

# The Mystery of Willing – A Phenomenological Perspective on the Fear of Freedom, the Tyranny of the Will, and the Spontaneity<sup>1</sup>

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I would like to begin with a letter Hannah Arendt wrote to her husband Heinrich Blücher in exile in 1937. In the letter she mentions a visit to the Louvre where she once again examined Rembrandt's painting *Bathseba*. Bathseba is portrayed naked in her bathroom holding a letter from King David, who has invited her to his bedroom. Bathseba's is in a dilemma because she is married and her husband, a commanding officer, is at war for the king. She eventually accepts the invitation and becomes pregnant. After a failed attempt to insinuate Bathseba's husband as the father, King David arranges for him to be killed in the war. The painting shows Bathseba's moment of decision. In the letter to her husband, Arendt praises Rembrandt as a painter "of the human face" rather than of beauty, who not only liberated the "woman or the human being" in this painting but dared to show him "in the humanness of his life". For Arendt, Rembrandt's art is always the triumph of age, the truly human essence which

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shows that man has a life and experience and gained knowledge about this life.”<sup>2</sup> Arendt wrote that in this painting “the face, and with it the human being, emancipates itself from the beautiful and used body, which in its particular friability manifests every signs of transience. And precisely because this body is by no means perfectly beautiful, it is human and can be ‘dominated’ by its face. Just as man manages to liberate himself from God and the Devil to the extent that he no longer is their plaything, just as he no longer *is* fate ... does he *have* a fate, which turns from blind chance to fortune and misfortune that is comprehensible and experienced on the human level.”<sup>3</sup>

Around this time Arendt was in the process of writing the last chapter of her biography of Rahel Varnhagen, the “Melody of an Insulted Life”, as she originally wanted to call the book. Only in exile did she find a solution for a life that had failed to find conformity with itself through assimilation or conversion: to remain a Jew and a Pariah and to counter assimilation with the “authenticity” of a No,<sup>4</sup> an assimilation that would always have implied adopting European anti-Semitism, the “denial of her own origins” and a “break in the solidarity with those who had not or not yet done so”<sup>5</sup>.

Both Rembrandt and Rahel Varnhagen refused to accept the given as fate. This resistance, however, entailed an active engagement with life in the broader sense, based on judgement and the will to act in accordance with the No.

So Arendt was concerned with thinking, willing and judging from early on in her life until the very end. It began with her discussion on the decision of the individual, which as a result of totalitarianism and the Holocaust soon takes on a far more disturbing dimension than the simple issue of destiny and conformism, in other words, the will to act based on the ability to judge. At the end of her life, she states in her book *Willing* that even those who personify spontaneous action most, that is, revolutionaries of the modern age, were overwhelmed by the radical contingency of their political acts. In the final chapter of *Willing* entitled “The abyss of freedom and the novus ordo saeculorum”, which was to be the last in her unfinished book *The Life of the Mind*, she

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<sup>2</sup> Between Four Walls. The Correspondence *BETWEEN* Hannah *ARENDR* and Heinrich Blucher, 1936-, 23.II.37. I am grateful for Fred Dewey’s hint to this letter he discussed in the workshop “Hannah Arendt’s Crisis in Culture 50th Anniversary: Reflections, Implications, Speculations” at the Free University Amsterdam May 16-19, 2012

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Hannah Arendt: Rahel Varnhagen, München 1981, p. 211.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 208.

writes: “When we directed our attention to men of action, hoping to find in them a notion of freedom purged of the perplexities caused for men’s mind by the reflexivity of mental activities – the inevitable recoil on itself of the willing ego – we hoped for more than we finally achieved. The abyss of pure spontaneity, which in the foundation legends is bridged by the hiatus between liberation and the constitution of freedom, is covered up by the device, typical of the Occidental tradition (the only tradition where freedom has always been the *raison d’être* of all politics) of understanding the *new* as an improved re-statement of the old.”<sup>6</sup>

*Willing* was Arendt most difficult book: a walk through the history of philosophy, the antiquity with Augustine of Hippo, the Middle Ages with Thomas Aquinas and Duns Scotus, and the modern age with Kant, Nietzsche and Heidegger. It is likewise a glance at the experience of men of action. Arendt’s conclusion, partly unspoken, was that the search for a philosophy of the will as the “organ of freedom and the future” simply showed that pre-modern societies whose social structures consisted of tribes and clans were hardly in a position to develop a political and philosophical concept of individual freedom. Way into the modern age, Christianity still had difficulty in reconciling belief in an almighty God with free will, thereby furthering the principles of causality and later Hegel’s philosophy of history. Arendt was particularly disappointed by the attitude of philosophers: “The greatest difficulty faced by every discussion of the Will is the simple fact that there is no other capacity of the mind whose very existence has been so consistently doubted and refuted by so eminent a series of philosophers.”<sup>7</sup> She presumed that philosophers were suspicious because “willing, it appears, has an infinitely greater freedom than thinking, which even in its freest, most speculative form cannot escape the law of non-contradiction. This undeniable fact has never been felt to be an unmixed blessing. By men of thought, more often than not, it has been felt to be a curse.”<sup>8</sup>

Hannah Arendt’s biographer Elisabeth Young-Bruehl and her research assistant, Jerome Kohn, pointed out that Arendt not only wanted to define the organ of freedom and the future but also to place it in context with the mental activities of thinking and

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<sup>6</sup> Hannah Arendt: *The Life of the Mind*, New York 1978, *Two/Willing*, p. 216.

<sup>7</sup> Hannah Arendt: *The Life of the Mind*, *Two*, p. 4.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 5.

judging. And they construct this relationship in a distinctly original manner by referring to Arendt's world of the republic and by linking *The Life of the Mind* with *On Revolution*. As Arendt highlights, the republic is based on the separation of legislative, executive and judicial powers and their mutually balanced limitation by a system of checks and balances. This political republic corresponds in the words of Kohn and Young-Bruehl to some sort of mental republic of thinking, willing and judging. Kohn writes: "Her image of the republican mind is one in which thinking, willing, and judging are equal and interactive. Thinking gives willing and judging 'thought things', images; willing gives thinking and judging the possibility of acting; judging, a 'side effect' of thinking, gives willing guidance, direction, 'what to do'."<sup>9</sup> And Young-Bruehl adds: "Arendt wanted to save the mental activities from mutual hostility, to avoid constructing them as warring parties. With good government in the mind, the faculties will check and balance each other".<sup>10</sup>

I will now briefly address what Arendt saw as a disappointing review of the history of philosophy and men of action, and go on to present the various aspects of Arendt's definition of subjective will, on the one hand, and pluralistic will, on the other. Finally, I will return to the good government of mental faculties.

#### 1. THE DISAPPOINTING REVIEW OF THE HISTORY OF PHILOSOPHY AND MEN OF ACTION.

Arendt's search for philosophical definitions of the will is characterized by her desire to find useful aspects that help to define the will as an organ of spontaneity. She may only have realized in the course of applying herself to this topic how little she would find in comparison with her other topics of thinking and judging. What she does find is a number of restrictions: as in Aristotle's faculty of choice, *prohairesis*, which simply means choosing from one or more alternatives; the impotence of the will in Paul the Apostle; the omnipotence of the will in Epictetus, safeguarding the mind from reality; the repudiation of the will in Nietzsche and the will-not-to-will in Heidegger.

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<sup>9</sup> Elisabeth Young-Bruehl and Jerome Kohn: A Conversation on Hannah Arendt's Concept of Sovereignty, in: Who's Afraid of Social-Democracy? <http://elisabethyoung-bruehl.com/articles/hannah-arendt-conversations/sovereignty/> (Last visit 28/5/2012)

<sup>10</sup> Elisabeth Young-Bruehl: Reflections on Hannah Arendt's 'The Life of the Mind', in: Political Theory, Vol.10, No. 2, May 1982, p. 292.

When it comes to prioritizing reason or the will, Thomas Aquinas favours the will. Even Kant proved to be less helpful here than he had been on the issue of assessment, where Arendt reinterpreted his aesthetic judgment as political, albeit with the exception of his remark on spontaneity as the human ability to begin something new, which was frequently cited by Arendt.

That leaves Augustine, Duns Scotus and Kant's one remark. Augustine worked on the idea of a willing that provokes the nilling. The will as the unifying power of the human senses refers to the outer world and can thus be understood as the driving force behind action. "The Will could indeed be understood as 'the spring of action'; by directing the sense's attention, presiding over the images impressed on memory, and providing the intellect with material for understanding, the Will prepares the ground on which action can take place."<sup>11</sup> As in her dissertation on the concept of love in Augustine, Arendt comes back to his notion of human natality, which in terms of the human condition represents birth as a new beginning. "If Augustine had drawn the consequences of these speculations, he would have defined men, not, like the Greeks, as mortals, but as 'natals', and he would have defined the freedom of the Will not as the *liberum arbitrium*, the free choice between willing and nilling, but as the freedom of which Kant speaks in the *Critique of Pure Reason*." Arendt also suggests a conclusion for Kant, which he himself did not draw: "... had Kant known of Augustine's philosophy of natality he might have agreed that the freedom of a relatively absolute spontaneity is no more embarrassing to human reason than the fact that men are born – newcomers again and again in a world that preceded them in time. The freedom of spontaneity is part and parcel of the human condition. Its mental organ is the Will."<sup>12</sup>

In Duns Scotus, on the other hand, Arendt encounters a fully-fledged concept of independent will, free vis-à-vis all objects, a concept of the contingency of causality, and the "experience of the Will as a mental potency whose power ... inspires and endows (the mind) with self-confidence"<sup>13</sup>. What Arendt finds here is nothing less than "the speculative conditions for a philosophy of freedom"<sup>14</sup>.

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<sup>11</sup> Hannah Arendt: *The Life of the Mind*, Two, p. 101.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 109/10.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 142.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 148.

The situation becomes more dramatic when – after the frustrating insights into the history of philosophy – Arendt turns optimistically to political freedom but is forced to admit that the nineteenth and twentieth centuries produced nothing of importance in this context. On the contrary, a non-political wave of speculative thought took hold after Kant, which was far removed from his critical thought. Arendt found that similarly biased opinions on freedom were shared by the great scientists of the twentieth century, and established that in her time politics was dominated by “materialists (who) play the game of speculation with the help of computers, cybernetics, and automation”<sup>15</sup>. There is little room for the experience of spontaneous action, and although numerous documents and theories about revolutionary action exist, according to Arendt we have no conception of the adequate form of government for spontaneous action. “For if it is true,” Arendt writes in *On Revolution*, “that all thought begins with remembrance, it is also true that no remembrance remains secure unless it is condensed and distilled into a framework of conceptual notions within which it can further exercise itself. Experiences and even the stories which grow out of what men do and endure, of happenings and events, sink back into the futility inherent in the living word and the living deed unless they are talked about over and over again”.<sup>16</sup>

To this forgotten heritage belongs the forgotten experience of revolutionary societies at the beginning of the French Revolution, which were annihilated by its leaders, and the republican heritage of the councils during the Russian Revolution and in Hungary.

Hence in both Western foundation legends, Roman and Jewish, Arendt seeks to identify the love of freedom as the “inspiring principle of action, and this both in the negative sense of liberation from oppression and in the positive sense of the establishment of Freedom as a stable, tangible reality”<sup>17</sup>. Between liberation and the foundation of the new, however, lies the abyss of freedom indicating that the time continuum had been interrupted, that nothing leads back and at the same time each step forward is uncertain and unknown. Men shied away from this abyss and claimed they

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid., p. 197.

<sup>16</sup> Hannah Arendt: *On Revolution*, New York 1963, p. 222.

<sup>17</sup> Hannah Arendt: *The Life of the Mind*, Two, p. 203.

were merely descendants; Rome was purely the renaissance of Troy. Everything revolved around re-foundation and re-establishment, never absolute beginning.

So in the end there is only resignation and the realization that faced with the recurring fear of the abyss of pure spontaneity we are left with Augustine's insight that man is capable of spontaneous action by virtue of birth: "That there be a beginning man was created before whom nobody was."<sup>18</sup>

## 2. CONCEPTS OF A SUBJECTIVIST AND A PLURALIST WILL.

At the same time Arendt interpreted the will in her philosophical diaries and her book on the will in several different ways, all of which are marked by the distinction between a negative, subjectivist and a positive, pluralist concept of the will. Common to both is the fact that willing is not an activity for its own sake, such as thinking that is filled with joy in a non-sensual sphere but geared to the future with tension, impatience, unease and concern. The will hopes for the I-can that has not yet taken place. The will can only be fulfilled by the beginning of action and the end of thinking and judging. It disregards pure thinking, which is solely concerned with the past, memory and perhaps nostalgia. When we think, we do not will, but when I will, according to Arendt, "I cannot think ... In this sense thinking suffocates the thirst to know and the will to know annihilates the capacity to think." – "Thinking is not determined by the objects of willing to know."<sup>19</sup> So if, on the one hand, we stop acting in order to think, we stop thinking, on the other hand, in order to act. Or more precisely, our actions are based on our judgments.

Hence for Arendt the will is of a strange nature, because unlike thinking and judging it is not dialogical but aggressive, even dictatorial. The will knows nothing but command and obedience<sup>20</sup>, Arendt sees it as the only violent capacity<sup>21</sup>. While thinking talks to itself and judging reflects on itself, the will is constantly actualizing an inner strife: "I will – says the self as master, I do not will – says the same self as servant. In thinking the self is a friend, in willing an enemy and in judging it becomes the measure

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid., p. 216.

<sup>19</sup> Hannah Arendt: *Denktagebuch 1950-1973*, Berlin 2002, p. 261.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., p. 638.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., p. 686.

or rather my starting point when I make a judgment.”<sup>22</sup> Wickedness in moral issues is a phenomenon of the will, but not evil; it’s a matter of poor judgment.<sup>23</sup>

This has consequences for politics because if the will becomes a guiding principle for political action it carries violence into the political realm in a threefold manner:

Firstly, in the shape of the modern sovereignty of nation states that have no sense of responsibility towards other states but exclusively to themselves. Or in Arendt’s words: “Sovereignty, which is completely independent of plurality, is realized in the will”, meaning “that sovereignty depends primarily on will and not on reason”<sup>24</sup>, which specifically aims at plurality. Sovereignty is not far from tyranny, which, according to Arendt, following Hegel, is will without reason, the sovereignty of the “decisive subjectivity” of the subject.”<sup>25</sup>

Secondly, the purposeful desire to know destroys thinking, which Arendt characterizes as the origin of freedom. From a desire-to-know perspective freedom is interpreted as a phenomenon of the will and not as unattached and unfounded spontaneity, not as the *Initium* Arendt derives from Augustine, not as freedom of action but merely as freedom of choice. “The choice refers to the means, not to the end.”<sup>26</sup> In her *Introduction into Politics* Arendt explains this choice as one “between good and evil. We do not see freedom as simply wanting this and that to be changed in some way or other”<sup>27</sup>.

Thirdly and finally, Rousseau’s *volonté générale* means the exclusion of plurality and consensus. “The difficulties all arise from the fact that he (Rousseau, WH) identifies this will with the ‘people’”<sup>28</sup> In other words, in the sovereign nation state the will replaces the violence of the former feudal sovereign and the individual internalizes this external violence as an inner command to himself.<sup>29</sup> Faced with an indivisible *volonté*

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid., p. 756.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., p. 767.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., p. 84.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., p. 96.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., p. 642.

<sup>27</sup> Hannah Arendt: *Introduction into Politics*, in: *The Promise of Politics*, New York 2005, p. 113. See also: *Freiheit und Politik*, in: *Zwischen Vergangenheit und Zukunft. Übungen im politischen Denken I*, München 2000, p. 205.

<sup>28</sup> Hannah Arendt: *Denktagebuch*, p. 244.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., p. 335.



générale, the notion of power sharing seems unattainable. In Arendt's view, equating power with will was the origin of a "preconception about the indivisibility of power"<sup>30</sup>. That power is not the work of a willing subject but originates between people is unthinkable. "The Machiavellian reason of state ends with Rousseau's *volonté générale*", explains Arendt. "But what a shift in emphasis! From state to society and from reason to will."<sup>31</sup>

This critique is at the same time the basis of Arendt's pluralistic concept of the will. Here the will is not directed at a concrete goal but targets action as such. After all, when freedom is not simply a choice between given alternatives but also, as Arendt writes in her essay *What is Freedom?*, the ability "to call something into being which did not exist before, which was not given"<sup>32</sup>, then the will has a general goal rather than a specific purpose. In this case action is not guided by an imagined future that can be grasped by the will but by Montesquieu's principle of action, such as virtue in the case of the republic. Action is more an expression of common activity than of subjective will. Hence freedom as *initium* can create something that does not yet exist in the imagination. This is the only way to separate power from will and sovereignty, to recognize "that this subjectivity is based on illegitimate monopolization" and to eliminate "the truly destructive element of power, its subjectivity"<sup>33</sup>.

Distinguishing between the capacity to will and the desired public action of plurality allows Arendt to understand the traditional concept of freedom and at the same time to destroy "the identification of a desired end and a producible purpose" ... on which "Western political philosophy is based"<sup>34</sup>.

### 3. THE GOOD GOVERNMENT OF THE MENTAL FACULTIES.

Finally, I would like to return to Arendt's remark about the knowledge of life and Young-Bruehl's comment on "the good government of the mental faculties" thinking, willing and judging. All three faculties must be intact and mutually

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid., p. 244.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., p. 509.

<sup>32</sup> Hannah Arendt: *What is Freedom?* In: *Between Past and Future*, New York 1977, p. 150.

<sup>33</sup> Hannah Arendt: *Denktagebuch*, p. 184.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., p. 287.

complement and confine each other if they are to be effective in the Arendtian sense of worldliness. In this context our attention is drawn to a particular remark in *Willing*: "Just as thinking prepares the self for the role of the spectator, willing fashions it into an 'enduring I' that directs all particular acts of volition. It creates the self's *character* and therefore was sometimes understood as the *principium individuationis*, the source of the person's specific identity."<sup>35</sup> In her report on "Eichmann in Jerusalem", Arendt discussed the fateful consequences of the inability to think: talking in clichés, lack of imagination, limited mentality capacities and thus the inability to judge. So the banality of evil is not only expressed in the inability to judge but in the flaws of all three mental capacities. Arendt holds that since judging dictates the goals of willing, how a personality develops is dependent on the capacity to think and to judge, on the "thinking of being together"<sup>36</sup>.

It was not Arendt's intention to design the image of a fully-fledged personality. She preferred to praise in the men and women she met, "Men in dark Times", certain features that implied the frequent use of their mental capacities: the autonomous thinking of Lessing and his radically critical attitude; the humanism of the Pariahs; the sense of reality of politically conscious refugees; the "unerring sense for quality and relevance" of her friend Waldemar Gurian, and his "slightly mischievous innocence"<sup>37</sup> and remarkable courage. Thinking, willing and judging were reflected in their actions as openness, independent judgment and strength of character.

These personalities developed their character through a strong relationship with plurality. It is here that Rembrandt's observations on the knowledge about life encountered Arendt's men in dark times.

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<sup>35</sup> Hannah Arendt: *The Life of the Mind*, Two, p. 195.

<sup>36</sup> Hannah Arendt: *Denktagebuch*, p. 287.

<sup>37</sup> Hannah Arendt: *Men in Dark Times*, p. 257-58.