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HERMENEUTIC COURAGE. WHAT GADAMER (AND ARENDT) CAN TELL US ABOUT POLITICAL THINKING

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Abstract

Hans-Georg Gadamer, despite his exchanges with and reception by major figures in the field of political theory, is often thought of as a philosopher as opposed to *a political theorist. For instance, the title of one of his essays, "On the Political Incompetence of Philosophy," is sometimes taken to indicate that Gadamer thought of his* own *philosophy as "politically incompetent" (Code 2003, 15). In this paper, I argue that Gadamer's hermeneutic philosophy is deeply concerned with our relation to the political world. To bring out these political concerns, I put Gadamer in conversation with Hannah Arendt, who overtly disavowed philosophy in favor of political theory. I show that Gadamer and Arendt share many of the same worries about the solitary model of much philosophy – particularly that of Heidegger – and that both try to promote a more involved, worldly mode of thinking. For Arendt, this mode of thinking attends in large part to the newness and distinctiveness of other people, whereas Gadamer emphasizes* what *other people say and how we must relate to them if we are to understand what they are telling us. I argue that although these are complementary ways of addressing political thinking, one important advantage of Gadamer's account is the way it brings into view the centrality of courage for understanding our shared political world. Because understanding frequently requires that we question our identities and renegotiate our existing relation to the world in often uncomfortable ways, political thinking involves what I call "hermeneutic courage.".*

Keywords: Hans-Georg Gadamer, Hannah Arendt, hermeneutics, courage, ethics, politics

> *"I know that for all of us it is not easy to really follow other ways of thought. I know that also from my experience with your books, where I often have had to be content to get out what is fruitful for me*."
> Hans-Georg Gadamer to Leo Strauss (Strauss and Gadamer 1978, 8)

Newcomers to Hannah Arendt often find themselves obsessing over the question of her politics. What, in fact, did she believe in?[1] While endlessly perplexing, the

[1] A recent episode of the podcast What's Left of Philosophy, "(Un)Learning How to Do Politics with Hannah Arendt," provoked a teacup-sized furor among Extremely Online readers of Arendt by devoting most of its runtime to this question.

question itself is a dubious pursuit, since Arendt herself disavowed any identification with the political categories of her day (Arendt 2018b, 470–71). Implicit in such an interrogation, which is a long-standing feature of the nonspecialist literature on Arendt, is an attempt to determine which "camp" Arendt is writing "for" – this despite the fact that Arendt scholarship is notable for its political heterogeneity. Such an attitude remains entangled in the fact–value distinction, unable to get away from some version of the view that whereas the hard sciences give us "facts" that we all can share, political theorists deal with "values," and that accordingly the task in reading theory is to identify and assess the moral project around which an author pivots.

The attempt to pigeonhole Arendt in this way, often as a prelude to dismissing her as belonging to the "wrong" camp, flies in the face of Arendt's own emphasis on diversity and on attention to a world shared in common. A similar reception has greeted Hans-Georg Gadamer, who, when acknowledged as politically invested at all, has often been painted as a "conservative."[2] This labeling is more straightforwardly falsifiable than the various labelings of Arendt – Gadamer was demonstrably a liberal (Grondin 2003, 153) – but the implication is similar: namely, that those inhabiting a more radical "camp" will find little of value in what he wrote. Indeed, the introduction to the volume *Feminist Interpretations of Hans-Georg Gadamer* is winkingly entitled "Why Feminists Do Not Read Gadamer" (Code 2003). No less than Arendt, however, Gadamer's thought concerns the world that lies between us rather than the contents of the soul (Gadamer 1988, 134–35). Both students of phenomenology, Arendt and Gadamer shared Husserl's catchcry "to the things themselves!" And both emphasized that these things are a collective concern, that they are used, inhabited, and illuminated in concert with others.

This paper aims to vindicate Gadamer as a political theorist for all (which is to say, a democratic theorist) who may be read fruitfully in tandem with Arendt, especially on the question of thinking and its relation to politics. The paper has four sections. In the first I clarify the position of politics vis-à-vis philosophy for

[2] The two main causes of this characterization are, firstly, Gadamer's debates with Jürgen Habermas and Jacques Derrida, both venerable figures on the Left; and secondly, Gadamer's prominent use of the terms "tradition" and "prejudice." In both cases, the view of Gadamer as taking a "conservative" position is based on a misreading of the texts.

Arendt and Gadamer through a reading of their essays on Martin Heidegger. Heidegger, who taught both Arendt and Gadamer, was a member of the Nazi Party from 1933 to 1945, and the relation of Nazism to his thought remains a controversial question. In their essays, Arendt and Gadamer distance the practice of philosophy from politics, showing that Heidegger's solitary and contemplative activity of philosophy is disconnected from the practical concerns of politics – and therefore signaling the need for a more worldly account of political thinking than what Heidegger can provide.[3] Both have been accused, however, of engaging in "apologetics" for Heidegger – an important charge insofar as it calls into question the pair's judgment and their methods of distancing the parts of Heidegger in which they are invested from the parts they wish to disavow. In the second section I assess what is at stake in this charge and clarify what "apologetics" might mean. This meditation on apologetics is valuable, I argue, because it brings into view certain important but contrasting features of the pair's approaches to theorizing politics: for Arendt, the practice of reflecting upon individuals, including their contributions and their failings; and for Gadamer, the essentially public nature of understanding that does not belong to any particular person or group.

I bring these differences to bear in the final two sections, arguing that they provide complementary ways of theorizing the relation of political thinking to the central political virtue of courage. In the third section I discuss Arendt's account of courage, arguing that this account is marked by a machismo for which thinking provides an antidote. However, this understanding of thinking as a counterpart to courage misses an opportunity to theorize courage as a *part* of thinking. Hence in the last section I turn to *Truth and Method*, showing that Gadamer's account of the "hermeneutic experience" is tightly interwoven with a critique of traditional imagery of courage (fighting, struggling, risking one's life, etc.) in a way that points toward a novel and valuable account of courageous, democratic thinking. This "hermeneutic courage," as I call it, draws attention to the troubling and renegotiating of the self that is involved when we think about political matters that are shared in common.

[3] The discussion of Heidegger additionally shows that my bracketing of the question of Arendt and Gadamer's political leanings should not imply an "anything-goes" attitude toward our theoretical lodestars.

1. Syracuse and Freiburg

Plato went to Syracuse on three separate occasions with the aim of educating the city's tyrant – first Dionysius I and later his son, Dionysius II – in the art of good rulership. For various reasons, detailed in the *Seventh Letter*, these expeditions failed, and on at least one occasion Plato barely escaped with his life. Soon after becoming rector of the University of Freiburg in 1933, Martin Heidegger joined the Nazi Party, which he described as a movement not just political but "spiritual" and "metaphysical," one that would bring about the overcoming of modern humanity's alienation from Being (Heidegger 2016, 99; 2017, 318–19). He resigned the rectorship within a year,[4] but remained a member of the Party until 1945. Following the war, he never publicly denounced the Nazis, and during the denazification hearings he was declared a *Mitläufer*: a fellow-traveler or non-exonerated follower. In 1934, soon after Heidegger resigned as rector, one of his colleagues greeted him in the street with "back from Syracuse?"

Arendt and Gadamer, arguably Heidegger's two most prominent students, attempted at different times – in both cases some decades after the fact – to come to terms publicly with Heidegger's Nazi involvement, both invoking Plato's Syracusan misadventures. In 1971 Arendt wrote "Heidegger at Eighty" for the *New York Review of Books*. After Heidegger's death, and after the publication of Victor Farias' book *Heidegger and Nazism* (Farias 1989, originally published in French in 1987), Gadamer in 1989 wrote "Back From Syracuse?", before rewriting and expanding the essay in 1993 under the title "On the Political Incompetence of Philosophy" (Arendt 2018c; Gadamer 1989; 1998). In these essays, both authors are concerned with the act of thinking and its relation to politics. If Heidegger's practice of philosophical reflection, which had a decisive influence on both, could not save him from politically repugnant decisions, then what is its value and role?

Of these pieces, Arendt's is by far the most famous. "Heidegger at Eighty" is a mostly laudatory account of Heidegger as teacher and thinker. Reminiscing about the "rumor" of a new teacher that had spread through Germany in the years following World War I, Arendt summarizes the rumor as follows:

> Thinking has come to life again; the cultural treasures of the past, believed to be dead, are being made to speak, in the course of which it turns out that

[4] This has sometimes been interpreted as a sign that Heidegger regretted his involvement, although short rectorships were common at the time.

> they propose things altogether different from the familiar, worn-out trivialities they had been presumed to say. There is a teacher; one can perhaps learn to think (Arendt 2018c, 421).

Heidegger, this "hidden king," engaged in a process of thinking that Arendt describes as "digging" and "penetrating to the depths," uncovering and dwelling within an "underground" "deep plane," where his task was not to excavate a new foundation but to lay down "wood-paths" (*Holzwege*) for those who wished to join him (Arendt 2018c, 422–23). Thinking, the mental exploration of this subterranean forest, is to be distinguished from the "system-building" which has been the accompanying vice of most previous philosophy (Arendt 2018c, 424). To think is to dwell in the forest and its "clearings," not to build a stairway from which we may climb out. And, notwithstanding Heidegger's role as guide, thinking is essentially solitary, silent, and still: the exemplar here is Socrates in one of his "moments," enraptured and insensitive (Arendt 2018c, 425; 2018d, 302). The withdrawal or "uplifting" inherent to thinking (for reasons unclear, Arendt reverses the image of descent) is "always paid for by a withdrawal from the world of human affairs," which are always plural, talking, and moving (Arendt 2018c, 427).

In the final few paragraphs, Arendt turns directly to Heidegger's involvement with the Nazis, writing that he "once succumbed to the temptation to change his 'residence' and 'intervene' … in the world of human affairs," much as Plato had done when he went to Syracuse (Arendt 2018c, 429). Ignorant at first about the true nature of the Nazi movement – not having read *Mein Kampf* and the other "gutter" literature, but only the fascist-adjacent Italian futurists – Heidegger quickly realized his error, and withdrew again after "ten short hectic months" (Arendt 2018c, 429–30). These passages – surely unsustainable following the 2014 publication of Heidegger's *Black Notebooks*, which Arendt never read[5] – are clearly meant to be exculpatory of Heidegger. But the real critical thrust of the essay consists in her subsequent linking together of the solitary business of thinking with the philosopher's alleged tendency to address political problems through the figure of *homo faber*, the solitary "maker" of goodness in the political

[5] For instance, a diary entry from 1932 seems to suggest that Heidegger had read *Mein Kampf*, describing it as "brainless" (Heidegger 2016, 104). He nonetheless joined the Party the following year.

realm. This, Arendt famously claims, is the "*déformation professionnelle*" of philosophy (Arendt 2018c, 431). It is important to note that for Arendt, Heidegger's response to his political failures was not the cultivation of an improved political judgment, but the total withdrawal from worldly affairs (Arendt 2018c, 430). Heidegger did not renounce the Nazis; rather he renounced *politics* for the sake of solitary thinking. In Dana Villa's memorable formulation, Arendt's position seems to be that "Heidegger, who claimed to be more genuinely anti-Platonist than Nietzsche, turns out to be more Platonist than Plato" (Villa 1995, 236–37).

In "On the Political Incompetence of Philosophy," Gadamer asks after the political value of philosophy, given its notable practical failures and its tendency to give "oblique, wayward answers" to important questions (Gadamer 1998, 4). In an indirect reflection upon Heidegger's moral failings, he wonders why it is that Heidegger was asked so often to write an Ethics, and what the implications of such an undertaking would have been.[6] Rejecting Pierre Bourdieu's claim that philosophers constitute a particular class of people whose work may be studied sociologically, Gadamer defines philosophy as the pursuit of universal questions, in which all people engage to some extent. This pursuit "comes up constantly against an ignorance that calls us into question" (Gadamer 1998, 5). Philosophy can never give rise to specialized knowledge or expertise, because our being is "disconnected from the natural order of things" and thus not a question of knowable *physis* or thinghood. Instead, philosophy returns constantly to "humanity itself, in its questioning and errors" (Gadamer 1998, 6). Gadamer contrasts this perpetual questioning that is philosophy with the habitus that continually integrates us into, and assigns us responsibility for, the world (Gadamer 1998, 5, 9–10). It is this responsibility, and not philosophical reflection, that for Gadamer is "the kernel of all ethics" (Gadamer 1998, 10). Why, then, should we look to professional philosophers for insight into ethics, when they bear so much *less* responsibility for the world than teachers, doctors, lawyers, and priests (Gadamer 1998, 5–6)?

Obviously, ethics is a long-established and central topic within professional philosophy; Gadamer is not trying to deny this. Rather, he is attempting to clarify the orientation and position of ethics as an activity originating in the world rather than in contemplation. Accordingly, ethics as a theoretical discipline is properly thought of less as a branch of philosophy in the modern academic sense, and

[6] Heidegger's "Letter on Humanism" was in part a response to these requests.

more one of political theory or sociology. These disciplines are concerned with the common political world, and this world contains a *sensus communis* to which people properly look for moral guidance. However, under conditions of "depoliticization," where this common world has withered, people will look elsewhere, including to professional philosophers like Heidegger (Gadamer 1998, 9–10). In these circumstances, professional philosophers can exert a damaging spiritual influence, as Heidegger had done. Philosophers are trained to "see possibilities," which makes them especially prone to political illusions and fantasies (Gadamer 1998, 6–7, 8–9; 1989, 428). But the fault lies with those followers who do not recognize this, who abdicate their own judgment in the face of the philosopher's aura (Gadamer 1998, 7). In any case, ethics is not a matter of having the right beliefs or convictions but is always a matter of action (Gadamer 1998, 10). To think that Heidegger, of all people, could give us insight on these matters is to be completely confused about the subject. Gadamer ends with the remark that philosophers "can only be of assistance if they are able to show other people how much we are faced with tasks whose resolution cannot be treated as the sole responsibility of others" (Gadamer 1998, 11). In other words, philosophy is useful for politics only when it brings into view political problems as questions of collective action and responsibility. This is perhaps Gadamer's sharpest rebuke of Heidegger, who during the Nazi years called philosophy the concern of "the few" who "transform creatively," and who after the war declared all thought and action futile, saying "only a god can save us" (Heidegger 2014, 11; 2009, 57).

2. The apologetic style

In "Did Heidegger Go to Syracuse?," a 2019 essay accompanying a new translation of Plato's *Seventh Letter*, Francisco J. Gonzalez distances Heidegger's involvement with the Nazis from Plato's Sicilian misadventures. For Gonzalez, Plato's concern with teaching good – that is, lawful – rulership is virtually the opposite of Heidegger's embrace of criminal dictatorship, which was deeply rooted in his philosophy. According to Gonzalez, "the connection between Heidegger and Syracuse is often made with the purpose of *defending* Heidegger" (Gonzalez 2019, 265, Gonzalez's emphasis) – singling out Arendt and Gadamer's essays as examples. For Gonzalez, these "apologetics" by "Heideggerians" aim to draw on the Heidegger–Syracuse parallel in order to reduce Heidegger's deep-seated Nazi

sympathies to the status of an "error" by a politically naïve philosopher (Gonzalez 2019, 265–67, 288–89).

The charge is that Arendt and Gadamer obscure (willfully or otherwise) Heidegger's doctrinal affinities to Nazism. Implicit here is a similar kind of analysis to that discussed in this paper's first paragraph. The question of Heidegger's politics is settled by a holistic reading of his philosophical texts. This reading concludes that Heidegger wrote Nazi philosophy, in which we find expressed a set of normative beliefs that grounded his involvement in the world. Since political philosophy deals with the analysis of values and value systems, and thus with the unmasking and refuting of bad or mistaken value systems like Nazism, Arendt and Gadamer's "apologetics" are dangerous, preserving fragments of Nazi philosophy in the world under some other, misleading heading.

This accusation misses the mark: as I have emphasized in my reading of "Heidegger at Eighty" and "On the Political Incompetence of Philosophy," Arendt and Gadamer are attending not to any doctrinal or normative claim of Heidegger's, but to the meaning of a particular *activity*. Arendt calls this activity "thinking" and Gadamer calls it "philosophy" or "questioning." Both authors associate this activity with Heidegger, but they note that he carried it out in a problematically unpolitical way. What for Gonzalez is an example of "apologetics" – the attributing of Heidegger's "error" to a flawed practical relation to the world, and not to his possession of mistaken or evil ideas – only emerges as such against the background assumption that belief grounds action, and that therefore what ultimately counts is the analysis of belief. This is an assumption that Arendt and Gadamer do not share.

However, this does not rule out the possibility that "Heidegger at Eighty" and "Political Incompetence" are "apologetics" in some other sense, and so in this section I attempt to clarify the meaning of apologetics and the essays' relation to it. In the broadest sense, apologetics is the attempt to vindicate a thing's place in the world by defending it from some charge that would seek to exclude it from the world. Accordingly, apologetics has always been part of the theorist's toolkit, but it may take drastically different forms. The word itself comes from the Greek *apologia*, which originally had the specific meaning of a defense speech delivered at a trial – the most famous example being that of Socrates (Plato, *Apology*; Xenophon, *Apology*). Its opposite was the *katēgoria*, or accusation, from which we

get "category." This dichotomy gives an important hint as to one facet of the apologetic style: if the accusation aims to *categorize*, to mark the accused as such-and-such, then the apology aims to undo this categorization, blurring and making uncertain its object's marking. The apology, then, is not the purely factual refutation familiar to modern-day criminal trials, where the legal categories themselves are not and cannot be up for debate, but consists in a problematization both of the categories and of the singling out of the object under investigation. In a modern criminal trial, the defense cannot ask "is it not really society that is guilty?" – this, after all, is the crux of Arendt's unease with the postwar trials, which attempted to subsume *political* crimes under a legal framing (Arendt 2003a, 39ff) – but the apology may attempt precisely such a problematizing (or, if one prefers, obfuscating) move. Some of the writing in "Political Incompetence" and "Heidegger at Eighty" could be seen to fit this sense of apologetics; on an uncharitable reading, the essays attempt to shift the terms of discussion away from Heidegger and his culpability and toward such questions as "don't we all carry responsibility?", "why does Heidegger matter so much?", or "isn't this a problem with philosophy/humankind, not with Heidegger?".

In the apology, this blurring takes place primarily by the defendant's act of telling his story. This story is an *apo-logia*: literally, an account-from. The account aims to convince the audience that the defendant acted appropriately within his particular circumstances. The process is one of contextualization: dislodging the framing of the act as the mere expression of some principle or category that we as audience may judge in an abstract or transhistorical manner (namely, as either inside or outside the "law"), and affirming the decision as the (hopefully more understandable) response to the configuration of questions confronting the subject in his concrete situation. Those familiar with the historicist school of reading texts will recognize this strategy: the act of placing authors firmly within their historical contexts tends to dissolve the prejudices (i.e., pre-judgments), formed within our own present context, that we bring to bear anachronistically in our reading (Skinner 2002, esp. 58–61). So too the journalist profiling the public figure, making them into a flesh-and-bone human and not a mere avatar of ideological categories. Of course, the picture that emerges may be a loathsome one: the apologist may fail to win sympathy; the journalist or Cambridge historian, in bringing the subject closer to our understanding, may multiply our grounds for

revulsion. Socrates, whom the Athenians probably wanted merely to exile, ended up convincing them to execute him instead.

What is decisive, however, is that the apology seeks to involve us in a different kind of judgment, one that invites us to judge the person as sui generis and not simply as "guilty" or "innocent." As Arendt would put it, we are invited to make a *reflective* judgment, in which we re-think the rule in light of the particular, as opposed to a *determinant* judgment, in which we subsume the particular under the pre-existing rule (Arendt 1989, 83). Reflective judgments call on us to *think*, which is dangerous: thinking is dissolvent; it tends to wash away all pre-existing standards (Arendt 2003b, 177). Thus apologetics will quite naturally attract a bad name – for example, whether there is social value in hearing apologetics for murderers is quite unclear, since this would mean questioning the category of "murder" itself. (Of course, judges can hear pleas in mitigation, but these are contingent firstly on a finding of guilt, so that the crime itself is not questioned. Moreover, they are governed by a host of rules determining in advance what may count as a mitigating factor, and how much these factors ought to be weighed.)

During the Christian era, the apology came to mean something quite different: namely, a rational defense of a particular doctrine (Christian theology). Paul the Apostle provides perhaps the first example of this, using the word *apologia* both in the traditional sense, in reference to the Corinthians' self-exoneration (2 Cor. 7:11); and in the new sense, to the defense of the Gospel (Phil. 1:7). Rather than the person, it was the *doctrine* that was now on trial, and this doctrine could not be defended through narration, only demonstration – this not least because, unlike the *logoi* that Socrates had "put to the test" in the agora, the Christian doctrine was the word of God: it was not the possession of any particular person or group (not even the Christians themselves) and therefore could not rely for its authority on its adherents' concordance of word and deed (cf. Plato, *Laches*, 187e–88a, 188c–89a). What originally was a question of judgment instead had to become a question of rational deduction, of following a complex theological argument through each of its steps. It also meant that the apology for the doctrine was logically distinct from any defense of the character of its adherents. Unlike for the Greeks, one could approve of the argument without approving of any of those who believe it; wisdom and virtue could be separated. This innovation was still obscure among the early Christian apologists, whose defense of doctrine rested largely on pointing out the good cha-

racter of Christians; however, once Christianity ceased to be the concern of a persecuted minority and became politically as well as ideationally a possession for all, the intellectual defense of its metaphysics took priority to the practical virtues of morality (Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* 1.1; Jaffa 1952, 24–25, 31; Garvie 1913, 5–6). To come to a rational appreciation of the truth of Christianity, it is not necessary to have first acquired good moral judgment; rather, to grasp this truth intellectually is the prerequisite and guarantor of moral judgment.

If the basic purpose of apologetics is to vindicate a thing's place in the world, then what Arendt and Gadamer seek to vindicate is neither the person nor the doctrine of Heidegger,[7] but rather a certain political practice of thinking and the usefulness of Heidegger for theorizing this thinking. Thinking is solitary, questioning, but "politically incompetent" if carried out in Heidegger's monomaniacal fashion. In one respect, Arendt and Gadamer's essays can be understood as part of an apologia for *themselves* as inheritors of Heidegger's intellectual legacy, with Heidegger appearing in the story as a decisive influence that must be superseded (not simply rejected) on the way to a properly political account of thinking. How might things have been different if Heidegger had truly attempted to think politics and not just Being?

Beyond the matter of Heidegger, Arendt and Gadamer's vindication of political thinking is inflected in decisive ways by what each takes from the apologetic tradition. The hermeneutic tradition in which Gadamer worked began as the practice of biblical interpretation, the exegesis of the Word of the Gospel. Gadamer's thought is secular and liberal, but its predominant concern is with the understanding of tradition as transmitted in texts (Gadamer 2000, 389–90).[8] As a result, his focus on the word sits in uneasy relation to the idea of a biography, an irony not lost on his biographer Jean Grondin (Grondin 2003, 8). Gadamer is deeply attuned to the particular, but biography tends to particularize in a special way: by emphasizing the logos of some individual (or in the Skinnerian tradition, some historical context), it casts

[7] Surely decisive against any claim that the essays are apologetics for Heidegger the person is the fact that both Arendt and Gadamer take the repulsiveness of Heidegger's judgment for granted: in other words, both authors have *already* rendered a verdict, and their essays are devoted to working out the verdict's implications.

[8] Gadamer works with his own phenomenological understanding of "tradition," which is by no means coextensive with the "Christian tradition"; it can be loosely defined as the totality of interpretive frames or "fore-understandings," shared in language, through which we access phenomena.

doubt on the unifying force of words, of a tradition which is not the possession of any person or group but is properly shared in common by all (a notion unknown to Europe before Christianity). Arendt would not necessarily disagree with any of this, except that she held that in the twentieth century this tradition was decisively "broken" and needed to be re-thought more or less from scratch (Arendt 2006b). Accordingly, apologia in the sense of narrative performs a vital role in her thought, from her biography of Rahel Varnhagen to her compilation *Men in Dark Times*. Bringing forth outstanding individuals is a way of provoking the reflective judgments necessary for new concepts, new "guideposts for future remembrance," to emerge (Arendt 2006a, 212; cf. 2018d, 186). Only by reflecting on what is sui generis, as if in a renewed agora, can we build tradition anew. As Arendt puts it in the preface to *Men in Dark Times*, her biographical writings are informed by the belief that "illumination may well come less from theories and concepts than from the uncertain, flickering, and often weak light that some men and women, in their lives and their works, will kindle" (Arendt 1970, ix).

In the next two sections, I show that these different inheritances can be helpfully compared through the lens of courage and its relation to political thinking. For Arendt, we need courage primarily to enter into the public arena: to appear for judgment before our peers, to enact newness and "kindle" new "light." Courage is required for individuation, to the unfolding of a unique story. However, it is seemingly not required for the activity of political thinking that attends to these stories. For Gadamer, the commonality of the tradition that lies between us – its possession by no person or group – means that political thinking involves a difficult relinquishment of ownership over meaning and the opening oneself to the claims of others. Although Gadamer does not theorize courage explicitly, he weaves into his account a critique of traditional contexts of courage (fighting, risking one's life, coming to terms with tragedy) in a way that strongly suggests a novel account of courageous political thinking, which I call "hermeneutic courage."

3. Arendt: Courage as a counterpart of thinking

Contrasting Heidegger throwing in his lot with the Nazis to Gadamer's careful non-involvement, Grondin makes the fairly ill-advised remark that "Gadamer had superior political instinct; Heidegger perhaps more courage" (Grondin 2003, 171). In Grondin's portrait, Gadamer's overriding priorities during the Nazi

years were with the security of himself and his family, and with the preservation of the tradition of thought against its destruction by ideology. He stood with his back to the political stream, without releasing himself to it or turning to face it directly. Neither shunning places of responsibility, nor advancing his position by embracing the Party, nor embarking on a suicidal resistance – Gadamer from 1933–45 walked a tightrope (to mix my metaphors) that, on Arendt's account of the totalitarian experience, should have been impossible (Arendt 2003a, 33–34, 47–48). This has understandably aroused suspicion about the degree of Gadamer's cooperation with the Nazis, but as Grondin has shown, there is little evidence that Gadamer gave the Nazis either tangible or symbolic support (Grondin 2003, 151–230). Certainly the easiest course of action, and in that respect the least courageous, would have been to do as Heidegger had done, which makes Grondin's judgment about his "courage" all the stranger.

In any case, the Nazi experience is far removed from what Arendt says is the true province of political courage, namely the participation in a political space marked by freedom and plurality. Courage, for Arendt, relates to the appearance before one's peers, the departure from private "hiding places" into the glare of the public realm (Arendt 2006d, 154–55; 2018d, 36, 186–87; 2005b, 122–23). In this public realm, one can never predict with confidence the consequences of one's actions, nor can one fully control the way in which one appears and the judgments to which one is thereby exposed. This terrifying uncertainty shapes what is meant by political courage. (Plato is known for crystallizing the themes of his dialogues by a phrase in the dialogue's first sentence; whereas he begins the *Apology* with *ouk oida*, "I do not know," and the *Republic* with *katebēn*, "I descended," he begins his dialogue on courage with *tetheasthe men ton andra*, "you have seen the man" (*Laches*, 178a). What is decisive is the visibility of the man – the citizen – before his peers.) Totalitarianism destroys the possibility of courageous action by requiring all appearance to take the form of a cowardly submission to the Party, and by making the consequences of action stark and utterly predictable. Under these conditions, only an extraordinary variety of courage is available in the form of the martyr, but the martyr's death does not reflect the *beginning* that courage ordinarily signifies (Arendt 2003a, 33–34, 44; 2018d, 177, 186).

This notion of courage as the individual's self-disclosure before her or his peers relates in important ways to Arendt's concern with biography. If it is true that we need to re-think our received concepts from scratch, and that one of the

main ways we can do this is to reflect on exemplary individuals, then an absolute prerequisite is that people have the courage to act (that is, to appear for public judgment), to *keep* acting despite the breakdown of old standards and concepts, to engage in something like the ancient Greek struggle to become exemplary. This Greek paradigm "stresses the urge toward self-disclosure at the expense of all other factors," fostering an "agonal spirit" marked by a "passionate drive to show oneself in measuring up against others" (Arendt 2018d, 194). Action in this sense "can be judged only by the criterion of greatness because it is in its nature to break through the commonly accepted and reach into the extraordinary, where whatever is true in common and everyday life no longer applies because everything that exists is unique and *sui generis*" (Arendt 2018d, 205).

But as Arendt herself acknowledged, this agonal spirit "eventually was to bring the Greek city-states to ruin because it made alliances between them well-nigh impossible and poisoned the domestic life of the citizens with envy and mutual hatred" (Arendt 2005c, 16). To view one's peers as objects of judgment implies seeing them as competitors for glory; what is missing is an antidote to such a monomaniacal agonism. This antidote is thinking, here understood in a specifically political way. Arendt turns to Socrates, who reinterpreted the self-disclosure of his peers as windows to a shared truth. If a person's *doxa*, or point of view, is their "opening to the world," then the Socratic practice of questioning and listening is intended to bring citizens together by illuminating the shared world that lies between them (Arendt 2005c, 14–15). In this way the agonistic politics of courage is tempered by a practice of "political friendship" and attention to the world (Arendt 2005c, 16–18).

Arendt's reflections in her "Socrates" essay, which originated in lectures delivered in 1954, form the basis for her account of "representative thinking," which first appeared in the 1967 *New Yorker* essay "Truth and Politics." There she writes that "political thought is representative. I form an opinion by considering a given issue from different viewpoints, by making present to my mind the standpoints of those who are absent; that is, I represent them." The "quality" and "validity" of the conclusions we draw in political matters derive from the number of viewpoints we make present in their absence. This is not a matter of "counting noses," but of taking into account as many "openings to the world" as we can in order to achieve the fullest available picture, the most "enlarged mentality" (Arendt 2006c, 237). In other words, it involves "train[ing] our imagination to go

visiting" (Arendt 1989, 43). The absence of others is a prerequisite of thinking, which takes place in an inner space of solitude, but in contrast to Heidegger, thinking is nourished by the presence of others. As Arendt puts it in *The Life of the Mind*, "I first talk with others before I talk with myself, examining whatever the joint talk may have been about, and then discover that I can conduct a dialogue not only with others but with myself as well" (Arendt 1981, 1.189). This practice of thinking, grounded in friendship, is an antidote to the centripetal force of the macho politics of courage that Arendt attributes to the Greeks (and that is often attributed to her in a one-sided manner: see Rich 1995, 205–06, 211–12; Brown 2002, 23–29). Both are necessary – courage and thinking – but they operate in a push-and-pull relation to one another.

But if courage is accorded this relationship to thinking, it is not clear that courage amounts to much more than "leaping in mindlessly and talking rubbish," to quote Aristophanes (*Knights*, 546). What I want to argue is that courage can relate to thinking in a more robust, less antagonistic manner, and that Gadamer gives us the resources for re-thinking courage as a thinking courage (as it were). Before turning to these resources, it is necessary to show that Gadamer's orientation to the question of thinking and politics is properly analogous to Arendt's; to show that Gadamer and Arendt are talking about the same thing, in other words.

Linda Zerilli provides a challenge to such a view, writing that whereas Gadamer's concern with truth is "based in ethics," Arendt's concern is with "truth and politics" (Zerilli 2016, 134). By "ethics," Zerilli understands "self-care," or the duties I have to myself. For Arendt, and for Zerilli, ethics in this sense is derivative of politics: the conversations I have in the public realm lead to the "two-in-one" of thinking, where I confront myself with what I have heard, speaking the other's perspective but in my own voice; this, in turn, gives rise to an "ethical" desire not to be at odds with myself, to harmonize the plural voices that nag at me in my solitude. This ethical desire for self-harmony grounds a sense of duty, but we are mistaken when we reverse the order of priority and view this ethical duty as a foundation for politics. What inspires politics is not ethical duty but *amor mundi*, the care we have for the world (Arendt 2018d, 77; 2005a, 203). So Zerilli's contention is that Gadamer analyzes truth within the framing of self-care, whereas Arendt analyzes it within the framing of care for the world (Zerilli 2016, 134–35).

This impression of Gadamer is understandable, given his lifelong interest in ethical philosophy (particularly Aristotle's) and his use of concepts of self-care. For instance, he repeatedly uses the language of *Bildung* to describe the acquisition of understanding (what he calls the "fusion of horizons") (see generally Warnke 1987). This term has a particular currency in German Romanticism; it generally means "education" or "formation" but in the Romantic tradition came to mean something like "self-actualization" – hence the literary genre *Bildungsroman*, or coming-of-age story. However, despite Gadamer's use of this language, he is not concerned with "ethics" in the sense of self-care. Rather, ethics for Gadamer is simply the branch of philosophy that is most attuned to the world and to practice. Since for him "understanding" is a worldly activity, ethics is better placed than other branches of philosophy (such as epistemology) to give us insight into what understanding is and how it comes about (Gadamer 2000, 295). In this respect his concerns are, I would suggest, very much congruent with Arendt's. As I have been arguing, Gadamer emphasizes the priority of the political to the ethical and stresses our relation not to ourselves or to other individuals, but to "tradition": an in-between, transmitted in words, which is not the possession of any person or group but is shared in common by all. If there is a normative standard at work here, it does not take the form of a duty to oneself that is then made into a ground for politics; rather, it is a matter of standards that arise from the practice of politics itself: what Ella Myers has called a "worldly ethics" (Myers 2013).[9] To my eyes, this does not differ meaningfully from Arendt's own invocations of normative standards – like courage and amor mundi – which are similarly meant to clarify our relationship to the world that lies between people.[10] Gadamer's "tradition" is somewhat different to what Arendt means by the "world," which for Arendt includes tangible objects; the tradition is, nonetheless, a major part of that world.

[9] This is somewhat different from the kind of neo-Kantian approach taken by Jürgen Habermas, which Zerilli calls "morality" rather than "ethics" (Zerilli 2016, 134). What characterizes "morality" is a concern that standards be rationally justifiable. Thus there is an implicit appeal to a "pure" rationality that, although brought to bear on the practice of politics, originates from outside of (or transcends) the political realm.

[10] For instance, in "Freedom and Politics, a Lecture," Arendt says that courage "does not gratify our individual sense of vitality but is demanded of us by the very nature of the public realm" (Arendt 2018a, 227).

4. Gadamer: Courage as a part of thinking

One of Gadamer's chief concerns is to understand the moment of understanding: to borrow some of Arendt's language, the moment at which we see the world more fully in the light cast by the other's "opening" onto it. As he puts it, "Understanding means first of all: oh, now I understand what you want!" (Gadamer 2007, 118). Arendt (unless I am missing something) is oddly silent about this moment: in her account of the "two-in-one" of thinking, we move from talking with others in the world to mentally representing their viewpoints to ourselves. After doing the former, we "discover" ourselves doing the latter (Arendt 1981, 1.189). The upshot is a frictionless quality to representative thinking and the practice of mentally "visiting" the perspectives of our peers. Accordingly, Arendt has found herself vulnerable to agonistic objections that emphasize the struggle, guilt, opposition, pain, and self-work that go into the acquisition of an "enlarged mentality." For instance, Leonard C. Feldman has argued persuasively that Arendt portrayed thinking as "the transcendence of private and personal tastes to reach a more general standpoint" without sufficiently considering the "renegotiat[ion of] the boundaries of the self" that such a process might require (Feldman 1999, 2). Similarly, I argue that what is often at stake in a lack of understanding is not just the kind of "*inability* to think" with which Arendt diagnosed Adolf Eichmann (Arendt 2006e, 49), but a lack of *courage* to do so.

The moment of insight is what Gadamer calls "experience." In a pivotal section of *Truth and Method*, "The Concept of Experience and the Essence of the Hermeneutical Experience," he investigates "experience" in conversation with Aristotle, Hegel, and Aeschylus. In what follows, I give a close reading of this section, arguing that Gadamer's choice of interlocutors, and the concepts of experience to which he replies, display a preoccupation with struggle, contestation, and situations of physical and spiritual precarity or risk. He thereby indicates the centrality of courage to understanding in a way that cuts against the unreflecting portrait of courage that Arendt provides.

Gadamer's first interlocutor is Aristotle. Aristotle's description of experience in the *Posterior Analytics* is summarized in a curious martial metaphor, which Gadamer describes as a "very fine image" (*Post. An.*, 100a5–15; Gadamer 2000, 352). For Aristotle, experience (*empeiria*) is an additive process that cul-

minates in the grasp of universals. Unless we grasp these universals, our perceptions have no structure and are akin to a fleeing army: chaotic, disunited, and defective. A perception only "stands firm" once it has been "experienced repeatedly," and this "firm" perception becomes the catalyst or touchstone around which other perceptions may gather and accrete into a "primitive universal" (*Post. An.*, 100a16; Gadamer 2000, 352). This primitive universal is the *arkhē* ("beginning," "command," or "foundation") from which the army as a whole may turn and "make a stand" (*Post. An.*, 100a13–14; Gadamer 2000, 352).

For Gadamer, the metaphor "captures the curious *openness* in which experience is acquired, suddenly, through this or that feature, unpredictably, and yet not without *preparation*" (Gadamer 2000, 352, my emphasis). Gadamer's meaning here is not transparent, since as will become clear, he means to replace the way Aristotle understands "openness" and "preparation" with his own senses of the words. In Aristotle's simile, the fleeing army is "open" in the sense of being scattered; once it has rallied, its ranks "close" around some particular arkhē. The acquisition of an arkhē therefore seems to require a kind of "openness" or lack of firmness, even if this acquisition then rules out that same openness. However, this understanding of openness in terms of a scattering that must be united, or a porousness that must become impenetrable, is what Gadamer means to *criticize* in the image. Instead, Gadamer wants to keep openness open, to find a form of openness directed to openness itself.

Likewise "preparation." In what sense might we speak of a fleeing army being "prepared" to rally? For Aristotle, this preparation presumably comes from the army's training. Having been trained in the art of soldiery, and having once stood firm, the soldiers have the capacity or "preparation" to rally should they be inspired by some new arkhē to do so. Again, however, this notion of preparation is what Gadamer rejects in the image. As Gadamer puts it, "Aristotle's image of the fleeing army is imperfect because it starts from the wrong assumption, namely that before fleeing the army was standing firm" (Gadamer 2000, 352). This "prior" standing should not be understood as a knowledge of universals which we once had and must somehow recover: this is Plato's account of understanding as "remembering," which Aristotle does not share (*Post. An.*, 99b35–100a3; cf. *Meno*, 81c–d). Rather, perceptions have an ability to stand firm which is innate, and "what persists in the flight of observations and emerges as a universal is … something common to them." The universality of concepts is therefore understood

in terms of *classification*, a classification that is "ontologically prior" to the accretion of experiences into principles (Gadamer 2000, 352). In this way, the process of experience is guided by a methodological essentialism, the metaphysical assumption of form (*Metaphysics*, 1013a26–29) – for Gadamer, an entirely mistaken type of "preparation."

Gadamer's issues with the metaphor inhere in the military context of the metaphor itself, of knowledge in terms of regimentation and univocal command. For Aristotle, the soldier's act of courage in turning and "making a stand" is concomitant with his discovery of an arkhē, a command (*Post. An.*, 100a15–17). However, courage and understanding remain disunited; the experience that gives rise to understanding is "acquired, suddenly, through this or that feature, unpredictably": it is only *after* the emergence of the arkhē that courage becomes possible. Just as experiences accrete only so as to reveal the ontologically prior universal, both the courageous soldier and the unified, courageous army act only for the sake of the arkhē. As a result, the appearance of hermeneutic courage is an illusion. Revealingly, experience is acquired in openness or flight; that is, in an act of "cowardice." Courage, in Aristotle's image, belongs not to thought but only to (instrumental) action, understood as soldierly obedience; it consists in the resolute pursuit of some goal or principle that we acquire only in the *absence* of resolution.

If politics requires that we "think courageously" and not merely execute preconceived ends, then Aristotelian universalism – as embodied in the metaphor of the rallying army – is a form of hermeneutic cowardice, a way of levelling or pre-empting challenging new experiences under the command of some universal. Universalism is a flight from openness that is directed to the overcoming of the conditions of experience. In this sense, Gadamer's understanding of experience seeks to recapture the heroic view of courage not as a means to some end – in the military case, victory in battle – but as a process or ethos that has no end beyond itself. What gives experience its courageous aspect is the fact that "this process is essentially *negative*" (Gadamer 2000, 353, my emphasis). As such, it is very nearly the opposite of the Aristotelian process. Rather than experience as a steady accretion of perceptions into a "primitive universal" that becomes the basis of resolute action, experience, for Gadamer, "takes place as false generalizations are continually refuted by experience and what was regarded as typical is shown not

to be so." The foundations of resolute action are in fact steadily *undercut* by experience as their *false* universality is exposed. Thus, "'experience' in the genuine sense … is always negative. If a new experience of an object occurs to us, this means that hitherto we have not seen the thing correctly and now know it better. Thus the negativity of experience has a curiously productive meaning" (Gadamer 2000, 353). This negative character of experience explains why understanding requires courage in the form of a willingness to face negation.

Talk of "productive negativity" strongly suggests Hegel and dialectics, to which Gadamer turns next (Gadamer 2000, 353–54). Rather than seeking out an arkhē whose purpose is to ground our involvement in the world, for Hegel we are always already entangled in the world and our reasoning is always practical and involved. As a result, our understanding of the world is coextensive with a self-understanding: "in order to accept a content as true, the man himself must be *present*" (Hegel, *Encyclopaedia Logic*, quoted at Gadamer 2000, 355). Negation for Hegel therefore consists in a "reversal of consciousness" in which the subject's altered understanding of the world implies an altered *self*-understanding (Gadamer 2000, 355). The relation between self and world is always already political, and so the negation of false understandings of the world is always bound up with political critique. For instance, aristocratic relations of mastery and servitude represent a pathological way of experiencing the world; their ideological essence is expressed in a myth of conquest in which the masters achieved dominance by being willing to risk their living bodies for the sake of recognition, while the others clung to life and were enslaved as a result (Hegel 1977, 187.113–190.116). Traditional accounts of courage as the willingness to risk life for the sake of honor therefore derive their meaning from this one-sided political relation (Gadamer 1982, 65), and this goes hand in hand with a "masterly" epistemology of abstract universalism, grounded in the master's ideological disavowal of his body. In this way, the vindication of a "truer" relation to the world is bound up with the overcoming of political relations of domination that distort our ways of thinking *and* our ways of understanding political courage.

Nonetheless, Gadamer rejects the dialectical element of Hegel's thought, wherein negation is "productive" insofar as it represents progress along a dialectical trajectory whose end point is a pure harmony between humanity and world,

an Absolute knowledge in which negation finally ceases.[11] In the end, Hegel's sleight of hand is the same as Aristotle's: the principle to be redeemed (openness for Aristotle, negation for Hegel) is revealed to be directed to its own self-overcoming, disavowed at the moment of its success. Beneath the qualified praise of openness and negation lies a subterranean hatred of experience and a yearning to be free of it. No doubt Arendt would say this is the *déformation professionnelle* at work: when push comes to shove, both of these philosophers would turn against experience in pursuit of a seductive and dangerous unity, the conversion of the political realm into a "home." For Gadamer, the positing of an end beyond experience risks turning experience into method, a mere means to attain the ends of comfort, certainty, or command. Experience, however, "stands in an ineluctable opposition" to such ends; it is never reducible to "the kind of instruction that follows from general theoretical or technical knowledge" (Gadamer 2000, 355). Rather, experience is an ethos: it "always implies an orientation toward new experience. That is why a person who is called experienced has become so not only *through* experiences but is also open *to* new experiences" (Gadamer 2000, 355). For Gadamer, the state of "being experienced" is a "perfection," but one that consists not in "the fact that someone already knows everything and knows better than anyone else" (Gadamer 2000, 355). Instead, the experienced person is "someone who is *radically undogmatic*; who, because of the many experiences he has had and the knowledge he has drawn from them, is particularly well equipped to have new experiences and to learn from them" (Gadamer 2000, 355, my emphasis).

The hermeneutic courage that I read in Gadamer is a "readiness for experience," an orientation to adventure and a willingness to face negation (Gadamer 2000, 362). This courage relates to our navigation through a political world that we only ever understand in a fractured and finite way, not a world that may be harmonized and absolutely understood. Gadamer avows an overtly tragic understanding of politics rooted in the awareness of "the absoluteness of the barrier that separates man from the divine" (Gadamer 2000, 357). However, Gadamer perhaps takes this thought too far when he writes that experience for the most part is "painful and disagreeable" and appeals to Aeschylus' *pathei mathos*, or learning through suffering (Gadamer 2000, 360; Aeschylus, *Agamemnon*, 177). If read as

[11] Gadamer was writing before the publication of Adorno's *Negative Dialectics*.

a one-sided valorizing of suffering, this passage is distasteful and politically unproductive. Yet as Gadamer puts it in "The Problem of Historical Consciousness," experience takes place within a particular context: namely, the discovery of an "affinity" with someone else, a common endeavor or shared practical concern within the world (Gadamer 1988, 125). Since our understanding of the world is predominantly a practical understanding, to understand others is predominantly to discover shared practical modes of relating to the world. In this way, the experiences that are "painful and disagreeable" – the blows to the ego, the renegotiations of the self – take place against what is creative and liberatory: the phenomenon of potential solidarity or alliance (even if this occurs through the reading of an ancient text). Here, too, we can see the concordance between Gadamer and Arendt, since this creative aspect of political experience was one of Arendt's primary emphases. For Arendt, the political actor is indeed a "sufferer," but this is the flipside of her being a "doer" (Arendt 2018d, 190). Anyone engaged in politics is engaged not merely in the negation of what is old, but in the creation of what is new. We learn not just through suffering but through creating, and in particular by creating connections that "force open limitations and cut across all boundaries" (Arendt 2018d, 190–91). Those with the courage to think politically – to challenge their assumptions about the world and their place in it, to welcome and take on board other's claims to the meaning of what is shared in common – will be best placed to find and embrace the new.

Conclusion

Far from writing "apologetics" for Heidegger, it has been my contention that Arendt and Gadamer's rehabilitative energies were directed toward the practice of thinking, of which Heidegger was merely a notable, albeit deeply flawed, exponent. For both, the engagement with Heidegger was directed toward a supersession, rather than an outright rejection, of his way of thinking. This supersession reorients thinking away from Being and toward the political world.

Gadamer and Arendt provide us with complementary elements of an account of political courage and thinking. For Arendt, courage is necessary to enact newness in the world, attaching to those who expose themselves to political judgment and reach out to forge new connections. However, whether she sees courage as playing any role in thinking is unclear: courage brings matters out into the

public eye where we may think about them, but thinking itself is given a frictionless quality that does not seem to call for courage.

Gadamer's account of thinking is oriented less to individuals and more to the linguistic "tradition" that lies between them. Against any conservative understanding of tradition, the defining quality of tradition is that it is the possession of no person or group. What lies between us and is communicated in words is the possession of all, and there is no authority that can "keep the other person's claim at a distance" (Gadamer 2000, 360). As he puts it, to understand the other is to discover an "affinity," a common enterprise with them. In practice, then, when I seek to understand those who are politically "other," I bring them close or ally with them in a way that risks the negation of myself as it exists currently. In this way, to carry out political thinking within a shared world involves a hermeneutic courage defined by openness to others, a recognition of finitude, and a willingness to face negation.

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