

Editor's General Introduction*

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This introduction first summarizes Arendt's life and chief works. The main part then examines three major streams in her thought, relating to totalitarian evil, her concept of plurality, and her quest for understanding. The concluding section briefly examines Arendt's status as a 'philosopher' – a title she herself disavowed. In a postscript I ask what Arendt might have made of the commentary collected in these volumes. A brief comment on principles of editorial section is also appended.

In addition, each of the volumes will contain a short introduction, summarizing its contents and noting overlaps between some of the different areas of critical discussion. There are four volumes:

- I. This first volume is principally devoted to **Arendt and political events**. The articles consider Arendt's understanding of totalitarianism and her historical method, as well as her concern with Jewish politics. This volume also includes some **personal portraits** of Arendt by those who knew her well.
- II. The second volume, **Arendt and political philosophy**, considers her thought in relation to major topics of political philosophy: rights, democracy, revolution, feminism. It also contains articles on public controversies provoked by her writings, especially by *Eichmann in Jerusalem*.
- III. The third volume, **The Human Condition**, is centred on this book as well as the essays contained in *Between Past and Future*. The articles assess these works and investigate key themes, such as Arendt's account of 'the social,' her philosophy of action, and her distinction between power and violence.
- IV. The fourth volume, **Arendt and philosophy**, opens by considering Arendt in connection with some of the philosophers who were most important to her intellectual formation. It then considers her book *The Life of the Mind* and the topic of its unwritten third part, judgment, before turning to Arendt's abiding preoccupation with political evil.

* To the collection *Critical Assessments of Hannah Arendt*, due to appear in Routledge's Critical Assessments of Leading Political Philosophers series at the end of 2005.

For comments and discussions regarding this introduction, I am extremely grateful to Seyla Benhabib, Margaret Canovan, Wolfgang Heuer, Morris Kaplan, Jerome Kohn, Ursula Ludz, Andy Schaap, Alison Stone, Roy Tsao and Myfanwy Williams.

Life and chief works*

Hannah Arendt was born in 1906 in Hannover, in northern Germany. Her father soon became ill with the tertiary syphilis that would kill him in 1913, and her parents returned to the city of Königsberg, where both sides of the family were well-established in the city's Jewish community. This city was destroyed in the second world war and the territory became part of the USSR; Kaliningrad now stands in its place. At the same time, the whole class of assimilated German-Jewry from which Arendt came was wiped out – killed or dislocated, across Europe, to Palestine, to the USA.

Arendt would arrive in America in 1941; in between were the years of her intellectual and political education. Her school years were a time of relative normalcy, nonetheless shadowed by the long illness and loss of her father. Arendt was precocious and brilliant; by sixteen, she had memorised a large part of German poetry and read Kant, Kierkegaard and Jaspers. This determined her decision to study theology and philosophy in Berlin, Marburg, and Heidelberg. Her teachers included the most famous names of her day – Jaspers, Husserl, Rudolf Bultmann, and Heidegger, with whom

* References to key texts are made using the following abbreviations:

OT: Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, new edition with added prefaces, Harcourt Brace, New York, 1973

HC: Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1958

EJ: Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, revised edition, Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1977

MDT: Hannah Arendt, *Men in Dark Times*, Harcourt, Brace & World, New York, 1968

LM I: *The Life of the Mind*, vol. I: *Thinking*, ed Mary McCarthy, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, New York, 1978

'P&P': Hannah Arendt, 'Philosophy and Politics,' *Social Research* 57:1, 1990, 73-104 (a slightly different version will be published under the title 'Socrates' in Hannah Arendt, *The Promise of Politics*, ed Jerome Kohn, Schocken, New York, 2005)

'MH80': Hannah Arendt, 'Martin Heidegger at Eighty' (1971), reprinted in *Heidegger and Modern Philosophy: Critical Essays*, ed Michael Murray (Yale University Press, New Haven, 1978, 293-303)

'HA': Hannah Arendt, 'On Hannah Arendt' (1972), in Melvyn Hill, ed, *Hannah Arendt: the recovery of the public world* (St Martin's Press, New York, 1977, 301-339)

HA-KJ: Hannah Arendt & Karl Jaspers, *Correspondence: 1926-1969*, trans Robert & Rita Kimber, Harcourt Brace, New York, 1992 (German edition: *Arendt-Jaspers-Briefwechsel*, eds Lotte Kohler & Hans Saner, Piper, München, 1985)

EU: Hannah Arendt, *Essays in Understanding*, ed. Jerome Kohn, Harcourt Brace, New York, 1994

RJ: Hannah Arendt, *Responsibility and Judgment*, ed Jerome Kohn, Schocken, New York, 2003

EYB: Elisabeth Young-Bruehl, *Hannah Arendt: For love of the world*, Yale University Press, New Haven, 1982; 2nd edition with new Preface, 2004

Reinterpretation: Margaret Canovan, *Hannah Arendt: A reinterpretation of her political thought*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1992

Arendt had a brief affair when she was eighteen.¹ Her studies ended at twenty-two with her doctoral dissertation on the concept of love in Saint Augustine.

Political events would now determine both Arendt's life and intellectual career. Despite her early lack of interest in both politics and Judaism, Arendt became more politically aware than many of her contemporaries, not least because of her friendship with the Zionist Kurt Blumenfeld. Living in Berlin with her first husband, Günther Stern (pen-name: Günther Anders), Arendt investigated the nature of Jewish assimilation in the German romantic era, writing a life of salon hostess Rahel Varnhagen (1771-1833). As Hitler gained power, she helped Blumenfeld's German Zionist Organisation and communists persecuted by the Nazis (though neither Zionist nor communist in her opinions). Arrested for the former activity, she fled Germany in 1933, and settled in Paris. Here she was active in Jewish causes and Zionist organisations. As she later said, 'If one is attacked as a Jew, one must defend oneself as a Jew... I wanted to go into practical work, exclusively and only Jewish work.'² In Paris she divorced Stern and met her second husband, Heinrich Blücher, in 1936, who would be her life's companion until his death in 1970.

In 1940, as the war on France began in earnest, Arendt was interned as an 'enemy alien,' and was transported to a camp in southern France, which she was able to leave in a brief moment of confusion when the French government fell in June 1940. Together with Blücher, she was lucky enough to obtain a visa to emigrate to the USA.

Arendt arrived in New York in May 1941, and quickly found a place in the city's Jewish intellectual circles. She wrote a column for the Jewish weekly *Aufbau* ('reconstruction'), arguing about Jewish politics and the fate of Zionism. She published in other Jewish and academic journals, as well as *Partisan Review*. Many of these articles would contribute to the first two parts of *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, a *tour de force* of impassioned political understanding that she completed in 1949. It was published to immediate acclaim in 1951 – the same year Arendt gained American citizenship.

Her reputation established, Arendt was awarded a research grant from the Guggenheim Foundation and a series of visiting professorships, amongst others at Princeton, Chicago and Berkeley. These were years of intense thought and writing: what is often regarded as her master-work, *The Human Condition*, appeared in 1958; a volume of essays, *Between Past and Future*, composed over these years, was published in 1961; *On Revolution* in 1963.

Though rarely mentioned in the pages of these books, Arendt's concern with the totalitarian catastrophe and Jewish politics did not disappear, as her 1963 book *Eichmann in Jerusalem* testifies. Arendt went to Jerusalem in 1961 to report on the trial of Adolf Eichmann, a Nazi functionary who had organised the transport of millions of Jews to the extermination camps. Arendt's account, in particular her description of the 'fearsome, word-and-thought-defying *banality of evil*,'³ set off a controversy that still

¹ The enduring importance of this relationship is explored in Dana Villa's article, 'The Anxiety of Influence,' in vol. IV [ref].

² As she observed in her famous interview with Günther Gaus, *EU* 12.

³ *EJ* 252.

leaves traces of bitterness in some circles. Intellectually, it led her to renewed interest in the roles of factual truth and individual thought in moral and political judgment.

These concerns were reflected in Arendt's discussions of American politics: of civil disobedience (non-violent action), of violence and its impotence (as in Vietnam), of lying (for instance, as revealed in the Pentagon papers on Vietnam). (This work was collected in *Crises of the Republic*, 1972). She pursued these issues in a quite different direction, too, in her lectures on the role of thought in moral matters, and her final philosophical reflections. In her Gifford lectures of 1973 and 1974, willing becomes her explicit topic alongside thinking – the two parts of her posthumous *The Life of the Mind* (1978). The intended third part, on judging, was never written as such – its title page stood in her typewriter when she died of a heart attack in 1975 in her New York apartment.⁴

The Life of the Mind was the first of a stream of posthumous publications. As Margaret Canovan has observed, 'The books for which Arendt is best known rise like islands out of a partly submerged continent of thought, some of it recorded in obscure articles, some of it only in unpublished writings.'⁵ Ron Feldman's collection of her articles on Jewish politics, *The Jew as Pariah*, appeared in 1978 but has, unfortunately, long been out of print. Arendt's lectures on Kant's 'unwritten' political philosophy appeared in 1982, edited by Ronald Beiner. A series of essays and lectures has appeared in journals such as *Social Research*. Ursula Ludz and others have edited many of her German writings, most recently the *Denktagebuch*, the notebooks she kept from 1950 to 1973 (though only a very few entries follow the first of 1971: 'Without Heinrich. / Free – like a leaf in the wind.'). In English or in German we now have access to her correspondences with many figures, including Karl Jaspers, Mary McCarthy, Heinrich Blücher, and Martin Heidegger. Jerome Kohn has been editing Arendt's uncollected and unpublished essays: *Essays in Understanding* and *Responsibility and Judgment* have begun this projected series of five volumes. Not least, the Library of Congress has made large parts of her papers available in electronic form.⁶

That this continent of thought is gradually seeing the light of day is one sign of Arendt's posthumous reputation. Likewise the outpouring of scholarship on her work, the influence of her thought in contemporary philosophy and political theory, the teaching of her work in universities across the world. These volumes attempt to gather some of the most important assessments of Arendt's work, from the time it was published up to the present day. Each of the volumes contains a short introduction, briefly summarising the contributions that are collected there. In the remainder of this general introduction, I would like to say something about the specific sources of Arendt's thought and some reasons why her reputation has grown so unmistakably since her death.

⁴ See Michael Denny's article, 'The Privilege of Ourselves,' in vol IV. [ref].

⁵ *Reinterpretation* 3.

⁶ <http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/arendhtml>

Specific sources of Arendt's thought

Hannah Arendt was a philosopher turned citizen and political thinker.⁷

Despite the variety and richness of Arendt's works, it is possible to trace her thought in terms of three basic themes: (1) Her encounter with the political disasters of the twentieth century, above all totalitarianism. (2) Arendt traces a traditional hostility between philosophy and politics. To surmount such hostility, Arendt's political thought is oriented by the concept of *plurality*, 'the fact that men, not Man... inhabit the world.'⁸ (3) The quest for meaning pursued via thought, which is then realized in terms of understanding, storytelling and judgment.

The encounter with modern political evil

Speaking in 1954, Arendt identified what, in her view, was the principal failure in the political thinking of contemporaries such as Camus and Sartre, Jaspers and Heidegger:

It seems to me significant that not one of [these] philosophers has mentioned or analysed in philosophical terms this background in experience ['the sheer horror of contemporary political events']. It is as though in this refusal to own up to the experience of horror and take it seriously the philosophers have inherited the traditional refusal to grant the realm of human affairs that *thaumadzein*, that wonder at what is as it is, which, according to Plato and Aristotle, is at the beginning of all philosophy...⁹

Faced with the abyss that had opened with the totalitarian extermination camps, Arendt wondered at 'the sheer horror of contemporary political events' with peculiar passion and intensity. In 1949 she had completed her first great book, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*. Arendt would stand by its analysis of the forces that had torn apart European civilisation, but the book did not wholly clarify the resulting political evils. An important additional essay, 'Ideology and Terror' (1953), analyses totalitarianism as a novel form of government, and would form the final chapter of later editions of *Origins*.

One controversy to be seen in these volumes regards the 'modernity' of Arendt's thought. Arendt's next book, arguably her *magnum opus*, was *The Human Condition* (1958). A criticism that has issued from – understandably baffled – readers concerned the 'nostalgia' and 'anti-modernism' of Arendt's vision. *The Human Condition* appears to idealise the ancient Greek *polis* and to reject the modern world – not only totalitarianism but also the achievements of liberalism and its steps to social equality. Throughout the book Arendt disparages modern equality as social conformism and deplores the preoccupation of modern politics with economic questions. Moreover,

⁷ Margaret Canovan, 'Socrates or Heidegger?' (at beginning of section 'Internal dialogue') – [ref to text in vol. IV]

⁸ *HC* 7.

⁹ 'Concern with Politics in Recent European Thought,' *EU* 445.

totalitarianism is mentioned in only the briefest passing in Arendt's account of 'the active life.'¹⁰

Yet, for the attentive reader, it forms a silent presence throughout the book,¹¹ especially in the light of her reflections in 'Ideology and Terror' (added to the second edition of *Origins*, also published in 1958). The totalitarian horror resonates darkly even as Arendt delineates perennial features of human action: the novelty of human affairs (what was more novel than this new form of government?), the unpredictability of action (what less predictable than the collapse of all certainties within the space of one generation?), the unreliability of men (who less reliable than the mobs and adventurers, race-thinkers and plutocrats who undermined the nation-state?¹²), the darkness of the human heart (where darker than when its moods and caprices determined life and death in the concentration camps?); and, above all, the frailty of human affairs. Arendt's silence, one may say in retrospect, was very loud indeed.

One thing that made her silence difficult to hear was the fact that she had already gone so far beyond other students of totalitarianism. As she indicated, philosophers were not facing the sheer horror of events, while political scientists had said much about Stalinist and Nazi methods of government, but kept largely silent regarding the exterminations they had visited upon their populations. It would be decades before Holocaust studies and memorials became established academic and political facts. Arendt saw immediately the scale of this evil – and insisted that it was indeed necessary to 'dwell on horrors.'¹³

However, Arendt was quite aware that mass murder had previously been perpetrated on even larger scales, indeed that whole peoples had been exterminated; nor was she prepared to invest a crime with special significance because of who its victims were. ('[A] crime against humanity, perpetrated upon the body of the Jewish people,' was her clinically apposite description of the Nazi genocide in *Eichmann in Jerusalem*.¹⁴) 'Seeing historically and thinking politically,' as she once put it,¹⁵ what she tried to do was to penetrate the *political* nature of the crime, which took her beyond its scale, beyond its origins, directly to the totalitarian form of government itself.

What made for the horrible novelty of totalitarianism was not, then, the number of victims nor the amount of suffering. Instead it was the experiment with human nature

¹⁰ Thus the title of the German edition of the book, *Vita Activa*.

¹¹ Thus Mary Dietz, 'Arendt and the Holocaust,' in Dana Villa (ed) *Cambridge Companion to Hannah Arendt*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2000.

¹² Who indeed? Perhaps, as Arendt suggests in writings from the mid-sixties onwards, those who seemed to be reliable in terms of traditional morality yet nonetheless exchanged commitments as soon as circumstances changed: 'those who were still very firmly convinced of the so-called old values were the first to be ready to change their old values for a new set of values,' 'HA' 314. See also 'Thinking and Moral Considerations' and 'Some Questions of Moral Philosophy' in *RJ*.

¹³ *OT* 441.

¹⁴ *EJ* 269.

¹⁵ In a letter to Jaspers, 29.1.46; HA-KJ 31.

that totalitarianism had undertaken: a demonstration that human beings can be made superfluous, the criminal attempt to ‘change human nature’¹⁶ and to eliminate the spontaneity of human beings. The camps, Arendt insists, ‘are the true central institution of totalitarian organisational power.’¹⁷ There we see the human being robbed not only of legal and political rights, not only of moral power of choice, but of the very capacity to do anything whatsoever on his own initiative. This experiment is central to totalitarianism because it vindicates the totalitarian ideology of historical and political *movement*, which holds each individual’s own initiatives to be unnecessary, pointless, meaningless. If events automatically follow laws of nature or history, any given individual becomes superfluous, the leaders as much as the ‘living corpses’ of the camps.¹⁸

A different way of understanding the evil of totalitarianism is its attempt to do away with all space between human beings. Arendt will insist that we only know ourselves and others insofar as we *appear* to one another. In thinking, we exploit our inner plurality, engaging in dialogue with ourselves. Yet this process always threatens to undo our identity and unravel our connection to a world shared with others. Our oneness or identity is revealed in acting and speaking – first, in the basic sense that we are (seen as) the same person now as we were yesterday, however unreliable we may be in other regards; second, in the sense of our distinctness, that we are (seen to be) not the same as any other person. But this distinctness is only revealed where we retain our power of initiative, and where others are able to judge us on the basis of our deeds and words. The camps eliminated not only initiative but also any ‘space of appearances.’ They were created as holes of oblivion – so that no testimony should emerge, so that all testimony that did emerge seemed intrinsically incredible, as incredible to the survivor who had been cut off from a shared world as much as to h/er listeners.

In short, ‘the true central institutions of totalitarian power’ annihilated what would become the centre of Arendt’s account of the public realm in *The Human Condition*. The initiative belonging to action is destroyed. The space that opens up between human beings when they speak and act and reveal themselves to one another is obliterated. All sorts of forces and accidents made this possible. Some of these forces are, Arendt argued, also at work in modern societies – hence *The Human Condition*’s pessimistic and controversial analysis of the modern world in terms of ‘the social.’ Moreover, at least some of the blame must attach to our failures to appreciate how far our human nature is only revealed to us in conditions of equality and freedom, where rights to action and to opinion are meaningful realities.

Philosophy, politics, and plurality

The transition between political evil and this second major theme is indicated by Arendt in an important letter to Karl Jaspers:

¹⁶ OT 458f.

¹⁷ OT 438.

¹⁸ OT 459.

I do not know what radical evil really is, but it seems to me to have somehow to do with the following phenomenon: Making human beings superfluous as human beings (not using them as means, which leaves their humanity untouched and damages only their human dignity), rather making them superfluous *qua* human beings. This happens when one cuts off all ‘unpredictability,’ the equivalent of spontaneity in human beings. ... such omnipotence of *the* human being makes human beings [NB plural – GW] superfluous... / I have the suspicion now that philosophy is not entirely blameless in this whole mess. Naturally not in the sense that Hitler had something to do with Plato. (Not least of my reasons for making so much effort to discover the elements of totalitarian governments was to clear the Western tradition from Plato to Nietzsche of such suspicion.) But rather in the sense, that this Western philosophy never had a clear concept of the political, and couldn’t have, because it necessarily spoke of *the* human being and treated the central fact of plurality [only] incidentally. (4.3.51)¹⁹

Philosophers have been occupationally ill-equipped, then, to appreciate this radical evil. In the first place, they have not taken the realm of human affairs seriously, (dis)regarding it as disruptive of reflection and even – recalling Plato’s reaction to the execution of Socrates – as dangerous to their persons. Hence Arendt’s comment, quoted at the beginning of the previous section, that modern European philosophy’s refusal ‘to own up to the experience of horror’ reflects a long-standing refusal to grant *wonder* to human affairs. Second, the most signal fact of human affairs – beyond all horrors and glories – is plurality, which Arendt formulates thus: ‘Plurality is the condition of human action because we are all the same, that is, human, in such a way that nobody is ever the same as anyone else who ever lived, lives, or will live.’²⁰

In a note-book entry from August 1950, Arendt anticipates one of the claims in this letter to Jaspers, writing: ‘philosophy and theology have always been concerned with the human being, so that all their pronouncements would hold even if there were one or two or only identical human beings in the world.’²¹ But this approach has necessarily left them unable to illuminate the human being *qua zoon politikon*, as a political animal,

as if there were something political *in* the person which belongs to h/er essence. But this is exactly wrong: *the* human being is apolitical. Politics originates *in-between* human beings, that is precisely *outside* the individual. Therefore there is

¹⁹ HA-KJ 165ff; my translation from the German edition, 202f.

²⁰ HC 8. Readers familiar with liberal theory may wonder how Arendt’s ‘plurality’ differs from the more usual term ‘pluralism.’ Pluralism may be said to consist in the fact of there being differences between different (groups of) people, who have different identities or cultures. Plurality, however, is not about people being sheerly different from one another (true as that may be), nor about trying to preserve those differences (there may be good reasons to want to overcome some differences). It is rather that distinct persons, biographies and viewpoints always emerge by virtue of our (inter-)acting. In one sense plurality is the more ‘individualistic’ notion, because it is primarily to do with acting individuals, not group identities. At the same time, however, it is more intersubjective, because it pictures our differences (and identities) as made up through our interacting with others, that is, by our relationships. This distinction is important to writers like Bonnie Honig, who use Arendt to overcome some difficulties inherent in political struggles based on supposedly pre-given identities (cf Honig, ‘Towards an agonistic feminism,’ [vol. II, ref]).

²¹ In the *Denktagebuch*, ed Ursula Ludz & Ingeborg Nordmann (Piper, München, 2002: vol I, 15ff); also reprinted in Hannah Arendt, *Was ist Politik?: Fragmente aus dem Nachlaß*, ed Ursula Ludz (Piper, München, 1993; 2nd ed, 2003: 9ff).

no strictly political substance. Politics originates in-between and establishes itself in terms of relations [*als der Bezug*].²²

Arendt arrived at these thoughts as she read and reread the tradition of political philosophy. Her intention was to study Marx, so as to redress the imbalance of *Origins*, its focus upon Nazism rather than Stalinism.²³ Unlike the Nazis' 'gutter-born' ideology, Stalinism had a distinguished paternity, in Marx's thought. Yet it was not just in Marx, but 'from Plato to Nietzsche,' that she found fear, disregard, even contempt of (to put it colloquially) the *messiness* of political life. If plurality, action and opinion had been granted any dignity in the history of thought, it was not by philosophers (although Arendt would make a characteristic exception for Kant), rather by figures in republican political thought such as Machiavelli, Montesquieu, or de Tocqueville.

Though her investigation began with Marx, Arendt would always tell the story of philosophy and politics as beginning with the key figure of Socrates. For Arendt, Socrates embodied at least a partial harmony between thought and the public realm, even as his eventual fate taught Plato about the hostility of politics and philosophy. Socrates practiced philosophy in public, offering not his solitary truths but rather engaging the opinions (*doxai*, from *dokei moi* or 'it-appears-to-me') of whoever would converse with him. And he remained committed to the city, refusing to flee, even when it sentenced him to death for this activity.

Arendt found basic two forms of retreat from the public realm in subsequent philosophers. One was Plato's escape from the cave of human affairs to a space of contemplation, where the thinker would be safe from politics. To ensure this safety, Plato then sought to bring back an absolute standard which stood above all opinions of citizens – the 'form' of the good – which could then determine or legislate the proper shape of political affairs. The other was that of Hegel and Marx: the creation of philosophies of history that 'discovered' a logic to human affairs above and beyond all particular intentions, opinions, actions, even events.

In one sense, at least, the effect of both retreats was the same, to obscure the specific character of human activity and its different modes: hence the famous typology from *The Human Condition*, labour, work and action. Arendt's distinction of labour and work stems from her investigation of Marx: while both are central to his picture of man, she finds that he systematically confused the two, equating our pursuit of life's basic necessities with the creation of lasting, worldly objects. Work figured in her analysis of Plato too, who had seen the political realm as an object to be 'made' by the philosopher-king – made out of 'human material' not capable of the philosopher's expert insight. Most consequentially, however, Arendt distinguished both labour and work from *action*, which Marx's philosophy did not recognise and Plato's philosophy had denigrated.

Action is what happens when a plurality of actors *interact* in a public realm, a space where matters of shared concern are decided in conditions of equality rather than rulership – that is, by consent and persuasion rather than force. As such, action depends on both speech and relationships: we must exchange opinions, speak for our deeds,

²² Ibid. See also *EU* 447, n25.

²³ Arendt consistently prefers the term 'Bolshevism,' as Roy Tsao discusses in 'Three Phases' (ref to reprint in this vol.), but for this introduction I will retain the more familiar term.

relate to those on whose consent and participation our capacity to (inter-)act depends. Arendt underscores two dangers here. *The Human Condition* is, once more, filled with foreboding in recognising that speech and thought might come apart from action, so that opinion and persuasion lose their meaning.²⁴ Second, mute or thoughtless action prefigures violence; violence sheers through the web of relationships and thus seems to relieve the actor of his dependence on others. Yet it also undoes the power that arises when people act together ‘of their own accord,’ as we might put it.

We should not be misled by the contrast with violence to suppose that power and action are by any means harmless. Arendt stresses emphatically the very factors that have made philosophers suspicious of action: its irreversibility, its unpredictability, the boundlessness of its consequences – in sum, the ‘haphazardness and moral irresponsibility inherent in a plurality of agents.’²⁵ In other words, Arendt’s philosophy of action is a distinctly bleak sort of celebration, by no means a call to gratuitous activism but rather an insistence that the specific greatness of action is to be found where it is properly bounded – by virtues such as moderation, by activities such as promising, and, if it is to find a stable place in the world, by constitutional frameworks.²⁶ Nonetheless, such boundaries provide no final guarantees: action ‘always establishes relationships and therefore has an inherent tendency to force open all limitations and cut across all boundaries.’²⁷

Arendt seizes, time and again, on instances of political action or insights from the history of thought to illuminate the nature and possibilities of free human interaction. Just as these exemplary deeds and events shed light against ‘dark times,’ so do these insights shine against the background of the philosophical tradition as a whole. Many have found her account of this tradition narrow or partial, her thesis overstated, her picture of Plato’s politics (for example) close to caricature. However this may be, it is difficult to deny her central claim. Again and again, the solitary thinker has been tempted by absolutes that implicitly or explicitly deny the most significant realities of politics, the realities that totalitarianism had repudiated: plurality and freedom – our freedom to do the new, in the company of our equals.

Thought, understanding and meaning

I want to understand. And if others understand – in the same sense that I have understood – that gives me a sense of satisfaction, like feeling at home.²⁸

Arendt’s vocation was thinking, not acting. She did act at some points in her life, had to, as she said, because the urgency of events was such that she felt responsible and could

²⁴ ‘...the realm of action, whose validity and meaningfulness are destroyed the moment thought and action part company.’ *HC* 225; cf also *HC* 200.

²⁵ *HC* 220.

²⁶ [Ref to Canovan, ‘Is there an Arendtian case for the nation state?’ in these volumes. Ref also to Waldron in these vols.]

²⁷ *HC* 190.

²⁸ Arendt in her interview with Gaus, *EU* 3.

no longer stand by.²⁹ (Her own experience of totalitarianism clearly informed her claim that it is ‘far easier to act under conditions of tyranny [*sic*] than it is to think.’³⁰) But her thinking is profoundly *active*: it reveals both an aliveness and an engagement, an aliveness linked to laughter³¹ and a seriousness linked to melancholy. Existentially, one might say, she was committed to thought in terms of two opposing images: On the one hand, on the image of life, as in her famous use of Cato’s words in the closing paragraph of *The Human Condition*: ‘Never is he more alive than when he does nothing, never is he less alone than when he is by himself.’³² On the other, thought as ‘taking on the colour of the dead,’³³ inasmuch as thinking depends on withdrawal from the world. ‘Doing and living in the most general sense of *inter homines esse*, “being among my fellowmen” – the Latin equivalent of being alive – positively prevents thinking.’³⁴ How could thinking maintain its connection to life amongst men?

Arendt always insisted that ‘thought itself arises out of incidents of living experience and must remain bound to them as the only guideposts by which to take its bearings.’³⁵ But the predicament of the thinker who confronts the horrors Arendt had to confront is clear – the threat of *meaninglessness*, of melancholy and alienation from the world. The problem, then, is how to discover meaning in the face of such political events without, on the one hand, belittling their moral import by subsuming them beneath historical generalities, or, on the other, falsely dramatising them as moralistic set pieces.

The first form of understanding which Arendt insisted would falsify political reality was a general account of historical process. She had already found a clear caution in the ideological quality of totalitarian thinking, its search for laws of history or nature that might provide a key to history and refute the contingency and unpredictability of human initiative. The temptation was not just that succumbed to the ‘brilliant but facile’ men of ideas, the intellectual race-thinkers she dissected in *The Origins of Totalitarianism*. For Arendt the Western tradition of political thought had met its end in Marx’s laws of history, that denied significance to the actions and initiatives of individual men and women. Equally significant, however, her beloved Kant had also looked at the course of human history, and discerned its meaning not in the initiatives of human beings, but in the progress that happens behind their backs. This progress is visible, not to the ‘fools’ (Kant) who act nor even to the historian who tells the story of particular events or periods, but to the thinker who reflects on the course of the whole – consoled by a story of progress enacted by providence rather than human hand. Whatever might be said

²⁹ *EU* 5.

³⁰ *HC* 219.

³¹ ‘...vitality – the feeling that it is fine to be alive and that it is a sign of being alive to make fun of everything,’ ‘Bertolt Brecht’ in *MDT* 230.

³² *HC* 220. Cf her words, ‘a *passionate* thinking, in which thinking and aliveness becomes one,’ ‘MH80’ 297.

³³ *LMI*, 79ff; ‘Thinking and Moral Considerations,’ *RJ* 167.

³⁴ ‘Thinking and Moral Considerations,’ *RJ* 165; cf *HC* 7.

³⁵ Preface to *Between Past and Future*, enlarged edition, Viking Press, New York, 1968: 14.

intellectually, the phenomena of Stalinism and Nazism constituted unanswerable rebuttal of such dreams.³⁶

As already indicated, some have thought that Arendt succumbed, instead, to an inverted form of this story: the early achievements of Western civilisation, the Greek polis, gradually obliterated by Christian contempt for the world, modern alienation and materialism, so that totalitarianism should not, it seems (in retrospect!), have surprised us so very much. There is truth lurking here, inasmuch as Arendt's picture of the modern age undoubtedly lacks nuance; but it is certainly not the case that Arendt's story is one of broad historical decline. Instead – and this is at the centre of her entire reply to these questions of meaning – Arendt focuses upon certain exemplary events, to provide orientation and inspiration to her reflections. Greek antiquity was one, though her reservations concerning its politics as much as its philosophy have been made plain in recent scholarship. But much of Arendt's thought is devoted to modern examples: the American revolution; the modern labour movement; the grassroots democratic organisation that had occurred in the course of later revolutions; right up to the still unfolding Civil Rights Movement and its practice of civil disobedience. Arendt insists: understanding must remain oriented by particulars, and not overall processes, under which all human initiative is necessarily submerged, fated to anonymity, futility, and ruin.

With regard to the other form of (mis)understanding I mentioned: One of Arendt's most distinctive qualities is how the passionately moral quality of her thought – thus William Shawn's simple, indisputable description of her as a 'moral force'³⁷ – is combined with a distaste for moralising, for undemanding pieties about right and wrong. One simple example is Arendt's insistence that more is allowed to the poets, as argued in her essay on Brecht (more, but not everything: no real genius survives the singing of odes to Stalin).³⁸ A much more complex case is shown in the complaint that she fails to lay down principles for politics or, indeed, human interaction – Seyla Benhabib and George Kateb, in particular, have wondered whether Arendt's thought is altogether too disdainful of modern universalism. Whatever one finally says about this (and much is said in these volumes), one of the compelling qualities of Arendt's thinking consists in her self-assurance with regard to the most fundamental moral concerns, combined with her deep sense that familiar moral claims provide no key to understanding the issues of our times. The moral catastrophe of Nazism was not a failure to grasp Kantian universalism, Christian morality, or Socratic precepts: it went so much deeper than this that moral denunciation, even her own earlier term 'radical evil,' was more an obstacle to thought than an aid to understanding.

Arendt rarely explained her attitude to these matters; the best testament is her lecture courses from the mid sixties, 'Some questions of moral philosophy.'³⁹ In any case, her specific combination of moral concern and anti-moralism was bound to attract

³⁶ Cf 'Concern with Politics in Recent European Thought,' *EU* 444.

³⁷ [Ref to Shawn, vol. I.]

³⁸ 'Bertolt Brecht' in *MDT*; cf Erich Heller 'Hannah Arendt as a critic of literature,' *Social Research*, 44(1), 1977, 147-159.

³⁹ *RJ* 49-146.

misunderstanding, the most famous instance of which was the furore surrounding her report on Adolf Eichmann's trial in 1961. If Arendt had previously referred to the 'radical' quality of totalitarian evil, she now wrote of the 'banality of evil' – though her explicit analysis of this term was still sketchier than that of the previous term. Fundamentally, however, nothing had changed in her attitude.⁴⁰ No one should doubt that an abyss had opened and that we were confronted with unprecedented horrors. But we would not understand these events if our interpretations remained at the level of time-worn moral categories – guilt versus innocence, good versus evil: we would only falsify the reality, inventing evil-doers demonic in proportion to the evil done, writing out whatever co-responsibility the victims may have borne. To remain at this level would seem to reveal a fear that otherwise our moral judgments would become hopelessly confused or confusing – demonstrating a lack of confidence in our ability to judge without predecided categories, or that peculiar insecurity that sees understanding as but half a step away from forgiveness, even complicity. Not least, it would be to refuse laughter at the 'clown' with whom she was faced, a man who spoke in endless clichés and who 'never realised what he was doing.'⁴¹ Later Arendt would quote Brecht: "One may say that tragedy deals with the sufferings of mankind in a less serious way than comedy." This of course is a shocking statement; I think that at the same time it is entirely true.⁴²

Arendt insisted that neither route – subsuming events beneath historical generalities, pious moralising – would be true to the reality, and hence discover the meaning, of the events in question. Her attempt was to discover meaning in political events without bringing preconceived generalities to bear – neither those of conventional morality nor of philosophies of history, and certainly not those of modern ideologies. Arendt makes radical use of Kant's category of reflective judgment: judgment that attends to the particular without interpreting or gauging it in terms of an already known rule or principle. Totalitarianism was not an instance of some already known form of government: it was radically novel, and its meaning would only be understood by a patient, circling⁴³ search for its distinctive nature, not least by uncovering its distinguishing marks⁴⁴ from spurious precedents such as tyranny. More broadly, if we trust human beings to act, then we must trust in their capacity to surprise us for better as well as for worse. And a trust in our capacity to act is a trust, too, in the capacity of our thinking to grasp the meaning of our initiatives⁴⁵ – a meaning that might finally be as surprising to the actor as to the on-looker, the story-teller, or the thinker.

⁴⁰ [Ref] to Richard Bernstein essay in volume IV.

⁴¹ *EJ* 54, 48ff, 287f; cf 252.

⁴² From a 1974 interview with Roger Errera, excerpted in *The New York Review of Books*, Oct 26, 1978, p.18.

⁴³ Thus her 1954 essay 'Understanding and Politics,' *EU* 307-327.

⁴⁴ To Mary McCarthy's remark, 'Very close to the roots of Hannah Arendt's thinking is the *distinguo*,' Arendt agreed, replying, 'I always start anything by saying, "A and B are not the same",' 'HA' 337f.

⁴⁵ 'Understanding and politics,' *EU* 321: 'a being whose essence is beginning may have enough of origin within himself to understand without preconceived categories and to judge without the set of customary rules which is morality.'

For Arendt, understanding is certainly part of the attempt to reconcile oneself to the world in which one lives. But this reconciliation is as far from some nasty mushy notion of being ‘at one’ with the world as it is from assenting to the crimes of totalitarianism. Arendt’s is much rather the attempt to retain ‘wonder at that which is as it is.’⁴⁶ It is highly significant and characteristic that Arendt links this wonder to both ‘grandeur and misery,’ quite aware that Plato’s own ‘admiring wonder’ left no place for the ‘factual existence’ of evil.⁴⁷ Arendt continued to wrestle with the question as to how far thinking could get to grips with evil,⁴⁸ nonetheless her thought never gives up on this early claim: ‘the speechless horror at what man may do and what the world may become is in many ways related to the speechless wonder of gratitude from which the questions of philosophy spring.’⁴⁹

In sketching Arendt’s life, I indicated that her reporting on Adolf Eichmann led her to a renewed interest in the roles of factual truth and individual thought in moral and political judgment. Certainly these are the major themes of her subsequent work – her reflections in the important 1971 essay ‘Thinking and Moral Considerations,’⁵⁰ and in *The Life of the Mind*; her reflections on factuality, truth-telling and (self-)deception in her political essays. But the ground of these concerns had long been present: In the contempt for reality shown by totalitarian ideology. (‘Ideologies are never interested in the miracle of being.’⁵¹) Likewise, in the separation of thought from action that happens when one person rules and others follow, or when people abandon their capacity to judge and, as if sleep-walking, accept the ‘moral reversals’ proclaimed by Stalinism or Nazism.⁵² Beyond all specific concerns, Arendt never ceased to ask how thinking, which withdraws from the world into an inner plurality, possibly even to a wordless state of contemplation, could remain in contact with reality. The task of thought, as Arendt pursued it, was to honour the plurality of perspectives that corresponds to people’s continually being born into the world – strangers who must find a reconciliation with one another, and their world, if they are ever to be at home there.

⁴⁶ ‘P&P’ 97ff.

⁴⁷ ‘P&P’ 103; cf also her comments in *LM I*, 150, 179.

⁴⁸ Thus her famous claim in her reply to Gershom Scholem, that evil ‘is “thought-defying”... because thought tries to reach some depth, to go to the roots, and the moment it concerns itself with evil, it is frustrated because there is nothing.’ (Reprinted in Ron Feldman (ed), *The Jew as Pariah*, Grove Press, New York, 1978: 251.) This claim is made and further elucidated at *RJ* 95.

⁴⁹ ‘Concern with politics in recent European thought,’ *EU* 445.

⁵⁰ *RJ* 159-189 (previously printed in *Social Research* 38:3, 1971, 417-446 and *Social Research* 51:1, 1984, 7-37).

⁵¹ *OT* 469.

⁵² Arendt often observes that here ‘the basic commandments of Western morality were reversed: in one case, “Thou shalt not kill”; in the other, “Thou shalt not bear false witness...”’, for instance *LM I*, 177, where she adds: ‘[as if] everybody was fast asleep when it occurred.’

Conclusion

I have indicated three sources of the richness and distinctiveness of Arendt's philosophy: her encounter with political evil; her mining of history and the philosophical tradition for insights into that which philosophy had always denigrated, plurality; and a quest for meaning that always took reality as its point of orientation, in the form of particular events and initiatives – that is, human stories.

Arendt denied that she was a philosopher. In her 1964 interview with Günther Gaus, she said that she neither felt like one nor had she been accepted within the circle of philosophers – her profession, whatever it was, was not that of philosophy.⁵³ How should we relate Arendt to the philosophical tradition, when she was so explicit in taking her distance? In the interview with Gaus she stresses the long hostility of philosophers to politics, and indicates that she wished to look upon politics with eyes unclouded by this tradition. My own view, of course represented in the title of these volumes ('leading political philosophers'), is that we should judge the matter differently: that Arendt is one of the outstanding political philosophers of our times. I want to add immediately, too, that the fact we should say this is a measure of Arendt's achievement. All originals alter the essence of that to which they contribute: political philosophy is in fact a subtly different entity, given Arendt's thought and writing.

What Arendt did, in attending to totalitarianism, to revolution, to civil disobedience and other 'crises of the [American] republic' was to honour these topics with a singular depth of thought and comprehensiveness of vision. This depth and comprehensiveness mean that in her own case we cannot insist on the division she made between philosophy (whether of Plato or Hobbes or Marx) and political thought (as in Machiavelli or de Tocqueville). She honoured Montesquieu as a political thinker rather than a philosopher, but liked to cite a chilling and prophetic phrase of his, one that showed he had nonetheless been 'driven to some ultimate conclusions'⁵⁴: 'Man, this flexible being, who bends himself in society to the thoughts and impressions of others, is equally capable of knowing his own nature when it is shown to him and of losing the very sense of it when he is being robbed of it.'⁵⁵ Arendt's achievement was to reflect on the events of her time, and the failures of the tradition to provide a framework that might illuminate them, and to do so – not exactly to reach ultimate conclusions, but to reach the fundamentals of human affairs.

Margaret Canovan cites some words of Arendt, to the effect that each great philosopher adds a new term to our philosophical lexicon 'because he responded rightly and thoughtfully to certain decisively new experiences of his time.' In Arendt's case, she adds, this term is surely *plurality*, the condition of our thought as well as our action.⁵⁶ At the beginning of this introduction I quoted the 1954 lecture, 'Concern with Politics in

⁵³ *EU* 1f, likewise at *LMI*, 3.

⁵⁴ *EU* 325, n9.

⁵⁵ 'Understanding and politics,' in *EU* 316. Also quoted, in a slightly different translation, in her reply to Eric Voegelin, reprinted in this volume. The quotation is from the Preface to his *Spirit of the Laws*.

⁵⁶ *Reinterpretation* 280f.

Recent European Thought,' where she stresses how philosophers have failed to confront the horror of contemporary events with their *thaumadzein*, their 'wonder at that which is as it is.' Arendt continues: 'An authentic political philosophy... can spring only from an original act of *thaumadzein* whose wondering and hence questioning impulse must now (ie, directly contrary to the teaching of the ancients) directly grasp the realm of human affairs and human deeds.'⁵⁷ These thoughts are brought together in another unpublished writing from the same year, entitled 'Philosophy and Politics,' in words which beautifully capture Arendt's own life-work:

If philosophers, despite their necessary estrangement from the everyday life of human affairs, were ever to arrive at a true political philosophy they would have to make the plurality of man, out of which arises the whole realm of human affairs – in its grandeur and misery – the object of their *thaumadzein*.⁵⁸

Postscript: What would Arendt have made of these volumes?

The world in which the commentator moves is the world of books; the world in which the author moves... is the real world... We need the commentator, but we should know that we move with him in a world which is no longer strictly speaking the world of the author, whereas when we read the author directly, we move in the same world – only that we come from a different corner and from a world which among other things was augmented precisely by him.⁵⁹

Arendt had no love of intellectuals and academics. She learnt a good deal about their unreliability when Heidegger and so many others in the universities 'coordinated' with the Nazis. Early in her American years she revised this attitude, praising American intellectuals' accessibility of argument and lack of fanaticism.⁶⁰ This attitude was darkened, once more, by the failure of many to appreciate the malignity of McCarthyism and, a decade later, by the reception granted to her report on the Eichmann trial. Intellectuals may vaunt their independence of thought, but to Arendt this was much more likely to reflect an independence from reality, a failure to stay true to the phenomena which may enable one to float off into intellectual abstractions but is unlikely to result in meaningful thought.⁶¹

⁵⁷ EU 445.

⁵⁸ 'P&P' 103.

⁵⁹ From the introduction to Arendt's 1955 lectures on the history of political thought at Berkeley, pp. 023943f. in the Library of Congress papers, available on-line (see note 6 above).

⁶⁰ EYB, 2nd ed, xlii.

⁶¹ Again see her Gaus interview, EU 11: 'Among intellectuals *Gleichschaltung* was the rule, so to speak. But not among the others. ... I still think that it belongs to the essence of being an intellectual that one fabricates ideas about everything. ... they made ideas up about Hitler, in part terrifically interesting things! ... Today I would say they were trapped by their own ideas.'

Arendt once told an audience, ‘Intellectually, non-conformism is almost the *sine qua non* of achievement.’⁶² She might have added that conformism, both in the sense of lack of originality and of overvaluing the norms and status distinctions of one’s profession, is an inescapable fact of much academic life. Her letters are filled with disdainful reactions to the academics she met during her visiting professorships. She will write of ‘the customary academic suspicion of anything that is not guaranteed to be mediocre.’⁶³ Her work takes no account of the debates of academic journals,⁶⁴ and not much more of scholarly conventions: her selective and free reinterpretations of the greats are just one case in point. Yet none of this is to say that Arendt despised scholarship as such: her admiration for a number of philologists, historians and political scientists can be seen in her letters, her footnotes, and indeed her friendships. Her comments on Alexandre Kojève may be indicative of her broadest view of the matter: he ‘actually believed philosophy had come to an end with Hegel *and* acted on [the belief]... he did what most people don’t do.’⁶⁵ Not that Arendt shared his ideas about philosophy or Hegel, of course, rather that she found his responsiveness to the practical implications of his intellectual opinions both rare and admirable.

There are several things one might say in considering the place of scholarship on Arendt. The most obvious is that, whatever Arendt’s own view might have been, her own opinion is hardly decisive in the matter, even if she had wanted (as she did not!) to be held up as an oracle. But that does not touch the substantive issue, which is only addressed by seeing what has, in fact, been achieved. I think these volumes attest that many different approaches have proved illuminating. Some contributions are eminently personal responses to Arendt, from friends and writers of their own literary or philosophical stature. A glimpse of Arendt the person provides us with insight into Arendt the thinker. Some contributors approach Arendt without personal knowledge but with expert scholarship, sifting her writings and contextualising her thought. In doing so, they bring to light insights and connections that less patient readers have missed or distorted. Still others, perhaps political philosophers in their own right, approach Arendt’s thoughts with their own concerns in mind, perhaps deforming her thought (as one may suppose of Habermas⁶⁶) or, where there is closer affinity, illuminating facets neglected by other readers.

One might add, moreover, that Arendt was remarkably relaxed regarding (mis)interpretations of her thought. ‘Each time you write something and you send it out into the world,’ she once said, ‘...everybody is free to do with it what he pleases... You should not try to hold your hand now on whatever may happen to what you have been thinking for yourself.’⁶⁷ True to her word, Arendt left us remarkably few responses to

⁶² ‘Rand School lecture’ (1948), *EU* 227; slightly differently quoted at EYB 210.

⁶³ *MDT* 160.

⁶⁴ On her ignoring the work of contemporaries, see ‘HA’ 336.

⁶⁵ Quoted EYB 117.

⁶⁶ See the section of vol III, ‘The Habermasian critique.’

⁶⁷ Quoted by Margaret Canovan, *Reinterpretation*, 2f.

criticisms of her work.⁶⁸ We never get, for example, a satisfactory response to the many problems haunting her notorious category of ‘the social.’⁶⁹ (It should be added, however, that apart from the book reviews, all the assessments included here were published after Arendt’s death: until the late seventies, she was regarded rather as a public intellectual than an object of scholarly scrutiny.) In fact, it is difficult to pin down any example where her contemporaries altered her mind as to the concepts and distinctions she fashioned. One can think of a handful of occasions where she conceded an error of judgment, to Auden or to Ralph Ellison for example.⁷⁰ Much more broadly, it is certain that Heidegger, Jaspers and Blücher had real influence on her thought (but as to where and when, again it is curiously difficult to be sure or precise). Arendt was true to her mission of *Selbstdenken*; and her ‘sovereign’⁷¹ character shows in her lancing dismissals of ways of thought that she found uncongenial (not always the faddish stupidities she implied), and in her acceptance that one judges – and that this judgment is then submitted to the judgment of others.

In his obituary on Arendt, the German novelist Uwe Johnson, a friend of her last years, said: ‘She risked her own person in judging.’⁷² There was no holding back in Arendt’s attitude here, rather a laughter⁷³ and a daring, quite ready for whatever judgments might be offered in their turn. No doubt she would be entertained by some of the scholarly ink spilled on her work. One can also see her reaching for the stock of thoughts she used upon receipt of honours,⁷⁴ if she could see the genuine depth of thought that has been brought to bear on her work (or, indeed, the devoted editorial attention given to her posthumous publications). Perhaps – though here one hesitates – she might have entered into conversation at some of these assessments of her thought.

There remains the question, if one grants Arendt’s thought its philosophical stature, how important reading (or indeed writing) commentary about Arendt may be. One view would be that the continent of her thought, always only partly visible to us when we are

⁶⁸ See my comments regarding principles of editorial selection [ref].

⁶⁹ Richard Bernstein’s discussion of the exchange between Arendt and her contemporaries on this at ‘HA’ 315ff, in his ‘Rethinking the social and the political’ [ref to vol. III, about halfway through the article].

⁷⁰ On Auden see EYB 371f; on Ellison, EYB 316. One might also recall her revisions to *EJ* – cf *EJ* ‘Note to the reader’ and EYB 362ff.

⁷¹ Hans Jonas, quoted by Michael Denny in ‘The Privilege of Ourselves’ [ref, vol. IV; 3rd to last page of article].

⁷² Originally in *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 8.12.75, reprinted in Hannah Arendt & Uwe Johnson, *Der Briefwechsel: 1967-1975*, eds Eberhard Fahlke & Thomas Wild, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt, 2004: 165.

⁷³ As indicated above, this laughter came through most clearly in her report on Eichmann. Thus Arendt’s comments to Gaus: ‘people take it amiss... that I can still laugh... Eichmann was a buffoon. ... Three minutes before certain death, I probably still would laugh. And that, they say, is the tone of voice [in the Eichmann book]. That the tone of voice is predominately ironic is completely true. The tone of voice in this case is really the person,’ *EU* 16. See also Jaspers’ interview about the affair, in vol. II [ref.] and her comments at ‘MH80’ 301.

⁷⁴ Cf EYB 461.

reading one or the other of her works, is sufficiently shaded and complex that overview and critique are indispensable. Another view is that her own texts should take precedence. And even if that is liable to sound somewhat pious, one may still suppose that too much commentary can constitute an obstacle to engaging with her concerns. Perhaps we may say, as Kant said of examples, that the pieces here are like a ‘child’s walker’⁷⁵ – they may enable us to gain better access to her thinking, a wider perspective on its limitations and problems. – And then what? Of course, all this must be for the reader to decide for h/erself. Allow me only to venture one answer that might especially capture the spirit of Arendt’s work: to turn to the political events of our own times, and to try to understand them on their own terms and in our own terms. As we do this, though, we may hope to find our thinking enriched by engaging with Arendt’s *doxa*: not just an ‘opinion,’ indeed, but a philosophy too.

Principles of editorial selection

As the body of writing on Arendt has grown, and grown ever more quickly, since her death, a great deal of selectivity has been necessary in this collection.

Two obvious criteria in selection have been quality and importance: quality of scholarship and thought, importance in terms of shaping and advancing our understanding of Arendt’s thought. In both of these regards I have been greatly helped by the editorial board, as well as many further Arendt scholars. A subsidiary consideration has been ease of availability: other things being equal, I have preferred to include pieces which would not be so easy to find in the average university library. Nonetheless, I have often found myself weighing imponderables: which of two pieces covering similar ground to include, or which selection from a plurality of mutually overlapping pieces? I can easily imagine a collection identical in aim to this one, the contents of which would overlap but partly. Of course, this is a tribute to the attention Arendt’s thought has attracted, in the short space of a few decades.

In addition, I have tried to see that as many as possible of the (complexly intertwined) areas of her thought should be represented. However, this has not always been possible: Arendt’s writings about American politics, about modernity and modern science remain curiously neglected, for example. It was also important that a plurality of voices should be heard – from Arendt’s most important friends and contemporaries, to a range of later scholars. Sadly, practicalities have meant that only a limited number of voices from outside the English-speaking world are represented, an omission only slightly addressed by the country-specific bibliographies.

On a few memorable occasions Arendt responded to the criticisms that were offered of her work. Several of the pieces here refer, for example, to her exchange of letters with Gershom Scholem concerning *Eichmann in Jerusalem*. This exchange will be published in Jerome Kohn’s on-going book series containing Arendt’s occasional or unpublished

⁷⁵ *Critique of Pure Reason*, B174. Kant’s term is *Gängelwagen*, which Arendt always preferred to translate with the older English word, ‘go-cart.’

writings. Essentially a primary rather than a secondary text, it is not included here. This is true, too, of the Toronto roundtable of Arendt and critics, first published in Melvyn Hill's *Hannah Arendt: the recovery of the public world* (St Martin's Press, New York, 1977). However, I have included Arendt's reply to Eric Voegelin's review of *The Origins of Totalitarianism*; while her reply has been reprinted (in Kohn's *Essays in Understanding*), it did not seem fair to include Voegelin's review only, especially since Arendt's reply constitutes the outstanding clarification of her method in the book.