A Note on Max Weber’s Impact on Hannah Arendt’s Thought

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Abstract
Among Hannah Arendt scholars, Max Weber’s impact on her thinking and writing remains unrecognized even today. Arendt’s and Weber’s thought has been compared surprisingly little. This negligence casts an unhappy shadow over the understanding of Arendt’s ‘methodology’. This article argues that Arendt adopted Weber’s ideal-typical method and used it as one of her most important analytical tools especially in her writings on Jewish pariahdom and analysis of totalitarianism. It is not generally understood that Arendt’s approach to the formation of Nazi totalitarianism is profoundly ideal-typical. The article also claims that Arendt drew from Weber’s ideas on responsibility and judgement even though they were not exclusively identical. Their understanding of these concepts has to be related to their conceptions of politics: Weber emphasized the conflictual character of politics, while Arendt focused on its creative dimension as a potential new beginning.

Keywords: Hannah Arendt, Max Weber, ideal-type, responsibility, political judgement, Nazi totalitarianism.

The literature does not tell us any precise information about young Hannah Arendt’s familiarity with Max Weber’s texts. Even though many of his ideas were relatively well known in the form of slogans, his thought was usually rejected by his contemporaries as old-fashioned liberalism, individualism, and neo-Kantianism (see, e.g., Bolz 1989). Nevertheless, one may assume that young Arendt did not join the ranks of this widely spread criticism because her teacher in Heidelberg, Karl Jaspers, was a devoted and tireless admirer of Weber. Jaspers both knew Weber personally and drew from his thinking, especially from the method of ideal-type, which provided him with a permanent tool of analysis. In addition, despite the fact that Weber personally did not imagine himself to be a charismatic leader, during the 1920s Jaspers believed, with many other members of Weber’s circle, that if he had reached the political leadership of Germany in 1918–19 the coming catastrophes could have been avoided or at least mitigated. Thus it is probable that Jaspers used

However, on the basis of Arendt’s and Jaspers’ correspondence it seems that Arendt’s knowledge of Weber was not very extensive before the 1950s, when she confessed in a letter to Jaspers that she was finally reading a lot of Weber:

Prompted by your dream I’ve read a lot of Max Weber. I felt so idiotically flattered by it that I was ashamed of myself. Weber’s intellectual sobriety is impossible to match, at least for me. With me there’s always something dogmatic left hanging around somewhere (Arendt 1992: 150).

Indeed, Arendt’s debt to Weber can best be traced from this correspondence. But alas, it does not tell us anything precise of the dimensions of Weber’s thinking that inspired her the most, giving us only a general impression that Jaspers repeatedly encouraged Arendt to read Weber. Given that Jaspers was a great admirer of Weber this is not surprising as such. On the contrary, it is most probable that during their regular meetings after the Second World War Arendt and Jaspers discussed Weber a lot. It is also most probable that Jaspers succeeded in arousing Arendt’s interest in Weber soon after the Second World War so that she was aware of, for instance, Weber’s concept of charismatic leadership when she wrote her ‘big book’, her first opus magnum, The Origins of Totalitarianism (1951). In it, there is a reference to Weber, which shows that Arendt did not share the conviction of some other scholars that Weber’s conception of political leadership somehow contributed to Nazism. Dealing with totalitarian movements Arendt remarked that it would be a serious error to interpret totalitarian leaders in terms of Max Weber’s category of the charismatic leadership (Arendt 1951/1978: 361-62). However, despite this late interest in Weber’s texts, Arendt was in all probability acquainted very early with two concepts of Weber that were decisive in the framework of her early writings. These are the concept of pariah people and the method of ideal-type.

Among Arendt scholars, Weber’s impact on her thinking and writing remains unrecognized even today. In fact, Arendt’s and Weber’s political thought has been studied and compared surprisingly little. Either Arendt and Weber scholars ignore each other once and for all or juxtapose these two thinkers without seeing any similarities whatsoever in their thought (see, e.g., Villa 2001). At the same time this negligence still casts an unhappy shadow over the understanding of Arendt’s ‘methodology’ especially when it comes to Arendt’s early writings on Jewish pariahdom and her analysis of the emergence of Nazi totalitarianism. It is not generally understood or recognized that Arendt’s approach to the formation of Nazi totalitarianism is profoundly ideal-typical. Arendt’s arguments
against causal historical explanations can be properly understood only if it is also understood that hers is a Weberian reading of the elements of totalitarianism.¹

In the following, I will try to show that Arendt drew from Weber both methodologically and conceptually. On one hand, Arendt adopted Weber’s ideal-typical method and used it as one of her most important analytical tools especially in her writings on Jewish pariahdom and analysis of totalitarianism. On the other hand, it seems plausible that Arendt also drew from Weber’s ideas on responsibility and judgement, even though it is not possible to argue that they were exclusively identical. On the contrary, Arendt’s and Weber’s understanding of these concepts always has to be related to their conceptions of politics that were not entirely identical as far as Weber emphasized the conflictual character of politics, while Arendt focused on its creative dimension as a potential new beginning. However, my aim is also to show that a number of apparent differences in their thought ought rather to be seen as differences in emphasis and not exclusive opposites.

The method of ideal-type

Er wird gewonnen durch einseitige Steigerung eines oder einiger Gesichtspunkte und durch Zusammenschluss einer Fülle von diffus und diskret, hier mehr, dort weniger, stellenweise gar nicht, vorhandenen Einzelscheinungen, die sich jenen einseitig herausgehobenen Gesichtspunkten fügen, zu einem in sich einheitlichen Gedanken bilde. In seiner begrifflichen Reinheit ist dieses Gedankenbild nirgends in der Wirklichkeit empirisch vorfindbar, es ist eine Utopie, und für die historische Arbeit erwächst die Aufgabe, in jedem einzelnen Falle festzustellen, wie nahe oder wie fern die Wirklichkeit jenem Idealbilde steht… (Weber 2003: 387-88).

As this often quoted fragment shows, Weber’s ideal-type was not an empirical category meant to refer directly to empirical realities. He describes

1. See my Weberian reading of Arendt’s conception of pariahdom in Parvikko 1996a. It is good to remember that The Origins of Totalitarianism was not the title Arendt wanted to give to the book. Her suggestion for the title of the English edition was The Burden of our Time, which did not satisfy the American publisher. In fact, the title of the German edition—Elemente und Ursprünge totaler Herrschaft (Frankfurt: Europäische Verlagsanstalt, 1955)—corresponds best to what the book is about.

2. ‘It is formed by a one-sided accentuation of one or several perspectives, and through the synthesis of a variety of diffuse, discrete, individual phenomena, present sometimes more, sometimes less, sometimes not at all; subsumed by such one-sided, emphatic viewpoints so that they form a uniform construction in thought. In its conceptual purity this construction can never be found in reality, it is a utopia. Historical research has the task of determining in each individual case how close to, or far from, reality such an ideal-type is…’ (Weber 2003: 387-88).

it, instead, as a utopia that has been arrived at by the analytical accentuation of certain elements of reality. As such, it is neither a hypothesis nor a description of reality (Weber 1904: 190; 2003: 389). It rather should be viewed in the framework of Weber’s perspectivist epistemology.

Weber emphasizes that an ideal-type is an analytical construct in a logical sense of the term to be kept apart from the idea of an ethical imperative, that is of a ‘model’ of what ‘ought’ to exist. In other words, even though he speaks of an ideal-type as a utopia, he does not mean by it any kind of normative ideal. Besides, Weber takes a deliberate distance from Rankean history writing by arguing that whoever accepts the proposition that the knowledge of historical reality can, or should, be a ‘presuppositionless’ copy of ‘objective’ facts will deny the value of the ideal-type (Weber 1904: 192-93; 2003: 389). Our interpretations always depend on, and change as a result of the viewpoints we choose and the traits we select and reorganize into an argument from a bulk of empirical facts.

In Weber’s understanding, it must be decided case by case whether the ideal-type method is a scientifically fruitful method of conceptualization and theory-construction. In other words, the construction of ideal-types earns its place only if it succeeds in revealing concrete cultural phenomena in their interdependence and their significance. The construction of ideal-types is, indeed, inevitable if the historian attempts to determine the cultural significance of an individual event. Otherwise his study remains a pure description of historical occurrence (Weber 1904: 193; Weber 2003: 389).

Correspondingly, Weber argues, the greater the need for a sharp appreciation of the significance of a cultural phenomenon, the more imperative is the need to operate with unambiguous concepts, which are systematically defined. The ideal-type is this kind of conceptual construct (Gedankenbild):

…welches nicht die historische Wirklichkeit oder gar die ‘eigentliche’ Wirklichkeit ist, welches noch viel weniger dazu da ist, als ein Schema zu dienen, in welches die Wirklichkeit als Exemplar eingeordnet werden sollte, sondern welches die Bedeutung eines rein idealen Grenzbegriffes hat, an welchem die Wirklichkeit zur Verdeutlichung bestimmter bedeutsamer Bestandteile ihres empirischen Gehaltes gemessen, mit dem sie verglichen wird… Der Idealtypus ist in dieser Funktion insbesondere der Versuch, historische Individuen oder deren Einzelbestandteile in genetische Begriffe zu fassen (Weber 1904: 194).3

3. ‘It is a thought construct; not historical reality, and most certainly not “genuine” reality. It is not for employment in the service of a method for which reality is reduced to an exemplary instance, but which functions instead as a purely ideal
There is, however, also another way of constructing an ideal-type. This is the construction of a model-type. In this case, the concept of ideal-type is not used in the logical sense but, instead, in the practical sense. ‘In dieser Bedeutung’, Weber argues, ‘sind die “Ideen” dann aber natürlich nicht mehr rein logische Hilfsmittel, nicht mehr Begriffe, an welchen die Wirklichkeit vergleichend gemessen, sondern Ideale, aus denen sie wertend beurteilt wird’ (Weber 1904: 199).\(^4\) Because the ideal-type claims empirical validity here, it penetrates into the realm of evaluative interpretation.

In Weber’s view, the trouble here is that the confusion between these two basically different meanings of the term ‘idea’ appears frequently in historical writings. On one hand, the modern historian attempts to understand the epoch of which he speaks in its own terms and, on the other hand, he seeks to judge it. In these attempts he feels the need to derive the standards for his judgement from the subject matter itself. In other words, he tries to make the ‘idea’ in the sense of the ‘ideal’ to emerge from the ‘idea’ in the sense of the ‘ideal-type’ (Weber 1904: 199-200; 2003: 393-94). Weber stresses that the elementary duty of scientific self-control is to distinguish between the logically comparative analysis of reality by ideal-types in the logical sense and the value judgement of reality on the basis of ideals. He passionately argues that an ‘ideal-type’ in his sense has no connection at all with value judgements (Weber 1904: 200; 2003: 393-94).

Finally, Weber also distinguishes between class concepts (\textit{Gattungsbegriff}) and the ideal-type. A class concept summarizes the common features of certain empirical phenomena but as such it has no typical character whereas the goal of ideal-typical concept-construction is to make explicit the unique individual character of cultural phenomena (Weber 1904: 202; 2003: 397).

Weber’s ideal-typical method provided Arendt with an overall framework in which to approach Jewish pariahdom. Instead of dealing with the Jews as a group, it was characteristic of Arendt to pick up an individual representative of pariahdom and analyse the pariah status through this figure. This choice reflects Arendt’s preference to use the notion of ideal-type in its model-type variant, which renders possible an evaluative judgement of the pariah. This is, indeed, what is at stake in Arendt’s \textit{limiting concept} (\textit{Grenzbegriff}), against which reality is compared, so that particular significant component parts of its empirical content can for the sake of clarification be measured… The ideal-type is in this function an attempt to comprehend historical individuals or individual components through \textit{genetic concepts}’ (Weber 2003: 390).

\(4\) ‘In this sense however the “ideas” no longer provide purely \textit{logical} assistance, they are no longer concepts with and against which reality can compared and \textit{measured}, but ideals with which it is evaluatively \textit{judged}’ (Weber 2003: 393).
discussions of individual pariah-figures: she attempts to evaluatively judge the acts and deeds of individual pariahs, confronting their personal decisions and choices with the historical context in which they lived. Drawing from Weber’s method of ideal-type, Arendt did not mean to construct any rigid and a-historical human types but, on the contrary, she attempted to focus on what was possible in a given situation and how well an individual pariah succeeded in exploiting opportunities available in this situation (cf. Weber 1904: 202; 2003: 397).

This is exactly how Weber meant the category of ideal-type to be used. Real, concrete individuals never completely correspond to the ideal-type with which they are compared. One and the same individual may resemble different ideal-types in different times and situations. One may also identify a number of ‘ideas’ of the pariah (cf. Weber 1904: 192; 2003: 397). The construction of ideal-types is a means of achieving tools for evaluating the significance of different configurations of pariah existence. The final goal of ideal-typical concept construction is to make explicit the unique individual character of pariah existence.

However, one should be aware of the fact that Arendt’s way of using ideal-types does not necessarily faithfully follow the Weberian method in every respect. It is rather characteristic of Arendt to freely apply concepts adopted from other theorists. In the case of ideal-types one may point out that in Arendt there is a clear inclination to use the concept in a normative way that was by no means characteristic of Weber. It is as if Arendt interpreted Husserl’s phenomenology in such a way that certain things may be given a position that is independent of historical change. This is best reflected in Arendt’s construction of the model of ‘conscious pariah’, which is not only a theoretical category of classification and analysis but also a normative model of politically and ethically exemplary figure.5

However, it is also possible to identify much the same in Weber’s and Arendt’s way to understand the purpose of the ideal-type. This similarity is related to the fact that for both of them the underlying motive in everything they did was to care for the world. From this perspective, for Weber the ideal-type is a heuristic that achieves clarity in the investigation of real cases, which then allows reflection and judgement beyond the scientific analysis. For Arendt, political theory at large was about understanding and judging what was going on in the world. Consequently, one may argue that while Weber wanted to maintain a demarcation between science and judgement without excluding the latter, Arendt’s stance approached that of pre-Socratic antiquity in which theorein included both analysis and judgement.

5. For a more thorough discussion of Arendt’s pariah figures see Parvikko 1996b.
Another context in which Arendt applied Weber’s method of ideal-type was her analysis of the emergence of Nazi totalitarianism. Here the ideal-typical frame remains more implicit than in her discussions of pariahdom. It provides her with an alternative to normal causal historical explaining as she firmly believed that the emergence of Nazi totalitarianism was not a result of a chain of causal factors. For Arendt, the Nazi totalitarianism was rather a result of a number of contingent events and phenomena that at a certain moment formed a constellation that allowed a totalitarian dictatorship to take shape. In other words, the Nazi totalitarianism was not a result of a necessary and unavoidable development and consequently it could not be explained by seeing it as necessary phase of a determined course of history. On the contrary, in order to understand how it was possible one has to focus on what was unique in the events and phenomena that composed it.

In this perspective Arendt constructs a bunch of elements that at a certain moment allowed a totalitarian dictatorship to emerge. None of these elements alone would have sufficed to establish the Nazi totalitarianism but together they formed a constellation, which we now classify as belonging to the group of totalitarian dictatorships. A number of scholars have complained that Arendt’s analysis of the Nazi regime cannot be applied to any other empirical reality such as Stalin’s Soviet Union. In my view, these scholars have not really understood the character of ideal-typical method. They have not understood that one of the guiding principles of ideal-typical method is that each empirical research requires its own ideal-types to be constructed. Consequently, it is not a shortcoming or weakness of Arendt’s analysis of the Nazi totalitarianism that it cannot be extended to cover the Soviet Union as well: she understood that a thorough analysis of Stalin’s empire would have required an analysis of its own, including construction of its own ideal-types. The fact that Arendt later included a well-known chapter of *Ideology and Terror* in *The Origins of Totalitarianism* does not undo the basis idea of the book: it was meant to be a story of how Nazi totalitarianism—and nothing else—became possible and could emerge.\(^6\)

**Responsibility and judgement**

As I argued above, Arendt’s ‘big book’ is a text that rejects all causal or deterministic interpretations of history and consequently argues that the

\(^6\) A third context, in which Arendt probably applied Weber’s method of ideal-type might be her reading of the republic in *On Revolution*. This aspect would deserve a study of its own.
Nazi totalitarianism was not a result of a chain of causal factors that inevitably produced a certain outcome. Arendt rather conceives history as a mosaic of contingent events; any apparent causal relationship between events is only a result of an *a posteriori* account of a historian or a storyteller.

Consequently, political judgement of historical events or human action in general cannot be based on causal relationships or general rules of human ‘behaviour’. In Arendt’s interpretation this ‘banisterlessness’ of judgement did not, however, belong to shared European cultural and political tradition. On the contrary, one of the reasons that made the emergence of Nazism possible was that the entire European political culture was incapable of judging new, unique events because it had learned to lean on general rules and patterns of thought established in the tradition of European political thought. In front of a new extreme phenomenon like Nazi totalitarianism these patterns turned out to be entirely useless and irrelevant.

Unlike most European political thinkers, Max Weber seemed to be well aware of the fact that a politician could not but act in the midst of contingent events. Consequently, one of the decisive qualities of a good politician is his/her capacity of judgement. In *Politik als Beruf* Max Weber aims at identifying the most important qualities of a good politician. In order to do so, he first distinguishes between an official and a politician. In terms of his *Beruf*, the true official should carry out the duties of his office *sine ira et studio*. For Weber, this is important because it represents exactly the opposite attitude compared to that of a politician. While the official should always keep cool and act without anger and prejudice, the politician ought to fight passionately (Weber 1919: 189-90).

Consequently, the actions of the official and the politician are subject to different principles of responsibility. The official’s honour consists of always carrying out the instructions of his superiors conscientiously and precisely in the same way as if they corresponded to his own convictions, because without this supremely ethical discipline and self-denial the whole administrative apparatus would disintegrate. By contrast, the honour of the politician consists of taking exclusive, personal responsibility for what he does without unloading it onto others. From this it

7. Obviously, Weber would have shared this kind of conception of history.
8. For a deeply sensitive and intelligent reading of Arendt’s concepts of history and storytelling see Guaraldo (2001).
9. Mckenna (1984) uses the term banisterless to describe Arendt’s conception of political action and judgement. Even if it may sound odd, it gives a vivid image of conducting politics without a hand-rail and fits well Arendt’s idea of politics as vertiginous and dangerous because of its unpredictability.
follows that those who are officials by nature are bad and irresponsible politicians, ‘in diesem Sinn: sittlich tiefstehende Politiker:—solche, wie wir sie leider in leitenden Stellungen immer wieder gehabt haben’ (Weber 1919: 190).10

In Arendtian terms, these lines of Weber read like a prophecy. To Germans’ cost this supreme ethical discipline of the official led to extreme consequences. It is as if Arendt had in mind precisely these lines of Weber when she presented her analysis of Adolf Eichmann. In her pamphlet *Eichmann in Jerusalem* (1963/1965) she argued that the decisive character of Eichmann was by no means a particularly evil nature but rather his spirit of a good official who always carried out the orders of his superiors as well as he could. His particular ethics of responsibility were not based on the evaluation of the consequences of his actions but rather on thoughtlessness: the good official was not supposed to think critically of what he was really doing but rather refrain from anything else than carrying through his duties (Arendt 1963/1965: 276-80, 287).

It is easy to agree with Arendt that this kind of conception of the honour of the official must have been one of the reasons why both officials and soldiers did what they did in the Third Reich. At the same time, however, it must be pointed out that Weber came to see it as out-dated: his *Beruf* should not be read as an official’s guidebook of good and desirable behaviour. Rather, his purpose was to identify the most important characteristics of the politician by way of comparing the official and the politician with each other.

Following Arendt, other scholars of the Holocaust have also characterized it as an administrative mass murder (e.g. Bauman 1989; Diner 1997) that could not have been carried out without a particular mentality of the Nazi officials. In Weberian terms, the Nazi genocide might be seen as an extreme case of *Beamtenherrschaft* in which nobody wanted to take responsibility for the whole of Nazi politics. However, to be fair, one has to add that Weber was not dealing with totalitarian dictatorship such as Nazi-Germany but rather tried to sketch out characteristics of future politics in ‘normal’ political circumstances. Thus he argued:


10. ‘thus of low moral stature in this sense—men of the kind we Germans, to our cost, have had in positions of leadership time after time’ (Weber 1919: 331).

11. ‘One can say that three qualities are pre-eminently decisive for a politician: passion, a sense of responsibility, judgement. Passion in the sense of concern for the
This authentic passion as concern for the thing itself should be carefully distinguished from the sterile excitement of the intellectuals that is best characterized as the romanticism of the intellectually interesting. This kind of excitement Weber sees rather as a curse of modern politics because it is lacking all sense of responsibility (Weber 1919: 227). Besides, a good politician needs two other characteristics to really become a good politician. This is where judgement enters the scene, because these two characteristics mutually depend on each other:


Here Weber uses the terms judgement and distance almost synonymously. He observes that the lack of distance is one of the deadly sins for any politician because only if by becoming accustomed to distancing oneself, can one achieve that powerful control over the soul, which distinguishes the passionate politician from the mere sterile excitement of the political amateur (Weber 1919: 227). In other words, in Weber’s view judgement is an activity that can take place only by distancing oneself. I have argued elsewhere that for Arendt political judgement is also an activity that requires critical distance (cf. Parvikko 2003). It is important to understand that for both of them critical distance is not a sign of irresponsibility but rather a prerequisite of responsible politics, as far as it can only be based on good and deliberate judgement.

As to the Nazi-Germany, it is also important to understand that, by way of her analysis of Eichmann, Arendt did not mean to argue that the leading Nazi officials and politicians did not really know what they were doing. She rather wanted to argue that die Vernichtung was only possible through a bureaucratic undertaking. Hitler and others did have their (bad) convictions and intentions and even a kind of ‘enlarged’ Weltanschauung as far as the destruction of Jews and other groups was based on thing itself (Sachlichkeit), the passionate commitment to a “cause” (Sache), to the god or demon who commands the cause’ (Weber 1919: 353).

12. ‘Simply to feel passion, however genuinely, is not sufficient to make a politician unless, in the form of service to a “cause”, responsibility for that cause becomes the decisive lode-star of all action. This requires (and this is the decisive psychological quality of the politician) judgement, the ability to maintain one’s inner composure and calm while being receptive to realities, in other words distance from things and people’ (Weber 1919: 353).
an ideological program and did not take place by accident. One may even think that the Nazi politicians conformed to Weber’s idea of a politician in a perverted way while they can simultaneously be criticized for lack of distance and *Eitelkeit*.

In this connection, it is also necessary to deal shortly with Weber’s distinction between two kinds of ethics that can guide political action:


Here Weber seems to suggest that if one acts by the ethic of conviction, one does not have to, or want to, answer for the consequences of one’s own actions. In this sense, the ethics of responsibility is a more politically-minded attitude as it takes into account that there always are consequences for which one has to answer and, more often than not, these consequences are unintended (cf. Palonen 2002). However, Weber does not see these two ethical attitudes as mutually exclusive but rather suggests that it depends on the situation, which one of the two is more desirable. On the other hand, he is aware that in extreme situations the ethics of conviction may lead to fateful consequences:

Hier, an diesem Problem der Heiligung der Mittel durch den Zweck, scheint nun auch die Gesinnungsethik überhaupt scheitern zu müssen. Und in der Tat hat sie logischerweise nur die Möglichkeit: jedes Handeln, welches sittlich gefährliche Mittel anwendet, zu verwerfen (Weber 1919: 240).14

13. ‘We have to understand that ethically oriented activity can follow two fundamentally different, irreconcilably opposed maxims. It can follow the “ethic of principled conviction” (*Gesinnung*) or the “ethic of responsibility”. It is not that the ethic of conviction is identical with irresponsibility, nor that the ethic of responsibility means the absence of principled conviction — there is of course no question of that. But there is a profound opposition between acting by the maxim of the ethic of conviction...and acting by the maxim of the ethic of responsibility, which means that one must answer for the (foreseeable) consequences of one’s actions’ (Weber 1919: 359-60).

14. ‘It seems that the ethics of conviction is bound to founder hopelessly on this problem of how the end is to sanctify the means. Indeed the only position it can logically take is to reject any action which employs morally dangerous means’ (Weber 1919: 361).
In *Eichmann in Jerusalem* Arendt discusses the case of Rabbi Leo Baeck, who tried to reject any action which employs morally dangerous means, but who ended up in committing a profoundly questionable deed in ethical and political terms. Leo Baeck was the Jewish leader of Theresienstadt who had to face the day when the inmates of the camp were to be deported ‘to the east’. Among the inmates the destination of deportations was not generally known. In this situation Baeck decided not to tell it in order to alleviate the sufferings of his people. Arendt gives the impression that in her view this highly ethical decision deprived the inmates of the possibility to consider their personal responses to the fact of deportation (Arendt 1963/1965: 119-20).

In *Eichmann in Jerusalem* Arendt did not thoroughly define her concept of responsibility but she returned to the theme in two later essays. In these essays Arendt makes a sharp distinction between political and personal responsibility. Political responsibility is that which every government assumes for the deeds and misdeeds of the past. It is a form of collective responsibility, which has to fulfil two conditions. On one hand, one has to be held responsible for something one has not done, and, on the other hand, the reason for one’s responsibility must be one’s membership of a group, which no voluntary personal act can resolve. Political responsibility is something that an individual assumes in relation to a political community or group, to which he/she belongs, and it concerns both past and future deeds carried out in this community. Quiet support is sufficient to make one involved and committed (Arendt 1968: 48).

In other words, political responsibility is something that principal political agents, such as governments, unavoidably assume not only for their own acts and decisions but also for the deeds and misdeeds of the past. It is, strictly speaking, not personal as far as a government’s deeds are not personal deeds. In Arendt’s view, the problem with this principle lies in the fact it may be valid and work properly only in politically free circumstances. Under totalitarian rule it is no longer valid as the totalitarian government rather establishes itself as organized irresponsibility, in which everybody only obeys the orders of his/her superiors.

These essays reveal that Arendt deals with responsibility and judgement in a different context from that of Weber. The latter approaches political action and responsibility under more or less normal circumstances, while the former deals with these themes in a politically extreme situation, that of totalitarian dictatorship. In other words, the prerequisite of assuming political responsibility is membership of a political com-

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15. These essays are *Personal Responsibility under Dictatorship* (1964) and *Collective Responsibility* (1968).
munity and it is very problematic whether one can speak about political community at all in the case of totalitarian dictatorship.

It seems, indeed, that there is a significant difference between Weber’s and Arendt’s conceptions of responsibility. Weber does not distinguish between political and personal responsibility but understands responsibility as something that is always assumed by an individual:

Ehre des politischen Führers, also: des leitenden Staatsmannes, ist dagegen gerade die ausschliessliche Eigenverantwortung für das, was er tut, die er nicht ablehnen oder abwälzen kann und darf (Weber 1919: 190).16

Thus, Weber’s responsibility seems to be always personal and non-collective, while Arendt seems to suggest the opposite: for her political responsibility is always collective, something that does not exist outside the political realm. Personal responsibility is not strictly speaking political but rather ethical, as far as it concerns an individual’s personal deeds and choices. However, precisely because of this, it assumes a kind of political dimension in the case of political outcasts who are not able to share a political community with anybody: while political outcasts cannot assume responsibility for a political community, they cannot disclaim responsibility for their own deeds and choices.

Does this difference in their conceptions of responsibility reflect on Weber’s and Arendt’s conceptions of judgement?

**Political judgement**

On the basis of what Weber and Arendt wrote on the subject, it seems that for both of them political judgement was not a theoretical matter but rather a practical activity or capacity aimed at evaluating concrete political events and phenomena. They saw good political judgement as an untamed activity that does not follow rigid rules or patterns of thought. With Aristotle they were convinced that political judgement cannot be taught in a classroom but it can only be developed by practising and exercising it. The only mode of learning from previous judgements is to study concrete examples and learn by analogy, simultaneously bearing in mind that history never repeats itself.

If political judgement is not a theoretical matter, the only way to try to define it and say something about it is to look at the politician and see what kind of role judgement plays in his/her action. It is important to

16. ‘By contrast, the honour of the political leader, that is, of the leading statesman, consists precisely in taking exclusive, personal responsibility for what he does, responsibility which cannot and may not refuse or unload onto others’ (Weber 1919: 331).
note that now we have moved to consider what Weber and Arendt say about politics and judgement under ‘normal circumstances’. In other words, the reference is no longer Eichmann and totalitarian dictatorship but rather everybody in ‘normal’ political situations. More importantly, when discussing political judgement in connection to Weber and Arendt one has to be aware of a certain incongruity between English and German. In English one can speak about discrimination or political judgement, while German distinguishes between Augenmass and Urteilskraft. Strictly speaking, Augenmass is neither discrimination nor judgement but rather ‘sense of proportion’ while Urteilskraft might be translated with ‘capacity of judgement’ referring rather to the faculty instead of activity. For Weber, this distinction was systematic and in many ways decisive. However, in my view it is implicit also in Arendt’s texts. One would rather argue that as a native German speaker she continuously fought against this and many other incongruities between the languages in which she thought and wrote, while also Weber must have been very conscious of them as a great admirer of Britain.

For Weber, the decisive thing is how to adjust passion and judgement together:


It is important to understand that, for Weber, controlling passion is not the same as repressing it. On the contrary, he argues that if politics is to be genuinely human action, dedication to it can only be generated and sustained by passion (Weber 1919: 228). The trouble is rather that if the politician is not able to control his passions, the most dangerous of them – politically speaking – may take control over him/her:

Einen ganz trivialen, allzu menschlichen Feind hat daher der Politiker täglich und stündlich in sich zu überwinden: die ganz gemeine Eitelkeit, die Todfeindin aller sachlichen Hingabe und aller Distanz, in diesem Fall: der Distanz sich selbst gegenüber (Weber 1919: 228). ¹⁸

¹⁷ ‘For the problem is precisely this: how are hot passion and cool judgement to be forced together in a single soul?... Only if one accustoms oneself to distance, in every sense of the word, can one achieve that powerful control over the soul which distinguishes the passionate politician from the mere “sterile excitement” of the political amateur’ (Weber 1919, 353).

¹⁸ ‘Every day and every hour, therefore, the politician has to overcome a quite
In other words, Weber suggests that it is precisely vanity that incessantly threatens to obscure judgement. In the case of the politician this is dangerous because the ambition for power is an inevitable means with which he works. If he is not able to control his passion for power and vanity, the inevitable result is a loss of judgement, which turns out to be a combination of two other capacities of the politician:

Seine Unsachlichkeit legt ihm nahe, den glänzenden Schein der Macht statt der wirklichen Macht zu erstreben, seine Verantwortungslosigkeit aber: die Macht lediglich um ihrer selbst willen, ohne inhaltlichen Zweck, zu geniessen (Weber 1919: 229).19

For Weber, political judgement turns out to be based on active practising or exercising of Sachlichkeit and responsibility. Without these two qualities the politician falls into vanity that obscures his capacity of judgement. Without distant Sachlichkeit the politician is not able to take all the relevant points of view into consideration and without responsibility he does not commit himself in a devoted manner. I would like to suggest that there are two important points in common with Arendt’s way of understanding political judgement. The first is connected to Sachlichkeit and the second is related to the politician’s sense of reality.

It seems to me that, in Weber, Sachlichkeit has a lot in common with activity, to which Arendt refers in Kantian terms as enlarged thought:

‘Enlarged thought’ is the result of first ‘abstracting from the limitations which contingently attach to our own judgement’, of ‘disregarding its private subjective conditions…by which so many are limited’, that is, of disregarding what we usually call self-interest and which according to Kant is not enlightened or capable of enlightenment but is in fact limiting… (Arendt 1978: Appendix 258)

For Arendt, enlarged thinking means that one has to take into account as many different standpoints and opinions as possible in order to be able to decide right from wrong, that is to make judgements:

[The] larger the realm in which the enlightened individual is able to move, from standpoint to standpoint, the more ‘general’ will be his thinking… This general standpoint we mentioned before as impartiality; it is a viewpoint from which to look upon, to watch, to form judgements, or, as Kant himself says, to reflect upon human affairs. It does not tell you how to act… (Arendt 1978: Appendix 258).

trivial, all-too-human enemy which threatens him from within: common vanity, the mortal enemy of all dedication to a cause and of all distance — in this case, of distance to oneself’ (Weber 1919: 353).

19. ‘His lack of objectivity tempts him to strive for the glittering appearance of power rather than its reality, while his irresponsibility tempts him to enjoy power for its own sake, without any substantive purpose’ (Weber 1919: 354).
In Weberian terms, one might say that enlarged thinking means maintaining one’s *Sachlichkeit*. As mentioned above, the *Sachlichkeit* of the politician is always threatened by vanity, which obscures judgement. He/she can try to fight vanity by always trying to take into account other people’s viewpoints and opinions. In other words, the politician should always try to maintain his/her sense of reality and the reality can be born and endure only in the presence of other people:

…the reality of the public realm relies on the simultaneous presence of innumerable perspectives and aspects in which the common world presents itself and for which no common measurement of denominator can ever be devised. For though the common world is the common meeting ground of all, those who are present have different locations in it, and the location of one can no more coincide with location of another than the location of two objects… Only where things can be seen by many in a variety of aspects without changing their identity, so that those who are gathered together around them know they see sameness in utter diversity, can worldly reality truly and reliably appear (Arendt 1958: 57).

**In conclusion**

My purpose has not been to try to bring Weber’s and Arendt’s thought entirely into accord on the basis of the remarks made above, but rather outline a few points in common in their thinking that best reveal the former’s impact on the latter’s thought. In this perspective my principal aim has been to show a certain unquestionable, but rarely recognized, methodological debt of Arendt to Weber in terms of ideal-types. In addition, I would like to suggest that their conceptions of politics should not be understood as being so exclusively different, as is often the case.

In addition, I have tried to show how Weber’s and Arendt’s ‘political-mindedness’ is reflected in their understandings of the concepts of responsibility and judgement that have points in common. Indeed, I would like to argue that what really links Weber’s and Arendt’s thinking is their care for the world, which renders their thinking characteristically political. Both of them can be identified as thinkers who were truly concerned with the world. This is precisely why the themes of responsibility and judgement play such an important role in their reflections on political action. In the final analysis, the most important point in common in Weber’s and Arendt’s thought is that both of them were convinced that the only weapon we have against political catastrophes is political judgement:

The manifestation of the wind of thought is not knowledge; it is the ability to tell right from wrong, beautiful from ugly. And this, at the rare moments when the stakes are on the table, may indeed prevent catastrophes, at least for the self (Arendt 1978: I, 193).
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