

Philosophical dialogues against totalitarianism

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For many practicing philosophical inquiries with children a motivation for doing this is the hope that such practice shall help children developing a free mind, thus the capacity of taking responsibility for their own actions. In a larger scale then, this would be a democratic gain, a society consistent of responsible citizens capable of making rational decisions for the benefit of all.

If this be the case, philosophical inquiries with children would be an efficient way to evade totalitarian thinking, and thus totalitarian regimes to develop. However history shows that totalitarian thinking can develop in societies richly intellectually developed, such as the German society in the 1930th. In fact philosophers themselves, like Martin Heidegger, often embrace totalitarian ideologies.

The fact that the intellectual elite time and again embrace totalitarian ideologies is rather discouraging from an intellectual point of view. What is the point in getting children involved in philosophy when Heidegger himself embraced the Nazi ideology? Can we help children see something through participation in philosophical dialogues which this great philosopher did not see? Why isn't traditional moral education sufficient?

In this paper I will use Hannah Arendt's analysis of the development of Nazism and a totalitarian regime in Germany in the beginning of last century to look into whether, and if so, how, philosophical inquiries with children can prepare them to resist totalitarian thinking, and thus prevent the development of totalitarian regimes.

Nearly fifty years ago there was an extraordinary trial in Jerusalem, where Adolph Eichmann was condemned for participation in genocide. To Hannah Arendt, who was there to report for The New York Times, the trial was a horrifying experience.

What made this trial so horrifying was not only the testimonies of cruelty and terror that had occurred during Holocaust, such stories were already well known to Arendt. What really disturbed her was the accused himself, not for being cruel and brutal, but on the contrary, for being polite, respectful and, in every sense, a perfect example of a well socialized citizen. How could such a person willingly and intentionally plan, coordinate and participate in genocide?

Confronted with the terror of Holocaust it is tempting to believe that its executioners were extraordinarily cruel, stupid or power-seeking. Indeed, as Arendt stated, on her arrival to the trial she expected to be confronted with the incarnation of evil. That the man on the contrary appeared to be polite and thoughtful was in the first place incomprehensible for Arendt.

Totalitarianism, in the form of totalitarian movements and totalitarian states, is a troubling phenomenon not only because of the terror they are based on and bring about, but because they put to question our faith in democracy and rationality, as the ward of respect for basic human rights. The fact that totalitarian rule is generally approved by the majority of the populations involved, and that it is not only carried out by the mob, but often planned and brought about by well educated and highly socialized individuals, is more than worrying in a

time when we put our faith in rational thought and democracy. But how is it possible to trick highly intellectually able citizens into highly irrational thinking?

Arendt separates totalitarian movements from other forms of tyranny on the basis that they seek complete control of the human being, not only of the body, but also of the mind and reality itself. It seeks at making people define themselves, and their place in the world, in terms of allegiance to the movement. A whole new frame of mind is created, new categories and standards to think within, so that even thought itself is limited by the frames set by the movement. Let's have a look at a few examples of how this is possible, through the example of Holocaust.

In order for a totalitarian movement to get power there must be a situation where people in general lack a sense of belonging within a community. Such a situation had already been established in Germany by the beginning of last century, through political and social circumstances like industrialisation, which uprooted individuals from their traditional communities, the abolishment of class society, and disclosure of the hypocrisy of established society. The old bonds of family and clan were evaporating, turning individuals into masses, in Arendt's words. According to Arendt, what constitutes a mass person is their lack of normal personal relations, a lack of place in this world, alienation. In a changing society where people had ever less control of their lives, the unpredictability of life became intolerable (Arendt 1968a).

According to Arendt, totalitarian movements, like Nazism, can offer an alternative reality which makes sense, where everything can be explained not by the coincidences of life, but by the totalitarian ideology, thus making reality understandable and thereby manageable. It also offers "the chosen ones" a sense of belonging, in respect to Nazism, to the "pure Arian raze" or "the German people". Finally it gives everyone a meaning to life, like the "quest to save the German people", or to take part in this movement which would establish a new world order that would last for thousand years.

Nazism started this process slowly, by using facts arbitrarily and proposing doctrines that may be radical, but still are "eatable" by the majority of the population. As they got more support they produced greater lies and radicalised. But in order to get the masses politically involved, a situation of fear had to be created in which not only each singular individual seemed threatened, but the whole society. The Nazis created for this purpose the idea that there existed a world wide Jewish conspiracy; that Jews all over the world were secretly planning, and consistently had been working on, complete world domination. This could seem credible on the basis that Jews until then had held leading positions in society, and the release of the book "The elders on Zion", supposedly an original plan written by Jewish leaders on how to conquer the world (Arendt 1968a, Arendt 1968b).

Other lies were added, first that the war was no war, second, that it was started by destiny and not by Germany, and third, that it was a matter of life and death for the Germans, who had to annihilate their enemies or be annihilated. In this way a new reality was created, in which killing innocent people and attacking foreign nations was a regretful, but necessary, move in order to save civilisation. Keeping in mind the necessity of giving each individual a sense of belonging and purpose of life, the lie most effective with the whole of the German people was the slogan "The battle of destiny for the German people".

According to Arendt the totalitarian movement feeds on enemies, real or imaginarily, which unites the "chosen" behind the movement, and justifies any terrible deed. In totalitarian thinking then, there is no room for neutrality; each person is defined either as "chosen" or a threat. This division is a slow process starting with differentiation in rights and duties according to specific characteristics, in Nazism, "pureness of raze" and "genetic strength".

Likewise she believes that the totalitarian movements aim is not convincing people of certain doctrines, but at creating a world. For instance, at the same time as the Nazis announced their raze-theory, they also made "pureness of raze" a prerequisite for joining the party, and as soon as they came into power, rights and duties were given on the basis of raze. In that way people started identifying themselves in terms of raze; claiming that raise was not an important issue simply didn't make sense.

In similar ways, Arendt notes, totalitarian movements keep making predictions about the future, and then making their predictions come true, through leading a policy that will ultimately make it happen. The Nazis could talk and behave as if their ideas were mere facts, simply because it was just a matter of time until they would be recognised facts. The idea behind is simply that reality is created by people. As long as people live as if something is a fact, it is a fact. In other words, if you repeat a lie sufficiently many times, it becomes a part of reality. In this way, totalitarian movements invent and constitute reality at the same time. The totalitarian movements aim at replacing the whole of reality with a fake parallel reality, thereby securing complete domination.

Now it could be argued that intelligent and well educated people should be able to disclose such gross lies. Arendt argues that when all society agrees upon a frame of mind and a set of values, this will be the standards thinking can operate within. When totalitarianism has taken control over reality, it has also taken control of thought itself (Arendt 1968a).

But how about morality, would not witnessing and participating in cruelty awaken people's consciousness and prevent them from further participation? According to Arendt most people act morally acceptable by following common rules of behaviour such as; "One shall not kill!", "One shall not steal!" etc. As Arendt perceived Eichmann, he was utterly conscious of social conventions, and did his utmost to follow them at all times. However, just as most people do, he did not take a personal stand to moral issues. According to Arendt that is ok as long as society is more or less stable. But in times of great change, were traditional social conventions don't seem adequate any more, it's incumbent that people have developed their own morality (Arendt 1998). Referring to Nazism, the creation of fear, the notion that the whole German people was threatened, made the common moral codex seem irrelevant, it seemed necessary to replace it with a new; "those who are threatening the German raze must be killed". If people in general don't relate to the content of the moral codex, it's all too easy to replace the existing codex to a new one, just as Hitler and Stalin did. Arendt concludes that there are few people who actually chose to be evil, but regretfully many never really ponder on how they want to be (Arendt 1998:107).

However, even philosophers pondering on the content of the moral codex, may end up with supporting a totalitarian codex. For instance; there is nothing irrational in presuming that it is better to kill a few than many, and if fewer threaten the existence of the many, these must be killed.

Referring to Zygmunt Bauman's "Modernity and the Holocaust" (1989), rationality does not seem at all contradictory to genocide, but on the contrary, it seem to deliver the very premise of holocaust! Thus, leading children to discipline their mind into rational thinking through leading them into philosophical inquiries does not at all seem to be of any help in respect of avoiding such in the future!

According to Arendt, philosophical inquiries can transcend mere logic. Referring to Socrates she argues that the outcome of deliberating concepts like "justice" through dialogue is not necessarily agreement on a definition, but becoming just. In this sense thought expands towards that which our mind cannot grasp, the philosophical astonishment of the unutterable. This goes beyond our frame of understanding. According to Arendt this state of consciousness can only be reached through dialogues with others. She refers to Socrates who through his questions brought his companions in a state of complete confusion and paralysis, and thereby awakened their inner life (Arendt 1998).

When the inner life is awakened one is removed from oneself, a separation is established between "I" and "me", so that "I" can observe and evaluate "me", thus making it possible to be in disagreement with oneself through an inner dialogue. For Arendt meta-reflection is what constitutes "thinking", which makes people aware and responsible. Without this it is not possible to have a conscience (Arendt 1998: 103-104). John Dewey calls this "reflective thinking", thinking which is aware of its own cause and effect. According to him reflective thinking is a prerequisite for deciding for oneself how to think and act. This implies freedom, and responsibility (Dewey 1996: 53). For Arendt then, the aim of thinking is not knowledge, but the ability to distinguish "good" from "evil", which according to her can prevent catastrophes (Arendt 1998: 116).

So again, what children are taught through participating in philosophical inquiries is not only rational thinking, but "thinking". To Arendt, thinking reaches for the roots, while the banality of evil lack roots, totalitarian thinking operates on the surface. She believes we can resist being swept away by the surface of things, by stopping ourselves and beginning to think by reaching another dimension than the horizon of everyday life. Thus, thinking is not dependent of knowledge, which anyway is distorted within totalitarian rule. Thinking is concerned with the meaning of experience, actions and circumstances. It makes it incumbent to judge for oneself; to ask "Will I be able to live with myself if I go through with what I'm doing?" Actions then are not based on a belief that the world will become a better place if I do this or that, but on my relation to myself.

According to Arendt then, judging must be based on thinking without banister, one must use Kant's concept of judging from the generalised other. This presupposes access to a magnitude of subjective views, thereby developing representative thinking. For Arendt this is developed by imagination, by "going visiting", making oneself acquainted with somebody else's point of view, exactly what is being practised in philosophical inquiries.

Let's go back to Eichmann. However able he seemed at rational thinking, being an engineer and rather ingenious in the industrial rational thinking of problem solving, he was not able to "think" in Arendt's sense. During the whole process, however sympathetic, considerate and nice he seemed to be completely unable to think from the standpoint of somebody else (Arendt 1963:18). To Arendt, Eichmann was not stupid, he was something even worse; he was thoughtless, in the sense of being authentically unable to think.

Now, more than helping children develop a genuine ability to think, is there any other way regular philosophical inquiries with children could help a society resist totalitarian influence? As we recall, a prerequisite for totalitarian domination is a society with weak bonds between people, a lack of sense of belonging in a group, a common world. Actually, as Arendt points out, Stalin had to systematically destroy such bonds between people in order to create a totalitarian state (Arendt 1968a).

Another point indicating a contradiction between communities of inquiries and totalitarian thought is the fact that a prerequisite for philosophical dialogues is that one acts with each other, and not for or against each other, in Arendt's terminology. Totalitarian systems though, do not allow for acting with each other, since each individual is considered to be merely a replaceable function of the system. Thereby a direct contradiction is implied between relationships within totalitarian systems and communities of enquiry.

The existence of a public place where people can come together out of their concern for what is common, creates community, a society with strong bonds between people. It may well be argued that such public spaces are created through philosophical dialogues.

Thus from this analysis it may seem that giving children the opportunity of regular participation in philosophical inquiries may help them developing the ability to think, and thus apt to resist being swept away by totalitarian ideologies. The fact that children through such practice may develop the ability of rational thought seem not to be the key issue, thus not making it sufficient letting them participate in more traditional scientific inquiries.

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