

Hegel and Arendt on Judgement, Culture, and the Experience of Thinking

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Abstract: In this paper, I consider the relationship between thinking and culture, arguing that the capacity for thought is properly realized, at least in part, in ways of caring for and cultivating non-instrumental intersubjective domains and practices—culture. To begin, I turn to Hegel’s critique of culture in the *Phenomenology of Spirit* to examine the form as which the individual’s explicit awareness of her own capacity for judgement, and, hence, her potential to take responsibility for the terms and manners of collective life, first establishes itself as the basis of culture--deliberately shaped and chosen intersubjective practices. I demonstrate that the shared intersubjective practices that Hegel calls “culture” are a necessarily destination of our capacity to withdraw from the world in order to judge it and shape it, but that this very capacity can be misunderstood and thereby undermine the possibility of freely cultivating domains in which meaningfully to engage with one another. Finally, I turn to the first volume of Hannah Arendt’s *The Life of the Mind*, “Thinking,” which offers another examination of our capacity for abstract reflection that itself demonstrates, largely by thematizing the Platonic experience of wonder and the exemplary character of Socrates’ thinking, how a different understanding of both subjective interiority and our capacity for abstract thinking can both prepare us for and orient us towards more realistic and potentially rewarding ways of sharing the world with one another.

In this paper, I consider the relationship between thinking and culture, arguing that the capacity for thought is properly realized, at least in part, in ways of caring for and cultivating non-instrumental intersubjective domains and practices—culture. To begin, I turn to Hegel’s critique of culture in the *Phenomenology of Spirit* to examine the form as which the individual’s explicit awareness of her own capacity for judgement, and, hence, her potential to take responsibility for the terms and manners of collective life, first establishes itself as the basis of culture.¹ In this first form, the individual understands that

¹ The section on “culture” is arguable, the last one in which Hegel analyses the character of the lived sociality that accompanies our self-recognition as singular judging agents; after the reign of terror that accompanies the French revolution, no new insights into our political self-conception emerge. While I don’t address it here, the loneliness and superficiality of modern society that Arendt analyses especially in *Origins of Totalitarianism*, is likely linked to the possibilities of culture Hegel analyses. On this latter points, see Ramos, 174; on the previous, see Ramos, :

the experience of subjective interiority is not sufficient unto itself and requires a world that reflects itself and its aspirations back to it; this world is the world of culture. While responsible for realizing this world, the individual does not, at this point, understand that subjectivity is itself constituted not solely by the private and discrete domain of interiority but also and necessarily by its particular and local ways of involving itself in the world. Thus, the individual sets the terms of mutual recognition in the practices of culture in ways that prevent it from being recognition by others as a subjectivity situated in worldly practices, and hence as always particular as well as capable of thinking from the standpoint of universality. As result, the shared world of culture that was intended as site for the flourishing of the human capacity to judge and take responsibility for the terms of collective life turns is realized as a situation in which the inner commitments of subjective individuals always appear to hypocritical and in which the meaningful terms of intersubjective life are therefore themselves undermined. Having seen that the shared intersubjective practices that Hegel calls “culture” are a necessarily destination of our capacity to withdraw from the world in order to judge it and shape it, but that this very capacity can be misunderstood and thereby undermine the possibility of freely cultivating domains in which meaningfully to engage with one another, I turn to the first volume of Hannah Arendt’s *The Life of the Mind*, “Thinking.” This offers another examination of our capacity for abstract reflection which considers how a different understanding of both subjective interiority and our capacity for abstract thinking can both prepare us for and orient us towards more realistic and potentially rewarding ways of sharing the world with one another.

Hegel on Modern Subjectivity and Culture

For the most part, our experience is defined by a sense of familiarity, largely constituted by our ability to be at home in and with the demands of our environments. Buying a cup of coffee on the way to the library, I need not ask myself how to behave and interact; meeting you for the first time, I rely on established codes of hospitality which may vary in form, but rarely in intent. In these interactions, I read my world and the demands it makes on me with an immediacy on which I need to not reflect, operating, as Heidegger says, out of a given sense of what “one” does and what one values. And yet the world to which I respond, and which seems, in everyday life, to be the obvious condition of things is itself always a historically and culturally specific context. Distinctive of the modern self-conception is an experience of oneself as an “I.”² Characteristic features of this experience include a sense of detachment from, rather than immersion in, reality; the experience of

Hegel’s analysis of Napoleon and his institution is very sparse. But what interests us more, in his narrative, is that the stage of Terror and absolute freedom is not succeeded by another political constitution, as though the work of French Revolution, that is, absolute freedom of the selves in a groundless world, was actually the last political stage of the spirit, of alienation and culture. Instead, Hegel moves forwards to a new shape of consciousness, which is moral spirit and *Gewissen*. Even more strikingly, both moral spirit and conscience (*Gewissen*) are taken, as it were, into a private, or at least non-political, world. See Ramos, “Enlightenment, Utility, and, Terror; Arendt and Hegel on Modernity.” In Del Castillo and Faerna Hickman, *Confines of Democracy: Essays on the Philosophy of Richard Bernstein*. 174.

² On the distinctive experience that corresponds to the “I,” see Hoff, “Rights and World: On the Political Significance of Belonging.”

reality as subject to one's assessment and judgement; the possibility of appealing to an "inner" standard in one's judgments; and the demand to recognize others are equally discrete and autonomous beings.³ This distinctively modern experience of the "I" must be recognized as both a truth about the reality of human consciousness *and* as rooted in particular historical constellation of beliefs, histories, values, language, and so on. While modern institutions may formally recognize the significance of individuality, it is within the lived dimensions of human life—language, communal practices, authority—that the otherwise isolated experience of interiority becomes real and concrete. It is therefore significant whether our ways of recognizing one another, our values, and our mechanism for enforcing shared norms can accommodate what it is to have an interiority—to be an agent capable of reflection and judgment who also lives in the world with others so capable, and whose "inner" experience can never be rendered exterior. Any community to which we belong as such reflective agents will both value and develop practices that attest to our reflective commitments, but when our shared terms of mutual recognition cannot accommodate the reality of subjective interiority, both our sense of ourselves and trust in others will be significantly undermined.

There are important norms that must be met for the experience of subjective interiority to function as lived element of social life, and Chapter Six of Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*, "Self-Alienated Spirit. Culture," is helpful in discerning these. In "Self-Alienated Spirit. Culture," Hegel analyses the character and quality of the intersubjective realities that arises out of the commitment to abstract personhood and universal modes of recognition that animate, ultimately, the liberal democratic project. Designating this intersubjective reality "culture," Hegel is referring (a) to the lived, material, practical contexts out of which we live up to our explicit sense of ourselves as abstract individuals, and (b) to the particular "task" that is associated with such contexts once they come to be understood as sites for the expression and realization of subjective interiority. Culture, then, is fundamentally a mediating phenomenon that either grants or fails to grant to the individual the experience of world that can accommodate her potential as an individual endowed with subjective interiority. It is by analysing culture as a phenomenon that mediates between subjective interiority and concrete and meaningful involvement with others that Hegel demonstrates that our ways of thinking about and responding institutionally to the significance of the abstract individual require, additionally, ways of answering to the demands of recognition that animate the lived, intersubjective life that typically operates only implicitly, as that familiar sense of the every with which we began our reflections.⁴ Let us consider briefly the trajectory leading to the individual's recognition of her own significance.

³ What I am here describing as characteristic of modern experience is largely true for the experience of Stoics; see Russon "The 'Freedom of Self-Consciousness'" in *Reading Hegel's Phenomenology*.

⁴ Thus, Hegel's account of culture criticises the Kantian cosmopolitan effort to transform the individual, always local and specific, into someone open to and capable of meaningful interactions within a global community. See Kant, "The Idea for a Universal History with a Cosmopolitan Purpose." For an account of the differing intellectual

According to the logic of the *Phenomenology*, the human being's irreducible capacity for such judgements had hitherto been concealed in the given terms of communal life, what Hegel terms ethical substance (*Sittlichkeit*) and describes as the happy comfort of a sense of unmediated involvement in meaningful reality.⁵ Therein, the individual was afforded both the experience of belonging and law simultaneously, at the expense of her self-recognition as rational agent capable of judgment. The individual who had not had to confront the actuality and demands of her individuality was able to both rest secure in sense of communal belonging and experience moral and political imperatives—laws—as rooted in the very fabric of reality; she could recognize herself in the “we” that was constituted by human institutions while simultaneously viewing such institutions as natural and given, rather than as accomplishments on the part of human beings inherently open to critique. Describing this experience, John Russon writes, “Now, in the ethical community, these laws are taken to be of the order of things, not rational judgments.”⁶ By contrast, Hegel's aptly named chapter, “Self-Alienated Spirit. Culture,” analyses the loss and divestment of hitherto given experiences of self that necessarily accompany our emerging self-recognition as judging agents whose capacity for judgement is discovered as the capacity to withdraw and isolate the self from the world.⁷ While our emerging insight into ourselves as judging agents constitutes a significant development on the part of human beings, the analysis of culture will ultimately reveal that our initial attempts to understand the significance of our capacity for judgment are mistaken, and, by extension, that the human institutions based on notions

background of both Kant and Hegel, see Albert William Levi. Hegel's “Phenomenology as a Philosophy of Culture,” *Journal of the History of Philosophy*, Volume 22, Number 4, October 1984. 445-470.

⁵ And, yet, the phenomenon of culture is itself responsive to lessons learned from previous, and less developed forms of consciousness, in particular from inadequacies of both what Hegel calls “Ethical Life” and “Legal Status.” Before proceeding with my central analysis, let us turn briefly to each of these. Doing so serves a two-fold purpose, to, one, provide some context for our discussion of culture, and, two, to situate Hegel's contribution to the notion of culture within the framework of established debates on multiculturalism that attempt to negotiate between the demands of the universality of legal status, on the one hand, and the significance of cultural particularity, on the other hand. John Russon explains that the project of *Phenomenology*, the study of various attitudes of consciousness and the nature of the objects disclosed by such attitudes, ultimately culminates in the recognition that the study of being can only be conducted as communication. See “Absolute Knowing: The Structure and Project of Hegel's System of Science” in *Reading Hegel's Phenomenology*.

⁶ Russon, John. “Spirit and Skepticism,” *Reading Hegel's Phenomenology*. 138.

⁷ By our “isolation” from the world, I mean to describe the experience of consciousness in its independence with respect to the authority of tradition, custom, religion, familial structures, common sense, etc. John Russon helpfully demonstrates that this experience of independence and isolation is characteristic of the experience of skepticism, according to which one only ever encounters one's own experience and therefore that “all that one encounters has ultimately the same status of being products on one's own powers of choice and judgement” (Russon 99). While this skeptical stance both a permanent feature of consciousness and had real and important implications [for example, consistent is “the general demand that one establish that one's perceptions are representative before going on to make universal and necessary claims about the real nature of things” (Russon 99)], it is ultimately founded on a failure to recognize that even if all experience lies inescapably within the realm of consciousness, consciousness remains blind so long as it assumes that knowledge of the world is therefore impossible; there remains within consciousness the possibility of knowing the world, but this possibility cannot be achieved without a more thorough understanding of itself, and thus by learning about the inadequacies of its own self-conception as an isolated independence (Russon 101).

of universality, while important, cannot ultimately accommodate what it means for us to judging being.⁸

What Hegel ultimately teaches us in “Self-Alienated Spirit. Culture” is that insofar as we understand ourselves in isolation from the world, and insofar as we lack shared terms practices and customs in which to engage with others, the social experiences of our time will be intrinsically superficial and necessarily marked by the suspicion of insincerity, and that the experience of agency is itself dependent on a world in which we can trust one another, a need to which culture is supposed, but fails to, respond. What I offer here is an analyses of what I take to be the three main ‘lessons’ of the section on culture: (1) our approach to and assessment of the world cannot depend on binary terms; (2) the terms on the basis of which to judge and asses one another must be able to accommodate our individual singularity, and must be terms to which we can live up; (3) we must recognize our responsibility to be constantly critical of the terms by which we approach and asses one another, never relinquishing our responsibility to an authority.

Hegel and the Lessons of Culture

Hegel’s dense and complex critique of culture (*Bildung*), found in section IV, B of the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, outlines the human being’s emerging recognition of her own capacity for judgement, as well as the frustrated attempts to engage in practices of “mutual, social recognition” that attest to the significance and reality of this intrinsic capacity of consciousness.⁹ In other words, Hegel outlines the fact that the human being’s recognition that answers to the questions such as “how ought we to live?” or “What action is correct in this case?” necessarily involve a subjective dimension in terms of which the individual recognizes her own responsibility for answering such questions. At the same time, he demonstrates that giving reasons and being self-responsible are not individual activities; they are intersubjective accomplishments of mutually recognizable justifications and accounts of action. In what follows, I shall analyse failings of our initial attempt to understand the significance of our capacity for judgement, discussing how each marks insight into our nature as judging beings, even as the implications of such insight go undetected. These phases are (1) the capacity to assign value or “judgement”, (2) Speech and Appearance or “community,” and (3) the institution of value or “recognition”; in each phase, respectively, we shall see our world divided, our singularity concealed, and our responsibility disavowed.

(1) The Capacity to assign value: Incipient Judgment

The recognition of our capacity to approach and assess the world according to standards subject to the authority of our own judgement, rather than the authority of community, emerges simultaneously with the loss of identity and belonging previously afforded by the happy comfort of ethical life, in which to know oneself was to know one’s place in an ordered and meaningful world. As a result, the appearance to us of our emerging

⁸ This tension is addressed in terms of the “inner” and “outer” dimension of personhood (Pippin 27).

⁹ According to John Russon, the section on culture involves a positive step forward from the abstract self-conception definitive of the experience of reason. See “The ‘Freedom of Self-Consciousness,’” 108.

perspective on the world and consequent ability to judge it is unaccompanied by substantially shared terms on the basis of which to judge and assess ourselves and others.¹⁰ Hegel explains that the empty experience of “having a perspective” orients us towards a binary assessment of the world within which experience will have to play out, rather to the cultivation of the kind of nuanced standards that accommodate the variability and complexity of human action.¹¹ For example, according to binary terms, one experiences oneself and others as either “good” or “bad,” in terms of which being “good” implies complete devotion to one’s self-conception as a rational agent capable of choice, and, therefore to the objective and rational institutions that support this choosing capacity (Noble Consciousness) and being “bad” implies a commitment to one’s particular irrational interests and a consequently antagonist attitude towards the institutions that would render one’s behaviour rational and free in the context of others (Ignoble Consciousness).

The development the terms “good” and “bad” may be rooted in the insights available to a newly liberated consciousness, but they do not remain merely individual, inner touchstones. Instead they become standards for new forms of human institutions and for the kind of self-cultivation to which each of us can aspire. Thus simple forms of judgement come to animate fundamentally the individual’s sense of what she must become in order to be a valuable participant in a shared world devoted to aspirations of universality and rationality. Consequently, the stark binary “good and bad” will now affect all self-interpretations, limiting our capacity to understand how the capacity for judgment can animate and enrich our ways of appearing to other, rather than simply grant us the capacity to cooperate explicitly as rational agents.¹²

(2) Appearing in terms of value: Speech

While artificial, and committed to the idea that the fundamental values animating human life are universal and ought to be realized through the faithful institution of such universality, the two-sided world inaugurated by consciousness affords new and real experiences of identification and belonging that render more sophisticated consciousness’

¹⁰ Describing the consequence of this loss, Hegel points to an emerging, perspectival distance between self and world: “As this free and pure consciousness he confronts the essence as something which is merely for him” (M495). The explicit experience of the freedom and purity of consciousness is thus equally the experience of concrete reality as subject to our perspective and assessment, and by extension, an experience of the demand to assess.

¹¹ As fundamentally contentless, meanwhile, consciousness will approach and assess the world without possible recourse to any independent standards that developed in the course of human interaction; she will judge things to be “good” when she recognises in them reflection of her one-sided self-apprehension and bad when no such reflection emerges; in performing these incipient judgments, she comes to recognize herself as “essentially judgement” [M495], as a being whose essential task it is to seek out what reflects her back to herself, those universal modes of recognition in which she is reflected as free and abstract; meanwhile, she will resist identification with that to which she takes herself to be opposed. Hegel criticises this form of judgement, explaining that “this first judgement cannot be regarded as spiritual judgement; for in it one side has been determined only as being-in-itself, or as the positive, the other only as being-for-itself, and as the negative” [M495].

¹² Thus, consciousness does not merely judge the world, it also realizes it: “The process whereby the individuality molds itself by culture is therefore at the same time the development of it as the universal objective essence, i.e. the development of the actual world” (M492).

grasps of its real nature as a self. While as particular as well as abstract beings, it is impossible to commit ourselves absolutely to universal terms, the recognized possibility in principle of such a commitment can be expressed in speech.¹³ That is, the idea that we are capable of “inner judgments, and that we can be devoted to the correct standards can only appear in the world as speech, and the act of speaking on behalf of newly emerging values gives rise to a sense of oneself as a member of an intentional community.

The developments of self-consciousness for which speech is the vehicle are substantial: speaking, we discover that we can express our devotion and thereby appear to others in terms of our commitments and aspirations. Language, Hegel tells us, “is the real existence of the pure self as self; in speech, self-consciousness, qua independent separate individuality, comes as such into existence, so that it exists for others” [M508]. As speakers, we are no longer merely abstract being existing for ourselves in the privacy of consciousness; we are beings whose inner reality, whose freedom, has the intrinsic capacity to be expressed and rendered perceptible to others. To be perceived or heard, Hegel explains, involves with others in a unity, a shared domain of meaning, such that the self-experience available to us previously as merely abstract disappears and is replaced by the knowledge that our commitments are rendered concrete and real through language, in the community of others to whom we appear:¹⁴ “This vanishing is thus itself at once its abiding; it is its own knowing of itself as a self that has passed over into another self that has been perceived and is universal” [M 509]. The capacity to appear to others in shared terms and to experience our belonging to be grounded by such terms renders possible the intentional communities marked by the set of practices through which mere universality acquires determinate content—nobility, taste, good will, and criticism.¹⁵ These practices mediate between our abstract existence as free beings and our actual existence as particular beings, and ambivalently afford “noble consciousness” the experience of belonging to a community devoted to universality and the insight that it must answer to the perspectives of others.

Yet, this this development of self-understanding and its accompanying possibilities of belonging could emerge only the sacrifice or renunciation of the activity and substance of our judgments and commitment and their replacement by speech. Our unique and singular commitments, therefore, cannot actually be expressed. Instead, representations of these appear in the form of cultural practices. Such practices rest largely on the formal standards that are meant to represent in a public and shared form attributes of a deliberately cultivated inner life. Meanwhile, because such practices evolve precisely out of the impossibility of performing the absolute sacrifice of particularity that is their guiding standard, they will inevitably fail to accommodate any expression of genuine commitment, of “nobility.” Thus,

¹³ It is because it is impossible fully to commit one’s existence to something without completing, so to speak, one’s self-sacrifice by dying for one’s cause that language becomes the vehicle of cultural devotion: “the true sacrifice of being-for-self is solely that in which it surrenders itself completely as in death, yet in this renunciation, no less preserves itself . . . But this alienation takes place solely in language . . . the power of speech . . . performs what has to be performed” (M507-508).

¹⁴ “The ‘I’ that utters itself is immediately *heard* or *perceived*; it is an infection in which it has immediately passed into unity with those for whom it is a real existence, and is a universal self-consciousness” (M508).

¹⁵ See Russon 142.

culture remains itself one-sided, ensuring that our belonging with others will be marked by terms to which we can never live up despite the way such terms operate and the foundation of our collective aspirations.

(3) Instituting Value: Recognition

The speech that affords us recognition and belonging has also the power to establish authorities tasked with both actively shaping and directing communal activities and with adjudicating between interpretations of shared values. Indeed, the universal community to which noble consciousness is committed comes to exist in its own right when the standards according to which we judge and assess ourselves and others acquire a *will* external to us that can continuously affirm our identities as members of a universal community. While, in fact, such a will can take various forms—that of religious leaders, or cultural critics, for example—Hegel's example of the ultimate instituted power is the absolute monarch who embodies the will of a universal community and holds the power to affirm and deny membership. The institution of a judging will ultimately brings to light the inadequacies of the incipient of community previously analysed.¹⁶

Once instituted, fear on the part of leaders and resentment on the part of community members take hold: the leader who know her power depends on recognition aims to ensure constancy of recognition by rewarding devotion to the universality she ostensibly embodied through material rewards—wealth and status. Those rewarded, meanwhile, while find that the particular forms of recognition that the monarch can offer are unsatisfactory, both because they issue from a particular person rather than universality embodied and because she is forced to woo these modes of recognition at the expense of her actual commitments in order to retain status as a community member. As a result, the “universal” institution to which she previously expected to be able to devote herself now reveals her to herself as no different from ignoble consciousness— as ready to rebel against instituted power and to prioritise her self-interest.

This disappointing experience for noble consciousness undermines the integrity of language, which had hitherto been recognized as the source of an unmediated expression of commitment; indeed, language now becomes something to be manipulated, to be played with such that the attempts sincerely to express oneself within becomes a fundamental misunderstanding of the new cultural context defined precisely by the senseless of language. Thus, the crisis of identity on the part of noble consciousness is in reality moment of self-recognition: to appear to others in terms of shared values requires that we take responsibility for realizing and instituting the terms according to which we judge and will be judge; this, in turn, requires that we recognize that it is as singular that we judge, and that our intensions will never appear and cannot function as a standard of inclusions and exclusion if our communal existence is to remain meaningful.

In short, then, in *Phenomenology of Spirit*, Hegel demonstrates that our possibilities of meaningful intersubjective life are threatened when we base our self-understanding and

¹⁶ Hegel links the capacity of speech to found community to its further power to institute by naming (M 511).

commitments to others on universal, abstract standards to which we can never, in fact, live up. Communities organized around such standards will be unavoidably undermined by the fact that one's effort to judge and act according to them will always appear to others in particular, perspectival ways, and thus never as an actual enactment of a commitment to values define belonging to that community. In other words, while we may judge according to universal standards, such standards are inadequate to the reality that always accompanies judging: being judged. If universal terms are inadequate to the inseparable fact of judging and being judged, then the very idea of judging according to universal standards embodies only a partial and incomplete insight into the reality of human judgement. Judgment, it turns out, is not properly exercised in relation to universal, unworldly standards, but rather in relation to the real, worldly standards in which we appear to one another. Without supplementing our to potential establish terms for ourselves by a more developed understanding of the relationship between our capacity to judge and the inevitably partial way we appear to others, we risk shaping communities unable to develop shared terms that sustain our sense of ourselves and our confidence in others.

Arendt on Thinking and Culture

In *The Life of the Mind, Vol. One* "Thinking", Arendt is also concerned with the basic problem that we have just considered—the relationship between domains of intersubjective recognition, on the one hand, and our experience of subjective interiority, the capacity to withdraw, on the other hand. Her historical study of and phenomenological approach to thinking considers the purpose of thinking in human life, ultimately concluding that thinking has a liberatory effect and thereby prepares us for independent moral judgments in times of crisis (LM 193).¹⁷ Arendt's point here is that it is only through the activity of thinking that each of us can take responsibility for our opinions and judgements, and that it is through the failure to do this that we become likely to behave immorally in times of crisis.

What distinguishes Arendt's account of thinking from the incipient experience of subjectivity that Hegel analyses is that, according to Arendt, thinking is originally responsive to meaning. If Hegel's individual knows that she can judge and build a world, she fails to apprehend that her motivation to do so must come from somewhere. Arendt, meanwhile, is precisely concerned with the relationship between the capacity for thinking that the very fact that we inhabit a meaningful world. Likening "thinking" to the sensation of being alive, she explains that in contrast to the various instrumental attitudes we otherwise take up in the world, thinking is something we engage in for its own sake. Without that given tendency to consider and question, no human world would ever have developed:

¹⁷ Her analyses involves (1) analysing the capacity to think, understood as a withdrawal from the world, *vis a vis* the concrete world itself from which all thinkers emerge and to which they inevitably and repeatedly return; (2) tracing the metaphysical presuppositions that have coloured especially philosophical ideas about thinking and the thinking ego; (3) considering the impetus for thought, and, what thinking brings to the world; and (4) what thinking tells us about the nature of consciousness and the dialogical mode of its proper realization.

It is more than likely that men, if they ever were to lose the appetite for meaning we call thinking and cease to ask unanswerable questions, would lose not only the ability to produce thought-things that we call works of art but also the capacity to ask all the unanswerable questions upon which every civilization is founded. (LM 62)

Only because we are primarily responsive to the phenomenon of meaning, only because what appears to us drags with it, so to speak, invisible realities to which only thinking has access, do the worldly values that sustain human civilization themselves emerge. Thinking, then, is both attuned to and capable of reanimating the experience of ineffable meaning that distinguishes our distinctly human experience and inspires the developments characteristic of human civilization.

What is thinking, then, if it is precisely that which enables us to come into contact with the significance that animates what we encounter? A first aspect of thinking is that is the capacity to approach phenomena intrinsic to the concrete world and remove those phenomena from the world in order to consider their significance. Thinking distinguishes the meaning of the object under consideration from the particular aspects of the situation in which it is otherwise encountered. Arendt refers to this aspect of thinking as its capacity to transcend and thereby attend to the invisibles that animate human existence; the mind goes further, “towards the understanding of things that are absent, that cannot be remembered because they were never present to sense experience” (77).¹⁸ When Arendt describes the power of thinking to ‘transcend,’ however, she does not have in mind the capacity of thinking to grasp some unchanging essence or from of things. Rather, what she has in mind is the fact that thinking is an activity whereby the meaning of things encountered in ordinary life comes to the fore.

The meaning that comes to the fore, so to speak, is never itself clear. As a result, thinking is the capacity to engage with the indeterminate significance that animate worldly experience, and it is as this capacity that thinking is at the root of the basic shapes of human civilization. According to Arendt, thinking is a hermeneutical and dialogical task. It must “unlock” the thinking “frozen” in our words and concepts (174-175). Clarifying the idea thinking unlocks insights frozen in words and concepts, Arendt turns to the example of the word “house.” As a word or concept, “house” functions as an abstraction that we can apply with flexibility and skill to a variety of kinds of dwellings. “House” as a concept, however, is itself rooted in a more ambiguous phenomenon: “it is a word that could no exist unless one presupposed thinking about being housed, dwelling, having a home” (171). Thinking, then, is an activity in which the basic phenomena of human life—dwelling, environments, the good life, and relations with one another—are approached as objects of thought whose significance can be questioned. The activity of thinking is meaning-oriented because it is

¹⁸ Thinking, however, is an ambivalent activity, one that has the potential both to enable us to see our world in terms of the harmony—or lack therefore—that it expresses or to deny the world and escape into the realm of the abstract. We are inspired to think either by the (Greek) wonder which motivates us to glimpse the harmonious order of the whole (LM 143) or, as the Romans, to use our capacity for thought to disappear from the world (LM 155), a temptation that, according to Arendt, is both the driving force behind science and the temptation of “professional thinkers” (LM 156-158).

oriented toward the possibility of a more profound experience of the phenomena that animate our existence and thus takes the experience of such phenomena to be in itself worthwhile, to be meaningful even if such experience can never appear in its most compelling form in the shared world of common sense. Arendt likens thinking to the feeling of being alive because it is oriented to gaining insight into the invisible phenomena that animate our meaningful world, the concentrated but confounding ideas through which we articulate what matters—justice, language, virtue (LM 178).

It is because thinking functions as a kind a pathway between originary significance and the human domain that Arendt calls “world” that thinking is meaning-oriented. To think involves withdrawing from the world and its conventions and prejudices in order to ask after the significance of the phenomena human beings encounter therein, a significance disclosed in terms of the basic attitude that animates our thinking—Periclean respect for immortality, Platonic wonder, or Modern Skepticism (LM 133, 143; 148). Thinking, in other words, is both responsive to a basic animating sense of significance, and it seeks in its objects an intimation of the significance that animates them. While necessarily activated in state of withdrawal, thinking can satisfy its originary driving impulse—the quest for meaning—only by becoming communicable. The reason for this is that thinking is an inherently responsive phenomenon—it does not merely witness, but attends to what strikes it by making that thing its own. As Arendt explains, thinking necessarily depends on language, by the “sheer naming of things . . . [*appropriates*] and, as it were [*disalienates*] the world into which, after all, each of us is born as a newcomer and a guest” (LM 100). Fleshing out this insight into the need of thinking to become expressive, Arendt explains that human language is itself in service of thinking rather than instrumental communication (LM 99). We have language because it is only by appropriating phenomena and rendering them communicable, thinking fulfills its purpose—to give an account:

the need of reason is to *give account, logon didonai*, as the Greeks called it with greater precision, of whatever there may be or may have occurred. This is prompted not by the thirst for knowledge—the need may arise in connection with well-known and entirely familiar phenomena—but by the quest for meaning. (LM 100)

Thinking, then, while in itself a sheer activity that therefore cannot be represented except metaphorically and inadequately (LM 123)—like being caught up in the wind of thought (LM 174)—itself becomes meaningful only by being expressed.

The need for thinking to fulfill itself by expressing itself occurs at different registers—in the solitariness of contemplation, in the activity of judgment, and in care for cultural practices.¹⁹ Let us consider each of these.

¹⁹ Cornelissen outlines three kinds of thinking that appear in Arendt’s work. The first, “dialectical thinking” is the inner dialogue that constitutes thinking once its object has been isolated from the world of shared concerns. The second, “representative thinking,” is the attempt to think from the perspective of others and most closely related to the Kantian faculty of judgement. The third, “thinking poetically” addresses the fact that thinking occurs in language (76-77). The first lacks the function of communication because it, while it differs from cognition which it aims at knowledge, it nevertheless depends upon the de-sensing withdrawal that constitutes solitary thinking. The second is

A brief consideration of the experience of wonder (*Thaumazein*) that Arendt attributes to Plato will be helpful in considering the expressive character of thinking as it operates within the self. Thinking, according to Arendt, is rooted in the experience of “admiring wonder” which arises when one beholds ordinary things and sees in them an “invisible harmonious order of the *kosmos*, which is manifest in the midst of familiar visibilities as though these had become transparent” (143). Thinking, by elevating particulars into objects worthy of thought, brings into relief the animating principle that could only remain latent without the perception of its various parts. Thinking accomplishes this by its ability to select object and differentiate them from their surroundings, by difference into what otherwise appears to us as a given whole. Only on the basis of this insertion of difference can the whole appear to us as the invisible that binds distinct things in a compelling manner. The capacity of thinking to insert difference into the world, meanwhile, is rooted in the very nature of human consciousness. As she writes, “What thinking actualizes in its unending process is difference, given as a mere raw fact (*factum brutum*) in consciousness; only in this humanized form does consciousness then become the outstanding characteristic of somebody who is a man and neither a god or an animal” (LM 187). Beholding the world with wonder, then, is how we realize ourselves as self-conscious agents. Moreover, the form that wonder takes as thinking is dialogical—as above, thinking is not the beholding of something static, but the practice of exposing oneself to significance, and the ongoing attempt to give an account of that which one experiences. Thinking, as Socrates illustrates, is a constant and critical activity that is, at bottom, a fundamentally responsive phenomenon—it treats established norms and values as attempts to capture and describe the real phenomena that animate human existence, and to do by actively undergoing an experience of the phenomena to which we give the names “justice” “piety” or “happiness.” Arendt attributes this basic insight into the inherently dialogical character of thinking to Socrates who understands that those who are devoted to wisdom and consequently the practices of thinking, must ensure the goodness of their character because in the ongoing process of thinking as giving an account is precisely a practice of dialogue with oneself (LM 181-183). The activity of thinking is originally a product of our human capacity to engage in such dialogue, and it because of this that the duality that is given as consciousness and realized in thinking.

If thinking is the activity whereby the significance of worldly phenomena is reckoned with, when thinking turns upon itself and makes itself an object of its own attention, the thinking self discovers that she must be able to give an account of her own thinking, not only to herself, but also to others: “its inherent duality points to the infinite plurality which is the law of the earth” (LM 187). It is within the domain of judgment that thinking develops into the practice of taking the perspectives of others into account. Judgement is the activity whereby we disengage from activity to reflect upon it, to consider the meaning of

communicative, but remains within the pre-established terms of human life. Only the third transcends pre-established terms without withdrawing into the isolation of thinking; it brings to light what is invisible and implicit in everyday affairs in and as the poetic act of disclosure, which Cornelissen describes as a condensing that is manifestly expressive (84).

what appears to the senses (LM 94-96). It is always retrospective and always dependent on upon constitute meaning inasmuch as it is judgement is fundamentally concerned with the categorizing, i. e., determining which actions or person are just, happy, or good. It is in the effort to categorise accurately the actions and products of human life that judgement appeals to the perspectives of others; given that no objective standards exist for measuring the significance and quality of human affairs, the judging agent must imagine how others might interpret what she is witnessing. She can identify the significance of what she witnesses only as its significance to others in the context of a particular world. According to Arendt, it is this capacity for judgement that, moreover, enables us to appear to others in our unique singularity, as, that is agents capable of judgment and choice. It is the difference between our inner lives, in terms of which we are all very much alike, and our appearing selves that affords us the possibility of appearing as singular and uniqueness.²⁰ As Aristotle points out, while we cannot chose our passions, we are responsible for how they affect us and, thus, for the outward behaviour to which they give rise.²¹ What appears in the world corresponding to our inner life is always mixed with reflection and judgement such that the aspects of ourselves that we chose to share with the world reflect our standards, which are more closely linked to our singularity than any immediate response (LM 29-31).²²

If our thinking selves are realized as the internal dialogue that ensures our exposure to a worldly significance, and if we appear to others as such selves in our choice of actions and words, we rely, for our self-actualization, on the existence of stories and other works of art that function as cultural touchstone for our interpretations of ourselves and others. While the activity of thinking is, in itself, without objective or instrumental purpose, thinking nevertheless effects products, what Arendt call “thought things,” concepts, metaphors, and even works of art.²³ It is through such products that thinking infuses the world with the

²⁰ In *The Human Condition*, Arendt refers to this possibility of accomplished singularity as a “second birth” afforded by action and speech (176).

²¹ See *Nicomachean Ethics*, Book II, Chapter 5.

²² Just as the scientist assumes that she will discover the truth about things by bringing to light the causal relationship between parts, we tend to assume about ourselves that our “inner” selves holds the key to our apparent, worldly selves, and that there is an unbroken continuity between somatic and psychic experiences. According to Arendt, this scientific approach to the world is linked to the abstract experience of self-hood that animates modernity; As Arendt explains in *The Human Condition*, the experience of doubt that characterises Descartes’ skeptical epistemology is answered by the scientific search for certainty. The reality if the discrete ego, meanwhile, cannot be explained by science because science knows us only in our sameness:

The monotonous sameness and pervasive ugliness so highly characteristic of the of the findings of modern psychology, and contrasting so obviously with the enormous variety and richness of overt human conduct, witness to the radical difference between the inside and outside of the human body” (LM 35).

Indeed, the perspective of modern science, expressed in psychological accounts of human behaviour and experience, cannot account for the lived reality of human experience which gains depth and variety in its worldly manifestation and which can therefore never be properly understood if this worldly manifestation is taken to be a mere representation of a uniform psychological tendencies.

²³ According to Ian Storey, thinking produces thought objects by abstracting or “de-sensing” worldly memories such that they can become the object of thinking (170-171). The status of thought objects as ends of thinking is similar to that of works of art as Arendt presents these in *The Human Condition* (172). Neither are reducible to either the ends of labour or of work. Rather, they are ends insofar as they are produced, but as object of production, have a significance that is irreducible to utility, a value that cannot be measured in economic terms (172). Instead the function of the work of art, and, by extension, thinking, is to help constitute a home for mortal human beings by

vitality that animates it. In its products, thinking shows how it has appropriated and articulated the meaning to which it responds; it brings out into the open that which originally attracted it (LM 178-179). Thinking, in other words, while irreducible to culture, finds its actualization as culture.²⁴ The realm of culture, of a public life that is irreducible to our universal political commitments, is essential for meaningful, responsive, and responsible dialogue. These demands are reflected in a series of imperatives that Arendt offers in her essay, “The Crisis of Culture”: these include: a sensibility to the need for “cultivating and tending nature until it becomes fit for human habitation” (CC 212); the exercise of taste with respect to beauty and wisdom, which understands these latter as occasions for appealing to the judgement of others (CC 214-215); the disinterestedness of the spectator for whom human actions aspire to be worthy of remembrance and whose quality is thus irreducible to displays of cunning or “inner” moral rectitude (CC 221-222); and, finally, a sense of responsibility for the standards according to which one may be admitted into a community, and a concern with the quality and character of one’s companions over and above the demands of truth and beauty (CC 24-225). What is key, here, is the prospect of cultivating terms through which meaningfully to recognize and engage with one another. Such terms, are irreducible to the mode of recognition characteristic of liberal democracy, in terms of which we appear to one another in our abstract capacity to reason. Our openness to others cannot be organized on the basis of a reason that is rooted in abstract subjectivity; instead, to be open to others, we rely on the products of thinking, on a world devoted to culture, on the basis of which to recognize our responsibility to assess what we see, to communicate our judgments, and to choose the interlocutors who will engage us in this process of meaningful dialogue.

Conclusion

Hegel’s critique of culture demonstrated that the explicit experience that consciousness has of itself as thinking and judging agent who needs to shape her world so as to find a home within it failed in this latter task—the forms of intersubjective life, of culture, associated with the initial experience of subjective interiority could not arrive at standards, practices, and institutions that could themselves accommodate the significance of interiority—it all cases, what was demanded was that the truth of our inner commitments take external form, and this demands meant that, rather than appearing to one another as judging and thinking beings, we appeared to one another as insincere beings who could demonstrate their suitability for the world only by engaging in the clever manipulation of language and other human institutions. The practices ultimately disavowed and excluded human beings from meaningful involvement in communal life because, as we saw, they were based on binary assessments of the world that answered to the authority of subjectivity in its abstract, universal character; because, while affirming that inner commitments are properly lived in community with others, failed to develop terms that could accommodate

recording the significance of events and actions now past (166). Specific products of thinking are metaphors and meaning, both of which help human being to come to terms with their world (173) and to thereby continue to find purpose in human life (174).

²⁴

the reality of the thinking and judging agent as an actual and particular self, and because they called for instituted authorities that both encouraged disavowals of responsibility for shared terms and required that anyone wishing to be recognized as belonging to the world of culture solicit the approval of particular authorities who represented universal values in name alone. Each of the lessons of Hegel's phenomenology correspond to the need not only to understand ourselves beings whose reality is largely worldly and intersubjective, but also the vitalizing function of thinking, and thus, to the need to cultivate and sustain a robust and meaningful cultural world.

Arendt's analyses of thinking is responsive to the "lessons" of culture enumerated above; it is, as we have seen, that faculty that stores up shared aspects of culture, enlivening them with a significance out of which we may live. First, as we saw with Hegel, the problem with the initial way of interpreting our capacity for judgement was that it is based on an abstract conception of the self—the self as judge and chooser—and of a likewise abstract consideration others that, together, establish binary terms for the interpretation of actual practices and institutions and as measures for prospective practices and institutions. Binary terms stand opposed to the two aspects of the thinking activity—a responsiveness to an undefined sense of worldly and the practice of differentiation as which thinking realizes itself. Second, we saw that, as a result of the experience of inner commitment, consciousness came to know that the only that way that interiority can be meaningful was to become expressible to others, but that unless the terms by which such self-expression can accommodate the fact that interiority can never, in fact, appear, the terms on the basis of which we develop into community will be impossible to live up to. Here, we something akin to the demands that the products of thinking be rendered communicable; thinking cannot merely represent, it realize itself as the faculty for judgement in appeal to others that solicits their attention and interest. Finally, we saw that while establishing authorities with respect to our ultimate values seems like the way to realize a new form of human civilization, it actually undermines it—unless each of us is recognized as critically responsible for the terms of collective life, language falls apart. Language, here, fails to ensure that that which appears in the word remains meaningful. What is missing is the practice of "giving an account" that completes the thinking experience of meaning by acknowledging not only the demand that thinking be communicated, but further that in communication, the opinions and judgment of others are paramount and that our relations with others are the ultimate object of our capacity for thought. Arendt's consideration of thinking shows it to the meaning-oriented activity without which civilizations and their animating significances could never have emerged. The existence of our developed forms of human life, therefore, are rooted in the experience of consciousness that is realized as thought, itself realized in dialogue with oneself and others, and as care for the common world.

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