

December 1, 1987 (vol. 3, no. 7)

Dear Colleague:

When we think well we have the "sensation of being alive," says Hannah Arendt, and this is because thinking is a natural human capacity, like digestion, the proper functioning of which produces a feeling of well-being. But, unlike other organic functions, which attach us to the world, thinking is achieved through a process of "de-sensing," of dematerializing the things in our immediate surrounding; it is to be dead to the world. After doing a lot of thinking alone, one feels etiolated--beautiful but without the green fuse of life--like a leaf that has been pressed and preserved between the airless pages of a book.

In an academic milieu, we claim to value thinking highly. But do we? Even Arendt, who loves to think, shows ambivalence in her book The Life of the Mind. The ordinary man or woman in our society puts little value on thinking. Common wisdom has it that thinking gets us nowhere--indeed will get us into trouble-- unless it is narrowly applied. To the Inuit Eskimos, thinking, unless it is necessitated by one's occupation of the moment (such as killing a seal or sewing up a boot), is dangerous. It has connotations of worry and brooding. It is a sign of craziness, of unhappiness, or of "strength"--that is, of antisocial independence. An Eskimo woman may say in a righteous tone of voice, "I never think." Another woman says suspiciously of a third person: "She is trying to make me think." What is she up to? Why is she disturbing the peace? (Jean Briggs, "Aspects of Inuit Value Socialization," Ethnology Service Paper no. 56, 1979, National Museum of Canada, Ottawa).

Eskimos appear to believe that when people think they will probably think bad or evil thoughts that can do harm both to themselves and to others. So their advice is: act rather than think. When people just act, they are likely to act according to long-accepted custom, which (in general) promotes social harmony. The Italian writer Cesare Pavese puts it thus: "We are all capable of evil thoughts, but only very rarely of evil deeds: we can all do good deeds, but very few of us can think good thoughts." We think murder, but rarely commit it; we do a dozen little good deeds a day, but how many of us can claim even one good thought that has a touch of freshness in it? Pavese committed suicide in 1950, shortly after he had won Italy's highest literary award, the Strega Prize.

Best wishes,

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