

Ethics and human relationality: between Arendt's accounts of morality

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Abstract

This paper considers a short quotation from near the beginnings of Arendt's *Denktagebuch*, dated to August 1950. This epigrammatic formulation presages Arendt's whole political theory, by situating the political outside of the individual, *in-between* a plurality of human beings. My concern, however, is not with politics as such. Instead, I ask: cannot what Arendt says of politics be said with equal truth of morality? To make some attempt upon this vast question, I examine Arendt's own more tentative explorations of the moral sphere, including the importance she attaches to judgment – in particular, our judgment of the company we might keep and the exemplars we should follow.

Introduction

I would like to consider a short quotation from near the beginnings of Arendt's *Denktagebuch*, dated to August 1950. Philosophy, claims Arendt, has been concerned with the human being, so that it would all be much the same if there were one or two or only identical human beings in the world. But this approach cannot illuminate the human being qua *zoon politikon*, as a political animal, she says,

as if there were something political *in* the person which belongs to h/er essence. But this is exactly wrong: *the* human being is apolitical. Politics originates *in-between* human beings, that is precisely *outside* the individual. Therefore there is no strictly political substance. Politics originates in-between and establishes itself in terms of relations [*als der Bezug*].^{1,1}

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¹ In the *Denktagebuch*, ed Ursula Ludz & Ingeborg Nordmann (Piper, Munich, 2002), I.21 (Aug 50, 15ff); also reprinted in Hannah Arendt, *Was ist Politik?: Fragmente aus dem Nachlaß*, ed Ursula Ludz (Piper, Munich, 1993; 2nd ed, 2003: 9ff); English version extracted and translated in Jerome Kohn (ed) *The Promise of Politics* (Schocken, New York, 2005: 95).

Arendt's 'agenda' will be familiar to all her readers. She means to insist that 'men, not Man,' inhabit the earth – leading to her analysis of the human condition and the political realm in terms of plurality. We are spontaneous, relating creatures, who do not see the world from the same perspective. Yet we depend on others for our sense of reality and are fated to the shared task of organising our co-existence. Just as each human being borne into the world is never quite the same as any other, so too are our actions never quite repetitions of what has gone before. Human judgment, then, finds no secure anchor in the past, and must always be prepared to grasp some element of the new.

For philosophy, Arendt continues in this same passage, the non-identical, unpredictable, perspectival, and relational character of human activity has been at best an embarrassment. While philosophers have generally assumed no meaning could subsist in our plurality, Arendt's experience of twentieth century politics leads her to perceive a clear nihilism in this neglect. The existence of so many unrelated, purportedly identical individuals seems altogether senseless: why should there be yet another 'more or less successful repetition of the same' model?² Arendt does not need to spell out one inference from this thought: why not eliminate some of those repetitions, especially those deemed 'less successful'?

As I say, these concerns will be familiar to every reader of Arendt's published work. However, this unpublished formulation of Arendt's is especially pointed. As such, it poses with great clarity a basic question that I would like to take up in this short paper. The question is this: Cannot what Arendt says of man's status as the political animal not also be remarked with equal truth of the human being as the moral animal? Arendt's philosophy contends with great force that philosophy has failed to consider plurality by virtue of metaphysical and sometimes religious assumptions concerning the soul – metaphysical assumptions no longer plausible to us. But this must surely have ramifications that are as far-reaching for our thinking about morality as they are for our thinking about politics. Like politics, after all, morality would be without recognisable meaning if we were not the plural, relating beings of Arendt's philosophy.

If we were directly to 'translate' Arendt's thought from politics to morality, we might rephrase her lines as follows:

The moral animal: as if there were something 'moral' in the person which belongs to his essence. But this is exactly wrong: the individual alone is amoral. Morality originates in-between human beings, not 'in' individuals. Morality is about how we relate to one another: it is not a matter of internal moral 'substances.' Morality originates in-between and establishes itself in terms of human relations.

Here, of course, I can only make the most preliminary attempt upon such a vast claim. To do so, I will consider some accounts of morality that Arendt herself advances, and their relation to the plural space of action and judgment that she found the Western

² Ibid.

tradition to have neglected so badly. Unsurprisingly, this leads me toward Arendt's account of judgment,³ and back to a long-standing question, concerning the relation between thinking and judging in Arendt's thought. Whereas her writing of the early fifties invokes the importance of *understanding*, her later thought divides this activity, into *judging* and *thinking*. While there are clear reasons why Arendt would want to move in this direction,⁴ her stark division is notably inadequate for addressing moral phenomena. I hope, however, to shed some light on the connections across this divide, by attending to two prominent themes in her lectures, 'Some Questions of Moral Philosophy'⁵: the idea of a person 'making up his mind,' or constituting himself as a person; and the importance of choosing one's company.

Arendt's different senses of 'morality'

What sort of claim would be involved if we were to transfer Arendt's claim to the domain of morality? Immediately, any reader of Arendt's will recall her repeated, uncompromising contention, which seems to bar any such move: 'In the centre of moral considerations of conduct stands the self: in the centre of political considerations of conduct stands the world.'⁶

The 'political' side of this claim is much easier to come to terms with than the 'moral.' Notwithstanding arguments we may have with her account of 'the political,' the abstract core of her definition, bound up in the quotation which I am making so much of, provides a notion of politics that is, I think, difficult to dispute. Politics is the attempt by plural, unreliable, unpredictable, relating beings to organise their living together. This is a *task* by virtue of our distinctness and spontaneity – or our plurality; it is an *unavoidable* task, by virtue of our psychic and physical need of others – our relationality, if you like. Even if we wished to dispute Arendt's conception at this fundamental level, we could hardly quarrel with this contention: 'in the centre of political considerations of conduct stands the world.'

But Arendt's claim, 'in the centre of moral considerations of conduct stands the self,' is much harder to accept. Arendt seems to picture morality in terms of care of the soul: it will be better for me, myself, if I abstain from wrong-doing. As such, her claim must rest on an account of morality which is undoubtedly idiosyncratic. It is a claim, moreover, that is inconsistent with much that Arendt herself says about morality. To see

³ A matter, one might feel, on which too little was written by Arendt and too much has been written by her commentators. I hope that my concern with the moral judgment of persons may nonetheless cast some new light.

⁴ While understanding is explicitly linked by Arendt with reconciliation with the world, judgment asserts a clear autonomy from the world. That is, understanding lacks the element of decision and definiteness belonging to judgment: 'there is indeed an element of willing in all judgments. I can say yes or no to what is.' (*R&J* 283n21) And this 'element of willing' of course translates into an active element in judgment, qua decision to act, which is quite absent from understanding.

⁵ These lectures having been expertly edited by Jerome Kohn in *Responsibility and Judgment*; hereafter SQMP.

⁶ 'Collective Responsibility,' *R&J* 153.

this we need only consider some of the different ways in which she herself discusses morality. I will try to set out four⁷ of these quite briefly:

First, there is a sense of morality which Arendt finds in the word's etymological root – morality as *mores*. This is the domain of the customary, which differs from one age to another, from one people to another – from differences in their table manners to their modes of shelter to their sense of 'good form' or acceptable conduct. Arendt plays off the triviality of some mores against the gravity of others, to remind us of how totalitarian politics corrupted a society's moral sense. Hitler and Stalin were able to invert fundamental commandments from the Decalogue 'with hardly more trouble than it would take to change the table manners of an individual or a people.'⁸ For morality in this sense, there is, of course, no real meaning to the claim, 'at the centre of moral considerations stands the self.' As Arendt insists, here there is no self, rather a thoroughly socialised 'mass man,' who 'behaves' rather than 'acts' – amid the conformism of mass society or, in the extreme, mass criminality. Although such a more or less arbitrary morality is inevitable in the social realm, it is ultimately a non-morality – a 'morality' only for those people who fail to make up their own minds, who fail to decide for themselves what the fundamentals of human conduct consist in.

Second, then, Arendt contrasts social mores with a morality of conscience. Here, my agreement with myself in thought – especially thought about my past actions – is decisive. There are things that, so long as I actually live in thinking dialogue with myself, it will be better for me that I do not do. At the same time, Arendt argues that thought dissolves conventional moral standards – morality as mores.

Morality concerns the individual in his singularity. The criterion of right or wrong, the answer to the question, what ought I to do? depends in the last analysis neither on habits and customs, which I share with those around me, nor on a command of either divine or human origin, but on what I decide with regard to myself.⁹

This is the sense of morality that Arendt has in mind when she says, 'In the centre of moral considerations... stands the self.' It is the morality which she finds in Socrates' pronouncement, that it is better to suffer wrong than do wrong. On Arendt's analysis, this morality provides no positive guidance, and is limited to a prohibition against involvement in evil-doing.¹⁰ As against the conformism of societies subjected to

⁷ I omit Arendt's account of goodness, which describes a particular morality, rather than a sense which Arendt invests in the word *tout court*. One might also add her account of virtue as she finds it in the ancient world: 'all the virtues in Greece or in Rome are definitely political virtues. The question is never whether an individual *is* good but whether his conduct is good for the world he lives in. In the centre of interest is the world and not the self.' ('Collective Responsibility,' *R&J* 151). Cf *Denktagebuch* XXV.6 (March 1966), 656.

⁸ SQMP 50.

⁹ SQMP 97.

¹⁰ Contrast Arendt's account of goodness, which plays such a distinctive role in *The Human Condition*'s distinction between self and world, public and private. For goodness not the self,

totalitarianism – and the conformism that was no less evident, once totalitarianism had gone¹¹ – this account of morality is underlain by the experience of those who said, in the face of totalitarian evil: ‘this I cannot do.’

As Arendt recognises, this morality has two significant limitations. The first major criticism is that of irresponsibility, or a lack of concern with the world ‘from the viewpoint of the community or of the world we live in... [conscience’s “This I *can’t* do”] is irresponsible; its standard is the self and not the world, neither its improvement nor change.’¹² The morality of conscience leads to non-participation rather than active resistance of evil. Such resistance is likely to involve one in doing evil oneself – just as many who resisted Hitler were also active in his regime. Suffering wrong rather than doing wrong can prevent personal, moral disaster: but it does not alter the fact that wrong has entered our common world. Second, because a morality of conscience necessarily refuses to take its bearing from standards shared with others, it is open to the equally grave charge of subjectivity.¹³ Arendt seems to say no more than that there will be *some* limits for the person of conscience¹⁴: at least – but perhaps also at most – a person will not participate in the limitless, extreme evils epitomised by totalitarianism. Conscience loses its air of political irresponsibility, its irrelevance to the world, only when the world is well on the way to being the worst it can be.

We find a third sense of morality in *The Human Condition*. This is Arendt’s political morality of promising and forgiveness, a morality that answers to the ‘boundlessness’ inherent in action – the inevitability of transgression, the unpredictability of action, and the unreliability of men. Like Arendt’s morality of conscience, it is a minimal morality. However, this morality concerns our actions and transgressions amongst others: it is a morality of the world rather the self.

[Morality has] at least politically, no more to support itself than the good will to counter the enormous risks of action by readiness to forgive and to be forgiven, to make promises and to keep them. ... [These precepts] arise... directly out of the will to live together with others in the mode of acting and speaking, and thus they are like control mechanisms built into the very faculty to start new and unending processes.¹⁵

The risks of action force the actor to accept her non-sovereignty: she is bound up with others, and is bound to act against some even as she acts for others, suffering all sorts of responses and consequences that she did not intend or anticipate. Nonetheless, we can limit these risks in two crucial ways: The actor may make promises to others,

rather the other, is the only criterion (cf SQMP 116). Goodness lacks both the self-centredness and the negative character of Arendt’s morality of conscience.

¹¹ Cf SQMP 54f.

¹² SQMP 79.

¹³ SQMP 110, 124f, 141; ‘Thinking and moral considerations,’ in *R&J* 182 (hereafter TMC).

¹⁴ Cf SQMP 101: ‘These limits can change considerably and uncomfortably...’.

¹⁵ HC 246.

thereby committing himself to be the same person tomorrow as he was yesterday. And others can forgive the actor, and so release him from the consequences of his deeds. Like promising, forgiveness is structurally bound to the continuity of agency: Arendt stresses the necessity of repentance, the demand that the actor recognise who he was yesterday, in order that he should not be identified wholly on those terms tomorrow.

This morality anchors two vital elements of responsibility: our readiness to commit ourselves into the future, and to be identified with our past actions.¹⁶ I need hardly say that we cannot meaningfully apply Arendt's strictures about morality and the self to this sense of morality: both world and self are at stake here. This is true, too, of Arendt's hints toward a fourth possible sense of morality:

This is a morality of judgment.¹⁷ It is not a political morality as such,¹⁸ but it certainly has a bearing on the world in Arendt's most general sense, as the space between human beings. Arendt describes judgment as: 'the faculty to judge *particulars* without subsuming them under those general rules which can be taught and learned until they grow into habits that can be replaced by other habits and rules.'¹⁹ This faculty is of some importance to our modern situation:

The loss of standards, which does indeed define the modern world in its facticity and cannot be reversed by any sort of return to the good old days or by some arbitrary promulgation of new standards and values, is therefore a catastrophe in the moral world only if one assumes that people are actually incapable of judging things *per se*, that their faculty of judgment is inadequate for making original judgments, and that the most we can demand of it is the correct application of familiar rules derived from already established standards.²⁰

As we know, three terms of Kant's recur in this morality of judgment. First, reflective judgment: judgment that operates without pre-given rules and is oriented by particulars (particular actors, actions, or events). Second, an enlarged mode of thinking that thinks with others, attempting to arrive at judgments that take account of others' points of view. And third, exemplary validity – taking our orientation from examples that not only crystallise a concept in an actual or historical form, but (as against abstractions or Kantian 'schemata') do so in an *exemplary* way. We judge in actual and anticipated dialogue with others, weighing their opinions, overcoming our subjectivity

¹⁶ Conscience also has an obvious relation to the continuity of agency, in that whether I can live with my past self, or imagine a future self who acted thus, is central.

¹⁷ I hardly need say that Arendt left only glimpses toward this account of morality, principally in 'The Crisis in Culture,' then in her lectures on moral philosophy, her lectures on Kant's 'political philosophy,' and in *The Life of the Mind*.

¹⁸ Cf Arendt's well-known contention that judgment is 'the most political of man's mental abilities' (eg TMC 188).

¹⁹ TMC 188f.

²⁰ 'Introduction into Politics,' (1956/7) in *The Promise of Politics*, ed Jerome Kohn (Schocken, New York, 2005: 104). [German original: *Was ist Politik?* 22f]

by admitting the world's plurality into our mental life, overcoming the lack (or failure) of determinate rules by attending to particular, particularly illuminating examples. As this may indicate, a morality of judgment stands in some tension with Arendt's increasingly strident division of thinking from judgment (as against her earlier emphasis on *understanding*, which seemed to unite the two). This is a question to which I will return in a moment.

These four accounts of morality are very different from each other, and correspond to quite different experiences. The first answers to the experience of social conformism and thoughtless participation in political evil; the second to the experience of those few who felt they had no choice but to abstain from that evil. The third corresponds to structural features of political (inter-)action; the fourth to the difficulty of taking one's bearings in a world which is systematically confused – not only in its judgments, but also concerning the need for judgment. While Arendt's account of the political realm possesses a certain systematicity, her accounts of morality are unquestionably partial.

Politics and morality, self and world

In the light of these very different accounts of morality, let me return to the non-quotation that forms my theme here.

The moral animal: as if there were something 'moral' in the person which belongs to his essence. But this is exactly wrong: the individual alone is amoral. Morality originates in-between human beings, not 'in' individuals. Morality is about how we relate to one another: it is not a matter of internal moral 'substances.' Morality originates in-between and establishes itself in terms of human relations.

How might such a claim relate to the four accounts of morality just set out?

In the first place, it may sound dangerously close to Arendt's morality as mores: the habits and customs of a social group, always liable to be perverted by political disaster, and in any case without any necessary connection to the fundamentals that concern a morality of conscience. It is the idea of mores unanchored by genuine selves: thoughtless, behaving, depthless selves, non-persons who strike no roots, take no bearings from the past, who do not 'make up their minds'²¹ but instead have their minds made up for them by the pressure of society or 'public opinion.' Non-persons, in short, who are unable to take responsibility for a common world, because unwilling to take responsibility for themselves. If we stress the relational aspect of morality, don't we give up on the selves who – Arendt quite reasonably demands – might resist the pressure to conform, resist the rush of events, resist some politically initiated descent into barbarism?

²¹ An idiom that appears at TMC 178, 180, and to which I return below.

Let us leave aside, for the moment, this concern with political emergency, and focus on more ordinary circumstances, where terror does not leave people isolated. Here, people can still take the initiative, act together, speak so as to give account of themselves and to persuade others. In these circumstances, I think a brief recollection of Arendt's political morality gives us reason to hope that a relational account of morality need not imply a morality of mere conformism. Her political morality provides for the lasting identification of the actor in terms of his deeds, constituting an answer to 'the basic unreliability of men who never can guarantee today who they will be tomorrow.'²² I am sure that Arendt is right to attach an elementary significance to promising and forgiving, inasmuch as they represent basic conditions for responsibility among beings who are (indeed) liable to forget what they have done and what they have committed themselves to, who are (indeed) dependent on the presence of others to sustain their sense of reality (in which we should include: a sense of the significance of their actions). In a nutshell: Arendt's political morality points my non-quotation away from a morality of mores, toward a morality where mutual visibility and mutual guarantees can inculcate responsibility.

To be sure, this will not save matters amid barbarism²³ – the situation which preoccupies Arendt when she explores conscience as a by-product, as it were, of thinking activity. That there is no connection between my non-quotation and Arendt's morality of conscience may seem all too obvious. Here, Arendt seems to postulate an ever-present capacity of everyman to think and remember, a lasting inclination to live with himself, an understanding that it is far more important to be on good terms with his self than the rest of the world. Thinking, as a withdrawal from the world of men and the world of the senses, may seem, for Arendt, to imply a realm of individual essences or substances, a timeless, internal faculty of conscience that can prevent disaster for the self, if not the world. However, several strands of Arendt's own thought point us away from this conception – above all, those thought-trains that defy her own strenuous division between thinking and judgment.

In the first place, when we live with ourselves in thought we live with ourselves in dialogue – that is, in speech. A language shared with others, and its implicit 'common sense,' is a fundamental, unavoidable condition of thought.²⁴ And this means, as Arendt's works constantly testify, that we think with others – not just with their judgments or opinions qua simple statements of position, but with their perspectives and arguments and styles of thinking; we move amongst their ways of interpreting the world and narrating their experience. (As many have noted, Arendt equivocates as to how distant philosophical thinking must be from thinking as the natural preserve of

²² HC 244.

²³ Nor, indeed, amid the mere 'pull and pressure and the tricks of cliques,' HC 203.

²⁴ To be sure we may interrogate the presuppositions and 'frozen thoughts' embodied in our language – thus Arendt's example of 'house,' TMC 172f. Cf further LM I 100; 'Personal responsibility under dictatorship,' *R&J* 48.

everyman. In any case, however, it is not philosophical thinking that is relevant to her reflections on conscience.²⁵)

Second, and more fundamentally: recall the importance of *experience* to Arendt's thinking. When she says that thought must take its guideposts from 'incidents of living experience,' she does not mean experience in a merely subjective, let alone solipsistic, sense. It is true, of course, that Arendt is concerned with experiences of inwardness or subjectivity, as well as of the world as we share it with others.²⁶ Yet in thinking about even the most inward of these her recourse is ever and again to poetry, philosophy, literature: however solitary an experience, it can only be explored – that is, thought through: its qualities precisely expressed, its significance weighed – alongside the testimony of others. With regard to experience of the world or politics, Arendt wording is revealing. She says: experience as *lived* – that is, as shared with others, as already partially comprehended by common sense, as already tentatively narrated. Even if *The Life of the Mind* does not emphasise the importance of experience as earlier writings did,²⁷ underlining instead the sheer activity, resultlessness and anti-common-sense of thinking, this assumption that experience is the foundation of meaningful thought must, I think, be seen as fundamental to Arendt's philosophy.

All of this should indicate that thinking, no less than judgment, is dependent on examples and searches out the exemplary – points which return us, then, to Arendt's morality of judgment. Commentators have dwelt on its Kantian elements of reflective judgment, enlarged mentality, and exemplary validity, long familiar to us from her lectures on Kant's political philosophy. Here, I should like to turn instead to 'Some questions of moral philosophy.' These lectures from 1964 and '65 make explicit the contrast between this morality of judgment and the morality of conscience. Here, Arendt worries more explicitly about the subjectivity of a morality of conscience than in any previously published writings. And in dealing with this issue, she introduce two themes, which allow us to discern a bridge between these two moralities.

Arendt's most obvious reply to the problem of subjectivity concerns our choice of company. She draws our attention to two quotations: from Eckhart, who tells of the happy beggar, who said: 'I'd much rather be in hell with God than in heaven without Him,' and from Cicero, who once wrote, 'I'd much rather go astray with Plato than hold true views with the Pythagoreans.'²⁸ That is: I would rather go wrong with *this* person, someone who I take to be exemplary, than fare better with others. Arendt continues: 'both... agree that there comes a point where all objective standards... yield precedence to the "subjective" criterion of the kind of person I wish to be and live together with.'²⁹

²⁵ See especially of Margaret Canovan's admirable discussion in 'Philosophy and Politics,' ch. 7 of her *Hannah Arendt: A Reinterpretation of her Political Thought* (previously published as 'Socrates or Heidegger?')

²⁶ I say 'of course,' but I must also thank Margaret Canovan for reminding me of this.

²⁷ It does restate this claim, however: eg LM I 87.

²⁸ See also: 'The Crisis in Culture' (*Between Past and Future*, revised edition, 1968: 224-6); LKPP 74; and *Denktagebuch* XXII.51 (June 1958), 595.

²⁹ SQMP 111.

This new usage of ‘subjective’ is certainly ironical: as Arendt glosses it in her next lecture, it is ‘subjective in that the issue finally turns on the question of with whom I wish to be together, and not about “objective” standards and rules.’³⁰ In other words, my ‘subjectivity’ turns outward: from what I may think and decide for myself, toward others who have thought and judged for themselves, and in whose company I choose

Alongside her recourse to Kant’s “enlarged mentality,” this move explodes her morality of conscience, in two senses: it takes us outside of ourselves, and it generates positive guidance for action. Here, my agreement with others and not only my agreement with myself is in question. ‘The validity of such judgments would be neither objective and universal nor subjective, depending on personal whim, but intersubjective or representative... Kant says, “We must so to speak renounce ourselves for the sake of others”.’³¹ So Arendt continues:

Only when it comes to these judgments of taste does Kant find a situation in which the Socratic “It is better to be at odds with the whole world than, being one, to be at odds with myself” loses some of its validity. Here I can’t be at odds with the whole world, though I may still find myself at odds with a good part of it. If we consider morality in more than its negative aspect – the refraining from doing wrong, which may mean the refraining from doing anything – then we shall have to consider human conduct in terms which Kant thought appropriate only for aesthetic conduct, so to speak... [for] only here did he consider men in the plural...³²

But being at one with the whole world may either prove impossible for want of agreement³³ – as we should expect in a world so deeply confused about the importance of judgment itself – or all too easy where the world’s *mores* have been utterly corrupted. So, if we are to “renounce ourselves for the sake of others,” we had better make some wise judgments concerning those before whom we should give up our subjectivity.

Arendt will return to her quotations from Eckhart and Cicero to help resolve this question. But the lectures also explore another thought-train that will be important to her conclusion, the idea of ‘constituting oneself as a person’ via the activity of thinking:

In this process of thought in which I actualize the specifically human difference of speech, I explicitly constitute myself a person, and I shall remain

³⁰ SQMP 125.

³¹ SQMP 141.

³² SQMP 142. See also the remarkable passage in the *Denktagebuch*, Kant Heft (28.4.64), 818, which concludes: ‘Can an ethic of power be developed out of the faculty of judgment?’ (My translation.)

³³ Cf SQMP 139.

one to the extent that I am capable of such constitution ever again and anew. ... personality... is the simple, almost automatic result of thoughtfulness.³⁴

In ‘Thinking and Moral Considerations’ Arendt also hints at this idea by speaking, less deliberately and more idiomatically, of ‘making up one’s mind.’ Morality as mores is literally mind-numbing: ‘What people... get used to is not so much the content of the rules... as the possession of rules under which to subsume particulars. In other words, they get used to *never making up their minds*.’³⁵

In both texts, Arendt’s stated concern is with thought and remembrance: thinking as the dialogue between me and myself; my memory of what I have done; my ability to live with the person who did (or might have done) such and such an act. But if we turn, now, to the conclusion of the lectures on morality – to my mind, a passage as important as anything Arendt wrote – we see something else. Having reminded us of her quotations from Eckhart and Cicero, Arendt continues:

our decisions about right and wrong will depend upon our choice of company, of those with whom we wish to spend our lives. And again, this company is chosen by thinking in examples, in examples of persons dead or alive, real or fictitious, and in examples of incidents, past or present. In the unlikely case that someone should come and tell us that he would prefer Bluebeard for company, and hence take him as his example, the only thing we could do is to make sure that he never comes near us. But the likelihood that someone would come and tell us that he does not mind and that any company will be good enough for him is, I fear, by far greater. Morally and even politically speaking, this indifference, though common enough, is the greatest danger. And connected to this, only a bit less dangerous, is another very common modern phenomenon, the widespread tendency to refuse to judge at all. Out of the unwillingness or inability to choose one’s examples and one’s company, and out of the unwillingness or inability to relate to others through judgment, arise the real *skandala*, the real stumbling blocks which human powers can’t remove because they were not caused by human and humanly understandable motives. [Arendt directly concludes:] Therein lies the horror and, at the same time, the banality of evil.³⁶

What we find here should surprise us greatly. Arendt still insists on a division between thought and judgment, preserving thinking as the domain of intercourse with myself, judging as an activity undertaken with others in mind. (All these idioms of ‘mind’ are telling.) Here, however, it is *not* thinking that conditions us against limitless, rootless, banal evil – something all her other writings would have led us to expect. No, instead of thinking it is this: the willingness and ability to ‘relate to others through *judgment*.’

³⁴ SQMP 95. Further: ‘thoughtlessness spells ‘the loss of the self that constitutes the person.’ SQMP 101; cf further 111f.

³⁵ TMC 178, my emphasis.

³⁶ SQMP 145f.

The opposite of this mode of relating is: ‘*not* minding,’ *not* ‘making up our minds.’ This is the failure to constitute oneself as a person – a person, as we say, in one’s own right. As Arendt will observe in ‘Thinking and Moral Considerations’: ‘The sad truth of the matter is that most evil is done by people who never made up their mind to be either bad or good.’³⁷ But what is it to make up one’s mind? So far as the thinking process is not wholly resultless, so far as it issues in definite results when we return from the inconclusive withdrawal of thought, it is this: to have settled on whose example we will keep in mind, on whose company we will take for our own.

The judgment of persons

I conclude with an issue raised most sharply by this unsurprising circling around the theme of judgment. The reader may well have had this in mind since I raised the organising question of this paper; at any rate, I am sure it represents the principal stumbling block for any claim to the effect that ‘morality originates in-between human beings, and is not a matter of internal moral “substances”.’ The issue is this: what are we judging, when we judge people, morally speaking? Is it not the individual herself – some internal substance, if you like, corresponding to our capacity for moral choice? – Arendt herself often seemed to adopt this Kantian view of matters (‘Kantian,’ that is, in the sense of his moral philosophy, not his aesthetics). She repeatedly indicates that individual freedom, together with the legitimacy of imputing to everyman the resources for basic moral insight, constitute the foundation of legal and moral judgment.³⁸ Is this not, then, the final reason why one might insist that morality belongs ‘in’ rather than ‘in-between’ individuals? Or in other words, do not all our judgments of one another finally refer to an internal moral ‘substance,’ that corresponds to the fact that the individual alone (so far as we attempt to conceive of such a being) is *not* to be thought of as ‘amoral’?

No doubt this way of putting things is rather imprecise, but I hope it permits us to see something of what is at stake here: What is it that finally justifies and directs our judgment of persons? This is of some importance: the collapse of judgment, our ‘widespread modern unwillingness to judge’ which I am sure is fully as disastrous as Arendt indicates, has many causes. But amongst them is the difficulty we have in seeing how one can fairly isolate the person from the fabric of relationships that made him who he has come to be.³⁹ One response to this situation may be to insist, in the teeth of the social and psychological sciences, that something in the person stands beyond all those relationships – something which we are not only entitled but duty-bound to judge: this is one way of understanding Arendt’s position, perhaps. Whatever one’s opinion as to the insights of those sciences, however, this is problematic, in that we are being told that we (‘the world’) should judge something that is finally a matter of the self.

³⁷ TMC 180.

³⁸ Eg, SQMP 128.

³⁹ Cf PRUD 19: ‘For behind the unwillingness to judge lurks [not the Biblical injunction, ‘Judge not, that ye be not judged,’ but rather] the suspicion that no one is a free agent, and hence the doubt that anyone is responsible or could be expected to answer for what he has done.’

Here, then, I have wanted to gesture toward a different account, by looking to a possible space between Arendt's senses of morality – between her political morality, her morality of judgment, and her morality of thinking. Her political morality grants responsible agency a limited reality, despite the basic unreliability of men. It does this because others witness our deeds, hear our words, provide us with a sense of reality – including a sense of what we ourselves have done and committed ourselves to. Arendt's morality of judgment provides us with orientation amid those present *and imagined*. In judgment, we provide those around us with our responses to their words and deeds, our assessments of their appreciations of situations, persons and themselves. Yet we also move among a wider company: we take the example, imagine the responses, of those who are absent, of those who we judge to be exemplary. Finally, I say Arendt's 'morality of thinking,' now, rather than of conscience, in the hope that some connections between thought and judgment may have become clearer.⁴⁰ However inconclusive thought may appear (especially in Arendt's more Heideggarian moments...), it provides for a process of making up one's mind. We never lose, I have suggested, our dependence on the thinking and judging and experiencing of others (we deceive ourselves, Heidegger-fashion, if we think we do). But we can make our minds up in the company we choose, and not merely in the company that any given circumstance may thrust upon us: for *that* is not to make up one's mind at all.

Allow me to close with another quotation from the *Denktagebuch*:

Every actor wishes that people will follow him. The act is always also an example. Political thought and judgment is exemplary (Kant), because acting is. Responsibility in fact means: to know that one sets an example, that others will 'follow'; in this way one changes the world.⁴¹

The sad irony is that when we thoughtlessly conform, we do not appreciate that others will (all too blindly) follow us. To know that one sets an example is already to think about how the act will be seen by others, and how it will be seen by those whose judgment one esteems.⁴² More, it is to have weighed whose examples it is that one – well, maybe not 'follows,' but certainly 'bears in mind.' In other words, 'to know that one sets an example' is to live with others in judgment – and to live with others in judgment is to live with the example of some rather than others. As Arendt says, the price of 'setting an example' is responsibility – the liability to be judged by others: not as a self which might exist outside of its relations with others, but as a person whose words and deeds make up the world – that is, the space between human beings.

⁴⁰ Clearer, I hope, than Arendt's own formula, at TMC 188f, that thinking 'liberates' judgment.

⁴¹ *Denktagebuch* XXIV.60 (January 1966), 664, my translation.

⁴² Cf *Denktagebuch* XXIV.56 (May 65), 641; XXV.54 (May 68), 682, on imagining how one's acts will appear before others.

i 'als ob es *im* Menschen etwas Politisches gäbe, das zu seiner Essenz gehöre. Dies gerade stimmt nicht; *der* Mensch ist a-politisch. Politik entsteht in dem *Zwischen-den*-Menschen, also durchaus *außerhalb des* Menschen. Es gibt daher keine eigentlich politische Substanz. Politik entsteht im Zwischen und etabliert sich als der Bezug.'

(Kohn (ed) gives alternative English version: '...there is something political *in* man that belongs to his essence. This simply is not so; *man* is apolitical. Politics arises *between men*, and so quite *outside of man*. There is therefore no real political substance. Politics arises in what lies *between men* and is established as relationships.')