



## The *Daimon* as Metaphor Naming the Ground of the "Who" in Arendt's Theory of Political Action

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**Abstract:** In Hannah Arendt's *Theory of Political Action*, Trevor Tchir highlights what he perceives to be a tension in Arendt's theory of political action. Tchir argues that Arendt's appeal to the *daimon* reveals a divine or transcendental element at the basis of this theory that stands in conflict with her post-metaphysical, existential account of the "who" that action discloses. This commentary deepens and challenges Tchir's thesis by considering Arendt's claim that her use of the *daimon* is metaphorical. Turning to Arendt's later writings on metaphor, I consider whether this figure of the divine may be interpreted not as forming the transcendental ground for her theory of action but rather as a basis for her insights into the impossibility of naming such a ground. In view of this, I suggest that we might treat Tchir's inquiry into the *daimon* as a platform for developing Arendt's contribution to such fields as negative theology, which seeks to navigate the very tension that Tchir identifies.

**Keywords:** Arendt, Hannah; Heidegger, Martin; Tchir, Trevor; the *daimon*; action; metaphor; negative theology.

In Hannah Arendt's *Theory of Political Action*, Trevor Tchir offers a novel and expansive reading of an underappreciated dimension of Arendt's theory of political action.<sup>1</sup> Drawing on her use of the figure of the *daimon*, Tchir argues that a tension arises in Arendt's effort to develop a post-metaphysical basis for thinking and acting. While Arendt resists traditional metaphysical approaches to grounding thinking and action, her appeal to concepts like the *daimon* remain "bound to notions of the spiritual, the transcendent, and the divine" (*TPA* 67). Tchir thus sets out to explore this tension in Arendt's thought and to explicate its consequences for her political framework. In so doing, Tchir provides an important basis for reexamining

and deepening Arendt scholars' understanding of the "who" that Arendt believes is disclosed through political action. With this, he challenges Arendt's theory of action by raising the question of whether she succeeds in completing her critique of the religious and metaphysical imposition of absolutes in political life (*TPA* 67).

Tchir's aim in this book is two-fold. First, he wishes to highlight the importance of Arendt's efforts to conceive of political action as the site of both self and world disclosure. Tchir explains that in asserting the irreducible uniqueness of the "who," Arendt makes a decisive intervention in political theories that equate freedom with sovereignty, as well as those that ground human affairs in a teleological conception of history. In elucidating the process by which the "who" is disclosed, Arendt challenges what she perceives as the totalizing

<sup>1</sup> Trevor Tchir, *Hannah Arendt's Theory of Political Action: Daimonic Disclosure of the 'Who'*, Cham, CH: Palgrave MacMillan, 2017. [Henceforth cited as *TPA*]

and reductive impulses in both of these approaches to political life. Yet, Tchir also insists that the ground of this "who" seems to refer to a "divine element in human beings" (TPA 12), which, in turn, raises the question of whether Arendt implicates herself in the very conception of transcendence that she wishes to overcome. In view of this, Tchir explains that the second aim of the book is to examine the important but underappreciated role that the *daimon* plays in Arendt's discourse on political action so as to deepen and complicate the stakes of her project. A figure of ancient Greek religion, the *daimon* serves as a mediator between the gods and humans. It appears not only in Arendt's work, but also in the work of the thinkers she engaged throughout her career, including Martin Heidegger in his elucidation of the authentic disclosure of *Dasein*, Karl Jaspers in his discourse on what Arendt interprets as "valid personality," and Immanuel Kant in his account of the genius (TPA 6). The philosophical relevance of this figure, Tchir explains, comes into view as early as in Plato's *Myth of Er*, grounding what one might call the voice of conscience, whispering guidance, or the birth attendant who accompanies mortals through life but who never becomes visible to the agent.

While Arendt only makes occasional reference to the *daimon*, Tchir argues that these references appear at such pivotal points in her discourse on action that they warrant greater scholarly attention. Perhaps her most notable reference to this figure occurs in *The Human Condition*. Arendt explains here that while the "who" appears clearly and unmistakably to others, it "remains hidden from the person himself, like the *daimon* in Greek religion which accompanies each man throughout his life, always looking over his shoulder from behind and thus visible only to those he encounters."<sup>2</sup> By considering Arendt's theory of political action in light of the figure of the *daimon*, Tchir thus endeavors to highlight an important, albeit, underappreciated conflict in her critique of modern sovereignty and teleological approaches to history. On the one hand, Arendt seems to identify a divine element in human beings, or at least an inescapable "existential illusion" of this divine presence (TPA 243). On the other hand, she is intent on distancing action, thinking, and judging from any residual vocabulary of transcendence (TPA 12). This, of course, raises a number of important

questions not just about Arendt's ability to complete her own critique of metaphysical absolutisms and teleological conceptions of history, but also about the ability of individuals in a secularized modern world to recover a sense of meaning without an appeal to the divine.

The lens that Tchir offers for interpreting Arendt's theory of action is unique and insightful. Indeed, while religious metaphor is present throughout Arendt's corpus, few have taken so seriously its vast implications for understanding the scope and limits of Arendt's political framework. Tchir makes clear how pervasive her theological grammar is even in her efforts to challenge Heidegger, Kant, Karl Marx, and G. W. F. Hegel in their respective views of history and sovereignty. Tchir is careful to point out the ways in which the figure of the *daimon* enables her to ground a notion of action that is worldly, plural, and capable of displacing messianic notions of the end of history. The *daimon* at once brings the divine into Arendt's supposedly secular and post-metaphysical politics, while, at the same time, substantiating the very framework that she develops in order to subvert totalizing and reductive approaches to the political.

With this in mind, I would like to raise four questions in response to Tchir's reading of Arendt. The first concerns the status that he suggests Arendt gives to the *daimon* in her discourse on action. As Tchir acknowledges, Arendt's use of the *daimon* is metaphorical. In contrast to Heidegger in his account of the call of conscience or Kant in his discourse on the genius, Arendt uses simile and metaphor to incorporate this figure into her description of the disclosure of the "who." As Arendt asserts in *The Life of the Mind*, metaphor has been used throughout the history of Western metaphysics to bridge an unbridgeable gap between the visible and the invisible. Arendt is clear, however, that as necessary as metaphor might be for rendering in words things that are unnamable, this use of metaphor is also self-effacing, revealing the very gap between what is and what is said that philosophers since Plato have sought to fill. Although it may be problematic to consider an earlier work such as *The Human Condition* in light of these later reflections, I nonetheless wonder whether her discourse on metaphor might be instructive for understanding the role that the figure of *daimon* plays in her account of the disclosure of the "who." Whereas Tchir suggests that it reveals Arendt's belief in a divine element in human action, perhaps Arendt wants to make a different kind of claim, one that speaks

<sup>2</sup> Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*, Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press 1998, pp. 159–60, cited in TPA 7.

to our inability to name the ground of action. Arendt's use of the *daimon*, while helpful for clarifying what it is like to appear to others as an irreducibly unique "who," is nevertheless metaphorical and may therefore serve to challenge the human ability to account for the ground of thought and action, no less than the possibility of complete self and world disclosure.

A further, related question concerns Tchir's reading of Arendt's notion of disclosure, particularly as this is developed in his discussion of Arendt's critical appropriation of Heidegger. While Tchir highlights the crucial counter points that Arendt offers to Heidegger, Tchir also draws a parallel between their respective accounts of authentic disclosure that may be too strong. Tchir notes that Arendt's conception of the disclosure of the "who" is more worldly than Heidegger's to the extent that it is not oriented by the inward, silent resolve of authentic *Dasein*, but rather by the agent's responsiveness to the visible and audible call of human plurality. Tchir also suggests that the "who" that comes to appear with and through others in the space of politics derives its immortality not from something transcendent, but rather through "retrospective narrative, a concretization of fragile and fleeting action through stories whose exemplary order can be interpretively expanded in the future" (TPA 119). Yet, Tchir maintains that for Arendt, world-disclosive action "makes the public realm a spiritual realm" (TPA 119). He argues, too, that the public realm becomes a space in which "transcendent Being may be disclosed" (TPA 119). While Tchir remarks that this disclosure of being requires a symbolic or representative order, he also insists that it is expressive of something divine or transcendent. In view of this, I wonder if more could be said about Arendt's notion of the disclosure of the "who" and Heidegger's notion the disclosure of being. Turning once again to *The Life of the Mind*, one finds that Arendt criticizes Heidegger for presuming that "'Meaning of Being' and 'Truth of Being' say the same."<sup>3</sup> Indeed, she suggests that because appearances are only ever disclosed as semblances that can reveal and conceal themselves, any assertion one might make about them will always remain provisional and never absolute. She argues, too, that thinking must be understood, not in terms of the acquisition of metaphysical truths, but rather in terms of the quest for meaning and the open possibility that this entails. In view of this, I would

like to raise the third question of whether Arendt has in mind a Heideggerian notion of the disclosure of being, or if her account of the disclosure of the "who" concerns something more like the disclosure of meaning. Of course, it may be problematic to assert such a stark distinction between the two. Yet, Tchir's argument appears to hinge on a reading of Arendt that emphasizes the former. For this reason, one might wonder how Arendt's concern to distance meaning and truth in her later writings complicate Tchir's account of her appeal to the divine. Whereas Tchir suggests that Arendt amends Heidegger's account by insisting "the disclosure of being requires judgment," I suggest that there may be an even greater distance between Arendt and Heidegger than Tchir indicates (TPA 119).

A fourth and final question arises regarding Tchir's concluding remarks on the broader implications of the tension he identifies in Arendt's discourse on action. Indeed, this tension is important, not just for comprehending Arendt, but also for understanding the loss of meaning in the modern age and the possibilities for reclaiming this meaning without appealing to the divine. Tchir makes the compelling suggestion that by attending to this loss, one might be able to develop a better understanding of the lingering religious vocabulary in Arendt's thought. It also leads me to wonder whether Tchir's project enables one to begin putting Arendt's theory of political action in dialogue with discourses in negative theology that emerge from the work of philosophers such as Jacques Derrida. After all, Arendt's use of the *daimon*, no less than her repeated appeal to religious concepts throughout her writings, work against religious forms of absolutism that cover over plurality and natality. In my estimation, the *daimon* is one among several religious references Arendt makes that seem to affirm alterity and difference, no less than the imminence of the meaning that political action introduces to the world. Tchir therefore puts before his readers the task of considering the new figures and discourses with which Arendt can be put in conversation, thanks to his incisive interpretation of the role of the divine in her theory of political action.

<sup>3</sup> Hannah Arendt, *The Life of the Mind*, San Diego, CA: Harcourt, Inc. 1978, p. 15.