

# Seeing the Light and Hearing the Call; the Aesthetics of Knowledge and Thought

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*Kafka listened to tradition, and he who listens hard, does not see.*

Walter Benjamin, *Some Reflections of Kafka*

When, with our mind's eye, we followed Socrates from the obscurity of the cave out into the clarity of the sun's light, we inherited a metaphoric world of knowing that remains deeply woven into the fabric of Western thought and language. The truth of Hannah Arendt's observation that, "from the outset in formal philosophy, thinking has been thought of in terms of *seeing*"<sup>1</sup> is evidenced by the ubiquitous presence of visual metaphors throughout our language. If you look at how you think about your own cognitive processes, you might see what I mean; but if you remain in the dark, this article should elucidate the claim. Although obvious once pointed out, the dominance of sight in the Greek way of thinking is so pervasive that it has entered the category of the invisible conditions of thought.

A number of thinkers have pointed out both the distinctly Athenian roots of vision's dominance in our models of thought, and the existence of another, parallel metaphoric world of knowing: the hearing of the Jews.<sup>2</sup> In his classic comparative text on Hebrew and Greek modes of thought, Thorlief Boman tracks this difference and

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<sup>1</sup> Hannah Arendt, "Thinking" in *The Life of the Mind*, Harcourt Brace and Jovanovich 1978, p. 110.

<sup>2</sup> See for example Gershom Scholem, *On the Kabbalah and its symbolism* Schocken, 1996; David Banon, *La Lecture infinie: Les Voies de l'interprétation midrachique* (Paris, Editions du Seuil, 1987, Marelene Zarader, *The Unthought Debt; Heidegger and the Hebraic Heritage*, pp. 75-76; Bultmann, "The Word of God in the New Testament" in *Faith and Understanding I*, Translated by Louise Pettibone Smith, London: SCM Press, 1969.

then links the two modalities of access to truth or 'what is' with the other key differences in the two traditions, such as their understanding of the nature of reality, their relative emphases on space and time and the epistemological status they accord emotion and reason. Put pithily, the Greek modality of vision is correlated with a static worldview favouring objectivity and spatial dominance, whereas the Hebrew modality of sound leads us to a dynamic, fluid world in which the knower is always already intimately and emotionally embedded.

This distinction is not of mere historical interest, but a way into recognising implicit qualities of our own epistemological and ontological preferences. To draw our attention to those implicit assumptions, as he leads us through the comparison, Boman continually remarks on the ease with which we (the modern Western reader) will grasp the Greek, whereas the Hebrew framework frequently strikes us as inconsistent, incomprehensible or perhaps vulgar.<sup>3</sup> Recognising this inclination, the first part of Boman's project is to cast doubt on our conflation of one modality of thought with pre-modern irrationalism and the other with reason's triumph. From here, his second move is to challenge our assumption that the two can be mapped across a progressive history where we stand at the top with Socrates, in the sun. As an alternative to this competitive structure, Boman invites us to regard the two modalities of knowledge in the same way as Niels Bohr regarded the wave and particle dimensions of atomic physics, that is, as "complementary", each necessary to form a complete relationship with the world, even as their simultaneous veracity amounts to a logical impossibility.

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<sup>3</sup> Thus, Boman frequently opens or closes discussions with phrases like: "It is hardly necessary to demonstrate that Greek thinking is of the logical sort ... taking into consideration what is otherwise familiar to us. It is considerably more necessary to penetrate the peculiarity of Israelite thinking first because [it is] more foreign to us ... and second because the singular value of Israelite thinking is misconstrued by most scholars and mistaken for primitive thinking as if it was prelogical." Thorleif Boman, *Hebrew Thought Compared with Greek*, London and New York: W. W. Norton, 1954, p. 195. Recognising this bias, he notes that when the Greek paradigm is held as the ideal, Hebrew thinking appears "exaggerated, immoderate, discordant and in bad taste". p. 27

For Hans Jonas, however, who conducted the first close phenomenological analysis of the difference between sight and hearing as modalities of knowing, there can be no such equanimity of judgment. Similarly, drawing on Jonas, but also mapping the differences across Athens and Jerusalem, Hannah Arendt concludes that sight, the noble sense, emerges the clear winner “as the guiding metaphor and model of the thinking mind”.<sup>4</sup> Moreover, for Arendt, the fading of an auditory path to truth in Western representations has not been the result of an innocent, or natural withering away, but rather represents a victory of Athens over Jerusalem. Intriguingly, Arendt cites Philo of Alexandria as the earliest martial of this battle, a Jew who tried to mediate the Jewish and Greek dimensions of his identity, just as Arendt did the Jewish and German ones of hers. Both did so, moreover, in contexts where the non-Jewish dimension was held as the location of higher thought or philosophy (Athens and Freiburg) and the Jewish dimension brought them into the belly of radical anti-Semitic violence. Also a student of the Greek (become German), Arendt follows faithfully in Philo’s footsteps, reiterating his attempt to reconcile the Hebrew and Greek traditions by interpreting the former as “a mere preparation for the latter, to be achieved by a divine intervention that made man’s ears into eyes to permit greater perfection of human cognition”.<sup>5</sup>

And yet, despite the apparent certainty of her verdict in the one text explicitly dedicated to understanding how metaphors of the ineffable shed light on the nature of thinking, a broader reading of Arendt’s work suggests that she was far more circumspect about vision’s unambiguous benefits. For elsewhere in her work it is the equation of truth with eternity, which she associates in this text with the visual modality, that she blames for the monological and totalitarian tendencies of metaphysics and its structural incapacity

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<sup>4</sup> Arendt, “Thinking” *op. cit.* p. 111; The key text for Jonas’ close phenomenological analysis is “The Nobility of Sight: A Study in the Phenomenology of the Senses” in *The Phenomenon of Life*, Evanston, Ill: Northwestern University Press, 1996, pp. 135-152.

<sup>5</sup> Arendt, *ibid.* p. 111.

to admit politics and plurality as noble expressions of humanity.<sup>6</sup> Picking up on Arendt's implicit ambivalence, this article draws on Boman's philological and Jonas' phenomenological analyses to explore the implications of these different metaphoric approaches to knowing and thinking. In particular, it asks, as Arendt does when she links the activity of thinking with the commission or prevention of evil, if the differing aesthetics of thinking may have different ethical implications.<sup>7</sup>

### Seeing with the Greeks and Hearing with the Hebrews

Before probing their implications, let us set the stage with a sketch of the dominant representation of these two sense modalities of thought.<sup>8</sup> To begin etymologically, Boman, following Bruno Snell, notes that the various Ancient Greek words for *knowledge* have as their stem, *oro*, 'see', or are otherwise related to the visual faculty.<sup>9</sup> Thus, Plato, the representative thinker is "a man of sight"; his thinking is "a thinking with eyes", and it leads to the highest form of seeing, *theoria*.<sup>10</sup> From here it follows that the Greeks understood the goal of this process of thought or contemplation, that is *truth*, as "that which is unveiled", made evident or brought into clear sight. Such visual dominance at the level of process and product is most striking in Plato's doctrine of ideas, but it is more generally apparent

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<sup>6</sup> To this end, she quotes Jonas from "The Nobility of Sight" cited above, "Only sight therefore provides the sensual basis on which the mind may conceive the idea of the eternal, that which never changes and is always present." *op. cit.* p. 112. She develops her criticism of the eternal in *The Human Condition*, University of Chicago Press, 1957, pp. 17-21.

<sup>7</sup> See in particular Introduction to *The Life of the Mind*, *op. cit.*

<sup>8</sup> The polarisation of the two approaches or modalities of thought as presented here is overdrawn and perhaps even caricatured. This absolute division is preserved in a fairly faithful reading of Boman's analysis, not because it is a correct portrayal of Jewish and Greek thought *in toto*, but rather because an ideal type presentation clearly portrays two tendencies in thought. Indeed it is on this point that Boman's work, along with similar dichotomous depictions like Lev Shestov's *Athens and Jerusalem* have been criticised. Recognising the importance of such deconstructive criticisms, the ultimate object of this work is to point out the necessary interdependence of the two approaches and indeed their co-presence in Western thought, a task that begins with an analysis of Arendt.

<sup>9</sup> Boman, *op. cit.*, p. 201. See also Bruno Snell, *The Discovery of the Mind*, New York, Harper, 1960, in particular chapter 1.

<sup>10</sup> Boman *ibid.*

in the intimate relationship that the Greeks perceived between geometry and metaphysics.

An early comparison of the advantages of seeing and hearing occurs in Heraclitus' characteristically fragmentary pronouncement that "the eyes are more exact witnesses than the ears".<sup>11</sup> His intention here seems obvious enough, but we should be careful about too quickly eliding his evaluation of sensual modalities with his assessment of their epistemological value. Heraclitus also warned that "eyes and ears are bad witnesses to men having rude souls",<sup>12</sup> and elsewhere repeatedly pointed to *hearing* as the channel through which one might gain access to reason.<sup>13</sup> Presumably then, Heraclitus did not assume that one could simply translate sight's sensual superiority into its superiority as a metaphor for thinking or knowing.

In his early and brief treatment of the senses, Aristotle similarly distinguishes between what might be superior in the way of sensual access to the world and what superior in the mental realm. Thus, he writes that, "seeing, regarded as a supply for the primary wants of life, and in its direct effects, is the superior sense; but for developing intelligence, and in its indirect consequences, hearing takes the precedence".<sup>14</sup> He goes on to elaborate that it is because seeing encompasses multiple dimensions of data (colour, figure, size, motion, number) that it is the more useful of the two for the necessities of life. However, "it is hearing that contributes most to the growth of intelligence", principally because learning is a result of rational discourse, which comes through sound. Yet, in a strange turn, he then says that discourse is in fact only indirectly audible, because its basic elements are words, and words are thought-symbols. He concludes the discussion with the verdict that, "of

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<sup>11</sup> Fragment 15. Translations and numbering are from *The Fragments of the Work of Heraclitus of Ephesus on Nature*, translated from the Greek text of Bywater by G.T.W. Patrick, Baltimore: N. Murray, 1889.

<sup>12</sup> Fragment 4.

<sup>13</sup> For example, "It is wise for those who hear, not me, but the universal Reason, to confess that all things are one" (Fragment 1) or "[T]hose who hear and do not understand are like the deaf. Of them the proverb says: "Present, they are absent" (Fragment 3)

<sup>14</sup> Aristotle, *On Sense and the Sensible*, 437a 4, J. I. Beare, trans.

persons destitute from birth of either sense, the blind are more intelligent than the deaf and dumb". It is difficult to see how this conclusion follows from his earlier argument, unless one assumes that his 'thought symbols' are essentially visual. Indeed, this reading would be far more in keeping with Aristotle's dominant understanding of *theoria* and *nous* as forms of inner seeing than a reading that locates thought and understanding in the sphere of some type of inner ear. Indeed, Aristotle begins the *Metaphysics* not only by drawing an analogy between the desire to know and the pleasure in visual perception, but also by distinguishing sight as that sense which provides the most knowledge and the highest degree of differentiation.<sup>15</sup>

This slippage in Aristotle's argument points to the fissure in sight's epistemological dominance. On the one hand, the processes of knowing or the object of knowledge (truth) both seem to be unequivocally visual in the Greek. Yet, the sensual status of language, which is the principle mode through which we come to know the world, is far more ambiguous. Language can be conceived in either modality. This essential ambivalence is evident in Plato, who distinguishes between the oral (and for Plato the original) dimension of language, "talking things through", and "written discourse [which] may be fairly called a kind of image".<sup>16</sup> The more elemental form of language is then the one that comes to us as sound, whereas the derivative representation in writing is only a copy, feigning language. Like a painting, "silent as a sanctuary" it is frozen in a single form, barren and only able to say the same one thing, and this forever. By contrast speech is living and fertile, always ready to be planted in different listeners where it might grow out into the infinite narratives that they create into the future. Yet, when it comes to thinking, which Plato calls that soundless

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<sup>15</sup> "All men by nature desire to know. An indication of this is the delight we take in our senses; for even apart from their usefulness they are loved for themselves; and above all others the sense of sight. For not only with a view to action, but even when we are not going to do anything, we prefer seeing (one might say) to everything else. The reason is that this, most of all the senses, makes us know and brings to light many differences between things." The *Metaphysics*, Book A (I) 980<sup>a</sup>.

<sup>16</sup> The relevant section is from the *Phaedrus*, 275d-277a.

dialogue I have with myself, the inner discourse once again seems to resolve to an object of vision, this time inner vision. This image, unlike the written word, is neither enlivened through (audible) speech, nor entombed in the (silent) written word image. As the most perfect medium of knowledge, it gives direct access, through the inner eye, to what is.

So, do we essentially see words, or do we hear them? Is the linguistically mediated process of thinking modelled on sight or hearing? The Greek itself is highly ambiguous here. The principle word for word, λόγος (logos) comes from λέγω (say), implying the immediate answer that the word comes to us primarily through the auditory channel. As Bultmann points out, however, the original meaning of λέγω is not to summon but to explain, where explain has its root in the concepts of gathering up, selecting, analysing and estimating.<sup>17</sup> Thus, it is not the word *in itself*, as an event (which would be heard), that constitutes the knowledge or access to what is. Rather the word is the gathering place at which 'that which is' is brought into order and through which reason does its work: "It is the meaning, not the being spoken, which is constitutive".<sup>18</sup> In Aristotle's terms, the word one hears would be the thought symbol, where the thought in itself is accessed through the mind's eye. Hearing is, as it were, the porter who ought to be dismissed once he has delivered the good(s). Once the contingency of sound is stripped away, the mind takes the message and resolves in silence to the ahistorical and thus intemporal logos, reason.

Things are very different with the Hebrews, who we approach now where we leave the Greeks, with their word for word, דבר *davar*. As with the Greek *logos*, *davar* gives us access to how the Hebrews understood mental life, knowledge and truth; but as we shall see, the two understandings diverge in significant ways. Starting with the most well-known biblical reference to the word, that is the word through which God created the world, we already know that, for the Hebrews, words *in themselves* are effective. Thus, like the Greek

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<sup>17</sup> See Bultmann, "The Word of God in the New Testament", *op. cit.* p. 292 and n. 26.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*

*logos, davar* derives from the root 'to speak', but in this case the speech is active and dynamic; it is an activity in which something is driven forward.

This is perhaps most clearly conveyed by the fact that *davar* signifies both *word* and *deed*. Thus for the Hebrews, in a manner later picked up in Austin's concept of the *performative*, words are acts, and not merely the names for acts.<sup>19</sup> This coincidence of the word and the deed begins to convey the distance between the Hebrew understanding of the word, and our habitual tendency, linked to the Greek understanding, to think of the word as something distinct from the deed, to which it refers.

The auditory quality of God's creation, understood not only as a singular act (in seven days), but as God's ongoing relationship with the world, is continuous with the Hebrew understanding that human beings gain access to God (and hence ultimate truth) by listening to God's words or hearing God's voice.<sup>20</sup> Thus, what is perhaps the central prayer, repeated several times daily and throughout the liturgy, opens with the words, "Shema Israel", "Hear Israel!" This, combined with the prohibition on making images of God and the impossibility of seeing God has led to a general understanding that, for the Hebrews, the pre-eminent knowing takes the form of hearing, and not seeing. In this regard, it is important to understand that the reason one cannot see God is not, as is frequently thought, because the sight of God would be overwhelming for a human being, and thus God must hide God's face to protect human beings. Rather, it is not in God's nature to be seen.<sup>21</sup> Thus even Moses, the prophet who was most able to approach God, and who came face to face, *panim al panim*, with God,

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<sup>19</sup> J. L. Austin, *How to Do Things With Words*, Cambridge, MA.: Harvard University Press, 1962.

<sup>20</sup> In fact, *davar* (word) and *kol* (voice), are manifested in different ways, representing different dimensions of God, but I do not explore this here.

<sup>21</sup> The unseen-able as distinct from the illusive quality of God is powerfully conveyed in one of the wondrous tales of Rab Nachman of Bratslav which follows the journey of the emissary of a King who wishes to find that one King of whom he does not have a portrait. The story is far too complex to retell interpret here, but one of its implications is that the King behind the screen (God) cannot be visually represented, even when the screen is pulled back. See "The King and the Wise man" in *Nahman of Bratslav; The Tales*, Translated by Arnold J. Band, New York, Mahwah: Paulist Press, 1978.

was not permitted to see God, but did hear God's extended speech and God's name, which he then conveyed to the people as the means of constituting them into a nation.<sup>22</sup>

It would be wrong, however, to conclude from this emphasis on the auditory path to truth that the metaphor of seeing is absent from Hebrew expression or understanding. Thus, in Moses' final speech to the people, just before he dies, we see an example of the use of *ra'ah*, see, understood as a form of deep knowing. He begins the last section of his address, the section containing the famous phrase, "Choose Life!", with the words, "See, I set before you this day life and prosperity, death and adversity" (Deut. 30.15). Still, we should read the references to seeing with caution. Moses' call is not to bring sight to the contemplation of forms, but rather to the acts through which God speaks. Similarly, Boman points out that even where Jews do (contrary to the prohibition) create visual representations of God or the events of the Torah, these are symbols of God's action and word, for example either the scrolls, or God's hand, which symbolises action, or the acts of people through which God speaks.<sup>23</sup> In this sense, to the extent that the modality of vision is recognised as an access to what is essential, it is not the image that we are asked to see, but the word or the act. Indeed, immediately after the verse, "And all the people saw the voice" (Ex. 20.14), comes the prohibition on making images.

Finally, and to complete this cursory comparison with the Greek, the notion of truth, or what one seeks through knowledge, has a very distinct meaning in Hebrew. Here it is not related (as in the Greek) to the notion of what is (or the verb to be), but rather to faithfulness, trustworthiness, conformity with experience. So, for example, *'emeth*, the word stated at the end of various prayers, does not, as in the Greek, convey the idea that something has been revealed, but rather fidelity to what we know.<sup>24</sup> If one starts from

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<sup>22</sup> The idea of the nation, being a modern phenomenon, did not of course exist. However, referencing the constituted body as "Israel" causes even more confusion!

<sup>23</sup> Boman, *op. cit.*, p. 113. The discussion here is of the cases in which Jews do, contrary to the prohibition, create visual representations of God or the events of the Torah.

<sup>24</sup> Boman, *op. cit.*, p. 202.

the perspective of the Greek worldview, detaching the idea of truth from what is (in itself) makes no sense, and removes all objectivity from knowledge. If, however, one suspends judgment as to the proper or essential nature of knowing or truth and allows these two different modalities to unfold, what transpires is that the world revealed through the Hebrews' knowing was, in certain categorical respects, a different world. More precisely, the ontological status of that which we seek to know and ourselves as knowers is importantly different in the two cases. In the Greek framework, the known and the knower begin as distinct bits of being which are then brought into relationship, where that relationship entails more or less accurate understanding. In the Hebrew, the relationship precedes the abstraction of things in themselves.<sup>25</sup>

### **The world our senses bring us to**

Jonas begins his phenomenological analysis of seeing and hearing as I have here, by observing vision's dominance as a model for thinking, beginning with the Greeks and persisting through the life course of Western philosophy. He then sets out to elucidate the particular qualities of the distinct world that sight gives us, contrasting it in particular with the heard world.<sup>26</sup> First is sight's capacity to give the perceiver access to "a contemporaneous manifold", or many objects of perception at the same time. Second is sight's abstraction of the object from a causal relation with the perceiver, and its isolation of the object as a thing in itself. Third is the way in which sight establishes a distance between the object and the perceiver. In elaborating these differences, Jonas' clear objective is to point to what it is about sight that makes it superior and to the

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<sup>25</sup> One might note here the resonances with Heidegger's thought. That Heidegger's work seems more in keeping with the Hebrew framework has been explored by Marlene Zareder in *The Unthought Debt: Heidegger and the Hebraic Heritage*, translated by Bettina Bergo, California: Stanford University Press, 2006.

<sup>26</sup> Jonas also considers touch and, in an appendix, movement, but I do not discuss them here.

deficiency of a heard world. In re-presenting them here, we might call that hierarchy into question.

Only sight, Jonas argues, gives us access to “many things juxtaposed, as co-existent parts” in a single horizon at the same time. In the other senses, he claims, a single moment gives us access only to one undifferentiated experience, and to gain access to many ‘parts’, say notes, one has to extend the experience over time. Thus, in hearing, “any present quality is just a point in a passage of transition ... the content is never present as a whole, but always in the making, always partial and incomplete”.<sup>27</sup> Sound, admittedly, may contain several elements simultaneously, as for example when an orchestra produces music, but the integrity of the distinct elements is lost, whereas when we see many objects at once, we still see them as discrete objects.

The most important result of this distinguishing quality of sight, he argues, is the way in which it alone produces the experience of *the present* “as something more than the point experience of the passing *now*.”<sup>28</sup> It does this by virtue of the fact that whereas time is built into the content of sound (the melody for example is the sequence), the content of what one sees (for example, the colour of an object) is not in itself effected by how long it lasts. It is independent of temporality.

There is a great deal going on in this single distinguishing ‘advantage’, principally the way in which sight presents us with discrete objects and vision’s distinct way of producing temporality. I will come back to the issue of the discrete object in the discussion of the second of Jonas’ advantages, but for now, pause to reflect on his analysis of temporality. A full discussion of different conceptions of time is well beyond what is possible here, so this exploration will be limited to two observations: first concerning the assumptions built into Jonas’ analysis about the temporal nature of being and the relative roles that time and space have in the essential *beingness* of the world, and second, concerning the question of the ‘distinct now’.

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<sup>27</sup> Jonas, “The Nobility of Sight”, *op. cit.*, p. 136.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.* p. 144.

Although he does not make this explicit, it is evident from Jonas' discussion of the special access that this frozen present gives us that he understands being in essentially *static* and spatial terms. This, as Boman points out, is in keeping with the Greek's predominantly spatial conception of reality, where being is essentially located in space, and temporality is added as a qualification or attribute of being. This ordering is not only alien to the Hebrew experience, but in fact negated by the forms of the Hebrew words for *to be*, which always also imply becoming (as well as effecting).

Thus, as Bergson most famously observed, time (as represented by Jonas) is conceptualised as a mobile image of immobile eternity. In other words, we assume that what is most essential to being is being as it would be in immobile eternity, a timeless place we discover with our minds eye. We then judge time's movement as the passage of discrete moments of being, removed from its essence into time. Were we to start with time, as Bergson does, being would always already be in time, essentially in flow. Boman, in linking hearing with this temporal priority and seeing with the spatial priority, would agree with Plato's observation that the senses other than sight, and in particular hearing, are the senses not of being but of becoming. Standing with the Hebrews, however, this does not imply that hearing *merely* gives them access to an unstable and thus difficult to understand being, or, in Jonas's terms, deprives them of the distinction between change and the unchanging or becoming and being. Rather, it is through the aural construction of temporality as flow that one gains access to being as it is, always becoming.

Jonas then goes a step further in linking vision with the project of metaphysics by noting that it is vision's production of being as essentially static which gives rise to the idea that being's ultimate truth or unmediated state is to be found in eternity, the place of absolute timelessness. The problem is that when he suggests this link, and indeed when Arendt reiterates it, it seems that they are just reporting things as they are, rather than advocating one of a possible number of approaches. Completely absent is any critical evaluation of the implications of this elevation of the eternal in the hierarchy of being. Yet for Arendt, this is hardly an innocent or neutral turn in

being's history! Elsewhere she argues that it is this very adulation of the eternal as being's ultimate state that gives rise to philosophy's structural incapacity to recognise the *sui generis* value of activity in itself and in particular of politics, with its constant becoming.<sup>29</sup> As with the Greeks, then, there would seem to be a fissure in Arendt's own declared allegiance.

Indeed, it is fascinating that although Arendt never associates her project of reviving politics with the Hebrews, she argues that to remedy this metaphysical turn, we need to revalue speech and deed (*davar*) as the highest achievements of the human condition. Indeed, she extends the being of this human activity beyond the frozen moment, into the narratives that human beings entering the conversation across time will continue to generate about them. In this sense, though she uses the Greek polis as her ideal type, what she describes is far more like a melody played by a continuous orchestra than it is the manifold data of the seen/scene.

Relatedly, in her discussion of the *nunc stans*, the distinct moment of the now, Arendt reads Kafka's nightmarish allegory of the *He* standing at the point of embattled engagement between the past and the future to suggest that it is only the insertion of the man (*He*) that transforms what would otherwise be a Bergsonian continuous flow into time as we know it.<sup>30</sup> In fact, it is only through the activity of *thinking* that the tenses, past, present and future, come to be emptied of content and constituted as such.<sup>31</sup> It is, she argues, the dream of metaphysics, and not the primary experience of being, which places us outside this seamless movement, sitting on high like an umpire of a game which could in fact not possibly be going on were we not down there on the court. Arendt's point is not to invalidate this metaphysical perspective, but rather to make explicit that it is a perspective, and not the only one. Indeed, it is one whose very

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<sup>29</sup> See in particular *the Human Conditions*, *op cit.* p. 20 and *Lectures on Kant's Political Philosophy*, ed. Ronald Beiner, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982, p. 24.

<sup>30</sup> Arendt, "Thinking", *op. cit.* p. 203ff.

<sup>31</sup> Boman in fact argues that for the Hebrews, time as such, understood as an empty form has no meaning, rather "the Semitic concept of time is closely coincident with that of its content without which time would be quite impossible." *Ibid.* p. 139.

existence rests on the existence of another. Thus, one might agree with Jonas that sight is superior as the medium through which metaphysics is constructed, but question the equation between metaphysics and a correct understanding of the world. Indeed, if the metaphysical position emerges only by abstracting from one's initial location as an actor in the scene of being, its claim to unmediated truth rests on the prior existence of contingent historicised experience and denial of that existence. It was perhaps Kafka's inability to abstract himself from the clamour of voices then, or his unwillingness to abandon their immediacy for the metaphysical heights, that explains, in part, his darkened vision, or, if Benjamin was right (as in the citation at the beginning of this article), his not seeing at all: "Kafka listened to tradition, and he who listens hard, does not see."<sup>32</sup>

Returning now to the question of the constitution of objects, one already sees in this first dimension of comparison that for Jonas one dimension of vision's superiority is that it distinguishes objects as discrete and static entities, understood as substantial bits of being. Sound, by contrast does not provide "object referents" as such, nor lead us to "existents ... enduring things beyond the sound events themselves". In sound, the boundaries are lost. When one reads Jonas' rebuke of sound's transgressive tendencies, one could almost think one had mistakenly switched books from a phenomenology of the senses to a liberal tirade against pre-modern collectivism: "[T]here is no "keeping to one's place" in the community of acoustic individuals", he complains, "[T]he simple fact is that sounds are dynamic events, not just static qualities, and thus trespassers by nature."<sup>33</sup> What Jonas fails to notice about his own judgment is that the very concept of trespass assumes that beings' essential being inheres within the boundaries of their form, and this has not yet been established. This incursion into each other's "space" is mirrored in sound's incursion on the hearing subject who cannot stand apart, but is, as it were, at sound's mercy. This, of course, is

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<sup>32</sup> Walter Benjamin, "Reflections on Kafka", in *Illuminations*, Henry Zorn, trans. New York: Schocken Books, 1963, p. 143.

<sup>33</sup> *ibid.* p. 139

the complete opposite to the case of seeing, where the subject is the master of the object he chooses to see.

Indeed, the relationships that seeing and hearing establish between the knower and the known differ along a number of dimensions. First, Jonas contends that when one sees an object, there is no causal connection, and indeed no relationship, where relationship implies that the parties affect each other.<sup>34</sup> When one looks at an object, "it is apprehended in its self containment from out of my own self containment". Thus, in sight, there is a distinction between the thing and the thing as it affects me. As Jonas puts it, I can carry away in my mind's eye what vision gives me as essential to the object, its form. Jonas correctly links this distinction with the distinctions between form and matter and essence and existence, which we know to be so pivotal to Aristotelian thought and the substance ontology which flows from it.<sup>35</sup> Moreover, although Jonas does not make this explicit, the causal disconnection, or absence of an affective relationship, is also the condition of our assumption that subject and object are essentially discrete. I only come to be as a subject who can observe the world and make sense of it, if I assume that there is a world there free from my act of observation, or correlatively, that the activity of observation is independent of the world observed.<sup>36</sup>

Interestingly, whereas throughout the discussion Jonas sings only vision's praises, at this point he sounds a note of caution. The causal disjunction inherent in vision's construction abstracts objects from causal sequences, bequeathing us the Humean problem of establishing causality. What he does not elaborate here, but does point out elsewhere, is that this absolute separation of subject and object or experiencing being and subject of experience gives rise to an objectification of experience, which while advantageous to the

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<sup>34</sup> Since Schrodinger asked us to imagine his cat, we know this is incorrect, but the point is made in a Newtonian, not a quantum world.

<sup>35</sup> Thus, with Aristotle, it is form that defines the object, giving shape to otherwise formless matter; with Kant, transcendental thought forms are abstracted from their particular existence in the world as matter.

<sup>36</sup> The obvious interlocutor here is mysticism in general and Buddhist philosophy in particular, where the distinction between subject and object is most thoroughly called into question.

metaphysical project, may be noxious when imported to other spheres of concern, such as faith and ethics. For example, for Heidegger's colleague Bultmann, whose primary concern is theological and ethical, this priority for 'seeing knowledge' effectively undermines the possibility of a transformative engagement. Thus, he writes that understanding which has the character of 'seeing', of observing from a distance, ultimately amounts to exposition of a world at a distance; "the world is an objective entity for me and I am an object in the world". By contrast, understanding that has the character of 'hearing', of knowing oneself to be summoned, "discloses the possibility of my existence which I must resolutely grasp, and so teaches me to understand myself anew".<sup>37</sup> We will return to this in the final section.

The second way in which Jonas argues seeing and hearing establish a different relationship between the knower and the known concerns the power relationship between them. Thus, the causal relationship which Jonas attributes to sound is one in which I am not merely affected, but as it were the victim, invaded by sound, and thus passive, unfree. This stands in stark contrast to the seeing subject, who might choose to rest her eyes where she wishes, or even to use her eyelids to block out objects altogether. Jonas provides a host of highly loaded descriptions of this disempowered state: the subject is "outside his control", "exposed", "has no choice in the matter", "at the mercy of environmental action" which "intrudes upon his sensibility without his asking" and "decides for him." Arendt even speculates that the resemblance (or perhaps even the etymological relationship) between the German *hören* (to hear) and a cluster of words associated with obedience and bondage may be explained by this deeper quality of hearing as a state in which one is dominated.<sup>38</sup> From a philological point of view Arendt is probably on shaky ground on this point, but her analysis is

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<sup>37</sup> Bultmann, "Church and Teaching in the New Testament", in *Faith and Understanding*, *op. cit.*, pp. 191-2.

<sup>38</sup> The words she lists are "*gehörchen, hörig, gehören*" meaning to obey, be in bondage, belong. The last, to belong has a very different resonance and is indeed far closer to the sense of truth as fidelity discussed here. Cf. *The Life of the Mind; Thinking*, *ibid.* p. 112.

continuous with a more general preoccupation in her work with which type of knowledge or ideas are conducive to human freedom, and which threaten it. More specifically, one sees in her interpretation of a putative link between hearing and obedience intimations of her thoughts about the danger that 'the Absolute' in general, and God in particular, pose for human freedom and politics.

For Arendt, the greatest threat to human freedom is that humans will not identify their own contingent worldly sphere and their own embodied conversations as the ultimate site in which they must make meaning and generate principles for how to live. Rather, they will see it as subordinated to a voice which commands from beyond what can be seen between men; an Absolute which cannot be interrogated and which is not permeable to compromises, but can only be obeyed.<sup>39</sup> The Absolute may take the form of a heteronymous being or principle which stands outside or above, or the murmur from the private darkness of the heart, but in either case, to the extent that a person answers to it, she sacrifices her status as a fully autonomous member of an autonomous human community. The problem here is that Arendt elides obedience, the Absolute and the loss of autonomy, thus missing the quite different understanding of those terms as conveyed, for example in Bultmann's writings on the nature of the word of God.<sup>40</sup> In this, her work suffers a not unusual (and not surprising) failure of philosophy to grasp the theological proposition that one could be freely obedient to the call of the Absolute. Given the immense difficulty that this challenge to our accepted understandings of freedom and the Absolute poses, I leave it to the side and simply suggest here that philosophers' failure to grasp the alternative logic suggested by the theologians may lie in part in the fact that they

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<sup>39</sup> She tells a powerful story of the dangers of the call of the Absolute, not only in the forms of which we might be suspicious, like vengeance, but even of love and compassion in *On Revolution*, Penguin Books, 1990, see in particular chapter 2.

<sup>40</sup> See for example "What does it Mean to Speak of God?" in *Faith and Understanding, op. cit.*, p. 61ff.

interpret the auditory relationship through the ontology of distinct and bounded entities which sight and not sound produces.

Coming back to Arendt, what is odd, and what gives rise to a sense of ambivalence in her narratives, is that while she associates the modality of hearing with the relationship of obedience, it is precisely through a relationship which takes place through hearing, that is the relationship of spoken discourse, that she envisages human beings establishing the conditions of autonomy. Thus, she argues that human freedom is not (as per the classical liberal conception) impeded by other people, but only arises under conditions of plurality. It is when we speak with each other that we bring into existence the in between space which she calls *inter-est*; and it is in this space that we can experience ourselves as free. This freedom, however, is not the freedom of mastery, for the meaning of our words will always remain open ended and continue to be created by those who hear us.

At the same time, her conception of the Absolute as something which stands over and above human beings as a frozen rule or principle bears a significant resemblance to the Hebrew's conception of the idol, or for that matter Plato's frozen image – a visual phenomenon. In other words, Arendt consciously assumes the priority of the visual as the superior modality of thought, but what her own texts speak of is an auditory path to a form of knowledge far more compatible with freedom. Thus, as she herself notes, metaphysics may be appropriate for certain forms of knowing or certain ways of being human, specifically the *vita contempliva*, but positively hostile to others, specifically the life of politics. While she does not link this latter argument with the modalities of seeing and hearing, the associations drawn here indicate that her own work would suggest that in her search for an engaged model of thinking, she might well adopt the metaphor of hearing. Finally, the reason this will be such a problem for Arendt, particularly in this last work *The Life of the Mind*, is that she is looking to build a bridge from thinking in itself, the modality of the *vita contempliva* to ethical action, which she has argued emerges from the multi-*vocality* of

politics. This then raises the larger question of the relationship between these two modes of reception and ethics.

Coming back to Jonas' analysis, on which Arendt based hers, one sees clear marks of the Greek conception of reality which Jonas uses as his compass of evaluation in the way he frames both of these dimensions of sight's special qualities. Had he begun his project with the proximity to the Hebrew texts and traditions that he clearly has with the Greek, his analysis may have had quite another tone. The affinity between Jonas' ideal world and that of the Greeks becomes obvious in the light of Boman's summary: "They [the Greeks] consider reality an objective, given quality with which our senses, particularly sight, bring us into contact."<sup>41</sup> Accordingly, we know it best when we can stand at a distance from it and observe it the way it is, free of us as we are free of it. By contrast, for the Hebrews, being is understood always as affecting or as experienced. Even at the linguistic level there is no designation for things as they are, but always things as they affect us or as we are affected by them. Hence for example, the heavenly bodies are lamps מֵאֲרוֹת (*me'oroth*), or lights, אֲוִרִים *orim*, which are not names of an entity out there, but of some happening which we know through its effects on us. The idea that it is "the sun" which then does this thing of shining or warming is already one step removed from the Hebrew linguistic experience; it abstracts and reifies the abstraction, a Greek translation! Boman calls this *psychological* as distinct from *logical* thinking. In doing so, however, he emphasises that this is not the same as mere subjectivism, a likely conflation if one takes the logical as the correct relationship with reality.

In the same vein, Hebrew expressions translated as boundaries or borders do not designate a dividing line between two distinct entities, given by the natural boundaries of those entities themselves. Rather, the boundary is always a specific part of reality in itself, say a mountain or the ocean.<sup>42</sup> Thus, boundaries are not assumed to arise from the essential nature of an entity's being (as

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<sup>41</sup> Boman *op. cit.*, p.113.

<sup>42</sup> Cf. Boman, p. 157ff.

bounded), but as human constructions set up to order the world in a particular manner. Similarly, there is no distinction in the Hebrew language between form and content, just like, as Jonas remarked, the melody is the form of the musical notes.<sup>43</sup>

## Synaesthesia

Daniel Barenboim, the world renowned Argentinean-born Israeli conductor entitled his 2006 Reith Lectures, *In the Beginning was the Sound*, thus providing his own variation on St John's beginning in the word and Goethe's in the deed.<sup>44</sup> In contradistinction to Arendt, who relegates Aristotle's remark on hearing's special relationship to our intellectual functions to a footnote and Jonas who mentions it not at all, Barenboim gives it pride of place, paraphrasing Aristotle to have him say that "the eyes are the organs of temptation, and the ears are the organs of instruction".<sup>45</sup> It is hardly surprising that Barenboim, a man who has lived his life in music, should reverse this hierarchy to privilege sound. Nevertheless, given the epistemological inheritance and everyday pursuits of our other commentators, his perspective might provide some balance.

Inverting Jonas' question, Barenboim asks why it is that sound occupies this special position. His first answer takes us directly to the intimate relationship between hearing and time noted here already on several occasions, but on this occasion we arrive there via a different route. Sound, Barneboim tells us, has a uniquely powerful relationship with recollection and memory. This implies not only that sound takes us across time, but that time itself alters in the moment of recollection; when one is remembering or recollecting, the past and the present are not distributed along a unidirectional line, but occur as undifferentiated experience.

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<sup>43</sup> Jones *ibid.* p. 156.

<sup>44</sup> As Boman points out when Goethe wrote that "In the beginning was the deed", he was in fact, perhaps unbeknownst to him, accurately portraying the essential ambivalence of *davar* as both word and act.

<sup>45</sup> The transcript and importantly the audio are available on the BBC website at <http://www.bbc.co.uk/radio4/reith2006/lecture2.shtml>, accessed 15 September 2006.

Perhaps this is why, even today, Jews access the stories told in the Torah, events they are enjoined to recollect and re-experience, by listening to them being sung, and not by looking at words (let alone pictures) on a page.<sup>46</sup>

Sound's second special quality, Barenboim tells us, this time drawing on contemporary neurobiology, is that the auditory system is physically much closer to the parts of the brain which regulate life, that is, those brain centres from which the basic emotions emerge. This proximity to affect is accentuated by the intimacy of sound's effect. Thus, providing a physiological analogue to Jonas' point about sound's direct impact on the listener, Barenboim notes that "the physical vibrations which result in sound sensations are a variation on touching, they change our own bodies directly and deeply". In other words, sound both affects us and effects us in ways which bypass other cognitive functions. Hearing is the single, unbroken movement of a vibration from 'the outside' to 'the inside': from your fingers to the strings of a piano altering the wave patterns of the molecules in the atmosphere and then vibrating in my eardrum. From the point of view of the eye, these are distinct bits of being (fingers, strings, air, ears); for sound, there is simply a single continuous vibration.

If one's project is to create distance and objectivity, this is of course a non-ideal arrangement; even more so, if one's project is to ensure that the human subject can stand over above the world as his object. Indeed, if one starts with vision's reality, where the parts of the sequence are distinct objects, and one reads the direction of power from the sequence of time, one must conclude with Jonas and Arendt that the listener is at the mercy of those fingers playing that piano. Things become even worse, from this perspective, when one adds Barenboim's point that the effect moves directly to the most basic of emotions, the seat of mere life which Arendt associated with the deprivation of human freedom.<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> The clearest example of this is from the Passover Haggadah which states, "In each and every generation every person must regard himself as though he had come forth from Egypt as a slave."

<sup>47</sup> Cf. *The Human Conditions*, *op. cit.*, pp. 96-101.

Arendt certainly has a point, if one thinks (as she no doubt did) of the power that Wagner's music had to induce uncritical allegiance amongst listeners when harnessed to a violent collectivist political ideology. One can well comprehend why resisting what Arendt called the voice of the Absolute became imperative for her and Jonas, both not only German Jewish refugees but also students of Heidegger.<sup>48</sup> From where they wrote, it makes perfect sense that the priority had to be to insist on establishing philosophical, political and even aesthetic conditions under which the individual was best placed to stand at a distance and choose which parts of her environment would act upon her. For us to reconstruct an ideal of some type of Romantic dissolution of the self, abstracted from the historical itinerary of earlier Romanticism, and thus from the context of their theorising, would be both politically naïve and amnesic.

However, as Jonas points out in a paper addressed not to philosophers, but to theologians, an historically justifiable preference neither trumps all other claims, nor annuls the perhaps unintended consequences of choosing this approach. Philo's conversion of ears into eyes and his putative elevation of the faithful from God's listeners to God's spectators fundamentally altered our understanding of the nature of God, as the Hebrews, who prohibited all images, well knew it would. As Jonas puts it, this shift effects a turn from "the original hearing of the living, nonworldly God ... to the theoretical will for vision of the supernatural, divine truths".<sup>49</sup> God seen is God objectified, and after this transition, faith must answer to *theoria* or philosophy. It is no coincidence that the Greek translation of *Israel*, is *one who sees God*. Indeed, it was Philo, the Greek Jew who is cited as the source of this interpretation, one he seems to have drawn by linking the Hebrew *Israel* with the similarly sounded *ish ro-eh el*, a person who sees God. But this etymological interpretation is absent from all Jewish commentary,

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<sup>48</sup> I have omitted entirely from this discussion the turn in the later Heidegger to speak of the conditions for the possibility of being as 'a call'. This is discussed in Derrida, *Of Spirit: Heidegger and the Question*, translated by Geoffrey Bennington and Rachel Bowlby, Chicago: university of Chicago Press, 1989.

<sup>49</sup> Heidegger and Theology, in *The Phenomenon of Life*, op. cit. p. 239.

which takes the etymology to refer back to *sarita* (you have struggled), recalling that Jacob was bequeathed the name Israel after he had spent the night wrestling the angel.<sup>50</sup> The important point for us is not whether the true etymology lies in seeing or wrestling, but rather that the Greek translation assumes the former and the Jewish tradition recognises only the latter. As various scholars of biblical exegesis have noted, when biblical interpreters make etymological claims, they are not tracking an accurate philological aetiology of the words 'as they are', but "trying to understand the text from the perspective of their own time and place".<sup>51</sup>

The result of this translation, or transformation of ears into eyes and God into an object of contemplation, is evident in Arendt's understanding of God's place in political life. As noted above, for Arendt, God, like all other Absolutes, is fundamentally inimical to the autonomous project which politics ought to be, and indeed as soon as God comes in, politics is over. If one understands God as some type of super-substance, this is no doubt a legitimate concern. Indeed, the observation perhaps tells us a great deal about how the people who currently justify thick moral absolutes and violence in theological terms (as God's commands), understand their God and their freedom. This understanding has, however, already gone through the conversion that the Hebrews forbade – indeed a conversion that is also called idolatry.

Constituted as we are, reversing this conversion presents a near incomprehensible project, especially as appreciating its value almost requires that we have already moved some way towards it. Yet it was this return to the call which Levinas, another Jewish refugee and student of Heidegger, believed was the antidote to the radical violation of human dignity which they had all experienced. For Levinas, in contradistinction to Arendt, what was needed was not to

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<sup>50</sup> The relevant verse here is Gen. 32:29. There is a significant debate in Philo scholarship about the sources of his etymological interpretation, which is so unique in the Jewish tradition. This debate includes a significant question mark over whether he read more than a little Hebrew at all. No doubt, he was using the Greek text. See Birnbaum, Ellen, *The Place of Judaism in Philo's Thought*, 1996: Brown University.

<sup>51</sup> Birnbaum, *op. cit.* p. 69.

recover politics from where it had been relegated under the rule of metaphysics, but rather to recover ethics from where it had been relegated. And for Levinas, this entailed reminding us of the ethical relationship in which the constitution of the subject does not logically precede her openness to the other, or, in Levinas' terms, placing ethics before ontology.<sup>52</sup>

Abstracting from the enormous complexity compacted into his project, the relevant part of Levinas' argument for our purposes is that if we assume that what comes first are beings as fully formed bits of being who arise for each other as objects of contemplation, ethics will always be a problem. As Jonas put it, when I look at an object, including another person, "it is apprehended in its self containment from out of my own self containment", and respecting my freedom entails allowing me to decide how I will treat that object and if I have any obligation towards it. The visual relationship with the object is, on this model, ideal, because I can always exercise my freedom by blocking it from my view. If, however, the other comes to me as a call, as a resonance, I am already implicated, touched by sound. The implication, which Levinas announces loud and clear, is that we are always and already responsible for the other.

The ethical infinity of Levinas' call is of course troubling to our conception of freedom, but this is just his point. Just as Arendt pointed out that the metaphysical priority for eternal forms undercuts our ability to grasp the *sui generis* value of historical engagement with other people, so too Levinas is pointing out that its schematisation of the world as an object of contemplation removes us from our being-as-implicated in the lives of others.

In both cases, what is really fascinating about these two Jewish writers, whose concepts were so powerfully hewn through the apparatus philosophy, is that the path they suggest is neither visual nor auditory, but synaesthetic. In Arendt's case, she writes of life in the *polis*, where one sees and is seen as one acts with the spoken

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<sup>52</sup> The themes discussed here are most fully developed in *Totality and Infinity*, translated by Alphonso Lingis, Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1969.

word. In Levinas's case, it is the call of the face that breaks the domination of a metaphysical conception of the other as my object. Perhaps what both were trying to achieve was that allusive manner of being in which two subjects can exist and know each other to exist simultaneously, haunted as they are on the one side by the danger of collapsing into undifferentiated symbiosis and on the other of experiencing each other only as limits on their own freedom. To stave off the first danger, they draw on vision's capacity to create distance; to avert the second, they draw on hearing's capacity to remind us that this distance is a visual illusion.

How one embodies or institutionalises the synaesthetic ethic is the next challenge, but one for which Barenboim gives us a working model in his final two lectures, delivered respectively at Ramallah and Jerusalem. In those two cities we have a political and social reality where the very problem I have discussed in the abstract is lived experience. On the one side, the dignity of both parties is threatened by the remoteness of distance; each has become the object of the other in the worst possible sense and as an object, is always expendable. On the other, that same dignity is threatened by the possibility of fusion; either might have its identity and particularity overwhelmed by the other, should the force of the other's voice (or weapons or numbers) become greater. Barenboim's response to this deadly choice, developed collaboratively with Edward Said, the Palestinian philosopher and musician, was to create an orchestra comprising young Arab and Israeli musicians, the West-east Divan. Neither would be so naïve as to suggest that an orchestra could be a panacea. Perhaps though, the metaphor of an audience watching an orchestra, where distinct bodies with distinct political and cultural histories create new pieces of music whose existence rests on their commonality and difference offers us a new ethical aesthetics.