

Dialogue with *The Life of the Mind*

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Abstract

The Life of the Mind is an intriguing unfinished book written by Hannah Arendt, known as a political philosopher, at the very end of her life in 1975. We devote this Special Issue of *Culture & Psychology* to this work, because we are convinced that it raises interesting and important questions for social and cultural psychology today. In this Introduction to the Special Issue, we first explain why we believe that this book deserves closer attention. Second, we present the context of its publication, and a short biography of Arendt, to show its position in her life. Published posthumously, the book was her last project, yet it is based on some of her lifelong concerns. Third, we summarise Arendt's ideas about the psyche, and the main three faculties of mind – *thinking*, *willing* and *judging* – with which the book is concerned. We then address three difficulties the book raises for psychologists reading her work. Finally, we explain the context in which we developed this Special Issue, and summarise the topics that will be addressed in the papers assembled here.

Keywords

Hannah Arendt, *The Life of the Mind*, thinking, willing, dialogue

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Introduction

The Life of the Mind is an intriguing unfinished book written by Hannah Arendt, known as a political philosopher, at the very end of her life in 1975. We devote this Special Issue of *Culture & Psychology* to this work, because we are convinced that it raises interesting and important questions for social and cultural psychology today. In this Introduction to the Special Issue, we first explain why we believe that this book deserves closer attention. Second, we present the context of its publication, and a short biography of Arendt, to show its position in her life. Published posthumously, the book was her last project, yet it is based on some of her lifelong concerns. Third, we summarise Arendt's ideas about the psyche, and the main three faculties of mind – *thinking*, *willing* and *judging* – with which the book is concerned. We then address three difficulties the book raises for psychologists: the style in which her ideas are presented, Arendt's reluctance for our discipline, and the translational difficulties that may arise without careful attention to the sense in which Arendt deals with various concepts (e.g. the mind, knowledge, common sense). Finally, we explain the context in which we developed this Special Issue, and summarise the topics that will be addressed in the papers assembled here.

Why read *The Life of the Mind*?

There are academic books that help one to appreciate the wisdom of well-developed ideas, build on them, and provide one with the feeling of understanding and advancement of thought. There are also academic books that are exciting and enjoyable to read despite the reader's struggle to grasp the ideas and comprehend the concepts expressed by the author. Hannah Arendt's *The Life of the Mind* belongs to the latter type of book. After it was posthumously published in 1978, reviewers described *The Life of the Mind* as a fascinating and demanding book of curious and elusive style, with digressions, aphorisms and flights of thought (Yarbrough & Stern, 1981). For others, it was 'a shock', 'unusually abstruse and metaphysical' (McKenna, 1979). Bernstein (1978) viewed the book as an ambitious investigation of thinking, and an even more ambitious and complex exploration of willing. Altogether, reviewers and commentators characterised it as a captivating and eminent text. Wolin (1978) warned readers that they should attempt to understand Arendt's terms properly, rather than disregard faults in Arendt's writing. Although it was described as an intricate philosophical book, Arendt intended this work as a critique of 'professional thinkers', and she directed it at non-professional, or genuine, thinkers, such as lay people, poets, artists, and writers.

While a considerable number of reviews and commentaries on *The Life of the Mind* were published in the late 1970s and 1980s after the book was published, interest from philosophers and political and social scientists soon diminished. Significantly, only one chapter in *The Cambridge Companion to Hannah Arendt* (Bernstein, 2000) is devoted to thinking, and so refers extensively to the book. Indeed, although *The Life of the Mind* consists of two parts, *Thinking* and *Willing*, with an appendix on *Judging*, reviewers and commentators focused on *thinking*, which Arendt herself prioritised as the most important mental activity. *Willing* was either neglected (e.g. Bernstein, 2000), or its inadequacies

were emphasised (e.g. [Jacobitti, 1988](#)). Curiously, almost all of the reviewers and commentators of the book paid more attention to what it did not achieve, that is, a full account of *judging*, which Arendt died before developing, leading to much wonderment and speculation as to how she would have treated this important mental activity in this text (e.g. [Bernstein, 1978](#); [Moors, 1980](#)).

If *The Life of the Mind* is above all about the history of the philosophy of thinking and willing, why do we, as psychologists, find the book of interest more than 40 years after it was published, and why do we devote to it this Special Issue? The simple answer is that *thinking* and *willing* are vital psychological concepts, and Arendt's approach offers a fundamentally novel perspective on these activities that inspires a non-traditional way of considering mental activities. One need not agree with Arendt's views to appreciate that they are provocative and have the potential to stimulate discussions, especially of a psychological nature, on these topics. In this Introduction, we expand upon the context of the book's publication (Hannah Arendt's life); explain in brief the three faculties of mind addressed within the book; consider some of the translational difficulties that arise in psychological readings of the text; and outline our individual interests in it, as they are expanded upon in the papers that make up this Issue.

Hannah Arendt's life in her time

Hannah Arendt (1906–1975) spent the majority of her early years in Königsberg, the then regional capital of the German province of East Prussia (now known as Kaliningrad in Russia). Her parents, Paul and Martha Arendt (née Cohn), were educated middle-class secular Jews, but Arendt did attend synagogue with her grandparents. Her father was an engineer who also had a love of Classics, collecting a substantial library that Arendt engaged with from an early age ([Nixon, 2015](#)). Both her parents were active members of the Social Democratic Party of Germany, holding discussion groups at home, and Arendt took to the streets with her mother in protesting the brutal murder of Rosa Luxemburg in 1919 ([Nixon, 2015](#)). After Paul Arendt's death in 1913, Martha remarried, providing stability but also a home that was more conservative and socially conformist. When Arendt was expelled from school for leading a boycott against a teacher who had offended her, Martha supported Arendt in moving to Berlin, where she took classes in classics and Theology whilst preparing for the university entry exam ([Nixon, 2015](#); [Villa, 2000](#)). At university, first in Berlin and later, in Heidelberg, Arendt studied under Martin Heidegger and Karl Jaspers, with scholars suggesting that Arendt's relationships with these two eminent European philosophers were foundational to her shift from being a student of philosophy to a political thinker ([Young-Bruehl, 2006](#)). Arendt wrote her doctoral thesis on the concept of love in the thinking of Saint Augustine, introducing discussion on the concepts of 'natality' and 'love of the world', each of which she continued to develop in her later works.

After completing her studies, Arendt married Gunther Stern, a young Jewish philosopher, and they moved to Berlin in 1930, becoming more involved in Zionist activities. As the Nazis rose to power, Stern fled to Paris, whilst Arendt stayed, offering her home as a safe house. However, she and her mother were arrested in 1933 after Arendt's

documenting of anti-Semitic propaganda (Villa, 2000). They were held and questioned for over a week, fleeing to Paris (via Czechoslovakia and Geneva) once released, which marked the beginning of Arendt's eighteen years as a 'stateless person' (Villa, 2000). In Paris, Arendt worked for a number of organisations that provided support to Jewish refugees and legal aid to anti-fascists; she divorced her husband and became involved with Heinrich Blücher, who would later become her second husband (Nixon, 2015). However, as anti-Semitism grew in France, Blücher, and then Arendt and her mother, were detained as 'enemy aliens' in French internment camps, only managing to escape in the confusion when France were defeated by the Nazis in 1940. They found safe passage to the US (via Lisbon) in 1941 (Villa, 2000). Settling in New York, Arendt developed connections with the German-Jewish community: she got a job writing for the German-language Jewish newspaper *Aufbau*; she worked at the Commission for *European Jewish Cultural Reconstruction*, later becoming its Executive Director and travelling to post-war Europe on its behalf; and also worked as an editor at *Schocken Books*, bringing her into contact with a broad range of artists and intellectuals (Nixon, 2015). During this time, Arendt began writing what would become *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, and also published 'What is Existenz Philosophy?' which included a critique of Heidegger, who had by that time aligned himself with the German Nazi party.

In 1951, Arendt gained US citizenship, and *The Origins of Totalitarianism* was published to immediate acclaim, establishing her as a public intellectual and prominent political thinker who would go on to publish notable texts such as *The Human Condition*, *On Revolution*, *Reflections on Little Rock*, and *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil*. The latter two texts were met with much controversy. It has been said that the 'firestorm' surrounding Arendt's reports of the Eichmann trials in 1963 – related to her obvious dislike of the chief prosecutor; her insistence that the Jewish leadership colluded in the deportation of Jews to concentration camps; and her representation of 'evil' as 'banal' – caused Arendt significant suffering, insofar as it led to the loss of her many friends in the Jewish community, which was '...riven by outrage, incomprehension and disappointment by what it saw as her betrayal' (Nixon, 2015, p.15).

Arendt spent the last five years of her life working on what would posthumously be collated as her final unfinished manuscript, *The Life of the Mind*, which was planned to consist of three volumes, each focused on a different faculty of the mind: *Thinking*, *Willing*, and *Judging*. Despite declaring herself not a philosopher years earlier (in part, thought to reflect her refusal of Heidegger's 'inward turn'), *The Life of the Mind* is arguably her most philosophical text, both in terms of its content and its intellectual ambitions (Nixon, 2015). Arendt presented the first two volumes on *Thinking* and *Willing* as a series of Gifford Lectures at Aberdeen University, and suffered a near fatal heart attack in the middle of the first lecture on *Willing*. She had barely begun the third volume on *Judging* when she died on 4th December 1975 (Villa, 2000). Whilst *The Life of the Mind* contains an appendix with notes from her New School course on *Judging*, its absence as a full volume has been said to make what is an already 'formidable' reading task all the more complex (Young-Bruehl, 1982). *The Life of the Mind* remains Arendt's least engaged with book.

Understanding The Life of the Mind

Arendt defines the three faculties of the mind around which *The Life of the Mind* is structured as ‘basic’ (Arendt, 1978, T. p.69¹), and it is their exposition that allows her to sketch a theory of what she calls ‘psychic life’ (Arendt, 1978, T. p.31) in the book. While these faculties share some important qualities (for example, that they are autonomous), they also differ from one another in terms of their relationship to time; the way in which they deal with the general and particular; and in what Arendt refers to as their ‘tonalities’, or how they feel.

In the introductory chapter of *Thinking*, the first volume, Arendt justifies the overall project of writing the book. Here, she explains her aim to address two questions with which she was confronted throughout her lifetime: the question of the nature of evil, emerging from her discussion of the Eichmann trial; and the opposition between action and contemplation, grounding her commitment as political philosopher. On her experience of the Eichmann trial, she explains as she did in *Eichmann in Jerusalem* that it was the ‘banality of evil’ that characterised his wrongdoings:

The only notable characteristic one could detect in his past behavior as well as in his behavior during the trial and throughout the pre-trial police examination was something entirely negative: it was not stupidity but *thoughtlessness* (Arendt, 1978, T. p.4).

This experience raised for Arendt many important questions, among them: ‘Might the problem of good and evil, our faculty for telling right from wrong, be connected with our faculty of thought?’ (Arendt, 1978, p.5). Eichmann seemed to Arendt to speak in clichés and ready-made sentences. In other words, he was not thinking, and ‘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’ (Arendt, 1978, T. p.4).

Second, Arendt returns to her work on a political philosophy based on action, and her reading of classical philosophy on the *vita activa* – active life – as opposed to the *vita contemplative*, a life of contemplation and thinking (see also Bernstein, 1978). In the history of philosophy, from the ancient Greeks to medieval authors, to Marx, the *vita contemplative* is seen as a silent meditation, and is thus opposed to praxis, the active life of doing things. Arendt explains at the outset her intrigue at those classical authors who subtly described the nuances of contemplation, and in so doing erased all distinctions between forms of activity: ‘Compared to this quiet, it was no longer important whether you labored and tilled the soil, or worked and produced use-objects, or acted together with others in certain enterprises’ (Arendt, 1978, T. p.7). Why such a simplification? And more fundamentally, is the life of the mind really so inactive? Arendt objects to this point, and thus grounds her enquiry:

I was, however, aware that one could look at this matter from an altogether 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 that “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 solum esset*). Assuming 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? (Arendt, 1978, T. pp. 7–8).

This double question, ‘what are we doing when we do nothing but think?’, and ‘where are we when we (...) are together with no one but ourselves?’ thus grounds Arendt’s enquiry; defining thinking, she would also understand what Eichmann was lacking. Arendt’s choice is to conceive of thinking as a solitary and serene experience of the individual who has internal dialogues with oneself. She distinguishes thinking from cognition, and, drawing on Kant, explained that *thinking aims at searching for meaning*, and is thus opposed to the *intellect*, aiming at *truth*. According to Arendt, thinking requires a withdrawal from the world and its evidential nature. It is a sort of internal dialogue, having no concrete aim and with no product (in contrast to cognition, which produces a ‘treasure of knowledge’ (Arendt, 1978, T. p.62)). To qualify such internal dialogue, Arendt draws on Socrates; she thus calls it a ‘two-in-one’, a form of dialogue during which one reflects upon one’s own activities and thoughts. In that sense, thinking is thus oriented toward what is or has been, and extends it into an enduring present. Thinking can address everyday events that require one to stop-and-think, as well as the general questions of humankind – what is beauty, or justice. Finally, thinking, which requires this internal dialogue in a form of withdrawal from the world, is a serene activity.

In the second volume of the book, Arendt defines willing in contrast to thinking. According to her, willing as a capacity of the mind was not known in ancient Greece, although the Greeks made a distinction between voluntary and involuntary acts, such as murder and manslaughter, and potentiality and actuality. These dichotomies, however, did not imply temporality and therefore it was not surprising that Greeks did not have a concept of willing that implied freedom, novelty and change. In developing her own ideas on willing, Arendt considers that the activity of willing as a mental faculty is distinct from thinking. Hence, if thinking takes place in the present and is based on the past, the willing faculty is the ‘organ for the future’ (Arendt, 1978, W. p.13): it examines that which has never been and extends it into an uncertain future. Unlike thinking, willing is doing something, not nothing; it is not done for its own sake, nor does it find its fulfilment in the activity itself. Every volition not only concerns particulars but also looks forward to its own end. In contrast to thinking, which has the potential to destroy itself, Arendt postulates willing as having greater freedom because it is not restricted even by the law of non-contradiction. Finally, willing, as the relationship between the I-will and I-nill, is full of tension, and in that sense is opposed to the tranquillity and serenity (the ‘tonality’) of thinking, as she conceives of it. According to Arendt, willing as a faculty of the mind was rejected by most philosophers because it is irrational and aims at free action; it is also difficult to define, because it can only be grasped through thinking, which in itself ignores the specificities of willing.

The third faculty of mind of interest to Arendt is judging, which should have constituted the third volume of the book. While less is written in *The Life of the Mind* about

this faculty for the reasons mentioned above, Arendt considers that judging actualises thinking. If willing is oriented toward the future, judgment is oriented toward the past. Thinking deals with invisibles, with representations of things that are absent, whereas judging always concerns particulars and things close at hand. Judging thus brings back to the world that which had been abstracted and made general in thinking; referring to particulars, without subsuming them under general rules, it is thus the 'by-product' of thinking.

In addition to these three core faculties of mind, Arendt presents three other aspects of the psyche. First, humans live in the real world, or the world of appearances, which they make real for themselves. For this, they use the five senses, completed by the sixth sense of common sense, which indexes these experiences as real and as one's own. Second, while humans are engaged in the real world, they also have emotional experiences. Arendt identifies the soul as the location of one's passions. In contrast with all the other aspects of psychic life, passions are immediate, and also visible in the world of appearances: one is embarrassed, and blushes, or scared, and becomes pale – for all to see. The question for Arendt was thus: how do we move from such a world of immediacy to thinking, willing and judging? Third, Arendt introduces imagination to address this question. Imagination both de-sensorialises experience, and makes it present to mind. It thus enables us to move across past, present, and future, thus making present what is not anymore and what could be, notably through the use of language and metaphors.

Hence, although *The Life of the Mind* aims primarily to account for thinking, willing and judging, it embraces, albeit perhaps sketchily, the entirety of our psychic life.

Translational difficulties from Arendt to psychology

So described, it is clear that *The Life of the Mind* may be of interest to psychologists who are also concerned with questions about the mind, thinking, knowledge and meaning, morality, temporality, and so on. However, as psychologists, reading *The Life of the Mind* presents us with three main difficulties.

The first difficulty is stylistic: Arendt's style of writing is that of a philosopher in dialogue with the history of philosophy. In particular, thinking and willing have been unequally addressed in the history of philosophy; if much has been written on the former, much less has been written on the latter. It is perhaps not surprising, then, that the two volumes on *Thinking* and *Willing* each adopt a unique style of inquiry. *Thinking* proceeds through an argumentative logic, raising questions, considering different answers, and then renouncing the question to move to another. As a very well read and trained German philosopher, Arendt in *Thinking* turns to the history of philosophy to find authors who reflected on the experience of thinking itself. She does not engage in a systematic exploration of the evolution of ideas about thinking; rather, she playfully engages in dialogues with old friends and imagined interlocutors, arguing and thinking mainly with the work of classical philosophers, the rationalists, and scholars of the German tradition (though she also draws upon alternative literatures, from religious texts, to theatre, to contemporary ideas in physics, psychoanalysis and the social and natural sciences). The volume on *Willing*, in contrast, follows a historical structure, where Arendt contextualises

the work of series of past philosophers, and carefully discusses their propositions regarding willing, eventually not finding any relevant proposition for the present.

The second difficulty is that Arendt herself was rather critical of the enterprise of psychology in her work. She suggested that psychology, in what she saw as its focus on the soul and passions and emotions that were conceived of as ‘body-bound’, relied on the idea that human beings are psychically similar to one another. In her view, the discipline offered ‘results and discoveries [that] are neither particularly appealing nor very meaningful in themselves’ (Arendt, 1978, T., p.35). In fact, she goes so far as to describe:

The monotonous sameness and pervasive ugliness so highly characteristic of the findings of modern psychology, contrasting so obviously with the enormous variety and richness of overt human conduct. (Arendt, 1978, T., p.35).

Indeed, throughout the book, Arendt also offers a more general critique of science and its reliance on the ‘criterion of truth’ (Arendt, 1978, T., p.61–62). Recall that she distinguished thinking from cognition, and, drawing on Kant, explained that *thinking aims at searching for meaning*, and is thus opposed to the *intellect* (in science and in common sense), aiming at *truth*. In fact, Arendt supposes that ‘the questions raised by thinking and which it is in reason’s very nature to raise – questions of meaning – are all unanswerable by common sense and the refinement of it we call science’ (Arendt, 1978, T. p.58).

It is not our intention to address these criticisms here, although we have elsewhere explained our own thoughts on some of the challenges arising from within the psychological discipline (e.g. Marková, 2016). It is nevertheless important to clarify that Arendt in *The Life of the Mind* freely uses concepts that have specific and evolving meanings in the history of philosophy, and which may differ from the meanings they have in psychology, either historically or at present; and this is the third difficulty we are faced with. One may be tempted, for instance, to align Arendt’s distinction between the ‘me and myself’ in thinking with Mead’s (1934) ‘I and me’, yet in *The Life of the Mind* one finds a rather different conception of the self that does not involve taking the perspective of a human other. Similarly, one can find in Arendt’s work the concepts of the mind, imagination, and common sense, which differ from the way in which they are understood in various psychological literatures. Most obviously, one can also identify in *The Life of the Mind* a specific treatment of thinking and willing, which may suffer translational difficulties should one aim to automatically understand their meanings in the context of psychology. It is for this reason that we describe the book not as one that we altogether agree with, or that psychologists must collectively now revive, but rather as provocative and as having the potential to stimulate dialogue. In so doing, we perhaps echo Arendt’s own suggestions, which align with her ideas about thinking, of how her work be approached:

If some of my listeners or readers should be tempted to try their luck at the technique of dismantling, let them be careful not to destroy the “rich and strange,” the “coral” and the “pearls,” which can probably be saved only as fragments (Arendt, 1978, T. p.212).

The Special Issue

In this Issue overall, we also reflect the approach Arendt took in *The Life of the Mind*, in terms of her commitment to ideas, her pleasure in thinking, and her ongoing dialogues with real and imagined interlocutors. Indeed, this collection of papers is the outcome of a series of dialogues shared by the contributors with the book and with each other. In our papers, we did not aim to capture the most significant themes of *The Life of the Mind*, but each co-author focused on reading and thinking about the topic of her/his interest. Therefore, the papers in this issue represent us as individuals interpreting some of Arendt's ideas, rather than an attempt to portray *The Life of the Mind* as a whole.

The first three papers of this Issue are concerned with thinking. First, Zittoun (this issue) examines Arendt's conception of the activity of thinking, and the distinction between thinking as meaning-making, and cognition as truth-seeking. She also retraces Arendt's views thinking as inner-dialogue, its temporality, and its link to language, metaphors and imagination; she then highlights some implications of these propositions for cultural psychology. Zadeh and Coultas (this issue) focus on Arendt's understanding of the relationship between thinking, dialogue, and friendship. They initiate a dialogue between some of the ideas in *The Life of the Mind* and social psychological ideas about the oppositional nature of thinking, arriving at an account of friendship that reflects the rhetorical and dialogical character of thinking through the use of different historical examples. Brinkmann (this issue) reflects upon the moral implications of Arendt's ideas about thinking using different examples. Considering the dialogue Arendt has in *The Life of the Mind* with Heidegger, and raising other dialogues she might have had with him and others, Brinkmann outlines how spaces for thinking might be developed in contemporary societies, and in particular, in schools.

The final two papers are concerned with willing. Cabra (this issue) discusses Arendt's view on the will in dialogue with psychology and psychoanalysis. Considering Arendt's definitional criteria, Cabra argues for the need to specify this psychological process – scarcely defined in psychology – and brings forward the importance of considering the affective dynamics, the temporality, and the products of the will. Finally, Marková (this issue) addresses the implications of Arendt's understanding of the relationship between willing and moral and ethical principles for social (political) psychology. Bringing into dialogue *The Life of the Mind* with the work of Hegel, Heidegger, Bergson, and Moscovici, among others, Marková explains that one can identify different forms of willing in political actions, focussing in particular on the example of dissidents. This leads her to new reflections on dialogical conceptions of the self.

In each of the papers, we interpret Arendt's ideas in *The Life of the Mind* according to our own perspectives. We attempt to summarise the key concepts and ideas of interest to us in Arendt's work, so that readers of this issue do not need to have read the book in full to engage with our ideas. Rather, we intend that this issue records our dialogues with the book and with each other, and hope that it might inspire further such dialogues going forward.

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Note

1. In the 1978 edition of *the Life of the Mind*, the section on *Thinking* is paginated pp. 3–238, and the pagination of section 2 on *Willing* starts over again (pp. 3–239). The two sections are thus almost two consecutive volumes. For clarification purposes, we add T or W in our references (as in (Arendt, 1978, T. p. 10)) to indicate from which section/volume we quote. Notes on *Judging* appear as an annex of the volume on *Willing*.

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