PRAXIS, LOGOS AND THEORIA – THE THREEFOLD STRUCTURE OF THE HUMAN CONDITION

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Abstract

Hannah Arendt's *The Human Condition* is famous for the distinction between *Vita Activa* (the intersubjective life of action) and *Vita Contemplativa* (the contemplative and solitary life in the realm of thought). One of the most problematic aspects of this distinction seems to be the question of how the *Vita Activa* and *Vita Contemplativa* are interrelated.

In this paper I argue that in order to understand how the two modes of human life are interrelated, careful attention must be paid to how Arendt uses the concepts of *praxis* (action), *theoria* (theory) and *logos* (language). I claim that Arendt is making neither an ontological nor a transcendental distinction between two radically different modes of being. She is not promoting a dualistic ontology or an elitist conception of society. Instead, Arendt claims that the two realms are tightly intertwined in the multifaceted human life.

For Arendt, philosophy is a form of practice that is always tied to the use of language. Unlike the Ancient Greek philosophers and later rationalist thinkers – for whom reason (*nous*) precedes language (*logos*) – Arendt holds that thinking is always already linguistic. Human beings think in terms of concepts and metaphors. The disclosure of who someone is happens by means of speech and action. Thus, it is politically significant what concepts we use for describing various events and phenomena. This awareness of the role of language brings in also an element of responsibility into Arendt's philosophy. Political action (*praxis*) requires a theoretical framework according to which human beings can act politically. However, this theory cannot be conceptualized in the form of a totalitarian or divine law. Instead, for Arendt the contingent and fragile human habitat must be supported by legal institutions and agreements such as international law. The relevance of Arendt's philosophy is thus still significant when analyzing such contemporary political phenomenon as the «war on terrorism».

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Adolf Eichmann's inability to reflect on abstract moral values and conventions was according to Hannah Arendt a result of his resistance to *think* independently. Driven by repetitive, cliché ridden use of language and habits, Eichmann had created a wall around himself that distorted his conception of reality (Arendt, 1963/1994: 49; Arendt, 2003b: 160). In addition to writing a report on the trial for *The New Yorker*, the purpose of *Eichmann in Jerusalem – A report on the Banality of Evil* was to give an account of the dreadful effects that a totally bureaucratic society can have on an individual. For Arendt, the character of Adolf Eichmann was what she called an «ideal type». The characteristic of Eichmann's inability to think represented for Arendt all those people who participated in one way or the other in the Nazi movement and in the holocaust.[1] It was this dramatic comparison with a Nazi officer and a general tendency that may be actualized in all human beings, that arouse a tremendous critique against the book.[2]

In her lecture *Thinking and Moral Considerations* from 1971 – in which she returns to Eichmann's inability to think – Arendt justifies her choice of using ideal types. Here Socrates' character functions as the critical thinker *par excellence* and Arendt states that «...the great advantage of the ideal type is precisely that he is not a personified abstraction with some allegorical meaning ascribed to it, but that he was chosen out of the crowd of living beings, in the past or the present, because he possessed a representative significance in reality which only needed some purification in order to reveal its full meaning» (Arendt, 2003b: 169). The representative significance of Adolf Eichmann is that he is a person who has become the prisoner of unexamined routines, social conducts and empty language. The «banality» of his evil deeds was according to Arendt not due to some Satanic or demonic wickedness, nor due to severe mental illness, but due to a lack of reflective thought and thereupon lack of judgment.

The trial of Adolf Eichmann and the conclusions that Arendt drew from this trial made her begin to examine the conception of thinking in the history of Western philosophical and political thought. If the lack of questioning and examining given moral conducts and codes of expression can lead one to blind obedience of rules, can critical thinking prevent one from comitting terrible deeds? Could it be that thought and action were connected in some morally significant way? In order to be able to give an answer to such questions, Arendt regarded it necessary to examine the *experience* of thinking. However, instead of attempting to define what thinking is, Arendt guided her inquiry by asking «what makes us think» (Arendt, 1978a: 125)?[3]

Philosophy as critical examination of the present

Arendt refered to her own way of thinking as *Selbstdenken* (thinking for oneself) and as *Denken ohne Geländer* (thinking without banisters) (Arendt, 1978c: 258; Bernstein, 2002: 279).[4] However, she rarely made any explicit statements about her «method» of thinking. Thus her train of thought must be traced from her actual writings, where her thought is in

action. Arendt's conceptual distinctions and mixing of litterary genres work for a purpose. For her, philosophy is a type of practice always tied to the use of language (Young-Bruehl, 1982/2004: 318). The task of thinking thus becomes to critically trace and examine such arguments, lines of thought and statements that have become habitual and common for us. Thus the task is also a practice tied to history. However, according to Arendt, thinking produces no end results or final statements. Instead, «the winds of thought» are destructive, they «...undo, unfreeze as it were, what language, the medium of thinking has frozen into thought – words (concepts, sentences, definitions, doctrines)...» (Arendt, 2003b, 175). By showing the context and philological origins of various «truths» and how they have evolved in the history of Western political and philosophical thought, Arendt aims to disclose the underlying presuppositions in the ways we use various notions and concepts today (Kohn, 2003: x–xi; Young-Bruehl, 1982/2004: 318).

At the end of the first book of the *The Life of the Mind* – called *Thinking* – Arendt reflects on her «method» in the following way:

> «I have clearly joined the ranks of those who for some time now have been attempting to dismantle metaphysics, and philosophy with all its categories, as we have known them from Greece until today. Such dismantling is possible only on the assumption that the thread of the tradition is broken and we shall not be able to renew it. Historically speaking, what actually has been broken down is the Roman trinity that for thousands of years united religion, authority, and tradition. The loss of this tradition does not destroy the past, and the dismantling process itself is not destructive; it only draws conclusions from a loss which is a fact and as such no longer a part of the "history of ideas" but of our political history, the history of the world» (1978a: 212).

Jacques Taminiaux and Dana Villa characterize Arendt's way of thinking as a form of deconstruction (Taminiaux, 1992/1997; Villa, 1996). In contrast to Heidegger's *destruction*, Arendt's aim is not to discover *the* authentic origin of our ways of thinking about Being, nor is it an effort to articulate the authentic vision of truth. Instead, Arendt's motives are ethical and political. It is to aim at the understanding of how we came to think about various political and philosophical phenomena in the ways that we do. Despite their differences, what is perhaps less evident is that Arendt's method bears a resemblance to Michel Foucault's «ontology of the present»[5] (Allen, 2002: 141–142; Altunok, 2005: 3–4). In the introduction to *The Use of Pleasure* Foucault writes of the task of philosophy:

> «There are times in life when the question of knowing if one can think differently than one thinks, and perceive differently than one sees, is absolutely necessary if one is to go on looking or reflecting at all. ... But then, what is philosophy –philosophical activity, I mean –if it's not the critical work that thought bears to bring on itself? In what does it consist, if not in the endeavor to know how and to what extent it might be possible to think differently, instead of *legitimating* what is already known? There is

always something ludicrous in philosophical discourse when it tries, from the outside, to dictate to others, to tell them where their truth is and how to find it, or when it works up a case against them in the language of naive positivity» (Foucault, 1985: 8–9, italics added).

Arendt herself writes in a similar manner of the political implications of her method of dismantling in *Thinking and Moral Considerations*:

> «The purging element in thinking, Socrates' midwifery, that brings out the implications of unexamined opinions and thereby destroys them – values, doctrines, theories, and even convictions – is political by implication. For this destruction has a liberating effect on another human faculty, the faculty of judgment, which one may call, with some justification, the most political of man's mental abilities. It is the faculty to judge *particulars* without subsuming them under those general rules, which can be taught and learned until they grow into habits that can be replaced by other habits and rules» (Arendt, 2003a: 189, italics in the original text).

Since for Arendt action (*praxis*) is a capacity to take initiative, to break with the habits and begin something new, philosophy as linguistic *praxis* can function as a possibility enabling us to think differently about our history and about our present. The break of the tradition means that the framework and posing of traditional metaphysical questions have lost its plausibility (Arendt, 1978a: 10). «What you are left with is still the past, but a *fragmented* past, which has lost its certainty of evaluation» (Arendt, 1978a: 212). For Arendt, history has neither a beginning nor an end. Instead, it is a narrative patchwork of events evaluated from multiple perspectives at particular times in particular places (Arendt, 1958/1998: 184–185; Vowinckel, 2001: 343). Philosophy as a critical examination of the present thus aims at an understanding of various contemporary phenomena, not at legitimating the necessity of historical process and doctrines of knowledge.

In the following I aim to shed light on a particular problem that Arendt wanted to dismantle and understand. This is the opposing of the life of thinking (*bios theōrētikos* and *Vita Contemplativa*) to the life of action (*bios politikos* and the *Vita Activa*) in the history of Western thought. Contrary to the general, historical conceptions of these two realms, Arendt claims that *praxis* and *theōria* are neither ontologically nor transcendentally separated. Instead the two are two drastically differing aspects, though always interrelated through discoursive, linguistic thought (*logos*).

The experience of thinking from the perspective of the *Vita Contemplativa*

Whereas Arendt devoted herself in *The Human Condition* to the investigation of the active life (*Vita Activa*) and especially the indeterminate and unpredictable nature of human action (*praxis*), in volume one of *The Life of The Mind*, called *Thinking*, Arendt engages herself in a

historical archeology of the dichotomous distinction between thought and action. Whereas the perspective in *The Human Condition* was that of the *Vita Activa*, the viewpoint has now shifted to the perspective of the *Vita Contemplativa*. The investigation is presented through a description of the *experience* of metaphysical reflection. In Richard Bernstein's words, «Arendt's project, especially in *The Life of the Mind*, might be characterized as developing a phenomenology of thinking» (Bernstein, 2000/2002: 286). Arendt's claim is that if we look at the descriptions of thinking in the history of Western philosophy, there seems to be something inherently isolating and solitary in the experience of metaphysical reflection, that is, in «thinking» (Arendt, 1978a: 197–199).

What is special in the first part of *The Life of the Mind* is that Arendt takes seriously the various descriptions of thinking that philosophers have given throughout centuries, instead of simply dismissing them as worn out and implausible.[6] Arendt's hypothesis is that if we are able to understand what for example Plato and Aristotle meant with wonder (*thaumazein*), what Dun Scotus and the medieval Christian philosophers meant with the infinite presence (*nunc stans* and *nunc aeternitas*) or what Descartes meant with «metaphysical meditations», then we can get a picture of some of the key elements in the faculty of reflective thought.

> «The metaphysical fallacies contain the only clues we have to what thinking means for those who engage in it – something of great importance today and about which, oddly enough, there exists very few direct utterances» (Arendt, 1978a: 11).

Arendt claims that although in perception the appearing, phenomenal world is always experienced as a spatio-temporal unity and background of our movement, metaphysical reflection somehow seems as if it is able to annihilate both time and space. Arendt gives several examples of this strange experience:

> «It is as though I had withdrawn to a never-never land, the land of invisibles, of which I would know nothing, had I not this faculty of remembering and imagining. Thinking annihilates temporal and spatial distances... As far as space is concerned, I know of no philosophical or metaphysical concept that could plausibly relate to this experience; but I am rather certain that the *nunc stans*, the standing now, became the symbol for eternity – the "*nunc aeternitas*" (Dun Scotus) – for medieval philosophy because it was a plausible description of experiences that took place in meditation as well as in contemplation, the two modes of thought known to Christianity» (Arendt, 1978a: 87–88).

These experiences of withdrawal to silence and solitude makes – according to Arendt – possible such philosophical doctrines as Plato's doctrine of ideas and the Cartesian mind-body dualism (Arendt, 1978a: 84–85; 197–213). This is because reflective *consciousness* is capable of focusing away from our everyday bodily awareness. However, this does of course not imply that the most basic structures of consciousness and embodiment

would stop functioning during meditation. The strangeness that Arendt locates is rather in the *experience* of not being aware of one's own body (Arendt, 1978a: 162–163). Arendt stresses that also our imagination is to a large extent voluntary, whereas bodily sense-perception is not. The experience of momentarily freedom from bodily needs is dramatically characterized in Plato's cave parable and also in the Greek conception of *thaumazein* – a type of wonder at the face of the world which is compulsive in the sense that wonder is not a matter of choice, but something that has to be endured. Arendt pays attention to the fact that in the context of this admirable wonder, the concept «world» means the harmonous *kosmos* or eternal universe, not the perishable and ever changing world of human affairs (Arendt, 1978a: 142–143).

The separation of thought and language in Ancient Greek philosophy

Acording to Arendt, it is the experience of silent and still, meditative thinking that leads to the ancient distinction between reason (*nous*) and language (*logos*). Arendt holds that for Parmenides, Pythagoras, Plato and Aristotle, the divine capability of the philosopher is his use of reason (*nous*), through which he can think (*noein*) and look (*theorein*) at the eternal truth and thereby become united with the imperishable kosmos and the Divine (Arendt, 1978a: 93, 129, 136). Arendt explains that for example Aristotle in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, holds this type of thinking to be *athanatizein* – to immortalize oneself (Arendt, 1978a, 136). The theoretical way of life, which for the Greeks was called *bios theoretikos* and for the medieval Christians the *Vita Contemplativa* becomes – with these *deliberate* choices of notions – the highest form of human life (Arendt, 1958/1998: 14–15; 1978a: 137).

Arendt notes that this old conception is based on an analogy between vision and thought. Reason is held to be non-linguistic (*aneu logou* and *arrheton*) (Arendt, 1978a: 137–138; Arendt, 1958/1998: 17–21). The philosopher simply sees the truth through his use of reason. However, the content of this non-linguistic truth must be expressed to other philosophers in the form of spoken words or written texts, if the philosophical tradition is to remain alive from generation to generation. Arendt remarks that for example Aristotle notices that after the thought-process, one must attempt to express the contents of thinking as truthfully as possible (Arendt, 1978a: 137). But in order for this to be possible, one must assume an isomorphic relation between thoughts and words. This is because the truth that the philosopher sees is according to Aristotle and Plato not a mere opinion (*doxa*), but an eternal truth (*aletheia*). However, speech and written texts inevitably belong to the perishable and contingent world of human affairs, since they are material. *Logos* is simply the capacity of mortals to say what is as it is. Thus Plato and his followers did not regard language (logos) as divine. The truth seen by the philosophers is regarded as being independent of who sees it. Therefore, the paradox is that the non-linguistic truth apprehended by reason, becomes the criteria for

truthful speech (*logos apophantikos*), which again – paradoxically – is always linguistic (Arendt, 1978a: 137–138). The exchange of mere opinions in the world of human affairs is regarded as less valuable and secondary to the eternal truths apprehended by thinking.

This distinction has dramatical consequences for the realm of politics and action. Plato's utopia of the philosopher-king who, through the use of supratemporal laws rules the state as a dictator – the one who literary dictates to others who obey – and Hegel's conception of the Absolute Spirit as the true subject of teleological worldhistory are dramatic examples of a philosophical theory for politics. In both cases, the «point is to eliminate the accidental» and the contingent (Arendt, 1978a: 139; Arendt 1968/1993a: 112–113; Arendt 1952/2004: 599–601). Arendt credits Nietzsche for being brave enough to question the eternal validity of idelogies and moral conducts and seeing the presuppositions lying beneath our use of concepts (Arendt, 2003a: 162–163).

> «The difficulty to which the "awesome science" of metaphysics has given rise since its inception could possibly all be summed up in the natural tension between *theoria* and *logos*, between seeing and reasoning with words, – whether in the form of "dialectics" (*dia-legesthai*) or, on the contrary, of the "syllogism" (*syl-logizesthai*), i. e., whether it takes things, especially opinions, apart by means of words or brings them together in a discourse depending for its truth content on a primary premise perceived by intuition, by the nous, which is not subject to error because it is not *meta logou*, sequential to words» (Arendt, 1978a: 120).

Arendt holds that the condition for the possibility of these experiences of timeless and non-spatial meditation is an imaginary abstraction from the way the world is originally given to us in sensible perception (Arendt, 1978a: 199). Our perceptual experience is dependent on a conception of spatial dimensions and thus we refer even to temporal tenses by using expressions such as «the past is behind us» and «the future is ahead of us» (Arendt, 1978a: 205–206). The conceptual language we use for describing our mental experiences, such as various forms of thinking, is a derivative from the language we use for describing perception. Thus, the ancient distinction between *nous* and *phainomena* – or in modern terms, between the «mental» and the «physical» – is not an ontological distinction, but a conceptual distinction, rooted in our use of language. Even in deep meditation, the thinking mind is still an embodied mind connected to the appearing, phenomenal world by means of the body and language (Arendt, 1978a: 162; Arendt, 1978b: 55). The perceived objects carry with them an indication that they are indeed objects for several subjects.

Discoursive thought and the intertwining of the *Vita Contemplativa* and the *Vita Activa*

Arendt's point is that the withdrawal to the subjective realm of reflective consciousness in the form of thinking presupposes the existence of an intersubjective community that shares a common world as the background

of perception and a common linguistic system as a reference point for thought. This is because according to Arendt, reflection takes its bearings from the visible world of perception and apprehends its structures by means of conceptual thought. Thus thinking is always already intertwined with language. The intentional bond between the philosopher and the world can never be interrupted by means of a philosophical method because language binds thought and the world (Arendt, 1978a: 110). *Nous* and *logos* – reason and language – are inseparable because thinking is discoursive (Arendt, 1978a: 31, 101; Honkasalo, 2006: 56–60).

Whenever we want to describe a perception, an experience or a thought-pattern, we need to rely on some form of a language or system of signs. This can be sign language, speech or a written text, but the criteria is that the language is constructed through a set of common rules of use for that particular language (Burks, 2002, §25–27, 33). Arendt admits that we might feel that we cannot adequately express our most personal experiences or complex thoughts properly in any type of language, since the experience of thinking is very different from for example the experience of perceiving something or doing something practical. It may appear as if something essential to the experience or thought disappears the moment it is brought into language. Thus Arendt asks:

> «Was it not precisely the discrepancy between words, the medium in which we think, and the world of appearances, the medium in which we live, that lead to philosophy and metaphysics in the first place?» (Arendt, 1978a: 8).

The problem concerning knowledge regarding the true metaphysical nature of the universe arises precisely because we cannot achieve a neutral point outside language from which we could evaluate which is prior to the other, thought to language or the other way around. Linguistic concepts are learned through the use of a flexible, historical language-system that we are born into. We learn to point to and speak about perceived objects by means of a linguistic system that has a set of common rules. Thus, according to Arendt, meaning arises through the use of words in particular sentences, in a particular natural language (Arendt, 1978a: 99, 171, 175). However, Arendt does not regard language and its concepts as somehow innate. Language is rather an elastic and holistic network whose concepts change within historical periods, and cultural contexts, through the creative inventions of language-using human beings who disclose themselves through speech and action.[7]

> «Human plurality is the paradoxical plurality of unique beings. Speech and action reveal this unique distinctness. Through them, men distinguish themselves instead of being merely distinct; they are the modes by which human beings appear to each other, not indeed as physical objects but qua *men*. With word and deed we insert ourselves into the human world and this insertion is like a second birth, in which we confirm and take ourselves the naked fact of our original physical appearance» (Arendt, 1958/1998: 176).

Here Arendt's conception of action is perhaps most clearly tied to language. In sections 24–26 of chapter V (Action) in *The Human Condition*, Arendts elaborates on the connection between narration and meaningfulness. Actions are meaningful due to the fact that they always happen against the background of an intersubjective community, the «web of human relationships» (Arendt, 1958/1998: 188; Tsao, 2002: 103). In a similar way as thinking needs to be conceptualized in order for its content to be comprehesible for others, also action needs to be conceptualized in the form of a story so that it can have durability in the fragile and changing human world. The task of thinking cannot be left for the «professionals», as Arendt calls academic philosophers, but is a capability of everyone.

Conclusions

For Arendt thus, language binds thinking and action, the *Vita Activa* and the *Vita Contemplativa*, without collapsing them into each other. The way we use language influences our ways of thinking and apprehending the world. However, critical thinking, which for Arendt is always already discoursive and semantically tied to the world, is needed to realize our customs and habits. In Arendt's nominalistic conception of language, there is no isomorphism between thoughts and words and thus there is neither an absolute nor a final truth that can be achieved through intuitive thinking. Particular philosophical and political issues require a context-dependent analysis.

Political action requires a theoretical framework to support the political life. However, this cannot be a theory in the sense of a supratemporal or necessary set of laws or force of history. Instead, the contingent and fragile human habitat must be supported by international agreements and constitutions that secure the rights and freedom of diverse individuals and thus affirms the plurality of humanity (Taminiaux, 2002: 175–177).

The link between thinking, language and judgment is a significant political issue even in contemporary international politics, especially during the so called post cold war "new world order". George Lakoff, Shari Stone-Mediatore and Camillo C. Bica among others have paid attention to the power of patriotic language-use in war propaganda, the justification of military interference as a tool for foreign policy and the use of war as an extension of diplomacy (Shari-Mediatore, 2006; Bica, 2006). Ken McDonald, director of the UK's Public Prosecution and head of the Crown Prosecution Service has warned about the consequences of calling the fighting of international terrorism as «war on terrorism» (Bannerman, 2007: 12). This type of language-use misleadingly represents civil cities as war zones and criminals as soldiers. Moreover, our use of concepts influences not only the formation of moral judgments, but real political decision making and legislation regarding for example immigration policies. The responsibility to reflect and act on issues like these is still as important as it was in Arendt's days.

«At these moments, thinking ceases to be a marginal affair in political matters. When evrybody is swept away unthinkingly by what everyone else does and believes in, those who think are drawn out of hiding because their refusal to join is conspicuous and becomes a kind of action» (Arendt, 2003a, 188)

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[1] In *Eichmann in Jerusalem* Arendt addresses also the question of how it was possible that the resistance to the *final solution* was so minimal (Arendt, 1963/1998: 117–120, 169).

[2] Arendt's former student, Elizabeth Kamar Minnich recalls that Hans Jonas actually stopped talking to Arendt after the publication of the book (Minnich, 2002: 123) For a detailed account of the reception of *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, see Cohen, 2001.

[3] It is ironic that in his lectures from 1951–1952, published as *Wass Heisst Denken?* (*What is Called Thinking*) Arendt's former teacher, Martin Heidegger had claimed that «Most thought-provoking [in our times] is that we are still not thinking» (Heidegger, 1954/1968: 4).

[4] In the interview with Günter Gaus from 1964, Arendt considers herself a political theorist rather than a philosopher. For her the importance is to understand difficult problems, not necessary to solve them (Arendt, 1994: 1–3). Richard J. Bernstein finds traces of Arendt's own thought in the passage of *Men in Dark Times* (p. 205–206), where she refers to Walter Benjamin's thinking as a form of pearl diving. (Bernstein, 2002: 279.) Elizabeth Young-Bruehl recalls that Arendt called her method «conceptual analysis» and «linguistic analysis» (Young-Bruehl, 1982/2004: 318).

[5] I thank Krista Johansson for this remark.

[6] In contemporary philosophy of mind and neurology, Antonio Damasio has used a similar research method. In addition to empirical research, Damasio has examined the texts of Descartes and Spinoza in order to understand how and why the classical mind-body division arose (see for example Damasio, 2003).

[7] Arendt, like Heidegger and the later Wittgenstein, holds that the meanings of words are formed in practices of languages. Arendt often uses as her example the word «house» and shows how the word designates various, particular houses which are all characterized by someone living and dwelling in them (Arendt, 2003a: 172–173).