

INTERPRETATION

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BOOK REVIEW:

Hannah Arendt's *The Life of the Mind*
 Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, N.Y. 1978,
 two vols. \$25.00

GERALD J. GALGAN
St. Francis College

Arendt analyzes the "vita contemplativa" into thinking, willing, and judging, thereby nearly completing the "arch" begun with (and repeating the symmetry of) *The Human Condition* where the "vita activa" is divided into labor, work, and action. Work, in *The Human Condition*, is presented as the activity which produces an artificial world of things, while labor is presented as the activity which produces vital necessities and in doing so corresponds to the processes of the human body; but both work and labor, as construed by the Classical Mind, are slavish activities since their end is the maintenance of life. Action, unmediated activity between men, is the only component of the "vita activa" worthy of a free man; the "political," consequently, is supreme in the "vita activa." This symmetry is repeated in *The Life of the Mind* where willing is presented as the power of spontaneously beginning a series of things, and judging is presented as the making manifest of thinking in the world of appearances; but both willing and judging have particulars as their objects. Thinking alone has the universal as its object and is therefore supreme in the "vita contemplativa." Arendt distinguishes thinking (the quest for meaning) from knowing (the quest for truth); since the "vita contemplativa," as understood by the Classical Mind, is superior to the "vita activa," the quest for meaning found in the raising of "unanswerable questions" is the highest activity for man.

The Human Condition dramatizes the Modern Mind's inversion of the Classical hierarchy of the "vita activa." Action and work are made subservient to labor, and this entails a redefinition of man, made explicit by Marx, as the "animal laborans." All 'use' objects (those of work) become 'consumption' objects (those of labor), as the industrial revolution replaces workmanship with labor and pushes the "animal laborans" into the public realm. The "political" can no longer be supreme in the "vita activa" since the only thing men have

in common is their private interests—private activities displayed in the open. The distinction between the “*vita activa*” and the “*vita contemplativa*” is erased and thinking comes to be interpreted as one among several manifestations of the “*vita activa*.” *The Life of the Mind* dramatizes the Modern Mind’s inversion of the Classical hierarchy of the “*vita contemplativa*.” Thinking and judging are made subservient to willing, and this entails a redefinition of man as the undetermined being, the being of unqualified freedom, whose selfhood transcends both the political and natural orders. By virtue of its notion of progress, the Modern Mind shifts its understanding of the future from the Classical “that which approaches us” to that which we determine by the projects of the will. Modern technology is thereby made possible as “the will to will,” that is, the will to subject the whole world to its domination and rulership.

These are the rudiments of the “arch” constituted by *The Human Condition* and *The Life of the Mind*; but this “arch” is unfinished. At the time of her death in 1975 Arendt had not started the section on judging; her plan was that this section could be much shorter than the sections on thinking and willing and that it would simply be appended to the second volume of *The Life of the Mind*. But the moral question she poses at the beginning of this work, a question which emerges out of her book *Eichmann in Jerusalem* where she speaks about the “banality of evil,” namely, whether thinking could be one of the conditions for men’s abstaining from evil, is never really satisfactorily answered by her analysis of thinking and willing. It appears that only an analysis of *judging*, where we find the ability not only to distinguish the beautiful from the ugly but the right from the wrong, would be a satisfactory answer to this question.

Yet, if the “arch” is unfinished, it does present a certain grandeur when viewed from the vantage point of contemporary experience. This grandeur is reflected in her hopes and expectations for the future of thinking.

She places herself in the company of those who attempt to “dismantle metaphysics and philosophy with all its categories as we have known them from their beginning in Greece until today.” She is interested not in the truth sought by the great thinkers but in their being for us (who live in a time when the “basic distinction between the sensory and the supersensory” has come to an end and where the “thread of tradition is broken” and incapable of being renewed) the

“only clues” to what “thinking means to those who engage in it.” The works of great thinkers survive because these works were written in a kind of “timeless time” in which men are able to create “timeless works with which to transcend their own finiteness.” We are experiencing today a “shrinkage of time behind us that is no less decisive than the shrinkage of spatial distances on the earth,” so that the antiquity of the greatest thinkers is “much closer to us today than it was to our ancestors.” As a result, our advantage is in our ability to recapture thinking with a mind “unburdened and unguided by any traditions”; and the only obstacle in the path of the exercise of this ability is the growing contemporary “inability to move, on no matter what level, in the realm of the invisible.”

The counterforce to this obstacle, however, is an inclination, “perhaps a need,” in men to “think beyond the limitations of knowledge,” a need which is not “inspired by the quest for truth but by the quest for meaning”—a quest which “permits the mind to withdraw from the world without ever being able to leave it or transcend it.” She is confident that the difference between thinking and knowing, along with the breaking of the thread of tradition, have come to the foreground of contemporary consciousness; we are now in a position where we no longer “expect truth to come from thinking,” where we no longer “mistake the need to think with the urge to know.” We are in a position to see that the experience of the “activity of thought” is the “aboriginal source of our notion of spirituality in itself, regardless of the forms it has assumed.” What has come to an end for us is not the possibility of thinking about the ultimates but the “Roman trinity” of “religion, authority, and tradition.” What has come to an end for us is theology, philosophy, and metaphysics, as traditionally practised—thinking as the province of a few professionals. If this be so, if thinking still remains for us and if it remains closer than ever, then the intimacy between thinking about ultimate meanings and judging about right and wrong requires that we at long last demand the exercise of thinking from every “sane person, no matter how erudite or ignorant, how intelligent or stupid, he may happen to be.” Her expectation is that at last “the many” will be open to the possibility of experiencing what, in the words of Coleridge, was only experienced by the “nobler minds” of the past, namely, that there is “within themselves a something ineffably greater than their own individual nature.” Her

fervent hope is that in transcending the ties of tradition we are in the position to transcend the “modern identity crisis” which can only “be resolved by never being alone and never trying to think.”

In the end, however, the grandeur of these hopes and expectations is rooted in the possibility that the quest for truth and the quest for meaning can be “meaningfully” distinguished and separated. But can they? Could it be that the only task that remains for thinking (when it ceases to be directed at the articulation of “what is the case”) is precisely what so many of the professional philosophical ‘few’ take to be philosophy, namely, the construction of “ideal languages”—the arcane intricacies of the new systems of symbolic logic? Could the persistent identification of the quest for meaning and the quest for truth in traditional philosophy, metaphysics, and theology be itself a “clue,” to use Arendt’s own words, to what “thinking means to those who engage in it”?