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The "Understanding Heart" of Hannah Arendt:
Understanding as a Practice of Moral Imagination

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Abstract

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By Mary Leigh Pittenger

The German-Jewish thinker Hannah Arendt is perhaps most famous for introducing the controversial phrase "the banality of evil" into moral discourse and for developing a conception of action that emphasizes participation in worldly affairs and respect for plurality. However, in this dissertation I argue that Arendt's most valuable contribution to moral philosophy lies in her practice and conception of *understanding*—which she also describes as *imagination*. Arendt, having fled from Germany in 1933, devoted her life and writing to the task of understanding the unprecedented evil that had taken place in the rise of the totalitarian regimes in Nazi Germany and Stalinist Russia. In a 1954 essay, she identified the "understanding heart," a metaphor drawn from the Hebrew Bible, as the most essential resource for navigating morally and politically through a post-Holocaust world. My dissertation seeks to identify the primary moral practices that lend themselves to the cultivation of an understanding heart. Based on Arendt's writings, I identify three moral practices: 1) attending to the reality of evil and suffering as they become manifest in one's own time; 2) committing to participation in worldly affairs through speech and action (including the practice of storytelling as a way of making meaning of events); and 3) cultivating a mode of thinking that is world-oriented, imaginative, and dialogic. I argue that Arendt's conception and practice of the understanding heart serves as a valuable model that we can employ to reflect on the urgent moral and ethical issues of our own time.

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I thank the Graduate Division of Religion for offering a dissertation proposal writing workshop, led by Ulrike Guthrie, in the spring of 2007, which helped jumpstart the writing process. I also thank the Graduate School of Arts and Sciences for providing me with funding in the summer of 2007 to examine materials in the Hannah Arendt collection at the Library of Congress in Washington, D.C.

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Contents

Preface: Why Hannah Arendt?

Hannah Arendt repeatedly stressed the importance of wisely "choosing one's company." She concluded her lecture on "Some Questions of Moral Philosophy" with emphasis on this point: "I tried to show that our decisions about right and wrong will depend upon our choice of company, of those with whom we wish to spend our lives. And again, this company is chosen by thinking in examples, in examples of persons dead or alive, real or fictitious, and in examples of incidents, past or present."[1] A person who chooses Bluebeard for companionship, she warned, might prove worrisome, but the most dangerous person of all would be one who refuses to choose, one who remains "indifferent" to those who surround him or her.

Embarking upon the writing of a dissertation requires such careful consideration of one's company. The decision to write on Hannah Arendt meant a commitment to living with her daily for several years, reading as much of her writings as possible, following the various "thought-trains" that she pursued as they traversed the vast terrains of moral philosophy, Christian theology, political history, and literary criticism, and engaging in nearly constant mental conversation with her. And, of course, the decision required that I also spend time in the company that *she* chose, including such a wide range of figures as Socrates, Augustine, Kant, Heidegger, Jaspers, Benjamin, Brecht, and Auden. While a choice of good company may shape my conscience and enlarge my mind, as Arendt suggested, pragmatic concerns may also arise in the case of an academic research project. How does the choice of Arendt come to bear on religious scholarship?

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[1] Hannah Arendt, "Some Questions of Moral Philosophy," in *Responsibility and Judgment*, ed. Jerome Kohn (New York: Schocken, 1994), 146.

To many readers, Hannah Arendt may appear as an unlikely choice as a dissertation topic for a doctoral program in Comparative Literature and Religion. After all, though Arendt was a theology student in her early years before turning to philosophy and writing her dissertation on Augustine's conception of love, historical circumstances led her in a different direction. Upon fleeing Germany after the burning of the Reichstag in 1933, she distanced herself from both philosophy and theology (which she saw as aligned with the *vita contemplativa*) as she emphasized the importance of the political sphere (the *vita activa*). While she investigated the writings of certain Christian thinkers rather extensively (especially Augustine and Jaspers), appropriating what she saw as their most useful ideas, Arendt criticized strands of traditional Christian thought for advocating an anti-political attitude—an "in the world, but not of it" stance—which she saw as highly dangerous in the light of twentieth-century events. She insisted that human beings are not only *in* the world, but also *of* it; if we do not regard this world as home, we will not commit ourselves to preserving a space where human beings can live together.

From all accounts, Arendt generally kept silent about her personal religious beliefs, even in her closest relationships. After her death, her longtime friend Hans Jonas shared an anecdote regarding an occasion when he and his wife were dining with Hannah Arendt and Mary McCarthy and an intense conversation about religion arose, during which McCarthy suddenly asked Jonas if he believed in God. Jonas reports that his answer of "yes" was followed by a tense two minutes of silence, and then "with a tactful feeling of shame the conversation turned to other subjects." With that scene in mind, Jonas was stunned on a later occasion when Arendt told him that she had never doubted the existence of God. He writes:

> Hannah, with great emphasis and seriousness, gave me the following explanation, literally face to face: "I have always believed in God and never doubted in His existence—perhaps the one thing in my life which stood fast with me." "But Hannah," I cried out, "why then, at that time, when *I* declared myself, your embarrassed silence, so obviously a silence of rejection?" "Oh no," she said, "I was embarrassed that it was *you* who had uttered it."[2]

This curious passage, containing the only explicit declaration of faith that I have come across in my study of Arendt, leaves me wanting to know more. It has that striking and enigmatic quality of many of Arendt's statements. For the most part, Arendt kept quiet on the subject of religion in her published writings. Though she asserted on one occasion that the horrors of the concentration camp would not have happened if people had still believed in God, she made clear that she did not expect any kind of "return" to religion to set things to rights. She did not believe that the authority of traditional systems, whether philosophical or religious, could provide a set of answers to twentieth-century moral and ethical problems. After the breakdown of metaphysics, she suggested, we have to learn how to "think without a banister."[3]

However, while Arendt disavowed adherence to traditional philosophies and religious systems, she constantly engaged philosophical and religious ideas. She was preoccupied with moral and ethical questions that have long captivated religious thinkers, questions regarding the nature of evil; the constitution (and the destruction) of the moral person; the relationship between language, truth, and ineffability; the tension between contemplation and action; and the difficulty and necessity of living responsibly with

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[2] Christian Wiese, *The Life and Thought of Hans Jonas: Jewish Dimensions*, trans. Jeffrey Grossman and Christian Wiese (Waltham, Mass.: Brandeis University Press, 2007), 72.

[3] Arendt, "On Hannah Arendt," in *Hannah Arendt: The Recovery of the Public World*, ed. Melvyn A. Hill (New York: St. Martin's, 1979), 336-37. "I have a metaphor which . . . I have never published but kept for myself. I call it thinking without a banister. In German, *Denken ohne Geländer*. That is, as you go up and down the stairs you can always hold onto the banister so that you don't fall down. But we have lost that banister. That is the way I tell it to myself. And this is indeed what I try to do."

others in a shared world. Arendt's method of "pearl-diving" attempts to salvage the best insights from traditional systems, reconfigured for use in a new context. While she always advocates the practice of learning to "*think anew*," this practice constantly draws upon available literary, philosophical, and religious resources.

I find it significant that Arendt's image of the "understanding heart," the image that inspired this dissertation, is drawn from the Hebrew Bible. Although she tried to bracket religion from her reflections on politics and ethics, Arendt apparently drew upon the Jewish tradition for a certain kind of wisdom. Hans Jonas made a similar observation when he explained why reading Psalm 90 in Hebrew and in English at Arendt's funeral was appropriate and meaningful:

> [It is] not only that she felt herself to belong [to Judaism] by heritage and to be bound to it by solidarity of fate; apart from that she had a vivid feeling for the timeless dignity and power of the ancient words—e.g., from the magnificent 90th Psalm, "So teach us to number our days, that we may get us a heart of wisdom"—whose sincere truthfulness she placed in view of its finiteness far above all modern sugar-coating. "The only thing appropriate," she used to say, approvingly or critically, depending on which funeral service we were coming from.[4]

I see the psalmist's prayer for a "heart of wisdom" as a sensibility that characterized Arendt's lifelong quest for what she called "understanding." While her moral and ethical thought continues to gain increased attention from scholars, I suggest that this facet of Arendt's ethics—the importance of cultivating a "heart of wisdom" or "an understanding heart"—remains largely unexplored.

In recent decades, Arendt's thought has drawn the attention of some religious scholars, including some Christian theologians. Most notably, these include James Bernauer, who published a collection of articles by various authors on the question of "faith" in Arendt's work; Wendy Farley, who admires Arendt's critique of totalitarianism

[4] Wiese, *The Life and Thought of Hans Jonas*, 71.

and her respect for the "other"; Charles Mathewes, who admires some aspects of Arendt's use of Augustinian theology; and Stephan Kampowski, who, like Mathewes, is strongly attracted to the Augustinian influence on Arendt's moral thought and builds on it to offer a comprehensive, appreciative view of Arendt's moral thought. Yet there remains a sense that writing on Arendt is an odd choice from a theological perspective. Mathewes reveals some ambivalence when he distances himself from Arendt somewhat, stating that "we can *use* Arendt's work, even as we do not attempt to *delight* in her personally."[5]

However, I do not share Mathewes's caveat. To the contrary, I *do* delight in Arendt's work and thought, and, sharing her view that one's choice of company *matters*, I would not choose to spend several years reading and reflecting on someone whose company did not delight me. Why take delight in Arendt's companionship? I suggest several reasons: her passion for understanding, her commitment to the practice of moral imagination, and her insistence that thinking and acting morally does not derive from rational thought but through *being relational*, from choosing a wide variety of companions to talk with and learn from. Above all, I value her sense of *amor mundi*, her emphasis on being at home in the world despite the fact that we live in a "world out of joint." My hope is that, as religious thinkers in a world that often seems to be hurtling toward destruction, thinking with Arendt can motivate us to seek new ways of reimagining this world as our home.

Our times have witnessed a "return of the religious" in academic and public discourse, and it is as true now as it has ever been that the religious imagination plays a

[5] Charles T. Mathewes, *Evil and the Augustinian Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 152. Author's italics.

crucial role in the shaping of moral thought and behavior for individuals and communities. I agree with Arendt's view that, especially in the current global context, it is futile and wrongheaded to appeal to religion to function as a moral authority for society in the way that it once did (and in the way that some fundamentalist thinkers still would have it). However, Arendt's model of finding resources in these traditions to inspire rethinking or reimagining can help us work through the religious questions of our time, such as: how to practice religion in multireligious cultures; how to work toward ending war/violence/sexual oppression that continues to be justified by appeals to sacred texts; how to critique irresponsible portrayals of the "religious other" in the media (whether the "other" is a Jew, a Muslim, or a "social justice Christian"); and how to bear witness or give testimony to issues of poverty and human rights. When taken seriously as a model, Arendt's work invites us to think about the ways that the moral and ethical imagination is shaped by religious education, religious themes in books and film, and religion in the news as well as traditional theological sources. The practice of imagination invites an interdisciplinary approach to contemporary problems, so that scholars and actors can communicate their different standpoints to each other and mutually improve understanding.

As Arendt reminded us, human beings think in examples. As a scholar in religion whose work has ventured into many disciplines (including theology, feminist theory, and literary theory), I find that Arendt offers both a valuable theory *and an example* of an imaginative, interdisciplinary approach to moral and ethical questions. In doing so, Arendt stands out as a thinker who neither accepts traditional religion uncritically as a moral authority nor dismisses religion altogether as a moral resource. I suggest that by

reading Arendt with special attention to the "thought-trains" illuminating her moral concerns, religion scholars might be inspired to *think anew* about the relationship between imagination, morality, and religious thought/practice/identity. In particular, I hope this investigation will contribute to conversations about how religious traditions (particularly Christianity) might serve as useful resources—albeit in nontraditional ways—for the development of a moral and ethical imagination.

Introduction

Reading Arendt's Conception of Understanding as the Key to Her Moral Thought

With the current abundance of scholarship on the German-Jewish writer Hannah Arendt, there is no doubt that she was an influential thinker. Yet, when Günter Gaus inquired in a 1964 television interview whether she thought of herself as being influential, Arendt answered, "What is important for me is to understand. For me, writing is a matter of seeking this understanding. . . . Do I imagine myself being influential? No. I want to understand. And if others understand—in the same sense that I have understood—that gives me a sense of satisfaction, like feeling at home."[1] My purpose in this dissertation is to explore Arendt's conception and practice of understanding. I will argue that her passionate desire to understand was a fundamentally moral stance that shaped her writings. In developing this argument, I hope to contribute not only to a better understanding of Arendt's work as a whole, but especially to an increased appreciation of her importance as an imaginative moral thinker. I will also suggest that Arendt's practice of understanding offers a model that can help us respond creatively to the moral and ethical challenges of our own time.

Arendt's desire for understanding led her to a life of wide-ranging intellectual exploration. Born in Germany in 1906, Arendt grew up in Kant's hometown of Königsberg and decided, upon reading Kant at age fourteen, that she wanted to study philosophy. (Arendt told Gaus: "The need to understand was there very early. You see, all the books were in the library at home; one simply took them from the shelves."[2]) She

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[1] Hannah Arendt, "'What Remains? The Language Remains': A Conversation with Günther Gaus" in *Essays in Understanding, 1930-1954: Formation, Exile, and Totalitarianism*, ed. Jerome Kohn (New York: Schocken Books, 1994), 3.
[2] Ibid, 8.

studied philosophy under the twentieth century masters--Edmund Husserl, Martin Heidegger, and Karl Jaspers—and wrote her doctoral dissertation, under the direction of Jaspers, on Augustine's conception of love. After fleeing from Nazi Germany in 1933, Arendt lived as a refugee for eight years in France, where she met her second husband, Heinrich Blücher. While in France she worked for the Zionist organization Youth Aliyah, which helped Jewish youth to emigrate to Palistine, until she was interned at a camp at Gurs. After escaping from the camp, reuniting with her husband and emigrating to America, Arendt earned a reputation as a political thinker as she devoted her attention to understanding what to her were the most incomprehensible events of her time—specifically the rise of totalitarianism in Nazi Germany and in Stalinist Russia, which culminated in the "speechless horror" of the concentration camps. Arendt was in the midst of her intellectual productivity when she suffered a heart attack in her New York City apartment in 1975. Having achieved notoriety for her books *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, *The Human Condition*, and *Eichmann in Jerusalem* (among numerous other books and articles), she had just begun to write a volume on judging that would conclude her three-part work *The Life of the Mind*.

Arendt's funeral service took place at the Riverside Memorial Chapel in New York City, on December 8, 1975. Psalm 90 was read in both Hebrew and English, and, afterwards, a smaller circle of Jewish mourners recited the Kaddish. Hans Jonas, whose friendship with Arendt dated back to their student years when they had both attended Heidegger's lectures in Marburg, was one of the speakers. As a Jewish philosopher who had, like Arendt, devoted much of his own writing to exploring the meaning of responsibility in a post-Holocaust world, Jonas was impressed by the profoundly moral

quality of Arendt's thinking. Describing Arendt as "intensely moral, but completely unmoralistic," he said, "Things looked different after she had looked at them. Thinking was her passion, and thinking with her was a moral activity." His eulogy continued:

> Whatever she had to say was important, often provocative, sometimes wrong, but never trivial, never negligible, never to be forgotten again. Even her errors were more worthwhile than the verities of many lesser minds. She liked, of course, to be right and on occasion could be quite formidably contentious; but she did not believe, as she confided to me, that 'truth' is to be had for us these days. She believed, instead, in the incessant, always temporary trying for that face of it which the present condition happens to turn toward us. Thinking it through is its own reward, for we will be more understanding after than we were before.[3]

In this portrait of Arendt, Jonas presents her as an original, important, and somewhat difficult or controversial thinker. But in describing her as "intensely moral" and recognizing her thinking as "a moral activity," Jonas captures what I see as the most outstanding quality of Arendt's writing. While Arendt's practice of thinking as a moral activity did not aim to arrive at a fixed notion of "truth" or at permanent solutions to moral problems, it was part and parcel of her quest for understanding.

Most readers of Arendt would be quick to agree with Jonas that her thinking was provocative. During her lifetime, her works garnered attention and respect, but some of her writings (especially *Eichmann in Jerusalem*) occasioned a great deal of controversy and alienated close friends. Despite the ongoing debates over how to interpret Arendt's work, and continuing criticisms of some of her assertions or approaches, an increasing number of readers would also agree that her work is important—or, as Jonas said, "never negligible, never to be forgotten again." In the past couple of decades, an "Arendt renaissance" has emerged as scholars, especially in the disciplines of political theory and

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[3] Hans Jonas, "Hannah Arendt: 1906-1975," Appendix C in Christian Wiese, *The Life and Thought of Hans Jonas: Jewish Dimensions*, trans. Jeffrey Grossman and Christian Wiese (Waltham, Mass.: Brandeis, 2007), 179-80.

political philosophy, have commented on Arendt's most insightful and useful contributions.[4] This proliferation of scholarship has shown how Arendt's work enriches our understanding of the political sphere, especially through her affirmations of action, natality, plurality, and worldliness.

I will argue, however, that because scholars have focused primarily on reading Arendt as a political thinker, her importance *as a moral thinker*, of which Jonas spoke so admiringly in his address, remains somewhat obscured. In this project, then, I will focus on reading Arendt as a moral thinker. In doing so, I do not intend to diminish the importance of Arendt's political thought; rather, I interpret her political and moral thought as being profoundly interrelated. Because they are so closely related, I believe that an examination of Arendt's moral thinking can improve our understanding of her work as a whole.[5]

Interpretive Difficulties and Debates

The claim that Hannah Arendt offers a coherent, compelling conception of morality is a contested one. Some critics, attending to the political emphasis in Arendt's major writings, have simply overlooked her preoccupation with moral and ethical concerns. Others have noted this preoccupation, but have too hastily dismissed the moral implications of her writings as incoherent, unhelpful, or even offensive. Granted, Arendt's moral thought is difficult to understand and lends itself to multiple interpretations. Jerome Kohn has suggested that Arendt's writing is difficult to

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[4] The term "Arendt renaissance" appears in Seyla Benhabib's *The Reluctant Modernism of Hannah Arendt* (Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications,1996), xxiii; and Dana Villa's *Philosophy, Politics, Terror: Essays on the Thought of Hannah Arendt* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), 3.

[5] Arendt's moral and ethical thought has actually become of increasing interest to scholars, judging from the most recent scholarship. See *Thinking in Dark Times: Hannah Arendt on Ethics and Politics*, edited by Roger Berkowitz, Jeffrey Katz, and Thomas Keenan (New York: Fordham University Press, 2010).

understand "not because her thought is obscure but rather because of the inherent difficulty of what she sought to understand."[6] Arendt's subject—the question of how to understand totalitarian evil and how to "reconcile ourselves to a world in which such things are possible at all"—certainly accounts for some of the difficulty of reading her work.[7] As Arendt herself stated many times, totalitarian evil, as an expression of "radical evil," has a "thought-defying" quality that resists being captured in thought or writing. However, other factors contribute to the difficulty of reading Arendt. In this section, I would simply like to indicate some of the difficulties involved in interpreting Arendt's moral thought and sketch out some of the main criticisms.

One challenge arises from the distinctiveness of Arendt's style and approach. Arendt was a highly interdisciplinary thinker whose work always resisted neat categorization. She deliberately avoided systematization and did not try to smooth over the tensions in her thought.[8] As her most insightful commentators have noted, the interpretation of Arendt's work involves the following of complex "thought-trains" that weave throughout her writings, meeting and crisscrossing with one another.[9] Margaret

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[6] Jerome Kohn has remarked on Arendt's commitment to understanding, describing her as "one of those rare individuals who experience understanding as a passion, which . . . runs parallel to her passionate espousal of politics." See Kohn, "Introduction" in Hannah Arendt, *The Promise of Politics* (New York: Schocken Books, 2005), xix.

[7] Arendt, "Understanding and Politics (The Difficulties of Understanding)" in *Essays in Understanding, 1930-1954: Formation, Exile, and Totalitarianism*, ed. Jerome Kohn (New York: Schocken Books, 1994), 308.

[8] Arendt suggested that contradictions and unresolved tensions in thought actually contribute to better understanding: "Inconsistencies, flagrant contradictions, if they do not occur, as they usually do not in second-rate writers, lead into the very center of most great thinkers where they belong to the most revealing clues of understanding." Arendt, "Karl Marx and the Tradition of Western Political Thought" (1953), qt. by Seyla Benhabib in *The Reluctant Modernism of Hannah Arendt*, 124.

[9] Describing Arendt's thought in terms of "thought-trains" borrows from her own terminology; she speaks of "trains of thought" when describing thinkers whom she admires. For example, when she describes Jaspers' philosophy as a new kind of thinking that does not "abolish" or "criticize" the philosophies of the past but instead "will strip them of their dogmatic metaphysical claims, dissolve them, as it were, into trains of thought which meet and cross each other, communicate with each other and eventually retain only what

Canovan describes Arendt's moral thought in particular as "an elusive train of thought that surfaces at many points in [her] writings," sometimes in a manner that is "obtrusive and baffling."[10] While many readers respect the independent quality of Arendt's thinking, others fault her for being inconsistent or idiosyncratic.[11]

A related challenge pertains to deciding precisely where to locate "the moral" in Arendt's works, and in determining precisely how it relates to "the political." Some critics fault Arendt for what they see as her radical separation of political and moral concerns. For example, Leah Bradshaw sees a "radical break" between Arendt's early (political) writings and her later (moral) writings. Favoring the early writings, she accuses Arendt of "betraying" her best political insights in her later reflections on morality.[12] Others, while similarly perceiving a separation between the moral and the political in Arendt, believe that such a separation undermines her description of both spheres. George Kateb, for example, accuses Arendt of subordinating morality to politics in her desire to preserve a "pure" or "aestheticized" politics: "politics purified, to a considerable extent, from moral anxiety as well as moral goals, just as other aesthetic

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is universally communicative." (Arendt, "Karl Jaspers: Citizen of the World?" in *Men in Dark Times* (Hammondsworth, England: Penguin, 1973), 93.

[10] Margaret Canovan, in *Hannah Arendt: A Reinterpretation of Her Political Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 156.

[11] Critics of Arendt's style include Arne Johan Vetlesen and Bhikhu Parekh, among others. According to Vetlesen, "Arendt aspired to an independence in her thought, yet her characteristic vacillations and many flagrant contradictions, some of which I find unresolvable, are the high price she paid." In *Perception, Empathy, and Judgment: An Inquiry into the Preconditions of Moral Performance* (University Park, Pa.: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1996), 122. According to Parekh, "Arendt is not a careful and systematic thinker. She never clearly sets out her categories, defines her terms, articulates her views and defends her position. . . . She was attracted to many different schools of thought which she never managed to integrate. Consequently her philosophy points in many different directions, and it is not always easy to follow her train of thought." In *Hannah Arendt and the Search for a New Political Philosophy* (Atlantic Highlands, N.J.: Humanities Press, 1981), xi. On the other hand, many scholars have expressed admiration for Arendt's original and interdisciplinary style, describing it as "poetic." These include Margaret Canovan, Julia Kristeva, Norma Claire Moruzzi, and Kimberley Curtis.

[12] Leah Bradshaw, *Acting and Thinking: The Political Thought of Hannah Arendt* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press), 68.

phenomena are held ideally to be." He dismisses Arendt's relevance as a moral thinker with these words: "Naturally, those of us who want to keep political life, even in any kind of ideal form, under constant moral scrutiny, will not find Arendt's position morally acceptable. . . . Arendt gives the moralist great cause for discomfort. . . ."[13] Kateb sees Arendt's view of politics as too idealized, and her morality as too subjectivistic.[14]

Even among those readers who *do* appreciate Arendt as a moral thinker, disagreement exists as to where to locate the core of her moral thinking. Some want to situate the significance of her moral thought primarily in her insights into "the banality of evil," which she presented in her highly controversial report on the trial of Adolf Eichmann. Others want to locate it in her "ethos of worldliness," an ethos which appears as early as her dissertation on Augustine and which is developed most fully in *The Human Condition*.[15] Some want to locate it in her examination of the Socratic conscience (and, among these readers, debate exists as to whether Arendt actually *advocates* or rather *disparages* the Socratic conscience), while others want to locate it in her remarks on enlarged thinking and judgment.[16] For the latter group, yet another

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[13] George Kateb, "The Judgment of Arendt," in *Judgment, Imagination, and Politics*, ed. Ronald Beiner and Jennifer Nedelsky (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2001), 122. Kateb's recent work, however, speaks more positively of Arendt's moral thought, recognizing her affirmation of moral imagination: "Following Arendt, we can say that the aim of fighting off moral blindness is served by the exercise of what she sometimes calls imagination and sometimes Socratic thinking, and what I could call individualized imagination. Only by such thinking can we come to believe that others are as real to themselves as we are to ourselves." ("Fiction as Poison," in *Thinking in Dark Times*, 39).

[14] Many critics have followed Kateb in accusing Arendt's moral thought of being "subjectivist." These include Charles T. Mathewes, who faults Arendt for espousing a "subjectivist voluntarism" (*Evil and the Augustinian Tradition*, 173) and Mark Coeckelberg (*Imagination and Principles*, 154). In contrast, scholars such as Serena Parekh, Kimberley Curtis, and Lisa Jane Disch emphasize the intersubjective elements of Arendt's thought, which I will discuss in Chapter Three.

[15] For analysis of Arendt's "ethos of worldliness," see Michael G. Gottsegen, *The Political Thought of Hannah Arendt* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1994); and Andrew Schaap, *Political Reconciliation* (London: Routledge, 2005).

[16] George Kateb has argued that Arendt aimed to disparage absolute morality whether in its Socratic form (the Socratic conscience) or in its Christian form (Jesus' ethic of love for one's enemy). In Kateb, *Hannah Arendt: Politics, Conscience, Evil* (Totowa, NJ: Rowman & Allanheld, 1983), 88ff.

difficulty emerges since Arendt did not live long enough to complete her work on judgment in *The Life of the Mind*. Readers are left to reconstruct what Arendt might have concluded about judgment the basis of other texts, such as *Lectures on Kant's Political Philosophy*.

My own approach assumes that Arendt's moral thought cannot be confined to a single text or to a particular set of texts. Instead, I locate it in her commitment to writing as practice of understanding. As I see it, Arendt's questions and insights pertaining to moral concerns appear as various "thought-trains" running and criss-crossing throughout her many writings, all motivated by her quest to understand. These thought-trains include reflections on the nature of evil; on the question of conscience; on moral personhood and responsibility; on the role of imagination in thinking, speaking, and judging; and more. Therefore, I resist the common tendency to draw a dividing line between Arendt's political and moral thought.

Certainly Arendt did not see politics and morality as identical. Following what she saw as the traditional distinction between the two spheres, she stated: "In the center of moral considerations stands the self; in the center of political considerations stands the world."[17] But clearly, as the events of the early twentieth century showed, moral and political problems intersect with each other. One's moral thought and practice are influenced by one's perceptions of the world, and they have real-world consequences. Like Julia Kristeva, I would suggest that "one cannot understand Arendt's political thought if one forgets that the reason she involved herself in the political realm was to

[17] Hannah Arendt, "Collective Responsibility," in *Amor Mundi: Explorations in the Faith and Thought of Hannah Arendt,* ed. James W. Bernauer (Boston: M. Nijhoff, 1987), 47.

expand and refine moral philosophy and ethics."[18] While Arendt does employ a more explicitly moral vocabulary in her later writings, I would argue that she was groping toward a moral vocabulary in her earliest attempts to come to terms with totalitarianism and that it took some time for that vocabulary to emerge.

Arendt herself admits that she found it difficult to find a helpful moral vocabulary with which to describe the evils that she had witnessed. She did not often write in an autobiographical voice, but in her 1964 essay "Personal Responsibility under Dictatorship" she spoke in the first person, defending herself against accusations made against her in the *Eichmann in Jerusalem* controversy. In her report on Eichmann, Arendt had raised a question about the moral dilemma faced by Jewish leaders who were manipulated by the Nazis into collaborating with them to a certain extent. Many readers, especially those in the Jewish community, accused her of casting a harsh and unfair judgment upon those leaders. In response to those who had accused her of "sitting in judgment" over people and events, and of not possessing the authority to comment on moral matters, Arendt said:

> If the heat caused by my 'sitting in judgment' has proved, as I think it has, how uncomfortable most of us are when confronted with moral issues, I better admit that not the least uncomfortable one is myself. My early intellectual formation occurred in an atmosphere where nobody paid much attention to moral questions; we were brought up under the assumption: *Das Moralische versteht sich von selbst*, moral conduct is a matter of course. . . . To be sure, every once in a while we were confronted with moral weakness, with lack of steadfastness or loyalty, with this curious, almost automatic yielding under pressure, especially of public opinion . . . but we had no idea how serious such things were and least of all where they could lead. We did not know much about the nature of these phenomena, and I am afraid we cared even less. Well, it turned out that we would be given ample opportunity to learn. For my generation and people of my origin, the lesson began in 1933 and it ended

[18] Julia Kristeva, *Hannah Arendt: Life Is a Narrative*, trans. Frank Collins (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2001), 167-168.

> not when just German Jews but the whole world had been given notice of monstrosities no one believed possible at the beginning. . . . .[19]

Arendt describes how her first reaction to the news of the concentration camps was one of "speechless horror"--a sense that complete "moral disintegration" had taken place, and that it was impossible to speak or make sense of what had happened. In order to reflect on the moral implications of these events, she and her contemporaries were forced "to learn everything from scratch, in the raw, as it were—that is, without the help of categories and general rules under which to subsume our experiences."[20] Given this situation of utter moral disorientation, deprived of her former assumptions about morality being "a matter of course," Arendt had to work through the problem of learning how to think and speak morally in a way that was true to her experience.

Because Arendt's moral thought emerged over time, through her practice of writing, engaging in dialogue, reading, and thinking, I believe that for the purposes of my analysis I must consider representative texts from across her oeuvre rather than isolating one or two key texts. However, I have singled out a particular text, Arendt's 1954 *Partisan Review* essay "Understanding and Politics (The Difficulties of Understanding)," as my starting place. In this essay, Arendt echoes a major theme of *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, namely that the horrors that occurred under the totalitarian regimes demand that twentieth-century thinkers commit themselves to the task of trying to understand totalitarianism, despite the enormous difficulties of the task. She explains that, if the task seems impossible, that is not only because of the magnitude of the evil that occurred, but also because totalitarianism represented a complete break with

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[19] "Personal Responsibility under Dictatorship," in *Responsibility and Judgment* (New York: Schocken Books, 2003), 22-23.
[20] Ibid., 25.

traditional standards of judgment. Significantly, Arendt ventures to suggest that the "understanding heart" prayed for by King Solomon in the Hebrew Bible—which she translates into contemporary terms as "imagination—is the essential resource to help human beings navigate through the moral and political disorientation of the post-Holocaust world.[21] I believe that the image of the "understanding heart," as it is employed in this essay, offers illumination into Arendt's conception of understanding and her moral thought as a whole. Thus, I use this phrase a lens through which to read her other writings. I see Arendt's writings as not simply providing descriptions of the understanding heart, but also as modeling its practice.

The "Understanding Heart"

Because I propose to read Arendt's work through the lens offered by her reference to the "understanding heart" in her "Understanding and Politics" essay, I believe that it would be helpful at this point to highlight some of the essay's main points and its moral vocabulary. In her descriptions of "understanding" and the "understanding heart," Arendt aligns *understanding* with other terms than she employs throughout her writings, namely *reconciliation* and *imagination*. Here I would like to sketch out some preliminary descriptions of these terms that are central to Arendt's moral thought, showing how they are closely interconnected.

Totalitarianism defies understanding, Arendt writes in her essay, because "its very actions constitute a break with all our traditions; they have clearly exploded our

[21] The phrase "understanding heart" is the King James translation of the Hebrew phrase used in 1 Kings 3:5-9. "In Gibeon the LORD appeared to Solomon in a dream by night: and God said, Ask what I shall give thee. And Solomon said….Give therefore thy servant an understanding heart to judge thy people, that I may discern between good and bad: for who is able to judge this thy so great a people?" A more literal English translation might be rendered as "listening heart."

categories of political thought and our standards for moral judgment."[22] As she had argued previously in *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, she argues here that the evil that had occurred under the totalitarian regimes, manifested particularly in the concentration camps of Nazi Germany and Stalinist Russia, was unprecedented in human history. To try to explain totalitarianism in terms of prior frameworks or analogies to other historical events (e.g., slavery, dictatorships, or even genocide) was to miss the unprecedented character of these modern manifestations of horror. However, Arendt argues that to recognize the incomprehensibility of totalitarianism does not mean that we should abandon the *quest* for understanding—the wholehearted dedication of our resources of thought, imagination, and dialogue—to examining these enigmatic events and our human culpability. In the following passage, she connects the quest for understanding with the task of *reconciliation* to the world:

> [Understanding] is the 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. Understanding begins with birth and ends with death. To the extent that the rise of totalitarian governments is the central event of our world, to understand totalitarianism is not to condone anything, but to reconcile ourselves to a world in which such things are possible at all.[23]

For Arendt, reconciliation is not to be confused with either the condoning or the forgiveness of evil; nor is it to be confused with mere acceptance or resignation.[24] To the contrary, Arendt aims to *resist* the temptation of resignation by maintaining an irreconcilable tension at the core of her thought. On the one hand, she faces the horrors

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[22] Hannah Arendt, "Understanding and Politics," 309-10.
[23] Ibid., 308.
[24] Some critics mistake her emphasis on reconciliation to the world for passive acceptance of its evils. For example, theologian Charles T. Mathewes argues that Arendt's conception of judgment (which, for Arendt, is closely aligned with reconciliation) "turned out to be only a device for resignation." In *Evil and the Augustinian Tradition*, 176.

of the concentration camps and declares unequivocally, "*This ought not to have happened*. . . . Something happened there to which we cannot reconcile ourselves. None of us ever can."[25] On the other hand, she maintains that, no matter how "topsy-turvy" the world becomes, human beings should not try to escape from it into an otherworldly, spiritual realm or into an interior life. She insists repeatedly that "*we are of the world and not merely in it*," reversing the conventionally otherworldly formula.[26] For Arendt, reconciliation means recognizing that the world is our home, no matter how uncomfortable, incomprehensible, or violent it becomes. Rather than seeking escape from the only world we have, we must seek reconciliation. To refuse the effort of reconciliation means the rejection of our very humanity.

How can we reconcile ourselves to a world in which human beings commit unspeakable crimes against one another? How can we "bear with" the innumerable strangers in this world that we share, despite our many differences? Invoking the example of King Solomon as a man "who certainly knew something of political action" and who identified "the gift of an 'understanding heart' as the greatest gift a man could receive and desire," Arendt states:

> As far removed from sentimentality as it is from paperwork, the human heart is the only thing in the world that will take upon itself the burden that the divine gift of action, of being a beginning and therefore being able to make a beginning, has placed upon us. Solomon prayed for this particular gift because he was a king and knew that only an 'understanding heart,' and not mere reflection or mere feeling, makes it bearable for us to live with other people, strangers forever, in the same world, and makes it possible for them to bear with us.[27]

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[25] Hannah Arendt, "'What Remains?,'" 14.
[26] Arendt, "Thinking," *The Life of the Mind* (San Diego: Harcourt, 1971), 22. (Arendt's italics.)
[27] Arendt, "Understanding and Politics," 322.

Thus Arendt suggests that the "understanding heart," while not identical with action, bears a close relationship with it.[28] Without this capacity for understanding, human beings would not be able to accept or bear the "burden" of action. In fact, Arendt describes understanding as "*the other side of action*, namely, that form of cognition, distinct from many others, by which acting men . . . eventually can come to terms with what irrevocably happened and be reconciled with what unavoidably exists."[29] In order to reconcile ourselves with reality, then, we need *both* understanding and action.

Arendt proceeds in her essay to translate the Biblical expression "understanding heart" into more contemporary ("though hardly more accurate") language, assigning it the name "imagination." Although she has sometimes been accused (falsely I think) of being a consolatory thinker,[30] Arendt's conception of the imagination is opposed to any kind of escapist fantasy or sentimental daydream. Instead, she unflinchingly faces what she called "the darkness of the human heart," while affirming that imagination is the essential resource that human beings must "mobilize" in order to live together in the world as responsible citizens.[31] She explains:

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[28] This passage evokes one of Arendt's core ideas, repeated in almost all of her writings—her conception of action in terms of "natality," or the human being's innate capacity to make new beginnings. She frequently attributes this insight to Augustine, referencing his interpretation of Genesis in *The City of God*: "In order that there might be this beginning, therefore, a man was created before whom no man existed." (St. Augustine, *The City of God*, Book XII, 21.)

[29] Arendt, "Understanding and Politics," 321-22. (My italics.)

[30] See, for example, Yaacov Lozowick, "Malicious Clerks," in *Hannah Arendt in Jerusalem*, ed. Steven Aschheim (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2001). Lozowick disagrees with Arendt's 'banality of evil' formulation and thinks that people find it appealing because it is comforting (222). More recently, Ron Rosenbaum has made a similar argument in "The Evil of Banality: Troubling New Revelations about Arendt and Heidegger," posted online in *Slate Magazine*, October 30, 2009 (http://www.slate.com/id/2234010).

[31] Arendt referred to "the darkness of the human heart" in several texts, using the word "darkness" not necessarily to mean "evil," but rather "hidden." For Arendt, the "heart" is where the private human passions reside: "Whatever the passions and the emotions may be, and whatever their true connection with thought and reason, they certainly are located in the human heart. And not only is the human heart a place of darkness which, with certainty, no eye can penetrate; the qualities of the heart need darkness and protection against the light of the public to grow and remain what they are meant to be, innermost motives which are not for public display." In *On Revolution* (New York: Penguin, 2006), 86.

> In distinction from fantasy, which dreams something, imagination is concerned with the particular darkness of the human heart and the peculiar density which surrounds everything that is real. . . . True understanding does not tire of interminable dialogue and 'vicious circles,' because it trusts that imagination eventually will catch at least a glimpse of the always frightening light of truth. To distinguish imagination from fancy and to mobilize its power does not mean that understanding of human affairs becomes 'irrational.' On the contrary, imagination, as Wordsworth said, 'is but another name for . . . clearest insight, amplitude of mind, / And Reason in her most exalted mood.'[32]

Though she was often critical of Romanticism because of its tendency toward introspection, here Arendt enlists the aid of a Romantic poet to suggest that the imagination, far from allowing us to escape reality, in fact grants us access to reality. We depend upon it to discern between good and evil, truth and deception, reality and illusion.

Arendt concludes the essay with a powerful affirmation of the imagination, writing:

> Without this kind of imagination, which actually is understanding, we would never be able to take our bearings in the world. It is the only inner compass we have. We are contemporaries only so far as our understanding reaches. If we want to be at home on this earth, even at the price of being at home in this century, we must try to take part in the interminable dialogue with the essence of totalitarianism.[33]

For Arendt, then, the imagination, understood metaphorically as King Solomon's "understanding heart," enables us to orient ourselves morally and politically in a world without standards. It does this by helping us to escape from the prison of isolation and subjectivity. Through dialogue, we are able to make connections with one another, to "become contemporaries," and to feel at home in the world.

Description of My Project

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[32] Arendt, "Understanding and Politics," 322-23. Wordsworth quotation from *The Prelude*, Book XIV, 190-92.
[33] Ibid, 323.

In this dissertation, I hope to illuminate the depth, complexity, and richness of Hannah Arendt's moral thought and practice through an analysis of her conception of understanding as it is illuminated by the image of the "understanding heart." Through an analysis of Arendt's work, I will argue that for Arendt, the "understanding heart" is cultivated through at least three moral practices: 1) "dwelling on horrors," that is, directing one's intellect and imagination toward understanding the reality of evil, no matter how it manifests in one's time; 2) participating in the world through speech and action; and 3) withdrawing *temporarily* from the world to practice the mental activities, especially Socratic thinking (which is closely related to conscience) and enlarged thinking (which is closely related to judgment).

Overview of Chapters

Chapter One: "Dwelling Upon Horrors" as a Practice of Understanding

In 1945, Arendt wrote that "the problem of evil will be the fundamental question of postwar intellectual life in Europe."[34] In this chapter, I will argue that Arendt's reflections on totalitarian evil are central to the development of her moral thought. Here I will focus on her early efforts to understand what she saw as an unprecedented manifestation of evil. I will begin by attending to the work that launched Arendt's career, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, in which she suggests that "dwelling upon horrors" is a necessary aspect of understanding. I will argue that Arendt's commitment to "dwelling upon horrors" appears in her analysis of the concentration camps as an appearance of "radical evil." Second, I will turn to *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, in which Arendt attempts to come to terms with evil as it appeared in the face of one man, Adolf Eichmann, who was

[34] Hannah Arendt, "Nightmare and Flight," in *Essays in Understanding*, 134.

responsible for deporting millions of Jews to the Nazi death camps. Here she introduced the controversial phrase, "the banality of evil."

Extensive commentary has previously been devoted to these two texts, with scholars debating whether Arendt's shift of terminology from "radical evil" to "the banality of evil" represents a decisive philosophical or theological change, or whether in fact the two descriptions are compatible. My examination differs from the existing scholarship in focusing on how both texts reflect Arendt's commitment to *understanding* evil, noting her insights into the difficulties of understanding evil and how we might go about trying to overcome these challenges. Arendt insists that, in order to resist evil, we must strive to understand it. Thus, my aim in this chapter is show why Arendt views "dwelling on horrors" as a moral imperative and to clarify what this task entails.

Chapter Two: "Amor Mundi": The Relationship of Understanding to Action and Speech

Arendt remarked in her "Understanding and Politics" essay that "although we merely know, but do not yet understand, what we are fighting against, we know and understand even less what we are fighting for."[35] Thus, while insisting that attending to the reality of evil was a *necessary* aspect of her quest for understanding, Arendt did not claim that it was sufficient. In this chapter I will turn from examining her understanding of evil, which she was fighting against, to examining her understanding of what she was fighting for—namely, the cultivation and preservation of a world in which people can participate in meaningful speech and action. Arendt's fundamental orientation toward the public world is often characterized as her "ethos of worldliness" or her "*amor mundi*." Here I will focus primarily on Arendt's book *The Human Condition* to consider how speech and action (which contribute to the constitution of the public world while

[35] Hannah Arendt, "Understanding and Politics," 310.

simultaneously "disclosing" selfhood) are related to the "understanding heart." I will emphasize the role of speech, especially dialogue and story, in the cultivation of understanding. In focusing on speech, I hope to illuminate the role of the imagination in the active construction of moral personhood: Arendt offers insight into how we constitute ourselves as moral persons through the stories we choose to tell about ourselves and others, the vocabulary and metaphors that we choose to employ, the examples of moral persons whom we recognize as "models," and the relationships that we maintain through forgiveness and promise.

Chapter Three: The Practice of Thinking as a Component of Understanding

(Socratic Thinking and Enlarged Thinking)

Toward the end of her life, Arendt embarked upon what she intended to be a three-volume work titled *The Life of the Mind,* which would offer an investigation into thinking, willing, and judging. In this chapter I will focus especially on the first volume, *Thinking*, since Arendt offers a more developed analysis of this mental activity than of willing or judging.[36] (However, I will touch on Arendt's conception of judging as well, since in her analysis of thinking she posits a close relationship between thinking and judging.) Arendt opens her reflections on thinking by returning to the questions posed for her by the Eichmann trial, specifically: "Might the problem of good and evil, our faculty of telling right from wrong, be connected with our faculty of thought?"[37] I will argue that, for Arendt, a certain mode of thinking—not the detached exercise of

[36] Arendt died of a heart attack on December 4, 1975 before the work could be completed; hence, the volume on Judging remained unwritten. Mary McCarthy informs us that upon Arendt's death, a page was found in her typewriter with the heading "Judging" and two epigraphs. See "Editor's Postface" in *Life of the Mind*, 242.

[37] Arendt, Introduction, Thinking, *Life of the Mind*, 5.

analytical reasoning but rather a mode of thinking that is oriented toward the world and toward others—is an essential component of the practice of understanding.

Arendt's investigation into thinking puzzled many critics who had appreciated her earlier critique of the *vita contemplativa* and her affirmation of the political realm. Some critics read this work as a return to philosophy and as a departure from her earlier views. Against these critics, I argue that Arendt's analysis of thinking in her late work maintains continuity with her early work in that it is similarly guided by the sensibility of *amor mundi*. While she acknowledges that thinking requires a temporary withdrawal from the world, she advocates the practice of a mode of thinking that takes worldly events and experiences as its starting point and retains connection with the world through the assistance of the imagination. In particular, she offers two at least two descriptions of imaginative thinking, with each description highlighting different aspects. In *The Life of the Mind*, Arendt affirms Socrates as a positive model of thinking, presenting him as the rare model of a philosophical thinker who was equally at home in the spheres of thought and action. She focuses here on the value of Socratic thinking, arguing that it can prevent people from doing evil by offering them a chance to stop and reflect rather than mindlessly going along with the crowd. In her reflection on judgment in *Lectures on Kant's Political Philosophy*, Arendt draws on Kant's conception of enlarged thinking to highlight an intersubjective dimension to the practice of thinking. Even while a person is withdrawn from the world in the activity of thinking, the imagination allows the mind to "travel" in such a way that it retains an orientation to plurality. Enlarged thinking functions as a way of preparing the mind for judgment and for communicating one's judgment to others, and it must result in actual dialogue in order to be brought to fruition.

This intersubjective component—the orientation to worldly affairs and emphasis on taking other peoples' views into account—makes thinking a practice of *understanding* and not simply a remote exercise of logic.

Conclusion: Cultivating an Arendtian Imagination for Our Time

I see the "understanding heart" as a quality that is as much needed in our own times as it was in Arendt's. In the concluding chapter, I will identify the primary insights that have been gained from this examination of Arendt's work and suggest ways of applying an Arendtian imagination to improve our understanding of present-day problems. I argue that Arendt's cultivation of the "understanding heart" involves particular practices that help persons to develop a moral way of being in the world—preparing them to respond constructively.

The Heidegger Affair and Its Impact on Arendt's Quest for Understanding

Arendt's student and biographer Elisabeth Young-Bruehl has observed that controversies in Hannah Arendt's life and writing have "contributed significantly to the kind of historical figure Arendt has become." She adds, "Even when she is revered, questions about her judgment shadow her."[38] Arendt has been something of a controversial figure since her first publication, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, partly because her writing did not conform to scholarly conventions. But two major controversies in particular have profoundly shaped the scholarship: the first surrounds her publication of *Eichmann in Jerusalem* (which I have already mentioned, and which I will discuss further in chapter 1); the other pertains to her complex relationship with her early teacher, Martin Heidegger. By now it is well known that Arendt was romantically involved with Heidegger when she was an eighteen-year-old student in his philosophy

[38] Elisabeth Young-Bruehl, *Why Arendt Matters* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006), 25.

classes at Marburg. It is also known that, after years of not speaking to him after fleeing Germany in 1933, she renewed contact with him in 1950 and achieved a measure of reconciliation. In addition, she honored him with a radio piece in Germany on his birthday in 1971, published in English in *The New York Review of Books* under the title "Martin Heidegger at Eighty." In light of these facts, some readers have wanted to discredit Arendt's moral thought, believing it to be irredeemably compromised by Heidegger's influence.

Elisabeth Young-Bruehl has discussed the history of the controversy in *Why Arendt Matters*. She writes that her biography of Arendt revealed the Heidegger/Arendt affair to the public, but it did not become a scandal until the publication of Elzbieta Ettinger's book *Hannah Arendt/Martin Heidegger* in 1995, which came out prior to the published correspondence of Arendt and Heidegger.[39] Young-Bruehl criticizes Ettinger's scholarship and argues that the book presented Arendt unfairly: "Ettinger projected a naïve and helpless Jewish schoolgirl and a charming but ruthless married Catholic professor playing out a drama of passionate recklessness and betrayal, followed by slavish loyalty on the part of the betrayed mistress."[40] She presents a different portrait based on Arendt's references to Heidegger in her letters to Jaspers and Blücher, showing that Arendt's view of Heidegger developed in several stages after the Holocaust, from outright damnation in the early stages to a willingness to engage in renewed conversation. But Arendt was certainly never uncritical of him or his philosophy. Young-Bruehl asserts that, while Arendt never stopped reflecting on Heidegger and the problems that

[39] See Elzbieta Ettinger, *Hannah Arendt/Martin Heidegger* (New Haven: Yale, 1995).
[40] Elisabeth Young-Bruehl, *Why Arendt Matters*, 21.

his thought posed for her, her work, even until the end of her life, "clearly rejected his philosophy."[41]

Here I would briefly like to situate Arendt's relationship with Heidegger in the context of her relationship with her other mentors. As I see it, both of Arendt's early teachers—Martin Heidegger and Karl Jaspers—influenced her moral thought, albeit in contrasting ways. Heidegger stimulated Arendt's reflections on thinking, but he did not function as a moral model for Arendt in the way that Jaspers did. By contrast, Jaspers functioned as Arendt's model of a thinker who practiced the cultivation of an understanding heart.

Despite Young-Bruehl's presentation of Arendt's critique of Heidegger and his thought, critics who wish to dismiss Arendt as a moral thinker have continued to evoke their relationship. Recently, Ron Rosenbaum suggested in an article for *Slate* that the "intellectually toxic" relationship between Heidegger and Arendt contaminated all of her thought, including her famous conception of the "banality of evil."[42]

My own view is that Rosenbaum and like-minded critics are wrong about Arendt and about what she was trying to accomplish in her work because they miss her emphasis on *understanding*. They have not attended to the degree to which she continually and intensely struggled, throughout her life, to understand the necessary conditions for moral

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[41] Ibid., 23.

[42] See Ron Rosenbaum, "The Evil of Banality: Troubling New Revelations about Arendt and Heidegger," posted on *Slate* on Oct. 30, 2009 (http:www.slate.com/id/2234010). Rosenbaum's article opens provocatively: "Will we ever be able to think of Hannah Arendt in the same way again? Two new and damning critiques, one of Arendt and one of her longtime Nazi-sycophant lover, the philosopher Martin Heidegger, were published within ten days of each other last month. The pieces cast further doubt on the overinflated, underexamined reputations of both figures and shed new light on their intellectually toxic relationship." See also Emmanuel Faye, *Heidegger: The Introduction of Nazism into Philosophy*; also Bernard Wasserstein, "Blame the Victim—Hannah Arendt Among the Nazis: The Historian and Her Sources" in *London's Times Literary Supplement*, Oct. 9, 2009; also Carlin Romano review essay of Faye's book in Oct. 18 *Chronicle of Higher Education*.

thought and judgment. Among the questions that Arendt sought to understand was the question of Heidegger's reprehensible behavior in the Nazi regime—a question that she did not often write explicitly about in public because it was so personal and painful.[43] If the practice of thinking can prepare us for responsible action in the world, as Arendt wanted to argue, how then was she to make sense of what Heidegger had done? As her teacher, Heidegger had offered a model of a passionate and brilliant thinker, and yet he had behaved abominably in supporting the Nazi regime and never adequately repented of his actions. On my reading, it was Heidegger's willingness to lend his thought to the service of Nazism that led Arendt to question the philosophical tradition and to articulate, throughout her life, such a strong critique of the *vita contemplativa*.[44]

Although Heidegger played an important role in Arendt's life and she was influenced by his investigations into thinking, she was by no means his lifelong disciple. Throughout her life, Arendt cultivated numerous intellectual partners. These included the novelist Mary McCarthy, the poet W. H. Auden, and others. One of her most important

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[43] However, readers may detect implicit references. Consider Arendt's remark to her interviewer Günther Gaus: "The problem, the personal problem, was not what our enemies did but what our friends did. In the wave of *Gleichschaltung* (co-ordination), which was relatively voluntary—in any case, not yet under the pressure of terror—it was as if an empty space formed around one. . . . . And among intellectuals *Gleichschaltung* was the rule, so to speak. But not among the others. And I never forgot that. I left Germany dominated by the idea—of course somewhat exaggerated: Never again! I shall never again get involved in any kind of intellectual business! I want nothing to do with that lot." (In "'What Remains?,'" 10-11).

[44] See Arendt's critique of Heidegger in "What Is Existential Philosophy?" in *Essays in Understanding* 163-187 (Original English publication in *Partisan Review*, 1946). Here she argues that his "Dasein" is basically a solipsistic Self: "The essential character of the Self is its absolute Self-ness, its radical separation from all its fellows. . . . What emerges from this absolute isolation is a concept of the Self as the total opposite of man. . . . The concept of Self is a concept of man that leaves the individual existing independent of humanity and representative of no one but himself—of nothing but his own nothingness....Later, and after the fact, as it were, Heidegger has drawn on mythologizing and muddled concepts like 'folk' and 'earth' in an effort to supply his isolated Selves with a shared, common ground to stand on" (181). Arendt contrasts Heidegger's philosophy to that of Jaspers, which she affirms: "Existence itself is, by its very nature, never isolated. It exists only in communication and in awareness of others' existence. Our fellowmen are not (as in Heidegger) an element of existence that is structurally necessary but at the same time an impediment to the Being of Self. Just the contrary: Existence can only develop in the shared life of human beings inhabiting a given world common to them all." (186)

conversation partners was her husband Heinrich Blücher, with whom she collaborated in research on *The Origins of Totalitarianism* and with whom she discussed most of her work.[45] I raise this point to emphasize that Arendt's search for understanding was not diminished by Heidegger's influence, nor was it a quest pursued in isolation. As I will show in this dissertation, Arendt believed that understanding can be gained not in perpetual solitude, but rather in ongoing conversation and companionship with others.

In particular, it was Jaspers whom Arendt admired as a moral thinker and who served as a model of the "understanding heart." To my knowledge, Arendt had never referred to the "understanding heart" in a publication prior to the "Understanding and Politics" essay. Significantly, however, it appears in the private correspondence between Arendt and Heinrich Blücher in the context of their discussion of a publication by Jaspers. In a letter written to Arendt on February 14, 1950, Blücher praises Jaspers' *Von der Wahrheit* as "the pivotal metaphysical and therefore the greatest and most central achievement of the resistance to Hitler."[46] In particular, he praises Jaspers for grasping "the core of human creative power," that is, for recognizing the human being's need for a "comprehending heart."[47]

Among Blücher's most important points in his letter to Arendt, he calls attention to the close connection between the "understanding heart" and Jaspers' conception of human freedom. In *Von der Wahrheit*, Jaspers describes the human experience of "the

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[45] Julia Kristeva is one of the few scholars to comment on Blücher's importance as a conversation partner for Arendt. She argues that Arendt's thought forged a middle way between Heidegger and Blücher: "Faced with the solitude of the philosophical sage who had lost his way in history (Heidegger) and the impetuousness of the bit actor who lost his way in politics (Blücher), Hannah had to choose one or the other, or, at the very least, to blend them together." In Kristeva, *Hannah Arendt*, 25.) (I think it is a mistake, however, to omit Jaspers from the equation.)

[46] *Within Four Walls: The Correspondence between Hannah Arendt and Heinrich Blücher, 1936-1968.* Ed. and with introduction by Lotte Kohler. Trans from German by Peter Constantine. (New York: Harcourt, 2000), 130.

[47] Ibid., 132.

freedom in which I am given to myself as a gift."[48] This gift comes with a great deal of responsibility, which can feel overwhelming. Following Jaspers, Blücher describes in his letter why prayer—a humble request for help—is a necessary posture for coping with such an overwhelming experience of freedom. He writes:

> Endless are the possibilities of the comprehending heart, and we never do enough, and therefore a prayer to God would be allowed, without containing a further impertinent demand to God: Lord, give me an understanding and wise heart. . . . A 'please' would be allowed here. . . . And this gift, given by God himself, is given to each and every one, regardless of whether the gods bestowed gifts upon the individual or not. Here is the core of human creative power, and he who grasps it well may gain the gifts of the gods too.[49]

In Blücher's description, while the comprehending heart is ultimately a gift, it is available to everyone who humbly recognizes the "sensed necessity" of the plea and takes the initiative to "grasp" the gift. Blücher clarifies that this gift is distinct from "genius" but that it is even more important. In his view, the gift of the understanding or comprehending heart distinguished Jaspers' work from Heidegger's: "Jaspers, on whom initially the gods had not bestowed their metaphysical gifts, holds on to this notion unwaveringly and has now written this work—not the more gifted Heidegger, who constantly kept overlooking this one thing."[50]

On the publication of her book *Sechs Essays* in Germany in 1947, Arendt wrote a dedication to Jaspers. The English translation reads:

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[48] See Karl Jaspers, *Karl Jaspers: Basic Philosophical Writings*, edited and translated by Edith Ehrlich, Leonard H. Ehrlich, and George B. Pepper (New York: Humanity Books, 2000), 146, also 192.

[49] *Within Four Walls*, 131-32.

[50] Arendt and Blücher admired Jaspers' ethical thought, but not uncritically. For example, in a 1946 letter to Blücher, Arendt expressed strong criticism, even anger, toward Jaspers for his emphasis on guilt and sin in what she called his recently published "guilt-monograph" [*Die Schuldfrage*] (In *Within Four Walls*, 84). Blucher agreed, saying of another of Jaspers' recent publications, *Die Idee der Universität*, "It's all very noble, great, and touching: the last humanist trying to halt the consequences of nihilism. Nice levees, but useless against the Deluge" (87).

> What I learned from you and what helped me in the ensuing years to find my way around reality without selling my soul to it the way people in earlier times sold their soul to the devil is that the only thing of importance is not philosophies but the truth, that one has to live and think in the open and not in one's own little shell, no matter how comfortably furnished it is . . . . What I have personally never forgotten is your attitude—so difficult to describe—of listening, your tolerance that is constantly ready to offer criticism but is as far removed from skepticism as it is from fanaticism; ultimately, it is simply the realization of the fact that all human beings are rational but that no human being's rationality is infallible.[51]

This passage captures aspects of Arendt's conception of *understanding*—that the practice of understanding is oriented toward reality (embracing the task of navigating reality without "selling our souls" to it); and that it requires us to "live and think in the open," engaging in respectful dialogue with others, recognizing that neither our own ideas nor those of others are infallible.

I will now proceed in this dissertation to further examine Arendt's conception of understanding, which, in her view, Jaspers possessed and Heidegger lacked. In her work, Arendt would investigate and affirm the necessary role of thinking in understanding, but she ultimately affirmed a *world-oriented mode of thinking* that differed from Heidegger's. I will turn first to an examination of Arendt's insistence on thinking about the phenomenon of evil as a reflection of her commitment to attending to worldly affairs.

[51] "Dedication to Karl Jaspers" in *Essays in Understanding*, 213-14. English trans. by Robert and Rita Kimber.

Chapter One

"Dwelling on Horrors" as a Practice of Understanding

Introduction

"The reality is that 'the Nazis are men like ourselves'; the nightmare is that they have shown, have proven beyond doubt what man is capable of. In other words, the problem of evil will be the fundamental question of postwar intellectual life in Europe . . . ."
--Hannah Arendt, "Nightmare and Flight" (1945)[1]

Hannah Arendt deserves recognition as a moral thinker because she devoted so much of her attention to understanding the problem of evil. Early in her career, upon reviewing Denis de Rougemont's book *The Devil's Share* (1944) for *Partisan Review*, she asserted that the problem of evil would be "the fundamental question of postwar intellectual life in Europe." In her review, she praised de Rougemont for recognizing the nightmare of the human predicament after the Holocaust, for recognizing "what man is capable of" in terms of participation in extraordinary evil. Yet she also criticized him for succumbing to a "flight from reality" despite his better intentions. By focusing on the nature of the Devil, she said, de Rougemont was "evading the responsibility of man for his deeds."[2] Further, she said that by presenting human beings as engaged in a cosmic battle between God and the Devil, between good and evil forces, he had succumbed to a modern form of Gnosticism.[3] In a cosmic battle, humans merely have the choice of aligning themselves with one side or the other, but they cannot really change "the order of the world."

Arendt published this review in 1945, the same year that she embarked upon research for the major work that would launch her career, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*

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[1] Hannah Arendt, "Nightmare and Flight," in *Essays in Understanding, 1930-1954: Formation, Exile, and Totalitarianism*, ed. Jerome Kohn (New York: Schocken Books, 1994), 134.
[2] Ibid.
[3] Ibid., 135.

(1951). In her remarks on *The Devil's Share*, she foreshadowed the major concerns that would dominate her own work: namely, the question of how to face the reality of human evil as "the burden which our century has placed on us," without giving in to the temptation of flight.[4] These remarks show her early recognition that, while trying to understand evil is an essential task, it is also an exceedingly difficult and painful one. We tend to mythologize evil, in her view, because we do not want to confront the problem of human responsibility. For Arendt, facing the nightmare of the post-Holocaust situation means, above all, facing the fact that ordinary human beings have committed atrocities that were previously unimaginable. If we hope to preserve a world in which human beings can flourish and interact with each other meaningfully, Arendt says, we must try to understand this new, unprecedented manifestation of human evil. Thus, in *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, she advocated a practice that might at first be perceived as counterintuitive or counterproductive: "dwelling on horrors."

When Arendt speaks of "dwelling on horrors" in the third volume of *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, she refers in particular to trying to understand what happened in the concentration camps of Nazi Germany and Stalinist Russia. Her research for this massive work involved reading as many survivors' reports as possible, including David Rousset's *The Other Kingdom*. From Rousset's account of the sixteen months that he had spent in Buchenwald, Helmstedt, Neuengamme, and Wöbbelin, Arendt drew the epigraph for her third volume of *Origins*: "Normal men do not know that everything is possible." Rousset had written of an unsurpassable gulf between survivors and "normal men" (those who had not personally experienced the horrors of the concentration camps). Even after

[4] Hannah Arendt, "Preface to the First Edition," *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (San Diego: Harvest, 1979), viii.

reading the survivors' accounts, people who had not lived through such horrors could not *comprehend* what they read in any meaningful way. Knowledge of the horrors could not penetrate their very flesh in the way that Rousset described.[5] Arendt admitted elsewhere that her own response to information about the concentration camps, when the knowledge first started coming out, was one of disbelief.[6] Agreeing with Rousset that knowledge of the concentration camps was a kind of knowledge that "common sense" refuses to assimilate, she elaborates:

> What common sense and 'normal people' refuse to believe is that everything is possible. We attempt to understand elements in present or recollected experience that simply surpass our powers of understanding. We attempt to classify as criminal a thing which, as we all feel, no such category was ever intended to cover. What meaning has the concept of murder when we are confronted with the mass production of corpses? We attempt to understand the behavior of concentration-camp inmates and SS-men psychologically, when the very thing that must be realized is that the psyche *can* be destroyed even without the destruction of the physical man . . . . The end result in any case is inanimate men, *i.e*., men who can no longer be psychologically understood, whose return to the psychologically or otherwise intelligibly human world closely resembles the resurrection of Lazarus. All statements of common sense, whether of a psychological or sociological nature, serve only to encourage those who think it 'superficial' to 'dwell on horrors.'[7]

Arendt believed that most people, when faced with the enormity of the horrors of totalitarianism, succumbed to one of (at least) two possible temptations. One temptation

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[5] David Rousset, *The Other Kingdom* (New York: Reynal & Hitchcock, 1947), 168-69. "Normal men do not know that everything is possible. Even if the evidence forces their intelligence to admit it, their muscles do not believe it. The concentrationees do know. The soldier who has spent months under fire has made the acquaintance of death. Death lived among the concentrationees at ever hour of their existence. She showed them all her faces. They came to know all her exigencies. They lived dread as an ever-present obsession. They knew the humiliation of beatings, the weakness of the flesh under the lash. They weighed the ravages of starvation. For years on end they groped their way through the fantastic scenes littered with the ruins of human dignities. They are set apart from the rest of the world by an experience impossible to communicate."

[6] Arendt, "'What Remains? The Language Remains,'" in *Essays in Understanding*, 13-14: "What was decisive was the day we learned about Auschwitz. . . . And at first we didn't believe it . . . . [My husband] said don't be gullible, don't take these stories at face value. They can't go that far! And then a half-year later we believed it after all, because we had the proof."

[7] Hannah Arendt, *Origins*, 440-41. [Arendt's footnote acknowledges George Bataille in *Critique*, January, 1948, as the source of the phrase 'to dwell on horrors.']

was to give up on the effort to understand because the horror was so immense, so ineffable. The other was to look to the past for guidance, seeking analogies with historical events or seeking explanations in traditional conceptions of evil or sinfulness. Arendt saw both temptations as representing forms of flight. She insisted that totalitarian evil was so difficult to understand because we cannot rely on common sense or on previously existing categories (such as that of "criminal") to explain the acts of evil that took place in the concentration camps. Nor can we rely on inherited beliefs about what it means to be human, since totalitarianism, by creating "men who can no longer be psychologically understood," threatens our very conception of human nature. Because we cannot rely on our previous tools for understanding, we must commit ourselves to the practice of "dwelling on horrors."

My purpose in this chapter is to explore Arendt's commitment to "dwelling on horrors," showing why this practice is a necessary component of understanding. While several of her works reflect Arendt's commitment to thinking about evil, here I will focus primarily on *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1951) and *Eichmann in Jerusalem* (1963). In the first, Arendt treats totalitarianism as an unprecedented manifestation of "radical evil," identifying the connections between the regimes of Hitler and Stalin, especially in their institution of concentration camps: "If it is true that the concentration camps are the most consequential institution of totalitarian rule, 'dwelling on horrors' would seem to be indispensable for the understanding of totalitarianism," she writes.[8] In the latter, Arendt narrows her scope, focusing on evil as it was exemplified by one man who had arranged for the deportation of millions of Jews to the death camps. Here she introduces the

[8] Arendt, *Origins*, 441. (See also 437: "The concentration and extermination camps serve as the laboratories in which the fundamental belief that totalitarianism that everything is possible is verified.")

controversial phrase, "the banality of evil." Both texts serve as examples of Arendt's own practice of "dwelling on horrors" as opposed to seeking a flight from reality.

In my reading of these two texts, I will focus on Arendt's argument as to why "dwelling on horrors" is a moral imperative, why it is so difficult, and how it should be approached. I will argue, following Arendt, that the ongoing attempt to understand evil is a necessary practice involved in the cultivation of an understanding heart.

Current Scholarship

Arendt's reflections on the nature of evil, from her analysis of "radical evil" (in *The Origins of Totalitarianism*) to her introduction of the phrase "banality of evil" (in *Eichmann in Jerusalem*), have received extensive commentary, including criticism as well as approbation, but the "banality of evil" phrase in particular generated an initial storm of controversy. While many readers initially took offense at the phrase, others have sought to clarify Arendt's meaning and to defend the validity of her insight into Adolf Eichmann's moral character (or lack thereof). Arendt's exploration of the problem of evil has made her of interest to a wide range of scholars outside the field of political theory. Though her analysis of evil remains controversial, she has increasingly earned attention from moral philosophers and theologians on the basis of these early texts.[9]

Arendt's introduction of the "banality of evil" phrase continues to receive more scholarly attention than anything else she said about evil; yet it remains frequently misunderstood. As Young-Bruehl pointed out in *Why Arendt Matters*, one often hears

[9] Most recently, Arendt's analysis of evil has attracted the attention of Richard J. Bernstein, *Radical Evil: A Philosophical Investigation* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2002) ; Charles T. Mathewes, *Evil and the Augustinian Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001); Stephan Kampowski, *Arendt, Augustine, and the New Beginning: The Action Theory and Moral Thought of Hannah Arendt in the Light of Her Dissertation on St. Augustine* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2008); and Arne Johan Vetlesen, *Evil and Human Agency: Understanding Collective Evildoing* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

the phrase evoked as a "soundbite."[10] Some recent critics protest against its continuing popularity. The journalist and author Ron Rosenbaum, for example, issued a vehement argument in a 2009 *Slate* article against the "robotic reiteration of the phrase the banality of evil as an explanation for everything bad that humans do." He states:

> Arendt may not have intended that the phrase be used this way, but one of its pernicious effects has been to make it seem as though the search for an explanation of the mystery of evil done by 'ordinary men' is over. As though by naming it somehow explains it and even solves the problem. It's a phrase that sounds meaningful and lets us off the hook, allows us to avoid facing the difficult question.

Rosenbaum proceeds to say that Arendt was wrong in Eichmann's case—that she fell for Eichmann's self-presentation at the trial as a mere follower of orders, though Eichmann was in fact "a vicious and loathsome Jew-hater and -hunter"—but also "wrong in almost all subsequent cases when applied generally." Asserting that Arendt should have stuck with her original formulation, "radical evil," he states, "Either one knows what one is doing is evil or one does not. If one knows and does it anyway, one is evil, not some special subcategory of evil. If one doesn't know, one is ignorant, and not evil."[11]

Most scholars agree that to understand Arendt, it is essential to understand what she meant by this phrase. As Young-Bruehl said, Arendt is known by that "soundbite," but when it is properly understood, the phrase leads to the core of Arendt's thinking.[12] In this chapter I will examine Arendt's early investigations into evil and argue that she certainly did not intend the phrase to "let us off the hook" or "avoid facing the difficult question" about evil (as Rosenbaum complained)—quite the opposite. For Arendt, Eichmann displayed a kind of moral blindness or obliviousness that was utterly baffling

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[10] Elisabeth Young-Bruehl, *Why Arendt Matters* (New Haven: Yale University Press), 5.
[11] Ron Rosenbaum, "The Evil of Banality: Troubling New Revelations about Arendt and Heidegger," *Slate*, Oct. 30, 2009 [http://www.slate.com/id/2234010]
[12] Young-Bruehl, *Why Arendt Matters*, 5.

to her. In using the phrase, she was trying to demythologize evil, but not to domesticate it. She was trying to call attention to a mind-boggling deficiency in Eichmann—a kind of vacuum where the capacity for empathy, conscience, self-examination, and ethical imagination should be. Far from positing the "banality of evil" phrase as an answer to a question or a solution to a riddle, she saw it as an incomprehensible phenomenon: How could a person commit evil on such a large scale so casually, unreflectively, and unrepentantly? Arendt continued to reflect on this question for the rest of her life.

In this chapter, I focus on Arendt's reflections on evil in *The Origins of Totalitarianism* and *Eichmann in Jerusalem* because they remain misunderstood and controversial, and, simply put, one cannot understand Arendt as a moral thinker without understanding what she meant by "radical evil" and the "banality of evil." Specifically, these early works reveal why evil plays such a large role in motivating her quest for understanding, why she perceived traditional resources as no longer adequate to assist our understanding, and how she approached the task of understanding. Moreover, they illuminate the idea that understanding is an *imaginative practice*. I use these two works to show that "dwelling upon horrors" is a fruitful practice, not for its own sake, but for its contribution to the task of understanding.

Understanding Radical Evil in *The Origins of Totalitarianism*

For many, Hannah Arendt's name is associated first and foremost with her famously controversial phrase, the "banality of evil," the subtitle of her report on Adolf Eichmann. While I agree that her insight into the character of Adolph Eichmann constitutes one of her most original and provocative contributions to twentieth-century moral thought, I believe that it is a mistake to view the "banality of evil" as either Arendt's starting place or her central insight into the nature of evil. In my view, Arendt's most important contribution is her insistence, throughout her work, that we must neither mythologize evil nor deny its reality, but rather engage continuously in the difficult process of understanding it.

In this section I argue that *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, a lengthy three-volume work that took Arendt four years to research and write, represents her first major effort to understand what she saw as an unprecedented manifestation of evil in the totalitarian regimes. In the third volume, *Totalitarianism*, Arendt explicitly describes totalitarian evil as *radical evil*. She argues that radical evil presents a paradox because by definition it defies or eludes understanding, yet, we must achieve some sort of understanding if we hope to resist it. Here I will examine Arendt's discussion of radical evil in order to illuminate her process of trying to understand evil. In particular, I wish to call attention to her insistence on "dwelling on horrors," emphasizing the following questions. How does "radical evil" threaten to destroy our capacity for understanding? How can we resist such evil? Faced with the breakdown of all standards and the "silence" of the philosophical tradition, how do we proceed with the task of understanding? Finally, what is the role of imagination in this process?

The Difficulty of Understanding Radical Evil

At this point in the development of philosophical and religious scholarship it may seem a commonplace to assert that radical evil by its very nature eludes understanding. Since the time of Plato, many philosophers and theologians in the Western tradition have found evil difficult to describe because they have perceived it as an absence or a lack. Augustine is the most famous defender of the view that in contrast to its opposite, goodness or virtue, evil has no reality.[13] More recently, philosophers such as Levinas have described evil not in terms of absence but rather in terms of an "excess," something unassimilable. In his book *Radical Evil*, Richard Bernstein explores conceptions of radical evil, beginning with Kant and including Levinas, Jonas, and Arendt, to highlight this "unassimiliable" quality. "There is, so I shall claim, something about evil that resists and defies any final comprehension," Bernstein concludes.[14] This "unassimilable" quality is especially apparent when one is confronted with examples of extreme evil such as the Holocaust. As Elie Weisel once stated, "I who was there still do not understand."[15]

Like these thinkers and others, Hannah Arendt in *The Origins of Totalitarianism* emphasizes the incomprehensibility of radical evil. But she focuses not on the difficulty of understanding radical evil (as an abstract concept) but rather on the difficulty of understanding a *particular manifestation of evil*. She argues that totalitarian evil was a new and different manifestation of evil, and therefore even more difficult to understand, than historical evils that had preceded it. In fact, she went on to argue, totalitarian evil was the *first* true example that humanity had ever experienced of radical evil. Since there

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[13] For an extended discussion of Augustine's view of evil and his influence on later thinkers (including Arendt), see Charles T. Mathewes, *Evil and the Augustinian Tradition*.
[14] Richard J. Bernstein, *Radical Evil: A Philosophical Investigation*, 7.
[15] George Steiner, "Postscript," *Language and Silence: Essays on Language, Literature, and the Inhuman* (New York: Atheneum, 1967), 163.

had been no manifestation of radical evil before, and since philosophers and theologians had not been able to conceptualize a true example of it, she saw the term itself as limited in its ability to enhance understanding of what happened in the concentration camps. Thus, she employed the term primarily as a signifier for the incomprehensibility of what had happened in the camps. As she said in her preface, the horror of the concentration camps was an "absolute evil" or "truly radical evil"—meaning that "it can no longer be deduced from humanly comprehensible motives."[16] While this evil was committed by ordinary human beings, it went beyond ordinary human sinfulness.

The primary reason why totalitarian evil was so hard to grasp, Arendt asserted, was that it represented a complete break with tradition, a total collapse of political and moral standards. She insisted that it was futile, therefore, to look to the past in order to gain understanding of present atrocities. Neither traditional philosophical thought nor religious thought had prepared the Western world for an encounter with absolute or radical evil. She put it this way:

> It is inherent in our entire philosophical tradition that we cannot conceive of a 'radical evil,' and this is true for both Christian theology, which conceded even to the devil himself a celestial origin, as well as for Kant . . . . Therefore, we actually have nothing to fall back on in order to understand a phenomenon that nevertheless confronts us with its overpowering reality and breaks down all standards we know.[17]

While Kant had supplied the term "radical evil," Arendt felt that his conception of it was limited. In *Within the Limits of Reason Alone*, Kant had argued that the vice of selfishness, or self-love, was the source of radical evil. But Arendt observed that the evil

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[16] Hannah Arendt, "Preface to the First Edition," *Origins*, viii-ix.

[17] Arendt, *Origins*, 459. While a sustained analysis of Kant's conception of radical evil is beyond the scope of my project, Richard Bernstein offers a close examination of Kant's view in *Radical Evil: A Philosophical Investigation*. After presenting Kant's conception of radical evil and calling attention to its unresolved tensions, he explores how three Jewish philosophers (Hannah Arendt, Hans Jonas, and Emmanuel Levinas) each worked with that concept or uniquely transformed it in their reflections on the Holocaust.

manifested in the appearance of the concentration camps surpassed such comprehensible motives as mere selfishness.

Arendt proceeded to define 'radical evil' in a novel way based on her insights into the horrors of the concentration camps. In a continuation of the above quoted passage, she wrote: "There is only one thing that seems to be discernible: we may say that radical evil has emerged in connection with a system in which all men have become equally superfluous."[18] In her view, the invention of a system designed to eradicate the very possibility of human spontaneity and to render human beings superfluous (*the perpetrators as well as the victims*) was the primary feature that distinguished totalitarianism from previous evils, including slavery and genocide. Totalitarianism attempted to reduce all people to mere automatons or marionettes—the human equivalents of Pavlov's dog. In Arendt's words,

> The camps are meant not only to exterminate people and degrade human beings, but also serve the ghastly experiment of eliminating, under scientifically controlled conditions, spontaneity itself as an expression of human behavior and of transforming the human personality into a mere thing, into something that even animals are not; for Pavlov's dog, which, as we know, was trained to eat not when it was hungry but when a bell rang, was a perverted animal.[19]

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[18] Arendt, *Origins*, 459. Similarly, Arendt wrote in a letter to Jaspers: "What radical evil really is I don't know, but it seems to me it somehow has to do with making human beings as human beings superfluous (not using them as a means to an end, which leaves their essence as humans untouched and impinges only on their human dignity; rather, making them superfluous as human beings). This happens as soon as all unpredictability—which, in human beings, is the equivalent of spontaneity—is eliminated." (Quoted in Bernstein, *Radical Evil*, 207).

[19] Arendt, *Origins*, 438. See Wendy Farley's analysis in *Eros for the Other: Retaining Truth in a Pluralistic World* (University Park, Penn.: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1996), especially the section titled "Totality as Anonymous Being" (54-60). Farley argues that Arendt's description and critique of totality here bears a similarity to that of Levinas. In her words, Arendt and Levinas are alike "in understanding that the distinctive violence of totality lies in its reduction of persons to objects within an anonymous Whole" (60).

Arendt elaborated on this point by describing the concentration camps as an experiment in "the transformation of human nature itself."[20] After knowledge of the atrocities had become widely known, people recognized that human beings had created a nightmarish system whereby millions of human beings had been dehumanized and murdered. As appalling and as difficult to understand as that was (and still is), Arendt's assertion that human beings had created a system meant *to transform or destroy human nature itself* posed an even more significant threat, and was more difficult to understand. She wrote: "The concentration camps are the laboratories where changes in human nature are tested . . . . Suffering, of which there has always been too much on earth, is not the issue, nor is the number of victims. Human nature as such is at stake . . . ."[21] It is this attempt to transform human nature—to permanently destroy humanity's capacity for personhood, spontaneity, and creativity—that Arendt summarizes as "radical evil."

Further, Arendt suggests that radical evil remains so difficult to come to terms with because it exceeds the normal human means of responding to crime and wrongdoing—namely, through forgiveness or punishment. She writes:

> In their efforts to prove that everything is possible, totalitarian regimes have discovered without knowing it that there are crimes which men can neither punish nor forgive. When the impossible was made possible it became unpunishable,

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[20] Arendt, *Origin*s, 458. Arendt's description of totalitarianism as an attempt to change or destroy human nature received strong criticism. For example, the political philosopher Eric Voegelin, a refugee from Germany like Arendt, wrote in his review of *Origins* for *Review of Politics* (January 1953, 68-85): "A 'nature' …cannot be changed or transformed; a 'change of nature' is a contradiction in terms…" (qt. in Young-Bruehl, *Hannah Arendt: For Love of the World* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004), 253-54. Arendt clarified her meaning in a reply: "The success of totalitarianism is identical with a much more radical liquidation of freedom as a political and as a human reality than anything we have ever witnessed before. Under these conditions, it will hardly be consoling to cling to an unchangeable nature of man and conclude that either man himself is being destroyed or that freedom does not belong to man's essential capabilities. Historically we know of man's nature only as it has existence, and no realm of eternal essences will ever console us if man loses his essential capabilities." (Qt. in Young-Bruehl, *Hannah Arendt*, 254.) In this reply, Arendt displays once again her commitment to facing the nightmare and resisting flight; she resists what she sees as a longing for "consolation," expressed in the belief in an essential "nature" of human being that remains unchanging regardless of historical or political conditions.

[21] Arendt, *Origins*, 458-59.

> unforgivable absolute evil which could no longer be understood and explained by the evil motives of self-interest, greed, covetousness, resentment, lust for power, and cowardice; and which therefore anger could not revenge, love could not endure, friendship could not forgive. Just as the victims in the death factories or the holes of oblivion are no longer 'human' in the eyes of their executioners, so this new species of criminal is beyond the pale even of solidarity in human sinfulness.[22]

Arendt's image of "holes of oblivion" is an evocative one. The totalitarian experiment on human nature depended on isolating human beings from each other, depriving them of the capacity for normal human relationships and of participation in community—even of their normal, human ways of coming to terms with crimes or sins perpetrated against them. Elaborating on totalitarianism's absolute destruction of the normal capacity for human communication, Arendt also uses the metaphor of an "iron band": "[Total terror] substitutes for the boundaries and channels of communication between individual men a band of iron which holds them so tightly together that it is as though their plurality had disappeared into One Man of gigantic dimensions."[23] These powerful metaphors—the holes of oblivion and the iron band of terror—convey Arendt's horror of totalitarianism's attempt to sacrifice plurality, or to sacrifice "human nature" itself, to an absolutely totalizing system.

In Arendt's view, the isolation between people was a key factor in depriving them of the capacity to understand what was happening to them. She vividly describes how, under the totalitarian regimes, communication was impossible between those on the outside of the camps and those inside. On the outside of the camps, no one knew whether their loved ones who had been transported were living or dead. Meanwhile, those on the

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[22] Arendt, *Origins*, 459.

[23] Ibid., 465-66. George Orwell used a similarly evocative image in his novel *1984* when he described totalitarianism's ideal as creating "three hundred million people all with the same face." Orwell, *1984*, with an afterword by Erich Fromm (New York: New American Library, 1961), 64.

inside were as completely cut off from the world of reality as if they were in fact dead. Arendt emphasizes that even after some people were liberated from the camps and returned to "the land of the living," they were unable to communicate their experiences because their experiences had been so "unreal." Describing how an "air of mad unreality" pervades even the survivor's reports, as if the authors themselves could not believe in the reality of their own experiences, Arendt writes:

> There are no parallels to the life in the concentration camps. Its horror can never be fully embraced by the imagination for the very reason that it stands outside of life and death. It can never be fully reported for the very reason that the survivor returns to the world of the living, which makes it impossible for him to believe fully in his own past experiences. It is as though he had a story to tell of another planet, for the status of the inmates in the world of the living, where nobody is supposed to know if they are alive or dead, is such that it is as though they had never been born. Therefore all parallels create confusion and distract attention from what is essential. Forced labor in prisons and penal colonies, banishment, slavery, all seem for a moment to offer helpful comparisons, but on closer examination lead nowhere.[24]

For Arendt, searching for historical analogies to help us understand totalitarianism is futile—a form of flight. At best, the most accurate analogy to the concentration camps is found in medieval imagery of purgatory and hell. These images attest to the fact that human beings have long possessed the capacity to imagine fantastic and gruesome scenes of torture, but such images had been relegated to depictions of the afterlife. Thus Arendt refers to the various forms of torture inflicted upon the concentration camp inmates as "experiments which human imaginations may have outlined but human activity certainly never realized."[25] Having lost the fear of God's judgment and the fear of hell as a metaphysical reality, human beings had invented a way to manufacture hell as an earthly reality.

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[24] Arendt, *Origins*, 444-45.
[25] Ibid., 436.

Some readers have questioned Arendt's accuracy in her claims about the uniqueness of totalitarian evil and the force of its impact on Western moral conception.[26] Historically speaking, were the evil acts committed under the totalitarian regimes actually unique, eluding comparison to other genocides? In a more metaphysical sense, did the radical evil committed in the concentration camps truly exceed the limits of moral conception or imagination? In other words, if Dante could offer horrifyingly vivid depictions of an inferno filled with tortured, suffering masses, how did the totalitarian regimes exceed the mind's limits in terms of the evil that it can conceive?

Regarding the question of historical uniqueness, I argue that Arendt's analysis of totalitarianism would remain valuable even if historians and political theorists were able to show that other manifestations of large-scale evil with similar characteristics had previously occurred. As I see it, Arendt's contribution lies partly in her warning that, when faced with radical evil, the mind grasps at analogies in its desperation to understand the event and lay the mystery to rest. She asks us to resist the temptation of analogy and to commit ourselves instead to the more unsettling task of attending to a specific event. In this pause, this moment of attending to the particular, we may see something new that would have evaded understanding if we had allowed ourselves to automatically accept an analogy. This point is important to keep in mind when examining the evils of our own time.[27]

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[26] Amongst those who have argued against Arendt's claims on the uniqueness of totalitarianism, the political scientist John L. Stanley has concluded that she was mistaken on that point. He argued that totalitarianism should be classified "into a wider category of extreme tyranny whose essence is despotism, or enslavement of the soul." "Is Totalitarianism a New Phenomenon?" in *Hannah Arendt: Critical Essays*, ed. Lewis P. Hinchman and Sandra K. Hinchman (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1994), 33.

[27] Elisabeth Young-Bruehl, illustrating the danger of grasping at an analogy, offers a recent example. She points out that, in the wake of the 9/11 attack, many pundits immediately referred to the attack as another "Pearl Harbor." She identifies several factors that differentiated the attack from Pearl Harbor, factors that should have been considered when our leaders determined their response. In *Why Arendt Matters*, 12-13.

Similarly, regarding the metaphysical question, Arendt's emphasis on the break with moral tradition highlights an important point. We cannot respond to current manifestations of evil by simply seeking a "return to the past" or a "return to fundamentals," as some moralists might suggest. Elsewhere, Arendt clarifies that the Western tradition offers "pearls"—fragments or images that are suggestive and helpful (Dante's image of the inferno might be one)—but she emphasizes that we cannot rely on the past for authoritative answers. Understanding the events of our own time, especially its horrors, means having to think anew.

In short, Arendt conveyed that totalitarianism, humanity's true example of "radical evil," ultimately threatened our capacity to understand anything at all—that it was expressly designed to destroy the human capacity for understanding. She showed how totalitarianism sought to destroy the capacity for personhood (for spontaneous action, for moral agency), for relationship, and for participation in human society—essential capacities upon which comprehension depends.[28] By emphasizing the novelty of totalitarian evil, Arendt tried to impress upon her readers both the importance of understanding and the enormity of the task. She made it clear that "dwelling on horrors" would prove to be an exceptionally difficult, though necessary, undertaking.

The Process of Understanding

If, as Arendt said, radical evil defies understanding, and if our traditions cannot reliably guide us, how then does one approach the task of understanding? Where do we begin? In her preface to the third volume of *Origins*, Arendt offers a reflection on her

[28] Arendt offers an extended analysis of the social and political "elements" that crystallized in totalitarianism. A presentation of this analysis lies outside the scope of this paper, but can be found in Margaret Canovan's *Hannah Arendt: A Reinterpretation of Her Political Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 23-28 and in Young-Bruehl's *Why Arendt Matters* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006), 46-57.

own process of seeking understanding. Here, she describes understanding as a process of storytelling akin to the work of a historian as well as that of a political scientist.[29] Arendt notes that she was not ready to engage this process of storytelling until Nazi Germany had been defeated. Describing a period of transition from "speechless outrage and impotent horror" to her readiness to articulate the most difficult questions, she writes:

> With the defeat of Nazi Germany, part of the story had come to an end. This seemed the first appropriate moment to look upon contemporary events with the backward-directed glance of the historian and the analytical zeal of the political scientist, the first chance to try to tell and to understand what had happened, not yet *sine ira et studio*, still in grief and sorrow and, hence, with a tendency to lament, but no longer in speechless outrage and impotent horror. . . . It was, at any rate, the first possible moment to articulate and to elaborate the questions with which my generation had been forced to live for the better part of its adult life: *What happened? Why did it happen? How could it have happened?*[30]

This passage offers some initial clues as to how Arendt conceptualizes the process of understanding. First, it suggests that while seeking understanding is a necessary response to the experience of evil and suffering, it is not possible to initiate the process of understanding in the midst of the events themselves, especially when these events have pushed people to the very limits of human experience and comprehension, revealing "a glimpse into the abyss of the 'possible.'"[31] Referring to the "backward-directed glance of the historian," Arendt suggests that in order to begin the search for understanding—even to begin to articulate the right questions—a person must have gained a certain degree of

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[29] See Seyla Benhabib's analysis of Arendt's on "storytelling" ("the theorist as storyteller") in *The Reluctant Modernism of Hannah Arendt* (Thousand Oaks: Sage, 1996), 91-97.

[30] Hannah Arendt, "Preface to Part Three: Totalitarianism," in *Origins*, xxiii-xxiv. Arendt's italics. Arendt evokes Tacitus' introduction to his 'Annals' (in the phrase "sine ira et studio") in multiple instances. For example, see the essay "Tradition and the Modern Age," in *Between Past and Future* (New York: Penguin, 2006). Here Arendt praises Nietzsche for recognizing "the profound nonsense of the new 'value-free' science . . . which never, despite all protests to the contrary, had anything in common with the Roman historians' attitude of *sine ira et studio*" (34). I take Arendt's use of the phrase not as an implicit critique of Tacitus' approach to relating history but as a critique of nineteenth century scientists/historians who purported to be following his ideal. She also uses the phrase in her "Reply to Eric Voegelin."

[31] Arendt, *Origins*, 437.

distance and stability. In her case, Arendt found it possible to begin her monumental work only after "part of the story had come to an end." At this point, she had achieved a degree of not only temporal, but also spatial, distance from the painful events.[32]

Arendt's reference to the "analytical zeal of the political scientist" offers a second clue to the task of understanding. While a historian observes events from a certain distance and with a purported objectivity, Arendt does not view the task of understanding as removed, detached, or objective. She proposes to integrate the insight of historian's backward glance with the "zeal" of a person affected by events and determined to make judgments about them.[33] Arendt declares that, in pursuing the task of understanding, she deliberately departs from the traditional approach to the historical sciences defined by "*sine ira et studio*."

In a letter to Eric Voegelin, a critic who had accused Arendt of a lack of objectivity in *Origins* (criticizing, for example, her references to Hell as inappropriate to a historical analysis), she defends her "rather unusual approach . . . to the whole field of political and historical sciences as such."[34] The letter clarifies why Arendt viewed a new, unclassifiable approach to be requisite for the task of narrating totalitarian evil. First, she explains that traditional methods of historiography posed a problem, since history is written to *conserve* events and ideas: "Thus my first problem was how to write historically about something—totalitarianism—which I did not want to conserve but, on

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[32] At the time of writing *Origins,* Arendt was living in the United States with her husband, Heinrich Blücher, with whom she collaborated in research, and to whom she dedicated the book. Elisabeth Young-Bruehl describes these years in chapter five of her biography *Hannah Arendt: For Love of the World.*

[33] I would argue that Arendt's 'zeal' appears in *Origins* as what her biographer Elisabeth Young-Bruehl identifies as a "passionate will to understand." Young-Bruehl writes, "No years of Hannah Arendt's life were more difficult than the stateless ones. *The Origins of Totalitarianism* does not, of course, tell her personal story. . . . But it obviously was written with the passionate will to understand that presupposes a deep tempering process, the kind of process Nietzsche said either kills you or makes you stronger." In *Hannah Arendt,* 114.

[34] Arendt, "A Reply to Eric Voegelin," in *Essays in Understanding,* 402.

the contrary, felt engaged to destroy."[35] Arendt felt that one should not be expected to write "objectively" about any assault on human dignity when the natural human response is one of "anger and indignation." She asserts that, since events take place "not on the moon, but in the midst of human society," one cannot divorce the human response to an event from its description without distorting the description itself. She writes,

> I parted quite consciously with the tradition of *sine ira et studio* of whose greatness I was fully aware, and to me this was a methodological necessity closely connected with my particular subject matter. … I therefore cannot agree with Professor Voegelin that the 'morally abhorrent and the emotionally existing will overshadow the essential,' because I believe them to form an integral part of it. This has nothing to do with sentimentality or moralizing, although, of course, either can become a pitfall for the author. . . . To describe the concentration camps *sine ira* is not to be 'objective,' but to condone them; and such condoning cannot be changed by a condemnation which the author may feel duty bound to add but which remains unrelated to the description itself. [36]

Arendt's desire to avoid the pitfall of "moralism" does not mean that her approach is not a fundamentally moral or ethical one.[37] One does not have to sermonize about evil (moralizing, too, can become a form of "flight" from facing evil directly), but neither should one pretend that it is possible, or even desirable, to write about evil in a neutral way. Arendt suggests that the attempt to divorce a description of evil from the natural human response of outrage is to some degree to succumb to the evil. Thus, her rejection of traditional methodology, and her experimentation with a new approach, was part and

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[35] Ibid. "The problem originally confronting me was simple and baffling at the same time: all historiography is necessarily salvation and frequently justification; it is due to man's fear that he may forget and to his striving for something that is even more than remembrance."

[36] Ibid., 403-04.

[37] Seyla Benhabib recognizes Arendt's narrative project as both a moral and political task, writing: "Whereas for Alexis de Toqueville a new reality required a new science to comprehend it and extract meaning from it, for Hannah Arendt totalitarianism required not so much a new science as a new 'narrative.' . . . The theorist of totalitarianism, as the narrator of totalitarianism, was engaged in a moral and political task. Put more sharply: some of the conceptual perplexities of Arendt's treatment of totalitarianism derive from her profound sense that because what had happened in Western civilization with the existence of Auschwitz was so radically new and unthinkable, telling its story required that one first reflect upon the moral and political dimensions of the historiography of totalitarianism." (In *The Reluctant Modernism of Hannah Arendt*, 86-87.)

parcel of her struggle for understanding, her determination to see and judge evil for what it is.

Arendt's rejection of scholarly neutrality links with another key point illuminating the relationship between her methodology and her conception of understanding. Arendt proceeds in her letter to Voegelin to call attention to the importance of *imagination* in writing about totalitarian evil. She observes that objections to her methodology or style are usually rooted in the traditional assumption that historical writing properly excludes the practice of imagination. In contrast, her methodology, which is expressly committed to the task of understanding, takes an imaginative approach. She writes:

> The problem of style is a problem of adequacy and of response. If I write in the same 'objective' manner about the Elizabethan age and the twentieth century, it may well be that my dealing with both periods is inadequate because I have renounced the human faculty to respond to either. Thus the question of style is bound up with the problem of understanding, which has plagued the historical sciences almost from their beginnings. I do not wish to go into this matter here, but I may add that I am convinced that understanding is closely related to that faculty of imagination which Kant called *Einbildungskraft* and which has nothing in common with fictional ability. The *Spiritual Exercises* are exercises of imagination and they may be more relevant to method in the historical sciences than academic training realizes.[38]

Here Arendt offers only a provocative nugget concerning what she means by imagination and why it should be employed "consciously as an important tool of cognition" in trying to understand a subject as difficult as totalitarian evil.[39] The passage suggestively links Kant's *Einbildungskraft* (theorized in his *Critique of Judgment*, a text that Arendt examines more thoroughly in later works) with *The Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius*, a

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[38] Hannah Arendt, "A Reply to Eric Voegelin," 404. When Arendt says that *Einbildungskraft* has nothing in common with fictional ability, I do not think that she denies its role in creating literary fiction. Rather, I think that she refers to the kind of denial of reality that the totalitarian regimes demonstrated, to their ability to create fictional or imaginary worlds that had nothing to do with the real world. This is one of the major themes of part three of *Origins*.

[39] Ibid., 404.

highly structured set of mental exercises designed for a retreat setting, intended to help persons experience the presence of God. Arendt suggests that Ignatius's "exercises of imagination" serve as a model of moral practice that can be transposed into a twentieth-century secular context. Dwelling on horrors, or thinking imaginatively about the experience of evil in a focused way, can help us to recognize the reality of evil and to resist it.

Although Arendt does not elaborate on this point in her letter to Voegelin, it is helpful to note that Ignatius's *Spiritual Exercises* are designed as practices of character formation. Through the use of imagination, persons learn to integrate their intellect, emotions, and physical sensations. Arendt sometimes criticized Christianity for being too otherworldly in its focus, but it is possible that she appreciated the *Spiritual Exercises* as practices designed not to detach people from involvement with the world, but rather to help them integrate their understanding of spiritual experience with their daily lives. In *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, Arendt's description of understanding similarly suggests that dwelling on horrors is not merely an intellectual exercise; it requires full personhood and strength of character. The person who seeks understanding of evil possesses the personal courage and determination to resist the temptation of flight—to face reality and to bear "the burden of our time."[40]

Above all, Arendt emphasizes throughout *The Origins of Totalitarianism* and in response to her critics that the effort to gain understanding requires paying attention to reality, a task that is rarely easy or comfortable. Arendt refers to "the impact of reality and the shock of experience," warning her readers to avoid seeking escape from the

[40] "The Burden of Our Time" was the title of the British edition of *Origins*. (See Young-Bruehl, *Hannah Arendt*, 186). It evokes a line from one of Arendt's poems, "A loving couple passes by / Bearing the burden of time." (Geht ein liebend Paar vorüber, / Trägt der Zeiten Last., 486.)

discomfort and disorientation caused by reality by retreating into denial or resorting to false analogies:

> The conviction that everything that happens on earth must be comprehensible to man can lead to interpreting history by common-places. Comprehension does not mean denying the outrageous, deducing the unprecedented from precedents, or explaining phenomena by such analogies and generalities that the impact of reality and the shock of experience are no longer felt. It means, rather, examining and bearing consciously the burden which our century has placed on us—neither denying its existence nor submitting meekly to its weight. Comprehension, in short, means the unpremeditated, attentive facing up to, and resisting of, reality—whatever it may be.[41]

By turning too quickly to analogies in our desperation to understand, we diminish the force of reality and ultimately compromise our understanding. The practice of understanding, then, requires the resolute determination to attend to the reality of a situation, even when that means looking evil in the face.[42]

Understanding and Resistance

My argument in this section, following Arendt, is that the best hope for resisting evil lies in the practice of trying to understand *our experience of evil* (not, as Arendt emphasized, trying to understand evil as an abstract concept, but rather in trying to understand the particular experiences of evil that have impacted us). Understanding our experience of evil requires us to apply our resources of intellect, emotion, and imagination to the practice of "dwelling on horrors." While some might protest that dwelling on horrors is self-defeating, or that understanding evil equates with acceptance of it, Arendt argued quite the opposite. Evil, especially radical evil, aims to destroy our

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[41] Arendt, "Preface to the first edition," *Origins*, viii.

[42] Wendy Farley is one interpreter who recognizes Arendt's commitment to facing reality (or "passion for reality") as an expression of her ethical practice: "The struggle against evil occurs in the ethical and political practices we engage in, but the struggle for truth is part and parcel of the struggle for justice. The theme of reality is constantly struck in Arendt's writings. This passion for reality is contrasted with the illusory world of totalitarianism. For Arendt, totalitarian domination is intimately related to its contempt for truth." In Wendy Farley, *Eros for the Other*, 63.

capacity to understand the world around us. Therefore, by trying to understand evil—which entails recognizing evil *as evil*—we are already engaging in resistance to it.

How can the practice of "dwelling on horrors" contribute to the kind of understanding that helps us to resist evil? In Arendt's analysis of totalitarianism, two particular facets of understanding emerge that I see as useful aids to resistance: 1) lending our imaginations to the service of reality (a practice involving the "fearful imagination"); and 2) practicing "gratitude for the given" (which involves recognizing natality as a source of hopefulness).

a) Imagination in the Service of Reality

First, Arendt suggests that human beings must employ their imaginations in attending to reality, including the most fearsome realities. Thus, she advocates the practice of a "fearful imagination." At first glance, the recommendation of a "fearful imagination" might sound disturbing. Critics might caution against the deliberate cultivation of a fearful imagination, arguing that fear typically leads not to insight, but to prejudice, intolerance, and violence. Cautious readers might also observe that those who have experienced and survived horrors such as those perpetrated in the concentration camps are already traumatized by fear, and can hardly be expected to dwell further upon such terrors. Therefore, it is important to clarify that Arendt advocated this practice not for those who had personally experienced the horrors of the concentration camps and suffered the paralysis of fear, but rather for "normal people" who found it difficult to overcome their disbelief, or what she identified as the "common-sense disinclination to believe the monstrous."[43] She found that while the survivors' accounts alone were insufficient for imparting an understanding of totalitarianism, they could serve as a

[43] Arendt, *Origins*, 437.

catalyst to stimulate a passionate, imaginative response from their readers. As she explains, "Only the fearful imagination of those who have been aroused by such reports but have not actually been smitten in their own flesh, of those who are consequently free from the bestial, desperate terror which, when confronted by real, present horror, inexorably paralyzes everything that is not mere reaction, can afford to keep thinking about horrors."[44] When Arendt advocates the willingness to cultivate a "fearful imagination," then, she clearly does not refer to indulging in thoughtless, fear-based reactions to events. Instead, she refers to the courage to allow one's imagination to contemplate reality even at its worst—to contemplate the fact that "everything is possible."

Arendt's analysis of totalitarianism also stresses the importance of actively choosing *how* we use our imaginations if we are to retain the capacity for responsible moral agency. Human beings must actively employ our imaginations rather than passively allowing our minds to be manipulated by propaganda or succumbing to egoistic fantasies that emerge in isolation from others. Arendt distinguishes, for example, between the benefits of exercising a "fearful imagination" and the dangerous distortions of imagination that derive from loneliness. She evokes Martin Luther's "*Warum die Einsamkeit zu fliehen?*": "A lonely man, says Luther, 'always deduces one thing from the other and thinks everything to the worst.'" Arendt adds: "The famous extremism of

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[44] Hannah Arendt, *Origins*, 441. Arendt seems to recognize that the practice of imagination may be possible for those on the outside while it is not always possible for those on the inside, for those who are trapped in the immediate horror of suffering or evil. As Charlotte Delbo writes in *Auschwitz and After* (1995): "You may say that one can take away everything from a human being except the faculty of thinking and imagining. You have no idea. One can turn a human being into a skeleton gurgling with diarrhea, without time or energy to think. Imagination is the first luxury of a body receiving sufficient nourishment, enjoying a margin of free time, possessing the rudiments from which dreams are fashioned. People did not dream in Auschwitz, they were in a state of delirium." Qt. in Jennifer L. Geddes, "Banal Evil and Useless Knowledge" in *Feminist Philosophy and the Problem of Evil* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 117-118.

totalitarian movements . . . consists indeed in this 'thinking everything to the worst,' in this deducing process which always arrives at the worst possible conclusions."[45] The 'fearful imagination' should not be confused, then, with the pessimistic tendency to "think things through to the worst," even though it is determined to face the worst that human beings have proved capable of.[46]

The fearful imagination that Arendt recommends is thus neither escapist nor, at the other extreme, susceptible to drawing the most catastrophic conclusions. Rather, it is determined to face the reality of the situation at hand. According to Arendt's description, this kind of moral imagination was lacking, or had been deformed, in the masses that were manipulated by totalitarian forces. Many people sought the comfort of a world invented by lies and propaganda, sheltered from the "shocks" of real life. Manipulated by the images created by totalitarian regimes, they were made to feel at home, content to live in "the gruesome quiet of an entirely imaginary world."[47] Here Arendt describes a situation in which human imaginations had become extremely vulnerable to outside forces. The key is to possess an active imagination that is willing to cope with the discomfort of shock rather than seeking escape into a comfortable, isolated world.

b) "Gratitude for the Given"

Second, Arendt advocates an attitude of appreciation or gratitude for what is "given." For instance, she saw her gender and her Jewishness as being "givens"—these were aspects of her personhood that she believed it necessary to accept; she claimed that she would never try to change these "facts" about herself. Elaborating on this stance in

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[45] Arendt, *Origins*, 477.
[46] Arendt frequently distinguishes between loneliness and solitude. Loneliness poses a moral danger; a lonely person lacks companionship with himself and cannot engage in dialogue with himself. In contrast, a person may experience solitude and retain the capacity for self-interrogation and dialogue.
[47] Arendt, *Origins*, 353.

her reply to Gershom Scholem's critical letter after the publication of *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, Arendt writes:

> I found it puzzling that you should write 'I regard you wholly as a daughter of our people, and in no other way.' The truth is I have never pretended to be anything else or be in any way other than I am, and I have never even felt tempted in that direction. It would have been like saying that I was a man and not a woman—that is to say, kind of insane. . . . To be a Jew belongs for me to the indisputable facts of my life, and I have never had the wish to change or disclaim facts of that kind. There is such a thing as basic gratitude for everything that is as it is; for what has been *given* and not *made*; for what is *physei* and not *nomo*. . . ."[48]

Some feminist scholars have remarked on a certain naïve view of gender difference conveyed in this passage.[49] Indeed, Arendt frustrated many feminists of her time by largely excluding gender concerns from her reflection and insisting on a fierce separation between the social realm and the political realm. Though Arendt's reflections on gender remained undeveloped and limited, I wish to highlight the positive aspect of her stance here. Arendt's expression of "gratitude for the given" presents an affirmation of embodiment, or as she puts it elsewhere, of "creatureliness," that departs from a long philosophical tradition in which the body is frequently devalued.

It is interesting that Arendt's emphasis on gratitude for what is "given" arises here in the context of a discussion of her Jewishness, since gratitude is a celebrated virtue in the Jewish tradition. Elie Wiesel's commentary on the "Dayenu" prayer in *A Passover Haggadah* resonates with the sensibility here evoked by Arendt. According to Wiesel,

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[48] Hannah Arendt, "Reply to Gershom Scholem" (July 24, 1963) in *The Jewish Writings* (New York: Schocken Books, 2007), 466.

[49] See, for example, Linda M. G. Zerilli's analysis of this passage in her essay "The Arendtian Body." Questioning Arendt's remarks on gender, she asks, "What would it mean to dispute or argue those facts? Does one have to be 'kind of insane,' and if so, what, exactly, induces that madness? Is it the imagined identification with masculinity ('like saying I was a man'), the imagined *dis*identification with femininity ('and not a woman'), or something else? Posing these questions, I am struck by the rhetorical features of Arendt's prose: the repetitive, insistent denial of any wish to argue the facts of identity; the claim that those facts are indisputable in any case; and the figuration of the challenge to gender identity as a psychic trauma, insanity." In *Feminist Interpretations of Hannah Arendt*, ed. by Bonnie Honig (University Park, Penn.: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1995), 170.

"A Jew defines himself by his capacity for gratitude. A Jewish philosopher was once asked, 'What is the opposite of nihilism?' And he said, '*Dayenu*,' the ability to be thankful for what we have received, for what we are."[50] Arendt's gratitude for the given is one expression of her attitude of *amor mundi* (which will be explored further in the next chapter).

In Arendt's view, the opposite of such gratitude is resentment. In her conclusion to the second volume of *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, she argues that highly evolved civilizations tend to display a certain resentment of nature or of embodiment, or, one might say, of createdness or creatureliness—of "everything that is merely and mysteriously given them."[51] Such resentment is dangerously manifested, in its most extreme form, in totalitarianism.

Here Arendt captures her appreciation of the "given" and of individual uniqueness with the phrase "*Volu ut sis*," with which she credits Augustine.

> This mere existence, that is, all that which is mysteriously given us by birth and which includes the shape of our bodies and the talents of our minds, can be adequately dealt with only by the unpredictable hazards of love and sympathy, or by the great and incalculable grace of love, which says with Augustine, "*Volu ut sis*" (I want you to be)," without being able to give any particular reason for such supreme and unsurpassable affirmation.[52]

Describing this "merely given" aspect of the human being, Arendt even uses the term "miracle." She argues that this "miracle" appears threatening to the public realm, asserting that a "highly developed political life breeds a deep-rooted suspicion of this private sphere, a deep resentment against the disturbing miracle contained in the fact that

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[50] Elie Wiesel, *A Passover Haggadah* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1993), 63.
[51] Arendt, *Origins*, 301.
[52] Ibid.

each of us is made as he is—single, unique, unchangeable."[53] The miracle of individual uniqueness appears as a threat because it cannot be organized and controlled, at least not without extreme difficulty and force. Arendt, of course, does not oppose the realm of politics, but advocates a separation between the public and private spheres. For her, a healthy public sphere is one that allows the "given" a space in which to flourish; it respects the miracle of individuality and plurality.

Because we exist as unique, individual beings, Arendt regards plurality as an essential human condition. In her use of the term, "plurality" refers to the fact that we share the earth, each of us an individual being with something unique to offer the world. To reject plurality is to try to make human beings (as individual persons) dispensable or superfluous, as the totalitarian regimes did. Operating from resentment of the "given," the totalitarian regimes tried to reduce human difference to sameness.

Arendt's appreciation for the "given" corresponds with her appreciation for natality as a source of hopefulness; the capacity to initiate new life, or new beginnings, is something that is "given" to human beings. Arendt locates hope for the future in this capacity to begin anew. In her conclusion to the third volume of *Origin*s, Arendt once again evokes Augustine, crediting him with recognizing natality as a given component of human creatureliness:

> But there remains also the truth that every end in history necessarily contains a new beginning; this beginning is the promise, the only 'message' which the end can ever produce. Beginning, before it becomes a historical event, is the supreme capacity of man; politically, it is identical with man's freedom. *Initium ut esset homo creatus est*—'that a beginning be made man was created' said Augustine. This beginning is guaranteed by each new birth; it is indeed every man.[54]

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[53] Ibid.
[54] Arendt, *Origins*, 478-79.

After dedicating three volumes to the effort of "dwelling on horrors," meticulously documenting the totalitarian regimes' ambitions to destroy human nature as we know it, Arendt culminates the work on a hopeful note. In her analysis, totalitarianism tried—but fortunately failed—to eradicate the human capacity for new beginning.[55]

Section Conclusion

While Arendt's commitment to "dwelling on horrors" was evident in this early work, lending itself to insights into the meaning of radical evil (specifically, how the human capacity for understanding is threatened by totalitarian evil, and how to resist it), these insights did not represent fixed conclusions for Arendt. Her drive for understanding was not so easily satisfied. While Arendt would turn from explicitly facing the question of evil in *The Human Condition*, she would return to it a decade later in *Eichmann in Jerusalem*. This time, instead of focusing on totalitarianism as a phenomenon, she focuses on the actions and the conscience of a single man who committed deeds of extraordinary evil.

[55] Stephan Kamposki recognizes Arendt's discussion of gratitude as a significant component of her moral reflection, writing: "Gratitude for what has been given, gratitude, that is, for life being given at all, is a recurring theme for Arendt and perhaps on e of her most central insights at the very basis of her writings…. For me to recognize and acknowledge the given as a gift, I need a certain moral quality, a certain disposition of character to receive this gift; I need to be open to the other. Whether I approach reality with gratitude or resentment, which, as we have argued, is the fundamental alternative that confronts the human person for Arendt, is an issue primarily…of moral disposition….Even though Arendt does not understand herself as a religious writer, it is undoubtedly true that the idea of gratitude colors her work with religious overtones, since gratitude is always necessarily gratitude toward *somebody*." *Arendt, Augustine, and the New Beginning*, 140-41.

Understanding the "Banality of Evil" in *Eichmann in Jerusalem*

A decade after she published her first major attempt to "dwell on" the horror of totalitarianism, Arendt received another opportunity to reflect explicitly upon evil—this time by witnessing the trial of Adolf Eichmann and reporting on it in a serial for *The New Yorker*. She volunteered for this opportunity, even though it meant rearranging her full schedule. By this time, Arendt had published her second major work, *The Human Condition*, and she held various teaching appointments in addition to holding a one-year grant from the Rockefeller Foundation. Writing to the Rockefeller Foundation to change the term of her grant, she explained, "You will understand I think why I should cover this trial; I missed the Nuremberg Trials, I never saw these people in the flesh, and this is probably my only chance." Similarly, she wrote to Vassar to cancel a lecture, saying: "To attend this trial is somehow, I feel, an obligation I owe my past."[56] In this chapter I will read *Eichmann in Jerusalem* as a second case study showing how Arendt approached the difficult task of understanding evil, and identifying the insights into understanding that she gained in the process.

In her preface to *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, Arendt had stated that she would explore such enormous questions as "*What happened? Why did it happen? How could it have happened*?"[57] In *Eichmann in Jerusalem* she takes a different approach, explicitly setting aside these broader questions to concentrate on what she saw as the sole purpose of the trial—to judge Adolf Eichmann. She criticized David Ben-Gurion, the Prime Minister of Israel, for wanting to stage what she called a "show trial," for using the occasion to impart various "lessons" on the dangers of anti-Semitism and the depth of

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[56] Elisabeth Young-Bruehl, *Hannah Arendt*, 329.
[57] Arendt, "Preface to Part 3," *Origins*, xxiv.

Jewish suffering. Here, the practice of "dwelling on horrors" meant excluding these larger concerns, important as they may have been, and peering closely into the face of one man who had committed horrifying crimes: "On trial are his deeds, not the sufferings of the Jews, not the German people or mankind, not even anti-Semitism and racism."[58] With ample evidence that Eichmann had organized the transportation of millions of Jews to the concentration camps, his guilt was not really in question. Arendt focused instead on the question of how Eichmann understood his own guilt. What had motivated him to commit his heinous deeds? Did he feel any remorse? At one point she described her report as "a report on Eichmann's conscience."[59]

What most profoundly disturbed Arendt was that, throughout his trial, Eichmann never displayed any recognition that what he had done was *evil*. He refused to take personal responsibility for his actions, repeating throughout his defense that he had merely followed orders and performed his duty. Arendt concluded that Eichmann was not the demonic figure that everyone had expected to encounter in a man who had committed such evil deeds, but rather an absurdly mediocre, banal man—devoid of the capacity to think for himself, to imagine a situation from another's point of view, or to speak without recourse to lies and clichés. In short, he lacked the capacity, or even the desire, to understand himself or the world around him. Summarizing the trial as a "long course in human wickedness," Arendt concluded that the lesson to be learned was "the fearsome, word-and thought-defying *banality of evil*."[60]

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[58] Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil*, Revised ed. (New York: Penguin, 1994), 5.
[59] Ibid., 112.
[60] Ibid., 252.

Arendt's introduction of the phrase "banality of evil" was highly controversial. Some critics thought that in using that terminology, Arendt was minimizing or trivializing the horrors of the concentration camps.[61] But, as Arendt protested (and as many scholars have since argued in her defense), she certainly did not view Eichmann's crimes as any less horrible for his banality. To the contrary, she regarded Eichmann's capacity to commit exceptionally horrendous crimes as all the more incomprehensible in the light of his unexceptional character. By now, Arendt's "banality of evil" phrase has been explained and debated *ad nauseum*. While her terminology imparts important insights, I argue that it is more helpful to focus on how Arendt models the process of understanding, how she arrives at her terminology, and what she has to teach us about understanding. In this chapter, I explore the thesis that in her portrait of Eichmann, Arendt depicts a man who refused to accept the task of trying to understand the world around him. By observing Eichmann through Arendt's eyes, as the model of a man who lacks an understanding heart, we learn more about what is involved in the task of understanding evil and why the refusal to participate in this task is so dangerous.

Calling the Conscience into Question

Observing Eichmann's behavior at his trial, Arendt was led to question the existence, or the reliability, of the individual conscience as it has traditionally been conceived. The judges at the trial inquired repeatedly whether Eichmann's conscience

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[61] For a summary of the controversy, see the following sources: Han Mommsen, "Hannah Arendt's Interpretation of the Holocaust as a Challenge to Human Existence: The Intellectual Background" in *Hannah Arendt in Jerusalem*, ed. Steven E. Ascheim (Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, 2001); Richard I. Cohen, "A Generation's Response to *Eichmann in Jerusalem*," also in *Hannah Arendt in Jerusalem*; and Young-Bruehl's *Hannah Arendt*. Arendt's most vocal early critics included: Gershom Scholem (personal letter to Arendt); Jacob Robinson, *And the Crooked Shall Be Made Straight*; and Walter Laqueur's review of Jacob Robinson's book in *NY Review of Books*. Dana Villa records that Young-Bruehl's sympathetic account of the controversy marked a turning point in the criticism, and more readers came to appreciate Arendt's point (Bernstein, Neiman, others). Still, the phrase 'banality of evil' is criticized by some and misunderstood by even some recent writers.

had been troubled by his deeds. But while he pleaded guilty to committing the deeds that he was accused of, Eichmann never admitted to being guilty of ill-will or any deliberate moral wrongdoing. One might be tempted to conclude that Eichmann simply did not possess a conscience, but Arendt rejects this conclusion. Strangely, he seemed to have one, but it functioned in a perverse, unpredictable way.[62] Arendt paid close attention to the moments in Eichmann's narrative when he spoke of having a "crisis of conscience" and to his descriptions of how he had placated his conscience at those points.[63] She was struck by the fact that, while Eichmann was never seriously troubled by his role in the dehumanization and murder of millions of human beings, he maintained that his conscience *would* have troubled him if he had disobeyed orders or avoided his "duty":

> As for base motives, he was perfectly sure that he was not what he called an *innerer Schweinehund*, a dirty bastard in the depths of his heart; and as for his conscience, he remembered perfectly well that he would have had a bad conscience only if he had not done what he had been ordered to to [*sic*]—to ship millions of men, women, and children to their death with great zeal and the most meticulous care.[64]

Indeed, Eichmann had even insisted that he had lived his whole life in accordance with Kant's moral philosophy.[65] He was able to recite the categorical imperative, emphasizing his commitment to duty.

Why was Eichmann's conscience, if he did possess one, satisfied merely by obedience to commands—even when the lives of millions of people were at stake? In

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[62] Arendt, *Eichmann*, 95. "Yes, he had a conscience, and his conscience functioned in the expected way for about four weeks, whereupon it began to function the other way around. Even during those weeks when his conscience functioned normally, it did its work within rather odd limits."
[63] Ibid., 112.
[64] Ibid., 25.
[65] Ibid., 135-36. Arendt, whose reading of Kant at age fourteen has motivated her to study philosophy in the first place, recorded her vehement response here: "This was outrageous, on the face of it, and also incomprehensible, since Kant's moral philosophy is so bound up with man's faculty of judgment, which rules out blind obedience" (136). She condemns Eichmann's distortion of Kant's moral philosophy for his own so-called "household use."

Arendt's view, part of the explanation lay in his susceptibility to the rhetoric of his superiors, which was designed to make him feel virtuous, even heroic, for his deeds. The Nazis employed "language rules" and "code names" as a way of deflecting reality and manipulating their adherents (e.g., "final solution," "evacuation," and "special treatment" were all code words for "killing"). As Arendt points out, "the very term 'language rule' (*Sprachregelung*) was itself a code name; it meant what in ordinary language would be called a lie."[66] Throughout the trial, Eichmann constantly resorted to the language rules, clichés, slogans, and catchwords that had justified and inspired his deeds. "Officialese [*Amtssprache*] is my only language," he admitted.[67]

While the judges appeared to think that Eichmann deliberately employed "empty words" as a ploy to disguise the heinous truth about his actions, Arendt reached the conclusion that Eichmann was actually *incapable* of speaking in any other way. "The point here is that officialese became his language because he was genuinely incapable of uttering a single sentence that was not a cliché."[68] Linking Eichmann's inability to *speak* with an inability to *think*, Arendt continued:

> [The judges'] supposition seems refuted by the striking consistency with which Eichmann, despite his rather bad memory, repeated word for word the same stock phrases and self-invented clichés (when he did succeed in constructing a sentence of his own, he repeated it until it became a cliché) each time he referred to an incident or event of importance to him. . . . The longer one listened to him, the more obvious it became that his inability to speak was closely connected with an inability to *think*, namely to think from the standpoint of somebody else. No communication was possible with him, not because he lied but because he was surrounded by the most reliable of all safeguards against the words and presence of others, and hence against reality as such.[69]

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[66] Ibid., 29.
[67] Ibid., 48.
[68] Ibid.
[69] Ibid., 49.

This passage makes clear that Arendt does not define "thinking" as a mere exercise in logic. When she accuses Eichmann of being unable to think, she means that he lacks the ability to consider another point of view or to recognize "the words and presence of others." For Arendt, the capacity to recognize and respect others, to truly see and hear them, is a prerequisite for understanding. Here Arendt reiterates that, as she had suggested in *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, one must be able to face the reality of *others* (of plurality) in order to recognize and resist evil.

Throughout her observation of the trial, Arendt observed how Eichmann used language not to disclose reality, but rather to shelter himself from it, soothing his conscience easily with stock phrases such as "My Honor is my Loyalty" and "These are battles which future generations will not have to fight again…." Arendt observes that such phrases served to redirect any natural feelings of compassion that the perpetrators might have had for their victims into feelings of self-concern: "So that instead of saying: What horrible things I did to people!, the murderers would be able to say: What horrible things I had to watch in the pursuance of my duties, how heavily the task weighed upon my shoulders!"[70] The coded language that Eichmann absorbed from his superiors enabled him to construct a fantasy about himself, shifting the focus of the situation away from the reality of his victims' experiences to a sole preoccupation with his own ego and its feelings. Carried away by images of himself as "courageous" and "loyal," he demonstrated a complete inability to "think from the standpoint of somebody else" (a capacity that Arendt will identify in her postscript as *imagination*) or even to recognize the humanity of his victims.

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[70] Ibid., 106.

Arendt, appalled by the degree to which the Nazis had succeeded in manipulating and distorting Eichmann's conscience, expressed amazement that the legal examiners at the trial did not seem to recognize the centrality of this problem: "To fall back on the unequivocal voice of conscience—or, in the even vaguer language of the jurists, on a 'general sentiment of humanity' . . . not only begs the question, it signifies a deliberate refusal to take notice of the central moral, legal, and political phenomena of the century."[71] Arendt concludes that the depth of the problem lies beyond the scope of traditional moral thought; the judges did not have a framework to help them conceive that a "normal" person (as opposed to a clinically insane person or an evil genius) could commit the crimes that Eichmann had committed and not feel guilty.[72] But Arendt saw that the extraordinary horror lay in the fact that Eichmann, a seemingly ordinary and banal man, not only committed these crimes but never realized that what he had done was evil.

Arendt's description of Eichmann's inability to think and to speak meaningfully is summarized in her word "banality," which she uses interchangeably with "thoughtlessness." Her use of the word "thoughtless" is misunderstood, perhaps, at least partly because it differs from the normal usage; she did not mean that Eichmann was merely absentminded or careless. Nor did she mean that he was unintelligent. (Even though Eichmann's levels of education and intelligence were unimpressive, Arendt frequently reminded her readers that well-educated, intelligent people, even philosophers, can be "thoughtless.") For Arendt, the term "thoughtlessness" encapsulates Eichmann's fundamental unwillingness to attend to reality, to question ideas, to engage in dialogue

[71] Ibid., 148.
[72] Ibid., 25. Arendt reports that Eichmann was declared "normal" by the psychiatrists.

with himself, to imagine another's point of view, to speak meaningfully, and to make judgments between right and wrong. Unthinkingly, Eichmann was willing to do what everyone else was doing, whatever was considered normal at the time. Arendt clarified her meaning in a postscript:

> It was sheer thoughtlessness—something by no means identical with stupidity—that predisposed him to become one of the greatest criminals of the period. . . . That such remoteness from reality and such thoughtlessness can wreak more havoc than all the evil instincts taken together which, perhaps, are inherent in man—that was, in fact, a lesson one could learn in Jerusalem.[73]

Arendt had already identified such thoughtlessness as "among the outstanding characteristics of our time" in her preface to *The Human Condition*, but it was Eichmann's trial that clearly manifested its horrifying possible consequences.[74] If anything, Eichmann's lesson for Arendt was that conscience cannot function properly apart from the capacity to think, to speak, and to recognize the real and meaningful existence of other persons. In other words, the proper functioning of conscience is necessarily linked with the other practices of understanding.

Having called into question the traditional conception of conscience, Arendt also questioned the reliability of guilt feelings. Traditionally many thinkers have assumed that the voice of conscience, upon convicting persons of guilt for their evil deeds, inflicts feelings of guilt upon them. Based on her observation of the Eichmann trial, Arendt

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[73] Ibid., 287-88. This distinction between thoughtlessness and stupidity aligns with a point that Arendt makes elsewhere: that even intellectuals and scholars (who are not generally thought to be stupid) can be thoughtless in Eichmann's sense. Thus thoughtlessness is not a problem that can be simply remedied by education. See Mary McCarthy's criticism of the term "thoughtless" in *Between Friends: The Correspondence of Hannah Arendt and Mary McCarthy, 1949-1975*, ed. Carol Brightman (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1995), xxiii. McCarthy accused Arendt of a "disregard for words" and argued against Arendt that Eichmann was indeed stupid.

[74] Arendt, "Prologue," *The Human Condition*, second ed. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1958), 5. Arendt had observed here that the capacity for meaningful speech and the capacity for thought are interdependent. There she had defined thoughtlessness as "the heedless recklessness or hopeless confusion or complacent repetition of 'truths' which have become trivial or empty" (5).

questioned whether guilt feelings can serve as any sort of reliable indicator of whether or not a person is actually guilty of wrongdoing. She observed that, while guilt feelings clearly *exist*, they seem quite arbitrary. After all, Eichmann showed no sign of having guilt feelings, even though he was in fact guilty of committing extremely evil deeds. Conversely, many Germans who were innocent of Nazi crimes claimed to feel guilty. Arendt explicitly criticized those Germans who claimed to experience a sense of collective guilt. For example, in the last chapter of her report, Arendt criticized Martin Buber, whom, she said, had called Eichmann's execution a mistake because it might "serve to expiate the guilt felt by many young persons in Germany."[75] She protested:

> It is strange that Buber, a man not only of eminence but of very great intelligence, should not see how spurious these much publicized guilt feelings necessarily are. It is quite gratifying to feel guilty if you haven't done anything wrong: how noble! Whereas it is rather hard and certainly depressing to admit guilt and to repent. The youth of Germany is surrounded, on all sides and in all walks of life, by men in positions of authority and in public office who are very guilty indeed but who *feel* nothing of the sort. The normal reaction to this state of affairs should be indignation . . . . Those young German men and women who every once in a while . . . treat us to hysterical outbreaks of guilt feelings are not staggering under the burden of the past, their fathers' guilt; rather, they are trying to escape from the pressure of very present and actual problems into a cheap sentimentality.[76]

Against those who assume that guilt feelings offer human beings a way of facing our own evil, Arendt argues the opposite—that guilt feelings are just another form of flight. "Cheap sentimentality" does not indicate true repentance but rather its opposite, self-indulgence.

Martin Buber was not the only eminent philosopher whom Arendt criticized for overestimating the value of guilt-feelings. Even her esteemed teacher, Karl Jaspers, came

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[75] Arendt, *Eichmann*, 251.
[76] Ibid.

under attack. In a personal letter to her husband, Arendt vented her anger toward Jaspers upon his 1946 publication of *Die Schuldfrage*:

> Jaspers' guilt-monograph, despite all its beauty and noble-mindedness, is an anathematized and Hegelized, Christian/pietistic/hypocritical piece of twaddle. . . . This whole guilt question simply serves as Christian hypocritical jabbering: for the victors as a better way to get what they want, for the vanquished as a way to continue occupying themselves exclusively with themselves (even if for the noble purpose of self-illumination). In both cases, guilt serves the purpose of extirpating responsibility.[77]

For Arendt, guilt inhibits understanding primarily by keeping people *self*-preoccupied rather than helping them turn their attention toward others in the world (especially toward the sufferers whom their actions have harmed) and toward determining how to act differently in the future. It thus enables people to *avoid* taking moral responsibility. Significantly, Arendt links the emphasis on guilt to religion, especially to Christianity's conception of original sin: "People were prepared to cower in the dust before God, incessantly guilty, so long as they could pin the blame on Him."[78] She suggests that bringing God into the discussion of human evil is "a trick that manages to prohibit moral judgment."[79] While Arendt was not an atheist (she referred to atheists on one occasion as "fools who pretended to know what no man can know"[80]), she recognized that the concept of God can be manipulated in moral thought and discussion as a way of undermining human responsibility. When human beings have committed evil against one another, as in the case of totalitarianism, we need to understand *why human beings did this* and figure out how to avoid doing it again. Too much talk of God, in Arendt's view, can serve as a distraction from the issue.

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[77] Arendt to Heinrich Blücher, July 15, 1946, in *Within Four Walls*, 84-86.
[78] Ibid.
[79] Ibid.
[80] Arendt, "Angelo Giuseppe Roncalli," in *Men in Dark Times* (Harmondsworth, England: Penguin/Pelican, 1973), 72.

Commentators on *Eichmann in Jerusalem* have rarely analyzed Arendt's comments on guilt feelings, focusing most of their attention of the controversial "banality of evil" phrase. But Arendt's remarks on guilt are suggestive even though they are brief, indicating that guilt feelings or other manifestations of sentimentality are ultimately detrimental to the task of understanding. Arendt's condemnation of sentimentality, though, does not equate with a rejection of all feeling or emotion.[81] Rather, I would suggest that for Arendt, sentimentality represents a distortion of true feeling just as clichés and stock phrases represent a distortion of true speech. Eichmann, for example, was a man preoccupied with his own feelings, including self-pity and grandiosity. He regarded himself as a person of noble, heroic sentiments. However, in substituting sentiment for conscience and imagination, Eichmann sacrificed his capacity to recognize evil, and especially to recognize his own responsibility for it.

An Alternative Story to Eichmann's: The Story of Anton Schmidt

In his self-defense, Eichmann claimed that he had tried to save Jews whenever he had an opportunity to do so. Arendt found that based on the evidence, this claim was false. But if Arendt's report on the Eichmann trial told a dismaying story, a story with a "thought-defying" lesson—the story of a man who refused to think about what he was doing, who could not recognize his deeds as evil—Arendt found it worthwhile to record an alternative story that was evoked during the trial. One of the witnesses spent a few minutes telling the story of Anton Schmidt, a German man who *did* try to save the Jews.

[81] Arne Johan Vetlesen faults Arendt for omitting emotion or feeling from moral thought and judgment, concluding that her conception of thinking and judging is "wholly one-sidely *intellectualistic*" in *Perception, Empathy, and Judgment: An Inquiry into the Preconditions of Moral Performance* (University Park, Penn.: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1996), 104. See also Vetlesen's chapter on Arendt in *Evil and Human Agency: Understanding Collective Evildoing* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005). I argue that Arendt's point is not to exclude feeling altogether but rather to emphasize the danger of mere sentiment. She suggests that sentimental indulgence distances one from others rather than enhancing one's capacity for empathy.

For five months, until he was arrested and executed in March of 1942, Schmidt had helped to supply Jews with forged papers and trucks. The story does not offer much detail; we are not told what motivated Schmidt to act on the behalf of the Jews even at the cost of his own life. But the witness made a point of saying that Schmidt had not done this for personal gain: "He did not do it for money."[82] The witness thus implies that Anton Schmidt knew how to judge between right and wrong, and had acted accordingly.

Arendt was particularly struck by the effect that Anton Schmidt's story had on the audience when it was told in the courtroom. She writes:

> During the few minutes it took Kovner to tell of the help that had come from a German sergeant, a hush settled over the courtroom; it was as though the crowd had spontaneously decided to observe the usual two minutes of silence in honor of the man named Anton Schmidt. And in those two minutes, which were like a sudden burst of light in the midst of impenetrable, unfathomable darkness, a single thought stood out clearly, irrefutably, beyond question—how utterly different everything would be today in this courtroom, in Israel, in Germany, in all of Europe, and perhaps in all the countries of the world, if only more such stories could have been told.[83]

Schmidt's story possesses enormous significance to Arendt because, in contrast to Eichmann's story, it has the power of illuminating the darkness. She identifies the story's "simple" but invaluable lesson: "Politically speaking, it is that under conditions of terror most people will comply but *some people will not* . . . . Humanly speaking, no more is required, and no more can reasonably be asked, for this planet to remain a place fit for human habitation."[84] For Arendt, the story bears witness to the fact that as individuals, each of us has the power to exercise moral agency. It teaches that, despite the prevailing

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[82] Arendt, *Eichmann*, 230. Arendt also refers to other sources of Anton Schmidt's story (Yad Vashem's Hebrew Bulletin).
[83] Ibid., 231.
[84] Ibid., 233. (Arendt's italics.) Susan Neiman observes that, in contrast to Arendt's ironic tone employed in her descriptions of Eichmann, her rhetoric when describing Anton Schmidt "displayed moral passion verging on the sublime." Susan Neiman, *Evil in Modern Thought: An Alternative History of Philosophy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002), 302.

cultural norms, individuals can *choose* not to participate in evil, and that this choice fundamentally *matters*. Such stories shape the moral imagination of the listeners, offering hope that the planet will remain "a place fit for human habitation" after all.[85]

The Aftermath of Arendt's Report

As is well-known, Arendt's report on the Eichmann trial immediately provoked intense controversy. The criticisms of Arendt circled around three main themes: her accusation that Ben-Gurion and others had tried to present a "show trial"; her comments/questions on the role of Jewish leaders in the events leading to the Holocaust; and her use of the phrase "banality of evil." Here I wish to focus on the latter. Arendt was never persuaded by her critics to abandon her use of this phrase. Just as Eric Voegelin's criticism of *The Origins of Totalitarianism* had pressed her to clarify important points regarding her methodology, the harsh responses to her "banality of evil" phrase pushed Arendt to elaborate on her intended meaning. In her replies, she deepened her insights into the kind of evil that was manifested by Eichmann. Her responses clarify why the banality of evil is so "thought-defying" or incomprehensible.

One of Arendt's detractors was Gershom Scholem, who, following the publication of the report, wrote her a letter suggesting that her use of a new phrase, "the banality of evil," constituted a rejection of her previous understanding of "radical evil," and accusing her of inventing a mere "catchword" or "slogan."[86] In my view, the accusation that

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[85] John McGowan questions whether Anton Schmidt's story can bear as much weight as Arendt wants to give it. "Confronted with the organized evil of totalitarianism, these human resources often seem hardly up to the task of preserving a world we could want to inhabit. Individual actions like Anton Schmidt's seem ineffectual, even pointless." He recognizes, however, that for Arendt, such stories remain essential because "it is only on the level of individual deeds that resistance to evil…can be enacted, because it is precisely the generalizing and abstracting forces of modernity that are the sources of evil in our time…." In John McGowan, *Hannah Arendt: An Introduction* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1998), 146.

[86] Scholem is one of the major representatives of the critical response to Arendt's report. In *The Jewish Writings*, editors Kohn and Feldman summarize his letter to Arendt (dated June 23, 1963): "In this letter he

Arendt was merely employing a slogan seems especially cruel and off the mark, since one of the main insights of her report was that someone who employs catchwords and slogans is incapable of thinking or accurately perceiving reality and is easily persuaded to commit evil deeds. Essentially, to accuse Arendt of merely employing a catchword was to equate her with Eichmann himself. In her response to Scholem, Arendt questioned why he had referred to the phrase as a "slogan," but proceeded to grant what she saw as a valid point—recognition of a distinction between "radical evil" as she had presented it in *The Origins of Totalitarianism* and the "banality of evil" as presented in her report on Eichmann. She identified a new insight regarding the "thought-defying" nature of evil:

> You are quite right: I changed my mind and do no longer speak of 'radical evil.' . . . (Incidentally, I don't see why you call my term 'banality of evil' a catchword or slogan. As far as I know no one has used the term before me; but that is unimportant.) It is indeed my opinion now that evil is never 'radical,' that it is only extreme, and that it possesses neither depth nor any demonic dimension. It can overgrow and lay waste the whole world precisely because it spreads like a fungus on the surface. It is 'thought-defying,' as I said, because thought tries to reach some depth, to go to the roots, and the moment it concerns itself with evil, it is frustrated because there is nothing. That is its 'banality.' Only good has depth and can be radical. . . . Eichmann may very well remain the concrete model of what I have to say.[87]

Arendt's response shows that her shift in her terminology does not mean to minimize the destructiveness, the horror, or the incomprehensibility of Nazi evil. Evil as a surface phenomenon, pictured as a rapidly spreading fungus, remains horribly destructive (it can "lay waste the whole world") and continues to defy understanding. Totalitarian evil defies understanding *not only* because it is a new phenomenon, as she had argued

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questions her German intellectual-political background, and her Jewish identity, suggesting that she lacks 'love of the Jewish people.' He questions her right to judge events at which she was not present, and especially the conduct of the Judenräte . . . . He accuses her of making a 'mockery' of Zionism, and of employing no more than a 'catchword' or 'slogan' for her 'thesis' on the banality of evil," 465.

[87] Arendt, letter to Scholem dated July 24, 1963, in *The Jewish Writings* 470-471. For a similar description of evil as a surface phenomenon, see Arendt's letter to Samuel Grafton in *The Jewish Writings* 479-480.

previously (Arendt never changed her view on this), but also because the practice of understanding involves *thinking*, the practice of "going to the roots." Thus, despite her admission that she has "changed her mind," Arendt's remarks on the banality of evil are consistent with her early thinking on evil. Whether Arendt was discussing "radical evil" in *The Origins of Totalitarianism* or the "banality of evil" in *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, she consistently tried to demythologize evil, as she had done in her early review of Denis de Rougement's *The Devil's Share*, and to emphasize human responsibility.

In addition to the evocative metaphor of evil as a spreading fungus, other noteworthy insights into understanding evil emerged in Arendt's responses to her critics. Several points appear in the postscript to *Eichmann*. First, Arendt describes Eichmann's banality explicitly in terms of a *failure of imagination*. Contrary to popular expectation, she explains, Eichmann did not appear at the trial as the villain that we typically encounter in philosophy or literature—as a mythologized, larger-than-life figure driven by malicious intent, like Iago, Macbeth, or Richard III.[88] Having no apparent motives excepting "an extraordinary diligence in looking out for his personal advancement," Arendt concludes that "He *merely*, to put the matter colloquially, *never realized what he was doing*."[89] She describes this flaw as a "lack of imagination": "It was precisely this lack of imagination which enabled him to sit for months on end facing a German Jew who was conducting the police investigation, pouring out his heart to the man and explaining again and again how it was that he reached only the rank of lieutenant colonel in the S.S. and that it had not been his fault that he was not promoted."[90] Even while facing his interrogator, Eichmann proved incapable of considering the other's

[88] Arendt, "Postcript." *Eichmann*, 297.
[89] Ibid, 287. (Arendt's italics.)
[90] Ibid.

perspective; he remained caught up in his limited, self-centered feelings. In this passage Arendt indicates that thought and moral awareness depend upon a fundamentally *imaginative* capacity, an ability to recognize a larger reality extending beyond the borders of the ego's narrow concerns. This kind of imagination might be called a moral or ethical imagination, or, in Richard Kearney's terminology, a "responsive imagination."[91] As Arendt had tried to show in her portrait of Eichmann, conscience cannot function without this imaginative capacity, which she had referred to in her "Understanding and Politics" essay as the "understanding heart."

A related insight that emerges in the postscript illuminates Arendt's distinction between *imagination* and what she called "*image-making*," a means of manipulating public opinion or deliberately obfuscating reality.[92] Lacking the essential quality that Arendt labeled *imagination*, Eichmann was particularly susceptible to "image-making," to the Nazi propaganda and clichéd speech that isolated him in a self-absorbed fantasy world. Arendt believed that a similar kind of image-making played a significant role in the controversy over her book. She asserted that many of her critics had not even read her report on Eichmann, but had chosen to believe a certain "image" of it that was being promoted. She wrote in her postscript:

> Even before its publication, this book became both the center of a controversy and the object of an organized campaign. It is only natural that the campaign, conducted with all the well-known means of image-making and opinion-

[91] While Arendt herself does not use the phrase "moral imagination," some scholars have employed the term when paraphrasing Arendt's point. For example, Dana Villa writes, "As the case of Eichmann amply demonstrates, where a 'law is a law'—where, in other words, thoughtlessness reigns—*the faculties of judgment and moral imagination atrophy and then disappear*." My italics. Villa, *Philosophy, Politics, Terror: Essays on the Thought of Hannah Arendt* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), 52.

[92] See "The Eichmann Case and the Germans: A Conversation with Thilo Koch" in *The Jewish Writings*: "As is well known, the manipulation of opinion in the modern world is done primarily by way of 'image making'—that is, one sends out into the world certain 'images' that not only have nothing to do with reality but are also often merely intended to disguise unpleasant realities" (486-487). For analysis of " image-making," also see Young-Bruehl, *Why Arendt Matters*, 160.

> manipulation, got much more attention than the controversy, so that the latter was somehow swallowed up and drowned out by the former. . . . And this was possible because the clamor centered on the 'image' of a book which was never written, and touched upon subjects that often had not only not been mentioned by me but had never occurred to me before."[93]

Arendt felt that because people had not read the book but based their reactions on a carefully constructed "image," they had not only misunderstood the truth that she sought to convey but they had made true dialogue about the book's ideas impossible.

In Arendt's view, image-making presents a fundamental threat to understanding because it deliberately distorts one's perception of reality, thus making it more difficult to see evil for what it is. Paradoxically, the effect of the image-making scandal over *Eichmann in Jerusalem* was to raise even more questions for Arendt, specifically *moral* questions. After her report on the trial and its ensuing controversy, she observed that "general moral questions, with all their intricacies and modern complexities, which I would never have suspected would haunt men's minds today and weigh heavily on their hearts, stood suddenly in the foreground of public concern."[94] Arendt wondered: Why did so many people seem afraid of making moral judgments? Why did so many want to obscure the most difficult moral issues raised by the trial? Why did they appear unwilling to face some truths made evident by the trial, such as the total collapse of morality? These questions were by no means finished for Arendt. They would lead her

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[93] Arendt, "Postscript," *Eichmann*, 282-83. See also Arendt's letter to Scholem: "It is a pity that you did not read the book before the present campaign of misrepresentation against it got under way from the side of the Jewish 'establishment' in Israel and America….It seems to me highly unlikely that without being influenced you could possibly have misunderstood certain statements. Public opinion, especially when it has been carefully manipulated, as in this case, is a very powerful thing." (In *The Jewish Writings*, 468). See also "The Eichmann Case and the Germans: A Conversation with Thilo Koch": "People claim I have 'made excuses' for Eichmann and that they prove him guilty—and mostly with quotes that come from my book. As is well known, the manipulation of opinion on the modern world is done primarily by way of 'image making'—that is, one sends out into the world certain 'images' that not only have nothing to do with reality but are also often merely intended to disguise unpleasant realities. They have had considerable success at this in the case of my Eichmann book." (In *The Jewish Writings*, 486-87)

[94] Arendt, "Postscript," *Eichmann*, 283.

to revisit the question of evil in her later work, and to examine in greater depth the role of thought and imagination in making moral judgments.

In a paper delivered at a 1997 conference commemorating Hannah Arendt, Richard I. Cohen attested to "the remarkable staying power" of Arendt's report on Eichmann.[95] Observing that Elisabeth Young-Bruehl's sympathetic account of the controversy in her biography had marked a turning point in Arendtian scholarship, he stated that "a generation later, the controversy over *Eichmann in Jerusalem* has given way to a greater appreciation of the author and to her theoretical contribution to understanding the nature of evil in modern society and the problem of individual choice and freedom of action."[96] Since the publication of Young-Bruehl's biography, scholars such as Ron Feldman, Richard Bernstein, and Dana Villa have tried to show why Arendt's conception of the "banality of evil" contributes to a better understanding of evil. Susan Neiman has even referred to Arendt's report as "the twentieth century's most important philosophical contribution to the problem of evil."[97] While some scholars remain dissatisfied with the phrase, many others have come to understand that in using the phrase Arendt was neither minimizing the horror of evil nor excusing Eichmann, but rather, identifying an essential relationship that exists between the ability to exercise a moral imagination and the ability to resist evil.

Finally, however, too many scholars have tended to interpret Arendt's "banality of evil" phrase as her *conclusion* or *answer* to her questions about evil, rather than as an important moment in her process of understanding. Arendt did not employ the phrase as

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[95] Richard I. Cohen, in "A Generation's Response to *Eichmann in Jerusalem*," in *Hannah Arendt in Jerusalem*, ed. Steven Aschheim, 276.
[96] Ibid.
[97] Susan Neiman, *Evil in Modern Thought*, 271.

a cliché, but it can become a cliché for scholars who regard it as culmination of Arendt's thought on evil, or who seem to think that it allowed Arendt (or allows us) to dispatch of the problem of evil once and for all. On my reading, although Arendt summarizes the "banality of evil" as "the lesson one could learn in Jerusalem," it was a lesson that raised many more questions than it answered. In her later work, she would continue to explore the questions that it raised, including the following: Is it possible, in the aftermath of the Eichmann trial, to consider the "voice of conscience" as a viable category for understanding moral judgment and action? How can we better understand the role of thinking, speaking, and imagining in making valid moral and political judgments? Most importantly, how can individuals cultivate an understanding heart so that, in contrast to Eichmann, we can become persons capable of moral agency?

Chapter Two

Amor Mundi: The Relationship of Understanding to Action and Speech

Introduction: "What We Are Fighting For"

Understanding, while it cannot be expected to provide results which are specifically helpful or inspiring in the fight against totalitarianism, must accompany this fight if it is to be more than a mere fight for survival. Insofar as totalitarian movements have sprung up in the non-totalitarian world . . . the process of understanding is clearly, and perhaps primarily, also a process of self-understanding. For, although we merely know, but do not yet understand, what we are fighting against, we know and understand even less what we are fighting for.

--Hannah Arendt, "Understanding and Politics"[1]

In Chapter One, I showed how Hannah Arendt practiced understanding by "dwelling on horrors"—particularly by reflecting on the "radical evil" of the totalitarian regimes in *The Origins of Totalitarianism* and on Adolf Eichmann's unrepentant conscience in *Eichmann in Jerusalem*. By "dwelling on horrors," she sought to understand what responsible twentieth-century human beings are "fighting against." My analysis of Arendt's writing showed her to be fighting against a manifestation of evil that threatened to obscure reality, to destroy the public realm, and to transform human nature (defined in terms of the human capacity for individual expression, spontaneous action, and moral agency).

But for Arendt, while the exercise of dwelling on horrors is a *necessary* aspect of seeking understanding, it is not sufficient. As she stated in the above-quoted "Understanding and Politics" essay, human beings must not only understand what we are fighting against, we must also try to understand what we are fighting *for*. Arendt warned her readers not to conceptualize understanding in utilitarian terms, expecting it to produce

[1] Hannah Arendt, "Understanding and Politics," in *Essays in Understanding, 1930-1954: Formation, Exile, and Totalitarianism*, ed. Jerome Kohn. (New York: Schocken Books, 1994), 310.

direct results or permanent solutions. Nonetheless, she suggested that unless we understand who we are as human beings, and what worldly conditions are necessary for human flourishing, we will be unable to resist the totalitarian movements (or other manifestations of evil) that seek to diminish or destroy us. Without understanding, we are poorly equipped to make moral choices and judgments.

In Chapter Two, then, I shift my focus from Arendt's efforts to understand evil to her efforts to understand and affirm the world that sustains human flourishing. Arendt conceived of "the world" as the realm of appearances, or, as she put it to Günther Gaus, "as the space in which things become public, as the space in which one lives and which must look presentable."[2] She frequently employed the metaphor of the world as an "in-between space," such as in her acceptance speech for the Lessing Prize in 1959, in which she stressed the importance of possessing gratitude toward this "in-between" space and a sense of obligation toward it:

> The world lies between people, and this in-between—much more than (as is often thought) men or even man—is today the object of the greatest concern and the most obvious upheaval in almost all the countries of the globe. Even where the world is still halfway in order, or is kept halfway in order, the public realm has lost the power of illumination which was originally part of its very nature. More and more people in the countries of the Western world, which since the decline of the ancient world has regarded freedom from politics as one of the basic freedoms, make use of this freedom and have retreated from the world and their obligations within it.[3]

Whenever an individual withdraws from participation in the world, Arendt continued, this "in-between" space is diminished: "what is lost is the specific and usually irreplaceable in-between which should have formed between this individual and his

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[2] Arendt, "'What Remains? The Language Remains'" in *Essays in Understanding*, 20.
[3] Arendt, "On Humanity in Dark Times: Thoughts about Lessing," trans. Clara and Richard Winston, in *Men in Dark Times* (Hammondsworth, England: Penguin, 1973), 12.

fellow man."[4] In *The Human Condition* Arendt likens this in-between space to a table, where individuals can gather to face one another and dialogue with one another, all the while preserving distinct perspectives as unique individuals.[5] Unlike a table, however, this space is not stable or durable, but must be perpetually recreated or renewed. Thus, Arendt's work suggests that *what we are fighting for* is the understanding and renewal of a shared world in which people can act and speak meaningfully as moral agents.

Arendt's commitment to the world of public affairs can be summed up in the phrase *amor mundi*, her intended title for the book that she published in 1958 as *The Human Condition*.[6] Arendt's primary aim in the text is to analyze the necessary conditions that support human activity in the world (e.g., life as the condition of labor, worldliness as the condition of work, and plurality as the condition of speech and action). Arendt urges her readers to understand and appreciate these conditions if we hope to maintain and renew a public world in which human beings can speak and act meaningfully.

In this chapter, by focusing primarily on *The Human Condition*, I hope to clarify not only how Arendt's profound sense of *amor mundi* informs her analysis of action and speech, but also to show how this analysis relates to her larger project of understanding. As Arendt put it in her "Understanding and Politics" essay, understanding is "the other side of action."[7] Without understanding, speech and action remain unactualized and unintelligible; conversely, without participation in action and speech, understanding

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[4] Ibid.
[5] Arendt, *The Human Condition*, Second ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958), 52. "To live together in the world means essentially that a world of things is between those who have it in common, as a table is located between those who sit around it; the world, like every in-between, relates and separates men at the same time."
[6] Elisabeth Young-Bruehl, *Hannah Arendt: For Love of the World*, Second ed. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004), 324.
[7] Arendt, "Understanding and Politics," 321-22.

remains undeveloped and meaningless. In this chapter, I will develop the thesis that Arendt's "understanding heart" is characterized by a sense of love for the world and by a willingness to participate in its affairs through responsible speech and action.

Scholarship

Among her major works, *The Human Condition* is the one primarily responsible for establishing Arendt's reputation as a theorist of the *vita activa* and as the representative of an "ethos of worldliness."[8] It is the work in which her *amor mundi* is most evident—first in her critique of a sensibility that she called "world alienation" (which might be understood as the opposite of *amor mundi*) and second in her analysis of speech and action as the modes by which human beings participate meaningfully in worldly affairs. Arendt's sensibility of *amor mundi* has been affirmed by numerous scholars, including Charles Mathewes, who writes:

> Most basically, she offers us a profoundly positive vision of the human good, and an account of how to resist the threats that imperil that good. To understand Arendt best we must understand her work through her concept of world, and her concomitant proposal of *amor mundi*, or "love of the world," as the central virtue of politically active life or *vita activa*. This concept helps us understand Arendt both philosophically and genealogically, for from her perspective, the concept of *amor mundi* is precisely what the philosophical tradition as a whole ignores or willfully rejects; and only *amor mundi* can provide us with the genuine goods of human existence.[9]

As Mathewes indicates, *The Human Condition* not only made Arendt known as an advocate of action in the public world; it also made her known as a critic of the Western philosophical tradition or the *vita contemplativa*. In the text, Arendt surveys the tradition from Plato to Heidegger, presenting an analysis of how it has been characterized by

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[8] The phrase "ethos of worldliness" is used by Michael G. Gottsegen in *The Political Thought of Hannah Arendt* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1994); and by Andrew Schaap in *Political Reconciliation* (London: Routledge, 2005).

[9] Charles T. Mathewes, *Evil and the Augustinian Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 178-179.

various forms of world alienation.[10] Arendt argues that, with certain exceptions such as Kant and Jaspers, philosophers have traditionally privileged a solitary life characterized by withdrawal from the realm of worldly affairs into an inner or spiritual realm. She maintains that the ancient philosophical privileging of the contemplative ideal denigrated the world of appearances, subordinating action and plurality to the ideal of perfect stillness and solitude. Modern philosophy, having succumbed to Cartesian doubt and introspection ("the sheer cognitive concern of consciousness with its own content"), is unable to shed much light on this problem.[11] Far from helping us resist the diminishment of a shared public space, Arendt observes that various modern philosophies, whatever the distinctions between them, have manifested a preoccupation with a narrowly conceived *self*. She writes:

> One of the most persistent trends in modern philosophy since Descartes and perhaps its most original contribution to philosophy has been an exclusive concern with the self, as distinguished from the soul or person or man in general, an attempt to reduce all experiences, with the world as well as with other human beings, to experiences between man and himself. . . . World alienation, and not self-alienation as Marx thought, has been the hallmark of the modern age.[12]

In presenting her critique of philosophy or the *vita contemplativa*, Arendt illuminates the dangers inherent in seeking perpetual escape from the world, whether such escape takes the form of philosophical speculation, longing for the soul's salvation, solipsistic introspection, or technological innovation.[13]

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[10] Arendt rejected the label of "philosopher" for this reason. As she explained to Günther Gaus in an interview: "[The philosopher] cannot be objective or neutral with regard to politics. Not since Plato!...There is a kind of enmity against all politics in most philosophers, with very few exceptions. …I want to look at politics, so to speak, with eyes unclouded by philosophy." Arendt, "What Remains," in *Essays in Understanding*, 2.

[11] Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 280.

[12] Ibid., 254. Similarly: "Modern man, the philosopher included, was "thrown into the closed inwardness of introspection, where the highest he could experience were the empty processes of reckoning of the mind, its play with itself. . . ." (320).

[13] Not surprisingly, Arendt's critique of the *vita contemplativa* extends to a critique of Christianity. She notes that early Christian philosophers not only accepted the philosophical privileging of contemplation but

Arendt's critique of the *vita contemplativa* has been misinterpreted by some readers, who have read it as a condemnation of *thinking*. This interpretation leads to confusion when Arendt unequivocally affirms the practice of thinking in later works, in which she turns away from analysis of the public world toward an examination of the mental faculties (thinking, willing, and judging) and questions of personal responsibility and conscience. Scholars have puzzled over what they see as an irresolvable discrepancy in Arendt's work: first, an unequivocal affirmation of the active life in *The Human Condition*, and then a "return to philosophy" (and simultaneous repudiation of the active life) in *The Life of the Mind*. Since I view Arendt's early and late work as presenting a coherent moral vision, I would here like to clarify how I interpret Arendt's critique of the *vita contemplativa* and its relationship to her conception of understanding.

Just as Arendt had found the philosophical tradition inadequate to help us understand the nature of radical or absolute evil, she also found it inadequate, because of its bias in favor of the contemplative life, to illuminate the world of public affairs. However, her intention was not simply to reverse the ancient hierarchy, privileging the active life.[14] Instead, Arendt argued that, because philosophers had always described the *vita activa* from the point of view of the *vita contemplativa*, they had never been able to offer an adequate theory of the active life. Distinctions between different types of activity (e.g., labor, work, and action) were obscured, making it difficult for people to recognize how the capacity for meaningful action and speech had been diminished in

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also "conferred a religious sanction upon the abasement of the *vita activa* to its derivative, secondary position…." (Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 16) Arendt criticizes Christianity's emphasis on the individual's quest for the soul's eternal salvation (an otherworldly preoccupation), which she distinguished from the Greek pursuit of immortality (the quest for a durable presence in the world) (20-21). In her view, Christianity's preoccupation with the destination of the soul prevented it from understanding and valuing the *vita activa* and its sustaining conditions.

[14] Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 17.

modern times. Arendt asserted that the modern age had in fact already witnessed the reversal of the hierarchy; in a period of unprecedented scientific and technological advancement, human beings prioritized constant activity, the incessant making and consuming of things. However, while modern people privileged action, they lacked an adequate understanding of it. Twentieth-century humans certainly knew how to keep themselves *busy* (e.g., inventing new technologies, industries, and consumer goods; sending man-made objects into space), but this constant activity does not constitute true, meaningful action.

Far from repudiating the practice of thinking, Arendt affirms in her prologue that meaningful thought and action are closely interrelated:

> It could be that we, who are earth-bound creatures and have begun to act as though we were dwellers of the universe, will forever be unable *to understand, that is, to think and speak* about the things which nevertheless we are able to do. In this case, it would be as though our brain, which constitutes the physical, material condition of our thoughts, were unable to follow what we do, so that from now on we would need artificial machines to do our thinking and speaking. If it should turn out to be true that knowledge (in the modern sense of know-how) and thought have parted company for good, then we would indeed become the helpless slaves, not so much of our machines as of our know-how, thoughtless creatures at the mercy of every gadget which is technologically possible, no matter how murderous it is.[15]

In this passage, Arendt warns that acting without reflecting upon *the meaning* of our activity —without being committed to the process of understanding what we do—is dangerous. She states her purpose as follows: "What I propose in the following is a reconsideration of the human condition from the vantage point of our newest experiences and our most recent fears. . . . What I propose, therefore, is very simple: it is nothing

[15] Arendt, "Prologue," *The Human Condition*, 3. My italics.

more than to think what we are doing."[16] Indeed, she identifies "what we are doing" as the book's central theme.

Rather than reading *The Human Condition* as a rejection of either contemplation or thinking, then, I suggest that one might more accurately read it as a critique of solipsism, subjectivity, and introspection—all aspects of "world alienation," the tendency to withdraw from responsible participation in a common world. On my reading, Arendt does not fault the exercise of thinking, but rather opposes a particular *orientation* of certain types of thought—a solipsistic orientation, focused on the self or the mind's own processes—rather than an outward orientation toward the world, the earth, and other people in their variety and particularity.[17] I understand Arendt to say that, while thinking and acting are not identical activities, they must function in tandem if we hope to preserve our essential freedom as moral persons and responsible world citizens. Thinking and acting are both essential components of the task of understanding, united by the sensibility of *amor mundi*.

It is also worth noting here that Martin Heidegger's name is often invoked in the scholarship on this work. Elzbieta Ettinger revealed in her controversial book on Arendt's relationship with Heidegger that Arendt had considered dedicating *The Human Condition* to him, as she indicated in a letter that she sent to Heidegger along with a

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[16] Arendt, "Prologue," *The Human Condition*, 5. Arendt also emphasizes the importance of thinking at the end of the book, when she warns that the faculty of thought is more vulnerable than ever before: "Unfortunately, and contrary to what is currently assumed about the proverbial ivory-tower independence of thinkers, no other human capacity is so vulnerable, and it is in fact far easier to act under conditions of tyranny than it is to think" (324).

[17] See Ronald Beiner for a convincing analysis along these lines: "What *The Human Condition* teaches . . . is that the underlying dynamic that drives modernity is an ever-accelerating tendency to subjectivize human experience, with the consequence that human beings are deprived of their deepest needs. Our prime need as human beings is to be drawn out of ourselves, and to be inserted in a public world of shared experience, shared vocabulary, shared spectacles; for it is mutual involvement in the enacted stories that unfold in our public world that confers meaning upon an existence that might otherwise reduce to senseless drudgery or banality. . . ." Ronald Beiner, "Rereading Hannah Arendt's Kant Lectures," in *Judgment, Imagination, and Politics: Themes from Kant and Arendt* (Lanham: Roman and Littlefield, 2001), 91-92.

German translation of her book: "Had the relations between us not been star-crossed . . . I would have asked you whether I may have dedicated it to you; the book evolved directly from the first Marburg days and it owes you just about everything in every regard."[18] Ettinger also cites a verse that Arendt wrote on a separate sheet of paper but apparently never sent:

> The dedication of this book is left out.
> How could I dedicate it to you,
> my trusted friend,
> to whom I remained faithful
> and unfaithful,
> And both in love.[19]

Scholars have analyzed the ways in which Heidegger's influence manifests in the work. For example, Arendt's category of "the world" appears to be indebted to him, though she transforms its meaning.[20] Significantly, Arendt's emphasis on natality seems intended to refute Heidegger's conception of being-toward-death. Arendt clearly viewed Heidegger as a philosopher whose thought was deformed by a sensibility of world-alienation, a representative of the dangers of the *contemplativa vita*.

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[18] Letter from Hannah Arendt to Martin Heidegger dated 28 October, 1960. Qt. in Elzbieta Ettinger, *Hannah Arendt/Martin Heidegger* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), 114.

[19] Ettinger, 114. According to Ettinger, Heidegger did not respond or even acknowledge the book. Arendt wrote to Jaspers that Heidegger resented her act of independence: "I know that he finds it unbearable that my name appears in public, that I write books, etc. Always, I have been virtually lying to him about myself, pretending the books, the name, did not exist, and I couldn't, so to speak, count to three, unless it concerned the interpretations of his works….But suddenly I became bored with the cheating and got a punch in the nose."

[20] Margaret Canovan: "The idea that human beings do not merely 'live on the earth' but 'inhabit' a specifically human world is unquestionably derived from [Heidegger's] insistence that men 'dwell' in the world rather than being in it the way that water is in a glass. But what Arendt means by 'the world' as opposed to 'the earth' is highly distinctive, involving a characteristically humanist contrast between the home that men have made for themselves and the natural environment to which they belong as biological creatures." Canovan, *Hannah Arendt: A Reinterpretation of Her Political Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 106. See Richard Wolin, *Labyrinths: Explorations in the Critical History of Ideas* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1995) for a critical assessment of Heidegger's influence on Arendt's conception of "world" and public space.

Scholars who are interested in questions of ethics or morality are sometimes puzzled or troubled by this book. Arendt's descriptions of action in terms of "greatness"—and her insistence that goodness must remain hidden—seem morally abhorrent to those who think Arendt suggests that "anything goes" as long as it is spectacular and glorious. Of course, such an interpretation seems implausible on the basis of Arendt's strong condemnation of evil in *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, as other commentators have pointed out.[21] While some passages from *The Human Condition* remain perplexing and do not resolve moral tensions in Arendt's thought, I argue that the text offers starting points for moral thought-trains that Arendt will take up and follow further in later works. I think that it is important to read this book in the context of her other work to fit together the pieces of her moral thought. This text primarily offers the following pieces: the idea that moral understanding must be infused with love for the world and the desire for its renewal, and the idea that speech and action are ways of constituting ourselves as moral persons and participating in worldly affairs.

Arendt's Conception of Action and Speech

In *The Human Condition*, Arendt's attitude of *amor mundi* manifests as an analysis of action and speech, the modes by which human beings appear in the world. She suggests that the willingness to participate in responsible action and speech is essential for at least two reasons. First, such participation enables the individual to remain human. As Arendt emphatically states: "A life without speech and without action

[21] See Margaret Canovan, *Hannah Arendt: A Reinterpretation*, 142, 193-94; Kimberley Curtis, *Our Sense of the Real: Aesthetic Experience and Arendtian Politics* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1999), 33, 143-44 ; Lisa Jane Disch, *Hannah Arendt and the Limits of Philosophy* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1994), 73-90; and Stephan Kampowski, *Arendt, Augustine, and the New Beginning: The Action Theory and Moral Thought of Hannah Arendt in the Light of Her Dissertation on St. Augustine* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2008), 27-37 for constructive readings of Arendt's conception of "greatness" and appearance in the public space.

. . . is literally dead to the world; it has ceased to be a human life because it is no longer lived among men."[22] Second, this participation enables people to create and to preserve a shared world, a *polis*. Here Arendt employs the metaphor of the in-between space: "The *polis*, properly speaking, is not the city-state in its physical location; it is the organization of the people as it arises out of acting and speaking together, and its true space lies between people living together for this purpose, no matter where they happen to be."[23] Arendt clearly valorizes action and speech, but what exactly does she mean by these terms? In this section I would like to offer at least a brief analysis of these terms so that I may describe their relationship to the moral practice of understanding. *Amor mundi* involves not only the willingness to act and speak, but also the willingness to reflect on action and seek understanding of it.

For Arendt, action and speech are necessarily interrelated, since one cannot appear without the other. In fact, she regards speech as *a form of action*, a "venture" into the public realm.[24] In contrast to the mental activities (thinking, willing, and judging), speech and action are activities that *appear* in the world; they are the modes by which we participate in worldly affairs. They are also the modes by which individuals disclose "who" (as distinct from "what," in Arendt's terminology) they are.[25] In Arendt's conception, not all activities or deeds qualify as true action, just as not everything that we say qualifies as true speech. For example, as discussed in the last chapter, Adolf Eichmann committed heinous deeds in his role of a Holocaust bureaucrat, but Arendt did

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[22] Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 176.
[23] Ibid., 198.
[24] See the interview with Günther Gaus, "What Remains," 23: "Speaking is also a form of action….And now I would say that this venture is only possible when there is trust in people. A trust—which is difficult to formulate but fundamental—in what is human in all people. Otherwise such a venture could not be made."
[25] See Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 178-88 for her analysis of the difference between "who" and "what" somebody is.

not regard such deeds as *action*; similarly, she did not regard the clichés that he uttered throughout his trial as *speech*, but rather as indications of his inability to speak.[26] In contrast to mere deeds and talk, action and speech are meaningful activities that shape public affairs, enact reconciliation with the world, and disclose each person's uniqueness or personhood.

In a passage that has perturbed some commentators, Arendt characterizes action in terms of greatness. In her description, action possesses an extraordinary quality. She suggests that action cannot be judged on the basis of the actor's motives or intentions, or even on the basis of its consequences. The actor's true *motives* are hidden from view (not only from the public's view, but also frequently from the actor's view), and the *consequences* are unforeseeable. Thus, drawing upon Pericles' funeral oration in Thucydides' *History of the Peloponnesian War*, she suggests that the criterion by which we judge an action is its *greatness*. She elaborates:

> Unlike human behavior—which the Greeks, like all civilized people, judged according to 'moral standards,' taking into account motives and intentions on the one hand and consequences on the other—action can be judged only by the criterion of greatness because it is in its nature to break through the commonly accepted and reach into the extraordinary, where whatever is true in common and everyday life no longer applies because everything that exists is unique and *sui generis*.[27]

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[26] Ibid., 180. Arendt categorizes propaganda and clichés as "mere talk" rather than speech. ("In these instances…speech becomes indeed 'mere talk,' simply one more means toward the end . . . here words reveal nothing . . . .")

[27] Ibid., 205. Critics such as George Kateb have interpreted Arendt's criterion of 'greatness' in terms of the expression of self-glory or vanity, and consequently have found it quite troubling for moral thought. See Kateb, *Hannah Arendt: Politics, Conscience, Evil* (Totowa, NJ: Rowman & Allanheld, 1984). Stephan Kampowski argues against such critics: "The problems with taking this passage of *The Human Condition* at face value are obvious. Here we have on the one hand a German Jewess who has scarcely survived the Holocaust, who is rightly shocked at the outrageous breakdown of morality she had to witness in Continental Europe; an author who, in her own account of the Holocaust and of totalitarianism refuses to take a scholarly-detached stance, saying that any attitude in describing these events other than moral outrage would mean implicitly condoning them.…" (27). He defends the passage by saying that Arendt means that "The greatness of action lies exactly in the fact that action is an activity meaningful in itself" (30). "Consequently, *the greatest activities that human beings are capable of are those activities they perform for their own sakes.* Their 'greatness' and 'specific meaning' lie 'only in the performance itself.'

Arendt highlights Thucydides' "insistence on the living deed and the spoken word as the greatest achievement of which human beings are capable," an appreciation of action and speech that she says the Greeks ultimately rejected and which was never recovered.[28] She also alludes to Aristotle's *Metaphysics*, suggesting that the same idea is captured in Aristotle's conception of *energeia* ("actuality").[29] It is the *performance* of the deed rather than the intention or outcome that signifies as action.[30]

Many critics are also perplexed by Arendt's insistence on distinguishing between action and goodness; she observes that action appears in the public realm while goodness, as it is conceived in the Christian tradition, cannot appear (at least without distortion) in public. Indeed, she goes further and makes a statement that strikes readers as paradoxical if they are accustomed to thinking of goodness as a personal virtue that enhances the public good: "Goodness, therefore, as a consistent way of life, is not only impossible within the confines of the public realm, it is even destructive of it."[31] Referring to Jesus of Nazareth as the model of goodness, she explains:

In other words, Arendt is far from suggesting that any action, irrespective of its potential moral depravity is good, justifiable, or recommendable as long as it is bombastic or outstanding. Rather she suggests that action is something great, simply in virtue of being done for its own sake, greater indeed than activities done for the sake of something else." Kampowski, *Arendt, Augustine, and the New Beginning*, 31.

[28] Ibid, 206. See also Arendt's comments on Pericles' Funeral Oration in *The Life of the Mind*, One-volume edition (San Diego: Harvest/Harcourt, Inc., 1971), 133, where she emphasizes that this view preceded the primacy of Being, and that the Greeks turned away from the world to the mind (*nous*).

[29] Hannah Arendt, *Human Condition*, 206. Also see Arendt's footnote on 205, where she refers to *The Poetics*: "The reason why Aristotle in his *Poetics* finds that greatness (*megethos*) is a prerequisite of the dramatic plot is that the drama imitates acting and acting is judged by greatness, by its distinction from the commonplace (1450b25). The same, incidentally, is true for the beautiful, which resides in greatness and *taxis*, the joining together of the parts (1450b34ff)." This passage is central to George Kateb's dismissal of Arendt as a moral thinker on the grounds that she is guilty of the "aesthetization" of politics and morality. See Kateb, "The Judgment of Arendt," in *Judgment, Imagination, and Politics: Themes from Kant and Arendt*, ed. Ronald Beiner and Jennifer Nedelsky. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2001), 122.

[30] I would suggest that, though Arendt excludes intention specifically as a criterion for judging action, intention still plays a role in the shaping of an understanding heart. Arendt does not develop this line of thought in so many words, but, as I see it, the formation of the attitudes that she advocates—gratitude, love of the world, respect for plurality—are attitudes that can be intentionally cultivated.

[31] Hannah Arendt, *Human Condition*, 77.

> The one activity taught by Jesus in word and deed is the activity of goodness, and goodness obviously harbors a tendency to hide from being seen or heard. Christian hostility toward the public realm, the tendency at least of early Christians to lead a life as far removed from the public realm as possible, can also be understood as a self-evident consequence of devotion to good works, independent of all beliefs and expectations. For it is manifest that the moment a good work becomes known and public, it loses the specific character of goodness, of being done for nothing but goodness' sake. When goodness appears openly, it is no longer goodness, though it may still be useful as organized charity or an act of solidarity. Therefore: 'Take heed that you do not your alms before men, to be seen of them.' Goodness can exist only when it is not perceived, not even by its author; whoever sees himself as performing a good work is no longer good, but at best a useful member of society or a dutiful member of a church. Therefore: 'Let not thy left hand know what thy right hand doeth.'[32]

In Arendt's view, goodness is hidden and silent; in contrast to action, it does not appear in the world. It would seem, on the basis of this passage, that goodness has no place in the public sphere, that *goodness* and *action* are somehow contradictory terms.

It is understandable that some scholars have been troubled by Arendt's remarks on goodness, interpreting them to mean that action (defined in terms of greatness) is incompatible with goodness and that Arendt rejects the latter in favor of the former.[33] However, I suggest that Arendt's distinction between goodness and greatness does not necessarily make them incompatible. In other texts, Arendt suggests that goodness serves as the primary inspiration for action and affirms Jesus as a model of action. In *On Revolution*, for example, she writes that "the terrifying question of good and evil could

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[32] Arendt, *Human Condition*, 74. This passage indicates why Arendt wanted to keep politics and religion separate. She thought that mixing the two spheres would endanger both. See James W. Bernauer, *Amor Mundi: Explorations in the Faith and Thought of Hannah Arendt* (Boston: M Nijhoff, 1987), 9: "in the light of her critique of Christianity, it is hardly surprising that Arendt was opposed to any attempt to transcend secularity and reintroduce religious viewpoints and passions into public-political affairs. For the political realm such a return would risk the injection of a fanaticism utterly alien to the very essence of freedom and would encourage an escapism from politics by promoting a search for unworldly solutions to worldly problems. The return would be no less dangerous to religion itself, which would face the threat of being perverted into an ideology and being made into an instrument of coercion."

[33] See, for example, George Kateb's critique of Arendt's discussion of goodness, where he argues that goodness cannot (nor should not) be severed from political life. Kateb, *Hannah Arendt: Politics, Conscience, Evil*, 96.

not even be posed, at least not in the framework of Western traditions, without taking into account the only completely valid, completely convincing experience Western mankind had ever had with active love of goodness as the inspiring principle of all actions, that is, without consideration of the person of Jesus of Nazareth."[34] For Arendt, Jesus serves as a model of how the pure love of goodness can be transformed into action that preserves human freedom and builds up the world.

Arendt's description of goodness exhibits certain similarities with her description of understanding. For example, Arendt insists that goodness, in order to be pursued for goodness' sake, must not be conceived in a results-oriented way. Like the pursuit of understanding, the pursuit of goodness is valuable for its own sake; its value does not depend on measurable results. The pursuit of goodness is also akin to the pursuit of understanding in that it is not about feeding one's ego. The good person must to some degree lack self-consciousness; the doing of a good deed must be focused on the deed itself (or perhaps the intended recipient of the deed, though Arendt does not specify this), not the doer. In order to be good, one must be *good for nothing*; otherwise, goodness becomes merely the expression of an ego-driven agenda.[35] Thus, while Arendt does not resolve the tension that she introduces between the hidden quality of goodness and the public expression of action, it would be hasty to conclude, on the basis of her comments on goodness, that she regards moral concerns as irrelevant to the public sphere, or that she "banishes" them from consideration.

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[34] Arendt, *On Revolution* (New York: Penguin, 1963), 72.

[35] Arendt's insistence on the hidden quality of goodness evokes comparison with the moral philosophy of Iris Murdoch. As Murdoch writes, "Saints must be invisible both to others and to themselves." In Murdoch, *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals* (New York: Penguin, 1992), 126.

Arendt's description of the "goodness" resembles her descriptions of the "heart"; the heart, too, remains hidden and cannot be displayed in public without being transformed into something else. However, despite her perception that the heart abides in a private sphere and action takes place in a public sphere, Arendt recognizes that the private and public exist in relationship; she acknowledges that the human being's capacity for action is frightening because action is bound up with the "darkness of the human heart" and the "darkness of human affairs." In speaking of the "darkness of the human heart," Arendt refers to "the basic unreliability of men who can never guarantee today who they will be tomorrow."[36] When human beings act, we inevitably do so *without* understanding; we are often blind to our own motives and to the meaning of our acts. Moreover, we are unable to foretell what the consequences of our actions will be, and actions, once performed, are impossible to "undo." While Arendt emphasizes the unpredictability, the "boundlessness," and the irreversibility of action, she hardly implies that "anything goes" as long as it is glorious and unique. Instead, she shows understanding of why philosophical and religious traditions have shunned the realm of action. Arendt suggests that one could easily despair of participation in the human realm if human beings did not possess two essential remedies for action gone awry: forgiveness and promise. As practices that foster intersubjectivity, binding human beings in relationship to one another, forgiveness and promise are essential to enabling us to live in the world.

Forgiveness and Promise as Practices of Amor Mundi

In her section titled "Action" in *The Human Condition,* Arendt depicts forgiveness and promise as essential faculties that enable human beings to maintain

[36] Arendt, *Human Condition,* 244.

continuity of identity and continuity of relationships in the world. As such, the practices of forgiveness and promise are manifestations of a sensibility of *amor mundi*. Arendt turns to the Judeo-Christian tradition to offer models of people who have recognized the importance of these faculties. For example, she presents the biblical Abraham as the "discoverer" of the faculty of promise—a man "whose whole story, as the Bible tells it, shows such a passionate drive for making covenants that it is as though he departed from his country for no other reason than to try out the power of mutual promise in the wilderness of the world, until eventually God himself agreed to make a Covenant with him."[37] Just as she describes Abraham as the discoverer of promise, she describes Jesus of Nazareth as "the discoverer of the role of forgiveness in human affairs."[38] Arendt suggests that even though Jesus' teachings on forgiveness were presented in a religious context, they prove equally useful in a secular context.

First, Arendt draws on Jesus' teachings to outline a moral code that enhances, rather than undermines, the public sphere.[39] Contrasting the moral teaching and practice of Jesus to Platonic rulership, she describes how Jesus operates from a moral code that is other-directed rather than self-centered.

> Since these faculties [forgiveness and promise] correspond so closely to the human condition of plurality, their role in politics establishes a diametrically different set of guiding principles from the 'moral' standards inherent in the

[37] Arendt, *Human Condition*, 243-44.
[38] Ibid., 238.
[39] Despite her criticisms of Christianity, Arendt was not opposed to drawing on Christian sources and texts for models to support or illustrate her thought. Some readers who regard Arendt as "anti-religious" (because of her critique of Christianity and her refusal to promote religious tenets as the building blocks of moral thought and practice) have expressed surprise that Jesus appealed to her as a compelling model. George Kateb writes, "Arendt has a startling reverence for the figure of Jesus. Her reflections on the quality of his goodness in *The Human Condition* are among her most searching explorations in moral psychology. Yet for all the tribute she pays Jesus in the form of a penetrating attention to his words and their meaning, she is moving in a direction that is not his, that would be opposite to his, if the Devil had not already taken possession of the opposite. Her work is in the service of the world….The goodness of Jesus destroys the world; the morality of love destroys the world." Kateb, *Hannah Arendt: Politics, Conscience, Evil*, 89.

> Platonic notion of rule. For Platonic rulership, whose legitimacy rested upon the domination of the self, draws its guiding principles—those which at the same time justify and limit power over others—from a relationship established between me and myself, so that the right and wrong of relationships with others are determined by attitudes toward one's self . . . . The moral code, on the other hand, inferred from the faculties of forgiving and making promises, rests on experiences which nobody could ever have with himself, which, on the contrary, are entirely based on the presence of others.[40]

Though Arendt acknowledges that we sometimes speak of forgiving *ourselves* or making promises to *ourselves*, she insists that these faculties only become real and binding in the presence of others: "for no one can forgive himself and no one can feel bound by a promise made only to himself; forgiving and promising enacted in solitude or isolation remain without reality and can signify no more than a role played before one's self."[41] For Arendt, then, forgiveness and promise are essentially *other-oriented* speech practices. Through these practices, we constitute ourselves as persons-in-relationship to others and to the world.

Arendt also suggests that forgiveness is important because of the unpredictability that inheres in action. She observes that action, by definition, has consequences in the world, and we can never predict those consequences with certainty. We sometimes act in the hope of achieving a positive outcome only to find that our action unexpectedly results in the disruption of a relationship or some other form of damage to the world. When actions result in painful or undesirable consequences, the possibility of forgiving or being forgiven releases us from being forever chained to those consequences or trapped in a

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[40] Arendt, *Human Condition*, 237-38.

[41] Ibid., 237. I suggest, though, that it might be possible to make promises to ourselves and to forgive ourselves, even if it is a matter of "playing a role" before ourselves. I think that here Arendt's description, drawn from Socrates, of the self as "two-in-one" (which will be discussed in the next chapter) could be used to argue against her. If the self contains a dimension of plurality—that is, if the self is a "companion" to the self"—it seems that self-forgiveness and promise would be possible. I do think, however, that these faculties function more effectively in the context of relationship and community, and I agree with Arendt's emphasis on their other-oriented dimension.

cycle of vengeance. It frees us to start anew and to act again in a different way.[42] It allows us to achieve reconciliation with the world so that we can continue living in it with others.

Throughout her discussion of forgiveness, Arendt emphasizes personhood and relationship. When we grant forgiveness, we do not forgive the *deed* committed. Though we may condemn the deed we may still forgive *the person* who committed it, thereby releasing the person from a chain of vengeance to begin again and to act differently in the future. The forgiveness of persons allows us to repair and preserve relationships whenever possible.

Despite Arendt's respect for the necessity of forgiveness, however, she by no means suggests that all deeds or persons are forgivable. "Radical evil" remains outside the purview of forgiveness. As she had suggested in *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, the evil that manifested itself in the concentration camps exceeded the reach of forgiveness and punishment as it exceeded the reach of comprehension. With no way to "reconcile" to the event of totalitarianism, it created a social/political/moral impasse. In a passage that echoes her previous work, Arendt elaborates:

> It is therefore quite significant, a structural element in the realm of human affairs, that men are unable to forgive what they cannot punish and that they are unable to punish what has turned out to be unforgiveable. This is the true hallmark of those offenses which, since Kant, we call "radical evil" and about whose nature so little is known, even to us who have been exposed to one of their rare outbursts on the public scene. All we know is that we can neither punish nor forgive such offenses and that they therefore transcend the realm of human affairs and the potentialities of human power, both of which they radically destroy wherever they make their appearance.[43]

[42] Ibid., 241.
[43] Ibid.

Arendt's claim that offenses are unforgivable when they "transcend the realm of human affairs and the potentialities of human power" is best understood within the context of her definition of "power." According to Arendt, "Power is what keeps the public realm, the potential space of appearance, between acting and speaking men, in existence."[44] Just as she distinguishes between mere talk and true speech, and between mere deeds and true action, Arendt also distinguishes between power as people often conceive it (as strength, force, or even violence) and true power. In her conception, power is not an individual possession, but a potential that can be actualized when people come together to participate in action and speech. She says, "Power is actualized only where word and deed have not parted company, where words are not empty and deeds not brutal, where words are not used to veil intentions but to disclose realities, and deeds are not used to violate and destroy but to establish relations and create new realities."[45] In other words, power can be actualized where action and speech function together to enhance understanding and to renew a shared world.

For Arendt, then, an unforgivable offense is one that destroys the human capacity for action and speech, for understanding and renewal: "Here, where the deed itself dispossesses us of all power, we can indeed only repeat with Jesus: 'It were better for him that a millstone were hanged about his neck, and he cast into the sea.'"[46] Arendt interprets this biblical passage as the expression of a unique recognition that some evil deeds are not mere transgressions (which can and must be forgiven) but rather *skandala*

[44] Ibid., 200.
[45] Ibid.
[46] Ibid., 241.

or "stumbling blocks" that cannot be integrated into the realm of human affairs.[47] On her interpretation, the person who commits *skandalon* can never again be allowed to participate in worldly affairs because his or her deeds have threatened to utterly destroy that realm.

Arendt wrote *The Human Condition* before witnessing the Eichmann trial, but her report on the trial illustrates her point about evil that exceeds the possibility of forgiveness. In her epilogue to the report, she confirmed her agreement with the judges that Eichmann needed to hang for his deeds. But she also wanted to make clear precisely *why* he should hang. Thus, she concluded the epilogue by writing a speech that she would have liked for the judges to have made to Eichmann. In this imagined speech, the judges inform Eichmann that his excuses for his deeds—i.e., that he had not intended to do anything wrong, and that others would have committed the same deeds if he had not—had no legal bearing on the matter. Arendt imagines the judges saying:

> "We are concerned here only with what you did, and not with the possible noncriminal nature of your inner life and of your motives or with the criminal potentialities of those around you. . . . Let us assume, for the sake of argument, that it was nothing more than misfortune that made you a willing instrument in the organization of mass murder; there still remains the fact that you have carried out, and therefore actively supported, a policy of mass murder. For politics is not like the nursery; in politics obedience and support are not the same. And just as you supported and carried out a policy of not wanting to share the earth with the Jewish people and the people of a number of other nations—as though you and your superiors had any right to determine who should and who should not inhabit the world—we find that no one, that is, no member of the human race, can be

[47] See Arendt's "Some Questions of Moral Philosophy" for additional discussion of the word *skandalon* (Hebrew *mikhshol,* or "stumbling block") to refer to unforgivable offenses. Arendt states, "There appears a distinction between transgressions . . . and those offenses where all we can say is 'This should never have happened.' From that statement it is but one step to conclude that whoever did it should never have been born. Obviously this distinction is very similar to the distinction of Jesus of Nazareth between the transgressions which I am supposed to forgive 'seven times a day' and those offenses where 'it were better for him that a millstone were hanged about his neck and he cast into the sea.'" Arendt, *Responsibility and Judgment*, ed. Jerome Kohn (New York: Schocken Books, 2003), 109.

> expected to share the earth with you. This is the reason, and the only reason, you must hang."[48]

Insofar as he acted out and supported a policy of eliminating a group (or multiple groups) of people from the earth, Eichmann's actions were irredeemably world-destroying and unforgivable. Whatever his intentions, Eichmann's concrete actions violated the sensibility that Arendt had described in *The Origins of Totalitarianism* as "gratitude for the given"—the fact that different peoples inhabit and share the earth is a "given," and no one has the "right to decide who and who should not inhabit the world." In carrying out a policy of mass murder, Eichmann not only took individual human lives, he also destroyed the conditions that are necessary for people to live together in a shared world.

For Arendt, forgiveness and promise are essentially moral faculties. She affirms them because they are modes of living in relationship with others, and they play a powerful role in how we conduct our affairs in the world. The understanding heart is characterized by the willingness to participate in worldly affairs and in relationships, but it recognizes necessary limits. One cannot forgive people whose actions are so utterly world-destroying that they have removed themselves from the realm of worldly affairs.

The Essential Roles of Speech: Disclosure, Meaning-Making, Dialogue

In her analysis of speech in *The Human Condition*, Arendt observes that while language serves the purpose of communication, its communicative function does not define it as *speech* (in the sense of being a form of action, a public "venture"). In Arendt's conception, speech transcends the merely communicative.[49] She regards speech

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[48] Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil, revised ed.* (New York: Penguin, 1994), 278-79.

[49] Arendt, *Human Condition*, 179. I argue against Margaret Canovan's interpretation, which sets up an unnecessary opposition between using language to communicate and using it to disclose or to understand. She writes, "Arendt did not make great efforts to communicate her ideas. As she once explained in an

as a form of action because of its capacity to "disclose realities."[50] Speech has at least three functions: disclosure of "who" the speaker is; making meaning of events; and dialogue with others (a function that transcends mere communication, though communication is part of it). The disclosive or illuminating power of speech, evident in each of these functions, renders it essential to the task of understanding.

Disclosure of the "Who" or Person

Arendt makes a point of distinguishing in *The Human Condition* between *who* and *what* an individual is. This distinction is important, for it is the "who" that one discloses through speech and action; similarly, it is the "who" that one forgives.[51] In Arendt's conception, an individual can easily describe "what" he or she is, but the "who" is more elusive. If I were to say, for example, that I am a thirty-eight year-old, white American woman, educated at Emory University, a member of the Episcopal Church, that description would not capture "who" I am. In fact, I would never be able to say "who" I am, because that "who" will never be visible to me. Arendt compares the "who" to the Greek *daimōn* that hovers behind a person's shoulders, visible to others but never to himself.[52] Thus, while the "who" is revealed by a person's action and speech, it is the inevitable *byproduct* of action and speech rather than the speaker's conscious goal. To

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interview, the motive behind her work was her own desire to understand, and writing was part of the process of understanding….Rather than being contributions to public discussion, her best-known writings were essentially inward-looking, part of the endless dialogue with oneself that seemed to her to constitute the life of the mind." Canovan, *Hannah Arendt: A Reinterpretation*, 2-3. While I agree with her claim that Arendt wrote for the primary purpose of gaining understanding, I disagree with her claim that Arendt was indifferent to communication or that she rejected it in her quest for understanding. I think that Arendt saw communication as a valuable function of speech but also believed that "disclosive language" goes beyond it. I hope to make this point clear in my section on Arendt's affirmation of dialogue.

[50] Arendt, *Human Condition*, 200.

[51] Ibid., 243. Forgiveness in the personal sphere depends on *love* for "who" a person is; correspondingly, it depends in the public sphere on *respect* for "who" a person is.

[52] Ibid., 179.

describe the "who" as a byproduct is not to diminish its significance, however. The disclosure of a "who" is nevertheless vitally important to the shaping of the world.

Arendt links her conception of speech with her conception of natality—her understanding of human beings as unique individuals, with each person at birth representing a new beginning and each possessing the capacity throughout life to initiate new beginnings.[53] She describes how persons insert themselves into the public world through speech and action: As a newcomer in the world, each person possesses a "unique life story" that unfolds within a "web of relationships" and that discloses "who" he or she is. Arendt writes:

> The disclosure of the 'who' through speech, and the setting of a new beginning through action, always falls into an already existing web where their immediate consequences can be felt. Together they start a new process which eventually emerges as the life story of the newcomer, affecting uniquely the life stories of all those with whom he comes into contact.[54]

This passage shows that, even though Arendt stresses human uniqueness and individuality, she also stresses our constant participation in relationships and our mutual dependence on others. We require the presence of others with whom to speak and to act; otherwise, there is no one to give witness to our unique life story. Our life stories will affect others, as theirs will affect us.[55]

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[53] As I showed in my discussion of evil in Chapter One, Arendt believed that totalitarianism had tried to destroy this human capacity in its attempt to eliminate human freedom and spontaneity, but it did not succeed.

[54] Arendt, *Human Condition*, 184.

[55] I disagree with Charles Mathewes' claim in *Evil and the Augustinian Tradition* that Arendt emphasizes the spontaneity of action to such a degree that she apparently recognizes no constraints or influences on action. When Mathewes writes, "Her work remains committed to the absolute autonomy of the will's choice, the totally ex nihilo spontaneity of the acting agent unconditioned by any external factors at all—including intention or desire. . . ." (174), he does not take into account Arendt's description of the "web of relationships" in which agents are inextricably bound. In Arendt's view, this ever-shifting web can profoundly affect one's actions, without negating the agent's ability to initiate something new.

Arendt credits Augustine with her conception of natality, quoting from *De civitate Dei*:

> Because they are *initium*, newcomers and beginners by virtue of birth, men take initiative, are prompted into action. [*Initium*] *ergo ut esset, creatus est homo, ante quem nullus fuit* ("that there be a beginning, man was created before whom there was nobody"), said Augustine in his political philosophy. This beginning is not the same as the beginning of the world; it is not the beginning of something but of somebody, who is a beginner himself. With the creation of man, the principle of beginning came into the world itself, which, of course, is only another way of saying that the principle of freedom was created when man was created but not before.[56]

Following Augustine, then, Arendt links natality to the concept of freedom, observing that human beings are free to act as agents. This freedom is a gift; it is something to be grateful for. If we choose not to act, however, we not only reject this gift but we diminish ourselves as human beings. We forfeit our status as a "somebody," becoming a "nobody," achieving less than full selfhood.

Because of our inability to foresee the consequences of our own actions, as well as our lack of control over events in general, Arendt insists that we are the agents, but not the authors, of our own life stories: "Although everybody started his life by inserting himself into the human world through action and speech, nobody is the author or producer of his own life story."[57] Asserting that "real" stories seem to have no author, Arendt evokes Plato's description of human affairs; she observes that human beings often appear to be like puppets, with the gods or some invisible hand pulling the strings behind our backs.[58]

When describing what narrative models are most truthful to human experience, Arendt expresses a preference for dramatic theater, asserting that theater is "the political

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[56] Arendt, *Human Condition*, 177, citing *De civitate Dei* xii.20.
[57] Arendt, *Human Condition*, 184.
[58] Ibid., 185. (See Plato's *Laws* 803 and 644).

art par excellence."[59] Despite our freedom to act, we, like the heroes of Greek tragedies, cannot control the outcome of our actions. We cannot even control our self-presentation; upon acting and speaking, we "disclose" ourselves to the world, but that disclosure appears to others and not to us. Similarly, while the meaning of our stories is not clear to the actors, it is clear to the spectators (the Greek chorus), commenting on the action, assigning meaning to the events that unfold, celebrating or mourning as need be.

Despite our inability to foresee consequences, we cannot avoid the moral and ethical responsibility to speak and act—not if we want to retain the gift of our full humanity and fulfill our obligation to the world. Therefore, we must exhibit the virtue of courage. Arendt writes:

> The connotation of courage . . . is in fact already present in a willingness to act and speak at all, to insert one's self into the world and begin a story of one's own. And this courage is not even necessarily or even primarily related to a willingness to suffer the consequences; courage and even boldness are already present in leaving behind one's private hiding place and showing how one is, in disclosing and exposing one's self.[60]

We have the gift of moral agency, but it comes at a cost—the surrender of the comfort and security of a private life in exchange for the sense of exposure and the risk of a public life.[61]

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[59] Arendt, *Human Condition*, 188. In connection with Arendt's preference for dramatic theater, see also her comments on tragedy: "I deliberately mention tragedy because it more than the other literary forms represents a process of recognition. The tragic hero becomes knowledgeable by re-experiencing what has been done in the way of suffering, and in this *pathos*, in resuffering the past, the network of individual acts is transformed into an event, a significant whole…." Arendt says that tragedy moves the audience to lamentation, and that it is lamentation that "establishes [an event's] meaning and the permanent significance which then enters into history." In Arendt, "On Humanity in Dark Times: Thoughts about Lessing," in *Men in Dark Times*, 28.

[60] Arendt, *Human Condition*, 186.

[61] Arendt, as much as she celebrated the willingness to participate in the public realm, personally found it very difficult to appear in public. When she was teaching at Berkeley, she wrote a letter to her husband describing the strain of her schedule: "I simply can't be exposed to the public five times a week—in other words, never get out of the public eye. I feel as if I have to go around looking for myself. No amount of success can help me overcome the misfortune of being 'in the public eye.' You will see : One of these days . . . I will be able to describe the actual domain of political life, because no one is better at marking the

Some critics have criticized Arendt's emphasis on disclosure of the "who" because they see it as mere self-display.[62] I would argue, however, that the "who" is not the self, or the ego, or the personality, but rather something that *transcends* self.[63] Arendt's description of the "who" bears a close resemblance to her discussion of the constitution of the "person" in "Some Questions of Moral Philosophy."[64] For Arendt, personhood does not come automatically; it is not a given. Individuals actively construct and disclose themselves as moral, responsible persons through thought, action, and speech. Personhood is not something that can be achieved once and for all; the individual must *continue* to engage in thinking, remembering, speaking, and acting in order to keep constituting his or her personhood. (Because of the necessity of ongoing participation in thinking, remembering, speaking, and acting, I prefer to refer to these activities as *practices* even though Arendt generally uses the term "faculties.") One must become a person in order to act as a morally responsible agent. This point emerges clearly in "Some Questions of Moral Philosophy" where Arendt states that people who prove themselves capable of resisting evil are not heroes or saints, but *persons*. She writes:

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borders of a terrain than the person who walks around it from the outside." (March 8, 1955, in *Within Four Walls: The Correspondence between Hannah Arendt and Heinrich Blücher, 1936-1968*, ed. Lotte Kohler, trans. Peter Constantine (New York: Harcourt, 2000), 236.

[62] See Richard Wolin, *Labyrinths: Explorations in the Critical History of Ideas* (Amherst: University of Massassusetts Press, 1995), 166: "Arendt views politics very much as a stage on which great individuals might display themselves…." And: "The great are judged by *who they are*, remarks Arendt, in a patently aristocratic spirit; that is, on the basis of certain existential attributes that, in action, are permitted to shine forth for all to see" (167). Wolin criticizes Arendt's description of disclosure of the "who" as being both aesthetic and aristocratic-elitist. But I argue that Arendt is not talking about vain self-display but rather the constitution of moral personhood, and she is not being elitist about this. She thinks that all people possess the capacity to constitute themselves as persons, and they have only to be willing to exercise it.

[63] As Kimberley Curtis argues, "Arendt's conception . . . of this effort at self-presentation (which she calls 'glory' in her 'Greek' works) is not a unidirectional, megalomaniacal urge to be admired by others. Rather . . . this urge at the center of our being is, in its very essence, 'world open and communicative" . . . . Intrinsic to our effort at self-presentation is a deliberate response to and moving out toward the plural world of others." Curtis, *Our Sense of the Real*, 33.

[64] Arendt, "Some Questions of Moral Philosophy," in *Responsibility and Judgment*, 95: "Taking our cue from Socrates' justification of his moral proposition, we may now say that in this process of thought in which I actualize the specifically human difference of speech, I explicitly constitute myself a person, and I shall remain one to the extent that I am capable of such constitution ever again and anew."

> We might call them moral personalities, but . . . this is almost a redundancy; the quality of being a person, as distinguished from merely being human, is not among the individual properties, gifts, talents, or shortcomings, with which men are born, and which they may use or abuse. An individual's personal quality is precisely his 'moral' quality, if we take the word neither in its etymological nor in its conventional sense but in the sense of moral philosophy.[65]

Arendt makes the connection between the "who," the "person," and the moral agent explicit when she echoes *The Human Condition*, saying that in order to forgive a crime it is necessary to forgive the person who committed it, and that the crimes of the Holocaust cannot be forgiven because they were not committed by persons: "The trouble with the Nazi criminals was precisely that they renounced voluntarily all personal qualities, as if nobody were left to be either punished or forgiven. . . . To put it another way: the greatest evil perpetrated is the evil committed by nobodies, that is, by human beings who refuse to be persons."[66] Through participation in meaningful action and speech, then, we constitute and disclose ourselves as "somebodies" as opposed to "nobodies." On my reading, this commitment to constituting ourselves as "somebodies" is an essential aspect of cultivating an understanding heart. In other words, a "nobody" is a being without the capacity for moral thought and action—a being void of understanding and even the desire for understanding—whereas a "somebody" is a person committed to the task of understanding.

Speech as a Practice of Meaning-Making

In Arendt's conception, while self-disclosure is a byproduct of speech, it is not the *purpose* of speech. The primary motivation for speech is the need to make sense of our experiences, to create meaning out of the seemingly random events that take place in the world. For Arendt, we participate in this ongoing practice of meaning-making primarily

[65] Ibid., 79.
[66] Ibid., 111.

through storytelling.[67] In this section, I wish to explore Arendt's conception of the importance of storytelling, showing why its practice is essential to the cultivation of an understanding heart.

In *The Human Condition*, Arendt's affirmation of the essential role of storytelling appears in her use of an epigraph from Isak Dinesen to open the section on Action: "All sorrows can be borne if you put them into a story or tell a story about them."[68] Elsewhere Arendt elaborates on this quotation to suggest that not only sorrow but all emotions—all "movements of the heart"—become "bearable and meaningful" by being put into a story.[69] How does storytelling help us to cope with our emotional responses to the events that befall us? Arendt suggests that we human beings are not only actors, we are also sufferers. Events beyond our control happen to us; events strike us as being random, meaningless, and frightening. Through storytelling, our experiences become shared (so that we are no longer isolated in our emotional responses) and we are better able to gain understanding of them. Rather than suffering the events of our lives passively and inarticulately, we can participate actively, as moral agents, in the process of meaning-making. Developing moral agency requires our committed participation in this unceasing, creative process of seeking understanding.

Isak Dinesen as a Model of Storyteller

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[67] See Arendt's letter to Mary McCarthy: "I wish you would write about what it is in people that makes them want a story. The telling of tales. Ordinary life of ordinary people—Simenon-like. One can't say how life is, how chance or fate deals with people, except by telling the tale. In general one can't say more than—yes, that is the way it goes. . . ." In *Between Friends: The Correspondence of Hannah Arendt and Mary McCarthy, 1949-1975*, ed. Carol Brightman (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1995), 294.

[68] Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 175. Arendt also cites this passage in her essay on Dinesen in *Men in Dark Times* and in her essay "Truth and Politics," in *Between Past and Future*, intro. Jerome Kohn (New York: Penguin, 2006), 257.

[69] Arendt, "Truth and Politics," in *Between Past and Future*, 257. "[Dinesen] could have added that joy and bliss, too, become bearable and meaningful for men only when they can talk about them and tell them as a story…." The storytelling function of the historian and the fiction writer is akin to the task of the poet—the "transfiguration of moods or movements of the heart—the transformation of grief into lamentations or of jubilation into praise."

In addition to citing Isak Dinesen in *The Human Condition*, Arendt also devoted an essay to her in the collection *Men in Dark Times*. While her essay takes the form of a review of a Dinesen biography, she offers more than a book review.[70] On a deeper level, Arendt's essay reflects on the question of what it means to be committed, as Dinesen was, to the practice of storytelling. Arendt regards Dinesen as a remarkable storyteller whose work and life offered illumination in "dark times." But for Arendt, Isak Dinesen "not only was one of the great storytellers of our time but also—and she was almost unique in this respect—knew what she was doing."[71] Through her commentary on Dinesen's life and work, Arendt reflects on how the practice of storytelling helps us to bear our sorrows or to navigate our way through dark times.

Arendt expressed appreciation for Dinesen because, first, she was never preoccupied with achieving an identity as a professional author but was instead preoccupied with the stories themselves. Arendt quotes Dinesen as saying: "I, I am a storyteller and nothing else. What interests me is the story and the way to tell it."[72] Elaborating on Dinesen's patience as a storyteller, on her willingness to "repeat" a story in her imagination and in the telling, Arendt suggests that being imaginatively "loyal to the story" is the equivalent of "being loyal to life." She writes:

> All [Dinesen] needed to begin with was life and the world, almost any kind of world or milieu; for the world is full of stories, of events and occurrences and strange happenings, which wait only to be told, and the reason why they usually remain untold is, according to Isak Dinesen, lack of imagination—for only if you can imagine what has happened anyhow, repeat it in imagination, will you see the stories, and only if you have the patience to tell them and retell them . . . will you be able to tell them well. . . . Without repeating life in imagination you can never be fully alive, 'lack of imagination' prevents people from 'existing'. 'Be loyal to the story,' as one of her storytellers admonishes the young, 'be eternally and

[70] Arendt's essay reviews Parmenia Migel's *Titania: A Biography of Isak Dinesen*, London, 1968.
[71] Hannah Arendt, "Truth and Politics," 258.
[72] Arendt, "Isak Dinesen," 98. [Arendt's translation of Dinesen's French]

> unswervingly loyal to the story,' means no less than, Be loyal to life, don't create fiction but accept what life is giving you, show yourself worthy of whatever it may be by recollecting and pondering over it, thus repeating it in imagination; this is the way to remain alive.[73]

For Arendt, Dinesen modeled the quality of imagination that Adolf Eichmann had lacked, an orientation of imagination that begins with worldly experience and remains "loyal" to that experience. With Dinesen, she emphasizes that the imagination, properly exercised, is neither a means of escape from real-world events, nor a distortion of our vision. Rather, through exercising one's imagination, repeating one's experiences in recollection, the storyteller remains "loyal" to life and to reality—indeed, one *gains* life in the sense of becoming more fully alive.[74] In other words, Arendt suggests that we are only alive insofar as we remain in contact with reality.

Arendt suggests that the practice of telling stories helps us to bear life events in part by helping us to find meaning in them. She writes, "The story reveals the meaning of what otherwise would remain an unbearable sequence of sheer happenings."[75] She links this revelation of meaning to the possibility of *reconciliation* with reality: "It is true that storytelling reveals meaning without committing the error of defining it, that it brings about consent and reconciliation with things as they really are, and that we may even trust

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[73] Arendt, "Isak Dinesen," 98-9. When Arendt says "don't create fiction," she doesn't refer to literary fiction…This is evident in her essay "Truth and Politics" when she says that the function of both the historian and the fiction writer is akin to the poet's function, to "teach acceptance of things as they are." Here she specifies that "a good novel is by no means a simple concoction or a figment of pure fantasy" (*Between Past and Future*, 257).

[74] See Kimberley Curtis for a compelling gloss on being "imaginatively loyal" to life: "This is an injunction to be attentive to the unique particulars of the world, to the phenomenal richness of our world as it has been gifted to us, and this depends on our capacity for imagination. Be imaginatively loyal, Arendt says through Dinesen, and if you excel, if your imagination is active and vigorous, you will 'remain alive.' Indeed, your sense of existence will be intensified; your world, as I argue, will be renewed." (Curtis, *Our Sense of the Real*, 115.)

[75] Arendt, "Isak Dinesen," 106. See also "On Humanity in Dark Times": "We can no more master the past than we can undo it. But we can reconcile ourselves to it. The form for this is the lament, which arises out of all recollection. . . . The tragic impact of this repetition in lamentation affects one of the key elements of all action; it establishes its meaning and that permanent significance which then enters into history." (In *Men in Dark Times*, 28.)

it to contain eventually by implication that last word which we expect from the 'day of judgement.'"[76] Arendt does not elaborate here on the relationship between storytelling and judgment, but she at least suggests that for her, "reconciliation with things as they really are" does not mean passive resignation to evil, as some have suggested.[77] To the contrary, because storytelling enhances our understanding of the reality of what has happened, it puts us in a better position to judge what has happened.[78]

Despite the fact that storytelling helps us to make sense of our lives, Arendt cautions against trying to live life as though it were a story, that is, "of interfering with life according to a preconceived pattern, instead of waiting patiently for the story to emerge . . . ."[79] We can make sense of certain events in our lives *after* they have taken place and we have had time to "repeat" or examine them in imagination. However, though Arendt speaks of "waiting patiently for the story to emerge," she by no means suggests that this waiting is a *passive* posture. Quoting Dinesen, she evokes the biblical image of Jacob wrestling with the angel: "My life, I will not let you go except you bless me, but then I will let you go."[80] Storytelling requires an active engagement with life. The trick is to remain "imaginatively loyal" to life itself rather than trying to determine in advance the shape that our lives will take. As Arendt had said in *The Human Condition*, we are the agents, but not the authors, of our life stories.

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[76] Ibid, 107.
[77] See Charles Mathewes in *Evil and the Augustinian Tradition*, 176: "In [Arendt's] later work she turned to the idea of explicitly political 'judgment,' but this turned out to be only a device for resignation . . . . the appeal to judgment seems more like a *deus ex machina*, brought in at the end to save the day."
[78] See also Arendt's comments on relationship between storytelling and judgment in "Truth and Politics," in *Between Past and Future*, 258: "The political function of the storyteller—historian or novelist—is to teach acceptance of things as they are. Out of this acceptance, which can also be called truthfulness, arises the faculty of judgment—that, again, in Isak Dinesen's words, 'at the end we shall be privileged to view, and review, it—and that is what is named the day of judgment."
[79] Arendt, "Isak Dinesen," 108.
[80] Ibid., 99.

Arendt's portrait of Dinesen offers a model of storytelling that illuminates the practice of storytelling as a means of cultivating the "understanding heart." Even though Arendt had said that Dinesen did not tell stories with the goal of becoming wise, she gained wisdom as a byproduct: "Storytelling, at any rate, is what in the end made her wise . . . . ."[81] Arendt helps us to see that wisdom or understanding, though it is a gift, does not arrive automatically. It emerges as a result of the patient and determined practice of telling and retelling stories—perhaps experienced as a wrestling match—that, over time, illuminates the meaning of life events and help us to reconcile to reality.

Speech as the Practice of Dialogue

In *The Human Condition*, Arendt does not devote considerable attention to the essential role of dialogue, though she does affirm its importance in other texts.[82] However, to some degree, the necessity of dialogue is at least implied in her stress on the fact that action and speech are practices that require the presence of others. Indeed, storytelling is itself a dialogic practice.[83] It is through *sharing* our stories, exchanging roles as speakers and listeners, that we participate in the intersubjective practice of meaning-making. In contrast to the attitude of "world alienation," which manifests as a tendency to isolate oneself in one's own mind, the attitude of *amor mundi* manifests in the practice of exchanging points of view, learning from other perspectives, accepting irreconcilable differences, cultivating trust in others, and building relationships. More

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[81] Arendt, "Isak Dinesen," 111.
[82] See, for example, "Understanding and Politics," in *Essays in Understanding*, 322, in which Arendt describes understanding as a process of "interminable dialogue" that proceeds in a circular rather than a linear fashion. "True understanding does not tire of interminable dialogue and 'vicious circles,' because it trusts that imagination eventually will catch at least a glimpse of the always frightening light of truth."
[83] As the anthropologist Michael Jackson points out in *The Politics of Storytelling: Violence, Transgression, and Intersubjectivity* (Copenhagen: Museum Tusculanum,Press, 2002), 39-40, without its dialogic component, storytelling becomes "not only self referential and solipsistic, but pathological." He draws on Arendt's work to describe how the act of storytelling involves "the vital capacity of people to work together to create, share, affirm, and celebrate something that is held in common."

than simple communication, the practice of dialogue is an essential practice in cultivating understanding.

As we observed in her comments on Isak Dinesen as model of storytelling, Arendt suggested that the imagination plays a vital role in storytelling—that imagination, far from serving an escapist fantasy, enables the storyteller to be loyal to life. What, then, is the role of imagination in the practice of dialogue? I suggest that imagination, or the practice of "imaginative loyalty," plays a similar role in dialogue as well. In order to truly hear what others are saying, we have to go through the steps that Arendt describes when she talks about "enlarged thinking."[84] First we have to release our attachment to our own views, not so that we might achieve some impossible "objectivity," but so that we can fairly hear expressions of other points of view. To understand why others hold their views, we must imagine what it would be like to stand in their place and to have lived through their experiences. Then we can respond in a way that is "loyal" to our own convictions, but which takes others' perspectives respectfully into account.

Karl Jaspers: A Model of Dialogic Practice

Arendt's appreciation for dialogue becomes especially apparent in her essays on her esteemed teacher, Karl Jaspers, who espoused a philosophy of "limitless communication." In one essay, Arendt affirms her teacher's conviction that communication is not merely a vehicle for the expression of a given or objective truth, but, more importantly, communication *reveals* truth: "Truth itself is communicative, it disappears and cannot be conceived outside communication. . . . Only in communication—between contemporaries as well as between the living and the dead—

[84] A more developed discussion of "enlarged thinking," which allows one to imagine others' viewpoints even in their absence, will be presented in the next chapter.

does truth reveal itself."[85] On this conception, we participate in dialogue with as many people as possible, including voices from the past, in order to catch a "glimpse" of truth. Because we do not "dwell" in a vision of truth or contemplative beholding, the need for dialogue is unceasing. We can never become passive; instead, we must stay actively engaged in the practice of communication.

Arendt stresses how Jaspers' emphasis on communication reflects a radical departure from the traditional privileging of contemplation in philosophy:

> A philosophy that conceives of truth and communication as one and the same has left the proverbial ivory tower of mere contemplation. Thinking becomes practical, though not pragmatic; it is a kind of practice between men, not a performance of one individual in his self-chosen solitude. Jaspers is, as far as I know, the first and only philosopher who has ever protested against solitude, to whom solitude has appeared 'pernicious' and who has dared to question 'all thoughts, all experiences, all contents' under this one aspect: 'What do they signify for communication? Do they seduce to solitude or arouse to communication?'[86]

While Arendt does not oppose the idea that one must occasionally retreat into solitude in order to think, she opposes the choice (too often made by philosophers, in her view) to abide perpetually in a realm of solitude beholding a vision of "truth" revealed to them alone. Her portrait of Jaspers offers an opposite model, in which thinking is depicted not as a solitary activity but as "a kind of practice among men." Arendt emphasizes that Jaspers strove to make his philosophy accessible to everyone (through radio broadcasts and other media) precisely because he believed that truth is revealed through the practice of communication.

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[85] Arendt, "Karl Jaspers: Citizen of the World?" in *Men in Dark Times*, 88.

[86] Ibid. Arendt reiterates this point in "Karl Jaspers: A Laudatio," in *Men in Dark Times*, 79: "Jaspers has often said, 'The individual by himself cannot be reasonable.' In this sense he was never alone, nor did he think very highly of such solitude. The *humanitas* whose existence he guaranteed grew from the native region of his thought, and this region was never unpopulated."

In Arendt's portrait of Jaspers, she indicates that the practice of dialogue in personal relationships (in friendships, teacher/student relationships, and life partnerships) is as important as dialogue in the public realm. She suggests that by participating in ongoing dialogue with friends and lovers, one can cultivate the necessary skills for public communication, such as attentive listening, knowing when to speak and when to keep silent, displaying patience, and identifying unspoken issues or feelings that need to be brought into discourse. By participating in dialogue, individuals create "in-between spaces," much as they do in the public sphere, where the "in-between spaces" multiply into a "web of relationships."

To illustrate the importance of personal relationships as a model for public participation in the world, Arendt offers the example of Jaspers' marriage. She regards his long marriage with a Jewish woman, Gertrud Mayer, as a gift of good fortune in his life, as a partnership that kept him from slipping into isolation. She also views it as a miniature model of a shared world:

> If two people do not succumb to the illusion that the ties binding them have made them one, they can create a world anew between them. Certainly for Jaspers this marriage has never been merely a private thing. It has proved that two people of different origins . . . could create between them a world of their own. And from this world in miniature he has learned, as from a model, what is essential for the whole realm of human affairs. Within this small world he unfolded and practised his incomparable faculty for dialogue, the splendid precision of his way of listening, the constant readiness to give a candid account of himself, the patience to linger over a matter under discussion, and above all the ability to lure what is otherwise paused over in silence into the area of discourse, to make it worth talking about. Thus in speaking and listening, he succeeds in changing, widening, sharpening—or, as he himself would beautifully put it, in illuminating."[87]

[87] Arendt, "Karl Jaspers: A Laudatio," in *Men in Dark Times*, 81. (Arendt presents a contrasting portrait of Heidegger's marriage in her letters to Blücher.)

Arendt's description of Jaspers' artful practice of dialogue bears a close resemblance to her description of Dinesen's storytelling. According to this portrait, Jaspers displayed patience—in this case, not "loyalty to the story" but a similar loyalty to the conversation partner and the discourse. With the capacity for active and keen discernment, he was even able to recognize what was unsaid and to "lure" it into speech.[88]

Arendt, following Jaspers, maintained that while it is important to try to engage in dialogue with as many people as possible so as to increase one's capacity for understanding and to build a common world, it is impossible to dialogue with those who refuse to use speech meaningfully. In Jaspers' words, the communicative mind "wants to communicate, but finds itself facing an actual rupture of communication as the other constantly dodges, stops talking, digresses, distracts, and deceives."[89] One cannot dialogue with the "image-makers," those who deliberately use language to obfuscate reality rather than to disclose or illuminate it. Similarly, Arendt expressed the conviction that one cannot participate in dialogue with those who refuse to exhibit "good faith": "Controversial issues can be discussed only in an atmosphere where the good faith of all concerned is beyond doubt."[90] Respect for the other and trust in the other's good faith is necessary if meaningful dialogue is to take place and if understanding is to be gained.

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[88] Jaspers praised Arendt's capacity for dialogue as highly as she praised his. In his "Philosophical Memoir," Jaspers commented on the regular visits that Arendt made to him and his wife after 1948. He described the quality of their "intensive discussions" as follows: "With her I could argue again . . . argue without reserve and mental reservations, blithely unafraid of going overboard, since you will be brought back and may hit upon something worthwhile; argue in the tension of differences which may be deep-seated, yet are encompassed by the kind of trust that will let them be shown without any loss of affection; argue in leaving each other radically free and ceasing to make abstract demands, because they wane in factual loyalty." Jaspers, "Philosophical Memoir," *Philosophy and the World: Selected Essays and Lectures*, trans. E. B. Ashton (Chicago: Regnery, 1963), 273-74.

[89] Jaspers, *Philosophy and the World*, 9.

[90] Young-Bruehl, *Hannah Arendt*, 314.

In short, the practice of dialogue, as modeled by Jaspers in Arendt's portrait, offers a means of refusing world-alienation. While world-alienation is characterized by resentment toward "the given," including the reality of other persons, the attitude of *amor mundi* manifests as an appreciation of others. Through the practice of dialogue, persons give expression to a respectful, appreciative stance toward the other. It allows persons to say to one another: "*Amo: volu ut sis*" (I am glad that you are).[91] Most importantly, dialogue allows persons to gain understanding and to work together toward the cultivation of a common world. Without the speech practices of storytelling and dialogue, the cultivation of a common world would be impossible.

Conclusion

In this chapter I have argued that Hannah Arendt's commitment to understanding entailed not only attending to the reality of evil ("what we are fighting against") but also attending to the world and its renewal. In *The Human Condition*, she undertook an analysis of action and speech to help readers appreciate their responsibility to participate in worldly affairs. However, Arendt's valorization of the world of action does not constitute a rejection of thinking. Indeed, while the book offers an analysis of action, it also models an exercise in reflection or the quest for understanding. Above all, Arendt emphasized the importance of being able to "think what we are doing" and being "imaginatively loyal" to our experience in the world.

Arendt's reflection on action offers a warning that we in our increasingly fast-paced world would do well to heed: that while frenetic activity, superficial chatter, and

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[91] Patricia Bowen-Moore suggests that this stance sums up Arendt's philosophy: "Directed always toward the world, Arendt's philosophy can be nicely summarized in the language of worldly love: *Amo:volu ut sis*: I love you—I will that you be. Yet this only can be appreciated fully by embracing Arendt's conviction regarding the capacity to begin even if—perhaps *despite* the fact that—the traditional banisters have been lost." Bowen-Moore, *Hannah Arendt's Philosophy of Natality* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1989), 161.

scientific-technological advancement dominate the public realm, people remain in danger of losing the capacity for meaningful, responsible action and speech. The capacity for meaningful action and speech depends on understanding, or moral imagination; it depends on the willingness to constitute ourselves as persons. While we can never possess full understanding of our action and speech in the moment of acting and speaking, we can (and must) apply our imaginations toward thinking about what we are doing, and remembering and reflecting on what we have done. We gain understanding by assigning meaning to the events that befall us, by attending to the consequences of our actions and asking forgiveness when necessary, and by talking to others openly and respectfully about their experiences and perceptions. This effort of understanding is guided by a sense of *amor mundi*. Because we love the world, we remain committed to participating in the world, and to making our participation meaningful.

Chapter Three

The Practice of Thinking as a Component of Understanding:

Socratic Thinking and Enlarged Thinking

"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 whatever happens to come to pass or to attract attention, regardless of results and specific content, could this activity be among the conditions that make men abstain from evil-doing or even actually 'condition' them against it?"

--*Arendt, Introduction to* The Life of the Mind, Volume 1: Thinking, *1971*[1]

Introduction

Toward the end of her life, Hannah Arendt turned from an analysis of action to an analysis of mental activities: thinking, willing, and judging. She devoted the first volume of *The Life of the Mind* to the subject of thinking.[2] In the volume's introduction, Arendt made an explicit connection between her present undertaking and her earlier investigation into evil. Her primary question was whether our capacity for thinking bears a relationship to our capacity for moral and ethical discernment. Arendt's report on the Eichmann trial had led her to suspect that the practice of thinking might help human beings to recognize evil and to abstain from participating in it. A decade later, she found that the question required further investigation. Just as she had previously set herself to the task of understanding the nature of action, she now set herself to the task of understanding the activity of thinking and its relationship to morality.

In the above-quoted passage from the introduction to *Thinking*, Arendt offers a preliminary definition of thinking as "the habit of examining whatever happens to come

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[1] Hannah Arendt, "Introduction," *Thinking, The Life of the Mind*, One-volume ed. (San Diego: Harvest/Harcourt,1971), 5.

[2] *The Life of the Mind*, intended for presentation at the Gifford Lectures, was never completed. Arendt finished a draft of the second volume, *Willing*, but died of a heart attack in 1975 when she had just begun the final volume, *Judging*.

to pass or to attract attention, regardless of results or specific content." Although she is more interested in describing the *experience* of thinking rather than defining it, this definition serves as a point of entry into her discussion, suggesting at least two points that will emerge prominently in her investigation. First, even though thinking is a mental activity (which, in contrast to action, does not appear in the world), it takes its point of departure from events and experiences in the world—from "whatever happens to come to pass."[3] Thus, as a practice that seeks to make meaning of events and experiences, thinking remains oriented toward the world. Second, for Arendt, the meaning and value of thinking inheres in its *process* rather than in its content or results. For this reason, when she examines the philosophical tradition for "clues" to understanding the relationship between thinking and morality, she does not embark on an examination of traditional *moral thought*. Rather, she examines philosophical sources to locate descriptions and metaphors that depict actual thinking processes. She argues that if thinking bears an essential relationship to moral behavior, its relevance inheres in the *thinking activity*.

Arendt admits that her proposed task is a daunting one. While thinking is an ordinary human experience, it remains an elusive subject. Following ancient philosophers, Arendt maintains that thinking, like the other mental activities of willing and judging, is a *hidden* activity. In contrast to speech and action, which appear in the world, thinking requires a withdrawal (even if a momentary one) from the physical world into an inner or invisible realm. Given Arendt's sensibility of *amor mundi*, her appreciation for a public realm defined by the "the fact of plurality," she finds this

[3] As Arendt told Günther Gaus in an interview, "Every thought is an afterthought, that is, a reflection on some matter or event." "What Remains? The Language Remains" in *Essays in Understanding, 1930-1954: Formation, Exile, and Totalitarianism*, ed. Jerome Kohn (New York: Schocken, 1994), 20.

withdrawal into solitude to be problematic. Thus, in her investigation she pursues the question of how to reconcile the solitary practice of thinking with the committed practice of speech and action in the world of appearances and plurality.

Arendt also suggests that thinking is difficult to investigate because available descriptions of the thinking experience have only been recorded by philosophers, not by ordinary citizens (although thinking, she insists, is an experience that *belongs* to everyone). Maintaining her long insistence that we who live in the post-Holocaust world cannot recover continuity with the Western tradition, she asserts that we must nevertheless turn to philosophical sources because they offer the few descriptions available to us of what happens in the thinking experience.[4] Arendt hopes that these sources may offer "clues" to understanding what happens in the activity of thinking and appreciating its meaning for us today.[5] Drawing on Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, she refers to her technique as "pearl-diving."[6] An excavation of sources from the past might yield fragments that have suffered a "sea-change." While they will not yield the meaning that they did in the past, perhaps they have been transformed into "pearls" that can yield new meaning in our time.

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[4] Arendt, "Introduction," *Thinking, The Life of the Mind*, 8.

[5] Ibid., 12. "None of the systems, none of the doctrines transmitted to us by the great thinkers may be convincing or even plausible to modern readers; but none of them, I shall try to argue here, is arbitrary and none can be simply dismissed as sheer nonsense. On the contrary, the metaphysical fallacies contain the only clues we have to what thinking means to those who engage in it—something of great importance today and about which, oddly enough, there exist few direct utterances."

[6] Hannah Arendt, *Thinking,* 212. "Full fathom five thy father lies / Of his bones are corals made, / Those are pearls that were his eyes. / Nothing of him that doth fade / But doth suffer a sea-change / Into something rich and strange." (Shakespeare, *The Tempest*, Act 1, Scene 1.) Arendt, an admirer of Walter Benjamin, used the term "pearl-diving" to describe his technique as well. See Arendt, "Walter Benjamin," in *Men in Dark Times* (Harmondsworth, England: Penguin/Pelican, 1973), 190.

The Life of the Mind is often identified by scholars as Arendt's return to the "*vita contemplativa* and her 'first love,' philosophy."[7] But although she embarks on an examination of the philosophical tradition, Arendt takes pains to distance herself from philosophers, saying, "I have neither claim nor ambition to be a 'philosopher' or to be numbered among what Kant, not without irony, called *Denker von Gewerbe* (professional thinkers)."[8] Arendt invites her readers to delve into these "rather awesome matters" ourselves rather than leaving them to the supposed experts.[9] Emphasizing that thinking is a practice that belongs to *all* human beings, Arendt writes, "Thinking in its non-cognitive, non-specialized sense as a natural need of human life, the actualization of the difference given in consciousness, is not a prerogative of the few but an ever-present faculty in everybody . . . ."[10] Therefore, she insists that we must be able to expect the practice of thinking—even *demand* it—from ourselves and from others, without exception.[11] It is only by recognizing that we are *all* capable of moral thought that we can hold ourselves and each other to be accountable for our actions.

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[7] Dana Villa, "Introduction," *The Cambridge Companion to Hannah Arendt* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 16: "Much has been made of this progression in the scholarly writing on Arendt. It seems that the preeminent theorist of the vita activa concluded her life by re-engaging the vita contemplativa and her 'first love,' philosophy—this time without casting aspersions on its anti-political character." [I think that she *does* cast aspersions on philosophy in this text. On my reading, Arendt makes clear that she turns to philosophy in *The Life of the Mind* not out of respect for the tradition, but out of a scarcity of resources on the mental activities from non-philosophical sources.]

[8] Arendt, "Introduction," *Thinking,* 3.

[9] Ibid., 3.

[10] Arendt, *Thinking,* 191.

[11] Arendt, "Introduction," *Thinking,* 13. Some critics have suggested that Arendt absolves Eichmann from his evil deeds by attributing his evil merely to thoughtlessness. But Arendt does not absolve Eichmann; to the contrary, she holds him at fault for his refusal to think. Arendt makes this position clear in her insistence that the capacity to think is an ordinary human capacity that we have a right to expect of every human being.

In this chapter, I will examine Arendt's analysis of thinking in order to clarify what she means by thinking and how she conceptualizes its relationship to morality.[12] Although some scholars read *The Life of the Mind* as a repudiation of Arendt's earlier emphasis on the importance of action and the public world, I argue that her sensibility of *amor mundi* is as apparent in her investigation of thinking as it was apparent in her earlier work. Although Arendt recognizes that thinking is not without its dangers, she offers a conception of thinking that is oriented toward the world and toward others. As an outward-oriented practice, thinking lends itself to the cultivation of an understanding heart.

Upon reading *The Life of the Mind*, one finds that Arendt's analysis of thinking is remarkably complex. Because she draws on many sources, the reader does not encounter a single description of thinking, but views several illuminating facets as Arendt examines her subject from different angles. I argue that Arendt affirms at least two modes of thinking that bear a relationship to moral thought and practice—Socratic thinking and enlarged thinking. In distinguishing between these modes, I wish to highlight various aspects of thinking that emerge in Arendt's descriptions—all of which play an essential

[12] It is important to examine Arendt's particular conception of "thinking" because some scholars who have questioned her understanding of the relationship between thinking and morality have operated with a completely different definition. For instance, Arne Johan Vetlesen accuses Arendt of never considering the possibility that thinking might actually *lead to* evil rather than preventing it, since she, being a philosopher, was biased in favor of thinking to begin with: "Arendt, the thinker, never entertained the thought that thinking—emphatically per se—could lead to evil: that thinking may actively side with, or even produce, evil. That is to say, she never pondered the hypothesis that there might exist—and indeed might be exemplified by Eichmann –a *positive* connection between thinking and evildoing. She built into her idea of thinking the unscrutinized axiom (a philosopher's predilection, to be sure) that *thinking is good*—if and when morally assessed." He goes on to say that some scholars (namely Zygmunt Bauman and Keith Tester) have argued that in fact Eichmann was capable of thinking rationally, and that it was "because Eichmann was so rational that he could be such an effective executor of evil…" (Vetlesen, *Evil and Human Agency: Understanding Collective Evildoing* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 60, Vetlesen's italics). But I argue that Arendt did recognize the dangers of thinking, expressed a great deal of suspicion toward the philosophical tradition—and made sure to distinguish what SHE meant by "thinking" from the kind of technical rationality that Eichmann may have possessed.

role in the practice of understanding. Specifically, Arendt's discussion of *Socratic thinking* highlights the dynamic quality of thought and the importance of engaging in dialogue with oneself, while *enlarged thinking* highlights the importance of using one's imagination to consider the perspectives of other people. I argue that Arendt's emphasis here on the value of internal dialogue and the value of imagining others' perspectives does not suggest that Arendt privileges internal conversations over *actual* dialogue. To the contrary, Arendt's commitment to actual dialogue remains firm throughout her work. Her purpose here, however, is to show that the internal process of thinking, even during those moments in which it is hidden from the world, retains a quality of such dialogue, a dimension of other-directness. Through this reading of Arendt's investigation into thinking, I aim to show that these practices of imaginative thinking, *in addition* to actual dialogue, characterize the understanding heart. These practices lend themselves not to remote, disengaged speculation, but to responsible speech and action in the world.

Scholarship

Arendt's examination of the mental activities—together with her explicit focus on moral questions—presented an enigma to many scholars, especially those who had admired her examination of the *vita activa* in *The Human Condition*. As I discussed in my last chapter, Arendt had argued in *The Human Condition* that the philosophical tradition, by privileging the ideal of the *vita contemplativa* (or *bios theoretikos*) over the *vita activa*, had obscured important distinctions between different spheres of the active life: labor, work, and action. She sought to undermine the traditional hierarchy by elaborating on these distinctions and by describing the necessary conditions for meaningful action and speech. Above all, she affirmed the importance of a public space,

which she saw as seriously endangered in the twentieth century, where human beings in their plurality could appear to each other through participation in meaningful speech and action.

Since Arendt in *The Life of the Mind* turned away from analysis of the public sphere to an analysis of the invisible mental activities of thinking, willing, and judging, many critics have puzzled over how to interpret her apparent shift from the *vita activa* to the *vita contemplativa*. Thus, much of the scholarship on this work focuses not on interpreting it on its own terms but rather on understanding its place in Arendt's *oeuvre*. Some critics have interpreted Arendt's shift as an outright repudiation or betrayal of her earlier views. For example, Leah Bradshaw writes, "It cannot be overemphasized just how much of a radical break Arendt made from her early 'political' works in turning her attention to questions of truth and morality. She had [previously] excluded any consideration of the interior life on the grounds that this 'life' is less real than the appearances of speech and deed."[13] I suspect that Bradshaw betrays her own reaction to *The Life of the Mind* when she goes on to describe it as a "disappointment":

> In many respects, *The Life of the Mind* may have been a disappointment to Arendt's readers. Accustomed to her often brilliant, always brash statements about politics and action, the reader might find this project subdued and rambling. Arendt was more tentative about her final project, probably because much of what she wrote contradicted her own earlier statements. *The Life of the Mind* is unquestionably an implicit refutation of much of what she said in *The Human Condition*.[14]

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[13] Leah Bradshaw, *Acting and Thinking: The Political Thought of Hannah Arendt* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1989), 68.

[14] Ibid., 71. Bradshaw describes *The Life of the Mind* as a "tentative" project compared to Arendt's earlier work. However, as Richard J. Bernstein notes, Arendt was not able to revise this work before she died; it should be read as a work in progress. Besides, Arendt did once say that she meant for her all of writing to have a tentative quality: "I would like to say that everything I did and everything I wrote—all that is tentative. I think that all thinking, the way that I have indulged in it perhaps a little beyond measure, extravagantly, has the earmark of being tentative." Arendt, "On Hannah Arendt" in *Hannah Arendt: The Recovery of the Public World*, ed. Melvyn Hill (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1979), 338.

Other critics, while not presenting their assessment of *The Life of the Mind* as starkly as Bradshaw, similarly remark upon what they see as a "shift" if not an outright refutation of her earlier work. Bradshaw is not alone in reaching the conclusion that Arendt ultimately rejects the world of action in favor of the contemplative life.[15]

A few critics who have addressed Arendt's conception of the relationship between action and thinking have reached the opposite conclusion. These readers have argued that, toward the end of her life, Arendt managed to overcome the longstanding opposition between acting and thinking (or, alternately, that if she had lived long enough to complete her volume on judging, she *would have* managed to achieve this synthesis.) They argue that in Arendt's latest work on judging, she had at least laid the foundations for achieving the seamless reconciliation of these two spheres.

Finally, there are also critics who have taken a middle road between these two positions. Dana Villa, for example, recognizes that questions about thinking and judgment had appeared throughout Arendt's early work, so he does not see her late work as representing a complete departure. However, while he argues against readers like Leah Bradshaw who see no continuity between Arendt's early and late writings, he also argues against those who too hastily try to smooth over any hint of tension between these writings. He maintains that it is "tempting, but wrongheaded" to conclude that Arendt finally resolved the tensions between the life of the action and the life of thought: "Her point, rather, was to remind us that there can be no easy synthesis of these two

[15] Several commentators argue that Arendt moves toward, and eventually embraces, a conception of judgment that is purely "contemplative," or remote from action. See, for example, Ronald Beiner, "Interpretive Essay" in Hannah Arendt, *Lectures on Kant's Political Philosophy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 139; Albrecht Wellmer, "Hannah Arendt on Judgment," in *Judgment, Imagination, and Politics: Themes from Kant and Arendt*, eds. Ronald Beiner and Jennifer Nedelsky (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2001), 168); William J. Richardson, "Contemplative in Action," in *Amor Mundi: Explorations in the Faith and Thought of Hannah Arendt*, ed. James W. Bernauer (Boston: M Nijhoff, 1987), 116.

fundamentally opposed ways of life. Between the life of the citizen and the life of the philosopher there lies an unavoidably tragic choice."[16]

That Arendt found "no easy synthesis" between acting and thinking I agree. But does Arendt really suggest that human beings must make an "unavoidably tragic choice" between a life of thought and a life of action? I do not think so. My own reading assumes a basic continuity between *The Life of the Mind* and Arendt's early work. Indeed, I believe that Arendt herself explicitly demonstrates continuity with her earlier reflections in her introduction, where she explains her motivations for undertaking this investigation into the mental faculties. While I would not say that Arendt eradicates the tension between the life of thinking and the life of action, neither would I go so far as to say that Arendt insists on a radical separation of these spheres. To the contrary, I think that she advocates a committed back-and-forth movement between the world of appearances and the inner world of reflection.[17]

Most scholars who have investigated Arendt's conception of thinking have proceeded straightaway to her analysis of Socratic thinking—which is understandable, since Arendt herself places so much emphasis on the importance of the Socratic conscience. These scholars have largely overlooked Arendt's comments on enlarged thinking (except for those who have focused more on her conception of judgment than her conception of thinking); rarely does one find scholarly attempts to discern how

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[16] Dana Villa, "Introduction," *The Cambridge Companion to Hannah Arendt* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 19. Arendt herself professed to have chosen the life of the thinker over the life of the actor: "I will admit that I am, of course, primarily interested in understanding. . . . And I will admit that there are other people who are primarily interested in doing something. I am not. I can very well live without doing anything. But I cannot live without trying at least to understand whatever happens." Arendt, "On Hannah Arendt" in *Hannah Arendt: The Recovery of the Public World*, 303.

[17] Note: I do not read this as an affirmation of the *vita contemplativa*, as many critics have done. Arendt insists on a distinction between thinking and contemplation, and she affirms the first *without* affirming the latter.

Arendt's discussions of Socratic thinking and enlarged thinking might connect with one another. In this chapter I wish to proceed differently. First I will examine some of the material that precedes Arendt's analysis of Socratic thinking in *The Life of the Mind*. The first two chapters of this text have been largely neglected by scholars, but I find them to be helpful for two reasons. First, they show that Arendt has not abandoned her commitment to *amor mundi*—that she is very concerned with figuring out how to cross the traditional philosophical divide between the world of thought and the world of action. They also show that the imagination plays an essential role in allowing us to cross that divide. Second, I will proceed to an analysis of Socratic thinking, drawing primarily from *The Life of the Mind,* and then to an analysis of enlarged thinking, which requires a leap to *Lectures on Kant's Political Thought*. My aim is to show that Arendt's descriptions of both Socratic thinking and enlarged thinking illuminate dimensions of the thinking process that contribute to the cultivation of an understanding heart.

Preliminary Remarks about Thinking: Questions, Concerns, Dangers

Hannah Arendt divides the first volume of *The Life of the Mind* into four sections: 1) Appearance; 2) Mental Activities in a World of Appearances; 3) What Makes Us Think?; and 4) Where Are We When We Think? Not so much seeking to define thinking, she does not pose her central question as "What *is* thinking?"; she seeks instead to illuminate what actually *happens* when we think. Because the "thinking ego always lives in hiding, *lathē biōsas*," she asks questions that try to "bring it out of hiding, to tease it, as it were, into manifestation."[18] Thus, she examines the writings of numerous philosophers to find descriptions of the experience of thinking.

It is beyond the scope of my project to analyze each section of the first volume in detail. However, I will comment briefly on the first sections in order to contextualize Arendt's discussion of Socrates, which appears in the third section of the volume and which figures prominently in her work as a possible link between thinking and morality. These preliminary sections are important because they show that Arendt remains committed to the world of appearances and plurality. They also display Arendt's awareness of the dangers of thinking. When Arendt argues that Socratic thinking bears a relationship to moral practice, she does so with a full appreciation for the dangers of thinking as suggested by the philosophical tradition. Furthermore, Arendt's description emphasizes the importance of imagination—the fact that thinking depends on an imaginative faculty that unites the world of thought with the world of appearances.

In the first section, "Appearance," Arendt contextualizes her discussion of thinking by comparing and contrasting it with willing and judging. Thinking differs from the other two mental activities because it deals with the present, while willing deals with

[18] Arendt, *Thinking,* 167.

the future and judging deals with the past. Moveover, the faculty of thinking deals with the general, while the faculties of willing and judging deal with particulars. Despite these differences, the three mental activities share one primary characteristic: they are *hidden, invisible activities that require a withdrawal from the world of appearances.* Arendt finds this characteristic the most perplexing and disturbing. She summarizes the problem as follows:

> This [withdrawal from the world of appearances] would cause no great problem if we were mere spectators, godlike creatures thrown into the world to look after it or enjoy it and be entertained by it, but still in possession of some other region as our natural habitat. However, *we are of the world and not merely in it*; we too, are appearances by virtue of arriving and disappearing; and while we come from a nowhere, we arrive well equipped to deal with whatever appears to us and to take part in the play of the world.[19]

Consistent with her affirmation of the *vita activa* in *The Human Condition,* Arendt makes clear that, in her view, human beings are *not* "mere spectators, godlike creatures," who are capable of viewing the world with detachment. On the contrary, she insists on the opposite position—that we are "of the world and not merely in it." Precisely because we are meant to inhabit this world and participate in responsible action in it, the mental faculties appear problematic, or at least paradoxical. If human beings are meant for the world, then why do we engage in these activities of withdrawal? Does withdrawal from the world not put us in danger of losing touch with reality altogether? Arendt states explicitly that her question is "whether thinking and other invisible and soundless mental activities are meant to appear or whether in fact they can never find an adequate home in the world."[20]

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[19] Ibid., 22. (Arendt's italics.)
[20] Ibid., 23.

Arendt recognizes that thinking can pose a genuine danger—specifically, the danger of leading an individual into a realm of perpetual solitude and disengagement from the real world. For the thinking ego, the temptation to isolate itself becomes powerful because thinking offers the ultimate sensation of feeling active and "fully alive."[21] Drawing from numerous philosophical sources (Cato, for example, who said that "never is a man more active than when he does nothing, never is he less alone than when he is by himself"[22]), Arendt observes that no activity feels more intoxicating and more worthwhile than thinking, so the thinking ego begins to view the world of action, appearances, other people—even the thinker's own body—as unreal or threatening. Soaring upon eagle's wings, the thinking ego perceives the body as a ridiculously slow, cumbersome obstacle. It perceives the world and the incessant claims of other people upon its attention as impediments to thought. Thus, the thinking ego is tempted to retreat perpetually to the world of thought, subordinating or rejecting the body and the material world. Arendt suggests that the experience of this heady sensation may partly explain why many philosophers have tended to privilege the world of thought to the world of appearances, action, and plurality. It is possible to become so caught up in the intoxication of thought that one loses touch with the "common sense" world altogether.

Along these lines, Arendt describes one problematic characteristic of thinking (indeed, of all the mental faculties) as a "bending back toward the self."[23] This characteristic isolates us from others; it leads us into the solitary self-absorption of the

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[21] Arendt, *Thinking,* 178.
[22] Arendt, "Introduction," *Thinking,* 7-8. The original version of this quotation, attributed by Cicero to Cato, stands as the epigraph to the entire volume on thinking: "Numquam se plus agree quam nihil cum ageret, numquam minus solum esse quam cum solus esset." Arendt was fond of this quotation and cited it in several of her works.
[23] Arendt, *Thinking,* 22.

thinking ego; it has no contact with reality. There is a reflexive quality to thinking that seems to suggest the experience of an "inner self." Arendt emphasizes the *seeming*; she finds the idea of an "inner self" to be a misleading notion. Thus, Arendt's examination of the mental life does not imply that she has modified or rejected her critique of interiority or her corresponding critique of psychoanalysis. In her view, psychoanalysis devalues the fascinating variety manifested in human beings' appearances by reducing our essences to some mechanistic function that occurs internally.[24] In other words, belief in an inner self reduces our fascinating exteriors of otherness to a monochromatic, sordid sameness**.**

Having acknowledged that thinking *can* lead us away from the world, Arendt is unwilling to settle for this problematic assessment of thinking as the end of the matter. Is there really no way for the thinking person to remain engaged with the world and with other people? Arendt suggests that the answer lies at least partly in "the mind's unique gift" of imagination.[25] She affirms imagination as a "gift" because it allows human beings to make the necessary withdrawal from the world in order to think and to make sense of our experiences, and it also keeps our thought connected to the visible world, especially through the vehicle of metaphor.

Here I wish to call attention to two main points that Arendt makes about the essential role of imagination in thinking. *First, imagination makes withdrawal possible. Without the ability to withdraw, gaining distance and perspective, we would not be able to make sense of our experiences.*

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[24] Ibid., 35-36.
[25] Ibid., 76.

Arendt emphasizes that, without the faculty of imagination, thinking would not be possible. The imagination allows us to withdraw from the world of appearances by transforming our visible-world experiences and sensations into mental images (or "thought-objects") to be stored in the memory. "*Every mental act rests on the mind's faculty of having present to itself what is absent from the senses*," Arendt writes. "Re-presentation, making present what is actually absent, is the mind's unique gift, and since our whole mental terminology is based on metaphors drawn from vision's experience, this gift is called *imagination* . . . ."[26]

Arendt draws upon Augustine's *The Trinity* to explain the two-step mental process that transforms objects that we see in the visible world into objects of thought. First, the imagination "de-senses" an object to be stored in the memory. Second, the mind actively retrieves the image from memory, so that it becomes a "vision in thought." The mind is then prepared to "go further" into the invisible world toward understanding an experience, question, or concept:

> Imagination, therefore, which transforms a visible object into an invisible image, fit to be stored in the mind, is the condition *sine qua non* for providing the mind with suitable thought-objects; but these thought-objects come into being only when the mind actively and deliberately remembers, recollects, and selects from the store-house of memory whatever arouses its interest sufficiently to induce concentration; in these operations the mind learns how to deal with things that are absent and prepares itself to 'go further,' *toward the understanding of things that are always absent*, that cannot be re-membered because they were never present to sense experience.[27]

The faculty of imagination not only makes remembrance possible, but it also "prepares" the mind to reach toward understanding of the ineffable. Again, Arendt emphasizes that

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[26] Ibid., 75-76. (Arendt's italics.) Here Arendt invokes Kant's definition of imagination as "the faculty of intuition even without the presence of the object."

[27] Ibid, 77. (My italics.) Arendt's discussion of Augustine refers to The Trinity, Book 11, "Psychological: Mental Image, Lesser Analogies."

this imaginative thought process is not unique to certain types of people, such as philosophers or poets. *Remembering* is one of the most basic thinking experiences, one that is available to human beings in general, and it is important because it roots our thinking processes in our worldly experiences. Remembering is thus a mental activity that takes us step further toward *understanding*.

Despite her recognition that thinking/imagining involves a withdrawal, Arendt retains her focus on the *world-oriented* dimension of thought. She emphasizes that experiences and events, not abstract theories, should always be the starting place of thought. Reiterating that "every thought is an afterthought," she explains, "By repeating it [an event or experience] in imagination, we *de-sense* whatever had been given to our senses. And only in this material form can our thinking faculty now being to concern itself with this data. This operation precedes all thought processes, cognitive thought as well as thought about meaning . . . ."[28] The only form of thinking that Arendt exempts from this imaginative process is "sheer logical reasoning—where the mind in consistency with its own laws produces a deductive chain from a given premise . . . ." Such logical reasoning "has definitely cut all strings to living experience. . . ." [29] It is important to remember that when Arendt affirms the moral necessity of *thinking*, she does not refer to logical reasoning, but to thinking that is engaged with experience.

Arendt reiterates that human beings have a basic need or drive to make sense of their experiences, and that this need propels our need to think, just as it propels our need to tell stories or to write poems. She states that "the quest for meaning that prompts men to ask [metaphysical questions] is in no way different from men's need to tell the story of

[28] Ibid., 87.
[29] Ibid.

some happening they witnessed, or to write poems about it."[30] Such an assertion undermines the traditional divide between philosophy (traditionally associated with "pure" reason or logic) and literature (traditionally associated with imagination, creativity, or "fantasy"). Both philosophy and literature emerge from the same source, "reason's need" to make meaning of experience. Without the need to make sense of our experiences, human beings would neither need to think ("All thought arises out of experience, but no experience yields any meaning or even coherence without undergoing the operations of imagination and thinking"[31]), nor would we have the urge to speak, or to "give an account," to narrate the events that have witnessed.[32]

Emphasizing the vital role of the imagination, Arendt writes that a withdrawal that remains imaginatively engaged with the affairs of the world is necessary not only in order to *think* meaningfully, but also to *judge* and to *understand*:

> Hence, withdrawal from direct involvement to a standpoint outside the game (the festival of life) is not only a condition for judging . . . but also the condition for understanding the meaning of the play. . . . This withdrawal of judgment is obviously very different from the withdrawal of the philosopher. It does not leave the world of appearances but retires from active involvement in it to a privileged position in order to contemplate the whole.[33]

Arendt thus conceives of withdrawal as a good and necessary practice, as long as it is not the disengaged, perpetual withdrawal of the philosophers. Understanding would be impossible for someone who retires from worldly participation into a purely speculative existence. But understanding would be equally impossible for a person who never

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[30] Ibid., 78.
[31] Ibid., 87.
[32] Ibid. "Even the simple *telling* of what has happened, whether the story then tells it as it was or fails to do so, is *preceded* by the de-sensing operation." (Arendt's italics.)
[33] Ibid., 94. It is curious that Arendt uses the word "obviously" to distinguish the judging spectator's withdrawal from the philosopher's withdrawal. The distinction has not been obvious to many of Arendt's commentators, who have for the most part overlooked Arendt's distinction in their haste to conclude that Arendt is advocating a return to a disengaged, philosophical *vita contemplativa*.

withdraws into solitude to think, reflect, remember, and "speculate meaningfully, about the unknown and the unknowable."[34]

Second, imagination, especially through the vehicle of metaphor, keeps invisible thought tethered to the visible world.

In her examination of the mental activities, as we have seen, Arendt called attention to the oddest characteristic of thinking—its hiddenness, its invisibility, its apparent inability to find itself at home in the world of appearances. But in the same volume Arendt shows that thinking does have a home after all—in "what cannot be seen but can be said"—that is, in language, especially in poetic structures such as metaphor, analogy, and parable.[35] For Arendt, the gift of poetic thinking lies in its associative power, which allows it to bridge the seeming abyss between the invisible world of thought and the realm of appearances.

Arendt suggests that there is no clear separation between thinking (which is invisible) and speaking (which is audible, *appearing* in the visible world); the two activities are interdependent. Thinking and speaking both arise from the same source, from an *urge* ("reason's need") to make meaning: "In any case, since words—carriers of meaning—and thoughts resemble each other, *thinking beings have an urge to speak, speaking beings have an urge to think*."[36] Driven by an inner necessity that transcends the mere need to communicate, human beings possess an urge to *name* things and to "give account" in words. Arendt writes, "The sheer naming of things, the creation of

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[34] Ibid., 71.
[35] Ibid., 109. "If speaking and thinking spring from the same source, then the very gift of language could be taken as a kind of proof, or perhaps, rather, as a token, of men's being naturally endowed with an instrument capable of transforming the invisible into an 'appearance.' . . . And it is in this context that the mind's language by means of metaphor returns to the world of visibilities to illuminate and elaborate further what cannot be seen but can be said."
[36] Ibid., 99. (Arendt's italics.)

words, is the human way of *appropriating* and, as it were, disalienating the world into which, after all, each of us is born as a newcomer and a stranger."[37] In addition, human beings participate in the world by *being named*. When we withdraw from the world of appearances into the realm of reflection and thought, it often happens that we find ourselves called by name back into participation in the visible world. Thus, both naming and being named help us to surmount the illusion that we are meant for some invisible or spiritual world, and help us to make ourselves at home in the world of appearances.

In a section titled "Language and Metaphor," (within the larger section on "Mental Activities in a World of Appearances"), Arendt presents an argument affirming the special power of metaphor to bridge the invisible and visible worlds. As she writes, "The metaphor, bridging the abyss between inward and invisible mental activities and the world of appearances, was certainly the greatest gift language could bestow on thinking and hence on philosophy . . . ."[38] Here Arendt argues that philosophical language, like poetry, is metaphorical through and through—that metaphor plays an essential role in our quest for meaning. (As she put it elsewhere, metaphors are "the daily bread of all conceptual thought."[39]) In particular, Arendt insists that, by enabling us to conceptualize the invisible realm in terms of the sensible world, metaphor keeps us rooted in the world of appearances.[40]

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[37] Ibid., 100. (Arendt's italics.)
[38] Ibid., 105. Arendt also describes metaphor as a bridge: "It is true that all mental activities withdraw from the world of appearances, but this withdrawal is not toward an interior of either the self or the soul. Thought with its accompanying conceptual language, since it occurs in and is spoken by a being at home in a world of appearances, *stands in need of metaphors in order to bridge the gap* between a world given to sense experience and a realm where no such immediate apprehension can ever exist" (32). (My italics.)
[39] Arendt, "Prologue," in *Responsibility and Judgment* (New York: Schocken Books, 2003), 13.
[40] Arendt, "Walter Benjamin" in *Men in Dark Times*: "Metaphors are the means by which the oneness of the world is poetically brought about" (164).

In defining metaphor, Arendt cites the Oxford English Dictionary's definition ("the figure of speech in which a name or descriptive term is transferred to some object different from, but analogous to, that to which it is properly applicable"), but proceeds to say that she regards this definition as too simplistic.[41] The word "metaphor," deriving from the Greek *metapherein* ("carrying over"), does not merely refer to the transfer of properties from one object to another.[42] Arendt turns to poets for a description of how metaphor, through the power of association, creates new understanding. For example, she cites Percy Bysshe Shelley's remark that the language of poets is "vitally metaphorical; that is, it marks the before unapprehended *relations* of things and perpetuates their apprehension . . . ."[43] Arendt thus affirms metaphor's capacity, through its power of association, not only to *recognize* correspondences between different objects, but to *create* correspondences between seemingly disparate realms; in other words, metaphor "bridges the gulf between the visible and the invisible, the world of appearances and the thinking ego."[44] Put simply, metaphor is the "invisible made visible."[45] Because metaphor "indicates in its own way the primacy of the world of appearances," it helps human beings to make our home in the world.[46]

What, finally, does metaphor have to do with the problem of morality or understanding? Arendt has said that in "dark times" without any moral guideposts, human beings are faced with (at least) two possible ways of going astray. One is to avoid

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[41] Arendt, *Thinking*, 102.
[42] Ibid., 103.
[43] Ibid. (Arendt's italics.) Quoting Shelley's *Defence of Poetry*, ed. H.F.B. Brett-Smith (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 26). Shelley argues that to perceive the relationship is to perceive the "true and the beautiful, in a word, the good which exists in the relation"—this ability to perceive the good implies a capacity for moral perception.
[44] Ibid., 123.
[45] Ibid., 107.
[46] Ibid., 109.

thinking at all, in which case we will act on habit, custom, prejudice, or self-interest; following this path we are capable of committing seriously evil crimes (like Eichmann). The other way to go astray is to get lost in thought, mistaking the "thinking ego" for one's real self, choosing a solitary escapism, a life of stillness and contemplation, instead of action in the world (like Heidegger and most philosophers, in Arendt's view). Arendt insists on a middle way of sorts, and suggests that metaphorical thinking (or what she elsewhere calls "poetic thinking") makes this middle way possible. Metaphor allows us to withdraw from the world of appearances in order to think, but it also keeps us tethered to the world of appearances. As Arendt summarizes,

> Analogies, metaphors, and emblems are the threads by which the mind holds on to the world even when, absentmindedly, it has lost direct contact with it, and they guarantee the unity of human experience. Moreover, in the thinking process itself they serve as models to give us our bearings lest we stagger blindly among experiences that our bodily senses with their relative certainty of knowledge cannot guide us through.[47]

Metaphor keeps our thought process tethered to the world, so that we do not end up being "lost in thought," losing contact with reality. Arendt continues: "The simple fact that our mind is able to find such analogies, that the world of appearances reminds us of things non-apparent, may be seen as a kind of 'proof' that mind and body, thinking and sense experience, the invisible and the visible, belong together, are 'made' for each other, as it were."[48] Arendt's appreciation for metaphor goes against the grain of the philosophical tradition by insisting on the primacy of the sensible world.

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[47] Ibid., 109. Compare Arendt's description of metaphor (giving us our "bearings") to her description of imagination in "Understanding and Politics." Imagination serves as a compass to help us navigate our experience: " Without this kind of imagination, which actually is understanding, we would never be able to take our bearings in the world. It is the only inner compass we have." (Arendt, "Understanding and Politics," in *Essays in Understanding*, 323.)

[48] Ibid., 109.

In this section I have tried to show that Arendt maintains her commitment to *amor mundi* as she pursues the question of thinking and its relationship to morality. She observes that, in the descriptions of thinking offered by most philosophers, there seems to be little connection between thinking (which can remove us from the world) and understanding (which orients us toward the world). Insofar as thinking removes us from the world, how can it help us to understand the world? In answer to this question, Arendt suggests that a certain kind of thinking ("sheer logical reasoning") *cannot* help because it is removed from actual experience. However, she affirms that certain dimensions of thinking, with the assistance of imagination and poetic structures such as metaphor, *can* help us to understand ourselves and our world. In the following sections, I will show how Arendt's descriptions of Socratic thinking and enlarged thinking highlight the role that imagination plays in connecting the thinking to understanding.

Socratic Thinking

Hannah Arendt's treatment of Socratic thinking appears in the third part of *The Life of the Mind*, titled "What Makes Us Think?"[49] Before exploring Socrates' answer to that question, she examines pre-philosophic sources, the works of Plato, and the writings of Roman philosophers, observing that all of these sources describe thinking as the response to an innate human need; for example, the Greeks understood thinking as a response to the sense of "admiring wonder" (*thaumazein*) about the universe. But Arendt finds all of these answers vague and somewhat unsatisfying. They do not tell us much about the activity of thinking, much less about the relationship of thinking to morality. In particular, in Arendt's view, they do not deal adequately with the problem of evil.[50] Thinking that is instigated by a sense of "admiring wonder" about the nature of the universe differs from thinking that is instigated by "wonder" about the manifestation of totalitarian death camps. Arendt seeks a model of thinking that lends itself to the attempt to understand and to resist evil.

Ultimately, Arendt seeks a model of the thinking process that differs from that of the other philosophers, the "professional thinkers," in several crucial aspects. In addition to responding to the existence of evil, this model of thinking could be practiced by everyone and not reserved for an elite set of individuals who by and large had shunned the public sphere. Given the "hidden" quality of thinking, and the paucity of descriptions of thinking written by ordinary citizens, Arendt asks how we can know or imagine what

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[49] Arendt also offers analyses of Socratic thinking in several other works, including the essays "Thinking and Moral Considerations," "Some Questions of Moral Philosophy," "Collective Responsibility" (all found in *Responsibility and Judgment*), and a chapter on Socrates in *The Promise of Politics* .

[50] Arendt, *Thinking*, 150. "Admiring wonder conceived as the starting-point of philosophy leaves no place for the factual existence of disharmony, of ugliness, and finally of evil. No Platonic dialogue deals with the question of evil, and only in the Parmenides does he show concern about the consequences that the undeniable existence of hideous things and ugly deeds is bound to have for his doctrine of ideas."

such thinking would look like? In the following passage, she offers the example of Socrates as the best available solution to the problem:

> The best, in fact the only, way I can think of to get hold of the question is to look for a model, an example of a thinker who was not a professional, who in his person unified two apparently contradictory passions, for thinking and acting—not in the sense of being eager to supply his thoughts or to establish theoretical standards for action but in the much more relevant sense of being equally at home in both spheres and able to move from one sphere to the other with the greatest apparent ease, very much as we ourselves constantly move back and forth between experiences in the world of appearances and the need for reflecting on them.[51]

Arendt describes Socrates as a rare find, "a thinker who always remained a man among men, who did not shun the marketplace, who was a citizen among citizens."[52] In her presentation, Socrates' reflections on thinking are valuable not only because he depicted thinking in an original and provocative way, but also because he showed that it is possible for a person both *to think about the world* and to *inhabit the world* as a home.

Arendt devotes a significant portion of her analysis to showing how the Socratic dialogues recorded by Plato unveil the process or experience of thinking. Here she emphasizes at least two important features of Socratic thinking. First, Socratic thinking is a *dynamic* process; in this respect it differs, in her view, from contemplation or stillness. Second, Socratic thinking is *dialectical*. Not only did Socrates participate in ongoing dialogue with others, but, according to Arendt, his internal thought process was *itself* dialectical, pointing toward the "fact of plurality." For Arendt, the Socratic conception of the self as "two-in-one" suggests that, even on occasions when thinking requires a temporary withdrawal from the world of appearances and actual dialogue, the

[51] Ibid., 167.
[52] Ibid.

thinking ego *continues* to engage in dialogue—with itself. In the following sections, I will focus on these two characteristics and examine how Arendt connects them to morality. I aim to show that, for Arendt, these characteristics of Socratic thinking are necessary components of understanding.

The Dynamic Quality of Socratic Thinking

First, Arendt describes Socratic thinking as dynamic in the sense that it never rests; it does not reach a conclusion or achieve a lasting result. When she says that Socratic thinking is valuable, then, Arendt means that the *process itself* is valuable, not its imagined or supposed results. The Socratic dialogues, distinguished by their aporetic quality, illustrate this dynamic motion. Socrates calls into question what his interlocutors *assume* they know. But he does not try to answer his own questions by advancing a logical thesis. Instead, his thinking is characterized by a circular motion; he inquires into the meaning of a concept like piety or justice, and when the discussion has come full circle, he begins again.[53] Arendt observes that even when the thought *content* pertains to questions of morality or virtue, Socratic thinking does not *produce* creeds, moral precepts, or prescriptions for conduct. To the contrary, the fundamental characteristic of Socratic thinking is its dynamic motion, its capacity to "unfreeze" all assumed creeds and concepts.[54]

Arendt elaborates on this dynamic quality of thinking by pointing to Socrates' metaphor of thought as a wind: "The winds themselves are invisible, yet what they do is

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[53] Ibid., 169-70: "None of the *logoi*, the arguments, ever stays put; they move around. And because Socrates, asking questions to which he does not know the answers, sets them in motion, once the statements come full circle, it is usually Socrates who cheerfully proposes to start all over again and inquire what justice or piety or knowledge and happiness are."

[54] Ibid., 171. "*The word 'house' is something like a frozen thought that thinking must unfreeze* whenever it wants to find out the original meaning. . . . At all events, this kind of pondering reflection does not produce definitions and in that sense is entirely without results, though somebody who had pondered the meaning of the word 'house' might make his own look better." (Arendt's italics.)

manifest to us and we somehow feel their approach."[55] This metaphor captures not only the dynamic and enlivening character of thought, but also its destructive potential. As Arendt points out, the Athenians accused Socrates of confusing and corrupting the citizens, especially the youth.[56] While Socrates denied that the practice of thinking is corrupting, he did not posit a direct correlation between thinking and moral improvement. He did not suggest that thinking would necessarily result in the shaping of a virtuous character or the practice of good behavior. Instead, he promoted the activity of thinking for its own sake. The activity of thinking is a matter of being fully alive. Arendt summarizes:

> The meaning of what Socrates was doing lay in the activity itself. Or to put it differently: To think and to be fully alive are the same, and this implies that thinking must always begin afresh; it is an activity that accompanies living and is concerned with such concepts as justice, happiness, virtue, offered us by language itself as expressing the meaning of whatever happens in life and occurs to us while we are alive.[57]

With Socrates, Arendt emphasizes that, whatever good may or may not result as a by-product of moral thinking, we remain committed to thinking about moral matters because it is a necessary condition of being fully alive.

While emphasizing this quality of being "fully alive," Arendt calls attention to a certain paradoxical character inherent in the thinking activity. Thinking certainly does not *look like* a dynamic activity from the outside. To an onlooker observing a person "lost in thought," it even resembles a state of paralysis, as suggested by the comparison

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[55] Ibid., 174. (Original source: Xenophon, *Memorabilia* IV, iii., 14.) Arendt emphasizes that the thinking process is best described through metaphor, and that Socrates recognized this. In addition to the wind metaphor, he also employed the "gadfly" metaphor and the "midwife" metaphor.
[56] Ibid, 178.
[57] Ibid.

of Socrates to an electric ray that paralyzes anyone it contacts.[58] Yet thinking is *experienced* as a dynamic and even intoxicating activity; it is experienced as "the highest state of being active and alive."[59] Searching for the best metaphor to describe the experience of thinking (and the mental activities in general), Arendt suggests, "The only possible metaphor one may conceive of for the life of the mind is the sensation of being alive. *Without the breath of life the human body is a corpse; without thinking the human mind is dead*."[60] If, for Arendt, thinking means to be awake and alive, then non-thinking means to be unawake and unaware: "Unthinking men are like sleepwalkers."[61]

Arendt recognizes that the "windlike" character of Socratic thinking makes the activity of thinking seem threatening. Thinking can *appear* destructive to moral and ethical thought because it threatens to "undo" all frozen thoughts, including moral creeds and dogmas. But such thinking is actually constructive in the sense that it awakens us from our moral slumber, from our inattention to what is happening around us. Arendt insists that this awakening is valuable, even if it only awakens us to awareness of "perplexities":

> The consequence [of undoing or unfreezing concepts] is that thinking inevitably has a destructive, undermining effect on all established criteria, values, measurements of good and evil, in short, on those customs and rules of conduct we treat of in morals and ethics. These frozen thoughts, Socrates seems to say, come so handily that you can use them in your sleep; but if the wind of thinking, which I shall now stir in you, has shaken you from your sleep and made you fully awake and alive, then you will see that you have nothing in your grasp but perplexities, and the best we can do with them is share them with each other.[62]

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[58] Ibid., 172. (The metaphor appears in *Meno.*)
[59] Ibid., 173.
[60] Ibid., 123. (Arendt's italics.) Here Arendt also evokes Aristotle: "The activity of thinking [*energeia* that has its end in itself] is life." (Source: the seventh chapter of Book Lambda of the *Metaphysics*.)
[61] Ibid., 191.
[62] Ibid., 174-75.

Following Socrates, then, Arendt sees thinking as a practice of sharing perplexities with one another. This sharing takes the form of *dialogue*—actual dialogue with others as well as internal dialogue with the self as two-in-one.

The Dialogical Character of Thinking

Arendt emphasizes the fact that thinking, as it is described and modeled by Socrates, is inescapably *dialogical*. Describing his function as a thinker in dialogue with others, Socrates employed the metaphors of gadfly (who stings people in order to arouse them) and midwife (sterile himself, but able "to deliver others of their thoughts" and to determine "whether the child is a real child or a mere wind-egg of which the bearer must be cleansed").[63] But Socrates did not *only* engage in dialogue with others. In a section devoted to analysis of Socrates' "two-in-one," Arendt emphasizes that he continued this process of dialogue even when he was alone with himself.

Arendt's discussion focuses on two moral statements presented by Socrates in *Gorgias*: first, "It is better to be wronged than to do wrong," and second, "It would be better for me that my lyre or a chorus I directed should be out of tune and loud with discord, and that multitudes of men should disagree with me rather than that I, *being one*, should be out of harmony with myself and contradict me."[64] She remarks that Socrates' interlocutor, Callicles, understandably accuses Socrates of being "mad with eloquence." By pointing out the normalcy of Callicles' reaction, however, Arendt invites her readers to hear Socrates' statements with fresh ears. On her reading, these statements are not to

[63] Ibid., 172-73.
[64] Plato, *Gorgias*, 482.c., qt. in Arendt, *Thinking*, 181. (Arendt's italics.)

be understood as moral propositions that can be easily dismissed as "cheap moralizing." Instead, they are startling insights that arise from the thinking experience.[65]

Elaborating on Socrates' statement about the importance of being "in harmony with myself," Arendt draws from Aristotle to highlight the idea of the "two-in-one" self as a friend or companion. An individual who refuses to think (like Eichmann) does not experience this duality of self; such a person remains *one*. It is only when a person withdraws into the activity of thinking (reflecting, remembering, anticipating, judging) that he or she becomes two—conversing with himself, questioning himself, or calling himself to account. Socrates said that he would not be able to endure contradicting himself or being "out of tune" with himself; he would rather be out of tune with the multitudes. Thus, his two-in-one self (not customs, laws, or set of principles) holds him to account for his behavior.

Arendt refers frequently to Plato's translation of Socrates' practice as "the soundless dialogue—*eme emautō*—between me and myself."[66] For Arendt, the thinker's capacity to converse with himself, to question himself, or to keep himself company implies that the thinking ego can preserve some of the plurality that characterizes the world of appearances. Further, she asserts that the duality of the thinking ego attests to the primacy of plurality as an essential condition of human existence:

> Nothing perhaps indicates more strongly that man exists *essentially* in the plural than that his solitude actualizes his merely being conscious of himself . . . into a duality during the thinking activity. It is this *duality* with myself that makes thinking a true activity, in which I am both the one who asks and the one who answers. Thinking can become

[65] Arendt, *Thinking*, 181. "It would be a serious mistake, I believe, to understand these statements as the results of some cogitation about morality; they are insights, to be sure, but insights of experience, and as far as the thinking process itself is concerned they are at best incidental by-products."
[66] Ibid., 185. See also 74-75 and 122.

> dialectical and critical because it goes through this questioning and answering process . . . .[67]

Here Arendt suggests that thinking in solitude is *not* at odds with her affirmation of plurality as the essential condition of human existence. Solitude differs from loneliness or isolation, which threaten to remove us from participation in a world defined by plurality. Arendt defines solitude as a state in which a person keeps him or herself company, whereas loneliness is a state in which, to borrow from Jaspers, "I am in default of myself (*ich bleibe mir aus*), or, to put it differently, when I am one and without company."[68]

Along these lines, Arendt evokes Socrates' description of thinking in *Hippias Major* as a practice of coming home to oneself. At the end of the dialogue, Socrates tells his obtuse partner Hippias that he (Hippias) is fortunate that he, unlike Socrates, will not have to go home to an obnoxious fellow who lives in his house and cross-examines him.[69] Arendt suggests that when making moral decisions, then, a person must ask such questions as: What kind of person do you want to come home to at night? What kind of person can you stand to live with? Who would want to live with a murderer?[70] Arendt connects this "two-in-one" dialogue to the question of conscience that she had explored in her report on Eichmann, affirming the conscience in this sense: "Conscience is the

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[67] Ibid. (Arendt's italics.) Also: "Since plurality is one of the basic existential conditions of human life on earth . . . to be by myself and to have intercourse with myself is the outstanding characteristic of the life of the mind" (74). See page 187 for an interesting analogy between metaphor and the silent two-in-one dialogue: "As the metaphor bridges the gap between the world of appearances and the mental activities going on within it, so the Socratic two-in-one heals the solitariness of thought; its inherent duality points to the infinite plurality which is the law of the earth."

[68] Ibid., 185.

[69] Ibid., 188.

[70] See also Arendt's discussion of the importance of choosing one's company in "Some Questions of Moral Philosophy," in *Responsibility and Judgment*, where she draws on two disparate sources—Cicero and Meister Eckhart—to lend credence to this idea. Cicero in *Tusculan Disputations*: "By God I'd much rather go astray with Plato than hold true views with these people" (qt. on page 110). From Meister Eckhart: "I'd much rather be in hell with God than in heaven without Him." (qt. on page 111).

anticipation of the fellow who awaits you if and when you come home."[71] Eichmann serves as an example of someone who, by refusing to think, never "came home" to himself. Such a person, Arendt says, will not refuse to participate in doing evil.[72]

The (Moral) Necessity of Socratic Thinking

Through these reflections on Socratic thinking, does Arendt's reader gain a clearer understanding of what thinking is, or what morality is, and whether a clear relationship exists between them? Has Arendt answered the question that she posed at the outset, as to whether the practice of thinking can help human beings to identify and resist evil, or has she instead followed the model of Socrates and infected her reader with perplexities? Arendt does not pretend to have answered her questions once and for all. Indeed, to do so would contradict her emphasis on the thinker's need to renew his or her inquiry continually. The task of Arendt's reader, then, is not to accept her answers as conclusions but rather to use her thinking as a starting place to enliven his or her own thinking process. However, Arendt's investigation has offered valuable suggestions that I wish to highlight in the conclusion to this section, some insights that can help us to better appreciate the role that thinking plays in understanding as a moral practice.

Admittedly, the link between Socratic thinking and morality appears to be rather tenuous on the basis of Arendt's reflections. Following Socrates, Arendt describes thinking as the act of withdrawing from the world, at least temporarily, and engaging in conversation with oneself. Moreover, as she acknowledges, Socratic thinking only

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[71] Arendt, *Thinking*, 191.

[72] Ibid. "A person who does not know that silent intercourse (in which we examine what we say and what we do) will not mind contradicting himself, and this means he will never be either able or willing to account for what he says or does; nor will he mind committing any crime, since he can count on its being forgotten the next moment. Bad people—Aristotle to the contrary notwithstanding—are *not* 'full of regrets.'"

results in a multiplication of "perplexities"? Arendt admits that Socratic thinking does not *necessarily* result in moral behavior, and that, when it does so, the moral result is only a by-product, a "marginal affair" from the thinker's standpoint.[73]

However, while Arendt recognizes that thinking does not directly lead to moral behavior or to the refusal to participate in evil, and that thinking might in some cases be dangerous, she emphatically reiterates that that the inability or refusal to think is *more* dangerous. From *Eichmann in Jerusalem* to *The Life of the Mind,* Arendt pursues the idea that such lack of thought potentially results in mindless evil such as that committed by Eichmann. She observes that most people underestimate the danger that the *lack* of thought poses to the public realm, reminding readers that the "absence of thought is a powerful factor in human affairs, statistically speaking the most powerful, not just in the conduct of the many but in the conduct of all."[74] The tendency to avoid thinking characterizes—and morally impoverishes—not only the Eichmanns of the world but all human beings who have ever acted from mere habit, custom, or prejudice.[75] Arendt recognizes that the "very urgency of human affairs" sometimes prohibits thinking; sometimes human beings must act from habit or custom simply because time does not afford us the luxury of withdrawal. She admits that we cannot think *all* of the time—such an effort would be exhausting. However, Arendt emphasizes that while we cannot withdraw from the world to examine or reconsider every single experience or question,

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[73] Ibid., 192. "For the thinker himself this moral side effect is a marginal affair. And thinking as such does society little good . . . . It does not create values; it will not find out, once and for all, what 'the good' is; it does not confirm but, rather, dissolves accepted rules of conduct. And it has no political relevance unless special emergency situations arise."

[74] Ibid., 71.

[75] Ibid. Arendt disagrees with the notion that "Everybody wants to do good." She writes, "The sad truth of the matter is that most evil is done by people who never made up their minds to be or do either evil or good" (180). In other words, most evil is committed by people who have not committed themselves to serious reflection or understanding.

our willingness to think at least some of the time, especially "when the chips are down," distinguishes us from a person like Eichmann, who was unwilling to "stop and think" at all.

Above all, Arendt makes clear her position, in contrast to some traditional moral philosophers, that moral thinking cannot be equated with the mere obedience to rules prescribed by society or religion. In her discussion of Socratic thinking, she reiterates that when people are taught to "hold fast to whatever the prescribed rules of conduct may be at a given time in a given society," they cease to examine the *content* of those rules and can easily be persuaded to exchange one set of rules for another.[76] Arendt saw the events of Nazi Germany and Stalinist Russia as proof of the failure of morality as a matter of rule-following. She writes that when the rules of morality were reversed and murder and false witness became the norm, numerous people went along with it because they were "fast asleep."[77] When the war was over, they apparently went along with the rules changing back again. Based on these historical events, Arendt insists that it is better to ask questions and to face perplexity than to adhere uncritically to rules, habits, or prejudices.[78]

Arendt ultimately agrees with the traditional philosophical tendency to distinguish between thinking and action. She insists that one must be alone (to some degree) in order to think, while one must be *with others* in order to act; moreover, thinking is a hidden

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[76] Ibid., 177.

[77] When Arendt criticizes people for conforming to the Nazi set of values, she is not displaying a lack of empathy for those who were pressured to conform under conditions of terror. The target of her criticism is those people, especially intellectuals like Heidegger, who conformed in an early stage. She put it this way to Günther Gaus: "The problem, the personal problem, was not what our enemies did but what our friends did. In the wave of *Gleichschaltung* (co-ordination), which was relatively voluntary—in any case, not yet under the pressure of terror—it was as if an empty space formed around one. And among intellectuals *Gleichschaltung* was the rule, so to speak." ("What Remains? The Language Remains" in *Essays in Understanding*, 10-11.)

[78] Ibid.

activity, while action appears in the world. However, Arendt argues against the notion that thinking and action are unrelated to one another or even opposed to one another. Arendt states in the end that thinking might *qualify as action* in certain cases—particularly in times that Jaspers referred to as "boundary situations," times of crisis or political emergency. When non-thinking is the norm, then thinking becomes conspicuous—that is, *appears*:

> When everybody else is swept away unthinkingly by what everybody else does and believes in, those who think are drawn out of hiding because their refusal to join in is conspicuous and thereby becomes a kind of action. In such emergencies, it turns out that the purging component of thinking . . . is political by implication. For this destruction has a liberating effect on another faculty, the faculty of judgment, which one may call with some reason the most political of man's mental abilities."[79]

In this passage, Arendt suggests that Socratic thinking bears a close relationship to *judgment*, which might serve as a bridge between thought and action, between the mental realm and the political realm.

In sum, Arendt appeals to Socrates to show that thinking involves the practice of questioning all assumptions, including all moral norms. Such questioning will not lead to answers, but it can at least purge individuals of false opinions or unexamined prejudices. In clearing away misunderstanding, it paves the way for understanding. While it does not lead directly to moral ends, the practice of thinking can help us to *stop* rather than joining in with others in emergency situations when evil-doing is the norm. Insofar as Arendt reaches a conclusion, it is this: "The manifestation of the wind of thought is not knowledge; *it is the ability to tell right from wrong*, beautiful from ugly. And this, at the rare moments when the stakes are on the table, may indeed prevent catastrophes, at least

[79] Ibid., 192. Arendt attributes the term "boundary situations" to Jaspers.

for the self."[80] While thinking does not necessarily lead to the acquisition of moral statements or conclusions, then, it does shape a person's capacity for understanding.

Arendt remains convinced, after her analysis, that she was right to initially connect Eichmann's inability to think with his inability to resist evil. While she affirms Socratic thinking as *necessary*, however, she recognizes that her analysis so far lacks a strong emphasis on intersubjectivity. In the next section, I will show that Arendt explores thinking from another angle, analyzing Kant's conception of enlarged thinking to highlight the public and intersubjective quality of thinking. Arendt suggests that both the practice of the Socratic conscience and the practice of Kant's enlarged thinking enhance understanding.

[80] Ibid., 193. (My italics.)

Enlarged Thinking

While Arendt draws primarily on Socrates in *Thinking* to highlight the dynamic and dialogical qualities of thinking, she draws primarily on Kant in her writings on judgment to discuss the importance of "enlarged thinking." In her analysis of *Critique of Judgment*, in which Kant describes enlarged thinking (*eine erweiterte Denkungsart*) as a practice that prepares the mind for making aesthetic judgments, Arendt continues to explore the question that she had raised about the relationship between engaging in mental activities and participating in the affairs of the world. Highlighting what she sees as an intersubjective dimension of judgment in Kant's conception, she advocates enlarged thinking as an imaginative practice that enables people to consider others' perspectives even in their absence. Though Kant's description focused solely on aesthetic judgment, Arendt emphasizes that enlarged thinking plays an essential role in moral and political judgment as well. In this section, I will explore how enlarged thinking opens up a plurality of viewpoints to the imagination and thus contributes to understanding.

Many commentators have remarked that Arendt's conception of judgment is particularly difficult to interpret, partly because she did not live to complete the third volume of *The Life of the Mind*, which was to focus on that subject, and partly because she seems to describe different kinds of judgment at different points in her writing. For my purposes, it is not necessary to enter into the debate over how many conceptions of judgment she had, or whether her conception of judgment shifted.[81] Arendt affirms this

[81] See, for example, Ronald Beiner's "Interpretive Essay" in Arendt's *Lectures on Kant's Political Philosophy*, where he identifies two theories of judgment in Arendt's work. He describes a "subtle but important reorientation" in her late work on judgment, which he sees as becoming more oriented toward the *vita contemplativa* than the *vita activa* (91). See also Seyla Benhabib, who identifies in Arendt's work not just two but three descriptions of judgment "which stand in tension to each other": 1) judgment as a moral faculty, enabling us to tell right from wrong; 2) judgment as an activity that helps us cull meaning from the past (involving storytelling); and 3) judgment as a conflation of Aristotelian *phronesis* with Kant's enlarged

one aspect of judgment—enlarged thinking—throughout her different analyses, including works such as *Lectures on Kant's Political Philosophy* (based on her teaching lectures) and essays such as "The Crisis in Culture," "Truth and Politics," and "Some Questions of Moral Philosophy." In Arendt's view, the practice of enlarged thinking takes place in solitude, like Socratic thinking. But enlarged thinking expands beyond the dialogue between me and myself to involve a consideration of others' perspectives. Arendt argues that, in this way, enlarged thinking possesses a public orientation.

Lectures on Kant's Political Philosophy provides my starting place to uncover Arendt's conception of enlarged thinking, since this text offers her most developed analysis of Kant's use of the term.[82] Arendt's interpretation of Kant in the lectures is somewhat controversial, as she purports to use Kant's analysis of the role of imagination and enlarged thinking in aesthetic judgment to work toward an appreciation of his *unwritten* political philosophy. Many critics take issue with whether or not Arendt's reading of Kant is a faithful or legitimate one.[83] Here, I only wish to show how Arendt's "creative appropriation" of Kant's work affirms the role of the imaginative practice of enlarged thinking as a preparation for judgment and as a component of moral

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thought. See "Judgment and Politics in Arendt's Thought," in *Judgment, Imagination, and Politics*, eds. Beiner and Nedelsky, 184.

[82] Ronald Beiner notes that the text is based on a series of lectures that Arendt gave at the New School for Social Research in 1970. He used Arendt's lecture notes, which were never intended for publication, to put the text together. Thus, Beiner advises that "the contents in this volume should in no way be mistaken for finished compositions. The reason for their being made available is simply to give access to ideas of signal importance—ideas that the author herself did not live to develop in the way she had intended." (Beiner, "Preface," *Lectures on Kant's Political Philosophy*, viii.)

[83] Beiner suggests that a reader who goes to the *Lectures* to understand Kant's political philosophy will only end up being confused; the reader should read the *Lectures* only to understand *Arendt's* political philosophy. (Beiner, "Rereading Arendt's Kant Lectures" in *Judgment, Imagination, and Politics*, 95-96, 98). It is beyond the scope of this project to offer a depthful analysis of Kant's philosophy and take sides on the debate regarding Arendt's fidelity to it.

understanding.[84] Arendt builds on Kant's concept of enlarged thinking to argue that the practice of enlarged thinking is crucial to making judgments not only in the realm of aesthetics, but also in the realm of politics and morality.

In the Kant lectures, Arendt focuses her analysis on section 40 of the "Analytic of the Sublime" in *Critique of Judgment*, where Kant presents his conception of enlarged thinking in the context of reflection on "taste as a kind of *sensus communis*." Here Kant attempts to explain how human beings can derive *valid* aesthetic judgments from the faculty of taste. (He refers to taste only in reference to *aesthetic* judgments, not moral judgments, because he sees moral judgments as determined on the basis of self-evident principles). On the one hand, taste is logically regarded as a faculty of judgment because, like the sense of smell, it is automatically discriminatory; it *chooses*. In other words, it reacts to a given sensation or phenomenon with a feeling of pleasure or displeasure. But, he asks, can taste function as a *reliable* faculty of judgment? Does it not appear to be hopelessly arbitrary, idiosyncratic, and subjective? If so, how is it possible to communicate one's judgments to others and to seek consensus?

According to Arendt, Kant does not wish to conclude that aesthetic judgments are purely subjective, private, and incommunicable. Whether we are eating a tasty dish or admiring a work of art, we want to not only be able to communicate our tastes to others, but also, often, to persuade them to agree with us. Therefore, Kant proposes that the faculty of taste possesses an intersubjective component. Arendt calls attention to his

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[84] The term "creative appropriation" is used by Lisa Jane Disch in *Hannah Arendt and the Limits of* Philosophy, with new preface (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1994), 146. She argues that criticism of Arendt's faithfulness to Kant misses the point, because Arendt is pointedly reading Kant "against the grain": "Arendt declares early on that her relationship to Kant's Third Critique is one of creative appropriation, claiming to go 'beyond Kant's self-interpretation in [her] presentation' but to remain 'within Kant's spirit'. Against the Kantian interpretation on Arendt's lectures on judgment, I propose to take this claim seriously and to interpret these writings as an Arendtian creative appropriation of Kant."

assertions that "in matters of taste we must renounce ourselves in favor of others," and, "in Taste egoism is overcome …."[85] Elaborating on the paradoxical quality of the "*other-directedness"* of taste, Arendt observes:

> Judgment, and especially judgments of taste, always reflects upon others and their taste, takes their possible judgment into account. This is necessary because I am human and cannot live outside the company of men. I judge as a member of this community and not as a member of a supersensible world . . . . The basic other-directedness of judgment and taste seems to stand in the greatest possible opposition to the very nature, the absolutely idiosyncratic nature, of the sense itself.[86]

The other-directedness of taste leads Arendt to depart from Kant somewhat in identifying judgment as the most "political" of the mental faculties.[87] The human propensity to consider others' tastes when forming our own judgments indicates that human beings live in a shared world and that we are *meant* for the world. Using Arendt's terminology, the other-directness of taste affirms "the fact of plurality."

Imagination plays an essential role in enlarged thinking, or preparing our minds to share our tastes and opinions with others. Citing Kant, Arendt observes that insofar as human beings are able to surmount egoism in taste, we depend on *die Einbildungskraft.* First, the imagination allows us to detach from our immediate self-interests in order to achieve an attitude of "disinterested delight" (*uninterressiertes Wohgefallen*). We can recognize the beauty of nature, artwork, poetry, or music even though the beautiful object doesn't benefit us in any direct way. The human being's capacity to respond to beauty with disinterested delight is important because it "proves that he is made for and fits into

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[85] Arendt, *Lectures on Kant's Political Philosophy*, 67. (Source: "Reflexionen zur Anthropologie," no. 767, in *Gesammelte Schriften*, Prussian Academy ed., 15:334-35: "Wir müssen uns gleichsam anderen zu gefallen entsagen.")
[86] Ibid., 67-68.
[87] Ibid., 14.

this world."[88] Second, the imagination allows us to put ourselves in the place of others. In short, we employ the imagination to consider how various other individuals would respond to the same sensation or event. Kant explains as follows: "This [operation of reflection] is done by comparing our judgment with the possible rather than the actual judgments of others, and by putting ourselves in the place of any other man, by abstracting from the limitations which contingently attach to our own judgment . . . ."[89] For Kant, an abstraction from "charm and emotion" is involved in imagining how an object might look if I were to stand in someone else's place. He elaborates:

> However small may be the area or degree to which a man's natural gifts reach, yet it indicates a man of *enlarged thought* if he disregards the subjective private conditions of his own judgment, by which so many others are confined, and reflects upon it from a *general standpoint* (which he can only determine by placing himself at the standpoint of others."[90]

For Arendt, following Kant, the more standpoints one is capable of taking into consideration, the more valid one's judgment is likely to be.

Arendt's main purpose in highlighting Kant's analysis of taste is to emphasize that taste has an intersubjective component that depends on the faculty of imagination. While thinking requires something of a withdrawal from the world, the thinker actively employs the imagination to keep others in mind. Here, using the term "critical thinking" synonymously with enlarged or representative thinking, Arendt writes:

> Critical thinking is possible only where the standpoints of all others are open to inspection. Hence, critical thinking, while still a solitary business, does not cut itself off from 'all others.' To be sure, it still

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[88] Arendt, *Lectures on Kant's Political Philosophy*, 30. (Die schönen Dinge zeigen an, dass der Mensch in die Welt passé und selbst seine Anschauung stimme.) Qt. "Reflexionen zur Logik," no. 1820a, *Gesammelte Schriften*, Prussian Academy ed., 15:388.

[89] Ibid., 71.

[90] Ibid. (Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, §40.) Note that Arendt's translation of Kant's "allgemein" as "general," not "universal," is distinctive. See Beiner's note in *Lectures on Kant's Political Philosophy*, where he explains that Arendt avoids use of the word "universal" because she explicitly rejects the idea that judgments are universally valid (163).

> goes on in isolation, but by the force of imagination it makes the others present and thus moves in a space that is potentially public, open to all sides; in other words, it adopts the position of Kant's world citizen. To think with an enlarged mentality means that one trains one's imagination to go visiting.[91]

Arendt's description of enlarged thinking as a practice of "training the imagination to go visiting" highlights what she sees as the intersubjective component of the thinking and judging process.[92] Thanks to the faculty of imagination, human beings do not have to lose ourselves in solipsistic fantasy when we think; we do not have to sever our connection with the world. The imagination allows us to hold the public realm present to our minds, so that the public realm rather than the solitary self serves as the reference point for making judgments.

To clarify her conception of enlarged thinking, Arendt carefully distinguishes it from *objectivity*. She explains that Kant's "impartiality" or "disinterested" attitude does not translate, in her view, into a position of neutrality or some sort of pure objectivity. She states, "You see that *impartiality* is obtained by taking the viewpoints of others into account; impartiality is not the result of some higher standpoint that would then actually settle the dispute by being altogether above the melée."[93] Arendt does not advocate an objective mindset but rather a "visiting" or "traveling" one—a mental capacity to travel from place to place to view an object or situation from as many perspectives as

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[91] Arendt, *Lectures on Kant's Political Philosophy*, 43.

[92] The political philosopher Lisa Jane Disch observes that by employing this metaphor, Arendt actually departs from Kant, offering a "conceptual innovation." (Disch, *Hannah Arendt and the Limits of Philosophy*," 162.) She maintains that Arendt departs from Kant in her recognition of human beings' inescapable situatedness and her appreciation for human difference. She understands Arendt as advocating a stance of "situated impartiality."

[93] Arendt, *Lectures on Kant's Political Philosophy*, 42. Arendt supports this interpretation by drawing from one of Kant's personal letters, where he wrote, "[The mind needs a reasonable amount of relaxations and diversions to maintain its mobility] that it may be enabled to view the object afresh from every side, and so to enlarge its point of view from a microscopic to a general outlook that it adopts in turn every conceivable standpoint, verifying the observations of each by means of all the others." ("Letter to Marcus Herz," Feb. 21, 1772, in *Philosophical Correspondence* 1759-99, ed. Zweig, 53.)

possible.[94] As the mind travels, it also prepares to communicate its perceptions to others. The validity of one's judgment, for Arendt as for Kant, is determined by its *communicability*, its ability to be tested in the public realm. Some critics have faulted Arendt's emphasis on the communicability of thinking by pointing out that dialogue must take place in the actual world—not only in the mind. But Arendt makes this point herself, emphasizing that unless the intersubjective dimension of enlarged thinking is somehow actualized in the real world, that dimension will disappear.[95]

In addition to distinguishing enlarged thinking from objectivity, Arendt also distinguishes it from *empathy*.[96] In her words, enlarged thinking "does not consist in an enormously large empathy through which one can know what actually goes on in the mind of all others."[97] First of all, she observes, one cannot totally access the minds of others. Others preserve a degree of privacy, a degree of genuine "otherness." Arendt's

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[94] Lisa Jane Disch suggests that Arendt's "visiting" metaphor departs from Kant and makes a valuable contribution by suggesting an appreciation of difference. Contrasting "visiting" to parochialism, assimilation, and "accidental tourism" (all of which undermine plurality), Disch observes that *visiting* a foreign place, if approached in a spirit of genuine desire to gain a better understanding of that place, requires us to step out of our comfort zone. However, Disch faults Arendt for not stressing the visitor's feeling of discomfort, disorientation, and alienation enough (158-59). She suggests turning to the writer Maria Lugone's description of "world-travel" for emphasis on the interactive and threatening aspects of travel. (Disch, 168, referring to Maria Lugone, "Playfulness, 'World'-Travelling, and Loving Perception," in *Lesbian Philosophies and Cultures*, ed. Jeffner Allen.)

[95] Arendt, *Lectures on Kant's Political Philosophy:* "Unless you can somehow communicate and expose to the test of others, either orally or in writing, whatever you may have found out when you were alone, this faculty exerted in solitude will disappear. In the words of Jaspers, truth is what I can communicate." (40) Arendt appeals to Plato as well, saying that what separates Plato from the preSocratic philosophers is the willingness to make his thoughts public, to be held to account (41). Seyla Benhabib emphasizes this point, describing enlarged thinking as a kind of listening: "I want to suggest we must think of such enlarged thought as a condition of actual or simulated dialogue. To 'think from the perspective of everyone else' is to know 'how to listen' to what the other is saying, or when the voices of others are absent , to imagine to oneself a conversation with the other as my dialogue partner. 'Enlarged thought' is best realized through a dialogic or discursive ethic." (In *Judgment, Imagination and Politics*, 198).

[96] Arendt's effort to distinguish enlarged thinking from empathy is a controversial move with the critics. Vetlesen, for example, faults Arendt for banishing empathy from moral thought and practice. George Kateb has faulted Arendt for rejecting empathy on this count as well, but in a recent article he suggests that enlarged thinking as Arendt describes it actually *is* empathy: "She celebrates the power of imagination as indispensable to the moral life, but she simply will not say a good word for empathy, which is simply another name for that sort of imagination…." (See Kateb, "Fiction as Poison" in *Thinking in Dark Times*, 36-37.)

[97] Arendt, *Lectures in Kant's Political Philosophy*, 43.

critique of empathy might thus be understood positively in Levinasian terms as a refusal to reduce the other to the same. In allowing the "otherness" of the other to remain, Arendt maintains respect for the *other's* particularity as well as the thinker's *own* particularity; or, to put it another way, she resists the reduction of the other to the same as well as the absorption of the self into the other. Arendt is committed to Kant's "maxim of a never-passive reason," to "*Selbstdenken*" (thinking for oneself).[98] In her critique of empathy, then, she resists a conception of enlarged thinking that would simply mean the passive acceptance of others' views, the exchange of one individual's prejudices for another's, or the surrender of one's own selfhood or voice. As she states in "Some Questions of Moral Philosophy," "I still speak with my own voice and I do not count noses in order to arrive at what I think is right. But my judgment is no longer subjective either, in the sense that I arrive at my conclusions by taking only myself into account."[99]

Arendt concludes the Kant lectures by emphasizing the importance of exemplary validity. Because judgment pertains to the particular rather than the general, we rely on *examples* rather than rules. Arendt quotes Kant as saying, "Examples are the go-cart of judgments."[100] When Arendt speaks of examples, she typically refers to examples of *persons*—real or imagined, living or deceased—who have thought, judged or acted in certain ways and who can therefore serve as models. Here a relationship exists between Socratic thinking and enlarged thinking. Just as the Socratic thinker must choose what kind of person she wants to meet when she goes home, so the enlarged thinker must choose, in her examples, what kind of companionship will influence her judgment.

Enlarged Thinking, Moral Judgment, Understanding

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[98] Ibid., 43.
[99] Arendt, "Some Questions of Moral Philosophy," in *Responsibility and Judgment*, 141.
[100] Kant, Critique of Pure Reason, B 173, qt. in Arendt, *Lectures on Kant's Political Philosophy*, 76.

In the *Lectures on Kant's Political Philosophy*, Arendt argues that Kant's affirmation of the role of enlarged thinking in making aesthetic judgments applies also to making political judgments. Here she stops short of acknowledging the role of enlarged thinking in making *moral* judgments. However, she does make clear in her essays that she sees Kant's insights into enlarged thinking, the role of the imagination, and the importance of choosing examples as equally pertinent to moral judgment.[101] In "Some Questions of Moral Philosophy," for example, Arendt presents Kant's enlarged thinking as a way out of the conundrum of moral thought after totalitarianism. On one hand, the problem is (as Arendt has maintained throughout her *oeuvre*) that we can no longer rely on rules and principles to dictate our morality, as the concentration camps represented a "total collapse of moral and religious standards among people who to all appearances had always firmly believed in them."[102] On the other hand, Socratic thinking alone does not offer an adequate alternative. In emergency situations, the Socratic conscience may prevent us from participating in evil-doing with the crowd, but it remains too subjective to satisfy our longing to connect and act with others in the world in meaningful and constructive ways. Arendt, then, emphasizes the importance of intersubjectivity in moral thinking and judging. As she puts it, this approach is demanded by historical reality of the rise of totalitarianism:

> I mentioned the total collapse of moral and religious standards among people who to all appearances had always firmly believed in them, and I also

[101] Arendt, "Truth and Politics," in *Between Past and Future*, 237: "It is this capacity for an 'enlarged mentality' that enables men to judge; as such, it was discovered by Kant in the first part of his Critique of Judgment, though he did not recognize the political and *moral* implications of his discovery." I emphasize the "*moral*," because prominent critics have missed the fact that that Arendt saw these insights as being pertinent to morality. For example, Seyla Benhabib promotes the idea that enlarged thinking is necessary to moral judgment—but credits this insight to herself rather than Arendt. She claims that Arendt saw enlarged thinking "as specifically political rather than moral." "Judgment and Politics in Arendt's Thought" in *Judgment, Imagination, and Politics*," 194.

[102] Arendt, "Some Questions of Moral Philosophy," in *Responsibility and Judgment*, 138.

> mentioned the undeniable fact that the few who managed not to be sucked into the whirlwind were by no means the 'moralists,' people who had always upheld rules of right conduct, but on the contrary very often those who had been convinced, even before the debacle, of the objective non-validity of those standards per se. Hence, theoretically, we find ourselves today in the same situation in which the eighteenth century found itself with respect to mere judgments of taste. Kant was outraged that the question of beauty should be decided arbitrarily, without possibility of dispute and mutual agreement, in the spirit of *de gustibus non disputandum est*. More often than not, even in circumstances which are very far from any catastrophic indication, we find ourselves today in exactly the same position when it comes to discussions of moral issues. So, let us return to Kant.[103]

Arendt uses Kant to reiterate the importance of the faculty of representative imagination and its essential role in enlarged thought. The imagination "stretches out to other people" and makes them present in absence.

Arendt also makes clear that, in her view, exemplary validity is essential to moral judgment. Because we cannot rely on general rules to make moral judgments, we must rely on the assistance of specific examples. Once again evoking Kant, but extending his argument about aesthetic judgment to the moral realm, Arendt states, "Examples, which are indeed the 'go-cart' of all judging activities, are also and especially the guideposts of all moral thought."[104] Again she asserts that the use of examples depends on *imagination*: "We judge and tell right from wrong by having present in our mind some incident and some person, absent in time or space, that have become examples. . . . They can lie far back in the past or they can be among the living. They need not be historically real." She quotes Jefferson to the effect that reading Shakespeare can teach us more about certain moral practices than "all the dry volumes of ethics and divinity that were ever written."[105] Since examples of persons are usually (always?) transmitted in a narrative mode, Arendt's remarks here recall the importance of *story*, which she had

[103] Ibid., 138-39.
[104] Ibid., 144.
[105] Ibid., 145.

alluded to in previous works, such as her reference to the story of Anton Schmidt in *Eichmann in Jerusalem*. In the context of Adolf Eichmann's trial, the witness's story about Anton Schmidt's self-sacrificial efforts to help the Jews was important because it gave an example of how one person in dark times can resist evil, not only by refusing to participate in the evil-doing, but also by taking constructive action to help the victims.

Arendt admits in "Some Questions of Moral Philosophy" that she has not begun to answer all the questions that she has posed about morality. But she hopes that she has at least pointed in certain directions:

> I can only hope that at least some indication of how we can think and move in these difficult and urgent matters has become apparent. . . . From our discussion today about Kant, I hope it became clearer why I raised . . . the question of whom we wish to be together with. I tried to show that our decisions about right and wrong will depend upon our choice of company, of those with whom we wish to spend our lives. And again, this company is chosen by thinking in examples, in examples of persons dead or alive, real or fictitious, and in examples of incidents, past or present.[106]

From examples, from stories, from various conversation partners, we choose the company that we want to accompany us through life.

Arendt emphasizes that, in order to become a person (a being capable of moral agency), it is necessary to *choose*. A posture of indifference is worse than making a bad choice. Arendt writes:

> Morally and even politically speaking, this indifference, though common enough, is the greatest danger. And connected to this, only a bit less dangerous, is another very common modern phenomenon, the widespread tendency to refuse to judge at all. Out of the unwillingness or inability to choose one's examples and one's company, and out of the unwillingness or inability to relate to others through judgment, arise the real *skandala*, the real stumbling blocks which human powers can't remove because they

[106] Ibid., 146.

> were not caused by human and understandable motives. Therein lies the horror and, at the same time, the banality of evil.[107]

In this passage Arendt connects the problem of indifference with several observations that she made in her previous work. She connects the refusal to judge or to choose one's company with the idea of *skandala* which she had presented in *The Human Condition*—the idea that some deeds are unforgivable because there are no persons—or no "human and understandable motives"—to forgive behind the deeds. She explicitly connects the refusal to choose and to judge with the banality of evil, the problem exemplified by Adolf Eichmann.

In this section, I have tried to show that Arendt's discussion of Kant, like her discussion of Socrates, highlights a dimension of thinking that is oriented toward the world. Enlarged thinking depends on the imagination to make other viewpoints present to us and to prepare our minds to return to the world, ready to dialogue with others. Thus, enlarged thinking lends itself to enlarged understanding.

Arendt's Own Practice of Enlarged Thinking: "Reflections on Little Rock"

Having examined Arendt's analysis of the role of enlarged thinking in political and moral judgment, I would like to show how she practiced this capacity in her own writing. One of her controversial essays, "Reflections on Little Rock," can serve as a case study that reveals both the limitations and the potential of this practice. In this 1959 essay written for *Commentary*, Arendt embarked on a thought-experiment in response to a newspaper photograph showing a young black girl surrounded by a "mob" of white adults while she was walking home from a newly integrated school. Arendt used her imagination to "think from the standpoint of others" while forming her own judgment

[107] Ibid.

that the forced desegregation of schools was wrong. For this conclusion Arendt was "strenuously attacked," as her biographer tells us.[108] The essay might be read as an example of how enlarged thinking can go wrong; to be sure, the attempt to "think from the standpoint of others" is not always successful. However, I think it is important to note that Arendt was willing to change her mind on this issue when Ralph Ellison challenged her views.

First, anticipating the angry reactions that she would receive from readers, Arendt prefaced her essay by asserting her clear opposition to racism. Drawing a connection between her own experience as a pariah (growing up Jewish in Germany) and the experience of black people in America, she wrote the following:

> I should like to remind the reader that I am writing as an outsider. I have never lived in the South and have even avoided occasional trips to Southern states because they would have brought me into a situation that I personally would find unbearable. Like most people of European origin I have difficulty in understanding, let alone sharing, the common prejudices of Americans in this area. Since what I wrote may shock good people and be misused by bad ones, I should like to make it clear that as a Jew I take my sympathy for the cause of the Negroes as for all oppressed or underprivileged peoples for granted and should appreciate it if the reader did likewise.[109]

Arendt begins the essay by describing the photograph, noting the features that stand out to her, namely, that the young black girl in the photograph looks plainly unhappy, being escorted by some white men who are protecting her and others who are photographing

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[108] Elisabeth Young-Bruehl, *Hannah Arendt: For Love of the World*, Second ed. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004), 315. Young-Bruehl notes that the editors at *Commentary* were displeased with Arendt's essay and published, alongside of it, a "defamatory" critique of it by Sidney Hook.

[109] Qt. in Anne Norton, "Heart of Darkness: Africa and African Americans in the Writings of Hannah Arendt" in *Feminist Interpretations of Hannah Arendt*, ed. Bonnie Honig (University Park, Penn.: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1995), 247-48. Anne Norton criticizes Arendt for this statement, remarking on a certain blind spot in Arendt's thinking on race. She writes, "Her constructions of Africans and African Americans, her forgetfulness of Asians, and her efforts to sequester racism in the South do not subvert or depart from what she called 'the common prejudices of Americans in this area.' The uneasy fit between her writings and race and her disavowal of complicity in an unjust racial order shows the danger of taking one's sympathies for granted" (248).

her. Arendt proceeds to imagine the different perspectives of those involved in the situation. First she asks, "What would I do if I were a Negro mother?" Arendt was neither a woman of African descent nor even a mother. But she imagines a reaction that seems plausible to her: "Under no circumstances would I expose my child to conditions which made it appear as though it wanted to push its way into a group where it was not wanted."[110] Then she tries to imagine the scene from a second standpoint: "What would I do if I were a white mother in the South?" She answers, "I would try to prevent my child's being dragged into a political battle in the schoolyard . . . ." However, she proceeds to imagine that if she were a white mother who strongly favored integration, she would try, "perhaps with the help of the Quakers or some other body of like-minded citizens—to organize a new school for white and colored children and to run it like a pilot project, as a means to persuade other white parents to change their attitudes."[111] She elaborates on her view that starting a school with the consent of everyone involved would be better than government coercion. Finally, she asks herself a third question, broadening her scope from a consideration of specific individuals to the larger cultural context: "What exactly distinguishes the so-called Southern way of life from the American way of life with respect to the color question?"[112] In her answer, she condemns racism and declares that the redress of racial inequality is essential to the survival of the Republic.[113] But she disagrees with the idea that the forced integration of schools is the best starting place to address this inequality because, in her view, it places schoolchildren in an unfair position: "It certainly did not require too much imagination to see that this [forced

[110] Arendt, "Reflections on Little Rock," in *Responsibility and Judgment*, 193.
[111] Ibid., 195.
[112] Ibid., 196.
[113] Ibid., 200.

integration] was to burden children, black and white, with the working out of a problem which adults for generations have confessed themselves unable to solve."[114] She concludes that society should not ask children to take on adult responsibility or to solve adult problems.

Critics did not hesitate to point out the gaps or flaws in the reasoning process that Arendt demonstrated here. Arendt dismissed the more intemperate criticisms, but, to her credit, she was willing to rethink her position when faced with a compelling argument from Ralph Ellison. Speaking to Robert Penn Warren in an interview for a 1965 volume titled *Who Speaks for the Negro?*, Ellison described what the "ideal of sacrifice" means to people who must make their way in a society—and who share in the ideals of that society—even while that society deprives them of any status:

> I believe that one of the important clues to the meaning of the Negro experience lies in the idea, the *ideal* of sacrifice. Hannah Arendt's failure to grasp the importance of this ideal among Southern Negroes caused her to fly way off into left field in her "Reflections on Little Rock," in which she charged Negro parents with exploiting their children during the struggle to integrate the schools. But she has absolutely no conception of what goes on in the minds of Negro parents when they send their kids through those lines of hostile people. Yet they are aware of the overtones of a rite of initiation which such events actually constitute for the child, a confrontation of the terrors of social life with all the mysteries stripped away. And in the outlook of many of these parents . . . the child is expected to face the terror and contain his fear and anger *precisely* because he is a Negro American. Thus he's required to master the inner tensions created by his racial situation, and if he gets hurt—then his is one more sacrifice. It is a harsh requirement, but if he fails this basic test, his life will be even harder.[115]

In response, Arendt wrote Ellison a letter saying that she had not understood the ideal of sacrifice and that she had gained understanding—and thus amended her views—from

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[114] Ibid., 203.
[115] Qt. in Elisabeth Young-Bruehl, *Hannah Arendt*, 316.

hearing Ellison's viewpoint. She then wrote her essay "Crisis in Education" to deepen her reflection on the meaning and purpose of American education.[116]

I intend for this reading of the "Little Rock" essay to show that, for Arendt, judgment is not a once-and-for-all event. It cannot be final because, if we are oriented to the world, we will always return to actual dialogue with others who may point out the fallacies in our thinking, and we are always encountering new "others" whose views should also be taken into account. Arendt's essay, employed as a case study, shows that she made a good faith effort to imagine what a difficult situation looked like from another point of view. In this case, she lacked sufficient knowledge and her imagination led her astray. However, her reflection was not an exercise in futility. In her willingness to expose her thought to the test of publicity, she made actual dialogue possible. Listening to Ralph Ellison's response allowed her to learn more and deepen her understanding. Thus, while the practice of imagination does not always lead to right judgment, it does create a frame of mind that is open to engaging with others and learning more from them.

Chapter Conclusion

In this chapter I have examined Arendt's investigation of thinking and tried to identify the observations that inform her conception of understanding. First, I have shown that, in the first half of her inquiry in *The Life of the Mind*, Arendt emphasized the importance of imagination and poetic structures such as metaphor that serve as a resource for thinking and keep thinking connected to the world. In her description of *Socratic thinking*, Arendt showed how thinking is dynamic and questing, not still and contemplative. It is also dialogic, involving a dialogue between me-and-myself that is essential to the formation of conscience. It can prevent us from participating in evil when

[116] Young-Bruehl, *Hannah Arendt*, 317.

others are mindlessly doing so. Finally, in her description of *enlarged thinking*, Arendt showed how the imagination allows us to put ourselves in the places of others in order to make better (that is, less egocentric and self-serving) judgments. Neither Socratic thinking nor enlarged thinking would be possible without the faculty of imagination.

Arendt launched her investigation into the mental activities with the recognition that for the mental activities to function, it is necessary to withdraw from the world. As I have tried to show, her emphasis on thinking does not mean that she turned her back on the world, as some scholars have assumed. The question of withdrawal initially piqued her curiosity precisely because she *was* so committed to speech and action in the public world. Her recognition that we must sometimes withdraw from the world does not mean that she believes we must isolate ourselves permanently in our solipsistic domain. To the contrary, she argues that when we enter into solitude, we can employ the imagination to bring the world of plurality into our mental activities. Then, having spent some time engaging the mental processes of thinking and judging, we are prepared to go out into the world again and resume actual dialogue with others. Furthermore, these real-world encounters with others provide more material for reflection in withdrawal. Ultimately, we will engage in a cyclical back and forth between withdrawal from the world and active participation in the world.

Arendt, then, does not suggest that thinking is synonymous with understanding, but rather that it is one essential component of it. Understanding, as I have argued, is the practice of attending to what is happening in the world and responding to it in a way that preserves the world for meaningful speech and action. Thinking is a necessary component—perhaps even the primary component. While Arendt does not exactly

reconcile thinking and action in *The Life of the Mind*, she at least suggests that human beings must cultivate the capacity to move back and forth between these worlds. Arendt's work not only encourages us to move back and forth between the world of thought and the world of action, but it also shows us that the bridging capacity of the imagination helps to make possible this crossing. Without this ability to travel between the worlds of thinking and worldly participation, understanding would not be possible.

Conclusion

Cultivating an Arendtian Imagination for Our Time

> Understanding…is an unending activity by which, in constant change and variation, we come to terms with and reconcile ourselves to reality, that is, to try to be at home in the world.
>
> —Arendt, "Understanding and Politics"[1]

In this dissertation I have chosen an image from Hannah Arendt's writing—the image of the "understanding heart," borrowed from King Solomon's prayer in the Hebrew Bible—and explored its power to illuminate Arendt's conception of *understanding* as central to her moral thought and practice. I have tried to show why, though she is perhaps most famous for her controversial phrase, "the banality of evil," I believe that the phrase "understanding heart" better captures the dominant impetus of Arendt's life and thought. On my reading, Arendt's writing does not so much define what evil is as it describes and models what the primary task of the thinker and citizen is—the task of trying to understand what is happening in the world in one's own time. As I have outlined in the dissertation, Arendt suggests that the task of understanding incorporates at least the following practices: facing the reality of evil in whatever form it appears (the argument of chapter one); participating in the public world through responsible speech and action, guided by a sensibility of *amor mundi* (the argument of chapter two); and exercising imaginative modes of thinking such as Socratic and enlarged thinking (the argument of chapter three).

Throughout the dissertation, I have tried to show that, for Arendt, understanding is a practice of moral imagination. She suggests that our ability to engage in the above practices of understanding depends on the cultivation and practice of an imaginative

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[1] Arendt, "Understanding and Politics," in *Essays in Understanding*, 307-08.

capacity to reach outward toward the world and toward others. When we are engaged in thought or reflection, the moral imagination enables us to stay connected with reality and prepares us to act in the world in responsible ways. Arendt also referred to this process as trying to "reconcile ourselves to reality" or trying "to be at home in the world." In affirming the possibility of reconciliation with reality, Arendt did not advocate the acceptance of evil; nor did she settle for the role of the passive, detached observer. Instead, she expressed her commitment to understanding the events that take place in the world, writing: "The result of understanding is meaning, which we originate in the very process of living insofar as we try to reconcile ourselves to what we do and what we suffer."[2] For Arendt, reconciliation meant recognizing that *this* world is our home and insisting that human beings must not relinquish the ideal of living together in a shared world in which plurality is allowed to flourish.

This dissertation has served as an exercise in thinking with Arendt. Through a series of close readings, I have followed her process of seeking understanding, which she demonstrated in the writing of numerous letters, essays, and books devoted to illuminating the salient qualities of the persons and events that defined her time. Here I would like to summarize how this reading of Arendt contributes to a better appreciation of the conception of moral imagination.

First, Arendt offers not just a description or theory of the imagination, but, through her interdisciplinary method, also offers an example of what imaginative moral thinking can look like. I do not situate the moral significance of Arendt's thought solely in the content of her writing; instead, I situate it in her commitment to the *practice* of understanding. After all, Arendt insisted that she was not interested in telling people

[2] Arendt, "Understanding and Politics," 309.

what to think; rather, she advocated that people (*all* people, not just philosophers or intellectuals) should participate in the ongoing practices inherent in understanding, such as thinking, storytelling, judging, and trying to "feel at home in the world." Reading her, we participate in a moral exercise, viewing moral questions and dilemmas through the eyes of someone "infected by perplexity" (in a Socratic sense) and driven by a desire to understand. Arendt always emphasized the importance of the thinking activity or process, not its conclusions. Her writing illustrates the process by which she sought understanding of events: she starts with questions stimulated by events taking place in the world (such as the Eichmann trial), she goes on to examine traditional vocabulary and philosophical reflections on the topic, and she points out where traditional conceptions remain unsatisfactory or where new dilemmas emerge. Arendt tends not to give answers, however, to the dilemmas that she poses. Her work resists neat conclusions. Instead, she guides her readers into a thicket of questions and problems and leaves them to find their own ways out. Thus, she goads readers into examining our own experiences more attentively, rethinking our assumptions about morality, working toward a more "disclosive" vocabulary, and forming judgments about new situations on our own.

Second, Arendt models a way of imaginatively rereading the Western philosophical tradition. While she does not blame Western philosophy or religion for the rise of totalitarianism, Arendt insists that we cannot turn to the "wisdom of the past" to supply the answers to our problems. In her view, totalitarianism revealed a "total collapse of morality" and a complete break with our traditions. Arendt's rereading of Western thought in light of this rupture illuminates the limitations inherent in traditional assumptions about morality. Specifically, she helps readers to understand why it is no

longer helpful to conceptualize morality solely in terms of "lawfulness," conscience, or obedience to rules or norms. She also critiques the tendency in Western religious thinkers to emphasize sin and guilt, viewing this tendency as a self-indulgent distortion of moral thought that mars even the work of thinkers like Buber and Jaspers, whom she otherwise respects.

Despite her critique of the philosophical tradition, however, Arendt does not discard the tradition, but rather suggests that insights from within the tradition might be creatively retrieved. She describes this process as "pearl-diving"—not trying to recover continuity with the past, but rather seeking out fragments that have suffered a "sea-change" over time and can prove useful today.[3] This process of retrieval depends on an imaginative mode of thinking that Arendt also refers to as "poetic thinking."[4] In her description and practice of imaginative thinking, Arendt shows the limitations of the tradition even while encouraging readers to engage in a pearl-diving process of their own, creatively re-reading traditional texts and gathering clues or fragments to use as resources for dealing with today's moral challenges.

Third, Arendt offers a conception of imagination that aims to bridge the traditional gap between the spheres of thinking and acting. Rejecting what she sees as the traditional philosophical privileging of contemplation over action, Arendt delineates a conception of imagination that is oriented toward the world and its affairs. She addresses the problematic gap between thinking and acting in two steps: First, she distinguishes between contemplation and thinking, rejecting the former (as static and removed from the world) while affirming the latter (as dynamic, dialogical, and oriented toward worldly

[3] Arendt, *Thinking, Life of the Mind*, 212; also "Walter Benjamin" in *Men in Dark Times*, 190-203.
[4] Arendt, "Walter Benjamin," in *Men in Dark Times*, 202-203. (Arendt describes Benjamin as the model of a pearl-diver and poetic thinker.)

experience). She insists that human beings must be willing to *think what we are doing*. She suggests that if we act without thinking, then our activity will degenerate into constant motion without meaning; but, on the other hand, if we merely speculate about worldly events without being committed to participation and action, then we are likely to become solipsistic and irresponsible.

Second, affirming both thinking and acting as integral to the moral life, Arendt proposes that the imagination, particularly through the vehicle of metaphor, functions as a bridge between the visible and invisible worlds. Drawing on Augustine and Kant, she argues that imagination keeps the thinking ego oriented toward the world and toward others. It plays an especially important role in preparing the mind for moral judgment, as, through the practice of "enlarged thinking," it enables thinkers to explore an issue or problem from perspectives other than their own. Arendt does not suggest, however, that imagining the world or the circumstances of others should *replace* actual dialogue or encounter with others. She advocates both the practice of an imagination that is oriented toward the world and the willingness to participate in worldly affairs.

Fourth, Arendt offers a conception of imagination that affirms the importance of cultivating moral personhood even while it highlights the importance of relationships. Arendt emphasizes the importance of cultivating moral personhood in order to exercise moral agency. While calling into question certain pervasive twentieth-century notions of selfhood (e.g., the conception of an "inner self," psychoanalytic views of the subconscious, the existential quest for "identity"), she shows how the moral person is constituted through thinking, speaking, and acting. Like her contemporary Levinas, Arendt steers her readers *away from* philosophical conceptions that prioritize the self, and

toward recognition of the unique individuality and particularity of others. Yet, in contrast to Levinas, she offers a portrait of the person who, while responsible to the other, is not utterly subjugated to the other. In Arendt's conception, the moral person preserves the integrity of his or her own individuality and voice and is capable of exercising independent thought.

While affirming the independence of the moral thinker, Arendt simultaneously emphasizes the importance of *relationships* to the cultivation of a person's capacity for moral thought. In her life and writing she showed that good *thinking* emerges in the context of good *friendships*, such as her own long-term friendships with Karl Jaspers, Hans Jonas, and Mary McCarthy. Describing a particular disagreement that she had once had with Jaspers, Arendt once said that although her conversations with Jaspers never resolved the disagreement, they did enrich the participants' thinking on the subject: "the thinking about such a thing itself became immensely richer, through this exchange, as he said 'without reservations,' that is, where you don't keep anything back."[5] Thinking that does not take place in the context of relationship lacks depth and richness—like the "banality" of thought displayed by Eichmann at his trial.

For Arendt, just as moral thinking is best generated in the context of relationships, moral action, too, requires the presence of others. The moral person in Arendt's conception is committed to participating in common life and building a durable world *with others*. Arendt emphasizes the importance of living in the world and of recognizing that human beings exist from birth until death in a "web of relationships." Our actions, and our intertwining stories, affect the entire web. For Arendt, action is not action unless

[5] Arendt, "On Hannah Arendt." In *Hannah Arendt: The Recovery of the Public World*. Edited by Melvyn A. Hill. (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1979), 339.

it takes place in the world and is performed with others. She emphasizes that even when we are thinking, it is essential to exercise the imagination in such a way that we retain an outward orientation; she offers an image of "leaning out of myself as I may lean out of the window to look into the street, that I establish contact with the world."[6] She resists what she sees as the philosophical tendency to retreat perpetually into solitude, insisting that it is essential to return to the world and to practice dialogue with others—the kind of dialogue modeled by Socrates and Jaspers. She also emphasizes the importance of forgiveness and promise as examples of a moral code based on recognition of our interrelationship with others. Thus, her work emphasizes the importance of relational approaches to moral questions and problems. By emphasizing the importance of relationships and dialogue, she suggests that the quality of moral thought and action is actually intersubjective rather than merely subjective.

Finally, while affirming the practice of moral imagination, Arendt's writing also helps us to recognize the terrifying extent to which modern (or post-modern) social and political forces strive to manipulate or to de-form the imagination. Arendt was a critic of what she called "image-making"—the ongoing effort to mislead public opinion by ignoring the "facts" or the given reality of a matter and promoting a manufactured image instead. Her writing lends insight into identifying and resisting such efforts to distort the imagination in world-denying and life-denying ways. Her work encourages us to resist destructive "image-making" by cultivating the world-affirming, reality-affirming

[6] Arendt, "Some Questions of Moral Philosophy" in *Responsibility and Judgment*, 81.

imaginative capacity of the understanding heart. In short, she shows us the importance of cultivating an imagination infused with a sensibility of *amor mundi*.[7]

While these insights gained from a reading of Arendt's work are useful, Arendt certainly would not want the effort to stop here, as though once her conception of "understanding" has been captured, our work is done. A recently published interview with Jack Blum, a friend of Arendt and her husband Heinrich Blücher, criticizes scholars who focus on a theoretical analysis of Arendt rather using her as a model to think through their own problems. Blum tells Roger Berkowitz, the interviewer:

> The thing I am most surprised by is how people try to parse every nuance of what she did in some academic theoretical way when, if there is one thing to take away from both Hannah and Heinrich, it is that what you should be doing is thinking critically about what is happening to you now, not why they said this or did that. They produced their work struggling with what happened to them. And you should be thinking about what they did not in terms of how to take that and mold it into something else, but in terms of how to take that and use it as a model for how you struggle with the mess you're in right now.[8]

For me, writing this dissertation serves as a preliminary exercise. Having read Arendt with the intent of learning how she goes about the process of understanding, I hope that the dissertation illuminates the value of applying what I would call an "Arendtian imagination" to our numerous present-day concerns or "messes."[9] These present

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[7] As Richard Kearney has observed in "The Crisis of the Image," the effort to distinguish between false "image-making" and reality-oriented imagination has become increasingly difficult in a postmodern context. As he puts it, Western civilization is characterized by a "circular game of mirrors, which perpetuates the reign of sameness through blank parody" (13). Thus, Kearney argues for the need to "form an alliance between an *ethics of responsibility* and a *poetics of imagination*" (17). I think that Arendt's work helpfully moves us toward this "ethics of imagining" that Kearney desires. (In *The Ethics of Postmodernity: Current Trends in Continental Thought*. Edited by Gary B. Madison and Marty Fairbairn. Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 1999.)

[8] Berkowitz, Roger. "Remembering Hannah: An Interview with Jack Blum." *Thinking in Dark Times: Hannah Arendt on Ethics and Politics*," 265.

[9] Although I have not elaborated on their work in this project, a number of scholars are engaged in the project of applying the model of Arendt's understanding to contemporary problems. These include Michael Jackson, an anthropologist who employs Arendt's analysis of storytelling to understand the

concerns include complex issues such as human rights violations, terrorism, sexual trafficking, and environmental destruction, among others. As I see it, the way to employ Arendt as a resource in thinking about these problems is not to ask what Arendt would say about these issues, but rather to approach these issues with what I might call an "Arendtian imagination." Those who possess an Arendtian imagination are attentive to the need to seek better understanding of the forces that threaten to diminish the human capacity for meaningful thought, speech, and action in today's world.

In concluding this dissertation, I would like to comment on certain limitations to Arendt's moral thought, or at least indicate some different directions that would be helpful to explore in further reflection on cultivating an understanding heart for our time. While Arendt's work is helpful in its critical analyses of political and social forces that distort the imagination and inhibit understanding, it is less helpful in guiding an analysis of *interior* impulses that help or hinder the process of cultivating the moral imagination. Arendt remains largely silent on realms of human existence that, in her view, belong to the private rather than the public sphere, including religion, spirituality, and sexuality. Her examination of moral thought and action largely brackets important traditional moral concepts such as goodness, virtue, and the pursuit of self-knowledge because, in her view, the pursuit of such goals involves a preoccupation with the *self* rather than with the public world. Along these lines, Arendt remains highly critical of contemplation, regarding the *vita contemplativa* as a traditional path that privileges an otherworldly sphere. In sum, Arendt maintains rigid dichotomies between the public and the private,

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experience of refugees in his native New Zealand; political theorists Peg Birmingham and Serena Parekh, who use Arendt's work to think through the problem of human rights; and Andrew Schaap, who applies Arendt's reflections on forgiveness to an analysis of the effectiveness of the Truth and Reconciliation Committee in South Africa.

between the *vita activa* and the *vita contemplativa*, between *amor mundi* and the pursuit of goodness, between care for the world and care for the soul. While I respect her effort to make careful distinctions between concepts, I suggest that Arendt's emphasis on these distinctions, and her attempts to bracket certain categories from her reflection, lends itself to a sense of unbridgeable gaps between these important realms of human existence. When cultivating the understanding heart and applying the imagination to the moral problems of our time, we must seek ways of including these aspects of human existence and of better understanding the relationships between the different spheres. Religion, spirituality, sexuality, and care of the soul—none of these aspects of the human person can be effectively bracketed from moral reflection. In particular, concern for the health of the public world today cannot afford to exclude the category of religion when so many of our current debates revolve around the presence of multiple religions in the public sphere.

I would advocate supplementing the development of an Arendtian imagination—an imagination characterized primarily by its emphasis on *amor mundi*—with the simultaneous development of a renewed appreciation for contemplation. Contemplative practices, I would argue, can also play an essential role in cultivating the moral imagination. In my view, Arendt's critique of the *vita contemplativa* as a tradition that denigrates the world serves as a valuable caution against the temptation toward disengagement. With Arendt's caution in mind, however, it is possible to retain the ideal of *amor mundi* while seeking contemplative practices that motivate positive and creative action. Religious traditions offer resources that can help foster a loving orientation to the world—resources such as the Four Limitless Ones chant from the Buddhist tradition or

the Prayer of St. Francis from the Christian tradition. In one instance, Arendt herself expressed admiration for the imaginative potential of the *Spiritual Exercises* developed by St. Ignatius: "The *Spiritual Exercises* are exercises of imagination and they may be more relevant to method in the historical sciences than academic training realizes."[10] Further scholarship remains to be done on how best to utilize resources from the religious traditions to cultivate an understanding heart and prepare ourselves for meaningful action in the world.

In conclusion, reading Arendt has helped me to clarify what I see as the meaning and purpose of interdisciplinary scholarship. By approaching moral problems through different disciplines, scholars can leave behind those traditional "banisters" and find fresh insights. Most importantly, I am reminded that the life of the mind is not an "ivory tower" pursuit but is oriented toward life itself. Although the activities of thinking and writing may sometimes feel as though they are not directly engaged with the world, there are ways of accessing the outward-directed dimensions of those practices. Above all, cultivating an Arendtian imagination means being committed to doing scholarship that reflects an attitude of engagement with the world and with the people who live in it; in other words, for a scholar with an Arendtian imagination, scholarship itself is a moral activity.

[10] Arendt, "A Reply to Eric Voegelin" in *Essays in Understanding* (404).

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