



Fallacies (Metaphysical) in Hannah Arendt (1905–1975)

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Arendt refused to say she was a philosopher. She was not being modest. She was accepting proclaimed ‘deaths’ of “God, metaphysics, philosophy” (1971: 11) with other “modern readers” who no longer found them “convincing or even plausible” (1971: 12). Thinking, then, for herself, “unburdened and unguided” (1971: 12), she became interested in metaphysical fallacies basic to the ‘dead’ traditions. Most evident are “two world Schemes” (think of Plato’s Divided Line), by which the good, the true, the beautiful are to be purely separate from messy actual lives. Arendt saw in such hierarchical divisions an occasion for the other basic fallacy: “to interpret meaning on the model of truth” (1971: 15).

Plato’s Divided Line is neither illogical nor logical; it is a meaningful description of a thinker’s experience of the “sheer” and “unimpeded” activity of thinking in stark contrast to the frustrations of material and social realities. Thus Arendt did not correct the “fallacies” by standards appropriate to truth. Taking them to reveal “the actual experiences of the thinking ego in its conflict with the world of appearances” (1978: 55), she reflected on their meaning within human lives.

Arendt also finds related lesser “fallacies”: taking an effect to be less real than its cause (1971: 25), or a generalization to be more real than a particular (1977: 75). Throughout, however, her concern is that we no longer conflate “the ‘urgent need’ to think and the ‘desire to know’” (1971: 15), or, the freedom of thinking -- and the meaning we can only find through unpredictable communication -- with truth, which deals with “what we cannot change” (2000: 574). We need both.

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