

"Arendt's greatest work... offers new insights to illuminate our own mental experience." —James M. Altman, THE NEW REPUBLIC

# HANNAH ARENDT



## The Life of the Mind

THE GROUNDBREAKING INVESTIGATION  
ON HOW WE THINK

Copyrighted material

The title I have given 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 at it, for I have neither claim nor ambition to be a “philosopher” or be numbered among what Kant, not without irony, called *Denker von Gewerbe* (professional thinkers).<sup>1</sup> The question then is, should I not have left these problems in the hands of the experts, and the answer will have to show what prompted me to venture from the relatively safe fields of political science and theory into these rather awesome matters, instead of leaving well enough alone.

Factually, my preoccupation with mental activities has two rather different origins. The immediate impulse came from my attending the Eichmann trial in Jerusalem. In my report of it<sup>2</sup> I spoke of “the banality of evil.” Behind that phrase, I held no thesis or doctrine, although I was dimly aware of the fact that it went counter to our tradition of thought—literary, theological, or philosophic—about the phenomenon of evil. Evil, we have learned, is something demonic; its incarnation is Satan, a “lightning fall from heaven” (Luke 10:18), or Lucifer, the fallen angel (“The devil is an angel too”—Unamuno) whose sin is pride (“proud as Lucifer”), namely, 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 resentment at not having turned out well through no fault of their own (Richard III) or the envy of Cain, who slew Abel because “the Lord had regard for Abel and his

1. Notes are on pages 217–238.

offering, but for Cain and his offering he had no regard." Or they may be prompted by weakness (Macbeth). Or, on the contrary, by the powerful hatred wickedness feels for sheer goodness (Iago's "I hate the Moor: my cause is hearted"; Claggart's hatred for Billy Budd's "barbarian" innocence, a hatred considered by Melville a "depravity according to nature"), or by covetousness, "the root of all evil" (*Radix omnium malorum cupiditas*). However, what I was confronted with was utterly different and still undeniably factual. I was struck by a manifest shallowness in the doer that made it impossible to trace the uncontestable evil of his deeds to any deeper level of roots or motives. The deeds were monstrous, but the doer—at least the very effective one now on trial—was quite ordinary, commonplace, and neither demonic nor monstrous. There was no sign in him of firm ideological convictions or of specific evil motives, and the only notable characteristic one could detect in his past behavior as well as in his behavior during the trial and throughout the pre-trial 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 on the stand, as it had evidently done in his official life, 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 that all events and facts make by virtue of their existence. If we were responsive to this claim all the time, we would soon be exhausted; Eichmann differed from the rest of us only in 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 *stop* and think—that awakened my interest. Is evil-doing (the sins of omission, as well as the sins of commission) possible in default of not just "base motives" (as the law calls them) but of any motives whatever, of 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? Might the problem of good and evil, our faculty for telling right from wrong, be connected with our faculty of thought? To be sure, not in the sense that thinking would ever be able to 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 matters of good and evil in courses in "morals" or "ethics" may indicate how little we know about them, for morals comes from *mores* and ethics from *ēthos*, the Latin and the Greek words for customs and habit, the Latin word being associated with rules of behavior, whereas the Greek is derived from *habitat*, like our "habits.") The absence of thought I was confronted with sprang neither from forgetfulness of former, presumably good manners and habits nor from stupidity in the sense of inability to comprehend—not even in the sense of "moral insanity," for it was just as noticeable in instances 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 that make men abstain from evil-doing or even actually "condition" them against it? (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" is enjoyed as a rule only by really bad people, criminals and such, while only "good people" are capable of having a bad conscience? To put it differently and use Kantian language: after having been struck by a fact that, willy-nilly, "put me in possession of a concept" (the banality of evil), I could not help raising the *quaestio juris* and asking myself "by what right I possessed and used it."<sup>3</sup>

The Eichmann trial, then, first prompted my interest in this subject. Second, those moral questions, arising from factual experience, and going counter to the wisdom of the ages—not only to the various traditional answers that “ethics,” a branch of philosophy, has offered to the problem of evil, but also to the much larger answers that philosophy has ready for the much less urgent question What is thinking?—were apt to renew in me certain doubts that had been plaguing me ever since I had finished a study of 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 about it was that the very term I adopted for my reflections on the matter, namely, *vita activa*, was coined by men who were devoted to the contemplative way of life and who looked upon all kinds of being alive from that perspective.

Seen from that perspective, the active way of life is “laborious,” the contemplative way is sheer quietness; the active one goes on in public, the contemplative 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.*) I have quoted from a medieval author<sup>4</sup> of the twelfth century, almost at random, because the notion that contemplation is the highest state of the mind is as old as Western philosophy. The thinking activity—according to Plato, the soundless dialogue we carry on with ourselves—serves only 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 aims at and ends in contemplation, and contemplation is not an activity but a passivity; it is the point where mental activity comes to rest. According to traditions of Christian time, 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 was no longer stretching out to know the truth but, in anticipation of a future state, received



it temporarily in intuition. (Descartes, characteristically, still influenced by this tradition, called the treatise in which he set out to demonstrate God's existence *Méditations*.) With the rise of the modern age, thinking became chiefly the hand-maiden of science, of organized knowledge; and even though thinking then grew extremely active, following modernity's crucial conviction that I can know only what I myself make, it was Mathematics, the non-empirical science par excellence, wherein the mind appears to play only with itself, that turned out to be the Science of sciences, delivering the key to those laws of nature and the universe that 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 “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”;<sup>5</sup> 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 the contrary notion of complete quietness in the *Vita Contemplativa* 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 played such a crucial role, “uses the expression ‘*Praxis*’ simply in the sense of ‘what man does’ as opposed to ‘what man thinks.’”<sup>6</sup> 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 a man 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 esse quam cum solus esset*).<sup>7</sup> Assuming 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 that, as we all know, have fallen into disrepute. If this were merely a matter of modern positivist and neo-positivist assaults, we perhaps need not be concerned. Carnap's statement that metaphysics should be regarded as 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, retorted by stating that philosophy and poetry were indeed closely related; they were not identical but sprang from the same source—which 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," which argues on the other side, would, if taken seriously, apply not only to what lies beyond sense experience but even more to objects of sensation. Nothing we see or hear or touch can be expressed in words that equal what is given to the senses. Hegel was right when he pointed out that "the This of sense . . . cannot be reached by language."<sup>8</sup> 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, in the form either of *logos* or of *noēsis*, that was held to reach truth or true Being, while by the end the emphasis had shifted to what is given to 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.

Our difficulties with metaphysical questions are caused not so much by those to whom they are “meaningless” anyhow as by the party 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. By now this is an old story. (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 on the metaphysical track,” actually also aimed at “overcoming metaphysics,” as he has repeatedly proclaimed since 1930.<sup>9</sup>)

It was not Nietzsche but Hegel who first declared that the “sentiment underlying religion in the modern age [is] the sentiment: God is dead.”<sup>10</sup> Sixty years ago, the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* felt quite safe in treating “metaphysics” as philosophy “under its most discredited name,”<sup>11</sup> and if we wish to trace this disrepute further back, we encounter Kant most prominently among the detractors, not the Kant of the *Critique of Pure Reason*, whom Moses Mendelssohn called the “all-destroyer,” the *alles Zermalmer*, but Kant in his pre-critical 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.”<sup>12</sup> All that needs to be said today on this subject has been admirably said by Richard McKeon: In the long and complicated history of thought, this “awesome science” has never produced “general conviction concerning [its] function . . . nor indeed much consensus of opinion concerning its subject matter.”<sup>13</sup> In view of this 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 re-



turns to one's mistress after a quarrel" (*wie zu einer entzweiten Geliebten*).<sup>14</sup>

I do not think this very likely or even desirable. Yet before we begin to speculate about the possible advantages of our present situation, it may be wise to reflect upon what we really mean when we observe that theology, philosophy, metaphysics have reached an end—certainly not that God has died, something about which we can *know* 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 is dead, it can only be the traditional *thought* of God. And something similar is true of the end of philosophy and metaphysics: not that the old questions which are coeval 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 sensory and the suprasensory, 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 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 also the distinction itself. Meanwhile, in increasingly strident voices the few defenders of metaphysics have warned us of the danger of nihilism inherent in this development; and although they themselves seldom invoke it, they have an important argument in their favor: it is indeed true that once the suprasensory realm is discarded, its opposite, the world of appearances as understood for so many centuries, is also annihilated. The sensory, as still understood by the positivists, cannot survive the death of the suprasensory. No one knew this better than Nietzsche, who, with his poetic and metaphoric description of the assassination of God,<sup>15</sup> 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 suprasensory realm as understood by metaphysics; he now uses, instead of "God," the expression

"true world" and says: "We have abolished the true world. What has remained? The apparent one perhaps? Oh no! With the true world we have also abolished the apparent one."<sup>16</sup>

This insight of Nietzsche's, namely, that "the elimination of the suprasensory also eliminates the merely sensory and thereby the difference between them" (Heidegger),<sup>17</sup> is actually so obvious that it defies every attempt 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 Democritus' little dialogue between the mind, the organ for the suprasensory, and the senses. Sense perceptions are illusions, says the mind; they change according to the conditions of our body; sweet, bitter, color, and so on exist only *nomō*, by convention among men, and not *physei*, according to true nature behind the appearances. Whereupon the 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."<sup>18</sup> In other words, once the always precarious balance between the two worlds is lost, no matter whether the "true world" abolishes the "apparent one" or vice versa, the whole framework of reference in which our thinking was accustomed to orient itself breaks down. In these terms, nothing seems to make much sense any more.

These modern "deaths"—of God, metaphysics, philosophy, and, by implication, positivism—have become events of considerable historical consequence, since, with the beginning of our century, they have ceased to be the exclusive concern of an intellectual elite and instead are not so much the concern as the common unexamined assumption of nearly everybody. With this political aspect of the matter we are not concerned here. In our context, it may even be better to leave the issue, which actually is one of political authority, outside our considerations, and to insist, rather, on the simple fact that, however seriously our ways of thinking may be involved in this crisis, our *ability* to think is not at stake; we are what men always have been—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 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 that actually died quite some time ago, though their demise has been publicly acknowledged only recently. If only, one would like to imagine, we could do in this situation what the modern age did in its early stage, that is, treat 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 the only record we possess of what thinking as an activity meant to those who had chosen it as a way of life is 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 none can be simply dismissed as sheer nonsense. On the contrary, the metaphysical fallacies contain the only clues we have to what thinking means to those who engage in it—something of great importance today and about which, oddly enough, there exist few direct utterances.

Hence, the possible advantage of our situation following the demise of metaphysics and philosophy would be twofold. It would permit us to look on 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 as to how to deal with these treasures. "*Notre héritage n'est précédé d'aucun testament*" ("Our inheritance comes to us by no will-and-testament").<sup>19</sup> The advantage would be even greater had it 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, had it 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 the past itself together with our traditions.

For even though there has never been much consensus about the subject matter of metaphysics, at least one

point has been taken for granted: that these disciplines—whether you called them metaphysics or philosophy—dealt with matters that were not given to sense-perception and that their understanding transcended common-sense reasoning, which springs from sense experience and can be validated by empirical tests and means. From Parmenides till philosophy's end, all thinkers were agreed that, in order 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 passions—aroused by sense-objects. The philosopher, to the extent that he is a philosopher and not (what of course he also is) "a man like you and me," withdraws from the world of appearances, and the region he then moves in has always, since philosophy's beginning, been described as the world of the few. This age-old distinction between the many and the "professional thinkers" specializing in what was supposedly the highest activity human beings could attain to—Plato's philosopher "shall be called the friend of the god, and if it ever is given to man to put on immortality, it shall be given to him"<sup>20</sup>—has lost its plausibility, and this is the second advantage in our present situation. If, as I suggested before, the ability to tell right from wrong should turn out to have anything to do with the ability to think, then we must be able to "demand" its exercise from every sane person, no matter how erudite or ignorant, intelligent or stupid, he may happen to be. Kant—in this respect almost alone among the philosophers—was much bothered by the common opinion that philosophy is only for the few, precisely because of its moral implications, and he once observed that "stupidity is caused by a wicked heart."<sup>21</sup> This is not true: absence of thought is not stupidity; it can be found in highly intelligent people, and a wicked heart is not its cause; it is probably the other way round, that wickedness may be caused by absence of thought. In any event, the matter can no longer be left to "specialists" as though thinking, like higher mathematics, were the monopoly of a specialized discipline.

Crucial for our enterprise is Kant's distinction between *Vernunft* and *Verstand*, "reason" and "intellect" (not "understanding," which I think is a mistranslation; Kant used the

German *Verstand* to translate the Latin *intellectus*, and *Verstand*, though it is the noun of *verstehen*, hence “understanding” in current translations, has none of the connotations that are inherent in the German *das Verstehen*). Kant drew this distinction between the two mental faculties after he had discovered the “scandal of reason,” that is, the fact that our mind is not capable of certain and verifiable knowledge regarding matters and questions that it nevertheless cannot help thinking about, and for him such matters, that is, those with which mere thought is concerned, were restricted to what we now often call the “ultimate questions” of God, freedom, and immortality. But quite apart from the existential interest men once took in these questions, and although Kant still believed that no “honest soul ever lived that could bear to think that everything is ended with death,”<sup>22</sup> he was also quite aware that “the urgent need” of reason is both different from and “more than mere quest and desire for knowledge.”<sup>23</sup> Hence, the distinguishing of the two faculties, reason and intellect, coincides with a distinction between two altogether different mental activities, thinking and knowing, and two altogether different concerns, meaning, in the first category, and cognition, in the second. Kant, though he had insisted on this distinction, was still so strongly bound by the enormous weight of the tradition of metaphysics that he held fast to its traditional subject matter, that is, to those topics which could be *proved* to be unknowable, and while he justified reason’s need to think beyond the limits of what can be known, he remained unaware of the fact that man’s need to reflect encompasses nearly everything that happens to him, things he knows as well as things he can never know. He remained less than fully aware of the extent to which he had liberated reason, the ability to think, by justifying it in terms of the ultimate questions. He stated defensively that he had “found it necessary to deny *knowledge* . . . to make room for *faith*,”<sup>24</sup> but he had not made room for faith; he had made room for thought, and he had not “denied knowledge” but separated knowledge from thinking. In the notes to his lectures on metaphysics he wrote: “The aim of metaphysics . . . is to extend, albeit only negatively, our use of reason beyond the limitations of the sensorily given world, that is, to *eliminate*



*the obstacles by which reason hinders itself*" (italics added).<sup>25</sup>

The great obstacle that reason (*Vernunft*) puts in its own way arises from the side of the intellect (*Verstand*) and the entirely justified criteria it has established for its own purposes, that is, for quenching our thirst, and meeting our need, for knowledge and cognition. The reason neither Kant nor his successors ever paid much attention to thinking as an activity and even less to the experiences of thinking ego is that, all distinctions notwithstanding, they were demanding the kind of results and applying the kind of criteria for certainty and evidence that are the results and the criteria of cognition. But if it is true that thinking and reason are justified in transcending the limitations of cognition and the intellect—justified by Kant on the ground that the matters they deal with, though unknowable, are of the greatest existential interest to man—then the assumption must be that thinking and reason are not concerned with what the intellect is concerned with. To anticipate, and put it in a nutshell: *The need of reason is not inspired by the quest for truth but by the quest for meaning. And truth and meaning are not the same.* The basic fallacy, taking precedence over all specific metaphysical fallacies, is to interpret meaning on the model of truth. The latest and in some respects most striking instance of this occurs in Heidegger's *Being and Time*, which starts out by raising "anew the question of the meaning of Being."<sup>26</sup> Heidegger himself, in a later interpretation of his own initial question, says explicitly: "‘Meaning of Being’ and ‘Truth of Being’ say the same."<sup>27</sup>

The temptations to make the equation—which comes down to a refusal to accept and think through Kant's distinction between reason and intellect, between the "urgent need" to think and the "desire to know"—are very great, and by no means due only to the weight of tradition. Kant's insights had an extraordinary liberating effect on German philosophy, touching off the rise of German idealism. No doubt, they had made room for speculative thought; but this thought again became a field for a new brand of specialists committed to the notion that philosophy's "subject proper" is "the actual knowledge of what truly is."<sup>28</sup> Liberated by Kant from the old school dogmatism and its sterile exercises, they

erected not only new systems but a new “science”—the original title of the greatest of their works, Hegel’s *Phenomenology of Mind*, was “Science of the Experience of Consciousness”<sup>29</sup>—eagerly blurring Kant’s distinction between reason’s concern with the unknowable and the intellect’s concern with cognition. Pursuing the Cartesian ideal of certainty as though Kant had never existed, they believed in all earnest that the results of their speculations possessed the same kind of validity as the results of cognitive processes.