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THE AUDACITY OF THOUGHT: SEEING THINKING AS THE MORAL  
VIRTUE PIVOTAL TO THE RE-FOUNDING OF DEMOCRACY ON A  
MORAL BASIS

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The Foundation for Ethics and Meaning

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Our theme of intellectual courage can help us re-conceive the activity of philosophizing as a *moral* virtue. For Aristotle, courage was the first of the moral virtues, empowering noble action in the human realm, contemplation the last and highest of the intellectual virtues, enabling the union of the human mind with the eternal and divine, but entirely removed from the realm of human action. Might we, however, also find a certain kind of courageous contemplation—personal philosophizing in a social context of absence of thought—as performing a unique kind of public service?

This question is a timely one. *Thinking*—the effort simply to see the world for oneself, apart from all acting within it, to take the world *in* and be changed by it, apart from all acting upon it—may be a virtue of particular importance for us to cultivate in the new times of democratic renewal we suddenly find ourselves living in. The central call of Obama’s *The Audacity of Hope* was for “a broad majority of Americans . . . engaged in the project of national renewal[;] who see their own self-interest as inextricably linked to the interests of others[;] . . . [who] think in terms of ‘[I and] Thou’ [not just ‘me’ and ‘us’].”<sup>1</sup> An essential precondition for this political renewal, though, is an instilling of the desire for *psychological* renewal, and some understanding of the processes through which it takes place, through education. Educational psychologist Carol Dweck distinguishes the “fixed mindset” (“believing that your qualities are carved in stone, [which] creates an urgency to prove yourself over and over”) from the “growth mindset” (the belief that “the hand you’re dealt is just the starting point for development, . . . that cherished qualities can be developed, [which] creates a passion for [thinking]”).<sup>2</sup> Is it possible to instill such a passion in “a broad majority of Americans” through the processes of schooling? To broadly institute the process of psychological renewal in our citizenry that will allow for genuine and thoroughgoing political renewal? To cultivate intellectual courage *en masse*?

These questions can’t be answered definitively in the course of a short essay. But I hope to provide here some beginnings of answers: first sharing with you some of the thinking about thinking that Hannah Arendt did toward the end of her life, then trying to bring that thinking home by sharing an audacious act of intellectual courage undertaken by one of my own students.

## CONTEMPLATION AS SOCIAL ACTION

*“Never do I do more than when I do nothing, never am I less alone than when I am by myself.”*

These words from the stoic Cato were Arendt’s last writing: found on an otherwise blank piece of paper in her typewriter upon her death in 1975.<sup>3</sup> They form an unusual epitaph for a thinker whose main concern through most of her life was the revival of spontaneous political action to awaken us from the conformity and comfortability of modern life. In fact, Arendt’s last, unfinished work, *The Life of the Mind* [emphasis added] (1978)<sup>4</sup> was her effort to ground a revival of politics in a *prior* spontaneity of *intellectual* life, which, if broadly cultivated, would spread the impulse toward democratic political initiative. It seemed to her that it was only through the cultivation of authentic “thinking” in the preponderance of a democratic polity that democratic politics could ever reflect anything more than either a power struggle among interest groups, or, worse, a general succumbing to a bland banality that is the antithesis of thought.

Standardized “thinking,” for Arendt, is not actually thinking at all. It works to blind us from the experience of reality, as she found happened to Adolph Eichmann—in her famous earlier work *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (1963)<sup>5</sup>:

Clichés, stock phrases, adherence to conventional, standardized codes of expression and conduct have the socially recognized function of protecting us against reality, that is, against the claim on our thinking attention that all events and facts make by virtue of their existence . . . Eichmann differed from the rest of us in that he clearly knew of no such claim at all.<sup>6</sup>

From her observation in the example of Eichmann of the moral and political devastation that could be effected by unthinking banality, Arendt speculated:

Could the activity of thinking as such, the habit of examining whatever happens to come to pass or to attract attention, regardless of results and specific content, could this activity be among the conditions that make men abstain from evil-doing or even actually “condition” them against it? (The very word “con-science,” at any rate, points in this direction insofar as it means “to know with and by myself,” a kind of knowledge that is actualized in every thinking process.) And is not this hypothesis enforced by everything we know about conscience, namely, that a “good conscience” is enjoyed as a rule only by really bad people . . . while only “good people” are capable of having a bad conscience?<sup>7</sup>

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And from these speculations on the essential connection between the intellectual act of pure thought and the moral acts of courage summoned by conscience came a clear and strong educational mandate:

If . . . the ability to tell right from wrong should turn out to have anything to do with the ability to think, then we must be able to “demand” its exercise from every sane person, no matter how erudite or ignorant, intelligent or stupid, he may happen to be . . . [T]he matter can no longer be left to “specialists” as though thinking, like higher mathematics, were the monopoly of a specialized discipline.<sup>8</sup>

Returning to our initial quote, then, “Never do I do more than when I do nothing, never am I less alone than when I am by myself,” let us ask, What great thing *is* it that we *do*, and *with* what great community do we come into communication, when, and *only* when, we think? For finding clear, communicable answers to these questions will obviously be key to convincing democratic communities to cultivate intellectual courage as the fundamental virtue of its citizenry, which—as we of *this* community know well—has been far from the central goal of any public educational policy in the past, and is practically antithetical to our current policies of totalizing educational standardization, which amount to banality enforced on students and educators by a police state.

#### *DIA-NOIA*: THE SOCRATIC “TWO-IN-ONE” OF THINKING, AND ITS CONNECTION TO CONSCIENCE AND AUTHENTIC DEMOCRATIC POLITICS

Arendt’s thinking about thinking took place in dialogue with the thinking of her two most important teachers: Martin Heidegger and Karl Jaspers. Heidegger’s first teaching and first major publication after the catastrophe of World War II was on the subject “What are we called to in thinking?”<sup>9</sup> The motto of that work could be said to come from the title of a poem Nietzsche wrote around the time he composed his *Zarathustra*: “The wasteland grows: woe to him who hides wastelands within!”<sup>10</sup> Nietzsche, Heidegger says:

. . . with greater clarity than any man before him, saw the necessity of a change in the realm of essential thinking and . . . the danger that conventional man will adhere with growing obstinacy to the trivial surface of his conventional nature, and acknowledge only the flatness of these flatlands as his proper habitation on earth.<sup>11</sup>

Here, already, in 1950 (or 1888 if you attribute it to Nietzsche) is the understanding of the evil of banality in modern times: the danger that, no longer in dialogue with any kind of transcendent authority, humanity will become thoughtless and two-dimensional. Heidegger saw Nietzsche’s

understanding of the self-transcending person, or *Uebersensch*—often called the “superman” or “overman”—as, in fact, the *thinking* person, the person able to re-introduce the element of transcendence into human existence by semi-autonomous processes rather than the fully heteronomous ones of religious revelation.

Thinking saves us from conventional banality (the force that Heidegger in *Being and Time* calls “the they,” the anonymous, banal practices of *socially* but not *personally* constructed thought<sup>12</sup>)—and saves us in the strongest sense: it *redeems* us from our unthinking social natures as members of herds, and gives us the strength to resist following those herds over the cliffs their collective force leads them to ignore. This is the brief answer to the first question we asked: “What great thing is it that we do when we do nothing but think?” We give our world intellectual depth by engaging in dialogue with ourselves, in no one’s company but our own, as is clearly implied in the Greek word for thought, *dia-noia*, or “two-fold knowing.”

But Arendt, quite importantly, also finds a *moral* depth in thought—distinguishing her from Heidegger and Nietzsche, who both saw themselves as amoral thinkers. She reverses Aristotle’s definition of true friendship at the end of the *Nichomachean Ethics*: if “the friend is another self,” “the self, too, is a kind of friend.”<sup>13</sup> This begins to answer our second question, of what kind of great community it is we enter into when we think: why we are, in Cato’s words, least alone when by ourselves. Once we enter into dialogue with ourselves, we are no longer alone in our solitude. We have committed ourselves to the moral act of befriending ourselves. This act then becomes the foundation for making authentic friendships with others, for seeing one’s friends as ends-in-themselves rather than as means to other, merely pleasurable or useful ends. One of Arendt’s favorite sayings was Duns Scotus’s “*Amo, volo ut sis*”: “To say ‘I love’ means ‘I desire a “you,” who differs essentially from myself, to exist.”<sup>14</sup> Having reflective self-presence, being a thinking “two-in-one,” working to reconcile the manifold in our *own* experiences, teaches us how to reconcile our own and *others’* experiences—what happens when we make *true* friends, when we have mutual intercourse with other minds. This is where Arendt relied on the thinking of her other teacher, Karl Jaspers, who saw “communication” in “loving struggle” as “human truth.”<sup>15</sup>

We can take this understanding of friendship to another level, from the moral to the political realm: a truly democratic *polity* is achieved, not by any mere declaration or constitution, but by a community becoming dedicated to one another through an “e-ducation”—a mutual “drawing-out”—of self- and other-befriending, a “sharing of words and deeds,” as Arendt puts it in *The Human Condition*.<sup>16</sup> This, and only this, is a true *polis*, a community of “manyness” and difference, whose members morally dedicate themselves to making, as far as they can, an *integral* oneness out of one another’s diverse manyness—as opposed to authoritarian government, which seeks unity by

suppressing or erasing diversity, as can easily happen under the cloak of nominally democratic institutions, as we have experienced in recent years.

And there remains one more level of thoughtful befriending beyond those of personal reflection, moral relationship, and democratic politics. Thinking—in Arendt’s understanding of Jaspers, conveyed at the end of her *laudatio* to him included in the collection *Men in Dark Times*—first opens up the cosmopolitan “realm of *humanitas*, which everyone can come to *out of his [or her] own origins*” (emphasis added):

Those who enter it [the realm of *humanitas*] recognize one another, for then they are [in Jaspers’ words] “like sparks, brightening to a more luminous glow, dwindling to invisibility, alternating and in constant motion. The sparks see one another, and each flames more brightly because it sees others” and can hope to be seen by them.<sup>17</sup>

The effort to befriend and be in community with oneself, to give the fullest answer to our second question, thus bears the potential of bringing one ultimately into a *kind of heavenly* community with others—uniting those two realms of which Kant was famously in awe, the starry skies above and the moral realm within, as we, being thoughtfully human with one another, evoke the glow of mutual insight. There is a community of thought that is larger than any community of living beings, and the act of our own thinking is what first gains us entrance to this largest of all democratic communities, which, because thought can be preserved in words and images, extends deep into the meaningful past and hopefully toward the infinite future.

#### TEACHING SELF-BEFRIENDING AS THE FOUNDATION OF AUTHENTIC EDUCATION, AUTHENTIC COMMUNITY, AND AUTHENTIC HUMANITY

*“This above all: to thine own self be true”*

Here, though, we come to a third, and crucial question: What are the obstacles to our befriending and coming into community with ourselves, and how do we elicit others, educationally, *toward* this entirely private act with such tremendous moral and public consequences?

The first—and in some ways the biggest—obstacle in our coming to think is that we cannot assume it to be *natural* for us to do so. We need to collectively re-conceive the activity of thinking precisely as something that must be carefully cultivated—not something that we are born knowing how to do, or that most of us simply learn shortly after birth. We assume, because thinking is so intimate a phenomenon, that it is part of human nature—even what characterizes human nature in its essence, as the phrase *homo sapiens* implies. This may be assuming far too much, though. Arendt prefers that we see thinking not as an essential, if often obscured part of human nature, but rather as part of the *acquired human condition*.

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Whether or not the capacity for personal reflection and contemplation is at the heart of our created nature, it is certainly a historically and educationally conditioned possibility of human *flourishing*—a virtue, something we need to personally and collectively hold up as a human excellence, a beacon of what it means to be a human in the fullest sense, rather than something that we can lay claim to in any simple way. The oft-quoted saying of Socrates, “The unexamined life is not worth living” actually goes something more like this: “The life whose meaning is not actively sought out is not lived humanly” (*anexetastos bios ou biôtos anthrôpôi* in Greek).<sup>18</sup> Here again we see the connection between thinking and the quality of humanity, and that there is a gap between human created nature and the experience of being a *humane* human being for which certain educational interventions are necessary. It may be that what we call groupthink, and see as a degradation of natural thinking, is actually what is more purely natural to us, and that thinking *proper* is best considered as a personal and community achievement.

Once we see thinking as a virtue that requires cultivation rather than as an essence that simply needs to be uncovered, we then see the clear need to know how to cultivate it in ourselves and in others, and the peculiar difficulties of cultivating it. If we are not *born* as friends of ourselves, neither can we be taught directly how to befriend ourselves, or be simply enjoined to do so, as Laertes famously is by his father Polonius in *Hamlet*: in the well known lines “This above all, to thine own self be true/ And then it follows as the night the day/ That thou canst not be false to any man” (I.iv.78-80), spoken by a father who sets spies on his son, tries, mostly ineffectually, to manipulate everyone around him, and continually contradicts himself.

Thinking is in no way a replicable or *directly* communicable skill, as many teachers as self-belying as Polonius, and other less obvious sophists imagine it to be. We can, however, either accidentally find ourselves in life situations that are conducive to our befriending ourselves, or be deliberately placed in such situations by teachers in the hope that we can find ourselves in the course of experiences they have artfully constructed for us—as, for example, we can infer Shakespeare hoped thoughtful readers would see through Polonius’s contradictions to the true value of *really* being true to ourselves, as Hamlet holds himself and others to being in the play. Finally, in a way that combines both of the above, we can *see* others thinking, as we see Hamlet and Socrates (and, indirectly, Shakespeare and Plato) doing, and find this to be something we find valuable for ourselves, and valuable to engage in with others. At this last level, thinking becomes not just a temporary experience but a desire and a moral life choice—the choice to continually search for new meaning in one’s own life and the life we lead in common with others.

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TOWARD A STANDARD OF THOUGHTFULNESS:  
GROUPTHINK, ME-THINK, AND I-THOU- AND WE-THINK

Thinking always requires a peculiar kind of courage—the audacity of always working to maintain genuine good will toward oneself, toward others, and toward the world in the face of one’s own and others’ aggressiveness, and the large-scale aggressivity of the nightmare of human history, within which we all find ourselves. Some of us are lucky enough to be occasionally—or even somewhat permanently—awakened from these nightmares: through teachers of various kinds, including the authors of books and art constructed to help us genuinely think; through coming into contact with thoughtful educative communities in which mutual insight is cultivated; and, sometimes, through living in periods of history that are unusually open to the cultivation of thought.

As mentioned at the outset, we may be entering into just such a period of historic thoughtfulness: we now have a head of State who has composed a memoir of his own coming into thought and thoughtful political action, a policy book centering how we can come into thoughtful community with one another, and, not least, a personal and political ethos of calm and deep thoughtfulness—unruffled by and deeply intellectually responsive to attempts to provoke his animosity. As one observer put it, in mid-November, 2008: “The election of Barack Obama could mean that all of us in the United States belong to the Greatest Generation now . . .”<sup>19</sup> Whether or not this *actually* happens, though, may greatly depend upon our collective will and ability—in “the fierce urgency” of this “*now*”—to introduce audacious new standards of thoughtfulness into our educational system: going beyond both the imposed “groupthink” of banal standardization and what might be called the “me- and us-think” of inciting individual and national competitiveness. We must seek to educe what might be called “I-Thou- and We-think” through processes of personal, relational, community, and political renewal. And we must start by educating a new generation of deeply thoughtful teachers.

Many of us in the field of Philosophy of Education teach what are now called “Social Foundations” classes, which tend to come only at the end of a course of professional study and practice in education, and often focus more on reflective practice rather than on reflection itself. These might be replaced, or built up to, by mandated “Personal Foundations” classes taught at the very outset, in which self-knowledge and self-befriending are made the explicit core of education, initiating and enabling the development of thoughtful, meaningful relationship of each human being to the complex realities of the world in which they personally find themselves.

These concerns have been central to my own Philosophy of Education courses. Students keep extensive journals, and their major assignments all involve their recalling or composing stories of their own and others’ personal growth, in the context of readings from classic philosophy and contemporary philosophy of education, all on the personal and moral heart of teaching.<sup>20</sup> I

was lucky enough to encounter near the outset of this teaching a group of students, mostly new to their professional studies, who were enormously receptive to it. In each and every class I have taught, I have seen enormous inner transformations in the majority of students through their writing, and regularly received testimony such as the following (from an anonymous course evaluation):

This class has totally changed my life and my perspective and outlook on life. It has also changed the way I interact with myself and others. This has been the most difficult class for me so far, mainly because I did not want to change. But one cannot help but change or at least think about change after the experiences of this class. I'm always going to love and thank Dr. -- -- for showing how to change or at least start the process of changing, from within first, then the world.

Still, the very fact that finding the heart of education to be personal and moral is an exceptional approach—within the university and the school of education in which the classes have been taught, and much, much more so in the educational world at large—may have largely mitigated the ultimate educational effect of these transformations, beyond whatever effect they had on the students themselves. The currently dominant educational cultures of “groupthink” and “methink”—of banality and competitiveness—can easily eclipse the culture of thoughtful human flourishing, as I often witnessed in the classes themselves: when many students were unable or unwilling to share with their fellows the dramatic inner change I knew they were experiencing; when others were unable or unwilling to move from a “fixed mindset” to a “growth mindset” (see Dweck, above) and would dismiss the entire content of the course as worthless “psychobabble bullshit” (in the phrase of one of the most memorable of them, who dramatically came around at the very end of the class, though many never did); and, sometimes, when a hidden or open culture of resistant “groupthink” was created—which happened regularly when cohorts of students found themselves generally demoralized by the overall process of their professional training, and dominant groups within these cohorts resisted facing themselves.

Despite all these reservations, I was recently left with an image of the power of this teaching, which I would like to share in closing. It represents to me the ultimate power of “the audacity of thought” when it is well aware of the *need* to be audacious, as Socrates was at his trial by the “groupthink”-dominated city of Athens.

When a student in one recent class used the phrase “we *all* think” just before we were to read the *Apology*, I was alerted to the possibility of a major “teachable moment” on the difference between social mirroring and genuine reflection and communication. This group had traveled together through two years of professional training. Few having found much moral sustenance in that

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training, they naturally sought it in one another, and by the time they entered my classroom, many had come to rely on a culture of defensive “groupthink” to get themselves and one another through. Though the moral climate in my class had at times been quite warm, it had taken a clear dive as we moved to traditional philosophical texts at the end of the course. Still, knowing that quite a bit of genuine reflection was happening beneath the dominant out-of-class conversations and emails, I left half an hour at the end of our discussion for the class to deliberate among themselves on the merits of the course and my teaching.

To prepare them for our reading of *The Apology*, I showed parts of the Tina Fey film *Mean Girls* and knew that two of the students in particular had taken it to heart, seeing some of the behavior of their cohort mirrored in the film, which they had watched the whole of together on their own. I had received touching letters from each of them, but I did not know what to expect on the day of the class.

One of them in particular—in a way that surprised even herself—rose to the test, brilliantly and courageously applying the lessons of reflection, non-violent communication, and community building that the class had been learning, within the context of the class itself. With her permission, I share with you her account, from her journal, of how she befriended herself, and the members of her cohort, on that day:

During class, we discussed the reading and I realized quite a few things. I thought I was going to trial to defend you or at least what you stood for, but that was not my purpose in this trial. I needed to be Socrates and be put on trial myself. I needed to show the rest of the class how I had changed through the course, in hopes that some would not be afraid to show they had changed as well. I was nervous and excited, especially since I do not speak in class as often as some do.

Everyone is like, “This is bullshit!” or “Just write down that he should not be a teacher!!” I was definitely scared. Everyone was talking at the same time, but not one person was talking with anyone. At this point, the first wave of people left, some maybe because they weren’t able to speak on your behalf and some because they thought this experience was not worthwhile (these are the people who I believe were at a point where they themselves were beginning to change, but were afraid of the transformation). Then people were saying that we had a great community and that you had no right to tell us otherwise, this all being said while ten other people were talking.

This is where I needed to interject. I said, “I need to say something and I need people not to talk over me or cut me off.” A few people did, but eventually I said, “We are not a community and we are proving it right now. I respect you as teachers, but we aren’t

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communicating with each other. Everyone is talking over anyone else that they can. We may be a community, but it is not a productive or inviting community, and it is definitely not one where someone can grow and feel comfortable sharing and celebrating it.” At this point another group of girls left.

When we got down to a smaller group of girls, we really were a community. The last ten or so people were able to communicate problems they were having and were able to display their happiness with having this course to help them blossom. At this point I sort of became a leader, which I do not normally do, and helped the last eight write a document to communicate their needs nonviolently. I was excited that I learned more about myself through this experience, as well as being able to help some students see a benefit in philosophy of education.

“*We are the ones we’ve been waiting for,*” Barack Obama has repeatedly said. This is more than a political slogan: it is a call for us to *find* ourselves, and one another, as this student suddenly audaciously found herself doing and helping others to do. Honestly searching her own conscience, she found the ability to speak above the polarizing groupthink of the dominant forces of her cohort, very much as Obama has done in the larger political world. The passion for personal renewal was sufficiently aroused in her to bring her to act—with tremendous audacity—to create a public space for it in the midst of this inhospitable environment.

I find a clear analogy between the emergence of this hitherto quiet student as a leader of this class and the emergence of a new leadership of those of open-minded and open-hearted conscience in American culture. This has been manifested in macrocosm in the current electoral cycle. But in such a culture, no leaders will be more important than those who have the moral and intellectual courage to truly teach our nation’s young: offering to all *early on* a required foundation in genuine thought.

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Barack Obama, *The audacity of hope: Thoughts on reclaiming the American Dream* (New York: Crown Publishers, 2006), 40, 216.

<sup>2</sup> Carol Dweck, *Mindset: The new psychology of success* (New York: Penguin, 2006), 6-7.

<sup>3</sup> Hannah Arendt, *The life of the mind*. Ed. Mary McCarthy. (New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1978), I, vii.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, *passim*.

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- <sup>5</sup> Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A report on the banality of evil* (New York: Penguin Books, 1994/1963)
- <sup>6</sup> Arendt, *The life of the mind*, op. cit., I, 4.
- <sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, I, 5.
- <sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, I, 13.
- <sup>9</sup> This is my translation. The German is *Was heisst denken?*
- <sup>10</sup> Martin Heidegger, *What is called thinking?* Tr. G. Glenn Gray (New York: Harper & Row, 1968/1954), 51.
- <sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 57.
- <sup>12</sup> Martin Heidegger, *Being and time*. Tr. Joan Stambaugh (Albany: SUNY Press, 1996/1927), 107-122.
- <sup>13</sup> Arendt, *The life of the mind*, op. cit., I, 189.
- <sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, II, 144.
- <sup>15</sup> Karl Jaspers, *Philosophy, Volume 2*, Tr. E.B. Ashton (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970/1932), 59-61.
- <sup>16</sup> Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989/1958), 199.
- <sup>17</sup> Arendt, *The life of the mind*, op. cit., I, 181.
- <sup>18</sup> Hannah Arendt, “Karl Jaspers: A laudatio,” *Men in dark times* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, & World, 1968), 80.
- <sup>19</sup> Roger Angell, “Class Report,” *The New Yorker*, November 17, 2008, 44.
- <sup>20</sup> The central text is David Hansen’s *Exploring the Moral HeART of Teaching: Toward a Teacher’s Creed* (New York: Teachers College Press, 2001).
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