

THINKING OUT OF ORDER

I

“A. A violent order is a disorder; and
B. A great disorder is an order. These
Two things are one.”

– Wallace Stevens (Connoisseur of Chaos)

Thinking is out of order. So proposes Hannah Arendt in *The Life of the Mind*, the book she was writing at the time of her death. What does it mean to say that thinking is “out of order”? The question, like the phrase, is multivalent.

Writing about her book project in a letter to Mary McCarthy, Arendt envisions *The Life of the Mind* to be a “kind of part II to the Human Condition”. Whereas in the earlier book she presented her innovative analysis of the *vita activa*, *The Life of the Mind* would re- envision the *vita contemplativa*, which Arendt divides into three primary activities: thinking, willing, and judging. In introducing her discussion of thinking, Arendt draws on Kant’s distinction between *Verstand* and *Vernunft*, which she translates, respectively, as “intellect” and “reason”. She stipulates that intellect, the manifestation of the desire for knowledge, is engaged in the “quest for truth”, whereas “the need of reason” is inspired not by the quest for truth but by the “quest for meaning”. These distinct faculties, intellect and reason, correspond to distinct mental activities, “knowing” and “thinking”. It is the latter that is Arendt’s primary concern in the *Thinking* part of *The Life of the Mind*.

The first time Arendt proposes that thinking is “out of order”, she explains that it “interrupts any doing, any ordinary activities, no matter what they happen to be”. She is invoking here not only the disjunction between the *vita contemplativa* and the *vita activa* – that is, between thinking and doing – but also the distinction she has drawn within the realm of the *vita contemplativa* itself, between knowing and thinking. Arendt maintains that the desire to know, and the cognitive activities that are in service of this pursuit of truth, are fundamentally tied to the world of appearances, the phenomenal world accessible to human beings through our five senses. The business of the intellect is to comprehend what is given to the five senses, thereby ensuring that we are “at home in the world”.

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Thinking, which pursues not empirical truth but rather meaning, effectively removes us from this world of common sense. When we think, we “withdraw” from the world of appearances, in order to make present to the mind what is absent from the senses. Following Augustine, Arendt maintains that what is perceived through the senses undergoes a twofold transformation, first becoming an “invisible image” that is stored in the memory, and then becoming a “thought-object” when the mind “remembers, recollects, and selects” something particular from the storehouse of memory. This “desensualization” of the objects of perception transforms them into thought-objects that can be present to the mind when the original objects are physically absent. Arendt sees in this rudimentary mental procedure the precursor to the kind of thinking that is concerned with thought-objects that were never present to sense experience – the ideas, concepts, and categories that become the special subject matter of philosophy.

WHEN WE THINK, WE “WITHDRAW” FROM THE WORLD OF APPEARANCES, IN ORDER TO MAKE PRESENT TO THE MIND WHAT IS ABSENT FROM THE SENSES

When thinking, our attention shifts away from the common, the ordinary, the shared world. Objects of thought are, by definition, absent or invisible to the senses. Insofar as we are thinking about a person, we do not perceive that person’s physical presence, but rather, we are occupied with our thought of the person, and when we “start thinking about somebody or something that is still present”, we “have removed ourselves surreptitiously from whatever our present surroundings are and are conducting ourselves as though we were already absent”.

Thinking, therefore, diverts or distracts us from the order of the day – not only does it inhibit us, while we are thinking, from engaging in whatever action may be

required, but it alienates us from the spatio-temporal reality we would otherwise be inhabiting. The thinking ego cannot be localized; it is invisible; it is, Arendt writes, “homeless in an emphatic sense”. Importantly for Arendt, this kind of thinking has its end in itself. It is sheer activity that serves no other purpose, is put to no other use, and produces no end result. Once the activity of thinking has ceased, literally nothing remains.

In calling thinking out of order, Arendt is highlighting the disjunction, the misfit, between the experience of the thinking ego and the exigencies of the spatio-temporal world that the individual nevertheless still inhabits in common with others. She is also deliberately invoking a pejorative sense of the phrase, the sense in which something may be ruled out of order. To engage in thinking, then, is to do something that has “often been felt to be unnatural, as though men, whenever they reflect without purpose...engaged in an activity *contrary to the human condition*”.

II

*“And if it all went on in an orderly way,
And it does...”*

Arendt identifies Heidegger as her source the first time she invokes the phrase “out of order”. “Thinking as such”, she writes, “not only the raising of the unanswerable ‘ultimate questions’, but every reflection that does not serve knowledge and is not guided by practical needs and purposes is, as Heidegger once remarked, ‘out of order’”. She cites the English translation of Heidegger’s 1935 lecture, *Introduction to Metaphysics*, originally published in German in 1953. Yet Heidegger refers in that passage not to “thinking” (*Denken*) but rather to “philosophizing” (*Philosophieren*). He writes: “to philosophize is to inquire into the *extra-ordinary*...the questioning does not lie along the way so that we bump into it one day unexpectedly. Nor is it part of everyday life...the questioning itself is ‘out of order’”.

The difference – Arendt’s appropriation and transformation of Heidegger’s remark – is illuminating. What is out of order for Heidegger is not “thinking”, understood in Arendt’s sense as an activity that all people, all rational agents, have the capacity for and engage in whenever they “stop and think”

about “whatever happens to come to pass or to attract attention”. Heidegger’s focus is explicitly and exclusively on “philosophy”, which “always aims at the first and last grounds of the essent [or, “of beings”, *Gründe des Seienden*]”. Moreover, for Heidegger “philosophy is always the concern of the few...those who initiate profound transformations”. In sum, what is out of order, according to Heidegger, is the “extraordinary inquiry into the extra-ordinary” conducted by “the few”, those who are called philosophers. For Arendt, by contrast, only the activity itself – which she calls “thinking” – is out of order. There is no “extraordinary” subject matter; in principle, anything that comes to our attention can become an object of thought. And more importantly, Arendt rejects Heidegger’s distinction between the few and the many. It is a distinction, she holds, that derives from a metaphysical doctrine that is no longer plausible. What has lost plausibility is the “basic distinction between the sensory and the suprasensory”, together with the idea that the suprasensory is “more real, more truthful, more meaningful” than what appears to sense perception. The few, traditionally conceived, were those who had some access to that which abides in that suprasensory realm (called, among other things, First Principles and Causes, Ideas, God, Being). With the collapse of that basic distinction, what had been called philosophy, and was reserved by nature for the few, ought now, according to Arendt, to be regarded as simply “the ability to think”, possessed by all human beings regardless of their degree of erudition or intelligence.

WHEN WE ARE WORKING, WE ARE NOT THINKING, AND WHEN WE ARE THINKING, WE ARE NOT WORKING

The translation of Heidegger’s “außer der Ordnung” into the English “out of order” plays nicely into Arendt’s hands. To be “out of order”, in idiomatic English, also means, of course, to be “not working”. As Arendt conceives of things, “Work” – along with Labor and Action – belongs to the *vita activa*, the focus of *The Human Condition*. *The Life of the Mind*, by contrast, deals with those human endeavours that fall outside the *vita*

activa, and among them, thinking is most distant from the business of the active life. When we are working, we are not thinking, and when we are thinking, we are not working.

There is, however, a more polemical point to be made here as well. In rejecting Heidegger’s distinction between the few and the many, Arendt claims not only that all human beings are capable of thinking, but that we “must be able to ‘demand’ its exercise from every sane person”. In the introduction to *The Life of the Mind*, Arendt explains that she was prompted to write the book in part because of her experience reporting on the trial of Adolf Eichmann. She notes that Eichmann was “ordinary” and “commonplace”, that he was “very effective” at his work, and that the only “characteristic” one could detect that correlated with his crimes was his “thoughtlessness”. As Arendt sees it, “all events and facts”, simply by virtue of their existence, have a claim on our “thinking attention”. For most people most of the time, some balance is struck between that which deserves our attention and that which we ignore. What set Eichmann apart, according to Arendt, was that he never stopped to think about anything. He was, in effect, never out of order; he was always working, very efficiently, and as a result, he accomplished great evil.

Thinking, for Arendt – perhaps like poetry, for Auden – makes nothing happen. It “interrupts ordinary activities”, jams the machine, stops business as usual, renders us out of order. This disruptive capacity has ethical significance, both for the individual and for the society. Because thinking is essential to the very life of the mind, a person who does not think – and this is an ever-present danger for everyone – is not fully alive. On the societal level, the ethical import of thinking comes to the fore in times of political emergency when “everybody is swept away unthinkingly” by the order of the day, so to speak. In such emergencies, those who stop and think, those who are out of order, become conspicuous, and their refusal to join becomes “a kind of action”. Arendt is circumspect in her assessment of any beneficial effects thinking may have for society at large. She says only, and cryptically, that thinking can “liberate” the human capacity to judge, which in turn allows thinking to manifest in the world of appearances, and that, again in turn, “may prevent catastrophes...in the rare moments when the chips are down”.

III

*“And yet relation appears,
A small relation expanding like the shade
Of a cloud on sand, a shape on the side of a hill.”*

Thinking, which is out of order, does not readily give itself over to an ordered accounting. Or at least, Arendt is ambivalent about offering one. The book has a certain structure – parts, chapters, sections – but she persistently pushes against systematic exposition. “I hope that no hearer or reader will expect of me a concluding summary”, she writes at the start of Chapter IV. The three points she offers in summary may appear to be “dogmatic propositions”, but they “are not meant to be” so. Likewise, at several points in the *Thinking* section, she seems to get ahead of herself, offering summary accounts of *Willing* and *Judging* that one might expect to follow, not precede, those parts. Some of this may be the result of the unfinished state of the project, and one can imagine that a final revision, with the complete manuscript in view, might have resulted in less hesitancy and a more rigorous ordering.

Yet it seems more likely that Arendt’s ambivalence has a deeper grounding and a different meaning. The thinking ego, she writes, is a “slippery fellow” who typically “lives in hiding”. It is so elusive, in fact, that while the history of philosophy “tells us so much about the objects of thought” it tells us very little about the “process of thinking and the experiences of the thinking ego”. I take Arendt’s circumspection and indirection, her occasional feint or sleight of hand, to be her way of staying true to the subject – too blunt, too ordered, and she may mar a curious tale in telling it.

The curious tale Arendt wants to tell is about “the experience of thinking”, or “what thinking means to those who engage in it...about which oddly enough, there exist few direct utterances”. We are not, however, entirely without resources. The “systems” and “doctrines” left behind by “great thinkers”, though they may in contemporary parlance be regarded as “metaphysical fallacies”, are the “clues” we have to the meaning of thinking as experienced by such thinkers. Substantial portions of *Thinking* Chapters I and II are dedicated to Arendt’s exploration of these “metaphysical fallacies”, author by author, working typically in a sympathetic spirit, attempting to show

how each thinker’s system or doctrine points toward or reveals the underlying “experience of thinking” that gave rise to it. In Chapter III, Arendt takes a different tack, focusing on the question, “what makes us think?”, but here too, her procedure is dialogical, evoking a variety of responses that were given by major authors in the Western tradition.

THINKING, FOR ARENDT – PERHAPS LIKE POETRY, FOR AUDEN – MAKES NOTHING HAPPEN

Most striking in these expositions, and most interesting for our present concerns, are instances of what Arendt refers to at one point as an “out of order” moment in the text she is interpreting. The moment to which I refer occurs in her discussion of the view, often ascribed to Plato, that philosophy begins in wonder. According to Arendt, this idea comes up only once in Plato’s corpus, when it is proposed, “rather abruptly”, by Socrates in the *Theaetetus*: “Speaking about something that is ‘out of order’, the passage itself is somewhat out of order, as happens frequently in Plato, where the most telling sentences can easily be isolated and sound out of context...” It is at precisely this out of order moment that Socrates makes the claim that “to wonder” is the “chief passion” of the philosopher, and that “there is no other beginning and principle...of philosophy than this one”.

Arendt is proposing here that such out of order moments – at least in the case of Plato – are particularly revelatory. And since we know that Arendt is seeking to recover from these texts some trace of the author’s original “experience of thinking”, we may reasonably surmise that she thinks these “telling”, out of order passages bear witness in some way to that experience. Now, in the case of this passage from the *Theaetetus*, it seems that form and content are united: it is a passage that appears out of order in the text and also one that explicitly speculates on the origin of the out of order experience called thinking.

I want to go further, however, and suggest that this

passage in Arendt's text is itself a kind of clue that reveals something about her hermeneutical method in general. It is not uncommon, in *The Life of the Mind*, for Arendt to call attention to how a given passage in the author she is discussing is somehow both out of order and particularly revelatory. It is in these moments of disorder where Arendt finds clues to the given author's own "experience of thinking", and the point of relation to her own.

It is the task of another occasion to expound on this in any detail, but a few additional examples may suffice to convey the idea.

In the section titled, "The intramural warfare between thought and common sense", Arendt notes that philosophers, like any other humans, must rely on common sense reasoning to navigate the world of appearances in which they too reside, and that this reasoning inevitably comes into conflict with the activities of the thinking ego. Where common sense reasoning seeks knowledge that is based on, and verifiable in reference to, empirical experience, and is entirely concerned with the exigencies of the appearing world, the thinking ego is wholly self-reflexive, yields no verifiable or useful results, and perpetually undermines whatever it (tentatively) establishes. Arendt maintains that it is the hostility of the philosopher's own common sense reasoning – not the animus of non-philosophers – that prompts the philosopher to think up ever more elaborate metaphysical systems.

In this context, she briefly discusses Hegel, "the most ingenious of the system-builders". She first lays out his audacious attempt to eliminate all contingency by "integrating every particular into an all-comprehending thought", and thereby transforming philosophy into a science – no longer the pursuit of wisdom, but wisdom itself (*sophia*). What concerns us at the moment is not her exposition of Hegel's system, but the brief addendum she includes:

In sharp contrast to all these theories... stands the famous, strangely unconnected and always mistranslated remark that occurs in the same Preface to the *Phenomenology* and that expresses directly, unsystematically, Hegel's original experiences of speculative thought: "The true is thus the bacchanalian revel, where no member [i.e., no particular thought]

is not drunken, and since every member [every thought] no sooner separates itself [from the train of thought of which it is a mere part] than it dissolves straightaway, the revel is just as much a state of transparent, unbroken quiet".

It is in this passage, according to Arendt, which she reads as a denial that speculative thought can ever attain certain knowledge, that Hegel gives voice to the original experience of the thinking ego, the experience that "underlies the whole 'system'".

ARENDT IS CIRCUMSPECT IN HER ASSESSMENT OF ANY BENEFICIAL EFFECTS THINKING MAY HAVE FOR SOCIETY AT LARGE

We see a similar move with Kant. Put briefly, Arendt notes that while in his published writing Kant claimed to have "laid the foundation of all future metaphysical systems", "in the privacy of his posthumously published notes, he wrote: 'I do not approve of the rule that if the use of pure reason has proved something, this result should later no longer be doubted as though it were a solid axiom'". To cite just one further example, in reference to Thomas Aquinas, Arendt observes that in his writing "there is an incidental remark – one of those on which we are so dependent in our inquiry – ...that sounds rather mysterious unless we are aware of [the] distinction between the thinking ego and the self".

A host of questions now clamour for attention. Surely this hermeneutical procedure must be read in conjunction with what Arendt says at the end of the *Thinking* section about how she proposes to deal with "thought-things" from the past – including of course the texts she is writing about – which, now that the "thread of tradition is broken" can only come to us in fragmented form. Borrowing words from Ariel's song in Shakespeare's *Tempest*, Arendt maintains that she takes up these fragments only after their "sea-change", when they have been transformed into things "rich and strange". Yet one may wonder whether these

fragments are strange enough, if she consistently finds in them the same fundamental experience. These out of order passages clearly seem to resonate for Arendt, but what do they tell us about the experience of Hegel or Kant or Plato or Socrates? Why privilege the out of order passages over what may be a preponderance of countervailing evidence in the work of any given author?

One might also, pursuing a different line of inquiry, ask whether Arendt is offering herself, and her own experience of thinking, as an example. In that spirit, one may ask the question: what makes Hannah Arendt think? Perhaps there is the beginning of an answer in the way that she presents and discusses these passages that, in the context of books she has spent a lifetime reading, strike her as being meaningfully out of order.

*“A great disorder is an order. Now, A
And B are not like statuary, posed
For a vista in the Louvre. They are things chalked
On the sidewalk so that the pensive man may see.”*

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