Introduction

Several months ago, I had the privilege of spending some time with Elizabeth Minnich, one of Hannah Arendt’s last students. During our conversation she told me that the most important question to ask when reading Hannah Arendt is “What kind of conversation is she having?” For example, is she having a historical conversation as in *Origins of Totalitarianism*, or political conversation as in *The Human Condition*, or a biographical conversation as in *Rahel Varnhagen*, or aesthetic conversation as in her early essays on Rilke, Brecht, or Kafka? To fail to ask this question is to risk misreading Arendt. Her works require attentive and consistent re-reading and re-thinking—something Arendt did with her own work.

In the Spring of 1963, after the *New Yorker* published Arendt’s articles on the Eichmann trial of 1963, a firestorm of controversy broke out over statements she had made about Eichmann, the trial, Israel, the culpability of the *Judenrat*, and her single phrase “the banality of evil.” In the wake of this controversy, Arendt decided to travel. She and her husband Heinrich Blücher went to Switzerland, Italy, Greece, and France. During her travels, and over the next year, Arendt recorded a series of 45 entries in her *Denktagebuch* that became the essay “Truth and Politics.” In these reflections, and the essay, composed between the summer of 1963 and the Winter of 1964, Arendt rethinks *Eichmann in Jerusalem* and the controversy that followed. This rethinking illuminates the kind of conversation that Arendt was having in *Eichmann in Jerusalem.*

“Truth and Politics” opens with an explanatory footnote that reads:

This essay was caused by the *so-called controversy* after the publication of *Eichmann in Jerusalem*. Its aim is to clarify two different, though interconnected issues
of which I had not been aware before and whose importance seemed to transcend the occasion. The first concerns the question of whether it is always legitimate to tell the truth—did I believe without qualification in “Fiat veritas, et perat mundus”? The second arose through the amazing amount of lies used in the “controversy”—lies about what I had written, on one hand, and about the facts I had reported, on the other. The following reflections try to come to grips with both issues. They may also serve as an example of what happens to a highly topical subject when it is drawn into that gap between past and future which is perhaps the proper habitat of all reflections… (Between Past and Future, exp. ed., 227).

When Arendt wrote Eichmann in Jerusalem, she believed she was engaging in an act of truth-telling and that telling the truth was always legitimate. What Arendt came to realize in the wake of the controversy is that truth-telling can be so unpalatable to some that they legitimate lying to themselves and others rather than grapple with the truth. These reflections suggest that Arendt was having a conversation about truth in Eichmann in Jerusalem, and this conversation reverberates in her activities of thinking and judging in the book. I want to briefly examine these two activities in Eichmann, in order to bring her conversation about truth into relief for our panel.

Thinking

In one of the entries in her Denktagebuch, Arendt links truth and thinking in the following way:

Truth is the supreme criterion of thought, not of action (freedom) or of work (beauty). As such, it never succeeds, it lives only in the process, the truth-saying [Die-Wahrheit-Sagen].

There is no truth without thinking, and thinking is only myself in dialogue with myself, the self that can be represented as an other. The dialogue of thought. Where it is absent, there is no depth but shallowness [die Verflachung]. The public life of our time is pushing for shallowness. From this shallowness comes disaster [das Unheil]—and not from the depth that we have lost (XXIV.14; 622).

Thinking, unlike action and work, aims at truth, which she equates with depth producing event that inhabits, or dwells in, the activity of thinking as “saying” [sagen], not said [sagte]. Thinking never arrives
Arendt’s central claim about Adolf Eichmann was that he was “thoughtless” (p. 49). She described his thoughtlessness in terms of Kant’s three modes of common understanding. Eichmann did not think for himself, from the perspective of another, or consistently between these two poles. Instead, insulated himself from the world and silenced the inner dialogue with himself by using clichés, stock phrases, and slogans to communicate because he had lost the ability puts his own thoughts into words and to think from the standpoint of someone else. This thoughtlessness, not a corrupt will, was the source of Eichmann’s evil deeds.

The activity of thinking, according to Arendt, involves a withdrawal from the world of particulars. In her posthumous The Life of the Mind, she described it as an “out of order” activity that “interrupts all ordinary activities and is interrupted by them” (“Thinking,” LOM, 197). Thinking “de-senses” the particulars that appear in the world and distills their meaning. Thinking involves a letting-go of the world with all of its standards and principles. When she was asked to describe what she meant by thinking at a conference on her work in 1972, she used the German metaphor Denken ohne Geländer, “thinking without a banister.” (Hannah Arendt: The Recovery of the Public World, 336). Thinking requires two things of the thinker: to let go of the banisters of conventional understanding, of tradition, and the opinions of others—to think for oneself—and to “let one’s imagination go visiting” (Lectures on Kant’s Political Philosophy, 43) in order to think from the perspective of the other. This is precisely what Eichmann was incapable of doing, but it was exactly what Arendt was doing in her reflections on him. Arendt was rethinking our traditional notions of evil
and imagining what it was like to be Eichmann. Her reflections were not aimed at understanding—truth. As she told Günther Gaus in an interview in 1964, “What is important for me is to understand. For me, writing is a matter of seeking this understanding, part of the process of understanding… As long as I have succeeded in thinking something through, I am personally quite satisfied. If I then succeed in expressing my thought process adequately in writing, that satisfies me also” (“What Remains? The Language Remains,” EU, 3). Arendt’s activity of thinking about Eichmann was an attempt at understanding, a truth-seeking activity.

**Judgment**

Whereas thinking is a withdrawal from the world that aims at truth as an orienting horizon and traffics in generalizations, the activity of judging is a return to the world that is a by-product of truth seeking that results in the truth-telling about particulars. As she put it in *The Life of the Mind*:

> The faculty of judging particulars (as brought to light by Kant), the ability to say "this is wrong," "this is beautiful and so on, is not the same as the faculty of thinking. Thinking deals with invisibles, with representations of things that are absent; judging always concerns particulars and things close at hand. But the two are interrelated, as are consciousness and conscience. If thinking-the two-in-one of the soundless dialogue-actualizes the difference within our identity as given in consciousness and thereby results in conscience as its byproduct, then judging, the by-product of the liberating effect of thinking, realizes thinking, makes it manifest in the world of appearances, where I am never alone and always too busy to be able to think. The manifestation of the wind of thought is not knowledge; it is the ability to tell right from wrong, beautiful from ugly. And this, at the rare moments when the stakes are on the table, may indeed prevent catastrophes, at least for the self (LOM, 193).

Judgment “realizes” the truth-seeking of thinking in the truth-telling. Arendt’s thinking in *Eichmann in Jerusalem* culminates in a public judgment about Eichmann. He was guilty, she wrote, of “carr[ying] out, and therefore actively support[ing], a policy of mass murder” and for this reason “no member of the human race, can be expected to want to share the earth with [him]” and therefore he “must hang”(279).
Contrary to her claims in *The Human Condition* (1958) that forgiveness is a necessary component of politics, without which a person would be “confined to a single deed from which [he] could never recover’ [he] would remain the victim[…] of its consequences forever…” (*HC*, 237), she did not offer Eichmann forgiveness for his crimes. Instead she told the truth about his character and his deeds.

In *Eichmann in Jerusalem* Arendt not only rethinks our traditional conceptions of evil, that hold that evil deeds flow from an evil will, she judges Eichmann and his evil deeds. Eichmann’s evil deeds did not flow from an evil will, but from thoughtlessness. As she puts it in the book, “Despite all the efforts of the prosecution, everybody could see that this man was not a ‘monster,’ but it was difficult indeed not to suspect that he was a clown” (*EJ*, 54). To describe Eichmann as a clown rather than a monster, seemed to many to exculpate him from his crimes. To make matters worse, Arendt used a single phrase in the book, and only once near the end, that became a flash point for the controversy over the book: “the banality of evil” (*EJ*, 252). With this phrase, Arendt later clarified, she ‘meant with this no theory or doctrine but something quite factual, the phenomenon of evil deeds, committed on a gigantic scale, which could not be traced to any particularity of wickedness, pathology, or ideological conviction in the doer, whose only personal distinction was a perhaps extraordinary shallowness” (“T&MC,” 159) Eichmann’s deeds were indeed monstrous and evil, but he was not the monster the tradition had taught us to suspect. The traditional understanding of evil as “radical,” or rooted in the will, which Arendt had pointed to in *Origins*, was no longer tenable in light of what she found in Eichmann. In *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, Arendt was telling the truth about evil and monsters, but she also told the truth about heroes.
Close readers of *Eichmann in Jerusalem* will recall one figure that stands out amidst the darkness of narrative and causes a sacred hush to fall over the courtroom. His name is Anton Schmidt. He was a German officer assigned to Poland who provided the Jewish underground with forged papers and military trucks without requesting payment. He was arrested and executed in March of 1942. Abba Kovner testified (told the truth) about Schmidt’s heroic efforts during Eichmann’s trial. Arendt singles out this scene in the courtroom as if to offer her readers a chance to participate in the activities of thinking and judging:

During the few minutes it took Kovner to tell of the help that had come from a German sergeant, a hush settled over the courtroom; it was as though the crowd had spontaneously decided to observe the usual two minutes of silence in honor of the man named Anton Schmidt. And in those two minutes, which were like a sudden burst of light in the midst of impenetrable, unfathomable darkness, a single thought stood out clearly, irrefutably, beyond question – how utterly different everything would be today in this courtroom, in Israel, in Germany, in all of Europe, and perhaps in all countries of the world, if only more such stories could have been told. (231).

Arendt holds up Anton Schmidt as an exemplar of thinking and judging, a counter-example to Eichmann. He is a human being who has the courage to think and judge without banisters, to seek the truth and speak the truth, without concern for the consequences. And when the chips are down, Arendt reminds us, it is precisely the Anton Schmidt’s of the world that can prevent catastrophes.

The conversation Arendt is having in *Eichmann in Jerusalem* is about truth and the ways in which thinking and judging make possible truth-seeking and truth-telling. Tonight, as our panelists engage in a critical revisiting of this important book 50 years after it appeared in print, I hope you will let go of your banisters, let your imagination go visiting, and begin to rethink *Eichmann in Jerusalem.*