

Gisli Vogler: Judging Complicity. How to Respond to Injustice and Violence

Review: Gisli Vogler: Judging Complicity. How to Respond to Injustice and Violence, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2024, 200 pp., eBook: Open Access.

“How should those profiting from injustice and violence respond to their complicity?”, asks Gisli Vogler in the opening sentence of *Judging Complicity*.

Over the course of the book, Vogler aims to place the question of complicity at the heart of issues of violence and injustice. To do so, he mainly relies on the work of Hannah Arendt and the contributions of British sociologist Margaret Archer. Arendt's ideas, combined with Archer's theory of social conditioning, are therefore mobilized to situate and extend developments in the literature on complicity, and to link together the concepts of complicity, judgment and commitment. Vogler is then able to formulate his main contribution, what he calls an “improved ethos of reality”, to better understand judgement on complicity.

A complex, multifaceted and changing concept detailed throughout the book, the notion of ethos of reality is central to the ability to judge complicity. It constitutes the “lenses” through which we can see the world, encouraging us to take up collective responsibility, care for others and be actively responsive to the causes of injustice. Vogler argues that the cultivation of this ethos of reality calls for the orientation of judgement “[...] towards the wellbeing of the common world, the space constituted by evaluating shared appearances, through which we can give life meaning”.

In the first chapter, Vogler introduces the debates and disagreements on complicity in the literature, and the problem of responsiveness. He presents the dominant legal and moral framework, in contrast to alternative visions like the ones defended by Iris Marion Young and poststructuralist thinkers, before building on more recent contributions forming an “ethic of responsiveness”.

In the second chapter, the author dives into Arendt's work on human plurality and reflective judgement, with a special emphasis on the personal position on complicity that does not rely on preconceived notions of blame. For Vogler, Arendt also provides the first dimension to the ethos of reality: pluralism, standing in opposition to world alienation (“worldlessness”). Pluralist disposition and pluralist public sphere are indeed important support to the capacity to identify and respond to complicity appropriately.

The third chapter is dedicated to the introduction of the debate in the Arendtian literature, notably Linda Zerelli, about reflective judgement. While adhering to a pluralist

ontology, it allows the reader to balance the potential and limits of plurality and show the need to consider a connection between “[...] a community of judges and their context”.

The fourth chapter deals with that last element, presenting Margaret Archer’s theses on social conditioning, to complement and continue Arendtian theoretical construction on the question of judgment and complicity. It identifies what is needed for the second dimension of the ethos of reality, on the situated character of judgement, which is to accept the distinct role of structure and agency in society and interact and engage with them to anchor objects and subjects in social reality.

The fifth chapter articulates the ethos of reality in relation to complicity, forming a prelude to the last chapter, “Resisting complicity through an ethos of reality in practice”, a concrete application of the analysis formulated in the book. Using the writings and interviews of Nobel laureate Herta Müller, Vogler argues that her experience during Romania’s dictatorship is an example of an improved ethos of reality and good judgement. The most interesting aspect to this chapter is probably methodological, forming a thorough formal application in the “real-world”, that is inspiring for normative philosophy.

One specific element in the second chapter calls to be highlighted. At the end of the section, Vogler discusses some of Arendt’s problematic positions on racial issues. However, rather than seeing this as a reason to reject Arendt’s contributions, he sees it as an argument for the salience of the approach put forward in the book: “Crucially, then, Arendt’s own case reveals that a focus on plurality, politics and judgement is not a panacea on its own for a person failing to judge politically. But a different, better public opinion formation process together with a greater willingness to interrogate her own prejudices might have helped Arendt identify and acknowledge how her frame of reference is vulnerable to reproducing racism.”

Overall, Vogler’s most important contribution is to set the stage for a renewed interest in judgement and complicity, with a special emphasis on contemporary social justice. *Judging Complicity* is indeed deeply rooted in contemporary social issues and debates, such as sexism (#MeToo), racism (Black Lives Matter), as well as the destruction of the environment). This book also broadens the relevance of Arendt’s work beyond conventional subjects, allowing it to continue flourishing by establishing new conversations with other authors. On that note, if the fourth chapter on Archer’s contributions in the field of sociology and critical realism might be more challenging to fully grasp for the Arendtian reader, it nevertheless provides grounds for a powerful and pertinent analysis, that we will need to be continued in the coming years.

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