

Diversifying Syllabi 2015 Text Summary and Teaching Tips

SECTION ONE: to be completed by presenter

Article/Essay Title: “Thinking and Moral Considerations”

Author: Hannah Arendt

Readability: Easy/**Moderate**/Difficult

Thesis: Arendt is interested in the “inner connection between the ability or inability to think and the problem of evil” (425). In the beginning of the paper, she phrases this as a series of questions: “Do the inability to think and a disastrous failure of what we commonly call conscience coincide?...Could the activity of thinking as such, the habit of examining and reflecting upon whatever happens to come to pass, regardless of specific content and quite independent of results, could this activity be of such a nature that it ‘conditions’ men against evil-doing?” (418).

The key claim seems to be that thinking is productive of *conscience*, which makes one more sensitive to moral concerns. (There may also be a parallel claim: being moral is productive of thinking – in other words, thinking and being moral may be co-constitutive).

Key Definitions:

- Two-world theories: theories that distinguish between a sensual realm and a supersensual realm
- Two-in-one: an internal dialogue, a back-and-forth with yourself
- Thinking: a kind of *conversation* with oneself (two-in-one)
 - vs knowing: one might be able to know a good deal without thinking; so knowledge isn’t necessary for thinking.
 - vs doing: “thinking’s chief characteristic is that it interrupts all doing, all ordinary activities” (423)
 - vs judging particulars: this kinds of reasoning deals with particulars that are close at hand, while thinking deals only with “invisibles”—representations of things that are absent (446). I think she has something like deliberation or means-end reasoning in mind here.

Brief Summary:

- Arendt wants to show that there is a connection between thinking and being moral.
- To show this, she discusses the nature of the activity of thinking by looking at Socrates’ life, discussing Plato’s Socratic dialogues. She points out how they are all “aporetic” and how “the argument either leads nowhere or it goes around in circles” (428). She takes this to be evidence for the claim that thinking is not *productive* of anything.
 - Socrates described his method in the following way: “It isn’t that, knowing the answers myself I perplex other people. The truth is rather that I infect them with the perplexity I feel myself” (431).

Arendt remarks that this is “the only way thinking can be taught” (431).

- It is in the nature of thinking to “undo, unfreeze as it were, what language, the medium of thinking, has frozen into thought—words (concepts, sentences, definitions, doctrines), whose ‘weakness’ and inflexibility Plato denounces so splendidly...The consequence of this peculiarity is that thinking inevitably has a destructive, undermining effect on all established criteria, values, measurements for good and evil, in short on those customs and rules of conduct we treat of in morals and ethics” (434).
- This destructiveness of thinking has a really interesting danger: nihilism, or the idea that there really are no truths worth investigating. She points out that individuals like Alcibiades became “a very real threat to the polis” because of the way they “changed the non-results of Socratic thinking examination into negative results: If we cannot define what piety is, let us be impious” (435).
 - In other words, nihilism is borne from a frustration about the way in which thinking doesn’t seem to produce results.
 - Adopting a nihilistic view, though, doesn’t count as thinking. This is because nihilism arises “out of the desire to find results which would make further thinking unnecessary.” She continues: “Thinking is equally dangerous to all creeds and, by itself, does not bring forth any new creed” (435).
 - This means that understanding thinking as conceptually connected to moral considerations prohibits us from formulating any determinate *moral rules* via the process of thinking.
- In the next section she makes the important claim that the very form of Plato’s dialogues captures what goes on within oneself during the activity of thinking: the two individuals in conversation are internalized into one’s own mind (“two-in-one”). So having a conversation with yourself is precisely what thinking is.
- She then describes the conditions that need to be present in order to have this kind of conversation with oneself.
 - “If you want to think, you must see to it that the two who carry on the thinking dialogue be in good shape, that the partners be friends” (442).
 - This depends on accepting two Socrates-inspired claims:
 - “Nobody would live with a murderer” – in other words, you must be a good person
 - Similarly, one shouldn’t be at odds with oneself.
 - Arendt writes: “who would want to be the friend of an have to live together with a murderer? Not even a murderer. What kind of dialogue could you lead with him?” (442).

- So thinking is not the province of a privileged few: all agents are capable of this inner dialogue.
- This is how thinking is productive of conscience: “He who does not know the intercourse between me and myself (in which we examine what we say and what we do) will not mind contradicting himself, and this means he will never be either able or willing to give account of what he says or does; nor will he mind committing any crime, since he can be sure that it will be forgotten the next moment” (445).
- In sum, thinking is a soundless dialogue with myself that results in *conscience* as its by-product.

SECTION TWO

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Author: Hannah Arendt

Possible Applications:

- Intro to Philosophy: it could work well as a text to assign near the beginning of the semester to get students to consider what’s valuable about studying philosophy (and even the humanities generally).
- Ancient Philosophy: the text includes extensive discussion of ancient thinkers with a particular focus on Socrates
- Continental Philosophy
- Social and Political Philosophy
- Critical Thinking courses
- Epistemology/ethics: the text could work well for courses that have a focus on virtue epistemology and/or virtue ethics.

Complementary Texts/Resources:

- Selections from Arendt’s *The Life of the Mind* (Orlando: Harcourt Inc., 1978).
- Arendt’s “Philosophy and Politics” in *Social Research* 57, no. 1 (1990), 73-103.
- Arendt’s *Eichmann in Jerusalem* (New York: Penguin, 2006), particularly those sections where she goes into detail concerning her notion of the “banality of evil”
- Arendt’s essay on Heidegger’s political engagement, “Martin Heidegger at Eighty,” trans. Albert Hofstadter in *The New York Review of Books* (October 21, 1971).
- Margarethe von Trotta’s 2012 film, *Hannah Arendt*
- On conscience:
 - Freud’s texts on the superego
 - Jonathan Bennett, “The Conscience of Huckleberry Finn”

- Bystander issues/themes in moral philosophy. Material related to the Milgram experiments and the Nuremberg defense.

- María Lugones, "Playfulness, 'World'-Travelling, and Loving Perception" in *Hypatia* 2, no. 2 (1987): 3-19. May be very helpful to juxtapose with "Thinking and Moral Considerations" on the need to understand a plurality of perspectives.

Possible Class Activities:

- This could easily be used as a text to assign early in an Intro to Phil course to frame the semester and start students thinking about the value of philosophy and humanities courses in general.

- Student could watch von Trotta's film and assess (in discussion and in assignments) whether they feel the film accurately conveys Arendt's views. They might also look at reviews of the film and assess whether the reviewers have successfully captured Arendt's views.

- Have students engage in a back-and-forth (mirroring how Arendt describes the "two-in-one") debating the meaning of a set of concepts you assign. Students could then write reflections comparing their in-class experiences with the details of Arendt's view.