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Robert Fine

Judgment and the reification of the faculties

A reconstructive reading of Arendt's *Life of the Mind*

Abstract The core argument in this paper is that, to reconstruct the last unwritten section on *Judging* in Hannah Arendt's *Life of the Mind*, it is necessary to address what Arendt was doing with the book as a whole and how the different parts relate internally to one another. This is no easy matter, especially as the existing sections on *Thinking* and *Willing* are quite different in tone from one another. My proposition is that the work should be read as a critique of the life of the 'modern' mind, and especially of the differentiation of the modern mind into distinct and reified faculties. The work as a whole is an attempt to understand the distorted forms of modernization that result from the division of the life of the mind into opposing faculties. It is, so to speak, a critique of the combined and uneven development of the life of the modern mind. While Arendt famously argues that the activity of thinking itself conditions people against evil-doing, the spectre that informs her analysis of both thinking and willing is the danger of nihilism inherent in these mental activities. The work raises vital questions concerning the conditions under which this danger is actualized and the means by which it might be averted. What this entails for our reconstruction of the missing section on judgment is that, rather than see it as the core of Arendt's contribution to political thought or as the promised solution to an impasse, we should explore the equivocations of judging. This aporetic reading of the text helps clarify Arendt's concerns over the separation of the life of the mind from the world and the role of both judging and understanding in renewing its connections to the world.

Key words critique · Hannah Arendt · judgment · life of the mind · modernity · nihilism · thinking · understanding · will · worldliness

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A question of method: judging and *The Life of the Mind*

Judgment, or judging, was to be the last section of Hannah Arendt's unfinished work on *The Life of the Mind*.¹ It was never written. What we have instead are fragments of discussion on the nature of judgment drawn from various texts, including the first two sections of *Life of the Mind*, those on 'Thinking' and 'Willing', Arendt's *Lectures on Kant's Critique of Judgment*, and various other political and cultural essays.² Curiously, this has not stopped many commentators from representing this 'incomplete', but in fact barely started, work as the core of Arendt's contribution to political thought. 'The faculty of judgment played a pre-eminent role in Hannah Arendt's political and moral thought', writes Albrecht Wellmer in characteristic mode.³ This may be true but it is a little strange to pick out this one radically incomplete aspect of Arendt's political thought when she proffered such highly developed analyses of other subjects such as totalitarianism, anti-Semitism, imperialism, evil, crimes against humanity, revolution and the public sphere. Something special is clearly being accorded to the faculty of judgment, or rather to one type of judgment, reflective judgment, and there is a sense in which either Arendt herself or her later commentators see in reflective judgment a kind of philosopher's stone that will open the secrets of political thought.⁴

Any reconstruction of this missing last section of *Life of the Mind* has to address what Arendt was doing with the book as a whole. To 'complete' in any satisfactory sense the unfinished section of this book, we need to extract the *method* present within Arendt's analysis of the life of the mind as a whole, see how she applies this method to the study of thinking and willing, and then extend this method to the subject of judging. This is no easy matter – particularly as the sections on 'Thinking' and 'Willing' have a very different character.⁵ Yet if we are to reconstruct the unwritten final section of *Life of the Mind* on judging, we need to have an idea of what the work as a whole is doing and how the different parts relate internally to one another.

Putting aside for a brief moment any doubts we might have about the treatment of thinking, willing and judging as distinct *faculties*, let me put forward the following proposition about the relationship between thinking, willing and judging as Arendt conceived or more accurately *might have* conceived it. My proposition is that Arendt was a classical thinker in this respect at least, that she had some notion of a possible harmony between these faculties of the mind; but she saw any such harmony severely jeopardized in the modern world where the activities of thinking, willing and judging are radically differentiated, specialized and in constant risk of non-reciprocal isolation. The danger she saw lies both in the atrophy and in the hypertrophy of one or more of these

faculties. If modernity in some sense constitutes the differentiation of the faculties and allows for the specialization of thought, will and judgment as discrete elements in a larger division of mental labour, modernity also creates the pathogenic conditions for the underdevelopment of some of these faculties of the mind and the overdevelopment of others. It is an instance, if you like, of combined and uneven development of the faculties of the mind.

The focus of Arendt's study, in my reading of it, are the pathologies of the life of the *modern* mind. When we read the text of *Life of the Mind*, it becomes clear that Arendt sees the 'faculties' of thinking and willing as containing deep inner contradictions and there is no reason to suppose that her treatment of judging would be any different. While the isolation of thinking, willing and judging in the modern division of intellectual labour brings to the fore the contradictions latent within each of these faculties, Arendt's underlying motif is that it is only through the unity of the life of the mind that the contradictions internal to one faculty can be mediated by another. In other words, we might say that the angle from which Arendt approaches the life of the mind as a whole, as well as judgment in particular, is that of understanding the distorted form of modernization that results from the division of the life of the mind into distinct and opposing faculties and of denaturing this division.⁶

A yet more radical question Arendt's text raises is whether we should rationalize the division of the mind into 'faculties' in the first place, and whether we should reconstruct the missing section on judgment on the basis of this reified category. The temptation to reify mental activities into faculties is certainly apparent in the text, but I would hold that it is incompatible with the more aporetic aspects of Arendt's work. Sometimes she seems to elevate thinking as the good faculty, demote willing as the bad faculty and posit judgment as the 'promised synthesis' or 'solution' to an 'impasse'.⁷ Or she might posit thinking as reflective inaction, willing as non-reflective action and judgment as the reconciliation of reflection and action. Or she might appear to treat thought as the abstract universal, will as the concrete particular and judgment as the reconciliation of the universal and the particular. I cannot believe, however, that any such 'dialectic' – in which thinking serves as the thesis, willing as its antithesis and judging as the synthesis – is a road Arendt wished to go down.

In short, in reconstructing the absent section on judging we should resist the impulse to elevate judgment as the moment of reconciliation between opposing faculties. To be sure, judgment is an essential component of the life of the modern mind (as any student of the superego will know) but it serves less as a promised synthesis than as the source of new repressions and conflicts. What I read in Arendt is that there is *no* faculty of the mind, not even reflective judgment, which

does not create as many difficulties as it solves when it enters alone into the public arena. Judgment without thought is arbitrary; judgment without will is ineffective.⁸ To support this aporetic reading of the text, I shall review first Arendt's analysis of the activity of thinking and its capacity to prepare the ground for judgment; second, the nature of the impasse she saw in the faculty of willing and the 'solution' proffered to this impasse through the appeal to judgment; and finally, the pertinence to the *Life of the Mind* of what was a recurrent theme in Arendt's earlier writings: the unity of understanding and judgment.

Thinking and judging

A common and indeed fruitful approach to understanding *The Life of the Mind* is to draw upon Arendt's reflections on the banality of evil with which she introduces the text.⁹ In her 'report' on the Eichmann trial Arendt argued that the most striking quality of Adolf Eichmann, the Nazi official in charge of transporting Jews to the death camps, was his thoughtlessness, his inability to engage in the activity of thinking.¹⁰ The effect of this 'inability to think', this 'total absence of thinking',¹¹ led her to focus on the relationship between thinking and judging and pose the following question:

Might the problem of good and evil, our faculty for telling right from wrong, be connected with our faculty for thought? Could the activity of thinking as such, the habit of examining and reflecting upon whatever happens to come to pass, regardless of specific content and quite independent of results, could this activity be of such a nature that it 'conditions' men against evil-doing?¹²

Arendt and most of her interpreters agree that thinking does have an internal connection with the ability to judge right from wrong and the final words of her essay on 'Thinking and Moral Considerations' express this connection with customary eloquence: 'The manifestation of the wind of thought is no knowledge; it is the ability to tell right from wrong, beautiful from ugly. And this indeed may prevent catastrophes, at least for myself, in the rare moments when the chips are down.'¹³ Faced with the conjunction of evil-doing and thoughtlessness, Arendt found in the activity of thinking as such a possible antidote to the doing of evil: 'thinking is among the conditions that make men abstain from evil-doing'.¹⁴

As Dana Villa sees it, the connection between thinking and judging was formulated by Arendt in basically negative terms: thinking prepares for judgment by purging us of 'fixed habits of thought', 'ossified rules and standards' and 'conventional . . . codes of expression'; it creates an 'open space of moral or aesthetic discrimination and discernment'.¹⁵

Arendt characterizes judging as the by-product of the liberating effect of thinking. While thinking deals with the representation of things that are absent, judging always concerns particulars and things close at hand. This liberating effect is not because thinking can reveal in a positive mode the truth of what is right: 'We cannot expect', she wrote, 'any moral propositions or commandments, no final code of conduct, from the thinking activity, least of all a new and now allegedly final definition of what is good and what is evil'.¹⁶ She does not recommend any such metaphysics of justice. Rather she finds something in the 'negative', 'resultless' and 'dissolvent' nature of thinking that, by questioning everything and treating nothing as final, shatters the unreflective morality of good and evil.

Arendt draws on the metaphors for thinking associated with Plato's account of Socrates. Thinking is a 'gadfly' that arouses us from our sleep and makes us feel alive; it is a 'midwife' that helps people purge themselves of unexamined prejudices; it is an 'electric ray' that momentarily paralyses us but makes us *stop* and think, interrupts our activities and infects others with our own perplexities. This 'stop-and-think' capacity may appear as irritating indecision but at times of crisis, when 'everybody is swept away unthinkingly by what everybody else does and believes in', thinking asserts the claims of inaction – of a refusal to join in. It makes us feel unsure of what seemed beyond doubt while we were unthinkingly engaged in action. If Eichmann is the representative figure of thoughtlessness, Socrates was the representative figure of the moral efficacy of thinking per se.

This is one side of the picture and it is the most familiar. There is, however, another aspect that frames Arendt's analysis of thinking. It concerns the *danger of nihilism* inherent in the activity of thinking as such. Arendt acknowledges that thinking 'inevitably has a destructive, undermining effect on all established criteria, values, measurements for good and evil, in short on those customs and rules of conduct we treat of in morals and ethics'.¹⁷ While the strength of thinking lies in its critical capacity, the pathology of thinking is the mirror of its strength. In Arendt's terminology, it transforms the non-results of Socratic thinking into negative results. If thinking undermines established notions of piety, it can also turn impiety into its maxim. The spectre of nihilism is latent within the very activity of thinking.

Thinking can at any moment turn against itself, produce a reversal of old values, and declare these contraries to be 'new values' . . . What we commonly call nihilism . . . is actually a danger inherent in the thinking activity itself. There are no dangerous thoughts; thinking itself is dangerous . . .¹⁸

Since all critical thought must go through a stage of negating accepted opinions and values, nihilism is the 'ever-present danger of thinking'.

The conclusion we may draw from these observations is that while thinking *may* clear the path for judgment, it may equally engender a mere reversal of old values. We find accordingly that thinking has an unexpected affinity with non-thinking. Non-thinking, as Arendt puts it, teaches us only ‘to hold fast to whatever the prescribed rules of conduct may be at a given time in a given society’.¹⁹ If the prescribed rules of conduct change and there is a reversal of the basic commandments of western morality like ‘Thou shalt not kill’ and ‘Thou shalt not bear false witness’ – as there was in the era of totalitarianism – we can as unthinkingly hold to the new code as we did to the old. The ease with which such reversals can take place under certain conditions, such as those that existed in Nazi Germany and Stalinist Russia, suggested to Arendt that most people were ‘fast asleep’ when they occurred.

This suggests to me what Arendt referred to in *The Origins of Totalitarianism* as ‘the temporary alliance between the mob and the elite’ – that is, a connection between the atrophy of thinking on the side of the mob and the hypertrophy of thinking on the side of the elite.²⁰ Arendt drew on Nietzsche’s depiction of nihilism in *The Will to Power*: ‘What does nihilism mean? That the highest values devalue themselves. The aim is lacking; “why?” finds no answer’.²¹ Nietzsche anticipated a time when the values and beliefs taken as the highest manifestation of the spirit of the West would lose their validity and breed a ‘spiritless radicalism’ full of hostility to culture and images of destruction. The barbarism Nietzsche anticipated proved to be a pale image of the barbarism to come. Arendt saw the conversion of nihilism into a political programme as the expression of a *justified disgust* with the fake world of bourgeois values felt by the most thoughtful of observers after the Great War. She wrote of how radical intellectuals of the ‘front generation’ shared a sense of revulsion at the gulf between the values society espoused and the mechanized murder they experienced.²² It was not thoughtlessness that provoked this elite to become ‘absorbed by their desire to see the ruin of this whole world of fake security, fake culture and fake life’. On the contrary, the desire to elevate violence, cruelty and destruction as ‘supreme capacities of humankind’ was itself the product of thought.²³ True, Arendt was at pains to emphasize the *temporary* nature of this alliance between the elite and the mob, for thinking and thoughtlessness are uneasy bed-fellows. But this experience of the pathologies of thinking belies any premature identification of this faculty with abstention from evil-doing.

Actually, the dangers of thinking are scattered throughout Arendt’s writings. Thinking can turn ‘what ought to be’ into an absolute standard against which everything that exists is treated with indifference or disdain. Thinking can turn the idea of Progress into a justification for the most criminal of human actions. Thinking can superimpose the ‘logic of

an idea' onto the concrete historical process and pretends to know 'the mysteries of the whole historical process'. Thinking can privilege deduction from ideological premises over any activity of judgment. Heidegger is perhaps for Arendt an exemplary case of the philosopher who pushes thinking to the point where its remoteness from the world leads to 'error', if not evil – in this case, his engagement with National Socialism.²⁴ It is an old story that great philosophers do not necessarily manifest sound political judgment and regard 'with indifference and contempt . . . the world of the city'. Thinking, we might say, does not only prepare the way for judgment. It needs judgment to save itself from itself.

Willing and judging

'Willing' is for very good reason the less studied section of *Life of the Mind*. Its long historical passages on philosophical conceptions of the will fail to make transparent what Arendt was seeking to say about this faculty and its relation to judgment. Certainly, she was interested in the modern identification of freedom with the will or rather with the disavowal of this modern conception of freedom. Freedom is a political artefact, not an internal quality of human beings, and its origins lie in the political community of the ancient *polis*. The faculty of the will, by contrast, is a modern phenomenon, its differentiation from the life of the mind as a whole is the product of modern times: 'We almost automatically equate freedom with free will, that is, with a faculty virtually unknown to classical antiquity . . . The Greeks never became aware of the will as a distinct faculty separate from other human capacities.'²⁵ The emergence of the will appears as a mixed blessing. On the one hand, we have the Kantian insight that free will is the basis of all modern conceptions of right, morality, responsibility and lawfulness: 'Without the assumption that the will is free no precept of a moral, religious or juridical nature could possibly make sense.'²⁶ Arendt, however, impatiently jumps over this aspect. Her focus is firmly on the pathologies of willing in the modern world. For Arendt, the idea of the will is more intimately attached to terror than to freedom – or rather to a form of freedom that can only express itself in the experience of terror.

Consider, for instance, Arendt's discussion of the doctrine of the 'general will' in *On Revolution*. She contrasts the idea of 'consent', with its 'overtones of deliberate choice and considered opinion', with the idea of 'will' which 'essentially excludes all processes of exchange of opinions and an eventual agreement between them'.²⁷ The silent assumption of this doctrine is that the will is an automatic articulation of interest and that the general will is therefore the articulation of a general interest. Indivisible and dedicated to unanimity, the general will can only exist

as a singular entity: 'a divided will would be inconceivable'. It conceives of the people as a 'multi-headed monster, a mass that moves . . . as though possessed by one will'. Its outstanding quality is unanimity and allows for no independence of personality. The general will presents itself as always in the right and holds that not only the particular opinions of individuals are subordinate to the whole but that the value of the individual should be judged by the extent to which 'he acts against his own interest and against his own will'. The common enemy that unites the people is not only an external power but the particular will and interest of each person: 'such an enemy existed within the breast of each citizen'. The general will inaugurates a world of universal suspicion and denunciation. It prepares the ground for the abolition of all legal and institutional guarantees. Following Rousseau's dictum that 'it would be absurd for the will to bind itself for the future', the general will anticipates the fateful instability of totalitarian governments: 'Nothing is less permanent and less likely to establish permanence than the will'. Even nature can offer it no resistance.

It is not surprising that Arendt presents the faculty of the will as 'the trickiest and the most dangerous of modern concepts and misconceptions'.²⁸ She found something deeply disturbing in the shift in the conception of the future that accompanies the modern age's concept of Progress – 'from that which approaches us to that which we determine by the Will's projects'. There is something frightening in the individuation brought about by the will – in the movement from a political conception of freedom that is possible only in the sphere of human plurality to a philosophical conception of freedom that is fundamentally solipsistic: 'No man can act alone . . . Men if they wish to achieve something in the world must act in concert.'²⁹ There is something delusional in the democratic prejudice that a political community should represent the will of the people, for all political communities 'constrain the will of their citizens' and at best 'open up some spaces of freedom for action'.³⁰ Unlike thinking, which is manifest in internal dialogue, Will is essentially about domination, not dialogue, even if we are both those who give the orders and those who obey them and take for granted the obedience in ourselves. 'To will is to command', writes Nietzsche; 'inherent in the Will is the commanding thought.'³¹ Drawing on Nietzsche, Arendt sees the impotence of the will, which is but the other side of its megalomania, as the primary source of human evil in the modern world. From the fact that 'the will cannot will backward . . . cannot stop the wheel of time . . . from that impotence Nietzsche derives all human evil' – resentment, the thirst for vengeance, the will to power over others.³² Drawing on Heidegger, she associates the will's destructiveness with its obsession with the future: 'In order to will the future in the sense of being the future's master, men must forget and finally

destroy the past. . . . This destructiveness ultimately relates to everything that is.³³ Technology, defined as the will to subject the whole world to domination, has as its natural end total destruction. ‘Man as he is now’, Arendt writes, ‘when he is honest, is a nihilist . . . a man who judges of the world as it is that it ought not to be and of the world as it ought to be that it does not exist’.³⁴ No surprise, then, that Arendt writes of the ‘abyss of freedom’ that opens up when the will underpins the establishment of a new social order (LM 11 207); the ‘abyss of nothingness’ that opens up before the thought of an absolute beginning (208); the ‘abyss of pure spontaneity’ that opens up in the face of the unfounded promises of a final realm of absolute freedom, which ‘would indeed spell “the end of all things”, a sempiternal peace in which all specifically human activities would wither away’.³⁵

And yet Arendt’s focus on the pathologies of willing reveals *only one aspect* of the will, namely, to use an Hegelian vocabulary, that it contains the possibility of abstracting from every determination in which I find myself and of treating every content as a limitation. If the will determines itself in this way, then indeed it can only become what Hegel called in anticipation of Arendt ‘the freedom of the void’.³⁶ However, the problem here lies not in the will as such but in its lack of determinate form. There is something strange in Arendt’s passing over the contribution of Kant and Hegel to our understanding of the will: their insight that the will must be *actualized* in the determinate social forms of right, morality, law and ethical life, and conversely that it is the one-sided abstraction of the concept of the will from its actual existence that exposes the *abyss* of freedom. Arendt too cannot in the end separate the achievements of modernity from the emergence of the will: the ability to realize the human capacity for beginning; the refusal to acknowledge anything not justified in thought; the attribution of rights of personality to all human beings; the overcoming of the sheer givenness of the world; the possibility of transcending one’s own self; the opening-up of a future beyond past and present; the very strength that lies in the willing act. Not for Arendt, therefore, the conclusion that to overcome nihilism we need the strength to ‘deify the apparent world as the only world’.³⁷ Not for Arendt the philosophical repudiation of the Will and the willing ego. Arendt’s final word on the will is *not* that of repudiation but of ‘impasse’ – an impasse which, she writes, ‘cannot be opened or solved except by an appeal to another mental faculty . . . the faculty of judgment’ (LM 11 217).

The relation of willing to thinking is perplexing. Arendt sometimes writes as if thinking and willing are not just two distinct faculties of the mind but ‘opposites’ – one based on the harmonies of internal dialogue, the other on an ongoing conflict between will and counter-will, command and resistance. It might appear from this perspective that willing is not only divorced from thinking but prejudicial to it.³⁸ However, such a

notion of distinct and opposite faculties would simply repeat the impasse Arendt seeks to surpass. On the one hand, one cannot have a will without thinking; an animal, for example, has no will insofar as it does not represent to itself in thought what it wants. On the other, one cannot think without a will, for thinking itself, as Arendt constantly reminds us, is an activity. The distinction between thinking and willing may be better conceived as that between a theoretical and a practical attitude.³⁹ These apparently distinct faculties are in fact inseparable, for both moments can be found in every act of thinking and willing alike. It is their *forced and reified* separation that opens the abyss.

And so to judgment

We are now in a position to consider, more briefly, the implications of this analysis for reconstructing the faculty of judgment. Judgment is defined as the ability to apply thinking to the particular or, as Arendt puts it, to ‘the manifestation of thinking in the world’.⁴⁰ On the one hand, Arendt picks up on the classical notion of *phronesis*, translated as ‘prudence’. Determinate judgment addresses when and how principles of thought are relevant and applicable to any set of particulars. On the other hand, reflective judgment is the ability to ‘tell right from wrong, beautiful from ugly’ (LM 193) even without the guidance of fixed rules, that is, ‘even when all “people” have to guide them is their own judgment’ and when their own judgment ‘happens to be completely at odds with what they must regard as the unanimous opinion of all those around them’ (EJ 294).

We are at the point of contact between the spectator who seeks to understand and give meaning to events and the political actor who seeks to have an impact on the world. We are also at the point of contact between a determinate form of judgment that moves from the universal to the particular and a reflective form which moves from the particular to the universal. Rather than apply accepted standards and given rules to a particular circumstance, we find in the latter the emergence of new categories of understanding and new standards of judgment. If Aristotelian *phronesis* is the virtue which allows the thinker to move from general theories to a judgment of this particular situation, it is Kant’s notion of reflective judgment that Arendt looks to when the world has gone mad. She writes thus of those few individuals who in the face of totalitarian terror were still able to tell right from wrong:

They went really on their own judgments, and they did so freely; there were no rules to be abided by, under which the particular cases with which they were confronted could be subsumed. They had to decide each instance as it arose, because no rules existed for the unprecedented.⁴¹

It was this capacity to make independent judgments irrespective of public opinion or scientific authority that Arendt sought to capture in the idea of reflective judgment. Perhaps determinate judgment and reflective judgment refer to extremes neither of which is fully achievable: in the case of determinate judgment the extreme of moving automatically and non-reflectively from a general principle or norm to a judgment of particulars; in the case of reflective judgment the extreme of making a judgment in total independence from any existing principle or norm.⁴²

When we begin to deconstruct this notion of reflective judgment, three relations come to the surface. The first has to do with the relation between judging and thinking. Arendt declares that the few who refused complicity with Nazism at great risk to themselves ‘were the only ones who dared judge *by themselves*’ (emphasis added). What was at issue, however, was not the non-existence of non-totalitarian standards of judgment but their absence from sight in that particular society at that particular time. The idea of ‘daring to judge by themselves’ was premised on the imagination to re-present to the mind’s eye standards of civilized judgment which had no visible presence in that context. *What was required, in short, was thought.* The second has to do with the relation of reflective judgment to willing. We do not know whether the few who refused complicity with Nazism were the only ones who dared judge by themselves, but we do know that they were the only ones who dared translate such judgment into action – into an act of resistance. In short, *they not only had the capacity to judge but the will to resist.* The third has to do with the relation of the act of resistance to judgment. Judgment must involve some process of linking the act of resistance to a general principle or norm, even if it has to be invented afresh, but in this case Arendt writes of judgment whether or not the resister draws general principles from this particular act. Arendt stresses instead the exemplary validity of such acts of non-conformity for spectators, who aim to persuade others of the validity of their act of resistance by virtue of its exemplary relation to who we are. Judgment belongs in this case more to the spectator than to the actor.

Arendt ties the faculty of reflective judgment to two terms she draws from Kant’s *Critique of Judgment* – ‘common sense’ (*sensus communis*) and ‘enlarged mentality’. Each has diverse and not altogether compatible connotations. Common sense relates to the world of experience rather than to the mantras of an ideology; it implies the sharing of a common world with others rather than the isolated existence of the individual; it requires the imagination to place oneself in the shoes of another and see the world from another standpoint.⁴³ Enlarged mentality is a mindset that breaks the fetters of self-absorption and orients itself to the world; it pushes beyond the boundaries of any communal grouping; it seeks to behold the world through the eyes of an abstracted generalized other

and embrace the standpoint of everyone else. This line of thought has been interpreted in the literature in a surprising number of ways, from the communitarian to the multicultural to the cosmopolitan, but it is the latter that seems to me to prevail:

One judges always as a member of a community, guided by one's community sense, one's *sensus communis*. But in the last analysis, one is a member of a world community by the sheer fact of being human; this is one's 'cosmopolitan existence'. When one judges and when one acts in political matters, one is supposed to take one's bearings from the idea, not the actuality, of being a world citizen.⁴⁴

One is supposed to take one's bearings from the idea of being a world citizen: I could not agree more. But what is the force of this *ought* and how is this invocation to cosmopolitan judgment fostered? To answer this we must move beyond the insular 'faculty' of judgment itself.

Judging and understanding

This brings me to the final step of my argument – the relation of judgment to *understanding*. This was a key thematic of Arendt's earlier works collected under the title of *Essays in Understanding*. Understanding in these essays has much in common with her later characterization of thinking. Arendt characterizes understanding as 'a profoundly *human* activity . . . a specifically human way of being alive; for every single person needs to be reconciled to a world into which he was born a stranger and in which, to the extent of his distinct uniqueness, he always remains a stranger'.⁴⁵ Understanding is the opposite of indoctrination or ideology. It generates no fixed results. It can only be done in concert with others. It takes into consideration the viewpoints of others. It is prepared to share its conclusions in open and uncoerced discussion with others. It is prepared, like Penelope's weaving, to 'undo every morning what it has finished the night before'.⁴⁶ It takes as much pleasure, as Gotthold Lessing put it, in 'making clouds' as it does in clearing them.

Where understanding differs from thinking is that it attaches the subjectivity of thinking to the substance of what is to be understood. Understanding is always of *something*. It must have an object and its task is the comprehension of what exists, not the setting up of an 'ought' which has 'no proper *topos* or place in the world'.⁴⁷ It can never be a statement, therefore, only of the subject's opinions, convictions or feelings. This does not imply that understanding signifies 'acquiescence in the arrangements of the world'. Here it is more like the will with its 'projects for the future': it challenges any belief in necessity and the peace it establishes with the world has fire in its belly. The value of

understanding is to preserve the subjective freedom of the individual while at the same time attaching it to the world. In this regard, it situates thinking in relation to the external world and it draws willing into the internal world of thought.

Arendt always stresses the unity of judgment and understanding. The crisis of understanding and the crisis of judgment she saw in the mid-20th century appeared so closely related that she could speak in the same breath of ‘the ruin of our categories of thought and standards of judgment’.⁴⁸ The essential point is to learn to ‘understand without preconceived categories and to judge without the set of customary rules which is morality’.⁴⁹ The two are interlinked. If judgment is severed from understanding, it can only reproduce the moral dichotomy of good and evil whose function is to constitute some people as unspeakable monsters and others by default as the good. From the other side, if understanding is severed from judgment, it proves itself incapable of grasping the darkness of the totalitarian imagination.

Such unity of understanding and judgment goes against the grain of a conventional consciousness divided between the ‘is’ and the ‘ought’. On the one hand, the *morality of good and evil* is prone to contrast judgment to any activity of understanding. It calls only for the destruction of evil as the condition for the triumph of the good. Evil, as Nietzsche writes, is the enemy as the man of *ressentiment* conceives him: ‘Here precisely is his deed, his creation: he has conceived “the evil enemy”, “the evil one”, and this in fact is his basic concept, from which he then evolves, as an afterthought and dependant, a “good one” – himself.’⁵⁰ The morality of good and evil offers no understanding of the world nor does it wish to engage in the activity of understanding. It contrasts sharply in this regard with those traditional theodicies, dating back to Leibniz, in which the occurrence of evil was an occasion for deep reflection on how human cruelty and misery can coexist with a just God. On the other hand, social scientific understanding – at least in its more positivistic manifestations – leaves little place for moral judgment, and Arendt maintains that this exclusion disables the social sciences in the face of human atrocity.⁵¹ The tradition of dispassionate and objective analysis makes it impossible to understand the phenomenon of terror and genocide:

To describe the concentration camps *sine ira et studio* is not to be ‘objective’, but to condone them; and such condoning cannot be changed by condemnation which the author may feel duty bound to add but which remains unrelated to the description itself. When I used the image of hell, I did not mean this allegorically but literally . . . In this sense I think that a description of the camps as Hell on earth is more ‘objective’, that is, more adequate to their essence than statements of a purely sociological or psychological nature.⁵²

Insofar as the social sciences try to explain the death camps in terms of some political, economic or military utility, they fail to grasp their anti-utilitarian quality – the ‘nightmare of reality’ before which such scientific categories necessarily fail. Just as judgment is conventionally opposed to any understanding of the world, so understanding the world can seriously lack judgment.⁵³ The forced diremption of understanding and judgment comes full circle when, confronted by the inability of the social sciences to find a *rational* explanation for atrocity, we are tempted to declare it ‘beyond human understanding’ and susceptible *only* to judgment. The justification of this trope is not hard to fathom. It is very difficult to understand why people should fabricate spaces in which ‘the whole of life was thoroughly and systematically organised with a view to the greatest possible torment’?⁵⁴ It seems senseless, beyond our capacity to understand. In any event we may recoil from understanding, as it were, for the sake of judgment – for fear that ‘*tout comprendre, c’est tout pardonner*’.⁵⁵

Arendt was thus confronted on two sides: the social scientist abjured judgment in the name of science; the moral philosopher accused Arendt of not facing up to the incomprehensibility of radical evil. Arendt’s work indicates a third road: neither the extinction of judgment in the name of understanding nor the extinction of understanding in the name of judgment, but a renewed willingness on our part to recover a lost sense of their unity.⁵⁶ The very texture of Arendt’s discussion of evil in *Eichmann in Jerusalem* is dedicated to restoring the lost unity of understanding and judgment. When Arendt wrote in *Origins* of the ‘appearance of some radical evil’ in relation to the death camps, it was to emphasize the need to understand why the idea of humanity had become such an abomination that totalitarian movements attempted its destruction. And when in *Eichmann in Jerusalem* Arendt abandoned the idea of ‘radical evil’ in favour of ‘banality of evil’, her primary concern was that the concept of ‘radical evil’ was implicated in a moral philosophy which denied the possibility of understanding. The charges put by Gershom Scholem, of both ‘trivializing’ the Holocaust and blaming the victims, were manifestly aimed at the wrong target; Arendt was in fact a lonely voice in the 1950s calling for the social sciences to confront the horrible originality of the death camps and the utter dehumanization of the victims. However, the standpoint from which Scholem’s criticisms of Arendt made sense is one which declares on the one hand that the Holocaust cannot be understood and on the other that the actions of Jewish victims cannot be judged. The offence Arendt’s critics found in her work was her twofold refusal either to abandon understanding in relation to the perpetrators of the Holocaust or to abandon judgment in relation to the leaders of the Jewish community.

In conclusion

I am going to state the conclusions I draw from Arendt's study of *The Life of the Mind* in a brief and unsatisfactorily schematic way. I am more than aware that in this article I have only touched upon these issues.

Arendt often writes of the *activities* of the mind rather than the *faculties* of the mind and this shift of terminology may serve as a warning not to rationalize the division of activities into faculties but question it as a problematic and potentially pathological product of the modern world. Her subject is in effect the life of the modern mind and, as I put it earlier, the distorted form of modernization that results from the division of the life of the mind into distinct and opposing faculties and of denaturing this division. Arendt's initial question on the link between thoughtlessness and evil, thinking and abstention from evil-doing, raises really important questions on the role of thinking in public life, that is, of the activity of thinking as such, of the time we need to engage in this activity and of the conditions that make it possible. Her thesis may be extended by asking whether the proclivity to evil-doing can be explained, in part or in whole, by the division of the life of the modern mind into isolated, distinct and opposing faculties. In any event it is necessary in this context to retain some notion of the unity of the life of the mind as a critical standpoint from which to view the effects of this differentiation.

Arendt's reconstruction of the critique of judgment makes a huge contribution to the understanding of the life of the modern mind. Reflective judgment is a vital capacity for political action. It emphasizes the importance of making distinctions in a homogenized world (where one painting, one lover, one regime, one death may appear as indifferent as the next); of holding onto equivocation where everyone searches for certainty; of daring to make autonomous judgments when all around us have lost their own ability to do so (as is the case when popular movements arise which are dedicated to destroying the greatest achievement of the modern age, the idea of 'humanity' as such); of finding a path between the violent imposition of 'universal' principles and truths and the subjective dissolution of all principle and truth. Arendt offers us good reason, however, not to elevate reflective judgment into an *ideal* faculty of the mind capable of reconciling or synthesizing the oppositions present in the life of the mind as a whole. The pathologies associated with the differentiation, specialization and isolation of the 'faculties' are not cured by the elevation of this particular faculty as *the* moment of reconciliation and synthesis.

Finally, Arendt's earlier focus on understanding, that is, on the activity of understanding the world, may usefully be drawn into her later study of the life of the mind. It helps to overcome the excess of subjectivity that can otherwise enter into the activities of thinking,

willing and judging alike when they lose touch with the world and look only to the subject for their validity. The spectre of nihilism is never far from the surface of her analysis of the life of the modern mind, since it is above all *worldlessness* (the isolation of thinking, willing and judging from the world) that opens up the abyss of freedom and turns even the life of the mind into a tool for barbarism.

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Notes

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- 1 Hannah Arendt, *The Life of the Mind*, ed. Mary McCarthy (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1978). This is a one-volume edition of what was originally published as two volumes. Part I is 'Thinking' and Part II is 'Willing'.
- 2 Hannah Arendt, *Lectures on Kant's Political Philosophy*, edited with an interpretive essay by Ronald Beiner (Chicago, IL: Chicago University Press, 1992). See also Arendt's 'The Crisis in Culture: Its Social and its Political Significance', 'Truth and Politics' and 'Freedom and Politics', all in *Between Past and Future: Eight Exercises in Political Thought* (Harmondsworth, Mx: Penguin, 1977), especially pp. 219–26.
- 3 Albrecht Wellmer, 'Hannah Arendt on Judgment: The Unwritten Doctrine of Reason', in Ronald Beiner and Jennifer Nedelsky (eds) *Judgment, Imagination and Politics: Themes from Kant and Arendt* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2001), p. 165. This is the most valuable collection on the topic.
- 4 Other key texts on Arendt's approach to judgment include: Ronald Beiner, *Political Judgment* (London: Methuen, 1983), especially ch. 6; Maurizio Passerin d'Entrèves, 'Arendt's Theory of Judgment', in Dana Villa (ed.) *The Cambridge Companion to Hannah Arendt* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), pp. 245–60; Ronald Beiner, 'Judging in a World of Appearances: a Commentary on Hannah Arendt's Unwritten Finale', in Lewis and Sandra Hinchman (eds) *Hannah Arendt: Critical Essays* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1994), pp. 365–87.
- 5 An analogy might be drawn here with Marx scholarship. When Marx scholars sought to reconstruct Marx's planned but incomplete work on law, morality and the state, a less than satisfactory approach was simply to pull together the various passages in which Marx commented on or expressed his opinions about these various issues. The more fruitful and certainly

more scientific approach was to reconstruct the methodology that Marx employed in his critique of political economy and apply it, flexibly and with due regard to the shift of subject matter, to the absent critique of political philosophy. This approach has not always been done well because the thinking of Marx scholars has too often been locked within the categories of political economy, but as a mode of reconstruction it is superior to the search for Marx's scattered and situated 'views' on these subjects. See my own *Political Investigations: Hegel, Marx, Arendt* (London: Routledge, 2001), ch. 5, 'Right and Value: the Unity of Hegel and Marx'.

- 6 The relation to Kant is never far from the surface. Arendt writes of Kant's 'paradoxical legacy . . . just as man comes of age and is declared autonomous, he is utterly debased'. She comments that this legacy is an accurate reflection of 'the antinomical structure of human being as it is situated in the world'. The splitting of the life of the mind into the distinct 'faculties' of thinking, willing and judging turns out to be one aspect of the antinomical structure of human beings as we are currently situated in the world. Kant recognizes and helps to create one of modernity's major accomplishments, the autonomy of reason, but for Arendt he pays too big a price for it: the separation of reason into allegedly autonomous fields. *Essays in Understanding 1930–1954* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1994), pp. 169–71. Cited in Jerome Kohn, 'Evil and Plurality: Hannah Arendt's Way to *The Life of the Mind I*', in Larry May and Jerome Kohn (eds) *Hannah Arendt: Twenty Years Later* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1997), p. 163.
- 7 Ronald Beiner writes: 'It is not merely that the already completed accounts of two mental faculties were to be supplemented by a yet-to-be-provided third but, rather, that those two accounts themselves remain deficient without the promised synthesis in judging . . . So we arrive at the threshold of Judging still in search of solutions to the basic problems that impelled Arendt to write *The Life of the Mind*' ('Interpretive Essay', in *Hannah Arendt Lectures on Kant's Political Philosophy* [Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1992]), pp. 89–90.
- 8 I find curious parallels between the structure of *Life of the Mind* and Arendt's earlier work *On Revolution*. In the latter Arendt distinguished between three moments of the revolutionary tradition: the American, the French, and the 'lost treasure' of town hall and council democracy that has existed on the margins of every modern revolutionary movement. At first sight, it appears that Arendt is positive about the tradition of 1776, negative about the tradition of 1789 and finds the realization of the revolutionary Idea in the lost treasure of participatory democracy. On reflection, however, we find along with Arendt that the American revolutionary tradition has its own disabling contradictions (e.g. its prioritization of private rights over rights of public participation); that the French revolutionary tradition represents a huge achievement despite the Terror (especially its formulation of the 'constitution of liberty'); and that the 'lost treasure' of radical participatory democracy has far more problems than is apparent at first sight. Arendt finishes the text on this note when she calls the council system an 'aristocratic' form of government run by a self-constituting elite (OR 279–80). As her study of revolution unfolds, it becomes apparent that there

is no 'pure' revolutionary tradition, no ideal form of actualization, no formula for liberation from tyranny and the constitution of liberty that does not reinstate the perplexities of foundation and new beginnings. The underlying structure of *On Revolution*, then, is not 'dialectical' or rather is dialectical only in the sense that it is a study of the development of the idea of revolution as it dissolves and produces its various particularizations. The lesson Arendt drew or seems to have drawn is not to repudiate the modern revolutionary tradition but to retain our political judgment in the midst of its perplexities. See Hannah Arendt, *On Revolution* (Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1988).

- 9 See, for example, Seyla Benhabib, 'Judgment and the Moral Foundations of Politics', in Beiner and Nedelsky, *Judgment, Imagination and Politics*.
- 10 Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (New York: Penguin, 1994).
- 11 Hannah Arendt, 'Thinking and Moral Considerations', in *Responsibility and Judgment*, ed. Jerome Kohn (New York: Schocken, 2003), pp. 159–60.
- 12 'Introduction', to *The Life of the Mind I*, p. 5.
- 13 Arendt, 'Thinking and Moral Considerations', p. 189.
- 14 Arendt, *Life of the Mind I*, p. 5.
- 15 Dana Villa, *Politics, Philosophy, Terror: Essays in the Thought of Hannah Arendt* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999), ch. 4, 'Thinking and Judging', pp. 89–90.
- 16 Arendt, 'Thinking and Moral Considerations', p. 167.
- 17 *ibid.*
- 18 Arendt, *Life of the Mind I*, p. 176.
- 19 *ibid.*, p. 177
- 20 Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (New York: Harvest, 1976), ch. 10, 'A Classless Society', part II, pp. 326–40.
- 21 Friedrich Nietzsche, *Will to Power* (New York: Vintage Press, 1969), p. 9.
- 22 For Ernst Junger, this negation of all existing standards was transmuted into the hope that the whole culture and texture of life might go down in 'storms of steel'. War appeared as the means of chastisement and purification in a corrupt age (Thomas Mann); as the great equalizer in class-ridden societies (Lenin); as the arena in which selflessness obliterates bourgeois egoism (Bakunin); as the site of the doomed man with no personal interest, no attachments, no property, not even a name of his own (Nechaev).
- 23 Arendt, *Origins*, p. 330.
- 24 See Dana Villa, 'The Banality of Philosophy: Arendt on Heidegger and Eichmann', in May and Kohn, *Hannah Arendt: Twenty Years Later*, pp. 179–96.
- 25 Hannah Arendt, 'What is Freedom?', in *Between Past and Future* (Penguin: Harmondsworth, 1977), pp. 157–61.
- 26 Arendt, *Life of the Mind II*, p. 164.
- 27 These quotations are drawn from *On Revolution*, ch. 2, 'The Social Question', pp. 73–94 and footnote at p. 321.
- 28 Arendt, *On Revolution*, p. 225.
- 29 Arendt, *Life of the Mind II*, p. 201.
- 30 *ibid.*, p. 199.

- 31 *ibid.*, p. 161.
- 32 *ibid.*, p. 168.
- 33 *ibid.*, p. 178.
- 34 *ibid.*, p. 169.
- 35 *ibid.*, pp. 207 and 216. We may be reminded of Arendt's comment in her discussion of the camps to the effect that the nihilist principle of freedom that everything is permitted came to mean only that everything is possible and can be destroyed. Arendt, *Origins*, p. 340.
- 36 Hegel put it well: 'Only in destroying something does this negative will have a feeling of its own existence . . . its actualization can only be the fury of destruction.' G. W. F. Hegel, *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, ed. Allen Wood, §5 A and R (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991). Paradoxically, there are some interesting parallels between the respective analyses of Hegel and Arendt.
- 37 Arendt, *Life of the Mind II*, pp. 168–70.
- 38 Hegel argued that 'Those who regard thinking as a particular and distinct faculty, divorced from the will as an equally distinct faculty, and who in addition even consider that thinking is prejudicial to the will . . . show from the outset that they are totally ignorant of the will' (*Philosophy of Right*, §5 R).
- 39 Hegel writes: 'When I think of something, it no longer stands opposed to me as something external. I re-present it in my mind and thereby make it my own. Similarly, when I am active, I again make things my own in a practical way – by making them into objects of my will' (*Philosophy of Right*, §5 R).
- 40 Arendt, *Life of the Mind I*, p. 193.
- 41 *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, p. 295.
- 42 Alessandro Ferrara has alerted me to the importance of Rudolf Makkreel's investigation of the space that separates the two extremes of pure determinant and pure reflective judgment, and of the intermediate forms of 'oriented reflective judgment' where the orienting factor reduces the otherwise vast range in which the search for principle might take place without pinpointing a subsuming principle. See Rudolf Makkreel, *Imagination and Interpretation in Kant: The Hermeneutical Import of the Critique of Judgment* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1994); Alessandro Ferrara, *Justice and Judgment: The Rise and Prospect of the Judgment Model in Contemporary Political Philosophy* (London: Sage, 1999), pp. 6–7; and Makkreel's review of this book in *Philosophy and Social Criticism* 27(3), pp. 105–10.
- 43 See in particular Ferrara's evocative contribution to this volume.
- 44 Arendt, *Lectures on Kant's Political Philosophy*, pp. 75–6.
- 45 Hannah Arendt, *Essays in Understanding 1930–1954* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1994), p. 308.
- 46 Arendt, *Life of the Mind I*, p. 88.
- 47 Arendt, *Life of the Mind II*, p. 196.
- 48 Arendt, *Essay in Understanding*, p. 388.
- 49 *ibid.*, p. 391.
- 50 Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals* (New York: Vintage, 1989), p. 39.

- 51 See Peter Baehr, 'Identifying the Unprecedented: Hannah Arendt, Totalitarianism and the Critique of Sociology', *American Sociological Review* 67(6) (2002): 804–31; and 'Of Politics and Social Science: Totalitarianism in the Dialogue of David Riesman and Hannah Arendt', *European Journal of Political Theory* 3(2): 191–217.
- 52 Arendt, *Essays in Understanding*, p. 404.
- 53 I think Arendt's characterization of the social sciences is perhaps overblown to the extent that there is an array of positions in the field that have indeed sought to face the tensions between facts and norms. I would rather see Arendt as providing a critique of social science *from within*.
- 54 Arendt, *Origins*, p. 445.
- 55 Primo Levi wrote of his desire to understand the Germans but nonetheless refused to meet the German chemist at Auschwitz for fear that this encounter might prevent him from making 'the correct judgment'. In the Afterword of *If This is a Man* Levi declared his own equivocation thus: 'Perhaps one cannot, what is more one must not, understand what happened, because to understand is almost to justify . . . I cannot say I understand the Germans' (London: Abacus, 1995), pp. 395–6. His *fear* was that understanding the Germans might lead to loss of judgment even though his *purpose* was to understand and judge at the same time.
- 56 See Susan Neiman, 'Theodicy in Jerusalem', in Steven Ascheim (ed.) *Hannah Arendt in Jerusalem* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), pp. 65–90.