

*TIJS Graduate Research & Travel Grants
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KAREN MCCARTHY, Philosophy

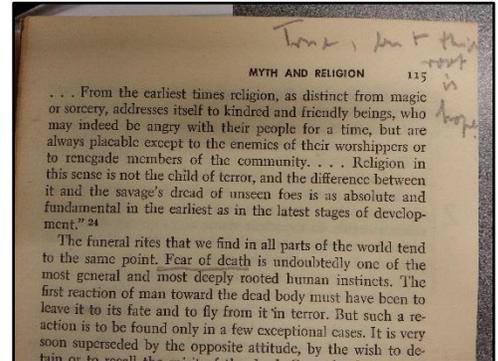
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Advisor: N. McAfee (Philosophy)

Purpose: Visit the Hannah Arendt Center at Bard College to research the personal library of Hannah Arendt – specifically, her annotations and marginalia within her collection of Ernst Cassirer’s work

Thanks to the Schatten Scholarship Grant award by the Tam Institute for Jewish Studies at Emory University, I was able to travel to Bard College and visit the Hannah Arendt Library. This library contains the personal collection of Hannah Arendt and allows the researcher a very special view into her thinking. A central claim in my dissertation is that we can better understand Arendt’s interpretation of Kant if we understand her reading of Ernst Cassirer’s Kant. The relationship between the two philosophers is one that is grounded in the roots of their shared tradition of liberal Judaism.

While Arendt rarely quotes directly from Cassirer, her personal library contains several volumes of his work, volumes that span decades, languages, and continents. I was able to trace through these works an ongoing interest and entanglement with Cassirer. Her marginalia and annotations highlighted where they agreed, and at what point their thinking broke apart. While I went expecting to spend the bulk of my time examining Arendt and Cassirer on *Kant*, I found a much more complicated, and personally exciting, web of influences that extended much earlier and more widespread in Arendt’s work than I had previously thought. While it is true that the common core between Arendt and Cassirer is their early 20th Century Germanic work with Kant (and their particular shared interest in the *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, the third and largely ignored critique), what I found in the archives was that this connection hinged not only on academic points of interest, but also brought together two practical concerns. The annotations and marginalia in these books and papers drew a connection between the threads of philosophy of science and technology that one stumbles over in Arendt’s work and the political philosophy, particularly her work on judgment, for which she is better known.



Cassirer worked closely with, and on, the early atomic physicists, and wrote extensively on Einstein and quantum physics — and these were works that Arendt had kept with her throughout her life. Her personal library held the philosophical works of Bohr, Oppenheimer, Planck, Heisenberg, and Schrödinger — many of which are cited by or cite Ernst Cassirer. The annotations and marginalia highlighted where the physicists indulged in a strange sort of Kantianism, one which lent itself to a worldview of determinism and resignation. It is exactly this strained reading of Kantian metaphysics and morals Arendt identifies in Adolf Eichmann. Her reading of Cassirer’s writings focused on those points where he also called for a return to a sense of responsibility toward the world, but she clearly resisted his answer, which was rooted in the possibility of a perfected science. For Arendt, the question for, and answer to, the problems of the modern world would always be first be grounded in the human possibility of beginning, the root of hope.

