

The stranger in jerusalem: arendt and the importance of philosophical thought



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Philosophy is defined simply by Oxford English Dictionary as “ knowledge, learning, scholarship,” but can also be defined as the pursuit of knowledge; whereas philo- means to have a liking of, and -sophy is translated as wisdom (philo, comb. form; sophy, n. 2; philosophy, n). If philosophical thinking is thinking to pursue knowledge, then anyone can do it. Socrates said that an “ unexamined life is not worth living.” We can learn much about examining our lives from Hannah Arendt in her works *Eichmann in Jerusalem* and *Thinking and Moral Considerations*. In her analysis of Adolf Eichmann and his trial in Jerusalem, Arendt advocates philosophical thinking and claims that we should consider all sides of an argument, that philosophy is a form of personal maintenance, and that an unexamined life without philosophical thinking will leave us susceptible to evil.

In considering not only philosophical information, but analyzing everyday information, we should attempt to look at both sides of the given situation. The Israeli court presented in *Eichmann in Jerusalem* was substantially underdeveloped. The court was unconcerned with Eichmann’s motives, did not care for the reason Eichmann did what he did, and only wanted to dehumanize him in the eyes of the public. The trial was merely a show trial for “ if Ben-Gurion, [the Prime Minister of Israel,] did ‘ not care what verdict [was] delivered against Eichmann,’ it was undeniably the sole task of the Jerusalem court to deliver one” (Arendt *Eichmann* 20). As the court was unconcerned with Eichmann’s motives, it did not look at both sides of his situation. Eichmann claimed to be an idealist who “ was not merely a man who believed in an ‘ idea...’ An ‘ idealist’ was a man who lived for his idea... and who was prepared to sacrifice for his idea everything and, especially,

everybody” (42). The Jerusalem court was indifferent to this aspect of Eichmann; thus, it was not thinking or analyzing information properly. The court only wanted to portray Eichmann at his worst, not caring whether he lived or died, not caring about the truth of the matter, essentially bullshitting the nation; Eichmann’s trial was purely a means to an end (Frankfurt).

In neglecting to look at both sides of Eichmann’s situation, the people of the Jerusalem court missed out on an opportunity to gain full understanding. Analyzing and considering two parts of an argument, rather than one, allows us to formulate a new perspective. We cannot have a strong understanding of a subject if we only have one section of it, just as a “ good elevator has not one cable, it has several” (Vartabedian). The more connections we have to support our knowledge of something, the stronger and fuller our understanding of it will be, just as an elevator will be stronger with more than one cable. Arendt implies this when she mentions that the Jerusalem court ignored the motives behind Eichmann’s actions.

Eichmann did not have many true motives behind his actions. Despite his selfish determination and habit of unthinking as a lack of attention or intent, Eichmann moved along by the rules of others. He simply followed the orders of his superiors for personal gain and security. The part deep inside Eichmann, relating to his motives and his thoughts, that the Jerusalem court missed was his misunderstood and broken conscience, which Arendt brings up in her work *Thinking and Moral Considerations*; she uses this work to analyze what thinking is. She notes during his trial that the “ longer one listened to him, the more obvious it became that his inability to speak was closely connected with an inability to think” (Arendt Eichmann 49).
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Eichmann's inability to think caused a lapse—a hiccup—in the way that his conscience operated. Arendt's definition of conscience is different from that of society; she states that the “very word con-science... means ‘to know with and by myself,’ a kind of knowledge that is actualized in every thinking process” (Arendt *Thinking* 160-161). To “know by” ourselves is to use ourselves as a guide when thinking, as a commitment to self-understanding; to “know with” is the rule that we offer to the world by which self-understanding shows itself (181). One of these faculties in Eichmann's conscience was broken, leaving him susceptible to evil and misunderstanding by the public.

In this sense, Eichmann can be related to the character Meursault in Albert Camus's *The Stranger*. Meursault, like Eichmann, moved along by the rules of others; he went to his mother's funeral not necessarily because he loved her, but because that's what others would have done. Throughout both works, the consciences of Eichmann and Meursault are expanded upon; both of them had a conscience that worked properly for some period of time before breaking down and functioning inadequately (Arendt *Eichmann* 95, Camus 60). Because both men had—neither good nor bad—broken consciences, both missing the “knowing by oneself” aspect, they were seen to the public eye as evil people (Arendt *Thinking* 160-161). Simply because they did not operate in the same way as everyone else, though they were seemingly normal members of society, their lack of attention and intent in their actions led them to being susceptible to evil. Neither men reflected on their lives. They lived with a broken conscience and followed others; thus, they did not pursue thought on their own terms.

In her analysis of Eichmann's inability to think, Arendt teaches us that philosophical thinking is a form of personal maintenance. She uses Kant in *Thinking and Moral Considerations* to emphasize that philosophy—and more specifically, thinking—is needed to have a good conscience and a life worth living. She specifically states that “in Kantian terms, one would need philosophy, the exercise of reason as the faculty of thought, to prevent evil” (164). By examining our lives and committing to philosophical thinking, we are inhibiting the formation of a bad conscience—helping to maintain our own way of thinking and viewing the world. In the act of stopping a bad or broken conscience from developing, we preserve our minds and protect ourselves from negative influences and actions. Pursuing knowledge helps to enhance our understanding of the surrounding environment, analyze new and current information, and better ourselves as a whole. By pursuing knowledge, we attempt to familiarize ourselves with multiple aspects of a subject—something that the Jerusalem court did not do when considering Eichmann's situation, and something that the court in French Algiers did not do when Meursault was on trial for murder (Camus 59-60). In order to properly diagnose a situation, we must understand it fully; in order to think and act properly, we must pursue the knowledge that will allow for complete comprehension.

Arendt stresses that philosophy and thinking go hand-in-hand, and both are necessary to be our best selves. Through her works *Eichmann in Jerusalem* and *Thinking and Moral Considerations*, we learn that philosophy—a love for knowledge—and the ability to think are crucial elements needed in life to acquire a good conscience and a life worth living. Not only do we see the

consequences of a life without philosophy in Eichmann, but in the character Meursault from Camus's *The Stranger*.