

## EVIL IN THOUGHTLESSNESS

**H**ANNAH Arendt died in December, 1975. She left behind her a number of books on political science and theory, all of which are of philosophical interest, but only in her last, unfinished work, 'The Life of the Mind', did she attempt to answer the perennial questions of metaphysics.

The starting point for her philosophical reflections was the Eichmann trial in Jerusalem, which she attended and reported on. During the course of the trial she found no firm ideological conviction or specific evil motive in Eichmann. The only thread connecting his actions in the war and during the trial was his total absence of thought.

So, the question that underlies these two thick volumes posed itself: might our faculty for distinguishing good from evil be connected with our faculty for thought? 'The Life of the Mind' is, then, an investigation into the relation between thought and ethics, a book that stresses time and time again their close commitment to each other. Note that she draws the relation between *thought* and ethics. Knowledge, as such, does not enter the picture. Thoughtlessness is something all of us, intelligent and stupid alike, are prone to. And so, according to Arendt, we are all equally prone to wicked actions.

This book was intended to be her *magnum opus*, a work that was to cover the entire spectrum of human mental action: Thinking, Willing and Judging. Unfortunately Arendt died before commencing the volume on judging. She had conceived of it as the easiest section to write, working from the premise that the only thinker of the first rank to have written at length on judging was Kant. As an appendix to the second volume we have a few excerpts from her lectures on Kant's Political Philosophy, which are sufficient for us to imagine what she might have said on judging itself, but which did not touch upon what would doubtless have taken a good deal of her time, the problem of taste, what is involved when we value one artwork more than another.

**THE LIFE OF THE MIND:**  
*Volume I: Thinking; Volume II: Willing.* By Hannah Arendt.  
Secker and Warburg, 258pp;  
276pp. \$33.50 per two-volume set.

Reviewer:  
**KEVIN HART**

One of the difficulties in writing philosophy is that in trying to answer any one question a whole nexus of related questions arises. In trying to pull one thread from the fabric of thought, the entire fabric creases around the thread. The main thread that Arendt tries to follow is the tendency amongst philosophers to divide reality into two, into minds and bodies, the natural and the supernatural, appearance and reality.

Arendt argues that the language of thinking is essentially metaphorical, that language by lending itself to metaphorical usage, enables us to think and — in doing so — gives us the illusion of two worlds. This is an old idea. The discrepancy between words, the medium in which we think, and the world of appearances, in which we live, led to philosophy in the first place. And Arendt is not the first to argue that the two-world theory is a metaphysical delusion. In their different ways Boehme, Spinoza, Hegel and their 20th century theological heirs, Bultmann and Tillich, have also distrusted the two-world theory.

The Positivist challenge to metaphysics earlier this century, the claim that the propositions of metaphysics are meaningless, that the only world is that one about us, the one that can be measured and felt, is seen by Arendt to be the signal that the two-world theory has at last run out of steam. Again, the point she makes is not new, but needs to be reiterated: metaphysical questions have not become "meaningless" but the way they have previously been formed and answered has lost plausibility.

This onslaught against the two-world theory is simply one aspect of 'The Life of the Mind'. Within this

'The Life of the Mind'. Within this framework many questions are raised and discussed. It may seem strange that such reflections stem from the Eichmann trial, and some people may find it hard to see the relation between Arendt's discussion of the two-world theory and the problem of evil. If I understand her correctly, in this book Arendt is simply doing for herself what she recommends all her readers do: think seriously and critically about the human situation; do not accept the ready-made formulations that are offered, but rather question their assumptions, for when we stop thinking and questioning and hide behind clichés, then we are in danger of doing evil.

---

This is a book to be read both inside and outside the universities. It is not an exposition of new ideas, not an "original" philosophy, rather — and quite Hegelian in this respect — a gathering together, a consummation and distillation of other people's ideas. The originality lies in the boldness of the enterprise, the care and beauty of the patterning of the ideas.

The only reservation I have about the central thesis of the book is that it seems somewhat too pat, too final. Is thoughtlessness really at the base of evil? Or is it possible for someone to thoroughly think out the human situation and decide to be evil? A nasty question, certainly, but a possibility that must be discussed.

---