

Between Socrates and Kant. Thinking and *sensus communis* in Arendt's conception of the banality of evil

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Abstract: The aim of this paper is to show how Hannah Arendt develops her concept of the banality of evil through a phenomenological appropriation of Kant's theory of judgment and of the principle of *sensus communis* in particular. Even though Arendt initially defined the banality of evil as a form of thoughtlessness grounded upon her understanding of thinking as an inner dialogue with one's 'other' self, I argue that she develops the concept much more extensively in relation to Kant's doctrine of reflective judgment and the possibility of a *sensus communis* as a pre-conceptual model of unforced consensus for the public space. I further argue that her reading of Kant is carried out together with both an existential-ontological re-appraisal of appearances and its relation to the transcendental imagination. Through the emphasis on the *sensus communis*, the banality of evil can then be re-defined as a refusal of the same.

Keywords: Banality of evil; Socrates; Kant; Thoughtlessness; Sensus Communis.

1. *Introduction. Arendt and Kant*

The first time that Hannah Arendt used the term 'banality of evil' was at the conclusion of *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, her report on the trial of the infamous Adolf Eichmann. Hearing his empty and cliché-filled talk, an incredulous Arendt described this lesson in human wickedness as "the fearsome, word-and-thought-defying *banality of evil*" (Arendt 1992a: 252). This outraged many of her contemporaries. What Arendt may have meant, about which she herself was not clear, was immediately misunderstood and remained so long after the initial controversy had passed. In response to the outrage Arendt quipped, "There is nothing so entertaining as the discussion of a book nobody has read" (Arendt 2003: 17). Although much more has been written on the idea since then, a real understanding of what she meant seems as far off as ever.¹

¹ See for instance Irving Horowitz's 2010 response to Bernard Wasserstein's "Blame the Victim: Hannah Arendt among the Nazis" (<http://www.firstthings.com/article/2010/02/assaulting-arendt>). And more recently, the exchange between Seyla Benhabib and Richard Wolin. (<http://opinionator>).

In the years following *Eichmann* the question of the banality of evil was never far from Arendt's mind, but it was not until the 1971 publication of *The Life of the Mind* that she cited it as the motivation for her inquiry into the nature of the three autonomous mental activities – thinking, willing, and judging. “Behind that phrase”, she wrote, “I held no thesis or doctrine, although I was dimly aware of the fact that it went counter to our tradition of thought [...] about the phenomenon of evil” (Arendt 1971: 3). What she was only dimly aware of at the time was its relation both to thinking *and* judgment, which required a certain existential-phenomenological elucidation on her part. I say “certain” to refer to the influence of Heidegger's existential phenomenology, whose question, ‘what is called thinking?’, she quotes at the beginning of *The Life of the Mind* in order to affirm thinking's autonomy from science and from instrumental reason. However, what drew Arendt to phenomenology was not the method but the spirit, with its emphasis on the *phenomenon* as that which shows itself as prior to the distinction between being and appearance, and which her two teachers, Heidegger and Karl Jaspers, would in different ways seek to displace through their use of the term “existence”. The clarification of the phenomenon ‘staring her in the face’ was of an evil that was banal because of its *thoughtlessness* rather than because Eichmann harbored some malicious intent or deeply held belief (*ibid.*: 4). Yet her conviction that Eichmann did not think, that he harbored no deep commitment to Nazi ideology, and that he had carried out the Final Solution “like a new set of rules” that kept him from *having* to think seems only a partial and insufficient explanation. How could such an ordinary man have committed such monstrous crimes against a whole people? Arendt's answer was provocative: Eichmann had kept reality, the claim that others make on our existence, as far as possible from himself. This is a matter of *judgment*, which unlike thinking always deals with particulars and with the world of appearances rather than withdrawing from them (*ibid.*: 213). The precise role that judgment plays in the conception of the banality of evil did not come to light until a decade later when Arendt explicitly addressed Kant's *Critique of Judgment*.

My essay attempts to shed further light on the nature of the banality of evil by reconsidering her appropriation of Kant's theory of judgment, particularly aesthetic judgment. By all accounts her posthumously published *Lectures on Kant's Political Philosophy* was to form the basis for the third part of the *Life of the Mind* (Beiner 1992: 89ff.). Arendt's reliance on Kant's theory of judgment has long been recognized, however its importance for understanding the ba-

nality of evil has been relatively neglected in favor of other concerns.² My claim is that it is essential, particularly Kant's idea that all judgments of taste rest on the principle of a *sensus communis* – our demand for universal agreement concerning our liking for what we find beautiful. Her treatment of the role of judgment shows that 'thoughtlessness' alone cannot fully describe Eichmann's evil. Confined to those terms, the banality of evil would amount to a perversion of conscience in which blind submission to Hitler's will had displaced Kant's free submission to moral law. The authority of the will of the Führer would then foreclose any inner dialogue with one's *other* self. But not only did Eichmann not think, he did not judge. What does that mean precisely? It signifies a refusal to participate in or even to admit the existence of the shared world of appearances in which both individuals and things show themselves in the plural. The inner relation between these two aspects is essential to understanding Arendt's idea.

The first part of the essay will attempt to show the significance of the idea of *thoughtlessness* as a definition of the banality of evil and explain why a move to the question of judgment was necessary. This leads to the second part concerning the central role of Kant's principle of *sensus communis* in which I argue that her interpretation of Kant's principle of aesthetic judgment is combined with a further elaboration of Heidegger's notion of our public being-in-the-world or *Mitsein*. Arendt's phenomenological reading of Kant can be clearly seen in the way that she affirms the full positivity of appearances. The final part then deals with the transcendental imagination's formative role in constituting our shared world of appearances; this then leads to a fuller conception of the banality of evil as a "lack of imagination" which comes to mean a *refusal* to take up the position of others and a denial of the world of appearances that is co-constituted with others.

2. *Thinking as ethos/thoughtless evil*

Arendt defines the banality of evil in *The Life of the Mind* in terms of two conceptual pairs, the profound and the shallow, stupidity and thoughtlessness: "I was struck by a manifest shallowness in the doer that made it impossible to trace the uncontestable evil of his deeds to any deeper motives". This, she adds, is "not stupidity but *thoughtlessness*" (Arendt 1971: 4). Later on she ex-

² Much of the discussion has dealt with Arendt's appropriation of Kant in terms of its merits or liabilities as a *theory* of political judgment. This, as Richard Bernstein and Margart Canovan have pointed out, mistakenly assumes that Arendt's aim was to construct such a theory. See Margaret Canovan (1992), and Richard Bernstein (2008).

plains the difference more in detail: “absence of thought is not stupidity; it can be found in highly intelligent people, and a wicked heart is not the cause; rather it is the other way around, that wickedness may be caused by absence of thought” (*ibid.*: 13). Her view here is evident: evil actions are not caused by an *intention* to do evil but rather as a *result* of the absence of thinking. What then constitutes thinking? Her appeal is to Kant’s distinction between Reason (*Vernunft*) and Understanding (*Verstand*). Whereas the latter deals with cognition, the former strives to think the unconditional that exceeds the conditions of knowledge. Arendt finds in Kant’s idea of reason a direct echo of the older and more original idea of Socratic self-examination: “the inability to think is not the “prerogative” of the many who lack brain power but the ever-present possibility for everybody [...] to shun that intercourse with oneself whose possibility and importance Socrates first discovered” (Arendt 2003: 187).

What is evident in these passages is first, that Arendt adopts a very specific and indeed non-instrumental idea of thinking as a need, or what Kant called the desire of Reason, and that shallowness follows from a refusal to engage in a form of Socratic self-reflection – he who consulted his inner *daimon* as a guard against political engagement. This identification of Kantian and Socratic conceptions forms a guiding thread throughout her later work. *Vis-à-vis* Eichmann, this does not mean he had no commitment to Nazism but that his duty to the Führer dictated his commitments. The substitution of an authority objectified in the will of the Führer for his own conscience *was* his thoughtlessness. Thus did Arendt describe Eichmann as a man who was neither “Iago nor Macbeth, and nothing would have been farther from his mind that to determine with Richard III ‘to prove a villain’” (Arendt 1992a: 287).

Arendt thus understands thoughtlessness as the contrary of a Socratic conception of the dialogical character of thinking, which means conversely, that the activity of thinking serves as a sufficient condition for not committing evil acts.³ This places the emphasis on the ethical rather than the cognitive. This becomes clear when she characterizes Socrates as the purest example of a thinker because he was the one for whom the meaning of the activity of thinking “lay in the activity itself”. What precisely did Socrates exemplify? That thinking had no other goal than self-examination, and that without this interruption of our immersion in the common-sense world of appearances, one could never be fully alive, if to *live* essentially involves a search for meaning (Arendt 1971: 178). This suggests that the force of thinking is negative. It withdraws from the world, it seeks to go beyond “the world’s sheer thereness” in or-

³ Regarding thinking Arendt asks, “could this activity be of such a nature that it “conditions” men against evil-doing?” (Arendt 2003: 160).

der to discover the meaning of its own autonomous activity (*ibid.*: 78). Thought is a dialogue that introduces a difference between the “I myself” of the ego and another who is also “with” me such that the self becomes a “two-in-one” – two selves, oneself and the friend, the *philo*, that always accompanies me when I am alone with my thoughts. The co-presence of the interlocutors determines the nature of the dialogue. Are we friends or enemies? Am I in harmony with my conscience or does it stand against me? In the latter case the dialogue ends since to be alone and at constant war with oneself as enemy would be unbearable. “The dialogue of thought can be carried out only among friends” (*ibid.*: 189).

Three characteristics are important here. The first is that the separation of thinking from appearance is not a metaphysical distinction nor does it assume any ontological commitment to a dualism of Being and Appearance. Thinking simply introduces a distance between its own activity and appearances, and in that way it serves as an aid to judgment: to place particular appearances at a distance frees us from common opinion so that we can judge anew.⁴ Secondly, thinking as the dialogue of the two-in-one does not rest on an authority, either of God or reason, which *prescribes* what one must do; the only prescriptive is to be in harmony with oneself. Both points are consistent with Arendt’s conviction that metaphysics is at an end, but noteworthy here is how she places both Socrates and Kant in the same position *outside* of metaphysics.⁵

The first characteristic suggests that thought is reflective; it deals with “invisibles”, generalities that are far removed from what is present to the senses. Still, this turning away from appearances is in fact a form of self-appearance that harbors an imperative: “Be as you wish to appear”. This Socratic motto is interpreted by Arendt to mean, “Appear to yourself as you wish to appear to others” (Arendt 1963: 101). This implies that for the thinking individual, self-appearance and the activity of thinking are coterminous. Self-reflection is self-appearing – the coincidence of being and appearance. If on the other hand one appears to *others* differently from appearance-to-*oneself*, the resulting disharmony institutes a separation of the inner and the outer, the private from the public.

The third characteristic has to do with the limits of thinking. In seeking to go beyond the world as knowable or known, thought literally encounters its own limit. In an earlier writing entitled “What is Existential Philosophy?” Arendt

⁴ “The whole history of philosophy [...] is shot through with an intramural warfare between man’s common sense [...] and man’s faculty of thought and need of reason, which determine him to remove himself for considerable periods from it” (Arendt 1971: 81).

⁵ See Dana Villa (1992) for a strong argument for the Nietzschean aspects of Arendt’s theory of political action.

affirms Jaspers' view that my particular existence (*Dasein*) can be divided into two spheres, the immanent, and the transcendent that "resists all thought" (Jaspers 1971: 68). Yet that which is encountered in transcendence is not the pure Beyond but the Real, the sheer "that-it-is" that always exceeds the immanent, all-encompassing world of consciousness. That Jaspers equates *Existenz* with the Real seems strange unless one recognizes that the Real can only be encountered where consciousness is bereft of its object. The Real is neither totalizable nor intelligible; it is experienced rather as a leap out of or moving-away-from existence: it *is* "in the imminence of departing from existence (*ibid.*: 71). What I cannot know is the pure "That-it-is" of *Existenz*, which is encountered only in a *Grenzsituation*, a limit-situation that comes to me from the world but never as something I can anticipate.⁶ Arendt generalizes Jaspers' insight regarding *Existenz* as a *Grenzsituation*, identifying it as the very condition of life itself, which as "limited by birth and death, is a boundary affair" (Arendt 1971: 192).

If these three characteristics define thinking as a vocation, how then do they illuminate Arendt's interpretation of totalitarianism and the banality of evil? They too are boundary situations, unprecedented, and can only be understood by recourse to a Socratic *ethos*. "Totalitarian government is unprecedented because it defies comparison. It has exploded the very alternative on which definitions of the nature of government have relied since the beginning of Western political thought" (Arendt 1994: 309, 339). Totalitarianism possesses the "weight of reality" that confounds thought, and in order to comprehend it, thought must carry on an inner dialogue in order to loosen the hold of prevailing *doxa* for the sake of preparing oneself for the point where thought necessarily fails. This is precisely where the power of reflective judgment comes into play, for only a judgment that operates without a rule can grasp the singular character of the unprecedented.

Contrast this with totalitarian ideology for a moment and the aims of Arendt's thought-trains become clearer. In so far as totalitarianism obeys the strict logic of the idea that a law of Race or History is running through the entire human species, this ideology knows no limits. Everything belongs strictly to the immanence of a single Idea that is present in each and every event, pre-determining the course of history which in turn sanctions every form of terror that helps to 'fabricate' the reality of that which has already been decreed as absolute truth – in such circumstances Eichmann could affirm Hitler's imperative, "Thinking exists only in the giving or in the execution of an order" (*ibid.*: 294). Thoughtlessness thus signifies more than just the refusal of an in-

⁶ "I lose transcendence when I anticipate it and think I have it in some already intelligible world" (Jaspers 1971: 75).

ner dialogue with oneself; it is equally the refusal to place oneself at the limits of intelligibility.

Still, this conception of the banality of evil is insufficient because the problem is not only moral but also political. The absence of thinking in Eichmann allowed him to carry out administrative mass murder against a whole people who were ultimately made to *disappear* from the world. And since Arendt understands the world not simply the totality of beings but as a *shared world* in which appearances are co-constituted by the co-appearance of others who also judge, the relation of the banality of evil to the constitution of appearances has to be illuminated. As previously suggested, what is needed is an articulation of the passage from thinking to judgment, which takes place in her engagement with Kant's third *Critique*.

A passage in which Arendt comments on the collapse of moral standards with Hitler's rise to power will serve as a convenient starting point for a discussion of Arendt's relation to Kant: "the few [Germans] who managed not to be sucked into the whirlwind were by no means the "moralists", people who had always upheld rules of right conduct, but on the contrary very often those who had been convinced [...] of the objective nonvalidity of these standards per se" (Arendt 2003: 139). This passage is significant because it suggests that it was not the *lack* of moral standards that facilitated Hitler's rise but rather the blind adherence to *existing* moral standards, which could be easily exchanged for another set. In short, what Germans at the time feared the most was *not to be in possession* of any moral standards. Hence, she continues, we find ourselves today in the position of Kant, who "was outraged that the question of beauty should be decided arbitrarily, without possibility of dispute and mutual agreement [...] we find ourselves today in exactly the same position when it comes to discussions of moral issues" (139).

Quite an extraordinary comparison! Kant's refusal to believe that judgments of taste were arbitrary corresponds to our situation as witnesses of totalitarianism? In one very important sense, yes: the rule of judgment is lacking. Totalitarianism is neither tyranny nor despotism, nor does it fit into any other political category (139).

To be in the position of Kant – this is how Arendt describes our dilemma, and the fact that she generalizes this position implies that the conditions that gave birth to totalitarianism and modernity are the same. What does this mean exactly? In his moral philosophy, Kant had already wrestled with the problem of how the categorical imperative applies to the particular case.⁷ In cases where

⁷ In these cases reason can only be guided by analogy since no particular example can ever serve as a representation of the moral law (see Kant 2002: 89-94, "On the Typic of Pure Practical Reason").

no fixed rules are present, one must judge reflectively, from the particular to a *possible* universal. This is our modern situation. Totalitarianism and its forms of evil have an unprecedented character that we are as yet unable to understand it because we lack the rule of judgment. Kant's doctrine of aesthetic judgment allowed her to address this dilemma.

Briefly, Kant posed the problem as to whether judgment has its own a priori principle, which was made all the more difficult because it had to be reflective: In contrast to logical judgments that guarantee the lawfulness of the objects of nature through the a priori application of concepts, reflective judgments start from the particular and proceed by the imagination's schematizing power towards a purely subjective idea of the harmony of the diversity of nature's empirical forms (Kant 1987: 20). Kant's "perplexity about a principle" is resolved through his analysis of aesthetic judgments that provide no rule for the cognition of objects but nonetheless directly relate our powers of cognition to the feelings of pleasure and pain (*ibid.*: 6). The principle in question is *purposiveness* without purpose (*Zweckmäßigkeit ohne Zweck*) which is subjectively universal in so far as it is the condition for the feeling of pleasure that accompanies aesthetic judgments, but which is also universally communicable, although in a quite different manner from the communication of objects of cognition. The latter is an objectively valid form of communication, guaranteed by the concepts of the understanding that can be predicated of any possible empirical object. Conversely, the communicability of aesthetic judgments relies on the a priori possibility of a *sensus communis* that is not a predicate since it says nothing *of* the object; it is however universally communicable as a sense (*Sinn*), i.e. a feeling of the pleasure in the beautiful that is communicable without the mediation of a concept. *Sensus communis* is "a power to judge that in reflecting takes account (a priori), in our thought, of everyone else's way of presenting [something]". Reflection is accomplished by means of the imagination in which "we compare our (aesthetic) judgment with the possible judgments of others [...] placing ourselves in the position of everyone else" (Kant 1987: 160).

Several points are relevant here. First, as a principle of reflective judgment, *sensus communis* prescribes no law that would govern the universality of the agreement. It is free, i.e. non-coercive and indeterminate in so far as it refers an unknown, indeed merely possible rule. Kant's exact phrase runs, "we solicit everyone else's assent (*Man wirbt um jedes anderen Bestimmung*)" (Kant 1987: 86). Second, Kant distinguishes between taste as a *sensus communis aestheticus* and common understanding as *sensus communis logicus*, the former which is proper our common *sense*, a communicable feeling, as opposed to the latter's law-governed nature (*ibid.*: 162). Does this mean that our common sense

is only a transcendental condition of our subjectivity? Here is where Arendt takes some liberties with Kant. For her, judgments of taste are addressed to phenomena as they show themselves. Her phenomenological extensionism goes beyond Kant's identification of the beautiful as a purely formal element that is confined to the object's presentation. In so doing, Arendt turns common sense into a principle for man's natural inclination towards sociability (*Geselligkeit*), which is an anthropological principle, hence empirical.⁸ However this confusion of the transcendental and the empirical, so often the subject of criticism, does not necessarily make Arendt guilty of a methodological oversight. In isolation, a transcendental basis for aesthetic judgment is indeed possible, however Arendt's point is that it already anticipates the humanity's political existence: "Men" she writes, "earthbound creatures, living in communities, endowed with common sense" (Arendt 1992b: 27). Kant also recognized that common sense is necessary for common understanding, but at least in the Third *Critique* he insisted on their separation in order to strictly identify the transcendental level. Lastly, Kant distinguishes purposiveness from having a purpose. Beautiful things are *zweckmäßig* in having no manifest *Zweck* that determines their destination; there is only the feeling of the harmonious play of our faculties. This provides Arendt with the means of evading purely instrumentalist or rational-purposive conceptions of political consensus: Man's natural vocation is for "general communicability" which forms the basis for all other forms of rational communication.

Before proceeding further with Arendt's interpretation of Kant's *sensus communis*, I must open a parenthesis to explain a second, methodological sense of what Arendt means when she says that we are in the position of Kant.

Regarding the concept of the banality of evil she writes, "To [...] use Kantian language, after having been struck by a phenomenon – the *quaestio facti* – which willy-nilly "put me in possession of a concept", I could not help raising the *quaestio juris* and asked myself, "with what right did I possess and use it".⁹ Her appeal to Kant's method of transcendental deduction should not be taken merely as an occasional remark but with the utmost importance. It shows that she understands the banality of evil as an *a priori* concept whose application to experience must be legitimated.

But what is her understanding of Kant's method? I pose this question because one finds no deduction in any of Arendt's work comparable to what is present in Kant's *Critiques*. However, the lack of any parallel does not mean

⁸ "Only in society is the beautiful of empirical interest" (Kant 1987: 163).

⁹ Arendt (2003: 161). There are at least three places where she repeats the same comment. In the Introduction to the *Life of the Mind* (1971), here in "Thinking and Moral Considerations", and in her *Lectures on Kant's Political Philosophy* (1992b).

that she ignored the *spirit* of the deduction. What was Kant's transcendental deduction after all? She interprets it as a modern form of the Socratic *ethos*: in an age when metaphysics has lost its binding force, thought has no recourse to anything other than the maxim of thinking for oneself. Just as with Socratic self-examination, transcendental deduction frees one from the doctrines and concepts one received from others (Arendt 1992b: 42).

If it is therefore the *gesture* of transcendental deduction that matters to Arendt, what is at stake in a deduction of the banality of evil? There are several clues one can follow. First, she was convinced that the "unmastered" legacy of totalitarianism had reappeared with the case of Eichmann, who tried to evade all responsibility for his actions by presenting himself as a mere functionary in the Nazi bureaucratic machine of administrative mass murder, a "nobody" that could not be judged as a *person* capable of rational autonomy. The understanding of the *fact* of Eichmann's self-presentation as a nobody and his evasion of personal responsibility had to be gained through the legitimation of the concept of the banality of evil as a condition of possibility for his pseudo-justification. Such an understanding would not only show that this evasion of responsibility was an existential possibility, it would also reveal the fundamental ways in which Eichmann *could* be held responsible after all. Was Eichmann truly a bureaucratic nobody, or was he person after all who could be held responsible for his actions? Once again, everything depends on Arendt's idea of the *ethos* of thinking: a person is formed through the act of thinking the two-in-one, and if thinking is absent as it was in Eichmann, then one must conclude that Eichmann was not a person: "in rootless evil there is no person left" (Arendt 2003: 95). Eichmann was evil, but not an evil person because he was no longer a person; and he was not a person because persons are only constituted through thoughtfulness, and only persons can be forgiven; therefore Eichmann cannot be forgiven. What reasoning! Her point seems to be that one can in fact choose not to be a person, but that is a *choice* for which one can be held responsible (Arendt 1992a: 279).

The second clue to her interpretation of Kant's method relates to the responsibility of thinking. Arendt constantly mentions Socrates and Kant in the same breath. What philosophical spirit did these two have in common? Arendt distinguishes Plato's Socratic dialogues from their predecessors by the *logon didonai*, which she translates as "to render an account" of an opinion, the demand to explain how and why one came to hold that opinion. Likewise, Kant's critical philosophy, by interrogating the very possibility of metaphysics, demands that all received doctrines and concepts that claim universality be subject to the same question, 'by what right does one possess and use a concept?' (Arendt 1992b: 42ff.)

Two points about Arendt's comparison are worthy of mention. The first is that despite her identification of Socrates as the "purest thinker of the West" (Arendt 1971: 174), the one who withdraws from the *agora* in order to consult his personal *daimon*, and of Kant as the first philosopher of our most political of all faculties, i.e. judgment, the two are in fact the same in their commitment to the public realm. Socrates "always remained a man among men" (*ibid.*: 167), and for Kant the very art of critical thinking depends upon its public use.¹⁰ Thus does Kant link the development of the ability to judge impartially with the pursuit of an "enlarged mentality" in which one places oneself in the position of others (Arendt 1992b: 42). This helps to clarify the previous point about the way in which the meaning of the transcendental deduction takes precedence over the method: the willingness to take responsibility for what one thinks requires viewing one's own judgments from the standpoint of others, but this standpoint is not simply that of the existing public but of an ideal public, identified by Kant as the position of the "world citizen" or spectator, the *Weltbetrachter*, a possible rather than an actual collective.

Bringing this parenthesis to a close and relating it to the question of aesthetic judgment, Arendt finds the strongest link between Kant's critical thinking and sociability in his idea of a *sensus communis* in the following way: the transcendental deduction and the question, 'by what right?' lies in its performative character – to carry out the deduction is to take responsibility for one's thinking, which is accomplished by placing oneself in the position of others in order to see one's own thought afresh and from every side. Thinking, which necessitates a withdrawal from the world of opinion, prepares the way for judgment because it *is* destructive. One could say without much exaggeration that the deduction is a political act, not because it judges directly on matters of justice or value, but because it interrogates all received and prevailing values according to a possible *sensus communis*.

To be in the position of Kant – we can now summarize what this means. The deduction of the banality of evil is needed not only in order to legitimate it a priori application to experience, it is also an essential act of thinking responsibly. In the example of Socrates, one is responsible to one's *daimon*, that "guardian spirit" who in demanding self-consistency acts as a guide throughout one's life. In Kant, the question "by what right does one possess and use this concept?" is addressed to the public before whom is answerable for what one thinks, which in turn demands impartiality and consistency. Although Arendt is not always

¹⁰ See Arendt (1992b: 37): "What Socrates actually did was to make *public*, in discourse, the thinking process – that silent discourse within me, between me and myself, he *performed* in the marketplace [...]".

careful in her explanations, this does not simply involve the collecting and combining of various opinions in an empirical manner. It also requires a transcendental act of imagination, which presentifies absence by imagining the *possible* judgments of others. Arendt is wholly in line with Kant, for whom the return to the world of appearances is made possible by the “gift of judgment”. Judgment depends on a “general communicability” – a *sensus communis* – which as a non-conceptual *sense* grounds our conceptually based “common human understanding” (*der gemeine Menschenverstand*). Drawing on Kant’s notion of an “enlarged mentality” (*erweiterte Denkungsart*), judgment in its public capacity “overrides the private subjective conditions of his judgment” and “reflects on his own judgment from a *universal standpoint* (which he can determine only by transferring himself to the standpoint of others)” (Kant 1987: 161).

Thinking’s withdrawal from the self’s immersion in the world of external appearances makes possible a different form of appearing – self appearance – which takes place as a dialogue, whereas the return to the world of appearances “cuts short the thinking process”. However, the two-in-one does not disappear since the self now appears to others in the plural, and the mode of communication proper to this public co-appearing is a demand for universal agreement concerning the feeling of pleasure, the *free liking* of that which appears, which in turn involves an act of imagination through which one places oneself in the position of others, whose eventual goal will be the cultivation of a finer sociability that is proper to humanity, i.e. an “enlarged mentality”. “Morality means being fit to be seen” and thoughts that remain private can be considered neither right nor true (Arendt 1992b: 49).

The clarification of the connection between thinking and judgment also clarifies the several senses of thoughtlessness. The banality of evil signifies not only the avoidance of an inner dialogue and a refusal to encounter thought’s limits, it is equally an evasion of the responsibility to think for oneself and in the place of others, whereas Arendt’s endeavor to *understand* that which is without precedent in our history is the highest form of responsibility: it exposes thinking to a *Grenzsituation* in which it freely acknowledges its own failure not as a gesture of renunciation, but in order to begin again: “thinking must always begin afresh” (Arendt 1971: 178). Thus between Socrates, Kant and Jaspers there is a continuity and a concern for the same thing, i.e. for *natality*, for thinking to begin again so as to prepare itself for what appears, which is always already plural and public, and without recourse to the authority of present or past opinions. Arendt’s political interpretation of *sensus communis* must now be addressed.

3. *Sensus communis and primacy of appearances*

Arendt's appropriation of Kant's theory of judgment has been extensively criticized for allegedly violating Kant's transcendental method by confusing *sensus communis* as an *a priori* principle with the empirical idea of a *common understanding* (Dostal 1992; Norris 1996; Wiedefeld 2013). Others including Habermas have criticized her theory of political judgment for failing to give enough emphasis to rational-purposive communication and to the idea that "common convictions" form the basis of our political institutions. (Habermas 1977). But common sense is not the same as common conviction. The latter refers to a set of beliefs whereas the former deals with things as they appear. And whether or not Arendt "takes undue liberties with Kant's texts" I agree with Ronald Beiner that such criticisms fail to appreciate Arendt's aim, which was *not* to establish a theory of political judgment that would serve as a basis for establishing norms, but to *understand* totalitarianism by re-thinking our sense of reality as a shared world of appearances that are communicated in ways not reducible to rational discourse (Beiner 1992: 142) By contrast, Zerilli (2005) and DeGryse (2011) rightly argue that Arendt's reading of Kant's doctrine of aesthetic judgment has little to do with aesthetics strictly speaking and more to do with the way we judge as members of a community, and with the role shared appearances play in the constitution of the public space. This in my view explains her move away from the subjectivist orientation of Kant's theory towards a phenomenological interpretation.

My claim is not novel. Ronald Beiner already recognized this element: "For Arendt, politics is defined by phenomenality". And quoting Ernst Vollrath, "Hannah Arendt's kind of political thinking regards topics within the political field not as "objects" but as phenomena and appearances. They are what shows itself" (Beiner 1992: 110-111). How this relates to judgment is what needs further exploration. Judgment is the faculty that deals directly with self-disclosive phenomena, and aesthetic judgment with those that are not already subsumed under a universal.

Before addressing her reading of aesthetic judgment explicitly, it is important to very briefly clarify the nature of her phenomenology. That Arendt affirms the priority of the phenomenal over a derivative ontology of being and appearance is clear from the very outset of her magnum opus, where she proposes a veritable ontology of self-showing:

In contrast to the inorganic thereness of lifeless matter, living beings are not mere appearances. To be alive means to be possessed by an urge toward self-display which answers the fact of one's own appearingness. Living things *make their appearance*

like actors on a stage set for them [...] To appear always means to seem to others...” (Arendt 1971: 21).

What is notable here is how Arendt extends Heidegger’s notion of *Mitsein* as a basic mode of Dasein’s being-in-the-world to include the theatrical. Whereas for Heidegger our being-with-others in its everydayness takes the form of the anonymity of *das Man*, Arendt rejects the reduction of everyday being-with-others to a public “They” in which *I* strive to conform with an impersonal Everybody, arguing instead that we distinguish ourselves as individuals in acts of self-display, staged before others, who as spectators are in a position to judge. “Nobody exists in this world whose very being does not presuppose a *spectator*” (*ibid.*: 19). Just as every act of consciousness intends its object, so too does every appearance presuppose a transcendental *inter*-subjectivity empirically present in the form of the shared public space. An individual’s self-presentation – his ‘objectivity’ if you will – would be meaningless if it were neither seen nor heard.

Consider the case of Eichmann in this context for a moment. That Arendt compares him with Shakespearean characters is no coincidence – he is neither Iago nor Macbeth. What “stared one in the face” about this particular individual, with his clichés and incessant talk about everything from Kant’s moral law to his disappointment about not receiving a promotion, was a man whose “urge to appear” was as someone without any individuality, a functionary rather than a person. Whether Eichmann intended to deceive is less significant than Eichmann’s *self-deception*: in his mode of seeming, he had banished any contact with reality from his mind for two reasons, first because he denied any personality by substituting his duty to the Führer’s will for his own conscience, and second, that he was completely incapable of assuming the standpoint of others because outside of the Führer’s will there *were* no others. Eichmann may have very well deceived everyone in the Jerusalem courtroom as to who he really was, or perhaps the “*who*” of Eichmann was a refugee from reality who did not have to face himself.

Arendt’s extension of *Mitsein* as a form of individuation within a plural community intersects with her political interpretation of Kant’s *sensus communis*. Recognizing full well that Kant never wrote a political philosophy, Arendt nonetheless claims that it is implicit in his notion of an “enlarged mentality”, which gains the impartiality of the *Weltbürger* by the “force of the imagination” which “makes the others present and thus moves in a space that is potentially public” (Arendt 1992b: 43). How this is so – how the realization of an ideal appearing-together-with-others, embodied in the idea of the world-citizen, is a function of our imagination, the faculty of presentation, describes in a nutshell

her attempt at a phenomenological interpretation of Kant. What needs to be shown therefore is how Arendt's interpretation of Kant's theory of the beautiful intersects with the phenomenological interpretation of worldly phenomena as having their own distinct manner of appearing that is to be valued for their own sake and not for other ends.

Proceeding forward, two things that must be kept in mind about aesthetic judgment. Kant claims that pleasure in the beautiful has the distinctive character of *Wohlgefallen*, a free liking – “free” in not being tied to any interest in the object. This *disinterestedness*, although distinct, can and does however “give rise to an *interest*” in society (Kant 1987: 46n10). The second distinction is that aesthetic judgments are singular: “This rose is beautiful” entails that “beauty” is predicated only of this rose and no others. “All roses are beautiful” is by contrast a determinate judgment in which ‘beauty’ serves as a general concept, which is qualitatively different from the pleasure I feel in judging this particular rose that is present to my mind's eye. The latter proceeds without a concept *and* without an interest in the object's existence. Disinterested pleasure in the beautiful, writes Kant, is “the pleasure of *mere reflection*” by which he designates the pleasure that accompanies my presentation of the rose, i.e. its pure appearance, and not the pleasure in the accomplishment of some end (*ibid.*: 158).

Kant also claims that we expect universal agreement for judgments of taste, although never in the form of a statement about an object, but only as a possibility. As men and women in the plural, only “the inner feeling of a purposive state of mind” is universally communicable, but not as a set of beliefs corresponding to some actual consensus (*ibid.*: 162). That a purposive state of mind is communicable is a transcendental condition of the subject; that everyone will agree remains a possibility whose actual accomplishment takes place according to the rules prescribed by critical thinking: first, one must make one's thoughts public, and second, one “overrides (*wegsetzen*) the private subjective condition of one's judgment” and reflects on his own judgement from a universal standpoint by “transferring (*versetzen*) oneself to the standpoint of others”. (*ibid.*: 161) Together these two define Kant's notion of an “enlarged mentality” (*erweiterte Denkungsart*). The connection between the aesthetic and the political is found here.

How does one move away from (*weg-setzen*) one's private judgments and trans-pose (*ver-setzen*) oneself to a universal standpoint? For Arendt, an enlarged mentality is accomplished by an act of imagination, which “makes the others present and thus moves in a space that is potentially public” (Arendt 1992b: 43). Arendt follows Kant up to a point – the common Understanding (*gemeine Menschverstand*) of which an enlarged mentality forms a part is the

empirical instance of a *sensus communis*, which is not simply a condition of the subject but an ideal of universal humanity with whom one shares the same feelings about the world of appearances.¹¹ Yet Arendt goes one step further: the imagination is not only the condition for common understanding, it *is* understanding, if by that is meant not the faculty of concepts but of *catching a glimpse* of the “darkness of the human heart” and the obscurity of the real. (Arendt 1994: 323) This double obscurity – a direct echo of Jaspers, where the limits of thought both before the concealed essence of human being and the encounter with the real begin precisely at the point where thought fails – can only be illuminated by a double operation of imagination that is

strong enough to put that which is too close at a certain distance so we can see and understand it without bias or prejudice, and generous enough to bridge abysses of remoteness until we can see and understand everything that is too far away from us as though it were our own affair [...] Without this kind of imagination, which is actually understanding, we would never be able to take our bearings in the world (*ibid.*: 323).

Although it may seem so, Arendt does not confine the imagination to a reproductive faculty for re-presenting absent things; rather she sees it as the power of world-orientation. It is perspectival – it forms the look of things by bringing them close or placing them at a proper distance so that they can appear to us in their proper light.

As such the perspectival corresponds to the imagination’s power of schema-formation laid out by Kant in the first *Critique*. There Kant defines the schema as the power of judgment to subsume an object under a concept by making the two of them “homogeneous”; object and concept can communicate with each other only in so far as the imagination creates a schema-image, itself invisible, that “sensibilizes” the concept. This it does by translating the concept into a time determination.¹² Arendt repeats essentially the same thing, “Hence no perception is possible without a schema”, placing the emphasis on the imagination as the key to both perception and understanding (Arendt 1992b; 82). Without the imagination, intuitions are worse than blind, they simply could not be intuitions in the first place because the schema-image is what “makes particulars *communicable*” and allows the mind to “recognize sameness in the manifold” (*ibid.*: 83).

Her recourse to Kant’s doctrine of the schematism as that which orients perception and also makes possible the communication of particulars allows for a

¹¹ This transposition to the idea of a humanity is certainly *implicit* in Kant but not explicit.

¹² Thus, for instance, the pure schema of the category of substance is permanence in time. See Kant (1996: B176ff.)

strong comparison with Heidegger's phenomenological interpretation of Kant in his *Kantbook*. Like Heidegger, Arendt affirms the priority of schematization as a function of the imagination. The schema is neither intellectual nor sensible; it is that which makes possible their *communication*: it pro-poses the shape (Heidegger calls it the "pure look") that "makes particulars *communicable*" in so far as it is "characteristic of many such particulars" (Arendt 1992b: 83). This implies further that in arguing against Kant as a strict representationalist, Arendt like Heidegger moves appearances out of the subjective realm and back into the world. In the case of appearances as representations, the imagination effects the synthesis that unifies the manifold of singular representations. In the case of appearances as phenomena, the *syn-thesis* is apophantic: it lets something be seen in its togetherness with something by pointing it out in discourse, (*logos*) – colors with seeing, sounds with hearing (Heidegger 1962: 56). The colors of the sunset are not internal to the representation; rather they are "out there" as the distinctive manner of the sun's presence, which gives itself to sight. The belonging-together of *logos* and appearance is precisely what Arendt takes over. When one speaks of the "real", what is actually meant is a *sense*, a common sense: "The reality of what I perceive is guaranteed by its worldly context, which includes others who perceive as I do". This "perceptual faith" in the co-presence of the world (a phrase adopted from Merleau-Ponty) cannot be characterized simply as a belief; it is rather what Husserl would call a *protodoxa*: the 'primal form' of the object's presentation in perception, and any modal modification of this *protodoxa* would again not be added as new characteristic but would involve the presentation of a new object, posited as existent. (Husserl 1983: 251ff.) Or as he would later express it, the *Lebenswelt* is the always already "intuitively given surrounding world" which was presupposed but never grounded by Kant. (Husserl 1970: 103)

Furthermore, in his phenomenological interpretation Heidegger extends Kant's schematism beyond conceptual representing, arguing that it makes accessible the very essence of finite transcendence as such: "if the Schematism belongs to the essence of finite knowledge and if finitude is centered in transcendence, then the occurrence of transcendence at its innermost level must be a schematism" (Heidegger 1997: 71). This applies not just to subsumption, the act of bringing under concepts, but to reflection, "bringing *out* concepts".¹³ Arendt stresses this even more: "In the schema, one actually "perceives" some "universal" in the particular". Drawing on Kant's distinction between subsuming presentations under a concepts and bringing their pure synthesis "*to*

¹³ See [note c] of the marginalia, p. 71. Pluhar's translation of Kant's phrase is "bringing *to* a concept" (Kant 1996: B104).

a concept” (Arendt 1992b: 83; Kant 1996: B104), Arendt focuses on the role of the *example* as an ideal of beauty where an idea is made sensible and cannot therefore be merely empirical.¹⁴ Thus, the example of Socrates “leads us to” the concept of what it means to think and it is only through his example that *thinking* can be made to appear publicly, as embodied.

Arendt thus identifies the schematizing power of imagination with the ability to reflectively place ourselves in the position of everyone else. The communication of one’s disinterested pleasures in the beautiful takes place through a choice of examples: “one tells one’s *choices* and one chooses one’s company” (Arendt 1992b: 74). In both cases, beauty is what communicates the kind of community that I desire and wish to share with others.

Yet what justifies Arendt in equating impartiality with aesthetic disinterestedness? The confusion can be cleared up if both are viewed as parts of a form of life based on freedom. Recall that Kant had distinguished the liking (*Wohlgefallen*) of the beautiful from other kinds of pleasure that are grounded in the sensuous or the moral in so far as the former is a *favoring* (*Gunst*) (Kant 1987: 52). What makes it free is that the presentation of the object is held up only to the feeling of pleasure, born of an awareness of harmony between the cognitive faculties without any reference either to need or inclination. Thus the free favoring of an object’s appearance reflects at the same time an affirmation of man’s essential freedom as both an autonomous and a formative being. On the other hand, impartiality is the privilege of the spectator who has withdrawn from any direct involvement in action. Although it may seem as if impartiality contrasts with disinterestedness by bringing conceptual determination into play, Arendt seems to downplay this, appealing instead to Cicero’s notion of a *cultura animi*, embodied in the spectator who sought neither “to win the glorious distinction of a crown” nor to make “gain by buying or selling” but who were attracted by the “spectacle and closely watched what was done and how it was done. They were, as we would say today, completely disinterested and for this very reason those best qualified to judge” (Arendt 2006: 223). The connection is clear: in both cases the judgment of the beautiful is in play, which is the “freest of pursuits” in so far as any interest in the necessary or the useful is put out of play. The beauty of the thing is what I esteem for its own sake, and that alone is what counts.

There are two points that follow from Arendt’s phenomenological interpretation of Kant’s notion of *sensus communis*. Whereas Heidegger tried to dismantle representationalism by re-thinking ‘appearances’ according to the existential structure of being-in-the-world, Arendt thinks the latter by placing the primary emphasis on *Mitsein* as its constitutive principle. In *Beyond Past*

¹⁴ See Kant 1987 Kant, 79ff. “On the Ideal of Beauty”.

and *Future*, the role of the beautiful in the constitution of our shared world is made even more explicit. "Taste", she writes, "decides not only how the world is to look but who belongs together in it" (223). This echoes her later conception in the *Life of the Mind* where she defines reality as a shared *sense*, "which includes others who perceive as I do" as well as "a working together of my five senses" according to one unified sense (Arendt 1971: 50).

The second point is that her reading of the Kantian schematism mirrors the public character of the *sensus communis*, giving her nascent theory of the mental faculties something like a social distributional character. Particulars communicate with the universal through the mediation of a schema, which in its transcendental structure consists of the communication between the two faculties of cognition. However, this description of our "inner life" in terms of autonomous faculties is essentially a *metaphor* for what appears in the outside world: "I first talk with others before I talk with myself [...] and then I discover that I can conduct a dialogue not only with others but with myself" (189). The primacy of public use in the development of one's mental faculties is noteworthy. She even at one point suggests that our mental competences are essentially extensive: the *show* of anger is a form of self-presentation in which I "decide what is fit for appearance" (31). This appeal to what is "fitting" is crucial. It corresponds to a decision on how I *wish* to appear, and this in turn is based on "the consistency and duration of the image thereby presented to the world" (36). As others have pointed out, this marks an explicit reliance on an Aristotelian ethics.¹⁵ Consistency of character is the result of the deliberate and repeated choice of virtuous conduct to the point where it becomes second nature, and what she says here is repeated later on in terms of the Kantian emphasis on our duty to declare our maxims and submit them for public examination: "Morality means being fit to be seen" (Arendt 1992b: 49).

What then can we say about the significance of the schematism in Arendt's attempt to propose a theory of the public space based on the *sensus communis*? Interpreted broadly, it makes possible the communication of particulars with the universal, and with a possible universal in the case of reflective judgment. Without the schema we could never encounter the particular as such and relate it with a possible universality, which in the public space would correspond to Kant's universal standpoint. Whereas in judgments of cognition the schematism sensibilizes the concept by translating it into a variety of pure images of time, in aesthetic judgment it is the communicability of my choices to a plural audience that matters, which are objectified in the examples that we share. In so doing, I free my judgments from private conditions, which are motivated by self-interest.

¹⁵ See Jacques Taminiaux (1992: 115-155).

4. *Conclusion. Evil without imagination*

Arendt's concept of the banality of evil must be treated as a multi-faceted phenomenon that cannot be reduced either to thoughtlessness or to the absence of or refusal of judgment. Both aspects resonate throughout her work. My contention has been that it is only by working the concept through her engagement with Kant's theory of judgment that all aspects become visible. Her reading both of Kant and Socrates has to be viewed as part of the task of the dismantling of the metaphysical basis not only the concepts of political science, but of thinking and judging.

What then can be concluded about the banality of evil? I will make two points. First, starting from the initial definition of the banality of evil as thoughtlessness, the 'inability to think' is based upon a Socratic ethics of the "two-in-one" as an inner dialogue of the self with its other, a difference that anticipates judgment in so far as my inner dialogue is a moment of an ongoing dialogue with other persons with whom I share the public space. My plural self is essentially linked to the plurality of other selves. The banality of evil thus has to be re-defined as a refusal both of thinking as the two-in-one and of the responsibility for judging reflectively, without the presupposition of a rule or concept, and submitting my judgments to the public. What the ensuing analysis highlighted was that this refusal of judgment banishes particulars, which are rendered null and void, and that this implies at the same time a refusal to participate in the creation of a *sensus communis* as a free and unforced agreement that extends to a possible community, i.e. to a free humanity always open to the standpoint of others. The nature and significance of this refusal was explained through the investigation of aesthetic judgment: the absence of any concern for a *sensus communis* means that decisions regarding the appearances of things, with their contingent character, and of others are likewise banished from the scene. This represents in fact the extreme logic of totalitarian ideology, that which Arendt called its "ideological supersense" (Arendt 1994: 242). In so far as the ideological supersense operates with a strict logical consistency that reduces everything to one all-dominating Law of history, contingency, especially among human beings, is not only ignored but annihilated – it is nothing, and so too is any encounter with the world that consists of a plurality of things and individuals. On this view, the banality of evil as a moral phenomenon has as its condition of possibility a radical refusal of the real. By itself this certainly does not suffice as an explanation of Eichmann's deeds as a mass murderer, but it illuminates certain necessary conditions for him to become so, and it challenges any reduction of his crimes to a willed intention born of an inner malice or hatred for the Jews.

The second point is that the phenomenological interpretation of Kant's *sensus communis* gives a strong sense to Arendt's characterization of Eichmann as a man lacking in imagination. It was his inability to think from the standpoint of somebody else that characterized him the most, a remark Arendt repeated frequently. This lack of imagination leads to what I characterized above as a loss of reality in two senses. The first consists of the inability to judge appearances that are themselves constituted by the co-presence of others who share a common space in the world; the second concerns the self. In judging the appearances of things for the sake of their appearance alone, Arendt's emphasis was on how one also communicates those choices to others; as such I present myself to others through my expectations of universal agreement. This aesthetic estimation implies an ethic: is my self-presentation contradictory as embodied in my judgments of the things that I deem fitting or worthy, or do I appear to others as I wish to appear even and especially if that other happens to be myself? Arendt's reliance on a Socratic ethic is not confined to the *vita contemplativa* of the thinker but is rather, as I have argued, immediately extended to the public sphere. Just as with the showing of one's anger, morality, to repeat Arendt's statement, "means being fit to be *seen*". What is then the case is that for Arendt, self-disclosure involves an act of judgment in which I decide what is fitting for public acknowledgement. This involves not only moral maxims but judgments of taste.

Taste, then, is a mode of self-disclosure and a mode of self-*exposure* in the public space. It is an essential aspect of an individual's public existence, one's "urge to appear", in which the individual discloses who she is by placing herself in the position of others, and by extension, she chooses her company. Consider then Eichmann. He was the one who presented himself as a nobody and who kept his private maxims hidden underneath a wall of verbosity and cliché. His utter hypocrisy, appearing as who he was not, never fearing to contradict himself, and his distorted form of agency in which the Law of the Führer had made all the decisions for him, represents an existence that goes hand-in-hand with the loss of reality.

The irony is that the banality of evil is nothing if not extreme. In the avoidance of thinking and judging lies a nihilistic comportment towards the world in which any encounter with particulars – which is always a shared, public experience – is the to be sacrificed on the blood-stained altar of ideology.

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