

Hannah Arendt

Thinking in Difficult Times

12. Thinking Without A Banister





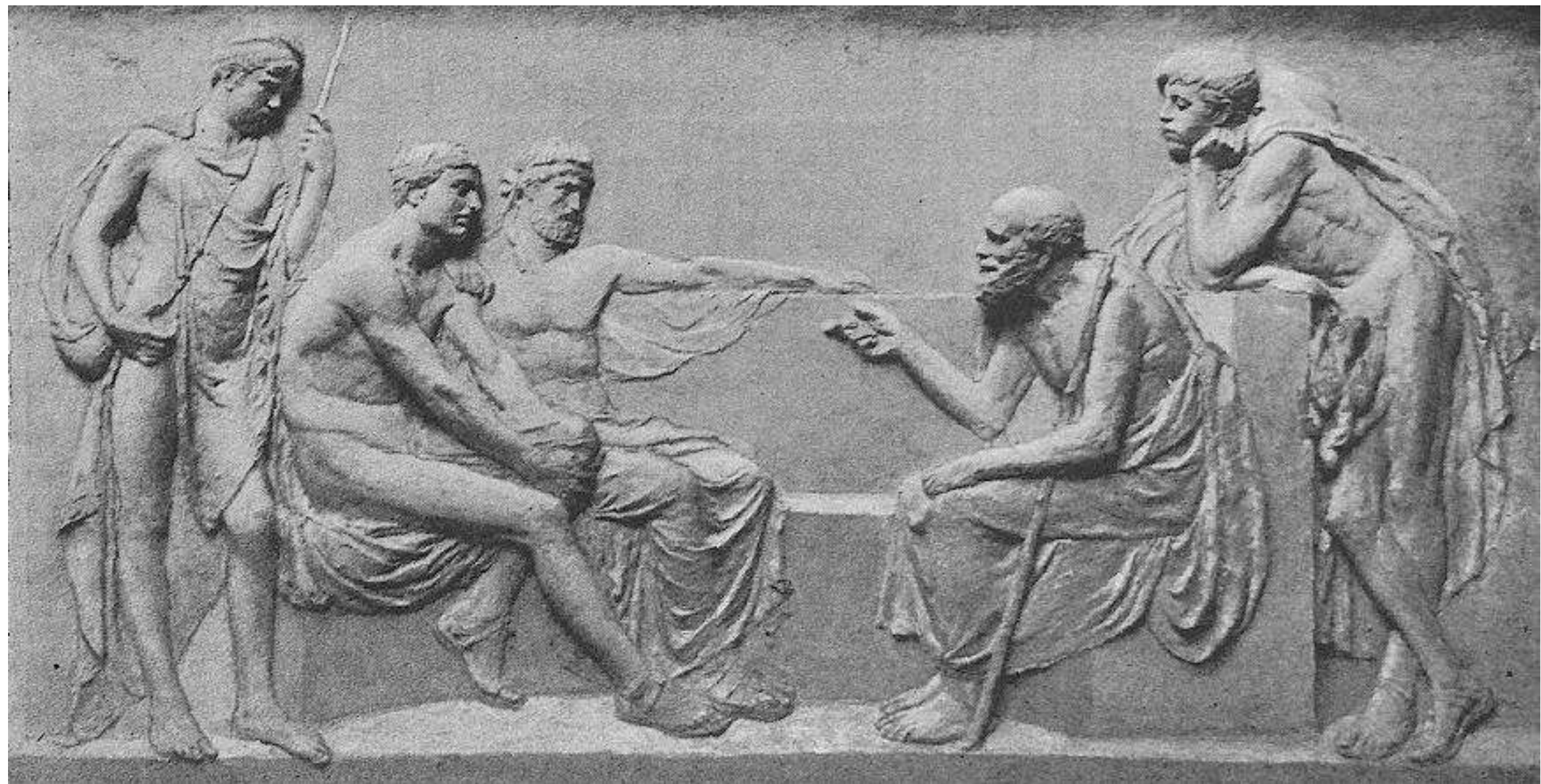
Agenda

- The power of thought
- Thinking vs knowing
- Kant's enlarged mentality
- Between past and future



‘It was this absence of thinking – which is so ordinary an experience in our everyday life, where we have hardly the time, let alone the inclination, to *stop* and think – that awakened my interest. ... Might the problem of good and evil, our faculty for telling right from wrong, be connected with our faculty of thought?

... Could the activity of thinking as such ... be among the conditions that make men abstain from evil-doing or even actually “condition” them against it?’



‘By posing the unanswerable questions of meaning, men establish themselves as question-asking beings. Behind all the cognitive questions for which men find answers, there lurk the unanswerable ones that seem entirely idle and have always been denounced as such. It is more likely that men, if they were ever to lose the appetite for meaning we call thinking and cease to ask unanswerable questions, would lose not only the ability to produce those thought-things that we call works of art but also the capacity to ask all the answerable questions upon which every civilization is founded.’

‘While our thirst for knowledge may be unquenchable because of the immensity of the unknown, the activity itself leaves behind a growing treasure of knowledge that is retained and kept in store by every civilization as part and parcel of its world.’ (LM I. p. 62)



'Full fathom five thy father
lies,
Of his bones are coral
made,
Those are pearls that were
his eyes.
Nothing of him that doth
fade
But doth suffer a sea
change
Into something rich and
strange.'

Shakespeare, *The Tempest*

The Life of the Mind (1975)

- Arendt's last work, incomplete at her death, was a three-volume study of what it means to think
- Building on a lifetime's work, she suggests that an absence of thinking can be associated with evil, and how thinking might be protected
- Two starting points: Eichmann's thoughtlessness, and a discomfort with the professionalisation of thought by contemplative philosophy
- While the history of metaphysics is strewn with daydreams and fallacies, the attempts of past thinkers can offer a valuable contribution to what thinking is... provided we separate it from knowledge



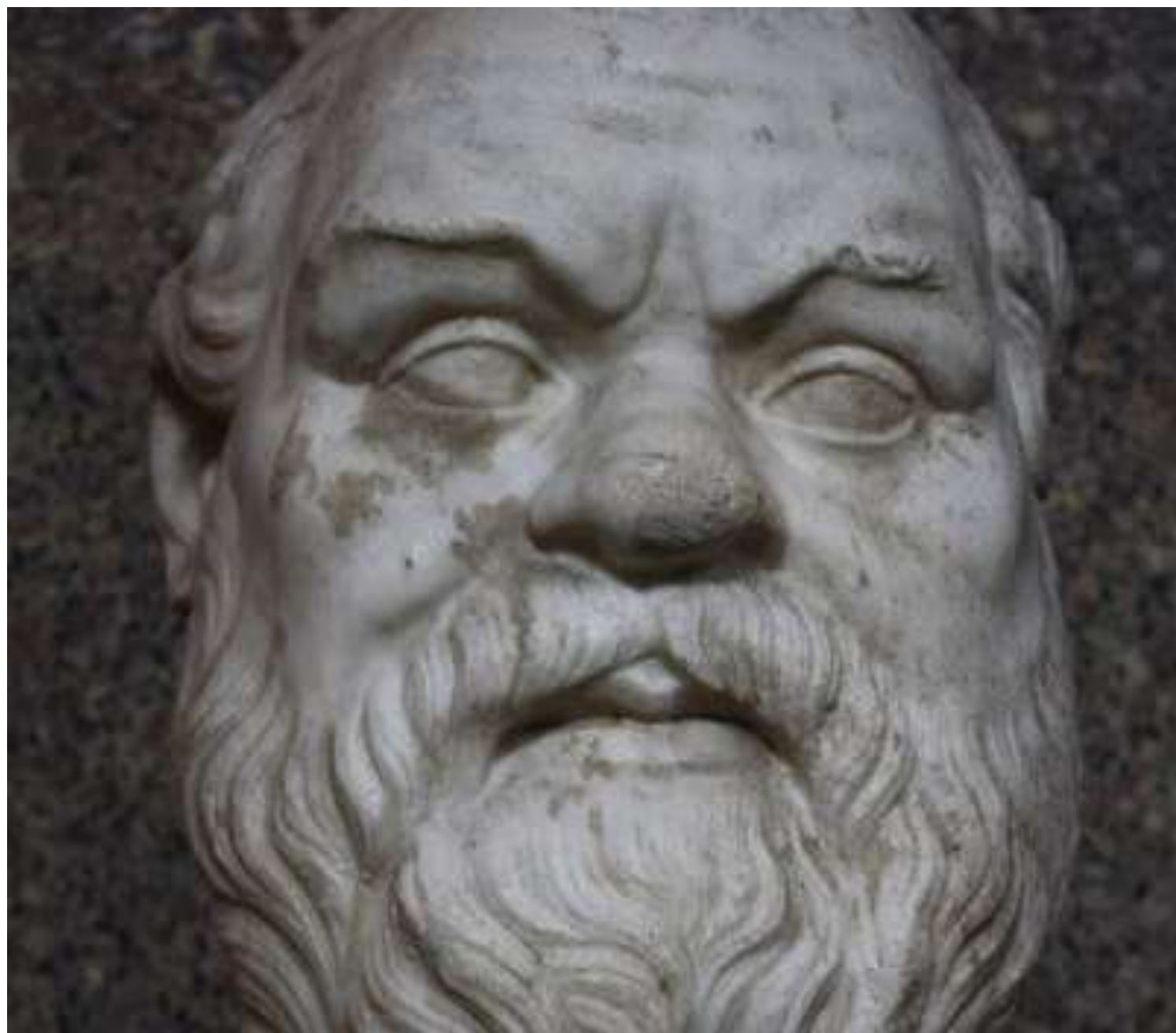
Over to you

In groups, decide on a question and discuss:

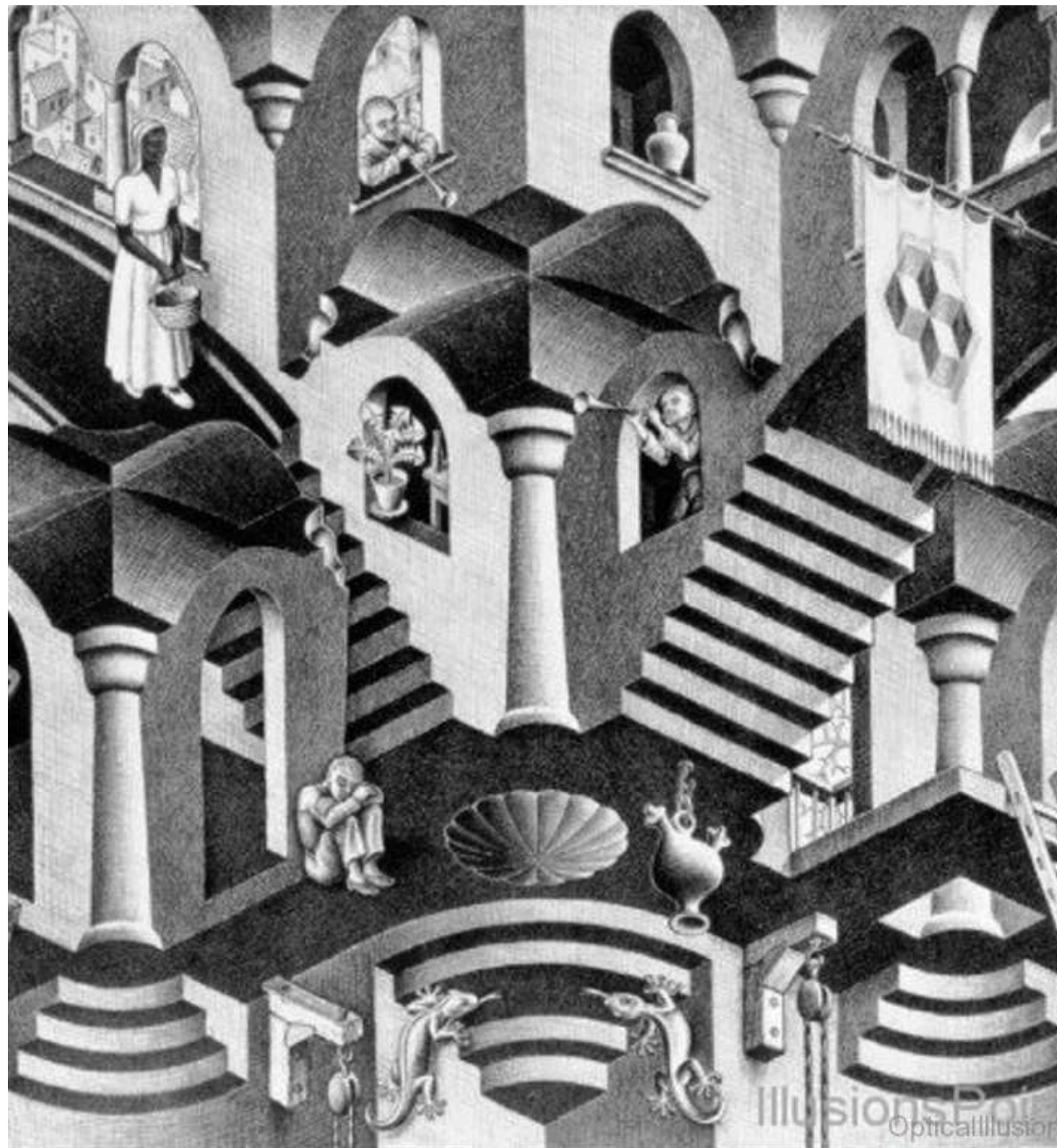
1. Arendt makes a distinction after Kant between two modes of thinking, 'reason' and 'intellect' (14-15). What is the difference, and why is it significant?
2. In her Lectures on Kant, Arendt makes the case for cultivating an 'enlarged mentality' (42-3)? What does she mean by this, and why is it of such importance for the development of thinking?

Thinking is not knowing, but searching for meaning

- *'The need of reason is not inspired by the quest for truth but by the quest for meaning. And truth and meaning are not the same. The basic fallacy, taking precedence over all specific metaphysical fallacies, is to interpret meaning on the model of truth.'* (15)
- 'Thinking is the faculty by which we ask unanswerable questions, but questions that we can not help asking. It is the faculty by which we seek to understand the meaning of whatever we encounter. And in the quest for meaning there is (and can be no) finality.' (Bernstein)

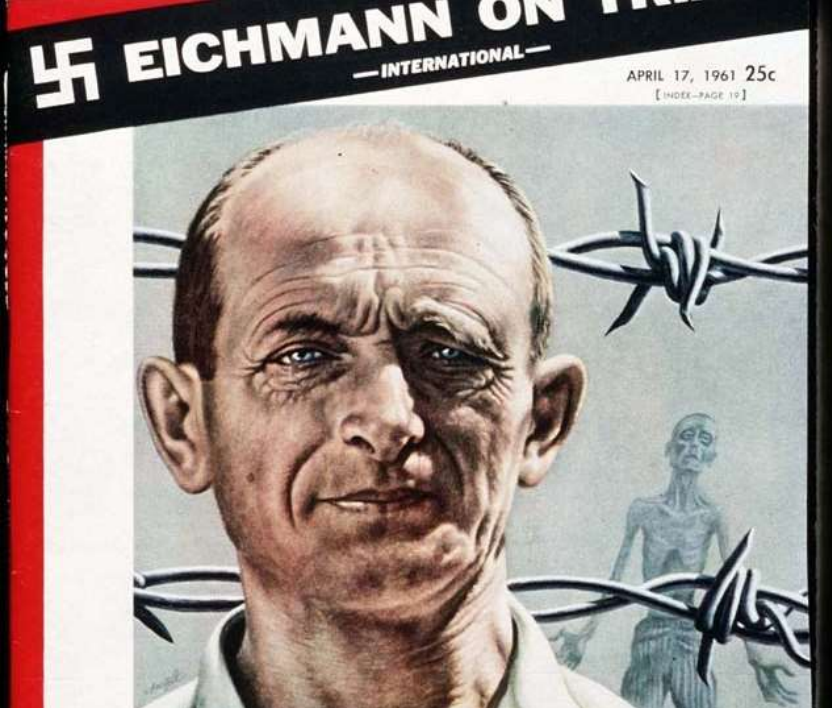


- 'To think critically applies not only to doctrines and concepts one receives from others, to the prejudices and traditions one inherits; it is precisely by applying critical standards to one's own thought that one learns the art of critical thought. And this application one cannot learn without publicity, without the testing that arises from contact with other people's thinking.'
- 'Critical thinking is possible only where the standpoints of all others are open to inspection. Hence, critical thinking, while still a solitary business, does not cut itself off from "all others." To be sure, it still goes on in isolation, but by the force of imagination it makes the others present and thus moves in a space that is potentially public, open to all sides; in other words, it adopts the position of Kant's world citizen. To think with an enlarged mentality means that one trains one's imagination to go visiting.'



Thinking without a banister

- Arendt's evocative phrase is an aspiration for each of us – all of us – to think without presuppositions
- Over this course we've read Arendt in her attempts to do that, responding to Nazism, anti-Semitism, civil rights, the need for democracy, loneliness and the modern age, or politics and truth...



Thinking without a banister

- What has stood out to you most on our course?
- How might we put Arendt's dedication to independent thinking to work in our own lives and times?
- How might Arendt respond to the crises of our time?



SOURCES

AINS WHAT SHE MEANT BY "ALTERNATIVE FACTS"



Donald J. Trump

@realDonaldTrump

Following

concept of global warming was created for the Chinese in order to make U.S. manufacturing non-competitive.

75 28

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‘For Kafka only those things are real whose strength is not impaired but confirmed by thinking . . . thinking is the new weapon – the only one with which, in Kafka’s opinion, the pariah is endowed at birth in his vital struggle against society’.

- “The Jew as Pariah” (1944)

‘He has two antagonists; the first presses him from behind, from his origin. The second blocks the road in front of him. He gives battle to both. Actually, the first supports him in his fight with the second, for he wants to push him forward, and in the same way the second supports him in his fight with the first, since he drives him back. But it is only theoretically so. For it is not only the two antagonists who are there, but he himself as well, and who really knows his intentions? His dream, though, is that some time in an unguarded moment – and this, it must be admitted, would require a night darker than any night has ever been yet – he will jump out of the fighting line and be promoted, on account of his experience in fighting, to the position of umpire over his antagonists in their fight with each other.’



VAN BUREN



BENTON



CASS

TAYLOR



CLAY

‘Seen from the viewpoint of man, at each single moment inserted and caught in the middle between *his* past and *his* future, both aimed at the one who is creating his present, the battleground is an in-between, an extended Now on which he spends his life. ... Man lives in this in-between, and what he calls the present is a life-long fight against the dead weight of the past, driving him forward with hope, and the fear of a future (whose only certainty is death), driving him backward toward “the quiet of the past” with nostalgia for and remembrance of the only reality he can be sure of.’

‘The gap between past and future opens only in reflection, whose subject matter is what is absent ... Reflection draws these absent “regions” into the mind’s presence; from that perspective the activity of thinking can be understood as a fight against time itself.’ (205-6)



‘Each new generation, every new human being, as he becomes conscious of being inserted between an infinite past and an infinite future, must discover and ploddingly pave anew the path of thought.’
They discover in thought a world aimed at themselves, ‘establishing a present for themselves, a kind of timeless time in which men are able to create timeless works with which to transcend their own finiteness.’
(LM I, p. 210)



Rounding up on Arendt

- While less esteemed than her earlier works, *The Life of the Mind* puts forth some now familiar Arendtian positions...
- The plurality, difference and spontaneity of human life
- The difficulty and opportunity of thinking, a mental activity which forever pursues but cannot ever know the certainty of its object
- Loneliness, conversing with oneself (the two-in-one)
- Socrates as the ideal thinker, within one of the few societies with genuine public spaces
- Above all, an Olympian vision of a life of the mind that is also immersed in public cultures, difference, and *amor mundi*

That's it – thank you!

- I hope you've enjoyed our journey through Arendt – I have
- If you'd like to dig deeper, there are some good collections of Arendt's work we didn't cover – *Crises of the Republic; Thinking without a Banister* or *The Promise of Politics*
- Next term I'll be giving a Political Philosophy class at the same time. If you've not enrolled already, do so soon, as it may be oversubscribed...
- Jonathan Wolff's *Introduction to Political Philosophy* recommended
- Otherwise, have a wonderful festive break