REVIEW

Tuija Parvikko 2008. *Arendt, Eichmann And The Politics Of The Past.* Helsinki: Finnish Political Science Association, 277 pp. ISBN: 978-951-98514-6-4

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Tuija Parvikko's book, *Arendt, Eichmann and the Politics of the Past*, aims to rescue Hannah Arendt from early Jewish critics of *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, like Gershom Scholem, who cast Arendt as a "heartless" critic of the Israeli 1963 trial of the Nazi criminal, Adolf Eichmann (181).[1] Parvikko aims to do so by arguing that this apparent heartlessness is actually part of Arendt's rhetorical strategy in the book – a strategy aimed at showing her readers uncomfortable truths about the conditions that made a criminal like Eichmann possible in the first place. On Parvikko's account, if Arendt had not taken on a distant and even seemingly "arrogant" tone in the text, she would not have been able to press her readers to acknowledge truths that many of them did not want to see – about the "banality of evil," Jewish complicity, and the bankruptcy of the European political tradition as a whole (215, 181, 50).

Much of Parvikko's book takes the form of an often very interesting historical recounting of the controversies surrounding Eichmann's trial, where she argues that various critics (like Michael Musmanno) "intentionally" misread *Eichmann in Jerusalem* (149). While I think that Parvikko may overstate the degree to which she proves that Arendt's critics "intentionally" misread her, I will refrain from commenting too much on that part of the book here, since most of this history (as

Parvikko herself notes) has been captured elsewhere. Instead, I will focus on the most interesting and promising part of Parvikko's book, which is confined to the last few chapters of the book, where she addresses Arendt's rhetorical strategies and tone of writing in *Eichmann in Jerusalem.* This part of the book is the most interesting because it makes us ask new questions about *Eichmann in Jerusalem* (which at this point in the development of Arendt scholarship, is an increasingly difficult thing to do). Specifically, Parvikko offers a distinctive way into the text. While most contemporary scholars writing on *Eichmann in Jerusalem* tend to focus either on her description of the "banality of evil" (Bernstein, Villa) or her discussion of the problem of judging the unprecedentedness of Eichmann's crimes (Benhabib, Bilsky), Parvikko instead asks how should we deal with the fact that Arendt often makes those criticisms of the Jerusalem trial in what seem to be unnecessarily harsh ways.

Parvikko's answer to this question is that in these supposed moments of heartlessness, Arendt is actually using strategies of irony aimed at "inscrib[ing] an implicit – and often also quite explicit – critique of the Jewish establishment" into the text (183). Parvikko draws on a (Kenneth) Burkean understanding of irony to describe Arendt's rhetorical techniques. While Parvikko's description of Burke's understanding of irony could have been clearer, her basic point seems to be that from Burke's perspective, irony involves "seeing something in terms of something else" – i.e. from another perspective (185). Irony is dialectical and reveals unexpected kinships, especially among apparent opposites (187). As an example Parvikko notes that "[w]e see irony if we understand the function of the disease in 'perfecting' the cure, or the function of the cure in 'perpetuating' the influences of the disease" (187). Through using irony, Parvikko suggests that Arendt aimed to grab our attention in ways that simply stating the facts would not: Arendt aimed "to push certain characteristics of the phenomenon under scrutiny to the extreme in order to illuminate her own point as effectively as possible" – the "point" being that some Jewish organizations were complicit in Nazi criminality during WWII (13).

Parvikko is surely right that irony in this sense is one of Arendt's great writing strategies – indeed, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* is one great exercise in showing us this kinship among opposites (between "Progress and Doom," as she says in her Preface) – and I learned a lot in reading Parvikko's description of Arendtian irony. However, I am

not sure that Parvikko's discussion of Arendtian irony ultimately offers a satisfactory explanation or exploration of Arendt's "heartless" tone in the book. For example, Parvikko suggests that we can see Arendtian irony in Arendt's description of how "[t]he ease with which the Final Solution was executed was due in large part to the cooperation of the Jews in their own destruction" (190). Parvikko draws this out by attending to Arendt's comment that "Heydrich 'expected the greatest difficulties' and ironically remarks that he could not have been more wrong" (190). This is irony – and not in a funny way at all, as Parvikko notes – and it does reveal a kinship between apparent opposites (the desire of Jewish organizations to save their people, and Heydrich's plan to exterminate them; these two have a kinship insofar as the Jewish organizations sometimes cooperated with the Nazis in hopes of saving some of their people). Yet while it is clear that there is irony in this example, Parvikko does not make clear how this irony relates to Arendt's apparently "heartless" tone. In other words, why would the use of irony require or call for Arendt's somewhat flippant *tone* in her comment about Heydrich (the tone which offended Scholem and others)? Parvikko does not specify, which leaves the reader wondering whether Parvikko has really explained Arendt's heartless tone at all: if irony just involves showing the kinship between two opposites, then why does Arendt need a "heartless" tone to reveal this?

Parvikko's answer to this question about the reason for Arendt's heartless tone seems to be the following: in using strategies of irony, Arendt is making a "political judgment" and, on Parvikko's account, political judgment is "independent" (225-226), "arrogant" (225), and made from a "critical distance" (216). Leaving aside the question of how irony connects to political judgment, which is an important one to which Parvikko does not sufficiently attend, Parvikko's conception of political judgment here seems strange to me. Specifically, this characterization of Arendtian political judgment, in emphasizing the importance of "distance" and "independence," seems to detract from Arendt's emphasis throughout her work, including (and even especially in) her work on political judgment, on the importance of inhabiting multiple perspectives.[2] In Lisa Disch's terminology, the individual judger comes to a judgment not through being independent, but through "going visiting" – inhabiting other's perspectives.[3] I would not rule out that Arendt's practice of political judgment would involve an apparently "heartless" tone. However, given Arendt's em-

phasis on the importance of perspectival pluralism in practicing political judgment, Parvikko's explanation of *why* this would be the case is not convincing.

One way Parvikko could have dealt with the points I am raising would have been for her to focus on the political stakes of Arendt's use of a "heartless" tone in the text, rather than on Arendt's "intentions" in using that tone (Parvikko insists that Arendt "consciously" uses strategies of irony, 181). Indeed, it seems to me that Parvikko's focus on sussing out Arendt's "intentions" leads her to evade the possibility that Arendt's "heartless" tone may be politically troubling *even if Arendt's intentions are good* – that is, that the effects of Arendt's tone may exceed her intentions. For example, in a moment that Parvikko fails to address in the text, Arendt harshly ridicules a concentration camp survivor and witness, K-Zetnik, for fainting on the stand.[4] Whatever Arendt's intentions are, this moment is troubling because it seems to show a lack of common human empathy – that is, of feeling some sympathy and kindness for someone who had to endure Auschwitz – and it makes readers (even sympathetic ones, like myself) doubt the reliability of the narrator (Arendt), who is trying to tell us truths about Eichmann's deeds. Contemporary thinkers like Shoshana Felman and Seyla Benhabib similarly address (and criticize) this moment, arguing that Arendt's treatment of K-Zetnik seems pointlessly "heartless."[5] In particular, Felman argues that Arendt's harsh tone prevents her from really displaying the unprecedentedness of Eichmann's crimes because it shows Arendt to be unwilling to engage victims' perspectives – perspectives that, on Felman's account, are necessary to establishing the nature of Eichmann's crimes. While Parvikko does not directly address Felman's argument in the text, it strikes me that the only rejoinder Parvikko could offer to Felman (based in her book as it stands) would be to argue that Arendt's harshness had a different intent – namely, to display truth. Yet even if Parvikko could convincingly prove this claim (which I'm not sure she can), it is still not a convincing rejoinder to Felman's point – not only because Parvikko does not show us how Arendt's "heartless" tone reveals truth (as I said earlier), but also because, even if Arendt did not intend to disparage victims like K-Zetnik, her tone *nonetheless* strikes us as disparaging and harsh and thus seems to prevent us from trusting her to reveal the truth about Eichmann's crimes.

I think that Parvikko could have developed a more convincing rejoinder to Felman's point that, in turn, would lead into a more satisfying approach to Arendt's "heartless" tone in general. Parvikko could have done this in part simply by addressing Arendt's ridicule of K-Zetnik (which she does not reference in her book) and the problem that it presents – namely, that Arendt's tone may be troubling regardless of her intent. Further, though, Parvikko could have explored whether and how this troubling character of Arendt's tone, contra Felman, might actually be productive for revealing truth. In other words, rather than trying to rescue Arendt by recourse to good intentions, Parvikko could have looked at how Arendt's apparent "heartlessness" may actually have important effects in revealing truth, and perhaps even in showing the ironic character of that truth. For example, might Arendt's heartless tone make us question her reliability in ways that are productive for truth – that is, by pressing us to consider multiple perspectives (and not just hers)? Or, from a different vantage point, might Arendt's strangely comedic ridicule of K-Zetnik show us – even if Arendt did not fully intend it to – the strange affinity between two apparently oppositional ways of dealing with these horrific crimes, comedy and tragedy? And might this not be an important truth worth addressing? To conclude, if Parvikko had addressed how Arendt's heartless tone may have effects that exceed her intentions, Parvikko might have been able to come up with a more compelling account of and explanation for the kind of argument she wants to make: that Arendt's heartless tone is not only troubling, but also productive for seeking the truth and making judgments about Eichmann, his unprecedented crimes, and the conditions that made them possible.

NOTES

1. Thanks to Crina Archer for comments on an earlier draft of this review.
2. Of course, the most important work here is *Arendt's Lectures on Kant's Political Philosophy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989) which Parvikko, strangely, does not even reference in her book.
3. Lisa Disch. *Hannah Arendt and the Limits of Philosophy.* Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1994.
4. Hannah Arendt. *Eichmann in Jerusalem.* New York: Penguin, 1963, 1992, pp. 223-224.
5. See Shoshana Felman's *The Juridical Unconscious: Trials and Traumas in the 20th Century*, especially Chapter 4 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002) and Seyla Benhabib's "Arendt's Eichmann in Jerusalem" in *The Cambridge Companion to Hannah Arendt*, ed. Dana Villa (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

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