## Between Individual Thought and a Plural Sphere of Action The Importance of Opinions for Truly Political Societies

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## 1. Introduction

**The topic of judgmentis central to the work of Hannah Arendt.** In the texts she produced in preparation for *Life of the Mind* that , there arises a concept that is on the one hand strictly individual, while on the other hand it is of fundamental importance for a functional public—and thus non-individual—sphere of action. In this essay, I want to argue that these two sides of the concept at first may sound contradictory or confusing, but that they are in fact tightly bound in Hannah Arendt’s political theory. I want to show this by examining the role that *opinions* play in her work. these form an essential junction point between the individual with her private responsibilities and the demands that derive from her being a part of a political community. As such, through opinions it becomes possible to connect the essential notions of individual critical thought, agency and plurality in Arendt’s work.

First I will explore Arendt’s view on the individual capacity of judgment, without looking at the political dimension of it. This part will deal extensively with the origins of our capacity to judge—namely, the capacity of thinking. After clarifying this important basis, I will look at the specific product of these individual capacities as they appear in a political setting, namely opinions. How do public opinions differ from individual judgments? Once it is clear how opinions come about and how they differ from individual judgments, I will reflect on their importance for a successful communal political process. In this context it is particularly important to understand how opinions differ from facts. Both have a public character, but they do not equally contribute to politics. Although the importance of opinions as intermediate concepts between individual reasoning and collective action should be clear by then, I want to conclude the essay by looking at the more extreme consequences of a situation in which opinions are turned into public convictions. This will stress the political and individual significance of opinions even further. After all, such situations were essential to the political disasters that prevailed in the twentieth century and which urged Arendt to write and reflect on political topics. The threat that such a scenario imposes—which is still relevant post World War II —cannot be left unmentioned in an essay on this topic and will make all the more clear why Arendt’s work is still so important to this day.

## 2. The Individual Capacity of Thinking and Judgment

Although the theme is most prevalent in her later works, a general impression of Arendt’s ideas on critical thought and judgment can already be found in her earlier works. Her explicit focus in later works are theoretical elaborations of central ideas on the importance of critical thought as they appear throughout her oeuvre. An immediate cause for Hannah Arendt’s focus on the concept of thinking was her work on the Eichmann trial. As she writes in the introduction of *The Life of the Mind*, her striking insight on “the banality of evil” revealed that thoughtlessness, rather than pure hate or radical evil, was essential to the monstrous deeds that Eichmann was responsible for.[[1]](#endnote-2) Eichmann was not a sadist or an extreme idealist, nor simply too stupid to understand what was going on. Instead, a striking absence of *thinking* had protected Eichmann against the macabre facts of reality and enabled him to be a substantial actor within this reality, without feeling personal remorse or guilt afterwards. Onemight even say that the lack of thought withheld him from understanding and feeling the need for such a sense of guilt. Despite the emphasis on the importance of thinking, at the time of publication of *Eichmann in Jerusalem*Arendt had not yet written an extensive theory on what was lacking.She therefore started to reflect more explicitly on the topic, trying to clarify the relation between this apparently essential capacity to think and our ability to act morally.As Arendt formulates her own presumptions:

Is our ability to judge, to tell right from wrong, beautiful from ugly, dependent upon our faculty of thought? … Could the activity of thinking as such, the habit of examining and reflecting upon whatever happens to come to pass, regardless of specific contingent and quite independent of results, could this activity be of such a nature that it “conditions” men against evil-doing? (LM 5)

### 2.1 A Kantian Distinction: Intellect and Reason

What does the activity of thinking actually comprise andhow should we think of its relatedness to morality and evil?Arendt’s starting point for further exploring the notion of thinking is Kant’s original distinction between *Verstand* and *Vernunft*. Although these concepts are generally translated as “understanding” and “reason” respectively, Arendt argues that instead these should be read as “intellect”and “reason”. To her, having an understanding of something is not the opposite of reason or *Vernunft*, but exactly an aspect of it; it is a form of intangible grasping, rather than having full reproducible knowledge of something (LM 13–14). The importance of the distinction, and thus of this alternate translation,lies in the fact that Kant acknowledges that there are two *different* ways to approach issues in the world that are yet*equally* important and valuable. There is the well-known cognition or intellect, which gives rise to the human urge for stable knowledge on truth and facticity. equally important is the capacity to go beyond this certainty and facticity and to ask about issues that transcend the limits of factual knowledge.

Due to their natural curiosity and perplexity, humans will always have a need to ask questions that may not have a factual or final answer. Issues like freedom or immortality are not factual truths or tangible objects that we can know and understand completely. But they are nevertheless valuable and worth pursuing, not just because they follow from curiosity but also because they are of great existential interest to mankind. Because of the nature of these issues, people are not concerned with a quest for truth; the intellect is therefore not of any use. Instead, in exploring these matters we turn to reason. Reason is exactly that capacity to think, to consider questions on themes that are absent from direct perception and that are never absolutely true, measurable or fully knowable (LM 14–15).[[2]](#endnote-3)

The product of thinking then is not knowledge, nor truth, but meaning. It is of fundamental importance to keep these two separated; instances of meaning can never be given a truth value, neither can they be considered to be stable facts. Not being bound to perception and sense-given objects, in thinking one temporarily withdraws from the ordinary world and—in isolation from it—uses imagination to formulate new perspectives on that world. Whereas knowledge can be judged on its absolute truth value, the value of thinking lies exactly in its reversibility and capacity for change. Enduring doubt and revision are its essential characteristics; contrary to the intellect, reason is successful to the degree in which it can destroy its current thoughts and values and rethink anew, creating new meanings and perspectives.[[3]](#endnote-4)

### 2.2 Reason and Morality

Thinking is thus characterized by change and revision, but this does not yet explain how it is linked to the actual moral practice of telling right from wrong. To link thinking to morality requires several propositions that follow both from the character of reason and from the nature of morality. First of all, Kant depictedreason as a human capacity that all are capable of. If that is the case, and if reason—i.e.thinking in Arendt’s interpretation—and morality are related, then the ability to tell right from wrong is a general faculty as well. Every sane person is thought to have a moral sense in some way or another. This is not just a logical remark, but it has the important implication that a lack of moral sense cannot be ascribed to a lack of intelligence or access to knowledge. Neither can one say that thinking about morality is confined to an elite. If the two are linked, then every person should be capable of moral reasoning (TMC 422).

Second, the self-critical and ever renewing nature of reason prevents morality from being defined by solid axioms and rules. What is bad and what is good is subject to continuous reflection and cannot be caught in an ultimate law or anything of such nature. Moral consideration thus has no real *product*; it is not sure that she who thinks about morality, automatically will come to the right deed. Nor is moral action something that we can learn, as a coherent palette of correct decisions. In addition to this, thinking neither deals with visible or tangible input. As stated before, thinking deals with exactly those matters which escape our immediate perception. In order to think, one must refrain from the concrete things.

When it comes to morality, that means that thinking is not automatically linked to moral action in concrete situations. how then doesthis intangible process of thinking can result in something valuable for the concrete world, if both the process itself and its results are not particular in any sense (LM 426)?

### 2.3 The Risks of Thinking

In order to establish the link between morality and thinking, Arendt first articulates how to think of these as universal capacities. She does this by first examining why the form of thought mentioned beforeseems absentso often. As described above, thinking implies an interruption of the current actions and brings about insecurity. It destabilizes previous certainties, concepts and values and forces us to refrain from our concrete activity for a while. Due to this unraveling nature, thinking can cause the thinker to be both agitated and paralyzed at the same time. This can be valuable but it has just as well a dangerous side. When everything escapes fixation, it may seem like there is no way out of that paralyzed state of doubt. The risk that looms there is nihilism; if we cannot establish stable criteria on what is “the right thing to do”, we might as well conclude that there is no such thing as the right thing to do.

Contrary to nihilism but equally linked to the unease that the unraveling nature of thinking causes, lies the opposite dangerof conventionalism. Both nihilism and conventionalism equally entail a strong binding to old forms and values—be it in a negative or affirmative way respectively (TMC 435).Conventionalism, or theavoidance of thinking,does have more damaging implications though. Whereas the nihilist is overly critical, the conventionalist easily forgets about his critical capacity to think at all. When this happens, it is not only easy to cling to existing criteria, but it also becomes very easy to uncritically follow new codes, rules and paradigms. In this warning it becomes clear how the theme of—critical—thinking has, in one way or another, always been central to Arendt’s work. Once more she here reminds us of 20th century totalitarianism as the actual horrific consequencethat can happen when we neglect our capacity to think critically (TMC 436). Arendt acknowledges the insecurity and unease that thinking can entail, but in the same argument she shows that both nihilism and conventionalism are, in a sense, the “easy ways out”. They are fallacies that arise when people give in to this unease and neglect the more challenging, but ever existing capacity to think critically.

### 2.4 Thinking as an Internal Dialogue

The question is then how one can continue to take on this thought process without getting trapped in nihilism or conventionalism. Arendt criticizes the classical view that *eros,* an inherently needy longing or desire, is the driving force to achieve this. Such a view would imply that one’s thinking and moral judgment depends on a stronger or weaker personal drive for wisdom. Moral thinking would then be confined to a distinguished elite of “noble minds,” which is exactly what Arendt tries to avoid (TMC 438). Instead, she explores the inherent structure of being and consciousness, which is the fundament of every human being and as well the basic essence of the thinker. According to Arendt, consciousness implies that someone is not just for others, as a being in the world, but also is for oneself, in having an *awareness* of this being. In addition to a direct conscious connectedness to the world, one is aware of oneself as being conscious as such. Thus thereappears a duality within the thinking subject between the immediate being and the awareness of that being. This division is essential, because it implies a possible site for reflection *within* the unity of the subject. As Arendt writes: “This curious thing that I am needs no plurality in order to establish difference; it carries the difference within itself when it says: ‘I am I’” (TMC 442).

At this site of plurality within consciousness, an internal dialogue can arise between both elements of the self. This dialogueis what Arendt calls thinking and, as a critical encounter within oneself, it is the realization of the difference within consciousness. In effect, thisinner dialogue gives us awareness of the dual structure of our consciousness. This duality gives rise to our feeling of always having an “inner debating partner”; it brings forth our conscience being the ever present inner moral awareness. Although this is a familiar idea, it is important to distinguish between conscience as something like the more theological or Kantian notions of “God’s voice” or an “inner law” and Arendt’s concept of thinking as an inner dialogue. For Arendt, after all, thinking is not a stable unified source for moral laws. On the contrary, thinking is a *process* that givesus inherent doubt rather than a straightforward solution. Our conscience does not tell us what to do; rather it is a continuous disturbance that enables us to keep on questioning ourselves and our decisions.

One can thus summarize Arendt’s view on thinking as the capacity to engage in a critical dialogue with oneself, between one’s immediate perceptive self and a more reflecting side of the self. This conception is as simple as it is convenient: clearly, everybody who has an awareness of oneself is then capable of thought and as such of critical reflection. And in the same sense, everybody is equally prone to its neglect; we are all able to think, but not everybody does so (TMC 445).

## 3. Judgment and the Public Sphere: Opinions

It is now obvious that the link between reason and actual moral actions does not lie *within* the thought process itself. After all, characteristic for thinking is that it lets the thinker refrain from practices and action in the world. Rather, the essential importance of thinking for moral action lies in what the thought process *brings about*.

### 3.1 Judgment

In Arendt’s view, our morally inclined “inner voice”, or conscience, is the byproduct of the dual nature of consciousness. As such, consciousness gives rise to an internal moral reflection on the self. In analogy to this, Arendt argues, the correspondingprocess of thinking gives rise to a morally inclined process that reflects on the world outside the self. This is the process of *judging*(TMC 446).Judging for Arendt is the individualevaluation of something particular, like an action or statement. Real judgments are always about singular cases and cannot be decided upon by rule following, factual deduction or given laws. After all, then the intellect would be able to take care of it. Instead, the capacity of judgment is part of reason; for real judgments the process of thinking is inevitable. Thinking needs to suspend the current state of affairs and is needed to create open spaces where general laws have no saying and no values, consequences or meanings are set in stone. Exactly through its destructive and as such ultimately liberatingcharacter, thinking opens the way for real particular judgment. By breaking up all stability and habit, it enables us to truly evaluate concrete singularities and actual situationsthrough our autonomous moral judgment, without being bound to rules or customs.

As such, the first importance of judgment lies in the general capacity to individually evaluate the concrete situation in which one finds oneself. With Arendt’s work in mind this of course first and for all relates to judging one’s political situation and the conditions of the world in which one lives. Yet the formulations Arendt uses in her later works also allow the principle to apply on a more personal level. Through thought and judgment, one always has a say over one’s own life through refraining from well-known principles and evaluating an action in life on its own merits. Although a first impression of the importance of these capacities has shown itself here, Arendt does acknowledge that it is impossible to always act in this way. After all, we engage in the world through actions and deeds; it would not be desirable to constantly refrain from this in order to think. But it is important to remember that we always *can* refrain from everything that seems normal, logical and meaningful to us. This is especially important in times of political change or disruption. When the world seems to change all too easy or all too slow, we are always able to withdraw from it. A reasonable person can always reconsider whether what seems right when seen in the totality of reality, actually *is* right too when we judge it on its own particular merits (ibid.).

### 3.2Morality through Diversity

Both the capacity of thinking and that of judging are universal human capacities. Together they enable humans to critically reflect on and evaluate particular deeds, decisions and actions at incidental moments of political significance. While in thinking a person refrains and reflects, the judgment is the actual moment of personal evaluation. Seen as such, judging is not just something that only takes place in moments of crisis and emergency but italso represents a certain critical stance in one’s active, public life.

The link to morality that occurs in the act of judging can easily be misunderstood. autonomous moral judgment brings along the connotation of an inner ‘knowledge’ of what is right or wrong. But such an interpretation would turn a judgment into a solid decision based on knowledge about an inner moral law, with our conscience being a Kantian source for such knowledge. To understand how our conscience can function as a disturbance rather than as a stable source of moral law, one has to keep onemphasizing the importance of the *particular* character of the faculty of judgment. In exploring what is actually going on in judgment, Arendtherself does not start with an investigation into knowledge and applications of a solid and universal moral law. Instead, sheturns to the immediate practice of a judging spectator who has to deal with distinctive appearances.She finds an explanation of such a judging practice in in our faculty of *aesthetic judgment*, described by Kant in his third Critique. Although this work was not intended to deal with moral issues, Arendt nevertheless argues that it is in this actual practice of dealing with particulars that the essence of judgment—and thus also of moral judgment—can be found (TMC 446).[[4]](#endnote-5)

Arendt’s alternative approach leads to a different appreciation of diversity amongst moral convictions. Whereas deviations and disagreement form a problem for theories claiming that we all have access to one unified and unambiguous moral law, for Arendt these actually form the essence of morality and judgment. When there is no first principle or central law to judge a certain conviction as absolutely wrong or right, every single personal judgment can refer to a potential truth. Instead, when it comes to human affairs, all judgments are grounded in a particular world view or *doxa*. Each *doxa* or perspective that grounds a judgment is formed through personal experiences and situations. Of course, this entails that such a judgment can be equally wrong or distorted as well.[[5]](#endnote-6). However, the important insight for Arendt is that the universal capacities for thought and judgment here receive their particular form through the inherently limited nature of one’s *doxa*. Just as for Kant, conscience is an individual notion; however, contrary to Kant, one’s individual conscience is not a closed unity that contains its answers within itself, but rather a critical process of disturbance: there is always a possibility for adaptation through new encounters and interactions.[[6]](#endnote-7)

### 3.3 Opinions as Publicly Justified Judgments

This focus on differentiation in *doxas*or perspectives is immediately connected to the more political form of judgments. The rejection of both nihilism and absolute moral truths leads Arendt to an appreciation of the only other way in which—temporarily—agreement can be reached over public judgments: through dialogue, exchange and debate. To examine and improve one’s own world view and the judgments that follow from it, it is important that one stays involved in exchanging experiences with others. This requirement works in two ways.

First of all, to test whether our everyday judgmentsare more than just individual prejudices or subjective criteria,it needs to be clear in what world view or *doxa* they are grounded and on what information and experiences they are based. A public judgmentneeds to be communicable:since it has a public form, it must be understandable for others in order for them to respond to it or to form their own judgments aboutit.[[7]](#endnote-8) Thus for a judgment to have public valuerather than simply being an individual predisposition, it must gain validity through recognition and acceptance by others. As such it becomes an *opinion* rather than a personal conviction.

Second, such communicability also removes the purely subjective character by opening up the individual view to change and adaptation. This second aspect is of substantial importance to Arendt. The way in which the opinion takes into account these alternative views is what determines the value of an opinion. A strong political opinion entails not just one view point, but takes into account as many realitiesas possible. The ability to imagine oneself as having someone else’s world view and to try and understand that viewis fundamental for forming good political opinions. A political decision maker must consider how her judgment will be justifiable for those who see the world different from her. Real politics therefore require a so-called enlarged mentality of those engaging in the process.[[8]](#endnote-9) As Arendt writes:

Political thought is representative. I form an opinion by considering a given issue from different viewpoints, by making present to my mind the standpoints of those who are absent; that is, I represent them. … The more people’s standpoints I have present in my mind while I am pondering a given issue, and the better I can imagine how I would feel and think if I were in their place, the stronger will be my capacity for representative thinking and the more valid my final conclusions, my opinion.[[9]](#endnote-10)

It thus takes a process of imagination, exchange and deliberationto develop a personal judgment into a valuable public opinion*.*This of course does not mean that the individual judgment has to align with a “collective opinion” or withthe judgments of others. Taking up an enlarged mentality is not a matter of simply adopting other views, taking over a major opinion, or even forming some sort of empathy for them. After all, by now it should be clear that a judgment is first an individual undertaking and that its essential value lies exactly in the possibility to criticize these communal norms and others’standards. Through this increased representation , one sticks to one’s own judgment, but equally tries to imagine someone else’s vision and then review that own judgment from that viewpoint*.*[[10]](#endnote-11)A general political judgment remains an individual undertaking, which becomes publicly valuable through accounting for and appealing to as many as possible distinctive views. For this, the process of open deliberation, debate and exchange is essential.

## 4. Opinions and the Vita Activa

The enlarged mentality that occurs through deliberation and exchange makes clear how participation in political debate turns a solitary individual into a public person. When reasoning from the point of the individual judger, it is clear why such a development is desirable. But ending there would lead to a too narrow understanding of public deliberation and would not grasp the essential role of engaging in public life that has been so passionately argued for by Arendt in her earlier works. The real importance of public engagement thus only becomes clear when these insights are connected to Arendt’s earlier works on the *vita activa* and the intrinsic importance of public life through deliberation in itself.

### 4.1 Action

In *The Human Condition*Arendt distinguishes action as being that sphere of activity which is not engaged with biological or worldly needs. Whereas labor deals with immediate and cyclic natural processes like shelter or nutrition, and work is the sphere in which man deals with self-created, yet recurrent needs like law and finance, action is concerned solely with human affairs like values and morals. It takes places directly between menthrough the ultimately human capacities of speech and deliberation.[[11]](#endnote-12)Since it is the only type of human activity that can completely refrain from reference to natural laws, worldly conditions or material things, it is the dimension in which real human freedom comes to expression. Here men can create or initiate ideas and visions that are new, beginnings that are not restricted by everything that is or has been before. Unbound by daily concerns or the current state of affairs, here men can strive for creating something persistent in the world that is not material—and thereby still of a decaying nature—but which is a product of speech and consideration, transcending the individual existence. Action is the domain of the unique human capacity to create and to take initiative. Politics as its practical form par excellence thus enables humans to not just live their lives in the material world, but also to create an independent sphere of abstract value that transcends our earthly, ending existence and enables us to reach for a form of immortality (HC 19).

Political action in the form of deliberation is the only way to truly express the diversity that is inherent to humanity and which shows that the world is inhabited by men, not man. Of great importance to Arendt is the capacity of man to distinguish himself, his individual existence, while at the same time acknowledging some form of equality with other human beings. Through their commonly shared capacity of speech and action, *humans can express their own unique being amongst their peers*. By no means then is public deliberation just a way to improve individual insights and to facilitate personal development. On the contrary: this development of a human being into a person with opinions is the ultimate prospering of human existence as a multitude of equal, yet unique beings. Action and deliberation, which distinguishes unique, free personhood from the mere physical human existence, is in fact so fundamental that no man can really refrain from it. This is formulated by Arendt as follows: “A life without speech and without action … is literally dead to the world; it has ceased to be a human life because it is no longer lived among men” (HC 176).

### 4.2 Action, Thoughtand Opinion

These capacities of speech and action are not just natural inclinations that follow from our biological make up or our partaking in a social community. Although these factors might stimulate it or be necessary for its proper functioning, the real ground for action lies in our tendency to start anew. As argued above, like no other forms of being, humans can withdraw themselves from natural laws and suspend everything that currently is the case. From such a situation they can then start something new, something that does not necessarily follow “logically” from ‘whatever may have happened before’ (HC 178).

Such phrases sound familiar. It is at this point that a connection can be drawn between Arendt’s views on reason and thinking and her ideas about politics and the *vita activa.*Their essential characteristic of being unbound to laws, current norms and material situatedness, makes that both reason and action are ultimate expressions of human freedom. The link has to be drawn carefully though. It is all too easy to just view the individual capacity of thought as the individual basis for action. A first critical remark that has to be made in this respect is that the grounding of thought in the dual structure consciousness leads to its characterization as a strictly internal, isolated process. The thinker can only refrain from the surrounding world by also refraining from his actions, and as such even from social interactions and active deliberations. Thinking is always temporal *and* singular*:* one retreats for a while into one’s own reflective inner dialogue, but then returns to practice. One cannot stay away from acting in the real world forever. The sphere of action, on the contrary, is part of the *vita activa*and as suchexactly what the thinker refrains from. A thinker does not just rest her hands, she also suspends her activity in the sphere of politics. Exactly contrary to thought, political action is the sphere of multitude and diversity, but—and that is important here—also of *ongoing practices*. Whereas thinking is a capacity one can turn to in a moment of reflection, the sphere of action is—or at least should be—exactly a continuingprocess of deliberation and exchange.

Although this is an essential difference, it is not fundamental enough to completely dismiss the compelling similar appeal that action and thinking make to freedom from restrictive rules and laws. But in order to connect both of them in a substantial way, there needs to be a bridging element that combines in it both the temporally and individual aspect and the enduring plural one. The opinion is exactly this bridging element. Grounded in thought, an opinion has its individual basis in the personal judgment. But opinions are neither “just” personal judgmentsthat concern a purely individual life. They are public; through their representative nature, they transcend the domain of pure subjectivity. In turning from the personal domain to the public sphere, somehow opinions must now be open to evaluation and judgment themselves. Thus, in order for it to really become an opinion, a judgment needs a public value which it gets when it is brought up fordiscussion the public sphere.It needs to open up; that way it can be part of the sphere of action while new insights can enrich its value through increasing the underlying *doxa*.

## 5.Closure: The Danger of Losing Opinions as a Threadin Arendt’s Oeuvre

This openness that an opinion has due toits public formis enduring and part of its definition. There are then two ways in which an opinion can get “lost”. The first is when it is being pulled back into the sphere of subjective reason. When the judging person refrains his judgment from the public sphere, it turns it back into a personal conviction. But the opposite can also happen; an opinion can be taken over by a multitude and become a mass conviction.

Here we find, from a conceptual approach, the recurring dangers again that have appeared before when we looked at it from the individual perspective: the overly suspicious skepticism and the uncritical and all too easy conventionalism. Both loom when the essential notions of diversity and multitude are relinquished. As a consequence, the opinion loses its inherent element of openness, doubt and improvability. It becomes a personal or collective conviction—a change in terminology that implies that a certain truth claim is now attached to the judgment which transcends the possibility of revision and doubt. A conviction claims to be “right”, whereas it is impossible to think in terms of “right” and “wrong”when talking about opinions. Since opinions are not completed, stable unities but rather open developments, it is impossible to give a definite approval on them.

This threat of giving up diversity and multitude, and a corresponding decline of real opinion, is the central concern that reappears in every work of Hannah Arendt. It is already apparent in her early *Jewish Writings*, written in the 1940’s, when she explores in a range of essays the varieties of divergence and reactions to anti-Semitism within the Jewish communities in Europe.[[12]](#endnote-13) She writes about the threat of exclusion; the need that Jews felt to assimilate and the failures of those who tried because they tried to change something that they *were*, not something they had chosen or that was a consequence of their deliberate actions. She also explores how, in an opposite move, exclusion then became the main characteristic for Jews to identify themselves with, through the cultural figure of the Jew as a pariah.

Where these early texts already give an oppressive insight in the situations of those subject to exclusion, the real dangerof unificationgets ominous in Arendt’s work *The Origins of Totalitarianism*. In her analysis of the rise of 20thcentury totalitarian regimes, Arendt ascribes how countries started to define themselves through ethnic categories, rather than through civil principles. In effect, large groups of people who did not fit the profile of the main ethnicities lost their citizenship, and thereby, their right to be political. In the exclusion of so many from the political community, the expelled were denied from exactly that sphere in which their actions and opinions mattered. The consequences were—as we all know now—disastrous. The exclusion of large numbers of individuals from the public sphere lead to the impoverishment of the political domain. By actively rejecting a large range of opinions and*doxas* that diverged from the main world view, European societies let their inherent prevention against unification and conventionalism diminish. Deviating voices were no longer heard; societies impoverished their opinions by narrowing down the number of views taken into account.

Equality through diversity was sacrificed to uniformitythrough assimilation. But even more dangerous was the rejection of the political capacity for action—for real free personhood—in all excluded stateless people. Stateless people were denied not only from contributing to, but also from realizing themselves within the most important sphere of activity: the unique human capacity for action. This deprivation was crucial in order to understand the horrors that took place decades later. Without the capacity for action, real human existence is not possible. As such, the exclusion of the stateless people from the sphere of action was the first step in the dehumanization that the Nazi- and Stalinist regimes could then bring to its ultimate realization.

The fundamental deprivation of human rights is manifested first and above all in the deprivation of a place in the world which makes opinions significant and actions effective. Something much more fundamental than freedom and justice, which are rights of citizens, is at stake when belonging to the community into which one is born is no longer a matter of course and not belonging no longer a matter of choice, or when one is place in a situation where, unless he commits a crime, his treatment by others does not depend on what he does or does not do. This extremity, and nothing else, is the situation of people deprived of human rights. They are deprived, not of the right to freedom, but of the right to opinion. Privileges in some cases, injustices in most, blessings and doom are meted out to them according to accident and without any relation whatsoever to what they do, did or may do.[[13]](#endnote-14)

This dehumanizing development formed the enabling condition for the final, physical destruction of millions of excluded people. But the conclusion that rises from Arendt’s analysis is that the enabling crime, the dehumanization, had already taken place in the foregoing decades. Yet, taking away from people their political capacities was not considered to be a devastating, dehumanizing practice. In fact, it was very common and went by pretty undisturbed, which is shocking to Arendt.[[14]](#endnote-15)

Arendt’s analyses have two strong implications; first of all, that the rise of totalitarianism was not inevitable or a necessary product of modernity. And second of all, that those who constituted these societies had been responsible for these political disasters, even though their guilt could not be defined in the traditional moral frames. Responsibility here does not mean that they were actively involved in worldly, specific deeds that were either good or bad according to law. With her analysis of thinking, Arendt can now explain what those contemporaries could be blamed for. They could—and should—have temporarily refrained themselves from what seemed to be “logical consequences” or “unavoidable measures”. They should have used their capacity for judgment to look at the particular cases that were going on. In short, *they should have thought*. Instead, civilians ignored their shared sense of humanity with those who were excluded and narrowed down their own political sphere by adhering to a generally shared sense of normativity.

Although *On Totalitarianism* is still very much a historical exploration, it clearly gives rise to Arendt deepest concerns, which she would then go on and develop further in a more theoretical style in her later works. With her work on thinking, Arendt has finally given an insight in how a plural society of individuals could give rise to totalitarianism. As such, it gives an explanation for the compelling, but first still unspecified notion of the banality of evil. Evil in itsbanal sense is not a bad deed, but rather a non-doing. A lack of thought, a neglect of the inner dialogue and a closure for alternative views have been the enabling conditions for the origination of totalitarian regimes. Totalitarianism thus arose from human neglect; a conclusion that not only shows its inherent humannature. Most of all, it forms a serious warning that as long as there are humans, they can fall back into an equal neglect of thinking and of the value of opinions for a truly political society.

NOTES

1. See Hannah Arendt, *The Life of the Mind* (San Diego: Harcourt Inc., 1978), p. 4; henceforth LM followed by pagenumber. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
2. See also Richard J. Bernstein, “Arendt on Thinking,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Hannah Arendt*, ed. Dana Villa (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), pp. 277—292. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
3. See Hannah Arendt, “Thinking and Moral Considerations,” in *Social Research* 38:3 (1971), pp. 417—446; henceforth TMC followed by pagenumber. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
4. See also Maurizio Passerin d'Entrèves, “Arendt's theory of judgment,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Hannah Arendt*, ed. Dana Villa (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), pp. 245—260. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
5. See Hannah Arendt, “Philosophy and Politics,” in *Social Research* 57:1 (1990): 73—103. See also Frederick M. Dolan, “Arendt on philosophy and politics,” in*The Cambridge Companion to Hannah Arendt*, ed. Dana Villa (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), pp. 261-276. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
6. Arendt 1990, p. 81; Dolan 2000, p. 266. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
7. See d’Entrèves 2000, p. 252. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
8. See Arendt 1990, p. 84. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
9. Hannah Arendt, Between Past and Future (New York: The Viking Press, 1961); p. 241. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
10. Ibid. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
11. Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 2nd ed.(Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1998), p. 7; henceforth HC. [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
12. See Hannah Arendt, *The Jewish Writings*, ed. Jerome Kohn and Ron H. Feldman (New York: Shocken Books, 2007). [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
13. Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, 2nd ed. (San Diego: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1973), p. 297. [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
14. Ibid., p. 459. [↑](#endnote-ref-15)