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Tyranny and Totalitarianism in Philosophical Perspective

James R. M. Wakefield¹

In *Totalitarianism and Philosophy*,² Alan Haworth seeks to establish whether totalitarianism was truly a ‘new entity’ in twentieth-century politics, or else something identical in all but name to some older form of dictatorship or tyranny (1).³ He tells us that he was moved to write the book by his worries about ‘the fragility to which institutions are prone’ and the possibility that we might soon see the emergence of something resembling the politics of Europe in the 1930s.

In the span of barely one hundred pages, Haworth covers considerable ground. He begins with the accounts of tyranny given by Plato and Aristotle, as well as attempts at taxonomic definitions by twentieth-century political scientists like Carl J. Friedrich. He goes on to discuss the positive accounts of totalitarianism in the works of Benito Mussolini, Giovanni Gentile, and Carl Schmitt, the widely influential accounts of totalitarian states in the dystopian fiction of Aldous Huxley and George Orwell, and finally the work of Hannah Arendt. A handful of others, like Ernest Renan and Slavoj Žižek, feature in passing. The book’s brevity, despite this large cast, makes it especially useful to students delving into the philosophical literature on totalitarianism for the first time.

Totalitarianism and Philosophy has something to offer existing specialists, too. There is something to be said for seeing authors whose works one knows well set in unfamiliar company, freed from the deadening effects of exhaustive exposition and excessive reverence. What follows, then, is to be a long review of a short book. I read it as a Gentile specialist, for better or worse, and this fact is reflected in the stresses I place upon it. A more-than-usually lengthy discussion is warranted in a review for *Collingwood and British Idealism Studies*, I think, by the rarity of new English-language books

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² Review of Haworth, Alan. *Totalitarianism and Philosophy* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2020) ISBN 978 0 367 43825 8, £44.99 hbk.

³ All unattributed page numbers cited in the text refer to Alan Haworth, *Totalitarianism and Philosophy* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2020). Other texts are cited in standard footnotes.

engaging with Gentile's political thought, and especially his contribution to the wider literature on totalitarianism.

1.

Totalitarianism is a contentious concept, understood in different ways in philosophy, political science, and conventional wisdom. It has come to stand in the popular imagination for a kind of horror politics: the worst excesses of twentieth-century dictatorships and the sum of all that is fearsome in our political histories and possible futures. It conjures visions of rallies and book-burnings, secret police and censorship, paranoia and propaganda, kangaroo courts and concentration camps. It is what unites Hitler's Germany and Stalin's USSR, as well as a variable list of examples, ranging from real-world states like Cold War-era East Germany and modern-day North Korea to fictional ones like Orwell's Oceania, Huxley's World State, and Atwood's Gilead. It is, moreover, an inescapably emotive term, and its use is almost always derogatory, laden with 'the particular values and theoretical preconceptions [of] whoever is using it' (11).

The picture is not much clearer in the scholarly literature. Totalitarianism presents a challenge to people interested in 'political taxonomy,' says Haworth, precisely because there is so little agreement on which real-world systems of government are genuine cases of totalitarianism and which characteristics of such systems are essential to identify any further case as genuine. Haworth points out the weaknesses of 'stipulative definitions' whereby the essence of totalitarianism is distilled from a fixed stock of exemplary cases. Any new example can only more or less perfectly resemble those from history, after all. So conceived, the word would not much help us determine whether a given regime, beyond the established set, is a true example of totalitarianism. If we take, say, Mussolini's Italy, Hitler's Germany, and Stalin's USSR as our models, Franco's Spain might be excluded on the grounds that the three exemplary totalitarian states had charismatic leaders, whereas Francisco Franco was notably *uncharismatic*. This exclusion might be appropriate, but it would also exclude regimes in every other respect identical to one or another of the exemplary cases. There is a risk, then, that stipulative

definitions will be arbitrary or absurd, confirming only the definer's preconceptions about what totalitarianism *really* is.

2.

As Haworth acknowledges, the term 'totalitarianism' originated in Italy, where it appeared in the works of Giovanni Gentile and Benito Mussolini in the mid-1920s. They opposed the 'abstraction' of liberal-democratic individualism and the corresponding conception of the state as just one association among others. They described a conception of the Fascist state as 'the synthesis and unity of all values' and the agent of ethical life, an organism over and (crucially) *above* the individuals and groups contained within it.⁴ Soon afterward, in Germany, Carl Schmitt would describe another vision of the 'total state' in similar terms, without explicitly supporting it. He called the total state 'a polemical concept' opposed to the 'neutralisations and depoliticalisations' of religious, cultural, educational, and economic domains that had characterised nineteenth-century politics. The total state, by contrast, 'embraces every domain' and 'no longer knows anything absolutely nonpolitical'.⁵

Haworth's account of the origins of totalitarianism begins with Mussolini. The history of the word in fact began a year or two earlier. The omission of this detail is understandable, given Haworth's interest in totalitarianism and philosophy, but it is worth remembering if we intend to make an assessment of the mature concept that emerged soon afterward. In 1923, the journalist and Democratic Liberal Giovanni Amendola used the word *totalitario* to describe the ways the Fascists sought to dominate elections, an all-or-nothing approach to power supported by intimidation, bribery and propaganda, as they began to consolidate their dictatorship.⁶ For him, *totalitarismo* characterised not the ideology or

⁴ Benito Mussolini and Giovanni Gentile, 'La dottrina del fascismo,' in Edoardo Susmel and Duilio Susmel (eds.), *Opera omnia di Benito Mussolini*, vol. 34 (Florence: La Fenice, 1961), p. 119; Mussolini in collaboration with Gentile in 'The Doctrine of Fascism,' translated by Douglas Parmée, in Adrian Lyttelton (ed.), *Italian Fascisms from Pareto to Gentile* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1973), p. 44.

⁵ Carl Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political*, expanded edition, translated by George Schwab (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2007), pp. 22, 25.

⁶ Bruno Bongiovanni, 'Totalitarianism: the Word and the Thing,' translated by John Rugman, *Journal of Modern European History*, 3: 1 (2005), p. 5; and Emilio Gentile, 'From Facts to Words: From Militia Party to Fascist Totalitarianism,' translated by Riccardo James Vargiu, in Tommaso Piffer and Vladislav Zubok (eds.),

programme of Fascism, but its *praxis*.⁷ In the way of political insults, the word was soon taken up by those it was intended to criticise, appearing in Mussolini's speeches and Gentile's statements of Party doctrine.

In early 1925, Gentile described Fascism as 'a party, a political doctrine... and above all, a total conception of life,'⁸ and Mussolini referred variously to the Fascists' totalitarian—meaning resolute—will; their totalitarian—meaning all-encompassing—syndicalism; and the need for totalitarian—meaning bold and decisive—solutions to problems.⁹ In this early period, then, 'totalitarian' did not yet signify much more than an image the Fascists sought to reflect in their descriptions of themselves. Gentile came closer to defining it as a political category when, in 1927, he referred to 'the totalitarian character of [Fascist] doctrine, which concerns itself not only with [the] political order and direction of the nation, but with its will, thought and sentiment'.¹⁰ By the early 1930s, the word had been cemented in Fascist discourse as an aspiration and principle of the regime. Gentile wrote that

the only liberty which can be a real thing [is] the liberty of the State and of the individual within the State. Therefore, for the Fascist, everything is in the State, and nothing human or spiritual exists, much less has value, outside the State. In this sense Fascism is totalitarian, and the Fascist State, the synthesis and unity of all values, interprets, develops and gives strength to the whole life of the people.¹¹

Totalitarian Societies and Democratic Transition: Essays in Memory of Victor Zaslavsky (Budapest: Central European University Press, 2017), pp. 114, 120.

⁷ Emilio Gentile, 'Le silence de Hannah Arendt: l'interprétation du fascisme dans Les origines du totalitarisme,' *Revue d'histoire moderne & contemporaine*, 55: 3 (2008), pp. 12–13.

⁸ Giovanni Gentile, *Che cosa è il fascismo. Discorsi e polemiche*, speech delivered 8 March 1925, in *Politica e cultura*, vol. 1, edited by Hervé A. Cavallera (Florence: Le Lettere, 1990), p. 36.

⁹ Benito Mussolini, 'Intransigenza assoluta,' speech delivered to Fourth National Congress of the Fascist Party, 22 June 1925; and telegram to Pino Moschini, 26 October 1925, both in *Opera omnia di Benito Mussolini*, vol. 21, edited by Edoardo and Duilio Susmel (Florence: La Fenice, 1956), pp. 362 and 498; and 'L'articolo 13 della legge sui rapporti collettivi di lavoro,' speech delivered to the Chamber of Deputies, 11 December 1925, in *Opera omnia*, vol. 22 (1957), p. 36

¹⁰ Giovanni Gentile, *Origins and Doctrine of Fascism: with Selections from Other Works*, translated by A. James Gregor (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction, 2002), p. 21; and Origini e dottrina del fascismo, dated April 1927, in *Politica e cultura*, vol. 1, p. 396.

¹¹ Giovanni Gentile, 'Idee fondamentali,' *La dottrina del fascismo*, in Susmel and Susmel eds., *Opera omnia*, vol 34, p. 119; 'The Doctrine of Fascism,' p. 44.

Mussolini, in his half of the same co-authored article, claims that ‘a party that governs a nation in a totalitarian way [*totalitariamente*] is a new fact in history,’ so ‘references and comparisons [to earlier forms of government] are not possible’.¹² Despite this claim, Gentile calls the Risorgimento leader Giuseppe Mazzini the originator of ‘a conception of integral politics, a notion of politics which does not distinguish itself from morality, from religion, or from every conception of life that [incorporates]... all other fundamental interests of the human spirit’.¹³ Meanwhile, Mussolini writes that the nineteenth-century French scholar Ernest Renan anticipated Fascism with his rejection of any conception of a democratic state that promotes the interests of ‘vulgar men’.¹⁴

Haworth makes effective use of Renan’s essay ‘What is a Nation?’ to criticise the Fascists’ conception of the relation between the totalitarian State, the Italian nation, and its ‘spirit’. Renan’s opposition to democracy is not, of course, evidence that he would have supported fascism or totalitarianism. He says a nation is ‘a great solidarity constituted by the feeling of sacrifices made and those that one is still disposed to make’ and ‘a daily plebiscite’.¹⁵ On Haworth’s reading, this amounts to the assertion that the state exists so far as people believe in it and feel self-consciously committed to acting according to its will. But in the absence of further identifying criteria or ‘publicly recognisable rules,’ this formulation ‘obliterates the line between the imaginary and the real’. It is equivalent, says Haworth, to saying that fairies or God exist because we believe in them (24–5). No doubt some people really do believe in such things and take these entities into consideration when reasoning out their actions, but no one could seriously maintain that their bare belief supports a compelling account of political obligation or authority.

Idealists and Gentile specialists might balk at this characterisation of spirit, which dispenses with most of the actualist terminology. Yet there is, to my mind, an obvious advantage to a more straightforward interpretation of the claims presented—it avoids the risk of understanding totalitarianism, which

¹² Benito Mussolini, ‘Dottrina politica e sociale,’ *La dottrina del fascismo*, in *Opera omnia*, vol. 34, p. 128; I have departed slightly from the translation in Lyttelton, *Italian Fascisms*, p. 52.

¹³ Gentile, *Origins and Doctrine of Fascism*, p. 21; *Origini e dottrina del fascismo*, p. 395

¹⁴ Ernest Renan, *Dialogues et fragments philosophiques*, fourth edition (Paris: Michel Lévy Frères, 1895), pp. 99–100; quoted in Mussolini, ‘Dottrina politica e sociale,’ p. 126; and Lyttelton, *Italian Fascisms*, p. 50.

¹⁵ Cf. a more recent, subtly different translation: Ernest Renan, ‘What is a Nation?’ in *What is a Nation? and other Political Writings*, translated by M. F. N. Giglioli (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018), pp. 261–2.

certainly stood (and stands) for something in the real world, only within the confines of a specific theoretical framework. Haworth determines that Gentile's account of totalitarianism 'does not fare all that well when considered as philosophy,' since it fails to establish that the state should be regarded as the ultimate source of authority, superior to and wholly encompassing every individual and group within it. He levels the same charge at Schmitt's version. Neither, adds Haworth, does their thought fare well when considered as ideology, since it explains little about what people in Fascist Italy (and Nazi Germany) really believed or what motivated them to act as they did. Most people in Germany would never have heard of Schmitt, and Gentile's rarefied Hegelianism can hardly have meant much to the Italian public at large (31).

Haworth sometimes shows impatience with the obfuscating tendencies of Hegelian language. 'Try convincing yourself... that the traffic police or the Inland Revenue Service are "wholly spiritual creations",' he writes; 'You would have to be kidding'. Even so, he shows admirable willingness to entertain the possibility that these thinkers were sincerely trying to make sense of a world shared with, and recognisable to, the rest of us, and that we can try to make their cases for totalitarianism intelligible in other words, without the 'quasi-Hegelian mode of expression' in which they are framed (22). He notes that Schmitt's view of 'an organised people,' like Gentile's of 'a nation,' hinges on the assumption that certain conditions must be in place before we can talk about political or social units as anything more than aggregates of individuals. Those individuals must think of themselves as contributing to a shared enterprise; their willingness to act as a single unit, or to sacrifice their individual interests to a wider community, presupposes that they conceive of themselves and their institutions in something like this way.

Haworth goes on to ask whether totalitarianism might better be understood as a state of affairs in which political leaders exercise total, rather than merely extensive, control over their citizens. This definition, he suggests, would enable us to distinguish totalitarian regimes from more conventionally tyrannical ones: totalitarianism would be a perfected form of tyranny, 'a theoretical ideal to which tyrants may aspire... resembling absolute zero, the infinitely small point, or the frictionless machine... [which] can never be achieved in practice' (39). Understanding totalitarianism thus, as the unattainable end of a

hypothetical scale, means that any law or government action of which we disapprove can be criticised for being, by necessity, *closer* to the totalitarian extreme than we would like. The word becomes simply a rhetorical marker for *too much government*, or the *wrong kind of government*, however conceived.

For Haworth, a decisive objection to this way of thinking about totalitarianism is that it effectively defines such regimes out of existence (43). Nazi Germany and Stalin's USSR might have been closer than other oppressive regimes, including Fascist Italy, to the ideal standard of totalitarian control, but even they hardly exercised total control over their citizens. Haworth points out that bans on smoking in restaurants and the walking of dogs in parts of certain public parks also impose limits on people's freedom, though they prevent people from doing those things only so far as those same people *want* to do so in the first place. For people who neither smoke nor own dogs, 'control does not enter the story' (40). If 'totalitarianism' is to be more than a term of abuse or bogeyman we can invoke when we disapprove of a government or its rulings—in the same way, says Haworth, that some on the right call people who support universal healthcare or gay marriage 'liberals,' not as a result of any 'cool analysis of [their opponents'] political standpoint,' but because they think anyone who supports such policies must be a 'schmuck'—we need to look elsewhere (57). Without some great change to human nature to make us 'totally controlled puppet[s],' he adds, the difference between totalitarian control and other kinds of coercive control can only be a matter of degree (42).

It is instructive to look again to Gentile and Schmitt to appreciate how the 'total control' and 'frictionless machine' views of totalitarianism fail to capture what kind of politics its advocates thought they were theorising. For Gentile, the maintenance of social order is 'the primary task' and an 'essential and fundamental need' of every state, but the state's 'vital sap' is drawn from the order that 'reigns in men's hearts'. He concedes that policing—to say nothing of castor oil and blackjacks—may sometimes be necessary, but only as 'medicine' to restore the ailing body politic to full health.¹⁶ Unless the people recognise the state as an extension of themselves, more policing will do nothing to persuade them.

¹⁶ Giovanni Gentile, *Genesis and Structure of Society* (1946), translated by H. S. Harris (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1966), p. 182.

While Schmitt is generally readier than Gentile to acknowledge the practical implications of his theory, he expresses reservations about what an all-encompassing state might look like in practice. In 1938, with the harsh realities of the Nazi dictatorship plain to see and his own position compromised as a result of his reservations about Hitler's personal rule, Schmitt makes a telling remark in his book on Hobbes:

[Hobbes's theory] still serves today as the prototype of what western democracy perceives to be a polemical horror picture of a "totalitarian" state... [The] objections [that] were raised against his formulations... if valid, would have turned his doctrine into an absurdity. For example, Hobbes' theory of the state would certainly have been a peculiar philosophy of state if its entire train of thought had consisted only of propelling poor human beings from the utter fear of the state of nature only into the similarly total fear of a dominion by a Moloch or by a Golem.¹⁷

This might be read as a confession of buyer's remorse— marking Schmitt's realisation, rather too late, that the kind of totalitarianism that had developed in Nazi Germany represented more than the overcoming of the limited imagination and corresponding vocabulary of nineteenth-century political thinkers. In 1933, he had pointed out the 'new means and possibilities of tremendous power, the range and consequences of which we hardly suspect'. It was high time, he suggested, for the new, 'qualitative' total state to seize these and rid itself of the limitations of the nineteenth-century political imagination and vocabulary.¹⁸ In the years since, those latent capacities had been realised, revealing a state resembling the 'horror picture'—the Moloch or Golem—western democrats described.

What is remarkable in the works of the thinkers who first promoted the idea of totalitarianism as the ideal form of state was that they so frankly acknowledged the powers of modern technology, media,

¹⁷ Carl Schmitt, *The Leviathan in the State Theory of Thomas Hobbes: Meaning and Failure of a Political Symbol*, edited by George Schwab; translated by George Schwab and Erna Hilfstein (Westport, CN: Greenwood Press, 1996), p. 71. Originally published in 1938.

¹⁸ Carl Schmitt, 'Further Development of the Total State in Germany' (1933), *Four Articles, 1931–1938*, translated by Simona Draghici (Washington: Plutarch Press, 1999), pp. 19–27

and education systems to change the way people thought, not only by forcing them, as tyrants had always done, but by reshaping them in such a way that they wanted what the state wanted them to want.

3.

The obstacles Haworth encounters on his quest for a clear view of totalitarianism are due, in part, to the opposing purposes of different generations of thinkers trying to make sense of the term. Those like Hannah Arendt, Carl J. Friedrich, and Zbigniew K. Brzezinski, who developed their accounts of totalitarianism after the Second World War, were concerned above all with the ways mass societies had been mobilised in the service of violence and oppression on an unprecedented scale. Arendt decries the combination of ‘sheer insanity’ and ‘absolute evil’ that enabled the totalitarian governments to come to power— which they conceived in an ‘entirely new and unprecedented’ form, rooted in a correspondingly new ‘concept of reality’—and to wield it as far as they did. The post-War theorists were little interested in the development of the concept by the people who professed to support it. As Friedrich and Brzezinski put it, ‘totalitarian dictatorship *as it actually developed* was not intended by those who created it’: Mussolini ‘talked of it, though he meant something different’.¹⁹ Arendt, meanwhile, is interested in the idea of totalitarianism—the currents of thought by which its horrors were fed and as a result of which they could be accepted and enacted by supposedly reasonable, cultured people—but not so much in totalitarianism in the history of philosophy proper. Gentile, for instance, is cited in just a single footnote in Arendt’s book, in support of a passage in which the author suggests that Italian Fascism ‘does not come up to the standards’ of genuine totalitarianism, having more in common, in practice, with more familiar forms of tyranny and personal rule.²⁰ Schmitt is cited more often, but Arendt does not consider his account of totalitarianism essential to an understanding of its true significance in practice as well as theory.

¹⁹ Carl J. Friedrich and Zbigniew K. Brzezinski, *Totalitarian Dictatorship and Autocracy*, second edition, revised by Carl J. Friedrich (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1965), pp. 15–16; my emphasis.

²⁰ Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, p. 325 and 325n

These post-War theorists shared a commitment to the idea that totalitarianism was one thing, though expressed in different forms and ideological contents. On this view, totalitarianism was a novel kind of politics at which the rulers of Nazi Germany and Stalin's USSR arrived from different starting points. Their philosophical justifications for adopting the distinctive means and methods of totalitarianism, where they gave any, are to a large extent beside the point. They may not even have done so self-consciously, and very probably did not see themselves as contributing to an endeavour in common with their wartime rivals. The characterisation of totalitarianism as a generic form of horror politics, then, was part of a constructive project intended to distinguish between a relatively decent, reasonable and correctable form of politics on one side and the fearsome totalitarian alternative on the other.

In chapter 5, Haworth tries a new tack. He has so far disposed of the idea that totalitarianism can be classified by political scientists in the way a creature washed up on a beach can be classified by zoologists; of the 'mysticism' underlying the total state according to Gentile and Schmitt, who presuppose a shared identity—a nation, a race—that remains to be concretely realised in political institutions; and of the identification of totalitarianism with unrestricted leadership and total control of the population. He turns now to the place of totalitarianism in dystopian fiction. He focuses on two examples: the 'over-utilitarian, over-optimistic scientism' of Huxley's *Brave New World*, and the overt oppression of Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (47).

Neither of these novels was intended to describe any actual state, nor any future one, exactly. Even so, both contributed appreciably to the way the concept of totalitarianism was (and is) commonly talked about. In *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, Orwell gave us the omnipresent, uncritically beloved figure of Big Brother, the mindless Two Minutes Hate, the fearsome Thought Police seeking to suppress thoughtcrime, the ugliness of Newspeak, the grand ironies of the Ministry of Truth's memory holes, and the bespoke horrors of Room 101 in the Ministry of Love. Orwell portrays the totalitarian state in vivid and memorable form, as something at once brutal and incomprehensible, led by faceless bureaucrats callously indifferent to truth and dedicated to control above all else. Its citizens are subject to permanent disorientation, paranoia, and fear. Huxley, in *Brave New World*, describes another kind of dystopia, in which 'an army of managers control[s] a population of slaves who do not have to be

coerced, because they love their servitude' (quoted in Haworth, 46). The horrifying promise of totalitarianism, common to both these accounts, is that the people subject to it might consent to their own oppression—indeed, they might even be in some sense *happy*, whether because they have been deprived of the ability to be otherwise (Huxley) or because they have been conditioned to love, or believe they love, what oppresses them (Orwell).

Haworth doubts that people living in a totalitarian state could ever experience more than 'Benthamite happiness'. It is one thing to be happy because one has been drugged, as in Huxley's novel, or, as in Orwell's, systematically deceived and cowed into compliance with a kind of 'perverted idealism'. There, though, the question of happiness hardly arises, since 'it is impossible to see how anyone could be happy' amid all the obvious horrors of *Airstrip One* (50, 53). It is quite another thing to be happy in the thicker, all-things-considered sense of the word preferred by Aristotle and John Stuart Mill. Citizens of Huxley's *World State*, says Haworth, are 'passive in relation to the pleasures they pursue and experience' (51). They have no opportunity to discriminate or choose between different courses their lives might follow. They are free in the sense that they are given the means to do what they want, but unfree in the sense that what they want is thoroughly determined for them in advance. To this extent, their lives are not their own.

We might worry that invocations of fictional dystopias, however well-known, cannot help us come to grips with real-world totalitarianisms, whether historical, actual, or as-yet-undiscovered. Yet it is, says Haworth, a 'disconcerting fact' that people living under real dictatorships were willing to give up their rights and liberties in exchange for other goods, such as security, stability, and national pride. Tempting as it may be to see this as a result of some extraordinary alignment of dark stars—resentment, modernist disorientation, industrial power, imperialism, and the previously untapped powers of mass communication, say—it is telling that large numbers of people really were willing to accept 'happiness for most people' at the cost of 'misery for some' (55–6). Orwell's beleaguered protagonist, Winston Smith, is given the horrifying promise that 'reality is inside the skull'—the victory of totalitarian regimes occurs when they control people's thoughts, and thus, by extension, their reality.²¹ Perhaps the

²¹ George Orwell, *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (London: Penguin, 2000), p. 277

great lesson of this scene is that such control did not, in general, demand the bespoke torture of Room 101, but only the more mundane means of propaganda, education, and a persistent sense of imminent peril.

4.

Fiction plays a further, perhaps unexpected, part in the remaining chapters of *Totalitarianism and Philosophy*. After a short connecting chapter, in which he ruminates on the sight of a stranger chasing a runaway dog and calling it a ‘fascist,’ Haworth turns his attention to Arendt. Arendt’s work is urgent and vital in part because it gives a narrative account of totalitarianism as horror politics. She is interested in ‘the questions with which [her] generation [was] forced to live for the better part of its adult life: *What happened? How did it happen? How could it have happened?*’²² The ‘it’ of these questions is not so much totalitarianism as described by those who advocated it, but instead what the word came to represent to those who, like her, were subject to its special forms of terror. The philosophical problem that motivates Arendt’s accounts of totalitarianism is that of how a new form of politics engendered the total ‘moral collapse’ of the societies it embraced. Victims and perpetrators alike, she insists, were caught up in the wave of totalitarian terror, complicit in atrocities while certain that, though they bore a heavy burden, they were on the right side of history.²³ People across Europe were primed for totalitarianism by a century of anti-Semitism, growing inequality, isolation, and capitalism. In Haworth’s gloss, these together formed a ‘totalitarian mentality,’ the ‘social soil’ from which totalitarianism proper could grow (67).

Fiction features in Arendt’s account of totalitarianism in two ways. First, she claims that totalitarian regimes performed ‘experiment[s] in constantly transforming reality into fiction... [for the ultimate purpose of] total domination’ (71).²⁴ The special power of totalitarian governments, which distinguishes them from oppressive regimes of earlier times, stemmed from their interest in preventing those under

²² Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (Orlando, FL: Harcourt, 1976), p. xxiv.

²³ Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (London: Penguin, 2006), p. 123.

²⁴ Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, p. 192.

their sway from thinking clearly or making judgements for themselves. The ‘iron band of terror’ binds people even when they are alone; they are given reason to distrust one another, to suppress any inclination to go against the grain, and to feel ‘utterly lost’ without the security the regime grants them.²⁵ This makes them unswervingly obedient, morally pliable, and dependent on recognised authority to the extent that they are practically—indeed, fanatically—impervious to outside influence, at least as long as the regime remains in power.²⁶

Haworth finds Arendt’s account of totalitarianism insightful, though not wholly persuasive in points of detail. Arendt describes an *idea* of totalitarianism that those who supported such regimes did not have of themselves. This is not to say that her analysis is mistaken. Rather, it is to say that her principal concern is with the rise of horror politics and the failure of entrenched social norms to prevent it. More especially, Haworth suggests that Arendt is wrong to suppose that every case of totalitarianism fits into one explanatory mould. For example, she insists that the *purpose* of totalitarian domination is to ensure that people are enclosed in a rigid, fanatically supported, internally consistent ideology of fictitious beliefs, as confirmed by the tendency of Soviet prisoners to confess to crimes they never committed,²⁷ and that Nazi concentration camps are best understood as ‘laboratories’ used for ‘experiment[s] in total domination’.²⁸ Thus she assumes, first, that totalitarianism was an end in itself, reached via different routes, more or less self-consciously, by the Nazi and Stalinist governments; and, second, that the development of this form of politics was motivated by a desire to ‘transform... the human personality into a mere thing’ (72).²⁹ This description conveys the horrors experienced by some people living under totalitarian regimes, some of the time, but it is not clear that such experiences are essential to the definition of totalitarianism. The selection of facts to fit a unifying narrative is the second way fiction features in her account. Regarding the concentration camps, for example, Haworth says that ‘to drop [Arendt’s] particular description is not... to detract from the camp system’s evil character’. The camps

²⁵ Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, p. 478.

²⁶ Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, pp. 363–4.

²⁷ Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, p. 353.

²⁸ Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, p. 392.

²⁹ Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, p. 438.

‘remain cruel institutions designed to gratify the sadistic appetites of a racist regime. It is simply to deny the applicability of a particular theoretical story to their case’ (73–4).

A more mundane explanation for the emergence of totalitarian regimes is not that they wrought any grand change to human nature, but that many human beings were, and presumably still are, more biddable than we like to imagine; we are readier to go along with the demands others make of us; and we are willing to redraw our moral boundaries to justify actions that, here and now, in relative comfort and security, we would dismiss as abhorrent. This is less neat than Arendt’s explanation, but in a way just as worrying. Reservations aside, what stands out for Haworth in her account is the idea that totalitarianism reveals something about the relationships between us, the world we inhabit, and the political and social structures on which we build our ideas about our lives. This, he says, ‘is an insight we would do well to take seriously, for we are, ourselves, living through times in which profound changes are taking place—changes that ought to prompt a rethinking of our social and political relationships’ (95).

5.

The brevity of *Totalitarianism and Philosophy* will make it occasionally frustrating for specialists in any of the major figures discussed in it. Yet, as mentioned already, there is real value in seeing these thinkers’ ideas distilled to their essences and laid out together, especially since so many of them are difficult for students to fathom. Philosophy enables us to look upon concepts like totalitarianism from multiple points of view, to compare the arguments used to reach each one, and to see how and why thoughtful people have arrived at judgements (sometimes) markedly different from our own.

When I finished the book, I was not yet convinced that Haworth had ‘nailed’ the concept of totalitarianism as squarely as he intended. Even so, the questions he raises along the way are pertinent and worthy of attention, his answers clear-sighted, and the overall tenor of the discussion neither reverential nor sententious, as some of the existing secondary literature has been. The book will serve as a useful aid for those teaching courses on mid-twentieth-century political theory. The ideas and

experiences of those interested in totalitarianism in the last century are likely, as Haworth suggests, to be instructive to us in the twenty-first century, for all that our circumstances are substantially, and in some ways radically, different from those that prevailed in the 1930s. It would be naïve to expect the worst of our politics in the present century to resemble exactly that of eighty or ninety years ago, but it is enough that today's 'despots, and would-be despots,' should aspire to resurrect the same spirit. 'Such can be the way of spectres,' Haworth concludes (97). Philosophy should, at the very least, help us recognise such spectres when we see them.