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Ethics for Dark Times

by

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ABSTRACT

This thesis argues that Hannah Arendt is correct to suggest that thinking enables judgment, even though Arendt never fully formulates this idea herself. I provide a critical reading of Arendt's essay "Thinking and Moral Considerations" and of her series of lectures on Kant's political philosophy. I argue that Arendt's concept of impartiality can provide the bridge between the concepts of thinking and judging that is otherwise lacking in her account of these faculties. I argue that Arendt's philosophy can be construed as an ethically relevant theory: despite the fact that Arendt offers no moral prescriptions, she describes a process of thinking through which ethical decisions can be made. Arendt's work is therefore highly relevant as a critique of relativism, nihilism and the skeptical notion that judgments are arbitrary.

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INTRODUCTION

In her essay “Thinking and Moral Considerations,” Hannah Arendt links the problem of evil with an absence of thinking. She argues that many evil actions are not the result of an individual's wicked character or lack of adherence to moral principles, but are instead the result of a shallowness or lack of critical thought. For Arendt thinking never culminates in moral knowledge, nor does it allow one to distinguish between good and evil as permanent essential forms. Nevertheless, Arendt argues that thinking enables the faculty of judgment, and with it “the ability to tell right from wrong, beautiful from ugly,”[1] at least in the context of particular concrete situations.

Joseph Beatty criticizes “Thinking and Moral Considerations” on the grounds that Arendt does not adequately support her claim that thinking prevents evildoing.[2] He points out Arendt’s assertion that “thinking yields absolutely no positive results” and argues that this precludes a “necessary connection between thinking and (moral) respect for persons.”[3] “Thinking

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[1] Hannah Arendt, *Responsibility and Judgment* (New York: Schocken Books, 2003), p. 189.

[2] Joseph Beatty, “Thinking and Moral Considerations: Socrates and Arendt’s Eichmann.” In *Hannah Arendt: Critical Essays*, Ed. Lewis P. Hinchman and Sandra K. Himchman. (New York: State University of New York Press, 1994.)

[3] Ibid., p.63.

and Moral Considerations" is indeed not persuasive in itself, but Beatty ignores the possibility that Arendt's later work on judgment makes sense of her earlier ideas on thinking. The purpose of this thesis is to further explore this possibility. I will argue that it does make sense for Arendt to claim that thinking enables judging, but only when her work as a whole is taken into consideration.

When Arendt's account of thinking is combined with her account of judging, the result is a theory of practical reasoning that describes how ethical decisions can be made. Because this theory does not provide normative values or prescriptions some would argue that it cannot be considered an ethical theory. However, Arendt's thinking undermines the plausibility of normative theories that make absolute claims. Her own theory provides guidelines for moral reasoning while admitting that there is no definitive conception of good or evil. Arendt also suggests that all maxims of action should admit to revision in light of further experience. If Arendt is correct, then all that an ethical theory can accomplish is to provide people with a means of thinking through ethical problems. It is therefore my contention that Arendt's theory of practical reason is indeed an ethical theory. Her theory is particularly indispensible in what Arendt would call dark times—that is, in times when conventional morality fails.

The main question I will attempt to answer is how does thinking enable judging? Unfortunately, Arendt leaves this question unanswered, having died before the completion of her magnum opus *The Life of the*

Mind. On her death a page was found in her typewriter, blank except for two epigrams and the title of the book's unfinished last section: Judgment.

The fact that Arendt died before completing her final project is not the only difficulty faced by interpreters of her thought. Arendt admits that her thinking is a work in progress and that she does not come to any definite conclusions. She writes:

> If thinking is an activity that is its own end and if the only adequate metaphor for it, drawn from our ordinary sense experience, is the sensation of being alive, then it follows that all questions concerning the aim or purpose of thinking are as unanswerable as questions about the aim or purpose of life.[4]

Arendt's intent is not to conclusively summarize the mental faculties of thinking and judging, but to reflect on what it *means* to think and to judge. As a result, there is no definitive Arendtian conception of thinking and judging. To complicate matters further, Arendt's reflections evolve over the course of her writing career. Ronald Beiner notes that Arendt's later account of judgment "clearly conflicts with some of her earlier formulations."[5] It is not clear that her later works conceive of the relationship between thinking and judging in the same way. For example, "Thinking and Moral Considerations" makes no mention of the faculty of will, whereas Arendt devoted a third of *The Life of the Mind* to willing. It is possible that Arendt intended to explain the relationship between thinking and judging in terms of willing, but if so this explanation died with her.

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[4] Hannah Arendt, *The Life of the Mind* (London: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1978), p. 197.

[5] Ronald Beiner, "Judging in a World of Appearances." In *Hannah Arendt: Critical Essays*, Ed. Lewis P. Hinchman and Sandra K. Himchman. (New York: State University of New York Press, 1994.) p. 375.

Because it is only possible to speculate about Arendt's intentions regarding the faculty of will, this thesis is limited to an examination of the relationship between thinking and judging. The most complete account of Arendt's conception of judgment can be found in the series of lectures she gave on Kant's political philosophy. It should be noted that Arendt does not provide an orthodox interpretation of Kant, but instead appropriates certain Kantian ideas to suit her own ends. (As she suggests in "Thinking and Moral Considerations," Arendt sometimes construes important philosophical figures as "ideal types,"[6] often purifying her account of historical details in order to reveal the full significance of these figures.) Though the passages Arendt sites from Kant certainly suggest a conception of judgment, this conception should not be mistaken for the traditional Kantian view. In fact, Arendt appropriates Kant's conception of aesthetic judgment in her conception of moral reasoning, whereas Kant believed that only determinate judgment was morally relevant. Arendt is aware that she takes liberties with her interpretation, and writes "if we went beyond Kant's self-interpretation in our presentation, we still remained within Kant's spirit."[7]

Approximately half of the *Lectures on Kant's Political Philosophy* is devoted to an explanation of critical thinking. Apart from the fact that Arendt uses Kant as the ideal representative of critical thinking here, the

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[6] Arendt, *The Life of the Mind,* p. 169.

[7] Hannah Arendt, *Lectures on Kant's Political Philosophy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), p. 33.

account of thinking Arendt provides in the lectures does not significantly differ from the account given in “Thinking and Moral Considerations,” in which Socrates is construed as the ideal type. The second half of the lectures is devoted to judgment. Conspicuously, however, Arendt never directly links her discussion of critical thinking and her discussion of judging. In fact, Arendt subtly conflates the two concepts, leaving the reader to speculate as to how these concepts are related. I will argue that the missing link between thinking and judging can be found in Arendt’s concept of impartiality. Although Arendt suggests that impartiality is necessary for both critical thinking and judgment, I believe that a more accurate view is that critical thinking is necessary for impartiality. If this is the case, then it makes sense to suggest that thinking enables judging, as it is impossible to judge objectively without being impartial.

It should be noted that Elizabeth Young-Bruehl attempts to answer the question of how thinking enables judging by invoking Arendt’s concept of exemplary validity. She writes:

> “We are prepared to make particular judgments spontaneously by having *thought* about the question, ‘What is courage?’ and the question, ‘What is goodness?’ and settled upon representative figures, examples—as Arendt settled upon Socrates when she asked, ‘What is thinking?’”[8]

In other words, thinking prepares judgment by providing the imagination with examples of virtuous people who are worthy of emulating. While I agree that Arendt may have chosen to link thinking and judging through exemplary validity, I

[8] Elizabeth Young-Bruehl, “Reflections on *The Life of the Mind*.” In *Hannah Arendt: Critical Essays*, Ed. Lewis P. Hinchman and Sandra K. Himchman. (New York: State University of New York Press, 1994.) p. 359–360.

believe that impartiality is the necessary link between the two concepts. Without impartiality, one could imagine many examples of virtuous behaviour while still being completely disconnected from the larger community of judges. As I will explain in chapter two, the judging community is a prominent feature of Arendt's conception of judgment, and it serves as a standard by which the validity of judgments is measured. What sets this thesis apart from other attempts to understand Arendt's philosophy is the emphasis I place on impartiality—a necessary concept for Arendt, the importance of which seems to have been overlooked by other commentators.

The first chapter of this thesis will provide a reading of Arendt's essay "Thinking and Moral Considerations." This essay is useful in that it sets up the question of how thinking relates to judging, and also situates Arendt's philosophy in the context of the end of metaphysics. Arendt escaped Nazi Germany shortly before the holocaust. In her lifetime she witnessed the easy reversal of traditional values and commandments such as "do not kill." In Arendt's view, these commandments were based on tradition, religion and authority. These three pillars of Western culture were based on a particular metaphysical interpretation, namely the dichotomy between the apparent world and the true world. The end of metaphysics corresponds to the end of the two-world dichotomy, and with it the end of the idea that one's actions in this world are ultimately judged by the higher standards of the next. With the advent of modern science and technology,

metaphysical explanations became implausible and were no longer effectively believed.

Arendt is not of the opinion that the old metaphysical questions—Is there a God? What is the form of the good and the beautiful?—are somehow foolish or misinformed, but rather that they have lost their meaning, their relevance as tools for explaining the modern world. In light of the horrors of the 20th century, Arendt recognizes that moral principles which were once considered to be self-evident have become shallow and ineffectual. Where these principles are still upheld, they are merely paid lip service without being considered genuinely binding or meaningful. For Arendt, the moral principles that one follows are less important than the story one tells about his or her actions, and the subsequent meaning these actions take on for both the individual and the larger community.

Arendt's ruminations on thinking and judging do not culminate in an ethical theory, at least not in the traditional sense of an ethical theory. Unlike the utilitarian pleasure principle or Kant's categorical imperative, Arendt's ethical thinking is not prescriptive. It is meta-ethical in that Arendt examines what it means to judge and what it means to take responsibility for one's actions, but it does not formulate principles that are meant to guide one's actions. In this respect, Arendt can be compared to particularists such as Jonathan Dancy (although it should be noted that unlike particularists, Arendt does not lay claim to moral knowledge.) Although she does not go so far as to suggest that moral principles are

useless, Arendt does believe that principles are not a substitute for critical thinking.

Arendt's account of thinking begins as a reflection on the trial of Adolf Eichmann and "the banality of evil" she witnessed there. Arendt observed that it was not evil character but a lack of thought that led Eichmann to commit some of the worst crimes of the Second World War. After being struck by the phenomenon of the banality of evil, Arendt writes that she could not help but raise the question: "with what right did I possess and use [this concept?]"[9] In order to answer this question, she begins an inquiry into the thinking process—an inquiry that Arendt considers presumptuous but necessary, as "few thinkers ever told us what made them think and even fewer have cared to describe and examine their thinking experience."[10]

In both "Thinking and Moral Considerations" and *The Life of the Mind*, Arendt gives an account of the thinking faculty, and relates it to an important distinction that Kant makes between reason and intellect. Unlike intellect, which is associated with cognition and logic, reason is associated with language and meaning. Arendt suggests that thinking and philosophy, like poetry and literature, are associated with reason, and hence with meaning as opposed to objective truth. By associating philosophic truth with meaning instead of knowledge, Arendt breaks from the Platonic tradition, specifically with Plato's concept of absolute knowledge and

[9] Arendt, *The Life of the Mind*, p. 161.

[10] Ibid., p. 168.

values. If it is possible to differentiate and decide between good and evil, as Arendt believes, then this must be done without absolute concepts of good and evil.

Although Arendt did not complete *The Life of the Mind*, the theme of judgment runs through a number of her earlier writings. For my purposes, the most significant of these writings are the *Lectures on Kant's Political Philosophy* and the essay "The Crisis in Culture." From these works, it is possible to piece together an approximation of what the last section of *The Life of the Mind* would have contained, had Arendt had the time to complete it. Chapter two will focus on Arendt's concept of judgment, and the difficulties of reconciling judgment with her concept of thinking. I suspect that Arendt's ethical project, which combines her accounts of thinking and judging, will strike some as an example of circular reasoning: thinking relies on judging if it is to have any bearing on reality, and judging relies on thinking if it is to be at all sound. However, as Arendt suggests, circular reasoning may be a problem from the logical perspective of the intellect, but it is not necessarily a problem where reason and meaning are concerned.

Hannah Arendt's goal was to make a place for judgment in a time when the traditional grounds of judgment have fallen away. She does so without surreptitiously slipping metaphysical concepts into her analysis. Her account of thinking and judging relies only on mental faculties that all humans posses. In the words of Elizabeth Young-Bruehl, Arendt "was

looking for a thinking that does not depend upon a noble nature but can lead to a moral resistance to evil doing; [and] a judging that does not surrender its reflectivity to imperatives."[11] Stated otherwise, Arendt conceives of moral reasoning as something that all people are capable of, without relying on rigid principles of action. Arendt makes sense of the ability to distinguish between good and evil, beautiful and ugly, in a time where concepts such these have been undermined by relativism and the disturbing sentiment that if God is dead, everything is permitted. Arendt may not have agreed with my interpretation of her ethical project. But if I go beyond Arendt's self-interpretation in drawing out the implications of her work, I will have endeavored to remain within her spirit.

[11] Elizabeth Young-Bruehl, *Why Arendt Matters* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006), p. 207.

CHAPTER ONE: THINKING AND MORAL CONSIDERATIONS

"Thinking and Moral Consideration" is prefaced with a brief discussion of Arendt's coverage of the Eichmann trial and "the banality of evil," the infamous phrase she used to describe Eichmann and his crimes. The essay is broken into three sections, the first dealing with the end of metaphysics and the unlikelihood of asking questions such as "what is thinking?" in an era when metaphysical concepts have come into disrepute. Section two examines the figure of Socrates as someone who, somewhat ironically, represents an alternative to the Platonic tradition of metaphysics. Section three suggests that the Socratic manner of thinking can enable judgment and condition us against perpetrating evil.

In the last paragraph of "Thinking and Moral Considerations", Arendt makes the claim that thinking enables judging. In the context of the essay this claim seems thoroughly undefended. Throughout the essay, thinking is characterized as a negative activity: it challenges dogma, dissolves stale concepts, and illuminates self-contradictions, but nowhere does it create standards by which to judge particular actions. At best, the essay tells only half of the story, as it does not provide an account of how thinking and judging are related, or what the activity of judging involves. As mentioned above, Arendt considered her philosophy to be a work in

progress. I will assume that Arendt intended to elaborate further on the relation between thinking and judging, perhaps in *The Life of the Mind*, but was unable to do so. Chapter one will examine Arendt's reflections on thinking in an attempt to set up the question of how thinking relates to judging. Chapter two will examine Arendt's conception of judgment in an attempt to provide the link between thinking and judging that Arendt merely hints at.

i. The Banality of Evil and the End of Metaphysics

In his introduction to Arendt's *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, Amos Elon describes how the book sparked a civil war among intellectuals.[12] Arendt used the phrase "the banality of evil" to describe the crimes of Adolf Eichmann, the SS Second Lieutenant who facilitated the mass deportation of the Jews. Arendt's phrase was widely misinterpreted, and she was condemned by the Jewish community for exonerating Eichmann.[13] But whereas Arendt might be faulted for coining an overly provocative expression, it was not her intention to suggest that Eichmann's crimes were trivial, or that he was somehow not responsible for them. In Arendt's words:

> I spoke of "the banality of evil" and meant with this no theory or doctrine but something quite factual, the phenomenon of evil deeds, committed on a gigantic scale, which could not be traced to any particularity of wickedness, pathology, or ideological conviction in the

[12] Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (London Penguin Books, 2006), p. vii.

[13] Ibid., p. ix.

> doer, whose only personal distinction was a perhaps extraordinary shallowness.[14]

Eichmann had arranged for the transportation of millions of Jews to their deaths. There was no question in Arendt's mind that he had committed a monstrous crime. But what Arendt observed, to her own surprise, was that Eichmann did not fit the traditional mold of a villain. Unlike Shakespeare's Richard the Third, who consciously determined to prove himself a villain, Eichmann had no thirst for blood, and certainly had no intention of becoming an evil man. More than anything else, Eichmann was a follower.

Arendt notes that Eichmann was well versed in clichés, the meaning of which he rarely questioned. His epistemic criterion for determining the truth, if he could be said to have one, was the authority of others, as opposed to his own critical thinking. He therefore believed whatever he was told to believe, even if his various truths contradicted each other. For example, on the gallows before his execution, Eichmann expressed "in common Nazi fashion that he was no Christian and did not believe in life after death."[15] He then borrowed "the cliché used in funeral oratory" and stated: "After a short while, gentlemen, *we shall all meet again*."[16] Eichmann borrowed phrases that expressed radically different sentiments. Content that his last words were associated with authority figures from his past, Eichmann did not consider the meaning of his words.

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[14] Hannah Arendt, *Responsibility and Judgment* (New York: Schocken Books, 2003), p. 159.

[15] Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, p. 252.

[16] Ibid.

Eichmann was not a monster and Arendt stresses that he was not a stupid man. Rather, Eichmann was characterized by "a curious, quite authentic inability to think."[17] As indicated by his last words, Eichmann had little trouble contradicting himself. His ability to do so was most apparent during his trial:

> He functioned in the role of prominent war criminal as well as he had under the Nazi regime; he had not the slightest difficulty in accepting an entirely different set of rules. He knew that what he had once considered his duty was now called a crime, and he accepted this new code of judgment as though it were nothing but another language rule.[18]

Eichmann exchanged principles of conduct as a polyglot would exchange conventions of language. As a Nazi, he accepted the will of the Führer as his moral obligation. As a prisoner in Jerusalem, he accepted that he was a criminal. According to Arendt, Eichmann's reversal in judgment had little to do with guilt. He had simply substituted one set of principles for another, and had done so without thought or regard for consistency. Eichmann was not lacking in intellect, but he was lacking in conscience. As Arendt notes, "the very word 'con-science' [means] 'to know with and by myself,' a kind of knowledge that is actualized in every thinking process."[19] Eichmann lacked this kind of self-knowing, and as a result he was unaware of the inconsistencies in both his thoughts and his actions.

Although he was an insipid man who borrowed the rationale for his volitions from others, Eichmann was nonetheless responsible for

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[17] Arendt, *Responsibility and Judgment,* p. 159.

[18] Ibid.

[19] Arendt, *The Life of the Mind*, p. 5.

facilitating the deaths of thousands. For Arendt, Eichmann's example represented a challenge to the interpretive framework by which she understood evil: here was a man who had committed evil deeds, but who had none of the characteristics of an evil man. Indeed, Eichmann's only startling characteristic was his lack of characteristics, coupled with his inability to think for himself.

Having observed Eichmann, and having recognized that evil deeds can be committed without evil intentions, Arendt asks: "Is our ability to judge, to tell right from wrong, beautiful from ugly, dependent upon our faculty of thought?"[20] She continues, "could the activity of thinking as such, the habit of examining and reflecting upon whatever happens to come to pass…be of such a nature that it 'conditions' men against evildoing?"[21] Nowhere does Arendt definitively answer these questions. Perhaps, to paraphrase Leon Craig, she aims to seduce her readers into engaging in the "distinctly human (and thus humanizing) activity of thinking," and she realizes that "what most effectively promotes philosophical activity is questions, not answers."[22] Whatever the case, it is my contention that the above questions represent the beginnings of Arendt's moral project. Implicit in them is the central thesis of this project: that thought, as opposed to virtues or principles, enables moral

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[20] Arendt, *Responsibility and Judgment,* p. 159.

[21] Ibid.

[22] Leon Harold Craig, *Of Philosophers and Kings: Political Philosophy in Shakespeare's Macbeth and King Lear* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2001), p. 12.

judgment.[23] Before delving into the questions that this thesis raises—What is thought? What is judgment? How are these concepts related?—it is important to explain how Arendt's thinking is situated within the tradition of philosophy. This will also provide insight into why Arendt rejects moral principles as the foundation of moral action.

Arendt's work presupposes that of Nietzsche and Heidegger, and she interprets the modern age in light of Nietzsche's proposition that God is Dead—or to paraphrase Heidegger's locution, that metaphysics has ended. For Arendt, the modern age is characterized by the end of theology, philosophy and metaphysics. As she explains in *The Life of the Mind*, this does not mean that God has died in any literal sense, "but that the way God has been thought of for thousands of years is no longer convincing."[24] Similarly, with respect to philosophy and metaphysics, Arendt writes "[it is] not that the old questions which are coeval with the appearance of men on earth have become 'meaningless,' but that the way they were framed and answered has lost plausibility."[25] Arendt notes that when Nietzsche wrote of the death of God, he intended God to be a symbol for the supersensory realm—for the notion of a "true" reality that lingers behind the "mere" appearance of things. What has lost plausibility in the modern age

[23] The importance of this thesis is demonstrated by the fact that the above questions are repeated, nearly verbatim, in the introduction to *The Life of the Mind*. See page 5 of the introduction.

[24] Arendt, *The Life of the Mind*, p. 10.

[25] Ibid.

> is the basic distinction between the sensory and the supersensory, together with the notion…that whatever is not given to the senses—God or Being or the First Principles and Causes (*archai*) or the Ideas—is more real, more truthful, more meaningful then what appears.[26]

Within the Western tradition of philosophy, the notion of a supersensory realm dates back to Plato and his theory of forms (or ideas,) and pervades much of Christian theology and morality.

Although Arendt would certainly not consider herself a Nietzschean, she would agree with Nietzsche's characterization of the history of Western thought. In "Thinking and Moral Considerations," Arendt quotes a passage from *Twilight of the Idols* where Nietzsche outlines the history of the sensory/supersensory distinction, describing it in terms of a distinction between the apparent world and the true world. However, because Arendt does not discuss the Nietzschean underpinnings of her work in any detail, I will briefly summarize Nietzsche's account in *Twilight of the Idols* for the sake of clarity.

In a passage titled "How the 'true world' finally became a fable," Nietzsche provides a six point genealogy that roughly traces the concept of the true world from its origins in Greek philosophy to its repudiation in modern times. The first point of this genealogy reads: "The true world—attainable for the sage…(The oldest form of the idea…A circumlocution of the sentence 'I, Plato, *am* the truth.')"[27] Nietzsche suggests here that the

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[26] Ibid.

[27] Nietzsche, Friedrich. *The Portable Nietzsche*, trans. and ed. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Penguin, 1976), p. 485.

concept of the true world originates in the philosophy of Plato—specifically in Plato's theory of forms, which is the source of the two-world dichotomy. Plato believed that it was possible for people to gain insight into the true world, and to therefore gain knowledge of what is true, good and beautiful, regardless of time, place or historical circumstance. The second point reads: "The true world—unattainable for now, but promised…for the sinner who repents…(Progress of the idea: it becomes more subtle, insidious, incomprehensible…it becomes Christian.)"[28] Here Nietzsche refers to Christianity's appropriation of the two-world dichotomy. In Christian theology, the dichotomy takes the form of an opposition between the kingdom of heaven and the kingdom of humankind. Whereas Plato suggests that meaning is attained through contemplation of otherworldly forms, Christianity suggests that the meaning of earthly existence is only realized in an otherworldly heaven. Implicit in this suspension of meaningfulness is a devaluation of life on this earth, as the true purpose of human life is only attainable in death. This devaluation disturbs Arendt, and one of her primary motivations is to make sense of morality and judgment in a way that does not rely on transcending—and therefore devaluing—worldly experience.

The third point of the genealogy reads: "The true world—unattainable, indemonstrable, unpromisable; but the very thought of it—a consolation,

[28] Ibid.

an obligation, an imperative."[29] Quite possibly Nietzsche refers to Kant here, as Kant introduced doubt into the idea that the true world could be known, but still considered metaphysical concepts to be meaningful. However, in the fourth point Nietzsche suggests that with the advent of positivism, the true world was considered unknowable, and "consequently, not consoling, redeeming, or obligating."[30] By modern times, the true world had become "an idea which is no longer good for anything, not even obligating—an idea which has become useless and superfluous."[31] Stated otherwise, the idea of the true world has last all plausibility, and is no longer meaningful. The concept of absolute and unchanging good—whether it takes the form of a Platonic idea or an immortal God—no longer situates people within a shared context of understanding. Finally, Nietzsche poses the question of what remains after the true world has been abolished: "The apparent one perhaps? But no! *With the true world we have also abolished the apparent one*."[32]

Arendt quotes this last passage in *The Life of the Mind*, rephrasing it using Heidegger's words: "the elimination of the supersensory also eliminates the merely sensory and thereby the difference between them."[33] She explains:

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[29] Ibid.

[30] Ibid.

[31] Ibid.

[32] Ibid.

[33] Arendt, *The Life of the Mind*, p. 11.

> All thinking in terms of two worlds implies that these two are inseparably connected with each other…once the always precarious balance between the two worlds is lost, no matter whether the "true world" abolishes the "apparent one" or vice versa, the whole framework of reference in which our thinking was accustomed to orient itself breaks down. In these terms, nothing seems to make much sense any more.[34]

The framework of reference that has broken down is the metaphysical "ground" Heidegger refers to in his essay "What are poets for?" In this essay, Heidegger metaphorically describes the end of metaphysics as a "default of God," suggesting that the modern "era is defined by the god's failure to arrive."[35] The result of this failure is a time of groundlessness, a destitute time in which the old metaphysical concepts lose their meaning. When this ground falls away, the old dichotomies of good and evil, beautiful and ugly are no longer plausible. These concepts are based on metaphysical principles, that is, on principles that were justified in terms of a supposedly demonstrable true world. When faith in this true world is lost, the framework of understanding that was founded upon the true world is lost with it. Among the casualties of this collapse was the framework of rules and precepts that were based on transcendental standards such as divine revelation—precepts that are perhaps best exemplified in the ten Christian commandments. Arendt notes that in the 20th century, these commandments utterly failed.

Even before the atrocities of the holocaust, Churchill wrote: "scarcely anything, material or established, which I was brought up to believe was

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[34] Ibid.

[35] Martin Heidegger, *Poetry, Language, Thought*, trans. Albert Hofstadter (New York: Harper and Row, 1975), p. 91.

permanent and vital, has lasted."[36] Arendt explains that principles such as the ten commandments were once considered to be "the few rules and standards according to which men used to tell right from wrong…and whose validity were supposed to be self-evident to every sane person either as a part of divine or of natural law."[37] However, the concept of morality as a permanent set of standards "collapsed almost overnight"[38] with the easy reversal of commandments such as "Thou shalt not kill" in both Hitler's Germany and Stalin's Russia. Arendt writes:

> It is was as though morality suddenly stood revealed in the original meaning of the word, as a set of *mores*, customs and manners, which could be exchanged for another set with hardly more trouble than it would take to change the table manners of an individual or a people.[39]

In light of the moral collapse of the 1930s and 40s, it became apparent that standards which were once thought to be self-evident and permanent were merely conventional standards, and could be reversed with surprisingly little difficulty. Divinely sanctioned principles were replaced by the orders of dictators.

Whatever the historical reasons for this devaluation and reversal of traditional values, Arendt explains the theoretical implications of the reversal in terms of the distinction between the true world and the apparent world. Paraphrasing Nietzsche's criticism of traditional values, Arendt writes:

> not only all Christian but also all Platonic ethics use yardsticks and measurements which are not derived from this world but from

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[36] Arendt, *The Life of the Mind*, p. 11.

[37] Ibid.

[38] Ibid.

[39] Ibid.

> something beyond it—be it the sky of ideas stretching over the dark cave of strictly human affairs or the truly transcendent beyond of a divinely ordained afterlife.[40]

The Christian and Platonic yardsticks that Arendt refers to are absolute moral principles. Jonathan Dancy defines these as "universal claim[s] to the effect that all actions of a certain type are overall wrong (or right.)"[41] Traditionally, absolute moral principles were justified by invoking the true world, a transcendent realm that cannot be perceived by human beings. With the advent of modern science and technology, faith in the true world waned, and as a result, absolute moral principles lost their grounding. Arendt does not believe that nihilism is the necessary consequence of this crisis in faith. However, she does believe that in the context of the modern age, it is not possible to phrase moral problems in terms of a two-world dichotomy. Arendt turns to the human capacity for thinking as a substitute for faith in a supersensory realm.

Apart from her lack of faith in the efficacy of supersensory explanations, Arendt has concerns about the efficacy of moral principles in general. Arendt's concern is not so much with the automatic and unthinking application of moral principles as with how easily moral systems can be reversed. She suggests that when moral principles are adopted without critical thought, then regardless of whether or not they have been theoretically justified before the fact, these principles become little more than clichés—they can either be applied or discarded on a

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[40] Ibid., p. 51.

[41] Jonathan Dancy, "Moral Particularism" (http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/moral-particularism/).

whim. While Arendt does not explicitly link clichés with moral principles, she considers clichés to be “standardized codes of expression and conduct” that “have the socially recognized function of protecting us against reality, that is, against the claim on our thinking attention.”[42] The same can be said of moral principles, and the danger is that an unthinking person is just as likely to sporadically switch between principles of action as between clichés.

During his trial, Eichmann exhibited the startling ability to reverse his standards of judgment without being aware of the contradictions involved. At one point in the trial, Eichmann “suddenly declared with great emphasis that he had lived his whole life according to Kant’s moral precepts, and especially according to a Kantian definition of duty.”[43] Arendt was amazed by this statement, as “Kant’s moral philosophy is so closely bound up with man’s faculty of judgment, which rules out blind obedience.”[44] However, Eichmann proceeded to correctly define Kant’s categorical imperative: Act so that the principle of one’s action can become a principle of general law. He then explained that “from the moment he was charged with carrying out the Final Solution he had ceased to live according to Kantian principles…[H]e had consoled himself with the thought that he no longer was ‘master of his own deeds.’”[45] In effect, Eichmann had distorted the categorical imperative to read: “Act as if the principle your actions were

[42] Arendt, *Responsibility and Judgment*, p. 160.

[43] Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, p. 135–136.

[44] Ibid.

[45] Ibid.

the same as that of the legislator or of the law of the land."[46] He reversed his standards of judgment in spite of the fact that his new standards contradicted his old standards.

Eichmann was no more beholden to Kantian ethics than he was to Nazi doctrine, essentially switching between the two when it seemed to suit his advantage. The example of Eichmann suggests an inherent danger of both clichés and moral principles: both numb the claim on a person's thinking attention, allowing him or her to respond automatically, without thought, to circumstances that may require critical attention. When faced with a moral dilemma, perhaps one that there is no time to think through, moral principles can be relied on as stock solutions. However, when moral principles are applied automatically, without reflection on why or how they are justified, the validity of these principles is merely assumed.

Arendt recognizes that it is not always possible to think through moral dilemmas. She writes: "if we were responsive to [the claim of thinking] all the time, we would soon be exhausted,"[47] the implication being that if we thought through our every action, we would never get around to acting. Like a rule utilitarian, Arendt recognizes that it in situations where immediate action is required, it may be better to fall back on principles that generally apply. Particularists such as Dancy would argue that there are no such generally valid moral principles. But even if the existence of

[46] Ibid.

[47] Arendt, *Responsibility and Judgment*, p. 160.

generally valid principles is accepted for the sake of argument, Arendt does not believe that principles are an adequate substitute or replacement for thinking. If Eichmann had thought before switching his standards of judgment, he may have avoided self-contradiction, and perhaps even the blind commission of horrific crimes.

ii. What Is Thinking?

In “Thinking and Moral Considerations,” Arendt approaches the question of what thinking is in two ways. Firstly, she describes Kant’s distinction between thinking and knowing, and the implications of this distinction. Secondly, she examines the figure of Socrates as a model for the thinking activity. Thinking is characterized as an activity with no tangible results. Indeed, thinking is destructive, as it undoes concepts and ideas by calling them into question. Arendt is left with the problem of how the thinking activity, which seemingly results in nothing, can condition people against evil doing.

Arendt writes: “We owe to Kant the distinction between thinking and knowing, between reason, the urge to think and to understand, and the intellect, which desires and is capable of certain, verifiable knowledge.”[48] Knowledge is characterized as a world-building activity, and Arendt compares the activity of knowing to house building. Arendt does not elaborate here on what she means by this. However, in *The Human Condition*, Arendt writes of the distinction between thinking and cognition,

[48] Ibid., p. 163.

which corresponds to Kant's distinction between reason and knowledge. Here thinking is characterized as "the source of art works" that is manifest "in all great philosophy."[49] In contrast, "the chief manifestation of the cognitive processes, by which we acquire and store up knowledge, is the sciences."[50] Whereas thought "has neither an end nor an aim," cognition "always pursues a definite aim…but once this aim is reached, the cognitive process has come to an end."[51] Cognition then, insofar as it represents the body of technical and scientific knowledge, is world-building in quite a literal sense. Our knowledge of the world shapes how we interact with it, influencing everything from the buildings in which we live to the food that we eat. Thinking, in contrast, "leaves nothing so tangible behind."[52] Whereas the cognitive process is satisfied when it reaches its aim, "the need to think can be satisfied only through thinking, and the thoughts which I had yesterday will satisfy this need today only to the extent that I can think them anew."[53]

For Arendt, philosophy is not concerned with knowledge and truth, but with thinking and meaning. Arendt's philosophy is a departure from the project that Hegel outlines in the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, namely that the

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[49] Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), p. 170.

[50] Ibid.

[51] Ibid.

[52] Arendt, *Responsibility and Judgment*, p. 163.

[53] Ibid.

"proper subject-matter [of philosophy is] the actual cognition of what truly is."[54] Arendt writes:

> To expect truth to come from thinking signifies that we mistake the need to think with the urge to know. Thinking can and must be employed in the attempt to know, but in the exercise of this function it is never itself; it is but the handmaiden of an altogether different enterprise.[55]

This altogether different enterprise is science, which concerns itself with factual truth. Arendt writes: "there are no truths beyond and above factual truths: all scientific truths are factual truths." [56] According to Arendt, "truth is what we are compelled to admit by the nature either of our senses or of our brain."[57] These cognitive truths are the basis of technical knowledge, but not of meaning. Arendt does not deny that thinking and knowing are connected, but she distinguishes between "thinking's quest for meaning and knowledge's quest for truth."[58]

Not everything that is thought can be known, but much of what cannot be known is meaningful. Arendt writes:

> Behind all the cognitive questions for which men find answers, there lurk the unanswerable ones that seem entirely idle and have always been denounced as such. It is more than likely that men, if they were ever to lose the appetite for meaning we call thinking and cease to ask unanswerable questions, would lose not only the ability to produce those thought-things that we call works of art but also the capacity to ask all the answerable questions upon which every civilization is founded…it is because reason and intellect are so connected, despite utter differences in mood and purpose, that the philosophers have always been tempted to accept the criterion of truth—so valid for

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[54] Georg Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A. V. Miller (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), p. 46.

[55] Arendt, *The Life of the Mind*, p. 61.

[56] Ibid.

[57] Ibid.

[58] Ibid., p. 62.

> science and everyday life—as applicable to their own rather extraordinary business as well.[59]

To do so is a fallacy. By asking unanswerable questions, philosophers do not establish scientific truth, but rather clarify or create meaning. Meaning is the context of understanding that people rely on to make sense of the world. Meaning is world-building in a different way than the factual truths of science: whereas science builds the world in terms of technical knowledge, meaning gives us a sense of how we ought to live in the world, and of why we should bother to do so at all. Questions of meaning cannot be answered factually, and they cannot be answered definitively. As Arendt suggests, the thoughts I had yesterday are only meaningful to the extent that I re-think them today. And after today's experiences, I might be compelled to rethink them entirely.

As Arendt notes, Kant's distinction between reason and knowledge has an unintended side effect: "the destruction of all possible foundations of metaphysical systems."[60] For centuries, the work of philosophy consisted of creating systems of thought. These thought-systems were often founded on general principles; for example, on Hobbes' assumption that humans are essentially base creatures, or on Bentham's assumption that happiness is self-evidently good. From these general principles sprouted the various attempts to explain the whole of things that characterize our tradition of philosophy. But if the need to think can only be satisfied through thought, and if yesterday's thoughts must be thought

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[59] Ibid.

[60] Arendt, *Responsibility and Judgment*, p. 164.

anew if they are to continue to satisfy this need, then the notion of a stable thought-system is oxymoronic. The moment a thought is committed to paper, it ceases to be a thought, and becomes a record. Thinking, however, has a self-destructive tendency. As soon as a thought is committed to record, it is as if the thinking process ceases. But when the thinking processes resumes, past thoughts may very well be questioned or overturned. In Kant's words: "I do not share the opinion…that one should not doubt once one has convinced oneself of something. In pure philosophy this is impossible. *Our mind has a natural aversion against it*."[61]

By implication, the general principles on which thought-systems are founded, being thoughts themselves, are constantly subject to the process of re-thinking, a process that they may or may not survive. Even the most complete thought-systems must be reevaluated in light of subsequent thinking. As a result,

> we cannot expect any moral propositions or commandments, no final code of conduct from the thinking activity, least of all a new and now allegedly final definition of what is good and what is evil.[62]

In something of a reversal of the Platonic tradition, Arendt considers philosophical thought to be entirely undogmatic: no truths or absolute concepts result from philosophy. In contrast to technical knowledge, philosophic thinking leaves nothing behind but its record. In a rather anti-Platonic mood, Plato himself

[61] Ibid., p. 166.

[62] Ibid., p. 167.

agrees with the above characterization of philosophy. In his highly ironic Seventh Letter, Plato writes that philosophy does not even leave behind a record of itself:

> On the subjects that concern me nothing is known since there exists nothing in writing on them nor will there ever exist anything in the future…For there is no way of putting it in words like other things which one can learn.[63]

The irony rests in that Plato, unlike Socrates, left a written record of his philosophy. Despite this, he seems to agree with Kant's assessment that philosophical thinking is distinct from knowledge. Whereas knowledge leaves behind a definite product, thinking leaves behind nothing.

If knowledge, the aim science, is also the aim of philosophy, then philosophy is indeed superfluous in the modern scientific age. However, as Craig suggests, the great philosophers did not aim to answer questions, but to raise them. If Plato can be taken for his word in the Seventh Letter, then there is no dogma to be learned in his philosophy. There is only the invitation to think for oneself. However, whereas Craig would likely subscribe to the belief that philosophy, as the activity of thinking, is suited only for the select few, Arendt rejects this opinion. She writes:

> If the ability to tell right from wrong should have anything to do with the ability to think, then we must be able to "demand" its exercise in every sane person no matter how erudite or ignorant, how intelligent or stupid he may prove to be.[64]

With this Arendt clarifies her earlier claim that Eichmann was thoughtless, but not stupid. She writes: "Inability to think is not stupidity; it can be found in highly

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[63] Ibid., p. 168.

[64] Ibid., p. 164.

intelligent people, and wickedness is hardly its cause."[65] According to Arendt, wickedness is "a relatively rare phenomenon."[66] As the case of Eichmann demonstrates, wickedness is not a prerequisite for the commission of evil deeds, though thoughtlessness may well be. With this in mind, Arendt writes, "one would need philosophy, the exercise of reason as the faculty of thought, to prevent evil."[67]

iii. Socrates and the Practice of Thought

As Arendt observes, it is problematic to give an account of thinking because "few thinkers ever told us what made them think and even fewer have cared to describe and examine their thinking experience."[68] Arendt turns to the figure of Socrates as a model for the practice of thinking. She reasons that unlike professional thinkers, Socrates and his thinking method can serve as an example for everyone. This is because Socrates "counted himself neither among the many nor among the few."[69] Furthermore, he did not try "his hand at formulating a doctrine that could be taught and learned."[70] This last claim might raise some scholarly eyebrows: in Plato's Republic, it is Socrates who describes the cave allegory and the theory of forms, and these are generally considered to be the defining doctrines of Platonic thought. However, much like her

[65] Ibid.

[66] Ibid.

[67] Ibid.

[68] Ibid., p. 168.

[69] Ibid.

[70] Ibid., p. 169.

interpretation of Kant, Arendt's interpretation of Socrates makes use of poetic license. According to Arendt, the teachings of Socrates are the antithesis of Platonic philosophy. She writes:

> there is a great deal of controversy about the historical Socrates…I shall ignore it and only mention in passing what is likely to be the chief bone of contention—namely, my belief that there exists a sharp dividing line between what is authentically Socratic and the philosophy taught by Plato.[71]

Arendt's "mention in passing" consists of a brief juxtaposition of two passages in Plato, one from *Symposium* which she considers to be Socratic, and another from *Theatetus* which she considers anti-Socratic. Arendt does not argue for this contention in "Thinking and Moral Considerations" but her essay "Socrates" better explains the supposed divide between Socrates and Plato.

Arendt suggests that the fundamental difference between Plato and Socrates lies in their attitude towards opinion and persuasion. Arendt notes that in Athenian culture, political affairs were conducted "in the form of speech and without compulsion," and therefore the art of persuasion was considered to be "the highest, the truly political art."[72] According to Arendt, a great rift opened between philosophy and politics when the Athenians condemned Socrates to death. Although Socrates was a master of rhetoric, he failed to persuade his jury that by questioning people's assumptions and opinions, he improved the city. According to Arendt, Socrates' failure to convince his jury of the value of philosophy, and his subsequent execution, led Plato to harbor a deep mistrust for the

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[71] Arendt, *The Life of the Mind*, p. 168.

[72] Hannah Arendt, *The Promise of Politics*. (New York: Shocken Books, 2005.) p. 7.

political art, and for politics itself. Arendt writes: “Closely connected with his doubt about the validity of persuasion is Plato’s furious denunciation of *doxa*, opinion, which…became one of the cornerstones of his concept of truth.”[73] Platonic truth, says Arendt, “is always understood as the very opposite of opinion.”[74] She writes:

> The spectacle of Socrates submitting his own *doxa* to the irresponsible opinions of the Athenians, and being outvoted by a majority, made Plato despise opinions and yearn for absolute standards. Such standards, by which human deeds could be judged and human thought could achieve some measure of reliability, from then on became the primary impulse of his political philosophy, and influenced decisively even the purely philosophical doctrine of ideas.[75]

Arendt’s interpretation of Plato is perhaps overly simplistic. It relies on psychological conjecture about Plato’s emotional reaction to the trial of Socrates. More importantly, it disregards the possibility that there is more than one teaching to be found in a writer so nuanced as Plato. It is my opinion that while Plato suggests the possibility of absolute standards—and even eloquently encourages the pursuit of these standards—he also subtly suggests that absolute truth is more of a meaningful story than an epistemic reality. The beauty of Plato’s dialogues, as John M. Cooper suggests, “is that Plato never speaks in his own author’s voice.”[76] In other words, he never makes his own opinions clear, and unlike Aristotle, he never sets out doctrines with an authoritative tone. Instead, Plato puts

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[73] Ibid.

[74] Ibid., p. 8.

[75] Ibid.

[76] John M. Cooper, “Introduction.” In Plato, *Complete Works* (Indianaplios: Hackett Pub., 1997.) p. xxii.

theories and ideas before his readers “to use as a springboard for our own further philosophical thought.”[77] Characterized in this way, Plato sounds much more like Arendt’s Socrates, and certainly not like his polar opposite.

However, Arendt’s decision to sharply distinguish between Plato and Socrates is not without its merits. Whether or not Plato intended to set up a two-world dichotomy with his theory of Forms (and with it, an absolute distinction between knowledge and opinion,) there is a long tradition of ascribing this distinction to Plato. As Cooper notes, there have been two widely contrasting schools of Platonic interpretation since antiquity. According to the skeptical school, Plato’s philosophy “raises questions about everything, examining the reasons pro and con on each issue, but always holds back from asserting anything as definitely established, as known to be the case.”[78] In contrast, the dogmatic school takes “the positions and arguments stated or suggested by Socrates, or whoever the principal speaker is in any given dialogue, as those of the author at the time of composition.”[79] I ascribe to the skeptical view, believing that If Plato’s goal was to establish uncontestable truths, he would have written with an authoritative tone and rejected the dialogue form. Instead, Plato raises more questions than answers, and his theory of Forms is always presented allegorically. However, dogmatic Platonism has had a greater

[77] Ibid.

[78] Ibid., p. xxiii.

[79] Ibid.

influence on the philosophic tradition than skeptical Platonism, in no small part due to the Christian appropriation of Plato's philosophy. It is for this reason that Arendt portrays, or perhaps invents, the strict divide between Platonic and Socratic thought. Recognizing that traditional metaphysics has fallen into disrepute (and Platonic philosophy with it), Arendt preserves the skeptical insights of Plato by attributing them to Socrates. Because dogmatic Platonism is indeed the antithesis of Socratic skepticism, it makes sense for Arendt to distinguish between the two.

It is important to note that in rejecting the two-world dichotomy, Arendt rejects the traditional preference for metaphysical knowledge over worldly opinion. Arendt links opinion with practical reason, and her philosophy can be thought of as an attempt to re-value practical reason. For Arendt, the dissolution of the two-world dichotomy changes the terms in which knowledge and opinion must be understood. Because the idea of absolute knowledge has lost its credibility, there is no longer a meaningful distinction between true knowledge and mere opinion. However, this does not imply that all opinions are equal, and this is why judgment is such an important concept for Arendt. If thinking does not result in knowledge, it may yet enable judgment, thereby providing a means to distinguish between good and bad opinions.

There are three similes that Socrates applies to himself, and in Arendt's view these similes illustrate the Socratic conception of thinking. Firstly, Socrates acts as a gadfly: "he knows how to arouse the citizens

who, without him, will 'sleep on undisturbed for the rest of their lives.'"[80] In other words, through questioning, Socrates incites those around him to think, and to examine the assumptions they had taken for granted. Secondly, Socrates acts as a midwife: he delivers "others of their thoughts, that is, of the implications of their opinions."[81] Furthermore, he performs "the Greek midwife's function of deciding whether the child was fit to live." [82] That is, "he purged people of their 'opinions'…of those unexamined prejudgments which prevent thinking by suggesting that we know [when we know not.]"[83] Finally, Socrates acts as an electric ray: he paralyzes others with his own perplexities.

Arendt notes the peculiarity of this last simile, as the paralyzing effect of the electric ray seems to be the opposite of the rousing effect of the gadfly. In order to explain the paralyzing effect, Arendt refers to the winds of thought, a metaphor that Socrates uses to describe the thinking process. The invisible winds of thought manifest in "concepts, virtues and 'values.'"[84] However,

> the reason why [Socrates] can be understood [as both gadfly and electric ray] is that this same wind, whenever it is aroused, has the peculiarity of doing away with its own pervious manifestations. It is in its nature to undo, unfreeze as it were, what language, the medium of thinking, has frozen into thought—words (concepts, sentences, definitions, doctrines.)[85]

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[80] Arendt, *Responsibility and Judgment*, p. 174.

[81] Ibid.

[82] Ibid.

[83] Ibid.

[84] Ibid., p. 175.

[85] Ibid.

Thinking, then, “inevitably has a destructive, undermining effect on all established criteria, values, measurements for good and evil, in short on those customs and rules of conduct we treat of in morals in ethics.”[86] Thinking paralyzes, because without these criteria and measurements, it is impossible to act meaningfully. When concepts unfreeze, the aura of certainty around them disappears. Socrates suggests that when you think about a concept, unfreezing its meaning, “you will see that you have nothing in your hand but perplexities, and the most we can do with them is share them with each other.”[87] Those who are used to “applying general rules of conduct to particular cases” will find themselves paralyzed and unable to act, as “no such rules can withstand the wind of thought.”[88] For this reason, the thinking process must eventually cease, allowing concepts to “freeze” once again. In other words, the thinker must put his or her perplexities aside, until the time comes when further reflection is possible. The thinking process does not necessarily generate new or better concepts, or even an idea of what “better” might mean. It is not clear that thinking results in anything at all.

Despite its destructive tendencies, thinking can influence our interpretation of concepts that we would not otherwise question. Arendt gives the example of the concept “house.” She suggests that “once you have thought about its implied meaning—dwelling, having a home, being

[86] Ibid., p. 176.

[87] Ibid.

[88] Ibid.

housed—you are no longer likely to accept for your own home whatever the fashion of the time may prescribe."[89] Questioning the fashion of the time has great political relevance: had Eichmann done this, he may have found himself at odds with the orders of his superiors. But as Arendt suggests, merely recognizing the complexity of a concept such as house "by no means guarantees that you will be able to come up with an acceptable solution for your own housing problems."[90] Simply recognizing that a concept is problematic does not aid one in developing a new concept. However, simply recognizing that such problems exist may enable the most politically relevant aspect of thought: Arendt suggests that all we can do with our perplexities is to share them with others. This sharing has great political significance, as it is the foundation of judgment. Unlike thinking, judgment is not a solitary act. It requires the input and the insights of a community of observers, and hence the sharing of perplexities. Arendt's notion of judging in the context of a community will be discussed further in chapter two.

iv. Putting a Resultless Enterprise to Use

Setting aside the possibility that thinking enables judging, what benefit can thinking—which is at best resultless, and at worst destructive—be to the individual? How is it that thinking can condition people against evildoing when thinking undermines all strict definitions of good and evil?

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[89] Ibid.

[90] Ibid.

Arendt describes thinking as an internal dialogue in which a person questions his or her own actions and assumption. Arendt's answer to the above questions is that by engaging in the thinking dialogue, people can be become aware of the implications of their actions and thereby avoid contradicting themselves. Those who think are less likely to act in ways that would go against their conscience, whereas those who do not think can easily act in ways that they would otherwise regret. Arendt's answer is problematic, but it is perhaps more compelling than it initially appears.

Drawing once again on Socrates, Arendt quotes the following passage from Plato's *Gorgias*:

> 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*.[91]

Arendt remarks on the seemingly paradoxical nature of this statement. It is impossible for something that is one to be "either in or out of harmony with itself; you always need at least two tones to produce a harmonious sound."[92] In the above quotation, Socrates refers to a peculiar aspect of consciousness: the fact that while we always appear to others as one being, there is also a sense in which we appear to ourselves. On a subjective level, through conscious self-awareness, "a difference is inserted into my Oneness."[93] Instead of existing in the singular, it is as if the thinker exists in the plural. Arendt writes: "So long as I am conscious…I am identical with myself only for others to whom I appear as

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[91] Ibid., p. 181.

[92] Ibid., p. 183.

[93] Ibid., p. 184.

one and the same. For myself…I am inevitably *two-in-one*.[94] Using Platonic language, this two-in-one is what makes possible the soundless dialogue of thinking, the dialogue "between me and myself."[95]

The Socratic method, whereby Socrates engages others in dialogue to test the strength of their opinions, is apparently something that Socrates also applied to himself. To better describe the two-in-one dialogue, Socrates uses the metaphor of going home to meet the "other fellow." He links the thinking process with meeting an obnoxious fellow—that is, with meeting himself—and having all of his opinions cross-examined.[96] For Socrates, the thinking dialogue is akin to retreating into the self's company and examining one's own opinions. Arendt suggests that if the dialogue is to accomplish anything, it is necessary for the partners to be friends. This is because the thinking dialogue is the greatest test of a person's conscience. She writes:

> It is better for you to suffer than to do wrong because you can remain the friend of the sufferer; who would want to be the friend of and have to live together with a murderer? Not even a murderer.[97]

Arendt gives the example of Richard the Third who, in his final soliloquy, confronts his inner self. When Richard contemplates his actions, it is as if he meets the other fellow. He realizes that in living with himself, he is living with a murderer, and can no longer bear his own company.

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[94] Ibid.

[95] Ibid.

[96] Ibid., p. 186.

[97] Ibid.

Those who do not think, however, will not be troubled with a guilty conscience. They will never have to answer to their inner selves. Arendt explains:

> He who does not know the intercourse between me and myself (in which we examine what we say and what we do) will not mind contradicting himself, and this means he will never be able or willing to give account of what he says or does.[98]

Arendt has Eichmann in mind, whose thoughtlessness led him to contradict himself with abandon. Unlike Eichmann, those who think can be held accountable to both themselves and to others. This is because thinking "brings out the implications of unexamined opinions and thereby destroys them."[99] According to Arendt, it would be self-contradictory for a thinker to recognize the negative implications of an action and still proceed in the act. To do so would be to make an enemy of oneself. (There are of course people who do just this, and Arendt may be referring to these people when she writes of the "relatively rare phenomenon"[100] of wickedness.)

Apart from the significance of thinking for self-consistency, Arendt suggests that the destructive nature of thinking is inherently political:

> For this destruction has a liberating effect on another human faculty, the faculty of judgment… It is the faculty to judge particulars without subsuming them under those general rules which can be taught and learned until they grow into habits… The manifestation of the wind of thought is no knowledge, it is the ability to tell right from wrong, beautiful from ugly. And this may prevent catastrophes, at least for myself, in the rare moments when the chips are down.[101]

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[98] Ibid., p. 186.

[99] Ibid., p. 188.

[100] Ibid., p. 164.

[101] Ibid., p. 188–189.

According to Arendt, thinking enables the judgment of particulars outside of the context of general rules. Thinking does not result in knowledge—certainly not in knowledge about right and wrong, beautiful and ugly—and yet it somehow manifests in the ability to tell the difference between these concepts. Arendt stressed earlier that if thinking is to have any moral significance, then every person must be capable thinking. However, the above passage concedes that thinking may only help a select few to avoid catastrophe—perhaps only Arendt. The pressing question which Arendt does not address here is this: *how* does thinking enable judgment of particulars? Furthermore, what is the relationship between judgment and concepts such as good and evil? It is not clear how it is possible to judge anything as good or bad without relying on the very concepts of good and bad that thinking undermines. Unless, that is, judgments are made based on concepts that are not considered to be absolutes, concepts that admit revision and adapt to the changing winds of thought. Apart from the question of how thinking enables judging, the above analysis of thinking leaves a number of other questions unanswered. What is meant by “giving an account” of one’s thought, and why is it morally important to avoid self-contradiction? Arendt explores these questions in her *Lectures on Kant’s Political Philosophy* and in the essay “The Crisis in Culture.”

CHAPTER TWO: JUDGMENT

Thinking has the cleansing effect of eliminating poorly considered opinions, but it does not necessarily result in better opinions. It can help one to get a sense for what is wrong, but not necessarily what is right. Presumably it is through judging that positive assertions about right and wrong are made. According to Arendt, judgment is the political faculty of the mind: it makes it possible for people to live together and also to take care of the world they share in common.[102] But how are thinking and judging related? The incompleteness of *The Life of the Mind* makes this a difficult question to answer. At the end of her earlier work "Thinking and Moral Considerations," Arendt suggests that thinking *enables* judgment, implying that it is not possible to judge without thinking. However, in *The Life of the Mind*, Arendt suggests that the mind's faculties of thinking, willing and judging are autonomous in that "each of them obeys the laws inherent in the activity itself."[103] As an example, she notes that while thinking may provide reasons for a person to act it is not capable of

[102] It should be noted that Arendt appropriates the term "faculty" from Kant, but likely does not mean to imply a technical sense of the term. While Arendt denotes three mental faculties, each with their own particular traits, it is likely that Arendt's own conception of the thinking faculty undermines any absolute distinctions. It could very well be that none of Arendt's faculties can be understood without the others, but the incomplete nature of Arendt's work makes it difficult to speculate about this possibility.

[103] Arendt, *The Life of the Mind*, p. 70.

actually moving the will. Therefore, willing cannot be reduced to thinking, and presumably neither can judging. It is possible that between writing "Thinking and Moral Considerations" and *The Life of the Mind*, Arendt rethought the relationship between thinking and judging, and no longer believed that thinking enables judging. But while it is true that Arendt speaks of thinking and judging as autonomous faculties, she maintains that they are closely related. It may not be possible to reduce judging to thinking, but this does not imply that one can judge well without thinking.

It is important to point out that Arendt had reservations about the scope of *The Life of the Mind*, and also in her own ability to make sense of such loaded concepts as thinking, willing and judging. She refers to the undertaking as "presumptuous" and she makes no claim to be either a philosopher or an expert in her subject matter.[104] Presumably then, Arendt considered her account of the mind to be a work in progress that would admit to later revision. This explains any discrepancies between her earlier and later works, and also suggests that Arendt had not fully realized the relationship between thinking, willing and judging.

The following chapter is devoted to an interpretation of Arendt's writings on judgment—specifically, her *Lectures on Kant's Political Philosophy* and her essay "The Crisis in Culture." I contend that Arendt does not adequately explain the relationship between thinking and judging in these works. However, if Arendt's concept of impartiality is

[104] Ibid., p. 3.

reinterpreted, it is possible to provide the necessary link between thinking and judging. After establishing this link, I will consider some objections to Arendt's concept of judgment. It should be noted that Arendt takes some liberties with her interpretation of Kant. Her explicit goal in the *Lectures* is to examine the political philosophy that Kant never wrote, but might have written had he had the time. To a great extent what Arendt writes is her own political philosophy, using Kant's ideas as a starting point. When I refer to Kant's understanding of judgment, I am therefore writing of Kant as Arendt appropriates him, and not necessarily as Kant understood himself.

More specifically, Arendt diverges from Kant's self-interpretation in respect to her appropriation of aesthetic judgment over determinate judgment. For Kant, determinate judgment is based upon subsuming particulars under universal laws, and it is only in this way that moral judgments are formed. Aesthetic judgment, in contrast, attempts to find what is universal in the particular. It is involved in subjective taste but never in moral reasoning. However, as I will describe further below, Arendt suggests that judgments of taste are the basis of both moral and aesthetic reasoning. This is a departure from a strictly Kantian understanding of judgment, but it is also an interesting way to make room for moral reasoning outside the context of universal laws.

The ability to cultivate taste by taking on the perspectives of others is an important aspect of judgment. Arendt implies that there are two ways of

cultivating taste. The first is to engage others in dialogue, dispassionately allowing their opinions to challenge and influence one's own. The second is to take on the perspectives of other people by imagining oneself in their place. However, it is arguable that neither of these methods is plausible. A Foucauldian, for example, might argue that how we perceive things is deeply ingrained through societal forces of discipline, and that perceptions cannot simply be overturned through imagination or rational argument. To the extent that this is correct, it is overly idealistic to presume that one can objectively understand another's perspective.

Arendt would likely agree that societal forces influence our perceptions, but would not agree that they do so absolutely. She does not comment on the extent to which imagination and dialogue allow people to understand differing perspectives, but Arendt certainly does not conceive of the world citizen as someone who possess objective knowledge about the perceptions of others. Presumably the world citizen imagines other perspectives to the best of his or her ability, and judges accordingly. As humans are finite and limited beings, this is perhaps all that can be asked of the human faculty of judgment.

Just as thought, for Arendt, does not result in absolute moral standards, judgment is never absolute but always admits to revision in light of further experience. What sets Arendt apart from the debate between relativists and absolutists is her realization that a lack of absolute standards does not prevent people from making judgments. The move

from doctrine to critical thinking characterizes the first aspect of Arendt's moral philosophy. The second aspect, inspired by Kant, is a reaction against the radical individualism implicit in Descartes' philosophy: Kant suggests that judgment is not a solitary activity, but a political act. From this Arendt abstracts that just as company is indispensible to the thinker, judgment is not possible without taking the perspectives of others into consideration. Arendt's moral philosophy is not a guidebook of principles, but rather an account of how judgments are formed and how they can be improved.

i. Critique and Midwifery

Arendt interprets Kant as a thinker who stands against the tradition of philosophy. By distinguishing between reason and knowledge Kant became "the 'all-destroyer,' namely, the destroyer of any belief that I can *know* in so-called metaphysical matters."[105] According to Arendt, Kant "stands in twofold opposition to dogmatic metaphysics on the one hand, to skepticism on the other."[106] Instead of dogmatically adhering to principles or skeptically denying all knowledge claims, Kant represents a third alternative: that of critical thinking. Kant's concept of critique comes from the Enlightenment ideal of criticism. For Kant, criticism implies a "liberation from prejudices, from authorities, a purifying event" as well as a "limitation

[105] Hannah Arendt, *Lectures on Kant's Political Philosophy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), p. 34.

[106] Ibid., p. 32.

and purification" of reason. [107] In this respect, Kantian criticism can be linked to the Socratic method. By engaging his fellow Athenians in dialogue, Socrates forced them to give an account of their opinions, "delivering" them of the implications of these opinions as a midwife would deliver a child. His intention was to purge opinions that did not hold up to scrutiny. Arendt writes: "Socrates discovered the only rule that holds sway over thinking—the rule of consistency (as Kant was to call it in the *Critique of Judgment*) or, as it was later called, the axiom of noncontradiction."[108] Kant, however, believed that the rule of consistency applied as much to action as to thought, and made it an integral part of his ethics.

> Ethics in Kant is also based on a thought process: Act so that the maxim of your action can be willed by you to become a general law…It is, again, the same general rule—Do not contradict yourself (not yourself but your thinking ego)—that determines both thinking and acting.[109]

For both Kant and Socrates, the results of critical thinking are "negative" in that thinking eliminates bad opinions but does not necessarily replace them with better opinions. Arendt notes that thinkers such as Hegel and Schelling were inspired by Kant to create grandiose philosophic systems. In doing so, they ignored Kant's insight that the benefits of thinking are negative, and instead attempted to establish new doctrines. Arendt dismisses the systems of Hegel and Schelling as "exercises in

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[107] Ibid., p. 31.

[108] Ibid., p. 37.

[109] Ibid.

sheer speculation."[110] She argues that philosophical doctrines go against the spirit of critical thinking: "it is not as though the seemingly negative business of critique could be followed by the seemingly positive business of system-making."[111] Philosophic systems attempt to establish their own validity by refuting competing theories. In contrast, critical thinking undermines the idea that any one perspective can explain the entirety of things. The critical thinker realizes that yesterday's conclusions can always be revised by the thoughts of today.

In "Thinking and Moral Considerations," Arendt uses the metaphor of frozen thoughts to describe how the meaning of concepts solidifies when they are not being subjected to thought. For example, the concept of house is relatively unproblematic: unless a person is philosophically reflecting on the meaning of house, there will not be anything alarming or confusing about it. It is a "frozen" thought because its meaning is fixed in place. Frozen thoughts situate people within an intelligible frame of reference, allowing them to go about their daily activities without slipping into existential crises. It would be difficult to go home from work if, on reflection, one had no idea what the concept of "house" meant.

Frozen thoughts are concepts that give people bearing: they allow us to make decisions based on the conceptual framework that they provide. Despite their practical importance, frozen thoughts always run the risk of unfreezing—at least around those who are inclined to think about them.

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[110] Ibid., p. 32.

[111] Ibid.

When concepts such as “house” are exposed to what Arendt calls the “winds of thought,” it is as if they dissolve, their meaning is no longer definite. As an example, Arendt notes that the word house “implies something considerably less tangible than the structure perceived by our eyes…it is a word that could not exist unless one presupposes thinking about being housed, dwelling, having a home.”[112] The layers of meaning that underlie the word “house” are made explicit when the concept is thought about. The meaning of the concept is no longer frozen, and a thinker’s experiences may influence how he or she determines the meaning of “house.”

Arendt notes the paralyzing effect of thinking on acting. If a builder is constantly thinking about the meaning of house, it would be difficult to build a house. Similarly, it would be difficult to make a judgment while contemplating the nature of justice. For this reason, the thinking process must eventually cease and thoughts must eventually solidify, freezing back into concepts. The thinker is then free to become an actor, and to utilize concepts when making decisions. The danger of philosophical, religious and ideological systems is that they attempt to permanently freeze concepts. Canonizing a certain dogma—be it a theory of forms, a theory of God, or a theory of Arian supremacy—is essentially an invitation (or perhaps a command) to stop thinking. Where institutional

[112] Arendt, *Responsibility and Judgment*, p. 172.

thoughtlessness serves as the societal norm—anything goes, and people will simply follow along with it.

As Arendt observed at the Eichmann trial, the greatest crimes of the war were made possible by a disturbing lack of thinking. Thinking about a concept is necessary in order to recognize its implications. Thinking is therefore also necessary in order to act responsibly, since it would be impossible to do so without being aware of the implications of one's actions. Critical thinking is a compelling alternative to dogmatism because dogmatism encourages irresponsibility (if not in the founder of the dogma, who presumably has reasons for creating it, then in those who follow him or her.) Critical thinking is a strong alternative to skepticism, if for no other reason than that nothing will come of nothing. As Arendt suggests, every thinker goes through a dogmatic stage: "we are either dogmatic in philosophy or we solve all problems by believing in the dogmas of some church, in revelation."[113] Skepticism is the first reaction thinkers have against dogmatism, and it is triggered "by the inescapable experience of *many* dogmas, all of which claim to possess *the* truth."[114] The skeptic concludes "that there is no such thing as truth, that therefore I may either arbitrarily choose some dogmatic doctrine…or I may simply shrug my shoulders about so profitless a business."[115] As an alternative to skepticism and dogmatism, critical thinking suggests the following:

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[113] Arendt, *Lectures on Kant's Political Philosophy*, p. 33.

[114] Ibid.

[115] Ibid.

> Perhaps men, though they have a notion, an idea, of truth for regulating their mental processes, are not capable, as finite beings, of *the* truth…Meanwhile, they are quite able to inquire into such human faculties as they have been given…Let us analyze what we can know *and* what we cannot.[116]

In other words, while it may not be possible to ascertain the truth about God or the Good, it is still possible to inquire into these concepts, to question what is said about them, and to purify them of unreasonable assumptions and opinions.

Kant's notion of critical thinking plays a similar role in Arendt's philosophy as Socratic midwifery: both offer alternatives to dogmatism and skepticism, and both suggest that thinking is an integral part of judging. However, it is only with Kant's insight that company is indispensible to the thinker that a coherent account of judgment begins to take shape.

ii. Publicity and Impartiality

According to Arendt, critical thinking "applies not only to doctrines and concepts one receives from others, to the prejudices and traditions one inherits; it is precisely by applying critical standards to one's own thoughts that one learns the art of critical thought."[117] Critical thinking is therefore a learned skill, one that can only be improved with further thinking experience. However, in an anti-Cartesian vein, Arendt suggests that the experience of critical thinking cannot be reduced to the perspective of the individual self-reflecting ego. On the contrary, critical thinking cannot be learned "without publicity, without the testing that arises from contact with

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[116] Ibid.

[117] Ibid., p. 42.

other people's thinking."[118] Publicity is a precondition for impartiality, and impartiality is a defining characteristic of good judgment. To better illustrate this point, Arendt quotes a letter from Kant to Marcus Herz:

> You know that I do not approach reasonable objections with the intention merely of refuting them, but that in thinking them over I always weave them into my judgments, and afford them the opportunity of overturning all my most cherished beliefs. I entertain the hope that by thus viewing my judgments impartially from the standpoint of others some third view that will improve upon my previous insights may be obtainable.[119]

Arendt explains this letter as follows:

> 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.[120]

The "impartial view" has long been understood as a God's eye perspective, one that transcends human comprehension, but has nonetheless been invoked to settle countless human disputes. This higher standpoint has had many incarnations in the history of western thought: it is exemplified in Plato's theory of Forms and the Judeo-Christian theory of God. Arendt links impartiality with publicity, and denies that a higher standpoint is necessary to obtain it. With this rather Promethean move, Arendt brings the concept of impartiality down to earth from the heavens, and argues that humans are in fact capable of it. For human beings, impartiality does not culminate in absolute judgments, but rather allows them to improve upon their opinions by taking other opinions into account.

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[118] Ibid.

[119] Ibid.

[120] Ibid.

Kant refers to impartiality as an “enlargement of the mind,” one that is accomplished by “comparing our judgments with the possible rather than the actual judgments of others, and by putting ourselves in the place of any other man.”[121] Impartiality results in the general standpoint of the world citizen, “a viewpoint from which to look upon, to watch, to form judgments, or…to reflect upon human affairs.”[122] According to Arendt, it is the mind’s faculty of imagination that allows people to adopt the standpoint of the world citizen.

Before I explain the significance of imagination for judgment, it is important to note what seems to be a conspicuous hole in Arendt’s reasoning. Up until this point in the lectures, approximately half way through the series as a whole, Arendt focuses almost entirely on Kant’s notion of critical thinking. However, after page 43, Arendt shifts her focus to judgment, and there is not a single mention of critical thinking in the subsequent pages.[123] The reason this is problematic is because Arendt does not distinguish between critical thinking and judgment, but rather conflates the two concepts. On page 42, Arendt associates critical thinking with impartiality, though she does not explain how these concepts are related. She later associates impartiality with judgment, and makes it clear that impartiality is a necessary condition for judgment. However, Arendt

[121] Ibid., p. 43.

[122] Ibid., p. 44.

[123] There is a mention of “uncritical” opinions on page 49, but not in a context that relates the concepts of critical thinking and judging. The word “critical” does not appear after page 43.

makes no effort to bridge the concepts of critical thinking and judging. She introduces the concept of impartiality in relation to critical thinking, but then proceeds to associate impartiality with judgment and ignores the concept of critical thinking entirely.

The suddenness of Arendt's leap between the concepts of thinking and judging, and the subtle way in which she conflates these concepts, suggests that Arendt never fully realized the relationship between thinking and judging. The *Lectures on Kant's Political Philosophy* is the best published account of Arendt's conception of judgment, yet it leaves the question of how thinking relates to judging unanswered. Unfortunately, the question that Arendt leaves her readers at the end of "Thinking and Moral Considerations"—how is it that thinking enables judgment of good and evil, beautiful and ugly?—will never be answered by Arendt. I can only hypothesize about what she may have written but never had the opportunity to complete.

When Arendt suggests that critical thinking cannot be learned "without the testing that arises from contact with other people's thinking," what she implies is that critical thinking requires impartiality, the enlargement of one's mind that "is obtained by taking the viewpoints of others into account."[124] Later in the lectures, Arendt explains that impartiality "is the condition *sine qua non* of right judgment."[125] Stated otherwise, Arendt is suggesting that impartiality is a necessary condition for *both* critical

[124] Ibid., p. 42.

[125] Ibid,. p. 73.

thinking and judgment. However, if this is the case, then it is not at all clear how critical thinking enables judgment. Furthermore, while it seems obvious that impartiality should be considered a condition for good judgment, it is not clear why impartiality is necessary for critical thinking. In fact, judging from Arendt's description of critical thinking as an alternative to both dogmatism and skepticism, it would be more intuitive to suggest that critical thinking is necessary for impartiality.

Dogmatism—the steadfast adherence to one particular point of view, to the exclusion of all other points of view—is the opposite of impartiality as Arendt understands it. The general standpoint of impartiality is achieved by comparing one's judgment with the possible judgments of others, and by allowing these judgments the opportunity to overturn one's own deeply held convictions. Skepticism—the belief that there is no such thing as a universally valid perspective, and that the quest for right judgment is fruitless—is just as antithetical to impartiality as dogmatism. Critical thinking, as an alternative to dogmatism and skepticism, is therefore the only perspective on the nature of truth that would allow for impartiality. Dogmatists would reject the perspectives of others and skeptics would reject all perspectives. In contrast, the critical thinker rationally considers disparate perspectives, questions whether or not they hold up to scrutiny, and amalgamates these perspectives into his or her own. Critical thinking is therefore a necessary condition for impartiality, and not vice versa.

If critical thinking is necessary for impartiality, and if impartiality is necessary for judgment, then it follows that critical thinking enables judgment. Although Arendt never explicitly formulates this syllogism, I believe it is implied in works such as “Thinking and Moral Considerations.” Furthermore, it is the only way to make sense of the abrupt leap between thinking and judging that Arendt makes half way through the *Lectures on Kant’s Political Philosophy*. It is my contention that although Arendt never formulated the relationship between thinking and judging as I have above, this is the formulation that she intended. It is the logical continuation of her discussion of critical thinking as an alternative to dogmatism and skepticism. More importantly, it provides the necessary bridge between thinking and judging that is otherwise missing from the lectures.

iii. Taste, Imagination and the *Sensus Communis*

As I mentioned before, it can be argued that impartial judgment is unattainable because it is not possible to gain any real insight into the perspectives of other people. No matter how empathetic or unbiased a person may be, it is impossible to know what another person is thinking or feeling. Arendt anticipates this argument, and to a large extent agrees with it. She writes: “critical thinking does not consist in an enormously enlarged empathy through which one can know what actually goes on in the mind of all others.”[126] On the contrary, even if this kind of enlarged empathy were possible, it “would mean no more than passively to accept [another’s]

[126] Ibid., p. 43.

thought, that is, to exchange [another's] prejudices for [one's own]."[127] In contrast to this exchange of prejudices, enlarged thinking is the result of "abstracting from the limitations" of one's own standpoint—where a standpoint is defined as the conditions a person is "subject to, which always differ from one individual to the next, from one class or group as compared to another."[128] More specifically, enlarged thinking requires that one disregards "what we usually call self-interest."[129] Arendt writes: "The greater the reach—the larger the realm in which the enlightened individual is able to move from standpoint to standpoint—the more 'general' will be his thinking."[130] General thinking is what characterizes impartiality, and an impartial standpoint is necessary in order to form judgments.

Arendt's response to the above argument is not entirely convincing. She suggests that impartiality is obtained by disregarding self-interest, but it is not clear why a self-interested person is less able to "move from standpoint to standpoint" than someone who is not self-interested. Granted, if the kind of general thinking that Arendt describes is possible, then a person who is not self-interested would be much better equipped to objectively assess the differing perspectives he or she would encounter. However the question remains as to what extent any person is capable of the enlarged mentality that Arendt describes. This is not a question that Arendt directly addresses, but since she strongly advocates that everyone

[127] Ibid.

[128] Ibid.

[129] Ibid.

[130] Ibid., p. 43.

is capable of critical thinking, it can be assumed that she believes everyone is capable of making sound judgments as well.

It is important to reiterate that being impartial does not entail knowledge of other people's perspectives. Impartiality only requires that one is capable of imagining how someone else's perspective may differ from one's own. Impartiality is therefore best understood as an attitude or disposition that aids people in understanding the perspectives of others, as opposed to an objective state of being. Complete impartiality is not possible for finite intellects.

In Arendt's view, judgment relies on both imagination and common sense, where common sense is understood "in its very special Kantian meaning, according to which common sense is community sense, *sensus communis*."[131] Imagination and common sense allow for the general communicability of taste, which is the sense that Kant associates with judgment. It turns out that impartiality has more to do with communicating one's own standpoint, and having an appreciation for how the standpoints of others may differ, than with having actual knowledge or experience of other people's perspectives. While some people are more capable of communicating than others, it can be assumed that everyone is capable of communicating to a certain extent. Insofar as everyone is capable of thinking and the highest form of thinking is speech, it is reasonable for

[131] Ibid., p. 72.

Arendt to suggest that everyone is capable of judgment, with the important caveat that some will be more capable than others.

According to Arendt, Kant uses the concepts of taste and judgment interchangeably. In fact, he initially thought of his *Critique of Judgment* as a Critique of Taste.[132] Arendt notes that it is odd for Kant to associate judgment with a highly subjective sense such as taste, as opposed to a more objective sense such as sight or hearing. Taste, in contrast to sight, is "the most private of the senses."[133] Furthermore, taste is "discriminatory by [its] very nature" because "the it-pleases-or-displeases-me is overwhelmingly present in taste."[134] A person's taste is "unmediated by any thought or reflection," and "there can be no dispute about right or wrong."[135] This is because "no argument can persuade me to like oysters if I do not like them. In other words, the disturbing thing about matters of taste is that they are not communicable."[136]

How, then, can the most subjective and incommunicable of the senses be representative of judgment, the faculty of the mind which is perhaps most dependent on communicability? According to Arendt, the answer lies in the faculties of imagination and common sense. Imagination is "the faculty of having present what is absent."[137] Imagination transforms

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[132] Ibid., p. 66.

[133] Ibid.

[134] Ibid.

[135] Ibid.

[136] Ibid.

[137] Ibid.

objects of perception “into something I do not have to be directly confronted with but that I have in some sense internalized.”[138] In other words, imagination re-presents objects to the mind, preparing these objects so that they can be reflected on. Arendt writes:

> Only what touches, affects, one in representation, when one can no longer be affected by immediate presence—when one is uninvolved, like [a spectator]—can be judged to be right or wrong, important or irrelevant, beautiful or ugly, or something in between. One then speaks of judgment and no longer of taste because, though it still affects one like a matter of taste, one now has, by means of representation, established the proper distance…for evaluating something at its proper worth. By removing the object, one has established the conditions for impartiality.[139]

Imagination is a means by which thinkers can distance themselves from the immediacy of their reactions to objects and events. Presumably, this establishes the conditions for impartiality by lessening the emotional bias of a thinker, and by improving a thinker’s ability to communicate his or her thoughts and opinions in an objective way.

However, it is not clear how the act of representing an object through the imagination succeeds in eliminating a thinker’s bias towards it. Generally speaking, bias has a source, be it socialization into the customs of a culture, or education in a particular doctrine. The psychological distance provided by representation may lessen a person’s immediate emotional reaction to an object. But if the source of this emotional reaction is an underlying bias or prejudice, then it is this prejudice which must be addressed before impartiality can be established. In other words, while

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[138] Ibid.

[139] Ibid., p. 67.

Arendt is correct in that imagination distances a thinker from the immediacy of an object, this distance may not in itself be enough to establish impartiality. The psychological distance provided by imagination would have to be combined with critical thinking, which eliminates prejudices, if impartiality is to be possible. Arendt does not specifically link critical thinking with imagination. However, she does imply that the two faculties are related when she writes of how imagination prepares objects for reflection:

> It is not important whether or not [a beautiful object] pleases in perception; what pleases merely in perception is gratifying but not beautiful. It pleases in representation, for now the imagination has prepared it so that I can reflect on it.[140]

Here it seems that imagination is a means to the end of reflection. Presumably, when Arendt refers to reflection she has critical thinking in mind; that is, critical reflection on whatever object the imagination represents. If this is the case, then it makes sense for Arendt to link imagination with impartiality.

If imagination prepares the way for impartiality, then common sense is what reconciles an individual's tastes and judgments with those of a larger community. Arendt writes: "Kant was very early aware that there was something nonsubjective in what seems to be the most private and subjective sense,"[141] that is, in the sense of taste. Regarding taste, Kant writes:

> The beautiful, interests [us] only [when we are] in society…. A man abandoned by himself on a desert island would adorn neither his hut

[140] Ibid.

[141] Ibid.

> nor his person…. [Man] is not contented with an object if he cannot feel satisfaction in it in common with others.[142]

Stated otherwise, the faculty of judgment presupposes that one is in community with others, and it does not function without taking the possible judgments of others into account. In matters of taste, "egoism is overcome…we must overcome our special subjective conditions for the sake of others."[143] Arendt explains that judgment "always reflects upon others and their taste…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."[144] The supersensible world that Arendt refers to is, once again, the world of Forms or of supernatural deities that philosophy and religion has been preoccupied with since the Greeks. Arendt suggests that in the modern world—which has renounced the traditional, supersensible standards of judgment—it is necessary to link judgment with this-worldly standards and experiences. The community in which a person judges becomes the standard by which judgments are made.

Arendt explains this further in her essay "The Crisis in Culture":

> Judgment, to be valid, depends on the presence of others. Hence judgment is endowed with a certain specific validity but is never universally valid. Its claims to validity can never extend further than the others in whose place the judging person has put himself for his considerations...it is not valid for those who do not judge or for those who are not members of the public realm where the objects of judgment appear.[145]

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[142] Ibid.

[143] Ibid.

[144] Ibid.

[145] Hannah Arendt, *Between Past and Future* (New York: Penguin, 2006), p. 217.

Judgments are only valid within the community of those who judge, and the size of this community is limited by the judging individual's ability to imagine the perspectives of others. If, for example, a person were to pass judgment on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict without taking into consideration the perspectives of both Israelis and Palestinians, whatever judgment he or she came to would be invalid. This is because neglecting the perspectives of either group would be akin to removing that group from the community of those who judge. Judgments are only valid to the extent that they take every member of an affected community into consideration. Furthermore, they are never universally valid because it is impossible to take every person's perspective into account, or to predict how future generations will react to present judgments. Judgments, much like concepts, must be revised as communities change and as their experiences evolve.

Common sense, or the *sensus communis*, is like "an extra sense…that fits us into a community."[146] This community sense is an important standard by which judgments are made. Arendt asks "What are the standards of the operation of reflection?"[147] and by this she means "What is the standard by which a person can choose between approbation or disapprobation when making a judgment?" Arendt settles upon the criterion of communicability, suggesting that the choice between approbation or disapprobation rests upon our ability to communicate our decision to the larger community of judges. Arendt's choice of the criterion

[146] Arendt, *Lectures on Kant's Political Philosophy*, p. 70.

[147] Ibid., p. 69.

of communicability is somewhat perplexing. If it is possible to communicate one's reasons for approving of something, it is equally possible to communicate reasons why one should disapprove. How, then, does the criterion of communicability aid in making a decision?

Presumably, the choice between approbation and disapprobation is made based on taste, and the ability to communicate taste in such a way that others understand and agree. Arendt writes:

> The it-pleases-or-displeases-me, which as a feeling seems so utterly private and noncommunicative, is actually rooted in this community sense and is therefore open to communication once it has been transformed by reflection, which takes all others and their feelings into account.[148]

The decision to approve or disapprove is therefore based on taste, and taste is based on one's sense of the possible (rather than the actual) opinions and feelings of others. However, there is no guarantee that all members of a judging community will agree with each other. "One can never compel anyone to agree with one's judgments…one can only 'woo' or 'court' the agreement of others."[149] For this reason, taste and judgment have great political significance. In "The Crisis in Culture," Arendt explains that "this 'wooing' or persuading corresponds closely to what the Greeks called *πείθειν*, the convincing and persuading speech which they regarded as the typically political form of [speech.]"[150] In contrast to dialogue—the philosophical form of speech—persuasive speech was not

[148] Ibid., p. 72.

[149] Ibid.

[150] Arendt, *Between Past and Future*, p. 219.

concerned with knowledge, but with "judgment and decision, the judicious exchange of opinion about the sphere of public life and the common world."[151]

In order to explain the significance of the persuasive nature of judgment, it is important to recall the distinction Kant makes between reason and intellect, as Arendt describes it in *The Life of the Mind*:

> Kant drew this distinction between the two mental faculties after he had discovered the "scandal of reason," that is, the fact that our mind is not capable of certain and verifiable knowledge regarding matters and questions that it nevertheless cannot help thinking about, and for him such matters, that is, those with which mere thought is concerned, were restricted to what we now often call the "ultimate questions" of God, freedom, and immortality.[152]

In other words, the scandal consisted in the realization that there could be no knowledge where the ultimate questions are concerned, despite the great existential importance of these questions for the lives of human beings. Whereas the concept of God can be meaningful for a person, there can be no knowledge of God. Therefore, Arendt writes, the distinction between reason and intellect "coincides with a distinction between two altogether different mental activities, thinking and knowing, and two altogether different concerns, meaning, in the first category, and cognition, in the second."[153] Whereas cognition is related to the quest for verifiable truth, "*the need of reason is not inspired by the quest for truth but by the quest for meaning*."[154]

Both reason and judgment are associated with meaning. Arendt writes:

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[151] Ibid.

[152] Arendt, *The Life of the Mind*, p. 14.

[153] Ibid.

[154] Ibid., p. 15.

> Taste judgments, furthermore, are currently held to be arbitrary because they do not compel in the sense in which demonstrable facts or truth proved by argument compel agreement. They share with political opinions that they are persuasive…Culture and politics, then, belong together because it is not knowledge or truth which is at stake, but rather judgment and decision.[155]

The above passage is significant because it suggests is that both reason and judgment are distinct from verifiable truth. Reason and judgment are *persuasive*: they are concerned with meaning as opposed to knowledge. When someone judges something to be beautiful, he or she is not claiming to have objective knowledge of what counts as beautiful. On the contrary, beauty is a matter of opinion, and opinions are only valid to the extent that the members of a judging community can be persuaded to agree with them.

Judging something to be beautiful, good, or ugly, does not involve making a claim about the nature of beauty or goodness. It is rather a way of clarifying the meaning of beauty or goodness for a particular community. Arendt writes:

> We all know very well how quickly people recognize each other, and how unequivocally they can feel that they belong to each other, when they discover a kinship in questions of what pleases and displeases. From the viewpoint of this common experience, it is as though taste decides not only how the world is to look, but also who belongs together in it.[156]

Judgments are valid within a community who shares common experiences. Not only do these common experiences influence the judgments that a community makes, but they serve as the link that unites a particular community in the first

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[155] Arendt, *Between Past and Future*, p. 219.

[156] Ibid., p. 220.

place. Arendt suggests that people who share the same tastes and make the same judgments belong in the same communities.

It is difficult to speculate about the implications of the above claim, as Arendt is not entirely clear about what she means by a community. For example, Arendt suggests that the impartial perspective of the world citizen is a necessary condition of judgment. However, she is careful to note that the world citizen is not meant to be understood as a citizen in a literal sense—that is, as a citizen of a world government. Arendt agrees with Kant that a world government "would be the worst tyranny imaginable,"[157] and clarifies that when she writes of the world citizen, what she really has in mind is a world spectator: a person who observes world events with impartiality, but remains a citizen of his or her own country. The perspective of the world spectator is meant to overcome the situated limits of an individual's perspective. However, judgment—which relies on the world spectator's impartiality—is also dependent on the community within which a person judges.

The world community, which is composed of disparate nations and cultures that often come into conflict when their judgments disagree, is not a good candidate for the type of community that Arendt describes in "The Crisis in Culture"—one that feels an unequivocal sense of recognition and belonging that is based on similar tastes. In the *Lectures on Kant's Political Philosophy*, Arendt suggests that the world spectator's community

[157] Arendt, *Lectures on Kant's Political Philosophy*, p. 44.

is “the reading public” which constitutes “a society of world citizens.”[158] However, the reading public is no less separated along national and cultural lines than the world public. Arendt also suggests that those who share similar tastes—that is, those who judge in similar ways—constitute a community. This implies that those who disagree in matters of judgment do not constitute a community. Furthermore, the judgments of one community are not valid for those of another community unless, through persuasion, one is able to convince the other to think in a similar way. This may seem like a surprisingly relativistic standpoint for Arendt to take. However, while Arendt believes that persuasiveness is a measure of a judgment’s validity, she does not believe that persuasiveness is the only criterion of good judgment. Judgment presupposes critical thinking. Presumably, if the standards of critical thinking are not upheld, then the validity of a judgment can be called into question. Perhaps when Arendt refers to the community of judges, she is referring to everyone who both thinks critically and makes decisions.

Near the end of the *Lecture on Kant’s Political Philosophy*, Arendt makes the link between critical thinking and judging more explicit. She lists the three maxims of the *sensus communis*, the community sense that guides the world spectator’s judgments: “Think for oneself (the maxim of enlightenment); Put oneself in thought in the place of everyone else (the maxim of the enlarged mentality); and, the maxim of consistency, Be in

[158] Ibid., p. 39.

agreement with oneself."[159] She then explains that "these are not matters of cognition; truth compels, one doesn't need any 'maxims.' Maxims apply and are needed only for matters of opinion and judgments."[160] With the exception of the second maxim, that of enlarged mentality, the maxims of the *sensus communis* are already present in Arendt's conception of thought. Consistency and thinking for oneself are the two major tenants of Socratic thinking, and these maxims are also implicit in Kant's conception of critical thinking. However, this is the first point in the *Lectures on Kant's Political Philosophy* that Arendt associates the above maxims with judgment, as opposed to thought. By including the maxims of thinking and the maxim of enlarged mentality under the rubric of common sense, Arendt suggests that judgment is only possible when critical thinking and impartiality are combined.

It is important to note, however, that Arendt does not consider the maxims of common sense to be self-evident or necessarily true. By abstraction, she does not believe that judgments based on common sense are necessary. When Arendt writes that the maxims of common sense are not matters of cognition, she is referring back to Kant's distinction between reason and cognition. Cognitive truths are the truths of science and logic, truths which do not require persuasion to be compelling. Cognitive truth is distinct from meaning, which is the culmination of rational thought. For something to be meaningful—be it a concept, a philosophy or a world

[159] Ibid., p. 71.

[160] Ibid.

view—there must be a reason to accept it as meaningful. Meaning is not self-evident, and for this reason, thoughts must be communicable and persuasive if they are to influence anything more than a thinker's solitude.

By linking meaning with judgment, Arendt suggests that both thinking and judging fall under the category of reason. Unlike cognitive truths, thoughts and judgments must be expressed if they are to have meaning, and this is why Arendt links thought and judgment with community. While it is possible to think in solitude, it is impossible to improve one's thought without the test of other people's thinking. Judgment, according to Arendt, is not possible outside of a community—be it a political community, or a hypothetical community such as the community that the world spectator imagines. As Kant suggests, a solitary individual would have little desire to pass judgment, as there would be no one to share his or her judgments with.

iv. The Practical Application of Arendt's Thought

Does Arendt have a theory of ethics? If so, does her theory have a practical application? Arendt never claims that her account of thinking and judging culminates in an ethical theory, and neither does she formulate principles of action. However, the ethical motivation behind Arendt's work is clear. In spite of her claims to the contrary, it is my contention that Arendt's thinking culminates in an ethical theory, and a practical theory at that.

Although it is incomplete and spread over numerous books and essays, Arendt's work implies an ethical theory, and this theory can be summarized in three main points. First, there is Arendt's observation that the greatest evils are not committed because of a lack of character, but rather because of a lack of thought. Critical thinking—in either its Socratic or Kantian formulation—is necessary to understand the implications of concepts and to be in agreement with one's self (that is, to be aware of any inconsistencies in one's thinking and to remedy these inconsistencies.) The quality of a thought cannot be judged without the test of other people's thinking, but individuals can rely on the principle of noncontradiction to point out inconsistencies in their thought. Secondly, critical thinking is a prerequisite of impartiality. To paraphrase Kant, one must think over reasonable objections and allow them the opportunity to overturn one's most cherished beliefs. Without impartiality, it is impossible to learn from others or to allow their insights to improve upon one's own. Finally, Arendt recognizes that judgment is not possible without the input of a community—be it a community of interlocutors, or the broader community of the reading public. Judgments are only valid for the members of a judging community, and therefore the validity of judgments is directly related to the scope of the community. Just as company is indispensable for the thinker—without it, the thinker is limited to merely one perspective—judgments must be influenced by the insights of others.

If sound judgment requires the perspectives of other people, does this imply that it is impossible for individuals to judge when they are not in the company of others? Arendt's answer is a qualified yes. To judge well, it is necessary to consider perspectives other than one's own, but it is not necessary for other people to be physically present. The presence of a judging community would improve the quality of any judgment since those involved could clarify their perspectives in order to avoid misunderstandings. However, the perspectives that a judgment takes into account can be hypothetical rather than actual. Individuals must rely on their imaginations to judge when they are not in the company of others. Unfortunately, this reliance on imagination poses a number of theoretical difficulties for Arendt.

The ability to imagine another's perspective requires both empathy and knowledge of the other's situation and circumstances. Barring the unlikely possibility of actually becoming another person, the ability to have certain knowledge of another's perspective is the stuff of science fiction. However, it seems overly skeptical to suggest that it is impossible to imagine another's perspective. An empathetic thinker who cultivates an impartial disposition and has some understanding of another's social background should be able to imagine the other's perspective to an extent. It is therefore possible to judge *as if* one is interacting with a judging community. However, it is at this point where Arendt's assertion that everyone is capable of judging is most vulnerable. Cultivating an

impartial disposition is no simple task. It may very well require a special kind of education to be capable of overcoming dogmatism, be it in the form of religion, ideology, or even bias toward one's own. It is tempting to suggest that an education in philosophy would be necessary, but philosophers are no less dogmatic in their thinking than anyone else. Arendt is correct that all people are capable of judging, but only to the extent that they are capable of thinking both critically and impartially. Some are therefore more capable of judging than others. However, this is not a major concession. Arendt's purpose is to describe how people form good judgments in reality, not how every person can be taught to judge infallibly. Known amongst her peers for her quick and lucid judgments, Arendt would likely be the first to admit that some are more capable of judging than others.

Compared to other ethical theories, Arendt's thinking most resembles ethical particularism. The basic tenant of particularism is that moral principles are both inadequate and unnecessary when dealing with ethical dilemmas. The particularist argues that unthinkingly applying moral principles is irresponsible, as the complexity of real-world dilemmas is too great for general principles to grasp. The danger of relying on moral principles instead of attempting to grasp the complexity of a situation is that one will likely remain ignorant of the situation's morally significant factors—factors that may invalidate the principle being used or make it irrelevant in that particular context. Blindly following a principle may

therefore lead to unintuitive or irrational results. A common example is of a Kantian who is placed in a hypothetical situation whereby he or she can prevent a murder by telling a lie. Since the categorical imperative forbids lying, the Kantian must either break with principle or allow a murder. In this scenario, it is intuitively immoral for the Kantian to stand by his or her moral principles, or to refuse to act by refusing to speak. Although this antinomy illustrates the limitations of general moral principles, it is not a compelling reason to abandon Kantian ethics as a whole. Arendt writes the following of Plato, but it just as easily applies to Kant: when we learn to exercise taste freely, "then we shall know how to reply to those who so frequently tell us that Plato or some other great author of the past has been superseded; we shall be able to understand that even if all criticism of Plato is right, Plato may still be better company than his critics."[161]

Instead of relying on principles, particularists recommend that people pay attention to the morally significant features of the dilemmas they face. By reflecting on these significant features, moral agents can base their judgments on contextual information that moral principles cannot take into account. Unlike particularists, Arendt does not explicitly deny that moral principles are useful. As the above quotation suggests, Arendt believes that there is much that can be learned from the systems of past thinkers, even if these systems are flawed. However, Arendt agrees with particularists that the uncritical application of principles can perpetuate

[161] Arendt, *Between Past and Future*, p. 222.

great moral lapses. As the case of Eichmann suggests, when moral systems are adopted casually and uncritically, they can be reversed with a simple change in political climate. For Arendt, this is not reason enough to abandon moral principles entirely, but rather to recognize their limitations. Like particularists, Arendt believes that critical thinking is necessary in order to grasp the complexity of moral dilemmas and to form reasonable judgments. However, Arendt improves upon a weakness in particularist thinking that has led some to criticize particularism for its impracticality as an ethical system.

Particularists rely on the concept of morally significant features, claiming that ethical deliberation involves sensitivity to these features. However, it is not clear what constitutes a morally significant feature, how one can become sensitive to these features, or how it is possible to form a judgment based on them. Arendt's insight that judgment requires the input of a community suggests what morally significant features are and how they can be recognized. For any particular judging community, the morally significant features that are recognized by the community will correspond to the tastes of that community. For example, a traditional Native American community would be averse to needlessly killing wildlife, whereas a British hunting party might do this for sport. These communities will have different intuitive reactions to hunting based on the tastes they have cultivated. Each community will have reasons and stories that explain their particular tastes, be they practical, religious or political. These

reasons will either be rational or irrational. If the Native Americans and the British hunting party were to come into conflict over the issue of sport hunting, then a valid judgment would have to take the perspectives of both groups into account. If one perspective is more reasonable or persuasive than the other, then the issue can be quickly resolved in favor of the party whose story makes the most sense. If there are equally valid arguments on both sides, then a compromise must be reached.

The ultimate goal of judging a case in which both parties have compelling arguments is to achieve the “third view” that Kant describes—an alternative that bridges both perspectives, taking the insights of both into account. There is no guarantee of achieving such a view, but the judging process does not halt if a third view cannot be imagined. Arendt reminds us that judgment involves courting the opinions of others, wooing them over to our own perspective. The courting metaphor is inspired by the Greek ideal of political speech, which glorifies coercion through rational argument instead of violence. If it is not possible to woo the opinion of another, then violence is not justified as a further means of coercion. The two parties may either continue to woo each other, or admit defeat and go their separate ways. To admit defeat would be the same as admitting that the groups do not belong in the same judging community, and should therefore not associate with each other. According to Arendt, judgments are only valid for the members of a judging community, and it is therefore prudent for two communities who cannot find common ground to

simply go their separate ways. (This is not an admission of cultural relativism. An Arendtian faced with the infamous Indian practice of Sati would quickly come to the conclusion that the practice is irrational.)

The above outline of the judging process resembles a judicial model. An impartial judge hears the stories of two conflicting parties, assess the rational merit of the arguments on both sides, and comes to a conclusion based on his or her reflections. A good judge will take all perspectives into account and form a judgment that either favours the more rational perspective or combines both perspectives into a third view. Unlike a Napoleonic conception of law, judgments are not based upon pre-conceived principles, but are made on a case by case basis. There is no written or codified moral law. Rather, the judge must rely on critical thinking that is tempered by the insights of a larger community. To the extent that individuals can both reason and adopt an impartial view, they are able to form moral judgments in a similar fashion. Arendt's process of moral reasoning is more practical than the particularist model as Arendt is able to flesh out the notion of significant moral features in terms of a community's moral tastes.

Arendt's process of moral reasoning is practical in the sense that it provides moral agents with an idea of what constitutes a good judgment, and also with a notion of how such judgments are realized. However, Arendt's method demands a great deal from moral agents in terms of both reason and imagination. Is her ethical theory practical in comparison to

principle-based theories such as utilitarianism or Kantianism? The apparent advantage of principle-based theories is that less gifted individuals can apply moral principles to any given situation, and likely come up with judgments that are morally sound by doing so. Apparently, this processes requires little critical thought, and is therefore viable for those with either no time or ability to think. If thinking is not necessary in order to achieve relatively sound moral results most of the time, then principle-based theories are indeed more practical than Arendt's.

In response to the above argument in favour of the principle-based approach, permit me a final, violently contentious observation that would require hundreds of carefully argued pages to adequately support: when cut to the pith, principle-based theories are not based on principles. On the contrary, principle-based theories are inevitably founded on the critical thinking of their creators. More importantly, the best made principles are fundamentally open to interpretation in such a way that moral agents cannot make use of them without engaging in critical thought.

For example, the utilitarian pleasure principle is useless without a conception of happiness. If a moral agent is to make use of it, he or she needs to reflect on the concept of happiness, and to continue reflecting on this concept as he or she learns from experience and from the perspectives of others. Kantians are instructed to act so that the maxim of their action can be willed as a universal law. However, Kant is wrong to assume that this general instruction results in absolute rules that apply in

every imaginable context. Like the utilitarian pleasure principle, the categorical imperative is not intended to dictate moral ultimatums—ultimatums that ignore contextual information and are unbending even in the light of further experience. Rather, the categorical imperative is meant to engage moral agents in a thought process, to invite them to think about what influence their actions would have if everyone were to follow their example. Utilitarianism and Kantianism, two theories which are often considered to be polar opposites, each boil down to the same deceptively simple word of advice: think. Stated otherwise, these paradigm examples of principle-based theories rely on the same uncodifiable process of thinking that is the foundation of Arendt's ethics. They are principle-based theories that shed their principles upon examination, and are therefore no more or less practical than Arendt's conception of judgment.

My characterization of utilitarian and Kantian ethics is obviously controversial. It is based entirely on an intuitive sense of what I believe thinkers such as Kant and Mill may have meant—that is, what they may have meant while explicitly denying what my intuition nonetheless tells me. As such, I cannot expect anyone to consider my opinion seriously without further argument, though I hold fast to the belief that such argument is both possible and compelling. For the sake of argument, then, I will suggest that Arendt's conception of ethics is just as practical as a principle-based theory, and simply leave it at that.

CONCLUSION: ETHICAL IMPLICATIONS

In “Thinking and Moral Considerations,” Arendt makes the seemingly outlandish claim that thinking—though destructive and practically useless—enables judging, which allows people to distinguish between good and evil. The nagging question that Arendt leaves unanswered is simply “how?” This thesis attempts to draw out the answer Arendt would have given had she lived to complete her work. While the theory of judgment that Arendt weaves into her later writings will not convince those who believe in absolute moral truths, it should be compelling for those whose faith in absolutes has been shaken but who still believe that judgment is possible.

When Arendt associates judgment with reason, what she really suggests is that there is no such thing as ethical truth; however, it is possible for something to be ethically meaningful. In *The Life of the Mind*, Arendt writes:

> The meaning of what actually happens and appears while it is happening is revealed when it has disappeared; remembrance, by which you make present to your mind what actually is absent and past, reveals the meaning in the form of a story.[162]

Meaning, Arendt suggests, is linked to the stories that we tell, the stories that situate us in the world and influence our perspectives on right and wrong,

[162] Arendt, *The Life of the Mind*, p. 133.

beautiful and ugly. And while stories about the nature good and evil may not have the validity of cognitive truths, it is mistaken to claim that they are arbitrary. At the individual level, these stories must pass the test of critical thinking—they must be both internally coherent and consistent with the individual's experiences. Furthermore, these stories must past the test of the *sensus communis*—they must be communicable to an audience of impartial spectators, who are persuaded by their reasoning. The tests of thought and judgment are fallible, and they will never result in *the* truth about anything. They are, after all, human tests, and rely on human faculties.

Arendt's ethical theory, if it can be called that, is not a prescriptive theory. It is not meant to tell anyone what the right course of action is in any given circumstance. However, Arendt's theory is similar to more traditional ethical theories in that it does provide guidance as to how to decide upon a course of action. The simplified version of Arendt's advice may seem overly broad, perhaps even cliché, but it is nonetheless profound: think for yourself, make sure that your reasoning is consistent, and judge impartially, as if you are a member of a larger community. This is perhaps all that can be asked of the human faculties of thinking and judgment. And in Arendt's words, "this indeed may prevent catastrophes, at least for myself, in the rare moments when the chips are down."[163]

[163] Arendt, *Responsibility and Judgment*, p. 189.

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