re structured plurally. We are not ourselves. We are ourselves and we are not ourselves. We are children, big children. Such is our undeniable and plural facticity. In many ways, this is where the main argument of Totality and Infinity winds up. “Fecundity is to be set up as an ontological category” (Totality and Infinity 277). [...] The unifying concept of the history of philosophy is the idea of being as one. That connects Parmenides to Heidegger. (Lecture four, “Pluralism: The Break with the One”) Overall, Critchley’s reading that Levinas’ plurality is more radical is well taken, but I do think that he overstates his case somewhat. Arendt does attend to this problem of plurality in her later work, but the degree to which Levinas is unmistakably concrete about it makes Levinas a helpful interlocutor for our purposes here, and helps articulate and open up the problems of (ethical) responsibility against its limits. For all of Arendt’s moves to bring us back into the world of action, she leaves too much at the threshold of the imagination. You can see her come close to Levinas’ concreteness at times, such as in her essay “Understanding and Politics,” where she pleads for the “understanding heart” that is “not mere reflection or mere feeling,” but then ends up as “the faculty of the imagination [as] the gift of the “understanding heart” (322). This passage makes me think of the Jewish concept of lev shome’ah (literally, the listening heart), not unrelated to Levinas’ ethical call. For Arendt it seems to be too risky in the end, and so it remains internalized.

194 Levinas, Otherwise than Being, 158. A useful summary from end of Otherwise than Being: “Signification, the one-for-the-other, the relationship with alterity, has been analysed in the present work as proximity, proximity as responsibility for the other, and responsibility for the other as substitution. In its subjectivity, its very bearing as a separate substance, the subject was shown to be an expiation for another, the condition or unconditionality of being hostage. This book interprets the subject as a hostage and the subjectivity of the subject as a substitution breaking with being’s essence” (184).
"Calling myself into question is a capacity rooted in plurality that is never compulsory because it cannot be willed or unwilled, it is in relation with infinity and so inscribed in utter passivity. “It is easier to tell myself to believe without promise than it is to ask it of the other,” Levinas tells the interviewer. “That is the idea of asymmetry. I can demand of myself that which I cannot demand of the other.”\(^{195}\)

Beliefs and promises are not reasons nor assurances. James Hatley comments on Levinas’ assertion of the non-rationality of responsibility (and of the Good) against this acutely painful context of the death camps, where “God let the Nazis do what they wanted.” Referring to the preface to Totality and Infinity, Hatley writes that even though Levinas was traumatized by the seeming collapse of morality (like many of his contemporaries, including Arendt), despite everything Levinas remained moved by those who “continued to insist they were responsible no matter what the consequences. In their actions is revealed for Levinas a responsibility without precedence, a concern for others that is gratuitous and beyond any reasonable justification.”\(^{196}\) At the core of ethical responsibility, now perhaps distinct enough from Arendt’s personal responsibility to resist being interchangeable terms, is an order to be for the other that is out of order with itself and that somehow coincides with a response that never quite coincides with the question it desires to answer.

With the introduction of the third, Levinas compounds the paradoxes of responsibility again with proximity that extends not just to the Other but to others, from duality to plurality, from ethics to justice. Political theorist Annabel Herzog notes that the question elicited by responsibility shifts subtly in Levinas’ later texts. In Otherwise than Being, it is “what do I have to do with justice?” This is the question at the limit of responsibility (proximity) that signifies the entry of the third party, which puts distance between me and the other and opens me to think about justice. In the essay “Peace and Proximity” (1984), Levinas

\(^{195}\) Levinas, “Paradox of Morality,” 176.

makes the question of justice more direct: “What am I to do?” Levinas asks. “This, too, is a question of justice but one that now addresses me,” Herzog elucidates.197 That is, in Levinas’ later work, justice and politics are in the same order, unified by the “extreme importance in human multiplicity of the political structure of society.”198 It is toward the domain of justice that the ethical response can be directed in subjectivity. Separate but tied together by the knot of subjectivity, ethics and politics require one another.

With reference to a close reading of Levinas’ later political texts, Herzog writes that,

> Without politics, ethics would perhaps forget, because of its extravagance, the concrete reality of hunger and its possible solutions. In revealing hunger and demanding a solution for it, ethics both controls and appeals to politics. More precisely, ethics dominates politics because it requires justice. Ethics and politics come together, the former demanding of the latter to correct the hunger that politics itself creates; that is, ethics demands of politics something ethics cannot provide because of its extravagance. Ethics is anterior to all questions; justice is necessary. Politics must be shot through with ethical concern; it must not be left to itself and has to be interrupted or “disturbed (troublé)” by ethics [...].”199

In a tense relationship with anarchical, ethical responsibility, justice can never be settled in a ground of certainty. The stability of universal concepts will always shake, and the competing claims of justice will always clamor. Oriented toward infinity, an abyss that is not empty, there is no reason to continue, and yet, thus far, we do. In short, responsibility appears in the faultline between ethics and politics.

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197 Herzog, “Levinas’s Politics of Surplus,” 240. The second part of the quotation is from Levinas himself in the essay “Peace and Proximity” (1984).

198 See the earlier note about justice and politics in Totality and Infinity vs. Otherwise than Being. Herzog (and others) reads two registers of politics in Levinas’ work, which Herzog characterizes as “that of politics without surplus and that of commitment toward utopia, that of representation and that of disturbing absence” (“Levinas’s Politics of Surplus,” 252–253). “The paradox of politics is that it is both the origin and the cure of hunger. The Other is dying because of politics, but he/she does not die automatically, thanks to politics. Strikingly, it is this paradox that reveals the ethical demand: it is through politics, or because of politics, that ‘the sake of the Other’ appears as the first and the predominant concern” (242).

199 Herzog, “Levinas’s Politics of Surplus,” 244. She is referring to Otherwise than Being, 194.
Chapter Five

Ritual as Praxis: Reflections on Learning, Teaching, and Meaningful Action

From two sides there is thus a knocking on the locked door of the future.

– Franz Rosenzweig, 1921

5.1 An Example: Shabbat as Ritual Between the Sacred and Profane

My approach to the question of the responsibility of activists in the face of genocide begins from an experience that I characterize as being in the faultline, an irreconcilable faultline between known and unknowable, and, as I have argued throughout this text, the faultlines between the self and the other, between thinking and action, between theory and practice, between ethics and politics. This faultline constitutes a fundamental separation, and separation is the key to this beginning as it has been to so many others. Without separation, there is no movement because there is no in-between space and there is no time, only eternity. I posit ritual as a communal and personal movement. With its sacred repetition, ritual introduces the movement between the flow of time and the eternal moment, or between action and thought themselves. In this sense, I offer an account of ritual as praxis, the movement between theory and practice, taking up both, devaluing neither, but maintaining the separation between them. In fact, it is separation that makes the space/time for faultline questions, that indeed opens the faultline.

2 I do not argue that these are all equivalent.
3 Who creates the separations that I have gestured toward in this paragraph? Is there really an essential separation between ethics and politics? Some separations seem to be descriptive, while others are more instrumental. For example, there seems to be a necessary separation between me and the Other, though it can be conceptualized in
Drawing inspiration from Levinas, I try to draw on “non-philosophical experiences” in order to describe something that exceeds the bounds of phenomenality, or that lies in the tension of the faultline.\(^4\) To this purpose, here in the final chapter, I revert not only to the personal voice but to personal story and memory. I begin with deep memories from my childhood and delve into the problems of anti-genocide activism, now specifically returning to my experiences as a member of STAND, the youth-led wing of the Save Darfur movement. I propose to think through separation, which allows for the possibility of both ethics and politics (as we saw in chapter four), through the ritual of Shabbat, or the Sabbath. At this point my research question (what is the responsibility of activists in the face of genocide?) becomes educational; my aim is to prepare activists (including me) for the task ahead, or to set the table for them. As such, what separation does for this work is suspend action in order to stop, and think, holding open the faultline not to recover truth but to ascribe meaning, to initiate movement (praxis). For this last task, we shall return to Arendt and Levinas at the end of the chapter.

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Shabbat is a holy day for Jews from the moment the sun sets on Friday evening until it sets again on Saturday. It marks the seventh day of the creation of the world, which in the foundational story of beginnings (Bereshit, or Genesis) was the day that the Hebrew God rested.\(^5\) In celebration of that story and in accordance with divine commandment, Shabbat is separated from the rest of the week, a separation that

\(^4\) Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, 120.

\(^5\) See Arendt on the establishment of new orders and the need for beginnings in *Life of the Mind*, vol. 2, Chapter 16 (“The Abyss of Freedom and the Novus Ordo Seclorum”), 195ff.
is practiced by Jews through the rituals that are enacted in the home and in the community. As a child in Vancouver, Canada, Shabbat rituals began on Friday afternoon before I would be dismissed from Jewish day school early in order to prepare for Shabbat at home. The final hours of the school week prepared me for what was to come: my peers and I would be given the most special treat, sweet and thinly sliced *challah* bread, and sing songs to welcome the Shabbat before going home. After school, my mother would insist that my younger siblings and I change out of our school uniforms and into Shabbat clothes and set the table for dinner. The Friday evening meal would be unlike our usual fare, composed instead of dishes reserved for that sacred day: the challah my father meticulously made that morning, with accompanying *matbucha*, hummus, and tahini, fried eggplants, meat patties, oven-baked chicken with flavoured rice, fresh salads of cucumbers and bell peppers and tomato. It was only on Shabbat that we used white tablecloths and dessert plates, that we sang songs of praise, that we had guests for dinner and actually ate all together. From the moment that we lit candles together, spoke a blessing together, a new time was initiated. I experienced and participated in these rituals of separation – was raised in them – but did not yet understand their significance as a teaching of the tradition I inherited.

When I started volunteering with STAND Canada at the age of 17, that changed in a very personal way. Earnestly engaged in the project of making “never again” a reality and a primary political responsibility, I took my job of “raising awareness” at my school and in my community very seriously. There was a deep sense of urgency, an urgency to know and to act. STAND was part of the Save Darfur movement, and that urgency was directed toward people in Darfur who seemed to need people like me to speak for them to change their bleak futures. Believing this grim and misguided task to be my responsibility, I took every obstacle and failure hard, with all the weight of the moral crisis genocide posed. Each one of my peers who came to a STAND group meeting one week and not the next, every polite or blank stare, each gaze that turned away – these moments began to congeal around my heart and grow heavy. I started to feel guilty – that particular brand of western guilt – for all the time I was doing other things instead of
fighting against the genocide that was happening now in Darfur, Sudan. I felt guilty for the time I spent watching TV and I felt guilty for the time I was doing my homework. It became utterly exhausting and I knew that it was no good. These feelings did not lead to more action nor reflection; like paralysis, they seemed to halt it. Guilt became a sluggish feeling to fight against rather than to motivate or inspire. It changed nothing.

It was at this point that Shabbat was reinscribed in my experience with new meaning. At some point in the early months of 2008, I was inspired to carve out a sacred time of worldlessness in the tradition of my families. Though I did not keep all the Halachic requirements, I committed myself to maintaining the Shabbat from the moment the sun set on Friday until it set again on Saturday. During that time, everything from the rest of the week was taken off the table to make room for Shabbat. By this, I do not mean that Shabbat is a time to stop caring about the other; quite the opposite. It is a time when certain types of actions are forbidden and others opened up, and a certain kind of time is initiated, and somehow it unlocked the paralyzing guilt to let in something else. In fact, the word for holiness in the sacred languages of Judaism, kodesh, comes from the root word signifying separation.6

It is difficult to separate theory from religious practice, deeply embedded in thousands of years of tradition, for a philosophical study (this is one problem with reading and working with Levinas). It is not for me here to attempt such a separation, if it were even possible or advisable, and empty Shabbat of its contents and weaken its form. At the same time, it is important to clarify that my intent in inviting the Shabbat to this text is not some kind of evangelizing effort to promote its observance in practice. Rather, like the political theorist Bonnie Honig, I offer the Shabbat as an example of a ritual (or what Honig calls a frame) that alters temporality through separation and, upon reflection, discloses the possibilities inherent

6 As Levinas notes in God, Death, and Time: “An ab-solute that rhymes with the Hebrew first name of the philosophical ‘God’: kodesh, which, without distinction, is the holy and the separated, as though the inscription of holiness inscribed separation by its own gesture, as though the chance coming of God into human language were the original inscription of the difference” (237).
in its structure and movement. Outside of its relative context, its meaning will not be given. I also invite the reader to consider this or other rituals that may speak to your own experiences. In the following section, I will engage some of the philosophical literature on Shabbat in order to show how that it is the separation of the sacred and the profane, or everyday, itself that does not create Shabbat, but is Shabbat.

In her essay, “Is Man a ‘Sabbatical Animal’? Agamben, Rosenzweig, Heschel, Arendt,” Honig wonders if Shabbat could be the frame “to stop business as usual in order to reflect on it from the perspective of a different temporality, alter it, undo its accreted injustices, and rehearse equality so that we do not forget what it feels and looks like.” She is responding to Giorgio Agamben’s theorization of Shabbat (or more specifically, the feast) in his essay, “Hunger of an Ox,” as an example of his notion of inoperativity, which refers to concepts and practices that resist the dominating pull toward “use.” What interests Agamben about the example of Shabbat is that it has a curious structure compared to other examples that are restricted to a mere cessation of labour: it is simultaneously inoperative and operative, in that it produces new use. In other words, Agamben is struck by the fact that on Shabbat, Jews are commanded to cease from certain activities (menucha, or rest) but also to perform certain kinds of activities that can only take place in the space opened up by those prohibitions and with the special joy appropriate to the ever-recurring festival of creation. Furthermore, that which is prohibited is mostly grouped under the category melacha, which refers specifically to creative work (i.e., work that has a desired end or purpose). That is, Agamben’s theorization of Shabbat recognizes “a dimension of praxis in which simple human activities are neither negated nor abolished but suspended and rendered inoperative in order to be exhibited, as such, in a festive manner.”


Honig criticizes Agamben’s tendency to subsume his examples under the universality of the inoperativity concept, threatening the core of its meaning by instrumentalizing that which is supposed to be without use. In her own proposal of a Shabbat frame of equality (presented in conversation with Arendt’s writings), she emphasizes the incommensurability of the inoperative and operative in order to draw parallels to the key ideas about Shabbat in other philosophical works: creation in Franz Rosenzweig’s *The Star of Redemption*, eternity in Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel’s *The Sabbath: Its Meaning for Modern Man*, natality in Arendt, and equality in Honig’s own work. With the additional depth of these thinkers, she thickens the conception of inoperativity in Shabbat with the strong notions of equality rooted in the three sabbatical rituals of Jewish practice and notes the structural similarities to Arendt’s conception of action (i.e., praxis). Honig is trying to open the capacity to begin (natality), inaugurated by equality that is embedded in its very structure. In the context of natality instead of inoperativity, Honig argues, Shabbat orients us to action in concert with our equals that has a “temporality and vitality” not subject to operative needs and wants.

While Honig attends more closely to some aspects of Shabbat, like Agamben’s, it seems to me that her framework similarly tends toward overdetermination. The equality that emerges from the sabbaticals and their laws and the importance of that emergence – for example, in the forgiving of debts and the freeing of slaves – cannot be elided in their ethical and political significance. However, by embedding equality into

11 Honig looks deeper into the biblical commandments around Shabbat to further dramatize the separation of Shabbat in its tripled meaning. *Vayikra* (Leviticus) includes instructions for two other sabbaticals: *Shmita*, which refers to the biblical command in *Vayikra* (Leviticus 25:2–7) for the land to rest from agricultural production on every seventh year (as its own Sabbath), as well as a forgiving of debts and a sharing of the fruit of the land with all for that period, and the *Yovel*, which denotes the jubilee of the fiftieth year (the year following seven times seven years) which mandates, among other things, the freeing of all slaves in the land (Leviticus 25:8–17). While the *Yovel* is no longer observed in post-destruction times, aspects of *Shmita* are still practiced today. Honig’s aim in describing the three sabbaticals together is to underscore the importance of the notion of equality in each.
the structure of Shabbat to create a “Sabbath of equality,” Honig risks instrumentalizing as well; rather than equality contingently emerging from the performance of the Shabbat rituals, it is a necessary precondition (an arche). In contrast, I argue that Shabbat’s inherent structure is the very separation that constitutes it – in this case, the separation between the sacred and the profane. Or, as Honig writes in an earlier essay, “The sabbatical is the suspension of the secular, the opening to the sacred that occurs in the cessation or, better, if Franz Rosenzweig is correct, in the intensification of the everyday.” Perhaps I can alter Honig’s original conception, just a little bit: Shabbat can be a frame for a commitment “to stop business as usual in order to reflect on it from the perspective of a different temporality, [and] alter it.”

How does Shabbat welcome its keepers into a different temporality? Following Rosenzweig and Heschel, Honig notes a curious feature of Shabbat: in contrast to the other holidays in the Hebrew calendar and other sabbaticals discussed by Honig, the seventh day is demarcated without any reference to the celestial movements of the Hebrew calendar and liturgical year. The separation of Shabbat from the other days of the week is completely unnecessary in the philosophical sense; it is utterly contingent on the continued practice of the observance of the separation. In other words, the significance derives from the

13 A closer reading of Arendt and Levinas on the topic of equality could provide an interesting counterpoint to Honig’s overall claims about Shabbat, which I find engaging.

14 Note that the idea of “secular” is a Christian one. The more appropriate distinction is sacred and profane, since secular implies (in common usage) the non-religious. The secular/religious dichotomy does not track in Jewish life in the same way as it does for Christians, nor as it does in western liberal democracies.


16 Honig, “Is Man a ‘Sabbatical Animal’?,” 21. The original reads: “Indeed, Sabbath arguably can be the frame not only of Judaic Saturdays and Christian Sundays but also of other not necessarily canonical theological commitments to stop business as usual in order to reflect on it from the perspective of a different temporality, alter it, undo its accreted injustices, and rehearse equality so that we do not forget what it feels and looks like.” Honig’s reflections on Shabbat (in direct relation to Arendt) remind me of Levinas’ claim that everything that appears, appears for the sake of justice. Of course, for Levinas, justice involves both equality and radical inequality, or asymmetry.

fact that we count the days of the week as a community and mark this time for specific purposes that are reserved only for that time (sacred), resulting in a shared temporality.

Rosenzweig emphasizes how this shared temporality becomes a shared reality. In the *Star of Redemption*, Sabbath, the festival of creation, “lends reality to the year;” each week it is repeated so as to re-create creation, and the rotation of Torah portions throughout the year unites all the weeks together, setting into motion a particular sense of time and its passage. “Judaism is a *religion of time* aiming at the *sanctification of time*,” Heschel writes in *The Sabbath*. “Judaism teaches us to be attached to *holiness in time*;” he continues, “to be attached to sacred events, to learn how to consecrate sanctuaries that emerge from the magnificent stream of a year. The Sabbaths are our great cathedrals; and our Holy of Holies is a shrine that neither the Romans nor the Germans were able to burn; a shrine that even apostasy cannot easily obliterate: the Day of Atonement [i.e., the Sabbath of Sabbaths].” He goes onto call Jewish ritual an “architecture of time.”

As Arendt notes in the *Life of the Mind*, it seems easier for humans to think in spatial metaphors than temporal ones. In this case, “architecture” refers to the way Shabbat holds open time, a functional metaphor for Heschel’s purposes as well as for mine. The metaphor, however, is a little too rigid and elides

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18 For Rosenzweig on the time of Shabbat, see part three of the *Star of Redemption*, especially pp. 310–315.

19 Rosenzweig, *Star of Redemption*, 310–311. Further, Shabbat is the microcosm of the entire Rosenzweigian sequence of creation-revelation-redemption: “So, though being at once the sign of creation and the first revelation, it is also, and even mainly, the anticipation of redemption” (314). I would like to make clear that while I find Rosenzweig’s interpretations of Jewish tradition and practice fascinating, and his commentary on Christianity likewise illuminating, the portions of the text that attempt to deal with other traditions (in particular Islam) are sorely lacking and often communicate only Rosenzweig’s own racism and ignorance, characteristic of European scholarly work of the time period.


21 Arendt, *Life of the Mind*, 1:13. The full quotation from Arendt, following a similar observation by Henri Bergson, reads: “The reason for preferring the spatial metaphor is obvious: for our everyday business in the world, on which the thinking ego may reflect but in which it is not involved, we need time measurements, and we can measure time only by measuring spatial distances. Even the common distinction between spatial juxtaposition and temporal succession presupposes an extended space through which the succession must occur” (13).
the activity that is Shabbat; in reality, it is Jews who keep time only through the act of the keeping. Nevertheless, I believe I argue alongside Rosenzweig and Heschel that the separation of the Shabbat is a foundational and eternally repeated ritual of Jewish life and practice in the faultline – an empty chasm, opened by the separation of the sacred and the profane, in which movement can take place. In this sense, the framework of Shabbat may help us think of separation in its temporal as well as spatial possibilities. It is unique in that the movement is wholly identical with its own structure and properly creates nothing. As Rosenzweig notes, the festival of creation commemorates that which has already happened. And yet we live it again.

The time of Shabbat is presented somewhat abstractly thus far, but it is essentially concrete. It is easy to get caught up in the clock-time of modern life, neatly and consistently divided into hours and minutes and seconds. In order to observe the time of Shabbat, one must become sensitized to the movement of the sun again, to the appearance of three stars in the sky when it sets, and to the crowding of darkness. With Saturday’s dusk, the week shifts again and the relationship between the sacred and the profane is re-enacted anew, the same but also different. It is a fundamental characteristic of Shabbat – at least in this world – that it cannot last forever. The ritual has a beginning and an end; it is not a closed cycle or dialectic, but rather follows a specific order and repeats itself against a liturgical calendar. The specific order can both reaffirm and reforge community ties but also reforge those bonds as living bonds.

When I say that I adopted Shabbat time as a way to deal with my inaction in the face of genocide, I do not mean that I turned away from the face of the Other for a night and day. Honig notes that Heschel and Rosenzweig both emphasize that Shabbat is not a time of rest for the purpose of being rested for work.

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22 As Rosenzweig writes in the *Star of Redemption*, “Movement is in fact the only possibly way to objectivize the temporal sequence which otherwise collapses irreparably into the time-point of the Presentive” (197).

23 Rosenzweig, *Star of Redemption*, 311.

24 Chasing Halachic observance can also easily be tied to the temporary and artificial exactitude of clock time (e.g., observing candle lighting time down to the minute).
the next day. That is already instrumentalization. As that guilt-ridden teenager with the uncertainty of the future stretching out before me, I was getting stuck. In my own personal story, it was the Shabbat ritual that put me into motion again and brought me back into contact with the growing community of activists to which I now belonged and fully committed to. It also reinscribed other inescapable and undeniable separations, like the separation between the self and the Other and especially between witness to and victim of genocide. While those suffering genocidal violence go to incredible lengths to maintain their rituals, it is characteristic of the witness on the outside, as we recall from chapter three, that they are able to open the space and time for rest, and peace. Shabbat is an invitation, but also a stark reminder of time’s passage, of where we are and the proximity and distances between us, of the unanswered call and the always-too-late and incomplete response. It pulls us deep into incommensurability, into non-productive activity for its own sake: praxis.

My use of the word praxis here might be confusing to an Arendt reader, who is familiar with Arendt’s revisiting (or, as Habermas claimed, “renewal”26) of the Aristotelean distinction between praxis (doing or action) and poesis (making).27 In this chapter I will maintain Arendt’s commitment to that

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26 Jürgen Habermas, Philosophical-Political Profiles, trans. Frederick G. Lawrence (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1983), 174. Dana Villa provides an alternative view:

Rather than “systematically renew” the notion of praxis, as Habermas suggests, Arendt pushes the inner tensions of Aristotle’s original conception to the breaking point. This tactic is part of a comprehensive strategy designed to reveal the instrumentalism at the heart of Aristotle’s account and to suggest why his concept of action is in many respects the source of the problem rather than its solution. For Arendt, the phenomenon of praxis can be revealed only if one reads Aristotle against the grain. Once we see this, the deeply antitraditional nature of Arendt’s theory of action (and her political philosophy in general) begins to come into view. Her desire is to consider action as an autonomous phenomenon within the public sphere, rather than as a means to something else (whether power, truth, or even justice). Yet, as the case of Aristotle illustrates, the means/end category and the metaphors of production from which it derives are so deeply rooted in our tradition that only a performance-oriented approach can reveal the peculiar freedom made possible by human plurality and the public sphere. (Arendt and Heidegger, 42)

distinction: poesis is an activity oriented toward means (making something), while praxis is oriented only toward its end (doing or acting, with no object other than itself). The movement of praxis I aim to show is similarly ends-oriented. It is for its own sake. In this broader sense, I argue (with some risk) that praxis need not be exclusively political without diminishing the status of political action itself. That is, while I expand the meaning of the word “praxis” in this chapter, I do not intend to expand on Arendt’s conception of political action, which in her work is identical with praxis. In splitting the two terms, I hope to reflect the multiple meanings the word praxis has come to possess over the centuries. My bracketing of praxis in the specific sense of political action also suspends, for now, the discourse around the priority of poesis over praxis that eventually appears in Heidegger and is critiqued by Arendt, Habermas, and others.

The separation of praxis from action makes space for another view that takes on the movement of a Hegelian dialectic and the self-critical character of Kant’s practical reasoning: that of the early Karl Marx. In his critique of certain popular brands of materialism at the time, Marx claims that any activity that aims to change the world, rather than merely describe it as the philosopher (or theorist) does, must be

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29 Consider, at the same time, how Arendt herself makes room for nonpolitical action (e.g., nonparticipation). Nonpolitical action is nonpolitical because it does not appear in public (“Some Questions of Moral Philosophy,” 112).

30 See Villa, chap. 7, “Arendt, Heidegger, and the Oblivion of Praxis,” in which he provides a thorough analysis of Arendt’s critique of Heidegger after the Kehre re: praxis (i.e., the abandonment of action). *Arendt and Heidegger*, 211–240.

31 The opposition between praxis and poesis is omitted from this discussion for the more relevant distinction between praxis and theoria (theory), which shall be elaborated upon in 5.3. See also Arendt’s critique of Heidegger in 4.2, in which I raised this distinction in the terms of acting (for Arendt, praxis) and thinking (here, theoria).
both practical (i.e. changes material conditions) and critical (i.e. involves human activity, including education or self-change). This he terms “revolutionary praxis.” The relationship between practice and critique (or theory, or education) thus became a central theme of praxis for Marxist philosophers like György Lukács and Antonio Gramsci, as well as in the Frankfurt School and other prominent movements like the Budapest School and the Praxis School.

In Paulo Freire’s Marxist-Catholic thought, the relationship between thought and action as praxis takes centre stage for his pedagogy, drawing on and fostering yet another sense of praxis in the Christian tradition and that, through Freire, Marx, and others, has become prominent in the field of education. While the importance of self-reflection in Freire’s praxis makes it particularly useful for critical pedagogy, it is also the emphasis on both theory and practice that makes praxis so influential in the educational space.

The roots of this opposition are not just Marxist: especially in Eastern Orthodox Christian theology, praxis


33 This list is not meant to be an exhaustive list by any means.


35 There are too many examples to cite in a note, though I have noted that it is fairly common to use the word praxis in a title or in passing without discussing its meaning. Often, praxis is used in education to denote “transformative learning,” as in the recent Transformative Learning Theory and Praxis, ed. Effrosyni Kostara, Andreas Gavrielatos, and Daphne Loads (Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 2022), or relating to/combined with phronesis (practical wisdom, understanding), as in Philosophy for Children: Theories and Praxis in Teacher Education, ed. Babs Anderson (Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 2017), see especially Naomi McLeod’s and Fufy Demissie’s entries. In these conceptions, the practice of teaching and of learning can be referred to as praxis. The emphasis on practice and theory makes praxis an important concept for art education, as in Curriculum Philosophy and Theory for Music Education Praxis, ed. Thomas A. Regelski (New York: Oxford University Press, 2021). Critical pedagogues tend to use praxis in the directly Marxist sense of revolutionary praxis, which emphasizes political action in relation to teaching and learning, see, for example, Theory and Praxis: Reflections on the Colonization of Knowledge, ed. Murzban Jal and Jyoti Bawane (Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 2020), 25; Routledge International Handbook of Critical Education, ed. Michael W. Apple, Wayne Au, and Luis Armando Gandin (New York: Routledge, 2009). It is not my intention to mount a critique against these kinds of theories of praxis. I do want to resist the urge to use praxis and practice interchangeably, or to refer to praxis as a solely reflective activity (i.e., thinking).
in the sense of orthopraxy refers to the correct practice of faith, again repeating the opposition of theory and practice. There are some similarities here to Jewish conceptions of *mizvot* (obligations or good deeds), which are essential to the practice of Judaism, as well as to Islamic beliefs. In these traditions, faithfulness in word but not in deed is considered false piety.\(^{36}\) However, in education, Christian theology, and, to an extent, in critical theory, there is a tendency to view praxis as a kind of resolution between irreconcilables. Just as there is a distinction between *praxis* and *poeisis*, there is also a fundamental distinction, repeated in philosophical traditions for millennia after Aristotle, between *praxis* and *theoria*.

In other words, I diverge from the Christian conception, and perhaps the Hegelian as well, in that I do not claim that praxis creates anything *new*, whether through negation or otherwise. In the Aristotelian sense, it does not create at all. In the vein of separation, I suggest a notion of praxis, not as a merging, combination, sublimation, or synthesis of two separate entities (in this case, activities), but as a *doing*, a movement that is set in motion for its own sake and possible only between irreconcilables. That is, in the context of this work, praxis is a movement that takes place in the faultline and between its faces. I call ritual the repetition of, or return to, this movement. In this chapter, I will provide a loose framework for thinking ritual as praxis in the form and time of the Shabbat and then trace the movement between the faces of the faultline in my own experiences with anti-genocide activism and its problems before returning to Arendt and Levinas to seek meaningful action over truth.

### 5.2 A Problem: Thinking with Youth Activists

The ethics of activism workshop that inspired my doctoral studies was born out of frustration. It started in 2013 with a group of undergraduate students, me included, at the UBC chapter of STAND Canada, a national, youth-led organization working to make ending and preventing genocide a cornerstone of

\(^{36}\) It is not my intention to generalize the similarities beyond what I have written here.
Canadian foreign and domestic policy.\textsuperscript{37} STAND, as I indicated in the introduction, was a part of the Save Darfur movement and subject to all the criticisms laid out by Mamdani, De Waal, and others, in chapter two, but I joined it at a time when the ethical and political problems of anti-genocide activism were fiercely and openly debated, especially on university campuses. Indeed, beginning in 2010, STAND UBC hosted an annual event we called “Debating Darfur,” named after Mamdani’s famous 2009 debate with John Prendergast of the Enough Project on the topic. What we debated were the issues raised in chapters two and three: the merits of the ICC, the ethics of humanitarian aid, the politics of intervention on the African continent, and so on. Those discussions highlighted the conflict between the seemingly straightforward, ethical imperative to act against genocide and the enormous challenges that arose in the course of political action born from that urgency.

As young adults just coming into political life, the tumult of thoughts, feelings, concerns, confusion, and questions was deeply destabilizing. Our frustration swelled especially because of the contrast between the discussions we were having and the narratives that had motivated us to enter into anti-genocide activism in the first place. That is, we aimed our frustration at what we saw as the damaging “make a difference” narrative, the “be the change” charge that is set to children when adults oversimplify political and ethical issues of life, dignity, and justice. Even though we were in our early 20s, working toward our undergraduate degrees at a university, many of us within the group became involved with this type of activism as schoolchildren (for me at age 14). I want to underscore that I do not mean to disparage the education given to me.\textsuperscript{38} This problem cannot be laid at the door of any particular institution, or teacher, or administrator.

\textsuperscript{37} My co-writers for the workshop were Krista Knechtle and Courtney Loftus. Facilitators, who gave detailed feedback and participated in revisions, included Tayla Shirley, Natasha Laponce, Deng Elijah, Parynaz Adamy, Anthony Santelices, Youmy Han, Emily Hopkins, and other members of STAND UBC.

\textsuperscript{38} The emphasis on the performance of \textit{mitzvot} (good deeds) and \textit{tikkun olam} (repairing the world) in modern Jewish education yielded many kinds of experiences that cannot be generalized. The focus on building community and acts of service were deeply impactful and continue to be meaningful to me today. However, the political approach of many educational programs based in these principles is problematic.
For some reason, maybe because adults cannot seem to grapple with it ourselves, because we do not have answers to these questions, we avoid showing children the incredible complexity that exists everywhere that there are relationships: relationships with the earth, with our other-than-human relatives, and with each other. It was as young adults that we at STAND UBC came to criticize this approach and attempt to remedy it in our own way for our juniors.

The desire to teach others did not come directly out of this frustration, but rather via the way we addressed that frustration in our own group. As students ourselves, the members of our group felt that we had figured out something that seemed missing from our own education. Instead of trying to answer these big questions about the practice of genocide and anti-genocide activism, we focused our attention instead on asking them, without any expectation of an answer. The question-asking took on the form of a seminar, which we committed to holding every month, often in collaboration with other student groups on campus. Together we would come up with the topics and a small team (including members from all hosting student clubs) would prepare a short presentation to begin an informal discussion. For example, in partnership with a climate-focused club called Common Energy, we explored the relationship between genocidal violence and the climate crisis; with Engineers without Borders UBC, we talked about conflict minerals in the Democratic Republic of Congo; UNICEF UBC joined us in a conversation about poverty and disaster pornography in humanitarian advertising; the prosecution of child soldiers was debated with a group called the Africa Canada Accountability Coalition; the International Relations Student Association co-hosted a seminar with us on international law, the validity of the International Criminal Court, and the problems with human rights discourse. All of these questions sparked engaged, thoughtful, and often surprising discussions.

This was not a plan that was theoretically informed, philosophically or pedagogically. My graduate studies began as an attempt to understand what it is that we did. Why did students respond to some things and not others? In many senses, these questions form the basis of this study.
conversations. In the seminar space, we as STAND UBC would acknowledge the questions and face them. By framing the seminars in this way, we opened many paths to faultline questions.

Like I already mentioned, as a group of students, we felt that we had learned something through the seminar program. Significantly, we had learned something that we seemed to have taught each other. That learning was a struggle, and we felt strongly that it was a necessary one. Why, then, avoid it? Why, then, paper over it with huge spectacles and quick slogans? All of those things might have their place, but they are not the substance of activism. Three of us wanted to show students, some of whom might be in similar situations or have their own questions and frustrations, that we could have these conversations and engage in this chaotic struggle. Rather than feeling like a middle step to ease us into a complex world, the oversimplified “make a difference” narrative was an actual obstacle for engaging in meaningful activism – one that takes a great deal of work to overcome and untangle. We set out to teach something different in the form of a three-part workshop designed for high school students, who in our view were old enough to engage with this kind of politics but young enough that they might be able to avoid the crises we faced, which we felt we had encountered too late.

When we went to pitch the workshop to high school teachers as a way to dig into ethical questions around activism, they were excited and relieved. It was no trouble at all to get two pilot projects scheduled at my previous high school (King David High School) in a Jewish history course, and at a Global Citizenship class at North Surrey Secondary (workshop co-author Krista Knechtle was an alumna of that class). Part of the reason why we were able to secure a pilot so easily and quickly was because

40 It is interesting to note that neither of these courses were part of the provincial curriculum (the natural home for such a workshop would be, I suggest, a social studies class). The space in schools to engage deeply in these kinds of issues is sadly lacking, for it requires unstructured time and ambiguity that is hard to welcome in the classroom alongside the demands of required curricula and student evaluations. We came to these classes because, as electives not mandated by the province, they did not have the onerous curriculum to get through. A social studies teacher would have to struggle to fit three sessions of a pilot workshop run by undergraduate students into their already overflowing syllabus. In these classes, there was more possibility to experiment and be responsive to the students.
schoolteachers are often under-resourced to do this kind of work. In particular, the teachers we approached were both beloved teachers from our own educational experiences and who were aware of the problems we had set out to address; the reason they welcomed us into their classrooms was because they did not feel that they had the capacity, in time or skills, to open up these questions in a pedagogically generative way. And so, the STAND UBC group sat down together, created a draft, and worked on it over a period of a few weeks. We came up with three sessions, which I will outline briefly for clarity. In the first session, we introduced the concepts of genocide and crimes against humanity. The complex series of conflicts in the Democratic Republic of Congo over the last 30 years was introduced as a case study, bringing in important issues around colonialism and the extractive industry (conflict minerals), as well as the complicity of Canadian mining companies and consumers (especially electronics consumers) in the perpetuation of this conflict that has killed millions of people. The case study was designed to think through different aspects of the conflict and provide a basic level of fluency in an example that we could expand upon throughout the other sections of the workshop.

The second session focused on activism. We devised “the three Cs” as paths to activism: citizenship-advocacy (advocating to government, which in some very concrete ways is cut off from children who are ineligible to vote), consumer-advocacy (advocating to corporations and businesses), and community-advocacy (advocating to or within communities directly). We tried to demonstrate how each person has a role to play in each of these areas, which affect us all regardless, but that activism looks different and has different (if overlapping) goals and strategies in the spheres of government, economy, and community. The third session was about ethics. Here we started by presenting a series of statistics about an ethnic group in a particular country and we asked the students to guess which country we were talking

41 In the second year of the project, we were asked to develop assignments so that the workshop could be incorporated into the course curriculum more fully. The teacher at North Surrey Secondary built a section of her course around a project based on our workshop, in which students would research a conflict of their own choosing.
about. The statistics came from census data about First Nations peoples and the country was our own, disturbing students’ ideas about our prejudices around the kind of places where economic and political oppression occurs, where activism is necessary, and introducing questions of proximity into the discussion. We presented a series of ethical quandaries relating to activism, drawing from the (now defunct) Africa Canada Accountability Coalition (ACAC) workshop entitled “So, You Want to ‘Save’ Africa?”: simplification, assuming voicelessness, celebrity activism, and knee-jerk reactions. In the final activity, we showed three videos, ads for contemporary advocacy campaigns relating to the DRC, and asked them to decide which was the best one in smaller groups. This question generated a lot of discussion. The facilitator of each group was tasked with leading students into more complexity, providing counterfactuals, pointing out potential problems, and provoking students to identify these problems on their own. The point of the activity was not that there was one video that was best or “ethical,” but instead that when it comes to activism, there is always a trade off. The question then becomes: how do we become conscious of and judge these trade offs in the course of our work?

Our first drafts of the workshop sessions relied too much on exposition, so we continued to work on them with each session over the two years that we ran the program. The iterative process reflected our attitudes in the seminar program on campus, which was oriented toward difficult questions and discussions. The other facilitators and I would sit around a table together afterward and ask, what had gone well? What was too long or too complicated? What sparked students to deep discussion? At that table we made changes to the material directly, took notes, and brainstormed new ideas.

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43 In other words, we relied upon the framework of human rights activism as an inevitable series of dilemmas, as Givoni discusses and which I cover in 3.3.

44 It helped that we had at least three facilitators at each session and our distinct views were like multiple camera angles, each helping us construct a clearer and more multi-dimensional picture of how students were responding to the workshop. Multiple facilitators also meant that we were able to include facilitated small group discussion in each
in a good place. The content was reducing into something denser but with more movement and breath; we found that by making thicker connections between different sessions and concepts, we could build a context for the students that was not so overwhelming and allowed room for thinking. That is, we found that we were editing down without oversimplifying. But we continued to hit a stumbling block that revealed itself in the surveys that the students filled out at the end of each session. The surveys asked some basic questions about their experience, their level of engagement with the ideas, and some comprehension questions to help us evaluate our own teaching. The surveys also left room for students to leave comments freely. It seemed important that students know and feel that they were, in some sense, co-authors of this workshop as well. Just as we intended to avoid the condescension that brought us to run the workshop in the first place, we wanted students to have a sense that their participation was meaningful and impactful. After each session, we would sit and review the surveys as part of our post-mortem. The third session on ethics (ending with the trade off), which was supposed to help students move out of paralysis and into inspired action, always seemed to be thwarted by the question that appeared on so many survey responses: “now what?” In other words, now that we had created room for that complexity that ethics and politics demand, the students were at a loss for what to do with that context.

This was worrying because one thing that we were specifically trying to work against was the sense of paralysis that had initially preceded the birth of the seminar program at UBC. When thrown into ethical and political questions about what we are doing, we can imagine or anticipate all sorts of questions, challenges, and courses of action that come into conflict with one another, that pull and push against each other so that any movement at all feels impossible. Sooner or later, most everyone comes up against this session. In the second year, we recruited other volunteers to facilitate the group discussion, a role that was separate from a presenter role and an organizer role and targeted toward future recruitment.

kind of paralysis when we think about something we had never thought about before, when we visit some
new and opposing perspective, when we are challenged by someone else, or simply when we do not know
what to do. Sometimes, we feel it when we reach a faultline question, bursting open with contradiction and
aftershocks that ripple outward in geometric, snapping waves. Without a sense of grounding, it is easy to
turn away utterly, to withdraw from the face of the other or the community. The question, “now what?,”
showed us that we still had work to do.

At the same time, we did specifically address a lack of resolution in the workshop. We adapted a
set of “community norms” from an organization started at UBC in response to the proliferation of global
service-learning programs offered to students. The group was called Ethics of International Engagement
and Service Learning (EISEL) and they ran a workshop for students that was a requirement before
beginning a service-learning course.46 EISEL’s community norms, adapted from Glen E. Singleton and
Curtis Linton’s book Courageous Conversations about Race: A Field Guide for Achieving Equity in
Schools, directly addressed this issue with the messiness of ethical discussions, the expectation of non-
closure, and the affirmation to “act for the best.”47 As we refined the ethics in activism workshop, another
conceptual tool from EISEL’s workshop came to help us structure it. Drawing from the literature on expe-
riential learning, EISEL reinforced the model of learning-action-reflection in the design and content

46 The workshop delved into ethical problems relating to service-learning programs (today this critique could be
broadly summarized as “voluntourism”). It is interesting to note (for me several years later, long before I thought of
the title for this dissertation) that the EISEL workshop was called “Global Praxis,” which refers to the learn-act-reflect
cycle in David A. Kolb, Experiential Learning: Experience as the Source of Learning and Development
(Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1984). The view I aim to present here is not unrelated but also distinct, in that I hope to focus
the attention of praxis onto the hyphens rather than the terms of the movement. Following the STAND workshop, I
also worked with the Simon K. Y. Lee Global Lounge and Resource Centre on a “Global Praxis: Reflective Leadership
& Ethical Advocacy” workshop for student clubs in 2014 and 2015.

47 The Ethics of International Engagement and Service-Learning Project (EIESL), Global Praxis: Exploring the Ethics
EIESL community norms were adapted from Glen E. Singleton and Curtis Linton, Courageous Conversations About
of their workshop for students about to participate in a service-learning program abroad.\textsuperscript{48} The model is cyclical, with learning leading into action, which leads into reflection, which leads back into learning. We found – in a “eureka!” moment while reviewing a session that had just concluded – that the first stage, learning, mapped onto our own first session. The second (on activism) was the action piece, and the ethics session was reflective. The students who asked, “now what?” were in fact following the exact model that EISEL elaborated upon in the facilitator’s section of their handbook, based on David Kolb’s model: “what?” – “so what?” – “now what?” – “do it!” – “what?”\textsuperscript{49} Except our students were getting stuck before the active part of the cycle. Instead of turning back upon itself (as reflection is wont to do), students were still following or trying to follow some linear progression. That is, there was a lack of the kind of dialectical movement that we were trying to create in the classroom.

It seemed that the “act for the best” piece needed some work. After much thought and debate, we ended up developing a worksheet that introduced yet another triad: motive-message-impact. The worksheet would ask questions to stimulate self-reflection on your motives (why are you doing what you are doing? Who are you in relation to this work?), message (what are you trying to say? What are some unintentional messages you might send? Where are the trade offs?), and impact (what happened? What feedback did you hear? What would you do differently next time?). There was even a score sheet on the back that you could use to determine whether or not something was “ethical” using a weighted system.

In the context of this text, I hope that it is clear already that there are some serious problems with the way we were trying to address the “now what?” question – but we were quite proud of what we had put together. That same year, we were invited to present about the workshop we had developed at a UBC conference called “‘Ethical Engagement:’ Representing Local and Global Inequalities in Public

\textsuperscript{48} EIESL, \textit{Global Praxis}, 23.

\textsuperscript{49} EIESL, \textit{Global Praxis}, 167. As I mentioned in an earlier note, they are referring to Kolb, \textit{Experiential Learning}. 
Communication, Teaching and Research.” In our presentation, we described the workshop sessions and did an activity with the group of attendees, mainly teachers. After the session, which went quite well, I approached Dr. Vanessa Andreotti, one of the event organizers, and showed her the worksheet that we had made in order to ask her for her opinion on it. I was freshly accepted into the master’s program at UBC and excited to get working on my re-write of the workshop. Her reaction to the presentation and activity was positive, but she was frank with me that she did not think the worksheet took the right approach to the problem at hand. She reminded me that these questions had no answers and that there was no checklist in the world that could determine whether an action was “ethical” or not. With that feedback, I realized that in our enthusiasm to respond to this question of “now what?,” we had forgotten that there is no response to this question except for the reinforcement of the movement: to eventually keep going (and that does not necessarily mean forward), moving between learning-action-reflection. That is, what we had forgotten was the very thing we had learned in the UBC seminars: when action seems impossible, the paralyzing questions are demanding to be asked in their full depth, not pushed aside or resolved.

STAND UBC started the seminar program to create a space where we could ask questions without worrying about their answerability or seeking any sense of closure. We engaged deeply with EISEL’s community norms, which affirmed the same thing: expect and accept non-closure, act for the best. We did all these things repeatedly and it was, indeed, the lesson that we had to learn ourselves yet again, and that we had to learn in order to become better teachers. This is not to say that I encourage anyone – activist or teacher – to charge ahead regardless of the real and possible ethical challenges around a course of action. The most important part of the workshop was to begin activism in responsibility rather than patronizing ideas of benevolence and even outright egoism. In chapter four, I recontextualized responsibility not as something one possesses, but as an emergence between people (responsibility as exteriority). Following Arendt and Levinas in their own ways, responsibility is inexhaustible and in it, you are irreplaceable. Perhaps the fatigue or impatience of the “now what?” question is a confrontation with one’s responsibility,
when one becomes sensitized to the challenges and complexities of action, when one is open as witness to the suffering of the Other, listens to the Other, and receives one’s responsibility for them.

5.3 A Reflection: The Third Turn to Justice (and Education)

In the last section, I briefly described the seminar program that was started by STAND UBC in response to what felt like being thrown into paralyzing questions about activism and specifically about anti-genocide activism. The program helped us feel like we could move out of the paralysis induced by that earlier ethical/political crisis. Reflecting upon the “now what?” question in the youth outreach program, I contend that by theorizing, that is, through critical reflection, the will to act came into conflict with thought – and, in this sense, politics with ethics – leading to paralysis. The workshop stimulated faultline questions, bringing students into that irreconcilability that is at the core of any attempt to “change the world” for the sake of the Other (justice). The youth outreach program ended after two years and has not been picked up again to date. Not too long after that, the STAND UBC group dissolved following the usual challenges student groups face: members graduate, some peoples’ schedules change, and someone forgets to submit paperwork. STAND Canada continued on, but always seems to struggle to sustain that level of engagement. Though the concept of genocide has generated a huge amount of scholarly and legal work, I worry that it is becoming more difficult to evoke the questions and initiate the movement toward them, especially when anti-genocide activism is approached empirically.

Arendt’s political project, to understand how actions undertaken by people changes the world, begins with the evocation to go back to thinking (the “stop and think”), to call our actions into question. In order to do that, we have to stop. We cannot think and act at the same time. What is needed is a suspension, and this is what makes Arendt a “political theorist.” What stands out to me, looking back at my involvement
with STAND today, is how the ritual of coming back to the questions enlivened our community. In this sense, Arendt’s “stop and think” moment seems like another kind of recurrence, a gesture of hope rather than of despair. The problems of anti-genocide activism raised in this dissertation, as well as across the literature and within activist communities, in my view demand that we stop and think, that we go back to the ethical roots of anti-genocide activism so that we can initiate not just intervention or prevention, but meaningful action as response and as responsibility.

In this sense, I conclude the dissertation by converting my research question (what is the responsibility of activists in the face of genocide?) into an educational one. Especially in a mode of responsiveness, it is absolutely the case that some courses of action should be rejected and abandoned; but neither is the other extreme, of total paralysis or abstention, promising for our shared world. Here is the

50 I found that the seminars filled my head with ideas, adjustments, tips, strategies, and I started writing out a handbook in order to deepen the thinking activity and resist the need to produce results. It is a hard pill to swallow for many. Participants, facilitators, and organizers of seminars insist that we should produce something from the conversation: an infographic or some other kind of project that will move the discussion into the light as some kind of visible, tangible object. I understand and respect this impulse; it is eminently appropriate in other contexts. But I also think that the movement into action from thought is a critically important one, as we saw in the last chapter. There is no movement without separation.

51 At this point I would like to clarify that I convert the question into an educational one in my framing of it and my approach to it, but for reasons of length and focus I do not do what I could and perhaps should do: introduce literature from philosophy of education that expounds exactly on these very questions and problems. Moreover, it is important to point out that Arendt and Levinas have both been taken up by philosophers of education; their respective theoretical projects and brief forays into explicitly educational matters have demonstrated their influence in the field through such prominent figures as Gert Biesta, Maxine Greene, Sharon Todd, Roger Simon, Ann Chinnery, Natasha Levinson, Paul Standish, Megan Laverty, and others. A number of these philosophers of education are also close readers of both Arendt and Levinas, including most of those listed already. My approach is reminiscent of theirs (for example consider the similarities to Biesta’s notion of radical openness in education or Todd’s emphasis on difficult learning).

A starting point for philosophy of education in relation to Arendt can be found in the collection of essays, Hannah Arendt and Education: Renewing Our Common World, ed. Mordechai Gordon (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2001). For more recent engagements with Arendt, see Hannah Arendt on Educational Thinking and Practice in Dark Times: Education for a World in Crisis, ed. Wayne Veck and Helen M. Gunter (London: Bloomsburg, 2019). Work on Arendt and education most often engages Arendt for issues relating to political education and pedagogy (especially democratic education) as well as on topics such as freedom, imagination, thinking, and childhood (natality).

A starting point for reading into the educational literature on/with Levinas can be found in Levinas and Education: At the Intersection of Faith and Reason, ed. Denis Egéa-Kuehne (New York: Routledge, 2008) and Levinas and the Philosophy of Education, ed. Guoping Zhao (Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 2018). Levinas is often cited or hovers in the background in discussions on ethical issues of teaching and learning, especially relating to issues of difference, dialogue, responsibility, thinking, knowledge, etc.
problem of action. As Arendt writes in the *Human Condition*, “Man’s inability to rely upon himself or to have complete faith in himself (which is the same thing) is the price human beings pay for freedom; and the impossibility of remaining unique masters of what they do, of knowing its consequences and relying upon the future, is the price they pay for plurality and reality, for the joy of inhabiting together with others a world whose reality is guaranteed for each by the presence of all.”

In other words, freedom carries with it (some degree of) doubt, and plurality (along with our shared reality) cannot necessitate a certain future.

In the *Life of the Mind*, Arendt describes another form of paralysis related to action, or more specifically, to action’s mental faculty of the will. “In short,” she writes, “the will always wills to do something and thus implicitly holds in contempt sheer thinking, whose whole activity depends on “doing nothing.” This leads to a significant tension that can cause paralysis of the will, and conversely a paralysis of thought:

> The willing ego, looking forward and not backward, deals with things which are in our power but whose accomplishment is by no means certain. The resulting tension, unlike the rather stimulating excitement that may accompany problem-solving activities, causes a kind of disquiet in the soul easily bordering on turmoil, a mixture of fear and hope that becomes unbearable […] The tension can be overcome only by doing, that is, by giving up the mental activity altogether; a switch from willing to thinking produces no more than a temporary paralysis of the will, just as a switch from thinking to willing is felt by the thinking ego to be a temporary paralysis of the thinking activity.

In both analyses, Arendt acknowledges the deeply emotional and interruptive experiences around acting. Recall that action for Arendt is not simply a doing, but rather the initiation of something new in the world, in concert with others. In the *Human Condition*, her seminal work on action, philosophy fails to address the problem of action (what she refers to as the inherent “frailty of human affairs,” that action is by definition

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53 Important for Arendt, however, freedom doesn’t carry with it radical doubt. That is, one can doubt beyond what freedom throws into question, but it is not necessarily so.
unpredictable and irreversible\textsuperscript{56}) because of philosophy’s preference for the \textit{vita contemplativa} (the contemplative, otherworldly life) over the \textit{vita activa} (the active, worldly life). In the \textit{Life of the Mind}, which turns its attention from human activity to the faculties of the mind, philosophy is biased against the faculty of the will in favour of thought for overlapping reasons. In the text, Arendt argues that

Professional thinkers, whether philosophers or scientists, have not been “pleased with freedom” and its ineluctable randomness; they have been unwilling to pay the price of contingency for the questionable gift of spontaneity, of being able to do what could also be left undone. Let us put them aside therefore and fasten our attention on the men of action, who ought to be committed to freedom because of the very nature of their activity, which consists in “changing the world,” and not in interpreting or knowing it.\textsuperscript{57}

It is this turn to freedom that marks Arendt’s theoretical project as distinctly political (in that it is attempting to understand the political). With an Arendtian political vocabulary to describe these shifts in thinking, we can consider the problem of action in the youth outreach program, where action was arrested by the uncertainty around \textit{what to do}.

A fundamental claim made in the workshop, and in this dissertation, is that it is critically important for activists to recognize the inherent unpredictability of action and to act in the fullest knowledge of that uncertainty – not to be able to anticipate every outcome, but to be able to act knowing that the desired outcome is not inevitable and, therefore, any path to action carries with it great responsibility to take the future, and perhaps even more so, the present, seriously. Responsibility involves, for Levinas, the calling-into-question of myself and that calling-into-question is theory in the deepest sense. “Theory understood as respect for exteriority,” Levinas explains, “delineates another structure essential for metaphysics. In its comprehension of being (or ontology) it is concerned with critique. It discovers the dogmatism and naïve arbitrariness of its spontaneity, and calls into question the freedom of the exercise of ontology.”\textsuperscript{58} In other

\textsuperscript{56} Arendt, \textit{Human Condition}, 188.
\textsuperscript{57} Arendt, \textit{Life of the Mind}, 2:198.
\textsuperscript{58} Levinas, \textit{Totality and Infinity}, 43.
words, it is theory as critique that forces us to question our own freedom and by extension our own actions.

It also suspends action, as Levinas continues in *Totality and Infinity*:

The famous suspension of action that is said to make theory possible depends on a reserve of freedom, which does not abandon itself to its drives, to its impulsive moments, and keeps its distances. Theory, in which truth arises, is the attitude of a being that distrusts itself. Knowing becomes knowing of a fact only if it is at the same time critical, if it puts itself in question, goes back beyond its origin – in an unnatural movement to seek higher than one’s own origin, a movement which evinces or describes a created freedom.\(^\text{59}\)

Again, Levinas arrives at the same irreconcilable as Arendt does, from the other side of the faultline. With the interruption of the Other, the calling-into-question of myself is an ethical activity, throwing the self into the reflexive movement of thought and suspending action. The freedom to exceed one’s own origin, to escape the bonds of necessity, is inextricable from responsibility and relationships. Without it, there is also no possibility for action.

Where we arrive through Levinas’ positioning of ethics as an-archical against Arendt’s politics of beginnings (arche) is to a pluralistic world, one that exists beyond me, that existed before I appeared in it, and will endure after I disappear. In short, we are in and of the world, and that world is a world of others.\(^\text{60}\)

\(^{59}\) Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 83. In the words of *Otherwise than Being*, skepticism “puts an interval between saying and said” – this is the task for philosophy. “Skepticism is refutable, but it returns,” Levinas writes (168). It is not absolute. This tension is articulated in the irreducible gap between my ethical responsibility for the absent Other in a non-phenomenal proximity and my/our responsibilities for all the present others signified by the relation with the Other. We might be able to see here some affinity between Levinas’ idea of fecundity with Arendtian natality.

\(^{60}\) *Totality and Infinity* begins with the lines: “‘The true life is absent.’ But we are in the world” (33). The inherent plurality is undeniable, and even clearer in Levinas’ essay “Religion for Adults,” in which he writes that, “He [man] is in a sense exiled on this earth, as the psalmist says, and he finds a meaning to the earth on the basis of a human society. This is not an analysis of the contemporary Jewish soul; it is the literal teaching of the Bible in which the earth is not possessed individually, but belongs to God.” Essay published in *Difficult Freedom: Essays on Judaism*, trans. Seán Hand (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990), 22. It is important that this world is not just a physical one: “For Judaism, the world becomes intelligible before a human face and not, as for a great contemporary philosopher who sums up an important aspect of the West, through houses, temples and bridges” (23, likely referring to Heidegger). The world is formed by intersubjectivity.

Similarly, Arendt writes in *The Life of the Mind*, “[...N]othing that is, insofar as it appears, exists in the singular; everything that is means to be perceived by somebody. Not Man but men inhabit this planet. Plurality is the law of the earth” (19). She repeats this several times throughout her work, especially in the *Human Condition*, where she establishes the public realm as a space of inter-est or *inter-esse* (inter-being, referring to Heidegger) that gathers between people like a table that can appear and reappear (53). The phenomenological roots of this argument
By arriving at the problem from the other side, I refer in contrast to the beginning of the *Life of the Mind* and the assertion of “the world’s phenomenal nature,” threatened by what Arendt calls the “two-world fallacy” endemic in modern philosophy, especially (and relatedly) in scientific objectivism. In “two-world” theories common to western philosophy since Parmenides, Arendt identifies a common thread in the separation, rather than the conflation, of “(true) Being and (mere) Appearance,” where mere appearance (i.e., phenomena) is ontologically less “real” than true Being, which is only disclosed in absentia from the phenomenal world (thinking or contemplation). In its zeal for the Truth of Being, Arendt accuses philosophers of abandoning the phenomenal world in favour of the life of the mind, as the philosopher who leaves Plato’s cave (*periagōgē*, translated by Arendt as “turnabout”) and then assumes based on that experience that everything that appears only conceals what is hidden, and that what is naturally hidden belongs to a higher ontological order than what appears. Unreflective of their reference to that experience, even in the light outside the cave, the philosopher still seeks a grounding for truth behind being, as if the plurality of appearances is only a deception overlaid on top of the monad of being. The transcendent life outside the cave becomes just another field of phenomena more real than the actual phenomena, disclosed

are clear and can be traced back to Heidegger’s notion of “being-with-others,” which influenced both Arendt and Levinas but was ultimately unsatisfying for both of them. Heidegger’s solipsism is a point of critique for both.

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61 The two-world fallacy is discussed mainly in *Life of the Mind* (1:19–26). See also the problem of the Archimedean Point,” which is related, and referenced in the earlier *Human Condition* (257–268). Despite the need to unify the two in Arendt’s presentation, she is not proposing an actual unity. The problem with the “two” worlds is that one world is supernal and the other fallen, unreal. Therefore, truth is found only in one. Arendt refers to this as “the old *hen pan*, ‘the all is one’ – either a single source or a single ruler” (*Life of the Mind*, 1:70). This is Parmenidean monism under other names, though also with specific reference to Parmenides. Levinas is more targeted toward objectivism “run amok” in *Totality and Infinity* than he is in *Otherwise than Being*, but the point holds across.

62 Arendt appears to be in perfect agreement with Heidegger at the beginning of her claim of the coinciding of Being and Appearance, but we shall see that this is not the case. See also *Life of the Mind*, 1:23–25.


64 As if, also, what appears only temporarily is less real, as if the grounding of something is the same as its cause, as if the cause is more important than the effect.
or appearing in this new field as truth (Heidegger’s *aletheia*).\(^\text{65}\) The thinking ego in two-world theories is always forgetful (though not completely so) of its relationship with the phenomenal world that it denies, in one way or another. Cartesian radical doubt, for example, conceptualizes a thinking ego that is radically unworldly, and therefore always essentially fictitious.\(^\text{66}\) The problem with two-world theories is not that they question the relationship between being and appearances, or that they doubt the powers of cognition or sense perception (in fact, such doubt is a feature of thinking’s critical character). The problem is that they expect to found truth in something more real than reality, in something that is undoubtable or certain.

Arendt’s goal is to reconnect Being and Appearance in order to rescue mere appearances from the grips of the professional thinkers, who dismiss the world of action and lay the ground for the tyranny of anonymous or absolute justice, untethered from the world.\(^\text{67}\) It is also to rescue objective reality from

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\(^{66}\) Arendt, *Life of the Mind*, 1:47–48. Arendt is building on her critique of Cartesian doubt from the *Human Condition*. It is not the idea of doubting the powers of cognition and sense perception that poses a problem; the experience of doubt itself is part of the thinking process and for Arendt, Descartes’ doubt led him to make significant (if not new) observations about the experience of thinking (*Life of the Mind*, 1:47–48.). The problem is that Descartes’ *cogito* is without body (*corps*), world (*monde*), and place (*lieu*). Arendt argues that is that in severing the thinking ego from the phenomenal world (being from appearances), Descartes introduces a doubt more radical than the initial doubt that inspired his meditations in the first place. She makes this argument via Nietzsche and Merleau-Ponty’s critiques of Descartes (see especially Arendt, *Life of the Mind*, 1:49).

Abandoning the phenomenal world does not bother Descartes, in Arendt’s reading, because he locates the guarantee of the existence of the thinking ego in the soul, whose reality is guaranteed by God – again, the two-world theory, between the worldly and unworldly (*Life of the Mind*, 1:48). Think of Levinas’ reading of this part of the Cartesian meditations, where he reads the trace of the Other in thinking (i.e., God).

\(^{67}\) An excerpt printed before the “Socrates” essay explains that idealism is always in conflict with action because it is in conflict with plurality:

The first catastrophe of Western philosophy, which in its last thinkers ultimately wants to take control of action, is the requirement of a unity that on principle proves impossible except under tyranny. *Second*, that to serve the ends of action anything will do as the absolute – race, for instance, or a classless society, and so forth. All things are equally expedient, “anything goes.” [...] *Third*, that by applying the absolute – justice, for example, or the “ideal” in general (as in Nietzsche) – to an *end*, one first makes unjust, bestial actions possible, because the “ideal,” justice itself, no longer exists as a yardstick, but has become an achievable, producible end within the world. In other words, the realization of philosophy abolishes philosophy, the realization of the “absolute” indeed abolishes the absolute from the world. And so finally the ostensible realization of *man* simply abolishes *men*. (3)
scientific objectivism that denies the plurality of appearances. Like Levinas, Arendt uses the phenomenological method to attend to the limits of her inquiry, which includes the distinction between ethics and politics. When Arendt refers to the phenomenal world as “objective reality,” she means something quite specific. Husserl’s phenomenological method (based in intentionality) establishes the link between consciousness and its object; with her focus on action, plurality, and freedom, Arendt sees the inverse as well: appearing objects always imply a subject that it appears to. To be a subject, we paradoxically also need to be an object to others, i.e., be recognized by others and so objectified. “The worldliness of living things,” she writes, “means that there is no subject that is not also an object and appears as such to somebody else, who guarantees its ‘objective reality.’” Arendt concludes from this that the only “guarantee” of objective reality is the degree to which an object that appears to me resembles the object that appears to others. After all, “Plurality is the law of the earth,” and so appearances do not appear (and are not perceived) in exactly the same way to everybody. That is, it is the inter-subjectivity of the world that grounds our (sense of) reality, that convinces people that they appear together and share things in common. This intersubjectivity comes from a “three-fold” commonness: “the five senses, utterly different

Arendt uses Kant’s phrase “professional thinkers” derisively in the sense that those who dedicate themselves to thinking (in the west) tend to privilege the thinking activity above all others. Kant is using it to democratize thinking (which Arendt carries forward as well) – the thinking activity itself is a faculty of the human mind and so every person can think (i.e., it is not a privilege or an acquired skill). Philosophers are merely “professional thinkers.”

Even scientists must search for the truth behind appearances, or universal truths instead of scientific truths in Arendt’s reading (Life of the Mind, 1:47). Her critique of modern science, and especially the social sciences, extends across her work.

Arendt, Life of the Mind, 1:19. I do not intent to argue that Arendt and Levinas are here identical. Rather, their own shared context can crystallize in looking at the questions of responsibility side-by-side.

Arendt, Life of the Mind, 1:19–20. Also, “Objectivity is built into the very subjectivity of consciousness by virtue of intentionality. Conversely, and with the same justness, one may speak of the intentionality of appearances and their built-in subjectivity. All objects because they appear indicate a subject, and, just as every subjective act has its intentional object, so every appearing object, has its intentional subject” (1:46).

Arendt, Life of the Mind, 1:19. She makes a similar argument with reference to Socratic wisdom (that absolute truth is not accessible to mortals, who are always conditioned by their mortal existence), that shows why she emphasizes the “it seems to me” (the relationship between my faculty of knowing and dokein, appearing). See also “Socrates,” 19–20.
from each other, have the same object in common; members of the same species have the con-text in common that endows every single object with its particular meaning; and all other sense-endowed beings, though perceiving this object from utterly different perspectives, agrees on its identity. Out of this threefold commonness arises the sensation of reality.”72 That “sensation of reality” is described by Arendt by the term “common sense,” which she borrows from Thomas Aquinas’ sensus communis.73 As common sense, objective reality relates to an inter-subjective reality of many distinct perspectives sharing objects in common long enough, rather than referring to the point of view of the rational subject or a consciousness ultimately directed toward itself (or Heidegger’s “existential solipsism”).74

In short, for Arendt the notion of an objective reality does not accomplish the coinciding of Being and Appearance.75 Reality and appearance are always complicated in this non-coinciding of being as appearance, fractured among many subjects. As we appear to others we appear in many perspectives, and so at the same time that we appear we disclose and also conceal ourselves.76 This does not mean that

72 Arendt, Life of the Mind, 1:50. See Levinas in Otherwise than Being: “There is something common to the objective and the lived. It is as though the sensible – whose meaning is multiple and whose status in consciousness was fixed only on the basis of knowledge as receptivity – were an element sui generis, into which identical entities dissolve and from which they emerge, but in which their opacity and fixity as substances turn into duration, while the flow of the lived is always on the verge of coagulating into ideal identities” (32).

73 Arendt, Life of the Mind, 1:49. In her lectures on Kant and the notion of political judgement, which is considered a precursor to her unfinished third part of the Life of the Mind on the faculty of judging, she traces the notion of common sense through Kant to Cicero (pp. 63–64). Common sense is also the term she uses (with reference to Kant) to describe the faculty of “publicness” or “communicability” that characterizes or constitutes public spaces, and therefore also political ones (see especially the twelfth lecture, pp. 68–72). Lectures on Kant’s Political Philosophy, ed. Ronald Beiner (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992). I prefer to cite the Life of the Mind, on the assumption that it better reflects where she intended to take her argument in context.

74 Arendt, Life of the Mind, 1:45–46. Arendt proposes a few senses of time from this perspective. My life is the stretch of time between my birth and death in which I appear in this world. The objectivity of objective reality relates to appearances that are sustained enough to enough people to appear in (objective, human) time. From here we could follow Arendt into her theory of history, which is heavily inspired by Walter Benjamin, and also has interesting resonances with Levinas (as Herzog points out; see earlier note).

75 Arendt, Life of the Mind, 1:37. “Obviously, self-presentation and the sheer thereness of existence are not the same.”

76 Arendt, Life of the Mind, 1: 21. The second part, that appearances disguise as well as disclose, is Arendt’s intensification of the Heideggerian disclosure of Being.
appearances, implying both disclosure and concealment, are less real than Being. It means that reality gains its phenomenal nature from the way subjects share their perception of appearing objects (Arendt’s “it-seems-to-me”).\textsuperscript{77} What appears in the light of objective reality (not Truth) does not imply total disclosure; with the light there is also darkness.\textsuperscript{78} With objective reality bracketed in this way as intersubjective appearing, that old problem of Parmenides and Plato, of the \textit{vita contemplativa} being the true life in contradistinction to the messy, chaotic world of falsehood and illusions, seems nonsensical.

Delineating common sense as something like intentionality that sustains itself from many points of view (and so creates an objective reality) clears the space for Arendt to distinguish common sense (or “common sense reasoning”) from the thinking activity.\textsuperscript{79} Thinking, in contradistinction to common sense, takes place both in a physical body and transcends it. It both appears and conceals (or is concealed) at once. The thinking ego does withdraw from objective reality (and the senses, including common sense) but only temporarily and never completely, as if it had no relationship any longer to the world in whose language it speaks.\textsuperscript{80} Put another way, thinking (including and even especially doubt) interrupts reality and common

\textsuperscript{77} Arendt, \textit{Life of the Mind}, 1:22–23. She describes how this can work on a species level, which I think is helpful to underscore how this framing already brackets or suspends the specificity of the perceiving subject. To extend her discussion with my own example: I do not perceive the world in quite the same way as anybody else, but there are overlaps in my experiences with others (overlaps do not mean agreements). The range of overlaps is huge: I can share a similar experience of hearing a song in a particular sequence in time, I can share the experience of saltiness, I can share the experience of sitting on a chair and not falling through its solid seat, and I can share the experience of having thumbs. None of these is absolute, but they can be grouped. I am more likely to share an experience of having fingers with another human being, or another mammal with analogous digits, than I would with a fish. Objective reality is made up of these shared appearances in different orders, and so never claims to correspond to objective Truth for Arendt. We are always limited by our perception as human beings.

\textsuperscript{78} At this point we are not far off from Levinas’ saying and said.

\textsuperscript{79} Arendt, \textit{Life of the Mind}, 1:51.

\textsuperscript{80} Arendt, \textit{Life of the Mind}, 1:52–53. Arendt characterizes this withdrawal through the Husserlian \textit{epoché} or suspension but also in the more mundane “absent-mindedness.” She also writes, “Men, though they are totally conditioned existentially – limited by the time span between birth and death, subject to labor in order to live, motivated to work in order to make themselves at home in the world, and roused to action in order to find their place in the society of their fellow-men – can mentally transcend all these conditions, but only mentally, never in reality or in cognition and knowledge, by virtue of which they are able to explore the world’s realness and their own (1:70–71).
sense, but it does not negate common sense. Descartes did not have to prove the existence of the ego (cogito) through thinking because thinking does not prove reality; it does not coincide with disclosure. Arendt’s reversal of radical doubt rests on absolving thinking from the impossible demand to reveal being more real than appearance, precisely because being is not “more real” than appearance (this is what she means by unifying being against the two-world fallacy). They are always related to one another; what thinking does is interrupt the relationship, and as such can also allow us to think about that relationship, achieve distance and become a spectator. Thinking’s ability to radically doubt sense perception is therefore invaluable, but it does not produce knowledge or disclose truth directly. In this claim, Arendt is not intending to contradict the fact that thinking can be employed for a purpose, for example as scientific thinking in the pursuit of scientific knowledge. What she does claim is that thinking has a “highly self-destructive tendency” that shows its ambivalence to or tense relationship with reality (with which scientific knowledge is concerned), and also its anti-authoritarian implications in political contexts. Thinking will always undermine or

Though silent and immaterial, thoughts are conceived with reference to the world and experience, and most significantly often in language, which always implies a listener (1:30–32). Not reality but language is actually what actualizes (in a limited, boundary sense, as a trace) in the thinking activity, because language occurs and is spoken in a being at home in the world of appearances. But thoughts are not of the world of appearances and so thinking uses metaphors. See the section “Language and Metaphor” (1:98–110) and the next section “Metaphors and the Ineffable” (1:110–125) for an extended discussion of metaphor and conceptual language.


82 Arendt, *Life of the Mind*, I: 53. “Interrupts” is my word, one that takes us closer to Levinas, though I do not think it incompatible with Arendt. She also refers to the withdrawal in thinking as “losing a sense of reality” or “absent-mindedness” (I would add the English-language idiom “getting lost in thought”). It is important for Arendt that thinking is not reserved as a power for the privileged few, but a faculty accessible to everyone. This is one of the points she draws from Kant, as well the observation that thinking is out of order, and so can examine semblances from a distance while remaining in relation. Arendt draws a good deal of her thinking on this topic from Kant but does not usually follow him to his own conclusions. Here she disagrees with the way Kant replicates the two-world fallacy (the thinking ego perceives true appearance beyond mere representations), what she takes from him is his description of the thinking activity itself. Specifically, she draws out how thought is out of time, can be faster than our bodies (1:41–45).


84 Arendt, *Life of the Mind*, I:56; Arendt, *Lectures on Kant’s Political Philosophy*, 38. See also the description of Socrates’ political radicalness, which resulted in his death (“Socrates,” 26–28).
interrupt reality because, even as a means to an end it, can always be turned against itself as critique. That is, thinking is an activity for its own sake, and when employed as a means for an end it must take on that end from outside the thinking process itself.\textsuperscript{85}

The thinking activity itself is not intentional; thinking pursues something other than an object, reality, or truth. What the thinking activity does pursue is meaning, which Arendt situates in opposition to

\textsuperscript{85} Scientific thinking is thinking that is employed as a means to an end and not as an activity for its own sake, and so it is always directed toward knowledge, i.e., back toward the world of appearances. The danger is that when thinking is leveraged for the end of truth or knowledge, it is (in a sense) subordinated to common-sense reasoning (creating a sense of reality) and so “lacks the safeguards inherent in sheer thinking, namely, thinking’s critical capacity […]” (Arendt, \textit{Life of the Mind}, 1:56). Directed toward an end as means rather than as an end in and of itself, scientific thinking is motivated not by the aimlessness of thought but by an outside factor, in this case the (non-scientific) question of what is important to know (1:54). This is part of a bigger critique in Arendt in this text and across several others about science (and also especially social sciences). “Science in this respect is but an enormously refined prolongation of common-sense reasoning in which sense illusions are constantly dissipated just as errors in science are corrected. The criterion in both cases is evidence, which as such is inherent in the world of appearances” (1:54). But appearances both reveal and conceal, so science is always somewhat arbitrary about what is evidence and what is not, what evidence is discarded because another is acquired (Merleau-Ponty) (1:54). Modern science, with its totalizing and uncritical notion of unlimited progress, has compounded the problems with Cartesian radical doubt by diminishing the sense of reality with iterative truth that does not recognize its own limitations, and also by forcing things to appear, as in a laboratory, which, for better or worse, further distances scientific reality from common sense (1:57).

Here Arendt also makes a distinction between truths of reasoning and truths of fact (via Leibniz) in the “force of their compulsion.” That is, (quoting Leibniz), “the truths of ’Reasoning are necessary and their opposite is impossible’ while ‘those of Fact are contingent and their opposite is possible’” (1:59). She draws an important conclusion (that is not quite what Leibnitz intended), that reason produces universal truths (can be witnessed by anyone from anywhere) whereas factual truth is always limited to its context, can be disbelieved since it is not witnessed directly by everyone. The truth of reason is opposite to error or illusion (impossible), but the truth of fact is opposite only to lies (1:59). Leibnitz makes this distinction through the classical one between contingency and necessity, where philosophy gives necessity a higher ontological status because it compels like/as reason (1:59). Greek philosophy saw necessity as a force more compelling than violence, connected with reason (mathematics). The compulsion of mathematical truths is not more ontologically true than any other truth grasped by the intellect and coming from the human brain. Even mathematical reasoning, after all, even though it abstracts far away from the phenomenal world through thought, is so enormously impactful on science and its goals – it comes back into the world as still of the world, and so subject to all the necessities of a living being. (How do we tell the difference between the necessities that are conditions of being itself and which are reflections of the necessities that limit my perception as a human being?"

Arendt contrasts the distinction between necessity and contingency (or accident) with the distinction between necessity and freedom, to reflect that, limited as a living being belonging to the world, \textit{everything we see appears to us from contingency}, including our own selves in which the intellect moves. The fact of my birth was contingent, and so is the \textit{meaning} of my life. To say that facts are necessary is to overdetermine their ontological status. From this Arendt concludes that all scientific truths are factual truths, because only factual truths are scientifically verifiable. The non-factual cannot be true or false according to science. “Truth is what we are compelled to admit by the nature of our senses or of our brain” (1:61).
truth or sense-making that is sought by common-sense reasoning (belonging to the faculty of cognition or the intellect). Since meaning is never obtained or achieved (it does not correspond to the categories of true or false, only the more particular “meaningful” and “meaningless”), thinking (as speculative reason) is thus distinguished by its essential aimlessness, which is non-intentional, and related to but not conditioned by the phenomenal world. Arendt writes that, “The quest for meaning is “meaningless” to common sense and common-sense reasoning because it is the sixth sense’s function to fit us into the world of appearances and make us at home in the world given by our five senses; there we are and no questions asked.”

Thinking, in contrast, takes us “visiting;” in thinking I am not at home with myself, I am not even really alone with myself. “It is this duality of myself with myself that makes thinking a true activity, in which I am both the one who asks and the one who answers,” Arendt notes in her section on Socrates’ “two-in-one.” “Thinking can become dialectical and critical because it goes through this questioning and answering process, through the dialogue of dialegesthai, which actually is a “travelling through words […]”. As a traveller, I can think about something I have never seen before, and I can think about something factually false (like a fantasy or a dream). Crucially, as a visitor I can also think without trying to know, without trying to make a new home in thinking. To confuse thinking and cognition/intellect, or “the need to think with the urge to know,” is to lose thinking’s critical capacity to call itself into question. “Applied”

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86 Thinking takes us beyond what is answerable by common sense, that is, by what is based in phenomenality and so is, in theory, answerable.


88 Arendt’s metaphor of “going visiting” extends across much of her work, especially in her later thought. The texts published in the collections Essays in Understanding and Thinking Without a Bannister are good further reading. Furthermore, she locates the importance of thinking to politics in the movement of thinking, which she identifies as the most ancient of political freedoms, the freedom of movement. See “Introduction into Politics,” 167–169; also “On Humanity in Dark Times: Thoughts about Lessing,” trans. Clara and Richard Winston, in Men in Dark Times (Cheshire, UK: Stellar Books, 2014), 3–32.

89 Arendt, Life of the Mind, 1:185.

90 Arendt, Life of the Mind, 1:185.
to an end, thinking’s critical capacity is relegated to the role of “handmaiden [to] an altogether different enterprise.”

It is not that thinking and knowing are unconnected, Arendt assures her readers. Conflating thinking and knowing obscures what is essential about the thinking activity to the human condition: “By posing the unanswerable questions of meaning, men establish themselves as question-asking beings.” It is not the questions that animate the human mind, but the thinking process itself, and without it one cannot be fully alive. The distinction between thinking (or speculative reason) and common sense reasoning (or the intellect), which Arendt draws from Kant, “liberates” thinking from truth and knowledge by absolving it from any obligation to produce results, that is, by removing the burden of necessity imposed by two-world theories on the one hand and radical doubt on the other. Thinking does not have to be instrumentalized; it can be “for its own sake,” it has the capacity to move outside of the world of appearances and produce no

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91 Arendt, Life of the Mind, 1:61. Arendt notes how much Hegel was bothered by the role of philosophy as “handmaiden” to science in the modern era as it was handmaiden to theology in the Middle Ages.

92 Arendt, Life of the Mind, 1:62.

93 Arendt, Life of the Mind, 1:191. “Thinking accompanies life and is itself the de-materialized quintessence of being alive; and since life is a process, its quintessence can only lie in the actual thinking process and not in any sordid results or specific thoughts. A life without thinking is quite possible; it then fails to develop its own essence – it is not merely meaningless; it is not fully alive. Unthinking men are like sleepwalkers.”

94 Kant does this in order to make room for faith, but Arendt thinks that instead he made room for thought – thought that does not need certainty to feed its infinite desire (Life of the Mind, 1:63). But even those who followed Kant (Hegel, Fichte, Schelling) continued to sacrifice themselves to the quest for certainty, “blurring again the line between thought and knowledge, and believed in all earnest that the results of their speculations possessed the same kind of validity as the results of cognitive processes” (1:63–64). See earlier footnote on necessity and contingency.

I am simplifying and drawing selectively from Kant and Arendt’s reading of him here, but I will say that Arendt is using “speculative reason” to distinguish thinking from Kant’s more demanding (and in this reading, blurrier) category of “pure reason,” which repeats the two-world fallacy by making the “highest objects of thought” (God, Freedom, Immortality are given as examples) again only “perceptible” in thinking. Arendt (purposefully) leaves behind much of Kant’s philosophy when she pulls out key ideas, for example in her distinction between speculative reason and pure reason, mathematics is taken from its supernal place in Kant’s epistemology as a priori knowledge and put back in the realm of cognition and intellect, which always retains its correspondence to phenomenalism on some level (1:63–65). For its more direct relationship to phenomena, Arendt appreciates geometry over algebra, but I wonder if that view is influenced by the non-Greek (i.e., Arabic) origins of algebra over geometry.
results, including "non-sense and meaningless" that is beyond common sense. Circular and reflexive, it cannot be claimed to reach, nor present, nor represent reality, but it always "accompanies life" and is always related to it as the thinking of someone who is born in a world of others. The gap overflows with meaning. Arendt’s goal is to establish the line of what can be claimed by cognition and what can be claimed by thought, from which we get thinking for its own sake, pursuing meaning rather than seeking truth. This is part of Arendt’s phenomenological reduction, a reduction that aims to disrupt rather than reproduce the two-world fallacy that undermines or severs being’s relationship with appearance. Like Levinas, this reduction takes her to the complex interplay, interval, or non-coinciding of being and appearance, of subjectivity and objectivity, which is signified by the experience of thinking.

Let us return now to the cave parable, where we can read Arendt’s critique of the “two-world fallacy” and radical doubt into the distinction between ethics and politics. In her “Socrates” essay, Arendt notes that Plato characterizes the famous allegory as describing “the relationship between philosophy and

95 Arendt, *Life of the Mind*, 1:64.
96 Arendt, *Life of the Mind*, 1:64. “Accompanies life” is from p. 191.
97 Arendt’s critique of Heideggerian thinking still owes a debt to him. From Arendt’s essay in honour of Heidegger’s 80th birthday:

For it is not Heidegger’s philosophy, whose existence we can rightfully question (as Jean Beaufret has done), but Heidegger’s thinking that has shared so decisively in determining the spiritual physiognomy of this century. This thinking has a digging quality peculiar to itself, which, should we wish to put it in linguistic form, lies in the transitive use of the verb “to think.” Heidegger never thinks “about” something; he thinks something. In this entirely uncontemplative activity, he penetrates to the depths, but not to discover, let alone bring to light, some ultimate, secure foundations which one could say had been undiscovered earlier in this manner. Rather, he persistently remains there, underground, in order to lay down pathways and fix “trail marks” (a collection of texts from the years 1929–1962 had this title, *Wegmarken*). This thinking may set tasks for itself; it may deal with “problems”; it naturally, indeed always, has something specific with which it is particularly occupied or, more precisely, by which it is specifically aroused; but one cannot say that it has a goal. It is unceasingly active, and even the laying down of paths itself is conducive to opening up a new dimension of thought, rather than to reaching a goal sighted beforehand and guided thereto. “Martin Heidegger at Eighty,” trans. Albert Hofstadter, *New York Review*, October 21 1971, [http://www.nybooks.com/articles/1971/10/21/martin-heidegger-at-eighty/](http://www.nybooks.com/articles/1971/10/21/martin-heidegger-at-eighty/)
politics in terms of the attitude of the philosopher toward the polis.” The figure of the philosopher begins in a cave, chained with others so that they are forced to watch the shadows that appear on the wall of the cave. The first turn (periagōgē) is when the philosopher frees themself and looks away from the shadows on the wall to see the “artificial fire” behind, casting the shadows. Curious about the fire and their surroundings, the philosopher turns around for the second time to leave the cave and enter into the daylight, which for Plato is the eternal realm of the Ideas. Here the philosopher can behold true forms or essence, but they cannot remain. The third turn is the return back into the cave, where the philosopher can no longer feel at home having been in the light.

Through Plato, the cave allegory is characterized as a kind of tragedy, where the philosopher is imprisoned in the phenomenal world. Arendt provides an alternative reading. Though she does not say so directly, in a footnote to the essay “Understanding and Politics” she points to the third turn as the turn toward understanding rather than the tragic final note of the story. She writes,


99 Arendt, “Socrates,” 29–30. Arendt notes that each of these turns is characterized by sensory disorientation, especially the first and third turns, which include the loss of common sense as well: first the exposure to the fire in the cave, and then when they try to explain what they saw outside to the others who are still enchained (30).

100 Arendt, Life of the Mind, 1:34. Villa characterizes Arendt’s “third turn” within her critique of Heidegger as well: The “philosophical” withdrawal of the later Heidegger is pure and complete: the Kehre does not lead the thinker back into the cave as does the Platonic turning, or periagōgē. Quite the contrary: it is the total character of Heidegger’s withdrawal from the world of appearances, his “taking up residence” in an abode where even the most renowned of philosophers only sojourned, that makes him, even more than Plato (though perhaps less than Socrates), the “philosopher’s philosopher.” It is this total withdrawal that also makes his “error” both more grotesque and more tragic than Plato’s misguided attempt to transform a run of the mill tyrant into a philosopher-king. And, Arendt would add, it also makes Heidegger’s actions more demanding, and perhaps more worthy, of forgiveness. (Arendt and Heidegger, 237)
To put it in a schematic and therefore necessarily inadequate way, it is as though, whenever we are confronted with something frighteningly new, our first impulse is to recognize it in a blind and uncontrolled reaction strong enough to coin a new word; our second impulse seems to be to regain control by denying that we saw anything new at all, by pretending that something similar is already known to us; only a third impulse can lead us back to what we saw and knew in the beginning. It is here that the effort of true understanding begins.\textsuperscript{101} (my emphasis.)

The desire to stay in the light, in the life of the mind, reflects the philosopher’s attachment to the solitary life of contemplation, amplified by the two-world theory that also designates the cave as a place of falsehood and meaninglessness. But the others are in the cave and part of the discomfort of going back into the cave, in Plato’s telling, is the difficulty of communicating the experience of the outside, and of the return. In other words, the third turn is disturbed by a loss of common sense, by a disconnection from a shared reality and a difficulty communicating it to others.\textsuperscript{102} It is a return to a new beginning (arche), and so disorienting and shocking.

The description resembles what she writes in the Socrates essay as the elements of the cave allegory that were omitted from the story: namely, the beginning and end of the philosopher’s life before they are chained to the shadow wall, which is defined by Socrates as thaumadzein, or wonder.\textsuperscript{103} Wonder here is something to be endured in speechlessness, until it can be translated into words, that is, unanswerable questions. To the wondering mind, the unanswerable questions are asked in “the pathos of wonder” which “can only be expressed as: Now I know what it means not to know; now I know what I do not know.”\textsuperscript{104}

\textsuperscript{101} Arendt, “Understanding and Politics,” 325n8.

\textsuperscript{102} Common sense is the manifestation of man’s humanity, and it is the sense related to communication and language/speech (Arendt, Life of the Mind, 1:70–71). “This sensus communis is what judgment appeals to in everyone, and it is this possible appeal that gives judgement their special validity. […] In other words, when one judges, one judges as a member of a community” (1:72). “To come back to what we said before: One judges always as a member of a community, guided by one’s community sense, one’s sensus communis. But in the last analysis, one is a member of a world community by the sheer fact of being human; this is one’s “cosmopolitan existence.” When one judges and when one acts in political matters, one is supposed to take one’s bearings from the idea, not the actuality, of being a world citizen and, therefore, also a Weltbetrachter, a world spectator” (1:76).

\textsuperscript{103} Arendt, “Socrates,” 33–39.

\textsuperscript{104} Arendt, “Socrates,” 33–34.
The shock and speechlessness are no advantage for achieving aims, and, like thinking, produces no results. What wonder does accomplish is establishing the wonderer as a “question-asking being.” At the same time, wonder is not thinking – it is not a dialogue with myself. It relates to the others in the cave, to the plurality of the human condition, and to common sense. It also does not require or produce knowledge, but endless meaning and understanding. Arendt writes in her characterization of Socratic wonder (in contradistinction to Platonic and Aristotelean wonder) that, “what begins as wonder ends in perplexity and thence leads back to wonder: How marvelous that men can perform courageous or just deeds even though they do not know, can give no account of, what courage and justice are.”

The excess of wonder, beyond its own possibilities or sense, is the essence of Arendt and Levinas’ answers to radical doubt. Recall that for Levinas, in responsibility (substitution), I contract and forget myself. In that forgetting of subjectivity, beyond consciousness and in relation with infinity, I attain what he calls an “open-eyed ignorance” of “the subject beyond this struggle for oneself and this complacency in oneself.” Levinas continues:

It is an ignorance of being and death […] an indifference to essence […] designated in the title of this book by the barbarous expression “otherwise than being”; it has to measure the scope of disinterestedness and, as ontological indifference, is the terrain necessary for the distinction between truth and ideology. This difference is not purely negative, for in another sense it is non-indifference, non-indifference to another, to the other. The very difference between me and the other is non-indifference, is the-one-for-the-other.

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106 As Arendt wrote in the introduction to her dissertation: “We must let the contradictions stand as what they are, make them understood as contradictions, and grasp what lies beneath them.” Love and Saint Augustine, ed. Joanna Vecchiarelli Scott and Judith Chelius Stark (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 7. Scott and Stark explain in their preface to the book that the published text was first translated into English by E.B. Ashton (by 1963) and then revised significantly by Arendt, who did not finish the revision before her death.
107 Arendt, Life of the Mind, 1:166
108 Levinas, Otherwise than Being, 177.
109 Levinas, Otherwise than Being, 177–178.
In the face of the Other (interest as in the Heideggerian inter-esse, inter-being) I become indifferent to essence (disinterestedness), to myself, and so can call myself into question. At the same time as I am indifferent to myself, only possible in relation to absolute difference, I contract from myself and make room for non-indifference for the other who is not me, and so become the-one-for-the-other. That is, responsibility is inscribed in difference and indifference and then non-indifference: the turn to the third, or the third turn.\footnote{I will note without much elaboration that Levinas’ transition from disinterestedness to non-indifference is mirrored in Arendt’s reading of Kant on pleasure and disinterestedness in judgement (as actor and spectator), see Lectures on Kant’s Political Philosophy, 73–74.} At this threshold is Levinas’ criticism of Cartesian doubt; doubt or skepticism is a feature of calling into question, but for Levinas the mistake is to stop there in disinterestedness rather than continue the descent through a “second negation.”\footnote{The critique of Descartes is markedly more pronounced in Totality and Infinity compared to the later Otherwise than Being. I have drawn the language of the “second negation” from the earlier text. For example, “The I in the negativity manifested by doubt breaks with participation, but does not find in the cogito itself a stopping place. It is not I, it is the other that can say yes. From him comes affirmation; he is at the commencement of experience. Descartes seeks a certitude, and stops at the first change of level in this vertiginous descent; in fact, he possesses the idea of infinity, and can gauge in advance the return of affirmation behind the negation. But to possess the idea of infinity is to have already welcomed the Other” (Totality and Infinity, 93). Already when we turn to the third, we have welcomed the Other. Radical doubt, unable to see the Other as knowledge/truth (unable to forget myself), forgets that it is already in relation.}  

At this threshold is Levinas’ criticism of Cartesian doubt; doubt or skepticism is a feature of calling into question, but for Levinas the mistake is to stop there in disinterestedness rather than continue the descent through a “second negation.”\footnote{Levinas, Otherwise than Being, 180–181. The following passage is instructive: “[…] this invisibility is non-indifferent and obsesses me before all thematization, […] the simple ambiance is imposed as an atmosphere to} 

In disinterestedness, there is also “exposure without assumption,” not to nothingness but to an emptiness filled with invisible air, “hidden from perception, save in the caress of the wind [proximity] or the threat of storms, non-perceived but penetrating me even in the retreats of my inwardness […].”\footnote{Levinas, Otherwise than Being, 180.} In the third turn, I find to my horror and surprise that the invisible air is breathable, and horrible. The openness of disinterestedness (exposure) welcomes air into my lungs so that I can, impossibly, breathe, there in the emptiness of an absent Other in me. The breath is still always “cut short by the wind of alterity.”\footnote{Levinas, Otherwise than Being, 180–181. The following passage is instructive: “[…] this invisibility is non-indifferent and obsesses me before all thematization, […] the simple ambiance is imposed as an atmosphere to} Here, before I take my first gasp, I arrive at the threshold of responsibility, between ethics and politics:
To open oneself as space, to free oneself by breathing from closure in oneself already presupposes this beyond: my responsibility for the other and my aspiration by the other, the crushing charge, the beyond, of alterity. That the breathing by which entities seem to affirm themselves triumphantly in their vital space would be a consummation, a coring out of my substantiality, that in breathing I already open myself to my subjection to the whole of the invisible other, that the beyond or the liberation would be the support of a crushing charge, is to be sure surprising. It is this wonder that has been the object of the book proposed here.\textsuperscript{114}

More than the third turn, it is also at this point that Levinas’s subjectivity turns to the third party.

Opposed to wonder is radical doubt and the unity of being. Total skepticism assumes that “everything in time were recallable, that is, able to form a structure with the present,” that from the diachrony truth can be recovered as a theme “without thereby refuting itself.”\textsuperscript{115} But skepticism is not satisfied by the rejection of truth or the relegation of truth to a beyond that excludes the world. It returns, again and again – in skepticism I am called into question. (“The reflexive pronoun \textit{oneself} and the recurrence it denotes raise a problem […].”\textsuperscript{116}) The contradiction of return (the “periodic rebirth of skepticism”) “\textit{does not strangle the speaker}” (my emphasis) – I can still draw breath. The contradiction instead “recalls the breakup of the unity of the transcendental apperception, without which one could not \textit{otherwise than be}.”\textsuperscript{117} Subjectivity begins from and ends up in plurality.

which the subject gives himself and exposes himself in his lungs, without intentions and aims, that the subject could be a lung at the bottom of its substance – all this signifies a subjectivity that suffers and offers itself before taking a foothold in being. It is a passivity, wholly a supporting.”

\textsuperscript{114} Levinas, \textit{Otherwise than Being}, 180–181.
\textsuperscript{115} Levinas, \textit{Otherwise than Being}, 171.
\textsuperscript{116} Levinas, \textit{Otherwise than Being}, 43.
\textsuperscript{117} Levinas, \textit{Otherwise than Being}, 171. Thinking and skepticism specifically, if in relation with alterity (“remains the servant of the saying that signifies the difference between the one and the one as the one for the other, as non-indifference to the other”), poses the greatest possibility for philosophy as “the wisdom of love at the service of love,” rather than a love of wisdom (161–162).

Consider the dramatic contrast with Hegel in \textit{Phenomenology of Spirit}, where instead of an open self, gasping in the breath of invisible air, is a closed self, relying only on itself and relegating the phenomenal world to ontological inferiority in relation to myself. It is a self that is refusing to breathe. Instead of wonder (the third turn), we have despair (the second turn as unity):

Natural consciousness will show itself to be only the Notion of knowledge, or in other words, not to be real knowledge. But since it directly takes itself to be real knowledge, this path has a negative significance for
Levinas’ metaphor in the final pages of *Otherwise than Being* emphasizes the vitality of thinking (as disinterestedness, calling oneself into question) in its continual interruption. For Arendt, thinking is also “out of order” (Heidegger). The duality of the thinking activity is only experienced in suspension, out of the world and out of time (I cannot think and act at the same time). As the “two-in-one,” I am not unified as an identity or as true Being in that suspension but infinitely fractured in an endless confrontation with myself. I only become unified (i.e., appear as one) when I return back into the world as a subject with a proper name, as Arendt explains: “the two-in-one becomes One again when the world intrudes upon the thinker and cuts short the thinking process. Then, when he is called by his name back into the world of appearances, where he is always One, it is though the two into which the thinking process had split him clapped him together again.”118 It is only in the phenomenal world of appearances that I can appear as one, as an object and subject among many. In order to be a subject as well as an object (for political purposes, in order to speak/act), I need the thinking activity: “Without the breath of life the human body is a corpse; without thinking the human mind is dead.”119

it, and what is in fact the realization of the Notion, counts for it rather as the loss of its own self; for it does lose its truth on this path. The road can therefore be regarded as the pathway of doubt, or more precisely as the way of despair. […] this path is the conscious insight into the untruth of phenomenal knowledge, for which the supreme reality is what is in truth only the unrealized Notion. Therefore this thoroughgoing scepticism is also not the scepticism with which an earnest zeal for truth and Science fancies it has prepared and equipped itself in their service: the resolve, in Science, not to give oneself over to the thoughts of others, upon mere authority, but to examine everything for oneself and follow only one’s own conviction, or better still, to produce everything oneself, and accept only one’s own deed as what is true. […] The scepticism that is directed against the whole range of phenomenal consciousness, on the other hand, renders the Spirit for the first time competent to examine what truth is. For it brings about a state of despair about all the so-called natural ideas, thoughts, and opinions, regardless of whether they are called one’s own or someone else’s, ideas with which the consciousness that sets about the examination [of truth] straight away is still filled and hampered, so that it is, in fact, incapable of carrying out what it wants to undertake. Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A.V. Miller, rev. ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979), section 78, 49–50.


119 Arendt, *Life of the Mind*, 1:124. See also in “Some Questions of Moral Philosophy,” “The idiomatic “stop and think” is indeed entirely right. Whenever we think, we stop whatever else we may have been doing, and as long as we are two-in-one, we are unable to do anything but think. Hence, there is more than a mere distinction between thinking and acting. […] The main distinction, politically speaking, between Thought and Action lies in that I am
The vitality and reflexivity of the third turn is also a re-turning, never complete. In this reading of the cave parable, the third turn reflects the limit of ethics and politics, discerned by a phenomenological approach to the problem of morality after Auschwitz and the problem of action in a world marked by totalitarian dangers. That is, to disengage from it is to refuse the relationship with and my responsibility for the other and for the world. “The greatest evildoers,” Arendt writes recalling Eichmann, “are those who don’t remember because they have never given thought to the matter, and, without remembrance, nothing can hold them back.” Here Arendt reminds us of the connection between thinking and remembering, that the return also involves remembering what I have done. In thinking about the past, I return, I “strike roots” in a shared world “into which we all arrive as strangers.” Rather than a universal morality or external code of ethics, it is the roots I strike in remembering, in returning to the community, that grounds me in the world and establishes limits to what I will do in it. The problem with evil, like Arendt saw in Eichmann, is that it is rootless, and so has no limitations. A “conscience” (which Arendt reminds us is the same word only with my own self or the self of another while I am thinking, whereas I am in the company of the many the moment I start to act)” (105–106).

120 Arendt writes: “However, what I meant to show here is that this whole sphere, its greatness notwithstanding, is limited – that it does not encompass the whole of my and the world’s existence. It is limited by those things which men cannot change at will. And it is only by respecting its own borders that this realm, where we are free to act and to change, can remain intact, preserving its integrity and keeping its promises. Conceptually, we may call truth what we cannot change; metaphorically, it is the ground on which we stand and the sky that stretches above us” (“Truth and Politics,” in Between Past and Future, 258–259).

121 Arendt, “Some Questions of Moral Philosophy,” 93–94. Villa’s introduction to Arendt and Heidegger discusses the nuance of Arendtian “renewal” or remembrance of old concepts and bygone traditions, where the renewal is really a break. (The tightrope is also a tripwire, see epigraph to conclusion.)

122 Arendt, “Some Questions of Moral Philosophy,” 100. In my reading, this is a fuller conception of her Socratic-inspired notion of responsibility, in the full light of the public. The imperative to be in agreement with myself and so be a friend to myself seems to me to be insufficient by the end of these reflections.

123 Arendt, “Some Questions of Moral Philosophy,” 100–101. Even more strikingly, on this point Arendt gives a rather uncharacteristic gesture to Jewish thought: she cites the return of repentance as the “shuv” of “teshuvah,” literally the repentance etymologically rooted in the word “return” (or “again”). Topolski has contributed to the intersections of Arendt and Levinas on the Jewish notion of teshuvah, see Anya Topolski, “The Ethics and Politics of Teshuvah: Lessons from Emmanuel Levinas and Hannah Arendt,” The University of Toronto Journal of Jewish Thought 2 (2011).

as consciousness in several languages including French) thus entails for Arendt not “the voice of God within us” or the light of reason, but the ability to be a witness to myself, to remember and hold myself to account for what I have done.\textsuperscript{125} Again, as we saw in the section on personal responsibility, this is not an objective moral limit. As related to thinking, conscience does not provide answers or results either.\textsuperscript{126} Arendt does not make thinking into something useful here, at the end. “It does not create values,” she underscores, “it will not find out, once and for all, what “the good” is; it does not confirm but, rather, dissolves accepted rules of conduct. And it has no political relevance unless special emergencies arise.”\textsuperscript{127}

Referring to her opening question in the \textit{Life of the Mind} (can the thinking activity condition men against evil-doing?), Arendt seems to hint that thinking, an invisible and largely private activity that is somehow also the insertion of difference in me (where I become together with myself, with myself as witness), in the final analysis is not sufficient for responsibility in the personal or political registers. Thinking can produce no results and so no prescriptions; how could it be relied upon to guard against evil? While thinking can take us out of the world, it is not thinking itself that brings us back into it. The world always intervenes in thinking, thinking always interrupts itself. It can “never directly change reality – indeed, in our world there is no clearer or more direct radical opposition than that between thinking and doing […].”\textsuperscript{128}

\begin{flushright}
125\footnote{Arendt, \textit{Life of the Mind}, 1:190. See also the introduction to the text (1:5), where she talks about consciousness as conscience (also conscience as con-science).}
126\footnote{Arendt, \textit{Life of the Mind}, 1:191. This is similar to Levinas too, except that Arendt refers to this as the fear of self-witnessing or self-judgement rather than the shame and apology I have for my own freedom.}
127\footnote{Arendt, \textit{Life of the Mind}, 1:191–192. As in the earlier discussion, the question “can I live with myself?” is reserved for “boundary situations” (a term she borrows from Jaspers, who is referring to the “general, unchanging human condition – “that I cannot live without struggling and suffering, that I cannot avoid guilt; that I must die” […]” (1:191–192). Such boundary situations seem to me to be all too prevalent today, if they were ever otherwise in Arendt and Levinas’ time. By virtue of the climate crisis alone, such questions are necessary and impossible to answer (inescapable).}
128\footnote{Arendt, \textit{Life of the Mind}, 1:71.}
What can change the world is the faculty of judgement, which actualizes thinking in the world just as thinking actualizes the difference in me. “In either case it is not through acting but through contemplating the ‘something else,’ namely, the meaning of the whole, is revealed. The spectator, not the actor, holds the clue to the meaning of human affairs – only, and this is decisive, Kant’s spectators [in contradistinction to Hegel’s] exist in the plural, and this is why he could arrive at a political philosophy.”\(^\text{129}\) What thinking can do is, in destroying prejudices (pre-judgements), have a “liberating effect on another faculty, the faculty of judgement, which one may call with some reason the most political of man’s mental abilities. It is the faculty that judges particulars without subsuming them under general rules which can be taught and learned until they grow into habits that can be replaced by other habits and rules.”\(^\text{130}\) That is, while “thinking deals with invisibles, with representations of things that are absent, judging always concerns particulars and things close at hand.”\(^\text{131}\) She continues,

But the two are interrelated, as are consciousness and conscience. If thinking – the two-in-one of the soundless dialogue – articulates the difference within our identity as given to consciousness and thereby results in conscience as its by-product, then judging, the by-product of the liberating effect of thinking, realizes thinking, makes it manifest in the world of appearances, where I am never alone and always too busy to be able to think. The manifestation of the wind of thought is not knowledge; it is the ability to tell right from wrong, beautiful from ugly. And this, at the rare moments when the stakes are on the table, may indeed prevent catastrophes, at least for the self.\(^\text{132}\) It is the turn to the third, to justice, which brings us to the question “What do I do?” It is not thought that can answer or even respond to that question: it is judgement that can respond to the question of justice, though never in the terms of universals.\(^\text{133}\) And though judgement is not the same as thinking, it depends

\(^{129}\) Arendt, Life of the Mind, 1:96. Arendt’s sense of judgement, as well as Levinas’ for that matter, is included only in brief and in part here, in order to limit the scope of my inquiry.

\(^{130}\) Arendt, Life of the Mind, 1:192–193.

\(^{131}\) Arendt, Life of the Mind, 1:193.

\(^{132}\) Arendt, Life of the Mind, 1:193.

\(^{133}\) In her lectures on Kant, Arendt notes that Kant’s classic metaphysical question (of three) “What ought I to do?” is metaphysical for him because it has no answer (Lectures on Kant’s Political Philosophy, 20). It also has nothing to do with action (according to Arendt), since his political context made freedom of speech (in writing) the primary
upon it to achieve the necessary critical distance, in which a gap is opened and we can think our principles anew.134 “In short, [judging and willing] depend on the performance of these apparently profitless mental enterprises that yield no results and “do not endow us directly with the power to act” (Heidegger).”135

Furthermore, related to the unanswerable questions, judgement is not compulsory like logic; it is only persuasive or not (relating again to sense and aesthetics).136

The third turn, or the turn to the third, reveals the limit of ethics and politics, that we must confront the abyss and that it offers no answers. The tension here in justice and in judgement informs the question of this dissertation: “what is the responsibility of activists in the face of genocide?” Following these reflections on responsibility, it should be no surprise that my intent is to deny the possibility of a general answer. The ethical demand, the moral urgency to stop murder, does not descend into the world and transform it by magic. It is a relationship across an irreducible gap, the gap between ethics and politics, between the anarchical question and the just search for a principle. The question of responsibility in the face of genocide is a question that, as activists trying to change the world together, can only be asked

sense of political engagement for Kant, so he thought of action in relation to this question solely as a personal, private matter. Arendt opens the door to criticize this; the common sense that is connected to judgement is fundamentally intersubjective, even more so than thinking (but not as much as action itself). Kant keeps making the mistake of philosophers regarding politics, in that he bases politics on the self rather than the world (20–22).

Arendt does seem to be implying also that the question “what ought I do?” is a question for the will, not judgement (as a question of action). Judgement for Kant “does not tell one how to act” (44). But this is the role of the spectator, who does not act but reflects (via imagination). The second part is “enlarged mentality” or the use of common sense, in which I imagine myself to be (in Kantian language) as “world citizen,” which Arendt corrects to “world spectator” since no one can have the responsibilities and rights that a citizen of the world would entail, it needs to be limited (44). Kant does characterize the spectator as “disinterestedness,” which he describes as “a moral character of humanity, at least in its predisposition, a character which not only permits people to hope for progress toward the better, but is already itself progress insofar as its capacity is sufficient for the present.” (45, quoting On History, ed. Beck, pp. 143–48 in “An Old Question Raised Again,” secs. 6 and 7. It is cited in the body of Arendt’s text as an excerpt from The Contest of the Faculties Part II, sections 6 and 7).

134 Arendt, Life of the Mind, 1:71. She states bluntly that though thinking “can never directly change reality,” “the principles by which we act and the criteria by which we judge and conduct our lives depend ultimately on the life of the mind.”

135 Arendt, Life of the Mind, 1:70–71.

collectively in a shared context. The task is to prepare anti-genocide activists for the restlessness of the question. The tension is irresolvable, as Hatley eloquently describes:

Ultimately, if there is to be peace, the political memory of violence must move beyond merely expressing an outrage for wrongs suffered. Yet, in being so called, those who would be just cannot forget these wrongs but must be ever attentive to how the memory of them can devolve into yet again rendering the other faceless: on the one hand, by instituting a justice in which I remain at war with the unjust, as if their wrong could be utterly wiped out; on the other hand, by instituting a memory in which the cries of the victims are yet again extinguished, as if their suffering could somehow be mastered. In this impossible tension, which demands a discourse of incessant correction, of a wakefulness for the sake of the other’s face for whose suffering I am always already responsible, justice must yet again mark out a course that leads to renewed listening to the other and to all the other others.¹³⁷

Hatley’s articulation, deeply inspired by Levinas, expresses much of the concerns of critical genocide scholars and activists alike, who are alarmed by the real consequences of the current state of affairs. I emphasize that their concern, and mine, is not abstract, though it may be also theoretical. Perhaps the concept of genocide can be a powerful rallying cry to justice as I believe it was intended to be. As I finish this dissertation, it is a word claimed both by tyrants to justify expansion and destruction and by activists who are gaining ground in centuries-long struggles against colonial violence, silencing, and impunity. “No more genocide” is a powerful articulation of “never again” today, if only it could be heard as such by anti-genocide activists. I do not demand that everything anti-genocide activism has become be abandoned. I do think we need a separation, a suspension, to think again the principles of anti-genocide activism. There are interruptions all around us and we ought to be open to them. To do that we need wonder and awe and courage. We come to that threshold in responsibility, and it is only from there that we can, together, ask the question of justice: “what do I do?” What we do matters, and justice demands that we think about what we are doing. That is not a logical claim, and through Arendt and Levinas I try to show why it cannot be so.

Put another way, here we can turn away from radical doubt to return, to turn a third time, to turn toward the third (the Other, and justice). From this perspective, activists are moved to think and act but not

to know. Arendt takes us to the problems of doubt from the side of action – the question “what do I do?” is on this side of beginnings and so not anarchical but in search of a principle.\textsuperscript{138} The problem of action signifies the troubling of politics by ethics that must occur.\textsuperscript{139} To speak “never again” is not to build a wall around the world through which genocide can never penetrate. In the final analysis of this text, I hear in it a call to be in the world – it is an ethical call, it is a political call. Neither can be systematized nor excluded. In the faultline, in the face of total destruction (Shoah), the response refers to the movement in between these irreconcilables. It refers to the open lungs that inhale empty air and the breath that utters the question of justice. It refers, I believe, to the communal repetition and re-turning that initiates praxis. What is “never again” for, if not for this?

\textsuperscript{138} Arendt’s political phenomenology helps us understand this through the inherent frailty of human affairs, which can only be secured by promises and forgiveness. As Topolski point out, promises and forgiveness are answers of a sort to the Levinasian ethical concepts of substitution (responsibility) and apology, but in synchronous time.

\textsuperscript{139} It also means that the problem of action must be understood in relation to the radical doubt of liberalism.
Epilogue

The true path is along a rope, not a rope suspended way up in the air, but rather only just over the ground. It seems more like a tripwire than a tightrope.

– Franz Kafka, 1917/1918

All my thoughts are happening all at once. But writing – and more importantly, speaking – is not like seeing, it is more like hearing. The words have to come out, one by one. So what are you supposed to do when they are all tangled up, in no time and no space? They fill themselves up and collapse in on themselves, and all you hear is a cacophony of ideas. In speaking, in writing, all those ideas must arrange themselves into words. I hear my own thoughts, and I must speak them anew, into a language that others can hopefully hear and in turn fill up those words again with meaning, some with that same meaning that made those words burst forth, but, invariably, also otherwise.

Many things are as hard as writing, speaking. It is hard to listen to the belaboured last breath of a loved one. It is hard to open yourself, like you need to do when you let someone love you. It is hard to shuck the ghosts of your desires when new ones take their places. It is also hard to utter, in the hearing of others, something that you truly mean to say. The implication is that you think it is also something worthy of being heard – and perhaps it is, by someone. In the world of letters, all we have are the things that we say to one another. In this dissertation, I reveal myself as a bit obsessed with the things that are hard to do and that have been hard for me to say. In fact, what I am trying to do here is to show you just how hard some things are, so hard that they leave you feeling like you are standing on the edge of an abyss, not at all confident in your ability to hold onto anything. I do not at all assume that you do not know these things – in fact, I expect that you do know – though many people teach that they should not be, or need not be, hard.

Or worse, that because they are hard, we should avoid or reject them, or change them into something easier as if that were a matter of choice.

There are things that are still hard to say and that I struggle to assemble into a sensible sequence of words. Much of it will be kept in reserve for work to come, dedicated to a future beyond this very moment of the final writing, the eve of the conclusion. All things must end; that is, all things do end. There are also new beginnings that erupt without necessity and preclude anticipation. In this diachronous flow of time that is a rushing torrent, a heaving ocean, there are actions that leave their mark upon the world and on people who are responsible for them. With an eye toward the end of this dissertation, I return to my own position that – contrary to what a reasonable reader might have assumed – lies outside the direct generational chain of Holocaust trauma. I learned the words “never again” at school, spoken in my community, and in general from a position other than in relation to a parent or grandparent or great-grandparent who witnessed total destruction as survivors of it. My own background reflects other histories and other articulations of “never again” altogether, ones that precede and succeed the Shoah and can be traced along other paths and different terrains, across a plurality of experiences as Jew and Gentile. I find myself dwelling in those landscapes now, called to them by an after-thought that is more than a memory. Was it these other versions of “never again” that brought me here, to anti-genocide activism, to the University of British Columbia, to graduate school? When my paternal great-great-grandparents left their homes in the territories of the Austrian, Russian, and British empires to cross the Atlantic Ocean, did they not seek to leave behind all sorts of “agains,” from which their children and grandchildren and great-grandchildren and great-great-grandchildren could be freed from having to repeat? When my maternal grandparents sailed from Morocco in the other direction, east across the Mediterranean to the nascent State of Israel, did their new beginning translate into a version of “never again”? Those words could have been spoken in English, as they are here, or in Arabic, Yiddish, Gaelic, Polish, German, Russian, or some other language altogether. What are the
translations of “never again” that do not appear in this text, and what would the process of translating them into these contexts reveal about responsibility in the face of total destruction?

It is dangerous to talk about the Shoah as the central event of responsibility in this way because it glosses over the price “never again” has demanded in these stories on the other side of time, after the words have been put into action. Both sides of my families arrived at their security by displacing other families, essentially acting as agents of the Crown of England and the State of Israel and becoming complicit in violence and terrible loss that evoked and continues to evoke yet new rounds of “never again.” Those “never agains” demand to be heard beyond recognition, evoking that same moral urgency and ethical responsibility in the face of suffering and total destruction. They also demand action, and here Arendt’s conception of political responsibility begins to show its deficits. European colonialism, after all, destroyed innumerable worlds over the past 600 years and continues to do so. Its vast reach has spread responsibilities across the world to billions of citizens of its homelands and colonies. By virtue of the decisions of my ancestors, I was born into the rights and privileges afforded to me as a citizen of two nations – those same rights and privileges that allowed me to study for 14 years at a colonial institution of “higher learning.” Arendtian responsibility holds that those rights and privileges carry with them an inherited responsibility for the colonial violence committed by my fellows and for my sake as a member of the generations that were to come. Arendt’s extension of complicity, accomplished by distinguishing responsibility from (criminal or moral) guilt, easily passes onto me responsibilities in the face of genocides far removed from the position of victim. Can my analysis hold up under such a weight?

Arendt herself anticipated how such an extension poses problems for action in another register that I have not discussed in the chapters of this work. In an essay on her mentor Karl Jaspers, she expresses her concerns for the future of political responsibility in a globalized world, concerns that read more intensely now than they might have in the mid-1960s:

It is true, for the first time in history all peoples on earth have a common present: no event of any importance in the history of one country can remain a marginal accident in the history of any other.
Every country has become the almost immediate neighbor of every other country, and every man feels the shock of events which take place at the other side of the globe. But this common factual present is not based on a common past and does not the least guarantee a common future. Technology, having provided the unity of the world, can just as easily destroy it and the means of global communication were designed side by side with the means of possible global destruction. 

[...] This negative solidarity, based on the fear of global destruction, has its correspondence in a less articulate, no less potent, apprehension that the solidarity of mankind can be meaningful in a positive sense only if it is occupied with political responsibility. Our political concepts, according to which we have to assume responsibility for all public affairs within our reach regardless of personal “guilt,” because we are held responsible as citizens for everything that our government does in the name of the country, may lead us into an intolerable situation of global responsibility. The solidarity of mankind may well turn out to be an unbearable burden, and it is not surprising that the common reactions to it are political apathy, isolationist nationalism, or desperate rebellion against all powers that be rather than enthusiasm or a desire for a revival of humanism. 

In this dense passage, Arendt puts into words a major political crisis of our time, one of a truly “intolerable situation of global responsibility” that presents compounded challenges to political action. What potentiality is there for me, or you, to take action against the climate crisis, or to end the detention, abuse, and murder of migrants? What is my capacity to act against global structures of power and wealth that implicate me in genocide and planetary destruction with the same gesture that gives me food, shelter, clothing, and so much more? At this point we seem far away from the “limit situation” of totalitarianism and into another terrain entirely. It seems to me that such a limitless and borderless situation, however, is not new but old, connected to long marches of colonial expansion and exploitation. The globe shrank and calcified into systems of oppression at the hands of human beings who either thought about, or failed to think about, the devastating impact of their actions on others. We live in the wake of their actions and in the midst of our own. The present situation, often bordering on hopelessness, seems to require more than what Arendt can offer in order to recover new beginnings and different futures.

2 Arendt, “Karl Jaspers: Citizen of the World?” in Men in Dark Times, 83. In “Organized Guilt” she writes, “In political terms, the idea of humanity, excluding no people and assigning a monopoly of guilt to no one, is the only guarantee that one “superior race” after another may not feel obligated to follow the “natural law” of the right of the powerful, and exterminate “inferior races unworthy of survival”; so that at the end of an “imperialistic age” we should find ourselves in a stage which would make the Nazis look like crude precursors of future political methods. To follow a non-imperialistic policy and maintain a non-racist faith becomes daily more difficult because it becomes daily clearer how great a burden mankind is for man” (131).
As a final conclusion, I offer Michael Rothberg’s notion of the “implicated subject” to begin to think about political responsibility beyond the Third Reich or, as some of the genocide scholars from earlier chapters do, in the broader context of European colonialism of which Nazism is a part. Drawing on Arendt’s thinking (and Jaspers’) on collective responsibility, Rothberg’s implicated subject occupies positions aligned with power and privilege without being themselves direct agents of harm; they contribute to, inhabit, inherit, or benefit from regimes of domination but do not originate or control such regimes. An implicated subject is neither a victim nor a perpetrator, but rather a participant in histories and social formations that generate the positions of victim and perpetrator, and yet in which most people do not occupy such clear-cut roles. Less “actively” involved than perpetrators, implicated subjects do not fit the mold of the “passive” bystander, either. Although indirect or belated, their actions and inactions help produce and reproduce the positions of victims and perpetrators. In other words, implicated subjects help propagate the legacies of historical violence and prop up the structures of inequality that mar the present; apparently direct forms of violence turn out to rely on indirection. Modes of implication—entanglement in historical and present-day injustices—are complex, multifaceted, and sometimes contradictory, but are nonetheless essential to confront in the pursuit of justice.3

With this modification of complicity into the broader sense of implication in mind, perhaps the present discussion on responsibility in the face of genocide can deepen yet further and adopt new vocabularies for the present day. Rothberg cautions, however, against thinking that being able to think or talk about implication in this way will automatically translate into action. Like we saw in chapters four and five, thinking and even dialogue alone cannot initiate change nor evoke justice.4 Is the language of implication or comparable constructions now an essential aspect of any thinking about political responsibility? Can it help unlock the paralyzing and ultimately self-serving sentiments of collective guilt (or innocence) that inhibit implicated subjects from even perceiving (i.e., participating in) the objective reality of devastation

3 Rothberg, *Implicated Subject*, 1–2. Rothberg names a number of influences other than Arendt for the notion of the “implicated subject,” including Primo Levi, Karl Jaspers, Simona Forti, Iris Marion Young, Jamaica Kincaid, Catherine Hall, Nicholas Draper, William Kentridge, Marceline Loridan-Ivens, and Hito Steyerl. However, Arendt plays a central role in the text and in the chapter of his earlier book, *Multidirectional Memory: Remembering the Holocaust in the Age of Decolonization* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2009), in which he brings Arendt into conversation with her contemporary, the anti-colonial thinker and politician Aimé Césaire (see chapter 2, “At the Limits of Eurocentrism: Hannah Arendt’s The Origins of Totalitarianism”).

and ruin, so tangible to those pushed to the margins of empires? I will carry these questions with me into whatever comes next.
References


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