

## Chapter 4

### HANNAH ARENDT: THE CARE OF THE WORLD AND OF THE SELF

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Hannah Arendt was born in 1906 in Kant's city, then called Königsberg, in East Prussia. (For her life, see Elizabeth Young-Bruehl's 1982 biography, *Hannah Arendt: For Love of the World*). Whereas for her family and many of the five thousand Jews in Königsberg Moses Mendelssohn was the exemplary social and cultural figure, the Social Democrat and Reform Rabbi Hermann Vogelstein was the religious and political leader. Arendt as a little girl had a crush on Vogelstein. After learning of some of the complexities of a secular Jewess marrying a Rabbi, this little girl was led to remark: "I will marry a rabbi with pork." (When older she proclaimed to the rabbi that she no longer believed in God, and he replied, "And who asked you?") In her teens she was fascinated with Kierkegaard and when sixteen she read Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* and Karl Jasper's *Psychology of Worldviews*.

Although she studied with Husserl and Heidegger (who, when she was eighteen, was her lover), Jaspers was her lifetime friend and mentor. "I am sort of a phenomenologist...but, ach, not in Hegel's way, or Husserl's." Like Jaspers she was always suspicious of philosophical schools and movements. In 1929, under Jasper's direction but also somewhat under Heidegger's influence, she completed her dissertation on *St. Augustine's Concept of Love*. In the same year she married the leftist philosopher Günther Stern (Anders) and then later (1940), as a refugee in Paris, the psychiatrist Heinrich Blücher.

The eighteen years in which she was a "stateless person," i.e., from 1933 until her receipt of American citizenship in 1951, decisively shaped her philosophical reflections. Before this time she was involved unofficially in Germany with Jewish underground, Zionist, and Communist causes. This led to her arrest but her lucky release by a Nazi officer ("a charming fellow") who was fascinated by her. The Sterns fled to France where she worked to help Jewish refugees.

Throughout her life she was in conversation with, if not a friend of, many of the leading European and American intellectuals, artists, and poets of the 20th century and her writings were a lightning rod for many of the most controversial

political-theoretical issues, such as Zionism, totalitarianism, student revolutions, and civil rights. She died in New York, December 4, 1975.

This paper will present Arendt's ethical theory as inseparable from her phenomenology of thinking as well as from her phenomenological ontology of politics. The context and occasional foil of the presentation will primarily be Husserlian phenomenology, wherein being and display to the transcendental ego are the inseparable moments of the philosophical field.

## 1. PHENOMENALITY AND THINKING ABOUT WHAT APPEARS

Let us begin with Arendt's own words:

In this world which we enter, appearing from a nowhere, and from which we disappear into a nowhere, *Being and Appearing coincide*.... Seeming—the it-seems-to-me, *dokei moi*—is the mode, perhaps the only possible one, in which an appearing world is acknowledged and perceived.... (LM 1, 19, 21)<sup>1</sup>

For us, appearance—something that is being seen and heard by others as well as by ourselves—constitutes reality. (HC, 50)

With the abolishing of the true world-in-itself beyond appearances, Arendt may say with Nietzsche (and somewhat in the spirit of Husserl) that we do not have the merely apparent one remaining. With the modern destruction of the metaphysical as the unappearing base for what appears, we have an opportunity for a restoration of the coincidence of reality and appearance or being and display. Yet this opportunity is in grave jeopardy because not only has modernity provided us with massive motivation to be uneasy with what appears and to prefer the unconscious, occluded, non-visible cause of what appears, but modernity has also replaced our own seeing for ourselves with the represented and mediated account by experts of what appears.

The efforts by ancient as well as modern scientists and philosophers to seek beyond appearances for the hidden grounds of the appearances is tied to an ancient belief that the hidden causes enjoy a higher rank than what meets the eye, that the surfaces of things are less significant than their hidden depths. But the underlying truth to be dis-closed (*alētheia*) can only be another phenomenon, originally hidden but supposedly of a higher order. The demotion of appearing to mere appearance leads inevitably to violence toward the appearing appearances and an interfering with them while still depending on them. No dissipation of an error or illusion, no

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<sup>1</sup>See the list of abbreviations at the end of the chapter for frequently cited works.

disillusioning or breakup of an appearance, occurs without a new appearing (LM 1, 26).

The fundamental conviction behind the modern temptation to see every view as ideology is that the world we live in is ruled by secret forces; everything is merely appearance and what appears in appearances is not truth but deception; the task of those liberated from ideology is to uncover the secret conspiracy. Nihilism is a progression of this suspicion insofar as it maintains that nothing is as it appears to be and everything can become what I make it.<sup>2</sup> These views are to be contrasted with Arendt's own, which, although skeptical toward metaphysics, resoundingly affirms "common sense's" disclosure of the common world. The Greeks whom Arendt appropriates believed that the criterion of being is appearance, and Machiavelli retrieves something of this when he urges the prince to disdain goodness as something apart from action, e.g., interiority and authenticity, because such a view separates being and appearing. Socrates also fought this tension by joining being and appearing: we are to appear as we are, and the criterion of appearance is how I am (appear) to myself even in the recesses of my soul; self-manifestation owes everything to how I exist in and through my action. Therefore, there is nothing of "mere appearances," there is only being and outright deception.<sup>3</sup>

Who we are for ourselves is inseparably tied to our intersubjective being—even though, as we shall see, there is the radically isolating phenomenon of conscience. The first-person plural dative of manifestation ("to us") is founding for the singular nominative ("I") as well as the singular accusative ("me") and singular dative of manifestation ("to me"). That is, the *cogito* can appear only if it is in the world for us all. The transcendental I, *pace* Husserl, can never suffice to guarantee reality because for Arendt the *ego cogitans* is evident, i.e., for us all, only through its speech, "which presupposes auditors and readers as its recipients" (LM 1, 19–20).

This claim for the radically intersubjective nature of appearing stands in tension with another kind of manifestation, a non-worldly self-awareness, of all my acts in their presencing of the world. I am aware not only of the world, but of my presentation of the world. Consciousness is not primarily an existing among others,

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<sup>2</sup>See the unpublished Course on Totalitarianism, 024122–024124. I wish to thank Professors Thomas Nenon and Lester Embree for permission to use and quote from the microfilm of Hannah Arendt's *Nachlass* in the Archival Repository of The Center for Advanced Research in Phenomenology at the University of Memphis. I do not pretend to have exhausted the full richness of her *Nachlass*; not only are ethical themes ubiquitous in all her writings, but the illegibility of some of the texts available on the Archival microfilm means that scholars will have to reconstruct original manuscript material. I also want to thank Gregory Desjardins, Ullrich Melle, John Drummond, and Lester Embree for comments on an earlier version of this paper.

<sup>3</sup>From the unpublished Lectures on Morality (New School, 1965), 024616.

but rather it is, as Kant put it, an awareness “not as I appear to myself, nor as I am in myself, but only that I am” (LM 1, 43–45, 74–75; KRV, B157). In another place, Kant perhaps inconsistently provided himself with a basis for the “thing-in-itself”: “In the consciousness of myself in the sheer thinking activity I am the thing itself although nothing of myself is thereby given for thought” (KU, B429; LM 1, 42). This awareness that “I am” or “I am I” is unitary (= One) and not yet a question of the moral, willing, or thinking self that is essentially a duality (Two-in-One) because it is self-reflexive.<sup>4</sup>

Just as there is no willing unless the will first wills itself to will, so in thinking I am conscious, *syneidenei*, i.e., I am alone *with* myself and thus not alone as bereft of others and the world. In my straightforward involvement with the world through conscious acts I am on the verge of an explicit reflexivity with myself. Thinking is this explicit being in conversation with myself, which is an absencing of the world, a “stop and think,” by which the manifest world is absented from the mind’s drift and I am taken up with my way of presencing the world. The worldly manifestation of thinking is absent-mindedness, where someone displays to others obvious disregard for the surrounding appearing world (LM 1, 72).

Thus we are for the most part in the natural attitude, i.e., in the world with others taken up with the things and events of the world. But because there is never a total obliviousness of the self to itself, because it is always on the verge of a full-scale reflexivity as long as the act or activity lasts, we have the fundamental capacity to think. And this is always a withdrawal from the world. In this attitude we are no longer concerned with how we appear to others, but with the meaning of what is. By “meaning” Arendt does not mean primarily the verbal sense of mental acts (as “to mean,” “I mean,” etc.), nor what is meant in those acts, nor Fregean senses distinct from referents. Rather, “meaning” refers to thinking’s “distillations, products of de-sensing, and such distillations are not mere abstract concepts; they were once called essences” (LM 1, 199). This is by no means a commitment to essences as ontological entities, but rather to necessary distinctions (distinctions we all must make) and to what is essential as distinguished from what is adventitious. Because the thinking I moves among these generalizations squeezed out from particulars, it is at home in no place or time; it is a view from nowhere. “Meaning,” properly speaking, i.e., thematized as such, only is in the reflective turning to our thoughtful presentations of the world.

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<sup>4</sup>See the unpublished Lecture on “Thinking,” 027549–027550. Arendt on some occasions seems to deny that there is anything like a non-reflexive manifestation of consciousness to itself; I have chosen to emphasize some passages where such non-reflexiveness is acknowledged, and which brings her closer to transcendental phenomenology.

Our being in the world in the natural attitude includes a passion for knowing and truth. Truth is what we are compelled to admit by reason of sense perception or by the way our brain is hard-wired, i.e., by way of logic and mathematics (LM 1, 59ff.) These latter are truths rooted in the facts of the natural necessities of intellect. That is, *pace* Husserl, there is no noetic region (*Sinn-Topos*) of logical-mathematical truths that may be entertained as having a validity apart from the facts of the natural make-up of the brain—which Arendt calls here interchangeably “intellect” (LM 1, 59–61).

These assertions are for the phenomenologist surprising, especially given Arendt’s procedure of making essential distinctions that highlight the necessary conditions of human life. Her position that “there are no truths beyond and above factual truths” and that thinking in itself, and not employed as an instrument of knowing, is not concerned with truth but with meaning, implies that her own work of meaning-clarification has little or nothing to do with truth. And when it seemingly uncovers logical-essential necessary truths, we must discount these as true and account for these necessities in terms of natural facts of the brain.

For Arendt, thinking is essentially aporetic. It does not come up with permanent results, for the mind has a natural aversion to the settled conclusions from the night before; a fortiori the insights of “wise men” are not wherein it rests. It can be satisfied only through itself thinking through the insights of yesterday and winning them afresh today (LM 1, 88).

Seen from the perspective of the intersubjective public world, the person alone with his or her thoughts is bereft of the world; but the one thinking will say with Cato to the world, “never is a man more active than when he does nothing, never is he less alone than when he is by himself” (LM 1, 7–8).

The unnatural (“out of order”—LM 1, 78, 211) attitude of thinking has a distinctive quiet inasmuch as it is a withdrawal from the doing and disturbances of the world. This withdrawal may or may not be theory, in the sense of beholding the spectacle. Indeed, Arendt joins ranks with Nietzsche, Heidegger, *et alii* in dismantling metaphysics and philosophy as forms of knowing that provide us with abiding forms and principles that sustain any special claim to wisdom, contemplative enthrallment, or “immortalizing” through *noein* (LM 1, 211–212; BPF, 71–72, 287–288; EU, 432).

## 2. THINKING, THE PROBLEM OF EVIL, AND ETHICS

The “banality of evil” is a phrase that refers to Arendt’s theory that evil deeds, committed on a monstrous scale, as in the Nazi crimes against the Jews, homosexuals, Gypsies, Slavs, and political dissidents, need not be traced back to wickedness, demonic possession, pathology, or even the ideological conviction of the agent; rather, the source of the horrendous evils in question may well lie only



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