

THE INTERRELATEDNESS OF SELF AND OTHERS AND POLITICAL SALIENCE
OF COMMON HUMANITY – THE CASE FROM HANNAH ARENDT

Reuven Shlozberg, University of Toronto, Department of Political Science

(work in progress; please do not cite without permission of the author)

Faced with times of increasing life uncertainty, such as the present economic recession, many agents feel a strong inclination to withdraw into, and prioritize, the self. In the present recession, for example, many people found themselves unsure of their ability, in the immediate or short-term future, to provide food and shelter for themselves, their partners, and their dependent loved ones. Others found themselves mortgaging their future – entering debt or exhausting savings meant for long-term goals – in order to provide such basic life-necessities. Almost every agent found herself facing a perceived necessity to tighten her expenditure of resources – material, mental, or emotional – either to meet immediate need for them, or to shore them up for possible need down the road. Such increased scarcity seems to dictate a change of priorities. Unnecessary expenditures must be cut. And most necessary, it appears to agents, are the needs, goals, and priorities of one's own and one's family and loved ones. I have to first take care of number one.

In such a tradeoff, concern for others who are not among one's loved ones seems to among the first to be reduced or even cut altogether. When I am pinching every penny, even the small change given to a street beggar appears better saved for a rainy day. When I have to work extra hours, or am looking for a job, time I would spend volunteering in my community appears all the more precious. When I feel that present adversity may require all the fortitude and perseverance I can muster, I am much less inclined to expend it on supporting friends through their adversity. In such adverse times, concern for others appears a luxury that can take a back seat to, and be overridden by, care for the self.

This also affects political decision-making, to the point of opposing not only policies they perceive to adversely affect them, but also policies using government resources that could have aided them to aid others. Indeed, during the recent health care debate in the United States, there was much resentment towards Obama's reforms in areas hard-stricken by the recession. Even more tellingly, for most of the duration of the debate, supporters of health care reform refrained from prominent use of arguments based on shared responsibilities or duties to others. It was in fact their opposition that utilized such arguments, albeit with regard to future generations, who, being 'our children', are more 'one's own' than 'others'.

In this paper I draw on Hannah Arendt for an argument that this way of thinking takes away an important element of what it means to be human in the world. In a lived reality of human interrelatedness and interdependence, concern for others is an integral and even partly constitutive component of care for the self, and our common humanity is integral

to each person's individual identity. To realize this fact, and to act accordingly, is the essence of being moral. In this respect, to be moral is to be meaningfully human. And this means maintaining a commitment to concern for others, alongside one's commitments to oneself and one's loved ones, even and especially at times of adversity, uncertainty, and insecurity.

I

Though primarily known (and self-described) as a political thinker, towards the end of her life Arendt's attention has turned to "the phenomenon of evil ... evil-doing ... the problem of good and evil, our faculty for telling right from wrong" (LMT: 3-5). This was the focus of her investigation of the mental activities of thinking, willing, and judging, the final and uncompleted project of her long intellectual life.¹ The 'immediate impulse' for this investigation was her 'discovery', in covering the Eichmann trial, of 'the banality of evil' (LMT: 3). According to Arendt, the phenomenon of banal evil-doing, as exemplified in Nazi Germany, "went counter to our tradition of thought – literary, theological, or philosophic – about the phenomenon of evil" (LMT: 3). It thus posed a serious challenge to this tradition, which Arendt sought, through her investigation of 'the life of the mind', to clarify and meet. To understand Arendt's later moral thought, then, we must first understand what this challenge was.

In calling Eichmann's evil banal, Arendt "did not mean that what Eichmann had helped to perpetrate was banal or that the extermination of the Jews, and of other peoples, by the Nazis was banal" (Benhabib, 2000: 74). Rather, she meant, at the most basic level, that this was evil committed without evil intent (*mens rea*).² The Eichmann that emerges from Arendt's *Eichmann in Jerusalem* (hereafter EJ) as an exemplar of the moral failure of the majority of German Nazi collaborators, was not ideologically Nazi nor anti-Semitic. He did not bear ill-will towards any of the millions he had helped send to their terrible fates. He simply failed to realize, not only that his mundane bureaucratic transport-coordination activities were immoral, but that they gave rise to any moral concern in the first place.

In other words, the moral failure of Eichmann and his fellow non-Nazi Germans was not that they chose evil-doing over righteousness. Nor was it primarily a failure to see what was evil and what was good among the decisional choices they were faced with, although many non-Nazi Germans failed in this respect as well (that is, a failure of moral guidance). Their primary failure was a failure of moral triggering, that is, the failure to realize that the decisional situations they were faced with called for making a moral choice in the first place. This is the core of the phenomenon of 'banal evil-doing'.

How did this phenomenon, then, challenge traditional Western thinking about evil? Traditionally, human agents are presumed to be endowed with an internal voice – conscience – which under any and all circumstances can alert (trigger) them to the need to make a moral decision, and then guide them through it. Of course, this makes agents presumptively capable of telling and choosing right from wrong and of realizing when they are faced with such a choice. As a result, the fact that an agent has committed evil

can be taken as a presumptive indication of the agent's evil intent, the more so the more blatant and patent the evil.

But under the (purposefully engineered) conditions Nazi Germany, agents who in good faith relied on their conscience for moral triggering and moral guidance were "under circumstances that make it well-nigh impossible for [them] to know or to feel that [they] are doing wrong" (EJ: 276). It was therefore factually possible that agents, even many at the same time, could commit evil without having evil intent. Even more perniciously, such circumstances are potentially repeatable (EJ: 273). But without the presupposition of conscience, can agents be held morally responsible for their actions *under any and all circumstances*? Are we not forced into releasing banal evildoers such as Eichmann from moral responsibility?³

Arendt, as her fervent support for Eichmann's death penalty attests, felt that banal evildoers had to be held morally responsible for the evil they commit, and this crystallized for her the challenge of banal evildoing for her. This challenge was to re-legitimize the ascription of moral responsibility on agents, even under circumstances that breed banal evildoing, without recourse to conscience as an ever-present trigger and guide. The challenge, in other words, was to find human mental capacities other than conscience that are in fact capable of triggering agents to moral decision-making, and of guiding them through such decision-making, under any and all circumstances. And already in EJ Arendt had the intuition that somehow thinking, and perhaps judging, could be among such capacities (EJ: 287-288). This was the intuition that the investigation of the human mental activities was meant to explore.

II

To understand how Arendtian thinking, judging, and willing emerge as such a decisional alternative to conscience, we must make better sense of the psychology of Eichmann's exemplary moral failure. Indeed, out of Arendt's disparate and unsystematic discussions of Eichmann's failure of conscience in EJ emerge two psychological features of banal evildoing that are particularly salient for this purpose. I shall call the first heuristic decision-making and the second a self-prioritizing decisional stance.

By 'heuristic' I mean any mental shortcut that agents use, in given decisions, to make their decision quickly and without full consideration. Recourse to such mental shortcuts – law abidingness, habitualness, dutifulness, conformity to the behavior of peers, and an empty ('thoughtless') reliance on clichés and stock phrases – is the most recurring psychological feature of Arendt's portrait of Eichmann (see especially EJ: 48-55, 131, 175, 232-233).

All these types of heuristics serve agents to obviate the need to reflect on given decisions. Laws function as general categories which agents determinatively apply to given decisions (Should I cross the road now? 'Cross only if the light is green'). Habits routinize certain decisional outcomes to always be taken under a recurring set of

circumstances (What should I do first after waking up? ‘I always brush my teeth after breakfast’). Duties both routinize decisional outcomes (usually less frequent ones than habits – ‘if it’s Monday, I need to take the garbage out to the curb’) and give overriding priority to certain decisional outcomes under certain conditions (Should I go out to a movie tonight? ‘my grades are due tomorrow, and they aren’t tabulated yet, so they get first priority’). The behavior of others provides decisional cues, especially under conditions of partial information (Should I take out garbage or recycling this week? ‘check what others on the street have put out to the curb’). Stock phrases and clichés replace thoughtful utterances not only when one cannot think of something better to say, but also when one does not wish to bother with a thoughtful response (‘How are you? Fine, thank you, and how are you?’). But more pervasively, since clichés and stock phrases draw their force from accepted social meanings, they also signal an implicit acceptance of such meanings as guiding one’s decision-making.

The other consistent psychological element of Eichmann’s banal evildoing was the fact that he acted in a manner that decisionally prioritized the needs of the self (survival, life-goals, *one’s own* family) over other considerations. Indeed, much of his decision-making under the Nazis was instrumental, guided by considerations of career advancement, the wellbeing of *his own* family, and eventually self-preservation (EJ: 60-67, 72-82, 91-96, 114-116, 140-150).

But even more strikingly for Arendt, a similarly instrumental moral calculus, overtaken by the concerns of the self, was also evident in banal evildoers who did realize the morally questionable nature of their. Arendt’s one striking example of such a person, Peter Bamm, decided not to intervene or even protest against mass killings he was witness to due to a moral calculus in which the danger of such opposition and the overwhelming unlikelihood of its success or of it making a practical difference outweighed the moral consideration (EJ: 231-233). Here, as well, self-privileging considerations (survival, the success of *one’s own* endeavor, the likelihood of being remembered for one’s actions) overrode moral ones in the decision-making of the banal evildoer. And the reason that these considerations had such an overriding weight was precisely that agents approached their decisions from a decisional stance that prioritizes the concerns of the self in the first place.

Importantly, for Arendt these two psychological features of banal evildoing are two sides of the same coin. Eichmann’s ability to reason instrumentally about the actions that best served his career, family, or survival was, for Arendt, but another feature of this thoughtlessness, also serving him as general categories applied determinatively to given decision-situations (that is, as heuristics). On the other hand, the decisional privileging of heuristics is itself a form of self-prioritizing in that it gives decisional priority to the meanings, values, and choices that are already held by the agent as part of the self. Banal evildoing is thus revealed as the outcome of making decisions entailing moral considerations out of the self-prioritizing decisional stance and in the heuristic decisional manner.

III

The notion that heuristic decision-making and a self-prioritizing decisional stance are what the agent has to overcome in her turn to moral action implicitly permeates Arendt's analyses of thinking, willing, and judging. The former is revealed once we pay attention to a certain symmetry in her seemingly separate analyses of thinking, judging, and willing. The latter is revealed once we pay attention to a certain feature of the operation of thinking and judging. Let me begin with the former.

In each of her analyses of thinking, judging, and willing, Arendt proceeds to distinguish between two separate mental activities that are commonly conflated under the respective headings 'thinking', 'judging', and 'willing'. They are easy to conflate because each pair is carried out by one mental faculty (thought, judgment, the will).⁴ But they are decisionally and existentially distinct, and what distinguishes the two activities in each pair is the same for all three pairs, namely, what Arendt calls reflectivity.

The activities of the faculty of thought are cognition and thinking proper.⁵ Cognition is concerned with ascertaining knowledge about the world and its appearances. It does so by employing the intellect and various reasoning powers to gather and process data about the world, for the purpose of dealing with problems and decisions agents face in daily life. In encountering a particular appearance, cognition would relate it to the parameters of the particular situation or problem at hand, to one's aims and purposes within the situation, and to the preexisting meanings that one ordinarily applies to similar appearances. Cognition is therefore carried out within the hustle and bustle of ordinary life, in an unreflective and often automatic manner.

By contrast, thinking proper (or, as I shall refer to it henceforth, reflective thinking) is concerned with ascribing meaning to the world and its appearances. It does so by employing speculative reason to figure out 'what it means for an appearance to be', beyond its immediate cause, function, or potential uses.⁶ Such meaning cannot be ascertained by the simple application of prior meaning-ascriptions to given situations and appearances. Rather, it requires a reexamination of such predetermined meanings and of the knowledge they are attached to. For this reason, meaning-ascertainment cannot take place within the hustle and bustle of life. Instead, it requires that the agent temporarily halt her daily activities and withdraw into the mind so as to consider what she is doing, the given situation or appearance, from a reflective distance.

Of course, if the quest for meaning takes place in such reflective detachment from the world outside the agent, it can only draw on data from within the agent's mind. It thus has to draw upon the agent's personal meanings in ascribing meaning to an appearance, even though she no longer automatically applies to the situation the same personal meanings she ordinarily would have. The quest for meaning thus inevitably entails a turn to the self, and the resulting meaning is always subjective, a personal meaning-*for-me*.⁷

Though Arendt did not live to write the judgment lectures of LM, her extant material on judgment similarly distinguishes between a reflective judging activity and a non-

reflective (‘determinative’) one.⁸ Both activities fit (classify) particular appearances to appropriate general categories (concepts). They differ, however, in the general categories they engage with and in their mode of operation.

Determinative judging classifies particulars under definable concepts that serve as a schema of what a certain type of particular physical objects is (e.g., dog, chair, bridge). The fitting of particular appearances to such categories is a matter of deductively subsuming the appearance under the proper definition, given the parameters of the problem at hand. It can therefore, like cognition, be carried out unreflectively and often automatically, as part of the hustle and bustle of ordinary life.

By contrast, reflective judging fits particulars to indefinable general concepts, which sense can only be indicated exemplarily (e.g., justice, goodness, piety, beauty, courage). Obviously, particulars cannot be fitted to such categories deductively. Instead, the faculty of judgment must discover the general category that “best captures our subjective response to a given particular” (Ingram, 1992: 124) and is therefore best exemplified by this particular (Beiner, 1982: 121). But such concepts are also evaluative categories, such that to fit a particular under them is also to attach a valuation (good/bad, beautiful/ugly, etc.) to that particular. This valuation task is the first task of reflective judging.

Of course, valuations, as exemplifications of indefinable *general* categories, aspire to general validity. When I assert that ‘this flower is beautiful’ I am not asserting that ‘this flower is beautiful to me’ but that ‘this flower is beautiful’ in general (RJ: 140; LK: 67-68).⁹ This implicit claim to general validity requires validation. Such validation is therefore a second task entailed in reflective judging.¹⁰ It is carried out by employing the power to represent, within one’s mind, the perspectives and judgments of other judging subjects, and to facilitate an imagined critical dialogue between oneself and these other judging subjects (what Arendt sometimes termed ‘representative thinking’). By passing her initial valuation through the test of this critical dialogue, the agent will have intersubjectively conferred upon her valuation general validity.

Notably, in carrying both reflective judging tasks, the faculty of judgment is guided by prior examples (of the relevant general categories and other perspectives, respectively).¹¹ The fit of these examples to the general category must therefore also be reexamined in light of the encountered particular appearance.¹² And this, again, requires withdrawal from the hustle and bustle of ordinary life and into the reflective distance (the spectator’s position) of the mind.

Though Arendt’s lectures on willing are structured primarily as a philosophical history of the will, they contain a similar distinction between two willing activities. This distinction is found, not surprisingly, in a watershed moment of the will’s philosophical history, namely, in the competing conceptions of willing proposed by Aquinas and Scotus (LMW: 113-146).¹³

In Aquinas willing is conceived as the activity of choosing the best means for satisfying existing ends, carried out primarily through the power of instrumental reasoning. In this

activity (which I label ‘arbitration’)¹⁴ the will neither chooses its guiding ends nor processes information regarding possible means for attaining these ends. It merely uses such given information to fit means to similarly given ends, provided, according to Aquinas, either by reason or by some desires. This is therefore on Arendtian terms the willing activity through which agents choose such action that best continues our previous patterns of behavior or best conforms to societal meanings and standards. It requires at most instrumental reflection, and can therefore be carried out within the hustle and bustle of daily life, often automatically, similarly to cognition and determinative judging.

By contrast, Scotus (and Arendt very much with him) sees the will as the mainspring of action that strays from prior patterns of behavior or goes against the grain of agents’ communities. The choice of such action is the task of the activity of free-willing, employing for this purpose the mental ability of spontaneity. Such action is contingent (‘a new beginning’), not in the sense of having no cause at all, but in that it could just as well have been left undone, been its opposite, or caused by a variety of other causes.

In free willing as in arbitration, the will draws on information about possible ends and means provided to it by other mental faculties. But unlike arbitration, in free willing the will directly considers, and either reaffirms or chooses afresh, the ends and aims that would guide the agent’s conduct and behavior. For this reason free willing also requires temporary reflective detachment from action in the world, similarly to reflective thinking and judging.

The Arendtian distinction between reflective thinking, reflective judging, and free willing on the one hand, and cognition, determinative judging, and arbitration on the other, is thus a distinction between reflective and non-reflective mental activities. Non-reflective mental activities are activities that can be carried out while agents are engaged in their ordinary actions in the world and without interrupting such worldly activity. By contrast, reflective activities require detachment from the affairs of the world and therefore interrupt the agent’s ongoing worldly activity and withdraw from it – though such withdrawal and detachment can only be temporary.

But there are two additional aspects to this distinction between reflective and non-reflective mental activities. First, the non-reflective mental activities accept the agent’s (or society’s) prior determinations (of meanings, values, guiding examples, aims, and patterns of behavior) as given while relating the encountered situation to them. By contrast, the reflective mental activities put such prior determinations to the test, using the encountered situation to revisit and possibly revise them. The reflective mental activities are thus self-reflexive, self-questioning, and self-examining. It is for this reason that instrumental reflection is, for Arendt, non-reflective. When I stop to reflect on whether my goal of becoming a career academic is better served by writing another paper or by taking a workshop to improve my teaching skills, I am not, for Arendt, being reflective. To be reflective I would need to revisit the reasons behind my choice of an academic career, reexamine and reaffirm them, and make my choice on their basis.

Second, the non-reflective mental activities can – and oftentimes are – carried out almost automatically, that is, heuristically. When needing to cross a busy street, I automatically cognize which color is lit on the pedestrian traffic light, determinatively fit it under the categories ‘safe to cross’ or ‘unsafe to cross’, and based on this decide whether to cross or to wait. Next to no cognitive effort is exerted in the process. By contrast, the reflective mental activities cannot be carried out heuristically, and in fact replace their heuristic non-reflective counterparts in the making of a decision. Thus, taken together, the reflective mental activities represent an alternative, reflective, way of making a decision. But as we have seen earlier, banal evildoing was for Arendt the result of approaching decisions entailing moral considerations in a heuristic manner. Reflective thinking, judging, and willing thus emerge as forming the decisional alternative that, for Arendt, is the appropriate one to be employed in making such decisions.

IV

The Arendtian reason that this reflective mode of decision-making is the appropriate one for moral decision-making is itself embedded in Arendt’s understanding of the operation of the reflective mental activities. Not surprisingly, an important link in this Arendtian argument has to do with the way that reflective decision-making poses an alternative to the self-prioritizing decisional stance characterizing banal evildoing.

In describing the operation of reflective thinking, Arendt is in fact pursuing three separate intuitions (or, in Arendt’s more favored phrase, thought trains) that, from a decisional perspective, do not at first glance jell easily with each other. One, already mentioned above, is the intuition that thinking is the activity that ascertains and ascribes meaning. Another, of Heideggerian origin, is the intuition that thinking, due to its radical doubt, sweeps everything in its path, questioning and therefore undermining all predeterminations it encounters (LMT: 51-52, 75-77, 88, 174-175, 192; RJ: 167, 171-176, 188). The third, which she exegetically attributes to Socrates, is that thinking is an internal dialogue with an ever-present inner voice who provides no positive counsel, but merely prods the agent to think about what she is doing by asking whether she could live with herself having done what is (or is contemplating) doing (LMT: 180-187; RJ: 76, 89-92, 180-193).¹⁵

Taken together, this triple characterization of thinking is obviously puzzling. How can thinking be the meaning-ascertaining activity if the dialogue of thinking consists only of questions about actions, and if the radical doubt of thinking destroys meanings rather than produce them? And how can one thoughtfully answer one’s internal friend if thinking’s radical doubt does no more than question everything itself? Surely, then, the three intuitions point in three different decisional. How, therefore, can they be decisionally reconciled? The solution to this puzzle, I propose, is to these three intuitions as pointing to three separate reflective thinking activities, each carrying out a specific mental task. These activities and tasks are disentangled, and ordered, once we take into full account one feature of the distinction between habitual and reflective decision-making kept in the shade thus far.

Reflective decisions, made in withdrawal from worldly action and through soul searching self-examination, are exceptional. Numerically, we make most decisions we are faced with more or less heuristically (especially if we consider, with Arendt, instrumental reflection to also belong to heuristic decision-making, and especially if we consider every voluntary action we make, to the level of volitional bodily motions, as stemming from decisions). Nor can we do otherwise, as Arendt herself acknowledges. To try to make every decision we face without recourse to mental shortcuts, Arendt notes, would overtax our mental resources to the point of paralyzing us from any action (LMT: 4, 71; LMW: 33; RJ: 159-160). This is even more the case when agents face, as they commonly do, limited time-spans for making most decisions. If we had to fully reflect anew, every morning, on the toothpaste we use, the brushing motions we employ, the amount of water we use, the choice, preparation and consumption of our breakfast foods (regular coffee or free-trade coffee?), our choice of clothes, etc., when would we leave our home for work? And if we have to be at work by 9 AM, can we afford to fully reflect on most of these decisions?

But if reflective decision-making is the exception, then by default heuristic decision-making is the rule. And as a result, when faced with any given decisions, agents' initial default inclination would be to approach the decision in a heuristic manner. If decisions entailing moral consideration are to be made reflectively rather than heuristically, then the reflective mode of decision-making has to have a means of breaking into the habit choosing heuristic decision-making. And once thereby triggered to reflection, the reflective mode must also have a means of preventing agents from recourse to their familiar and often used predeterminations – otherwise the reflection will become instrumental rather than self examining.

But once we realize this, it becomes evident that two of Arendt's three characterizations of reflective thinking present reflective thinking precisely as the means for attaining each of these decisional effects. Dialogic thinking serves to interrupt the agent in her ordinary and habitual decision-making and alert (trigger) her to the need for reflective decision-making. Critical thinking then 'sweeps away' the predeterminations that ordinarily guide the agent's decision-making, though obviously not in the literal sense of erasing such prior aims, meanings, valuations or examples from the agent's memory. Rather, what critical thinking does is to 'de-privilege' the priority such predeterminations ordinarily have, both in terms of being applied to appearances or situations of this kind, and in terms of their decisional priority in guiding action.

Once the habitual mode of decision-making has been thereby bracketed through this double operation of dialogic and critical thinking, the mind can reflect upon the situation at hand 'without banisters'. As we have already seen, such reflection characterizes the activities of the quest for meaning (speculative thinking) and reflective judging, which therefore enter the decision-making process at this point. In decisions entailing moral considerations, this would mean that speculative thinking would ascertain the moral meaning or meanings of the situation at hand. Reflective judging would then attach moral valuations ('morally right' or 'morally wrong') to these meanings, and these valuated

meanings would be then be intersubjectively validated through the critical dialogue of representative thinking. These *evaluated* meanings would then stand before the will as internal voices counseling it to choose certain courses of action in the situation at hand.

But of course, in becoming an evaluated meaning, the initial meaning and the validated valuation (judgment) are brought into mutual agreement and coincidence, in the context of the given decisional situation. As a result, meaning and judgment are revealed as complementing each other. But even more fundamentally, in coming together in this way, meaning and judgment also become, in part, mutually constitutive. The meaning partly constitutes the valuation because the latter must be attached to the former. The judgment partly constitutes the meaning because it also, by proxy, intersubjectively validates it – a rejection of an initially valuated meaning through the dialogue of representative thinking forces the mind to reconsider the meaning as well as of the valuation.

V

It is here that we finally find the alternative that the reflective decision-making process poses to the self-prioritizing decisional stance that characterizes banal evildoing.¹⁶ As noted earlier, the quest for meaning – that is, speculative thinking – entails a turn to the self and its personal meanings. In other words, the ascertainment of moral meaning through speculative thinking entails, for Arendt, an experience of encountering selfhood. By contrast, reflective judging entails a turn to other judging subjects and a critical dialogue with them for the purpose of intersubjectively validating one's initial judgment (and, by extension, subjective meaning). Moral judgment therefore entails, for Arendt, an experience of encountering otherness.

But reflective decision-making, as just noted, brings meaning and judgment into mutual coincidence in the situation at hand, thereby revealing them in their mutual complementariness and as partly constitutive of each other. In doing so, reflective decision-making also thereby reveals to the self the fact that selfhood and otherness can also stand in mutual coincidence and complement each other, and are in fact partly constitutive of each other. In this way concern for others is revealed as part of what is entailed in, and required by, care for the self.

This interrelatedness of selfhood and otherness stands in contrast to the self-prioritizing decisional stance that characterizes heuristic decision-making and characterized banal evildoing. When the goals, needs, and desires of the self take decisional priority, self and others are cast as standing apart from each other, in opposition to each other, potential competitors or impediments to the fulfillment of the self's own goals, needs, and desires. And the tendency towards the latter tends to grow the more difficult it is to fulfill the goals, needs, and desires of the self – that is, the more the times are perceived as times of scarcity or danger. Indeed, this latter tendency was precisely radicalized under the Nazis and became a powerful component of banal evildoing. And even though daily heuristic decision-making does not take such an extreme view of the self in relation to others, it is always, for Arendt, in danger of deteriorating into it.

What reflective moral decision-making reveals to the self on Arendtian terms, then, is that there is another way of seeing the self in relation to others – that is, as interrelated, complementary, and in part even mutually determining and constituting. And it does so through the process and hence the experience of reflectively making a moral decision. This imbues this alternative view of the self with experiential resonance that for Arendt can rival the resonance of the ordinary and self-prioritizing experience of selfhood.

VI

My last point, however, implies a further specification, on Arendtian terms, of the moral decision-making process. Specifically, it implies that a moral decision entails not only a choice between courses of action counseled by various reflectively-attained evaluated meanings. Rather, it also entails a choice between the reflective and the heuristic modes of decision-making, with their concomitant underlying conceptions of self-and-others – that is, between being-reflective and between being-banal (ordinary, habitual, heuristic). Indeed, without such a choice responsibility cannot be ascribed to banal evildoers. Thus, heuristic decision-making, bracketed by dialogic and critical thinking so as to enable moral reflection through reflective thinking and judging, reasserts itself as a decisional option once moral reflection has been completed.

The moral choice as Arendt conceives it therefore in fact entails two choices. One is the choice between righteousness and non-banal evildoing, both of which are revealed to the self through moral reflection.¹⁷ The other is the choice between making this choice and avoiding it altogether by approaching the decision at hand heuristically. This is the choice between moral reflection and between banal evildoing. And it is the fact that banal evildoing is in fact the product of such a choice that makes it something that agents can be held morally responsible for.

In making its choices, the will considers and questions, as noted earlier, the aims actualized and the meanings revealed in the courses of action they counsel. But such aims and meanings also implicitly reveal a self-determination, a ‘kind of person I would be if I acted in this way’. And such a self-determination cannot but entail a view of the self’s relation to others. In other words, the conception of the self implied by the different banal and reflective courses of action before the will is part of what the will considers in its moral choices.

Of course, for the choice between the two conceptions of the self to be similarly viable, both need to be backed up by the self’s experiences. The self-prioritizing conception comes with such strong experiential resonance because it has a proven track record of decision-making useful to the self. For Arendt, the reflective conception matches it through the experience of the coincidence of encounters with selfhood and otherness, attained in the reflective decision-making process.

But here, I think, lies an important weakness in the Arendtian account. The experience of the coincidence of selfhood and otherness, since it emerges only in the agreement of moral meaning and moral judgment, is not integral to either of them. As a result, it is not experienced as an *inherent* fact of reflective being-in-the-world. From the point of view of the self that is so used to an altogether different experience of selfhood, this new experience is therefore suspect. It just as well could be a happenstance of the specific circumstances at hand, a lucky coincidence, or a conceit of the mind stemming from its need to bring meaning and judgment into agreement. At most, it establishes reflective selfhood as an exception in the specific circumstances to the rule of ordinary selfhood, and an exception all too easy to discard in most other circumstances. But it does not suffice, in my view, to establish reflective selfhood as a potential alternative rule for the self.

This weakness, in my view, is not insoluble. Rather, the Arendtian understanding of moral reflection can be fortified so as to endow its conception of the self with sufficient experiential resonance to stand as a viable alternative to its self-prioritizing counterpart. This is attained, in my view, if the ascertainment of moral meaning, and moral judging, are both understood as entailing encounters with both selfhood and otherness. In this way, the coincidence of selfhood and otherness would be experienced by the self as it arrives at both moral meaning and moral judgment, making it integral to both meaning and judgment rather than to the circumstances that brought them together.

This would be attained, in my view, if two additional decisional elements – empathy and practical wisdom – are introduced into moral reflection. The introduction of these elements, in turn, also helps resolve several other weaknesses in Arendt’s understanding of moral meaning-ascertainment and of moral judging.

Personal meaning cannot, on its own, suffice for fully ascertaining the moral meaning of a situation.¹⁸ Let us assume, for example, that I need to decide whether or not to intervene in an incident of forced beard-cutting that I am witnessing. It may be that the bearded person feels about the beard the same way as I do about my facial hair. But it may also be that the beard serves that person as sign of mourning or commemoration of a loved one, the way I feel about a certain locket I wear around my neck. Further, let’s assume that the person’s attackers are in fact intending to fit the bearded person’s face into a life-saving air-mask. It may be that the bearded person simply does not know that. But it may be that the bearded person cares more about the beard than about being thereby saved. If I tried to decide the moral meaning of the situation *for me* simply by ascertaining what my facial hair means to me and how I would weigh it against my own life, I would be replacing myself for the involved Other. Instead, I should try to ascertain the meaning of the situation for the Other, so as to find the correct ‘translation’ of the meaning of the situation within my own personal meanings. And this entails an empathetic encounter with the involved Other that is adjoined to, and enriches, my encounter with my own self.

Practical wisdom (*phronesis*) similarly fortifies the Arendtian understanding of the process of reflective moral judging.¹⁹ It is needed, in my view, to facilitate (and check)

the selection of participants in the dialogue of representative thinking, to arbitrate the exchange of meanings and judgments that occur in this dialogue, and finally to facilitate the application of the resulting evaluated meanings to the parameters of the situation at hand. But since practical wisdom draws on personal experience and history, it intertwines into judging's encounter with otherness an encounter with selfhood, which turns the process of moral judging as well into a process that entails an experience of the coincidence and mutual compatibility of self and others.

VII

On these fortified terms, the two conceptions of the self indeed both stand before the will with strong experiential resonance. The self-prioritizing conception has a proven track record of successful decision-making. The reflective conception matches it through the experiences entailed in the reflective decision-making process. On what basis, then, would the will choose between them? To preserve its autonomy, the will cannot simply accept, or rely upon, other mental faculties. As a result it has to draw upon its own unique experiences, which are the experiences of acting into the human world.

In Arendt, the experience of acting into the human world is first of all an experience of the human conditions of plurality and natality. Agents share the world with other human agents, all unique but holding the world in common. And each of these agents has the autonomous capacity to initiate spontaneous action. The result of these is a web of human interrelationships, in which each person's actions engender outcomes and reactions she cannot expect or control, such that agents must act together, and therefore rely on each other, to bring their actions to fruition.

From this perspective, the reflective conception of the self is revealed as more authentically reflecting this reality of being-human-in-the-world. It acknowledges this mutual determinedness and interconnectedness of human agents, and accepts the interdependency that results from it as part of what constitutes a human self²⁰. It reflects and instantiates our common humanity as a constitutive component of what makes each human being who she is.

By contrast, the self-prioritizing conception denies and thus closes the agent's eyes to this reality, leading her instead to act as if she were in a world of her own. It leads the agent, in other words, to deny the human condition rather than to own up to her humanness and either actualize it (through being-moral) or rebel against it (through the choice of non-banal evildoing). It leads her to leave this most important personal choice between being-moral-and-human and between being-immoral-and-inhuman, a choice already flagged in dialogic thinking, to chance and the vagaries of life, thereby dehumanizing the agent herself. And in this Arendtian move, finally, being-moral comes to be identified with meeting the challenge of meaningfully being-human. It is for this reason that reflective decision-making, which identifies and clarifies this moral choice between humanness and inhumanity, is the appropriate mode for making decisions entailing moral considerations.

VIII

Of course, if to be moral is to be meaningfully human, and to act morally is to act out of a recognition that self and others are interdependent and mutually determining, agents seeking to lead a meaningfully human life cannot simply cast concern for others aside in the name of care of the self. To do so is to denigrate the most basic fundamental facet of who they are, namely, the fact that they are human beings. This applies even and especially in times of widespread or general adversity, uncertainty, and insecurity. Granted, in such times, many of the resources (material, emotional, and mental) needed to maintain the self grow scarcer. But as this Arendtian analysis shows, concern for others is also one – and a rather important one – such resource, and one it is within the power of human beings to increase or decrease regardless of, or even through, external adversity. This raises, rather than diminish, the human power to face and overcome adversity.

The perception that when times are tough one has to first take care of number one, then, to the extent that it is translated merely into concern for immediate personal needs and gains, is but a temptation away from the meaningfully and essentially human in us. Such personal concerns need to be addressed – one has to eat and pay the bills. But in addressing them, we should not forget that if we are to be human beings, as opposed to animals of the human species, we must not shut out concern for others from the mix of our daily decisions and actions, no matter how pressingly we feel the crunch of our other needs and necessities. What the right mix is, no one can say, and we all must decide – choose – that for ourselves, through ongoing action. Herein lies part of the challenge, but also part of the accomplishment, of being human.

Notes

¹ *The Life of the Mind* (hereafter LM) is a posthumously published version of two separate sets of public lectures, on thinking (hereafter LMT) and willing (hereafter LMW), which Arendt finished writing just before her death. A planned third set, on judging, was never written by Arendt. In the present paper, I take the material in LM as authoritative, superseding in case of disagreement earlier analyses of the same subjects. I draw on these earlier analyses, particularly the lecture materials posthumously published as *Lectures on Kant's Political Philosophy* (hereafter LK) and *Responsibility and Judgement* (hereafter RJ) to fill gaps left by the materials in LM. For the background, development, and publication of LM and the materials leading up to it see Kohn (2003a; 2003b) and McCarthy (1977).

² On this point, see also Neiman (2002: 270-277, 298-304).

³ This, of course, was also Eichmann's own self-defense, which, together with his propensity to lie, may be seen to taint what Arendt learns from him. On this we may heed the eminent Holocaust historian Christopher Browning, who considers "Arendt's concept of the 'banality of evil' a very important insight for understanding many of the perpetrators of the Holocaust", even if we take Eichmann to only be pretending to have been a banal evildoer himself (2003: 3-4).

⁴ Arendt is decidedly unsystematic in her usage of the terms 'faculty', 'capacity', 'ability', and 'activity' with regard to the various facets of the mind that she discusses. She is similarly unsystematic in her usage of 'thinking' vs. 'thought' and 'judgment' vs. 'judging'. For the sake of clarity, I have employed a unified set of terminological choices, taken from some Arendtian usages but occasionally contradicted by other usages. Thus, I see the Arendtian picture of the mind as that of certain mental *faculties* (e.g., thought,

judgment, will) that employ various mental *abilities/powers* (e.g., intellect and instrumental, deductive and inductive reasoning, speculative reason, imagination, representative thinking, spontaneity; I see the terms ‘mental ability’ and ‘mental power’ as interchangeable) in the carrying out of certain mental activities (e.g., the various activities of thinking, judging, and willing).

⁵ The main discussions that I draw on here are found in LMT: 11-15, 53-64, 70-71, 75-81, 85-88, 119-123, 185-187, 197-199 and LMW: 6, 11. Into these I have incorporated certain specific additional materials from RJ (164-166, 177-178, 189), from the earlier *The Human Condition* (hereafter HC: 170-172) and *Between Past and Future* (hereafter BPF: 14), and from the lesser known public presentation published as “On the Human Condition” (1966: 214).

⁶ Arendt refers merely to ‘reason’ as the mental power employed in reflective thinking. I use ‘speculative reason’ to sharpen the distinction between this mental power and other reasoning powers (deductive, inductive, instrumental).

⁷ Subjective meaning-determinations can become generalized if accepted by others, but for that purpose they need to be told to others, that is, captured in a story, and such storytelling entails, as I show elsewhere, conferring intersubjective general validity upon them.

⁸ My discussion of the activities of judging here incorporates materials from LMT (69, 102, 119, 169-171, 192-193, 215-216), RJ (138-139, 143-144, 188-189), LK (13-15, 76-77), BPF (247-248) and HC (140-141, 171). It also draws on the important discussion of general concepts, schemas and examples in separate seminar notes published posthumously (under the title “Imagination”) as an addendum to LK (LK: 80-83).

⁹ Of course, as long as the valuation has not been generally validated, it remains subjective (‘this flower is beautiful to me’). Indeed, valuations must begin as a subjective valuation for the same reasons that meaning-determinations are subjective – they draw upon examples internalized within the agent. The difference is that valuations, unlike meanings, do not remain subjective but aspire to be intersubjective.

¹⁰ Such validation is not required for determinative judging because definable categories, by virtue of their generally accepted definition, already possess confirmed general validity.

¹¹ Notably, Arendt nowhere explains how – that is, through what mental powers – does the faculty of judgment choose these guiding examples and then fit particular and category under the mediation of these examples. I would argue that the mental power of speculative reason is employed in the former and that of practical wisdom in the latter, but cannot develop this argument here.

¹² Otherwise, the agent would determine not whether an appearance is, for example, beautiful, but whether the agent ordinarily considers such appearances beautiful or whether they are considered so by the agent’s community. Such determinations, of course, are quasi-deductive and thus determinative.

¹³ In my discussion of the two willing activities I additionally draw on LMW (6, 14-15, 19-20, 26-30, 35-38, 57, 62, 69, 89, 101, 109-110, 156-158, 216-217), LMT (69-70, 92, 213), RJ (136, 282 fn. 19, 283 fn. 21) and BPF (151).

¹⁴ The labels ‘arbitration’ and (for Scotus’ willing activity) ‘free willing’ are my own, straying from LMW’s ‘free choice’ and ‘free will’ (employed by Arendt because she is speaking in Aquinas and Scotus’ voices) for the sake of clarity.

¹⁵ Hereafter, I shall refer to these disparate characterization of reflective thinking as ‘speculative thinking’, ‘critical thinking’, and ‘dialogical thinking’, respectively.

¹⁶ This move on my part is indebted to another set of published Gifford lectures, Paul Ricoeur’s *Oneself as Another* (1990/1992). It Ricoeur’s work that suggested to me the idea of a juxtaposition between a view of self and other as interrelated and a view that sets them apart. This, in turn, goaded me to pay attention to the way the relation between self and other is conceived in both the heuristic and reflective modes of decision-making, respectively (though the alternative conceptions I suggest are not Ricoeur’s). I had intended giving Ricoeur a more prominent role in the present paper, but alas, space and time consideration Ricoeur’s role ended up, as it were, on the cutting room floor.

¹⁷ Non-banal evildoing is a reflectively revealed decisional option, the course of action counseled by the evaluated meaning adjudged to be ‘morally wrong’.

¹⁸ In turning in this direction I am taking my cue from a different argument along these lines, developed (through all too many misreadings of Arendt) by Arne Johan Vetlesen (1994).

¹⁹ I take my understanding of practical wisdom, and the suggestion that it should aid in moral judging, again from Paul Ricoeur (1990/1992, especially 256-261, 269-273, 286-290).

²⁰ This acknowledgment characterizes both righteousness and non-banal evildoing. The difference between the two, on Arendtian terms, is thus in whether they accept, actualize, protect and promote this

interconnectedness (righteousness, now seen as a form of being-with-others) or reject it and rebel against it (non-banal evildoing, now seen as a form of being-against-others).

References

- Arendt, Hannah (1958). *The human condition*. Chicago: U of Chicago Press.
- Arendt, Hannah (1965). *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A report on the banality of evil* (rev. and enl. ed.). New York: Penguin.
- Arendt, Hannah (1966). On the human condition. In Alice Mary Hilton (Ed.). *The evolving society: The proceedings of the first annual conference on the cybercultural revolution – cybernetics and automation* (pp. 214-219). New York: The Institute for Cybercultural Research.
- Arendt, Hannah (1968). *Between past and future: Eight exercises in political thought* (enl. ed.). New York: Penguin.
- Arendt, Hannah (1977). *The life of the mind*. San Diego and New York: Harcourt.
- Arendt, Hannah (1982). *Lectures on Kant's political philosophy* (Ronald Beiner, Ed.). Chicago: University of Chicago press.
- Arendt, Hannah (2003). *Responsibility and judgment* (Jerome Kohn, Ed.). New York: Schocken.
- Beiner, Ronald (1982). Hannah Arendt on judging. In Hannah Arendt, *Lectures on Kant's political philosophy* (Ronald Beiner, Ed.) (pp. 89-95). Chicago: University of Chicago press.
- Benhabib, Seyla (2000b). Arendt's *Eichmann in Jerusalem*. In Dana Villa (Ed.). *The Cambridge companion to Hannah Arendt* (pp. 65-85). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Browning, Christopher R. (2003). *Collected memories: Holocaust history and postwar testimony*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Prsss.
- Garsten, Bryan (2007). The elusiveness of Arendtian judgment. *Social research*, 74 (4), 1071-1108.
- Ingram, David (1992). The postmodern Kantianism of Arendt and Lyotard. In Andrew Benjamin (Ed.). *Judging Lyotard* (pp. 119-144). London: Routledge.
- Kohn, Jerome (2003a). Introduction. In Hannah Arendt, *Responsibility and judgment* (Jerome Kohn, Ed.) (pp. vii-xxix). New York: Schocken.
- Kohn, Jerome (2003b). A note on the text. In Hannah Arendt, *Responsibility and judgment* (Jerome Kohn, Ed.) (pp. xxxi-xxxvii). New York: Schocken.
- McCarthy, Mary (1977). Editor's postface. In Hannah Arendt, *The life of the mind, volume two: Willing*. (Mary McCarthy, Ed.) (pp. 241-254). San Diego and New York: Harcourt.
- Neiman, Susan (2002). *Evil in modern thought: An alternative history of philosophy*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Ricoeur, Paul (1992). *Oneself as another* (Kathleen Blamey, Trans.). Chicago: University of Chicago Press. (Original work published 1990).
- Vetlesen, Arne Johan (1994). *Perception, empathy, and judgment: An inquiry into the preconditions of moral performance*. University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press.