

"Imagination is the prerequisite of understanding" (Arendt)

The bridge between thinking and judging

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Throughout her life, Arendt dealt with the importance of understanding. Understanding had an existential meaning for her and meant finding a sense in what has happened, or in her words being "at home in the world". And in a more philosophical way this meant finding a way to judge under unprecedented circumstances. In her late lectures on judging, which form the unfinished third part of "The Life of the Mind"; she talked about the importance of imagination in Kant's "Critique of Judgment". Imagination has two tasks: Firstly to represent what is absent "in the past as well as in the future, the no-more and the not-yet" which is the activity of the sense. And also to create schemas for knowledge like the notion 'table'. Both representation and creating schemas or examples are the preconditions for reasonable knowledge and judgement.

So, in concentrating on the question of judging or understanding, Arendt examined at the same time the faculty of imagination as the bridge between reality and judgement. There are some very instructive papers of her courses on Political Experience in the Twentieth Century which help us to understand the importance which Arendt gave to the role of imagination. Proceeding from these courses I would like to examine four aspects: 1) the importance of experience in Arendt's work, 2) the relationship between thinking and understanding, 3) the role of the picture in her thinking about imagination, story and metaphor, and 4) the relationship between understanding and theory.

I. Political Experience in the Twentieth Century

The Hannah Arendt Estate contains the scripts of three courses with this title which Arendt held in 1955, 1965 and 1968. So, it seems as if the topic was important for her.

In all three courses Arendt was not interested in political theories about the 20th century but in the experience of an ideal-typical man who lived in the 20th century. He was not someone who belonged to the political realm or "made" politics but as Arendt wrote in one of her scripts "upon whom the events were raining as it were and who reacted."¹ This ideal-typical man was born in 1890 and probably French. He experienced times which Arendt discussed in the following way: he participated in World War I and "became the Unknown Soldier". Then he wanted to change the world, from left or from right and became a "professional revolutionist. This landed him in a totalitarian form of Government" which attracted him somehow in spite of the existence the concentration camps. World war II gave his participation on the sides of the allied forces or the Résistance some sense and he came out of it as a philosopher of rebellion like Camus or as a philosopher of "s'engager" like Sartre. Out of the two World Wars resulted the One world in which the difference between domestic and foreign politics became increasingly unreal. And in the industrialized countries a mass society has emerged with scientific developments such as nuclear weapons with which mankind could be annihilated. "Every meeting of the scientist (is) more meaningful in political terms than most political science meetings." That has consequences for the common man in a common world with common sense and also for "the scientist who is no longer allowed to exist in the ivory tower"².

Thus the topics of Arendt's courses dealt comprehensively with WW I, with the spirit of the revolution, with the ascent of totalitarianism, with WW II, with the problem of the One world, with mass society and with the relationship between science and politics. It is remarkable that Arendt used hardly any political science literature but mostly a mixture of literary testimonies, memoirs and essays. Only Hajo Holborn's "The Political Collapse of Europe" and David Risman's "The Lonely Crowd" were used for analysing WW I and mass society. Arendt discussed WW I with the help of Hanna Hafkesbrink's literary documents of the mood in Germany before the war, with William Faulkner's novel "Legend" and his story "Victory", with Bertolt Brecht's poems "Of poor BB" and "An die Nachgeborenen" and with Karl Jaspers' essay "Man in the Modern Age". For the other topics Arendt used texts by André Malraux, Czeslaw Milosz, Albert Camus, Jean-Paul Sartre, Ernst Jünger, Etienne Gilson and Robert Oppenheimer.

¹ Hannah Arendt, *Political Experiences in the Twentieth Century*, 1965, Library of Congress, p. 023761

² Hannah Arendt, *Political Experiences: Notes*, 1955, Library of Congress, p. 024159

In her later courses she completed the list with recent publications: "Griff nach der Weltmacht" by Fritz Fischer, "The Face of the Third Reich" by Joachim Fest, Konrad Heiden's book on Hitler, biographies of Lenin und Stalin by Louis Fischer and Boris Souvarine respectively, the memoirs of Ilja Ehrenburg, texts by Arthur Koestler, reports from concentration camps by David Rousset and Tadeusz Borowski, the personal notes of the Auschwitz commander Rudolf Höss, texts about the Oppenheimer case and "Brighter than a Thousand Suns" by Robert Jungk. And of course literature: "A Farewell to Arms" by Hemingway, "Doctor Faustus" by Thomas Mann, "The Mint" by T.E. Lawrence, "Catch 22" by Joseph Heller; "Doctor Zhivago" by Boris Pasternak, "The Fall" by Camus, and the resistance poem "Hypnos" by René Char.

Arendt grounded her discussion of that time not so much on scientific analysis as on biographies, memoirs and literature. And among the notes of her course 1968 we also find her excerpts of the letters of T.E. Lawrence which had been published in New York in 1939 and which she had obviously used in the early 1940s for the work on imperialism which later formed the second part of her book on totalitarianism. That leads us to a methodological speciality of that book: the use of literary texts and memoirs to describe experiences and their transformation into values and habits. She used the book "In Search of Lost Time" by Marcel Proust to describe the emergence of a specific form of anti-Semitism in France. She used the novel "Heart of Darkness" by Joseph Conrad as a synonym of the path from civilization to wilderness. And she used what she called the "imperialist legend" of Rudyard Kipling to describe the emergence of the imperialist character in the realm of the British Empire, "the only school of character in modern politics"³. These literary descriptions not only illustrate the contemporary mentality but also tell the stories of that time: mob and elite "needed ... any help to give a sense to their lives and to make comprehensible their experiences in the world and with the world.

Thus the best had been guided and seduced by legends and pseudo-legends in the way how the mass of the average left themselves to the ideologies while the mob already passed away their time with trashy literature of secret world conspiracies."⁴

³ Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, Cleveland/New York 1958, p. 209

⁴ Hannah Arendt, *Elemente und Ursprünge totaler Herrschaft*, München 1986, p. 338 (Not included in the English edition, translation by the author)

Here Arendt is quite near to Karl Jaspers, whose "Psychology of World Views" had impressed her very much in the age of 14 as she later remarked in her interview with Günter Gaus. Jaspers had been influenced by Dilthey's "descriptive psychology" and it seems as if this work also influenced very much the way how Arendt thought about understanding. Jaspers wrote that "what actually makes us ask" is not cold scientific thought "but experiencing thinking"⁵ and that in the end "only casuistic, biographical and historical research"⁶ would be helpful to explore attitudes, world images and worldviews. He emphasized the importance of the moment, much like Arendt emphasized the importance of the event, and while Jaspers emphasized the world images as boxes, Arendt called them banisters. And even much later when Arendt worked on the possibilities of independent judgement, the words of Jaspers returned: "He who judges" wrote Arendt in her notebooks, "thinks with the help of examples" casuistically, and his measures are exemplary "role models."⁷

Such an understanding caused unequivocally her book on Rahel Varnhagen "still written in a very thorough reduction of the narrated to that what Rahel Varnhagen herself might have told ... My portrait therefore follows as closely as possible the course of Rahel's own reflections upon herself"⁸ and excluded all further interpretation. In her notes for the course of 1968 she wrote that she wanted to deal with the narration of historical experience "in terms of a life story, a biography. Of what a man could or would tell when he were to tell his story, and how he would distil, as it were, its essence."⁹

Arendt repeats this way of understanding in her portraits of Isak Dinesen and also of Bertolt Brecht, even when her essay on Brecht, as she wrote to Jaspers, "originally dealt with our long debate on: a good verse is a good verse"¹⁰. But also this topic could be treated very well in a biographical manner in order to understand Brecht's political actions as the possibilities of a member of the "lost generation"; to act.

⁵ Karl Jaspers, *Psychologie der Weltanschauungen*, München 1985, S. 7 (Translation by the author)

⁶ *ibid.*, p. 43

⁷ Hannah Arendt, *Denktagebuch*, München-Zürich 2002, tome II, p. 680 (translated by the author)

⁸ Hannah Arendt, *Rahel Varnhagen. The Life of a Jewish Woman*, San Diego 1974, p. xv f.

⁹ Hannah Arendt, *Political Experiences in the Twentieth Century*, 1968, Library of Congress, p. 023611

¹⁰ Hannah Arendt / Karl Jaspers, *Briefwechsel 1926-1969*, München-Zürich, 1985, p. 643 (translated by the author)

II. On the context of thinking and understanding

"What is the subject of our thought?" Arendt asked in a discussion with friends and colleagues, and answered: "Experience. Nothing else! And if we lose the ground of experience then we get into all kinds of theories."¹¹

Such thinking, Arendt wrote in the notebooks, "emerges in the element of the not knowable."¹² It has nothing to do with the will to know and nothing with belief or logic either, but with understanding. No force of the will, no authority of the faith and no tyranny of the logic can be compatible with this understanding, - on the contrary: all force puts immediately an end to an understanding thinking. Understanding consists in a thinking-of-a-thing (einer Sache nach-denken) and can only, in Arendt's words, take place as "free thinking" which aims at "no purpose", has "no objects" and does not create "any result", but "sense". "Thinking", Arendt noted, "is a hearing (reason), that means 'sense hearing' or meditating action."¹³ ("Ein vernehmendes (Vernunft), nämlich 'Sinn vernehmendes' or sinnendes Handeln".)

The understanding thinking does not look for truth, but starts from an originally found truth. Nobody would assume to hold already the truth in his or her hands. Thinking about the truth (the Nach-denken) "never reaches the originally found truth, is never quite adequate, therefore thinking only ends with the end of the life. Like life is feeded from the source of the birth thinking being related only to it from the root of the truth." And like life "necessarily moves itself farther and farther away from its origin also thinking removes from truth. But this thinking originally inspired by the truth but nevertheless always removing from it only makes truth vivid: truth lives and works in it like the event in the memory. This is reality. ... The pure experience, the medium where I experience event and truth just never constitutes reality, it even is starry-eyed."¹⁴

¹¹ Hannah Arendt, In Hannah Arendt, in: Hannah Arendt: The Recovery of the Public World, ed. by Melvyn A. Hill, New York 1979, p. 308

¹² Hannah Arendt, Denktagebuch, *ibid.*, t. I., p 261

¹³ *ibid.*, p. 283

¹⁴ *ibid.*, p. 489f

In thinking reality works like a root, in the memory it is the event. To go after truth and event by thinking means therefore to go into depth. Not thinking remains on the surface. In her study of Eichmann, Arendt corrected her original notion of the "radical evil". In reality it was an "extreme" evil because it would never be radical because it does not have roots, no depth, and would therefore remain on the surface like a mushroom. This evil has no depth, but thinking deals with depth. Thinking, Arendt wrote into her notebooks, "always is directed towards that what is under the surface, that means towards depth. The depth is its dimension"¹⁵. Where "the dialogue ... is absent there is no depth anymore but lack of niveau ... from the lack of niveau comes all mischief, not from the depth which we have lost"¹⁶. Therefore, depth for Arendt has something to do with having roots, lacking depth is uprootal. "Under the conditions of uprootal the dimensions of greatness and depth get lost which belong together. Greatness emerges when depth comes to light, projects into the world; all greatness is rooted in the depth. Depth is the dimension by which we sense the 'roots'."¹⁷

Arendt talks about the "dialogue of thinking". To the muteness of the logic and the falling back into silence of an instrumental knowledge she opposes the never ending eloquent human plurality. Even when the wish to understand may take place in the loneliness like thinking it never takes place without the representation of the position of others.

Understanding, in the words of Arendt, is the sense, which perceives the "common". This common includes "the existence of other people, the general conditions which were before I was born, the events that happened."¹⁸ This is the political importance of the Common Sense. Such understanding is either prescribed by rules or free imagination. "Without imagination, understanding is possible only as long as customs (general rules of behavior) rule everything."¹⁹ But considering the break of tradition where all "old ways of thinking", "rules" and "signs for manners and customs"²⁰ had been destroyed only, creative representation, that is imagination, remains. In her introductory remarks for her course on "Political Experience in the Twentieth

¹⁵ *ibid*, t II, p. 740

¹⁶ *ibid*, p. 622

¹⁷ *ibid*, t. I, p. 451f.

¹⁸ *ibid*, p. 315

¹⁹ *ibid*

²⁰ Hannah Arendt, Bertolt Brecht, in: *Menschen in finsternen Zeiten*, München-Zürich 1989, p. 266 (translated by the author)

Century" in 1968 Arendt wrote: "I could have called this course Exercises in Imagination. The only aim is to recapture Experiences."²¹ And it must be added that creative does not mean in an artistic sense the creation of something new but the representation of something which exists in the memory and is not accessible for perception, so that it can only be perceived indirectly.

Imagination as the prerequisite of understanding makes it possible to observe the world from different points of view, to represent real or possible points of view of others. Arendt uses the metaphor of the table to illustrate this. "It is the common world of us all and that what is between you and this other location like the table separates you and binds you to him at the same time. That is the meaning of ONE world."²²

It is not reason but imagination which makes understanding possible. Because "against the self-sense, the reason, which lives out of the I-think, stands the world-sense which lives as common sense (passive) and as imagination (active) from the others."²³ With regard to this world-sense Arendt not only realizes by her study of Kant's aesthetic judgement "how near arts and politics are because both are dealing with the world."²⁴ She also realizes during her discussion of the sense that thinking actually has something to do with that which does not appear. "Sense is what never appears, not even manifests itself (?) ... To raise it from depth into the air is the task of poetry, of all art."²⁵

III. The role of the image in Arendt's study of imagination, narration and metaphor

Concepts like "imagination", "representation", "depth", and "appearance" show the special role which the sight plays in the activity of understanding. Arendt wrote in the notebooks: "The sense of feeling is the tactile sense and also the olfactory sense; that of thinking is actually the sight, the sense of the distance."²⁶ The literary texts and metaphorical images which we meet so often in Arendt's texts are not mere aids to

²¹ Hannah Arendt, *Political Experiences in the Twentieth Century*, 1968, p. 023609

²² Hannah Arendt, *Political Experiences: notes*, 1955, p. 024160

²³ Hannah Arendt, *Denktagebuch*, *ibid.*, t. I, p. 570

²⁴ *ibid.*, p. 571

²⁵ *ibid.*, t. II, p. 740

²⁶ *ibid.*, p. 793

make complicated arguments more understandable but are images of experience of thinking, of imagination and understanding. Arendt uses this sort of thinking image to represent the perspectives of the others. "Imagination is the prerequisite of understanding", she wrote in her course notes in 1955. "You," the students, "should imagine how the world looks from the different points of view where these people are located."²⁷ For that purpose it is not sufficient to name these points of view in an abstract way: "the unknown soldier", "the revolutionary", "the resister", "the scientist". It is necessary to get to know their world to be able to look at it as if one would look at it with one's own eyes. Understanding and judging cannot take place by abstract designation but only in a concrete way with the help of creating images. To tell one's own experiences or the experiences of others presupposes this capability of imagination. So, when Eichmann, as Arendt wrote, "never had imagined what he had done"²⁸ he not only lacked imagination but he had also lost the capacity of telling stories. What interested Arendt in her courses, namely to imagine "what a man could or would tell when he were to tell his story" could not be found in Eichmann. He was only able to express himself with the help of clichés.²⁹

"Every sequence of events can be told as a story" wrote Arendt in her course notes in 1965.³⁰ It is decisive that the storyteller only tells his story and does not explain. Thinking does not mean to explain but to understand. Also story-telling does not explain. "Story-telling" wrote Arendt in her portrait of the writer Isak Dinesen "reveals the sense without committing the fault to name it, he leads to the congruency and reconciliation with things how they really are and perhaps we can even trust him to contain implicitly that last word which we expect from the Day of Judgement."³¹

Now, Arendt not only used stories in the sense of thought images but also of scenes. They resemble short scenes on the stage which express the sense of events.

²⁷ Hannah Arendt, *Political Experiences: notes, 1955*, p. 024160

²⁸ Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem, Ein Bericht von der Banalität des Bösen*, München-Zürich, 1963, S. 16 (translated by the author)

²⁹ In a quite different context but with a similar meaning Mark Danner described the dilemma of the USA in Iraq four years after the attack on the WTC with the following words: „A war that had a clear purpose and a certain end has now lost its reason and its finish. Americans find themselves fighting and dying in a kind of existential desert of the present. For Americans, the war has lost its narrative.“ Mark Danner, *Taking Stock of the Forever War*, in: *The New York Times Magazine*, September 11, 2005

³⁰ Hannah Arendt, *Political Experiences in the Twentieth Century*, 1965, p. 023761

³¹ Hannah Arendt, *Isak Dinesen*, in: *Menschen in finsternen Zeiten*, *ibid*, p. 125

- For example, the reading of Boris Pasternak in 1946 in the Soviet Union who appeared in the public for the time after decades of silence. "He read from his poems and it happened that while reading an old poem the page slipped out of his hand. "There a voice in the hall began to continue the reading of the poem by heart. From several corners of the hall other voices arose. And the recitation of the interrupted poem ended in a chorus."³²

- Another scene has been described by her friend and professor of philosophy Glenn Gray in his book on war. As an American soldier, he had met an Italian farmer whose simplicity and humanity moved him deeply. All of a sudden he realized that he had to forget "the simplification of abstract thinking". It took him 14 years since that noteworthy encounter "to become fluent in the art and the language of "concrete" thoughts and feelings, and thus to comprehend that both abstract notions and abstract emotions are not merely false to what actually happens but are viciously interconnected."³³

- Finally the scene when the story of the member of the German Wehrmacht Anton Schmidt was told during the Eichmann trial. Arendt wrote: "It was as if the audience had spontaneously decided to keep the usual two minutes of silence in honour of the man Anton Schmidt. And during these two minutes which were like a sudden beam of light amidst a dense and impenetrable darkness a single thought became visible, clear, irrefutable, undoubtable: how completely different would be all today, in this courtroom, in Israel, in Germany, in all Europe, perhaps in the whole world, if there were more stories like this one to be told."³⁴

The way Arendt described these scenes makes them condense to images which do not let you go.

These thought images can also take the form of metaphors. Arendt's work is full of metaphors whenever she wants to describe the specific of a phenomenon. "That what combines thinking and writing poetry," wrote Arendt in her thinking diary, "is the metaphor. Philosophy calls notion what poetry calls metaphor. Thinking gains its "concepts" from the visible to describe the invisible. ... All thinking 'transfers', (is)

³² Hannah Arendt, *Die ungarische Revolution und der totalitäre Imperialismus*, in: *In der Gegenwart. Übungen im politischen Denken II*, München 2000, p. 94. Hannah Arendt cites a passage from an article by Leon Leneman in *L'Express* June 26, 1958. (Translated by the author)

³³ Hannah Arendt, Introduction to: J. Glenn Gray, *The Warriors*, New York 1967, p. viii

³⁴ Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, *ibid*, p. 277

metaphorical."³⁵ Especially the new, the invisible, needs new notions from the sphere of the visible to be called, to be made visible and representable. Arendt coined a lot of such notions, for example the light of the public, the disclosure of the agent in speech and action, the web of relationships, the world as a common table, promising as islands in a sea of uncertainty, thinking without banister, the iron band of terror under totalitarianism, etc. All human activities are characterized by the corresponding spatial relationship between the persons: the being-together in action, the solitude in thinking and the isolation in labour.³⁶ Some of the metaphors are formed by Arendt as animated images, some sort of always returning stories. For example she describes the praxis of the totalitarian movement in contrast to the praxis of a tyranny, "as if a way had been found to set the desert itself into motion, to let loose a sand storm that could cover all parts of the inhabited earth. The conditions under which we exist today in the field of politics are indeed threatened by these devastating sand storms."³⁷

And in her notebook, Arendt unfolds with several entries a whole scenario about love as the fifth of the "elementary human activities as modifications of plurality": "Love burns, cuts like a flash through the in-between, that means the worldly space, between the persons. This is only possible with two persons. When a third one appears immediately the space re-establishes itself."³⁸ And while "all talking with others ... always is already talking about something common for both ... the talking of two persons in love is free. It is as if in it (love, WH) they only become people become that as what they give themselves as poetry composers. They do not talk and they do not speak but they sound."³⁹

The metaphor itself can only be defined metaphorically. For Arendt it is a "bridge over the abyss between the inner and invisible activity of the mind and the world of appearance."⁴⁰ Metaphors cause "the unity of the world"⁴¹. "Analogies, metaphors, and emblems are the threads by which the mind holds on to the world even when, absently, it has lost direct contact with it, and they guarantee the unity of human experience."⁴²

³⁵ Hannah Arendt, *Denktagebuch*, *ibid*, t II, p. 728

³⁶ *ibid*, t. I, p. 493

³⁷ Hannah Arendt, *the Origins of Totalitarianism*, *ibid*, p. 47

³⁸ Hannah Arendt, *Denktagebuch*, *ibid*, t. I., p. 372

³⁹ *ibid*, p. 214

⁴⁰ *ibid*, p. 110

⁴¹ *ibid*, t. II, p. 773

⁴² Hannah Arendt, *The Life of the Mind*, San Diego 1971, p. 109

The metaphor is for Arendt "certainly the freest gift language could bestow on thinking and hence on philosophy"⁴³.

IV. The relationship between understanding and theory

So what is the relationship between the process of understanding and political theory? It is remarkable that Arendt concentrated in these courses on exercises in imagination and not on political theory. In a similar way in the same year 1955 she called a lecture "History of Political Thought" and not History of Political Theory or History of Political Ideas, though she talked about classics like Hobbes, Locke, Montesquieu etc. She was not interested in them as classics but as thinker. As Arendt remarked, experiences and words precede ideas and not vice versa. Which experiences, which words? This question attracted her attention. Political theory for Arendt moves between experiences in history and philosophical notions and has become a kind of meeting ground for disappointed philosophers and disappointed statesmen. Instead of theorists she preferred to speak of authors and commentators.⁴⁴ Authors who enrich the world with their works and who move in the same world as we do, namely in the "real world" while the commentators move in the world of the books. "The political writer," Arendt wrote in her lecture 'History of Political Thought', "loves the world, for the world, the human world ... is the subject of politics in the broadest sense. Only the commentator is interested in theory, and loves political theory. We need the commentator, but we should know that we move with him in a world which is no longer strictly speaking the world of the author, whereas when we read the author directly, we move in the same world, only that we come from a different corner and from a world which among other things was augmented precisely by him."⁴⁵

⁴³ *ibid.*, p. 105

⁴⁴ And when she spoke of theory then in the sense of understanding, not of science. In her course notes in 1965 Arendt asked at the end: „What has this (topic of imagination, WH) to do with political theory? Distinction between theory and thought: Every event that is remembered at all is being thought about. The telling of a story is the appropriate way of thinking about it. Out of this comes Theory. Theory, made in the present, is like all present time between past and future – that is between remembrance and anticipation. Kafka’s parable: The two forces acting upon man out of which he thinks and acts. This is not theory, but it certainly is the determination of the location of the theorists.“ *Ibid.*, p. 023762

⁴⁵ Hannah Arendt, *History of Political Thought*, Berkeley 1955, Nachlass, Library of Congress, p. 023944

That means that we meet authors on the level of political thinking, just as we meet authors on the level of experiences. Both have to do with our world. The way they differ is not the supposed gulf between science and not-science but the step from story-telling to thinking and judging. Both deal with understanding and both need imagination and images to understand. In her essay "Understanding and politics" Arendt emphasizes the difference between understanding and knowledge or between thinking and science. Understanding precedes knowledge as "preliminary understanding" transcends it as "true understanding", but both "make knowledge meaningful".⁴⁶ The political sciences, writes Arendt, are "in the highest sense called upon to pursue the quest for meaning". But they need an imagination distinguished from "fancy" and for which, not surprisingly, Arendt only finds metaphorical words, in the words of King Solomon an "understanding heart", and the words of the English poet Wordsworth "Clearest insight, amplitude of mind, / And Reason in her most exalted mood"⁴⁷.

⁴⁶ ⁴⁶ Hannah Arendt, *Understanding and Politics*, in: *Essays in Understanding*, New York 1994, p. 311

⁴⁷ *ibid*, p. 322f.