

Entry from Hannah Arendt-Handbuch: Leben–Werk–Wirkung [Life–Work–Influence], eds. Wolfgang Heuer, Bernd Heiter & Stefanie Rosenmüller (Metzler Verlag, 2011: 325-327)

40. Verantwortung [Responsibility]

Although Arendt's references to responsibility are scattered, it is no coincidence that her editors and commentators have given particular prominence to this concept. This entry considers Arendt's reflections on responsibility in *Origins of Totalitarianism*, before turning to two later essays about responsibility, and finally to her views on the responsibility of the political actor.

Origins is preoccupied with the fate of stateless peoples, whose situation was prefigured by those who did not fit within the framework of the nation-state, especially the Jewish people. Arendt opens the book by rejecting theories based on Jewish 'innocence,' that see the Jews purely as victims (of eternal antisemitism, as the world's scapegoat). Instead, she insists on treating the Jews as 'one group of people among other groups, all of which are involved in the business of the world. [A group] does not simply cease to be coresponsible because it became the victim of the world's injustice and cruelty' (*OT* 6). In harsher vein, she charges the Jews with a failure to take political responsibility: they 'stumbled from one role to the other and accepted responsibility for none' (*OT* 8). She criticises a repeated tendency to seek the protection of particular rulers or elites; her (strictly limited) support for Zionism reflected her judgment that this was the only movement that explicitly responded to the political nature of the Jews' circumstances (*OT* 120). These views underlay her vehement arguments for the formation of a Jewish army to fight Hitler. ('The Jewish Army – the beginning of a Jewish politics?' (1941) and subsequent articles in *Aufbau*.)

Origins also contains bitter reflections relating to the stateless individual's 'non-responsibility.' Needless to say, this non-responsibility finally proved far more costly than responsibility. Under Nazism, for example, much better to be accused or guilty of a crime than to be without legal status (*OT* 295). As she also observes, historical accounts based on Jewish innocence found a factual basis in 'the complete and inhuman

innocence which so strikingly characterizes victims of modern terror' (OT 8). These thoughts underlie the book's famous discussion of a 'right to have rights': 'The fundamental deprivation of human rights is manifested first and above all in the deprivation of a place in the world which makes opinions significant and actions effective... a right to have rights... means to live in a framework where one is judged by one's actions and opinions' (OT 296).

Arendt returned to the plight of stateless (and defenceless) peoples in 'Collective Responsibility' (a *piece d'occasion* from 1968). Although stateless peoples do not have to bear collective responsibility – lacking a political structure of their own, they cannot be held responsible *together* for their members' deeds – they are also disabled from acting collectively. Arendt reiterates the cruel irony that is such a prominent theme in *Origins*: 'the price paid for collective non-responsibility is considerably higher [than that of collective responsibility].' (CR 150) She also makes the striking argument that to bear the costs of others' deeds is a precondition, not only of political community but of political action itself: 'This vicarious responsibility for things we have not done, this taking upon ourselves the consequence for things we are entirely innocent of, is the price we pay for the fact that we live our lives not by ourselves but among our fellow men, and that the faculty of action, which, after all, is the political faculty par excellence, can be actualised only in one of the many and manifold forms of human community.' (CR 157f)

Notwithstanding this 'price' of action, Arendt sharply distinguishes collective responsibility from questions of personal guilt or innocence. This is especially clear in her 1964 lecture, 'Personal Responsibility under Dictatorship,' one of her many responses to the issues raised by the Eichmann affair. Arendt repeatedly insisted: 'where all are guilty, no one is,' and that 'guilt and innocence make sense only if applied to individuals' (PRUD 21, 29). This is not, however, to suggest that individual responsibility for political crimes need attach only to a few. She argues that to speak of *obedience*, except in conditions of complete powerlessness (cf PRUD 45), elides personal responsibility – as if a bureaucrat like Eichmann were (as he wished to be seen) a mere "cog in the machine." 'The reason we can hold these new criminals, who never committed a crime out of their own initiative, nevertheless responsible for what they did is that there is no such thing as obedience in political and moral matters.' (PRUD 48, cf EJ 279) Instead, Arendt insists that we should speak of *consent*, or the individual's active *support* of whoever demands 'obedience.'

Arendt's thoughts on the responsibility of the political actor are complicated by her somewhat polemical stance on the unpredictability of action, and against the use of means-end thinking in politics. Further complications arise from her intricate views on the relations of morality and politics, including her notorious invocation of greatness rather than 'moral standards' as the criterion by which action is judged (*HC* 205). Arendt insists that the political actor cannot be sovereign over his deeds, being always dependent on the cooperation of others and doomed to suffer responses to his deeds that most likely frustrate his original intentions. But this lack of sovereignty is not meant to absolve the actor of responsibility – let alone as an argument against attending to the likely consequences of one's actions. Thus Arendt praises the virtue of moderation (*HC* 191), evidently prizes political judgment, and (in her account of forgiveness) emphasises the importance of a person repenting his transgressions, even when he could not anticipate that the deed would misfire (*HC* ch. 33).

One of the most beautiful lines in Arendt's *Denktagebuch* relates to her further emphasis on exemplarity in political judgment: ‚*Verantwortung heisst in wesentlichen: wissen, dass man ein Beispiel setzt, dass Andere "folgen" werden; in dieser Weise ändert man die Welt.*’¹ (Jan 1966, *DT* 644) Political action is not only a means to whatever end or goal the actor pursues: it is also a contribution to the form our world takes. While everyday conduct – behaviour – may be judged by conventional moral standards, political action aims to change our opinions and even institutions. The 'morality' that applies must therefore be a specifically political one, centred on a responsibility for the world rather than a concern with established standards or personal integrity. Arendt frequently expressed this last thought by invoking Machiavelli's words, so remote from what is usually called Machiavellianism: "I love my city more than my soul." (*OR* 37, *CD* 61, *LKPP* 50, cf *SQMP* 80)

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¹ English translation (GW): 'Responsibility means, in its essence: to know that one sets an example, that others will "follow"; in this way one changes the world.'

Literature

Peg Birmingham, *Hannah Arendt & Human Rights: The Predicament of Common Responsibility* (Indiana University Press, 2006)

Jeffrey C Isaac, 'A New Guarantee on Earth: Hannah Arendt on Human Dignity and the Politics of Human Rights' in his *Democracy in Dark Times* (Cornell UP, Ithaca, 1998: 74-99)

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See also the following *Handbuch* entries: III - Niccolo Machiavelli; IV - Bürokratie, Denken, Flüchtlinge / Minderheiten / Überflüssige, Gewissen / Moral, Politischer Raum / Welt / Zwischen, Schuld, Souveränität, Urteilen / Einbildungskraft, Versprechen / Verzeihen; V - Politisches Handeln

Abbreviations

EJ *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, 1965 revised edition

OT *Origins of Totalitarianism*, 1973 revised edition

HC *The Human Condition*

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*

LKPP *Lectures on Kant's Political Philosophy*, ed R Beiner

OR *On Revolution*

DT *Denktagebuch*, eds Ursula Ludz & Ingeborg Nordmann