

Dag Javier Opstaele

THE POWER OF THE TRADITION

Critical reflections on recent literature on Arendt

Dag Javier Opstaele lives in Cologne. After studying philosophy in Louvain and Cologne, he gained a Ph.D. at the Philosophical Faculty of the University of Cologne. Publication: *Politik, Geist und Kritik. A hermeneutic reconstruction of Hannah Arendt's concept of philosophy*, Würzburg 1999.

1 In the editor's introduction to *Hannah Arendt. Ich will verstehen. Selbstauskünfte zu Leben und Werk* (Munich/Zurich 1996) Ursula Ludz speaks truly: "With the popularity of her name and the elevation of hypotheses and quotations from her work to the status of platitudes in the public discussion, the original work is in danger of being increasingly obscured, and the author built up or knocked down. The real Hannah Arendt is almost unknown to a broader public, and it is not going too far to claim that meanwhile more ignorance is being propagated about Hannah Arendt than knowledge." (p. 8)

2 Jürgen Habermas, *Hannah Arendts Begriff der Macht*, in: Adelbert Reif (ed.), *Hannah Arendt. Materialien zu ihrem Werk*, Vienna etc. 1979, pp. 287-305 (p. 291, 296).

Mein Beruf – wenn man davon überhaupt sprechen kann – ist politische Theorie.

I think one has got to modify this notion of the unity of theory and practice to such an extent that it will be unrecognisable for those who tried their hand at it before.

Hannah Arendt

I. POLITICS AND THE POLITICAL

Looking over recent literature on the philosophical work of Hannah Arendt, one striking feature is the variety of ways in which her political approach is characterised. One writer refers to Arendt's political anthropology, another to her critical historiography, or her sociology of the political. There are references to her ontology of human modes of activity, her phenomenological essentialism, political aestheticism, philosophical existentialism, and alongside all of these, to her political philosophy.

This variety of characterisations is, of course, a reflection of the rich variety of her ideas and the structural complexity of the Arendtian political theory. It also bears striking witness to the fact that nearly twenty-five years after the death of the philosopher, there is still no clarity, let alone unity, concerning the theoretical typification of Hannah Arendt's thought.¹

The penetration to the fundamental layers of Arendt's philosophising with the aim of reaching a more profound knowledge and understanding of it is not possible without clarifying Arendt's specific *theory position* as developed in the first volume *Thinking* of the projected trilogy *The Life of the Mind*. Four questions are of priority, they concern:

1. The specific character of the theoretical model developed by Arendt.
2. The mode of rationality constitutive for this theory.
3. Its inner structure.

4. The nature of its relationship to the practical or the real.

The literature has not yet come up with a satisfactory answer to any of these points. Time and again one finds that Arendt's entire work has been read from the perspective of *The Human Condition*, or *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, usually on the basis of the premise that Arendt's theoretical analysis of action forms the core of her *practical philosophy*, around which all other sections of her thought orbit. These *action related* interpretation models, which have characterised the research since its beginnings, have now established themselves so firmly that it is possible to refer without exaggeration to a *tradition* of praxis-centred Arendt interpretation in the literature. One of the first, and perhaps most prominent representatives of this *praxis-centred* approach is Jürgen Habermas, who in his essay in 1976 on Arendt's concept of power speaks with welcome clarity of Arendt's *practical philosophy* (in the German text: *Praxisphilosophie*) "this narrowing of the political to the practical".²

A revision of this practice-centred interpretation model, indeed a radical break with this influential but one-sided interpretational approach, seems urgently necessary, as does an effort to adopt a *general standpoint* which leaves behind any foreshortened view of Arendt's work, and allows the hermeneutic development of an essentially dyadic structure. Recent literature is far from the *decentralised* approach to the work of Hannah Arendt proposed here.

Before demonstrating this for some recent publications, I would like to look more closely at the *duality* of Arendt's political theory just mentioned, which I believe offers a key to the correct understanding of her phenomenological political hermeneutics.³

1. Arendt's double theoretical *break* with the western tradition of practical philosophy and with metaphysics corresponds within her thought to a double, practical and purely theoretical philosophical endeavour, which can be traced through from her earliest publications to the posthumously published writings. It is only this double politico-philosophical orientation which makes it possible to recognise her theoretical project in its totality and conceptual unity, and establishes its unique position and status within western political reflection.⁴ This double politico-philosophical orientation of Arendt's thought has not the slightest to do with the usual division of her work into so-called *political* texts on the one hand and *philosophical* texts on the other.⁵ Such a division not only misunderstands the fundamental intention of her philosophising, but is positively misleading, because it is tacitly based on the traditional assumption, energetically rejected by Arendt herself, that there is a direct relationship at a fundamental level between philosophy and politics, between the sphere of *Geist* and the field of practical existence. This is also to say that the above-mentioned difference cannot be pinned down to any single one of Arendt's writings: It crosses through the chronology of her publications just as it breaks through the traditional philosophy-politics distinction.

2. The reason for this is that we are not concerned here with a thematic but with a *categorical distinction* between on the one hand phenomenological reflection on the nature of the political, whose central task is the critical analysis of concepts, and which is therefore concerned with transhistorical phenomena, and on the other hand another phenomenological reflection, but this time concerning the specific historical forms of politics, which is primarily concerned with the critical understanding of historical-political events in their empirical randomness, phenomenological particularity, and objective

irreversibility. In other words, on the one hand the hermeneutic penetration in the sphere of the possible (but at any time realisable) and on the other hand the understanding assessment of the real on the basis of its concealed, generally valid meaning. In short, here the comprehending reflection on timeless phenomena of the political, there the hermeneutic confrontation with concrete historical phenomena of politics.

3. This double phenomenological reflection on politics and the political is closely linked with Arendt's double methodological approach, *relating stories* and *rescuing the prephenomena*. The two methodological methods of *political thought* which should be understood as a response to the double theoretical break with the western philosophical tradition which Arendt sees, may often be thematically linked, and in as much form an integral part of her political theory, but at the same time they are strictly different levels of reflection due to their different theoretical orientations. A *categoric error* here leads necessarily to misinterpretations, and the discovery of supposed contradictions and discontinuities in the development of Arendt's work.

II. THE BETRAYAL OF THE SPIRIT

Hannah Arendt's double phenomenological reflection on the *political* and *politics* has far-reaching consequences for our assessment of her political theory as a whole. It touches particularly on the question of the systematic unity of this political theory, its normative relevance for the modern democratic constitutional state, and its specific contribution to contemporary philosophy in its highest, pure theoretical form.

[Étienne Tassin] in his excellent work *Le trésor perdu. Hannah Arendt, l'intelligence de l'action politique* (Paris 1999), regrettably fails to address the latter question, which is surprising given that his sensitive and detailed analysis is written from a wholly philosophical perspective. The reason for this may lie in the fact that he has taken for granted the setting equal of *political philosophy* and *practical philosophy* which is the dominant view in current research on Arendt.

3 Of course, the basic duality of Arendt's political theory can only be touched on here. For a systematic analysis of the theoretical political aspects of Arendt's phenomenological political hermeneutics, see Dag Javier Opstale, *Politik, Geist und Kritik. Eine hermeneutische Rekonstruktion von Hannah Arendts Philosophie-begriff*, Würzburg 1999.

It should also be noted that the following critical considerations do not, of course, relate to the relevant publications in their entirety, but only to their central themes.

4 Cf. *Politik, Geist und Kritik*, Introduction, Part 1: Sinnsuche, Chap. 1: Befreiung, Conclusion.

5 Cf. Ursula I. Meyer, *Die Welt der Philosophin*. 4. Sub-volume. *Moderne Zeiten: Das 20. Jahrhundert*, Aachen 1998; Hannah Arendt, *The Life of the Mind*, p. 265-291; Seyla Benhabib, *The Reluctant Modernism of Hannah Arendt*, Sage 1996. (Cf. infra).

6 Arendt supposed rejection of "philosophical theory" as such is also claimed in Dana R. Villa, *Arendt and Socrates*, in: *Revue Internationale de Philosophie*, Volume 53, No. 208, 2/1999, pp. 241-257.

Indeed, Etienne Tassin declares that he is concerned with presenting Arendt's *phenomenology of action*, which he characterises in the introduction as follows: "La position arendtienne [...] permet que se développe une authentique philosophie politique dont l'axe central est l'élucidation de l'action tout entière ordonnée, dans une tension difficile, autour de l'instauration d'un monde commun." (p. 13) Etienne Tassin accepts the common assumption that Arendt's theory of action represents the inner core of her political philosophy, to which all other aspects of her thought referred and from which they each drew their significance.

The really new aspect of Tassin's interpretation lies in his *radicalisation* of this traditional praxis-centred interpretation of Arendt. Tassin sees Arendt's political philosophy not only in the sense of *practical philosophy*, that is as a politically proceeding philosophy which attempts to act normatively on political practice. For him Arendtian *political thought* can be treated in its own right as directly practical-political behaviour: In Arendt's conception, *political thinking*, in contrast to purely contemplative thinking, is of direct practical effect, and is constitutively integrated in the world of human interaction and thus itself an element of political practice. "Ce qui constitue la radicalité discrète de l'analyse arendtienne est la relégation de la question de l'Être au profit de la question de l'activité. Car, y compris lorsqu'il s'agit de la pensée, saisir l'activité revient toujours à saisir la modalité d'advenue d'un monde, bref sa phénoménalité." (329).

And more clearly: "l'action elle-même est manifestation – actualisation, au sens de phénoménalisation – de la pensée." (345).

Correlatively to this attempt to locate the practical aspect of *philosophical thought*, which Etienne Tassin undertakes with reference to Arendt's interpretation of Socrates, every form of *theoretical* activity is condemned as *metaphysical* and therefore *unpolitical*, and is banned from Arendt's political theory.⁶ Not only does this strip the theory of its special character, but it also pushes aside the possibilities, dignity and significance of philosophy as such: "Arendt construit une figure du platonisme qui [...] vise à rendre manifeste la

connivence entre une détermination stricte-ment théorique du penser philosophique et une occultation radicale de la condition politique de l'exister humain." (558) Tassin's interpretation of the relationship between theory and practice in Arendt's work thus leads to the paradoxical result that he completely eliminates *theory* from her political scheme in favour of *practice*, whereas Arendt herself always insisted that she had done nothing else all her life other than work with *theory*. How would the author like to explain this contradiction?

The *practicalisation* to which Etienne Tassin subjects Arendt's political theory is expressed at a linguistic level by the fact that instead of speaking of *categories* of practical life, he refers like Heidegger to "existenciaux de la vita activa" (102), and that he chooses to ignore without explanation the radical opposition between theory and practice which Arendt repeatedly emphasises.⁷ It leads to a systematic undervaluing of the purely theoretical part of her political hermeneutics, and this despite the fact that the author is well aware of this dimension of her thought. He notes, for example, with respect to Arendt's methodological remarks in the introduction to *The Human Condition*, where Arendt comments on her double epistemological interest: "La même démarche, double, à la fois structurelle et génétique, systématique et historique, ou, dans les termes de Heidegger, existentielle et historique, l'oeuvre aussi bien dans l'analyse des origines du totalitarisme que dans celle de la condition humaine." (20). This remark is completely correct. But just what meaning this *double démarche* could have for the inner structure of Arendt's political theory is unfortunately not pursued further.

Tassin's systematic undervaluing of the purely theoretical part of Arendt's political theory culminates in his claim that the efforts of the philosopher were directed primarily towards *reversing* the classical hierarchy of *vita activa* and *vita contemplativa*, in order to give inter-personal action the first place in the hierarchy of human modes of activity which it has so long been denied in the western philosophical tradition: "En renversant la hiérarchie de la pensée et de l'action,

7 Cf. the Toronto Conference (Nov. 1972) on "The Work of Hannah Arendt", in: *Hannah Arendt. The Recovery of the Public World*, Melvyn A. Hill (ed.), New York 1979, *On Hannah Arendt*, p. 301f.

8 Cf. *Politik, Geist und Kritik*, IV: Zuschauer.

de la vita contemplativa et de la vita activa, Arendt formule, depuis l'écart qu'elle creuse entre l'intelligence du fait politique et l'héritage de la tradition philosophique, les conditions d'une nouvelle compréhension philosophique du politique." (557)

It is difficult to bring this idea into line with Arendt's reflections on theory. Indeed, I would go so far as to say that in taking Arendt's political philosophy as a mere reversal of the theory-practice relationship which determines the tradition of western philosophy (and as mentioned above, destroying theory without trace in the process), Etienne Tassin only realigns her thought within this western tradition of philosophy and thus betrays the idea of *breaking with tradition* which is fundamental for Hannah Arendt. Incidentally, did not Arendt herself in the essay *Tradition und die Neuzeit* compare three rebellious thinkers, namely Marx, Nietzsche and Kierkegaard, and convincingly demonstrate that a mere *reversal* of received philosophical tradition necessarily takes place within the conceptual framework of the tradition itself, and thus represents a part of this tradition, even if it may be the last one? The radical negation also contains the acceptance of that which is being negated, as Marx's jump from philosophy to politics demonstrates. Arendt's theory of action is in no way the *axe central* of her political philosophy, and she in no way condemns the pure *observing theory* as *apolitical*. On the contrary, Arendt develops a concept of *philosophical theory* which stands comparison with her *politics* concept and which brings her political theory to its conceptual completion. Arendt's theoretical analyses of action must be related to complementary reflections on *pure theory*, which represent their necessary and consequential continuation, and it is only the thematic complementarity of both areas of her political theory, namely the practical and theoretical parts, which leads her political scheme to its completion.⁸

If Etienne Tassin is concerned primarily with the philosophical innovation of Arendt's political thought, then Seyla Benhabib in her critical but lively study *The Reluctant Modernism of Hannah Arendt* is primarily concerned

with the difficult question, as yet not satisfactorily handled in the literature, of the normative relevance of Arendt's view of politics for the modern liberal society. It is apparent that she also approaches Arendt's work from a practice-oriented perspective.

Now Seyla Benhabib by no means goes so far as to ascribe direct practical-political effects to Arendtian philosophical thought, like Etienne Tassin. Nevertheless, she presents her own version of Habermas's assumption of *practical philosophy*. In her view, a key to the correct understanding of Arendt's work, in addition to the profound influence of Martin Heidegger's *Existenzphilosophie*, is to be found in the *existentialist roots* of her thought: "These seemingly theoretically marginal but existentially crucial categories of identity – a woman and a Jew – or, more correctly, Arendt's identity as a German Jewess in the twentieth century, are the sources out of which Arendt's thought flows and to which we, her readers, must attend to understand her properly." (XXXIV) Benhabib then combines this link between Arendt's *mental* life and her *biographical* roots with the claim "to offer a rereading of Hannah Arendt's political philosophy" (XXIV), the intention of which is to reveal the *real* Hannah Arendt.⁹ This *new reading*, must begin, according to Benhabib, with a *decentring* (20) of her thought. The traditional view of *The Human Condition* must be relinquished in favour of an interpretation from a perspective which emphasises the biographical roots of Arendt's work, since it is only this which makes it possible to view the entirety of Arendt's thought in its historical development and to judge it adequately: "It is a principal goal of this book to decenter the place of *The Human Condition* in our reading of Hannah Arendt. Although I do not question the forceful brilliance of the work, it is my thesis that only when we read *The Human Condition* in the light of the historical development of Arendt's thought as a whole can we interpret its import." (XXV)

With her call to *decentre* Arendt's thought, Seyla Benhabib has indeed put her finger on a sore point of Arendt interpretation, as we have already demonstrated. Unfortunately, when it comes to responding to this challenge

9 According to Arendt, thinking is an activity which is based on the "unconditional" and which takes place in a sphere of complete "detachment". "As to the world of appearances, which affects our senses as well as our souls and our common sense, Heraclitus spoke truly: 'The mind is separate from all things.'" (*Thinking*, New York, 1977, p. 71) cf. *Politik, Geist und Kritik*, Teil II: Kampf, Teil V: Geschichte, Kap I: Wahrheit.

10 The "mind" does not search for "truth", but for "meaning"; both are strictly separated from each other, even if in important respects they are inter-dependent. Cf. *Politik, Geist und Kritik*, Part II: Kampf (Zugehörigkeit), Part V: Geschichte, Kap. I: Wahrheit.

she does not reach the goals she herself has set. To be sure the *The Human Condition* does not form the cornerstone of her analysis, but Seyla Benhabib still clings tightly to idea that Arendt's theory of action represents the centre of her political philosophy. This is the basic pre-condition on which her whole critical analysis is based. If she really intended to *de-centre* Arendtian thinking it would also have been necessary to drop this idea. As it is, Benhabib remains entrapped in the practice-centred perspective of Arendtian thought, and reinforces this.

This leads her, similarly to Etienne Tassin, to systematically obscure the boundaries between Arendt's theoretical and practical political reflections, although she too knows of the difference between the two levels of Arendt's reflection. Thus at the start of the important Chapter V, where she subjects some of Arendt's central terminological distinctions to critical scrutiny: "Arendt's phenomenological essentialism frequently leads her to conflate conceptual distinctions with social processes, ontological analyses with institutional and historical descriptions. This method has the virtue of throwing unprecedented light on social and political phenomena; at the same time, it often leaves us confused as to which level Arendt is operating on." (124) Nowhere, however, is the idea formulated that an interpretation with the declared aim of improving understanding Arendt's philosophy should be particularly concerned to separate the two levels of reflection from one another, in order to obtain a better view of the thematic relationships between them. On the contrary, Benhabib is concerned to bring the two categorial strands of Arendtian thought into harmony, and she commits the cardinal error of the Arendt literature: "How then," she asks with an eye on *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, "to reconcile these complex historical-cultural analyses with the categorial oversimplifications that stare at us from the pages of *The Human Condition*?" (139)

Mixing Arendt's historical and systematic analyses in this way leads on the one hand to the usual claims of *great tensions* and unresolved *contradictions* (118) in her work, and on the other hand, more seriously, to a failure to

recognise the specific normative contents of the conceptual distinctions she uses to define the nature of the political. Thus, for example, Seyla Benhabib finds that Arendt's fundamental distinction between the political and the social is *problematic* and calls for a *revision* (198) and "some defensible reconstruction of her hotly contested distinction". (137) The criterion, therefore, by which Benhabib measures the legitimacy of Arendt's conceptual differentiation is empirical: Arendt's distinction between the political and the social is rejected as inadequate, because it is inappropriate for the socio-political conditions and real power relations of modern capitalist societies. "If we assume that what distinguishes the social-cum-economic from the political are content- or object-domain specific distinctions, are we not then obscuring power relations that underlie the economic domain?" (140) Or: "Arendt's attempt to separate the political from the economic via an ontological divide between freedom and necessity is (...) futile and implausible. The realm of necessity is permeated through and through by power relations." (158)

Benhabib's criticism of Arendt's conceptual distinction between the social and the political – a standard in the repertoire of the critical literature – is based on a misjudgement of the specific normative value and link to the practical of Arendt's theory of the political, and therefore misses the mark. A criticism can only claim inter-subjective validity if it is based on a correct interpretation of the object of criticism.

There is only space here to outline three aspects of Benhabib's misjudgement of the specific normative link to the practical in Arendt's political teaching:

1. When Benhabib calls into question Arendt's definitions of political and social by drawing on the criterion of socio-political adequacy, then she introduces the empirical level into her categorial theory of the political and fails to appreciate its *critical-significational* function, which draws precisely from its reality-transcendental (not to be confused with unrealistic) orientation. The specific feature of Arendt's distinction between politics

and economics is that she does not make a claim to empirical objectivity. Hadn't she made plain in *Thinking* that the language of the mind is subjected neither to the criterion of practical usefulness nor to empirical truth, but solely that of searching for meaning?¹⁰

Benhabib's criticism of Arendt's dichotomy between the social and the political, that this is not practicable under the conditions pertaining in modern liberal societies, therefore misses the distinction of *truth* and *meaning* which is fundamental for Arendt's categorisation of the political, and therefore fails her target.

2. Following the idea of *Ursprungsphilosophie* (95) in accordance with Heidegger, Benhabib explains Arendt's conceptual definitions in terms of their *historical* origins, and thus lends them an eminently descriptive character, which does not do justice to their *critical-normative* status. I would say that Arendt's political categories are not empirical-descriptive, but have a critical-ahistorical status.¹¹ They are not intended to help to describe political reality, or to understand this better, but they point primarily to possible states, in comparison to which each past historical constellation is only an incomplete formation, and behind which any future practical realisation in as much as this is meaningful, will necessarily remain. In my opinion the conventional historical explanations of Arendt's definitions of concepts found in the literature should be abandoned. Arendt's analytical concepts are not based on historical-political reality, whether ancient or modern, but have their own intellectual and semantic origins and thus stand fully for themselves, even when they draw on historical material. In short: Arendt's concept of political has never possessed political reality, neither for the classical peoples or for political experiments of recent times, but is an intellectual construct which corresponds to nothing in reality.

3. When Seyla Benhabib adopts the traditional idea of the direct practical benefit of theory for practice and attempts to apply Arendt's conceptual definitions directly to the practical reality of modern society, she

lines Arendt's categorial teaching up alongside the western tradition of *practical philosophy*, for which the *application* or the *subsumption*, in whatever form, represented the link between theory and practice. She thus falls behind Arendt's idea of the *break in tradition*, but misjudges also the specific link to reality and the actual normative function of her categorial system, in which the traditional postulate of the direct transition from the theory to practice is no longer valid. For Arendt, there is, if at all, only an indirect, *critical dialectical* transition from theory to practice, which takes substantial account of the reality of the social relationships in question. This critical-dialectical transition, however, is no longer the work of a theoretician, but is essentially the work of the politically active.¹²

A general conclusion is that the problem of the normative practice link of Arendt's categorial system of the political should be reconsidered in the literature starting from scratch. One of the future tasks of the criticism will be to free Arendt's systematic reflections on the concept of the political from the entanglement with historical analyses, in order to be able to determine its specific normative function for the present. This seems to be not only the only reading which does justice to her systematic political reflections, but also the only way to be done once and for all with the misunderstanding of anti-modernism, which to some extent is also the problem of Seyla Benhabib, although she no longer presents Arendt as the nostalgic of the ancient polis, but as the melancholic mourning as ancient Greek thought.

Ronald Beiner occupies a special place in the literature in as much as he is one of the few who have not been led to interpret Arendt's purely theoretical considerations on the capacity of the mind in a practical political way, in order to integrate them in her theory of action, but has made a serious attempt to judge their own value. In this, he lays the foundations for an appropriate assessment of the complex thematic links between the practical-political and the pure theoretical-political subsectors of her philosophical project. Unfortunately, however, his much-cited essay on *Arendt's Theory of Judgement*¹³

11 Cf. Hauke Brunkhorst, *Hannah Arendt*, Munich 1999, p. 115f.; Hanna F. Pitkin, *The Attack of the Blob*, Chicago 1998.

12 Margaret Canovan makes the practical uselessness of "theory" by Arendt very plain: *Hannah Arendt as a Conservative Thinker*, in: *Hannah Arendt. Twenty Years Later*, Larry May/Jerome Kohn (ed.), Cambridge, Mass. 1996, pp. 11-32 (p. 22).

13 Hannah Arendt, *Lectures on Kant's Political Philosophy*. Edited and with an Interpretative Essay by Ronald Beiner, Chicago 1982.

14 The idea of “break” still determines the debate on Arendt’s reflections on judgement. Cf. Albrecht Wellmer, *Hannah Arendt on Judgement. The Unwritten Doctrine of Reason*, in: *Hannah Arendt. Twenty Years Later*, opus cit., (pp. 33-52); George Kateb, *The Judgement of Arendt*, in: *Revue Internationale de Philosophie*, opus cit., (pp. 133-154).

15 Cf. *Politik Geist und Kritik*, Part IV: Zuschauer, Chap. II: Gemeinschaftlichkeit.

16 Cf. *Politik, Geist und Kritik*, Part III, Chap. II.

17 Key evidence for this is the passage from the last lecture which can be regarded as a highly compressed expression of Arendt’s political ethics – in contrast to her individual ethics: “It is by virtue of this idea of mankind, present in every single man, that men are human, and they can be called civilised or humane to the extent that this idea becomes the principle not only of their judgements but of their actions (...). When one judges and when one acts in political matters, one is supposed to take one’s bearings from the idea, not the actuality, of being a world citizen and, therefore, also a *Weltbetrachter*, a world spectator.” (*Lectures on Kant’s Political Philosophy*, p. 75/76).

18 Cf. *Politik, Geist und Kritik*, esp.: R. Beiners ‘Rekonstruktion’ von H. Arendts Urteilstheorie, p. 228f.

19 Hannah Arendt, *Karl Jaspers, Correspondence, 1926-1969*, ed. by Lotte Koehler and Hans Saner, New York 1992, p. 576.

does not provide a comprehensive appraisal of her political theory. On the contrary, the inner unity within the external difference remains largely hidden to Ronald Beiner. The reason is not hard to find. It lies in his thesis that Hannah Arendt assumes an irreconcilable contradiction between politics, or political theory on the one hand, and philosophy or pure theory on the other (192). However, this merely shows that Ronald Beiner, like Etienne Tassin and Seyla Benhabib, has accepted without criticism the praxis-centred interpretation of Arendt, but has reached different conclusions.

Ronald Beiner sees a *break* in Arendt’s work on judgement between “(...) Arendt’s early and late theories of judgement”, with “the former *political*, the latter as *contemplative*.” According to Beiner, from the beginning of the 1970s judgement was no longer a practical, direct guide to action, but only fulfils a contemplative function, and has therefore only subjective validity, since “judgement pertains only to the life of the mind, the mind’s communication with itself in solitary reflection” (p. 152, 144, 140).¹⁴ This subjectivistic interpretation of the *Life of the Mind* not only misjudges the eminently political character of Arendt’s purely theoretical reflections on judgement¹⁵, but reintegrates these in the western philosophical tradition, for which philosophical thought in its highest form was an essential solipsistic, apolitical matter, and with this undermines Arendt’s *overcoming of tradition*. There are hardly any textual references to support Beiner’s distinction between an early political phase in Arendt’s reflections on judgement and a later, conflicting contemplative phase. On the contrary, Arendt’s later purely theoretical ideas on judgement within the framework of her reflections on *Life of the Mind* make plain again and again how much they thematically augment her interpretation of judgement as a directly practical-political ability, and build on this, rather than contradict or replace it. Indeed, a thorough reading shows that the judgement in its purely theoretical use has the function, within the overall structure of Arendt’s political theory of overcoming the distinction between the *Life of the Mind* and

The Human Condition, since its special function is to combine the sphere of thought with the objective area of reality of the political actors. Without this binding function of theoretical judgement, Arendt’s philosophical reflections in her investigation of *The Life of the Mind* would be separated by an unbridgeable gap from her theoretical analysis of action.¹⁶

My thesis is that Arendt’s purely theoretical reflections on judgement are in no way in conflict with her theme of judgement as a practical-political ability as representative thought, but rather represent a necessary and consequent continuation of this.

Only the complex interaction between both lines of argument, which both have the theme of judgement as a basic political ability, the one from a practical view the other from a purely theoretical one, presents her views on judgement in their entirety and ensures the inner unity of her political theory.

In particular on the basis of the late lectures on Kant, it is possible to show this well, because judgement in its double practical and theoretical form is the main theme of these lectures, without one form being played off against the other.¹⁷ It can be seen that this double theme of judgement is not a peculiarity of the Kant lectures, but was a feature of Arendt’s reflections on judgement from the beginning by referring to the relevant passages from the fundamental essays produced in the various periods of her intellectual development: *Verstehen und Politik, Kultur und Politik*, and *Wahrheit und Politik*.¹⁸ How important this double function of judgement was for Arendt can also be seen in a letter written to Karl Jaspers on 29 November 1964, in which Arendt specifically points out the difference between the practical and theoretical application of this mental ability. Arendt writes:

“I’ve learned a lot, particularly in the area of method (...). In connection with the Critique of Judgement. A possible conceptual structure for history and political science. And representative thinking in politics on the basis of judgement.”¹⁹

To sum up, Arendt does not formulate two theories of judgement, one *political* and

another conflicting *contemplative* theory, but she brings the political ability of judgement into the discussion here in a practical and there in a purely theoretical context, with each preconditioning and augmenting the other. There is no *break* in Arendt's analysis of judgement, but the continuity of a complex line of thought, which presented various aspects at various times and in various works.

III. THE TIMELESS NOWHERE

The dominant praxis-oriented interpretation of Arendt's political philosophy in the literature and the resultant systematic blurring of categorial limits between Arendt's *conceptual* and *historical* analyses is attributable to inadequate study of her concept of *theory*, i.e. the methodological basis of her political theory.

In a letter to Hannah Arendt dated 15 February 1972, Martin Heidegger writes: "What is the [...] *theoria* doing? Where everyone is chattering on about *theory*, your book ought to *dazwischenfahren*."²⁰ The book to which Heidegger is referring is the posthumously published work *The Life of the Mind*, the importance of which for Arendt's political theory is still underestimated in the literature.²¹ According to Glenn Gray, "this book is at least a hundred years ahead of its time."²² Whether this is the case only time will tell. It definitely is the only work in Arendt's extensive oeuvre in which, by means of a historical analysis of the *Life of the Mind*, she gives detailed information of her own approach, her *Method of Political Thinking*. Arendt's philosophical thinking should not be traced back to her biographical roots or the influence of Martin Heidegger²³ but to its purely mental origins. This represents the true hermeneutic key to the understanding of her phenomenological political hermeneutics. Arendt spoke extensively about this *mental* origin of her philosophising in *The Life of the Mind*, namely in connection with her reflections on the *place of thinking*, this *nowhere*, which Wolfgang Heuer has fittingly characterised as "non-existent and yet very present."²⁴

We must install ourselves in this historically transcendental place *nowhere* as the true location of the mind, if we wish to really understand Arendt. From this invisible standpoint

outside space and time, we must look at her works, in order to comprehend their specific value and their speciality, and to gain deep insight into what Heidegger could have meant with *dazwischenfahren*. If we did this, then we would understand as Margaret Canovan has rightly remarked: "Arendt's political thought [...] not only [...] has been much misunderstood, but also [...] is even more original and stimulating than is usually appreciated."²⁵

20 Hannah Arendt – Martin Heidegger. *Briefe 1925-1975*, edited by Ursula Ludz, Frankfurt/M. 1998, p. 226.

21 Jerome Kohn rightly remarked about Arendt's "final, tremendously ambitious, yet strange work *The Life of the Mind*: "The existing two volumes comprise more than 400 pages, thus making it the longest, after *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, of any of her books, and it would have been the longest of them all had it been completed. Still, although there has been speculation about its final, unwritten part, the extant text has received relatively little attention and less analysis in the considerable body of scholarship devoted to Arendt." (*Evil and Plurality: Hannah Arendt's Way to The Life of the Mind*, in: *Twenty Years Later*, opus cit., pp. 147-178, here p. 155).

22 Cited after Carol Brightman, in: *Hannah Arendt – Mary McCarthy. Im Vertrauen. Briefwechsel 1949-1975*, ed. with an introduction by C. Brightman, Munich 1995, p. 33.

23 Cf. also Dana R. Villa, *Arendt and Heidegger. The Fate of the Political*, Princeton 1996. The emphasis in recent months on an intellectual dependence of Arendt on Heidegger is a fad which will vanish. There can be ^Tdoubt that Arendt was inspired by Heidegger – and by many other prominent thinkers. However, as with any genuine philosophical project she also goes far beyond this thinker to create something original. T_{no}

24 Wolfgang Heuer, *Gegenwart im Nirgendwo. Hannah Arendts Weg in die Postmoderne*, in: *Merkur* 51, July 7, 1997, pp. 596-607 (p. 597).

25 Margaret Canovan, *Hannah Arendt. A Reinterpretation of Her Political Thought*, Cambridge 1992, p. 2.