

Hannah Arendt
The Life of the Mind

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Hannah Arendt

The Life of the Mind Texts

Edited by Wout Cornelissen, Thomas Bartscherer,
and Anne Eusterschulte

Herausgegeben von Wout Cornelissen, Thomas Bartscherer
und Anne Eusterschulte

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THE LIFE OF THE MIND

Hannah Arendt

THE LIFE OF THE MIND

Nunquam se plus agere quam nihil cum
ageret, nunquam minus solum esse quam
cum solus esset.

Cato

Every one of us is like a man who
sees things in a dream and thinks
that he knows them perfectly and then
wakes up to find that he knows no-
thing.

Plato, Statesman

Hannah Arendt

10

THE LIFE OF THE MIND

15

Numquam se plus agere quam nihil cum
ageret, numquam minus solum esse quam
cum solus esset.

Cato

20

Every one of us is like a man who sees
things in a dream and thinks that he knows
them perfectly and then wakes up to find
that he knows nothing.

Plato, Statesman

THINKING

5

Thinking does not bring knowledge as do the sciences.
Thinking does not produce usable practical wisdom.
Thinking does not solve the riddles of the universe.
Thinking does not endow us directly with the power to act.
Martin Heidegger

10

Introduction

15 The title I gave to this lecture series, *The Life of the Mind*, sounds pretentious, and to talk about Thinking seems to me so presumptuous that I feel I should start less with an apology than with a justification. No justification, of course, is needed for the topic itself, especially not in the framework of eminence inherent in the Gifford Lectures; what disturbs me is that I try my hand
20 at it for I have neither claim nor ambition to being a “philosopher” or what Kant, not without irony, called the “*Denker von Gewerbe*,” the “professional thinkers.”^{1a} The question then is, shouldn’t I have left these problems with the experts, and the answer to it will have to spell out what prompted me not to leave well enough alone but to venture forth from the relatively safe fields
25 of political science and theory into these rather awesome matters.

On the level of factual genesis, my preoccupation with mental activities has two rather different origins. The immediate impulse came from my attending the Eichmann trial in Jerusalem, and in my report on it I spoke of “the banality of evil.” Behind this term, I held no theory or doctrine, although I
30 was dimly aware of the fact that our tradition of thought—literary, theological, or philosophic—on the phenomenon of evil was opposed to it. Evil, we have learned, is something demonic; its incarnation is Satan, a “lightning fall from heaven” (St. Luke, 10:18) or Lucifer, the fallen angel (“The devil is an angel too,” Unamuno) whose sin is pride (“proud as Lucifer”), namely,
35 that *superbia* of which only the best are capable: they don’t want to serve God but to be like Him; evil men, we are told, act out of envy; this may be the resentment of not having turned out well | without any fault of their own [2]
(Richard III) or the envy of Cain who slew Abel because “God had regard

40 1a Critique of Pure Reason, B872

for his offering but for Cain and his offering he had no regard.” They may also be prompted by weakness (Macbeth) or, on the contrary, by the powerful hatred of wickedness for sheer goodness (Iago’s “I hate the Moor: my cause is hearted” or Claggart’s hatred for Billy Budd’s “barbarian” innocence, a “depravity according to nature”) or by covetousness, “the root of all evils” (*Radix omnium malorum cupiditas*). However, what I was confronted with was utterly different and still undeniably factual; I was struck by the manifest shallowness in the doer which made it impossible to trace the uncontested evil of his deeds to any deeper level of roots or motives. However monstrous the deeds were, the doer—at least one of them and a very effective one who now was on trial—was quite ordinary, commonplace, and neither demonic nor monstrous. In the absence of firm ideological convictions and also of specific evil motives, the only characteristic one could detect in his past as well as during the trial and in the preceding police examination was something entirely negative: it was not stupidity but *thoughtlessness*. In the setting of Israeli court and prison procedures he functioned as well as he had functioned under the Nazi regime; but when confronted with situations for which such routine procedures did not exist he was helpless, and his cliché-ridden language produced now as it had done then a kind of macabre comedy. Clichés, stock phrases, adherence to conventional, standardized codes of expression and conduct have the socially recognized function of protecting us against reality, that is, against the claim on our thinking attention which all events and facts arouse by virtue of their existence. If we were responsive to this claim all the time, we would soon be exhausted; the difference in Eichmann was only that he clearly knew of no such claim at all.

It was this absence of thinking, which is so ordinary an experience in our everyday life where we have hardly the time, let alone the inclination, to [3] *stop* and think, that aroused my interest. Is evil-doing, not just the | sins of omission but the sins of commission, possible in the absence of not merely “base motives” (as the law calls it) but of any motives at all, any particular prompting of interest or volition? Is wickedness, however we may define it, this being “determined to prove a villain,” *not* a necessary condition for evil-doing? Should the problem of good and evil, should our faculty to tell right from wrong be connected with our faculty of thought? To be sure, not in the sense that thinking could ever produce the good deed as its result as though “virtue could be taught” and learned; only habits and customs can be taught, and we know only too well the alarming speed with which they are unlearned and forgotten when new circumstances demand a change in manners and patterns of behavior. [(The fact that we usually treat of the matters

of good and evil in “morals” or “ethics” may indicate how little we know about them, for morals comes from *mores* and ethics from *ethos*, the Latin and the Greek word for customs and habit, whereby the Latin associates with *mores* rules of behavior, whereas the Greek meaning is derived from habitat like our habits.)] The thoughtlessness I was confronted with sprang neither from oblivion of former, presumably good manners nor from stupidity in the sense of inability to comprehend, not even in the sense of “moral insanity,” for it was quite obvious in matters that had nothing to do with so-called ethical decisions or matters of conscience.

The question that imposed itself was: Could the activity of thinking as such, the habit of examining whatever happens to come to pass or to attract attention, regardless of results and specific content, could this activity be among the conditions or even actually “condition” men in such a way that they abstain from evil-doing? (The very word *con-science*, at any rate, points in this direction insofar as it means “to know with and by myself,” a kind of knowledge that is actualized in every thinking process.) And is not this hypothesis enforced by everything we know about conscience, namely, that a “good conscience” exists only as absence of bad conscience, of which, it seems, only “good” people are capable, whereas really bad people, criminals and such, as a rule are never bothered by it. To put it differently and use Kantian language: after having been struck by a fact which, willy-nilly “put me in the possession of a concept” (the banality of evil), I could not help raising the *quaestio iuris* and asking myself “with what right I possessed and used it.”¹ [4]

Second, moral questions, originating in factual experience, and turning against the wisdom of the ages in these matters [—not only against the various traditional answers which “ethics,” a branch of philosophy, has offered to the problem of evil, but the much larger and much less urgent answers which philosophy holds ready for the question *What is thinking?*—] were liable to renew in me certain doubts which had plagued me ever since I finished a study on what my publisher wisely called “The Human Condition,” but which I had intended more modestly as an inquiry into “The Vita Activa.” I had been concerned with the problem of Action, the oldest concern of political theory, and what had always troubled me in this concern was that the very term under which I reflected on this matter, namely, *Vita activa*, was coined by those who themselves were devoted to the contemplative way of life and looked upon all kinds of being alive from this perspective.

Seen from this perspective, the active way of life is “laborious,” the contemplative way is sheer quietness, the active one is in public, the contemplative

¹ Notes to the lectures on *Metaphysics*, Ak. Ausg. XVIII, 5636.

one in the “desert,” the active one is devoted to “the necessity of one’s neighbor,” the contemplative one to the “vision of God.” [(*Duae sunt vitae, activa et contemplativa. Activa est in labore, contemplativa in requie. Activa in publico, contemplativa in deserto. Activa in necessitate proximi, contemplativa in visione Dei.*)²] I quoted from a medieval author of the 12th century, almost at random, because this notion that contemplation is the highest state of mind is as old as Western philosophy. The thinking activity, according to Plato the soundless dialogue we carry on with ourselves, only serves to open the eyes of the mind, and even the Aristotelian *nous* is an organ for seeing and beholding the truth. In other words, thinking ends and aims at contemplation, and contemplation is no activity but a passivity, it is the point where mental activity comes to rest. According to later Christian traditions when philosophy had become the handmaiden of theology, thinking became meditation, and meditation again ended in contemplation, a kind of blessed state of the soul where the mind no longer stretches out to know the truth but, in anticipation of a future state, is temporarily given truth in intuition. [(Descartes, characteristically, still called “*Méditations*” the treatise in which he set out to demonstrate God’s existence.)] With the rise of the modern age, thinking became chiefly the handmaiden of science, of organized knowledge; and even though thinking now became extremely active, following the crucial conviction of modernity that I can know only what I make myself, it was Mathematics, the non-empirical science par excellence where the mind appears to play only with itself, which turned out to be the Science of sciences, delivering the key to knowing those laws of nature and the universe which are concealed by appearances. If it was axiomatic for Plato that the invisible eye of the soul was the organ for beholding invisible truth with the certainty of knowledge, it became axiomatic for Descartes—during the famous night of his 1 “revelation”—that there existed “a fundamental accord between the *laws* of nature [which are concealed by appearances and deceptive sense perceptions] and the laws of mathematics”³; that is, between the laws of discursive thinking on the highest, most abstract level, and the laws of whatever lies behind mere semblance in nature. And he actually believed that with this kind of thinking, with what Hobbes called “reckoning with consequences,” he could deliver certain knowledge about the existence of God, the nature of the soul, and similar matters.

What interested me in the *Vita Activa* was that this notion of complete

2 Hugh of St. Victor.

3 Andre Bridoux, *Introduction to Descartes*, p.viii. Cf. Galileo, “les mathématiques sont la langue dans laquelle est écrit l’univers.”

quietness in contemplating was so overwhelming that compared with this stillness all other differences between the various activities in the Vita Activa disappeared. Compared to this quiet, it was no longer important whether you labored and tilled the soil, or worked and produced use-objects, or acted together with others in certain enterprises. Even Marx in whose work and thought the question of action plays such a crucial role “uses the expression ‘Praxis’ simply in the sense of ‘what man does’ as opposed to ‘what man thinks.’”^{3a} I was, however, aware that one could look at this matter from an altogether different viewpoint, and to indicate my doubts I ended this study of active life with a curious sentence that Cicero ascribed to Cato, who used to say that “never is he more active than when he does nothing, never is he less alone than when he is by himself.” (*Numquam se plus agere quam nihil cum ageret, numquam minus solum esset quam cum solus esset.*)⁴ Assuming that Cato was right, the questions are obvious: What are we “doing” when we do nothing but think? Where are we when we, normally always surrounded by our fellow-men, are together with no one but ourselves?

Obviously, to raise such questions has its difficulties. At first glance, they seem to belong to what used to be called philosophy or metaphysics, two terms and two fields of inquiry which, as we all know, have fallen into disrepute. If this were merely a matter of modern positivist and neo-positivist assaults, we need perhaps not be concerned. Carnap’s statement that metaphysics should be regarded like poetry certainly goes counter to the claims usually made by metaphysicians; but these, like Carnap’s own evaluation, may be based on an underestimation of poetry. Heidegger, whom Carnap singled out for attack, countered by stating that thinking and poetry were indeed closely related, they were not identical but sprang from the same source—the source is thinking. And Aristotle, whom so far no one has accused of writing “mere” poetry, was of the same opinion: poetry and philosophy somehow belong together. Wittgenstein’s famous aphorism, “What we cannot speak of we must be silent about,” on the other side, would, if taken seriously, apply not only to what lies beyond sense experience but, on the contrary, even more to objects of sensation. Nothing we see or hear or touch can be adequately expressed in words as they are given to the senses. Hegel was entirely right when he pointed out that “the This of sense ... cannot be reached by language.”⁵

3a Lobkowitz, p. 419

4 *De Re Publica*, I, 17.

5 *Phenomenology of Mind*, Trans. by Baillie, “Sense-Certainty,” p. 159.

Was it not precisely the discovery of a discrepancy between words, the medium in which we think, and the world of appearances, the medium in which we live, that led to philosophy and metaphysics in the first place? Except that in the beginning, it was thinking, be it in the form of *logos* or of *noesis*, that was thought to reach truth or true Being, while at the end the emphasis had shifted to what is given to sense perception and to the implements by which we can extend and sharpen our bodily senses. It seems only natural that the former will discriminate against appearances and the latter against thought.

- [8] Our difficulties with metaphysical questions are much less caused by those to whom they are “meaningless” anyhow than by those who are under attack. For just as the crisis in theology reached its climax when theologians, as distinguished from the old crowd of non-believers, began to talk about the “God is dead” proposition, so the crisis in philosophy and metaphysics came into the open when the philosophers themselves began to declare the end of philosophy and metaphysics. (The attraction of Husserl’s phenomenology sprang from the anti-historical and anti-metaphysical implications of the slogan *Zu den Sachen selbst*; and Heidegger, who “seemingly remained in the metaphysical track,” actually also aimed at “overcoming metaphysics,” as he repeatedly has proclaimed since 1930.)^{5a} And this is by now an old story. It was not Nietzsche but Hegel who first declared that the “sentiment which is underlying religion in the modern age [is] the sentiment: God is dead.”^{5b}

Sixty years ago, the Encyclopedia Britannica felt quite safe in treating ‘Metaphysics’ as “philosophy under its most discredited name,”⁶ and if we wish to trace back this disrepute historically we encounter most prominently among the detractors Kant, but not the Kant of the *Critique of Pure Reason* whom Moses Mendelssohn called the “all-destroyer,” the *alles Zermalmer*, but Kant in his precritical writings where he quite freely admits that “it was [his] fate to fall in love with metaphysics” but also speaks of its “bottomless abyss,” its “slippery ground,” its utopian “land of milk and honey” (*Schlaraffenland*) where the “Dreamers of reason” dwell as though in an “airship” so that “there exists no folly which could not be brought to agree with a groundless wisdom.”⁷ All that needs to be said today on this

5a See the Note to “Vom Wesen der Wahrheit,” a lecture first given in 1930. Now in *Wegmarken*, p. 97.

5b See “Glaube und Wissen” (1802) in *Theologische Jugendschriften*, Tübingen, 1907

6 11th edition, vol. XXI, p. 441a

7 *Studienausgabe*, 1963, vol. I, pp. 982, 621, 630, 968, 952, 959, 974.

subject has been admirably said by Richard McKeon⁸: In the long and complicated history of thought in which we study these matters, this “awesome science” has never produced “general conviction concerning [its] function nor indeed much consensus of opinion concerning its subject matter.” In
 5 view of this long history of detraction it is rather surprising that the very word ‘metaphysics’ has been able to survive at all. One almost suspects that Kant was right when as a very old man, after having dealt a deathblow to the “awesome science,” he prophesied that men will surely return to metaphysics “as one returns to one’s mistress after a quarrel” | (*wie zu einer entzweiten* [9]
 10 *Geliebten*).⁹

I do not think that this is very likely or even desirable. But before we begin to speculate about the possible advantages of our situation, it may be wise to reflect upon what these ends of theology, philosophy, metaphysics actually mean—certainly not that God has died, something about which we can *know*
 15 as little as about God’s existence (so little in fact that even the word “existence” is misplaced) but that the way God had been thought of for thousands of years is no longer convincing; if anything should be dead, it can only be the traditional *thought* of God. And something similar is true for the end of philosophy and metaphysics: not that the old questions which are coeval
 20 with the appearance of men on earth have become “meaningless,” but that the way they were framed and answered has lost plausibility.

What has come to an end is the basic distinction between the sensual and the supersensual, together with the notion, at least as old as Parmenides, that whatever is not given to the senses—God or Being or the First Principles and
 25 Causes (*archai*) or the Ideas—is more real, more truthful, more meaningful than what appears, that it is not just *beyond* sense perception but *above* the world of the senses. What is “dead” is not only the localization of such “eternal truths” but the distinction itself. Meanwhile, in increasingly strident voices the few defenders of metaphysics have warned us of the danger of
 30 nihilism inherent in this development; and although they themselves seldom

8 “Introduction” to his *Basic Works of Aristotle*, p. xviii.

9 *Critique of Pure Reason*, B878. The striking phrase occurs in the last section of the *Critique of Pure Reason* where Kant claims to have established metaphysics as a science the idea of which “is as old as speculative human reason; and what rational human being does not speculate, either in scholastic or in popular fashion?” (B871) This “science” “has now fallen into general disrepute” because “more was expected from metaphysics than could reasonably be demanded.” (B877) Cf. also Sections 59 & 60 of *Prolegomena to any future Metaphysics*
 40

invoke it, they have an important argument in their favor: it is indeed true that once the suprasensual realm is discarded, its opposite, the world of appearances as understood for so many centuries, is also annihilated. The sensual, as still understood by the positivists, cannot survive the death of the
 [10] supersensual. No one knew this better than Nietzsche who, with his poetic and metaphoric description of the assassination of God,¹⁰ has caused so much confusion in these matters. In a significant passage in *The Twilight of Idols*, he clarifies what the word *God* meant in the earlier story. It was merely a symbol for the suprasensual realm as understood by metaphysics; he now uses instead of *God* the word *true world* and says: “We have abolished the
 10 true world. What has remained? The apparent one perhaps? Oh no! With the true world we have also abolished the apparent one.”¹¹

This insight of Nietzsche, namely, that “the elimination of the suprasensual, also eliminates the merely sensual, and thereby, the difference between them,” (Heidegger)¹² is actually so obvious that it defies every attempt
 15 to date it historically; all thinking in terms of two worlds implies that these two are inseparably connected with each other. Thus, all the elaborate modern arguments against positivism are anticipated by the unsurpassed simplicity of a little dialogue by Democritus between the mind, the organ for the
 20 supersensual, and the senses. Sense perceptions are illusions, he says, they change according to the conditions of our body; sweet, bitter, color and such exist only *nomō*, by convention among men, and not *physei*, according to true nature behind the appearances—thus speaks the mind. Whereupon the
 25 senses answer: “Wretched mind! Do you overthrow us while you take from us your evidence [*pisteis*, everything you can trust]? Our overthrow will be your downfall.”¹³ In other words, once the always precarious balance between the two worlds is lost, no matter whether the “true world” abolishes the
 30 “apparent one” or vice versa, the whole framework of references, in which our thinking was accustomed to orient itself, breaks down. In these terms, nothing seems to make much sense anymore.

[11] These modern deaths—of God, of metaphysics, of philosophy, and, by implication, of positivism—have become events of considerable historical
 35 consequence since, with the beginning of our century, they have ceased to be only the concern of an intellectual elite and become not so much the concern as the common unexamined assumption of nearly everybody. With

10 *Gay Science*, Book III, 125, “The madman.”

11 “How the ‘True World’ finally became a fable,” 6.

12 Heidegger, “Nietzsches Wort ‘Gott ist tot’” in *Holzwege* p. 193.

13 B125 and B9.

this political side of the matter we are not concerned here. In our context, it may even be better to leave this issue, which actually is the issue of political authority, outside our considerations, and to insist instead on the simple fact that however seriously our ways of thinking may be involved in this situation, our *ability* to think is not at stake; we are what men always have been, namely thinking beings. By this I mean no more than that men have an inclination, perhaps a need to think beyond the limitations of knowledge, to do more with this ability than to use it as an instrument for knowing and doing. To talk about nihilism in this context is perhaps just unwillingness to part company with concepts and thought-trains which actually have died quite some time ago though their demise has been publicly acknowledged only recently. If only, one is tempted to think, we could do in this situation what the modern age did in its early stage, that is, treat of each and every subject “as though no one had touched the matter before me” (as Descartes proposes in his introductory remarks to “*Les Passions de l’âme*”)! This has become impossible partly because of our enormously enlarged historical consciousness, but primarily because we possess no other record of what thinking as an activity meant to those who had chosen it as a way of life than what we would call today the “metaphysical fallacies.” None of the systems, none of the doctrines transmitted to us by the great thinkers may be convincing or even plausible to modern readers; but none of them, I shall try to argue here, is arbitrary and can be simply dismissed as sheer nonsense. The metaphysical fallacies, on the contrary, contain the only clues we possess to what thinking means to those who engage in it—something of great importance today and about which, oddly enough, there exist very few direct utterances. [12]

Hence, the possible advantages of our situation after the demise of metaphysics and philosophy would be twofold: It permits us to look upon the past with new eyes, unburdened and unguided by any traditions, and thus to dispose of a tremendous wealth of raw experiences without being bound by any prescriptions of how to deal with these treasures. *Notre héritage n’est précédé d’aucun testament*—“our inheritance was left to us by no testament.”¹⁴ This advantage would be even greater if it had not been accompanied, almost inevitably, by a growing inability to move, on no matter what level, in the realm of the invisible; or, to put it another way, if it had not been accompanied by the disrepute into which everything that is not visible, tangible, palpable has fallen so that we are in danger of losing together with our traditions the past itself.

14 René Char, *Feuillets d’Hypnos*, Paris, 1946. English translation: *Hypnos Waking*, New York, 1956.