Back to the Core
Rethinking Core Texts in Liberal Arts & Sciences Education in Europe

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Table of Contents

Dedication vii

Introduction 9
Emma Cohen de Lara and Hanke Drop

SECTION 1 Perspectives on Liberal Education 23

Chapter 1 Curiosity and Conflict: Liberal Education Today 25
Christopher B. Nelson

Chapter 2 Can Liberal Studies Be Brought Back into European Universities? 33
Miguel Tamen

Chapter 3 Liberal Education and Core Texts: The Case of the Netherlands 43
Emma Cohen de Lara

Chapter 4 “The Spirit of Liberal Learning”: A Reflection on the Cowan Method of Teaching the Liberal Arts 61
Angela C. Miceli Stout

Chapter 5 The Idea of Core Texts at a Research University: The Program of Liberal Studies after 65 Years 77
Thomas A. Stapleford

Chapter 6 Core texts in Academia's Future 93
Alkeline van Lenning

Chapter 7 Thinkeries Ancient and Modern: Democracy’s Challenges for Liberal Education 105
Ewa Atanassow and David Kretz

Chapter 8 Freedom, Arts and Sciences, Criticism in the Liberal Arts: an Aristotelian Perspective 123
J. Scott Lee
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter 9</th>
<th>Freedom is to Learn: Education for its Own Sake</th>
<th>147</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Nigel Tubbs</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 10</td>
<td>Instrumentalizing Education: Critical Theory as an Introduction to the Canon of Core Texts</td>
<td>159</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Connell Vaughan</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>SECTION 2</strong></td>
<td>The Practice of Liberal Education</td>
<td>175</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 11</td>
<td>Under-Thought: Teaching Homer in a Liberal Arts and Sciences Curriculum</td>
<td>177</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>David Janssens</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 12</td>
<td>Plato’s <em>Euthyphro</em> and Philosophical Liberation</td>
<td>191</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Richard Kamber</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 13</td>
<td>Socrates’s “Art of Turning” as an Education in Prudential Thinking</td>
<td>199</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Matthew Post</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 14</td>
<td>Core Texts and Big Questions for Health Undergraduates. The Cases of Job and King Lear</td>
<td>217</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Teresa Vallès-Botey and Andrea Rodríguez-Prat</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 15</td>
<td>Bruegel’s <em>Via Crucis</em>: (Visual) Experience and the Problem of Interpretation</td>
<td>233</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Geoff Lehman</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>List of Figures</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td>247</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 16</td>
<td>World Classics and Local Heroes: Lope de Vega’s <em>Fuenteovejuna</em> as a Core Text</td>
<td>259</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Álvaro Sánchez-Ostiz</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 17</td>
<td>René Descartes’s Modern Turn and Liberal Education Today</td>
<td>273</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Topi Heikkerö</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 18</td>
<td>Rousseau’s Three Concepts of Freedom</td>
<td>289</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Hanke Drop and Iko Doeland</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Chapter 19  The never-ending Pursuit of Happiness: Taking Inspiration from Sigmund Freud’s *Das Unbehagen in der Kultur* 297
Sandra G.L. Schruijer

Chapter 20  Franz Kafka as a Law Professor: What Kafka’s *The Trial* Teaches Us about Legal Procedure 305
Arie-Jan Kwak

Chapter 21  Grossman’s *Everything Flows* or the Ineradicability of Freedom 319
Gelijn Molier

Chapter 22  Devastating Irony. Hannah Arendt and Harry Mulisch on the Eichmann Trial 335
Joop Berding

Chapter 23  Hannah Arendt and Biopolitics 349
Elizabeth Stewart

Chapter 24  Hannah Arendt: Modernity as Paradox 361
Ruth A. Bevan

Chapter 25  What We Do and What We See Is Not Separate: The Embodiment of Seeing in Merleau-Ponty’s *Eye and Mind* 375
Iko Doeland and Hanke Drop

Chapter 26  David Foster Wallace’s *Infinite Jest* as Contemporary Core Text: Re-Evaluating Postmodernism and Existentialism 383
Allard den Dulk

About the authors 401

Index of names 407
Dedication

This book is based on a conference on Liberal Arts and Sciences Education and Core Texts in the European Context held at Amsterdam University College in September 2015. The conference would not have been possible without the gracious support of Amsterdam University College’s founding Dean Marijk van der Wende, who in the early stages of AUC’s existence took the risk of supporting what turned out to be a monumental conference. The editors are also grateful to the Association for Core Texts and Courses and, in particular, to its director J. Scott Lee who was crucial for making the conference a success. The editors of the volume wish to thank all participants to the conference who, with their contagious commitment to teaching core texts, were invaluable for making the conference a success, facilitating the exchange of ideas and good practices and building a community around the teaching of core texts in Europe. Finally, the editors thank Joanna Boothman, who helped to develop a title for the book and designed its playful cover.
PAGES MISSING
FROM THIS FREE SAMPLE
Core texts have the power to move people, and that is why they are of extreme importance, not only in education but also in public discourse. This is certainly the case with the two books that I will discuss in this essay: Hannah Arendt’s *Eichmann in Jerusalem* and *Criminal Case 40/61, the Trial of Adolf Eichmann* by Harry Mulisch. This has everything to do with the topic of both books, referring to the question of how an individual’s responsibility is to be judged with regard to one of the greatest and incomprehensible disasters mankind ever has had to deal with, namely, the Shoah. But another question also arises, i.e. if this disaster is indeed unspeakable, what literary means remain for anyone who wants to write about it? For now, I am mainly occupied with the second question. It is clear that the literary style used by both authors has in many ways contributed to the impact of their works, and also to the controversy that arose, and goes on, more than fifty years after they were first published. That style, I propose, is a devastating irony.

Background

First, let me give a sketch of the historical backgrounds. During the Nuremberg trials after the Second World War Eichmann’s name came up a few times but this did not lead to action. In spite of many investigations, Eichmann was

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1 I wish to thank Kitty Saal and M. Mathijsen-Verkooijen of the Harry Mulisch Huis and the University of Amsterdam for their hospitality and for making the integral typescript of Mulisch’s *Criminal Case 40/61* accessible to me.
4 Cf. Elizabeth Stewart’s chapter in this volume.
5 Although it is sometimes contended that Eichmann’s name was not mentioned at all or only casually, this is convincingly proved faulty by Bettina Stangneth, *Eichmann before Jerusalem* (London: The Bodley Head, 2014).
never located, although recent research reveals that already in 1952 the German Secret Service knew or might have known of his whereabouts. Eventually the Mossad found out that Eichmann had lived for some time in Argentina under the false name of Ricardo Klement and had had a minor job at an office after some failures to start his own company. After meticulous research and surveillance, Israeli secret agents succeeded in capturing and abducting Eichmann near his home in Buenos Aires on May 11, 1960. He was flown to Israel and put in prison. There he was to be tried before an Israeli court, and to be held accountable for his deeds, more precisely his involvement in the Endlösung: the so-called “definitive solution of the Jewish question.” The Israeli way of dealing with Eichmann was questioned from the beginning. Why did this trial take place before an Israeli and not an international court of law, and second, what exactly had been Eichmann’s position, function and responsibility within the Third Reich? The answers to these questions have much to do with the historical situation regarding the State of Israel instituted in 1948 and the awareness of scale and impact of the Holocaust, which at the time had only just begun. It seemed that Israel wanted to show the world that the Jews were “still around” and they were determined in the name of justice to hunt down Nazis everywhere in the world. At the same time it seemed that Israel wanted to tell its own people, and the world, the story of the near destruction of the Jews all at once as a form of “education”, as both Arendt and Mulisch, and others, see it. To which deeds Eichmann himself was exactly accountable seemed of minor relevance. The trial dragged on, the dead penalty was called for, Eichmann appealed to the Supreme Court, and on May 31, 1962 he was hanged and his corpse incinerated. Only a few hours later his ashes were scattered across the ocean. In retrospect, one can say that in a sense from that moment on, the world and the Jews were free to deal with the Holocaust.

**Arendt and Mulisch**

The German-American-Jewish political thinker Hannah Arendt (1906-1975) and the Dutch author Harry Mulisch (1927-2010) played a major role in these events. In 1941, Arendt had escaped from occupied France, via Lisbon to the

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8 Following Hannah Arendt, I will not define her as a philosopher. See Hannah Arendt, “‘What Remains? The Language Remains’: A Conversation with Günter Gaus,” in *Hannah Arendt: The Last Interview and Other Conversations*, 1-38 (Brooklyn NY: Melville House, 2013). Harry Mulisch’s mother was Jewish, a fact that plays a role in several of his major literary works.
United States and had established herself as an editor (at Schocken Books), and later on as author, teacher and professor. When not involved in “worldly” activities she led a somewhat secluded life in New York, together with her husband Heinrich Blücher and a few friends, amongst whom the author Mary McCarthy. At Arendt’s own request, the journal *The New Yorker* sent her as a journalist to the Eichmann trial. She read all records of the trial that were available at the time, including transcripts of the interviews the Israeli chief of police Av. Lesner had conducted with the prisoner, and she attended the first days in the Court Hall. In 1963 her reports were put together in her book *Eichmann in Jerusalem*.

In 1961 Harry Mulisch was still seen as a novice, though his first works had been awarded important prizes in his native country, the Netherlands. In the same year, he requested that the weekly journal *Elsevier* sent him to Jerusalem. Mulisch published his book, based on the reports that he wrote for *Elsevier*, in 1962 – a year before Arendt’s - under the title *Criminal Case 40/61*. The scope of his reports, and of the book, was broader than the case itself. Mulisch wrote about his wanderings through Jerusalem, his excursions to the remnants of Eichmann’s office in Berlin, and about trips to Warsaw and Auschwitz.

The parallel reading I propose of both author’s works on the Eichmann trial seems more than appropriate. Not only do both books discuss the same theme but they are also characterized by the same tone or literary style. Both authors show how what they call “language destruction” operates in practice. From this we can learn something about what happens with language under totalitarian circumstances. Moreover, Arendt refers to Mulisch’s work in her book and acknowledges that he, as one of the very few, understood her perspective on both the trial and the person of Eichmann.

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10 During the trial, Arendt also wrote on other related topics, primarily in letters to her husband. See Lotte Köhler, ed., *Hannah Arendt Heinrich Blücher Briefe 1936-1968* (München & Zürich: Piper, 1999), 518ff.

11 Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, 282. Arendt wrote a letter to Mulisch dated January 27, 1964, in which she indicates that she is in agreement with most of the views expressed in *Criminal Case 40/61* and promises to use some quotes from Mulisch’s, which in fact she did, see Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, 27, 28, 96, and esp. 282. Arendt also mentions that she regrets that they did not meet in Jerusalem. A reproduction of the letter is published in R. Ammerlaan, *Zijn Eigen Land (His Own Country)* (Amsterdam: De Bezige Bij, 2016).
From the beginning, Arendt was critical towards the intentions of the State of Israel with regard to Eichmann’s trial. The builder of its location, the House of the People, Arendt writes, “had a theater in mind,” and she considers it “not a bad place for [this] show trial.” The journalists who attended the trial were supposed to see “a spectacle as sensational as the Nuremburg trials.” But it degenerated in “a rudderless ship tossed about on the waves,” especially, Arendt states with metaphorical eloquence, because the judge appeared unable to get a grip on the publicity machine of the prosecutor and the state. Eichmann declared himself not guilty in the sense of the indictment on all fifteen counts of the charge. What he had done were only crimes in retrospect; he had always been a law-abiding citizen, he stated, and had only acted according to the Führerbefehl (command of the leader). “He ‘personally’ had never anything whatsoever against Jews.” But, in Arendt’s writing, he emphasized how tough it had been for him to obey orders, and spoke about “the burden of responsibility and of importance that weighed supposedly on those who had to execute orders.” Here we have a first and typical example of Arendt’s ironic way of reporting. Of course, Arendt adds, Eichmann did not really say this, but this was the way he thought.

In a prison in Jerusalem, Eichmann wrote an autobiography which, according to Arendt, is a maze of stereotypes or clichés, referring to his description of his difficulties as a youngster, how he was fired, and how already in 1932 he joined the Nazi party, the NSDAP, and later the SS. Arendt concludes that Eichmann wanted to give his audience the impression that he was just “a typical member of the lower middle classes” (a “Kleinbürger”), while in reality being the “décadé son of a solid middle-class family.” With a lot of details - and detail is very important - Arendt relates how Eichmann after 1935 became an “expert” in the field of Judaism. His boss was Reinhard Heydrich, who in January 1942 organized the Wannsee Conference and who informed representatives of other parts of the Reich of the Führerbefehl on the Final

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13 Ibid., 6.
14 Ibid., 9.
15 Ibid., 26.
16 Ibid., 27.
17 This is only one of the writings in which Eichmann strategically emphasized certain points, changed dates, or left out events, see Bettina Stangneth, *Eichmann before Jerusalem* (London: The Bodley Head, 2014).
Solution. Eichmann was an able secretary who provided ample preparatory documents in which he, to the convenience of both his boss and his other fellow-Nazis, calculated the number of Jews to be “extracted” from the European countries. All in all they numbered a mere eleven million. Eichmann taught himself some Hebrew - “a smattering of Hebrew,” as Arendt calls it, “not a very difficult accomplishment” - and actually immersed himself in the history of Judaism and Zionism. Eichmann became the perfect bureaucrat who organized with fanatical precision the transports of Jews to the East. Only once did he take the independent decision to cancel a transport. Arendt concludes thus: “[Eichmann] had a conscience, and his conscience functioned in the expected way for about four weeks, whereupon it began to function the other way around.” And this it did, even when in July 1944 the end of the Third Reich was inescapable. At that point, against the direct order of Himmler, Eichmann put half a million Hungarian Jews on transport. However, there were no means of transport left and they had to walk. There were virtually no survivors.

Arendt connects Eichmann’s moral poverty to the language that he employed during the trial. She quotes one of Eichmann’s statements during the trial: “Officialese [Amtssprache] (official bureaucratic speech) is my only language.” He dealt in platitudes, repetitive phrases, and clichés. Eichmann’s inability to speak in an eloquent manner, Arendt writes “was closely connected with an inability to think, namely, to think from the standpoint of somebody else. No communication was possible with him, not because he lied but because he was surrounded by the most reliable of all safeguards against the words and the presence of others, and hence against reality as such.”

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22 Arendt, Eichmann in Jerusalem, 95.
23 Ibid., 48.
24 Ibid., 49. The part of this sentence “namely, to think from the standpoint of somebody else” is crucial. Stangneth, Eichmann before Jerusalem, 268, excludes it from her considerations of Arendt’s statement on Eichmann’s thinking and thereby distorts the essence of it. Arendt’s protest against what might be called the betrayal of language has a forerunner in Montaigne, who wrote: “Our intelligence being by no other way communicable to one another but by a particular word, he who falsifies that betrays public society,” Michel de Montaigne, The Complete Essays of Montaigne, trans. D.M. Frame (Stanford CA: Stanford University Press, 1976), II.XVIII.
This is the core of Arendt’s view of this criminal, and it is precisely this determination of “thoughtlessness,”\(^\text{25}\) not the “monstrosity” of Eichmann that Israel wanted to show the world, that brings her at the end of the penultimate chapter to describe the whole thing as “the lesson of the fearsome, word-and-thought-defying banality of evil.”\(^\text{26}\)

Would Arendt herself have suspected that precisely this sentence, these three words in a report of over three hundred pages would have the effect it had? Because it was this sentence\(^\text{27}\) that made people, good friends of hers, discontinue their friendships of decades, it led to active campaigning against her book and her person, and made a French magazine pose the question “Hannah Arendt: est-elle une Naze? (Hannah Arendt: is she a Nazi?)” on its cover. According to David Cesarani, Eichmann’s biographer, over two hundred books and articles appeared that deal with the controversy raised by Arendt’s report.\(^\text{28}\) Arendt herself did not mean for the notorious phrase to be misunderstood in this way. To her, the crimes committed by Eichmann, namely, the attempt to eradicate the Jewish people, had as its goal the end of human plurality, which she had ardently defended in _The Human Condition_,\(^\text{29}\) and for her this was by no means a banal affair. It was to her the man himself who was banal, the man who succeeded in mistreating even the philosophy of Kant (his categorical imperative) in a banal way; the man who said moments before his execution, that he was a “believer in God,” which in Nazi-rhetoric implied the non-existence of an afterlife in the Christian sense.\(^\text{30}\) “Long live Germany, long live Argentina, long live Austria. I will never forget them.”\(^\text{31}\) were allegedly his last words. For Arendt he was all cliché in the flesh.

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\(^{25}\) Again, one may wonder if Eichmann really was “thoughtless”, and the doer of “thoughtless” evil. An alternative view might be that he was “thoughtful” evil in the flesh.

\(^{26}\) Arendt, _Eichmann in Jerusalem_, 252, emphasis in the original.

\(^{27}\) I am aware that besides Arendt’s wording of the banality of evil there are other aspects of her report that caused uproar, especially her depiction of the position of the Jewish Councils in Nazi-occupied countries. Cf. Corey Robin, “The Trials of Hannah Arendt,” _The Nation_, May 12, 2015, https://www.thenation.com/article/trials-hannah-arendt/.


\(^{30}\) For more detail, see Elizabeth Stewart’s chapter in this volume.

\(^{31}\) Arendt, _Eichmann in Jerusalem_, 252, emphasis in the original.
**Mulisch: Criminal Case 40/61**

Unlike Hannah Arendt Harry Mulisch describes in his report the judgment and the execution of Eichmann already in the first chapter, “The verdict and the execution. 3/26/61”.

Like Arendt, Mulisch highlights Eichmann’s characteristic thoughtlessness and uses a good dose of irony to do so: “Not only did Eichmann not know what he was doing when he transported his victims by the hundred [sic] of thousands to the gas chambers; in a sense he did not even know that he was doing something.”

Listening to Eichmann speaking brings Mulisch to the conclusion that he was “a wickedly unreal person, alienated from himself.”

To demonstrate the multi-faceted, multi-layered and distorted personality of Eichmann, Mulisch engineered a photo trick in which the face of Eichmann was divided in half and the mirrored halves were pasted together. Thus arose three Eichmanns, the “real,” the “barbaric, twisted mug of the mass murderer,” and finally the “human” Eichmann. The latter persona plays witness to the former two and is at the same time, according to Mulisch, the most enigmatic.

Like Arendt, Mulisch discusses the “difficult” life of Eichmann as a youngster, and uses all of his powers of irony in the description of the supposed correlation between these difficulties and his later deeds as a Nazi: “He is said to have had no friends, preferring solitary reading. This is supposed to help explain the mass murder. But it is also said that he was the leader of a youth gang that beat up Jewish boys. This, too, is supposed to explain the mass murder.”

Early in his career, he learned to “drink and to have sex, two things that kept him busy for the rest of his life”, and in addition to these two he “got to know two kinds of people … : Jews and Nazis.”

Nevertheless he taught himself, “being an ‘idealistic’ Hebrew, and confesses that had he been a Jew he would have developed into a fanatical Zionist. Mulisch writes that “[t]he frightening part is that he means it.”

Similarly to Arendt, Mulisch experiences the trial as a play and as an exercise in pedagogy: “the greatest public lesson in world history.” Also for Mulisch, Eichmann is no monster, he “turns out to be human: a somewhat grubby

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32 In the Dutch edition. In the English edition, Mulisch’s short foreword is chapter 1. Like Arendt Mulisch also read the transcripts from the interviews of Eichmann by Lessner.

33 Mulisch, *Criminal Case 40/61*, 4, emphasis in the original.

34 Ibid., 5.


36 Ibid., 17.

37 Ibid., 18.

38 Ibid., 22.

39 Ibid., 35.
man with a cold, wearing glasses.”

Other media reported on the appearance of his eyes as “snake eyes,” or “gas chamber,” but Mulisch has another interpretation: his eyes are “soft and somewhat velvety, which is only more horrifying.” He has multiple faces: an “inexplicably merciless face, sending shivers up my spine - a smattered face, simultaneously evoking strong pity.”

Eichmann is “a lonely, dying man”; “he has become a disease.” In later stages of the trial his face will become even more ruinous; it is in constant motion, and is sometimes “cramped into a horrendous grimace.”

Gradually, during the legal process a different picture unfolds. Eichmann shows himself to be a civil servant who would have obeyed anybody in power: “I obeyed. Whatever they might have ordered me to do, I would have obeyed. Certainly, I would have obeyed. I did obey. I obeyed - I cannot escape from my skin.” For Mulisch, this constitutes the core of the uniqueness of Eichmann, and he responds to Eichmann’s “confession” with a bout of irony: “If not Adolf Hitler but Albert Schweitzer had been the Reich’s Chancellor in those years, and if Eichmann had received an order to transport all sick blacks to modern hospitals, then he would have carried out that order without fail … He is less a criminal than he is someone capable of anything.” The order preceded everything else, but when the giver of orders was no longer among the living, Eichmann made a 180-degree turn and became a peaceful citizen in Argentina. The difference between Eichmann and a machine is that the latter is put together, the former conceived.

His capabilities for adaptation are miraculous: during the interrogations in Israel not one cross word passed his lips. Mulisch concludes: “This extremely useful, absolutely uncorrupted, highly dangerous man is the precise opposite of a ‘rebel’ […] He is a machine that is good for anything. He is the right man in the right place. He is the ideal of psycho-technology.” Like Arendt, Mulisch notices Eichmann’s use of language, or

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40 Ibid., 37.
41 Ibid.
42 Ibid., 131.
43 Ibid., 111.
44 Ibid., 111-112. Stangneth denies this. She repudiates the statement made by Nazi-hunter Simon Wiesenthal that “Eichmann would have persecuted red-haired or blue-eyed people with the same commitment if someone had ordered him to.” The crucial reason, for Stangneth, is “that Eichmann was so receptive to the totalitarian system that he was already in thrall to totalitarian thought,” see Eichmann before Jerusalem, 222.
45 Mulisch, Criminal Case 40/61, 112.
46 Ibid., 115.
47 Ibid., 119.
rather as she calls it, his struggle with the German language and his inability to control this. And these endless phrases-within-phrases from which humanity has disappeared bring Mulisch to a concluding remark: “This way of speaking is Fascism.”

“I am quickly becoming a real reporter,” says Mulisch in Jerusalem, and he is proud of a scoop: reading Eichmann’s autobiography that he wrote during his imprisonment and that counts 200 pages. Mulisch comments that “Everything is correct time wise, but there is not a word of truth.” Eichmann wrote the text like a machine, like a crazed machine without operator: “Hungary 1944 shows this.” In June 1944, going against his superiors, Eichmann ordered the Jewish leader in Budapest, Brand, to fly to the Allies to negotiate “the most insane offer in world history,” namely, the exchange of one million Jews for ten thousand trucks. The deal failed and, ultimately, writes Mulisch, the man who least deserved it was made into a “myth.”

Conclusion: Devastating Irony

Not only Arendt but Mulisch as well has been criticized for the tone of his report. Mulisch was accused of identifying too much with the subject, and was he not a Jew himself? He discusses these matters at the end of his book. Mulisch does not see himself as a journalist but as a writer; he asked to be sent to Jerusalem to report on the trial, which he has in common with Arendt. Eichmann, Mulisch writes, “has cured me of many things: of indignation with-

49 Ibid., 127, emphasis in the original. In the Dutch edition, unlike the English one, Mulisch quotes Eichmann in German: “Where possible quotations are in German, for in Dutch they are nog longer what they are: dangerous. For those who cannot read German, one of the most important entrances to criminal case 40/61 will in this way remain closed – maybe that makes them fortunate,” De Zaak 40/61. Een Reportage (The Case 40/61. A Report) (Amsterdam: De Bezige Bij, 2010), 1, translation by author - JB. In the typescript, Mulisch writes as follows: “In order to make this clear I will have to cite even more in German, I am sorry, but I will not translate it – in Dutch it would not be anymore what it is: dangerous. It has advantages to write in Dutch,” Mulisch, Harry, De Zaak 40/61. Een Reportage (Criminal Case 40/61. A Report), 1961, typescript located at Harry Mulisch House Amsterdam, 98. Translation by the author - JB. The sentence is crossed out, by Mulisch I suppose, and does not appear in either the Dutch or the English edition.

50 Mulisch, Criminal Case 40/61, 133.

51 Ibid., 134. From Stangneth’s recent extensive investigation in Eichmann before Jerusalem of many available autobiographical documents that Eichmann wrote in the different phases of his life we may conclude that lying is the guiding threat of his personality.

52 Mulisch, Criminal Case 40/61, 137.

53 Ibid., 142.
out obligation, for example, but also of much carefreeness. He has also taught me a certain vigilance: my eyes have opened a little wider. I see him, myself, as well as others, in a brighter light. [...] This is where speechlessness begins."

Mulisch and Arendt both had to deal with “language destruction.” Was the irony, the devastating irony used by them, the only weapon left for these reporters? Was not the alternative to remain silent? Knott argues that for Arendt irony was “her means of holding experience at arm’s length in order to think it through, a protection against panic and powerfully aggressive impulses that would only interfere with her ability to judge.” Irony, indicating statements of which the intended meaning is the opposite of what appears to be expressed, is the dominant literary style in both works. By using irony authors run the risk of not being understood, for in a sense they “redescribe” reality. In my opinion, Mulisch goes further than Arendt, because for him not only Eichmann and his evil deeds were at stake, but also himself as a writer. He makes it clear how fundamentally the trial changed his perception of life and of himself. Undoubtedly, Arendt also experienced the impact of the trial, but the impact was probably more incisive after the publication of her report and its reception in the Jewish world and the world at large.

The Eichmann trial left a number of questions unanswered, such as the question who Eichmann “really” was. If he was not a monster but a boring servant, then what does this mean for the chance of repetition of his behavior? Exactly this question caused Arendt to immerse herself in ideas and

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54 Mulisch, Criminal Case 40/61, 159, emphasis in the original.
56 Mulisch himself defined irony as follows: “He who speaks ironically states the opposite of what he means, but in such a way, that the other sees through this,” Harry Mulisch, Het Ironische van de Ironie (The Irony of Irony) (Brussel: Manteau, 1976), 52, author’s translation - JB. The problem, according to Mulisch, was that many people did not see through this when it came to Criminal Case 40/61 and Arendt’s Eichmann in Jerusalem.
58 Knott analyzes in detail Arendt’s behavior during the famous Gaus interview in 1964, which includes what Knott calls “bizarre laughter,” Unlearning with Hannah Arendt, 20. I would argue that, on this occasion, laughter has taken the place of language because Arendt realizes that regular language does not suffice. Arendt has written and spoken about her laughter on several occasions, e.g. Arendt, “What Remains?” 27.
60 Arendt categorically rejects the idea that there might be “an Eichmann in every one of us” as some commentators of her work would have it, see Melvyn A. Hill, Hannah Arendt: The Recovery of the Public World (New York: St.-Martin’s Press, 1979), 308.
practices of thinking and their history, which resulted in part one of *Life of the Mind*. In this book, every trace of irony is gone and replaced by serious philosophical investigation. And what about Mulisch? He decided that he did not want to be a reporter but, instead, continued to produce an impressive literary output including masterpieces such as *The Assault* and *The Discovery of Heaven* and, much later, *Siegfried*. Themes of the Second World War permeate much of his work. In one instance he even said: “It’s not that I have “experienced” the Second World War; I am that war.” Irony for Mulisch became self-irony as the only way to fight off the outside world and to relate to its brokenness. The impact on public discourse of both authors’ works about Eichmann continues to date - but that is a different matter for another time and another place.

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65 Harry Mulisch, *De Pupil (The Pupil)* (Amsterdam: De Bezige Bij, 2012).
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Index

A

Adorno, Theodor W., 161, 162, 164, 165, 167, 168, 170, 350
aesthetics, 48, 162, 406
Agamben, Giorgio, 350, 353, 357, 361
aggression, 147, 299
*agora*, 367, 368, 369
algebraic geometry, 278
alienation, 19, 161, 164, 291, 306, 313, 315, 391, 392
*amor mundi*, 367, 371
Amsterdam University College, vii, 9, 50
anarchism, 366
Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, 19, 335, 337, 351, 357
Arendt, *Origins of Totalitarianism*, 319, 362, 369
aristocracy, 275, 292
Aristophanes, 105, 106, 111, 112, 113, 115, 117, 120
Aristophanes, *Clouds*, 105, 106, 107, 112, 113, 114, 120
arithmetic, 14, 45, 137, 280
astronomy, 14, 45, 109, 214, 280
*Ausbildung*, 162, 163, 170
autonomy, 291, 292, 327, 386, 395

B

Bacon, Francis, 159, 165, 277, 278, 282
Benjamin, Walter, 362, 371
Bible, 17, 43, 90, 171, 221
*Bildung*, 53, 54, 101, 147, 163, 170
*Bildungskanon*, 15, 16, 165
*Book of Job*, 220, 221, 222, 227, 230, 231
Bruegel, Pieter the Elder, 17, 233, 234, 239, 242, 244

C

Cartesian dualism, 381
Cervantes, *Don Quixote*, 259
Christ, Jesus, 238, 239, 242, 243
Christian, 90, 225, 236, 237, 240, 260, 340
citizenship, 105, 276, 283
civic engagement, 9, 119, 129
civil disobedience, 368
civilization, 20, 47, 48, 73, 74, 116, 120, 297, 298, 299, 328, 350, 352, 354, 371
classical tradition, 14
cognition, 380, 381
cognitive sciences, 375, 376, 381
Columbia College, 275
communism, 62, 322
community colleges, 36
conference, vii, 9, 10, 25, 27, 39, 66
conscience, 290, 299, 324
constructivism, 162
consumerism, 164
core curriculum, 33, 43, 51, 71, 72, 73, 74, 80, 81, 116, 119, 259, 260
creativity, 9, 19, 36, 39, 45, 124, 291, 302
Critical Pedagogy, 169
curiosity, 25, 31, 53, 243
curricular, 21, 107, 115, 117, 120, 126, 129
Cusa, Nicholas of, 241, 242

D
deliberative democracy, 115, 118
democracy, 12, 34, 38, 40, 105, 106, 107, 110, 112, 113, 115, 120, 123, 147, 319, 351, 353, 354
Descartes, Discourse on Method, 18, 274, 277
Descartes, Meditations on the First Philosophy, 283
Descartes, René, 18, 273, 277, 278, 279, 281, 282, 283, 285, 376, 377, 379
Descartes, The Geometry, 277
Dewey, John, 169, 371
dictatorship, 322, 324, 327
digitalization, 94, 95
direct democracy, 268
dissociation, 349, 356, 367
divine love, 193, 195
dogmatism, 115

E
economics, 10, 37, 51, 73, 116, 260, 261
embodiment, 20, 375
empathy, 19, 53, 219, 240, 243, 320, 321, 331, 380
Enlightenment, 13, 20, 148, 150, 163, 320, 350, 361, 365, 367
epistemology, 88, 379
epistemology of the eye, 375, 376
epistemology of the hand, 376
Erasmus, Desiderius, 47, 238
Erasmus, Praise of Folly, 238
Esposito, Roberto, 350, 356, 357, 361
Euclid, 278, 280
exclusion, 51, 351, 353, 356
existentialism, 20, 195, 385, 386, 390, 395, 397, 402
extracurricular, 118, 119, 129

F
feminism, 98, 154, 162
Forgiveness, 9
formative, 9, 10, 43, 44, 46, 54, 273
Foucault, Michel, 349, 350, 365, 386, 389, 397
fragmentation, 20, 95, 385, 388, 389, 390, 393, 397
Freud, Civilization and its Discontents, 19, 297
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Index</th>
<th>409</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Freud, <em>Group Psychology</em>, 352</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Freud, Sigmund, 19, 159, 165, 275, 297, 298, 299, 300, 301, 302, 314, 351, 352, 354, 355</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>friendship, 195, 298, 367, 371, 395</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>G</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gadamer, Hans-Georg, 307, 312, 313, 317</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Galileo, Galilei, 277, 278, 282</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gallese, Vittorio, 380</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gandhi, Mahatma, 10, 368</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>genealogy, 13, 14</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>general education, 11, 25, 43, 44, 46, 54, 85, 260, 403</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>genocidal violence, 349</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>genocide, 164, 354</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>geometry, 14, 45, 214, 280</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>great books, 18, 25, 27, 54, 68, 73, 115, 142, 260, 268, 275</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Greek tragedy, 349, 354</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grossman, Vasili, 322, 323, 324, 325, 326, 329, 331</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>guilt, 19, 225, 227, 299, 306, 310, 313, 314, 315, 326</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>H</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Halbbildung</em>, 170, 171</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hanks, Tom, 34</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>happiness, 135, 205, 210, 222, 297, 299, 300</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>health sciences, 217, 218, 219</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hegel, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich, 47, 159, 165, 365</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hegel, <em>Phenomenology of Spirit</em>, 149</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Heidegger, Martin, 47, 209, 281, 361, 362, 364, 367</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hesiod, 187, 192</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hitler oath, 352, 353</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hitler, Adolf, 157, 159, 165, 352</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Holocaust, 224, 336, 367</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Homer, 10, 16, 131, 159, 165, 177, 178, 180, 182, 186, 187, 192, 371</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Homer, <em>Iliad</em>, 16, 177, 181, 182</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Homer, <em>Odyssey</em>, 16, 177, 181, 182</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Homeric poetry, 16, 179</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>honor, 74, 206, 223, 224, 225, 231</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>hope, 326</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>humanism, 147, 152</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>humanistic, 17, 126, 128, 217, 218, 219, 221</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Husserl, Edmund, 375</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hutchins, Robert, 78, 149</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>hyperreflexivity, 391, 392, 397</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>I</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>identity, 162, 260, 364, 365, 386, 392</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ideology, 19, 147, 161, 317, 323, 324, 328, 355</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>imagination, 9, 11, 12, 30, 31, 57, 67, 69, 103</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>impiety, 106, 191</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>injustice, 19, 170, 309, 311, 314, 320, 332</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>innocence, 223, 227, 228, 265, 267, 326</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
interdisciplinarity, 50, 141, 302, 361
interdisciplinary, 20, 73, 110, 139, 162, 165, 217, 219, 220, 233, 260, 301, 350, 361, 365, 366
interpretation, 13, 17, 26, 52, 118, 233, 234, 235, 236, 237, 243
interpretive relativism, 118
irony, 178, 179, 187, 193, 335, 341, 342, 343, 344, 345, 357, 384
Israel, 336, 338, 340, 342, 352

J

Jaspers, Karl, 231, 361, 362
Jewish, 340, 343, 344, 363, 364
Jews, 157, 301, 336, 339, 343, 362, 363, 368
justice, 54, 66, 74, 118, 133, 203, 204, 205, 211, 212, 213, 214, 307, 308, 313

K

Kant, Immanuel, 15, 47, 88, 150, 151, 159, 165, 170, 285, 320, 321, 340, 365
Kierkegaard, Søren, 101, 388, 389, 390, 393, 394, 395, 396, 397

L

Lacan, Jacques, 354
language destruction, 337
law, 51, 305, 316
legality, 354
liberal arts and sciences education, 10, 11, 21, 50, 52, 161, 164, 379
literature, 10, 12, 14, 17, 18, 19, 30, 44, 45, 51, 66, 67, 68, 73, 82, 84, 217, 231, 261, 320, 331, 391
logic, 26, 43, 48, 51, 109
Lope de Vega, Fuenteovejuna, 18, 259, 260, 261, 262
love, 72, 118, 195, 224, 262, 265, 298, 299, 351
Luhmann, Niklas, 307, 310, 311, 317

M

Machiavelli, Niccolò, 100, 241
Machiavelli, The Prince, 241
Maritain, Jacques, 66, 67
Marx, Karl, 159, 161, 165, 170, 328, 365
Marxism, 154, 161, 163, 169, 366, 371
mathematics, 10, 18, 27, 30, 48, 55, 56, 73, 84, 109, 138, 276, 279, 280, 281, 282, 283
medical humanities, 218
medical sciences, 44, 46, 367
memorization, 99
Merleau-Ponty, Eye and Mind, 20, 375, 377, 378, 379, 381
Merleau-Ponty, Maurice, 376, 377, 378, 379, 381
metaphysics, 15, 148, 149, 150, 152
methodology, 30, 379, 403
MOOC’s, 100
moral community, 313, 321
moral relativism, 111
moral value, 16
morality, 16, 19, 111, 139, 194, 283, 285, 290, 316
Mulisch, *Criminal Case 40/61*, 19, 335, 337, 341
Mulisch, Harry, 335, 336, 337, 341, 342, 343, 344, 345
music, 14, 45, 55, 56, 71, 89, 94, 127, 129, 132, 171, 214, 217, 280, 326, 327, 361

N

narcissism, 20, 367
natural sciences, 10, 45, 46, 51, 56
Nazis, 336, 339, 368
Nazism, 319, 356, 369
neoliberal university, 94
neurosciences, 218, 379
Newman, John Henry, 77
Nietzsche, Friedrich, 47, 88, 159, 165, 210, 363, 364, 371
nihilism, 202, 214
Nussbaum, Martha, 107, 115, 117, 161

O

ontology, 213, 379

P

paideia, 137, 147, 154, 156
pastoral poetry, 262
paternal love, 268
pedagogical, 10, 16, 21, 54, 159, 162, 166, 167, 233, 292
performativity, 140, 142
philosophy, 10, 14, 19, 43, 44, 45, 46, 47, 48, 51, 54, 55, 68, 69, 73, 82, 84, 89, 93, 117, 138, 201, 217, 276, 283, 301, 361
Plato, 10, 17, 44, 54, 56, 68, 100, 105, 106, 109, 132, 159, 179, 191, 193, 194, 200, 201, 207, 214, 261, 267, 269, 280, 320, 368, 375, 376, 379
Plato, *Apology*, 106, 191
Plato, *Crito*, 267, 269
Plato, *Euthyphro*, 16, 191
Plato, *Republic*, 17, 54, 111, 280
pluralism, 11, 16, 17, 52, 120, 147, 211, 212, 213, 214, 240
poetic imagination, 12, 70
poetry, 12, 14, 45, 56, 66, 67, 68, 74, 98, 109, 112, 125, 134, 135, 136, 171, 188, 371
political science, 19, 51, 54, 56, 82, 88, 116, 301, 362, 366
political space, 349, 353, 369, 372
political theology, 353
positivism, 161
post-colonialism, 154, 162
postmodernism, 20, 167, 383, 384, 385, 386, 387, 388, 390, 391, 397
postmodernist, 383, 384, 385, 386, 388, 389, 391, 392, 397
poststructuralism, 385, 389
pride, 68, 225
psychiatry, 19, 98, 297, 301
psychoanalysis, 301, 302
Index

psychology, 19, 47, 51, 82, 88, 162, 218, 297, 301

Q
quadrivium, 45, 214, 274, 280, 281, 282, 283

R
relativism, 112, 114, 115, 117, 199, 202, 285
Renaissance, 233
research universities, 12, 50, 52, 53, 77, 80, 81, 87
rhetoric, 14, 45, 51
Rorty, Richard, 212, 320, 321, 322, 331
Rousseau, Jean-Jacques, 18, 151, 170, 289, 290, 291, 292, 293, 294
rule of law, 351

S
Sartre, Jean-Paul, 195, 291, 370, 386, 393, 395, 396, 397
Schmitt, Carl, 349, 353, 361
sciences, 43, 47, 63, 74, 136, 137, 138, 235, 379
scientific methodology, 376
self-becoming, 386, 393, 394, 395, 397
self-directed learning, 29, 53
self-knowledge, 18, 109, 275, 282, 284, 312
Seneca, 33, 34, 40
sexuality, 298
Shakespeare, 261, 269
Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, 266
Shakespeare, *King Lear*, 218, 221, 230, 231
Shakespeare, *Macbeth*, 266
Shakespeare, *Richard III*, 266, 269
Shakespeare, William, 17, 100, 221
Shoah, 20, 335
Showalter, Elaine, 98, 99
Showalter, *The Female Malady*, 98
social sciences, 10, 51, 71
sociology, 10, 19, 47, 88, 301
Socrates, 26, 29, 54, 56, 101, 105
Socratic education, 105, 106, 107, 109, 110, 112, 113, 115
Sophocles, 351, 354, 356
Soviet Union, 319, 322, 323, 330, 331, 369
specialization, 18, 25, 44, 47, 66, 74, 165, 281, 283, 285, 301
St. John’s College, 11, 25, 27, 70, 71, 80, 84, 129, 275, 279
Stalinism, 319, 323
state, 11, 35, 37, 39, 164, 306, 324, 325, 326, 327, 329, 338, 368, 369
Strauss, Leo, 178
sympathy, 320, 321, 331

T
teaching methodology, 219
team-taught, 361, 363
technology, 20, 63, 74, 94, 142, 283, 285, 298, 367
theology, 19, 44, 68, 73, 82, 84, 89, 93, 109, 116, 171, 242, 301
Thucydides, 371
totalitarian personality, 351, 352
totalitarian state, 19, 317, 324, 325, 369
totalitarianism, 19, 166, 319, 331
Totalitarianism, 369
tradition, 10, 13, 14, 15, 17, 27, 34, 36, 38, 47, 48, 72, 73, 82, 102, 103, 109, 116, 124, 147, 148, 156, 159, 160, 165, 167, 200, 201, 234,
Index

transdisciplinary, 26, 28, 30, 31, 53, 119
transformative, 11, 12, 14, 72
trivium, 45, 274, 280
tyrannicide, 262, 265, 266
tyranny, 19, 314
tyrant, 265, 267

U
University of Chicago, 36, 78, 80
University of Dallas, 12, 63, 64, 66, 73, 80
University of Navarra, 18, 260, 261, 267
University of Notre Dame, 12, 78
utilitarianism, 110, 113, 120

V
value studies, 117
Varela, Francisco, 379
violence, 192, 290, 316, 353, 354, 357, 369, 370
virtue, 14, 66, 74, 147, 192, 195, 199, 200, 203, 205
virtue ethics, 88
vita activa, 368, 369

W
Wallace, David Foster, 383, 384, 385, 386, 387, 388, 390, 391, 393, 395, 397
Wallace, *Infinite Jest*, 20, 383, 384, 386, 388, 391, 392, 393, 394, 395, 396, 397
Weber, Max, 151, 209
Wirkungsgeschichte, 275

Y
Yeshiva College, 361, 363