

The Origins of Modern Political Evil in Hannah Arendt and Leszek Kołakowski

Paul G. Gray, MA¹

Abstract

Leszek Kołakowski and Hannah Arendt are two important thinkers in relation to the theorisation of modern political evil. Despite common ground as scholars in exile from totalitarianism, they remain seldom compared as thinkers. This paper explores certain key ideas in each one's approach to the problem of political evil – through the lens of the “origins of dialectic” in Kołakowski's thought and that of the “crystallization of elements of totalitarianism” in Arendt's. It then makes a summary comparison of their two contributions to understanding political evil. The comparison includes their respective responses to Marxism and the philosophy of history, expressed in Kołakowski's *Main Currents of Marxism* and Arendt's responses to Marx as embodied in *The Human Condition* and other writings. By encouraging uncompromising focus on the problem of evil, these readings can help freshen twenty-first century approaches in non-ideal theory.

Introduction

On a teaching visit to Berkeley in 1955, Hannah Arendt was asked about the topic of a forthcoming talk on totalitarianism. The host who invited her to speak, a retired General and President of the Commonwealth Club, recognised Arendt as author of *The Origins of Totalitarianism* but wanted more details. Accordingly, he visited her office and asked, “if I am for or against totalitarianism, just so he knows where to put me in the program,” as she later related to husband Heinrich Blücher. “Not that it matters,” the General said. Arendt mirthfully reported the visit to her with the comment: “Oh, dearest, what a fantastical world.”²

The anecdote suggests, then as now, a phenomenon of misconception, misunderstanding and pure ignorance of the term “totalitarianism”, or perhaps perspective confusion on how it should be used. Recent critics of Arendt from Slavoj Žižek to Samuel Moyn have been firm in condemning her use of the term as a kind of mask for conservative ideology – an ideological weapon for demonising and undermining legitimate social and political action, suggesting an affinity with a kind of crude McCarthyism.

Yet the empirical historical phenomena of Naziism and Stalinism, whose intersection leaves tremors even today across that broad geography characterised by Timothy Snyder as “the bloodlands” of Western Russia and Eastern Europe (if not further afield) were clearly held in view by Arendt and others as they constructed debates on the totalitarian experience through the second half of the twentieth century.

¹ Doctoral candidate, Deakin University.

² Hannah Arendt and Heinrich Blücher, *Within Four Walls: The Correspondence between Hannah Arendt and Heinrich Blücher, 1936-1968*, 1st U.S. (Harcourt, 2000), 226.

One scholar's lived experience may seem to be another's constructed ideology, depending on context, perhaps. But in Arendt's case, as in the case of the second writer explored in this paper, Leszek Kołakowski, lived experience is clearly primary in understanding what is meant by their uses of the term.

In this paper I want to address the meaning of "totalitarianism" as Arendt in particular understood the term, and explicitly connect it to the broader categorical term, "evil". In Arendtian language, it is reasonable to discuss "the problem of evil" specifically as a political problem, situated in the lived reality of modern and contemporary human beings, rather than as a theological question pertaining to the creation of God and Man and their respective relations to the world.

In his volume *Reappraisals* in 2008,³ Snyder's late friend and colleague Tony Judt describes Kolakowski and Arendt in separate chapters as two important thinkers in relation to the experience of political evils in the modern world. Both can be seen as exemplary public intellectuals who shared a commitment to moral seriousness and a clear-eyed confrontation with the major political catastrophes and ideologies of their time, Judt argued.

Obviously, it is not *inevitable* that any writer should write whatever they write. But the biographical data are incredibly important nevertheless, in these as in other cases. As Judt expresses it:

... the twentieth century saw the emergence of a new intellectual type: the rootless "voyager in the century." ... Many of these representative twentieth-century intellectuals were Jewish ... overwhelmingly from the Jewish communities of Eastern and Central Europe: "chance survivors of a deluge" in Hannah Arendt's words. Many, too, came from cities and provinces that for all their cultural cosmopolitanism, were geographically peripheral: Königsberg, Cernovitz, Vilna, Sarajevo, Alexandria, Calcutta or Algiers. ...

Taken all in all, these men and women constituted a twentieth-century "Republic of Letters": a virtual community of conversation and argument whose influence reflected and illuminated the tragic choices of the age.⁴

Judt explicitly links Arendt and Kołakowski into this notional republic of letters via a pointed reference to the related idea of "evil":

Modern secular society has long been uncomfortable with the idea of "evil." Liberals are embarrassed by its uncompromising ethical absolutism and religious overtones. ... But in the wake of World War II, the Nazi destruction of the Jews, and a growing international awareness of the scale of Communist crimes, "evil" crept slowly back into moral and even political discourse. ... Arendt was perhaps the first to recognise this ... but it is Leszek Kołakowski, a very different sort of philosopher working in an avowedly religious

³ Tony Judt, *Reappraisals: Reflections on the Forgotten Twentieth Century* (Penguin Press, 2008). Unexplored in this paper is Judt's later, 2012 mentions of both Kolakowski and Arendt in *Thinking the Twentieth Century*, collaboratively written with Snyder.

⁴ Judt, *Reappraisals*, 14.

tradition, who has put the matter best: “The Devil is part of our experience. Our generation has seen enough of it for the message to be taken extremely seriously.”⁵

Judt’s bracketing of Arendt and Kołakowski notwithstanding, the two thinkers remain seldom compared in scholarly literature. This is for good reason, I would suggest. Not only is their mutual referencing virtually non-existent; there are also significant differences in style, subject matter and intellectual interest between them. Both, it is true, work centrally within the broad tradition of twentieth century continental philosophy, canonically (as it were) referencing many of the same major thinkers and schools of thought, from Socrates and Plato through Augustine and Aquinas via Hegel and Nietzsche to Heidegger and Jaspers⁶. Both also evince a kind of philosophical atheism (or “a-theism”, as Kołakowski puts it, channelling Heidegger⁷); and in respect of this, and in different ways, both defend religious faith as being phenomenologically reasonable.

Yet the temperamental and stylistic differences between them are striking. Against Arendt’s propensity for journalism and the unorthodox scholarly approach, with prose delivered in a *salonnière* style that is often intentionally provocative,⁸ Kołakowski is a progenitor and exemplar of a disciplined approach within the history of ideas built around the social and historical context of thought with systematic summary and critique of the contributions of key thinkers to major lines of philosophical inquiry. This latter approach, characterised by Andrzej Walicki⁹ as typifying the work of the Warsaw School of the History of Ideas, is strongly evident throughout the three volumes of *Main Currents of Marxism* – a work that functions today both as a practical handbook for students and scholars less familiar with this or that aspect of the Marxian tradition, and as a unique statement of philosophical perspective from a scholar steeped in the deepest lines of European thought.

Despite these differences, both thinkers leave a substantial deposit of considered works, with Arendt’s intellectual fame as a philosopher resting firmly on her work in *The Origins of Totalitarianism* and *The Human Condition* as well as the (incomplete) *The Life of the Mind* and the strongly journalistic *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil*. Each writer

⁵ Judt, *Reappraisals*, 16–17. In the following part of the same quote, also given by Judt, Kołakowski remarks: “Evil, I contend, is not contingent, it is not the absence or deformation, or the subversion of virtue (or whatever else we may think of as its opposite), but a stubborn and unredeemable fact.” This theme, non-contingency, is discussed in more detail below, in relation to Kołakowski particularly.

⁶ Arendt’s debt to and admiration for Jaspers is unmistakably expressed by her. Kołakowski’s quieter regard is signalled for example in his reference to “existentialism before Jaspers” (rather than before Heidegger, or Sartre) in his opening discussion of intellectual pre-histories in *Main Currents of Marxism*; see Section 1 below.

⁷ Leszek Kołakowski, *God Owes Us Nothing: A Brief Remark on Pascal’s Religion and on the Spirit of Jansenism* (The University of Chicago Press, 1995), 188.

⁸ The *salonnière* idea is proposed by Seyla Benhabib, and useful (I suggest) in relation to Arendt’s Eichmann book. Seyla Benhabib, *The Reluctant Modernism of Hannah Arendt*, Modernity and Political Thought; v. 10. (Sage Publications, 1996); Paul Gray, “Hannah Arendt and Immigration Detention” (master’s thesis, Deakin University, 2020), <https://hdl.handle.net/10779/DRO/DU:22649821.v1>.

⁹ Andrzej Walicki, “On Writing Intellectual History: Leszek Kołakowski and the Warsaw School of the History of Ideas,” in *Leszek Kołakowski in Memoriam*, ed. Jacek Migasiński (Peter Lang, 2012).

also leaves a large number of essays in which many themes encountered in their best-known books are explored with different emphases.¹⁰

In this paper a brief contrast and comparison is attempted between Arendt and Kołakowski in relation to the origins and derivations of evil – its source and relevance in modern and contemporary politics. The paper assumes, based on the language chosen by each writer, that this theme is of great importance to both of them and seeks little other justification for making the attempt. Nevertheless the discussion itself might be a small contribution to non-ideal theory in political science: the efforts by scholars from various perspectives who are working in the wake of Arendt, Shklar, Kołakowski and Jaspers.¹¹

A working assumption in the paper is that we can locate the “origins of evil” so defined within the thought of Arendt and of Kołakowski in the following two places essentially: in Kołakowski, in the “origins of dialectic” argument, and in Arendt, in her argument about totalitarianism becoming “crystallized” in the mid-twentieth century. Echoed across their writings, these two main ideas can be found authoritatively first in the opening chapter of *Main Currents of Marxism*, “The Origins of Dialectic,” and second throughout *The Origins of Totalitarianism*. Both these thoughts are complex but can be sketched in outline here, in two brief sections, sticking close to the texts of each writer. The paper will make its contribution by bringing these textual treatments together for comparison in a third section, before concluding.

1. Kołakowski's Origins of Dialectic

In *Main Currents of Marxism*, Kołakowski sets up his historical analysis of Marxist thought from its pre-history through to the Frankfurt School and Maoism, with a long opening chapter, “The Origins of Dialectic.”¹²

Kołakowski's chapter traces or describes a philosophical “narrative arc” that centres the presence in history and the history of ideas of a human desire to “abolish evil” through a process (or rather number of distinct processes over time) of theoretical reasoning, reformulation of the evidence of history and experience, and the careful structuring of thought to explain evil as something unnecessary, inessential, ultimately illusory and conquerable by humans; this represents an activity by which we may escape fear of the pointlessness, the meaninglessness of human existence, of existence and life in this world. These historically anchored chains of reasoning do not occur randomly or entirely spontaneously; Kołakowski presents them as a cogent historical tradition of thinkers and schools often building one on another. This is a tradition that is spatially and temporally spread over a reasonably broad

¹⁰ In a late interview, Kołakowski said that his most important work was the brief *Metaphysical Horror* because it most directly sought to answer the most important philosophical questions. His interviewer was at pains to emphasise the importance of *Main Currents of Marxism*, an interpretation Kołakowski was likewise at pains to resist. Pura Sánchez Zamorano, “Interview with Leszek Kołakowski: ‘I Don't Consider *Main Currents of Marxism* My Opus Magnum,’” *Hybris*, no. 9 (2009).

¹¹ The “non-ideal” perspective, bracketing Arendt and Shklar with others including Sheldon Wolin, is highlighted by Taeku Lee in his 2025 Presidential Address on present challenges facing the discipline, at the American Political Science Association meeting in Vancouver. Taeku Lee, “Epistemic Institutions and the Populism Dilemma: Reimagining Political Science as a Vocation amid Democratic Breakdown,” *Perspectives on Politics* 24, no. 1 (2026): 9–25, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1537592726104575>.

¹² Leszek Kołakowski, *Main Currents of Marxism: Its Origins, Growth and Dissolution*, 1: The Founders, trans. P. S. Falla (Oxford University Press, 1978), 10–80.

canvas – roughly, across Europe and the (Middle Eastern) homelands of “the desert religions”, and between the time of Plotinus (c.270AD) and Hegel (1770-1831.)

Methodologically, the chapter illustrates Kołakowski’s ambitious yet disciplined approach¹³, essentially synthesising a single strand of thought within the history of ideas, while recognising and illustrating precise points of difference and the originality of thinkers at each step on the way. The essence of the thought here might be summed as being that *contingency as evil haunts philosophy*. The theme is signalled from the first sub-section (“The contingency of human existence”) and continues to the final two sub-sections, which deal with Hegel’s thought, presenting it as a kind of launching pad for Marxist and Marxian-descended thinking.

From Neoplatonist beginnings through Eriugena

An awareness of human imperfection has always been an anchor and key stimulus to the practice of philosophy. Through Aristotelian language initially, the term “contingency” first emerged into systematic thought, but it was through the Platonic tradition that “an unbearable disjunction” between the ideal “Being of humanity,”¹⁴ on one hand, and empirical existence as we experience it, on the other, became a serious impulse to deeper questioning. The founder of Neoplatonism, Plotinus, posited a series of “hypostases of reality,”¹⁵ with each of the lower stages or hypostases, below that of the One (or Being or intellect), representing a degradation from this ideal, with matter and bodies at the bottom level. Through the Neoplatonists, philosophy became familiarised with such categories, expressing a deep discordance between empirical human existence and “man’s True Being.”¹⁶

The first signs of the dialectic which eventually flows through to Hegel and Marx emerges in the wake of philosophical recognition of a particular version of the problem of evil. The early efforts of both non-orthodox Christian Platonism and orthodox Christianity to explain the degradations of reality in creation as being consistent in some way with a superabundance of God’s goodness left in place significant difficulties surrounding the presence of evil in the world. In Kołakowski’s telling, the fundamental intellectual challenge, so to speak, is the non-necessity of the existence of the world; while orthodox Christian theodicy has posited numerous answers to this, for many “[t]he answer to the problem of evil, and also to that of contingency, thus leads to a dialectic of negation, i.e. to the idea that evil and contingency must exist if all the possibilities of being are to be realized.”¹⁷

Through subsequent centuries (after Plotinus and Augustine,) the idea of a divine principle at work in human history took root from these beginnings. It was “incompletely” seen in the medieval thought of Neoplatonist John Scotus Eriugena (815-877), and since has been prominent in “all Northern mysticism of the pantheistic kind.” Within this idea, “transience,

¹³ The political context for this choice of method is interestingly described by Kołakowski’s colleague Walicki. In essence, their “Warsaw school” were reformist Marxists initially eager to abandon the “reified” form of Marxism which pretended to a pseudo-scientific monopoly on truth. In their post-war Stalinist context, “historicism” (not in Karl Popper’s sense) was seen by these reformist intellectuals as a liberating force which enabled human subjectivity not ideology to be placed at the centre of knowledge work. Walicki, “On Writing Intellectual History,” 12–13.

¹⁴ Kołakowski, *Main Currents of Marxism*, 1: The Founders, 12.

¹⁵ Kołakowski, *Main Currents of Marxism*, 1: The Founders, 14.

¹⁶ Kołakowski, *Main Currents of Marxism*, 1: The Founders, 16.

¹⁷ Kołakowski, *Main Currents of Marxism*, 1: The Founders, 21–22.

contingency and evil" characterize a reality which evolves out of the Absolute;¹⁸ this takes place as the Absolute itself grows towards self-realization. Evil and contingency thus become a necessary part of history's unfolding.

Kořakowski follows this idea from "the dialectic of deification" in the thought of Meister Eckhart (c. 1260–1328) in which contingency in human existence "is only apparent",¹⁹ through Nicholas Cusanus (1401–1464) who epitomizes the logical contradictions of belief in an Absolute Being in his argument for "God's need for creation",²⁰ and into Lutheran dissidence via Jakob Böhme (1575–1624) whose partly traditional cosmic mysticism combines with a kind of dialectical belief in the Deity's need for self-exteriorization and display.²¹

Enlightenment hinge-point

The chapter's discussion of the historical hinge-point between early-medieval and Enlightenment-modern thought on evil and contingency is a good example of the dense historical reasoning chains favored by Kořakowski throughout his career, and powerfully evident throughout *Main Current of Marxism* in particular. The passage in question notionally identifies a stage in the historical development of "Enlightenment thinking", an in-between stage after thinkers such as Cusanus, Angelus Silesius and Fenélon and before Rousseau, Hume and Kant. Yet far from being taxonomical history, it boils down the historical movement of these thinkers' ideas to central shared concepts, coming to a crux with a return to the perennial problem of evil – a problem yet to be (for the reader) resolved.

Kořakowski presents certain threads of the early Enlightenment – ideas including the concept of "natural man" versus "civilization," a right to happiness and a right to freedom – as being initially plausible and liberating, but within a short time posing contradictory and competing demands on each other. In particular, a clash between "nature" and "reason" appeared in the offing: was reason itself a gift of nature and if so, was it reasonable to keep thinking about nature? He cites French naturalist Julien Offray de la Mettrie (1709-1751) who argued that the reasoning of mathematicians showed little difference from the performances of monkeys, rhetorically highlighting the claim that reason, like moral laws, is the work of nature, "natural mechanism." Against this thread, it could be argued that if nature is so deeply purposeful, it is merely playing with words or names to call it Nature rather than God. If Nature is responsible for everything in human ken – reason and morals – then even immoral behaviour is simply a part of Nature. Kořakowski claims:

We are back to the eternal dilemmas with which atheists have taunted worshippers of the gods since Epicurus's time: since the world is full of evil, God must be either evil or powerless or incompetent or all three; and the same can be said of 'good and omnipotent' Nature. If, on the other hand, nature is indifferent to man and his fate, there is no reason to believe that evil can be vanquished: it may be that the only natural law is that of the jungle and that human societies are no better off than plant or animal species.

¹⁸ Kořakowski, *Main Currents of Marxism*, 1: The Founders, 23.

¹⁹ Kořakowski, *Main Currents of Marxism*, 1: The Founders, 32.

²⁰ Kořakowski, *Main Currents of Marxism*, 1: The Founders, 33.

²¹ Kořakowski, *Main Currents of Marxism*, 1: The Founders, 36–37.

Kořakowski takes this to show a subsequent divergence among Enlightenment thinkers, with later writers such as the satirists Mandeville, Swift and Voltaire presenting a more pessimistic view of human nature and of the potential for virtue to conquer vice. Enlightenment optimism about the resolution of the problem of evil at this point begins to falter, he argues.²²

We see in this discussion of an historical hinge-point a particular illustration of the method employed by Kořakowski more widely throughout *Main Currents of Marxism* and in other works. As the opening chapter of a work whose historical scope spans close to 2000 years, it is notable that the theme or “problem of evil” – whether conceived as contingency or moral vice – is anchored strongly throughout; indeed it remains visible within Kořakowski’s perspective as a central intellectual concern throughout the history of ideas from start to finish.

Hegelian conclusion

The treatment of Hegel in the chapter’s final two sections represents an advanced stage in the argument, presenting the Hegelian views of human consciousness progressing towards the Absolute, and of freedom as the goal of history. For Kořakowski, Hegel’s “majestic system” as advanced in *Phenomenology of Mind* is an advance on earlier unsuccessful efforts to deal with a world “infected with contingency”; the advance works by positing the operations of Mind as an “assimilating negation” (i.e. a negation of the world’s alienness which, post-negation, still leaves the richness of the world intact.²³ Despite the majesty of the system, Hegel’s *Phenomenology of Mind* in which these ideas are expressed is also full of “monstrous ambiguities.”²⁴ Likewise, ambiguity dogs other ideas familiar through Hegel’s more widely read *Lectures on the Philosophy of History* and *Philosophy of Right*; for example, Kořakowski states that Hegel’s thought “is beset with ambiguity” at a crucial point in his argument about whether or not rebellion against the state can be justified in accordance with his system.²⁵ Nevertheless through its historic response to the challenge of contingency, Hegel’s thought effectively sets the scene for the revolutionary ideas of Karl Marx. Via Hegel, who builds on a long thread of thinking about evil – a thread extending back to Plotinus – a “new philosophical possibility and a new eschatology” come into view with Marx. While directly connected to the same long and broad philosophical tradition, the coming phase (of Marxian thought) affirms a new philosophical approach which rejects all solutions that posit an Absolute Being separate from humanity, the great Prometheus to be awakened shortly.²⁶

The Devil, and intransigent evil

The above description of a philosophical narrative arc outlining the history of dialectic within the “pre-history” of Marx is essentially contextual: contextual for Kořakowski’s authoritative

²² Kořakowski, *Main Currents of Marxism*, 1: The Founders, 40–41.

²³ Kořakowski, *Main Currents of Marxism*, 1: The Founders, 57.

²⁴ Kořakowski, *Main Currents of Marxism*, 1: The Founders, 58.

²⁵ Kořakowski, *Main Currents of Marxism*, 1: The Founders, 79.

²⁶ The Promethean theme – humanity as a “collective Prometheus” courageously shaping its own destiny in defiance of the gods – is a leitmotif of Kořakowski’s three-volume work. It is signalled with a literary flourish at the end of Volume 1, likening humanity on the cusp of Marxist revolution to Kafka’s unhappy man-turned-insect, Gregor Samsa, in the story “Metamorphosis.” Kořakowski, *Main Currents of Marxism*, 1: The Founders, 420.

(although controversial) interpretation of the history of Marxist thought, and contextual also for the bedrock theme of this paper, which is the problem of evil as it can be seen and interpreted in the thought of Kołakowski and Arendt. For both thinkers, evil is characteristically “real” in a political sense – its role within the history of ideas as a proposition to be debated and discussed notwithstanding. Nevertheless as thinkers concerned with the history of ideas, albeit in different ways, both Kołakowski and Arendt laboured to understand the problem of evil in relation to the world that we have inherited and that we hope to shape, bearing future generations of humans in mind. Arendt’s famous idea of “natality” is a good illustration of the centrality of these future generations within her thought. Aspirationally, totalitarianism at one level seeks to destroy human spontaneity and individuality, which is itself a direct consequence of the fact of human natality, and in this sense (she says, quoting Augustine) is doomed to failure in its own terms so long as humans are being born. The aspiration to destroy spontaneity comes close to defining the essence of evil, within Arendt’s thought. This theme is discussed in the next section.

For Kołakowski, description of the intransigence of evil and the central importance of understanding this fact recurs not only in his early-mid career critique of Marxism and Stalinism, but under two other headings as well. These are “the Devil” and the theme of “metaphysical horror.” The Devil serves for him both as metaphor for understanding the problem of evil in the history of thought (as in the essays “Can the Devil Be Saved?” and “The Devil in History”) and as a standing indication of the presence of evil as a *political* reality in modern-contemporary lives. In possibly his final interview (in 2009) Kołakowski expressed a summary view of this problem to Pura Sánchez Zamorano:

LK I do believe that the distinction between good and evil is not our arbitrary decision, that we find it ready-made. It is in human nature yes, but more than that, it is something that we cannot change because it is imposed on us by ... (Kołakowski meditates a long while).

PS By the Universe?

LK By the Universe, or God, or any other way of putting the same thought.²⁷

Underlining the persistence of this problem – both for thought and experience – in his 1997 essay “Genocide and Ideology” Kołakowski meditates on the history of the Holocaust and raises the question of who in the contemporary world are “the spiritual heirs of Hitler.” Here he states that whoever does not reject the content of Nazi ideology (of whom there are few) must not avoid the follow-up question: “to what extent are they ready to justify evil for the sake of ideological values of any sort?”²⁸ This concern with the problem of evil as a pressing contemporary matter can be read as a strong thread both in the thought of Kołakowski and of Arendt.

2. Totalitarianism and its elements in Arendt

Discussion of the problem of evil in Hannah Arendt relies heavily on her understanding of totalitarianism. The terms “evil” and “totalitarianism” are not interchangeable in her thought,

²⁷ Sánchez Zamorano, “Interview with Leszek Kolakowski,” 22.

²⁸ Leszek Kolakowski, *Is God Happy? Selected Essays* (Penguin, 2012), 91.

but little insight can be had into her various mentions of evil and the problem of evil across her voluminous public and private writings without close attention to an understanding of the meaning she constructed for the historical phenomena that she characterized as totalitarian.²⁹ At times the interconnection of the two is intimate, and is essential for understanding the significance of Arendt's thought on evil as a political phenomenon.

One space in her writings where this seems clear is in her responses to criticisms of her portrait of Adolf Eichmann, the portrait published as *Eichmann in Jerusalem*.³⁰ During the heated controversy over this book, in late 1963 Arendt wrote to a correspondent seeking her input to a (never-to-be-published) newspaper article about the affair; the correspondent included a list of interview-style questions seeking comment on her critics. In the first part of her answer, Arendt largely ignored the latter questions to make three broad statements indicating her specific philosophical interest in the three themes of "totalitarianism," "judgment" and "evil" – all illustrated by the trial.

Parking the correspondent's questions momentarily, Arendt starts: "Let me begin by answering a question you did not raise." This is the question of why she had chosen to attend the Eichmann trial in Israel, in 1961, in person. Arendt uses this rhetorical device (posing her own question) to then launch her three claims:

1. During her earlier descriptions of "the totalitarian system" she dealt with types rather than individuals, with "the system as a whole". This was "the context of theory," in which context individuals can be perceived only as being more or less cogs in a machine. However an advantage of the intense individual focus in a court-room trial on what an individual was thinking when making their decisions as part of the totalitarian machinery was that it enabled judgment of an individual working "as a free agent," with and inside the totalitarian system.
2. In a kind of philosophical *mea culpa*, she states that she had contributed to a widespread view that the crimes of totalitarianism in power were of such magnitude as to "defy the possibility of human judgment and explode the framework of our legal institutions." While acknowledging the numerous difficulties associated with prosecuting a totalitarian criminal (e.g. nation state jurisdiction; the atmosphere of terror inside totalitarian states such that even its servants fear for their lives) it nevertheless still seems necessary to establish what are the possibilities for "rendering justice" through states and institutions when confronted with totalitarian crimes. This was a second reason for attending the trial.
3. The third claim was more briefly stated, here in full: "I have been thinking for many years, or to be specific 30 years, about the nature of evil. And the wish to expose myself – not to the deeds, which, after all, were well known, but to the evildoer himself – probably was the most powerful motive in my decision to go to Jerusalem."³¹

Eichmann as a living (in 1961) specimen of a totalitarian state servant was thus a prime object for her research, and in the largely (to some, offensively) unemotional tones in which she

²⁹ The noun and adjective here could of course be singular, as the title of Arendt's famous book shows. However, the thrust of the present analysis is to show *multiple* elements in totalitarianism which "crystallize" – a thought which is present consistently throughout her writing on the theme, though sometimes overlooked in the reading.

³⁰ Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (Penguin Books, 2006). Hannah Arendt, *The Jewish Writings*, ed. Jerome Kohn (Schocken, 2007), 62.

³¹ Arendt, *The Jewish Writings*, 474–75.

subsequently reported on and judged the individual in the dock, Arendt may be read here as social scientist more than moralist.

This indeed was a defining feature of Arendt's work as a public thinker: in describing “evil” for the public square, Arendt was less attentive to the emotive aspects and impacts of evil deeds, and more attuned to their epistemological and – in her sense – political meanings in the contemporary world. This attentiveness persisted through her late writings, through to the incomplete final work, *The Life of the Mind*.

Naturally, or at least plausibly, the attempt to think and write with a predominantly theoretical frame in mind while sitting in the courtroom alongside other survivors of the Holocaust listening to exhaustive testimony about possibly the greatest mass crime in history was bound to result in offence being taken somewhere. On the other hand, alongside the outrage voiced by some at Arendt's tone in relation to Adolf Eichmann, some critics less concerned with the Eichmann trial have taken strong issue with Arendt's general deployment of the term “totalitarianism,” blaming her for prolonging the life of a terminological category they deem useless (or worse) for social science. (See Introduction.)

A more neutral voice here – she both criticizes Arendt and praises her in relation to “totalitarianism” – is Judith Shklar. In her review of Elizabeth Young-Bruehl's still-standard biography of Arendt first published in 1982, Shklar rejects parts of Arendt's wide-ranging argument in *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, including the latter's blanket rejection of nationalism as being “a thing of the past” and not to be compared with “the living ideologies of the age.”³² This Arendtian judgment was plainly wrong, Shklar wrote in 1983.³³

Yet Arendt's book made “a real addition to the theory of regimes,” in the tradition of Montesquieu and de Tocqueville, Shklar said, noting in particular the Arendtian theory of “superfluous populations” mentioned in the book's discussion of European imperialism. Shklar calls Arendt's concern with superfluous populations a “surrealist vision”,³⁴ a characterization that fits well with Arendt's heavy use of literary evidence in this part of her analysis, in particular Joseph Conrad's well-informed imperialist horror story “Heart of Darkness.”

The elements of totalitarianism in Arendt

The theory of totalitarianism in Hannah Arendt centers on the “crystallization of elements” within empirical historical experience which coalesce for no particular historiographical reason but with devastating human consequences. Working within a broad German tradition strongly imbued with ideas describing a philosophy or philosophies of history, she makes no claim that her own understanding of totalitarianism constitutes a new departure or arrival point for this tradition.

Understanding her theory relies essentially on seeing the “elements,” or perhaps better described, the shared modern historical experiences, which come together to produce totalitarian rule. Discerning these elements is a different exercise, though a closely related one, from detecting the themes about which Arendt wrote while grappling with the phenomena she was laboring to describe under the rubric of totalitarianism. In the discussion below I will look at the most striking themes in her account, subjectively as a reader, in the hope of thereby

³² Judith Shklar, “Hannah Arendt as Pariah,” *Partisan Review* 50, no. 1 (1983): 69.

³³ Given the national passions displayed in the course of numerous recent wars, Shklar's judgment here retains its validity.

³⁴ Shklar, “Hannah Arendt as Pariah,” 70.

suggesting the “elements” which Arendt believed became crystallized in the historical (empirical) totalitarian experience.³⁵

These themes are given in the table in descending order of importance, as I judge the case to be. The themes are broadly grouped into the categories of System and Mind: the operations of the totalitarian system in the world, and the mental and intellectual processes associated with them:

MIND
The destruction of “the human”
Radical evil (and shallow evil)
Logical consistency
SYSTEM
Superfluousness
Concentration camps
Decline of “the nation state”
Rightlessness
Terror (by states and non-state actors)
The idea of “movement”
Totalitarianism pre-power and in power
Antisemitism and imperialism
Pan movements

A point-by-point explanation of these themes follows.

Mind

1. At the highest level, Arendt sees the totalitarian system as aiming at the **destruction of the human** itself, the replacement of it through politics. This involves not necessarily the elimination of all human beings from the earth but the deliberate replacement of human freedom and plurality with a non-spontaneous form of existence without meaningful connections between people, a replacement enacted by the totalitarian state through its normal workings. The mental or intellectual spring source of this replacement operation is to abolish men in the plural and remake them in the singular image of the omnipresent leader. This goes beyond the aspirations of previous despotisms, tyrannies and autocracies.

2. The non-incidental evil that is performed by totalitarianism is called “radical”, a word borrowed from the philosophical terminology of Immanuel Kant but denoting a new phenomenon (possibly suspected by, but unknown to Kant) that is characterized by a lack of

³⁵ This working method I call intentionality, or judging and experiencing the intentions of the author, in this case Arendt, where the author has left a vast amount of writing with apparently contradictory meanings at times, even when ostensibly discussing the same thing. It is the method Arendt herself used and explored in her doctoral thesis on St Augustine; see in particular her comment on “parallel trains of thought [in Augustine that] defy systematic conjunction.” Hannah Arendt, *Love and Saint Augustine*, ed. Joanna Vecchiarelli Scott and Judith Chelius Stark (University of Chicago Press, 1996), 4.

selfish motive or impulse and aimed exclusively at dehumanization (in the sense given above.) The thought process associated with **radical or unthinking evil** is that of Eichmann, in other words a shallow, banal “going along with” the operations of the totalitarian movement in power.

3. Rather than pure megalomania on the part of the totalitarian leader, the thinking of the totalitarian system and those who serve it is entirely focused on proving the validity and **cohesiveness of its logic**. Arendt calls this the totalitarian “supersense” which replaces the “common sense” by which humans generally orientate themselves to living in a shared world. Logic rather than truth is uppermost here.³⁶

System

4. The notion of **superfluousness** (or “superfluity”) is the most important systemic correlate of the destruction of the human within Arendt's theory of totalitarianism. Building on her own reading of history, which is influenced by a number of threads including the Marxist thought of Rosa Luxemburg, she highlights the creation of superfluous populations and groups of people both in the heartland of European imperialism (Europe itself) and in colonised lands around the world, from the late nineteenth century onwards. The creation of superfluous people – the making of certain groups of people into superfluous resources to be used or discarded by blind capitalism or totalitarian movements is a distinctive feature of modernity in a certain sense, and underpins the radical evil of totalitarianism.

5. Arendt highlights **concentration camps**, distinct from traditional prisons, as being the emblematic proving ground of totalitarianism in practice, in which both “objective enemies” and superfluous people can be removed from the world in accordance with the logic of the totalitarian movement and state. She delineates three beyond-the-world locations, based on older conceptions of phases of life after death, that describe the types of concentration camps seen alongside the emergence of the totalitarian system: terminologically, these locations are drawn from the traditional Western literary imaginary: “hades, purgatory and hell,” and indicate rising levels of torment for the inmates.

Generally, the most salient human characteristic of the “superfluous people” interned in camps is their “innocence.”³⁷

6 + 7. Arendt characterises the modernity evident by the early twentieth century, the era of superfluous people, as “homelessness on an unprecedented scale, rootlessness to an unprecedented depth.”³⁸ A strong part of the political appeal of totalitarian movements within this context is loss of faith in **the nation state**, in part caused historically by “the minorities problem” – the constitution in Euro/Mediterranean countries of new nation states carved out of the multi-ethnic empires which collapsed in World War I. Arendt delineates a statelessness or **rightlessness problem** (“the right to have rights”) which emerges with these new, post-World War 1 states. With these states typically dominated by a single national group, long resident non-nationals within them became “rightless” in an unprecedented way, adding to the problem

³⁶ Arendt gives an example of this supersense by saying that to loyal Bolsheviks, being told that only Moscow has a subway really means that all subways should be destroyed. Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, Third edition. (Penguin, 2017), 503.

³⁷ Using Kotakowski’s account of Husserl’s phenomenology, I have tried to delineate Arendt’s concentration camp insights as a distinct “concentration camp form.” Paul Gray, “Persistence in the Concentration Camp Form: Boochani’s Manus Island,” preprint, *Politics and International Relations*, September 8, 2025, <https://doi.org/10.33774/apsa-2025-5w33x>.

³⁸ Arendt, *Origins*, ix.

of human superfluity. This pattern of rightlessness and superfluity originated between World Wars I and II, but continues on a more global scale in the post-World War II era.³⁹

8. Terror is described by Arendt as a primary tool of the totalitarian state, and familiar from descriptions of secret police operations in Nazi Germany and Stalinist Russia. This is consonant with the use of terror, and secret police methods to intimidate and crush opposition in non-totalitarian states also; its significance in Arendt's theory is in its linkage with the (attempted) destruction of all connection and human plurality among entire populations, whereby terror extends deeply into private life, the home, as well as into all public places.⁴⁰

9. In keeping with people in the modern world being “homeless” and “rootless,” a corresponding feature of totalitarianism is its **dynamic of perpetual motion**. In her “desert” metaphor – likening the modern world to a desert in which man struggles to be at home in part because of the distractions of psychology, entertainment, and totalitarian movements – Arendt calls totalitarian movements sandstorms: “the sandstorms in which false or pseudo-action suddenly bursts forth from death-like quiet.”⁴¹ Well-adjusted to the spiritual and psychological aridity of modernity, the “movements,” though false actors, attract individuals because they replicate a craved sense of purpose and logic about the world. However the permanent ceaseless motion of totalitarianism ultimately consumes its servants and members, a dynamic epitomised in Stalin's purges when even the most loyal of totalitarian state servants were subject to sudden downfall and elimination as objective enemies.

10. The self-descriptive term used by totalitarian parties in many countries, affirming themselves to be “movements” as distinct from (and often as well as) political parties, is a not insignificant echo of this characteristic of permanent motion. The logic of a particular totalitarian ideology becomes evident during **its initial movement** phase; the logic is only fully seen during after the movement achieves power, becoming **the totalitarian state**. Totalitarian state rule comes into automatic tension with earlier existing forms of government rule such as the nation state or empire because by its internal logic it seeks worldwide domination; in power in one country, its ceaseless motion seeks to impose this logic across the earth.

11. and 12. Antisemitism and imperialism; the pan movements. The emergence of the totalitarian system in the first half of the twentieth century was strongly colored by certain historical experiences which for theoretical purposes can be grouped together. These are antisemitism, imperialism and the “Pan movements” (Pan-Germanism, Pan-Slavism.) Arendt, whose early writing from the late 1920s to the early 1940s engaged closely with antisemitism, Zionism and the Jewish experience in Europe, distinguished broadly between historical and modern antisemitism, noting that its late modern form (in particular as Nazi antisemitism) found its immediate antecedent in the French antisemitism which exploded with the Dreyfus Affair in the 1890s, as distinct from earlier traditional forms. This late antisemitism is connected to the similarly modern as distinct from traditional imperialism that was practiced by European colonizing states during the so-called Scramble for Africa (roughly 1880–1914.) At the same

³⁹ A single example is the situation of the Rohingya people of South East Asia. Rejected as belonging to the state of Myanmar and its neighbours, the essentially stateless Rohingya appear now as classically superfluous people in the Arendtian sense.

⁴⁰ Orlando Figes' *The Whisperers*, documenting the practice of extensive secret-keeping within families in Soviet life under Stalin is a post-Arendt scholarly demonstration of this use and effect of totalitarian terror. Orlando Figes, *The Whisperers: Private Life in Stalin's Russia* (Metropolitan Books, 2007).

⁴¹ Hannah Arendt, *The Promise of Politics*, ed. Jerome Kohn (Schocken Books, 2005), 202.

time, inherently globalising (i.e. oriented towards conquest) ideologies of "blood" emerged in sync with modern antisemitism, giving rise to significant strains of racist sentiment which were expressed definitively in Nazi German ideology (though this was not its only variant.)

Since "blood" ties could transcend national borders, a path was laid through the pan movements for a racial variant of totalitarian ideology to adopt global conquest as its aim. But in one of the most problematic aspects of Arendt's theory, the alternative pathway of a non-racial, "class"-based ideology similarly oriented to global conquest (e.g. Stalinist Marxism) was largely neglected in her writing of *The Origins of Totalitarianism*. We can address Arendt's neglect of Marxism in discussing the comparison with Kołakowski .

3. Comparison of Kołakowski and Arendt on the Origins of Modern Political Evil

In the foregoing discussion we have examined "origins" of political evil, as distinct from political evil itself. The proposal of the paper is that the sources of political evil can be found in particular places in the thought of each of these two thinkers: in Kołakowski's case, the "origins of the dialectic" argument, and in Arendt's, the "crystallization of elements of totalitarianism" idea. It does not claim that evil can necessarily be fully explained by these originating sources. The "essence" of evil itself, insofar as this can be discussed, is beyond the scope or purpose of the paper.⁴² At the same time, the existence or presence of political evil in modern times is simply assumed here – taken as a given, with Kołakowski and Arendt taken as primary witnesses to its reality. With different points of emphasis, both writers (I argue) share a clear belief in evil as an irreducible core of negativity in shared political life. These differing points are worth considering.

In distinct ways, the thought of Arendt and Kołakowski foregrounds themes such as the Devil and the demonic, evil that can be described alternatively as "macabre," "radical," and "banal," the lived reality and theoretical and ideological underpinnings of twentieth century totalitarianism, and the spiritual or mental conditions of modernity in which particular evils thrive, both actually (seen already in history) and potentially (to be noted for the future.)

Both thinkers are "a-theistic" in a philosophical sense. I take this to indicate that neither affirms or explicitly rejects the existence of God or the Devil in orthodox theological terms; rather, both adopt a neo-Heideggerian position philosophically, in effect that the existence or non-existence of God is not a question for philosophy. Another highly relevant point of similarity is in their views of the primary historical figures of Joseph Stalin and Adolf Hitler and their respective political systems. Both Stalin and Hitler equally are emblematic figures of totalitarianism, and embodiments of totalitarian evil, for both thinkers; and both thinkers are careful to understand and elaborate the ways in which ideas and systems interact with these historical figures, producing the evil that they do.

Against these points of similarity in general methodological terms, distinct differences between the two philosophers emerge. Exemplary of the Warsaw School of the History of Ideas approach, Kołakowski's writing (on the origins of political evil as elsewhere) embodies rigorous pursuit of philosophical questions undertaken with a deeply historiographical anchoring of the

⁴² Modern political evil and how this might be understood from within Hannah Arendt's writing is the focus of my forthcoming doctoral thesis at Deakin University.

ideas discussed. By contrast Arendt, while also anchored in the history of ideas as a literary *salonnière* or conversationalist across time, pursues what can be called a phenomenological or existentialist method, reflecting but also building upon the influence of her lifelong mentor Karl Jaspers. Arendt remarked of herself that she was a sort of phenomenologist, but “not in Hegel’s way, or Husserl’s.”⁴³ Arendt’s phenomenology is concerned with the operations of mind in the context of the modern “desert” and under the impact of totalitarian evil; both “banality” of mind as one response to desert conditions and the embrace of totalitarian ideology as a solution to homelessness and rootlessness are among her central concerns.

Beyond a-theism and method, the two writers’ responses to “the Devil”, either considered as a trope or as a philosophical category, illustrate another subtlety of their respective responses to the problem of political evil. Kolakowski, highlighting the Devil as part of twentieth century political experience, presents this as an unchanging, intransigent part of human reality. Though he has been labelled a Catholic philosopher by Judt and presumably others, and left a number of cryptic remarks indicating Christian sympathies later in life, Kolakowski also denied being a “sacramental” Catholic in his final year. He seems to mean by the Devil the intransigent core of evil which can be overlooked by modern humans even as they are being assailed by it – a weakness to which intellectuals who do not “believe in the Devil” may be especially prone.

Both writers are quite “literary” in their uses of the Devil. In his Introduction to *Main Currents of Marxism*, Kolakowski likens his Marxist history-writing project to what the German author Thomas Mann was attempting in relation to Nazi history in the novel *Doctor Faustus*.⁴⁴ Mann’s play on the legend of Faust, the man of knowledge who exchanges his soul for worldly success, is widely read as a creative interpretation of Germany’s historic “pact with the Devil” in accepting Hitler; the metaphor, in a double sense, hangs over Kolakowski’s own attempt at describing the history of Marxist thought.⁴⁵

Arendt, who frequently references Goethe (and other towering literary figures) across her work, similarly holds the Faustian character of Mephistopheles in mind in discussing the nature of political evil. In a summary statement just after the Eichmann controversy in 1963, she referred to what she called “the widely held opinion” that evil has a power to produce good, illustrating this with three examples, from Goethe, from the Biblical-Miltonic name “Lucifer” and (less demonically) from Hegel’s idea of the dialectical overcoming of the negative in the philosophy of history:

Mephisto in *Faust* is the *Geist der stets das Böse will und stets das Gute schafft* [the spirit that always wills evil and always creates good]; [furthermore] the devil seen as a fallen angel (Lucifer) suggests that the best are most likely to become the worst; Hegel’s whole philosophy rests on the “power of negation,” of necessity, for instance, to bring about “the realm of freedom,” and so on.⁴⁶

In Arendt’s mind, this patterning places the demonic in the context of the banal, “radical evil” and the wider experience of totalitarianism, her constant focal areas of thought. Nevertheless,

⁴³ Elisabeth Young-Bruehl, *Hannah Arendt: For Love of the World*, Second edition. (Yale University Press, 2004), 405.

⁴⁴ Kolakowski, *Main Currents of Marxism*, 1: The Founders, 4.

⁴⁵ Though an immensely granulated history across hundreds of pages and three volumes, *Main Currents of Marxism* both begins and ends in neo-Faustian tones of judgment on “the monstrous tyranny of Stalin,” and the proposition that “Marxism has been the greatest fantasy of our century.”

⁴⁶ Arendt, *The Jewish Writings*, 479.

despite their common referencing of demonic allusion in literature, there is a sense in which Arendt plays differently from Kolakowski, more lightly or conversationally upon the theme.

The final (and arguably most important) point of comparison and contrast between Kolakowski and Arendt is that in relation to Marxism. As argued, both thinkers are acutely conscious of political evils and the nature of totalitarianism, and both are deeply aware – much more so than many of their contemporary theorists – of the connections between Marxism as ideology or political philosophy and the dehumanised lived reality of totalitarianism, particularly as it emerged with Stalinism. Neither Kolakowski nor Arendt “blamed” Marx for Stalinism, nor for that matter Nietzsche for Hitlerism. But as Kolakowski remarks, in words that seem *simpatico* for Arendt:

It is not a question of establishing the “guilt” of Nietzsche, who as an individual was not responsible for the use made of his writings; nevertheless, the fact that they were so used is bound to cause alarm and cannot be dismissed as irrelevant to the understanding of what was in his mind.⁴⁷

Likewise, the pursuit of what was in the mind of Marx is vigorously undertaken both by Arendt and Kolakowski, who do not come to different conclusions from each other so much as make different uses of what they see. Both are acutely mindful of the fact that totalitarian uses were made of Marx’s writings. Each builds on their insight in this area to develop particular lines of reasoning.

In Kolakowski’s case, the compliment is paid to Marx that his influential and in some respects brilliant scheme of philosophical reasoning is both an original outcome and in many ways also a direct child of German philosophy. This is established from the opening chapters of *Main Currents of Marxism* tracing the pre-history of Marx’s thought, linking it back both to NeoPlatonic and northern European strands of philosophy, and showing both the sophistication and creativity of Marx and his collaborator Engels in establishing a new revolutionary system of thought. The subsequent emergence of Leninism as a state ideology, Stalinism as a totalitarian ideology and various subsequent “critical” strands of Marxism and Marxian thinking are carefully traced. At journey’s end, the fantastic dimension of Marxism – Marxism as a shared fantasy that revolution could usher in a utopian or even improved state of political reality – is persuasively argued. At this point in his own intellectual history, Kolakowski then departs the field of Marxist study for (in his view) more important areas of inquiry.

For Arendt, despite early attempts after publication of *The Origins of Totalitarianism* to write a considered history of Marxism that would fill in the gaps, so to speak, between her accounts of Nazi and Stalinist totalitarianism, Marxism was likewise largely abandoned as an intellectual project. The results of the early attempts emerge in different forms in two places notably: *The Human Condition* of 1958, and the edited versions of Arendt’s Marx manuscripts in the Jerome Kohn-edited 2018 essays volume *Thinking Without a Banister*.⁴⁸ Through *The Human Condition* the profound effect of Arendt’s long reflections on Marx and Marxism come to fruition in her account of “Action” in contradistinction to “Labor” and “Work.” Marx misconceived reality, she argues, by elevating “labor” to the particular central place in history and politics – in the Marxist

⁴⁷ Kolakowski, *Main Currents of Marxism*, 1: The Founders, 4.

⁴⁸ Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 2nd ed., Charles R. Walgreen Foundation Lectures (University of Chicago Press, 1998); Hannah Arendt, *Thinking Without a Banister: Essays in Understanding 1953-1975* (Schocken Books, 2018), 1–68.

version of dialectic – that he did. Instead, from the point of view of *praxis*, or practical politics, Action not Labor should be viewed as the most important historical category. Her proposal of the Labor-Work-Triad was arguably a major intellectual effort to resuscitate what was helpful in the Marxist tradition but place it on a firmer intellectual footing, pointing it away from the totalitarian danger evident in such claims as the idea that “violence is the midwife of history” – a statement of Marx which she held in particular disdain.

Conclusion

Recent scholarship, including Daniel Edison's examination of the influence of Spinoza within Kołakowski's thought, points to the vast research potential lying untapped within the latter's work.⁴⁹ By contrast Arendt's thought on totalitarianism, plurality, natality and righteousness is already being profitably mined by scholars in a wide range of disciplines, an enterprise likely to continue. The two are only part of a considerable intellectual legacy hinted at in Judt's "twentieth century republic of letters."

This paper has pointed to the specific framing of a problem of evil to be more broadly considered within political science, drawing on the distinctive thought trains of both these exile scholars. Where Arendt has been taken, Kołakowski may go further, and vice-versa. Given the upheavals of the twentieth and the twenty-first centuries, their contrasting explorations of fundamental political experience invite further thought and use.

⁴⁹ Daniel Edison, "None of It Matters Now': Leszek Kołakowski between Marx and Spinoza," *Modern Intellectual History* 22, no. 3 (2025): 582–606, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1479244324000520>.

References

- Arendt, Hannah. *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil*. Penguin Books, 2006.
- Arendt, Hannah. *Love and Saint Augustine*. Edited by Joanna Vecchiarelli Scott and Judith Chelius Stark. University of Chicago Press, 1996.
- Arendt, Hannah. *The Human Condition*. 2nd ed. Charles R. Walgreen Foundation Lectures. University of Chicago Press, 1998.
- Arendt, Hannah. *The Jewish Writings*. Edited by Jerome Kohn. Schocken, 2007.
- Arendt, Hannah. *The Origins of Totalitarianism*. Third edition. Penguin, 2017.
- Arendt, Hannah. *The Promise of Politics*. Edited by Jerome Kohn. Schocken Books, 2005.
- Arendt, Hannah. *Thinking Without a Banister: Essays in Understanding 1953-1975*. Schocken Books, 2018.
- Arendt, Hannah, and Heinrich Blücher. *Within Four Walls: The Correspondence between Hannah Arendt and Heinrich Blücher, 1936-1968*. 1st U.S. Harcourt, 2000.
- Benhabib, Seyla. *The Reluctant Modernism of Hannah Arendt*. Modernity and Political Thought; v. 10. Sage Publications, 1996.
- Edison, Daniel. “‘None of It Matters Now’: Leszek Kołakowski between Marx and Spinoza.” *Modern Intellectual History* 22, no. 3 (2025): 582–606.
<https://doi.org/10.1017/S1479244324000520>.
- Figes, Orlando. *The Whisperers: Private Life in Stalin’s Russia*. Metropolitan Books, 2007.
- Gray, Paul. “Hannah Arendt and Immigration Detention.” Master’s thesis, Deakin University, 2020. <https://hdl.handle.net/10779/DRO/DU:22649821.v1>.
- Gray, Paul. “Persistence in the Concentration Camp Form: Boochani’s Manus Island.” Preprint, Politics and International Relations, September 8, 2025. <https://doi.org/10.33774/apsa-2025-5w33x>.
- Judt, Tony. *Reappraisals: Reflections on the Forgotten Twentieth Century*. Penguin Press, 2008.
- Kolakowski, Leszek. *God Owes Us Nothing: A Brief Remark on Pascal’s Religion and on the Spirit of Jansenism*. The University of Chicago Press, 1995.
- Kolakowski, Leszek. *Is God Happy? Selected Essays*. Penguin, 2012.
- Kolakowski, Leszek. *Main Currents of Marxism: Its Origins, Growth and Dissolution*. 1: The Founders, translated by P. S. Falla. Oxford University Press, 1978.
- Lee, Taeku. “Epistemic Institutions and the Populism Dilemma: Reimagining Political Science as a Vocation amid Democratic Breakdown.” *Perspectives on Politics* 24, no. 1 (2026): 9–25.
<https://doi.org/10.1017/S1537592726104575>.
- Sánchez Zamorano, Pura. “Interview with Leszek Kolakowski: ‘I Don’t Consider *Main Currents of Marxism* My Opus Magnum.’” *Hybris*, no. 9 (2009).
- Shklar, Judith. “Hannah Arendt as Pariah.” *Partisan Review* 50, no. 1 (1983).

Walicki, Andrzej. "On Writing Intellectual History: Leszek Kolakowski and the Warsaw School of the History of Ideas." In *Leszek Kotakowski in Memoriam*, edited by Jacek Migasiński. Peter Lang, 2012.

Young-Bruehl, Elisabeth. *Hannah Arendt: For Love of the World*. Second edition. Yale University Press, 2004.