

# Arendt, Eichmann, and the Perils of Thoughtlessness: Reflections on the Liberal Arts

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*Bookend Seminar, November 20, 2013*

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I thought that I [Wade Roberts] would begin by trying to establish the context for this piece. I presented it at the annual meeting of the Association for Core Texts and Courses, which is a body that is dedicated to the preservation of liberal arts education. And this piece, as you'll see, is very much a meditation on the purpose of the liberal arts. One of the really nice things about this conference is that you are encouraged to give a relatively short and concise paper, and then you open it up for broader conversation. At the conference I felt like this paper was really well received. We got a lot of interesting feedback. Jim encouraged me to present it and said that he would comment on it, which I appreciate. After looking over Jim's comments, I actually think I like his comments better than mine.<sup>1</sup>

I just thought I would start here with a couple of brief comments about the biographies of Arendt and Eichmann since they are the two central figures in this narrative. Hannah Arendt was born to secular Jewish parents in Hanover, Germany, in 1906. She was a precocious and gifted student. She eventually went to the University of Marburg where she studied with Martin Heidegger, the author of *Being and Time*.<sup>2</sup> In 1933, she fled from Germany for obvious reasons: the emergence of the Nazis as a political force. She established residence in Paris and remained there until 1941 when she fled once again, due to the invasion of France. While she was in Paris, she actually provided assistance to various Jewish refugee groups who were attempting to smuggle Jews out of Germany. In 1961 she was asked by the *New Yorker* to cover the trial of Adolf Eichmann in Jerusalem, and she did so. She produced a series of dispatches at the trial, and in 1963, her book *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* appeared.<sup>3</sup> This is her account of Eichmann's trial. And in a moment I'll say more about why I think this is such a unique and interesting text, but it was an immensely controversial text at the time of publication, and it has remained an immensely controversial text.

I now want to say just a couple of things about the other very important figure, and this is of course Adolf Eichmann. Born also in 1906, he spent much of his early life moving from one job to the next. In the early thirties, he joined the Nazi party and established himself as an efficient bureaucrat, and

he was able to rise very quickly in the ranks of the Nazi party. He was especially well known for his ability to facilitate the expulsion of Jews. As the philosophy of the Nazis began to shift, and the Nazis began to emphasize less the expulsion of Jews and more the extermination of Jews, Eichmann took very readily to the next task, and he was extraordinarily effective at his job. In 1942, he was one of the key participants at the Wannsee Conference, where the Nazis' Final Solution to the problem of European Jews was formulated. Eichmann was an essential and important figure in establishing the architectonics of what eventually became the Holocaust. He thought very carefully about how to efficiently establish channels of transportation between the peripheries of Europe and the centers of the concentration camps in Germany and Poland. After the war, he was arrested by American forces, and he managed to escape. In 1946, he fled to Argentina, and he lived in Argentina until 1960, when he was abducted by Mossad agents and taken back to Israel to stand trial for crimes against humanity. He was convicted on December 12, 1961, and in 1962, he was hanged for crimes against humanity. So, those are some brief autobiographical comments for the two figures in this text.

To now get into the text proper, I want to start by establishing the context of this piece. I want to comment here on what I call "the zeitgeist" of our moment in higher education. Broadly speaking, one of the trends we see in higher education is an emphasis on making sure we can quantify outcomes. The idea is that we show that an education is valuable by demonstrating that, for example, it translates into a vocation, by showing that students can acquire jobs, or by showing that they do well on tests. What we tend to emphasize is the quantification of outcomes. This is increasingly how we think about higher education, for better or worse. Probably for worse, but that's where we are. And so, I think that increasingly we talk about the value of an education, and even a liberal arts education, in terms of its practical value. I want to take a slightly different approach, a bit of a heterodox approach. I want to explore the hypothesis that perhaps at least one value of a liberal arts education is its impracticality. The value derives, at least in part, from the fact that it doesn't accomplish anything or that it accomplishes very little. I know that seems somewhat paradoxical, but hopefully I can make the case for this rather extravagant claim as we plow ahead.

I want to now move to the text of *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, which in many ways was the inspiration for my remarks here about the liberal arts. In Arendt's *The Life of the Mind*, she claims that it was precisely the Eichmann trial that prompted her to begin reflecting on the problem of thinking, and, more specifically, she says that the Eichmann trial prompted her to begin grappling with the connection between thinking and moral issues.<sup>4</sup> So what precisely is that connection that Arendt wanted to explore? Well, in *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, as she observes Eichmann's performance and his testimony in the trial, one of the things that she is struck by is what she refers to as Eichmann's "banality." It became apparent, at least to Arendt, that Eichmann was not an ideologue, that he was not committed to the core principles

of Nazism; he didn't have any significant moral investment in the ideology. Rather, Eichmann came across as a vacuous bureaucrat who simply attempted to achieve the ends of extermination as efficiently as possible. He didn't think about whether or not the ends that the Nazis were pursuing were moral ends, at least according to Arendt. Rather, he asked the question, how can we achieve the ends as efficiently as possible? What are the means that we can use to facilitate the mass extermination of European Jews?

There is a difference here for Arendt, a contrast in many ways between the figure of Eichmann, who is a representative of what she calls the "banality of evil," and our traditional way of conceptualizing evil. She says that this is in many ways how evil occurs in the modern era, where our societies are dominated by bureaucrats and technocrats. Increasingly, evil results from banality. It results from this failure to think and to reflect on whether or not our purposes or ends are moral. Here, Arendt contrasts Eichmann with any number of figures from literature, such as Iago in *Othello* and Milton's Satan. These are figures that very carefully calculate and plan out evil, and Arendt thinks that Eichmann is a departure from this traditional way of thinking about evil as the product of intention and planning. This is a wonderful quote from the *Life of the Mind* about Eichmann.

I was struck by a manifest shallowness in the doer that made it impossible to trace the uncontestable evil of his deeds to any deeper level of roots or motives. The deeds were monstrous, but the doer—at least the very effective one now on trial—was quite ordinary, commonplace, and neither demonic or monstrous.<sup>5</sup>

In short, then, Arendt regarded Eichmann as a commonplace bureaucrat and technocrat.

Now there's a very fine discussion of Eichmann in Neil Postman's excellent book *Technopoly*.<sup>6</sup> If you haven't read it, I can't recommend it highly enough. Postman, like Arendt, thinks that Eichmann is in many ways the paradigmatic example of the unreflective technocrat. But what is the technocrat? The technocrat is the figure who simply figures out how we can achieve a given set of ends most efficiently. The technocrat doesn't particularly worry about whether the ends are morally praiseworthy or whether the ends are good. The technocrat says, okay, we have ends; let's figure out how to achieve them. We want to exterminate six million Jews; let's figure out how to do it as efficiently as possible. I think that one of the things to note here, and certainly Postman does, is that we tend to have a very problematic interpretation of Nazism. There is a widespread belief that Nazism was an irrational doctrine. According to this interpretation, it represented a rejection of modernity and the Enlightenment, but I think the problem is much more complicated. And here my reading of Nazism tends to follow that of Adorno and Horkheimer in the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*.<sup>7</sup> They argue that actually if you look at how the Nazis achieved their ends, they were able to mobilize the full power of modernity, technology, and science to more efficiently carry out the project of mass extermination. It is very difficult to exterminate six million people in a relatively short span of time unless you have the industrial capacity that the Nazis did. It would have been

very difficult to facilitate the kinds of transportation necessary. So they were able to use these various aspects of modernity to carry out their ends more efficiently.

We've already talked a bit about one of Arendt's observations about Eichmann. She thinks that his actions were at least, in part, a result of thoughtlessness, just the failure to think. He failed to ask, is this morally justifiable? And this led her then to begin reflecting on the relationship between thinking and moral considerations. There is a set of questions that Arendt poses for herself. She does think that there is this connection between thoughtlessness and evil, but then she begins to wonder, could thinking perhaps prevent us from spiraling into the abyss of evil? She says, perhaps that's the case, too. This is the hypothesis that I want to explore a bit more here. Now, before we look at the problem of thinking, I very quickly want to review an objection. This is an objection I actually got at the liberal arts conference, and it's an objection that is raised fairly commonly in response to Arendt's piece. At the time of publication, as I said, it was extraordinarily controversial. Arendt made very provocative claims about the extent to which certain Jewish groups and Jewish leaders collaborated in the Holocaust. It was extraordinarily offensive to many Jews. But I think more recently, she's come under attack because there's been this line of thought that ultimately, she just gets Eichmann wrong. There are indeed very compelling reasons to think that she might have.<sup>8</sup> There's a quote that Jim's going to tell you about where Eichmann very clearly and explicitly announces his attachment to Nazism and very clearly affirms the worth of the ideology of Nazism. So there have been reasons to doubt Arendt's account. But my interest in *Eichmann in Jerusalem* really has little to do with whether or not her account is correct. In fact, I think that's actually the most uninteresting question to ask about *Eichmann in Jerusalem*. I think really the much more interesting question is, does it yield potentially valuable insights that allow us to understand the perils of thoughtlessness, the perils of irrationality, and the perils of technocracy? I think that's the more interesting part of her account, and she has very important things to say about that in *Eichmann in Jerusalem*.

So I want to begin talking here a bit about the distinction Arendt cultivates between knowing and thinking. And this is not an obvious distinction. She does use these terms in slightly technical ways, and I think we have to sketch this out to see what the connection potentially is between thinking and morality. I want to start here with the category of knowing. What precisely is knowing and what is knowledge for Arendt? Well, it has roughly three characteristics. First of all, knowledge is concerned with empirical questions. So if I say there is a table here in the front of the room, that is an empirical claim, and you can either verify it or falsify it. The sciences, especially the natural sciences, are the paradigmatic example of disciplines that are concerned with knowledge for Arendt. Secondly, knowledge is linked to what Kant refers to as "the understanding."<sup>9</sup> This is a bit technical, but here she's talking about Kant's theory of

mind. I won't say a lot about that. But the final thing I want to say is that it's a search for truth. So when we're engaged in the search for knowledge, we're attempting to discover the truth about the world.

Arendt contrasts this with what she calls thinking. Unlike knowledge, where we're looking for empirical answers, in the realm of thinking, we're dealing with problems of speculation. Is there teleology in the universe? Is the universe purposeful? Is there a god? Is there a meaning to life? What is the good life? If there is a good life, what would it mean to pursue the good life? What is character? Secondly, again drawing a contrast from Kant's epistemology, it's linked to the faculty of reason rather than the understanding. And finally, it's a search for meaning. Rather than a search for truth, rather than attempting to say what the world is, rather than attempting to describe and collate the contents of reality, it's concerned with the problem of meaning. How do we take up our existence? How do we interpret the great existential problems? How do we take up the problem of the good? So these are a very different set of questions than the ones dealt with by knowledge.

I thought I would give you here a quote from the *Life of the Mind* where she characterizes the thinking activity. As Arendt writes, "The thinking activity on the contrary leaves nothing so tangible behind, and the need to think can therefore never be stilled by the insights of 'wise men.'"<sup>10</sup> You can see here the contrast between knowledge and thinking. Knowledge is an attempt to produce empirical results; in the case of knowledge, we're trying to answer empirical questions. Thinking, on the other hand, poses questions which don't admit empirical answers. So when we pose problems such as, What is the meaning of life? Is there a God? Is there a purpose to the universe? What is the moral good? How can we pursue it?, these are not empirical questions, and in most cases, we can't get an empirical answer. Now, I contend, and I would presume that most of you would agree, that simply because we can't get empirical answers to these questions, it doesn't follow that we ought not to think about them. It doesn't follow that we ought not to reflect on them carefully. And we're going to see that Arendt makes that case compellingly.

Now we are left to wonder, if thinking is really empty in this particular way, if it leaves behind no tangible trace, what sort of impact can we expect it will have on morality and on conduct? Arendt's idea here, I think, is very interesting. The idea is that thinking interrupts any doing, any ordinary activities no matter what they happen to be. All thinking demands that we momentarily step back from the hustle and bustle of everyday life and reflect on our actions. So what Arendt is arguing here is that when we retreat into thinking, when we retreat into contemplation, what it forces us to do is to step back from the world of practice. For the most part, we're engaged in what I call a "relentless practicality." I think we all feel that viscerally. There's this insistence that we always achieve one more goal, or this insistence that we always do one more thing, that we always achieve one more empirical result. It just becomes relentless. What Arendt is saying here is that if we can step back from this relentless practicality, perhaps it opens up a

space in which thought can establish a kind of distance for us. And in so doing, perhaps it can stop us from acting immorally. It can deal with these metaphysical questions. It can deal with the problem of “the good” in ethics. It can subject accepted conventions to a withering critique. In addition, and here she invokes the great figure of Socrates, it can ask the question, is the unexamined life worth living? This is Socrates’s central question, which he poses in the *Apology*.<sup>11</sup> It’s the question that halts the jury, although it doesn’t halt them enough. But in any event, thinking poses this question: is the unexamined life worth living? And I think that we can now begin to see what Arendt is trying to get at here. She wants to argue that thinking, in so far as it carves out a space for reflective withdrawal, can permit us to step back from our everyday life. It can allow us to step back from this relentless practicality and ask, Is it the case that the ends that I’ve elected to pursue are good ends? Are they morally defensible?

At the end of my paper, I try to anticipate a number of objections, although Jim has raised a number of wonderful objections, as you’ll see in a moment. But there are a couple fairly obvious ones that I want to lay out here. The first concern we might have about Arendt’s account is that there’s a danger that this could lapse into a kind of corrosive nihilism. If we’re constantly withdrawn from the world, if we are constantly subjecting moral norms to a withering critique, isn’t there a danger to this? Isn’t this a slow path to nihilism? I think that this is a real danger, and I don’t want to minimize it. However, I do want to insist that we counterbalance that very real danger with another danger, and that’s the danger of thoughtlessness. So how can we establish a balance between the two? Not easy, but important to think about.

Another objection: what’s the guarantee? If we retreat into thinking and begin to wrestle with means and ends, how can we guarantee that this is going to prevent us from engaging in immoral activity? As I would assume that most of us have learned from painful experience, there are no guarantees in life. There is no guarantee that this is going to prevent us from collapsing into immoral activity, but again we have to remember the danger on the other side of the ledger, the danger that we will become the sort of automatons that are carrying out everyday tasks and just want to turn out numbers, just want to do our job as efficiently as we can no matter what the job is, no matter how immoral the job is. So granted, I think these are both real objections, and I don’t want to minimize them, but I think we have to recognize the dangers on the other side of them.

Now, what does all this have to do with the liberal arts? Here, we have to go back to some of my initial comments and remember that one of the things that I find sort of worrying about higher education is that we have this emphasis on practicality, on turning out empirical results, and on constant quantification. I think that increasingly we (and I will include myself here as a culprit) tend to justify the value of a liberal arts education by talking about what you can do with it. Can you find work with it? Is it going to help you to become a better critical thinker? Will it help you to become a better citizen? I will

confess that I think that a liberal arts education does all of those things. I think it does help you to become a better critical thinker. I think it can improve your marketability. It can make you a better participant in the populace, in democratic life. It can do all of those things, but I think that perhaps Arendt here gives us a different perspective. Maybe the kind of thinking promoted by a liberal arts education is valuable because it helps us to step back from the relentless practicality of everyday life in order to reflect on these grand speculative questions. Ultimately, perhaps its value is that it allows us to step back and think about what the good life is precisely.

Now, this question about the good life is the kind of question that can make people on both the political left and the political right uncomfortable. On the political right, there's a certain segment that would suggest we ought to leave questions of the moral good up to the market. Let the market sort it out. It's a question of individual preferences and the market will decide what the good is. On the left, there's a certain orientation that says there is no answer to the good life, and to pose this kind of question is just a form of elitism. Who are you to say what the good life is? And my response to these kinds of questions is simply that if we want to make a distinction between, for example, the behavior of Eichmann and the behavior of Martin Luther King, then we need moral criteria. If we want to critique a particular person for engaging in intolerant behavior, and if that's the reason why we reject the claim of elitism, then remember that presumably, we want to condemn intolerance. We think intolerance is an evil. And so I think that we ought not to reject this question of the good life too quickly. I think we need to think more carefully about it.

Ultimately then, what's the takeaway? Maybe the value of a liberal arts education is that it accomplishes nothing, or to put this paradoxically, its greatest utility is derived from what Arendt might call its profound uselessness. Now, as many of you probably know, philosophers like to draw very subtle distinctions and like to debate about linguistic minutiae. And so I hope you'll grant me a bit of latitude where I can let my hair down and play with language. I will say that there is certainly a measure of rhetoric here and an attempt to engage in provocation. I think it's a paradoxical formulation. One of the reasons I use this language is that I hope this will prompt you to think about it. And we'll see that Jim's going to take me to task for this. This is a fine place to stop, and I'll turn it over to Jim.

**James Roney:** Thank you, Wade, for your remarks and the essay on which they were based. You brilliantly accomplished the primary task of good scholarship by discovering a new relevance and a new depth in the thought of someone I had read and thought I fully understood, thereby renewing my interest in Arendt's work on both thinking and education. In my comments, I will address three aspects of your discussion: (1) Arendt's interpretation of Eichmann and the reactions to it you described; (2) the nature and possibility of thinking as a form of useful uselessness and how this paradoxical formulation can be clarified by some of her ideas on the nature of human life; and (3) how her writings on education

illuminate your application of her concept of thinking to the nature of the liberal arts, yielding a promising understanding of the purpose of liberal arts education.

Let's start with a quote I found this morning on the website of the Bard College Hannah Arendt Center: "There are no dangerous thoughts, thinking itself is dangerous. —Hannah Arendt."<sup>12</sup>

If you understand at the end of this session why Bard would have used this quote and how it relates to our talks, Wade and I will be really happy. Arendt seems to be saying that as long as thinking yields a product, a "thought," it is not dangerous. Thinking reduced to its products can be normalized, integrated into society, and, in our society, safely commodified. It can be measured, managed, paraphrased, and sold for its exchange value. However, to the extent that thinking is a process, it is dangerous, because it is not bounded by the existing social arrangements and does not contribute to their replication as a form of social reproduction. I hope that by the end of my remarks, this quote will mean something to us all, if it doesn't already.

#### ARENDT'S INTERPRETATION OF EICHMANN

Mark Lilia used the following quote to prove that Arendt has Eichmann wrong. It is his English translation of an interview with Eichmann done before the trial. You can see by the language in it that Eichmann seems to be a Nazi ideologue, not a dull, banal bureaucrat.

The cautious bureaucrat, yeah, that was me.... But joined to this cautious bureaucrat was a fanatical fighter for the freedom of the *Blut* I descend from.... What's good for my *Volk* is for me a holy command and holy law.... I must honestly tell you that had we...killed 10.3 million Jews I would be satisfied and would say, good, we've exterminated the enemy.... We would have completed the task for our *Blut* and our *Volk* and the freedom of nations had we exterminated the most cunning people in the world.... I'm also to blame that...the idea of a real, total elimination could not be fulfilled.... I was an inadequate man put in a position where, really, I could have and should have done more.<sup>13</sup>

When I look at that quote as someone trained in cultural interpretation, I find it more interesting as a confessional text than as a simple proof that Eichmann was an ideologue for three reasons. First, it seems to me that Eichmann is in a dialogue both with himself and with what he's heard other people say about him. Notice, "The cautious bureaucrat, yeah, that was me." One senses either self-doubt or a reply to criticisms uttered by others before he asserts his identity, affirming his status as a "fanatical fighter." Second, the words left in German, *Blut* and *Volk*, reveal something about our attempts to make sense of the Holocaust and our relationship to it. We want to make the Holocaust strange; we want to make it an alien event carried out by Nazis who were part of a foreign narrative of organic unity with soil and blood that we are somehow beyond. In this way, we inoculate ourselves against the evil and its implications for our own nature and for the corruptibility of our own institutions. It's worth taking a little time to perform a thought experiment by imagining how our reactions would differ if we spoke not of "blood and nation"



but of “gene pool” or “human enhancement,” including references to the eugenics movement to which, of course, the Nazi movement was related in some ways. Third, this quote might actually be a confession. In one of her essays on freedom, Arendt talks about Saint Augustine’s *Confessions* as the place where European culture discovers the notion of freedom as the freedom of the self alone with God, a freedom which is lost as you interact with the social world and can only be regained by confessing the sins that both cause and are caused by this original alienation from God - the only source of truth.<sup>14</sup> She points out that Christian confession often takes the form of a will admitting its own insufficiency.<sup>15</sup> We can paraphrase Eichmann’s remarks: “The best part of me willed the Holocaust, but I was a failure. I was weak, my lord. I did not quite live up to my willed demands for who I wanted to be.” I see a conflicted individual in this quote, one who wishes to have the significance of a fanatic but fears, or realizes, he might be merely a banal bureaucrat. So now we have three interpretations of Eichmann already, mine lacking in the historical research I probably should give it.

The different interpretations could be summarized as three possible claims Wade might be making about the significance of Arendt’s portrayal of Eichmann:

Claim One: Eichmann’s banality proves the need for useless thinking.

Claim Two: Eichmann’s banality can be usefully interpreted as an example of the dangers of not thinking, and this interpretation allows us to understand the dangers of instrumental or technocratic thinking and the value of useless thinking.

Claim Three: Eichmann’s banal combination of technocratic skill and ideological commitment suggests the need for useless thinking as a crucial part of education for a good life.

I am going to use these three related claims to ask Wade exactly what he is claiming. I don’t think Wade is making the first claim, and if he is, it’s just silly: Eichmann does not prove the need for useless thinking. I don’t think we have to do much talking about the nature of proof to show that’s just not true. On the other hand, I think that the second claim is close to what I hear in Wade’s essay. The case for Eichmann can be usefully interpreted as demonstrating the dangers of not thinking. This interpretation allows us to understand the dangers of instrumental or technocratic thinking and the value of useless thinking. I don’t know whether Wade will accept that way of phrasing his argument, but I think it is implied by his argument that philosophy directed toward the good life helps us avoid unthinking evil. I then took the liberty of modifying the second claim to create the third claim based on the way I read the quote above to suggest Eichmann might actually have had a combination of technocratic skill and ideological commitment. It seems to me both that such an interpretation is quite plausible and that it could also strengthen your argument for profoundly useless thinking. Eichmann was trained as a bureaucrat. He had a lot of administrative skills; he also had a set of sentences that made up his moral values. If he had a task, then he could say right away: *Blut, Volk*, institutional objectives, proper procedures, available

technical means. He didn't have to engage in any thinking about what it all meant or justify his purposes to himself or others. He merely had to find the best practical, instrumental solutions to the tasks he had been given. He engaged in no ethical reflection. He was, in that sense, a thoroughly socialized individual who could work in the world productively while advancing his own career. Perhaps Arendt was right to call this the banality of evil. I, like you and Arendt, find it a frightening image of a man with considerable power to affect the lives of others.

Since my background is in the methodology of scholarship, I can't help asking some methodological questions about interpreting historical figures. What is a historical narrative, and what happens when we use the Nazis as examples? It seems to me there's a real question here. When a philosopher, whether it's Roberts or Arendt, interprets the figure of Eichmann and uses him in an argument, it's a kind of thought experiment. It is an act of imagination and reasoning that makes use of an imagined Eichmann. And we can ask, what are the criteria by which we should judge that use? Is it plausibility? Is it the case that even if Eichmann wasn't like Arendt's depiction of him, it's plausible to believe a lot of people were? Is such a depiction then best judged by aesthetic criteria? Does it arrest my attention? Does it make me follow the discussion with heightened attention? Does it yield some sort of metaphysical awareness of life? Is it a good aesthetic construct? Is it rich in meaning? Does it just spawn more and more thought? Roney writes a paper on Roberts who wrote a paper on Arendt who wrote a study of Eichmann, and the whole process keeps going; in which case, do we really care about the historical accuracy? Or must any such depiction be judged as historically real by the criteria of historical investigation? If we are after historical reality, I immediately ask: Can you really know the meaning of anyone else's actions? Do we really even know the meaning of our own actions, and is the purpose of historical research to reach an endpoint? Is it useful thinking which wants to yield the best interpretation of a figure, or is historical research itself a kind of a useless thinking that aspires to be profoundly useless in that it wants to generate lots of interpretations and lots of meanings? In Arendt's terms, as described by Roberts, do our remarks represent not historical knowledge but historical meaning?

Such resonant meanings can be seen in the way Arendt and Roberts compare Eichmann with other figures. It would be really useful to compare him with Iago, whom I teach as one of the quintessentially modern individuals: I have my preferences; I have my goals; I use my techniques; if I'm a real man, I will make everyone else do what I want. Iago succeeds wonderfully until they all die together. The figure of Satan in Milton and the Romantic poets shows how paradoxical, or even pathetic, Eichmann's claims to be a fanatical fighter seem. An even better comparison might be with Stefan Oblonsky, who comes from Tolstoy's novel *Anna Karenina*. Oblonsky is a finely educated, liberal individual who follows all the social rules.<sup>16</sup> If there had been social assessment rubrics, he would have scored ten plus in every category. By the time you are done with the novel, you think: you evil bastard.

Oblonsky's banal self-assurance wrecks the lives of the women around him. In some ways, I think he's even better than Eichmann as an example of the moral peril of non-thinking. I do wish Wade had not skipped over the figure of Martin Heidegger, who could be a counter-example against the value of thinking. Heidegger was thirty-five years old and a philosophy professor when he had a love affair with a nineteen-year-old Hannah Arendt who, as a woman, was told by him casually that she shouldn't pursue a philosophy career; that's for men. She was a German Jew; he turned around and joined the Nazi party. He's another figure we could talk about, and I would argue that he has to be somewhere in the background of Arendt's interpretation of Nazism and the banal evil of official functionaries who unthinkingly achieve all the mission goals of the institutions in which they work. When the institution's goals are immoral, they have no means of resisting or seriously questioning them.

The Nazis are dangerous to use in contemporary discussion. Chronocentrism is a critical problem in cultural study of all kinds. It is impossible to recapture what Mikhail Bakhtin called the "eventness of the event" (событийность события).<sup>17</sup> In 2014 we know what happened in the Nazi period and largely share a common appraisal of their actions. We can, therefore, use them as a piece of political rhetoric in our own debates. The Nazis are a wonderful card to play to discredit an opposing narrative because everyone knows the Nazis were bad. But Arendt writes of herself as living in a time between past and present, a time when the pressure of the past is heavy upon you, and the pressure of the future is pushing at you.<sup>18</sup> It's important to remember that the Nazis were an open event for her. They were the central event of her personal history and of European history, not past evidence for the validity of contemporary positions. As you think about Arendt's writing and her concepts, it's important to realize that she is writing about a still-not-articulated presence in the world, not about an example that everyone knows is bad.

#### USEFUL USELESSNESS AND ARENDT'S THOUGHT ON HUMAN EXISTENCE

There's a significant contradiction in the middle of Wade's talk, and he knows about it. He was actually going to take it out but he decided to leave it in so I had something to say. He's a really nice guy. I want to use his language to describe that contradiction because before I met him, I didn't know the word "consequentialist." Wade criticizes Martha Nussbaum's consequentialist justification of the liberal arts (humanities) while himself offering a consequentialist justification for thinking. Let me explain.

Nussbaum says the humanities and the liberal arts make you better citizens,<sup>19</sup> and Wade says one should not use such a justification for the liberal arts, since it is really based on outcomes and therefore denies the inherent value of profoundly useless thinking. But then, Wade says that profoundly useless thinking can keep us from being Eichmann. In other words, we need the profound uselessness of a liberal arts education (thinking) because it has the practical consequence of making us better people. To me that

is a contradiction. When a really smart person has a contradiction like that, people in my field get all excited because you know that's where the action is. We know it's not a case of bad thinking, but of being willing to confront the issues. Nevertheless one has to ask whether Wade's move introduces another kind of purpose for thinking, a higher order purpose of stopping to consider the value of the ends we are pursuing in our practical lives? Is this really useless, or is it rather an appeal to higher purposes and long-term effects? This raises some general questions we don't have time to talk about in any detail. Can thought really be useless? Is useless thought really a central part of a liberal arts education? Is it only word play to say the useless can be useful? I have an additional comment on this contradiction and a list of other such questions at the end of my talk.

In order to address these questions and propose a partial answer to them that Wade should accept, I need to do a little bit of exposition to remind us of the "eventness" of Arendt's words. We need to ask, why was she using them, and what was the worldview behind this kind of opposition? Ultimately, I'm going to suggest that this useless thinking can be best understood as part of a larger view of a liberal arts education that agrees with the views of Arendt and Roberts while slightly modifying those views without, I hope, distorting them.

To understand a lot of what Arendt is saying, one has to understand her view of human existence.<sup>20</sup> Arendt argues that what is human, what is uniquely human, is that we are born into both a biological life and a human world. As biological creatures, we share the need with everyone else to sustain our bodies through labor. I think that means simply that we have to extract energy from the material world, both organic and inorganic, in order to survive. She argues the biological realm is the realm of necessity, the realm of natural and economic laws. She develops this model from her work on ancient Greek life. For the Greeks that realm is the fundamentally unfree realm of household coercion. It's a realm in which those who know the laws administer those who do not know the laws. It's the realm of the later Roman *dominus*, the head of the household, slavery, paternalism, and domination. In the classical world this realm of unfreedom made it possible for free citizens (male, of course) to go out and create the beauties of Athenian Greece. She argues that the biological aspect of life is still with us in the shape of economic and technical necessity and the instrumental thought which supports it. The category of the immediately useful and quantifiable applies in this realm or in a social world construed according to its principles. Arendt and Roberts view the application of this realm and its rules to all human activity as a categorical error that leads to immoral acts and a false understanding of what it means to be human.

The realm of biological necessity is juxtaposed to the human world, which is best exemplified by the free political realm of the Greek *polis* in which individuals engage in free political activity and agree to be governed by norms of persuasion. We cannot coerce other people to do things; we have, instead, to persuade them. They have to give assent; it is not a world of biological necessity. Arendt argues that this

realm involves the goal-oriented fabrication of products, including words, arguments, and deeds, which are expressed in both actions and speech. For her the classical purpose of historical writing was to identify the deeds which had attained sufficient glory, or excellence, to deserve to last beyond our mortal life span. When our biological life ends, we live on in the human world by the way history has recorded our deeds. This involves not only academic history but also all forms of human memory, including stories and songs such as the Homeric epics. We all create products, deeds, actions, works, and words, which are then either sustained by other people or perish.

Arendt believed that changes in the modern world have made the classical worldview inaccessible to us in its original form. Why did she think that? In the modern world, we have shifted the goal of human activity from the contemplation of excellence through the pursuit of inherent purpose to doing through acting in the material world. Wade called that change the unexamined dominance of quantified thought. We are now socialized to believe that quantifiable doing is the purpose of life. This modern reversal of contemplation and doing has both made our tradition beyond our comprehension and also made any return to the free, persuasive world of Greek politics impossible. The human world, on which that politics depended, has been subsumed under the laws of biological and social necessity as the contemporary life world—governed by “necessary” natural laws, economic laws, social regulations, institutional standards, and biological fact—has expanded to incorporate the world of free political activity. Arendt’s view of free political activity as characteristic of the human world supports Wade’s claim that “relentless practicality” is threatening both education and a fuller sense of human capabilities. The biological, conceived as the statistically given, and the social, shaped by the top-down application of universal methods for human organization, are devouring the human and the moral freedom and individual responsibility on which the human rests.

If we remember the way in which Roberts and Arendt deal with Eichmann, we can see how this all comes together. We can’t recapture the free political life of the Greek *polis*, because in the modern world, that world has been subsumed under the laws of biological and social necessity. As a result, our world today is governed by instrumental thinking. That’s what Roberts has warned us about. We have a world governed by things which can be quantified, measured, and judged by and for their instrumental value. Social roles have become quasi-transcendent standards that operate by coercion rather than persuasion and allow for no space outside of themselves.

I would like to close this part of my remarks with a suggestion Wade would probably agree with: maybe the value of useless thinking is that it gives you space and time (which might open or be opened either within or outside of that necessary realm) that allow you to think and imagine without being governed by these laws of necessity and coercion. That’s how I understand and support Wade’s claim that profoundly useless thinking is actually a protest against the state of the modern world. It potentially

allows you to be unwilling to participate, an act of will and thought of which Eichmann was not capable. I hope that's a fair way to read Wade's claim that profoundly useless thinking, in the sense of not being goal-oriented, might be useful and that a liberal arts education might be the most useful education of all and the most essential for our society if we wish to imagine alternative futures or make moral judgments about our present. I also suspect Martha Nussbaum would agree with him.

## ARENDT'S THOUGHT ON EDUCATION

The following quote from Arendt's article on education reveals how Wade's comments on useless thinking and the liberal arts, Arendt's work on human existence as combining biological life and the human world, and the few tweaks I have made can combine to provide an appealing understanding of the nature and value of liberal arts education.

Education is the point at which we decide whether we love the world enough to assume responsibility for it and by the same token save it from that ruin which, except for renewal, except for the coming of the new and young, would be inevitable. And education, too, is where we decide whether we love our children enough not to expel them from our world and leave them to their own devices, nor to strike from their hands their chance of undertaking something new, something unforeseen by us, but to prepare them in advance for the task of renewing a common world.<sup>21</sup>

I love this quote. Arendt begins by saying, "Education is the point at which we decide whether we love the world enough to assume responsibility for it." I think she's referring here to the human world we discussed above. According to her, education is where adults have to ask themselves whether we love the human world we have created enough to take responsibility for its existence, to share with young people its characteristics, good and bad, to take on the risk of teaching something that they might not want to learn, of talking about mistakes that we might not want to admit, of revealing uncertainties we might prefer to hide from developing minds, of not denying the possibility of choices which might change or even abolish that to which we are accustomed and hold dear. And if we don't take that risk, she says, our human world inevitably dies. What could she mean by this? What is the connection between love and responsibility that forces us to take responsibility for that which we love? Remember our discussion of the two dimensions of human existence and of the role of history as how we immortalize those deeds which are worthy of memory in story. If the stories are not retold, then we, as the actors in them, and the values we hold will die a second death in the human world that matches the inevitable physical death of biological organisms. We cannot escape from our birth and death (the fatality of our existence)- not into Platonic absolutes, not into our self-verified personal preferences, and not into biological or social laws that validate instrumental thought processes. Perhaps, this is why, as Wade noted, profoundly useless thought tends toward death or at least toward a contemplation of human limits (finitude) and the pluralistic meanings of human actions. I would only add that pluralism requires not only death and fate but also birth and possibility.

The reason for that, and this is supported by Arendt's view of humanity, is that we are all born and we all die. Every human life has its twin poles of birth and death. We could say that human life is characterized by its natality, the quality of entering the physical world by being born, and its mortality, the quality of leaving that world by dying.<sup>22</sup> Everything that we know is going to die with us unless the young life that is constantly being born decides to sustain it. The only way each generation's values and deeds will continue to exist in the human world is if some young person takes them over, memorializes, and renews them. However, renewal means change. In order to grow into adults, young people have to create their own sense of things, inevitably changing what they renew. So you have to be willing to allow the young to have the freedom to change what you're trying to teach them. The rules, I would argue, of the regimented, standardized, evidence-based, quantified biological and social world do not apply to education. If Arendt is right, there is an awe-inspiring paradox at the center of education. If the adults write up and enforce a perfect set of rules and procedures for the young to follow, the young cannot grow up to renew the human world. And if the young cannot grow up to renew the world, that world will die along with the adults who thought they were maintaining it. Education will fail.

It is worth repeating Arendt's argument here. We are mortal beings in two senses: as biological beings, we have mortal bodies because of the biological laws of matter (entropy); as free beings, the human world that we create is also mortal because the freedom of the young means they must choose whether to maintain it and what form to give it. It is not too much to say that natality and mortality require each other; those who are coming into being and those who are passing away depend on each other. Adults need young people if their word is going to survive their own death, and young people need adults to mentor their way into the world. That is what makes education a really funny and infinitely exciting place. A liberal arts college must be an unusual space, because it's both a space in which the young have to be protected from the world, because that world will instrumentalize them and turn them into working Eichmanns (ignoring my own warning about not using the Nazis), and, at the same time, it is also a space in which the world has to be protected from the young, because they can destroy it either by ignoring it or by changing it so much that it no longer has any resemblance to what it once was.

The second half of Arendt's quote talks about saving the world by loving our children enough to allow them to be born by giving them the disconcerting power to change our world. This means empowering them to develop their own answers to the fundamental questions beneath the surface rules of our society or even to reject those questions entirely. If Arendt is right, education requires a combination of courage and love if it is to realize the potential inherent in the reality of the birth and death that surrounds each generation. Do we want to let young people into our debates? Do we want to admit that our debates are debates or just present them as facts, universals, or verified truths? Do we love the young enough to take the risk of allowing them to throw away everything we believe in by sharing with them the

agency to change our beliefs? Arendt is arguing that only a space that is open to that give-and-take process of continuous disruption can allow education to keep going and provide us with any chance that our common human world will continue to exist. Therefore, education must be a useless sabbatical, a space set slightly askew from the demands of the life it engages, a sabbatical from the relentless practicality of the modern world. If so, a liberal arts education remains the quintessential form of education, the one that realizes, even in all its daily failings, the *telos* of education itself as the optimistic bridge between natality and mortality.

## BEYOND USELESSNESS

If I can beg a little more of your patience, I would like to make two final points with which Wade would probably agree. First, I think that if you look at Arendt's entire writings, and you think about what it would take to maintain both our biological life and the human world, profoundly useless thinking is not enough. Since biological and social processes are very real aspects of human existence, we need more to live well, to flourish. If we're really going to survive as biological beings, don't we also need useful thought about the way in which the biological world works? If we have to survive as social beings, with social laws that are necessary to our current interactions, don't we have to know about those social laws? I think if you consider Arendt's thought as a whole, the rest of this education becomes really important. For this reason, a liberal arts education requires a serious engagement with various disciplines and fields of inquiry as well as practical engagement with the world around us. If I had more time, I might argue that useful and useless thought work best when they mutually enrich each other, and each student has a serious encounter with each of them. Maybe, the dichotomy between them would even begin to seem exaggerated and harmful. Action in the common human world, including historical and ethical reflection on how we are free to originate processes, but not to control them, is essential if we are to consider how our moral choices affect our goal-directed actions in the biological and human worlds. This will only become even more true as our technology offers us increasing capability to modify our own and other species' biology and seemingly change the workings of the natural world itself.

Second, my last comment suggests the need for sustained historical and ethical reflection on action in the common human world and the biological world on which it depends, a world which is, in turn, increasingly shaped by our human values and the actions they justify. This raises the questions of whether we have moral obligations to sustain the natural and the human worlds and of how we justify our choices about what to sustain and what to change. This is an issue we rarely talk about at Juniata because liberalism is very uncomfortable with questions of value, since liberals' commendable emphasis on equality and tolerance makes it hard for them to speak about the purpose of life. Wade raised this point by warning about our aversion to taking any stand on the good life and our related preference for teaching



the process or skill of instrumental thought, or critical thinking, which runs the risk of becoming a form of nihilism or relativism that could not withstand the contemporary economic and political power of a quantified status quo.

How then do we respond to the challenge implicit in Arendt's reference to the role of culture and taste in deciding what aspects of the human world are worthy of being renewed? She argues that in the modern world tradition and authority, as the classical world knew them, have disappeared.<sup>23</sup> She follows many Europeans in assuming culture could step in and fill the void in the human world left by the now absent tradition and authority. She also understands that would require an understanding of culture that is very different from the contemporary American sense of culture as any meaningful behavior done by any identified group of people or anything that sells in the marketplace of mass culture. It is not certain her understanding of culture can survive in a world without authority, tradition, or a commitment to some notion of the good and beautiful. She points out that culture, as a word and concept, was unknown to the Greeks, and that for the Romans, it was originally related to agriculture. There is a nice little metaphor in this observation: agriculture is about knowing the details of the natural world well enough to cultivate nature into a garden; in effect, culture is a means of getting life-sustaining things out of the natural world. She further argues that when Cicero talks about *humanitas* in his writings, he is using culture to describe the ability to cultivate the human world through education. As our discussion of the inevitability of birth and death suggests, such cultivation is necessary if the human world is to survive. Cicero believed this requires taste: the ability to discern what's worth preserving and preserve it. This is not easy, and it is not an ability or an aspect of character valued by an instrumental world. Remember, if we stop teaching what is worth preserving, it dies. But the young are only going to want to learn it if we let them change it, and they might pick things we do not consider worth preserving to preserve or preserve them in a form that seems degrading to us. It requires a subtlety that we could call taste or the art of teaching to deal with this. For liberal arts teaching to thrive, both teachers and students (alternatively, readers, critics, writers or even college professors and administrators) have to be willing to say: I can't really understand what you are saying, but since you are talking about something that seems like it might be worth talking about, that's okay with me; help me understand what you mean. I really want to ask Wade whether he would accept this idea of culture, thinking, and the liberal arts. If so, then useless thinking might pursue meaning as endless interpretation of the excellent that changes and renews both the interpreter and the interpreted with every act of interpretation. Education would become an endless debate about what's worth studying, what's worth reading, and what meanings and purposes we can find in what we read, think, and do in an infinite process that is its own goal. It would be, therefore, useless in the sense of not being justified by any other, higher purpose. I am not sure whether I have just resolved Wade's contradiction or merely restated it in other words.

Since I am now completely out of time, I can only list some other questions Wade's provocative piece raised for me:

- Should profoundly useless thinking be the *telos* of the liberal arts or one essential part of a larger educational process that combines the search for meaning with the study of natural and social laws, action in the world, ethical and epistemological reflection, and the acquisition of culture and taste?
- If philosophy began in wonder, does profound uselessness represent another form of wonder?
- Is useless thinking a form of speculation on the good life, or does it resemble the liberal aversion to taking any stand on the good life by emphasizing the process or skill of thinking, albeit in a new form?
- Given Wade's warnings about the risk of nihilism and relativism, does even useless thinking have to link itself to a version of the good life? If it does, does it run the risk of becoming useful?

Wade and I really hope our remarks could become the start of a sustained conversation about the nature of the liberal arts or the purposes of education and life, and we would love to respond to your questions either now or at a later time. Feel free to contact us.

## NOTES

1. Thanks very much to Colleen Wall and Jim Tuten, who patiently transcribed our comments. Our remarks were delivered without a written text and we have decided to retain the extemporaneous qualities of our lecture, with very slight modifications for purposes of clarity.
2. Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. Joan Stambaugh (Albany: SUNY Press, 1996).
3. Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (USA: Viking Press, 1963).
4. Hannah Arendt, *The Life of the Mind*. Vol. 1. (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1978), p. 3.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 4.
6. Neil Postman, *Technopoly: The Surrender of Culture to Technology* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1992), pp. 86-88.
7. Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, trans. John Cumming (New York: Continuum, 1996).
8. For a general discussion of criticisms relating to the historical accuracy of Arendt's claims, see Seyla Benhabib, *The Reluctant Modernism of Hannah Arendt* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2000), pp. 175-185.
9. For his discussion of understanding, see Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. Paul Guyer and Allen Wood (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), pp. 201-337.
10. Arendt, *Life of the Mind*, Vol. 1, p. 62.
11. Plato, *Apology*, in John M. Cooper, ed., *Plato: Complete Works* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1997), p. 33.
12. The Hannah Arendt Center for Politics and Humanities at Bard College.  
<http://www.bard.edu/hannaharendtcenter/>.

13. Mark Lilia, "Arendt & Eichmann: The New Truth," *The New York Review of Books*. Issue 21 November 2013. <http://www.nybooks.com/articles/archives/2013/nov/21/arendt-eichmann-new-truth/>.
14. For purposes of convenience, I based my remarks largely on essays found in an easily accessible collection: Hannah Arendt, *Between Past and Future: Eight Essays in Political Thought*, 1961 with additional material 1968 (New York: Penguin, 1993). She addresses this topic in her essay "What Is Freedom?" in Arendt, *Between Past and Future*, pp. 143-171.
15. This insufficiency is related to Augustinian and later Christian ideas of original sin and life as a pilgrimage in search of God.
16. Leo Tolstoy, *Anna Karenina* (New York: Random House, 1965).
17. For an account of Bakhtin's ideas on this and other topics, see Gary Saul Morson & Caryl Emerson, *Mikhail Bakhtin: Creation of a Prosaics* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1990).
18. Hannah Arendt, "Preface: The Gap between Past and Future" in Arendt, *Between Past and Future*, pp. 3-15.
19. Martha Nussbaum, *Not For Profit: Why Democracy Needs the Humanities (Public Square)* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010).
20. Hannah Arendt, "Tradition and the Modern Age" and "The Concept of History: Ancient and Modern" in Arendt, *Between Past and Future*, pp. 17-90.
21. Hannah Arendt, "The Crisis in Education" in Arendt, *Between Past and Future*, p. 196.
22. I would like to thank Robert Wagoner, Professor Emeritus of Philosophy at Juniata College, whose insightful comments after our talk made me aware of the importance of natality in Arendt's thought and how it was an implied refutation of Heidegger's emphasis on "being towards death." I was not fully aware of this aspect of her thought (and mine) until my conversation with him.
23. See Hannah Arendt's essays "What Is Authority" and "The Crisis in Culture: Its Social and Its Political Significance" in Arendt, *Between Past and Future*, pp. 91-141, 197-226.