

## IX—KANT AND ARENDT ON BARBARIC AND TOTALITARIAN EVIL

HELGA VARDEN

This paper starts by sketching Kant's four ideal legal and political conditions—'anarchy', 'despotism', 'republic', and 'barbarism'—before showing their usefulness for analysing different political forces that may operate in any given society. Contrary to the common tendency in political philosophy to view our societies as either in the so-called 'state of nature' ('anarchy') or in 'civil society' ('republic'), I propose that we might find ourselves in societies where aspects or 'pockets' of our lives are subject to any one of these (anarchic, despotic, republican, and barbaric) political forces. I then combine Kant's ideas on barbaric evil with Arendt's ideas on totalitarian evil, which gives us a fourfold conception of political evil. This fourfold distinction is then used to identify some types and patterns of destructive political forces as they occur in actual, historical societies, such as racist, sexist, or heterosexual violence and oppression.

### I

*Introduction.* This paper brings together and develops ideas from two Königsbergers—Immanuel Kant and Hannah Arendt—on the topic of the worst political evils, which Kant calls 'barbaric' and Arendt 'totalitarian'. Characteristic of all such political evil is that the legal-political institutions are used to facilitate or perpetrate wrongdoing to people subjected to their power. Both types of barbarism therefore involve—to use another of Arendt's phrases in a slightly revised way—violently denying someone else 'the right to have rights' to freedom in some existentially important regard (Arendt 1948, pp. 296–8). In addition, I propose that all barbarism involves state-facilitated or organized absence of law and freedom as well as the presence of violence that seeks to make its victims suffer

into numbness. Barbaric violence is therefore not striving to kill or enslave *as such* (though it often involves and leads to this too). Rather, barbaric violence ultimately strives to make human beings suffer so as to bring them down to a functioning level that may be described as existential numbness ('living dead'), which is why risking lethal danger or committing suicide can present as felt ways out for those subjected to it.

At the centre of barbaric violence, there is what Kant calls a 'depraved heart', or what Arendt describes as a striving to destroy human dignity in the name of protecting or realizing it. In *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1948), Arendt furthermore suggests that totalitarian political forces are ultimately impossible to understand by appeal to 'the rules of common sense and self-interest . . . [because they are forces] that look like sheer insanity' (1948, p. vii); they simply do not track 'humanly comprehensible motives' (p. ix). As we see below, although modern totalitarian barbarism took human evil to a new level (in terms of state organization and involvement), no barbaric violence ultimately makes any rational, let alone moral sense; barbarism always involves deeply self-deceived strivings to destroy human dignity. In fact, I show how Kant's account of evil helps us capture why and how barbaric violence is always both self-deceived—it aims at destroying human dignity in the name of protecting it—and so, as Arendt emphasizes, involves striving to destroy any truthful description of reality at all (Arendt 1948, p. 9). Barbarism announces itself in two ways: perpetrators of barbaric violence are always self-deceived in that they always do the awful things in the name or under the guise of the good, and barbarism always first appears in historical societies by some social group(s) becoming unprotected against or subjected to numbing violence. In its institution, the self-deception used in barbarism typically involves false descriptions of what is happening, of human nature, of law (justice), or of freedom, which is also why the social groups initially targeted tend to be characterized by histories of dehumanization and oppression.

More specifically, I propose that we can distinguish between four different types of barbaric evil, two of which may be called instances of 'pure' barbarism, while the other two may be labelled 'totalitarian' barbarism. I suggest that we place Kant's own examples of barbarism in the category of 'pure' barbarism, meaning that they involve the state denying some social groups the legal protection

needed to live safely as who they are in private and public spaces. We can also develop Kant's idea by arguing that pure barbarism comes in two forms, depending on whether the violence is merely legally permitted (passive) or legally required (active). Exploring these themes is the main focus of §II of the paper. In contrast to 'pure' barbarism, I argue in §III, 'totalitarian' barbarism not only legally permits or requires violence against some groups of people, but actively and self-deceptively deploys its legal-political institutions to terrorize segments of its own population or (de jure or de facto) stateless or other people under its coercive control, and thereby involves attacking the legal-political institutions themselves. Totalitarian barbarism can also be seen as coming in both a passive and an active form. The passive form centrally involves state-organized, terrorizing absence of law and freedom, since it involves states refusing or stripping some people of their status as citizens or as persons having legal standing to get state protection (and potentially citizenship)—and leaving them with no protection and nowhere safe to go to avoid the dehumanizing violence. The second, active and even starker form of totalitarian barbarism involves states using the legal-political system to terrorize a (or some) segment(s) of its own population or stateless people(s) in a totalizing way. In the concluding section of the paper, I indicate how this analysis is useful to capture central features of actual historical societies—past and present.

## II

*Kant on Barbarism.* This section starts by briefly outlining Kant's idea of 'barbarism', including how it differs from the three other possible legal-political conditions, namely, 'anarchy', 'despotism' and 'republic'.<sup>1</sup> These ideas are then used to identify different ways in which social groups can be deprived of their basic rights in actual historical societies. Kant's own examples of barbarism can be seen as pockets of 'pure' barbarism—a category that can be used to capture other historically significant examples too. Finally, Kant's account of the predisposition to good in human nature (of 'animality', 'humanity' and 'personality') is, I suggest, particularly useful to

<sup>1</sup> I explore these four conditions—including some interpretative-philosophical puzzles—in Varden (forthcoming).

explain why and how barbaric violence fundamentally aims at numbing people's embodied, social, rational and moral being.

2.1. *From Legal-Political Ideas to Analysing Actual Historical Societies.* Kant proposes that three principles constitute our possible legal-political conditions: law ('*Gesetz*'), violence ('*Gewalt*'), and freedom ('*Freiheit*'). These three principles, he continues, can be combined in four different ways, yielding four distinct (a priori) ideas of legal-political conditions: 'anarchy', which is constituted by the principles of freedom and (provisional) law, but not the principle of violence; 'despotism', which combines law and violence and excludes freedom; 'republic', which involves all three principles (law, violence and freedom); and finally, 'barbarism', which is a condition of violence and neither freedom nor law (*A*, 7:330-1).<sup>2</sup> Much of the secondary literature on Kant over the past couple of decades has discussed how to understand Kant's claim that the postulate of public right—namely, the command that if one cannot avoid living side by side with others, one must enter rightful conditions by establishing a public authority—'can be explicated analytically from the concept of right in external relations, in contrast with violence (*violentia*)' (*MM*, 6:307). The related (liberal republican) line of interpretation I find most persuasive maintains that Kant's analysis of interactions in the state of nature shows that if private individuals interacting in this condition enforce their innate or private rights against one another, there will be an ineradicable element of unjustifiable violence.<sup>3</sup> The only way to eliminate this element of violence is by postulating a *public* person as the omnilateral legal-political institutional means through which interacting persons make their rights enforceable against one another. Hence public right is the establishment of rightful (public) uses of coercion ('*Zwang*') that forcefully limits possible interactions, is fused with laws and freedom, and is the contrary to violence (force that aims at

<sup>2</sup> Throughout this paper, Kant's works are cited by volume and page number of the standard Prussian Academy pagination, and also by the following abbreviations: *A*: *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View*; *GW*: *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*; *MM*: *The Metaphysics of Morals*; *R*: *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason*; *CPrR*: *Critique of Practical Reason*; and *TP*: 'On the Common Saying: That May Be Correct in Theory, But It Is of No Use in Practice'. *A* appears in Kant (2007) and *R* in Kant (1996b), while the rest are in Kant (1996a). Full publication details are given in the list of references.

<sup>3</sup> For more on these interpretative traditions, see the 'Introduction to Part II' of Varden (2020).

limiting human interactions but isn't fused with laws and freedom). This is why Kant argues that internally (domestically) a republic solely prevents or 'hinders hindrances to freedom under universal' law by subjecting all domestic interactions to coercive laws consistent with and required by each person's innate right to freedom (*MM*, 6:237). And it is why the republic's uses of 'force' ('Kraft') or 'power' ('Macht') are correctly described as 'coercion' ('Zwang') that is 'rightful' ('rechtlich'), because it lets laws of freedom (law and freedom) set terms of the coercive framework within which people can peacefully interact—and hence Kant contrasts the republic's use of coercion with mere 'violence' ('Gewalt') (*MM*, 6:231).

What about the three other possible conditions, anarchy, despotism and barbarism? Anarchy is defined as the absence of violence and the presence of freedom and (provisional)<sup>4</sup> law, meaning that in the best of scenarios, all we can achieve is the absence of injustice and the presence of (provisional) law and freedom. Moreover, anarchy is 'devoid of justice' in this analysis (*MM*, 6:312), because although the principles of freedom govern interactions (provisionally just laws that specify the a priori principles of innate and private right), they are not yet rightfully enforceable (conclusively just laws) (*MM*, 6:256–7, 6:305–13). In despotism, by contrast, there is law and violence—a monopoly on force used against others that is regulated by positive laws—but no freedom, since these laws are not grounded on universal principles of freedom but on contingent laws (such as various religious laws or laws grounded on a particular cultural interpretation). Hence, in this condition, there will be either injustice (in so far as these despotic laws are enforced) or prudential obligations (in so far as the positive laws concur with one's conception of the good or happiness). Finally, under barbarism there is only violence and no law or freedom, and hence there is necessarily destruction of embodied, social, rational being. In such a condition, humanity cannot be realized in its fullest form, namely to act freely in morally responsible ways (autonomy). To set ends in a morally responsible way is to set ends of one's own in accordance with laws one gives oneself either on one's own (virtue) or together with others (right).

The above ideas enable us to identify three principled ways in which we can find ourselves without a legally recognized and

<sup>4</sup> Unless we think of law here as provisional law, these four conditions become inconsistent with Kant's general theory of right. For more on this, see Varden (forthcoming).

politically protected right to freedom, and so without political obligations (republic). First, we may choose to live in solitude or together with others in a peaceful state of nature (with no legal-political institutions whatsoever), where there happen to be no uses of coercion and no political obligations (anarchy). Second, we can find ourselves in a condition where the state's laws are not grounded on principles of freedom but on some conception of the good life, and consequently where there are no political (but only prudential) obligations (despotism). Third, we can find ourselves in a condition where there is neither law nor freedom governing our interactions, and so there is only violence. In such a condition, there are no political obligations, and prudential obligations only reference trying to stay alive (barbarism).

Notice, however, that these ideas (of anarchy, despotism, barbarism and republic) are exactly that: they are *ideas* of reason; they do not describe complete, actual legal-political realities in the world or historical societies. The world we live in—in historical time—is much messier; actual historical societies are not identical to idealized societies that are constituted by any one of these ideas of reason. These ideas are therefore useful, not because each accurately describes a different, particular historical society, but because they can capture actual political forces at work as well as *ideals* that are regulating or are supposed to regulate how we actually go about things in a society. It follows that actual societies may have all these forces operating at the same time—where different groups participate in and are subjected to different forces simultaneously—which is one reason why realizing good, just historical societies is so extraordinarily difficult. Let me explain.<sup>5</sup>

To start, if people do not want to enter civil society as they would rather, and are able to, live peacefully together or in solitude in the state of nature, then they are not thereby wronging one another, since no coercion (let alone violence) occurs. This is the case only if

---

<sup>5</sup> I started developing this proposal for how to use the four ideas of reason when engaging historical societies in Varden (2020). Although the focus and point are different, I believe this analysis is consistent with Crenshaw's (1989), Pateman's (1988), and Mills's (1997) idea that because much ideal theory focuses only on describing what an ideally just society looks like, it never makes it to the question of what our actual, oppressive societies look like. Hence the philosophical practice of only doing ideal theory serves to unintentionally legitimize our actual societies. I also hope that this essay counts as an instance of what we, with Arendt and Mills, can call assuming responsibility for being 'pariahs' or 'outcast' (Arendt) or for 'occupying liberalism' (Mills) in academic philosophy.

no one uses coercion or violence and everyone happens to agree on all matters of interaction, and hence no (reasonable or unreasonable) conflicts actually arise. However, if these people choose to stay in the state of nature *or* if disagreements do occur and the parties choose to fight it out *or* if one party wants to enter civil society to secure their rights and the other refuses to, then there is wrongdoing. In the first two scenarios they do not wrong each other, Kant argues, but they commit a formal wrong—a wrong in the highest degree—by refusing to interact rightfully, namely, by refusing to establish a public rule of laws of freedom by means of which they can or do regulate their interactions and settle their conflicts (*MM*, 6:307–8. ). In the third scenario, the one who is refusing to enter civil society and instead insists on fighting it out violently is also wronging the other person (committing both a formal *and* a material wrong).

In our actual, historical societies and as a general rule, however, this is not how we experience anarchy. Rather, in our historical societies, sometimes we find pockets of anarchism when some people do not want to take part in civil society. For example, people sometimes choose to live together in voluntary non-conventional communes and do not want to have the law involved in their internal workings. At other times—and probably more common—some social group is denied entrance to civil society in central regard(s) by being denied access to some set(s) of laws as other citizens' equals. For example, Jewish communities legally required to live in ghettos and only permitted to hold certain types of jobs in Europe throughout early modern and modern times were denied access to civil society as other citizens' equals. Moreover, in so far as they were able to live together peacefully, their ghetto life could be described as anarchic and 'devoid of injustice'. In contrast, in so far as there were disputes among the people living in this community, any use of coercion to settle them would be at most provisionally just, which would happen in so far as principles of freedom were used to settle them. Also, because these Jewish populations were denied access to legal protection as others' equals, the state forced them to stay in this condition. Hence the people who participated in upholding or didn't resist that the rule of law functioned in this way did wrong in the highest degree and wronged the Jewish people formally and materially if they actively participated, and merely formally if they simply didn't have the power to actively resist.

Analogously, in so far as polyamorous or same-sex couples are denied the right to marry in the world today, they are denied

entrance into civil society with regard to their homes or their domestic relations with their partners. Again, the best they can do in such situations is to solve all problems of interaction amicably—to maintain a situation devoid of injustice—since they are denied access to the legal-political apparatus (family law) to settle disputes or find good ways of ending a relationship and going their separate ways. In response to this problem, if such outcast—what Arendt calls ‘pariah’—communities function well, they tend to be characterized by much welcoming affectionate love and care (communal spirit), less judgement, and a lack of political experience among its members. Consequently too, the process of obtaining more rights is commonly experienced by the members of such communities as involving losses of a kind described so well by Arendt when she talks fondly about the Jewish community in Königsberg where she grew up. In a spirit similar to Rousseau’s description of the transformation that happens with the establishment of morality as an orienting way for human beings,<sup>6</sup> Arendt argues that becoming an active participant in legal-political society or obtaining freedom (gaining rights and obtaining related political experience) has a price: it involves giving up something valuable, namely, some of the tolerant and welcoming affectionate love constitutive of well-functioning outcast (‘pariah’) societies.<sup>7</sup> Similar kinds of descriptions are also common among people who have lived in well-functioning, pariah LGBTQIA communities as they achieve rights to live and function in society at large as others’ equals, that becoming part of ‘the establishment’ involves an experience of communal loss. As Arendt says, freedom has its price.<sup>8</sup>

Despotism, by contrast, does not permit freedom, and hence the laws enforced are not founded on universal principles of freedom but on some particular, historical conception of the good life, such as is captured in a historical religion or a historical culture. Indeed, Kant thinks that historical societies tend to start with a good dose of despotism because

nature within the human being strives to lead him from culture to morality, and not (as reason prescribes) beginning with morality and its law, to lead him to a culture designed to be appropriate to morality.

<sup>6</sup> See Rousseau’s *Discourse on the Origins and Foundations of Inequality among Men* and *On the Social Contract*, both in [Rousseau \(2011\)](#).

<sup>7</sup> See Günter Gaus’s 1964 ‘Zur Person’ interview with Hannah Arendt: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dsolmQfVsO4&t=880s>.

<sup>8</sup> Again, see Gaus’s interview with Arendt.

This inevitably establishes a perverted tendency: for example, when religious instruction, which necessarily should be a *moral culture*, begins with *historical* culture, which is merely the culture of memory, and tries in vain to deduce morality from it. (A, 7:327-8 )

So, for example, in Arendt's childhood, not only was Königsberg German but the majority of the population self-identified as (predominantly Lutheran) Protestants belonging to the Evangelical Church of Prussia. Moreover, this most powerful of social group did not consider Jewish people 'proper' Germans since they were not Protestant (Lutheran) Christians, and the laws in place expressed this view too. This feature of Germany's legal-political system was despotic: instead of upholding the rule of law that considered all its subjects free and equal citizens, some were less equal than others. Correspondingly, within the Königsberg Jewish community coercion was used by Jewish leaders against its own members when their actions were deemed inconsistent with Jewish teachings; this was despotic in so far as they used a historical interpretation of the religion to decide what was permissible or impermissible behaviour.

To illustrate, part of the reason Arendt has quite fond memories from her childhood presumably tracks the fact that she was socially well-positioned in this society (given her family's standing in the Jewish community and her obvious intellectual abilities) and that her way of being was in conformity with its dominant social views. For example, a hypothetical lesbian, radical artist Arendt would likely have had fewer fond memories of her childhood since such a Hannah would have had to face enormous resistance from powerful forces in this conservative Jewish community.<sup>9</sup> Analogously, in LGBT+ communities, there tend to be internal social norms that ultimately set the parameters for what is and is not permitted—something that the socially powerful members have a lot of say about. To extend the example, to date, some ways of being sexual or gendered—such as being transsexual or bisexual—have been even more difficult than being gay or lesbian, which appears internally connected to the fact that much socially powerful queer theory insists that our sexual or gendered identities are constructed all the way down. (After all, on such theories, it is hard to make philosophical

<sup>9</sup> Indeed, in the Gaus interview, Arendt reveals her lack of appreciation for most non-traditional ways of being a woman, though she also comes across as a little uncomfortable with her own views.

sense of being transsexual or bisexual.) Moreover, and as I will come back to later in the paper, one of the disheartening characteristics of our species is that being seriously oppressed and violated in some regard does not entail that we will not oppress and violate others.

What these examples reveal is that some of the existing states in the world are described by pockets of despotism. Perhaps they (*de facto* or *de jure*) require public officials to be members of a particular religion or public schools to teach a particular religion. For example, although only *de facto* (and not *de jure*), it appears practically impossible for a non-Christian to become President of the USA today.<sup>10</sup> Similarly, legal-political systems that only recognize the right to public holidays as determined by one or two particular religions are, in these regards, despotic. Living within the boundaries of these despotic laws may be prudentially obligatory for all—in that acting contrary to them is too dangerous or because doing so happens to be consistent with obtaining happiness as one understands it—but they cannot morally oblige all since they are inconsistent with treating and respecting everyone as free and equal under the law. More generally, despotic societies are more harmonious in so far as the people living there are largely in agreement in their conception of what a good human life (happiness) looks like. Also, since culture has a strong emotional pull on us, we are likely to start forming historical legal-political communities with people with whom we share a basic cultural outlook. Yet such societies remain despotic because such legal-political institutions are inconsistent with the idea of a republic, where the public authority is established and entrusted to posit, apply and uphold laws that enable its citizens to interact as free and equal. Indeed, if Kant is right, the danger of despotism in a society never goes away because ‘*animality* ... [always] manifests itself earlier and, at bottom, more powerfully than pure *humanity*’ (which is what is realized in a ‘civil [republican] constitution’) and, combined with our ‘self-will’,<sup>11</sup> entails that we always have an ineradicable temptation to ‘break out in aversion towards ... [our] neighbor’ and

<sup>10</sup> For an overview over the religious affiliations of all the US Presidents, see <https://www.potus.com/presidential-facts/religious-affiliation/>. Of 531 members of the 117th Congress (2021), 468 (88.1%) are Christian, 33 (6.2%) are Jewish, 18 (3.4%) do not identify or refused to answer, and 12 (2.4%) identified as some other religion (<https://www.pewforum.org/2021/01/04/faith-on-the-hill-2021/>).

<sup>11</sup> Below I explain how ‘self-will’ here means our capacities for setting ends of our own and our social sense of self.

push our 'claim to unconditional freedom ... [to] not merely ... be independent of others, but even to be master over other beings who by nature are equal to [us]' (A, 7:327). We have, in other words, an ineradicable temptation to turn republican legal-political institutions into despotic ones, to make others behave in accordance with our conception of the good, all in the name of upholding republican institutions of freedom and equality.

Finally, barbarism, we remember, is the presence of violence and the absence of law and freedom. Kant argues that, just as the ever-present danger of despotism cannot be eradicated in historical societies, the threat of 'revolutionary barbarism'—the destruction of the public legal-political institutions as a whole—is always also present (A, 7:326). Moreover, as mentioned in the introduction, I believe we can develop Kant's analysis by first distinguishing between a passive and an active version of both 'pure' and 'totalitarian' barbarism. For now, the focus is only on 'pure' barbarism, where the distinction between its 'active' and 'passive' forms can be seen as tracking whether the violence against certain social groups is merely legally facilitated or also legally required. Given these distinctions, I propose that Kant's own examples of barbarism are of 'passive pure' barbarism. Those examples include multiple wives being kept in a sexualized 'kennel' or 'prison' (German: *Zwinger*) by their shared husband (A, 7:304), as well as punishment of unwed new mothers who commit infanticide in order to avoid social condemnation and of officers who can defend their honour only by risking their lives through deadly duelling (*MM*, 6:337). These passive, pure forms of barbaric laws, then, involve legal-political institutional frameworks that permit numbing violence by some groups of citizens against others without legal consequence. In my view, other historically prominent examples of passive, pure barbarism include various kinds of public shaming and other failures to legally and politically protect not only women but also sexual, gendered, disabled, racialized, ethnic, or religious minorities against violence by the corresponding majorities.

This passive version of 'pure' barbarism can, in turn, be distinguished from a starker, active form of pure barbarism according to which the legal-political institutions target groups of people in such a way that in order to stay safe they must hide who they are. For example, this public targeting of specific social groups includes so-called sodomy laws, laws that prohibit the exercise of one's religion, and laws that require women to wear or not wear specific kinds of

clothing.<sup>12</sup> Such pure barbarism is actively barbaric in that it involves using state power to go after women and various social minorities such that they cannot interact safely as who they are. Hence, in order to avoid violence, those facing it must hide who they are and behave in ways that appear to conform with the social norms dictated by the socially more powerful groups. Moreover, like the passive form, active pure barbarism also involves violence (and no law and freedom), but the active form is starker: it permits such unjustifiable violence to occur among social groups *at the same time* as it uses its monopoly of coercion to make it impossible to escape the violence, or it uses the state's legal-political institutions to violate specific members of the population in numbing ways.

*2.2 Barbarism's Inherent Self-Deception and Numbing Effects on Human Beings.* Before discussing totalitarian barbarism in the next section, let me address the question of why all forms of barbarism strive, not to enslave or kill as such, but to numb other human beings under the guise of the good. To do so, I first sketch important aspects of Kant's account of human nature that enable us to say something about the badness involved in denying others the possibility of realizing themselves well, and about why using violence to numb others can be both tempting for human beings and a serious, heinous wrong for which we are morally responsible.

Kant thinks that we have a threefold nature consisting of 'animality', 'humanity' and 'personality'. In contrast to his predecessors like Hobbes and Locke, who think *the* animalistic principle is self-preservation, Kant conceives of self-preservation as one of three conscious, natural drives constitutive of our animality. The two other animalistic drives, Kant argues, are the sex drive and the social drive for affectionate community. Each is one prong of the threefold predisposition to good in human nature, namely, the predisposition to animality. All three exist as conscious drives as soon as we are born, and they are fundamentally grounded in our natural 'vital force' (our embodied forcefulness). Moreover, each predisposition is

---

<sup>12</sup> Given the analytical framing of this paper, using the concept of law here can be misleading (in that it can easily be assimilated with despotism and not barbarism). Hence, notice that in important ways, these 'laws' don't function as proper laws. For example, sodomy 'laws' are characteristically sham laws, in that they are not upheld against all populations equally, but are used to target members of the LGBT+ community, and not all practices of sodomy (such as those practised by straight people).

enabled by a relational category of the understanding—namely, substance (self-preservation), causality (sex drive) and community (affectionate community)—which must here be understood teleologically, as orienting a newborn's ability to act in accordance with pleasures and pains, enabling it to function as a good, forceful whole. To illustrate, from the moment they are born, human babies preserve themselves by eating until they are full (until it is no longer pleasant to eat), they respond with pleasure to relatively gentle, small amounts of physical human touch (the sex drive), and they are comforted by being held close and talked to in loving, affectionate ways (community). These activities do not require reasoning as such, but they can be and are partially developed by means of associative thinking, which we see, for example, in how babies begin to associate certain smells and sounds with pleasures.

In addition, however, that (only) human babies scream when they are born, Kant proposes, can be explained philosophically only if we attribute an additional capacity for representation to human babies as compared to non-human animal newborns, namely, a frustration over not being able to act, to be free (*A* 7:268). With time, this rational capacity is the one that is developed, Kant famously argues, by humans learning to act on maxims (subjective rules of action) by means of which humans set ends of their own. (More on this shortly.) Within a short time, human babies will also start to interact with loved ones through smiling and crying, however. As the scream expresses pain (frustration at not being able to act) and the crying a need for togetherness (to restore the unity as experienced inside the womb), the smile reveals a social sense of self, and their smiles express their pleasant awareness of being seen by another and that the other is happy to be seen by them. Hence in contrast to Rousseau, who deems the social sense of self (*amour propre*) as originally only bad, Kant deems being seen by another as originally a good thing.

Both kinds of representation—of freedom and of a social sense of self—constitute the predisposition to humanity ('rationality'), or what Kant also refers to above (*A*, 7:327) as 'self-will'. Moreover, in order to develop this predisposition well, human beings need to develop their capacity to reason. In short, human babies must learn to set ends of their own by mastering acting on universalizable maxims—which requires reflective self-consciousness and mastering abstract concepts—and they must learn to manage social emotions that involve comparison, such as winning and losing, envy and

jealousy. Finally—and this is where Kant distinguishes himself from all his predecessors—in order to be able to act morally responsibly, human beings must learn to act as motivated by their practical reason. That is to say, they must be able to act as motivated by *moral* reasons, by whether or not a certain action is right or wrong, and this is difficult because our animality and ‘self-will’ develop earlier, and so easily and strongly motivate us. To put this point in Kantianese, to act morally responsibly is to act consistent with respect for, and in so far as possible supportive of, oneself and others as rational beings, as beings who have the capacity to set ends of their own, and who consequently must be treated as ends in themselves (not mere means) or as having dignity (a pricelessness). To be able to act as motivated by this ought—to do something *just because* it is the right thing to do and to refrain from doing something *just because* it would be wrong—is to have developed the third predisposition, namely, to personality (moral responsibility). Developing personality requires us not only to master reasoning but to heed what our reasoning says about the rightness or wrongness of an action (regardless of what we want to do). It requires us to develop our ‘moral vital force’. Consequently, it takes us (human beings) a long time to develop our animality, humanity and personality into an integrated whole for which we are able to assume moral responsibility. Moreover, this whole can be divided into two components: one component that constitutes our happiness (rational end-setting grounded on and consistent with our animality and humanity) and one that constitutes our morality (ensuring that our actions are consistent with and supportive of a moral world).<sup>13</sup> The highest good (aim) for us in actual, human lives is therefore to bring these two parts—happiness and morality—into as close a union as possible (*TP*, 8:279; *CPrR*, 5:110–15) and hence also to bring our ‘natural’ and our ‘moral’ vital forces into harmonious union.<sup>14</sup>

In addition to his idea of the predisposition to good, Kant’s theory of human nature contains an account of our propensity to evil. In short, on my preferred interpretation, Kant proposes that evil is something we bring upon ourselves through our capacity for choice (setting ends of our own). Evil is furthermore seen as coming in three

<sup>13</sup> See Kant (*R*, 6:26–8) for his account of the predisposition to good in human nature, and see [Varden \(2020\)](#) for my interpretation of his account.

<sup>14</sup> For an excellent interpretation of why Kant thinks that going about our lives in this way makes rational sense even when we deserve to be morally happy, but are not, see [Deligiorgi \(2020\)](#).

degrees—‘frailty’, ‘impurity’ and ‘depravity’—where moving from one degree to the next, from frailty to impurity or from impurity to depravity, means that we lose our way in life in significantly more complex ways (and, correspondingly, healing becomes more difficult subjectively). More specifically, frailty refers to an instance or an area of our life where we are likely to do wrong, impurity to an emotionally unstable pattern of motivations determining our actions, and depravity to a striving to weaken our subjective susceptibility to act morally (our moral force). Regarding the latter, Kant proposes that a depraved heart always involves adopting ‘evil maxims’ and ‘reversing the ethical order as regards the incentives of a *free* power of choice’ in a self-deceptive manner (since humans do not have a ‘diabolical’ will) (*R*, 6:29–30). A depraved heart, in other words, always involves acting on a non-moral motivation. Consequently, it becomes subjectively harder and harder to do the right thing (morally responsible exercises of freedom) as one strives only to do what makes one feel most happy or excited or powerful (perverted uses of freedom). Moreover, feeling the most happy or excited or powerful involves describing what one does by means of moralized language (doing bad or even awful things in the name of doing good, even heroic things).<sup>15</sup> Finally, both actions of frailty and of impurity can be undertaken in self-deceived or non-self-deceived ways, whereas a depraved heart always involves self-deception.

In light of the above, we can see how Kant combines his idea of a depraved heart with the vices that can be grafted onto the predisposition to humanity in order to identify ‘*diabolical vices*’, vices that capture the worst we humans can do (*R*, 6:27). Kant describes such diabolical destructive violence as rooted in an ‘anxious endeavor’ to obtain a ‘hateful superiority’ over others (*R*, 6:27). Moreover, he thinks diabolical vices can be called ‘vices of *culture*’, since they attach to the predisposition to humanity (end-setting and a social sense of self), and they are characterized by an ‘extreme degree of malignancy [, namely.] . . . a maximum of evil that surpasses humanity . . . e.g. in *envy, ingratitude, joy in others’ misfortune, etc.*’ (*R*, 6:27). In other words, these evils ‘surpass’ humanity in that they are not fully comprehensible by, as Arendt also says, common sense, rational self-interest, or humanly comprehensible motives. Hence these evils are

<sup>15</sup> See Kant (*R*, 6:28–45) for his account of the propensity to evil in human nature, and Varden (2020) for my fuller interpretation of his account.

at war with, or cannot sustain, human life in any sense of the word, as they are the (profoundly irrational) undoing of it. Important too as we set out to explore the nature of barbarism, notice Kant's proposal that 'An evil heart can coexist with a will which in the abstract is good. Its origin is the frailty of human nature, in not being strong enough to comply with its principles, coupled with its dishonesty' (*R*, 6:37). In other words, the first step towards depravity is always frailty—as this is the lowest level of evil—and it is always developed by giving up on the project of being truthful. Or to put the point from the other direction, evil always involves not knowing what or why one does what one does (*R*, 6:37), or what Kant elsewhere calls the duty to know one's heart (*MM*, 6:441).<sup>16</sup>

As we have seen, Kant thinks that trailing our animalistic drive and our drive for freedom is an anxiety—a 'self-will'—that makes it tempting for us to want to dominate others rather than to want to spend our energy on setting challenging and good ends of our own. Why is this the case? One reason is that our social sense of self involves a deep vulnerability because, in Kant's words, it makes it subjectively tempting for us to view ourselves as happy or unhappy *only* relative to how happy others are. And that makes it possible for us to feel happier simply because others are less happy, which also means we have a vulnerability to dislike or even hate others in so far as they are happy and to take pleasure in bringing others down (make them miserable). Moreover, as we saw, Kant proposes that this vulnerability can exist together with a generally or abstractly good heart, a heart that generally strives to do good. For example, as some of the writings on what DiAngelo (2018) has usefully called

<sup>16</sup> In my view, a brilliant recent dramatization of a depraved heart that is in the abstract good is the character Elena Richardson in *Little Fires Everywhere*, a TV miniseries based on Celeste Ng's novel of the same name. Richardson tells herself a story, according to which she is aiming at the good, but in fact she is fundamentally unable to be truthful. She doesn't know herself (her own heart), and she cannot bring herself to genuinely respect herself or others as having dignity, which gives itself expression in much racism, sexism and heterosexism, as well as much oppressive and damaging behaviour towards everyone around her—a realization she has at the end, where she argues that although it is the children who literally set their home on fire, ultimately it is she who has burned it down. In many ways, we can see the efforts of those who care about Ms Richardson as trying to make her be more truthful in her descriptions of herself, those around her, and her life in general. She is, in Kant's phrase, in the abstract good, but her lack of truthfulness makes it impossible for her to live in a good way (for herself, in relation to anyone else, or generally). The contrast to such a depraved heart (that is, in the abstract good) would be one that is not abstractly good, but bad or aimed at destruction of human dignity, such as that expressed in a white supremacist's characteristic thought and action.

‘white fragility’ emphasize, many white people who benefit from and participate in practices that uphold racialized hierarchies (without being generally upset about it or resisting how the related interactions proceed), upon reflection, firmly believe racism is bad. Similarly, one might point to how interactions that involve relating to other social groups as inferior to one’s own are often accompanied by the reflective thought that all social groups are equal. Kant argues that these are ways in which our depraved hearts operate. Indeed, we might add that we saw it in Kant himself: he harboured and expressed many racist, sexist and heterosexist<sup>17</sup> thoughts and feelings, and yet he was also deeply committed to understanding morality in terms of freedom and equality. It is, in other words, very tempting to have the world function in such a way that regardless of what we do or do not do, we are still better (off) and have more power than others, just by virtue of our (often inherited) social identities.

To see this from another angle, when we are unsuccessful at setting and achieving ends of our own, it becomes tempting not to try harder, but instead to focus our energy on having others do it for us. However, such low self-esteem also opens up a much worse temptation, namely, to simply start channeling our energy towards bringing others down psychologically (so that they don’t feel good about their own accomplishments) or doing what we can to make sure that they fail too. In fact, such a depraved point of view will see as threatening any expression of independent spontaneity—of flourishing animalism, humanity or personality. That is to say, for someone who has lost their way like this, the very fact that there is expression of another’s independent being—of flourishing animalistic life, of freedom, of a healthy sense of self, or of moral care—is experienced as upsetting (anxiety-inducing) by a depraved heart; the drive of such a heart is to crush any such spontaneous—happy or moral—expressions. And to do that, one needs to make the others suffer by making them focus their energy and attention on not expressing themselves spontaneously in independent ways at all, and instead act so as to appear to exist only to affirm one’s own sense of self. In other words, the fundamental striving of diabolical evil is ultimately to make others exist as the living dead, the residue of persistent numbing violence.

---

<sup>17</sup> In Kant’s case, his heterosexism probably also expresses self-hatred. For more on this, see [Varden \(2020\)](#).

Yet another way to see this complex irrational side of ours begins by noting the following: to create something that is truly good or right or beautiful—to create being—is difficult (even if deeply meaningful and satisfying). In contrast, to destroy things (destroy being) is relatively easy. Hence we are liable to go for the latter—to feel powerful by destroying or belittling what others are or make—instead of trying for the former. To express this point in an even more abstract way, being necessarily precedes non-being. That is, only if something exists can we destroy it, and to destroy something is not to make something else, though we are tempted to act as if this were the case because destroying something can create a strong sense of self, a subjective sense of being very powerful. People who do horrible things to others, for example, are liable to present themselves as equally or more impressive than those who are creating things: sexing up wrongdoing and wrongdoers is a real temptation for us. To use a famous illustration in the Kant literature, Kant argues that stealing presupposes property, in that we can only steal if there is something to be stolen; a maxim of stealing cannot hold as a universal law, whereas a maxim of property can. Stealing, therefore, cannot be a principle of reason—of being—as it is inherently parasitic on the principle of property. These two principles—property and stealing—cannot take each other's place; the latter presupposes the former, but not vice versa. Only property is constitutive of rational being—something that is—stealing is not (as it only aims at destroying rational being or something that is).<sup>18</sup>

Let me illustrate this also with regard to the three degrees of evil. On a bad day, I may, for example, respond with no interest or a complete lack of appreciation to something beautiful a friend shows me. Usually, I respond appropriately and don't find it hard to do so, but today I'm grumpy and so I fail, and I hurt my friend. This is frailty. Alternatively, I may have let myself develop a patterned, emotional problem with feeling envy. Now, whether or not I respond appropriately to my friends' beautiful creations is a rather accidental affair since it always depends on how good I feel about myself. This is impurity. Both of these ways of acting may or may not involve self-deception. With frailty, if I am self-deceived, I may tell myself that my friend is inconsiderate in showing me the beautiful thing exactly today (since, surely, she must/ought to know that this

<sup>18</sup> For example, see Kant's discussion of universalizable maxims (GW, 4:402).

is a day when I need some serious TLC). If not self-deceived, then I may realize that my emotions are very unruly right now, but even so I yield to the temptation to treat my friend badly. Similarly, with impurity, I may or may not be aware that I have a problem with envy—and being unaware (self-deceived) is worse, in the sense of harder to fix. Finally, I may have developed a depraved heart, in which case exactly how I respond to my friend's art is always tailored to what will maximize my sense of self in the moment. If it will make me feel powerful and excited by belittling her art, then that's what I will do, but if it feels good to charm her with compliments, then that is what I will do. What I will not do is to strive to make sure that I am around my friend and her art in a way that expresses my deep appreciation of and respect for her and her art—and regardless of how I act, I am never bothered that perhaps I acted wrongly (unlovingly and disrespectfully). Realizing my own ill-treatment of others and the reasons for it is humbling—and being humbled is exactly what I strive to avoid; after all, all of this bad behaviour comes exactly from a place of low self-esteem, of putting others down because I feel bad about myself and I desperately want to avoid that feeling. In the *Anthropology*, Kant relatedly argues that treating others in this way is arrogance, which he defines as 'the unjustified demand on another person that he *despise* himself in comparison to others ... [And] such a thought cannot enter the head of anyone except one who feels ready to debase himself' (A, 7:273; see also MM, 6:465-6).

If we now return to the above examples of pure barbarism, we can see how they all involve strivings to numb others, something that is only possible in so far as our own pleasures and pains are, in some regard, out of balance due to a lack of both truthfulness and a healthy sense of self. Correspondingly, our susceptibility to moral feeling (our moral vital force) is weak. This analysis fits well with Kant's examples of sexualized prisons or kennels for women, women who face a condition of either social annihilation or infanticide, and soldiers who must either face the lethal threat of a duel or be socially shamed. In all these cases, the social forces and the legal-political institutions are so arranged that some people (the many wives, the women who get pregnant outside of wedlock, the insulted soldiers) must not affirm themselves as free and equal relative to members of other social groups (the husband, the married people, the other soldiers) or they will face extreme social consequences. If they do affirm

themselves as free and equal, they will be subjected to coercion or, ultimately, violence aimed at numbing this desire to behave in ways that express themselves as full of vitality (animality), as free to set their own ends honorably (humanity)—and with the presumption of moral responsibility (personality). And so choosing the extreme becomes viewed as a possible, albeit terrible, way out, namely infanticide, becoming a sheer provider of sexual services, or accepting the duel. As mentioned, I believe that other barbaric ways in which women as well as sexual, gendered, ethnic, racialized or religious minorities have often been or are being treated are similar in that the oppressive forces strive to numb them, to threaten members of these groups to be ashamed of their own animalistic embodiment, to view themselves as not entitled to be as free and honorable as others, and as not capable of moral responsibility. And there simply is no moral, good way out for them.

Hence such barbaric legal-political systems either facilitate the practice of non-oppressed members of society to act coercively or violently (without legal consequence) as far as necessary to keep these people numb in their expressions (passive pure barbarism) or involve actively using the legal-political institutions to make people hide who they are or their defining behaviours and practices (active pure barbarism). Ultimately, such oppression strives to make others feel and behave as if they do not have dignity—as beings who do not set ends of their own and who do not deserve to be treated with respect—and this is done by attacking any self-assertion of another, whether animalistic, social, free or moral, that reveals a presumption of a right to consider themselves as valuable and as equal. And the only way to explain this philosophically goes via a lack of truthfulness and a lack of a stable social sense of self for the oppressing people. It is this toxic mix that allows this destructive anxiety to get hold of the legal-political institutions through self-deception. After all, such destruction is not the declared, intentional aim of the legal-political institutions; this destruction is done in the name of the good and justice. Consequently, acting in this way is possible only if we have weakened our susceptibility to moral feeling by orienting towards ourselves and others without a fundamental commitment to truthfulness and dignity. And weakening our susceptibility to act in ways respectful of others as our equals is achieved by having dehumanized them, by having told oneself a story according to which they are perverted or not as human as we are. (More on this

below.) In so doing, in a Kantian analysis, those who dehumanize fail to heed their conscience (*MM*, 6:400-1), because conscience is understood as the awareness of ‘an *internal court* in the human being (“before which his thoughts accuse or excuse one another”)’ (*MM*, 6:438). And just like moral feeling (our susceptibility to morality’s commands), our conscience is a feature of ours that we cannot destroy but only weaken significantly by developing certain patterns of thoughtless feeling (affect) and hateful thought (passion) that makes it easier to block it or feel it only weakly (respectively) (*MM*, 6:400-1). And it is, ultimately, because we cannot destroy our conscience—as it is enabled by our ability to use practical reason and so to be morally responsible for our actions—that we are responsible for our wrongdoing, including awful, heinous wrongdoing. We could have done better; we always did have resources internal to ourselves that we chose not to use but to block or had numbed when we engaged in the wrongdoing. Wronging others is always also to wrong ourselves and comes from places of emotional damage.

Notice too that we can now explain why it is the case that truly awful wrongdoing always involves self-deception. That is to say, when we do awful things to others, we are self-deceived in that we describe the situation incorrectly. Typically, the language used involves dehumanization, meaning that we describe the social groups as, somehow, perverted or evil human beings. Often when we do, we describe others in animalistic terms that makes them more like animals or also as perverted animals—as too and wrongly self-concerned (for instance, as secretly and conspiratorially trying to pervert, destabilize, or take over the world), as too sexual (really liking sex) or liking sex wrongly (such as by not liking submissive sex or by liking non-straight sex), or as too and wrongly affectionate (as incapable of reasoning). The reason why we do this is because of how our reasoning powers work. In so far as we involve our reasoning powers at all (and don’t block them by acting in affective, feeling ways)—which we always do in barbaric violence, as it is sustained violence aimed at numbing others—the way our reasoning powers track the fundamental distinction between being and non-being entails that when we act destructively, we bring our minds around by describing ourselves or others as if we or they are perverted—we or they are non-being or trying to destroy being—and hence are subjected to ‘corrective’ uses of force (uses that protect being). The more self-deceived we are—so that the more barbaric our wrongdoing is

and the more depraved our hearts are—the more we speak of ourselves and our projects as expressing great moral heroism; indeed, even appealing to being itself ('God') is something we are liable to do. Correspondingly, being subjected to terrible evil is commonly experienced as involving both failing fundamentally to uphold dignity in our interactions with others *and* as requiring us to hold onto ourselves by appealing to our dignity, understood as something we have in virtue of being a human being and which no one can take away.<sup>19</sup>

### III

*Totalitarian Barbarism.* Turning to totalitarian barbarism, my proposal is that totalitarian barbarism presupposes or necessarily comes after pure barbarism in historical time and that the main difference between them concerns the way in which legal-political institutions are used as means of violent wrongdoing. In so far as actual states are characterized by pockets of pure barbarism, they legally permit or require numbing violence against certain social groups. In contrast, actual states characterized by totalitarian violence use the legal-political institutions to attack the legal-political institutions themselves—participate in their own destruction—by making them deprive groups of subjects of their basic rights and subject them to totalizing violence under the guise of upholding law and freedom. Hence totalitarian barbarism has the power to destroy the entire legal-political system since it involves using the institutions as the means of their own destruction. Where pure barbarism facilitates the use of violence that strives to destroy persons as who they are in some basic regard (for example, sexual, gender or religious identities), totalizing barbarism actively uses violence to undermine the idea that persons, as such, have a right to exist at all—and in so doing, totalitarianism turns the violence into a destruction of the legal-political system as such.

Totalitarian violence also comes in two forms. One is a passive form that can be described as a state-organized, terrorizing absence of law and freedom since it involves states refusing or stripping some people of status as citizens or as persons having legal standing to get

---

<sup>19</sup> For some powerful accounts of this struggle, see Douglass (1855), Améry (2009), Brison (2011), Kashua (2016), and Ghamari (2016).

state protection (and potentially citizenship) and leaving them with nowhere good to go; they are, as Arendt says, denied the ‘right to have rights’ (Arendt 1948, pp. 296–8). Historical examples<sup>20</sup> include Norway’s original constitution of 1814, according to which Jews and Jesuits were not permitted to enter the territory, and European states’ treatment of the Roma people in modern times. They also include cases where states have stripped some of their citizens of citizenship, such as Nazi Germany’s stripping its Jewish population of their citizenship, and the UK’s stripping segments of its (especially Caribbean) population of their right to citizenship (the ‘Windrush scandal’). Passive, totalitarian barbarism also includes states that have or are denying refugees a safe haven, such as European states’ denial of entry to stateless people after the First World War, and many states’ current denial of entrance for stateless people and refugees into their territory, which leaves them with no safe place to be or go.

The second, active, and even starker form of totalitarian barbarism involves a state using its legal-political system to terrorize a (or some) segment(s) of its own population, stateless people(s), or peoples under its de facto control in a totalizing way. Historical examples of this starkest form include European colonialization, Antebellum slavery in the United States, Western countries’ schools for indigenous people’s children in the twentieth century, apartheid South Africa’s treatment of its non-white, especially Black populations, Nazi Germany’s concentration death camps for Jewish people, the disabled, the Roma people, LGBT+, and various states’ historical terrorizing treatment of indigenous peoples, states’ historical uses of mental hospitals to ‘medically treat’ LGBT+ persons and ‘loose’ (sexually ‘promiscuous’) women, current Black mass incarceration in the USA, the USA’s current separation and incarceration of refugees and immigrants’ children, European current refugee camps in Southern Europe, some of Israel’s military engagements with Palestinians and in the Palestinian territories, US prison facilities at Guantanamo Bay, and China’s Xinjiang ‘re-education camps’ for its Muslim populations. This last, starkest form of totalitarian barbarism, as mentioned above, has the potential to bring the entire legal-political system into total self-destruction since these legal-political practices are at war

<sup>20</sup> I use the examples here to illustrate the general principle, not as an exhaustive list. My knowledge of the history of various states around the world is insufficient to give representative examples from around the globe.

with the foundational principles of justice. Consequently, once these legal-political violences set the framework within which everything else functions, the legal-political system is brought into active self-destruction. Moreover, because it is a self-deceived project of destruction, it is not accidental that as totalitarian violent forces become increasingly totalizing, the official institutions increasingly become a public sham whose main purpose is to create a sense of normalcy in the world while the real uses of state force become hidden in a violently destructive and increasingly more powerful secret police and military forces. The first time we saw this happen was in Nazi Germany and Stalinist USSR: the Nazi death camps and Stalin's genocide of millions of their own people by means of its own legal-political institutions and on its own territory are logical outcomes of such state-organized, self-deceived self-destruction.

#### IV

*Concluding Remarks.* In the ways indicated above, the theoretical resources left us by Kant and Arendt are useful for capturing some of the moral psychological and phenomenologically patterned aspects of both dehumanizing oppression and violence. Let me close by noting some ways in which the above analysis provides us with philosophical resources for speaking to emotional challenges facing us in so far as we live within emotionally stunted and stunting legal-political institutional frameworks.

To start, the above analysis provides us with theoretical resources with which we can give philosophical accounts of why and how living in legal-political conditions that facilitate barbarism tend to be emotionally stunting. They can capture why the repercussions of these barbaric wrongdoings live on as intergenerational trauma in the families of those subjected to the wrongdoing, in the families of those actively resisting it, in the families of the wrongdoers, and in the societies of all involved, and why it is typically truly difficult to stop the resulting patterns of self-destructive and other emotionally arrested or destructive behaviours in the next generations. After all, these behaviours were originally triggered in efforts to survive lethal dangers (survivors and resistance fighters) or to self-deceptively abandon human dignity as the fundamental orienting principle of how one goes about one's life (wrongdoers). These behaviours and

reactive patterns are neither easy to control nor easy to manage by reflective cognitive powers, since they in part function at the merely reflexive level (survivors) *or* are deeply self-deceived (wrongdoers).

In addition, notice that all barbaric violence starts as ‘pockets’ of barbarism in historical societies and is self-deceived in that its legal-political institutions are used to create the absence of protection or the destruction of humanity (law and freedom) in the name of protecting or enabling it. In other words, barbarism always involves ‘normalized’, yet fundamentally perverted and self-deceived, uses of law and freedom. Kant’s account of the propensity to evil helps us see different ways in which people can be tempted to participate in oppression and wrongdoing, and to see a distinction between formal and material wrongs, to capture some of the moral complexity facing those subjected to inescapable wrongdoing. Moreover, the active, stark form of totalitarian barbarism has the potential to destroy the entire legal-political system because the actual uses of violence are self-deceptively attacking the institutions of law and freedom—the very notion of human dignity as our fundamental orienting moral force—domestically (which happened in apartheid South Africa and the Antebellum South) or in other countries (which happened in European colonialism in Africa) or the world (which happened in Nazi Germany and Stalinist USSR). If these destructive forces are not stopped—by the civil war and later civil rights movements in the US, by the eradication of apartheid in South Africa, by the Allies in the Second World War—then that legal-political system becomes untenable. Paradoxically, therefore, although barbarism always involves attacking socially weak groups by state (passive or active) means, once it transforms into its starker totalitarian forms, it is either stopped or it will destroy the legal-political institutions from within. As Arendt told us in 1943, ‘The comity of the European peoples went to pieces when, and because, it allowed its weakest member to be excluded and persecuted’ (Arendt 1943, p. 274). Which is not to say that those who face the less stark versions of barbarism are facing something easy. Bar On reminds us of this point in her work on fascism by emphasizing that, regardless of which version of it—‘lite’ ones or not—‘There is, of course, nothing lite about it for those who are its targets’ (Bar On 2019, p. 12).

Finally, even if the starkest totalitarian forces are stopped, this does not mean that society automatically moves on without barbaric violence. Because barbarism is only possible against a background of

serious dehumanization of some social groups by others, pockets of passive totalitarian or pure barbarism typically remain even after state-organized, active totalizing barbarism is defeated. That is to say, the Second World War stopped Nazi Germany's totalitarian project; European colonialization ended; the US Civil War ended legalized slavery; apartheid South Africa fell; women and sexual and gendered minorities are slowly gaining rights many places in the world. And yet it would be plainly wrong to claim an end to pockets of barbaric violence and oppression of Jewish people, women, racialized groups, polyamorous and LGBTQIA communities, religious groups, or ethnic groups even after the end of these important active, state-organized uses of totalitarian violence. Europe continues to struggle with serious racism—including anti-Semitism (now against both Jewish and Muslim populations)—and in recent years, refugees are held in internment camps by individual states or in Europe-organized ones in the south. LGBTQIA, the Roma people, and disabled people did not obtain equal rights (*de jure* or *de facto*) after the Second World War; they still haven't in many European countries. The US is still torn apart by and unable to overcome deep social and institutional dysfunctions involving barbaric racist violence, as revealed by horrific statistics in relation to Black mass incarceration and police violence against Black populations, and the extraordinary lack of non-white people in powerful public and private institutions. And if all of this were not sufficiently sad, utterly disheartening is the fact that social groups that really do know—either themselves or their recent ancestors—the pains and suffering involved in being dehumanized, can themselves engage in the same or similar treatment of other social groups or sub-groups within their own populations. For example, some of Israel's engagements in the Palestinian territories, especially in relation to the expansive settlements and Gaza, remove any delusion that knowing barbaric violence in the first person as such entails that we will not engage in any kind of it ourselves. Conversely, some Muslims, including Palestinians, do not focus their anger at Israel's oppressive and unjustifiable policies against Palestinians, but instead convert their frustration into violent anti-Semitism. The statistics on barbaric, including sexualized, violence against women and sexual or gendered minorities, including internally to otherwise oppressed societies, such as inside African American or Latinx populations in the US or among Black populations in South Africa, are similarly utterly

disheartening. One last example: some feminists oppress and harass some women, such as women who don't fit their conceptions of what 'proper' womanhood is. Traditionally, the main target has been women who are very much on the femme side of things and women sex workers, while most recently their main target has been women who are trans. The above account can speak to all of this, to how being subjected to horrific dehumanizing violence does not in itself result in wisdom around these tremendously difficult aspects of human life and why the truthfulness and resulting transformation required for such wisdom to arise are such important and incredible human achievements.<sup>21</sup>

*Department of Philosophy*  
*College of Liberal Arts and Sciences*  
*University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign*  
200 Gregory Hall  
810 S. Wright St, MC-468  
Urbana, IL 61801  
USA  
*hvarden@illinois.edu*

#### REFERENCES

- Améry, Jean 2009: *At the Mind's Limits: Contemplations by a Survivor on Auschwitz and Its Realities*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Arendt, Hannah 1943: 'We Refugees'. In Jerome Kohn and Ron H. Feldman (eds.), *The Jewish Writings*, pp. 264–74. New York: Schocken Books, 2008.
- 1948: *The Origins of Totalitarianism*. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1973.
- Bar On, Bat-Ami 2019: 'But Is It Fascism?' *Journal of Social Philosophy*, 50(4), pp. 407–24.
- Brisson, Susan 2011: *Aftermath: Violence and the Remaking of a Self*. Princeton, nj: Princeton University Press.
- Crenshaw, Kimberlé 1989: 'Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist

<sup>21</sup> Thanks to Lucy Allais, Lisa Chason, Katerina Deligiorgi, Alzbeta Hajkova, Guy Longworth, Eric Miller, Peter Niesen, Martin Sticker, Daniel Peres, Shelley Weinberg, and the audiences at the Aristotelian Society, AMINTAPHIL, the NAKS Biannual conference, and the Purdue Post-Kantian Bioethics Conference.

- Theory and Antiracist Politics'. *University of Chicago Legal Forum*, 1989(1), pp. 139–67.
- Deligiorgi, Katerina 2020: 'Kant, Schiller, and the Idea of a Moral Self'. *Kant-Studien*, 111(2), pp. 303–22.
- DiAngelo, Robin 2018: *White Fragility: Why It's So Hard for White People to Talk about Racism*. Boston, ma: Beacon Press.
- Douglass, Frederick 1855: *My Bondage and My Freedom*. Excerpted in John Stauffer and Henry Gates Louis, Jr. (eds.), *The Portable Frederick Douglass*, pp. 101–39. New York: Penguin, 2016.
- Ghamari, Behrooz 2016: *Remembering Akbar: Inside the Iranian Revolution*. New York: or Books. reduce
- Kant, Immanuel 1785: *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*. In Kant 1996a, pp. 37–108.
- 1788: *Critique of Practical Reason*. In Kant 1996a, pp. 133–271.
- 1793a: *Religion with the Boundaries of Mere Reason*. Translated by George di Giovanni in Kant 1996b, pp. 39–215.
- 1793b: 'On the Common Saying: That May Be Correct in Theory, But It Is of No Use in Practice'. In Kant 1996a, pp. 273–309.
- 1797: *The Metaphysics of Morals*. In —1996a, pp. 353–603.
- 1798: 'Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View'. Translated by Robert B. Loudon. in Kant 2007, pp. 227–429.
- 1996a: *Practical Philosophy*. Translated and edited by Mary J. Gregor. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- 1996b: *Religion and Rational Theology*. Translated and edited by Allen W. Wood and George di Giovanni. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- 2007: *Anthropology, History, and Education*. Edited by Günter Zöllner and Robert B. Loudon, translated by Mary Gregor, Paul Guyer, Robert B. Loudon, Holly Wilson, Allen W. Wood, Günter Zöllner, and Arnulf Zweig. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Kashua, Sayed 2016: *Native: Dispatches from an Israeli-Palestinian Life*. New York: Grove Press.
- Mills, Charles 1997: *The Racial Contract*. Ithaca, ny: Cornell University Press.
- Pateman, Carol 1988: *The Sexual Contract*. Oxford: Polity Press.
- Rousseau, Jean-Jacques 2011: *The Basic Political Writings*. Edited and translated by Donald A. Cress. Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company.
- Varden, Helga 2020: *Sex, Love, and Gender: A Kantian Theory*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- forthcoming: 'Kant's Four Legal-Political Conditions'. To appear in *Norsk Filosofisk Tidsskrift (Norwegian Journal of Philosophy)*.