

Bachelor thesis "Hannah Arendt: Thinking and Action". The author: Emma Lobenhofer.

In her essay, Emma Lobenhofer addresses the problem of the relationship between thinking and acting in Hannah Arendt's philosophy. In doing so, she first discusses the explanation of action from *The Human Condition* (using the German edition of *Vita Activa*, edited by the author). After explaining the nature of action and the relationship between action and speech, in the second part, she focuses on the 1971 essay *Thinking and Moral Considerations*. This text receives the most attention. In the third and shortest section, she then proceeds to explain the nature of judgment from Arendt's later texts. She then concludes by addressing the question "whether thinking can actually lead to action" (p. 44). She answers that it does not. Thus, while thinking is not directly related to action, judgment, which was the focus of Chapter III, "could possibly have a freeing effect on action" (p. 45).

The work is generally well written, the argumentation is mostly good and convincing. I have reservations mainly about the structure, the choice of the main texts to be interpreted and thus the conclusions Lobenhofer reaches. All those who follow Arendt know that the relationship between action and thought, or thought and morality, needs to be thought of primarily in terms of late philosophical texts, especially Arendt's lectures on *Kant's Critique of Judgment* and the unfinished *Life of the Mind*. The Kantian lectures are given almost no attention in the text, while the problem of the relation between mental activities and actions is precisely one that cannot do without judgment. Ronald Beiner's interpretive essay is briefly introduced, but it is certainly far from exhausted, as Beiner also addresses the topic and offers a more nuanced reading of the relationship between thinking and judging.

A sentence from Arendt's essay poses a great challenge for the author: "Judging, the by-product of the liberating effect of thinking, realized thinking, makes it manifest in the world of appearance" (*Thinking and moral considerations*, p. 446). This thesis, according to Lobenhofer, "remains unclear" (p. 43), since "neither thinking nor judgment can clearly be seen as a moving principle for action" (p. 43). In this sentence (which appears in various variations throughout the thesis) lies, in my judgment, the main source of some confusion between Lobenhofer and Arendt. It comes from the fact that Ms. Lobenhofer does not address the problem of freedom and beginning in Arendt. Indeed, action is for Arendt an expression of freedom, and the search for a "moving principle for action" attempts to weave the spontaneity of the human capacity to begin something new into the chain of the intrinsic causality of motive. Action is free, however, precisely when it does not take place under the dictates of the intellect or the will, that is, when the "moving principle for action" is not determinative. Arendt writes "Action, to be free, must be free from motive on the one hand, from its intended goal as a predictable effect on the other. This is not to say that motives and aims are not important factors in every single act, but they are its determining factors, and action is free to the extent that it is able to transcend them." (*What is freedom? In Between Past and Future*, 2006, p. 150). If Lobenhofer had also laid out the theme of freedom and action, the questions she addresses and finds unresolvable might not have been an issue.

However, the above quotation from Lobenhofer's essay *Thinking and Moral Considerations*, which serves as a starting point for the inquiry, goes on to suggest an answer to the question Lobenhofer poses to Arendt - suggesting how thinking, or judging, can manifest itself in the

world of phenomena. Arendt continues in *Thinking and Moral Considerations*, "The manifestation of the wind of thought is no knowledge, it is the ability to tell right from wrong, beautiful from ugly. And this indeed may prevent catastrophes, at least for myself, in the rare moments when the chips are down." (p. 446) Ronald Beiner then explains this quote by saying that thinking frees from the grip of the commons (and thus morality) "and thus frees judgment to operate in an open space of moral or aesthetic discrimination and discernment. Judgment functions best when this space has been cleared for it by critical thinking.(...) Thinking thereby assumes a political relevance by virtue of its relationship to the faculty of judgment. By loosening the grip of the universal over the particular, thinking releases the political potency of the faculty of judgment-the potency that inheres in its capacity to perceive things as they are, that is, as they are phenomenally manifest." (Beiner, ch. 6 of the interpretive essay) I do not understand why the student passes over this interpretation, which she considers authoritative, with silence. In any case, working with Beiner's essay might give her answers to some of her questions.

I have a reservation about Lobenhofer's treatment of the concepts of *Verstand* and *Vernunft*. She understands *Verstand*, with a vague reference to Kant, as a "capacity of gathering knowledge" that is not inherent in all people, "For to demand that everyone has the capacity to acquire knowledge is not reasonable" (p. 44). However, it is clear from the *Critique of Pure Reason* that *Verstand* is simply the capacity of a rational being to navigate the world of phenomena and to organize sense perceptions into categorical relations (succession, causality, etc.).

Formally, the thesis has some shortcomings. In philosophical texts, it is usually not appropriate to use the author-date style of citation, but footnotes with the full titles of the texts. Classical texts such as Plato's dialogues should have been referred to only secondarily in modern translations, but primarily to standard editions (pagination tends to be given on the pages). This is missing here and makes it difficult to trace and follow the interpretation. Also confusing is the dual style of notes (these are after the text and are lettered, but some are also in the text and are numbered).

Overall, the work is very ambitious, dealing with a difficult subject that requires both a good knowledge of many of Arendt's texts from different periods and of the secondary literature. Emma Lobenhofer has handled it well, but there is plenty of room for improvement in terms of the structure of the thesis, its content, and its formal aspects.

Therefore, I recommend the thesis for defense and suggest a grade of **very good**.

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