

Understanding and Judging History: Hannah Arendt and Philosophical Hermeneutics

Jakub Novák
Charles University in Prague

Abstract

In this study I primarily deal with the problem of historical understanding in the work of Hannah Arendt. In doing so, I try to show that Arendt's ideas concerning the problem of understanding history (which mainly involves the task of understanding unique historical events) may be compared to the works of Heidegger and Gadamer and further developed using some hermeneutical insights as found in their works. I also try to address the topic of judgment; I attempt to show that for Arendt, judgment is an integral, indispensable part of the process of understanding.

Keywords: method, historical event, understanding, judgment, empathy, Arendt, Heidegger, Gadamer

Introduction

This paper mainly focuses on the problem of method in Hannah Arendt's thinking. Though Arendt never discusses her method openly, I believe numerous reflections on this issue may be discerned in her early writings, especially in a 1954 essay entitled *Understanding and Politics*. Here, Arendt tackles the problem of historical understanding. For her, this involves primarily the question of the possibility of understanding unique, unprecedented historical events and occurrences, which, consequently, cannot be fully grasped within the framework of traditional tools and categories. My basic thesis is that this relatively narrow problem of how to grasp unprecedented phenomena in the field of history shows

proximity of Arendt's thinking to philosophical hermeneutics as developed by H. G. Gadamer. Thus, in Arendt, we find not only problems which constitute the very basis of Gadamerian hermeneutics: the role of prejudices, the practical nature of all understanding, the problem of distance or strangeness separating us from the phenomena we strive to understand, but Arendt's reflections on this issue also share with those of Gadamer a number of questions which seem to be problematic or at least unclear. For example, where can we locate anything like 'truth' in the process of understanding? How can we know that this process has come to its end? To what extent does understanding exhaust itself in empathy, i.e. in an attempt to re-think the thoughts or re-live the feelings of historical actors?

I also attempt to interpret Arendt's notion of history and historical understanding in the light of Martin Heidegger's notion of phenomenology from *Being and Time*. I wish to demonstrate that Arendt's concept of (genuine) historical events shares some important similarities with what Heidegger in section 7 of *Being and Time* calls a "phenomenon". As far as I know, this relationship between Arendt and Heidegger remains little explored in secondary literature, since most of these works concentrate exclusively on the tension between philosophy and politics in both thinkers.¹ There is yet another similarity between Arendt and Heidegger concerning the problem of method. They both share a rather negative outlook on the capability of tradition to guide our understanding. On the one hand, Heidegger describes the program of "destruction of the history of ontology" (Heidegger 1996, 17-23), whereas Arendt repeatedly speaks of a definite breakdown of tradition (Arendt 1994d, 316). Gadamer, on the other hand, sees tradition as essentially positive and productive.

In part I of this article, I try to situate Arendt's approach within the broader context of some basic questions concerning method and its relation to the object. The main problem seems to be that it is unclear whether we can make some positive assertions about method or about how it should proceed, if, at the same time, we acknowledge that the method's primary objective is to approach something which is unique (such as, in our case, historical events). Every such delineation done before

we actually confront the phenomenon seems to interfere with this uniqueness. In part II, I try to elucidate what Arendt in fact means when she speaks of historical events, while pointing out some difficulties resulting from her quite radical notion. In the final chapter of this paper, I discuss broader implications of Arendt's concept of historical understanding, especially in comparison to Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics. Finally, I address the question of the relationship between understanding and judgment; I propose an interpretation where understanding and judgment may support each other or even coincide as shown in the final analysis. It appears that understanding does not necessarily need to be an act of empathy in which any type of judgment is suspended; rather, it can, and in some cases needs to be judgmental.²

I. I wish to start by asking two basic questions which might help to elucidate Arendt's position. The first of these questions is whether the methodical approach that Arendt proposes, and which she herself employs in analyzing particular historical phenomena, is some kind of a universal method which can be positively delineated before we start investigating things, or whether is it bound to a specific region or area of objects. Is historical understanding then a special kind of understanding employable exclusively to historical events?

Though she does not say this explicitly, Arendt rejects the idea that there should be one method common for history as well as for natural science. The reason here is quite simple: naturalistic explanation must always be deterministic, i.e. explain the phenomenon causally, as an instance of some general law. This would, of course, render usage of the term 'human history' quite meaningless, for there would be no action springing from specifically human causes such as motives, reasons and intentions, but solely from one class of natural causes (which would ultimately reduce all human actions to, as Charles Taylor puts it, mere movements (Taylor 1964, 36). For Arendt, on the other hand, history is shaped by human endeavors, though we cannot say that it is fabricated by men. She apparently holds the view that human actions, and consequently also history, represent a special region of

phenomena or entities distinguished by their origin in human freedom; facts and events of history could have been otherwise. Holding that history somehow springs from human freedom also presents the only way of how to come to terms with historical catastrophe. Holding, on the other hand, that suffering of the victims was somehow necessary or law-governed would only underplay it. For Arendt, this applies primarily to totalitarianism: the only way how to confront and consequently prevent the 'nightmarish' nature of its crimes is to see them not as something out of this world, but precisely as something caused by men (Arendt 2008, 384-5). This should be enough to require a special methodical approach for history, distinct from the method of natural science.

Still, does this mean that there is only one way to grasp the meaning of historical events, that there is something like a universal method of historical understanding? Even the second point seems to be rejected by Arendt, for she speaks of and even uses several types of distinct approaches or techniques. Grasping the meaning of some historical event might involve, for instance, its explanation by setting it within the context of larger historical trends as well as taking into account thoughts and feelings of historical actors. Another approach might concentrate solely on the consequences of such events, disregarding the actors' intentionality. Finally, understanding historical events and historical actors might involve the task of judging them. The point here is that it cannot be said in advance which of the approaches just listed will be the most appropriate, for, obviously, we cannot employ them all at once; some of them are even mutually exclusive at first glance (such as explanation relying on larger trends in history and explanation based on the intentions of historical actors). Interestingly, some phenomena in history might even be excluded from the need to judge them. For instance, Arendt herself withholds her judgment on the issue of Jewish collaboration in the conditions of concentration camps (as opposed to involvement of Jewish councils in the organization of transports in later stages of the war), precisely for the reason that there was no possibility open for acting otherwise (Arendt 2008, 468-9). In this case, understanding would rely more on

empathy than on judgment, i.e. on an attempt to put oneself, partially at least, in the situation of concentration camp inmates.

This obvious impossibility to decide beforehand upon certain methodical approach or a fixed combination of several approaches brings forth a couple of more general consequences. Does it then mean that the historical event itself should somehow 'pick' the most suitable method? Or should we be able to carry out some preliminary, non-methodical survey of the phenomenon, and *then* choose the proper approach? Or is there, after all, some universal method for exactly this purpose? Similar difficulty seems to arise in the case of the conceptual classification of events. Arendt states that events in history are, at least in a certain sense, unique. Still, we commonly identify whole classes or types of events: revolutions, upheavals, wars, etc. Does it mean that we simply subsume the event under a general category, depriving it precisely of its uniqueness? Not necessarily, because such classification can, in fact, expand the original meaning of the concept (thus Arendt specifies and narrows the meaning of the word 'totalitarianism'), or we can even invent a new concept or phrase to describe a phenomenon hitherto unknown ('banality of evil'). Again, there seems to be no a priori criterion for which sort of classification should be used (subsumption, expansion, invention); we must, so to say, 'wait' for the phenomenon to speak up. To me, this seems to be the problem of all object-governed methods, since it is quite impossible to give a positive account of what it means to be governed by object without somehow describing what the object is and thus limiting the range of possible diversity as far as objects are concerned. This can probably be seen on the level of our *praxis* as well, as the problem of 'method' of orientation in the situations of our life. Here, to confront everything as radically new and 'unique' would simply be practically impossible. In a many situations we can deal with understanding situations in habitual ways, or by recognizing them as special instances which are ultimately subsumable under general rules and conceptual categories. Our habitual orientation in the world is not and must not be paralyzed whenever we are confronted with something. In the final

analysis, there seems to be a presupposition of some elementary openness or even alertness to new experience which would operate, so to say, 'in the background' without requiring our full attention.

Now I want to move a little bit forward and address the question of disinterestedness of understanding. Suspension of personal interests and inclinations concerning the object seems to be a necessary condition of arriving at scientifically (i.e. objectively and universally) valid conclusions. Yet, Gadamer stresses that in the case of hermeneutical understanding, we are no longer dealing with the relation of disinterested distance between the subject and the object of understanding, but rather with a relationship of affinity, of affecting each other, especially when the object comes from the very same tradition as the interpreter (Gadamer 1999, 283). Arendt also rejects the methodical ideal of disinterestedness, though for different reasons. Since Arendt is mainly interested in the problem of understanding recent historical and political events, and mainly the great historical catastrophes of the twentieth century as exemplified by the rise of totalitarian regimes, these events might still be effective to a large degree, influencing the common, human world we live in. However, the fact that history (and not only recent history) might be effective does not mean for Arendt that understanding is for that reason hampered, or that we must withhold judgments about issues still involving people's interests and feelings.³

There is yet another side of this issue. As Arendt stated in her reply to Eric Voegelin's review of *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, she explicitly rejects the old notion of *sine ira et studio*. In this case, 'disinterestedness' does not only refer to the absence of effect between the subject and the object, but rather something like 'cold', emotion-free approach to phenomena (Arendt 1994a, 403; Baehr 2002, 806-8). Arendt seems to hold the view that emotional response caused by the phenomenon in us – such as outrage – essentially belongs to its unique nature, and should be taken into account for that reason, rather than put into brackets. And again, such feelings that accompany our investigation of various events in history would naturally differ (without necessary being a result of

personal idiosyncrasies – whether a feeling results from such a subjective inclination, or somehow belongs to the way in which the phenomenon shows itself, would probably be subjected to our judgment). Thus, I think that Ronald Beiner is wrong in his interpretation of Arendt's notion of historical judgment as always involving an element of disinterested pleasure, thus being analogous to Kantian aesthetic judgments (Beiner 1982, 144). This is again easily visible in Arendt's own analysis of totalitarianism; she certainly does not express anything like pleasure either in describing this phenomenon, or is her approach disinterested.

II. In section 7 of *Being and Time*, Heidegger presents an outline of his own version of phenomenological method. For him, the term 'phenomenology' does not mean some 'science of phenomena'. Rather, it combines the words 'phenomenon' and 'logos' (speech) in a specific way. What concerns us about Heidegger's analysis is mainly his notion of phenomenon. According to Heidegger, phenomenon (as derived from the Greek word *phainomenon*) should not be confused with other modes by which things may present themselves to us, such as 'appearance' or 'semblance'. The basic difference between phenomenon and appearance derives from the fact that phenomenon only shows itself; phenomenon means self-showing, not pointing or referring to something else, to a hidden cause of the apparent. But on the other hand, appearance, involves a referential relationship between the level on which something is immediately manifest and the level of its cause or basis. To appear does not mean to show itself, but to point or refer *beyond* itself (Heidegger 1996, 26-7).

Now I want to show not only that a very similar distinction may be found in Arendt, but also that this distinction is crucial for her notion of history and leads to a rejection of certain types of historical explanation. To be sure, she addresses the problem of appearance or disclosure quite extensively, especially in relation to politics. To act politically means, among other things, to disclose one's own personality, to disclose 'who' somebody is (Arendt 1958, 175-180). This disclosure (and this is the first point where Arendt comes quite

close to Heidegger's concept of phenomenon) does not make apparent something which has hitherto been hidden; action does not primarily disclose one's nature which existed prior to the event of disclosure. Rather, one's 'who' is constituted in one's action as it is perceived by others. More broadly put, human action does not point to a stratum of hidden motives, intentions and plans as its cause. For Arendt, these neither constitute the meaning of action, nor are we capable of explaining action only by examination of this layer of individual motivation, which might escape notice even of the actor himself (Arendt 1961b, 144). To prevent confusion, it must be said that Arendt does not advocate any kind of 'external' or mechanistic approach to action in which the whole sphere of human intentionality, including actors' own understanding of what they do, is dismissed as irrelevant.⁴

For Arendt, human, and especially political action is a field where Heidegger's self-showing may take place, where phenomena can occur without being mere 'appearances'. Now, what does this outlook on human action mean for the problem of historical understanding? I have said that to understand history essentially means to understand it as action. But it seems to me that for Arendt it is also the other way round. *Action, in a certain sense, can be only understood as history* (let me clarify that by 'understanding action' I do not mean its general structural analysis as a distinct form of human activity, but solely the question of understanding particular actions or deeds). The first point worth mentioning is that we are unable to grasp a particular deeds' meaning insofar every deed results in some process of subsequent reactions on the part of other people. This means that a deed cannot be understood while it is still immediately apparent, for its meaning is also shaped by its consequences, and these consequences are still being shaped by the reaction of others even after the original actor's initiative has come to its end (Arendt 1958, 234). Only the meaning of action which is finished constitutes a relatively stable whole which can be somehow grasped, though of course, not fully, for we are unable to unravel all of its single threads. But on the other hand, the meaning of action which is still, so to say, 'in progress', changes constantly (Arendt 1958, 192). The

conclusion here is somehow peculiar: the meaning of action can disclose (show) itself only when action is not *apparent* anymore, when it ceases to be visible as the individual person's activity performed in front of other people. There is one other consequence of the relation between human action and history to be pointed out. As I said above, Arendt insists on understanding history (including historical misdeeds and catastrophes) as springing from human activity. What decides the course of history is thus not a law of any sort, which would operate, as Arendt puts it, 'behind the backs of acting man' (Arendt 1982, 59). This, however, does not mean that men are able to shape the course of history as they please. The reason here is the simple fact that human action is essentially plural, that other people are able to enter it and thus change its direction in an unforeseeable way. The event always somehow transcends the original intentions of historical actors, and this makes it new and unique not only for those uninvolved in its origination, but also for the actors themselves.

This might seem to be a bit far from the original Heideggerian distinction between phenomenon (self-showing) and mere appearance (referential relationship). I believe that the distinction may still be employed here, precisely because events cannot be explained as though they were pointing to a layer of deeper, originally hidden causes and laws degrading them to a mere epiphenomenon of those laws and depriving them of a meaning of their own. This would render everything that happens in history essentially predictable and expected, turning history into "dead monotony of sameness" (Arendt 1994d, 319-320).

Should we then adopt the opposing, but no less radical view, that everything that happens in history constitutes a radical interruption of what existed before? Does Arendt deny all causal connections between events, and, consequently, see history as a field of radical contingency? I believe that the view in which all historical events are totally unexpected, breaking all chains of causation, including all actors' intentions and goals, would provoke several serious consequences. First, it would mean that there is virtually no difference in degree as far as how unprecedented events are. It would render them *equally*

new and surprising. Secondly, if there is always total discrepancy between cause and effect, between actors' intentions and the actual outcome of actions, then there is no point in acting at all. Action becomes an entirely futile enterprise. Thus, necessarily, not all action ends up as history and, moreover, some historical action may succeed in meeting its goal, though the actual outcome would probably always somehow transcend the original motivation. Finally, as Peter Baehr pointed out (Baehr 2002, 811-2, 823-5), saying that events are unprecedented cannot mean that there are no precedents in history whatsoever, that there are no regularities and general categories under which events fall. This would even be denied by some of Arendt's later work, for she points to the constant presence or regular appearance of certain phenomena in history, for instance, the spontaneous forming of various popular councils during revolutions (Arendt 1963, 255-281).

I think that newness and uniqueness of historical events along with the impossibility to explain them causally is again exemplified mainly by the event of totalitarianism. As is well known, for Arendt totalitarianism is something which is entirely new, for which no precedents exist in history whatsoever. It is a "novel form of government," and thus it transcends the known categories provided by the tradition of political science (Arendt 1994c, 232-247).⁵ There is also a special reason why totalitarianism cannot be explained causally. Arendt states that if we singled out a cause or implicated a bunch of causes of totalitarianism, it would simply seem wholly inadequate or even ridiculous compared to the monstrosity of totalitarian crimes which it purportedly explains (Arendt 1994d, 326). In this respect, the event of totalitarianism really seems to transcend all its preceding causes. Arendt also denies that there was anything like the "essence" of totalitarianism somehow latently present in preceding historical events and processes, only waiting to unfold (Arendt 1994a, 405-6). This determines Arendt to rule out the category of causality altogether from historical understanding and to replace it with the notion of 'elements' of historical events (Arendt 1994d, 325; Arendt 1994a, 402-3, 405-6). Whereas in causal explanation causes precede their effects,

the relationship between an event and its elements is in fact reversed. Elements are incomprehensible without the event's first being grasped, at least preliminary in its uniqueness. It is the event in its singularity which subsequently illuminates the elements, or more precisely, makes them visible as *its* elements. It is only due to this light the event sheds that we are able to trace the elements back to the past and grasp them as something which crystallized into and yet did not cause the event. I think that this distinction might be roughly illustrated by Arendt's own treatment of the phenomenon of antisemitism. Clearly, there is a radical difference between traditional antisemitic prejudices and the new form of antisemitism as incorporated in the structure of totalitarian regimes (Arendt 2008, 75, 371). Thus, every account of antisemitism must start with the question of how its crystallization (or transformation) into an element of totalitarian domination was possible, rather than with identifying traditional antisemitism as one of the causes of totalitarianism.

III. In this last chapter we shall see that Arendt's concept of historical understanding is in fact broader; it does not only address the issue of causal explanation as opposed to understanding based on seeking elements of historical events. I wish to focus on the relationship between understanding and prejudices, on the practical nature of understanding, and finally, on the question of interrelatedness of understanding and judgment. I also draw upon Gadamer quite extensively.

III a) Understanding and the Problem of Prejudices

Rehabilitation of prejudices from the enlightenment's "prejudice against prejudice" (Gadamer 1999, 274-285; Bernstein 1983, 161) is one of the most pervasive themes of Gadamerian hermeneutics. For Gadamer, prejudice is not necessarily something negative which blurs our vision, but there can be 'guiding' prejudices as well. In fact, these guiding prejudices make the very process of understanding possible. However, Arendt's overall approach to explaining the role of prejudices, if they are taken as traditional (and somehow ossified) conceptual patterns, either as conceptual schemes of political science or our

criteria for discriminating right and wrong, i.e. our criteria of moral judgment, is rather negative. The main reason for this negative stance was the tradition's inability to recognize the unprecedented nature and, subsequently, to prevent the rise of totalitarian regimes (Arendt 1961, 26). In her *Introduction into Politics*, Arendt gives a more extensive account of the nature and role of prejudice. She points out two constitutive features of prejudices. Firstly, they are not idiosyncratic. Rather, prejudices are expressions of collective attitudes toward and viewpoints on the common world (Arendt 2005, 86). In this respect, there is a substantial political element present in them. Secondly, though prejudices, when adopted, can constitute a viewpoint that is possibly distortive to newly emerging situations and phenomena (prejudices, inasmuch as they are being shared and transmitted, i.e. coming from the past, must be inflexible and rigid); they are still somehow rooted in an actual confrontation with things and events of the world. According to Arendt, there is always an original, i.e. direct, world-confronting judgment at the core of every prejudice. This is quite similar to Heidegger's account of the problem of historicity, namely to his program of destruction of the history of ontology. Heidegger also claims that there must be some original confrontation with being itself, standing at the tradition's beginning, which was concealed, distorted or even forgotten in the process of handing down this original experience (Heidegger 1996, 17-23).⁶

However, Arendt seems to advocate the indispensable (and in this way positive) role of prejudices by stressing the obvious practical impossibility of forming new, original judgments in all the situations of daily life. There must be some degree of faith in prejudices, or at least in their capacity to guide us through some of our day-to-day situations. On the other hand, this reliance must never be complete; there are obviously cases when we need to be open and ready to form original judgments about events and occurrences. Two things are worth mentioning here: first, there is apparently no criterion that might help us decide when we are to switch to the stance of openness and awareness to the events and occurrences of the world, and when we, conversely, are to stay

relaxed, submerged in the realm of preconceived evaluations and opinions. This is, in fact, partly analogous to a problem encountered by Kant in the first *Critique* (Kant 2010, 135). Kant understands judgment (in its cognitive role) as a faculty whose main task is the application of concepts to a given manifold. Such a task must be conducted by the faculty of judgment itself; such an application is not itself secured by a set of conceptually determined rules. Judgment thus has to 'see' whether a given instance really instantiates the rule. If there was another rule specifying the conditions under which subsumption is possible, this would again create a need for another rule governing this second-order subsumption and so on (Beiner 1983, 131). The point I am trying to make is that there must be always some gap left for an act of 'autonomous' judgment even in the case where rules are already given; even Kantian determinant judgment probably cannot be seen as a purely mechanical, algorithmic task (Arendt 1978, 216; Gadamer 1999, 27-8). For Arendt, however, (and this is where I see a substantial difference between Arendt's account and Gadamer's hermeneutical views) there is a mutual exclusivity between 'original judgments' and prejudices, and thus also a sharp borderline between determinant and reflective judgment (Kant 1987, 18-19). Arendt seems to identify determinant judgment, to which falling back upon existing prejudices would belong, with purely mechanical subsumption, while reflective judgment is seen as radically free, lacking all external criteria of operation. According to Arendt, for this task of judging the given situation or event anew (either from inside or without, as an 'actor' or a 'spectator'), "*the sole prerequisite is the faculty of judgment*" (Arendt 2005, 103).

The final point I want to make is that even in the case of understanding/judging phenomena that seem to be entirely unprecedented, there still remains a minimal, though necessary role to be played by tradition. Traditional concepts and yardsticks still retain some degree of validity as that against which the new and unprecedented can be identified and contrasted (this method of contrasting and drawing distinctions is again widely used by Arendt in her own analysis of totalitarianism).

III b) Understanding as the Other Side of Action

Arendt speaks of understanding as “the other side of action” (Arendt 1994d, 322). We already saw that historical understanding primarily deals with history as a result of human action. However, Arendt seems to mean something more than this; there is probably a stronger connection between acting and understanding. That leads us to the question whether understanding is a purely theoretical enterprise, or whether it is itself somehow practical. In Gadamer, understanding seems to come into play whenever a task of application of something general to something particular is at stake, including the practical task of applying general norms and shared views on the good in a particular ethical situation without distorting the specific claims which the situation places upon us (Gadamer 1999, 309-320). To put it bluntly, to act in a situation presupposes and involves an act of such an application, i.e. interpretation (Bernstein 1983, 38). Gadamer thus sees an essential proximity between acting in a situation and, say, trying to understand a traditional text, for both involve the same task of application or concretization of something universal in particular circumstances, be it a situation of action or a hermeneutical situation. Moreover, even seemingly purely theoretical understanding constitutes an event in the course of tradition, i.e. can be seen as a form of action.

Arendt’s position differs from that of Gadamer, for she sees understanding as leading to an essentially practical end: understanding is to *reconcile* us with the world we live in (Arendt 1994d, 308; Vollrath 1997, 174). This reconciliation does not involve only the present state of affairs, but also reconciliation with the past, especially with the catastrophes of recent history (it is still the same world as that in which these catastrophes came to pass). For Arendt, in the first place, this task of reconciliation carried out by understanding does not involve forgiveness (Arendt 1994d, 308).⁷ This is, I would say, one of the reasons why understanding cannot rest solely on empathy, i.e. on an attempt to enter inwardness of historical actors, to see deeds and misdeeds committed by them through their eyes. Such empathy tends to lead toward an indulgent or

even forgiving stance toward these actors, for we are now able to see and fully understand 'why' they acted in the way they did. Something other than pure empathy is thus required in order for understanding leading to reconciliation to occur. I would argue that this second component is judgment, which might be uncompromising and unforgiving, as often was in Arendt's personal case.⁸ Judging, i.e. taking an evaluative stance toward historical events and actors somehow helps us to gain or re-gain autonomy in our relation to history, for judgment is able to disregard its actual course and outcome, and judge historical phenomena independently (though not randomly) (Arendt 1978, 216). To put it differently, historical judgment does not depend on historical success as sole criterion. Finally, judgment is inseparably connected with human freedom: we can judge only such historical actors who had the opportunity to act otherwise. Consequently, in judging historical events and persons, we somehow reinforce our awareness of history as human history along with the awareness of historical catastrophes as caused by men and preventable by men.

Still, the question of how we arrive at such judgment, which is, so to say, the final layer of the whole process of understanding as coming to terms with the world, remains open. Is it preceded rather by a process of reduction or even destruction of misguided sediments of tradition and various theoretical frameworks, or should understanding be described as a process of peaceful dialogue with what the 'Other' has to say to us, i.e. the process of merging the other's perspective with one's own in order to reach a *common* understanding? Should we then, in Arendtian context, engage in a dialogue with totalitarianism? If the essential component of understanding was such a reduction of prejudices, we would have to ask where the criterion for judgment comes from. Is the appropriate judgment somehow already attached to the phenomenon which is now stripped from the traditional and personal prejudices as well as misleading conceptual patterns? This would turn judging into a sort of perception, depriving it of its autonomy. On the other hand, understanding conceived essentially as dialogical enterprise, as in Gadamer, does not

eventually lead to mere reduction, but is itself an event in which something new comes into being. I want to show that Arendt, after all, does not reject the role of empathy altogether, though she rather speaks of putting oneself into the other person's position or place.

III c) Empathy, Judgment and Truth

Finally, in *Understanding and Politics*, Arendt speaks of understanding as comprising two operations or two movements. These are distancing of what is too close or familiar on one hand, and "bridging abysses of remoteness" (Arendt 1994d, 323) on the other. We can somehow translate these two metaphorical expressions Arendt uses and identify the two operations with what was described above as dialogical and reductionist elements of understanding. Thus, distancing of what is too close might involve some kind of reflection concerning our prejudices and habitual ways in which we approach things as long as we belong to a certain tradition. In this context, Gadamer speaks of a tension between simultaneous familiarity and strangeness involved in every act of understanding. Something (e.g. a traditional text) always appears as somehow familiar or already known, for it is necessarily perceived through the eyes of tradition in which we grew up and to which we grew into, as Heidegger puts it (Heidegger 1996, 17). But on the other hand, the text is also strange, for the simple reason that it has its unique meaning which is *yet* to be understood. For Gadamer though, it would be a naïve objectivistic illusion to think that this distancing can ever be complete, that after all the prejudices have been successfully eliminated, the alleged 'thing in itself' appears. This is both virtually technically impossible (for we might hold some of our prejudices quite unconsciously) and, even if we succeeded in such elimination, we would be deprived even of those prejudices that are guiding and fruitful for the process of understanding: we would simply do not know where to begin from.

Arendt seems to be more radical in this respect. As I said before, her overall stance to tradition and prejudice is rather negative; tradition, according to her, is irretrievably broken. For that reason, understanding and judgment are needed,

which are somehow capable to confront phenomena directly. In one passage from her *Introduction to Politics*, Arendt even identifies judgment with “genuine experience of the present” (Arendt 2005, 101-2).⁹ This might seem to be pretty close to some form of objectivism, for how could we differ or disagree on such unprejudiced experience? Could we then ascribe to Arendt some conception of “pure historical judgment”, analogous to Kant’s notion of pure aesthetic judgments, in which we must, after we have eliminated all sources of interests, inclinations and subjective fancies, ultimately come to an agreement? I think that in the case of historical understanding and historical judgment (or historical understanding involving such judgment), one possible source of disagreement between those who judge historical events might be found in the fact that such understanding and such judgment is always perspective. There is a perspective in the sense that the judge is not located in some sort of vacuum, but is himself standing in a concrete (and unique) historical situation. Understanding and judging will thus probably, partially at least, take the form of Gadamerian application, i.e. mediation between the event and between the interpreter’s own historical situation. Judgment and understanding are always perspective also in the sense that they have to select from the potentially inexhaustible richness of aspects and details in which historical phenomena present themselves (Arendt 1961, 49-50).

The second component or movement of understanding is the “bridging of abysses”. I would identify it with the dialogical approach to understanding, with an attempt to somehow take into account the perspective of other people (in our case primarily historical actors). This taking into account can involve a whole range of things: it does not have to be only other people’s feelings, but also their own understanding and judgments relating to the event they are involved in. It may also include an attempt to understand concepts guiding the historical actors’ behavior (such as the concept of ideology). What is striving in all these cases is not an act of pure empathy, i.e. an attempt to *adopt* such feelings, judgments, etc.¹⁰ Such a notion of empathy leads in fact to relativism: we do not care whether the standpoint we try to adopt contains

anything like truth about the phenomenon; all such standpoints are equally valid. Truth is reached once we managed to situate ourselves fully into the way in which the other sees/feels/judges the world. This notion of understanding is again widely criticized by Gadamer in *Truth and Method* which reads as follows: "...understanding is not a mysterious communion of souls, but sharing in a common meaning" (Gadamer 1999, 292). For him, the stances of objectivism and relativism share the same utopian assumption of getting rid of one's own rootedness in tradition: in the first case for the sake of unprejudiced seeing of the 'thing itself', in the second case for the sake of leaving this rootedness behind and jumping into a different horizon of understanding. For Gadamer then, understanding always involves a dialogue between two perspectives, mediating between two viewpoints or horizons, when truth does not belong exclusively to any of them, but is yet to emerge in the process of mutual understanding.¹¹

Something like this Gadamerian fusion of horizons (*Horizontverschmelzung*), i.e. a process of weighing and mediating different outlooks and standpoints in which their particularity is overcome, can be actually found in Arendt as well. One example might be, I think, the one in which she speaks of a peculiar double logic of totalitarianism (Arendt 1994b 302-3; Arendt 1994c, 326). Its actions may seem strikingly illogical to us as long as by 'logic' we understand the logic of purposiveness in which something makes sense only insofar as it falls under the means-end category. For example, as Arendt repeatedly points out, Nazi concentration camps were of no military value, they were completely unnecessary for winning the war (Arendt 1994e, 13-14). But on the other hand, the actions of totalitarianism and totalitarian institutions such as concentration camps are perfectly logical in the context of ideological reasoning (as some sort of laboratory, where the central hypothesis of totalitarianism that everything, even the craziest outcome of ideological reasoning, is possible can be tested) (Arendt 1985, 437-8). Understanding in this case consists neither in retaining our utilitarian perspective, through which these actions of totalitarianism are incomprehensible, nor in adopting the standpoint of ideology

through which they are justified. The task here is to see both perspectives somehow together, which does not necessarily mean that they should be viewed from an objective standpoint external to them both. Arendt gives another example of such mediation between various perspectives relating to one phenomenon in a series of lectures, i.e. *Some Questions of Moral Philosophy* delivered in 1956 and 1966 (Arendt 2003). Here, Arendt presents an example of a situation in which I am to judge the situation of the inhabitants of a slum dwelling. What she wants to show in the first place is that we cannot arrive at the 'correct' judgment about their situation solely by empathy. The dwellers might have become accustomed to their miserable life conditions and thus ceased to perceive and judge them as poor and miserable. This of course does not make the situation (and whatever caused it) any less blameworthy. Similarly, even if I disregarded their actual feelings and judgments and tried to imagine myself "in my own identity" (Arendt 1961d, 241) in their place, this again would not assure that my judgment would be adequate to the situation; since it may be overshadowed by my personal idiosyncrasies (I might for example endure hardships extremely easily). What needs to take place again is the careful weighing of the perspectives involved, including my own putting in the place of the other. In other words, I need to *judge* between those perspectives without any rule deciding which of them should be taken into account and to what degree given to me in advance. This gets of course vastly more intricate in the case of judging actual events in history, where we have to deal with multifarious, virtually innumerable perspectives of different historical actors.¹² In this respect, historical judgment would differ from other modes of judgment, such as aesthetic or political, in which a potential (as opposed to actual) judgment or opinion of other *judges* is taken into account (Arendt 1961d, 241). However, such confrontation, be it real or imaginary, with different judges concerned with the same phenomenon might be a useful tool for getting my judgment rid of unnecessary prejudice, i.e. a tool of overcoming the narrowness of my judgment. This ultimately shows that the reductive and dialogical elements of understanding can be interwoven.

One last point is worth making. Historical judgment, as the culmination of the process of historical understanding, possesses a specific truth claim.¹³ It strives to judge the phenomenon adequately; when condemning or praising historical events and actors, we are not doing so randomly, but we believe that our judgment somehow matches the nature of what we judge. This gets us little closer to Kant's conception of aesthetic judgment; historical (as well as political and maybe even moral) judgment is not simply an expression of subjective preferences, but it claims some sort of an intersubjective agreement. This does not mean that we actually expect others to agree with us, or that we actively try to persuade them, to 'woo the consent of others' (Arendt 2003, 142). Rather, we believe that others, confronted with the same phenomena, would judge them similarly. Moreover, our judgments are open to subsequent judgments of others;¹⁴ they can be accepted as apt or dismissed as inadequate. Last, we might speculate whether we would be able to engage in an operation of enlarged thought of any sort, weren't it for the common world, where an *actual* confrontation with opinions, perspectives and judgments of other people can take place. Thus, the experience of politics, in a very broad sense, would be a precondition of our interrelated faculties of understanding and judgment (Arendt 1982, 42).¹⁵

NOTES

¹ An exception to that general trend can be found in M. Yar's essay (Yar 2000, 19).

² Ronald Beiner and Ernst Vollrath also speak about "judgmental understanding" (Vollrath 1997, 178-9) or "understanding judgment" (Beiner 1983, 159-160); he also employs the term "understanding spectatorship".

³ See especially Arendt's response to G. Scholem's criticism of her book on Eichmann in (Arendt 1998, 468), where she states that judging the involvement of Jewish councils is the only way to master and finally come to terms with the Jewish problematic past.

⁴ For the impossibility to separate in explanation the actors' own grasp of certain concepts and the way they act see Winch (Winch 1958, 125-8).

⁵ For Arendt's explanation of the distinction between the institution of totalitarian terror (as the core of totalitarian regimes) and terror in traditional tyrannies, see Arendt (1994b, 297-307).

⁶ Above I prefer to use the term 'destruction' rather than 'destructuring' as a translation of the German word *Destruktion*.

⁷ See also Arendt's notion of forgiveness in *The Human Condition* (Arendt 1958b, 236-243).

⁸ See some of the controversies caused by Arendt's book on Eichmann and especially by her description of the role of Jewish councils (Arendt 2008, 465-511).

⁹ The expression 'present' does not have to have here only temporal meaning, but can simply mean everything that stands in front of us as a phenomenon, though not in direct sensual perception.

¹⁰ For a discussion of the role of empathy in Arendt see also G. Kateb (2001, 132).

¹¹ See Gadamer's very clear expression in *Truth and Method* (Gadamer 1999, 304): "Transposing ourselves consists neither in the empathy of one individual for another nor in subordinating another person to our own standards; rather, it always involves rising to a higher universality that overcomes not only our own particularity but also that of the other".

¹² For my thesis that judging cannot be restricted to an act of enlarged mentality cf. also Young's article *Asymmetrical Responsibility* (Young 2001, 223).

¹³ In this, I differ from some of the studies from secondary literature. See for example Steinberger's *Hannah Arendt on Judgment* (Steinberger 1990, 812-4). Steinberger denies judgment any claim to truth. Instead the primary objective of judgment is to come to an agreement with others, to win the other's consent.

¹⁴ For the issue of judging other people's judgment see also A. Wellmer's *Hannah Arendt on Judgment: The Unwritten Doctrine of Reason* (Wellmer 2001, 177).

¹⁵ See Arendt, *Lectures on Kant's Political Philosophy*, p. 42. Something similar, though in relation to moral judgment can be found in S. Benhabib (1988, 47-8), where she views the confrontation with others in the common world as a precondition for the development of moral sensitivity. See also R. Bernstein's *Beyond Objectivism and Relativism* (Bernstein 1983, 216).

REFERENCES

Arendt, Hannah. 1958. *The Human Condition*. Chicago: Chicago University Press.

Arendt, Hannah. 1961a. "The Concept of History, Ancient and Modern." In *Between Past and Future. Eight Exercises in Political Thought*, by Hannah Arendt, 41-90. New York: Viking Press.

Arendt, Hannah. 1961b. "What is Freedom?". In *Between Past and Future. Eight Exercises in Political Thought*, by Hannah Arendt, 143-171. New York: Viking Press.

Arendt, Hannah, 1961c. "Tradition and Modern Age." In *Between Past and Future. Eight Exercises in Political Thought*, by Hannah Arendt, 17-41. New York: Viking Press.

Arendt, Hannah, 1961d. "Truth and Politics." In *Between Past and Future. Eight Exercises in Political Thought*, by Hannah Arendt, 227-265. New York: Viking Press.

Arendt, Hannah. 1963. *On Revolution*. New York: Penguin.

Arendt, Hannah. 1982. *Lectures on Kant's Political Philosophy*, edited by R. Beiner. Chicago: The University of Chicago.

Arendt, Hannah. 1978. *The Life of the Mind*. San Diego: Harcourt Inc.

Arendt, Hannah. 1985. *The Origins of Totalitarianism*. New York: Harcourt Inc.

Arendt, Hannah. 1994a. "A Reply to Eric Voegelin." In *Essays in Understanding. 1930-1954*, by Hannah Arendt, edited by Jerome Kohn, 401-409. Translated by R. Kimber and R. Kimber. New York: Harcourt Brace & Company [1953].

Arendt, Hannah. 1994b. "Mankind and Terror." In *Essays in Understanding*, by Hannah Arendt, edited by Jerome Kohn, 297-307. Translated by R. Kimber and R. Kimber. New York: Harcourt Brace & Company [1953].

Arendt, Hannah. 1994c. "Social Science Techniques and Study of Concentration Camps". In *Essays in Understanding*, by Hannah Arendt, edited by Jerome Kohn, 232-247. Translated by R. Kimber and R. Kimber. New York: Harcourt Brace & Company [1950].

Arendt, Hannah 1994d. "Understanding and Politics." In *Essays in Understanding*, by Hannah Arendt, edited by J. Kohn, 307-327. Translated by R. Kimber and R. Kimber. New York: Harcourt Brace & Company [1954].

Arendt, Hannah. 1994e. "What Remains? The Language Remains: A Conversation with Günter Gauss." In *Essays in Understanding*, by Hannah Arendt, edited by Jerome Kohn, 1-23. Translated by R. Kimber and R. Kimber. New York: Harcourt Brace & Company [1965].

- Arendt, Hannah. 2003. "Some Questions of Moral Philosophy." In *Responsibility and Judgment*, by Hannah Arendt, edited by Jerome Kohn, 49-147. New York: Schocken Books.
- Arendt, Hannah, 2005. *The Promise of Politics*. Edited by Jerome Kohn. New York: Schocken Books.
- Arendt, Hannah. 2008. *Jewish Writings*. Edited by Jerome Kohn and R.H. Fieldman. New York: Schocken Books.
- Baehr, Peter. 2002. "Identifying the Unprecedented. Hannah Arendt, Totalitarianism and the Critique of Sociology." *American Sociological Review* 67 (6): 804-831.
- Beiner, Ronald. 1982. "Interpretive Essay." In *Lectures on Kant's Political Philosophy*, edited by R. Beiner. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.
- Beiner, Ronald. 1983. *Political Judgment*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.
- Beiner, Ronald. 2001. "Rereading Hannah Arendt's Kant Lectures." In *Judgment, Imagination, Politics*, edited by R. Beiner and J. Nedelsky, 91-103. Boston: Rowman and Littlefield.
- Benhabib, Sheyla. 1988. "Judgment and the Moral Foundations of Politics in Hannah Arendt's Thought." *Political Theory* 16 (1): 29-51.
- Bernstein, Richard. 1983. *Beyond Objectivism and Relativism*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Gadamer, Hans-Georg. 1999. *Truth and Method*. Translated by J. Weinsheimer and D. Marshall. New York: Continuum.
- Heidegger, Martin. 1996. *Being and Time*. Translated by J. Stambaugh. New York: State University of New York.
- Kant, Immanuel. 1987. *Critique of Judgment*. Translated by W. S. Pluhar. Indianapolis: Hackett.
- Kant, Immanuel. 2010. *Critique of Pure Reason*. Translated by M.J. Gregor. Pennsylvania State University: Electronic Classics Series.
- Kateb, George. 2001. "The Judgment of Arendt." In *Judgment, Imagination, Politics*, edited by R. Beiner and J. Nedelsky, 121-139. Boston: Rowman and Littlefield.

Steinberger, Peter. 1990. "Hannah Arendt on Judgment." *American Journal of Political Science* 34 (3): 803-821.

Taylor, Charles. 1964. *The Explanation of Behaviour*. London: Routledge.

Vollrath, Ernst. 1977. "Hannah Arendt and the Method of Political Thinking." *Social Research* 44: 160-182.

Yar, Majid. 2000. "From Actor to Spectator: Hannah Arendt's 'two Theories' of political Judgment." *Philosophy & Social Criticism* 26: 1-27.

Young, Iris Marion. 2001. "Assymetrical Reciprocity: On Moral Respect, Wonder and Enlarged Thought." In *Judgment, Imagination, Politics*, edited by R. Beiner and J. Nedelsky, 205-229. Boston: Rowman and Littlefield.

Wellmer, Albrecht. 2001. "Hannah Arendt on Judgment: The Unwritten Doctrine of Reason." In *Judgment, Imagination, Politics*, 165-183. Boston: Rowman and Littlefield.

Winch, Peter. 1958. *The Idea of a Social Science and Its Relation to Philosophy*, London: Routledge.

Jakub NOVÁK is a Ph.D. student at the Faculty of Arts at the Charles University in Prague and an assistant lecturer at the Faculty of Humanities at the Charles University. His basic research interest lies in hermeneutics, political philosophy and philosophical analyses of human action. Jakub Novák's current research focuses on the problem of moral and political judgment in Hannah Arendt and Hans-Georg Gadamer.

Address:

Jakub Novák

Assistant Lecturer

Charles University in Prague

Faculty of Humanities

U Kříže 8, Prague 5-Jinonice, 15800

Czech Republic

Email: novakku@gmail.com