



Article scientifique

Article

2010

Published version

Open Access

This is the published version of the publication, made available in accordance with the publisher's policy.

---

## Hannah Arendt's tactlessness : reading "Eichmann in Jerusalem"

---

Swift, Simon

### How to cite

SWIFT, Simon. Hannah Arendt's tactlessness : reading 'Eichmann in Jerusalem'. In: New Formations, 2010, n° 71, p. 79–94. doi: 10.3898/NEWF.71.06.2011

This publication URL: <https://archive-ouverte.unige.ch/unige:124560>

Publication DOI: [10.3898/NEWF.71.06.2011](https://doi.org/10.3898/NEWF.71.06.2011)

# HANNAH ARENDT'S TACTLESSNESS: READING *EICHMANN IN JERUSALEM*

---

Simon Swift

**Abstract** *This essay engages with the problem of Arendt's historical style, particularly the style of *Eichmann in Jerusalem* (1963) and what Gersholm Scholem described as its lack of feeling for the suffering of others, its lack of *Herzenstakt*. Arendt thought that totalitarianism had changed the way in which history must be written; in particular, she thought that the extermination of the Jews of Europe meant that historical writing could no longer conform to classical standards of dispassion and withhold anger. In light of this claim, I examine anger in Arendt's writing in relation both to her reflections on the cognitive meaning of anger in *On Violence*, particularly the anger of the Black Power movement, but also (and more expansively) the tactlessness of her writing both about *Eichmann* and the survivor testimony that formed the 'background' to his trial. By drawing on Hans-Georg Gadamer's arguments about the importance of tact, and the ancient Stoic formulation of *sensus communis* for the methodology of the human sciences, I read Arendt's tactless, abrasive style not as simply dismissive towards the suffering of others, but rather as a key expression of her understanding of political modernity. Arendt's tactlessness signals, I argue, what she thinks of as an abandonment of the political language of 'sentiment.' Again, such an abandonment, I argue, is a result of the pressure that totalitarianism had placed on the possibilities of political and historical writing.*

**Keywords** Tact, Sensus Communis, Eichmann, Anger, Gadamer, Israel, Testimony

---

Thus you will avoid hatred from the offence by harming nobody gratuitously: from which *sensus communis* will protect you.

Seneca

There is a great temptation to explain away the intrinsically incredible by means of liberal rationalization. In each one of us, there lurks such a liberal, wheedling us with the voice of common sense.

Hannah Arendt

I have written a wicked book, and feel spotless as the lamb.

Herman Melville

Is it possible to envisage a viable theory of tact in the humanities? Tact has a long history, and for writers like Hans-Georg Gadamer it is bound up with the recovery of the Roman idea of the *sensus communis* over the course of

1. Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (2nd ed, rev), Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall (eds, trans and rev), London and New York, Continuum, 2004, p19. All further references will be included in the text as *TM*.

2. So Seneca writes in *On Benefits*: 'No one is so stupid as to need the warning that he should not send gladiators or wild beasts to a man who has just given a public spectacle, or send a present of summer clothing in midwinter and winter clothing in midsummer. Common sense [*sensus communis*] should be used in bestowing benefit; there must be regard for time, place and the person, for some gifts are acceptable or unacceptable according to circumstances'. Seneca, *On Benefits*, 1.12.3 in *Moral Essays*, 3 vols., John W. Basore (trans), London, Heinemann, 1935, 3:39-41. For a very different version of tact that derives it from the ancients, particularly the sceptics, see Roland Barthes, *The Neutral: Lecture Course at the Collège de France (1977-1978)*, Thomas Clerc (ed), Rosalind E. Krauss and Denis Hollier (trans), New York, Columbia University Press, 2005, pp32-38.

3. Hannah Arendt, 'A Reply to Erich Voegelin', in *Essays in Understanding*:

the eighteenth century, from Shaftesbury through to Kant, and the impact of that recovery on the birth of the human sciences. For the Roman Stoics, the *sensus communis* implied an idea of social conduct. In the Stoic theory of judgement, according to Gadamer, '[t]he grasp and moral control of the concrete situation require subsuming what is given under the universal - that is, the goal that one is pursuing so that the right thing may result'.<sup>1</sup> Such practical wisdom included an awareness of how to avoid giving offence, and more expansively an ability to make judgments of what is right and proper in social situations such as the giving of gifts.<sup>2</sup> As Gadamer argues in the first chapter of *Truth and Method*, during the nineteenth century the different meanings that had come to be attached to the ancient idea of the *sensus communis* (from a feeling for the common interest of mankind in Shaftesbury to a model for the subjective universality of aesthetic judgement in Kant) provided justification for the emerging human sciences. A kind of 'tact,' in Gadamer's account, came to distinguish the kinds of judgement involved in the writing of, say, history, from the inductive reasoning of the natural sciences, as I will show in what follows.

The writing of history, and the kind of judgements that the historian might be expected to make require tact, in order to match thinking and writing to the often traumatic objects that they describe. Writing in a 1953 response to Eric Voegelin's review of *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, Hannah Arendt wrote that '[t]he problem of style is a problem of adequacy and of response'.<sup>3</sup> Style, and in particular the style of writing required by an account of the pre-history and history of totalitarianism such as Arendt had written in *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, embodies the relation of thinking and writing to the realities of history, and notices that relation as a problem. For Hannah Arendt, doing justice to those realities means avoiding the wheedling voice of liberal 'common sense' that lurks within, and that would try to rationalise them away. Implicit in its attempt to rationalise events, such a liberal voice would seek to maintain the classical standard of a dispassionate style of historical writing *sine ira et studio*, a style that Arendt claimed to have abandoned, in her reply to Voegelin, 'as a methodological necessity' in *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (p403). To write about the concentration camps without anger, *sine ira*, she writes, 'is not to be 'objective,' but to condone them' (p404). The angry style of *Origins* thereby signals Arendt's abandonment of liberal forms of rationalisation, objectivity and dispassion that unwittingly condone the totalitarian reality that they fail to understand; and in the process it challenges an ancient opposition between reason and the passions, particularly anger.<sup>4</sup> To rationalise, in the light of recent events, would no longer mean primarily to avoid allowing the emotions to cloud one's judgement; to rationalise would mean now to condone what should never have happened. The angry style of *The Origins of Totalitarianism* resists such a move by insisting on the particularity of totalitarianism. The book's insistence and anger account for the peculiarly divergent types of emotional tone that its earliest readers found

in it; the book's style tends, Arendt wrote to Voegelin, towards being 'praised as passionate and criticized as sentimental' (p403).

Where *Origins* was praised as a passionate, or attacked as a pathetic account of contemporary history, the report from the Eichmann trial in Jerusalem that Arendt wrote ten years later saw her accused by an old acquaintance, Gershom Scholem, of 'heartlessness' or even of lacking *Herzenstakt*, tact of heart.<sup>5</sup> Scholem linked Arendt's being, as he put it, one of the 'intellectuals who come from the German Left' - a designation that she rejected in her reply to him - to her lack of *Ahabath Israel* or 'love for the Jewish people'. This lack of love, according to Scholem, led Arendt to make cruel judgements of the actions of others, for example the Jewish councils of Europe who collaborated with the deportations during the Second World War. Confessing that he could not imagine what it might have felt like to be in the position of the *Judenräte*, Scholem instead chose not to judge at all. Arendt's heartlessness also manifested itself, for Scholem, in what he called her 'slogan,' that became a catchword for the trial: the banality of evil.

The circumstances of the Eichmann case are well known. During the war, Eichmann had been responsible for the enormously complex railroad transportation of Jews from the German Reich to the concentration and extermination camps in the east. Israeli secret agents had kidnapped him from outside of his home in Buenos Aires in May 1960 and taken him to Israel, where he stood trial for crimes against humanity and against the Jewish people. The legal problems with the trial - Israeli violation of Argentine sovereignty in the kidnap, the fact that the crimes, and the prosecutor itself had not existed at the time of the actions under discussion - didn't bother Arendt. But she did feel that the court in Jerusalem missed an unprecedented opportunity to examine the 'banality' of one of totalitarianism's prime servants, out of a desire to freight him with evil and agency; so too, she was troubled by the conduct of the trial itself, and in particular its reliance on 'background witnesses,' many of whom had had no direct connection with Eichmann. Her frustration with the trial's greater interest in political point-scoring than in the philosophical question of Eichmann's personality accounts for the heartlessness that Scholem found in *Eichmann in Jerusalem*. Examples of it abound in the book, most famously around the issue of Jewish collaboration with the Nazis, as well as in Arendt's treatment of the survivor testimony that made up a large amount of the court's proceedings. But also, as we will see, this tactlessness plays around a troubling sense that Eichmann is amusing in a bizarre, surreal, and necessarily inappropriate way, given what he was accused of.

The aim of this essay is to take Arendt's heartlessness, or her 'tactlessness' seriously as a rhetorical mode that runs through her work, from *The Origins of Totalitarianism* and *Eichmann in Jerusalem* to her essay from the end of the sixties *On Violence* and her lectures on Kant's philosophy from the very end of her life. Such a focus on Arendt's style differs from much of the critical scholarship

*Formation, Exile, Totalitarianism*, Jerome Kohn (ed), New York, Schocken Books, 1994, p404. Further references will be included in the text.

4. See Seneca, *On Anger* 1.7.3 in *Moral Essays*, 1:125.

5. See Arendt's letter to Scholem of July 24, 1963, reprinted in *The Jewish Writings*, Jerome Kohn and Ron H. Feldman (eds), New York, Schocken Books, 2007, p467.

on Arendt, which either tries to situate her work in relation to debates within post-Kantian philosophy or to assess her contribution to Genocide studies. Moreover, much of Arendt scholarship seems to take Arendt at her word rather than considering the force and perlocutionary effects of her writings (which are only touched on in Scholem's letter). One way of reading the abrasive tone of her study of Eichmann, and indeed of many of Hannah Arendt's writings, particularly in the 1960s, is as a kind of symptom, or performance of the violence that totalitarianism had inflicted onto the *sensus communis*. No longer can part be made to fit whole in an harmonious judgement that assumes a dispassionate power of reason to be an adequate guide to the world; yet demonstrating this collapse means, *inter alia*, owning up to the fact that the horrible can be funny. I take the problem of Arendt's historical style to be a kind of negative record of the death of the *sensus communis* in judging history, and I take this claim to hold for her entire oeuvre, even though Arendt's own treatment of the *sensus communis* is largely limited to her late reading of Kant, her sense of the loss of a shared experience of the world in modernity being more often couched in terms of a loss of 'the public'. Rather than dismissing her style as an angry or heartless abandonment of reason, what I take to be a calculated lack of heart and a cultivated anger in Arendt's writing can be seen to be imbued with forms of historical and political meaning from the point of view of the account I am proposing. In particular, such a lack of tact warns about the dangers of a 'common sense' approach to the concentration camps, about the attempt to rationalise them away as if they tell us nothing new about what it is to be rational or to exercise common sense.<sup>6</sup> In the lectures on Kant that she gave at the end of her life, Arendt describes Kant's idea of the *sensus communis* as the sense 'that fits us into a community' and as 'the capability by which men are distinguished from animals and from gods. It is the very humanity of man that is manifest in this sense'.<sup>7</sup> The horrible suffering of totalitarianism's victims, which, as I'll show in what follows, she read as both a seductive and unproductive object of political thought, as well as the loss of a community sense in its perpetrators that made her both angry and amused, suggest that for Arendt the term 'sensus communis' no longer had the expansive, public meaning it had for the Romans, and that Kant had tried to retain through a critique of judgements of taste.<sup>8</sup>

6. The link between the heart and *sensus communis*, at least, is long established. As Gadamer notes, in *Eighteenth-Century Pietism* '[w]e find *sensus communis* translated simply as "heart,"' (TM, p24).

7. Hannah Arendt, *Lectures on Kant's Political Philosophy*, Ronald Beiner (ed), Chicago, The University of Chicago Press, 1992, p70.

8. For a recent treatment of the political and aesthetic efficacy of the *sensus communis*, see Jacques Ranciere, 'Aesthetic Separation, Aesthetic Community: Scenes from the Aesthetic Regime of Art,' *Art & Research*, (Summer 2008) 2, 1: 1-15.

## 1. HANNAH ARENDT'S TACTLESSNESS

One of the more troubling aspects of the abrasiveness of Arendt's tone is found in what can easily be made to seem like a greater impatience with those, supposed enemies of totalitarianism, who fail to face up to the violence that totalitarianism has inflicted onto any kind of community sense, than with totalitarianism's principal actors. Arendt's tactlessness, then, markets itself as a facing up to reality, however uncomfortable formulating an adequate style to cope with this reality might make its readership feel. The lurking, liberal,

pseudo-rationalising evasion of reality figures conversely in her writing as a kind of 'sentimentalism' which is a political survival from the pre-totalitarian environment, and that subsequently proved to offer a useful ideological tool for the Israeli state, which staged survivor testimony, in the case of the Eichmann trial, as a kind of negative truth - the pure, suffering victim, - in order to offset Israel's sense of its own belligerent strength.

The survivor as pure victim of genocide has a politically dubious prominence in the trial, in Arendt's account of it, but the court is strangely silent about the matter of Jewish collaboration. Nazism was perverse enough to make its victims cooperate with it, to take away their status as victims, but the court in Jerusalem that put Adolf Eichmann on trial in 1961, Arendt thought, wanted to pass over this in silence, not least since it was intent on blaming Eichmann for everything, including the selection of those who were to be transported to the East, in order to avoid discussing the humiliating matter of Jewish collaboration with the selections on the world stage that the court offered. Implicit in her disruptive account is Arendt's sense that the real problem with the court's narrative is that it fails to face up to the ways in which totalitarianism had proved that a suffering body can never be a political subject under the name of 'victim', and had instead employed that victim for its own ideological ends. One part of Arendt's tactlessness then emerges as a refusal to countenance the court's silence; her angry tone signals one of the purposes of her book to be a facing up to the reality of the collaboration, however uncomfortable that 'whole truth' might make a Jewish audience feel.<sup>9</sup> In other words, Arendt wanted to advertise her failure to stick to the politically-motivated script of the trial, which configured it as a declaration on the part of the Jewish people that, with their own state, they could finally stand up for themselves.

At stake in Arendt's tactlessness, I want to argue in what follows, is a crucial, although often unacknowledged strand in her thought as a whole, namely the issue of the relation between politics and feeling. The relation emerges in Arendt's writing as a repeated account of the ways in which totalitarianism had inflicted fatal damage onto the humanist idea that the heart can offer an adequate orientation of the self within a political community. Yet at least for one of its most famous servants, Adolf Eichmann, totalitarianism effected this severance of the heart from politics precisely by maintaining the fiction that the heart was still working properly as the organ of sympathetic identification with others. The comic and agonised tone of *Eichmann in Jerusalem* then plays around both this *décalage* between how Eichmann, under cross-examination, describes his feelings towards those who worked with him but who ended up victims nonetheless and the reality of what he was sending them to, as well as the ability of this 'normal' man to manage the seemingly impossible traffic between the two. Underlying this story is an account, equally central to Arendt's political theory, of how a liberal politics of compassion has failed European society since the French Revolution. The French Revolution,

9. 'But the whole truth was that there existed Jewish community organizations and Jewish party and welfare organizations on both the local and the international level. Wherever Jews lived, there were recognized Jewish leaders, and this leadership, almost without exception, cooperated in one way or another, for one reason or another, with the Nazis'. Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil*, Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1994, p125. All further references will be included in the text as *EJ*.

10. For an excellent account of the importance of Arendt's critique of sympathy in *On Revolution* to the tone of *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, which were written simultaneously, see Deborah Nelson, 'Suffering and Thinking: The Scandal of Tone in Eichmann in Jerusalem', in *Compassion: The Culture and Politics of an Emotion*, Lauren Berlant (ed), New York and London, Routledge, 2004, pp219-244. Nelson describes *On Revolution* as 'an extended defence of coldness and heartlessness' (p226). A fine example of Arendt's attack on what might be thought of as Eichmann's interpellation into an ideology of pity comes early on in *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, in Arendt's retelling of the fate of the Jewish community leader Storfer, whom Eichmann had worked with in Vienna in the late 1930s and who was apprehended trying to escape. He sends Eichmann a desperate telegram from Auschwitz, and Eichmann goes to see him to explain that no one ever gets out once they have gone in. Storfer 'told me his grief and sorrow' and Eichmann arranges for him to be let off of heavy work. 'It was a great inner joy to me that I could at least see the man with whom I had worked for so many long years' (*EJ*, p51). Arendt claims this

Arendt claimed in her essay *On Revolution*, had attempted to base an entire political claim for the sovereignty of the people around the spectacle of the suffering of the urban poor; in the process it revealed pity and sympathy to have become grotesque alibis for biopolitical power.<sup>10</sup>

Eichmann, in Arendt's reading of him, emerges as a kind of eighteenth-century man of feeling. Eichmann's sentimentalism, and the way in which it insulated him from reality, is everywhere in Arendt's account of him, and is particularly connected to the key Eichmann feeling of 'elation', a kind of transcendent emotional state matched with an elating vocabulary that allowed him, so Arendt's story goes, to rise above the reality of events.<sup>11</sup> In the space of three pages, Arendt describes how Eichmann loses all joy in his work, blushes with shame, and feels 'grief and sorrow' (*EJ*, p54). Yet Eichmann is constitutionally incapable of making contact with reality, and his use of language - his 'heroic fight with the German language' which amounts to 'a mild case of aphasia,' and his inability to utter 'a single sentence that was not a cliché' is the site of this failure (*EJ*, p48). In Eichmann, then, Arendt confronts us with the spectacle of a man caught up in sentimental clichés that, while shielding him from reality, offer him the illusion that he is thinking and feeling for and with others. It is made clear to us that this average bourgeois sentimentalism continues to shield Eichmann from reality at the time of the police interviews that preceded the trial, and that it also accounts for Eichmann's own tactlessness. Towards the end of her book Arendt identifies in Eichmann a 'lack of imagination' that 'enabled him to sit for months on end facing a German Jew who was conducting the police interrogation, pouring out his heart to the man and explaining again and again how it was that he reached only the rank of lieutenant colonel in the S.S. and that it had not been his fault that he was not promoted' (*EJ*, p287).

## 2. TACT AND THE SENSUS COMMUNIS

The joke here is that Eichmann can't possibly know how tactless his lament might seem, embroiled in his own hard-luck story as he is. Is Hannah Arendt, on the other hand, being *deliberately* tactless in *Eichmann in Jerusalem*? It seems difficult to believe that she can't have known, at least to some extent, how much offence her book was likely to cause. To answer the question of Arendt's tactlessness adequately requires a brief examination of the history of tact and propriety from Eighteenth Century ideas about taste, and a consideration of the way in which tact, via Gadamer, found its way into hermeneutic understanding.

Tact, I am arguing, links up with the long tradition of thinking about the *sensus communis*, from the Stoics to Gadamer and beyond. Arendt's direct consideration of the *sensus communis* is, however, fairly brief, and takes place late on in her lectures on Kant. Arendt quotes Kant's account of the role of the *sensus communis* in the forming of judgements of taste, where

it acts 'by comparing our judgment with the possible rather than the actual judgments of others, and by putting ourselves in the place of any other man, by abstracting from the limitations which contingently attach to our own judgment'.<sup>12</sup> Tact, by this reading, is what enables someone to harmonise his thoughts and feelings with those of another, to allow the heart of another to 'beat time to his own', as Adam Smith puts it in his description of sympathy in *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*.<sup>13</sup>

A lack of such awareness, or tactlessness and the dissonance it produces, can lead others to be embarrassed for our behaviour on our behalf. Thus in Smith's theorisation of propriety we 'blush for the impudence and rudeness of another, though he himself appears to have no sense of the impropriety of his own behaviour; because we cannot help feeling with what confusion we ourselves should be covered, had we behaved in so absurd a manner'.<sup>14</sup> It is just this ability to really put oneself in someone else's situation, this liberal dream of selves that perpetually swap places through the power of the sympathetic imagination that totalitarianism, according to Arendt, had cancelled out. Where the comedy of Eichmann's behaviour depends on his not knowing how funny he is, his having no awareness of how unsympathetic a German Jew in Israel might be to the tragic plight of his careerism, Arendt, I want to suggest, knows just what is at stake in her own tactlessness. Her tactlessness is deliberate and performative to the extent that it knows its effect on her audience. It abandons the liberal investment in a sense of humour that operates Shaftesbury's notion of *sensus communis*, whereby, as Gadamer glosses it, telling a joke is defined by 'the attitude of a man who understands a joke and tells one because he is aware of a deeper union with his interlocutor,' a form of social intercourse and mutual understanding through which 'there is nevertheless a moral, even a metaphysical basis implied' (*TM*, p22).<sup>15</sup> Rather than anticipating a shared joke as testament to a worldview held in common, such that laughter is bound up with morality, Arendt challenges us *not* to find Eichmann funny in her account of him - which means that she already knows that we want to keep a straight face. Humour keeps cropping up in a bizarre and disturbing connection with horror, and Arendt refuses to repress this.

In his attempt to develop a systematic methodological basis for the human sciences in the mid-Nineteenth Century, Hermann von Helmholtz made a distinction between the procedure of the natural and human sciences in which the notion of tact is key. Where the natural sciences can depend on the general rules and sharply defined principles of scientific method, and in particular rational deduction, argues Helmholtz, the human sciences predominantly arrive at their judgements by psychological feelings of tact. By psychologising the judgements of the human sciences, Gadamer argues, Helmholtz made of them a poor cousin to the natural sciences, in that tact is intended to work in a way that is analogous to scientific method and thus attains a pseudo-scientific justification. Gadamer's argument is instead that, in the procedure of philosophical hermeneutics, the work of memory, testimony and the feeling

as an example of how '[no]w and then [...] comedy breaks into the horror itself, and results in stories, presumably true enough, whose macabre humor easily surpasses that of any Surrealist invention' (*EJ*, p50). Six weeks after what Eichmann describes as his 'normal human encounter' with his former colleague, writes Arendt, 'Storfer was dead - not gassed, apparently, but shot' (*EJ*, p51).

11. For a powerful psychoanalytical reading of Eichmann's 'elation' see Rei Terada, 'Thinking for Oneself: Realism and Defiance in Arendt,' *Textual Practice* 22, 1 (2008): 85-111

12. Arendt, *Lectures on Kant's Political Philosophy*, op. cit., p71.

13. Adam Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, Knut Haakonssen (ed), Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2002, p27. In German, *takt* is the word used to describe beat in music.

14. Adam Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, op. cit., p15.

15. For Shaftesbury on humour and the *sensus communis*, see 'Sensus Communis, an Essay on the Freedom of Wit and Humour in a Letter to a Friend',

of tact through which the human sciences form their judgements attest to a rich world of embodied truth, and a relation to tradition and authority, which has been disavowed by the post-Kantian attempt to model these kinds of judgements on the methodology of the sciences. Gadamer goes back, instead, to the ancient idea of the *sensus communis* and seeks to trace an alternative path towards the truth of the human sciences.

Tact, then, signifies at the outset what is distinctive about the methodology of the human sciences, albeit that it appeared to the Nineteenth Century to err from objectivity while recuperating a link to tradition. Dilthey's understanding of the human sciences still models itself on the natural sciences, argues Gadamer, but is coloured 'by genuine individual tact' that 'presupposes a spiritual cultivation which indicates that the world of classical culture and the romantic belief in individuality survive in [him]' (*TM*, p6). With Dilthey the human sciences were, in Gadamer's account, far from considering themselves as simply inferior to the natural sciences. Instead, they 'carried forward the proud awareness that they were the true representatives of humanism' (*TM*, p8). Hermeneutics, for its part, is 'universal' (*TM*, pxxx) in outlook and to that extent precedes and refuses the distinction, enforced on it by the scientific concept of method, between an emergent historical science which claims objectivity in its relation to tradition (thereby acting as if tradition 'were as alien, and from the human point of view as unintelligible, as an object of physics' (*TM*, pxxx)) and an 'unhistorical dogmatic' relation to tradition (*TM*, pxxi).

Gadamer's treatment of tact, understood in relation to the *sensus communis*, draws attention to the possible shape of a community, by which I mean the relation between the persons within it and the distance between them, since tact implies knowing how to preserve distance in speech and gesture, while gesturing towards a form of connectedness that shouldn't, in truth, be spoken. It offers a kind of intersubjective knowledge, a knowledge of how to act in a community, that is not capable of abstract formulation. Tact, characteristically, leaves things unsaid:

By 'tact' we understand a special sensitivity and sensitiveness to situations and how to behave in them, for which knowledge from general principles does not suffice. Hence an essential part of tact is that it is tacit and unformulable. One can say something tactfully; but that will always mean that one passes over something tactfully and leaves it unsaid, and it is tactless to express what one can only pass over. But to pass over something does not mean to avert one's gaze from it, but to keep an eye on it in such a way that rather than knock into it, one slips by it. Thus tact helps one to preserve distance. It avoids the offensive, the intrusive, the violation of the intimate sphere of the human person (*TM*, p14-15).

Gadamer draws attention to tact as a cognitive mode - its 'keeping in mind' bearing a relation to memory and forgetting which, by ordering knowledge

within an historical horizon, distinguishes the mode of thinking of the human from the natural sciences. He argues that 'the tact which functions in the human sciences is not simply a feeling and unconscious, but is at the same time a mode of knowing and a mode of being' (*TM*, p15). Tact involves an orientation towards otherness, particularly the otherness of the past and of one's own private self in acts of interpretation, as a way of developing knowledge. It entails 'keeping oneself open to what is other - to other, more universal points of view. It embraces a sense of proportion and distance in relation to itself, and hence consists in rising above itself to universality. To distance oneself from oneself and from one's private purposes means to look at these in the way that others see them' (*TM*, p15).

Tact, in Gadamer's account, involves a peculiar kind of bearing in mind of something that the laws of tact do not allow one to confront. Tact is not saying what we all know, but keeping an eye on it, slipping by it, just about touching on it. Tact, to this extent, and as its Latin etymology discloses, involves some kind of relation to touch and the untouchable, to an intimacy which is perhaps announced in its very disavowal. Tactlessness, by contrast, might be said to constitute a direct expression of the intimate sphere of the human being, which the tactful person would pass over discreetly.

Totalitarianism, at least in Hannah Arendt's account of it, destroys respect for intimacy in its 'pressing men against each other';<sup>16</sup> and in doing so, it destroys the authority of memory, and the openness to the testimony of others that operates Gadamer's revival of hermeneutics. Arendt's tactless handling of Eichmann's and the survivors' appearance before the court in *Eichmann in Jerusalem* outlines a particular hostility to *the genre of testimony itself*, which follows the death of the *sensus communis*. Defences of, for example, the validity of historical judgment vis-a-vis scientific deduction in the enlightenment period depend on an assertion of the equal truth value of testimony, which for Gadamer points towards the revival of the *sensus communis* as the true basis for the human sciences. He quotes d'Alembert's claim that the part of historical knowledge that 'may be founded on testimony alone, often produces in us a conviction as strong as that born from axioms' (*TM*, p21). In contrast to d'Alembert, it is quite extraordinary to note Arendt's dismissiveness of the value of any kind of survivor testimony from the concentration camps as early as *The Origins of Totalitarianism*:

If it is true that the concentration camps are the most consequential institution of totalitarian rule, 'dwelling on horrors' would seem to be indispensable for the understanding of totalitarianism. But recollection can no more do this than can the uncommunicative eyewitness report. In both these genres there is an inherent tendency to run away from the experience; instinctively or rationally, both types of writer are so much aware of the terrible abyss that separates the world of the living from that of the living dead [...] Only the fearful imagination of those who have

16. Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, 3 vols, vol 3, San Diego, New York, London, Harcourt Brace, 1985, p176. Further references will be included in the text as *OT*.

17. It only seems extraordinary, of course, in light of the prestige that the genre of testimony has attained in our understanding of the holocaust since Arendt's book, and partly as a result of the Eichmann trial itself with its insistence on the importance of 'background witnesses,' as well as wider shifts in historical methodology in the postmodern era, in particular a new emphasis on the people's history. Arendt is in fact entirely typical of her generation in rejecting the historical and philosophical significance of survivor testimony. For an account of this in Poliakov's *Breviaire de la Haine* (1951) and Reitlinger's *The Final Solution* (1953), see the introduction to Tony Kushner's *The Holocaust and the Liberal Imagination: A Social and Cultural History*, Oxford, Blackwell, 1994. In a letter to Samuel Grafton, who was writing a piece on her for *Look* magazine in 1963, Arendt even suggested that criticism of her report on Eichmann deflected criticism from more weighty historical tomes that shared the same approach. She cites a letter she had received in March of that year from Dr. Siegfried Moses, president of the Leo Baeck Institute and of the Council of Jews from Germany, to support this view: 'I came to New York

been aroused by such reports but have not actually been smitten in their own flesh, of those who are consequently free from the bestial, desperate terror which, when confronted by real, present horror, inexorably paralyzes everything that is not mere reaction, can afford to keep thinking about horrors. Such thoughts are useful only for the perception of political contexts and the mobilization of political passions (*OT*, p139).

The passage is extraordinary in the way that it quietly dismisses the entire genre of testimony that was beginning to emerge as Arendt published *The Origins of Totalitarianism* in the 1950s. The experience of the survivor is so traumatic, she seems to say, that it cannot be truly recollected, nor, consequently, communicated. Any attempt to write about such experience runs away from it.<sup>17</sup> Such testimonial accounts can generate a kind of thinking in others, those who have not been paralysed by the experience by having lived through it and its terror; but this thinking manifests itself as a macabre and, implicitly, unproductive 'dwelling on horrors' which is limited in its usefulness to 'the perception of political contexts and the mobilization of political passions'. Testimony seems to be extra-political and political at the same time; it delimits political contexts, and mobilises the kind of dangerous political passions that would focus on Arendt herself in the Eichmann controversy ten years later; it forestalls any meaningful communication since the experiences that are described simply cannot be communicated, generating instead a kind of fascination with the bestial terror of others.

I want in the next section of this essay to pursue the thought of Arendt's tactlessness in relation to another aspect of her thinking, that I have already gestured to in my opening discussion of the style of *The Origins of Totalitarianism*: her treatment of anger, and in particular her understanding of anger as a significant counterweight to reason as it gets articulated in her essay *On Violence* (1969). This treatment bears a crucial relation to the issue of intimacy and being touched that Gadamer stakes out, by challenging the hermeneutic ideal of openness to the other. It worries that the classical restraint and distance from the other that govern the hermeneutical search for a universal sense is no longer viable given the crushing proximity between selves and others and the fake intimacy that entail in the post-totalitarian world, and in the wake of the incommunicable, post-totalitarian and politically ambivalent activity of 'thinking about horrors'. Openness towards the other may no longer offer a means of access to the universal; Arendt appears to say, instead, that our best chance of making sense of contemporary history and politics depends precisely on being suspicious about the other and what he says.

### 3. ANGER MANAGEMENT

'Generally speaking,' Arendt wrote in her letter responding to Scholem's accusation that she lacked *Herzenstakt*, 'the role of the "heart" in politics

seems to me altogether questionable. You know as well as I how often those who merely report certain unpleasant facts are accused of lack of soul, lack of heart [...] We both know, in other words, how often these emotions are used in order to conceal factual truth'.<sup>18</sup> Yet in an essay written a few years after the Eichmann controversy and in light of the Vietnam war, *On Violence*, Arendt seems to qualify this hard opposition between truth and the heart. Paraphrasing Chomsky's 1968 essay 'Objectivity and Liberal Scholarship', she writes:

Absence of emotions neither causes nor promotes rationality. 'Detachment and equanimity' in view of 'unbearable tragedy' can indeed be 'terrifying,' namely when they are not the result of control but an evident manifestation of incomprehension. In order to respond reasonably one must first of all be 'moved', and the opposite of emotional is not 'rational', whatever that may mean, but either the inability to be moved, usually a pathological phenomenon, or sentimentality, which is a perversion of feeling.<sup>19</sup>

Such pronouncements seem to allow the emotions a strong role in rational comprehension of the world. Pseudo-rational detachment is often a mask - as Chomsky argues was the case in debates about the Vietnam war - for a failure to comprehend, a rearguard attempt to give the appearance of being in control. The inverse of this is a strong understanding of what Arendt describes as "'natural" *human* emotions', such as rage, as modes of understanding, and in particular as modes of understanding injustice in the world. While rage and violence may lack the full status of political responsiveness, in that they involve acting without argument and without counting the consequences, they trace a borderline between affect and reason on which it is sometimes necessary to act, by which I mean that the reality of injustice allows reason, temporarily, to ally itself with violent action and to interpret such action as a mode of understanding and insight. Where detachment and equanimity might look suspiciously like an attempt to hide loss of control, being rational depends, here, on some kind of original movement, some sort of giving up of control at the outset. Sentimentality is then figured by Arendt as one perversion of this primary emotional shift, this having been moved.

Sentimentality turns out, in Arendt's (incredibly tactless, it must be said) argument about the Black Power movement in this essay, to be responsible for breaking the alliance between rage and reason that she sketches out here. Discussing what she describes as 'certain moods and unreflecting attitudes of society at large,' Arendt writes that

... it has become rather fashionable among white liberals to react to Negro grievances with the cry, 'We are all guilty', and Black Power has proved only too happy to take advantage of this 'confession' to instigate an irrational 'black rage'. Where all are guilty, no one is; confessions of

with the draft of a statement which was to be published by the Council of Jews from Germany. It was to attack the presentation given in Hilberg's book [*The Destruction of the European Jews*] and in articles published by Bettelheim. Now [i.e., after the publication of my articles in *The New Yorker*], the defense of the council must oppose primarily your articles'. [Cited in *The Jewish Writings*, 476].

18. Arendt, *The Jewish Writings*, op. cit., p467.

19. Hannah Arendt, 'On Violence', in *Crises of the Republic*, New York, Harcourt Brace, 1972, p161. Further references will be included in the text as *OK*.

collective guilt are the best possible safeguard against the discovery of culprits' (*OV*, p162).

The problem with sentimentality here, as Arendt understands it, is that in its ethical softness when faced with the rage of the other - its giving in immediately to an excessive version of the demands of that others' rage, processed by the liberal imagination - it dissolves the temporary alliance between rage and reason framed by the others' sense of injustice, and pushes that other into the position of an irrational, all-destroying rage. A sentimental response to the other's claim of injustice, in other words, blocks the chances of that other finding his way to what justice is. In claiming to identify with that sense of injustice, in taking all the blame, it sweeps the ground from under the others' feet.

White guilt and liberal guilt, as Julie Ellison has shown in her book *Cato's Tears and the Making of Anglo-American Emotion*, emerged as synonymous phenomena in the era of the civil rights movement. 'Liberal guilt', writes Ellison, 'is about race, and it always was'.<sup>20</sup> Ellison traces hostility to liberal guilt back to the theorisation of sentiment in the Eighteenth Century, and in particular to the work of Adam Smith. As Ellison shows, Smith specifically links the phenomenon of guilt with race and the burgeoning imperial politics of his moment. Trying to limit acts of sympathy to the context of spectacle and face-to-face contact, Smith upbraids 'those whining and melancholy moralists, who are perpetually reproaching us with our happiness, while so many of our brethren are in misery'.<sup>21</sup> Smith's attack on this kind of 'artificial commiseration', as he calls it, is itself derived from the classical ethics of the Stoics, as Martha Nussbaum has shown extensively in *Upheavals of Thought: The Intelligence of Emotions*: '[w]hatever interest we take in the fortune of those ... who are placed altogether out of the sphere of our activity', writes Smith, 'can produce only anxiety to ourselves, without any manner of advantage to them'.<sup>22</sup> One problem with this form of compassion, from the Stoic position that Smith explores, is that it is unproductive. It doesn't help those for whom we feel compassionate, who don't even know about our compassion, and in the generation of paralysing anxiety for ourselves, it forestalls the possibility that we might work towards alleviating the suffering of those around us. But even more dangerously, as Nussbaum shows, this kind of unproductive compassion is 'cruelty's first cousin; the difference between them is made by fortune'. Glossing Seneca, Nussbaum argues that the person who wants to feel compassion for the misfortune of those whom they have never met will turn to retributive anger when the wheel of fortune turns and they find themselves suffering. Having 'given' unproductive compassion to others, they will expect it as a right in return and turn to anger when it doesn't appear. But they were never asked for compassion in the first place, and have no right to expect it back. Thus anger is, as Nussbaum paraphrases Seneca, 'a circumstantial inflection or modality of the same evaluative judgments that

20. Julie Ellison, *Cato's Tears and the Making of Anglo-American Emotion*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1999, p171.

21. Adam Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, op. cit., p160.

22. Ibid., p161.

23. Martha Nussbaum, *Upheavals of Thought: The Intelligence of Emotions*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2001, p362.

24. Towards the end of *EJ* Arendt acknowledges the same link between guilt and anger as Nussbaum, and notices that guilt stands in for righteous indignation in the younger generation in Germany, who are concerned about the negative effects that anger might have on the advancement of their careers. German youth ends up feeling guilty, then, for their parents out of reasons of expediency: 'The youth of Germany is surrounded, on

have, in other circumstances, compassion as their inflection'.<sup>23</sup>

Clearly Arendt thinks of guilt as a useful trick for a liberal society to play - and she was similarly enraged by the phenomenon of German war guilt, which she also describes as a kind of cheap, exculpatory sentimentality at a number of points in her work.<sup>24</sup> Comprehension of injustice, to reiterate, means here an alliance of rage and reason, which is always threatened in practice by the evasiveness of a kind of mass mood of sentimentalism. The flip side of this is that, to keep hold of reason in situations of social conflict, some kind of traction is required: I may need to dig in and hold a more bloody-minded version of my position, as it were, in the name of the other. If white liberal guilt stops black people from being rational, then tactlessness around civil rights (this is now I think Arendt's position) marks, paradoxically, a desire to hold the other in reason. In other words, a defensive reading of Arendt might say that her claim that the Black Power movement's penetration of the US campus is designed to lower academic standards (*OV*, p120) doesn't mean what it appears to say, but wants rather to keep the others' anger together with reason by provoking it, offering it some kind of harder traction than white liberal guilt offers: if you really are a political movement, it says to Black Power, then prove it by engaging rationally with this kind of criticism.<sup>25</sup> Perhaps this speculation registers an even less palatable version of white liberalism than does liberal guilt, which latter version takes its mission to be keeping the other on the self-improving path to rational self-development: you can be angry, in other words, but let me make sure that your rage is ultimately convertible into my idea of moral and rational self-awareness. And the way I'll do this for you is by provoking your anger, refusing to yield to the soft liberalism that you anticipate in me but that simply makes you more angry and less rational. However, the critique of liberal guilt from Smith has to do with a kind of uneasy response to others' suffering from a distance, the kind of 'remote control suffering' organised by global capital that Gayatri Spivak has more recently challenged.<sup>26</sup> Surely Black Power demands some kind of active engagement since it concerns a politics of the nearby, or perhaps, to invoke an early Arendtian term, a politics of the neighbour?

#### 4. THE LOVE OF PERSONS, OR TRANSFERENCE

We will perhaps look into the psychology of affects together some day. In order to impress upon you the inadequacy of what has so far been done on the subject, especially in psychoanalysis, I should simply like to propose to you a few incidental objects to reflect on - an affect such as anger, for example [...] is no doubt a passion which is manifested by means of an organic or physiological correlative, by a given more or less hypertonic or even elated feeling [...] it requires perhaps something like the reaction of a subject to a disappointment, to the failure of an expected correlation between a symbolic order and the response of the real. In other words,

all sides and in all walks of life, by men in positions of authority and in public office who are very guilty indeed but who *feel* nothing of the sort. The normal reaction to this state of affairs should be indignation, but indignation would be quite risky - not a danger to life and limb but definitely a handicap in a career', (*EJ*, p251).

25. Shaftesbury's account of the popularity of the 'paradoxical systems' of Hobbes and Locke understands them in just these terms; as a rhetorically-charged effort, on the part of 'men of wit', to oppose other systems which have served the cause of tyranny through their 'fair appearance,' rather than as commitment to those paradoxical systems per se: 'The reason, perhaps, why men of wit delight so much to espouse these paradoxical systems is not in truth that they are so fully satisfied with them, but in a view the better to oppose some other systems, which by their fair appearance have helped, they think, to bring mankind under subjection', Shaftesbury, 'Sensus Communis', op. cit., p45.

26. Gayatri Spivak, Preface to Mahasweta Devi's *Imaginary Maps*, reprinted in *The Spivak Reader*, Donna Landry and Gerald Maclean (eds), New York, London, Routledge, 1996, p277.

anger is essentially linked to something expressed in a formulation of Charles Péguy's, who was speaking in a humorous context - it's when the little pegs refuse to go into the little holes.

Jacques Lacan

And if the word *integration* means anything, this is what it means: that we, with love, shall force our brothers to see themselves as they are, to cease fleeing from reality and begin to change it.

James Baldwin<sup>27</sup>

27. Lacan, *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis 1959-1960: The Seminar of Jacques Lacan Book VII*, Jacques-Alain Miller (ed), Dennis Porter (trans), Abingdon, Routledge, 2008, pp126-7. James Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time*, Harmandsworth, Penguin, 1964, p17.

The rules of tact and social decorum are always in principle sacrificable, in Arendt's argument, to contact with reality, and the hope for a politics which might grow out of it. To this extent, anger - whether the anger of the author of *The Origins of Totalitarianism* or a member of the Black Power movement - could be understood as a healthy symptom of the political self's desire to make contact with reality, to push through sentimental, guilty and narcissistic responses to suffering in order to uncover what the politically real might be. Such anger, both in the style of political writing and in political action, might risk appearing heartless and tactless, but then a loving, heartfelt response to the world is something of a contradiction in Arendt's terms anyway. After all, as she claims in *The Human Condition*, 'Love, by reason of its passion, destroys the in-between which relates us to and separates us from others'. Love is 'killed, or rather extinguished, the moment it is displayed in public [...] [b]ecause of its inherent worldlessness, love can only become false and perverted when it is used for political purposes such as the change or salvation of the world'.<sup>28</sup>

28. Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1958, pp242, 51-2.

When Scholem accuses her of lacking love for the Jewish people, Arendt's response is blunt. 'I am not moved by any "love" of this sort,' she writes in reply to his letter, 'I have never in my life "loved" any people or collective - neither the German people, nor the French, nor the American, nor the working class or anything of that sort. I indeed love "only" my friends and the only kind of love I know of and believe in is the love of persons'.<sup>29</sup> Yet on closer inspection of its origins in Arendt's thought, even this residual love of persons dissolves into something otherworldly. In her pre-war dissertation, *Love and Saint Augustine*, which Arendt was revising as she defended herself during the Eichmann controversy, she had framed the love of persons (or of 'the neighbour' in the vocabulary of Christian phenomenology that she inhabited in the 1920s) in the following way:

29. Arendt, *The Jewish Writings*, op. cit., pp466-7.

Just as I do not love the self I made in belonging to the world, I also do not love my neighbour in the concrete and worldly encounter with him. Rather, I love ... something in him, that is, the very thing which, of himself, he is not. 'For you love in him not what he is, but what you wish that he may be.' This [...] means that for the neighbour as well love is merely a call to isolation, a summons into God's presence.<sup>30</sup>

30. Cited in Nussbaum, *Upheavals of Thought*, op. cit., p552.

Her courting of anger, albeit framed by a relation to reason, and these disavowals of a politics or intersubjectivity framed by love give Arendt's work a strong and unexpected resemblance to the dynamics of the transference in psychoanalytic theory. In Freud's papers from the 1910s such as 'The Dynamics of Transference' (1912) and 'Observations on Transference-Love' (1915), the transference confronts psychoanalytic practice with its own difficult relationship to issues of tact and decorum. When a patient falls in love with her analyst, the process of analysis clams up, since the patient 'feels at liberty then to disregard the fundamental rule of psycho-analysis which lays it down that whatever comes into one's head must be reported without criticizing it'.<sup>31</sup> The transference means that the patient 'feels at liberty' to stop speaking freely of whatever comes into her head - a peculiar abandonment of a freedom which feels constraining to the neurosis. The transference seeks to reinstate a courtly relation between patient and analyst. This desired courtship, founded in repression, blocks the cure, which depends on the freedom and disregard for decorum of the analytical situation. The analyst finds himself in an 'awkward position' (p163), since in the transference '[w]e are constantly coming up against the obligation to professional discretion - a discretion which cannot be dispensed with in real life, but which is of no service in our science' (p159). The method of analysis is dismissive of the rules of decorum, but the patient's cathecting of an erotic charge onto the analyst forces the method into conflict with the ethics of an institutional situation, any institutional situation, and seems to usher in once again an unwanted, and entirely inappropriate call for decorum. The patient forces the analyst's hand - unable to gloss over the claim to love in the way that the rules of decorum would demand in other institutions, the analyst must find a mode of action in relation to the patient 'for which there is no model in real life [...] He must keep firm hold of the transference-love, but treat it as something unreal, as a situation which has to be gone through in the treatment and traced back to its unconscious origin' (p166).

Love must be shown in this particular kind of inter-subjective exchange to be unreal, and uncovering it as unreal must become part of the cure. The name for this lesson, in psychoanalysis, is the counter-transference. The analyst's counter-transference, as John Guillory has argued in *Cultural Capital*, enables the transference to be 'ruthlessly exposed as "resistance," but also encouraged as the primary means of access to the unconscious'.<sup>32</sup> I would argue that there is a similar kind of counter-transference operative in Arendt's claim not to love the Jewish people, the working class nor even (if we look closely enough) her friends. Love keeps creeping into the political in inappropriate ways, yet the kind of politics Arendt seems to be after is dependent on rejecting love, a kind of founding aberration that marks the path for politics. Love is not just a distraction from the political path, but rather a resistance that must be overcome in the name of politics; and perhaps just this resistance is what in fact gives birth to politics. The paradox of Arendt's relation to the

31. Sigmund Freud, 'The Dynamics of Transference', in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, vol. 12, James Strachey (ed), London, Hogarth Press 1966-74, p107. Further references will be included in the text.

32. John Guillory, *Cultural Capital: The Problem of Literary Canon Formation*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1991, p183.

sensus communis is that identification cannot be disowned. Her work still wants to imagine the standpoint of the other, but it knows how this act of the imagination can collapse into naïve sentiment and what the consequences of this might be, and so it binds its thinking of the other to a dismissal of ‘care’ for the others’ wellbeing. This dismissal is, in fact, a sign for responsibility in Arendt. Like Eichmann, the man of feeling gone wrong, and perhaps like psychoanalysis too, Arendt’s writing lived in the wreckage of a sentimental mode of identification with others that it kept trying to separate itself from, in ever more tactless ways. Anger and the rejection of love are symptoms of this, and each testifies to a failure to fit the little pegs into the little holes.