



## Arendt's integrity

**Samantha Rose Hill: Hannah Arendt. London: Reaktion Books, 2021, 232pp, £12.99 PB**

**Valentin Beck<sup>1</sup>**

Accepted: 2 May 2022 / Published online: 23 May 2022  
© The Author(s) 2022

Part of what makes Hannah Arendt such a fascinating figure is that her life and work are an embodiment of the intellectual virtues that she made a central subject in her writing. Among those virtues is an activity of critical self-reflection which Arendt emphatically called ‘thinking.’ By that, she did not simply refer to the innate human capacity of engaging in internal mental activity of some kind. What she had in mind was a qualitatively more demanding process; an internal critical dialogue with oneself that touches on existential questions, such as what kind of person one wants to be and what kind of life one should lead. By implication, even those who engage in intellectual work professionally may nevertheless lack the capacity to ‘think’ and can therefore lead ‘thoughtless’ lives, according to Arendt.

Samantha Rose Hill’s captivating new biography recounts Arendt’s life and shows how she developed a rare capacity for independent thought and action which she retained even under the most difficult circumstances. In comparison to Elisabeth Young-Bruehl’s seminal biography (see Young-Bruehl 1982), Rose Hill’s biography is written in a shorter format. It aims, in her own words, ‘to introduce newcomers to the life and work of Hannah Arendt, while filling in some biographical details that have been left out of previous accounts’ (15). In staying true to these aims, Rose Hill’s book makes for an absorbing read and provides a valuable service to those who approach Arendt’s work for the first time. Those who are already more familiar with Arendt will also be rewarded, thanks to the vivid presentation, personal details and anecdotes which bring new insights even for connoisseurs.

Rose Hill’s introduction to the book preempts its central themes: ‘thinking’ as critical self-reflection in the form of an internal ‘two-in-one’ dialogue (see, for example, 10–11; 45, 59 and 148), and Arendtian ‘understanding’ more broadly conceived. In the twenty engaging chapters that follow, Arendt’s life is recounted in a chronological, yet holistic manner, starting with her early childhood in Königsberg

---

✉ Valentin Beck  
valentin.beck@fu-berlin.de

<sup>1</sup> Freie Universität Berlin, Berlin, Germany

and ending with the final years in which she worked on the unfinished book project entitled *The Life of Mind*.

The most stirring parts of the book are those which cover Arendt's escape from totalitarian rule. Arendt first fled to Paris from Berlin, where she was held and interrogated for several days in prison after conducting 'suspicious' research on antisemitism. After seven years in French exile, she made it to New York, which became her new home until her death in 1975. Rose Hill's depiction of the hardships Arendt endured and the dangers she escaped since 1933 eerily resonate at a time when millions are once again seeking refuge from political oppression and war's destruction. Her account makes clear that while Arendt was a refugee, social relationships played a particularly vital role for her. In coordination with other fellow female prisoners in Gurs, a French internment camp, which Arendt only briefly mentioned later, she managed to escape during the transfer of authority to the Vichy regime (see 83–90). After that, friends helped her to reunite with her husband, Heinrich Blücher, at a house in Montauban, from where they went on to Marseille (92). Varian Fry of the New York-based Emergency Rescue Committee secured the couple, and shortly thereafter also Arendt's mother Martha, a place on an ocean liner from Lisbon to New York. Rose Hill also highlights how Arendt's relationship with Walter Benjamin had a lasting influence on her. She visited him in Lourdes in 1940, directly after escaping from Gurs and before reuniting with Blücher. In early 1941, after Benjamin had tragically committed suicide in Port-Bou, Arendt and Blücher stopped on the way to Lisbon, in order to visit his grave, and rescued a suitcase with his last writings (see 71 and 91–95).

Rose Hill's approach is that of reconstructing a social biography. She illustrates Arendt's social experience of the world using a wide range of sources, including the words of close friends, acquaintances, and colleagues, poetry read by Arendt and her contemporaries, and countless passages from Arendt's monographs, essays, thought diary, correspondence and interviews. She also gives extensive background on figures like Günther Anders (see 55–63), Arendt's first husband who later became known for his writings on the philosophy of technology, as well as philosophical heavyweights Martin Heidegger and Karl Jaspers. All three played important roles in Arendt's life, although, in the case of the first two, mostly in pre-exile times. Jaspers, to the contrary, remained a near colleague and became an important friend, which is illustrated by their profound, decades-long correspondence (Arendt and Jaspers 1992). Rose Hill emphasizes how Arendt's conception of 'thinking' relates to the emphasis on conversation in the work of Jaspers (45, 181). Arendt's relation to Heidegger, which started as a love affair, is much more ambiguous, and Rose Hill depicts it without attempting to iron out contradictions or to solve remaining pieces of the puzzle. Arendt's late reunion with the former rector of Nazified Freiburg University is narrated in the touching words of Hans Jonas, another twentieth century philosopher of technology and former fellow student in Marburg (120).

Although Arendt was critical of the 'collective guilt thesis,' she morally condemned active supporters and uncritical followers of the Nazi Regime alike, and treated figures like Adolf Eichmann as prime examples of widespread 'thoughtlessness' (see, for example, Arendt 1965; Schiff 2012; Beck 2020). "Those who did not 'go along,' chose to think," Rose Hill explains (162). In a course taught

at the New School of Social Research entitled ‘Some Questions of Moral Philosophy,’ Arendt pointed to the link between ‘thinking’ in this specific sense, and *integrity*. She reminded her audience that ‘those murderers in the Third Reich who led not only an impeccable family life but liked to spend their leisure time reading Hölderlin and listening to Bach, [are] proving (as though proof in this matter had been lacking before) that intellectuals can as easily be led into crime as anybody else’ (Arendt 1965, 96). She went on to say that

this capacity for appreciation has nothing whatever to do with thought, which, as we must remember, is an *activity* and not the passive enjoyment of something ... More than thoughtfulness is needed to write a good poem or piece of music, or to paint a picture — you need special gifts. But no gifts will withstand the loss of integrity which you lose when you have lost this most common capacity for thought and remembrance. (ibid., 96-7)

Rose Hill does not cite this work, but one strong impression that arises after reading her book is that of Arendt’s very own thoughtfulness and integrity. These personal qualities become particularly evident in the way Arendt dealt with criticism. She notoriously resisted vehement public criticisms in the wake of the publication of *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, because she did not perceive them to be anchored in sincere reasoning and truthful discourse. In her eyes, they were driven by political interests (see 163) or a resentment of her ironic style, which she intentionally employed in the spirit of Brecht, who proposed that ‘the great political criminals must be exposed and exposed especially to laughter’ (cited on 160). But Arendt was not immune to criticism. Rose Hill’s account found no space for the debate on the Sassen interviews, which finally revealed the fanatic, racist antisemitism that Eichmann tried to hide in court. Given Arendt’s own demonstrated commitment to truth, it is likely that she would have corrected parts of her account of Eichmann’s trial, which rests on the empirical evidence at hand at the time of writing, in the light of these documents. But her diagnosis of thoughtlessness in the outlined sense nevertheless applies to Eichmann, lower ranked Nazi bureaucrats and Nazi followers. Rose Hill also describes how Arendt reacted to criticism of her still contentious essay ‘Reflections on Little Rock,’ in which Arendt criticized a Supreme Court decision in favor of forcing integration in formerly racially segregated schools. Part of what motivated Arendt’s position on this issue is an arguably mistaken categorical distinction between the political and social sphere which also informed other parts of her oeuvre (see, for example, Jaeggi 2008). Arendt did not show herself to be incorrigible. She conceded to her critic Ralph Ellison in a personal letter that his “remarks [on ‘Reflections on Little Rock’] seem to me entirely right, that I now see that I simply did not understand the complexities of the situation” (151). What stands out after reading Rose Hill’s biography of Arendt is not that she was always right. Rather, it is Arendt’s impressively sincere manner of reflecting on and publicly defending what she thought was right, often against considerable pressure.

**Funding** Open Access funding enabled and organized by Projekt DEAL.

**Open Access** This article is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License, which permits use, sharing, adaptation, distribution and reproduction in any medium or format, as long as you give appropriate credit to the original author(s) and the source, provide a link to the Creative Commons licence, and indicate if changes were made. The images or other third party material in this article are included in the article's Creative Commons licence, unless indicated otherwise in a credit line to the material. If material is not included in the article's Creative Commons licence and your intended use is not permitted by statutory regulation or exceeds the permitted use, you will need to obtain permission directly from the copyright holder. To view a copy of this licence, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>.

## References

- Arendt, Hannah. 1965. Some questions of moral philosophy. In *Responsibility and Judgment*, ed. J. Kohn, 49–146. New York: Schocken.
- Arendt, Hannah, & Karl Jaspers. 1992. *Correspondence, 1926–1969*, ed. L. Kohler and H. Saner (trans: Kimber, R. and R. Kimber). Harcourt Brace Jovanovich.
- Beck, Valentin. 2020. Two forms of responsibility: Reassessing Young on structural injustice. *Critical Review of International Social and Political Philosophy*. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13698230.2020.1786307>.
- Jaeggi, Rahel. 2008. Wie weiter mit Arendt?. In *Wie weiter mit...?* ed. Hamburger Institut für Sozialforschung, Hamburger Edition.
- Schiff, Jacob. 2012. The varieties of thoughtlessness and the limits of thinking. *European Journal of Political Theory* 12 (2): 99–115. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1474885111430616>.
- Young-Bruehl, Elizabeth. 1982. *Hannah Arendt. For Love of the World*. London: Yale University Press.

**Publisher's Note** Springer Nature remains neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.