

MORAL MEANING AND MORAL RESPONSIBILITY BETWEEN SELFHOOD  
AND OTHERNESS: ARENDT AND BEYOND

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ABBREVIATIONS:

Arendt:

EJ                    *Eichmann in Jerusalem*  
LM                    *The Life of the Mind*

Vetlesen:

PEJ                    *Perception, Empathy, and Judgment*

I

This paper is part of a larger project devoted to systematically explicating and critically analyzing an original conception of moral performance which, I argue, Hannah Arendt was developing in her uncompleted Gifford lectures, published as LM<sup>1</sup>. In covering the Eichmann trial she realized that moral agents could be committing evil through their daily activities without realizing their actions are morally problematic ('banal evil') to the extent that they rely only on laws and norms, the behavior of their peers, or their own consciences, because those moral guides can be rendered ineffective under certain circumstances such as those created by the Nazis. If such agents are to be held morally responsible for their actions, as she believed they should be, then moral performance had to be conceived as being performed by mental capacities all human beings possess and which function in detachment from socially predetermined meanings and valuations. In thinking<sup>2</sup>, reflective judgment, and free-will, as she conceived them, Arendt believed she had found those mental capacities, each needed for a particular stage ('moment') of the moral decision – moral triggering (the Socratic two-in-one of thinking), ascertaining moral meaning (speculative thinking), moral valuation (reflective judgment), and moral

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<sup>1</sup> Being part of this larger, still in progress, project, this paper must inevitably draw on the fruits of unpublished prior interpretive work that cannot be tracked back here other than where absolutely necessary due to space limitations. The interested reader may consult two previous public presentations elaborating my explication of Arendt's conception of moral performance (Shlozberg, 2007a) and my analysis of the 'moment' of moral triggering (Shlozberg, 2007b), respectively. Both are available upon request.

<sup>2</sup> In LM Arendt oscillates between discussing thinking as human beings' meaning-questing activity and as the internal dialogue she draws out of her reading of certain Platonic texts. In earlier works she also spoke of 'representative thinking', a mode of thinking in which the agent strives to look at something through a variety of perspectives, which is manifested in LM in the activity of reflective judgment. Each of these has aspects that make it incongruent with the other two, so I read her as in fact referring to (perhaps without fully realizing it) three separate mental activities, which I here term 'speculative thinking', 'the Socratic two-in-one of thinking' and 'Kantian representative thinking'. The latter two terms are taken from Vetlesen, whose work is central to this paper.

choice (free-will)<sup>3</sup>. This paper focuses on the adequacy of the Arendtian account of the ‘moment’ of ascertaining moral meaning.

The would-be moral agent enters the ‘moment’ of ascertaining moral meaning after being triggered to morality. On the Arendtian account, it is impossible for human beings to make all decisions they face in the hustle-and-bustle in a reflective manner. As a result, we ordinarily make our decisions in a quick, unreflective, almost automatic manner, in which self-interestedness (my interests, desires, needs, hopes, plans, values, and beliefs) and non-reflective cues and guides (laws, norms, habits, the behavior of others) have primacy in guiding decisions. Once accustomed to making decisions in this manner, making decision reflectively becomes unnatural, such that we would need to first realize that we are faced with extraordinary circumstances requiring reflection – in other words, we would need to be triggered out of ordinary decision-making and into reflection. Since moral decisions, according to Arendt, are such that need to be made reflectively, moral triggering is thus necessary for successful moral performance, and the failure of such triggering is the cause of the phenomenon of ‘banal evil’.

The task of moral triggering is performed in Arendt by the intervention of what she calls my ‘internal friend’, who speaks to me in the internal dialogue that is the Socratic two-in-one of thinking. Going beyond Arendt, I have shown (Shlozberg, 2007b) that this internal voice serves to amplify the cry for help of the Other impacted by a given situation or a proposed action so that it can effectively break through the self-interestedness guiding our ordinary decision-making processes. This amplification is achieved by facing the self with the threat of potential internal discord within the self should the agent make the wrong decision. This threat is strong enough to give the agent a self-interested (though other-originated) reason to ‘stop and think’ (in Arendt’s terms) about what the agent is doing. Therefore, having been triggered to morality, the agent is faced with the task of confirming or denying the reality of this threat – of ascertaining, in other words, whether some of my possible courses of action in the given situation would threaten the integrity of something within the self. To do this, the agent must ascertain the moral meaning of the situation.

Note, however, that in the Arendtian analysis to ascertain the meaning something is to fit it into a relevant context of meaning<sup>4</sup>. What, then, is this morally relevant context of meaning into which I must fit the choices of action open to me so as to ascertain their moral meaning (and eventually to value them as morally right or wrong)? In a detailed study of moral performance that is in large measure a dialogue with Arendt, Arne Johan Vetlesen suggests (though, as we will see below, not explicitly in these terms) that for Arendt this context is the self, and that this is in fact an error on Arendt’s part. In the remainder of this chapter I will present Vetlesen’s own conception of moral performance, and analyze his disagreements with Arendt. Through this analysis I will show what, in

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<sup>3</sup> Many of the terms I use here, such as the names I gave to each ‘moment’ of the moral decision, are mine rather than Arendt’s, but I believe they not only do not run counter to Arendt’s own analysis but help systematize and thus sharpen her own analysis.

<sup>4</sup> While ‘meaning’ is a recurring concept within LM, Arendt never defines it or discusses it directly. However, an analysis of what mental activities would be required for the task of the storytelling spectator, a central figure on LM, shows that meaning-generating speculative thinking is the activity that the storytelling spectator would need to use to determine where and how the particular appearance she is observing fits into the whole of the play. I infer the notion of meaning as fit from this analysis.

fact, are the contexts of meaning relevant to the moral decision, as well as the balancing act that is, indeed, entailed in successfully ascertaining moral meaning.

## II

Moral performance, according to Vetlesen, requires the successive performance of three activities: perception, judgment and action (PEJ: 103-104; 163). He accepts Arendt's stress on the need for judgment<sup>5</sup> and then action in moral performance, but disagrees with her as to the activity that must precede judgment in moral performance. He understands Arendt to say that this activity is thinking, an activity requiring purely cognitive capacities, and argues for replacing it with perception, an activity that requires both cognitive and emotional capacities<sup>6</sup>.

According to Vetlesen, a moral situation is a situation in which the 'weal and woe' of another is implicated (PEJ: 153-154). The woe of others "has to do with their suffering" (PEJ: 6), while the weal of others "has to do with the degree to which they are treated with a sense of justice and with trust and the degree to which their dignity and autonomy as persons is respected" (ibid)<sup>7</sup>. The fact that the 'weal and woe' of others is implicated in a given situation is part of the human relevance of that situation (PEJ: 166) – of what Charles Taylor called the 'import' of the situation (PEJ: 169). However, as Taylor pointed out, the import of a situation is always recognized by a subject (PEJ, 168), which means that "the fact that the situation bears this import for me reveals something about the kind of being I am", namely, a "being on whom a moral obligation can be laid" (ibid), that is to say, a human being: "Only human subjects are capable of initiating action in its emphatic sense, and they alone can be held responsible for the consequences that ensue from action. Only humans act morally – or fail to do so" (PEJ, 169).

Perception, according to Vetlesen, is "the capability of recognizing and identifying the object or phenomenon about which judgment is subsequently to be passes ... as belonging to a specific class of phenomena, for example, as being a moral phenomenon as opposed to a physical one" (PEJ: 104). In moral performance, then, perception is "the ability to 'see' whether and to what extent the weal and woe of others is at stake in a situation" (PEJ: 153), to "identify some features in a particular situation as carrying *moral* significance" (PEJ: 164, italics in original), to recognize, in other words, the import of the situation. It is through perception that we come to see that the other is either 'gaining in weal' or suffering ('gaining in woe') as a result of something that happens, or would happen, to them (PEJ: 158). This is why, according to Vetlesen, perceiving makes one a moral subject (PEJ: 154).

Unlike Arendtian thinking as Vetlesen understands it, perceiving entails both a cognitive and an emotional 'seeing' (PEJ: 158). Emotions, for Vetlesen, enable us to access the domain of human experience (PEJ: 154), because emotions make us "aware of the peculiarly *human* reality or, more broadly, the human relevance of a specific situation. Emotions make us attentive to the issue of how the *other* perceives the

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<sup>5</sup> For Vetlesen "the basic *cognitive faculty* required for the exercise of moral judgment" is representative thinking as Arendt understands it through her reading of Kant's 3<sup>rd</sup> *Critique* (PEJ: 105, italics in original).

<sup>6</sup> Compare the diagram at PEJ: 163, representing his own understanding of moral performance, with the diagram at PEJ: 103, representing Arendt's (as he understands it).

<sup>7</sup> Vetlesen takes this idea of the moral salience of 'the weal and woe' of others from Lawrence Blum.

situation” (PEJ: 166). Emotions, therefore, play a crucial part in recognizing a situation as ‘addressing’ us as moral, that is, human, beings (PEJ: 169). “[F]eelings, by virtue of attributing imports, open us to the domain of what it is to be human, of what matters to us qua subjects” (PEJ: 173).

This function of our emotions is an active rather than passive one (contra Kant), even though Vetlesen acknowledges, with Kant, that emotions are reactions to external stimuli (PEJ: 154). For Vetlesen emotions are not something that we passively ‘suffer’ but, like cognition, something that we actively ‘do’ (PEJ: 153; 169). Emotions are “eminently active insofar as [they involve] ascribing an import in a situation” (PEJ: 173; see also PEJ: 162; 167), and we can choose (for example, after consulting our cognitive capacities) whether to act upon them or dissociate ourselves from them, a choice for which we are responsible (PEJ: 156). Thus, emotions are still part of (rather than external to) our genuine moral self (PEJ: 155; contra Kant), and are indispensable for perception and hence for moral performance (PEJ: 154).

However, emotions do not replace the need for judgment in moral performance as Vetlesen conceives it. Rather, emotions pave the road for the use of moral judgment (representative thinking): “an emotion as I conceive it is ... a first, intuitive grasp of a situation, one awaiting verbal articulation, one calling for further reflection, pondering, evaluation, and – if vehement – for self-control” (PEJ: 175). Through emotion we enter the sequence of moral performance and get our initial, intuitive, orientation in it, but through our cognitive powers (namely, judgment) “we try to elaborate, question, modify, deepen this ‘gut’ take” of the situation, and the ensuing process is a back-and-forth between our emotional and cognitive capacities, a back-and-forth leading up to action (PEJ: 175-176). “In this way, emotional and cognitive capacities join company and assist each other in a joint preoccupation with the situation we have tuned into” (PEJ: 175). Thus, emotions give us “the first access to and grasp of another person’s emotional experience” on which “the full-blown cognitive and more detached evaluation and assessment of the other’s emotional experiences rests” (PEJ: 205). Both emotions and cognition are thus necessary and, on their own, insufficient for moral perception<sup>8</sup>.

As a result, there can be no purely disinterested or objective moral perception because to ‘see’ (recognize) the suffering (or weal) of the other person as suffering (or weal), I must first take an interest in that person – that person must have import for me (PEJ: 159; 160). This, together with the fact that “emotions link our perception of the situation to that of the other involved in it” (PEJ: 166), mean that to perceive “is already to have established an *emotional bond* between myself and the person I ‘see’ suffering” (PEJ: 174; italics in original). This emotional bond, created through perception, constitutes the perceiver and the perceived as co-subjects in the situation and is therefore not morally neutral but has intrinsic moral significance for the co-subjects (PEJ: 179).

Thus, when an agent witnesses a situation of suffering, in choosing to adopt an objective, ‘none of my business’, attitude towards the situation and turning away from it, the agent is, in essence, suspending the emotional bond between herself and the sufferer which had been established through her perceiving the situation as one of suffering. For

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<sup>8</sup> Thus, Vetlesen’s explication of the roles of emotion and cognition casts perception as a purely emotional activity and judgment as a purely cognitive activity, contra his explicit claims that both activities have both emotive and cognitive components. On his actual account it is moral performance as a whole, but not the specific activities of perception and judgment, that are both emotive and cognitive.

Vetlesen, such suspension disavows both the sufferer's and the agent's "very humanity" (PEJ: 179; see also PEJ: 91). It was precisely this double dehumanization stemming from a suspension of the emotional bond between agent and sufferer that is established through perceiving – and not a cognitive failure, which is what Vetlesen understands Arendt to mean by 'thoughtlessness' – that was, in fact, the moral failure exhibited by Eichmann and symptomatic of non-Nazi Germans under Nazi rule (PEJ: 180).

However, as Vetlesen is fully aware, not all emotions are morally benign. Just as the Other may elicit such emotions as love or compassion which bring us closer to the Other's domain of human experience, the Other may also elicit feelings such as hatred, which cause us to shut away the Other as a morally relevant co-subject. Moreover, even a 'benign' emotion such as love may sometimes lead to moral failure. As a result, for Vetlesen, it would be a mistake to speak of 'feelings in general' as a prerequisite for successful moral performance (PEJ: 123-124; 218; 220). Rather, what is required for perceiving and thus for successful moral performance is the capacity to emotionally connect with an Other and access the Other's domain of human experience, which is provided, according to Vetlesen, by the human faculty of empathy<sup>9</sup>.

Empathy, as Vetlesen conceives it, "is people's basic *emotional faculty*" (PEJ: 105, 119), the faculty of taking "an emotional interest in the human 'import' of the situation in which the persons affected by [one's] actions found themselves" (PEJ: 105). Empathy is a feeling-with through which I, the agent, endeavor to recognize the Other as an Other meriting recognition, rather than as merely a thing (PEJ: 118; 201). However, it is a feeling-with that comes without me abandoning myself and my own standpoint, without abolishing, absolutizing, or suspending, "the space between myself as one and the other as other" (PEJ: 118-119). In empathy I take "an interest in how my cosubject experiences his or her situation", without sharing in this experience myself (PEJ: 204-205). Empathy thus entails confronting my own particularity with the particularity of the Other (PEJ: 119). Thereby, empathy recognizes the distinctness of the two persons involved as something to be maintained (PEJ: 204), and therefore "establishes a *reciprocal* relation ... as opposed to the one-way relation of elementary identification" between agent and object (PEJ: 201). Empathy, in other words, entails both a moment of sameness (sharing the same access to an experience) and a moment of difference (your experience is yours and not mine, we remain separate human beings) (PEJ: 207).

It is thus that empathy enables me to recognize the Other as another self whose weal and woe – and by extension, the impact of my actions on whose weal and woe – are of moral consequence to me. A capacity for empathy is thus a necessary precondition for successful moral perception. However, for Vetlesen, merely having a potential capacity for empathy – that is, the possession of a faculty of empathy, something that all human beings possess – is not sufficient to ensure that an individual agent will succeed in the activity of moral perception. This is because the ability to exercise empathy in the activity of perception must be learnt by the individual, through observing the way others in society, particularly significant others, empathize and perceive (PEJ: 194), and perhaps even more importantly, through experiencing, early in life, the exercise of empathy

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<sup>9</sup> Hatred, according to Vetlesen, does not stem from the faculty of empathy but rather is indicative of deficient or lacking empathy (PEJ: 221-222). As Vetlesen puts it, it is indifference, rather than hatred, that is "the prime threat to the exercise of the faculty of empathy" (PEJ: 211).

towards the individual (and experiencing the results of its reciprocation by the individual), especially from such significant others (PEJ: 259-267).

As a result, “[f]ar from arising *de novo*, as if within a social vacuum, perception is taught to individuals, in a sense even imposed on them by society” (ibid). Of course, any society (liberal or authoritarian), by its nature as a society, draws a boundary between morally appropriate and morally inappropriate objects which the agent experiences as predetermined (PEJ: 193), and which thereby potentially fixes the manner in which the other is disclosed, blocking one’s experience of the other rather than opening one up to the other, and thus potentially blocking the exercise of one’s faculty of empathy (PEJ: 194-195). Thus, empathy “is exceedingly vulnerable to societal manipulation ... in ways that disallow the other to be disclosed as anything else than an abstract target, not a human face to which I can relate myself in *my* human and emotional being” (PEJ: 195, italics in original). As a result, if “I should pick an object that society all around me unanimously deems to be a ‘wrong’ object, my resisting such pressure or succumbing to it is a question decided by, say, my independence as a person, my preparedness to stand up for what I – but perhaps no one else around me – believe is right” (ibid)<sup>10</sup>.

In sum, for Vetlesen, a functional capacity for empathy – the ability to *feel with* an Other – is a necessary precondition for successfully perceiving the Other as a moral co-subject and thus a necessary precondition of successful moral performance. To the extent that moral performance is conceived without recognizing this, such a conception would be erroneous. This is precisely what Vetlesen faults in Arendt’s conception of moral performance and Arendt’s critical analysis of Eichmann and of other non-Nazi Germans that stems from it.

### III

The essence of Vetlesen’s criticism of Arendt is that her conception of moral performance suffers from a cognitivist bias in that it casts moral performance as something to be handled primarily through cognitive capacities which abstract away from the moral object and detach the agent from it, rather than through emotive capacities which keep the moral object concrete, preserving its particularity, and relating and even attaching the agent to the moral object, all of which, according to Vetlesen, are crucial for successful moral performance. This results, according to Vetlesen, not only in a misconception of moral performance, but also in a potential misdiagnosis of the moral failure of Eichmann and other non-Nazi Germans under Nazi rule, in that Arendt disregards the possibility that a failure of the emotional capacity of empathy, rather than ‘thoughtlessness’, was at the root of this failure (PEJ: 121-122).

The reasons for Arendt’s rejection of the role of emotions in moral performance are found, according to Vetlesen, in her critique of Rousseau on compassion in *On Revolution*, compassion serving, according to Vetlesen, as a stand-in for emotions in general. Arendt, according to Vetlesen, faults Rousseau for substituting the dialogic two-in-one that is thinking with a soul torn in a conflict between selfish reason and selfless emotion that is aimed at a particular other and is therefore antipolitical in that it both prevents the agent from reaching out to the multitude of all others and abolishes the in-between necessary for human intercourse (PEJ: 115-116). This position entails, according

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<sup>10</sup> This is, of course, highly problematic for Vetlesen’s argument, as I show later in this paper.

to Vetlesen, an uncritical acceptance on Arendt's part of both the dualism Rousseau also accepts between reason and passions, and of an erroneous understanding of empathy as entailing the loss of self in the other which Vetlesen believes Arendt inherited from Dilthey (PEJ: 118). The result of this is a Kant-like view of emotions as impairing judgment, which for Arendt "must remain *disinterested* and *impartial*" (PEJ: 117-118).

As a result, Arendt remains, according to Vetlesen, blind to the possibility that emotional capacity is a precondition of successful moral judgment, and that Eichmann's moral failure may have had as much or more to do with an impairment of this emotional capacity as it had to do with his 'thoughtlessness' (PEJ: 103-107). Instead, Arendt as Vetlesen understands her conceives moral performance entirely in terms of thinking (in the form of the Socratic two-in-one) and moral judgment (in the form of Kantian representative thinking), and conceives both activities as requiring only cognitive capacities. The Socratic two-in-one of thinking is an existential condition of the ego, always internal and detached from the actual world and hence not impacted by any particulars the ego encounters, and emerging into the actual world only as the criterion of judgment into which thinking is transformed by this emergence from the spectator's withdrawal (PEJ: 100-103). The Kantian recourse to the enlarged mentality, which on Vetlesen's understanding is all that is needed for moral performance according to Arendt, entails a moment of mental universalization, "a stretching out *from* something particular and context-bound *toward* something universal and ideal", namely, the community of judges whom the agent represents in her exercise of representative thinking (PEJ: 98-99).

The problem with this, according to Vetlesen, is that the Socratic two-in-one of thinking and the Kantian enlarged mentality both endanger the appreciation of particularity that was supposed to be secured, according to Arendt herself, in moral performance (PEJ: 114)<sup>11</sup>. Indeed, for Vetlesen, Eichmann's failure was not a failure of mental universalization but a failure to identify with his victims as individuals, that is, to meet them as a particular meeting a particular (PEJ: 114). Such a meeting of particulars is avoided and thus rendered impossible, according to Vetlesen, either when the agent withdraws from the encounter into the spectator's position of the thinking self, or when the agent abstracts from the encounter into the universalized and idealized enlarged mentality. To the extent that moral performance consists of only the Socratic two-in-one of thinking and Kantian enlarged mentality, it would thus fail to encounter the Other in her particularity as a moral co-subject, would lack the emotional bond that is created by this encounter, would therefore be in danger of failing to see the import of the situation for the particular Other, and thereby fail in arriving at a successful moral decision. This is what Vetlesen faults the Arendtian conception of moral performance for.

#### IV

The problem with this criticism of Arendt is that, in fact, Arendt does not conceive moral performance strictly in terms of the interrelation between the Socratic two-in-one of thinking and Kantian representative thinking through an enlarged mentality. Rather, as

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<sup>11</sup> Vetlesen makes this point explicitly with regard to the Kantian enlarged mentality, but I believe he would also apply it to the Socratic two-in-one of thinking, since he himself notes that both the Kantian and the Socratic traditions share the cognitivist bias of prioritizing "humanity's cognitive faculty over its emotional one ... as far as the view of moral performance is concerned" (PEJ: 124).

noted earlier, Arendt conceives moral performance as comprised of four essential ‘moments’ and thus as requiring four distinct and equally necessary mental activities, of which the Socratic two-in-one of thinking and Kantian representative thinking are but two. This misunderstanding of Arendt results in several specific problems in Vetlesen’s argument, none more damaging than his resulting failure to properly account for moral triggering.

As we have seen, Vetlesen does indeed recognize that a moral agent needs to be triggered to the fact that the situation she is faced with requires the exercise of moral judgment. The task of triggering the agent to this need is given by Vetlesen to the activity of perception. Only, if we consider what exactly it is that I, the agent, am to recognize – to perceive – in order to recognize that the situation I am witnessing requires moral judgment, we realize not only that the activity of perception is a meaning-ascertaining activity rather than a triggering activity, but also that perception itself requires prior triggering, which it cannot itself perform, before it is activated.

To recognize that the situation I am witnessing requires moral judgment, on Vetlesen’s own terms, I must first recognize that the object I am witnessing is human. Then I must recognize, in succession, that she is a *fellow* human; that her weal or woe is implicated in the situation she now finds herself in and which I am witnessing; that my action (or inaction) in the situation would impact it and therefore would impact her weal or woe; and that by virtue of the fact that I am witnessing a *fellow* human being in a situation in which her weal or woe is impacted, my own humanness as well as hers would be impacted by my reaction (action or inaction) to this situation. In other words, after making the banal factual observation that the object in front of me is a human being, perception entails my recognition of the *meaning* of this fact (that is, my recognition of the other *as other*), of the *meaning* of the situation for her, of the *meaning* of the choices of action I am faced with for the situation and hence for her, and finally the *meaning* of these choices, and thus of the situation I am witnessing and finally (and ultimately) of the person I am observing, *for me*<sup>12</sup>. Perception, then, on Vetlesen’s own terms, is, like Arendt’s speculative thinking (but unlike both the Socratic two-in-one of thinking or Kantian representative thinking) a meaning-seeking and meaning-conferring activity<sup>13</sup>.

Note, however, that these successive recognitions of meaning are to be done, according to Vetlesen, through a direct encounter with the situation at hand and with the person caught in it, to the exclusion of – that is, in temporary abstraction from – considerations of its immediate and practical context. Whether or not I am in a hurry, whether or not the situation entails physical or material gain (or danger of loss), whether or not I find the person caught in the situation aesthetically pleasing, even whether or not my attempt to aid the person caught in the situation I am observing is likely to succeed, are not properly aspects of any of the above meanings I am to recognize, and therefore are to be excluded from the activity of perception and from the determination of whether or not I should do something to help this person I am observing, lest they lead my perception and judgment astray. Only, it is the bracketing of precisely such considerations that is the task of oral triggering according to Arendt.

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<sup>12</sup> Cast in this way, Taylor’s ‘import’ as Vetlesen uses it becomes synonymous with ‘meaning’ in the Arendtian sense.

<sup>13</sup> Only if perception is understood as a meaning-conferring activity can the perceiving agent be seen as constituting the moral object rather than merely reacting to it (PEJ: 162).



Thus, perception as Vetlesen conceives it in fact presupposes prior moral triggering. When the agent is – like Eichmann (PEJ: 110-112) and other non-Nazi Germans (PEJ: 180-183) were according to Vetlesen – already acting in an environment of morally false or perverse meanings, they would not only fail to realize the need for moral judgment but also fail to realize the need for moral perception, without moral triggering. Eichmann’s failure, then, is not a failure of perception (Vetlesen’s diagnosis of Eichmann) but a failure of triggering (Arendt’s diagnosis of Eichmann)<sup>14</sup>.

This would not be problematic if empathy were capable of performing the task of moral triggering itself. But empathy as construed by Vetlesen is learnt from others in society and is thus at least partially predetermined by, and susceptible to, the meanings prevalent in the agent’s social environment. If empathy is to encounter the Other as Other and to relate the Other to the self as self – as Vetlesen’s explication of perception requires that empathy do – it must first shed any such predetermination for the purposes of the decision at hand<sup>15</sup>. Thus, the empathy that is required for moral perception itself requires prior moral triggering, and cannot in itself perform such triggering<sup>16</sup>.

## V

Does Vetlesen’s misunderstanding of Arendt mean that his criticism of Arendt misses its mark, or that perception is defeated in its claim to be considered an activity necessary for moral performance? I believe that if Vetlesen’s argument and criticism are limited, as they should be, to the ‘moment’ of moral meaning, his criticism does in fact hit its mark, and perception does in fact successfully stake a claim for a necessary role in moral performance.

For Arendt, the primary<sup>17</sup> mental activity we make use of in ascertaining meaning, and thus for the purpose of ascertaining moral meaning, is speculative thinking. And for Arendt speculative thinking is an activity that is conducted wholly within the mind, in direct contact with objects only in the form of de-sensitized and thus abstracted mental representations, and seeking to fit (or re-fit) the encountered particular into some general (vis-à-vis the encountered particular) context. From Vetlesen’s perspective this would, indeed, seem like another instance of Arendt’s cognitivist bias coming to the fore in her conception of moral performance, disregarding the necessity and importance of our

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<sup>14</sup> What Arendt calls ‘thoughtlessness’ is precisely the failure of moral triggering, not a failure of moral judgment, as Vetlesen understands Arendt to mean. Indeed, Eichmann himself was not blind to the fact of the suffering of his victims – we know from the trial that witnessing such suffering made him physically ill (EJ: 87-90) and that he sought to alleviate ‘unnecessary’ suffering on his victims’ part (EJ: 92). What he was blind to is the fact that this suffering, *and his feelings about it*, morally matter.

<sup>15</sup> Only after such predetermination has been bracketed does “my independence as a person, my preparedness to stand up for what I – but perhaps no one else around me – believe is right” emerge so as to determine “my resisting [societal] pressure [to conform to its boundaries of moral appropriateness] or succumbing to it” – Vetlesen’s only counteragent to the societal susceptibility of empathy (PEJ: 195).

<sup>16</sup> Indeed, Vetlesen is forced to acknowledge as much when he notes that “the significance accorded to the difference that is claimed to exist between the Aryans and the Jews”, by virtue of which Jews were defined as having no moral or human status, is “beyond empathy” (PEJ: 188).

<sup>17</sup> Aren’t gives the Socratic two-in-one of thinking and to Kantian representative thinking a secondary role in ascertaining moral meaning (they can reject meanings I arrive at, but not generate such meanings themselves).

emotional capacity and the connection it establishes between us and the Other who is the moral object, in moral performance.

One could counter this with the criticism that, since empathy itself requires prior triggering, empathy is also exercised in detachment and abstraction and thus would, paradoxically, also be considered 'cognitivist' in Vetlesen's terms. This criticism, however, misses the mark because the detachment created by moral triggering is different from the detachment created by speculative thinking as Arendt understands it. Moral triggering detaches the moral object, the situation, and the would-be moral agent from whatever prior contexts of meaning they might be embedded in, and thus predetermined by. In other words, moral triggering in a sense isolates agent, object, and situation, together as a unit, from the rest of the world. Speculative thinking, on the other hand, separates agent *from* object and situation and thus splits this unit. Granted, as we have seen, Vetlesen acknowledges that such separation is needed for successful moral performance. Only, for Vetlesen, this separation must first be preceded by perception, which creates a just-as-necessary emotional bond between agent and Other. It is the omission of the need for this emotional bond that Vetlesen faults Arendt for.

But is this omission really as problematic as Vetlesen contends? Or, to ask the same thing more pointedly, would we be in danger of ascertaining moral meaning wrongly if we were to approach it strictly as spectators, in detachment from object and situation? Recall that for Arendt ascertaining the meaning of an object means (re-)fitting this object into some relevant context, within which it would mean something for the object to be. In a moral situation, in which contexts of meaning external to the situation have been rendered immaterial and thus blocked off through moral triggering, the only remaining relevant contexts of meaning to fit object, situation, and agent (more precisely, the agent's possible actions) into, are the participants in the situation, namely, the self who encounters the situation, and the Others already involved in it. But for Arendt the meaning I arrive at must not be self-contradictory *for me*, so the relevant context into which I must fit the moral object, situation, and prospective action I am faced with on the Arendtian account is my self. Thus, as Vetlesen would have suspected, speculative thinking, in itself, privileges the self over the Other as the relevant context of meaning into which the moral object, the situation, and the agent's prospective actions must be fit.

One may defend Arendt by pointing to the fact that Arendt does give a role in ascertaining moral meaning, secondary as it may be, to the Socratic two-in-one of thinking and Kantian representative thinking, which she also sees as introduce an element of otherness (plurality is her term) into this activity. Only, as far as representative thinking is concerned, because the others I represent to myself through an enlarged mentality are also positioned as spectators, the relevant context of meaning they introduce is the context of (as Arendt calls it) the play as a whole, albeit now in a morally non-dangerous form, at least according to Arendt.

It may seem as if a better case can be made for the claim that the Other is reintroduced as a relevant context of meaning through the proscriptive role accorded by Arendt to my internal friend, who after all serves to amplify the voice of the Other. But what is amplified by my internal friend is merely the cry for help issued by the Other, not the subjective meanings that generated that cry for help. Rather, as Arendt seems to conceive moral performance, such meanings remain something that moral reflection must verify. Thus, even on the Arendtian account, ascertaining moral meaning must entail not only

ascertaining moral meaning *for me*, but also (as Vetlesen argues) ascertaining moral meaning *for the Other*. Both self and Other are contexts of meaning necessary for moral performance.

But on the Arendtian account the ascertaining of moral meaning *for the Other* must also be conducted through speculative thinking, that is, in an uninvolved and detached manner and from a perspective external to both Other and situation. Can moral meaning *for the Other* can be successfully ascertained strictly through speculative thinking, without the participation of perception? I believe, with Vetlesen, that it cannot.

The problem lies in the fact that both the weal and the woe of a person are, at least to a large extent, subjective and different from person to person. The forceful shaving of one's beard, for example, may cut to the core of their personhood and sense of self because growing a beard has a deep personal meaning for them (a religious edict, a personal pledge, etc.), or it may be of no consequence to them. When I am faced with an involuntary beard-cutting situation and need to decide what it means for the person whose beard is being cut, to the extent that I rely solely on my speculative thinking, I am bound to take as my guidepost what beard-cutting means *for me*, either specifically (if my beard was involuntarily cut would I feel that this morally justifies an Other's intervention) or generally (should involuntary beard-cutting be something that morally requires intervention in general). In the first case, I would thereby cast the Other in my own image; in the second, I would cast the Other in some abstract image of 'people in general'. Either way, I would risk collapsing the particularity and uniqueness of the Other, de-personalizing and thereby de-humanizing her.

It is the danger of such (inadvertent and well meaning as it may be) de-humanization that is counteracted through the exercise of empathy in the activity of perception. Perception not only alerts me to the fact of the Other's suffering (or gaining in weal), but, in opening myself up to sharing in the Other's sphere of experience, also enables me to create the proper analogy between myself and the Other – for example, to realize that the Other's beard is meaningful to the Other as a symbol of mourning, similar to what, say, a locket given to me by a dead friend (rather than my own beard) symbolizes for me. To put this in other, Arendtian, terms, the use of empathy in the activity of perception is what enables me to adopt the perspective of the involved Other and to view the situation from that perspective. In this way empathy and perception ensure that speculative thinking's turn to the self as its guidepost for the determination of moral meaning would not be misled by the temptations of self-centeredness<sup>18</sup>.

Granted, empathy and perception also carry their own temptation, as Vetlesen himself was fully aware. Indeed, as we have already seen, Vetlesen insists (without explication) that empathy and perception could lead us astray as well, and thus need to be checked and verified through cognitive means. It is through Arendt's insistence on speculative thinking being enacted from a spectator's position that we realize the danger that Vetlesen merely alludes to, namely, the fact that the Other, being also a self, is just as susceptible to the temptation of self-centeredness as any other self. To continue with the

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<sup>18</sup> Arendt seems to have been vaguely aware, at least initially, of the moral significance of the role emotions play in counteracting an objective stance on the part of the agent and in facilitating the switch in perspectives that she herself sees as crucial for moral decision-making. See in this regard her comment (regarding Eichman's lawyer's insistence on referring to killing as a 'medical matter') that objectivity (understood as emotional detachment) is no guarantee of moral understanding or evaluation, (EJ: 69).

involuntary beard-cutting example, it may be that the persons who are forcefully cutting the beard are doing this so as to fit the bearded person's face into a life-saving air mask, while the bearded person is either unaware of this or would rather die than have the beard cut. If I merely act upon my empathy with the bearded person, I may end up costing the person's life, which may or may not be the right thing to do under the circumstances (and that is something for speculative thinking and the activities involved in valuation to determine). If different Others involved in the situation ascribe to it conflicting moral meanings, perception in itself can help me ascertain those conflicting meanings, but it cannot tell me which one is correct. It is through stepping back to a spectator's position, armed with the meanings of the situation for those involved, for the purpose of determining the meaning of my prospective action in the situation *for me*, that these dangers inherent in the temptations of otherness and empathy are counteracted.

## VI

Thus we have seen that to successfully make a moral decision, both perception and speculative thinking are needed, and both must work in concert to determine the moral meaning of the situation and the actions I, the agent, am about to take. Using our faculty of empathy in the activity of perception as Vetlesen understands it enables me to ascertain the meaning of the situation for those already involved in it, which is a crucial component of its overall meaning and thus cannot be neglected and should not be distorted by the use of speculative thinking in determining the meaning of the situation *for me*. It is through this that I confirm my earlier suspicion and fear that I am faced with a situation which portends the danger of internal discord within my self if I choose the wrong course of action.

However, it is still the meaning of the situation *for me* that must ultimately be ascertained, and that determines the action to follow; the self, not the Other, is the ultimate guidepost for the decision. In this important respect the self retains primacy over the Other in the determination of moral meaning. This is not a matter of a bias, cognitivist or otherwise, toward the self. Rather, it is merely a reflection of the fact that it is ultimately me, the agent, who is deciding, who must act, and most importantly, as Arendt correctly stresses (albeit more with regard to moral triggering), who must live with this action in the future. The decision is very likely to go askew if the Other is not given proper heed in determining the meaning of the situation, but it is ultimately the self that makes the decision, carries it out, and has to live with it as a part of itself after it has been carried out.

But what exactly does it mean to have the self as the ultimate guidepost for ascertaining the moral meaning of the situation as part of making the moral decision? In other words, what context of meaning within the self is the *for me* into which the situation and the self's prospective actions in the situation must be fit? Here Arendt leaves us with a curious vagueness. We know from her account what this context cannot be – namely, the web of self-interests, desires, biological and other needs, wants, aims, goals, personal and societal values and meanings, and practical considerations, that serves as the context of meaning for all of our day-to-day decisions. Beyond this, the best we can glean out of Arendt is the rather vague notion that it is what is distinctly human about us, which is revealed – made to appear – by our action (be it action that is immediately there for all to

see, or action that, like in the Holocaust, has to be done out of sight, and whose self-revealing nature is made to appear only later, through the backward glance of the storytelling spectator).

Interestingly, as we have seen earlier in this paper, this Arendtian notion was actually echoed by Vetlesen in his discussion of Taylor's idea of 'import', where he also insisted on the interconnectedness between 'being moral' and 'being human' (PEJ: 169). Vetlesen's discussion of Taylor seems to suggest that this interconnectedness is found in that "the fact that the situation bears this import for me reveals something about the kind of being I am; the import shows me to be the kind of being on whom a moral obligation can be laid" (PEJ: 168, italics in original). Notably, however, in a discussion immediately preceding his discussion of Taylor, a broader conception of this interconnectedness is hinted at. There Vetlesen discusses change in moral conduct – for example, from a racist to a non-racist stance – and suggests that change in my treatment of others requires a prior change in how I understand myself, because my attitude towards myself – how I see myself, understand myself, and what kind of person I want to be – determines whether I feel I can live with myself given something I do (PEJ: 160-161). This discussion is immediately followed in Vetlesen by his discussion of the realization of import, an activity which itself, as we have seen, entails constant self-interpretation and re-interpretation.

Thus, Vetlesen points us towards a broader understanding of the interconnectedness between being human and being moral, and also to the context of meaning within the self into which the situation and my prospective actions in the situation must be fitted. What is revealed in the human import I see in a moral situation and more broadly in the moral action I take in it is, indeed, *the kind of being I am*, but not in the narrow sense of (merely) a being capable of moral responsibility, but in the broader sense of what kind of person I believe I should be, that is to say, what kind of person do I believe a *human being* should be. It is this notion of the properly human (good, humanly right) life that is the facet of my self into which the meaning of the situation must be fitted, which is re-examined, re-interpreted, and sometimes even altered, as a result of this act of fitting, and which is ultimately revealed when I act morally. It is in this sense that the encounter with the moral situation and with the Others implicated in it forces me, as noted earlier, to also recognize myself as a moral self and draw out the implications of that recognition. The meaning of the situation *for me*, which is my ultimate guidepost for the determination of moral meaning, is the meaning of the situation for myself as someone who wishes to live a moral, that is, a properly human, life.

Granted, in saying that the moral meaning I ascribe to the situation is inexorably bound up with my notion of what is the humanly *right* life to lead not only brings valuation into the picture of moral meaning, but it intimately ties the two activities together. Indeed, as conceptually distinct as they may be, the two activities must, in the practice of the moral decision, be carried out hand-in-hand, valuation emanating out of my self-understanding of what kind of person I should be and what kind of life I should lead just as meaning is fitted into it. As a result, potential dangers to, and possible distortions of, moral valuation also endanger the successful determination of moral meaning, and the potential correctives for such dangers and distortions also have an important role to play in the determination of moral meaning.

On the Arendtian conception of moral performance, this is where representative thinking enters the fray. But now we can see that if my valuation is not such that would command, as Arendt requires, the assent of other judging subjects represented through an enlarged mentality, I am sent back to re-examine not only that valuation or the moral meaning I had ascertained, but also, and perhaps most importantly, my self-understanding of what kind of person I should be. But is this use of representative thinking as sufficient for this task as Arendt had believed? This is one of the foci of the next stage of my project.

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