Beyond the Sensory

CLARISSA LEHNE

In “Thinking-I,” the first essay of her three-part series for The New Yorker, Hannah Arendt grapples with the concepts of the sensory, which we perceive through our senses, and the suprasensory, which transcends somatic experience and has inspired philosophical and metaphysical debate for centuries. This discussion is part of a larger exploration into the relationship between thought and evil—more precisely, into the possibility that they are not connected at all, and that evil stems from thoughtlessness. Arendt examines established patterns in human thought, arguing that a loss of engagement with the suprasensory has brought about “an end [to] the basic distinction between the sensory and the suprasensory” (71). Humans have lost interest in the metaphysical and philosophical questions that have dominated discussion up to the present, as “the way they were framed and answered has lost plausibility” (71). Unfortunately, this shift away from suprasensory investigation unbalances the frame of reference in which thought occurs. The mind orients itself by these two areas; neither concept can exist without the other, as the two are “inseparably connected” (71). Arendt acknowledges the conflict inherent in the notion of the suprasensory as “more real, more truthful, more meaningful than what appears” and “above the world of the senses” (71). She points out that the elevated realm of the suprasensory was born out of “the very appearingness of this world” and, as a result, its authenticity depends on the grounded veracity of the sensory (86). The two interlaced realms of thought must be valued in equal measure, as any imbalance in their fragile harmony precludes explorative thinking as we know it, depriving human life of “meaning” gained from contemplation.

To Arendt, the struggle to determine the distinction between “being” and “appearing” dates back to the origins of human speech. She identifies its source as “the discovery of a discrepancy between words, the medium in which we think, and the world of appearances, the medium in which we live” (68). Essentially, philosophy and metaphysics find their roots in inadequacies of terminology. But Friedrich Nietzsche’s dissection of human morality
explores another facet of this casual relationship. He indicates that while gaps in language may feed elevated thought, they can also lead to dangerous oversimplifications that stunt its scope and deny its subtlety.

In his 1887 polemic *On the Genealogy of Morality*, Nietzsche calls for greater scrutiny of the language of morality. He warns of “the descent of our moral prejudices” and the lack of appraisal involved in following the common morality, then sets out to determine “the value of morality” by exploring its sources (4, 6). His exhaustive outline of the etymological origins of the ideas of “good,” “bad,” and “evil” illuminates how arbitrarily these concepts came to be and how imprecisely they are used in modern discussions of morality. The word “evil” illustrates his point, having been conceived among the clergy as the counterpoint to a banal and out-dated notion of purity—one assigned to any man “who washed, avoided certain foods which cause skin complaints, did not sleep with filthy women of the lower orders and had a horror of blood, nothing more” (15-16). Now a disturbingly significant expression, “evil” has surprisingly “unsymbolic” foundations (15). Nietzsche indicates how dangerous these tenuously conceived concepts can be, linking “evil” to “the slaves’ revolt in morality,” a movement that reversed the socioeconomic understanding of morality, previously common, that the noble and wealthy are “good” (18). But this movement in turn propagates the idea, which Nietzsche sees as dangerous, that “[o]nly those who suffer are good, only the poor, the powerless, the lowly are good; the suffering, the deprived, the sick, the ugly are the only pious people . . . salvation is for them alone” (17). “Evil” has brought a new, more pliable and manipulative dimension to common morality; unlike “good” and “bad,” it has no grounding in social structure. Because “evil” has no obvious connection to the material world or social structures, it is more difficult to define than its two predecessors. As such, it can be used and misused according to the whims of those it suits. Nietzsche refers to such inaccuracies and ambiguities as “the seduction of language,” a system which has “fundamental errors of reason petrified” within it (26). In his view, language becomes capable of both overhauling moral structures that have existed for centuries and paralyzing reason, allowing rational thought to stagnate in a fog of indefinable terms.

Nietzsche’s concerns about the pitfalls of human expression are echoed in Arendt’s essay. Just like “good,” “bad,” and “evil,” “being” and “appearing” are distinct only insofar as we have created different names for them, Arendt looks to and assesses Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s assertion on the tenuousness of human definition: “Since Being and Appearing coincide for men, this means that I can flee appearance only into appearance” (85). The same tenu-
ousness applies to the sensory and the suprasensory. Philosophers might have
drawn the boundaries between these areas of human experience elsewhere
and disseminated different terms. As such, any discussion of their disparities
and conflicts is rendered obsolete, as these two concepts are in reality one and
the same. Humanity is then faced with the daunting task of more concretely
articulating ideas that have grown almost unfathomable in their abstractness,
or else concede to Ludwig Wittgenstein’s claim that “[w]hat we cannot speak
of we must be silent about” (qtd. in Arendt 67). We must attempt to find clar-
ity in a conceptual language convoluted by metaphors and jargon, a task com-
plicated by the unfortunate fact that “reason, man’s speculative capacity, nec-
essarily transcends the cognitive faculties of his intellect” (Arendt 111). Man’s
questions always evolve beyond his ability to answer them.

David Rosenberg’s translation of The Book of J presents one possible
response to this dilemma, demonstrating a simultaneous fusion and bifurca-
tion of the sensory and the suprasensory in its depiction of a walking, eating,
fighting, yet still awe-inspiringly powerful Yahweh. The text, written more
than two and a half millennia ago by the so-called “Yahwist” or “J,” depicts
Yahweh as surprisingly practical and human, largely because the text was not
conceived as a holy work. The idea of God or any supreme being traditionally
falls outside the tangible domain of the senses, in keeping with the principle
that “God can be thought, but only as that which does not appear [and] is
not given to our experience . . . [as] He is not for us” (Arendt 110-111). This
doctrine appears, for example, in the condemnation of idol worship in Judeo-
Christian teachings. As Arendt points out, Nietzsche equates God to the con-
cept of a “true world,” an equation that elevates these suprasensory themes
above the “apparent” world (71). She also mentions Immanuel Kant’s codifi-
cation of God as an “Idea of reason” as being similarly abstract (111). It is dif-
ficult to reconcile J’s humanized Yahweh with these traditional abstractions of
God. The author has, however, overcome the “old metaphysical dichotomy of
(true) Being and (mere) Appearance” by acknowledging “the primacy . . . of
Appearance” as a vehicle for explaining “being” (Arendt 85).

Yahweh is introduced in The Book of J through his physicality. He is given
hands to “shape an earthling from clay,” a mouth to “[blow] into its nostrils
the wind of life,” and legs with which to go “walking in the [G]arden [of
Eden]” (1, 1, 6). J has endowed Yahweh with a perceivable exterior to “bridge
the gap between a world given to sense experience and a realm in which no
such immediate apprehension of evidence can ever exist” (Arendt 98). Arendt
recognizes that “our soul-experiences are body-bound to such an extent” that
we can only absorb abstruse concepts if they are presented in a familiar and
tangible shell (Arendt 98). Despite this necessary anchoring of Yahweh, he remains an inconceivably powerful and distant figure, his might falling “beyond sense perception” (Arendt 71). Yahweh commands the great flood in order to “erase the earthlings [he] created across the face of the earth” when he sees them “growing monstrous” (Rosenberg and Bloom 21). He unleashes the ten plagues of Egypt and spills “a volcanic rain” over Sodom and Gomorrah (46). He parts the Red Sea to lead the enslaved Israelites out of Egypt and miraculously produces manna and water from nothing when they are starving in the desert. These extraordinary and often terrifying deeds are rendered more glorious when offset by Yahweh’s seemingly humble, human attributes. J employs the sensory as a medium for the suprasensory, a means of making it perceivable or even, perhaps, comprehensible.

The synthesis of these two spheres diverges from Arendt’s assertion that “the inner, non-appearing organs might exist only in order to bring forth and maintain the appearances” (92). While Arendt postulates that the sole purpose of the internal may be to provide a foundation that determines the external, J reveals how this determination can work in reverse: sensory experiences can serve to overcome the constraints of “conceptual language” and momentarily concretize the elusive suprasensory (Arendt 94). Arendt herself affirms this use of words “invariably derived from expressions originally related to the world as it is given to our five bodily senses” to “make manifest the life of the mind” (94). To comprehend concepts that extend beyond the realm of bodily experience, we can attempt to define them through sensory knowledge. Just as J uses the human form as a vessel for a usually uncontainable supreme being, aiming to introduce Yahweh in a more palatable way, we can use life to interpret death or an infinitesimally small atomic particle to visualize the infinitely expanding universe. A known phenomenon can help us contextualize an unknown phenomenon, if only through the contrast it presents.

Using the sensory to develop the suprasensory departs from the formerly more widely accepted means to the same end. Arendt states that “all thinkers were agreed that, to deal with such matters, man had to detach his mind from the senses by detaching it both from the world as given by them and from the sensations—or passion—aroused by sense-objects” (72). One potential ontological objection to this approach is that it postulates the existence of something that cannot be perceived. If everything exists solely as a result of being perceived, and we suspend our ability to perceive in the traditional sense when dealing with the suprasensory, then the suprasensory cannot exist in our eyes. The one thing we can tap into to clarify the big, intan-
gible questions is our enormous resource of human experience, grounded as it is in the small and the tangible. Just as we cannot understand the sensory without drawing upon the suprasensory, we cannot apprehend the suprasensory by abandoning the sensory.

WORKS CITED


