'Amor Mundi' Threatened? War and the 'Darkness of the Human Heart'

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The preface to the first edition of *The Origins of Totalitarianism,* that Hannah Arendt wrote in the summer of 1950, obviously refers to a different historical period, yet seems highly relevant in our day and age. This can also be said of the entire book, which is written in an attempt to understand the genocidal violence of totalitarian regimes. In her preface, Arendt mentions the chaos of wars and revolutions and the unpredictability of the future in a world "where political forces cannot be trusted to follow the rules of common sense [...] forces that look like sheer insanity" (Arendt 2017, ix). She mentions the "irritating incompatibility between the actual power of modern man [...] and the impotence of modern man to live in and understand the sense of, a world which their own strength has established" (ibid., xi). The text could hardly be more up to date in the first decades of the twenty-first century, in which autocracies worldwide threaten to overrule democracies, and in which war and conflict show their ugly faces from the centerstage position they have managed to reach. The violence of totalitarianism and totalitarian war is unmistakably the instigator of a large part of Arendt's oeuvre. Up until the last years of her life, she seems to have grappled with the question of totalitarian violence, which is for a large part – if not the largest part – personified in Adolf Eichmann's "inability to think," according to Arendt in her book *Eichmann in Jerusalem* (1992) [1963]. As Young-Bruehl remarks, Arendt often said that Eichmann's thoughtlessness was in fact the reason for her to write the part "Thinking" in *The Life of the Mind* (Young-Bruehl 2007, 156). This is underlined by Arendt herself in her introduction to "Thinking" (Arendt 1978, 3). Arendt's answer to totalitarianism seems to be to counter the destructiveness of this phenomenon by restoring the ability to think and, in doing so, restoring judgment and responsibility, for these qualities are precisely those destroyed by totalitarianism.

Yet, what does this mean in a military context; the context Eichmann also found himself in? The question seems relevant, given the fact that the

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deployment of military means was, and is, often called for in fighting autocrats. Moreover, the deployment of military means is a form of "acting in concert" and, even though Arendt hardly mentions this form of "acting," she is not against it. In the German New York City-based journal *Aufbau*, Arendt made a plea for a Jewish army as part of the allied forces fighting totalitarianism in Europe (cf. Young-Bruehl 2007, 40). Arendt does not reject the deployment of military means; she is not a pacifist and neither does she seem to share the feminist critique of the male-dominated testosterone-fuelled violence of military deployment. Moreover, she acknowledges that the deployment of military means might be necessary for a community in order to defend the power structure that constitutes this community. The deployment of military means is granted when it is aimed at a just (*iustus*) goal (see also: Schutter en Peeters 2015, 85 and 86 and Verweij 2019). Notably, Arendt's political theory is based on her insight into the political meaning of war. Her questions regarding the role of force and the difference between the just and unjust deployment thereof (Arendt 2017, 178) make clear that war and brute violence are not the same (see also: Owens 2007). Yet, what does this mean? When Arendt suggests that totalitarianism can be countered by restoring the ability to think and in doing so restoring judgment and responsibility, this also holds for military personnel in their actual fight against their totalitarian opponents.

This paper tries to find out what thinking means in a military context, as opposed to thoughtlessness in a military context, of which Eichmann, according to Arendt, was an infamous example. His inability to think will be further discussed in the second section of this paper. Subsequently, John Glenn Gray's book, *The Warriors: Reflections on Men in Battle* (1998) [1959] will be discussed in the third section. Gray's book, to which Arendt wrote a laudatory introduction and whom she mentions in her own book, *On Violence*, is interesting in many ways. Given his ability to think, the – almost unknown – American soldier John Glenn Gray seems to be the opposite of the infamous Adolf Eichmann. However, what does this mean, and more specifically, what did this mean in the context Gray found himself in? And what does this mean in regard to Arendt's "*amor mundi*," as the love and responsibility for a common world? Doesn't the deployment of military means, which, per definition, makes room for the destructive forces of the "*homo furens*" as Gray suggests, threaten Arendt's *amor mundi*?

Thoughtlessness in a Military Context: Eichmann and the Banality of Evil[1]

Arendt wrote five articles for *The New Yorker*, as well as the book, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* in which she discusses the thoughtlessness that she accused Eichmann of. It was (and is) this thoughtlessness that led (and leads) to genocide. According to Arendt, genocide is an attack upon human diversity as such, upon the human status as such, without which the very words "mankind" or "humanity" would lose their meaning. Arendt points out that "[i]t was when the Nazi regime declared that the German people not only were unwilling to have any Jews in Germany but wished to make the entire Jewish people disappear from the face of the earth, that the new crime, the crime against humanity appeared" (Arendt 1992, 268). It is precisely because of this violation of human diversity as such that state-employed mass murderers must be prosecuted. For, "If genocide is an actual possibility of the future, then no people on earth [...] can feel reasonably sure of its continued existence without the help and protection of international law" (273).

In regard to Eichmann, the person who committed these crimes against humanity, Arendt states that he is neither a sadist nor a monster and that he did not have any ideological motives. According to Arendt, the trouble with Eichmann was precisely that so many were like him – neither monsters nor demons – they were (and are) astonishingly normal. This "normality" was confirmed by six psychiatrists (25) and is revealed in his personal history, that Arendt discusses extensively. Eichmann came from a middle-class family and worked as a traveling salesman before he became an SS officer. His task as an SS officer was defined as "'forced emigration", which meant, literally, that, under his command, Jews were to be forced to emigrate. Eichmann was successful in his job. In eight months, 45,000 Jews left Austria. Due to his success, Eichmann became an expert on the Jewish question, an authority on emigration, and "the master who knew how to make people move" (65). He was effective and efficient and subsequently, he became ambitious. His aspirations grew; he wanted to become a colonel or a chief of police. However, these aspirations proved to be futile. In Eichmann's words "Whatever I prepared and planned, everything went wrong [...] I was frustrated in everything, no matter what" (50). This mono-focus on himself and on what happened to him was typical of Eichmann. What characterized Eichmann, according to Arendt, was

his lack of compassion, his deficient thinking faculty, "his inability ever to look at anything from the other fellow's point of view" (49).

There is one more important characteristic: Eichmann was in fact a very obedient officer. In his last statement for the court, Eichmann pointed out that "his guilt came from his obedience", and that, "obedience is praised as a virtue" and that his virtue "had been abused by the Nazi leaders" (247). He claimed not only to obey orders but also to obey the law and underlined the fact that he had lived his whole life according to Kant's definition of duty. Arendt considers this statement outrageous (136) since Kant's moral theory refers to the ability to judge rather than the ability to obey without thinking. With reference to Hans Frank, Arendt states that Eichmann replaced Kant's categorical imperative with the "categorical imperative of the Third Reich: act in such a way that the Führer, if he knew your action, would approve it" (136). It is clear Eichmann considered himself a law-abiding citizen, because "the Führer's words had the force of law" (148 and 105).

Arendt maintains that neither Eichmann nor the other Nazis were sadists or monsters. They all were ordinary men whose feelings of pity, caused by the sight of the suffering they themselves had created, were turned away from their victims and directed towards themselves. This was the trick Himmler used, Arendt explains. By shifting the focus from the victims to the self, the Nazis were able to say, "What horrible things I had to watch in the pursuance of my duties, how heavily the task weighed upon my shoulders," and not, "What horrible things did I do to these people?" (106). In Eichmann's final statement at the Jerusalem court, he still spoke of the revaluation of values prescribed by the Nazi government (287). With regard to this final statement, Arendt mentions again Eichmann's inability to think and states that "the essence of totalitarian government, and perhaps the nature of every bureaucracy, is to make functionaries and mere cogs in the administrative machinery out of men, and thus to dehumanize them" (289). What is crucial, according to Arendt, is the nature and function of human judgment, which she calls one of the central moral questions of all time; being able to judge implies being able to think.

Although Arendt's insights, with regard to Eichmann's character and motives, might not have been entirely correct, as Stangneth 2014 and De Swaan 2015 have suggested, and while Eichmann was probably more cunning and more of a fervent Jew-hater than Arendt believed him to be, her analysis of his inability to think, still holds. What is often overlooked in

these critiques is that Arendt's concept of thinking is based on Kant's differentiation between *Vernunft* and *Verstand*, which led Arendt to distinguish between "thinking" and "knowing." As Vasterling 2002 points out, Arendt's concept of thinking differs from the way this concept is used in Western philosophy, in which thinking tends to be identified with knowing, which generates the idea that thinking focuses on truth. However, thinking as a goal in itself is an activity focused on sensemaking and meaning, which implies that sense and meaning are created in the thinking process itself. They are not given in the way that truth is given and can be found, or revealed, in the process of knowing. Sense and meaning are plural and changeable, leading to many different interpretations of given facts. Thinking in this way can be learned. In the chapter "The answer of Socrates" in *The Life of the Mind*, Arendt discusses Socrates' qualities as a teacher in thinking. Notably, Arendt rejects the traditional interpretation of a Platonic Socrates and stresses his authentic way of thinking based on his ability to question (see also Schutter and Peeters 2012, 23).

Being able to think implies being able to have an inner dialogue. On the basis of her analysis of Socrates, Arendt maintains that thinking is the duality of oneself with oneself. This inner dialogue implies that a person is both the one who asks and the one who answers. In this inner dialogue, the confrontation of the voices from the outside and the voices from within have to be brought to agreement. The only criterion for Socratic thinking is agreement, which means that one has to be consistent with oneself in order to be able to think. This implies that the basic criterion is not to contradict oneself; persons who are not able to have an inner dialogue, by which actions and ideas are examined, will not mind contradicting themselves. Subsequently, this person will never be able nor willing to account for what he says or does. Only those who think – who are capable of having an inner dialogue – have a conscience. Being able to think is a human faculty, just as the inability to think is a human failure, as Arendt points out. It is thinking that makes judgment possible, yet judging is not the same as thinking. This is because thinking deals with representations of things that are absent, whereas judging only concerns perceptible things. However, the two are interrelated in the sense that one facilitates the other. "The manifestation of the wind of thought is not knowledge; it is the ability to tell right from wrong, beautiful from ugly. And this, at the rare moments when the stakes are on the table, may indeed prevent catastrophes, at least for the self" (Arendt 1978, 193).

It seems that John Glenn Gray, also working – like Eichmann – as a military professional during the Second World War, but then on the side of the allied forces, was able to think in this sense. Yet, was he indeed able to prevent catastrophes, "at least for the self"?

Thinking in a Military Context: Gray and the Enduring Appeals of Battle

As mentioned above, Arendt wrote a laudatory introduction to a book by John Glenn Gray, a former American soldier who had just finished his doctorate in philosophy as he entered the army in 1941. He served in North Africa, Italy, France, and Germany as an intelligence officer and was honorably discharged in 1945. After fourteen years he began rereading his war journals on which his book, *The Warriors: Reflections on Men in Battle* (1998) [1959], is based. As Arendt puts it in her introduction: "It took him fourteen years of remembrance and reflection to understand and come to terms with what had happened in these four years" (viii). Arendt expresses her surprise at the fact that the book did not get the attention that "good books" normally get when they are published. Yet, she notices a "small and intimate success" (viii). She calls it a "singularly earnest and beautiful book" (iv). According to Arendt, the book is "on the surface" about the "homo furens" and the "homo sapiens" (concepts used by Gray), but "in fact, it is about life and death, love, friendship, and comradeship, about courage [...] about inhuman cruelty and superhuman kindness [...] and at the end about conscience, the very opposite of ecstasy" (xi). In order to better understand Arendt's introduction and better answer the questions posed in the first section of this paper, it is relevant to take a closer look at Gray's book.

Gray discusses the effects of war on the personal level of the soldier and shows why and how soldiers do what they do. This also implies why and how they can be attracted to fighting. "War reveals dimensions of human nature both above and below the acceptable standards of humanity" (Gray 1998, 26). In the atmosphere of violence, of either killing or being killed, soldiers react in different ways. In order to resist "the encroachments of the violent and the irrational" (27) soldiers cling to the memory of their civilian existence, as Gray himself tried to do. However, the soldier who "has yielded himself to the fortunes of war" (ibid.) or who has been

exposed to battle for a long time, transforms into what Gray calls a "homo furens", a "fighting man."[2] According to Gray, a "homo furens" is a subspecies of the homo sapiens, and man as a warrior is only partly man and in danger of being overwhelmed by the "furens" part of his identity. Although Gray doesn't mention it, the term "homo furens" is also used by Philip Caputo in his book, *Indian Country* (2004), a book about a boy (named Christian) who follows his friend to serve in the Vietnam War. The term appears when a letter is discussed that Christian's father wrote to his son when he was told that Christian was going to Vietnam. The father is shocked and disappointed by his son's intention and hopes that Christian turns out to be a bad soldier because a man cannot be a good soldier and a decent human being at the same time; a good soldier belongs to a different species, homo furens, half man and half beast. "I do not fear for your life or safety, but for what may happen to you inside. Homo furens, half man, half beast, that is what I fear you will become" (Caputo 2004, 98). This fear seems real, given the fact that in Gray's words: "The emotional environment of warfare has always been compelling [...] reflection and calm reasoning are alien to it [...] It was hard for me to think" (Gray 1998, 28). Combat is both loved and hated. Gray discusses the three often overlooked "attractions of war": the delight in seeing, the delight in comradeship, and the delight in destruction; all three belong to the enduring appeals of battle.

With regard to the delight in seeing, Gray states that war is an enormous spectacle that should not be underestimated since we all experience "the lust of the eye."

Although Gray refers to the Bible in this context, one can also mention Plato's discussion in *The Republic* of Leontinus and the dead bodies he wants and does not want to see. There is a passion to see, as the interest in accidents and fires makes clear. The eye yearns for the new, the unexpected, and the spectacular as a welcome distraction from the monotony and boredom of everyday life. Gray compares certain war scenes and battles with images of storms above the ocean and sunsets in the desert that absorb the spectator; he calls these experiences of war experiences of the sublime (33). With awe and amazement, we lose ourselves in the perception of something bigger and more powerful. Gray calls this an "ecstatic" experience, in the original meaning of the term: a state of being outside the self (36), which implies the loss of morality, since "morality is based on the social; the ecstatic, on the other hand, is transsocial." Gray asks if this

"aesthetic ecstasy" is not also one of the causes of the loss of morality in war (39).

The second enduring appeal of battle Gray discusses is comradeship, which also includes this ecstatic element. The communal experience of being close together in extreme conditions, in which the lives of all who are present are at stake, creates a special bond. "An hour or two of combat can do more to weld a unit together than months of intensive training. Many veterans [...] will admit, I believe, that the experience of communal effort in battle [...] has been a high point in their lives" (44). This experience of comradeship in the face of mortal danger or the threat of destruction is also an ecstatic experience, according to Gray. "We feel earnest and gay at such moments because we are liberated from our individual impotence and are drunk with the power that union with our fellows brings" (45). In situations like these, the comrades "sense a kinship never known before." Furthermore, "their 'I' passes insensibly into a 'we', 'my' becomes 'our', and individual fate loses its central importance" (45). According to Gray, self-sacrifice in situations like these is relatively easy: "I may fall, but I do not die, for that which is real in me goes forward and lives on in the comrades for whom I gave up my physical life" (47). With reference to a book by Georg F. Nicolai entitled *The Biology of War* (1915), Gray wonders whether this intoxicating "capacity for self-sacrifice" might not be the reason that "men will never give up warfare" (48).

The third enduring appeal of battle Gray discusses is the delight in destruction, which he says is much more sinister than the other two delights. Here the homo furens, as discussed above, comes to the fore. In their "blinded rage to destroy, and supremely careless of consequences," soldiers seem "seized by a demon and are no longer in control of themselves" (51). Gray quotes from the diary of Ernst Juenger, who fought on the German side during the First World War: "With a mixture of feelings, evoked by bloodthirstiness, rage, and intoxication, we moved towards the enemy. [...] Boiling with a mad rage which had taken hold of me and all the others in an incomprehensible fashion. The overwhelming wish to kill gave wings to my feet. Rage pressed bitter tears from my eyes. [...] The monstrous desire for annihilation. [...] A neutral observer might have perhaps believed we were seized by an excess of happiness" (52). According to Gray, many soldiers have learned of this mad excitement and the delight in destruction in military practice. Of the many authors who have written about the urge toward destruction and the spirit of violence, Gray consid-

ers Hemingway the best. With reference to Hemingway, Freud, and Empedocles, Gray discusses the two familiar "primordial forces" of "eternal conflict": Eros and Thanatos (53-5). Eros is the power to connect and unite, whereas Thanatos is the power to annihilate, and thus to destroy what is connected and united. Gray also talks about love as a concern (88), which is also present on the battlefield and, like friendship, is directed toward preservation of being (93) and thus, also opposed to destruction. Yet, the satisfaction in destruction seems overwhelming and, as such, "peculiarly human" [...] "We sense in it always the Mephistophelean cry that all created things deserve to be destroyed" (55). The delight in destruction also has an ecstatic character, however. It is "an ecstasy without union," for, unlike the other delights, it turns men "inward upon themselves and makes them inaccessible to more normal satisfactions" (57). According to Gray, it is the "spiritual emptiness and inner hunger that impel many men toward combat. Our society has not begun to wrestle with this problem of how to provide fulfillment to human life, to which war is so often an illusory path" (58).

Arendt's introduction to Gray's book is full of quotes taken from Gray's text which show her appreciation of his work and his ability to reflect. Notably, she does not only seem to admire him as a writer but also as a soldier. With reference to Gray's conclusion at the end of his book and his statement that "Survival without integrity of conscience is worse than perishing outright," Arendt maintains: "Nowhere perhaps than in these passages does one understand better that Glen Gray's friend thought of him as '*the soldier*' [italics by Arendt]. For they express but the last and, under today's circumstances, inevitable conclusion of the soldier's basic credo – that life is *not* [italics by Arendt] the highest good" (iv).

'Amor Mundi' and the Danger of the Darkness of the Human Heart

Against the backdrop of the political chaos in our era, in which war and conflict are again instigated by reckless autocrats, this paper focuses on the meaning of Arendt's concept of thinking in a military context (as exemplified by Gray), as opposed to thoughtlessness in a military context, of which Eichmann was an infamous example. Although both Gray and Eichmann were soldiers, the context they worked in was rather different,

and it could be argued that this influenced their ability to think. Eichmann might be called a "desktop killer," who, with one single stroke of his pen sealed the fate of millions of Jews. People he had never seen himself were brutally maimed and murdered on the basis of the decisions he made from behind his desk. Gray, on the other hand, experienced war up close. Even though his work as an intelligence officer was different from that of an infantry soldier, Gray saw, heard, smelled, and felt what war actually consists of. This experience from up close – looking one's enemy in the eye – makes it more difficult to dehumanize him for, after all, he is just a human being, mortal, like oneself. Behind a desk in a bureaucratic organization, dehumanization and "reification" (Honneth 2008) arise quite easily. The other is stripped of his human qualities and reduced to a digit, an anonymous "n." Unless, as Arendt points out, one is able to think, even behind a desktop in a full-blown bureaucracy, "thinking" is possible.

As discussed above, the inability to think was and is, according to Arendt, one of the main causes – if not the main cause – of totalitarian violence. Thus, countering it implies restoring the ability to think, both in the civilian and military context, as well as on the battlefield and behind the desktop. What Arendt seems to appreciate in Gray is precisely his ability to think, to reflect, and to judge, on the basis of which he was able to act conscientiously. Yet, as Gray's analysis of the enduring appeal of battle makes clear, this is not the case for every soldier (perhaps for most soldiers), for war seems to be able to blow away the capacity to think and reflect, as Gray himself states. It is precisely in the ecstasies, present in all three of the "delights," as discussed above, that the ego – and thus the capacity to think – loses itself and seems to dissolve. Gray acknowledges this, as was discussed above. With regard to the first appeal of battle, the 'delight in seeing', he poses the question whether the aesthetic ecstasy present in the delight in seeing is not also the cause of the loss of morality in war, given its "transsocial" character. With regard to the second appeal of battle, the "delight in comradeship," Gray discusses the experience of belonging to a "band of brothers," in which an unprecedented kinship is experienced that frees individuals from their insignificance, their weakness, and vulnerability. Comrades become one, powerful and potent, and willing to sacrifice themselves for their beloved unit, in which their egos have dissolved. In regard to the second appeal of battle, Gray poses the question whether this "intoxicating" experience might not be the reason men will never give up war. The third appeal of battle, the "delight in

destruction," concerns a mad excitement that many soldiers have learned in military practice, according to Gray. He connects the ecstasy found in destruction and annihilation to the "spiritual emptiness" and "inner hunger" that drives many men toward battle.

Thus, Gray's book is not only "on the surface" about the "homo furens," as Arendt claims. It is precisely this "furens" part that is, in its destructive ecstasy, able to switch off the ability to think, like the other ego-transcending ecstasies Gray discusses in reference to seeing and comradeship. In that sense, "thinking" soldiers are in danger of losing their ability to think and thus their ability to judge in the heat of the battle. Yet, Arendt is also right that Gray's book is also about love, friendship, comradeship, "superhuman kindness," and most importantly, conscience. And, as stated above, it is – even in the context of war – about love as a concern, which comes very close to *amor mundi* as the love and responsibility for a common world. It may precisely be out of concern for a common world, for *amor mundi*, that injustices are fought and that armed force is needed to save the plurality of perspectives that – per definition – gets lost in totalitarianism. However, the destructive side of war, even of just wars, is always present; it hangs like a shadow over Gray's story. This is the strength of his book, as Arendt states in *On Violence*. Arendt maintains that once a person enters "the community of violence" he will "fall under the intoxicating spell of "the practice of violence" which binds men together as a whole (Arendt 1970, 67). Arendt refers to Gray in a note, writing that his book "is most perceptive and instructive on this point. It should be read by everyone interested in the practice of violence" (ibid.). In the pages following this reference, the echo of Gray's words can also be detected. Arendt maintains that the danger of violence, however well intended it may be, will always be that "the means overwhelm the end." She also adds that "the practice of violence, like all action, changes the world, but the most probable change is to a more violent world" (80).

It seems that Gray's story reveals the danger of what Arendt calls, in *The Human Condition*, "the darkness of the human heart" (Arendt 158, 244). She is here referring to the basic unreliability of human beings, who can never guarantee their own integrity; "who can never guarantee today who they will be tomorrow" (ibid.). And this seems to hold in the civilian context, as well as in the military context. This lack of integrity means that the consequences of actions taken within a community by the members of this community can never be fully predicted. This also holds both in a civil

and military context. In the words of the chorus in Sophocles' *Antigone*, man is *deinon*, both capable of the most wonderful and the most reprehensible actions. It is the destructive side of this *deinon* character that Arendt calls "the darkness of the human heart." It is always there and, in times of war, it is able to increasingly create space for itself.

Totalitarianism is not defeated, as Arendt already feared; a fear she expressed using the symbol of the desert, which she borrowed from Nietzsche's poem "Die Wüste wächst." The whole title of the poem is: "Die Wüste wächst: weh dem, der Wüste birgt" (Nietzsche 1988, 380). Nietzsche's individual focus in this poem differs from Arendt's broader focus on the desertification of the world (although one might ask how individual Nietzsche's focus in this poem is, given his reference to Europe and Europeans in the poem). In *Was ist Politik?* (1993), Arendt discusses the progressing desertification in our world and sees it in the "desert psychology" that tells us that something is wrong with us (Arendt 1993, 181). She points out that we do not acknowledge the fact that we cannot live in desert conditions and, for that reason, have lost our ability to judge. The fact that something is wrong with us under these conditions at least shows that we are still human, according to Arendt. Fortunately, there are oases in the desert, which are identified by Arendt as areas that are independent of political conditions, for something has gone wrong with politics and thus, with us (183). These areas are the places of artists, philosophers, lovers, and friends; they are life-giving sources that enable us to live in the desert, without reconciling us with it (ibid.).

As Arendt suggests, we need to keep sharpening our ability to think and thus to judge, both in a military and in a civilian context, by taking the plurality of perspectives into account. Sharpening her ability to think is what Arendt did, Young Bruehl tells us, and she quotes Arendt, saying in her thick German accent: "Vell, Vell, und from the other side... und listen, look at it this way..." (Young Bruehl 2007, 19). It is the ongoing wind of thought that prevents us from losing hope in the possibility for action and thus for change.

Notes

1 Parts of this section are based on Verweij 2004.

2 The Latin *"furere"* means rage, rant, being possessed.

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