

# On Hannah Arendt's Judgment

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'Vita activa' and 'vita contemplativa' are two main topics in Hannah Arendt's thought. In her last years, she tried to find the way move from 'mental faculties' to 'action.' Within all mental faculties, Arendt paid much attention to two evil-preventing abilities known as 'thinking' and 'judging.' But before her death, she had not finished the section on 'judging' (the last volume of *The Life of Mind*) yet. Researchers can only construct Arendt's theory of 'judging' from her lecture notes (especially *Lectures on Kant's Political Philosophy*) and a few articles (included in *Responsibility and Judgment*). Although *The Life of Mind* was left unfinished, Arendt already pointed out the relationship between 'thinking' and 'judging' in the postscript on *Thinking* (the first volume of *The Life of Mind*): 'thinking is an indispensable preparation for deciding what shall be and for evaluating what is no more.'

The main purpose of this article is to explicate what is 'judging' for Arendt and how can 'thinking' be the preparation for it. From my perspective, the common basis of 'thinking' and 'judging' is 'inner conversation.' The critical difference between the two mental faculties is: during thinking, as participants of the conversation, we can test the accuracy of our thoughts through the process of cross-examination. But when judging, we play the role as 'judge,' determine which one is less inconsistent among different claims. With 'thinking,' we can dissipate prejudices or stereotypes; with 'judging,' we can avoid an open-ended situation and arrived at positive conclusion to act upon it.

**Key words: Hannah Arendt, Vita active, Vita contemplative, judging, thinking.**

## I. Preface

In Hannah Arendt's thought, 'thinking' and 'judging' are two mental faculties dealing with morality. Thinking can helps people prevent from evil doings<sup>1</sup> and 'judging' can helps people to tell right from wrong (Arendt 2003a, 137; 2003b, 189). But when Arendt discussed about the link between 'vita contemplativa' and 'vita active,' she chose 'judging'<sup>2</sup> and deserted 'thinking.' There are two important reasons that 'thinking' could not be a 'political' ability: First, 'thinking' can't come up with a

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<sup>1</sup> Arendt gave the situation that 'unable to think' a term—'banality of evil.'

<sup>2</sup> Arendt had said that 'the faculty of judgment' is 'the most political of man's mental abilities.'

conclusion (Formosa 2010, 91) and second, thinking is the ability dealing the relationship between someone and himself/herself but not the connection between man and his/her community (Canovan 1992, 178-179; 1994, 198).

We can expand on this problem from Arendt's exemplar of 'thinking' – Socrates (2003b, 169). Socrates had two well-known features: helping others to exam their own perspective (doxa) and insist the creed that 'it is better to suffer evil than to do it,' extended from 'it is better to conflict with world than with yourself' (Arendt 2003b, 185; Kohn 1996, 168-169). Actually, these two features is the same thing. To Arendt and Socrates, 'thinking' is an 'inner-conversation,' which means that your conscience would examine your idea, just like what Socrates had done to others. If it is true, when people are thinking, there are actually two 'men' are talking in his/her mind. Furthermore, Socrates claimed that no one want to get along with evil people. In summary, if anyone has done something bad, that means he/she will talk with an evil person while he/she thinking.

According to Socrates another claim, he was a man who knowing nothing. That means he could only examine others knowledge but could not give one. Arendt used 'gad fly' and 'midwife' to describe Socrates (2003b, 173) due to anyone who talked with him would be forced to 'stop and think' (just like cows bitten by fly) and one who through the process can make sure that my perspective is firm or not (just like midwife helping other examine the new born baby is health or not). The critical point is: no one can pass the examination because Socrates' standard was 'no contradiction with any other perspectives.' That's the main reason why 'thinking' cannot give us any conclusion.

Comparing with 'thinking,' Arendt claimed that 'judging' is based on 'sensus communis' or 'enlarged mentalities,' which means 'the senses of others' (Arendt 1968, 220; Denny 1979, 264-266; Kohn 1996, 172). In other words, judgment its by nature is 'political' (Schwartz 2016, 178). However, Arendt had not explain that 'how to get "a" conclusion from the "enlarged mentalities"' (Wellmer 1996, 38). There are three suggestions: First, Canovan considered that we can get a conclusion through public discussion (1994, 195). It might be a solution during 'actual' life (vita activa), but not a solution dealing with 'inner-world' (vita contemplativa). Second, Caze suggested that we can use some 'exemplar' to help us make a judgment (2010, 80). Of course, following exemplars can help. But if we want to use one, we should make a judgment that which exemplar is a more proper one. The more important reason is, using exemplars to help us making judgment is kind of 'applying standards.' It would

go against with Arendt's claim directly. Third, Wellmer said that we can make a judgment based on a position which can apply to all. Actually, this suggestion is the same as Kant's 'categorical imperative.' It would conflict with Arendt's thought obviously.

In order to solve the problem of 'judging,' I suggest we could start from a more previous question: 'thinking' and 'judging' are really totally different 'abilities?' In fact, Arendt had point out that there are some connections between two faculties. In the postscriptum of *Thinking*, Arendt said:

**If we wish to placate our common sense, so decisively offended by the need of reason to pursue its purposeless quest for meaning, it is tempting to justify this need solely on the grounds that thinking is an indispensable preparation for deciding what shall be and for evaluating what is no more (1977, 213).**

There are some scholars also notice the link between 'thinking' and 'judging.' Both Villa and Mack pointed out that 'unable to think' means that some can't think from other's position (Villa 1996, 181-182; Mack 2010, 24-26). Schwartz had suggested that if anyone want to make judgment is only possible if he/she is also a thinker (2016, 179). I will elaborate this connection in next part.

## II. Thinking Based on Enlarged Mentalities

Let's back to Socrates again. As we known Socrates's conversation with others is the prototype of Arendt's 'thinking.' But if a conversation can began, there must have at least two different opinions. If this conversation can be 'open-end,' that means there must have a lot of different perspectives. In the first book of *Republic*, Socrates used various reasons to challenge others' definitions of 'justice.' During the process, we can see that Socrates was not the man who know nothing but nearly know every things (at least know more than other interlocutors). It shows us that if you want be a good challenger (thinker), you have to know different perspectives and opinions. 'Enlarged Mentalities' is the common base of 'thinking' and 'judging.'

Then, what is the really differences between them? First, 'thinking' request a conclusion which can withstand every possible challenge but 'judging' only require a solution can make current opinions would not go against with each other; and second, we are an interlocutor in 'thinking' but a 'spectator' in 'judging.'

## III. From Thinking to Judging: *Reflections on Little Rock*

'Reflections on Little Rock' is an article about black students attending the previously all-white Little Rock Central High due to Federal decision. In this article,

Arendt shows a negative attitude to Federal and public of her day. After Arendt's death, her student — Jerome Kohn — edited the article and other writings into a book named *Responsibility and Judgment*.<sup>3</sup>

Though Kohn had considered 'Reflections on Little Rock' to be a part of 'Judgment,' I think we can give reconsideration to this judgment. If we pay more attention to the text, it is hardly to say we should call those 'reflections' are 'judging' or 'thinking.' At the beginning of the writing, Arendt points out the situation of those children who attended school under protection of military and purpose three critics from different perspectives(2003c, 193-197).<sup>4</sup> This technique of expression is just like the beginning of *Republic*. In the first book of *Republic*, Socrates purposes different questions of others' definitions of 'justice.' Arendt was just doing the same thing. If we can agree what Socrates does in *Republic* is the prototype of 'thinking,' then we could say that 'Reflections on Little Rock' — at least the first part — is "re-thinking of the decision which forced black and white attending the same school."<sup>5</sup>

Nevertheless, this article is not ended up with an open-ended conclusion. In the text, Arendt purposes two firm judgments: First, Federal decision is improper, and second, the realm of education is not only the domain of the public but also social and private. Now, the question is: How to make these judgments? We can notice that through the essay, Arendt was not following any particular stream of thought (liberalism nor conservatism, 2003c, 210). She examines this issue by three realms of human life — the political, the social, and the private — and comes up with the conclusion that would not let one realm against each other. This is the process which Arendt called 'judging': Understanding different realms and perspectives within the community (enlarged mentality) and find a way to let them would not being conflict with each other.

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<sup>3</sup> The book has two parts. The first part named 'Responsibility,' includes: 'Personal Responsibility under Dictatorship,' 'Some Questions of Moral Philosophy,' 'Collective Responsibility, and 'Thinking and Moral Considerations'. The second part named 'Judgment,' includes: 'Reflection on Little Rock,' 'The Deputy: Guilt by Silence?' 'Auschwitz on Trial,' and 'Home to Roost'.

<sup>4</sup> They are 'a negro mother,' 'a white mother in the South,' and 'American way of life'.

<sup>5</sup> We should know that Arendt was not mean that 'black and white attend a same school' is unacceptable but that 'black and white are "forced" to attend a same school' is not a suitable decision.

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