

Hannah Arendt

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FULL ARTICLE

Introduction

As a German Jew who fled Germany in 1933 and a stateless refugee up to the moment that she received American citizenship in 1951, Hannah Arendt (1906–1975) lived through many of the events shaping European history in the first half of the twentieth century, and the history of the United States in the second half. Among the events she closely witnessed were the emergence of statelessness in interwar Europe, the rise of totalitarian ideologies (national-socialism and Stalinism) and the terror of the annihilation camps and gulags in Europe and the USSR. She personally attended various post-Second World War tribunals, including the one of the prominent SS official Adolf Eichmann in 1961. She lived through the Cold War and McCarthyism, and closely followed the rise of the civil rights movement from the 1950s in the United States, and subsequently the constitutional crises and the protests against the war in Vietnam. All of these contemporary events found their way into her work, most prominently *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1951), *Eichmann in Jerusalem* (1963), *Men in Dark Times* (1968b), *Crises of the Republic* (1972), and the essays posthumously collected in *The Jewish Writings* (2007). In addition, she frequently resorted to recounting past historical events, which she saw as constitutive for current politics, such as the ancient Greek polis (*The Human Condition*, 1958) and the legacy of the eighteenth-century French and American Revolutions (*On Revolution*, 1963).

However, even if Arendt's work is deeply informed by the weight of contemporary history, and despite her keen interest in historical events, in the distant or recent past, she never considered herself a historian and is only rarely seen as one. She is widely regarded as a political philosopher and, indeed, her work is thoroughly embedded in the tradition of European philosophy, from ancient philosophy to contemporary philosophical hermeneutics. In her major works *The Human Condition* (1951) and the unfinished trilogy *The Life of the Mind* (1971/1978), she engaged in fundamental philosophical investigations of respectively the active, political life and the "life of the mind," namely, the mental activities of thinking, willing, and judging. Still, she always kept reservations about philosophy because of its ineradicable metaphysical and ideological tendencies and what she saw as its inherent hostility to the plurality, contingency, and unpredictability typical of the "human affairs" and its activities. To see clearly, one had to renounce all preconceived theoretical ideas.

In spite of the fact that Arendt's work does not belong to the historical canon, it has been widely discussed, both favorably and critically, by historians, historical sociologists, and philosophers of history. This is especially the case with her work on totalitarianism and the

Holocaust, namely, her books *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1951) and *Eichmann in Jerusalem* (1963). And as Arendt considered lived experience the guidepost and starting point of all thinking (including philosophical thinking), even her seemingly most abstract writings are always historically informed and situated, albeit not always immediately recognizable as such for the reader.

Methodologically, it is Arendt's background in hermeneutic phenomenology—and its inherent narrative approach—that explains her take on the philosophy of history and on historiography. She once described her philosophical practice as “old-fashioned storytelling” (Arendt 1962: 10) and, indeed, this is how she saw the position of the historian.

Influences

Arendt was an independent thinker, whose work does not easily fit within any existing school of either philosophical or political thought. Main figures in the philosophical canon and in the history of political theory are among her interlocutors, most notably Plato (and Socrates), Saint Augustine, Immanuel Kant, Karl Marx, and Martin Heidegger, as well as republican thinkers and actors from Aristotle to Machiavelli, Montesquieu and the American Founding Fathers. She familiarized herself with the work of most of these thinkers as a graduate and doctoral student in theology and philosophy in Germany in the 1920s and she would return to their work time and again, mostly in a critical fashion.

If phenomenology is considered in a broad, not strictly Husserlian, sense, Arendt's work can be seen as phenomenological in an original, consistent, and exemplary way (Loidolt 2018; Vasterling 2011). Though Arendt attended lectures delivered by the founder of phenomenology, Edmund Husserl, the existential phenomenology (Existenzphilosophie) of Karl Jaspers, and the hermeneutic phenomenology of Martin Heidegger had more and a lasting impact on her thought. While increasingly being recognized as belonging to the phenomenological and hermeneutic traditions in philosophy, Arendt also transformed it by applying it to a new subject matter: political phenomena and events. The two key notions in Arendt's phenomenology of action—plurality and natality—will be introduced below, as they deeply inform her view on history as the domain of the new (see “Impact,” below). Also, key elements of her hermeneutic, interpretative approach to events, including genealogy, deconstruction, and storytelling are discussed because of its direct bearing on her views on historiography (see “Impact,” below). Although Arendt is best known as a thinker of action and the active, political, life, she has always also engaged with the “life of the mind,” entailing the mental activities of thinking, willing, and judging. This section will finish with an outline of Arendt's appropriation of Kant's theory of aesthetic (“reflective”) judgment to articulate a notion of political judgment suitable for historiography after “the rupture in tradition” that totalitarianism brought about.

Phenomenology of political life

Arendt's phenomenological approach is often demonstrated through her intellectual debt to Heidegger (Taminiaux 1997; Villa 1996). Though justified to a certain extent, this debt should not cloud the profound originality of Arendt's phenomenology.

Arendt's work shares several motifs and assumptions with other (hermeneutic) phenomenologists, while politicizing phenomenology in important respects. Like other phenomenologists, she engages in descriptive analyses of phenomena, that is, of things as they appear to human beings in lived, pre-reflective experience. Like Heidegger, she holds that experience is constituted by an implicit, pre-reflective understanding of phenomena, which comes about through people's familiarity with them in their practical dealings. Explicit, scholarly interpretation originates from this preliminary understanding. Similar to Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty, Arendt often takes a *via negativa*, or negative approach, to the phenomena and experiences she investigates. These phenomenologists are interested in humans' everyday being in the world and the concrete and practical structures of worldly experience, but to elucidate daily experience, they, each in their own way, attend to the non-everyday: limit cases, pathologies, or more mundane instances of breakdown of ordinary routines. In Arendt's case, the phenomena of revolution, but above all totalitarianism are the "unprecedented" experiences that set off her thinking.

The feature of Arendt's phenomenology that stands out in comparison to the other phenomenologists, is that she is mainly interested in understanding political phenomena, events, and experiences. These political phenomena consist of "human actions and that which is produced by these actions among men, things, and relationships" (Vollrath 1977: 166).

Arendt demonstrates how a careful investigation of the lived experience of the human activity that she calls "action," reveals two components: interaction, on the one hand, and improvisation or initiative, on the other. Action always implies interaction, as it takes place in the presence of and together with others. Therefore, action requires a public "space of appearances" (Arendt 1958a: 199), a space to show oneself in deed and words to others, to be seen and heard by them, while they mutually expose their uniqueness and achieve equality. This points to the key notion that informs Arendt's work: the human condition of plurality. "Plurality" is often wrongly taken as sociocultural diversity, whereas Arendt has something different in mind. Plurality is a deliberately paradoxical notion, as it simultaneously involves difference and equality. For Arendt, difference refers to individual distinctness or uniqueness; it is what prevents people from being interchangeable. What makes people distinct, is that they are situated beings with a unique biography and a unique perspective on the world. Human beings are not born as unique individuals, they individuate through interaction with others. Neither is equality a natural given, such as an inalienable property that all human beings allegedly have, by virtue of being born (natural law doctrine) or because they are created equally in God's sight (the biblical doctrine of equality). For Arendt, equality is a political notion, in that it is entirely artificial or conventional. Like difference, equality needs public space for its enactment. For Arendt, difference and equality presuppose each other. Equality presupposes that a person is equal to a different person. If we were all the same it would make no sense to pursue equality. In the same way, relevant differences can be identified only with respect to the norm of equality (Arendt 1958a: 175–6; 2005: 93).

The second indispensable component of action, improvisation, refers to the human condition of natality: the capacity of taking an initiative, of starting something new in the world that did not exist before and which cannot be deduced from precedents or a preconceived ideology by acting together. Action always constitutes a surprise, an interruption in the course of events (Arendt 1958a: 175–81; 1958b: 478–9; 1968a: 143–72; 1978).

Due to the condition of plurality, action is uncontrollable, unpredictable, and irreversible; due to natality it is fundamentally contingent and inherently open and creative. Contingency and freedom are therefore closely related. The uncontrollability and contingency of action rule out complete causal determination.

Interpretation

The interpretive current in Arendt's work is particularly manifest in relation to the phenomenon of totalitarianism. It is accentuated in her often-cited insistence that her work is animated by the "desire to understand": *Ich will verstehen* (1994: 3). "Understanding" for Arendt means: explicating the meaning of phenomena and events in their very particularity, newness ("unprecedentedness"), and contingency. Starting with Heidegger's early work, hermeneutic phenomenologists consider humans as interpreting beings that invariably, but mostly implicitly, find, or look for meaning in what they experience. The scholarly activity of interpretation, such as the work of historians, is dependent upon this existential condition.

Arendt's method is to approach political events through the shared, namely, intersubjective and worldly, experience of these phenomena. These experiences constitute "the true, the only reliable teachers of political scientists [and historians], as they are the most trustworthy source of information for those engaged in politics" (Arendt 1958b: 482). Research "arises out of" the experience of events and should "remain bound to them; as the circle remains bound to its focus" (Arendt 1962: 2; 1968a: Preface).

Like any phenomenologist, Arendt always takes a relational and engaged point of view with respect to the things she studies. The perceiver—including the scientist, the scholar, and the historian—is not opposed to or separated from that which she perceives: "phenomena" or "appearances." The perspective the perceiver takes upon things is therefore central to the phenomenologist's attention. Thus, phenomenologists challenge the theoretical discourse in which the perceiver is seen as an external observer that takes a third-person position over and against the perceived, namely, the world. This representation of the perceiver is key to the ideal of universally and objectively valid knowledge. Phenomenologists instead acknowledge that the third-person position is always enabled by a prior first- and second-person perspective and therefore advocate a more situated and intersubjective mode of validity.

In the preface to *Between Past and Future*, Arendt writes that her work consists in "essays" or "exercises in understanding" (1968a: 14) that feature two dimensions: critique and experiment. Understanding has the critical dimension of destruction ("dismantling" [1977: 212]) and the experimental dimension of storytelling. Critique is directed toward the past, the given order; experiment toward the future: the new and unexpected that defies what is given. Still, the critical and experimental moments of understanding are connected for Arendt. Critique always also has an experimental dimension and meaningful experiments, on the other hand, never create something "altogether new." Critique without experiment results in cynicism ("debunking"), whereas experiment without critique all too easily leads to utopianism (Arendt 1968a: 15; 1962: 3).

Arendt's deconstructive method concerns, first, a genealogical investigation of the way the history of political experiences and phenomena are sedimented in language. She typically starts her phenomenological investigations with an analysis of concepts because they provide

a privileged access to political experiences and phenomena, “not because [they] reveal the phenomenon in any straightforward way, but because [they] carry the record of past perceptions, true or untrue, revelatory or distorting” (Young-Bruehl 1982: 405). The aim of such a genealogical project is to disclose the experiences, the “spirit” and meanings, the “phenomenal reality” underlying these political concepts in order to achieve a better understanding of the phenomena they refer to (Arendt 1968a: 15).

Subsequently, Arendt offers a phenomenological description of their relevance to specific—often conflicting—experiences one has when engaging in active life or in mental activities. Most of the time, Arendt argues, concepts either express generalizations of particular experiences of the political, or amalgamations of different experiences. After making manifest generalizations and amalgamations, she criticizes them, and subsequently introduces phenomenal distinctions to retrieve the experiences covered up by them (Taminiaux 1997: 199; Villa 1996: 114). This practice of discriminating is an important, but no doubt the most controversial, feature of Arendt’s phenomenology. She criticizes the historians and political scientists of her days for their “growing incapacity for making distinctions,” for example, between totalitarianism, dictatorship, and autocracy (Arendt 1994: 407).

The experimental dimension of understanding is expressed in Arendt’s narrative interpretation of phenomena and events (Arendt 1958a, 1968b: 3–32, 95–110, 153–206; 1968a: Preface; cf. Benhabib 1990; Disch 1994; Herzog 2000, 2001, 2002; Luban 1983; Vasterling 2007a; Vollrath 1977). Storytelling is experimental because it always and necessarily transcends facts or testimonials, and turns them into a meaningful account, while remaining true to the facts. For Arendt, a story explicates the meanings implicit in our understanding of reality, rather than making up a fictitious storyline and imposing it upon reality. Historiography is a particular—scholarly and public—practice of storytelling. Through stories, Arendt aims to retrieve forgotten experiences or “lost treasures” (1968a: 4); not just, as is often thought, the political experiences of the ancient polis but also the modern experiences of revolutions and civic councils. Stories have vital existential significance, as they enable humans to come to terms with the past.

Reflective judgment

Critically examining and trying to come to grips with the human catastrophes that took place in her lifetime, Arendt became aware of the problem of political judgment: how are we to evaluate problems, events, and phenomena if handed down norms and principles no longer seem to provide firm yardsticks for understanding them? She observed that “the thread of tradition is broken” (Arendt 1994: 310–11, 321; 1977: 212). If tradition is no longer accessible to us, norms become anachronisms (Arendt 1994: 309–10, 313, 316; 1968b: 10; 1968a: Preface). In this situation, judging is “like counting without the notion of numbers” (Arendt 1994: 313). It is, as it were, lawless, that is, not guided by general rules, nor derived from any ground or foundation. In reflecting on the challenges of judgment, Arendt’s perspective flips, from the active, political life, to the life of the mind, from actors to non-participating spectators, “who proclaim their attitude in public” (1982: 46).

The problem of political judgment made Arendt, in a highly original move, turn to Kant’s theory of aesthetic (taste) judgment, as a more promising alternative to his account of what he himself considered practical—namely, moral and political—judgment (1982, 1977: 94; 1968a:

220–1, 234–5, 241). Practical judgment for Kant is “determining”: it subsumes particular cases under a given, general rule. Aesthetic judgment, on the other hand, is “reflective,” meaning that only the particular is given, and the rule for assessment needs to be found. The promise of reflective judgment is that it does justice to both the aspiration to leave behind mere subjectivism and partiality (informed by prejudice, petty interests, and hegemonic power relations), on the one hand, and to the situatedness of judgment, on the other. This is a challenging task, for judging means first of all discriminating between what is good or evil, right or wrong, true or false, beautiful or ugly, and taste plays an essential role. As our faculty for immediately discriminating between what appeals to us, elicits our enthusiasm, and what does not, taste is our most subjective and partial sensory function. While pre-reflective immediate taste judgments are hardly communicable gut feelings, it takes hard work to achieve an explicit, reflective, and independent political judgment. First, imagination and storytelling are required, the act of trying to see the world from others’ points of view, by putting ourselves into their place, while being fully aware that we can never know for sure what it looks like for them. Arendt describes this exercise as “training one’s imagination to go visiting” (1982: 43) the conceivable plural perspectives of as many others as possible, without suppressing one’s own judgment. In addition, judgment also appeals to the opposite faculty of critical thinking for oneself, independent from what others may think.

Reflective judgments are never universally valid. Neither do they claim objective truth, as they pertain to the meaning of events. Though she can never prove that her judgment is true, the spectator strives toward winning others’ approval for her point of view, hence the essential publicness of judgment. Also, our judgments are often guided by inspiring examples. A particular case or story has exemplary validity when it reveals a general meaning in its very particularity.

Impact

This section discusses Arendt’s critical and affirmative views on the philosophy of history and historiography, respectively.

Philosophy of history

Following from her phenomenology of action and the human conditions of plurality and natality (see Influences, above), Arendt is interested in the typical or exemplary experiences of history: new events, facts, and states of affairs that emerge as a consequence of human actions and words. She insists on novelty, interruption, and discontinuity and underscores the contingency of the course of history: events could have always have unfolded otherwise. It is only retrospectively that the order of events may take on a semblance of necessity. She also stresses the singularity of happenings. Events are always unique, one-off, and “unprecedented.” The course of history is as a principle unpredictable and events and phenomena are incomparable.

History for Arendt solely consists of events—for better or worse (events are morally neutral). History is not propelled by ideas or material forces in a particular linear (usually forward) direction. Arendt’s emphatically rejects causalist, determinist and teleological philosophies of history, as exemplified by G.W.F. Hegel and Karl Marx. Even if the first built an idealist, the

second a materialist explanatory system, both dialectical philosophers share a pursuit of historical laws of collective human behavior, after the model of the laws of nature. In Hegel's view, history unfolds inevitably and according to unwavering dialectical laws, in the direction of its final aim: the self-realization of Spirit (Geist). Introducing the idea of the "ruse of reason" (List der Vernunft), he states that this historical process takes place behind the backs of its agents, who often do not notice the true course of history in the apparent disorder and multiplicity of events. Marx made predictions based on the dialectical laws of class struggle and claimed the logical necessity of a future proletarian revolution and the emergence of the classless communist society.

More generally, Arendt considered the principle of causality "an altogether alien and falsifying category in the historical sciences," for

not only does the actual meaning of every event always transcend any number of past "causes" which we may assign to it [...]; this past itself comes into being only with the event itself. Only when something irrevocable has happened can we even try to trace its history backward. The event illuminates its own past, it can never be deduced from it.

--(1994: 319)

Likewise, she warned against the "pitfall of analogical thinking" (Benhabib 1990: 184): looking for similarities between as many different cases as possible in order to establish ("discover") regularities (patterns, processes, forces, laws, or trends) in the realm of the human affairs and continuities between past and present. Arendt held that generalizations and categorizations obliterate that which makes phenomena concrete, irrevocable, and unique, in other words, they obscure their inherent significance or meaningfulness (1994: 319–20; 1958a: 300; 1958b: 482; 1968a: 60–5, 81).

The moral and political problems inherent in (multi)causal and analogical reasoning in philosophies of history are multiple. It suggests that "what has been will be again, what has been done will be done again; there is nothing new under the sun" (Ecclesiastes 1: 9–14). To ignore the new means to relinquish the hope that the status quo may change and may even lead to normalization; turning the unknown, absurd, unacceptable, and horrible into something commonplace, ordinary, customary, familiar. "Denying the outrageous, deducing the unprecedented from precedents, or explaining phenomena by [...] analogous generalities" ensures that "the impact of reality and the shock of experience are no longer felt" (Arendt 1994: 320). This may even lead to neutralization and ruling out resistance. Finally, the search for necessary continuities between past and present suggest that the way history has turned out has been inevitable all along. This may, often unwittingly, serve to justify, even condone, what has happened.

In Arendt's view the principle of conditionality provides a much better lens for understanding the course of history than causality. Unlike a cause—a one-way external determination—a condition may or may not be enacted, depending on other conditions and occurrences. As such, it allows for contingency. In *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, Arendt is therefore not concerned with establishing the causes of totalitarianism (although the title may unfortunately suggest so). This would imply that the Holocaust was the inevitable outcome of modern history. Rather, Arendt demonstrates how particular elements that were present in European political and moral culture in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries—anti-Semitism, "race-

thinking,” and imperialism—contingently “crystallized” into the unexpected and new phenomenon of totalitarianism in the twentieth century. This contingency is reflected in the loosely structured architecture—some say, lack of unity—of *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (Arendt 1994: 401–8; King and Stone 2007; Canovan 1992). This crystallization—a notion she borrowed from Walter Benjamin—can as a principle only be ascertained retrospectively, in hindsight (Arendt 1968b: 153–206; Herzog 2000; Schoonheim 2020).

Historiography

Arendt’s rejection of causalist philosophies of history, along with her hermeneutic, interpretative, and narrative approach of phenomena (see “Impact,” above), puts the kind of historiography she embraces squarely in proximity to storytelling. She draws a parallel between (shared) history and (individual) biography. History is an entanglement of a plurality of life stories (with no biography ever evolving without interaction with others) that ultimately become the “storybook of mankind” (Arendt 1958a: 184).

For Arendt, the role and meaning of storytelling is not merely illustrating phenomena, but providing rich phenomenological descriptions that reveal their meaning bottom-up or inductively. She holds that stories fit historical phenomena and events, since they are capable of capturing their particularity, uniqueness, contingency and unpredictability (Borren 2013; Mrovlje 2014; Novak 2010; Sigwart 2013). Unlike causal or analogical accounts, stories do not generalize phenomena, or explain them by reducing them to chains of causes and effects, but reveal their meaning. Unlike theories, stories do not present compelling truth claims, but bring out the meaning of events. Stories do justice to the contingency, transience, and novelty of events, while theories tend to reduce the new and unprecedented to the already known. Stories presuppose and demonstrate that experiences are contingent, but they simultaneously create some coherence, if only because a story has a beginning, an end, and some sort of plot (Canovan 1992: 97–8).

Storytelling has vital existential significance, Arendt argues. By telling stories, people may start to understand events. And understanding may initiate a process of coming to terms with the past and of reorientation to the future, which is particularly relevant in the face of a fragmented past and with respect to giving an account of dark times, primarily the event of totalitarianism (Arendt 1958a: viii; 1968a: 45; 1968b: 95–110; 1994: 307–9, 321–2; Benhabib 1990; Herzog 2001; Luban 1983; Pía Lara 2007; Vollrath 1977).

As a professional storyteller, the historian is a spectator. Unlike the disengaged, third-person observer, the spectator takes a second-person perspective. She is more or less engaged insofar as the events she investigates make an appeal on her. Hermeneutical phenomenologist Arendt holds that understanding starts with phenomena addressing the person, eliciting a response (see “Influences,” above). Such an appeal or address is a minimum requirement for the disclosure of the meaning of events. Unlike the first-person actor, on the other hand, the spectator is not directly involved in the events she studies. A lack of distance precludes access to the meaning of events as much as withdrawal: no reflective historical judgment is possible without distancing (Arendt 1968c: 2).

Renouncing the application of the principle of causality, the narrative method challenges the norm of objective validity in the historical sciences (Arendt 1968a: 41–90). In its ultimate and un-reflected consequence, this norm presupposes an “Archimedean point,” an abstract or (quasi-)universalistic point of view. To challenge absolute objectivity is anything but a call for a subjective point of view. Arendt rejects subjectivity as much as objectivity in favor of an intersubjective perspective.

The validity of historical judgment in Arendt can be explained in terms of what she calls “impartiality” (1982: 72), best described as “situated” or “critical impartiality” (Disch 1994). This validity is the result of the contextually dependent proportion between the representative and critical moments of understanding and judging (Vasterling 2007b). The spectator’s judgment is neither universal nor detached, like the disengaged observer’s perspective, but appeals to imagination, that is, to representative thinking (see “Influences,” above). Arendtian impartiality does not admonish detachment of perspectives or putting ourselves in the position of any other person, in abstraction from the context and situation (Villa 1996: 296). This would in fact imply a return to the Archimedean conception of objectivity as abstraction from all particular situations and involvements and hence a suppression of plurality. Also, impartiality is dependent upon not only imagination but also critical reflection.

Even if Arendt questions the norm of absolute objectivity, this does not lead her to a wholesale or radical relativist rejection of this ideal, but to the development of an alternative normative criterion for sound political understanding and historical judgment. A story is successful when it demonstrates or reveals meaning in a non-generalizing, exemplary way (Arendt 1968a: 247–8; 1977: 169).

Arendt’s thinking about historical research has a “proto-normative” dimension (Loidolt 2018) that gestures toward a particular professional ethos of the historian. She describes this ethos in terms of “style” (Arendt 1994: 404; Vollrath 1977). In her view, the historian’s style should be adjusted to the phenomenon under consideration itself. Arendt describes this as the question of “adequacy and response.” So the historian’s style is a matter of “response-ability,” responsibility in bringing accounts—stories—into the public sphere (Herzog 2002: 86–7). “If I write in the same ‘objective’ manner about the Elizabethan age and the twentieth century, it may well be that my dealing with both periods is inadequate because I have renounced the human faculty to respond to either,” Arendt writes (1994: 404), defending the indignation which permeates her investigations of totalitarianism. Setting aside moral indignation would, at least in cases as extreme as the camps, come down to moral complicity. “To describe the concentration camps *sine ira* is not to be ‘objective’, but to condone them” (Arendt 1994: 404). This means choosing an appropriate style, which may include expressing explicit value judgments on one’s topic of investigation. Understanding and judgment not only demand imagination to leave behind the merely subjective and to enlarge one’s mentality but also critical reflection to “meet the phenomenon, so to speak, head-on, without any pre-conceived system” because theoretical constructions and prejudices obstruct access and attention to the phenomena as unique and novel occurrences. This implies a readiness “to say what is”—as she approvingly quotes Herodotus’ motto in his *Histories* (Arendt 1968a: 64)—or to “try to tell and to understand what had happened” (Arendt 1958a: xxiii). The aim is to let political phenomena speak for themselves as much as possible, to account for them in their own terms or bring them to an articulation of their own meaning. Arendt understood the phenomenological

motto *Zu den Sachen selbst!* as a scholarly attitude of commitment to events and appearances, and of radical openness to the factual, that is, contingent and unpredictable nature of events through relinquishing as much as possible one's preconceived categories and, especially, the temptation to reduce the new to the old. A topical example of this reduction are too facile comparisons raised today between authoritarianism and right-wing populism with totalitarianism. This is to miss out on the novelty of, for example, the Trump presidency.

In short, the challenge of historical judgment is to find a proper contextual balance, time and again, between distancing and engagement, away from both withdrawal (the external observer) and participation (the actor), appropriate for the topic under investigation. In other words, in Arendt's view, there is no one predetermined proper method of historiography.

Interpretations

The two books that have been discussed the most among historians are, not surprisingly, Arendt's most historical books, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* and *Eichmann in Jerusalem*. Whereas the first sparked wide-ranging and ongoing debates on historical method, the second became the center of a controversy that does not show any signs of dying out.

The Origins of Totalitarianism is generally considered as the first "serious attempt to forge the theoretical, historical, and conceptual tools, necessary to illuminate the great cataclysms of the twentieth century" (Aschheim 2001: 12). Arendt's claim that totalitarianism is an unprecedented, radically new phenomenon that cannot be derived from other types of domination still stands out among the standard works on totalitarianism that relate it, either through analogy, causal reasoning, or conceptual analysis, to other historical formations and regimes. For example, political scientist Franz Neumann argues, in *Behemoth: The Structure and Practice of National Socialism 1933–1944* (1944), that totalitarian dictatorship is an age-old phenomenon as the example of ancient Sparta proves. Philosophers such as Karl Popper, Theodor Adorno, and Max Horkheimer were more inclined to look for conceptual roots of totalitarianism. Popper detected, in *The Open Society and its Enemies* (1945), proto-totalitarian tendencies in Plato's philosophy while Adorno and Horkheimer, in *Dialektik der Aufklärung* (1947), uncovered a totalitarian dialectics resulting from the Enlightenment's reduction of reason to instrumental reason and mathematical formalization. Finally, famous sociologists such as David Riesman and Raymond Aron, though critical, were also fascinated by her analysis of totalitarianism. Arendt was skeptical about the contribution of sociology and the social sciences because she considered them "deeply compromised by the mass societies they purported to explain. [...] She argued that social scientific explanations couched in terms of structural theories of causality denied the existence of human freedom" (Baehr 2010: 4).

Since the early 2000s reception of *The Origins of Totalitarianism* has picked up again, mainly for two quite distinct reasons. On the one hand, post- and decolonial theorists show a new interest in *The Origins of Totalitarianism* that is subjected to a novel reading, often labeled "the boomerang thesis" (King and Stone 2007; Kistner 2008; Moses 2010; Stone 2011; Zimmerer 2004). The boomerang thesis refers to Arendt's claim, new at the time, that the European doctrines of racial and cultural supremacy arose, at least in part, as a result of imperialist exploitation of Africa and Asia, and the establishment of colonial societies. The latter's practices of domination, based on ideas of racial supremacy "boomeranged" to the

European countries. On the other hand, the reemergence of populism, the new extreme right, authoritarian leaders, and other symptoms of eroding democracies in the United States and Europe has given rise to a renewed interest in totalitarianism.

Written as a journalist's report of the Eichmann trial in Jerusalem 1962, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* contains detailed discussions of the history and politics of the Holocaust. Since its publication *Eichmann in Jerusalem* has played, and still plays, a central role in a broad range of debates. In the humanities the debates concern historical method and explanation and philosophical questions concerning the nature of evil, in the social and behavioral sciences *Eichmann in Jerusalem* has been the inspiration of famous experiments testing obedience to authority (the Milgram experiments), and last but not least, *Eichmann in Jerusalem* is the source of ongoing discussions in law about crimes against humanity.

Before discussing the historical debates and interpretations related to *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, we first have to address a remarkable state of affairs: there are few publications in the twentieth century that have given rise to so much controversy, passionate rejection, and above all, misunderstanding and misinterpretation. In retrospect, there are basically two reasons for this state of affairs. First, the subject matter and, second, the way Arendt drafted the report. The subject matter was and is of course highly sensitive, touching upon traumatic experiences which, in the early 1960s, were quite fresh. Even now, after decades of Holocaust memorials and commemoration rituals, it is very questionable whether, what the Germans call *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*, coming to terms with the past, has been achieved or is achievable at all. Exactly that, coming to terms with the past, however, is a driving force of Arendt's work, and in particular of the two historical books, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1951) and *Eichmann in Jerusalem* (1963). Though she describes understanding as an "unending activity by which, in constant change and variation, we come to terms with and reconcile ourselves to reality" (Arendt 1994: 308), she also, in the famous 1964 interview with Günther Gaus, says of Auschwitz: "This ought not to have happened. And I don't mean just the number of victims. I mean the method, the fabrication of corpses and so on—I don't need to go into that. This should not have happened. Something happened there to which we cannot reconcile ourselves. None of us ever can" (Arendt 1994: 14; emphasis in the original). Even if reconciliation is impossible, Arendt's resolve to attempt to understand Auschwitz and what Auschwitz stands for should not be underestimated. This was one of the reasons, quite probably the reason, why she departed for Jerusalem to report on the Eichmann trial.

The second reason for the extraordinary extent of controversy around *Eichmann in Jerusalem* is the tone and style of this work. The subtitle is a case in point. Even though the book leaves no doubt that the term "banality" refers to the doer, Eichmann, and not to his deeds, one wonders why Arendt choose a provocative and slightly misleading subtitle for the book. There are many complaints about Arendt's sarcastic tone, for instance, in calling Eichmann a clown, and the indifference and coldness this tone supposedly manifested (Arendt 1963: 29). Some of the grievances come from good friends such as Gershom Scholem who called *Eichmann in Jerusalem* "'heartless', 'flippant', 'sneering', and 'malicious'" (quoted in Maier-Katkin and Stoltzfus 2013). Sarcasm and irony, however, are also means to keep emotions at bay and Arendt is quite obviously, though not always sensitively and felicitously, using those means to maintain the distance of a reporter. For, as she emphasized time and again after publication, the book is a report, and what she did was render the facts of the trial as objectively as

possible. Though the stance of a reporter or journalist was important to her, it is at the same clear that the portrait she draws of Eichmann, his ambitious careerism, his sense of self-importance, and indeed, his sometimes inadvertently comic way of exhibiting it, solemnly pronouncing misplaced clichés (cf. Arendt 1963: 252), is not simply a rendering of facts.

Apart from the tone, the maybe most important reason for much misunderstanding is that Arendt does not explain or account for the central insight of her book. The expression “banality of evil” occurs only once in the book, namely, at the end. Arendt concludes her report, in the very last sentence before the epilogue, with these words: “the lesson that this long course in human wickedness had taught us—the lesson of the fearsome, word-and-thought-defying banality of evil” (Arendt 1963: 252). Jerome Kohn (2011) is right to observe that

Arendt’s *Eichmann in Jerusalem* is an essentially controversial book, and I for one would rue the day it ceased to be. For it challenges its readers to reconsider what most of us, including Arendt, were brought up and taught to believe about the nature of evil, namely, that in all its forms, human as well as natural, evil is out of the ordinary.

But in view of the many misinterpretations, this essentially controversial book also proves to be too much of challenge for many of its readers.

The most widespread misinterpretation concerns the role and person of Eichmann. Influenced by the famous experiments on obedience to authority, conducted by Yale psychologist Stanley Milgram, Eichmann is seen as a bureaucrat mindlessly following orders, a mere cog in the Nazi machine. As the majority of participants in his experiments proceeded to administer deadly electroshocks to other human beings, Milgram concluded that ordinary people are likely to be obedient to orders given by authority figures to the extent of killing an innocent human being. In his view, his experiments confirmed the truth of the banality of evil, namely, that there is a bit of Eichmann in most of us but it is the situation that determines whether our “inner Eichmann” develops and takes over. Arendt objected to Milgram’s interpretation in that he conflated obedience and support. Eichmann was not so much obedient as full of admiration for high placed Nazi authorities, he voluntarily supported the Nazi regime and furthered his career with great ambition within the Nazi bureaucracy.

Another common misinterpretation concerns Arendt’s qualification of Eichmann as thoughtless. She explains to some extent what she means by thoughtlessness—it is not stupidity but a lack of imagination, he “never realized what he was doing” (Arendt 1963: 134). Most readers take this explanation on face value and do not take the trouble of examining Arendt’s conception of thinking, even though she has written a whole book on the topic, the first volume of *The Life of the Mind*.

The third misinterpretation that is still prevalent, especially in literature critical of Arendt, concerns her understanding of history in general, and of totalitarianism and the death camps in particular. In *The Origins of Totalitarianism* Arendt not only argued that totalitarianism was a novel phenomenon that cannot and should not be reduced to tyranny or dictatorship, she also presents its historical roots, namely, anti-Semitism and imperialism. Recognizing anti-Semitism

as a factor in the mass murder of the Jews, she nevertheless disagrees with the historical frame of reference of the trial's prosecutor Hauser and, for that matter, of most Zionist Jews. Hauser relied on the well-known account of the long-standing history of anti-Semitism. To take anti-Semitism as the exclusive cause of the death camps comes down, from Arendt's perspective, to ignoring the totalitarian character of the death camps. What makes the death camps—both the Konzentrationslager and the Gulag—totalitarian is, first, their anti-utilitarian character. Even when Germany was on the brink of defeat and the Soviet Union close to economic collapse, the camps continued to be operational. Their function was less to provide for extra labor than to exercise total domination. To understand what the camps were about one has to recognize their totalitarian character, that is, the attempt, through terror, to dominate human beings totally by either killing them or shaping them in accordance with ideological doctrine, whether that ideology is about race or class. What follows from this is, second, that for Arendt, the death camps never were simply about anti-Semitism and the Jews. The totalitarian experiment in total domination of human beings has had many victims apart from the Jews, namely, Poles, Roma and Sinti, homosexuals, people with mental and physical disabilities, Soviet Russians of every walk of life, and others.

Historians, both those who are critical and favorable of Eichmann in Jerusalem, generally agree that the work has its share of historical mistakes. Some historians dismiss the work completely, most prominently Raoul Hilberg. He accuses Arendt, who relied heavily on his *The Destruction of the European Jews*, published in Chicago in 1961, of plagiarism. Despite the consensus about the inadequacy of the historical research, *Eichmann in Jerusalem* plays a crucial role in the historiography of the Nazi regime and the Holocaust, starting with the intentionalism-functionalism debate that was mainly conducted by German historians during the 1970s and 1980s. This debate turns around the question "whether one should regard the actions of the 'National Socialist Regime' as the unfolding of the ideology and expressed intentions of its leadership (and of Hitler in particular), or whether one instead should focus on the dynamics of decision-making processes and the institutional pressures inherent in the Nazi system of government" (Bessel 2003: 15). The so-called intentionalists, Andreas Hillgruber and Eberhard Jackel, affirmed the first part of the question while functionalists such as Hans Mommsen affirm the second part. The latter linked *Eichmann in Jerusalem* to this discussion by stating, in a publication from 2001, that Arendt "presented an innovative interpretation that in some respects anticipated the arguments of the functionalist school that developed in the later 1960s" (Mommsen in Aschheim 2001: 225) Mommsen refers to Arendt's rejection of the view, espoused by the prosecutor in the Eichmann trial, of the Holocaust as the culmination of an age-old history of anti-Semitism in favor of highlighting the role of "bureaucratic and technical mechanisms" (224). Already in 1990s, however, most historians agree that an adequate explanation of the Nazi regime and its actions require attention for both intention and ideology, on the one hand, and function and structure, on the other. Exemplary of this new consensus is the work of Christopher Browning who publishes two important books in 1992: *The Path to Genocide: Essays on Launching the Final Solution* and the well-known *Ordinary Men: Reserve Police Battalion 101*. The former contains an essay with the self-explanatory title of "Beyond 'Intentionalism' and 'Functionalism': The Decision for the Final Solution Reconsidered." Of particular interest, in view of the link with Arendt's work, is Browning's detailed investigation of the ordinary men, soldiers, doctors, bureaucrats, who

implemented the orders issued by high-placed Nazi's and Hitler himself. Though he does not refer to Arendt himself, reviewers of Browning's work comment on how this investigation illustrates "what Hannah Arendt has called 'the banality of evil'" (Krammer 1994: 195).

The second important installment, from a historical point of view, of the debate and interpretation of Eichmann in Jerusalem was the publication of Bettina Stangneth's *Eichmann before Jerusalem: The Unexamined Life of a Mass Murderer*, published in German in 2011 and in English translation in 2014. Though not an historian (Stangneth is a philosopher), this fascinating study of Eichmann's life, career, and residence in Argentina, from where he was abducted by the Mossad to be put on trial in Jerusalem, is based on meticulous historical research. As indicated already by the title, the study engages in a dialogue with Arendt. Though Stangneth emphasizes the brilliance of Eichmann in Jerusalem she ultimately concludes that Arendt was mistaken in her qualification of Eichmann as banal. According to Stangneth, the mistake was due to lack of information, in particular, the new evidence that she, Stangneth, uncovered from the interviews conducted in the late 1950s by the Dutch Nazi Willem Sassen. These interviews show Eichmann as a convinced Nazi who for that reason cannot be qualified as thoughtless. He knew very well what he was doing, Stangneth concludes, and, as the reviews of her book confirm, almost everybody concurs (apart from the already cited Browning 2015, see, for instance, Eley 2015; Wolin 2016).

Stangneth was wrong to believe that Arendt did not know about the Sassen interviews. The most damning excerpts of the interviews were not only used in the trial but also published in *Life* magazine. More importantly and surprisingly, for the philosopher Stangneth is, she fails to examine Arendt's concept of thinking. In the first volume of *The Life of the Mind*, Arendt analyses the activity of thinking as an inherently critical and imaginative quest for meaning. As such, the activity of thinking is hardly compatible with Arendt's understanding of ideology, namely, "isms which to the satisfaction of their adherents can explain everything and every occurrence by deducing it from a single premise" (1951: 469). As the logic of an idea, ideology is meant to give a shortcut explanation to its adherents who are not looking for a mental challenge but, on the contrary, for the support and security of a movement or group to belong to. Ideological conviction therefore is closer to thoughtlessness than to thought in Arendt's sense. The thoughtlessness Arendt saw in Eichmann was his failure of imagination, of seeing "outside of his own blinkered worldview," as Roger Berkowitz points out. "Such a failure to think from the perspective of others, such dumbness, is what allowed Eichmann to confide in and seek understanding from his Israeli interrogator," of all people (Berkowitz 2014: 201). Not his ideological convictions but this lack of imagination, and in particular the inability to see the world from the perspective of others, allowed Eichmann to carry out, over the course of several years, the worst imaginable crimes.

Legacy

Several areas of historical research will continue to bear the imprint of Arendt's work: political history, genocide studies, Holocaust studies, and the recently established field of memory studies. In genocide and Holocaust studies, the question of enabling factors and conditions is likely to remain on the research agenda, as well as the question what impact enabling factors and conditions have on people. Perhaps the most important lesson to be drawn from *The Origins of Totalitarianism* and *Eichmann in Jerusalem* is that totalitarian conditions erode not

only moral standards but also common sense, people lose orientation, get isolated, and hence, become prey to ideologies and conspiracy theories. This warning is nowadays recognized by many researchers. Though the circumstances are new, the continued neoliberal economic and political climate, together with the all-pervasiveness of social media, seem to have a similar effect, namely, people are reduced to a tenuous sense of reality and become susceptible to bizarre conspiracy theories invented by ideologues on the extreme right (Kohn 2018). What exactly the lessons are we have to learn from the European past of totalitarianism and death camps is, of course, a question of debate (Verovšek 2020), but certain is that historical research needs to be aware of the tendency to reduce the new to the old. As contemporary history is the domain of the unexpected new, historical research of our present condition requires imagination and reflective judgment (Storey 2017).

Without memory and past records history is not possible. Arendt's work also stimulates new questions on memory. Whether it is the question of an excess of memory and of forgetting, or an abuse of memory or of forgetting, all these questions have been impacted by Arendt's work (Kattago 2021; Ricoeur 2004; Ruin 2018). In the wake of her work also questions are raised as how to integrate traumatic memories and, more in general, how to deal with victim testimonies in historiography and in court (Aharony 2015). Even if Arendt herself was critical of the prosecutor in the Eichmann trial because of opening the stage to testimonies of survivors that were irrelevant of establishing Eichmann's guilt, her in depth treatment of these issues lead to new ways of dealing with collective trauma, justice, and politics (Dean 2017; Felman 2002). The plethora of literature on Truth and Reconciliation commissions, for example, in South Africa and Columbia, and on restorative justice in general, testifies to the fertility of Arendt's reflections on memory, justice, and reconciliation (Avruch 2010; Bartel 2018; Kohen 2009; Mordechai 2015; Madison, Clark, and de Costa 2016).

Conclusion

This contribution has presented Arendt's philosophical method as deeply historically informed, situated, and contextual. It demonstrated why she thought the humanities are the domain of historically specific and particular meanings, rather than universal and eternal truth claims, and why narrative, not theoretical discourse is therefore a fitting approach to the past and present of human affairs.

When reconstructing Arendt's work from the perspective of her own recounting and analysis of particular historical events, of her views on the philosophy of history and of those on historiography, it becomes apparent that the emergence of totalitarianism in the twentieth century in Europe and Russia plays a double role. The Holocaust in particular has, of course, been a major historical event, not just one particularly brutal among others but one without precedent that sparked Arendt's thought. Perhaps even more fundamentally, for Arendt, it also called into question how to give an account of the past. In this way she was a pioneer in her ideas about the impossibility to "write a history" of the Holocaust (cf. Friedländer 2007a, b). A novel phenomenon in human history, totalitarianism also challenges the very foundations of the faculty of historical judgment itself, the norms by which to assess it and make sense of it. True to the phenomenological dictum to let one's method be determined by the phenomena one studies, Arendt argues that totalitarianism has driven it home that "the thread of tradition is broken" (see "Influences," above), implying that we can no longer take recourse

to general rules handed down by this very tradition to give an account of totalitarianism. The rupture in tradition confronts historiography with the methodological challenge of writing about the unprecedented (Benhabib 1990; Disch 1994). However, Arendt does not just regret this fact. The loss of tradition also opens up a space for a new type of historical research "that needs no pillars and props, no standards or tradition to move freely over unfamiliar terrain" (Arendt 1968b: 10) As such, it enables "thinking without banisters" (8).

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