Review

Hannah Arendt's Ethics

Deirdre Lauren Mahony

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Deirdre Lauren Mahony's *Hannah Arendt's Ethics* offers a new and daring reading of Hannah Arendt, which analyzes and evaluates Arendt's moral theory independent of her political theory from an Anglo-American perspective. This approach yields some illuminating insights into Arendt's key ethical claims, but the approach and interpretation ultimately prove problematic.

Mahony opens her book with what she takes to be Arendt's primary ethical question: Why were ordinary German citizens complicit in the unprecedented evil of the Nazi regime? (p. 6). This question, according to Mahony, led Arendt to formulate four 'theses' that serve as answers to Arendt's question: the banality-of-evil thesis, the thoughtlessness thesis, the living-with-oneself thesis, and the nonparticipation thesis (p. 17). Mahony subjects each thesis to a rigorous logical analysis, intentionally jettisoning the standard phenomenological approach in Arendt's work, reading her instead within an explicitly Anglo-American framework of ethics that aspires to deduce a value theory and metaethics from Arendt's normative claims about evil, thinking, living with oneself, and nonparticipation. Mahony attempts to situate Arendt's moral theory within contemporary analytical conversations about intentionality, moral responsibility, and decision making. Readers expecting a genealogy of Arendt's ethics as a way of illuminating her judgments will be disappointed in this book; however, readers who have hoped for a rigorous conceptual analysis of Arendt will find a friend in Mahony.

The majority of the book is devoted to an analysis of the moral controversy surrounding Arendt's ethical judgments about Adolf Eichmann. In the first two chapters, Mahony argues that Arendt formulated two distinct ethical 'theses' about Eichmann to explain mass complicity in evil: the 'banality-of-evil' thesis and the 'thoughtlessness' thesis. The first thesis holds that, 'motives which are banally self-serving can nonetheless result in deeds of great evil' (p. 25); the second thesis is concerned with Eichmann's 'inner life, to the thought processes (or lack thereof) which contributed to the formation of those banal motivations which spurred him on despite the horror of the consequences' (p. 26). The former thesis pertains to the

quality of Eichmann's motives, and the latter thesis is concerned with 'how, given those motives, an offender would have been able to organize, oversee and engage in acts of such despicable evil without... being a devastatingly monstrous individual himself' (p. 27). To substantiate this reading, Mahony canvasses the most relevant scholarship on the Eichmann controversy by Susan Neiman, Judith Shklar, Berel Lang, Daniel Goldhagen, David Cesarani, Deborah Lipstadt, Bettina Stangneth, and Roger Berkowitz. This section of the book will be profitably read by those seeking a succinct overview of the Eichmann controversy.

Although Mahony concedes the conceptual legitimacy of Arendt's banality-of-evil thesis, she finds Arendt's claims about Eichmann's thoughtlessness and the subsequent claim that thinking can be a prophylactic to committing evil as deeply flawed. She argues that if thinking is an aimless activity that undermines normative criteria, then it cannot contribute to moral reasoning, and therefore, it cannot prevent evil actions. Arendt's argument, Mahony argues, amounts to a tautology: 'one can always explain any incident of wrongdoing by saying that the perpetrator simply did not think, for, if she had, she would have not done wrong since thinking necessarily excludes wrongdoing' (p. 130). If thinking cannot prevent evil, and thoughtlessness does not necessarily produce evil, then Arendt's banality-of-evil thesis and the thinking thesis it relies upon fail. Unfortunately, Mahony, in spite of her best efforts, conflates the activities of thinking and judging throughout the book and elides any substantive discussion of the interrelated activity of willing. Her evaluation of Arendt's understanding of the connection between thinking and judgment would have profited greatly from an understanding of the correlated temporality of thinking (present), judgment (past), and willing (future).

In the last two chapters, Mahony evaluates Arendt's third and fourth ethical thesis: the living-with-oneself thesis and the nonparticipation thesis. Mahony interprets the first thesis as a form of moral existence which can prevent wrongdoing, and the second thesis as a description of ordinary citizens 'who resisted or refused to participate, and whose good moral principles were deeply offended by crimes sanctioned by the state' (p. 187). Mahony interprets Arendt as a moral realist (moral truths are possible and absolute) (p. 145), who is committed to two interrelated claims: (1) 'moral knowledge is a matter of apprehending axiomatic principles, but this kind of knowledge is not universally possible' (p. 156), and (2) 'people who "live with themselves" know how to avoid wrongdoing' (p. 158). Arendt's moral realism, Mahony claims, leads to two normative principles that underlie the living-with-oneself thesis: (1) 'it is better to have harmony than disharmony within the self and therefore one ought to act in such a way that one's actions accord with one's self, which will mean that one can live with oneself having committed those deeds', and (2) 'wrongdoing would necessarily entail an individual not being able to live with herself – that to do wrong would inevitably result in discord in the self' (pp. 159–160). However, Arendt's thesis ultimately fails, according to Mahony, because 'living with oneself and doing evil are not

mutually exclusive' because it is possible for someone to commit evil actions and live with themselves, and therefore, living with oneself cannot be an ultimate moral standard (p. 164). Mahony makes one final blow at Arendt's thesis by arguing that thinking is incompatible with living with oneself. According to Mahony, anyone who lives with themselves does not think about what might be wrong to do; they simply know that certain actions are incompatible with who they are.

Although the first three theses of Arendt's moral theory fail to survive Mahony's logical scrutiny, the fourth and final thesis about nonparticipation, which holds that while one cannot be culpable for not resisting, one can be culpable for participating and being complicit (p. 189) does succeed. Mahony interprets Arendt's nonparticipation thesis as a species of moral incapacity, a concept developed by Bernard Williams that means the 'incapacity to do a certain thing knowingly' (p. 198). This moral idea is 'at the heart of Arendt's ethics', Mahony argues, and people who possessed it 'did not have to think and they may or may not have been people who lived with themselves but what was striking about them was that they could not participate, they encountered a moral incapacity which saved them from collaboration in evil' (p. 201). However, as Mahony argues, Arendt denies that moral incapacity can be developed – 'one simply has it or one does not' (p. 201) – but this ultimately means that it cannot provide any 'universal normative standards' (p. 202). This conclusion has significant consequences for Arendt's moral theory: If nonparticipants 'do not need to think in order to conclude that a given action is morally unacceptable to them, but rather simply apprehend it as such, rendering the commission of the act in fact unthinkable, how can there be any deep connection between thinking and morally good behavior?' (p. 203). Still, Mahony concludes that 'Arendt's great value as a moral philosopher' is that she pointed us to moral incapacity as the source of nonparticipation, and it is only this inability to act immorally that could have prevented mass complicity in evil (p. 210).

Hannah Arendt's Ethics is a view of Arendt from the other side of a great abyss separating the analytic and continental traditions in philosophy. Bridging this divide in philosophy is a challenging task that requires an appreciation of the value and potential of both traditions. For this reason, it is important to remember that Arendt was a continental theorist whose intellectual roots were nourished by the streams of phenomenology, hermeneutics, and existentialism that emerged in Kant and meandered through Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Heidegger, Jaspers, Merleau-Ponty, and Camus. She was an imaginative thinker who engaged in thought exercises about human experience by reflecting on ideas generated at the intersection of literature, politics, and philosophy. Her great value as a modern political theorist was that she was a creator of signposts not maps: in Arendt there are no maps, there are only ciphers. This is especially true of her approach to ethics, which cannot be separated from her political theory any more than Aristotle's ethics can be separated from his politics. Arendt's ethical concerns are less about crafting precise arguments that are logically valid and more about rethinking the

conditions for the possibility of ethics. Arendt would remind us of Aristotle's claim in the *Nicomachean Ethics* that ethics is necessarily imprecise and requires aesthetic rather than calculative judgment. Regrettably, Mahony's evaluation of Arendt's moral theory seeks maps where there were only ciphers. Arendt was engaged in a counter-move to Anglo-American ethics in a way similar to Jackson Pollock's counter-move to realism. Evaluating Arendt's ethical claims from an analytic perspective without sufficiently appreciating the continental trajectories in her thought is akin evaluating Pollock's 'Untitled (Green and Silver), 1949' using the principles of realism; it simply misses the point of the endeavor.

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