Hannah Arendt's Concept of Responsibility

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Hannah Arendt defined responsibility in terms of political presence, not in legal or moral terms. I shall argue that she regarded political presence as requiring both acting and belonging, that is, as consisting of actions actualising a given and, therefore, apolitical fellowship. The fact that Arendt considered political presence as including some kind of givenness or passivity will surprise those who are familiar with her theory of performative action. Therefore, it is worth recalling that Arendt referred to presence in two different contexts[1]: In 'What is Freedom?' she wrote, '[A]cting men need the presence of others before whom they can appear.' (1993: 154, see also 1998: 187-188). However, in *Truth and Politics* she stated 'I form an opinion … by making present to my mind the standpoints of those who are absent; that is, I represent them.' (1993: 241) Accordingly, Arendt used presence for 1) making oneself present in the presence of others, and 2) making others present in one's mind. Opinions represent the others, while at the same time make the agent present to others.[2]

I will demonstrate that Arendt identified responsibility with the forming of opinions, that is, with the simultaneity of belonging or suffering and acting or doing. I will show that, for her, responsibility is 'radical' and stands in opposition to the 'banality of evil'; and that, as a result, her concept of responsibility links her political theory to her conception of the world. Arendt did not use the word responsibility unequivocally, as her understanding of it evolved over time. Moreover, she repeatedly tried to distinguish the responsibility of political actors from that of intellectuals. At this point, I shall focus on the former, and follow the development of her view from her early article, 'We Refugees,' to the Eichmann trial and beyond.

A short genealogy of Arendt's concept of responsibility

In her article of January 1943, 'We Refugees,' Arendt outlines the main features of a non-political condition. The refugees' condition can certainly be recounted only negatively. Their loss is absolute: 'We lost our home … We lost our occupation … We lost our language … We left our relatives … and our best friends have been killed in concentration camps' (Arendt, 1978a: 55-7). The only place they can dwell in is a nowhere, a camp; the only thing they can do is remember people who are no more. In *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, first published in 1951, Arendt once again describes the de-politicisation of 'dark times' as the loss of all framework and fellowship. She compares the condition of stateless peoples with that of ancient slaves dwelling in the private sphere and who despite their oppression belonged to a community. She demonstrates that the development of the 'rightless' condition of stateless people, meaning a 'loss of a polity itself,' resulted from the conjunction of two distinct processes, that of anti-Semitic rejection and imperialist expansion (1979: 297). The calamity of the rightless condition, she explains, lies in 'the deprivation of a place in the world, which makes opinions significant and actions effective.' She concludes that '[i]nnocence, in the sense of complete lack of responsibility' is the seal of such a complete loss of political status (1979: 295; see also Parvikko, 1996).

According to Richard J. Bernstein, '[s]tatelessness, the sudden loss of political rights … was the basic phenomenon that provoked [Arendt's] reflections (Nachdenken) on the meaning of politics' (1996: 86). However, in this context, Arendt's use of the term responsibility is not self-evident, nor is her use of innocence as its opposite. What is remarkable here is the connection between a concept commonly related to the moral or juridical sphere and the idea of belonging to a political community. Arendt is certainly not the only theorist to link responsibility with the political sphere; however, most discussions on this issue address the question of the existence of collective analogues to individual moral responsibility. Arendt's use of the word responsibility is far removed from this liberal context, although her analysis intersects the liberal discussion.[3] For her, the sphere of human plurality 'is not simply an extension of the dual "I-and-myself" to a plural "We"' (1977b: 200). Rather, and somewhat paradoxically, she contends that responsibility pertains to the individual belonging to a community and, therefore, to the subject and not to the community.

This subjectivisation of responsibility is the opposite of solipsism. For Arendt, solipsism is related to egoism and is seen as an apolitical position (Curtis, 1999: 147). She stresses that the refugees' answer to their enemy's denial of their political presence was 'selfishness,' that is, the acceptance of this denial. Being denied a presence within the political space led some of them to suicide - an enactment, as it was, of the fact that the refugees had nowhere to be. Most of them refused to consider their personal fate as a general, political fate (Arendt, 1978a: 60). The refugees tried to escape their identity: 'Whatever we do, whatever we pretend to be, we reveal nothing but our insane desire to be changed, not to be Jews' (1978: 63). However, declares Arendt, they refused to act and have opinions even before they were denied a political presence: 'We committed no acts and most of us never dreamt of having any radical political opinion.' (1978: 55) For Arendt, the refugees' relinquishing of their identity was a form of collaboration with the excluding forces. She contends that the refugees' fate represented a political problem that required a political response. Jews should have emphasised their Jewishness as a political identity and responded to their enemies' actions with their own actions and opinions. In her 1964 interview with Günter Gaus, she recalls that, in contrast to the refugees, she herself had opinions as early as 1933. As a result, she 'was no longer of the opinion that one can simply be a bystander' and felt responsible: 'I tried to help in many ways [and] I must say it gives me a certain satisfaction. I was arrested … I thought at least I had done something! At least I am not "innocent"' (1994a: 5). Here, the terms responsible and innocent do not refer to belonging and loss of belonging, but to action and inertia, respectively. Arendt, subsequently, uses the concept of responsibility in the context of either belonging or doing something.[4]

Before analysing the possible connection between belonging and doing, it should be noted that both definitions take us far from the common (Kantian) moral sense of responsibility, that is, from the notion of a relationship between autonomy and general laws. As Connolly suggests,

> Arendt resists the Kantian morality of law … and she resists any metaphysics that gives singular priority to foundational authority, law, regularity, routine or the unworldly. Arendt, indeed, is impressed by the extent to which the morality of law was impotent under the onslaught of totalitarianism; she is even, perhaps, wary of the degree to which the vaunted simplicity of morality carries with it a disposition to obedience. (1997: 15)

Linking responsibility to belonging immediately de-legalises responsibility. 25 years after 'We Refugees', Arendt still argued that one is responsible not because one acts under a predetermined law but only because one belongs to a group that acts, or has acted, independently of him/herself. She wrote, 'I must be held responsible for something I have not done, and the reason for my responsibility must be my membership in a group (a collective) which no voluntary act of mine can dissolve' (1987: 45). Such individual responsibility is called collective or political, (1994b: 298) and is distinguished from individual guilt, which corresponds to morally or legally reprehensible individual acts, that is, acts disobeying laws. In the 1964 Postscript to *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, Arendt emphasises that Eichmann had to be condemned for his guilt and not for his political responsibility (1994b: 298). He undoubtedly was politically responsible, but the Court only had to deal with his individual guilt (or innocence). In 'Collective Responsibility', she maintained that: 'What I am driving at here is a sharper dividing line between political (collective) responsibility, on the one side, and moral and/or legal (personal) guilt, on the other' (1987: 46). What she therefore argued is that guilt is moral and/or legal, whereas responsibility is political. In that sense, political responsibility is a pleonasm, which has no moral connotation.[5]

Arendt de-legalises responsibility again when she refers to responsibility as acting. In *The Human Condition*, published in 1958, Arendt explains that action is independent of moral standards or laws and expresses only 'greatness,' that is, the unique and extraordinary initiative of the political agent, the changes that s/he introduces in the public sphere (1998: 205, see also Honig 1993: 79).[6] If acting has no moral or legal basis, and if responsibility is related to acting, then responsibility cannot be connected to moral standards, but only to greatness. In her interview with Gaus, Arendt recalls her own attempt to help and 'do something' after 1933 that was (she believes) consistent with the 'criterion of greatness.' It is with great pride (it gives her a 'certain satisfaction') that she tells Gaus how she lied to the Gestapo because she 'couldn't let the [Zionist] organization be exposed,' and how she subsequently crossed the border illegally. Conversely, she stresses that in many cases compliance with the law really amounted to an excuse for not taking responsibility for one's actions: the Nazis claimed that, 'they had just followed orders.' Arendt's clearest example of a-moral responsibility is to be found in her reference to Jaspers:

> For him, responsibility is not a burden and has nothing whatsoever to do with moral imperatives. Rather, it flows naturally out of an innate pleasure in making manifest, in clarifying the obscure, in illuminating the darkness. His affirmation of the public realm is in the final analysis only the result of his loving light and clarity (1968: 74-75).[7]

Responsibility, acting and suffering

In 'We Refugees' as in *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, Arendt seemed to be assuming that belonging and acting are chronologically linked; that initiative, unrelated to a pre-existing law, is, nevertheless, related to something anterior to the action because 'the place in the world' - understood as a political or human world (Canovan, 1992: 105-12) - is a 'framework where one is judged by one's actions and one's opinions' (1979: 296-297). An agent will be held responsible for his/her words and deeds only if s/he belongs to a public sphere at the moment of his/her acts: 'The disclosure of the "who" through speech, and the setting of a new beginning through action, always fall into an already existing web where their immediate consequences can be felt' (1979: 184). Responsibility in acting is apparently determined, or at least preceded, by fellowship. I am responsible in acting because I share a collective responsibility with my fellow-citizens. I am therefore responsible for my acts as they are determined by an existing group of people to whom I belong and for whose previous actions I am also responsible, and then I am responsible for beginning something radically new based only upon my own initiative.

However, in *The Human Condition* and in later works, Arendt repeatedly argued that a political status is defined, or even created, by actions. One does not acquire a political presence and then begins to act. It is through actions that one reveals oneself as a political agent. It follows logically that an agent is someone who acts, and no one can be considered a political agent before acting. According to Honig, '[t]he unique political action, in Arendt's account, is … the performative utterance, a speech act that in itself brings "something into being that did not exist before'" (1993: 99, see also Arendt, 1998: 178). The public sphere is created by performance-like speeches (or actions) (1993: 153-154), and the essence of an action does not exist before the action is realised (Arendt, 1953: 81). Arendt emphasises the performative mechanism of actions, that is, the fact that actions are not predetermined or preconditioned, by alleging that they depend neither on general laws nor on personal interest but appear with their own principles such as glory, honour, excel-

lence, or love of equality, whose manifestation 'comes about only through action.' These principles of 'greatness' 'are manifest in the world as long as the action lasts, but no longer' (1993: 152). To act means to begin something new and unique (1998: 177), and '[w]hat saves the act of beginning from its own arbitrariness is that it carries its own principle within itself, or, to be more precise, that beginning and principle, principium and principle, are not related to each other, but are coeval' (Arendt, 1990: 212). Nothing pre-exists action, not even its own principle. (Villa, 1999: 139, Williams, 1998: 943) As a result, the 'we' of a community arises whenever people live and act together. (1977b: 200f.) Fellowship appears to depend on one's taking responsibility by acting.

Therefore: on the one hand, responsibility is assigned to the doer who already belongs. S/he is responsible for acts that s/he did not commit, or for her actions that are determined by her fellowship. However, Arendt's theory of action makes it clear that actions are ungrounded, and as a result responsibility, action, and publicity emerge together, out of nowhere. In Kateb's words, '[i]t approaches the miracle' (1984: 33).[8]

In order to resolve the contradiction between the two meanings of responsibility, we need to recall Arendt's phenomenology of free action. For Arendt, a person reveals him/herself through the flux of his/her actions and speeches. In acting, the agent reveals his/her uniqueness as being radically distinct from given qualities shared with others (1998: 178, 181). Only performed acts and speeches, or political opinions, reveal my distinctness. The disclosure of uniqueness is the guarantee of one's reality, which, 'humanly and politically speaking, is the same as appearance' or presence (1998: 199). Bickford notes that this manifest presence is not something intimate: It 'requires that we actively make ourselves present to each other through what we say and do' (1988: 64). My presence counts if others see, hear, and touch it (1977a: 19); it depends on 'the surrounding presence of others' (1998: 188). My presence is a presence to others. I act, or change the political situation in an unexpected way (1993: 250-8) when I reveal my presence to the presence of others. As Arendt writes:

> The performing arts … have indeed a strong affinity with politics. Performing artists … need an audience to show their virtuosity, just as acting men need the presence of others before whom they can appear; both need a publicly organized space for their "work," and both depend upon others for the performance itself (1993: 154).

To say that others are present means that they too are acting and making themselves present to others. As a result, my action enters a chain reaction of plural presence, or, more precisely, it initiates a chain reaction of presence and plurality:

> [A]ction, though it may proceed from nowhere, so to speak, acts into a medium where every reaction becomes a chain reaction and where every process is the cause of new processes. Since action acts upon beings who are capable of their own actions, reaction, apart from being a response, is always a new action that strikes out on its own and affects others. Thus action and reaction among men never move in a close circle and can never be reliably confined to two partners. (1998: 190)

The disclosure of one's uniqueness is a new beginning that engenders new beginnings. It is only that, a creation of a new plural presence. Being responsible for doing therefore has nothing to do with the moral or legal consequences of my acts, but consists only of creating an endless chain reaction of presence that changes the human world. The courage that one needs to start acting and speaking 'is not necessarily or even primarily related to a willingness to suffer the consequences' (1998: 186). The responsibility of the doer is related to his/her initiative in changing the public space, and not to what will endlessly follow it.[9]

However, this new beginning is entangled in existing relationships. The results of action 'fall into a predetermined net of relationships, invariably dragging the agent with them, who seems to forfeit his freedom the very moment he makes use of it' (1998: 234). The moment I do something I am trapped into a predetermined web of relationships, that is, into sharing collective responsibility. What I begin freely in order to reveal 'who' I am, is, in my individual way, the continuation of the acts of my community. My responsibility for my radically new act cannot be considered independently of my responsibility for acts that my community has committed without me. My doing encounters my fellowship and as a result of this interaction, perpetuates it.

Moreover, in doing, I become involved in the chain reactions that I myself initiate. My action creates a plurality of presence and, independent of my will, makes me become part of it. I am responsible for creating new beginnings,

but this responsibility for my actions is carried on into the future and makes me appear 'much more the victim and the sufferer than the author and doer' of what I have done (1998: 234). I am responsible for the endless consequences of my acts because they will happen in a world that I will be sharing and experiencing with others, both actively and passively: I am responsible for the consequences of my acts because I do not disappear after I act, and I also participate in the web of relationships. Put differently, my responsibility for the consequences of my own acts is a kind of collective responsibility that I now endure like any other fellow citizen. For example, if I participate in the election of a particular government, I am responsible for my doing, that is, for influencing a given political situation. Subsequently, I will be responsible for the policy of this government not because I voted for it, but because it reflects the chosen policy of my community. From this point forward, there will be no difference between me, who voted for this government, and my neighbour who voted for other candidates. Confronted by a political situation, it will not help me or my neighbour to 'shift from the world and its public space to an interior life, or else simply ignore that world in favor of an imaginary world "as it ought to be" or as it once upon a time had been, that is, to choose "inner emigration"' (1968: 19). My collective responsibility that follows my acts, like that of my neighbour, is completely independent of these acts.

As it appears, therefore, belonging is synonymous to what Arendt calls suffering. Arendt writes, '[b]ecause the actor always moves among and in relation to other acting beings, he is never merely a "doer" but always and in the same time a sufferer' (1998: 190). Suffering refers to my being immersed in and affected by the human web of relationships (Benhabib, 2001: 190-191). In using the term suffering here, Arendt had in mind not the common sense of feeling pain but the semantic field of passivity as opposed to activity. Passivity makes sense only in a relationship because, as she notes in the above citation, it involves being related to, or being the object of actions performed by other actors with whom one is always in relation. Passivity, or suffering, is equivalent to belonging. Arendt continues, '[t]o do and to suffer are like opposite sides of the same coin, and the story that an act starts is composed of its consequent deeds and sufferings.' Therefore, acting and suffering are simultaneous. In doing, I carry the political history or the political context of my act. Then, with my fellow citizens I suffer the political consequences of my acts; hence, I am led to act again. In other words, action happens within a web of relationships and creates such a web. It is both the result and the

condition of suffering. There is no doing without suffering and my responsibility is not limited to my initiative only. However, there is no suffering without doing either, because suffering is always perpetuated or initiated by acting. According to Arendt, suffering without doing would be apolitical and, therefore, it would no longer be suffering. She calls such a situation fraternity and stresses that it characterizes 'persecuted peoples or enslaved groups,' and is accompanied by a 'loss of the world' (1968: 13).

I am responsible when I suffer the consequences of the acts of my community - including those acts in which I did not participate - and when my acts are determined by my community. I am also responsible when I introduce radically new beginnings in the world, that is, when I do something 'undetermined'.[10] Therefore, I am responsible when I act in relation to a belonging, or a suffering. My responsibility in acting is always intertwined in collective responsibility. We can go one step further here and suggest that responsibility, defined in this twofold manner, constitutes the political. Arendt identifies the political with actions and freedom, but, as just demonstrated, she claims that actions and passions together constitute 'both sides of the same coin.'

We find an example of this twofold structure of responsibility in Arendt's claim that, '[i]f one is attacked as a Jew, one must defend oneself as a Jew.' (1994a: 12). As she stated in her letter to Scholem about the controversy surrounding the Eichmann book, Jewishness is *physei*, natural givenness (1978a: 246). Such fellowship is natural, passive, and apolitical. However, responsibility is the manifestation of this givenness in acts - acts that have no predetermination, but which, on the other hand, cannot happen without givenness.[11] In her interview with Gauss, Arendt expands on her distinction between 'belonging to a people' and 'being a citizen' (1994a: 8):

> In the first place, belonging to a group is a natural condition. You belong to some sort of group when you are born, always. But to belong in the way you mean, in a second sense, that is, to join or form an organized group, is something completely different … People who become organized have in common what are ordinarily called interests (1994: 17).

There is a fundamental difference between passive or natural belonging, and active or political belonging (to join or form a group) - specifically, between natural fellowship and political membership. The active group is not required

to be distinct from the natural group, but in order to be political, fellowship must become active: one must 'defend oneself as a Jew.' As she explained later, '[i]n saying, "A Jew" … I was only acknowledging a political fact through which my being a member of this group outweighed all other questions of personal identity … Nowadays such an attitude would seem like a pose' (1968: 18). When she was 'attacked as a Jew,' Arendt made her natural Jewishness become a political reality, which is equivalent to saying that she became responsible. Responsibility consists of acting; but acting publicises a natural, apolitical passivity that is always there (1998: 208). Responsibility consists of the simultaneity of passivity and activity: natural givenness becomes public through acts, and acts reflect a belonging, a suffering, which results from previous acts.

We find another striking example of the twofold nature of responsibility in the way Arendt describes the story of Anton Schmidt in *Eichmann in Jerusalem.* What is important to her is not that someone helped the Jews, but that it was a German who did so (1994b: 231). The value of Schmidt's initiative lies in the fact that he was a German. Putting aside all other examples of Polish or Christian help, Arendt contrasts Schmidt's story with the testimony of another German, Peter Bamm, who 'knew but did nothing.' She writes, '[p]olitically speaking, [the lesson of Schmidt's story] is that under conditions of terror most people will comply but some people will not' (1994: 233). Here again Arendt identifies the connection between actions and passive fellowship (being German), as being political. What is important politically speaking constitutes responsibility, specifically, the link between acts and their 'natural' framework - being German. Contrary to Eichmann, Schmidt and Bamm were not guilty of any crime but they were responsible for Germany's acts, because they were Germans. However, Bamm did not do anything; he only obeyed the Nazi law. His position represents an 'emptiness' for which Arendt did not even try to hide her contempt (1994: 232). In contrast, Schmidt was not only responsible for Germany's acts but, by taking the initiative, he changed the very meaning of being a German, the meaning of his fellowship itself: He was a German who saved Jews, so, as a result, there were 'Germans who saved Jews' (similarly, Arendt's own position does show that there were Jews who defended themselves). Arendt's claim is extreme. Responsibility, according to Arendt goes as far as to sacrificing one's own life. In 'Organized Guilt and Universal Responsibility' Arendt wrote: 'the only way in which we can identify an anti-Nazi is when the Nazis have hanged him. There is no other reliable token' (1978a: 227-228).[12] In *Eichmann in Jerusalem,* she concludes that,

'[i]t would be of great "practical usefulness" for Germany today… if there were more … stories [like that of Schmidt] to be told' (1994b: 233, original emphasis). Some people will not comply, she says; in other words, some people will take upon themselves the responsibility to act and change the human world - the actual situation and the meaning of membership itself (see also 1987: 48).

In the situations where Jews defended themselves, or where Germans saved Jews, the process similarly consisted of 1) a recognition of a natural given, since one does not choose to be born a Jew or a German, and 2) a change of the meaning of this given through actions, individual and unique radical initiatives. Therefore, responsibility is the link between individual deeds, fellowship and membership. Political life consists of the transformation of identities through individual acts.

Responsibility for the world

Eichmann's case was more complicated than that of a regular criminal. He was guilty of 'carrying out a policy of mass murder' (1994a: 279), but there was something else:

> The longer one listened to him, the more obvious it became that his inability to speak was closely connected with an inability to think, namely, to think from the standpoint of somebody else. No communication was possible with him, not because he lied, but because he was surrounded by the most reliable of all safeguards against the words and the presence of others, and hence against reality as such (1994: 49).

These sentences acquire their full meaning only when read in comparison to the following paragraph of 'Truth and Politics,' the essay that was written in response to the Eichmann controversy:

> Political thought is representative. I form an opinion by considering a given issue from different viewpoints, by making present to my mind the standpoints of those who are absent; that is, I represent them. This process of representation does not blindly adopt the actual views of those who stand somewhere else, and hence look upon the world from a different perspective; this is a question neither of empathy, as though I tried to be or to feel like somebody else, nor of counting

> noses and joining a majority but of being and thinking in my own identity where actually I am not. The more people's standpoints I have present in my mind while I am pondering a given issue, and the better I can imagine how I would feel and think if I were in their place, the stronger will be my capacity for representative thinking and the more valid my final conclusions, my opinion. (1993: 241)

Opinions, which express my free individuality, are formed in relation to others: 'No one is capable of forming his own opinion without the benefit of a multitude of opinions held by others' (1990: 225). Therefore, opinions are only possible for those who belong to a community of others. (Remember that in 'We Refugees,' when speaking about the loss of belonging, Arendt explicitly complained about the refugees' lack of opinions.) The process of forming opinions constitutes 'a critical decision that is not justified with reference to an abstract standard of right but by visiting a plurality of diverging public standpoints' (Disch, 1994: 162).[13] The critical simultaneity of acting and belonging - that is, responsibility - is manifested in opinions: 'There can be no patriotism without permanent opposition and criticism' (1978a: 247).

It may seem that in her description of the formation of opinions Arendt is merely attempting to define impartiality. Yet, she certainly did not mean that Eichmann was incapable of being impartial. The fact that Eichmann was unable to think from someone else's standpoint was the result of a vast process of de-politicisation which Arendt described genealogically in *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, and which reached its apotheosis in totalitarian ideology and terror. In a totalitarian regime, Arendt explains, people have no opinions and believe in an ideology, which has no real empirical roots but consists of the 'logic of an idea' (1979: 469). (As illustrated above, Bamm's attitude incorporates additional evidence of the Nazis' de-politicisation). Under the spell of ideology people become blind to the objective presence of others. They forget that they are dealing with human beings. In other words, Eichmann dissociated his acts from his most natural givenness, his belonging to humanity. He would have sent his own mother to death if he had been told to do so, because he had become insensitive to the existence of others. He replaced them by imagined 'races,' which are neither based on natural fellowship nor on political membership, but only on ideological logic. De-politicisation, therefore, does not affect membership, but the entire world. Contrary to what Arendt claims, at the end of Eichmann in Jerusalem, she departs from her limited focus on guilt and expands upon her notion of

responsibility: responsible acts are the actualisation of a belonging not only to a specific community, but to the world in general. Or, more precisely, it is through belonging to a community transformed by individual opinions that we are responsible for the world. In this sense, the 'banality of evil' is a lack of responsibility for the world.

Accordingly, responsibility has a radical meaning, which includes the possible need to sacrifice oneself 'for the world.' Much has been said about Arendt's 'love of the world.' To my mind, however, Arendt's responsibility to the world has to do with gratitude rather than with love. In her letter to Scholem, Arendt wrote that, 'the only kind of love I know of and believe in is the love of persons.' (1978a: 246) It is true that in a letter to Jaspers in 1955 she had written: 'I've begun so late … to truly love the world … Out of gratitude, I want to call my book on political theories "Amor Mundi".' (Kohler and Saner, 1992: 264) But the book was eventually called *The Human Condition* and Arendt mentioned gratitude again in the letter quoted above to Scholem, when she said '[t]here is such a thing as a basic gratitude for everything that is as it is; for what has been given and was not, could not be, made.' Responsibility, which we can now define as the critical and radical transformation of a given fellowship through representative opinions and actions, is an expression of 'metaphysical' gratitude for everything that has been given.[14] Eichmann's metaphysical banal evil consists of nihilism, of destroying the given by erasing particular 'nations,' namely, of deciding what should not be:

> And just as you supported and carried out a policy of not wanting to share the earth with the Jewish people and the people of a number of other nations - as though you and your superiors had any right to determine who should and who should not inhabit the world - we find that no one, that is, no member of the human race, can be expected to share the earth with you. This is the reason, and the only reason; you must hang. (1994b: 279)

Responsibility, on the contrary, means continuing that what is, even if it requires non-compliance with laws and (paradoxically) sacrifice of one's life, as was illustrated in the case of Anton Schmidt. It is 'ontologically rooted' in 'the miracle that saves the world,' namely, natality (1998: 247). It is then contingently constructed through critical oppositions and changes in localised communities. These changes take into account the given, the others who surround me and are sometimes spatially or temporally absent. Visiting opinions

- taking others into account as human beings - is, therefore, related to the past, to the vanishing in time of others' actions and opinions.[15]

In forming political opinions, I act while, at the same time, I take others into account. I re-present absent people in creating a new presence. In making myself present, I represent others; by representing others, I make myself present. This process, in which 'we try to reconcile ourselves to what we do and what we suffer' (1994a: 309), is a catharsis or 'reconciliation with reality' which, Arendt recalls, according to Aristotle and Hegel, respectively, is the essence of Greek tragedy (1993: 45, 1968: 20). Tragedies reach their dramatic climax at the moment when their heroes acknowledge their responsibility, that is, they reconcile their deeds with the gods' will and accept 'things as they are' (1993: 262). Responsibility is tragic in that it consists of that vanishing moment when one is 'able to say how one came to an opinion' (1982: 41); that is, when one recollects the given otherness.

I am responsible when my free doing stands for other others; when I accept my link to a particular community, to its traditions; when my acts are the continuation of the fate of members of that community. All attempts at cutting the relationships with what is given to me are ideological: Ideologies are 'the logic inherent to their respective ideas,' that is cut off from opinions and reality. Ideologies, therefore, are 'never interested in the miracle of being' (1979: 469). However, I am responsible only when I change the given, which I also accept, thereby possibly risking my own life for the transformation and continuity of the miracle of being. I am responsible only when, through my initiative, I challenge my specific community and its traditions, because such challenges affect the whole humanity. My responsibility fills the gap between my community and the world.

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Notes

1. The question of presence in Arendt's political theory has been raised several times and authoritatively by Susan Bickford (1988). However, presence has been defined mostly in the context of the visibility of the public realm, usually becoming part of arguments about theatricality or communication. As I am recalling here, Arendt refers to two different senses of presence.

2. Representing others adds a fourth component to Michael Denneny's definition of responsibility: 'to declare the presence of that which is present; to declare oneself present; and to declare a bond between oneself and that which is present to one.' (1979: 269)

3. In the essay, 'Collective Responsibility', an answer to Feinberg's essay of the same title presented at the American Philosophical Association in 1968 (see Feinberg 1970), Arendt writes: '[Feinberg] tries from the beginning to construe all issues according to models which are either legally or morally relevant, so that the political issue appears to be no more than a special case of matters that are subject to normal legal proceedings or normal moral judgments' (Arendt 1987: 44).

4. In the latter example, this was helping the Zionist organization in order to help the Jewish people, to which she belonged. As early as January 1933, she had explained to Jaspers that she did not belong to the German people but to the Jewish people. See their exchange of letters (Kohler and Saner 1992: 16-8). In December 1946, Arendt wrote to Jaspers: 'Politically, I will always speak in the name of the Jews whenever circumstances force me to give my nationality … I never felt myself, either spontaneously or at my own insistence, to "be a German"' (1994: 70).

5. I therefore cannot agree with Lilian Alweiss who recently argued that, in 'Collective Responsibility', Arendt distinguishes moral and political responsibility. Arendt makes it extremely clear that her distinction is between guilt and responsibility. See Alweiss (2003).

6. For Arendt, the 'ordinary' and non-unique are characteristics of biological repetition, hence of life in the private sphere or, unfortunately in her mind, of social conformism.

7. It could be argued that Jaspers was not a political actor and that Arendt does not assign equivalent responsibility to the philosopher/writer/artist and the political actor/citizen. As I said above, at this point, I only focus on the responsibility of the political actor. However, Jaspers's case is relevant because Arendt refers to him as 'a public figure in the full sense of the

word' (hence, as an actor) and adds that, '[t]he philosopher - in contrast to the scientist - resembles the statesman in that he must answer for his opinions' (1968: 74-75).

8. According to Lawrence J. Biskowski, 'the various dimensions of our socialization and "situated-ness" do not wholly determine our actions and choices, nor do they by themselves constitute the whole of our subjectivity' (1993: 875).

9. Sometimes, however, political initiatives become crimes, in that they violate laws. As Kateb emphasises: 'How can morally unlimited action be anything but gravely immoral? ... Arendt has a way of dealing with the terrible consequences of greatness. She relies on the human capacity for forgiveness' (1984: 33). According to Kateb, forgiveness and promise-keeping are, for Arendt, the 'internal morality of political action,' as distinct from external morality, the relation to general laws. To forgiveness and promise-keeping I would add, however, the alternative to forgiveness (which is not, as Arendt stresses, its opposite), namely punishment. Punishment is the legal reaction to an illegal act. Hence, punishment does not refer to responsibility but to guilt.

10. By 'undetermined' I mean not related to previous laws or motives. Undeter-mined is here synonymous to unique. This uniqueness is political; its significance is public and general.

11. Natural membership or passive givenness has nothing to do with a so-called 'natural character' or any kind of ethnic bond. See for instance Arendt (1978: 231).

12. This claim is clearly problematic: Arendt's husband, Heinrich Blücher, was not a Nazi although he did not fight to save the Jews but escaped Germany. Jaspers was not a Nazi, but chose 'inner emigration' (with which Arendt disagreed). Heidegger, who was attracted to tyrants and Führers by philosophical déformation professionelle, is never defined as evil by Arendt. See Arendt (1978: 303).

13. We have therefore moved from moral harmony (I give myself my own law) to political plurality (I take into account other standpoints). See also Benhabib (2001: 198).

14. Antonia Grunenberg has recently argued that '[f]or Arendt, responsibility was tantamount to the concept of ethics in its authentic meaning. It is identical with paying attention to the world' (2002: 376).

15. This point solves the apparent discrepancy between Arendt's concern for actual action and freedom and her interest in tradition and foundations. Dark times are indeed characterized by a 'gap between past and future' (1993: 3), that is, by the absence of a link between tradition and the future. The public realm of actual presence collapses not because there are no more actions, but because there is no more responsibility that links the given past to the future. This also explains Arendt's interest in narrative and her own use of a somewhat un-orthodox genealogical method. See Guaraldo (2001) and Herzog (2001).

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