

*Entry from Hannah Arendt-Handbuch: Leben–Werk–Wirkung [Life–Work–Influence], eds. Wolfgang Heuer, Bernd Heiter & Stefanie Rosenmüller (Metzler Verlag, 2011: 284-286)*

## **15. Gewissen / Moral [Conscience & Morality]**

Arendt's reflections on conscience and morality are characteristically intricate. Although her major works before *Eichmann in Jerusalem* (1963) say much that is relevant to moral questions, Arendt's study of Eichmann's 'conscience' (*EJ* 25ff & passim) offers the most obvious focal point. Further key texts are her posthumously published lectures, 'Some Questions of Moral Philosophy' (1964/5), the first part of 'Civil Disobedience' (1970), 'Thinking and Moral Considerations' (1971), and the similar thought-trains contained in *Life of the Mind I: Thinking*.

As Arendt saw it, the key issue posed by Eichmann's conduct was a conscientious participation in evil-doing. While Arendt did not regard naked criminality as calling for special explanation, the phenomenon of Eichmann's conscience was more puzzling. Nor was it unique: in important respects, his conscientiousness was prefigured by the largely voluntary *Gleichschaltung* of much of 'respectable society' in the earlier stages of Nazi rule (cf SQMP 54, PRUD 24).

This led Arendt to reflect on the original meaning of 'morality' and 'ethics.' As she repeatedly observed: 'it 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' (SQMP 50; cf PRUD 43, TMC 178, *LM I* 177f). As she would add, 'The ease with which such reversals can take place under certain conditions suggests indeed that everyone was fast asleep when it occurred' (*LM I* 177). In this respect, the return to "normality" after the war was disturbing rather than reassuring: 'we witnessed the total collapse of a "moral" order not once but twice' (SQMP 54).

In trying to understand ‘the mere habit of holding fast to something’ (PRUD 45), of ‘never making up [one’s] mind’ (TMC 178), which had proved so morally and politically disastrous, Arendt took her cue from Eichmann’s ‘total absence of thinking’ (TMC 160, cf *EJ* 287f). She found an exemplary contrast in Socrates. In general, Socrates’ thinking yielded no certainties, neither moral theories nor precepts nor definitions. Indeed, Arendt goes out of her way to insist that his thinking – for her, paradigmatic of thinking as such – proved corrosive of all certainties, of all ‘those customs and rules of conduct we treat in morals and ethics’ (TMC 175).

However, Socrates did hold to two minimal propositions: ‘I would rather suffer wrong than to do wrong’ (*Gorgias* 469ff, 489ff) and, ‘It is better to be at odds with the whole world than, being one, to be at odds with myself’ (*Gorgias* 482; cf SQMP 142, 90; CD 62; TMC 181ff; *LM I* 181). As shown by Plato’s dialogues, these propositions proved indemonstrable to Socrates’ interlocutors, but were nevertheless certain to Socrates himself. They also bear a striking similarity to the testimony of those who had refused to participate in totalitarian evil – who said to themselves, “This I cannot do” (SQMP 78, PRUD 44). Or in other words: I could not live with myself if I did this; better to suffer whatever reprisals may follow, than to live with a murderer or a calumniator; even if the whole world should say, “Thou shalt kill,” better be at odds with the world than with my own self (cf *LM I* 188).

The precondition for experiencing subjective certainty of these propositions is, on Arendt’s account, only the willingness to live with oneself in thought – the normal, non-philosophical thinking that we may ‘“demand”... in every sane person’ (TMC 164/*LM I* 13). This habitual inner dialogue conditions the self against participation in evil-doing; by contrast, Arendt observes, ‘unthinking men are like sleepwalkers’ (*LM I* 191). It is not, however, that thinking men will be readier to act on their own account. Arendt insists, ‘This conscience, unlike the voice of God within us or the *lumen naturale*, gives no positive prescriptions (even the Socratic *daimon*, his divine voice, only tells him what *not* to do); in Shakespeare’s words “it fills a man full of obstacles.”’ (*LM I* 190) In this sense, conscience demands no active responsibility for the world or political affairs. ‘Politically speaking... [conscience’s “This I *can’t* do”] is irresponsible; its standard is the self and not the world, neither its improvement nor change’ (SQMP 79).

Conscience is also open to the allied charge of subjectivity. Thus Arendt would often insist: ‘In the centre of moral considerations of conduct stands the self: in the centre of political considerations of conduct stands the world’ (eg CR 153). Such concern with

the self is liable to corruption in political matters, and becomes still more corrupt when it extends to the inner dispositions of other political actors (*OR* ch. 2). As she expresses the point in a *Denktagebuch* entry, ‘*auf Gesinnungsethik hat man nur in “Grenzsituationen” [= Situationen der Ohnmacht] ein Recht, wenn man für die Welt Verantwortung nicht mehr übernehmen kann.*’<sup>1</sup> (Apr 1964, *DT* 818) Conscience is therefore of marginal political significance, except in ‘emergencies’: ‘When everybody is swept away unthinkingly by what everybody else does and believes in, those who think are drawn out of hiding because their refusal to join in is conspicuous and thereby becomes a kind of action’ (*TMC* 188/*LMI* 192).

Conscience is thus quite distinct from *goodness*, on Arendt’s account, which treats Jesus of Nazareth (as she referred to the historical figure) as exemplary (*HC* ch. 10). Both are politically marginal but for different reasons. Goodness demands the doing of good works, not only refraining from evil as subjectively defined. Goodness must also be hidden, if it is not to be corrupted by appearing in public. Goodness is not even to appear *in foro interno*: ‘whoever sees himself performing a good work is no longer good, but at best a useful member of society or dutiful member of a church’ (*HC* 74). Thus goodness demands self-forgetfulness, unlike the ‘friendship’ with the self required by the internal dialogue of thought.

Arendt’s attempts to relate thinking, conscience and morality are complicated by her view that philosophers have often been tempted by tyrannical political solutions. While Plato’s philosophical republic was a theoretical matter only, Heidegger’s enthrallment with Nazism involved complicity with evil. Arendt never forgot this failing of Heidegger’s – nor could she give a simple answer to it (cf *CWP*, MH80). It seems, however, that philosophical thinking – as opposed to the thinking that “everyman” may engage in – is not necessarily oriented toward a world shared with others, nor anchored in a person’s worldly doings and sufferings. It might be added that both of these features are essential to the notion of *experience* implicit in all Arendt’s writings.

In this regard, her lectures on moral philosophy from the mid-sixties may be more revealing than the better-known ‘Thinking and Moral Considerations.’ The lectures explicitly connect thinking with remembrance and depth of the self. Heidegger was

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<sup>1</sup> English (*GW*): ‘One has a right to an ethic of principles [in Weber’s sense of inner integrity] only in limit situations [of powerlessness], when one can no longer take responsibility for the world.’

notably forgetful of his own doings; in a letter, Arendt writes forcefully of his lack of character (to Karl Jaspers, 29.9.49). In the lectures Arendt writes: ‘For human beings, thinking of past matters means moving in the dimension of depth, striking roots... I [thereby] explicitly constitute myself as a person.’ (SQMP 95; cf 100f) In doing so, as Arendt points out, people may also realise [*verwirklichen*] the original meaning of conscience: ‘the faculty by which we know, and are aware of, ourselves’ (SQMP 76, cf TMC 160).

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#### *Literature*

Margaret Canovan, *Hannah Arendt: A Reinterpretation of Her Political Thought*, chs. 5 ‘Morals and Politics in a Post-Totalitarian Age’ & 7: ‘Philosophy and Politics’

Jerome Kohn, Introduction to Hannah Arendt, *Responsibility and Judgment*

Richard Bernstein, ‘Did Hannah Arendt Change Her Mind? From Radical Evil to the Banality of Evil’ in *Hannah Arendt: Twenty Years Later*, eds. L. May and J. Kohn (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1996: 127-146)

Dana Villa, ‘Conscience, the Banality of Evil, and the Idea of a Representative Perpetrator’ in his *Politics, Philosophy, Terror. Essays on the Thought of Hannah Arendt* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999: 39-60)

*See also the following Handbuch entries: II - Eichmann in Jerusalem; III – Martin Heidegger; IV - Das Böse, Denken, Schuld, Tugend, Urteilen / Einbildungskraft, Verantwortung, Versprechen / Verzeihen*

**Abbreviations**

HC *The Human Condition*

OR *On Revolution*

PRUD ‘Personal Responsibility under Dictatorship’ in Kohn (ed) *Responsibility and Judgment*

CD ‘Civil Disobedience’ in *Crises of the Republic*

CR ‘Collective Responsibility’ in Kohn (ed) *Responsibility and Judgment*

CWP ‘Concern with Politics in Recent European Philosophical Thought’ in Kohn (ed) *Essays in Understanding*

MH80 ‘Martin Heidegger at Eighty’ [German version: *Merkur* 10 (1969), 893-902]

TMC ‘Thinking and Moral Considerations’ in Kohn (ed) *Responsibility and Judgment*

SQMP ‘Some Questions of Moral Philosophy’ in Kohn (ed) *Responsibility and Judgment*

LM I *The Life of the Mind*, vol. I: *Thinking*

DT *Denktagebuch*, eds Ursula Ludz & Ingeborg Nordmann