

“Hannah Arendt: Thinking and the Human Condition”

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Abstract

This article seeks to synthesize Hannah Arendt's *The Human Condition* by making use of her metaphor of Penelope's Thread as the prism of discussion. The parts of the article includes: a clarification of the metaphor of thinking (Penelope's Thread); implications of the metaphor on the Point of Departure (totalitarianism), the tripartite Arendtian rendition of human volition (creativity) and general human conditions of mortality and natality (the public and life). Lastly, the conclusions seek to answer the critiques levelled against Arendt by Habermas and Canovan.

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I. Introduction: Penelope's Thread and Thinking

Hannah Arendt in *The Life of the Mind*, used Penelope's thread to give us a metaphor of what she means by thinking.¹ Taken from book 19 of Homer's *Odyssey*, Penelope's weaving is a never-ending task of doing and undoing. Applied to thinking, it seems at first that restlessness and the reality of having no settled results are what ultimately characterize this act. It looks as if

¹ HANNAH ARENDT, *The Life of the Mind*, vol. 1 / Thinking (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1978), 88.

Arendt means to take on thinking as a cyclic task of: (1) weaving on the one hand; (2) and on the other, unpicking stitches of concepts (words, sentences, definitions, doctrines) through the torchlight of thinking.² This way of thinking about thinking is evidently consistent with her admission of having joined the ranks of those who have tried to submit metaphysics to the Sysiphusian task of deconstructing and dismantling:

I have clearly joined the ranks of those who for some time now have been attempting to dismantle metaphysics, and philosophy with all its categories, as we have known them from their beginning in Greece until today. Such dismantling is possible only on the assumption that the thread of tradition is broken and we shall not be able to renew it. Historically speaking, what actually has broken down is the Roman trinity that for thousands of years united religion, authority, and tradition. The loss of this trinity does not destroy the past.... What has been lost is the continuity of the past.... What you then are left with is still the past, but a *fragmented* past, which has lost its certainty of evaluation."³

According to our thinker, the dismantling is made possible by the radical break that happened with tradition. This will be later discussed as her point of departure dealing specifically with totalitarianism as key to the origin and depth of her thought. What is relevant at this point is her curious insistence on a fragmented past, that is, though broken up into pieces – is nevertheless available for us. She insists here on a continuity that is somehow already discontinuous with our present. Keeping this in mind and

² Elsewhere she used another metaphor: "Xenophon... indicates that *the invisible wind of thought* was manifest in the concepts, virtues and 'values' with which Socrates dealt in his examinations. The trouble is that *this same wind*, whenever it is roused, has the peculiarity of doing away with its own previous manifestations: this is why the same man can be understood and understand himself as gadfly as well as electric ray. *It is in this invisible element's nature to undo, unfreeze, as it were, what language, the medium of thinking, has frozen into thought – words (concepts, sentences, definitions, doctrines)...*" *Ibid.*, 174.

³ *Ibid.*, 212.

going back to her metaphor of Penelope's thread, it seems that "Arendt's thinking about thinking is more like a gossamer veil that is woven and rewoven again and again, sometimes using older threads and sometimes introducing new threads into the fabric. There is continuity as well as discontinuity and difference."⁴

II. Penelope's Thread and the Human Condition

Thinking What we are Doing

Shedding some light on how we understand thinking ala Arendt is relevant in doing a systematic reading of her work on human volition. Arendt describes the very project of *The Human Condition* thus:

What I propose in the following is a reconsideration of the human condition from the vantage point of our newest experiences and most recent fears. This obviously, is a matter of thought and thoughtlessness – the heedless restlessness or hopeless confusion or complacent repetition of "truths" which have become trivial and empty – seems to me among the outstanding characteristics of our time. What I propose, therefore, is very simple: it is nothing more than to think what we are doing.⁵

Again the quote above mentioned the point of departure that is made increasingly relevant by Arendt. This will be discussed in the next section, at this point however it is good to make clear the goal of the present article. If the aim of her capolavoro, *The Human Condition*, is to submit what we are doing to thinking; then consistent with her metaphor, this paper seeks to plot the *continuity as well as the discontinuity and difference* that marks Arendt's discourse about the *vita activa*.

⁴ RICHARD BERNSTEIN, "Arendt on Thinking", *Cambridge Companion to Hannah Arendt* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 283. From hereon, references to this book will simply be CCHA.

⁵ HANNAH ARENDT, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958), 5.

*Totalitarianism as the Second Fall,
Arendt's Point of Departure*

The point of departure of Arendtian thought represents for her an historical event that could not have been predicted or caused by whatever has gone before it. Her very first book was dedicated to plotting the origins of this systematic rule of terror that we have come to name as totalitarianism.⁶ As a political event, this historical phenomenon involves us all and can never be rooted only to the idea of a handful of individuals or the destiny of a particular or specific social group.⁷ Totalitarianism therefore could never be understood through recourse to historical precedents or the use of homogenizing social scientific categories.⁸ Arendt was convinced that it is an entirely novel phenomenon unlike anything ever encountered or discussed by philosophers.⁹ She speaks about this phenomenon thus:

Everything we know of totalitarianism demonstrates a horrible originality... its very action constitutes a break with all our traditions.¹⁰

Strangeness therefore marks this historical event for never before has terror been used to render humans irrelevant, replaceable and even superfluous.¹¹ While its terrifying novelty cannot be traced to causes, it nevertheless yields to elemental origins of a

⁶ MARGARET CANOVAN, *CCHA* 25. "The Origins of totalitarianism, first published in 1951, established Hannah Arendt's reputation as a political thinker and has a good claim to be regarded as the key to her work, for trains of thought reflecting on the catastrophic experiences it seeks to understand can be traced to the heart of her later and overtly more theoretical writings."

⁷ HANNAH ARENDT, "Marx and Western Political Thought," *Social Research* 69/2 (2002): 281. Cf. ARENDT, "Understanding and Politics," *Essays in Understanding*, 130-54, ed. Jerome Kohn (New York: Harcourt Brace & Co., 1958), 309.

⁸ HANNAH ARENDT, *EU*, 319-20, also 403.

⁹ HANNAH ARENDT, *Origins of Totalitarianism* (London, Allen and Unwin, 1967), 329-38.

¹⁰ HANNAH ARENDT, *EU*, 309.

¹¹ HANNAH ARENDT, *OT*, 466.

great ambit of events that sharply points to widespread experience of human superfluousness as a key factor.¹² Hence terror is the essential novelty while human superfluousness accompanies us with a tragic familiarity.

Thinking through the strangeness and familiarity of this historical break with tradition we are challenged to make use of our abstracting imagination. A mind shaped by Hollywood pop culture may lead one to conceive of this strangeness as an incarnation of an alien presence with the agenda of taking over the world and infecting the human race with destruction.¹³ An alternative look with literature however, aids us to detect some resemblances between the novelty/familiarity of the event of totalitarianism with the classic myth of the fall. The next paragraphs will shortly discuss the myth of the fall. The close of this section will also trace the parallelisms between the fall and Arendt's Totalitarianism; thus highlighting the latter as *the second fall of man*.

The myth of the fall in the sacred scriptures as a narrative speaks of a radical event that impacted on the very being of man. As such it is something that involves all and yet cannot be simply said to originate from the very first acts of our being human. Otherwise the fall will not be other than that of an instinctual act; there is then this profound strangeness to this mythical event. Yet it does not remain as such, i.e. *mythically alien*, because we readily admit to ourselves that there is humanity's oneness in this strange original fall. In the very experience of doing what we know should not be done we experience our unity in fallenness. To eloquently put it in St Paul's words: "What I do, I do not understand. For I do not do what I want, but I do what I hate.... The willing is ready at hand, but doing the good is not. For I do not do the good I want, but I do the evil I do not want. I do what I do not want."¹⁴

¹² *Ibid.*, 459.

¹³ HANNA PITKIN, *The Attack of the Blob: Hannah Arendt's Concept of the Social* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 93-96.

¹⁴ Romans 7, 16-21.

This story of the Original Fall as taken up by Paul Ricoeur¹⁵ necessitates an educated imagination to get to the fact of a reality that involves all and yet is not at the very root of what humanity is. Man as fallible at the radical foundation of who she is, can only be approached through a break with our present situation. That is, there ought to be accomplished a radical discontinuity with the self before and after the fall, for we are as Ricoeur would characterize humanity as in fact already fallen. This misery as Ricoeur would put it indicts all of us, yet through an abstraction we get to a truer self of fallibility that is the condition of possibility for ethical decision, judgment and even creativity.

Han Urs von Balthasar added a curious twist to this myth of the fall in observing that the first man would not take responsibility for his action and puts the blame on the first woman, while the woman herself would not also take responsibility for her actions and blames the snake. According to Von Balthasar, this passing on of the blame between humans renders them all guilty.¹⁶

Weaving a parallel between Totalitarianism and the biblical myth of the fall we can then gather some pertinent insights to Arendt's point of departure. Both are radical breaks to a reality that can only be recovered via creative imagination or willful action. Both impacts on what it means to be a human person given the historical realities of who we are. In this continuity and discontinuity with the thread of the myth of the fall we can further name the reality of human superfluosness as internalized abnegation of responsibility. In the same way that the first man and woman shied away from responsibility, people of the age of totalitarianism found themselves in grooves of an overarching system that render them free from responsible thinking or even acting but not from culpability.¹⁷

¹⁵ PAUL RICOEUR, *Fallible Man* trans. Walter Low (New York: Fordham University Press, 1986), 1-6 see also *Symbolics of Evil* trans. By Emerson Buchanan (New York: Harper & Row, 1967), 175-90.

¹⁶ HANS URS VON BALTHASAR, *Mysterium Paschale*, (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2000), 118. Von Balthasar mentioned the myth of the fall in passing as an analogy to the passing on of responsibility that also happened during the trial and condemnation of Jesus Christ.

¹⁷ MARGARET CANOVAN, "Arendt's Theory of Totalitarianism", CCHA, 38.

The present age for Arendt, as post totalitarian, is totally discontinuous with tradition. This age however carries the burden of responsibility of the reality of terror as an event that happened in humanity's history and also the burden of responsibility of preventing it from ever happening again.¹⁸ The truth of the weaving is an ever-present continuity of history in the sense that this event affects everyone, involves everyone and invites everyone to decisive action. The more we refuse the responsibility the more we are likely to go with the fall and the more we are made guilty by this second fall. Yet with humans who were rendered superfluous remains still a capacity for decision, for ethical judgment, for human action. This capacity will be highlighted in the next chapter as we go into the discussion of *The Human Condition*. To close this section of our weaving through Arendt's point of departure, it is best to close with Margaret Canovan's eloquence:

Looking around us at a time when ideological politics is discredited, and when free market liberalism has thawed frozen political systems and has set them in motion, we might suppose (following more orthodox theories of totalitarianism) that the omens for the twenty first century are encouraging. But Arendt's theory gives us no such grounds for complacency. Brilliant and baffling in equal proportions, it cannot be safely yet be laid to rest.¹⁹

Creativity as Crystallized in the Human Condition

Consistent with our reading that is mindful of what is continuous and discontinuous we can see that: 1) in Arendt's thinking on what we are doing there is the crystallization of creativity as a human possibility that is encountered at every stage of human volition; and 2) Arendt's tripartite discussion of labor, work and action are existential categories that are not to be treated merely as sociological concepts.

¹⁸ HENRI NOUWEN, *Living Reminder*, (New York: Harper Collins, 1977), 17-21. Nouwen describes eloquently the guilt of humanity that is inherent to all who have lived after what happened in the Nazi Camps. He goes as far as describing it as a human condition of culpability common to humanity who lives in present history.

¹⁹ CANOVAN, *CCHA*, 40.

Creativity as a continuous and discontinuous human possibility at every existential act manifests itself differently. At the very lowest level or in the order of what she would call as labor, creativity is limited to reproduction as a necessity of life and re-production of the self as maintenance of life. Creativity on the level of work on the other hand, is that of production that results to the world that houses the summit of human action. On the level of this peak of human volition, creativity involves that of creating the (public) self amidst plurality and creativity in action that is open to excellence and novelty.

Arendt in this sense is not engaged in coming up with empirical or sociological concepts of labor, work and action as available for us merely for comparison and contrast. In a metaphorical way of speaking her categories are not boxes to be filled up with acts that are ready for our inventory and viewing. What we are saying is that, while Hannah Arendt insists on differentiating between these human acts, she nevertheless does not intend on sharply separating each one from the others. It seems that with the radical point of departure in mind, she intends to do a recovery of what it means to be human and what it means to act responsibly amidst other men.²⁰ These human acts then are far from being a chain of concepts but are more like existential acts that enable man to do a recovery of himself, his world and his life as lived with others.²¹ Convinced that the catastrophic break with tradition done by totalitarianism resulted in our inability to rely on tradition, accepted categories and guideposts,²² Arendt invites us to creatively think through the fragments of the past, empowered by our human capacity for excellence and creativity.²³ She calls attention to our ability to creatively do a recovery of

²⁰ MARY DIETZ, "Arendt and the Holocaust", CCHA.

²¹ MARY DIETZ, "Hannah Arendt and Feminist Politics," Hannah Arendt: *Critical Essays*, ed. Hinchman and Hinchman (New York: State University of New York Press, 1994), 233.

²² Bernstein, CCHA, 278.

²³ ARENDT, *Men in Dark Times*, 205-206.

the self that was driven to superfluosness by the winds of our times.²⁴

There are a couple of resulting implications if we view Hannah Arendt's work on the *vita activa* in this way. The first brings Arendt back to the tradition of Existentialism following upon the footsteps of her mentors namely Karl Jaspers and Martin Heidegger.²⁵ This existential thread in Arendt is widely discussed as her debt to her mentors. Another implication of this way of thinking is that it enables us to respond critically to those who charge Arendt of elitism or a purely formal rendition of Political Philosophy.²⁶ The following section will venture into a discussion of this critical reading of Arendt and a provisional response to it.

Arendt and Habermas

Jurgen Habermas leveled a stringent critique against Arendt. This involves her seeming hard headedness in not allowing the concerns of the private to interfere with what is properly public. To frame our discussion, it seems appropriate to quote Jurgen Habermas:

A state which is relieved of the administrative processing of social problems; a politics which is cleansed of socio-economic issues; an institutionalization of public liberty which is independent of the organization of public wealth; a radical democracy which inhibits its liberating efficacy just at the boundaries where political oppression ceases and social repression begins – this path is unimaginable for any modern society.²⁷

²⁴ "Gjentagelse" [repetition], which more literally means "taking again." SOREN KIERKEGAARD, *Fear and Trembling/Repetition* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1983), 177-188. The difference of course between the two thinkers is that Arendt locates her repetition amidst the experience of plurality.

²⁵ Cf. L.P. & S.K. HINCHMAN, "Existentialism Politicized, Arendt's Debt to Jaspers" in *Hannah Arendt: Critical Essays*, 139-78.

²⁶ ALBRECHT WELLMER, "Arendt on Revolution," *CCHA*, 234-235.

²⁷ JURGEN HABERMAS, "Arendt's Communications Theory of Power," *Critical Essays*, 218.

Attempting to give an educated response to this sharp critique by Habermas we are simply to stay within the treatment of work, labor and action as existential and not sociological categories for Arendt. In this regard there is between these three properly human acts a relationship of continuity and discontinuity. That is, continuity in that all these are properly human acts while there is discontinuity in the sense that these are indeed different manifestations of being human.

In the Arendtian search for volition that is full in creativity, not limited even by motives and needs she raises action as the summit of what it is to be human. We however need to be alert in noting that Arendt never spoke against our being concerned with private affairs or that of the level of the social and the economic.²⁸ Perhaps we can interpret Arendt as saying that the political ought not to be limited only to concerns that are purely social or economic in nature.²⁹ That is let the political be the realm for excellence in acts that are of varied natures and not exclusively that of concerns for survival or economics. She means to free the government in merely conducting itself as a system for social service.

This therefore does not mean that the sphere of the social is not important for Arendt. If there is a need to take it up – then they are to be treated. However, what concerns her is that which is left after securing or not securing this sphere of economic or private concern. *Is that all there is in being human?* Here lies the genius of Arendt in that beyond the fullness or perhaps amidst wants on the level of life and worldliness; or even beyond social concerns that really is neither private nor public; there remains for Arendt a sphere that locates creativity and excellence of the phenomenon of politics. To better give light to this discussion of the excellence of the political life, the next section will deal specifically with the relationship between the space of appearances, worldliness and life itself as the implicit human condition of the preceding two conditions.

²⁸ Dietz, CCHA, 237. See also her article in *Critical Essays*, 159-163.

²⁹ James Knauer, "Motive and Goal in Hannah Arendt's Concept of Political Action," *American Political Science Review*, 74, no. 3 (1980): 721-733.

The Public and Life

In *The Human Condition*, Arendt is eloquent in discussing the public as embracing both aspects of being the place of appearances and the need for the artificial structure of worldliness.³⁰ The first aspect concerns itself with a lighted place where people can be heard and acts can be given dignity.³¹ The other aspect concerns itself with giving humanity a home and protection against the brute forces of nature.³² The world as a place is an aspect of the public that sustains the place of appearances.

Arendt's public realm, then, concerns a solid, durable common world, and constitutes something much more fragile and transitory, a space within which people act and appear in the presence of one another. Within the public arena, the affairs of the world and the actions of men appear in the light and can be seen. Both world and action are essential aspects and the two complement one another.³³

According to Arendt herself, 'without being talked about by men and without housing them, the world would not be a human artifice but a heap of unrelated things ... without the human artifice to house them, human affairs would be as floating, as futile and vain, as the wanderings of nomad tribes.'³⁴ What we can add to complement this discussion between Arendt and Canovan is the reality of life itself as intrinsic both to the possibility of worldliness and the space of appearances. This might already be too obvious for Arendt to even discuss it, but the crux of the matter at this point is that while Arendt is famous in being precise in describing the three conditions of being human as life, world and plurality, each one of these conditions are linked by a relationship to each one that is continuous and discontinuous. That is consistent with our aim of thinking through what we are doing, it is

³⁰ Margaret Canovan, *Politics as Culture*, in *Critical Essays*, 180-181.

³¹ Arendt, *The Human Condition*, p. 45.

³² Arendt, *Human Condition*, pp. 81-88; 119-133; 146-153.

³³ Canovan, *Critical Essays*, 182.

³⁴ Arendt, *Human Condition*, 183.

obvious that like a thread one is connected to the other two in a gathering up while at the same time there remains the originality and creativity proper to each level. A discussion of Arendt that seeks to present her as somehow marginalizing the social and the private is simply unsustainable given an educated reading of her writings.³⁵ We again close this section with Canovan's words highlighting creativity in plurality:

The only answer to the contemporary predicament lay, in her view, in affirming and putting our faith in the aspect of the human condition that totalitarianism had denied: human plurality, the fact that not a single man but men inhabit the earth. If human beings stop worshipping necessity and recognize their own limited powers to establish "lasting institutions" by making and keeping promises, they can give laws to the world and bestow on one another rights not given by nature.³⁶

Thinking with Natality and Mortality

A man must marry between the ages of thirty and thirty-five, reflecting that there is a sense in which nature has not only somehow endowed the human race with a degree of immortality, but also planted in us all a longing to achieve it, which we express in every way we can. One expression of that longing is the desire for fame and the wish not to lie nameless in the grave. Thus mankind is by nature a companion of eternity and is linked to it, and will be linked to it, forever. Mankind is immortal because it always leaves later generations behind to preserve its unity and identity for all time; it gets its share of immortality by means of procreation.

– Athenian to Clinias in Laws of Plato, Book IV

³⁵ See JAMES T. KNAUER, "Motive and Goal in Hannah Arendt's Concept of Political Action," *The American Political Science Review* 74/3 (September 1980): 721-733. Also, HANNAH PITKIN, "Justice: On Relating Private and Public," *Political Theory* 9, no. 3 (August 1981): 327-352.

³⁶ Canovan, 36. OT, 439; OR 81, OT 221.

It is helpful to end this chapter with a fragment from the laws of Plato that speaks about immortality in procreation and in the agonian drive for distinction. There is here a dignity accorded to procreation and a dignity to that of achieving distinction or a name. Mindful however of Plato's own version of a thinking that is continuous and discontinuous at the same time we ought to be alert in seeing that immortality in procreation and fame are not simply of equal stature.³⁷ Nevertheless this fragment informs us that immortality for Plato is achievable in various ways.

Closing our chapter then on thinking with Arendt on the *vita activa* we turn to her overall and general conditions of being human: *natality and mortality*. Birth in Arendt's mind is not limited to the very physical act of being born. Although consistent with it Arendt calls natality the very act of man that is marked by his unicity and irrepeatability as someone truly born. On the level of work this birthing manifests itself in products that go beyond the lifespan of the producer. At the very peak of human action this birthing again opens up the possibility of human acts for originality and newness. Man can make his mark not only in the physical persistence that is particular to the level of worldliness but also in the spiritual remembrance that is of stories.

In this sense death is not also limited to the physical cessation of life, it can be willingly and creatively taken to find oneself immortalized in acts of excellence that is proper to being human. Remaining here goes beyond the cycle of life but spins through the weaves of excellence that even breaks the very thread of weaving for it goes beyond the conditions of life and worldliness. Death in this sense is far from that experienced by animals that no longer breathe; it is even beyond the death that is the condition of authenticity for Heidegger. Arendt's death can be willed to find oneself immortalized in the spaces between human beings.

Death here is the decision to go beyond the self; choosing to stand in public; leaving what is merely private to oneself; taking up a personae that is public; that is, thinking with others and

³⁷ I am speaking here of beauty as analogous in the thought of Plato as he has shown in his *Symposium* trans by C. Gill & D. Lee (New York: Penguin, 2005).

performing for others. A man who have died this way and manifests himself as consistently dying to himself in this way will not simply loose himself or will not simply submit himself to the brute physical cessation of life. This aspect of dying is missed in the thoughts of Heidegger and even Jaspers as they talk of death as a human condition. Arendt's rendition of the immortalized man is saved from namelessness and persists in the stories of remembrance.³⁸

Viewed closely as realities that manifests itself in the different existential levels of human volition, natality and mortality are but other ways of looking at the crystallized human capacity for creativity that we have seen in the foregoing reflection on labor, work and action.

III. Critical Conclusions

Ambiguities in Arendt?

In an article titled "Arendt's Theory of Totalitarianism," Margaret Canovan gave a passing but scathing remark against Arendt:

Totalitarianism illustrated the human capacity to *begin*, that power to think and to act in ways that are new, contingent and unpredictable that looms so large in her mature political theory.... Arendt presents the baffling paradox of a new phenomenon which is at one and the same time illustrates human inventiveness and is dedicated to its destruction.³⁹

The disturbing turn of the discussion here of Arendt's theory in the light of the further thematization of her philosophy through thinking and action is the fact that *her point of departure can be called as non other than a manifestation of the summit of human ingenuity and novelty* according to Margaret Canovan. This basically means that the full circle of Arendt's thought splattered

³⁸ ARENDT, *Human Condition*, p. 50. See D. LUBAN, "Explaining Dark Times: Hannah Arendt's Theory of Theory," *Social Research* 50 (1983): 219-23.

³⁹ CANOVAN, *CCHA*, 27-29.

in the very dregs of her uncritical oscillation between the point of departure and her celebration of a recourse to creativity in plurality. What Margaret Canovan here is saying is that our "myth of the second fall" is not actually a fall but is a very illustrative act of man's truly becoming himself. It is in his committing what is other than his nature; the Oedipusian transgression against limits that he did first become a true hero of tragedy. Totalitarianism is but an act of novelty in the very scandal of its terror and ingenuity.⁴⁰ It then seems true that "there are significant affinities between what Arendt admires and what she deplors."⁴¹

Resolving Arendtian Ambiguities

In the science fiction novel titled *Perelandra*, Clive Staples Lewis portrayed the main antagonist as arguing in the same vein that Canovan above seems to be doing. Is it not sin that finally caused the savior to be born into the world, is it not man's coming to terms with himself as denying the Father, the very cause of his salvation? Is it not true that even in the catholic Liturgy of Easter Vigil in the *exultet* is found St. Augustine's words that call Original Sin as *the happy fault*?

C.S. Lewis of course allowed his protagonist to respond to the claims of sin causing salvation, and it is beyond doubt that Augustine can clarify his calling of original sin as the happy fault not to mean it being the *primary* cause salvation. What of the affinities between acting/thinking and the terror of totalitarianism? Perhaps we can allow our main protagonist, Hannah Arendt, to speak in length against nihilism as the very danger of thinking; nihilism which is at the very heart of the sources of totalitarian violence:⁴²

⁴⁰ Cf. FRIEDRICH NIETZSCHE, *The Birth of Tragedy*, trans. Shaun Whiteside (New York: Penguin, 2003), 39-45. See also, SIGMUND FREUD, *Totem and Taboo*, trans. A.A. Brill (New York: Vintage Books, 1946), 197-207.

⁴¹ GEORGE KATEB, "Ideology and storytelling," *Social Research* 69/2 (2002): 2002, 352.

⁴² CANOVAN, *CCHA*, 31. "This nihilism and its practices, reimported into Europe by movements seeking to emulate imperialism, was one of the sources of totalitarian violence."

The quest for meaning which relentlessly dissolves and examines anew all accepted doctrines and rules, can at any moment turn against itself, produce a reversal of the old values and declare these contraries to be "new values".... Such negative results of thinking will then be used with the same unthinking routine as before; the moment they are applied to the realm of human affairs, it is as though they had never gone through the thinking process. What we commonly call "nihilism" – and are tempted to date historically, decry politically, and ascribe to thinkers who allegedly dared to think "dangerous thoughts" – is actually a danger inherent in the thinking activity itself. There are no dangerous thoughts; thinking itself is dangerous, but nihilism itself is not its product.... All critical examinations must go through a stage of at least hypothetically negating accepted opinions and values by searching out their implications and tacit assumptions, and in this sense nihilism may be seen as an ever-present danger of thinking.⁴³

Consistent with our discussion of Arendt's normative invitation "to think what we are doing," the quote above can readily answer Canovan's misdirected pass against her. Thinking ala Arendt is a creative and willful doing and undoing (unfreezing/unweaving) of "what language, the medium of thinking, has frozen into thought – words (concepts, sentences, definitions, doctrines)."⁴⁴ In this sense it has the peculiarity of doing away with its own previous manifestations and thus "dismantle[s] metaphysics, and philosophy with all its categories, as we have known them from their beginning in Greece until today."⁴⁵ As such however, it is ever in danger of falling into the danger of ceasing, that is, the thinker can stop the very act of thinking and fall prey to what Arendt calls nihilism. Therefore this human act is and ought to be a never-ending thinking and re-thinking; with the very thinker presenting and representing himself. As the very summit of human action and excellence, "there is an abyss between the men

⁴³ ARENDT, *The Life of the Mind*, vol. 1 / Thinking, 176.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 174.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 212.

of brilliant and facile conceptions and men of brutal deeds and active bestiality which no intellectual explanation is able to bridge."⁴⁶

Thinking then as the crowning glory of human natality and his grasping to immortality through stories in the spaces between persons is far from the fragmentation that is the result of totalization of terror. It also distances itself from all encompassing systems that seeks to silence discussion and leads to "complacent repetition of 'truths' which have become trivial and empty."⁴⁷ Thinking as the summit of human activity⁴⁸ for Arendt is man fully alive:

To think and to be fully alive are the same, and this implies that thinking must always begin afresh; it is an activity that accompanies living and is concerned with such concepts as justice, happiness, virtue, offered us by language itself as expressing the meaning of whatever happens in life and occurs to us while we are alive.... Thus those who are in love with examining and thus "do philosophy" would be incapable of doing evil.⁴⁹ □

⁴⁶ ARENDT, *OT*, 183.

⁴⁷ ARENDT, *The Human Condition*, 5.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 325. "For if no other test but the experience of being active, no other measure but the extent of sheer activity were to be applied to the various activities within the *vita activa*, it might well be that thinking as such would surpass them all. Whoever has any experience in this matter will know how right cato was when he said: Never is he more active than when he does nothing, never is he less alone that when he is thinking."

⁴⁹ ARENDT, *The Life of the Mind*, 178-179.