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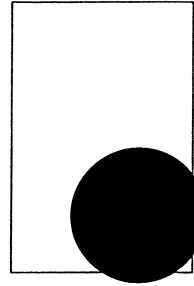
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Where thought belongs

An anthropological critique of the project of philosophy

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Abstract

Adorno, Arendt, Badiou, Derrida, Heidegger and Rorty have variously called for radically new conceptions of philosophy, but none has made a case for turning from the historical and genealogical past to the anthropological present. Taking the view that thought cannot escape the impress of a thinker's immediate situation, this article invokes the phenomenological notions of lifeworld and *lebensphilosophie* to explore the *social* spaces where thought arises and transpires. Beginning with Hannah Arendt's conception of thinking as grounded in the *vita activa* rather than the *vita contemplativa*, it is suggested that ethnographic method provides a compelling way of realizing her vision of thought as inextricably political and tied to events – expressions of the power relations between human subjects, and between private and public realms.

Key Words

Arendt • ethnographic method • event • judgment • *lebensphilosophie* • limit situation
• *vita activa*

Philosophy is no longer applicable to the techniques for mastering one's life. At the same time, by abstaining from all definite content, whether as a formal logic and theory of science or as the legend of Being beyond all beings, philosophy declared its bankruptcy regarding concrete societal goals. (Adorno, 1998: 5–6)

To speak of the 'end'¹ or the 'bankruptcy' of philosophy is, perhaps, to confess an exasperation and exhaustion at habitually turning to the Greeks as our sounding board – to thinkers who cannot talk back to us, with whom we cannot converse or interact face to face, and whose social circumstances were very unlike our own. It is also to acknowledge the difficulty of rethinking philosophy from within its own traditions. This is what Alain Badiou means when he says that, as a methodological first principle, we must forget the *history* of philosophy and wrest thought back from the 'genealogical imperative' (2008: 4–5). But where do we go from here? Though Badiou evokes Saint

Paul's conversion experience as a critical moment that takes us beyond the Jewish tradition of the law and the Greek tradition of wisdom, his point of departure is, ironically, a historical rather than contemporary event and he remains committed to the question of truth, even though the *singular* truth of an event subverts the philosophical notion of truth as a *conceptual* understanding that can be universalized. As for Rorty's argument that philosophy may be reinvigorated or reinvented by reconsidering 'edifying' thinkers like James and Dewey, for whom truth is a word we retrospectively assign to events whose outcome has proved positive for us, we are still left with the questions as to *what* kinds of events require philosophy, *where* in our own immediate world we might most usefully take up the task of thinking, and *how* we understand the very nature of thought. Badiou is right, I think, to encourage us to focus on an event, and to caution us that it may deliver 'no law, no form of mastery, be it of the wise man or the prophet' (2008: 42). But why not make our point of departure *current* events? Rather than proceed from historical events and figures, why not locate our thinking in the here and now, immersing ourselves in the quotidian situations of others, taking our intellectual cues from their concerns, and conversing on terms that they decide? In short, why not find in anthropology the kind of inspiration that historicism once provided, moving elsewhere rather than earlier in time to enlarge the conversation of humankind in ways that Plato would not have dreamed of (Rorty, 1979: 391)? Whereas philosophers have typically sought a standpoint that frees the mind from its bodily, sensory and practical embroilments in everyday life (a project that Adorno writes off as 'delusional' (1998: 7)), anthropologists insist that thought is always tied to mundane interests, material matters, cultural preoccupations and everyday situations.² Accordingly, the separation of the *vita contemplativa* from the *vita activa* is not only false; it is utopian, which is to say it can be achieved nowhere. It is an illusion, akin to the alienation that follows the separation of product from process, text from context, capital from labor.

At most, philosophy is a kind of bas-relief – an artificial, partial and arrested image of the eventful and multi-dimensional procession of life itself; at worst, it imitates the self-perpetuating, self-reflexive figure of the Ouroboros. At the core of phenomenology, existentialism, critical theory and pragmatism lies the methodological question as to how thought may be anchored in rather than abstracted from human lifeworlds, and how it may begin in *media res*, with the processes rather than the products of intersubjective life – cultural and symbolic forms, legal and moral codes, religious texts, found objects – much as the humanities eschew the focus in natural science on an *experimental* subject that is similarly decontextualized and generalized as a species, specimen, or typical example. In fact, the truth of any *human* subject can never be entirely encompassed by the *discursive* subjects with which we conventionally identify and construe ourselves and others as male or female, old or young, working class or middle class, literate or illiterate, modern or premodern. To fully recognize the eventfulness of being is to discover that what emerges in the course of any human interaction overflows, confounds and goes beyond the forms that initially frame the interaction as well as the reflections and rationalizations that follow from it. Though this indeterminate relationship between experience and episteme may not be readily apparent, it becomes dramatically obvious in critical events and limit situations when little in one's experience can be grasped or explained by reference to what is already known and named, or what can be thought and spoken. It is for this reason that I have sought a vocabulary that captures the

indeterminacy, instability, eventfulness, incoherence, quandaries, aporias and poetics of existence.

THE HUMAN CONDITION

Against the view that thought can escape the impress of the thinker's immediate situation and existential imperatives, we invoke the phenomenological notion of lifeworld to define the *social* space where thought arises, occurs, and transpires. Perhaps no one has made a better case for this *existenzphilosophie* or *lebensphilosophie* than Hannah Arendt, and in the following pages I summarize and contextualize her conception of the intellectual project, consider its limitations, and suggest that ethnographic method may provide a compelling way of realizing her vision of thought as inescapably political – working through our relations with one another in a common world rather than laying claim to a privileged position beyond it.

On Thursday, 4 December 1975, five days after completing the second section of her book, *The Life of the Mind*, Hannah Arendt received two old friends – Salo and Jeanette Baron – for dinner in her Riverside Drive apartment in New York City. After dinner, the three friends retired to the living room. As they were talking over coffee, Hannah Arendt suffered a brief coughing fit, then slumped back in her armchair and lost consciousness. A heart attack had killed her instantly.

For the next three years, Mary McCarthy devoted herself to editing and publishing her friend's unfinished book. Working until late at night, and even in her dreams, Mary McCarthy would speak of this labor of love as sustaining 'an imaginary dialogue . . . verging sometimes, as in life, on debate'. Mary McCarthy explains in her editor's Postface that Arendt's book had been conceived in three parts – Thinking, Willing, and Judging. But the faculty of judgment had been, for Hannah Arendt, the 'linchpin in the mind's triad' (Brightman, 1995: 391), for judgment brings home to us our connectedness to the world we inhabit with others; it is judgment that makes intellectual activity worldly and wise. At the time of her death, Hannah Arendt had written only scattered notes toward this third and final section of her book. These were found on her desk. Threaded into her typewriter was a sheet of paper, blank but for the title, 'Judging', and two epigraphs that unfortunately gave little clue as to what she had intended to write. *The Life of the Mind*, then, resembled a story without an end (Beiner, 1982: 90). Yet its conclusions were presaged in Arendt's lectures on Kant's political philosophy, delivered at the New School for Social Research in the Fall of 1970.

In Hannah Arendt's view, judgment presupposes our belonging to a world that is shared by many. Unlike pure reason, judging does not consist in a silent Platonic dialogue between me and myself, but springs from and anticipates the presence of others (Arendt, 1968: 220). More than any other mode of thought, it is socially-situated and socially-mediated, taking its bearings from incidents in our lived experience and finding expression in stories (Arendt, 1968: 14). The faculty of judgment, however, requires distance from 'subjective private conditions', though this distance is not achieved through the kind of social and affective disengagement that scientific rationality demands – assuming 'some higher standpoint . . . above the *melée*' (Arendt, 1968: 220, 1982: 42). Remaining faithful to its essentially *social* character, judgment seeks distance through imaginative displacement – reconsidering one's own world from the standpoint of another.³ Reminiscent of Jaspers' notion of 'limit situations' (*grenzsituationen*), where

philosophy gives up the search for bounded and coherent theories of the whole and addresses the conditions under which it may be confounded or unsettled (Arendt, 1946, 1994: 182; Jackson, 2009), Arendt's interest is in how thought may go beyond the thinker. However, she is at pains to point out that the practical and experiential mimesis that one looks for when adopting the standpoint of others neither eclipses one's own being nor supposes an understanding of what actually goes on in the minds of others. Distancing oneself from one's own customary point of view is not, therefore, a matter of exchanging one's own prejudices for the prejudices of others (Arendt, 1994: 43). Nor does it imply passivity. Unlike classical empiricism, where the observer makes himself a *tabula rasa* in order to register his impressions of the observed, judging requires active engagement and conversation – allowing *one's own thoughts* to be influenced by the thoughts of others. Accordingly, judging implies a third position, reducible to neither one's own nor the other's: a view from in-between, from within the shared space of intersubjectivity itself.

Imagination alone enables us to see things in their proper perspective, to be strong enough to put that which is too close at a certain distance so that we can see and understand it without bias and prejudice, to be generous enough to bridge abysses of remoteness until we can see and understand everything that is too far away from us as though it were our own affair. This distancing of some things and bridging the abysses to others is part of the dialogue of understanding for whose purposes direct experience establishes too close a contact and mere knowledge erects artificial barriers. Without this kind of imagination, which actually is understanding, we would never be able to take our bearings in the world. It is the only inner compass we have. We are contemporaries only in so far as our understanding reaches. (Arendt, 1994: 323)

But isn't there something too idealistic in this notion of judgment that is neither an empathic merging of one's own identity with the other nor an abstract conceptualization that sets one apart from others, but depends, rather, on a lateral displacement that puts oneself in the place of others even though their views and tastes may be repellent? Doesn't Arendt's view tend to play down the entrenched divisions in the public realm that militate against 'communicative transparency' and make it practically impossible to accept what Bill Readings calls 'dereferralization' (1996: 122–4, 166–7)? To inhabit a 'dissensual community' – thinking without identity, thinking 'without bannisters' – may be within the reach of academics, but is it possible in situations where difference is not a matter for academic debate and edification but a matter of life and death? For example, in Veena Das's moving account of a woman called Shanti, who survived the death of her husband and three sons during the Delhi riots that followed the assassination of Indira Gandhi in 1984, we are confronted with the ideological impossibility of Shanti's loss being reconciled with the patriarchal ethos of her community. As the community scapegoats and shames Shanti for having lost her sons and betrayed 'the male world', she sees that 'a life built around female connections is not . . . a life worth living', and commits suicide (Das, 1990: 346–62).

This brings me to my second point: that judging, in Arendt's sense of the term, is always, in practice, less a question of a person's *intellectual* acuity than of his or her emotional and social capacity. No matter how earnest our intentions, the fact is that

whenever we endeavor to accommodate any kind of radical otherness, the habits and dispositions that define our own sense of who we are, are placed in jeopardy. For this reason, people are unlikely to ponder their own worldview as it appears from the standpoint of another unless circumstances compel them to. In reality, understanding is usually a result of *enforced* displacement, of crises that wrench a person out of his or her habitual routines of thought and behavior, rather than a product of philosophical choice or idle curiosity.

Understanding others requires more than an intellectual movement from one's own position to theirs; it involves physical upheaval, psychological turmoil, and moral confusion. This is why suffering is an inescapable concomitant of understanding – the loss of the illusion that one's own particular worldview is universally tenable, the pain of seeing in the face and gestures of a stranger the invalidation of oneself. And it is precisely because such hazards and symbolic deaths are the cost of going beyond the borders of the local world that we complacently regard as the measure of *the* world that most human beings resist seeking to know others as they know themselves. By this same token, we find the most compelling examples of how human beings suffer and struggle with the project of enlarging their understanding in those parts of the world where openness has become the unavoidable condition of existence. It is here, in what I call the migrant imagination (Jackson, 2007: ch. 6), rather than in European salons and seminars, that we may recognize and be reconciled to the sometimes painful truth that the human world constitutes our common ground, our shared heritage, *not as a place of comfortably consistent unity but as a site of contingency, difference and struggle.*

In reconciling ourselves to this condition, storytelling is crucial, for storytelling provides us not with a means of changing that which we cannot change but with a way of re-imagining it. Consider the following ethnographic examples. In his study of the interplay of local and transnational identifications in Belize, Richard Wilk shows that one effect of the increasing presence of foreign goods, television, tourists, money, entrepreneurs, music, language, drugs, gangs, tastes and ideas in Belize has been the self-conscious creation of localized culture, including the culture of food. This process, Wilk argues, is played out as a narrative or drama that pits the local against the foreign, self against other, and provides Belizeans with a sense of being in control of the 'global ecumene' rather than at the mercy of it. 'The moral of this story,' he notes, 'is that the technological apparatus of capitalism, including television and other media, has been turned to very local and anti-hegemonic purposes' (1999: 248).

A second example, taken from Andrew Lattas's study of cargo cults in Papua New Guinea, also shows how storytelling enables an imaginative reconfiguring of the relationship of local and global realms. Cargo narratives are grounded in the traditional conviction that journeying across vast distances to unfamiliar places – particularly the land of the dead – is a precondition of enlarging one's understanding and increasing one's power. When Europeans arrived in Papua New Guinea, changing its cultural, economic and political landscapes, this world of empowering otherness became identified with whites. Cargo cult stories accommodated this new focus while remaining preoccupied with 'breaking out of contained spaces', transgressing boundaries in order to tap into and move within 'the secret space of the other' (1998: 71). Indeed, the Pisin word *stori* means 'a narrative about secret and lost forms of power' (p. 82). But these imaginative strategies should not be dismissed as modes of sympathetic magic. Though

local metaphors speak of adopting another skin or inhabiting another body (in much the same way that we speak of putting ourselves in another person's shoes), the cult adepts rarely lapse into submissive modes of empathy and imitation, but actively experiment with new imaginative and interpersonal strategies that will provide them with *real* power to control the world.

While Cargo narratives are informed by blatantly pragmatic designs, Hannah Arendt's notion of judgment is anchored in the humanistic goals of the Enlightenment. Understanding is its own good. Judgment is 'representative' not because one adopts, advocates or even empathizes with the views of others, still less because one comes into possession of an abstract knowledge that corresponds to some external reality, but simply because the understanding that informs one's judgment is pluralistic rather than monistic, intersubjective rather than subjective (Arendt, 1968: 241). Yet, in her insistence that reality lies neither within oneself nor with the Other, but in-between – in the 'web of relationships' where self and other are as natively intermingled as love and violence⁴ – Arendt unwittingly echoes the communitarian logic of non-Western thought.

ETHNOGRAPHIC JUDGMENT

It is obvious that, for Arendt, judgment grows out of our relationships with people rather than from first principles. Located in our intersubjective encounters, judging cannot, therefore, claim any final resolution of the quandaries of life. This means that judgment is not a matter of some unreflective, a prioristic, moralistic *condemnation* of difference on the egocentric or ethnocentric grounds that alien beliefs or practices belong outside the pale of what is human. On the contrary, judgment is a way of doing justice to the multiplex and ambiguous character of human reality by regarding others *not as inhuman, but as ourselves in other circumstances* – even though those 'others' may include the Adolf Eichmanns of this world. We judge Eichmann not because what he did or licensed was subhuman and evil, but because he exemplifies a banal mode of human thoughtlessness – as superficial as it is self-interested – in which one assumes a knowledge of others without subjecting this knowledge to the test of putting oneself in the position in which the other has been placed, or in the position in which the other has placed himself or herself.⁵ As a corollary, no judgment should claim to bring conversation to a close, for every judgment is itself, in turn, open to the judgment of others (cf. Readings, 1996: 134).

Neither of these points imply an argument for moral relativism; they simply make an appeal for strategies that make judgment conditional upon understanding – which is to say, thinking through one's relationships with others. As such, understanding, like storytelling, means beginning with 'particulars and things close at hand' rather than with sweeping generalizations. (Arendt, 1971: 193)

One might argue, for instance, that what is most disturbing about those in the West who raise their voices against the 'barbarity' of female genital operations, by declaring clitoridectomy to be an abomination of patriarchy or Islamic mediaevalism, is not the intrinsic 'wrongness' of their point of view but the wrongness of their refusal to understand the phenomenon from any standpoint other than their own, coupled with their bad faith in invoking 'human rights' to rationalize a position that they have never risked

by putting themselves in the place of the other. In other words, the ‘universal’ should never be either one’s own local or particular view projected onto the world at large, or a view from afar, allegedly liberated from social and worldly ties; rather, the word is best used to denote an enlarged understanding that comes from a sustained *practical and social engagement* in the lifeworld of others (Arendt, 1968: 221). In this sense, the assumption underlying Hannah Arendt’s theory of judgment is similar to the assumption that underpins ethnography: that we deliberately put our own preunderstandings at risk by immersing ourselves in the lifeworlds of others. It is not that we necessarily cease condemning and condoning; rather that such value judgments are less likely to precede than to follow from our investigations, which rely on a method of suspending our accustomed ways of thinking, not by an effort of intellectual will, but by *a method of displacing ourselves from our customary habitus*.

In her essay on Karl Jaspers, Hannah Arendt makes this observation: ‘Whatever I think must remain in constant communication with everything that has been thought’ (1973: 87). Edification, it is here implied, ideally takes the form of a dialogue between the living and the dead – between ourselves and the past. As to which past we may most fruitfully turn, Arendt shares Jaspers’ view that this should not be the Christian past, centered on the advent of Christ and focused on the idea of salvation and final judgment; rather, it should be defined as the pivotal period between 800 and 200 BC that saw the birth of philosophy simultaneously in several places – Confucius and Lao-tse in China, the Upanishads and Buddha in India, Zarathustra in Persia, the prophets in Palestine, Homer and the philosophers and tragedians in Greece.

As an ethnographer, I question this view on the grounds that this distant ‘axis of world history’ gives us only worldviews to engage with, not lifeworlds in which to sojourn. If one is to actually put oneself in the position of others it is never enough simply to think one’s thoughts by way of theirs; one must, at all costs, access and experience directly the lives that others live *in their own place*. In Arendt’s words, this need to extend the reach of one’s understanding means training ‘one’s imagination to go visiting’ (Arendt, 1982: 43). However, it may be that anthropology, not history, provides the most challenging terrain for this ‘visiting imagination’. Though it is certainly edifying to enter into ‘dialogue’ with the ancients, it is surely important to learn the languages of those who seem most distant and alien to us in the world *in which we presently live*, and by sojourning among them discover the meaning of the truth that Arendt and Jaspers set such store by – the truth not of abstract knowledge *of* the other but of communication *with* the other.⁶

Ethnography thus provides an antidote to the idealism from which Arendt never completely escapes, for the ethnographic method demands not merely an imaginative participation in the life of the other, but a *practical and social* involvement in the various activities, both ritual and mundane, that contextualize and condition the other’s worldview (cf. Bourdieu, 1996: 22). This imposes great demands not only on an ethnographer’s linguistic and conceptual abilities, but on his or her emotional and bodily resources. Ethnography forces the life of the mind from contemplation to experimentation. To paraphrase Foucault, being obliged to live among others on their own terms constitutes a kind of ‘limit-experience’ in which one’s identity and sanity are risked in order to explore the possibility of knowing the world other than how one has known it before (1990: 8–9). For this reason, anthropological understanding is never simply a

cognitive matter, and perhaps no other intellectual discipline combines dispassionate observation and personal ordeal in the way that fieldwork does.

Because it entails a direct, intimate, and practical engagement with the object of one's understanding, ethnographic judgment abolishes the subject-object split of natural science, and replaces it with an intersubjective model of understanding. This implies a negative dialectic. For while the ethnographer is both influenced by his or her initial preoccupations *and* by the other's self-understandings, the outcome of any intersubjective encounter is never a synthesis of all the various points of view taken together, but an arbitrary closure that leaves both self and other with a provisional and open-ended view that demands further dialogue and engagement.

Although anthropology's foundational methodology – participant-observation – supposedly allows for the coexistence of views from without and views from within, anthropology has always shuttled uneasily between so-called objective and subjective standpoints. At one extreme, there have been numerous methodological and rhetorical inventions to make anthropology a kind of natural science, in which the observer is disengaged from the observed in order to discern the rules and regularities that underlie and explain social reality. At the other extreme there have been a variety of romantic variations on the metamorphic theme of 'going native', in which the observer loses his or her identity in the other. The model of intersubjectivity overcomes the false dichotomy between these extremes, for object and subject are no longer construed as having any *a priori*, substantial or static reality, but seen phenomenologically as words with which we mark moments or modalities of *experience* that reflect the various potentialities that are realized or foregrounded in the course of interactions between persons and persons, persons and things, or persons and beliefs (Jackson, 1998). If ethnographic method is understood to be primarily not some arcane set of techniques we have to acquire but a commonplace body of social skills we already possess (the protocols of hospitality and reciprocity, for instance), then we will be more inclined to accept that subjectivity and objectivity cannot be defined 'objectively' and decontextually, since their value is always determined by one's relative position within – and one's particular *experience* of – a particular social field.

Hannah Arendt understood perfectly this relativity of objective and subjective positions. How, she once asked, can one write about totalitarianism without making explicit one's outrage at the injustices and terror involved? If one is to be 'objective' about such phenomena, the lived experiences and consequences of the phenomenon are central, not distorting. Using the example of Nazism, she notes: 'To describe the concentration camps *sine ira* is not to be "objective," but to condone them'. She then says, 'I think that a description of the camps as hell on earth is more "objective," that is, more adequate to their essence than statements of a purely sociological or psychological nature' (Arendt, 1953: 79).⁷ In another example, she speaks of excessive poverty in a nation of great wealth.

The natural human reaction to such conditions is one of anger and indignation because these conditions are against the dignity of man. If I describe these conditions without permitting my indignation to interfere, I have lifted this particular phenomenon out of its context in human society and have thereby robbed it of part of its nature . . . For to arouse indignation is one of the qualities of excessive poverty insofar as poverty occurs among human beings. (1953: 78)

THE VISITING IMAGINATION⁸

Judging implies journeying, and travel means travail – a succession of changing horizons, arduous digressions, and unsettling perspectives. The art of ethnography is to turn this deterritorialization (Deleuze and Guattari, 1991) to good account, to make a virtue out of not being at home in the world.

Aristotle considered homelessness as one of the blessings of the philosopher's way of life (Arendt, 1971: 199–200). In his *Protreptikos* he celebrates the life of the mind (*bios theoretikos*) as the life of a stranger (*bios xenikos*). The intellectual life is best pursued nowhere, doing nothing; it can only be hindered by a preoccupation with particulars, and with local allegiances. True thought, he observed, requires neither tools nor places for its work, for 'wherever in the whole world one sets one's thought to work, it is surrounded on all sides by the presence of truth' (Aristotle, 1952: 34). I share Hannah Arendt's view that thought cannot free itself from the practical, physical, and sensible immediacies of the world, and imagine she might have shared Merleau-Ponty's view that philosophy is not a matter of rising above the mundane, but of a 'lateral displacement' (1964: 119) that enables one to critically reconsider one's views from another vantage point. Rather than a 'nowhere' outside of time and circumstance, one seeks an 'elsewhere' *within* the world. For an ethnographer, this elsewhere is some other society; for the historian, some other time.

For Hannah Arendt, 'otherness' had a very personal connotation. As a displaced Jewish German intellectual, her marginal status was both given and chosen. In the latter sense, it meant making a conscious virtue out of her pariah status (Arendt, 1944). Like the storyteller, the poet, and the refugee, the conscious pariah may, as a discursive figure, stand for the person who remains unassimilated, ill at ease, and suspect. This estrangement may endow the pariah with an ability to see into and see through the very society from which he or she is ostracized.

Anthropologists call this 'stranger value'. While insiders find it difficult to see the world from any point of view other than their own, the pariah has no fixed position, no territory to defend, no interest to protect. As a visitor and sojourner, as one who is always being moved on, he is much freer than the good citizen to put himself in the place of another. It costs him nothing. He can try out a plurality of perspectives without any personal loss of status or identity, because he is already marked as marginal, stateless, and indeterminate. This 'visiting imagination' of the pariah implies neither an objective standpoint (the pariah does not seek disinterestedness or distance from the other), nor an empathic one (the pariah is not interested in losing himself in the other); it is, rather, a way of trying on other identities. The result is neither a detached knowledge of another's world nor an empathic blending with another's worldview. Rather it is a story that switches from one point of view to another without prioritizing any one, yet unsettles in the mind of anyone who reads or hears the story not only his certainties *but his belief in the possibility of certainty*.

The work of exiles like Joyce, Beckett, Nabokov, and Arendt all share this skeptical, creatively estranged attitude. What Camus called 'lucid indifference' is linked, therefore, to the distancing effects of displacement. It is neither a matter of seeing the world from some privileged 'nowhere', nor of aligning oneself with any particular person or group of persons on the sentimental grounds that they are in sole possession of the truth,⁹ but of interleaving a multiplicity of particular points of view in a way that calls into question

all claims for privileged understanding. No matter how abhorrent the view of the other, it represents a logical possibility for oneself. It is in this sense that the difference between self and other is always conditional upon our social interactions, and not predetermined by some genetic, cultural, or moral essence.

WHERE THOUGHT RESIDES

To ground philosophy within human lifeworlds is to forego the epistemological presumption that thought should throw light on the essence of a culture, society or person, and to desist from appraising the truth of a belief or behavior against some abstract ethical or logical ideal. It is, in fact, to embrace a pragmatist search for how thought, speech and action are tied to human interests, measuring their worth against the consequences they have for human wellbeing. As John Dewey observed, 'thinking is not a case of spontaneous combustion; it does not occur just on "general principles." There is something specific which occasions and evokes it', namely, 'some perplexity, confusion, or doubt' (1991: 12). This may be a historical crisis or a catastrophe such as the American civil war, which led Oliver Wendell Holmes to assert that certitude leads to violence and to develop a critique of ideology that gave birth to pragmatism (Menand, 2001: 61), or the period of Nazi power in Germany that prompted Karl Jaspers to ponder the ways in which worldviews (*weltanschauungen*) are not so much ways of comprehending the meaning of human existence as avenues of escape from it. For Jaspers, thoughts that arise at the limits of what can be comprehensively thought or readily said may be more worthy of us than 'formulated doctrines of the whole' (Jackson, 2009).¹⁰

Thought is equally critical to situations in which our wellbeing depends on practical skill and know-how. Faced with the perennial possibility of crop failure and hunger, Trobriand Islanders have recourse to what we call 'magic', as if their techniques for mastering the world were inferior science and infantile philosophy. But as Malinowski showed, Trobriand garden spells have to be understood not in terms of their conformity to some rational, logical or religious *principle*, but in terms of the effect they have on bolstering a gardener's confidence, focusing his attention, and helping him apply himself to the task at hand. A fertile garden is not the direct result of the spell, but of the careful and mindful work of preparing the soil, planting the taro, and tending to the growing crop.

Critical reflection may also arise from situations of radical scarcity, inequality and imbalances of power. Consider, for example, Kenelm Burridge's description of a visit to the Melanesian island of Manam, during which local nobles revealed to the anthropologist their ancestral lore, contained in a 'book' that was in fact a dusty collection of traditional objects made of turtleshell, hardwood and stone. Taking the white man into their trust was but a prelude to asking him why the lore that made whites so wealthy and powerful had not been shared, and why the 'message' Burridge supposedly carried, that 'would straighten things out', had not been communicated with his younger Melanesian brothers. People were in tears as they spoke. But one impetuous young man did not mince words:

You see, this, the things you have seen [the ancestral lore], belong to us. They are ours, our own, and all we have. We think that white men have deceived us. So we

are turning back to our ancestors. How is it that white men have so much and we have so little? We don't know. But we are trying to find out.

The anthropologist's response? 'There was little for me to say, little I *could* say' (1960: 6).

Such encounters suggest that when human beings seek guidance, illumination or advice it is not necessarily the *content* of *what* is said in response by an expert or contained in a tradition or text that is important, but rather the process and action of being free to voice one's concern and be listened to, for in speaking or acting out one effectively externalizes what is on one's mind or in one's heart, and this alone transforms one's experience of the quandary, lifting the burden, restoring a sense of agency, and lessening one's solitude. In short, speaking and acting is an ethical good in its own right, irrespective of what is spoken or what follows from one's action.

Finally, we must consider thought in relation to the social needs it answers rather than the epistemological character it may possess. Let us take as an example the so-called Aboriginal denial of physiological paternity. This is less a reflection of ignorance (or mistaken thought) than of a need to affirm the connections that tie a person to his or her patrilineal *place* of origin rather than a specific father. As Edmund Leach argued, a belief like the Christian doctrine of virgin birth appears to be irrational when considered out of context, but becomes explicable when its practical repercussions are understood – in this case, a need to affirm that Jesus is the son of God (Leach, 1969: 95). The metaphysical bias of Western philosophy has not only led European thinkers to measure or explain non-Western beliefs and practices solely in terms of their logical coherence or correspondence with objective reality (in the cases above, the 'facts' of reproductive biology); it has persuaded many African philosophers to seek some intellectual high ground in explicating their own traditions. Either they find their own traditions wanting when compared with the 'systematic' and 'speculative' thought of Kant (Wiredu, 1996: 114), or they focus on local sages and ritual specialists who bear comparison with the hierophants of Western thought. In this view, Africa appears to be interesting only in so far as it approximates Western conceptions of civilization – monumental architecture, monotheistic religion, centralized states, advanced technologies – or possesses philosophers like Plato, sacred or learned texts, and deep cosmological knowledge such as that attributed to the Dogon sage, Ogotemmêli, by the French ethnographer Marcel Griaule (Van Beek, 1991). Even those philosophers who criticize this kind of ethnocentrism, arguing that 'the traditional and non-traditional must be granted *de jure*, equal and reciprocal elucidatory value as theoretical alternatives' (Hallen, 1975: 261), tend to turn to the 'fathers of secrets' (Hallen, 1975: 264; Hallen and Sodipo, 1986: 8–9) to elucidate the 'high culture' or 'great tradition' rather than explore the existential quandaries of ordinary people that constitute, in my view, the soil from which all thought springs.

Where, then, in any tradition – Melanesian, African, Eastern or European – does thought reside? It does not necessarily find expression in the work of great minds, isolated in ivory towers, accessing libraries, using abstract language, eschewing 'low' or 'popular' culture and proclaiming universal truths. Nor need it be located in myth, cosmology, proverbial wisdom, and beliefs (in witchcraft, sorcery, ancestral influence, and ritual forms) as Wiredu and others suggest.¹¹ Philosophy is neither a privileged vocation nor an activity that takes place in a protected location. It is a mode of being-in-the world, and as such is inextricably a part of what we do, what we feel, and what

we reckon with in the course of our everyday lives. This is the essence of Nietzsche's argument that philosophical thinking is, like all conscious thinking, an 'instinctive activity', and that every great philosophy is 'a confession on the part of its author and a kind of involuntary and unconscious memoir' (1973: 17, 19). It is a view that Foucault and Lévi-Strauss insisted on: that thought finds conscious expression in us, but is not necessarily generated by a self-conscious thinking subject.

For Heidegger, thought is similarly grounded – and may be compared with dwelling and building; it *is* a mode of constructive activity, a way of inhabiting the world (1971: 146–51). For Heidegger's student, Hannah Arendt, thought belongs to the *vita activa* – the social field of interest, interaction, and intersubjectivity. Here it makes its appearance as thoughtfulness, mindfulness, care, discernment and judgment. For Kuranko, such social skills define what it is to be a moral person. Personhood (*morgoye*) consists in having regard for others (*gbiliye*) and showing them respect (*lembé*) – recognizing their status, paying them their due, contributing to their wellbeing. At the same time, personhood is consummated in self-restraint, bringing one's emotions under control, weighing one's words before speaking, thinking of the wider context in which one lives:

Morgo kume mir' la I konto I wo fo la [whatever word a person thinks of, that will he speak; i.e. think before you speak, lest you blurt out stupid ideas].

I mir' la koe mi ma, I wo l ke la [you thought of that, you do that; i.e. think before you act lest your actions belie your intentions].

As my friend Sewa Koroma put it:

When people do things or say things, you have to think twice, think why, why they're doing this – is it because of this? I'm young. I've got to think that even if the *Diang* [chief] lived a long life or I die, I have kids coming up, and if I have access to the chieftaincy they might be interested, you know. People don't write history, they don't write things down. You have to remember everything. We say, *i tole kina i bimba ko* [your ear is as wise as your grandfather's words]. When my father was young he was listening to the elders talk about things that happened long before his time. Then he told me those stories, and I will tell them to my son. They're not written down, but if you listen you will know them. Those are the things you have to think about, that you have to know deep down. Ade [Sewa's wife] says, 'You think too much', but I tell her there are things you have to think about, things beyond normal, so that you'll know.

Clearly, reflective thought involves getting beyond oneself – thinking of one's immediate situation from the standpoint of one's forebears' experience and understanding. This is not a quest for a transcendent view, but for identifying those factors and forces that lie in the penumbral regions beyond everyday, self-centered awareness. But reflective thought is not a matter of plumbing the psychic depths of other minds or achieving empathic understanding; rather, it is focused on one's relationships *with* others. Kuranko refuse to speculate about other people's experience. 'I am not inside them' (*n'de sa bu ro*), one is told, or 'I do not know what is inside' (*n'de ma konto lon*). Empathic

understanding is, however, not only thought to be impossible; it is regarded as largely irrelevant to behaving as a moral being with social intelligence or common sense (*hankilime*). The Kuranko emphasis is less on being of one mind than on moving with, working with, eating with and sitting with others (often in amicable silence). Accordingly, one of the greatest challenges to a Western anthropologist is how to acquire these techniques of practical mastery and mutuality in which a knowledge of the motives, mindsets, and sentiments of others counts for less than one's social skills in *interacting* convivially with them.¹² As Paul Ricoeur phrased this in his last writing, our goal is not an identification with the other, which is, anyway, 'neither possible nor desirable', but 'an accompanying' that means that no one will have to live or die alone (2009: 17).

This echoes the traditional Maori view. Much has been written in commentary and criticism of Mauss's reading of Tamati Ranaipiri's elucidation of the Maori notion of *hau* (wind, breath, vital essence), but for me the enduring value of Mauss's reading lies in its sensitivity to the Maori emphasis on striving for life and vitality (*mauri ora*) against degradation, enervation and death. *Mauri tu mauri ora, Mauri noho mauri mate* – an active spirit means life, an inactive spirit leads to death. Life is a constant struggle between the processes of *tupu* (unfolding, growing, strengthening) and *mate* (weakening, diminishing, dying). Sometimes this entails giving life to others, sometimes it requires the violent taking of life and the ritual absorption of that life within one's own body. Sometimes it demands being welcoming and open to the outside world, sometimes it demands closure and opposition. Hence the saying, *Ko Tu ki te awatea, ko Tabu ki te po*.¹³ Since everything is evaluated in terms of its life-enhancing potentiality or potency, it is not surprising that the Maori conception of knowledge (*maatauranga*) draws on notions of *oranga* (necessity for life) and *taonga* (cultural wealth), suggesting that it is like the ancestral land through which one's identity is affirmed – the matrix of life, language, and livelihood, the milieu in which the living and the dead are united as one body. Knowing has no value apart from sustaining the life of the community whose *taonga* it is. Indeed, for many Maori people knowledge is so utterly embodied that its loss imperils the life of the group to which it belongs. In the words of Te Uira Manihera of Waikato, knowledge that goes out of a family is quickly dissipated among others. The knowledge thus loses its 'sacredness' and its 'fertility'. 'And knowledge that is profane has lost its life, lost its tapu' (King, 1975: 7). As my friend Te Pakaka Tawhai put it, what matters is life – life that produces life. In Te Pakaka's view, 'ancient explanations' and ancestral wisdom (*korero tahito*) were invaluable, not because they held the key to understanding every epoch or every existential quandary that human beings face, but because they were flexible and adaptable, able 'to accommodate the capacity of the narrator to render them more relevant to the issues of the day' (Tawhai, 1996: 14).

Te Pakaka died in 1988. So I cannot ask him if we still do justice to life when 'the issues of the day' seem to admit of no ultimate resolution. But in his conviction that thought is a technique among other techniques for creating a more viable and equitable world I see a common thread with thinkers like Hannah Arendt and John Dewey for whom philosophy does not require us to make claims to certitude or truth; it asks only that we reflect on the implications of what we think and say and do for the wellbeing of all in a world of inescapable scarcity and difference.

Notes

- 1 See *The End of Philosophy* and *The Task of Thinking* (Heidegger, 1969).
- 2 See Dewey's argument against the separation of knowledge from contexts of practical and worldly activity: 'If we see that knowledge is not the act of an outside spectator but a participator inside the natural and social scene, then the true object of knowledge resides in the consequences of directed action' (1980: 196).
- 3 Arendt's ideas here resemble those of Adorno, for whom thinking demands the abrogation of the ego. 'Open thinking points beyond itself,' he observed. 'What has been cogently thought must be thought in some other place and by other people' (1978: 168). It is also worth remarking a parallelism with the social phenomenology of Alfred Schutz (possibly because both models have their source in Kant), for whom 'the reciprocity of perspectives' and 'the interchangeability of standpoints' defined the strategic field of intersubjectivity and 'common-sense' thinking (Schutz, 1970: 183–4; 1973: 312–16).
- 4 I see this as Montaigne did – as a mode of understanding that makes metaphor central, for one crosses to and fro between one's own standpoint and the standpoint of another dialogically, availing oneself of common images or tropes to compare one's experiences with the experiences of the other. The result is a rough overlapping that uses the inexactitude of metaphor (the things compared are not exactly alike) to open up conversation, to break an impasse, to close the distance between self and other.
- 5 Writing in January 1945, Hannah Arendt already anticipates the conclusions she will reach in *Eichmann in Jerusalem* (1963). 'Himmler's over-all organization relies not on fanatics, nor on congenital murderers, nor on sadists; it relies entirely upon the normality of jobholders and family-men' (Arendt, 1978: 232). James Baldwin, also writing of the Holocaust, says very much the same thing: 'a civilization is not destroyed by wicked people; it is not necessary that people be wicked but only that they be spineless' (1970: 77).
- 6 The history of anthropology has involved a transition precisely from historical to ahistorical modalities of understanding. Thus the late 19th century anthropology of Tylor, Frazer, Morgan and de Coulanges centres its cross-cultural inquiries on antiquity and the model of cultural evolution, while the ethnographic method of Malinowski, which establishes the modern fieldwork tradition, places history in parentheses (as does the later structuralism of Claude Lévi-Strauss).
- 7 See Devereux (1967) on 'subjectivity' as a methodologically essential aspect of 'objectivity' in the human sciences, and Adorno on the 'reciprocal' need for studies of any abstract 'subject' to include accounts of 'subjectivity' and vice versa (1998: 245–58).
- 8 In her account of Hannah Arendt's notion of judging, Lisa Jane Disch coins the phrase 'the visiting imagination' to capture Arendt's notion of visiting as a way of 'constructing stories of an event from each of the plurality of perspectives that might have an interest in telling it and imagining how I would respond as a character in a story very different from my own. It is a kind of representation that arrives at the general through the particular' (Disch, 1994: 158).
- 9 In *Minima Ethnographica* (1998: 194) I question the view espoused by Sartre (1983: 256), Berger (1984: 38), and, more recently, by Said (1994: 44), that critical thought

must involve a repositioning of one's viewpoint in such a way that one affiliates oneself with or 'bears witness to' the subaltern or the oppressed on the grounds that those most marginal to centers of power, those most unsettled or dislocated by the vicissitudes of history, hold the most authentic insights into the workings of society and history.

- 10 Writes Don Seeman: 'Scholars have been reluctant to confront the hard limits placed on meaning-making by radical suffering, which can be both world and consciousness destroying.' In his compelling reading of Rabbi Shapira's writings from the Warsaw ghetto, Seeman criticizes the study of religion for its tendency to 'privilege discursive coherence at the expense of sufferers' desperate concern with practical efficacy' (2008: 466–7).
- 11 See, for example, the collection of essays produced by the International African Institute, entitled *African Systems of Thought* (Fortes and Dieterlen, 1965).
- 12 This was dramatically evident in the immediate postwar period. Demobilized combatants were often accepted back into the villages where they had caused terrible grief, not on condition that they undergo some kind of therapeutic or ritually redemptive reprocessing but on condition that they behave themselves, show respect, and contribute to the life of the community.
- 13 Literally 'Tu in the daytime, Tahu in the evening'. Tu is the god of war, and his spirit (Mauri Tu) governs the space in front of a meeting house where visitors are met with aggressive displays; tahu (to light) symbolizes 'the milder and quieter reception within the lighted house at night' (Te Rangi Hiroa, 1966: 373).

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