

RESPONSIBILITY
◆◆◆ AND ◆◆◆
JUDGMENT

Hannah Arendt

Powerlessness which always presupposes isolation is a valid excuse for doing nothing. The trouble with this argument is of course that it is entirely subjective; its authenticity can be demonstrated only by the willingness to suffer. There are no general rules, as in legal proceedings, which could be applied and which would be valid for all. But this, I am afraid, will be the bane of all moral judgments which are not supported by or derived from religious commands.

The only activity that seems to correspond to these *secular* moral propositions and to validate them is the activity of thinking, which in its most general, entirely nonspecialized sense can be defined with Plato as the silent dialogue between me and myself. If applied to matters of conduct, the faculty of imagination would be involved in such thought to a high degree, that is, the ability to represent, to make present to myself what is still absent—any contemplated deed. To what extent this faculty of thought, which is exercised in solitude, extends into the strictly political sphere, where I am always together with others, is another question. But whatever our answer to this question, which we hope will be answered by political philosophy, might turn out to be, no moral, individual and personal, standards of conduct will ever be able to excuse us from collective responsibility. This vicarious responsibility for things we have not done, this taking upon ourselves the consequences for things we are entirely innocent of, 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.

The water lily equation is a good illustration of the phenomenon of growth in a closed environment. Let's imagine a water lily planted in the middle of a large lake with the hereditary property to produce another water lily everyday. After thirty days, the whole lake is covered and the entire species dies, deprived of space and food.

Question: how long does it take for water lilies to cover half of the lake?

Answer: not fifteen days like we might think a bit too hastily, but twenty-nine days, that is to say on the penultimate day, since the number of water lilies doubles everyday.

If we were one of these water lilies, when would we realise that we are about to run out of space? On the 24th day, 97% of the lake's surface is still available, and we would probably not imagine the looming disaster, although we would be less than a week away from the extinction of our species...

What if a particularly watchful water lily started to worry on the 27th day, went searching for new spaces, and found three new lakes on the 29th day, therefore quadrupling the available space? In this case, the species would disappear on the...32nd day!

Albert Jacquard

« L'Équation du nénuphar », Calmann-Lévy, 1998.