is the price we pay for the fact that we live our lives not by ourselves but among our fellow men, and that the faculty of action, which, after all, is the political faculty par excellence, can be actualized only in one of the many and manifold forms of human community.

1968

THINKING AND MORAL CONSIDERATIONS

For W. H. Auden

To talk about thinking seems to me so presumptuous that I feel I owe you a justification. Some years ago, reporting the trial of Eichmann in Jerusalem, I spoke of "the banality of evil" and meant with this no theory or doctrine but something quite factual, the phenomenon of evil deeds, committed on a gigantic scale, which could not be traced to any particularity of wickedness, pathology, or ideological conviction in the doer, whose only personal distinction was a perhaps extraordinary shallowness. However monstrous the deeds were, the doer was neither monstrous nor demonic, and the only specific characteristic one could detect in his past as well as in his behavior during the trial and the preceding police examination was something entirely negative: it was not stupidity but a curious, quite authentic inability to think. He functioned in the role of prominent war criminal as well as he had under the Nazi regime; he had not the slightest difficulty in accepting an entirely different set of rules. He knew that what he had once considered his duty was now called a crime, and he accepted this new code of judgment as though it were nothing but another language rule. To his rather limited supply of stock phrases he had added a few new ones, and he was utterly helpless only when he was confronted with a situation to which none of

them would apply, as in the most grotesque instance when he had to make a speech under the gallows and was forced to rely on clichés used in funeral oratory which were inapplicable in his case because he was not the survivor.[1] Considering what his last words should be in case of a death sentence, which he had expected all along, this simple fact had not occurred to him, just as inconsistencies and flagrant contradictions in examination and cross-examinations during the trial had not bothered him. 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 which all events and facts arouse by virtue of their existence. If we were responsive to this claim all the time, we would soon be exhausted; the difference in Eichmann was only that he clearly knew of no such claim at all.

This total absence of thinking attracted my interest. Is evildoing, not just the sins of omission but the sins of commission, possible in the absence of not merely "base motives" (as the law calls it) but of any motives at all, any particular prompting of interest or volition? Is wickedness, however we may define it, this being "determined to prove a villain," *not* a necessary condition for evildoing? Is our ability to judge, to tell right from wrong, beautiful from ugly, dependent upon our faculty of thought? Do the inability to think and a disastrous failure of what we commonly call conscience coincide? The question that imposed itself was, could the activity of thinking as such, the habit of examining and reflecting upon whatever happens to come to pass, regardless of specific content and quite independent of results, could this activity be of such a nature that it "conditions" men against evildoing? (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.) Finally, is not the urgency of these questions enforced by the well-known and rather alarming fact that only good people are ever bothered by a bad conscience whereas it is a very rare phenomenon among real criminals? A good conscience does not exist except as the absence of a bad one.

Such were the questions. To put it differently and use Kantian language, after having been struck by a phenomenon—the *quaestio facti*—which willy-nilly "put me into the possession of a concept" (the banality of evil), I could not help raising the *quaestio juris* and asked myself, "with what right did I possess and use it."[2]

I

To raise such questions as "What is thinking?" "What is evil?" has its difficulties. They belong to philosophy or metaphysics, terms that designate a field of inquiry which, as we all know, has fallen into disrepute. If this were merely a matter of positivist and neopositivist assaults, we need perhaps not be concerned.[3] Our difficulty with raising such questions is caused less by those to whom they are "meaningless" anyhow than by those who are under attack. Just as the crisis in religion reached its climax when theologians, as distinguished from the old crowd of nonbelievers, began to talk about the "God is dead" propositions, the crisis in philosophy and metaphysics came into the open when philosophers themselves began to declare the end of philosophy and metaphysics. Now, this could have its advantage; I trust it will once it has been understood what these "ends" actually mean, not that God has "died"—an obvious absurdity in every respect—but that the way God has been thought of for thousands of years is no longer con-

vincing; and not that the old questions which are coeval with the appearance of men on earth have become "meaningless," but that the way they were framed and answered has lost plausibility.

What has come to an end is the basic distinction between the sensual and the supersensual, together with the notion, at least as old as Parmenides, that whatever is not given to the senses—God or Being or the First Principles and Causes (*archai*) or the Ideas—is more real, more truthful, more meaningful than what appears, that it is not just *beyond* sense perception but *above* the world of the senses. What is "dead" is not only the localization of such "eternal truths" but the distinction itself. Meanwhile, in increasingly strident voices the few defenders of metaphysics have warned us of the danger of nihilism inherent in this development; and although they themselves seldom invoke it, they have an important argument in their favor: it is indeed true that once the supersensual realm is discarded, its opposite, the world of appearances as understood for so many centuries, is also annihilated. The sensual, as still understood by the positivists, cannot survive the death of the supersensual. No one knew this better than Nietzsche who, with his poetic and metaphorical description of the assassination of God in *Zarathustra,* has caused so much confusion in these matters. In a significant passage in *The Twilight of Idols,* he clarifies what the word "God" meant in *Zarathustra.* It was merely a symbol for the suprasensual realm as understood by metaphysics; he now uses instead of "God" the term "true world" and says, "We have abolished the true world. What has remained? The apparent one perhaps? Oh no! With the true world we have also abolished the apparent one."[4]

These modern "deaths" of God, of metaphysics, of philosophy, and, by implication, of positivism may be events of great importance, but they are after all thought events, and though they concern most intimately our ways of thinking, they do not concern our ability to think, the sheer fact that man is a thinking being. By this, I mean that man has an inclination and, unless pressed by more urgent needs of living, even a need (Kant's "need of reason") to think beyond the limitations of knowledge, to do more with his intellectual abilities, his brain power, than to use them as an instrument for knowing and doing. Our desire to know, whether arising out of practical necessities, theoretical perplexities, or sheer curiosity can be fulfilled by reaching its intended goal; and while our thirst for knowledge may be unquenchable because of the immensity of the unknown, so that every region of knowledge opens up further horizons of knowables, 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. The activity of knowing is no less a world-building activity than the building of houses. The inclination or the need to think, on the contrary, even if aroused by none of the time-honored metaphysical, unanswerable "ultimate questions," leaves nothing so tangible behind, nor can it be stilled by allegedly definite insights of "wise men." The need to think can be satisfied only through thinking, and the thoughts which I had yesterday will satisfy this need today only to the extent that I can think them anew.

We owe to Kant the distinction between thinking and knowing, between reason, the urge to think and to understand, and the intellect, which desires and is capable of certain, verifiable knowledge. Kant himself believed that the need to think beyond the limitations of knowledge was aroused only by the old metaphysical questions of God, freedom, and immortality, and that he had "found it necessary to deny knowledge to make room for faith"; by doing so he had thrown the foundations of a future "systematic metaphysics" as a "bequest to posterity."[5] But this shows only that Kant, still bound

by the tradition of metaphysics, never became fully aware of what he had done, and his "bequest to posterity" turned out to be the destruction of all possible foundations of metaphysical systems. For the ability and the need to think are by no means restricted to any specific subject matter, such as the questions which reason raises and knows it will never be able to answer. Kant has not "denied knowledge" but separated knowing from thinking, and he has made room not for faith but for thought. He has indeed, as he once suggested, "eliminated the obstacles by which reason hinders itself."[6]

In our context and for our purposes, this distinction between knowing and thinking is crucial. If the ability to tell right from wrong should have anything to do with the ability to think, then we must be able to "demand" its exercise in every sane person no matter how erudite or ignorant, how intelligent or stupid he may prove to be. Kant, in this respect almost alone among the philosophers, was much bothered by the common opinion that philosophy is only for the few, precisely because of this opinion's moral implications. In this vein he once remarked, "Stupidity is caused by a wicked heart,"[7] a statement which in this form is not true. Inability to think is not stupidity; it can be found in highly intelligent people, and wickedness is hardly its cause, if only because thoughtlessness as well as stupidity are much more frequent phenomena than wickedness. The trouble is precisely that no wicked heart, a relatively rare phenomenon, is necessary to cause great evil. Hence, in Kantian terms, one would need philosophy, the exercise of reason as the faculty of thought, to prevent evil.

And this is demanding a great deal, even if we assume and welcome the decline of those disciplines, philosophy and metaphysics, which for so many centuries have monopolized this faculty. For thinking's chief characteristic is that it interrupts all doing, all ordinary activities no matter what they happen to be. Whatever

the fallacies of the two-world theories might have been, they arose out of genuine experiences. For it is true that the moment we start thinking on no matter what issue we stop everything else, and this everything else, again whatever it may happen to be, interrupts the thinking process; it is as though we moved into a different world. Doing and living in the most general sense of *inter homines esse*, "being among my fellowmen"—the Latin equivalent for being alive—positively prevents thinking. As Valéry once put it: *"Tantôt je suis, tantôt je pense,"* now I am, now I think.

Closely connected with this situation is the fact that thinking always deals with objects that are absent, removed from direct sense perception. An object of thought is always a re-presentation, that is, something or somebody that is actually absent and present only to the mind which, by virtue of imagination, can make it present in the form of an image.[8] In other words, when I am thinking, I move outside the world of appearances, even if my thought deals with ordinary sense-given objects and not with such invisibles as concepts or ideas, the old domain of metaphysical thought. In order to think about somebody, he must be removed from our senses; so long as we are together with him we don't think of him—though we may gather impressions that later become food for thought; to think about somebody who is present implies removing ourselves surreptitiously from his company and acting as though he were no longer there.

These remarks may indicate why thinking, the quest for meaning—rather than the scientist's thirst for knowledge for its own sake—can be felt to be "unnatural," as though men, when they begin to think, engage in some activity contrary to the human condition. Thinking as such, not only the thinking about extraordinary events or phenomena or the old metaphysical questions, but every reflection that does not serve knowledge and

is not guided by practical purposes—in which cases thinking is the handmaiden of knowledge, a mere instrument for ulterior purposes—is, as Heidegger once remarked, "out of order."[9] There is, to be sure, the curious fact that there have always been men who chose the *bios theōrētikos* as their way of life, which is no argument against the activity being "out of order." The whole history of philosophy, which tells us so much about the objects of thought and so little about the process of thinking itself, is shot through with intramural warfare between man's common sense, this highest, sixth sense that fits our five senses into a common world and enables us to orient ourselves in it, and man's faculty of thinking by virtue of which he willfully removes himself from it.

And not only is this faculty for the ordinary course of affairs "good for nothing" while its results remain uncertain and unverifiable, but it also is somehow self-destructive. Kant, in the privacy of his posthumously published notes, wrote: "I do not approve of the rule that if the use of pure reason has proved something, this result should later no longer be doubted as though it were a solid axiom"; and "I do not share the opinion . . . that one should not doubt once one has convinced oneself of something. In pure philosophy this is impossible. *Our mind has a natural aversion against it*"[10] (my italics). From which it seems to follow that the business of thinking is like the veil of Penelope: it undoes every morning what it had finished the night before.

Let me sum up my three main propositions in order to restate our problem, the inner connection between the ability or inability to think and the problem of evil.

First, if such a connection exists at all, then the faculty of thinking, as distinguished from the thirst for knowledge, must be ascribed to everybody; it cannot be a privilege of the few.

Second, if Kant is right and the faculty of thought has a "natural aversion" against accepting its own results as "solid axioms," then we cannot expect any moral propositions or commandments, no final code of conduct from the thinking activity, least of all a new and now allegedly final definition of what is good and what is evil.

Third, if it is true that thinking deals with invisibles, it follows that it is out of order because we normally move in a world of appearances in which the most radical experience of *dis*appearance is death. The gift for dealing with things that do not appear has often been believed to exact a price—the price of blinding the thinker or the poet to the visible world. Think of Homer, whom the gods gave the divine gift by striking him with blindness; think of Plato's *Phaedo* where those who do philosophy appear to those who don't, the many, like people who pursue death. Think of Zeno, the founder of Stoicism, who asked the Delphic oracle what he should do to attain the best life and was answered, "Take on the color of the dead."[11]

Hence the question is unavoidable: How can anything relevant for the world we live in arise out of so resultless an enterprise? An answer, if at all, can come only from the thinking activity, the performance itself, which means that we have to trace experiences rather than doctrines. And where do we turn for these experiences? The "everybody" of whom we demand thinking writes no books; he has more urgent business to attend to. And the few, whom Kant once called the "professional thinkers," were never particularly eager to write about the experience itself, perhaps because they knew that thinking is resultless by nature. For their books with their doctrines were inevitably composed with an eye to the many, who wish to see results and don't care to draw distinctions between knowing and thinking, between truth and

meaning. We do not know how many of the "professional" thinkers whose doctrines constitute the tradition of philosophy and metaphysics had doubts about the validity and even the possible meaningfulness of their results. We know only Plato's magnificent denial (in the *Seventh Letter*) of what others proclaimed as his doctrines:

> On the subjects that concern me nothing is known since there exists nothing in writing on them nor will there ever exist anything in the future. People who write about such things know nothing; they don't even know themselves. For there is no way of putting it in words like other things which one can learn. Hence, no one who possesses the very faculty of thinking (*nous*) and therefore knows the weakness of words, will ever risk putting down thoughts in discourse, let alone fixing them into so unflexible a form as written letters.[12]

II

The trouble is that few thinkers ever told us what made them think and even fewer have cared to describe and examine their thinking experience. In this difficulty, unwilling to trust our own experiences because of the obvious danger of arbitrariness, I propose to look for a model, for an example that, unlike the "professional" thinkers, could be representative for our "everybody," i.e., to look for a man who counted himself neither among the many nor among the few—a distinction at least as old as Pythagoras; who did not aspire to being a ruler of cities or claim to know

how to improve and take care of the citizens' souls; who did not believe that men could be wise and did not envy the gods their divine wisdom in case they should possess it; and who therefore had never even tried his hand at formulating a doctrine that could be taught and learned. In brief, I propose to use a man as our model who did think without becoming a philosopher, a citizen among citizens, doing nothing, claiming nothing that, in his view, every citizen should do and had a right to claim. You will have guessed that I intend to speak about Socrates, and I hope that no one will seriously dispute that my choice is historically justifiable.

But I must warn you: there is a great deal of controversy about the historical Socrates, about how and to what extent he can be distinguished from Plato, what weight to assign to Xenophon's Socrates, etc., and though this is one of the more fascinating topics of learned contention, I shall ignore it here altogether. Still, to use or, rather, to transform a historical figure into a model and assign to it a definite representative function stands in need of some justification. Etienne Gilson, in his great book *Dante and Philosophy,* shows how in the *Divine Comedy* "a character conserves as much of its historical reality as the representative function Dante assigns to it required."[13] Such freedom in handling historical, factual data, it seems, can be granted only to poets, and if nonpoets try their hand at it, the scholars will call it license and worse. And still, with or without justification, this is precisely what the broadly accepted custom of construing "ideal types" amounts to; for the great advantage of the ideal type is precisely that he is not a personified abstraction with some allegorical meaning ascribed to it, but that he was chosen out of the crowd of living beings, in the past or the present, because he possessed a representative significance in reality which only needed some purification in order to reveal its full meaning. Gilson explains

how this purification works in his discussion of the part assigned by Dante to Thomas Aquinas in the *Divine Comedy.* In the 10th canto of "Paradiso," Aquinas glorifies Siger of Brabant who had been condemned for heresy and whom "the Thomas Aquinas of history would never have undertaken to eulogize in the way in which Dante makes him eulogize him," because he would have refused "to carry the distinction between philosophy and theology to the point of holding . . . the radical separatism that Dante had in mind." For Dante, Aquinas would thus have "forfeited the right to symbolize in the *Divine Comedy* the Dominican wisdom of faith," a right to which, on all other accounts, he could lay claim. It was, as Gilson brilliantly shows, that "part of his make-up, which [even Aquinas] had to leave at the gate of the *Paradiso* before he could enter."[14] There are a number of traits in the Xenophonian Socrates, whose historical credibility need not be doubted, which Socrates might have had to leave at the gate of paradise if Dante had used him.

The first thing that strikes us in Plato's Socratic dialogues is that they are all aporetic. The argument either leads nowhere or it goes around in circles. To know what justice is you must know what knowledge is, and to know knowing you must have a previous, unexamined notion of knowledge. (Thus in *Theaetetus* and *Charmides.*) Hence, "A man cannot try to discover either what he knows or what he does not know." If he knows, there is no need of inquiry; if he does not know. . . he does not even know what he is to look for" (*Meno* 80). Or, in the *Euthyphro:* In order to be pious I must know what piety is. Pious are the things that please the gods; but are they pious because they please the gods or do they please the gods because they are pious? None of the *logoi,* the arguments, ever stays put; they move about, because Socrates, asking questions to which he does *not* know the answers, sets them

in motion. And once the statements have come full circle, it is usually Socrates who cheerfully proposes to start all over again and inquire what justice or piety or knowledge or happiness are.

For the topics of these early dialogues deal with very simple, everyday concepts, such as arise whenever people open their mouths and begin to talk. The introduction usually runs as follows: To be sure, there are happy people, just deeds, courageous men, beautiful things to see and admire, everybody knows about them; the trouble starts with our usage of nouns, presumably derived from those adjectives which we apply to particular cases as they *appear* to us (we *see* a happy man, *perceive* the courageous deed or the just decision), that is, with such words as "happiness," "courage," "justice," etc., which we now call concepts and which Solon called the "non-appearing measure" (*aphanēs metron*) "most difficult for the mind to comprehend, but nevertheless holding the limits of all things"[15]—and Plato somewhat later called ideas perceivable only by the eyes of the mind. These words, used to group together seen and manifest qualities and occurrences but nevertheless relating to something unseen, are part and parcel of our everyday speech, and still we can give no account of them; when we try to define them, they get slippery; when we talk about their meaning, nothing stays put anymore, everything begins to move. So instead of repeating what we learned from Aristotle, that Socrates was the man who discovered the "concept," we should ask ourselves what Socrates did when he discovered it. For surely, these words were part of the Greek language before he tried to force the Athenians and himself to give an account of what they and he meant when they uttered them, being convinced that no speech would be possible without them.

This conviction has become questionable. Our knowledge of the so-called primitive languages has taught us that this grouping

together of many particulars into a name common to all of them is by no means a matter of course, for these languages, whose vocabulary is often much richer than ours, lack such abstract nouns even if they relate to clearly visible objects. To simplify matters, let us take such a noun which to us no longer sounds abstract at all. We can use the word "house" for a great number of objects—for the mud-hut of a tribe, for the palace of a king, the country home of a city dweller, the cottage in the village or the apartment house in town—but we can hardly use it for the tents of some nomads. The house in and by itself, *auto kath'auto,* that which makes us use the word for all these particular and very different buildings, is never seen, neither by the eyes of the body nor by the eyes of the mind; every imagined house, be it ever so abstract, having the bare minimum to make it recognizable, is already a particular house. This house as such, of which we must have a notion in order to recognize particular buildings as houses, has been explained in different ways and called by different names in the history of philosophy; with this we are not concerned here, although we might have perhaps less trouble defining it than such words as "happiness" or "justice." The point here is that it implies something considerably less tangible than the structure perceived by our eyes. It implies "housing somebody" and being "dwelt in" as no tent could house or serve as a dwelling place which is put up today and taken down tomorrow. The word "house," Solon's "unseen measure," "holds the limits of all things" pertaining to dwelling; it is a word that could not exist unless one presupposes thinking about being housed, dwelling, having a home. As a word, "house" is shorthand for all these things, the kind of shorthand without which thinking and its characteristic swiftness—"swift as a thought" as Homer used to say—would not be possible at all. *The word "house" is something like a frozen thought which*

thinking must unfreeze, defrost as it were, whenever it wants to find out its original meaning. In medieval philosophy, this kind of thinking was called meditation, and the word should be heard as different from, even opposed to, contemplation. In any event, this kind of pondering reflection does not produce definitions and in this sense is entirely without results; it might however be that those who, for whatever reason, have pondered the meaning of the word "house" will make their apartments look a bit better—though not necessarily so and certainly without being conscious of anything so verifiable as cause and effect. Meditation is not the same as deliberation, which indeed is supposed to end in tangible results; and meditation does not aim at deliberation although it sometimes, by no means very often, turns into it.

Socrates, however, who is commonly said to have believed in the teachability of virtue, seems indeed to have held that talking and thinking about piety, justice, courage, and the rest were liable to make men more pious, more just, more courageous, even though they were not given either definitions or "values" to direct their further conduct. What Socrates actually believed in in such matters can best be illustrated by the similes he applied to himself. He called himself a gadfly and a midwife, and, according to Plato, was called by somebody else an "electric ray," a fish that paralyzes and numbs by contact, a likeness whose appropriateness he recognized under the condition that it be understood that "the electric ray paralyzes others only through being paralyzed itself. It isn't that, knowing the answers myself I perplex other people. The truth is rather that I infect them also with the perplexity I feel myself."[16] Which, of course, sums up neatly the only way thinking can be taught—except that Socrates, as he repeatedly said, did not teach anything for the simple reason that he had nothing to teach; he was "sterile" like the midwives in Greece who were

beyond the age of childbearing. (Since he had nothing to teach, no truth to hand out, he was accused of never revealing his own view [*gnōmē*]—as we learn from Xenophon, who defended him against this charge.)[17] It seems that he, unlike the professional philosophers, felt the urge to check with his fellowmen if his perplexities were shared by them—and this urge is quite different from the inclination to find solutions for riddles and then to demonstrate them to others.

Let us look briefly at the three similes. *First,* Socrates is a gadfly: he knows how to arouse the citizens who, without him, will "sleep on undisturbed for the rest of their lives," unless somebody else comes along to wake them up again. And what does he arouse them to? To thinking, to examining matters, an activity without which life, according to him, was not only not worth much but was not fully alive.[18]

Second, Socrates is a midwife: here the implication is threefold—the "sterility" I mentioned before, the expert knowledge of delivering others of their thoughts, that is, of the implications of their opinions, and the Greek midwife's function of deciding whether the child was fit to live or, to use Socratic language, was a mere "wind egg," of which the bearer must be cleansed. In this context, only the last two of these implications matter. For looking at the Socratic dialogues, there is nobody among Socrates' interlocutors who ever brought forth a thought that was no wind egg. He rather did what Plato, certainly thinking of Socrates, said of the Sophists: he purged people of their "opinions," that is, of those unexamined prejudgments which prevent thinking by suggesting that we know where we not only don't know but cannot know, helping them, as Plato remarks, to get rid of what was bad in them, their opinions, without however making them good, giving them truth.[19]

Third, Socrates, knowing that we don't know and still unwilling to let it go at that, remains steadfast with his own perplexities and, like the electric ray, paralyzes with them whomever he comes into contact with. The electric ray, at first glance, seems to be the opposite of the gadfly; it paralyzes where the gadfly arouses. Yet, what cannot but look like paralysis from the outside and the ordinary course of human affairs is felt as the highest state of being alive. There exist, despite the scarcity of documentary evidence for the thinking experience, a number of utterances of the thinkers throughout the centuries to this effect. Socrates himself, very much aware that thinking deals with invisibles and is itself invisible, lacking all the outside manifestation of other activities, seems to have used the metaphor of the wind for it: "The winds themselves are invisible, yet what they do is manifest to us and we somehow feel their approach."[20] (The same metaphor, incidentally, is used by Heidegger, who also speaks of the "storm of thought.")

In the context in which Xenophon, always anxious to defend the master against vulgar accusations with vulgar arguments, mentions this metaphor, it does not make much sense. Still, even he indicates that the manifestations of the invisible wind of thought are those concepts, virtues and "values," with which Socrates dealt in his examinations. The trouble—and the reason why the same man can be understood and understand himself as gadfly as well as electric ray—is that this same wind, whenever it is aroused, has the peculiarity of doing away with its own previous manifestations. It is in its nature to undo, unfreeze as it were, what language, the medium of thinking, has frozen into thought—words (concepts, sentences, definitions, doctrines), whose "weakness" and inflexibility Plato denounces so splendidly in the *Seventh Letter.* The consequence of this peculiarity is that think-

ing inevitably has a destructive, undermining effect on all established criteria, values, measurements for good and evil, in short on those customs and rules of conduct we treat of in morals and ethics. These frozen thoughts, Socrates seems to say, come so handy you can use them in your sleep; but if the wind of thinking, which I shall now arouse in you, has roused you from your sleep and made you fully awake and alive, then you will see that you have nothing in your hand but perplexities, and the most we can do with them is share them with each other.

Hence, the paralysis of thought is twofold: it is inherent in the *stop* and think, the interruption of all other activities, and it may have a paralyzing effect when you come out of it, no longer sure of what had seemed to you beyond doubt while you were unthinkingly engaged in whatever you were doing. If your action consisted in applying general rules of conduct to particular cases as they arise in ordinary life, then you will find yourself paralyzed because no such rules can withstand the wind of thought. To use once more the example of the frozen thought inherent in the word "house," once you have thought about its implied meaning—dwelling, having a home, being housed—you are no longer likely to accept for your own home whatever the fashion of the time may prescribe; but this by no means guarantees that you will be able to come up with an acceptable solution for your own housing problems. You may be paralyzed.

This leads to the last and, perhaps, even greatest danger of this dangerous and resultless enterprise. In the circle around Socrates, there were men like Alcibiades and Critias—God knows, by no means the worst among his so-called pupils—and they turned out to be a very real threat to the polis, and this not by being paralyzed by the electric ray but, on the contrary, by having been aroused by the gadfly. What they had been aroused to was license and cyni-

cism. They had not been content with being taught how to think without being taught a doctrine, and they changed the nonresults of the Socratic thinking examination into negative results: if we cannot define what piety is, let us be impious—which is pretty much the opposite of what Socrates had hoped to achieve by talking about piety.

The quest for meaning, which relentlessly dissolves and examines anew all accepted doctrines and rules, can at every moment turn against itself, as it were, produce a reversal of the old values, and declare these as "new values." This, to an extent, is what Nietzsche did when he reversed Platonism, forgetting that a reversed Plato is still Plato, or what Marx did when he turned Hegel upside down, producing a strictly Hegelian system of history in the process. Such negative results of thinking will then be used as sleepily, with the same unthinking routine, as the old values; the moment they are applied to the realm of human affairs, it is as though they had never gone through the thinking process. What we commonly call nihilism—and are tempted to date historically, decry politically, and ascribe to thinkers who allegedly dared to think "dangerous thoughts"—is actually a danger inherent in the thinking activity itself. There are no dangerous thoughts; thinking itself is dangerous, but nihilism is not its product. Nihilism is but the other side of conventionalism; its creed consists of negations of the current, so-called positive values to which it remains bound. All critical examinations must go through a stage of at least hypothetically negating accepted opinions and "values" by finding out their implications and tacit assumptions, and in this sense nihilism may be seen as an ever-present danger of thinking. But this danger does not arise out of the Socratic conviction that an unexamined life is not worth living but, on the contrary, out of the desire to find results which would

make further thinking unnecessary. Thinking is equally dangerous to all creeds and, by itself, does not bring forth any new creed.

However, nonthinking, which seems so recommendable a state for political and moral affairs, also has its dangers. By shielding people against the dangers of examination, it teaches them to hold fast to whatever the prescribed rules of conduct may be at a given time in a given society. What people then get used to is not so much the content of the rules, a close examination of which would always lead them into perplexity, as the possession of rules under which to subsume particulars. In other words, they get used to never making up their minds. If somebody then should show up who, for whatever reasons and purposes, wishes to abolish the old "values" or virtues, he will find it easy enough provided he offers a new code, and he will need no force and no persuasion—no proof that the new values are better than the old ones—to establish it. The faster men held to the old code, the more eager will they be to assimilate themselves to the new one; the ease with which such reversals can take place under certain circumstances suggests indeed that everybody is asleep when they occur. This century has offered us some experience in such matters: How easy it was for the totalitarian rulers to reverse the basic commandments of Western morality—"Thou shalt not kill" in the case of Hitler's Germany, "Thou shalt not bear false testimony against thy neighbor" in the case of Stalin's Russia.

To come back to Socrates. The Athenians told him that thinking was subversive, that the wind of thought was a hurricane which sweeps away all the established signs by which men orient themselves in the world; it brings disorder into the cities and it confuses the citizens, especially the young ones. And though Socrates denied that thinking corrupts, he did not pretend that it improves, and though he declared that "no greater good has ever

befallen" the polis than what he was doing, he did not pretend that he started his career as a philosopher in order to become such a great benefactor. If "an unexamined life is not worth living,"[21] then thinking accompanies living when it concerns itself with such concepts as justice, happiness, temperance, pleasure, with words for invisible things which language has offered us to express the meaning of whatever happens in life and occurs to us while we are alive.

Socrates calls this quest for meaning *erōs,* a kind of love which is primarily a need—it desires what it has not—and which is the only matter he pretends to be an expert in.[22] Men are in love with wisdom and do philosophy (*philosophein*) because they are not wise, just as they are in love with beauty and "do beauty," so to speak (*philokalein,* as Pericles called it),[23] because they are not beautiful. Love, by desiring what is not there, establishes a relationship with it. To bring this relationship into the open, make it appear, men speak about it in the same way the lover wants to speak about his beloved.[24] Since the quest is a kind of love and desire, the objects of thought can only be lovable things—beauty, wisdom, justice, etc. Ugliness and evil are excluded by definition from the thinking concern, although they may occasionally turn up as deficiencies, as lack of beauty, injustice, and evil (*kakia*) as lack of good. This means that they have no roots of their own, no essence of which thought could get hold. Evil, we are told, cannot be done voluntarily because of its "ontological status," as we would say today; it consists in an absence, in something that is not. If thinking dissolves normal, positive concepts into their original meaning, then the same process dissolves these negative "concepts" into their original meaninglessness, into nothing. This incidentally is by no means only Socrates' opinion; that evil is a mere privation, negation, or exception from

the rule is the nearly unanimous opinion of all thinkers.[25] (The most conspicuous and most dangerous fallacy in the proposition, as old as Plato, "Nobody does evil voluntarily," is the implied conclusion, "Everybody wants to do good." The sad truth of the matter is that most evil is done by people who never made up their mind to be either bad or good.)

Where does this leave us with respect to our problem—inability or refusal to think and the capacity of doing evil? We are left with the conclusion that only people filled with this *erōs,* this desiring love of wisdom, beauty, and justice, are capable of thought—that is, we are left with Plato's "noble nature" as a prerequisite for thinking. And this was precisely what we were not looking for when we raised the question whether the thinking activity, the very performance itself—as distinguished from and regardless of whatever qualities a man's nature, his soul, may possess—conditions him in such a way that he is incapable of evil.

III

Among the very few positive statements that Socrates, this lover of perplexities, ever made there are two propositions, closely connected with each other, which deal with our question. Both occur in the *Gorgias,* the dialogue about rhetoric, the art of addressing and convincing the many. The *Gorgias* does not belong to the early Socratic dialogues; it was written shortly before Plato became the head of the Academy. Moreover, it seems that its very subject matter deals with a form of discourse which would lose all sense if it were aporetic. And yet, this dialogue is still aporetic; only the last Platonic dialogues from which Socrates either disappears or is no longer the center of the discussion have entirely lost

this quality. The *Gorgias,* like the *Republic,* concludes with one of the Platonic myths of a hereafter with rewards and punishments which apparently, that is ironically, resolve all difficulties. Their seriousness is purely political; it consists in their being addressed to the multitude. These myths, certainly non-Socratic, are of importance because they contain, albeit in a nonphilosophical form, Plato's admission that men can and do commit evil voluntarily, and even more importantly, the implied admission that he, no more than Socrates, knew what to do philosophically with this disturbing fact. We may not know whether Socrates believed that ignorance causes evil and that virtue can be taught; but we do know that Plato thought it wiser to rely on threats.

The two positive Socratic propositions read as follows: The *first:* "It is better to be wronged than to do wrong"—to which Callicles, the interlocutor in the dialogue, replies what all Greece would have replied: "To suffer wrong is not the part of a man at all, but that of a slave for whom it is better to be dead than alive, as it is for anyone who is unable to come either to his own assistance when he is wronged or to that of anyone he cares about" (474). The *second:* "It would be better for me that my lyre or a chorus I directed should be out of tune and loud with discord, and that multitudes of men should disagree with me rather than that I, *being one,* should be out of harmony with myself and contradict *me.*" Which causes Callicles to tell Socrates that he is "going mad with eloquence," and that it would be better for him and everybody else if he would leave philosophy alone (482).

And there, as we shall see, he has a point. It was indeed philosophy, or rather the experience of thinking, that led Socrates to make these statements—although, of course, he did not start his enterprise in order to arrive at them. For it would be a serious mistake, I believe, to understand them as the results of some cogita-

tion about morality; they are insights, to be sure, but insights of experience, and as far as the thinking process itself is concerned they are at best incidental by-products.

We have difficulties realizing how paradoxical the first statement must have sounded when it was made; after thousands of years of use and misuse, it reads like cheap moralizing. And the best demonstration of how difficult it is for modern minds to understand the thrust of the second is the fact that its key words, *"being one"* it would be worse for me to be at odds with myself than in disagreement with multitudes of men, are frequently left out in translation. As to the first, it is a subjective statement, meaning, it is better *for me* to suffer wrong than to do wrong, and it is countered by the opposite, equally subjective statement which, of course, sounds much more plausible. If, however, we were to look at the propositions from the viewpoint of the world, as distinguished from that of the two gentlemen, we would have to say what counts is that a wrong has been committed; it is irrelevant who is better off, the wrongdoer or the wrong-sufferer. As citizens we must prevent wrongdoing since the world we all share, wrongdoer, wrong-sufferer, and spectator, is at stake; the City has been wronged. (Thus our law codes distinguish between crimes, where indictment is mandatory, and transgressions, where only private individuals are being wronged who may or may not want to sue. In the case of a crime, the subjective states of mind of those involved are irrelevant—the one who suffered may be willing to forgive, the one who did may be entirely unlikely to do it again—because the community as a whole has been violated.)

In other words, Socrates does not talk here as a citizen who is supposed to be more concerned with the world than with his own self. It is rather as though he said to Callicles: If you were like me, in love with wisdom and in need of examining, and if the world

should be as you depict it—divided into the strong and the weak where "the strong do what they can and the weak suffer what they must" (Thucydides)—so that no alternative exists but to either do or suffer wrong, then you would agree with me that it is better to suffer than to do. The presupposition is if you were thinking, if you were to agree that "an unexamined life is not worth living."

To my knowledge there exists only one other passage in Greek literature that, in almost the same words, says what Socrates said. "More unfortunate (*kakodaimonesteros*) than the wronged one is the wrong doer," reads one of the few fragments of Democritus (B45), the great adversary of Parmenides who probably for this reason was never mentioned by Plato. The coincidence seems noteworthy because Democritus, in distinction from Socrates, was not particularly interested in human affairs but seems to have been quite interested in the experience of thinking. "The mind (*logos*)," he said, makes abstinence easy because "it is used to getting joys out of itself (*auton ex heautou*)" (B146). It looks as though what we are tempted to understand as a purely moral proposition actually arises out of the thinking experience as such.

And this brings us to the second statement, which is the prerequisite of the first one. It, too, is highly paradoxical. Socrates talks of being one and *therefore* not being able to risk getting out of harmony with himself. But nothing that is identical with itself, truly and absolutely *one* like A is A, can be either in or out of harmony with itself; you always need at least two tones to produce a harmonious sound. To be sure, when I appear and am seen by others, I am one; otherwise I would be unrecognizable. And so long as I am together with others, barely conscious of myself, I am as I appear to others. We call *consciousness* (literally, "to know with myself") the curious fact that in a sense I also am for myself, though I hardly appear to me, which indicates that the Socratic

"being-one" is not so unproblematic as it seems; I am not only for others but for myself, and in this latter case, I clearly am not just one. A difference is inserted into my Oneness.

We know of this difference in other respects. Everything that exists among a plurality of things is not simply what it is, in its identity, but it is also different from other things; this being different belongs to its very nature. When we try to get hold of it in thought, wanting to define it, we must take this otherness (*alteritas*) or difference into account. When we say what a thing is, we always also say what it is not; every determination, as Spinoza has it, is a negation. Related to itself alone it is the same (*auto* [i.e., *hekaston*] *heautō tauton:* "each for itself the same"),[26] and all we can say about it in its sheer identity is "A rose is a rose is a rose." But this is not at all the case if I in my identity ("being one") relate to myself. This curious thing that I am needs no plurality in order to establish difference; it carries the difference within itself when it says: "I am I." So long as I am conscious, that is, conscious of myself, I am identical with myself only for others to whom I appear as one and the same. For myself, articulating this being-conscious-of-myself, I am inevitably *two-in-one*—which incidentally is the reason why the fashionable search for identity is futile and our modern identity crisis could be resolved only by losing consciousness. Human consciousness suggests that difference and otherness, which are such outstanding characteristics of the world of appearances as it is given to man as his habitat among a plurality of things, are the very conditions for the existence of man's ego as well. For this ego, the I-am-I, experiences difference in identity precisely when it is not related to the things that appear but only to itself. Without this original split, which Plato later used in his definition of thinking as the soundless dialogue (*eme emautō*) between me and myself, the two-in-one, which Socrates

presupposes in his statement about harmony with myself, would not be possible.[27] Consciousness is not the same as thinking; but without it, thinking would be impossible. What thinking actualizes in its process is the difference given in consciousness.

For Socrates, this two-in-one meant simply that if you want to think you must see to it that the two who carry on the thinking dialogue be in good shape, that the partners be friends. It is better for you to suffer than to do wrong because you can remain the friend of the sufferer; who would want to be the friend of and have to live together with a murderer? Not even a murderer. What kind of dialogue could you lead with him? Precisely the dialogue which Shakespeare let Richard III lead with himself after a great number of crimes had been committed:

> What do I fear? Myself? There's none else by.
> Richard loves Richard: that is, I am I.
> Is there a murderer here? No. Yes, I am:
> Then fly. What from myself? Great reason why—
> Lest I revenge. What, myself upon myself?
> O no! Alas, I rather hate myself
> For hateful deeds committed by myself.
> I am a villain. Yet I lie, I am not.
> Fool, of thyself speak well. Fool, do not flatter.

A similar encounter of the self with itself, undramatic, mild, and almost harmless in comparison, can be found in one of the contested Socratic dialogues, the *Hippias Major* (which, even though not written by Plato, may still give authentic evidence of Socrates). At its end, Socrates tells Hippias, who has proved to be an especially empty-headed partner, "how blissfully fortunate" he is compared with himself who, when he goes home, is awaited by a

very obnoxious fellow "who always cross-examines [him], a close relative, living in the same house." Hearing Socrates give utterance to Hippias' opinions, he will ask him "whether he is not ashamed of himself talking about a beautiful way of life when questioning makes it evident that he does not even know the meaning of the word 'beauty' " (304). In other words, when Hippias goes home he remains one; although he certainly does not lose consciousness, he also will do nothing to actualize the difference within himself. With Socrates or, for that matter, Richard III, it is a different story. They have not only intercourse with others, they have intercourse with themselves. The point here is that what the one calls "the other fellow" and the other "conscience" is never present except when they are alone. When midnight is over and Richard has joined again the company of his friends, then

> Conscience is but a word that cowards use,
> Devised at first to keep the strong in awe.

And even Socrates, so attracted by the marketplace, must go home where he will be alone, in solitude, to meet the other fellow.

I chose the passage in *Richard III,* because Shakespeare, though he uses the word "conscience," does not use it here in the accustomed way. It took language a long time until it separated the word "consciousness" from "conscience," and in some languages, for instance in French, such a separation never happened. Conscience, as we use it in moral or legal matters, supposedly is always present within us, just like consciousness. And this conscience is also supposed to tell us what to do and what to repent of; it was the voice of God before it became the *lumen naturale* or Kant's practical reason. Unlike this conscience, the fellow Socrates is talking about has been left at home; he fears him, as the

murderers in *Richard III* fear their conscience—as something that is absent. Conscience appears as an afterthought, that thought which is aroused either by a crime, as in the case of Richard himself, or by unexamined opinions, as in the case of Socrates, or as the anticipated fear of such afterthoughts, as in the case of the hired murderers in *Richard III.* This conscience, unlike the voice of God within us or the *lumen naturale,* gives no positive prescriptions—even the Socratic *daimonion,* his divine voice, only tells him what *not* to do; in the words of Shakespeare, "it fills a man full of obstacles." What makes a man fear this conscience is the anticipation of the presence of a witness who awaits him only *if* and when he goes home. Shakespeare's murderer says: "Every man that means to live well endeavors . . . to live without it," and success in this endeavor comes easy because all he has to do is never to start the soundless solitary dialogue we call thinking, never to go home and examine things. This is not a matter of wickedness or goodness, as it is not a matter of intelligence or stupidity. He who does not know the intercourse between me and myself (in which we examine what we say and what we do) will not mind contradicting himself, and this means he will never be either able or willing to give account of what he says or does; nor will he mind committing any crime, since he can be sure that it will be forgotten the next moment.

Thinking in its noncognitive, nonspecialized sense as a natural need of human life, the actualization of the difference given in consciousness, is not a prerogative of the few but an ever-present faculty of everybody; by the same token, inability to think is not the "prerogative" of those many who lack brain power but the ever-present possibility for everybody—scientists, scholars, and other specialists in mental enterprises not excluded—to shun that intercourse with oneself whose possibility and importance

Socrates first discovered. We were here not concerned with wickedness, with which religion and literature have tried to come to terms, but with evil; not with sin and the great villains who became the negative heroes in literature and usually acted out of envy and resentment, but with the nonwicked everybody who has no special motives and for this reason is capable of *infinite* evil; unlike the villain, he never meets his midnight disaster.

For the thinking ego and its experience, conscience, which "fills a man full of obstacles," is a side effect. And it remains a marginal affair for society at large except in emergencies. For thinking as such does society little good, much less than the thirst for knowledge in which it is used as an instrument for other purposes. It does not create values, it will not find out, once and for all, what "the good" is, and it does not confirm but rather dissolves accepted rules of conduct. Its political and moral significance comes out only in those rare moments in history when "Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold; / Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world," when "The best lack all conviction, while the worst / Are full of passionate intensity."

At these moments, thinking ceases to be a marginal affair in political matters. When everybody is swept away unthinkingly by what everybody else does and believes in, those who think are drawn out of hiding because their refusal to join is conspicuous and thereby becomes a kind of action. The purging element in thinking, Socrates' midwifery, that brings out the implications of unexamined opinions and thereby destroys them—values, doctrines, theories, and even convictions—is political by implication. For this destruction has a liberating effect on another human faculty, the faculty of judgment, which one may call, with some justification, the most political of man's mental abilities. It is the faculty to judge *particulars* without subsuming them under those

general rules which can be taught and learned until they grow into habits that can be replaced by other habits and rules.

The faculty of judging particulars (as Kant discovered it), the ability to say, "this is wrong," "this is beautiful," etc., is not the same as the faculty of thinking. Thinking deals with invisibles, with representations of things that are absent; judging always concerns particulars and things close at hand. But the two are interrelated in a way similar to the way consciousness and conscience are interconnected. If thinking, the two-in-one of the soundless dialogue, actualizes the difference within our identity as given in consciousness and thereby results in conscience as its by-product, then judging, the by-product of the liberating effect of thinking, realizes thinking, makes it manifest in the world of appearances, where I am never alone and always much too busy to be able to think. The manifestation of the wind of thought is no knowledge; it is the ability to tell right from wrong, beautiful from ugly. And this indeed may prevent catastrophes, at least for myself, in the rare moments when the chips are down.

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