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Chapter 9

Twixt Mages and Monsters: Arendt on the Dark Art of Forgiveness

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In this chapter, I will offer a strategic new interpretation of Hannah Arendt's conception of forgiveness. In brief, I propose understanding Arendt as suggesting—not that evil is *objectively* banal, or a mere failure of imagination—but instead that it is maximally forgiveness-facilitating to understand the seemingly unforgivable as merely a failure of imagination. In other words, we must expand our imaginative powers (what Arendt terms "enlarged mentality") by creatively imagining others as merely insufficiently unimaginative, all in order to reimagine them as beings whom we are willing and able to forgive. It is in this sense that I understand forgiveness for Arendt as a kind of "magic." That is, forgiveness involves the imaginatively-funded creation of a new reality by merely naming it, like the phenomenon of "magic thinking," wherein one believes one's thoughts or speech are immediately realized in the world. The magic of forgiveness, in other words, is an incantation or performative speech act, based on the forger's choice to "make believe," or pretend-into-being, that the forgiven person is forgivable on the grounds that the forgiven person is merely thoughtless.

Before getting into the details, however, I wish to make one acknowledgement regarding my embodiment, and anticipate one objection to the entire chapter. First, especially given the centrality of the Holocaust to Arendt's thought, I feel it is relevant to acknowledge here that I am merely a gentile philosopher, and would not presume to judge on behalf of Jewish people regarding the issue of forgiveness of

the perpetrators of the death camps. As will become clearer below, I am actually more interested, as I believe Arendt is herself, in those who were more passively complicit with Nazi totalitarianism, at most including the lowest-level Nazis who never had the occasion to perpetrate acts of violence.

As for the aforementioned objection, some will surely remember Arendt's statement, in *The Human Condition*, that forgiveness is suited only for normal failings, whereas extraordinary acts that deserve the label "evil" are beyond the pale of forgiveness, and belong instead to punishment, or even divine justice. In response to this objection, I suggest thinking of a continuum or spectrum of imaginativeness, at one end of which lies a person so evil, so much a monster, that no one could possibly forgive him/her, and at the other end of which lies a person so superhumanly forgiving that, for such a person, no one would be unforgivable. This could be likened to something like the ends of the medieval Great Chain of Being, with Satan as the nothingness of pure sinful evil, and Jesus as the divine forgiver of sins. My interpretation of this spectrum, however, is that both extremes are fictitious, in that no one (at least not in the human world) is utterly evil, and no one can forgive everything. And yet, for Arendt, the best way to live is to strive to realize (through the use of mental imagery) the image of the maximal forgiver in oneself, and to interpret every offense requiring forgiveness as resulting from a superficiality/lack of depth of thought and imagination.

In support of this conception, the etymology of the word 'monster' means "to show" (or "appear"), such that a pure monster would be a pure appearance or empty show without substance (i.e., a mere appearance without the capacity to observe other appearances, like a television monitor as opposed to a mind). Similarly, I suggest thinking of the perfect forgiver as one with a perfect imagination—a maximally powerful manipulator of images, or "mage" (i.e., one who can manipulate any image into any other for strategic purposes, in this case to reimagine any offender as forgivable).

Real human life, though it of course always lies between these two extremes (i.e., maximally forgiving mage and minimally-forgivable monster), can nevertheless be intermitently nudged—on my reading of Arendt here—in the direction of greater imaginativeness.

To make my case, in each subsequent section, I will connect forgiveness to: 1) art, 2) magic, 3) imagination, and 4) the world as fantastic theatrical play, respectively. Following Arendt's lead, I have organized these sections around a metaphor—the metaphor of "magic spells." Beginning with forgiveness and art and working through all four sections, each "spell" will bind the elements of these sections together, like "magic thinking" functions to bind heterogeneous elements in the minds of a depressed person, or those in the communities of tribal ancients.

I will begin with a brief investigation into the secondary literature on the role of imagination in Arendt's conception of forgiveness, focusing on essays by Mary Dietz and Marie Luise Knott, both of whom link forgiveness to art and to the miraculous. Second, I will bind this art of forgiveness to the concept of magic, through a rereading of the section on forgiveness in *The Human Condition*, focusing on Arendt's explicit suggestion that forgiveness constitutes a magic beyond even the miraculous in the work of Jesus of Nazareth. Third, I will bind this magical art of forgiveness to imagination, through a consideration of Arendt's account of Nazism in *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, as a failure of imagination. Finally, I will bind the imaginatively magical art of forgiveness to a conception of the world as a fantastic theatrical play. I do this through a reading of Arendt's *The Life of the Mind*, focusing on imagination in its guise of "the common sense" (or, in her more magical synonymous phrase, "sixth sense"), as that

which sustains the evolving script of our theater-world.⁹⁴ In sum, the best way to live, according to Arendt, is to continuously improvise our performances of community, on the theatrical stage of our world. And the best way to enhance these performances is to increase our power and respect for imagination, through the dark art of forgiveness.

I. Forgiveness as art in Arendt scholarship (Dietz and Knott)

As noted above, the two most important secondary sources on Arendt for this chapter are Marie Luise Knott's *Unlearning with Hannah Arendt* and Mary G. Dietz's chapter from *The Cambridge Companion to Hannah Arendt*, entitled "Arendt and the Holocaust." Ironically for a survey on forgiveness, the first name shared by both of these scholars ('Mary') means "bitterness." More substantially, both interpreters emphasize Arendt's indebtedness, for her concept of forgiveness, to the arts and the miraculous.

Beginning with Dietz, her primary innovation is to read *The Human Condition* as about the Holocaust, more specifically as offering "a grand, optimistic illusion" of the Greek polis as space of egalitarian appearance (2000, 102). The purpose of this illusion, according to Dietz, is to liberate the survivors from their justified hatred, and to liberate the non-Nazi Germans from their complicity, which Arendt termed (in a letter to Jaspers) a "factual territory" that the Holocaust had

created" for these two groups (1994, 214; quoted in Dietz 2000, 88). The chief difficulty for the survivors in doing so, as Arendt tells Jaspers, is what she terms "the fabrication of corpses" in the camps (1992, 423, quoted in Dietz 2000, 86). This factual territory, Arendt elaborates, "opened up an abyss" within itself, sucking everyone in—and when anyone attempted to pull away from this abyss, it left them in an "empty space" of "individuals" without "nations" or "peoples" (1948, quoted in Dietz 2000, 89). In other words, this abyss is a space empty of human affairs, lacking political appearance in Arendt's sense, in the face of what she terms "the image of hell" (1948 215). Returning to Dietz, on these grounds she reads *The Human Condition* as "a direct and personal effort to offer both Germans and Jews a way back from the abyss" (2000, 91).

More specifically, Dietz for a second time in her essay invokes the phrase "grand, optimistic illusion," which she then reveals to be a quote from Nietzsche on Thucydides's Funeral Oration of Pericles (specifically, from *Human, All Too Human*, Section 474). Nietzsche's main point is that the historical event of Thucydides's speech took place, not only: a) before one of the worst times in Athens' history (including a terrible plague); but b) after those times in the remembrance of Thucydides; and also c) outside of time altogether as an imaginary depiction of what had never been (Dietz 2000, 91). In Nietzsche's metaphor, Thucydides offers an evening glow, in which the evil of the day's events can be forgotten, which Dietz crystallizes with the title of "theorist-as-healer" (Ibid., 92). In other words, Thucydides "creates a contrary world" to "block the human impulse to ruminate upon and incessantly rekindle the perpetual memory of hardship and evil, thereby fanning the flames of desire for retribution and revenge" (Ibid.). Just so, Arendt in *The Human Condition*, according to Dietz, "created a powerful, iridescent image that counters the reality" of the Holocaust (Ibid.). Moreover, the inspiration for this "healing image" comes from the same source,

⁹⁴ For support of the centrality of storytelling, like the plot of a theatrical play, see Melvyn A. Hill, "The Fictions of Mankind and the Stories of Men," in *Hannah Arendt: The Recovery of the Public World*, ed. Melvyn A. Hill (New York: St. Martin's, 1979), 275-300. Hill's thesis is that "the stories that citizens tell are the source and remain the touchstone of political thinking" (277). Toward the end of her essay, Hill introduces the term "political imagination," as that which Arendt's thinking can contribute to action, namely by creating shelters for freedom to emerge (295).

the Funeral Oration as description of pre-philosophical Athenian politics (Ibid., 93).

In her close reading of *The Human Condition*, Dietz claims that the concentration camps are the conspicuously absent heart of the book, which she justifies in part by noting that the extreme forms of labor and work—"labor as routinized deathlessness, and work as the objectified violation of life itself"—have only hitherto come together in the camps (Ibid., 97). So extreme and radically isolating were the camps, in fact, that Arendt claims they "could never be fully embraced by the imagination for the very reason that [this horror stood] outside life and death" (Arendt 1973, 444; quoted in Dietz 2000, 98). And it is this phenomenon, this existential extreme possibility, that Dietz argues is the true purpose of Arendt's concept of "action" as the "space of appearance" (2000, 99). That is, action functions to keep individuals appearing as individuals, through the heroic courage of "self-revelation," rather than becoming again the chattel who are supplied to the camps' "fabrication of corpses" (Ibid., 101).

In sum, Dietz sees Arendt as offering "a disruptive counter-memory, attempting to reach over the historical abyss created by Auschwitz, and break the mastery of the Holocaust" (Ibid., 100). With Arendt's "imagistic symbol of the space of appearance," Dietz claims, "there is illuminated a way back from Auschwitz's empty space." In other words, it is a "recreative escape, a chance to give one's self over to the radiance of light and the 'shining brightness' of the represented world." Finally, in achieving this (and here Dietz anticipates the emphasis of my next section), Arendt performed a kind of "miracle" (Ibid., 102).

On the one hand, I agree with Dietz's characterization of Arendt qua magician, casting a spell over the present in order to heal the future from our totalitarian and genocidal past. But on the other hand, I am concerned about the casual abruptness with which Dietz talks about the undoing of the Holocaust, and the forgetting intended for all parties involved, not to mention Dietz's oversimplified distinction

between "Jews" and "Germans" (as if there were no German Jewish people, including Arendt herself, and as if that were not a crucial dimension of the horrors of Nazism). Rather than a forgetting of horrific events, I see Arendt seeking a re-understanding of those events—a throwing of a magical cloak across them—which allow the traumatic memories to remain, without disrupting the individual or community's ability to weave those memories into the fabric of the future.

Turning to my next (etymologically) "bitter" source, Mary Luise Knott organizes her reflections around four themes she finds in Arendt—laughter, translation, forgiveness, and dramatization. Beginning with laughter, Knott affirms Jaspers's linkage of Arendt's laughter to irony, in *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, which constituted "a protection against panic and powerfully aggressive impulses that would only interfere with her ability to judge" (2015, 9). Moreover, Knott adds to Jaspers, it is "a liberating laughter; it creates freedom and connection, gives substantive differences their due and keeps them in flux" (Ibid., 14). Thirdly, this laughter for Knott is the product of Arendt's choice to "allow herself to be touched by what she saw and heard," causing her and her readers to "lose their bearings" (Ibid., 18). Fourth, laughter in the face of such absurdity as Eichmann offers "a pause to catch one's intellectual breath" (Ibid., 19). And finally, since laughter tightens the muscles of the diaphragm, Knott observes that with her laughter, "Arendt allows the show to make her taut rather than slack" (Ibid., 21). Thus, through laughter, and its irony, the literary makes its way to the front of the stage—or, more precisely, Arendt takes her seat in the front row of the audience.

In Knott's discussion of translation, she links translation's etymological "carrying-across" to metaphor and the other literary imaginative powers in language itself, which powers ultimately involve "a celebration of contamination" of a plurality of things and ideas (Ibid., 40). Because of this connectedness, Knott notes, Arendt observes that "the only people who still believe in the world are the poets; they cannot afford

to be alienated from it" (Ibid., 41). This latter remark also calls to mind a second uniqueness of the poets, as attributed to the poets by Arendt in *The Human Condition*, namely that only for poets is love "indispensable" (Ibid., 82). This is important for the present chapter in that Arendt claims (as I will discuss below) that love is the private catalyst for forgiveness (as Kantian respect is its public catalyst). Here, a second literary dimension, namely the metaphorical heart of poetry, steps into the spotlight of Arendt's textual stage.

As for forgiveness, Knott emphasizes how Arendt went from: a) condemning the historical version of forgiveness; b) to "unlearning" that version; and then c) affirming Arendt's own modified one. For evidence, Knott cites Arendt's journal from 1950, the *Denktagebuch*, in which she is critical of Christian forgiveness "as a gesture of superiority, a dead end" (namely, because in her view it destroyed the equality between the forgiver and the forgiven) (Ibid., 60 and 66). The motives for this unlearning, Knott claims, were: a) her experience of negotiating post-WWII with former aggressors and survivors; and b) her and her husband's persecution for their earlier views and actions during the McCarthy era (Ibid., 60-1, 67-9). The intellectual catalyst for Arendt's shift toward forgiveness is illustrated, for Knott, in Arendt's claim in the German version of *The Human Condition* (entitled *Vita Activa*) that "the person is forgiven for the sake of humanity" (rather than the sake of the aggressor) (Knott 2015, 80). This catalyst, Knott claims, was the published critique of Arendt's conception of forgiveness by her friend, the poet W. H. Auden. In response, she shifted in order to anchor the concept of friendship in Kantian respect, or "political friendship" (Ibid., 81). In other words, Arendt was able to anchor forgiveness in the imaginative fiction called "humanity." And since this was inspired by a poet, and requires fictive imagination, this also constitutes a third spotlight on the literary in Knott's account of Arendt.

Finally from Knott, her chapter on dramatization focuses on Arendt's metaphor of the world as a stage, which in the

modern world requires performing without either mario-nette strings or a traditional script (Ibid., 93). Like Dietz, Knott emphasizes the "miracle" nature of these self-revealing performances. Moreover, Knott analyzes Arendt's own texts as each a kind of theater, in which her quotes and citations are the "actors" that spontaneously improvise new and illuminating artistic performances (Ibid., 96-97). Along with these actor-quotes, moreover, Arendt's readers are invited to take the stage as well—to join the political conversation, where "reading becomes a rehearsal for action," and where "readers become (potential) actors in that they achieve self-empowerment" (Ibid., 109 and 111). Here, then, is the final affirmation of the literary in Knott's Arendt, as the play-within-a-play of her thought and texts. To summarize, Knott affirms the centrality of the literary in Arendt through laughing irony, poetic metaphor, fictive imagination, and multi-layered theatricality.

On the one hand, I agree with Knott's claim that Arendt uses artistic strategies to reinterpret the world in the interests of a more flourishing global polis. But on the other hand, I see Arendt's reinterpretations, not as Knott's "unlearning" of knowledge, but rather as acts of forgiving. More precisely, they are acts of forgiving the inadequate conceptions that Arendt takes on from her fellow thinking friends (such as Aristotle and Kant), by making-believe that her own conceptions are merely repetitions of theirs, when they are in reality artful improvisations thereon. And on this improvisatory note, I turn to my own analyses (improvisations?) of Arendt's texts, beginning with forgiveness in *The Human Condition*.

II. The art of forgiveness as magical in *The Human Condition*

Having established an intrinsic connection between forgiveness and art/the miraculous, through the interpretations of Dietz and Knott, I will now show how Arendt herself connects this art-of-forgiveness concept to magic in *The Human Condition*. At the beginning of the section on forgiveness,

Arendt introduces forgiveness as a "faculty," a power. More specifically, it is a sub-power, within the power of action, of "redemption" from "the predicament of irreversibility" (Arendt 1988, 237). This sub-power, she elaborates, "serves to undo the deeds of the past," which she compares—apropos of the title of my chapter—to "the magic formula to break the spell" that bound "the sorcerer's apprentice" (Ibid., 237). The limitations on this magic of forgiveness, though, are that one cannot do it to oneself, and that it only works in "the realm of human affairs" (as opposed to "natural science and technology") (Ibid., 237-8).

The creator of human affair-forgiveness, for Arendt, is the most magical Jewish man of all time, Jesus of Nazareth (and the "redeemer" [messiah] to forgiveness as "redemption"). She emphasizes that he transformed forgiveness into a human power (which does not derive from god), and which must be activated among humans before humans ask it of god. In a footnote, she adds that it is this aspect of Jesus's practice, "even more than his performance of miracles, that shocks the people" (Ibid., 239n76). Arendt's reference to Jesus also leads to a new limitation for her on the concept of forgiveness, namely that forgiveness is only intended for unintentional wrongs, and not "crime and willed evil" (Ibid., 239).

Arendt then contrasts forgiveness with revenge, in which context she adds that forgiveness "can never be predicted" as it is "the only reaction which does not merely re-act but acts anew," and thereby frees "from its consequences both the one who forgives and the one who is forgiven." In short, Jesus's forgiveness is "the freedom from vengeance." Arendt elaborates on this, when she adds that "men are unable to forgive what they cannot punish," including that which, "since Kant, we call 'radical evil'" (Ibid., 241). In response to these latter acts, which radically destroy human affairs per se and "the potentialities of human power," Arendt cites Jesus to the effect that capital punishment would, *for the aggressor himself*, be preferable. Finally in this section, Arendt then

affirms of Jesus the "recognition" that forgiveness is "an eminently personal (though not necessarily private or individual affair)," in which "*what* was done is forgiven for the sake of *who* did it" (Ibid.). The basis of forgiveness for Jesus, she continues, is love, whereas for the public application she recommends the Kantian concept of "respect" for persons (Ibid., 242-243).

To condense these insights from *The Human Condition*, forgiveness here is a power of action that redeems by undoing, in a way that is magical beyond miracles, but that works only on others, only in the realm of human affairs, and only for non-criminal, unintentional wrongs, as the freedom from revenge, conferred for the sake of the other, and on the basis of respect. One paradoxical aspect of this treatment is that it makes forgiveness both proximal to, and yet barred from, legal and judicial judgment. As I noted above, Arendt claims that forgiveness is not for "crime," but its precedents nevertheless include the Roman principle of sparing the vanquished foe, and the head of state's commuting a death sentence, both of which involve judgments at the border of legality/sovereignty (in Agamben's sense).⁹⁵ Moreover, the death of the evil man referenced by Jesus appears to involve some sort of judgment, if only of the man by his own self/conscience. Appropriately, then, I now turn to Arendt's quasi-judicial judgment, in *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, on what she views as the theater of Eichmann's literal trial.

⁹⁵ Agamben's central example is the ancient Roman law concerning the *homo sacer* ("sacred man"), who both: a) could be killed by anyone without punishment, but also b) could not be sacrificed as part of a ritual (Agamben 1998, 8). His ultimate point, building on Foucault's notion of biopower, is that contemporary sovereignty involves a permanent suspension of the law, leaving all of us in the position of *homo sacer*.

III. The magical art of forgiveness as imaginative in *Eichmann in Jerusalem*

Having shown how Arendt binds the art of forgiveness to magic in *The Human Condition*, I will now bind this magical art of forgiveness to imagination in *Eichmann in Jerusalem*. In brief, Arendt shows us the way to imagine Eichmann such that he could conceivably—though not necessarily, and not deservingly—be forgiven for the horrendous extremes of his mass murdering crimes against humanity. To wit, Arendt paints Eichmann as an extreme case of unimaginative thoughtlessness, in the dual senses of both: a) failing to think carefully and critically, and also b) failing to considerately imagine oneself in another's position. And in light of Eichmann's extreme case, Arendt thereby makes the average, low-ranking Nazis, along with the complicit non-Nazi, non-Jewish Germans of that era, seem much more forgivable as well.

I will attempt this binding of forgiveness to imagining by analyzing a concept I extract from *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, which I will term 'reimagining'. My approach to this concept will be indirect, beginning with Arendt's reflections on thoughtlessness, which I will argue is the result of a lack of reimagining. Arendt defines 'thoughtlessness' in *The Human Condition*—which serves as the text's central concept—as follows: "the heedless recklessness or hopeless confusion or complacent repetition of 'truths' which have become trivial and empty" (1988, 5). Returning to *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, given that Eichmann is her privileged example of thoughtlessness (possessing what Arendt's *Lectures on Kant's Political Philosophy* calls "exemplary validity"), she offers a surprisingly humorous portrait of him. This humorlessness is buttressed, moreover, by her reference in *The Life of the Mind* to his "macabre comedy" (Arendt 1981, 4). As this latter phrase suggests, the theatrical is central for Arendt (as already attested above in Dietz and Knott), which foreshadows the connection I will draw (in this chapter's penultimate section) between forgiveness and the world-as-theater.

This theatricality arises at the beginning of *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, where Arendt describes his trial as a theatrical performance (2006, 4). As the book's title suggests, Eichmann's trial took place in the city of Jerusalem in the recently reestablished nation of Israel. The charges leveled against him were referred to as "crimes against humanity," in regard to his actions as a high-level bureaucrat in the Nazi regime during their attempted genocide of the Jewish people. More specifically, Eichmann was in charge of transporting Jewish people from Western Europe to the concentration camps in Eastern Europe. As for her own personal judgment of Eichmann, Arendt concludes that he was—shockingly—too completely "normal," specifically in a horrific Nazi context in which, in her words, "only 'exceptions' could be expected to act 'normally'" (Ibid., 27). Pinpointing the problem, Arendt observes that Eichmann showed an "inability to ever look at things from the other fellow's point of view" (Ibid., 48).

Amazingly, and to return to the macabre comedy of Eichmann's performance at his trial, Arendt somehow manages to find humor in his fatal flaw. She describes the "horrible" phenomenon of his thoughtlessness as "outright funny" (Ibid.). For example, she writes that "officialese," as she terms it, "became his language because he was genuinely incapable of uttering a single sentence that was not a cliché" (Ibid.). As such, Eichmann's role as an actor in the theater of his trial, according to Arendt, is "not a 'monster'," but rather "a clown" (Ibid., 54). Predictably, as a clownish character, Eichmann foreclosed his own mind and judgment, repeatedly comparing himself to Pontius Pilate washing his hands of the murder of the Jewish Jesus. "Who was he," Arendt quotes Eichmann's testimony, "to have [his] own thoughts in this matter" (Ibid., 114)? Finally in regard to Eichmann's thoughtlessness, Arendt notes that "he always thought within the narrow limits of whatever laws and decrees were valid at a given moment" (Ibid., 157). In short, Arendt sees Eichmann as dramatizing the horrendous potential of the clownish thoughtlessness of the average modern person. In

support of this interpretation, Richard Bernstein observes, Eichmann's own writings explicitly remark on his thoughtlessness as well.⁹⁶

The opposite of such thoughtlessness, as Arendt writes in her *Lectures on Kant's Political Philosophy*, is a maximally "enlarged mentality" (Arendt 1989, 44). Such a mentality "makes the others present," Arendt explains, "by the force of the imagination (Ibid., 55). By this, Arendt means that reimagining incorporates, in the act of forming a political judgment, indefinitely many other peoples' perspectives. Her analogy for this incorporation is the ideal theatrical spectator, who incorporates various angles on a given performance in order to judge its merits. By this, Arendt means something like an imaginary deliberation staged by every single spectator of a play, in which each spectator voices her/his perspective, the end result being a final judgment maximally informed by a maximal plurality of perspectives.

To return to *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, Arendt also offers, in addition to Eichmann as thoughtless clown, his theatrical counterpart in the people of Denmark. For Arendt, the Danes were equally theatrical, and in their case the role was heroic. Facilitated by their thoughtful reimagining of their Jewish others as fully human (against the Nazis' racist imagination), the Danes openly defied the Nazis' attempts to forcibly evacuate the Jewish people there (Arendt 2006, 171). And in doing so, Arendt notes, they were "unique among the countries of Europe" (Ibid.). The story of how the Danes ac-

⁹⁶ Richard J. Bernstein, "Arendt on Thinking," *The Cambridge Companion to Hannah Arendt*, ed. Dana Villa (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000, 277-292). Bernstein quotes Eichmann's notes as follows: "Now that I look back, I realized that a life predicated on being obedient and taking orders is a very comfortable life indeed. Living in such a way reduces to a minimum one's need to think." Quoted from Cohen 1999.

complished this, she claims, should be "required reading in political science for all students who wish to learn something about the power inherent in non-violent action and in resistance to an opponent possessing vastly superior means of violence" (Ibid.).

The outlines of Denmark's story are as follows. First, Arendt notes that "only the Danes dared speak out on the subject [of the Jewish question]" to their German masters," whereas all of the other European nations held their tongues, and resisted (if at all) in secret (Ibid.). Second, when the Nazis proposed using the infamous yellow badge to identify Jewish people, the Nazis "were simply told that the King would be the first to wear it" (Ibid.). Third, the Danes argued that "because the stateless refugees [non-Danish Jewish people] were no longer German citizens, the Nazis could not claim them without Danish consent" (Ibid., 172). Fourth (as a consequence which Arendt describes "truly amazing"), "everything went topsy-turvy," as "riots broke out in Danish shipyards, where the dock workers refused to repair German ships and then went on strike" (Ibid.). Fifth, when the Nazis came to kidnap the Jewish people and begin their deportation out of Denmark (and ultimately to the concentration camps), the Danish police only allowed the Nazis to take those Jewish people who were "at home and willing to let them in"—which ended up being a mere 477 out of 7,800 Jewish people there (Ibid., 173). Sixth, the Jewish authorities publicized the impending kidnappings openly in the synagogues, giving the people "just enough time to leave their apartments and go into hiding" among a Danish community in which every citizen welcomed them (Ibid., 173-4). And finally, in regard to the final phase of Denmark's response (namely, secretly evacuating those Jewish people hiding to safety into Sweden) the extensive cost of this effort, Arendt notes, "was paid largely by wealthy Danish citizens" (Ibid., 174).

Even more surprising to Arendt than the actions of the Danish, however, was the fact that their imaginative thought-

tness proved to be contagious as well, in that "the German officials who had been living in [Denmark] for years were no longer the same" as they had been back in Germany (Ibid., 172). In fact, Arendt elaborates, even "the special S.S. units employed in Denmark frequently objected to 'the measures they were ordered to carry out by the central agencies'" (Ibid., 173). In conclusion, Denmark was "the only case we know in which the Nazis met with open native resistance," and "the result seems to have been that those exposed to it changed their minds" (Ibid., 175). In other words, the Danish citizens re-imagined themselves in the Jewish peoples' place, and then acted politically on the basis of this reimagining, which managed to inspire even some of the Nazis to reimagine the Jewish people as fully human.

IV. The imaginatively magical forgiving art as script-sustainer in *The Life of the Mind*

Arendt herself makes an explicit connection between: a) what seems like her most concrete/political work (*Eichmann in Jerusalem*), and b) her most abstract/philosophical work (*The Life of the Mind*), on the very first page of the latter. The "immediate impulse" for *The Life of the Mind*, she notes, "came from my attending the Eichmann trial in Jerusalem" (1981, 3). More specifically, she names—and italicizes—Eichmann's "thoughtlessness," defined by the fact that "he clearly know no such claim at all" in regard to "the claim on our thinking attention that all events and facts make by virtue of their existence" (Ibid., 4). With Eichmann thus situated at one extreme, or pole, of the thinking spectrum, Arendt asks whether thoughtfulness might "be among the conditions that make men abstain from evil-doing or even actually 'condition' them against it?" (Ibid., 5) If thought does have this ethical power, Arendt elaborates, then "we must be able to 'demand' its exercise from every sane person, no matter how erudite or ignorant, intelligent or stupid he may happen to be" (Ibid., 13). The justification for this universal demand, following Kant, is Arendt's sharp distinction between think-

ing (as domain of reason) from understanding (as the domain of the same name). While understanding concerns "knowledge," she claims, reason concerns "meaning" (Ibid., 15). Thus, no matter how much or how little a person knows, s/he bears for Arendt an ethical-political obligation to seek meaning.

Arendt then launches into what is arguably the most theatrical metaphysics in Western history. She begins with theatrical rhetoric, in the surprising claim that "Nothing and nobody exists in this world whose very being does not presuppose a *spectator*." And this, in turn, derives from her insistence, going as far back as *The Human Condition*, that "Plurality is the law of the earth" (Arendt 1981, 19). Whereas in her older work, this plurality concerned primarily the human species, here in *The Life of the Mind* she radically extends it to the rest of the animal kingdom, noting "an equally astounding diverseness of sense organs among the animal species," and that the members of each species "lives in a world of its own" (Ibid., 20).

Building on this theatrical rhetoric with a more explicit theatrical metaphor, Arendt goes on to claim that "To be alive means to be possessed by an urge towards self-display," and that "Living things *make their appearance* like actors on a stage set for them" (by previous generations). "The stage is common," Arendt continues, "to all who are alive, but it *seems* different to each species, different also to each individual specimen" (Ibid., 21). The point about the stage is critical, for its concession to objective factuality is what differentiates Arendt from purely social-constructivist metaphysics, and also from totalitarian politics (an issue to which I will return below). Based on this commonness of the objectively-real stage, and despite these indefinitely-many occurrences of seeming, "men and animals" enjoy their "fellow-creatures" of various species "to play with," in what Arendt terms "the play of the world" (Ibid., 21-2).

The only thing unique to humans, for Arendt, is that our "mental activities" not shared by other species all involve "a

withdrawal from the world as it appears and a bending back toward the self" (Ibid., 22). Interestingly, Arendt follows Aristotle in placing human souls squarely with those of other species, none of which require metaphors to bridge any alleged chasm between soul and world. In fact, souls for Arendt do not even need any verbal language at all. Instead, "the life of our soul in its very intensity is much more adequately expressed in a gland, a sound, a gesture, than in speech" (Ibid., 31).⁹⁷ This invocation of gesture is the first indication of the relevance of Arendt's discussion of soul to her theatrical metaphysics. More specifically, we still have a choice, for Arendt, as to which soul-expressions to share with the world, and which to disguise, and when. For example, she claims that a "courageous man" is simply "one who has decided that fear is not what he wants to show," perhaps "because [he wishes] to set an example, that is, to persuade others to be pleased with" what pleases him (Ibid., 36). And thus, "pretense and willful deception on the part of the performer, error and illusion on the part of the spectator are, inevitably, among the inherent possibilities" of appearances in our theatrical world (Ibid.).

Perhaps surprisingly, Arendt draws the inference from this that "the only way to tell pretense and make-believe from reality and truth is the former's failure to endure and remain consistent" (Ibid.). The implication here appears to be that make-believe that is sustainable will eventually become (indistinguishable from) truth. In support of this, Arendt goes

⁹⁷ Interestingly, Arendt also claims on this topic that "our soul-experiences are body-bound to such an extent that to speak of an 'inner life' of the soul is as unmetaphorical as to speak of an inner sense...of our inner organs" (1981, 32). Additionally, the soul's "passions and emotions" "also seem to have the same life-sustaining and persevering functions of our inner organs" (Ibid., 35). For the connection to Aristotle, see Aristotle 2001.

on to claim the following, which might be understood as a formula for ethical/legitimate transformation of make-believe into truth:

All virtue begins with a compliment I pay to it, by which I express my being pleased with it. The compliment implies a promise to the world, to those to whom I appear, to act in accordance with my pleasure, and it is the breaking of the implied promise that characterizes the hypocrite. (Ibid.)

Here, Arendt invokes the opposite redeeming power to forgiveness, namely promising. She then summarizes this redemptive power as follows: "The test applying to the hypocrite is indeed the old Socratic 'Be as you wish to appear,' which means appear *always* as you wish to appear to others even if it happens that you are alone and appear to no one but yourself" (Ibid., 37). This point is reinforced in Arendt's next section, where she discusses "true semblances" created by animal perspectival-ness, along with Kant's discussion of "authentic illusions" (including the appearance of "sunrise") (Ibid., 38-9). In other words, at a certain level we cannot get past "semblances" (*doxa*). Thus it is sufficient that we perform our appearances in this world consistently, in order to be virtuous. This includes the etymological sense of the word 'virtuous', namely "power," in this case, to create and recreate our world.

Imagination enters the scene of this theatrical metaphysics shortly after the latter discussion, beginning with Arendt's reference to Aquinas's "*sensus communis*," which Aquinas himself took from Aristotle's conception of imagination as the power that preserves and combines the images abstracted from sensory-perception images (1981, 50). That is, visual, auditory, tactile, olfactory, and gustatory sensory-perceptions are retroactively coordinated by the imagina-

tion, which abstracts them into images in temporal proximity to each other. The "worldly property" of the imagination, the analogue for imagination of visibility for vision, is for Arendt "realness" (Ibid., 50). This realness conferred by the imagination, moreover, is so powerful that she claims that "thinking can neither prove nor destroy" it. She then concludes that "the French, perhaps for this reason, also call" this power "*le bon sens*, the good sense" (Ibid., 52). Thus, Arendt's reader can detect another echo of the ethical within performance (the original sound being that of the courageous man as fear-non-shower, in the above block quote).

It will likely be objected that imagination and common sense are two distinct terms for Arendt. Despite her at times misleading presentation, however, I would argue that these two names refer essentially synonymously to one main power. I find evidence for this synonymy primarily in the way the two terms are deployed in the two most important historical sources for Arendt's conception of them, namely Aristotle and Kant. That is, neither of the latter philosophers makes such a distinction. Consider, for example, Aristotle's discussion in *On the Soul*, or the following passage from Arendt's seminar on Kant's *Critique of Judgment* in 1970:

Finally, our sensibility seems to need imagination not only as an aid to knowledge but in order to recognize sameness in the manifold... Without it, there would be neither the objectivity of the world—that it can be known—nor any possibility of communication—that we can talk about it. (Arendt 1989, 79-80)

Here, Arendt uses the one term, 'imagination' to describe the power to both preserve and improvise on sensory-perception images.

Imagination reappears onstage in *The Life of the Mind* not long after the passage on the *sensus communis*, but this time imagination appears in the guise of "re-presentation" (Arendt 1981, 76). Arendt christens this power "the mind's unique gift," adding that, "since our whole mental terminology is based on metaphors drawn from vision's experience, this gift is therefore "called *imagination*, defined by Kant as 'the faculty of intuition even without the presence of the object'" (Ibid.). In Arendt's memorable phrase, the imagination works to "*de-sense*" the particulars in the world, leaving images, which in turn can become "thought-objects" (Ibid., 77).

Though Arendt distinguishes images from thought-objects, her reason for doing so is that the initial involuntary images are different from a "deliberately remembered object" (Ibid., 86). On the Aristotelian account of imagination with which Arendt begins, however, the power of memory is merely a sub-power of the imagination. The importance of Aristotle for Arendt's conception is even clearer, moreover, not long after this passage, in her reference to the Aristotelian distinction between "*productive* imagination" and "reproductive imagination" (Ibid.). (The former creates through imagistic combinations, while the latter recalls to mind images as first perceived.)

Arendt's dependence on imagination—or, more precisely, her elevation of imagination—is intensified later in *The Life of the Mind*, when she claims that metaphor is "the only way" that "thinking, can manifest itself," as only a metaphor can transform a thought into "being an appearance among appearances" (Ibid., 103). As Arendt boldly puts it on the next page, "All philosophical terms are metaphors, frozen analogies" (Ibid., 104). More specifically, a metaphor illuminates a truth of the mind by comparing mental phenomena to

things in the world.⁹⁸ Or, as she clarifies by reference to Kant, metaphor illuminates truth by comparing the relationship between two mental phenomena to an analogous relationship between two worldly phenomena (Ibid.). For example, the (weak) metaphor of “My love for you is like the sun shining on the lilies” illuminates the mental relationship between the lover and the beloved by comparing the love relationship to the physical relationship between the sun and the flowers—rather than by offering a relationship between the lover and the sun as subjects.

This point is significant for Arendt because it illustrates the dependence of mind on world—even when thinking is mostly withdrawn from world—since thought can proceed to itself and its meaning only by recourse to the sensual. “Analogies, metaphors, and emblems,” Arendt concludes, “are the threads by which the mind holds on to the world even when, absentmindedly, it has lost direct contact with it, and they guarantee the unity of human experience” (Ibid., 109). Note two things here. First, Arendt’s pun indicates that mind, when it forgets the world, ceases to be fully mind (viz. “absentminded”). This “indicates,” in her terms, “the absolute primacy of the world of appearances” (Ibid.). Second, the function of metaphor is, as with the “common” or “sixth” sense earlier in the text, the work of the imagination to create a common world. In other words, “the thinking ego obviously never leaves the world of appearances altogether” (Ibid., 110). In short, the world is only one in imagination, whereas in sensual actuality it is instead an overlapping of different worlds for each member of each species on the earth. That is to say, the first fiction about the world is that there is only

⁹⁸ Here, perhaps, lies yet another reason for Arendt’s idolizing/idealization of Socrates, since he is famous for having described himself primarily in terms of the two metaphors of the gadfly and the midwife.

one. Thus, when we theorize about “the World,” including in our political theorizing, the ship of non-fictional truth has already sailed. “There are not two worlds” as in the Platonic theory, nor more than two, for that matter, “because metaphor unites them” (Ibid.). To clarify, this means that, for Arendt, there are many worlds, in practice, on the earth, but imagination makes them one.

Finally on the subject of metaphor, Arendt claims that in the case of thought itself, ironically, “there exists no plausible metaphor.” The closest we can get, she claims, is “the sensation of being alive” (Ibid., 123)—thus her title, *The Life of the Mind*. Or, as she puts it in her next section, thinking is a kind of dance, a performance for its own sake, for “the sheer beauty of appearances” (Ibid., 129). And in this dance, “virtue” becomes “what we would call virtuosity” (Ibid., 130-1). Moreover, similar to a common experience in dance, Arendt later compares thought (drawing on Socrates) to the rush of “the wind” (Ibid., 174). Aptly, then, Arendt elsewhere links Socrates to dancing (as does Kierkegaard before her), via the middle term of the “flute-player,” as an example of an artist whose performance is an end-in-itself. Socrates, she writes, “performed in the marketplace the way the flute-player performed at a banquet” (Arendt 1989, 37). And in dance, one can see another connection to the theatricality of Arendt’s metaphysics.

I will now conclude this section on *The Life of the Mind* with a second dance-resonant moment in the text. Arendt suggests two correctives to evil in thought itself, namely in Socrates’s claims that it is better to suffer than to do evil, and better to be in conflict with the rest of the world than out of (musical, dancing?) harmony with oneself—in the solitary dance of thought, between the two “partners” and friends, who are both oneself (Arendt 1981, 181, 185, and 188). By contrast, “unthinking men”—like Eichmann—“are like sleepwalkers” (Ibid., 191). Losing the capacity to think, which is dependent on imagination, according to Arendt destroys “the faculty of judgment, which one may call with some rea-

son the most political of man's abilities" (Ibid., 192). With judgment, in the battleground of the present, we must either fall like Eichmann (and Heidegger), or gracefully dance our fight between the opposing forces of past and future (as in the metaphor Arendt invokes from Kafka). In the middle of the "storm," with the infinite "diagonal" of our magical powers of thought, our dances can create our own new imaginative world to share (Ibid., 209).

V. Conclusion: The necessary dark art

Even if the reader is sympathetic to the general drift of my analyses, s/he has perhaps noticed that I have not yet addressed the word "dark" in my title, and wonders about what would make forgiveness—as the imaginatively magical art of theatrical world-sustaining—a dark art. To begin to answer this question, I note that Arendt approvingly cites Kant's claim that the power of the imagination in organizing/creating our reality is a "hidden art in the depths of the human soul" (Kant 1999, A141/B180-1). Forgiveness, too, I would argue, requires a kind of hiddenness, and recourse to psychic depths.

In essence, since forgiveness for Arendt is the "undoing" of action's deeds, and since deeds are above all for her a performance in the proper political sphere of self-revelation, through public appearance, forgiveness would thus seem to involve a magic of disappearing or invisibility—the waters of *Lethe* that drown the *aletheia* of truth as disclosure. More specifically, I wish to suggest that forgiveness involves erasing lines form the script of the world-play, and perhaps especially those lines of dialogue that involve interpretations of tragic and horrific events. In other words, what forgiveness "undoes" are not facts at an objective level, but rather "deeds" conceived as speeches, as well as non-speech actions disclosed in speech. Put still differently, forgiveness creates spaces for freedom of interpretation, rather than trying to pretend that historical events did not occur at all.

This latter point is also important for a reason that connects with scholarly criticisms of postmodern interpretations of Arendt such as the one in this chapter. To wit, forgiveness invisibly undoes lines of the script, rather than visibly uprooting even the boards of the stage. The latter act, by contrast, is instead that of totalitarianism, as it replaces the factual boards with purely fictional ones, forcing falsities into the minds of the people through propaganda. Thus, to follow Arendt, one must instead preserve carefully the theater of world-history, while simultaneously trying to be the most creative and flourishing-enhancing co-playwrights that one can be. Above all, this involves forgiving the inevitable mistakes of one's fellow playwrights, if not for their sakes, then for the sake of the beloved shared world.