



IWM Junior Visiting Fellows' Conferences, Vol. XXI/7

© 2006 by the author

Readers may redistribute this article to other individuals for noncommercial use, provided that the text and this note remain intact. This article may not be reprinted or redistributed for commercial use without prior written permission from the author. If you have any questions about permissions, please contact [Klaus Nellen](#) at IWM.

*Preferred citation:* MacLachlan, Alice. 2006. An Ethic of Plurality: Reconciling Politics and Morality in Hannah Arendt. In *History and Judgement*, eds. A. MacLachlan and J. Torsen, Vienna: IWM Junior Visiting Fellows' Conferences, Vol. 21.



## An Ethic of Plurality: Reconciling Politics and Morality in Hannah Arendt

Alice MacLachlan

### Introduction

My concern in this paper is how to reconcile a central tension in Hannah Arendt's thinking, one that – if left unresolved – may make us more reluctant to endorse her political theory. Arendt was profoundly and painfully aware of the horrors of political evil; in fact, she is almost unparalleled in 20th century thought in her concern for the consequences of mass political violence, the victims of political atrocities, and the most vulnerable in political society – the stateless, the pariahs, the outcasts. At least, this is the case in her discussions of concrete, historical political situations. Yet in her philosophical writings, she continues to argue that the *political* realm ultimately redeems human existence, and furthermore, that politics should remain distinct and autonomous from moral evaluation. Political action must be evaluated according to “greatness,” not goodness or any other explicitly moral standard.[1] She goes so far as to suggest that politics and morality may be deeply hostile to one another, and can only be reconciled in situations of extreme emergency.

This can leave many of us feeling both perplexed and deeply uncomfortable with the theory of human action that Arendt proposes. Some, like George Kateb, have attempted to reconstruct her account with the addition of traditional moral concerns as limiting factors.[2] Others have accepted her as essentially agonistic and even anti-moral. Dana Villa, for example, has argued that Arendt provides an overtly Nietzschean aestheticization of action, while Bonnie Honig has developed the agonistic quality of Arendt's thought as radicalized democracy.[3] Still others have used this seeming contradiction as reason to dismiss Arendt's theoretical aspirations altogether, and to treat her as a glorified political journalist. While I am sympathetic to Villa and Honig's interpretations of Arendt, in particular, in this paper I want to explore another strategy for understanding her political theory, in part by focusing on aspect of her thinking that has, until fairly recently, remained undeveloped: her discussion of forgiveness at the end of *The Human Condition*. [4] I hope to demonstrate that accepting Arendt's claims vis-à-vis morality and politics does not prevent us from recognizing her theory of political action as predicated on a deep moral concern for the

conditions of human life. In fact, Arendt articulates – though not overtly – an ethics of plurality, insisting on an ethical component to judgment and action.

What many critics have failed to distinguish is that Arendt uses ‘morality’ to identify a number of different targets in her writing. She is consistently critical toward only one of these: what I will call customary morality, or the “self-evident” moral standards of a given society. Her claim about the second – Christian morality – is that it has no place in the political sphere because of the naturally “hidden” nature of goodness. When she discusses the “Socratic” morality of conscience, Arendt identifies an important political role for such thinking moral agents in situations of political collapse. This nuanced set of concerns reflects not only Arendt’s focus on political extremity – that is, the limit conditions for the possibility of politics – but also her desire to move past abstract standards and laws, indeed, one might even say, to move beyond a metaphysical ethics. Instead, Arendt appears to envisage a politics that is not reigned in by a moral system, but guided by a political ethic that arises from the potential of political action itself. She never explicitly describes the latter ethic, but we glimpse it in her discussion of forgiving and promising as moral faculties that are also, essentially, political.

While distinguishing and diffusing these separate critiques goes some way towards explaining Arendt’s supposedly anti-moral stance, there remains her puzzling claim about the evaluation of action:

Unlike human behaviour – which the Greeks, like all civilized peoples, judged according to “moral standards,” taking into account motives and intentions on the one hand and aims and consequences on the other – action can be judged only by the criterion of greatness...[5]

In order to properly explain this, in the final sections of my discussion I present a brief account of Arendt’s theory of action, focusing particularly on two claims: that it is judged not according to motives or consequences, but by the principles it actualizes, and that action can be remedied by the human faculty of forgiveness. In doing so, I hope to address just what Arendt means by “greatness,” (as the appropriate standard for Arendtian political action) and to show that Arendtian action is only properly understood as emerging from what she calls a “moral personality” and is grounded in *amor mundi*: the love of the world as a condition for what is most valuable in human existence. Moreover, her discussion of forgiveness indicates that her reservations over ‘moral’ judgments of action indicate a tragic, rather than amoral, understanding of human action.

## I. Arendt’s critique of “Self-Evident” Moral Standards

Perhaps not surprisingly, Arendt’s discussion of conventional morality is historically and politically situated in her experiences of Nazi Germany. She describes how “morality collapsed into a mere set of mores – manners, customs, conventions to be changed at will – not with criminals, but with ordinary people, who, as long as moral standards were socially accepted, never dreamt of doubting what they had been taught to believe in.”[6] In part, she identifies this as the world-historical phenomenon of nihilism discussed by Nietzsche and by Heidegger, but her interest is not so much in the fate – or even the value – of the

particular values that had been reduced to “mere mores,” but the ease with which people accepted and responded to the radical shift: “The faster men held to the old code, the more eager will they be to assimilate themselves to the new one; the ease with which such reversals can take place under certain circumstances suggests that everyone is asleep when they occur.”[7]

This is not a merely sociological or psychological critique; Arendt is making a structural point about moral standards that take the form of universal prescriptions, “thou shalt not kill,” “thou shalt not bear false witness.” Subsuming particular cases under universals that are handed to us – in a combination of social, legal and moral institutions – easily becomes a habit. It becomes simple to follow universal prescriptions righteously and yet unthinkingly. In fact, the habit of turning to them may shut down the thinking process altogether. The comfort and familiarity of universal standards makes them ultimately useless; they work only so long as they *are* comfortable and familiar, that is, as long as everything is proceeding normally. But in dark times, when the familiar and comfortable is gone, these universals will inevitably fail us too and “we hardly need experience to tell us that the narrow moralists who constantly appeal to high moral principles and fixed standards are usually the first to adhere to whatever fixed standards they are offered.”[8] The paralyzing effect of moral platitudes was particularly evident to Arendt in the trial of Adolf Eichmann. She describes how Eichmann constantly repeated clichés, for example that he “would like to find peace with his former enemies,” as a kind of protective armament against the reality of his situation.[9] “Clichés, stock phrases, adherence to conventional, standardized codes of expression and conduct have the socially recognized function of protecting us against reality.”[10]

Thus Arendt’s concern with morality as a set of universal prescriptions for behavior is two-fold. First, the very structure of universal normative claims makes it easy to adopt them unthinkingly, so that we lessen our ability to act as thinking moral agents the more we rely on them. Second, they are ultimately unreliable; they occupy a place so general and unquestioned in our thoughts that ultimately, others just as general and unquestioned can replace them. Since such claims lead to thoughtlessness, they fail to provide us with the tools for real moral critique and evaluation. They may reinforce particular moral codes, but they actually undermine rather than reinforce moral agency. Arendt is defending moral agency, not arguing for its irrelevance.

## II. Arendt’s Critique of Christian Morality: The Performance of Good Deeds

While Socratic morality based on the activity of thinking was chiefly concerned with avoiding evil, Christian ethics, based on the faculty of the will, puts the accent entirely on performing, on doing good .[11]

Arendt’s critique of Christian morality is not just the familiar Nietzschean refrain: that is, its origin as a slavish anti-life instinct perpetuated by the weak and the sick, (although she does adopt a similar genealogy of freedom of will, and certainly gives credence to Nietzschean concerns). Rather, she is concerned the Christian focus on “goodness” in deeds. While ancient ethical systems, she claims, focused either on what is good for the self or for the world, in the teachings of Jesus and Paul, “the criterion is no longer the self

and what the self can or cannot bear to live with, but the performance and the consequences of the deed at large.”[12] Both the self and the world drop out of the equation, leaving only the shadowy notion of goodness, itself, as a standard of evaluation.

What does it mean for pure goodness to leave both the self and the world behind? Arendt claims that, “goodness can exist only when it is not perceived, not even by its author.”[13] In other words, it “harbours a tendency to hide from being seen or heard” and “the moment a good work becomes known and public, it loses its specific character of goodness, of being done for nothing but goodness’ sake.”[14] This secretiveness – even from the morally good agent herself – is essential to the nature of real goodness: “the ultimate criterion for positively doing good...we found to be selflessness, the losing of interest in yourself.”[15] Thus, a return to the world, or even the self, means that pure goodness becomes corrupt: “goodness that comes out of hiding and assumes a public role is no longer good, but corrupt in its own terms and will carry its own corruption wherever it goes.”[16] The ideal of goodness is thus particularly unsuited to the compromises and moderation of the public, political realm. Whenever it truly exists – and this is rare – it manifests itself as a kind of radical innocence that is particularly harmful to the perpetuation of plurality and freedom, “[spelling] doom to everyone when it is introduced into the public realm.”[17]

Part of Arendt’s claim relates to the absolute nature of ‘pure’ goodness. Goodness as a moral absolute must, by its nature, trump all other claims. If I act in the pursuit of this end, I should not be dissuaded by others’ opinions, nor do I ultimately have a reason to concede – or listen – to them at all. I threaten not only the plurality of opinions that constitutes the public realm, but also the freedom of other actors. Arendt concludes that absolute goodness is like absolute truth: “from the viewpoint of politics, [it] has a despotic character.”[18] Since the ultimate value of the realm of politics depends on maintaining conditions of plurality and freedom, an absolute like goodness will always be harmful. “Goodness, therefore, as a consistent way of life, is not only impossible within the confines of the public realm, it is even destructive of it.”[19] Thus Arendt rejects the second pillar of traditional philosophical ethics, the absolute, otherworldly ideal. Such an ideal is just as incompatible with, even destructive of, the conditions of human flourishing – that is, for Arendt, the shared political realm based on overlapping perceptions and common, public experience – as the universal moral prescriptions favored by Eichmann.

### **III. Politics and the Socratic Morality of Conscience**

If both universal moral precepts and absolute ideals like goodness are ultimately harmful to politics, where can political morality ever hope to find a foothold? Arendt criticized customary morality for failing to produce individual moral agents, and Christian morality for not respecting the plural nature of a public realm composed of the same. The Socratic morality of conscience, however, is based on our ability to think and the experience of plurality – that is, of difference – in this solitary activity.

Arendt begins etymologically, stating that “conscience in all languages means originally not a faculty of knowing and judging right and wrong but what we now call consciousness, that is, the faculty by which we know, are aware of, ourselves.”[20] In other words, her aim is to connect our ability to be moral with our

ability to think. She turns to two statements made by Socrates in the *Gorgias*: first, that it is better to suffer than to do wrong and second, that “it would be better for me...that most men should not agree with me and contradict me, rather than I, being one, should be out of tune with myself and contradict myself.”[21] She sees in the second the primary reason for the first. It is worst for me to commit wrong because even were I to escape all punishment, I would then be forced to live out my days with a wrongdoer – my own self – in unbearable intimacy. This is the origin of conscience, that “I cannot do certain things, because having done them I shall no longer be able to live with myself.”[22]

Of course, to experience the pain of this unbearable intimacy, some intimacy must take place. The Socratic idea of “being out of harmony” implies a duality in unity: that I, as one, am also two-in-one. For Arendt this duality only arises in the experience of thinking: the two-in-one discourse with myself that happens in solitude. Thinking takes place without natural end or purpose (except as a kind of by-product). It is not dependent on intelligence or sophistication, and is naturally satisfying. Moreover, this internal experience of plurality is the basis by which we individuate ourselves; “an individual’s personal quality is precisely his ‘moral’ quality.”[23]

In *The Human Condition*, Arendt argues that we become a “who” rather than a “what” only when we insert ourselves into the worldly web of human relationships through meaningful deeds and speech.[24] In this case – the experience of thought – her essential condition is no different; she has merely internalized the individuating experience of plurality, so that it takes place when thinking with myself, as preparation for speaking meaningfully with others. Those who cannot think, the thoughtless, never achieve this all-important individuation. They are human beings, but not persons; they are ‘nobodies.’ (Against the charge of elitism, Arendt has replied that these are equally likely to be cultivated academics as uneducated laborers). Part of the reason for this is that “thinking and remembering... are the human way of striking roots, of taking one’s place in the world into which we all arrive as strangers.”[25] Moreover the status of person carries moral connotations, since “extreme evil is possible only where these self-grown roots, which automatically limit the possibilities, are entirely absent.”[26] It is not so much that extreme evil dehumanizes (or de-persons) but that it can only take place in conditions of total thoughtlessness, where no ‘personality’ in this moral sense had emerged in the first place. Once again, Arendt focuses on the constituting conditions of rich moral agency – in this case, the development of good judgment and conscience – rather than privileging any one normative approach or set of moral precepts for the moral agent to follow.

Clearly, Arendt places a great deal of faith in our capacity to think, but she concedes that it is not essentially political. For one thing, the command “stop – and think” is accurate: “There exists an inherent tension between these two kinds of activity [thinking and action].”[27] Since thinking is an activity that takes place in solitude, and is without natural end or purpose, thinkers will inevitably shun the public sphere and the company of others. As a result, they find themselves unused to politics and the requirements of good political judgment. Second, the injunction not to do wrong is always tied to *self*-disharmony and the pain of *self*-reflection: “In the centre of moral considerations of human conduct stands the self; in the centre of political considerations of human conduct stands the world.”[28] This is the crux of Arendt’s worry about

Socratic morality; it demands that I value my relationship to myself more than my relationship to the world. “It says no more than ‘I’d rather suffer than do.’ Politically speaking – that is, from the viewpoint of the community or of the world we live in – it is irresponsible; its standard is the self and not the world, neither its improvement nor change.”[29] She cites Machiavelli’s claim that he must teach men how *not* to be good, precisely so that they will put the needs of the city above the fate of their own souls. Thus, “the political answer to the Socratic proposition would be, ‘what is important in the world is that there be no wrong; suffering and doing wrong are equally bad.’”[30]

This reversal means that thinking and political action can come into conflict as competing priorities, and that one can endanger the other. But they are not necessarily antagonistic. For one thing, thinking *can* act as preparation for political judgment (even if a life entirely dedicated to thinking does not). In discourse with myself, I have my first essential experience of plurality, the space for difference of opinion and conflict. This prepares us for the “enlarged mentality” of political judgment in which I am required to take into consideration a number of possible viewpoints.[31] Arendt notes that in Eichmann’s case, “the more decisive flaw in [his] character was his almost total inability ever to look at anything from the other fellow’s point of view” something “closely connected with an inability to *think*.”[32] Thus, this kind of moral reasoning can become politically valid in certain marginal situations; that is, precisely those situations where the unthinking norms of conventional morality have collapsed, and the very possibility of politics is threatened by the emergence of mass violence. Then, thinking reference to the self as moral standard takes on political significance. Someone who limits his own actions by what he cannot live with the memory of is a kind of anti-Eichmann. Thinking reveals the emptiness of stock phrases and clichés, and a thinking person will resist the urge to mindlessly follow the depravities of those around him. This resistance is nothing other than political resistance, borne out of moral consideration.

#### **IV. An Ethic of Plurality? Forgiveness in *The Human Condition***

As the various critiques of morality discussed above demonstrate, Arendt is deeply critical of any attempt to impose any external standards upon political action, or to limit and change its nature – even if such an attempt is made for deeply moral, even humanitarian reasons. Her criticisms rest upon her understanding of human existence itself; action is the highest of human activities because it authentically reflects our most essential conditions (freedom and plurality) and because it brings value to human lives, both in its own ‘radiance’ and in the narratives it creates.[33] Yet despite the supra-moral priority Arendt gives to action, she cannot help but be aware of its potential to destroy as well as create. She refers to this dangerous potential as “the frailty of human affairs,” noting that the predicament of political action is that we can never fully predict its consequences, nor reverse what it is we have done.[34] Action cannot be safely left to its own devices, as it were, without profound and devastating (moral) repercussions for humankind.

Yet if action cannot properly be moderated by normative claims arising from universal moral standards, Christian goodness, or even (wholly) by the Socratic conscience, what alternative does Arendt suggest? She insists that the only proper ground for a political ethic is, in fact, the ground for the political sphere itself, “the will to live together with others in the mode of acting and speaking.”[35] The appropriate morals

are thus those that can be generated by this will alone:

[Morality] has, at least politically speaking, no more to support itself than the good will to counter the enormous risks of action by readiness to forgive and to be forgiven, to make promises and to keep them. These moral precepts are the only ones that are not applied to action from the outside, from some supposedly higher faculty or from experiences outside action's own reach .[36]

Readiness to forgive, and be forgiven, and a willingness to make and keep promises to others are the only precepts to emerge from sheer willingness to engage in a political enterprise. Certainly, the importance of making and keeping promises to other is the foundation of many theories of political obligation, including the tradition of social contracts, in political philosophy. It is hardly surprising Arendt would list it as a necessary political attitude.

More controversial, however, is her turn to turn to forgiveness. Arendt acknowledges that forgiveness “has always been deemed [both] unrealistic and inadmissible in the public realm,” something she attributes partly to the religious heritage of forgiveness in the West, and partly to its association with the ‘anti-political’ emotion of love.[37] Arendt claims that despite these traditional misgivings, forgiveness ultimately has a political character. It has the quality of freedom, since in forgiving we act unexpectedly and spontaneously by refusing to perpetuate cycles of revenge and violence, and it also corresponds to the human condition of plurality. Forgiving and being forgiven, Arendt claims, are both experiences that depend on others; when we claim to ‘forgive’ ourselves we do no more than signify “a role played before one’s self.”[38] We cannot experience forgiveness in isolation any more than we can recognize the significance of promises made only to ourselves; both rely on our previous experiences of forgiving and being forgiven by others. Thus, as a moral faculty, our ability to forgive arises primarily from our connection to the publicly grounded, shared space of others: the political realm.

What exactly does Arendt mean by forgiveness? Her account differs from other philosophical discussions in that she pays little attention to the emotional dimension of forgiving.[39] Indeed, her very willingness to acknowledge forgiveness as political indicates her resistance to identifying it as an *emotion*. Arendt has little time for moral sentiments in politics; she claims that sentiments like compassion and pity – while virtuous in the private sphere – become vices in politics.[40] Even noble sentimentality can easily undermine genuine political engagement. Rather than a matter of emotional change, therefore, forgiving is best understood as a political *act*, and the readiness to forgive as a publicly recognizable political stance. Arendt describes the act of forgiving as a ‘release’ or a ‘dismissal,’ noting that, “without being forgiven, released from the consequences of what we have done, our capacity to act would, as it were, be confined to one single deed from which we could never recover.”[41] Forgiveness ‘undoes’ those acts whose consequences have bound us – either as the doer or as the sufferer of the deed – and from which we wish to escape. Indeed, Arendt suggests that forgiveness bears the same relation to action as destruction does to creation.[42]

If forgiving is primarily an act of undoing, it is worth investigating what kind of a 'release' Arendt imagines forgiveness to be. Clearly acts of forgiveness, however magnanimous, have no supernatural (counterfactual) ability. They cannot *literally* undo the events of the past. Nor is it clear that Arendt imagines forgiveness to be an act of deception or historical amnesia, in which past traumas are covered over and ignored. While she describes forgiveness as the opposite of vengeance, she also calls it an alternative to punishment, "but by no means its opposite."<sup>[43]</sup> Both forgiveness and punishment have the same function, Arendt argues: to put an end to cycles of violent reaction. But if forgiveness is relevantly like punishment, it cannot forsake responsibility and accountability for the past – this would defy the purpose of retributive punishment altogether. Nor would an amnesiac response be in keeping with Arendt's respect for narrative and shared history. So the 'release' that forgiveness offers is not relief from the very fact of our actions, nor is it relief from our accountability for them.

The clue to understanding Arendtian forgiveness lies in the connection she makes between the doer and the deed, in her discussion of action. Part of action's value is, for Arendt, that it properly discloses 'who' rather than 'what' we are: our unique personhood. Yet there is tremendous danger in this identification if the identity that emerges confines us to our worst deeds, without hope of recovery. In forgiving, Arendt claims, "*what* was done is forgiven for the sake of *who* did it."<sup>[44]</sup> Forgiveness displays the same revelatory character as all action, and so – qua action – allows us to assume identities beyond the restrictive 'victim' and 'wrongdoer' identities created by the original (wrongful) act. This does not mean that the deed vanishes from public memory, however this new, revelatory act shifts its original meaning. Just as an apology by the wrongdoer can change the initial message of a wrongdoing, so too can forgiveness by the injured party alter the relationship between the two. As Andrew Schaap explains, Arendtian readiness to forgive displays a willingness to re-enter the sphere of political debate with former enemies and combatants, forsaking the apolitical methods of vengeance and violence.<sup>[45]</sup> Forgiveness returns the actor and the act to the shared political realm. It does not signal an end or final reconciliation, therefore, but – like all Arendtian political action – a new beginning.<sup>[46]</sup>

In other words, what Arendt refers to as acts of forgiveness are the renewals of trust required to sustain a political space of verbal and not violent disputes. They are grounded in our ongoing commitment to that sphere (a responsibility to the common world Arendt calls *amor mundi*) as well as our respect for those who are our co-participants in it. Arendt describes the appropriate relation of political respect as something akin to Aristotle's *philia politike* (political friendship) and also as analogous to love in the private sphere.<sup>[47]</sup> Since it concerns our personhood as speaking and acting beings, such respect is sufficient ground – Arendt believes – to forgive others when necessary, as is the presumable awareness that we, ourselves, will eventually need forgiveness in turn. Yet this respect, and the forgiveness it engenders, is not an all-encompassing solution to political violence.

Yet forgiveness alone cannot provide generate a moral code sufficient to protect the political sphere from the dangers of individual and institutional wrongdoing. While it is an appropriate remedy to what Arendt refers to as the 'everyday trespassing' occasioned by the chaotic nature of political action, it does not apply

to crime and “willed evil.” [48] The political response to the latter, she claims, must be just retribution, not forgiveness and there remain acts of political atrocity so extreme that the realm of human affairs cannot respond to it. She calls these, following Kant, “radical evil” and suggests that since they “transcend the realm of human affairs and the potentialities of human power” they are, in a sense, both unforgivable and without proportionate punishment. [49] A political ethic based on trust and renewal is indeed admirable, but if forgiveness is Arendt’s proposed remedy to the immoral potential of political action, it remains a mitigating factor at best.

## V. Moral Criteria, Greatness and Arendtian Action

Thus far I have argued that Arendt leaves room for ‘Socratic’ morality alongside – or as a complement to – the political action she values so tremendously and that her discussion of forgiveness gestures towards a more properly political ‘ethic of plurality’. But neither of these is able to wholly defend her from the charge of amorality (or even anti-morality), if the category of action itself remains immune to normative evaluation. In the remaining part of the paper, I offer a closer analysis of Arendt’s theory of political action, and the moral possibilities it contains. I began my paper with this quotation:

Unlike human behaviour – which the Greeks, like all civilized peoples, judged according to “moral standards,” taking into account motives and intentions on the one hand and aims and consequences on the other – action can be judged only by the criterion of greatness... [50]

Arendt distinguishes ‘greatness’ from the kind of evaluation that takes motives, intentions and goals into account. She argues explicitly that these are inappropriate ways of trying to access action when she asserts that: “action insofar as it is free is neither under the guidance of the intellect nor under the dictate of the will... but springs from something altogether different which... I shall call a principle.” [51] Principles “do not operate from within the self, as motives do... but inspire, as it were, from without; and they are much too general to prescribe particular goals, although every particular aim can be judged in light of its principle once the act has been started.” [52] Here Arendt identifies action both with freedom, and with our capacity to be inspired by principles; these are two sides of the same quality, and they separate action from mere behaviour (which is neither disclosive nor meaningful). [53] We are capable of freedom to the extent we are capable of principled action. This is deeply significant, since it saves Arendt’s account of freedom (that we are ourselves ‘principles’ of beginning) from the charge of arbitrariness, as she herself acknowledges: “what saves the act of beginning from its own arbitrariness is that it carries its own principle within itself... beginning and principle... are not only related to each other but are coeval.” [54] Moreover, since these principles are distinctive to action, they are also the proper standard to measure it; action is great insofar as it enacts principles that are themselves great. Arendt is insisting that the *sui generis* character of individual acts and the status of action *qua* category as the highest of human activities means that action must be judged by its own potentialities; no external standard can possibly be appropriate, since all other human categories are themselves redeemed – that is, made valuable – by the potential of action.

Just what are these principles? In eulogizing Winston Churchill, Arendt alludes to “whatever makes for

greatness – nobility, dignity, steadfastness, and a kind of laughing courage.”[55] Elsewhere, she says, “such principles are honour or love of equality, which Montesquieu called virtue, or distinction or excellence... but also fear or distrust or hatred.”[56] In *The Human Condition* they are described as a kind of shining glory that illuminates deeds, or “what is great and radiant.”[57] Yet Arendt is frustratingly elusive in articulating what kind of a thing a principle is. They are not eternally-existing Platonic forms, since political action is concerned only with the phenomenal world of appearances and “the inspiring principle becomes fully manifest only in the performing act itself.”[58] Understanding Arendtian principles in such an abstract way would render them unmoving absolutes, like the goodness she has already deemed too ‘despotic’ for the public realm. Arendt continues to resist any metaphysics of ethical action. The actor herself may not be aware of the principle she instantiates, as she is caught up in her own – ultimately irrelevant – motives and goals. The principle, as the specific meaning of the deed, is only fully available to the spectator who judges and immortalizes it in narrative and history. This is, perhaps, the most helpful formulation; the principle of an act is the ideal that we identify *after the fact* as having brought together political actors at a specific moment to achieve something great. Thus Arendt describes how love of freedom is manifest in the struggle of the American Founding Fathers, or equality in the civil rights movement and the early labor movement.[59]

Since Arendt claims we do not act freely when we subsume particular circumstances under general laws, she needs to explain how we have access to these elusive principles in the first place, if not by an act of subsumption. She does this by appropriating an account of judgment from Kant, albeit in a highly idiosyncratic manner, drawing not on his overtly moral and political philosophy but by claiming to articulate the political philosophy dormant in his aesthetic writings: specifically, our judgment of the beautiful.[60] Arendt uses the distinction between determinative and reflective judgment, and the idea of disinterested contemplation, which abstracts from my own concerns and interests, in order to explain what she means by political judgment. “Political thought is representative,” Arendt claims. In good political judgment, I abstract from my own view and interests in order to represent those who are not present. This is neither a matter of empathy or of straightforwardly ‘counting noses’; I do “not blindly adopt the actual views of those who stand somewhere else” (which would continue to mire me in personal interests and motives). Political judgment, for Arendt, is rather a matter of “being and thinking in my own identity where actually I am not,” or the imagination.[61] Arendt describes this as an ‘enlarged mentality’ (which is developed in part by the two-in-one practice of thinking) and argues that “the more people’s standpoints I have present in my mind while I am pondering a given issue...the stronger will be my capacity for representative thinking, and the more valid my final conclusions.”[62] This ‘enlarged mentality’ is crucially different from Nietzschean perspectivism because it is ultimately grounded in a shared world of appearances and the Kantian notion of a *sensus communis*, “that there is something non-subjective in what seems to be the most private and subjective sense.”[63] This is the “sense [that] fits us into a community with others, makes us members of it and enables us to communicate things given by our five private senses.”[64] Just as we appeal to communal standards in matters of taste, we do so in political judgments. Political objectivity is neither the absolute truth of the philosopher (which is politically ‘despotic’) nor a radically private subjectivism; the best political judgments are inter-subjectively grounded in our shared political world.

Since these judgments are reflective, not determinative, we do not access political principles as universals but rather through our comprehension and memory of apt examples that are, quite literally, representative of the principle; that is, I *represent* them to myself when judging. Arendt suggests, “most political virtues and vices are thought of in terms of exemplary individuals.”<sup>[65]</sup> So, for example, Martin Luther King may represent the principle of non-violence to me, or Socrates, intellectual integrity. Here Arendt again draws on Kant, who calls examples “the go-cart of judgment.”<sup>[66]</sup> In political judgments, as with judgments of the beautiful, I do not perform a syllogism from the universal to the particular; I judge each particular *qua* particular, with reference to exemplary instances drawn from my thinking and remembrance. Presumably, part of Arendt’s point is that practicing this kind of judgment actually strengthens faculties necessary to moral agency, unlike repeated performance of the universal practical syllogisms present in customary (and even Kantian) moral judgments.

This is the picture of Arendtian action that we have so far: although judgment and will are necessary preparation for action, genuine action only takes place to the extent it is free – that is, not wholly determined by these but inspired by a principle. Yet judgment still plays a significant role, since we access these principles through our capacity for representative political judgment, by which we are able to identify and respond to “great” or inspired political action and take into account multiple political perspectives. Thinking is not directly connected to action, but is a kind of preparation for the enlarged mentality required for judgment, and is also significant after the act, when taken up by the spectator in story. Because action is free, personal motives and interests do not determine it. Also, it is spontaneous and unpredictable, its consequences ultimately unknown. This means that action is not properly judged either by motives and goals, on the one hand, or by consequences, on the other but by the quality of the principle it instantiates.

For this picture to be ultimately convincing, it seems to me that at least two questions still need to be answered. The first of these is the criteria for judging principles themselves. If action is only properly judged according to principles, but these can range from equality, honour and love to fear and hatred, then Arendt needs further grounds for distinguishing the ‘great’ from the ‘ignoble.’ All that is ultimately ruled out by insisting that action be ‘principled’ is the thoughtless evil perpetuated by Eichmann and other ‘nobodies.’ Yet Arendt acknowledges that, “freedom *or its opposite* appears in the world whenever such principles are actualized,” meaning that not all principles are created equal, as it were. <sup>[67]</sup> At times, she seems to assume it is self-evident that courage, love of freedom and equality are ‘good’ principles, while hatred and fear are ‘bad,’ but I think a more satisfying answer can be drawn from her commitment to *amor mundi*, that is, love and care for the world. Arendt’s entire account of human existence is predicated on the idea that what is most valuable to it – that is, free speech and action in conditions of human plurality – can only take place in a stable, political realm, a true *polis*. It is our greatest responsibility, therefore, to struggle for the creation and perpetuation of such a shared public world; we achieve this only when people act together in concert. Those principles that enhance and perpetuate conditions of plurality and freedom are good; those which harm it are not, because they destroy what is most valuable in human existence. Arendtian action is ultimately judged by the same standard that determines when we can forgive its particular transgressions.

## Conclusion

The criteria for judging Arendtian principles may be the final obstacle to grasping Arendtian political action, but locating their proper ground – that is, the political responsibility generated by *amor mundi* – raises a final and perhaps more disturbing question. Do Arendt's concepts of good political action, political judgment and political remedy offer anything close to a safeguard against the possibility of political destruction? Can Arendtian action, even in the ideal circumstances she describes, protect the conditions of its own possibility? I believe her answer is no, and her view of the human condition is ultimately tragic. The frailty – the irony, even – of human existence consists in this: the very conditions which make human existence valuable and give it meaning (the freedom of political action and the diversity of human plurality) simultaneously introduce an element of arbitrariness to our actions (in the case of freedom) and prevent us from ever having control over what we do and suffer (in the case of plurality). Her critique of motive- and consequence-oriented normative judgments (that is, deontology and consequentialism) is that they begin from falsehoods about human persons and the conditions under which we act, that we can look into the 'darkness of the human heart' or treat action as if it were just another chain of cause and effect.[68] Similarly, customary morality must begin from a falsehood, i.e. that it is more than customary, and cannot be shifted at a moment's notice. As Arendt commentator Margaret Canovan puts it, for Arendt any personal morality "cannot solve the dilemmas that arise out of the very nature of politics itself." [69] Any straightforward application of non-political morality, however much it may give us hope for politics, must therefore rest on falsehood.

For us to go beyond such falsehoods, Arendt claims, that is, for us to develop a political morality that *is* more than 'the sum total of *mores*,' we cannot depend on the fantasy of a supposedly higher standard able to rescue political action from its own consequences. Human political action cannot be redeemed; it can only be remedied. The moral resources Arendt allows herself are both few and frail: our capacity for genuine thought, the principles enacted in 'great' action and the faculty of judgment that gives us access to them, and the twin faculties of forgiving and promising as remedies to the irreversibility and unpredictability of action. Yet her reasons for so limiting herself are ultimately compelling; in grounding her moral concerns in what she sees as most humanly valuable, that is, the free and plural nature of human action, Arendt has insisted on an ethics that refuses to transgress any of these conditions. In *The Human Condition* Arendt criticizes Plato for developing a political morality based on the individual's conduct towards himself, or self-control.[70] In this paper I have argued that it is Arendt's purpose to accomplish precisely the opposite, that is, to offer an ethics of plurality, in which what is good is developed from what is most politically important: *amor mundi*, or love of the world.

---

Notes:

1. H. Arendt, *The Human Condition*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958. p. 205.
2. G. Kateb, *Hannah Arendt: Politics, Conscience, Evil*. New Jersey: Rowman and Allenfeld, 1983.
3. D. Villa, "Beyond Good and Evil: Arendt, Nietzsche and the Aestheticization of Political Action," *Political Theory* 20(2) May 1992, pp.274-308.  
B. Honig, "The Politics of Agonism: A Critical Response," *Political Theory* 21(3), August 1993, pp. 528-533.
4. One notable exception to this oversight is Andrew Schaap, who has written on the political possibilities of forgiveness in several places, including (but not limited to): A. Schaap, "Forgiveness, Reconciliation and Transitional Justice," in A.F. Lang and J. Williams (eds.), *Hannah Arendt and International Relations*. New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2005. pp. 67-93. See also: A. Schaap, "Guilty Subjects and Political Responsibility: Arendt, Jaspers and the Resonance of the 'German Question' in Politics of Reconciliation," *Political Studies* 49, 2001, pp. 749-766.
5. Arendt, *The Human Condition*, p. 205.
6. Arendt, *Responsibility and Judgment*. Jerome Kohn (ed.), New York: Schocken Books, 2003, p. 54.
7. Arendt, *Responsibility and Judgment*, p.178.
8. Arendt, *Responsibility and Judgment*, p. 104.
9. Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem*. London: Penguin Books, 1963.
10. Arendt, *The Life of the Mind, Vols. I and II*. San Diego: Harcourt Inc., 1978, p. 4.
11. Arendt, *Responsibility and Judgment*, p. 123.
12. Arendt, *Responsibility and Judgment*, p. 125.
13. Arendt, *The Human Condition*, p. 74.
14. Arendt, *Responsibility and Judgment*, p. 123.
15. Arendt, *Responsibility and Judgment*, p. 123.
16. Arendt, *The Human Condition*, p. 77.
17. Arendt, *On Revolution*. London: Penguin Books, 1963, p. 84.
18. Arendt, *Between Past and Future: Eight Exercises in Political Thought*. London: Penguin Books, 1961, p. 241.
19. Arendt, *The Human Condition*, p. 77.
20. Arendt, *Responsibility and Judgment*, p. 76.
21. Plato, *Gorgias*, 469c and 482b-c.
22. Arendt, *Responsibility and Judgment*, p. 97.
23. Arendt, *Responsibility and Judgment*, p. 79.
24. Arendt, *The Human Condition*, pp. 181-188.
25. Arendt, *Responsibility and Judgment*, p. 100.
26. Arendt, *Responsibility and Judgment*, p. 101.
27. Arendt, *Responsibility and Judgment*, p. 105.
28. Arendt, *Responsibility and Judgment*, p. 153.
29. Arendt, *Responsibility and Judgment*, p. 79.
30. Arendt, *Responsibility and Judgment*, p. 153.
31. This concept is elaborated in the final section (Moral Criteria, Greatness and Arendtian Action).

32. Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, pp. 48-49.
33. She also argues that such attempts – even those originally begun out of a concern for the destructive powers of action – are themselves the origins of some of the most appalling political atrocities in human history.
34. Arendt, *The Human Condition*, p. 236.
35. Arendt, *The Human Condition*, p. 246.
36. Arendt, *The Human Condition*, p. 245.
37. Arendt, *The Human Condition*, p. 243.
38. Arendt, *The Human Condition*, p. 237.
39. Most philosophical contemporary discussions of forgiveness follow the model set by Jeffrie Murphy and Joram Haber in the 1980s and early 1990s, defining forgiveness primarily in terms of resentment and other negative emotions. See, for example, J. Murphy and J. Hampton, *Forgiveness and Mercy*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988; N. Richards, "Forgiveness," *Ethics* 99, 1988, pp.77-97; J. Haber, *Forgiveness: A Philosophical Study*. Lanham. Md: Rowman and Littlefield, 1991; T. Govier, *Forgiveness and Revenge*. New York: Routledge, 2002. Indeed, Arendt is to be credited for avoiding the pitfalls of such a narrow definition, which have plagued the emerging analytic debate.
40. Arendt, *On Revolution*, p. 84.
41. Arendt, *The Human Condition*, p. 237.
42. Arendt, *The Human Condition*, p. 238.
43. Arendt, *The Human Condition*, p. 241.
44. Arendt, *The Human Condition*, p. 241, (italics in original).
45. Schaap, "Forgiveness, Reconciliation and Transitional Justice," pp. 75-78.
46. "Forgiving...tries the seemingly impossible, to undo what has been done, and succeeds in making a new beginning where everything seemed to have come to an end." Arendt, *Essays in Understanding 1930-1954: Formation, Exile and Totalitarianism*. Jerome Kohn (ed). New York: Schocken Books, 1994, p. 308.
47. Arendt, *The Human Condition*, p. 243.
48. Arendt, *The Human Condition*, p. 240.
49. Arendt, *The Human Condition*, p. 241.
50. Arendt, *The Human Condition*, p. 205.
51. Arendt, *Between Past and Future*, p. 152.
52. Arendt, *Between Past and Future*, p. 152.
53. Arendt, *Between Past and Future*, p. 153. She says, in particular, that, "men are free...as long as they act, neither before nor after; for to be free and to act are the same."
54. Arendt, *On Revolution*, p. 212.
55. Arendt, *Responsibility and Judgment*, p. 49.
56. Arendt, *Between Past and Future*, p. 152.
57. Arendt, *The Human Condition*, p. 206.
58. Arendt, *Between Past and Future*, p. 152.
59. Arendt, *On Revolution*.
60. Arendt, *Lectures on Kant's Political Philosophy*. Ed. Ronald Beiner. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989.
61. Arendt, *Between Past and Future*, p. 241.

62. Arendt, *Between Past and Future*, p. 241.
63. Arendt, *Life of the Mind*, p. 264.
64. Arendt, *Responsibility and Judgment*, p. 139.
65. Arendt, *Responsibility and Judgment*, p. 144.
66. I. Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, B174, quoted in Arendt, *Responsibility and Judgment*, 143.
67. Arendt, *Between Past and Future*, p. 152 (italics added).
68. Arendt, *The Human Condition*, p. 244.
69. M. Canovan, *Hannah Arendt: A Reinterpretation of her Political Thought*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992, p. 185.
70. Arendt, *The Human Condition*, pp. 220-230.

[Close Window](#)