

THE BANALITY OF NECESSITY: A MATERIALIST CORRECTION TO HANNAH ARENDT'S ETHICS OF THINKING

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Abstract: This article problematizes Hannah Arendt's concept of *thinking* in *The Life of the Mind*, especially the tension between the activity of thinking as an internal dialogue (*two-in-one*) and the material conditions necessary for it. Based on the phenomenon of "thoughtlessness" (*tuna pikir*), this work contends that the lack of thinking in the precarious subject is not a moral failure, but a structural outcome of the political economy of time. With a materialist framework using Marx's alienation and Jameson's political unconscious, this article stages a phenomenological critique of three literary works: Ahmad Tohari's *Orang-Orang Proyek*, Kazuo Ishiguro's *The Remains of the Day*, and Franz Kafka's *The Trial*. The analysis uncovers that the total consumption of the body (Tohari), the commodification of the self (Ishiguro), and the colonization of time (Kafka) are, by their nature, the reasons why the "withdrawal" Arendt needs for judgment is not possible. This article ends with the idea of the Banality of Necessity—a state in which the survival imperative closes down critical reflection—which constitutes a materialist correction to Arendt's ethics.

Keywords: Hannah Arendt, materialism, thoughtlessness, precarity, literature.

Abstrak: Artikel ini mempersoalkan konsep "berpikir" (*thinking*) dalam filsafat Hannah Arendt, khususnya ketegangan antara aktivitas berpikir sebagai dialog batin (*two-in-one*) dengan kondisi material yang memungkinkannya. Berangkat dari fenomena *tuna pikir*, penelitian ini mengajukan tesis bahwa absennya aktivitas berpikir pada subjek prekariat bukanlah kegagalan moral, melainkan konsekuensi struk-

tural dari ekonomi politik waktu. Dengan menggunakan kerangka materialis yang mengacu pada konsep alienasi Marx dan nirsadar politik Jameson, artikel ini melakukan kritik fenomenologis atas tiga karya sastra: *Orang-Orang Proyek* (Ahmad Tohari), *The Remains of the Day* (Kazuo Ishiguro), dan *The Trial* (Franz Kafka). Analisis menunjukkan bahwa konsumsi total atas tubuh (Tohari), komodifikasi diri (Ishiguro), dan kolonisasi waktu (Kafka) secara struktural menghalangi “penarikan diri” (*withdrawal*) yang disyaratkan Arendt. Artikel ini menyimpulkan dengan mengajukan konsep “Banalitas Keniscayaan” (*The Banality of Necessity*) – sebuah kondisi di mana imperatif bertahan hidup memantapkan refleksi kritis – sebagai koreksi materialis terhadap etika Arendt.

Kata-kata Kunci: Hannah Arendt, materialisme, tuna pikir, prekaritas, sastra.

INTRODUCTION

Hannah Arendt, towards the end of her life, shifted her philosophical attention to the mind itself, focusing especially on the act of *thinking*. In *The Life of the Mind* (1978), which was published posthumously, she explores what it truly means to think. For Arendt, thinking is not an abstract or lofty process. Instead, it is something fundamental and deeply personal – a quiet inner dialogue she refers to as the “two-in-one.”¹ This process is more than just daydreaming. It is the genuine capacity to pause, to step away from the rush of everyday life and reflect, even if only briefly. That basic act – stopping everything to think – breaks through routine, allowing us to look beyond the surface of things.

Arendt’s primary point in looking at this mental operation was to figure out where the most radical kind of evil in modern times came from. Her looking at the issue came off the “banality of evil” in Adolf Eichmann. What she saw was that Eichmann was not a demon of a kind who was fuelled by a shockingly angry malicious intent, but rather he was characterized by “thoughtlessness” – a lack of any kind of critical inner

1 Hannah Arendt, *The Life of the Mind*, one-volume ed. (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1981), 185.

dialogue with himself. Consequently, Arendt posed a pivotal question: is it possible that thinking as such, independently of its content or result, is what makes human beings capable of not doing evil? For Arendt, banal evil is “thought-defying” precisely because it lacks depth or roots.²

The close connection of the freedom to think with the prevention of evil as uncovered by Arendt’s analysis is still very much alive in the modern-day context. She doesn’t simply dismiss evil as something monstrous and uncommon; she examines how evil can hide within everyday routines and ordinary behavior. This view makes her work essential for understanding how regular people might end up committing terrible acts when they stop thinking for themselves. Today, with so many intense discussions about ethics and morality, her call to truly think for ourselves seems more urgent than ever. This urgency is clear in, for instance, Karlina Supelli’s lecture, which highlights just how vital it is to keep questioning and thinking clearly as the world becomes more complex.³ This issue has also been picked up by educational philosophy lately,⁴ when Michalinos Zembylas points out the emergence of a “world alienation” of increasing intensity, a situation which requires the continuous development of one’s thinking ability so as to effectively resist systemic disinformation and the depletion of truth. Having said that, Zembylas stresses the educational imperative of thinking but simultaneously observes that the ability itself is being threatened by the architectural forces which divide and tire the individual.

Still, if we consider Arendt’s command to “stop and think” as something that should be done in every socio-political situation of the present day, it results in a contradiction that calls for an immanent critique. Even though thinking, according to Arendt, is a faculty that is beyond instru-

2 Elisabeth Young-Bruehl, *Hannah Arendt: For Love of the World* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1982), 369.

3 “Berpikir bersama Hannah Arendt” (lecture, Goethe-Institut Indonesia in collaboration with STF Driyarkara, Jakarta, November 22, 2025).

4 Michalinos Zembylas, “Hannah Arendt and the Post-Truth Era: Rethinking Political Education,” *Journal of Philosophy of Education* 60, nos. 1–2 (2026): 365–82, <https://doi.org/10.1093/jopedu/qhaf046>.

mental knowledge, the very moment of withdrawal it necessitates is dependent on time, space, and freedom.⁵ Thinking has, in fact, been closely associated with being free from “earthly cares.”⁶ This brings about an important paradox: Arendt frequently criticized and was trying to exclude biological needs – the domain of labor and necessity – from the political sphere.⁷

In late capitalism,⁸ which is characterized by great insecurity and a shortage of time, the question becomes very important: materially, can all individuals afford the liberty to slow down and reflect? Is not the moral requirement to think – regarded as a condition for being “somebody” – somehow at odds with the pressing biological need to work in order to live (*animal laborans*)? This conflict between Arendtian ethics and impelling necessity for survival through work is where this article’s materialist critique takes its departure. My critique revolves mainly around what I call the Banality of Necessity: a situation where the basic requirements for biological survival and the total control of time in late capitalism get rid of the possibility of “withdrawal” which is necessary for moral evaluation. Unlike Arendt’s idea of the “banality of evil” – which results from a choice not to think – the banality of necessity is when the basic material and time conditions for reflection are deliberately removed, so

5 Marie Morgan, “Hannah Arendt and the ‘Freedom’ to Think,” *Journal of Educational Administration and History* 48, no. 2 (2016): 173–82.

6 Ian Storey, “Facing the End: The Work of Thinking in the Late *Denktagebuch*,” in *Artifacts of Thinking: Reading Hannah Arendt’s Denktagebuch*, ed. Roger Berkowitz and Ian Storey (New York: Fordham University Press, 2017), 172. in *Artifacts of Thinking*, ed. Ian Storey and Roger Berkowitz, *Reading Hannah Arendt’s Denktagebuch* (Fordham University Press, 2017), 172.

7 Amy Allen, “Solidarity after Identity Politics: Hannah Arendt and the Power of Feminist Theory,” *Philosophy & Social Criticism* 25, no. 1 (1999): 97–118; Angela Last, “Re-Reading Worldliness: Hannah Arendt and the Question of Matter,” *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 35, no. 1 (2017): 72–87.

8 I follow Ernest Mandel (1987) and Fredric Jameson (1991) in using the term “late capitalism” to denote the post-World War II stage of globalized, multinational capital. Unlike earlier competitive or imperialist stages, late capitalism is characterized by the total commodification of all spheres of human existence – including time, the psyche, and the “world of appearances.” For the purposes of this article, its defining feature is the “time-space compression” (Harvey, 1989) that eliminates the temporal surplus required for the *vita contemplativa*.

that thoughtlessness becomes a structural outcome rather than a moral failing.

The concepts of *Thinking* and *Judging* in an Arendtian framework and their moral implications have been the focus of a lot of debate in the works of various scholars. Seyla Benhabib, among others, engaged in the interpretative work of “thinking with and against Arendt” and identified a “normative lacuna” in Arendt’s ethics.⁹ Some other critics emphasize the omission of a politico-economic analysis in Arendt’s work, such as poverty, which she figured as outside the political domain.¹⁰ However, these confrontations seldom challenge the politico-economic conditions for thinking to be possible; it is as if the material conditions for the *vita contemplativa* are presumed to be already there.¹¹ Steven Klein, for instance, notices that Arendt did not follow up her insights about the worldly character of the economy with a deeper investigation.¹² This paper intends to close that gap by providing a materialist correction to Arendtian ethics.

This article explores this tension by drawing on materialism and Marxism—focusing on Marx’s concept of alienation and Fredric Jameson’s idea of the “political unconscious.” Rather than seeing work as simply something people must do, this perspective exposes it as a system that ensnares individuals, preventing any real escape. To examine this, I employ a kind of phenomenological simulation: I analyze a selection of literary texts—Ahmad Tohari’s *Orang-Orang Proyek* (2002), Kazuo Ishiguro’s *The Remains of the Day* (1989), and Kafka’s *The Trial* (1925). I approach these works as cognitive laboratories, spaces to probe and challenge how people think when subjected to relentless labour and ongoing insecurity.

9 Seyla Benhabib, *The Reluctant Modernism of Hannah Arendt*, new ed. (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2003), 193.

10 Last, “Re-Reading Worldliness,” 72–87; Nica Siegel, “The Roots of Crisis: Interrupting Arendt’s Radical Critique,” *Theoria: A Journal of Social and Political Theory* 62, no. 144 (2015): 60–79.

11 Ville Suuronen, “Resisting Biopolitics: Hannah Arendt as a Thinker of Automation, Social Rights, and Basic Income,” *Alternatives: Global, Local, Political* 43, no. 1 (2018): 35–53.

12 Steven Klein, “‘Fit to Enter the World’: Hannah Arendt on Politics, Economics, and the Welfare State,” *American Political Science Review* 108, no. 4 (2014): 856–69.

In this way, literature does more than mirror reality – it transforms experiences into “thought-things,” tools that allow us to investigate what lies beneath the surface of this crisis.

This article contends that “thoughtlessness” as a phenomenon in the precarious subject should not be considered a moral failure, but rather a structural result of how the economic system steals time. The main novelty of this article, which is a materialist correction, moves the emphasis from individual moral responsibility (Arendt) to the system critique that conditions the subject to be simply *homo oeconomicus*. Accordingly, this article is in agreement with Arendt’s critique of the perils of thoughtlessness, and at the same time, it adjusts her ethical assumption which disregards the material conditions for intellectual freedom. The argument will first look into the analysis of the anatomy of Arendtian prerequisites for thinking, then the politico-economic framework of time in late capitalism followed by a literary constellation analysis as a phenomenological simulation of the death of critical power.

I. THE ANATOMY OF PRIVILEGE IN *THE LIFE OF THE MIND*

Hannah Arendt identifies thinking as one of the primary mental faculties which is different from, although often mixed up with the pursuit of knowledge. This notion is in line with Reason (*Vernunft*), which, according to Kant, Arendt considers to be different from Intellect (*Verstand*). Intellect is related to cognition aimed at truth – seeking certain and verifiable knowledge – while Reason is involved in the never-ending search for meaning. Thinking is the process of giving something its being, not asking *what* it is or *if* it exists, but “what it means for it to be.”¹³ In his recent article,¹⁴ Wout Cornelissen reconsiders Arendt’s last work and contends that thinking is to be seen as a “practice of orientation” – a necessary mental function which helps to resist the mechanical, pre-digested responses that

13 Arendt, *The Life of the Mind*, 57.

14 Wout Cornelissen, “Switching Perspectives: Reading Arendt’s *The Life of the Mind* Anew,” *Arendt Studies* 9 (2025): 21–49, <https://doi.org/10.5840/arendtstudies202594>.

characterize modern life. This “orientation” is far from being a simple matter of cognition; rather, it is an existential one demanding a steady position which is under continuous threat by the changes of late capitalism.

What drove Arendt to explore this question in *The Life of the Mind* was her experience observing Adolf Eichmann, a man whose crimes shocked her not because of any profound evil, but because of his total absence of thought. She didn’t see a monster. Instead, she saw someone disturbingly ordinary, indifferent, and unthinking. Arendt described this as “heedless recklessness or hopeless confusion or complacent repetition of ‘truths’ which have become trivial and empty.”¹⁵ This realization led her to ask whether the very act of thinking – of questioning, reflecting, refusing to accept easy answers – helps prevent people from committing evil, or perhaps even protects them from it.

Thinking removes us from the world of appearances¹⁶ and political activity. It requires a genuine interruption – a moment to “stop and think” that blocks out everything else for a time.¹⁷ This is the idea behind Cato’s words at the beginning of Arendt’s book: “*Numquam se plus agere quam nihil cum ageret, numquam minus solum esse quam cum solus esset,*” meaning “never am I less alone than when I am by myself, never am I more active than when I do nothing.”¹⁸ In short, thinking may seem like inactivity, but it is far from empty. It is restless, ongoing, and never produces a final product. Arendt describes it as a kind of wind – constantly moving, continually thawing out rigid ideas, but never settling or building anything solid to grasp. She likens it to Penelope’s web: each day, you unravel what you completed the previous night.¹⁹ Cognition, by contrast,

15 Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday Anchor Books, 1959), 6.

16 By the “world of appearances,” Arendt refers to the public realm – the space of “human togetherness” where individuals disclose their unique identities through speech and action. To “appear” is to be seen and heard by others in a common world; it is the domain of political life. However, the mental act of thinking necessitates a temporary retreat from this surface world into the invisible, silent dialogue of the “two-in-one”

17 Arendt, *The Life of the Mind*, 175.

18 Arendt, *The Life of the Mind*, 216.

19 Arendt, *The Life of the Mind*, 88.

provides us with a “treasure of knowledge”²⁰ – something lasting. Thinking does not. It slips outside normal space and time, allowing the mind to gather fragments of past and present into an “enduring present.” In this realm, the thinker is both nowhere and everywhere – what Arendt calls *nunc stans*, a timeless suspension that enables the whole process.²¹

The interaction with oneself here is not loneliness but rather the state of solitude, when awareness turns into an inner dialogue. According to Arendt, in this mode of thinking the self splits into two entities, “me and myself,” that engage in a silent conversation.²² This inner duality is a reflection of the fundamental human condition of plurality existing in the outer world. In order for the conversation to proceed, the two sides must remain in a relation of friendship: the “me” should be capable of tolerating, questioning, and finally living with the “self.” It is this relationship that, according to Arendt, gives rise to conscience. Conscience, in her view, is nothing but “being at peace with myself,”²³ a state which stops the self from being a partner in evil or hypocrisy. Since this inner dialogue is incessant and goes over the same points again and again, it prevents one’s ideas from being too firm, inflexible, or dogmatic.

Still, this fundamental operation of the mind – which is based on a step back and a silent conversation with oneself – very much relies on the fact that one has the time and the necessary distance from one’s needs. The capability to make a judgment and to engage in politics indirectly presupposes that “the needs of the living organism have been provided for.”²⁴ In order for a political actor to be “free for the world,” he or she has to be liberated from the requirements of survival. Arendt observes that most people don’t spend much time thinking – either because they’re too

20 Arendt, *The Life of the Mind*, 62.

21 Arendt, *The Life of the Mind*, 202.

22 Arendt, *The Life of the Mind*, 64.

23 Peter D. Burdon, “Hannah Arendt: On Judgment and Responsibility,” *Griffith Law Review* 24, no. 2 (2015): 230.

24 Serena Parekh, *Hannah Arendt and the Challenge of Modernity: A Phenomenology of Human Rights* (New York: Routledge, 2008), 86.

occupied or simply don't want to stop and reflect.²⁵ Historically, the possibility of a *vita contemplativa* depended on a sharp separation from *vita activa*.²⁶ Socrates, for instance, is seen by Arendt as the ideal thinker, but his dialogues were possible only because ancient Greek society maintained a strict boundary between the household, where daily needs were managed, and the political realm, where genuine freedom was exercised.²⁷ Thus, Arendt's ethics of thinking rests on a hidden material premise: one must first be liberated from the labour of survival before one can afford the luxury of conscience.

II. ALIENATION AND THE LOSS OF THE INTERNAL PARTNER

The whole idea of Arendt's three-point conceptualization of thinking – going one's way into solitude, the inner conversation of the two-in-one, and the moment of stillness from which the reflection comes – was in the end dependent on the material and temporal conditions which Marx's kind of alienated labour was destroying in a systematic way. With the pressures of modern production, the subject is taken out of self by the external economic demands resulting in the capacity of autonomous reflection becoming a privilege and not a universal possibility anymore. Reflective freedom, for the *animal laborans* – the human being caught in the ceaseless biological necessity – is structurally absent.

As explained above, Arendtian thought is inherently based on solitude, a condition where the self, in silence, communicates with itself. The division between "I" and "myself" should always be there as a kind of inner alliance or "friendship," which makes conscience and self-criticism possible. Alienated labour, on the other hand, terribly disrupts this fragile internal duality by bringing a much more forceful external division.

25 Sophie Zadeh et al., "Dialogue with *The Life of the Mind*," *Culture & Psychology* 28, no. 2 (2022): 155–65.

26 Charles Des Portes, "Hannah Arendt's Hidden Phenomenology of the Body," *Human Studies* 45, no. 1 (2022): 139–56.

27 William Tilleczek, "Training the Philosopher King: Ancient Models of Political Action in Hannah Arendt and Michel Foucault," *Journal of the Philosophy of History* 18, no. 3 (2024): 365–91.

As Marx points out, in alienated labour the worker is “at home when he is not working, and when he is working he is not at home.”²⁸ Thus, productive activity is turned into nothing more than a means to keep life going. Under capitalism, most individuals must “sell their labour-power for subsistence,” reducing the worker to a mere “bearer of labour-power.”²⁹ This imposed division—the one that we have to work to live and the one that is theoretically free and conscious—basically rips the subject apart from the outer world. In these kinds of situations, the internal dialogue which Arendt considers the grounding of moral life, cannot be supported. The psychological freedom necessary for the two-in-one operation—the freedom that requires independence, firmness, and the ability to detach—gets replaced by the constant demand for survival. The inner “friend” with whom we have to keep the conversation cannot be upheld in the case of a severe and prolonged material dependency.

As a result, Arendt’s thinking process is an escape from the outer world, a solitude state which should be separated from the negative isolation of loneliness. It may be said that the thinking ego is “without a home in an emphatic sense”³⁰ because it deals with universals rather than with particulars; however, this philosophical homelessness still assumes a stable earthly base, an “inner refuge” from where it is possible to reflect.³¹ Arendt makes it clear that the disinterestedness required for judgment “cannot arise unless we are in a position to forget ourselves, the cares and interests and urges of our lives.”³² That is to say, the fulfilment of basic biological needs is a precondition for the higher mental functions.

Marx’s portrayal of *animal laborans*, whose “life process” is no longer tied and in fact “absorbs the whole body politic,”³³ is a radical change that

28 Karl Marx, *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, trans. Martin Milligan (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1974), 66.

29 Onur Ulas Ince, “Bringing the Economy Back In: Hannah Arendt, Karl Marx, and the Politics of Capitalism,” *The Journal of Politics* 78, no. 2 (2016): 411–26.

30 Arendt, *The Life of the Mind*, 199.

31 Morgan, “Hannah Arendt and the ‘Freedom’ to Think,” 173–82.

32 Parekh, *Hannah Arendt and the Challenge of Modernity*, 86.

33 Ince, “Bringing the Economy Back In,” 411–26.

fundamentally overturns the existing situation. A working subject, driven by necessity – a person who has to “make a living” forever³⁴ – does not get from a withdrawal the peace of solitude but only the painful exhaustion caused by the endless cycle of labour. The worker instead of finding an internal partner for reflection, realizes that his inner space has already been taken over by the “urgency of the life process.”³⁵ There is no longer the grounded solitude necessary for the two-in-one dialogue, but rather the lonely despair of a self that is not able to secure even the smallest distance from necessity that thinking requires.

In addition, Arendt distinguishes the process of thinking largely by its ability to “stop-and-think.” This interruption is not a matter of choice but rather the very element of the reflective work. In opposition to that, capitalist labour time, according to Arendt, exposes individuals to the unvarying rhythm of *labour*, which she refers to as “cyclical, repetitive activities tied to biological necessities.”³⁶ Her contrast between *Labor* (repetitive, instantly consumed) and *Work* (productive of durable objects and rooted in linear time)³⁷ is a way of pointing out that contemporary capitalist production, in its very essence, merges all human activities into the temporality of labour.

Stopping this cycle, for those who live in material precarity, is simply not compatible with survival: to “stop” is to give up subsistence. The constant worry about how to meet one’s most basic needs excludes the time or temporal freedom necessary for a deep and lasting reflection. While Arendt associates political freedom with the ability to start over – to break the necessity³⁸ – alienated labour keeps the worker in the continuous un-

34 Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 110.

35 Parekh, *Hannah Arendt and the Challenge of Modernity*, 96.

36 Lisa Herzog, “Old Facts, New Beginnings: Thinking with Arendt about Algorithmic Decision-Making,” *The Review of Politics* 83, no. 4 (2021): 565. New Beginnings: Thinking with Arendt about Algorithmic Decision-Making\ \uc0\ \u8217}, {\ \i} The Review of Politics} 83, no. 4 (2021): 565.

37 Katherine Davies, “The Architecture of Appearance,” *Arendt Studies* 4 (2020): 53–82.

38 Stefania Fantauzzi, “Taking Responsibility for the World,” *Arendt Studies* 3 (2019): 133–51.

changeable biological metabolism rhythm. The “freedom to think,” therefore, is a condition of having a temporal surplus, which the structurally constrained labourer cannot access, thus making reflective activity not only very difficult but also a materially forbidden luxury.

Finally, Arendt links thoughtlessness to the failure of the person to use his or her critical faculties which is most obviously shown by the unreflective reliance on clichés and stock phrases.³⁹ However, Fredric Jameson gives a materialist explanation of the same phenomenon, holding that non-thinking should not be considered as a moral fall but as a psychic defense that is part of the political unconscious.⁴⁰ In Jameson’s view, the deep structural contradictions of capitalism—exploitation, alienation, and the compulsion to labour—present themselves to the reflective subject as a “logical scandal” or an irresolvable double bind.⁴¹ If there were really to be any self-examination, it would have to be the worker who, in that case, would be forced to face these unbearable contradictions and the ubiquitous suffering arising from a life dominated by necessity. Hence thoughtlessness, according to the theory, becomes a manifestation of repression or ideological closure, an agent through which painful realities must be sealed off in order to survive.⁴² The very routines and clichés that Arendt is against, are, therefore, psychological shields for people who live under chronic material pressure. Material precarity, in this case, does not only limit the capacity for thought; it actually makes thoughtlessness a necessary condition for psychic endurance under capitalism.

III. THE LITERARY CONSTELLATION OF THOUGHTLESSNESS

In order to support this materialist critique of Arendt’s ethics, I rely on literature as a “cognitive laboratory.” By means of a phenomenolog-

39 Ashley N. Biser, “Calibrating Our ‘Inner Compass’: Arendt on Thinking and the Dangers of Disorientation,” *Political Theory* 42, no. 5 (2014): 519–42.

40 Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (London: Routledge, 2007), 22–24.

41 Jameson, *The Political Unconscious*, 68.

42 Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011), 222.

ical reading of Ahmad Tohari, Kazuo Ishiguro, and Franz Kafka, I come to understand that “thoughtlessness” is not an ill of individual’s mind, but is a structural condition – resulting from the total consumption of the body (Tohari), the alienation of the soul (Ishiguro), and the colonization of time (Kafka).

THE EXHAUSTED BODY: ORANG-ORANG PROYEK

The phenomenology of labor in Ahmad Tohari’s *Orang-Orang Proyek* is a detailed description of how the workers are affected by the structures that limit their ability to think. The river dam construction in Cibawor is the place where, according to the author, the concept of pure necessity can be observed in its most ruthless form. It is the impersonal force against which man has to struggle without rest, man and nature locked in a fight to the death, as the authors dramatically puts it. He does not depict the river as a source of inspiration but rather a destructive agent:

Pagi ini Sungai Cibawor kelihatan letih...Air yang semula jernih mulai mengeruh di pagi hari, meninggi dan segera menggelora setengah jam kemudian.⁴³

This turbidity represents the confusion of the subject’s own mind. The workers are immersed in an environment of *lumpur* that weighs down their every move, physically showing the heaviness of necessity. The continuous noise of the project also removes the option of the silent two-in-one dialogue. The mechanical cacophony – “*Deru mesin truk... dentam godam kuli yang sedang memecah batu*”⁴⁴ – is taking over the sound space that is needed for thought.

In this domain, the workers (*kuli-kuli*) become Marx’s *animal laborans* – organisms whose being is essentially the nonstop labour and consumption cycle that is required for their survival. According to Tohari, their lives are controlled by what he calls the *perut*, they are driven by the first and foremost fear for their survival. They are a “*generasi yang malang*”

43 Ahmad Tohari, *Orang-Orang Proyek* (Jakarta: PT Gramedia Pustaka Utama, 2016), 5.

44 Tohari, *Orang-Orang Proyek*, 24.

who quit school early “*demi perut*.”⁴⁵ Becoming biological functions only, it makes them “worldless” in the Arendtian sense; they are not able to go beyond the necessity realm and get into the freedom one. Their time belongs not to them; it is determined by the external political imperatives, for instance, the hurry to finish the bridge before the 1992 General Election (*Pemilu*).⁴⁶ This political deadline shortens their temporal existence to the extent that they have to go into *lembur* (overtime) in order to meet it and thus their bodies are literally pushed to the point of tearing:

Wah, sayang, Pak Tarya. Sampai proyek ini selesai, jangan-jangan saya tak punya waktu lowong, kecuali malam hari bila pas tidak ada lembur. Proyek ini memang sedang dikebut. Demi pemilu, kan?⁴⁷

Here, the “realm of freedom” (free time) is totally dominated by the “realm of necessity” (labor time).⁴⁸ The rupture of the internal partner even for the educated subject is shown through the tragic example of Kabul the engineer who, technically, is part of the intellectual class. In contrast to the “thoughtless” Eichmann who *chose not* to think, Kabul is *inhibited* from thinking. The overwhelming force of necessity – made worse by the mental torment of having to deal with systemic corruption⁴⁹ (*permainan*) – takes up all of his cognitive horizon:

Mak Sumeh, pekerjaan di proyek ini menyita seluruh perhatian dan pikiranku. Jadi, aku belum bisa memikirkan hal lain.⁵⁰

Such an admission marks the characteristic feature of the *animal laborans*. Kabul’s extremely intense physical output and his handling of structural deceit show him as a being whose existence is governed by the metabolic cycle. In fact, even eating, which could have been a moment of rest or communal bonding, has been taken away from humans, the quotation

45 Tohari, *Orang-Orang Proyek*, 68.

46 Tohari, *Orang-Orang Proyek*, 11.

47 Tohari, *Orang-Orang Proyek*, 155–56.

48 Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 90.

49 Tohari, *Orang-Orang Proyek*, 30–31.

50 Tohari, *Orang-Orang Proyek*, 54.

goes: *Makan menjadi hal yang sangat mekanis*.⁵¹ The result is psychological: the individual's inner voice is silenced not due to a moral failure, but because the mental energy needed to keep it has already been consumed by the necessity of the life process.

THE BUREAUCRATIC SOUL: *THE REMAINS OF THE DAY*

While Tohari can be seen as representing the exhausted body, Kazuo Ishiguro's Stevens can be seen as the soul that is, alienated from the self by choice. Stevens is a complicated examination of structural alienation and the disintegration of the internal moral framework due to the influence of professional ideology. His character becomes a clear example of the huge break described by Marx—the transaction not only of labour power but of selfhood—and thus a literary forerunner of Arendt's account of the unthinking nature of bureaucracy.

One way in which Stevens essentially separates himself from his own personality is by his fixation on "Dignity." In order to do this, he forcibly superimposes a very strict and unemotional professional mask which deliberately excludes the possibility of looking into one's own self. The model of dignity which is at its very core binary opposed to the moral nature of the human mind. Stevens puts forward a kind of model that a really dignified butler should carry his professional duties "to the utmost," and see his intimate self as a weakness that has to be repressed:

'Dignity' has to do crucially with a butler's ability not to abandon the professional being he inhabits...They wear their professionalism as a decent gentleman will wear his suit: he will not let ruffians or circumstance tear it off him in the public gaze; he will discard it when, and only when, he wills to do so, and this will invariably be when he is entirely alone.⁵²

By limiting the "private self" – the only place where the Arendtian two-in-one can happen – to cases of absolute isolation, Stevens basically removes conscience from the public sphere. He considers emotions and

51 Tohari, *Orang-Orang Proyek*, 214.

52 Kazuo Ishiguro, *The Remains of the Day* (New York: Knopf, 1989), 42–43.

feelings as inferior, dangerous and thus keeps his whole being strictly under the control of the professional rule. Thus, even in situations of his personal misfortunes, such as the death of his father or the loss of Miss Kenton, he goes back to the "suit" of his profession. When crying after the death of his father is spotted by Lord Darlington, Stevens quickly brings in a professional alibi: "I laughed and taking out a handkerchief, quickly wiped my face. 'I'm very sorry, sir. The strains of a hard day.'"⁵³ This is the Marxist self-mortification; he rejects his own human side in order to be the perfect instrument for another.

The most prominent instance of this self-alienation is when Stevens actually sells his inner voice. It is his frugal, deliberate refusal to use moral or political judgment that shows the self-alienation most clearly. Stevens not only represses his power of critical thought but also he hands over the whole faculty of judgment to his master. On encountering the political intrigues of Lord Darlington (who is seeking Nazi appeasement), Stevens reacts with absolute rejection, saying that it was "not my place to be curious about such matters, sir."⁵⁴ This refusal is not simply humility; it is an ontological surrender. He exchanges professional duty for internal deliberation, thereby quieting the conscience whose voice comes only from the inner duality.

This thoughtlessness, in fact, escalates to its climax point during the firing of the Jewish maids. Miss Kenton, when protesting against the unfairness of the act, is met by Stevens, who instead of having a moral debate with himself, merely changes his refuge to the language of routine bureaucracy. He mockingly rebukes Miss Kenton for her being carried away by her emotions while she interfered with the "wishes of our employer"⁵⁵:

Miss Kenton, let me suggest to you that you are hardly well placed to be passing judgements of such a high and mighty nature...our best course will always be to put our trust in an employer we judge to be

53 Ishiguro, *The Remains of the Day*, 105.

54 Ishiguro, *The Remains of the Day*, 222.

55 Ishiguro, *The Remains of the Day*, 149.

wise and honourable, and to devote our energies to the task of serving him to the best of our ability.⁵⁶

Steven reaches Arendt's Eichmann analysis in a very direct and clear manner. Similar to the bureaucrat who insisted that he was "just following orders," Stevens contends that his obligation is "not to our own foibles and sentiments"⁵⁷ – which is his own way of referring to human conscience – but to the objective function of the household. By systematically shutting down the internal ethical debate, this action leaves no room for Arendt's two-in-one figure, as it essentially demolishes the conditions required for this concept. He turns into "a new kind of person" brought about by modernity, as defined by Arendt, someone who carries out the policy with "zeal and the most meticulous care" yet stays absolutely indifferent to the moral aspect of the things done.⁵⁸

This unfortunate separation from oneself is only made clear when the "suit" is taken off and Stevens understands that in the act of selling his labour power, he has also given away his life. The time just before his retirement, he makes a statement that his "dignity" was something superficial. To an unknown person, he reveals that his faithfulness to Lord Darlington was not a principled decision but rather a kind of instinct which took up his whole being:

'The fact is, of course,' I said after a while, 'I have my best to Lord Darlington. I gave him the very best I had to give, and now – well – I find I do not have a great deal more left to give.'⁵⁹

The ultimate conclusion is that Stevens removes any human elements from himself and becomes a mere procedural function. His lack of empathy was definitely not a mistake; it was the outcome of a way of living that was indifferent to him, focused on the employer's goal rather than his fellow human beings. He divided his inner self with his employer,

56 Ishiguro, *The Remains of the Day*, 149 & 201.

57 Ishiguro, *The Remains of the Day*, 149.

58 Shmuel Lederman, "Ordinary Men and the Banality of Evil: Recovering the Conversation between Arendt and Browning," *Holocaust Studies* (2025): 1-19.

59 Ishiguro, *The Remains of the Day*, 242.

thereby abandoning himself, in the end, he was left with no one to talk to – an empty man in a flawless suit.

THE VIOLENCE OF TIME: *THE TRIAL*

Joseph K., the main character in Franz Kafka's *The Trial*, is a stark illustration of how the structures that surround us can, through sheer chronological inevitability, destroy our very ability to think critically. His situation shows that the active life, and more specifically the inherently circular and self-reinforcing drive of the wage earner to reproduce both himself and his position, leaves no room for the contemplative withdrawal necessary for self-reflection. The fall of the very possibility of Arendt's timeless *nunc stans* from which self-reflection is possible, is what substantiates Fredric Jameson's notion of the political unconscious being revealed in the form of defensive busyness.

K.'s dissociation from his own reflective nature is a result of the continuous temporal compression that is imposed on him by the modern work-world. Arendt sees thinking as a process that cannot be done without coming out from appearances, finding a space that separates time from the stream of the day. For K. such coming out was made impossible due to his total functional absorption in his professional role. His life at the bank was the epitome of being tightly scheduled and worrying about one's reputation. K. throughout the novel is obsessed with the clock, he looks at his watch not to find his way in the world, but to make sure that he is in sync with the economic machine. Even at the time of his arrest – a situation which should have disrupted his routine – his reaction was to control his punctuality:

Down below he decided, his watch in his hand, to take a taxi so as to save any further delay in reaching the Bank, for he was already half an hour late.⁶⁰

This obsessive following of instrumental time is completely against the idea of thinking. One of the most important things is that the "Court"

⁶⁰ Franz Kafka, *The Trial*, trans. Willa Muir and Edwin Muir (New York: The Modern Library, 1956), 22.

(which stands for the existential crisis) is also using the same capitalist time logic as the Bank. It decides to carry out the investigations on Sundays mainly “so that K. might not be disturbed in his professional work.”⁶¹ By violating the Sabbath, the Court announces the total colonization of time; K. is given no moment of temporal refuge (*scholê*) in which he could have gotten away from the world of appearances. Although in a technical sense he is even free, K. is still bound to his role and during his own interrogation he makes a self-contradictory statement “I am pressed for time and must leave very soon”⁶² which he utters while lamenting.

The continuous effort to deal with his case at the same time keep his professional appearance is, in a way, a Jameson’s political unconscious – a kind of a shared psychological shield against the threat of facing the structural emptiness of his life. Jameson implies that this unconscious acts like “a symbolic resolution of a real contradiction.”⁶³ In the case of K., the conflict is between the ideal of a reasoned legal system and the ridiculousness of the actual judicial process. K. is deceiving himself that he can apply the same methodical way that led to his promotion at the bank to efficiently solve his existential case:

He had managed to work himself up to his present high position in the Bank...surely if the abilities which had made this possible were to be applied to the unraveling of his own case, there was no doubt that it would go well.⁶⁴

Certainly, this is a case of confusing categories. K. tries to apply *Verstand*, which is the intellectual side of the mind responsible for rational and bureaucratic understanding, to a problem that is inherently related to *Vernunft*, the realm of sense. His ceaseless activity is a kind of psychic defense; he drowns himself in “pressing work”⁶⁵ just to be able to escape the terribly sad recognition of the system’s basic nihilism. Anytime he is

61 Kafka, *The Trial*, 40.

62 Kafka, *The Trial*, 57.

63 Jameson, *The Political Unconscious*, 65.

64 Kafka, *The Trial*, 158.

65 Kafka, *The Trial*, 23.

on the verge of being paralyzed with fear, he summons the machinery of his office to get himself going again: “Almost involuntarily, simply to make an end of it, he put his finger on the button which rang the bell in the waiting-room.”⁶⁶ The bell thus becomes a sort of defibrillator for the *animal laborans*, hurling him back into the reflexive, compulsive work which is a form of intellectual evasion.

The greatest misfortune of this fleeting conflict in time is the one that happens at the Cathedral. It is the scene in which the Priest tries to communicate to K. a parable regarding the Law (Meaning), and K., out of reflex, looks at his watch. When the Priest invites him to discontinue his “album of sights” – which was a metaphor for his being occupied – K. not only discards it, but also “violently”⁶⁷ scratches his head with the gesture, and, without losing a moment, he returns to his work:

I’m the Chief Clerk of a Bank, they’re waiting for me, I only came here to show a business friend from abroad round the Cathedral.⁶⁸

In this situation, the “Bank” (Capitalism) is closing off in a very formal manner any real meeting with the “Court” (Conscience). K. is not allowed to stay in the *nunc stans* of the parable as he is always “waiting for” clients in the linear temporality of instrumental reason. The problem is clearly stated: K.’s continual running around is not a sign of him having power but rather that he is imprisoned. He is still caught in the bureaucratic double bind because if he were to “stop and think” it would mean that he has to admit that the Law he is looking for is not there – a recognition that is too overwhelming to face.

THE ONTOLOGICAL ENCLOSURE OF THE SUBJECT

The literary constellation of Tohari, Ishiguro, and Kafka does not operate as a mere set of loosely connected instances of the phenomenon, but rather as a deep analysis of the way the late capitalist structures influence the subject’s ontological enclosure. When these stories are consid-

⁶⁶ Kafka, *The Trial*, 161.

⁶⁷ Kafka, *The Trial*, 264.

⁶⁸ Kafka, *The Trial*, 277.

ered together, they proclaim that the ability of authentic thinking—one that, according to Arendt, is a single, reflective mental operation, hence solitary in nature—should not be regarded as a natural biological endowment, but rather a delicate political accomplishment that the prevailing economic system gradually tears down.

The texts, in particular, show the manner in which late capitalism destroys the three conditions that Arendt considers necessary for thought: the area from which one can withdraw (the body), the wholeness of the inner companion (the soul), and the suspension of time (time). As a result, thinking stops being a capability of all humans and turns into a risky, class-dependent privilege.

The combined argument of these three case studies forces us to reconsider the Arendtian problem in a different way. All three literary case studies demonstrate that in late capitalism, the primary failure of the subject is not just an “unwillingness” to think—the very first assumption of the “banality of evil”—but a deep structural incapacity to do so. Consequently, the *banality of evil* is redeveloped into the *banality of necessity*: a situation in which economico-psychological and time-related factors preclude the option of moral judgment.

In all these examples, the infrastructure—whether it is the dam project, the mansion, or the bureaucratic court—serves as an ontological enclosure that maintains conformity by dissolving the conditions of self-criticality. The city of Kabul and the *kuli-kuli* are “killed” by material necessity; thus, no caloric or spatial surplus is left for philosophical distance. Stevens deliberately destroys his own self, thereby removing the internal partner, by replacing professional roles with conscience. K. is killed by the harshness of time, caught in a bureaucratic stream that eliminates the *nunc stans* necessary for reflection. If thinking is able to survive, it is only in system-generated cracks for these subjects, and it thus calls for a difficult, often momentary, “recessive action” against the overwhelming flow of structural demands.

CONCLUSION

Thoughtlessness, the condition that is often lamented as *tuna pikir*, is a structural phenomenon that should not be understood as an individual's moral failing. This extensive psychological depletion is not only the result of a mere refusal to engage in the Socratic internal dialogue, the two-in-one; rather, it is a consequence of the systematic denial of both material and temporal resources necessary for such a dialogue. Arendt, in a very conclusive manner, sets the conditions for political participation and judgment when she points out that disinterestedness—a primary condition for reflective thought—cannot be the case unless the needs of the living organism have been already taken care of. Political life does not produce economic sufficiency, but rather, the latter is a condition for political life. The existence that is precarious and characterized by the mass casualization of lab or and the omnipresence of anxiety over the question of where the next meal will come from makes the thinking subject devoid of the material ground for critical independence. Poverty, which is driven by bodily needs, is a levelling agent that cancels out plurality and hinders political engagement.

The literary instances provide proof for this materialist enclosure which involves the breakdown of *vita contemplativa* and its political potential in a very detailed and systematic way. Through the characters of Tohari, we see the process in which physical weariness demolishes the primary material base of thought and consequently the subject is always reduced to the cyclical, repetitive biological labour. The read of Ishiguro unveils the changes in a person's identity to be sold under the capitalistic demand that this breaks the basic duality of the thinking-I, thus the dialogue between the two sides in Socratic being replaced by the senselessness of professional identity. In addition to that, Kafka's psychic collapse records show how temporal anxiety—the non-stop hyperactivity and uneasiness of a precarious life—makes it impossible to have an enduring present which is the basis for contemplative thought. This over-the-top, lonely tiredness is, in Byung-Chul Han's words,

“worldless, world-destroying.”⁶⁹ In sum, these stories reveal the complete confinement of the thinking subject who is solely caught between the biological imperative of the *animal laborans* and the instrumentalizing mechanism of capital with no “space between”⁷⁰ for critical appearance left.

The structural condition here necessitates the introduction of a new analytical category: *The Banality of Necessity*. This idea exists as the most important element that contrasts with Arendt’s “Banality of Evil.” According to Arendt, the Banality of Evil comes from a lack of thinking, being without roots, and superficiality – an evil which is very difficult to conceive because it has no depth. The Banality of Necessity is a complete reversal of it. Necessity doesn’t escape consideration due to superficiality; it actually silences the very ability to think by taking over life completely with the consumption/reproduction cycle of labour. While evil came from not looking at the matter (Eichmann’s non-thinking), Necessity comes from the absolute impossibility of disengagement needed for the inner dialogue.⁷¹ The continuous demand of biological survival, which Marx explained as the worker’s life becoming hostile and alien to him,⁷² is substituting political appearance with the univocal and prepolitical cry for bread. This makes the precarious subject discard the broadened mentality that is necessary for reflective judgment. The structural survival imperative leads to the surrender of autonomy, thus the subject is ensured to be stuck in performing mechanical tasks and not in a position to initiate something new and unpredictable. Necessity is a banality as it is completely normal and everyday in appearance, however, it goes on demolishing the human potential for critical interaction systematically.

69 Byung-Chul Han, *The Burnout Society*, trans. Erik Butler (Stanford: Stanford Briefs, 2015), 32.

70 Hans Teerds, “‘The Space between’: An Architectural Examination of Hannah Arendt’s Notions of ‘Public Space’ and ‘World’,” *The Journal of Architecture* 27, nos. 5–6 (2022): 757–77.

71 Zadeh et al., “Dialogue with *The Life of the Mind*,” 155–65.

72 Marx, *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, 64.

As a result, the legitimate question about *tuna pikir* essentially has to change its target. Using the argument that the person should “think for oneself” while at the same time maintaining structural violence, which closes the material conditions for thought, is an ideological strategy of control. The use of moral judgment and conscience cannot replace the fight for the public sphere. If one does not change the material and temporal conditions of life, the command to think becomes powerless, it serves only to find the structural failure in the individual as guilt or lack of something. The fundamental structural limitations of praxis have to be answered by providing the material basis that is necessary for freedom to arise. There is no intellectual freedom without material freedom.

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