

Hannah Arendt: Life of the Mind

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Introduction to Hannah Arendt, *The Life of the Mind*, Chapter 2.

The best way to approach this introduction, I thought, was not to make a summary of the chapter but to concentrate on the structure of the book, to look at what she is doing. The content I have left as much as possible for the discussion in the group.

Setting the scene: What we looked at last month.

In the Introduction, she made the case for the importance of her subject. There are two driving forces behind the book:

1. She suspects that evil is caused by an absence of thinking, a failure to think so it's important to get people to think
2. She wants to find a way to combine thinking with being active in the world So she wants to make us think and for her that means looking at the conditions for thinking in a one-world scenario (there are no separate worlds for thinking and being). As a result of the death of metaphysics, she has to start from fundamentals. And, being a good Kantian, she chooses as her starting point Kant's distinction between Vernunft (Reason) and Verstand (Intellect). Vernunft (Reason) is driven by the need to think, wants to find meaning Verstand (Intellect) is driven by the desire to know, wants to find truth.

In chapter 1 she makes the case for her first condition for thinking: the primacy of appearance. Being and appearing coincide. Appearances are all there is. When we start thinking, we can't withdraw from the world of appearances. She emphasises the point by playing with Portmann's idea of the primacy of appearance.

Consequences:

- There has to be a world to appear in, so there have to be other people to appear to and to appear to us. Without others we can't even know that we exist.
- There is a difference between mind and soul (we'll get back to that in the next chapter).
- Self-presentation: we have a choice of what we want to show. This requires selfawareness
- Error and semblance caused by mistaken appearances
- Sensus communis, a context shared by everyone in the world of appearances. This common sense gives rise to a feeling of reality. Thinking can doubt this feeling, but it cannot do away with it because it is inbuilt ("belongs to our

biological apparatus”).

- Science is a specialist form of common sense reasoning, it's after cognition, truths that become a part of the world.
- Questions raised by thinking are unanswerable by common sense and science. They cannot lead to truth but lead to meaning.

The results of chapter 1 :

- Establishment of the primacy of appearances <she needs this because in the next chapter we're going to withdraw from the world of appearances in order to be able to think>
- Clarification of the distinction between Verstand and Vernunft, knowing and thinking, truth and meaning.

On to Chapter 2: Mental activities in a world of appearances.

Having made very sure that there is no escaping the world of appearances, Arendt now examines what this means for her three categories of mental activities: thinking, willing and judging. In good Heideggerian fashion, she starts with a definition of mental activities. They are:

- Basic: cannot be derived from each other
- autonomous: they obey their own laws
- and thus unconditioned: they are not necessitated or conditioned by the world
- invisible to the world of appearances

Still part of the definition: differences between mind and soul. The soul is passive, we suffer it. It is caused by the outside world and gives rise to emotions. Whereas the mind is active, we can start and stop it at will. Arendt has to emphasise this difference because mind and soul have been confused by past philosophers. Mental activities are characterised by duality: I keep myself company. They are of a reflexive nature: the mental agent acts back upon herself. The thinking ego disappears when the mental activity stops.

(This bit comes back in the next chapter when she illustrates duality with the example of Socrates and uses it to derive conscience).

After this definition section, Arendt moves on to a description of the process of thinking in a world of appearances. It goes something like this:

Mental activities come about through a deliberate withdrawal from the world of appearances. The faculty of the imagination has to transform visible objects from the world of appearances into invisible mental images, to be used for thinking. From these, the mind can go further and move to things that were never present to the senses.

Finer points:

- You have to withdraw from the world of appearances in order to think about things that aren't appearances (past and future for example). Thinking is more radical in its withdrawal from the world than willing and judging, but all three need a withdrawal from partiality and involvement.
- A philosopher's common sense makes her feel "out of order" when she thinks because it's an interruption of being (stop and think). This explains the affinity of philosophy and death, which is also a withdrawal from the world of appearances.
- All thought arises out of experience but no experience yields any meaning without undergoing the operations of imagining and thinking. Seen from the perspective of thinking, life in its sheer thereness is meaningless. The thinking ego withdraws from (meaningless) Being to search for meaning.
- Which does not yield any results that are useful in the common sense world of appearances. Philosophers come up with lengthy arguments to defend themselves, not from the (mostly amused) multitudes, but from the doubts arising out of their own common sense about the usefulness of the whole enterprise.

So we now have withdrawal from the world of appearances as a condition for thinking. Then we get a sort of intermezzo where she flags up the question where we withdraw to for willing and thinking by using the example of the spectator of a play (withdrawal for judgement). The spectator can see the whole, the actor only her own part. But the spectator is still part of a multitude (the audience).

She will return to this later in the book and I think the point is inserted here to link this bit about withdrawal with the later chapter.

On to the next condition for thinking: language.

Mental activities become manifest in the world of appearances only through speech. Humans have language at a level quite unnecessary for everyday life, it's there for thinking. That it also comes in handy for communicating your thoughts is a by-product, there's no audience needed for thinking. The Chinese language example is supposed to show that our minds are already trained to deal with invisibles in everyday experience because we use abstract words for things and not a pictorial language. To be able to use language for thinking, we need a way to bridge between thinking and appearing. We do this by using metaphors, more specifically analogies, and even more specifically "a perfect resemblance of two relations between totally dissimilar things" (from Kant's "prolegomena to any future metaphysics").

Philosophical metaphors (unlike poetic metaphors) are strictly one directional, used to turn the mind back to the sensory world. <Kurt Riezler brings the metaphor from poetry to philosophy 108>. All this may sound as if Hannah Arendt has fallen into the two-world abyss, but she makes very clear (109-110) that analogies, metaphors and emblems “are the threads by which the mind holds on to the world” and show “the absolute primacy of the world of appearances”.

Final sentence of this section (110) “There are not two worlds because metaphor unites them.” That is not to say that there are no dangers in the use of metaphors. These are dealt with in the final section of the chapter. There is a quick mention of the dangers of the use of metaphors in science: metaphors can be used instead of evidence (iceberg!).

The main point of this section: almost all philosophers insist that there is something they can’t put into language. (Plato’s 7th letter as an example). This is because there is an incompatibility between intuition and speech (p118): intuition ... presents us with a cotemporaneous manifold whereas <speech> is a sequence of words.

None of our senses can be translated into each other. And none can be translated into words, (we’ve been here before, feeling pain is not the same as say AU!). Again, this shows that there are things we can’t put into words. All this means that the sight metaphor (thinking described in terms of seeing) is defective, because thinking doesn’t lead to a demonstrable truth, only to sentences. This leaves us without a metaphor for thinking.

Hannah Arendt ends the chapter with the suggestion that the closest to a metaphor for thinking is living. Her reasons:

- Like living, thinking produces no end result that will survive the activity.
- Like living, thinking moves in circles.
- There is no answer to “Why do we think?” as there is no answer to “Why do we live?”

Since she cannot ask “Why do we think?” the title for the next chapter has to be: “What makes us think?”

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