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Thinking, Love, and Direction for Knowing: Perspectives on Morality

The issue of evil is pervasive, and its study complex. Consideration of solutions and realization of peace in an atmosphere wrought by conflict meet persistent interference by group and individual perceptual bias on every level of moral and ethical conduct and mentality. Multiple disciplines have addressed the issue surrounding evildoing and its manifestations both between individuals and between groups.

Current and historic figures prominent in civil rights activism, as well as persons caught in social and political disasters and moral dilemmas, surely do experience a need for the problem’s resolution, if for no other end than to quiet the dissonance in their own minds. The latter predicament is that underlying Hannah Arendt’s exploration of the value of thought in her chapter, *Thinking and Moral Considerations*, a work delineating Arendt’s efforts to make sense of the evident split between her lover’s evil actions and his non-thinking soul (see Arendt 419-46). Arendt’s work cited herein provides a sense of Arendt’s perspectives and thoughts about morality and its relationship with the faculty of thought.

Arendt’s ideas may be contrasted to other perspectives: *Love in Action*, a powerful and pertinent writing by Martin Luther King, elaborates ideas that both draw similarities to and strike differences with those held by Arendt (see King 47-55). Both of the works and their authors offer meaningful contributions to the overall discussion about the concept of evil and its linkages with inherent human shortcomings. Additionally, they inform a position of understanding with an orientation of peaceful problem-solving in all spheres of life.

Hannah Arendt, in her work, sees evil as an outcome of the failure to actively engage in thought. She questions whether wickedness as a characteristic of an individual is necessary to commit evil deeds and engage in evil acts. Conscience, by extension, is suggested to potentially be conditional on this ability to think. Thus it is evident from her discussion of evil and action that, in her view, evil can be manifest independently of the individual.

In her writing, Arendt distinguishes between the process of knowing and that of thinking. The pursuit of knowledge is deliberate, its process always yielding something tangible­­ – objects, facts, ideas that can be shared – and it occurs in the worldly realm that Kant called “phenomena” (Arendt 419). The process and activity of knowing is analogized by Arendt to the building of a house in that it results in tangible products that are sensible in the domain of the apparent (421). Out of practicality or other reasons, human beings have a desire to know and therefore seek knowledge. A distinguishing quality of knowing and the quest for knowledge, which involves doing, is that it is satisfied by the accomplishment of the particular goal.

This concept is distinct from Arendt’s notion of thinking in that nothing tangible can be left in the wake of thought. She cites the philosopher Kant as having “[…] believed that the need to think beyond the limitations of knowledge was aroused only by the old metaphysical questions of God, freedom, and immortality” (422). Whether considering “time-honored metaphysical, unanswerable ‘ultimate questions’” such as these (421) or thinking about more worldly issues and ideas, the activity of thinking, according to Arendt, has a perpetual quality, and the need to think, unlike the desire to know, is satisfied only through engaging in the thinking activity. The product of thought cannot materialize in the realm of appearances, as does a house. It cannot be shared and experienced by peers, as can be a constructed building such as this. Instead, a thought’s product is only the thought itself, though it may undergo transformations. Furthermore, the activity of thinking interrupts whatever other activities may be occurring, because of its transcendent quality (423). Since thinking takes place outside the world of the apparent, it is necessary that it deals only with mental representations of things. And because of all these elements that characterize this type of thought, it is this faculty that serves as the medium for the “quest for meaning” (424).

According to Arendt, the planes of the mind and the physical world are suggested to correspond to the activities of thinking and that of knowing, with each activity being limited to its respective domain. As indicated earlier, knowledge is deemed to have functional, practical properties, and results in a product. Thought and thinking do not produce things, and indeed its “products” are nothing more than dynamic notions that are liable to take on a different form each time they are confronted. Though thinking does not result in any tangible outcome, it is a necessary activity and may buffer the lack of conscience that would otherwise result. Thus, Hannah Arendt emphasizes the faculty of thought and the exercise of the intellect as a solution to the problem of evil.

Additionally, Arendt cites Kant as having claimed that eliminating the level of the numena, or the realm on which unseen things (such as thinking) occur, does nothing more than to eliminate the world of the phenomena, or the realm of appearances. In the description, Kant uses the terms “true world” to refer to God, or the suprasensual realm. She quotes Kant’s work, “We have abolished the true world. What has remained? The apparent one perhaps? Oh no! With the true world we have also abolished the apparent one.” (420-421) Contrary to intuition, negating thinking does not make the world of appearances more vivid or pertinent. Eliminating either the apparent or transcendent world eliminates the connection between them, which demolishes both in terms of meaningful experience.

Recall that Arendt conceives of thinking as an activity necessary for humans. There are nonetheless dangers associated with thinking. In particular, the possession of a level of understanding that surpasses or diverges from that of the majority carries with it a degree of risk. However, Arendt believes that the dangers of non-thinking may have further-reaching implications. A danger of non-thinking is that individuals and groups are subject to becoming passive participants in their social and political arenas. They become dry leaves in a storm of forces that are seemingly inevitable and static. The lack of thinking as well as the lack of insight that begs to be extracted by such a process is inherent in the individual who unquestioningly endorses the social values and norms he has most greatly come to espouse.

However, it is a person’s very unthinking readiness to subscribe to a particular set of standards that is predictive of his malleable conformation to any new sets of rules. Arendt describes Eichmann’s committal of evil deeds as having occurred despite the absence of any trace of evil ever characterizing Eichmann himself. Neither monstrosity nor stupidity are descriptive of Eichmann, she explains. Instead, an “authentic inability to think” was the detrimental attribute that would be his downfall, enabling him additionally to heed just as soon to the role of the war criminal as to the rules prescribed by the Nazi regime to its constituents (417).

When Arendt discusses “thought” and “thinking” in her work, she uses the contrasting idea of knowledge to clarify her meaning. The concept of knowledge, in the way I understand her denotation, has already been established. My understanding of Arendt’s intended meaning of “thinking” is that it is a particular – and particularly under-exercised – ability that humans have, which entails mindful and deliberate reflection on life and humanity.

In regards to the house-building analogy, it is the thought: “house” that can only be experienced when not in the presence of one. The significance in the symbolic nature of thought in this manner is in kind with the fact that in the tangible world there may be many dwellings that could be considered a house However, in our minds, there is only one symbol, with all its accommodating associations, for these variable entities. It is the intellect that desires and can obtain verifiable knowledge. But reason extends beyond knowledge; it is the inclination to think and to understand. My view is that Arendt and Kant are suggesting we ask questions not merely of *how* but of *why*. Further, it may be that knowing is only safe with the simultaneous or prior exercise of thinking.

There may be much to gain through the study of facts and ideas; of *how* things work, how to do things, and how things have come to be. Certainly science and technology are media that have power to propel positive change. And within these truths lie the bridge between the insights that may blossom in the thinking mind and the activation of these ideas in the world experience.

In order for knowledge to result in positive change, then, it must be used alongside thinking. Thinking is the prerequisite process for the use of knowledge. If approached appropriately, thinking can fuel and propel scientific and other worldly action and creation. Science has the power to show us the *how* aspect. Without thinking having occurred prior, the power of knowing and the material consequences are left dangerously untethered.

In traditional societies, new scientific and technological endeavors underwent some thought before their implementation. Whether due to religious or other reasons, technology was like a privilege that citizens knew could be easily abused. Though knowledge and technology were advanced and enriched, the costs were first carefully considered (Ellul).

However, with the advent of modern technological society, social and economic challenges distracted from this process of careful consideration of the use of science. World War II, for instance, was partly an outcome of the use of knowledge under conditions of economic and psychological stress that averted the exercise of the intellect and thinking, which otherwise might have prevented the deaths of millions of people across of globe, and millions of minorities in Germany and other countries.

Scientific endeavors – “how” processes – nonetheless have the capacity to generate means for positive change. However, it must be used in association with thinking, lest it have devastating consequences. Science, and therefore knowing, may be most dangerous when its employment is not used with meaningful reflection.

In *Love in Action*, Martin Luther King engages in a discussion surrounding the idea of acting with love, which is grounded in Jesus’ biblical quotation, “Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do.” This statement, uttered in the company of several human perpetrators of evil, demonstrates “love at its best” as King described (King 36). It is under the most agonizing conditions – of Jesus, the Creator’s only begotten Son, primed for crucifixion – that this phrase is stated. In the presence of the most basic example of mankind at its lowest, most disgraceful, most hateful and betraying state, Jesus acted not out of vengeance but out of love, points out King.

In his chapter, King notes a dichotomy similar to that discussed by Arendt in that it threatens to extinguish the relationship between our internal and external worlds. Whereas Arendt described thinking and knowing, which have implied respective relationships to concepts of the world of the metaphysical and the world of appearances, King introduces mankind’s prevalent problem of hypocrisy in terms of our actions being consistent with the beliefs we claim to possess. He describes this dualism in the context of what he outlines as the first of two lessons to be obtained from the biblical scene. A profound tragedy, he says, is that “men seldom bridge the gulf between […] doing and saying. A persistent schizophrenia leaves so many of us tragically divided against ourselves.” (37)

What King is referring to is a split between the values endorsed by man and the actions in which they nonetheless engage. It is a notorious dilemma he refers to, here; one often both fueled and complicated by social bias via peers and upbringing on the interpersonal level, and by political and religious affiliation as well as professed ideology on the macro level. Society is riddled with inconsistencies of this sort. Forgiving is a widely valued action in America, a nation founded primarily under principles of Christian origin. But the employment of capital punishment is evidence of society’s refusal to forgive, as exemplified by King (39).

But Jesus, in King’s first noted lesson, exemplifies the impeccable example of overcoming this dilemma. The unyielding forgiveness He displays shows consistency between these two levels; between saying and doing, belief and action. By responding with “aggressive love,” it is with ever-persisting importance that Jesus demonstrates the insufficiency of the law of revenge, which, despite its failure to solve any social problems, continues to attract followers. The story serves as a reminder that “only goodness can drive out evil and only love can conquer hate” (39).

Another lesson that King draws from this action is that of Jesus’ awareness of man’s intellectual and spiritual blindness (40). “They know not what they do,” King quotes, continuing that Jesus acknowledged that it is not badness that characterized the men who nailed Jesus to the cross, but rather a need for enlightenment. It is that they have been misguided, not that they are evil. He says of those who support warfare: “They are not evil people. On the contrary, they are good, respectable citizens whose ideas are robed in the garments of patriotism.” (40-41). However, he continues that war is inevitably futile in that, at least in today’s world, the destruction elicited by war weaponry eliminates any possibility of positive outcomes (41).

King, lastly, suggests that intelligence is a mandatory quality that all Christians should hold. It is morally essential for human to resist not only sin, but also ignorance (44). It’s an unfortunate truth that passion and sincerity, when guided by a stagnant mind, can be dangerous. Even goodness presents a risk in the absence of intelligence. And a trained mind is not required to satisfy this moral requirement, King says. All humankind should deliberately consider multiple perspectives and possibilities on issues instead of blindly adhering to a set of prescribed standards.

Intellectual and moral blindness is a self-inflicted impairment caused by mankind’s misuse of freedom, in combination with the failure to use their minds to their fullest capability (44). “One day we will learn that the heart can never be totally right if the head is totally wrong,” he says (45). Without our minds and the exercise of contemplation, our love can be fruitless, and even devastating.

Arendt, in the context of a set of circumstances that challenge her psychologically and emotionally, philosophizes about the reasons and complexity that underlie the problem of evil in the world and the question of whether a person must be inherently evil to commit evil deeds, or whether instead it is possible for good people to do evil things. King’s focus is the capacity to forgive, along with the moral necessity to be both loving and intelligent.

The example given by King of Americans’ support for white supremacy, justified (in the minds of the people) by religious, scientific, and philosophical insight, is yet another tragic example of knowledge and action gone awry. Had thinking, in the way Arendt describes, and love, as emphasized by King, been exercised by the people during this time, this “tragic blindness” (King 42) might not have characterized these people. The subjugation and oppression of African Americans in the West and the ethnic cleansing that took place in Germany might not have occurred.

Both Arendt’s and King’s writings reflect dualistic perspectives in that, in the context of evildoing, the individual’s qualities are extracted from their actions to some extent. They allude to the moral difficulties inherent in being human, and they tend to maintain that the people themselves are not evil. Arendt’s perspective is that the inability to think is responsible for the conditions leading to evildoing. King attributes evildoing to a sort of naiveté of people, rather than any particular “badness” and, similar to Arendt, call for the need for enlightenment.

It is interesting to note King’s reference to mankind’s misuse of freedom as being responsible for our intellectual and moral sightlessness. As Fyodor Dostoevsky suggests in *The Grand Inquisitor* (297-319), freedom can be conceived of as a privilege, and can carry with it a burden. The freedom to choose your actions and to make decisions and moral judgments on your own can be taxing both individually and collectively. In conditions of insecurity, it seems that it is simply easier for people to idolize without reflection, and to worship and follow according to a given set of rules. There is no room for worry or doubt in doing so. During the time of World War II in Germany, such were the conditions. There were no difficult choices to make, as they had already been made. Basic living needs were already provided. And this in exchange for the people’s freedom.

What I have extracted from these theories is that during periods of repressed freedom and mass social anxiety or tension, the faculties of thinking and of loving are challenged, and are only intact insomuch as an individual or group are resilient. This resilience may, to some extent, be contingent on the person’s prior level of involvement of thinking and thoughtful loving. If a group can develop and sustain these capacities, the risk for entering freedom- or autonomy-restrictive conditions on their own accord is limited. If they are confronted with the reality of these conditions from an outside force, they may be more psychologically and spiritually equipped to withstand the situation and even to influence its progress in a way that is beneficial.

However, when the guiding forces of people are not thinking and loving, but instead are things like non-reflective determination and passion, nationalism, and rigid beliefs, all of which can potentially generate hate-like attitudes and practices, the knowledge used to guide actions or the means to an intended goal is fueled by negative energy. This will result in negative actions and outcomes like hate and conflict, regardless of the apparent end goal. If the goal is increased freedom, this is particularly true, as Dostoevsky illustrates.

Thinking about life, human well-being, happiness, and morality is important. This is especially true when considering how to use knowledge and its products in a way that will be beneficial to humankind. Thus, love-directed thinking should precede action, that being the manifestation of the use of the medium of knowledge. If thinking on the level Arendt suggests is not achievable, as some may say is the case for less educated or less philosophically-inclined people, then love must still fuel the tools of knowledge and the resulting actions in order to result in beneficial outcomes.

If the intellect and the mind are the cogs that turn the wheels of knowledge and action in a positive direction, then love and the heart are the engine that powers those cogs. So positive guiding forces, like love and thinking, can power knowledge in a positive direction, resulting in actions and outcomes that reflect goodness and deflect the forces and powers of evil and evil-doing.

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