

**Bethania Assy, Hannah Arendt – An Ethics of Personal Responsibility, (Hannah Arendt Studien Bd. 3), Peter Lang, Frankfurt am Main, pp. 199, 2008. With a preface by Agnes Heller.**

The central thesis of Bethania Assy's recent book is that we can derive an "ethics of responsibility" from the work of Hannah Arendt, (p. 160) and by focusing on responsibility we can resolve the many inner tensions, such as that between spectator and actor, which pervade Arendt's work. Assy's threefold ethics of responsibility is comprised of a responsibility toward ourselves to choose who we display to others through consistent action, a responsibility to judge for ourselves and develop representative opinions through engagement with others, and a responsibility to care for the plurality of the fragile public space that constitutes our world. (p. 10) All three levels of responsibility are deeply interconnected, for we show who we are through acting and judging in concert with our peers, and through so doing we maintain and care for the public space that constitutes the world. In this sense we can read Arendt's claims that in liberal modernity genuinely public interests have been overwhelmed by private and social concerns, and that the loneliness of the jobholder, perpetually labouring, working and consuming, has become the dominant mode of being, as claims about our individual and collective lack of responsibility. The point of rights, for Arendt, is not so much to protect a sphere of private interest from interference by others, as it is to guarantee the space from which we can freely interact with our peers. Such interaction is the very thing that makes life meaningful, and allows us to be reconciled to a world in which great moral disasters, such as the Holocaust, can and do occur.

Assy is thus right to contend that responsibility is the central focus of Arendt's ethical and political thinking. But we may well ask whether Arendt's understanding of responsibility, as Assy interprets it, is itself ethically and politically responsible. This question involves answering whether the often noted inner tensions in Arendt's work between the actor and the spectator, the withdrawn life of the mind and the involved life of the citizen, care of the self and care of the world, and so on, can be satisfactorily resolved. Assy admirably attempts such reconciliation. On her reading of Arendt, appearance, consistency, the compatibility of truth and doxa (a Socratic doctrine rejected by Plato), otherness and plurality operate at both the level of the mind and the level of the citizen. As Assy clearly illustrates, the same categories - publicity, consistency, plurality, responsibility, judgment - that are operative in accoutring for the life of the mind are also operative in the political realm. (pp. 159-60) Morality and politics are both part of the realm of appearance and opinion, and are not a matter of rational cognition or the unknown intentions of an 'inner' or noumenal self. Heroic figures, like Achilles, and master storytellers, like Homer, are not the only actors and spectators, although they have a unique role as the creators of cultural objects that preserve exemplarity. Through ordinary interactions with our peers we too can reveal who we are, even if such everyday actions rarely take on the veneer of exemplarity, to be remembered and used as guides for

future judging that the heroic likes of Achilles, as immortalised by Homer, attain. (pp. 148-50) Similarly, though few of us attain the poetic heights of a Homer, we can also reveal who we are through acting as judges and spectators of the lives of ourselves and our peers, through deliberating with others about the sort of world we wish to live in. (p. 149)

Thinking clears the way for judging, judging can lead to willing, and willing can lead to action in the world. It is thus through being both actors and spectators in the world that we not only reveal who we are to others, but also constitute our own inner identity. Indeed we have a responsibility to do just this. Mind and world, spectator and actor, are ontologically interdependent and cohere at a deeper level of unity. As such, the Kantian dualisms in Arendt's thought are, if we follow Assy's reading, reconciled in a Hegelian sense through the intermediary of responsibility. Assy expresses this point by claiming that "we are of the world not merely in it", (p. 2) or in more phenomenological terms, "being and appearing coincide" (2). To see a dualistic gulf between the life of the mind and the life of the citizen in Arendt's work is to fail to appreciate the extent to which Arendt undermines that very distinction.

But this reconciliation is not without its fissures, as illustrated by the figure of Socrates. We get two images of Socrates in Arendt's work, the anti-political Socrates of conscience who cares for the self above the world and is thereby led to inaction, and the engaged Socrates who neatly reconciles the political and the philosophical and is at home in both realms, but neither exclusively. (p. 124) We can call the first Socrates the exemplar of thinking and the advocate of an "ethics of impotence", (p. 70) and the second Socrates the exemplar of judgment and the advocate of an ethical politics of action based on judgment formed through public deliberation. While Assy claims that Arendt "shifts toward" the latter model, (p. 124) she also notes that in what Arendt calls 'crises', 'times of emergencies', or (following Jaspers) 'border situations', we are supposedly to abandon the latter model and adopt the former. That is, Arendt's "ethics of emergencies" is to revert to an ethics of impotence, (p. 61) by caring for the self above the world. In such times we are to become pure spectators who 'act' only by not acting at all. Assy seems to accept this Arendtian position which, however, undermines the generality of her responsibility message. A better move would have been to deploy her account of responsibility against Arendt, by arguing that especially in such times we must reveal who we are through acting, as best we can, with like-minded peers to prevent further atrocities. Sometimes, surely, it would be irresponsible to merely abstain from action, especially during emergencies. Indeed, we might say, Assy's threefold ethics of responsibility should demand nothing less.

However, there is one particular tension that Assy arguably fails to do sufficient justice. That is the tension between the Arendt, in her more Kantian mode, who puts in place the architecture for developing a constructivist account of universal judgment validity, and the Arendt, in her more existentialist mode, who thinks that not only can no general norms be rationally justified but that all such norms are positively harmful in that they tend to become mere customs and habits. (p. 2) While Assy admits the "deliberative emphasis" in Arendt's account of judgment, she goes out of her way, on numerous occasions throughout her book, to differentiate this from a "rational faculty leading to

agreement". (pp. 101, 136) As such, Assy resolves the tension in Arendt's account of judgment only by, arguably, overplaying the existentialist and underplaying the Kantian tendencies in Arendt's work. Whether this is what Arendt would have done in her unwritten book on judging, or whether she would have explicitly maintained the tension, or moved closer to Kant, we cannot know. Which solution we think she ought to have adopted will clearly depend on whether or not we think that we can have, in one coherent account, space for universal moral norms, the importance of public interaction and judging, the avoidance of norms becoming mere habits and customs, and the recognition of the ontological status of plurality and difference as constitutive of the public realm.

Assy's Arendt thinks that universal moral norms are incompatible with the full recognition of plurality and difference, and this pushes Arendt in the direction of the likes of Derrida. Alternatively, something more like Seyla Benhabib's Arendt (see p. 100) thinks that we can combine a respect for difference and an understanding of plurality with intersubjectively valid norms, and this pushes Arendt in the direction of the likes of neo-Kantians such as the later Rawls and Habermas. Our assessment of Assy's book will thus depend on which trajectory we see Arendt's account of judging taking. If we hold the latter trajectory has the answers, then the type of responsibility advocated by Assy's Arendt will seem rather irresponsible in that it fails to recognise and ground the validity of universal moral and political norms of justice that alone can protect plurality from political interference. If we think the former trajectory has the answers, then the type of responsibility advocated by Assy's Arendt will seem the only one that is sufficiently responsive to the condition of plurality that constitutes the public realm.

We can illustrate this point as follows. For Assy the fundamental Arendtian moral and political question is: who do we want to share the world with? (p. 2) We must keep ourselves company and, as the world itself is intersubjectively constructed, the company we keep makes the world we live in. But, for Assy's Arendt, there are no rationally justifiable standards by which we are to make the decision about the company we want to keep. To the person who is happy to have a murderer for company, or is happy to reveal themselves to be a Bluebeard or a Hitler, or if these are usual cases, an Eichmann, there is nothing much we can say except that you are not the sort of company we choose to keep. Of course, they are equally justified in responding in kind. Without intersubjectively valid standards to appeal to we are left in an agonistic dead end, neither side having any further argumentative leg to stand on. This is decisionism, for at the deepest level the basis of our moral and political values is the decision, which cannot be rationally justified - although we can try to 'woo' and 'persuade' others of our view - about the sort of company we wish to keep.

However, Arendt has the conceptual architecture in place to deal with this disagreement. We might argue that the company we choose to keep is based on representative opinions, judgments that take into account the views of all, and that these opinions are, on these grounds, intersubjectively valid. In contrast, the opinions of a Bluebeard or a Hitler are not representative and therefore not intersubjectively valid. But this move pushes Arendt in a direction that she wished to avoid, by focusing not so much on the responsibility of revealing a unique who but rather on the responsibility of abiding, first and foremost, by intersubjectively valid norms of interaction. Of course we can make

room for both views – universally valid norms of right and the freedom to express who one is, in terms of one's conception of the good, within the limitations of right. But then we get a liberal Arendt who ends up far closer to Rawls and Habermas than Assy, and many other Arendt scholars, would want.

Assy's book is a solid piece of Arendt scholarship that usefully draws upon both Arendt's published work and the rich archives of her unpublished materials, as well as engaging with the relevant secondary literature. Assy focuses mainly on the material Arendt wrote in the 1960's and early 1970's, after her coverage of the Eichmann trial, which for Assy marks the beginning of Arendt's attempts to think positively about morality - a problematic view given that Eichmann is a figure that steps straight out of 1958's *The Human Condition*. Assy's use of the concept of responsibility to tie together disparate parts of Arendt's work and resolve tensions is productive, even if, as I have suggested, it is not completely successful. At times the book, especially in the earlier chapters, covers material that will already be familiar to Arendt scholars. However, the book, especially in the latter chapters, makes more than enough interesting and original points in its attempt to unify Arendt's work to warrant attention by Arendt scholars, as well as providing a detailed introduction for those new to Arendt's work. More importantly, Assy's book illustrates the continuing importance of Arendt's work for thinking deeply about the very nature of the moral and the political. No doubt, there remains more thinking to do on these matters and Assy's book helpfully raises many of these important issues.

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