

# Introduction

Mika Ojakangas

University of Helsinki

Hannah Arendt, one of the most outstanding political theorists of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, believed that our decisions about right and wrong depend on our choice of company and especially on who we choose as exemplary figures for our moral and political orientation.<sup>1</sup> Arendt herself called upon a number of such exemplary figures: Socrates, Cicero, Christ, Augustine, Montesquieu, the Founding Fathers, Kant, and Heidegger, to mention a few. On what grounds, however, do we choose our company and the figures we are supposed to follow? For Arendt, this question relates to judgment and taste, both outcomes of the faculty of judgment, which according to her is probably the most political of man's mental abilities.<sup>2</sup> In other words, it is the judgments of this political faculty that determine our choice of friends and examples – and consequently, our decisions about right and wrong, since these decisions depend on our choice of company.

Yet Arendt had at least two different conceptions of judgment. In both of them, the human capacity to judge is intimately linked to one's capacity to think, but the image of thinking they invoke is different. In the first model thinking is conceived as a dialogue with oneself, whereas judgment is conceived as the manifestation of this dialogue.<sup>3</sup> This dialogue is a solitary business, deriving its criteria not from the world but from the individual conscience, which Arendt conceives as the inevitable by-product of thinking. Hence, although judgments direct attention to the world, being the manifestation of thought, they are nevertheless mediated by the conscience, which in itself is a "worldless" and inherently inward-turning. It merely guards that one does not contradict oneself in one's thinking, that is to say, it tells what is suitable for *me* as a thinking being. In this respect, Arendt's model was

---

1 Hannah Arendt, "Some Questions of Moral Philosophy." In Hannah Arendt, *Responsibility and Judgement*. New York: Schocken Books, 2003, 145–146.

2 Hannah Arendt, *The Life of the Mind*. New York: Harvest Book, 1971, Vol. I, 192.

3 Hannah Arendt, "Thinking and Moral Considerations." In Hannah Arendt, *Responsibility and Judgement*. New York: Schocken Books, 2003, 189.

Mika Ojakangas (ed.) 2010  
Hannah Arendt: Practice, Thought and Judgement

COLLEGIUM

Studies across Disciplines in the Humanities and Social Sciences 8.  
Helsinki: Helsinki Collegium for Advanced Studies. 3–7.

Socrates, but although she embraced certain Socratic ideas, her negative attitude to the self as the centre of existence makes it understandable that she never fully accepted the triad of thinking-conscience-judgment as the solution to the problem of how to choose one's company or to tell right from wrong, arguing that it has any relevance only under exceptional circumstances in which all moral standards have been rendered inoperative.

Arendt's second conception of judgment calls on Immanuel Kant as its example. Here the emphasis is no longer on the self but rather on others. The idea of thinking as the precondition for judgment takes on a different form as well. The solitary dialogue is replaced by a capacity to think representatively, that is, to think from the viewpoint of everybody else. Arendt called this capacity an "enlarged mentality," adopting the term from Kant's *Critique of Judgment*. According to Arendt, it is this enlarged mentality that should determine our decisions about right and wrong. In a sense, this means that we should choose everybody as our company:

The more people's standpoints I have present in my mind while I am pondering a given issue, and the better I can imagine how I would feel and think if I were in their place, the stronger will be my capacity for representative thinking and the more valid my final conclusions, my opinion.<sup>4</sup>

This does not mean that "my opinion" should be the same as that of the majority. Although Arendt was always critical of the Platonic idea that a (transcendent) truth could provide the measure of politics, she did not find the opinion of the (immanent) multitude a satisfactory standard either. On the contrary, her critique of the modern mass society suggests that the enlarged mentality does not primarily concern a *people's* standpoint but rather people's *standpoints*. If Arendt affirms the multitude, she does not affirm it as a Voice but rather as a plurality of voices. In a sense, it is this plurality *as such* that should be chosen as the exemplary figure. It should be chosen as the model even under conditions in which factual plurality has been reduced to the minimum, as happened in the National Socialist Germany. In these kinds of situations plurality must be recreated – and it is created by the human capacity of imagination.

The approach of the present volume on Hannah Arendt's thought can best be illustrated in terms of her own notions of the exemplary figure and the enlarged mentality associated with the human capacity of imagination. To all of us who have contributed articles to this volume, Arendt has indeed been an exemplary figure in the light of whom we have sought to orient ourselves, without undue obedience or imitation. Some of the articles are, in fact, quite critical in tone. The reason why we have all chosen Arendt as our guidepost is simple: she suits our intellectual taste. But she suits the taste of each contributor for a different reason, whence comes the

---

4 Hannah Arendt, *Between Past and Future*. New York: Penguin Books, 1977, 241.

plurality of the standpoints presented in the volume. This is not to say that the articles would have no common denominators. The main contribution of this volume to the growing body of research on one of the most interesting political theorists of the 20<sup>th</sup> century concerns the contexts of Arendt's thought. This is how we understand the enlarged mentality and imagination: as going beyond the immanence of Arendt's own texts and locating points of comparison and reference, either in works of other philosophers or in the context of history and history of ideas.

In her article "What St. Augustine Taught Hannah Arendt about 'how to live in the world': Caritas, Natality, and the Banality of Evil," Joanna Vecchiarelli Scott insightfully analyzes the avant-garde intellectual context of Arendt's post world war career in the United States and particularly in New York, as well as the Augustinian background of Arendt's political and ethical thought. Vecchiarelli focuses especially on the Arendtian notions of caritas, natality, and the banality of evil, laying emphasis on the fact that all of these terms are already present in Arendt's 1929 dissertation on Augustine's philosophy.

Jussi Backman's article "The End of Action: An Arendtian Critique of Aristotle's Concept of *Praxis*" re-examines the Aristotelian backdrop of Arendt's notion of action. On the one hand, Backman takes up Arendt's critique of the hierarchy of human activities in Aristotle, according to which Aristotle subordinates action (*praxis*) to production (*poiêsis*) and contemplation (*theoria*). Backman argues that this is not the case since Aristotle conceives *theoria* as the most perfect form of *praxis*. On the other hand, Backman stresses that Arendt's notion of action is in fact very different from Aristotle's *praxis*, to the extent that Arendt thinks of action as an external to the means-ends scheme, whereas Aristotle ultimately remains caught in this scheme proper to production (*poiêsis*) in thinking of *praxis* as its own end. According to Backman, Arendt's concept of action can therefore be understood as a critique, rather than as a rehabilitation of Aristotelian *praxis*.

In his article "Hannah Arendt's Thesis of Different Modes of Evil," Jari Kauppinen examines Arendt's different and sometimes quite contradictory concepts of evil ("absolute evil," "radical evil," "banal evil"). He compares these concepts with the traditional Western conceptions of evil, considering among others the notions of Augustine, Kant, and Heidegger. In Kauppinen's view, Arendt's notion of evil is basically Augustinian (evil exists in the world as the privation of good), but he pays attention to other, less apparent aspects in the Arendtian conception as well. In addition, Kauppinen's article offers us an overview of the recent interpretations of Arendt's understanding of evil.

Mika Ojakangas's article "Arendt, Socrates, and the Ethics of Conscience" examines Arendt's idea of thoughtlessness as the source of evil and her suggestion that the activity of thinking could resist evil, by focusing on Arendt's interpretation

of Socrates as a conscientiously thinking being and thus, the opposite of Adolph Eichmann. Ojakangas argues that Arendt's interpretation of Socratic ethics is somewhat misguided and open to correction: it is not thinking as such but rather bad conscience that is the alpha and omega of Socratic ethics. By this very gesture Socrates profoundly changed the moral landscape of the Greek polis, paving the way for the Western ethics of guilt.

Julia Honkasalo's article "What Constitutes Our Sense of Reality? Hannah Arendt's Critique of the Search for Epistemic Foundations" examines Arendt's epistemological assumptions and specifically, her critique of epistemological foundationalism. Honkasalo argues that Arendt's critique of epistemological foundationalism pertains to its rationalist and empiricist version, both culminating in the mathematization of nature. In her view, Arendt's own epistemological position is based on a conception according to which it is language that must function as the starting point of inquiry. Language is not, for Arendt, a fixed system but defined by historically contingent linguistic conventions, meaning, as Honkasalo stresses, that Arendtian epistemology leads to a position in which our scientific truths as well as moral doctrines are seen to be contingent, open to critical debate, and fallibilistic.

Finally, in his imaginative article "Hannah Arendt's Angels and Demons: Ten Spiritual Exercises," Markku Koivusalo journeys to the metaphysical and mystical roots of Arendtian thought, emphasizing its embeddedness not only in the Western tradition of philosophy but also in Greek, Roman, Jewish, and Christian mythology and theology. Koivusalo's article focuses on notions such as birth, beginning, genius, and fame in Arendt's work, using the images of angels and demons as the metaphorical guides to his investigation. The article thus offers us a fresh "angelological" reading of Arendt's political and ethical thought.

The articles in the volume are based on papers presented at the *Practice, Thought, and Judgement – Hannah Arendt 100 Years Anniversary Symposium*, held at the Helsinki Collegium for Advanced Studies in November 2006. I want to thank all those who participated in the symposium and especially Joanna Vecchiarelli Scott and Dana R. Villa, our keynote speakers. Furthermore, I want to thank all the organizers, particularly Marja-Liisa Honkasalo, Krista Johansson, and Julia Honkasalo, for their indispensable contribution to matters practical and somewhat less practical before, during, and after the symposium. In addition, I want to thank Krista Johansson and Tuomas Tammilehto for editorial assistance. Finally, I want to thank Soili Petäjaniemi-Brown for correcting the language of the articles.

## References

- Arendt, Hannah 1971. *The Life of the Mind*, vol. 1–2. New York: Harvest Book.
- 1977. *Between Past and Future*. New York: Penguin Books
- 2003. “Some Questions of Moral Philosophy.” In Hannah Arendt, *Responsibility and Judgement*. New York: Schocken Books.
- 2003. “Thinking and Moral Considerations.” In Hannah Arendt, *Responsibility and Judgment*. New York: Schocken Books.