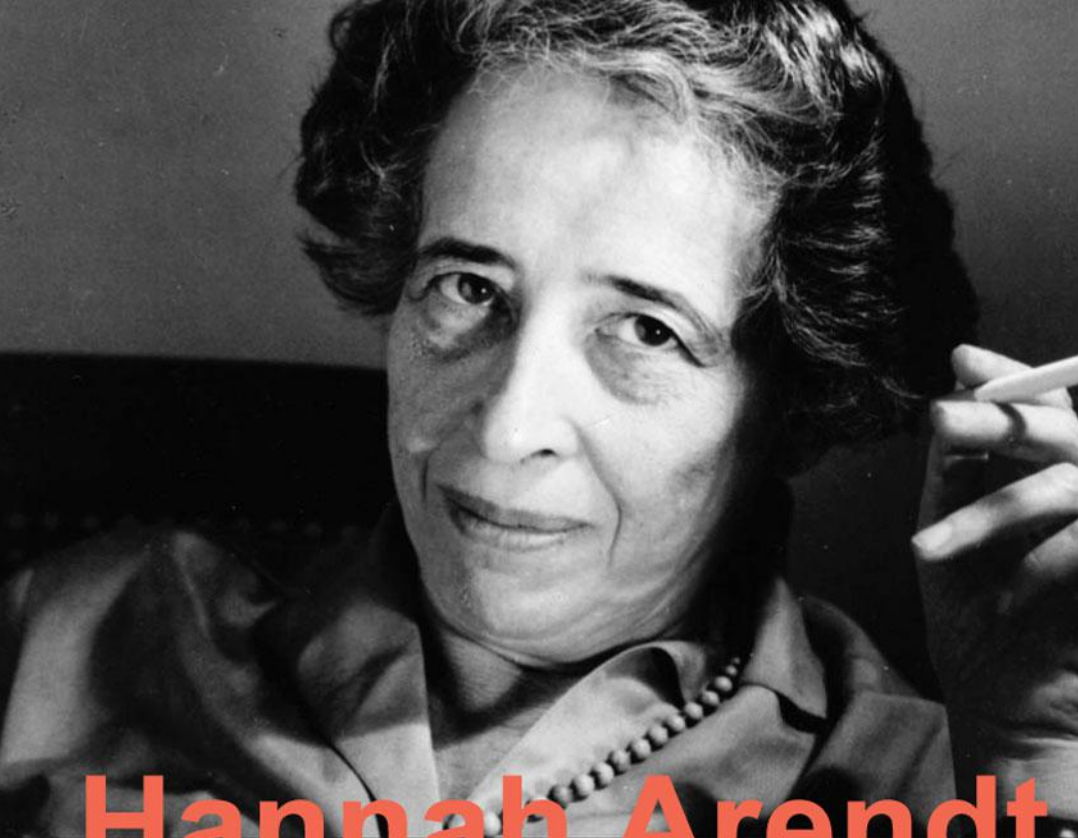




Hannah Arendt

Key Concepts



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Hannah Arendt

Key Concepts

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INTRODUCTION

Illuminating Hannah Arendt

Patrick Hayden

Philosopher, political theorist and critic, Hannah Arendt is widely regarded as one of the twentieth century's most brilliant thinkers. An independent and erudite figure central to the intellectual scene of the last century, Arendt remains one of the most influential contributors of original and incisive concepts that bear on fundamental questions at the heart of the humanities and social sciences. Her explorations are wide-ranging in scope and eclectic in approach, addressing questions such as freedom and responsibility, violence and revolution, war and totalitarianism, social alienation and technological fetishism, imagination and judgement, participatory politics and civil disobedience, and the meaning of human existence itself. Arendt's vast corpus includes dense, complicated and distinctive books of philosophy and political theory, hundreds of essays, interviews and lectures spanning history, philosophy, literature and culture, as well as more intimate correspondence and astute journalistic writings. As author and public figure, she was widely read and frequently controversial; her unconventional life and writings attracted passionate supporters and equally ardent critics. Above all, Arendt's thought and her concepts aim to bring into focus the often obscure processes transforming the modern world and to highlight the great challenges we face individually and in common; hers are observations on a world struggling to find its way in times riddled with uncertainties.

In this introductory chapter I set out key moments from Arendt's life, in order to demonstrate how her own lived experience constituted a formative basis for her philosophical and political texts, and to provide some guideposts to the pathways of her work. Along the way, I

will also examine how Arendt's philosophical sensibility emerges from the phenomenological–existential tradition yet also develops, because of pressing questions about the fate of the political in modernity, into a unique theoretical voice. I will then attend to some of the central themes that arise from Arendt's reflections on the frequently paradoxical character of human existence, and her attempts at understanding both the degrading and empowering conditions to which humanity must respond.

Outlines of a life

Hannah Arendt was born on 14 October 1906 in the German city of Hannover and was raised in Königsberg, then the regional capital of East Prussia and now the Russian city of Kaliningrad.¹ Arendt's paternal and maternal grandparents emigrated to Königsberg from Russia in the nineteenth century, drawn by the prospect of a German-Jewish Enlightenment and emancipation from anti-Jewish pogroms. Her father, Paul Arendt, and mother, Martha Cohn, were educated, secular and well-established members of the middle-class community of business and professional families (her father was an engineer), and both were committed supporters of the Social Democratic Party. Although Arendt was exposed to anti-Semitism during her childhood, her mother taught her always to defend herself and her dignity assertively. While “the word ‘Jew’ was never mentioned at home”, she once remarked (Arendt 1994: 7–8), the assimilated Arendt family also never rejected that factually they were “born” Jewish and they maintained good relationships with religious acquaintances. The question of Jewish identity, along with that of religious, national, social and political identity more broadly, was a multifaceted problem that Arendt explored periodically throughout her life.

Paul Arendt died following a prolonged illness when Hannah was seven years old. In August 1914, Martha and Hannah Arendt fled for Berlin as Russian troops advanced on Königsberg at the start of the First World War, but they managed to return at the end of the year when the advance was repulsed by the German army. Arendt was a precocious, determined and highly intelligent adolescent – “difficult and mysterious” (Young-Bruehl 2004: 36), in her mother's words – who flourished in her study of and exposure to classical languages, philosophy, theology, literature, history and poetry. After passing the highly demanding *Abitur* (the final examination required of German secondary school students in order to attend university) – despite having been expelled

from her school due to a “rebellious” boycott of the classes of one of her teachers – Arendt enrolled as a student at the University of Marburg in the autumn of 1924. There she studied both theology, with the respected theologian Rudolf Bultmann, and philosophy, most significantly with Martin Heidegger. At the time, Heidegger was developing a reputation among students as a brilliant and path-breaking young intellectual, capable of renewing post-Kantian philosophy through a radical phenomenological critique of metaphysics and bringing original thinking “to life again” (*ibid.*: 49; see also Arendt 1971). Arendt and Heidegger were drawn to each other passionately, and soon embarked on a secret although brief affair that lasted until the summer of 1925. Heidegger later claimed that Arendt had been his inspiration during the period when he was writing his 1927 masterwork, *Being and Time* (Young-Bruehl 2004: 50).

After Arendt decided to break off the affair with Heidegger, she spent a semester at the University of Freiburg studying with Heidegger’s teacher and mentor, Edmund Husserl, the leading representative of the school of philosophical phenomenology (the reflective description and analysis of the structures of lived experience and its subjective dimensions). She then moved to the University of Heidelberg in order to continue her studies with Karl Jaspers, the psychologist-turned-philosopher who developed *Existenzphilosophie* as a phenomenological–existential attempt to “illuminate existence” and human freedom (Arendt 1994: 183). Under Jaspers’s supervision, Arendt obtained her doctorate in 1928 with a thesis on Saint Augustine’s concepts of love. Arendt attributed Jaspers with having the most decisive influence on her intellectual development, initiating her into an awareness of how philosophical thinking about human existence relates to interpersonal dialogue, *praxis* and politics. She and Jaspers cultivated a close, lifelong professional and personal friendship lasting more than four decades.

In 1929 Arendt moved to Berlin, where she met and married the philosopher Günther Stern, and published her doctoral thesis. Arendt also carried out research on German Romanticism with an eye towards writing a biography about Rahel Varnhagen, the early-nineteenth-century Jewish writer, society woman and salon host (*salonnière*). While Arendt had written most of the manuscript of the Varnhagen biography by 1933, the deteriorating social and political situation in Germany interrupted its completion, and the book was not published until 1958. With Hitler’s appointment as chancellor in January 1933 and the burning of the Reichstag in February, the German parliament approved a state of emergency decree or “Enabling Act” granting Hitler the power to suspend civil liberties and to pass laws by decree. In the months following

the Reichstag fire Arendt became politically active, illicitly offering her apartment as a way station for Communist and Jewish political figures escaping Hitler's regime. One of those forced to flee was her husband Günther Stern, who left for Paris as the Gestapo began sweeping up leftists days after the Reichstag fire. Remaining in Berlin, Arendt also carried out clandestine research in the Prussian State Library for her friend Kurt Blumenfeld, secretary general of the Zionist Federation of Germany, in order to document anti-Semitic statements made by German civil society groups, business associations and professional societies. Arendt was then arrested and interrogated for eight days by the police in Berlin in connection with this work. Soon after her release, she and her mother fled Germany without travel documents, escaping first to Prague, then Geneva, and finally to Paris, where Arendt lived as an "undocumented" refugee for the next seven years (Arendt 1994: 5–6; Young-Bruehl 2004: 105–7).

The time in Paris was an intensely formative period intellectually and politically for Arendt. If 1933 marked the birth of Arendt's profound political awakening – her realization that "indifference was no longer possible" and that responsibility means one cannot "simply be a bystander" (Arendt 1994: 3) – then the ensuing seven years represented the progressive maturation of her political philosophizing. While life in Paris as a refugee was difficult for Arendt, which contributed to her separation from Günther Stern in 1936, it was also a culturally and politically fertile cosmopolitan milieu. Although critically dissatisfied with many elements of Zionism, Arendt worked enthusiastically for several Jewish organizations operating out of Paris, helping émigrés and refugee children settle in Palestine. Now fully realizing the childhood lesson imparted by her mother, Arendt explained her desire for active engagement thus: "If one is attacked as a Jew, one must defend oneself as a Jew ... I wanted to go into practical work, exclusively and only Jewish work" (*ibid.*: 12). Arendt also became involved with many notable intellectuals, including fellow exiles such as Walter Benjamin and Bertolt Brecht, and others such as Alexandre Kojève, Jean Wahl, Jean-Paul Sartre and Albert Camus. Perhaps most importantly, Arendt met the non-Jewish German political refugee Heinrich Blücher in 1936. Blücher had been a Communist Party member active in Rosa Luxemburg's revolutionary Spartacus League. With a proletarian background and little formal education in the traditional sense, Blücher was a deeply political character who nonetheless possessed a formidable intellect. Together, Arendt learned much about the political realm from Blücher, and Blücher learned much about philosophy and political theory from Arendt. Arendt and Blücher married in January 1940, and remained

devoted companions, friends and collaborators until his death in October 1970.

In May 1940 the Vichy government designated numerous stateless persons and refugees in France (primarily German Jews) as “enemy aliens” and ordered them into internment camps. Arendt was separated from Blücher, and sent to the Gurs internment camp in southwest France. Gravely endangered, Arendt managed to escape from the camp in July and make her way to a safe house where she was fortuitously reunited with Blücher, who had also managed to escape from the camp outside Paris where he had been sent. After living as fugitives for several months, Arendt and Blücher obtained emergency visas to the United States. They then had to make their way to Lisbon where they waited for three months before securing passage to New York, arriving in the United States in May 1941 (Young-Bruehl 2004: 152–9). Ten years later Arendt became a naturalized US citizen.

Life in New York City also proved to be difficult initially. Adjusting to a socially different way of life, attempting to find employment and, especially, learning a new language presented numerous challenges. After working as a columnist for the German-language newspaper *Aufbau*, in which she published numerous articles publicizing the persecution of European Jewry and the expanding Final Solution, and as a part-time teacher, Arendt became a senior editor at Schocken Books in 1946. She worked as well in the mid- to late 1940s for the Commission on European Jewish Cultural Reconstruction, an organization tasked with identifying important cultural items looted during the Nazi occupation of Europe for purposes of their recovery and restoration. It was during this period that Arendt conducted the immense amount of research leading to the publication of her first major book, and the first book she wrote in English, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, in 1951. The reception of this book brought both acclaim and criticism. Some critics focused on supposed deficiencies in Arendt’s historical methodology, while others expressed dissatisfaction at the disproportionate attention Arendt gave to Nazism in comparison to Stalinism (Baehr 2010). Nonetheless, the book was one of the first to analyse the “chief elements of totalitarianism” (Arendt 1994: 403), and to account historically for its “unprecedented” nature as a hitherto unimaginable phenomenon.

With the generally positive reception of *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, Arendt’s scholarly reputation began to broaden beyond the German émigré community into the networks and institutions of American academia. In 1952 Arendt received a Guggenheim Foundation fellowship to pursue a research project on “The Totalitarian Elements of Marxism”, which she conceived as an attempt to flesh out the links

between Marx's thought and Stalinism only briefly intimated in *The Origins of Totalitarianism*. Over the next several years Arendt delivered a series of high-profile invited lectures at institutions such as the University of Chicago, the University of Notre Dame and Princeton University, exploring not only her critique of Marx but also developing her critical interrogation of the Western philosophical tradition and its disturbingly consistent hostility towards political freedom of speech and action. She took up a visiting professorship at the University of California, Berkeley in 1955, and in 1959 she was appointed to a full professorship at Princeton University (which Arendt referred to, in her typically irreverent and "difficult" manner, as "the snobbish university *par excellence*"; Young-Bruehl 2004: 272). Arendt's second major book, *The Human Condition*, appeared in 1958 and offered her account of how public-political matters are constitutive of a properly human existence.

In a letter of Arendt's, written to Karl Jaspers in July 1953, she bemoaned, "If only I knew more about the problem of evil" (Young-Bruehl 2004: 287). In 1961, Arendt got her wish when *The New Yorker* magazine engaged Arendt as a correspondent to cover the trial of Adolf Eichmann in Israel. Eichmann, a mid-level SS officer responsible for coordinating the mass deportation of European Jews to the Nazi death camps during the Holocaust or *Shoah*, exemplified for Arendt the "banality" of evil. Where *The Origins of Totalitarianism* addressed the "radical" evil of the extermination camps, *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, published in May 1963, contended with the problem of how such evil can be brought about by seemingly normal individuals "thoughtlessly" taking part in, or loyally following, the policies of state. Arendt's argument provoked a firestorm of controversy and hostility. Some critics believed the phrase "banality of evil" trivialized the horrific atrocities of the Final Solution, while others, less generously, condemned her purported attempt to blame Jewish victims by analysing the role of the Jewish Councils in cooperating with Nazi authorities (Arendt 2007a: 465–511).

It is unsurprising, then, that over the course of the following decade, Arendt became preoccupied with a series of interconnected concepts having profound moral and political implications in light of the very real problem of how political evil can come about: thinking, judgment, responsibility, power, violence, opinion, plurality, tradition and revolution. Many of her reflections were prompted by various crises darkening the American social and political landscape, including racial segregation and the civil rights struggle, the war in Vietnam and the Watergate scandal. During this highly troubled yet abundantly

productive period Arendt published *Between Past and Future* (1961), *On Revolution* (1963), *Men in Dark Times* (1968), *On Violence* (1970) and *Crises of the Republic* (1972).

Having acquired a distinguished academic reputation, and not a little notoriety, Arendt assumed the position of university professor at the New School for Social Research in New York in 1967. She also received various public accolades acknowledging her life's work, including numerous honorary degrees, the Sigmund Freud Preis of the Deutsche Akademie für Sprache und Dichtung (German Academy for Language and Literature) in 1967, the Emerson–Thoreau Medal of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences in 1969, and the Sonning Prize for Contributions to European Civilization in 1975. In 1973, Arendt was invited to deliver the prestigious Gifford Lectures at the University of Aberdeen in Scotland. There she presented material from what was planned to be a book examining the three defining activities of the mind – thinking, willing and judging – and developing her understanding of the relation between thinking and politics. However, Arendt's book was to remain unfinished. Arendt died of a heart attack on 4 December 1975, while entertaining friends at her New York apartment. *The Life of the Mind* was published posthumously in 1978.

Arendt's phenomenological–existential sensibility

When interviewed on German television in October 1964 by the journalist Günter Gaus, Arendt offered the following characterization of her intellectual orientation and vocation: “I do not belong to the circle of philosophers. My profession, if I can even speak of it at all, is political theory. I neither feel like a philosopher, nor do I believe that I have been accepted into the circle of philosophers” (Arendt 1994: 1). Arendt further clarifies that “there is a vital tension between philosophy and politics” (*ibid.*), and later elaborates that she does “not believe that there is any thought process possible without personal experience. Every thought is an afterthought, that is, a reflection on some matter or event” (*ibid.*: 20). Although Arendt's education was predominantly philosophical, informed particularly by Heidegger and Jaspers, and despite her obvious affiliation with the discipline of philosophy – one commentator referred to her as “a philosopher's philosopher” (Arendt 1979: 307) – Arendt persistently resisted attempts at the rigid categorization of her life and her works. She was thus always ambivalent towards philosophy proper, and especially dubious of its “professional” mode. As well as being a prolific writer, she was an extraordinarily

versatile thinker whose ideas are difficult to demarcate according to established schools of thought and conventional political distinctions. Indeed, when Hans Morgenthau, the renowned international relations scholar and close friend of Arendt, asked her, “What are you? Are you a conservative? Are you a liberal? Where is your position within the contemporary possibilities?”, Arendt commented wryly:

I don’t know. I really don’t know and I’ve never known. And I suppose I never had any such position. You know the left think that I am conservative, and the conservatives sometimes think that I am left or I am a maverick or God knows what. And I must say I couldn’t care less. I don’t think that the real questions of this century will get any kind of illumination by this kind of thing. I don’t belong to any group ... So I cannot answer the question.

(*Ibid.*: 333–4)

As Arendt put it in the Gaus interview, “I have always done what I liked to do ... I am not particularly agreeable, nor am I very polite; I say what I think” (Arendt 1994: 3, 17). The reader might be forgiven for beginning to wonder how this admittedly “difficult and mysterious” thinker won the respect and popularity that she did. Nonetheless, it was of the utmost importance to Arendt – personally, theoretically and politically – to cultivate the attitude of the “conscious pariah”, the dissident status of outsider who remains politically engaged with the world while asserting his or her independence and critical distance (Arendt 1968: 13–14; 2007a: 275–97). For Arendt, it is only by deliberately taking a stand as a conscious pariah and resisting conformity that one can properly accomplish thinking and judging. “Social nonconformism”, Arendt once remarked, “is the *sine qua non* of intellectual achievement” (Young-Bruehl 2004: xliii).

Central to all of Arendt’s work is her concern with the activity of thinking and, as she said in response to Morgenthau, its capacity to bestow “illumination”. Arendt did not see herself as offering any indubitable prescriptions for realizing the good or constructing the just society. She eschewed the temptation to propose indisputable ideals or write treatises that could be applied to remake society in accordance with a perfectionist theory or programme. She even suggested that this temptation “burdened” the tradition of “political philosophy” (Arendt 1994: 3), with the inauspicious consequence that philosophers have long claimed mastery over the political realm. As an unconventional political theorist, Arendt was concerned instead with the principal yet barely acknowledged question, “What are we doing?”. The theme to

which she devoted her life, in other words, and which shaped the entirety of her work, “is nothing more than to think what we are doing” (Arendt 1958: 5). The modern human condition, she believed, has become characterized by the thoughtless or unthinking adoption of social, economic, technological and political policies and instruments that habitually promise to deliver progress and happiness, yet with shocking regularity instead bring death, destruction, insecurity, corruption, inequality and alienation. We are shielded from the need to think by the widespread availability of information, facts and technical expertise – now incessantly “on demand”, of course, given the omnipresence of the internet and mobile devices. With the detritus of a collapsed tradition behind us and the delusions of a society cured of its ills by so-called experts in front of us, where do we find ourselves now and what do we think we are doing? By what standards can we take our bearings in the present? Are we able to make sense of the complex goals that are meant to dictate our choices and actions in a world apparently on the march to something superior? What or who are we willing to sacrifice today in exchange for a supposedly better tomorrow?

Arendt presented the activity of thinking, and therefore of political theorizing, not as something that is “productive” in the sense of offering practical guidance for how to “get things done” – “know-how”, as she puts it in *The Human Condition* (Arendt 1958: 3) – but instead as something that is “illuminating” in response to the succession of concrete problems faced in political life and what is at stake in responding to them (Arendt 1968; Curtis 1999). Thinking what we are doing allows for the profuse interpretation of acts and events, it discloses the multiple possibilities of historically significant meaning, and it exposes motivations, justifications, intentions and effects to the provocative gaze of critique. Most importantly, *thinking* invites us to *understanding*, to the process by which we give meaning to what we are doing and to the world(s) in which we live. Arendt believes, as Sartre (1998: 575) asserted, that human beings are “hunters of meaning”. “What is important for me”, Arendt concludes of her work, “is for me to understand” (Arendt 1994: 3).

Although Arendt did not subscribe to a specific school of thought or systematic methodology *per se*, she did describe herself as a “sort of phenomenologist” (Young-Bruehl 2004: 405). What she means by this is that her approach to thinking about the human condition and political affairs aims at understanding them as phenomena, that is, in the way they appear to those living through them, experiencing them and interpreting them. Her attitude towards describing the work she did as broadly phenomenological and existential was clearly expressed in the

following comment from 1972: “What is the subject of our thought? Experience! Nothing else. And if we lose the ground of experience then we get into all kinds of [abstract] theories” (Arendt 1979: 308; [1961] 1968: 14). In this way, political theory had an existential meaning and import for Arendt, inasmuch as it begins from and remains constantly informed by the lived experience of the most politically salient features of human existence: freedom, belonging, responsibility, birth and death, friendship, domination, imagination and so forth. Arendt’s phenomenological–existential synthesis led her consistently to emphasize lived experience, and to maintain that all thinking is a kind of “afterthought” formed through attentiveness to the human world in which we are situated and the various ways we appear meaningfully in it with others.² This is one reason, in any case, why Arendt refused to consider herself a traditional philosopher. As Arendt conceived it, purely philosophical contemplation is self-referential; it is a circular process in which thinking always thinks of itself (introspection). In contrast, Arendt contends that what drives the need to think as a morally and politically significant activity is the collision of thought with an external, phenomenal reality – most fundamentally, with the social and political experiences of our times. To be sure, while thinking should never be cut off from the world of everyday human affairs, it also requires solitude and quiet in order to function and manifest itself: one must occasionally stop in order to think (Arendt 1978b: 4).

The influence of Husserl, Heidegger and Jaspers that kindles Arendt’s phenomenological–existential leaning is complemented by the inspiration she draws from classical Greek and Roman philosophy, tragedy and poetry (see Villa 1996). Arendt takes seriously that the Greek word *phainómenon* signifies “that which appears”, which manifests, discloses, or reveals itself. While *phainómenon* may have a non-political meaning of course, for Arendt it implies most distinctively the way that self and others appear to one another within the worldly space of the political sphere. Indeed the *polis* is defined precisely as a “space of appearances”, as the place for “coming together, being together, speaking about something with one another” and where “all things can first be recognized in their many-sidedness” (Arendt 2005: 164, 167). A phenomenological–existential sensibility seems particularly well-suited to Arendt’s attempt to draw our thinking closer to the lived experience of political reality, as a specific form of our situatedness in a meaningful world shared with others. The traces of mutual disclosure – of revealing to one another who we are in our plurality within an interpersonal space of appearance – are reflected historically not only in laws and institutions, but also in the languages and concepts

we create to convey, express and query the possible meanings of our condition and experiences. That is why concepts, even those arising from or set in distant times and places, are of such great consequence to Arendt. Concepts crystallize or distil linguistically the phenomenally concrete historical experiences and existentially plural modes of living constitutive of unique domains of the human condition, most famously those of labour, work and action as set forth in *The Human Condition* (Young-Bruehl 2004: 318; Arendt 1958). The various concepts that recur throughout Arendt's writings are used to explore these diverse experiential domains which, she believed, should always be carefully distinguished conceptually as well as experientially.³

In her 1946 essay "What is Existential Philosophy?", Arendt claims that the most striking aspect of Husserl's phenomenology is its post-metaphysical "refounding" of humanism. By bringing reality into the sphere of human interpretation, Husserl aims to return philosophy to the world of lived experience. This does not entail simply focusing on affective states, but rather gathering together particular phenomena into an intelligible world capable of communication – thereby conjuring "up a new home from a world perceived as alien" (Arendt 1994: 165). The phenomenological standpoint seizes things as they appear in their specificity, begins from the mysterious contingency of all that which exists, yet nevertheless affirms the value of humanity despite the fact that "man is not the creator" of Being itself (*ibid.*: 167). This is in sharp contrast to the fundamentally dehumanizing tendencies of the modern sciences and formal philosophies. Despite recognizing the merit of Husserl's attempt to make human experience the chief concern of contemporary philosophy, Arendt is quick to express her antipathy to the Husserlian methodological assumption that phenomenological observation can form an objective picture of human nature. The implausibility of resolving the question of existence through the frame of objective truth is evident when Arendt turns her attention to Kierkegaard, inasmuch as he shows that "subjective truth, the truth of 'that which exists,' is a paradox because it can never be objective, never universally valid" (*ibid.*: 168). The "hubris" of providing objective truth by reference to human nature is compounded further, in Arendt's view, by the tendency of phenomenology to retreat from the external world into the interiority of consciousness. Arendt's critical engagement with post-Husserlian phenomenology and existentialism, then, is concerned with making it more "worldly", refracted through the classical esteem for political life. Here is where a properly politicized phenomenology, for Arendt, opens up the more profound question of the genesis or coming into appearance of the world, the experience of which can only

be established by interaction and communication between “a plurality of individuals or peoples” who inhabit that world together (Arendt 2005: 175). It is vital not to underestimate the importance of Arendt’s point, for it underlies the thrust of her work as a whole. In seeking to draw connections between thought and experience, Arendt insists that thinking must remain oriented to and from the world in all its contingency, unpredictability, improbability and strangeness. In the mode of political theorizing, then, she wishes to throw light on certain political conditions and experiences – most notably of plurality, freedom, action and what Arendt calls “natality” or the capacity to bring something new into the world – which have been relegated to obscurity by the philosophical tradition since Plato. Here, too, it is a question of the existential achievement of making a meaningful world with others: “The *raison d’être* of politics is freedom, and its field of experience is action” (Arendt [1961] 1968: 146).

But Arendt’s ideas about the powers of thinking and political theorizing to disclose or display are not applicable only to positive phenomena such as freedom. Her point is that theory should also reflect upon and illuminate the “dark times” of the world, those events or periods which evoke what Jaspers termed limit or “border situations” (Arendt 1994: 182–4); these are exceptional situations in which human consciousness confronts unforeseeable experiences that confound our previous ways of thinking and acting and induce confusion, despair, dread and anxiety. Arendt borrows the expression “dark times” from Brecht’s poem “To Posterity”, which, she tells us, speaks of “the disorder and the hunger, the massacres and the slaughterers, the outrage over injustice and the despair ‘when there was only wrong and no outrage,’ the legitimate hatred that makes you ugly nevertheless, the well-founded wrath that makes the voice grow hoarse” (Arendt 1968: viii). These are the times of crippling silences, systemic corruption, misinformation, obfuscation, deprivation, deception, secrecy, terror and fear; in short, times of “political catastrophes” and “moral disasters” when the public realm is shrouded in shadows and truth itself rendered opaque (*ibid.*: vii). Dark times represent such a serious threat to the condition of being human, because our capacity to sustain that fragile condition is utterly dependent on the possibility of sharing a sense of reality, a meaningful world, in common with others. The twentieth century was witness to many such times that overshadowed the existence of a world in common – totalitarianism, fascism, dictatorship, imperialism, mass genocide, world war, Cold War, nuclear proliferation, bureaucratic metastasis – and the twenty-first century is no stranger to these as well as to newer forms of social and political calamity (for instance, fundamentalist state

and non-state terrorism, global environmental degradation, chronic and debilitating inequality, and the worldwide manipulation of economic systems by gigantic financial institutions in collusion with the most powerful governments). And yet Arendt suggests that the lived experiences of dark times, or at the very least the persistent spectre of such darkness, are the crucial starting points for theoretical reflection, since “even in the darkest of times we have the right to expect some illumination” of the perplexities we confront (*ibid.*: ix). Accordingly, the phenomenological–existential sensibility that we find in Arendt’s work is the driving force for her theorizing, built as it is on her profound commitment “to throw light on the affairs of men” so “they can show in deed and word, for better and worse, who they are and what they can do” (*ibid.*: viii). Not unlike the “miracle” of natality (Arendt 1958: 247), political thinking has a vital role to play in the potential renewal of the public space that is the world. The choice to engage in thinking thus brings with it the formidable burden of responsibility for the fate of a common world.

Key themes of Arendt’s work

The unification of positive and negative phenomena within the revelatory task of political theorizing is given clear expression by Arendt in her 1954 lecture, “Concern with Politics in Recent European Philosophical Thought”. There Arendt argues that the “preliminary condition” for political thought must be, as the ancient Greeks put it, a kind of *thaumazein* or sense of “wonder at what is as it is” in the realm of human affairs. Yet Arendt points out that given the background experience of the modern world, the sense of wonder from which political thought today should begin comes in two mutually implicated forms: “speechless wonder of gratitude” and “speechless horror”, each of which is provoked by consideration of “what man may do and what the world may become” (Arendt 1994: 445). Political theory gives voice to speechless wonder and horror by urgently reformulating the classic questions of political philosophy: “What is politics? Who is man as a political being? What is freedom?” But, as Arendt saw it, these questions will remain meaningless except in so far as they take their bearing from contemporary political realities and the circumstances that either enrich or debase the possibility for a properly human life, that is, a life fit for “man as an acting being” (*ibid.*: 433). Indeed, this manner of proceeding underlies the major themes of Arendt’s *oeuvre*, and therefore the concepts that serve as points of reference throughout this book.

A pervasive theme throughout Arendt's work is her concern with the "frailty of human affairs" (Arendt 1958: 188, 222). From *The Origins of Totalitarianism* onwards, Arendt emphasizes the public realm's susceptibility to numerous political pathologies. Although the public realm serves as the binding medium for cultivating our humanity through concerted political action, the space of appearance is often transient and vulnerable to closure. This vulnerability is mirrored in the human status itself. For Arendt, the properly *human* status depends on an appropriate corresponding *political* status, and therefore on certain socio-political conditions. She underlines that we are human not solely because of our physical birth but also because of our belonging with others politically in a world we create together between us; we *become* fully human on the basis of the natality of our second, "political" birth (*ibid.*: 176). Another way to put this is that while we are born naturally into the human species, the process of becoming a human person by surpassing our merely physical existence is a feature of interpersonal experience that arises through public-political togetherness. In Arendt's formulation, humanity is an interpersonal *status* that we mutually guarantee to one another through recognition in a public realm characterized by the conditions of plurality and frailty (*ibid.*: 176, 188, 222). Our shared capacity for speech and action, Arendt suggests, constitutes a common political world where we may appear to one another and disclose our unique or distinct identities, that is, "who" and not merely "what" we are. Speech is the form of action through which we come to recognize ourselves as different, as existing with a plurality of other persons. Yet it is also through speech that we become equal, because speech is a common medium that enables us to understand one another, to recognize one another as equal members of a human community. The normative significance of the process of political recognition is that it is the basis of human dignity. Dignity – our humanness or *humanitas* – is not simply an inner subjective disposition but a feature of worldly experience, a mode of being that is acquired by interactive means of equal recognition expressing due respect for the vulnerability and particularity of others (Arendt 1968: 73–5). The capacity for acquiring our humanity is dependent, then, upon each individual having his or her equal political status reciprocally affirmed within a community of plural others. This dependency highlights both the historically conditioned nature of the human status and its precariousness in the face of domination, oppression and exclusion.

Another important and related theme is that of superfluity, or what Arendt regards as the process of endangering human plurality itself. What Arendt calls "superfluosity" is the problem of dehumanization

associated with the dispensability or disposability from political life of large numbers of people. Superfluous people are not only oppressed or treated unjustly; they are made expendable from a properly human world, which proves fatal to their human status. Making “human beings as human beings superfluous” was, for instance, a central element of the totalitarian project (Arendt & Jaspers 1992: 166). In their systematic attempt to eliminate human spontaneity, individuality and plurality, totalitarian regimes were not simply liquidating individuals but rather annihilating the very idea of humanity itself. All human beings, including the leaders of totalitarian regimes themselves, were treated as completely superfluous and expendable (*ibid.*: 69). Yet the problem of superfluity is not confined to totalitarianism, as it is crucial to Arendt’s understanding of modern “mass society” and its dehumanizing effects. First spawned by imperialism and later radicalized by totalitarianism, the administrative organization of making human beings superfluous has become a central feature of modern social and political orders. Where colonial imperialism produced both “surplus” capital and “surplus” people (the “unproductive” European and colonized masses) (Arendt [1951] 2004: 198–200), and totalitarianism produced the eminently “expendable” victims of extermination camps (*ibid.*: 592), contemporary society (both domestic and global) generates conditions that threaten to banish many – “parasitic” immigrants and refugees, the “useless” poor, and the irredeemably “backward” or technologically “underdeveloped” – to the politically impotent and obscure margins of human association. Arendt insists that theorists must remain attentive to modes of political organization that alienate others from the “world common to all people” (Arendt 1968: 16).

Arendt’s interest in the frailties of the public realm and human status, as well as with the projection of superfluity into modernity, clearly converges with the key themes of freedom and human action. In contrast to Heidegger’s elevation of mortality or “the anticipation of death” as the defining characteristic of human existence (Arendt 1994: 181), Arendt instead thinks in terms of the phenomenon of birth or “natality”. Although admittedly natality and mortality are co-implicated, a decisive moral and political difference is introduced by the stress placed on one or the other. Finitude or mortality, according to Heidegger ([1927] 1967: 284), is authentically meaningful only for the singular individual, the radically separated self. Birth, conversely, involves not the isolated self, but rather entails a creative act between plural selves – a “we” rather than merely an “I”. The “fact that we have entered the world through birth”, is decisive to Arendt’s understanding of the human condition because without it “man’s existence, like the

existence of the world, is utterly perishable” (Arendt 1958: 51). The capacity to create new human beings not only replenishes the world of human togetherness, it also corresponds politically to the capacity to initiate something new and perform something spontaneously, that is, to human action (*ibid.*: 178). On this point, Arendt draws upon Aristotle’s (1955) distinction between *poiesis* and *praxis*. *Poiesis* refers to instrumental activities intended to produce external ends, while *praxis* is a form of action done as an end in itself; while necessity is inherent to *poiesis*, freedom is inherent to *praxis*. The relationship between natality and action points, in turn, to the potential for human freedom. Through the mediation of freedom in shared political life it is possible for “co-existents” acting together to transcend the mortality that the individual alone cannot escape, and shore up the frailty of the public realm exposed to the constant flux of time. Freedom of action requires discourse and plurality in the form of diverse actors and spectators who share their deeds and words, weaving them into transgenerational narratives about where they have come from, who they are, and where they are heading. Such narratives stitch together the fabric comprising the realm of human affairs. Collective memory preserves the past, while continuing dialogue, debate and persuasion open the space of appearance to diverse voices and new opinions. The manifestation of freedom in action thus has at its core a fundamental paradox. On the one hand, it introduces change – the novel, the unexpected, the unique – into the web of existing human endeavours. On the other hand, it imparts durability – continuity, stability, foundations – to the world shared in common. Action may sweep away past accomplishments, but it may also rescue them from oblivion.

Since Arendt conceives of plurality as “one of the basic existential conditions” (Arendt 1978b: 74) of political life, in so far as contestation and consensus regarding different perspectives and opinions are constitutive of co-existence in the public realm, the themes of power, violence, judgement and forgiveness are central to her thought as well. Ontologically and politically, Arendt thinks of power as a potential that is actualized only when unique human beings, recognized by others as equals, speak and act together and thereby constitute a world shared between them. Whereas the conventional conception of political power sees it first and foremost as the ability to impose one’s “own will against the resistance of others” (Weber 1978: 53), by contrast Arendt understands it as arising from the mutual promises and agreements achieved by individuals acting together with a common purpose. On Arendt’s account, power is contrary to domination and violence in that it is the result of participatory interaction between unique individuals who

reciprocally affirm their equality. It is actualized by collective action and speech intended to create or locate shared interests and a relatively stable space where freedom may be revealed. Power thus arises up between a plurality of others in the public space of persuasive speech and action dedicated to debate and deliberation, to the negotiation and exchange of opinion. She points out that the “revelatory character” of speech by means of which actors make their appearance in the human world and disclose themselves as subjects with unique identities, can thrive only “where people are *with* others and neither for nor against them” (Arendt 1958: 150). When the instruments of violence are employed against others, human togetherness and public freedom are lost. For this reason Arendt contends that power and the public realm must be regarded as concomitant; the public realm is the space where it is possible for both agreement and disagreement to occur on the basis of the free exchange of diverse points of view between individuals as equal political actors. Politics as an *empowering activity* not only presupposes the condition of plurality, it must also foster plurality within the framework of a shared human world, and violence can indeed extinguish political power but is incapable of generating it (Arendt 1970: 56). Despite Arendt’s distinction between power and violence, however, she does claim that the resort to violence may sometimes be justified (*ibid.*: 51–2). In certain situationally specific cases, she suggests, the temporary use of violence may be needed in the attempt to protect innocent lives or to open up space for the political realm (Arendt 1963: 19–20; 2007a: 445), when these are threatened with violent destruction at the hands of malign others. It is also true that power and violence often “appear together” (Arendt 1970: 52). Nonetheless, such violence should not be conflated with power or the political strictly speaking, and its continued use will inevitably endanger the fragile relationships on which the public realm is based.

Power, then, exhibits the same frailty as freedom in the public realm. Power is not a static property that is possessed, it is a reversible phenomenon that is generated when people freely act together and it vanishes when that mode of being together is precluded, curtailed or otherwise ceases. Power is always in danger of being suppressed, and its appearance remains ephemeral. But if it is true that various pathologies – such as corruption, coercion, discrimination, tyranny and violence – often greet the potential actualization of power in the public realm with hostility, it is also given a warmer welcome by the capacities for political judgement and forgiveness. In the political realm where conflict and tension frequently surface, Arendt argues that judgement plays an essential role in guiding the process of thinking towards reflective

assessment of actions that may erode and deform the world which shelters our common interests. Yet the consequences of our actions are very often unpredictable and what significance or meaning they hold for others cannot be determined in advance. Political action manifests humans' ability to begin anew, although all actions occur within a given context and thus always draw upon and become part of the existing world and its established traditions of meaning. At the same time, actions arise out of particular interpersonal situations and relationships and are immediately open to the varied interpretations and evaluations of other human beings. Actions themselves, however, cannot be undone or annulled whatever effects, wrongs or mistakes they release into the realm of human affairs. But this is not Arendt's last word on the subject since, as she points out, the capacity for judging and coming to a public consensus about the meaning of action clears the path towards the redemptive power of promises and forgiveness. One of Arendt's greatest insights is that the "unexpected" act of forgiveness often functions as a precondition for freedom and natality, in that it opens up collective possibilities for beginning anew in the aftermath of tragic past actions, but without forgetting the past (Arendt 1958: 237–41). Moreover, forgiveness is then connected to promising, in that forgiving past wrongs can be accompanied by assuming a shared sense of responsibility for a future in which, it is promised, such wrongs will not be repeated (*ibid.*: 234–7; Arendt 1963: 175). In this sense, forgiveness and mutual promise making are positive political actions oriented towards power and empowerment – reconstituting a fragile yet future-oriented space for political community – closely intertwined with the damaging outcomes of what we too often do – clinging vengefully to a cycle of violence burdened by the weight and resentments of the past.

These and numerous other themes take shape through the array of concepts explored in the essays that follow. By the end of this volume, readers should appreciate not only the impressive breadth and depth of Arendt's body of work, but also the multiple vistas in thought that it opens. As Arendt never tired of pointing out, the richness of our sense of reality depends upon enlarging our capacity to think the possible meanings of our times and actions. Where this capacity is nurtured and practised, it may illuminate and even dispel the shadows darkening the common world. If this view is correct, then what is at stake in learning to think, judge and act in the modern world that is no stranger to political disaster is nothing less than keeping alive the revelatory and humanizing space of appearance itself.

Notes

1. The only comprehensive biographical study of Arendt in English remains Young-Bruehl (2004).
2. For discussions of the development of Arendt's thought in light of the influence of Heidegger, *Existenz* philosophy and existentialism, see Hinchman and Hinchman (1984, 1991), Taminiaux (1997) and Villa (1996).
3. We must be careful not to make too much of Arendt's emphasis on *differentiation*. Patchen Markell (2011: 33) argues that Arendt does not mean that differentiation of such domains should be reduced to rigid separation and purity; rather they are characterized by a complex "relationship of simultaneous difference and interdependence".

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PART I

On the human condition

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ONE

Nativity

Karin Fry

From very early on in her intellectual career, Hannah Arendt's interest in life and the political implications connected to the fact of being born is significant. The concept of "natality" is central to her overall theory of politics, and perhaps, its most optimistic aspect. Focusing on life and natality, as opposed to death and mortality, raises the political life into a hopeful activity in which one truly displays aspects of the self to the world in meaningful ways. Focusing on natality suggests that individual action is important and earthly events are significant. Connected to her concepts of political action and plurality, natality is at the heart of Arendt's theory of politics.

Nativity and Augustine

Having attended Martin Heidegger's lectures during the period in which he was writing *Being and Time*, Arendt's first significant break from his point of view occurs in her doctoral dissertation, published in 1929 as *Der Liebesbegriff bei Augustin: Versuch einer philosophischen Interpretation*. This work has been translated into English as *Love and Saint Augustine* (published in 1996), and includes later revisions Arendt made to her thesis as she anticipated its English publication during 1964–5. Because of her failure to finish the revision, there is controversy concerning the overall significance of her investigation of Augustine.¹ Nonetheless, her revisions to the English translation include the term "natality" and indicate that her examination of Augustine's work may have inspired the formation of this concept. Ultimately, Arendt explains

nativity more thoroughly in her later work, especially in *The Human Condition*. Nonetheless, Arendt's thesis and its revision provide interesting clues to the overall significance of nativity to the rest of her theory.

Martin Heidegger's fundamental ontology looms large over her dissertation, although her thesis supervisor Karl Jaspers's *Existenz* philosophy also has an influence. Arendt's analysis of Saint Augustine's theory is a phenomenological exploration of the concept of love in much the same vein as Heidegger's exploration of time. Nevertheless, there are two aspects in particular that break with Heidegger's work. Throughout her career, Arendt's major criticism of Heidegger involves his lack of attention to the active life of politics, in favour of the contemplative life of eternal truths. Although this criticism is expressed more directly in her later work, it emerges in her discussion of Augustine's concept of love and is explored in two different ways in this text. First, there is an analysis of nativity, or what it means to be born, as opposed to Heidegger's emphasis on mortality. Second, Arendt develops a critical analysis of Augustine's discussion of love of the neighbour from the Christian worldview. This criticism extends to Heidegger's work as well, since Heidegger fails to give much attention to positive relations with others in *Being and Time*. Focusing on the solitude of death, as opposed to the potential of birth, may result in a more solitary and less politically oriented philosophy.

Heidegger's *Being and Time* ([1927] 1967) is known for exploring the authentic life of the individual in the mode of being-towards-death. The authentic person faces up to his mortality and does not pretend life is endless. Only through acknowledging that life is limited will one be filled with the urgency to make authentic decisions about one's present life. Often, Heidegger writes about this as a seemingly solitary and individual task, since mortality is uniquely one's own. In ordinary experience, other people distract us and encourage us to be inauthentic, as they are caught up in everyday concerns that refute the idea that death is an ever-present possibility. Heidegger calls other people in the inauthentic mode of engagement with the self *das Man*, sometimes translated as "the they". Engaging with the inauthentic "they" leads one away from facing mortality and towards getting caught up in the idle chatter of everyday concerns. Even though Heidegger mentions the possibility of authentically being-with-others, what he calls *Mitsein*, its discussion is not as emphasized as the seemingly more usual problematic relation with other people that produces inauthentic behaviour based in either distraction or outright denial of the limited time that one has on earth.² By examining different forms of love in Augustine's work, Arendt finds problems that may easily extend to Heidegger's ontology.

Arendt rejects the solitary “authentic” existence that seems to be the outcome of both Heidegger and Augustine’s work.

According to Arendt, Augustine describes love as involving *appetitus*, or craving, which concerns desiring an object thought to bring happiness (Arendt 1996: 9). However, craving is not unrelated to fear, since all goods can be lost. Arendt notes *appetitus* in Augustine’s work is often related to mortality, since mortality can be understood as an enemy to be feared, connected to loss. Typically, mortality is beyond personal control, and humans crave the ability to face the future without fear or loss of life (*ibid.*: 11–12). As Arendt’s biographer Elizabeth Young-Bruehl notes, the ultimate goal of craving is a “life without fear” (Young-Bruehl 2004: 491). Yet, to truly satisfy the craving, the right kind of love is required. Through loving God, the fear of mortality is superseded by a love that produces eternal life, which is crucial for the Catholic saint. The wrong sort of love, *cupiditas*, is love for things of this world and in Augustine’s framework it is exemplified by those who belong to the city of man, doomed to not be saved. Arendt describes *cupiditas* in Heideggerian terminology as a flight from death. Those who crave for permanence cling “to the very things sure to be lost in death” (Arendt 1996: 17). This produces unsatisfying enslavement to things outside of one’s control that *can* be lost against one’s will (*ibid.*: 20). Fear of death does not end with *cupiditas* because one is still tied to temporal things that can be lost (*ibid.*: 23). Arendt describes this phenomenon as a type of “flight from the self” and parallels it to Heidegger’s description of inauthentic life (*ibid.*). Through *cupiditas*, one is distracted from fear of mortality, but the self gets lost in earthly things and the anxiety about death is not resolved (*ibid.*: 23–5).

Augustine’s cure for this state differs from Heidegger’s, largely due to Augustine’s overtly Christian concerns. *Caritas* is the right kind of love that pursues eternity (*ibid.*: 17). The correct kind of love, *caritas*, finds eternity through rejecting the objects of the temporal world and closes the gap between the individual and God (*ibid.*: 20). Through *caritas*, God, or the beloved “becomes a permanently inherent element of one’s own being” (*ibid.*: 19). The true happiness of the eternal life of the soul emerges through this love, by transcending human, mortal nature (*ibid.*: 30). Unlike for Heidegger, being and time are opposed for Augustine. Arendt states that in Augustine’s work, to truly *be* “man has to overcome his human existence, which is temporality” (*ibid.*: 29). In effect, “Death has died” (*ibid.*: 34). Humans are essentially liberated from mortality because of an eternal afterlife. The love of life on this earth is a sinful temptation, or at best, secondary and derivative, as compared to the rewards of *caritas*.

In order to explain how temporality works in Augustine's thought, Arendt turns to natality. Heidegger emphasizes the future eventuality of death, but for Augustine, it is the past that is more crucial for influencing the present and the future (*ibid.*: 47). In her revision to the dissertation for its English translation, Arendt changes her discussion of the importance of the past for Augustine to include the word "natality". By this time, she has already elaborated upon natality in *The Human Condition* and other works. She includes the following statement in her revision of her thesis: "the decisive fact determining man as conscious, remembering being is birth or 'natality,' that is, the fact that we have entered the world through birth" (*ibid.*: 51). In her original dissertation, Arendt discusses only the phenomena of "beginning" and "origin" but adds the word "natality", which signifies that some of the inspiration for this idea can be found with Augustine (Scott & Stark 1996: 132–3). In fact, Arendt usually quotes Augustine whenever she discusses natality or birth. In relation to Heidegger, mortality is still important for Arendt, but not as emphasized because natality and the potential that humans have for living has greater significance for political action. Jeffrey Andrew Barash argues that the difference in temporal emphasis between Arendt's examination of Augustine and Heidegger's temporality is fundamental to her criticism of Heidegger as a whole.³ Barash describes Heidegger's ontology as being a type of existential "futurism", whereas Arendt stresses the importance of memory and remembrance more greatly than Heidegger (Barash 2002: 172–6). For Arendt, memory and origin are fundamentally related to the capacity for humans to act politically.

Arendt connects the notion of natality within Augustine's thought to gratitude for all that has been given. This links natality with Arendt's idea of *amor mundi*, or love the world. Whereas so much philosophical analysis in Western philosophy emphasizes abstract and eternal realities, Arendt insists that a love of this world is needed. In the Augustinian framework, remembrance and gratitude quiet the fear of death (Arendt 1996: 52). Arendt describes the love that seeks eternity as a kind of recollection, a return to the self and to the Creator who made the self, linking it with origins (*ibid.*: 50, 53). This appreciation of the past is an appreciation of God's part in the creation of the universe and of the self (*ibid.*: 50). Arendt then connects the awareness of the origin to the potential for human action. It is because humans know and are grateful for their origin that they are able to begin and act in the story of humanity (*ibid.*: 55). Arendt notes that Augustine uses two different words to describe the difference between the beginning of the universe and human beginnings. *Principium* refers to the beginning of

the universe, while *initium* refers to the human beginnings as they act in the world (*ibid.*). The remembrance of the origin involves both facets, although Arendt notes that for Augustine, it seems that the *initium* of a human being is equally, if not more, important (*ibid.*: 55; Arendt 1958: 177 n. 3). Augustine is on to something with his examination of the importance of remembering origins for Arendt. Because of his interest in birth and gratitude for the world, there is the potential for a real connection to the importance of things in this world and an understanding of the meaningfulness of each individual life. However, Augustine's Christian ideology forecloses this possibility for Arendt due to the way that Christianity understands the world, the individual's role in it and the proper relationships to other people. The Christian world-view prioritizes the eternal and heavenly over earthly events affecting mortal humans.

Arendt asserts that for Augustine, human beings have a crucial temporal role. The existence of mortals who live life sequentially means that time and change can be marked and events in the universe can have a purpose when viewed sequentially. Different from God's time of eternal simultaneity, humans mark what occurs in the world, and contribute to it through action. She concludes in her English revision that "it was for the sake of *novitas*, in a sense, that man was created" (Arendt 1996: 55). Although Heidegger also examines humanity's relation to time, he does not emphasize the fact of birth in *Being and Time* except to say that we are thrown towards our deaths, since being born and dying are beyond our free choice.⁴ Arendt specifically points to Heidegger as someone who promotes expectation of death as unifying human existence (*ibid.*: 56). In contrast, she asserts that it is remembrance of the origin that is important, giving "unity and wholeness to human existence" (*ibid.*). She states "Only man, but no other mortal being, lives toward his ultimate *origin* while living toward the final boundary of death" (*ibid.*: 57, emphasis added). It is not only mortality, but natality, that leads to action.

Arendt's English translators, Scott and Stark, emphasize that it is Augustine who guides Arendt in abandoning Heidegger's death-focused phenomenology, by focusing instead on birth and origin (*ibid.*: 124). However, Arendt is not entirely uncritical of Augustine, and the last third of the dissertation examines a problem that arises out of Augustine's Christian and Platonic worldview. In his own way, Augustine also prioritizes eternal things, such as the eternity of the soul and the eternal nature of the universe as God's creation. Therefore, he does not acknowledge the importance of acts on this earth. The greater importance of the whole of creation and its eternal nature means that

the individual life has little significance, especially outside of its potential for heavenly existence (*ibid.*: 60). Arendt states that for Augustine “life is divested of the uniqueness and irreversibility in which temporal sequences flow from birth to death” (*ibid.*). All of creation is deemed to be good as part of God’s creation. Actions only *seem* evil if one does not adopt the perspective of the whole and looks at events as sequential, instead of simultaneous in God’s time. Unique events are not good because of their individual distinction, but only because they are part of God’s universe. Consequently, the individual is “both enclosed and lost in the eternally identical simultaneity of the universe” (*ibid.*: 62). Human life does not possess autonomous significance outside of the eternal plan. Arendt believes that Augustine’s failure to acknowledge the importance of an individual life is Platonic in origin and is another instance of emphasizing the eternal and abstract at the cost of the earthly. In this sense, humans are not “worldly” and do not love this world (*ibid.*: 66).

In fact, to be saved, humans must pick a love that is outside of the world, *caritas*, as opposed to *cupiditas* that clings to the worldly (*ibid.*: 78). *Cupiditas* or covetous, sinful love detaches individual things from God’s creation and sins by doing so (*ibid.*: 81). Alternatively, choosing God through the right kind of love, *caritas*, makes the actual world a “desert” for Arendt, since the saved person can live in the world only because they have oriented themselves towards God and eternity (*ibid.*: 90). Those who will be saved view the world as God does, which raises questions for Arendt about neighbourly love. Love of the neighbour comes from *caritas*, but as such, is not a love that acknowledges the neighbour’s worldly existence (*ibid.*: 93–4). To love a neighbour in the proper way for Augustine, one must renounce oneself and worldly relations in order to imitate God. Instead of loving neighbours for their uniqueness, love of the neighbour “leaves the lover himself in absolute isolation and the world remains a desert for man’s isolated existence” (*ibid.*: 94). Every human is the same, as part of God’s creation, and not loved for any other reason. Humanity is alienated from the world and from each other. As Elizabeth Young-Bruehl describes it, since humans love neighbours for the sake of God, “love of our neighbors for their own sakes is impossible and ... our neighbors are *used*” (Young-Bruehl 2004: 493). In this case, neighbours are loved as vehicles to gain salvation and to satisfy craving by enjoying the love of God (*ibid.*: 492). The common traits of humans, like their being part of God’s creation and their need to imitate Christ are emphasized by Augustine, rather than what is unique and distinct about them. Within this

context, Arendt's criticisms of Augustine's love of the neighbour imply a needed shift in focus to the positive relation one could have with others by acknowledging the significance of their lives in this world. Arendt's criticisms of Augustine's love of the neighbour can be applied to Heidegger's philosophy as well because both Heidegger and Augustine prioritize an authentic self or authentic relation to God, over engagement with others in the political realm.

The importance that Arendt places on natality and the fact that humans are born with such potential for individual distinction is paramount in her political philosophy. Although her concept of political action is not examined in relation to Augustine, it seems that both in the original dissertation and through her English revisions, her criticisms about Western philosophy typically ignoring natality emerge and are restated. By ignoring natality, those who focus on the eternal and emphasize contemplation above all else, miss the significance of this realm. For this reason, Elizabeth Young-Bruehl argues that Arendt's interest in natality has its roots in her thesis on Augustine, but also in her personal political experiences as a displaced German Jew during the Second World War (*ibid.*: 495). To ignore the political, earthly realm because of ideological or intellectual concerns could result in deadly earthly consequences. For Arendt, it is not always problematic to be interested in things of this world, but rather, quite the reverse. To ignore this world at the expense of some ideal vision of politics allows for untold evils to occur. Furthermore, it misses what is precisely important about humanity: their potential to act and to be distinct individuals whose earthly lives are meaningful. Arendt argues that in both Christian and Platonic worldviews, the emphasis is on non-earthly matters, making efforts to distinguish oneself in this realm futile (Arendt 1958: 21). In *Between Past and Future*, Arendt connects Augustine's discussion of "beginning" with freedom and the ability to act. She states "Because he *is* a beginning, man can begin; to be human and to be free are one and the same. God created man in order to introduce into the world the faculty of beginning: freedom (Arendt [1961] 1968: 167). As Scott and Stark note, if Arendt had not examined Augustine's work, "it is difficult to imagine the context out of which her analysis of freedom and its relationship to politics may have emerged" (Scott & Stark 1996: 147). Similarly, Young-Bruehl comments that despite her criticisms of Augustine's philosophy, it is through the writing of her thesis that Arendt begins to retrieve natality from its neglect by philosophy (Young-Bruehl 2004: 495). Although the seeds of Arendt's concept of natality emerged in her thesis on Augustine, her later work describes the concept in much more detail.

Nativity fully formed

Arendt's notion of natality is more fully developed in arguably her most important work, *The Human Condition*. This book lays out the framework for Arendt's political theory in which political action is central. The activity of labour, which is the unending effort to sustain the survival of human life, and the activity of work, which builds a world of permanent things, are necessary preconditions for political action. For Arendt, the activities of labour and work are connected to natality "in so far as they have the task to provide and preserve for, to foresee and reckon with, the constant influx of newcomers who are born into the world as strangers" (Arendt 1958: 9). Since natality grounds all initiative, it is related to labour and work. However, action has the closest connection with the human condition of natality. She states that "the new beginning inherent in birth can make itself felt in the world only because the newcomer possesses the capacity of beginning something anew, that is, of acting" (*ibid.*: 9). Of all parts of the active life, political action is most connected to initiating something new, and that capacity is the result of natality, or the fact that humans are born with untold potential.

Action is grounded in natality, but it also relates to the human condition of plurality. Arendt describes plurality as "*the condition – not only the *conditio sine qua non*, but specifically the *conditio per quam* – of all human life*" (*ibid.*: 7). Plurality concerns the fact that all human beings are unique and different from one another, but also political equals. With the idea of plurality, Arendt is not focused upon the physical differences between humans, which she calls otherness (*ibid.*: 176). Although otherness is connected to plurality, otherness is shared with all organic life, and even inorganic objects. Therefore, otherness is not distinctly human (*ibid.*). On the other hand, plurality concerns *who* a person is. The plurality that is displayed in human political action is the fact that "nobody is ever the same as anyone else who ever lived, lives, or will live" (*ibid.*: 8). Plurality is inherent in the human condition and Arendt's politics are attentive to the important differences between humans. Whereas Platonic-inspired political theory shapes the political community based upon participants conforming to a true ideal of the most just state, Arendt expects disagreement in politics based upon legitimate differences in points of view. It would be anti-democratic to get rid of plurality, but also, it would replicate the Platonic or Christian model which minimizes the significance of earthly events. Plurality is exemplified in political action, through what individuals accomplish and what they reveal about themselves to the world.

The most important trigger for political action is natality. To act means to begin something new and it is because they are “*initium*, newcomers and beginners by virtue of birth, men take initiative, are prompted into action (*ibid.*: 177). Arendt quotes Augustine, once again showing how her ideas about natality are reflected in Augustine’s thought. She translates Augustine’s Latin into “that there be a beginning, man was created before whom there was nobody” (*ibid.*). For both Arendt and Augustine, each birth is unique and brings something new into the world. New political actions are grounded in the fact that each person can begin. Someone’s effect on the world cannot be predicted or controlled, but what can be assured is that it will be different due to human plurality. Arendt calls political action the actualization of the condition of natality, which answers the question: “Who are you?” (*ibid.*: 178). It is through action in words and deeds that “men show who they are, reveal actively their unique personal identities” (*ibid.*: 179). Acting and beginning allow humans to disclose who they are to others. Arendt’s difference from Heidegger is quite clear on this point. Although natality affects labour and work as well, Arendt thinks “natality, and not mortality may be the central category of the political, as distinguished from metaphysical, thought” (*ibid.*: 9). Arendt agrees with Heidegger and Jaspers that death is an important limit on human life, and represents an existential boundary condition, but she ultimately thinks that birth is more crucially connected to politics. Therefore, to ignore birth, may very well result in philosophical theories that ignore the active life as well. Her difference with Heidegger’s approach is demonstrated in the following. She states:

The life span of man running toward death would inevitably carry everything human to ruin and destruction if it were not for the faculty of interrupting it and beginning something new, a faculty inherent in action like an ever-present reminder that men, *although they must die, are not born in order to die but in order to begin.* (*Ibid.*: 246, emphasis added)

Action is what is distinctive about humanity and it interrupts the natural life cycle with something new and surprising. A focus on mortality, instead of natality, ignores the hopeful beginnings that occur within a mortal life. In her last work, *The Life of the Mind*, Arendt suggests that if Augustine could draw out the correct consequences of his view, he would have defined humans as “natals” as opposed to “mortals” (Arendt 1978b: 109). It is what occurs by virtue of birth that defines who human beings are. Furthermore, in contrast to Heidegger, a focus on natality

implies a more positive relationship to others, since it is Arendt's view that action is not evaluated on its own, but needs other people for its meaning to be assessed. It is the spectators and witnesses who judge human action and decide its meaning. Who a person is cannot be disclosed in isolation but requires a community into which the action falls. Ultimately, death happens alone, so focusing on the phenomena of death is much more isolating. It is not surprising that by prioritizing mortality, as opposed to natality, the result would be a largely negative analysis of interpersonal relationships, as in Heidegger's case.

Arendt often discusses the miraculous nature of action that is grounded in natality. Arendt suggests that the "new" appears as though it is a miracle, because it seems to arise against all odds (Arendt 1958: 178). In *The Human Condition* Arendt states that action is the "only miracle-working faculty of man" (*ibid.*: 246). She continues:

The miracle that saves the world, the realm of human affairs, from its normal, "natural" ruin is ultimately the fact of natality, in which the faculty of action is ontologically rooted. It is, in other words, the birth of new men and the new beginning, the action they are capable of by virtue of being born. (*Ibid.*: 247)

For Arendt, the potential that humans have by virtue of being born allows humans to have faith and hope for the world because new possibilities for action occur with each new birth (*ibid.*). When discussing the miraculous nature of action, Arendt often references Jesus of Nazareth. Arendt is not concerned with the divine qualities of Jesus, but the philosophical implications of his worldview. She believes that the "glad tidings" of the Gospels can be viewed as relating to the miraculous nature of action. Moreover, Arendt connects the statement that a "child has been born unto us" from the book of Isaiah explicitly to natality. Arendt allegorically extends this saying beyond the birth of Jesus, to being an expression of faith and hope for the world generally, since the birth of a child signifies a new hope (*ibid.*). For Arendt, "miracle working" can be understood as being within human capacities because humans can interrupt the world with new beginnings (Arendt [1961] 1968: 169). These beginnings cannot be predicted and are surprising, lending to the seemingly miraculous nature of the event. This does not mean one should wait for specific miracles to cure society's ills, but one could "expect" the unforeseeable and unpredictable in human affairs because of the arrival of new actors and their plurality (*ibid.*: 170). In fact, Arendt thinks political action is like a "second" birth by beginning something new and disclosing who one is (Arendt 1958: 176). She states

that the impulse for this second birth “springs from the beginning which came into the world when we were born and to which we respond by beginning something new on our own initiative” (*ibid.*: 177). Unlike our initial birth, this metaphorical re-birth is chosen and confirmed by human actors through their action. By acting, actors reveal who they are and are remembered.⁵ This “re-birth” springs from our natal condition and our ability to begin something new.

In contrast to her analysis of Augustine who seeks immortality in the realm of the afterlife, Arendt thinks there is the possibility for immortality in the actions of political actors on this earth. She models this idea after the views of the pre-philosophical Greeks, whose memorable actions are described in the works of Homer and Herodotus. For Arendt, the pre-philosophical Greeks admired political action most of all. The primary concern of politics was not legislating, but acting memorably before a community. Largely, this was because human actions in words and deeds have an immortality to them that can be remembered after the actors die. Arendt claims that all that remains after death is the stories that can be told about that individual (*ibid.*: 193). For the pre-philosophical Greeks, to not be remembered is equivalent to living and dying like animals (*ibid.*: 19). It is through political action that humans appear to each other as distinctly human. Entering the common, public world allows persons to outlast their mortal lives and be remembered (*ibid.*: 55). Arendt states that when the agent is disclosed in the act in a profound way, the act shines in brightness and in glory (*ibid.*: 180). This act is remembered, in memory, in narratives, or more officially in monuments, documents or art (*ibid.*: 184).

Arendt insists that the actor cannot control what will be disclosed in his act and, therefore, it should not be thought of as a mere means to an end, which would allow the actor to fabricate his public persona (*ibid.*). Actions reveal an agent, but one who is not the author or producer of his own life story, because one cannot control how others will remember particular actions (*ibid.*). In fact, the narrative about an action can change over time, if new facets of the act are later revealed or if the community itself changes, and therefore, the public reception of the act may change. Unlike objects, which can be shaped and controlled through human fabrication, human beings are not materials to be managed (*ibid.*: 188). Actions are unpredictable, and result in disclosures of individuals without their total pre-knowledge or control. In contrast to some philosophical, economic or religious theories that tend to view history as being made by individuals who can pull the strings or direct the play, Arendt rejects this type of manipulation and alternatively grounds history on the memories of the community

(*ibid.*: 186). Consequently, action requires courage, since the reception of action cannot be controlled and one risks negative exposure (*ibid.*). One must be willing to leave the protection of private life and expose oneself to the judgements of others in action. For Arendt, the reason that action is unexpected and cannot be predicted is because of natality (*ibid.*: 178).

Although one can readily recognize the need for the individual life to be disclosed and remembered, a troubling aspect of Arendt's analysis is that it appears that this occurs only through political action. Recognition and remembrance occur privately for everyone in our relationships with others, however. Arendt states that all lives can be told as a story and she names this fact as the pre-political and prehistoric condition for history (*ibid.*: 184). Publicly, however, immortality and distinction occur primarily for those interested in politics. Arendt comments that not everyone would want to participate in politics. In fact, she describes herself as a political thinker, not a political actor. Additionally, even if one acts politically, the likelihood that one's acts will be remembered are not good (*ibid.*: 197). Arendt does not discuss this issue, but it seems that public self-disclosure is possible if one is interested in politics, perhaps in other areas of public engagement, but it will not occur for all and more often than not, the acts themselves will be forgotten. It is understandable that the greatness of action is not egalitarian and many acts are forgettable. Yet, since actual self-disclosure of "who" one is seems inextricably linked to public, political life, it is troubling that it will not occur for most. Nonetheless, Arendt's criticism that the respect for political action has been lost because modern life fails to recognize the importance of individual actions is notable. Politics is important. Arendt thinks that politics should not be thought of as a game of manipulation by those involved, but as a stage upon which an actor courageously relinquishes control and reveals himself. Since politics has come to be understood as being like controlled fabrication, Arendt asserts that there has been "almost complete loss of authentic concern with immortality" (*ibid.*: 55). This means there is failure to recognize the unique importance of individual life as well as the importance of specific earthly events.

Conclusion

Hannah Arendt was interested in birth, and what she would later call natality, from the very beginning of her career. Her interest in political action and plurality are rooted in the concern for natality and events

that occur throughout one's life on earth. Plato famously compared philosophy to practising for death, since he thought philosophers are well versed at separating the soul from the body when they use their minds to ascertain the truth (Plato 1995: 235). Arendt rejects this approach by keeping her mind attuned to the appearance of life. For Arendt, interests in eternal truths or political or philosophical ideologies should not always take precedence over more worldly actions. It is through the fact of birth, so easily ignored by the tradition of philosophy, that a more deeply held appreciation of individual and collective life can emerge.

Notes

1. Scott and Stark (1996) argue that the seeds of many of Arendt's concepts like the pariah-parvenu as well her distinctions between the public, private and social, come from her work on Augustine (Arendt 1996: 125–34). Other thinkers are less focused on the importance of the work with Augustine. Margaret Canovan stresses Arendt's rejection of many parts of Augustine's thought. Canovan observes Arendt's need to change so much of the original thesis during the translation process so that it more greatly resembled her later theory (Canovan 1992: 8). It should also be noted that since Arendt did not complete the revision for translation into English, it suggests she was in some way dissatisfied with the work.
2. Frederick A. Olafson (1998) argues that Heideggerian ethics could be grounded in his concept of *Mitsein*, even though Heidegger does not discuss this directly.
3. It should be noted that Arendt also thinks that Augustine is guilty of over-emphasizing the future, because of his interest in eternal salvation (Arendt 1978b: 109).
4. Anne O'Byrne argues in *Nativity and Finitude* (2010) that Martin Heidegger's work can be viewed as suggesting numerous implications for natality.
5. Ann W. Astell (2006: 376) links the "second birth" to Saint Augustine's second birth when he was reborn in Christ.

TWO

Labour, work and action

Paul Voice

Labour, work and action are the three elements that constitute Hannah Arendt's *vita activa*. Together, and in combination, they represent Arendt's account of what it means to be human. The *vita activa* is a radical and profound challenge to two traditions in political thought.¹ The first tradition Arendt opposes is one that privileges contemplation and theoretical knowledge, the *vita contemplativa*, over action. She traces this view to ancient Greek political thought, which is continued in Christian ideas about the proper ends of human life. In essence, this tradition disengages from the world and demotes and diminishes the value of political action. The *vita activa* recovers an alternative tradition that values action and worldliness. Second, Arendt opposes a modernist tradition that, while it rejects the *vita contemplativa*, values labour and work over political action. In other words, Arendt not only defends the *vita activa*, she also defends a particular hierarchical ordering of its elements – privileging political action over work and labour.

Arendt's great contribution to contemporary political thought is her conceptualization of political action as a distinct category of philosophical enquiry. While a great deal of attention has been given to Arendt's notion of action, it is important to see how it fits together with the other elements of the *vita activa*. I will therefore discuss labour, work and action in order and end with a brief survey of some major criticisms.

Labour and work

Labour lies at the bottom of Arendt's hierarchical *vita activa*. Labouring is an animal activity required to sustain life, involving eating, digestion and general physical care. Any activity that is aimed towards maintaining or reproducing life is labour on Arendt's account. Thus, planting seeds, showering, grocery shopping, dish-washing, childcare and so on, are labour. They are activities we share in common with the rest of the animal kingdom. In addition, industrial activities that aim at helping us to live and reproduce are also labour. Large-scale farming, food trucking, and resource extraction for heating homes for example, count equally as labour. As animals we are subject to biological necessity and the natural processes of an earthbound biological life. This constraint on human life takes the form of *necessity* that binds us to a capricious natural realm and from which we only escape at death. It is important to notice from the outset that Arendt directly opposes necessity to freedom. In so far as we are only embodied creatures tethered to our biological needs we cannot be free. The possibility of freedom requires that we transcend our natural, biological selves. Indeed, Arendt adopts the ancient view that "the labor of our body which is necessitated by its needs is slavish" (Arendt 1958: 83). This is a rather blunt denigration of a class of activities that occupy a good portion of our daily lives.

Lying at the root of Arendt's concern is the futile character of these activities. They are repetitive and ceaseless and can be understood on a circular conception of time (*ibid.*: 97–8). Once we have eaten we are required to seek out more food so that we can eat again, and so on, ceaselessly until the cycle is stopped by death. Looked at from this perspective, we share the circularity of time with the rest of biological nature. There is nothing at the level of labour, understood in this way, that distinguishes me from you except, perhaps, the details of how we confront and, for a while at least, defeat necessity. There is nothing that distinguishes me from an ant or a tulip either in so far as we all seek subsistence in our own peculiar ways. Arendt argues that our individuality as *human* beings is lost in the grand scheme of life and our distinction as *particular* human beings with purposes and projects is equally lost from view. The endless cycle of life and death confronts us with our inevitable decay and our mortality.

Arendt focuses on the fact that the products of our labour are used up in consumption and thus our labours leave nothing permanent behind – labour "never 'produces' anything but life" (*ibid.*: 88). As we will see shortly, this lack of permanence signals the absence of a human world to inhabit. It should be clear from these brief remarks that Arendt

reserves a special meaning for the word “human” in this context. In the first place, human lives require a world to inhabit that is, in a sense yet to be explained, objective and more or less permanent. Labouring and consuming, the twin activities of animal life, cancel each other out and leave no properly human mark. Second, labouring for the purpose of maintaining and reproducing life is an act done in isolation, according to Arendt. Digestion is a solitary act in the same way that pain is a solitary experience – we cannot digest each other’s food any more than we can feel the pain of others. Arendt remarks:

The only activity that corresponds to the experience of worldlessness, or to the loss of the world that occurs in pain, is laboring, where the human body, its activity notwithstanding, is also thrown back on itself, concentrates on nothing but its own being alive, and remains imprisoned in its metabolism with nature without ever transcending or freeing itself from the recurring cycle of its own functioning. (*Ibid.*: 115)

The isolated and solitary character of labour marks it not only as animal rather than human but also as pre-political. This is because Arendt insists that a fully human life is one lived among other people in a community. A human life, well-lived, is conducted among a plurality of people and not in isolation.

Before moving on to Arendt’s account of work we should note that while she wants to sharply distinguish labour from the positive attributes she attaches to work and, most directly, to action, she does acknowledge the “blessings” and “pleasure” that accompany “the functioning of a healthy body” (*ibid.*: 105–6). While labouring can be a grim Schopenhauerian struggle for existence, the pleasures of the body offer some compensation. However, Arendt does not want us to conflate the idea of pleasure with the essential constituents of a good human life. Indeed, she correlates the desire for “happiness” with living in a society that values labour: “For only the *animal laborans*, and neither the craftsman nor the man of action, has ever demanded to be ‘happy’ or thought that mortal men could be happy” (*ibid.*: 134). Finally, we should not mistake Arendt’s views as a utopian desire to rid people of the need for labour. She is clear that our mortal, embodied, nature makes labour a permanent feature of the human condition. She accuses Marx of utopian thinking in believing that the necessity of labour can be banished from human life (*ibid.*: 87–93).

Arendt calls the political orientation that cherishes the values of labour over the other elements of the human condition “the social”.

She is particularly critical of the way in which social issues concerning welfare (satisfying the needs of the human body) intrude on, and corrupt, the political realm. She says that "The social viewpoint is identical ... with an interpretation that takes nothing into account but the life process of mankind, and within its frame of reference all things become objects of consumption" (*ibid.*: 89). We will return briefly to the issue of the social in Arendt's thought when we review some of the criticisms that have been made against her notion of political action at the end of this essay.

In many ways it is unsurprising that a philosopher would focus on labour and its place in the political vocabulary of modern thought. As she points out in detail in *The Human Condition*, the classical modernists, such as Locke, Smith and Marx, set the notion of labour at the centre of their thought. Indeed, it is fair to say that the modernist view of "man" is of someone who labours. However, Arendt thinks this view fails to make a crucial distinction between labour as she describes it and a quite different activity, namely the activity of work. The difference is important because without the perspective of work we cannot see the reality of labour as a mode of being. She says:

This destructive, devouring aspect of the laboring activity, to be sure, is visible only from the standpoint of the world and in distinction from work, which does not prepare matter for incorporation but changes it into material in order to work upon it and use the finished product. (*Ibid.*: 100)

One of the important contributions Arendt makes to contemporary political thought is to point out and articulate the distinction between labour and work.

Arendt says that work makes a "world" in which humans can live. What workers make are objects that are durable and have a measure of permanence. She says that "Viewed as part of the world, the products of work – and not the products of labor – guarantee the permanence and durability without which a world would not be possible at all" (*ibid.*: 94). She has in mind mundane objects like a table or a building, as well as cultural artefacts like books and, indeed, abstract objects like poems and stories (as long as they are recorded). Unlike labour which is essentially non-productive in so far as its products are used up in consumption, work leaves behind something that extends beyond satisfying the biological needs of its maker. What work produces is an objective world that constitutes a shared human reality. She describes this as work constituting the very structure of human experience by

constructing a world that we then inhabit, and to which, in our own way, we contribute to through our own work. Arendt provides a helpful metaphor to understand the role of the world when she says that just as a table functions as an in-between, separating and at the same joining people together, so the world functions as an in-between, providing a common ground that joins us into a community but which also separates us into distinct individuals (*ibid.*: 182). It is in fact essential to the possibility of genuine political action that a world brings together the plurality of human beings. The presence of the other and the world both requires and helps establish an objective reality that is distinct from the subjective mind of the individual for whom the other and the world would otherwise be indistinguishable from mere subjective representations. This phenomenological insight is affirmed in Arendt's remark that "The whole factual world of human affairs depends for its reality and continued existence, first on the presence of others who have seen and heard and who remember, and, second, on the transformation of the intangible into the tangibility of things" (*ibid.*: 95).

Arendt's conception of the world also makes it the intermediary between nature and humanity. Work elevates us beyond the repetitious and mute cycle of nature and gathers us into a common reality and shared objective space. The world is therefore a non-natural space, one that is entirely humanized. One further feature of work's relationship to nature is Arendt's assertion that work, in transforming nature into artefacts, does violence to nature. Work is an inherently violent activity, breaking up nature through extraction of raw materials and then the transformation of nature into useful objects.

Not only are the products of work different from the products of labour in their being more or less permanent fixtures of a world, they also represent a quite different orientation towards time. We noted earlier that for Arendt, time for *animal laborans* is circular – eating so that one can eat again later. The cycle of nature, birth, reproduction and death is a fact for both us and all other animals. However, work introduces an alternative conception of time that is linear rather than circular. The artefact is meant to persist through time beyond the life of its maker and stand permanently in the world. In this way the maker of an object is rewarded with the possibility of a kind of immortality. Work offers the prize of stepping out of the biological limits of nature. Time as linear rather than circular is thus "human time" rather than "natural time".

Finally, and importantly, work is governed by a teleological view. Work is a strategic activity that sets itself an end and seeks the means to accomplish this end. Work is undertaken in order to achieve something

rather than for its own sake. *Homo faber*, the fabricator, is an instrumentalist for whom an activity must answer to the questions: What is it for? What purpose does it serve? Dana Villa has made the argument that although Arendt adopts many of the themes and philosophical attitudes of ancient Greek philosophy and of Aristotle in particular, she takes a critical view of Aristotle's universal teleology. While Arendt concurs with Aristotle as far as work is concerned, she rejects extending the teleological view to action. We will see soon that Arendt identifies freedom with action and in particular with what Villa calls action's "self-containment", its non-purposiveness.²

Arendt's account of the *vita activa* sits unsteadily between two sorts of claims. First, the elements of the *vita activa* appear to be part of an ontological claim about the essential and constitutive features of human life. Second, the *vita activa* appears to be a critique of modernist mores, attitudes and values. A reader might wonder how we can fail to be what we are. However, Arendt is not offering an account of human nature in the traditional sense. Instead she is identifying modes of being in the world that are available to human beings, what Seyla Benhabib (2003) has called Arendt's phenomenological existentialism. While each mode of being is necessary to human life, each mode has its proper and correct place. Arendt is critical when the order of the *vita activa* is disrupted and a lower mode of being comes to dominate society, cancelling out the virtues of the higher modes. She is particularly critical of the mode of existence typified by *animal laborans* and we will examine some of those criticisms here. We will also examine some of the vices of *Homo faber*.

Arendt recognizes Marx as the great theorist of labour and we have already mentioned Arendt's claim that Marx runs together labour and work and fails to distinguish between these separate kinds of activities. More pressing though than this academic point is Marx's elevation of labour as *the* singular human virtue. For the reasons Arendt spells out and we have rehearsed, labour is far from being a virtue; it is rather a necessity imposed on us by nature. It lacks the freedom and agency that a genuine virtue would possess. However, Marx is not alone in trumpeting the value of labour. The classical liberal tradition too promotes labour's virtues, albeit with different outcomes in mind. For Arendt, the consequence of this has been the creation of a society dedicated to consumption, the lowest, most animal-like human condition. We seek satisfaction and contentment which we call happiness. Moreover, the consumer attitude has begun to "eat away" at the world by transforming what were once durable and permanent objects into throw-away consumables. If no artefact is made to be permanent but rather made

to be obsolete, to be used and consumed, then the very structure of the world, as Arendt understands it, is threatened. She argues that:

The endlessness of the laboring process is guaranteed by the ever-recurrent needs of consumption; the endlessness of production can be assured only if its products lose their use character and become more and more objects of consumption, or if, to put it another way, the rate of use is so tremendously accelerated that the objective difference between use and consumption, between the relative durability of use objects and the swift coming and going of consumer goods, dwindles to insignificance.

(Arendt 1958: 125)

As Marx well understood, capitalism eventually commodifies all parts of human life and work, and on this point Arendt is in agreement. Furthermore, the elevation of labour to the head of the *vita activa* does more than distort the rank and order of our properly human capabilities, it also undermines the possibility of political action, as Arendt understands it. As we will see below, because the attitude of *animal laborans* is one fixed on fulfilling wants and satisfying desires, the political realm is hijacked to serve social needs rather than being a venue for real political action.

Arendt pays less attention to the distortions and dangers of elevating work to the head of the *vita activa*, although she is careful to note that these dangers are real. Dana Villa calls this phenomenon the “politics of instrumentality” which “generalize the fabrication experience” to the whole of life (Villa 1996: 23). Taking the means-end attitude that is central and proper to the domain of work, and generalizing it to cover the political domain, corrupts the latter by turning political questions into strategic calculations. Arendt writes: “The issue at stake is, of course, not instrumentality, the use of means to achieve an end, as such, but rather the generalization of the fabrication experience in which usefulness and utility are established as the ultimate standards for life and the world of men” (Arendt 1958: 157). A political act when conducted in the mode of work becomes a mere means to some further end but Arendt will argue that action, and political action in particular, is an end in itself. She sees the problematic influence of *Homo faber* throughout political as well as ethical discourse that looks to consequences and outcomes as the measure of political success.

One aspect of Arendt’s analysis of labour and work that deserves mention is her claim that a “meaningful” human existence cannot be achieved in lives dominated by the values of labour and work. Labour’s

cyclical character makes it forever an inward-looking life that cannot transcend the urgent demands of the self. Work is locked into a never-ending chain of means and ends and it is therefore chained to an instrumental view of life. On the instrumental view everything is a means and so transcendence here too is impossible. It is only in action that transcendence is possible and thus it is only in action that a meaningful life is possible.

Before we move away from labour and work and turn to Arendt's entirely novel account of political action it is worth noting a significant critique of Arendt's account of labour. Feminists have been both sceptical about the value Arendt puts on labour and puzzled by her failure to see the gendered character of her sharp division between labour and work. The roots of Arendt's account of labour lie in Aristotle's distinction between the public and the private, between *agora* and *oikos* – the public square and the household. It is in the household that reproductive labour is undertaken, including child rearing and what Marx calls the "reproduction of our labour power", and this labour has traditionally been the work of women. The fact that women have been denied access to the public square and cloistered in the home, responsible for the labour that meets our biological needs, is not something that Arendt overtly addresses. Furthermore, feminists have argued that what Arendt calls "unproductive" labour should be reassessed and affirmed as properly belonging at the centre of human values and virtues. Of course, Arendt doesn't think that labour *should* be woman's work and much of the labour she references has to do with labour that is traditionally done by men. Moreover, some feminists while remaining sceptical perhaps of some of the language Arendt uses to describe labour have found her work very useful in furthering feminist concerns (see Honig 1995).

Action

What Arendt means by action is not easy to sum up in a few sentences. It is a complex concept that draws together a number of ideas into a largely coherent but nonetheless challenging notion. The difficulty is partly explained by the revolutionary nature of Arendt's undertaking in overturning several truisms in political philosophy. We noted in the introduction that Arendt thinks "against the tradition" in political thought. Bhikhu Parekh goes further and says: "It is hardly an exaggeration to say that she is the only philosopher in the history of political thought to undertake extensive investigations into and offer a perceptive analysis of the nature and structure of political action" (B. Parekh

1981: 125). It is not surprising then that her account of action needs an extensive elaboration.

We can return to the idea that Arendt challenges two traditions in political thought. The first was mentioned in the introduction where we noted that Arendt challenges the view that the contemplative attitude is the pinnacle of human achievement – a view that is dominant in both ancient Greek and Christian thought. In opposition to this Arendt privileges the practical over the theoretical in the realm of the political. The second tradition is a more recent one that, like Arendt, is keen to give a place to the practical but which Arendt finds severely wanting. Kant best represents this modernist tradition in that he privileges practical reasoning as an essential feature of human life. Yet, in Arendt's view, Kant retains some of the worst aspects of the pre-modern Christian/Greek tradition. First, Kant, in his ethical writing, which is dedicated to articulating a philosophy of practical life, retains the notion that practical thinking is essentially a solitary affair – conducted between an individual and the dictates of universal reason. Second, Kant locates the source of authority for practical wisdom outside the human world in the noumenal realm. Arendt objects to both of these characterizations of the practical life – to the idea that practical thinking is solitary and that practical authority resides outside the human world. As she says at the beginning of *The Human Condition*, it is crucial to realize the “fact that men, not Man, live on the earth and inhabit the world” (Arendt 1958: 7). Kant therefore imports into his account of practical reason elements of the *vita contemplativa* by failing to acknowledge the plurality of human beings and by failing to locate within the human sphere the source of practical authority and meaning. Arendt's articulation of the notion of action is meant to be a remedy to these major faults in the tradition of political thought.

Action is something undertaken by a person. This seemingly obvious fact hides an important distinction that motivates much of what Arendt has to say about action. She distinguishes between *who* a person is and *what* they are. What we are is a member of a particular species, physically, biologically and chemically much the same as other members. However, who we are picks out the ways in which we are different from others. So, for Arendt, each individual person is “unique, unexchangeable, and unrepeatable” (*ibid.*: 97) and each has a narrative that distinguishes her from the manifold of humanity – “men distinguish themselves instead of being merely distinct” (*ibid.*: 176). Actions are the deliberate deeds of particular humans that individualize them, lifting them from being merely instances of a natural species to being persons who have a recognizable identity. She says that “In acting and

speaking, men show who they are, reveal actively their unique personal identities and thus make their appearance in the human world” (*ibid.*: 179).

The distinctiveness of the individual cannot be revealed, however, without a context. In the first place, an action must be witnessed because an action is self-disclosure. It reveals *who* a person is by what they do and say. This notion of revelation and disclosure logically requires a spectator and so there are no strictly private actions. Thus, actions must be public and so there must also be a space for them to occur and to be witnessed. On this point Arendt ([1951] 2004) notes that one of the principal features of a totalitarian regime is its denial of the public space needed for genuinely political actions. Second, a person’s action is part of a distinctive narrative that describes the *who* of a person’s life. A narrative of this sort attempts to capture the meaning of an action and, while the actor is closest to the deed, it is the audience who best understands the meaning of what has been done: “*Who* somebody is or was we can only know by knowing the story of which he himself is the hero – his biography, in other words; everything else we know of him, including the work he may have produced and left behind, tells us only *what* he was” (*ibid.*: 186). The narrative of a person’s life is not finalized until their life has been completed, and even then there are some exceptional lives whose full meaning is still debated.

Action therefore has a role in individuating and disclosing persons but how does one act? What form does action take? Arendt most often associates action with speech. Some commentators wonder whether action and speech are the same thing for Arendt but the texts are ambiguous on this point. Whatever interpretation is favoured, it is clear that speech is very closely associated with action. Speech has a number of features that make it suited to action. First, it reveals the mind and character of the speaker in the clearest way. Second, speech communicates directly with an audience thus immediately connecting actor and spectator. Third, speech articulates while also challenging the meaning of the life shared by a community. Fourth, speech is connected to reason and judgement thus humanizing action and offering a different picture of human motivation and behaviour than the Hobbesian account that rests on an animal-like motivation, consisting of aversion and attraction. Lastly, speech is recordable and suited to the idea of a person’s life as narrative.

Arendt regards a citizen’s disclosure of herself as a performance. Her words and deeds are given up for the judgement of others within what she calls the “space of appearance”. There is therefore a sense of theatricality in the idea of an action. The individual performs her

act as a hero in the narrative that constitutes the script of her life. Her stage is the public square and her audience is her fellow citizens. In a very Greek sense, Arendt regards citizens as seekers of glory and fame. At best, their deeds are heroic and they are seen as heroes in the eyes of their communities.

This brings us back to the idea of immortality we first encountered in regard to work. Like work, action offers the possibility of immortality. Actions take place on a linear conception of time rather than the circular conception of labour time. This is because, like an object or artefact, political actions can endure beyond the lives of their authors. They endure because of their consequences or because they are remembered in history through writings, poetry and art. However, unlike objects, actions are “fragile”. They disappear in the moment of their execution unless they are recorded in some way to preserve them and secure the immortality of their authors.

It is natural to ask what makes an action worthy of being remembered. Arendt says that what is special about action is that it inserts something original and unanticipated into the world. The dull regularity of the natural world is disrupted by action and so what is distinctive about human beings is that they are capable of “starting something new”. She calls this phenomenon *natality*, the giving birth to the new. The unexpected in history, novelty in human affairs and culture are the result, says Arendt, of the capability we have to originate a chain of events through our actions. This is a crucial aspect of the idea of action because it assigns authorship to a deed as well as responsibility for the consequences of an action.

Responsibility is a topic crucial to understanding Arendt’s discussion of action. She says that actions are “boundless” (Arendt [1951] 2004: 190). By this she means that their consequences are “inherently” unpredictable and beyond the control of an action’s author. In this way, an action is never completed, rather it is initiated and thrown into the world much as a stone is thrown into a pond. This occasions a significant dilemma on the part of the actor for not only are the outcomes of actions unpredictable, once initiated an action and its consequences are irreversible. An actor is therefore responsible for both the action she is about to undertake and for the actions she has already initiated. She cannot change the past, of course, and she has only limited control over the future. Actions are therefore “risks” that individuals take but which the community must mitigate if it is to permit the full expression of humanity. Despite our utopian wishes, there is no “remedy for the frailty of human affairs” (*ibid.*: 195). Arendt addresses the existential dilemma of responsibility for action

by introducing norms of promising and forgiveness. Promises mitigate the unpredictable nature of actions and forgiveness mitigates their irreversible nature. As Parekh expresses Arendt's thought – "promise stabilizes the future, forgiveness suspends the past" (B. Parekh 1981: 117). Responsibility for actions remains with the actor but the risk of acting is, in a way, shared through the community in episodes of promising, acting and forgiving.

In summary, an action can be described as a moment of origination that discloses the individual actor within a plurality of others who constitute an audience and who are bound to the actor by a common world. These characteristics of action lead to the centre of Arendt's discussion of action, which is the idea of freedom. Human freedom is exemplified and perhaps constituted by actions. To be free is to act in Arendt's very specific understanding of action. Moreover, to act is to be human in the highest sense of the *vita activa*. For Arendt, the purpose of life is not to lead a "good life" in the Aristotelian sense but to be free in a sense much closer to the existentialist view of freedom. The opposite of freedom is necessity, and action, on Arendt's view, escapes both the necessitations of labour as well as the necessitations of means-end thinking that constitutes the instrumentality of work. Freedom through action thus promises the possibility of transcending the limitations of our embodied selves and the mechanical thinking of instrumentality. Freedom through action brings meaning to human lives.

There is one further aspect of action and particularly of speech that is crucial to the idea of action, and one that has been deeply influential in contemporary political thought. This is the deliberative nature of political life, an idea that Arendt pioneered and which has been taken up in the deliberative democracy movement. Arendt argues that unconstrained deliberation aimed at argument, persuasion and negotiation is the essence of political life. It is in speech with others that we acquire what Kant calls an "enlarged mentality" and thereby escape our solitude and subjectivity. Here, once again, we see Arendt insist that genuine political action is conducted among "men" in their plurality and their differences. What Arendt calls "power", in opposition to "violence", is exercised through a political community, between citizens, in deliberation with one another:

Power is actualized only where word and deed have not parted company, where words are not empty and deeds are not brutal, where words are not used to veil intentions but to disclose realities, and deeds are not used to violate and destroy but to establish relations and create new realities. (Arendt 1958: 200)

This is an articulation of a form of “communicative power”, as opposed to “strategic power”, that Habermas (1977) finds original and compelling in Arendt’s work. For Arendt, politics is not a pale version of an ideal, transcendental ethics or a theoretical practice best conducted by Philosopher Kings. Instead it is a messy dialogue that takes place between citizens. Of course there are constraints on deliberation that constitute the legitimacy of the power exercised by citizens collectively, the main constraint being that political debate is free of coercion in all its forms.

To deliberate with others as citizens is to act through speech. However, speech requires a shared point of reference for citizens’ deliberations. This common world is, as we have seen, made through work. It forms the structure, objects, cultural artefacts and institutions that serve as a shared background that enables citizens’ actions and speech to gain purchase with one another. A shared world serves the function of a “*sensus communis*” that enables a plurality of people to arrive at an objective judgement in the absence of universal truths (Arendt 1992). Our “common sense” shaped by our shared world enables the possibility of political agreement, even if this agreement is by its nature temporary and subject to revision.

While Arendt is a champion of democracy, she is deeply suspicious of modern representative democracy (see Arendt 1963; Kateb 1984). Her account of action values individual agency and so the form of democracy that most fits with this radical form of individualism is a Greek-style participatory democracy. She thinks of representative democracy as a handing off of a citizen’s opportunities for action, for their own humanity, onto an elaborate form of bureaucracy. If action signals the pinnacle of individual human agency then this cannot be represented by another person. Another can act for you but *your* action cannot be theirs.

Modern democratic states administer and bureaucratize and so turn citizens into subjects, in Arendt’s opinion. The kinds of democratic participation that she favours as examples of genuine political action are historically rare. Aside from the ancient Greek *polis*, Arendt mentions revolutionary America and fleeting moments of participatory democracy in past revolutions such as the 1871 Paris Commune and the 1956 Hungarian revolution. Perhaps the New England town meeting is a vestigial form of participatory democracy in the modern world. It is easy to be sceptical of Arendt’s romantic Rousseau-like attachment to face-to-face democracy. It is hard to know how to institutionalize a political apparatus that would accommodate the demanding requirements of political action, as Arendt understands it.³

We can now turn to some critical responses to Arendt's account of action. The argument Arendt makes in setting out the distinctions between labour, work and action is profound and consequently the conclusions she draws are controversial. A brief survey of several prominent criticisms of *vita activa* will help deepen our understanding of her views. First, Arendt has been accused of "amoralism" or even "immoralism" because, it is claimed, action is focused on the glory and heroism of the political actor, her performance and the response of her audience, rather than on what action the political actor performs or her motivations for acting. George Kateb says: "Arendt in her Greek thinking suggests that political action does not exist to do justice or fulfill other moral purposes. The supreme achievement of political action is existential, and the stakes are seemingly higher than moral ones" (Kateb 1984: 31). Arendt's insistence that action must be undertaken for its own sake leads to an uneasy connection with morality. If we subsume political action to moral purposes and insist that political action be motivated by moral principles then action becomes a means to achieve an ulterior end. Likewise, if political action is aimed at achieving justice then once again it is a mere means towards an ulterior end. Political action must be free of these constraints if it is to be *sui generis*, as Arendt requires. However, this means that a political action may be admirable in Arendt's sense yet reprehensible in a moral sense. If genuine action aims at no moral good and cannot be judged by the principles and standards of morality, then this presents a seemingly significant problem for Arendt's view.

A second, related, criticism concerns the content of action. Arendt seems unconcerned with what political actions are about. Instead, as we saw above, she is interested in how an action is revelatory of the character of the actor and how an action initiates something "new" in the world. However, some critics think that it matters greatly what the content of an action is.⁴ This is particularly so when we are concerned with political action. What makes an action political surely has to do with its content, with what it aims at and what it accomplishes. Divorcing content from action suggests a political aestheticism that some critics find objectionable.⁵ Moreover, if action is divorced from morality and its value is independent of its content, then how are we to distinguish between the political acts of fascists, for example, and those who strive for democracy? This is especially puzzling because of Arendt's personal history of resisting Nazi fascism and the fact that she is among the first to theorize the distinctive evil of totalitarian politics.

It is worth noting a third criticism here before we look at an attempt to address these worries. It is argued that Arendt's view of action

encourages an “elitist” view of history (see Passerin d’Entrèves 1994: 95–7). History, on her account, becomes a narrative populated by the deeds of great men. This archaic understanding of history leaves aside the significance and place of men and women whose lives are not lionized in poems and tales of great deeds. It is true that when Arendt draws on historical examples she chooses people who were “great men” and it is also true that the politically and socially marginalized are mentioned mostly in passing and usually with little interest or sympathy.

We should note here a bifurcation in Arendt’s thinking on political action between a focus on individuals and a focus on democratic practices – between agents and the *polis*. The former concern is with how action is revelatory of the *who*, whereas the latter is a concern with the political context that enables action to take place. Maurizio Passerin d’Entrèves has argued that this bifurcation signals a tension in Arendt’s thinking between what he calls an expressive model of action and a communicative model of action (*ibid.*: 84–5). The expressive model advances a conception of politics as a pursuit of individual excellence in which heroic men display and are applauded for their courage and achievements. On this view, politics is an arena for the demonstration of humanity’s most distinctive traits. Economic and social concerns on the other hand belong outside the *polis* with the practices of labour and work.

On the other hand, the communicative model shows Arendt interested in democratic practices and the requirements of political action within a community of citizens. Here she is alert to the many ways that societies constrain and restrict speech and action and thus undermine the possibility of real democratic power. Here she is concerned with the idea of unconstrained deliberation between political equals and mapping out an idea of political legitimacy as distinct from forms of state violence. Passerin d’Entrèves argues that Arendt moves uneasily between these two models of political action and that her critics have largely focused on the expressive model and taken these criticisms to apply to the whole of Arendt’s thought. He suggests that the sorts of criticisms we rehearsed above apply, when they do, mainly to the expressive model and not to the communicative model.

If morality is distinct from political action on the expressive model, some form of moral constraint reappears in the communicative model. Dana Villa has argued that if we take unconstrained deliberation as the foundation of Arendt’s notion of politics, then we see that action, as speech, is the “basis of non-violent, non-coercive being and acting together” (Villa 1996: 32). Privileging speech in the form of deliberation between citizens within a political community automatically rules

out certain forms of coercion, fraud and violence. Villa goes further to argue more generally that for Arendt political action, properly understood, is aimed at the “creation” and “expansion” of the public sphere. On this interpretation we can clearly distinguish between the politics of fascism and the politics of democracy, and so following the communicative model, we alleviate some of the worries that concerned us earlier.

However, the distinction between the models is not airtight. Some of the earlier worries re-emerge when we recall the sharp difference that Arendt insists on between the political and the social. The social, as we mentioned earlier, includes economic concerns and Arendt understands these issues to fall within the realm of necessity. Politics is the realm of freedom. However, as Villa and others have pointed out, economic and social issues loom large when we think about *access* to deliberation. Who speaks and who is listened to is as much a matter of economic status as it is a matter of political will. Arendt’s public sphere is, in principle, open to all citizens equally but the facts overwhelmingly demonstrate that the poor and the marginalized are denied access to the public sphere and so cannot speak as equals with their fellow citizens. If politics cannot be concerned with social issues and thus with matters of access to the public sphere, then Arendt’s idea of unconstrained deliberation between equal citizens is seriously jeopardized. On the other hand, if politics does allow in social concerns, then Arendt’s quarantine of the political and the social is breached. As many of Arendt’s critics have said, there needs to be a place for morality and justice in her account of political action. The intriguing question is how this can be achieved while at the same time preserving the enormously valuable insights of her account of political action.

Notes

1. See Dana Villa’s (1996) extensive account of the background to the *vita activa*.
2. See his discussion of Arendt’s debt to Aristotle in Villa (1996: [chapters 1 and 2](#)).
3. Arendt’s only sustained discussion of this topic argues for an elaborate, tiered, council system (Arendt 1963: 258–9).
4. For example Hanna Pitkin questions Arendt’s account when she says: “But there is more wrong here than injustice. On this account, I suggest, one cannot even make sense of politics itself; even for those admitted to its benefits, it can be no real benefit. To see what I mean, put two questions to Arendt: What keeps these citizens together as a body? And what is it that they talk about together, in that endless palaver in the agora?” (Pitkin 1981: 336).
5. See, for example, Martin Jay’s (1978) attempt to connect Arendt’s work with the “political existentialists” such as Carl Schmitt.

THREE

Hannah Arendt on the world

Siobhan Kattago

Introduction

Hannah Arendt's concept of the world captures the centrality of the world over the self and the sentiment that one should not run away from the world, but cherish and preserve it. In order to understand why the world is such an important concept for her, we need to see how she thought both with and against the tradition of philosophy. In particular, it is important to stress Arendt's attitude towards the world as *amor mundi* or love of the world (Young-Bruehl 2004). Her reflections on the concept of the world are influenced by many thinkers – among them Saint Augustine, Martin Heidegger, Friedrich Nietzsche, Immanuel Kant and Karl Jaspers. But it was, above all, her own experience as a German Jew in Germany, France and the United States, as well as her many years of statelessness, that influenced her concept of the world.

This chapter weaves together five themes that characterize Arendt's concept of the world. Because these themes overlap in different texts, the chapter moves in chronological order of publication. While Arendt's concept of the world is most fully examined in *The Human Condition*, her ideas have greater coherence when seen in conjunction with her other writings. Beginning with her doctoral dissertation on Augustine and ending with her posthumous *The Life of the Mind*, the concept of the world remains an integral part of Arendt's political philosophy. Her concept of the world is, first of all, rooted in her lifelong dialogue with Augustine and Heidegger about being at home in the world. This question of belonging to the world has important consequences for her subsequent reflections on metaphysics, ethics and politics. Arendt

is inspired by Augustine's argument that man lives in two realms. Likewise, her early thought is influenced by Heidegger's concept of being-in-the-world. Her existential reflections on belonging to the world shift to her second theme of political exclusion. In some places in her writings, questions of inclusion and exclusion manifest themselves in the historical categories of pariah and parvenu. In other places, she turns her attention to modern phenomena of loneliness, world alienation, statelessness and the superfluosity of the individual. Existential questions of belonging crystallize into Arendt's third theme that modern mass society and totalitarianism encourage individuals to escape from the world, rather than to engage with it. This theme of escape and rejection of the world is mirrored in the fourth theme of the conflict between philosophy and politics. As we shall see, the conflict between philosophy and politics is related to a particular attitude of the self towards the world. In her examination of the phenomenal nature of the world, Arendt emphasizes the importance of action and speech over contemplation and retreat from worldly affairs. As individuals become increasingly worldless and alienated, Arendt wishes to cultivate the public realm as the fragile space in-between people. And yet, in spite of her sharp criticism of philosophy, it is her sense of gratitude that a world exists at all that becomes increasingly relevant. Throughout Arendt's work, she returns to the ancient idea of wonder that there is a world at all. Moreover, in this fifth theme, she redirects wonder from philosophical reflection on eternal truths outside the everyday world to gratitude for appearances and opinions in the world.

Finding a home in the world: worldly and worldless love

Arendt first began to think about the world as a physical and existential place that one belongs to in her dissertation. Written under the supervision of Karl Jaspers, *Love and Saint Augustine* (Arendt 1996) asks how one can live simultaneously in two realms: the city of man (Babylon) and the city of God (Jerusalem). In her dissertation, Arendt asks how it might be possible to love both God and one's neighbour. She argues that love (*amor*) as desire (*appetitus*) can be both worldly and non-worldly. *Cupiditas* is worldly love because the object of desire is not eternal, but in the world. *Caritas*, on the other hand, as charity, takes place between individuals and is worldless because such love is linked to an eternal God. The question of how to reconcile the worldly love of neighbour with a worldless God is the starting point for Arendt's fascination with the concept of the world: "It is through love of the

world that man explicitly makes himself at home in the world, and then desirously looks to it alone for his good and evil. Not until then do the world and man grow ‘worldly’” (Arendt 1996: 67). Although her concept of the world is most fully developed in *The Human Condition* (1958), her dissertation demonstrates how the world, rather than the solitary self is a central category of human experience.

Simultaneous existence within two worlds, in conjunction with Augustine’s emphasis on man as a beginner (*initium*) has a profound influence on Arendt’s mature thinking. Origins and beginnings signify entrance to the world and are full of possibility. Moreover, the world both precedes and outlives our individual existence. New beginnings inspire Arendt – whether in the most dramatic sense of revolution or in the seemingly more mundane ability to promise and forgive. She resists the tendency to escape from worldly affairs into philosophical contemplation. Instead, we are compelled to make ourselves at home in the world. As she quotes Augustine: “For we call ‘world’ not only this fabric which God made, heaven and earth ... but the inhabitants of the world are also called ‘the world’ ... Especially all lovers of the world are called the world” (Arendt 1996: 17). Augustine inspired Arendt to think of how the self has different attitudes towards others, the world and God. What she began noticing is that the feeling of homelessness leads to the desire to find a better home away from the world. Hence the physical world becomes a transitory place on the way to something higher.

Pariah and parvenu

Arendt’s sense of the duality of the world that she discovered in the philosophical writings of Augustine shifts to questions of inclusion and exclusion into the public realm with her biography of Rahel Varnhagen. After the publication of *Love and Saint Augustine*, Arendt began writing what would have been her *Habilitationsschrift* enabling her to teach in German universities. The manuscript on Rahel Varnhagen was completed in 1933, except for the last two chapters, which she wrote while in exile in France in 1938 and subsequently published in 1958. What links *Rahel Varnhagen: The Life of a Jewish Woman* to her dissertation on Augustine and later writing is her preoccupation with being at home in the world. Varnhagen (1771–1833) was a German Jewess in Berlin noted for her vibrant salons. What does being at home in the world mean for a late-eighteenth-century, early-nineteenth-century German Jewish woman?

Arendt uses the categories of pariah and parvenu from the French journalist Bernhard Lazare to describe the situation of Jews in European society. If a pariah is a permanent outsider, excluded from society, the parvenu is assimilated and granted marginal acceptance. The collapse of Rahel's salon coincided with the collapse of the ideal of the German Enlightenment that assimilated Jews believed in. As Rahel wrote: "We have been created to live the truth in this world ... We are *alongside* of human society. For us no place, no office, no empty title exists!" (Arendt [1958] 1974: 205). The worldly character of the salons that Jewish women such as Rahel created in the nineteenth century stood in contrast to the stateless and worldless people that the Jews became in the twentieth century. Interestingly enough, the salons were not public, but took place in the privacy of the home. For Arendt, nineteenth-century Jews were the best examples of parvenus who aimed for inclusion in European society. In many ways, Rahel was just such a parvenu. And yet, Arendt was fascinated by the fact that Rahel, although aware that she was never quite at home in the world, decided to remain a pariah: "Rahel had remained a Jew and a pariah. Only because she clung to both conditions did she find a place in the history of European humanity" (*ibid.*: 227). This sense of being torn between two different worlds that Rahel describes becomes a central motif in *The Origins of Totalitarianism* and *The Human Condition*. Indeed, Seyla Benhabib argues that Arendt's concept of the world is an important link between Rahel's worldless existence as a Jew and Arendt's own desire to cultivate a public realm through action and speech (Benhabib 2003: 11–12).

Loneliness, statelessness and totalitarianism

With Hitler's rise to power and Arendt's emigration from Germany, her focus changed from philosophical and sociological questions of being at home in the world to how totalitarianism, as a new political phenomenon, changed the very contours of our understanding of the world. In *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1951), originally published in Britain with the title *The Burden of Our Time*, Arendt applies the existential categories of loneliness and homelessness to an analysis of totalitarianism. Loneliness and isolation are in themselves not new; however Arendt argues that totalitarianism would not have been possible without such deep loneliness characteristic of individuals in modern "mass" society with no sense of their place in the world: "But totalitarian domination as a form of government is new in that it is not content

with this isolation and destroys private life as well. It bases itself on loneliness, on the experience of not belonging to the world at all, which is among the most radical and desperate experiences of man" (Arendt [1951] 2004: 612). What links Arendt's interest in Rahel Varnhagen to her existential and phenomenological reading of totalitarianism is an acute sense of homelessness and exclusion.

Loneliness is connected with uprootedness and the process of making individuals inhuman and superfluous. Uprootedness is directly linked with the rise of mass society, imperialism and mob rule. Arendt, however, concentrated on the devastating consequences of being superfluous and unnecessary. She writes: "To be uprooted means to have no place in the world, recognized and guaranteed by others; to be superfluous means not to belong to the world at all" (*ibid.*). One of the hallmarks of totalitarianism was the labelling of individuals as unwanted, subhuman and unnecessary. In this sense, Arendt argues that concentration camps crystallized the rational process of eliminating those deemed unworthy of sharing the world with others.

Influenced by Heidegger's notion of angst and Kierkegaard's notion of despair, Arendt's conception of loneliness expresses the alienation of one who is not at home in the world, of one whose very existence has nothing in common with others. Loneliness is not solitude, but a feeling of not belonging with others: "What prepares men for totalitarian domination in the non-totalitarian world is the fact that loneliness, once a borderline experience usually suffered in marginal social conditions like old age, has become an everyday experience of the ever growing masses of our century" (*ibid.*: 615). Her existential language demonstrates how the extremes of worldlessness, loneliness and superfluosity made totalitarian movements possible. In telling the story of totalitarianism as a new political phenomenon, Arendt also searched for ways in which to rekindle a common world. Indeed, one might say that Arendt's conception of the world is connected to her larger understanding of modernity. Taken together, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* and *The Human Condition* trace elements of worldlessness, world alienation and loneliness amid the modern world.

From being-in-the-world to being-in-the-world with others

It is especially in *The Human Condition* that Arendt delves politically and philosophically into what it means to live in the world with other people. In conjunction with two earlier essays, "What is Existential Philosophy?" (1948) and "Concern with Politics in Recent European

Political Thought" (1954), Arendt increasingly distinguishes her concept of the world from that of Martin Heidegger. By developing his existential insights and transforming his concept of the world, she opens up new avenues for political engagement. Critics such as Seyla Benhabib, Elizabeth Young-Bruehl, Margaret Canovan and Dana Villa argue that Arendt does not simply apply Heidegger's categories, but transforms them. Moreover, since Arendt shifts the terrain from the existence of the self to plurality, her concept of the world is far richer than Husserl's or Heidegger's. Husserl was still in the Cartesian framework of the subject as it encounters objects in the world. Likewise, Heidegger's being-in-the-world (*in-der-Welt-sein*) and care (*Sorge*) are centred on the self. As Arendt glosses Heidegger's position, "The basic mode of being-in-the-world is alienation, which is felt both as homelessness and anxiety" (Arendt 1994: 179), she further develops his insight that being in the world is always being with others. She does not emphasize authentic existence in opposition to the masses or *das Man*, but existence with others in a shared world. In contrast to Heidegger, Arendt is interested in the political and moral consequences of what he calls *Mitsein* or being in the world with others. "It may be", she suggests, "that Heidegger's concept of 'world,' which in many respects stands at the center of his philosophy, constitutes a step out of this difficulty" (Arendt 2005: 443).

For Arendt, it is the fact of plurality, not death, that distinguishes our humanity. Thus Heidegger, like Augustine provides Arendt with starting points for her own political philosophy: "Heidegger's is the first absolutely and uncompromisingly this-worldly philosophy. The crucial element of man's being is its being-in-the-world, and what is at stake for his being-in-the-world is quite simply survival in the world" (Arendt 1994: 179). Although Arendt is influenced by Heidegger's phenomenological description of human existence, she does not remain fixated on the self, but instead argues that philosophy has traditionally privileged authentic experience as solitude and man in the singular. In reflecting on this idea in her posthumous publication, *The Promise of Politics*, she writes that for ordinary men, solitude is an essential but nonetheless "marginal experience" (Arendt 2005: 443).

In *The Human Condition*, Arendt states that her task is "to trace back modern world alienation, its twofold flight from the earth into the universe and from the world into the self" (Arendt 1958: 6). By dividing the world into public and private realms, corresponding to the Greek concepts of *polis* and *oikos*, she also traces how the rise of the social accompanies the shrinking of the public realm and deformation of the common world. In spite of the fact that Heidegger's name is

not mentioned once in the book, Arendt is radically transforming his existential concept of being-in-the-world. Heidegger's sense of world is rooted in care, anxiety, being-towards-death, the sense of being thrown into the world, *das Man* and everydayness. As he explains, "'Worldhood' is an ontological concept, and stands for the structure of one of the constitutive items of Being-in-the-world" (Heidegger [1927] 1967: 92). Arendt's love, by way of Augustine and Jaspers has aspects of *cupiditas*, *caritas*, friendship, gratitude, life, natality and new beginnings. Arendt's love (*amor*) differs from Heidegger's care (*Sorge*) because *Sorge* still emphasizes the self as a singular subject. Likewise, his call to conscience is self-oriented and seems more in opposition to the world, rather than involved with it. Arendt takes Heidegger's being-in-the-world very seriously and puts the emphasis on plurality in the world, rather than on abstract Being.

It is in *The Human Condition* that Arendt also distinguishes between the earth and the world, as well as between public, private and social realms. World alienation means the loss of shared experiences and action. Earth alienation, on the other hand, denotes the concrete desire to leave the earth through science and technology. World alienation and the rise of the social occur roughly between the sixteenth and nineteenth centuries. Earth alienation, in contrast, is a specific feature of the twentieth century. World alienation threatens the very continuity of the shared world in the modern age. For Arendt, the modern age is characterized by three events: the discovery of America, the Reformation and the invention of the telescope. The discovery of the New World and mapping of new lands expanded the modern understanding of the physical world. Likewise, the invention of the telescope enabled space exploration and the possibility to leave the earth. The Reformation ushered in the Protestant ethic and spirit of capitalism as a global development. Influenced by Weber, Arendt laments the innerworldly asceticism of modern capitalism and notes: "World alienation, and not self-alienation as Marx thought, has been the hallmark of the modern age" (Arendt 1958: 254). Alienation from the world leads to the rejection of everything that is shared in common – the plurality of languages, traditions, cultures and worldviews. Arendt is interested in how world alienation affects politics and morality. Moreover, world alienation is characteristic of modernity and has greater destructive consequences than self-alienation.

Worldliness and plurality: the space in-between people

Arendt's distinction between the earth and the world has clear political implications. Human beings live on earth, but dwell in the world. Her view of nature is influenced by ancient Greek ideas of life, growth and decay. Hence civilization provides stability against the uncertainty of nature. Because there are many different human beings – “Men, not Man live on the earth and inhabit the world” – a space opens up in between them for discussion and action (Arendt 1958: 7). Given the fact that plurality is such a basic part of everyday life, Arendt seeks ways to encourage people to share and care for the world. This leads her to a discussion of action and the space in between people. The plurality of men therefore creates the public realm or *polis* as a flickering space between people. As Margaret Canovan suggests, such a worldly space is similar to Heidegger's *Lichtung* or clearing where Being discloses itself (Canovan 1992: 112).

Worldliness is an important aspect of the human condition. The world is comprised or furnished by man-made products, such as building, bridges, houses and art (Arendt 1958: 7–11). But these things themselves are not the world as such; rather it is what happens *in-between* people that constitutes the world. The public is the world that is shared among people. The private realm cannot be common to others, but remains private. Moreover, for Arendt, the world is the space in-between people:

To live together in the world means essentially that a world of things is between those who have it in common, as a table is located between those who sit around it; the world like every in-between, relates and separates men at the same time. The public realm, as the common world, gathers us together and yet prevents our falling over each other, so to speak. What makes mass society so difficult to bear is not the number of people involved, or at least not primarily, but the fact that the world between them has lost its power to gather them together, to relate and to separate them. (*Ibid.*: 52–3)

Originally entitled *Amor Mundi*, *The Human Condition* describes the relationship between the *vita contemplativa* and *vita activa*. One needs the capacity to engage with the world, as well as the ability to stand back from worldly affairs, in order to think and judge. Arendt laments the expansion of the social and atrophy of the political realm. Society is not the same as the public realm or the *polis*. Nor is society synonymous

with the world. Likewise, the public signifies two interrelated aspects: public appearances and the world: “For us, appearance – something is being seen and heard by others as well as ourselves – constitutes reality” (*ibid.*: 50). Reality is what is shared between individuals. While each person has a private realm of intimate experience and feelings, only the public realm comprises experiences that can be spoken about and seen by others.

Arendt asks how we might cultivate the space in-between people to counter the increasing encroachment of the social. Historically, early Christianity tried to create a bond strong enough to replace the world. Yet Augustine’s “brotherhood” and charity are worldless because they focus on a transcendent God, rather than on earthly appearances. Arendt insists “Worldlessness as a political phenomenon is possible only on the assumption that the world will not last; on this assumption, however, it is almost inevitable that worldlessness, in one form or another, will begin to dominate the political scene” (*ibid.*: 54). In Arendt’s opinion, the world transcends changing generations and possesses a kind of immortality.

The common world, *polis* and reality

Arendt looks to ancient Greece for examples of the common space between people. The *polis* is the imaginary space in between people. Similar to the table metaphor mentioned earlier, the *polis* is linked with the action and speech of individuals. It is “the space of appearance”. Although the *polis* is not permanent, to be deprived of this shared experience is however to be deprived of reality: “To be deprived of it means to be deprived of reality, which, humanly and politically speaking, is the same as appearance” (Arendt 1958: 199). Arendt emphasizes the impermanence and fragility of the *polis* as the common world. Is the *polis* a kind of Holy Grail or Camelot? Is it a flickering image or utopia? If anything, Arendt is deeply critical of utopian blueprints for a better society. Time and again, she returns to the fact that men, not (an ideal) man live in the world. Plurality and new beginnings, spontaneity and action are all founded on a deep respect for each person (*ibid.*: 243). The world is held together by the continual birth of new people. Hence action is “ontologically rooted” in natality, not mortality (*ibid.*: 247).

Although human beings make durable things in the world, such objects do not, in themselves, comprise the world. Rather, action, storytelling and remembrance weave the space in between people. Arendt’s concept of the world is built on speech and deeds: “The whole factual

world of human affairs depends for its reality and its continued existence, first, upon the presence of others who have seen and heard and will remember, and second, on the transformation of the intangible into the tangibility of things” (*ibid.*: 95). What is needed for the world to continue is thinking, willing, judging, acting and remembering. Arendt’s fondness for Homer and Herodotus reminds us that the poet and the historian remember the deeds of the immortal heroes. The heroes are immortal only so long as we remember them. Moreover, the world is not defined by labour and work. It is, above all, comprised of the symbolic and imaginary space of action and plurality.

Arendt writes that the “common world is what we enter when we are born and what we leave behind when we die. It transcends our lifespan into past and future alike; it was there before we came and will outlast our brief sojourn in it” (*ibid.*: 55). Such a durable common world is only possible if it appears in public. Because it is common, it cannot be secret or private. Immortality is exemplified in Homer’s *Iliad* when the tales of both the winners and the vanquished are told for future generations. Thus, the Athenian *polis* was the place of immortal appearance. Yet modern mass society and loneliness destroy the sense of reality that is common to people in the world. Retreat into the private realm means that individuals “are all imprisoned in the subjectivity of their singular experience” (*ibid.*: 58). Furthermore, philosophical solipsism from Descartes onwards lessens the importance of the world by privileging the solitary subject. Such a tendency, coupled with mass society and consumerism shrinks the world that we share in common. Does this mean that Arendt was against privacy and the private realm? Particularly for liberals, privacy is one of the most important values. Likewise, does Arendt’s plea for the centrality of the common world render her a communitarian? No, she was neither a liberal nor a communitarian. If anything, she emphasized republicanism – or the importance of *res publica*. It is mass society and the rise of the social that destroys the ancient distinctions between public and private, *polis* and *oikos*.

The conflict between philosophy, politics and the world

Arendt’s concept of the world is linked with her life-long criticism of traditional philosophy. If philosophy studies man in the singular and downgrades the world in favour of the mind, politics is based on the plurality of human affairs: “Politics is based on the fact of human plurality. God created *man*, but *men* are a human, earthly product, the product of human nature” (Arendt 2005: 93). In addition to the distinction

between man and men, Arendt argues that the realm of philosophy is distinguished spatially from the arena of politics. From Plato onwards, philosophy tends to reject the everyday life of appearances for the higher reality of contemplation. In *Between Past and Future*, Arendt reflects on the prejudice within philosophy to “turn away” from the world and wonders how it might be possible to re-direct philosophical wonder towards it (Arendt [1961] 1968: 25). Moreover, she interprets the philosophical emphasis on death as a problematic exit from this world. Particularly in light of the destructive twentieth century, she argues for the need to cherish the world of appearances and opinion, rather than to reject it.

In her final book, *The Life of the Mind*, Arendt argues for “the world’s phenomenal nature” (Arendt 1978b: 19–23). Arguing against the two-world theory that contrasts appearance with Being, Arendt asks how thinking as a non-thing appears in the world. Taking her cue from Heidegger’s notion of truth as *aletheia* or disclosure, truth appears to individuals in the world. It is not located spatially in a different realm of existence, but truth itself is also an appearance: “In this world which we enter, appearing from a nowhere, and from which we disappear into a nowhere, *Being and Appearing coincide*” (*ibid.*: 19). Arendt returns to earlier questions about the role of thinking in the world and pleads for the primacy of the phenomenal world. Appearance is not a deception or illusion leading away from truth. Rather, one needs to understand the “phenomenal nature” of the world as that which seems to appear differently to each person. We live in the world of appearance, but may choose to think of our “true” home in philosophical abstraction, religious faith or political ideology. However, Arendt stresses that each person is born into the world of appearances. Thus, the world is defined by plurality and appearance. It is not reality *versus* appearance. Rather, reality *is* appearance. The world is a stage for thinking, willing, judging, speaking and acting with others. Moreover, it is a place between people that will outlive our brief entrance and exit: “The stage is common to all who are alive, but it *seems* different to each species, different also to each individual specimen” (*ibid.*: 21).

Arendt admires Nietzsche’s affirmation of life and criticism of the two-world theory. In particular, she is influenced by Nietzsche’s account of “How the ‘True World’ Finally Became a Fable” from *Twilight of the Idols* (*ibid.*: 10–11). In this brief parable, Nietzsche outlines how the history of philosophy has denigrated and even forgotten the world. Beginning with Plato “the true world – attainable for the sage, the pious, the virtuous man; he lives in it, he is it” – is equated with a transcendent realm behind or above the merely apparent. As the fable progresses to

Christianity, the true world becomes unattainable, but promised for the sinner who repents. The Kantian true world is then noumenal and unattainable. With positivism, the true world of thought is unattained and unknown. Nietzsche's parable ends with Zarathustra: "The true world – we have abolished. What world has remained? The apparent one perhaps? But no! With the true world we have also abolished the apparent one" (Nietzsche 1968: 485–6). Like Nietzsche, Arendt argues that most philosophers have been too eager to leave the everyday world for a higher realm of existence beyond appearances. She emphasizes how escapes from the world are a rejection of responsibility and a dangerous privileging of the solitary mind over other people.

Gratitude for the world and humanity

In addition to Arendt's critique of the philosophical tendency to reject the world and cultivation of the public realm between people, she was grateful for the sheer existence of the world. In her acceptance speech for the Lessing Prize in 1959, she expressed gratitude as a kind of love of the world. Even more than Heidegger's *Sorge* or Augustine's *amor*, Lessing felt gratitude for the very existence of the world. Such gratitude, however, did not deter him from criticizing it. But, Arendt insists, "it was also an attitude that remained indebted to the world, never left the solid ground of the world, and never went to the extreme of sentimental utopianism" (Arendt 1968: 5). The same could also be said of Arendt herself. The concept of the world goes hand in hand with humanity. In her opinion, if eighteenth-century thinkers such as Lessing and Kant praised humanity, the nineteenth century celebrated history and ideology. For Arendt, Lessing embodied *Selbstdenken* or thinking for oneself. Yet his thinking was not the same as that of Heidegger. He did not privilege philosophical solitude. Rather Lessing linked his gratitude for the world to an appreciation of humanity and friendship.

For Arendt, like Lessing, humanity is not an abstract concept, but is linked concretely with friendship. Communication, spirited dialogue and engagement with others about the world are central to being human. It is especially from Aristotle, but also from Karl Jaspers that Arendt develops the political relevance of friendship. Friendship is similar to public debate. It is not the same as intimate conversation or a retreat into the modern self: "In discourse the political importance of friendship, and the humanness peculiar to it, were made manifest" (*ibid.*: 24). It is precisely discussion and passionate debate over different opinions that Arendt cherishes.

Arendt poses the question most clearly, when she asks: “To what extent do we remain obligated to the world even when we have been expelled from it or have withdrawn from it?” (*ibid.*: 22). Given her biography and writings on totalitarianism and evil, this question of why “we remain obligated to the world” is far from abstract. The fact that technology enables men to leave the earth and to completely destroy it makes the world even more fragile than before. Likewise, the destruction of two world wars and the power of totalitarian ideologies underscore tendencies towards violence and nihilism. Hence, horror and wonder are part of Arendt’s concept of the world. Horror might lead one to withdraw in cynicism away from the world, but wonder is linked with gratitude: “For the speechless horror at what man may do and what the world may become is in many ways related to the speechless wonder of gratitude from which the questions of philosophy spring” (Arendt 1994: 445). In German, the word for thinking (*denken*) is closely related to thanking (*danken*). Gratitude for humanity and the world means stepping back from everyday affairs to pause and think. Arendt’s concept of the world stems from one of the oldest philosophical questions: why is there something and not nothing? However, when Arendt asks this question, she highlights that it is raised from a condition of modern worldlessness, which is to be distinguished from the other worldliness of religion. The question of why there is something and not nothing is an old one. However, the context from which this question is raised is a new one. As Arendt explains, “out of the conditions of worldlessness that first appeared in the modern age – which should not be confused with Christian *otherworldliness* – grew the question of Leibniz, Schelling, and Heidegger: Why is there anything at all and not rather nothing?” (Arendt 2005: 203–4). In addition, she asks why is there somebody and not nobody in the world. Totalitarianism tried to create a realm of nobodies, who were superfluous and incapable of thought. In her opinion, Adolf Eichmann was a prime example of this tendency. Hence, Arendt raises old philosophical questions from a very modern context.

In addition to existentialism and early Christianity, Richard Bernstein suggests that Judaism is an additional source of Arendt’s *amor mundi*: “Arendt’s faith, like that of so many Jews before her, is directed more to creation than to the creator” (Bernstein 1996: 188). By cherishing creation, as well as, or even above the creator, she draws not only from European philosophy and theology, but also from her own life experience and Judaism to argue that the philosophical gaze of wonder should be redirected towards the changing world, not turned away from it. In a letter to her friend, Gerschom Scholem, Arendt writes:

“There is such a thing as a basic gratitude for everything that is as it is; for what has been *given* and was not, could not be, *made*” (Arendt quoted in *ibid.*: 188).

Conclusion

Although Augustine was an early influence for Arendt’s concept of the world, she emphasizes the beauty of creation rather than the creator. She appropriates Augustine’s love of God and love of neighbour, as well as his sense of living between two worlds, the city of God and city of man. Yet, while Augustine preferred an eternal God to the mortal world, Arendt redirects his love towards the world. Likewise, she appropriates Heidegger’s concept of being-in-the-world. While reflecting existential unease in the world and the simultaneous desire to be home in it, she develops a richer understanding of being-with-others (*Mitsein*). In contrast to Heidegger’s privileging of thinking and Being, Arendt restored wonder (*thaumazein*) to its origin in the world. Moreover, if he tended to view the everyday world as full of idle chatter and inauthenticity, she searches for moments when freedom, spontaneity and plurality might appear between people, not simply to the solitary thinker.

Arendt’s concept of the world is deeply relevant in the twenty-first century as we struggle with violent cultural differences, scarce resources and unprecedented technological change. Her writing reminds us of the important fragility of the world that we share in common. In addition, she calls our attention to the political and moral connections between the self, others and the world. “In the last analysis, the human world is always the product of man’s *amor mundi*, a human artifice whose potential immortality is always subject to the mortality of those who build it and the natality of those who come to live in it” (Arendt 2005: 203).

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FOUR

Narrating and understanding

Maša Mrovlje

Hannah Arendt's distinct approach to political theorizing – what she affectionately, yet not without ironical undertones, referred to as “my old-fashioned story-telling” (Arendt quoted in Disch 1993: 666) – inspired much perplexity among commentators of her work. Indeed, her exercises in political thinking continue to manifest a stubborn resilience against all attempts at an easy categorization within established frameworks and schools of thought. This perplexity can no doubt be at least partly attributed to Arendt's general reluctance to engage in methodological and epistemological debates. Her work instead is guided by a rare attentiveness to the living experience of ever-changing reality, to which, in her words, “thought must remain bound ... as the only guideposts by which to take its bearings” (Arendt [1961] 1968: 14; see Hinchman & Hinchman 1984: 183). Yet this focus itself warrants an exploration of the ontological and epistemological premises that underlie it if we are not to miss out on its full import. Against this background, this chapter attempts to read Arendt's narrative approach to political phenomena not as “a method” strictly speaking, but in terms of her phenomenological–existentialist commitment to illuminating and making sense of the plural, unpredictable and changing worldly reality. In this way, it also aims to show that Arendt's “testament” (Arendt [1961] 1968: 5) consists of no prescriptions on what to think, nor does it offer clear-cut procedural rules on how to think. Rather, it arguably suggests a way of being in and relating to the world, whereby we continuously come to recognize the possibilities and limitations inherent in political action and our worldly existence as such.

In the first section, I tie the problem of thinking after the modern breakdown of traditional standards and categories of thought to the challenge of understanding and point to its political significance. The second section explores how Arendt's storytelling answers to this challenge; examining the philosophical and literary sources of her turn to narrative and situating it in relation to narrative theory, it seeks to elucidate the distinctiveness of Arendt's storytelling approach. Finally, the third section engages some key examples of Arendt's narrative practice to bring to light the peculiar way her writings speak to us in the present.

Thinking and the challenge of understanding

Accompanying Arendt's preoccupation with the need to uphold the dignity of political action is her attentiveness to the political significance of thinking. Indeed – and even though explicitly addressed only in her later turn to “the life of the mind” – Arendt displays throughout her work an abiding concern with thought and its relationship to the world of human affairs. The urgency of this focus arose directly from her realization that the traditional frameworks and categories of thought have become profoundly inadequate for understanding “the incalculable evil that men are capable of bringing about” (Arendt 1994: 132). From her attempt to come to terms with modern political experience, in particular the radical evil of totalitarianism, follows an awareness that she shares with the broader tradition of *Existenz* philosophy: by so tragically exposing the ruin of traditional standards of thought, modern events have also posed the genuine *philosophical* problem of the continued relevance and meaningfulness of thought itself and confronted political theory with the urgent need to rethink its own attitude towards the public, political realm (*ibid.*: 430, 444). This challenge only gains a terrifying concreteness in Arendt's later claim that the radical evil of Adolf Eichmann could be traced not to any demonic motives of the doer, but “merely” to his inability to think. In short, thinking, as Buckler (2011: 162) notes, now became directly “implicated in the fate of the world”.

Arendt's phenomenological–existentialist sensibility, in this respect, is made manifest in her efforts to resuscitate the exercise of thinking in the service of what she calls the general human need for understanding. The link between the two arises from the distinction Arendt draws between *vita activa* and *vita contemplativa*. While thinking and acting are essentially interrelated, Arendt holds, they are also different “‘existential’ positions” grounded in distinct kinds of “genuine” experience

– a distinction that must be acknowledged if the inherent dignity and significance of both activities is to be upheld (Arendt 1979: 305; 1978b: 78). While acting involves direct participation in the world and is only possible among the many, the activity of thinking is distinguished by its reflexive nature; it can only be done in solitude and presupposes as its essential precondition a withdrawal from active involvement in the world of appearances so as to be able to contemplate actions and events that are past (Arendt 1978b: 74–5, 78).

Thinking is for Arendt a “basic”, “autonomous” activity (*ibid.*: 69–70). By this she means that it is in its essence not conditioned or necessitated by anything outside of itself, but arises simply out of the fundamental existential need of a living human being to engage in the quest for meaning of whatever exists (*ibid.*: 166). To tease out its distinct way of proceeding Arendt draws on the example of the Socratic two-in-one dialogue between me and myself. Thinking does not correspond to mere self-awareness, an affirmation of the self-identical I-am-I, but consists of a ceaseless dialogical activity, in which the mind actualizes the duality inherent in consciousness and reflects on whatever is given to it or stirs its attention in experience (*ibid.*: 74–7). For this, it rests crucially on the faculty of imagination, which allows the mind to withdraw from the immediacy of sense perception and re-present to itself what is absent from the senses (*ibid.*: 76). While objects of thinking are “given in the world”, then, it is inherent in the activity of thinking to constantly transcend, question and submit to critical scrutiny “the sheer givenness” of the outside world (*ibid.*: 70). For this reason, thinking cannot have an end external to itself, and Arendt persistently warned against envisaging thinking as an instrumental activity meant to, for instance, provide a blueprint for political action. On the contrary, thinking remains loyal to its original impulse and can be of political significance only if it leads to understanding. Understanding is for Arendt a distinctively political manifestation of thought precisely because it answers to the basic human need to make sense of whatever happens to occur in the course of our lives and try to make ourselves at home in the world (Arendt 1994: 307–8). It is, in other words, of paramount political significance considering the phenomenal nature of the world of political affairs – the fact that the world is grounded upon, and also represents the appearance of the constitutive existential condition of human plurality, and thus consists of the unfolding of new initiatives manifesting the distinct human capacities for action and speech. For Arendt, human beings are both *in* the world, perceiving and acknowledging it, and *of* the world, as appearances to be perceived and acknowledged by others:

[T]he word “appearance” would make no sense, if recipients of appearances did not exist – living creatures able to acknowledge, recognize, and react to – in flight or desire, approval or disapproval, blame or praise – what is not merely there but appears to them and is meant for their perception. (Arendt 1978b: 19)

The ability to recognize and come to terms with the originality, contingency and unpredictability that arises from this dynamic condition of political life becomes for Arendt the paramount task of political thought. This is also where the essential interconnectedness between thinking and acting comes to light. Arendt calls understanding “the other side of action” in so far as it is of utmost importance for humans as worldly and (potentially) acting beings to “come to terms with what irrevocably happened and be reconciled with what unavoidably exists” (Arendt 1994: 321, 308, 322).

The political significance of the challenge of understanding can be gleaned from Arendt’s inquiry into the inadequacy of traditional “tools of understanding” (*ibid.*: 313). Arendt directs the gist of her reproach to the tradition of political theory against what she considers to be its “basic fallacy”, the fallacy of subordinating the generally (and distinctly) human capacity of thought in the quest for meaning to the characteristically philosophical desire to reach the ultimate truth of Being (Arendt 1978b: 15). Driven by the will to truth, philosophers have thus claimed for themselves a detached, solitary, supposedly objective position altogether removed from the disorderly realm of politics to contemplate a realm of eternal concepts and ideas, “what is forever invisible ... and truly everlasting” (*ibid.*: 131). This fallacy Arendt finds so troubling because it gave birth to the belief that the world of political affairs too can be approached on the model of rational or philosophical truth: that is, by pretentiously assuming that results reached in solitude also possessed universal validity in politics, and then applying them onto this realm, so to speak, from the outside and above. Blurring the distinguishing line between thinking and acting, political theorists envisioned a reconciliation between the two activities to occur by erecting a hierarchy, where thought, by virtue of its alleged ability to reach true knowledge of reality, is identified with rulership, and where action is reduced to mere execution of a pre-given standard or idea (Arendt 1958: 225). Yet in this way, according to Arendt, they have in fact opened “an abyss” between thought and action, philosophy and politics, which came fully to light with the modern crisis of understanding (Arendt 2005: 6).

The main problem for Arendt is that this mode of proceeding pays little heed to the phenomenal nature of the world and threatens the

existence of the public realm. The sense of the common world and the very reality of the public realm as a space of appearance, as Arendt (1958: 55–7) persistently points out, only emerges in relationships *between* a plurality of distinct individuals engaging the world in word and deed, speaking and acting with, and appearing to, each other. The “rational” attitude in politics, as manifested most clearly in traditional “two-world” metaphysical fallacies, on the contrary, attempts to explain and construe the realm of “mere” appearances in terms of supposedly deeper and truer realities, thought to lie above or beneath them, grounding or causing them (see Arendt 1978b: 10–12, 216). But the practice of subsuming whatever happens within preconceived frameworks of thought allows for nothing new – in the sense of both originality and irrevocability – to happen “under the sun” (Arendt 1994: 309). Rationalism is thus bound to grow less and less informed by and increasingly distant from particular occurrences and facts in the realm of human affairs and ensue in an atrophied sense of worldly reality. It is precisely this concern that could also be seen as grounding Arendt’s general scepticism about methodological debates. For the very concept of method, as Vollrath (1977: 162–3) points out, presupposes an attitude preoccupied with developing “appropriate” frameworks and tools through which to approach, control and master the object of observation, all from a position that is essentially foreign to it.

The prevalence of the rational attitude in political theory represents for Arendt a paramount political problem because humans depend on a shared sense of the world for the very sense of their own selves as autonomous agents, able to engage with and respond to ever-changing political reality. For what thought’s prolonged severance from experience puts into question is what Arendt calls the “preliminary understanding”, the very basic sense of one’s self as a worldly being which grounds the possibility of all thought and action (Arendt 1994: 310; [1951] 2004: 614). This danger came particularly clearly to light in the modern age. The crucial shift occurred when, unhinged from the realm of eternal absolutes, yet without abandoning the traditional quest for certainty, the activity of thinking came increasingly to resemble mere instrumental reasoning or logicity, whose main characteristic is that it carries within itself a claim of compulsory validity regardless of others and the world, that is, regardless of our situated existence (Arendt 1994: 318). The disturbing result was that modern thought, most notably in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century philosophies of history, thus ended up subordinating reality itself to the supposedly self-evident and necessary, yet essentially arbitrary, logic of process (see Arendt 1978b: 26–7, 53–5; 1958: 296–7, 304; [1961] 1968: 57). In this way it in effect

reduced humans to mere objects of inhuman forces and processes, and also finally destroyed the sense of the common world as a frame of reference within which human words and deeds could appear. Indeed, Arendt counts the radical worldlessness of modern thought among one of the main conditions that made individuals so susceptible to the lure of totalitarian movements and their ideological interpretations (and recreations) of reality.

Rational truth, in so far as it paints an unambiguous picture of reality and also provides a blueprint for political action, may easily appear to be a more effective and powerful political attitude. Yet it risks distorting or even destroying the fundamental existential basis of plurality, which represents the very condition of the possibility of politics and also its ultimate meaning. It was also on those terms that Arendt was deeply critical of attempts within the social sciences and historiography of her day to reach “actual knowledge” of totalitarianism as some force arising from outside politics itself, and on this basis construct appropriate tools to defeat it once and for all. For what was thus missed was not only the disturbing fact that “totalitarian governments have not been imported from the moon” but arose from the very midst of modern societies, but also the understanding of political experience that would bestow meaning on the fight against it (Arendt 1994: 310; see also Buckler 2011: 12).

The modern challenge of understanding, then, does not refer simply to the fact that traditional standards of thought have suddenly become obsolete as if all that was needed was to erect a new set of yardsticks, more adequate to the present realities (see Arendt 1966). Rather, the breakdown of traditional standards of thought brings fully to light as “a tangible reality” and “a fact of political relevance” the challenge of understanding as it arises out of the perplexity inherent in the experience of thinking itself (Arendt [1961] 1968: 13). This perplexity results from the fact that the privilege of a withdrawal from the world is exercised by a living being that is itself part of the world of appearances, who seeks to grasp the meaning of everything that is but can never leave or transcend it altogether (Arendt 1978b: 45). Rather than trying to escape it, this perplexity must be assumed in what Arendt calls “thinking without a bannister”, of confronting experience without prefabricated concepts and frameworks of thought (Arendt 1979: 336). Following in the footsteps of her philosophical mentors, Heidegger and Jaspers, she accordingly embraces the notion of truth as disclosure or revelation. This notion is crucial to Arendt’s vision of understanding proper because it is based on the recognition of thought’s subjective, situated character, and consequently affirms also the independent existence and

value of outside factual reality, in its “stubborn thereness” and contingency, its particularity and plurality (Arendt [1961] 1968: 253). The political significance of this attitude emerges in that its proper concern is with what Arendt calls factual truth in contrast to rational truth. On the one hand, rational truth refers to abstract and relatively permanent axioms and theories pertinent to mathematics, science and speculative philosophy. On the other hand, factual truth refers to “common and factual reality itself”, that is, to actions, events and situations that happen when many people interact together, constituting the contingent fabric of the political realm (*ibid.*: 232, 227).

Arendt’s concern therefore is not to deny knowledge a necessary part in the process of understanding. Instead, she remains wary of the various ways in which the “rational” quest for completeness and finality might stir the focus away from its proper aim: to confront the multiplicity of actions and events in their originality and particularity and weave them into the fabric of the common world, that is, to gauge what they mean for *us* and thus constantly engage in reinvigoration of our sense of the common world and our own selves in it. Yet, as an activity of ceaselessly confronting and transcending the world in the quest for meaning, “thinking without bannisters” can never definitively establish meaning and is in this sense even “entirely without results” (Arendt 1978b: 171, 191, 197). The “wind of thought”, Arendt suggests as she draws on the example of Socrates, corresponds to “the technique of dismantling”; it has “a destructive, undermining effect” on all established standards, values and rules by which we understand the world and conduct our lives, including its own previously reached conclusions (*ibid.*: 212, 174–5). How, then, can thinking also help to endow the plurality and contingency of experience with sufficient coherence and comprehensibility needed to affirm the value of human freedom and enable human action in the world? To this Arendt replies by weaving the caught meanings into stories in order to share the meaning of what appears with others. If thinking removes us from the world in the quest for meaning of what has happened, storytelling answers to the challenge of understanding because it returns us to the plurality of the world of appearances and thereby moves us to the future.

Storytelling and the retrieval of the “lost treasure” of political freedom

Arendt’s attempt to retrieve storytelling as a distinct approach to political phenomena draws inspiration from the ancient, “pre-philosophical”

concern, as manifested in Greek poetry and historiography, with endowing with meaning and thus immortalizing the fleeting and perishable affairs of men (Arendt 1978b: 131). Before the philosophical turn to the “truly everlasting”, it was the distinctively “political function” of the storyteller, poet or historian to watch over and praise the words and deeds of mortals, tell stories about them and so keep them alive in the memory of history (Arendt 1958: 197). For Arendt, storytelling thus embodies the recognition that humans as worldly beings unhinged from the realm of eternal absolutes can only search for meaning to their lives in their temporal and intersubjective existence itself. Stories answer to this horizon because they correspond to the temporal structure of human action in the world: the fact that humans exist in the gap between past and future and that the way of thinking, acting and living, and the very way of human freedom, consist of a constant negotiation between the need to retrieve and assign meaning to what once was, and the aspiration to project oneself towards uncertain futures, all without a stable bridge of traditional verities. In this Arendt intimates the recent bent within political theory to find in the narrative proximity to the particularity and plurality of human existence a valuable prism and voice through which to illuminate and confront problems plaguing the contemporary mind.¹

What distinguishes Arendt’s approach, however, is its focus on the specifically political import of narrative. Her storytelling, indeed, is tied intimately into her efforts to bring to life again, after the twentieth-century horrors, the meaning of human freedom and reinvigorate, in the midst of the desert-like conditions of modern life, a public realm able to house properly human action and speech. Ontologically, Arendt’s argument for storytelling echoes what Paul Ricoeur, one of the prominent contemporary theorists on narrativity, calls “the pre-narrative capacity of life” (Ricoeur 1991: 28–9). In this notion is contained a two-way acknowledgement that human life is always-already storied, implicitly caught in temporal dramas of the appearing world as well as “an activity and a passion in search of a narrative” that would organize the flux of events into a meaningful life-story and offer points of orientation for the future (*ibid.*). Or, in Arendt’s words, while our condition as worldly beings engaging the world in action and speech grounds the very possibility of stories and constitutes “the prepolitical and prehistorical condition of history”, it is stories that are able to humanize our lives by revealing the distinctively human character of action (Arendt 1958: 184; 1978b: 131–5). Arendt’s embrace of storytelling then rests on the claim that because stories by their very form imitate the structure of human acting and suffering, they are able to affirm the human

character of the world, history and politics, and kindle the sense of our own selves as political agents, capable of responsible action in the world (see Kristeva 2001: 7–8).

Crucial to understanding the distinctiveness of Arendt's storytelling is her rejection of the traditional narratives of historical continuity and logical succession, where each event gains its meaning only as part of an encompassing whole or process, and is, in fact, portrayed as mere necessary instantiation of some inevitable "higher law". In particular, she abhorred the historicist notion of salvation in history, most notable in the idea of the "Progress" of "Mankind", whereby any occurrence could be explained and also justified in terms of the next stage in the overall development and where, consequently, the position of the ultimate judge of human affairs was yielded to the criterion of "Success" (Arendt 1978b: 216). Against this tendency, Arendt's storytelling is indebted to Walter Benjamin's historiography of a fragmented past, as epitomized in his metaphor of "the angel of history" (Arendt 1968: 165). Like Benjamin's angel of history, Arendt's storyteller affirms the reality of the gap in the linear succession of time, and thus also his or her freedom to look upon the past with eyes unburdened by the spectre of teleology and thereby "redeem" those fragments of past experience that the "storm of progress" has destined for oblivion (*ibid.*: 197, 165). Liberated from the quest for deeper causes and realities, purposes and ends, and distanced from immediate interests in the world, the angel is able to consider each particular deed in its particularity and endow it with a general meaning.

The notion of "the redemptive power of narrative" (Benhabib 1990) that Arendt draws from Benjamin is of an immediate political import because it encapsulates the ability of stories to "reclaim our human dignity" (Arendt 1978b: 216). For by endowing with significance particular, single events and gestures, stories are able to affirm human freedom as a source of worldly events. Indeed, the peculiar political significance of stories, according to Arendt, can be traced to their unique capacity of revealing the "who" rather than the "what" of the protagonists' identity (Arendt 1958: 186). Stories, in other words, affirm "the revelatory character" of action and speech, the fact that they, apart from being "about some worldly objective reality", involve a disclosure of the acting and speaking agent (*ibid.*: 182). In this way, stories foster the view of human beings as actors and sufferers, not passive victims or objects of deeper and truer realities, metaphysical or historical causes or ends. Thus, they are able to uphold the potentialities of human freedom and establish the distinctively human significance of politics also in the present and for the future. This emphasis is crucial because human

freedom and the status of an acting being, for Arendt, is not a matter of a self-evident or natural fact, but exists only “as a political and as a human reality” (Arendt 1994: 408). In other words, it is predicated upon our recognizing each other as equal members of the public realm and can, by implication, be denied or even completely obliterated if such intersubjective, political recognition is refused.

It is this awareness and concern that grounds the meaning of Arendt’s claim that the aim of storytelling is not to reach objective knowledge of the past by, for instance, seeking to unearth a previously concealed essence or origin of a phenomenon or explaining it (away) in terms of its supposed “causes” (*ibid.*: 319, 403–5, 407). For this would not only deny the reality of the new and the unprecedented in history, but also mean that the future, too, can be foretold. At work in Benjamin’s notion of redemptive historiography, rather, is a “method of ‘drilling’”, akin to the “digging quality” of Heidegger’s “passionate thinking” which Arendt conveys with the metaphor of a “pearl diver” (Arendt 1968: 202, 206; 1971: 50–52). The pearl diver reaches into the depths of the past, but not “to resuscitate it the way it was and to contribute to the renewal of extinct ages” (Arendt 1968: 205). The aim is to bring to life again those “corals” and “pearls” of past experience long buried or concealed under the segmented layers of traditional categories and listen to their “rich” and “strange” echoes in the present (*ibid.*: 205–6). It is to make them a living reality in the storyteller’s own world, and thereby to make them speak with new vigour and unexpected significance to the concerns and intricacies of the present and the future. The concern with immortalizing past words and deeds thus becomes intimately tied with, indeed indistinguishable from, the affirmation of a new beginning in the present. It is in this sense that Arendt (1994: 320) says that “history is a story which has many beginnings but no end”.

Yet if this bond between the past and the future is to be upheld, a fundamental distinction needs to be kept. While stories make action and life meaningful, as Arendt emphasizes in her reflections on Isak Dinesen, it is a highly dangerous error to try to live life as if it were a story, that is, try to make a preconceived script come true in politics (Arendt 1968: 105, 109). The danger of this aestheticist reversal, to be sure, is present in the method of drilling itself. This is because its desire to liberate past experiences from their predetermined place within some larger whole easily lapses into an embrace of what is supposedly purely original or authentic, too genuine, in short, to reveal any broader meaning that would be communicable to others and able to speak in the present (*ibid.*: 198–9). As Arendt elaborates in her

reflection on the troubling political implications of Heidegger's philosophy, however, this reversal occurs only when thinking, based as it is on a withdrawal from the world of appearances, forgets to return to the common phenomenal reality and turns inward towards itself (see Arendt 1971). In this way it also fails to affirm the independent existence of outside reality and mistakenly assumes that the plural character of the world can be resolved into, and in fact reduced to a mere function of, the essentially subjective thought process. Far removed from common intersubjective reality, this form of thought can only lead to action by an "absolutizing of individual categories of being" – thereby furthering the view of the world and others as mere material to be moulded at will and representing the ultimate manifestation of the traditional philosophical prejudice against the political realm (see Arendt 1994: 185, 176–82).

The basic rule of storytelling instead is "to be loyal to life" (Arendt 1968: 97). Affirming the intersubjective, plural character of human existence, Arendt is clear that "nobody is the author or producer of his own life story" (1958: 184). This means that nobody can really "make" their story, but only let it emerge out of repeating in imagination whatever "life is giving you" (Arendt 1968: 97). What underlies this rule is recognition that the temporal, plural and unpredictable character of the appearing world can never be made completely transparent to thought (Arendt 1994: 183–4). Following from this understanding is the insight that Arendt admires in the thought of Karl Jaspers: that meaning, as opposed to truth, and thought itself only come into existence *between* human beings, that is, "in communication", and can only assume the form of "a perpetual appeal" to the freedom of others (Arendt 1968: 85; 1994: 182–3). This shift Arendt develops further in her notion of "representative thinking" (Arendt [1961] 1968: 237). This is thinking that remains always in close contact with the world and other people, representing them and considering their standpoints in the solitary dialogue of thought. Hence emerges the perspective of worldly impartiality, which Arendt praises in the great ancient historiographers and which further establishes the distinctly political relevance of her storytelling approach (*ibid.*: 51). For by travelling freely about the world and imagining what it looks like from a plurality of different perspectives, it brings into existence a space of appearance, where the "redeemed" contents of the past can be brought into a "playful" communication with each other and "illuminated" – in Jaspers's phrase – in their worldly, intersubjective existence (Arendt 1968: 79–80, 85; 1994: 186). This emphasis is crucial because it grounds the capacity of stories to humanize the world. For the recognition of humans as acting and

speaking beings can only follow from an understanding of the way they appear on the temporal and spatial plane of the world, in the web of human relationships constituting the public realm.

Here is also where Arendt's storytelling both echoes and at the same time distances itself from the main concern guiding the recent proponents of the ethical and political value of the narrative voice. The main emphasis in the writings of, for instance, Martha Nussbaum (1995) and Richard Rorty (1993), lies on the narrative ability to inspire empathetic identification with others' experience of suffering and injustice, and thereby cultivate in the reader appropriate emotional responses and moral sentiments. From Arendt's perspective, however, this focus risks reducing the meaning of a particular event or experience to a moral lesson or idea, while missing out on its distinctive appearance in the common, political world. For the same reason, Arendt refused to write history simply from the standpoint of the victims or the oppressed. Any such attempt, unmediated by the perspective of worldly plurality, for Arendt, is bound to abstract the experience of suffering or oppression away from its phenomenal manifestation, and reduce it to an essential, seemingly eternal trait of the victims' identity. As such, it in fact risks justifying their victimhood and obscuring the possibilities for the oppressed to affirm their freedom in the future (see Arendt 1994: 402). Arendt's emphasis on the importance of "reconciliation with reality", then, does not suggest mere acceptance or complacency in the face of what happened (Arendt [1961] 1968: 257). The value of the storyteller's impartiality, on the contrary, is that, in stark contrast to the modern notion of objectivity, it resists closure to be able to instead retain the "impact of reality and the shock of experience" and preserve a space for critical reflection on what particular occurrences and events mean for our common world (Arendt [1951] 2004: xxvi; Buckler 2011: 12, 45–6, 57–8, 107). Its perspective of worldly plurality lets the meaning (or value judgement) of actions surface tentatively, and never unambiguously, out of a consideration of how they emerged within the web of human relationships, "in the midst of human society" (Arendt [1961] 1968: 404). And conversely, it reveals the significance of events by examining how they echo in the common world, how they bear upon the human, political status of a plurality of individuals constituting it (see Arendt 1994: 404). As such, stories further critical understanding and always-already contain an appeal to the freedom of others. For by showing how any particular situation came about through a plurality of human (in)actions in the world, stories also disclose previously unrecognized or concealed potentials of human freedom in the present.

Illuminating dark times

To illustrate the human and humanizing capacity of stories, this section engages two examples of Arendt's narrative practice: her essay on Isak Dinesen – for her an exemplary storyteller – in *Men in Dark Times*, and her seminal attempt at understanding the reality of her time in *The Origins of Totalitarianism*. These examples were chosen because they both engage stories as a response to “dark times”, those times when the potentials of human freedom are dormant or extinguished. As such, they bring out particularly clearly the resisting aspect involved in narrative understanding – what Arendt called “the unpremeditated, attentive facing up to, and resisting of, reality” (Arendt [1951] 2004: xxvi).

Isak Dinesen (1885–1963)

Not only could Isak Dinesen (the pseudonym of Karen Blixen) tell stories – what made her “unique”, Arendt says, was that she “also ... knew what she was doing” while telling them (Arendt [1961] 1968: 257). “All sorrows can be borne if you put them into a story or tell a story about them.” It is with these words attributed to the Danish Scheherazade that Arendt underlines the political function of the storyteller in her chapter on action in *The Human Condition* and in her essay “Truth and Politics”. For behind these words stands not the desire to “*be* a writer”, but a conscious resort to storytelling as a way of bearing the passions and sorrows of life, of remaining “fully alive” (Arendt 1968: 96–7). Arendt's story about Dinesen, accordingly, is neither a conventional biography nor a literary essay in honour of a great writer. Critically responding to just such an attempt made on the part of Parmenia Miguel in her biography, *Titania: The Biography of Isak Dinesen*, Arendt proceeds by freely assembling the facts and occurrences of Dinesen's life along with quotes from her writings in order to bring out and salvage for the future the practice and wisdom of storytelling.

What Arendt discerns in Dinesen's life-story is the conviction that even in the darkest of times stories are able to kindle meaning and make life bearable. This is just as well, as Dinesen's life, for Arendt, contains a warning that with “the slightest misunderstanding” this humanizing relevance of stories will inevitably be betrayed (*ibid.*: 105). Dinesen's youthful folly, for example, was her attempt to make a preconceived story she had construed about herself – the idea of a life of passion among the natives bequeathed to her by her father – come true in life. It was this “misunderstanding” of the relationship between storytelling and life, Arendt suggests, that made her marry the twin brother of

her true love and embark with him on the adventure to East Africa. So, too, it regained its grip on her life while there. Not without irony, Arendt recalls how Dinesen appropriated the image of Scheherazade, using her storytelling ability to keep alive “the flame of passion” for her lover, the restless adventurer Denys Finch-Hatton, as much as for the not yet tamed wilderness of Africa (*ibid.*: 101). Stories helped her cope with reality; through them, she revelled in her liberation from the suffocating norms of respectability and usefulness ruling nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century European societies, and affirmed her freedom in “that direct contact with God which we shared with the hippo and the flamingo” (Dinesen quoted in *ibid.*: 102).

But the problem was that her stories made her lover, her African adventure and the whole of her life appear “magical”, even when it was anything but (*ibid.*: 103). For Arendt, and as suggested in Dinesen’s tale “The Poet”, Dinesen’s youthful temptation embodies “the vices of *Bildung*”, the nineteenth-century romanticist tendency to use culture as a refuge from society and politics, to seek to escape the threat of reality and recreate the Paradise lost by virtue of the cultivation of one’s own self. Indeed, Dinesen’s tendency to project upon reality her own ideas about “what she wanted to be, how she wanted to live”, Arendt suggests, in fact made her ill-prepared to recognize and confront the disaster that was to follow (*ibid.*: 103). Dinesen herself lucidly exposed in her writings the trap represented by the preoccupation with one’s own identity; it means, as she writes in her short-story “The Dreamers”, to be one’s own “slave and ... prisoner” (*ibid.*: 96; see also Arendt 1958: 211). For underlying the concern with the self is actually the fear of one’s worldly “fate” (Arendt 1968: 105). And this fear – as she, no stranger to the lures of vanity and social prestige, well knew – far from affirming human freedom, the ability to respond to whatever may be, leads back “inescapably” into the embrace of the philistine society, fostering the willingness to “accept as success what others warrant to be so ... at the quotation of the day” (*ibid.*: 96, 105).

Her awareness of the dangers of aestheticism and her loyalty to the original impulse of storytelling came only after she had lost “what had constituted her life”, both her farm in Africa and her lover, when she had nothing left “except grief and sorrow and memories” (*ibid.*: 98). For, tragically echoing Arendt’s insight into the break in the thread of tradition, it was only then that all venues for a magical escape were finally destroyed and that all that Dinesen had left to resort to was the world in its inherently fragmentary nature. Then, her concern shifted from endowing the world with her own “magic” to repeating in imagination the fragments of experience and assembling them into stories in

order to reveal both the pattern of a life, and herself as she existed in the world, what she called a “destiny” or, in Arendt’s terms, a worldly “who” (*ibid.*: 97, 104). In this way stories made her sorrow “bearable and meaningful”, they “saved her love, and ... her life” (Arendt [1961] 1968: 257; 1968: 104). This is because they liberated her from a fixed identity as something seemingly beyond her control. For by revealing one’s destiny, one’s joys and sufferings in their human, worldly character, stories also affirm the fact that the meaning of a human life necessarily transcends whatever a person has done or suffered. In this way they thus return back within the realm of human powers the privilege of reflecting upon whatever may be, understanding and judging it, answering to it and resisting it (Arendt 1968: 97).

Through the stories she wrote, the older Dinesen was able to review her life, judge it and thus also “let go” and act anew (*ibid.*: 97). Arendt recounts three of her stories that all directly address and expose as a fundamental error Dinesen’s early attempt to try to make life conform to art, in particular to use others for the realization of a preconceived idea. Her stories, then, are not narratives of emotional or moral growth, of loss and eventual (personal) redemption, characteristic of the nineteenth-century *Bildungsroman*. They are stories of the discrepancy between individuals’ ideals and the resistance of the world, ever exploring the boundaries of reality, and thereby disclosing a space for human action – not in the sense of acting out a predetermined goal, but in the sense of opening oneself and responding to “the infinite possibilities of life” (*ibid.*: 96). It is in those terms that we may understand the political significance of Dinesen’s example, and Arendt’s remark that storytelling was “what in the end made her wise” (*ibid.*: 109).

The Origins of Totalitarianism

It is this wisdom of storytelling that could be said to inform Arendt’s resolve to understand and bear “the burden of our time”. She qualifies *The Origins of Totalitarianism* as a narrative exercise by emphasizing that her aim was not to write a historical book, but a political one (Arendt [1951] 2004: 617–18). By this she means that she was guided by a concern with the present, that is, she sought to shed light on the “disturbing relevance” of the emergence of totalitarianism (*ibid.*: xxvi). This concern, at its most fundamental, was founded upon the insight that, as an attempt to destroy the very humanity in human beings – what she called the making of humans superfluous *as human beings* – totalitarianism also posed the radical question of the meaning of being human (*ibid.*: 620). She was accordingly critical of any attempt at explaining

totalitarianism in an “objective” fashion, by tracing it to a clearly discernible cause or portraying it as a result of some or other underlying essence or idea. This practice, she was convinced, would not only end up normalizing and in fact justifying the phenomenon, but also – as clearly manifested in prophecies of both Progress and Doom – stupefying the present human capacities of understanding and response (see Arendt 1994: 404–5). Arendt’s aim, on the contrary, was “to destroy”, to reveal that any narrative about the event of totalitarianism necessarily will be inconclusive and that there can be no definitive, final story to tell (Arendt [1951] 2004: 617). This she attempted to do by illuminating those elements that, in hindsight, could be seen as having crystallized into totalitarianism (*ibid.*: 617; 1994: 403). In doing so, Arendt draws extensively on literature, memoirs, letters, anecdotes and biographies, in addition to historical, political, legal and philosophical scholarship. The following analysis briefly points to several examples of Arendt’s “pearl-diving” in order to show how she sought thereby to reveal those conditions “in the midst of human society” that made totalitarianism possible, as well as recover the human potentials of resisting “totalitarian solutions” in the future (Arendt 1994: 404; [1951] 2004: 620).

One of the elements that eventually made possible the totalitarian affront against humanity Arendt discerns in the way the category of the social intervened in the development of modern anti-Semitism (Arendt [1951] 2004: 115). Rejecting the ideas of “eternal” anti-Semitism and “eternal” victimhood, Arendt turns to Marcel Proust’s literary (self-) portrait to illuminate the position of Jews within European nation-states. Proust’s world, where all worldly events and issues were reduced to the “dazzling, fascinating reflections” of individual members of society, she notes, paints a picture of the broader modern development where the citizen’s concern for the public world gave way to the bourgeois regard for private interests, inner personal traits and social standing (*ibid.*: 106). Just as *Remembrance of Things Past* depicted reality as a reflection of a virtually incommunicable inner life, so too bourgeois European society regarded “Jewishness” as a kind of innate and curiously perverse “inner experience” (*ibid.*). It was Benjamin Disraeli – for Arendt an exemplary case of the rising parvenu mentality among the Jews – who discovered that within this constellation the “crime” of Judaism as a religious and political category could easily be transformed into a potentially attractive private vice, alluding to “an inherent, psychological quality” that is racially predetermined (*ibid.*: 93, 107, 110). Yet the upshot of this development was that the (non-) acceptance of Jews within Western societies was predicated upon public opinion about “what” they were presumed to be in their inner selves,

rather than on anything they might actually have said or done publically. As Proust was well aware, this situation also made them particularly vulnerable; for if “punishment is the right of the criminal”, it was the vice of Jewishness that, once in the hands of a political movement, could lead to a “wholesale extermination” (*ibid.*: 107, 115). Arendt points out that such “social factors” were invisible to historians of major political and economic events, and were “recorded only by the more penetrating and passionate force of poets or novelists” (*ibid.*: 115).

The way for the category of race to become an organizing principle of a political movement geared towards global rule, however, was paved by imperialism. Imperialism, for Arendt, reflects “the political emancipation” of the social mentality, with the bourgeoisie appropriating the state apparatus in order to pursue its private interests of capital accumulation (*ibid.*: 185–6). A glimpse into the underlying truth of the era Arendt sees revealed in Rudyard Kipling’s *Kim*, a portrait of an exemplary agent of imperialism, an individual in love with “the game for its own sake” (*ibid.*: 281). Kim is the image of purposelessness; he is severed from all social bonds, specific concerns and goals, and contemptuous of his own identity. As such, he is all too willing to forfeit his individuality to become a participant in and a mere function of the given forces of history, and treat others and even whole nations as mere “stepping-stones” on the path of endless expansion – not for the sake of his country or any other definable interest, but for the sake of the aimless process itself, as it seemed to embody the ultimately inexplicable mystery of life (*ibid.*: 161, 281–2). In his purposelessness, Kim points to the novel development introduced by imperialism, whereby political power became unhinged from the utilitarian motives that had originally stirred it into motion, and liberated itself from the specific political, constitutional constraints of the body politic (*ibid.*: 184–5, 268–9). This shift came out most clearly in the rise of regional European “pan-movements” that severed the category of race from all actual experience and any definable interests, and developed it into the mainspring of an ideology, a hidden law of process working above the positive laws of the state (*ibid.*: 269–98).

According to Arendt, imperialism thus brought to light the failings of the “social” attitude in politics. For it showed how the endless pursuit of private interests and the practice of reducing others to mere objects or means to an end, was based upon and fostered an atmosphere of rootlessness, making people increasingly distanced from, and shorn of a set place and purpose in the world and among other people. Equally well, it revealed how this process, in turn, hindered the development of a sense of self as a moral and political agent, able to recognize, and assume

responsibility for, others as equal members of the common world. This situation gained additional concreteness and a terrifying impetus with the transformation of people into masses, which came about with the rise of unemployment and the collapse of the old class system. By turning to Kipling's novel, Arendt evokes the profile of atomized, lonely and socially and economically superfluous individuals, who, after having lost the last remaining threads that had bound them to the world and other people, are ready at any moment to escape the threat of reality into and relinquish their capacity of independent judgement in front of some or other seemingly inexorable force of a movement.

From this brief illustration of Arendt's narrative approach, it becomes evident that there follows no clear-cut conclusion as to the cause or underlying essence of totalitarianism. Arendt instead retains her focus on "the *event* of totalitarian domination itself". Here her "method" meets "the general philosophical implications" of her analysis (Arendt 1994: 402). Just as there is no "essence" of totalitarianism out there to be discovered, so too no realm of eternal ideas can be of help in resisting it in the future (*ibid.*: 407–8; Arendt [1951] 2004: 625–32). Any resort to a given and unchangeable human nature would not only fail to acknowledge the radicalness of the totalitarian affront against humanity, but also, as Arendt's narrative about the varied experiences of the period well shows, easily lend itself to perversion. Arendt's account instead affirms that human nature in the sense of the "essential capabilities" of human beings can indeed be changed, that is, destroyed (Arendt 1994: 408). Further, Arendt's pearl-diving for the conditions of possibility of this change reveals, by negative example, that "human nature" can only be upheld by a community of one's fellows, who alone can guarantee "a place in the world which makes opinions significant and actions effective" (Arendt [1951] 2004: 376). Her narrative account thus seeks to retrieve the potentials of human freedom and of politics so that the present forms of political, economic or social superfluousness are met by a political affirmation of human solidarity: "Do thyself no harm; for we are all here" (*ibid.*: 632).

Conclusion

Arendt's turn to storytelling is not to be understood as an attempt to provide a new set of substantive rules or standards with which to approach the plurality and unpredictability of political life. Arendt was generally sceptical of the idea that the thinker, either in the form of a supposedly neutral scientist or a committed intellectual, should "instruct" or

directly provide the goals to be followed in political action (Arendt 1979: 303–10). Her storytelling approach, instead, suggests a way of moving meaningfully in the gap between past and future (Arendt [1961] 1968: 14), coming to terms with whatever is past which always bears the mark of the new and the strange and thereby being better able to face up to the uncertainties of the future. This is also where storytelling becomes the other side of action, in so far as reconciliation with political reality corresponds not to the philosopher's desire for the unity of thought and Being, theory and practice, but to the need of worldly, acting beings to come to terms with the phenomenal character of their human, political existence. Stories cannot offer a remedy for the perplexities of political action in the sense of providing it with a secure foundation and offsetting its awe-inspiring spontaneity and unpredictability, without thereby also reducing its intrinsic value. Yet by bringing into existence a space in which things of this world can appear in their plural, human character, stories reveal "the conditions of [our] freedom" and also "what [we] can and cannot do" (Arendt 1994: 186). Stories thus have a crucial revelatory and communicative function regarding freedom and action in the political realm. By bringing to light the human, political character of events, stories invite us to acknowledge the past as something which is part of our own world and for which responsibility needs to be assumed. Yet they also liberate us from its grasp by kindling the awareness that it could have been otherwise and that it is therefore possible to act and create anew and differently. At the same time, by bringing out the phenomenal reality of the political world, stories further the view that a new beginning, too, is only possible among the many. In this sense stories help us recognize and reconcile with the possibilities and limitations of political action as they inhere in the framework of the public realm in all its plurality and unpredictability.

Acknowledgement

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Note

1. Spanning the fields of political theory, literature, history and psychology, theorists have, for instance, examined how narrative sensitivity can be engaged to confront the problems of evil and trauma, address issues of identity and difference, and reinvigorate debates about judgement and public deliberation. See, for example, Nussbaum (1995), Rorty (1993), Lara (2007), LaCapra (2001) and Black (2010).

PART II

On modernity's crises

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FIVE

Totalitarianism and evil

Lars Rensmann

For Hannah Arendt, totalitarianism constitutes a new form of domination distinct from all previous forms of political rule. This new form especially crystallized in the Nazi terror exercised in the death camps of Auschwitz and Treblinka, where only death ruled and “where there was absolutely no meaning left whatsoever” (Arendt 1989: 3). Arendt insists that this genocidal domination signifies a distinctly new radical evil, and its legacy affects our very understanding of history, politics and human existence. As Jeffrey Isaac (1998: 23) argues, for Arendt the Nazi atrocities signified an “apotheosis of the destructive impulses at the heart of modern civilization”. The collapse of modern civilization was so fundamental that it demands new categories of analysis and understanding, even experimentation with new epistemology. Totalitarianism fundamentally broke, she suggests, with the continuum of our history. Its policies “have exploded our traditional categories of political thought ... and the standards of our moral judgment” (Arendt 1994: 405). Yet, as Arendt conveys in her later work, the agents of genocidal atrocities, who enabled and were enabled by totalitarian domination, were mostly petty modern subjects, lacking the capacity to think and judge, and embodying the “banality” of radical evil in modern times.

Against this backdrop, it is hardly surprising that coming to terms with totalitarianism as an unprecedented historical event and understanding its conditions in the modern world was one of Arendt’s central theoretical concerns. This objective specifically culminated in a variety of essays as well as two of her most significant works, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1951) – often described as one of the most influential books of the twentieth century – and the controversial study *Eichmann*

in *Jerusalem* (1963). Both books secured Arendt's enduring legacy, while the latter also "set off a storm like few books before", in the words of Fred Kaplan (2013), "and reshaped the way people have thought about the Holocaust, genocide and the puzzle of evil ever since".

The issue of totalitarian rule and genocidal abyss influenced and informed Arendt's concurrent and subsequent works. Thus it is critical to understand Arendt's conception of totalitarianism and the new forms of radical political evil it represents in order to fully grasp Arendt's general theoretical motives and arguments, and her critical rethinking of the modern condition in particular. This is also an important endeavour because Arendt's work has significantly shaped the subsequent study of totalitarianism and genocidal politics. Most importantly, engaging with Arendt's studies may offer a crucial lens to understand the origins, dynamics and legacies of totalitarian movements and the total state. Arendt's work clarifies new forms of radical evil that emerged in the twentieth century and illuminates their meaning in the context of new threats to humanity under contemporary conditions of global politics. However, while there has been a renewed interest in specific aspects of Arendt's work on totalitarianism and evil in politics, the substantive impact of her theory of totalitarianism and evil for an Arendtian approach to global political theory in an age of genocide have yet to be systematically developed.¹

This chapter explores Arendt's concern with totalitarianism and the problem of modern radical evil that, in her view, the former both generates and epitomizes. The chapter will first address how Arendt conceived of totalitarianism as a novel and distinct form of rule and radical evil in the modern world. Second, the chapter discusses how Arendt understands totalitarianism's emergence in the context of the evolution of modern anti-Semitism, racism and imperialism, as well as the decline of the sovereign nation-state system, which she viewed as inherently paradoxical from its inception and ultimately complicit in the creation of "superfluous" masses of stateless humans. The third section goes on to explore radical evil as a consequence of the relationship between bureaucratic despotism, the decline of public freedom in mass society, and a distinctly modern paralysis of judgement and thinking among atomized citizens that enhances conditions for totalitarian politics. The section examines Arendt's theoretical understanding of new forms of radical evil, epitomized in totalitarian terror, as *potential* by-products of political modernity that confound traditional moral ideas and political principles. The chapter concludes by briefly drawing some cosmopolitan moral and political implications from Arendt's reflections for twenty-first-century politics, and it points to their meaning for

critical theorizing that reflects on the relationship between democracy, totalitarianism and radical evil in contemporary times.

Ideology and terror: Arendt's phenomenology of modern totalitarianism

Arendt conceives of totalitarianism as an historical event that is modern in character but breaks with all hitherto existing forms of human domination – it is a “totally different kind of government” (Arendt [1951] 2004: 595). Just as totalitarianism breaks with the very idea of “common sense” among men, totalitarianism explodes “the very alternative on which all definitions of the essence of governments have been based in political philosophy, that is the alternative between lawful and lawless government, between legitimate and arbitrary power” (*ibid.*). Whenever regimes became truly totalitarian, they “started to operate according to a system of values so radically different from all others, that none of our traditional legal, moral, or common sense utilitarian categories could any longer help us to come to terms with, or judge, or predict their course of action” (*ibid.*: 593).

Dominant typological views that mirror such common sense conceive totalitarianism as any one-party dictatorship that exercises an extreme form of “ruthless” Machiavellian power politics and utilizes modern means of propaganda, communication, technology and repression to control society, indeed all aspects of social life.² Yet according to Arendt, confusing totalitarian rule with tyranny and other forms of one-party dictatorships misconceives the very essence of totalitarianism as a novel and distinctly modern phenomenon. While certain institutional features may be integral to totalitarian rule, they do not grasp its essence. By contrast, Arendt argues that totalitarian domination did not create a set of institutions supporting despotism but a novel form of association that is “anti-state” in nature. In Arendt’s understanding the very *lack* of any stable political and legal order characterizes totalitarianism, as well as the lack of rational interests grounded in traditional concepts of political power. Behind its self-proclaimed image of a “total state”, totalitarianism epitomizes the very collapse of society and social relations. In this conceptualization, totalitarian domination is seen as a *process of universal dissolution* that replaces the state under the spell of the totalitarian movement, its ideology and terror.

Arendt is especially concerned to distinguish totalitarian rule from tyranny, that is, a lawless government in which power is wielded by one man. Totalitarianism, she argues, cannot be understood as a tyranny

serving the power (and thus *rational*) interests of a dictator, even if the persecution of political opponents and the consolidation of a dictator's power may shape its early stages. For Arendt (1994: 330) totalitarianism is neither despotic in Kant's sense (a lawless form of rule which arbitrarily defies positive law and avoids a separation of powers), nor constitutional, democratic or republican (that is based on lawfulness, popular representation and the separation of powers in government). In light of Montesquieu's (1989) thesis that every form of government is defined by a "particular structure" and correlative principle which guides all of its relevant actions (honour in a monarchy, virtue in a republic, and fear in a tyranny), Arendt suggests that totalitarian rule is driven by mercilessly executed "suprahuman", "objective laws", that is, total ideologies which can purport to explain everything and every occurrence by deducing them from a single premise, and which replace and destroy all social relations.

While conventional dictatorships are defined by arbitrary rule serving the power interests of a dictator or party and employing a system of fear against opposition, under totalitarian rule the party and even the dictator are guided by and subordinated to such suprahuman ideological laws – the former are means to the end of a universally encompassing ideology determining human life. In Arendt's view the totalitarian dictator, in sharp contrast to the tyrant, does not believe that he is a free agent but claims to be the interpreter and "executioner of laws higher than himself" (Arendt 1994: 346). This is the new and most terrifying instantiation of Hegel's dictum that freedom is insight into and conforming to necessity. Thus for Arendt totalitarianism is lawless in the sense that its suprahuman ideology defies all positive laws, even those it has itself established, and does away with their petty legality and order. Yet totalitarianism is not lawless and arbitrary in so far as "it obeys with strict logic and executes with precise compulsion the laws of History or Nature" (*ibid.*: 340). It is "more obedient" to suprahuman forces "than any government was ever before" and goes straight to the supposed sources of authority from which all positive laws receive their ultimate legitimacy, namely mankind or the species, without ever bothering to translate them into standards among individuals. Individual or collective judgement and decision-making are eradicated. Totalitarian ideologies, then, do not primarily seek to legitimize dictatorships. Rather, they appeal to a higher form of legitimacy beyond all government, and distinct from all actions of men. These ideologies aim at effacing human action and the life of individuals under the spell of proclaimed future historical developments. Far from wielding its power in the interest of one man and arbitrary tyrannical will, totalitarian rule

“is quite prepared to sacrifice everybody’s vital immediate interests to the execution of what it assumes to be the law of History or the law of Nature” (Arendt [1951] 2004: 595).

Changing the very meaning of “law” from a framework of stability and normativity into the very expression of suprahuman forces that purport to be inevitable and “objectively necessary”, totalitarian ideologies metamorphose “action” into behaviour and *bios* into *zoē*, the bare life. They render all reference to individual actions, thoughts, or choices superfluous. Different from mere epistemological consistency, the suprahuman laws hypostasize a consequential logic that cannot be challenged by events. The “ice cold reasoning” of their logical deductions and alleged “scientificity”, originating in modern scientific ideology, is completely immunized from all experience and reality (*ibid.*: 607; Arendt 1994: 204). While all modern ideological world explanations, such as social Darwinism and “dialectical materialism”, already contain totalitarian elements – by explaining not what is but what becomes and by annulling factual contradictions – only totalitarian movements develop them fully. This gives totalitarian ideology a distinct *form*. The content of totalitarian ideology is secondary; it is devoured by the logic – the form – with which the “idea” is carried out. This form uses mankind as the material of its self-coercive, stringent logicity. It turns individuals into “exemplars of the species” (Arendt 1994: 343).

Totalitarian terror, then, executes these ideological laws in a permanent motion. It is “lawfulness, if law is the law of the movement of some suprahuman force” (Arendt [1951] 2004: 599). No longer a means of intimidation to secure power, terror is totalitarianism’s very essence: “If lawfulness is the essence of non-tyrannical governments and lawlessness is the essence of tyranny, then terror is the essence of totalitarian domination” (*ibid.*). Totalitarian terror, says Arendt, particularly targets and systematically executes those who are ideologically constructed as “objective enemies”. These doomed individuals are declared to be both antagonistic to the “superior race” or “superior class” and superfluous: Jews under Nazi totalitarianism, “dying classes” under Stalinism (Arendt 1994: 341, 348). They are purely innocent victims whose opinions and actions have no influence on their fate. Affecting all intersubjective relations, totalitarian terror eliminates men in order to clear the way for the predestined movement of Nature or History, allegedly for the sake of the species or “superior race”. It “executes on the spot the death sentences which Nature is supposed to have pronounced on races or individuals who are ‘unfit to live,’ or History on ‘dying classes’” (Arendt [1951] 2004: 601). Terror mercilessly abolishes all boundaries – especially those boundaries of law that

constitute the living space for human freedom and free action. As the most radical form of evil, totalitarianism, Arendt says, turns terror into society's "iron band" (*ibid.*: 610). It serves as the system's engine and ultimate *raison d'être*, and it is "without an end" (Arendt 1994: 302).

Arendt hereby argues that totalitarian terror does not diminish when the opposition is destroyed, but to the contrary, such destruction marks the beginning of its reign; it becomes truly total only after the liquidation of political opposition (Arendt [1951] 2004: 598). It does not shrink but grows as the opposition is reduced, turning to "absolutely innocent people who have done nothing wrong and in the literal sense of the word do not know why they are being arrested, sent to concentration camps, or liquidated" (Arendt 1994: 299). This is why for Arendt totalitarian terror was different from violence practised by revolutionary movements or modern dictatorships. She argues such terror was evident only in Nazi Germany after 1938 and in Soviet Russia after 1930 (after the Moscow trials), though in 1966 she recognized totalitarian tendencies in China under Mao.

However, terror, Arendt suggests, does not only destroy enemies and "others" but also the space "in-between" men. In the totalitarian context terror becomes the general mode of relation that destroys the very diversity of human life and politics, "the plurality of men" (Arendt [1951] 2004: 600). It is terror that truly moulds the plurality of men into a homogeneous species, removing a world based on human plurality and distinctness in which men can freely act in the pursuit of shared purposes and turning it into, in Arendt's metaphor, "One Man of gigantic dimensions". Compared to the conditions of totalitarian terror "even the desert of tyranny ... appears like a guarantee of freedom" (*ibid.*: 602). For Arendt, this terror is comprised of a peculiar mixture of terrible coercion and enthusiastic cooperation – while it aims at everyone, Arendt suggests that terror simultaneously works as a last support in a world where nobody is reliable and nothing can be relied upon. After all, totalitarian terror is not "so much something which people may fear, but a way of life" (Arendt 1994: 357). The compulsion of total terror, Arendt resumes, presses masses of isolated, powerless men together *and* supports them in a world that has become a wilderness for them (Arendt [1951] 2004: 611). Totalitarianism hereby aims at the transformation of the very conditions of human existence; at the extermination of humans but also *at the extinction of human freedom as such*. Indeed, it is "the most radical denial of freedom" (Arendt 1994: 328). Totalitarianism, then, is understood as the eclipse of politics – the destruction of the conditions and capacity to act, and, in fact, of the very possibility of human

diversity, judgement and reason. The concentration camp is therefore in Arendt's view totalitarianism's "most consequential institution", indeed the "central institution of totalitarian organizational power": because it aims at eliminating the very sources and human capacities of freedom while it furnishes the "theoretical" verification of totalitarian ideology (Arendt [1951] 2004: 565, 590).³

Finally, according to Arendt totalitarianism is total in the sense that it is not just inherently expansionist, permeating all spheres of society. It is also inherently global and imperialistic in its ambitions, which must logically follow from its construal of suprahuman historical laws. Totalitarian movements, Arendt claims, use the state for their long-range goal of seemingly inevitable world conquest; the struggle for total domination of the total population of the earth is inherent in their ideology and dynamic (*ibid.*: 510–11). Totalitarianism does not only entirely eliminate the public realm, the locus of action and freedom, and the difference between public and private spheres, citizen and individual, or politics and society (boundaries established by constitutional law). Its claim to global rule and domination of all mankind also extinguishes the difference between domestic (constitutional) government and foreign relations (Arendt 1994: 332). After all, according to Arendt totalitarianism is defined by a lack, or dissolution, of any determinate political structure. It is characterized by the permanent, essentially global motion of terror and it is directed *against the state* – that is against a territorially circumscribed political order that provides at least some sort of stability and legal framework. Following an ideology and movement that does not know any limit or practical goal, totalitarian governments only serve as "headquarters" on the way to global rule. Underneath the self-proclaimed ideology of the total state, then, the state paradoxically collapses into the movement that is totalitarianism's organizational glue. One should not forget, Arendt argues, that only a building can have a structure while a movement "can have only a direction, and that any form of legal or governmental structure can be only a handicap" (Arendt [1951] 2004: 517).

In Arendt's understanding the so-called totalitarian state thus ceases to be a state at all. The state, the embodiment of administrative order and governmental stability, is overpowered and eventually substituted by the ideological laws that are executed and supported by a modern mass movement, set into permanent motion until the entire world is conquered. The state dissipates under laws "higher" than itself that tear down all political boundaries, transforming into an amorphous, planned shapelessness. In fact, totalitarian rule exists only in so far as it is permanently in motion. Nazism's and Stalinism's aim of total

global domination is something “that no state and no mere apparatus of violence can ever achieve, but only a movement that is constantly kept in motion” (*ibid.*: 432). The totally integrated state is a façade. According to Arendt, even the stringent, self-coercive logicity of a *Weltanschauung* under which the totalitarian organization operates discloses the very opposite of stability and predictability: everyone can turn into a victim. Rather than signifying any kind of political structure, totalitarianism has no practical goal that would define its end. Arendt views it as a process that leads to universal destruction, genocide and nihilistic self-annihilation. Instead of creating a new mankind, totalitarianism destroys the state, others, and ultimately itself.

For Arendt this dissolution of social relations and political structures under the spell of totalitarian domination, specific and contingent as it is, can only be understood against the background of a set of modern conditions and developments. The origins of these conditions can be traced back to the nineteenth century – from the evolution of modern ideologies, including anti-Semitism and racism, to the decline of the European nation-states and of functioning public spaces in bureaucratic mass societies that denigrate politics and human judgement. Just as conceiving totalitarianism simply as dictatorship makes it seem less harmful, explanatory accounts viewing totalitarian rule as mainly caused by cultural conditions downplays the frightening nature and relevance of this modern phenomenon (Arendt 1994: 347).

Anti-Semitism, racism and imperialism

Before turning to Arendt’s arguments about general conditions for the rise of totalitarian ideology, movements and domination that can be associated with political modernity, a look at Arendt’s examination of specific historical developments in Europe may yield some surprisingly contemporary and relevant insights. Arendt’s “exercises in understanding” totalitarianism and radical evil follow a distinct historical–genealogical path. In exploring the origins and conditions of totalitarianism’s emergence, Arendt’s theoretical narrative reconstructs multiple interconnected developments and conditions that enabled the rise of totalitarian movements. In particular, she refers to (i) the evolution of modern ideologies such as anti-Semitism and racism; (ii) the imperialistic expansionism by modern European powers and its implications for the spread of pan-nationalist, racist movements and inhuman policies at home; and (iii) the decline – indeed collapse – of the European nation-state system, which produced “superfluous” stateless

masses who had no one to turn to for the protection of their rights and could be subjected to expulsion, persecution and terror.

First, Arendt explores traditions of anti-Semitism and their specific transformations in the modern world from a peculiar *ressentiment* to a (totalitarian) ideology that suffocates all space for individual action. The anti-Semitic parties, riots and movements in late-nineteenth-century Europe hereby already displayed a shocking level of cruelty. Arendt observes that by that time Jews were often no longer perceived as individuals, citizens or members of a group but irredeemably locked into a completely objectified entity in which particulars were seen as mere expressions of a collective from which there was no escape.⁴ This transformation indicates that the rise of modern anti-Semitism was not just a politically motivated phenomenon. According to Arendt, it also served significant social functions in a modern mass society that was driving more and more men into desperate solitude and “loneliness”. To be sure, Arendt insists that the deciding forces that pushed Jews into the centre of public attention and subjected them to persecution had political origins – among them the decline of representative and class-based organizations and the gradual dissolution of the modern state into factions, which Arendt observes across the European continent in the first half of the twentieth century. Yet she also suggests that we should not underestimate modern societal and psychological conditions engendering the mad, catastrophically thorough and passion-driven hunt of “the Jew in general”, that is “the specific cruelty, the organized and calculated assault upon every single individual of Jewish origin, that was already characteristic of the antisemitism of the Dreyfus Affair” (Arendt [1951] 2004: 115). Political anti-Semitism, taking shape as an ideological force in the midst of modern Europe, could not have succeeded without the psychological attraction and public resonance of glaringly irrational images of “the Jew”. Ultimately, Arendt argues, “social factors, unaccounted for in political and economic history, hidden under the surface of events ... changed the course that mere political antisemitism would have taken if left to itself, and which might have resulted in anti-Jewish legislation and even mass expulsion but hardly in wholesale extermination” (*ibid.*). For Arendt the extermination of the European Jews depended on the support of an increasingly anti-Semitic, yet otherwise disintegrating mass society of lonely, atomized individuals. Although the “concept of race” had “immediately political purposes, its application to the Jewish question in its most sinister aspect owed much of its success to social phenomena and convictions which virtually constituted a consent by public opinion” (*ibid.*).

Second, Arendt links the rise of racist ideology to European colonialism and modern imperialism. European nations exercising imperial conquest and colonial rule, Arendt argues in the section on “Imperialism” in the *Origins of Totalitarianism*, had systematically transgressed those civil, moral and legal norms limiting the exercise of power at home.⁵ In their conquest of foreign territories, “civilized” European citizens had subordinated local inhabitants and regressed to unprecedented levels of inhumanity by despotically administering, objectifying, oppressing, torturing and raping entire populations of “savages” they faced. After experimenting with forms of total domination abroad, the lessons learned in Africa, Arendt argues, ultimately returned to continental Europe with totalitarianism (*ibid.*: 159–286; Benhabib 2011: 212). Racism is an integral part of this dialectic: conceiving their laws as an outgrowth of national substance rather than of public deliberation, the European nation-states denied legal autonomy and sovereignty claims by the peoples they conquered. Denying their colonized victims the legal rights of citizens and claims to national sovereignty taken for granted domestically, racism emerged as a justificatory ideology and practice entitling European imperial powers to such denial of rights and sovereignty abroad. Imperial expansionist policy and subjugation depended on the legitimization by racist ideology, or “race theory”. This had domestic repercussions.

According to Arendt, the breakdown of external rule of law by imperialism, justified by racist ideology, also engendered racist (pan-)nationalist movements at home. And both excessive imperial domination and racist ideology prepared and primed the political and moral collapse of rule of law, indeed of legal state authority, on the European continent itself. (Pan-)nationalist – and subsequently fascist – movements could thus mobilize more and more ubiquitous racism and anti-Semitism, further disintegrating the European nation-states and their fragile socio-political balance.⁶ In so doing, they simultaneously paved the way for the ideological and practical disenfranchisement of European citizens that defines, discriminates against, and excludes ethnic minorities in the name of the “ethnic nation” and “race” (Arendt [1951] 2004: 210 ff.). In other words: the conquest of imperialism and racism turned into the triumph of the (ethnic) nation, or the “racial community”, over the state and the subjective rights it had granted. The nation-state system’s ruin, “having being prepared by its own overseas imperialism, was eventually carried out by those movements which had originated outside its own realm” (*ibid.*: 321). And the colonial experiment with inhuman, ruthless modern planetary politics, Arendt suggests, ultimately helped engender totalitarian self-destruction in Europe.

Third, in Arendt's view modern totalitarianism actively dissolved and swept away already disintegrating modern nation-states and the rule of law. Modern totalitarianism violates all borders and boundaries, and it deprives "superfluous" races or classes of all their rights. Yet the nucleus of this disintegration can be traced back to the nation-state model's very beginning. The production of relegated minorities and the creation of stateless and "superfluous" masses first and foremost exposes contradictions inscribed in the very construction of the modern nation-state and the implosion of the European nation-state model as such, indeed the irreversible "bankruptcy of the nation-state and its concept of sovereignty" (Arendt 1972: 108). Arendt suggests that its contradictory character became fully obvious when nation-states started to expel millions of citizens based on "national" or other pseudo-natural "racial" criteria. This refers in particular to the "secret conflict between state and nation", namely between legal rule protecting rights of man on the one hand and national sovereignty on the other (Arendt [1951] 2004: 297). The full implication of the "identification of the rights of man with the rights of peoples in the European nation-state system came to light only when a growing number of people and peoples suddenly appeared whose rights were as little safeguarded by the ordinary functioning of nation-states in the middle of Europe as they would have been in the heart of Africa" (*ibid.*: 370). While modern ideologies completely undermined political life and took over political institutions, the mythical "national interest" that eventually gained priority over the law and the state resolved the tension between nation and state in favour of the former long before Hitler could claim that "Right is what is good for the German people" (*ibid.*: 379). The transformation of the modern state "from being an instrument of law into one of lawless discretion in the service of the nation was completed", however, "when states began to practice massive denaturalizations against unwanted minorities" (Benhabib 2004: 54).

Rooting its legitimacy in the mythical aura of a nationalism, which sharply demarcates the boundary between itself and rights granted by one's human dignity, according to Arendt the nation-state thus harbours the very seed of irrationalism, lawless arbitrariness and imperial aggression that had become a terrible signifier of European political modernity (Arendt [1951] 2004: 382 ff.). Statelessness as a mass phenomenon of the twentieth century, rendering millions of people superfluous and entirely unprotected, thereby also exposes the modern aporia of human rights: in the modern international order humans depend on the nation-state for their fundamental "right to have rights", the right to membership in a political community without which all other rights

claims have proven fruitless and meaningless, to be realized. In a global system of sovereign states, humans cannot rely on any supposedly “inalienable rights” (*ibid.*: 369–84).⁷ But precisely the nation-states are the culprit in the loss of this right: they expelled their citizens and produced “superfluous” masses of stateless that became unprotected, subject to totalitarian persecution and genocide. Reliance on the modern nation-state and the principle of (popular) sovereignty is no longer a working solution when dealing with statelessness and the radical modern evil of genocide. Rather, the nation-state is complicit in its own demise, and in the loss of fundamental membership and rights for those who were made “superfluous”. Behind all past and present “nationalistic phraseology”, Arendt concludes that:

[N]ational sovereignty is no longer a working concept of politics, for there is no longer a political organization which can represent or defend a sovereign people, within national boundaries. Thus the “national state,” having lost its very foundations, leads the life of a walking corpse, whose spurious existence is artificially prolonged by repeated injections of imperialistic expansion.

(Arendt 1994: 143)

In Arendt’s view, modern racism, anti-Semitism and imperialism were thus enabling conditions and, in the case of Nazi Germany, key elements of totalitarian domination, producing “superfluous” masses and “objective enemies” that were subsequently exterminated. We may argue with Arendt that those objectifying ideologies and practices of domination are more than just a legacy of the past. Rather, in different forms they have survived their own death on the eve of Europe’s destruction. Even though open racism, anti-Semitism and imperialism now tend to be discredited – at least in liberal democracies and international institutions – it can be argued that they have often transformed into more subtle forms without ever entirely disappearing. As an ongoing threat, they constitute a persistent evil of political modernity even after the catastrophe of totalitarianism and the Holocaust. Moreover, the failure of the modern nation-state system to protect humans against the new evil of totalitarianism’s global policies signifies that from now on, at a point of no return, radical evil and crises of humanity will have to be faced in the context of a “global situation” and can no longer rely on nation-states only: “[W]hether we like it or not we have really started to live in One World. Only with a completely organized humanity could the loss of home and political status become identical with expulsion from humanity altogether” (Arendt [1951] 2004: 376–7).

To protect humans from statelessness, superfluousness and genocide would require a new *nomos* of the earth. Yet so far, says Arendt, “statesmen have found no other clue to world politics than the blind alley of imperialism” (Arendt 1994: 117).

Arendt’s specific *historical* genealogy has thus, somewhat counter-intuitively, critical implications for understanding political evil in contemporary times. She early on questions the return to national sovereignty in a globalized world that faces the evil of totalitarianism, statelessness, crimes against humanity and genocide. Arendt also sharpens our insights into the potential dynamics of anti-Semitism and racism as contemporary global challenges. By way of criticizing imperialism, Arendt illuminates how the coarseness with which a society treats humans in “foreign” territory, and humanity at large, has an effect on (democratic) politics and politics “at home”. The kind of kick-back dynamic when dealing with “others” might also help understand how even constitutional democratic states discriminate against immigrants and minorities.

Theorizing modern conditions of evil

Arendt also situates the aforementioned three problems, and the problem of radical evil in politics, in the context of a general crisis of modern society. Although Arendt is a far cry from being an anti-modern thinker, she argues that certain trends in modern mass society erode the egalitarian, constitutional and democratic opportunities and promises that political modernity created (see Benhabib 2003; S. Parekh 2008). Arendt’s approach to totalitarianism reflects a particular interpretation of Max Weber’s theory of social modernization, bureaucratization and rationalization.⁸ More specifically, her critique of modern social undercurrents of mass culture and politics converge in the key claim that the “modern condition”, and the specific rationality and logic it generates, systematically undermine the free public sphere and individuality inherent in the very idea of modern enlightenment. Generating atomized individuals who are susceptible to totalitarian ideology, social homogeneity and submission, political modernity, she argues, can potentially turn totalitarian. Arendt thus suggests that new forms of radical evil – among them totalitarianism and genocide – could take hold against the backdrop of a decline of political life and the public realm in mass society and the groundlessness of modernity. Its overpowering economic and bureaucratic logic, she claims, tends to suffocate public freedom, action and responsibility, and helps foster a distinctly

modern paralysis of judgement and thinking among citizens. What follows is a closer look at Arendt's general theoretical argument about radical evil as *potential* by-product of political modernity.

Arendt's argument is grounded in the critique of the dominance of modern economic and bureaucratic modes occupying mass society. In *The Human Condition*, she elaborates her previous criticism of mass society and criticizes what she calls modern "labour society". In Arendt's view, modern society is linked to an instrumental mode of labour that progressively "colonizes" all forms of human activity. Accordingly, modern society is preoccupied with labour, production and consumption. They undermine functioning public spheres and dissolve meaningful political life into a society of atomized, alienated individuals. While in this description the otherwise much criticized Marx resonates, her concept of "alienation", as developed in *The Human Condition*, points to a different direction. She sees "world alienation", the loss of worldliness in which people can speak and act, and not "self-alienation" of the human as the hallmark of the modern world (Arendt 1958: 254). It turns political communities increasingly into a society of "jobholders" rather than communities of citizens. In modern mass society's distinct social fabric, shaped by instrumental modes of action and the logic of permanent rationalization permeating all societal spheres, organization of public life is increasingly transformed under the functional – indeed totalizing – logic of economic imperatives and disciplinary constraints of an administered society. Modern labour society thus tends to liquidate, Arendt argues, the very conditions for political action, individuality and *inter-esse* between humans. And these tendencies aim towards a world in which no one acts or is accountable.

The collapse of modern political life and institutions is no inevitable process; no event in human history is inevitable for Arendt. In fact, political modernity also embodies temporality, that is, the "break" with tradition, radical insecurity, unpredictability and socio-cultural transformation: permanent rapid changes uprooting traditions, people, societies and political systems. However, crises of modernity and "the specific conditions of an atomized and individualized mass" may help create a breakdown of national political, public and social structures (Arendt 1994: 406). These crises can produce a moral and political vacuum – the nothingness from which novel forms of radical evil can emerge. In Arendt's theoretical-genealogical account of modern mass society, hence, political communities are threatened to erode by social processes from the inside. In Arendt's lens, the dissolution of traditional societal bonds and organized interests under economic and administrative imperative tends to produce a worldless, unstructured mass of desperate

individuals which may nurture totalitarian movements and ideologies. Accordingly, Arendt describes the modern “mass man” as peculiarly disinterested, while “yearning for anonymity, for being just a number and functioning only as a cog” (Arendt [1951] 2004: 436). Isolated and disinterested individuals no longer care much about their own lives, and they are often ready to sacrifice the lives of others. Indeed, Arendt sees atomized masses that are stripped of common bonds, interests, and of the capacity to think, judge, and act, as *the* central precondition of totalitarianism.⁹ Totalitarianism, then, welds together in a novel way worldless masses, transforming humans into mere things – a denigration and nullification of individuality that reflects the objectifying rationality of modern ideologies and society (*ibid.*: 565).

For Arendt, the bureaucratic, depoliticizing social rationale that turns even genocide into an abstract administrative procedure therefore “grew out of the fragments of a highly atomized society” (*ibid.*: 421). Its competitive structure had been held in check only through membership in a class and interest-based organizations.¹⁰ Yet reinforced by the history of modern wars and their massive waste of human lives, signalling a prelude to societal breakdown, in Europe the gigantic massing of individuals had evolved into a world characterized by nihilism, the “bored indifference in the face of death”, the general contempt for the rules of common sense, and – maybe most strikingly – the radical loss of genuine self-interest (*ibid.*). For Arendt totalitarian societies are characterized by extreme loneliness – in its most modern, radical form, the experience of a vanished private and public life, indeed of being deserted by human companionship and of not belonging to the world at all (*ibid.*: 611). Hereby “Self and world, capacity for thought and experience, are lost at the same time” (*ibid.*: 614). And such loneliness points to the aforementioned processes and conditions of social atomization in modern mass society. Loneliness constituted the common ground for totalitarianism, Arendt claims, and it is “closely connected with [the] uprootedness and superfluousness which have been the curse of modern masses since ... the breakdown of political institutions and social traditions in our time” (*ibid.*: 612).

Dissolution and superfluousness correspond to the rise of modern ideologies. The latter, Arendt suggests, elevate an objectifying thinking that turns human affairs into pure matters of administrative control, economic rationality, or other forms of a (pseudo-)scientific logic operating independently from actual human interaction. Modern ideologies such as anti-Semitism and racism in Arendt’s understanding thus to a considerable extent replicate economic and administrative rationalities that seek to apply stringent logicity, functionality and purely objective

criteria to human relations. Such ideologies that embody the application of an idea with the “coercive force of logicity” and subsume the particular under the general–abstract are conceived as precursors of the totalitarian logic that strives to organize the infinite plurality and differentiation of human beings “as if all of humanity were just one individual” (*ibid.*: 609, 565). Nullifying the living world and experience, the totalitarian logic thereby bureaucratically sorts out everything that does not fit in, starting with those groups declared historically superfluous or “objective enemies”. Such “bureaucratic despotism”, Arendt claims, further atomizes humans, transforming them in practice from unique individuals with the capacity to act into sheer quantities of biological bodies engaged in animalistic behaviour.¹¹

Nothing expresses the extreme form of modern “bureaucratic despotism” and its link to the totalitarian logic more drastically than the high-rank Nazi administrator and “deportation specialist” Adolf Eichmann, whom Arendt examines in her controversial *Eichmann in Jerusalem*. In her view, Eichmann is a self-centred, ambitious, thoughtless petty-bourgeois administrator driven by more or less exchangeable ideological intentions, and possessing only scant personal desire to kill the European Jews. Arendt deems Eichmann quite “unideological”. His striking quality was not any particular wickedness or moral depravity but thoughtlessness, that is, he was “genuinely incapable of uttering a single sentence that was not a cliché” (Arendt [1963] 1965: 48). His inability to speak, hence to actualize an individual identity, for Arendt only expresses his general “inability to *think*, namely to think from the standpoint of somebody else” (*ibid.*: 49). Following Arendt’s earlier speculation about the significance of the loss of thought and experience among totalitarian masses on the last pages of *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, Arendt observes that Eichmann was no passionate anti-Jewish ideologue but he lacked the capacity for judgement. In fact, Arendt portrays Eichmann as the ideal type of the loss of this faculty (*ibid.*: 21–55; see Benhabib 2012). According to Arendt, Eichmann hereby also signifies the typical, in some respect most dangerous and distinctly new Nazi perpetrator – a well-functioning, thoughtless desk murderer who never killed with his own hands. Following an ideology of “objectivity”, he mainly viewed the extermination of the European Jews as a “staggering job of organization and administration” (*ibid.*: 151).

The totalitarian crimes against humanity for which Eichmann shared responsibility were monstrous and monstrously inhuman, yet Eichmann, she argues, was not necessarily an inhuman being; if anything, he appeared to be a clown who, viewed just by himself and stripped of his function in the Nazi regime, could be belittled. For Arendt, Eichmann

was not an idealistic mastermind but a simple-minded, indeed “banal” careerist petty-bourgeois and administrator. Yet he simultaneously represents an unprecedented modern genocide and helped organize unimaginable atrocities, unthinkable evil. Arendt thus alerts to the paradox that modern genocide inverts the ancient heroic notion that deeds are bigger than an individual life: simple, “ordinary” citizens can participate and create unimaginable evil, and those new forms of evil – in particular the systematic extermination of an entire people – are much bigger than the sum of its perpetrators whose individual intentions and accountability become almost irrelevant. Eichmann – as a representative of a genocide carried out by thoughtless, ordinary bureaucrats in a totalitarian system – thus epitomizes some of the most significant political, legal and moral challenges of modern evil.

Eichmann, the almost speechless bureaucrat who is incapable of understanding others and himself, thereby *also* generally exemplifies modern subjectivity and its problems. In light of Eichmann Arendt refutes Kant, who presupposes an independent human faculty that is “unsupported by law and public opinion, that judges anew in full spontaneity every deed and intent whenever the occasion arises” (Arendt 1994: 41). To the contrary, Arendt wants to show how the capacity for action and individual judgement – the ability to distinguish right from wrong and good from evil – is dependent on a constitutionalized free public sphere that presupposes their exercise but that has been uprooted and severely damaged under modern conditions (see Bernstein 1997: 305). The modern subversion of the essential human capacities of agency, experience and political–moral judgement preconditioned the historical emergence of totalitarianism and, as Dana Villa (1997: 302) points out, this subversion “may yet succeed where totalitarian ideologies could claim only a temporary victory”.

With the voice of conscience and the ability to judge weakened by the decline of our *common* sense (which for Arendt regulates all other senses and depends on a world that we share with others), totalitarianism could invert the moral cosmos into the ice-cold reasoning of “Thou shalt kill” (Bernstein 1997: 304). Thus the self-coercion of the totalitarian logic eliminated an already socially weakened self, which is enclosed in its own particularity. This logic completely “destroys man’s capacity for experience and thought just as certainly as his capacity for action” (Arendt [1951] 2004: 611). Substituting for expressions of human solidarity and the bonds of political community, totalitarian rule turns humans entirely into a bundle of reactions lacking in personhood and character, and entirely bereft of the ability to think, judge and act. Arendt’s view of Eichmann as both the totalitarian subject *sui*

generis and *the* weakened modern subject without subjectivity, that is without human experience, attachments and imagination, epitomizes and crystallizes Arendt's critical approach to political modernity and radical political evil in modern times.

Totalitarianism and evil: cosmopolitan lessons

Arendt's work on the subject of totalitarianism and political evil has profoundly influenced the way we think about them. Yet her work is also subject to on-going controversies. Not only is its relevance contested, but also what contemporary cosmopolitan lessons can be drawn from her political theorizing. There are problems of historical and conceptual transfer: as the phrase "totalitarian" has become somewhat ubiquitous in political language and popular culture, so too have been attempts to associate Arendt's critical phenomenology of totalitarian domination and genocidal politics – as the most radical form of political evil – with all kinds of diverse political events. It is dubious if such applications can do justice to Arendt's theoretical and political contributions. For instance, Alison Lurie (2013) recently identified the totalitarian designation of superfluous "nonpersons", who are deprived of their rights as citizens and murdered with impunity, with the "celebrity culture" in democratic societies that excludes all non-celebrities. Some political theorists have deliberately flattened Arendt's analytic distinctions by suggesting we live in a totalitarian democracy, an "inverted totalitarianism" of a "managed democracy" (Wolin 2008). Yet to employ concepts such as totalitarianism "indiscriminately for all kinds of political phenomena", Arendt argues, points to a confusion, where all that is distinct disappears. This seems to be "the hallmark of modern historical and political sciences" (Arendt 1994: 407). However, if we engage with Arendt's reflections on the legacies of totalitarianism and the threat of radical evil, and what she can teach us about our own times, it is important also to seriously engage with her conceptual distinctions and caution against their indiscriminate transfer.

To be sure, at times Arendt's own analyses of totalitarianism and radical evil lack the historical specificity and accuracy on which she rightfully insists. For instance, although Arendt offers crucial insights into the fact that under conditions of modern bureaucratic systems and divisions of labour petty ordinary citizens can become mass murderers, the image of Eichmann she presents has been questioned by historical and archival research. The latter displays a self-declared anti-Semitic "idealist" who feared Jewish world conspiracies, clearly articulated a

desire to kill the “enemy” long before he organized the deportations, and a man who was hardly unaware of the external world or the consequences of his actions (Cesarani 2006). In addition, Arendt herself may ultimately present an overly sceptical and generalizing view of modern social conditions that may not fully honour global political modernity’s ambivalences and opportunities. A levelling image of modernity is in danger of screening out its emancipatory features (Postone 2000: 284).

However, Arendt provides crucial insights into the origins and logic of modern totalitarian regimes, in which nothing is off limits, and into new forms of radical evil that confound traditional moral and political principles while drawing perpetrators and victims into an abyss of destruction and self-destruction. Such violence has marked the “short” twentieth century, and continues to matter in the twenty-first. Reading Arendt helps understand that the threat of radical evil is distinct but also entangled in general conditions of modernity – and far from simply being liberal democracy’s radical or external Other. Arendt’s multifaceted approach broadens the critical horizon by offering a self-reflective understanding of the relationship between the “global condition” of modernity and contemporary challenges of political evil that require cosmopolitan political and legal responses. Among other things, Arendt anticipated all too present, increasingly globalized economic and bureaucratic imperatives that restrict the public realm and continue to govern political life, threatening public freedom and democratic accountability. Engendering conformism and legitimating social exclusion, the universal, unquestioned glorification of these imperatives ultimately produce the evil of a “superfluous humanity” that cosmopolitan politics needs to address (see Hayden 2009: 32 ff.). Arendt’s reflections also help illuminate the dynamics of modern ideologies such as anti-Semitism and racism, which are not just a spectre from the past but reappear in ever new forms – for instance in political ideologies advancing modern radical religious pan-nationalism and counter-cosmopolitanism. Finally, Arendt’s work makes us aware of the destructive effects of modern imperialism – however ideologically disguised – abroad and at home, while simultaneously recognizing the cosmopolitan responsibility to prevent new genocides from happening.

Arendt’s path-breaking contributions on totalitarianism and radical evil in politics alert us to constitutive conflicts still haunting world society. They include the challenge of crimes against humanity, which continue to recur despite international legal reforms. And they entail the persistent problem of statelessness, which points to the precarious status, indeed the continuous aporia of human rights in a world still politically dominated by sovereign power claims of nation-states – even

though for “the first time in history all peoples on earth have a common present” (Arendt 1968: 83). Against the backdrop of radical evil and conflict, Arendt hereby engenders a critical cosmopolitanism from below. It recognizes humanity as a global political reference point while engaging with particular, situated struggles to regain citizenship and recover the public realm.

Notes

1. For initial work on the subject, and specifically on the impact for a critical cosmopolitan theory of human rights in an age of genocide, see Hayden (2009), Benhabib (2011), Fine (2012), Rensmann (2012), Ingram (2008) and Villa (1999).
2. See, most prominently, the definition and model proposed by Friedrich and Brzezinski (1965). For the authors, who add that a full-fledged ideology and state-run economy are totalitarian features, modern organization and technology serve both as defining criteria and key explanatory variables of totalitarianism.
3. To be sure, according to Arendt’s view of human nature and the condition of natality, the freedom of men, rooted in the fact that men are being born and each of them is a new beginning, can never fully be eradicated.
4. On Arendt’s account of modern anti-Semitism see Bernstein (1996), Benhabib and Eddon (2007), and Wessel and Rensmann (2012).
5. On Arendt’s account of the relationship between imperialism and racism see Mantena (2010), and King and Stone (2007).
6. For Arendt such movements also benefited from other factors aggravating social disintegration: the decline of European party systems, of class-based organizations, and generally of class society, which was replaced by mass society. Arendt attributes the collapse of the European party systems to those structural factors and to the peculiar alliance of the “mob” with capital and European elites that willingly sacrificed the rule of the law to imperial ambitions and nationalism. See Arendt ([1951] 2004: 339 ff.), and also Katznelson (2003: 58 ff.).
7. See also Arendt (1945); on the discussion of political evil and statelessness see Hayden (2009: 55–91).
8. Arendt largely puts aside Weber’s emphasis on the *necessarily ambivalent* nature of this cage, its function as a metaphor of the burden accompanying the modern sceptical spirit. Instead, she interprets the “iron cage” as a metaphoric encapsulation of modern domination.
9. Arendt argues that the circumstances of modern mass society were “very different” in Germany and Russia: Stalin had first to create the kind of atomized modern society that had helped engender the Nazis’ rise to power (Arendt [1951] 2004: 423).
10. Arendt insists that modern masses did not result from growing equality of condition but rather from social atomization. While her use of the term “masses” seems at times condescending in *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, Arendt was a supporter of democratic mass uprisings. With regard to Nazi totalitarianism,

she is also acutely aware that the “percentage of the so-called educated classes among the actual killers is amazing” (Arendt [1951] 2004: 115).

11. While economic progress may attenuate such bureaucratic despotism, the latter is neither incompatible with the former, in Arendt’s view, nor is economic progress incompatible with ideology and terror. See Baehr (2010: 78), who also discusses Arendt’s critique of the social sciences and behaviouralism, which replicate and reinforce this trend.

Statelessness and the right to have rights

Ayten Gündoğdu

Fleeing Nazi Germany in 1933, Arendt became a stateless person and remained in this precarious status for eighteen years until 1951 when she received her American citizenship. This formative experience significantly shaped her trajectory as a thinker; it “provoked her quest for the meaning of politics” (Bernstein 1996: 84) and “laid the foundations for her political theory” (Young-Bruehl 2004: 113). This chapter examines Arendt’s arguments about statelessness and human rights. It first inquires into what statelessness entails by focusing on her claim that the loss of citizenship rights is accompanied by the loss of human rights. Those who are stateless, according to Arendt, find themselves in a fundamental condition of “rightlessness”, which results from the loss of a political community that could recognize their legal, political and human standing. Rightlessness of those who appear in their bare humanity takes her to a critique of human rights, and the second section looks into the distinctive features of this critique. Arendt’s analysis of “the perplexities of the Rights of Man” shows how the eighteenth-century declarations of these rights rest on the assumption that each human being is a citizen. The problem with this assumption comes to view with massive scales of statelessness produced by mass denationalizations and denaturalizations of the twentieth century. Despite her radical critique of human rights, Arendt ends her analysis of statelessness not with a renunciation of these rights but instead with a call for rethinking them in terms of “a right to have rights”, or a right to citizenship and humanity, as discussed in the third section. The chapter concludes by briefly discussing the contemporary relevance of Arendt’s critical reflections on statelessness and human rights.

Statelessness and the condition of rightlessness

Arendt's efforts to understand statelessness as "the newest mass phenomenon in contemporary history" (Arendt [1951] 2004: 352) take her to the political instability that followed from the dissolution of multiethnic empires after the First World War. The Peace Treaties worked with the assumption that each political community should be organized into a nation-state defined in terms of "homogeneity of population and rootedness in the soil" (*ibid.*: 345). But this idea was entirely at odds with the multiethnic composition of the successor states and gave rise to the problem of minorities. International efforts to address this problem with the Minority Treaties were harbingers of what was to come. Identifying minorities in each successor state and entrusting the protection of their rights to the League of Nations, these treaties gave an official sanction to the idea that "only nationals could be citizens, only people of the same national origin could enjoy the full protection of legal institutions" (*ibid.*: 350–51). In contrast to historical accounts that applaud Minority Treaties as the precursors of modern human rights, Arendt's analysis shows how these treaties set a dangerous precedent for the racial politics of the twentieth century and urges us to understand mass denationalizations and forced deportations in the light of the failure of the international community to address the problem of minorities.¹

To comprehend twentieth-century statelessness in its full scale, there is a need to move beyond the narrow juridical definition of this problem, according to Arendt. Understood in strictly legal terms, "statelessness" is reserved only for those people who do not have the legal bond of nationality with any country. At the time *de jure* statelessness constituted only a small fraction of the problem, leaving aside millions who had this legal bond but were effectively stripped of their rights as they were forced to move from one country to another. Arendt asserts that "the core of statelessness ... is identical with the refugee question" (*ibid.*: 356) and criticizes the international failure to recognize *de facto* statelessness. But if refugees were the most paradigmatic group exemplifying this new predicament, others gradually joined their ranks as a result of tightening immigration controls during the interwar era. Even resident aliens such as "economic immigrants" became *de facto* stateless with the mass repatriations of the 1930s (*ibid.*: 363). In addition, a growing number of citizens were rendered "potentially stateless" due to the ever-present threat of denaturalization in many countries (*ibid.*: 356). Carefully attending to how the forced displacements of the twentieth century blurred the

conventional juridical distinctions and created “a tangle that never again could be unraveled” (*ibid.*: 363), Arendt offers a revised and expanded definition of statelessness that refuses to take this phenomenon as an exceptional incident and aims to understand it instead as “the newest mass phenomenon” (*ibid.*: 352). For her, statelessness is a common plight shared by all those who are “ejected from the old trinity of state-people-territory” (*ibid.*: 358).

Stateless people lost not only citizenship rights but also human rights. Arendt captures this double loss with the term “rightlessness”, but the meaning of this term is far from obvious. To clarify this loss, she identifies the one truly human right that is not reducible to the rights that we are entitled to as citizens: “a right to have rights”, or “a right to belong to some kind of organized community” (*ibid.*: 376). Stateless people were rendered rightless as they were deprived of this human right, which Arendt sees as the condition of possibility for meaningfully exercising other rights. She further clarifies her notion of “rightlessness” when she describes it as a fundamental condition that cannot be reduced to the violation or denial of specific rights. Giving the example of soldiers during time of war, she argues that even citizens can be deprived of certain rights, including the right to life; but as long as these citizens belong to a political community that could recognize their legal and political standing, they are not rightless (*ibid.*: 375). On the other hand, although the stateless might be granted certain rights such as the right to life or freedom of opinion, they are rightless to the extent that they are dependent on the charity or good will of others (*ibid.*: 376). Rightlessness denotes a fundamental condition that can render void even the rights that one is granted, and this condition has legal, political and ontological dimensions.

The legal dimension of the problem consists in the loss of personhood. Incapable of being incorporated into the legal community of the receiving nation-states and deprived of rights in international law, the stateless were subjected to “a form of lawlessness, organized by the police” (*ibid.*: 366). The contrast that Arendt draws between the condition of the stateless and that of criminals is important in this regard: Whereas criminals are punished according to the “normal juridical procedure in which a definite crime entails a predictable penalty” (*ibid.*: 577) and they have a right to appeal the verdict, the stateless are practically non-persons living under an arbitrary rule since what they endure has no relation to “what they do, did, or may do” (*ibid.*: 376). Given this predicament of legal dispossession, committing a crime becomes the only way for the stateless to escape “arbitrary police rule” and stand before the law:

Even if he is penniless he can now get a lawyer, complain about his jailers, and he will be listened to respectfully. He is no longer the scum of the earth but important enough to be informed of all the details of the law under which he will be tried. He has become a respectable person. (*Ibid.*: 364)

Arendt's use of the term "rightlessness" does not simply point to a legal predicament; it also draws attention to the political and ontological dimensions of the loss endured by the stateless. The stateless lost not only personhood but also "the entire social texture into which they were born and in which they established for themselves a distinct place in the world" (*ibid.*: 372). Deprived of home, family, occupation and language, as Arendt highlights in her essay "We Refugees", the stateless lost "the familiarity of daily life" and experienced a "rupture of [their] private lives" (Arendt 2007a: 264–5). They were dispossessed of a political community that could render their actions, speech and opinions relevant and meaningful (Arendt [1951] 2004: 376). What was perhaps unprecedented in the case of twentieth-century statelessness was the impossibility of finding a new home. Only in a world organized into nation-states "could the loss of home and political status become identical with expulsion from humanity altogether" (*ibid.*: 377). This statement urges us to consider the ontological implications of rightlessness as a condition that unmakes one's human status. Unable to find a new home and confined in camps, the stateless were deprived of the possibility of participating in the common world constituted through human activities, especially action and speech. Arendt's comparison of statelessness to slavery highlights this last point. Drawing on Aristotle, Arendt reminds us that neither the stateless nor the slave is considered a "political animal" or "a being commanding the power of speech and thought" (*ibid.*). It is not that the slave or the stateless has literally lost the faculty of speech, but rather his or her speech is rendered unintelligible, meaningless or irrelevant. Arendt's insistence on the centrality of action and speech to human life in her later work, especially her argument that "[a] life without speech and without action ... has ceased to be a human life because it is no longer lived among men" (Arendt 1958: 176), needs to be understood in the light of her early encounter with statelessness.

Arendt's analysis highlights the failure of international efforts to address statelessness. Affirming nationality as the organizing norm of the international system, these efforts cast statelessness as "an unfortunate exception to an otherwise sane and normal rule" (Arendt [1951] 2004: 342). Understood as an anomaly, statelessness was treated as a

problem that could be fixed with exceptional and temporary measures. This approach manifested itself first in the Minority Treaties, as discussed earlier. But it could also be detected in the common practices of repatriation and naturalization. Repatriation worked with the assumption that every person has a homeland (*patria*) to be returned to, but this assumption failed to confront the novel challenge of twentieth-century statelessness, which created a group of people who were simply “undeportable” in the sense that “there was no country on earth in which they enjoyed the right to residence” (*ibid.*: 352). Naturalization, reserved only for exceptional individual cases, also “broke down” with the arrival of millions of stateless people (*ibid.*: 361). Finally, even the right to asylum, which Arendt describes as “the only right that had ever figured as a symbol of the Rights of Man in the sphere of international relationships” (*ibid.*: 356), could not adequately grapple with the twentieth-century statelessness. Emergence of massive scales of statelessness practically put an end to this right, which was always granted in exceptional cases.

All of these measures ended up aggravating the problem of statelessness by rendering it an anomaly. Treating statelessness as an exceptional and transitory phenomenon was quite “tempting” precisely because “it left the system itself untouched” (*ibid.*: 352) and avoided a radical questioning of its organizing principles. For Arendt, however, it is precisely these principles that should have been subjected to a critical examination. As she puts it, “the explosion of 1914 ... had sufficiently shattered the façade of Europe’s political system to lay bare its hidden frame” (*ibid.*: 341). Writing against the common tendency to treat statelessness as an “unfortunate exception”, Arendt takes it instead as a symptom manifesting the problems in this “hidden frame” and offers a critical examination bringing to view the constitutive tensions of the nation-state and the rights of man. Her critical inquiry suggests that statelessness is a systemic problem produced by the organizing principles of the international order.

Critique of the nation-state and the rights of man

Arendt draws attention to the intertwined historical trajectories of the nation-state and the rights of man, as she announces in the title of the chapter devoted to statelessness in *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (“The Decline of the Nation-State and the End of the Rights of Man”), and provides a critical inquiry centred on “perplexities” or aporias of both. Without an understanding of these internal or constitutive tensions,

she highlights, we cannot understand why and how the stateless found themselves in a condition of rightlessness once they lost their membership in a political community. Arendt does not draw a straight line from these internal tensions to the problem of rightlessness, however. Equally important are the devastating effects of various external factors such as the rise of imperialism.

For Arendt, the nation-state is defined by the tensions arising from the conflicting principles of “state” and “nation”. Whereas the state derives its legitimacy as the “supreme legal institution” from “the protection of all inhabitants in its territory”, including members and non-members, nationhood denotes an exclusive community composed of only those who belong “by right of origin and fact of birth” (*ibid.*: 296). The French Revolution conjoins territorial jurisdiction and national membership and strikes a “precarious balance between nation and state” (*ibid.*: 351).² The nation-state can remain a representative institution upholding the rule of law only by maintaining this balance and resisting the pull of national consciousness and the idea that only nationals have rights. Given this internal tension characteristic of the nation-state, what Arendt calls the “conquest of the state by the nation”, following the French sociologist J. T. Delos, is always a possibility, as nationalism can prevail over the constitutional government and leave those who are not nationals without access to equal rights (*ibid.*: 296; Arendt 1946: 139). The “decline” of the nation-state needs to be understood in terms of this conquest; once the will of the nation began to prevail over the rule of law, Arendt argues, the nation-state collapsed into an arbitrary system of rule and lost its legitimacy since it no longer represented all those present on its territory.

The internal tensions of the nation-state become manifest in the eighteenth-century idea of the rights of man. These rights were assumed to be “natural” in the sense that individuals were entitled to them by virtue of being born as human beings. As distinct from rights that took their ground from “history” and changed from one community to the other, rights of man were grounded in human nature that was assumed to be universally shared (Arendt [1951] 2004: 378; 1963: 108–9). They were the rights of human being as such (“man”), abstracted from any belonging or membership in a political community. They were “inalienable” since they could not be surrendered by individuals to the sovereign and no sovereign could infringe on them. They were “irreducible to and undeducible from other rights and law”; as the source of all the other rights and laws, they did not need any special law to protect them (Arendt [1951] 2004: 369). But these purportedly natural, abstract and inalienable rights were coeval with the nation-state. As

can be seen in the title of the 1789 Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen, there was no gap between “man” and “citizen” in this context; each human being was assumed to be a member of a nationally defined political community: “[M]an had hardly appeared as a completely emancipated, completely isolated being who carried his dignity within himself without reference to some larger encompassing order, when he disappeared again into a member of a people” (*ibid.*). Within the nation-state, “rights of man” came to be identified with “rights of citizen”. Natural, abstract, and inalienable rights seemed to be unenforceable in the case of individuals deprived of citizenship. This problem became visible with the emergence of statelessness as a mass phenomenon: “The world found nothing sacred in the abstract nakedness of being human” (*ibid.*: 380).

Arendt takes issue with conventional assumptions about human rights, especially the idea that these rights are pre-political and that we are entitled to them as human beings regardless of our political status. These assumptions, she argues, are belied by the plight of statelessness. Deprived of all political belonging, the stateless “come under exactly the situation for which the declarations of such general rights provided” (*ibid.*: 381). But paradoxically, precisely when the stateless appear in their mere givenness, it becomes very difficult to recognize their humanity and uphold their rights: “It seems that a man who is nothing but a man has lost the very qualities which make it possible for other people to treat him as a fellow man” (*ibid.*).

Arendt’s critical analysis presents rightlessness of the stateless as a systemic condition that needs to be understood in the light of the “perplexities” or aporias of the nation-state and the rights of man. But does this mean that this plight is inescapable given these perplexities? Does Arendt end up locating the origins of rightlessness (and eventually totalitarianism) in the eighteenth-century idea of the rights of man?³ Arendt’s reflections on her historical method in *The Origins of Totalitarianism* suggest that rightlessness of the stateless is neither an accidental plight nor an inevitable one.

The key term for understanding Arendt’s approach to history is “crystallization”, which brings to light the crucial importance she attaches to contingency and her refusal to subscribe to a thesis of inevitability (*ibid.*: 8; see also Arendt 1994: 324–5n, 403). For Arendt, a historical phenomenon such as rightlessness of the stateless is like a crystalline form that consists of a particular configuration of multiple elements; this formation has a structure and yet it is also contingent to the extent that it is not caused or determined by any of these elements.⁴ Internal tensions of the nation-state and the perplexities of human

rights are crucial for understanding the pervasive rightlessness of the stateless. But this problem also needs to be understood by examining other “elements” in this constellation. In explaining the decline of the nation-state, for example, Arendt notes several historical conditions in addition to the internal tensions that characterize this institutional form: “[m]odern power conditions which make national sovereignty a mockery except for giant states, the rise of imperialism, and the pan-movements” (Arendt [1951] 2004: 344). From the perspective of human rights, especially devastating are the “boomerang effects” of overseas imperialism (*ibid.*: 267, 288).

Arendt’s account emphasizes how several practices of overseas imperialism were imported to Europe to the effect of rendering millions rightless and superfluous. As a “limitless pursuit of power that could roam and lay waste the whole globe”, imperialism recognized no legal and normative limits on the exercise of power (*ibid.*: 161). Through its imperialist uses and abuses, nationalism became increasingly racialized, deployed in ways justifying the division of humanity “into master races and slave races, into higher and lower breeds” (*ibid.*: 152). Racial stratifications consolidated by imperialism had disastrous effects on the notion of “humanity”, a pivotal concept for human rights, as they denied “the principle of equality and solidarity of all peoples guaranteed by the idea of mankind” (*ibid.*: 214).

Equally destructive for the nation-state and human rights were the “boomerang effects” of imperial practices developed to manage, subdue and eliminate indigenous populations. Camps, invented during the Boer war, came to be used in Europe as a means to control and contain various groups of “undesirable elements” or those who have become “superfluous and bothersome”, including refugees, the stateless, asocial or unemployed (*ibid.*: 568, 574). Similarly, the category of “protective custody” was invented within the context of imperialism to justify the internment of these undesirable elements. It was later to be deployed by the Third Reich as a euphemism to justify the arbitrary arrest and incarceration of Jews as the only means of protecting them from the German people (*ibid.*: 568). In short, without the “boomerang effects” of overseas imperialism, it is impossible to understand either the emergence of millions of stateless persons or their treatment in camps subjected to lawlessness.⁵

Arendt’s analysis suggests that the aporias or internal tensions of the nation-state and the rights of man do not inevitably lead to the rightlessness of the stateless. These tensions are among the elements that form the complex constellation that gives rise to this problem, but their effects cannot be understood without looking at other elements

such as imperialism and racism. This emphasis on historical contingency distinguishes Arendt's critique from others that locate in the paradoxes of human rights the origins of an inevitable doom. To illustrate this point, it is worth briefly mentioning the work of the contemporary Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben. Agamben takes his starting point from Arendt's claim that the problems encountered by the stateless are symptomatic of the paradoxes embedded in human rights. But in a move that is at odds with her historical approach emphasizing contingency and discontinuity, he argues that these paradoxes, embodied especially by the constitutive tension between "man" and "citizen", reinscribe the centuries-old metaphysical divide between *bios* (politically qualified life) and *zoē* (natural life) to the effect of subjecting every aspect of human life to sovereign violence. Agamben's sweeping statements that tie human rights inextricably to the logic of biopolitical sovereignty lead to a call for a politics that severs its connections to rights, citizenship and political belonging altogether (Agamben 1998: 126–35; 2000: 15–26; see Gündoğdu 2012b). For Arendt, on the other hand, paradoxes of human rights do not inescapably result in rightlessness of the stateless, and accordingly, her critical inquiry leaves open the possibility that the aporetic terrain of human rights can be politically navigated in new ways to establish new guarantees for equality and freedom for all regardless of nationality (Gündoğdu 2012a). In fact, her proposal for rethinking human rights as "a right to have rights" can be taken as an example representing this possibility.

Perplexities of "a right to have rights"

Towards the end of her analysis of statelessness, Arendt proposes to rethink human rights in terms of "a right to have rights", which denotes "a right to belong to some kind of organized community" (Arendt [1951] 2004: 376) in which one's actions and speech can be taken into account as well as "the right of every individual to belong to humanity" (*ibid.*: 377). The importance of this right becomes apparent with the plight of the stateless who find themselves deprived of not only legal personhood but also a right to action, speech and opinion in the absence of "a community willing and able to guarantee [their] rights" (*ibid.*). In an essay published in 1949, Arendt suggests that a right to have rights, or "the right of men to citizenship", is the one human right that cannot be reduced to the rights of citizens. In fact, she criticizes the UN for its failure to include in its Universal Declaration of Human Rights this "one right without which no other can materialize" (Arendt 1949: 37).

Arendt briefly invokes “a right to have rights” without much elucidation, but her proposal of this right is crucial for understanding the goal guiding her critique of the paradoxical assumptions and effects of human rights. Her critical inquiry aims at thinking these rights anew in response to the challenging problem of statelessness. This goal sets Arendt’s critique apart from one of her major sources of inspiration, namely, Edmund Burke’s critique of the rights of man in his work on the French Revolution.

Arendt draws on Burke’s critique in some respects and even suggests that the problems faced by the stateless “offer what seems an ironical, bitter, and belated confirmation” of Burke’s critique of the rights of man (Arendt [1951] 2004: 380). After all, millions of stateless persons found it very difficult to be recognized as human beings entitled to equal rights precisely when they lost their citizenship. Their plight seemed to validate Burke’s claim that the rights of man are mere abstractions and the real rights are those grounded in “entailed inheritance” transmitted from one generation to another in a bounded political community (Burke 2004: 119). Arendt claims that Burke’s critique achieves a “pragmatic soundness” in the light of statelessness, but her critique of human rights is not simply a restatement of his position on the rights of man (Arendt [1951] 2004: 380).⁶ Arendt’s analysis suggests that, in a world that has frighteningly vindicated Burke’s theses, we cannot rely on his conclusions as remedies. Renouncing the rights of man and insisting instead on “the rights of Englishman” would only aggravate the condition of rightlessness in an international context in which millions can no longer make a claim to so-called “inherited” rights as nationals. In fact, to the extent that “entailed inheritance” has “its curious touch of race-feeling”, grounding rights in history, understood as heredity, would not resolve but compound the problem of rightlessness (*ibid.*: 232). For this reason, Arendt affirms the significance of citizenship and political community for guarantees of equal rights, but she does that without renouncing human rights altogether; hence, her insistence on rethinking human rights as “a right to have rights”, or a right *to* citizenship, as different from rights *attached* to citizenship.

Arendt’s short discussion of “a right to have rights” has given rise to challenging questions about the institutional guarantees and normative foundations of human rights. Her account of statelessness shows that the one truly human right, the right to citizenship, cannot be guaranteed by the nation-state. She argues that this right “transcends the present sphere of international law which still operates in terms of reciprocal agreements and treaties between sovereign states” and it “should be guaranteed by humanity itself” (*ibid.*: 379). But what this guarantee

would entail institutionally is far from clear. Arendt briefly ponders the possibility of a world government but concludes that even such a post-national structure would not eliminate the danger of violent exclusion as long as “what is right” is equated with “what is good for”:

For it is quite conceivable, and even within the realm of practical political possibilities, that one fine day a highly organized and mechanized humanity will conclude quite democratically – namely by majority decision – that for humanity as a whole it would be better to liquidate certain parts thereof. (*Ibid.*)

In her later writings, she raises more concerns about world government, arguing that it can end up destroying differences among peoples, creating “a horridly shallow unity” (Arendt 1968: 87) and giving rise to “a forbidding nightmare of tyranny” (*ibid.*: 81). She even takes issue with her mentor Karl Jaspers’s cosmopolitan vision of a “world-wide federated political structure” (*ibid.*: 84), alerting her readers to the worrisome possibility of “federated police forces” (*ibid.*: 94).⁷ Noting Arendt’s dissatisfaction with national and post-national solutions, several of her readers have argued that she advocates a territorially bound republican state, resting on limited sovereignty, to provide effective institutional guarantees for “a right to have rights” (Axtmann 2006: 107–10; Beiner 2000: 55; Benhabib 2006: 15; Cohen 1996: 170, 175). But even a republican state is not an indestructible bulwark against rightlessness. As Arendt’s reflections on the American Revolution highlight, a republican framework is not immune to the danger that rights will become petrified in a set of ossified institutions that fail to establish common spaces for the actualization of freedom and equality (Arendt 1963: 232–9). And as can be seen in her reflections on slavery and poverty in the United States, a republican state can have its own violent exclusions.

Although Arendt’s reflections on the possible institutional frameworks for the protection of a right to have rights are inconclusive, they are important for bringing to light an ineluctable tension between rights and their institutional guarantees. Her critical analysis of the nation-state and the post-national possibilities points to an “antinomic” relationship between human rights and institutions, to use the apt phrase of Étienne Balibar (2007: 733–4): on the one hand, human rights, mischaracterized as natural, pre-political and pre-institutional, can only be recognized in a political community by instituting reciprocal guarantees of equality and freedom. On the other hand, institutions established to protect rights can also turn against them, as the historical

trajectory of the nation-state demonstrates. Arendt's analysis does not resolve this antinomy but instead invites critical inquiries of how it can resurface in different contexts.

"A right to have rights" has proved to be perplexing for scholars of Arendt's political theory also due to the normative question it raises. If this new right cannot derive its validity from any existing legal framework (domestic and international), what is its normative foundation or ground? Arendt's analysis highlights the impossibility (and dangers) of grounding rights in "nature" or "history", but it does not provide a clear answer to the question of what kind of a new foundation, if any, can replace these eighteenth-century categories.

How to interpret Arendt's silence on the foundation of a right to have rights? Is it a sign revealing the normative weakness of her political theory or a temporary lapse that can be corrected by turning to her other works? For critics such as Seyla Benhabib, Arendt's silence results from her aversion to "strategies of normative justification" and it constitutes a serious problem since she fails to clarify on what grounds we can defend each human being's entitlement to a right to citizenship (Benhabib 2003: 185; see also Benhabib 2004: 59). For scholars such as Peg Birmingham (2006) and Serena Parekh (2008), although Arendt does not explicitly state the foundation of "a right to have rights", her political theory provides plenty of sources to fill this lacuna; a new foundation for human rights can be derived from the key concepts of Arendt's political theory, including plurality, natality and givenness.

But Arendt's silence on the question of foundations might give rise to a different reading; perhaps it is a deliberate attempt to move away from the philosophical quests for foundations in the debates on human rights. This reading is quite plausible given Arendt's strong critique of foundationalist attempts to turn to an absolute such as "nature" to ground rights in her account of modern revolutions.⁸ That critique points to the problems of deriving the validity of rights from a pre-political or extra-political ground and highlights that their validity is inextricably connected with political practices of declaring, claiming, validating and reinventing them.⁹

Arendt's turn away from philosophical quests for foundations to political practices of founding equality and freedom can also be discerned in her insistence of a "new guarantee" for human dignity (Arendt [1951] 2004: xxvii), her suggestion that a right to have rights "should be guaranteed by humanity itself" (*ibid.*: 379) and her argument that "we become equal as members of a group on the strength of our decision to guarantee ourselves mutually equal rights" (*ibid.*: 382). Arendt's choice of the term "guarantee" (instead of "foundation") in these instances

can be read as an invitation to come to terms with the “irreparable groundlessness of rights”, as Frank Michelman (1996: 207) puts it. Read in the light of her unique understanding of politics in terms of action and the capacity to initiate new beginnings, this groundlessness can be taken as an affirmation of “active citizenship” (Cotter 2005: 95), including political practices of those who do not have the formal status of citizenship. Offering neither a new institutional design nor a new normative foundation, Arendt’s proposition of “a right to have rights” highlights the significance of political action for cultivating new forms of political responsibility and solidarity in response to challenging problems of rightlessness and for augmenting the fragile institutional guarantees of equality and freedom.¹⁰

Conclusion: rethinking statelessness in an age of migration

Various contemporary processes and practices related to globalization, particularly international migration, have deprived millions of people from the protections of citizenship rights. Today more than 200 million people are estimated to be living outside their country of birth. In addition, there are approximately 29 million internally displaced people who can no longer appeal to their states for guarantees of their rights. Arendt’s effort to understand statelessness as a “mass phenomenon” (Arendt [1951] 2004: 352) becomes all the more pertinent within this global context in which growing numbers of people find themselves “ejected from the old trinity of state-people-territory” (*ibid.*: 358). As many scholars have highlighted, her analysis of statelessness achieves a new significance in understanding the contemporary plight of asylum-seekers, refugees (Owens 2011; Xenos 1993), undocumented immigrants (Kesby 2012: 92–117; Krause 2008) and even citizens who have become *de facto* stateless due to social exclusion (Somers 2008), homelessness (Feldman 2004) and poverty (Hayden 2007).

But if there are various parallels between the contemporary landscape and the one Arendt observed, there are also some differences that need to be noted. When Arendt wrote about statelessness, she was pointing to the “somewhat shadowy existence” of human rights, saying that they “never became law” (Arendt [1951] 2004: 357). Since the end of the Second World War, and particularly in the last few decades, we have witnessed the global proliferation of human rights norms, mechanisms and organizations. Human rights no longer seem to be simply abstract commitments, and they are recognized as central to a new understanding of legitimate statehood that rests on the idea

that a state does not have exclusive authority when it comes to the fundamental rights of its residents (Keck & Sikkink 1998; Risse *et al.* 1999). These developments are seen as crucial for various categories of migrants. Even if one does not agree with the strong claim that the rise of a universal human rights framework has led to the decline of national citizenship (Jacobson 1996) and the emergence of a post-national membership (Soysal 1994), it is now largely accepted that there has been a shift from nationality to universal personhood in the basis of entitlement to rights, allowing migrants to claim many of the rights that were formerly associated with citizenship status (Benhabib 2004; Sassen 2002).

These developments might give the misleading impression that the condition of rightlessness that Arendt described in her analysis of statelessness has altogether disappeared from the contemporary landscape. But “the perplexities of the Rights of Man” manifest themselves in new ways in the international human rights norms, and some of the contemporary developments such as the emergence of an increasingly restrictive global apparatus of immigration control make it increasingly difficult to navigate the paradoxes of human rights for millions of migrants.

The constitutive tension between “man” and “citizen”, highlighted in Arendt’s analysis of the 1789 Declaration, has not completely disappeared with the shift to “human” rights. Especially important in this regard are the perplexities or aporias arising from the intertwining of universal personhood with territorial sovereignty in the international human rights framework. These aporias can be seen, for example, in the peculiar formulation of the right to asylum. Article 14 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights guarantees “the right to seek and to enjoy in other countries asylum from persecution”. This formulation, which does not automatically guarantee a right to be granted asylum, aims to balance the right to asylum with the sovereign right to control borders; it underscores that the human right to exit is not accompanied by a right to enter another country.

The precarious balance that the human rights framework strikes between universal personhood and territorial sovereignty has been put in jeopardy by troubling developments that make it increasingly difficult for various categories of migrants to access rights. Within the context of restrictive immigration controls, measures such as detention and deportation, which were previously reserved mainly for states of emergency, have become normalized (Walters 2002). Camps have resurfaced as “the only practical substitute for a nonexistent homeland” (Arendt [1951] 2004: 361); they have appeared in new forms (e.g. detention centres,

waiting zones), but they continue to be defined by arbitrary rule or lawlessness. To stop migrants before reaching their borders and to evade human rights law, states have resorted to extreme measures including practices such as intercepting migrants on the high seas, excising some of their territory from their jurisdiction, and signing readmission agreements that risk the *refoulement* of asylum-seekers and refugees (Hyndman & Mountz 2008). These problems have been compounded by the rise of racism and xenophobia in many immigrant-receiving countries, making it very difficult even for permanent residents and citizens of racial minorities to exercise their rights.

In light of these developments, Arendt's argument that the stateless find themselves in a fundamental condition of "rightlessness" assumes a new meaning. What this term captures within the contemporary context is not the absolute loss or lack of rights such as legal personhood but instead their increasing fragility. "Rightlessness" alerts us to the precarious legal, political and ontological standing of many migrants (and some citizens) in an age that is simultaneously defined by the proliferation of human rights and the globalization of immigration control.

These challenging problems highlight that the universal human rights framework falls short of guaranteeing "a right to have rights", or a right to citizenship and humanity. But if the existing institutional order cannot easily accommodate this right, various political struggles waged by migrants demanding "papers for all" draw attention to its urgency (Beltrán 2009; Krause 2008; Schaap 2011). Arendt's proposition of "a right to have rights" can serve as a fruitful starting point for understanding not only the limits and problems of the existing human rights framework but also the political possibilities of reinventing these rights in response to challenging problems of rightlessness.

Notes

1. For a positive account of Minority Treaties, see, for example, Lauren (1998: 115–17). For a critical analysis that links minority protection to racial politics of twentieth century, see Weitz (2008).
2. For the constitutive tensions of the modern nation-state, see Brubaker (1992) and Habermas (1996: 491–515).
3. These questions are based on several criticisms raised against Arendt's account of human rights; see, among others, Brunkhorst (1996) and Rancière (2004).
4. For more on the notion of "crystallization", see Benhabib (2003: 64) and Disch (1994: 148).
5. On the "boomerang effects" of imperialism on the European nation-state, see Benhabib (2003: 75–86; 2004: 51–2) and Owens (2007: 52–71).

6. For analyses that point to the similarities between Arendt and Burke, see, among others, Brunkhorst (2000: 189), Canovan (1999: 146–7), Cohen (1996: 169, 183), Rancière (2004). For readings that highlight the differences between Arendt and Burke, see, among others, Birmingham (2006: 45–6) and Isaac (1996: 64–5).
7. For discussions of Arendt’s arguments about federalism at the international level, see Axtmann (2006) and Klusmeyer (2000).
8. For the turn to absolutes in modern revolutions, see Arendt (1963: 182–5).
9. See, for example, Arendt’s interpretation of the statement “We hold these truths to be self-evident” in the Preamble of the American Declaration of Independence along these lines (Arendt 1963: 192–4).
10. For action-centric readings of Arendt’s notion of “a right to have rights” see, among others, Ingram (2008) and Isaac (1996).

SEVEN

Hannah Arendt on the social

Philip Walsh

Introduction

Hannah Arendt's understanding of the social, together with her diagnosis that the modern era is beset by a crisis which she characterizes as the "rise of the social", are difficult topics. They provoke and challenge her readers today at least as much as they did when she first presented them in her writings of the 1960s and 1970s. Indeed, although three generations of commentators have now weighed in on the issue, there is still no settled interpretation of exactly what she means by the phrase "the rise of the social". In this contribution, I consider some of the various interpretations of the phrase, and propose that we consider Arendt's concept of the social in the context of the general theory of human activity presented in *The Human Condition*. This involves interpreting some of Arendt's claims about the category of labour in a way that yields a broader meaning of the concept of the social than is customarily presented. A subsidiary argument pursued throughout this chapter is the fruitfulness of interpreting Arendt through her relation to the works of the founders of the modern sciences of the social, especially Max Weber, Karl Marx and Karl Mannheim. This interpretation runs counter to some other interpretations, principally those that align her philosophically with existential individualism or politically with conservatism.

The social and the social sciences

Conventional wisdom suggests that contemporary academic disciplines are ordered according to the phenomena they study. Therefore, the social looks like it ought to be the primary concern of sociology, and the best way forward might be to compare Arendt's understanding of the social with the subject matter of sociology. Divergences in meaning could then be referred to philosophers of social science. But this view assumes two things; first that "the social" names a distinct set of phenomena requiring a special science, in the same way that "the economy" and "politics" presumably name distinctive phenomena studied by specialists inhabiting economics and political science university departments. Second, it assumes that Arendt's intention was to intervene in debates among sociologists about the proper range or character of their discipline.

Neither assumption is tenable, of course. The idea that modern societies can be neatly or naturally analysed into their component parts, each corresponding to a set of institutions with a distinctive function would, I think, be unlikely to be defended by many knowledgeable practitioners within university social science faculties today, even though they all still work within arrangements that seem to assume such a division. The work of Michel Foucault, Immanuel Wallerstein and other luminaries of the history of the sciences have taught us that the disciplines that we classify as "social sciences", and sub-classify as "politics", "economics", "sociology" and so on, do not name "natural kinds" but evolved mostly in response to practical imperatives or to relations of power.

Of course, the question of disciplinary boundaries rests on more than how it defines its subject matter, and many contemporary knowledge practitioners within the social sciences might still defend the sovereignty of their discipline based on other grounds (methodology, perhaps, or a settled vocabulary). But, given the prevailing scepticism about disciplinary boundaries, and the particularly nebulous quality of the term the social, we might be tempted to neutralize the term, or at the least try to re-define it in such a way that it can be contained.

Unfortunately, this is a difficult directive to apply to Arendt's thinking about the social, partly because, as noted above, she has no interest in clarifying either the vocabulary or the substance of the social sciences, of which she was often very critical. But it is also misleading to try to re-define Arendt's concept of the social, because in doing so we will likely misunderstand many of her most interesting, controversial and important claims.

Arendt is not interested in offering a settled definition of the social, which she uses sometimes as a synonym for “society” and, more often, as referring to a range of other phenomena. Rather, she is concerned to provide an analysis of the *meanings* associated with the social. This is partly a historical project, but Arendt’s intentions cannot be encompassed by grasping it solely in this way. Rather, in *The Human Condition*, most explicitly, but also elsewhere in her writings, she is concerned to offer a *historical phenomenology* of a range of phenomena, of which the social is only one.

This is not the place to explore fully Arendt’s commitment to phenomenology, but something needs to be said about the goals of her phenomenological inquiry in general, given its centrality to her treatment of the question of the social in *The Human Condition*.

Historical phenomenology and the social

Arendt’s conception of phenomenology was heavily influenced by the work of the German philosopher, Martin Heidegger, with whom she enjoyed a complex personal and intellectual relationship. But what Arendt took from Heidegger was less a settled methodology or philosophical style than a set of assumptions about the goals of phenomenological inquiry. According to Heidegger, the goal of phenomenology is not to provide some single, undisputed one-to-one correspondence between a concept and what it names. On the contrary, much of his writing is devoted to revealing the problematic assumptions underlying such a goal, which are due largely to the peculiar properties of language. Arendt too stresses that concepts depend utterly on the words we use to denote them. Words are not neutral counters, as much of twentieth-century Anglo-American philosophy assumed (either explicitly or implicitly). Rather, they carry with them the historical residues of past meanings and past associations with certain practices; their meanings are shot through with nuances of value and dependence on other words. Thus, the word “labour”, for example, as Arendt (1958: 48) points out, has a meaning quite distinct from “work” in every major European language, and carries with it in each of these languages long-sedimented etymological associations with pain, burdensomeness and contemptibility, which affect its meaning, as well as the meaning of the word “work”. These associations are not contingent or affectual elements that may be cleared away by some “underlabouring” philosophical machinery. Rather, they are deeply attached to the meaning of the concept itself. If we ignore or attempt to extirpate the historical

and conceptual residues that attach to words, we will simply lock ourselves into the presuppositions and prejudices of our own particular linguistic and situational environs. Phenomenology, at least in the form in which Arendt tries to practise it, is therefore not intended to replace an “objective” with a “subjective” form of inquiry, but to arrive at a greater degree of objectivity by taking into account the historicity of language, and its users themselves. Concepts like “labour” and “the social” therefore need to be treated with a sensitivity to their position within the tissue of relationships within which they have developed. Arendt’s phenomenological approach has close affinities with genealogy, as this term has come to be understood by interpreters of Michel Foucault, who himself borrowed and augmented the meaning bestowed on it by Friedrich Nietzsche (who Arendt has much in mind in developing her own phenomenological approach).

All this means that we cannot take the concept of the social as a simple referent to a unified and bounded set of phenomena. Rather, Arendt takes it to name a historically variable set of meaningful human activities, which are bound up with other distinct kinds of relationships, the names for, and meanings of which are also more or less unstable.

Polis and oikos

We can come to a preliminary understanding of what Arendt means by the social by summarizing her historical account of its development, which is most fully presented in the posthumously published *The Promise of Politics* (Arendt 2005). On this interpretation, the meaning of the social can be extracted from understanding the history of the institutional space that this term names.

The Ancient Greeks and Romans had no word for the social, or “society”. They distinguished instead between the *polis*, the space of freedom and political life, and *oikos*, which means “the household”, the space of necessity. The distinction between the two implies a fundamental structural, spatial and symbolic division of activities that prevailed fairly consistently for a period of centuries in Ancient Greek and Roman Republican urban life. It prevailed not simply, or even principally, because of functional or economic imperatives operating within these societies, but because of a normative consensus, expressed in practices, expectations, customs and, above all, law, of the respective value and meanings of these two spheres of life. This corresponded to the prevailing order of domination in these societies where a small stratum of male aristocrats exercised absolute rule over a household. This

allowed them the freedom to congregate in the *polis* as a community of individuals, equal with each other and freed from the necessity to labour. The suborning of slaves and family members in the household allowed the *polis* to flourish as a space for a small segment of the population to speak and act with each other as equals, and thereby to govern the community. The *polis* was therefore the realm within which freedom was seen as possible, and the events that took place within the space of the *polis* were regarded as what would come down to later generations as the “history” of the period. The household (*oikos*), by contrast, Arendt characterizes as the realm of “darkness”, where activities have no meaning beyond their purely instrumental or institutional function (Arendt 2005: 116–32).

It is tempting therefore to say that the slavery of the household was seen, in Ancient Greece and Republican Rome, as the means to the perceived higher end of freedom in political life. But here we encounter a snag with a straightforward historical interpretation. Arendt cautions against indiscriminately applying distinctively modern words and ways of thinking to Ancient (and, by implication, to all pre-modern) societies. She points out that for the Greeks (or, rather, for the Greek elites), “the means/ends category has no application whatever within the realm of life per se”. She goes on:

If we want to understand the connection between the household and *polis* in terms of ends and means, then life sustained within the household is not a means to the higher purpose of political freedom, but rather, control over the necessities of life and slave labour within the household is the means by which a man is liberated to engage in politics. (*Ibid.*: 132)

Arendt’s point here is to remind us that the categories which *we* associate with terms like “household” and “politics”, together with relationships that we assume exist between them are not necessarily trans-historical. Understanding the transformations of these spaces therefore requires reconstructing the meanings that the people associated with them as much as it does the actual structuring of the spaces themselves.

Arendt says little about the fate of the *polis* and the *oikos* in the Medieval and Early Modern period. Her discussion of the “rise of the social” is most fully developed in *The Human Condition*, where her account moves instead to the eighteenth century, which saw the emergence of a third space of social relations between the *oikos* and the *polis* that transformed both. Understanding this transformation depends on another distinction Arendt makes, between the private and the public.

In Ancient, Feudal and Early Modern societies, the two oppositions – *polis* and *oikos* on the one hand and private and public on the other – coexist and are essentially aligned with each other: the household is private and the *polis* is the *res publica* (*ibid.*: 170). The third realm that develops, from the eighteenth century onwards, is defined by the fact that it is directed towards the necessities of life, but is nevertheless public. The conventional interpretation of what Arendt means by the social aligns it with this “third space”, or *public oikos*, although Arendt nowhere says this explicitly. Rather, she suggests that

[t]he emergence of *society* – the rise of housekeeping, its activities, problems and organizational devices – from the shadowy interior of the household into the light of the public sphere, has not only blurred the old borderline between private and political, it has also changed almost beyond recognition the meaning of the two terms and their significance for the life of the individual and the citizen.
(Arendt 1958: 38, emphasis added)

Is it *society* that constitutes the “third space” of relations, or is she here using the term as a synonym for the social? Arendt is not very consistent in her usage of these two terms, and at least one commentator has charged her with simply failing to keep track of her own vocabulary (Pitkin 1998: 3, 18; Canovan 1974). Nevertheless, it seems that, in this section of *The Human Condition* at least, she identifies a public *oikos* with society, rather than the social. In so doing, she is concerned to point to original and world-historical changes in the organization of human activities. The term “society” here encompasses a range of activities that include the differentiation of “living” and “working” spaces, the growth of laws governing private property, driving the expansive growth of markets, and radical alterations in the character of human labour.

Arendt focuses most of her discussion of this conception of ‘society’ on changes in the character of labour, and largely ignores the technological innovations that are given priority in most conventional histories of industrialization. She is most interested, like Adam Smith and Karl Marx – on whom she draws extensively in this section of the book – in the impact of the division of labour on the patterning of human activity. We can understand this in purely historical terms as the transformation of everyday life for a large portion of the population, beginning around the end of the eighteenth century, from relatively unstructured, locally and communally coordinated, needs-based production to routinized, specialized, atomized and market-oriented labour. Although she never uses the term “alienation” in the sense of

“alienated or estranged *labour*”, as Marx did, Arendt’s reflections on these changes bear a striking similarity to Marx’s, as these appear in his important early writings, as do the other elements that she associates with the emergence of ‘society’.

The emergence of a public *oikos* is an important part of the meaning of the social in Arendt’s work, but it does not capture the full range. Indeed, Arendt would regard a historical narrative that presents this development in terms of the transformation of distinct “spaces” of human activity without reference to the acts of individuals as misleading, smacking of “behaviourism” and “economism”, and implying that society exists primarily as a set of economic relations that become historically modified over the course of time. Arendt suspected that the social sciences were integrally infected with this kind of thinking, which she traces to the influence of Marx, and this partly accounts for her hostility towards them. Indeed, the major point of Arendt’s critique of Marx in *The Human Condition* is that he was responsible for establishing the “social viewpoint”, which both redefined human relationships in accordance with a particular ethical–practical ideology, and successfully made this the “viewpoint of the whole modern age” (Arendt 1958: 88). I return to this extension of the social as a viewpoint below, after considering some further elaborations of how the concept is defined in Arendt’s earlier works.

The historical story of the rise of public *oikos* does not include some of the most important conceptual elements that Arendt included in her account of the social. To grasp these, we have to look beyond *The Human Condition*, and also beyond a purely historical understanding of the term. A different and influential interpretation of the meaning of the social that takes more account of the far-flung character of Arendt’s conception of it, and its “rise”, has been provided by Seyla Benhabib in her *The Reluctant Modernism of Hannah Arendt* (2003). Benhabib here points to the importance of Arendt’s early writings – notably *The Origins of Totalitarianism* and *Rahel Varnhagen: The Life of a Jewish Woman* – to argue for a different centre of gravity to Arendt’s category of the social. First, as Benhabib points out, in *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, Arendt emphasizes *capitalism*, understood in terms of the limitless search for profits, as a defining principle of the modern social order (Benhabib 2003: 77–9). Second, in her Varnhagen biography, Arendt discusses the changes in activities defined by tastes in fashion, manners and codes of interaction that grew out of the salon culture of the eighteenth century. These changes contributed to the growth of ‘civil society’, or what Norbert Elias referred to as “*civilite*” (*ibid.*: 16, 27). Third, Benhabib argues that Arendt’s abiding concern with the

emergence of “mass society”, understood as both the overall growth in population and the supposed levelling effect this has on shared experiences, is at least as important an ingredient in her conception of the social as the features associated with a public *oikos*.

Benhabib’s book shows how interpreting “the rise of the social” as simply the emergence of a “public *oikos*” is not sufficient, and that we need to understand her account of the social in broader terms than those that dominate *The Human Condition*. Her interpretation therefore rescues Arendt’s perspective from a too-narrow understanding, to which an earlier generation of theorists had subjected it. Nevertheless, Benhabib’s analysis remains within a primarily historical perspective, though emphasizing developments that are given more priority in Arendt’s early work than her later. Yet there is another dimension to Arendt’s concept of the social and its rise that cannot be captured by either of the preceding interpretations. This has to do with the phenomenological aspect of *The Human Condition*, and its concern with the meaning of human activities. To explore this dimension of the social, we turn initially to the general structure of the book.

The social and the transvaluation of labour

The bulk of *The Human Condition* is devoted to analysing the meanings of three distinct kinds of human activity – labour, work and action (parts III, IV and V). These parts deal with the “most elementary articulations of the human condition, with those activities that traditionally, as well as according to current opinion, are within the range of every human being” (Arendt 1958: 5). Parts I and II of the book are comparatively short prolegomena to these main parts, while part VI consists of wide-ranging, and sometimes wandering, reflections on the relationship between human activity and ideas.

As the structure of the book suggests, Arendt distinguishes labour and work sharply from each other, and in several different ways. The distinction lies partly in the “durability” of the object that the activity is directed towards, but also, more significantly, in the conditions under which the activity takes place. The making of furniture, for example, may be understood as work if it is the outcome of purposeful craftsmanship, but labour if it occurs on an assembly line. But even the degree of “alienation” (in Marx’s sense) in the activity is not the decisive factor. This is to be located instead in the meaning that the activity has for the worker (or labourer, as the case may be). When all activity is perceived to be labour, or “housekeeping”, that is strictly, or at least primarily,

in the service of reproducing one's individual life, this brings about a decisive change in how actors confront their own activities. Moreover, this change depends partly on the particular associations of the words used to describe the activities. The meanings that have become sedimented in the terms "labour" and "work" play a major part in how individuals make sense of what they are doing. This exemplifies the phenomenological aspect of *The Human Condition*, and demonstrates why a strictly historical approach to understanding the meaning of labour and work will be unsatisfactory.

In section 6 of [part II](#), Arendt ties the "rise of the social" directly to the increasing extent to which labour has become the dominant mode of human activity in the modern era:

Perhaps the clearest indication that society constitutes the public organization of the life process itself may be found in the fact that in a relatively short time the new social realm transformed all modern communities into societies of laborers and jobholders; in other words they became at once centered around the one activity necessary to sustain life ... (To have a society of laborers, it is of course not necessary that every member actually be a laborer or worker ... But only that *all members consider whatever they do primarily as a way to sustain their own lives and those of their families.*) Society is the form in which the fact of mutual dependence for the sake of life and nothing else assumes public significance and where the activities connected with sheer survival are permitted to appear in public. (*Ibid.*: 46, emphasis added)

Arendt's claim is that the increasing extent to which people *experience* their activities in terms of labour – that is, in terms simply of the reproduction of their physical lives – aligns with the increasing dominance of the category of the social. This association of the social with the activity of labouring *per se* is reaffirmed a few pages later when Arendt strikingly describes the expansion of the category of the social as the "unnatural growth of the natural" (*ibid.*: 47). Later still, she refers to the "rise of society" as the "victory of the *Animal laborans*" (*ibid.*: 320–21). This suggests that Arendt's conception of the "rise of the social" refers, above all, to the expansion of the category of labour, understood as a kind of human activity to which actors attach a particular meaning.

One particularly important element of this meaning is the "transvaluation" of human activities. It is an integral part of what it is to labour, to work and to act, that actors invest the activity not only with

meanings, but also with values. In the modern era, these valuations now derive from and reproduce societal values, since labour and work have become part of the public sphere. The alterations in the hierarchies of the values that these activities command within the public sphere is therefore one of the most important and, to the historically minded, astonishing developments of the modern era.

Several themes that run throughout *The Human Condition* intersect with this question of the transvaluation of labour. One of these is the dominance of what Arendt regards as the social viewpoint which she believes, infects the roots of the social sciences, and increasingly spills over into the public sphere also. The social viewpoint reduces the meanings and values of all activities to the common denominator of their “productivity”. As Marx had argued, via the “labour theory of value”, that all economic value derives ultimately from the activity of labouring, so his followers threaten to extend this thinking to other spheres, including personal identity, aesthetics and politics.

The perception that the social sciences are integrally infected with the values of the social viewpoint partly accounts for Arendt’s visceral opposition to them throughout her lifetime. Nevertheless, it is worth noting that the discourse of “productivity” as the highest good has become, in contemporary times at least, the mantra of the political (populist) Right, and opposition to it the purview of many who are sympathetic with the view of the social sciences. Nevertheless, when contemporary social scientists engage with the descendants of Adam Smith about *which* groups should be rewarded with the privilege to consume, with public influence or political power, both are implicitly conceding the question of the intrinsic value of “productivity” in advanced industrialized societies to adherents of the social viewpoint.

But Arendt’s fullest engagement with the implications of the transvaluation of labour derives from another great critic of Marx, Max Weber, whose perspective figured centrally in the early history of the social sciences. In *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* ([1920] 2011), Weber argues that the transformations of the division of labour analysed by both Marx and Smith, were preceded by a no less important change in the valuation of labour, brought about “accidentally” by the radical religious beliefs associated first with Calvinism and then with the European religious movements of the seventeenth century that came to be known collectively as Puritanism. For Weber, economic (or political) factors alone were insufficient to explain the emergence of capitalism; the more fundamental, and earlier, change involved a transformation in attitudes on the part of the faithful towards the everyday activity of labour. The “sanctification of labour” that resulted became, Weber

argues, the necessary basis on which modern rational capitalism could develop. This was so because modern rational capitalism, in contrast to other variants (Weber distinguishes between “traditional”, “adventure” and “pariah” forms) depended on a disciplined, steady, methodical work ethic, together with culturally enforced restraints on consumption, at least in its early, formative manifestation. This combination alone made possible the accumulation of significant sums of capital among middle-class business owners, who became the nascent class of bourgeoisie. The religiously inspired work ethic that came to dominate both the bourgeoisie and the workers who became their employees, later persisted – without the religious content – as the “spirit of capitalism”. Weber’s classic study may therefore be said to have traced the history of the “transvaluation of labour” – its transformation from being perceived in terms of intrinsic “burdensomeness”, and its status in every hitherto existing social value system purely as a necessary means to the ends of maintaining life, to its modern hegemony as the source of personal identity, yardstick for the esteem accorded to particular social groupings and basis of political power.

Arendt’s view of the relationship between the transvaluation of labour initiated by the Protestant ethic in the seventeenth century and augmented by the rise of industrialism in the eighteenth develops Weber’s sketch of the consequent broader cultural associations. Her conclusions also, though couched in rather different terms, are not dissimilar. Weber suggests that the decay of the spiritualist justification for the valuation of labour would not necessarily undermine the ethic. Rather, it would persist, but as a set of values – a “spirit of capitalism” – that lacked depth, authenticity or intrinsic reward for those born into it. Hence his metaphor – much misunderstood – of modern society as a *stahlhartes Gehäuse*, an iron cage in which people are condemned to seek the meaning in their lives through their labour, while the original justification for the meaningfulness of this sphere has vanished. For Arendt, labour comes to stand for the social – for the life process in general, and includes also consumption. She, like Weber, regards a society which invests such importance in this sphere of life as one that threatens its members with meaninglessness in their individual lives. Yet Arendt rejects the idea underpinning the “iron cage” thesis, that labour threatens to engulf and pervade all human activity. On the contrary, she argues that the sphere of *action* – the source of human spontaneity and the unpredictable capacity of human beings to enact “beginnings” – resists this tendency and continues to be the source of unpredictable and unprecedented events, especially in the central sphere within which action dominates, that of *politics*, to which we now turn.

The social and the political

The final meaning of Arendt's conception of the social concerns its dependence on and contrast with the political. The two categories run parallel with each other and, since the *oikos* has become public, are to some extent antagonistic. The sphere of politics is the space where speech and action take place, where people can gather together as equals but as distinct individuals and make collective decisions to govern their shared future. Arendt's conception of the "rise of the social" has often been taken to imply a concomitant "decline of the political".

One can certainly find parts of Arendt's work that support this reading. In *On Revolution*, for example, Arendt suggests that one of the principal conditions that led to the Terror of the French Revolution was the inability to generate a "founding" constitutional basis for the new regime in the face of the threatened starvation of the mass of the population. The concern with the "life-process" therefore became a direct factor in political decision-making and governance, leading to disaster. In contrast, Arendt claims, the American revolution was successful precisely because of the insulation of the majority of the population from conditions of extreme want. As a result, "social issues" were kept at sufficient distance from the realm of the political to allow the framers of the Constitution to recognize each other's speech and action and so establish a new "founding" for the rule of law. In contrast, she says, "the *malheureux* whom the French Revolution had brought out of the darkness of their misery ... [were] driven by one will ... for what urged them on was the quest for bread, and the cry for bread will always be uttered with one voice. In so far as we all need bread, we are indeed all the same" (Arendt 1963: 94). This is not heartlessness on Arendt's part, but recognition of the basic fact (which Marx, and other early defenders of the social viewpoint are to be credited as forcing upon their conservative opponents of the nineteenth century) that free thought, speech and action only become possible where people have their basic needs secured.

A contrasting interpretation of Arendt's view of the relationship between the social and the political in the modern era is to place her closer to those who theorize the political as a distinct, autonomous field of human action, obedient to quite different principles from those that govern, for example, the fields of morality, economics and civil society. (Max Weber's conception of the "relative autonomy of the political" is an example of this view.) On this interpretation, the category of action, and the sphere of the political, persist and even become more dominant in the modern era. "The rise of the social" and the "decline

of the political” are therefore not necessarily correlated. In many places, Arendt refers to the indestructability of action, of the capacity to begin, and the way in which this has consistently confounded the attempt to control, predict or even forecast the human future. Certainly, in the years since Arendt wrote, there has been no shortage of the capacity for politics to surprise us: the fall of the Berlin Wall and, more recently, the Arab Spring, come to mind as only the most prominent examples. Still, this view does not really square with many of Arendt’s stated fears about the potential of the social to overwhelm politics.

Another, more fruitful, approach to the relationship between the social and the political is to emphasize how the distinction between the two realms may become itself a question of “politics”. This line of thinking explains one of Arendt’s most striking but puzzling remarks in *The Human Condition*, where she claims that “the most social form of government” is that of *bureaucracy* (Arendt 1958: 40). The origin of this perspective may be traced to the writings of the sociologist Karl Mannheim, who Arendt encountered as a doctoral student at Heidelberg. Although at the time his thought infuriated her – her first publication, “Philosophy and Sociology” (Arendt 1994), was a strongly critical review of his key work *Ideology and Utopia* (Mannheim [1929] 1960) – as a prime example of the social viewpoint, his ideas later influenced her considerably. In the key chapter on “scientific politics” in *Ideology and Utopia*, Mannheim distinguishes between “politics” and “administration” and suggests that “we are in the realm of administration ... [w]hen in the accustomed life of an official, current business is disposed of in accordance with existing rules and regulations” (*ibid.*: 113). By contrast,

[w]e are in the realm of politics when envoys to foreign countries conclude treaties which were never made before; when parliamentary representatives carry through new measures of taxation; when an election campaign is waged; when certain opposition groups prepare a revolt or organize strikes – or when these are suppressed. (*Ibid.*)

Mannheim pointed out that the line dividing these two realms was by no means fixed, and that any phenomenon to which the distinction is applied (Mannheim gives as examples a social movement and a series of administrative steps), would inevitably evidence an admixture of both elements. But Mannheim shows how the distinction is useful, not simply as an ideal type for the student of politics, but also as itself a “political” tool. This is evident in perhaps his most striking diagnosis

of the essence of “bureaucratic conservatism”, which he defines as “the fundamental tendency ... to turn all problems of politics into problems of administration” (*ibid.*: 118).

Although Arendt never uses the explicit binary of “politics” and “administration”, the idea resonates closely with her vision of how the social can invade the political in modern societies in the form of the ascendance of bureaucracy. Bureaucracies treat political questions and issues *as if* they were questions concerning routinized activities associated with the life-process. They thereby increase, or even obliterate, the distance between an act and the responsibility for it. This has the effect, not of *destroying* political action, but of shrouding it in the “darkness” associated with “housekeeping”, thereby destroying its public character. Apart from the unaccountability of power that results from this tendency, it also creates the potential for legal and moral “black holes” within which individuals and groups find themselves suspended, because nobody is empowered to make a judgement on their situation. Thus, bureaucracy within the realm of politics has the potential to become “rule by nobody”, which is, Arendt, remarks, “not necessarily no-rule; it may indeed, under certain circumstances, even turn out to be one of its cruelest and most tyrannical versions” (Arendt 1958: 40).

Conclusion

There is no settled or precise delimiter on what counts as the social in Arendt’s writings. Her use of the term is sometimes inconsistent, and often seems to suffer from a surplus of meaning. Nevertheless, it is precisely in her refusal to be bound by the scripts of modern “scientific” scholarship, to accept the consensus on disciplinary boundaries and the pedantries that often flow from these, that allows Arendt to offer her most telling diagnoses and interpretations. This is certainly the case with respect to her analysis of the social, which continues to pose telling questions about the character of our modern world, the priorities of our value-orientations and the directions of our politics.

Hannah Arendt on authority and tradition

Douglas B. Klusmeyer

Tradition is a discursive construct of beliefs and conventions based on the presumption of historical continuity in the transmission of inherited patterns across generations. The modern English word derives from the Latin *traditio* meaning “handed down” or transmission and in law the transfer of possession. More broadly, a tradition is a normative mode of knowledge through which an image of society’s relationship to time is understood and through which ascribed linkages to the past are conceived as sources of authority for institutions and actions in the present. These sources of authority may be conceptualized in various combinations as binding standards, models of conduct, exemplary acts, precedents and/or accounts of origins. In many contexts, then, the grounds of tradition and authority are interdependent. The interpretation of a tradition’s prescriptive informational content is always connected to how authority in the present is being construed, while any tradition also defines the terms through which such authority is framed.

For Hannah Arendt, one of the hallmarks of thinking is the capacity to draw distinctions, but she found this capacity badly eroded in contemporary discussions among social scientists (Arendt [1961] 1968: 15, 95). Basic concepts such as authority, power and violence “refer to distinct, different phenomena and would hardly exist unless they did” (Arendt 1972: 142; [1961] 1968: 136). However, today they are used without any sense of the history behind their linguistic meanings or their connections with the political experiences in which these meanings originated. Rather such concepts are most typically defined abstractly in terms of the functions that they are purported to serve in

theoretically conceived models of various types of political systems. Thus, for example, she observes, “if violence fulfills the same function as authority – namely, makes people obey – then violence is authority” (Arendt [1961] 1968: 102–3). Accordingly, contemporary analysts employ the term “authoritarian” to regimes whose rule is grounded on violence, while traditionally it referred to regimes bound by law that justified their rule by invoking transcendental claims to authority. Alternatively, today, terms like authority are simply collapsed into more general notions such as legitimate power. As a result, the meaning of these concepts is not only relativized to suit the theory at hand, but also rendered interchangeable in pinning this meaning to whatever functions they are deemed to serve. In investigating the original meanings of traditional concepts such as authority, Arendt seeks to restore a richness to them that had been lost and also to show how the tradition that carried them also distorted them (*ibid.*: 15).

While Arendt’s analysis of the loss of tradition and authority may be described as modernist as a broad intellectual characterization, it stemmed most immediately from her encounter with totalitarianism. From this encounter she concludes:

We can no longer afford to take that which was good in the past and simply call it our heritage, to discard the bad and simply think of it as a dead load which by itself time will bury in oblivion. The subterranean stream of Western history has finally come to the surface and usurped the dignity of our tradition. This is the reality in which we live. And this is why all efforts to escape from the grimness of the present into nostalgia for a still intact past, or into the anticipated oblivion of a better future, are vain.

(Arendt [1951] 2004: xxvii)

Her approach proceeded from her premise “that thought itself arises out of incidents of living experience and must remain bound to them as the only guideposts by which to take its bearings” (Arendt [1961] 1968: 14). At the core of this experience lay her shock over the Holocaust “as if an abyss had opened” (Arendt 1994: 14). That such an event could occur in the heart of Europe revealed to her that “there were no ultimates which one could with validity appeal to” in the sense of extra-political standards, metaphysical absolutes or religious teachings to which people felt bound (Arendt 1979: 314). Although providing an overview of Arendt’s approach to authority and tradition requires consulting a diverse array of her writings over a long career, the core concerns behind this approach change very little.

What was authority and tradition?

When discussing the “great tradition of Western thought” Arendt is thinking of a literary one articulated by educated elites with a content drawn from philosophical, juristic and theological sources (Arendt 1958: 234). She conceives of it in monolithic terms based on an abstract reconstruction of inherited patterns traced through this intellectual history and the critical stance she develops towards the tradition is predicated on this very reification. She emphasizes that any tradition offers a highly selective, stylized portrait of a society’s relationship to its past that obscures diversity and conflict in order to emphasize perceived continuities. As she observes, “tradition puts the past in order, not just chronologically but first of all systematically in that it separates the positive from the negative, the orthodox from the heretical, that which is obligatory and relevant from the mass of irrelevant or merely interesting opinions and data” (Arendt 1968: 198–9). A tradition provides both a collective framework for remembrance and a collective set of interpretive guideposts for comprehending the meaning of events in the present. Arendt distinguishes tradition as a practice embedded in shared assumptions, prejudices, customs and habits from traditionalism as an intellectualized defence glorifying a tradition’s role in a society experiencing radical change. In her view, such a defence, like Edmund Burke developed in his critique of the French Revolution, is always doomed in the long run because its appearance is symptomatic of a tradition’s irreversible decay. To some degree the binding power of a tradition depends upon a broad, unconscious acceptance of its core presuppositions. It is this same broad acceptance that provides a shared basis of tacit knowledge or “common sense”, namely a collective set of standards for judging the world and a shared vocabulary for communicating those judgements.

In conceptualizing authority Arendt emphasizes that its exercise involves neither persuasion through reasoning nor compulsion through coercion or violence (Arendt [1961] 1968: 93). Its exercise is grounded on respect for the person or the office, which is inspired from recognition of meritorious qualities in ability, character and judgement of the bearer of authority. The deference shown authority has a consensual dimension because according respect retains an element of free choice to give, withhold or question. At the same time, the hierarchical relationship of authority implies an obligation of consultation, namely that deference entails heeding the direction that is offered or the standards that are asserted without strong grounds to the contrary. To the extent that persuasion proves necessary, then the deference owes more to the

cogency of the reasoning than to regard for the bearer of authority. The capacity of authority is limited to advising, initiating, proposing or giving guidance rather than commanding or mandating. Authority is also vested with responsibility for those matters within its competence, that is, for the world its bearers share with those deferring to their guidance (Arendt [1961] 1968: 190). In the political realm, established authority provides a crucial source of stability because its character is not ephemeral or transitory. She was chiefly interested in the role authority played or failed to play in this realm as the crucial basis for continuity, durability and stability.

For Arendt authority is most stable when it is anchored in tradition, which she sees exemplified in the Roman concept of *auctoritas*. As she observes, “the Romans conceived of history as a storehouse of examples taken from actual political behavior, demonstrating what tradition, the authority of the ancestors, demanded from each generation and what the past had accumulated for the benefit of the present” (Arendt [1961] 1968: 64–5). Her etymological method to recover the original meanings of words from their corrupt usage in modern parlance stems from the recognition that “[a]ny period to which its own past has become questionable as it has to us must eventually come up against the phenomenon of language, for in it the past is contained ineradicably, thwarting all attempts to get rid of it once and for all” (Arendt 1968: 204).

Arendt points out that *auctoritas* has its roots in the verb *augere* (to “augment” or “increase”) and the noun *auctor* (“author” or “originator”). These root meanings are indicative of the importance of the idea of foundation to the Roman understanding of tradition and the exercise of authority as the conservator, expounder and enlarger of this tradition. In contrast to a notion of tradition as timeless without a fixed origin, the Romans had ascribed a sacred significance to the foundation of their city as the cornerstone of their tradition that each generation held in trust and transmitted to their successors. Rome was not simply fabricated as a builder constructs a dwelling from an architect’s design, but had an author that had infused the Roman tradition with a set of animating principles or a collective spirit that guided its development of the body politic and to which its people were bound. The core idea of this understanding, *mos maiorum* (“custom of the ancestors”) reflects how closely the Romans tied standards of conduct in both public and private back to the past. Underpinning the *mos maiorum*, Roman religious practices and beliefs fortified the binding character of tradition. “As long as this tradition was uninterrupted”, Arendt observes, “authority was inviolate; and to act without authority and tradition, without accepted, time-honored standards and models

was inconceivable” (Arendt [1961] 1968: 124). In the Roman Republic authority was vested institutionally in the Senate as a select body of distinguished elders of noble lineage. The formal role of the Senate was to advise in public matters, while the Roman body politics’ constituent power (*potestas*) was vested in the popular assemblies and the power to command in the magistrates.

Arendt sees the “trinity” of authority, religion and tradition that the Romans established as the fundamental stabilizing principles of civilized order throughout European history to the modern era. This combination of elements is so closely intertwined that no one alone can survive without the others. As she observes, “The past, to the extent that it is passed on as tradition, has authority; authority, to the extent that it presents itself as history, becomes tradition; and ... [a]cceptance of tradition without religiously-based authority is always non-binding” (Arendt 2005: 73). The trinity was preserved but reconfigured with the rise of Christianity in late antiquity. The Christian Church’s understanding of its own inception of itself as a corporate body and of the tradition that developed from it also centred around the idea of an original founder and of foundation as a worldly event. As the Church began to assert itself in the political realm, it “adopted the Roman distinction between authority and power, claiming for herself the old authority of the Senate and leaving the power – which in the Roman Empire was no longer in the hands of the people but had been monopolized by the imperial household – to the princes of the world” (Arendt [1961] 1968: 126). While this reconfiguration removed the secular basis for authority from the political realm, it nevertheless preserved the key components of the trinity. Likewise, the Church’s teaching on the threat of divine reward and punishment in the afterlife helped to reinforce customary standards of conduct and morality. In this form, the Roman trinity of authority, religion and tradition endured until it encountered its first momentous challenge in the Protestant Reformation.

The end of authority and tradition

For Arendt the “great tradition” began to lose its moorings with the Protestant Reformation, entered its death throes in the nineteenth century, and finally ruptured in the early twentieth century. The decay of this tradition left much of its external form intact even as its content became ever more hallow. Many have continued to adhere to the external form without recognizing how the ground has shifted underneath their feet while others have mounted impassioned defences in the face of

ever more serious challenges to it. "The end of tradition", she observes, "does not necessarily mean that traditional concepts have lost their power over the minds of men. On the contrary, it sometimes seems this power of well-worn notions and categories becomes more tyrannical as the tradition loses its living force and as the memory of the beginning recedes" (Arendt [1961] 1968: 26). While especially attentive to how the corruption of the tradition was advanced and reflected at the highest intellectual levels, Arendt never wavered in her insistence that "not ideas but events change the world" (Arendt 1958: 273). In contrast then to certain aesthetic, text-centred modes of interpretation associated with postmodernism, her analysis of discourse assumes the existence of an autonomous world outside the text to which authors are responding.

The Reformation initiated a long secularization process that would split the Roman trinity apart (Arendt [1961] 1968: 69–70, 128; 1963: 16). In challenging the temporal authority of the Catholic Church, Luther and his followers undercut not only the basis for any authority in the political realm, but also the influence of religious norms and sanctions on tradition. The spectacular achievements of the Scientific Revolution subverted confidence in the inherited wisdom of tradition, in knowledge of external reality confirmed through the practical tests of custom, in concrete everyday experience and habit, and in the notion of truth as disclosed through revelation. It also helped to inspire seventeenth-century political theorists such as Thomas Hobbes to begin driving a wedge between theology and political thinking in conceptualizing natural law, human nature and the premises of civic order (Arendt [1961] 1968: 56, 70, 76). Any understanding of the world that could not be validated through the rational method of science was increasingly relativized into a mere expression of the arbitrary tastes, subjective judgements and biased self-interest of atomized individuals. As Christianity lost its authority, traditional notions of divine retribution in the afterlife eroded, which robbed moral conventions of their theological sanctions (*ibid.*: 31–2, 135).

The rise of historicism in the nineteenth century further subverted the authority of the tradition as a venerable paradigm for aligning the relationship between past and present (*ibid.*: 61, 82–5). Through its emphasis on the uniqueness of past eras as singularly distinct from one another, historicism undercut assumptions of history as an overarching panorama of human drama in which all characters walked the same stage and shared equivalent attributes of common humanity. Where the connecting links of tradition supposed notions of repetition, permanence and stability in the manner that each generation acted out inherited patterns, the new historicist perspective understood the continuity

between dissimilar eras in terms of a linear sequence in a dynamic developmental process. The concept of development assumes that historical change evolves in a particular direction with each successive era playing its own part in the progressive unfolding of the whole. For Arendt this conception of history reaches its apogee with Hegel, who through his dialectical method was able to integrate all of the breaks, contradictions and divergent movements of this process into an abstract system. His approach not only relativized all of the concrete particulars of human history into mere transitory expressions of the system's evolution, but also displaced tradition with a new rational conceptual framework that ascribes ultimate authority to the progressive unfolding of the World Spirit that is only comprehensible from a perspective outside tradition (*ibid.*: 28–9, 38–9).

The Industrial Revolution not only provided the most potent manifestation of this idea of progress guided through the application of instrumental reason, but its sweeping transformation of the organization of labour and production destroyed the cultural, economic and social structures in which the tradition had been framed. In modern market society moral values become social commodities with no intrinsic merit of their own, but rather are relativized to a means/ends calculus according to whatever functions they may serve. As Arendt observes, “The ‘good’ loses its character as an idea, the standard by which the good and the bad can be measured and recognized; it has become a value which can be exchanged with other values, such as those of expediency or of power” (*ibid.*: 33; see also Arendt 1958: 163–7). One symptom of the faltering of tradition was the rise of mass-based ideologies as a new form of political discourse with doctrines offering a complete worldview abstracted from the bewildering complexities of concrete experience and cohering around its own internal logic.

Against this background, the century's most acute thinkers “perceived their world as one invaded by new problems and perplexities which our tradition of thought was unable to cope with” (Arendt [1961] 1968: 27). Considered together, Kierkegaard, Marx and Nietzsche brought the tradition to an end in their revolt against it (*ibid.*: 27). Confronting an era in which religious truth had fallen prey to reason's all-consuming suspicion, Kierkegaard sought to rescue faith from doubt by embracing the absurdity of belief as an attribute of the authentic religious experience of the individual. Recognizing the radical changes being wrought by the Industrial Revolution, Marx inverted the traditional hierarchy of labour and contemplation in the ranking of distinctive human capabilities while seeking to redirect the traditional aims of philosophy from theory to the sphere of practice. Nietzsche attacked

the Platonic distinction between a transcendental realm as an objective reality and a sensuous realm of deceptive appearances that had been the cornerstone of Western metaphysics in positing human beings as the creators of their own values (*ibid.*: 29–40).

While this rebellion against tradition had been indicative of its increasing atrophy, it did not “break” until the twentieth century in the abyss of the First World War and the catastrophes that followed (*ibid.*: 26–7; Arendt 2005: 146–62). The war shattered illusions of progress, security and order that had masked the growing conflicts and contradictions within European society. It showed how the enormous means of force that modern societies were capable of exercising far outstripped any available political, legal or moral precepts to regulate an escalating scale of violence directed at civilians and soldiers alike. In its wake totalitarian movements arose that would radicalize ideological thinking, embrace terror as a central instrument of rule, and spurn any of the traditional limits on the conduct of politics. The brutal realities and unprecedented character of totalitarian government, Arendt observes, “clearly exploded our categories of political thought and our standards for political judgment” (Arendt 1994: 310). The originality of totalitarianism was exemplified in the Nazis’ creation of the death camp system through which they implemented their policy of industrial mass murder aimed at eliminating entire categories of people from the earth. In Arendt’s view the nature of this new form of criminality could not be comprehended within the traditional concepts of evil or adequately punished within the existing framework of law and politics. The experience with totalitarianism demonstrated that the tradition that might have been expected to provide effective resources for resisting its rise was, in fact, dead. As she observes:

Morality collapsed into a mere set of mores, manners, customs, conventions to be changed at will – not with criminals, but with ordinary people, who, as long as moral standards were socially accepted, never dreamt of doubting what they had been taught to believe in. And in this matter, that is, the problem it raises is not resolved if we admit, as we must, that the Nazi doctrine did not remain with the German people, that Hitler’s criminal morality changed back again at a moment’s notice, at the moment “history” had given the notice of Hitler’s defeat. Hence we must say that we witnessed the total collapse of a “moral” order not once but twice, and this sudden return to “normality,” contrary to what is often complacently assumed, can only reinforce our doubts. (Arendt 2003: 54–5; see also Arendt 1978b: 177–8)

From this experience Arendt concludes that attempts either to reanimate the traditional standards or fashion new universal ones are futile because it is no longer possible to invest them with adequate authority to secure enduring popular allegiance (Arendt 1979: 314). All of the modern challenges and pathologies with which the tradition had proven unable to cope remained unresolved. Moreover, when the rich cultural diversity of humanity is considered from the vantage point of global politics, the difficulty of establishing new authoritative extra-political or metaphysical standards is further compounded (Arendt 1968: 84–7). The post-war reconstruction then was built on shifting sands after a Second World War more destructive than the First and in the shadow of the new technology of nuclear weapons (Arendt [1951] 2004: xxv).

The critique of authority and tradition

For Arendt the crisis to be faced is manifest in a pervasive experience of alienation, meaninglessness and the subjectification of reality (Arendt 1958: 254–7, 273–89, 320–25). The loss of a public realm and the instrumentalization of politics have degraded recognition of the human capacity for action and spontaneity. The perception of crisis as the distinctive condition of modernity presupposes a past time before this condition arose. For Arendt the disintegration of the tradition and authority are two defining characteristics of this crisis, so understanding the roles that they played in the past is essential to coming to terms with the crisis in the present. Given her bleak assessment of the present and her refusal to take flight into a utopian vision of the future, returning to a fragmentary past to search for whatever resources may be available for thinking today is one of the few paths that remain open. Indeed, she emphasizes how remembrance gives depth to thinking. In this sense, her approach is nostalgic, which is reflected at times in her idealized rendering of the past. However, she not only rejects any prospect of overcoming the rupture in the tradition, she is sharply critical of how the conceptual lens of tradition has obscured and distorted fundamental aspects of political experience in the past. She identifies her own approach with “those who for some time now have been attempting to dismantle metaphysics, and philosophy with all its categories, as we have known them from their beginning in Greece until today” (Arendt 1978b: 212). Her critique of tradition is premised on the recognition that “History and tradition are not the same. History has many ends and many beginnings, each of its ends being a new beginning, each of its beginnings putting an end to what was there before” (Arendt 2005:

43). Thus, the break with tradition opens the door to drilling down in this past from new angles and considering what is then uncovered from fresh perspectives, but without any hope of weaving the shattered fragments of the past into a new unitary pattern (Arendt [1961] 1968: 28, 94). In elaborating this point, her description of Walter Benjamin's approach applies equally well to her own:

Like a pearl diver who descends to the bottom of the sea, not to excavate the bottom and bring it to light but to pry loose the rich and the strange, the pearls and the coral in the depths and to carry them to the surface, this thinking delves into the depths of the past – but not in order to resuscitate it the way it was and to contribute to the renewal of extinct ages. (*Ibid.*: 205)

In approaching the past then, Arendt writes not from the standpoint of a historian seeking to contextualize it in order to understand it on its own terms that are very different from our own, but rather more from the standpoint of shipwrecked mariners on an island scavenging for whatever resources can be found after the catastrophe that landed them there. Accordingly, her account of the political experience that the tradition obscured relies more on inference from selected texts than on a systematic investigation of the available evidentiary sources.

For Arendt the classical Greek *polis* stands out as an historical exemplar for exploring the radical contingency, expressive quality and relational character of human action that is central to this political experience. In examining the Roman conception of authority, she seeks not only to underscore its distinctiveness as an alternative to persuasion and command, but also to show how this conception derived from political experience and not from something outside the political realm. She turns to the example of the classical Greek *polis* to offer a counterpoint. She argues that Greek political experience was incompatible with developing such an understanding of authority. The public realm of the *polis* was predicated on its division from the private realm of the household. This public realm provided an arena of freedom to be enjoyed by citizens who shared a general equality in status that did not efface their distinctiveness as individuals. The Greeks experienced this realm not only as fiercely agonal, but also free from any relationships of domination/subjection, ruling/being ruled, or command/obedience. They identified these relationships with the structure of the private realm of the household, which was organized around supplying the necessities of life. In the household the master ruled over slaves and family as a despot or a monarch. The experience of subjecthood then

lay outside the political realm and was understood to be a degraded status (*ibid.*: 104–6; Arendt 1958: 28–37).

When Plato and Aristotle introduced notions of rulership into their theories of politics, they drew their models from the private realm and from a philosophical perspective hostile to politics. With the death of Socrates at the behest of the *demos* in mind, Plato's primary political concern was to make the *polis* safe for philosophers and to establish the rule of reason over the cacophony of opinion in the political realm (Arendt [1961] 1968: 104–15; 2005: 6–16). Having no confidence in the efficacy of persuasion, he sought to justify a role for coercion that did not depend on instruments of violence. In his early writings he invoked the model of the expert who commanded obedience on the basis of specialized training and knowledge. He developed this model from analogies to the helmsman, shepherd, physician and slave master that presupposed clear hierarchical relationships. However, these analogies were not entirely satisfactory because, as is most explicit in the case of the slave master, they did not entirely exclude aspects of violence from the relationship model. He found a better solution in postulating a transcendental realm of ideas that supplied authoritative standards and measures for judging human affairs, but which only philosophers could apprehend, that is, the true "essence" of goodness, justice, courage and other virtues behind the ephemeral appearances of this world. For the vast majority who would not accept the "compelling power of reason", he invented theological tales of an afterlife with rewards and punishment as a "political device" to help enforce absolute standards of obedience on the multitude (Arendt [1961] 1968: 111, 131). In his last work, Plato transferred the role upholding these absolute standards from a philosopher-king to the laws governing the *polis*.

While rejecting Plato's approaches to the problem, Aristotle was never able to overcome inconsistencies in his own attempt to explain the basis of rulership in the political realm (*ibid.*: 116–20; Arendt 2007c: 942–3; 2005: 52–60). On the one hand, he argued that this basis derived from natural differences between rulers and subjects as reflected in the hierarchical relationships between masters and slaves, husbands and wives, the old and the young. On the other hand, he acknowledged from his own observations of Greek political experience that there were no clear markers of natural superiority that might be used to demarcate a class of rulers from a class of subjects in the political realm. To circumvent this problem, Aristotle posited that all citizens shared in rule by taking turns in governing and being governed. However, Arendt contends, Aristotle's solution merely betrayed the fact that he had appropriated his concept of rule from the household

model which he then sought to graft into a theory of political order that was at odds with Greek political experience. More broadly, the costs of transposing the concept of rulership into the political realm was that it distorted the understanding of action in politics from the core idea of initiating something new among equals into the kind of command/obedience relationship that structured the hierarchy of the private household.

This same sort of transposition occurred in late antiquity as Roman emperors defined their titles of office. They borrowed the legal term *dominus*, meaning “master”, that had been used to designate the head of a household and *dominatus*, meaning the position of a *dominus*, to signify preeminent status as head of government (Arendt [1961] 1968: 106). With no tradition of political theory of their own, the Romans appropriated the heritage of Greek philosophy, most notably Plato and Aristotle. As a result, the Romans came to incorporate Greek philosophical concepts and categories into their own understanding of authority, law, politics and rule. In the process, the tradition marginalized those aspects of political experience that did not fit neatly into its Greek philosophical categories, and so “lost sight of man as an acting being”, of the experience of freedom in the company of one’s equals that is the *raison d’être* of politics, and the fact of “plurality” as the basis of the political realm (Arendt 2005: 60–61; [1961] 1968: 146). For its part, the Christian Church drew upon both Greek philosophical ideas and the structure of Roman political institutions in developing its own synthesis of the trinity of authority, religion and tradition (Arendt [1961] 1968: 128–35). As the Church assumed more political responsibility it adopted the Platonic account of a final judgement in the afterlife to enhance its authority over the multitude and strengthen its competition with secular powers. However, Arendt contends, “[n]othing perhaps in the whole development of Christianity throughout the centuries is farther removed from the teaching of Jesus of Nazareth than the elaborate catalogue of future punishments and the enormous power of coercion through fear” (*ibid.*: 133). In elaborating stories about the cruel suffering of the damned in hell to be enjoyed by the faithful gazing from heaven, the Church introduced a dimension of violence into its religious teaching and the exercise of its institutional authority.

Foundations, revolution and authority in the modern era

In emphasizing how authority had disappeared in modernity, Arendt means only a “very specific form” of authority, namely, that contained

in the old Roman trinity. Its loss “does not entail, at least not necessarily, the loss of the human capacity for building, preserving, and caring for a world that can survive us and remains a place fit to live in for those who come after us” (*ibid.*: 95). Similarly, in analysing the collapse of the Western tradition, she does not contend that the diverse heritages coming from the past are no longer relevant, but rather that this particular tradition has lost its cohesion and authority. These heritages give peoples around the globe their distinctive cultural identities, which the new technologies of communication, transportation and violence are threatening to hollow out as much as the contact they facilitate may sharpen animosities among peoples (Arendt 1968: 84–7).

Arendt sees the Roman experience with foundations serving as the cornerstone to authority as an exemplar that can help guide our thinking about politics today. Machiavelli’s approach to studying this experience illustrates how we learn from it a fresh perspective. “The greatness of his rediscovery”, she observes, “lies in that he could not simply revive or resort to an articulate conceptual tradition, but he had himself to articulate those experiences which the Romans had not conceptualized but rather expressed in terms of Greek philosophy vulgarized for this purpose” (Arendt [1961] 1968: 138). In revising the received wisdom of this tradition, Machiavelli rejected the application of any transcendental standards to judging politics, but rather identified a dynamic interplay of *virtù* and *fortuna* as the fundamental feature of politics that its agents must judge. In contrast to the Romans’ understanding of foundations as a retrospective experience whose meaning projected forward, however, Machiavelli considered it largely from the standpoint of a future goal to be obtained, such as in the establishment of a united Italy. By transposing it into this means/ends calculus, he posited this goal as a justification for using whatever means of violence were appropriate to achieve it.

For Arendt the promise that founding new body politics may have for re-establishing a secure basis for authority and tradition is exemplified in the creation of the American republic. “Under modern conditions”, she observes, “the act of foundation is identical with the framing of a constitution”, but constitutions obtain enduring authority to the degree that this act involves a people constituting its own government rather than a government imposing one upon itself from above (Arendt 1963: 116, 136–9). While drawing inspiration and insight from Roman exemplars, the American founders did not attempt to ground the legitimacy of their experiment on tradition or on transcendental sources of authority (*ibid.*: 189, 196). Rather they emphasized the novelty of their enterprise and based their approach to framing a constitution on

their own political experience. While adopting the Roman distinction between power and authority, they vested the latter in the Supreme Court rather than as the Romans had in the Senate. By so doing, they changed the character of this form of authority from political to legal. In its role as the highest interpreter of the Constitution, the Supreme Court both conserves and augments the original act of foundation as it adapts the Republic's framework of government to change over time (*ibid.*: 191–3). Whether the boundary between legislative law-making and judicial interpretation has ever been as clear cut as Arendt supposes is open to question, but she does not pursue it through any examination of Supreme Court jurisprudence. Nevertheless, she does not claim to be offering a comprehensive historical account of the founding. Rather she seeks to construct an “ideal type” in the Weberian sense out of the American Constitution (Arendt 1979: 329). Such an approach to conceptualization relies on a one-sided accentuation of certain features of a phenomenon to highlight analytical distinctions in order to facilitate comparative investigations. In underscoring the contrast to their French counterparts, Arendt emphasizes that the American founders largely avoided the corrupting effects of violence in this act apart from that involved in waging their war for independence. The reverence that Americans have long displayed towards their Constitution and its framers illustrates the potential durability of these acts of foundation as a binding source of stability, guidance, precedents and standards for future generations (Arendt 1963: 190–91).

In grounding political authority on the relativity of human authorship and compacts rather than a transcendental absolute, the American founders took counsel from Montesquieu. He had rejected the top-down, command/obedience model of rule that Plato had introduced into the Western tradition in favour of a spatial conception of law as a web of relationships connecting together different spheres of activity and associations of individuals that subsist in the interests between them. Accordingly, “among the prerevolutionary theorists”, Arendt notes, “only Montesquieu never thought it necessary to introduce an absolute, a divine or despotic power, into the political realm” (*ibid.*: 180). He differentiated power from violence, while in conceptualizing power avoided the means/ends trap that had ensnared Machiavelli (Arendt 2007b: 722). This conception of power rested on the insight that its source is the acting capacities of a plurality of individuals, and so action itself is what sustains any public realm. What Montesquieu demonstrated in theory, the American founders realized in practice.

While Arendt views Machiavelli, Montesquieu and the founders of the American republic as exemplary in important ways for thinking

through the political challenges we face today, she hardly regards their examples as holding the solution to the broader crisis of modernity. While the American founders' experience with public freedom remains instructive, she also emphasizes that this experience could not be sustained even to the next generation. Similarly, she commends the examples of the council democracies as the most promising model for suggesting "how to reconcile equality and authority", but is fully cognizant that all such experiments have thus far proved short-lived (Arendt 1963: 258–9, 263, 270). Aside from pointing to the short-lived twentieth-century experiments with council democracy, she never proposed any new organizational models of authority. The loss of authority and tradition clears our horizons for rethinking our relationship to the past and for beginning something new, but also leaves us "thinking without a banister" in exercising our own autonomous capacities for judgement (Arendt 1979: 336).

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PART III

On politics and the public world

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NINE

Power and violence

Elizabeth Frazer

Problems of power

In her essay on civil disobedience Arendt examines the way political thinkers either invoke individual conscience or soul in justifying their actions and positions, or invoke the good of the city or the state (Arendt 1972: 51; see also Arendt 1963: 179). Questions about the relationship between individual and state or society – how it changes over time, what if anything mediates it, which is ontologically prior, which ethically prior – are central to a good deal of political theory, including controversies about how to conceptualize and explain social and political power, and how significant power is for our understanding of politics and society.

Power was highly contested in twentieth-century political and social thought, and it continues to be a topic that can be guaranteed to bewilder scholars and students (Lukes 1974; Barnes 1988; Hindess 1996). There are many ways of approaching the proliferation of texts, theories and models of power, but one common way is in terms of individual or collective, agency or structure. Theories which emphasize power as a property of individuals vary with regard to whether they focus on intentional agency or not; whether power is thought of as a potential or only admissible to social theory when it is actually exercised; how, exactly, it is exercised; and with regard to the sources of individuals' power. Max Weber's contributions to these problems are one common point of reference for theorists in this tradition. Alternatively some theorists emphasize structure and system, rather than individual agency. Rather than focusing on individual capacities and actions, we focus on

distributions and processes that maintain distributions stable. Groups, institutions and individuals come into relation with resources – and their capacities and actions *vis-à-vis* others are the result of the structure, rather than the other way round. Karl Marx's theory of capital is often, not invariably, read in this kind of frame. Power is not thought of as a property of individuals, but rather as the forces that constitute individuals in relation to each other.

Arendt's contributions to twentieth-century debates about power are typically original and independent, departing from and challenging both the individualist and the structuralist approaches, seeing the world through a very different frame from either Marxism or neo-Weberianism. For Arendt power cannot be a property of an individual – it is only even a potential when people come together in a way that can result in action in concert, or cooperative effort (Arendt 1963: 175). We shouldn't even think of it as a capacity, like horsepower, which is reliably measurable (Arendt 1958: 200). Arendt dismisses the thought that power can proceed from abstractions or from resources independent of people; people are the only source of power (Arendt 1963: 157, 178). Very often, power is not realized or exercised by people although, potentially, they could come together to defeat violent groups or individuals, or to prevent destructive, disruptive, actions (Arendt 1970: 42). But power is the only thing that can make a world – a shared world of permanent institutions (Arendt 1958: 200; 1963: 175).

Arendt's account of power, then, is significantly distinctive. On the question of the subject of power, it holds that this is not individuals, not structures nor any of the variations on that idea, not classes, status groups or parties, but distinct people together. On the question of how power is done, this is not by physical force, nor manipulation of other people's preferences, nor reduction of their options, nor any other of the myriad mechanisms that can be found in the literature (Lukes 1974; Barnes 1988; Dowding 1996; Morris 2002). It is done, rather, by cooperative effort between people who differ from one another yet have the capacity to come together. Critically, such cooperative effort either implicitly or explicitly has agreement, promise making and keeping, compacts which give individuals a measure of assurance that others will continue to cooperate, at its centre (Arendt 1958: 237–8; 1963: 175). On the question of what power is for, it is not for dominating or subjugating populations or individuals or classes, nor for maintaining advantage. It is for “the world” and for the maintenance of the “in-between” space by which we are related to each other.

On the question of what part the concept of power plays in explanations of historical change, Arendt's account emphasizes collective

actions which enact and re-enact our commitments to this world, and our acknowledgement of its “givenness” – the fact that we are born into it and it will continue after we die (Arendt 1958: 55). Failures of power also play a part in historical explanation: as when people fail to act together, or when they mistake administration, or authority, or legislation, or economic exchange, or violence, for power. These errors and failures are important elements of the explanation of bureaucratic, military and other forms of governmental domination (Arendt [1951] 2004: 185, 242; 1963: 91).

Changes in Arendt’s account of power

Arendt did not publish any chapter or book length account of power, as she did for authority, violence, truth, freedom and other concepts. Her account, as I have briefly set it out above, is clear enough. However, her presentation of the concept, and more importantly, her uses of it, are not completely consistent.

In *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, the earliest of her published books on political theory, Arendt notably uses the term power in its “ordinary” sense. For a group or class to “have power” is for it to dominate. A group’s holding of power can “increase” and “grow”, and did so in the process of imperial expansion and domination. With power comes control over territory, people and things. Power is deployed to dominate territory, to allow the accumulation of capital. Violence is used as an instrument of power. Political organization requires power and it generates it. Power can be delegated to governors. Politics comes to be defined by power in this sense (Arendt [1951] 2004: 181–96). This account is highly reminiscent of Weber’s chapters in *Economy and Society*, and in his political essays (Weber 1978, 2000). In this passage, Arendt cites Hobbes and mentions Marx. And, of course, the account is very recognizable to thinkers who are accustomed to thinking of power, domination, politics, government, monopolization and control together. In *On Revolution*, too, we find Arendt acquiescing, as it were, in Marx’s account of political power as the domination and control of legislation, enforcement of the laws, and ideology, in a model which yokes this to control of the means of production (Arendt 1963: 62). In these and other such passages politics is more or less all those processes surrounding the power to govern, and the power to govern involves domination and monopolization of a territory, and the people and goods in it. In this framework, it makes sense that power is mistrusted, and that misuse of power is a problem of and for politics (*ibid.*: 146).

But in later pages of *On Revolution*, Arendt attributes to Montesquieu the insight that the so-called power of a ruler is not actually power at all, but violence: “the multiplied strength of one who has monopolized the power of the many” (*ibid.*: 151). In her reading of the American revolutionary and constitutional traditions, and in certain elements of classical theories of politics, Arendt then finds the principle that people, distinct and separate from one another, with the critical faculty of promise-keeping and capacity for agreement, are the fount of power. This is a different, proper, form of power. It has nothing to do with violence, and is distinct from strength. It will come “into being only if and when men join themselves together for the purpose of action, and it will disappear when, for whatever reason, they disperse and desert one another” (*ibid.*: 175).

In *The Human Condition* and in other essays and lectures, Arendt insistently and consistently uses this latter, normative, concept of power as it ought to be understood and thought of (Arendt 1958: 200–203; 1970: 43–56; 2003: 106). Power in this sense is always relatively fragile, given the logic of society, economy, religion, violence and household. Under many social conditions – for instance, those of divided or segregated societies in which some groups are systematically excluded, or the conditions of mass society in which there are pressures to homogeneity and the loss of distinction between individuals – the “power to gather, relate, and separate” can be lost (Arendt 1958: 52).

We can call this concept and theory of power normative. This is not in the sense that it is normal, for as we have seen it departs markedly from ordinary language, whether that is in daily discourse or in mainstream social studies. It is normative in the sense that Arendt insists that this is how the term “power” ought to be used; this is how we ought to understand power – it ought to be normal. And accordingly, a number of the phenomena that we might be tempted to bring under that heading – violence, authority, sovereignty among them – should be used quite differently and excluded from the domain of the concept of power. It is normative, furthermore, in the sense that this is how the world ought to be. No matter that our political and social relationships hardly feature any instances of power in this sense, or that we find it difficult to work out how such power could possibly be realized, given how things are. That is irrelevant to the question how things ought to be. For Arendt, justification of a conceptualization of how the world should be is by way of an articulation of how things have been, and could have been. There are intimations in the twentieth century of the possibility of horizontal, people based, power (Arendt 1972: 190).

But, equally, throughout her essays Arendt discusses the shortcomings and problems with other conceptualizations of power. For example, there are numerous problems with Rousseau's idea of power as individual will, and as individual and collective sovereignty (Arendt [1961] 1968: 163 ff.). And in places, when discussing twentieth-century states, for instance, she has to use the term power in its non-normative, ordinary sense (Arendt 2003: 38, 45). Undoubtedly, the way the term power is deployed in Arendt's work – with these different conceptualizations used for different purposes from essay to essay, and section to section – can add to a sense of elusiveness, although careful reading in context shows her analysis to be clear.

Violence

One of the key texts in which Arendt's conceptualization of power is made clear is *On Violence* (1970). In this essay Arendt is concerned to distinguish violence from a number of concepts and phenomena with which it is commonly confounded – notably, politics and power. Here, in a sustained critique of how power is usually thought of, Arendt emphasizes her themes that power – and hence politics – relies on numbers and relationships; it is the ability to act in concert. It is not to be thought of instrumentally as a means to an end, but as a condition of action. The exercise of power proper needs no justification, because it is a condition of politics and polity (*ibid.*: 42–55). A crucial point of all this is that power and violence are antithetical (*ibid.*: 56).

Arendt here is reacting to a range of articulations of the relationship between violence and politics, both mainstream and counter-cultural. She addresses the Weberian analysis of violence as the ultimate kind of power, a central instrument of rule in association with other forms of power (*ibid.*: 35–6). In this tradition, power is understood as command, integral to government understood as the rule of man over man (*ibid.*: 38–40). The problem with this tradition is that it overstates the concept of obedience – to laws, to commands – on the part of people; it is mistaken in its theory of the human condition and of politics. This strain of theory is subject to the illusion of control, and is apt to talk of strategic uses of violence (*ibid.*: 4, 6). And it fails to see the antithesis between power in Arendt's normative sense and violence. For Arendt violence is non-political – anti-political, actually (*ibid.*: 64). We can sometimes see it as pre-political, as when violence in the form of war or mayhem is followed, chronologically, by new agreement, constitution, framing of laws and subsequent political life (Arendt 1958: 31).

But it is, at most, a marginal phenomenon in the public political realm (Arendt 1963: 19).

This account of violence's anti-political nature is central also in Arendt's opposition to counter-cultural celebrations and uses of violence in revolutionary and anti-colonial contexts. The activists of the anti-war and anti-state movements in the USA and Europe, and the inheritors of the civil rights movement, justified uses of violence, in Arendt's understanding, in terms that were reminiscent of the tradition of Georges Sorel, and of Frantz Fanon, especially Jean-Paul Sartre's reading of him (Sorel 1999; Fanon 1965; Sartre 1965). Arendt picks out several problems with these arguments. First, she argues that Marx has been garbled: he is taken to have seen violence as the engine of historical change, and capitalism as violent in its essence. These readings ground then a view that revolutionary movements must use violence, both because it is foreordained, as it were, in history, and because the context of capitalist and colonial societies is suffused with violence which cannot be avoided. But Marx argues that contradictions, not violence as such, drive history. His theory emphasizes also the non-violent mechanisms of capitalism, and warns against a politics based on any dream of a better future (Arendt 1970: 11–12, 20–21).

Second, Arendt attacks what she sees as dangerous biological themes in these theories. Biological metaphors are, of course, very common in both classical and modern social theory. For instance, there is Marx's metaphor of the new age as a seed within the old (*ibid.*: 26). More dangerously, Arendt's own time saw the rise and development of socio-biology, and extrapolations from understanding of aggression in wild animals to the political organization of human societies (*ibid.*: 59 ff.). The confounding of zoological aggression with ethical rage is particularly ridiculous (*ibid.*: 63–4). Rage is rational; of course it is sometimes an impetus to violence. In some settings we might judge such violence to be justified (*ibid.*: 64). But this has nothing to do with politics, and it will utterly fail to bring about any (creative) political effects. Third, these biological themes are continuous with an even more dangerous theme of hygiene. In both Sorel and in Fanon we find allusions to the "cleansing" effects of violence, its effects on the body and hence the self of the perpetrator who is energized by it. Violence is falsely equated with creativity (*ibid.*: 69, 74). These biological themes are obviously most dangerous when historical constructions of race are drawn into their ambit (*ibid.*: 75).

Fourth, Fanon emphasizes the bond that is created between co-participants in violence (*ibid.*: 67). Echoing a pervasive theme from *The Human Condition* and other essays Arendt insists on the anti-political

nature of such solidaristic bonds, which are wordless and counter-worldly in assuming a “natural” connection (*ibid.*: 68–9; 1958: 256). Political power and action are founded on speech, on our ability to articulate to each other the justification and the nature of alternative courses (1958: 3–4, 26, 176–80). It is very common, of course, to think of politics in terms of solidarity. Arendt challenges this idea again and again – not solidarity but plurality; not shoulder to shoulder, but interaction in concert by distinct individuals, is the mark of a political life in common.

Fifth, Arendt is concerned to debunk strategic theory – the pretence of control in planning and execution, and the realization of ends whose goodness justifies the means (*ibid.*: 6). The clashes of the 1960s – anti-war movement with military state, anti-capitalist action against corporate power – were frequently clashes between two kinds of celebration of violence. On the one hand, state officers’ convictions that violence could be used justifiably and strategically; on the other hand, protestors’ conviction that the only strategic response to state violence is violence.

Arendt’s theory of violence

Arendt’s theory of violence has attracted comment and criticism as have her other key theories and concepts. Here I am going to discuss some of the major lines of concern, attempting to be clear about what, exactly, is at stake in criticisms of Arendt by theorists and commentators.

To begin with, Iris Marion Young observes that there is no definition of violence in Arendt’s essay (Young 2002: 261). This isn’t really a fair criticism, although again Arendt’s usage varies and has to be read very carefully in relation to her political theory. Undoubtedly, the question of what violence means is of first importance in twenty-first century political and social theory, and Arendt’s position on this question is central to any assessment of the significance of her work for current concerns. On the one hand, Arendt is interested in violence in the physical sense – it exacts injury on bodies by use of implements (bearing in mind that parts of the perpetrator’s body can be used as weapons) (Arendt 1970: 4). Materially and ethically, violence brings unpredictability into social life, because its outcomes cannot be foretold. In this, it is to be contrasted with fabrication – making – where the outcome fashions the means and (if successful) the product will conform to the advance design (*ibid.*: 4; 1958: 139–40). Violence unmakes, it injures or destroys. The unpredictability of violence is contrasted, also, with the unpredictability of action, whether individual or action in concert.

Action also has unpredictable effects, but action proper has effects that are creative, that give birth to something new (Arendt 1958: 177). Violence has deathly effects.

On the other hand, Arendt also associates violence with fabrication. The materials that are used to make an artefact have first to be killed or torn out of their natural surroundings: “This element of violation and violence is present in all fabrication” (*ibid.*: 139). Now clearly, while they are continuous, in the emphasis on death, with the focus of *On Violence*, these remarks also gesture to a different and a much more expansive conception of violence. Different because the violence of fabrication – chopping down trees, for instance – is not that unpredictable, even though accidents do, of course, happen. On the expansiveness, or extension, of the concept of violence: in contemporary theories we meet a range of positions in this regard, from the narrow focus on torturing, killing and injuring human beings that is familiar from mainstream war studies, to ideas of “structural violence” in which violence becomes more closely coextensive with harm, to even more expansive theories in which any arrest or check to any process is encompassed under the heading of violence (Frazer & Hutchings 2011a, b).

Arendt clearly means it when she points to the violence of fabrication. This is one important element in her account of the distinctiveness of political action and political relations, in contrast to economic, social and domestic conduct and relations. From the point of view of politics, violence, in all its kinds, is to be rejected; and we must constantly take care that we don’t muddle up economic processes with political relations, or mistake administration and the government of things with political actions by people. That these confusions are endemic to our ordinary understanding, and that people speak of political violence, doesn’t alter this imperative at all. To the contrary. In imperialism, as in totalitarian regimes, violence can be organized and “administered”, and claimed to be political, by both perpetrators and by victims and opposition (Arendt [1951] 2004: 184). But violence destroys power; it can never substitute for it (Arendt 1958: 202–3). Of course, the violence of imperialist, racist and totalitarian regimes is wrong in many ways – among these wrongs is the destruction of political relations, properly speaking.

Critics are disconcerted by the vehemence of Arendt’s insistences on these and other conceptual and phenomenological distinctions (Frazer & Hutchings 2008; Finlay 2009). They wonder whether, given the theoretical relationship between violence and politics, the very clear conceptual distinction and separation that Arendt insists upon can really be sustained. This takes us on to a second set of problems with

Arendt's theory of violence, centred precisely on this matter of the relationship between politics and violence, and the vexed question of whether it makes sense to think of "political violence". Finlay argues that Arendt's acknowledgement that violence is sometimes justifiable, and that the justice that violence can sometimes achieve can be important for politics, effectively means that Arendt does not endorse the view that "violence is completely without utility" (Finlay 2009: 27). Frazer and Hutchings observe that for Arendt violence can "clear the way for power", which more or less entails saying that it can "have political effects", and quite often what we mean by "political" is "have political effects" (Frazer & Hutchings 2008: 103–4).

However, Arendt would reply that "having political effects" is instructively different from being "politically instrumental". Violence might have political effects, but this does not bring us close to any view that violence can be a political act. Political effects can be discerned after the event – it can turn out that war or destruction cleared the way for peace talks and institution building. But that is very far from any justification of a project of war in order that institution building can occur, or any justification of violent confrontation with political opponents in order that institutions can be built. Any moral justification of violent action does not support any understanding of violence in terms of political strategy.

In fact, many thinkers do, in the end, shy away from the idea that violence can be used as any kind of assured means to an end, because of all sorts of problems in means-end planning. The means tend to condition or subvert the end, for one thing; and in human and social contexts the relationship between cause and effect is very rarely well understood, let alone controlled (Frazer & Hutchings 2007). But if violence is not instrumental for politics, how else might it be related to it? One answer is that it might be internal to it, part of it. Some thinkers, including Fanon in some passages, suggest that violence is not so much instrumental and strategic as that it is a given – a necessary, inevitable feature of the situation (Fanon 1965: 48). Arendt would certainly concede that in some settings violence is "the only way" (Arendt 1970: 64). But Fanon and others put this kind of situational necessity into the context of a view of history as a series of dialectically related stages. When Arendt observes that in a given setting an actor might have no choice but to use violence, she conceives of this as an ethical matter. It is very far from the kind of historical necessity that Fanon and thinkers like him invoke.

So she rejects the conventional view that violence is internal to politics and power – a necessary aspect of them – as she rejects the view

that it is, or can be, instrumental for politics and power. Her own view that it is antithetical to these, finally, must be distinguished from the liberal version of that antithesis. Liberal political thought tends to see a pacified politics as a historical achievement. Competitions to dominate tend to feature violence, the uses of economic power, religious threats and the like. Over time, in favourable circumstances, political competition can be legalized, rationalized and pacified. That is to say, violence can be replaced by politics. Furthermore, liberal theory often engages in a thought experiment to establish that the constitution of government, procedures for competing for and transferring the power to govern, institutions of representation, could all be set up entirely without violence. It would, under certain circumstances, be rational for individuals to enter into political engagement with others on this basis. Social contract theory offers one version of a model in which politics is a quite distinct process from violence, which can be used to set up systems of government and thereafter to operate them. Politics is alternative to, antithetical to, violence.

Arendt's account of the antithesis of violence and politics is, again, instructively distinct from this. It involves rationality, but not rationality abstracted away from other human capacities in the way that it is in the rational choice theory of human decision and action that is typical of twentieth-century liberal political theory. Rather politics involves distinctive human "faculties" of promise making, action, speech and forgiveness. These are emphasized in *The Human Condition* (Arendt 1958) and *On Violence* (Arendt 1970; see also Arendt 1990). We can add also the faculty of judgement (Arendt 2003; Beiner 1992). This focus on human faculties, and the relationships between humans that they make possible, add up to a very different and distinct philosophical anthropology which sets Arendt apart from the liberal tradition as that was most often interpreted in her time. The liberal tradition, in general, also continues to focus on violence as one important instrument – for governments, for states, for political actors. As we have seen, for Arendt this line of argument utterly fails.

In the twenty-first century political science and political theory alike have developed a renewed focus on questions of violence. Forms and incidences of violence shift and change, yet brutality – in war, in social life, in cultural representation – seems to be as ubiquitous and as horrifying as ever. Political theorists and scientists seek explanation and understanding. An important strand in such analysis focuses on ideology – that is to say, how systems of ideas are related to institutions and conduct, and how they are negotiated and used by actors in explanation or justification of their actions (Hollander 2008). This line of explanation

examines how ideology, ideas, can motivate actors and can legitimate their actions. Arendt's considerations of the role of ideology in relation to violence are, once more, instructively distinct. She certainly seeks to bring systems of ideas into view – for example, the dreams of liberation projects, the nature of racist thinking (Arendt 1970: 21, 77). She remarks that ideologies “work” by splitting and dissolving association, by fracturing any public world (Arendt 1972: 79).

This aspect of Arendt's political theory has attracted much hostile criticism. Her conception of public political life seems to rule out any sectional politics at all (as a contradiction in terms), and accordingly feminists, socialists, any class activists at all, campaigners for ethnic or racial justice, react indignantly to the depoliticization and dismissal of their work (Dietz 1991; Passerin d'Entrèves 1994: 139–66; Benhabib 2003: 146–66). This chapter is not the place to discuss these issues in any detail. From the point of view of violence and politics the point is that, in Arendt's view, sectional social formations and ideologies heighten the probability of violence. And they are vehicles for the kinds of ideologies of violence – that it is a cleansing force, or biologically driven, or expressive of freedom – that she identifies as such important elements of the modern scene (Arendt 1958: 228; 1970).

Conclusion: the question of non-violence

Finally, I want to turn to Arendt's relationship to the politics of non-violence. One might think, given this relentless repudiation of any justifications or attempts at legitimation of violence, this relentless debunking of any “political” analysis of violence or any attempt to bring it in to politics as a form of action, that she would have been sympathetic to twentieth-century pacifist movements and their actions in public. In fact, this is not particularly the case.

Like the many disarmament activists, Arendt thought that the invention and deployment of nuclear weapons had changed everything (Arendt [1951] 2004: 570n; 1970: 3–5, 19). However, her scattered remarks emphasize three things. First, in all kinds of contexts including international affairs, one must be prepared to fight. Disarmament is dangerous for one's future if one is a state (Arendt 1970: 5). Retreat into a privatized world of culture and sectionalized civil society is dangerous if one is a member of some cultural minority (Arendt [1951] 2004: 151–3). Second, the experience of violence – including the trenches, the camps, the barracks and the movements of the twentieth century – tends not to turn people into pacifists. This can be because the experience of

violence distinguishes one, ennobles one as it were, so those who have been involved in organized violence are set apart from their society. In any case, and particularly in the Second World War and Cold War context in which Arendt was writing, pacifism looks simply unrealistic (*ibid.*: 435; Arendt 1970: 14). Third, though, Arendt was hostile in general to social movements and to their claims to political status. A problem with rights claims articulated in demonstrations and marches, from an Arendtian perspective, is that they mirror the politics of violence and evade her normative conception of political power. Pacifism, peace politics and the uses of non-violent tactics and strategies in pursuit of claims, all rely on wordless solidarity, on becoming the same as one another, on people behaving as if they are members of a family (Arendt 1958: 57–8).

Violence and non-violence, then, are strikingly close to one another. Arendt is struck by the uses of non-violence in the service of violence – to incite violence by state officers, to unmask the violence that underpins a social order (Arendt 1970: 18–19). The rhetorical structure of *On Violence* plays, it seems to me, these congruences and this intimacy off one another, and these underpin her account of how commitments to violence are able to displace commitments to non-violence in, for example, the US civil rights movement, or in labour movement campaigns (*ibid.*: 21). On the other hand, this critique of non-violent politics of the twentieth century is articulated side by side with an insistence on the deeper non-violence of power: “To speak of nonviolent power is actually redundant” (*ibid.*: 56). This is a non-violence that is not, in any sense, dialectically related to violence. Violence has roots that are absolutely different from the roots of power; and it has a nature that is absolutely different from the nature of power (*ibid.*).

Acknowledgement

My reading and understanding of Arendt on violence owes practically everything to my joint work with Kim Hutchings, with whom I am engaged in a detailed project on the phenomenology and justifications of violence. This chapter sets out my interpretation of Arendt on violence and power; any misunderstandings or errors are my own.

TEN

Arendt and the political power of judgement

Patrick Hayden

Particular questions must receive particular answers; and if the series of crises in which we have lived since the beginning of the century can teach us anything at all, it is, I think, the simple fact that there are no general standards to determine our judgments unfailingly, no general rules under which to subsume the particular cases with any degree of certainty. (Arendt 2003: vii)

Hannah Arendt spoke these words in 1966, and her reflections on the crisis of judgement that frames the deepest ethical and political problems of late modernity were and remain both stimulating and disturbing. Few thinkers have displayed a more resolute concern for the complex relation between judgement and the political, both in terms of its potentiality and of its fragility, than Arendt. Arendt regards the capacity for judgement as the political faculty *par excellence*. This is not only because such a faculty belongs equally to all human beings endowed with possibilities for social and political freedom. Judgement is political more importantly in so far as it presupposes the fundamental human condition of plurality, and requires a diverse community of equals who develop, exchange, share and critique each other's claims and opinions. The activity of judging is indispensable for meaningful political action, Arendt shows, drawing as it does upon representing, imagining and communicating one's perspectives and experiences with others. At the same time, Arendt approaches judgement through an acute awareness of its crises and failures in the twentieth century. From the devastation of two world wars, to the horrors of the Holocaust, to the collapse of traditional moral verities under the assaults of

totalitarianism and the rise of mass consumer society, Arendt witnessed not only how judgement failed time and again but also how so many people eagerly relinquished their willingness to judge. Across the range of Arendt's writings, then, the potentiality and fragility of judgement are profoundly linked. For this reason, her account of judgement involves a paradox: while she recognizes that critical judgement is indispensable to sustaining a political existence worth living, she also notes its perplexing deterioration in political modernity.

In light of this paradox, Arendt sought to reformulate a theory of judgement suited to the uncertainties and vicissitudes of a world where totalitarian tendencies, the absence of transcendent truths and a propensity to regard politics with suspicion define the challenges facing contemporary political theory and practice. The following pages will explore three main facets of Arendt's conception of judgement in order to reconstruct its central arguments and illuminate how it aims to renew the activity of judging.¹ I shall begin with the distinction she draws between prejudice and judgement proper, and the way this distinction is motivated by her defence of the power of judgement against its treatment by the philosophical tradition. I then turn to an elucidation of Arendt's notion of reflective judgement, based on her appropriation of Immanuel Kant's analysis of taste and aesthetic judgements. Finally, I situate her understanding of judgement with respect to the political realm and the temporal significance of human affairs. The autonomous capacity for critical judgement, Arendt holds, must do justice to the communicability inherent in a world shared with others, without necessarily being able to rely upon any formal or existing criteria by which to orient such a faculty.

From prejudice to judgement

At the time of her death, Arendt had been preparing to embark on writing the third and final part of her last book, *The Life of the Mind*. The three parts of the book were meant to correspond to what are seen by Arendt as the "three basic mental activities" of thinking, willing and judging (Arendt 1978b: 61). Although Arendt never completed her planned volume on judgement, she had already signalled near the end of the volume on thinking that the faculty of judgement is "the most political of man's mental abilities" (*ibid.*: 192). In some respects, this is not a surprising claim. Whereas thinking, the speculative activity of contemplating whatever happens to attract the mind's attention, and willing, the volitional activity of the mind's freely purposive striving

and power to choose, are capacities that generally function irrespective of normative purpose or content, judging by contrast is the specific and unique ability “to tell right from wrong, beautiful from ugly” (*ibid.*: 193). Judging is the process of identifying, comparing, discriminating and evaluating particular objects, actions, experiences and events in order to assert or interpret a value about them. When judging, individuals are actively engaged in making distinctions in the world around them and disclosing their preferences to others. Of the three basic activities of mental life, therefore, it seems clear that judging has the most salience and potential when it comes to the political arena.

Yet it is less clear this is the case when we consider that, according to Arendt, the faculties of thinking, willing and judging are “autonomous”. Although they possess some “common characteristics” and are closely interrelated, each nonetheless operates according to its own “inherent laws” and “they cannot be reduced to a common denominator” (*ibid.*). Unlike the great majority of important intellectual figures up to the mid-twentieth century, Arendt discerned several fallacious assumptions in the fundamental moral ideals of the Western philosophical tradition. One of these assumptions is that thinking, understood as possessing rational intelligence and philosophical knowledge, when scrupulously followed determines that human agents will make “correct” judgements. A further assumption is that willing, if guided by reason, “freely obeys” as it were the truths or principles that thought prescribes to itself, and therefore wills what we know we “ought” to do or not do. To know the good is necessarily also to will it. A final assumption is the conviction that knowledge of the truth – conceived as “yardsticks and measurements which are not derived from this world but from something beyond it” (Arendt 2003: 51) – is synonymous with moral judgement of what is right and wrong. Knowledge and truth lead, it would seem, inevitably to virtue. In this way, then, thinking, willing and judging are collapsed together, or at least are conceived as forming an integrated hierarchy such that suitably rational thought reliably disposes us to do what we know we ought to be doing (see Arendt 2005: 6–16). Yet for Arendt the events of the twentieth century fully exposed not only that these assumptions were intellectually bankrupt, but also that they were morally and politically dangerous. Adolf Eichmann believed, for instance, that what he ought to do was follow orders leading to the deaths of millions of Europe’s Jews. The temptation to do the “wrong” thing by disobeying such orders was, Arendt wryly notes, faithfully resisted by many ordinary people who believed they possessed knowledge of moral truth (Arendt [1963] 1965: 150; 1978b: 177–8; 2005: 54).²

If thinking does not itself determine “correct” judgement, and willing does not and cannot necessarily will what it “ought”, we are left then with the problem that there is no guarantee for judging, nothing else that backstops it or independently ensures that a judgement is or is not sound. We know what the activity of judging is, but that does not tell us how to do it, how to engage in this activity so as to better discern right from wrong or to enhance our ability to judge especially when it matters most – in morally ambiguous and politically unprecedented situations when it is not clear what is or is not the right thing to do. Without the faculty of judgement we would be lost politically; we would be like sailors navigating uncharted waters without a compass. Going against the grain of the philosophical tradition, Arendt maintains not only that the realm of human affairs is very much like uncharted waters, but furthermore that there is no absolute and knowable guarantee that any compass we employ to navigate those waters will invariably point in the right direction. Yet the tremendous importance of judgement is apparent when we consider that, much like a compass, we rely upon it to orient ourselves meaningfully towards the past, present and future. This way of conceptually framing the disorienting ambiguity and uncertainty that confronts the autonomous activity of judging reveals the deeper reason why Arendt views judgement as the most political of our abilities, and implies a need to decisively rethink some of the tradition’s own assumptions.

Arendt gives an indication of how a reconsideration of judgement will start to take shape when she writes that the “very urgency, the *a-scholia* [i.e. pressing concerns of politics and morality], of human affairs demands provisional judgements, the reliance on custom and habit, that is, on prejudices” (Arendt 1978b: 71). In “Introduction *into* Politics”, Arendt attempts to flesh out this relationship between politics and prejudice in two directions: prejudices against politics, and the political character of prejudices. In terms of modern prejudices against politics – that politics is little more than a quest for power, that political power corrupts all that it touches, that common interests are trumped in favour of the narrow self-interests of the rich and powerful, and that exercising democratic representation is futile – Arendt accepts that they “faithfully reflect our current situation precisely” (Arendt 2005: 96). Such prejudices are not baseless inasmuch as “politics as usual” has indeed spawned impersonal bureaucracies, immense inequalities and advanced technologies capable of destroying all of humanity. As for the political character of prejudices, this stems from the fact that prejudices are an inextricable element of “those human affairs that are the context in which we go about our daily lives” (*ibid.*: 97). Prejudices

are the background opinions and beliefs that form much of our ordinary discourse. Our ability to function politically with others is, in a broad sense, dependent on shared customary prejudices which we can exchange without elaborate explanation or justification. Conventional political life, in short, relies upon prejudices which circulate like a common currency. Here again we face a paradox: on the one hand, prejudices are an elementary condition that makes possible living in common with others; on the other hand, prejudices can generate both apathy and antipathy that threaten the very project of organizing ourselves politically.

In a way, even if prejudices occupy an inherently paradoxical place politically, it is neither possible nor desirable to expunge them *per se* from the political domain. It is not possible because to be human is to be prejudiced since we are born into pre-existing communities and traditions, and it is not desirable because the effort would demand inhuman consequences (and would leave untouched, we might add, the idealist's underlying prejudice against prejudices). This is why Arendt stresses that prejudices are not judgements. Prejudices and judgements differ in several respects. While assent is "ready-made" or built into prejudices, since they are widely shared opinions taken to be self-evident, judgements must actively seek the agreement of others through persuasion and justification. And while each original judgement has some basis in present experience, prejudices are accretions of the past; judgements arise from critical examination of the present, prejudices from the habitual repetition of the past. Nevertheless prejudices and judgements are interrelated. Judgements normally evolve into prejudices over time and prejudices, in turn, anticipate judgements (*ibid.*: 100–101). In that respect, judgements are formed in light of and on the basis of whatever prejudices prevail in the present. Because each current context presents us with some element of the new and unexpected for which we are morally and politically unprepared, we often rely upon prejudices to find our way through such situations until we are able to judge the experience with which we are confronted.

Yet the danger of prejudice is twofold: first, we may so rigidly adhere to a prejudice that it blocks our ability to engage with the reality of experience and to make sound judgements reflecting that reality and, second, we may then be so overwhelmed by the new reality with which we are faced that the political arena ceases to function at all. A prejudice, says Arendt succinctly, is a "prejudgement" (*ibid.*: 102).³ In the ordinary course of events a prejudice serves as a widely agreed standard or measure with which to classify and respond to what happens around us. But such prejudgements, Arendt reminds us, should be considered no more

than provisional. They are conditional in the dual sense that, first, they stand behind judgements in sedimented form and, second, they must be critically illuminated and supplanted by judgements when existing standards, laws and norms are no longer adequate or applicable to the changing landscape of the realm of human affairs. This especially is the case in times of moral and political crisis, when the unfamiliar appears, the unexpected happens and existing standards begin to break down and fall silent. In such times, “when we are confronted with something which we have never seen before and for which there are no standards at our disposal” (*ibid.*), the faculty of judgement as an autonomous ability to distinguish right from wrong in the absence of reliable prejudgements remains the most potent hope for saving politics.

The retrieval of Kantian reflective judgement

For Arendt, both our understanding of the faculty of judgement and our ability to judge have become seriously compromised in the modern era. Historically and sociologically, the human capacity for judgement has been moulded increasingly to a model of instrumental rationality whereby it serves primarily to determine the most effective means to achieve some predetermined ends (Arendt 1958: 154). Yet the ends themselves for which political community purportedly exists – whether of “progress”, “revolution”, “happiness”, “development” or “production” – appear transcendent and ultimate, presumably derived from the objective laws of either History or Nature (or the pronouncements of scientific “experts”) and therefore impervious to the scrutiny of judgement (Arendt 1978b: 216, 149–55; 2005: 76). Judgement today seemingly is powerless to question the ends that dictate contemporary human affairs. Philosophically, judgement has been subordinated to the quest for truth and certainty. The Western philosophical tradition since Plato has viewed an autonomous faculty of judgement – a perilously “anarchic concept” (Arendt 1973: 7) – with suspicion, opening a “gulf between philosophy and politics” (or more generally between thought and action) which has only widened with time (Arendt 2005: 6). Up to the twentieth century, the main currents of philosophic thought demanded that the contingency of opinions and plurality of value judgements be redeemed by a kind of Cartesian certainty bestowed by universally valid “knowledge of what truly is” (Arendt 1978b: 15–16). Yet if not only faith in our ability to judge adequately but also belief in the existence of fixed standards to ground our judgements have been shaken by the moral, political and technological catastrophes to which

the modern world has been witness, then in what way can judging be retrieved to renew its critical potential? How does Arendt propose to bring the activity of judging back into the realm of political thinking and acting?

Having identified a distinction between prejudice as a kind of pre-judgement that arises from the historically formed background of established standards and traditions, and judgement as the capacity to discriminate and assess without the aid of pre-established categories and criteria, Arendt offers a schema for affirming the faculty of judgement as a real-world phenomenon by way of a creative reworking of Kant's critical philosophy. She argues that judgement as a distinct and autonomous capacity does not occur through the logical operations of either deduction or induction, which are concerned with essentially unworldly abstractions, but rather departs from something akin to the rich aesthetic experience of beauty and taste that are part and parcel of the world of appearances (*ibid.*: 215). Consequently, while most theorists regard Kant's *Critique of Practical Reason* and the *Metaphysics of Morals* (particularly the [first part](#), the "Doctrine of Right") as containing his moral and political philosophy proper, by contrast Arendt turns instead to his *Critique of Judgement* to further develop its implications regarding the political power of the enterprise of judging (see Arendt [1961] 1968: 219).

In Arendt's account, Kant is the first major thinker to appreciate the significance of the faculty of judgement and give it the attention it deserves. Arendt's remarks to the American Society of Christian Ethics on 21 January 1973, give a clear sense of the thrust of Kant's significance to her vision of judgement: "And the reason why I believe so much in Kant's *Critique of Judgement* is not because I am interested in aesthetics but because I believe that the way in which we say 'That is right, that is wrong,' is not very different from the way in which we say, 'This is beautiful, this is ugly'". What aesthetic judgement and moral judgement have in common is that both are "prepared to meet the phenomena, so to speak, head-on, without any preconceived system" (Arendt 1973: 9). Since nobody can attribute an absolute value of "beautiful" or "ugly" to a work of art in itself, aesthetic judgement, unlike deduction or induction, will have to be part of an inherently ambiguous and situated process of trying to envision the perspectives of others within the representational sphere of public opinion. Similarly, moral and political judgement becomes for Arendt the "art" of giving to others a part or place in our mental processes of assessing whether the "tremendous wealth of raw experiences" that are disclosed in human affairs are right or wrong (Arendt 1978b: 12), without the aid of a

“securely anchored tradition” (Arendt [1961] 1968: 94). From antiquity to modernity, philosophers have lamented the uncertainty of both aesthetic and moral judgement; but what is reproached by the tradition is embraced by Arendt as the only possible manner of facing up to the ways that current realities imperil human freedom.

There are three principal aspects of Kant’s theory of judgement that Arendt draws upon for her own critical account. First, reconstructing the activity of judging requires distinguishing between determinative and reflective judgements. Second, judging entails the formation of an “enlarged mentality” that engages the worldly perspectives of others. Third, the processes and conclusions of judging must be situated in terms of a “*sensus communis*” or shared “community” sense. Although Arendt did not live long enough to write the third and concluding part on judging for *The Life of the Mind*, her posthumously published *Lectures on Kant’s Political Philosophy* provide a lucid if incomplete exposition of these three themes (among others), and thereby captures Kant’s “nonwritten political philosophy” as extrapolated from *Critique of Judgement* (Arendt 1992: 19).

As Arendt explains, the *Critique of Judgement* intimates more adequately the political significance of judging than do Kant’s earlier critical texts, since it “speaks of men in the plural, as they really are and live in societies” and not simply as singular cognitive or intelligible beings (*ibid.*: 13). Whereas the *Critique of Pure Reason* and the *Critique of Practical Reason* focus on the conditions for the possibility of reason and intellect that would be formally valid for all rational beings irrespective of their empirical differences, and on the basis of which it would be possible to legislate for humanity as a whole, Arendt suggests the third *Critique* introduces a conception of the faculty of judgement that allows for it to deal with concrete differences in their particularity without being subsumed under a pre-given universal law (*ibid.*; Wellmer 1996: 39). In the *Critique of Pure Reason*, Kant argues that “If understanding in general is to be viewed as the faculty of rules, judgment will be the faculty of subsuming under rules; that is, of distinguishing whether something does or does not stand under a given rule” (Kant 1983: 177). This implies that reason itself is unable to provide a general rule for when judgement has been employed satisfactorily, because every general rule would require yet another rule (and so on) for each concrete application of judgement in a particular circumstance. For Kant, then, there is a clear distinction between determinative and reflective judgements: “Judgment in general is the ability to think the particular as contained under the universal. If the universal (the rule, principle, law) is given, then judgment, which subsumes the particular under it,

is *determinative* ... But if only the particular is given and judgment has to find the universal for it, then this power is merely *reflective*" (Kant 1987: 18–19).

Determinative judgements, in Kant's understanding, occupy an important place in practical reason and hence in morality. Practical reason aims to answer the question, What ought I to do? In morality, individual actions are to be subsumed under an absolute universal rule, namely, the categorical imperative (Kant 1997: 28–30). On this account, an individual exercises determinative judgement (i.e. judges what ought to be done) by freely imposing (willing) the objective moral law upon his or her maxims; the *a priori* moral law determines (or constitutes) the formally moral attribute of our specific actions. In contrast, reflective judgements play an important role in matters of taste and thus in aesthetics. Here a particular work of art or something in nature is presented and it must then be decided to which standard or universal it belongs, such as beauty. The universal is found at the end rather than at the beginning of the process of reflective judgement. Because there are no objective rules of beauty or standards of taste that can be given in advance of each particular object in its particularity – *this* painting, *this* flower, *this* landscape – aesthetic judgements must themselves constitute rather than presuppose their universal validity. Matters of taste are subjective and the feeling of "it pleases-or-displeases me" is immediately present to the perceiver "unmediated by any thought or reflection" (Arendt 1992: 66; 2003: 137–8).

Subjective matters of taste, however, are not yet judgements. Matters of taste are strictly private matters of mere subjective preference, while judgements emerge as generalizations that are communicable to others (Arendt 1992: 64–5). Aesthetic judgements *per se* arise from a process of reflection which mediates the pleasing or displeasing perception by means of imagination and common sense. Imagination is the capacity to make present to one's mind what is in fact absent; it is the faculty of representation and synthesis that bridges the gap between the general and the particular. In representing, in calling up images of what is absent, one is able to reflect upon a particular pleasing or displeasing object with the kind of "distance", "disinterestedness" or "impartiality" needed to arrive at a general evaluation of whether it exemplifies the universal predicate of beautiful or ugly (*ibid.*: 67). Importantly, such reflective judgements allow us to ascend from the particular to the universal, or to find the universal only through the particular, without losing the particularity of that which has been represented. Impartiality arises from but does not extinguish difference or particularity. A particular flower judged to be beautiful exemplifies beauty, but beauty

in itself is not and cannot be given; and many different flowers too can exemplify beauty. The particular that remains at the heart of each reflective judgement constitutes an example, that is, an instance or case that does not exhaust the bottomless depth of the universal that it exemplifies, and through which the imagination springs into action. For this reason, both Kant and Arendt thought of examples as “the go-cart of judgements” (Kant 1983: 178). What is more, reflective judgements embody an “exemplary validity”. Their force or authority, in other words, derives from their claim that something exemplifies “right or wrong, important or irrelevant, beautiful or ugly” in its specificity and thus that it has a general meaning for others as well, while retaining its uniqueness (Arendt 1992: 67). As Arendt puts it:

one may encounter or think of some table that one judges to be the best possible table and take this table as the example of how tables actually should be: the *exemplary table* (“example” comes from *eximere*, “to single out some particular”). This exemplar is and remains a particular that in its very particularity reveals the generality that otherwise could not be defined. Courage is *like* Achilles.
(*Ibid.*: 77)

To say that something is beautiful or ugly, right or wrong is to make a claim about its meaning or significance that lies beyond the person making the claim. Reflective judgements depend therefore on the possibility of making a claim on other persons, and the condition of reflective impartiality is achieved by taking on the point of view of others and their possible assent or dissent. This means that the process of building from the particular to the universal is simultaneously a progression from the subjective (taste) to the intersubjective (judgement); it is a process of making sense together with others (*ibid.*: 67). For Kant and Arendt, the representational operation of imagination puts us into virtual communication with others, a mode of “universal communicability without presupposing a determinate concept ... the mental state in which we are when imagination and understanding are in free play” (Kant 1987: 62). Another way of putting this is that making a judgement entails the criterion of “communicability or publicness” (Arendt 1992: 69; 2003: 141), which means sharing our judgement, exposing it to the opinions of others and testing it against their own possible judgements (Kant 1987: 160). This assumption about the communicability of reflective judgement implies a specifically human capacity for communication, through which our thoughts and judgements become public rather than private and we actively make sense of observed objects and events

together with a diversity of others. The term *sensus communis* is shorthand for this special “community” sense of a common realm of shared, communicative meaning. Arendt describes this *sensus communis* as follows:

Common sense – which the French so suggestively call the “good sense,” *le bon sens* – discloses to us the nature of the world insofar as it is a common world; we owe to it the fact that our strictly private and subjective five senses and their sensory data can adjust themselves to a nonsubjective [i.e. intersubjective] and “objective” world which we have in common and share with others. Judging is one, if not the most, important activity in which this sharing-the-world-with-others comes to pass.

(Arendt [1961] 1968: 221)

Communicability and imagination allow reflective judgements to assume a dialogical character, even if only through the hypothetical rather than the actual exchange of opinions with others. Those making reflective value judgements, we might say, commit themselves to a dialogical, impartial attitude towards their claims not by assuming an abstract Archimedean point above the *sensus communis*, but by supplementing their own points of views with the perspectives of a projected community of judging subjects. This process of perspective-taking, of putting oneself in the place of others, is what Kant and Arendt refer to as “enlarged thought” or mentality (Kant 1987: 160–61; Arendt 1992: 71–4). What Arendt underscores is that the *sensus communis* is a phenomenological condition for the possibility of language, communication and the exchange of opinions, because it is comprised of a plurality of individuals with different perspectives and a diversity of judgements. Exercising reflective judgement means freely assembling these diverse points of view into the enlarged mentality so that one can “think from the other person’s standpoint” (Arendt 1992: 74), rather than from either one’s own viewpoint in isolation from others with whom we share the world or the position of a theoretically abstract truth that determines all judgements (*ibid.*: 42). The interplay between imagination and reflection communicates the particularity of specific objects, actions and events, while relating this uniqueness to a larger community of shared meaning. When an enlarged thought strives for representativeness and impartiality, it fosters a “general standpoint” by critically reconstructing the particular standpoints of diverse individuals, seeing the world from their point of view and bringing these to bear upon its own beliefs and judgements. This is not a matter of simply

adopting the opinions or judgements of others as one's own, since that would thoughtlessly subvert the activity of reflective judgement itself. But it is a way of imaginatively bringing others into one's own partial perspective and placing oneself into their standpoints, so as to compare and test one's judgement with the possible judgement of others about the same objects, actions and events (*ibid.*: 64–5; Arendt [1961] 1968: 221). Consequently, while reflective judgements can never conclusively settle matters – claims about what is beautiful, right and important can always be contested – they do possess an intersubjective validity that serves as the “go-cart” for communicatively (re)creating and (re)evaluating shared meaning in a common world infused with plurality.

Political judgement without yardsticks

I have focused thus far on Arendt's appropriation of Kant's analysis of aesthetic reflective judgement, but her principal aspiration is to breathe life into our understanding of the political relevance of reflective judgement. Political existence incessantly concerns making judgements of right and wrong in concrete yet often new, unpredictable and ambiguous circumstances where we must think “without a banister” (Arendt 1979: 336). Such circumstances confront us in their particularity, presenting unique problems and challenges which defy assimilation to traditional answers of the past that have lost their legitimacy, yet without the presence of fixed standards to guide us with certainty into the future. This suggests that we do best to regard political judgement as a form of reflective judgement. It is through engagement with differences of perspective, giving due weight to the perspectives of others so as to question our own opinions as well as received social conventions, that we exercise and improve the faculty of judgement. Because reflective judgement has its value and function in the context of navigating indeterminate choices, the more complex political reality becomes and the more uncertainties individuals must face, the richer and more developed their enlarged mentality has to be in order to be able to arrive at sound judgements that will sustain the fragile web of human relationships. Thus Arendt views the aesthetic (or cultural activity) and the political as distinct yet linked in terms of reflective judgement:

Culture and politics, then, belong together because it is not knowledge or truth which is at stake, but rather judgment and decision, the judicious exchange of opinion about the sphere of public life

and the common world, and the decision what manner of action is to be taken in it, as well as how it is to look henceforth, what kind of things are to appear in it. (Arendt [1961] 1968: 223)

The primary question for political judgement, then, is just what shape and character the political realm ought to assume, how it ought to “look” given the human conditions of plurality and freedom (Arendt 2003: 93). To respond to such a question, members of political communities must agree by means of a situated judgement that also addresses itself retrospectively and prospectively, to the “no-longer” and the “not-yet” as well as the “already”: What kind of common world do we have here and now, what ought or ought not we have done in the past and what ought or ought not we do to maintain a properly political world for each other? Particular experiences, actions and events that have become examples can help us to respond to such questions. Likewise, these questions are so pressing precisely because contemporary history has yielded exemplary experiences, including totalitarianism, genocide and the rise of the social, that have come tragically close to achieving the disappearance of a shared political world.

To explicate this temporalization of judgement, Arendt turns to one of Franz Kafka’s parables from the collection of aphorisms entitled “He” (Kafka 2002). In this parable, “He” battles two antagonists, trapped between one who attacks from behind and another who attacks from the front. “He” dreams that, “some time in an unguarded moment”, he will jump out of the fight and into the position of an umpire who will then adjudicate the dispute between the two antagonists (Arendt 1978b: 202). Arendt interprets Kafka’s parable as depicting the way “in which time’s two tenses, the past and the future, are understood as antagonistic forces that crash into the present” (*ibid.*: 203). What is both disconcerting and enlightening about the parable, however, is that this way of portraying the temporality of the human condition runs counter to the conventional conception of time as progressive rectilinear motion. The present, in other words, can be understood as an “abiding now” between past and future; the now exists as the confluence rather than the disjunction of the past and future. Yet this enduring gap exists or becomes apparent only because of the human capacity for reflection. Reflection is a process of lifting oneself “out of the fighting line”, and the present is defined by judging and making sense of what no longer is and what is yet to come. Put in explicitly political terms, the parable expresses the conditions in which reflective judgement occurs: political thought and action must come to terms with the past which preceded it, in order to pursue the question of the meaning of present

events, while confronting a veiled future whose outcome is unknown. And while “He” can only dream of ascending to a position to arbitrate the clash between past and future (*ibid.*: 207; Arendt 1958: 248), the activity of political judgement remains reflectively distanced from but positioned in the midst of the vicissitudes of time and the movement of events encountered in the world. The activity of judging always takes place within the temporal limits of the world.

Arendt is keen to emphasize the point that the activity of judging is a matter of bringing together the retrospective and prospective points of view even though, as we have seen, this seemingly imbues the present with an ambiguity that makes it still harder to arrive at a general standpoint without a determinate point of view. Given that the phenomena of human affairs often appear to us as if they “could always have been otherwise” (Arendt [1961] 1968: 242) or indeed that they “ought not to have happened” (as with the example of the Holocaust) (Arendt 1994: 14; 2003: 75), Arendt takes her cue from a “curious phrase” attributed to Cato by Lucan: “*Victrix causa deis placuit, sed victa Catoni*” (“The victorious cause pleased the gods, but the defeated one pleases Cato”) (Arendt 1978b: 216). Cato’s insight, Arendt tells us, was to identify a vital political principle whereby the human capacity for judgement about the past is what allows us to “reclaim our human dignity” (*ibid.*). Cato linked the freedom of action, the power to initiate new beginnings in the present, with the ability to reflect upon past events and assign them a particular significance liberated from the spectre of necessity – without, that is, having to prejudge “which things are worthy of being thought about and which are not” (*ibid.*: 139). History itself, in the guise of the transcendent “gods”, does not sit in ultimate judgement on us; rather, human beings, as exemplified by Cato, are able continuously to inquire, interpret and render the facts and events of history into politically meaningful judgements. Through the exercise of judgement as “our faculty of dealing with the past” (*ibid.*: 216), we are able to navigate the various and variable situations that give shape to our lives in the present.

Cato’s “curious phrase” is also important in bringing out that there are two elementary ways to judge and grasp the meaning of events: judging retrospectively, from the historian’s perspective or from the point of view of someone located outside events as they take place; and judging in the present, from the perspective of the situated political agent directly involved in an event as it is happening. Arendt ties this point about the historian’s and the agent’s specific manners of judging to her understanding of “spectators” and “actors” within the public political realm. The public sphere is, of course, the realm in which

political actors and the unfolding of political events appear. Because “whatever appears is there to be seen”, the “very concept of appearance demands a spectator” (*ibid.*: 140). Indeed, Arendt suggests that the spectator possesses a distinct “privilege” when it comes to judging, namely, the advantage of having a certain distance from the action. As a non-participant in action, the spectator or witness of a political event, much like the spectator at a play, is able to adopt a general point of view on the “stage” of the public realm and the fullness of its constituent acts, and therefore is able to make sense of the whole and to judge it impartially (in Arendt’s conception of the term as the disinterested enlargement of one’s thought, not as an infallible attribute; Arendt 1992: 58). The political actor, in contrast, is engrossed in his or her “part” and by definition has only a partial view of the spectacle, and thus only a limited understanding of the event as a coherent whole (Arendt 1958: 192). It may be that an actor has to make his or her decisions with an immediacy that thwarts reflection or contemplation – caught in the act, as it were – therefore making a reliance on customary prejudices or the rules of others more likely. What is more, an actor depends upon an audience for attributing meaning and worth to what has been done by making it memorable, which is to say *representable*, through their opinions. The outcome of this argument is that the rightness or wrongness of our actions (individually and collectively) and of their consequences may become apparent only with the passage of time, and the “final verdict of success or failure” remains in the hands of a community of spectators (Arendt 1978b: 93–4; 1992: 62).⁴

Here again we see the central themes and accompanying persistent tension of Arendt’s account of the political power of judgement. On the one hand, political action, in which plural actors appear together on the stage of the public realm, manifests tangibly the potentials of human freedom and preserves the basis of human dignity (Arendt 1958: 8–9, 247). The move to take action often is prompted by critical judgement about existing social norms and conventions, and by political deliberation about phenomena that appear in public. Yet political actors can also lack the distance needed to engage in the process of thinking what they are doing, and are not always themselves the most suitable vehicles of the human capacity for genuinely independent judgement. On the other hand, the ability to adopt a spectator’s viewpoint, to pause and reflect with an enlarged mentality about a particular action or event is indispensable to endowing that action or event with shared meaning. The spectator’s judgement is reflective in that it sees political action from the vantage point of the world and mediates that vision by communicating it with others, provisionally drawing together in the

present the threads of the past and future. At the same time, however, the spectator forfeits the exceptional human experience of acting in concert with others, which is the “price” paid for withdrawal from participation in politics (Arendt 1978b: 93). Further, the spectator bears a responsibility to distinguish between withdrawing from active involvement, which nonetheless remains engaged in the world of appearances, and becoming a mere moral bystander (Arendt 1994: 5). While the spectator’s perspective is thus absolutely essential to reclaim the critical autonomy of judgement (and human dignity with it), it is also the case that political action opens up the space for the very possibility of reflective judgement. Judgement can never transcend action, while action is meaningless without judgement. The perspectives of spectators and actors are not inevitably contradictory, then, but instead form two sides of the same coin, even if those two sides are bound together uneasily. The elusive power of judging means that we must *perform* our judgements as members of a common world and not just find them as “given” or “apply” them thoughtlessly.

We can turn again to Arendt’s reading of Kant to illustrate this productive tension. Reflecting on the “world-historical” event of the French Revolution, Kant discerned that what made it “a phenomenon not to be forgotten, were not the deeds and misdeeds of the actors but the opinions, the enthusiastic approbation, of spectators, of persons whom themselves were not involved” (Arendt 1992: 65). Kant well understood that the spectacular significance of this particular event was revealed only through the eyes of witnesses and the critical observations eagerly expressed in public opinion both near and far, and later by historical narratives, each of which may recount a slightly different story.⁵ Kant himself “waited with great impatience every day for the newspapers”, fascinated by the ideals and initiative exhibited by the revolutionaries and passionately following the unexpected drama with a sense of “delight” (*ibid.*: 15). Yet at the same time, Kant was mentally torn since as a matter of moral and political principle he could not condone the idea of revolution. In the abstract, revolution is morally and politically negative. Resorting to violence as a means to achieve political ends, as did the actors of the French Revolution, both violates the categorical imperative and destroys the security and order established by the rule of law. Caught in this tension between the positions of actors and spectators, Kant nevertheless conceded that the *meaning* of the French Revolution could not be settled by solitary philosophical fiat. For how it was looked upon by an engaged public as a unique event is key to deciphering the judgements of politically situated human beings (*ibid.*: 44–6). In the end, when Kant assumed the position of a reflective

public spectator and considered matters from the standpoint of the *sensus communis*, tempered by a “disinterested interest”, he welcomed the French Revolution as an event that exemplified the possibility of human progress and symbolized hope for future generations (*ibid.*: 56). In this way, we might say that from Arendt’s perspective, Kant’s example typifies both the potentiality and the fragility of judgement in relation to the condition of political existence.

Conclusion

The foregoing discussion is intended to provide a sense of the complexity and depth of Arendt’s striking account of the political power of judgement. Despite the fact that reflective judgement can neither rely upon nor impose a universal rule, thinking for ourselves by considering different points of view, which posits the perspectival communicability of judgement, has an important and even irreplaceable role to play in sustaining our shared sense of reality. Within a political community, independently judging particular events or phenomena by including the possible standpoints and opinions of others is as essential as potentially acting jointly with them in the public realm, even though the activities of judging and acting remain distinct and in tension. Arendt may not provide us with a fully worked-out theory of the faculty of judgement, but her primary interest, after all, was an explicit recovery of the autonomous activity of judging for critical discernment and diagnosis of modernity’s pathologies. By the same token, the account of reflective judgement she offers clearly is shaped by and dovetails with her apprehension about the retreat of the political and abdication of judgement, given the crises of prevailing legal, moral and political paradigms and in the absence of objective certitude. No doubt there are numerous aspects on which Arendt might be criticized or where her argument remains to be more fully developed. Ronald Beiner (1983) has argued that she should have turned to Aristotle’s concept of *phronesis* rather than to Kant’s theory of aesthetic taste in order to provide a more appropriate basis for improving practical reasoning and promoting political practice (see Arendt [1961] 1968: 221). There is also the question of what is the precise relationship between the faculty of judgement, that “manifestation of the wind of thought”, and the prevention of the “catastrophes” of political evil posited by Arendt (1978b: 193; Bernstein 2008; Hayden 2009). One might argue, moreover, that she becomes ensnared by a “dualism” between the *vita contemplativa* of the spectator and the *vita activa* of the actor, which she is unable to resolve in terms

that favour political action (Beiner 1992: 140; Bernstein 1996: 231). These are important issues to work out, but it is worth considering as well that Arendt does not in fact seek to reconcile theory and practice. Her approach instead, it could be said, insists on affirming the unrelieved tensions between thinking, judging and acting in the context of human plurality so that we are able to keep the inescapable ambiguity of a world-centred political existence constantly in view. Ultimately, for Arendt, it is not the indeterminateness of judgement that is the *skandala*, the scandalous “stumbling block” of modern morality and politics, but rather the widespread “unwillingness or inability to relate to others through judgment” when reality does not admit of a clear determination between right and wrong (Arendt 2003: 146).

Notes

1. For a detailed treatment of the various interpretations prompted by Arendt's writings on judgement, see Beiner and Nedelsky (2001).
2. The “fundamental problem” of the “nature and function of human judgment” can also be seen, then, in the context of the Nuremberg and Eichmann trials (and indeed all subsequent trials for genocide and crimes against humanity), since what “we have demanded in these trials, where the defendants had committed ‘legal’ crimes, is that human beings be capable of telling right from wrong even when all they have to guide them is their own judgment” (Arendt [1963] 1965: 294–5).
3. In this respect, Arendt's approach bears a strong resemblance to Hans-Georg Gadamer's (1989) phenomenological–hermeneutical retrieval of the positive meaning of prejudice as historically bound prejudgement.
4. Elsewhere Arendt (2005) portrays Socrates as seeking to engage the citizens of Athens as spectators of public events in order to develop their capacity for critical judgement.
5. Hinchman and Hinchman (1994) suggest that Arendt's emphasis on seeking out and imagining a pluralism of perspectives in order to comprehend political actions or events reflects an interpretation of Kant indebted to Karl Jaspers's *Existenz* philosophy.

Responsibility

Annabel Herzog

Arendt understood responsibility in terms of political presence, which she regarded as requiring both *acting* and *belonging* – that is, as consisting of actions actualizing a given and, therefore, apolitical fellowship. The fact that Arendt considered political presence as including some kind of givenness or passivity might surprise those who are familiar with her theory of performative action.¹ Therefore, it is worth recalling that Arendt referred to presence in two different contexts: (1) making oneself present in the presence of others, namely, acting; and (2) making others present in one’s mind, namely, representing.² The purpose of this chapter is to show that, for Arendt, responsibility can be found in the connection between these two types of presence.

As with other concepts, Arendt’s use of the word responsibility was neither systematic nor unequivocal. Moreover, she tried to distinguish the responsibility of political actors from that of intellectuals. I shall focus on the former, and follow the development of her view from her early article, “We Refugees”, to the Eichmann trial and beyond.

I shall first establish a short genealogy of “responsibility” in Arendt’s work, showing that she used the term in the distinct contexts of belonging to a political community, and acting as an individual. In the [second part](#) of the chapter, I will explore Arendt’s phenomenology of action, and demonstrate that acting is inseparable from suffering. In conclusion, I will show that in democratic societies, the simultaneity of acting and belonging or suffering – that is, responsibility – is manifested in political opinions.

Responsibility: between belonging and acting

In her 1943 article “We Refugees”, Arendt outlines the features of a non-political condition that can be recounted only negatively. Refugees belong nowhere; they can do nothing but remember people who are no more. Their loss is absolute: “We lost our home ... We lost our occupation ... We lost our language ... We left our relatives ... and our best friends have been killed in concentration camps” (Arendt 1978a: 55–7). In *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, Arendt describes the de-politicization of “dark times” as the loss of all framework and fellowship. She compares the condition of stateless peoples with that of ancient slaves who were oppressed but at least belonged to a place and to a community (Arendt [1951] 2004: 377). The extreme new calamity of modern statelessness, she explains, lies in “the deprivation of a place in the world, which makes opinions significant and actions effective”. She concludes that “[i]nnocence, in the sense of complete lack of responsibility”, is the seal of such a complete loss of political status (*ibid.*: 374).

Arendt’s use of the term responsibility in this context is not self-evident, nor is her use of innocence as its opposite. What is remarkable here is the connection between a concept commonly related to the moral or juridical sphere and the idea of *belonging* to a political community. Arendt is not the only theorist to link responsibility with the political sphere; however, most discussions on this issue address the question of collective analogues to individual moral responsibility. Arendt’s use of the word responsibility is removed from this liberal context, although her analysis intersects the liberal discussion. For her, the sphere of human plurality “is not simply an extension of the dual ‘I-and-myself’ to a plural ‘We’” (Arendt 1978b: 200). Rather, she contends that responsibility pertains to the individual belonging to a community and, therefore, to the *subject* and not to the community. This subjectivization of responsibility is the opposite of solipsism, which she considers a selfish and apolitical position (Curtis 1999: 147). Arendt stresses that the refugees’ answer to their enemy’s denial of their political presence was “selfishness” – that is, acceptance of this denial. Most refused to consider their personal fate as a political fate, and tried to escape their political identity: “Whatever we do, whatever we pretend to be, we reveal nothing but our insane desire to be changed, not to be Jews” (Arendt 1978a: 63).

The individual responsibility engendered by belonging to a community is not identical to what Arendt calls “collective responsibility”. In an essay by that name, she makes a distinction “between political (collective) responsibility, on the one side, and moral and/or legal (personal)

guilt, on the other” (Arendt 2003: 150–51). She argues that one is collectively responsible when one belongs to a group that acts, or has acted, independently of oneself. She writes, “I must be held responsible for something I have not done, and the reason for my responsibility must be my membership in a group (a collective) which no voluntary act of mine can dissolve, that is a membership which is utterly unlike a business partnership which I can dissolve at will” (*ibid.*: 149). Such collective responsibility must therefore be distinguished from reprehensible individual acts, namely, personal guilt.³

Individual responsibility for acts that can be legally or morally judged is distinct from political/collective responsibility. However, it is political in another sense. Indeed, in order to be considered guilty (or innocent), one must belong to a community that recognizes one as an actor and that, by this simple fact, gives one the “right” to be judged (Arendt [1951] 2004: 376). In other words, the responsibility that leads to moral or legal judgements is political, because it is related to belonging.

According to Arendt, the refugees’ condition represented a political problem that required a political response, which the refugees rejected. They refused to act even before they were denied a political presence: “We committed no acts and most of us never dreamt of having any radical political opinion” (Arendt 1978a: 55). In her 1964 interview with Günter Gaus, she recalls that she herself had tried to act as early as 1933. As a result, she felt responsible: “I tried to help in many ways [and] I must say it gives me a certain satisfaction. I was arrested ... I thought at least I had done something! At least I am not ‘innocent’” (Arendt 1994: 5). Here, the terms responsible and innocent do not refer to belonging and loss of belonging, but to action and passivity, respectively.

Arendt famously explains that action expresses “greatness”, that is, the unique and extraordinary initiative of the political agent, who introduces change in the public sphere (Arendt 1958: 205).⁴ If individual responsibility is defined by acting and acting is that which expresses greatness, then individual responsibility is likewise that which expresses greatness. Arendt’s own attempt to “do something” after 1933 was (she believed) consistent with the “criterion of greatness”. It is with pride that she tells Gaus how she lied to the Gestapo because she “couldn’t let the [Zionist] organization be exposed”, and how she subsequently crossed the border illegally.

In “We Refugees”, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* and parts of *The Human Condition*, Arendt seems to assume that belonging and acting are chronologically linked; that initiative and greatness are related to something anterior to the action because “the place in the world” – understood as a political or human world – is a “framework where one

is judged by one's actions and one's opinions" (Arendt [1951] 2004: 376). An agent can be held responsible for his words and deeds only if he belongs to a given group of people at the moment of his acts. He is responsible in acting because he shares a community with his fellow-citizens: "The disclosure of the 'who' through speech, and the setting of a new beginning through action, always fall into an already existing web" (Arendt 1958: 184). Responsibility in acting is therefore apparently determined, or at least preceded, by fellowship. It is within an existing group of people to whom one belongs and for whose previous actions one is also responsible (this is collective responsibility), that one is responsible for beginning something new and "great" based upon one's own initiative.

However, in *The Human Condition* and in other works, Arendt also repeatedly argues that political status is defined, or even created, by actions. One does not acquire a political presence and then begin to act. It is through actions that one reveals oneself as a political agent. The public sphere is created by speech and actions; put differently, it is created by performance (Arendt [1961] 1968: 153). Likewise, actions have no essence before they are realized (Arendt 1994: 406). Principles such as glory, honour, excellence or love of equality are manifested "only through action"; they "are manifest in the world as long as the action lasts, but no longer" (Arendt [1961] 1968: 152). Under this performative understanding of action, to act inherently means to begin something new and unique (Arendt 1958: 177); hence, nothing pre-exists action, including moral standards, laws or principles (see Villa 1999: 139; G. Williams 1998: 943). As a result, the "we" of a community arises when people live and act together, and never before (Arendt 1978b: 200). Fellowship depends on taking responsibility by acting.

On the one hand, therefore, responsibility is assigned to the doer who already belongs. On the other hand, Arendt's theory of action makes clear that actions are ungrounded, and as a result responsibility, action and publicity emerge together. In Kateb's words, "[i]t approaches the miracle" (Kateb 1984: 33). In order to resolve the contradiction between the two contexts and meanings of responsibility, we must turn to Arendt's phenomenology of action.

Responsibility as simultaneity of acting and suffering

In acting, the agent reveals her uniqueness, and the disclosure of uniqueness is the guarantee of one's reality, which, "humanly and politically speaking, is the same as appearance" or presence (Arendt 1958: 199).

However, this presence “requires that we actively *make ourselves present* to each other through what we say and do” (Bickford 1996: 64). One’s presence counts only if others see, hear, or feel it (Arendt 1978b: 19); therefore, it depends on “the surrounding presence of others” (Arendt 1958: 188). In other words, one’s presence is necessarily a presence *to others*. As Arendt writes: “Performing artists ... need an audience to show their virtuosity, just as acting men need the presence of others before whom they can appear; both need a publicly organized space for their ‘work’, and both depend upon others for the performance itself” (Arendt [1961] 1968: 154).

To say that others are present means that they too act and make themselves present to others. As a result, the agent’s action enters a chain reaction of plural presence:

[A]ction, though it may proceed from nowhere, so to speak, acts into a medium where every reaction becomes a chain reaction and where every process is the cause of new processes. Since action acts upon beings who are capable of their own actions, reaction, apart from being a response, is always a new action that strikes out on its own and affects others. (Arendt 1958: 190)

The disclosure of one’s uniqueness is a new beginning that engenders new beginnings. It is the creation of a new plural presence. Therefore, being responsible for doing consists of creating an endless chain reaction of presence that changes the human world. The responsibility of the doer is related to his initiative in changing the public space, and not to what will follow it.⁵ As Arendt writes, the courage that one needs to start acting and speaking “is not necessarily or even primarily related to a willingness to suffer the consequences” (*ibid.*: 186).

However, since presence and new beginnings are always entangled in existing webs of presence, the results of action “fall into a predetermined net of relationships, invariably dragging the agent with them, who seems to forfeit his freedom the very moment he makes use of it” (*ibid.*: 234). The moment one does anything, one is drawn into a predetermined web of relationships, that is, into sharing collective responsibility. The agent’s responsibility for radically new acts – acts designed to reveal “who” she is – cannot be considered independently of her responsibility for acts committed by her community. In doing, the agent encounters and perpetuates her fellowship.

Moreover, in doing, the agent initiates new chain reactions of which she perforce becomes a part. Her action creates a new beginning, and thereby, a plurality of presence: a web of relationships that she shares

and experiences with others, both actively and passively. In this way, an agent's responsibility for her actions can make her appear "much more the victim and the sufferer than the author and doer" of her acts (*ibid.*: 234). Put differently, the agent's responsibility for the consequences of her acts is a kind of *collective responsibility* that she will endure like any fellow citizen. For example, in voting, I am responsible for influencing a given political situation. Subsequently, I will hold collective responsibility for the policies of the government whether or not I voted for it, because it reflects the chosen policy of my community. From this point forward, there is no difference between me and my neighbour, even if one of us voted for the government in power and the other did not. Confronted by a political situation, I have no right to "shift from the world and its public space to an interior life, or else simply ignore that world in favor of an imaginary world 'as it ought to be' or as it once upon a time had been" – that is, to choose "inner emigration" (Arendt 1968: 19). Collective responsibility is independent of one's actual acts.

It appears, therefore, that belonging is synonymous to what Arendt calls *suffering*. As she writes, "[b]ecause the actor always moves among and in relation to other acting beings, he is never merely a 'doer' but always and at the same time a sufferer" (Arendt 1958: 190). Suffering refers to my being immersed in and affected by the human web of relationships. In using the term suffering here, Arendt had in mind not the common sense of feeling pain, but the semantic field of *passivity* or *passion* as opposed to activity and action. Passivity makes sense only in the context of relationships, because, as Arendt notes, it involves being the object of actions performed by "other acting beings", who are themselves able to act only in relation to others. Arendt continues, "[t]o do and to suffer are like opposite sides of the same coin".

It follows further that acting and suffering are *simultaneous*. In doing, an agent both expresses the political history or the political context of his act and, at the same time, suffers – with his fellow citizens – the political consequences of his act; hence, he is led to act again. In other words, action happens within a web of relationships and creates such a web. It is both the result and the condition of suffering. There is no doing without suffering, and there is no suffering without doing, because suffering is always perpetuated or initiated by acting. Indeed, according to Arendt, suffering without doing would be apolitical and, therefore, it would no longer be suffering. She calls such a situation fraternity, and stresses that it characterizes "persecuted peoples or enslaved groups", and is accompanied by a "loss of the world" (Arendt 1968: 13).

As individuals, we are responsible when we suffer the consequences of the acts of our community – including those acts in which we did

not participate – and when our acts are determined by our community. We are also responsible when we introduce radically new beginnings in the world – that is, when we do something “undetermined”.⁶ Put differently, the agent is responsible when he acts in relation to a belonging/suffering. We can go one step further here and suggest that responsibility, defined in this twofold manner, constitutes the political. Arendt identifies the political with actions and freedom, but, as just demonstrated, she claims that *actions* and *passions* (as defined above) together constitute “both sides of the same coin”.

We find an example of this twofold structure of responsibility in Arendt’s claim that “[i]f one is attacked as a Jew, one must defend oneself as a Jew” (Arendt 1994: 12). As she stated in her letter to Scholem about the controversy surrounding *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, Jewishness is *physei*, natural givenness (Arendt 1978a: 246). Such fellowship is *natural*, *passive* and *apolitical*. However, responsibility is the manifestation of this givenness in acts – acts that have no predetermination, but which, on the other hand, cannot happen without givenness.⁷ In her interview with Gaus, Arendt expands on her distinction between “belonging to a people” and “being a citizen” (Arendt 1994: 8):

In the first place, belonging to a group is a natural condition. You belong to some sort of group when you are born, always. But to belong in the way you mean, in a second sense, that is, to join or form an organized group, is something completely different ... People who become organized have in common what are ordinarily called interests. (*Ibid.*: 17)

There is a fundamental difference between a natural condition (to be born something), and a political condition (to *join* or *form* a group) – specifically, between natural fellowship and political membership. The active group is not required to be distinct from the natural group, but in order to be political, fellowship must *become* active: one must “defend oneself as a Jew”. As she explained later, “[i]n saying, ‘A Jew’ ... I was only acknowledging a political fact through which my being a member of this group outweighed all other questions of personal identity” (Arendt 1968: 18). When she was “attacked as a Jew”, Arendt made her natural Jewishness *become a political reality*, which is equivalent to saying that she became responsible. Responsibility consists of acting; but acting publicizes a passivity that is always there (Arendt 1958: 208). Responsibility consists of the simultaneity of passivity and activity: a givenness becomes public through acts, and acts reflect a belonging, a suffering, which results from previous acts.

We find another striking example of the twofold nature of responsibility in Arendt's discussion of Anton Schmidt in *Eichmann in Jerusalem*. What is important to her is not that *someone* helped Jews, but that it was a *German* who did so (Arendt [1963] 1965: 231). Setting aside other examples of rescuers (identified as Poles, or simply as Christians), Arendt contrasts Schmidt's story with the testimony of another German, Peter Bamm, who "knew but did nothing". She writes, "[p]olitically speaking, [the lesson of Schmidt's story] is that under conditions of terror most people will comply but *some people will not*" (*ibid.*: 233). Here again Arendt identifies the connection between actions and passive fellowship (which, by contradistinction with being Jewish, is, this time, a passive *political* fellowship: being German) as being political. What is important *politically speaking* constitutes responsibility, specifically, the link between acts and their given framework – being German. In contrast to Eichmann, Bamm was guilty of no crime; he only obeyed Nazi law. But Bamm and Schmidt were responsible for Germany's acts, because they were Germans. Bamm's position represents an "emptiness" for which Arendt did not even try to hide her contempt (*ibid.*: 232). In contrast, Schmidt not only took responsibility for Germany's acts but, by taking the initiative, he changed the very meaning of being a German, the meaning of his fellowship itself: He was a German who saved Jews; as a result, the fellowship of Germans included Germans who saved Jews (similarly, Arendt's own position shows that there were Jews who defended themselves).

Arendt's claim is extreme. Responsibility, in her view, requires even the sacrifice of one's own life. In "Organized Guilt and Universal Responsibility" she writes: "[T]he only way in which we can identify an anti-Nazi is when the Nazis have hanged him. There is no other reliable token" (Arendt 1978a: 227–8).⁸ In *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, she concludes that "[i]t would be of great 'practical usefulness' for *Germany* today ... if there were more ... stories [like that of Schmidt] to be told" (Arendt [1963] 1965: 233, emphasis added). *Some people will not comply*, she says; in other words, some people will take upon themselves the responsibility to act and change *the human world* – to change things, and so to change the meaning of membership itself.

Both Jews who defended themselves and Germans who saved Jews engaged in the same twofold process: (1) a recognition of a given, since one does not choose to be born a Jew or a German; and (2) a change in the meaning of this given through action – through individual and unique radical initiatives. Responsibility thus consists of the transformation of given identities through individual acts.

Responsibility and opinions

Arendt emphasizes the greatness of action, shining a light on deeds of glory and even self-sacrifice. However, in a democratic context, actions most often consist in expressing political opinions. What is a political opinion? In “Truth and Politics” Arendt writes:

Political thought is representative. I form an opinion by considering a given issue from different viewpoints, by making present to my mind the standpoints of those who are absent; that is, I represent them. This process of representation does not blindly adopt the actual views of those who stand somewhere else, and hence look upon the world from a different perspective; this is a question neither of empathy, as though I tried to be or to feel like somebody else, nor of counting noses and joining a majority but of being and thinking in my own identity where actually I am not. The more people’s standpoints I have present in my mind while I am pondering a given issue, and the better I can imagine how I would feel and think if I were in their place, the stronger will be my capacity for representative thinking and the more valid my final conclusions, my opinion. (Arendt [1961] 1968: 241)

Opinions, which express the agent’s free individuality, are formed in relation to others, to the past, and to the vanishing in time of others’ actions and opinions: “No one is capable of forming his own opinion without the benefit of a multitude of opinions held by others” (Arendt 1963: 225). Therefore, opinions are only possible for those who belong to a community of others. (Remember that in “We Refugees”, when speaking about the loss of belonging, Arendt explicitly complained about the refugees’ lack of opinions.) In other words, the critical simultaneity of acting and belonging – that is, responsibility – is manifested in the making of opinions: “There can be no patriotism without permanent opposition and criticism” (Arendt 1978a: 247).

In forming political opinions, the agent acts while, at the same time, she takes others into account. She *re-presents* absent people in creating a new presence. In making herself present, she represents others; in representing others, she makes herself present. This process, in which “we try to reconcile ourselves to what we do and what we suffer” (Arendt 1994: 309), is the *catharsis* (Aristotle) or “reconciliation with reality” (Hegel) that is the essence of Greek tragedy (Arendt [1961] 1968: 45; 1968: 20). Tragedies reach their dramatic climax at the moment when their heroes acknowledge their responsibility – that is, when they

reconcile their deeds with the gods' will (the ineluctable given) and accept "things as they are" (Arendt [1961] 1968: 262). Responsibility is tragic in that it consists of that vanishing moment when one is "able to *say* how one *came* to an opinion" (Arendt 1992: 41); that is, when one recollects the given *otherness*.

Responsibility, which we can now define as the critical and radical transformation of a given fellowship through representative opinions and actions, means *continuing and changing that which is*. The changes take into account the given – those others who surround me, though they may be physically absent. One is responsible when one's free *doing* stands for others' actions and suffering; when one accepts one's link to a particular community, to its traditions; when one's acts are inextricably linked to the fate of that community and its members. All attempts at cutting the relationships that represent what is given are *ideological*. Indeed, ideologies are "the logic inherent to their respective ideas", and so are cut off from opinions and reality. However, one is responsible only when one *changes* the given, which one also accepts, thereby possibly risking one's own life for the transformation and continuity of what is. One is responsible only when, through one's initiative, one *challenges* one's community and its traditions. Such challenges, argues Arendt, affect all of humanity. Responsibility fills the gap between one's community and the human world.

Acknowledgement

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Notes

1. On Arendt's "metaphysics of presence", see Visker (2007) and Degryse (2008). The question of presence in Arendt's political theory has been raised several times, and authoritatively by Susan Bickford (1996). However, presence has generally been defined in terms of the visibility of the public realm, usually in the context of arguments about theatricality or communication. In fact, Arendt refers to two different senses of presence.
2. Representing absent others adds a fourth component to Michael Denny's definition of responsibility: "to declare the presence of that which is present; to declare oneself present; and to declare a bond between oneself and that which is present to one" (Denny 1979: 269).

3. For instance, in the 1964 postscript to *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, Arendt emphasizes that Eichmann had to be condemned for his personal guilt and not for his collective responsibility (Arendt [1963] 1965: 297).
4. For Arendt, the “ordinary” and non-unique are characteristics of biological repetition, hence of life in the private sphere or, unfortunately in her mind, of social conformism.
5. Sometimes, however, political initiatives become crimes, in that they violate laws. As Kateb emphasizes: “How can morally unlimited action be anything but gravely immoral? ... Arendt has a way of dealing with the terrible consequences of greatness. She relies on the human capacity for forgiveness” (Kateb 1984: 33). According to Kateb, forgiveness and promise-keeping are, for Arendt, the “internal morality of political action”, as distinct from external morality, the relation to general laws. To forgiveness and promise-keeping I would add, however, the *alternative* to forgiveness (which is not, as Arendt stresses, its *opposite*), namely punishment. Punishment is the legal reaction to an illegal act. Hence, punishment does not refer to responsibility but to guilt.
6. By “undetermined” I mean not related to previous laws or motives. Undetermined is here synonymous to unique. This uniqueness is political; its significance is public and general.
7. Natural membership or passive givenness has nothing to do with a so-called “natural character” or any kind of ethnic bond. See for instance Arendt (1978a: 231).
8. This claim is clearly problematic: Arendt’s husband, Heinrich Blücher, was not a Nazi, although he did not fight to save the Jews but escaped Germany. Jaspers was not a Nazi, but chose “inner emigration” (with which Arendt disagreed). Heidegger, who was attracted to tyrants and Führers by philosophical *déformation professionnelle*, is never clearly defined as evil by Arendt. See Arendt (1978a: 303).

Arendt and the question of revolution

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Hannah Arendt published *On Revolution* in 1963. The book drew upon an idiosyncratic reading of the French and American revolutions to explore the relationship of political action and political institutions. The book is not the only place where revolution is addressed in her *oeuvre*, nor is it the only place where she explores the various concepts that relate to revolution; indeed, one might say that the idea of revolutionary political activity as something that “creates anew” can be seen throughout her political theory.

The book, however, has also been subject to criticisms, particularly on her ideas of representation and constituent power (Negri 2009; Wellmer 2000) and her historical account of the American founding (Disch 2011). Some of these critiques are based on misunderstandings of the text, however, while others fail to grasp the wider project in which she was engaged. To truly appreciate what Arendt meant by revolution, it is necessary to place the work into that wider context, particularly her ideas about politics and agency.

This chapter begins by explaining Arendt’s ideas about political action and institutions, with a focus on law and constitutionalism. It then turns to a close reading of *On Revolution*, examining the conceptual moves she makes in this text in an effort to see how they link up to her larger theoretical project. The chapter concludes with a brief discussion of modern day protest movements and Arendt’s gesture to an international or global understanding of revolutionary movements.

From action to institutions

Arendt famously privileged political action as part of what it means to be human. In her most important work of political theory, *The Human Condition*, she differentiated three realms of life: labour, work and action. The first concerns those realms of life devoted to the conditions that support the physical existence of individuals, such as food, housing and clothing. The second concerns the creation of those artefacts that live beyond the immediate existence of specific persons or communities, including the creation of art, buildings or writings. The third, and the one to which she devotes considerable attention here and elsewhere, is the public activity of individuals coming together to speak about, decide on and create new institutions and structures that govern our communal lives, that is, our lives as political beings. This realm, that of political agency, is one that Arendt believes has been neglected by much of political theory especially theorists inspired by Marx and others who wished to privilege the first two realms over the third.

The concept of political action is elusive at times, for Arendt draws upon a mixture of Martin Heidegger and Aristotle to create a framework that does not resonate with most standard accounts of political life. For Arendt, agency is about revealing oneself to others, presenting oneself through deeds and words. Agency is political for it is the presentation of oneself in public that defines how we live together. The constructed stage of a parliament or town meeting provides spaces in which the human person can be both revealed and engaged in the (re)creation of the political realm. Arendt develops this concept of action in an engagement with Greek and Roman philosophers who sought to define the realm of the political. That realm, combining a Homeric agonal spirit with an Aristotelian notion of speech as the quintessentially human characteristic, results in a public space that allows for competition and conflict.

According to Arendt, the public realm is the place where “everybody had to constantly distinguish himself from all others, to show through unique deeds or achievements that he was best of all” (Arendt 1958: 41). Since political action is a public presentation of the self, there must be a community to whom this presentation is made. She notes that action occurs within a “web of human relationships”, a place composed both of other people acting and speaking and of the “common world” that surrounds and anchors human interaction. Politics thus requires a public realm, one composed of fellow humans with an agreed upon equality, not one of merit but one of agency.

Arendt moves from conceiving of political action as occurring within a web of human relations to action within a *polis*. But political action, according to Arendt, cannot be confined within the walls of the *polis*. Political action is similar to a miracle – something one cannot expect and cannot contain. Action tends to go beyond the boundaries within which we attempt to contain it:

Action, moreover, no matter what its specific content, always establishes relationships and therefore has an inherent tendency to force open all limitations and cut across all boundaries. Limitations and boundaries exist within human affairs, but they never offer a framework that can reliably withstand the onslaught with which each new generation must assert itself. (*Ibid.*: 190–91)

While the *polis* is an attempt to create a physical space for political action, action forces itself beyond those boundaries. In other words, Arendt leaves a space here for an international or better yet global political space, one not confined to a single community or territory but boundless in its energy and creative force. As I will suggest in the conclusion to this chapter, it would seem that even in revolutionary political activity which appears to be confined to a single constituent community, there may be space for global revolutionary movements to come together and create new global spaces of liberty and political agency.

Ultimately, action does not just create spaces and institutions for politics, it creates the agents themselves. It is here that Arendt's work moves to the ontological realm. For in her argument, humans exist as fragmented, alienated and acquisitive entities until they engage in political action. Once they appear on the public stage, either through words or deeds, human agents become a definitive "who" as opposed to a "what".

The link between agency and the creation and functioning of political institutions is not fully developed in *The Human Condition*. The closest Arendt gets to how action results in institutions is where speaking and acting in public places us in a "web" of relationships, a context that exists "between" people: "Most action and speech is concerned with this in-between, which varies with each group of people, so that most words and deeds are *about* some worldly objective reality in addition to being a disclosure of the acting and speaking agent" (*ibid.*: 182). The elusive character of Arendt's notion of political action in this text results not from her inability to theorize about institutions, as we shall see below. Rather, it results from her effort to reclaim the importance

of political action and to prevent such actions becoming ossified and unchanging. For one of the most important aspects of political action for Arendt is its creative force, its ability to allow humans to begin new things. This “natality” as she calls it defines the human condition in the political realm.

The Human Condition provides an existential or phenomenological understanding of political life. Arendt did not remain here, though, but went on to explore how such actions do indeed translate into political institutions and structures, yet perhaps retain that essential creative force that would allow them to constantly evolve and create anew. One institution that Arendt explores, if only briefly, is law. Before turning to the text of *On Revolution* a few words on the idea of law and its relation to her understanding of political agency might be helpful.

In her essay, “Introduction *into* Politics”, Arendt provides some insight into how she understands law in relation to politics. This text compares an idealized Greek and Roman conception of law. The Greek conception is that of natural law, a framework that tightly links the ethical and the legal. The law can come from an outsider, either human or divine, who brings the most rational and just formulation of the law to the community. The model of Solon, the Greek lawgiver who defined the Athenian legal code in its historical–mythological narrative, is one example of this process:

For the Greeks, law is neither an agreement nor a contract; it certainly does not arise between men in a back and forth exchange of words and action, but is essentially conceived by a law giver and must first exist before it can ever enter the political realm. As such, it is prepolitical, but in the sense that is constitutive of all further political action and interaction. (Arendt 2005: 180)

In opposition to this idea of law, Arendt conceives of Roman law as emerging from the kind of political interaction that she describes in *The Human Condition* (or at least a variation of that process). For the Romans, law emerges from a political context in which individuals must bargain and negotiate with each other, a context that is also defined, in the Republican era, by a constitutional order in which different classes are represented by different institutions (Lincott 2004). Law is that which “links human beings together, and it comes into being not by diktat or by an act of force but rather through mutual agreements” (*ibid.*: 179). Arendt adds to this mix the process by which the Roman Empire, during its various stages of expansion, needed to bring into its legal structures a diverse array of foreign legal, political and even

religious institutions. As such, its legal code was defined by pluralism and negotiation, a process that resulted in a vast edifice which was not demarcated by a single ethos, but one that emerged from something like diplomatic negotiations rather than judicial decision making.

Law, on this account, emerges from political action. Even more importantly for the purposes of this essay, law “constitutes and preserves a common world – a public realm – where the spirit of action, the defining characteristic of the human condition, can endure” (Goldoni & McCorkindale 2012: 11). Arendt does not privilege one account over the other in her understanding of political life, but when some of this material makes its way into *On Revolution* it appears closer to her idealized Roman version than the Greek one. *On Revolution* also tells a story of how a revolutionary moment turns into a constitution, or perhaps does not. As such, understanding Arendt’s views on the link between agency and institutions through her conception of law is a useful jumping off point from which to explore the text of *On Revolution*.

The argument of *On Revolution*

According to Jerome Kohn, *On Revolution* was intended to be the [first part](#) of a larger project by which Arendt would turn her theoretical reflections from *The Human Condition* towards the dilemmas of creating political institutions (Kohn 2005: xvii). It continues themes she had addressed previously, collected together in the first edition of her 1961 volume of essays, *Between Past and Future*. These same themes then appear throughout her influential volume, *Crises of the Republic*, particularly in the interview she gave in 1970, reprinted under the title “Thoughts on Politics and Revolution” (Arendt 1972).

Revolution, then, is a core concern for Arendt. But, it is not simply the act of revolution or a dissection of what causes revolutions that animated her. Arendt found in revolution a concept that highlights the potential of an active political life, one that reflects the essential natality of the political. Arendt begins *On Revolution* by linking revolution and war, noting that these practices define the twentieth century. The link is to be found in their shared reliance upon violence, but they differ in that war does not advance freedom and is, as Arendt highlights in other works, generally antithetical to the political. In the introduction to *On Revolution*, she presages arguments that are more fully developed in her essay *On Violence*, especially the claim that violence stands outside the political realm. The book seems to move towards the conclusion that revolution, especially in its violent manifestations, suffers

from the same anti-political nature as war. Yet, throughout the text, this point gradually dissipates, allowing Arendt to subtly move away from the arguments of her contemporaries, such as Frantz Fanon, who wished to claim revolutionary violence as a justified mode of political life (Fanon 1965). For while she does not shy away from the violence of revolutionary movements, her understanding of revolutions provides an alternative to those contemporaneous to her. As some commentators have noted, her understanding of revolution, when disconnected from the conceptions of violence found in theorists such as Fanon, better represents the revolutions that took place in the late 1980s and early 1990s following the fall of the Soviet Union (Howard 2010).

Arendt proceeds to redefine revolution, starting with Machiavelli as the “spiritual founder of revolution” (Arendt 1963: 37). Arendt privileges the Machiavelli of the *Discourses* rather than of the *Prince*, for she highlights his understanding of revolution as an act of founding. This republican tradition of thought can be found throughout *On Revolution*. But she points out that Machiavelli was medieval enough that he still understood the word revolution as rebellion against the ruler. This meant that Machiavelli did not explicitly link revolution to the idea of freedom, that which essentially constitutes its meaning into the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. The meaning begins to change when a revolution is understood as the replacement of an entire political order rather than a ruler. Moreover, as Arendt points out, it changes by becoming linked to history in a radical way. The modern meaning of the term, as Arendt explains, finds its origins in Copernicus’s idea of the revolution of the planets (*ibid.*: 42). This connected with emerging trends in natural law, particularly those accounts that looked to the natural world for insight into the human condition. The confluence of newly secularized natural law and the civil war in Britain shaped the meaning of revolution. As Arendt explains, revolution was understood in this seventeenth-century context as a “return” or the “rotation” of a cyclical pattern that saw uprising and then a return to the monarchy, as in the Glorious Revolution of 1688.

As Arendt highlights, the inevitability of the naturalist account underwent a subtle shift in the eighteenth century, particularly in the context of the French Revolution. Its advocates no longer saw revolution as part of the nature of things, but as part of a historical progression, a new beginning that cannot be controlled. It moves from “the lawfulness of a rotating, cyclical movement to its irresistibility” (*ibid.*: 48–9). This new meaning intersects with historicist thinking in the nineteenth century, beginning with Hegel and continued by Marx. Their accounts found revolution to be part of a wider and longer historical process

that left little room for the agency and natality of politics that Arendt highlighted in *The Human Condition*. Arendt argues the Hegelian and Marxian reading of the French Revolution is what shapes the modern understanding of the term, especially its valences of the inevitable and irresistible understood through the metaphors of “currents”, “streams” and “rivers”. Human agency is lost and all we can do is sit as spectators watching the flow of history: “What the men of the Russian Revolution had learned from the French Revolution – and this learning constituted almost their entire preparation – was history and not action” (*ibid.*: 58). In linking revolution first to the natural philosophy of the seventeenth century and then the historicism of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century, Arendt suggests that perhaps the very idea of revolution cannot escape a kind of determinism, something that is, in fact, antithetical to the type of political agency that was at the core of her ideas. In a sense, Arendt wishes to reclaim the meaning of revolution from these accounts, although it remains questionable the extent to which her project can succeed as a result of the powerful influence these historicist readings have in our collective understanding of revolution.

The problem of revolution is further compounded by the introduction of the “social question”, which frames Arendt’s discussion in [chapter 2](#) of *On Revolution*. The social was introduced as a problem for political life in *The Human Condition*, where Arendt develops a critique of how the private realm of the *oikos* was mistakenly introduced into the public sphere of the *polis* (Arendt 1958). For Arendt, the conflation of these realms undermines the political, for it reduces political agency to the mundane realm of feeding, clothing and housing. The social appears in *On Revolution* as that which overwhelmed the French Revolution. Rather than a sphere of political life in which they could establish and constitute a new polity, as took place in the American Revolution, the French were forced to confront poverty which resulted in their revolutionary trajectory collapsing into violence.

This is the dominant reading of the social question of *On Revolution*, and in some respects it connects well with Arendt’s overriding concerns to privilege the political and political action. Instead of this reading, or perhaps in addition to it (for it is not completely false), I propose here an alternative; that her critique of the social in this section of the book is really a critique of the idea of constituent power as a way to understand how a revolution turns into a constitution or institutional structure. The idea of constituent power refers to the notion that polities or constitutional orders have their creative source in the constituting will of “the people”. The point Arendt is making here is not to disparage the concern with feeding and clothing ourselves, or a critique of revolutions

that arise from and seek to alleviate the problem of poverty. Rather she is critiquing the idea that an alienated yet unified body politic brings about a revolution and then can be easily transformed into a democratic political order, an idea that underlies the French Revolution as a result of the influence of Rousseau and Abbé de Sieyès.

Arendt begins [chapter 2](#) with a critique of Marx, one that parallels her critical engagement with his work in *The Human Condition*. But she moves from Marx to a more sustained critique of Rousseau and one aspect of Rousseau's work that she found particularly troubling – compassion. Compassion, etymologically, means “suffering with”, creating a unity with the other. Rousseau allowed compassion to come through to the political realm in the guise of the general will. But, as Arendt notes, a people is best unified in opposition to a foreign enemy, a fact that Rousseau transformed in his account:

Thus [Rousseau's] problem was where to detect a common enemy outside the range of foreign affairs, and his solution was that such an enemy existed within the breast of each citizen, namely, in his particular will and interest; the point of the matter was that this hidden, particular enemy could rise to the rank of a common enemy – unifying the nation from within – if one only added up all particular wills and interests ... To partake in the body politic of the nation, each national must rise and remain in constant rebellion against himself. (Arendt 1963: 78–9)

This internal conflict in the breast of each citizen had to be overcome by the general will in forcing the individual to be compassionate and selfless. Any appeal to interest or prudence in the creation of new institutions was negative, something that needed to be overcome so that the individual could lose him or herself in the general will, a will that emerged from the revolutionary moment. Constituent power, then, is defined in Rousseau's terms by its selfless, compassionate nature, which would enable the creation of institutions to better the poor and deprived in society.

Rousseau's ideas about the general will connected with a belief in absolute goodness in human institutions. For if the individual desires that trouble the individual citizen could be eradicated by devotion to the good of the whole, this could result in a political life that was infused with the good. Arendt briefly introduces here the novella *Billy Budd* by Herman Melville, the story of the innocent, pure, but mute sailor who suffers at the hands not only of the evil Master Claggart but, crucially, Captain Vere who must protect the ship by imposing a sentence of death

on Budd for his inadvertent murder of Claggart. Arendt uses the story to emphasize that goodness *per se* cannot exist in political life, nor can evil for that matter, for it is only the prudent action of a Captain Vere that can sustain the institutional life of the ship (*ibid.*: 82). Political institutions, once shorn of compassion, goodness and idealism, will be able to function as a means by which political agency can have a chance to flourish: “The tragedy is that the law is made for men, and neither for angels nor for devils. Laws and all ‘lasting institutions’ break down not only under the onslaught of elemental evil but under the impact of absolute innocence as well” (*ibid.*: 84).

Arendt argues that what the American founders understood that the French did not is precisely this point – political institutions cannot work if they are intended to reflect a constituent power designed to create perfection. With this in mind, Arendt explores the nature of public freedom that the American founders proposed in the framing of the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution. She highlights the idea of public “happiness” arguing that happiness was not to be found in pleasures of the home but in public deliberation, in the actions of citizens engaged in governing themselves. This pursuit of public happiness was only made possible because the American founders did not need to concern themselves with the drudgery of daily life, the necessities of the “social” that so preoccupied the French revolutionary founders. These chapters have become the ammunition for those who want to claim Arendt as a champion of American exceptionalism. Indeed, there are passages of hagiography in the text, where she sees in figures such as John Adams and Thomas Jefferson paragons of what she understands as political agents. But to read Arendt in this triumphalist vein is a mistake; she notes, for instance, that American “slavery carries an obscurity even blacker than the obscurity of poverty” (*ibid.*: 71). It is clear, though, that Arendt finds in slavery a violation of the core of political freedom that she celebrates throughout her work, and it is its threat to public freedom for all rather than pity for the slave that Jefferson and others saw as the problem with this “peculiar institution”.

As *On Revolution* unfolds, Arendt explores the founding of the American Republic and examines the link between revolutions and constitutions, a link which is often overlooked by those who wish to find in this work a simple comparison of the French and American revolutions. She turns to Thomas Paine, the most radical of the American founders, to highlight what made these revolutionary moments so different and important: “A constitution is not the act of a government but of a people constituting a government” (*ibid.*: 145). But what differentiated the American and French revolutions on the constitutional

question can be seen in the influence of Montesquieu on the Americans, for it was Montesquieu's ideas that enabled the Americans to combine freedom and power by recognizing the need to limit the institutions of government. Rather than rely on law alone to check power, Montesquieu understood that "Power can only be stopped and still be kept intact by power" (*ibid.*: 151). Montesquieu and the American founders were not interested only in limiting power, a point misunderstood by libertarians and free market interpreters of the American experience.

Arendt goes on to explore the relationship of power to law. She argues that the constituent power of the revolutionary moment, played very different roles in the ideas and practices of the French and American revolutions. In France, constituent power was seen to be the source of the law and constitutions; as such, its fluid and unstable nature resulted in constituent assemblies and constitutions riven by conflict, resulting in instability throughout the nineteenth and even twentieth centuries. The American experience, on the other hand, did not rely on constituent power to found its legal foundation, at least according to Arendt. Instead, the American founders drew on the idea of covenanting that they derived from the charters and common law traditions of England which they brought with them to found their order. Arendt argues that this heritage of common law and legal traditions gave the American experience something more worldly and stable upon which to found their constitutional order (*ibid.*: 157). The American constitution, while the result of a meeting of individuals who represented their constituents, was also the result of an engagement with historical traditions of thought and practice that give it more solidity than a revolutionary document designed to capture the abstract general will, as in France. Arendt is not here disputing the importance of a revolution or privileging the Thermidor over the power of radicalism; rather, she is arguing that there needs to be something concrete and worldly upon which the results of the revolution can rest, a constitution that can guide the republic through its revolutionary period.

After establishing that the distinction between law and power in the American context made it more successful than the French revolution, Arendt turns to themes she had addressed in *Between Past and Future* (Arendt [1961] 1968) and in "Introduction into Politics" (Arendt 2005: 93–200). We find here discussions of the Roman conception of law, its reliance on the ideas of authority, tradition and religion at their founding. These foundational elements are read into the American experience, finding in references to the republican tradition by the founders parallels to Roman efforts. The American founders' reliance on the charters of the seventeenth century and the covenants of the

Pilgrims reinforces these foundational elements, drawing on Ancient Israelite traditions rather than simply Roman ones. Their respect for the authority of tradition gives the American experience something that the French, with their desire to sweep away all vestiges of the old order, failed to capture. Yet the American experience should not be confined to the authority of tradition, for Arendt reminds us that it was still a revolution, a break with the established order. It is the dialectic between the history of the tradition and the natality of the act of revolution that is at the core of Arendt's account of the American experience.

The book does not end here, though, for in the final chapter Arendt suggests that there is a "lost treasure" in the revolutionary tradition. The American founders sought to create permanence and durability in their institutions, which meant they failed to uphold the centrality of freedom and the force of political natality. While the success of the American experience in contradistinction to the French was its ability to draw on the past in founding its legal and constitutional order, it also went too far, according to Arendt's reading. When the founders moved to formalize the revolution in the creation of a constitution, they failed to leave space for the "townships and the town-hall meetings, the original springs of all political activity in the country" (*ibid.*: 239). In seeking to create national institutions through a constitutional assembly, the pluralistic spirit of political action that had motivated the revolution in the first place was lost. Here Arendt turns back to the French Revolution's idea of representation. While Robespierre criticized representation for failing to capture the will of the people, Arendt argues that representation fails to give people the motivation to act on their own, to engage in political activity on a daily basis. She points to the way in which small groups appear in all revolutions, from the American town hall to the Parisian communes to the Russian soviets. Thomas Jefferson celebrated the councils of early America as a resource that must be treasured, and Arendt sees in his vision the lost treasure of the revolution. It is the ability to continue acting in political life, the centrality of these daily modes of political participation, that need to be rescued. Arendt recognizes, of course, as did Jefferson, that to give space to these councils will challenge and perhaps even undermine the larger political order. Jefferson's famous line that the "tree of liberty must be nourished with the blood of revolution" is then not only about the large-scale national revolution, but about the continued potential of the people acting together that might challenge the established order. Arendt continues this line of thought by critiquing the creation of a party system in the early American Republic, for parties are oriented towards representation and the creation of professional politicians,

while the council system was oriented towards the creation of spaces for citizens to be active members of political life, and to prevent an elite or a set of institutions from dominating their political existence (*ibid.*: 273).

Arendt's revolutionary tradition and ours

In *On Revolution*, Arendt used her reading of the French and American Revolutions to rescue the idea of political action (Arendt 1963). Her careful and nuanced reading of the intersection of revolution, founding, constitutions and law points to the importance of a dialectical relationship between political agency and political institutions. It demonstrates that even in that most democratic of institutions, representative government, liberty will be lost as individuals are no longer able to act in public as citizens. In an interview from 1970, Arendt moves from her historical focus on the French and American revolutions to an assessment of the student movements of the 1960s. She begins by arguing that the movements reinforce one of her core claims – that public political protest demonstrably brings about a kind of public happiness (Arendt 1972: 202). After mildly rebuking the student movement for its turn towards universities rather than keeping focused on public political affairs, Arendt makes a fascinating move. In the concluding discussion with the interviewer, she translates her arguments about the joy of revolutionary activity and the importance of council politics into a discussion of the international. Here she suggests that a series of global protest movements, stretching across different national contexts might unite into a kind of federated structure, one that might retain a council ethos but somehow become international. This global federal structure could rely on local political councils, but no longer ones bound by the idea of sovereignty:

In this direction, I see the possibility of forming a new concept of the state. A council state of this sort, to which the principle of sovereignty would be wholly alien, would be admirably suited to federations of the most various kinds, especially because in it power would be constituted horizontally and not vertically. But if you ask me now what prospects it has of being realized, then I must say to you: Very slight, if at all. And yet, perhaps, after all – in the wake of the next revolution. (*Ibid.*: 233)

The potential for global political protest to emerge as a space of freedom and a way to capture the lost treasure of the revolution finds

expression in this interview. As with the space left open for political action to turn global, this is not a carefully defined dimension of Arendt's thought. But it is intriguing nonetheless. This quote furthers her critique of Rousseau's general will as confined to a single nation or people, and expands the potential for global political action, global revolutionary action, to create new spaces of freedom and liberty.

Arendt points to something that theorists of revolutions and politics have failed to see. The alternative globalization protests from the late 1990s against the World Trade Organization, the Occupy movements of the early twenty-first century, and the revolutionary dynamics of the Arab Spring all point to the continued importance of a revolutionary spirit that transcends boundaries. Even though such movements are oriented towards state-building goals at times, or are animated by the moralism that Arendt disdained, they reflect the inherent "joy" in political action that she sought to capture. They are also global in scope, reflecting and refracting different visions of political life, combining in ways that might surprise us if we are locked into a conventional theory of revolution, one that relies on the traditional conception of constituent power. Instead, they represent efforts to create new modes of freedom, new spaces of liberty. They are on-going efforts, not confined to a single moment or place. Arendt's reflections on revolution may not be proved completely accurate, but it is undeniable that she brings forth a "treasure" that continues to be found by new generations of activists around the world.

THIRTEEN

Promising and forgiveness

Marguerite La Caze

This chapter addresses the importance of forgiveness and promising in Arendt's account of action and thus political life. They play a very special role in solving the problems that arise in action and in constituting what she calls a "moral code" for politics. Both feature in *The Human Condition* (Arendt 1958), and promising is central in *On Revolution* (Arendt 1963). The frailty or fragility of human affairs comes from the human condition of natality, in that something new is always being done that unsettles any stable existence (Arendt 1958: 188–92). In *The Human Condition*, Arendt sets forgiveness and promising apart as having the potential to oppose the problems that arise in action, that is, irreversibility and unpredictability. Irreversibility is the impossibility of actually undoing our actions once they are finished. Unpredictability relates to the impossibility of knowing or controlling what the end of our action will be, and to human unreliability or that we cannot guarantee that someone will do what we expect them to.

A third problem of action that both forgiveness and promising can respond to is boundlessness, a characteristic that Arendt does not stress, but which is part of her contribution to understanding their role in politics. Boundlessness concerns the consequences of any action, which may set off a chain of reactions that cannot be controlled or stopped (*ibid.*: 190–91).

Arendt argues that action is distinct from labour and work in that its liberation from its own weaknesses comes from within, through further action. The repetition and impermanence of labour is compensated by the enduring objects made in work, and the relative lack of meaning of work is transformed through speech and action that develop significant

narratives (*ibid.*: 236). Forgiving enables the possibility of liberation from “irreversibility” or not being capable of taking back something one has done in the past. (*ibid.*: 237). Promising focuses on the future, in an attempt to establish an assurance of stability and connection in a fragile and uncertain world. Forgiving releases us from the consequences of our mistakes in life, while promising binds us to others and to the future. Forgiveness and promising save the human condition from destruction from within through action. Action is closest to natality, in that it initiates something new and is the most political activity (*ibid.*: 8–9), and it also carries the risk of creating a series of irreversible and unpredictable results. That risk partly comes from the distinctiveness of action in not being primarily focused on results or purposes. Accordingly, neither forgiveness nor promising aims at a specific end; as Arendt says, “action can result in an end product only on condition that its own authentic, non-tangible, and always utterly fragile meaning is destroyed” (*ibid.*: 196). Nevertheless, they can change and improve the course of events in politics.

While natality entails frailty, acts of forgiveness and of promising also express freedom and natality, since for Arendt political relations can start something again: forgiveness enables a person a fresh start following a mistake, and promising originates new agreements. These faculties of forgiving and promising constitute a distinct moral code that reflects our living in a world with others: “The moral code ... inferred from the faculties of forgiving and making promises, rests on experiences which nobody could ever have with himself, which, on the contrary, are entirely based on the presence of others” (*ibid.*: 238). These moral precepts arise within action and speech, and thus are internal “control mechanisms” that save us from endless chains of consequences and reactions (*ibid.*: 246). In “The Tradition of Political Thought” Arendt writes that “forgiving is the only strictly human action that releases us and others from the chain and pattern of consequences that all action engenders” (Arendt 2005: 59); promising is added in *The Human Condition*. Forgiveness and promising go beyond custom or mores and concern good will, not duty or principle (Arendt 1958: 245). They are special ways of acting in the distinctive political space. I will discuss why Arendt believes promising and forgiving are so important, how they enable morality and politics, and the implications for public life.

Forgiving and irreversibility

Arendt's focus in relation to forgiveness and promising is their potential to initiate something new that can be an advance in political life. Her primary concern is this potential, rather than with providing a definition of forgiveness. The conception of forgiveness she develops is secular, human and political. Rather than considering interpersonal forgiveness, she provides political equivalents such as the Roman principle *parcere subiectis* (to spare the vanquished) and the right to change or pardon a death sentence "which is the prerogative of nearly all Western heads of state" (*ibid.*: 239). Other similar examples of strictly political forgiveness are amnesty, clemency, mercy and reconciliation. For Arendt, they are the forms that forgiveness takes in the political realm and what make her view of forgiveness relevant to that realm (see Schaap 2005), and that is what I will focus on in this chapter. A feature of the idea of political forgiveness here is its performative aspect. The performative nature of promises in general and political promises in particular has been frequently discussed (see, for example, Derrida 1986; Honig 1991). Less discussed is the performative nature of forgiveness in a political sense. While personal forgiveness is usually taken to involve a change of mind and require a depth of sincerity, political forgiveness in the forms Arendt enumerates do not rely on a state of mind, although they would involve supportive action. Nevertheless, her conception of forgiveness retains some elements of interpersonal forgiveness in its focus on the person, or *who*, as I discuss below. Also, the perceived state of mind of the person being forgiven may have some bearing even in political and legal contexts, such as that they appear remorseful.

Arendt focuses on certain kinds of trespasses as actions that may be forgiven. She suggests that forgiveness is appropriate for wrongs that have been committed "unknowingly" or without an awareness of how wrong they are, which appears to imply that forgiveness can only play a limited role. She writes: "The possible redemption from the predicament of irreversibility – of being unable to undo what one has done though one did not, and could not, have known what he was doing – is the faculty of forgiving" (Arendt 1958: 237). Arendt claims that "crime and willed evil are rare" (*ibid.*: 240), and that is why most wrong actions will be deserving of forgiveness. Here she argues that we forgive "*what* was done ... for the sake of *who* did it" (*ibid.*: 241). These wrongs and their consequences are an aspect of the irreversibility of human life, and her special focus is these wrongs in politics and possible political responses to them.

Boundlessness concerns these outcomes of action and it is here that the distinctiveness of Arendt's view comes to the fore. While it may seem that she is only referring to forgiving minor wrongs rather than serious trespasses, her focus on the unforeseen consequences of our action can include what began as a minor wrong, but had serious results. In that sense, Arendt's discussion of forgiveness anticipates later discussions of "moral luck" where to some extent how we judge an action depends on what follows from it (see B. Williams 1981). Furthermore, implicit in what she is saying is that we can be mistaken in our judgements and in that sense may deserve to be forgiven. Forgiveness tends to be thought of as a response to actions intended to harm others, on the grounds that careless mistakes do not need to be forgiven. However, because Arendt is discussing political forgiveness here rather than personal forgiveness, she is concerned with actions that can have a ripple of unintended consequences. She acknowledges that not all wrongs are committed unknowingly, as she believes some actions are unforgivable, so forgiveness "does not apply to the extremity of crime and willed evil" (Arendt 1958: 239) which destroy human affairs and power. Arendt can be seen as making too strong a contention here. In certain cases, at least arguably, we may (properly) forgive extreme crimes and evil that is willed (Allers 2010) while in others it may be wrong to forgive such crimes (Vetlesen 2011). However, then the relevant form of forgiveness is more likely to be a personal rather than a political one, as is shown in Arendt's discussion of punishment.

The problem of irreversibility is that we cannot undo the past, so forgiveness must play another role. Arendt makes the point that forgiveness involves giving up revenge and thus avoiding the cycle of violence in order to enjoy a relatively stable political life, a feature connected to the potential of promising. In political terms, forsaking revenge means not taking action in response to wrongs done. Forgiveness is the opposite of vengeance, Arendt argues, since vengeance means that the process that was originally begun by a mistake or trespass is continued in a chain reaction. In contrast, "the act of forgiving can never be predicted; it is the only reaction that acts in an unexpected way, and thus retains, though being a reaction, something of the original character of action" (Arendt 1958: 241). While forgiveness is a reaction to another's action, Arendt claims it is a kind of "miracle" in being unpredictable and improbable (Arendt 2005: 114). For Arendt, revenge is quite mechanical, where we simply react, unlike the action of forgiveness. In contrast, forgiving is linked to acting, just as destroying is linked to making. Revenge is a destructive response and forgiveness allows a

new beginning and releases us from some of the consequences of the past, even if it does not undo them.

The second alternative, although not opposite, response to forgiveness for wrongs is punishment. For Arendt, forgiveness and punishment are both attempts to end a process that might continue indefinitely. She writes “It is therefore quite significant, a structural element in human affairs, that men are unable to forgive what they cannot punish and they are unable to punish what has turned out to be unforgivable” (Arendt 1958: 241). The view that unforgivable crimes cannot be forgiven can be contrasted with Jacques Derrida’s view that pure forgiveness is forgiveness of the unforgivable (Derrida 2001). These features characterize “radical evil” in Arendt’s sense of extreme evil. We cannot forgive or punish radical evil as it transcends the realm of human affairs (Arendt 1958: 241). In *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, Arendt describes how radical evil involves a successive process of stripping human persons of their legal identity, depriving them of moral choice, and undermining their basic human freedom; in short, treating them as superfluous (Arendt [1951] 2004: 577–89). Furthermore, on Arendt’s account, radical evil is distinguished by the difficulty of understanding it through “ordinary” evil motivations like greed, hatred, resentment, self-interest in general, vengefulness, or even sadism and cruelty (*ibid.*: 591–2). Banal evil is an extreme but thoughtless evil, such as that of Eichmann, and cannot be forgiven and must be punished, even though that punishment is incommensurable with the extremity and nature of the crime (Arendt [1963] 1965). The link Arendt makes between punishment and forgiveness seems to raise a puzzle, since many of the examples of political forgiveness Arendt provides concern abrogation of punishment, so that forgiveness appears as an alternative to it. However, the puzzle may be at least partially resolved by considering that unknowing wrongs can be punished and also forgiven by limiting that punishment or by punishing them lightly.

While the forgiveness that Arendt is discussing is political, she still holds such forgiveness is personal, since an individual is forgiven for what they have done for their sake, for *who* they are (Arendt 1958: 241). In “Some Questions of Moral Philosophy” she stresses that we forgive the person, not the act: “To put it another way, in granting pardon, it is the person and not the crime that is forgiven” (Arendt 2003: 95). The political nature of forgiveness is emphasized here through her use of the term “pardon”, yet Arendt still holds that in such forgiveness we always forgive a person, a *who*, as she expresses it. What Arendt means by this aspect of forgiveness is that each person is distinctive and that enables forgiveness. Human beings are different from objects,

plants and animals in being unique (Arendt 1958: 176) and that uniqueness, revealed in speech and action, makes them potentially forgivable. The “who” is distinguished from “what” a person is, their “qualities, gifts, talents, and shortcomings” (*ibid.*: 179–80). The individuality of each person appears in “something entirely idiosyncratic and undefinable and still unmistakably identifiable” that others experience even when we change from one aspect of our life to another (Arendt 2003: 13). Arendt also suggests that the who is revealed through the narrative of a person’s life of speaking and acting, so forgiveness becomes possible from understanding that narrative (Arendt 1958: 186). Since each person is unique we all have the possibility of being forgiven.

Political forgiveness, Arendt argues, must be based on respect or friendship rather than love, as forgiveness is in private life, in order to make it suitable for the public sphere. Love is by nature unworldly, and is not only apolitical but anti-political, she contends. Arendt believes that the intimacy of love destroys the space that relates us to and separates us from others. She is probably considering intense love, rather than love understood as benevolence, as she calls it a passion, notes the need for privacy in love, and that it is rarely experienced (*ibid.*: 242). Arendt concludes that love enables forgiveness in private life, whereas respect makes it possible in politics.

In the political context, respect can be seen as more appropriate, as it is not an intense, intimate or private feeling, and is more amenable to control. For Arendt, respect is a kind of political friendship, without intimacy and closeness, which enables space between people and is not dependent on qualities that we esteem or admire. Again we focus on the who, the individual, the narrative, rather than the person’s “qualities and shortcomings no less than [with] his achievements, failings and transgressions” (*ibid.*: 242). Arendt argues that “Respect, at any rate, because it concerns only the person, is quite sufficient to prompt forgiving of what a person did, for the sake of the person” (*ibid.*: 243). We are able forgive their action in the political context due to who they are, and because Arendt’s concern is not with extreme evil here, she can accept that every wrong that is a kind of a mistake can be forgiven.

Both forgiveness and the promise are special in recognizing the plurality essential to the political sphere. Arendt argues that we cannot forgive ourselves as we do not appear to ourselves in the way that we appear to others. We cannot forgive ourselves in any real sense and certainly not in the political sense because we cannot be both the subject and object of forgiveness. We are dependent on others to do that. We lack the (external) experience of the person or the *who* for the sake of whom one can forgive. In that sense, we are more of a *what* to ourselves

than to others, in that we judge ourselves through our successes and failures. Both faculties depend on plurality, “for no one can forgive himself and no one can feel bound by a promise made only to himself; forgiving and promising enacted in solitude or isolation remain without reality and can signify no more than a role played before one’s self” (*ibid.*: 237). For Arendt, forgiveness must be of the other, especially if it is political, although an individual may try to reach harmony through the inner dialogue we hold with ourselves. Her idea is illuminated in “Thinking and Moral Considerations”, where she observes that “in a sense I also am for myself though I hardly appear to me” (Arendt 2003: 183). We are conscious of ourselves but we do not appear to ourselves in the same way we appear to others, that is, publicly. So we cannot perceive the who that is needed to forgive. In the next section, I outline the distinctive aspects of promising, and the role of promises in politics, as Arendt understands it.

Promising and unpredictability

In addition to being ephemeral if unremembered, human action is unpredictable. There are two features of this unpredictability; first, human changeability and second, the fact that we cannot envisage the results of our actions (Arendt 1958: 244). Arendt writes that:

Human action, projected into a web of relationships where many and opposing ends are pursued, almost never fulfils its original intention; no act can ever be recognized by its author as his own with the same happy certainty with which a piece of work of any kind can be recognized by its maker. Whoever begins to act must know that he has started something whose end he can never foretell, if only because his own deed has already changed everything and made it even more unpredictable. (Arendt [1961] 1968: 84)

In painting so stark a picture of the vagaries of action, Arendt wishes to resist the temptation to formulate a theory that would make sense of the disorder and boundlessness of action. Rather, she aims to show that we rely on the special features of promising to counter and limit the worst aspects of unpredictability, but we inevitably and properly do that in a piecemeal way. Unpredictability is also not entirely negative. Consider, for instance, the uprisings in North Africa and the Middle East, the so-called Arab Spring; such new configurations can only occur because action is unpredictable.

Unlike the possibilities for forgiveness, the capacity for promising to create stability is well known and can be traced back to Roman law, the biblical narrative of Abraham and covenants and centuries of political contract theories (Arendt 1958: 243–4). Her idea is that reciprocal promising can link people together; however she distinguishes her view of promising from that of social contract theory. In “What is Freedom?” Arendt connects promising and politics, saying:

All political business is, and always has been, transacted within an elaborate framework of ties and bonds for the future – such as laws and constitutions, treaties and alliances – all of which derive in the last instance from the faculty to promise and to keep promises in the face of the essential uncertainties of the future.
(Arendt [1961] 1968: 164)

Specific written laws provide a further strengthened authority to these initial promises, as Keenan (1994) discusses. The mutual trust exemplified in the promise increases the power to act together politically. Thus promising is central to both the momentous occasions of founding new states, their more mundane maintenance, and improvement or augmentation of existing polities (Arendt 1963: 201). Arendt accepts that promising does not eliminate unpredictability completely; it only produces “islands of predictability” and “guideposts of reliability” (Arendt 1958: 244). Otherwise we are trying to create the stability and durability of a made object, a goal Arendt associates with work.

There are two reasons that distinguish Arendt’s idea of promising in politics from social contract theories. The first is that the promises she is concerned with are events, not theories.

Arendt sees the development of the American republic as stemming from the compacts (or covenants) that were made from the Mayflower onwards by British colonists so that a new authority could be formed based on all these preceding forms of authority, a subject she discusses in *Between Past and Future* (Arendt [1961] 1968). Arendt argues that the early American colonists used promises to create a new political form of speech. She describes that connection this way:

The grammar of action: that action is the only human faculty that demands a plurality of men; and the syntax of power: that power is the only human attribute which applies solely to the worldly in-between space by which men are mutually related, combine in the act of foundation by virtue of the making and keeping of

promises, which, in the realm of politics, may well be the highest human faculty. (Arendt 1963: 175)

This kind of promising is an event, rather than a theory, because it responds to specific difficulties in a particular context and is based in actual mutual confidence in the faithfulness and determination of others (*ibid.*: 172–3). This power of promising, Arendt suggests, underwrote success in the war of independence, and set up a principled basis for the American Revolution (*ibid.*: 214). In contrast to political views that embrace violent revolutions for the creation of a new polity, Arendt argues that promising leads to a political sphere more expressive of the features of action.

The second difference is that social contract theories depend on a false unity rather than a genuine plurality. Promising must involve the plurality of politics. The important distinction is between Arendt's idea of a social contract that is an actual promise based on equality and a fictitious social contract the contractors are assumed to agree to. Both had been theorized, but their difference neglected, and the first not put into practice until the British colonization of America, Arendt contends. In her promise-based contract, she insists, we gain power to act with others and lose isolation from them; in the fictitious contract, we lose that power and our isolation from others is maintained (*ibid.*: 170, 181). What she means is that in her concept of promising we experience a plurality and community that enables power whereas in the social contract joint power is sacrificed to state power. The power Arendt is concerned with is connected to the forming of loose alliances rather than unity:

In other words, the mutual contract where power is constituted by means of promise contains *in nuce* both the republican principle, according to which power resides in the people, and where a “mutual subjection” makes of rulership an absurdity ... and the federal principle, the principle of “a Commonwealth for increase” ... according to which constituted political bodies can combine and enter into lasting alliances without losing their identity. (*Ibid.*: 171)

Mutual promising provides the basis for a shared power to act together. Arendt discusses the political societies that British immigrants to America created as a political arena “that enjoyed power and was entitled to claim rights without possessing or claiming sovereignty” (*ibid.*: 168). Sovereignty understood in Arendt's terms more properly

characterizes a political group formed through promising than the kind of conventional sovereignty that is connected with dominance and not needing others. “Sovereignty resides in the resulting, limited independence from the incalculability of the future”, argues Arendt (1958: 245).

On this point, Arendt sees the social contract found in Hobbes, Locke and Rousseau, for example, to entail the government absorbing individual will and power in “absolute rulership” and a “national principle” (Arendt 1963: 171). It is important that the promise is not considered to be the uniting of the plurality of people into a single will, as in Rousseau’s social contract. She diagnoses Rousseau as having unlinked the will from all other faculties and from the need to discuss with others in the political realm and so making it a non-political or even anti-political force (Arendt [1961] 1968: 164). Rousseau’s general will is distinguished from the idea of consent, which Arendt connects with government and specific political decisions. She argues that this notion of the general will was taken by Robespierre, for example, to mean a unanimous will, rather than an opinion that many people were in agreement with publicly (Arendt 1963: 76). This unanimous will replaces the single will of the absolute monarch. Furthermore, the general will lacks the stability of the promise, as it is more important that it be unified than that it be binding. Thus political promises in that case are only effective if they satisfy that will or interest and can change arbitrarily. Arendt’s discussion here suggests that promising takes a strong role in creating political obligations, and respects the plurality of opinion.

As in relation to forgiveness, Arendt takes it that promises to others are primary, promises to ourselves secondary. She argues that without promises, we would not be able to maintain our identities, as:

we would be condemned to wander helplessly and without direction in the darkness of each man’s lonely heart, caught in its contradictions and equivocalities – a darkness which only the light shed over the public realm through the presence of others, who confirm the identity between the one who promises and the one who fulfils, can dispel. (Arendt 1958: 237)

Mutual promising and the expectations promises develop create a web of relationships and a durability of the self. Her idea is again that promises “keep us honest” because we have to make them to others rather than deceiving ourselves about our commitments and the kind of person we are. I doubt she is denying that we can make commitments or resolutions to ourselves; the thought is that promising between people

is the prior concept and such commitments depend on agreements we make with others.

One of the critics of Arendt's view of forgiving and promising is George Kateb. He argues that because the moral code based on these two acts concerns the frailties of action, "It is as though morality, however understood, tends to be a tax on human endeavours rather than a crowning human achievement, or at least a set of constraints that dignifies what it constrains" (Kateb 2000: 142). Furthermore, Kateb sees Arendt as neglecting to take into account the content and consequences of forgiving and promising. This omission is very deliberate on Arendt's part as she is outlining an account of what promising and forgiveness can do, not what they must do. However, in a later paper, he concedes that Arendt gives us an inspiring sketch of a moral code of conduct or action that could be supplemented with the principles and virtues she centres on in other texts (Kateb 2001). What is important for Arendt is that in the case of forgiving and promising, morality has a specific political relevance.

Political implications

Arendt sees morals or ethics in general as quite distinct from the political realm because they do not concern what we share with others but our dialogue with ourselves in thought. Thus, we need to understand what is distinct about the moral code based on forgiving and promising. Arendt's phenomenological approach does not demand that forgiving and promising provide a full normative justification, although implicit in her view is that as public connections with others they create links of expectation and obligation. The link she makes between each person's transgressions implies consistency should inspire forgiveness; likewise with our anticipation that others will keep their promises. This idea does not suggest that reason dictates that what we expect from others we should demand from ourselves, rather that reflection on political circumstances, forgiveness given and received, and promises made and kept, both rely on good will and generate good will. There are a number of implications that follow from Arendt's emphasis on forgiveness and promising in public life, and they are linked in important ways. Much of the literature has focused on forgiveness for grievous crimes, precisely the kind of forgiveness she rules out in *The Human Condition*. Arendt's account of political forgiveness appears to suggest that public or collective forgiveness is possible. A government or representative could forgive on behalf of a group, although it is not clear that there

can be political forgiveness *of* a group, according to Arendt. This latter is problematic due to her characterization of forgiveness as of the person and because of her rejection of collective guilt, although not collective responsibility (Arendt 2003: 147). Thus only political pardon or amnesty for a particular crime makes sense on Arendt's view. Glen Pettigrove argues that forgiveness of a collective is possible even on Arendt's terms as she recognized that the wrongdoing of individuals could be exacerbated by being part of an institution or systemic injustice (Pettigrove 2006: 494). Nonetheless, just as Arendt stressed that punishment must be of individuals, it follows that political forgiveness in her sense must be of individuals. Pettigrove acknowledges that a collective cannot be a who or person in Arendt's sense, and that we would be better to think of more normalized relations with less hostile policies between groups (*ibid.*: 496). Political forgiveness of individuals can be seen in a range of reconciliation and transitional justice processes such as the Truth and Reconciliation Commissions in South Africa or Bosnia and Herzegovina, to provide only two examples, and the Rwanda Gacaca trials, although these processes are often understood to be primarily personal forgiveness. Yet numerous wars may have been averted if taking revenge on countries for the actions of individuals was given up. Promises and forgiveness could also be more powerful forces than they are in politics in relation to examples which in themselves are not large-scale events, but can have broad ramifications.

One of the most important forms of political forgiveness, understanding forgiveness in Arendt's sense of putting aside vengeance in the case of minor wrongs, may be the need for forgiveness of broken promises in politics. Political life shows numerous instances of moralism concerning claims that politicians have broken their promises, or have lied, even though there may be good reasons for doing so, such as a lack of support or finances or viability. Moreover, Arendt's concern with the unforeseen consequences of our actions is one that is especially relevant to politics, where decisions can have wide effects that are difficult to predict. While public discussion concentrates on these less important concerns, the truly significant issues tend to be ignored. It is common to say that the public does not trust politicians, but as Arendt points out, mutual good will is needed, not one-sided good will. The lack of forgiveness in political life makes participation in politics an unattractive proposition for everyone and so undermines the polity further, through the kind of endless chain of reaction Arendt deplored.

The promise to do better, to make amends, and not let wrongs happen again included in a true apology are promises central to political life, as we have seen in numerous recent political apologies (see La

Caze 2006; Muldoon 2009). Breaking promises, especially to oppressed groups, also shows a lack of respect that apologies attempt to rectify. The promise features in political life after mistakes are made, so forgiveness and the promise are linked in that further sense. If a promise to change is made, that can be the condition for forgiveness. Promises can also be connected to political progress. One way of understanding progress in politics is as the increasing recognition of the equality of others, for example through the feminist movement and anti-racist movements. Perhaps, on Arendt's account, because she sees proper contracts and treaties as promises, a more inclusive public sphere is one where the promise is extended. For example, countries where colonizers made treaties with indigenous peoples, no matter how disadvantageous the terms, arguably have a greater potential to improve indigenous-settler relations. When such promises are made, there is at least some acknowledgement of the prior claim of the traditional owners of the land. Likewise, a refusal or unwillingness to make even such a basic promise is indicative of a basic lack of recognition of their political position and the appropriate relation to them. Promising, like forgiveness, is linked to our relations to others rather than our relation to ourselves. Arendt's delineation of these two forms of political moral action – forgiveness that releases us from the burden of the past and promises that bind us to a shared future – points the way to a more amicable, if uncertain politics, an uncertainty that Arendt embraced.

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Chronology of life and works

14 October 1906 Born in Hannover, Germany

October 1913 Father dies

Spring 1924 Graduates from Königsberg's *Gymnasium*

Autumn 1924–28 Begins studies at Marburg University; attends Martin Heidegger's lectures and seminars; spends a semester in Freiburg and studies with Edmund Husserl; continues her education in Heidelberg with Karl Jaspers; completes her doctoral dissertation on *Saint Augustine's Concept of Love*

1929 Moves to Berlin and receives a research stipend from the Notgemeinschaft der deutschen Wissenschaft

September 1929 Marries Günther Stern (Anders)

January–February 1933 Hitler becomes Chancellor of Germany; burning of the Reichstag, followed by a series of anti-Jewish measures and arrests

Spring 1933 Conducts research for the Zionist Federation of Germany led by Kurt Blumenfeld; arrested by the Gestapo and released after eight days; flees Germany and becomes a "stateless" person

Mid–late 1930s Works in Paris for Agriculture et Artisanat and Youth Aliyah, organizations that helped young Jewish refugees emigrate to Palestine

Early 1936 Separates from Günther Stern and begins relationship with Heinrich Blücher, a former Spartacist and communist

Late 1936 Works with the Ligue Internationale contre l'Antisémitisme to provide legal aid to David Frankfurter, a Jewish student who murdered a Nazi party leader in Davos, Switzerland

- January 1940 Marries Blücher
- May 1940 Sent to an internment camp for “enemy aliens” and “undesirables” in Gurs, France; escapes and is reunited with Blücher
- May 1941 Obtains an American emergency visa and sails for New York via Lisbon
- November 1941 Columnist for the German-language New York newspaper *Aufbau*
- Early 1943 News of Hitler’s Final Solution arrives from Europe
- Mid-1940s Publishes in the *Partisan Review*, *Jewish Social Studies*, *Commentary*, *The Nation*, *Menorah Journal* and *Jewish Frontier*; Arendt’s critique of Jewish politics leaves her isolated from the Zionist community
- 1944–46 Research director of the Commission on European Jewish Cultural Reconstruction, established to recover the European Jewish cultural heritage
- 1944 Meets Mary McCarthy
- 1946 Senior editor at Schocken Books
- 1948–52 Executive director of the Jewish Cultural Reconstruction organization
- 14 May 1948 Establishment of the state of Israel
- Summer 1948 Member of a group led by Judah Magnes to bring about pacification in Palestine, further cooperation between Jews and Arabs, and promote favourable conditions for the establishment of a federation
- July 1948 Mother dies
- August 1949– First trip to post-war Europe for Jewish Cultural Reconstruction;
- March 1950 visits Jaspers; re-establishes relationship with Heidegger
- February 1951 Publication of *The Origins of Totalitarianism*
- April 1952 Awarded Guggenheim Foundation grant for a study on “Totalitarian Elements of Marxism”
- Autumn 1953 Invited to deliver the Christian Gauss Seminars on Criticism at Princeton University, the first woman to receive this invitation
- Spring 1955 Visiting professor at the University of California, Berkeley
- Spring 1956 Invited to deliver the Walgreen Foundation Lectures at the University of Chicago
- Autumn 1956 The Hungarian Revolution
- June 1958 Publication of *The Human Condition*
- September 1959 Awarded the Lessing Prize of the Free City of Hamburg
- August 1961 Publication of *Between Past and Future*

- April–June 1961 Attends the Adolf Eichmann trial in Jerusalem as a reporter for *The New Yorker*
- February 1963 Publication of *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil*; stirs wide controversy and strains relations with many of her former Jewish friends, including Kurt Blumenfeld
- March 1963 Publication of *On Revolution*
- Autumn 1963–67 Professor at the University of Chicago, Committee on Social Thought
- 1967–75 Professor at the New School for Social Research, New York
- October 1967 Awarded the Sigmund Freud Preis of the Deutsche Akademie für Sprache und Dichtung
- Spring 1968 Student protests break out at a number of American universities; with some reservations, Arendt endorses the student rebellion
- October 1968 Publication of *Men in Dark Times*
- April 1969 Awarded the Emerson–Thoreau Medal of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences
- 26 February 1969 Karl Jaspers dies
- March 1970 Publication of *On Violence*
- 31 October 1970 Heinrich Blücher dies of a heart attack
- September 1972 Publication of *Crises of the Republic*
- Spring 1973 Delivers Gifford Lectures at the University of Aberdeen on the theme of “Thinking”, the first of the proposed series composing “The Life of the Mind”
- May 1974 Delivers the second series of Gifford Lectures on “Willing”; suffers a heart attack in the middle of the lecture
- April 1975 Awarded the Sonning Prize for Contributions to European Civilization by the Danish government
- 4 December 1975 Dies of a heart attack in her New York apartment while entertaining friends

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