

REFLECTIONS

THINKING-I

Numquam se plus agere quam nihil cum aeret, unquam minus solum esse quam cum solus esset.—Cato.

Every one of us is like a man who sees things in a dream and thinks that he knows them perfectly and then wakes up to find that he knows nothing.—Plato.

Thinking does not bring knowledge as do the sciences.

Thinking does not produce usable practical wisdom.

Thinking does not solve the riddles of the universe.

Thinking does not endow us directly with the power to act.—Martin Heidegger.

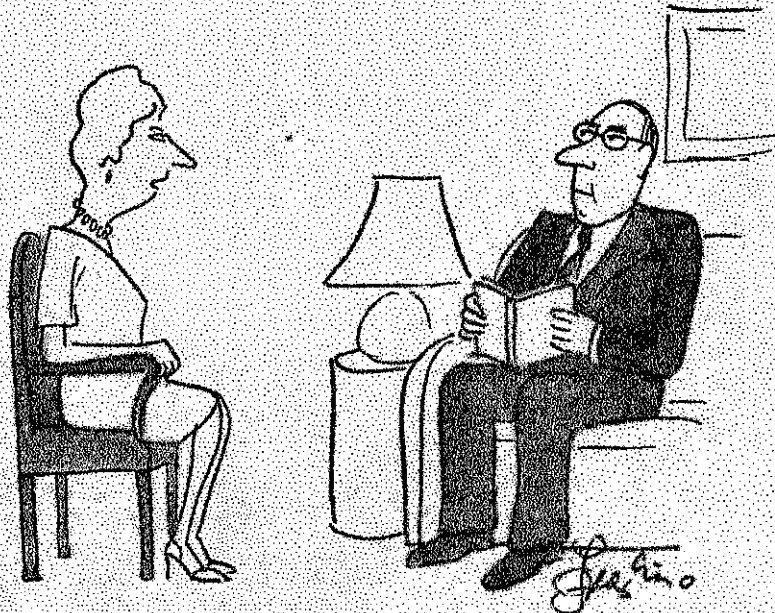
TO talk about Thinking seems to me so presumptuous that I feel I should start less with an apology than with a justification. No justification, of course, is needed for the topic itself. What disturbs me is that I try my hand at it, for I have neither claim nor ambition to be a "philosopher," or be numbered among what Kant called, not without irony, "*Denker von Gewerbe*" ("professional thinkers"). The question is, then, should I not have let this problem remain in the hands of the experts, and the answer will have to show what prompted me to venture from the relatively safe fields of political science and political theory into these awesome matters, instead of leaving well enough alone.

Factually, my preoccupation with mental activities has two rather different origins. The immediate impulse came from my attending the trial of Adolf Eichmann, in Jerusalem. In my report on it, I spoke of "the banality of evil." Behind that phrase I held no thesis or doctrine, although I was dimly aware that it went counter to our tradition of thought—literary, theological, or philosophical—about the phenomenon of evil. Evil, we have learned, is something demonic. Its incarnation is Satan, a "lightning fall from heaven" (St. Luke 10:18), or Lucifer, the fallen angel (Unamuno: "The devil is an angel, too") whose sin is pride ("proud as Lucifer"); namely, that *superbia* of which only the best are capable—what they want is not to serve God but to be like Him. Evil men, we are told, act out of envy; this may be resentment at not having turned out well through no fault of their own (Shakespeare's Richard III), or the envy of Cain, who slew Abel because "God had regard for Abel and his offering, but for Cain and his offering he had no regard." Or they may be prompted by weakness (Macbeth). Or, on the contrary, by the powerful hatred that wickedness feels for sheer goodness (Iago's "I hate the Moor; my cause is heard," Claggart's hatred for Billy Budd's "barbarian" innocence, a hatred considered by Melville to be "a depravity accord-

ing to nature"), or by covetousness, "the root of all evil" ("*radix omnium malorum cupiditas*"). However, what I was confronted with was utterly different and still undeniably factual: I was struck by a manifest shallowness in the doer which made it impossible to trace the incontestable evil of his deeds to any deeper level of roots or motives. The deeds were monstrous, but the doer—at least, the very effective one now on trial—was quite ordinary, commonplace, and neither monstrous nor demonic. There was no sign in him of firm ideological convictions or of specific evil motives, and the only notable characteristic one could detect either in his past behavior or in his behavior during the trial and throughout the pre-trial police examination was something entirely negative: it was not stupidity but *thoughtlessness*. In the setting of Israeli court and prison procedures, he functioned as well as he had functioned under the Nazi regime, but when confronted with situations for which such routine procedures did not

exist he was helpless, and his cliché-ridden language produced on the stand, as it had evidently done in his official life, a kind of macabre comedy. 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 make by virtue of their existence. If we were responsive to this claim all the time, we would soon be exhausted; Eichmann differed from the rest of us only in that clearly he knew of no such claim at all.

It was this absence of thinking—which is so ordinary an experience in our everyday life, where we have hardly the time, let alone the inclination, to stop and think—that awakened my interest. Is evil doing—the sins of omission as well as the sins of commission—possible in default not just of "base motives" (as the law calls them) but of any motives whatever, of 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 evil doing? Might the problem of good and evil, our faculty for telling right from wrong, be connected with our faculty of thought? To be sure, not in the sense that



"You're always telling me you know exactly how I feel. Well, this time I'm calling your bluff. Exactly how do I feel?"

thinking would ever be able to produce the good deed as its result, as though "virtue could be taught" and learned; only habits and customs can be taught, and we know only too well the alarming speed with which they are unlearned and forgotten when new circumstances demand a change in manners and behavior patterns. (The fact that we usually treat matters of good and evil in courses in "morals" or "ethics" may indicate how little we know about them, for the word "morals" comes from *mores* and the word "ethics" from *ethos*, the Latin and the Greek words for customs and habit, the Latin being associated with rules of behavior, whereas the Greek has to do with habitus, like our "habit.") The absence of thought I was confronted with sprang neither from forgetfulness of former, presumably good manners and ways nor from stupidity in the sense of inability to comprehend—not even in the sense of "moral insanity," for the absence was just as noticeable in instances that had nothing to do with so-called ethical decisions or matters of conscience.

The question that imposed itself was, could the activity of thinking as such, the habit of examining whatever happens to come to pass or to attract attention, regardless of the results and the specific content of the activity—could this activity be among the conditions that make men abstain from evil-doing, or even actually "condition" them against it? The very word "conscience" at any rate, points in that 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, criminals and such, while only "good people" are capable of having a bad conscience? To put it differently, using Kantian language: after being struck by a fact that, willy-nilly, "put me in possession of a concept" (the banality of evil), I could not help raising the *quæstio juris* and asking myself "by what right I possessed and used it."

As for the second source of my pre-occupation, once I had raised those moral questions, springing from factual experience, and going counter to the wisdom of the ages—not only counter to the various traditional answers that "ethics," a branch of philosophy, has offered to the problem of evil but also counter to the much larger answers that philosophy has ready for the much less urgent question "What is think-

THE TRANSFORMATION OF FATHER

The transformation of Father began
the spring they left the port.
His crocheted scarf dropped between the dock boards,
his skunk-fur cap plopped into a barrel
like a black banana peel.

That summer, grappling with the scrap lot
where he labored to collect
himself, he lost his suspenders
among hubcaps, odd buttons, cans of beer.
His vest slunk down the sewer.

The transformation of Father began
to speed up with the fall.
Hunched in a circle, the children stamped
around him, rugging at long underpants.
His face turned red as hell.

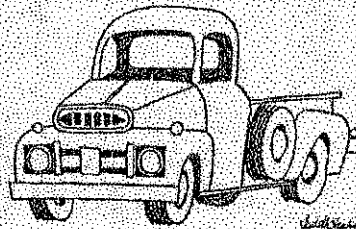
Stripped to the skin, he stooped, and threw his clothes
into the fireplace, poked
them three times with a steel-pronged fork.
The ash died white as snowflakes. It was time
to chuck the old regime.

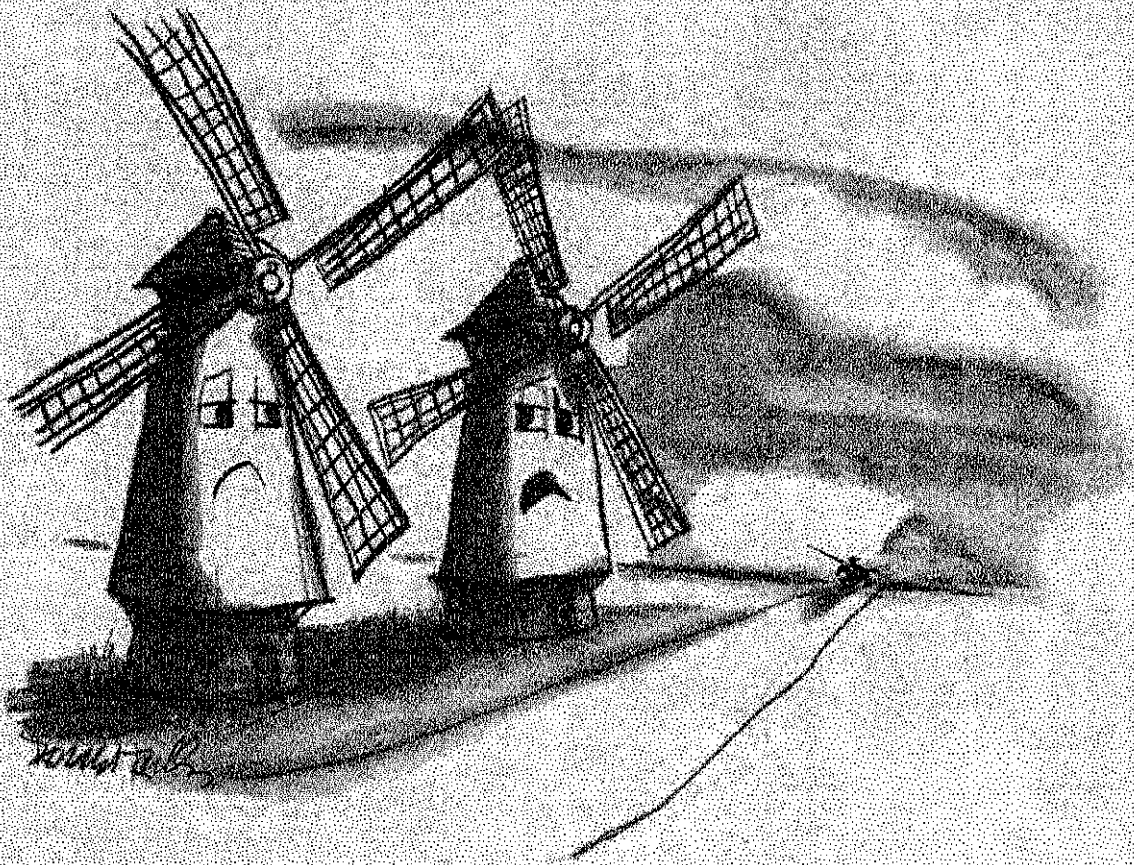
—FLORENCE ELON

ing?"—they tended to renew in me certain doubts that had been plaguing me ever since I finished a study of what my publisher wisely called "The Human Condition," though I had intended it more modestly as an inquiry into "the *vita activa*." I had been concerned with the problem of Action, the oldest concern of political theory, and what had always troubled me about it was that the very term I adopted for my reflections on the matter—namely, *vita activa*—was coined by men who were devoted to the contemplative way of life and looked upon all kinds of being alive from that perspective.

Seen from that perspective, the active way of life is "laborious," the contemplative way sheer quietness; the active one goes on in public, the contemplative one in the "desert," the active one is devoted to "the necessity of one's neighbor," the contemplative one to "the vision of God." ("*Quæ sunt vitæ, activa et contemplativa. Activa est in labore, contemplativa in requie. Activa in publico, contemplativa in deserto. Activa in necessitate proximi, contemplativa in visione Dei.*") I have

quoted from an author of the twelfth century almost at random, because the notion that contemplation is the highest state of the mind is as old as Western philosophy. The thinking activity—according to Plato, the soundless dialogue we carry on with ourselves—serves only to open the eyes of the mind, and even the Aristotelian *noûs* is an organ for seeing and beholding the truth. In other words, thinking aims at and ends in contemplation, and contemplation is not an activity but a passivity; it is the point where mental activity comes to rest. In Christian tradition, when philosophy had become the handmaiden of theology, thinking became meditation, and meditation again ended in contemplation, a kind of blessed state of the soul in which the mind was no longer stretching out to know the truth but, in anticipation of a future state, receiving it temporarily in intuition. Descartes, still influenced, characteristically, by this tradition, called the treatise in which he set out to demonstrate God's existence "Meditations." With the rise of the modern age, thinking became chiefly the handmaiden of science, of organized knowledge; and even though thinking then grew extremely active—following modernity's crucial conviction that I can know only what I myself make—it was Mathematics, the non-empirical science par excellence, wherein the mind appears to play only with itself, that turned out to be the science of sciences, delivering the key to those laws of nature and the universe which are concealed by appearances. If it was





“En garde! A vat!”

axiomatic for Plato that the invisible eye of the soul was the organ for beholding invisible truth with the certainty of knowledge, it became axiomatic for Descartes—during the famous night of his “revelation”—that there existed “a fundamental accord between the laws of nature and the laws of mathematics,” that is, between the laws of whatever lies behind mere semblance in nature and the laws of discursive thinking on the highest, most abstract level. And he actually believed that with this kind of thinking—what Hobbes called “reckoning with consequences”—he could deliver some knowledge about the existence of God, the nature of the soul, and similar matters.

What interested me in the *vita activa* was that the contrary notion of complete quietness in the *vita contemplativa* was so overwhelming that compared with this stillness all differences between the various activities in the *vita activa* disappeared. Compared with this quiet, whether you labored and tilled the soil, or worked and produced ob-

jects of use, or acted together with others in certain enterprises was no longer important. Even Marx, in whose thought the question of action played such a crucial role, “uses the expression ‘Praxis’ [practice or exercise] simply in the sense of ‘what man does’ as opposed to ‘what man thinks.’” I was, however, aware that one could look at this matter from a quite different viewpoint, and to indicate my doubts I ended this study of active life with a curious sentence that Cicero ascribed to Cato, who used to say, “Never is a man more active than when he does nothing, never is he less alone than when he is by himself.” (*Numquam se plus agere quam nihil cum ageret, numquam minus solum esse quam cum solus esset*). And, if Cato was right, the questions are obvious: What are we “doing” when we do nothing but think? Where are we when we, normally always surrounded by our fellow-men, are together with no one but ourselves?

Obviously, to raise such questions has its difficulties. At first glance, they seem to belong to what used to be

called “philosophy” or “metaphysics,” two terms and two fields of inquiry that, as we all know, have fallen into dispute. If this were merely a matter of modern positivist and neo-positivist assaults, we would perhaps have no need to be concerned. To be sure, Carnap’s statement that metaphysics should be regarded in the same light as poetry does go counter to the claims usually made by metaphysicians; but these, like Carnap’s own evaluation, may be based on an underestimation of poetry. Heidegger, whom Carnap singled out for attack, retorted by stating that philosophy and poetry were indeed closely related; they were not identical but sprung from the same source—which is thinking. And Aristotle, whom so far no one has accused of writing “mere” poetry, was of the same opinion: poetry and philosophy somehow belong together. Wittgenstein’s famous aphorism “What we cannot speak of we must be silent about,” which argues on the other side, would, if it were to be taken seriously, apply not only to what lies beyond sense experience but,