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# Mysteries of times of crisis: Hannah Arendt on morality under Nazism

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## Abstract

The original inspiration of Hannah Arendt's last work, *The Life of the Mind*, was the question of whether human thinking could help us resist evil. Arendt concluded that its answer was positive: thinking was a shield against evil. But, subverting this claim, her *magnum opus*, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, showed that thinking could not have served as a moral safeguard in the history of Nazism. Conversely, Arendt's interpretation of that same history, in her most controversial work *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, revealed an all too real defense against evil: human judgment. But, paradoxically, the model of judgment that she sketched in her philosophy of mind denied the survival of judgment under the historical conditions of Nazism, transforming its existence into a mysterious puzzle. This essay thus argues that Arendt's philosophical thinking—her conceptions of thinking and of judgment—clashed with her understanding of the history of Nazism, and this conflict disorganized her views on morality in the time of this, the greatest political and historical crisis of the modern West.

Terrorism has been unsettling Europe. Attacks in Paris, Brussels, Berlin, Manchester, London, have made it an everyday reality. After one killed 130 people in Paris in November 2015, France declared a state of emergency—which lasted for two years. Indeed, the entire continent has been thrown into some such state—and its end does not appear to be near.

Following 9/11, Giorgio Agamben theorized states of emergency in his philosophical essay *State of Exception*. Agamben articulated a critique of Western democracies. He claimed that they have turned the state of emergency—or “state of exception” as he called it—into a habit. Instead of introducing emergency policies, which curb the rights and freedoms of their citizens, only in exceptional cases, to deal with exceptional crises, they have come to use them routinely. In this way, they have transformed the exception into the rule, undermining democracy.<sup>1</sup> Agamben thus conceived the state of exception as a danger, a potential threat to democratic politics. Indeed, he defined *totalitarianism* as a state of exception: as “the establishment, by means of the state of exception, of a legal civil war that allows for the physical elimination not only of political adversaries but of entire categories of citizens who for some reason cannot be integrated into the political system.”<sup>2</sup>

*State of Exception* has focused academic attention on its titular concept. As a philosophical problem, however, that concept is not a novelty. Agamben himself demonstrated that it has a long genealogy, stretching back to Roman Antiquity. His book was, also, a response to the concept's earlier theorization by the German political

philosopher Carl Schmitt. But also before Agamben, the state of exception was analyzed by another major Western intellectual of the twentieth century—Hannah Arendt.

In Arendt's thinking, the state of exception assumed a specific form. This was totalitarianism. As such, it became a defining problematic of her oeuvre. Arendt analyzed it most systematically in *The Origins of Totalitarianism*. This work, which Bernard Crick has called Arendt's "greatest," became a foundational text in the academic study of totalitarianism in the West after World War II.<sup>3</sup> Arendt's most controversial book—*Eichmann in Jerusalem*—was a sequel to *Origins*. It examined the trial and the deformed mind of Adolf Eichmann, one of the chief perpetrators of the Holocaust. Besides *Origins* and *Eichmann*, two of Arendt's other main works were also related to her confrontation with totalitarianism. Her early biography of the Jewish *salonnière* Rahel Varnhagen was influenced by her real-life experience of Nazism and by her embrace of Zionism at that time. Her last work, the philosophical treatise *The Life of the Mind*, was inspired by Eichmann's trial. Arendt's observation of Eichmann's warped way of thinking during his trial led her to explore how the human mind works.

Like Agamben, Arendt conceived totalitarianism as an exceptional condition of politics. She defined it as "a novel form of government"—an unprecedented political regime, a historically new system of politics.<sup>4</sup> She also called it "the burden of our times"<sup>5</sup> and "the crisis of our century."<sup>6</sup> In Arendt's thinking, totalitarianism was, thus, the exception *par excellence* in modern Western history and politics. It was their most critical crisis, their most exceptional exception.

This essay explores Arendt's understanding of this supremely critical exception. More specifically, I focus on a key aspect of that understanding: Arendt's thinking on the fate of the individual's morality in this exceptional time of crisis. Confronted with "the crisis of [her] century," Arendt considered the possibility of morality in it. And she affirmed that possibility. I argue, however, that a crucial tension in her work—between her philosophical thought and her historiography—dissipated that hope.

The original inspiration of Arendt's last work, *The Life of the Mind*, was the question of whether human thinking could help us resist evil. Arendt concluded that its answer was positive: thinking *was* a shield against evil. But, subverting this claim, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* showed that thinking could not have served as a moral safeguard in the history of Nazism. Conversely, Arendt's interpretation of that same history revealed an all too real defense against evil: human judgment. But, paradoxically, the model of judgment that she sketched in her philosophy of mind denied the survival of judgment under the historical conditions of Nazism, transforming its existence into a mysterious puzzle. This essay thus argues that Arendt's philosophical thinking—her conceptions of thinking and of judgment—clashed with her understanding of history, and this conflict disorganized her views on morality in the time of the modern West's greatest crisis.

### **Arendt on thinking and on judging**

As Arendt herself testified in it, *The Life of the Mind* was born of her confrontation with Nazism. "The immediate impulse" that gave rise to her "preoccupation with mental activities," she explained, "came from [her] attending the Eichmann trial." In Israel, her "interest" was "awakened" by what she thought was the most striking feature of the accused—his "thoughtlessness," a blatant "absence of thinking" both "in his past behavior [and] in his behavior during the trial." Faced with this emptiness of mind, Arendt

wondered whether there might be a link between human thinking and evil. “Could the activity of thinking as such,” she asked herself, “the habit of examining whatever happens to come to pass or to attract attention, regardless of results and specific content, could this activity be among the conditions that make men abstain from evil-doing or even actually ‘condition’ them against it?” This question was what gave rise to *Life*.<sup>7</sup>

Arendt intended *Life* to be an analysis of what she thought were the “basic activities” of the human mind. They were three: “thinking, willing, and judging.”<sup>8</sup> Arendt planned *Life* as a tripartite treatise, with each part set to explore one mental activity. Accordingly, *Life*’s first volume focused on thinking.

But while thus focused, that volume also sketched the nature of all three of the mind’s activities. Arendt posited that they are “autonomous;” that is: “they cannot be derived from each other and ... cannot be reduced to a common denominator.” Nor do they possess obvious causes. They are in this sense gratuitous, arising from naturally given and inexplicable propensities of the mind. They do, however, share “their *invisibility*”: “they never appear” in the sensible world. What they also share, and what is the pre-condition for their invisible “actualization,” is their “deliberate *withdrawal*” from that phenomenal reality. All three activities take place when the mind turns away “from the [sensible] world’s being *present* to the senses,” and toward itself.<sup>9</sup>

To understand thinking in particular, Arendt turned to Immanuel Kant. She incorporated his concept of the human imagination into her conception of thinking.<sup>10</sup> Kant had defined the imagination as “the faculty of representing in intuition an object that is not itself present.”<sup>11</sup> Following this definition, Arendt posited that the imagination “re-presents” in the mind the images of objects once perceived by the senses but no longer present to them. These “image[s] [are] then stored in memory, ready to become ... ‘vision[s] in thought’ the moment the mind gets hold of [them].” Thinking consists of this “getting hold of” images stored in the memory and their subsequent manipulation. In the process of manipulation, the mind creates its own “thought-objects”—“concepts,” “ideas,” or “categories”—through a process of “abstracting,” or generalizing, from the images produced by the imagination and kept in the memory.<sup>12</sup>

The tendency toward “generalization” is related to the character of the realm where the thinking mind, or “thinking ego,” withdraws. In thinking, the mind “deals with,” or “moves among,” de-materialized, “invisible” generalities—be they concepts or ideas—and is utterly “removed” from any spatially defined particulars; it “is, [spatially] speaking, nowhere.” In terms of time, the thinking mind situates itself in a peculiar “gap” of a “timeless present.” Without the presence of the mind, time, non-human time, is “a continuously flowing everlasting stream.” By beginning to think, the mind disengages itself from “the continuity of ... life in [the] [sensible] world.” Since “the subject matter” of thinking is necessarily either “what has already disappeared or what has not yet appeared,” and cannot be what is appearing at the moment of thinking, the mind is able to move along time’s continuum. It can even transform time into its object of reflection and definition, “articulating” time, for example, into past, present, and future. By thus disregarding and even opposing time, thinking creates for itself an extended “now” where time’s flow is suspended. This is thinking’s “timeless present”—characteristic only of “mental phenomena” and non-existent in “historical or biological time”—a present “actualized in the thinking process and last[ing] no longer than this process lasts.”<sup>13</sup>

For Arendt, the possibility for creating such strange “gaps” in time arises from the character of thinking. “The thinking ego,” she wrote, “is sheer activity and therefore ageless, sexless, without qualities, and without a life story.” Thinking’s transcendence of temporal constraints is made possible by the fact that the thinking ego is not temporally defined or constrained.<sup>14</sup>

The thinking ego resembles an inexhaustible and invisible spring, soundlessly murmuring forth an endless stream of invisible thoughts. The paradoxical murmur arises from thinking’s peculiar “dialogical” character. Thinking is, in fact, a “dialogue” of the thinking ego with itself. It is a “soundless dialogue ... between me and myself,” in which the thinking ego talks to, listens to, and responds back to itself. Thinking, claimed Arendt, quoting Kant, is “talking with oneself ... hence also inwardly listening.” It is, in principle, “unending;” but it is interrupted whenever the mind immerses itself in, or is “intruded upon” by, the sensible world. Such an interruption transforms “the two-in-one [into a] One ...[,] as though the two into which the thinking process had split [the thinker] clapped together again.”<sup>15</sup>

The activity of thinking is self-contained, “an end in itself,” not initiated or propelled by an “outside” purpose. It arises out of a natural “need” of the mind to “search for” “meaning.” Thinking is precisely an endless process of dialogical questioning and “quest for meaning.” It does not produce stable “truths” or knowledge, such as experimentally verifiable scientific explanations, but, constantly asking questions and looking for their answers, generates ever-changing meaning. Thinking’s “criterion”—what determines the degree of its meaningfulness—is the “agreement” between the partners in the dialogue of thought. Meaningful, for instance, are thoughts that, arising from one of thinking’s partners, meet the approval, the affirmative “It makes sense,” of the other.<sup>16</sup>

This, in sketch, was Arendt’s conception of thinking. Unfortunately, her analysis of judging remained unfinished. She passed away as she was beginning to write it, having completed shortly before *Life’s* second volume, on the mental activity of willing. Arendt, however, did formulate definite ideas on judging in her work. They appear in *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, in *Life’s* extant text, in three of her essays,<sup>17</sup> in her “Lectures on Kant’s Political Philosophy,”<sup>18</sup> and in notes that she prepared for a graduate seminar that she taught on Kant.<sup>19</sup> As these texts indicate, and as Seyla Benhabib has observed, Arendt conceived judgment as “a moral faculty.” For her, judgment was “the faculty of ‘telling right from wrong.’”<sup>20</sup>

In her writings on it, Arendt articulated two main *modi operandi*, or models, of judgment. Both were premised on Kant’s idea that judgment “is the faculty of thinking [a] particular as contained under [a] universal.”<sup>21</sup> The first model consisted of Kant’s concept of a “determinant judgment.” Such a judgment is formed when the mind evaluates a particular according to a “given” general principle—by applying that principle to the particular. The determinant judgment is the conclusion of this mental procedure.<sup>22</sup> Terrorism offers an example: holding the idea that murder is evil, we would assess a murderous terrorist act as evil.

Following Kant again, Arendt called judgment’s second *modus operandi* “reflective judgment.” In it, there are no general principles, and the movement of the mind in forming judgments is reversed: from the particular to a general principle—a principle, moreover, that the mind has to discover on its own.<sup>23</sup> In his *Critique of Judgment*, Kant had analyzed *aesthetic* “reflective judgments.” Arendt re-interpreted Kant’s analysis,

and suggested that there was a general mental operation of reflective judgment that worked in the same way as Kant's aesthetic reflective judgments.<sup>24</sup>

As Arendt understood it, reflective judgment involves a complex mental operation. It begins with the imagination—our faculty of re-creating images of once-perceived objects. When the imagination reproduces such an image, it distances its original—the object of which the image is a copy—from the mind, thereby enabling the mind to judge the object in a detached, impartial manner. The mind then judges the image, according to the affects that the image induces in it. If, for instance, an image terrifies us, we would decide that it is terrible. The mind thus forms a first, a proto-, judgment of an object.<sup>25</sup>

Thereafter, the mind becomes a stern reflexive judge. In a move of double judgment, it judges its own proto-judgment. To do so, it tries to understand how other people would judge the object of its proto-judgment. It imagines how others would judge that object, and then compares its own proto-judgment of the object with the others' imagined judgments of the object. After this comparative procedure, the mind formulates its final judgment of the object. Kant had termed the mind's imagined comparative assumption of the thinking of other people "enlarged thought" and "enlarged mentality." Arendt believed that it plays a crucial role in judgment. It refines the mind's final judgment of an object, because it sifts that judgment through its comparison with other people's judgments. It also increases the final judgment's validity—which Arendt defined as "possible appeal." Since it takes into consideration the judgments of others, the sieve of comparison makes the mind's final judgment potentially agreeable to many.<sup>26</sup>

It is crucial to note that "enlarged" thinking is not a solipsistic activity of the mind. On the contrary. It is intersubjective. It necessitates a multiplicity of minds. The existence of a human community is for it a *conditio sine qua non*. As Arendt put it: the "enlarged way of thinking ... needs the presence of others 'in whose place' it must think, whose perspectives it must take into consideration, and without whom it never has the opportunity to operate at all."<sup>27</sup>

Applying given general principles to particulars, or assessing particulars vis-à-vis the imagined assessments of others: this was how Arendt conceived the two main *modi operandi* of judgment—"determinant" and "reflective" judgment. Besides these two models, she also formulated a third, much more tentative, understanding of the faculty's operation. This was judgment by example, an idea that Arendt again derived from Kant. The mind, as she saw it, can think of a particular as an example of a general idea. Thereafter, it can employ its selected example as a criterion for evaluating other particulars. 9/11, for instance, could be chosen as an example of terrorist evil; we can then use it as a standard to judge the evil of other acts of terrorism.<sup>28</sup>

Compared to her theorization of determinant and of reflective judgment, Arendt's views on judging by examples are undeveloped. They are a sketch, not a conception of how judgment works. What Arendt left us with, then, are her two main, distinct models of judgment, and, as a supplement to them, a sketch of judgment by example.

### **Individual morality under Nazism**

Arising out of Arendt's confrontation with history, *Life* was intended to discover whether our mind can help us resist evil in real life, in actual, lived, historical reality. Ironically, however, Arendt's philosophy of mind, while inspired by her experience of

history, came to conflict with her understanding of that past. It clashed with her attempt to understand the history of Nazi totalitarianism. Benhabib has indicated this contradiction. “The moral attitude of enlarged thought,” she writes, “seems to be missing when we most need it, that is, in those situations of moral and political upheaval when the fabric of moral interactions that constitute everyday life are [*sic*] so destroyed that the obligation to think of the other as one whose perspective I must weigh equally alongside my own disappears from the conscience of individuals.”<sup>29</sup> Enlarged thinking, in other words, evaporates in times of crisis. Arendt’s historiography of Nazism reveals further tensions of this kind, ones involving her understanding of the mental activities of both judging and thinking. These strains frustrate her thinking on resisting evil under Nazism.

*Origins* and *Eichmann* formed the core of Arendt’s work on Nazism. A main theme in them was the relationship between Nazism and human understanding. Arendt’s exploration of it is the locus of the conundrums in her thinking on evil in the era of Nazism.

In *Origins*, Arendt’s inquiry into the connection between Nazism and human understanding was related to her analysis of Nazi ideology. The book postulated that ideology was one of Nazism’s defining traits. Nazism was a thoroughly and vigorously ideological form of government.<sup>30</sup> As Arendt conceived them, ideologies in general are centered on a single idea; for example, “the struggle of races” in the case of racism. Accepting as axiomatic their central idea, viewing history as a moving process, and elaborating their core idea to explain this historical process, ideologies develop self-contained explanations of all of history. An ideology, claimed Arendt, “promises to explain all historical happenings, [to provide] the total explanation of the past, the total knowledge of the present, and the reliable prediction of the future.” Ideologies, in other words, pretend to be omniscient about history. They are, also, logically consistent in the elaboration of their ideas. And, as “total explanations,” they “become[...] independent of all experience.” The racist ideology of Nazism possessed these traits, but was also special—in its uncompromising extremism. Hitler and the Nazis embraced and believed in it “dead seriously” and “literally.” Fanaticized in this way, they developed its “implications [to] extremes of logical consistency.” Beginning from its axiom that the struggle of races is the basic law of history, Nazism inferred, with a lethal logical consistency, that some races would die in the struggle; hence, they were “unfit to live,” do not deserve to live, and should be liquidated. “Ideologies are harmless,” wrote Arendt, “... only as long as they are not believed in seriously. Once [they are] ... taken literally they become the nuclei of logical systems in which, as in the systems of paranoiacs, everything follows comprehensibly and even compulsorily once the first premise is accepted.” The racist ideology of Nazism was precisely a zealously embraced, self-contained, and extremely logical, “system” of ideational lunacy.<sup>31</sup>

The mad system of its ideology swept its followers into Nazism. It became a key source of the regime’s appeal, converting people into faithful Nazis. The reason was that the madness of the ideology resonated with a momentous distortion in the minds of those faithful.

In *Origins*, Arendt argued that Nazism originated from the cataclysms of modern German history. World War I humiliated Germany painfully and profoundly. It was followed by a severe economic crisis, indeed one so extreme that it crashed the very



class structure of German society. It “declassed” millions, throwing them into a social and economic free fall. This socio-economic disaster led to a political one as well. It wrecked Germany’s “party system, chiefly because [its] parties, being interest parties, could no longer represent class interests.” The entire socio-economic and political structure of German society was thus thrown into disorder. This chaos disoriented Germans radically. They came to distrust and hate the parties and party system of the Weimar Republic. More fatefully, the liquefaction of classes destroyed their “membership in a class.” And that, Arendt thought, was the most important foundation of individual identity in German society at that time. Germans lost their sense of self. Their identity gone, they were left in a mental no-man’s-land. This mess of subjectivity was a bonanza for Nazism. Claiming to fight against Weimar’s hated party system, it sucked into its ranks the multitudes of self-less, disoriented, and “atomized” individuals, whose only form of identity became their “belonging to [the Nazi] movement.”<sup>32</sup>

These people, decentered in their subjectivity, formed what Arendt termed the “masses” of modern Europe. They were, indeed, a European, not only a German, phenomenon. They were the children of the *Sturm und Drang* of modern European history. These storms and stresses included revolutionary political changes and acute political crises, dizzying economic progress and devastating economic disasters, vertiginous social changes, dislocations and disorder, World War I. They shook Europe relentlessly, but they became especially disruptive in Germany, where, as we just noted, they disintegrated society and politics. They created Europe’s and Germany’s “mass men.” In Germany, these “mass men” flocked to Nazism *en masse*. They became its strongest source of popular support.<sup>33</sup>

Besides their disordered subjectivity, the modern masses were unsettled by another woe. Loneliness. Arendt defined loneliness as “the experience of not belonging to the world.” As she saw it, it too was the product of the historic storms and stresses that had given birth to Europe’s masses. They increasingly denied individuals a stable “place in the world,” thereby tearing them away from the world, and making loneliness a pervasive malaise.<sup>34</sup>

Arendt conceived loneliness as a terrible tribulation. In her eyes, it belonged “among the most radical and desperate experiences of man.” Its darkest aspect was that it impaired the human mind. It damaged, and even destroyed, the mind’s activities. Loneliness, argued Arendt, transforms the inner dialogue of thinking—its “two-in-one,” its “dialogue between me and myself”—into a singular “one,” when the individual is “deserted by [his or her] own self.” The companion in the dialogue of thought vanishes. The dual thinking self becomes a mono-self. Singularized in this way, “man loses trust in himself as the partner of his thoughts.” Thinking, dependent as it is on the duality of the thinking ego, is no longer possible. It dies. With thinking dead, the human mind retains only “the ability of logical reasoning whose premise is the self-evident”—a mental “capacity ... which is as independent of thinking as it is of experience.” Loneliness allows one solely to elaborate logical deductions: to make, for instance, mathematical calculations, or, concentrating on factual events, to foresee their consequences, without subjecting these projections to the approval or disapproval of the partner of thinking’s two-in-one. An apocalyptic-minded mathematician exemplifies both of these kinds of mental operations.<sup>35</sup>

In Arendt's view, the distortion of the human mind toward logicity was fateful. It was what transformed the modern masses into a prey of Nazism—compelling them to give their devotion to it. By engrossing them in it, loneliness habituated the masses to the devious thinking “characterized by ... logicity.” Thereby, it attuned the minds of the “mass men” to the extreme logicity of Nazi ideology. In turn, the insane system of the latter provided a desperately needed source of identity. Embracing the ideology and aware that “he will be utterly lost if ever he lets go of [it],” the individual tries not to depart from the (ideo)logical system, and this attempt, this “inner coercion,” to keep one's self in line “seems to confirm a man's identity outside all relationships with others.”<sup>36</sup>

In her interpretation of the relationship between Nazism and the human mind, Arendt thus established a crucial affinity between extremist logical thinking and susceptibility to Nazism. She saw such thinking as the result of a total absence of thinking, understood as the mind's inner dialogue with itself. *Origins*, in other words, showed absence of thinking as an indispensable prerequisite for the success of Nazi ideology. The death of thinking led to Hitler. Arendt took up this issue of the death of mind again in her second main book on Nazism—*Eichmann in Jerusalem*. In it, she hinted that the absence of the “enlarged mentality” also contributed to Nazism. The death of judgment led to the Holocaust.

*Eichmann's* exploration of the link between Nazism and the human mind culminated in what Arendt called “the banality of evil.” This phrase was one of the book's most controversial aspects.<sup>37</sup> As Arendt noted, the phrase was not meant to be a philosophical concept. She formulated it to describe an empirical reality—a “factual phenomenon,” as she called it, “which stared one in the face at [Eichmann's] trial.” This factuality was comprised of what Arendt saw as two striking traits of the Nazi bureaucrat. The first was that he was not an evil “monster,” motivated by a wish to kill; that, on the contrary, he was more or less a “normal” individual. His second shocking trait was his “sheer thoughtlessness.” He displayed an “almost total” “inability to *think*, namely, to think from the standpoint of somebody else.” Arendt thought that this failure of mind played a crucial role in Eichmann's crimes during the Nazi regime. As she saw it, it “predisposed him to become one of the greatest criminals of that period.” From the perspective of Arendt's theorization of the human mind, Eichmann lacked the capacity for “enlarged thought”—which she conceived to be a prerequisite for judgment. His fateful defect was a deficiency of “enlarged thinking,” and hence, aberrant judgment. Because of it, he failed to understand that his involvement in the Holocaust was morally wrong. It transformed him into an instrument of genocide.<sup>38</sup>

Her engagement with the Eichmann trial thus led Arendt to think that a key source of Nazi evil might be aberrant judgment, itself a consequence of “thoughtlessness.” In *Eichmann*, however, she suggested, further, that flawed judgment was, in fact, a trait that Eichmann shared with millions of Germans; failure of judgement had a been a mass phenomenon during the Third Reich. Arendt emphasized “the totality of the moral collapse” under the Nazis; “there existed,” she asserted, “not a single organization or public institution in Germany, at least during the war years, that did not become involved in criminal actions and transactions.” She was convinced that only “few [Germans] were still able to tell right from wrong.” Proper moral judgment had all but died.<sup>39</sup>



In *Origins*, Arendt contended that Nazism was radically destructive of any form of human community. One of the book's main arguments was that it was a wildly megalomaniacal form of government. Nazism did not have circumscribed, even if extreme, political objectives. It pursued two goals: "world conquest" and "the permanent [total] domination of each single individual in each sphere of life." Nazism wanted to devour the world, people and all. What is crucial to notice is that its drive toward total domination of the individual spelled doom to all communication and community. Nazism aimed at taking over the separate individual totally; it had zero tolerance for human togetherness.<sup>40</sup> In *Eichmann*, Arendt argued that Nazism subverted traditional principles of morality in European society. For example, it replaced the hallowed commandment "Thou shalt not kill!" with a license to kill. Its genocidal racist ideology sanctioned mass murder. Thus, Nazism wrought an anti-revolution in European morality.<sup>41</sup>

These arguments of Arendt—about Eichmann's flawed judgment, about judgment's mass breakdown in Nazi Germany, about Nazism's aggressive assault on human community and Western morality—have momentous implications regarding the operation of judgment under Nazism. This unprecedented state of exception, Arendt suggests, brought down the two main pillars of judgment: given general moral principles and human community. It thereby made judgment's failure on a mass scale an all too expected—a borderline inevitable—phenomenon. In this situation, only examples could conceivably have served as props of judgment. But even this possibility and hope does not refute the factual reality, as presented by Arendt in *Origins* and *Eichmann*, that Nazism imperiled profoundly the ability to judge. While not downright impossible, a survival of judgment under these conditions would be highly surprising.

Arendt's perception of a mass breakdown of judgment in Nazi Germany, in *Eichmann*, exemplified a conceptual convergence in which her views on "the life of the mind" reinforced her analysis of Nazism in *Origins* and *Eichmann* combined. Such a convergence, however, did not always grace her work. We have seen that her observation of Eichmann's highly constricted way of thinking led her to begin her philosophical inquiry into the hope of resisting evil through thinking. But, in a significant irony, her theorization of the mind conflicted with her analysis of Nazism in *Origins* and *Eichmann*. This conflict has critical implications: Arendt's conception of mental activities undermined a momentous, *actual* survival of judgment and escape from evil—which she discerned under the demoralized conditions of Nazism. In a further paradoxical twist, her historical interpretation of these very conditions, conversely, eroded the hope for resisting evil that she had set out to find—and that she thought she had found—in *The Life of the Mind*.

In *Eichmann*, Arendt perceived in Nazi Germany a "factual phenomenon" as real as Eichmann's "thoughtlessness." This was a momentous resistance to evil—precisely the improbable resistance of those few Germans still able to exercise proper judgment. They "were still able to tell right from wrong," and, in this way, escaped from the mass "moral collapse" and resisted the radically demoralizing grasp of Nazism. Theirs was the profoundly surprising defiance of evil enabled by the survival of judgment. That defiance was, indeed, miraculous.<sup>42</sup> Arendt is absolutely certain that these people's judgment continued to function under the same adverse conditions that made judgment's failure well-nigh inevitable. She is totally convinced that judgment was an *actual* safeguard against evil. It was, thus, a possible answer to the original question, of

whether thinking could be a shield against evil, which inspired *The Life of the Mind*. Arendt herself is also aware, however, that this survival of the ability to judge is perplexing.<sup>43</sup> How this was possible, how judgment could still operate in this most critical of moments, and what made the exceptional few different from an Eichmann and from the majority of Germans, she never showed. She did believe that, as a mental activity, judgment is gratuitous, but what also appeared gratuitous in *Eichmann* is “proper” judgment, the ability “to tell right from wrong.”<sup>44</sup> Then again, Arendt’s views on the role of examples seem to indicate a potential solution. But, still not developed at the time of her death, they provide precisely that: a potential solution, perhaps a promise, but not an explanation. In the last analysis, the existence of proper judgment under Nazism remained a perplexity—an unexplained miracle in Arendt’s work. Indeed, her two main models of judgment—of determinant and of reflective judgment—clashed with it and denied it.<sup>45</sup>

Nor did a solution to the conundrum of defying evil emerge from Arendt’s philosophy of mind. Setting out to discover, in *Life*, if thinking could stave off evil, she affirmed that thinking could protect us. Arendt thus seemed to have uncovered a way of resisting evil, of escaping, through thinking, its encroachment on the individual. This hopeful escape, however, was actually spurious. It was challenged and upset by Arendt’s interpretation of the history of Nazism in *Origins*. Thinking, she showed, could keep evil at bay, but only in the abstract, not, or only with great difficulty, in the historical development and context of Nazism.

In *Life*, Arendt concluded that thinking “could,” indeed, “make men abstain from evil-doing.” We have seen that, as she understood it, the “criterion” for the validity of thinking is the “agreement” between its two-in-one, between the two voices in the split self of thought. For Arendt, the possibility of internal strife between the two partners in the mental dialogue is what transforms thinking into a natural safeguard against evil. Thinking, she thought, is directed not only toward outside things, but also internally, toward the self: it is a “silent intercourse” of the dialogic partners in which they examine each other. As such, it accustoms us to subjecting ourselves to examination. Habituated to this inner (self-)scrutiny, we anticipate the silent partner when we are not engaged in the dialogue of thinking. This “anticipation” is a crucial aspect of the life of the mind. It is what, Arendt postulated, constitutes “conscience.” More particularly, by making the inner self-scrutiny a familiar experience, thinking inculcates in us a fear of the partner that “awaits” us in solitude. This fear prevents us from “contradicting” ourselves—from starting a fight with our inner partner, from incurring the partner’s wrath—by committing evil. This fear—a saving one, indeed—makes us more likely to not do evil. By contrast, an individual not used to thinking’s self-scrutiny “will not mind contradicting himself, and this means he will never be either able or willing to account for what he says or does; nor will he mind committing any crime, since he can count on its being forgotten the next moment.”<sup>46</sup> An individual devoted to thinking is thus a very unlikely supporter of tyranny or perpetrator of crime. If not its opponent, that person is at least a likely avoider of evil.

Though coherent with and within her theorization of the human mind, Arendt’s claim that thinking is a shield against evil was, in fact, irrelevant to the history of Nazism. In *Origins*, as we saw, the storms and stresses of German and European modernity made loneliness a widespread malaise, which, in turn, resulted in the death of

thinking, its substitution with logicity, and the latter's mobilization by the Nazis. If anything, Arendt's representation of this fateful process shows both how fragile thinking is, and how dependent it is on external factors. Thinking vanished in loneliness, and loneliness itself was a product of modernity. What is more, loneliness started spreading in Europe "in the nineteenth century." In this way, it *pre-dated* Nazism. "It showed itself clearly," wrote Arendt, "when philosophers ... were no longer content with the fact that 'philosophy is only for the few' and began to insist that nobody 'understands' them. Characteristic in this respect is the anecdote reported from Hegel's deathbed which hardly could have been told of any great philosopher before him: 'Nobody has understood me except one; and he also misunderstood.'" Loneliness had begun afflicting Europeans as early as the time of Hegel.<sup>47</sup>

This historical sketch of Europe is momentous. It indicates that modernity had started undermining thinking *before* evil burst on the European scene in the form of Nazism. When evil did so explode, thinking could hardly have prevented it, because thinking had begun to disappear. By the time evil was ready to lay claim to the masses, therefore, the very question of whether thinking, as such, could prevent evil-doing had ceased to make much sense. Thus, Arendt's analysis of the history of Nazism in *Origins* thwarted the originary intuition, and the primary moral-philosophical claim, of *Life*—that human thinking is a safeguard against evil. In *Origins*, historical understanding dissipated the glimmering philosophical hope.

Paradoxically, Arendt's work, as a whole, provided no adequate answer to the question of whether thinking could prevent evil. That question, as we just saw, was not even an issue when evil was in full swing. The time when it did make sense—when thinking existed—was when people could have identified—as evil—the historical developments that would lead to evil only eventually. It also made sense after evil had tried to destroy the world. Not thinking *per se*, therefore, but thinking about the historical conditions that destroyed thinking could stave off evil. In Arendt's oeuvre, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, rather than *The Life of the Mind*, contained a greater promise for discovering a way of resisting evil. Contra Arendt's own thinking, history offered a greater hope than philosophy.

### Concluding reflections

In his essay on it, Agamben conceived the state of exception as a "no-man's-land" in the juridical order of Western society, an empty space where law is suspended. It is a law-less locus—a locus void of legality.<sup>48</sup> As we indicated, he saw this space as a danger zone. Lacking legality, it could become the womb for the birth of a criminal—even a radically criminal—sovereign.<sup>49</sup> Indeed, as we also noted, this was how Agamben understood totalitarianism.

In her work on Nazism and the human mind, Arendt interpreted the problem of morality in exceptional times of crisis similarly. Her oeuvre too presented such times—as embodied in Nazism—as a dangerous "no-man's-land" of morality. The moment of crisis, she showed, was a locus void of individual morality. It was like a black hole that drained the possibility of morality. In Arendt's work, that drainage was actualized by a conflict between her historiography and her philosophical thinking. While her philosophy claimed to have discovered a path to morality, a way of resisting evil, in the time of crisis of Nazism, her historical understanding of Nazism denied that

hope. Conversely, while her historiography detected an actual, factual, all too real, shield against evil under Nazism, her philosophy negated it. It faded that glimmer of hope.

Both Agamben's and Arendt's thinking on exceptional times of crisis is, thus, deeply pessimistic. They see these crises as historical moments of danger—indeed, of extreme danger. Law is suspended in them, the possibility of ruthless tyranny is all too real, that of morality is radically denied. The individual is lost in a mentally decentering legal and moral black hole.

The problem now is that a disorienting crisis has descended upon Europe. This does not, of course, mean that Europe today is the same as it was on the eve of Nazism. The Great Recession, the sovereign debt crisis, unemployment, have posed serious challenges to its economy. Politically, it is in the midst of Brexit and an acute refugee crisis that has strengthened right-wing parties and sparked xenophobia. Terrorism, as we have noted, has turned its cities into places of fear and death. Still, Europe's current economic troubles are much less dire than those of the 1920s and 1930s—the tribulations of Germany, for example, and especially the calamity of the Great Depression. Young Europeans do suffer from unemployment, but children are not playing with worthless bundles of money in European streets, as they did during the early-1920s hyperinflation in the Weimar Republic. Politically, Europe has not witnessed the rise of ominous right-wing dictatorships that overwhelmed it between the two World Wars. And, in general, it is not experiencing the historic *Sturm und Drang* that distressed its modernity.

Despite these historical and historic differences, Europe *is* living in troubled times. Its troubles are a clear and present danger. Terrorism has, indeed, bloodied its cities. How Europe will survive this time of crisis remains to be seen. Can we use Agamben and Arendt as guides? Are there any lessons that we can learn from them? Perhaps there is one that Arendt's work implies. And it is related to what is, in fact, a problem in her understanding of Nazism.

The problem appears in Arendt's analysis of Nazism's popular support in *Origins*. It consists of the formalism of that analysis. As we saw, Arendt focused on and stressed intensely the logicity of Nazi ideology. Indeed, in her analysis, logicity overshadowed the ideology's content. Most obviously, for example, Arendt ignored Nazism's virulent anti-Communism. As we showed, it was really logicity that ensnared its followers into Nazism. Nor did Arendt appreciate sufficiently the historical role of emotions. The widespread, intensely negative passions stemming from Germany's defeat in World War I, as well as excitement and enthusiasm for a better future that it deceptively promised, really fueled Nazism's popular appeal. *Origins* contends that its followers embraced Nazism because their minds were taken over by logicity. It might be taken to imply that they supported Hitler because they were good at math.

This formalism corresponds to a formalism in Arendt's search for morality in her philosophy of mind. There, as we saw, she sought to discover if human thinking *per se* could constitute a safeguard against evil. She again largely ignored the content of thinking, and focused on and stressed the activity itself. And, as we also showed, this quest for morality ended in an impasse. It was frustrated by her historiography.

This frustration may not in fact be that perplexing. For Arendt, as we indicated, thinking is an atemporal activity. In its actualization, it emancipates itself from temporality, and occurs in a dimension of a present that is exterior to time. History, in

contrast, is defined by time. It could even be seen as hyper-temporal. Arendt's search for morality in atemporal thinking was, thus, perhaps bound to clash with her understanding of highly temporal history.

The lesson that Arendt's oeuvre implies for Europe's current time of crisis is that its overcoming might appear less exclusively in pure reason. Arendt shows that pure thinking is not a sufficient guarantee of resisting evil. Perhaps it needs help. And perhaps less purely rational buttresses might aid it. Attitudes and emotions, such as, respect for the other, friendship, kindness, hatred of violence, could also be sources of morality. Culture, too, might help. Being embedded in history, it too is temporally defined. As such, it might clash with pure thinking. But, it could also oppose evil. Values, identifications and forms of identity, ideals, could be solid grounds of morality. Resolute commitments to peace, tolerance, justice, freedom, human dignity, might offer hope for the future.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup>Giorgio Agamben, *State of Exception*, trans., Kevin Attell (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2005), Kindle edition, chapter 1.

<sup>2</sup>*Ibid.*, section 1.2.

<sup>3</sup>Bernard Crick, "On Rereading *The Origins of Totalitarianism*," *Social Research* 44: 1 (Spring 1977): 125. For the history of the concept of totalitarianism, see Abbott Gleason, *Totalitarianism: The Inner History of the Cold War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995).

<sup>4</sup>Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (Orlando: Harcourt, 1994), 460–474.

<sup>5</sup>This was the title under which *The Origins of Totalitarianism* was first published in England.

<sup>6</sup>Arendt, *Origins*, 460.

<sup>7</sup>Hannah Arendt, *The Life of the Mind: Thinking*, vol., 1, ed., Mary McCarthy (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1978), 3–5.

<sup>8</sup>*Ibid.*, 69.

<sup>9</sup>*Ibid.*, 69–71, 75–76.

<sup>10</sup>*Ibid.*, 75–77.

<sup>11</sup>Hannah Arendt, "Imagination [notes from a 1970 seminar on Immanuel Kant's *Critique of Judgment*]," in Hannah Arendt, *Lectures on Kant's Political Philosophy*, ed., Ronald Beiner (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1982), 79.

<sup>12</sup>Arendt, *Life: Thinking*, 75–77, 103.

<sup>13</sup>*Ibid.*, 199, 204–210.

<sup>14</sup>*Ibid.*, 42–43, 206.

<sup>15</sup>*Ibid.*, 185–187.

<sup>16</sup>*Ibid.*, 57–59, 62, 64, 123, 185–186.

<sup>17</sup>Hannah Arendt, "The Crisis in Culture: Its Social and Its Political Significance," in Hannah Arendt, *Between Past and Future: Eight Exercises in Political Thought* (New York: Penguin, 2006), Kindle edition, 194–222; Hannah Arendt, "Truth and Politics," in Hannah Arendt, *Between Past and Future: Eight Exercises in Political Thought* (New York: Penguin, 2006), Kindle edition, 223–258; Hannah Arendt, "Thinking and Moral Considerations: A Lecture," *Social Research* 38 (Autumn 1971): 417–446.

- <sup>18</sup>Hannah Arendt, "Lectures on Kant's Political Philosophy," in Hannah Arendt, *Lectures on Kant's Political Philosophy*, ed., Ronald Beiner (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1982), 7–77.
- <sup>19</sup>Arendt, "Imagination," 79–85.
- <sup>20</sup>Seyla Benhabib, *The Reluctant Modernism of Hannah Arendt* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2003), Kindle edition, 174.
- <sup>21</sup>Maurizio Passerin D'Entrèves, "Arendt's Theory of Judgment," in Dana Villa, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Hannah Arendt* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 250; Arendt, *Life: Thinking*, 69.
- <sup>22</sup>Arendt, *Life: Thinking*, 69; Arendt, "Lectures," 76; D'Entrèves, "Arendt's Theory of Judgment," 250–251.
- <sup>23</sup>Arendt, *Life: Thinking*, 69; D'Entrèves, "Arendt's Theory of Judgment," 250–251.
- <sup>24</sup>Benhabib, *Reluctant Modernism*, 188–189, 191.
- <sup>25</sup>Arendt, "Lectures," 62, 65–69, 72.
- <sup>26</sup>Arendt, "Lectures," 42–43, 71–74; Arendt, "The Crisis in Culture," 216–218.
- <sup>27</sup>Arendt, "The Crisis in Culture," 217.
- <sup>28</sup>Arendt, "Lectures," 76–77; Arendt, "Imagination," 84.
- <sup>29</sup>Benhabib, *Reluctant Modernism*, 193.
- <sup>30</sup>Arendt, *Origins*, 460–474.
- <sup>31</sup>*Ibid.*, 457–458, 468–473.
- <sup>32</sup>*Ibid.*, 260–266, 312–315, 317–318, 323–324.
- <sup>33</sup>*Ibid.*, 260–266, 306–308, 311–318, 323–324, 474–479.
- <sup>34</sup>*Ibid.*
- <sup>35</sup>*Ibid.*, 474–477.
- <sup>36</sup>*Ibid.*, 471–478.
- <sup>37</sup>Dagmar Barnouw, *Visible Spaces: Hannah Arendt and the German-Jewish Experience* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990), 2. For an analysis of the controversies surrounding the publication of *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, see *Ibid.*, 1–3, 223–251.
- <sup>38</sup>Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (Penguin 2006), Kindle edition, 46–51, 275–277, 286–288.
- <sup>39</sup>*Ibid.*, 124–126, 158–159, 294–295.
- <sup>40</sup>Arendt, *Origins*, 323, 326, 378, 389, 392, 411, 415–416, 465–466.
- <sup>41</sup>Arendt, *Eichmann*, 135–136, 147–150, 286–288, 294–295.
- <sup>42</sup>*Ibid.*, 294–295. I am indebted to Dominick LaCapra for the idea that this defiance of evil was miraculous. I am deriving it from his view that Arendt tended to conceive the historical event as a "miracle." Dominick LaCapra, panel discussion comments, Tracing the Temporal: New Trajectories in Cultural and Intellectual History Conference, Ithaca, NY, Cornell University, April 21, 2006.
- <sup>43</sup>Arendt, *Eichmann*, 294–295.
- <sup>44</sup>Arendt, *Life: Thinking*, 69; Arendt, *Eichmann*, 294–295.
- <sup>45</sup>As Doris Bergen has indicated, making a clear distinction between "Nazis" and "Germans" in the historiography of Nazism is tricky. Doris L. Bergen, *War & Genocide: A Concise History of the Holocaust*, 2nd. ed. (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2009), 2–3. Who were the "Nazis?" To what extent did Germans embrace Nazism? To what extent were they Nazis? These questions do not admit of



easy answers. In *Origins*, Arendt actually complicated the distinction between “Nazis” and “Germans.” She argued that one of the defining traits of Nazism, as a political movement and as a system of government, was a gradation of escalating loyalty and ideological fanaticism. She called it Nazism’s “peculiar onion-like structure.” Arendt, *Origins*, 413. In this scheme, the center of Nazism was its Leader—Hitler; he was surrounded by an inner circle of close associates; they were, then, encircled by elite organizations, such as the paramilitary corps of the SA (*Sturmabteilung*) and the SS (*Schutzstaffel*); around those stood the members of the Nazi Party; finally, the outermost ring consisted of sympathizers of Nazism. This was the Nazi “onion.” Dedication to Nazism increased from its periphery to its center. The people outside it were those who did not accept, or opposed, Nazism. *Ibid.*, 364–388, 412–417, 437. The individuals who, miraculously, exercised good judgment and thus resisted the evil of Nazism would be situated here, outside the circles of Nazism.

<sup>46</sup>Arendt, *Life: Thinking*, 185–191.

<sup>47</sup>Arendt, *Origins*, 260–266, 306–308, 311–318, 323–324, 474–479.

<sup>48</sup>Agamben, *State of Exception*, sections 1.1 and 3.6.

<sup>49</sup>*Ibid.*, sections 4.4 and 6.9.

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