

Solitude and the Activity of Thinking

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“The true predicaments of our time.” Hannah Arendt wrote, “will assume their authentic form only when totalitarianism has become a thing of the past.”² The totalitarisms in Germany and the Soviet Union were only symptoms of these true predicaments, of what Arendt early on calls the mass society characterized by “organized loneliness.”³ Later, covering the trial of Adolf Eichmann, she would come to see that the bond between totalitarianism and loneliness is the phenomena of thoughtlessness.

I have long been struck by Arendt’s suggestion that totalitarianism depends on thoughtlessness that is itself rooted in the experience of loneliness. Loneliness, she writes, is the “common ground for terror, the essence of totalitarian government.”⁴ As the “experience of being abandoned by everything and everybody,” loneliness deprives one of a common sense and a common world; cut off from the experience of taking another seriously, of hearing the voice of conscience, and of listening in other ways, lonely men are uniquely susceptible to the delusional fellowship promised by ideological and totalitarian fantasies. Thrust back on his own insecurity, the lonely man is prone to embrace a coherent and stable world offered by ideological extremism.

Observing Adolf Eichmann during his trial in 1961, Arendt was confirmed in her earlier speculations regarding the connection between loneliness and totalitarianism. Eichmann, she argued, was a joiner; he craved, more than anything else, “being a member of something or other;” he feared, above all, to live alone, without orders and directives, cut off from an organization or group that would give his life direction and meaning.⁵ Fearing the loneliness that permeates the bourgeois world defined by private interests, Eichmann, Arendt writes, sought out

a movement that gave his life sense. He was an “idealist” in the sense that he “*lived* for his idea” whatever the idea was, because that idea gave significance to his insignificant life.⁶ In thrall to the movement and its ideas, Eichmann was prepared to sacrifice everything and do anything that was asked of him. Thus does loneliness open the door to thoughtlessness. Barricaded behind an impenetrable fortress of clichés, Eichmann traded his human power to think for the power of membership in a mass movement. It is this refusal to think—his “inability to *think*”—that frustrates all communication with others and defines Eichmann’s loneliness even amidst his immersion in a movement.⁷ And 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 Arendt came to see as the dangerous wellspring of evil in modern times.⁸

Thoughtlessness, like the loneliness that nourishes it, is hardly new. As we all know, the activity of thinking is rare. Yet, what makes thoughtlessness especially dangerous today is the fact--Arendt insists we recognize it as a fact--that we are the first people in history for whom the authority of tradition--like the authority of custom, religion and truth--has evaporated. Malicious men have always and will always exist; yet, ordinary albeit thoughtless men could, in earlier times, be restrained from evil by the force of habit, the authority of tradition, and even the commands of religion. Arendt recognized that throughout most of modern history, traditions are absorbed into a common sense that contributes to the building of a shared and public world, the world's law and politics. She also saw that the retreat of traditional standards leads common sense and politics to atrophy as well. Since traditions are what root us in a common world, the decay of tradition is the factual basis of our political crisis. Shorn from tradition and left rootless, modern individuals are lonely. Thrust back on themselves, men and women yearn, Arendt suggests, for nothing so much as a home.

The “isolated human being” amidst the breakdown of tradition and the uprooting of friendships, loses his place in the world, and “seeks his place only from his belonging to a movement.”⁹ The last 100 years are witness to what men are capable of in the service of a movement. And today, the current struggle between jihad and democratic capitalism has extended further the proof of mankind’s potential for depravity. Time was that blowing oneself up in public, torturing enemy soldiers, and disappearing people without a trial--and doing so in accordance with legal procedures or religious sanction--was the very mark of an uncivilized people. Today, suicide bombings and legalized procedures of torture burst the bounds of common sense. To take seriously our modern predicament is to recognize that once burst, it is not clear whether the public bonds of tradition and common sense can be put together again.

How do we begin to try? Do we try? Arendt’s political project asks the question, and it remains for her a question of how and if politics can, or even should, found an ethical world. Can we who live without traditions nevertheless make a human world in which we live and act together?

In the face of this question, Arendt teaches the supreme importance of thinking. Arendt’s question--the question that drives so much of her work from the *The Origins of Totalitarianism* through *The Life of the Mind*--is whether, in the absence of tradition, thinking can halt the temptation of human evil. “Could the activity of thinking as such,” she asks, “be among the conditions that make men abstain from evil-doing or even actually “condition” them against it?”¹⁰ Thinking--the habit of erecting obstacles to oversimplifications, compromises, and conventions--is an important part of Arendt’s answer to Lenin’s famous question: what is to be done?

To reflect on the political importance of the activity of thinking suggests that the space of politics may not be limited to its traditional abode within the public realm. Indeed, I want to suggest that Arendt's defense of political action requires attention not only to the public but to the private as well. What has been overlooked amidst all the attention to Arendt's defense of the public realm of politics over and against the rise of the social is her equally strong insistence upon a vibrant and secure private realm where active thinking is possible, secured from the unthinking habits, common opinions, and constraints of the social.

Of course the public realm is important to Arendt's conception of political action. She herself writes: "Action needs for its full appearance the shining brightness we once called glory, and which is possible only in the public realm."¹¹ With some justification, therefore, Arendt scholars have focused their critical gaze on political action and sought to "discover a set of criteria that will isolate genuinely political action from its various simulacra."¹² There is a widespread view critiqued by a number of the essays in this volume that Arendt seeks an idea of politics that is purified of all practical, social, and private activities.

And yet, what is often ignored by the single-minded focus on the boundary of Arendtian politics, is her equally emphatic call for the protection of a private realm as a sphere of dignity; the "sacredness of privacy" she writes, "was like the sacredness of the hidden, namely, of birth and death, the beginning and end of the mortals who, like all living creatures, grow out of and return to the darkness of an underworld."¹³ Similarly, Arendt repeatedly returns to the quotation from Cato: "Never is he more active than when he does nothing, never is he less alone than when he is by himself."¹⁴

The private, Arendt insists, is not necessarily the realm of loneliness that is opposed to politics and action. Nor is the private an economic realm concerned with the pursuit of individual

interests. Instead, the private can be a space of solitude that is the necessary prerequisite for the activity of thinking. Indeed, it is solitude that nurtures and fosters thoughtfulness and thus prepares individuals for the possibility of political action. What Arendt teaches is that in dark and lonely times we must not seek only the company of others in public; just as importantly, we must be vigilant in protecting the sanctuaries of solitude from out which the activity of thinking is born. To combat the loneliness of the modern world, Arendt suggests, requires solitude, which she sees as the cradle of thinking.

It is important to remember that the thinking that happens in solitude is different in kind from the public rationality of political thought. To think is not the same as to reason. Indeed, in the project of building a world, Arendt warns us against the seductions of reason. Arendt forces us to confront the fact that it is rational for a democratic government charged with protecting its citizens to do so, as the slogan goes, by any means necessary. It is rational for guerrilla fighters to promote their cause through terror. Indeed, the normalization of terror and torture shows how ordinary men can reason themselves into justifying what ought to be unthinkable. Thus, reason, Arendt writes, “fits man into the iron band of terror.”¹⁵ Reason, Arendt warns, reasons, it does not think.

Against reasoning that fits men with the dead weight of answers, Arendt insists that thinking proper be understood as a kind of action. “When everybody is swept away unthinkingly by what everybody else does and believes in, those who think are drawn out of hiding because their refusal to join in is conspicuous and thereby becomes a kind of action.”¹⁶ Thinking separates individuals from the mass and inoculates the thinker from the contagion of conformity. Thus, the activity of thinking is the last barrier to the lonely and conformist uniformity of the blood-dimmed tide.

To orient herself in the activity of thinking and its foundation in solitude, Arendt rightly looks not to theories but to models. This makes sense. Given the way Arendt thinks, a rigid conceptual analysis risks distorting her point. She is a brilliant associative thinker who often begins with an image or idea or event and allows her thought trains to proceed from there and radiate outward. So perhaps the best way to pursue what Arendt means by the fertile relationship between solitude and thinking is to inquire more deeply of the examples she gives.

Two thinkers--Socrates and the German philosopher Karl Jaspers--appear and reappear as Arendt's examples that shed light on the power of thinking in dark times. What unites Jaspers and Socrates in Arendt's imagination is their shared ability to replace the thoughtlessness of loneliness with the thoughtfulness of solitude. Loneliness, Arendt writes, is the loss of the experience of being with others that can strike one even when and especially when one is with others and lost in and amongst them. In contrast to loneliness, solitude demands that one actually is alone; and yet, in the being alone of solitude, "I am 'by myself,' together with my self."¹⁷ It is in solitude, Arendt sees, that we are least alone. Amidst the plurality that attains in solitude, there is the possibility for the activity of thinking that interrupts totalitarianism and fosters political action.

I want, briefly, to sketch Arendt's extraordinary accounts of these two models of solitary thinking in dark times.

When she writes about Karl Jaspers in her book *Men in Dark Times*, Arendt is struck by his internal exile where he stood entirely separate, independent, and alone. Although he remained in Germany and did not join the armed or peaceful resistance, Jaspers was politically relevant because he appeared in public as a living refutation of the Nazi regime. While some might condemn him for staying in the country, Arendt argues that Jaspers' dignified and silent

resistance spoke volumes, and suggests that his dignified presence in the world was itself at the very heart of political action.

Jaspers, Arendt writes, is possessed of “*humanitas*,” by which she means “something that was the very height of humanness because it was valid without being objective.”¹⁸ *Humanitas* is not objective. It is not rational, at least not in the sense of something that can be demonstrated or deduced. Nor is *humanitas* subjective, a property of an isolated individual. Instead, *humanitas* is a “personal element beyond the control of the subject”--that which defines a man as who he is and never leaves him.¹⁹ The magnificence of Jasper’s *humanitas*, Arendt writes, is that in the darkness of total domination, he stood firm as a beacon to the ultimate triumph of humanity over barbarity.

This striking personal element of Jaspers’ *humanitas* is, for Arendt, a public act--a beacon--but one rooted in the solitude of his thinking. What Jaspers manifested to all whom he encountered was “a confidence that needed no confirmation, an assurance that in times in which everything could happen one thing could not happen. What Jaspers represented then, when he was entirely alone, was not Germany but what was left of *humanitas* in Germany.”²⁰ Alone, Jaspers was anything but lonely. If loneliness is marked by an inability to think, Jaspers’ solitude is a being at home in a “region of reason and freedom,” in a “space forever illuminated anew by a speaking and listening thoughtfulness....”²¹ In dark times in which public affairs and politics tend to shatter rather than inspire thoughtfulness, solitude is a refuge that harbors the proper realm of thinking. And not simply thinking. The solitary act of thinking is, for Arendt, inevitably an activity of politics.

Arendt is struck, too, by the solitude of Socrates--the one pure example she admits of the thinking man. In the *Life of the Mind* and also her essay *Socrates*, she emphasizes Socrates’

discovery that solitude is “the necessary condition for the good functioning of the polis.”²²

Socrates’ solitude is marked by what Arendt names the dialogue of the “two-in-one,” the fact that when he is alone he is not alone but “by himself.” Socrates is actually with his other self.

This other self--figured as Socrates’ daemon--is that divine voice to whom Socrates goes home; he is that “very obnoxious fellow who always cross-examines him.”²³ The daemon is what interrupts the individual’s sovereign and unitary self. The importance of thinking, and hence of solitude, is that thinking interrupts the oneness, certainty, and confidence that allows ideology to overwhelm thought. The Socratic thinker is a gadfly who stings citizens and also himself and thus arouses them from the satin sleep of conformity to the activity of thinking.

In asking herself where the activity of thinking originates, Arendt answers that thinking is born from the experience of “absolute solitude.”²⁴ It is only in solitude that the murderer can encounter himself, as when Richard III encounters himself in Shakespeare’s play:²⁵

What do I fear? Myself? There’s none else by:
Richard loves Richard: that is, I am I.
Is there a murderer here? No. Yes, I am:
Then fly: what! From myself? Great reason why:
Lest I revenge. What! myself upon myself?

For Arendt, it is in solitude that Richard comes face to face with his conscience, his other self--the one who, gadfly-like, stings us into thinking. Only someone who has the experience of “talking with himself” is someone who understands the danger that he might contradict himself--he may, for example, commit a murder and then have to live with himself, a murderer, for the rest of his life--only such a thinker can develop a conscience. This is why Arendt writes that “living together with others begins with living together with oneself.”²⁶

Arendt also addresses the intimate connection between solitude and thinking in her speech celebrating Heidegger's 80th birthday. It is there that she recalls the "rumor" that originally brought her to Heidegger's lecture hall. It was the rumor that Heidegger was teaching thinking; namely, that against the scholarship of universities, Heidegger broke with the tradition, those "dark times" in which philosophy had become an academic exercise. It is against philosophy that Arendt, building upon Heidegger, describes her own passion for thinking as necessarily "something solitary."²⁷ In all spoken dialogue there remains something unspeakable; there is, in truth, always that which "cannot be fully made to ring through language," something, she insists, that "does not communicate itself either to others or even to the person involved." While Arendt forever remains suspicious of a thinking that has its place fully outside the world, she nevertheless wants to "honor thinkers"²⁸--especially those thinkers like Socrates and Jaspers whose thought bursts the bounds of solitude in which it originates.

For both Jaspers and Socrates, the thinking that emerges from solitude is as loud and as active as glorious speech could ever be; thinking, she insists, can be of even greater consequence than traditional political activism. In Jaspers' silence in the face of Nazism and Socrates' humble refusal to escape his ultimate sentence by the Athenians are manifest activities of thinking that shine brightly in dark times. And it is in dark times, when everybody is swept away unthinkingly, that those who think come to act in their refusal to join in.

It is Arendt's profound belief in the power and need for thinking in solitude that drives her controversial and widely loathed essay *Reflections on Little Rock*. Arendt provocatively argues against governmentally mandated integration of the public schools. Her position has been heavily and at times rightly critiqued; Arendt herself, in a letter to Ralph Ellison, withdrew her claim that forced desegregation sacrificed black children in a struggle their parents were

unwilling to fight themselves. And yet few commentators have fully grappled with Arendt's warning, never withdrawn, that in mandating how parents educate their children we risk eviscerating the realm of the private that is the necessary foundation of solitude, the activity of thinking and even of politics. Whatever one thinks of Arendt's conclusion--and it is difficult to endorse her willingness to allow segregated public schools--the provocation of her arguments demand attention.

In the Little Rock essay, Arendt distinguishes three realms of life: the public, the social, and the private. While the public, or political, realm is governed by equality and the social realm by inequality, the private realm is the realm of exclusivity and uniqueness. The "rule of uniqueness" that Arendt attributes to the private sphere will always conflict both with the political demand for equality and the social demand for discrimination against certain kinds of people and behavior. While the private can co-exist with the political, it is--like the political too--particularly endangered by the rise of the social. As Arendt writes, "The rules of uniqueness and exclusiveness are, and always will be, in conflict with the standards of society precisely because social discrimination violates the principle [of uniqueness], and lacks validity for the conduct, of private life."²⁹ And given the increasing power of the social world of conformity, "not many people are left who know the rules of and live a private life."³⁰ The great threat today is that the drive to remedy the inequalities characteristic of the social realm will overwhelm not only the political realm--in which only political equality is at issue--but also the private realm--where the drive for political and material equality threatens the sacred dignity of unique individuals. And it is this very private realm, the realm of uniqueness, where one can retreat from both equality and sameness to the experience of solitude.

Arendt insists that we recall the importance of solitude for politics as well as for thinking. For, if it is the activity of thinking that might originate a politics that would ward off evil, Arendt reminds us that thinking originates in the experience solitude. Solitude, she writes, is that which makes possible the two-in-one of thinking; it is solitude, therefore, that is “the necessary condition for the good functioning of the polis, a better guarantee than rules of behavior enforced by laws and fear of punishment.”³¹ To preserve the realm of solitude, and thus the activity of thinking upon which politics depends, Arendt emphasizes the essential value of privacy. The protection of the private sphere includes the right to marry someone of any race, a right she defends as integral to the dignity and uniqueness of the private sphere, and also the right to raise one’s children as they will. These rights must, she writes, remain the private business of every person.³² We must, she argues, safeguard the right of every person to be unique and different within the four walls of his home.

The private right to uniqueness resonates, Arendt writes, nowhere more than in a parent’s rearing of children. There is no greater right of privacy, a right of living as one thinks right, than the right to raise one’s child as one sees fit. “To force parents to send their children to an integrated school against their will means to deprive them of rights which clearly belong to them in all free societies--the private right over their children and the social right to free association.”³³ What offends Arendt in the Little Rock case is not the ideal of desegregation, but the danger that well-intentioned governmental attacks on social discrimination will erode the walls of privacy that nourish the possibility of thinking and of acting--and thus of plurality. Since the space for solitary thought depends on the protection of a vibrant private realm, the protection of privacy is a necessary first step in the cultivation of thoughtful political action.

To think in private is not easy. Nor is it easy today to defend and protect the right to privacy in the name of thinking. For it is surely the case that the call for and the protection of privacy can all too easily be turned away from a foundation for the activity of thinking and toward a defense of thoughtless individualism and hateful racism. All too often advocates of privacy yearn for the lonely and bourgeois pursuit of interests--from accumulating wealth, to cooking, and even to philosophizing. There is a difference between an individualist and a thinker. And yet the need for thinkers militates for the protection of individuals.

Thinking is a difficult business. It requires a separation from the world, a passion for truth, and a willingness to let go of the affairs of the world. In the name of and out of care for the world, thinking requires a distance from the world.

To stand apart from the public does not mean to stand alone. Arendt distinguishes solitude--the conversation one has with oneself--from loneliness--the experience of the absence of being with others. To hole up in the lonely refuge of one's psyche is to lose one's humanity that can only appear in public.

While the experience of thinking might begin in solitude, it can only be brought to fruition when one "ventures into the public realm."³⁴ What Jaspers and Socrates combine is the ability to live doubly, both in solitude and in public. When such persons appear as beacons of dignity, they inspire us. There is, Arendt writes, something fascinating about someone's being inviolable, untemptable, unswayable. Something fascinating, and also deeply political.

There may be no thinker in the canon of political thinking more attuned to the political relevance of the dignity of the solitary thinker than Ralph Waldo Emerson. Emersonian self reliance is possessed by those who follow the inflexible string that colloquially is called one's backbone. Trust thyself, Emerson counsels, and hear that iron string that every hearts vibrates to.

As Emerson writes: “He only who is able to stand alone is qualified for society.”³⁵ Emerson’s imperative, to take up the divine idea allotted to each one of us, resonates with Arendt’s Socratic imperative, to be true to yourself.

Are Emerson and Arendt fooling themselves? Are we truly to believe that thinking in solitude can be the animating source of politics?

The answer depends on our understanding of politics. If politics is about policies, if it is what happens in legislatures and courts and in administrative agencies, if it is about the distribution of power in society, then dignity seems quite foreign to politics. Similarly, if politics is about the rational organization of a state, personal dignity fits uneasily with the pursuit of political ends. Clearly, politics is about policies, and it is about the rational pursuit of ends.

And yet, there is also another idea of politics, one that has its beginning in Plato’s claim that the politician is an educator. For Plato as for Thoreau, the political actor is one who awakens himself and others to the claim that the just and the good make upon us. As Arendt understands it, politics in this sense is the unification of a multitude. As the activity of unifying, politics is based on the activity of revealing, of showing to a people the common ground of their unity.

Arendt’s elitism is neither that of an oligarchic nor a hereditary elite; it is, rather, an elitism of those who have had the experience of freedom, whether in public or in private. The free are a self-selected elite who, knowing both the joy and the precariousness of freedom, seek to “protect the island of freedom they have come to inhabit against the surrounding sea of necessity.”³⁶ In her attunement to the phenomenon of freedom, Arendt discovers islands of freedom in revolutionary action and inner exile. What unites both public and private activities of freedom is their separation from the predictable, statistical, ordinary, and normalizing demands of our modern world. Against the social scientific demand that the world be lawful,

understandable, and thus improvable, Arendt holds out the possibility of action. What elitism seeks is not rule or power, but spaces of freedom. Some of those spaces are public and political. One such space, however, is the private life of solitude.

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² Hannah Arendt, *Origins of Totalitarianism* (Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1973) 460.

³ *Id.*, 478.

⁴ *Id.*, 475.

⁵ Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem* (Penguin Books 1977) 32.

⁶ *Id.*, 42.

⁷ *Id.*, 49.

⁸ Hannah Arendt, *Life of the Mind* (Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1978) 4.

⁹ *Origins of Totalitarianism*, 324.

¹⁰ *Life of the Mind*, 5.

¹¹ Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (University of Chicago Press, 1958) 180.

¹² Dana Villa, 1996, 20. See also Hannah Fenichel Pitkin, "Justice: On Relating Public and Private," *Political Theory* v. 9 (1981): 327-352.

¹³ *The Human Condition*, 62.

¹⁴ *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, 476; *The Human Condition*, 325.

¹⁵ *Origins of Totalitarianism*, 475.

¹⁶ *Life of the Mind*, 192.

¹⁷ *Origin of Totalitarianism*, 476.

¹⁸ Hannah Arendt, *Men in Dark Times* (Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1983) 73.

¹⁹ *Id.*, 73.

²⁰ *Id.*, 76.

²¹ *Id.*, 76, 79.

²² "Socrates," *The Promise of Politics* (Schocken, 2005) 24.

²³ *Life of the Mind* (Thinking) 188.

²⁴ "Socrates," *The Promise of Politics*, 20-21.

²⁵ Arendt cites Richard's war with his conscience in *The Life of the Mind*, 189.

²⁶ "Socrates," *The Promise of Politics*, 21.

²⁷ Arendt, Heidegger at 80, in *Arendt-Heidegger Letters* (Harcourt, 2004)155 (citing Hegel's letter to Zillman from 1807).

²⁸ *Id.*, 161.

²⁹ "Reflections on Little Rock," *Dissent* (Jan.-Feb. 1959) 53.

³⁰ *Id.*

³¹ "Socrates," *The Promise of Politics* 24.

³² "Reflections on Little Rock," 53; 55.

³³ *Id.*, 55.

³⁴ *Men in Dark Times*, 73-4.

³⁵ Ralph Waldo Emerson, *The Fugitive Slave Law* (Modern Library, 2000).

³⁶ Hannah Arendt, *On Revolution* (Penguin, 1991) 276.