

Bethania Assy

Hannah Arendt: An Ethics of Responsibility.

Frankfurt: Peter Lang 2008.

191 pages

US\$43.95 (paper ISBN 978-3-631-54990-2)

This book is the third volume in the Hannah Arendt Studies series. It addresses Arendt's ethics or moral philosophy, an aspect of Arendt's work that is rarely addressed at great length, as both the series editor's introduction and the preface emphasize.

This is Bethania Assy's doctoral work at the New School University in New York. The book shows its origin in the careful tone taken, as well as in its thoroughness. It thus provides a good resource for further study, yet the density of the text also makes the argument disappear at times. The reader who is not as well versed in Arendt's work as Assy, is likely to get lost. Going through the work I found myself increasingly wishing for a stricter editor, who for instance would have modified the complexity of chapter and subsection headings. Most importantly such an editor would not have left it to the reader to link the *suggestion* of the interesting question that Arendt asks (2) with the *actual* question ('whom do we want to be together with?') a hundred pages later (103).

I would not mention these difficulties so early in a review, did I not think that the topic of Arendt's ethics deserves a much larger audience than that of Arendt-scholars. Assy addresses significant issues, and it is a pity this book is not written in a manner more accessible to a larger audience. Hopefully Assy will adopt a more confident style in future and will consider the lay rather than the professional reader.

Assy starts by explaining her interest in ethics and outlining two puzzles. The first is created by the existence of good people—'a true but hardly proved notion' (1), where it is not clear why they exist or how they have become good. The second puzzle involves the discrepancy between the invisibility of inner good and the visibility of good actions. These two puzzles have become all the more significant, Assy suggests, in the present disappearance of the public realm, and in the rather dark sketch of the 'devaluation of traditional morality' (5).

Assy locates Arendt's emergent interest in ethics in her writing on totalitarianism and on Eichmann as a representative of totalitarianism. These phenomena suggested to Arendt the insufficiency of the concepts of 'ethics' (Greek for habits) and 'morals' (Latin for custom). Habits and customs have proven to be too susceptible to change with the rise and decline of totalitarian regimes. As Assy points out, Arendt did not see the sudden reversal of morality in Germany after the war as consolation, but as the same phenomenon as its fall into totalitarianism before the war (21-2). Habit and custom cannot contend with the evil of totalitarian regimes.

In *Eichmann in Jerusalem* Arendt famously characterized Eichmann's deeds by the phrase 'the banality of evil'. She was struck in particular by Eichmann's use of language (*Amstsprache* or *officialese*), the clichés he used to describe the most horrific events, and his selective memory, which had only stored events only insofar as they related to his career (16). 'Banality of evil', Assy emphasizes, does not for Arendt describe 'an explanation or theory of evil'. Rather, it is 'a whole set of inquiries' to understand further the significance of Eichmann (13). Could it be, Arendt wonders, that Eichmann's deeds can be explained as a lack of thinking.

Arendt returns to the Eichmann trial in her last and unfinished work, *The Life of the Mind*. At the time of her death, she had just finished the first two parts (thinking and willing). Of the third part, on judging, she had just typed two epigraphs. Her lectures on Kant's political philosophy are considered preparation for this third part, and form for Assy the basis for her chapter on judging. Arendt begins *The Life of the Mind* by prioritizing 'the value of the surface' and thus reversing the traditional metaphysical hierarchy (25). 'Being means appearing' (29). Assy claims that Arendt's concern with the activities of the mind—thinking, willing, and judging—is in the world of appearance (25), and in 'terms of company' (104). In Assy's work thinking and judging receive more emphasis than willing, which may be a reflection of Arendt's work. Arendt once confessed that she found the part on willing the most difficult to write.

Arendt characterizes thinking as 'two-in-one', a dialogue of myself with myself. As a dialogue it presumes plurality and the world of appearance. While thinking cannot indicate what to do, it does reveal what not to do (59). Following Socrates, it is argued that it is better to be out of harmony with the world at large than with oneself. (62) Willing and Judging are more immediately present in the world. Willing expresses a direct relation to the other and the world. It is not possible to will in solitude (96). Judging is based on the ability of the imagination to place oneself in another's position (120, 126).

Thus, through a discussion of thinking (Chapter 3), willing (Chapter 4), and judging (Chapter 5), Assy develops an ethics of responsibility. This ethics is not concerned either with an inner self or with eternal principles. Instead, Assy argues, that Arendt's central question ('With whom do we want to be together?') locates ethics in the world of appearance, and more particularly in the consistency of a 'who'. This 'who' is sustained through the life of the mind—through thinking, willing and judging.

These are just a few of the important thoughts hidden in Assy's book. They carry the promise of an important contribution to contemporary discussions in ethics. Assy shows it is worth pursuing Arendt's thought in an area (i.e. ethics) mostly ignored.

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