



Thinking in Hannah Arendt (1906–1975)

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Observing a Nazi officer's trial, Arendt was struck by one “perhaps extraordinary” characteristic of this otherwise apparently ordinary man: a “curious, quite authentic inability to think.” (Arendt 1994: 159) This startling observation led her to ask, “Do the inability to think and a disastrous failure of [...] conscience coincide?” (1994: 160). Tracing “experiences rather than doctrines” (1994: 167), she developed a concept of thinking as a practice antithetical to such deadly thoughtlessness.

She distinguishes *thinking* from solitary, other-worldly, mind-stilling *contemplation*. As “sheer activity” (1958: 325), thinking surpasses even action, and thinkers are “never less alone” (1958: 325) than in solitude. Thinking is “the silent dialogue of me with myself” (1971a: 122), revealing our mind's ability to recoil on itself, to be self-conscious.

She also distinguishes thinking from rule-constrained, result-seeking “science” (“cognition”) for which thinking is only a means to the end of knowledge. Thinking actualizes consciousness, a human need, thus is an end in itself. Again like action, thinking has *effects* and *by-products* rather than products that define it.

But how can result-less dialoguing with ourselves inform moral choice?

Thinking gives no positive guidance, but, activating the two-in-one of self-consciousness, it has as a by-product, conscience: the ability to think about our acts. And since I think with myself, the only person with whom I *have* to live, it is wise to remain my own friend. Who after all, Arendt asks, wants to live with a murderer?

Considering political action, Arendt observes that, as the two-in-one dialogue of thinking opens a space for conscience, the purging effect of thinking, its dissolving of results, opens the space for *judgment*, “the most political of man's mental abilities” (1971: 188). Thinking thus gives us the possibility and a motive for moral choice and action.

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