

ARENDT'S PERSPECTIVE ON THE ROLE OF THE INTELLECT IN THE ACT OF AVOIDING EVIL

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Abstract:

Human being is a rational animal who has the capability to think. The activity of thinking distinguishes man from other animals. Nevertheless, there are some people who do not use their capability to think. Many people just follow what other people said without really considering what they actually do. For Hannah Arendt, this is one of the factors that causes many evils have occurred in our daily life. Moreover, she used the term of the banality of evil to describe the evil that has happened because of the culprit's inability to think. Therefore, she emphasized the importance of thinking in every human being. For her, thinking makes human to avoid grave evil.

Keywords:

Evil, totalitarianism, conscience, thinking, thoughtlessness, intellect, banality of evil, imagination.

1. INTRODUCTION

Nowadays we often encounter various forms of crime and terror plaguing society. There are a lot of crimes against humanity that occurred in different parts of the world in the last 20 years. For example, the genocide in Rwanda in the late twentieth century that led to more than 500000 to 1000000 civilians killed; riots and persecution of some ethnics in Indonesia; the civil war in Syria; ISIS, etc. One thing that should be our concern, often the culprit did not have the slightest feeling of guilt. They have not realized what they have done was a very grave evil.

Hannah Arendt, one of the most influential philosophers in our century, argues that many people in modern times have lost their conscience. Many people do not realize the things that they have done. They have just done it without considering whether it was good or bad.

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Arendt was a German philosopher of Jewish descent who had accurate and sharp view in politics. She was a free thinker who was not tied to any philosophical system. She was known to have a keen and critical view of the problems of the common life and the state in modern times. Her view was influenced by the background of her personal life, where she lived at the time when the savage Nazis committed genocide against the Jews. She devoted much of her life to making sense of totalitarianism. She discusses so many issues about totalitarianism, revolution, the nature of freedom and the importance of thinking in every human being.

Arendt argues that every human being as a rational animal has the capability to think. Thinking is a human activity in which man uses his intellect to consider and decide something. For Arendt, the activity of thinking can be an antidote against a person committing grave evil. One of Arendt's ideas, which also has proven to be very relevant in today's world, was her view about the *banality of evil*. What does she actually mean by the banality of evil? Why does she use this term? Is there a relation between thinking and the banality of evil? Or, as she herself puts it, "Might the problem of good and evil, our faculty of telling right from wrong, be connected with our faculty of thought?"¹ In this paper, we will discuss about those problems. This paper is presented in some parts which are interconnected to one another.

2. A LOOK AT ADOLF EICHMANN AND HIS TRIAL

Otto Adolf Eichmann was one of the Nazi leaders who played important role in the annihilation of Jews during World War II. He organized the transport of the Jews to the concentration and extermination camps, which means to their death. After the Nazi regime fell, Eichmann fled to Argentina with his family. He was caught in a suburb of Buenos Aires on the evening of May 11, 1960 by Israeli secret agents and immediately deported to Israel to face responsibility for what he had done.² Hearing about Eichmann's trial, Arendt went to Jerusalem in 1961

¹ Hannah ARENDT, *The Life of the Mind*, "Thinking", Harcourt, New York (NY) 1978, 5.

² Hannah ARENDT, *Eichmann in Jerusalem, A Report on The Banality of Evil*, Penguin Group, New York (NY) 2006, 21.

and came to Jerusalem as a reporter for The New Yorker.³ Eichmann's trial was held in the District Court in Jerusalem on April 11, 1961.

Arendt was surprised when she looked Eichmann directly for the first time. She described Eichmann's physique as an ordinary man: "medium-sized, slender, and middle-aged, with receding hair, ill-fitting teeth and nearsighted eyes."⁴ It was the first time for Arendt to see Eichmann directly. Arendt argues that, "The deeds were monstrous, but the doer was quite ordinary, commonplace, and neither demonic nor monstrous."⁵ According to her, Eichmann did not look like a scary monster or devil, but just like an ordinary people. Physically, there was nothing particular about Eichmann.

Eichmann was "accused on fifteen counts: "together with others" he had committed crimes against the Jewish people, crimes against humanity and war crimes during the whole period of the Nazi regime and especially during the period of the Second World War."⁶ It was really a surprise when Eichmann stated during the trial that he has never hated the Jews. Eichmann admitted that he had not had any motives of hatred towards the Jews. He professed that he did not have the slightest intention to exterminate the Jews. In fact, he even had a special relationship with some Jews. Eichmann defended himself against the charge brought against him that he was not guilty. To each count Eichmann pleaded, "Not guilty in the sense of the indictment."⁷ Eichmann had not felt guilty about the things that he had done, not even a little. According to him, he just followed his leader's commands, nothing else. In Eichmann's perspective, he was a law-abiding citizen and obeyed the law.

Robert Servatius of Cologne, Eichmann's lawyer, argues that Eichmann did not commit any crime under the Nazi legal system: "Eichmann feels guilty before God, not before the law."⁸ Therefore,

³ Amos ELON, *Introduction in Hannah Arendt: Eichmann in Jerusalem, A Report on The Banality of Evil*, Penguin Group, New York (NY) 2006, xi.

⁴ Hannah ARENDT, *Eichmann in Jerusalem...*, 5.

⁵ Hannah ARENDT, *The Life of the Mind*, "Thinking" ..., 4.

⁶ During the trial, Adolf Eichmann was "accused on fifteen counts: "together with others" he had committed crimes against the Jewish people, crimes against humanity and war crimes during the whole period of the Nazi regime and especially during the period of the Second World War." Hannah ARENDT, *Eichmann in Jerusalem...*, 21.

⁷ Hannah ARENDT, *Eichmann in Jerusalem...*, 21.

⁸ *Ibid.*

Eichmann rejected the accusations against him. For him, “He could be accused only of “aiding and abetting” the annihilation of the Jews.”⁹ Eichmann himself has believed that “he had lived his whole life according to Kant’s moral precepts, especially Kant’s definition of duty.”¹⁰ He also added that he had read Kant’s famous work, *Critique of Practical Reason*. He had consoled himself with the thought that he was not “master of his own deeds” and “he was unable to change anything.”¹¹ Therefore, he only could do what had been ordered to him.

3. THE BANALITY OF EVIL IN THE THOUGHT OF HANNAH ARENDT

Arendt used the term *banality of evil* for the first time in her book *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil*¹² after she followed Eichmann’s trial in Jerusalem. She used this term to illustrate what Eichmann had done. In his defense, Eichmann said over and over that he did not at all intend to commit the genocide against the Jews. He claimed that he had just tried to do his job properly. Arendt argues that Eichmann’s conscience did not function well since he just did what his leader ordered him without thinking and reflecting first what actually the ordered was.¹³ For Arendt, “The banality of evil describes the character and motivations of the culprit (Eichmann), not his deeds—the monstrous actions that he committed, and for which he was fully responsible.”¹⁴

Banal does not imply that the evil is simply common to everyone. Evil can become banal even if the evil itself is not merely a trivial matter. Thus, banality of evil does not mean that the evil itself is trivial and

⁹ *Ibid.*, 22.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 135-136.

¹¹ *Ibid.* 136.

¹² The Banality of Evil was written in the summer and fall of 1962, and finished in November of that year during Arendt’s stay as a Fellow of the Center for Advances Studies at Wesleyan University. See Arendt’s Note to the Reader in Hannah ARENDT, *Eichmann in Jerusalem*.

¹³ See Hannah ARENDT, *Eichmann in Jerusalem...*, 95.

¹⁴ Richard J. BERNSTEIN, “Is Evil Banal? A Misleading Question”, in Roger BERKOWITZ, Jeffrey KATZ, - Thomas KEENAN, *Thinking in Dark Times: Hannah Arendt on Ethics and Politics*, Fordham University Press, New York (NY) 2010), 131.

common to everybody.¹⁵ The “ordinary people” can commit evil deeds without being vicious monsters or even having evil intentions.¹⁶ Simply we can say that banality of evil is doing something evil without any motives. In other words, we just follow what other people do without knowing the reason properly, “we did it because others also did it”. Evil becomes something banal when it becomes something “natural” or “normal”.

Arendt did not want to propose a general theory when she spoke about the banality of evil. “No theory or doctrine but something quite factual, the phenomenon of evil deeds, committed on a gigantic scale, which could not be traced to any particularity of wickedness, pathology, or ideological conviction in the doer, whose only personal distinction was a perhaps extraordinary shallowness.”¹⁷ The banality of evil is not evil action that came from something serious or deep, but it came from something ordinary. Banality of evil came from the inability of a person to think. For Arendt says, “The sad truth of the matter is that most evil is done by people who never made up their minds to be or do either evil or good.”¹⁸

The person who has done the banality of evil just did something like an automatic machine would do it, without thinking and reflecting first on what he would do, as happened in Eichmann. Eichmann’s actions did not come from a moral decision on which he reflected carefully and deeply. Eichmann was just like a machine in his party since what he had done could not have come from his own willing. He just obeyed what was ordered to him by his blind obedience, without understand and thinking about what actually happened. Consequently, he had done something very evil, which Arendt termed the “banality of evil”.

On a debate held at Hofstra College (New York) in 1964 about *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, Hannah Arendt emphasized that the banality of evil does not have any roots. The notion that the banality of evil has “no-roots” is inherently connected with Arendt’s understanding that only the faculty of thinking can reach the profundity, and consequently reach the

¹⁵ Bethania ASSY, “Eichmann, the Banality of Evil, and Thinking in Arendt’s Thought”, in <http://www.bu.edu/wcp/Papers/Cont/ContAssy.html> (accessed on 17th December 2013).

¹⁶ Richard J. BERNSTEIN, “Is Evil Banal? A Misleading Question”..., 135.

¹⁷ Hannah ARENDT, “Thinking and Moral Considerations: A Lecture”, *Social Research* 38:3 (1971), 417.

¹⁸ Hannah ARENDT, *The Life of the Mind*, “Thinking” ..., 180.

roots.¹⁹ The banality of evil itself relates to man's inability to think. "Evil comes from a failure to think", as Arendt concluded after following Eichmann's trial in Jerusalem.²⁰ What Eichmann did, according to her, was because of "his incapacity to think, or to think from another person's point of view".²¹ The banality of evil arises because of the absence of the process of thinking in human being, which leads to the absence of the ability to distinguish good and bad morally, the ability to make a moral decision, and the ability to consider the implications of one's actions. The crime is banal when a moral agent failed to use his ability to think in understanding the various orders, laws or liabilities, and justifies his actions based only on certain general moral principles or laws.²²

4. THINKING IN THE THOUGHT OF HANNAH ARENDT

Arendt discusses her thought about "thinking", especially in her book *The Life of the Mind*. She emphasizes the importance of thinking in every human being. In her book *Responsibility and Judgment*, Arendt also relates the activity of thinking to the faculty of willing and the faculty of judging. Let us discuss what thinking is in the thought of Hannah Arendt.

4.1. Socrates as the Model of a Thinker

"What makes us think?" This question is posed by Hannah Arendt in *the Life of the Mind*. By this question, she does not mean to ask for either causes or purposes. Every man according to Arendt needs to think. Thinking is the need of every human being, as a rational animal. Arendt takes the figure of Socrates as the model of thinkers. Many of the classic philosophers also confessed the wisdom of Socrates. Not only was Socrates a thinker, says Arendt, but he also "sought to provoke his fellow citizens into becoming thinking persons. And this thinking manifests itself

¹⁹ Bethania ASSY, *loc.cit.*

²⁰ Amos ELON, *Introduction in Hannah Arendt: Eichmann in Jerusalem...*, xiv.

²¹ *Ibid.*, xiii.

²² Yeremias JENA, "Kejahatan yang Banal dan Kekerasan oleh Negara: Refleksi Hannah Arendt atas Pengadilan Adolf Eichmann di Yerusalem," 155-156, in <https://www.academia.edu/> (accessed on December 17, 2013).

in *logos* (speech).²³ Socrates believes that the philosopher has the task of giving courage to his fellow citizens to think for themselves.

Arendt refers to the work of Plato, *Gorgias*²⁴. In *Gorgias*, Plato admitted the wisdom of Socrates. Plato illustrates two positive Socratic propositions that Arendt quoted in her book. The first is: “It is better to be wronged than to do wrong”²⁵, while the second is: “It would be better for me that my lyre or a chorus I directed should be out of tune and loud with discord, and that multitudes of men should disagree with me rather than that I, *being one*, should be out of harmony with myself and contradict me.”²⁶ For Arendt, these two prepositions “derive their validity from the idea that there is a silent partner within ourselves to whom we render account of our actions.”²⁷ The silent partner here is nothing else than our conscience. Conscience, according to Arendt, is a “a kind of knowledge that is actualized in every thinking process.”²⁸

Socrates chose to suffer rather than to do wrong. According to Arendt, “only Socrates was able to practice both “ordinary” and “extraordinary” thinking without sacrificing the one to the other.”²⁹ She also argues that Socrates did not fear at his death and always offered a new way of thinking to the citizens. “Socrates is a man who had the courage to confront his death, his disappearance from the world, as

²³ Richard J. BERNSTEIN, “Arendt on Thinking”, in Dana Villa (ed), *The Cambridge Companion to Hannah Arendt*, Cambridge University Press, New York (NY) 2000, 281.

²⁴ The *Gorgias* is the dialogue about rhetoric, the art of addressing and convincing the many. It does not belong among the early Socratic dialogues; it was written shortly before Plato became the head of the Academy. *The Life of the Mind*, “Thinking”, 180.

²⁵ Hannah ARENDT, *The Life of the Mind*, “Thinking” ..., 181.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ Maurizio Passerin D’ENTRÈVES, “Arendt’s Theory of Judgment”, in Dana Villa (ed), *The Cambridge Companion to Hannah Arendt*, Cambridge University Press, New York (NY) 2000, 249.

²⁸ Hannah ARENDT, *The Life of the Mind*, “Thinking” ..., 5.

²⁹ In *The Life of the Mind*, however, Arendt is not concerned with engaged or political thought, but with what (for lack of a better term) might be called “extraordinary” or philosophical thinking. In fact, her last work is as adamant as *The Human Condition* in its insistence that this activity stands in the greatest possible tension not only with the life of the citizen, but with worldly existence in general. Thus, while she had the greatest possible respect for “extraordinary” thinkers from Plato to Heidegger, she continued to distrust them. Dana R. Villa, “Introduction: the Development of Arendt’s Political Thought”, in Dana Villa (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Hannah Arendt...*, 18-19.

something entirely new, a sort of adventure.”³⁰ Socrates had the capacity to influence others with the experience that he had. Arendt admired Socrates as a genuine thinker. She argues that not everyone has the capability to think well since “only people inspired by the Socratic *erōs*, the love of wisdom, beauty and justice, are capable of thought and can be trusted.”³¹ Socrates himself argues that “only few are capable of thought and that only certain objects of thought, visible to the eyes of the well-trained mind but ineffable in discourse, bestow dignity and relevance on the thinking activity.”³²

Socrates believes that “every man has his own *doxa*”. It means that every man as a thinking being has his way of thinking which might be different than others. Here, he actually wants to encourage his citizens to become thinking persons. He does not teach any doctrine, but he wants to encourage all the citizens to find the truth in their *doxa*.³³ For him this is the truth which every man potentially has. As a social animal, man lives together with others. Man lives in a society where he can make relationships with other people. There is no one in this world that can live totally separate from others. In this regard, Socrates argues that in order to live harmoniously with others, first of all we have to live harmoniously with ourselves. Without living harmoniously with ourselves, it is not possible for us to have a good relationship with other people. Arendt argues that Socrates concerns himself with friendship among all the citizens.

4.2. Thinking as an Activity in the Human Mind

Arendt argues, since thinking belongs to the field of philosophy or metaphysics, therefore it is not easy to answer what thinking is.³⁴ We can say for sure that thinking is one of the activities which supposed to be

³⁰ Jerome KOHN, “Freedom: the Priority of the Political”, in Dana Villa (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Hannah Arendt*, Cambridge University Press, New York (NY) 2000, 122.

³¹ Hannah ARENDT, *The Life of the Mind*, “Thinking” ..., 180.

³² *Ibid.*

³³ “Il rechercherait non pas à détruire la “*doxa*” de tel ou tel, non pas à améliorer les citoyens, mais à trouver la vérité dans la “*doxa*”, qui révèle à la “*doxa*” sa vérité propre”, in Anne Amiel, *Hannah Arendt Politique et événement*, Presses Universitaires de France, Paris 1996, 76.

³⁴ See Hannah ARENDT, “Thinking and Moral Considerations” ..., 419.

found in every rational animal. Again, every human being as a rational animal has the capability to think. Thinking is not the activity which can be found only in some group of intelligent people. Thinking belongs to every man as a rational animal. Thinking is “the highest and perhaps the purest activity of which men are capable. Every man needs to think and can only be satisfied through thinking.

Arendt believes that thinking is a mental activity in human beings, and it happens continuously without stopping. Thinking is like a breathing process in the human mind. For she says, “the business of thinking is like Penelope’s web. It undoes every morning what it has finished the night before.”³⁵ This is similar to the process of making networks continuously strung together, without stopping. Stephan Kampowski assumes that “thinking is not the same as an exercise of the intelligence.”³⁶ Arendt believes that every human being, as a rational animal, has the intellectual abilities to think and has the inclination “to use them as an instrument for knowing and doing.”³⁷ It is the characteristic of every human being in general. However, even though man has the capacity to think, “We are not pure thinking beings. As human beings, living our lives in a world of appearances, we may occasionally withdraw from this world in order to think in solitude.”³⁸

As an independent thinker, Arendt also wants to show us a new form or a new way of thinking. She calls it independent thinking (*Selbstdenken*). Arendt elaborates this idea in her speech *On Humanity in Dark Times: Thought about Lessing*, which she gave when she received the Lessing Prize in 1959.³⁹ She argues that by becoming an independent thinker, “the individual can hope to avoid moral catastrophe in those situations where ‘everyone else is carried away’ by a wave of misguided conviction or enthusiasm.”⁴⁰ For Arendt, *Selbstdenken* means “a new kind of thinking that needs no pillars and props, no standards and traditions to

³⁵ Hannah ARENDT, *The Life of The Mind*, “Thinking” ..., 88.

³⁶ Stephan KAMPOWSKI, *Arendt, Augustine, and the New Beginning: The Action Theory and Moral Thought of Hannah Arendt in the Light of Her Dissertation on St. Augustine*, William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, Michigan 2008, 92.

³⁷ Hannah ARENDT, “Thinking and Moral Considerations” ..., 421.

³⁸ Richard J. BERNSTEIN, “Arendt on Thinking” ..., 286.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 278.

⁴⁰ Dana R. VILLA, *The Cambridge Companion to Hannah Arendt...*, 18.

move freely without crutches over unfamiliar terrain.”⁴¹ On the contrary, Arendt argues that we should be critical of tradition. “We live today in a world in which not even common sense makes sense any longer.”⁴² This was very obvious to her after she saw the totalitarianism in the twentieth century especially during the annihilation of the Jews.

4.3. Thinking as a Dialogue between Me and Myself

Socrates believes that thinking itself is such a reflexive activity that involves I and myself. Thinking is a true activity by which I make dialogue with myself. Thinking is soundless dialogue between me and myself. When I am thinking, at the same time I realize that I am thinking. When I am thinking, I am standing in my own presence. Moreover, since thinking goes through a questioning and answering process, it can become dialectical and critical. These ideas refer to Socrates’s idea of my ‘being one’.⁴³ According to Socrates, when I am thinking, I am a “two-in-one”.⁴⁴ Socrates believes that it is possible for us to have intercourse with ourselves and also with others. “The duality of the two-in-one meant no more than that if you want to think, you must see to it that the two who carry on the dialogue be in good shape, that the partners be *friends*...”⁴⁵ Here, Socrates actually wants to show us that we are also our own friend, and this makes the dialogue possible. It means that myself is my partner when I am thinking. When I am thinking, I am “speaking with myself; I live together with myself.”⁴⁶ In thinking, I am the one who asks and answers. As I am thinking, I go into myself and can achieve a variety of things.

In *the Life of the Mind*, Arendt gives an example of such a dialogue in Shakespeare’s Richard III. Richard dialogues with himself after he has killed a whole group of people. He is troubled with what he has done. Here, Arendt wants to show us the dialogue that happens when man’s soul is not in harmony with itself. For Richard III says to himself:

⁴¹ Hannah ARENDT, *Men in Dark Times*, A Harvest Book, New York (NY) 1968, 10.

⁴² Frederick M. DOLAN, “Arendt on Philosophy and Politics”, in *The Cambridge Companion to Hannah Arendt*, Dana VILLA (ed), Cambridge University Press, New York (NY) 2000, 273. Cf. Hannah ARENDT, “Philosophy and Politics”, *Social Research* 57 (1990), 102–104.

⁴³ See Arne Johan VETLESEN, “Hannah Arendt on Conscience and Evil”, *Philosophy & Social Criticism*, vol. 27 no. 5, SAGE Publications, London 2001), 10.

⁴⁴ See Hannah ARENDT, *The Life of the Mind*, “Thinking” ..., 179-193.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 187-188.

⁴⁶ Hannah ARENDT, “Philosophy and Politics...,” 86.

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?
 Alack! I love myself. Wherefore? For any good
 That I myself have done unto myself?
 O! no: alas! I rather hate myself
 For hateful deeds committed by myself.
 I am a villain. Yet I lie, I am not.
 Fool, of thyself speak well: fool, do not flatter.⁴⁷

As a dialogue between me and myself, Arendt argues that thinking is born from the experience of “absolute solitude.”⁴⁸ Roger Berkowitz explains that Richard III is in a solitude that makes him able to face himself.⁴⁹ Here, solitude means dialogue between me and myself, a “two- in-one”. In other words we can say that even though a man is alone, actually he is not totally alone since he is accompanied by himself.

4.4. Thinking and Its Relation to the Faculty of Imagination

Thinking is “a creative activity which requires remembrance, story-telling, and imagination.”⁵⁰ It requires the virtues of both courage and independence. Thinking also requires a withdrawal from the world of appearances and deals with invisibles.”⁵¹ Arendt believes that imagination plays an important role in the activity of thinking. Man needs to use his imagination in order to think properly. When she was attending Eichmann’s trial, Arendt saw that Eichmann did not have the imagination necessary to be able to “think from the standpoint of somebody else.” He did not have the imagination and empathy to make him feel the

⁴⁷ Hannah ARENDT, *The Life of the Mind*, “Thinking” ..., 189.

⁴⁸ Roger BERKOWITZ, “Solitude and the Activity of Thinking”, in Roger BERKOWITZ, Jeffrey KATZ, - Thomas KEENAN, *Thinking in Dark Times...*, 241.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

⁵⁰ To express what she means by thinking, she again turns to Kafka. Commenting on a parable of Kafka and an aphorism of René Char, “Notre héritage n’est précédé d’aucun testament,” she links thinking together with remembrance and story-telling. Remembrance is one of the most important “modes of thought,” and it requires story-telling in order to preserve those “small hidden islands of freedom.” Richard J. BERNSTEIN, “Arendt on Thinking” ..., 279.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 279, 286.

consequences of his actions on others. As a consequence he just had done his job with blind obedience without feeling guilty when he had sent the Jews to concentration camps.

Eichmann is a “new type criminal” who “commits his crimes under circumstances that make it well-nigh impossible for him to know or feel that he is doing wrong.”⁵² He lived in the era of totalitarianism. In her essay *Understanding and Politics*, Arendt explains that “totalitarianism is *beyond human understanding*.”⁵³ Yet according to her, the activity of understanding is an activity which is carried out continuously, without stopping. Totalitarianism, she believes, makes us unable to understand meaning and also eliminates the category of political thought and standards of our moral judgments. Totalitarianism destroys our accepted standards of judgment and our conventional categories of interpretation and assessment, be they moral or political.⁵⁴ The only way to repair this situation according to her is to use the imagination. By imagination, we can see everything in its proper perspective. For Arendt says:

Imagination alone enables us to see things in their proper perspective, to put that which is too close at a certain distance so that we can see and understand it without bias and prejudice, to bridge abysses of remoteness until we can see and understand everything that is too far away from us as though it were our own affair. This “distancing” of some things and bridging the abysses to others is part of the dialogue of understanding.⁵⁵

As a human being, we always live in the present time, which is the moment between the past and the future. Arendt mentions these thoughts especially in her book, *Between Past and Future*. When thinking, man can freely bring his imagination to the past and the future. Imagination is related to representative thinking. In this account, according to Kirstie M. McClure, imagination transforms worldly objects of

⁵² Joseph BEATTY, “Thinking and Moral Considerations: Socrates and Arendt’s Eichmann”, in Lewis P. HINCHMAN – Sandra K. HINCHMAN (eds.), *Hannah Arendt: Critical Essays*, University of New York Press, Albany 1994, 69.

⁵³ Hannah ARENDT, *Essays in Understanding: 1930-1954*, Jerome Kohn (ed.), Harcourt Brace & Co., New York (NY) 1994, 233.

⁵⁴ Maurizio Passerin D’ENTRÉVES, *op.cit.*, 247.

⁵⁵ Hannah ARENDT, *Lecture on Kant’s Political Philosophy*, Ronald BEINER (ed.), University of Chicago Press, Chicago 1982, 96-97.

perception into images and representations.⁵⁶ By the imagination, “one can represent objects that are no longer present and thus establish the distance necessary for an impartial judgment.”⁵⁷ Imagination makes us see and understand things more clearly since it puts things in proper perspective. As a consequence, as Maurizio Passerin d’Entrèves says, imagination “makes possible our reconciliation with reality, even with the tragic reality of the twentieth century.”⁵⁸ The role of imagination is like a memory, which allows us to formulate various categories to understand the events that actually happened in the past and connect them with the present. By imagination, we can remember the past selectively, fix the meaning of life as well as shed light on contemporary circumstances, without having to use a traditional standard framework that according to Arendt has lost its validity.

4.5 Thinking and Its Relation to Conscience

Conscience plays an important role in every man as a rational animal. Etymologically, conscience “refers to the same phenomenon as consciousness or self-awareness.”⁵⁹ In the introduction of *the Life of the Mind*, Arendt argues that “the very word ‘conscience’, 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.⁶⁰ “Does the inability to think and a disastrous failure of what we commonly call conscience coincide?”⁶¹ Arendt raises this question in the beginning of her lecture *Thinking and Moral Considerations*.

Arendt believes that thinking does not have any direct product. But, the activity of thinking produces conscience as its byproduct. Conscience is the byproduct of thinking and not its product. Conscience, by forcing me to be in my own presence and thus develop an interest in

⁵⁶ Kirstie M. McCURE, “The Odor of Judgment”, in Craig CALHOUN & John MCGOWAN (eds.), *Hannah Arendt & The Meaning of Politics*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis 1997, 75.

⁵⁷ Maurizio Passerin D’ENTRÈVES, *op.cit.*, 251.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 248.

⁵⁹ Stephan KAMPOWSKI, *Arendt, Augustine, and the New Beginning: The Action Theory and Moral Thought of Hannah Arendt in the Light of Her Dissertation on Augustine*, William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, Michigan 2008, 102-103.

⁶⁰ Hannah ARENDT, *The Life of the Mind*, “Thinking” ..., 5.

⁶¹ Hannah ARENDT, “Thinking and Moral Considerations” ..., 418.

making sure my own presence is something bearable. As a consequence of a good conscience, a man will act well. Thinking and conscience relate each other. Conscience is an “interiorized moral principle, which moves a person from “I ought not” to the “I can’t”.⁶² A man with good conscience rather says “I can’t kill” than “I ought not to kill”.

Arendt herself is not totally sure whether conscience is the voice of God or of nature. But, she believes that “whatever the voice of conscience may be, it cannot be said to be ‘silent’, and its validity depends entirely upon an authority that is above and beyond all merely human laws and rules.”⁶³ She believes that “it is a metaphor for man’s intercourse with himself – and especially for a ‘side-effect’ of such intercourse.”⁶⁴ Arendt believes that our actions are affected by our conscience. The conscience, “told you, as the divine voice of either God or reason, what to do, what not to do, and what to repent of.”⁶⁵ Therefore, she argues that conscience should be always present in every human being. Conscience plays a significant role in what we do.

Did Eichmann have a conscience? Arendt says very clearly that Eichmann had a conscience, but “his conscience functioned in the expected way for about four weeks, whereupon it began to function the other way around.”⁶⁶ For Arendt, Eichmann had a conscience when he was still new to the job and freely took some risks by disobeying his superior’s evil order. It was the first time and the last time Eichmann used his conscience. After that, “his conscience did not bother him; and he did not suffer from remorse”.⁶⁷ Eichmann himself confessed that he would have been bothered if he had not done what had been ordered him. For Arendt says: “He remembered perfectly well that he would have had a bad conscience only if he had not done what he had been ordered to do -

⁶² See Stephan KAMPOWSKI, *op.cit.*, 113.

⁶³ Hannah ARENDT, *The Life of the Mind*, “Thinking”..., 215.

⁶⁴ Mika OJAKANGAS, “Arendt, Socrates, and the Ethics of Conscience”, in https://helda.helsinki.fi/bitstream/handle/10138/25815/008_06_Ojakangas (accessed on 1st March 2014). Cf. Hannah ARENDT, *Responsibility and Judgment*. Schocken Books, New York (NY) 2003, 188.

⁶⁵ Hannah ARENDT, *The Life of the Mind*, “Thinking”..., 215.

⁶⁶ Hannah ARENDT, *Eichmann in Jerusalem...*, 95.

⁶⁷ Jerome KOHN, “Evil: the Crime Against Humanity”, in *The Hannah Arendt Papers*, (Library of Congress: 2001) <http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/arendthtml/essayc1.html> (accessed on 18th February 2014).

to ship millions of men, women, and children to their death with great zeal and most meticulous care."⁶⁸ Eichmann has never made up their minds to be or do either evil or good.⁶⁹ Eichmann's lack of thinking clearly relates with his lack of conscience.

Arendt believes that it is possible that someone's conscience can be corrupted by society. Eichmann had lost his conscience since he had not realized what he had actually done, and he just followed what had been ordered him. Peg Birmingham writes a very interesting passage about conscience in Eichmann. According to her, Eichmann's voice of conscience was caught up in the voice of his superior. It made him ignore his own desire and try to fulfill his job perfectly:

Eichmann's voice of conscience was not silenced—it was carried away, caught up in the voice of another; his voice had literally been "voiced over" with the voice of Himmler. Not only does Eichmann's elated voice of conscience identify the law with the will of Hitler but also, and at the same time, his desires and fantasies become identified with Hitler's. The elated voice of conscience told Eichmann to ignore his own desire and dutifully carry out the law of the land.⁷⁰

Citing the words of Dana Villa, Vetlesen writes that "Eichmann's conscience did not function in the expected manner since it was based on a conflation of *morality* with *legality*. As a result, he was troubled only by the temptation to *do good*, that is, to disregard his *duty* under the laws of a criminal regime and 'be soft'".⁷¹ As a conclusion, Villa says: "Eichmann's case demonstrated how conscience ... is perverted: it no longer tells individuals what is right and what is wrong. But neither is it totally silenced, for it continues to tell people like Eichmann what their "duty" is."⁷²

⁶⁸ Hannah ARENDT, *Eichmann in Jerusalem...*, 25.

⁶⁹ Hannah ARENDT, *The Life of the Mind*, "Thinking" ..., 180.

⁷⁰ Peg BIRMINGHAM, *Hannah Arendt & Human Rights: The Predicament of Common Responsibility*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington 2006, 109.

⁷¹ Arne Johan VETLESEN, *op.cit.*, 16. Cfr. Dana VILLA, "Conscience, the Banality of Evil, and the Idea of a Representative Perpetrator", in Dana VILLA (ed.), *Politics, Philosophy Terror: Essays on the Thought of Hannah Arendt*, Princeton University Press, New Jersey (NJ) 1999, 45.

⁷² *Ibid.*

Arendt believes that the activity of thinking affects our conscience. The thinker is the one who follows his conscience. Conscience can tell us what we should do or what we should not do. Conscience, according to Arendt, is the actualization of thinking process. In order to live well, we have to try to hear the voice of conscience inside our heart. We can have it only when we start to (critically) examine our deeds and thoughts.⁷³ We have to make dialogue with ourselves in order to realize it. For she says, “No man can keep his conscience intact who cannot actualize the dialogue with himself.”⁷⁴ Here, she points out the importance of thinking in order to realize “conscience” in ourselves. In order to actualize conscience, you must think to your self.

5. THOUGHTLESSNESS AS THE CAUSE OF THE BANALITY OF EVIL

As mentioned above, Arendt argues that Eichmann was not such a scary monster or devil; but he just looked like an ordinary person. Arendt didn’t see any hatred in Eichmann toward the Jews. Yet, in fact, Eichmann had played a very active role in the annihilation of the Jews. It was the absence of thinking that made him committing a very grave evil. His inability to think or his thoughtlessness was the necessary condition of the very evil thing that he had done. Arendt uses the term “thoughtlessness” in an unusual way. It’s not very clear what her definition of thoughtlessness is. Even Mary McCarthy, Arendt’s friend, was confused with Arendt’s terms “thoughtlessness” and “stupidity”.⁷⁵

We can say that thoughtlessness refers to the absence of consideration. The absence of consideration happened in Eichmann. Eichmann could not consider things that ought to be considered. He was unable to consider viewpoint of others, which made him done the very evil thing. According to St. Thomas Aquinas, the absence of consideration makes the rational creatures committed a very grave sin, like happens in the fallen angels. This “absence of consideration” relates strongly with man’s conscience.

⁷³ Mika OJAKANGAS, *loc.cit.*

⁷⁴ Hannah ARENDT, “Socrates”, in Jerome KOHN (ed.), *The Promise of Politics*, Schocken Books, New York (NY) 2005, 25.

⁷⁵ Cfr. Hannah ARENDT and Mary MCCARTHY, *Between Friends: Correspondence of Hannah Arendt and Mary McCarthy, 1949-1975*, Carol BRIGHTMAN (ed.), Harcourt, New York (NY) 1995, 296.

In order to understand the meaning of thoughtlessness in Arendt's perspective, we have to look at Eichmann's behavior during the trial. For Arendt, the expression "thoughtlessness" means "the inability to imagine the standpoint of someone else and the inability to realize what one is doing."⁷⁶ Arendt noted that during the trial in Jerusalem, Eichmann always used an expression in the same words. Eichmann did not have the capability to speak. He was unable to give an alternative expression for a phrase unknown to the latter. He was unable to look at anything from the other fellow's point of view.⁷⁷ Eichmann warded himself off against reality as such. He has not have the ability to communicate with others effectively and the ability to realize what actually was happening.

Eichmann also had the inability to realize what he was doing or what is about to be done to him.⁷⁸ He didn't realize that he had done very evil things. Again, he never had any intention to exterminate the Jews. He had not had evil motives as such, not at all. "It so happened", as he said. Stephan Kampowski in his dissertation mentions that, "This does not mean that he made a simple cognitive mistake, thinking himself to be organizing the shipment of wheat to starving people in Ethiopia, while in fact he was organizing to transport of millions of people to death camps."⁷⁹ In fact, Eichmann had known perfectly what his task was. The thoughtlessness in Eichmann also regards his inability to realize what was being done to him. Arendt points out that Eichmann failed to exercise his capacity of thinking, of having an internal dialogue with himself, which would have permitted self-awareness of the evil nature of his deeds.⁸⁰

Thoughtlessness is not the same as stupidity, since we can find the thoughtlessness in highly intelligent people, as it happened in Eichmann. Eichmann had never really used his faculty of thinking. Arendt argues that Eichmann was neither stupid nor insane, "it was sheer thoughtlessness – something by no means identical with stupidity – that predisposed him to become one of the greatest criminals of that period."⁸¹ Basically,

⁷⁶ Stephan KAMPOWSKI, *op.cit.*, 82.

⁷⁷ See Hannah ARENDT, *Eichmann in Jerusalem...*, 48.

⁷⁸ See Stephan KAMPOWSKI, *op.cit.*, 85.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 83.

⁸⁰ Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy, "Hannah ARENDT (1906-1975)," in <http://www.iep.utm.edu> (accessed on 17th December 2013).

⁸¹ Hannah ARENDT, *Eichmann in Jerusalem...*, 287-288.

Eichmann knew quite well what it was all about by sending the Jews to concentration camps, but in fact, he did it without reflecting and thinking what he had actually done. Arendt was baffled at how Eichmann could not have realized that sending them to concentration camps was a totally evil thing.

Since Eichmann was not insane and (only) had an inability to think well, therefore he was culpable and he is not excused from guilt.⁸² Eichmann had to be responsible what he had done, legally and morally responsible. For Arendt, there would be no excuse for Eichmann to be “free” from the punishment. Even though other people had done what Eichmann did, Eichmann must be responsible what he had done since he was born in the aspect of a human being who has the ability to think. Every human who was not insane has to be responsible for what he has done.

6. THE IMPORTANCE OF THINKING IN EVERY HUMAN BEING

After attending Eichmann’s trial and has seen the inability of Eichmann to think well, some questions arose in Arendt’s mind regarding the relation of thinking to morality. Arendt believes that thinking has a relation to morality. Thinking as reflexive activity affects human beings in their actions. In the introduction of *the Life of the Mind*, Arendt posed an interesting question: “Could this activity be among the conditions that make men abstain from evil-doing or even actually “conditioning” them against it?”⁸³ Moreover she says, “If there is anything in thinking that can prevent men from doing evil, it must be some property inherent in the activity itself, regardless of its objects.”⁸⁴

Taking the idea of Socrates about “two-in-one”, Arendt argues that it is important for us to know ourselves. I have to live with myself when I am thinking. I become aware of myself when I am thinking. When I am aware of myself, as a consequence I want to live in harmony with myself and that guards me against doing evil things. It follows that the activity of thinking can stop man from doing grave evil since man cannot live in

⁸² Cf. Stephan KAMPOWSKI, *op.cit.*, 88. See André ENEGRÉN, *La Pensée Politique de Hannah Arendt*, Presses Universitaires de France, Paris 1984, 218.

⁸³ Hannah ARENDT, *The Life of the Mind*, “Thinking”..., 5.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 180.

harmony with himself when he does evil things. In the words of Roger Berkowitz, “Only one who speaks with oneself will worry that in acting unethically he or she will have to live with a criminal.”⁸⁵

As we have seen, Eichmann’s inability to think allowed him to do very evil things. Banality of evil came from the inability of a person to think. If we do not use our ability to think, then we can fall into “thoughtlessness”, and open ourselves to fall into evil deeds, like Eichmann had done. This thoughtlessness can be cured and avoided by the habit of thinking, especially the kind of thinking which Socrates used to practice (dialogue). Thinking may *hinder* people from committing grave evil. By thinking well, we will get the good conscience that guides us in what things we should do and what things we should not do. In Bernstein words, “thinking may prevent us from tolerating or becoming indifferent to evil deeds” since we realize, if we do the evil things, that we will not live in harmony with ourselves.⁸⁶

Therefore, it is very important for every man in using his faculty of thinking, so that he can keep his conscience intact and prevent him in doing evil things. Only if I have good conscience as the product of thinking I can realize that by doing evil things I cannot live in harmony with myself. Arendt deals with conscience in its connection with the morality. Conscience affects human actions. Conscience, like the voice in our heart, tells us what we should do or what we should not do. In order to live in harmony with ourselves, we have to listen to the voice of conscience within our heart. We have to make dialogue with ourselves to keep our conscience intact.

7. CONCLUDING REMARKS

Arendt emphasizes the importance process of thinking in every human being, especially when she attended Eichmann’s trial in Jerusalem. She argues that thinking is an essential activity in every human being as a rational animal. Thinking can prevent us from committing grave evil. Therefore, it is very important for us to practice our faculty of thinking. In Arendt words, “If the ability to tell right from wrong should have anything to do with the ability to think, then we must be able to “demand” its

⁸⁵ Roger BERKOWITZ, *op.cit.*, 5.

⁸⁶ Richard J. BERNSTEIN, “Arendt on Thinking”..., 285.

exercise in every sane person no matter how erudite or ignorant, intelligent or stupid he may happen to be.”⁸⁷

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