

## “THINKING POLITICALLY, SEEING HISTORICALLY”. HANNAH ARENDT ON THE METHOD OF POLITICAL THINKING

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**ABSTRACT.** In my paper, I try to summarize Hannah Arendt’s reflections on the method of political thinking, following them through their genesis. My fundamental assumption is that although she had been preoccupied with the issue before (at least from 1957), she became more seriously interested in it after the controversy following the publication of the Eichmann volume. It is generally known that Arendt believed to have found the pattern for the method of political thinking in Kant’s third critique, the one about judgment; more precisely in the Kantian description of the reflective judgment. This served as a pattern for Arendt for what she sometimes called representative thinking or opinion. If, on the other hand, we examine Arendt’s referring thoughts in their genesis we also come to realize why that was the case. In my opinion, Arendt looked in Kant’s work for a form of political thinking that remained impartial, in other words, it was not committed to one political cause or another, yet did not break its relations to politics, remaining entirely political.

**Keywords:** *Hannah Arendt, Immanuel Kant, impartiality, political thinking, ideology, reflective judgment, representative thinking.*

On the summer of 1957, just like in other years, Hannah Arendt and her second husband, Heinrich Blücher withdrew to Palenville to escape the sweltering heat of New York. These were the weeks and months of the year when Arendt could undisturbedly devote herself to the pleasure of reading. She read all sorts of things at such times, even crime stories – as we learn from her best biographer, Elisabeth Young-Bruehl.<sup>1</sup> Yet, on the 29<sup>th</sup> of August, she related in a letter to her former teacher, master and friend, Karl Jaspers, that she was reading Kant’s book, the *Critique of Judgment* [Kritik der Urteilskraft], with an “increasing fascination”. Although,

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<sup>1</sup> Elisabeth Young-Bruehl, *Hannah Arendt. For Love of the World* (Second Edition), Yale University Press, New Haven & London, 2004, 399.

she wrote, this had always been her favorite of the three critiques of Kant, she had never felt before so “powerfully spoken to”; and that this was the work and not the *Critique of Practical Reason* [Kritik der praktischen Vernunft] where Kant’s real political philosophy was “hidden”. Then she quickly listed the thoughts in which she believed to discover the so-called “political philosophy” of Kant: for example his praise for “common sense”, so often scorned and despised, or the description of the “expanded mode of thought”, which was part (and parcel) of judgment; and which always made it possible for us to think from someone else’s point of view.<sup>2</sup>

Years later, on the 29<sup>th</sup> of November 1964, she wrote again (this time from the University of Chicago) to Jaspers (and his wife) that in the *Critique of Judgment*, of which she happened to be lecturing at the time, she believed to discover “a possible conceptual structure for history and political science”, and that “representative thinking”, which was based on judgment, may be a form of political thinking. This hasty (and somewhat superficial), passing observation could most likely be an answer to one of the earlier critical remarks formulated by Jaspers: that Arendt’s political thinking lacked a method. Although this criticism has no specific written trace in their correspondence (Jaspers must have probably said it during one of their personal meetings in Basel), it can still be deduced from the fact that Arendt mentions in her letter that she had made progress in the area of “method”. More concretely, she writes that she “had learnt” a lot during her teaching activity in Chicago, particularly in the area of method, which her thinking, at least according to Jaspers, had always been “somewhat lacking”.<sup>3</sup> (Nevertheless it is a fact that Jaspers mentioned Arendt’s “errors” in one of his earlier letters dated on the 31<sup>st</sup> of December 1958, although he immediately added that political thinking, unlike mathematical knowledge, was always exposed to possible objections, and that he “felt” Arendt’s “impulse” was still true, even when she herself was in error.<sup>4</sup>) Jaspers was not the only one at the time to feel the lack of method in Arendt’s political thinking: several reviews following the appearance of *The Origins of Totalitarianism* in 1951 or *The Human Condition* in 1958 also considered it the error of these books.

The mere fact that Jaspers and others felt her thinking lacked method would perhaps not have been enough reason for Arendt to get a 7-year old idea out of the drawer and dust it off in 1964. Something happened that made her interest turn to this direction: in 1963, her book came out about the Jerusalem trial of Adolf Eichmann, resulting in the so-called “controversy” connected to her person. Thus,

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<sup>2</sup> Lotte Kohler and Hans Saner (eds.), *Hannah Arendt and Karl Jaspers: Correspondence, 1926-1969* (translated by Robert and Rita Kimber), A Harvest Book, Harcourt Brace & Company, San Diego, New York, London, 1992, 318.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid. 576.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid. 359.

Arendt started to be preoccupied more seriously by the issue of an adequate method of political thinking only because of the scandal that followed the appearance of the book about Eichmann. As a matter of fact, the controversy resulted in a considerable loss for Arendt also in her personal connections as some of her friends broke their relationships with her. She was most affected perhaps by her break with Gershom Scholem, who in a letter dated the 23<sup>rd</sup> of June 1963 (made public later) even accused her that not only her book, but even her own personality strikingly lacked “love for the Jewish people”.<sup>5</sup> And although Arendt answered that she only loved her friends, and was quite incapable “of any other sort of love”<sup>6</sup> (she, as she writes, had never in her life loved any nation or collective: not the German, French, or American nation, or even the working class), yet the question gave her no respite: what had she done in fact, when according to her best endeavor she reported for the readership of *New Yorker* about the trial of Eichmann in Jerusalem (these articles were gathered later on into the volume) *impartially*? True, her impartiality turned into a curse upon her, but could she have acted differently, as a historian and as a political thinker?

The first among the more important texts (quite a few in line) in which she struggles with these questions – turning them more and more methodological than personal –, is her essay entitled *Truth and Politics*, appearing in its form as it is known today in 1967 in the *New Yorker*. She mentioned to Jaspers for the first time that she was working on a “long essay”, “a by-product of the Eichmann mess” on the 25<sup>th</sup> of July 1965: “Should one, may one simply speak the truth in politics?”<sup>7</sup> She mentioned it for the second time a year later, on the 10<sup>th</sup> of August 1966, talking about it as a finished lecture to be delivered on the 7<sup>th</sup> of September at the annual meeting of the *American Political Science Association*.<sup>8</sup> Yet, Arendt had several lectures bearing this title between these two times, as a guest speaker at various universities, such as Emory University, Eastern Michigan University, St. John’s College in Annapolis and Wesleyan University. She faced new reactions at every stage of her lecture route as the controversy around the Eichmann book created more and more waves, and she tried to incorporate these reactions, and her reflections about them, into the text of the essay.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Marie Luise Knott (ed.), *The Correspondence of Hannah Arendt and Gershom Scholem* (translated by Anthony David), The University of Chicago Press, Chicago and London, 2017, 202.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.* 206.

<sup>7</sup> Lotte Kohler and Hans Saner (eds.), *Hannah Arendt and Karl Jaspers: Correspondence, 1926-1969*, *op. cit.*, 607.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.* 648.

<sup>9</sup> Elisabeth Young-Bruehl, *Hannah Arendt. For Love of the World*, *op. cit.*, 397-398.

Naturally, she mentions right in the beginning of the essay (in a footnote) that she was urged to write her text by the “so-called controversy” connected to her book about Eichmann, and that one of the questions she would like to clear in it was “whether it was always legitimate to tell the truth”?<sup>10</sup> She addresses the issue of impartiality in the last chapter of the essay (V), where, as she says, she “returns to the questions she had raised at the beginning of her reflections”. Impartiality, she writes, is the precondition of truth-telling, and as such, it is the privilege of philosophers, scientists, artists, historians, judges, witnesses, and reporters. It belongs to the positions of those pursuing such occupations, because philosophers, just like scholars and artists, are outside the political realm, and in order to effectively practice their occupations, they indeed need to be outside of that: as long as one pursues these occupations, “no political commitment, no adherence to a cause, is possible”.<sup>11</sup> Homer was the first one, she writes, who was able to look with equal eyes upon friend and foe, who decided “to sing the deeds of the Trojans no less than those of the Achaeans”.<sup>12</sup>

Therefore, as long as she wrote about the trial of Eichmann as a reporter or a historian, she had to remain impartial right from the very beginning (whether or not she felt love for the Jewish people), because that was pertaining to the calling, or the occupation pursued right then and there. In 1964 she gave a longer television interview to Günter Gaus, who asked her, among other things, about her correspondence with Scholem (known to the general public by then), and thus the issue of impartiality came inevitably up during the conversation. Here too, just like later in her essay about truth, Arendt brings up the example of Homer, but she immediately adds that Homer was followed by Herodotus, who spoke about “the great deeds of the Greeks *and* the barbarians”. Not only history, but all sciences come from this spirit, the spirit of impartiality, tells Arendt to Gaus, and if someone was “not capable” of this impartiality, because “he pretended to love his people so much”, and “paid flattering homage to them all the time”, then there was nothing to be done against that, but in her opinion “people like that” were not “patriots”. If someone set off to report or write history, like she had done in Jerusalem, then they must remain impartial.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Hannah Arendt, *Truth and Politics*, in Hannah Arendt, *Between Past and Future. Eight Exercises in Political Thought*, Penguin Books, 2006, 223-259, 223.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 255.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.* 258.

<sup>13</sup> Hannah Arendt, *What Remains? The Language Remains. A Conversation with Günter Gaus*, in Hannah Arendt, *Essays in Understanding, 1930-1954* (ed. by Jerome Kohn), Schocken Books, New York, 1994, 1-23, 20; see also: Hannah Arendt, *Truth and Politics*, in Hannah Arendt, *Between Past and Future. Eight Exercises in Political Thought, op. cit.*, 258.

However, by this impartiality – and this is in fact the main topic of her essay about truth –, she immediately excluded herself of politics. For, “looking upon politics from the perspective of truth”, writes Arendt, as she herself had done as a reporter or when writing the essay, means “to take one’s stand outside the political realm”. Homer’s impartiality or the impartiality of the poet is different from the impartiality of the person thinking about politics *inside* the political realm, and who is only expected to form a “qualified, representative opinion” about its issues.<sup>14</sup> These two types of impartiality must necessarily be different, because the impartiality of political thinking, as it is *political*, cannot be achieved *outside* politics: the impartiality of the representative opinion is always only possible inside the world of politics. The question Arendt asks therefore is how at all we can form an impartial judgment about the issues of politics, without placing ourselves outside its realm? Like all Arendt’s other questions formulated in this essay, this one is also deeply personal in nature: how could she as a reporter in Jerusalem place herself outside politics, when she in fact had always considered political action as a supreme form of human activity? What is the political position (if there is one at all) of the person *merely* reporting about reality, without aiming to change it? Is impartial judgment a political activity at all? And so on.

These are the questions (above all obviously the one about the impartiality of political thinking) to which Arendt, as she herself affirmed, believed to find the answers in the *Critique of Judgment*. As we know, in this third (and last) critique, Kant made a distinction between the so-called “determinant” and “reflective” judgments. In his view we practice the first one when there is a given universal principle, law or rule (or notion, as he says it elsewhere), and we only have to subsume the particular, the specific under the general rule (or notion): for instance, being aware of the canonical rules of beauty we have to decide about this or that object if it is beautiful or not. This is not a simple case either, for as Kant himself remarked in the *Critique of Pure Reason*, the application of the rule (i.e. the passing of judgment) cannot have a rule itself (because that would again require judgment in the application of the rule), therefore, in his perception, judgment “is a peculiar talent which can be practiced only, and cannot be taught”. “Deficiency in judgment”, he wrote, “is just what is ordinarily called stupidity, and for such a failing there is no remedy”.<sup>15</sup> If, on the other hand, there is no such rule given, the task becomes a different one; in this case the aim will be to create a general rule, principle or law (i.e. a notion) that can serve as a

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<sup>14</sup> Hannah Arendt, *Truth and Politics*, in Hannah Arendt, *Between Past and Future. Eight Exercises in Political Thought*, *op. cit.*, 255.

<sup>15</sup> Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason* (translated by Norman Kemp Smith), London, Macmillan & Co. Ltd., New York, St. Martin’s Press, 1963, 177-178.

general measuring scale for the judgment of the unusual, namely starting from the particular. This is the process that Kant called reflective judgment, and this was the idea that Arendt considered to be the most important political novelty of Kant's aesthetics.

Why this Kantian idea was so important for Arendt is relatively simple to understand. She was convinced (and she hardly missed any opportunity to tell it), that because of certain events in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, fundamental categories of our political and moral thinking lost their validity; therefore we are forced to replace them with others. Thus, the rules or measures we have applied before for the phenomena of our political or moral life are no longer effective. When in June 1972 she was asked to deliver lectures at the University of Aberdeen within the framework of *The Gifford Lectures* (these were the lectures from which *The Life of the Mind*, her last work remaining unfinished because of her death, grew out), she used that series to popularize what she commonly called "thinking without a banister".<sup>16</sup> In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, we have been left no other choice, opined Arendt, than to think without a banister. Thus, for instance, by the totalitarian regimes (both right- and left-wing) such new forms of government came into existence in Europe that had no antecedents in history, therefore our notions meant to describe forms of governments, primarily inherited from the ancient Greeks, were no longer suitable to name them. She herself tried to describe this new form of government in her book entitled *The Origins of Totalitarianism*. Similarly, she was convinced that the historic experience of the death camps endangered the validity of all our traditional moral categories, and therefore the issues of sin or personal responsibility had to be fundamentally reconsidered (among other things, this, *too*, was one of the topics of her book written about Eichmann's trial). Arendt's question was (and as she was analyzing the fate-turning events of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, she inevitably had to raise it for herself), how in fact we could think without a banister at all?

*The Society of Christian Ethics* dedicated its 14<sup>th</sup> annual general assembly on the 21<sup>st</sup> of January to the oeuvre of Hannah Arendt. Arendt, who was also present, reacting to the lectures delivered, briefly summarized how she saw this entire "business" of thinking. Thinking, she said, was one way to confront the crises of our age. Not because by thinking we could get rid of them, but because it prepared us to observe things with a fresh eye: to overcome our old prejudices and habits. After thinking one remains "empty" in a way, just like all the conversation partners of Socrates in Plato's dialogues: they remain without evidences. (In fact, the only real

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<sup>16</sup> Elisabeth Young-Bruehl, *Hannah Arendt. For Love of the World, op. cit.*, 453; see also: Mary McCarthy, Editor's Postface, in: *Hannah Arendt: The Life of the Mind* (ed. by Mary McCarthy), A Harvest Book, Harcourt, Inc., San Diego, New York, London, 1977, 1978, 241-254, 242 (second volume).

*outcome* of Socratic thinking is doubt; it is by no chance that Socrates himself declared he knew only one thing for sure, namely that he knew nothing.) That is why, tells Arendt to the audience, there are in fact no dangerous thoughts: "thinking itself is dangerous enough". On the other hand, she adds, this "enterprise" of thinking is the only one that corresponds to the "radicality" of the current crisis. Because once one remains empty, they are prepared to "judge" without having any previous collection of rules under which the special, particular cases could be subsumed, and one could say that "This is good," "This is bad," "This is right," "This is wrong," "This is beautiful," "This is ugly". And the reason why she "believes" so much in Kant's critique of judgment, she says, is not because she is interested in aesthetics, but because she is convinced that the way in which we determine what is good and what is bad is not essentially different from the way we decide what is beautiful and what is ugly. Consequently, by thinking we become prepared to face the phenomena itself, the issue itself, without prejudices, "head-on", and judge it impartially.<sup>17</sup>

Thus, aesthetic judgment, as this capacity had been described by Kant, is suitable for Arendt to be applied in the sphere of politics for two reasons. (Let us add, however, that Kant himself would not have restricted the functioning of reflective judgment to the judgment of beauty, either: he claimed this could also be helpful in finding our ways in the worlds of proprieties and lawfulness.) On the one hand, because in our political judgments, just like in the case of aesthetic ones, we must always deal with the unique, the one-time, the "real". The procedure described by Kant can be especially useful, opines Arendt, in judging those political or historical events that are without precedent, like totalitarianism, as in such cases we inevitably have to find the new concepts needed to describe them. These are therefore the situations when we must follow the practice of representative thinking and judgment. On the other hand, reflective judgment (more exactly getting ready to it by thinking) helps us to get rid of our *prejudices*. The latter, i.e. unprejudiced political thinking was so important for Arendt that she didn't only consider it imperative for herself at all times, but she also didn't even tolerate anyone thinking in a prejudiced way, or "ideologically" about political matters in her personal entourage.

In November 1972 the *Toronto Society for the Study of Social and Political Thought* organized a conference in honor of Hannah Arendt, in the presence of her friends (e.g. Hans Jonas and Mary McCarthy), members of her narrower and wider intellectual circles, professionals she had great regard for.<sup>18</sup> She was originally invited as a guest of honor, but instead of that she wished to participate actively in

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<sup>17</sup> Hannah Arendt, *Remarks*, in Hannah Arendt, *Thinking without a Banister. Essays in Understanding 1953-1975* (ed. by Jerome Kohn), Schocken Books, New York, 2018, 476-484, 481.

<sup>18</sup> Elisabeth Young-Bruehl, *Hannah Arendt. For Love of the World, op. cit.*, 450, 452.

the proceedings of the conference, and she lengthily reacted to some of the lectures delivered, and answered the questions she was asked. At one moment Hans Morgenthau fired the somewhat impolite question “What are you? Are you a conservative? Are you a liberal? What is your position within the contemporary possibilities?” (He could do it because they were good friends and former colleagues at the University of Chicago). “I don’t know,” answered Arendt laconically. She really did not know, she said, and she had never known. The left thought she was a conservative, and the conservatives thought she was left or a maverick, “God knows what”. She had to say, she added, that she could not care less, and she did not believe that the “real questions” of the century could get an illumination by these kinds of ideologies. And just to entertain the audience, she even told an anecdote to illustrate that: when she had come to America, she said, she wrote an article about Kafka, in her very “halting” English at the time, which the *Partisan Review* tried to “English” (*Englising*: this was Arendt’s all-time word for this activity). When she visited the editorial office to review the improved version, she was surprised to discover the word “progress” coming up frequently in the text. When she asked what that meant, as she had never used that word in the original article, the editor went to another colleague in another room, and she overheard him whispering in despair: “She doesn’t even believe in progress”.<sup>19</sup>

Although Arendt’s aversion for ideological thinking may seem to be deeply personal in nature, it undoubtedly had reasons related to matters of principle. If we want to discover the latter ones, we should browse her text entitled *Ideology and Terror*. (This is mostly known as the epilogue of *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, but in fact it was still missing from the 1951 American edition, and Arendt included it only in the second, 1958 edition.) The first versions of the text must have been produced some time during 1952, when Arendt delivered several lectures with the same title at various German universities, like Tübingen and Heidelberg.<sup>20</sup> The original, German language version of the text must have been completed based on these lectures. It appeared in the *Festschrift* compiled in honor of Jaspers in 1953, but the same year a somewhat longer version came out in English, too, in the July issue of the *Review of Politics*. (Arendt, for that matter, as she related to her husband in her letters at that time, had mixed feelings after the lectures: in Tübingen, for instance, she was charmed by the interest and intellectual susceptibility of his young students in their twenties, who, as she wrote, “only now are beginning to understand their

<sup>19</sup> Hannah Arendt, *Hannah Arendt on Hannah Arendt*, in Hannah Arendt, *Thinking without a Banister. Essays in Understanding 1953-1975*, op. cit., 443-475, 470.

<sup>20</sup> Elisabeth Young-Bruehl, *Hannah Arendt. For Love of the World*, op. cit., 283.



experiences”;<sup>21</sup> on the other hand, she was horrified by the “Sectarianism” of the university milieu of Heidelberg,<sup>22</sup> and, as she wrote to her husband, she was basically happy “to be getting out”.<sup>23</sup> Both of these letters are good evidence to show what high regard she had for intellectual openness.)

Arendt’s premise in her text is that one of the characteristics of totalitarian government, which makes it be without precedent, is the rule of ideology. Yet, one must not understand ideology (idea + logos) as the science of ideas (like the science of biota in the case of biology), but rather what the word ‘ideology’ directly suggests: the logic of an idea. The fundamental premise of ideological thinking is that there is a direct correspondence between the logic of an idea (i.e. the logical process unfolding from an idea) and the *real* or *actual* course of history (because *history* is in fact the subject matter of all ideologies, says Arendt). Thus, the course of history can be calculated in advance, simply based on the logic of the idea: empirical observations are no longer needed to learn the course of history. For instance, if we accept as a premise that “the history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles”, then history indeed becomes a series of struggles of classes for us, no matter what the empirical observation of history shows (which can, in the best case, only convince us that there *had indeed been* class struggles in history). And because history is a series of class struggles, therefore this must also be true for the future; in other words: new and new class enemies will be needed for the party and for the working class led by it, to get even with, or otherwise the whole course of history would obviously be stuck. This is how *terror* becomes the engine of history according to Arendt, and this is how in her interpretation ideology and terror become connected.<sup>24</sup>

Thus, according to Arendt, the bottom line is that ideologies in totalitarianisms are not simply systematic lies used by totalitarian leaders to deceive the masses, but tools by which thinking can be freed from the “burden of experience”. Hence, ideological thinking becomes emancipated from the reality that we perceive “with our five senses”, and “insists on a »truer« reality concealed behind all perceptible things”, requiring a sixth sense to make us aware of it: in totalitarian systems this

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<sup>21</sup> Lotte Kohler (ed.), *Within Four Walls. The Correspondence between Hannah Arendt and Heinrich Blücher, 1936-1968* (translated by Peter Constantine), Harcourt, Inc., New York, San Diego, London, 2000, 187.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.* 205.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.* 206.

<sup>24</sup> See Hannah Arendt, *Ideology and Terror: A Novel Form of Government*, in Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, A Harvest Book, Harcourt, Inc., San Diego, New York, London, 1994, 460-479.

sense was attempted to be developed in people by indoctrination.<sup>25</sup> Therefore, the ideal subject of totalitarian rule according to Arendt is “not the convinced Nazi or the convinced Communist”, but the people, for whom the distinction between “true and false”, “fact and fiction” no longer exist.<sup>26</sup> It is not incidental that when in the penultimate chapter (IV) of her essay on truth she gets back to these thoughts from 14 years earlier, it is exactly this “emancipating” character of ideology, its function to eliminate the dichotomy of true and falsehood she wishes to emphasize again: the “consistent and total” substitution of lies for factual truth occurring in totalitarian systems, she writes here, does not only result in “lies accepted as truth, and the truth be defamed as lies”, but also in “that the sense by which we take our bearings in the real world – and the category of truth vs. falsehood is among the mental means to this end – is being destroyed”.<sup>27</sup>

Hence, if Arendt personally rejected ideological labels and did not tolerate people thinking ideologically about political matters in her company, beyond personal aversion this was also the result of the fact that in her conviction nobody thinking ideologically for any reason could be able to see reality as it appeared in front of their eyes. (Ideologies, she said, “are never interested in the miracle of being”.<sup>28</sup>) In her letter dated the 21<sup>st</sup> of May 1966 sent to Jaspers from Chicago, she recounts that she had spent a “very pleasant” evening in the company of a young German man, a certain Klaus Wagenbach. He, she writes, is a member of the Gruppe 47, and “has written an excellent biography of Kafka”. Yet the “stereotypical” nature of his political judgment is incredible, she adds. “Still so young,” writes Arendt in plain irony and of course with regret at the same time, “and already totally incapable of learning anything”. He sees in everything only “more support for his prejudices”, and cannot absorb anything “concrete, factual” anymore.<sup>29</sup> (Although in her text entitled *Ideology and Terror* Arendt only speaks about totalitarian ideologies, she remarks that originally these had not been more totalitarian in nature than the other 19<sup>th</sup> century ideologies: they all had contained “totalitarian elements”, insofar as they all had claimed “total explanation”, and made thinking “independent” of all experience, from which they “cannot learn anything”.<sup>30</sup>)

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid. 470-471.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid. 474.

<sup>27</sup> Hannah Arendt, *Truth and Politics*, in Hannah Arendt, *Between Past and Future. Eight Exercises in Political Thought*, op. cit., 252-253.

<sup>28</sup> Hannah Arendt, *Ideology and Terror: A Novel Form of Government*, in Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, op. cit., 469.

<sup>29</sup> Lotte Kohler and Hans Saner (eds.), *Hannah Arendt and Karl Jaspers: Correspondence, 1926-1969*, op. cit., 639-640.

<sup>30</sup> Hannah Arendt, *Ideology and Terror: A Novel Form of Government*, in Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, op. cit., 470.

Turning back to the issue of political impartiality, it can be seen that Arendt had quite high demands from what she sometimes called representative thinking or opinion, the patterns of which she thought to have discovered in Kantian reflective judgment and the enlarged way of thinking: although representative thinking was supposed to be impartial, it was not allowed to break its relations to politics; in fact it had to remain entirely political itself. At the same time, it had to avoid the trap of ideological thinking, not only because thinking without a banister, which was the condition of impartial judgment, automatically questioned the validity of all preliminary principles or rules, but also because all types of ideological thinking covered reality, and retained us from seeing the things themselves, political events or phenomena in their concrete factuality.

Arendt saw that all these conditions are met by the operation of Kantian judgment. Kant described the practice of judgment, as it is well-known, in his famous paragraph 40 of the *Critique of Judgment*. If we wish to avoid the difficult philosophical language he used and his complicated phrase structures, we can summarize his thoughts expressed there in the form of the following statements: 1. although we are inclined to think it otherwise (and we usually speak like that), there are no such things as *sense* of “beauty”, “honesty” or “justice” etc.; 2. these are all the *results* of the functioning of judgment, and as such, they bear from the outset an element of “reflection”; 3. as they contain the element of reflection, in their functioning they automatically infer a higher faculty of cognition (i.e. they cannot rely on mere sensory impressions), which is called “common sense” (*sensus communis*); 4. although *common* in many European languages is a synonym for vulgar (just like the German word of *gemein*), there is nothing vulgar, or trivial in common sense according to Kant: on the contrary, it is what helps us in our orientation in the human world of beauty and justice; 5. thus, if it is common at all, it is only so insofar as it is the least to be expected from everyone “claiming the name of man” to have it.<sup>31</sup>

The *sensus communis* thus is a “common sense”, affirms Kant, which is functioning in a way so that when we carry out a judgment – at least in our thought – we try to compare it with the “collective reason” of all humanity, we try to take into account the judgments of “everyone else”. Obviously, we are not guided by the *actual* judgment of all the people, but rather try to consider, by some act of *imagination*, the *possible* judgments of others. Like this we succeed to avoid the mistake to consider all that is “subjective” in our judgments (e.g. our personal attractions, emotions) “objectively” true, otherwise judgment could not formulate “general rules” starting from the individual (in that case the judgment would not be anything else but *my*

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<sup>31</sup> Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment* (translated by J. H. Bernard), Hafner Publishing Co., New York, 1951, 135-136.

special opinion). In other words: when we pass a judgment, we need to put ourselves in thought in the place of everyone else, we need to place ourselves at the “standpoint of others”, because this is the only way our judgments can gain objective validity – and according to Kant this is exactly the maxim of the “enlarged” way of thinking.<sup>32</sup> (Arendt, for that matter, who liked to read with a pencil, underlined almost every sentence of this paragraph in her own, English language copy of Kant’s work, and wrote in English the following on the bottom of the page: “enlarged – everybody: only imagination and disregard of his own interests”.<sup>33</sup>)

Although it is completely clear that these are the Kantian thoughts that served as a source of inspiration for Arendt, she visibly handles them with relative freedom when forming her own ideas regarding representative thinking: she passes over certain parts of Kant’s train of thoughts, while reinterpreting others. Although in the texts written in the last decade of her life, in her university and other types of lectures, she often speaks about representative thinking, she gives the most complete and concise definition for it in her essay about truth and politics. Political thought, she writes here, is always “representative” in nature. This means that we form an “opinion” about a given political issue by trying to recall with the help of our imagination the standpoints of “those who are absent”, i.e. to *represent* them in our own minds. It is not that we perform some kind of “counting of noses” of those standing somewhere else, she adds, or that we blindly adopt the actual view of the majority, but we rather simply put ourselves in others’ positions: try to see the world with their eyes. We may be inclined to call this some kind of an intellectual *empathy*, but Arendt outspokenly rejects that: in her view it is not our *empathic* ability, but our imagination that becomes active, and by no means do we emotionally identify ourselves with the standpoints of others, or even try to be and feel like them, but we are rather “being and thinking” in our own identity, where actually we are not, in the place of some people that we are not – and we obviously cannot be. “The more people’s standpoints I have present in my mind,” she writes, “while I am pondering a given issue, and the better I can imagine how I would feel and think if I were in their place, the stronger will be my capacity for representative thinking, and the more valid my final conclusions, my opinion.”<sup>34</sup> (It can be seen that the Kantian demand for the universality of judgment, the maxim of thinking “for everyone else”

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid. 136-138.

<sup>33</sup> Hannah Arendt’s personal library is owned by the Bard College, the digitization of the stock is being carried out. The Critique of Judgment can be reached at the following link: <https://blogs.bard.edu/arendtcollection/kant-critique-of-judgement/>

<sup>34</sup> Hannah Arendt, *Truth and Politics*, in Hannah Arendt, *Between Past and Future. Eight Exercises in Political Thought*, op. cit., 237.

is relegated to the background in Arendt’s opinion, and is replaced by the demand for the mental representation of “the most people”: yet under such circumstances the “validity claim” of the judgment can never be extended beyond those, whose place the judging person has put himself into for his considerations either, as she herself admits that in her essay about crisis in culture.<sup>35</sup>)

Of course, Arendt also tells in her essay about the truth (just like almost everywhere, where she deals with these issues), that this capacity of enlarged mentality making “human judgment” possible was discovered by Kant in his *Critique of Judgment*; but she immediately adds (as always), that Kant himself did not recognize the “political and moral implications” of his own discovery. Furthermore, she affirms (in complete harmony with her pencil notes at the bottom of the page), that the only condition for this exertion of the “imagination” is disinterestedness, and “the liberation from one’s own private interests”.<sup>36</sup> (Which is remarkable, as Kant does not speak about private interest in his famous paragraph 40, but about “prejudices”, and the necessity of “deliverance” from them: in his view prejudices cannot be “enlightened”.<sup>37</sup> Arendt, however, here and in her later lectures about Kant’s political philosophy, mentions *self-interest*.<sup>38</sup>)

Let us add nevertheless, that Arendt (as opposed to Kant) did not have too many illusions about human inclination to representative thinking (or the human desire for “enlightenment”, in other words). As she wrote, she was aware that this procedure, the practice of impartial judgment was uncommon even among highly educated people who usually formed an opinion about political issues taking into account only their own interests, or the interests of the groups to which they belonged. But wherever, among any kind of people it occurred, she affirmed convincingly, it was always rooted in “lack of imagination” and the inability to pass reflective judgment, therefore it was nothing else but the stubborn pursuance of self-interest. The quality of a political opinion, she wrote, as of a judgment, always depended upon “the degree of its impartiality”. Those that refuse this practice of representative thinking, even if they are the most sophisticated people, also refuse to get rid of

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<sup>35</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*, op. cit., 194-222, 217.

<sup>36</sup> Hannah Arendt, *Truth and Politics*, in Hannah Arendt, *Between Past and Future. Eight Exercises in Political Thought*, op. cit., 237.

<sup>37</sup> Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, op. cit., 136-137.

<sup>38</sup> Hannah Arendt, *Lectures on Kant’s Political Philosophy*, in Hannah Arendt, *Lectures on Kant’s Political Philosophy* (ed. by Ronald Beiner), The University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1992, 7-77, 43.

self-interest in their judgments, and as such, prove “blind obstinacy”.<sup>39</sup> The ability of impartial judgment is not connected to erudition, and therefore it is not the exclusive possession of educated individuals, as it is the ability of the most common human sense. (That is why Kant affirms that it cannot be learned, and that its lack is stupidity, for which there is no remedy: even educated people can be stupid.)

Although Arendt always said about the enlarged way of thinking that it was Kant’s discovery, she has got a few texts leading us to the conclusion that she regarded it more as a rediscovery, rather than a proper discovery. In 1955 she promised Klaus Piper (introduced to her by Jaspers) to write a short volume about politics for Piper Verlag, like the one written by Jaspers in 1953, *Introduction into Philosophy*. (She mentions this to Jaspers for the first time on the 29<sup>th</sup> of December 1955<sup>40</sup>.) In the second half of the 1950s Arendt worked on the book continuously (asking for newer and newer postponements from Piper), but the book was never finished. Still, there remained certain fragments that the publisher eventually published, under the editorship of Ursula Ludz in 1993. In one of these fragments left behind Arendt affirms that what Kant called *sensus communis*, was nothing else but the *phronesis*, i.e. the mental ability of (political) insight, considered by Aristotle “the cardinal virtue” of the political man. For the Greeks this meant, writes Arendt, “the greatest possible overview of all the possible standpoints and viewpoints from which an issue can be seen and judged”.<sup>41</sup> (That the thought about the sameness of the *phronesis* and the enlarged way of thinking, as perplexing as it may seem at the first hearing, was not just a superficial idea for Arendt, is proven by the fact that she repeated it in her essay about the crisis of culture.<sup>42</sup> It is also true however, that she may have worked simultaneously on these two texts, as she also published the original version of the essay about the crisis in 1960, under the title of *Society and Culture*.<sup>43</sup>)

Even more interesting is how Arendt perceived the *actual* functioning of this enlarged way of thinking or thinking in the place of others. This is illustrated by an example in a university lecture about judgment, held on the 24<sup>th</sup> of March 1965, during the spring semester of the New School for Social Research, and published

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<sup>39</sup> Hannah Arendt, *Truth and Politics*, in Hannah Arendt, *Between Past and Future. Eight Exercises in Political Thought*, *op. cit.*, 237.

<sup>40</sup> Lotte Kohler and Hans Saner (eds.), *Hannah Arendt and Karl Jaspers: Correspondence, 1926-1969*, *op. cit.*, 271.

<sup>41</sup> Hannah Arendt, *Introduction into Politics*, in Hannah Arendt, *The Promise of Politics* (ed. by Jerome Kohn), Schocken Books, New York, 2005, 93-200, 168.

<sup>42</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*, *op. cit.*, 218.

<sup>43</sup> Elisabeth Young-Bruehl, *Hannah Arendt. For Love of the World*, *op. cit.*, 542.

after her death. (The lecture was part of a series entitled *Some Questions of Moral Philosophy*; although she kept similar lectures in 1966 at the University of Chicago, under the title of *Basic Moral Propositions*.) Let us suppose, she says in her lecture, that I look at a specific slum dwelling that I perceive within the general notion of poverty and misery, although the circumstances of dwelling do not by themselves carry directly the *notion* of poverty, neither that of misery. What I see are merely certain living conditions that *I myself* judge as miserable. Yet, I arrive by them at the notions of poverty and misery because I try to imagine for myself “how I would feel” if I had to live in that dwelling. In other words, I try to think in the place of others, the dwellers of the slum. The judgment that I create however, will by no means be the same as the inhabitants of the slums judge their own situation: the passing of time and hopelessness may have dulled in them the outrage for their living conditions. They may feel resigned, or sunken in apathy due to their hopelessness, i.e. they may have entirely different *feelings* about their situation than the ones I had. Therefore, empathy would not be extremely helpful in understanding their situation. Their situation could nonetheless serve as an example for me, and help me perceive the situation of slum-dwellers *in general*, or to understand *poverty* itself, so it can be a means – as Kant put it – “to find the general for the specific” insofar as the situation of the dwellers there is in some sense *exemplary*. In this case, it would serve for me as an “outstanding example” of the judgment of similar situations, an example that can help me understand poverty itself in its generality.<sup>44</sup>

There are examples, says Arendt at the last gathering of her lectures series about Kant’s political philosophy held in the autumn semester of 1970 at the New School, which are characterized by “exemplary validity”. In principle it may seem that when we make a judgment, we only have two alternatives: either we subordinate the particular to the general (i.e. to the notion), carrying out what Kant called a determinant judgment, or the other way round: starting from the many particular cases we find the general pertaining to the particulars. If we take the most common philosophical example, the example of the table, says Arendt, then we either subordinate this or that table to the concept of table (independently whether we perceive the concept of the table as the *ideal-typical* table according to Plato’s ideas or a *schematic* table, according to Kant’s schemes), or we set off from the images of the many different tables we had come across over time, strip them of their secondary qualities, and what remains, is the “generally accepted table”, the *abstract* table,

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<sup>44</sup> Hannah Arendt, *Some Questions of Moral Philosophy*, in Hannah Arendt, *Responsibility and Judgment* (ed. by Jerome Kohn), Schocken Books, New York, 2003, 49-146, 140-141.

which will include all the minimum qualities common to all of them.<sup>45</sup> The latter procedure, albeit it indeed sets off from the particular, the peculiar, and reaches the general, it carries the disadvantage of stripping the particular tables of their specific uniqueness. The only way for us to reach the general is to disregard everything that makes the specific tables unique. And yet in politics (just like in aesthetics), we must always deal with the unique, the one-timed, because all the political events are one-timed, in the sense that they had never occurred before. In political thinking we can reach nowhere if we disregard the uniqueness and one-timedness of the occurring events.

However, theoretically there is also a third alternative, and this is the one that offers the solution for Arendt in the above dilemma: the case of model-like or exemplary validity. We can say, affirms Arendt, that a specific, well-defined table is the “best possible table”, and we can consider it to be an exemplary table, which shows “how tables actually should be”. (That is also indicated by the origin of the word, too, she says, as the English word *example* is coming from the Latin *eximere*, which means to single out something special.) This example is special and it remains so: by its particularity and uniqueness it represents something general that could not be defined without it.<sup>46</sup> Therefore, we can judge something, draws the conclusion Arendt, without destroying what makes it special, and we can still reach the general from the particular. The impartial judgment of a special historical event (totalitarianism, for example) can result in general concepts, a special historical example can help us understand something in its generality, and, according to her, this is exactly the task of political thinking or, in other words, of the enlarged way of thinking, or representative thinking. At another one of her seminars, also in the autumn of 1970 at the New School, held about imagination, she even affirms that “most concepts” in our political and historical thinking are restricted in nature: “they have their origin in some particular historical incident, and we then proceed to make it »exemplary« – to see in the particular what is valid for more than one case”.<sup>47</sup> (Such concepts are in her view Caesarism and Bonapartism for instance, none of which would make too much sense without the personalities of Caesar and Napoleon – i.e. the particular, the unique.)<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> Hannah Arendt, *Lectures on Kant's Political Philosophy*, in Hannah Arendt, *Lectures on Kant's Political Philosophy*, *op. cit.*, 76-77; see also: Hannah Arendt, *Some Questions of Moral Philosophy*, in: Hannah Arendt, *Responsibility and Judgment*, *op. cit.*, 143-144.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.* 77.

<sup>47</sup> Hannah Arendt, *Imagination*, in Hannah Arendt, *Lectures on Kant's Political Philosophy*, *op. cit.*, 79-85, 85.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.* 84; see also Hannah Arendt, *Some Questions of Moral Philosophy*, in Hannah Arendt, *Responsibility and Judgment*, *op. cit.*, 144.



If we observe Arendt’s thoughts in this form, following their *genesis*, we can easily reach to the conclusion, after all this, that although she had been preoccupied with the issue of the method of political and historical thinking before, she became more seriously interested in it after the publication of the Eichmann volume. The answer to the question how it could be effective to think about politics in an age without banisters to guide us, she believed to have found in the *Critique of Judgment*, more precisely in the thoughts she had already mentioned in her letter to Jaspers in 1957: the praise of the common sense, and the description of the enlarged way of thinking. It may seem that Jaspers was right after all: as long as she had not found Kant, one could indeed affirm that Arendt’s thinking had been lacking a method. Still, what may have happened was simply that Arendt found enforcement, or a foundation in Kant’s third critique for the way she had always thought about political matters. During the Second World War Arendt and Jaspers lost contact for quite some time: they did not even know about each other whether they had survived at all. They established contact again in 1945, and Jaspers asked Arendt to write a few words about herself: she was obviously a literary presence in American public life, he wrote, but who was her husband, in what kind of circumstances was she living, what was her personal life like at all, for he did not even know what her “last name” was.<sup>49</sup> In spite of that, Arendt felt it was necessary to better describe her literary existence, or her existence as a thinker, and in connection to that she felt it most important to remark that thanks to her husband she had learned to “think politically and see historically”.<sup>50</sup> Writing that in a moment when she had not yet published any of her more significant political or historical works.

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<sup>49</sup> Lotte Kohler and Hans Saner (eds.): Hannah Arendt and Karl Jaspers: Correspondence, 1926-1969, op. cit., 25.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid. 31.

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