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The Ugly Psyche: Arendt and the Right to Opacity

Anne O'Byrne
Department of Philosophy, Stony Brook University, Stony Brook, NY, USA
anne.obyrne@stonybrook.edu

Abstract

Arendt was famously dismissive of the work of psychologists, claiming that they did nothing more than reveal the pervasive ugliness and monotony of the psyche. If we want to know who people are, she argued, we should observe what they do and say rather than delving into the turmoil of their inner lives; if we want to understand humanity, we would be better off reading *Oedipus Rex* than hearing about someone's Oedipus complex. The rejection has a certain coherence in the context of her understanding of public life as the realm of appearance and opinion, but examining it through the specific question of ugliness complicates that understanding. While beauty invites us to contemplate the world and admire it, ugliness repels our attention and sows the seed of a worry that the world might not want to be known. Working with *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, *The Life of the Mind: Thinking*, the Kant lectures and a striking *Denktagebuch* entry in which she reacts with revulsion to Matisse's *Heads of Jeannette*, I argue that Arendt's response to the ugly psyche requires a re-examination of the *sensus communis*. If the psyche does not want to be known, and if not all points of view are open to imaginative occupation, the ideal and practice of enlarged mentality must reckon with a right to opacity.

Keywords

Arendt – Matisse – aesthetics – psychology – psychoanalysis – ugliness – Kant – appearance – Eichmann – judgment – opacity

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> 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.
>
> HANNAH ARENDT, *The Life of the Mind*

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In *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, Hannah Arendt writes dismissively of the psychologists who examined Eichmann and found that he was really quite an unremarkable man. They concluded that his attitudes towards his family and friends were not only normal but desirable, and the minister who spent time with him after his capture added that he was a man with very positive ideas. Eichmann himself was sure that he was not an *innere Schweinehund*, and regarded himself as someone who had a conscience. After all, he would have felt quite bad if he had not done his job properly. The people Arendt called "the soul experts" could not move our thinking past the fact that Eichmann was not insane in any legal or moral sense, but nevertheless could, and did, send millions of people to their deaths. Their methods and their worldview did not have a place for "an average, 'normal,' person, neither feeble-minded nor indoctrinated nor cynical, [who was] perfectly incapable of telling right from wrong."[1] Elsewhere, Arendt chastises psychologists for indiscretion, claiming to know what they cannot know, claiming to know what the people they study do not know themselves, rummaging for curiosities, and presuming that what lies hidden in us is necessarily bad. The assumptions on which their methodologies are based—their disciplinary prejudices—mean that all they can find when they look inside us is "monotonous sameness and pervasive ugliness."[2]

Much of this resistance can be traced to a phenomenological commitment to the study of appearances, which undergirds Arendt's thought and becomes a central theme in her last works, *The Life of the Mind* and *Lectures on Kant's Political Philosophy*. In contrast with "the enormous variety and richness

1 Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, 26.
2 Arendt, *The Life of the Mind*, 35.

of overt human conduct," the inner world looks boring and ugly.[3] After all, the most distinctive element of our human existence is our ability—indeed propensity—to appear in front of our fellow humans and show them, by word and deed, who we are. However, psychologists are not the only ones who would struggle to recognize this Arendtian depiction of what they do. The *logos* of the *psyche* has its critics: within the discipline there are disputes over premises and methodologies; beyond, there is discussion about the degree to which it is an art and/or a science; non-psychologists often reject its reach and agree that it encourages claims to know what cannot be known. But only Arendt points to findings of sameness and ugliness as the problem, and her objections—which extend with no apparent variation to Freudians, Jungians, depth psychologists, psychologists *simpliciter*, and graphologists—are not so much controversial or provocative as they are strange.

It is a compelling strangeness, for several reasons. First, Arendt makes a firm link between the capacity to tell right from wrong and the capacity to tell beauty from ugliness, though the form of that link remains obscure. Second, ugliness emerges not just as the absence of beauty, and not just as a characteristic of things, but as a distinctive sort of judgment that upsets the analogy between the two capacities and also frustrates the effort to plot the relations among the four terms—right/wrong, beautiful/ugly—into a *bella figura* of opposition and analogy. The judgment of the ugly has a distinctive structure with its own aesthetic but also moral and existential implications. Third, her objections point to the fact that the Eichmann problem is unresolved, and, despite psychology's efforts (and the efforts of legal and moral thinkers), we struggle to understand someone who carries out murderous actions apparently conscientiously.

Arendt was accused of superficiality and aestheticism in her responses to Eichmann; when we see her responding to the inner workings of the psyche as boring and ugly, we see that that was her point, and we also see where the point takes us. The psychologists saw sameness as evidence of normality; Arendt points out that their research ignored the *sensus communis* that places us in the human community, that is, in a community of humans, plural. The thought that psychic sameness could underlie not only unremarkable deeds but also deeds of outstanding goodness, *and* deeds of horrifying violence marked it as a finding that was both banal and abysmal. If ugliness turns out to be an intimation that the world may not want us to know it, then the ugliness of the psyche signals *its* refusal to be known, and an opacity that the operations of *sensus communis* may not overcome.

3 Ibid.

1 Judgment of the Ugly

Beautiful and *ugly* slip easily into the grammar that attributes qualities to objects: the dog is ugly; the vase is ugly; the painting is ugly. We know what these statements mean, even if we go on to dispute the claims: what you regard as an ugly animal is my adored pet; that ugly vase, placed in the right room, turns out to be elegant; the painting is ugly according to the expectations of an earlier generation of art lovers. This is why empirical studies of ugliness do not produce definitions but instead are social histories of a certain sort of experience and a certain sort of judgment.[4] Very often, they document the experience and judgment of ugliness as the opposite of beauty or the lack of beauty, and this is how Arendt uses it repeatedly in the *Life of the Mind: Thinking*: "This is beautiful, this is ugly."[5] "The manifestation of the wind of thought is not knowledge; it is the ability to tell … beautiful from ugly."[6] If we know ugliness in its connection to and distinctness from beauty, we have ready to hand a structure for specifying what it is, that is, an element of the judgment of taste as Kant taught us to think of it. When I say "This is beautiful," I am speaking *as if* beauty were a property of the object, while the sentence is better understood as the expression of my judgment of taste; in the same way, then, when I say "This is ugly," I am speaking as though ugliness were a property of objects. The sentence takes the form of a statement predicating something of an object, but it is the expression of a judgment. Its form suggests that everyone *should* agree but, as Arendt points out, I cannot in fact insist that everyone agree with me; I can at best woo or court their assent.[7]

In these pages in *The Life of the Mind: Thinking*, when Arendt mentions telling the beautiful from the ugly, she invariably folds the capacity for discerning these two into the capacity for telling right from wrong. Thus: "This is beautiful, this is ugly, this is right, this is wrong."[8] "The manifestation of the wind of thought is no knowledge; it is the ability to tell right from wrong, beautiful from ugly."[9] Clearly, rightness and wrongness are not properties of objects, or at least not of singular objects. We use the words to talk about the same objects, and use the same grammar, but the statement "This vase is wrong"—unlike "This vase is ugly"—implies that it is wrong *for this place*, that it does not *go* with this

4 See Umberto Eco's edited volume *On Ugliness*, a compilation examples of artworks and fragments of philosophical reflection on the theme.

5 Arendt, *The Life of the Mind*, 69.

6 Ibid., 179.

7 Arendt, *Lectures on Kant's Political Philosophy*, 72.

8 Arendt, *The Life of the Mind*, 69.

9 Ibid., 179.

room. Used in their aesthetic sense, *right* and *wrong* point to the demands of a specific context, and to qualities of the relations among objects in a situation. They also suggest the existence of a rule—a technical code derived from a science of color and proportion, for example, or the culturally specific dictates of the fashion of the moment. What is right is appropriate, fitting, the right thing in the right place, the right thing at the right time, harmonious, balanced; what is wrong is out of place, jarring, discordant, clashing, outdated or before its time. Used in their ethical sense they also point to the demands of a context and to qualities of relations, though now it is no longer a matter of relations among colors or proportions but among people and other ethically relevant beings. They suggest the existence of rules and customs according to which an action is right and appropriate, or wrong and mistaken. That is to say, the range of words we reach for to express aesthetic rightness and wrongness as opposed to ethical rightness and wrongness may differ, but the structure of the judgment remains the same.

Yet will the ability to make this sort of judgment serve us when the chips are down, as Arendt puts it? Will it be enough to avert catastrophe? Will it be adequate to the problem of Eichmann? Importantly, when Arendt approaches the phenomenon of Eichmann's thoughtlessness, *right* and *wrong* are no longer paired with *beautiful* and *ugly* but are set with *good* and *evil*. She captures the question, which will go on to become the central question of *The Life of the Mind: Thinking*—in this way: "Should the problem of good and evil, should our faculty to tell right from wrong be connected with our faculty of thought?"[10] This suggests another, different sort of *as if*: when we moralize, we say "This is right" *as if* we were applying a moral law. Ethical rules emerge in a specific form of life; moral laws claim their authority from an elsewhere that transcends the here and now. Insofar as a use of *right* is analogous to the aesthetic use of the word, *right* refers not to an object but an act or practice that takes shape and has its meaning in a specific context: "You did the right thing" means "You did the right thing there" in the same way that "That's the right shade of red" means "That's the right shade there." The difference is that "This color is just right" points to empirically derived rules of color interaction, but "You did the right thing" or "There's a right and a wrong" can refer to a custom or practice (ethics), or can be pronounced as if this rightness were a matter of the application a transcendent, universal moral law.

The significant difference is that the aesthetic and ethical uses of "This is right" involve reflective judgment; the moral use involves the application of a general rule to a particular instance, which is a matter of determinate judgment.

10 Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, 4.

Reflective judgment "does *not* descend from the general to the particular but 'ascends from the particular to the universal' by deciding *without* any general rules."[11] (When Arendt uses the term *judgment* without qualification she is referring to reflective judgment.)[12] It is not that Arendt wishes to deny the possibility of morality and moral action. The problem is that Eichmann proved capable of taking the apparatus of moral law, switching out Kant's categorical imperative and substituting the will of the Führer, with evil results.[13] Arendt's intervention is to insist that this is not a failure in judgment but a refusal to judge, which for her is also a refusal to think.

There is another difference, however, this time between the ethical and moral uses of "This is right" and "This is wrong," on the one hand, and the aesthetic, on the other, where Arendt, following Kant, identifies disinterest as the differentiating criterion. She writes in the *Lectures on Kant's Political Philosophy*: "Disinterestedness is implied in the very words beautiful and ugly, as it is not in the words right and wrong."[14] The formulation is precise. When we judge beauty and ugliness, we do so impartially, as is made clear by our choice of those words. *Right* and *wrong* do not imply disinterest but nor do they imply interest, which is what makes them available for the expression of aesthetic judgments *and* ethical judgments. They can go either way. The difference is that when we judge rightness and wrongness in the ethical sense, we cannot but be partial, just as we cannot but be partial in our judgments of goodness and evil.

We can say of ugliness, then, that it is not a quality of objects but a judgment we make regarding objects, that it is a reflective judgment made in the absence of a determining rule, and that it is disinterested.[15] As for the basis of the judgment, Kant's primary concern is with the judgment of the beautiful and the feeling of pleasure that gives rise to it; he points to an array of feelings that, while not quite opposites of the feeling of pleasure in the beautiful, would account for the *lack* of that feeling. If a beautiful object is one that occasions the

11 Arendt, *The Life of the Mind*, 69.

12 She writes: "Kant does not believe that moral judgments are the product of reflection and imagination, hence they are not judgments strictly speaking." Arendt, *Lectures on Kant's Political Philosophy*, 72.

13 Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, 135–37.

14 Arendt, *Lectures on Kant's Political Philosophy*, 73.

15 To make this argument in the detail it deserves would require an explanation of the theory of aesthetic judgment in Kant's *Critique of Judgment*. For a précis, see Ronald Beiner, "Interpretive Essay: Hannah Arendt on Judging," 132–33. As Beiner writes, it is a difficult and often perplexing theory, and when Arendt turns her attention to it in the *Lectures on Kant's Political Philosophy* it is not to offer a reading so much as to make one of her characteristic tiger leaps.

experience of a particular pleasure, an ordinary one occasions indifference, a disgusting one produces a distinctive displeasure connected to revulsion, and an ugly one is associated with yet another sort of displeasure, but it is not yet clear what sort of displeasure and what sort of feeling it will be.[16]

That is to say, the ordinary, the ugly, and the disgusting are all contraries of the beautiful, but in different ways. In the case of what is ordinary, we refrain from judging it beautiful.[17] Disgust, in contrast, is a conscious response to the idea of putrefaction or contagiousness of the offending object; it is driven by a feeling of disgusted displeasure that alludes to a sense of danger and the emotion of fear.[18] Not even art can transform the feeling of disgust into aesthetic liking. In contrast, Kant assures us that our response to an ugly object can be transformed into liking in the context of artistic presentation. He writes: "things that in nature would be ugly and displeasing" such as "the furies, diseases, devastations of war, and the like" appear beautiful presented in works of art.[19]

Kant has a highly formal account of the distinctive feeling of pleasure we take in the beautiful and the judgment of beauty that follows upon it. It's not that we find the beautiful thing agreeable or simply pleasant; that's the response we have to things we happen to like, idiosyncratically. In those cases we don't require other people to agree with us, we don't have much patience for anyone telling us we should or shouldn't like those things, and there isn't much more to be said. As Arendt puts it, these are "pleasures and displeasures that are subjective, immediate, incommunicable and about which there is no dispute."[20] Yet when we pronounce something beautiful, we do have an expectation that others agree with us. This requires three separate (or at least theoretically separable) operations: perception, reflection and judgment. We perceive the object when the data from our senses are made coherent under a concept of the understanding. This already requires a certain sort of harmonious cooperation between our faculties, since we represent objects to ourselves by means of the imagination, transforming them into objects for

16 Arendt, *Lectures on Kant's Political Philosophy*, 68.

17 This point deserves more attention, since it does not follow that there is no judgment involved in failing to judge something beautiful, as is implied by Guyer's reading of Kant. After all, the statement "This has no value" has the form of a judgment, and habits of disregard are tightly tied to forms of life that make it possible for us to discount particular opinions, remain ignorant of certain forms of suffering, and think of some people as disposable.

18 Kuplen, "Disgust and Ugliness: A Kantian Perspective," 39.

19 Kant, *Critique of Judgment*.

20 Arendt, *Lectures on Kant's Political Philosophy*, 66.

consciousness. When we reflect on them, those representations may arouse the particular sort of pleasure that is not merely a matter of liking but is a communicable experience of beauty; for Kant, this is a pleasure in the harmony of our faculties of understanding and imagination that does not resolve in the determination of the object by a concept, but allows the imagination free play.[21] On the basis of this experience, we judge objects to be beautiful.

For Arendt, and for Kant, the stakes could not be higher. Beauty and the ability to experience beauty are not pleasant supplements to our lives; they have a crucial existential significance, which Arendt finds captured in a note in Kant's *Nachlass*: "The fact that man is affected by the sheer beauty of nature proves that he is made for and fits into this world" (*Die schoenen Dinge zeigen an, dass der Mensch in die Welt passe und selbst seing Anschauung der Dinge mit den Gesetzen seiner Anschauung stimme*).[22] When we perceive an object and take it up in our imagination, contemplating it disinterestedly, undertaking no action towards it, letting our imagination range freely, we sometimes feel a distinct pleasure that comes from that free play as it harmonizes with the operation of the understanding. This is the experience of beauty. It does not arise when we understand something that was previously mysterious, pinning it to a concept—this would be the triumph of the faculty of understanding. Nor is it the feeling of our imagination simply having free rein—this would be the triumph of the faculty of imagination. Instead, it is the experience of harmonious free play between the two, and it reassures us that we are at home in the world.

What, then, of the experience of ugliness? If beauty has to do with harmony, surely ugliness is linked to disharmony. But, Paul Guyer argues, when we judge an object ugly, we have already experienced the harmonious cooperation of our faculties in *perceiving* it as an object at all; what could this other sort of disharmony—a specific disharmony of the ugly—possibly be? Can there indeed be such a thing? He writes: "A free play of our cognitive powers [i.e., of the imagination and the understanding] that results in a disharmony between them is not a logical impossibility, just as Allison maintains; but it is an epistemological impossibility on Kant's fundamental theory of human consciousness."[23] That is to say, Guyer appreciates the stakes. If there were such an experience as the aesthetic disharmony of the faculties, we might have to rethink how we know, and might find ourselves doubting *that* we know. He concludes that there can be no such explanation of the judgment of ugliness,

21 Ibid., 65.

22 Reflexionen zur Logik, no. 1820a GS, Prussian Academy edition, 16:127. Cited in Arendt, *Lectures on Kant's Political Philosophy*.

23 Guyer, "Kant and the Purity of the Ugly," 6. See also Allison, *Kant's Theory of Taste*, 116–17.

and that the ugly is just what we find physically disagreeable (disgusting) or morally offensive (bad) or an imperfect instance of the sort of thing it is.[24] Yet what remains obscure in this solution is the source of the dread that attaches to experiences of ugliness.

Perhaps it is anxiety about the very conditions of knowledge. Beautiful things attract our eye and invite our minds to contemplate them. The imagination, with its free play, draws us into an experience of harmony that is obscured and ignored so long as our minds are preoccupied with subsuming sensations under concepts, making decisions about function and utility, or applying general rules to particular instances. Confronted with beauty, what Arendt calls contemplative pleasure and inactive delight invite us to stay with the experience, lingering with the intimation that just as our faculties are well-matched for harmonious free play, they are fit for their encounter with the world given to us in sense perception. As James Phillips writes, responding to Guyer: "The pleasure of beauty is [in §12 of the *Critique of Judgment*] the pleasure of the mere possibility of knowledge, of the contemplation that can issue in knowledge … [It] is the pleasure in the world's seeming willingness to be known."[25]

Phillips agrees with Guyer that there is no Kantian account of a pure experience of aesthetic ugliness:

> Kant does not pause to account for the pleasure of harmony or to examine the possibility of displeasurable harmony. In this regard, Kant shows himself a man of the eighteenth century and its culture of the appreciation of the harmonious, whether it is met with in the symmetry of Georgian architecture, the dynamics of Viennese classical music, or the concord of self-serving activities in Adam Smith's economics. A displeasurable harmony of the faculties, on whose basis one might make a disinterested judgement of free ugliness, is from a Kantian perspective nonsensical. As the displeasure of ugliness cannot be traced to the harmony of the faculties and its essentially pleasurable character, it must have another source than disinterest and its judgement must therefore be an impure aesthetic judgement.[26]

24 He adds that an apparent example of disharmony between the imagination and the understanding in the experience of the mathematical sublime is in fact a failure of the imagination alone. Guyer, "Kant and the Purity of the Ugly," 20.

25 Guyer, "Kant and the Purity of the Ugly."

26 Phillips, "Placing Ugliness in Kant's Third Critique: A Reply to Paul Guyer."

Knowledge is communicable thanks to the concepts of the understanding, and for Kant and Arendt it is essential that judgments of the beautiful also be communicable. Yet how can this be when there is no definition or determinate concept of beauty? Indeed, uncertainty and contingency are built into the experience, since we never know which objects will strike us as beautiful and will reward contemplation with an experience of inner harmony.

After all, ugliness is striking too; the difference is that it punishes contemplation. It captures our gaze but we turn away because, in Phillips's canny phrase, "it retracts the promise made by beauty to our cognitive ambitions." He writes:

> The beautiful intrigues us: no matter how long we contemplate it, our contemplation does not resolve itself in a concept … [T]here is [likewise] something essentially obscure and unintelligible to the ugly as a consequence of its rebuff to contemplation. The dreadfulness of the message of the ugly is not simply that contemplation might not be its own reward, but that contemplation is in and of itself painful. The displeasure of ugliness is the displeasure of the thought that the world might not want us to know it. [The ugliness of an ugly object] will remain over as an excess, as a hostility to contemplation and a caveat to knowability … [It] will continue to resist conceptualisation. Ugliness is a secret that is nothing other than its appearance. It is an argument against justifying the world through reference to humanity's epistemological goals.[27]

Put another way, it is an argument against justifying our existence through reference to the knowability of the world.

2 Arendt and Matisse

Arendt's notes on the exhibition "The Magic of Matisse" splash onto the pages of her Denktagebuch in April 1966.

> Matisse Show in Chicago: The five sculptured heads of Jeanette (1910–1913): the first—her appearance, and then as though layer upon layer were ripped off, one uglier than the former, the last like a monstrosity

27 Phillips cites Kant's in the "Methodenlehre der teleologischen Urtheilskraft," §86: "Es ist aber auch nicht das Erkenntnißvermögen desselben (theoretische Vernunft), in Beziehung auf welches das Dasein alles Übrigen in der Welt allererst seinen Werth bekommt, etwa damit irgend Jemand da sei, welcher die Welt betrachten könne."

FIGURE 1 © 2020 Succession H. Matisse / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York

> makes the first look as though our face were nothing but a precarious façade. Plato's naked soul piercing into naked soul. As though our clothes were only to hide the ugliness of the body. The whole of modern psychology. The soul-body problem = appearance versus being.[28]

At this point Arendt has written elsewhere (in *The Human Condition*) about the role of the artist and the existential significance of the artwork, but here we catch her in the act of responding viscerally, irritably, to a particular work. The heads of Jeanette provoke her to respond in a way that reverberates through later works, emerging in the *Life of the Mind: Thinking*, the Kant Lectures and in the conversations she had in her last seminars in the Fall of 1974 on Kleist, Adolf Portmann, and Joseph Heller.

We can assume that Arendt visited the exhibition in Chicago that month, April 1966.[29] The first and second heads, both of which Matisse modelled from life in 1910, are recognizable as portraits, though already in Jeanette II the artist is shifting attention from the depiction of his model's features to the forms and shapes that together form the head. A few years earlier he commented that his portraits were not meant to be precise renditions of likenesses but were

28 Arendt, *Denktagebuch*, Zweiter Band, Heft XXV, §10, 658.

29 She may have known of it from newspaper or magazine articles, since it started its tour at UCLA, and contemporary articles and reviews sometimes included photographs of the heads. (See, for example, the April 1966 edition of *Apollo: the Magazine of the Arts*.) However, the published images I have found do not include all the sculptures. Besides, the five sculptured heads have an impact when seen together, in person, that far exceeds the impact of photographs.

focused, rather, on revealing the essential qualities of the model in ways that physical images could not do. The third, fourth and fifth heads were modelled on the first two between 1910 and 1916, and in them he moves progressively further from the surface.

Where art historians see Matisse backing away, Arendt sees him moving in, cutting past the figure's face. The history of modern art regards the change of style from head to head as a process of abstraction, as though the artist drew back, squinting, letting the details of Jeanette's face blur until what remained was a set of shapes that together made up the shape of a head. The sculptures belong to the collection at the Museum of Modern Art, where the gallery note points out that: "As he progressed with the series, Matisse dramatically abstracted his subject, organizing the head into increasingly simplified chunks." In the catalogue for the 1972 MOMA exhibition *Sculpture of Matisse*, Alica Legg writes: "While the process of abstraction in these heads is clearly evident, Matisse also demonstrates his extraordinary mastery of organic form and its expressive possibilities."[30] Grace Glueck, reviewing a 1998 exhibition, also discusses the series in terms of an arc towards abstraction:

> Moving from near-realism to the stripped-down, almost surreal essence of a face, they illustrate Matisse's struggle to separate sculpture from portraiture. In 'Jeannette V' the face has become a grotesque, pared of most of its hair, with one bulging eye and the other simply a socket. Part of its skull seems also to be missing. Possibly inspired by an African sculpture Matisse owned, its daringly severe reductiveness forecasts much that was to come in 20th-century sculpture.

Picasso saw them in 1930. Ellen McBreen writes:

> As might be expected from one of the sharpest observers of Matisse's work, Picasso recognized this giving form to desire as a theme in Matisse's later "Jeannettes," his series of five heads that grow increasingly abstract over time (1910–16). From *Jeannette IV* (1913) to *Jeannette V* (1916), Matisse modified his composition by pulling the caricatural volume signaling hair into the structure of the skull itself. Now continuous with an exaggerated nose, the female hair is fetishistically displaced onto phallic form. After seeing the "Jeannette" sculptures at a 1930 exhibition, Picasso embarked

30 *Sculpture of Matisse* (New York, MOMA, 1972), 32.

> on a series of portrait heads of Marie-Thérèse Walter with more explicitly sexualized volumes, responding as if to unmask "Jeannette."[31]

Arendt experienced the development of the series as tearing off the surface in order to expose the underlying flesh and bones that were never meant to see the light of day. In the one, the subject of the artwork withdraws; in the other, it is flayed, its internal ugliness cruelly put on show. In both cases, the starting point is the particularity of an individual, the subject of a portrait, and the end is impersonality and a universal sameness.

What strikes Arendt as ugly here? On one level, it is a matter of the shapes into which the sculpted head is resolved. The emergence (what the art historians regard as the *resolution*) of those shapes reminds her, on another level, of the exposure of inner organs which, in their disarray, prompt her to think of the exposure of the inner workings of the psyche. What's repeated on all three levels is the destruction of a composed exterior—a façade, the exterior of a body, a public persona—, the sight of uncomposed, jostling forms inside, and the apparent impossibility of differentiating one collection of these messy forms from another. "Inside organs are never pleasing to the eye," she writes in *The Life of the Mind*. "Once forced into view they look as if they had been thrown together piecemeal … [Besides], if this inside were to appear, we would all look alike."[32] This is a strange claim. Perhaps we would look alike, but that must depend on who is looking. A surgeon will see plenty of difference, and the more experience she has and the more she trains her eye, the more differences will become apparent, and not just those between what's normal and abnormal, healthy and diseased. But if we—you, I, non-experts generally—imagine the sight of inner organs, we encounter something that Arendt identifies as both banal and abysmal. We may think of the abyss as the void of the mountain crevasse or the depths of space, but Arendt encounters it in the ugliness of indistinguishable viscera exposed to the light of day.

In *The Human Condition*, bodily labor and consumption, while essential for life, are the sort of activity in which no-one distinguishes herself; one set of limbs is more or less as good as another, one back or one womb can function much as another. We labor with our bodies and work with our hands but action requires a face and speech. This is the appearance that counts as distinctive and distinctively human. Stripping away the face *does* reveal something essential, but it turns out to be an utterly impersonal, natural essence, the banal, inexpressive essence of mammalian life. This is of little interest to Arendt. We

31 McBreen, "Exhibition Review of Matisse: Painter as Sculptor," 117.

32 Arendt, *The Life of the Mind*, 29.

only properly appear to each other when we show our faces, when we stand face to face and look at one another in mutual recognition. If gazing at innards is indeed looking at abysmal life, the horror is in their banality and the sense that it is impossible to recognize oneself or anyone there. This is the abyss that does not look back. This is the psyche refusing to be known.

For her, the last head of Jeanette shows that the physical face is a precarious façade covering ugly sameness, and it provokes the anxiety that between the seething *passive* life of the passions and our *actions* in the world, there is nothing more than a front that might crumble at any moment. The project of the *Life of the Mind* is to reject this. Instead of a thin façade between the passions we undergo and the actions we undertake there is all the thinking, willing, and judging of the mind. The psyche or soul is studied here in the analogy of the body, but it is also more than an analogy. Arendt will argue that each emotion is somatic, but also that it is not meant to appear in its raw state any more than the viscera are meant to appear to our eyes. Rather, every show of emotion will be understood as a reflection on that emotion.[33]

Note that it is not a matter of the mind *itself*, or the *being* of the mind. The moment in the *Gorgias* (523e) when soul pierces naked soul is the moment of Platonic judgment after death; this is when the crooked, ugly, stained souls have nowhere to hide. Once identified, they are sent to Tartarus. Plato has the metaphysics to allow for this—that some souls *are* straight and some *are* crooked, that some *are* ugly and some *are* beautiful, and so must be judged in their *being*—but, for Arendt, judgment happens here, in this world, where we deal in appearance rather than being, and not appearance as an indication or shadow of being. Living, living among others, distinguishing ourselves, acting, speaking; all is appearance, and it's all we've got.

3 The Ugly, Boring Psyche

The *Denktagebuch* note from April 1966 continues:

> The Freudian fallacy, and the fallacy of all modern psychology, not only that they pretend to know what they most certainly don't, not only the nonsense of the "unconscious." But the oldest prejudice: What is hidden, non-visible, is what I am ashamed of, hence what is *bad*. Since my thought and feelings can't be seen except through bodily display they must be bad.

33 Ibid., 31–32.

Initially, Arendt's gripe with the Freudians seems to be a matter of inference. Refusing to take what appears *as* appearance, or testimony *as* testimony, they infer all the way to the unconscious, and claim what they find there as knowledge of what is *really* going on. In *Life of the Mind: Thinking* she takes up Hans Blumenberg's description of this as an "iceberg" theory that posits an unseen unconscious whose being cannot be demonstrated.[34] Second, the implication of the theory of the unconscious is that an action cannot be accounted for on its own terms and the terms of its world. Its meaning must lie behind and beneath it. Specifically, Freudians collapse thoughts and feelings under the heading of the "non-visible" while, for Arendt, these are non-visible in different ways. Thoughts belong to the life of the mind, while feelings belong to the soul or psyche that is the object of psychologist's professional attention. Thinking includes contemplation, reflection, and the practice of following thought-trains, remaining "steadfastly non-manifest" even in full actuality.[35] We sometimes have an indication of it in absentmindedness, or in judgment, but it does not appear. Emotions, meanwhile, *should not* appear:

> The soul, where our passions, our feelings and emotions arise, is a more or less chaotic welter of happenings which we do not enact but suffer (*pathein*), and which in cases of great intensity may overwhelm us as pain or pleasure does; its invisibility resembles that of our inner bodily organs of whose functioning or non-functioning we are also aware without being able to control them.[36]

Third, the Freudians succumb to an old tendency to prejudge, that is, to judge without thinking, that when thoughts and feelings cannot be articulated and can find expression only in gestures, tics and slips, those thoughts and feelings must be bad.

Arendt appears to have read Freud; her personal library contains *Civilization and its Discontents*, *Future of an Illusion*, and *Moses and Monotheism*, though only the last of these, an English translation dating from 1955, contains marginal markings. She also owned at least one volume by Carl Jung, as well as a work on dream interpretation by phenomenological psychologist Ludwig Binswanger. Also, in 1933 she published a review of a work by the Marxist

34 Ibid., 113.
35 Ibid., 72.
36 Ibid., 72.

feminist psychologist Alice Rühle-Gerstel.[37] A study of her relation with those texts would surely shed light on the willfulness of her misreadings, but it is work for another day; in the spirit of the introduction to her book on Rahel Varnhagen, where she runs together and dismisses "the pseudo-scientific apparatuses of depth-psychology, psycho-analysis, graphology, etc.,"[38] I will treat *Freudian psychology* as functioning as a placeholder for Arendt.

The first criticism—pretending to know—is not so much a matter of faulty inference as the wrong sort of inference. Psychology proceeds as though it were a science when it could own up to its speculations and acknowledge the science *and* art of its analytic practices. (Would Arendt's view have been different, I wonder, had she spent some, or more, time with Freud's case studies?) It offers its diagnosis on the basis of observed behaviors, tracing them to origins in the invisible operations of the unconscious which turn out to be the same for everyone. The Oedipus complex is a generalization that reduces individual experience to a hidden universal drive and a morass of feeling. We turn away because contemplating its ugliness is painful, and its sameness promises no reward in the form of an insight into a particular life or individual predicaments, neither our own nor anyone else's. On the contrary, it is a signal that we may not be accessible to ourselves. Nobody is distinguished by his Oedipus complex. Nobody wants to hear about *your* Oedipus complex. After all, as she writes in a letter to Mary McCarthy, we'd be better off reading Sophocles.[39]

What would the difference be? What Arendt finds shocking about psychology is that it devotes such attention to the sameness and ugliness that contrasts "so obviously with the enormous variety and richness of overt human conduct."[40] We grasp the situation that Oedipus finds himself in; we see the world shaped by his—though not only his—ignorance and actions; we watch what Jocasta does; we watch Oedipus's recognition; we watch his world shatter. If we must reckon with the possibility that the psyche may not be knowable, literature's stories offer an occasion for that reckoning. In contrast, psychology's (pseudo) scientific claims to truth deny that very possibility, and reckoning is foreclosed.

Not all literature earns this privilege, and notes from her last seminar (1974) show her responding to Joseph Heller's 1966 novel *Something Happened* as a piece of writing that compounds rather than overcomes the problems of

37 Arendt, "On the Emancipation of Women" in *Essays in Understanding, 1930–1954*, 66–68. My thanks to Barbara Hahn for these references.

38 Arendt, *Rahel Varnhagen*, xiii.

39 Arendt, *The Life of the Mind*, 34–35.

40 Ibid., 35.

psychology. The work consists of a tight first person narrative detailing the interior life of its protagonist, Bob Slocum. The note reads:

> Joseph Heller, *Something Happened*
> Unhappiness as the result of the journey inwards—Monotony and boredom: The sameness and the lack of feeling
> World-Alienation: The enormous Entertainment value of the world, its diversity.

Bob, depressed and pessimistic, describes the stream of an inner life that is rarely made manifest in the world. Other characters appear only in his reflections on them, which are largely narcissistic and unimaginative, and his relations with them seem to consist only of manipulations. The result is a difficult, 600-page read that would not satisfy an ambition to gain access to human being as such, nor to the character of Bob as an individual being in a world. According to Arendt's scheme, this is inevitably the result when a modern writer approaches a character with the prejudices of psychoanalysis, and has him spill his guts.[41]

We could be forgiven for thinking that Arendt rejects all that's modern—Matisse's modern art, modern psychology, Heller's modern novel—and that she rejects everything that appears under the heading of psychology, but the finer contours of her critique become clearer in the contrast between her comments on Heller and her admiring review of the novels of Natalie Sarraute, a writer who describes herself as taking "the psychological" as her focus. The difference is how and where the psyche comes into view, and what is offered as evidence. Arendt writes:

> [Sarraute's decision] to choose the intimacy of family life, this "semi-darkness" behind closed curtains with its Strindbergian overtones, as the laboratory for this kind of psychological vivisection, instead of the couch, was a sheer stroke of genius: for here, "the fluctuating frontier that [ordinarily] separates conversation from sub-conversation" breaks down most frequently so that the inner life of the self can explode onto the surface in what is commonly called "scenes."[42]

41 My thanks to Jana Schmidt for helping make these connections and for her conference presentation "Into the Marionette's Center of Gravity—Thinking Appearance as Judgment" at the inaugural conference for Hannah Arendt's *The Life of the Mind. Critical edition*. Vanderbilt University, March 30th, 2019.

42 Arendt neglects the possibility that the couch might be considered a prop in the scene that unfolds between analyst and analysand.

In these novels, movements and interactions among characters replace descriptions of the inner states of a single protagonist, overcoming the banality of interiority and, importantly, democratizing interpretation.[43] Observing a scene, we have to figure out what's going on *in the action*; the characters reveal themselves, but never completely, leaving us to reckon with the play of transparency and opacity that is no more than the condition of all action and interaction. We encounter scenes every day, and what they require of us is not a professional's capacity for analysis, nor the insights of depth psychology, but the complicated everyday work of interpretation by which we make sense of what appears to us.

After all, the professionals who interviewed Eichmann and plotted his responses on the scale of normality and abnormality found him to be normal. His way with words and the ability to express himself using well-known turns of phrase reinforced their view that he was an average man. And yet this psychologically normal person could describe his work expropriating and deporting the Jewish population of Vienna as an arrangement "based on mutuality;" he could speak of walking side by side with his Jewish school friend while wearing the Nazi badge and claim that his friend "did not think anything of it;" he could explain how good he felt when he went to Auschwitz to visit a Jewish leader he knew from his work making Vienna *Judenrein*, Kommerzialrat Storfer. Eichmann later described the meeting to the Jewish police examiner in Jerusalem: "I said: 'Well, my dear old friend, we certainly got it! What rotten luck!'" As far as he was concerned, it had been a "normal human encounter." Eichmann returned to Vienna; Storfer was killed in the camp six weeks later.[44]

The psychologists' conclusion ignored the fact that Eichmann was a normal *Nazi*, and that his language was made up of familiar *Nazi* clichés. He was a good citizen *of a totalitarian state*. Arendt, in contrast, studied Eichmann in the context of his world, using the existential category of plurality and the aesthetic/existential analysis of action as appearance; in this schema, his clichés showed him to be a man locked in his own perspective, incapable of seeing things from "the other fellow's point of view."[45] It is not that cliché fails to stimulate thinking; its glib coherence and unrelenting reinforcement of the obvious rebuff interpretation and fend off thinking.[46]

43 Sjöholm, *Doing Aesthetics with Arendt*, 44.

44 Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, 48, 10, 51.

45 Ibid., 48.

46 Norberg, "The Political Theory of the Cliché: Hannan Arendt Reading Adolf Eichmann," 88–91.

4 Opacity

The Eichmann court required legal and moral concepts, and called on psychologists to provide the scientific thinking that would establish the fact of the matter regarding the psychic normality or abnormality of the accused. Arendt came to the court as to a spectacle, and brought to it an aesthetic thinking that provoked broad abhorrence; it is not difficult to understand the desire that overwhelmed many of her critics to moralize her reportage without delay. We should resist that temptation. Staying with the banal inability to judge right from wrong, and thinking of it in terms of the four-fold figure of right/wrong, beautiful/ugly, and of the judgment of ugliness in particular, means that we arrive at the role of *sensus communis* from an oblique angle. This common sense is what we assume as the condition for the possibility of communication. We assume it in everyone; it is what lodges us in the human community. For Kant, it is "the faculty of judgment which, in its reflection, takes account (*a priori*) of the mode of representation of all other men in thought, in order, as it were, to compare its judgment with the collective reason of humanity."[47]

Sensus communis is also not merely natural or given; it comes with maxims, which are required because there are decisions to be made and guidance needed. The maxims are clear—think for oneself (maxim of enlightenment), think from the point of view of everyone else (maxim of enlarged mentality), and remain in agreement with oneself (maxim of consistency)—but the result they promise is not truth or knowledge but communicability. The maxims of *sensus communis* are maxims for the cultivation *of sensus communis*. Remember that in making judgments of beauty and ugliness we expect others to agree with us, but we cannot make them do so. We can only try to woo and court their agreement.[48] This image of a community devoted to discussion and persuasion is as inspiring to Arendt as it is to Kant. Certainly, we participate in the *sensus communis* by virtue of our participation in humanity. She writes:

> In the last analysis, one is a member of a world community by the sheer fact of being human; this is one's "cosmopolitan existence." When one judges and when one acts in political matters, one is supposed to take one's bearings from the idea, not the actuality of being a world citizen and, therefore, also a *Weltbetrachter*, a world spectator.[49]

47 Arendt, *Lectures on Kant's Political Philosophy*, 71.
48 Ibid., 72.
49 Ibid., 75–76.

We may take our bearings from an idea, but we inhabit the world with people and make our judgments in the company of a community of interlocutors; we woo and court particular people; we enlarge our mentality by talking to and learning from one another.

This is where the judgment of ugliness gives us pause. If ugliness makes us look away, suddenly making us doubt that what had seemed like a match between our faculties and the world, we must suspect that there are limits to our ability to see the world from the other fellow's point of view after all. We can understand what is meant by taking account *a priori* of the representations of all others, and by the "as it were" caveat that conditions the comparison with universal human reason, but enlarged mentality will have content only insofar as we think our way into another person's point of view, and we can't ever be sure that we're doing it right. We will always worry that we are committing a version of the insult of the psychologists, that is, claiming to know what we can't possibly know.

The only thing worse than having this doubt is the hubris of *not* having it. Someone incapable of making a judgment of the ugly is someone for whom the world is quite transparent. He may regard his surroundings with aesthetic indifference, or regard them as quite beautiful, but he will not run up against the thought that the world may resist our knowing it; he will not be susceptible to existential doubt about being at home in the world. It is not necessary that he be ignorant of ugliness, or that the word be absent from his vocabulary. In fact, he may be intensely aware of the ugliness of those who are racially inferior and impure, and of art that is degenerate and bad as dictated by Nazi ideology and demonstrated in Nazi propaganda, but for him this ideology and propaganda make ugliness an evident quality of objects and people, not a matter of judgment. Since he knows what is the case, points of view are irrelevant, and people might have to be made to see the truth.[50] He will remain undisturbed in his conviction that the world belongs to him. In this way, Eichmann's obliviousness is cultivated in him by a world that protects him not only from the need to judge but the very *possibility* of judgment.

What does this mean to non-Nazis living in liberal democracies, people committed to the principles of humanity, enlightenment, consistency, and enlarged mentality, people working to give content to their imaginings of the

50 Jakob Norberg writes: "His [Eichmann's] complete submission to a narrow linguistic code demonstrates his inability both to perceive and to enunciate distinct positions in relation to speaking others." Norberg, "The Political Theory of the Cliché: Hannan Arendt Reading Adolf Eichmann," 89.

world from the points of view of others? The challenge comes in the encounter with opacity and, more importantly, the thought that it may be more than a stumbling block. Perhaps there is a right to opacity.[51] As Édouard Glissant writes, it is the experience and the thought of opacity that "distracts me from absolute truths … saves me from unequivocal courses and irreversible choices."[52] The stumbling block is not to be overcome in a transfer to transparency, but encompassed in a respect for mutual forms of opacity. This does not condemn us to a stand-off of chauvinisms (what Glissant's critics call *barbarism*) because it does nothing to release us from our commitment to enlarging our mentality. It will cause worry and doubt, but those do not condemn us to inaction; rather, they are the condition of judgment.

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51 My thanks to Leah Kaplan for insisting on this point, and for Stephen Wrenn for directing me to Glissant.

52 Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, 192.

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