Thinking, Conscience and Acting in Times of Crises

Introduction

If there is one lesson that Hannah Arendt drew from her encounter with Adolf Eichmann in Jerusalem it was that the moral and political dangers of thoughtlessness had been grossly underestimated (Formosa, 2007a). However, the claim that thoughtlessness *is* a mass phenomenon is one that Arendt had already defended in *The Human Condition*. Indeed, the reason why Eichmann is, according to Arendt, so "terrifyingly normal" (EJ: 206), is precisely *because* he is primarily characterised by thoughtlessness, a trait he shares with his fellow "*Animal Laborans*", the victorious "jobholders" of modern mass society (HC: 320-25; see also BPF: 4-13). Of course, the labelling of the 'masses' as thoughtless and inauthentic has been a persistent philosophical theme from Plato, through to Kant, Nietzsche, Heidegger and beyond. What is novel about Arendt's claim is her argument that there is a link between mass thoughtlessness and mass evil, the type of large-scale evil that can only be perpetrated with the support of the masses.

Arendt, however, remains cautious about recommending thoughtfulness per se as a panacea to modern mass thoughtlessness. While she closes *The Human Condition*, a book about action, with a few hopeful words beckoning towards the promise of thoughtfulness, her advocacy of the importance of action also leads her to claim that "non-thinking … seems so recommendable a state for political and moral affairs". While thoughtlessness clearly "has its perils", (LMT 177) as the example of Eichmann illustrates, thoughtfulness has its own problems, as the example of Heidegger illustrates. In the course of her 1964 interview with Günter Gaus, Arendt recalls her distaste for "intellectual business" that arose from witnessing the widespread and "relatively voluntary" *Gleichshaltung* (co-ordination) of German "intellectuals" with the Nazis in 1933 (EU: 10). This was the year that Heidegger, Arendt's former teacher and friend, "entered the Nazi Party in a very sensational way" (EU: 187). Arendt, in a 1946 review, even lists Heidegger as one of "those outstanding scholars [who] did their utmost to supply the Nazis with ideas and techniques" (EU: 201). But Heidegger is for Arendt also a paragon of thoughtfulness who exposes the "incomprehensible triviality" (or banality) of "the they" and their "mere talk" (MDT: ix; see also Pitkin, 1998: 49-60). This raises the following question: how can thoughtfulness, in the guise of Heidegger, and thoughtlessness, in the guise of Eichmann, *both* (though to a very different extent) lead to 'co-ordination' with the Nazis? What does this tell us about the relation between thinking and evil?

Arendt begins her account of thinking in *The Life of the Mind* with an attempt to answer this question. She asks there (LMT: 5) whether the mere activity of

thinking is "among the conditions that make men abstain from evil-doing or even actually 'condition' them against it?" For Arendt, there are moral benefits to be gained from simply learning *how* to think, above and beyond those gained from learning *what* to think (RJ: 101). However, conditioning implies only that, as a result of thinking, a person will be less likely, inclined or disposed to perpetrate or support evil. But how might the sheer activity of thinking do this and do all *types* of thinking have this same effect? In order to answer this question I shall examine Arendt's distinction between critical and professional thinking, and her account of conscience, in order to argue how and why critical (but not professional) thinking can condition against evil. Drawing on this argument, I then proceed to critically investigate Arendt's account of the masses, conscience, and action in times of crises.

Critical Thinking

For Arendt, thinking along with willing and judging are the three autonomous, spontaneous and independent faculties that comprise the life of the mind. The activity of thinking, as with all the activities of the mind, is hidden from the world and thereby involves a "deliberate withdrawal from appearances" (LMT: 75). The hidden and withdrawn nature of the mind inevitably puts it in constant "tension" with action, which can only occur in the world of appearances (RJ: 105). Arendt bases her account of thinking on Kant's distinction between reason (*Vernunft*), "the urge to think and to understand", and intellect (*Verstand*), "which desires and is capable of certain, verifiable knowledge" (RJ: 163). This distinction, according to Arendt, "coincides with two altogether different mental activities, thinking and knowing, and two altogether different concerns, meaning … and cognition [respectively]" (LMT: 14). This is not to say that there is no thinking involved in knowing, but only that in such cases thinking remains a mere reasoning tool or "handmaiden" for the intellect's quest for knowledge (LMT: 61; see also Deutscher, 2007: 16). With this distinction Arendt sees Kant as liberating thinking by differentiating it from knowledge, and thereby opening up room for reason to think about issues that lay beyond what can be known, but which remain of "the greatest existential interest to man" (LMT: 15). However, when thinking goes beyond the limits of what can be known, by asking questions about the meaning of facts or stories, or by addressing ethical or political issues, it remains a never-ending or open-ended activity. Arendt accentuates this non-finality, this going around in circles (LMT: 124), by likening thinking to "Penelope's web," in that it "undoes every morning what it has finished the night before" (LMT: 88).

It is here that Arendt, despite her close affinities with Kant, makes her decisive break with Kantian moral theory. The critique of pure reason by reason, for Arendt, goes around forever in circles, whereas for Kant, it shows us (among other things)

that a rational belief in freedom and the accompanying moral law can withstand the destructive power of such a critique. Arendt thus uses a Kantian distinction from the First Critique, between thinking and knowing, to deny a Kantian position from the Second Critique, namely that thinking can practically ground universally valid moral and political norms, rather than only destructively undermine them (RJ: 159-189). Arendt claims that thinking and meaning remain forever unstable and non-definitive, whereas Kant claims that we can strike solid ground in practical matters through critical reflection and the recognition of the absolute value of humanity.

In any case, how might stopping and thinking, in order to re-present thought-objects in the pursuit of meaning, condition against evil? Indeed, this thesis might seem to be a non-starter for the following reasons. If the thesis is correct, then we would expect that the more frequent and the deeper a person thinks, the greater the conditioning effect. But there does not seem to be any such effect. As we have seen, Heidegger's deep and frequent thoughtfulness did not prevent his "error" or "lack of judgment" (as Bernstein (1996: 174) puts it) in regard to his support of the Nazis in 1933. If we find a wide spread willingness to support the racist agenda of the Nazi party among both the thoughtful intellectual elites, such as Heidegger, and the thoughtless many, such as Eichmann (Villa, 1999: 86), then this would seem to refute Arendt's claims about the conditioning effects of thinking.

However, Arendt's position is more complex, as she makes an important distinction between 'critical thinkers', of whom Socrates and Kant in particular, but also the likes of Lessing and Jaspers, are Arendt's exemplars, and 'professional thinkers' (*Denker von Gewerbe*) (LMT: 3), of whom Heidegger is an important exemplar. The professional thinker is not simply someone whose job it is to think, for both Heidegger and Jaspers earned a living from thinking. Rather the difference lies in the *way* or *mode* of thinking, as I shall make clear below. This distinction is important for Arendt because not all thinking, but only critical thinking, has a conditioning effect against evil, or so I shall argue.

All thinking for Arendt is withdrawn and isolated, or similarly private and monological. But only "critical thinking, according to Kant and according to Socrates, exposes itself to 'the test of free and open examination,' and this means that the more people participate in it, the better" (KPP: 39). Critical thinking is 'representative' or 'enlarged' thinking, and this involves thinking through an issue from as many different standpoints as possible (BPF: 241). For Kant this leads to "pluralism" as a "way of thinking", whereby other citizens are needed as a *necessary* "touchstone", though not a replacement, for one's own thinking (2006: 7:128-30). It is this need for a touchstone that leads Kant to claim that the "freedom to speak and to publish" and to make "public use of one's reason" is the most important political freedom (KPP: 39). This is because without a space for the public use of reason, without "the

test of free and open examination," Arendt argues that "no thinking and no opinion-formation are *possible*" (KPP: 40). While Arendt somewhat overstates the case to say that no thinking and no opinion forming are *possible* for the thinker without a public space for the testing of their ideas, she is right to point out that *critical* thinking does require such a space or, more accurately, can't survive too long (or at least flourish) without it. Kant makes a similar point: "Thus one can very well say that this external power which wrenches away people's freedom publicly to *communicate* their thoughts also takes from them the freedom to *think*" (1996a: 8:144).

In stark contrast, the professional thinker is one who "presupposes that I am capable of making up my mind all by myself" (KPP: 39). While all thinking is hidden and withdrawn, critical thinkers "cannot endure living constantly in" the world of isolated thought (MDT: 76). For the critical thinker reason is dialogical, in the sense that though thinking itself is monological, it remains tentative and inconclusive until it can test itself publicly against the reason of a plurality of others. For the professional thinker such public testing is not an integral and essential part of the thinking process itself. The former publicise their preliminary reasoning so as to enter into dialogue with others in order to obtain representative opinions, whereas the latter simply state their already definitive conclusions (no Penelope's web here). We can think of the professional thinker as stuck permanently at the level of what Hegel (1952: § 140-150; see also Houlgate, 2005: 181-210 and Wood, 1993) calls the moral standpoint, convinced that their convictions *alone* define what is right (or true). In contrast, the critical thinker has progressed to what Hegel calls an ethical standpoint, whereby they see themselves not as the absolute and infallible arbitrators of what is right, but as active participants in the public shaping of collective self-understanding of rightness through dialogue. The critical thinker has the intellectual and ethical humility to find a middle ground between abdicating their rationality to the status quo or the views of others and arrogantly asserting with the professional thinker their right to alone determine what is right in utter disregard to the plurality of the public realm.

Arendt's account of the critical thinker is able to resolve the above difficulties concerning the conditioning effects of thinking, and explain the potential dangers of both thoughtfulness and thoughtlessness. To think critically is to think independently, and this "purifying event" results in the "liberation from prejudices … [and] authorities" (KPP: 31). This "destructive" nature of critical thinking has a "paralysing effect" which makes that which was once "beyond doubt while you were unthinkingly engaged in whatever you were doing" no longer seem so certain (LMT: 175-6). The critical thinker stops and thinks, whereas the thoughtless masses simply, as if by habit (and '*mores*' mean 'customs and habits' – see (RJ: 50)), carry on as if nothing out of the ordinary is happening. They just do what everyone else does, even when what everyone else does is murder. The "*thoughtless*" person is one who, according

to Kant, "regards everything that he undertakes as easy" (2006: 7:148-49). In contrast, due to the destructive and purifying nature of thinking, the critical thinker does not regard anything they undertake of any importance to be easy. As such, critical thinking conditions the thinker against being swept along thoughtlessly by mass movements that can lead to evil.

Critical thinking has a further conditioning effect, as it sets the foundation for (but does not guarantee) representative judgment. Good judgment requires the ability to put aside prejudices and appreciate the particularity of individual cases. Critical thinking is able to set the foundation for good judgment by acclimatising the thinker to regularly considering their opinions from a plurality of perspectives, which leads to both impartiality and an acute awareness of the nuances of difference. In contrast, the isolation and aloofness of professional thinking, deaf as it is to the plurality of the public realm, tends not to have this effect, and this can lead to insensitivity to difference and an inflexible, dogmatic certainty that can wither away one's faculty of judgment. This failure to embrace an enlarged and representative perspective through dialogue with others may help to fill in a small part of the picture as to why so many professional thinkers, of whom Heidegger is the exemplar, lacked good political judgment when the Nazis came into power. In any case, this at least explains one way that Arendt is able to conceptually handle the case of the unethical professional thinker who lacks good judgment.

But a withered faculty of judgment is not the only or the worst danger. Far more worrying are the dangers of nihilism, dogmatism and ideology that are an "ever-present danger of thinking" (LMT: 176). These dangers are best illustrated by the fact that so much evil is the *result* of thinking and the spread of poisonous ideas. The danger of such ideas lies not least in their ability to become ideologies which claim "total validity" (see Formosa, 2006: 503, and OT: 473-4). While the thoughtless many may get swept along with everyone else into a blind commitment to such popular ideologies, many thoughtful people can become convinced by them, even fanatically so. When this happens the "results of thinking will then be used with the same unthinking routine as before" (LMT: 176). As such, these dangers of dogmatic certainty, ideological system-building and nihilism are not so much dangers of thinking itself, but of a "desire to find results that would make further thinking unnecessary" (LMT: 176). Nonetheless, thinking cannot go around in circles forever. At some stage thinking must stop, even if only for a moment. But for the critical thinker, "each time you are confronted with some difficulty in life you have to make up your mind anew" (LMT: 177), whereas convinced or committed ideologues never face any new difficulties in life. Everything is easy for them because they think that they alone already have all the important answers. They refuse to be stung back into reflection and sanctify their convictions as beyond question. Critical thinking, in its

openness to plurality, thereby conditions against evil by avoiding the twin dangers of common thoughtlessness and unethical professional thoughtfulness.

Conscience

Arendt argues that a 'genuine' conscience (see Vetlesen, 2001: 18-19) is a by-product of the activity of thinking and not simply the presence of consciousness. This is because thinking is dialectical, whereas consciousness is intentional. While there is always a certain "duality" inherent in the reflective nature of consciousness, this duality is only "actualised" in the "solitude" of the two-in-one of thinking (LMT: 74-5). As such, conscience arises out of the dialectical nature of thinking, as in thinking "I am both the one who asks and the one who answers" (LMT: 185), that is, I am two-in-one. This inner difference, this literally 'having to live with oneself', is the foundation of conscience.

Arendt argues that conscience plays only a constraining role, by placing barriers in one's way and advising on the pain of being unable to live with oneself that one ought *not* to perform certain actions. Thus for Arendt both conscience and authentic (or Socratic) morality are "entirely negative" (CR: 63). Conscience only says 'don't' and never 'do'. For this reason conscience is anti-political (see May, 1983: 60), as it not only values the integrity of the self over the state of the world, but it also undermines and never counsels action (CR: 60-1). Of course, we often think of conscience as issuing positive imperatives to act – such as, 'I couldn't live with myself if I *didn't* do something'. But Arendt denies this because she denies that thinking can ever reach positive conclusions. Thinking, in going around forever in circles, undermines any and all reasons we have for acting and, as such, it cannot issue any reasons for acting which it cannot simultaneously undermine. Critical thinking is for Arendt so tentative and non-final as to lack the resources to issue positive moral imperatives to act (RJ: 122). Judgment must bridge this gap.

Arendt's account of conscience endorses Aristotle's analysis of the base man as one whose "relations with themselves are not friendly" and who, as a consequence, must either "do away with" himself or "seek the company of others" (LMW: 59). The base man, in other words, can no longer live with themselves in solitude. For this reason Arendt argues that a good conscience is a precondition for the very ability to think. In order to think, one's two-in-one must be on speaking terms, and so one must be able to be "friends" with oneself (LMT: 187-8). But, according to Arendt, one cannot be friends with an evildoer (LMT: 188). However, this claim is too strong for a number of reasons. Firstly, there is clearly some sort of Aristotelian account of friendship underlying this position (see PP: 21). But on some non-Aristotelian accounts of friendship, it is possible to be friends with an evildoer, so long as you

know that they are unlikely to be evil to *you* (see Wood, 1999: 277). In any case, even Aristotle (2001: 1156b), allows for a sort of lesser friendship, based in "pleasure or utility", between those who are bad and those who are good, or both bad, or neither good nor bad. Secondly, it is not only friends that are on speaking terms. Sometimes the worst of enemies can converse. Only a peace treaty, and not friendship, is required for dialogue to take place. As such, an inability to be friendly with oneself would not seem to be fatal to the thinking process per se.

But in some cases it may be. Arendt makes much of Socrates' claim (in *Gorgias*: 469c) that, though he wishes neither, it is better to suffer wrong than inflict it. Socrates would rather die or be at odds with the whole world, than be at odds with himself (RJ: 100). This is because Socrates could not live with himself if he were unjust or a wrongdoer. As Socrates values the examined life as the only one worth living (*Apology*: 38a), he has a very strong interest in never becoming a wrongdoer. In Socrates' case, the valuing of the examined life generates an interest in morality and his own integrity.

But while Socrates would rather die than give up the examined life, the claims conscience makes on the rest of us are surely somewhat less. Many do not, like Socrates, value the examined life as the only one worth living. Such people are willing to put up with some moral self-disapproval in order to get something they value more highly, be it wealth, power, revenge, or pleasure. In any case, moral self-disapproval is often easy enough to get rid of through self-deception, rationalisation, compartmentalisation and gradual habituation. As Kant notes (1997: 27:356-7), through "habituation" one's conscience can become "as accustomed to vice as to tobacco-smoke". Arendt is perfectly clear that her account of conscience is phenomenological and descriptive, rather than normative. But Arendt's account of conscience is riddled by her error of over-generalising Socrates' particular experience into a general phenomenology of conscience. But Socrates had the conscience of a moral saint (see Formosa, 2007b: 238), and to generalise from his example is bound to be misleading.

Even more troubling is the fact that there are, as Arendt notes, some people who actually "*prefer* Bluebeard for company" (RJ: 146) and, as such, who will be more than happy to have an evildoer as their partner in silent dialogue. Such persons do not even require the falsity of self-deception to live with themselves. They may even wear their conscious moral rebellion as an existential badge of honour. In any case, conscience can have a conditioning effect, by creating an interest in one's own moral integrity, for at least those people who cannot live with an evildoer.

However, the usefulness of such a conditioning effect is largely negated on Arendt's account by the fact that most people do not have a genuine conscience. Thoughtfulness is a precondition for having such a conscience, but Eichmann and his

like are primarily characterised by thoughtlessness and thus do not satisfy this condition. Hence such persons have at best the sort of 'artificial' (as opposed to 'genuine') conscience that society inculcates into them. Such persons are like Plato's Hippias who, when he goes home, "remains one, for, though he lives alone, he does not seek to keep himself company" (LMT: 188). This requires one to live in a state of loneliness, as distinct from the solitude of thinking. But loneliness is for Arendt a "mass phenomenon" (HC: 59). It is the very condition of labouring (HC: 212) and therefore the dominant mode of being for the jobholders of modern mass society. Unlike Socrates, the masses prefer the comfort of thoughtlessness to the angst of the examined life. But without the sting of conscience to jolt the thoughtless many out of blind conformity, there is literally no limit to what evil such people can perpetrate (RJ: 101, 146).

Thinking Critically

There are three difficulties in Arendt's account of the relation between thinking and evil which I shall examine here. These pertain to her characterisation of the thoughtlessness of the masses, her failure to consider the rebuilding function of conscience, and the lack of a positive role for action in times of crises.

For Arendt the origins of the masses is a complicated story, but one that chiefly focuses on the atomisation of society that occurred as the public realm was swallowed up by the social, thereby resulting in a society of jobholders who, perpetually labouring and consuming, have lost their roots in a common plural inter-subjective world (see HC: 248-326, and section one, chapter 10, "The masses", in OT: 305-26). Arendt locates "equality of conditions" as the "outstanding trait of mass society" (EU: 425), where this is understood as the "equality of the laboring activity with, and even its precedence over, all" other activities, including political action and thoughtfulness (EU: 435-6). This 'equality' manifests itself in a mass society in which alienated people either live in lonely separation or are pressed together into a crowded mass so "that they seem to have become one" (EU: 406). There is no in-between space for proper human relations to form (EU: 406), and this leads to the "conformism" of the masses (EU: 423-7) whose members 'behave' rather than 'act' in thoughtlessly following social mores (HC: 322). This, Arendt claims, makes them the "best positive 'material' for [totalitarian] movements" (EU: 406). More generally, it makes them the best positive material for *any* mass populist movement, and Arendt in a 1954 essay considers McCarthyism as evidence that such mass movements are possible not just in pre-war Europe but in post-war America as well (EU: 423).

But is Arendt here simply falling back on the old philosophical prejudices against the polis that she (PP: 81) sees as defining the Western tradition of political philosophy? Does it even make sense to make a distinction between the 'few' and the 'many', and to do so in terms of thinking? If we keep in mind that by 'thinking' Arendt means pure reason, or thinking undertaken for its own sake, as opposed to thinking used as a tool for means-ends reasoning or knowledge acquisition, then it does not seem implausible to claim that many people rarely, if ever, engage in such an activity. But this can and should remain a somewhat loose distinction. Thoughtlessness comes in degrees. Most people rarely engage in Socratic thinking, others may do so occasionally, but few do so regularly, even among so-called professional intellectuals. Most people most of the time have better things to do. As such, Arendt's distinction is not *prima facie* implausible if understood in this way.

But Arendt's claim about the masses' thoughtless following of social mores is in fact stronger than my analysis thus far suggests. A society's mores, or ethical life in Hegel's sense, are those shared values, customs, norms and rules which a community, as a whole, by and large identifies with, accepts and justifies their actions in terms of. As such, it is surely correct that most people (i.e. the masses) do in fact follow their community's mores. After all, such widespread acceptance is part of what *makes* that set of mores the mores of *that* particular community. But Arendt's claims go far beyond such trivialities. For her most people thoughtlessly follow their society's mores *blindly*, *no matter* the nature of those mores. For this reason, Arendt claims that the masses can blindly conform to *any* old set of mores, no matter how barbaric (RJ: 178).

Arendt sees the dramatic confirmation of her thesis in the changing of the German peoples' ethical mores from the old code ('thou shalt not kill'), to its opposite ('thou shalt kill') during the Nazi period, and then back again after the war, as if they were changing nothing more than mere "table manners" (LMT: 177, but see also Arendt, 1955: 023953 and RJ: 153). Arendt takes this to show that the masses are not thoughtfully committed to the *content* of any particular set of rules, but rather are thoughtlessly committed to the following of rules, *whatever* their content (LMT: 177). Thus Arendt claims that: "If somebody appears who … wishes to abolish the old 'values' or virtues, he will find that easy enough, provided he offers a new code ... the more firmly men hold to the old code, the more eager will they be to assimilate themselves to the new one" (LMT: 177).

But this is a particularly controversial way of reading what went on in pre- and post-war Germany. Alternatively, we might instead see the Nazis as drawing upon a distorted version of the old code by offering a 'self-defence' argument, based on false views concerning the threat posed by the mere existence of Jewish people. This is *not* a claim about how leading Nazis viewed the matter, but about the mores of

the German people. On this reading the "Nazis did not fundamentally alter basic ethical convictions" (Haas, 1998: 7). Of course, as stated, this is a dramatic and misleading over-simplification, although no more so than in Arendt's version of events. There was surely something more complex and multifaceted going on in Nazi Germany. However, the point is that, on this alternative reading, it was not the German peoples' ethical mores that fundamentally changed, self-defence has always been justifiable, but rather their racial views, or at least the importance and implications they drew from these *in terms of* the old code.

To kill was still an exception, even if killing was far from exceptional. In Nazi Germany the class of exceptions ballooned enormously to include, not only enemy combatants, but also prisoners of war, occupied civilian populations and all those perceived to be 'racially inferior'. Certainly, people found plenty of ways, through rationalisation, self-deception and gradual habituation, to circumvent moral boundaries and 'justify' the perpetration of much evil. This is not to say that *every* Nazi thought that their actions were 'justifiable', but only that at least some did, even if only through self-deception. But such Nazis never justified their actions *in terms of* the norm 'thou shalt kill', for if this were the case, murder would not be the sort of thing that *needed* to be justified. For example, some Nazis might have been able to 'live with themselves' only by actually believing that: their actions were justified ones done for the sake of defending racial purity; or that Jews were not really 'persons' at all; or that they were 'only following orders' and 'someone else would have done it anyway'. But if such Nazis genuinely subscribed to the norm 'thou shalt kill,' then such rationalising and self-deception would be not only unnecessary but unintelligible.

This might imply that Arendt is wrong to think that any old set of ethical norms can function as a society's mores. It seems implausible that people could thoughtlessly swallow *any* set of mores, no matter how brutal or revolting. People must, as Hegel reminds us, be able to see some sort of rationality in them (see Wood, 1993: 228; see also Habermas, 1990: 62). Thus even if most people are *in general* thoughtless, they are not *that* thoughtless. For Arendt the masses take on board ethical values like they take on board table manners. As such, "it should be no more difficult to change the mores and habits of a people than it would be to change their table manners" (LMT: 177). Arendt thereby fails, refuses or lacks the conceptual resources to make the customary distinction between rules of conduct which are genuinely arbitrary, like table manners, and rules that have some sort of rational foundation, like treating other persons with respect. This leads Arendt to conflate, too directly and too simplistically, all ethical norms with any and all other purely arbitrary norms, like table manners. Whatever the similarities, ethical norms are not as malleable, as arbitrary, as variable, as insignificant and as rationally unjustifiable as table manners.

This does not, however, undermine Arendt's claims about the banality of evil. Arendt's point here is only that even, or especially, 'normal' people, the "respectable pillars of society" (LMT: 177), will thoughtlessly follow social mores all the way into evil, where that is where those mores lead. When evil is normalised, when it becomes part of 'what one does' in a certain society, as happened in Nazi Germany, it takes only an unexceptional (rather than an exceptional) person to perpetrate evil. In such situations, as Arendt notes, the "sad truth of the matter is that most evil is done by people who never made up their minds to be or do either evil or good" (LMT: 180). It took no special decision to perpetrate evil in Nazi Germany. Indeed, quite the opposite. But we can accept this position without also accepting the stronger claim that the masses can and will thoughtlessly follow and identify with *any* old set of ethical norms. We can do so because, while the masses can be manipulated into perpetrating acts which, if thoughtfully reflected upon, clearly violate their ethical values, they cannot quite so easily be manipulated into identifying with, consciously adopting and reflectively endorsing any old set of ethical values (such as 'thou shalt kill').

The second issue with Arendt's account that I shall address here can be illustrated by asking the question: what if Eichmann had *become* thoughtful? On becoming thoughtful and examining his character and actions Eichmann should have discovered that he was living with a murderer. The result of this, on Arendt's account, is that Eichmann should literally no longer have been *able* to think. This is because he should no longer have been able to live or speak with himself, given the radical evil that he had perpetrated. As we have seen, conscience, on Arendt's account, can counsel just two options: either kill yourself or avoid your own company (LMW: 59). In either case, further thinking is impossible.

But there is a third option which Arendt overlooks (and Kant (1997: 27:353-56) does not). Conscience not only does work *before* an act, warning us not to act wrongly, but it also does work *after* an act, compelling us to make amends for wrongs committed. Arendt's account completely ignores this 'working through' or 'rebuilding' function of conscience, whereby we are compelled to compensate those we have wronged, so that we might come to live with ourselves in peace once again. In Eichmann's case we would expect (or hope) that conscience would prompt him to try and perform such actions that might 'redeem' him, such as to immediately quit the Nazis and join the resistance, or attempt to transport as many Jews to safety as possible, etc. Conscience has a post-evil reconciliatory function which leaves open the possibility of speaking and living with oneself even after the worst acts, provided that one is committed to reforming oneself and making amends in the future.

Arendt's purely negative account of conscience and morality leads to another problem. Arendt advocates that in times of "emergency" or "crisis", when the moral

"stakes are down", the thing to do is *not* to engage in action (LMT: 192-3; but see also RJ: 122-3, 188-9). This is because it is only in times of crisis that thinking is anything but "a politically marginal activity" (LMT: 192), as it is only in such times that many of us are faced with decisions in which whether we will be able to live with ourselves or not is a consideration of central importance (RJ: 104). As such, we are thrown back upon our conscience, in which "the self" is "the ultimate criterion", and this becomes politically a kind of "emergency measure" (RJ: 104). But conscience, "which will never tell you what to do, only prevent you from doing certain things" (RJ: 105), places stumbling blocks in your way and this ideally leads to a "refusal to join in" which, given the times, is "conspicuous" and so amounts to "a kind of action" (LMT: 192).

In times of crises the critical thinker, by necessity, temporarily gives up on the project of achieving an ethical life based in representative norms formed through judgment and dialogue in the public realm, and falls back on the moral standpoint of conscience in which the self, and not the world we share and create with others, is primary. Thus Arendt argues that "the marginal situation in which moral propositions become absolutely valid in the realm of politics is impotence" (RJ: 156). In times of crises we are forced back on ourselves for we are literally powerless. Power is for Arendt the ability to freely act in concert with others in a plural public realm (see Habermas, 1977). But without power, we are impotent and cannot act. We are forced into an "inner emigration", the "flight from the world in dark times" that Arendt praised in Jaspers (MDT: 22, 76). Arendt therefore likens "heroic resistance" against tyrannies to mere "strength" (as opposed to power), for tyrannies abolish the plural public space and with it the very space from which action could spring (HC: 202-3). As such, we need not do anything, as "powerlessness … is a valid excuse for doing nothing" (RJ: 156). Thus when the moral stakes are down, both Arendt's purely negative account of conscience and her restrictive understanding of power and action (see Breen, 2007 and Allen, 2002), forces her to conclude that all we can and ought to do is not thoughtlessly join in like Eichmann (see Kateb, 1984: 101).

From this it is obvious that while conscience "may indeed prevent catastrophes … for the *self*" (LOM 193), it will do little to stop the spread of evil in the world. As such, Arendt seems to miss the importance of Machiavelli's argument, which she was fond of quoting, that to not "resist evil" has the result that "wicked rulers do as much evil as they please" (HC 78). The thrust of this argument is that, contra Arendt, *especially* in times of crisis it is important to also care for the world and not just for the self. While merely abstaining from supporting a law or regime through peaceful civil disobedience may be the only morally legitimate form of dissent in (or against) a functioning democracy, the same cannot be said (let's assume) for those living under tyrannical, despotic or totalitarian regimes that are not responsive to the public use of

reason. Such regimes do not rely on the consent of a majority of their citizens, and so merely abstaining from giving that consent is alone *unlikely* to seriously challenge the regime's stability and powerbase, or pressure it to reconsider its policies (although in *some* cases it might).

Indeed, it may even have the opposite effect, because to not act in such times may be conspicuous, but not for the reasons that Arendt thinks. Non-action in such times may be conspicuous as it *encourages* and *aids* the perpetrators of evil to keep on doing what they are doing, because the silence of bystanders is often read as tacit acceptance (see Staub, 2003: 292, 331-2). Arendt praises the merits of "passive resistance" as an effective force, because it "cannot be countered by fighting … but only by mass slaughter" (HC: 201). But passive resistance can only be effective if it is organised on a large enough scale, which the likes of the Nazis would never have allowed, and if the regime that is being resisted will, unlike the Nazis, not find mass slaughter politically unpalatable. When one lives under, or faces, a totalitarian or authoritarian regime intent on perpetrating radical evil or maintaining its position at all costs, there comes a time when action and resistance is politically necessary, and arguably even morally obligatory.

In any case, at least some people have found that in such situations to not actively resist evil regimes is something that their conscience would not let them live with. Arendt endorses Thoreau's claim that conscience does not "compel us to right wrongs", but only to not "support them" (CR: 60). But when it is radical evils that we deal with, Arendt is wrong to claim that "conscience requires nothing more" (CR: 60). For some people at least, their conscience compels them to do something more in the form of active resistance.

Arendt claims that to 'act' (in any official capacity) during the Nazi regime, for example, would have involved becoming, to some extent, complicit in the Nazi's atrocities. But do not the resistance fighters and rescuers, those acting outside of, and in resistance to, the official 'public space', show us that action *is* still possible, even in such dark times? Are not such heroic moral resisters *acting* and not merely employing *strength*? Indeed, Arendt concludes her *On Revolution* with an account of a French resistance fighter who, through his actions, 'found himself', before finishing the book with the claim that "it was the *polis*, the space of men's free deeds and living words, which could endow life with splendour" (OR: 280-1). But it seems as if Arendt has already forgotten the significance of the resistance fighter, who acts *outside of* and in *opposition to* the official 'polis', whose *actions* also, or even especially, endow life with splendour, with or without a plural public realm.

In any case, it is clear that Arendt wants not the Socratic moral standpoint but mores, the public customs of ethical life, to play a central social and political role during 'normal' times. Indeed, Arendt goes so far as to claim that "those who under

perfectly normal conditions appeal to high-flung moral standards are very much like those who take God's name in vain" (RJ: 105). However, in dark times of crises, such as occurred under totalitarian rule (although Taylor (2002: 158) argues that we should conceive of 'dark times' more broadly), Arendt wants an authentic morality of conscience, and not public mores, to play the central role. Times of crises are thus those times when our collective ethical life has gone astray to the extent that it is mute violence and fear, and not the power generated through free association and dialogue, that rules the day. However, due to the enormous gulf that Arendt places between morality and action (see Kateb, 2000: 130-44), Arendt's claim that morality should come into play politically *only* in such extreme situations is not a viable solution as such times, if any do, call for the sort of action that conscience (as Arendt understands it) simply undermines. Arendt may have responded to such an objection by arguing that the role of conscience and thinking is only as a precursor to judgment, and it is judgment that leads to action. But in the ethically barren isolation from others and the world which defines times of crises, judgment can find no firm ground, lacking as it is in access to the publically expressed free opinions of others. Stuck in the isolation of the moral standpoint, judgment remains perpetually undermined by the destructive power of critical thinking. As such, either Arendt's account of conscience, or the role she affords it, is not viable. Or perhaps both – conscience has a rebuilding function which Arendt ignores, and conscience can sometimes issue positive imperatives to act, especially in times of crises.

Conclusion

Arendt understands Eichmann's thoughtlessness to be the norm in modern mass societies. The masses, on Arendt's story, are so alienated and thoughtless that they will blindly follow any set of mores, no matter how irrational or violent. This claim seems too strong. Norms that garner widespread support almost always have some firmer basis than the mere thoughtless desire of the many to comply with the status quo. Even so, Arendt's view that mass evil is perpetrated in large part by people who thoughtlessly cooperate, and have no intention of being either good or evil, remains a valid insight. The critical thinker does not make the moral mistake of the masses in acting as if it is business as usual during times of crises when mores completely lose their ethical character. The critical thinker also rejects the ethical arrogance of the professional thinker whenever opportunities exist for building power, through dialogue and free association, from which action and representative judgments can emerge. But in such times of crises conscience can (perhaps) be a more powerful positive force for action than Arendt's purely destructive account of critical thinking and

negative account of conscience can allow for. Sometimes critical thinking can underwrite and not just undermine action, especially when the moral stakes are down.

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